FROM LOUISIANA SUGAR CANE FIELDS TO YOUR SUGAR BOWL

Sugar is pure, contains no man-made chemicals or warning labels, is 100% natural, and contains less than 16 calories per teaspoon. Unlike artificial sweeteners, sugar has been declared safe by the Food & Drug Administration (GRAS list). Sugar, or sucrose, is produced mostly from sugarcane or sugar beets when the energy of sunlight along with chlorophyll in the leaves transforms water and nutrients into sugar. Sugarcane and/or sugar beets are produced in 16 states and provide over 9.0 million short tons of sugar to the USA.

Sugarcane is being produced on over 544,000 acres of land in 25 Louisiana Parishes. Production should exceed sixteen million tons of cane and has an economic impact of $2.3 billion to the cane growers and raw sugar factories of the state. Louisiana produces about 20% of the sugar grown in the United States (beets and cane). Approximately 16,000 employees are involved in this production and processing of sugar in Louisiana alone.

Of the U.S. sugar producing areas, Louisiana is the oldest and most historic. Sugarcane arrived in Louisiana with the Jesuit priests in 1751 who planted it near where their church now stands on Baronne Street in New Orleans. Several plantations were planted in what is now the city limits of New Orleans and in 1795, Etienne deBore, first granulated sugar on a commercial scale in Audubon Park. Except for disastrous production years during the Civil War, during a disease epidemic of the 1920's, and from 10-degree freezing temperatures affecting the 1990 crop, the Louisiana sugarcane industry has continued to increase in productivity, mainly due to improved varieties, cultural practices, pest control and sugar processing techniques. The Louisiana sugarcane industry is currently in its third century of sugar production.

Sugarcane is planted vegetatively, using whole stalks of cane rather than true seed. Each stalk consists of several joints which each have a bud. Cane stalks are planted in rows during the fall of each year and the buds produce shoots of cane the following spring. After maturing into stalks during the late summer, the cane crop is first harvested that fall and is called the plant cane crop. Sugarcane is a grass and more than one cutting can be harvested from each planting. In Louisiana, two to four additional annual cuttings (called ratoon crops) are made before the land has to be fallowed and replanted.

All Louisiana sugarcane is mechanically harvested using either soldier or combine type harvesters. Soldier harvesters cut off the cane tops, cut the stalks from their attachment to the row, and lay them on heaps behind the machine. After the cane heaps are burned to remove excess trash, cane loaders place the cane in large wagons for transport to the raw sugar factories. Combine harvesters cut the stalks into short pieces or billets, while extractor fans remove a portion of the leaf trash. Billets are then transported to the factories.

At the raw sugar factories, cane is washed and crushed, with the juice being boiled down to a thick syrup. The cane by-product is bagasse which is used as a fuel to power the factories. The thick syrup is separated into sugar crystals ("raw sugar") and molasses (used in livestock feed). The raw sugar is sold to refiners who melt the raw sugar crystals, remove the remaining impurities and color, and produce white or "refined" sugar.

Prepared and distributed by the American Sugar Cane League of the USA, Inc.
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