



Reggie Rodgers, with the help of his daughter Gina, is bringing his mother's recipe for banana pudding sauce to the masses in Hampton Roads.

When Reggie Rodgers was just a tyke, his anticipation of his mama's banana pudding was almost too much to bear. As Polly Rodgers stirred the sauce atop her wood-burning stove in her Tennessee kitchen for what seemed like hours, "I'd be sitting right at her table waiting for her to finish so I could lick the bowl," Reggie remembered.

Fast-forward a few decades, and there are Reggie's daughters, Gina and Charizza, sitting on the kitchen counter, little girl legs dangling, impatient for their father to finish stirring the sauce.

"I'd try to steal the pot early," said Gina, now 27.

Now, at Gina's prompting, the Rodgers family is sharing this tradition – a comforting, sweet, silky-smooth pudding base for all things banana pudding. In 2008, they started packing jars of all-natural Reggie's Banana Pudding Sauce in their Chesapeake kitchen. That required gallons of love and dedication. It took Reggie about 40 minutes to make just four jars. But it was good stuff. The product quickly earned the "Virginia's Finest" designation from the state, which means it is a top-quality, Virginia-produced and -processed agricultural product. To get the product to the people, the Rodgers family dished up samples and sold the sauce on Saturdays at the Five Points Community Farm Market in Norfolk. People loved it, demand grew and just last month the family contracted with Rowena's, a local company, to cold-pack the pudding in its facility, 30 to 50 gallons to the batch. But, Reggie pointed out, they still whisk it by hand, "which is one of the main ingredients."

Making banana pudding sauce is a definite career switch for Reggie, a retired 26-year career Navy man who served as a navigator for a diving team stationed in San Diego. "I was just missing home and my mom's cooking." He especially missed her banana pudding, and no West Coast restaurant he could find served the dish. So he called his mother, got her recipe and started to make it himself. Now Reggie knows his way around a kitchen. He does most of the cooking for his family; his specialties include lasagna and buttermilk biscuits from scratch. One taste of Reggie's banana pudding, and that's all his friends want.

They pester him to make it for Super Bowl parties and any other get-together.

"And it's always the first to go," Gina said. "You can hear the clanging when people scrape the bottom of the bowl with their spoons."

"Once at a party at our house," Reggie recalled, "I didn't want to make banana pudding. People were looking in our cabinets saying, 'I know you got a banana pudding in here somewhere.'"

Gina was the one who prodded her dad into the pudding business and now works to publicize the product and dream up ways to use it. Charizza, now 31, helps with focus groups. Their mother, Martha Ross-Rodgers, takes care of the business end, including the design of their Web site. The site serves up several ideas for using the sauce – as a fondue dip, in fruit crepes and, of course, in the classic banana pudding, warm and comforting, made with Reggie's sauce, vanilla wafers and sliced ripe bananas. So although Polly Rodgers has passed away, her banana pudding legacy lives on. There's no stirring on the stove in this version, and it takes five minutes to make. "That's because," Reggie said, "I've already taken all of the hard labor portion out of it for you."

Lorraine Eaton, (757)446-2697, lorraine.eaton@pilotonline.com