

# UNCRACKABLE

## Putt Wetherbee Persists

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PHOTOS BY **BROAD STREET MEDIA, GABRIEL HANWAY**

The feeling of morning dew soaking your shoes and the bottom of your pant legs. The sharp whistle of bobwhite quails. The sight of tiny nutlets growing on the trees, on their way to becoming full-fledged pecans. The vivid, gardenia-like perfume of the leaves that transcends into a crisp, slightly eucalyptus aroma when you crush one between your fingers.

Putt Wetherbee grew up in pecan orchards and is intimately tuned into all the sensations of walking through them. Yet because of one fateful day, he almost didn't get to experience them anymore.

In 2017, the owner and grower behind Albany, Georgia-based Schermer Pecans and Nut Tree Pecan Company, lived through a violent home invasion that left him paralyzed from the waist down.

"I remember after [the intruder] stuck a gun in my face, he asked, did I want to tell my family good-bye?" Wetherbee recalls. I said, "If they were here, I'd say something, but I'm not going to rely on you to relay the message, and I'm not going to beg you for my life."

It's hard to imagine holding your ground in such a situation. But it's that same persistent attitude in the face of adversity that's driven Wetherbee to be so successful throughout his life, which he miraculously was able to continue.

Some of the land Wetherbee farms today in southwest Georgia came into the family in 1868. His great-great uncle gave Wetherbee's father, Frank, and his wife a piece of the orchard to farm for a wedding present in 1959. His father got into the pecan industry in a bigger way in 1968 when he started Nut Tree Pecan Company. "He just kept buying orchards here and there and in 1977 purchased Schermer Pecans [that had been] started in 1946," he says. In 2009, Wetherbee purchased everything and took over operations. He's been working in the orchards for far longer, however.

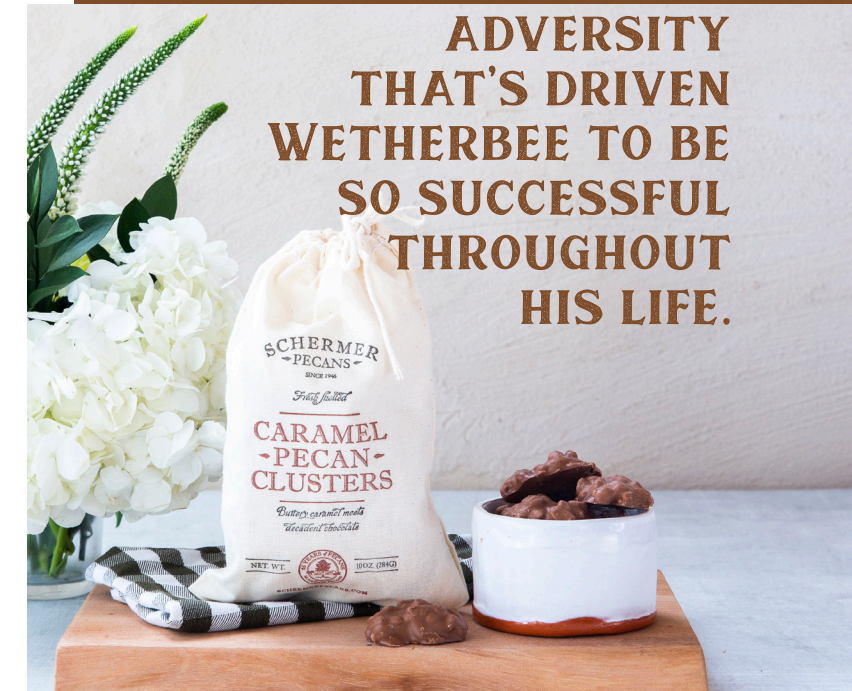
Frank had the second mechanized harvester in the state of Georgia, which would pick up the pecans and transfer them via conveyor or belt into a buggy, which Wetherbee rode in as a small boy. "My mother would bring a lunch box down in the morning, and my job was to keep the lunch box from getting buried in the pecans until lunchtime," Wetherbee recalls. He got his first paycheck at age 9.

Wetherbee also learned from a young age about the power of innovation. More than fifty years ago, Frank implemented irrigation in his orchard, a farming technique that was unheard of at the time. "A lot of people laughed at me and said, 'Oh, that Wetherbee, he can lose his money anyway he wants to. Now, nobody would think about planting an orchard without irrigating.'"

He's carried that pioneering DNA with him to move his operations today into the future. In addition to a 1,500-acre pecan orchard and



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a new 2,000-acre orchard under development, Nut Tree Pecan Company includes one of the top pecan nurseries in the Southeast, growing more than twenty varieties of pecans that growers purchase to start their own orchards, and an advanced cleaning plant capable of sorting 40,000 pounds of nuts per hour. Schermer Pecans is the consumer division of his business, shipping dozens of items from bulk pecan pieces to chocolate-covered pecans to new pecan flour, around the country.

For Wetherbee, what sets them apart is not what they're doing, but the way they're thinking. For instance, right now they're focused on understanding the microbial community and the soil and how those interact with the trees. "We're not saving the world one pecan tree at a time; we're coming at it from the standpoint of, we'd like to do better, we'd like to have more production, we'd like to cut our costs, and it just so happens that those intersect with all these wonderful things like regenerative and sustainable farming," Wetherbee says. They're working toward not using synthetic fertilizers or herbicides and have a five-year plan to improve the soil, which will in turn enable them to use less water.

Along with the changes Wetherbee has implemented in his operations, he's had to modify the way he moves since the attack. He's built adaptive equipment to get around and see the things he needs to see, including an elevator in the cleaning plant and a specialized machine to navigate the bumpy terrain of the orchards. "It's basically a track-driven, zero-turn mower that you drive a wheelchair into and control with a joystick," he explains. He's even invented a device comprised of an old tractor seat and a winch attached to the front of a pickup that enables him to quail hunt, one of his favorite activities.

That's not to say the journey over the last five years has been easy. Aside from being paralyzed, he deals with a lot of physical pain and arduous tasks to take care of his body. He decries the word "hero" and the mantle others have placed upon him that he is inspiring. On his worst days, "sometimes you just don't want to do it," he says. "You don't like this, and it's not fun, but people need to have the perception that you're not going to quit." But most days, he powers through, not bitter about his situation, training his mind to stay positive.

To do this, he relies on family—his daughters Frannie, Berkeley, and Sims, and his wife Margaret—on his strong faith, and on his insatiable desire to improve not only his operations but his community. Surviving has given him the understanding and a platform to be able to work toward developing programs to help others in his community, he says. "What if [the young man who did this to me] had been touched by things like this and it had changed his life? Then he wouldn't be in jail, and I wouldn't be sitting in this wheelchair."

In a nutshell, it's all taught him a lot about seeing the orchard through the trees.

"The fragility and temporary condition of life on earth is much more vivid to me," says Wetherbee, "and the fact that this life is preparation for our next life is a lot clearer now." **GG**



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# INSIDE-OUT PECAN STICKY BUNS WITH SORGHUM GLAZE

RECIPE BY SCHERMER PECANS

## Ingredients:

Serves 12

## Dough

3 cups plus 2 tablespoons  
all-purpose flour  
2 teaspoons coarse kosher salt  
1/3 cup granulated sugar  
1 1/2 teaspoons instant yeast  
3/4 cup whole milk  
8 tablespoons unsalted butter,  
softened, divided  
2 large eggs,  
at room temperature, lightly  
beaten

## Sticky Pecan Filling

3/4 cup packed brown sugar  
1/2 cup sorghum  
3 tablespoons unsalted butter,  
plus more for the pan  
2 tablespoons cinnamon  
1 1/2 cups finely chopped  
pecans

## Sorghum Glaze

1 1/2 cups confectioners sugar,  
sifted  
1 tablespoon sorghum  
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract  
3 tablespoons whole milk

Stir together flour, salt, sugar, and yeast in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook. In a small pot or in the microwave, warm together milk and 6 tablespoons of the butter, just until butter is melted and mixture reaches about 100°F (do not overheat or you may kill the yeast). With the mixer on low speed, slowly add half of the milk mixture to the dry ingredients until combined. Add eggs and mix on low to combine. Finally, mix in the remaining milk. Increase to medium speed and mix for 5 minutes until you have a tacky but homogenous dough. Stop and scrape down the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula, then mix for 3 minutes longer on medium speed.

Turn the dough out into a large bowl coated with nonstick spray and cover with plastic wrap. Let rise at a warm room temperature until doubled in size, about 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Meanwhile, combine brown sugar and sorghum in a small pot. Warm over low heat just until melted. Remove from heat and add butter, pecans, and cinnamon, stirring until butter is melted. Transfer to a small bowl and let cool to room temperature.

Preheat oven to 400°F and coat a 9x13 baking dish with 1-2 tablespoons of softened butter. Transfer dough to a clean work surface. Sprinkle with a touch of flour if needed to prevent sticking, then gently roll into a large 12x16-inch rectangle.

Spread sticky-pecan filling evenly over the surface of the dough. Starting with the short side, roll dough into a tight cylinder. Using a serrated knife (or unflavored dental floss), divide the cylinder crosswise into twelve 1-inch pieces. Arrange rolls in the prepared pan. Cover with plastic wrap or a clean kitchen towel and let rise again at a warm room temperature for about 30 minutes, until rolls have puffed up close to each other. Cook until golden brown but still soft and tender, about 18-20 minutes.

Meanwhile, whisk together the glaze ingredients until smooth.

Drizzle glaze over the top of the sticky buns while warm. Serve immediately, or store in an airtight container for 2 days. Reheat day-old sticky buns in a 300°F oven for a few minutes (or in the microwave for about 20 seconds).

Visit [goodgritmag.com](https://goodgritmag.com) to get Schermer Pecan's recipe for Pecan Puppy Chow with Pecan Butter.