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The Future of the Family Farm

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by *Sadie Stein*

When Arnold Coombs was nine years old, a schoolmate demanded, “Hey Coombs, you going into the old man’s business?” Sugaring—tapping maple trees to produce syrup—was what he and his family had done for six generations; he’d tapped his first tree at age four or five. Now, at 46, Coombs is the general manager of Coombs Family Farms, which makes and distributes syrup in partnership with Bascom Maple Farms, which is owned by Arnold’s childhood friend Bruce Bascom. Each year the farm sells two million pounds of certified organic maple syrup, and also supplies retailers such as Stonyfield Farm, Boar’s Head, Costco, and more than 75 private labels.

Despite its growth, Coombs’ operation maintains its roots in the land and the community. To tap the maples during the six-week sugaring season, Coombs and his workers use “health spouts”—small-gauge plastic tubes that do minimal damage to the trees. Besides tapping their own maples, Coombs and Bascom source sap from more than 1,000 small farmers, providing them credit to buy equipment in exchange for syrup. And for the past few years, the farm has sponsored a free training seminar for these farmers, teaching skills such as proper forest management, responsible tree tapping, and selling syrup over the Internet.

Coombs introduced organic maple syrup in the late 80’s and today it makes up roughly twenty percent of the company’s business. The certification process, though costly, has proved to be a good investment.

Maple farmers face a new challenge in global warming, which has shortened the sugaring season and caused production to move northward, where freezing nights and warmed days still enable sap flow. Partly as a result, Canadian syrup production has more than tripled since the 70’s, while Vermont’s continues to decline. Invasive species like the Asian longhorn beetle are also a looming threat.

Arnold acknowledges the ups and down of his industry. “You can’t do something else and do sugaring on the side—it’s really a way of life,” he says.

When asked if he thinks his own sons—Max, 17, and Addy, 15—will carry on with the farm, Arnold shrugs. “I think right now, basketball coach and pro skateboarder are what’s on the agenda.” He adds, though, that Max accompanied him to a conference recently, and that



Press Room



Addy will be working in the farm's candy kitchen this summer. "For the first time this year, they volunteered to work in the sugar houses," says Arnold, who admits that in his case, it took a bit longer. "The more I was into it and looked into the heritage, it became a bigger part of me," he says.

Sitting at a table with a maple-print cloth, a maple calendar on the wall, and a jug of syrup in front of him, Arnold's father, Bob, puts it perfectly. "Maple," he says simply, "is just what we do."



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