March 2008

Learning Curves

Delta Sky

By John Grossman

Ping. Ping. **I'd done this before—arranged a surprise getaway, stowed the suitcases in the car, and started driving. Sparing my wife Gail the usual 20 questions for guessing the destination, I presented her with a wrapped package.**

Nature's sweetest gift—all natural, nothing added, just the sap boiled down to its essence—what better gift is there for a loved one than maple syrup? John Grossmann's found it—and is willing to share.

It isn't often you can make someone's dreams come true. My wife's unrequited dream had us headed north to New England so she could live a beloved childhood recollection. I'd heard her sharing it with a friend when they discovered they'd been enthralled by the same Scholastic book in grammar school.

When the wrapping came off, that book, *Understood Betsy*, by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, reappeared. First published in 1917, its pages turned anew in a Vermont-bound car. Somewhere in Connecticut, Gail reached her Rosebud passage:

"Concentrated sweetness of summer days was in that mouthful," wrote Fisher, "part of it still hot and aromatic, part of it icy and wet with melting snow."

Elizabeth Ann took up her cup and poured some of the thick, hot syrup out on the hard snow, making loops and curves as she poured. It stiffened and hardened at once, and she lifted up a great coil of it, threw her head back, and let it drop into her mouth. Concentrated sweetness of summer days was in that mouthful, part of it still hot and aromatic, part of it icy and wet with melting snow. She crunched it all together into a delicious big lump and sucked on it dreamily. . . .

Hoping for similar maple delights, I timed our trip for Vermont's annual March Maple Open House Weekend, when scores of its sugarhouses open their doors to the public as they boil gallons and gallons of sap, sending aloft scattered spires of steam that are every bit as evocative of New England as white church steeples. Production facilities are called sugarhouses. That's because from Colonial times on into the 20th century, the boiling of maple sap to concentrate its sweetness typically proceeded past the syrup stage to maple sugar, which none other than Benjamin Franklin, eyeing independence from imported molasses from West Indies sugar-cane plantations, championed as the national sweetener.

Founding Father Thomas Jefferson tried, unsuccessfully, to tap maples he transplanted at Monticello, in Virginia, which proved to lie just beyond their productive range. While the two most commonly tapped species of maple, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) and black maple (*Acer nigrum*), range as far west as Minnesota and as far south as West Virginia, they're most prolific across the upper Northeast—Maine, New Hampshire, New York and especially Vermont, which produces about one-third of the country's annual 1.5 million gallons of maple syrup, and is synonymous with this sweet and versatile kitchen staple.

Ping.

"That ping in the bucket . . ." says Arnold Coombs, just after tapping another maple. He's back in his boyhood for a moment, recalling the vibrant, percussive music of the woods as a scattering of newly hung buckets resounded with the initial drops of a flowing bounty first known to American Indians. "When you've just tapped 30 trees in a sugarbush [grove of maple trees], it's really cool."

We could not be blessed with a better maple docent. Coombs, a seventh-generation Vermont sugarmaker, is chairman of the Vermont Maple Industry Council. In 1966, when he was 6 years old, his family's sugarhouse in Wilmington, in the southern part of the state, boiled down the sap from some 26,000 taps, giving them claim at the time to the status of world's largest maple producer. (Made only in the United States and Canada, perhaps nothing is as North American as maple syrup.) Nowadays, with most large operations replacing buckets with more efficient sap-carrying plastic tubing, some operations in Maine and Quebec, Canada, run to 75,000, 100,000, even as many as 175,000 taps. Accepted practice allows one tap when a maple reaches a foot in diameter, which typically takes about 40 winters, and another tap for each additional 12 inches in diameter. The 300-year-old giant in Coombs' boyhood backyard, which measures some 21 feet in circumference, has filled as many as five buckets at a time, the family tapping conservatively, as instructed by earlier generations.

"I didn't expect the sap to be clear," Gail says, emptying the contents of a metal bucket into a 5-gallon plastic collection pail before reattaching the catch bucket on the hook on the underside of the tap. A dipped finger delivers a second surprise: The colorless, watery sap bears only the slightest trace of sweetness. Which explains the need for sugarhouses and big evaporation tanks atop roaring fires, and prompts Coombs to mention Jones' Rule of 86.

Devised by C.H. Jones, an early 20th-century professor at the University of Vermont and author of a 150-page paper, "The Carbohydrate Contents of the Maple Trees," Jones' Rule of 86 provides an easy way to comprehend both the labor involved in making maple syrup and the concentrated value of the end product. It boils down to this: Use a hydrometer to measure the percentage of sugar in the sap, which varies from sugarbush to sugarbush and even tree to tree, and divide that into 86. If the sap is 2 percent sugar, you'll need 43 gallons of sap to produce 1 gallon of syrup.

Should the sap's sugar content measure 3 percent, 28.7 gallons of sap will yield that amount of syrup.

Here's another harvest window. Call it the rule of trunk. An average maple, spurred by the necessary combination of freezing nights and daytime thaws of a good, five-week season overlapping the month of March, will produce about 10 to 12 gallons of sap. Boiled down, that sap becomes a quart of syrup. Thus, one tree equals 1 quart of syrup.

Approaching the well-weathered Coombs family sugarhouse, steam billowing from its open cupola, Gail and I marvel at the sweetness in the air. Inside, Coombs' older brother Bill Coombs and cousin Ted Butterfield tend the fire and closely monitor the boiling sap. Though these days Coombs Family Farms buys virtually all of its syrup from other farmers and has shifted production to a second, sister company—Bascom Maple Farms, Inc., of Alstead, New Hampshire, also headed by a seventh-generation sugarer—syrup-making remains a powerful family tradition. It's what's done in these parts. Gathering around a bubbling evaporator, awash in the sweet scent of maple, remains a productive seasonal ritual that signals the approaching end of another winter.

We watch as Butterfield dips a flat-ended syrup ladle into the second stage of the big rectangular evaporator tank where the liquid is thickest. Slowly, he tilts the ladle. "I'm watching for it to apron off," he says, explaining that when the syrup hangs, momentarily, in a sheet off the straight edge of the ladle, it's finally reached the desired consistency. Then it's drained off from the evaporator and poured through a cone-shaped device—a paper filter inside a wool filter— to remove so-called sugar sand, or niter, a grainy impurity that the family once sold to nearby Brattleboro Optical to be used in the grinding of lenses.

Getting sappy although most Vermont sugarhouses welcome visitors year-round, the best time to visit is when the sap is boiling during the annual Maple Open House Weekend. This year's seventh annual syrup celebration is March 28–30. Go to www.vermontmaple.org for participating sugarhouses, and where to find "sugar on snow" and pancake breakfasts featuring locally made syrup.

We ask for a half-gallon, which goes warm into a plastic jug. Last year's price of $20 still holds. This first run of the weekend is deemed Grade A Medium Amber, determined by comparing a newly poured sample to the USDA syrup grading system. Grade A Light Amber (or "Fancy")—more delicate in flavor, deemed harder to make, and a point of pride for sugarmakers—has traditionally commanded a higher price and a certain cachet. But times and tastes seem to be changing. Syrup tasters at *Gourmet* magazine, citing a preference for the robust flavor of the darker, Grade B syrups, judged only the darker ones in a 2006 ranking whose No. 1 was a Coombs Family Farms product—calling it "the essence of spring in maple country" and terming it "deep, earthy, and complex."

Our syrup sabbatical continues through the weekend with visits to two more nearby sugarhouses, identified by numbered maple leaves on the map we procured at the Vermont visitors center just over the state line on Interstate 91. At the Dix Family Sugarhouse in Whitingham, family members clad in Got Syrup! sweatshirts offer us a taste of homemade maple ice cream. There, we buy an 8-ounce bottle of Fancy. Braving the mud-season mire of the unpaved road leading to nearby Corse Farm rewards us with a Dixie cup bearing a frothy (no ice cream) maple milkshake. After the production tour we purchase a quart of Grade A Dark.

Late that afternoon, still anticipating Sunday morning's pancake and French-toast breakfast at the Jacksonville municipal center, and already discussing a maple-syrup-in-every-course dinner party that would display the various grades as a colorful, educational and functional centerpiece, we stop at Adams Farm. Here, sap boils outdoors in a big kettle and the maple products appear endless: maple cinnamon fudge, maple cheesecake mix, maple mustard sauce, even maple hickory-smoked cheese. We're sampling a few when the woman behind the counter makes us an offer we can hardly refuse.

Turning to a cooler full of crushed ice, she asks, "Would you like to try some sugar on snow?"

http://www.delta-sky.com/2008_03/learningcurves/

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