

It was 1971 when ten-year-old Randy Galusha tasted his first delectable drop of his very own homemade maple syrup. He and his younger brother, Patrick, had found a handful of galvanized sap spouts in their barn, in Athol, and tapped them into holes they'd bored in a maple tree, just as they'd seen their grandmother Galusha do. The brothers' dad, Jim, smiles at the memory. "They showed me a big maple where they had three coffee cans hanging and said they were going to make maple syrup," he says. Who could have guessed that those few cans would result in Toad Hill Maple Farm, the largest maple producer in Warren County?

That first maple season, the Galusha brothers boiled their sap in a borrowed two-by-three-foot evaporating pan over an open fire as their father supervised. "They simmered sap all morning, but they weren't getting any steam off that pan," Jim explains, so he built them an arch—a firebox to support the pan and heat it. After that first batch of syrup, the whole family was hooked on sugaring. "I think of it as a disease," says Randy. "Once it gets into your blood, you can't get rid of it."

Whether it's a sickness or hobby gone wild, the allure of sugaring has sent generations of Adirondackers tramping into the late-winter woods when sap rises in sugar maples. The Galushas bought more buckets. More buckets required a larger evaporating pan. A larger pan meant extending the arch. "Every year," says Jim, "it just grew."

Soon buckets gave way to plastic tubing, and the Galushas bought and leased additional land. Then they needed larger gathering tanks and trucks with pumps and containers for transporting. With the increased sap, they had to have bigger and better evaporating equipment. They outgrew the dirt-floor barnboard sugarhouse they built in the 1970s and, in the 1980s, put up a new stick-frame one with pine siding, large cupola and a stainless steel stack. Clambering over treacherous snowbanks with kettles of scalding hot syrup convinced the Galushas that they needed a finishing kitchen too.

Each transition reflected growing pains. Randy and Patrick's mother, Norma, laughs about Jim's first maple-cream experiments, when he tried to whip it up in her kitchen: "The steam peeled the wallpaper, and he burned up the motor on my electric mixer!" Randy corrects, "Make that three mixers."

The Galushas' old quarter-ton army truck sagged so much under the three-ton weight of sap, they had to block up the springs to clear the axle. The truck had to be driven backwards up steep hills so sap wouldn't slop out of the hatch on the back of the tank. Fire threatened Toad Hill more than once. One night Jim steadily stoked the arch, unaware that the overheated stovepipe on the outside of the sugarhouse had ignited the siding. He and friends had to use the remainder of that day's sap to douse the flames.

Another time Randy's friend Ray saw sparks reflected in the tank truck's side mirror. Randy dismissed it as a quirk in the old truck's wiring, but Ray leaned out his door for a better look, then shouted, "We're on fire!" The emergency brake was ablaze, just inches from the gas tank. The men activated the pump on the back of the truck to flood the

flames with sap. Randy says, “I thought that temperamental old brake was ruined, but after that, it worked better than it did before.”

The family continued sugaring throughout the boys’ school years. Randy fell more and more under the maple spell, while Patrick opted out. Randy married his high-school sweetheart, Jill, after their graduation from Clarkson University, in Potsdam. Thurman beckoned them home, and eventually they took over Toad Hill Maple Farm. Nowadays jobs (Randy is an environmental engineer for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Jill is a physician assistant), kids and community service keep them busy, and the maple business consumes most of their free time. Far from just a springtime activity, sugaring creates chores for every season. In summer the Galushas prioritize building projects, maintenance and new equipment installation. They’ve built two large sheds and three vacuum stations, each with a well and water heater for clean-up and ultraviolet lights to sterilize the sap and prevent it from spoiling.

Whenever the ground is dry or frozen enough to keep heavy equipment from compressing soil around tree roots, Randy heads into the sugarbush to cull undesirable, unhealthy trees from the 762 acres he manages. With an eye toward long-term improvement of this land that he and Jill hold in trust for their teenagers, Nathan and Lindsey, he implements a professionally developed forest management plan, increasing both sugar and timber potential.

After thinning, Randy flags the courses and slopes of new main lines he installs on support wires to carry sap to the collection tanks. Next he and his crew run smaller lateral lines from the main lines to the trees and attach vertical drop lines, each with a spout on the end. Toad Hill uses “health spouts,” which are smaller than traditional ones and cause less damage to the tree. Nathan and Lindsey are often pressed into service to help Jill with the annual ritual of drilling tapholes. Although it can be exhilarating to work in the woods on an early spring day when warm moist air and melting snow bear promises of catkins and trillium, often sugarmakers must install and repair tubing in body-numbing sub-freezing temperatures in February and March, scrambling up and down ice-glazed hills, faces frosted by the breath of their own exertion.

But once those lines have been run and the taps are in place, the stage is set to make lots of syrup. Or not.

Production all boils down to a question of weather. Temperatures must dip below thirty-two degrees at night and rise above freezing during the day in order for sap to flow. Weeks of preparation are for naught if the weather doesn’t cooperate for an extended period. Approximately forty gallons of sap are needed to produce each gallon of syrup, and it takes many gallons of syrup to pay for the modern sugaring equipment and fuel used by big evaporators. Randy’s evaporator burns about twenty-five gallons of oil an hour. It’s topped by a Steam-Away that recycles escaping steam to preheat incoming sap, reducing the amount of fuel burned. Fans blow air through the sap in the Steam-Away to induce more evaporation. An all-digital system regulates the flow of sap through the

evaporator and draws off the finished syrup at the optimum density. Next a filter press removes sugar sand and particulates. These processes demand hours of work. The steamy sugarhouse be-comes the Galushas' gathering place. "We've celebrated many birthdays in the sugarhouse," Randy says, "and I can't begin to guess how many meals Mom has brought me there because I couldn't leave the evaporator."

After spring boiling, the Galushas spend days scrubbing tanks and the evaporator, flushing out miles of tubing, removing each spout from its tree and capping it. They drain water systems and heaters to prevent freezing. Then they bottle syrup, make maple cream and candy, and, finally, package everything for delivery to stores such as Hudson River Trading Company, in North Creek; the Crossroads and Main Street Ice Cream Parlor, in Chestertown; and Nemecc's Sport Shop, in Warrensburg.

Each year the cycle is repeated, following nature's ebb and flow, always the same, always different. Over Randy's lifetime in the sugarbush, his operation has grown from three coffee cans and a trickle of syrup to more than four-thousand taps and, on average, eight-hundred gallons of syrup a year. Mom's mixer has been replaced by a commercial cream machine. Randy's dreams have been realized, but he still seeks ways to make the operation smoother and the products better. An expensive reverse-osmosis machine now tops his wish list. Capable of re-moving seventy-five percent of the water from raw sap, it will save much fuel and time, enabling them to process sap from even more taps.

Do the rewards of sugaring merit the exhausting work, discomfort, weather worries and hefty investment? Just ask Randy. "When I pass a sample of our syrup or maple cream to someone and I see their eyes light up," he says, "it's all worth it."