

Maple sugaring season, in case you did not grow up in the northeast, is only a few weeks long. It occurs in that brief window of time each spring when the days are beginning to warm but the night time temperatures are still below freezing. In the lower part of New England this happens in February, but in the part of northern Vermont that I grew up in it can start as late as April. Sugar Maples realize that its going to be spring soon and start producing a watery sap and sending it up to its branches, where famished little leaves-to-be are waiting. If you drive a hollow metal spout into the tree it will intercept some of this sap, enough to fill a big tin bucket in just a day when things really get going, without harming the tree. And if you boil that big bucket of sap down on the wood-stove, you will get a cup or so of thick maple syrup. Its a staggering amount of work, even today, when much of the process has been simplified by technology.

My uncle, who made syrup off and on during the thirty plus years that he farmed in northern vermont, told me once that the biggest reason that most small farmers threw themselves into the seemingly futile effort of making syrup every spring was to “get the \$%** out of the house.” Having lived through a few Vermont winters when months went by without the thermometer registering double digits and with more cats than television channels (the television was black and white anyway, at least until my mother put her foot through it’s screen during one particularly grueling battle with the rabbit ears during an episode of The Waltons, after which it was just black), I could understand that sentiment.

There was also something about that time of year in Vermont, when Spring's imminent arrival was an undeniable certainty, reports of her slow and clearly drunken northward trek heard daily from reliable sources in the south. The hardware stores were by now sold out of plastic sleds but stocked with the bright green hoses and stainless steel spouts and buckets. It was now only a few weeks until bunches of daffodils and litters of unplanned kittens would start nosing out from under the front porch.

A few years ago I visited my uncle at this exact time of year. He was trying to get his sugaring operation going again after a few years of dormancy. I drove my completely un-snow-worthy rental car up the steep and snowy dirt road to his farm and found him at on the road in front of his sugarhouse, towing an enormous and brand new evaporator behind a small tractor. He jumped off and gave me a hug. He felt cold, thin, and tired, not at all what his mood conveyed, and with weeks of work ahead of him, but this was surely the happiest I had seen him in a very long time. His mood was infectious, I had an overwhelming desire to somehow become a part of the process, so I volunteered to help find a buyer or design a new label. Mike’s girlfriend, who had already made a few biting comments about my “fancy” car and my “bright” winter jacket was quick to remind me that those were “the easiest parts”. I was absolutely wounded by her comments. When had I become so different from them? It was all I thought about on my long drive back home (which, incidentally, involved doing some minor.. ok, major... damage to that rental car), and the very question that led me to (for the record) commit a minor act of corporate espionage in order to convince the huge health food coop in Arcata, CA to buy all of the syrup that Mike could produce for their bulk foods department.

maple syrup over vanilla ice cream with walnuts / from WEEKEND SEWII tracked down the bulk foods buyer and gave him my practiced shepel. I was a health food store's ideal supplier, right? I was representing a small farmer who used traditional (if not primitive) methods. He was interested, and gave me much more time and attention than I deserved, but he already had a supplier: Shady Maple Farms. This is where I crossed the line. "Shady Maple?" I said, eyebrows up and voice lowered to convey my corporate horror, "you do know about them, right?" "No, what about them?" he asked. I had nothing. I was just hoping to hit a socially conscious nerve, hoping that there was something wrong with Shady Maple, like the fact that they used Canadian suppliers (gasp) or used non-labor or underage sugar maples, some fact that he already felt guilty about but was knowingly ignoring. He stared back at me, waiting for the bad news about his trusted, long-standing supplier. "Lets just say they put the shady back in maple", I said, nodding slowly and squinting a little. That did it. I had an order for fourteen massive plastic casks of my uncles maple syrup. That was over four thousand dollars. The fact that they would be buying and selling it in bulk was important, Mike wasn't equipped to sterilize, fill, seal, and ship small bottles of syrup safely or profitably, so he needed a buyer who would take all of his syrup in these casks instead of fancy little bottles with labels. It took me almost an hour to convince UPS to send a driver up the long dirt road to my uncles place to pick up all that syrup, even though the snow would be light by then. I heard the word NO more than once, but by then my "do the right thing for the small farmer" lobbying skills had gotten pretty advanced and eventually won out.

I know what you're thinking. Obviously, it was wrong of me to imply that Shady Maple is anything but a decent company, and I am sorry about that. As long as I'm coming clean, I should also say that if you visited a swimming hole near Montgomery, Vermont, underneath a covered bridge on a sweltering day in the summer of 1978 and a small unwashed girl told you that the water was infested with bloodsucking leaches and asked if you "had a lighter with you in case you needed to burn one of 'em off" and you got right back into your car and drove all the way back to Montreal without even getting your feet wet, then I also owe you an apology. There weren't any leaches. If I remember right you were a newscaster. Or maybe I just thought you looked like someone from television because you had short hair and were clean-shaven. It was 1978 and it was Vermont. You looked about fortyish to me. Which maybe means you were twenty five. I'm really sorry. You were sort of in my back yard and I had some territory issues and no bathing suit. Still, it wasn't the right thing to do.

Back to the syrup. The sell price would have to be raised, and the store's customer would want to know why, so a logo and company description would be needed for the store's big wooden bulk container. I called Mike with the news, and offered to make a logo. "OK, you can make a logo, but don't give me that cutesy moose and cow crap", Mike had said, "I want something real, something that shows what Vermont is REALLY like." Mike's Vermont was an especially harsh one, and not a lifestyle that could or should be depicted on a bulk foods bin, so I went for humor instead, and drew the image above. He loved it. He told me that when he first saw it that he laughed and

laughed and laughed. My mother loved it too. I consider this - making two rather cynical and wood-stove dependent Vermonters laugh in what must have been February, to be a great personal artistic achievement.

Thanks in part to the lucky timing of a fad diet known as the maple syrup cleanse sweeping through California at about this time, Mikes syrup sold out very quickly. It also did well because it was, in every way, superior maple syrup. I kept a half gallon of it for myself, and found two beautiful old vintage brown glass Mrs. Butterworths bottles to keep it in, corking them with pour spouts. These bottles have lived with me since, refilled as necessary. I even used them in a recipe photo for Weekend Sewing. The Food Coop was thrilled with the experience, and the following year we tried it again but Mike was not well, and the year after that we lost him. We all miss him a great deal. I have a few old jars of Mikes syrup, but can't bring myself to use it except on special occasions. Most of the syrup I buy now is from a producer that comes down to our Greenmarket here in the city from northern Vermont, from a place not far from where I grew up. I buy it just once a year, as much as I can afford in big rectangular tin containers, just a few days after it was made. Its not a freshness thing, syrup doesn't get stale or even go bad. Its just that I like that for a short moment I have that sense of being a part of the process, even if it's the last part. Even if its the easiest part.

Last winter the first bit of syrup started showing up at ourGreenmarket in February. I don't expect to see my guy in town until April, which means I have about a quart of syrup to last until then. When I was at Greenmarket last week I noticed that my favorite farm raised pork supplier has lovely cuts of meat at the moment, and the apple cider from another local farm still tastes exceedingly fresh and this year's squash is still everywhere, so I'm planning to make a roast this weekend using this recipe. I made this last year, for Thanksgiving for my in-laws, its crazy good and surprisinglyhealthy, and so very easy.

So please, as the season approaches, buy some maple syrup directly from a small producer. Its worth every penny. And if you run out before next maple syrup season, I highly recommend the stuff from that wonderful and socially conscious upstanding company, Shady Maple Farms.