

Old-time syrup, new-fashioned values



MICAH LUXEN FOR THE TORONTO STAR

John and Colleen Nyman and their son Shea walk through the sugar bush on their property.

Young Picton couple focus on sustainable farming techniques

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Maple syrup runs in the blood of Ontario farmers John and Colleen Nyman and their toddler son, Shea.

Just as their parents tapped trees for sap many years ago, the Nymans are preparing their Picton sugar bush this spring and they're inviting the public to take part, during Maple in the County, tomorrow and Sunday.

From age 10, John worked at his maple hobby-turned-venture, selling homemade maple candy on the school bus for 25 cents.

"My parents got me started in it," John says. "The family put up 10 buckets and burnt more syrup than we salvaged. That was about 15 years ago."

When he was 12, his parents gave him the lumber to build a sugar shack and John built his first evaporator and firebox with two rows of bricks and an old steel pan.

Today, John and his wife, Colleen, continue tapping, with 580 buckets, as well as raising animals for meat, but the young farmers' main focus is to operate sustainably. Working organically, the Nymans grow their own grain and raise animals and crops without chemicals.

As a representative of Ontario at the Canadian Young Farmers Forum, Colleen is impressed by how sustainability is embraced across the country. "Whether or not a lot of people are adopting sustainability, a lot of people are seeing the value," she says.

"Making money farming is really difficult on any scale. On a huge scale, you can make money to some degree, whichever way you want to farm, but as a small farm, to try and farm conventionally (potentially harming the environment), you might as well be doing it for fun. And how much fun is it to know you're not doing something great?"

"If it's the case that you're struggling to make money one way or the other, it's a no-brainer that you're going to do it the way that's best for the environment."

But working with the right methods from the ground up hasn't been easy for the small family.

"One time Johnny collected for 12 hours in a row, filling 55 gallon pails and I was boiling. It was a 10-minute rotation: check the stove full of wood, go to the woodshed, fill the wheelbarrow full of wood, sit down for three minutes in a really lovely old chair pulled out of a crappy old car, close your eyes and then get back up and put more wood in the stove," Colleen says.

But they smile as they say it's worth it and they look forward to the day they won't pull their hair out to make 25 cents an hour.

This tapping season, five teens, aged 15 to 18, worked the sugar bush in the Nymans' youth development program.

"It's a perfect opportunity," Colleen says. "Everyone loves to learn about maple syrup and it's something that will boost their confidence a little and give them something to put down on their resumé."

Colleen takes the students through a workshop, relating what they're doing in the sugar bush and sugar shack with any other business or organization.

The couple recall that the students' first weekend on the farm was less than ideal.

"When we were done in the sugar bush, we went further in to make a loop with all these kids on the wagon and it was pretty much a dead end," Colleen says. "Everyone was hungry for lunch, but we all decided that it had happened on purpose and was a team-building exercise for us to unhook the tractor, drive it out of the way, hand move the wagon around and hook it back up."

The students are organizing the Nymans' horse-drawn wagon tour during Maple in the County. The event, created by the maple producers in Prince Edward County, features a variety of maple-themed tours. The Nymans' will be demonstrating how maple syrup is made.

"The maple season is great," says John. "The smell of the smoke, watching the sap boil in the pan. By the end of the month and a half, I'm so sick of it, I never want to see it again. By May and June, I can't wait for the season to start again."

For more information on Maple in the County, visit mapleinthecounty.ca.

Sweet to know

Aboriginal people first harvested maple sap. It's thought the sap was heated in hollowed-out logs with hot stones. Forty litres of sap are boiled down to make one litre of syrup.

One tree makes approximately one litre of syrup every year.

Maple sap drips out of trees like clear, sweet-tasting water.

Maple syrup naturally appears light, medium or amber.

The lighter the colour of syrup, the lighter the taste.

Sap runs faster from trees near a creek, because the ground thaws more quickly and the roots take in more liquid.

To tap maples, nights must be cold, to draw sap out of the branches, and days must be warm, so sap expands and flows.

The maple season is usually February to April.

Sap becomes more bitter as the season ends and it ruins trees to tap once buds appear.

Other types of trees can be tapped, such as birch, but the ratio of sap to syrup is 80 to 1 and the syrup is not as sweet.