

Border Farm Maples' syrup wins best in show

by Richard Creaser

DERBY LINE — To hear Roy Davis tell it, winning the best in show award at the 2011 Farm Show in Barre for his medium amber maple syrup is only the second best prize he's ever won. The first, he insists, was winning the hand of his charming wife, Shirley.

"She's done all right as a city girl," Mr. Davis insists.

If anything, Mr. Davis' assertion underlines the fact that sugaring is a family affair at Border Farm Maples. While technology has gradually reduced the amount of hours spent converting maple sap into maple syrup, the support of the family has always been a key ingredient to the farm's success.

In the days before vacuum pumps and reverse osmosis (RO) systems, sugarhouses were often located deep in the sugarbush at the base of a somewhat convenient slope. The arrangement was not unlike the hub and spokes on a bicycle wheel, explained George Cook, a maple specialist with the University of Vermont Extension office in Morrisville. Mr. Cook is also himself a sugarmaker.

"When everything was gravity fed it made sense to do that," Mr. Cook said. "But it could be tough going to get to it, I'll tell you."

The original Border Farm Maples sugarhouse was similarly situated, Ms. Davis recalls. Deep in the sugarbush, getting food to the crew was always a challenge.

"It was all we could do to send the sandwiches up," Ms. Davis said.

"And I bet everyone appreciated it all the more for it," Mr. Cook added.

The Davis' have had a long time to perfect their sugarmaking technique. They bought the farm in 1959 and even then it had an established sugarbush courtesy of the previous owner. A condition of the sale was that the Davis family maintain the sugarbush. A half century later, no one could claim Roy and Shirley Davis have done otherwise.

The exact reason why Border Farm Maples has consistently turned out fine syrup is somewhat of a mystery. Certainly, climate and soils play a role, Mr. Cook said. But every so often a sugarhouse turns out a syrup that simply stands out among the rest.

"Every syrup of every grade has a certain taste to it and they are pretty much the same, or at least, they should be," Mr. Cook said. "But then you get that one batch that makes you stand back and say

"Wow! That is the best!"

Finding that batch was the task before the judges at the annual Vermont Farm Show in Barre from January 25 to January 27. As one of the judges for the maple syrup contest, Mr. Cook is familiar with the process of choosing a winner.

The judges compared each syrup in every category. The categories are fancy, medium amber, dark amber, and B grade syrups. Every syrup grade has a certain distinct profile of clarity, density, and color.

"The ultimate test is through the lips," Mr. Cook said. "More than anything else, when you're selling maple syrup you're selling flavor."

From every category, a few standout syrups would be pulled aside for secondary evaluation. The winner within a category would be chosen from those exemplary syrups. Then, in the grand finale, the category winners would stand side by side and from those four syrups the ultimate maple syrup would be chosen. In 2011 Border Farm Maples' medium amber stood alone above the rest.

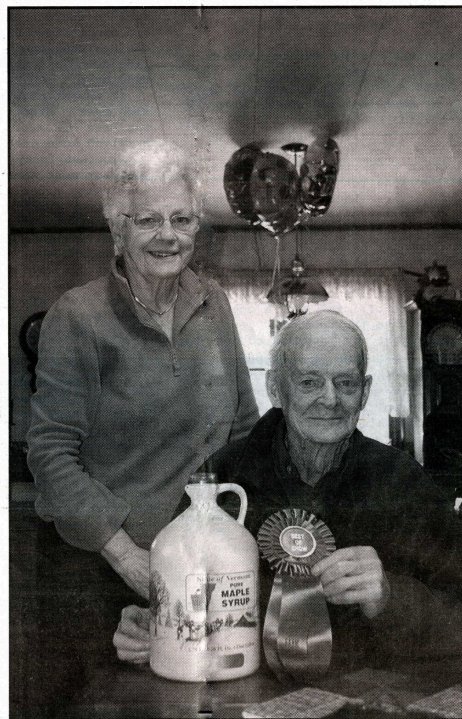
"I don't know how it happened," Mr. Davis said. "We're awful lucky to make a good tasting syrup."

Though the basic premise of sugarmaking is relatively the same, the technology certainly is not. A vacuum pump system allowed the Davis' to move their sugarhouse closer to the road for ease of access. Two feet of snow in the woods might complicate reaching the taps, but at least the slog to the sugarhouse is far less daunting.

The reverse osmosis system enables sugarmakers to cut back on the amount of excess water in the sap, reducing the overall boil time. The general rule of thumb for knowing how much sap goes into a gallon of syrup is determined by dividing the number 86 by the percent of sugar in the sap. A typical sap is 2 percent sugar, meaning it takes 43 gallons of sap to make a single gallon of syrup, Mr. Cook explained.

"If you can increase that percent of sugar to eight or ten percent through RO, you can really cut down on your boil time and the amount of fuel you use," Mr. Cook said. "That is probably the quickest payback on any piece of equipment on the farm."

Border Farm Maples has also just bought a high efficiency wood gasification evaporator. Mr. Davis had asked Mr. Cook if it was a wise investment, and Mr. Cook assured him that it was. A wood gasification evaporator would



Roy and Shirley Davis of Border Farm Maples in Derby Line won the coveted "Best in Show" award at the 2011 Vermont Farm Show in Barre in January for their medium amber syrup. While it marks the first time the Border Farm Maples won the award, the family run operation has certainly worked hard to perfect its craft over the last 52 years. Photo by Richard Creaser

further reduce the energy used by the 4,500-tap sugaring operation by making the fullest use of the energy potential of the wood.

"By the time the wood burns down you're left with just a little bit of powdery residue," Mr. Cook said. "It burns the wood that cleanly."

As much as technology has changed the face of sugaring, economic demands have likewise affected the industry. Though it might seem odd to consider that boiling the sap from a tree might not be considered organic, that is indeed the case. Border Farm Maples has invested a great deal of time, money and energy into earning certified organic status for their syrup.

There are a variety of conditions that sugaring operations must meet in order to be

certified organic. These include the methods used to flush the lines, restricting the additives introduced into the boiling vat to reduce foaming, as well as ensuring that the sugaring operation is environmentally sustainable, Mr. Cook said. The benefit of following these rules is the ability to market your products to a wider customer base at premium price.

"We don't advertise it as organic but it is," Ms. Davis said. "Every year we get a stack of papers to fill out to prove that we are."

The Davis' spoke to Mr. Cook about forthcoming changes in the sugaring industry. They were particularly interested in learning if the Vermont Seal of Quality program would be restored.

The Seal Of Quality program
(Continued on page 10B.)

IN THIS WEEKLY SECTION, YOU'LL FIND: BIRTHS 1 WEDDINGS/ENGAGEMENTS 1 OBITUARIES 1 KINGDOM CALENDAR 1 CLASSIFIED ADS 1 RESTAURANTS & ENTERTAINMENT 1 CHRONICLE CUPBOARD 1 REAL ESTATE & AUCTIONS 1 CHRONICLED HISTORY 1 YOURS FROM THE PERIMETER LAND MORE!

Page 10B

the Chronicle, February 16, 2011

Border Farm Maples takes top prize

(Continued from page 1B.)

was discontinued by the Agency of Agriculture following the agency's inability to properly police the program, Mr. Cook said. The state and producers recognized the value of the Vermont brand but the inability to prevent false or misleading claims diminished consumer confidence in the program. Word is that the agency is revamping the program and may roll it out as soon as later this year, Mr. Cook said.

"If you don't have the will or the manpower to police it, it's not going to work," he said. Though the Seal of Quality program faltered, the state's efforts to preserve the integrity of its maple industry is commendable, he said. "We're very fortunate in Vermont to have our maple laws and the Agency of Agriculture ready to stand up and defend them."

Maple industry associations are also working on creating a definite maple syrup grading system, Mr. Cook said. Though talk of uniform grading has been around for decades, the major players in the North American sugaring industry appear closer than ever to a consensus.

The grading systems vary from state to state and in Canada as well. This serves to make it confusing for consumers, he said. Certainly, individual states will rally hard to incorporate their own distinct systems.

"Vermont sugarmakers will fight to keep their fancy," Mr. Cook said. "While Vermont is a big player in the U.S. market, knowing that 80 percent of the world market comes out of Quebec certainly puts our contribution in perspective. So, they need to balance all of those factors no matter what they decide."

