



BACKYARD BOIL

One Vermont family's maple syrup operation

As a lifelong Vermonter, I know, of course, that the sweetest, most delicious food on Planet Earth is Vermont maple syrup. But until a few years ago, I didn't fully understand the process of how syrup is made.

Gunnar changed that.

Four years ago, on a mild and muddy February day, I brought my then-4-year-old son Gunnar and his then-2-year-old sister Ingrid to check out my cousin Sherwood Morse's backyard sugaring operation in East Montpelier. The kids were impressed with his homemade sugarhouse, the blazing fire in his Leader evaporator, and the sap bubbling madly in the maple pan over the flames.

The kicker, though, was obvious: the maple syrup samples that Sherwood generously handed out in small shot-glass-sized cups.



Previous page: Sugarmaker Gunnar Aiken, 8, collects sap at his family's backyard sugaring operation. Clockwise from top left: Gunnar inspects buckets hanging from a sugar maple. Ingrid Aiken poses in front of the first-year primitive boiling setup, also known as a pile of cement blocks. Mark Aiken checks his upgraded evaporator and maple boiling pan. Sweet reward.



On the drive home, Gunnar was quiet as he processed what he'd seen. Then he uttered five life-changing words.

"I want to do that," he said.

As anyone will tell you, I'm a yes person, so rather than explaining that I didn't really know much about tapping sugar maples, that I certainly didn't know anything about collecting sap, and that I knew nothing—zero!—about how to boil it, I instead answered, "Sure, let's give it a go."

A couple of days later, after a few email exchanges with Sherwood, some Google searches, and a \$36 shop at Agway, Gunnar supervised my drilling of six holes in four maple trees at the end of our driveway. He inserted metal taps and hung buckets. He steered those first sap collections, pulling his red Radio Flyer wagon down the driveway as we poured sap into five-gallon buckets.

That first boil—on Gunnar's fifth birthday—took forever.

Boiling 60 gallons of sap in a stainless-steel buffet tray over an open fire on concrete blocks while kids sledged on our backyard hill took almost 13 hours to yield about a gallon-and-a-half of syrup. For fuel, we mostly used sticks from a brush pile. Boiling off the last gasp of sap was the hardest part, but we finally brought a large pot of almost-syrup up to the propane grill on our deck.

Soft fluffy snow began to fall as we peered through darkness at the readout on the digital meat thermometer we used to tell us the status of our syrup. When the thermometer reached the magic number—sap becomes syrup when it reaches 217 degrees Fahrenheit—three inches of fresh snow had fallen on the railing of our deck.

My wife Alison got four spoons.

I removed the pot from the grill and ladled it onto the snowy deck railing.

With goose feather flakes falling on hand-knit hats, our family scooped fresh sugar on snow off the railing—one of the most memorable and well-earned desserts of my lifetime.

Four years later, we're still sugaring. Gunnar continues to drive our operation, which has seen significant upgrades—15 taps on eight trees, a boiler converted from an 80-gallon steel barrel, and a real maple sap boiling pan we found online.

We also cut two woodpiles each summer—one good hardwood pile for heating our home and one pile of scrub, pine, and hemlock to

power the maple ops. We make just enough syrup to share with friends and family.

The best part of the Aiken maple operation is the year-round focus it gives our family. Maple season stays in the back of mind all year as we make minor upgrades and preparations. Then it culminates with those few weeks every February and March when the days get warm and the nights cold, and we place the taps and make our collection rounds.

Our family's reward on boiling days is that sweet golden gift from the trees that you get when you make your home in the mountains of Vermont.



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Mark Aiken is a Vermont writer and ski instructor at Stowe. He co-authored the guidebook "Hiking the Green Mountains" (FalconGuides, GlobePequot Press) and is working on a guide to the fire lookouts of New England. He lives in Richmond with his wife and kids and prefers Vermont maple syrup on pancakes and in his morning coffee.