

NEWS: Local/Regional

From the heart of their woods to your table

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Matriarch Betty Currey (front center), her son Art (back center) and grandsons John (back left) and Rob (back right) are making things sweet again on the Currey family farm in Charlevoix. After more than 25 years, the family is making maple syrup again.

CHARLEVOIX - In the heart of the maple woods at Currey Farms in Charlevoix, sap flows through an intricate web of blue veins, winding its way through the forest to the sap house where it finds a sweet end.

For the three generations of the Currey family on the farm, the same sap seems to flow through their own veins, carving a sweet and long-lasting place in their hearts. And now, after more than 25 years, they have come together once again to make that sweet smell of maple syrup fill the farm.

“It gets in your blood,” said family matriarch Betty Currey. “Maple syrup gets in your system and you feel you have to do it.”

For Betty, now 84, that love for the sugarbush began when she was a young girl. Her father, Mark Williamson, used to tap trees and carry the buckets of sap out of the woods by horse-drawn wagon. He taught her how, and when she and her husband, Bob, had a farm of their own they continued the tradition. And passed it on to their children.

“One of my early memories was going out to the woods and watching grandpa make syrup,” said Art Currey, Betty's second oldest son. “That was an annual event to go to grandpa's when we were little guys.”

Betty and Bob continued to make syrup, even when they moved in 1973 from their Almont farm to Charlevoix, where Betty still owns 320 acres.

“They made syrup here (in Charlevoix) for four years,” Art recalled. “But my brothers and I were all starting our careers and couldn't help out anymore.”

Then when Betty lost her husband she felt she couldn't keep the maple syrup business going. She sold the equipment and stopped producing.

But Art, now 54, never forgot what his mother and father taught him. So even as he was working as a veterinarian and raising his two sons, Rob and John, with his wife, Jane, in Livingston County, he always carried with him that love for the sugarbush.

“Whenever we would go hunting or in the woods dad would always be looking at the maple trees. I could call dad the syrup evangelist of Livingston County,” Rob recalled with a laugh.

As young boys, Rob and John both learned the art of tapping trees and collecting syrup. They both found that they, too, had a unique passion for the woods and the sweet syrup it produced. So when their dad told them he wanted to retire and return to Charlevoix to rebuild the family maple syrup business, they were both up for the task.

"I had the chance between jobs to come back and work with these guys. I couldn't pass that up," said 24-year-old Rob, who had been working in Boston. "Career-wise this might not be the most lucrative thing. It feels a little like I jumped out of a plane with no parachute. But I really think it's worth it."

John, who is on break before heading off to medical school, said he feels the same way.

"Our family is really close and maple syrup has such a great history in our family. I can't imagine anywhere else I would rather have been for the last five months," said the 23-year-old. "If in 10 to 15 years I could be back here, living on the farm, and making maple syrup in the spring and working at the hospital, that would be a dream come true for me."

Of course, rebuilding the family maple syrup business would take more than just warm memories. It would take a lot of work.

"The engineering and farming aspect is both a challenging and daunting task," Rob said. "There's a huge amount of work to get things up and running."

Before the sap started flowing, it took six people - including friends and neighbors of the Currey family - four days to tap 3,700 trees. Then 15 miles of tubing had to be run from each tree to central lines, which eventually led down to the pumping station and then on to the sap house near the main home. The intricacy of that alone takes some serious engineering.

"It's like a giant puzzle. It's a big process with lots of little parts," John said.

So the Currey family had to become engineers, plumbers, electricians, mechanics and even woodsmen just to get the jobs done each day.

"All my skills have greatly increased," Art said. "The hobby operation was much simpler than this. But you can learn a lot from other sugar makers and suppliers."

Both Art and John have even gone further by attending seminars to further their knowledge of the business in things like how to best manage their woods.

"Wood lot management is one of the most consuming parts of making maple syrup," said John. "It's a lot of chainsaw work, a lot of buzzsaw work. It's all about the canopy."

Art said drawing sap and making maple syrup is "even more fickle than farming" as far as getting your crop. You have to make sure that you tap good trees, ones with a large canopy for better sap production, make sure the right tubing is set for collection and keep the pumping equipment up and running. Then you have to sit back and rely on the weather to create the perfect season: 25 degrees at night increasing to 40 degrees by mid-morning.

"You can expect in a season to get four good days," Art said.

So far the season has been slower than expected, with only some 85 gallons of syrup having been made. Art was hoping to have 250 gallons at this point.

"It's a lot of work but it's a lot of fun to be in the woods," he added.

And the Currey family has no intention of giving up. In fact, they only hope to keep building as they go.

"We hope to do this for a lot of years," John said. "Hopefully my kids will do it, too."

For more information about Currey Farms or to tour the maple syrup farm call (866) 823-3267 toll free or visit www.curreyfarms.com. Currey Farms' pure maple syrup can be purchased by visiting the Web site or visiting the farm, 5358 Barnard Road, in Charlevoix.