



Gaia Dolan, center, and visitors keep warm over boiling sap during the annual Maple Moon party March 19 at Sapsquatch Sugarbush's sugarshack in Enfield.

A SWEET SPOT

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Party at 111 Monroe St., a gathering in February to kick off maple season and get everyone excited for the sweetness this spring will bring. Dozens of pairs of boots line up on the stairs, boots with laces and zippers and straps, brown suede, black leather, green rubber, all practical and worn-in, the boots of people who aren't afraid of a little mud, the boots of people who require more than a couple feet of snow and some blustery weather to keep them indoors.

Maple syrup maker Josh Dolan plays the role of host. His band, Horse and Chariot, keeps the crowd dancing with twangy sounds and bouncing riffs of original country songs.

He sings from behind his bushy auburn beard and black, square rimmed glasses. The men are all beards: pruned mustaches with handlebars reaching toward the sky, proud muttonchops more an extension of hair from the head than facial hair, wispy whiskers falling on upper lips, big black clouds of fur rolling from chins. The sock-clad, braided-hair wives of band members dance hand in hand with their little girls in the center of the living room, their bright smiles encouraging the little ones. No sooner did the band decide to take a break when Josh's mother-in-law Linda announces what many had been waiting for.

"Hey Joshua, I'm doing the pancakes now, with the last

pint of last year's syrup," she proclaims, more to the guests than to Josh, who had consumed plenty of last year's batch and would soon begin constant tastings of this year's. The room cheers, and soon everyone is collecting their share of the warm, pillowy pancakes from a large aluminum pan near the refrigerator collaged with "Free our Midwives" news articles. The pancakes doused in sweet, sticky syrup fare well with grape-maple rum fizz, a grapefruit juice spritzer spiked with maple and rum.

Soon after licking every last drop of the vanilla- and caramel-hinted stickiness from their fingers, the guests, mostly Josh's family and friends, begin signing up for what Josh calls CSS shares, Community Supported Sugaring. These shares provide the necessary start-up capital Josh needs to kick off Sapsquatch Sugarbush's fourth season, while guaranteeing participants a share of the treasure. Since its founding, Josh has invited the community to take part in his maple adventures.

"Sapsquatch is hosting a community workday tomorrow, and I hope some of you join us," he announces. "Chop some wood, carry some water, that sort of thing."

The winter wind howls outside. Gentle snow dances in the air, falling on the frozen earth below, and not even a drop from the 2010 maple harvest remains. Josh knows it must be that time again.

◆ "What does that smell like to you?" Josh's friend Ian asks from behind the black curly beard billowing from his chin, wafting the thick steam rising from a huge tin of boiling, foaming liquid, toward his face.

The sweet smell — the essence of cotton candy, kettle corn, the perfume of winter woodland fairies — permeates the shack for the first time this season. It's the first boil, the first time the bubbles bounce around the freshly cleaned evaporator. Prime time for a preview of what this year's batch will taste like. Josh says every year the syrup tastes a little different.

His first year, the syrup was black as midnight, filled with the nutrients that remained in the old tubes he used. He said it was the best tasting syrup he's ever made but that most people prefer the "fancy" grade — clear, delicate maple with very little mineral impurities. The big, burly boiler digests the wood feast Josh has fed it throughout the day, performing the magic of turning sap — initially mere sugar-water — into the sticky syrup people pour on their pancakes. The steel beast won't starve tonight.

"It's a little cramped in here with all the wood," Josh says, motioning to the stacks of firewood loaded into the sugar shack. He doesn't mind, though; it forces everyone to stay close to each other and close to the source of heat in the center of the shack, essential for surviving the 24 (or more) hours of continuous boiling during frigid winter nights.

"It gets really overwhelming after it gets dark. You start to feel the stickiness all over your face," says Josh's partner, Maybe Yell. Sapsquatch is a family affair; it is built on Josh's uncle-in-law's property. Maybe's girlfriend is Josh's sister-in-law.

"Some say we're in-laws, but Josh says we're more like outlaws," Maybe says.

The shack is an adult's version of a fort in the woods that kids build out of found items. Two sides are fashioned out of

old plastic billboards ("Third-hand stolen property," Josh says), one side is built from wood, and the other is open. The make-shift kitchen is complete with a sink, a long wooden counter, a stereo, a Crock-Pot, some mugs and a propane stove. In a corner just past the evaporator sits a large, wooden trunk overflowing with the tools and toys of the craft: spirals of tubing, rusty clippers, wood scraps.

Josh dumps steel buckets filled with slushy sap into the back of the evaporator, where it melts and soon comes to a boil. The front of the evaporator is violent with bubbles, and each of its five metal troughs boils in its own unique style and pace. One trough is a soft bubble bath with a light layer of foam on top. Another trough simmers with foam-spewing volcanoes of bubbles. The trough above the hottest part of the fire boils most rapidly, the chocolate-brown sweetness becoming thicker and thicker, ready to flow like a waterfall out of the spout on the side of the tank.

Josh keeps careful monitor over the temperature of the boil. Too cold and nothing happens, too hot and the syrup turns black and runs the risk of warping the evaporator beyond repair. A delicate balancing act.

"215 is my nemesis," Josh says, crouching to get eye-to-eye with the old, rusty thermometer, waiting for the mercury to climb to the desired 220 degrees.

The highs and lows predicted on the weather report each morning also determine how much, if any, sap will run from the maples. Freezing nights combined with daytime temperatures above 40 degrees make for ideal syrup weather. Sugar-makers obsess over temperature like no other.

"219... almost there..."

"I hear it's going to be in the 40s this week, we'll be busy next weekend!"

◆ The transport system Josh uses to bring the sap to the shack is beautiful in its simplicity. Lines of baby blue plastic tubing strung from maple to maple are a superhighway of sap in this neck of the woods. A pregnable yet generally trusty system, as Josh rediscovered when he repaired some of the tubing last week. At bird's-eye, the tubes map the trees Josh partners with to sustain his quest for nature's sweetener, a connect-the-dots puzzle leading to the gold. One tree connected to another, connected to another, lines flowing downhill at a precise 2-degree decline, working with gravity to bring the sap home. The fact that most of these lines are firsthand materials is new for Josh; when he first opened Sapsquatch four years ago, he scavenged a fellow farmer's lines. Things have been improving in this part of the woods ever since.

Josh hopes to switch to an all-bucket system in the upcoming years. Buckets like those hung from the largest trees around the shack — old, tin buckets complete with tin hats hung from the special tree-saver taps meant to maintain the vitality of the tree.

"There's something that's spiritually lost with all the tubing, lots of clutter," Josh says. He instructs volunteers to hang the buckets low enough so children can reach them on the community workdays he hosts.

Electricity is limited within the sugar shack. Most of the time, the sunlight gently illuminates the shack enough to accomplish the day's tasks. At night, they light one strand

of large, white Christmas lights, strung from a beam, like 20 small moons, bright, soft and full. There are also two small spotlights, each aimed at the object of attention. But when things really get going, it still can be hard to see, as the gushing steam swirling around the shack absorbs much of the light. Steam so hot and so thick that when it condenses on the beams overhead, it starts to rain inside. *Drip... hiss... sizzle... gone.*

Though a blanket of cold wraps the outside of the shack, it's a warm party inside. Josh cracks open a PBR and his friend Ian passes a Mason jar of hot sap and bourbon around. Take a swig, pass the good stuff. Because the sap is only half-boiled, it is still thin as water, the sweetness tickling the tongue, followed by the splash of bourbon on the throat, each sip heating the body all the way down.

"There's no maple trees where this music was made," Ian says, in reference to the Cuban beats of Ibrahim Ferrer dancing from the stereo, as he sings along in perfect harmony.

"Only coconuts!" Josh says. He and some buddies formed Horse and Chariot a few years back, but his taste in music is not genre-specific. At the beginning of the night, '80s hip-hop pounded, and by the end, even Bob Dylan wanted in on the party.

The whole process of tree to syrup, earth to plate, is evident in this little shack tucked away off Route 79 in Enfield, N.Y. The ground, snow, trees, sap, tank and evaporator work

together in a process that has been happening in this area of the world since Native Americans developed it centuries ago, when maple was first cultivated. The process, with its sense of family and a mission, is what drives Josh and company to return each year. They have plans for building a better kitchen, real walls, even a bed-and-breakfast one day. But for now, it's just a few beams, some old billboards and a syrup operation beneath a hanging sign proclaiming "The Friendliest Place in Town."

◆ The cool blue moon rests low and large on the horizon on the chilly March night as people start arriving to the sugar bush for the annual Maple Moon party. Biggest moon in 20 years, they keep saying. Known as a "perigee" moon, it appears to be about 14 percent larger and 30 percent brighter than a typical full moon, especially when it sits low on the horizon during twilight. The perigee moon makes it an auspicious time for the Maple Moon party, its name sounding as authentic as can be.

Maple Moon parties have been celebrated since the time when the Iroquois nation was the main inhabitant of this land. They would perform a maple dance to encourage warmer weather to make the trees flow. As the Nearings put it in, "The Maple Sugar Book," "This intimate fusion of their work and religious custom is further evidence of the antiquity, the veneration and the knowledge of maple among them."

Many of Sapsquatch's visitors say when they smell the

syrup boiling, they know spring is on its way. And like the Iroquois, Josh and his guests encourage spring by celebrating late into the night, singing, dancing, playing music and enjoying good times around the fire.

"Hey, do you guys know where you're going?" asks Lou, a man with long, gray hair and fiddle, flute and wife in hand, from across the yard. "I went over and asked the goats where to go, but they weren't much help."

They slosh through the thick muddy path to the sugar shack, its translucent walls glowing around the shadows of the group gathered inside. The evaporator still steams, keeping the dozen guests warm, but Josh has collected less sap than he had hoped, and by now, most of it is already boiled.

For Josh, it's nothing to be worried about. He sold \$200 in syrup earlier in the day, and now it's time to kick back and allow the sugar shack to be the place he had intended: a celebration zone, connecting the beauty of nature with the comfort of community. Bliss.

The remainder of the hot sap serves the party well, though. Thomas, a young farmer from Six Circles Farm just down the road, with short, dark hair and an excitement for the land, sips maté made with hot sap. Two weekends ago, during an over-night boil, Thomas went on about the possibilities of maple soda, but for now, maple and caffeine enter the body by means of hot maté.

Ian dunks a mug into the evaporator and carefully pours in a generous splash of Maker's Mark. The hot, sticky concoction warms his hands, his chest, his belly. Others dip into Grade B syrup made fresh today, drizzling it over fresh pancakes that Gaia, Josh's chubby-cheeked, smiling daughter, helped prepare in the kitchen.

"It's all fluid and fire," Lou says, motioning to the evaporator.

"I was the biggest pyro when I was a kid," Josh replies. Though they did not know each other before now, all it took was a mutual passion for fire to form a friendship, if only for tonight. That's how these parties are — some know each other,

others don't; some frequent Sapsquatch often, others have never been here.

Lou sits down on the large wooden bench and pulls out a large drum. He pounds, the low echoes reverberating throughout the shack. *Bam, bada, bam, bam.* Another man with shaggy hair, a wool cap and scraggly beard pulls out a smaller drum, accenting Lou's beats. The music seems to hypnotize the guests as others start drumming on anything they can: big plastic buckets (*Thud, thud, thud thud*), metal spoons on glass mugs (*Ting ting ting, ting ting ting*), even just hands, clap, clap, clapping.

"Oh, oh, yeah yeah, at the sugar shack, at the sugar shack," Lou sings. One of the canine friends lets out a long, robust howl in perfect timing with the drumming.

Later, practically a full orchestra emerges in the shack. Trumpets, guitars, fiddles and the purity of the human voice communicating with the low, cracking hum of the evaporator, warm the shack in a way fire never could.

Gaia and her friend Ramnaya dance around the drum circle. Ian belts Spanish melodies from the bottom of his

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— JOSH DOLAN



Maybe Yell collects boiled syrup from an evaporator. Sap becomes syrup when it reaches 220 degrees Fahrenheit.

chest, eyes closed, chin up toward the light overhead, completely at peace.

"I want this to be a community space for people to get down, drum, have crazy ideas," Josh says. "It's like a laboratory."

If this is his experiment, maple is surely the catalyst.

◆ "Taking sap from the tree is like giving blood," Josh says.

It doesn't hurt the tree because they take only about 10 percent of the stored sap at any given time. Plenty of lifeblood still runs through the tree, bringing precious nutrients and minerals up through the trunk to the very tips of the branches. Since it takes about 40 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of syrup, Josh attaches a \$75 per gallon price to his fine product.

The chilly, wet New York State Maple Weekend draws visitors from all over to sugar shacks throughout the state in mid-March. Josh chose not to "officially" participate because the cost was more than \$300.

Josh only has about 300 taps, an incredibly small operation compared to his neighbors at Cornell University's Arnot Forest, which has more than 2,000 taps.

"It's definitely hobbyists who are at this scale, but it's more than just a hobby for me," Josh says.

Still, guests have stopped by Sapsquatch all week. Josh gave a demonstration to an English as a second language class on Thursday and has continued entertaining visitors since.

"It's fun, and it feeds me spiritually for the rest of the year," he says.

Gaia, probably the most welcome visitor of all, has been out all weekend as well. Most of the time, she can be found just by the *shwoooosh* of her sled darting down the hills.

"It used to be a pain to have her out here, always having to entertain her and give her things to do," Josh says. "Now she's actually a big help."

A curious family, mom, dad, son and daughter, poke their

heads into the sugar shack as Josh invites them in. They stand near a sign written by a child's hand on a torn notebook page, "Free tours! All about sap! Tips welcom [sic]!" Josh shows them around the sugar shack and gives them a few facts about sugaring.

"Gaia has a Japanese word she'd like to share with you," Josh says after the dad tells him they are from Japan.

Gaia looks down and shakes her head.

"You're too embarrassed now? I'm sorry; I put you on the spot," Josh says to his little girl. "She wanted to say konichiwa."

"Oh! Konichiwa!" the mother replies with glee, her face lighting up. She looks over at the sticky jugs lining the counter, still warm with the day's boil, and agrees to buy 1 gallon. Josh asks Gaia

to take the jugs out to the stream to give them a rinse before the family takes one home. Down on her hands and knees, she scrubs the plastic containers on a bridge built a few years ago by Jewish schoolboys on an alternative spring break trip. She proudly brings the cleanest one back into the shack, and the family takes it home.

"I'm trying to inspire other people to get into this," Josh says. "This is a real viable way our state can support itself."

The fact that only 2 percent of the tappable maple trees in New York state have actually been tapped is what drives Josh to host free workshops and teach anyone with an interest in the art of maple sugaring. On the first community workday of the season, most volunteers had never tapped a tree before. Using a battery-operated drill to make a hole in the trunk and a hammer to lightly pound the tap into place, each of the half-dozen volunteers were able to hang a metal bucket from a tap they put in.

Ziiiiiiiiiiiiing, tap tap tap, click.

Wood scrap confetti sprinkled on the snow below each tap, giving further cause for celebration.

During the rest of the year, Josh can be found farming wild leeks and working as a community food garden coordinator for Cornell Cooperative Extension. Though he often works more than 40 hours a week, he still feels strained financially.

"Everyone else is praying for spring this year, but not me," Josh says. "I'd really like to make some money this year."

Despite the financial hardships, Josh finds farming to be a fulfilling lifestyle. Boiling maple syrup and harvesting wild leeks already occupy the first two of seasons of the year; no doubt he could find something else delicious to cultivate during the other two.

"I'm trying to support my family and grow a community," says Josh. "I'm tapping into the independent American spirit. It's a foundation for self-sufficiency."