



Noah, Nell, Suzanna, Helen, Lyda, Jen, Avery, Shai, Mike

THE BUNKER FARM



Producer OF THE *Month*

MARCH 2021

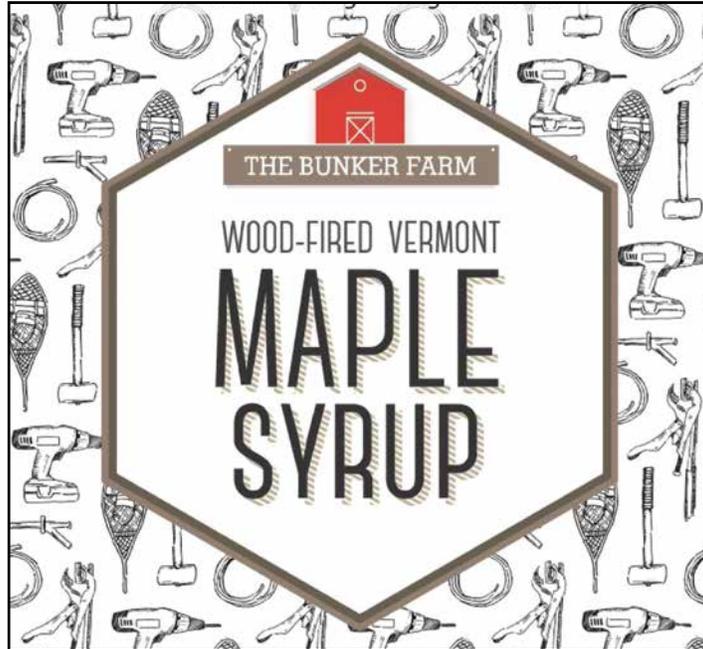


BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer ^{OF THE} Month

The Bunker Farm

by Jon Megas-Russell



Deep in the woods of Dummerston, Vermont, you will find Mike Euphrat working on his sugarbush. Outfitted with a variety of tools, tubes, and taps he works to prepare, upgrade, and or check on his lines that deliver maple sap back to his evaporator on the Bunker Farm. The Bunker Farm is owned collectively by Mike, his wife Jen, her sister Helen, and Helen's husband Noah. It is a multi-faceted farm in which Helen operates a nursery and private gardening business that focuses on rare and specialty annuals and perennials, Noah raises pastured chickens, pigs, turkeys, and cows for a meat CSA, and Mike manages their sugar bush and maple syrup business. It has been a large undertaking that has been tremendously rewarding.

The ownership of Bunker Farm started in 2013 when Noah excitedly shared with Helen, Mike, and Jen that the Bunker Farm was for sale. This conversation kicked off a whirlwind of activity with them executing on the application and interview process that was part of the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program. This program assists young farmers to acquire land otherwise inaccessible due to the high cost of real estate. As a part of the process the four of them were required to put together a business proposal for the farm. Their plan outlined a sugaring operation, meat CSA, and nursery/gardening business. Due to their stellar proposal combined with their collective farming experiences and excellent references, they were awarded

the farm. Essentially, they paid the current agricultural value on the land and the Vermont Land Trust made up the difference to pay the owner the current residential value of the property.

During their first year Helen started their greenhouse for annuals and perennials. Mike planted a large number of vegetables and they started selling firewood. Noah acquired some pigs to pasture-raise in order to begin their CSA. Oh, and Mike and others on the farm installed close to 800 maple taps on a portion of their sugarbush. During that first season they sold their sap to a local maple sugar company to process. On top of this busy first year, both Helen and Jen gave birth to each of their first children. With



beautiful newborns and a large amount of responsibility on the farm, the families realized that they would need to pare down what they offered. Firewood and growing vegetables were omitted from their business plans, and they stuck with annuals and perennials, maple and meat.

Also, in year two of owning the farm, they were offered a lease with approximately 3,000 more taps on a sugarbush in Putney. They took

the lease in addition to purchasing a wood-fired evaporator and installed it in one of their cow barns on Bunker Farm. They collected sap in Putney and drove it back to Dummerston to process with the sap from Bunker Farm. For the first time, finished maple products were sold right at the farm, as well as direct to restaurants and to bulk maple packers such as Hidden Springs and Bascom Maple. They even sell maple nuggets, which were

used a few years back by Tavernier Chocolates in the Downtown Brattleboro Alliance Golden Ticket contest and which Tavernier still incorporates in their Golden Nugget chocolate bar.

Working on the sugarbush is the most rewarding part of owning the farm for Mike. He loves being deep in the woods with tubing, a drill, taps, and a hammer, among other tools. He calls the infrastructure for collecting maple sap in the woods the “untold story” of maple sugaring. It is the most important step in the process and is an amazing agricultural craft that is not often talked about. Maintenance on the taps, trees, and tubes is year-round work, as everything from animals eating through lines to trees falling can occur. Working with the trees to create an intricate network of tubes that runs sap back to the farm brings him joy. In an effort to commemorate the work in the woods, the label for Bunker Hill maple syrup highlights the tools of the trade. It was created by a few close friends who hand-drew the tools for the label design.

Ideal weather for maple sugaring season is below freezing (20s) at night and then sunny days that climb into the 30s and 40s. This means that tapping can start as early as January but often begins in late February or even early March. Mike loves the connection he feels with the trees and the weather during the sugaring season. Witnessing the trees filling tanks with sap in real time based on the fluctuation in temperature is a treat. Once those tanks are full, the farm utilizes reverse osmosis technology to remove much of the water before the sap is placed in the evaporator. An evaporator essentially boils off water and brings forth the sugars that give maple syrup its amazing



Jesse

flavor. On the Bunker Farm they use a traditional wood-fired evaporator that Mike says delivers their uniquely delicious flavor. Creating maple syrup from a wood-fired evaporator takes more time than an oil-fired setup, but it's that "time" that allows for the syrup to take on complexity and a traditional smokiness. With Bunker Farm maple syrup, you are obtaining a single-source batch, with little to no blending that is delivered from a specific confluence of weather events. They obtain different grades of syrup based on the ambient temperature—thus golden syrup comes from colder temperatures, with the syrup becoming darker and more robust as spring and warmer weather approaches.

Sugaring season is extremely exhausting because they must continually work as long as the sap runs. This means firing their evaporator with wood for long hours and

at times with no sleep. Mike made a request to give a specific shout-out and thank you to Rosa Donaldson, Jesse Ackerman, and Matt Bolster who have been integral over the past few years of sugaring and on the farm operation. He also has gratitude for the grandparents who in a normal year provide childcare and cook meals. Mike expressed a deep respect for the Cooper-Ellis family who have been valuable teachers for his sugaring knowledge. Lastly, he wanted to thank the Manix family at Walker Farm who was his employer and teacher for many years before he owned the Bunker Farm.

Growth is not on Mike's mind, as he is quite content with the volume and quantity of syrup they are producing. His partners are also content with the scale of their on-farm meat CSA and Helen's nursery/greenhouse/gardening operation. In regard to the maple operation,

Mike feels they produce a special syrup that delivers flavors not often obtained in the region. A dream of his is to take better notes during the sugaring process and share information unique to each batch of syrup. In particular he would like to share the weather events and other funny stories that helped to make that particular batch of syrup. Syrup can be as complex as beer and wine and thus he wants to deliver more information to customers to enhance their knowledge as they excite their taste buds.

You can obtain many different flavors of maple syrup in many different-size glass jugs right here at the Co-op. Add some syrup to your next shopping trip or curbside order.

