

Sap's running at Warren Farm & Sugarhouse

But sweet season's early arrival worries owners, ecologists

“Mr. Science here,” said Dale Wentworth as he placed three icicles liberated from a freshly cut tree on the stainless steel table top in front of me in late January.

“These are not, are they?” gasped Jan, his wife, in complete surprise.

“They are,” he confirmed, as he walked out of the room.

“Sapsicles,” Jan smiled, answering the question I was about to ask. “This is one of the Native American things. Taste it.”

Not one to be rude, I picked up one of the melting icicles from the table and bit off the end. At first it tasted just like a regular, mid-winter icicle, but I felt my eyes light up in sweet surprise as it turned to water in my mouth and I recognized the sweet, delicate maple notes I have loved all my life dancing over my taste buds.

“The sap is running, this is not a good sign,” said Jan. “We’re not thrilled to see these here, unfortunately.”

Al Gore, somewhere, is nodding his

head in acknowledgement. Dale and Jan Wentworth, owners of the Warren Farm & Sugarhouse in North Brookfield, had just given me my first physical lesson in global warming. On some abstract level I can handle the stories about melting polar ice caps and a potential, far-away-day, underwater Manhattan. But my visit to this beautiful and fascinating farm, which sits on 9.87 acres of land at the end of a dead end street, was the first time I saw how this phenomenon is hitting home, right now.

“We’ve been doing maple for close to 1,000 years in North America,” Jan said at one point. “But if we are able to do it in another 50 years, we’d be surprised.”

For those of us with a sweet tooth or two, that is sad news. Yes, it’s getting warmer earlier and yes, as a result, maples are on the endangered species list. Those gorgeous, amber bottles of syrup won’t be around forever. But life will go on, and if you visit the Warren Farm this March for one of their maple sugaring tours, you’ll see how this small farm is savoring the sweet present while preparing for the future.

Making the most of maple

Jan and Dale bought the farm in

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the mid-1990s and originally used it as a relaxing weekend retreat where they could take a break from the office supply business they owned. In time they learned that the farm had been around since 1847 and at one point spanned over 200 acres. Eleven families owned it over the years, yet none of them did any sugaring. Someone had planted maple trees along a stone wall, though, and one day, Jan and Dale decided to tap a few trees and make some syrup. The sugar bug bit and the rest, as they say, is history.

Neither was raised in a sugaring family, so they taught themselves how to make the syrup and other sugary delights from the sap flowing from their trees. In time they branched out and started collecting sap in different maple-producing areas of Central Massachusetts. They currently own and operate about 4,000 taps in the area.

They decided to offer maple sugar tours to the public during the month of March, when the weather conditions (at least for now) are optimal for sap collecting. Their unique tours effortlessly combine the fun of watching the maple collection and production process with education about the history of the maple industry, from our region’s founding years to the present.

To make their maple last as long as possible, the Wentworths practice a kind of active conservation with the products they sell, and have spent years researching and creating different seasonal products that feature maple yet use it sparingly.

“We knew right away when we got into this that we wouldn’t be able to make tons and tons of syrup,” Jan said. “That’s what led us to decide to develop products that use maple, like the maple mustard, because we could use less maple.”

In addition to the classics (you’ve got to try the candy), they offer a wide



Dale Wentworth taps one of the Warren Farm's maple trees.

variety of maple-based products that put their philosophy into practice for use on non-breakfast meals, including marinades, mustards, and sauces. Their products are available at the farm and at other locations in the region, including other small, local farms and at the Gulf Express rest stops along the Mass Pike.

The Farm's Future Reach

In spite of its small size, there is a lot more to the farm than just maple. Just about all of the companion ingredients used in the maple products, from the fruits in the different jams to the herbs in the marinades, are also grown on the farm. Over 200 trees occupy the farm's orchard, and Jan has plans to use the fruit grown from those trees as the foundation for a possible canning club, where people will come and learn how to can the fruit for future use.

Heirloom vegetables—tomatoes in particular—are another farm specialty. Heirloom vegetables are grown from seeds that have been in families for generations, not ones that have been formulated in a lab. If a crop fails or is hit by a natural disaster, farmers often turn to heirloom seeds to help them adapt to changing conditions and recover from whatever crop failures they may have encountered. The Warren Farm's collection includes seeds from all over the world.

"They're a piece of history but they also end up being what saves us in the future," Jan said.

Getting people more educated and involved with food production is one of the farm's goals. By selling their products at local farmers' markets and offering different events at the farm, they have joined the ranks of other "agri-tourism" destinations. They ultimately hope to offer seasonal events where, after visiting areas of the farm, people will end up eating the things that are growing at the time of their visit.

"Our focus is to get people to re-appreciate local agriculture, the things that are grown and produced locally," Jan said with a smile.

You will do just that if you visit the Warren Farm. Though small, it's clearly a special place that touches a lot

of people, whether on the farm itself or at a rest station along the Mass Pike. ●

If You Go: The Warren Farm will offer guided Maple Sugaring Tours to the public Saturdays and Sundays from March 1 through March 30 at 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. School groups can schedule tours Mondays through Thursdays during school hours. Scouts should schedule tours after school Mondays through Thursdays or at 9:30 on Saturday mornings. Admission is \$4 and reservations are required. Call

508-867-0174 to save your spot.

The Warren Farm and Sugarhouse is located on 31 Warren St. in North Brookfield, just a few blocks away from the center of town. Look for the sign at Bell Street. The farm's Maple Store is open year round Thursdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Wentworths also visit a variety of farmers' markets and host various events throughout the year. For more about the farm, visit warrenfarm.com or call 508-867-0174.

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