

Backyard Sugarmaking Sensation: The Sapling

This Montpelier couple's invention is a new option for hobbyist maple sugarmakers.

Story by Sarah Weiler/Photos by Philip R. Jordan and Sarah Weiler

STEAM SO THICK YOU CAN'T SEE THE PERSON standing next to you in a sugarhouse...the sweet and earthy smell of boiling sap...the bite of late February and early March challenged by the blaze from within a 16-foot-long stainless steel evaporator—this is the image of traditional

sugarmaking in Vermont, the one you find on postcards and paintings. These days, however, another kind of sugarmaking image comes to mind, this one belonging to the hobbyist: the person with both maple trees and a taste for syrup, but not the time nor tools for serious sugaring. These are the people

who, at one point, have likely made the kitchen wallpaper peel while trying to boil maple sap in a turkey-roasting pan. At least that's what Vermonters Justin McCabe and Kate Whelley McCabe first used.

It was the early 2000s. Kate and Justin had just moved back to New England from Ohio, where, after college, they met while working together as managers for a car-supply company. Kate had graduated with a degree in economics, Justin in chemical engineering, and, when they reached quiet and cold Montpelier, they applied those interests toward becoming licensed attorneys. So how is it that two lawyers—Kate of finance, Justin of intellectual property law—have come to be leaders in the hobbyist sugarmaking community?

Blame that turkey-roasting pan. The McCabes moved to the



PHOTO BY PHILIP R. JORDAN

Justin and Kate McCabe of the Vermont Evaporator Company demonstrate the Sapling, their cleverly designed response to the (previous) lack of an affordable, small-scale sap evaporator.



Sugarmaking has always been demanding work, but the McCabes have put the elements of fun and convenience into it with their invention; at an open house boiling event (above), Kate tends the Sapling while Justin (below) hauls wood to keep its fire hot.

outskirts of Montpelier a handful of years ago with their two small children, Elke and Seamus. There, the red maples that surround their current home lured Justin and Kate into sugaring, something they had been exposed to as children but which they had never tried themselves. Wanting only to make a few gallons of syrup, they thought the turkey-roasting pan would serve them well. What they soon discovered, however, was that their kitchen tools were no match for the demands of sugarmaking—it took \$50 of propane to make only three-quarters of a gallon of syrup.

Discouraged, they tried brewing beer the following year, but beer just wasn't what they dreamed of when they looked at those red maples. Where she grew up in New Hampshire, Kate lived close to longtime residents of the area who sugared every year. "They were like 10th-generation New Englanders," she says, "trade workers who got off work at 3:00 and would boil until midnight." Walking home from school in the slush of mud season, she and her siblings were drawn into the sugarhouse by the sweet smell of boiling maple sap. For their efforts to help watch the boil, they were given a cup of syrup to drink. Determined to forge their own connection to this New England tradition, Kate and Justin decided to try sugaring again, but they would need something better than a pan from their kitchen to do it.





"Sugaring is a social activity," says Kate, and accordingly, popcorn, cider, and other treats (above) awaited guests at an open house event. Below, efficiency in action: cold sap in the bucket flows through a pre-heating coil around the smokestack to warm it before reaching the boiling pan.



Justin has always been what Kate calls a "serial hobbyist," wanting to know how things work, what they're made of, in which directions they can go. Over the years his interests have included working on cars and motorcycles, carpentry, home brewing, running, biking, skiing, and playing hockey on an annually built rink in the backyard. It makes sense then that Kate wasn't surprised by his response to the lack of an affordable small-scale sap evaporator on the market: inventing his own. "I wasn't really taking it seriously," says Kate as she remembers the day Justin went into the garage to test out his initial ideas for an evaporator. "I just thought, oh there he goes again making noise and strange smells." But he was making more than that.

Made chiefly from a new 55-gallon stainless steel drum that has been cut to fit a pan for boiling sap, Justin's evaporator, called the Sapling, is both uniquely its own shape and reminiscent of a backyard grill—appropriately so, too, because in the off-season when sap isn't running and sugaring tools are left to linger, the Sapling can be adapted to become a wood-fired grill for cookouts. "There's a metal pan that looks like it's welded in," explains Kate. "That actually comes out. And then you put down grill grates that come standard with the unit." Always one for exploration, Justin continues to experiment with new ideas of stretching his invention's limits. In the coming years, accessories such as a lid and a baffle to diffuse heat will be made available that convert the Sapling into a meat-smoker and a home-brewing station.

Every spring now, the McCabes gather around a Sapling and watch the steam billow as sap from their red maples moves through the pan. And this time it's Elke and Seamus who sample the syrup when it is ready to be drawn off. "Whenever we sugar we always have little coffee cups for them," says Kate, "and they'll ask us where in the pan they can dip." But sweet tastes from the pan and amber baths over pancakes wasn't all the Sapling brought to their lives. This small, unassuming evaporator also pivoted Kate and Justin's careers in an entirely new direction: business. So impressed themselves with how well the Sapling worked, and how affordable it was to build, they tried selling a few locally. From there, it was only a matter of time before the Sapling "took root" and became the champion product of the McCabes' own business in Montpelier, the Vermont Evaporator Company.

To Kate, "sugaring is a social activity," but she's not just talking about hanging around and visiting while sap boils; she's also talking about the way she and Justin run their company. A blog on their website addresses maple sugaring, boiling directions, maple recipes from "Auntie Kate" (so called by her nephews), and a general celebration of the small-scale, do-it-yourself sugarmaking community, which had been mostly difficult to connect with until now. "There wasn't a product on the market," says Kate. "There wasn't an easy-to-find community. You could find one for home brewing, for keeping bees, but not for this. There's a hole in the market for people who are [sugarmaking] hobbyists."

Running their own company means Kate and Justin get to make the big decisions themselves. "Nobody but myself and my customers has expectations of me at work," says Kate. "And I'm really comfortable with those expectations. I'm a taskmaster, and I really value my customers, and so that makes it easy. I'll be here on a Saturday if I need to." This dedication has paid



Two different versions of the Sapling, which sells for about half the cost of setting up a hobbyist sugarhouse (it requires no building cover) and can easily be adapted to become a wood-fired grill for cookouts and a smoker, as well.



off, as the Vermont Evaporator Company has enjoyed tremendous success since its inception in 2016. And, as it turns out, this unexpected plunge into entrepreneurship isn't as jarring as one might expect—in fact, it is actually made *easier* by Kate and Justin's experiences as attorneys. "Things are not unconnected," says Kate, who has been a vital voice in the company's financial matters. "When you're running a business you have to comply with a lot of regulatory schemes," she explains. "It's easier for me [as an attorney] to both locate and understand those types of things." For Justin, understanding the particulars of intellectual property law has helped apply for patents on the Sapling.

Traditional sugaring has always been demanding work, starting in the days well more than 150 years ago when a white plume of steam rising from the middle of the woods in March or April marked a small clearing, a gathering spot to which wool-clad farmers carried sap in wooden buckets slung from yokes carried on their shoulders. There, in the open, a simple fire and crude evaporator or even a cauldron served to make maple syrup. Longtime sugarmaker of West Rupert, Axel Blomberg, remembers seeing the remains of these ancestral boiling areas when he walked through the woods as a child with his father, uncles, and brothers, collecting sap from the trees of a 300-acre farm in the 1940s.

Axel is a large-scale sugarmaker, producing roughly 1,200 gallons of syrup each year and selling it both locally and around the world. His parents' farmland is home to a large portion of the 6,000 trees he taps each year—quite a different setup from the hobbyists' backyard bounty. But Axel appreciates the appeal of a simple and efficient backyard evaporator, because he knows firsthand how complicated the large-scale sugaring process can be.

When he was a child, sap was carried to the sugarhouse by bobsled and a team of horses in a galvanized container called a gathering tank. During the years, the sled was replaced by a wagon, then later by a tractor (once even a bulldozer when the going was particularly tough), and now Axel relies on a plastic gathering tank in the bed of a sturdy pickup. On his property in West Rupert, a hand-painted wooden sign for Axel's Sugar House announces the entrance to a small building containing a 5-foot-by-16-foot stainless steel evaporator. This sugarhouse began as nothing but a tin roof when Axel first started sugaring on his own. All the money he made selling syrup was at first invested back into the operation until he was able to bulk it up to what it is today, with specialized equipment and a 2,000-gallon tank of oil that fuels the evaporating pan.

But while Axel is established in his own sugaring community now, his path to sugarmaking, although undoubtedly fortuitous, was impulsive like the McCabes'. His wife, Donna, of 55 years, says he has done a little bit of everything in his life, including selling potatoes, strawberries, firewood, deer hides, gloves, and even oil. After going to Korea as a member of the U.S. Army's Civil Corps as a radio operator, he fell in with a carpenter on base and learned enough about his trade to be hired as a foreman at a major woodworking company in Granville, New York when he returned home. "Seemed like I fell into something good every time I turned around," he says. But, all the while, he was sugaring, simply because it was a natural thing for him to do. In fact, it was from the company in Granville that he got a steady supply of kiln-dried wood to heat his



The charm of making one's own maple syrup hasn't changed a bit for Axel Blomberg of West Rupert, who first tried making syrup the backyard way; he now taps 6,000 maple trees each year. His rustic-looking sugarhouse started out as nothing more than a tin roof out in the open.





Sugarmaking as it was on the Blombergs' family farm, with sap carried in tanks on horse-drawn bobsleds, and in the days when sugarhouses were first built to house evaporators, replacing the use of open fires and cauldrons to do the boiling.

evaporator with for years. Mention his sugaring history, and he'll shrug, saying it comes down to the peculiarities of life. Mention the McCabes', and they'll say the same thing.

Old and new, the charm of making one's own maple syrup has not changed. Axel tried his hand at backyard boiling himself when his own children were young, to teach them how it worked. Using an aluminum pan to boil sap over a campfire behind the house, all went well until they had to leave it unattended for half an hour. "We went in the house for supper," he remembers, "and when we came out the pan was gone—it melted." This is the reason stainless steel is used for modern evaporators, including the Sapling. "They're using the right materials," says Axel, who considers the Sapling a clever design. "Some of these simple things turn out to be real, real good," he adds. "I wouldn't be surprised if it [the Sapling] turns out to be more practical [than other small-scale sap evaporators] because it functions as a grill, too."

These days the manufacturing of Saplings is streamlined, but, like Axel, the McCabes had to learn a lesson in materials before it got to be that way. At one point in the initial building process, Justin decided they weren't going to buy previously used barrels anymore. "Part of the lure was repurposing," says Kate. "But it's not always the case that what people tell you was in the barrels was what was actually in the barrels. So we're not messing with whatever was inside or whatever was outside." Specifically, by "outside" she means paint. Some of the first drums Justin tried to use were coated with paint that couldn't withstand the heat necessary for sugaring; it would flake. To prevent this, the current Sapling's paint holds up against temperatures up to 1,200 degrees.

Like Axel and Justin, Kate has her own hobbies. One of those is gardening. But it is not just about planting things and helping them grow for her—she prefers to break new ground, literally. "I like to cultivate things that haven't been cultivated," she says. "I like strange things." An appropriate attitude from someone who, with her family, has taken the hobbyist sugarmaking market by surprise with an invention that fits just so where it's been planted. The Vermont Evaporator Company, and the Sapling, are still in their early growing stages, but that growing is happening fast—each year Saplings sell and pre-sell out with the same vigor that made the first 10 disappear from Craigslist in 2015, for \$785 a piece (Saplings are now \$825), with production doubling from 110 in 2017 to 220 in 2018, and the McCabes now have their own warehouse in Montpelier. They aren't just tapping trees—they're also tapping success.



Sarah Weiler lives in Sandgate, VT with her family. A recent graduate of Southern Vermont College, she aspires to attain a career in writing. Her first novel, *The River Tines*, has recently been published as part of the Shires Press Publishing Program in collaboration with Northshire Bookstore.

JUST THE FACTS

The Vermont Evaporator Company

157 Pioneer Center, Suite 1

Montpelier, VT 05602

Call (802) 552-8499 or visit vtevap.com.

