

SOMETHING SWEET

"It's a big network with a lot of moving pieces, and, you know, every season, something comes up. There's always something new and exciting."

Jenna is the 4th generation in her family to live on the land known as Baird Farm in North Chittenden, VT. The Farm that now encompasses 585 acres of forest, field, and sugarbush, has been in the family since 1918. Jenna's great-grandmother made maple syrup on a very small scale, had a few milk cows, and ran a guesthouse in the old farmhouse. Great grandma taught her dad, Bob, how to sugar on the stovetop in the house. Jenna does like to poke a little fun at her dad. "According to Bob," she says, "he started sugaring at the age of two — or was that one." Jenna's parents actually met at the farm when her mom, Bonnie, was working at the guesthouse during summer breaks. Family history runs very deep on the Baird Farm, as does knowledge about the sugaring industry and the land handed down through generations.

Much like forestry or any endeavors connected to working the land, maple



JENNA

sugaring is a male-dominated world. Jenna notes that this is beginning to change for the better, but remembers early workshops and conferences where the men were working together and learning while the women were preparing and serving the food for lunch.

Jenna and partner Jacob both went off to college after high school and then traveled for about six months as part of "WWOOF," World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. They acquired a wealth of knowledge and experience on farms around the world, but they quickly realized that they needed jobs. After living and working for a year in Eugene, Oregon, Vermont beckoned, and they returned home in 2015. As it happened, Bob's

farmhand was aging and he needed help. So, Jenna and Jacob went to work. It was actually her first experience working in the woods and although it's very physical work, she loved it.

You would think with the long history of sugaring on the farm that Jenna would have grown up "in the family business." She loved the sugar house and would sometimes accompany her dad when he tapped or looked for vacuum leaks, but Bob never pressured his children to be involved. Jenna actually worked for a farmstand up the road, Woods Market Garden in Brandon, Vermont from the time she was in sixth grade.

Ownership of the sugaring business has been a transition for the couple, occurring in several stages. Initially, they both worked for Jenna's parents. After a few years, they were interested in owning the retail maple business so it was split off from syrup production. At this stage, they were buying syrup in the drum from her parents, bottling, and retailing it. The next step was owning the entire maple business — production and retail — so the two businesses were again combined and are now owned by Jenna and Jacob. In essence, they lease the land from Bob and Bonnie who still own it and have a conservation easement through Vermont Land Trust. "They make a lot of the woods' decisions but we have a lot of conversations and are almost always on the same page about everything," Jenna says. Conservation is a priority for the family. "When we returned we were like 20-something and my Dad was skeptical that we could make a living here," says Jenna, "but we worked really hard at marketing, had to figure out what worked for us, and we've done it!"

Although they don't own the woodlands, Jenna and Jacob's livelihood depends upon the woodlands and sugaring business. Jacob focuses more on the woods and production; Jenna manages the retail side. But they make business decisions together. Most of Jenna's time is spent working the retail end of the business now, but she comes by her love of the land and of working outdoors through her father. "My dad's very, very passionate about land conservation."

Today, Jenna talks about the complexity of producing and retailing maple syrup. She and Jacob manage everything, from tapping the trees all the way through to packing and shipping the maple syrup. The sugaring operation is supported by 14,000 trees, spread across 240 acres of Baird Farm land and other land leased from neighbors. "It's a big network with a lot of moving pieces, and, you know, every season, something comes up. There's always something new and exciting." Technology continues to change the industry, requiring new investment and new skills.

They are certified organic maple producers and also certified through the Vermont Sugar Makers Association's Sugarhouse Certification program. Jenna and Jacob pushed for organic certification when they

returned in 2015.

Although it requires regular inspections and a forest management plan for the woodlands, the pair believes that it differentiates their business and adds safeguards that are good for the forested landscape, too. Inspectors often choose to show up in the height of the sugaring season, so finding those hours to devote to the inspection can be challenging when the sap is running. “But,” says Jenna, “they are passionate about having a sugarhouse that is up to those high standards.”

The family thinks about succession planning. Jenna has a sister who lives in New York City and while they have different lifestyles, they share a history on the family farm and include her in conversations. They understand that the key to maintaining good relationships is being really open about everything. Jenna and Jacob have no plans to go anywhere and have taken advantage of available in-state resources. They worked with Mark Canella from the Maple Benchmark Program and Sam Smith from the Farm Viability Program for assistance in building the maple business. Jenna says, “Our advisors are kind of like our ‘Farm Therapists.’” They’ve helped us a lot and we’re still getting advice when we need it.” Bob and Bonnie have completed an Estate Plan that will provide for the Farm to

remain in the family for another generation.

Jenna speaks about the need for farm diversification. “Don’t put all your maple trees in one parcel,” she says. She and Jacob think a lot about global warming and seasonal changes that can impact sugaring. “When your job and livelihood depend on the weather at a specific time of year, the fluctuations can be quite worrisome.” Seasons can be boom or bust, and that calls for some real strategic thinking in terms of how much syrup you need to carry over from one season to the next, especially when your income is derived from forest products. But the couple is totally invested in expanding product offerings and growing the retail business. “It is a lot more work, but we really enjoy it,” Jenna offers. They have one employee who works in the woods and the bottling room, allowing Jenna more time to focus on expanding markets, especially restaurant accounts.

“Agritourism is also a big part of the farm plan,” says Jenna. People love to visit and learn about the process. Farm tours are available Wednesday through Sunday and can be scheduled on the website. This saves Jenna a lot of time emailing back and forth with people, but she still gets those occasional groups that just show up. This might call for a shorter tour and a tasting, but there’s always a way to accommodate. Many “tasters” remember this Vermont experience and become long-term customers.

Yearround, there is work to do in the woods, from replacing tubing and trunk lines that come down off the mountain to drilling and placing new taps. It’s important to get the new holes in the right location so that vertical scar tissue doesn’t block the flow of sap.

Jenna has a “tree cookie” with tap holes in the Sugarhouse that she received as a Christmas gift – her Christmas Cookie – that’s a great demonstration piece for what the tree looks like inside. “There are trees out there that my great-grandmother tapped that we still tap, which is kind of neat,” says Jenna. Although there have been past harvests, as the maples age or get unhealthy, they are left to finish off their life in the woods. Introduced species also require attention, but all removal must be done manually because of the organic certification. The lines in the woods are all above ground, but anything in the fields is buried, along with miles of underground lines to the pump stations, eliminating the need to collect and truck sap from anywhere on the farm. Although Jenna uses “we” to describe most of the work, she quickly explains that when it comes to the excavator, that’s strictly Bob’s bailiwick, even though Jacob might be itching to use it.

The retail side of the business has customers across the country and around the world, although Jenna readily admits that international shipping can have its challenges. During ski season, there are lots of visitors from the northeast; foliage season brings them from much further away. “One of the main goals is to establish relationships with customers. “They are not just any customer. We encourage folks to follow us on social media and subscribe to the newsletter. If anyone reaches out on Facebook, I respond,” says Jenna.

Although Jacob spends more time on the land, Jenna describes her relationship with the woods as “generational,” based on all the time she and her family members have spent there. “You become familiar with certain trees and with certain areas, like

the twin elms on top of the hill.”

Jenna’s sister got married in the open field near those trees, so it’s a very special spot. And the property has no shortage of spectacular western views across the mountains. Walking up the hillside, taking a break to enjoy the panoramic view of the farm and Middle Road is an experience that runs deep for the whole family. This land that supports their business is food for the spirit that has nourished this family for generations.



Jenna handing out maple syrup samples.

