
KEEPIN' IT LOCAL

By Karin Edmondson



The sap house at Spruceton Valley's Sugar Moon Maple Farm. Photo by Karin Edmondson

Spruceton Valley, a singular place of beauty, exuberant wildness too, nestles in between the Hunter Range and the Lexington Range in the Northern Catskill Mountains. The valley is a place of scattered homesteads—most houses are occupied only in the summer months—and discreet access to strenuous hiking trails along the Devil's Path with nary a hiker on the trail. The area is a bushwhacker's dream: hemlocks and, further up the mountains that enclose the valley, firs and spruces create thickets of tangled brush that, with enough curiosity and sheer doggedness, yield a gift of sunny exposed rock—large enough for a mountaintop tête à tête with a new love. It is a place that both lures and haunts me with some sort of irrational addictive force. My mother lives in Spruceton Valley. My friend Mark used to live at the very far end of Spruceton Valley. Last summer, my life there was distilled—sharp and fast—down to death, love, loss and heartache. Life in Spruceton Valley is honed to an essence that is perhaps a bit more rugged, dangerous yet also soaringly gorgeous than anywhere else in the Catskill Region. The closing of a former logging road that accessed Route 214 from Spruceton Valley Road effectively secluded the valley, caused the shuttering

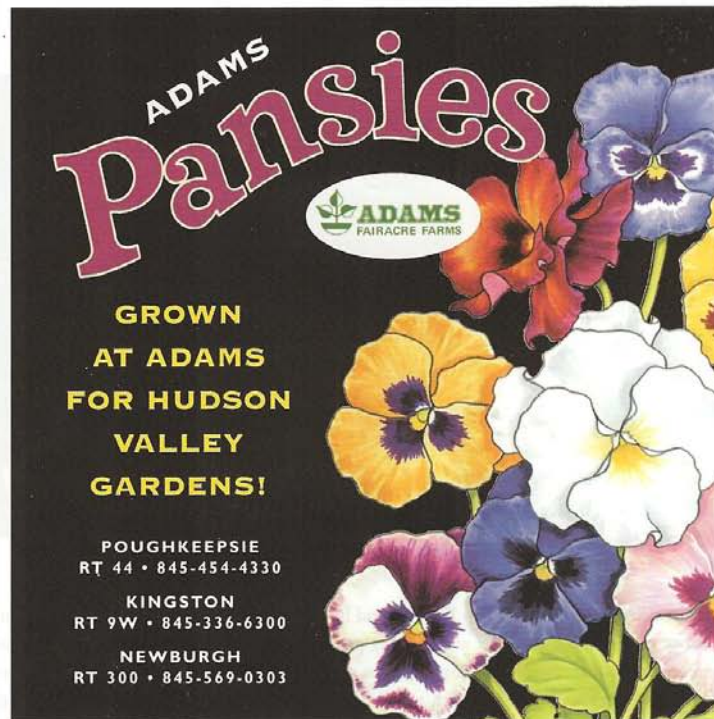
of restaurants, taverns and—rumor has it—even a bordello or two, and has allowed for the return of mountain lions who harbor no remorse at taking two horses for a meal last winter. Even sap from the *Acer sacharum* runs sweeter in Spruceton Valley.

Sugar Moon Maple

Terroir—or the taste of place, “the sum of the effects the local environment has on the manufacture of the product”—is a word oft tossed around in discussions of food products, including maple syrup. The sap in maple trees run the length of the tree from root to crown only on the very outermost layer of the tree, the portion that is directly under the bark. Roots pull up groundwater and nutrients from the soil so the location of the tree—north slope, south slope, river basin, pastureland—affects the sort of life force the tree is able to draw from the ground. “I’ve had real maple syrup aficionados from all over New York State, Vermont and Maine tell me that our syrup is special, that it is the best tasting syrup they’ve ever had,” says Tim Barcone of Sugar Moon Maple in Spruceton Valley. Tim points to his trees, most of them fifty year old sugar maples that don’t look their age.

The Barcones have two stands of sugar maples ("the upper sector and the lower sector"), both of them on the south slope of Rusk Mountain in the Lexington Mountain Range. The trees stand on rocky slopes so "they're pulling up a lot of minerals." The trees grow slower on the rocky soil and form a dense, hard wood, more so than trees that might grow in a fertile pastureland. According to Michael Kudish, author of the exceptional book *The Catskill Forest: A History* (Purple Mountain Press), soil or "bedrock" in the Catskill region "is largely sandstone...followed by an abundance of shale...the remaining several percent is the exceptionally coarse grained, gravelly sandstone known as conglomerate or, locally, puddingstone. Limestone, although abundant in the Hudson Valley, is uncommon in the Catskills except for the occasional stray breccia boulders..." A *New York Times* article from December 2006 entitled "Fresh From Vermont's Maples, A Taste of Terroir" published the results of a study at the University of Vermont that "concluded that syrup produced from trees on limestone bedrock had the highest quantities of copper, magnesium, calcium and silica which scientists hypothesized had a role in the taste. Shale syrups came in second in all of these substances, followed by schist." In essence, sugar maple trees that grow on rock make syrup higher in mineral content thus perhaps, better tasting. The maple syrup from the Barcones's trees is special, with a mellow, rounded orb of sweetness and no edgy aftertaste. The experience on the palate is sweet and mellow, enticing and voluptuous from start to finish.

The afternoon of my visit in late February, a comparatively warmish day in the low thirties, the sap had only commenced its run a few hours earlier, when the sun was at its zenith in the sky. "Earlier this morning, the sap was still frozen when we pulled the bark away. It was still frosty, nothing ran except on



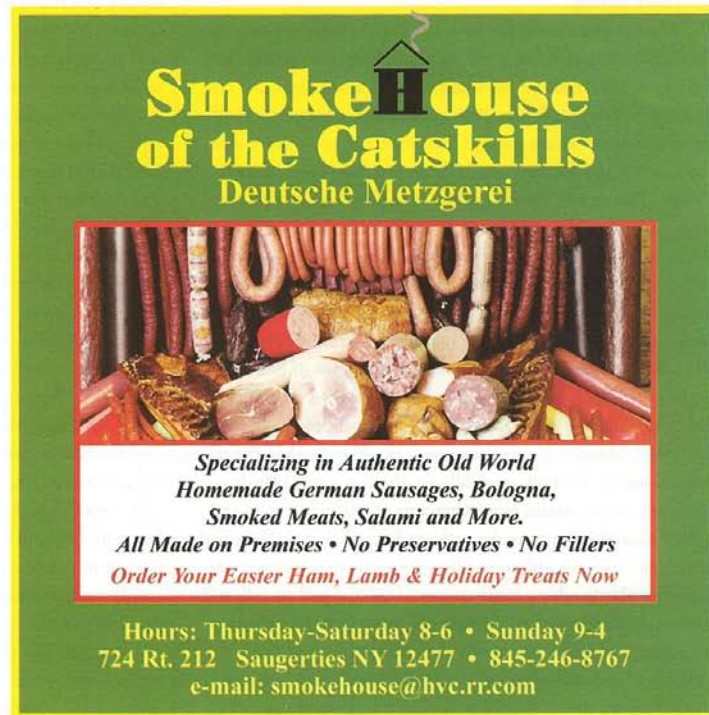
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southern trunk exposures." Tim Barcone and his son, Michael, a history major at SUNY Ulster and aspiring political science major, were out in their forest, tapping trees with a minimum four to five inches in diameter with a drill. "A day like today will yield a short flow time, especially after mostly grey cold weather we've been having."

The Barcone family has been tapping their maples since the early 1990s thanks in large part to Uncle Pete (who passed four years ago), who initiated the tradition with much vigor and creative savvy. Tim recalls how Pete would finance his yearly southern vacations by packing up his Suburban and trailer with jugs of maple syrup and selling them at campsites from New Jersey to Florida. Tim says he decided to renew his brother's syruping tradition in earnest three years ago "in order to make something out of nature." This year Tim and Michael have 1200 taps on trees in both sectors. The Barcones use the plastic tubing method of collecting the syrup. (Last summer, on a bushwhack up Rusk Mountain, my friend Mark lost his sense of return direction and we wandered right into the Barcone's upper sector of blue-tubed maple trees which had the vaguely surreal air of an art installation, a sort of trees in bondage motif.) Michael points out that the plastic tubing is more environmentally friendly than the traditional bucket method, especially for the Barcones's hillside operation, which would require tractors or trudging horses and culling trees in order to make paths and access routes. The plastic tubing method also utilizes smaller taps so there is less tree scarring. The plastic tubing route uses gravitational pull to collect the sap and sluice it downhill through the tubes into the collection container. The Barcones employ the traditional wood fire method, as opposed to oil heat to boil down the sap into rich syrup. "We do things the old fashioned way when it comes to

boiling sap. Ten hours boiling with a wood fire will yield about ten to fifteen gallons of syrup—from about 700 gallons of sap—a day, as opposed to an oil burner which can produce 60 gallons of syrup per hour." Sugar Moon Maple has available the following: Grade A Fancy, which yields from the first sap flow ("Some folks say the first run is the best but it's mostly myth," says Tim), Grade A Medium, Grade A Dark and Grade B maple syrup as well as maple sugar and maple sugar candy. "This year's experiment is maple butter," says Michael.

Tim's wife, Janice, designed the distinctive and atmospherically apt electric purple, violet and yellow Sugar Moon Maple label that captures the curves of the mountains which animate—and the giant orb of February's Sugar Moon that illuminate—Spruceton Valley. "A sugar moon is very amber, like maple syrup, in color and is the last full moon in February." Sugar Moon Maple Syrup is available for purchase directly from the Barcones. Please call Tim at 518 989 6462 or at Black Bear Hollow Café on Route 28 in between Shandaken and Phoenicia. For more information, visit blackbearhollow.homestead.com or call 845 688 9800. Maggie's Krooked Café in Tannersville (518 589 6101) has Sugar Moon Maple Syrup on the menu and, if you find yourself in Powder Springs, Georgia or in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, you'll be able to find Sugar Moon Maple Syrup at select stores as well. "We also have this one customer who has a house in Thailand and he'll buy several gallons each year to keep himself in maple syrup supply in Thailand." Tim states there is a maple syrup shortage—"Canadian reserves are dry"—so be prepared to pay a little extra (about \$10 per gallon) this year for real maple syrup. The taste of place, savoring a bit of what makes a region—soil, water, air, sunlight, vegetation and that certain ineffable natural resonance—special is indeed worth it.