



# TAPPING INTO A SWEET HERITAGE

## *Operator engineers 17-acre wood lot for maximum maple syrup production*

**L**ocal 139 member Jesse Wagner was a little boy when he took interest in what his father did.

His dad, John Wagner, now a retired Operating Engineer, ran heavy equipment for a living and also got Jesse interested in tapping trees to make maple syrup.

Jesse is a foreman for Vinton Construction Co. and has been an Operating Engineer since 1991. He also developed an incredible interest in fine tuning the art of producing maple syrup.

Jesse's prime piece of real estate in Manitowoc County is made up of



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**Shane Griesbach**  
Business Agent/Organizer

1,000 or so sugar maples on 17 acres. The trees range in age from 40 to 200 years old.

Last year Jesse produced a whopping 610 gallons of award-winning, crystal-clear maple syrup with the help of his wife, Margo, and his father. Jesse engineered his operation through the

years to involve less labor and maximize harvesting ability.

This hobby was started many years ago using 5-gallon pails, which led to 500 pails hanging on the trees around his home at one time. To increase his yield and decrease labor costs, Jesse installed a tubing system which consists of 5/16-inch tubing coming from a tree which then goes into a larger, 1-inch main line. The main line is gravity feed to a 580-gallon tank set at the lowest elevation on Jesse's property.

All total, at least three miles of tubing snakes through his woods. A vacuum-type system connected to the lines allows the syrup to flow more freely out of each tree, which increases production, and then to the tank in the woods.

Jesse insists, "Your money is made in the woods, referring to getting the best yield possible out of these trees.

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# GOOD TO THE LAST DROP



*Jesse Wagner with the evaporator inside the “sugarhouse” and, top, cords of firewood stacked outside the building. Page 11 photo shows Wagner’s finished syrup products.*

Production also hinges on using new tree taps every year.

Sap is pumped about 100 yards to a “sugarhouse” where it ends up in a 1,600-gallon stainless-steel bulk tank. When the season is in its prime, filling this daily is expected. Sometimes up to 2,000 gallons a day pass into this tank. From there it is pumped through a reverse osmosis machine which eliminates 75 percent of the water. This concentrated sap then is gravity fed into a large machine known as an evaporator where the sap is boiled to take out the last of the water.

The evaporator, heated by a wood furnace underneath, just kills the water. Each hour, the evaporator will take in 120 gallons of highly concentrated sap and pour out 15 gallons of pure maple syrup at approximately 219 degrees Fahrenheit. The finishing touches in the process include

running the syrup through a filter press and bottling it, which is usually done by John Wagner.

Jesse has gotten to the point where he buys sap from other producers because his operation has gotten so self-sufficient. Sap from approximately 2,000 trees annually runs through his evaporator. Temperature and barometric pressure play a large role in quality, production and labor in this business. The vacuum starts up at 32 degrees and shuts down at 29 degrees.

Sap flows best when the temperature hits 40 degrees during the day, then drops below freezing at night. Jesse has invested more than \$50,000 in equipment to cook his brand of maple syrup. This is no small operation, folks.

Jesse’s product is all top-of-the-line, Grade A amber: About 75 percent light, 20 percent medium and 5 percent dark. Darker syrup has a more intensified maple syrup flavor.

His most prestigious award so far came in 2012 when he sent three jars to Connecticut for the North America Maple Syrup Council annual meeting. In a judging contest of nearly 1,000 entries, Jesse’s medium and dark amber each took third place.

Jesse is thankful to his father for supporting him and assisting him every step of the way in his entrepreneurial activity. But he also says, “If not for the Operating Engineers allowing me to make a good wage, I could not have afforded to get his dream hobby off the ground and running like I have.”

Jesse wants to make sure that if any Local 139 members want to visit his operation, they should first reach out to him. The best time to visit is when the sap is boiling, so call first at 920-242-9050. His website is [www.inthewoods-sugarbush.com](http://www.inthewoods-sugarbush.com).