

MORSE MAPLE FARM

Introduction

Morse Farm in Montpelier is one of the state capital's top tourist attractions, drawing thousands of tourists year-round for a very Vermont experience.

Situated about three miles out of town, it is home to a well-known local family, the Morses, that spans eight generations of Vermonters over a 200-year period.

There is a classic feel about Morse Farm, a former dairy farm that has become an outlet store for many Vermont products, specialty foods, and all things maple, many of them made right here.

Even in winter, the farm outlet store is popular with locals and visitors alike, since it introduced a comprehensive cross-country skiing and snowshoe center.

To get to Morse Farm, take Exit 8 off I-89 to Montpelier on Route 2 East. After the exit ramp, turn left at the fourth traffic light onto Main Street, go through one more light to the end of the street. At the traffic circle take the first exit right onto upper Main Street, follow it up the hill, around a sharp corner and continue to follow Main Street as it becomes County Road for about three miles.

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Burr Morse is the star of the show at Morse Farm, a seventh generation farmer who in large part is mostly responsible for many of the developments here. His son, Tom, has also joined the business, making it an eight-generation enterprise.

It was a typical dairy through much of its existence until Burr's father, Harry Morse, sold his dairy herd in 1966, and switched to growing vegetables and raising beef cows.

The Morse Farm operating today is actually a series of outbuildings north of the farmhouse and barn that started as a single 18- by 24-foot vegetable stand when the dairy operation ceased.

Today, it is a string of additions, now close to 3,000 square feet in area, that were added as the farm's operations diversified and expanded.

The farm has always had a healthy maple sugar industry, tapping nearly 3,000 trees across 240 acres. On average, they gather 30,000 gallons of sap that will make about 800 gallons of syrup each year.

During sugaring season, in March and April, the farm's sugar shack is like a beacon for passers' by as thousands of gallons of sap are boiled down, with plumes of steam wafting through the cupola in the roof. It doesn't get more rustic than this. You can watch Burr Morse and his assistants working almost round the clock for nearly two months to finish the job, feeding sap into an evaporator, where it is heated by an eco-friendly wood chip boiler to maintain the correct temperature.

Even out of season, the sugar shack is a big attraction. There is a video in the Woodshed Theatre that shows the sugar shack in action, and you can still see all the equipment used. It is part of a larger series of quaint dioramas, with carved wooden still-life figures and farm animals, farm implements and sap buckets. Brief notes recount traditional Vermont homilies about farm life.

Outdoors at Morse Farm, there are long views across open pasture and forests to distant mountains in Berlin and Northfield, a beautiful view to eat "sugar (that's maple syrup) on snow," or in summer, a classic Maple Creemee. Parts of the farm are still used by other farmers to grow corn, cut hay, and pasture cows, making the picture complete.

In the winter, the farm becomes a popular cross-country ski and snowshoe center. It's a joint affair, with the farm providing the land and groomed trails, and Onion River Sports running a ski shop and ski and snowshoe rental business. On the ski trails, designed by Olympian John Morton, there are views of Camel's Hump and three major ski mountains. A heated snack area awaits your return.

Like many farm operations, it is the goodies it makes and markets that are the big attraction here. Morse Farm does a brisk trade in its maple products, and there are many. For starters, there's maple syrup in various grades – fancy, A Medium Amber, A Dark Amber, and B – light to dark, delicate to stronger in flavor. Maple syrup is 66.9 percent sugar and weighs 11 lbs. per gallon.

You'll find plenty of it inside the farm outlet store, in classic maple leaf-shaped clear glass bottles of various sizes and in larger quart bottles and gallon tins.

Specialty foods that use maple syrup are also in great abundance. The one Burr Morse is most proud of is his now-famous Maple Kettle Corn, popcorn roasted in oil and maple syrup in a hot kettle. It's sold in sympathetic-styled cardboard sap buckets and in smaller-size bags, and is a real taste treat.

Maple syrup also finds its way into many other products: candy, creams, sugarcakes, mustards, oils, salad dressings, nuts... the list goes on.

Morse Farm also sells a huge selection of coffees, cheeses, beverages, clothing, toys, kitchenware, pottery, books, calendars and ornaments.

For children, there is a farmyard with goats, sheep, calves and chickens. Sugar-on-snow is a big hit with them, and the still-life dioramas will keep them engaged while you relax and enjoy the surroundings.

And you can still buy vegetables from the farm stand that first started the farm's contemporary metamorphosis into the farm outlet it has become.

Morse Farm is a prime stop for many tour operators. It also does much of its business through mail order catalog and online.

For more information about Morse Farm, call 800-242-2740, or visit its Web site at: www.morsefarm.com