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The largest American-based syrup equipment manufacturer calls Hilbert home

Smoky Lake Maple Products owners tap into industry innovation with fresh eyes



Every Smoky Lake pan and evaporator, Co-owner Angela Schumacher said, is "handcrafted by elite artisans" in Hilbert. Submitted Photo



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Contributor



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HILBERT – Angela Schumacher – co-owner of Smoky Lake Maple Products (208 N. 12th St. in Hilbert) – said the company has earned the designation of the largest American-based equipment manufacturer in the maple industry for a reason.

"We have been in the industry long enough – since 2010 – that we've built a well-established base, yet are young enough to have fresh eyes and the tenacity, perhaps more than some (competitors) who have been around a long time," she said. "Every Smoky Lake pan and evaporator is handcrafted by elite artisans in Hilbert."

Schumacher said her husband and co-owner, Jim, is the engineer and oversees the operations side of the business.

Together, the couple said they are joined by 12 other customer service, shipping and sales employees.

Becoming a business co-owner, Schumacher said, was not necessarily her lifelong dream.

"I always wanted to be part of a really strong team and do big things," she said. "So in that way, I've dreamed of this job, but I never really dreamed as a kid about being a business owner. That just happened naturally and morphed into our company."

Schumacher said her degree in communications, along with work experience with advertising agencies, exposed her to a broad base of experiences and multiple aspects of how a business is run.

"In my first big job out of college, I did a lot of packaging and promotions and worked at an ad agency," she said. "You are exposed to a variety of tasks (in a role like that) – including the development of logos, catalogs, photography and video production. All of those things translated to this job."



Angela, left, and Jim Schumacher said Smoky Lake Maple Products is more than a company that sells equipment to syrup makers – it's about "partnering with anyone who wants to immerse themselves in the industry." Submitted Photo

Schumacher said she works mostly on brand development and communicating product information to the customers, while Jim focuses on product development.

"Jim was training for this (role) his whole life, though he didn't realize it," she said. "He has an engineering mind and can really envision things in a three-dimensional way."

'Looks at business differently'

Like many other small businesses, Schumacher said Smoky Lake Maple Products got its start in their garage in 2010.

"Because we started out making equipment in our garage, and we filled such a big need within the syrup industry – the business just kind of grew naturally," she said.

Schumacher said they have several innovations that have changed how the industry processes maple sap.

"Take the Murphy compensation cup, for example," she said. "It has changed the way the entire industry does density testing. This product is used as an integral quality control check in the maple syrup process to assess the density of the syrup. It's been a great success. This was a result of being new to the industry and asking, 'Why is it done this way?' It just took a fresh pair of eyes and asking all the right questions."

Though many other companies have been in the maple industry for decades, Schumacher said the team at Smoky Lake looks at the business differently.

"When we build something, we're not just thinking, 'how can we do what's already been done?' We think, 'how can we do it better?'" she said. "That's been our philosophy from the beginning."

Schumacher said they have emerged as an industry leader from a manufacturing process.

Smoky Lake, she said, uses and sells a filter press, which is a premium way of filtering maple syrup, which has applications in the pharmaceutical and food industries.





The Schumachers said they have several innovations that have changed how the industry processes maple sap. Submitted Photo

"Smoky Lake developed a way for the filter press to be used where the plates are never misassembled," she said. "One of the major complaints with a filter press is that when they are assembled incorrectly, it does not filter properly, and the process has to be repeated. It causes a big mess. Ours is impossible to misassemble. It sounds like such a simple thing, but it had never been done before."

Like any husband-and-wife business team, Schumacher said there needs to be clear lines of work responsibility, but "sometimes ours overlaps" as they look to solve a problem or create a better product.

The filter trays in the steam bottler, she said, is one such project.

"We used to have just a standard grid hole pattern in the filter tray," she said. "But I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool if the whole pattern was the Smoky Lake Maple logo?' I was able to use my design background to extend brand awareness. We worked together and created the new logo filter tray."

Growing interest

Schumacher said the geographic scope of Smoky Lake grows every year.

"Our customer base used to go as far west as Minneapolis and northeast up to Maine," he said. "Now, we are expanding to the Pacific Northwest."

Environmental developments, Schumacher said, have been a big contributor to the company's growth, namely a tree called the Big Leaf Maple.

"This tree is indigenous to the Pacific Northwest and is creating a lot of excitement, and an increasing number of people are tapping that tree," she said. "As a result, maple production has really grown in the Pacific Northwest. We're sending more equipment out to the West Coast and are expanding into Canada."

Schumacher said Smoky Lake's maple syrup hobbyist segment of the business is also seeing significant growth.

"We love supporting those individuals who we would call hobbyists and are just getting into it for the first time," she said. "Wisconsin has so many trees that have never been tapped. The potential to grow the maple industry is (significant)."

Schumacher said the sugar maple tree is not the only tree that can be harvested for syrup.

The Acer family of trees, she said, is popular, too.

Schumacher said the red maple is the most common tree of all trees in North America to be tapped and "makes awesome maple syrup."

"People also make syrup with sap from the black walnut trees," she said. "Birch trees make a nice syrup, too."

Expanding Smoky Lake's distribution of products to New York and other areas on the East Coast, Schumacher said, is her and Jim's newest initiative.

"We are growing our distribution and connecting with more folks on the East Coast and eastern

states," she said. "We just partnered with a new dealer in New York and now have a storefront."



Smoky Lake Maple Products was named Exporter of the Year by the Wisconsin Small Business Association in 2020. Submitted Photo

As commerce moves to an online presence, Schumacher said they are looking at business differently and focusing their efforts on having a shelf presence.

"We know there's a lot of things you can just go buy online these days, and certainly a lot of people do that with maple evaporators," she said. "We want customers to have both (purchasing) opportunities... There is something to be said about being able to touch and feel a product before you buy it, to see (the product) and ask questions with a specialist. There is great value in that human connection."

In 2020, Schumacher said Smoky Lake Maple Products was named Exporter of the Year by the Wisconsin Small Business Association.

The education piece

Schumacher said community outreach is an important initiative at Smoky Lake – as they strive to teach individuals, from kindergarteners to adults, who want to learn more about the maple industry.

"There is nutritional value found in syrup," she said. "Syrup is not a processed sweetener and holds properties of antioxidants that can't be found anywhere else in nature. Syrup has many benefits as a sweetener. You can adapt a recipe to use maple syrup or maple sugar and add a more complex flavor. Maple syrup has more oomph than regular cane sugar."

Schumacher said Smoky Lake is more than a company that sells equipment to syrup makers.

"We partner with anyone who wants to immerse themselves in the industry," she said. "We're here to celebrate the outdoors and have a fun season."

In the Northeast Wisconsin region, Schumacher said the syrup-making season typically begins early to mid-March, "but will fluctuate from year to year."

"Last year was an anomaly, where we were done by mid-March," she said. "You really have to watch the weather. If the weather is below freezing at night and above freezing during the day, that is prime weather for syrup to fly."

However, as an equipment supplier for professional and hobbyist maple syrup producers around the country and Canada, Schumacher said Smoky Lake's busy season far exceeds those few months.

Smoky Lake Maple Products' location in Hilbert, Schumacher said, is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturdays through the end of February.

For hours beyond that and any other information on Smoky Lake, head to smokylakemaple.com.

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