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Medieval maze daze

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By HEATHER SACKETT, Enterprise Staff Writer

GABRIELS — "I found it!" I cried. Victory at last. For 45 minutes, I had been searching for the six clues hidden in the Great Adirondack Corn Maze at Tucker Farms in Gabriels, and I had finally discovered the last one needed to complete the puzzle. I triumphantly pulled the scotch tape from the mailbox and attempted to stick the last puzzle piece into place on my map that was now wet from the rain.

But my satisfaction was short-lived. Although I now had the completed map in my possession, I quickly realized I still had ahead of me the daunting tasks of finding my friends, from whom I had become separated, as well as the exit from the maze. I studied the water-logged map, trying to determine the most direct route to the exit. I folded the map, returned it to the safety of my raincoat pocket and trudged ahead through the endless rows of corn, hoping every next turn would lead to my escape.

Twenty soggy minutes later I followed the sound of the Tuckers' barking dog, Princess, a giant, fluffy Saint Bernard, and emerged from the maze to find my friends waiting for me.

"We were about to send in the search dog for you," Tom Tucker joked. "Bet you didn't even know you were lost!"

It took about an hour and fifteen minutes for me to collect all the clues and finish the maze.

"Most people are persistent enough to get all the clues," said Tucker. "The average completion time is anywhere from an hour and 10 minutes to two-and-a-half-hours."

Tucker said the longest one family spent wandering the maze this year was four-and-a-half-hours.

"They made a whole day of it," he said. "They came at about 11 a.m., came out and had lunch, then went back in to find the rest of the clues."

The "clues" are six mailboxes hidden in different locations throughout the maze each containing a piece of paper that has a drawing of a section of the maze. Maze-wanderers tape the clues to a 'game piece' in the appropriate place, like a puzzle, to form a map of the entire maze. Ideally, this map should help orient you and guide your way to the next clues and, eventually, the exit.

When viewed from the air, the corn maze is an intricately detailed medieval scene, complete with a castle with spires, a moat and a fire-breathing dragon. But once inside the maze, it becomes a disorienting labyrinth: six acres of endless twists and turns that leave you second-guessing your sense of direction. And the maze is not without its snares. Signs pointing seekers the wrong way and empty decoy mailboxes

are added to confuse and misguide.

By far the most demoralizing, yet hilarious, moment came when I followed the signs to the viewing platform. I raced up the stairs to the raised observation deck, thinking it would provide an aerial view where I could get my bearings. But I quickly realized it was another trick: the platform wasn't nearly high enough. The stalks were still over my head and I could see nothing but a sea of corn for what seemed like miles in every direction.

The idea for this corn maze came from a farm in Schuylerville, near Saratoga Springs, Tucker said. The Tuckers made their first maze four years ago and each year it gets bigger and better.

"We were looking for something as an alternative income for the farm during the slow season," Tucker said. "We went to Schuylerville and looked at it. My two brothers are engineers from Clarkson and figured we could do this."

Tucker Farms specializes in growing seed potatoes. Tucker said each year, the brothers look for ways to perfect the maze and make it more challenging.

Every year the design is different and the Tuckers begin planning the new one almost a full year in advance. Past designs have included an Adirondack theme with a canoe, moose and beaver, a dairy farm with a barn and a cow, and the most simple design from the first year — a tractor and wagon. This year's castle design was the most complicated yet.

"It keeps getting bigger," Tucker said. "We've learned how to make it a lot more difficult as time progressed. Every year we learn more about it. We try to have the design (for the next year) figured out by December. All the people who work for me have input on what they think would be cool."

Brainstorming themes is the easy part; transforming an artist's vision onto a field of corn is a bit more complicated.

"Scott Rhoe, a cartoonist from Saranac Lake, does all the artwork for us," Tucker said. "He gets it done on a spreadsheet. We plant it (the corn field) in the spring, and when it's four inches high, we measure it out on the ground and start mowing it. It takes almost a week to transfer it from paper to ground. Then we spend eight hours a week mowing the corn because it keeps coming back if you don't mow."

Although I never doubted I would eventually find all the clues, even if it took a while, Tucker said he and his brothers know the maze well enough to provide assistance to those who want a hint.

"We spend enough time in it from day one that we know where everything is," he said. "We know where people are going to be stuck and confused."

Indeed, Tucker was a little surprised that it was clue number one that gave me trouble.

"Usually it's number four or five that stump people," he said.

I was surprised to learn that there are different scientific methods for solving a maze that involve using mathematics and algorithms. Tucker said the maze gets visitors that have made running mazes a hobby

and travel around the country trying to solve them in record time. I used the “random mouse” method, which means when I came to a junction, I just chose my path at random. Maybe it wasn’t the most efficient or quickest way, but it worked.

Eventually. If you decide to venture into the Great Adirondack Corn Maze, go soon. On Nov. 1, the corn is cut and turned into cow feed. The maze is located on Hobart Road in Gabriels, and is open from 1 to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. Every Friday, the maze is open until 10 p.m. for flashlight night.

“You have to bring your own flashlight,” Tucker said. “It’s just the thrill of making it through the maze in the dark.”

Tucker joked that those who make it out alive will be treated to s’mores around a bonfire. Ghosts and ghouls will be lurking around every corner on the night of Saturday, Oct. 27 for a haunted maze in honor of Halloween. Entry fees are \$8 for adults, \$6 for kids aged 4-12 and kids 3 and under are free. Tucker recommended groups no bigger than six. For more information, visit www.tuckertaters.com.