

Press Room

March 2, 2008

Local Prices Vary, but They're All High*The New York Times*

By Jan Ellen Spiegel

Most Connecticut syrup is sold directly to customers at sugarhouses, with some local product available at specialty stores and Whole Foods. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture provides the most complete list.

Maple syrup grades are based on color and flavor -- both of which are pretty much the opposite of what logic would suggest. The lighter the color, the more delicate the flavor, the higher the grade and the higher the price.

The lightest syrup is Grade A light amber. It comes from the earliest sap runs, which have the highest sugar content and the lowest level of microbes, and that means less boiling. As the season progresses, the sugar content of sap typically goes down, the microbe levels go up, the boiling required increases and the resulting syrups grow darker with more pronounced flavors corresponding to Grade A medium amber, dark amber and Grade B -- which is a cooking syrup. But all the grades have the same density and the same percentage of sugar.

Prices vary around the state, but two things are certain: one, maple syrup is expensive; two, it's getting worse. High fuel costs, which also affect the production costs of the oil-based plastic jugs that most producers now use, as well as fallout from the horrible 2007 season, are pushing prices up. The average price for a retail gallon of Connecticut maple syrup in 2006, the most recent year available from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, was \$44. The state has consistently ranked No. 1 in the cost of syrup because it produces so little, it sells nearly all of it retail instead of wholesale or in bulk, and it can get away with it given its New York-area customer base.

An informal survey as the 2008 season began showed prices headed for \$50 or more a gallon -- and higher if production is down. We found half-gallons approaching \$30.

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