

Press Room

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Sweet, Tricky, Sticky (And Not From Vermont)*The New York Times*

By Jan Ellen Spiegel

IN the world of maple syrup, Connecticut is small but mighty. It ranks last among the 10 maple syrup-producing states, with a meager 1 percent of the national product, but it still has some 300 producers, who sell every golden, and expensive, drop they make.

Uncooperative weather the last few years has made it increasingly challenging for this hardy band of sugar makers, as they are called, to keep up with demand for this unlikely sounding luxury product -- the boiled sap of a sugar maple tree. To make ends meet, they are turning more to high-tech equipment for this traditionally low-tech enterprise. In the last two years, the state's Department of Agriculture has handed out five grants to sugar makers for devices like vacuum pumps and reverse osmosis machines.

"Last year we had the poorest season in 36 years of sugaring," said Robert Lamothe. His family-owned business, Lamothe's Sugar House in Burlington, is the largest producer in the state. In 2007, Connecticut production was 8 million gallons, down 20 percent -- against a 13 percent drop nationally. But large sugar makers like Mr. Lamothe, 58, said their crops were off by a third or more.

The unpredictable climate finally forced Mr. Lamothe to invest in a costly vacuum pump system to get more sap out of a portion of his 4,400 taps. "I cannot afford to take a hit like last year," he said, though he agreed that this season has the makings of the first "normal" one in a long time.

Sugar maples are unique in that under the right conditions the air in their wood cells expands and pushes the tree's sap up and out of the tree -- if there's a hole.

There is a fine line between science and crapsheet in figuring when to put that hole in the tree, because it will stay open only about six weeks. During that time, sap flow will be at its best when the temperature dips into the mid-20s at least every few nights so the tree can replenish fluid, and the days stay in the mid-40s pretty consistently.

Most large sugar makers now use tubing to collect sap instead of buckets, which may be picturesque, but are no fun to lug out of the woods. A vacuum pump is placed at the central collection tank for the tubes, usually alongside a road closest to the stand of trees. When the pump is operating, the sap will run under what would be marginal conditions, like colder daytime temperatures, for systems that just depended on gravity.



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Timothy Perkins, director of the Proctor Maple Research Center at the University of Vermont, estimates that a vacuum pump produces 50 to 200 percent more sap. Which is fortunate, because Dr. Perkins's research also shows that in the last 40 years the maple sugaring season, traditionally mid-winter through early spring, has shifted to start a week earlier and end 10 days earlier, making it three days shorter than it used to be.

During that time, it's a race against the clock of the closing tap hole. While making syrup is a fundamentally simple process -- boiling sap, which starts at about 2 percent sugar, until it is 66 to 67 percent sugar -- it requires about 43 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. That means long, tiring, and often sticky and steamy days at the evaporator.

"I kind of dread it sometimes in a way -- there's so much work coming up," said Bill Proulx of River's Edge Sugar House in Ashford. Even though some of his biggest competitors had already tapped, Mr. Proulx was getting in a last round of golf on a Florida course in early February, a week or so before he planned to tap his trees. "Once you get that evaporator going, it's pretty neat," he said. "It's still amazing what you can make out of a tree."

Ever since Mr. Proulx, 47, began sugaring as a hobby in 1993, with 20 buckets and a lasagna pan for an evaporator, he has gone full-time with more than 3,000 taps, most of which are on vacuum pumps. He has also added a reverse osmosis machine that helps get rid of about 75 percent of the water in the sap before evaporation begins, but decided against a steamaway, which preheats the sap, and is used by several smaller sugar makers instead of the much more expensive reverse osmosis equipment. Mr. Proulx burns far less wood than he used to, and for sugar makers who use oil, such equipment can mean considerable savings.

While old-timers call syrup like Mr. Proulx's "techno-syrup," many sugar makers find they need to use at least one modern device.

Donald Bradway, whose Stafford Springs operation, with about 3,500 taps, is considered the state's second largest, can't use a vacuum pump because his trees are too spread out. And he knows his old reverse osmosis machine, one of the first in the state, is not as efficient as newer ones. But for him, maple syrup is more a labor of love.

His grandparents made syrup during World War II when sugar was rationed, and his uncle built the business after the war. An early wood sap bucket hanging in his sugarhouse is a reminder of when he and two dozen cousins were often roused in the middle of the night to tend to overflowing sap in 2,000 pails.

"I'm more doing this because I've done it since I can remember," said Mr. Bradway, 46. "It's more a family heritage than anything." Even though he still holds a full-time job as a carpentry supervisor in the maintenance shop at the University of Connecticut, he can't imagine not making syrup, he said. "It just seems like it's part of life."

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