

Favorable weather produces a sweet sugaring season

Maple syrup yield running ahead of last year's total

By Roger L. Noyes

Correspondent

Wood crackles as a plume of maple-scented steam slowly spreads its delicate fingers skyward. Magic is happening here in the maple sugarhouses of Williston, as it does every year at this time — a kind of alchemy that turns tree sap into amber gold.

“It’s been a good season,” said Ginger Isham, who taps 15 acres of sugarbush on Oak Hill Road along with her husband, David. “The weather’s been better this year.”

Because of cooperative temperatures, the Ishams got their 900 taps installed by early March, as they have in typical years. This wasn’t the case last season when chilly conditions delayed operations until

March 20.

“Last year was too cold for too long,” said Ginger Isham, who writes a cooking column for the Observer.

Ideal sugaring conditions call for nighttime temperatures that drop below freezing, but then climb to 40 degrees by midday. The nightly chill freezes water within the tree, resulting in pressure that is later released with the daytime thaw. Then the sap runs — a deluge, sugarmakers hope.

To some, the idea of maple syrup production may conjure images of diligent sugarmakers tending bucket-laden trees. While this scene still exists in Vermont, many commercial operations no longer collect sap in buckets. Instead, gravity-fed tubing draws it directly from trees

SUGARING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

to the sugarhouse.

Of course, diligence is still a necessary ingredient in the process.

When conditions are right, enough sap accumulates by late afternoon so that the boiling can begin — a 5-hour task in the Ishams' case. Then comes bottling the syrup, which often goes on late into the night. Syrup is ready for sale by morning.

Isham expects a decent yield this year. With 185 gallons produced as of late last week, she predicts a total of 230 gallons by season's end. Last year she finished with little more than half that amount.

The Ishams' experience this season mirrors that of sugarmakers statewide. Milder temperatures have helped the syrup crop, according to Tim Perkins, director of the University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center in Underhill.

"It seems to be going well so far," he said late last week. "We've had a fair amount of syrup this year. It's been a very good year for color and flavor."

Darker colored syrup typically results when temperatures are too warm. That has not been the case this March, which is a good sign since "the market likes light syrup," Perkins said.

Annually, about 500,000 gallons of syrup are produced in Vermont. Perkins said it is too early to predict how the state will fare this season.

In June, the U.S. Department of Agriculture releases its maple syrup production statistics.

The statistics will also tell more about the scale of maple sugaring in Vermont. Traditionally, syrup was considered a cash crop for farmers during the winter when there was little other agricultural activity. However, "now we are finding a lot more people who are getting into (sugaring) recreationally," Perkins said.

On the other end of the spectrum, he added, there also seems to be an increase in the number of larger maple syrup producers, defined as those who use 10,000 or more taps.

"My sense is that there has been an increase in the number of taps because of those larger, full-time operations," Perkins said.

Bernie Comeau doesn't quite have 10,000 taps. Yet Comeau Family Sugarhouse, located on Bradley Lane near the intersection of Old Creamery and Oak Hill roads, is growing despite a fire last April that destroyed the sugarhouse and thousands of dollars worth of syrup and equipment stored inside.

"The only setback was what it was at the time," Comeau said. This year, "it didn't delay us one bit." He said his taps were running on schedule by the first week of March.

Comeau credits this season's success to the speed with which he and his family picked up the pieces from the fire, beginning with construction of a new sugarhouse shortly after the blaze. By October, Comeau had also replaced the sug-



Photo by Daria Bishop

Clem Comeau throws wood into the evaporator firebox Saturday evening at Comeau's Sugarhouse. Williston sugarmakers say the harvest has been bountiful this year.

aring equipment, thanks to an insurance settlement that covered much of the loss, including the 500 gallons of syrup destroyed in the fire.

"We put an awful lot of work into getting the new sugarhouse built," he said of the project, which took a couple months to complete.

Until last year's fire, Comeau was enjoying his most successful season in almost 18 years of sugaring. Having now recovered from the loss, he expects this year to hold even more promise. He's installed a few hundred more taps, which he hopes will draw 750 total gallons of syrup.

Comeau has set his sights even

higher for next year when he plans to increase the number of taps in his 50-acre sugarbush from 2,600 to 4,000. But he said next year's expansion is probably the limit since he wants the operation to remain manageable for him, his wife, Ann, and his father, Clem, who all run the business.

Another Williston sugarmaker, Gary Grzywna, said it has been a good season overall despite setbacks resulting from a dispute over access to his sugarbush.

Grzywna experienced delays this year stemming from legal disputes over access to 1,000 taps on land he

had intended to lease. Grzywna owns 500 taps, but without sap from the additional sugarbush he has had to truck in nearly 5,000 gallons from a supplier in St. Albans, which is costly.

"It put me behind quite a bit," he said.

Grzywna expects to produce more than 120 gallons of syrup. He said he could have produced 500 gallons if the additional taps were available this year.

Grzywna's business, Sherwood Forest Maple, is located on Sherwood Forest Road, near the Richmond town border.