

Thoughts on the Season: Bruce Bascom

Even before the NASS numbers were released in early June, Bruce Bascom, owner of Bascom Maple Farms in Alstead, New Hampshire knew that 2016's maple crop was the biggest in 100 years. He knew because he was running out of room in his warehouse, where he stores the drums of syrup he buys from producers throughout the maple region. Sugarmakers from just about every maple producing state were lined up in his parking lot with drums of bulk syrup to sell starting in March – small producers with one or two drums, and larger operations with trailerloads.

The season was particularly good for those in northern regions, like Maine, northern New York and Vermont, says Bruce, where the bulk of U.S. production comes from. Producers farther south had a mediocre season, but those regions make up a relatively small portion of overall production each year, so that didn't impact the totals very much.

Favorable weather was the main factor in the increased production, of course, but an increase in the number of taps also plays a role, says Bruce. He estimates, based on conversations with equipment manufacturers and dealers, that the U.S. added about a million taps in 2016. Many producers who brought syrup to Bruce reported that they had made ½ gallon of syrup per tap.

While the NASS numbers confirm that it was a great season, those numbers don't accurately depict the size of the crop, says Bruce. There have been years, for instance, when he has purchased more bulk syrup from New York producers than NASS said was produced. "We know that there's a big undercount in those numbers," he says,

"but we don't know by how much."

Quality followed quantity, too – there were far fewer drums of off flavored or commercial grade syrup than in recent years, he says, and even the Dark Robust syrup that he has purchased has had excellent taste.

With so much syrup on hand, the prices that bulk buyers are willing to pay are lower than they were a few years ago – \$2.20 a pound for top quality Golden syrup. The price most likely won't change much any time soon, predicts Bruce, thanks mostly to the quota system in Quebec, which he credits for stabilizing the market. "The price of syrup has more to do with the U.S./Canada exchange rate and with the amount of syrup in Quebec's reserve than it does with production," he explains. Large buyers may slow down in their purchasing until supply levels off, he said.

The strong season is already prompting many producers to upgrade their equipment, Bruce says, after finding that their reverse osmosis machines and evaporators couldn't keep up with the sap this season. "Increasing operation size reduces the cost of production," he says, and he expects operations will keep getting bigger. There has been an increase in smaller producers as well, he added, based on an uptick in the number of hobby evaporators sold, and in the number of buckets sold.

Overall, Bruce says he is positive and optimistic about both production and demand, estimating that both could double in the U.S. in the next decade or so. "Some people think it's a bubble," he says, "but I think the market is still very strong."