

The Season is Over: Now, How Will You Sell Your Syrup?

Olga Peters

Any sugarmaker will tell you that it's a slippery slope from 'just hanging a few buckets' as a hobby, to buying lots of shiny equipment and not getting a full night of sleep from February through April. Intentionally turning a backyard sugar operation into a business, however, requires thought and planning.

And no two sugarmakers follow the exact same path. For some, their business grows slowly, one weekend farmers market at a time, and they prefer to stay small. Others build their backyard operations into wholesale businesses that keep them busy year-round. Some enjoy selling directly to their customers. And others would rather focus on production, and let established retailers take care of the rest.

These snapshots of four sugaring enterprises illustrate just a few of those successful models.

Matt's Maple Syrup Marlboro, VT

As with many New England restaurants, wait staff at the popular Brattleboro eatery, the Chelsea Royal Diner, offer diners a choice: table syrup, or for an extra fee, real maple syrup with their waffles or pancakes. A flyer on the door notifies customers that they can also purchase jugs of Matt's Maple Syrup on the premises.

"The waitresses sell the syrup as a favor," says sugarmaker Dave Matt. The jugs aren't part of the restaurant's inventory, he explains. The wait staff

keep a few jugs on hand for when customers ask.

The Chelsea Royal is the only off-farm outlet where Matt sells his syrup. He also sells it from his farm to adventurous visitors who turn off southern Vermont's twisty Route 9 after spotting Matt's sign. Repeat customers even drive from as far away as New Hampshire, he says.

For a few years, Matt invested in a state-sanctioned road sign that the Agency of Transportation installed on Route 9. Matt gave the sign up, however. He felt it cost too much and didn't bring in as many visitors as his own sign at the end of his road.

Matt has approximately 1,800 taps. In an average season, the farm produces 450 to 500 gallons of syrup. Out of preference, he does not use reverse osmosis. His son Eric helps with a lot of the sugaring. Other family members help when their schedules allow.

And Matt is fine with the size of his sugaring operation. He has no desire to focus on maple all year. Matt also hays and sells firewood. He enjoys the variety, he says.

"I'm great at making syrup," Matt says of his one-restaurant contract. "I'm not so great at marketing."

Vermont's maple market is saturated, Matt continued. He says he would feel odd bringing a sample of his syrup to a store or restaurant that is already

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selling his neighbor's syrup. "I don't want to step on anyone's toes," he says.

**Thurston and Peters Sugarhouse, LLC
West Newfield, ME**

"I don't want to be a robot filling orders all day for people I haven't met," says Debi Hartford who, with her husband Harry, owns Thurston and Peters Sugarhouse in Newfield, Maine. Their operation includes 2,100 taps, a sugarhouse, a small shop, and an ice-cream stand.

Almost all of the Hartfords' products are sold on the farm, and their store carries a variety of other retail items, like pancake mixes, jellies, honey, and crafts.

Debi and Harry are retired teachers, and education courses through every aspect of the couple's business. They design their business to be people-oriented, and they make a point of educating customers on what it takes to boil sap into maple syrup. They discuss the product's nutritional features. They also share the importance of forest health with visitors. Debi jokes that she is the quick "just the facts m'am" kind of tour guide. Harry provides long tours with a lot of detail.

Debi says Thurston and Peters will

never become a "point-and-click" business. Nor do they have aspirations of selling their syrup in bulk. Neither business model is personal enough for them.

Most of their customers come to the farm for the maple soft-serve ice cream, says Debi. She estimates 90 percent of their business is on the farm. Debi also makes a popular soft-serve maple pie. They are in the process of creating a small educational installation in a second sugarhouse.

Debi notes that they planned very little of their business. At least not in the traditional way. They haven't sat

down and created long-term outlooks or business plans. Instead, the company has grown organically. Debi says, the successful enterprises like the soft-serve maple ice cream, "just happened."

So why is the couple successful

and happy with Thurston and Peters?

According to Debi, they've always been honest with themselves. Honest about where they felt willing to put their effort. Honest about how they wanted to spend their time. The couple knew from the start that they wanted to teach and work with people.



"Provide packaging that looks professional," says Stu Peterson of Camp Aquila in Dent, Minnesota. "Package in glass where your quality product can be seen and use an attractive/unique label."

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Debi recommends the same honesty to prospective entrepreneurs. "Work around your passion," she says. Customers know when you're not having fun.

**Stu and Corinne Peterson
Camp Aquila, Dent, MN**

Stu and Corinne Peterson operate Camp Aquila in Minnesota. They have 1,250 taps, and the business is a size that they can manage with just the two of them. Stu says he's not interested in getting bigger than that.

"Everything is in balance," he says.

Stu describes Minnesota as a "syrup deficit state." The state rests at the westernmost edge of sugar maple trees' habitat, and maple syrup is a "demand waiting to be met," he says. Compared to a state like Vermont where the maple industry is deep and commercial, Minnesota has a "boutique" or niche industry, he says.

Stu prefers the wholesale market to selling retail. The farm is hard to find with roads that are impassible for something like a school bus, he says. They sell approximately 90 percent of their syrup wholesale to local stores and restaurants.

Stu tapped his first sugar maples in 2000. By 2003 he obtained the necessary licenses to sell his syrup, and later received organic certification. Having these licenses made selling to approximately 15 to 20 stores in the area much easier. He explained that the maple market is small in Minnesota, and so is customers' understanding of the product. The licenses helped legitimize

Camp Aquila's syrup for any nervous retail outlets.

That, and Stu could look business owners in the eye and say Camp Aquila was a locally-made and -sourced product. He provided stores with rack cards explaining that the syrup was 100 percent local.

Most of Stu's neighbors are backyard hobbyists. For the first three years that Peterson harvested maple, he boiled with a friend just for fun. He has continued to learn from fellow sugarmakers through the

Minnesota Syrup Producers' Association.

"It's a hobby that got way out of control," Stu says about his love for maple.

Stu's transition into a sugarmaker started when a local forester surveyed what was then the couple's then second home. The tree doctor told Peterson and his wife that their land would be



"Quality products sell themselves!" says Michael Bryant of Hilltop Boilers Maple Syrup in West Newfield, Maine.

perfect for a sugarbush.

In 2000, Stu decided to take early retirement from his job as a commercial lender specializing in the agricultural industry. He tapped 50 trees that year.

His initial retail sales did not come easily. Maple might be in high demand in Minnesota. But, that doesn't mean that customers or retailers understood it. Stu says he spent a number of his early days educating people about maple syrup.

Stu reminds new entrepreneurs that it's important to produce a quality product. And, produce it consistently.

Stu says Camp Aquila has a good reputation. So good that he dropped the organic certificate recently. He hasn't changed how it produces the syrup, but simply saves the \$300 inspection fee.

Stu offers what he calls his "Lucky Seven" pieces of advice for new sugar-makers:

1. Be sure you are confident in your ability to produce a consistent, quality product using best practices and using all food grade equipment. Your product is your reputation. Don't oversell your ability to supply.
2. Be sure you are licensed and inspected according to state requirements.
3. Start locally and establish close relationships with retailers and restaurants who appreciate and promote locally produced products. Build a relationship with local buyers. That is your niche. Build out from there as conditions permit. Promote what sets your operation apart from the rest of the pack.

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4. Build your reputation as a consistent reliable supplier of quality pure maple syrup products. Seek out press interviews and publicity. Get involved in local events and celebrations.
5. Provide packaging that looks professional. Package in glass where your quality product can be seen and use an attractive/unique label that meets all state and federal requirements. This will set you apart from those who package in plastic using generic containers.
6. Selling to the public is a business with risks. Separate your business from your personal finances by forming a corporation or LLC. Why put everything you own at risk? A legitimate business operation can also provide some useful tax deductions. And be sure you have sufficient general and

product liability insurance. Some buyers will want proof of insurance before they will carry your product.

7. Keep good records for analyzing your business and for tax purposes. These records will help you understand which customers, product sizes, packaging and value-added products are worth the effort.

**Hilltop Boilers
West Newfield, ME**

Michael Bryant started Hilltop Boilers with his brother Mark in 1984. The then middle-school aged boys learned how to sugar from their grandfathers.

More than three decades later the brothers are still 50-50 owners. Michael tends to the marketing and finance side of the business while Mark deals mostly with maintaining the operation's equipment.



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Remember, these benefits don't stop in the woods. Customers value eco-friendly methods of production, which translates to higher syrup prices at your sale counter!



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Hilltop is a four-seasons working farm. Along with the family's maple syrup and baked goods, the farm also sells hay, tilling services, firewood, and custom woodworking services with a focus on cabinetry.

Michael says in the past two to four years, he has pushed to grow the maple business. According to him, the family's children are old enough to participate in Hilltop. Bryant says he sees the business as the Bryant kids' future.

Hilltop's production has grown substantially. Last winter, Hilltop built a new sugarhouse. This summer the family hopes to complete their farm store. Michael says Hilltop taps trees on land owned by 41 different people.

"We're working hard to grow," he says.

Some of the business growth has come through planning. Some through chance, Michael says.

Early on, Michael decided to invest in customer service. "In 2018, people make decisions fast." A lot of people like supporting farmers, he says, but they'll go to Amazon if they can get something faster. So Michael decided to sell Hilltop products through the farm's website. He likes that he can take orders and ship syrup "around the clock." Free shipping on orders over \$50.00 is a big draw, he says.

Hilltop also sells its syrup in Christmas Tree Shops across Maine. Hilltop won the contract after a handful of Christmas Tree Shop employees fell in love with its syrup. The employees rallied their managers and requested the shop sell Hilltop.

Michael advises fledgling entrepreneurs to look beyond their local maple association for training and network-

ing. The maple associations know maple, he says. But opportunities to learn broader marketing, financing, and other business skills abound. He recommends signing up for every non-maple marketing course an entrepreneur can find.

As an example, Michael says his wife recently attended the Maine Governor's Tourism Conference. The event opened "massive doors" for Hilltop, Michael continued. Opening similar doors at a maple convention can prove sticky, since the other attendees are also the competition.

It's easy to get stuck in marketing to people similar to one's self, Michael says. Remember, maple famers are not the average customer.

Local Chambers of Commerce are good resources, adds Michael.

Michael credits success to diligence and producing a quality product.

No one with questions leaves the farm or a tasting without a jug of syrup, Michael says. If someone stops by the farm asking about wedding favors, for example, then they leave with a sample.

"A quality product will grow a business," Michael says.

This article is the first in a series devoted to marketing and selling maple products. Look for more articles in pcoming issues, and on the next few pages.

Sales Advice From a Business “Hatchery”

Olga Peters

Businesses grow and sustain on repeat customers, says Jim Verzino.

Verzino is the director and entrepreneur-in-residence at Windham Grows, an agricultural and food business accelerator located in Brattleboro, Vermont. The program works with entrepreneurs who want to grow their existing businesses, who built their businesses to where they’re working full time and have at least one or two employees and need additional resources and mentorship.

Verzino spent way too much time perfecting his website and not enough time building a customer base in his early days as a new entrepreneur, he says.

A website is important, but “people don’t realize the asset they have in a fan base,” Verzino says.

For example, if a sugarmaker travels to multiple farmers markets, they can build future retail contracts by asking repeat customers to recommend them to the customers’ favorite stores.

Verzino recommends sugarmakers plan their business and finances before making their first sale. What type of business do they want? Will they sell to their local general stores, or create a bulk maple business?

Entrepreneurs also need to insert buffers into their business. “Assume everything will take more time and more money than you expect,” he says.

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New entrepreneurs will make mistakes and miscalculations, Verzino says. Keeping risks low, practicing good money management, and not investing in new markets or equipment until there is demand will give sugar-makers the breathing room to make mistakes. In other words, make enough money to support the business before quitting any other jobs.

Verzino says entrepreneurs should ask themselves a number of questions early in their process:

1. Do they have the financial space to grow the business? This includes calculating all expenses, from the monthly mortgage, to babysitting costs, to groceries, to purchasing new bottles for the maple syrup, to printing brochures.
2. Can they commit the time? The business must fit an entrepreneur's personality, but must also fit with other

commitments to friends and family.

3. Do they have their family's support?
4. Safety, safety, safety. Verzino recommends talking first with their local town offices to find out if there are any ordinances governing food businesses. Then call their local state agencies of agriculture.
5. Build a business strategy with a rough timeline of actions and results. If the business will consist of selling to the local general store, then make a list of stores, who to contact at each store, and the date to make the call. If the business will become more complex than that, then so will the business strategy.
6. Develop a marketing plan. How will their syrup stand out from everyone else's? Will it be a different bottle? A colorful label? A compelling story behind the syrup? A unique flavor?

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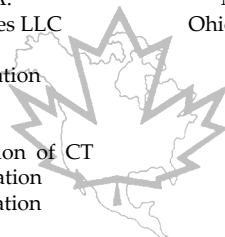
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Business Advice From a Maple Specialist

Olga Peters

Reverse osmosis changed the maple industry, says New York State Maple Specialist Stephen Childs. It helped make maple profitable.

That doesn't mean people shouldn't put hours of paper planning into their business before they tap their first tree, he says. "Educate yourself ahead of time," says Childs.

"Understand what it is you like to do," he says. Don't like people? Then, consider selling syrup wholesale, he says. Really love people and nurturing relationships? Then retail is the path.

Once that decision has been made, it's time to paper plan, Childs says. Study the local maple market. Explore who will do what work, when it will get done, where, and what is the likely outcome, he adds.

For example, before setting up a booth at the local farmers' market, visit the market. Talk to the vendors about the market's ups and downs. What does an average day of sales look like? Chat with visitors. Ask people what they think of maple. How much do they buy?

Next, discover how well potential customers, and the target area know about maple.

"There are many little details," Childs says.

Some states don't understand that maple is boiled even, he says. This may influence the type of licenses a sugar maker needs to sell within different locations. Checking regulations is especially important for sugar makers living in a cross-boarder region.

"This [upfront work] can save people a lot of investment and time," Childs says.

What if all the best-laid plans fall apart? Childs says many things can waylay a new, or established business. The market can change or an owner falls ill. If this happens it's time to re-evaluate.

Childs sees value-added products as the next trend in maple. Cornell University, for example, is experimenting with finding inexpensive ways to use maple as a sweetener in soft drinks.

"It's the most natural and most healthy sweetener," he says. "Maple can step above the crowd."

Cornell University's maple program offers multiple resources. To learn more, visit: <http://blogs.cornell.edu/cornellmaple/>

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