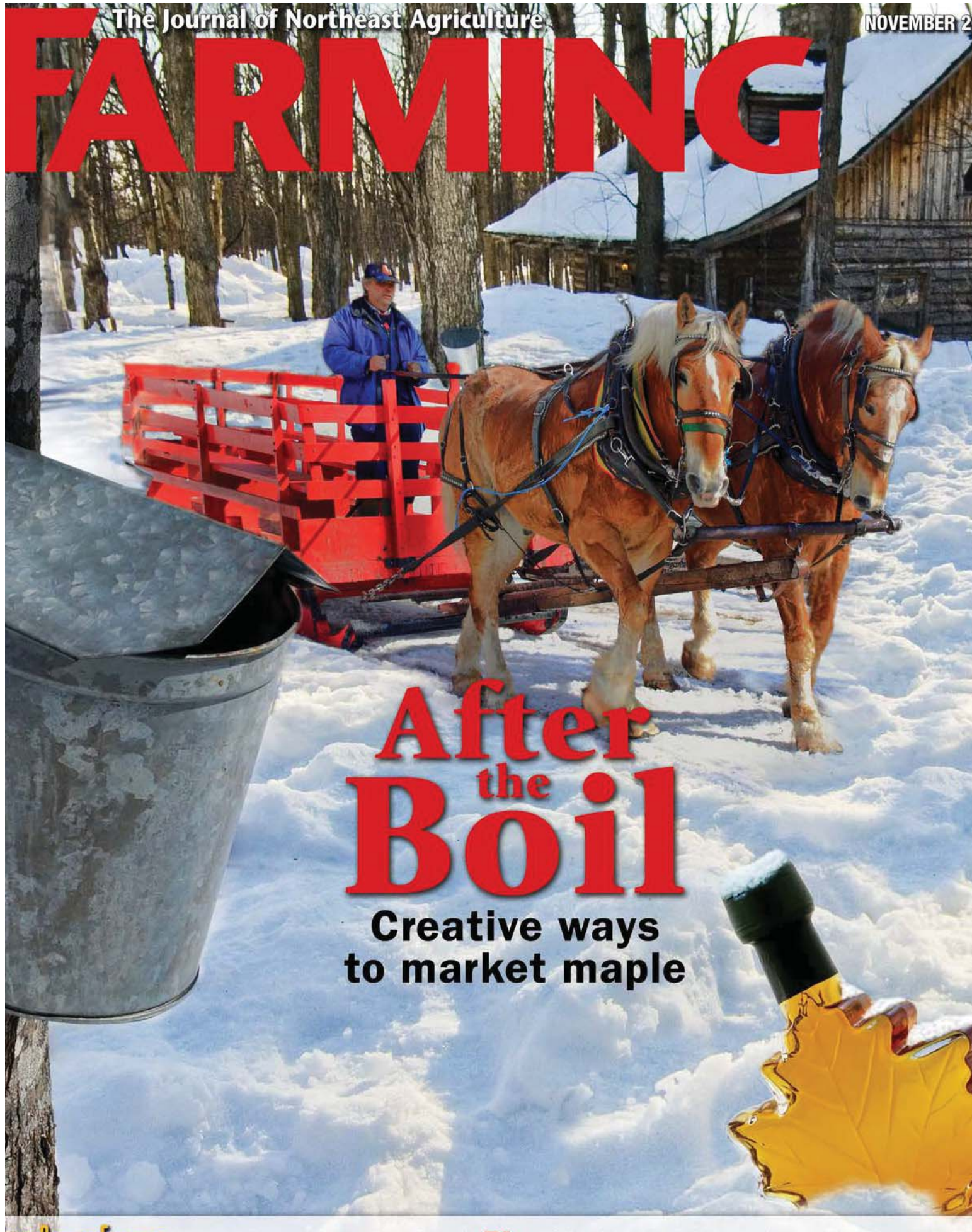


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# FARMING



## After the Boil

Creative ways  
to market maple





# Beyond the Boil

## Creative ideas for selling maple syrup and value-added products

by Winton Pitcoff

It may be the purest product you can think of—just one ingredient, boiled down to a precise density—but even though the recipe for making maple syrup hasn't changed in hundreds of years, producers continue to come up with creative ways to sell their liquid gold.


U.S. production has been increasing steadily in recent years, thanks to an increase in tap counts and new technologies that help producers make syrup more quickly and efficiently. However, U.S. consumers demand more than the amount that is made here. With Canada still producing more than 80 percent of the world's maple syrup, and exporting it in quantities that allow prices to stay low, American maple producers are turning to a range of marketing and education efforts to help keep customers loyal to local products.

Many producers have found that maple syrup is a product that can virtually sell itself. All-natural, fat-free, dairy-free, gluten-free syrup has fewer calories than most other sweeteners—and it had all of these attributes long

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## Beyond the Boil

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before trendy diets made people start reading food labels. Unfortunately, maple syrup has such a tradition as largely a single-purpose product that it’s taking some effort by sugar makers to get consumers to think beyond the pancake and use maple syrup and other maple products in baking, cooking, dressings and other ways. This means educating consumers about maple products and the process of making them, trying some new marketing techniques, and offering a range of products that demonstrate the versatility of maple syrup.



Maple candy can be molded into nearly any shape for any occasion.

*Photo by Jeanne Boyden*

### Educate consumers

At Berkshire Sweet Gold in Heath, Mass., sugar makers Brooks McCutchen and Janis Steele use their maple operation as an opportunity to teach customers how the trees they steward and tap play a role in sequestering carbon, and what that means to climate change and biodiversity. To reduce the carbon footprint in their own production, they use a reverse osmosis machine, burn a biodiesel blend in their evaporator, and have a solar array to generate electricity.

They also celebrate the history of maple sugaring itself, with an informative website ([www.berkshiresweetgold.com](http://www.berkshiresweetgold.com)) about traditions and trends in the industry and explanations about the range of colors and tastes of maple syrups. The syrup they produce is all made in small batches. “Each small batch captures surprising and complex flavors that are driven by wild fermentation and artisanal farm practices,” the website says. The syrup is put in distinctive glass bottles to highlight the colors of the syrup and to distinguish their product from that of other producers. Customers who return the empty bottles for reuse receive a refund.

### Make it personal

For the maple consumer who wants to understand the product, Tonewood Maple offers a uniquely personal experience. Tonewood Maple, located in Waitsfield, Vt., has teamed with two maple producers to allow customers to adopt a tree from one of the sugar bushes and receive gourmet maple products in return. The adoption fee is higher than those products might otherwise cost, but the website ([www.tonewoodmaple.com](http://www.tonewoodmaple.com)) explains why: “Proceeds from adoptions support our partnering sugar makers and fund research to protect future maple production.” Products from the two farms are sold in modern-looking glass bottles and packaging aimed at gourmet food purchasers.

While the ubiquitous gray plastic jugs are familiar to most consumers, glass bottles ranging from the traditional maple leaf shape to simple bottles to elaborate etched designs are becoming more common as a way for sugar



makers to distinguish their syrups from others. Some syrup producers say that small glass bottles are popular as wedding favors, or as corporate gifts or other types of premiums. Glass allows customers to see the color of the syrup, and many sugar makers report that it's also better than plastic for maintaining the flavor and freshness of syrup.

Where the darker, stronger-tasting Grade B syrup was once relegated to commercial use and baking, cooking shows and magazines have helped popularize it to the point where some sugar makers report a greater demand for darker syrup than for the more delicate-flavored light varieties. Technology and production methods were long geared toward helping producers make the lightest syrups possible, but now sugar makers are finding that they need to be able to provide customers with syrups encompassing the whole color and flavor spectrum to accommodate a range of tastes.

Many sugar makers and maple trade associations are promoting the use of maple syrup as a sweetener and flavoring agent in cooking and baking, from dressings and marinades to baked beans and glazes for meats. Websites list recipes, and many producers offer recipe brochures with purchases. The health benefits of maple syrup are also touted in consumer literature in an effort to show how well maple syrup stacks up against other sweeteners.

Along with attracting customers to maple syrup and getting them to think about using syrup in nontraditional ways, many sugar makers are making value-added products. Maple syrup alone gets more versatile the more it's boiled, concentrating it further, intensifying flavor, and yielding fantastic products with growing consumer demand. While they take a bit more work, the profit margin on these items tends to be better than for sales of comparable quantities of liquid maple syrup. As an added bonus, these products can be made throughout the year, a nice change of pace from the often frantic, compressed sugaring season, when timing is everything and the sugar maker's schedule is at the whim of Mother Nature.



Baker's Maple Products in Bainbridge, N.Y., offers a gift collection packaged in a used sap bucket that includes pancake mixes, coffee, maple syrup, honey, maple sugar, maple jelly and maple-coated nuts.

Photo courtesy of Baker's Maple Products.

### Maple cream

Cooking syrup to 22 to 24 degrees above the boiling point of water, cooling it rapidly in a water bath (without agitating the syrup at all, to avoid a grainy cream) to below 75 degrees, and then stirring it results in a smooth, creamy product known as maple cream. It's delicious on toast or English muffins, on a slice of apple or as a cake frosting.

Maple cream can be made with relatively little special equipment, and some even do the stirring by hand. A sturdy stand mixer can produce good cream. Turntable cream machines are common and allow you to monitor the product as it is being stirred. Gear pump cream machines are available from a number of manufacturers and are expensive, but ensure a smooth, consistent product.

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## Beyond the Boil

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Cream can be packaged and sold in plastic or glass containers. It is usually shelf-stable for about a month, or longer if refrigerated or frozen. Some separation may occur after long-term storage.

While maple cream is traditionally made with the lightest syrup available, Merle Maple Farm ([www.merlemaple.com](http://www.merlemaple.com)) in Attica, N.Y., makes a variety from darker syrup called "Robust Maple Spread." It has a more intense flavor, says sugar maker Lyle Merle, and customer demand for the product has increased. The farm also offers flavored maple cream, such as cinnamon and raspberry, which has developed a following.

### Maple candy

Boiling syrup still further, to 32 to 34 degrees above the boiling point of water, cooling it slightly, stirring and pouring it into molds yields maple candy, or "molded maple sugar" for those in states where anything called "candy" is taxed.

Metal or high-temperature rubber molds are used to shape the candy, and a variety of shapes are available from maple equipment dealers, from the ubiquitous maple leaf to holiday shapes. Candy pieces can be removed from the molds within an hour and left to dry before



Maple cream is simply maple syrup that has been heated, cooled and stirred. It's a popular item that's easy to make with a device such as this maple cream machine. Photo by Winton Pitcoff.

packaging. Stored in a cool, dry location, they will keep for several weeks.

Some sugar makers take the extra step of coating the candies to extend their shelf life. This involves soaking the dried candies in syrup heated just a few degrees above boiling for at least six hours, and then draining and drying them. This coating will help protect the candies from drying out, and some sugar makers report a shelf life of up to a year.

While maple candy can be made by hand, those who regularly make large batches usually invest in a stainless steel candy machine that stirs the heated syrup and has a nozzle to control the rate at which the syrup is dispensed into the molds.

Individual candies are usually sealed in a cellophane bag and labeled. An assortment of candies is packaged in cardboard boxes with a clear cover so customers can see the candies.

### Granulated maple sugar

Cooking syrup to a few degrees higher still—45 to 50 degrees above the boiling point of water—stirring slowly and then sifting produces granulated maple sugar. Often sold in shaker bottles, consumers love this product in coffee and tea, as a substitute for refined sugar in baking, and for other purposes. It can be used as a one-to-one replacement for white or brown sugar in recipes, and it imparts a wonderful maple taste.

Successfully making any of these products requires measuring the invert sugar level of the syrup being used and understanding what those numbers mean. Without checking this measurement, candy may fail to set or large crystals may form in cream. Cornell University's maple program has published a guide (<http://maple.dnr.cornell.edu/pubs/confections>) to making value-added maple products, complete with an explanation of the dynamics of invert sugar variations. The Massachusetts Maple Producers Association produced a 10-minute instructional DVD, "Making Maple Candy & Cream," which is available for purchase on the association's website ([www.massmaple.org](http://www.massmaple.org)).

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While all of these products list just a single ingredient—maple syrup—many producers have found markets for other products that highlight maple syrup as one of a number of ingredients. Many offer maple-coated nuts, for example. Some mix granulated maple sugar with white sugar to make a cotton candy mix. Others have experimented with combining maple syrup with seltzer for a delicious soda.

Merle Maple offers a diverse line of products featuring maple syrup, including barbecue sauce, apple butter, mustard and granola. The products are made in-house and go through a customer testing process while refining recipes, says Merle. The products are sold through the farm store, on the farm's website, and wholesale to specialty and natural food stores.

Items available through the website of Baker's Maple Products ([www.bakersmaple.com](http://www.bakersmaple.com)) in Bainbridge, N.Y., include maple coffee and tea, maple jelly and a maple walnut dessert topping.

Farms that offer a range of maple products often offer gift baskets with a selection of items that could include syrup, baking mixes and candies, for example. Baker's Maple Products offers a gift collection packaged in a used sap bucket that includes pancake mixes, coffee, maple syrup, honey, maple sugar, maple jelly and maple-coated nuts. Merle Maple has a gift box shaped like the state of New York, complete with syrup in a glass bottle shaped like the Statue of Liberty.

The key is to think creatively, says Merle, whose farm even offers a maple-coated dog biscuit, which he says sells well. **F**

Winton Pitcoff is a freelance writer and coordinator of the Massachusetts Maple Producers Association.

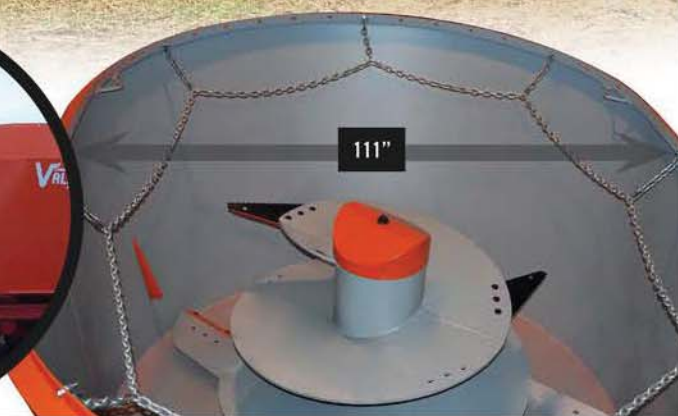


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