

Judging Syrup: The Industry is the Winner

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Judged maple syrup contests originated as a friendly competition amongst producers in the early part of the 20th century. More recently, these competitions have evolved into a valuable opportunity for producers to improve their practice and evaluate their production methods. The grading system employed in the judging process facilitates communication about the uniqueness of pure maple syrup. The world standard definitions, uniform grading system, and related guidelines have been developed to promote uniformity throughout the maple industry. In competition, the same standards apply, regardless of where the contest is being held. As maple judging has evolved, so have the guidelines. Every region has contributed to the refinement of these criteria, as the process of judging has become more sophisticated and widespread. Producers throughout the US and Eastern Canada have begun to embrace maple judging as they understand the value of knowing how to make syrup to a high standard. Consumers benefit from the emphasis on taste, and off-flavored syrup is kept out of the market.

In recent years, the maple judging process has promoted improvements. Historically, density was most often the basis for disqualification of contest entries. Through education, producers are more aware of how to “get it right.” This trend was illustrated at the International Conference 2022 at La Crosse, Wisconsin when only one

entry was disqualified on the basis of incorrect density. Another basis of disqualification has been submission into the wrong color class, usually to the Golden Class. Sometimes, entries are too dark for the class. Producers should note that syrup may darken over time, and before submitting entrants should confirm that the syrup is entered into the appropriate color class. Presently, off flavors account for the most disqualifications. In LaCrosse, 20% of entries were eliminated for this reason.

Before even contemplating a competition entry, producers must know the grades of syrup. There are several sources to consult in order to ensure that you have accurate information that meets the industry standard. Two particularly helpful aids to learning your grades are the Flavour Wheel developed by Centre ACER research center in Quebec: <https://www.centreacer.qc.ca/en> and the flavor chart developed by the Proctor Maple Research Center at The University of Vermont: <https://www.uvm.edu/cals/proctor-maple-research-center>

The North American Maple Contest Guidelines are now well established, having been standardized by IMSI, and ratified by NAMSC and individual State and Provincial Associations. Anyone choosing to enter their product for judging can be assured of bias-free and formally agreed-upon assessments for their entries. The results can be informative to the producer, who is able to

compare their product to any others being produced in the North American maple industry.

Present day guidelines are widely shared, and many institutions and organizations make resource materials and expertise readily available to all. The most comprehensive source one can consult to learn and prepare for judging is the document *North American Maple Contest Guidelines*. (<https://mapleresearch.org/pub/contestjudging/>) This thorough guide explains in detail how to assess one's own product, and how to prepare samples for judging. While the *Guidelines* cover the judging of maple sugar, maple butter/cream, maple jelly, the focus here is on maple syrup. In each category, the criteria are broken down for scoring, and fully explained. For example, *Guidelines* explore the evaluation of maple syrup for competition in terms of Density (30% of score), Color (20%), Clarity (10%) and Flavor (10%). All of the judging criteria are fully explained for all categories of submission. As well the *Guidelines*

address appearance, packaging, nutritional and aesthetic elements. Most useful are the sample score sheets included in the *Guidelines*.

Once you have an understanding of the categories, you need practice in tasting and identifying flavors in your own product. There are a few tips that can help you to select samples, apply the judging criteria, and compare your product to the standards. Doing this in your sugarhouse requires some organization and record keeping. Suggested practice includes first looking at the color of your product to ensure that you know how to classify it.

You will need to develop your powers of taste. Quality is largely dependent on flavor. There are several flavors that you will easily recognize; others come with practice. Human sensory systems can distinguish about 100,000 different flavors. According to the 2017 Food and Health Survey, 84% of Americans confirm that taste is the top driver of food purchases. Maple syrup flavor



has some unique properties, in that it can be affected by soil type, weather, tree health, and processing methods. Sensory impression is determined by taste, smell and “trigeminal senses” which detect chemical irritants — ammonia, ethanol, acetic acid, carbon dioxide, capsaicin, and menthol, for example — in the mouth and throat. Some foods are altered with natural or artificial flavorants which influence these senses. Flavor is a mix of sensory data, of which taste is just one of the senses. Nevertheless, taste is complex, and can suggest to the taste buds sweet, sour, bitter, savory, fatty, alkaline, metallic and water-like qualities. Regardless, flavor comes down to personal preference. The industry continues to develop terms and language to define and assess flavor in maple products.

Producers benefit from an understanding of how consumers perceive flavor, and take this into account when marketing products. Even more important, producers submitting samples for maple judging need to have a good understanding of the characteristics of flavor when assessing their own samples.

If you are ready to think about entering a competition, there are some preparatory steps you can take. During the season, if you think you have produced excellent syrup, put some away and taste it later once it’s cooled. Hot syrup usually does taste good, but that can give a false impression. More flavors become identifiable once it’s cooled. An important tip: put three glass containers (of contest entry size) away and do your own judging on one of the bottles

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before submitting to a competition. Check for density, clarity, and color class and most importantly TASTE it. By testing this one sample you can now determine if you want to enter one of the other samples.

When you decide that you are going to submit your own syrup to a competition, there are a few practical considerations. You need to ensure that you follow instructions about the size and kind of container that is acceptable. This should almost always be a glass container (a half pint or 250 ml). While this is a practical feature for the judges, it is also important to help spectators at fairs and events to see and learn from the samples being judged.

Look at the competition guidelines for submitting entries. Important to keep in mind is how you will make sure that your entry is delivered to the judging site safely, with appropriate packing, and on time.

Once your entry has been submitted, it is in the hands of the judging team. Judging is done blind, and all potential bias has to be ruled out. For that reason, it is essential that none of the judges can identify your product in any way. Know that everyone in the competition is being judged according to the same scorecard. Scoring addresses the same criteria across the regions. See sample scorecards in the *North American Maple Contest Guidelines*.

The judging process will be the same in all areas. Once you submit your entry, the judging will follow a standard set of steps:

- A guardian record keeper takes the entry, records the entry into the class, and assigns a number to it. The record keeper is the only one with the master list.
- The sample is passed blindly to a judge to measure density, check for

The Judge's Score Sheet

MAPLE SYRUP - SCORE SHEET

Entry No. _____ Class _____

DENSITY (30%) Brix measured: _____
 Disqualified (below 66.0°Brix or above 68.5°Brix)

COLOR (20%)
 Meets color class entered
Measured Color Class:
 Golden/Delicate
 Amber/Rich
 Dark/Robust
 Very Dark/Strong
 Disqualified (does not meet color class entered)

FLAVOR (40%)
 Best flavor: 40 points
 2nd best: 35 points
 3rd best: 30 points (deduct 5 points with each subsequent placing)
 Disqualified (off-flavor, i.e. scorched, buddy, moldy, chemical taste, etc.)

CLARITY (10%)
 Best crystal clear: 10 points
 2nd best: 8 points
 3rd best: 5 points
 4th best or lower: 0 points

TOTAL

After scoring the sample, complete below:

Judges' Comments

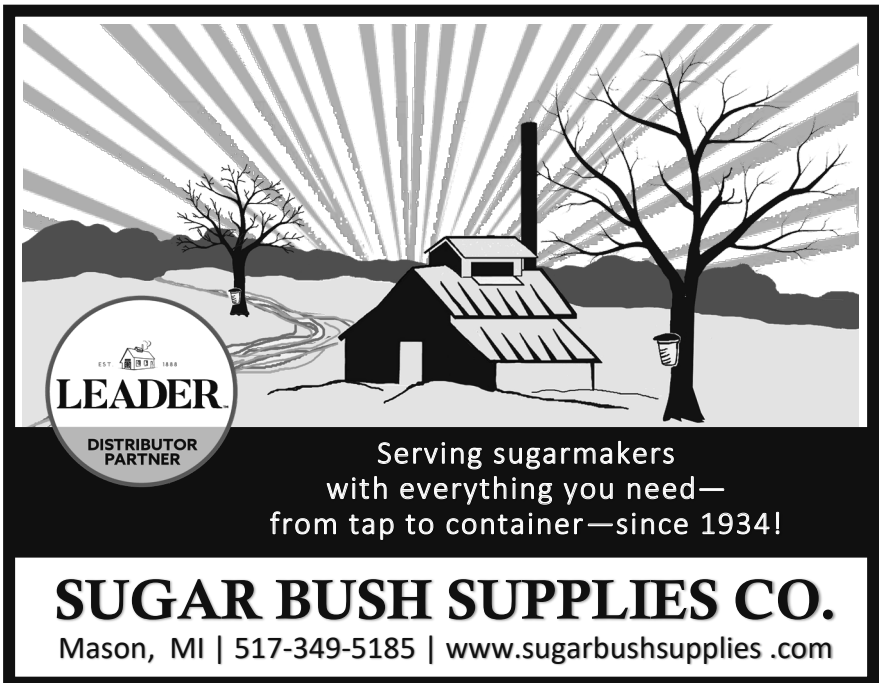
clarity and color. Scores are given to each entry for these criteria.

- The sample is tasted, and positioned and ranked within the color category. The higher ranking syrups are tasted numerous times, to come to a consensus of best in class.
- Scorecards are used to record comments and rankings. The same scorecard format is used for all entries, and the judge should provide feedback, especially on submissions that are disqualified, so that the producer understands what went wrong

All the while, the judge only can see a number attached to the entry. Following all these steps, the judges determine the winner and the guardian record

keeper announces the individual results. Determining the winner is not the only value of the competition. The feedback that judges provide to all entrants via the scorecard is equally significant. This important step gives the producer the opportunity to learn and take corrective measures to improve the quality of their product.

These events can be a great learning experience if one is willing to take constructive feedback. For example, a producer who was disqualified from a competition in one season was determined to improve their entry the following year. They asked for help, and researched what was required to “make the grade” with subsequent entries. The following year, that producer won the competition.



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An individual's willingness to improve and to make a commitment to learning benefits everyone in the industry. As well, contests create a marketing opportunity. Hanging ribbons in the sugarhouse only helps to sell product! Having been recognized for winning a contest at a local, state or international level, a producer can lay proud claim to the excellence of the syrup, and value-added merchandise.

Above all, use contests to improve the quality of your product. Contest judging isn't easy, as there will be many excellent syrups entered in any competition. While there is only one overall winner, being in the top five doesn't mean your syrup is inferior. Increasingly, we see in competition that there are many good entries, power-

ful evidence that the entire industry is improving. To become even more proficient in evaluating maple products, consider taking the two-day grading school offered annually at the NAMSC international conference by the University of Maine. As maple judging has continued to evolve in recent years, we see trends and refinements. The international level of competition illustrates for all of us some of the triumphs and some of the pitfalls, but ultimately ensures that our maple products continue to improve in a thriving market.

To learn more about the judging process, and to build your own skills, visit The University of Maine Maple Syrup Grading School at <https://extension.umaine.edu/maple-grading-school/related-resources/>.

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