

WHY CHANGE THE MAPLE GRADING SYSTEM? *reprinted from Farming, the Journal of Northeast Agriculture December, 2010*

For the past several years, various maple organizations, headed by the International Maple Syrup Institute, have been conducting meetings and consumer research to study possible changes in the maple grading system. A new proposal for uniform international standards will be presented to maple producers in the near future. Change will not come easily for many producers, and there will be questions from many about why a new system is needed. In this column I will describe some possible sources of confusion for consumers under the current maple laws. I am grateful to Henry Marckres, Consumer Protection Chief for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, for helping me with much of this information.

Maple syrup is graded by color in all states and provinces, although grading is not mandatory in some states, a fact that I will discuss below. The color of syrup is determined by the percent light transmission, which can be determined using a spectrophotometer. In most cases, producers determine the color of their syrup using a grading kit, and these kits consist of either colored glass slides or bottles of liquid, both of which are manufactured to accurately match a certain percent transmission as determined by the spectrophotometer. The maple industry today uses various cut-off points in light transmission to break up the shades of syrup into different grades, or classes within grades, so that syrup that is 75% or higher is the lightest class of the top grade, etc. All states and provinces currently divide their top grades and classes of syrup at 75%, 60.5%, 44% and 27% light transmission. So far, so good, but where the confusion for a consumer might begin is in what these grades and classes are called throughout the maple world. In Canada, the lightest syrup is Canada No. 1 Extra light, or AA. In Vermont the lightest syrup is Vermont Fancy Grade, and Ohio also uses the designation Fancy. In other states the lightest syrup is called U.S. Grade A light Amber. For syrup produced in one state or province and sold in another, the names might be slightly different. If a consumer wants a dark syrup, which is preferred by many for cooking or putting on pancakes, the Vermont grade of choice might be Vermont Grade B, which can be

no darker than 27% light transmission (if it was as light as 44% it would be called Vermont Grade A Dark Amber). Across the border this syrup would be called Canada Number 2 Amber or Grade C (Grade C in Vermont is something entirely different), except in Ontario where it could be called Ontario Amber. In Maine this syrup would be Grade A Extra Dark Amber. In New York it would be Grade B or Extra Dark for Cooking, and in other states it would be U.S. Grade B for Reprocessing. In all U.S. states except Vermont, Maine and Ohio, there is no lower limit to the percent light transmission of this syrup—it could be at zero light transmission.

When consumers choose syrup by color, what they really want is the flavor that they associate with that color. Despite this, Vermont is currently the only state or province whose maple law specifies a flavor that should accompany a particular color. For example, if a Vermont syrup is Fancy Grade but has a flavor characteristic of Grade A Dark Amber, it can't legally be called Fancy. While this may not be an issue for many consumers, there are technologies that can legally lighten syrup, so that its percent light transmission does not match its flavor; additionally there are times, particularly towards the end of the sugaring season, when many producers might produce light syrup which has the flavor of dark syrup. There are two maple producing states, Ohio and Michigan, where grading is voluntary. In these states, consumers can buy syrup that is labeled just Maple Syrup, but this could be a totally different flavor from a neighbor's Maple Syrup. Perhaps sellers in these states offer a taste sample to the buyer.

The proposed changes to the International grades and standards for maple syrup should go a long way toward clearing up these potential sources of confusion. In addition to providing uniform names and flavor descriptions for different classes of syrup that will be used across the maple region, the changes include a reduction in the number of classes and grades. Some of the other legal characteristics of syrup, such as the density requirement, will also become uniform. A full description of the proposed new changes will be published soon. Some states, or certain producers in some states, will have a very hard time accepting changes in the maple laws and class designations that they have lived with for many years, and some states may include maple laws that make the grading, for example in allowable minimum

density, stricter than the new international standards. In all cases, it is hoped that consumers will be happier, and even more willing to buy our great products.