Maple Open House on tap this weekend

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

Maple Open House is taking place this weekend on Saturday and Sunday, March 23-24, as sugarhouses in our area and across the state invite people to sample their maple products, including syrups, ice creams, and donuts.

Sugar houses like Sugarbush Farms in Woodstock are preparing for what will be a busy weekend, despite an early start to the season with lower sap flow. The sugaring season — when producers extract sap from trees to then boil down into maple syrup — typically runs from late February to the middle of April. But heavy rainfall last year, followed by a warmer and milder winter, caused sugarmakers to start tapping their trees as early as December.

"We've had quite a few days where it didn't really freeze at night for us," said Jeffrey Luce of Sugarbush. "We would continue to get sap, just not as high a quality and not as much sugar content." This has resulted in "about two thirds of what we produced last year" so far at Sugarbush, said Luce.

Producers like Eric Withington of Silver Lake Syrups in Barnard also experienced an earlier season, initially "tapping out" of sap by Feb. 24, he said. A "super-duper run" of seemingly non-stop sap extraction and boiling followed until warming temperatures also began to halt production.

"Now we're kind of in a holding pattern just because the night doesn't freeze up very good, and it doesn't shine very much sun during the day," said Withington. "Without that freeze at night and then the thaw in the day with the sunshine, [the sap] really doesn't run."

Nonetheless, sugarmakers are hopeful that imminent freezing temperatures and snowfall will result in "another good week or two of sap flows," Luce told the Standard on Monday.



Eric Withington, pictured here, embraces the centuries-old tradition of maple sugaring, and one that has created a "brotherhood" of sugaring and land stewardship. Courtesy of Eric Withington

This outlook is shared by Don Bourdon at Bourdon Maple Farm in Woodstock, who says the season may actually surpass expectations. "I think most producers here in Vermont are reporting that they're doing quite well and it will exceed last year's production records because the weather has been favorable," said Bourdon.

According to Meg Emmons, the head of sales, operations, and marketing at Bourdon, their farm "just hit 3,000 gallons two nights ago. So it's been really good quality sap," she told the Standard on Tuesday.

Out of the six to eight week season when the weather is conducive to producing maple syrup, farms like Sugarbush and Silver Lake Syrups have less than three weeks to oversee the boiling process. That process turns maple sap — with a meager two percent sugar content — into the sweet syrup that is an essential topping for pancakes.

"The holes we drilled in the trees are really only viable for about six weeks," said Luce. "If you've had really good sap flow during those six weeks, it might last longer, but the majority of the time, towards the end of the season, it gets warm several days in a row and the trees will actually start to heal themselves up."

After that, "We probably have anywhere between 12 and 18 days that we'll collect enough sap to boil," he added.

The process of production differs from sugarhouse to sugarhouse, but it is always complex. Luce said, "There's an awful lot of mitigating circumstances in the sugaring season" from counting on optimal weather and temperature patterns to finding the right air pressure for extracting sap from maple trees.

"That's probably the biggest learning thing that people take away from coming to visit us, is how much it actually takes to make syrup," said Luce. "Everybody thinks that it just comes out of the tree looking like syrup. It comes out like water."

Sugarhouses like Sugarbush and Bourdon utilize technologies such as vacuum systems and the process of reverse osmosis. The latter technique helps to sweeten the sap and produce syrup at a more efficient rate than in previous generations of sugarmakers.

Withington said he produces syrup "in a very old fashioned way" without the use of reverse osmosis. He says that a network of maple tappers connected to trees keeps the farm "pretty well occupied."

Much like foliage season, events like the Spring Maple Open House Weekend are huge draws for locals and out-of-state visitors.

"The quintessential Vermont thing is cheese, maple syrup and pretty leaves," said Luce.

But sugarhouses occupy an important position in the State of Vermont beyond producing a favorite breakfast ingredient. It is not just that producers contribute millions of dollars in revenue for the state — maple sugaring holds significant cultural and historical significance for Vermont.

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> — Meg Emmons, Bourdon Maple Farm

"It's our heritage," said Emmons. "The tradition has been going on for centuries. Even with the changes in technology and efficiencies and production that we see today in modern operations, we still really hold true to the tradition of it, and to working the land and utilizing our natural resources."

Being committed stewards of the land that produces maple sugar is central to keeping this tradition going, added Emmons. "Taking care of the forest and the property is very important to us. [As is] maintaining the rural integrity of the land and Vermont's landscape," she said.

For Luce, sugar making is a multigenerational affair. The property at Sugarbush was purchased by Luce's grandparents in the early 1940s. It was incorporated as a sugarhouse in 1953, where both his grandparents and parents were producers of maple syrup. Luce himself is a third-generation producer and his two children are working alongside him.

Withington comes from a "long line" of sugar makers and remembers hauling up to 800 buckets of sap at his uncle's operation from the age of 12. "I hope that the industry still can have that kind of Vermont, romantic part of sugaring for this time of year where there's not much happening," Withington said. "You can't ski, you can't [go] hunting, you can't go fishing. But you go to a sugar house and have a nice,

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Jeffrey Luce of Sugarbush Farm, seen here pouring a bucket of sap into the farm's boiler, says there are "an awful lot of mitigating circumstances in the sugaring season" that make it a much more complex process than many would think. Courtesy of Jeffrey Luce