
James and Alice Thiel Maple Syrup

*E-6306 Butternut Rd.
Manawa, WI*

Operation

James and Alice Thiel Maple Syrup is a small-scale seasonal maple-syrup production and sales operation. Thiel Maple Syrup produces 250 gallons to 300 gallons of syrup per season that is sold at \$8 per quart and any additional shipping cost, if shipping is necessary. The business sells its product via local sales and some mail-order transactions to long-standing customers. Any additional inventory easily is sold by placing a small advertisement in the local newspaper. Sales and storage are located on a former dairy farm, from which part of the family income is generated by a lumber and mill-work business housed in the barn and out buildings, recreational and housing real-estate rentals, several Christmas tree plantations, and the maple syrup operation. The former dairy farm's high-quality tillable land is cash-rented to adjacent corn growers. The "sugar-bush" (maple-syrup operation) is a continuation of three generations of syrup manufacturing by the family in this local. Syrup production is traditional, with sap collection and cooking-evaporation operations conducted in the hardwood forest over wood fires. Modern materials, inspections, and certification are employed to ensure labeling and food-safety compliance.



Business Development

The first sugar-bush was developed by Jim's grandfather on his mother's side, although his grandfather on his father's side also participated in the business. As a boy, Jim helped to produce syrup and continued in the business from that time forward.

The yearly goal of the operation is to sell the entire yearly inventory by late spring or early summer. Expansion of the operation has primarily been driven by word-of-mouth sales, and demand for the exceptionally high-quality product from dedicated repeat customers. Infra-structural expansion has hinged on several variables, the foremost being production of enough product to meet demand, but not exceed it, and in turn, to be able to produce enough product

with the labor available to address the short, but intense, round-the-clock activity associated with the sap run.

A critical step in the expansion of the business was when early inventory depletion resulted in a lack of product for long-term regular customers. This necessitated expansion. The expansion consisted of the addition of a second food-grade stainless-steel evaporation pan and the addition more part-time labor to help with the syrup collection, fire maintenance and related production operations.

Barriers to Success and Unexpected Problems

Market access and market development, concerns of most entrepreneurs starting a business, have not been a concern of this operation since it is a long-term operation that has expanded only in response to demonstrated demand and as available labor has allowed. An ongoing problem for many sugar-bush operators is finding reliable, local, seasonal labor that is willing to work very odd hours at relatively low wages for a very limited term. Here Jim is fortunate in that he usually is able to rotate in one of the workers employed by the lumber and mill-work operation, and has acquaintances that are retired individuals that are interested in the camaraderie, extra income and a change of routine during the long Wisconsin winter.



Traditional small-scale maple syrup production is sufficiently labor intensive that it would be prohibitive, by today's wage standards, for most operators to attempt it. Coupled with the cost of purchasing a full inventory of new food-grade stainless steel and plastic equipment, a considerable long-term investment, it is unlikely that anyone trying to establish a business could make a profit from "syruping" alone. Perhaps this is why other operators have opted to bundle their production with an agri-tourism operation or other source of revenue generation.

The Thiels experimented to some extent with agri-tourism, hosting tours for school and visitor groups. For the Thiels, this was more trouble than it was worth. The cost of liability insurance, for instance, was a severe added expense. Dealing with tour groups also was a drain on the already limited number of experienced personnel during peak activity periods, and some minor vandalism and breakage were annoying distractions.

Small syrup producers may have other problems. For instance, the Thiels experienced difficulty evaluating the potential of "boutique marketing" smaller-volume glass containers. They found that it was almost impossible to purchase small or mixed lots from glass producers. Most bottle manufacturers do not want to deal with small orders. A small order is anything less than several dozen cases.

Success or Failure

This business is succeeding as a component of the total integrated operation. Current plans for the business are to maintain production at current levels. On good sap-flow years, this is optimal with respect to available labor and evaporator capacity.

Industry / Market Changes

The local market for the Thiel's product is quite constant. And there are no plans to seek out additional markets or change how the product is marketed. The Thiel operation primarily produces syrup for long-standing established clients.

Jim had several observations about the industry. There is a trend among some retailers toward supplying consumers with small plastic bottles of product in the interest of selling smaller "gift-sized" or "souvenir-sized" quantities at higher prices. Thiel noted a problem with this, in that there may be a shelf-life issue with the small plastic bottles compared to traditional glass bottles. In the interest of maintaining their reputation for a quality product, the Thiel's have chosen not to take a chance on the consumer having a negative experience and stayed with glass containers. Here too, they have had some problems. When testing a smaller glass container, they found that the paper seals in the screw tops could develop slight mold growth during storage. Although this has no appreciable effect on the quality of the syrup, it was visually distasteful and suggested a lack of initial purity. Although some small bottles are used (with foam-seal lids), the vast majority of the Thiel product is sold, as in decades past, in pint- and quart-capacity glass canning jars. If the syrup is of the proper consistency and no free sugar crystals are present as a "starter" for crystallization, syrup sealed in a glass canning jar will almost indefinitely maintain its shelf-life. Jim has a jar of canned syrup on a shelf in his shop that is almost forty years old and probably is as good as the day it was sealed.

Another consideration is truth in labeling. Thiel Maple Syrup is inspected and certified as Pure Maple Syrup. To have and maintain this label, only food-grade stainless steel cooking containers and food-grade plastic collection and transfer containers can be used during sap collection and syrup production. Also, some small producers and hobbyists still produce syrup using old traditional soldered-seam (particularly the corners) evaporator pans. Although these have a very nostalgic look and feel, there is the chance that the solder may have some lead content that could leach into the product; additionally, the use of traditional galvanized-tin syrup (sap) pails are no longer approved for use due to concerns about zinc contamination. Syrup produced using this equipment may still be available to consumers and probably constitutes a very minimal health; however, it can not legally carry the Pure Maple Syrup label. In the State of Wisconsin, Pure Maple Syrup producers are inspected, certified and re-certified on a yearly basis by state authorities, additionally, no flavorings, additives, or other adulterations are allowed.

Lessons Learned

"Maple syruping" is a labor of love and a means to maintain a disappearing craft and American tradition. It is a difficult business for most newcomers to enter into and production levels are highly dependant upon whether or not natural conditions contribute to a strong and continuous sap flow. With this in mind, producers have no trouble retailing product or selling unsold inventory to wholesalers. It is a personally rewarding experience, but hardly profitable for small

producers from a monetary standpoint, particularly if new equipment must be purchased and labor costs can not be controlled.

For Additional Information:

Wisconsin Maple Syrup Producers www.wismaple.com Wisconsin Maple Syrup Producers Association (WMSPA). WMSPA represents commercial and hobbyist sugar makers in Wisconsin. The site contains information on labeling and food safety, marketing, educational events and producer meetings, and other information. Contact: Lloyd Franz, Treasurer, 2207 HWY F, Athens, WI, 54411.

Savor Wisconsin.com http://www.savorwisconsin.com/find_out_more/prod_info.aspx?recid=21
Quality facts about Wisconsin maple syrup, information on events, and links to various information sources. This Web site is maintained by the Wisconsin Apple Growers Association and ProNet Consulting, LLC. Contact the site administrator by emailing questions to info@savorwisconsin.com; or (608) 224-5117.

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