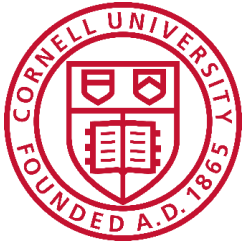


Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

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John Whitney, Agriculture Educator



*This article is the fifth in a series focusing on vendors who are selling their wares at the Western New York Welcome Center's **Taste NY Market**. Thank you to the Merle Maple management team and crew for taking the time to share the Merle Maple story along with some marketing tips and strategies.*

Spotlight on Merle Maple

When your motto is the “Worlds Widest Variety of Maple Products,” you’ve clearly moved beyond producing an agricultural commodity into the wild, wide open, value-added arena. Merle Maple Farm on Route 98 (Creek Road) in Attica, New York in Wyoming County has been making maple syrup and confections for more than a century. Lyle Merle and his wife, Dottie, along with their business partners, Eileen Downs and Kristina Copeland, have combined their processing expertise, imagination, innovation, foresight, energy, stewardship goals, and diverse skills to move Merle Maple far beyond syrup and sugar production while remaining faithful to their family farm values and traditions.

According to Cornell Maple Program specialist, Aaron Wightman, advances in production technology have resulted in the quadrupling of the size of the maple products industry over the last fifteen years. Aaron reports that NY maple producers finished 820,000 gallons of syrup in the 2019 season compared with 255,000 gallons in 2004. Merle Maple’s 9000-9500 gallon annual production is around 1% of the total New York State production in gallons. Clearly, it’s what you do with the syrup that is the difference between struggling to stay in business and thriving, with a bright future. Along with the four partners, Merle Maple employs four full-time workers and additional part-time people during peak sugaring and packing periods.

The sustainably managed hillside “sugar bush” that is the resource base for operation has grown to over 19,000 taps. All the taps are on plastic pipelines which are part of a vacuum collection system with buried lines feeding into the sap house. Greg Zimpler, who manages the sap house, monitors a color-coded computer screen to identify vacuum pressures so the woods crew knows what zones to check when the inevitable problems occur. Deer break the tubing or pull out taps. Squirrels, chipmunks, coyotes, rabbits, porcupines or other animals chew the

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plastic lines and taps. Branches or trees fall on lines during wind and snow storms. Greg and Lyle also keep the evaporators running during boiling season. The efficiency of the operation was recently improved significantly with the installation of a reverse osmosis (RO) unit funded in part through the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The RO unit removes water from the sap by squeezing it through microscopic filters at high pressure. This helps concentrate the sugar levels, reducing boiling time needed to finish the syrup by 75% or more. Considering it typically takes 40-45 gallons of sap or more to produce one gallon of syrup, those are big savings in time, energy and fuel. Combined with tube and taphole sanitation and vacuum collection, total sap production can be more than doubled. Modern maple operations like Merle Maple have seen huge gains in yield and efficiency.

Still, it is what is done with the product that makes the final difference in the bottom line. Some successful producers continue to focus on bulk or bottled pure syrup production. Some have moved into confections and maple crème. Merle Maple has taken the diversity path. Dottie did some quick calculations based on 2019 sales. Thirty-four percent of sales were maple syrup, either bottled or bulk. Nineteen percent of sales, using approximately 1,300 gallons of syrup, was from sugar candy. Maple crème (spread) accounted for 11% of sales, using 900 gallons of syrup. Three percent of sales came from granulated maple sugar, using another 500 gallons of syrup. The balance of sales came from what the industry is often calling "gourmet foods," along with gift baskets and other specialty products. These include:

- Barbeque sauces – 6%
- Flavored syrups (including the currently popular, bourbon) – 5%
- Maple mustard – 4%
- Maple hot sauce – 3%
- Misc. – 15% (gift baskets, maple fudge, pancake mixes, maple cotton candy, syrup sticks, maple dog treats, etc.).

Maple hard candy, coffee, tea, dog biscuits and coated nuts are the only products not produced on site. Merle Maple Farm's web page at www.merlemaple.com includes more about the business history, product diversity, and packaging and pricing options.

Dottie and Lyle moved beyond "pure maple" products into the value-added arena twenty years ago when they took over the maple part of the operation. Diversifying has been the key to improving the income stream. Merle Maple LLC partners, Eileen Downs and Kristina Copeland explained that a portion of their production is sold directly to other maple producers and outlets in the region. Eileen said Merle Maple has secured and maintained a New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets Article 20-C Food Processing Facility license, which includes required training. This has allowed Merle Maple to diversify its own production and greatly expand marketing possibilities. It also allows for processed food products to be

packaged and sold to other businesses that do not have the capacity or desire to go through the licensing, training and on-going inspection steps themselves. Merle Maple recently had a large banner professionally printed to help market that part of the business. “Let Our Product be Your Product” is a marketing alternative that allows other producers and vendors to purchase unlabeled packaged goods and then apply their own labels if they chose to go that route.

Merle Maple is a year-round operation. While the sap season is restricted to late winter into early spring, cold storage of maple syrup in 30 and 40 gallon drums allows for canning and marketing of various grades of syrup throughout the year. Dottie says “we’re actually busier during the fall and winter than the rest of the year – because of marketing.” Eileen quickly added, “other than Maple Weekend.”

Merle Maple participates in many product shows, especially in the Fall. The business also participates in County Fairs and the New York State Fair. Holiday gift packs are an increasingly popular option. Products are sold in many area farm markets and retail outlets as well as in Merle Maple’s on-site “Country Store.” Products are also sold through Dottie and Lyle’s nephew’s Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm and market just down the road. While the Merle Farms dairy cows and chickens are gone, Merle Maple still uses the historical logo because “that’s what people know” and it reflects the farm’s history. Vidler’s, Premier Gourmet, Spoth Farm Market, Mayer Bros., and many other retailers carry Merle Maple products. The web page no longer lists outlets because of the frequent changes and the diversity of what various outlets choose to carry. Merle Maple does its own regional deliveries and ships to outlets farther away. UPS shipments go out nearly every business day, sometimes on pallets for high volume buyers. Packages ship to Canada and overseas, including to military bases. This requires some extra paperwork which Kristina is glad to handle to keep products moving and customers happy.

Maple Weekend, a statewide event sponsored and coordinated through the New York State Maple Producers’ Association, brings approximately 6000 visitors to the farm each year over the two weekends. This helps visitors feel a connection to the operation. They know the Merle name and quality, which also makes them more likely to try the value-added products. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 concerns, Maple Weekend has been cancelled for the 2020 season.

Eileen said Merle Maple doesn’t store syrup in bourbon barrels to produce their bourbon flavored syrup like many producers do. Instead they add bourbon to the syrup and then boil off the alcohol, testing to be sure that residual alcohol is less than 0.5%. This is monitored with a YSI Bioanalyser secured with the assistance of the Genesee Valley Regional Market. Raspberry, blueberry and strawberry concentrates are used for Merle Maple’s fruit flavored syrups. These are blended hot, filtered and bottled. It doesn’t hurt that Eileen has a chemistry degree and pharmaceutical experience combined with her dairy and maple background having grown up

one valley to the west from the Merle Maple location. So far, Merle Maple hasn't chosen to move into the maple beverage market, which would require a liquor license. Eileen's family rents some of the open cropland on the farm to support their dairy operation.

Kristina, who grew up just "up the road" from Merle Maple Farm, has a degree in Ag. Business from SUNY Cobleskill. She started working at Merle Maple while in high school canning syrup and sugaring. Dottie grew up in Kenmore. She and Lyle have been married for 33 years. Early in their time together, Dottie worked for the CEO of Fisher Price in East Aurora, while working part-time with Lyle in the maple business. She shifted to full-time work at Merle Maple after their daughter graduated from college. Until just a year ago, Lyle's mother, Florence, now 105 lived in the Merle Maple house.

Lyle has lived his entire life on the farm. While he helped with livestock and field work, his love was always the maple part of the business. Eileen said Lyle is constantly coming up with new ideas to improve efficiency and add to product diversity. His equipment designs and modifications have led to commercial products now used by many other operations. Dottie joked that "there are times when people around here ask me to feed him a sleeping pill" to slow the steady flow of new ideas. The "sugar popper" which uses a stainless steel rack and a customized rolling pin to push the sugar candies out of the rubber molds has saved countless hours compared with the old method of pressing each candy out of the mold with thumbs and fingers. A new innovation is the mechanical wiper used to remove excess moisture off the coated sugar candies. They used to all be dabbed with drying cloths. Not all producers coat their sugars. Coated sugars have more visual appeal and considerably longer shelf life at peak quality. Still, each and every maple sugar candy is handled by gloved fingers at least four times from the time the candy leaves the mold through drying and packaging. Syrup and sugar analysis, testing, and shelf studies are going on all the time. That's all part of quality control and new product evaluation.

With the exception of a few recipes, Merles follow the long tradition of comradery and sharing of technological advances, product ideas and efficiency improvements. This also extends to marketing. Dottie says, "if we went into a store and they had someone else's maple syrup, we wouldn't try to sell them ours...and I don't think we're alone in that." The majority of maple producers try to boost the whole industry at the same time they are marketing their own products. That's part of the reason for participation in Maple Weekend, county and State Fairs, and many festivals in the region. While Vermont's maple industry gets the marketing prize for promoting Vermont as "The Maple State," New York State is not far behind with its large number of producers, total production, excellent maple tree resources and, importantly, the large market.

Lyle is the New York delegate to the International Maple Syrup Institute. He served on the State Board of the New York State Maple Producers Association and is active in the Western New York

regional association as Treasurer. Dottie says it's important to be engaged and on the forefront of new developments in the industry.

In value added products, Merle Maple is in the top five or so statewide. In total production, many operations produce more total syrup, often marketing primarily in bulk. Kristina says Merle Maple is in the top 10% or so in total production.

Merle Maple tries to come up with new products each year. Processes are all approved by the Cornell Food Venture Center in Geneva and production follows the prescribed criteria and checklists. New products are often tested by visitors during Maple weekend. Chocolate, white and raspberry coated sugars are new to this year's product line. The popular maple barbeque sauce led to questions about the possibility of making a maple hot sauce. Maple hot sauce is fast becoming an important component of the Merle Maple line.

Merle Maple's Facebook page and other social media activities are maintained by Dottie and Kristina. The web page is maintained by a contract webmaster. Low volume and new product labels are done in house with higher volume labels and flyers printed by other local commercial services.

Just imagine all the changes and innovations that 105 year old Florence Merle experienced in her lifetime. What will the next popular value-added maple products be? For Merle Maple Farm that could well depend on what visitors suggest during Maple Weekend, maybe next year now, or on the questions asked at an upcoming festival, or maybe what Lyle dreams up in the middle of the night. Then, it will be up to the management team and staff to perfect and market the product as part of the "Worlds Widest Variety of Maple Products" at Merle Maple Farm.



Taste NY at the Western New York
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Taste NY Market at the Western NY Welcome Center
1999 Alvin Road
Grand Island, New York 14072
(716) 773-0970
erietasteny@cornell.edu

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