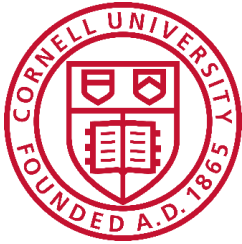


# Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

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*This article is the sixth 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 Phil and Hamilton for taking the time to share the Sage Family Maple story along with some marketing tips and strategies.*

## Spotlight on Sage Family Maple

Sage Family Maple, LLC has been producing pure maple syrup and other maple products on its 180 acre, Town of Middlebury farm just outside of Warsaw, New York since the current operators' grandfather, Charles Sage, purchased the farm in 1937. Roger Sage worked with his father and eventually took over the operation, expanding the business to include becoming a distributor for Leader Evaporator Co., Inc. in 1968.

Roger worked with his three sons, Philip, Matthew, and Hamilton in the maple business and distributorship until his death in 2011. For a while, Roger focused on equipment sales so his children, Phil, Matt and Hamilton, who now run the operation as an LLC, had experience with traditional taps and buckets on the yard's trees only. Phil said that about thirty years ago, they started tapping the woods again with a tree-to-tree pipeline system with 300 taps. They went to 700 and now the operation has grown to 3,000 tapped trees. Sage Family Maple, using advanced, energy-efficient processing technologies, is producing approximately 1,500 gallons of maple syrup each year. Most is sold as pure maple syrup but like many operations, Sage Family Maple uses value-added products to improve profits, expand marketing options, and satisfy customer demands.

Like many larger maple syrup producers, Sage Family Maple uses a vacuum pipeline system to collect and transfer sap. This technology has significantly increased sap production. Combined with other innovations, including the use of a Reverse Osmosis (RO) system and incorporation of a Steam-away<sup>tm</sup> recaptured steam-based sap pre-heating system, the fuel oil-fired evaporation phase is much faster and energy efficient. Phil said RO technology has been in use for more than 10 years, starting with a smaller unit which was upgraded about five years ago. He said, "We added another membrane to it just last week."

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For the Sage Family Maple business, these energy and time saving technologies are doubly important because they all have full-time, off-farm jobs. As Phil and Hamilton explained, Sage Family Maple has been able to take advantage of New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) to offset some of cost of the energy saving equipment and installations. A Rural Energy for America (REAP) grants also helped cover the cost of running electric power 2800 feet back to the pump house. Eligibility starts with an energy audit which may be updated from time to time. For example, the Sages are now looking into energy savings through a transition to LED lighting in the Sugar House.

Sage Family Maple is an authorized distributor for Leader Evaporator Company, Inc., a fully USA-made, Wisconsin-based, maple sugaring industry equipment manufacturer. They also are an authorized dealer for Sugarhill® Containers, based in Turner Falls, Massachusetts. The proprietary Sugarhill® line of maple syrup containers, manufactured by Hillside Plastics, Inc., was introduced in the early 1980s and quickly became the industry standard, replacing glass and steel containers. With custom private labels available, the containers become an affordable and important part of branding and marketing.

Food-grade diatomaceous earth is used in a Leader Filter Press for a final filtration/clarification step prior to barreling or bottling syrup. Some products are sold directly out of the Sugar House, especially during “Maple Weekend” events. The retail product shelf in the Sugar House is kept well stocked throughout the year so products are available any time a customer happens to stop in. The Sage Family Maple web page, [www.sagefamilymaple.com/](http://www.sagefamilymaple.com/), details the history of the business, including Roger’s commitment to the industry and some of his many achievements including his 2006 induction into the International Maple Hall of Fame based in Crogan, New York. The web page also describes Sage’s mix of products and lists current prices.

A trip back into the woods was an opportunity to observe additional components of a modern maple syrup operation. Taut, plastic vacuum tubing in various shades of blue runs from tree to tree to collect the sap that slowly drips into clear taps connected to the tubes with thinner light blue or new yellow drip tubes and black plastic or white fittings. Many valves, pressure gauges, fittings, clamps, wires & straps, manifolds, vacuum boosters, and other hardware attached to trees and strung through the woods are all part of the modern maple sap collection system. The collector lines all lead to an electric-powered pump station significantly downhill and more than half a mile from the sugar house. The plastic pipe (tubing) system greatly reduces labor costs and increases profitability. A high efficiency pump sends the collected sap through a buried pipeline back to storage tanks at the sugar house for processing. Cameras in the pump house allow the Sage brothers to monitor pressure readings and flow rate on their cell phones. A rubber track-mounted ATV and a four wheeler are used for getting back and forth from the woods for routine cleaning, checking for leaks, repairs and maintenance.

While approximately 40% of the syrup goes out in barrels, Sage Family Maple's value-added line includes: gift baskets, bourbon barrel-aged maple syrup (six months in the barrel!), maple cotton candy, pure maple syrup in both plastic and glass containers, pure maple cream, pure maple sugar pieces, maple hard candy, maple barbeque and hot sauce, maple mustard, granulated maple sugar, old fashioned hard maple sugar, maple coffee & tea, and Sage Family Maple T-shirts. These can all be purchased on-line, at the sugar house or at various festivals and retail outlets seasonally or throughout the year. Sage Family Maple products are on sale at a number of Taste NY Markets including at the Western New York Welcome Center on Grand Island. Phil, Matt and Hamilton handle many deliveries themselves in their daily travels for work or special orders. Wholesale accounts are filled throughout the year, including accounts with the Made in America Stores and many other outlets.

Sage Family Maple participates in many area festivals and shows including the Western New York Gas & Steam Engine Rally, Apple-Umpkin Fall Arts and Crafts Festival, and Agri-Palooza. Sage Family Maple participates in the Erie and Wyoming County Fairs and the New York State Fair, where Roger helped build and staff the maple booth for 25 years. Sage Family Maple, LLC won best of show at the Erie County Fair in 2014, 2015 and 2016. They are looking forward to the 2020 Spencerport Canal Days, a new show for Sage Family Maple. Their cotton candy and "Maple-chino" machines are familiar to fair and festival attendees. Until very recently and for 39 years, starting when Phil was a 1 year old, Sage Family Maple staffed the Genesee Country Village & Museum annual maple syrup and sugar exhibit. Museum staff were trained by the Sage family members and are taking over exhibit management tasks – although this year's event have been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hamilton and Phil said they typically do a significant amount of business during the annual Statewide "Maple Weekend" sponsored and promoted by the New York State Maple Producers Association. Unfortunately, out of an abundance of caution and due to social distancing requirements, Maple Weekend events across the State are cancelled for the 2020 season. This will create both marketing challenges and opportunities. Sage Family Maple's award-winning products can still be ordered on-line through Sage Family Maple's web page or by e-mailing: [sales@sagefamilymaple.com](mailto:sales@sagefamilymaple.com).

This interview and visit was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated medical, social and economic impacts began to unfold in Western New York. With discretionary travel currently discouraged or restricted, mail-order options or shopping during off-peak periods at low density retailers may be short-term options. Sage Family Maple will be glad to help with on-line or e-mail orders and shipping and remains committed to high standards of sanitation and quality control both for production and customer interactions. Sage Family Maple will not be alone in reevaluating marketing plans for the coming months. Thanks to Phil

and Hamilton for taking time during their very busy season to explain the Sage Family Maple operation, to discuss marketing strategies, and to show me around their syrup house and woods. We hope you enjoy the story and photographs and have an opportunity to visit the Sage Family Maple, LLC web page for more details: [www.sagefamilymaple.com/](http://www.sagefamilymaple.com/).



Taste NY at the Western New York  
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**Taste NY Market at the Western NY Welcome Center**

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