

Entering and Judging a Maple Syrup and Maple Confections Contest

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Syrup from various geographic locations of a state and from different States or Canadian provinces will accentuate different flavors due to factors like tree species, soil type and minerals, environmental conditions, and processing methods to mention a few.

Top quality maple syrup with good flavor is strived for and is sought by maple producers everywhere. Many like to have their syrup compared to other producers’ syrup by entering it in contests. The blue ribbon is great, but knowing that a panel of judges rated your syrup or product the best that day is a point of pride. Entering a maple syrup/confection contest is a fun activity that can lead to assurance that you are producing the highest quality product possible.

How A Maple Syrup Contest Is Judged

In a contest the syrup samples being judged are anonymous to the judges. To determine the best syrup, judges check the four basic variables of all quality maple syrup (density, clarity, color, and flavor). A judging panel is usually made up of several people and they all must agree on the winners.

Typically density is checked first as if syrup is not within the proper density range there is no need to move further in the process. Next, syrup color and clarity are checked to see if they match contest guidelines. When a sample passes these first three stages it moves to the tasting component of the contest. When judges taste syrup samples, they will set aside any entree with exceptional flavor. They go back and taste all the exceptional flavored samples against each other to determine the best one.

During sugaring season many producers will hold back syrup that stands out as having exceptional flavor. This syrup should be stored in clean, new, glass containers and kept in the freezer for freshness. However, it is important to remove the syrup from the freezer at least two days before a contest. For best results only enter the sample in a new, clean, unused container. Be sure to triple rinse even new jars with the hottest possible water to assure cleanliness. Canning jars are acceptable, but never reuse mayonnaise jars, pickle jars, peanut butter jars, tomato paste jars, or the like as the syrup can pick up the off flavor from the jars previous contents. You could have done everything correctly and ruined the chances of winning by entering contest syrup in a used contaminated container.

Every contest can be slightly different. Contest organizers should have an entry form that you will fill out and submit with your entry. They should also have contest guidelines so you know what to enter and how the entries will be judged. With confections it is important to know if packaging or presentation is judged. Most experienced judges prefer to judge product quality not appearance of the package.

Preparing Syrup for a Contest

Density

Where the contest is held can depend on how the density is judged. In the United States and Canada for maple syrup to be legal density it must be a minimum of 66° Brix and a maximum density of 68.9° Brix. Only Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine have a minimum density of 66.9° Brix or 36° Baume and a maximum density of 68.9° Brix or 37° Baume. It is important to get your density within the contest range entering. Some contests give or reduce points depending on tenths of a point in density. Determining this is difficult to do as the human eye can't read nor are there marks in tenths of a degree on a standard hydrometer. So be aware of these guidelines as density is usually the first of the four components checked. Density is typically checked with an optical refractometer or sometimes with a digital refractometer.

How Density Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Checked with a refractometer. *Sometimes points are given depending on density within a set range between the low and high end densities and is verified with a hydrometer.*
- ◆ If not within density ranges set for the contest the entry is rejected.

Clarity

Good filtering is a must for all syrup sold but especially for contest syrup as your entry is typically displayed in a glass jar and if cloudy, contains organic matter or debris it will be apparent. Contest entries are shaken in the original container entered before being transferred into the contest judging glass container. If niter (sugar sand) or sugar crystals have formed on the bottom they will be re-suspended and can disqualify an entry for clarity issues. Pressure filters will do the best job of polishing the syrup but gravity filters will work too. Which ever filter method used make sure the filter is clean. Only use syrup filters, do not use what you find in the kitchen like coffee filters. Take care with filtering as syrup filtered through new materials can pick up a chemical off flavor and if filters are washed with soap, a soapy taste can be transferred to the syrup. If you reheat syrup and filter before packaging your entry use caution that density is not increased during the process.

How Clarity Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Viewed through clean glass container with an illuminated background.
- ◆ If syrup is cloudy, contains foreign matter or impurities the syrup is rejected.

Color

Color is important as the grade names for syrup within the United States and Canada are different (see table 1). So be sure you are entering the proper color grade in the proper class if an international contest. Make sure the syrup held its grade once in the container. Use either a permanent or temporary grade kit to check color grade. If a Vermont temporary grading kit is used understand that

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the samples fade in these kits and are only recommended for a maximum of two years use. Grading kits must be kept in a dry dark place. If stored in direct sunlight the colors will fade even faster giving you false readings. Check permanent kits for scratches or fading and cleanliness. Dirty glass sample bottles can impact what you are seeing in any type of grading kit used.

How Color Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ All samples entered are arranged from the lightest in the grade class to the darkest in the class. The lightest and darkest are poured into a sample bottle and checked against a USDA permanent maple syrup grading kit. If the lightest and darkest entries in each grade class are within set color standards then all the rest will be as well. *If other grading methods are used, the contest organizers should indicate this.*
- ◆ If color does not meet the grade indicated on the container entered or meet the grade color of the class entered the sample is rejected.

Flavor

Flavor is the most important component to all four variables in maple syrup, especially contest syrup entries. Producers should taste their syrup often to assure good maple flavor. Syrup entries should be free of any off flavors and representative of the grade entered. For example a Golden, Delicate Taste (previously called light amber) syrup entry should not have a robust flavor found in a Grade A Dark syrup. It is not advisable to just grab a container off the shelf and enter it as contest syrup. Often it is hardest to judge your own syrup, and occasionally producers don't even taste their own syrup once placed into containers. Having more than one person taste the flavor of your entry choice is a good practice. Comparing all the different runs or batches from within a grade will assure you are entering the best representative sample that you produced in that grade.

How Flavor Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Judges will each taste all the syrups and typically move a sample either forward or backward in the line indicating it has superior flavor. If off flavored syrup is found it is set out and rechecked later to make sure the off flavor detected was still present. Once all the superior samples are selected they are all tasted again to find the ones that stand out above the others. Then these are tasted again to rank 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc.
- ◆ If a best of show is awarded then the 1st place winners of the classes are judged against each other and the entry best representing their grade class is awarded best of show.
- ◆ If syrup has an off flavor it is rejected, if the flavor does not meet the flavor of the class i.e. too strong or weak of flavor for the class entered it may not be rejected but will not be in the running for placing.

Packaging The Entry

Some contests give points for decorating the container. Traditionally syrup is judged by what's inside the container not how the container looks. So be aware if points are deducted if the entry container is

not decorated. The size or volume of syrup to enter should be specified by contest organizers; typically a pint is all that is needed. The most important component is that the producers contact information should be on the original entry container. Typically placing this information on the bottom of the container is best. Also the grade of the syrup must be marked on the container. Judges do not make that decision. For example, if Grade A Golden, Delicate Taste (*previously called light amber*) syrup is entered in a container labeled as Grade A Amber, Rich Taste (*previously called medium amber*) it will be disqualified as it does not meet the indicated grade on the container. Most all contests will require you to fill out an entry form so your sample can be assigned a number to be used through the judging process as judges will not see the original container.

Preparing Maple Confections For A Contest

Entering confections can be tricky as what one confection is called in one State or Province can be called something different elsewhere. Reading entry guidelines carefully will help. The most common confections entered are: maple sugar also called Indian sugar or stirred sugar (lose granulated sugar); maple cream also called maple spread or maple butter; and molded sugar candy also called soft sugar candy. Many other items like fudge, novelty sets and gift baskets are also included in some contests.

Maple Cream, Maple Spread Or Maple Butter

This product should have a smooth uniform consistency (much like soft peanut butter) with no crystals in it. Good flavored Golden or Amber (formerly light or medium amber) syrup is best for making this product. Special attention to the level of invert sugar is important as if too high (greater than 4% invert) the sample will not crystallize properly and the cream will be too fluid and separate into layers in the container. Moisture is important here as too moist and it appears “runny” and too little moisture it is too “stiff” to spread.

How Cream or Spread Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Appearance – no separation, no air bubbles, good color
- ◆ Texture – hardness, no crystallization or “gritty” texture
- ◆ Flavor – representative of maple cream with no off flavors
- ◆ If sample does not meet these it will not be in the running for placing. Typically only if a sample entered has an off flavor will it be rejected on that basis.

Molded Maple Sugar Candy (crunchy, soft, crystal coated)

Contest organizers should indicate the number and maybe size of molded candies to enter. For molded candy light amber syrup is best, but medium amber syrup will work too. The molded pieces should be uniform shape and well formed. Watch for large crystals which will give the candy a granular texture when tasting. You should strive for minimal white spots or air bubbles due to the cooling environment while making. With the increased interest in crystal coated candy, contest organizers may need to have two classes as a crystallized coated candy and non coated candy is greatly different. It is best to place

each candy into an individual candy paper and a traditional candy box to keep candy from bumping against each other damaging the edges or its shape and form.

How Candy Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Appearance – no white areas, or mold, good uniform color, good shape/form
- ◆ Texture – level of hardness, no crystallization or “gritty” texture
- ◆ Flavor – representative of maple candy with no off flavors
- ◆ If sample does not meet these it will not be in the running for placing. Typically only if a sample entered has an off flavor will it be rejected on that basis.

Maple Sugar or Indian Sugar (granulated)

Using strong flavor or dark amber syrup is best for this product. Moisture content is key as the sugar should have enough moisture to have “creep” or flowing together if poured and not too little that it acts as individual grains of sugar like cane sugar. Uniform crystals are important and of course it should have a good taste. Enter this in a dry, clean, tightly sealed container so no moisture can enter the sample affecting the quality. Don’t use syrup with an off flavor as it can show up in the sugar.

How Granulated Sugar Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Appearance – good color and flow or “creep”
- ◆ Texture - even crystal size, no clumps
- ◆ Flavor – representative of granulated sugar with no off flavors
- ◆ If sample does not meet these it will not be in the running for placing. Typically only if a sample entered has an off flavor will it be rejected on that basis.

Maple Fudge

Grade A Golden, Delicate Taste or Amber, Rich Taste (previously called Light or Medium Amber) or a light flavored syrup works best for this product. Fudge should be firm and have the ability to be cut into small squares without crumbling or collapsing on cut lines. Make sure it is not too hard or too soft. If using nuts be sure not to put too many in and don’t use recipes with a lot of butter as the maple flavor should be the prominent flavor. Fudge should be packaged like candy in individual wrappers and in a box to help it keep its shape.

How Fudge Is Typically Judged:

- ◆ Appearance – no air bubbles, good mix of nuts if included
- ◆ Texture – consistent texture throughout and good form
- ◆ Flavor – representative of fudge with maple flavor as the prominent flavor and no off flavors
- ◆ If sample does not meet these it will not be in the running for placing. Typically only if a sample entered has an off flavor will it be rejected on that basis.

Maple Specialties or Novelties

Some contests have a category with novelty displays that are made from pure maple syrup. Some contests have a basket display using maple products. Entries in this type of category may or may not be tasted but should be made from pure maple syrup. Typically they are judged on appearance and use of or display of maple products. This category varies greatly within the North American maple production region.

Score Sheets and Comments

Most contests do not return the product after the contest. Most will however give you a copy of the judges scoring card or scoring sheet used during the contest. This is helpful as you can learn how your entry was judged and see comments. If disqualified for one of the four basic guidelines or for an off flavor you can learn from the experience. Use every contest as a learning experience and use what you learn towards entering the next one. Talk to others who have won and ask them for tips and what they do different. If you don't win or place don't think you don't make a great product or syrup. It is just that on that day with those judges there was another syrup or confection that stood out. If you entered the same samples with another panel of judges you may place differently. If you have the opportunity to experience being on a maple contest judging panel do so as you will gain appreciation on how some entries stand out over the others.

Final Thoughts on Entering Maple Contests

Entering maple contests is a fun activity and if you win on a consistent basis it is a quality indicator of your product produced. It is very important that producers check syrup entries using the four basics (density, clarity, color, and flavor) before entering a contest. The most important component to entering a contest is to taste the syrup and confection. Experienced judges have all seen entries that were not tasted before entering as the syrup or confection had an off flavor that would have been picked up if the producer would have tasted it before entering. Another important component is to follow the contest guidelines closely as they vary on how the entries are to be packaged, the volume to enter and the names of the confection. When entering international contests be sure you label syrup properly as the grade names have changed with the New International Grading Standards implemented in 2015 by both the United States and Canada.

Being A Maple Contest Judge

Being a judge of a maple contest is a great opportunity to taste many types of syrup. Not all maple syrup or confections tastes the same. As a judge you will be required to consume large amounts of sugar so be sure you can do so without being effected. To judge you use the standards of the contest you are judging for and can use the guidelines within this fact sheet as well. It is important to leave the sample on the tongue for a period of time to allow the various sensory zones to pick up the flavors.

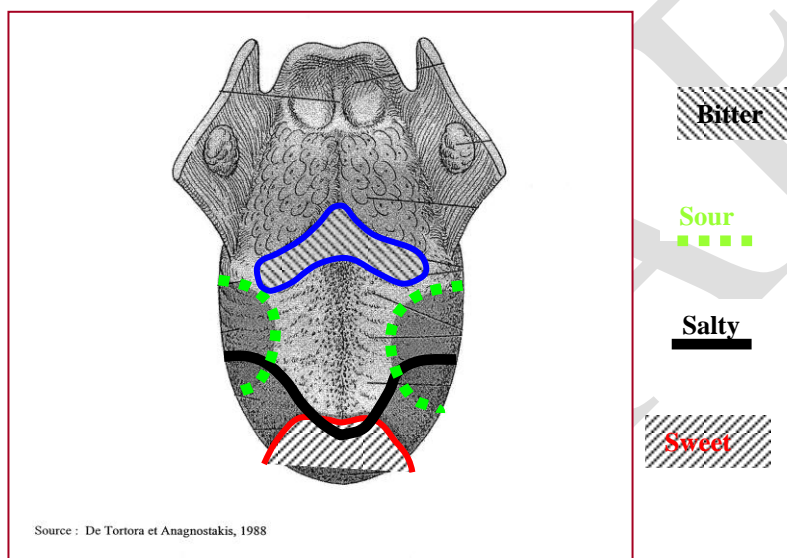
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See Graph 1 below as to where on the tongue different taste characteristics are picked up on the tongue.

When it comes to tasting syrup the following steps will help you utilize all your senses as you judge.

1. Take three quick sniffs of the syrup (*this will help you pick up any off flavors which could be in the syrup*).
2. Take a small sip and swirl the syrup on the tongue (*this allows the various sensory zones on the tongue to be utilized*). The syrup can be spit out if wanted but let residue sit on tongue to see if an after taste appears.
3. Rinse mouth with water between tasting each sample to clear palate.
4. If a strong off flavor was experienced eating plain saltine crackers followed with water will help clear the palate so no residue is transferred to the next sample to be tasted.

Graph 1: Tongue sensory zones **THIS GRAPHIC WILL NEED REDONE**



To Learn More:

To learn more about how to make other maple treats from maple syrup obtain a copy of Ohio State University Extension fact sheet F-46 titled *Making Maple Candy and Other Confections* or consult the Ohio State University Extension Bulletin 856 entitled *North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual* published in 2006. For those interested in making maple syrup obtain the Ohio State University Extension fact sheet F-36 titled *Hobby Maple Syrup Production* or the *North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual* OSU Extension Bulletin 856. To obtain these fact sheets and to purchase the Maple Producers manual see your local county office of Ohio State University Extension. For other fact sheets available from Ohio State University Extension visit “Ohioline” at <http://ohioline.osu.edu>.

Table1: New grading Standards developed by the International Maple Syrup Institute are as follows. (These International standards will be approved in 2015 and will be the same grading standards used within the United States and Canada).

| Old Name | New Name | Flavor Descriptors* | Light Transmission* |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Grade A Light Amber | Grade A Golden | Delicate Taste | $\geq 75.0\%$ |
| Grade A Medium Amber | Grade A Amber | Rich Taste | 50% - 74.9% |
| Grade A Dark Amber | Grade A Dark | Robust Taste | 25.1.0% - 49.9% |
| Grade B | Grade A Very Dark | Strong Taste | $\leq 25.0\%$ |

References:

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