

---

# Letters From New England

October 11, 2009

*Vermont Maple Syrup*



Maple Syrup Display

Dakin Farm Store, Ferrisburgh Vermont



### Proof that New York State is going to the dogs

Today we headed back to New York State and home. We drove to Burlington on Interstate 89 – much to Agnes’s<sup>1</sup> protestations: what does she know? – and from there headed South on Route 7. We did not stop at any restaurants. We did, however, stop at the Dakin Farm Store just south of Shelburne to pick up a year’s supply of maple syrup.

“Why not buy the maple syrup in New York?” – you might ask. There is maple syrup. And then there is Vermont maple syrup. There is no better: period.

Maple syrup is made primarily in the Northeastern United States and the bordering provinces of Canada. But Vermont maple syrup is made only in Vermont. That is to say: if the bottler wants to put the Vermont label on the container, the syrup must be made from sap collected and boiled in Vermont. Some commercial outfits truck sap down from Canada, mix it with some from the States, and produce a multinational stew. Tastes like it too. Sap is highly perishable and must be kept refrigerated until it’s boiled down to syrup. Most sap runs directly from the trees in plastic tubing to a holding tank next to the evaporator, where it’s boiled as soon as there’s enough to make a batch. Some farmers use gas-fired boilers, but I think the wood-fired boilers make the best syrup. Probably some of that smoke flavor gets into the syrup. Nothing quite like walking into a sugar house on a cold March evening with steam clouds coming out of the roof and the interior cozy warm from the evaporator which doubles as a wood stove.

Having lived and worked in Vermont for almost twenty years, I had plenty of opportunity to sample the goods. Now it’s been over twenty years since I left Vermont to work in Rochester, New York, and I still use Vermont maple syrup, despite New York’s relatively large maple

---

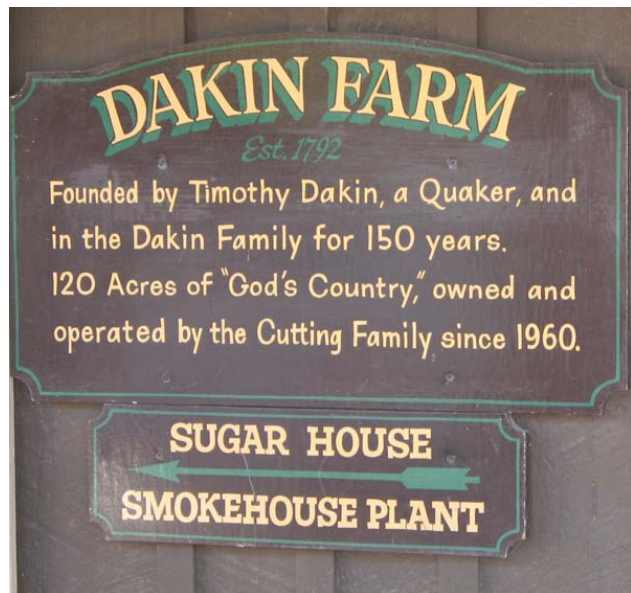
1. Note: Agnes was described in the previous letter, October 10: *Stowe – On the Busiest Weekend of the Year.*

industry. Add to my resume that I worked for several years at what was then known as the *George D. Aiken Sugar Maple Laboratory* in South Burlington, Vermont, and you can begin to understand the source of my bias.

I use maple every morning on cooked cereal. At that rate I would go through about a gallon every 6 months, but the actual rate is a little higher. The grandkids show up occasionally; Ann makes them griddle cakes or French toast, and they add a generous helping of butter and maple syrup to aid their digestion. Between Ann and I, we have eight grandkids, seven of whom are old enough to participate in a maple breakfast.

There are a number of different grades of maple syrup, but in fact you only need to remember one to get the best possible flavor and that is “Grade B.” Look for it on the can or jug. All the others are way too sweet and short on flavor. If you can catch a batch from the bottom of the evaporator at the end of the season, you’ll be in maple heaven. It will have the consistency and color of black-strap molasses. But, man, is it good.

Best place to buy syrup is from someone who makes it. I always used to get mine from a sugar house between Hinesburg and Shelburne where I could occasionally watch the boiling in process.



Now we buy our syrup at Dakin Farm because it’s on the way. They make their own. You can also have them ship it to you but that’s damned expensive. Cheaper to drive up to Vermont and get your own.

Once you’ve bought your syrup, refrigerate it right away so’s to keep the flavor, especially if you’ve opened it. If you bought it in a tin, best to transfer it to glass Mason jars, and keep those refrigerated. My experience has been

that the tin will transfer a “tinny” taste to the syrup, especially after it’s been opened for a couple of months.

A good Grade B will run thick when you take it out of the refrigerator. If it’s watery when cold, it hasn’t been sugared off properly and will taste thin and off no matter how dark it looks.

Don’t heat maple syrup! Makes it thin and watery, and causes it to run all over everything, mostly your plate. You want it to stay on the food. You don’t need a lot if it’s Grade B, and the little bit that you put on is not going to cool down the pancakes or whatever. But go ahead and put on a lot if you want. Just don’t heat it up.

You can substitute maple for brown sugar when you’re making baked beans. Can’t tell you the amount though; never bothered to write it down ‘cause I’m always adding a bit more as the pot cooks. That’s the best way to tell. Just taste it.

Ann’s oldest son is a wine aficionado, and every time he visits he brings some of the best French and Italian wines that money can buy. Don’t mind drinking them at that price. But occasionally he’ll bring over a jug of New York maple, because he knows how much the kids consume with the French toast and what. Thinks he’s doin’ us (and the kids) a favor. Next time I go to his place I’m bringing several varieties of a Spanish Rose at \$6.99 a bottle. A typical description reads: “This medium pink-colored 2008 Borsao Rose reveals aromas of strawberry and rhubarb. Light, dry, and crisp on the palate, this nicely concentrated, refreshing Rose will deliver pleasure over the next 12-18 months.” I’ll hint that it’s as good as that maple he brought over last time.

Garrett (with Ann)