

Local Maple Syrup Feasibility Study

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CDAE 195: Barriers to Local Food

Introduction

Maple Syrup is one of the many items that Vermont has successfully branded to be a product that Vermont is famous for. So why at the University of Vermont do we only currently have a REAL maple syrup procurement rate close to 50%. Our current dining service provider, Sodexo, currently works with two distributors to procure maple syrup, Sysco and Black River Produce. We receive both real and imitation maple syrup from the larger scale, national producer, Sysco. We end up purchasing 32 gallons of imitation syrup and 8 gallons of 100% maple syrup for a total of 40 gallons coming to us through Sysco. On the other hand, UVM procures 29 gallons of maple syrup, both grades A and B, from Sugarman Maple, which is a local Vermont company and aligns with the REAL Food Challenge standards. Totaling these numbers our university purchases 69 gallons of all types of maple syrup each month. If the university was to purchase all twelve months of the year, which we do not when we account for the summer and winter breaks, we would need to purchase 828 gallons a year to meet our current demand. We believe that a much larger percentage of local maple syrup could be purchased by sodexo. In order for us to better understand the way that the University procures local maple syrup we looked into other Vermont suppliers that Sodexo could potentially work with in order to increase the, already high, 50% procurement rate of local maple syrup.

Methodology

We began our research by looking up farms that seemed as if they would be large enough to be able to supply to UVM which would need to buy in large quantities. We also emailed the Intervale Center, a huge supporter of distributing local food, if they had any ideas of maple farms that sold wholesale that they thought would be a good fit to work with UVM. The Intervale led us to the website of the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association, which ended up being a valuable resource in our attempts to identify farms. Their website has a search generator through which we could sort all maple producers in Vermont by county and wholesale availability. We ended up identifying Goodrich Maple, Amber Ridge Maple, Macomber Family Farm, and Hillsboro Maple as new possible suppliers of local maple syrup to UVM in Chittenden County. We had Professor Garza reach out to make initial contact with the farms. If they had a positive response, we then reached out asking them to participate. One they confirmed with us we sent them a short survey that gathered information on many different aspects of their farm. We created the survey based around the questions on the project assignment which included pricing, availability, distribution, and meeting REAL food challenge sustainability standards. Below are the questions that we sent to the participants through a google survey platform.

- How much Maple Syrup are you currently supplying the University of Vermont? Is this the maximum value you could supply?
- What is your availability and pricing of providing wholesale kegs, barrels, or drums of maple syrup? If you don't distribute in these sizes, would you be able to?
- UVM is currently approved to use the following distributors. (Sysco, Black River Produce, Best of Vermont, Intervale Food Hub) Which distributor do you currently work with?
- If not, how do you distribute, how often, and what is your insurance policy?

- If you do not work with the distributors mentioned above, would you consider having flexibility in your distribution system to work with an already approved distributor?

- UVM is involved with the REAL food challenge, in which we try procure as much REAL food as possible, meaning local, fair, ecologically sound, and humane sources. How do you feel your company upholds these values?

- Is there any other information you would like to have? Including other company values, opinions or any questions or concerns for us?

We also reached out to both current local suppliers while doing our research, Sugarman Maple, a maple producer in Hardwick VT, as well the UVM Proctor Center, a maple research facility. These farms received a slightly altered survey that took into account that they already provide for UVM and focused slightly more on how they currently work with the university. After contacting all current local providers and potential new providers of syrup we were disheartened with the response we received. We at first received confirmation from four of the six companies we reached out to including both current suppliers, Goodrich's Maple, and Amber Ridge Maple. Hillsboro farm generously declined the opportunity to participate in our survey and we received no response whatsoever from Macomber Family Farms. Out of the four facilities that agreed to participate only Tom Perkins at the Proctor Center and Ruth Goodrich of Goodrich's maple completed the survey, drastically limiting our research.

Once UVM Proctor Center and Goodrich's Maple responded to our survey online we discussed and analyzed the information they gave us as a group and discussed how we felt about each company based on the Real Food Challenge criteria, perceived sustainability from the information they gave us, and our overall feeling of how effectively they communicated with us.

Findings

As follows is our analysis of the UVM Proctor Center and Goodrich's Maple who agreed to answer our survey, and an analysis on Hillsboro farm which declined the offer to begin supplying to UVM. Through these analysis we do believe that it is feasible to increase our local maple procurement, although it would take a lot more time and research for us to be able to do so. Overall our reaction to the sugar makers that we have spoken with is that they are extremely proud of their work and the Vermont brand. It seems they would be fully committed to supporting the increased procurement of local maple syrup to the University of Vermont if they have the means to do so.

UVM Proctor Center:

The UVM Proctor center is a maple field based research center in Underhill Center, Vermont as an extension of the Plant Biology department in the College of Animals and Life Sciences. As of now, the Proctor Center only supplies maple syrup in very small amounts in the form of "gifts" from the UVM Foundation and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Dean's office. However, they have the potential to supply 1,000 gallons or 11,000 pounds of their maple syrup a year. Since UVM only uses 828 gallons of syrup a year, this could be easily covered by the Proctor Center.

In addition since the Proctor Center is a maple research center associated with the university, they are not dependent on making a profit, and therefore have the potential to sell the maple syrup to us at the same prices that it takes to produce, rather than for a profit. Tim Perkins, from the center estimated that price to be at \$35 a gallon or around \$3.15 a pound.

The Procter Center does not work with any of UVM's current distributors but because of our affiliation with them, we assume that we would be able to work out some kind of direct distribution arrangement, similar to that of the relationship that is currently between Hood Milk and UVM.

In addition, the Procter Center is both certified organic by the Northeast Organic Food Association and by the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association. Both of these certifications ensure that the maple syrup is being taken sustainably and with environmental implications in mind.

Goodrich's Maple Farm:

The Goodrich's Maple Farm is located in Cabot, Vermont, and is in its seventh generation of growing Vermont maple as a family. In their survey, they gave us very vague information when they filled out their survey which made it very difficult for us to extrapolate any real data or comparison for their ability to supply to UVM. However, Ruth Goodrich, one of the owners of the farm, told us that they have worked with large institutions in the past, and seemed interested in continuing the conversation with UVM about the possibility of her supplying us. Specifically she said in the survey that they have "good availability and pricing," which gives us the impression that she would be willing to work with us and thinks that she has the ability to do so.

Ruth spoke specifically about not working with Sodexo distributors such as Black River Produce and Sysco because of their "requirements for factory style production lines and paperwork requirements that only the largest packers can handle." Goodrich's Maple is not big enough to build the infrastructure for Black River or Sysco, and from what we heard from Ruth she would be very unwilling to change to fit those distributors.

Goodrich's Maple Farm is also dedicated to protecting the environment "by conserving the land in agricultural use of this type, we ensure that forests will remain intact for use of future generations." Ruth's description, plus the farm's certification with the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association, makes us confident in the sustainable practices of the farm.

Hillsboro Sugarworks:

When Professor Garza initially made contact with Hillsboro Farm, right away they did not want to supply maple syrup for UVM. Their reasoning is that they feel that it would "not be a good business move right now" since they feel they are at a comfortable size with their current accounts and are "deeply committed to maintaining those relationships." This might be a significant issue moving forward when it comes to sourcing from local maple farms. Since many of the farms are so small, if they wanted to supply for Sodexo, UVM would have to become a primary account, and if they wanted to do that, and maintain the relationships with their current accounts, they would have to scale up significantly, which many farms do not have the capacity for or the desire to do.

Conclusion

There were many things we considered when discussing what would be the best option for Sodexo to take regarding increasing the amount of local maple syrup we purchase. A huge barrier when it comes to obtaining local food in general is the generally higher price. We do not have an estimate of what UVM spends on the maple syrup they currently purchase but the

average wholesale price for maple syrup according to the USDA was \$2.80 per pound in 2013. If we were to purchase 37 gallons of real maple syrup a month then we can approximate that UVM spends around \$1200 dollars a month on maple syrup.

Assuming this is all accurate, the UVM's Proctor research center has a competitive price to this state average as well as the positive benefit they are affiliated with our university. The Proctor Center is also the only company we have spoken with that has the NOFA organic certification. Their ability to not only meet but exceed our demands as well as their sustainable and eco- friendly production of maple syrup makes the Proctor Center our top choice for maple syrup purchasing in the future. We believe that supporting the research center only adds to the sense of community and support of local food we feel here at UVM. A downside to purchasing all of our maple syrup from the Proctor Center would be dropping the business of Sugarman of Vermont, a company that is trying to make a profit. We can only assume the relationship that Sodexo has with Sugarman, and we do not know how much of their business comes to us, but we would not want to hurt a local business that we are supporting. From our research however it seems that Sugarman is a large company that provides many maple products for the food and hospitality industry. We do not believe that dropping them from our list of purchasers would drastically damage their business.

A last thing to consider is the price of imitation syrup being extremely low which as a dining provider is very appealing. It is also a product that some people demand over real maple syrup and we can not entirely exclude the option from our dining halls. Is Sodexo willing to possibly spend a little more money to provide more local maple syrup that promotes both environmental sustainability and our UVM community, and purchase a higher percentage of real maple syrup than its imitation competitor? These are the questions we are left with as we just begin to scratch the surface of the research that needs to be done about this topic. In the end, we are left with a sense of support from the sugar making community and a confidence that as long as UVM is willing, they are more than able to procure a much larger amount of their Maple products from a local and sustainable source.

Sources

Tim Perkins, UVM Proctor Maple: <http://www.uvm.edu/~pmrc/>

Ruth Goodrich, Goodrich's Maple Farm: <http://www.goodrichmaplefarm.com/>

Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association: <http://vermontmaple.org/>

The Sugarman of Vermont: <http://www.sugarmanofvermont.com/>

Hillsboro Sugar Works: <http://www.hillsborosugarworks.com/>

USDA Maple Report:

http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_England_includes/Publications/0605mpl.pdf