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Vermont Agency Says Maple Industry Should Innovate

by Michael Bielawski

NORTHEAST KINGDOM – According to a new study by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets, maple producers should be thinking outside the box if they wish to expand their markets and sell more volume. In particular, the study recommends that maple fill the gap as high-fructose corn syrup and artificial sweeteners such as aspartame are increasingly associated with bad health in scientific studies.

"Vermont's maple producers are world leaders in maple. This research will help sugar makers stay ahead of the curve in a competitive market," said Agriculture Secretary Anton Betters. "Vermonters are serving up a sweet and natural product. This research will open up more markets for those making their living off the land."

According to the report, maple producers should focus on the health status of maple. "Given that maple syrup is all natural and nutrient-rich with calcium, potassium and zinc, it has the potential to play a large part in the healthy snack trend as an alternative sweetener to sugar," it states. It continues that maple "is benefiting from growing health awareness and wellness trends and has an opportunity to become the next preferred substitute for sugar. Maple syrup contains several antioxidants reported to have anti-cancer, anti-bacterial, anti-diabetic, and anti-inflamatory compounds."

According to Dr. Indra See Ram, a professor in the Department of Biomedical and Pharmaceutical at the University of Rhode Island, all the vitamins, minerals, amino acids and other healthy components have been found to "prevent or delay inflammatory disease such as cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome and diseases of the brain."

For example, maple could find itself a new market in soda products. Vermont Sweetwater, based in Poultney, has introduced a line of maple-sweetened sodas.

It is not just soda that producers can add maple to. According to the report, maple is finding its way into other common products, including "salad dressing, oatmeal, bacon, beans, sausage, BBQ sauce, coffee, cocktail syrup and more."

The study suggests that as the market expands, Vermont can stay ahead of the competition by "maximizing production, optimizing reduction technologies at low cost, utilizing efficient packaging equipment."

Mario Fradette of Fradette Maple Farm located in East Hardwick says that this is an ongoing trend in the industry, but he added smaller operations such as his own do not generally participate in value-added products.

"A small producer like me, I don't have the facilities [for those types of products]," he said. He explained that his operation produces products that come more directly from the syrup, such as maple cream, maple candies and maple taffy.

Sandy Gebbie of Gebbie's Maplehurst Farm in Greensboro said she is familiar with the study, and she concluded that she also does not think that her farm is in a position at this point to take advantage of value-added products directly. She did say her farm and the industry as a whole may nonetheless benefit from a shift into such products. "There is room for more growth in the maple market and if the large producers are going to be moving towards value-added products, that means the smaller producers have room to produce more and hopefully get a better bulk or wholesale price for their syrup when they sell it to the larger producers of those products," she commented.

She added that she does see a move away from the less healthy artificial sweeteners. "We've seen that just in our sales nationally or even local. That is something that our purchasers comment on," she said. "They would like to use maple in place of other sweeteners."

photo by Vanessa Fournier

Paul Ruta of Marshfield gave families a horse and carriage ride around the Village Common in Cabot Jan. 4 during the Cabot Village 12th Night Celebration.

Cabot's Twelfth Night Helps Revitalize Community

by Michael Bielawski

CABOT – Cabot village came to life Saturday when more than 100 participants converged to watch stage and musical performances, take part in outdoor recreation, enjoy a community meal, a singalong and more. Called the Twelfth Night Celebration, it was the first of its kind.

According to Dana Robinson, the main organizer, this event is intended to recognize the end of the holiday season and the beginning of longer days and shorter nights as the end of winter inches nearer. It's also a way to help keep the community tight.

"In a way, it's just a really good excuse for the community to come back together," Robinson said. There were six performances including storytelling, a puppet show, classical, jazz and Irish music.

All the performers were Vermonters, Robinson said.

"We have an abundance of really talented people and this innate desire to spend time together and celebrate these things that come naturally to us," he continued. "We're having a Wassail, a community sing. These are songs that are from before Christmas carols came along, songs blessing the trees for a bountiful harvest."

Over on the Village Common, a horse and carriage could be seen going around in the snow, and children were engaged in snow painting and building forts. Inside the library was a paper lantern workshop and the lanterns were later used in a parade.

At sunset, the parade was led by the The Midnight Capers who performed English Cotswold Morris dances and more. It was followed by a community meal served at the Cabot United Church. Finally, the Wassail or community singing commenced before dark.

Featured performers from earlier in the day were storyteller Tim Jennings, the Cabot Community Theater which performed the Mummers' play and Modern Times Theater which put on their popular Vermont version of Punch and Judy. Jeremiah and Annemieke McLane provided a classical music program. Robinson shared some high praise for Jennings' performance. "Tim is a genius and a treasure of a storyteller," he said. "He's been telling stories for a little over 50 years."

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OSSU Discusses Mental Health In Schools

by Emmett Avery

HARDWICK – The January 6 meeting of the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (OSSU) school board started with a discussion of the weekend's and events involving the death of Hazen student Finn Rooney. The meeting then moved to a brief discussion of this year's auditors report (perfect marks) and on to a much more significant budgetary discussion.

Anja Pfeffer, a teacher at Hazen, spoke during the public comment section of the meeting. Pfeffer shared what she said was her concern for the "well-being of the students as a whole." "We are doing everything we can to help the students who are calling out for help." But, she said, there are extremes, there are students who are calling out for help, who are getting support, then "you have the ones in-between. The I would say, many, many students who come to school, who do their work, who smile at you, who are polite. They're doing everything right, and then they leave your classroom. Because they did not do something that caught your attention …we are missing out on the opportunity to reach out to those kids who are quietly doing their work, Finn being one of them."

Pfeffer said that "because of the way the system is set up, it is very, very difficult to provide them (the students who don't show obvious signs of needing help) even with a check-in." She said that she felt teachers' time is under so much demand that it is no longer possible to have one-on-one check-ins with students who are not obviously in need. She asked the board to consider that "we are not serving a majority of our kids well enough."

Pfeffer acknowledged that the system is big and complex and that a full discussion would be large-scale. But she said, "What just happened could happen anytime. I have many other kids I am extremely worried about in this regard." How do we provide "the time, the opportunity, for the real listening? Because these kids say 'I'm fine,' and I think it is our job to look beyond that."

OSSU Superintendent Adam Rosenberg then gave an overview of the school's response to the tragedy. He spoke about the school being open over the weekend, and the gatherings of students in Finn's memory, as well as a series of other programming intended to help students.

Lamoille County Mental

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photo by Vanessa Fournier

REACH! Afterschool director Ceilidh Galloway-Gaine (left), Amelia Crank (center) and her sister Madeline Crank (right) joined 10 other students to go cross country skiing around Hazen. The ski program will run every Friday until the end of February. It is co-sponsored by Hardwick Trails and the Recreation Committee.

CAE Purchases Farm Connex Delivery Service

HARDWICK – The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) purchased a local food transportation infrastructure in order to keep it operating. Farm Connex, a farm product and food delivery service operated as a business by Don Maynard since 2002, will be run by the Hardwick-based nonprofit effective January 1.

Most food is shipped in Vermont by distribution companies that buy the food from producers and resell it to retail outlets.

Farm Connex operates only as a delivery service for small and medium farms and food businesses that might not otherwise have a way to get their products to market. Farm Connex serves more than 60 farmers by picking up products and delivering them to their markets. In addition, Farm Connex picks up and delivers products for Green Mountain Farm Direct, Deep Root Co-op and CAE's own farm product to institution program.

Farm Connex moves between $3 million and $3.5 million dollars worth of local farm and food products each year and employs five people. In many cases, products shipped by Farm Connex represent all or most of a business's wholesale sales. Farm Connex operates 15 to 20 truck routes a week in 12 of 14 counties in Vermont, all but Rutland and Bennington.

When Maynard told his customers he was ready to sell the service or end it, they turned to the CAE, which had been providing Farm Connex with business advisement for 18 months.

"It's filling an obvious need for producers and consumers," said CAE Executive Director Jon Ramsay, adding that the nonprofit will have the capacity to grow the service strategically to benefit small farms, small retail outlets and consumers in a way that would not be possible if a profit margin was the only measure of success. Ramsay said taking on the transportation service will allow CAE to work more strategically with the half-dozen other food hubs around Vermont to increase efficiencies and get more local food and farm products to local consumers.

"This is an exciting opportunity that has clear and direct benefits to farmers and consumers," Ramsay said. He added that CAE

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courtesy photo

Paul Lisai of Sweet Rowen Farm in West Glover has been a client of Farm Connex for seven years. He expressed thanks for all Don Maynard has done and excitement for the future of local food systems in Vermont.

photo by Elijah Lew-Smith

A street on Gorée Island.

Hazen Student Reports on History of Slave Trade in Senegal

by Elijah Lew-Smith

Special Sub-Saharan Africa Correspondent

DAKAR, SENEGAL – Senegal is located on the western-most point of Africa and comprises the transitional zone from the semi-arid Sahara desert to the north to the tropical rain forests to the south. The first inhabitants were culturally and linguistically diverse and lived mostly in small settlements that periodically formed or were absorbed into empires.

Islam began replacing animistic religions in the 1000s as a result of trans-Saharan trade and penetrated all but the southern-most region of the country, Casamance. Starting in the middle of the 1500s, slavery dominated the political and economic landscape of Senegal, which engendered internal fractures and devastated existing social and political institutions.

Senegal was colonized by France in 1895, and the French instituted a colonial government and educational system while aggressively promoting the French language. In 1960, there was a peaceful transition of power to a democratic Senegalese government. Despite civil unrest in Casamance, reports of corruption, and the lasting effects of slavery and colonialism, all transitions of power have been peaceful and democratic. Senegal has become a model among developing countries.

Just south of Dakar lies the island of Gorée, an infamous slave trading post and popular tourist attraction. This testament to the atrocious history of the slave trade has been visited by the past three American presidents, Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II.

Naturally, a trip to the island was the first cultural activity for the four other YES (Youth Exchange and Study) Abroad program students and me upon arriving in Dakar. Our cultural guide told us how 20 million slaves had been sold on the island, many passing through the House of Slaves, a beautiful building with a repugnant story. He recounted how the slaves were crammed into rooms so small they didn't have the room to lie down and had to stand in their own excrement

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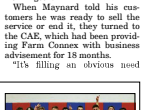

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