

Sweet success for area's maple syrup makers

17 Jan 2010 — Erie Times-News

By TIM HAHN

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Life continues to be sweet for the region's maple product producers.

Local sugar house operators once again cleaned up in the maple products judging at the Pennsylvania Farm Show, finishing first or second in 11 of 15 competitions at the 2010 show.

Northwestern Pennsylvania also has the distinction of being home to two grand maple champions, as James Bortles of Linesville took home the Best Syrup of Show award and Janet M. Woods of Washington Township was named premier exhibitor at the Farm Show, which closed Saturday.

All told, members of the Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Association collected 26 ribbons at the Farm Show, outperforming the typically strong maple region of Potter and Tioga counties, said Woods, who was on hand to watch the awards presentation last weekend.

"It's like we always say, the northwest has the best," she said of the association, which covers Erie, Crawford, Mercer, Venango and Warren counties.

The retired educator, who has been making syrup since the 1950s and now plies her craft at Hurry Hill Farm off Fry Road, was named premier exhibitor for the second straight year. She took first place in the maple cream or butter and the baked goods competitions, and finished second in six other categories, including four syrup competitions.

Three of her second-place finishes were to Bortles, whose syrup took the top prize in the half-gallon, quart and light amber in glass competitions.

"By golly, we had some luck this year," said Bortles, a respiratory therapist at the Meadville Medical Center who started making maple syrup with his son, Chase, 17, in 2005. "It just shows that we're doing some real, nice syrup."

Another notable local competitor at the Farm Show was Gerhard Bilek of Cranesville, who took first place in the crumb sugar competition and second place in maple cream or butter and in candy.

The Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Association was additionally honored with a first-place ribbon for their association exhibit, which was a display of a working sugar house.

"I just hope (the Farm Show successes) bring a lot more awareness to what we have in the area," Bortles said.

"There are a lot of syrup producers, a lot of small ones that don't even send syrup to the show. And a lot of people are getting back into it."

That is evident in the growing roster of Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Association members, which now stands at 59 and includes people from western New York and eastern Ohio.

"It's a real neat idea to bring (syrup making) back to this part of the state," Bortles said.

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