

# Neighbors

## Walter Mattice — Morewood's Mr. Sweet

The maple syrup business has come a long way since the days when it could take 15 men working round the clock to operate one bush.

Take Walter Mattice's 17 1/2-acre bush near Morewood. The sophisticated, modern setup can be run by one man fresh from a full night's sleep.

Fortunately, there are some things that technology cannot change. The sweet, intoxicating aroma of boiling maple sap permeates every corner of the Mattice bush.

Walter and Mary Mattice and family have been producing and selling syrup for 30 years now. Son Rick operates the business under dad's watchful eye (son Bob farms near

by and owns a tractor ship in Morewood). Although the bulk of today's syrup production goes to a major food supplier, there are many local customers and visitors to the bush from mid-March to mid-April are sure to get a dipperful of the sticky ambrosia and a pleasant tour.

The trees are still tapped with a spoil but rather than let the sap drip into a bucket, it is sucked by vacuum into a 5/16-inch plastic hose to a central pumphouse. Walter has 6800 taps and 14 miles of plastic line all hooked up to two pumping stations powered by three turbine pumps. In a bad year such as this, when the winter has been hard on the

trees, the old bucket system wouldn't get nearly as much sap as the new vacuum system. A good supply is guaranteed.

From the pumping stations the sap travels through 1-inch black plastic lines to the evaporator, where it is eventually processed into maple syrup. It takes 60-80 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup as the season starts. As the sap gets richer as the tree runs, it may take only 30-40 gallons to make one gallon. In the evaporator, the sap is kept boiling by oil burners. Mica reflectors are used to intensify the heat. It is not uncommon for Walter to go through more than 1000 gallons of oil when the sap is running.



Morewood Syrup Producer Walter Mattice (Suzanne Veh Photo)

By Suzanne Veh

A major concern in the maple syrup business is cleanliness as the sap gathers bacteria quickly and cannot be held for long before being boiled down. Walter cleans out all the holding tanks in the evaporator at night with Sulphamic Acid to dissolve and clean off any sugar residue in preparation for a fresh start the next day. The pans used for the sap in the evaporator are changed and cleaned every four hours. At the start of each season, all the plastic hose is washed out with a water and chlorine solution. The simple flick of a switch on a control panel forces the cleansing agent into the lines up to the pumphouse and back again, flushing the system. At the end of each season the hose is also flushed and stored in sealed plastic bags until the following year.

At the end of hours of boiling, the sap is released through a cheesecloth strainer into a large milk can. Syrup — thick, sweet, amber-coloured — nothing else can possibly taste like the real thing. In days gone by, this syrup would have had to stand overnight, or until cool, and then be tested for proper thickness or doneness. If it was not quite right, it would have to go back into the evaporator and boil all over again. Today, Walter simply uses a Refractometer. This compact and complex little meter has a small lens on one end on which Walter puts a drop of fresh syrup. He holds the apparatus up to the light and looks through a viewfinder to take a numerical reading. A good reading for maple syrup is 66 or 67. Gizmos aside, the old-fashioned taste test said his was bang on.

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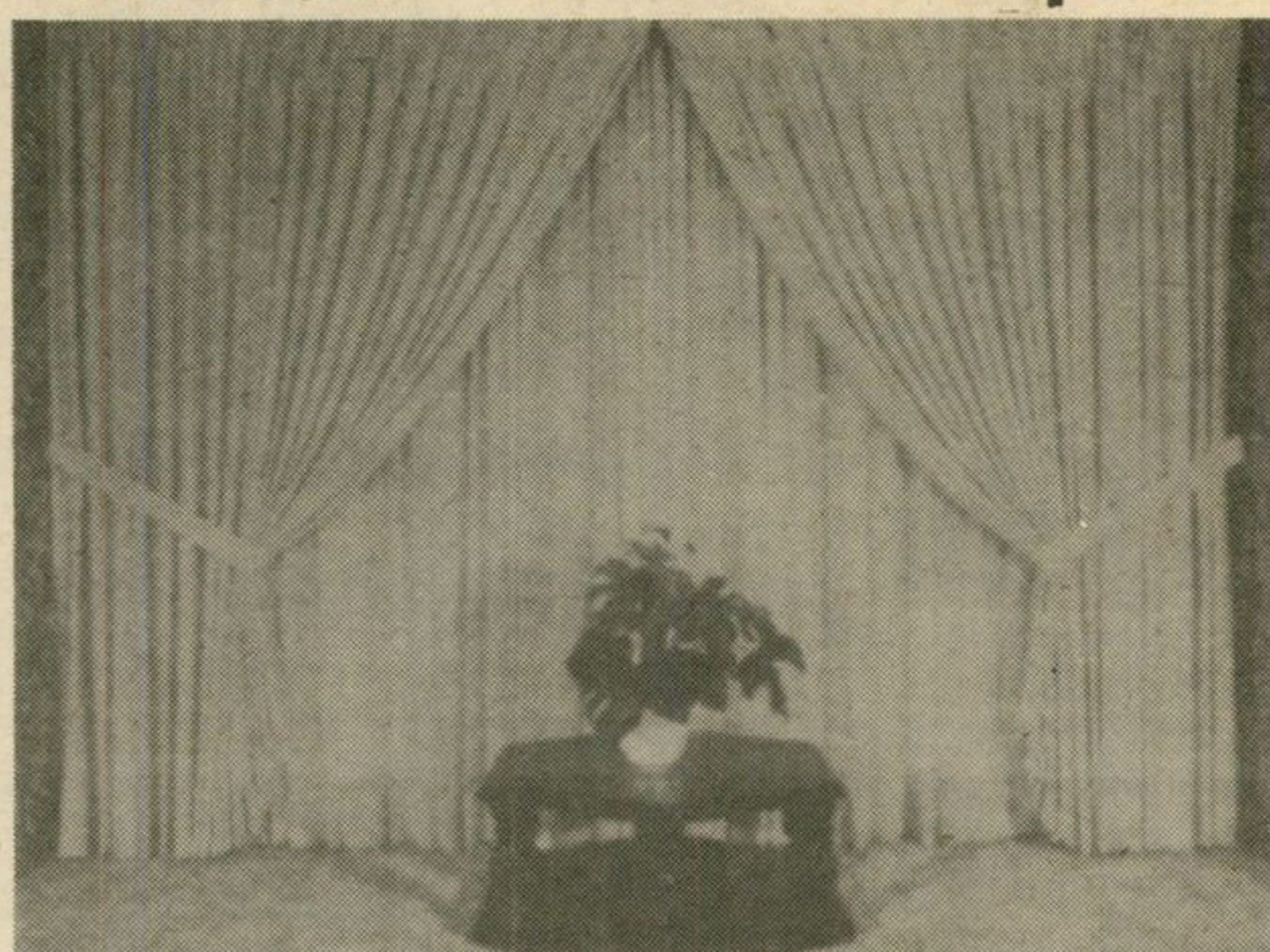
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