

Syrup maker ready for his close-up



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By Jaye Beeler

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Ready or not, Steve Stallard, maker of BLiS fine foods, is prepared for instant fame.

A couple of years ago, Stallard was aging his Vermont maple syrup in old Kentucky bourbon barrels in Kentwood, flattered by the supporting role BLiS maple syrup might play at Charlie Trotter's Restaurant in Chicago or the celebrated seafood restaurant, Providence, in Los Angeles.

The Press featured the artesian food-maker in September 2006. Three months later, Oprah Winfrey touted his syrups in O, The Oprah Magazine, and the surge began.

"It's kind of taken me by surprise, said Stallard, who earned his cooking and baking/pastry credentials at the Culinary Institute of American in Hyde Park, N.Y. "I didn't dream that it would branch out so far and so fast."

Still, "Diary of a Foodie" came calling Wednesday, looking to spotlight Stallard and his kettle-cooked organic maple syrups.

Produced by WGBH and Zero Point Zero Productions along with Gourmet Magazine and National Geographic, "Diary of a Foodie" is a public television series that takes viewers to the very best kitchens in the world.

Louisa Chu, Gourmet's Chicago correspondent and a producer for the show, discovered the syrup at Grant Achatz' Alinea restaurant in Chicago. Shortly thereafter, Stallard was tapped for "The World of Sweets" episode for the season starting in January.

For the New York City production crew, Grand Rapids was the last stop on its Midwest swing. They filmed PolyScience's Philip Preston, who develops high-tech kitchen gadgets; Sebastien Canonne at the French Pastry School in Chicago; Paul Bartolotta in Milwaukee; a dairy farm in the village of Scandinavia, Wis.; and a fish fry at Fish Creek in Door County Peninsula in Wisconsin.

Cinematographer Brett Albright captured how Stallard creates his matured organic maple syrup that's fabulous on pancakes, as well as in sweet and savory dishes.

Stallard showed Chu the 55-gallon drums of organic maple syrup shipped to him from Vermont. He poured out the raw syrup, added fistfuls of aromatic ingredients and funneled his now-infused maple syrup into wooden casks.

Also at Stallard's Kentwood processing facility were series producer Amy Teuteberg and producer Diane Schutz.

"Wow, Steve. This is delicious," Teuteberg said after tasting the syrup. "Oh, this is incredible."

Stallard also cooked a few dishes spiked with his bourbon maple syrup: a berry and ice cream dessert (recipe below), his version of "bacon and eggs" -- a shredded potato pancake with caviar -- and a fois gras with squab over a confit of rhubarb and apples.

BLiS's infused maple syrups retail for \$20 and are available at Grand River Grocery, 496 Ada Drive SE, Ada, 676-9292; Kingman's Market, 2225 Plainfield Ave. NE, 363-7575; and Martha's Vineyard, 200 Union Ave. NE, 459-0911.

