

Maple Sugaring



From Nova Scotia to Minnesota the Sugar-on-Snow parties are the same but sugaring-off has become big business. For instance, in Vermont, you might read an invitation to:

Visit a Sugar Bush during March and April as guests of sugar makers who cater to Sugar parties... After the production season we are planning Summer Sugar-on-Snow parties, so come early, come late, but come, see "how she's done" and have fun.

Some maple producers say "it's awful hard work" to run a Sucrierie and money alone is not enough-a person has to love what he is doing. One writer insisted that "sugar making is not for the weak hearted or bodied" because it is one of the "most laborious occupations". As more and more farms are sold and trees cut down or abandoned and family's scattered and young people turned off the land, the old Sucrieries are disappearing. Progress has taken a sweet toll. When Lawson Smith of Cumberland County, N. S., gave up making sugar he sold his equipment to other sugar makers.

"And the Nova Scotia government bought the land for a picnic park". Smith's grandfather "made sugar back of Stanley" and his three sons bought a 120 acre Sugar Woods in 1894. Ownership changed hands several times and finally in 1932, "the Department of Highways bought the whole lot when they made the highway to Springhill which is now paved". Similar transactions and forest depletion have drastically influenced the character of the country and of the people who live there.



In 1925 a group of otherwise-thinking Maple Syrup producers in Quebec got together and formed a cooperative. They knew that the Sucrierie would disappear unless there was some guarantee of quality standards and a ready cash market. Many of the sap orchards were consolidated and today the cooperative has a membership of 4.300 producers. Quebec is the world leader in the production of Maple syrup and other maple products. The French Canadian cuisine is famous internationally for such voluptuous delicacies as maple mousse, soufflé, parfait, Tarte a la ferlouche, Pain Perdu or the once homely Grand Peres that are now served as a gastronomic delight. It is not surprising that about 40 percent [1,266,939 U.S. gallons] of the annual production of pure maple syrup is consumed within the Provinces, leaving 60 percent of the Quebec maple harvest to be exported to other markets.

This is a time of Maple Renaissance in Canada and the mood extends across the border. The industry is being rejuvenated and continual research and improvement of equipment and marketing skills. More family farms are being reborn as more young North Americans recognize and seek the dignity of a simple life, closer to nature. It may be true that some farmers say that "it's the worse damn job there is" but when the sap weather winds begin to blow these same farmers can't wait to head to the bush.



An introduction to the erable a sucre would not be complete without an acknowledgement to the North American Indian who shared the sweet secrets of the Sugar Bush with the early Jesuits later colonists.

There are many legends, most of which vary only slightly, explaining how the Indian learned to harvest the liquid fruit of the Maple Tree and how he discovered the greater mystery of converting this sap to Maple Syrup. Between the recipes that follow are bits and pieces of the folklore and here are a few versions that have survived countless tellings.

The Chief took his tomahawk from the Sugar Maple tree where he had thrown it the night before. As the sun got higher, the sap began to drip from the gash in the tree. The Indian wife tasted it and it wasn't bad so she used it to cook the meat. Or, the pot was left under a broken Sugar Maple branch and the sap dripped into it. Later when the meat was cooked, the sap boiled down to syrup. The irresistible sweet scent and the taste of the maple meat so delighted the chief that he named it "Sinzibuckwud", the Algonquin word meaning "drawn from trees" and used by the Indian when referring to Maple Syrup.

Visitors to the Sugar Bush, especially those from the towns and cities, are often surprised to know that the Maple Syrup does not flow from the trees in its final thick sweet state. The Chippewas and the Ottawas of Michigan believe that many moons ago, the God NenawBozhoo loved his people and feared they would become indolent and destroy themselves if nature's gifts were given too freely. Similarly, another story is that the Earth Mother, Nokomis, made the first Maple Syrup. She made a hole in the tree and the syrup poured out. Her grandson Manabush was worried. If the sweet gift of the Maple tree was so easily obtained the Indians might become shiftless and lazy. So he showered the top of the Sugar Maple with water, diluting the Maple Syrup into sap. Ever since then it has taken long hard labor to make Maple Syrup.



Marius Barbeau tells us that the Indian gradually reduced the sap to syrup by a series of freezing, discarding the ice and starting again. In the 16th century the Indians had only clay pots. They boiled meat and fish by constantly adding hot stones to the pot and replacing them with hotter ones. For two hundred years there was no significant change from the methods used by the early Indians. The French Canadians were not interested in the backwoods sugar until imports from France were cut off in the early 1700's, forcing the colonists to be self sufficient. Similarly, no until the War for Independence in the late 1800th century, was sea traffic so blocked off, did the colonists consider the value of the crude Maple Sugar. By the end of the 18th century the maple industry was established in Quebec but mainly as a "typical habitant activity". It was not until the end of the 19th century that iron or tin pots were used to gather and boil the sap, and not until the 20th century has the renaissance of the Sugar Maple industry been taken seriously.

As I write the introduction to the Sugar Bush Connection, it is early in February, but the winter sunshine seems warmer and the days longer. I fear that a false spring is upon me! Yet this, in itself, is a cue that winter will soon give up, disappearing in puffs of sweet smoke from the Sucrieries.

Maybe you too, respond to the season of the sap with its promise of sugar weather and sugar water-the rustic rites of a northeastern spring. Why not put the mood into action by making some Maple Magic in the kitchen? Or begin Maple Sugaring in your own backyard, or look for a few sugar trees in the field of a friendly neighbor. Better still, start a Sucrierie. It will mature in forty years and last at least another hundred and fifty-a living legacy of the most versatile luxury of nature. How sweet it is!