

Maple Sugar



What better month than March to begin a new adventure-to bid a "sweet goodbye to winter". The nights are still frosty cold and the warm sun begins to "honeycomb the snow" and the maple moon and the sweet water weather promises that spring is near.

The ambivalent moods of a northeastern winter are forgotten when the warm sap-running winds carry off the patches of old snow; even when the muddy earth becomes a cheery challenge- about mid-March when the Canada geese are heading home. Now there is a sense of subtle stirring of the spirit, a persuasive restlessness that seems to affect all living things. It is as if the sugar sunshine triggers off an ambrosial nostalgia. We are not immune to the hidden forces that regularly seduce and subdue nature. Robert Frost used to say" spring is the mischief in me "and the influence of the moon on behavior is no longer ridiculed by scientists. It is said that in parts of New England even the crows go crazy just before the sap runs!

So-in a very real sense, by the logic of the sun and the moon and the tides, when March comes to the northeastern woodlands of North America, a transmutation takes place. Once again, as if touched by ancient alchemy, the Sucreie offers its sweetest of gifts and, as if under the same spell, we too, respond to this renewal of nature. The roots of life go deep, and, without our consent, spontaneously with a kind of wonder, we find ourselves responding to spring out of the collective depth within us, as if reaching out for a long lost memory.

March is the sweetest month. With the "salutary sap of the erable a sucre", the season of the hearth comes to a close and the "long sweetener" begin, and all the time you could see diamond flashes in the woods as a crystal drop of sap caught the sun and glistened for an instant like a sequin.

Cranberry Cottage

February, 1982

"What is a man but all his connections?"

Being far too typical a consumer of nature's gifts, I knew very little about the Sugar Bush until about four years ago. Even then, the things I learned were mainly by accident while researching and writing The Cranberry Connection and later, The Blueberry Connection. As I came across the many historical references to the erable a sucre, I made separate notes, just in case I got the Maple fever at some later date.



Early last spring I drove on a country road out of Guysborough, Nova Scotia. For miles and miles there were nothing but trees and then, along side the road, was the Department of Lands and Forests sign. On a sudden impulse, I drove down the long

rugged road to the Giant Lakes Sugar Woods in the midst of 150 acres of Sugar or Rock Maple. The operation is relatively small, only 4,000 [40 acres], but I was impressed by the potential Maple Syrup it represented. At the same time I was awed by the grandeur of the isolated Sugar Bush on the headwaters of the Salmon River which empties into Chedabucto Bay.



Then began a period of reading, and writing to the Departments of Agriculture in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Quebec and the Northeastern States, west to Minnesota. This was followed by a more personal letter to the heads of all Maple Sugar Associations, requesting snapshots, sketches, anecdotes, personal histories-and recipes- anything that would better acquaint me and the public with the past and present and future of nature's industry. At the same time I talked with a lot of people and confirmed what I feared was true, that few Nova Scotians or North Americans know very much about the secrets of the Sugar Maple. Dorothy Moore from Upstate New York, who, with her husband and two sons, has a family Sucrerie on the side, wrote me,

You would be surprised at the number of children and adults too, who haven't the slightest idea how real maple syrup is made.

I asked my mother if there was a Sugar Bush near the village where I grew up in Hants County, Nova Scotia. "Oh, no" she replied. "Maple Syrup comes from Vermont or down New Hampshire way." In Cumberland or Colchester County the response might have been different.

I pondered on how little North Americans know about something so closely linked to their heritage and simultaneously I was reminded of Haliburton's Sam Slick sayings,

'Braggin' saves Advertisin' ". With his words ever before me as well as the words of my mother, ideas for the book began to come together.

The responses to my request soon filled a huge file and after a year they still arrive as one person tells another or someone thinks of someone to add to an earlier letter. I feel that I know a multitude of people I shall never meet but with whom a connection, a sweet connection, has been made. This should not have surprised me because sort of thing happened during the Cranberry and then the Blueberry adventure. In this increasingly depersonalized world it is always a relief to know such people exist.

The research on the erable a sucre began to haunt me. The more I read, the more I reread-old books, technical journals, and poetry too. It was difficult to focus on recipes when my head was now so full of other wonderings. How could man have so separated himself from nature? Not that man should attempt to return to the past, which is never possible. But it is naïve to hope that man might once again be open to renewal of friendship and respect and cooperation of nature? I thought of an old poem by Charles G. D. Roberts-so Canadian and yet such a universal plea,

Make thou my vision sane and clear that I might see what beauty clings. In common forms, and find the soul of unregarded things.

Flavored with such musing, the Maple memorabilia had become the third connection.

The pages that follow are some of the things I now know or believe about the Sucrierie and the mystery of the Sap and the Syrup, and some "Braggin'" about the most versatile delicacy in nature, and a collection of sweet recipes from all over North America. They range from backwoods to gourmet delights, each one using only pure Maple syrup or Sugar, except in a few instances where I suggest a few drops of Maple flavoring or extract.



The early calendar began with the vernal equinox in March. When the new calendar was adopted in 1752, the beginning of the New Year was changed from March 25th to January 1st. It is said that the farmers were the most resistant to the change. March seemed a more honest beginning, more accurate, more to the "natural order of things". When civilization was younger and man lived close to the soil, all living things fit into a pattern - a time, a place and a season. Farming was closely linked to a man's religion and philosophy and the spring of the year had unique significance as a time of spiritual and natural rebirth.

The first crop of the year is the Sugar Bush harvest that begins with the surge of sap that runs each spring for a brief period. Sometimes it starts as early as mid February and stops as late as mid April but within that period the heavy sap run may be only ten to twenty days. The flow is directly affected by climatic conditions. The nights must be freezing cold [24 degrees F.] and the daytime sunshine warm [40 degrees F.]. Think on the mystery. Without such precise conditions, the sap will stop running or will not start at all. With all of his lunar expertise, man is at the mercy of this Sugar Maple magic. All he can do is wait.

The sweet gift of the Sucrierie now seems so natural, so much a part of our North American heritage that we take it for granted. It is not a paradox to the agricultural specialist, the conversion of sap to syrup is still regarded as one of nature's most intriguing mysteries.

An integral part of the maple sap enigma is its deceptive taste and appearance-like fresh spring water and barely a taste. Why, then, does the sap take on the distinctive Maple flavor only after it is boiled? There is no simple answer to that question but experience and research explain other parts of the puzzle. The Maple Sugar Producers of Quebec tell us that

...each fall, the tree produces its own supply of starch to act like antifreeze for the roots in winter. With the melting of the snow, water enters the roots and begins the circulation of "sugar water" through the trees for the growing season.

Consequently, each spring the sap begins to run with the first thaw but under climatic conditions found only in the Northeastern woodlands of North America. The Maple tree can be grown in other areas and is hardy as an ornamental tree or its

hard wood but it needs a cold winter, frosty spring nights and sunny spring days-precise conditions-for the sweet Maple magic to repeat itself.

Of the thirteen varieties of maples native to North America, only four produce the sweet sap that makes Maple Syrup and only two are heavy producers-the erable a sucre, or Sugar Maple, known also as Hard Maple, Black Maple, Rock Maple, Curly Maple or Bird's Eye Maple [acer saccharum Marsh] and the Red Maple, whose leaf is the emblem of Canada [acer rubrum L.]. The erable a sucre does not grow in any quantities outside the Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Southern Ontario and Quebec and the Northern States from New England west to Minnesota. Within this concentrated area about 5,000,000 U. S. gallons of pure maple syrup were produced commercially in 1981 of which 3,369,342 were from the Province of Quebec. This does not, of course, include the products of many family farms that sweeten and color the Northeastern landscape.

The early settlers got sap from other than maple trees. If the weather conditions are right, such trees as the ash, box elder, [Manitoba Maple', walnut and birch can be tapped but will not give the sweet syrup of the erable a sucre. In Lady Simcoe's diary [she accompanied her husband from England to what was then Canada in the late 18th century' there is reference to the unique sap of the maple and that of the birch trees.

This is the month for making Maple Sugar, a hot sun and frosty nights causing the sap to flow most. Slits are cut in the bark of trees and wooden troughs set under the tree into which the sap-a clear sweet water-runs. It is collected from a number of trees and boiled in large kettles till it becomes of hard consistence.

Moderate boiling will make powder sugar but when boiled long it forms very hard cakes which are better. In a month's time when the best sap is exhausted, an inferior kind runs of which vinegar is made. Cutting the trees does not kill them for the same trees bear it for many years following

...The sap of the birch trees will make vinegar.

York, 19th March, 1794

Public archives of Canada

The Maple Sugar industry of early days took place in the yard, in a clearing, in a crude Sugar Shack or in the kitchen. It was usually the responsibility of the women to supervise the sugaring-off. Susanna Strickland Moodie who came from England in 1832 to live in the Canadian wilderness wrote:

...while Jenny was engaged in boiling and gathering the sap in the bush, I sugared off the syrup in the house, an operation watched by the children with intense interest.

But her matter of fact tone changed a bit later, I was heartily sick of the sugar-making long. Before the season was over; however, we were well paid for our troubles. Besides one hundred and twelve pounds of fine soft sugar, as good as Muscovado, we had six gallons of molasses, and a keg containing six gallons of excellent vinegar. [1837]

Roughing It in the Bush [1852]

Susanna's sister, Catherine Parr Traill, also immigrated to Canada and she wrote:

...in the backwoods the women do the chief of the sugar making; it is rough work, and fitted for men, but Canadians think little of that.

The Backwoods of Canada [1836]

The word "sugar-off" found its way to the literature of North America. Originally it referred to the conversion of sap to syrup but this colloquialism soon took on other meanings-the period when the sap is running [sugaring-off days] , the Sucreie as a designated place [the Sugar off] ; a time of merriment that could take a variety of forms [Sugaring-off party or a Sugar-off].

Elizabeth Therese Baird wrote about a Sugar Bush and a Sugar-off on Mackinaw Island, Michigan, in 1802.

A visit to the sugar camp was a great to the young folks as well as to the old. In the days I write of, sugar was a scarce article, save in the Northwest, where Maple Sugar was largely manufactured. All who were able possessed a sugar camp. My Grandfather had one...

About the 1st of March nearly all the inhabitants of our town... would move to prepare for the work. Our camp was delightfully situated in the midst of a forest of maple, or a maple grove. A thousand or more trees claimed our care and three men and two women were employed to do the work.

Baird then told of a party "near the close of sugar making." It was a Crepe party. Each woman brought a frying pan "in which to cook and turn Les Crepes or pancakes", being first instructed that "no girl was fitted to be married until she could turn a crepe." The food served was not the now typical sugaring-off fare. They ate "partridges roasted on sticks, rabbit and stuffed squirrel, cooked French fashion, and finally with as many crepes with [Maple] syrup as we desired." Everyone left the party with "bark of wax and sugar cakes" [containers were made of birch bark and the wax was soft maple taffy]. The merry-making associated with sugaring-off filled an important need in the life of early settlers.

Even today the Maple moon means sugaring-off parties. It is a time when families come together-and many tell me they come from great distances-and touch one another's lives again for a brief time in the sweet shadow of a Sucrierie; when neighbors gather to celebrate an ancient feast; when communities, even towns reach out and welcome strangers to the sugar table last April 4th, for instance, at the 17th annual sugar party in Elmira, Ontario, newspaper headlines read, "the Maple Syrup festival crowds estimated at 35,000." Visitors lined up before 7 a.m. for pancakes-more than 150 lbs. of butter and 100 gallons of maple syrup were used. It is not surprising that in Elmira, in the heart of Ontario sugar country, there is a charming gift shop called-what else - the Sap Bucket1!

In some parts of rural Quebec the sugaring-off season begins with the Blessing of the Sucrierie or the Sugar maple. With the sweet harvest there are sugaring-off parties throughout the Province. Sometimes the celebrations last all night with dancing and food and entertainment for all ages. It is a season festivity and a colorful part of the French Canadian culture.