

Sweet March!

Deliciousness awaits at regional maple sugar shacks



By Katharine Fletcher

During March, the sun's getting stronger, the daylight's getting longer, and if we're lucky, the snow's starting to get that crunchy "corn snow" look. In other words: spring is around the bend and the sap will soon be running in the trees. And that means it's sugaring-off time.

Many of us parents, uncles and aunties remember the old way of gathering sap from trees. And some of us may even have had the chance to assist friends or family with screwing the taps into the trees and hanging metal (or even wooden) buckets from the spigots to capture the precious liquid.

Some sugar bushes still tap a few trees with buckets. Some even have horse-drawn wagons to drive through the woods. Draught horses such as chestnut-coloured Belgians patiently wait as buckets are dumped in containers on the back of the wagon, then when these are full; they transport the sap to the evaporation tanks.

This is the old way. The far less-picturesque method of collecting sap these days is by plastic tubing, which snakes through the woods, transporting sap from tree to tank, on its own. No more hanging, washing and storing buckets! No more slow collection! – But far less photogenic!

Oh, well. It's still interesting to take the kids to see the entire process, from collecting the sap to tasting the sticky, deliciously sweet syrup. And, when you can plan to have a hearty breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and beans after playing about in the snow, well, that's a fantastic Canadian tradition we all wait for, yearly.

Back to the sap. How does it become syrup?

Kids will be interested to see that when sap comes out of the tree, it resembles water.

No wonder: it's about 97% water and roughly 3% sucrose. That's a natural sugar which forms during spring from starches which overwinter in the tree's roots. After boiling and evaporation, the sap must be transformed to at minimum 66% sugar and 34% water before it can be considered syrup.

So it is no surprise to discover that the evaporation process seems to take "forever."

And not all syrup is created equal. Most sugar shacks have a demonstration area where your family can look at the difference between different grades of syrup. These include Extra Light, Light, Medium and Amber. See which you all prefer – and if you all want to become aficionados, why not visit a couple of sugar shacks and compare syrups and grades?

Quite apart from the syrup itself, have you and the kids ever tried tire-surneige? If not, do it this year because it's one of our sweetest Canadian traditions for sure. Here's how it works: first, the sugar shack operator gets a clean container of snow. Then maple syrup is poured on top of it. Quick! Before the syrup totally hardens, grab a wooden popsicle stick and scrape off the hardening taffy. Eat.

Now, this is a major yum. I defy you and the family not to love it!

Birthday party tip: If you're not up for a sugar shack birthday party visit (which could be a very fun idea), why not do this yourself at home in the back yard or, after gathering clean snow, in your apartment?

Okay, we all understand visiting a sugar bush is a sweet idea. But what is the sap in a tree, anyhow?

First, sap is the lifeblood of any tree: it is stored mostly in the roots during winter, and in spring it starts to ascend up the trunk to invigorate the branches and twigs, to bring nutrients to the plant. Maple trees, and specifically sugar maples, have an abundance of sweet sap which First Nations' peoples learned how to boil and produce syrup. In turn, they taught settlers when the newcomers came to North America.

Right, but what makes one year better than another for what's called the sap run?

Outside temperatures must cooperate in order for the sap to “run” well. Ideally, night temperatures will fall between -2 to -8 Celsius, followed by daytime temperatures of +2 to +8 Celsius.

Let’s hope for a good season where producers can enjoy a good yield, and where we can all take part in one of our wonderful outdoorsy traditions.

Valley list of sugar shacks

Here in the Ottawa Valley we’re blessed with lots of maple trees and lots of great sugar shacks. Finding one is easy: why not try a new one this spring? In West Quebec, go to www.agro-outaouais.com, navigate to “directory” then select “Maple Syrup, Maple Products” in the pull-down menu. Or, go to www.ottawa-information-guide.com and click on Ottawa Sugar Bushes.

Katharine and Eric Fletcher’s fifth edition of Quebec Off the Beaten Path, is the couple’s latest book.

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