



Tapping maples

Sweet Tastes of Spring

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis except where noted

March is maple syrup time, one of the first signs of spring. As the earth tilts toward the sun again, bringing bright blue skies and warming daytime temperatures to above freezing, and the nights continue to fall below freezing temperatures, the sap of the sugar maple trees begins to flow.

First Nations people harvested what they called “sweet water” during the “maple moon” or “sugar month.” We don’t know when they first began using sap. Very likely it was centuries ago. A legend attributed to the Iroquois has it that an accidental

Tepee at Jack Smythe Field Centre

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Sweet water drips into sap bucket.



A pioneer method of boiling sap.



The sugar shack at Jack Smythe Field Centre.

piercing of a maple tree during sap flow led to the discovery of the sweet water, which was added to a pot of venison as it was cooked. The result was so enjoyable that a tradition was born. It is assumed that European settlers learned how to create maple syrup from the First Nations.

Maple syrup has become a signature product of southern Ontario and Quebec, known all over the world. It continues to be produced along the Niagara Escarpment today, wherever there are good growths of sugar maples. It is still possible to see old metal sap buckets hanging from spouts in the trees of some properties, or plastic tubing leading to a central sap collection point.

Prudent tapping does not harm mature maples. So much sap flows that it's not uncommon to see or hear sap dripping from the tips of branches on a sunny day, or even to spot "sapsicles" hanging frozen from a cut in a branch. Squirrels have even been seen to enjoy these treats of nature, and many a dog will gladly lick the sweet end.

A tapped tree may lose no more than seven per cent of its sap. Trees that are young or under stress should not be tapped extensively. Even on large trees it's best to limit the taps to two. During the high point of the sap flow, sap may contain 2.5 per cent sugar while it tapers off to less than one per cent at the end of the season.

After collection, the raw maple syrup is evaporated into syrup. This requires a lot of time and dedication. It takes approximately 151 litres of raw maple sap to boil down into 3.8 litres of pure maple syrup.

People have tried boiling sap in their kitchens for days, only to have sticky steam leave a sugary coating on all the walls, surfaces and ceiling. This is probably why separate shacks were built for the process. More efficient systems can make the job easier, and these include wood-fired evaporators and re-

verse osmosis systems that use high pressure to separate the water from the sugar molecules.

March is also the time of maple syrup festivals, where old production techniques are demonstrated and all things maple syrup are celebrated and enjoyed. Conservation Halton is celebrating what they call the tastiest time of the year at two locations, Crawford Lake and Mountsberg Conservation Areas.

On weekends and holidays from Feb. 28 to March 29, Sweet Water Season at Crawford Lake Conservation Area lets you visit the reconstructed Iroquoian village and experience how maple syrup was discovered and how First Nations people harvested sap and produced the sweet stuff. The innovative way they heat the sap to boiling is fascinating. Interactive and edible demonstrations will have you licking your fingers. Children will be invited to participate in maple-themed crafts and discovery hunts.

On these same days, staff at Mountsberg Conservation Area will guide you through "Maple Town." Horse-drawn rides take you through the sugar bush where you can see historical and modern methods of tapping trees and collecting sap. Demonstrations of boiling sap into syrup and making maple candy will be given. A pancake pavilion will be set up to serve stacks of pancakes and syrup.

March 1 will be a special day at Mountsberg, when "The Flapjack Olympics" will be held. Visitors will compete in traditional sugar bush events, and the less-traditional competition of testing how high flapjacks can be stacked.

Some Maple Syrup Producers

- 🍁 Kemble Mountain Maple Products, Owen Sound, 519 371 9128
- 🍁 Smokey Kettle Maple Co., Grimsby, www.smokeykettle.com, 800 461 1752
- 🍁 Voisin's Maple Products, Formosa, www.vmaple.com, 866 592 8126
- 🍁 White Meadows Farms, St. Catharines, www.whitemeadowsfarms.com, 905 682 0642



Some Outlets Selling Maple Syrup

- Creemore 100 Mile Store, Creemore
- Denninger's, Burlington, Hamilton, Oakville, Stoney Creek
- Downey's Farm Market, Caledon
- Foodstuffs, Georgetown
- The Horn of Plenty, Dundas
- Picone's, Dundas
- Springridge Farm, Milton
- The Sweet Shop, Tobermory



Some Maple Syrup Festivals

- 🍁 Bronte Creek Provincial Park, **Maple Syrup Festival**, March weekends and through March break. Wagon ride to heated pancake house, 1890s costumed interpreters giving maple demonstrations, a maple museum, 100-year-old farmhouse. www.brontecreek.org, 905.827.6911

- 🍁 Crawford Lake Conservation Area, **Sweet Water Season**, Feb. 28 to March 29. First Nations demonstrations of maple syrup making, maple-themed craft activities, discovery hunts. www.conservationhalton.on.ca, 905.854.2276
- 🍁 Elmira, **Elmira Maple Syrup Festival**, April 4. World's largest one-day maple syrup festival, with pancakes and other maple syrup treats, local sugar bush tour. www.elmiramaplesyrup.com, 877.969.0094
- 🍁 Jack Smythe Field Centre, **March Break Maple Syrup Days**, March 15 to 21. Tour the sugar bush, tepee, early settler site and sugar shack. 905.877.7771
- 🍁 Mountsberg Conservation Area, **Maple Town**, Feb. 28 to March 29. Historical and modern methods of syrup making, a pancake pavilion as well as The Flapjack Olympics. www.conservationhalton.on.ca, 905.854.2276
- 🍁 Tiffin Centre, **Spring Tonic Maple Syrup Festival**, April 4 & 5. Pancake breakfast, tours, horse-drawn wagon rides, War of 1812 re-enactors, low-ropes course. www.nvca.on.ca, 705.424.1479
- 🍁 Westfield Heritage Village, **Sweet Taste of Spring Maple Syrup Festival**, Sundays in March plus some of March break. Maple syrup making by First Nation, pioneer and modern methods, horse-and-wagon ride, pancake breakfast. www.westfieldheritage.ca, 800.883.0104.

Both photos, Mountsberg Conservation Area, courtesy Conservation Halton