

Where life is sweet and the welcome warm *(once the snow melts)*

When winter begins to loosen its icy grip, there's cause for celebration in Quebec – and it's not just because spring is around the corner. Claire Nelson visited a traditional sugar shack during maple season and had a come-back-for-more taste of the local hospitality



The deep freeze of the Canadian winter is coming to an end, and with it the thawing of

snow, the first optimistic buds appearing on trees and the faint sound of honking as geese return to the lakes. Across this vast, rugged country, Canadians are preparing for what might just be the most anticipated time of the year: maple season.

There's no denying the ties that

bind Canada with all things maple – it's as much a part of the culture as ice hockey. The maple leaf is the symbol on the national flag, after all. And if maple syrup is the blood that runs through Canada's veins, then Quebec is its beating heart. Nearly 70 per cent of the world's maple syrup comes from this single province.

Quebec is noticeably different from the rest of the country – and this is a point of pride. The region was originally colonised by France, and when it later fell to the British,

the French-Canadians held on tight to their heritage. Today the province is predominantly French-speaking (it's the official language), and expressions of Europe are everywhere, in the classical architecture of Quebec City and the countless boulangeries. But it's still Canada, and what you get is an undeniable *je ne sais quoi* set among the breathtaking North American wilderness.

Embraced by the province of Ontario to the west and New Brunswick to the east, Quebec is divided lopsidedly in two by the St Lawrence River. The colossal northern region is charged with wild lakes and rivers and stretches right up into the Arctic tundra. In winter it's an area for skiing, snowshoeing and dog-sledding. The tiny sliver of southern Quebec is pinned to the northern part by the two major cities (Montreal and Quebec City) which span the river and contain most of the province's population. Southern Quebec is also home to most of the province's 13,500 maple syrup producers, making this the prime destination for people on the maple trail.

THE SWEET SPOT

Sugaring – the collection of maple sap – takes place in early spring, when temperatures hit the sweet spot between freezing nights →

PHOTOGRAPHS: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES



SHORT AND SWEET
In spring, as the snow melts, the maple syrup season starts and lasts for about six weeks



OTHER SUGAR SHACKS WORTH SEEKING OUT

VEGAN-FRIENDLY: Handfield

(45 minutes' drive northeast of Montreal)

It's rare to find a sugar shack menu that offers vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options, but this countryside inn happily makes the effort. There's accommodation and a spa onsite too, so you don't have to move far after your lavish lunch. aubergehandfield.com/en/sugar-shack

GOING GOURMET: Cabane à Sucre Au Pied

De Cochon *(45 minutes' drive west of Montreal)* Renowned chef and restaurateur Martin Picard puts a twist on tradition with this cavernous temple to meat and maple. With dishes such as suckling pig with duck fat crepes and apple crumble pie with maple taffy ice cream, this feast isn't for the faint of heart. aupieddecochon.ca



and warmer days. The finely balanced temperature fluctuation builds pressure inside the tree and encourages the sap to flow. The season lasts for about six weeks, during which time the trunks are tapped continuously until temperatures creep up a few more degrees, the sap stops and it's all over for another year.

Although the start of the season has historically been between 8 and 12 March, the exact timings are ruled by the whims of the weather. The effects of climate change are already causing noticeable inconsistencies: in recent years, warmer temperatures have initiated sap flow as early as mid-February leading to occasional bumper years. Then again, last year's cold daytime temperatures caused Quebec's syrup output to drop almost 27 per cent. In this business, Mother Nature calls the shots – which is a problem for an industry that contributes CAN\$384 million (£225 million) to Canada's annual GDP.

Maple syrup isn't called liquid gold for nothing. It's about 25 times more valuable than oil – which is where the Federation of Quebec Maple Syrup Producers comes in: a government-sanctioned agency that's essentially a cartel. The subject is a divisive one among the workers of Quebec – not everyone is happy working under such control (they're obliged to sell their syrup to the Federation). But on the plus side it protects an industry that would otherwise shrink or swell every year depending on the yield each season. The Federation sets quotas for export sales and anything over that level is kept in a vast reserve bank to top up future shortfalls.

Sales to the public, however, are not controlled by the Federation, and buying straight from the source will ensure you get the good stuff. Visit Quebec in early spring and you can experience a *cabane à sucre*, or sugar shack. It's a classic Canadian tradition, and primarily Quebecker, which opens the doors

of maple syrup making, welcoming in visitors to celebrate this age-old craftsmanship.

WORKING WITH NATURE

I travelled to Montreal to get a taste of it myself. There are plenty of sugar shacks a short distance from the city, and I made a beeline for one about an hour's drive east in Brigham, a small mountainside village in the Eastern Townships. As I turned my car into the woods I saw smoke rising through the early morning mist, and soon a wooden cabin came into view, a rustic idyll. My destination was Pic Bois, a *cabane à sucre* run by the Pollender family since 1993. André Pollender came out to greet me. "Bonjour, hello!" he called out, eyes smiling above a grey beard, red checked shirt and sturdy boots – every bit the quintessential Canadian.

André had learned how to make maple syrup as a young lad, watching his father and grandfather tapping trees using the traditional methods. André, however, became a cabinetmaker but had his epiphany one morning. "I wanted to buy some maple syrup locally, and I couldn't find the right taste, like my father was producing," he told me. "So I thought: I'll have to make my own."

We headed into the woods, our boots crunching in the snow. I could hear the rumble of a tractor in the distance as workers completed the daily task of checking the metal buckets hanging from every tree. All 1,100 of them... André's is a comparatively small operation. "My neighbour on the other hill has 27,000 trees," he told me. "One of the bigger ones I know has 150,000."

Maple trees have to reach about 12 years of age before they're tapped for sap. At Pic Bois they use the traditional method of taps and buckets, but on larger-scale farms the sap is collected via a system of tubes and pumps, sucking the sap straight to the sugar shack. "They get five times more production than we can make just with gravity," Andre explained, "but my father

used to say, 'We have to work with nature.' And that's what I do."

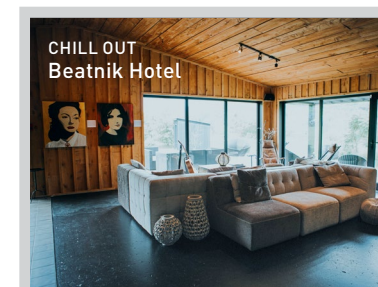
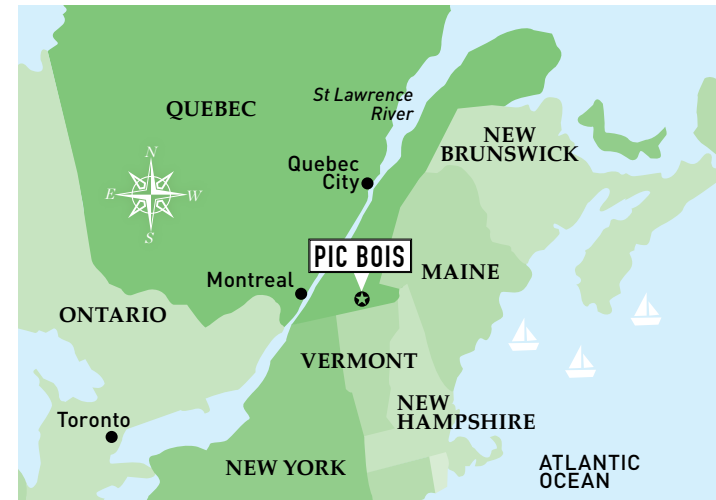
Back inside the shack, the dining room was ready for lunch. Long communal tables with chequered tablecloths were lined up in front of the large windows with views of the snowy woods. André's wife Danielle was in the kitchen, managing the food. Today, as with every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Pic Bois was cooking for up to 125 visitors.

THE BEST KIND OF COMFORT FOOD

The meal is key to the *cabane à sucre* experience. During maple season, almost every sugar shack will serve up a variant of the traditional menu, centred around a few key dishes: *soupe aux pois* (split-pea soup); *fèves au lard* (baked beans in fat with maple syrup); *tourtière* (meat pie); and *oreilles de crisse* (fried pork rinds). It's food that nods back to the pioneering days of lumberjacks and fur-trappers, who needed high-calorie sustenance to keep them going in brutally cold conditions.

For the rest of us it's simply good, old-fashioned comfort food. The spread on the day of my visit also included maple sausages, roast potatoes, coleslaw and a crisp green salad with Pic Bois maple dressing. The room was filled with the chatter of families, friends and strangers getting to know each other. There were bottles of house maple syrup plonked along each table, much like ketchup in a diner, and I felt no shame in drizzling syrup on a slice of fresh baguette; this was pure maple oblivion and I was there to enjoy it.

Dessert was a rich maple pie with crumbly shortcrust pastry, and *grands-pères au sirop d'érable*: tender dumplings cooked in maple syrup until sticky and very moreish. The latter is Danielle's speciality. "In English it translates as 'grandfathers in maple syrup,'" she told me, laughing. "I don't know where it comes from. It's an old recipe, you know?" I nodded and surrendered to the urge for a second helping. →



WHERE TO STAY NEAR PIC BOIS

• BEATNIK HOTEL

A comfortable aparthotel just down the road from Pic Bois. Mixing up the best bits of rustic and retro style, the 17 rooms and studios feature record players rather than TVs, and the folksy, sociable vibe carries into the common areas, where there's a ping pong table, library and pool. *Doubles from £80; beatnikhotel.com*

• LE ST-MARTIN BROMONT HOTEL & SUITES

Fireplaces and mountain views are par for the course in this chateau-style hotel 15 minutes from Pic Bois. Here small comforts make a big impression, such as large, sumptuous beds, in-room coffee machines and a heated pool with bar service. *Doubles from £108 B&B; lestmartinbromont.com*

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Traditional maple syrup tap using a metal bucket; maple syrup farmer André Pollender; as the sap is heated it gives off clouds of steam; emptying the buckets of sap is a daily task; snow shoes for getting around the woods in winter

SUGAR SHACK PHOTOGRAPHS: LAUREN KOLYN. BEATNIK HOTEL PHOTOGRAPH: SAME RAVENELLE



Turning the sap into syrup (left); see delicious. Kitchen to learn about the grades of maple syrup

It was clear that tradition is as important to maple syrup as maple syrup is to tradition.

THE MASTER AT WORK

After lunch I practically had to roll myself next door to see the boiling room. I found André, barely visible through the thick, sweet-smelling steam, standing over a vat of hot

liquid, stirring and checking dials. The sap is gently cooked to reduce the water content and concentrate it. It needs constant monitoring to ensure the temperature doesn't drop too low (making it sour) or spike too high (causing crystallisation). Maple sap is only 2 per cent sugar, while the syrup is closer to 67 per cent. To get a litre of pure maple syrup

you'll need a whopping 40 litres or more of sap. That's why good maple syrup doesn't come cheap.

A short while later, as tables were cleared, visitors ventured outside for some maple taffy. André presented a trough filled with clean snow and poured dollops of syrup straight onto it, twirling each one around an ice lolly stick as it hardened into a chewy candy; even after a huge meal, few refuse. Everyone's breath puffed out in clouds, but nobody seemed to mind the cold – insulated, no doubt, by a comforting coat of sugar.

As I chewed on my taffy I had a new appreciation for what's involved in getting maple syrup to that pinnacle of quality and taste. As with winemaking, there are so many variables to account for – not least of which is the unpredictable climate. "We never know exactly what's going to happen," André told me. For a moment I wondered if he worries about the future. But he smiled and gave a nonchalant shrug. "Mother Nature, you know?" So long as she keeps the maple sap flowing, hungry visitors will keep coming back to Quebec to welcome its arrival. And I'm sure I'll be one of them. Second helpings of this place are difficult to resist.

RECIPES AND FOOD STYLING: SOPHIE AUSTEN-SMITH. FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS: GARETH MORGANS. STYLING: WEI TANG

hungry traveller.

Recipes to try at home

Love the flavour of maple syrup but need inspiration beyond drizzling it on pancakes? Deputy food editor Sophie Austen-Smith has created three recipes to champion one of nature's sweetest treats

Roast duck with rich maple-baked beans

SERVES 6. HANDS-ON TIME 20 MIN, OVEN TIME 2½ HOURS

MAKE AHEAD

The beans will keep covered in the fridge for up to 3 days. Reheat in a pan on the hob until piping hot to serve.

FOOD TEAM'S TIPS

Before serving, separate the duck fat and cooking juices, then stir the juices into the beans for extra flavour.

The beans would also taste great with pork belly or sausages, or simply on toast.

- 2kg whole duck
- 2 tbsp sea salt flakes
- 2 tbsp maple syrup
- Small handful fresh flatleaf parsley, chopped

FOR THE MAPLE BEANS

- Splash olive oil
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- 1 carrot, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed

- 2 tbsp tomato purée
- 2 x 400g tins haricot beans, drained and rinsed
- 400g tin cherry tomatoes
- 400ml vegetable stock
- 2 tbsp maple syrup
- 1 tbsp dijon mustard
- Splash whisky (Canadian, ideally – but any whisky will do)

1 Take the duck out of the fridge an hour before cooking to take the chill off. Heat the oven to 220°C/ 200°C fan/gas 7. Sit the duck on a wire rack set inside a deep roasting tin. Rub all over with the sea salt, then roast for 30 minutes. Reduce the heat to 160°C/140°C fan/gas 3 and cook for 2 hours, turning and basting occasionally to ensure even cooking. Ten minutes before the end of cooking, brush with 2 tbsp maple syrup to glaze. **2** Meanwhile, for the beans, heat the oil in a large shallow casserole with a lid. Fry the onion and carrot for 10-12 minutes until softened. Stir in the garlic and tomato purée

and cook for 2 minutes more. Add the beans and cherry tomatoes, rinse out the tomato can with a little of the vegetable stock and add to the pan with the rest of the stock. Bring to a gentle simmer, season with salt and black pepper, then cover and cook in the oven alongside the duck (once you've reduced the temperature) for 1½ hours. Remove the lid, stir in the remaining ingredients, then return to the oven uncovered for 25 minutes more, or until the sauce has reduced and thickened (see Make Ahead and tips).

3 Carve or shred the duck and serve with the maple beans with a sprinkling of freshly chopped parsley.

PER SERVING 635kcal, 23.3g fat (6g saturated), 72.6g protein, 27.1g carbs (12.7g sugars), 2.4g salt, 10.2g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE Soft, ripe reds rule here – try a mellow and smooth côtes du Rhône-villages or, for a treat, Châteauneuf du Pape. →





Baked salmon in a creamy maple and spinach sauce

SERVES 4. HANDS-ON TIME 30 MIN

MAKE AHEAD Once cooked, the salmon will keep covered in the fridge for up to 2 days. Gently reheat until piping hot to serve.

- Splash olive oil
- 4 x 200g sustainable salmon fillets, skinned
- 75ml dry white wine
- 300ml half-fat crème fraîche
- 2 tsp wholegrain mustard
- 1-2 tbsp maple syrup
- 1-2 tbsp lemon juice
- 200g baby spinach
- Small handful fresh dill, roughly chopped
- Steamed waxy potatoes to serve

1 Heat a splash of olive oil in a large heavy-based shallow frying pan or shallow casserole with a lid over a medium heat. Add the salmon, skinned-side up, and cook until just golden and beginning to cook through (about 5 minutes). Transfer to a plate and set aside.

2 Add the white wine, crème fraîche, mustard, 1 tbsp each of the maple syrup and lemon juice to the pan with 75ml water, stir to combine, then bring almost to the boil.

Season with plenty of salt and black pepper, then return the salmon to the pan, skinned-side down. Cover with the lid and cook for 5 minutes, then remove the lid and scatter over the spinach. Cook, uncovered, for about 3 more minutes until the spinach has wilted and the salmon is just cooked through. Taste the sauce and add more maple syrup, lemon juice or seasoning to taste.

3 Sprinkle the salmon with plenty of chopped dill and serve with steamed waxy potatoes.

PER SERVING 619kcal, 44.6g fat (13.6g saturated), 44.4g protein, 5.9g carbs (4.6g sugars), 0.4g salt, 1.2g fibre

WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE Light, bone-dry whites are out here – this needs a richer wine such as an Australian semillon-chardonnay blend.

QUEBEC'S CLASSIC DISHES

The area's culinary character is predominantly a blend of French, North American and Jewish influences. Meat and fat feature heavily (foie gras crops up almost everywhere – be warned) as do seafood, potatoes and apples.

- **Poutine** French fries covered with squeaky cheese curds and gravy – the ubiquitous speciality of the province.
- **Viande fumée** This smoked meat resembles something between pastrami and corned beef, and is especially prevalent in Montreal, where Jewish delis are plentiful and competition is hot for the best smoked meat sandwich or bagel.
- **Tourtière** A simple pie of spiced minced beef, veal or pork in a thin golden pastry, this is often prepared for special family occasions and makes regular appearances on sugar shack menus.
- **Cretons** A salty pork spread made with onions, garlic and breadcrumbs, commonly spread on toast for breakfast.
- **Cidre de glacé** This makes the most of Canada's climatic extremes using the same method as for ice wine. Apples are left to freeze over winter before being pressed for their concentrated juice, which is then fermented. The result is 'ice cider': sweet, crisp and very boozy.

NEXT MONTH
The thrilling sights, sounds and flavours of Bali

hungry traveller.

Oaty maple and pecan flapjacks

MAKES 16 SQUARES. HANDS-ON TIME

15 MIN, OVEN TIME 25 MIN

MAKE AHEAD Once cooled, the flapjacks will keep in an airtight container for up to 4 days.

FOOD TEAM'S TIP Use other nuts instead of pecans, and/or dark chocolate in the topping.

- 300g butter, plus extra to grease
- 150g demerara sugar
- 50g maple syrup
- 125g golden syrup
- ¼ tsp ground cinnamon
- 75g shelled pecans, toasted in a dry pan and chopped

- 300g rolled oats
- 200g jumbo oats

FOR THE DRIZZLE TOPPING

- 25g white chocolate, chopped
- 2 tbsp maple syrup
- 1 tbsp shelled pecans, toasted in a dry pan and chopped

YOU'LL ALSO NEED...

- 20cm square cake tin lined with non-stick baking paper

1 Heat the oven to 150°C/130°C fan/gas 2. Put all the ingredients, except the nuts and oats, in a large pan with a pinch of salt and stir until melted. Add the nuts and oats and stir well with a wooden spoon to coat. Spoon

the mixture into the lined cake tin, level the top, pressing down slightly, then bake for 25 minutes.

2 Remove the tin from the oven and transfer to a wire rack. Score with 16 squares, then leave to cool completely in the tin.

3 For the topping, put the chocolate and maple syrup in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of barely simmering water (don't let the bowl touch the water); heat until just melted, then stir and drizzle over the flapjacks. Sprinkle with chopped pecans, then cut into squares to serve.

PER FLAPJACK SQUARE 365kcal, 22.4g fat (10.8g saturated), 4.6g protein, 34.9g carbs (13.5g sugars), 0.4g salt, 2.8g fibre **A**

