



IN PRAISE OF MAPLE SYRUP

Deep in the snowy forests of Quebec, farmers are preparing to harvest the sweet, sticky nectar, as Claire Nelson discovers



The maple trees are at least a couple of decades old, cutting slender, ghostly figures through the late winter mist. Here, in the lower St Lawrence region of Quebec, farmer David Collin tends to them like a vintner would their vines, checking each one in preparation for the harvest of that quintessential Canadian gold: maple syrup.

One of several suppliers behind Waitrose's No.1 range of maple syrups, David's farm is very much a family affair. "My dad bought the first maple farm about 14 years ago as a retirement project," he says. "We grew it, and now we have a nice forest." That's something of an understatement – there are some 12,000 trees here – although David says the farm is a "medium-sized" business by Quebec standards. This region is maple country: Canada provides around three-quarters of the world's maple syrup, and 91% of that comes from this one province, making even rural farms like this the heart of a global industry.

Yet this is an industry that is intimately tied to nature at its roots (quite literally). One of the wonderful things about maple syrup is that there's only one way to make it: a process dependent entirely on time and climate. Done right, it leads to a brief harvest during the first few weeks of spring, known in local French as 'le temps des sucres' – the time of the sugars.

"Usually, we have to be ready [at the] beginning of March," says David. "Although sometimes it's mid-March, or even the third week." Because the slightest shift in temperature dictates when the season begins and ends, farms in western Quebec (where it can be a couple of degrees warmer) are likely to start 'tapping' – extracting the sap from the trees – earlier than those in eastern Quebec, like David, who adds: "We're pretty much the last one to hand our crop in at the beginning of May."



Until you see the process, you might imagine maple sap to be sticky, like the syrup it becomes, but in fact it has a consistency more like water; a liquid starch formed in the roots and trunk of the tree. During the plunging temperatures of deep winter, the sap freezes and expands. Then it's a matter of time. The crucial moment is when nights are still just below 0°C, but the daytime temperatures slightly above, as the alternating freezing and thawing creates a pressure in the tree that encourages the sap to flow. That's when the tapping can begin.

The traditional tapping method uses buckets, hung below the taps and emptied by hand. But these days more operations, including David's, use a modernised process of tubes, which connect to each tap and snake through the forest, coaxing the sap directly to the 'boiling room'.

However, even with this innovation, there's plenty to be done. Maple farmers bundle up against the cold, strap on their snowshoes and head out in all weather to tend to their taps. As David explains, "You have to go to tap the tree... Then during the season, you have to make sure there are no leaks in your vacuum system. The third time you go is to remove the tap and make sure your tree is healing well, until next year." It's a lot of work. "Every year I'm losing 15 pounds," he laughs. "Even though I'm having maple syrup a lot! Because going in that deep snow for that long a day – you need lots of energy."

Thankfully, maple is nature's sugar. People are often surprised to discover that nothing is added to what is taken from the tree. Traditionally, the sap was boiled for days, until rich and sweet. Modern farmers like David will instead run the sap through a 'reverse osmosis' machine, which uses pressure to force out two-thirds of the water molecules, leaving concentrated maple sap behind. It's a more efficient and eco-friendly method that doesn't require endless fuel burning. Finally, the sap is given a quick boil to evaporate any remaining liquid, becoming denser and sweeter, until all that remains is what goes into the bottle. Some varieties are lighter, such as the No.1 Canadian Maple Syrup Medium (No.1), which has a milder taste and tends to come from sap collected early in the season. Other grades, such as the No.1 Canadian Maple Syrup Amber (No.2), are darker, usually from the later-season harvest, or a richer concentration, with a more robust, caramel flavour.





Above: Maple taffy, made by pouring hot syrup onto snow, is a traditional treat during the tapping season. *Below:* The bottled syrup is concentrated but pure

Whatever your preference, maple syrup is a precious thing: it takes 40 litres of sap to make a single litre of syrup. And each tree yields only about one litre of sap per season. It's important not to take too much, as David emphasises. "If a tree is well cared for, it can be good for 150 years, if you don't over-tap it."

For Canadians, maple is a point of pride, and the tapping season a cause for annual celebration. Come the beginning of spring, visitors from near and far head for the maple farms, colloquially referred to as 'sugar shacks' (or 'cabanes à sucre'), gathering for lively lunches of traditional dishes – think maple-baked beans, crispy pork rinds, pea soup, maple-cured ham and sausage – and rich desserts of maple pie or sweet dough dumplings baked in the syrup. It's food to keep you warm, and perhaps work off with some post-meal dancing. Maple taffy: fresh, hot maple syrup poured over troughs of immaculate snow until it hardens into toffee, is also eaten in abundance – and best enjoyed in the surroundings of the frost-tipped forest.

This coming-together feels as valuable a part of the maple season as the tapping itself, a way of appreciating the best of the region and the generosity of the land when it's well cared for. "I don't know if it's because of Canada's [maple leaf] flag or that it's an every-year thing, but the celebration is very important," says David. "Every spring, it's a good time to get together and have something sweet, and to be outside. It's part of our culture and it's going to stay there for a long time."



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