

Maple Syrup

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There are legends as to how maple syrup was discovered. Perhaps a squirrel was observed lapping at the sweet juice by a primitive man, who in turn decided to try it and found a wonderful sweet treat. Every spring, many Indians would become sick with scurvy because they were not able to provide themselves with vitamin C through the winter months. Because of its vitamin C content, maple syrup became a cure for scurvy. Through time the process of naming and producing maple syrup was established: One has to drill a maple tree, collect the sap-water from it, boil the sap to perfection, and finally filter the maple syrup.

Maple syrup was named after the maple tree. Today, there is no oak syrup or butternut syrup because maple trees produce more sap and sweeter sap. Also, its sap runs for a longer period of time in the tree, providing more time to collect it. A mixture of chlorophyll (the substance that gives the maple leaves their green colour), carbon dioxide, water and sunlight provides the maple leaf with its sap. Looking at a maple leaf, one can clearly see little veins, in which the sap is stored and transported to the tree branches and trunk for nutrition. The sap freezes in the winter and thaws in the spring.

In spring, when night-time temperatures drop below freezing and day-time temperatures rise above four degrees Celsius for a few days, the sweet sap-water runs in the trees. Trees that are forty to eighty years old and at least seventy five centimeters around the trunk when measured one meter above the ground, are old enough to be tapped for sap. Sap is extracted from the maple tree by drilling gently into the bark of the tree for eight centimeters. Then a spile (metal tube) is inserted, with a bucket hanging from it to collect the sap. Another method is to use plastic tubing that runs from tree to tree so that sap can be vacuum pumped to the sugarhouse for collection.

After collection, the sap must be boiled within a week, or it may spoil. Forty liters of sap will become only one liter of syrup. Tending the boiling sap is time consuming and one must always be on his or her feet. Often the work of boiling sap continues during the night. At boiling point the sap produces a layer of foam, which is a natural way for the sap to clean itself of foreign matter. After the foam is removed with a skimmer, time becomes critical as the temperature of the boiling sap approaches 103 degrees Celsius, when it becomes syrup. If it is a few more degrees too hot, the syrup can turn to cream within a few seconds, and then burn. Once the syrup is filtered, it is ready for consumption.

In conclusion, the process of making maple syrup has been passed down through generations. Even though modern technology has simplified the process, making maple syrup is still time consuming, but well worth it since many Canadians and tourists enjoy the sweet taste.