

the sweetest MONTH

Fresh maple syrup makes suffering through a long, cold Northeastern winter worthwhile.

story and photos / CINDY RUGGIERI, ENDICOTT, NEW YORK



MOST FOLKS THINK the harvest starts in the warm weather of summer. Well, for me it starts in March, when sap flows from the sugar maples and the sweet smell of sugar water is in the air.

A number of sugarhouses open their doors to visitors during the last half of March for Maple Weekends, a statewide event in New York in which maple producers welcome the public for tours, tastings and demonstrations of the production process. I always make sure to take advantage of their hospitality.

On this particular trip, I visited SweetTrees Maple Products, run by Dan and Ruth Beasley with the help of their sons in the small, rural town of Berkshire, New York. On their 160 acres of wooded hillside, they currently have 700 trees tapped, with plans to increase that number to at least 1,000.

The outside scene was just what I expected: a patchwork of melting snow on the ground, hinting at spring's imminent arrival. Metal cans with lids and spigots hung on the maple trees. The air was crisp, but not the freezing cold of winter, and held a fragrant mix of burning wood and boiling sap.

Inside the sugarhouse, Dan and Ruth's son Eric patiently explained the process. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of pure maple syrup. As the sap bubbles and boils, the water slowly evaporates. The boiling process is a long one, and the sap doesn't become pure maple syrup until it reaches the right temperature and sugar density.

I watched Eric and his crew strain the syrup through a wool filter and pour it into jars shaped like maple leaves, cabins and jugs that proudly carry the words "Pure Maple Syrup."

Determining the grade based on the color was the final step. Syrups will range in color

from light to dark amber. My mouth watered when Eric handed me a sample poured directly from the tap. It was a little taste of heaven.

At the sample table near the entrance of the sugarhouse, I couldn't pass up the maple cream, a smooth, sweet treat most often used as a spread.

I took a short walk up the hill to the modern operation, a zigzag network of blue tubing that allows sap to flow to a single collection unit. Dan was explaining all the connections, taps and tubing to a group of maple syrup lovers like me. It's a great time-saver to empty one large unit instead of trekking from tree to tree to empty individual buckets. But near the sugarhouse, the metal buckets continue to hang on the trees. It's symbolic of the season.

March is a great month. Winter loses its grip and the snow melts. A sheen of spring's first buds appears on the trees, and pure maple syrup is on tap. It's a sweet month indeed. ☺

The Beasleys still use a few buckets to collect sap (*opposite*) though a network of blue tubes collects the rest of the sap (*above left*). Eric pours syrup from the tap (*above right*).

Ruth likes to share recipes with visitors. Here's one of her favorites:

maple cheesecake

- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1/2 cup pure granulated maple sugar
- 8 oz. whipped topping
- 1 graham cracker crust (9 inches)
- Additional pure granulated maple sugar

1. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese and maple sugar until smooth. Fold in whipped topping. Spoon into crust.
2. Refrigerate overnight. Sprinkle with additional maple sugar just before serving.

Note: Maple sugar is available online and at some specialty stores. Get more maple recipes from the Beasleys at sweettreesmaple.com.



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