

Home Town Radio Kitchen with Chef Steve Muni

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MAPLE SYRUP

The cool weather got me thinking about one of the most American of foods, which we use in our breakfast cooking every weekend. After all, what would pancakes be without maple syrup? Nobody knows for sure who first started boiling down the sap of the sugar maple or the rock maple tree to make a sweet syrup, but its invention is generally credited to the Native Americans in what is now New England and Quebec.

By 1685, the British Royal Society was reporting how the Indians score the bark of the maple tree with their tomahawks and boil down the collected sap to make a sweet syrup. The French-Canadians refined the process, and soon maple syrup and maple sugar became the household sweetener of the northern colonies, rather than cane sugar or molasses. Today Canada produces about 80% of the world's supply of maple syrup, with the U.S., primarily in Vermont, supplying the rest.

With the onset of early spring, with freezing nights but warmer days, the maple sap starts flowing again. When that happens, the harvesters bore holes into the tree and insert a tap which drains into a bucket which used to be collected daily. Nowadays plastic tubing runs directly from the tree into a large storage tank located near the processing shed. Harvesting is halted as soon as the tree starts to bud, as the tree will need its sap for its own new growth.

The sap is highly perishable so it's boiled down right away in the processing shed, called the "sugarhouse". It takes 30 to 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. It is in the boiling of the sap that the sugar maker's art comes into play. Too much cooking can cause the sugars to start to caramelize, resulting in a darker and lower-grade syrup. Or worse—if the syrup boils over it will scorch and the entire batch will be ruined. Before the days of thermometers and hydrometers, the sugar maker would test for doneness by holding up a scoop of syrup and watching the way it poured off the scoop in a slow curtain or sheet.

Maple syrup can also be carefully boiled down further and then stirred to make a coarse granulated maple sugar, or even hard maple candy. "Sugar on Snow", a traditional maple syrup-making treat, is made by pouring hot fresh maple syrup on clean snow. The syrup suddenly turns waxy and is eaten like candy, along with doughnuts.

Maple syrup is graded into three grades. The top is Grade A, which is further divided into Light, Medium and Dark Amber. These have a light color with a sweet, delicate maple flavor. Grade B is a darker, more strongly maple-flavored syrup, often used in cooking. Grade C is only used commercially, and a little Grade C is often put in commercial "table syrup" blends to add maple flavor. While Grade A may be the top of the line, my personal preference is for Grade B, which you can find at Trader Joe's, as I really like the taste of the stronger maple flavor. By the way, pure maple syrup contains nothing else but maple syrup. The pancake syrups or table syrups most commonly seen in restaurants and stores are basically corn syrups with only a little Grade C maple syrup added for flavor.

So what can you do with maple syrup other than putting it on pancakes? Well, the uses are many and varied. Besides putting maple syrup on your pancakes, waffles or French toast, you can use it to sweeten apple sauce, in milkshakes, to sweeten tea, coffee or hot toddies, to sweeten fresh fruit (try it on grapefruit or on sliced bananas), to add flavor to baked beans, to mix with softened butter to glaze sweet potatoes, squash or carrots, over ice cream, on hot cereal, on biscuits or corn fritters, or on baked apples.

With a melon-baller, core a large apple almost but not quite through to the bottom. Then peel the apple about a third of the way down. Put the apple in a little bowl and fill the cavity with some nuts, raisins or dried cranberries. Then pour a little maple syrup over the top, cover with plastic wrap, stick it with a fork to let the steam out, and microwave the apple for about 3 to 3 and a half minutes. Serve warm. So go out and get yourself some real maple syrup. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.