

Press Room

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Sap Happy*The New York Times*

By Oliver Schwaner-Albright

The maple syrup you poured on your waffles this morning probably came from Quebec, where more than 75 percent of the world's supply is produced. And it's at least one year old. Maple trees can't be tricked into thinking it's harvest time, and in Canada the sap doesn't start running until early March, when the nights are still freezing but the days are bright.

Last March, Marc Seguin, a painter who commutes between his farm in Hemmingford, Quebec, and his Brooklyn studio (where he's finishing a series titled "I Love America and America Loves Me"), inaugurated his cabane a sucre, or sugar shack, a rough-hewn cabin for making syrup. He installed a wood-fed evaporateur, built a table that seats 12 and invited his friends to spend a Sunday eating the high-calorie peasant feast that traditionally accompanies the harvest.

The hourlong parade usually includes split-pea soup, pancakes, bacon and ham, pork rinds, omelets, eggs poached in syrup, baked beans, bread and pan drippings, pickled carrots and beets, maple-syrup pie and taffy -- all washed down with an optional Molson. And while such meals once fueled workers gathering sap, they now also stoke a growing tourist industry based around the province's hundreds of commercial cabanes a sucre.

Seguin's meal, however, was even more ambitious. On a bright morning, more than 20 adults and toddlers in snowsuits trudged to the remote cabane a sucre carrying boxes of food and plates. Among the party was Champlain Charest, one of the world's legendary wine collectors, with his cases of Burgundies. There was Seguin's father, Andre. And there was Martin Picard, the chef of Au Pied de Cochon in Montreal, who came with his girlfriend, their two children and his sous-chefs Hugue Dufour and Mehdi Brunet-Benkritly.

While boxes were unloaded, Picard put out a snack -- a loaf of cretons, Quebecois pork pate filled out with milk and bread. Then he joined Dufour and Brunet-Benkritly at the tiny wood-burning stove, warming split-pea soup; frying smoked pork loin; simmering cod livers in jars; and stacking pancakes with ham, cheese and seared lobes of foie gras, then dousing the pile with maple syrup. While Picard stoked the fire with duck fat, Chantal Seguin, Seguin's wife, brought out a tarte au sucre, maple-syrup pie. It was time to harvest.

Wearing a Dominion & Grimm cap, which is to syrup-making what John Deere is to farming, Seguin explained that the cabane a sucre was a way to link the land to his 9-year-old son,



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Marc-Emile. "He learns there are some things you can't control," he said. "Not everything is an Xbox game."

Seguin and Marc-Emile climbed on a Ski-Doo (the snowmobile's answer to the pickup truck) with a plastic drum strapped to the back and headed into the woods. The rest of the party marched behind through waist-high snow, adults pulling children on sleds. Instead of tapping the trees with hoses, as is the usual technique, Seguin had installed a network of aluminum buckets, 180 in all. The buckets had to be emptied by hand, a two-hour process that might be repeated three or four times a day. "I have no real proof, but I think the oxidization helps the flavor," Seguin said.

Back in the cabane, Seguin mixed up a round of "hemmingfords" -- cider ice wine and vodka shaken with snow -- then emptied the newly collected sap into the evaporateur. Dufour scrambled two dozen eggs and added thick slices of blood sausage while Picard poached more lobes of foie gras sealed sous vide with maple syrup. And when a leg of venison from a deer shot by Seguin was too big for the oven, Brunet-Benkritly grilled it outside, basting it with a maple-syrup-and-venison-stock reduction. By the time the sun went down, there was a second tarte au sucre and t re, or taffy -- syrup heated until it is the consistency of soft caramel and poured over snow packed into a trough made from a hollowed-out log.

The rule of thumb is that 40 gallons of sap make 1 gallon of syrup, but at the beginning of the season, when the sugar content is lower, it could take double that, and at 9 p.m. Seguin's syrup was still cooking. Forgoing a hydrometer, Seguin passed around a glass of warm syrup, trusting his eyes and nose to tell him when it was done.

"C'est parfait," said Picard.

Seguin tasted, nodded and passed the glass to Marc-Emile. Then he drained the evaporateur, measuring the day's work into glass bottles: two gallons total. Tomorrow's breakfast would have fresh syrup.



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The Hemmingford

1/4 cup vodka

1/4 cup Neige ice cider from La Face Cachee de la Pomme.

Shake over shaved or blended ice and strain into a martini glass. Makes 1 drink. Adapted from Martin Picard and Marc Seguin.

Maple-Roasted Rack of Venison

1 4-pound rack of venison, trimmed (see note)

Salt and freshly ground

Black pepper

Olive oil

1 1/2 cups maple syrup

2 1/2 cups veal stock (see note)

6 sprigs thyme

1 bay leaf

8 peppercorns

2 cloves garlic, peeled

2 tablespoons butter

5 large carrots, peeled and chopped

20 small boiler onions, peeled.

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Season venison generously with salt and pepper, rub with a little olive oil and let rest at room temperature. Meanwhile, in a medium saucepan, combine the maple syrup, veal stock, thyme, bay leaf, peppercorns and garlic. Gently boil

until reduced by half.

2. Set a roasting pan over medium-high heat and add the butter. When hot, brown the rack on all sides, then transfer to a plate. Pour the maple-stock reduction into the roasting pan, scraping the brown bits on the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. Return the rack to the pan, meat-side up. Add the carrots and onions and season them with salt. Cook in the oven for 10 minutes, basting venison with sauce every 5 minutes. Flip venison and continue roasting until a thermometer inserted in the center registers 130 degrees, 10 to 20 minutes more (start checking the internal temperature after 10 minutes).



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3. Transfer rack to a cutting board and let rest for 10 minutes. If vegetables are fork-tender, transfer them to a serving platter. If not, put them in a saucepan. Strain the sauce into the saucepan and simmer until reduced to desired thickness or until the vegetables are tender. Season sauce to taste with salt and pepper. Slice the venison and serve with vegetables and sauce. Serves 8. Loosely adapted from Martin Picard, the chef-owner of Au Pied de Cochon.

NOTE: Rack of venison can be ordered from most butchers with a few days' notice. Veal stock is available at Staubitz, 222 Court Street, Brooklyn, (718) 624-0014, or can be ordered at Park East Kosher, 1623 Second Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 737-9800.

Maple-Syrup Pie

For the crust:

1 cup flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon sugar

5 tablespoons butter, cubed

3 tablespoons ice water

For the filling:

2 eggs

1 tablespoon flour

1/2 cup heavy cream

1 cup maple syrup, preferably medium dark

Crème fraiche, for serving.

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Make the crust by combining the flour, salt and sugar in a large bowl. Cut the butter into the flour with a fork or pastry blender until the mixture is the texture of coarse meal. Sprinkle a tablespoon of ice water at a time over the dough, lifting and tossing it with the fork. When it begins to come together, gather the dough, press it into a ball and then pull it apart. If it crumbles in your hands, it needs more water. Add a teaspoon or two more water, as needed.

2. Flatten the ball of dough and roll between two sheets of plastic wrap into a circle 10 inches in diameter. Remove the plastic and lay the dough into a 9-inch tart pan, press into place and remove excess dough. Place in the freezer.

3. Meanwhile, make the filling by beating the eggs in a bowl. Gradually whisk in the flour. Add the cream and maple syrup and whisk until combined. Pour into the crust-lined pan. Cook



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until the middle still jiggles but is solid, 25 to 30 minutes. Serve with creme fraiche. Serves 12. Loosely adapted from Chantal Seguin.

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