

JIM SERVI

Maple Syrup Is A Delicious Springtime Hobby

Celebrate the end of winter with a tasty treat

As the days get longer and the temperature begins to push above freezing, an amazing (and delicious!) process is taking place throughout the maple forests of Wisconsin. This time of change means maple syrup season has arrived. More and more people are starting maple syrup operations right in their own backyard as a great springtime hobby.

It's relatively easy to get started, but timing is everything. Although the first tapping of the year varies a little, it generally happens around the middle of March. Maple trees run the best when the nights drop below freezing and the days are above freezing. This causes the tree to become pressurized, and the sap begins moving from the roots up the tree. As the temperature drops, the reverse happens and suction is created. When you tap the tree with a small hole and insert a spout, you are taking advantage of this natural process. The sap will begin to drip. You can then use buckets, bags or plastic tubing to capture the maple sap.


After you collect your maple sap, you filter it and begin cooking. Amazingly, it takes approximately 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of maple syrup, depending on the sugar content. A good old-fashioned cooking pan is the easiest way to get started. These pans can be found at any maple syrup specialty store or by shopping craigslist for a used option in maple syrup country. Many operations have evolved and use reverse osmosis systems, evaporators and other modern technology, but all that is truly needed for delicious maple syrup is an open flame.

Your maple syrup is ready when it reaches 219 degrees, although, you should take it off a little bit earlier. Evaporation will continue at a fast pace as you filter in one more time. Hydrometers, which measure the percent of sugar by density, also work well and are among the special tools you can buy to test when the syrup is ready. Once it's filtered and cooled just a bit, you're ready for the best part: tasting! Try it warm

from the pan over cold vanilla ice cream for a delicious treat. Sealed properly in a glass jar, maple syrup will last for years.

If you're not ready to start your own operation, you're in luck, because there are locations throughout the state to learn more about, and taste, this unique process. After visiting many maple syrup operations over the years, I've learned that you can stop by nearly any sugar shack in the spring. Most are more than willing to show their setup and are always happy to have the company. Just drive down a country road until you see steam pouring out of a side building or a pan set up in the yard, and you've found your place. Of course, you always have an open-ended invitation to visit our maple syrup operation as well.

For those who don't like stopping by random strangers, there is a better option. MacKenzie Center, near Poynette, offers a fun-filled day of maple syrup festivities on April 1, 2017, from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM. First, they discuss the progression of making maple syrup from the Native Americans to modern day. They have a horse-drawn wagon ride and other activities as well. Best of all, you get to try fresh maple syrup during their pancake breakfast. Our little red country school house, Maple Grove Elementary School, has its annual First Tapping pancake breakfast at the end of March.

Many other communities have something similar. From the Sugarin' Off Pancake Breakfast every Sunday in March at the River Bend Nature Center in Racine to the Maple Sugarin' Open House in Newburg and the Taylor County Lions Maple Fest in Medford, there are opportunities to see, learn and taste for yourself in every corner of Wisconsin. But be careful ... it gets in your blood. Taste too much maple syrup and before long you'll have a new springtime hobby. 

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