

History of Maple Syrup

The sweet sap of the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) was known and valued by Indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands, including the Abenaki, Haudenosaunee and Mi'kmaq, long before the arrival of European settlers. Haudenosaunee tradition tells of the piercing of the bark of a maple and the use of its "sweet water" to cook venison, a happy accident that might have also established the culinary technique of maple-cured meats. Maple curing was a food preservation method practiced by the Anishinaabe that allowed communities to keep food stores for winter months when food was scarce.

The Anishinaabe called the "sugaring off" period when sap was collected the "maple moon" or "sugar month." The tradition of sugaring off became established in communities in the deciduous forests of North America and has survived to the present.

Techniques varied, but Indigenous peoples tapped trees by cutting v-shaped patterns into the bark or by inserting basswood or willow tubes into the tree. Birch-bark bowls were placed beneath the tap to catch the watery sap in early spring, when sap was made into syrup using different methods. Some left the sap out in the cold and threw away the frozen water that separated from the sugary syrup. Others boiled the sap down to syrup by adding hot rocks to birch-bark pots or boiled the sap in clay or metal kettles over a fire.

French settlers learned from the Indigenous peoples how to tap trees to obtain sap and how to boil it to reduce it to sweet syrup or sugar slabs to be stored for later use. The first settler accounts of maple sugaring were by André Thevet, who wrote of Jacques Cartier's voyages, in 1557, and by Marc Lescarbot, who described the collection and "distillation" of sap by Mi'kmaq in 1606.

Maple sugar production began among settlers in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Colonists drilled holes into maples and fitted them with wooden spouts through which sap flowed and was collected in hollowed-out logs. The sap was transported to a sugar shack (alternatively sugar house, or *cabane à sucre* in French), where it was boiled down to syrup in large metal kettles over a fire. Over time, innovations in evaporation methods decreased the amount of time it took to boil down the sap. Improvements were also made in the way sap was tapped and transported from trees to the sugar shack.