

MAPLE SYRUP

The Sweetest Crop

By Brenda Visser

Ah, spring! The blue skies, the dripping snow and ice, and the brown of mud lure us outside to breathe deeply after the long haul of winter and cold.



For many in Leeds-Grenville, producers and consumers alike, early spring is a sweet time. Sarah Gibbons says, “Maple syrup production is the first agricultural crop of the year”. She and her father, Bill Gibbons, have been in the business of turning maple sap into syrup, sugar, and butter for twenty years, on location at their Frankville farm (www.gibbonsmaple.com).

First made by Native Americans, maple syrup and its production were quickly adopted by immigrants and pioneers to this land. For settlers, it may have been more a matter of being resourceful and using available food sources than simply having a sweet treat, but maple syrup is still a smart choice today. It is a local food, is naturally organic and unrefined, is gentle on the environment, and has a greater nutritional value than other sweeteners. Did you know that maple syrup contains riboflavin and other minerals? (See www.ontariomaple.com for more details).

Maple syrup production is unique in the world to the eastern portion of North America. Four Canadian provinces and several American states produce this sweet goodness. For years, there have been different, albeit similar, grading systems used for quality syrups, according to which governmental body a producer complied with. For 2015, a new grading system is proposed. No longer will you find “Canada No. 1 Extra Light” and others, but rather one of these four international grades: Golden, Amber, Dark, and Very Dark. Undoubtedly, there are pros and cons to making one system, but you’re best off initiating that conversation with a syrup producer directly. (Or Google this website: <http://www.internationalmaplesyrupinstitute.com/>). Apart from cost differences, wondering about the origin of the syrup, and other concerns, grade may not matter very much- we like them all!

Variances in maple syrup taste can be highly personalized. Regional and site differences can produce unique syrups. For example, syrup from Quebec may taste slightly different from one from Leeds-Grenville. Syrup from two farms near each other may even taste differently; much like raw honey has local, subtle variations. Some people swear they can taste the difference between syrup made in a wood-fired evaporator and one made in an oil-fuelled one. I guess



the only way to know is to try a few from different sources and compare!

One of many maple syrup producers in our area, Gibbons Family Farm offers free activities and entertainment on the last two Saturdays of March, and the first two Saturdays of April. (In 2014, the dates are March 22, 29, April 5, 12). They offer maple taffy on snow, a petting zoo and pony rides by Westwinds Ranch from Westport, and music and storytelling by Bear the Tinker from Lansdowne.

In the newly renovated sugarhouse, you can follow the history of maple syrup production and see the artefacts they have gathered, such as old sap collection buckets. Schools sometimes have class trips here as well. Student-made thank-you's decorate part of the wall. Guests are welcome to walk on the tractor trail to the bush, and see sap collection by buckets or pipelines.

Gibbons Family Farm does not provide a pancake breakfast, as other producers do. (Check out Drummond's Sugar Bush





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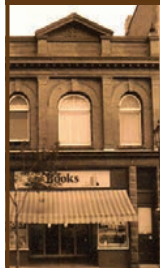


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in Spencerville, which is open Saturdays and Sundays, 8:30-4:30, March 1 to April 13. Drummond's has been producing Maple Syrup since 1802. Others are listed in this link: <http://www.leedsgrenville.com/en/visit/thingstodo/MapleSyrup.asp>.

However, your yummy breakfast is still within reach! Partnering with St. Thomas Anglican (Parish of Kitley) in the village proper of Frankville, Gibbons provides all the syrup for this church's annual fundraising event. Running from 8 a.m. until noon, the Pancake Breakfast is \$8 per adult, and \$3 per child age 12 and under. It's worth the drive! The dates are identical to the ones that Gibbons is open (March 22, 29, April 5, 12).

Another event that may help satisfy a sweet tooth is the family-friendly "Tapping-out Party" to be held on March 8th, from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. This event includes a variety of activities such as a ceremonial tree tapping at noon, by Bob FM's breakfast hosts, Jamieson and Jenn. If that doesn't interest you, perhaps the wagon rides, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing will. Of course, maple syrup and other products will be available in abundance. Why not purchase some to take home when you are done your light lunch? This year's Tapping-out Party will be held at the farm of Greg & Lynda Halladay, 156 Quabbin Hill Rd, Mallorytown. (See more details here: <http://www.ldmspa.com/tappingout.html>)

Lest you become bored, yet another Maple Syrup event is just around the corner. The 47th Delta Maple Syrup Festival will be held on Easter weekend- April 19 and 20th. Here you can sample and see the work of many producers and artisans. This is sponsored by the Delta Fair Society. If you would like more information on being a vendor or checking out the schedule of events, be sure to follow www.deltafair.com and click the links, or contact Marlaire Hart at 613-928-2800.

Spring is the best time to indulge in this sweet harvest, and enjoy the outdoors. However, don't forget local maple syrup is available year-round. Many farms have maple products available onsite during any given month. You can "come by chance", or make an appointment. Why not take advantage of this wonderful time of year to enjoy a local crop we can all be proud of. Sweet bon appetit! **LH**

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