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Maples Yield a Sweet Harvest in the Woods of Pa.

By Paulette Dininny
Special to The Washington Post
Sunday, March 8, 2009; Page F06

Things get hot and steamy along the eastern shore of Lake Erie around now: It's maple-sugaring time.

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The sugarhouse at Hurry Hill Farm near Edinboro, Pa., sits amid maple trees from which sap is collected in tin buckets. (By Paulette Dininny For The Washington Post)

"When neighbors see steam rising from the woods, they know the season is underway, and they start showing up at the sugarhouse," said Janet Woods of Hurry Hill Farm outside Edinboro, Pa.

Cold nights and warmer days signal maple trees to send sap upward in the outer sapwood of the tree; that's where producers tap and collect the raw material.

"I'm hoping for a good run," Woods said. "The sun is out, so sap is running on the south side of the tree." The retired high school principal's sugarhouse was built by her father more than 50 years ago. The rustic structure, on rolling farmland carved out of the forest in 1846, is at the end of a lane that winds past maples, each of which wears a sap bucket like a giant tin ornament.

Sugar maples are native to the Northeast. Canada and Vermont are clearly associated with maple syrup, but the sweet sap of the tree is the same everywhere, and it can be tapped with a spout whenever the nighttime temperature drops to between 15 and 28 degrees and the day warms up to between 36 and 45 degrees. That's why, when Woods asks visitors, "What do you need to make maple sugar?" the answer she's looking for is, "Mud and snow." (Which explains why she recommends that visitors wear warm clothes and boots, for either condition.) The season is over when the trees' buds start to pop open.

Bill Phillips, vice president of the Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Association, said his area has a five- to eight-week sugaring season. The association picks one weekend (this year it's March 14-15; see details at right) for its free annual Maple Taste & Tour Weekend. About a dozen syrup producers open their operations for the popular event, including Woods's Hurry Hill Farm and Phillips's Fort LeBoeuf Maple Syrup in nearby Waterford.

During the event, visitors can see the tinned buckets, and in some places the tubing, that collect the sap, which is then sent to the

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sugarhouse to be boiled down. Hurry Hill and Fort LeBoeuf use wood-fired evaporators for the process, while some others use equipment powered by oil or natural gas. Because sap is about 98 percent water and only 2 to 2 1/2 percent sugar, it takes 30 to 50 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup, which is 67 percent sugar. Syrupmakers know their job is done when the sap reaches seven degrees above the boiling point of water.

In past events, Boy Scout Troop 176 has camped in Hurry Hill Farm's sugarbush, or grove of maple trees, to demonstrate how early settlers and Native Americans, lacking a way to keep syrup stored properly, boiled off all the water from sap until only granules remained, making maple sugar. Scouts boil sap in a huge black iron kettle over a fire, but also show how Native Americans filled hollowed-out logs with syrup and dropped hot stones into them to evaporate the water. They eagerly show off antique adults' and children's yokes, used to carry buckets, as well as old drills and wood spiles, or spouts, which were used to direct sap into birch-bark containers and wooden buckets.

Making syrup is still hard work. Tapped trees can be spread out over many acres and sometimes square miles, sometimes deep in the woods. The heavy work is emptying the buckets. When a good run starts, it can mean long hours over a period of a few days, requiring frequent collection. The farms on the Maple Taste & Tour have anywhere from 75 to 7,000 taps; some older trees can have up to four taps in them.

At Hurry Hill, visitors can tour the sugarbush on foot or ride in hay wagons pulled by a tractor or teams of draft horses. At the sugarhouse, a warming tent has children's activities and a stand offering free maple hot chocolate and samples of maple products. Woods has also fashioned a new maple sugar museum, displaying antique sugaring equipment. Her demonstrations of the maple-sugaring process go on all day. She engages young and old, blending science with history and culture in an entertaining way that ensures visitors will leave knowing more about the sweet product.

"I love watching my kids learn and experience something new," said Pamela Brown, a teacher who moved to Corry, Pa., from Arizona several years ago with her husband and five children. "The boys also got to try drilling into a dead tree to see how to tap a maple."

Ray Sammartino of Erie, Pa., who was at Hurry Hill with his wife, Jackie, said, "The event . . . was like stepping back in time. It's a craft that has not changed, and I was amazed at how complex the process is."

The weather doesn't always cooperate with the demonstrations. "You can keep sap only two days," Phillips explained. "Then it turns sour. And if the day isn't warm enough, there's no sap. Sometimes," he added with a laugh, "we just boil water so people will see steam and get the idea of how we boil the stuff down."

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