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By Jonathan Levitt

Maple syrup makers go with the flow

Near Brattleboro, VT, the Coombs family has been making maple syrup for eight generations. Arnold Coombs gathers sap from over 2,000 acres of sugar maples, including some of the 300-year old giants that his great-great-grandparents tapped. Sap is collected for four to six weeks in early spring, from the first big thaw until the nights stop freezing.

The success of a sugaring season depends on the weather. Sunny days with temperatures in the 40s and very cold nights help the sap to flow. To gather it, workers drill small tap holes in trees at least 40 years old and 10 inches in diameter at chest height. A wooden, metal, or plastic spout is stuck into each hole as deep as the cambium layer of the tree, and the sap flows out. "It is as if the tree is giving blood," says Coombs. Most commercial sugar farmers use plastic tubes, which carry sap, sometimes with the help of vacuum pumps, right from the maples to gathering tanks. Those tanks are brought from the woods to the sugar house to be boiled down into syrup.

While you may picture a rustic sugar shack with a wood-burning boiler, many modern operations are all stainless steel and glass with propane burning boilers. Some even have reverse osmosis devices that remove most of the water without heat. Coombs has a traditional sugar shack with sap gathered from buckets and a more modern place with tubes and stainless steel and reverse osmosis. "We like doing it the old way, too," he says. "It gets us back to our roots."

Right from the tree, sap looks like water and is only slightly sweet. To make syrup, about 65 percent of the water must be boiled away. As it evaporates, the sap takes a winding path through the pans of the boiler. At 219 degrees, syrup starts forming, then thickens, and is finally draw off to be filtered and bottled. If the syrup is left to boil at higher temperatures, it becomes maple butter, then maple taffy or soft sugar, and then hard sugar. Depending on the tree and time of year, it takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Late season sap has less sugar, is boiled longer, and has a darker color and stronger flavor. Coombs says that good dark syrup is his favorite.

In their home kitchen, the Coombses make buttermilk biscuits to eat with warm syrup. During sugar season, they take hot syrup right from the evaporator and whip up maple taffy, pour it on bowls of mounded snow to cool it down, twirl the sticky taffy around sticks or forks, and wolf it down with dill pickles, doughnuts, and coffee. "The kids even make chocolate chip cookies with maple sugar," he says.