

MONDAY, MARCH 13, 1995

TASTE

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TASTE BUDDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

Tap into maple trees for homemade syrup

It seems to me that the old ground hog got his signals mixed somewhere along the line. Spring can't come fast enough as far as I'm concerned. And I know it must be getting pretty close to spring when I start hearing about the "flowin' of the sap," — that great springtime ritual observed by hundreds of North American maple syrup makers.

Collecting sap commences in the early days of spring when warm days begin to follow cool nights causing the sap of the sugar maple tree to begin flowing. During the winter, some of the starch that the tree made during the previous summer and stored in its roots is converted to sugar. Primarily, the sap contains four to 10 percent sugar. Collected sap is boiled to evaporate the water and concentrate the sugar. Since it comes from a maple tree the characteristic flavor of "maple syrup" is made. Interestingly, the maple flavor of the syrup is not at all present in the sap, but develops as the sugars "cook" and, as the sugars heat, the maple flavor is born.

Harvesting sap

Harvesting sap from sugar maples is a rather picturesque operation that could easily qualify for a Norman Rockwell portrait. Quebec is the world's leading maple syrup producer, converting more than 60 million gallons of sap into more than 30 million gallons of luscious syrup. The total U.S. production is estimated at just under four million gallons, with much of that total coming from small independent producers and sold mainly as "tourist items."

To see how maple trees are tapped for syrup, visit the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloomfield Hills. They're holding their annual Maple Syrup Festival, 1:40 p.m. Sat. & Sun., March 18-19. Call (810) 645-3209 for information.

You don't have to be a naturalist at Cranbrook to collect the running sap and turn it into real maple syrup. A few years ago, I successfully tapped the aging sugar maple that graces the grounds of the James Gang hacienda. I collected more than four gallons of sap and ended up with a little less than a half gallon of what was deemed by the entire gang as the "best syrup that ever graced a pancake."

Sap is collected by drilling small holes into any type of maple tree about 2-3 inches deep, and about 3 feet above the ground. The number of holes drilled depends on the size of the tree with some larger, more mature maples supporting about 4-6 "taps." A small metal spout is fitted into each hole and a pail is hung just below it to collect the sap.

In my case, a plastic milk jug was easily wired to the tap and adequately served its purpose. Each day, the accumulated sap is collected from the pails, poured into a large tank and hauled by sled or wagon to the sugar house. Of course, in my case, the plastic jug was dumped into my stockpot and boiled to death.

There is a more modern method of collecting the sap that involves a system of plastic pipelines that transport the sap directly from the tree to the sugar house, but what would be Rockwellian about that sight?

Regardless of the method used, a good maple tree will yield 15 to 40 gallons of sap in a single season. Processing occurs in a sugar house. It is there that the sap is strained and placed in shallow pans (evaporators) over wood, oil or gas fires. As the sap boils, the water evaporates. When the sugar concentration reaches 66.6 percent it is drawn off, filtered and bottled as maple syrup. Maple sugar is produced by boiling sap until most of the water evaporates. One gallon of syrup will yield about eight pounds of maple sugar.

An old fashioned treat enjoyed by those making maple syrup is called "jack wax," which is a taffy-like confection formed by pouring the hot syrup into a mound of clean snow. The resulting syrup hardens into a stringy treat and is usually made with the first "draw" of the syrup.

You don't have to have any talent or sophisticated cooking equipment to make maple syrup. If you have a maple tree, you can tap it, get the sap and boil it down nice and slow all day long until it forms a golden-brown syrup.

A singular harbinger of spring, maple syrup makes for a unique cooking ingredient.

See Larry Jones' family-tested recipes inside. Chef Larry is a freelance writer for the Observer & Eclectic Newspapers. To leave a voice mail message for him dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1888.

TOP OF THE MORNIN' TO ALL THINGS IRISH

BY SANDRA DALEKA-PRYBY
SPECIAL WRITER

When the Clinton, Donahue and Lanigan children hear their parents say "top of the mornin'" they know it's St. Patrick's Day. After all, this greeting is as Irish as shamrocks, the color green, corned beef and cabbage.

Joe and Jane Clinton of Troy will be offering this greeting to their three children, Martha, 17, Michael, 14, and Kelly, 11 this Friday. There will also be decorations, special foods and lots of "good wishes" from other Clinton family members.

"St. Patrick's Day is a big occasion for my husband and his all-Irish family," said Jane, a teacher in the Warren Consolidated School District. "I'm Scottish so March 17 wasn't a special day until I met Joe. When we married, celebrating being Irish became a way of life."

Joe's kin, both on his mother's and father's side, are from Ireland.

"For a number of years, my grandfather, Daniel O'Donnell, ran a popular Irish pub called the Shamrock in Detroit," said Joe, a teacher at Troy High School. As a boy, St. Patrick's Day was one of his favorite holidays. It still is.

Joe said his family would start celebrating by attending the parade downtown in Detroit the Sunday before St. Patrick's Day. "Then the day before the holiday, I would go with my mother to the farmer's market to buy food for the large family party the next day. This was one of my favorite things to do."

Once the special day arrived, the celebration was low-key. It started with church and ended with a meal of corned beef and cabbage, boiled potatoes, and Irish soda bread. "And, of course,



JIM RUDEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Clinton clan: Joe Clinton's sister, Judy Griffin (back row, left to right), Martha Clinton, Bailey the dog, Joe and Jane Clinton, Kelly Clinton, Peg O'Donnel (Joe's mom). The family gathers every year to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.

that day everyone was 'wearing the green.'"

The Clintons continue to celebrate St. Patrick's Day with a family party, but they've added other traditions for their children.

Over the years, the Clinton kids have been treated to green bread, green beverages and green ice cream. "And sometimes we forego corned beef and cabbage and have Irish meat loaf instead," Jane said. "It's really just regular meat

loaf, but Joe prefers it to the traditional St. Patrick's Day fare."

Traditional Irish food is a must on St. Patrick's Day for the Donahue children, Michael, 19, Patrick, 15 and Mary Grace, 12.

"The kids would be disappointed if I didn't make Irish soda bread or shamrock cookies (sham

See IRISH, 2B

Favorite foods:

Brother Patrick
O'Hare with
some of his
favorite
dishes —
Irish Soda
Bread and
stew.



Cooking reminds Brother O'Hare of his homeland in Ireland

BY LAURIE HUMPHREY
SPECIAL WRITER

He may be a long way from his native Ireland, but Brother Patrick O'Hare can reminisce about his early days every time he steps into a kitchen and prepares authentic Irish food. At least once every 10 days, O'Hare treats himself and the nine other Brothers living behind Brother Rice High School in Birmingham to Irish cooking that is acclaimed by many.

Molly Robinson, public relations director for the high school, attested to the fact, calling him "a wonderful cook." O'Hare, who got a late start in cooking, doesn't consider himself a great cook. He sees himself more as a person who is willing to try both new recipes and stick with the traditional Irish stand-bys. He continues to use those recipes that work and forgets about the ones that don't. O'Hare, a teacher of 46 years stationed in Michigan, Hawaii, California, Canada, Chicago and Ireland, started cooking for himself when he went to college at the Christian Brothers Community in

Ireland. There, 100 brothers shared cooking duties.

Whenever it is his turn to cook, O'Hare is sure to make soup, whether it is as a side dish or the meal itself. "I love to cook soup. I also love to cook fish," he said. "My favorite is trout."

Coupled with the Irish people's love of potatoes, and O'Hare's love of soups, one might imagine that potato soup is one of his specialties. But the truth is, he didn't even hear about potato soup until he came to the United States in 1949.

Of course, potato soup may be a big thing in Ireland today, since the Irish are adopting recipes and cooking methods from across the world. "The food has changed over the past 30 years," he said. "Restaurants are open for all types of foods. The cooks have been sent all over the world to study." Despite the big switch, O'Hare tends to stick with the traditional Irish foods including colcannon — mashed potatoes mixed with chopped cabbage and scallions. Potato bread, made from mashed pota-

See HOMELAND, 2B

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Great American Meat Out celebrates vegetarianism.
- Wines from Napa Valley's Sterling Vineyards.