Drop By Drop The Golden Sap Is Gathered and Processed for the Saint John's Table
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A Labor of Love!

On nearly any day from mid-March to mid-April, as one drives up the familiar road to Saint John’s and stops by the small, green evaporating house with its large wood pile in front, a flurry of activity can be seen about that area. Men attach gails to trees, others empty buckets into larger ones, some lug wood to the fire-eating stove in the evaporating house. For it’s maple syrup time, which conjures up an image of a stack of steaming flaps-jacks covered with butter - and that golden fluid!

To the few men who gather and process maple tree sap in Saint John’s bountiful woodlands, it is a science. It takes a practiced eye and hand to know when the mixture’s ready — and won’t crystalize or mold.

Tree receives more than 4 taps. Trees with multiple taps have hoses which empty the sap into a common collecting bucket.

“I usually tap a tree on its south side,” says Brother Marcellus, “but it really makes no difference,” he admits.

Some 2,200 taps in the Saint John’s “sugar bushes” produced over 13,000 gallons of raw sap this spring. (This was later refined to yield the 350 gallons of maple syrup.)

During the sap gathering period, students, clerics and novices pitch in at least twice a day to keep up with bucket toting chores. A hard maple will usually produce a gallon of sap per day. The sap is then emptied into 50 gallon drums nearby, waiting for a tractor, hauling a 175 gallon drum on wheels, to come bumping down the many logging trails to pick it up.

The sap gets its first screening when it is dumped into the tank truck. From the sugar bush, the tractor hauls the tank to the evaporating house where the sap is transferred to outside stock tanks. From here the sap is fed into the evaporating pans in the stove. The pans can hold 200 gallons at one time.

During the “cooking” of the sap, periodic checks with a hydrometer indicate the percentage of sugar in it. When the desired level of 65% sugar is reached, the maple syrup is drained off, filtered several times, and bottled.

Overcooking the sap will result in crystallization of the sugar. Not cooking it enough (i.e., not concentrating the sugar sufficiently) results often times in spoilage.

When all of this golden elixir has been finally collected in gallon jugs, it’s ready for the Saint John’s table — well worth the patience and care in preparing it!

Although refined principally for the monks, a lot of it makes its way to the college and prep refectories.

Notice!

Beginning June 1, lovers of Saint John’s Bread (Fresh, frozen or brown ‘n serve) should check all large supermarkets in the following areas:

Arizona
California
Colorado
Minnesota
Nebraska
North Dakota
Oregon
South Dakota
Washington
Wisconsin

Check SAFEWAY STORES everywhere including the Washington, D.C. area and RALPH’S in Los Angeles. KROGERS also has a franchise under consideration.