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THE GOOD LIFE

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Nutrition Notes: Welcoming Spring with the Sweetness of Maple Trees

By Bi-sek Hsiao, PhD, MS, RD, LDN

Bi-sek Hsiao

The first drops of maple sap in late winter are magical. I feel alive with awe and excitement when I taste those drops of sweetness, my hands and face nestled on the bark of the maple tree while I reach my tongue out to catch the sweet drops from the small opening in the tree, each person in my family taking their turn. At home our family taps only about 5 maple trees with 1-2 taps in each tree, but the abundance of sweet sap that flows from them is enough to make about a couple gallons of syrup, usually enough to last us through the year. In the U.S. in 2024, the average yield was 0.342 gallons per tap, and 5,860,000 gallons were commercially produced, which was more than 3 times the production in 2012. While maple sugaring is a growing industry in New England, many families like mine still enjoy the process of making our own syrup.

Making maple syrup for us is a special family tradition that lasts about 3 weeks just before spring emerges, when the temperatures are freezing at night and thawing during the day. We make maple syrup the old way, without plastic tubing and tanks. After giving our words of gratitude to each tree, we drill small holes about two inches deep through the bark, hammer in metal spiles, hook on metal buckets and covers, and wait for the plink, plink, plink sounds of sap hitting the buckets to signal that the taps are working. The buckets fill up quickly when the temperatures are right and the flow is strong. We monitor the buckets throughout the day and empty them into 5 gallon water jugs, which we use to carry the sap closer to the house. Our simple sap boiling system is a big metal barrel sitting sideways which acts as the fire chamber, with cutouts for two hotel catering pans to sit on the fire and hold the boiling sap. On one end of the barrel is an opening to load the wood, and a metal chimney takes the smoke out the other end. It takes about 40 gallons of maple sap to make 1 gallon of syrup. Making syrup is hard work! Trudging through the snow carrying heavy buckets of sap, gathering fallen tree branches for firewood, keeping the fire stoked, watching the sap boil, and keeping the syrup from burning requires attention, time, and energy; but the process is worth it. We welcome the connection to the trees and to the land, the workout to condition our bodies, and the sweetness to add to our family meals.

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In the book Braiding Sweetgrass, author Robin Wall Kimmerer, a scientist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, describes the synchronization of nature that brings us the gift of sweet maple sap. Every bud on maple trees has hundreds of photo sensors that detect growing daylight with the coming of spring. Hungry for fuel to grow into full-fledged leaves, the buds send a hormone signal down the trunk into the roots, triggering the formation of an enzyme called amylase that breaks up large starch molecules in the roots into smaller sugar molecules. The increase of sugar concentration in the roots creates an osmotic gradient that draws water in from the soil, and allows the sugary water to stream upward into the branches to feed the buds. When the buds break and leaves emerge, they begin to make sugar on their own and the upward movement of sugar ends. It is just this small window of time when we can tap into the tissues behind the bark to collect the sweet sap.

Robin Wall Kimmerer explains through the teachings of Nanabozho, the Anishnaabe Original Man, that while the gift of sap brings us hope and possibility, it also brings responsibility. The hard work involved in maple sugaring is a reminder to be mindful of what we take from the earth and to receive earth's gifts with gratitude and with commitment to attending to the health of the trees and the ecosystems. Understanding the processes that bring us food can clue us into nature's gifts as well as our limits for consumption so that we can live with more gratitude and health, and with less exploitation of resources.

Maple syrup, as with all sweeteners, is concentrated energy that should be consumed sparingly. One tablespoon of maple syrup provides 52 calories from 13g of carbohydrates. This energy is similar to what table sugar has, but maple syrup provides more minerals, including calcium, potassium, iron, and manganese. Maple syrup also has a lower glycemic index of 54, compared to the glycemic index of 65 in sugar, which means that maple syrup doesn't cause blood sugar to rise as quickly and drastically as sugar. Maple syrup also has a variety of polyphenols, which are compounds that can have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects which may benefit our health. These qualities suggest that maple syrup may be a healthier choice than sugar, but it should still be used in small amounts. Many people also enjoy drinking maple sap before it's boiled down to syrup. Containing 2-3% sugar, several minerals, and polyphenols, the sap is often considered an electrolyte drink to rehydrate the body. I enjoy making tea with the maple sap—just heat up the sap with your favorite herbs and spices and you have a delicious warm beverage with natural sweetness.

We celebrate National Nutrition Month this March with the theme "Food Connects Us." Enjoying maple sap or maple syrup is one way of building local connections through our food by supporting the local food economy and practices of caring for the trees, and by enjoying social connections around a meal that has been sweetened by maple trees. Connecting to the processes that provide our food deepens our respect and appreciation for nature and the people who nourish us.