

Sugar Time



Sugarbush, Limbour, Quebec.

Once the drastic change in Canada's seasons brought a drastic change in Canada's diet.

In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the first sign of winter's end was spring lamb. Novelist Hugh MacLennan remembers his father telling him that the celebration of Christmas was nothing compared to the festivity of the day the first fresh lamb was brought to the table.

"In those days [MacLennan wrote] when the Island was almost cut off, this must have been the day of the year, for during the last months of winter and the early weeks of spring, people had lived from barrels of apples, potatoes, salt herring and cod, and even fresh cod was a treat. Things are not like that now of course, but the lambs which have pastured on those rain-washed hills are still the tenderest I have ever tasted."

Now Canadians eat lamb whenever they feel the urge, but there are still changes in the supermarket and the dinner table when fresh fruit hangs heavy in the orchards of southern Ontario and the Okanagan valley in British Columbia, berries come to the bushes of the Maritimes and the sugar maples are tapped in Quebec.

Sugar maples abound in eastern and Atlantic Canada, but along the banks of the St. Lawrence the making of syrup, sugar and maple taffy provides the occasion for a family festival. In his woods the Quebec farmer may have as many as 4,000 maple trees. Only those that are at least six inches in diameter are sap producers, but even so, an awful lot of sap is flowing in March.

It runs when the moon is in the proper phase and the daytime temperature is at least 45°F. It runs sweetest when the warm days come late, and it runs best when the day is foggy and the

nighttime temperature is below freezing.

Twenty-five years ago the farmers made their rounds in the spring with a horse-pulled sled, but now the big producers use tractor-hauled wagons and the smaller ones snowmobiles. The traditional system of collecting—by tapping the individual trees with spigots and letting the sap flow into a covered bucket—still prevails among the farmers, but the big commercial operations now link the trees with plastic tubing and the sap is pumped automatically into the storage tanks. The tubing is said to increase production by as much as forty per cent.

The old method is more fun. The farmer and his helpers first tap the trees and set out the buckets—a full day's hard work for three on an average farm.

Then the sap, which runs most readily in the day but sometimes at night, is collected daily. Collection begins when the sun is well up and the snow and frost have been melting for several hours. The sound of the sap dripping is loud in the woods. The gatherers have a big tank on their snowmobiles, or a bigger one, up to 500 gallons, if they are working with tractors and wagons. They also have gathering pails, one for each worker, about twice as capacious as the pails on the trees.

The caravan makes its way into the sugar bush. The worker lifts the lid from the pail attached to the tree and then tips it, pouring the sap into the gathering pail. It takes practice, for it is easy to splash the sap from the full pail. The rhythm of the work depends on the rate of flow; sometimes it takes several sap pails to fill the gathering pail, sometimes only a couple. The gathering pail must be lifted shoulder high when it