



HISTORY OF MAPLE PRODUCTION

Centuries ago Native Americans discovered and made the first maple syrup and other maple products. Legend says that a chief threw his tomahawk into a maple tree during late winter or early spring. When he removed it, sap began running and was collected in a container that happened to be at the foot of the tree. The chief's wife mistakenly thought the clear liquid was water and used it to cook venison. They found that after cooking, the meat and liquid that remained were sweet and delicious. So, they retraced their steps and found the sap came from the maple tree.

They repeated that process and that basic premise is used even today ... collecting the sap and boiling it into syrup.

Sap is forced from maple trees in the spring when it flows from the roots into the branches. Early recorded accounts show that maple producers probably used an ax to chop a groove into a tree. However, producers found this method damaged the trees and contaminated the sap in future years. So, they began to drill holes into the trees a few days before the sap is expected to start running. They then collect the sap in buckets hung from wooden spouts called spiles. These spiles were usually hollowed out branches from sumac, but later they were fashioned out of metal. The spiles are removed after the sap quits running, so the tree can heal.

Each day the sap ran, the producer checked the buckets to make sure they did not overflow. When full, the buckets were emptied into barrels that were hauled through the woods (also called the sugar bush) by horse drawn wagons.

Collecting sap in this manner is the most time consuming and hardest work even today. However, by using buckets the maple producers can easily recognize trees that are good sap producers. In fact, some large scale maple producers continue to collect sap using buckets, though equipment is now of higher quality than in early years.

Evaporating the water in the maple sap leaves a more concentrated sugar solution. This makes maple syrup. The first producers started this evaporation process by placing hot rocks into hollowed out logs. Later, metal containers over open fires replaced the more rudimentary system. Producers found that boiling the sap in a single kettle often resulted in a darker, lower quality syrup. So, to get a higher grade they began using a series of kettles. The modern evaporators used today evolved from the open kettle system.

Back then, as today, it takes approximately 45 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup. Sap becomes syrup when the sugar concentration reaches approximately 67%.