



written by Sandy Irvin.

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In late winter, as the roads begin to reappear from beneath their skin of ice, and the sunlight lingers in the evenings, and the fields settle into a crunchy crust, a young person's fancy turns to...syrup. Nothing promises spring so much as taffy on snow. It's not that winter is over, so much that spring always follows syrup season. Even now, the syrup producers of Lanark County (maple capital of Ontario, after all), are prepping their gear: repairing lines, sterilizing equipment, walking the trails, and checking their trees.

What's that? You had a romantic vision of horse drawn sleighs, sap buckets and open wood fires? Not anymore, baby. Maple syrup has come a long way.

It seems like everyone has a childhood memory of a school trip to a sugarbush, usually involving wet mitts and at least one kid getting a soaker. Those trips still happen, but the syrup industry has come evolved a lot since most people's childhoods. Some of the changes occurred in the name of better quality, others in the name of saving energy (both people and power).

To my mind, one of the best integrations of technology and nostalgia happens every spring at Fortune Farms. It's a family operation that manages to combine a state-of-the-art operation for volume production with a superb historical perspective and display. All that and free taffy on snow, to boot.

Located at the Eastern edge of the Lanark Highlands, just as the hills begin to roll, the Fortune farm is only a short drive West of Almonte. Almost park-like in its setting, with its wide, winding trails, the late winter sunlight highlights the rhythmic spacing of the maples, the shadows on the snow, and the odd flash of green as a pine stands out among the maples. It is starkly beautiful this time of year. It's hard to imagine all this tranquility masks the cutting edge of maple syrup making.

But walk into the back of the main sugar house, and that's exactly what you see. A vacuum pump brings the sap to a holding tank, and from there it flows into an amazing shiny silver machine. It looks like something out science fiction rather than rural Ontario,

but it's all a part of the process. Recently upgraded after a tragic fire in 2006, the Fortunes' reverse osmosis filter concentrates the sap, removing 60% of the water, with a minimal use of energy. But concentrated sap is not syrup – it takes cooking at the right time and temperature to get the right taste and consistency. And scientific as it is, a good syrup maker still knows by eye and taste and feel when the syrup is perfect, often before the machine. The same goes for maple sugar, butter, fudge, candy, and taffy, which are made in the front of the sugar house by hand.

What about the romance of syrup making? The history? I guess it depends on how romantic you find stoking wood fires all night. The Fortunes maintain one of their original sugar houses on site, with an old-fashioned syrup boiler (also called an arch for its shape). It smells *wonderful* when you walk in and smell the clouds of syrup and woodsmoke. You'll get a chance to taste syrup too. It's slightly smokier in taste and darker in colour than commercial syrup – this is a matter of preference for some people.

Further up the path, the Fortunes take you back even further in time. Shorty, Tubby, and Slim, the Kettle Boys, will introduce you to old-fashioned kettle-based syrup making (don't forget to ask for a taste), their own fudge, and many traditional sugar camp crafts and folklore, as well as antique items of the trade.

After all that syrup tasting, you may want to burn off a little energy, and the trails are well worth it. As long as you're dressed for winter, you'll be fine, and the woods are beautiful and peaceful. Please note that this year, the snows are deep, or as I was warned during the writing of this article, "It's a great day for snowshoein'".

How to get there

Find their web site at www.fortunefarms.ca.

From HWY 7, just West of Carleton Place, take **Tatlock Road (County Road 9)** North for 7 or so twisty km. Your first big intersection is with **Wolf Grove Road (County Road 16)**. You'll know you're there by the historic **Union Hall** (built in 1857) located directly across from you. Admire the view, then turn **LEFT** and proceed for approximately 2km. You will find **Fortune Farms** on your right – can't miss the sign!

From Almonte, take **Wolf Grove Road** West for 9 km till you reach Union Hall. Keep going another 2 km.

Other Great Sugar Camps

Fortune Farms is a wonderful sugarbush, but much as fine wines vary due to terroir, so too, with maple syrup. You may also enjoy visiting and tasting at these fine Lanark County establishments. And maybe because Lanark is where the fibre optic cable meets the pitchfork, they all have websites, too.

Temple's Sugar Camp, 1700 Ferguson Falls Road (just south of Ferguson Falls). You'll see the tubing running through the woods long before you reach the main building. A modern operation housed in a historic-style timber frame building, Temple's is known for its restaurant, which seats up to 200.

www.temple sugars camp.ca

Wheeler's Maple Products Pancake House and Sugar Camp, McDonald's Corners. With over 10,000 taps, they are one of the largest commercial maple & tourism operations in this part of the world, Wheeler's is open year-round for different maple-related activities, but tapping time is still the best time to visit.

www.wheelersmaple.com

Fulton's Pancake House and Sugarbush, Pakenham. Billing itself as a four-season resort, Fulton's is well known for its school programs, extensive activities, and fun scavenger hunts. They also conduct team-building workshops and corporate retreats.

www.fultons.ca

Sidebar or box:

Facts about maple sugar

Maple syrup contains as much calcium as milk, and many other trace nutrients, which can vary depending on the soil.

All maples produce sap, but only 3 species are sweet enough to be important in syrup production. The Sugar Maple (*acer saccharum*), the Red Maple (*acer rubrum*) and the Black Maple (*acer nigrum*) can all be tapped.

Warm sunny days (above 40° F) and frosty nights are ideal for sap flow.

Tapping does no permanent damage to the tree. Only 10% of the sap is collected each year.

It takes 40 litres of sap to make one litre of maple syrup.

Early Canadian settlers often drank fresh sap as a tonic.

In the mid-1800s, at the height of the abolitionist movement, some activists promoted maple sugar as a better and home-grown alternative to cane sugar, which they saw as a corrupt product of the misery of slaves (only the language was more florid).

Don't boil sap in your house; the clouds of steam will coat your kitchen with sticky sugar. Not that I'm speaking from experience or anything.