



# LIQUID GOLD

## THE SWEETNESS OF SUGARING SEASON

Story And Photography By Sheila McGrory-Klyza

In late winter and early spring, mild daytime temperatures and cool nights mean one thing in Vermont: sugaring season—or “sugarin,” as many locals are apt to call it. This annual rite of spring is celebrated throughout much of the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. When the snow finally starts to melt, the small, rustic sugarhouses that dot the countryside come to life. Steam blasts from their chimneys as maple sap boils away inside, signaling to all a sweet farewell to winter.

My friends David and Louise Brynn live on 33 acres of land that is abundant with sugar maples, the tree which supplies the sap that’s boiled down into maple syrup. For more than 20 years the Brynns have been tapping their trees to make maple syrup. At one point, briefly, they used rubber tubing to increase their production and sold some of their syrup commercially, but they prefer to do it the old-fashioned way—collecting the sap in the 60 metal buckets they have attached to the trees, and carrying it down to their hand-built sugarhouse.

### Maple Syrup Classification

Maple syrup is classified based on its color, which is an indicator of its flavor intensity: darker syrup means a stronger flavor (and a lower price). What makes this confusing is that many maple-producing states and provinces have their own laws for regulating syrup; if not, they follow the USDA regulations. They also use different terms to describe the colors, and Canada’s colors are generally a bit darker in each grade. Below is a comparison chart to help you in purchasing syrup, although beginning in 2014 Vermont producers will gradually switch over to international grading standards. Under these new guidelines meant to dispel confusion, all syrup will be labeled Grade A, with descriptors such as Delicate, Rich, Robust and Strong Taste. The USDA is considering adopting these new standards as well.

Although the lightest syrups are prized by many for their delicate flavor, I don’t recommend these for cooking and baking. The darkest syrups have a very pronounced flavor, and I don’t recommend these either. The grades in the middle are ideal for cooking and baking, and you may find that you prefer them straight on your pancakes and oatmeal as well.

USDA	Vermont	Canada
Grade A Light Amber	Fancy	No. 1 Extra Light
Grade A Medium Amber	Medium Amber	No. 1 Light Grade A
Grade A Dark Amber	Dark Amber	No. 1 Medium Grade A
Grade B for reprocessing	Grade B	No. 2 Amber

*Derived from The Cornell University Sugar Maple Program website*



“I like walking in the woods, collecting the sap myself,” says David. “It’s meditative. You have a relationship with the trees.” A forester by profession, David is also the founder of Vermont Family Forests, a nonprofit conservation organization, so he knows something about trees. He shows me the small metal spout that he inserts into the bark of his trees. The sap, a clear liquid with just the slightest hint of maple flavor, flows up from the roots when the temperature rises above freezing, supplying the branches with nutrients and water. When a tree is tapped, some of that sap is syphoned off and flows into the attached bucket. As long as the tapping follows recommended guidelines, it doesn’t do the trees any harm. When buds start to form on the tree, the flavor of the sap turns and the season is over.



### Boiling the Sap

Inside the sugarhouse, David pours the sap into their wood-fired “rack,” the apparatus that transforms the sap into syrup. Once in the rack, the sap moves through a series of panels as it boils down to the correct density. It takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup—a process that lasts around



an hour in their rack, which is the smallest commercial size available. The fact that it’s powered by wood is unusual in this day and age, but it imparts a delectable, mildly smoky flavor.

As the sap boils down, steam blasts off the surface, filling the small space with a faintly sweet aroma that blends with the wood smoke in an irresistibly fragrant combination. It’s the definition of coziness on a chilly, late winter day.

“With this rig, we could do up to 500 taps, but we’re doing it small and smart,” David says as he checks the hydrometer for the syrup’s viscosity. Louise adds one drop of extra virgin olive oil to the bubbling liquid to reduce its surface tension. Apparently some “old timers” used to toss in a slab of bacon for the same effect.

David and Louise’s two grown daughters, Devon and Callie, come home every year to participate in the process, and often other friends drop by.

Catching up with family and friends is clearly an integral part of the process. When the syrup has reached the correct density and it’s time for a tasting, David turns a tap on the side of the rack, allowing the syrup to drip slowly into a filter, which removes particles and “shines the syrup up,” as David

says, so it’s a beautifully clear amber color.

Louise passes out glasses and we hold them under the



tap to catch the syrup. It's hot, but no one can resist taking a sip. The caramelized flavor is complex and reminds me of toffee, but the only word that aptly describes it is "maple." There's nothing else quite like the taste of pure maple syrup, so much so that its flavor components are not fully understood by scientists. I take another sip and David points out, "That syrup was in the tree an hour and a half ago." The transformation is remarkable and age-old, discovered by Native Americans, passed along to the early settlers, and still greatly appreciated by many of us today. There's a reason maple syrup is referred to as "liquid gold."

## Cooking and Baking with Syrup

The Brynns usually harvest around 15 gallons of syrup and enjoy it, as many people do, poured over pancakes and waffles. Their daughters grew up eating sugar on snow—

### Maple Products

When purchasing maple products, be sure that they're made from only pure maple syrup, not corn syrup with artificial flavors and dyes. Read the labels and buy from a reliable source. If you don't live in an area that produces maple syrup, all of these products can be found online.

**Maple Syrup:** Everyone has a favorite grade of maple syrup. Mine is "Medium Amber," according to Vermont's classification system. It has a more pronounced maple flavor than "Fancy" and is often the preferred choice for cooking and baking. The only way to find out your preference is to sample a variety. Experimentation is also encouraged when cooking and baking with this versatile natural sweetener.

**Maple Sugar:** A traditional sweetener in Canada and the northeastern United States, maple sugar is light brown and has a granular texture. Sprinkle it on oatmeal, use it in a spice rub, or substitute it (equally) for granulated sugar when baking for a distinct maple flavor.

**Maple Cream:** Also called maple butter or maple spread, this spreadable cream is made by stirring warm maple syrup until it becomes opaque and thickens to the consistency of peanut butter. It's delicious served with hard cheeses or used as a glaze for baked goods.

**Maple Candy:** Enjoyed by kids of all ages, pure maple candy can be found in two forms: a soft, crystalline candy that comes in decorative shapes, the most popular being the maple leaf; and a hard candy that's translucent and melts in your mouth.

**Maple Flakes:** A relatively new product, maple flakes are made through a dehydration process and add a delicate maple seasoning to any number of foods. Sprinkle them on appetizers, vegetables, entrées and desserts before serving for a surprising crunch.

**Natural Maple Flavor:** Similar to an extract, this concentrated flavoring is useful whenever you'd like a strong taste of maple without a lot of extra sweetness. Unlike the other products listed here, there will be additional ingredients in this flavoring compound.

warm syrup poured over fresh snow, causing the syrup to harden into a taffy-like candy. Louise also makes irresistible Maple Walnut Squares and, luckily for our readers, she was willing to share her recipe.

But why stop with breakfast and dessert? As a natural sweetener, maple syrup is highly versatile and adds its distinctive, earthy depth to all aspects of cooking. When you begin to experiment with incorporating it, you'll find that the food to which it's added doesn't necessarily taste sweet, but the syrup has added another complex layer that wasn't there before. It's also nutritious: Although mostly sucrose, maple syrup contains important minerals and antioxidants.

Maple syrup has a particular affinity for roasted vegetables, especially winter squash, sweet potatoes, carrots and brussels sprouts. A drizzle of syrup brings out the vegetables' natural sweetness and gives them a subtle boost in flavor. Add a splash to soups, chili and baked beans, or use it as a glaze for meats, especially pork. Maple sugar, a granulated form of maple syrup, is not quite as common as syrup but worth seeking out. My recipe for pork tenderloin uses maple sugar in an easy spice rub for results that taste like the finest barbecue.

In baking, the possibilities for incorporating maple syrup are endless—cakes, cookies, pies, tarts and frostings all can be enhanced by substituting syrup for white sugar. The Cornell University Sugar Maple Program has an excellent website (<http://maple.dnr.cornell.edu>) that's filled with information on maple syrup, including a conversion chart for replacing various kinds of sugar with maple syrup. But for a quick dessert that's sure to please, simply pour syrup over your favorite ice cream or blend it into a milkshake.

Fortunately, maple syrup is available year-round throughout the country. But it tastes especially good during this brief time of year when it's produced. Subject to the whims of nature, sugar makers have to be ready to drop everything when the conditions are ideal and the sap is running. If there's an early spring, the season can be cut short—sometimes dramatically. For the Brynns, though, and many others, it's not about the outcome, but the process. Being outside among the trees, participating in a longstanding tradition, and sharing the experience—and the product—with family and friends: That's what makes the season so sweet.

### PORK TENDERLOIN WITH CHIPOTLE-MAPLE SUGAR RUB

*A rub of pure, granulated maple sugar and chipotle powder (ground chipotle peppers) infuses pork tenderloin with a deep, smoky sweetness.*

SERVES 6

**1-1/4 teaspoons maple sugar**  
**1 teaspoon chipotle powder \***  
**1/2 teaspoon sea salt**  
**3 minced garlic cloves**  
**1 tablespoon olive oil**  
**Two 1-pound pork tenderloins, trimmed**

\* chipotle chiles are dried, smoked jalapeños. The powder can be purchased in spice stores, the spice section of the market, or online.



Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. In a large bowl, combine the first 5 ingredients, stirring well to distribute the garlic evenly and form a paste. Rub the mixture all over the tenderloin, coating it generously.

Heat a large heavy pan (enameled cast iron works well) over medium-high heat. Cook the tenderloins until browned on all sides—about 5 minutes, being careful not to burn the garlic. Place the pan, uncovered, in the preheated oven and roast the pork until a thermometer inserted in the middle reads 145 degrees—about 17 minutes. Allow the pork to stand for at least 5 minutes before slicing.

**COOK'S NOTE:** *When browning the pork on the stove, it will smoke a bit and some of the chipotle will be released into the air. Turn on the blower in your range hood and be careful not to breathe in the smoke.*

## CHARRED RADICCHIO WITH MAPLE MUSTARD VINAIGRETTE

*In this warm salad, the bittersweet flavor of the radicchio is complemented by the tangy sweetness of the vinaigrette. If you'd like to make the salad more substantial, sprinkle a little crispy maple bacon on top before serving.*

SERVES 6

**4 tablespoons extra virgin oil – divided use**  
**1 tablespoon red wine vinegar**  
**2 teaspoons Dijon mustard**  
**1 tablespoon maple syrup**  
**3 heads radicchio**  
**coarse salt and freshly ground pepper**

Preheat the broiler. In a small bowl, whisk together the first 4 ingredients, reserving 1 tablespoon of the olive oil.

Quarter the radicchio, leaving the core intact. Rinse and pat it dry. Put the radicchio on a rimmed baking sheet and drizzle the reserved tablespoon of olive oil over the quarters. Using your hands, rub the oil onto the quarters to coat. Season them with salt and pepper. Broil the radicchio 5 inches from the heat, turning it once, until it's softened and charred on the edges, about 3 minutes.

Transfer the radicchio to a serving platter and drizzle the dressing over the top. Serve immediately.





## MAPLE BUTTERNUT SQUASH BISQUE

*Winter squash and maple syrup is a match made in heaven. This velvety soup is mildly sweet and redolent with warm spices.*

SERVES 8

**1 butternut squash**  
**1 cup water**  
**1/2 cup chopped onion**  
**2 minced garlic cloves**  
**3 tablespoons butter**  
**3 cups chicken broth**  
**1/2 cup maple syrup**  
**1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg**  
**1/2 teaspoon cinnamon**  
**1/4 teaspoon ground cloves**  
**1/4 teaspoon ground allspice**  
**1/2 cup nonfat plain Greek yogurt**  
**kosher salt and pepper**

### **for the garnish:**

**1/4 cup toasted pepitas (pumpkin seeds)**

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Cut the squash in half lengthwise and scoop out the seeds and membrane. Put the two pieces of squash face down on a rimmed baking sheet. Pour the water into the pan and bake until the squash is tender—about 45 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow the squash to cool.

In a large stockpot, cook the onion and garlic in the butter over low heat, stirring often, until the onion is soft. Meanwhile, with a spoon, scoop the squash out of its skin and into a bowl. Add the squash and

the broth to the stockpot and stir to combine. Bring to a simmer over medium heat and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and add the syrup, spices and yogurt. Stir well to combine.

In a blender, puree the soup in batches until smooth. Return the soup to the stockpot and season with salt and pepper. Reheat, if necessary, over low heat before serving. Garnish with a sprinkle of pepitas.

## MAPLE-BACON BRUSSELS SPROUTS

*The combination of maple and bacon is irresistible to many people. When combined with roasted brussels sprouts, it makes a substantial side dish (or to me, a whole meal!). For a vegetarian version, you can substitute roasted hazelnuts for the bacon (and olive oil for the bacon juices) and the dish is still more than satisfying.*

SERVES 6

**2 pounds brussels sprouts (ends and outer leaves removed)**  
**1 large shallot – thinly sliced**  
**6 ounces bacon (high quality, thick cut)**  
**2 tablespoons maple syrup**  
**sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste**

Rinse the brussels sprouts and cut them in half (or into quarters, if they're large). Put them in a large baking dish (they should be in a single layer) and add the shallot slices.

Cut the bacon into 1/2-inch pieces (lardons). In a medium pan, fry the lardons over medium heat until they're firm—about 8 minutes. Remove the lardons from the pan and reserve them in a small bowl. Pour the bacon drippings over the brussels sprouts and shallot slices and stir to





coat. Drizzle the maple syrup over the top and season with salt and pepper. Stir to combine and evenly distribute the shallot.

In a preheated oven, roast the brussels sprouts at 425 degrees for about 30 minutes, stirring them occasionally so they caramelize evenly. Add the lardons and roast for 5 more minutes. Serve immediately.

### LOUISE'S MAPLE WALNUT SQUARES

*These legendary squares taste like a mini piece of pie. You can substitute pecans for walnuts if you prefer, but maple/walnut is a classic combination.*

MAKES ABOUT 24 SQUARES

#### for the crust:

1-1/2 cups flour  
 1/4 cup packed brown sugar  
 1/2 cup melted unsalted butter

#### for the filling:

2/3 cup packed brown sugar  
 1 cup maple syrup  
 2 eggs – beaten  
 1/4 teaspoon salt  
 1 teaspoon vanilla  
 1/2 tablespoon flour  
 1 cup coarsely chopped walnuts

**To make the crust:** Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a small bowl, combine the flour and the brown sugar. Pour in the melted butter and, using a pastry blender, blend the mixture until it's crumbly. Press the mixture into a buttered 8x13 baking dish. Bake for 15 minutes, and then remove the crust from the oven and allow it to rest and cool. Do not turn off the oven.

**To make the filling:** In a saucepan, combine the brown sugar and the maple syrup and cook for 10 minutes on medium heat. Cool the mixture slightly.

In a medium bowl, combine the remaining ingredients and pour in the syrup mixture. Stir to mix thoroughly and then pour the mixture onto the baked crust. Put the baking dish back into the hot oven and bake for 20 minutes, until the filling has set (it should be springy, but not runny). Allow it to cool and cut the pastry into small squares. 🍷

