

The Sweet Lining Behind the Weather’s Identity Crisis

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condensed by Kim Holtrop

Is it spring? Still winter? On a Monday you were in shorts and by Tuesday a scarf and mittens.

Wednesday—windows rolled down, Thursday—seat heaters on. Friday—you uncovered your plants, Saturday—covered them. Welcome to maple syrup season in Michigan!

Maple tree sap is the glorious product that only happens when the weather can’t make up its mind. When the nights are still frigid and the days are finally reaching 40 degrees, that shimmery sap begins to flow.

For those who love the ancient art of sapping, it’s during that unpredictable time when tree tapping begins. The trees that can be tapped are the ones that are healthy enough and mature enough to recover from the wound of a tap. A rule of thumb is if a tree is at least ten inches in diameter it can have one tap, eighteen can have two, and over twenty-one inches can have three.

Meet the Millers



In a quest for local maple syrup, one may look to Facebook Marketplace and come upon the Miller Family Farm & Market in Fruitport. Gabrielle and Dale Miller operate a farm of cows, pigs, horses, and chickens. A few years ago, a friend prompted them to tap a few of their trees and now they’re up to 86 taps, with hopes of doubling next year. Similar stories abound on Facebook groups of backyard maple syrup makers, as well as coaching and encouragement for those getting started.

The Millers are fortunate enough to have mature silver and sugar trees growing right in their front yard. These massive, beautiful maples can produce about 2 gallons of sap a day, and about 80 gallons throughout the four-to six-week syrup season. Typically, it takes 40 gallons of sugar maple sap to produce one gallon of syrup. Since the Millers are tapping both silver and sugar maples, it takes them about 53 gallons of sap to get one gallon of syrup.

The trees in their yard get tapped as well as trees in the woods behind their farm. Gabrielle explained how making the syrup involves the whole family. Dale starts or rekindles the fire at about 3 a.m. when he gets up to start his farm chores. A few hours later their son takes their four-wheeler and gathers buckets of syrup from the woods, which he does every day throughout the season before and after school. And their daughter? Her job comes later with the labeling and—the most important job of all— the taste testing.

Gabrielle’s favorite part of the syrup process is sitting in the sugar shack watching the sap boil down, all while seeing how hot they can get the fire to speed the boiling. While the sap boils they have friends over.

As Gabrielle said, “I don’t know what’s so fascinating about it, but we have lots of people come over that like to watch it. Our kids really enjoy it because we put the table out here and we’ll play Skip- Bo.”

The buckets of sap are continually poured into the evaporator until they have about two gallons of what will be syrup. Dale and Gabrielle like to do just two gallons at a time, so they don’t get ahead of themselves.

Once it’s boiled down, the almost-syrup is moved to a propane heater for the finishing process. That’s not the only way to finish, but it’s the Miller way. Using a hydrometer they measure the brix (sugar density), watching it climb to the ideal percent.



Go Time

And suddenly, it’s “Go Time”—as their kids like to call it. Once they reach their goal of 60 brix, there’s only so much time to filter and get the syrup into bottles before it starts cooling. No matter if they’re in the middle of their kids’ bedtime routine or other chores, when Go Time comes, all focus is on the syrup.

The start-to-finish process for a finished two gallons of maple syrup takes the Miller family about twelve hours. Those hours aren’t only spent on syrup. All the while, there are chores to be done, day jobs to go to, and school to attend.

Syrup season is weather dependent and can be short. Gabrielle said there might be a few hot days during that time, but then the overnight freezing will kick the trees back into gear. However, the minute the trees bud, that’s it. The season is done. On those days, the sap will sour. Once it spoils, it has to be dumped.

It seems like a lot of time and effort to get pure maple syrup. Is it worth it? When asked what it’s like when they get their first taste of the season, Dale said, “It’s like heaven in a cup.” How do these syrup farmers most enjoy their bounty? Gabrielle loves it in her coffee with fresh-from-their-farm raw heavy cream... or over vanilla ice cream... or in her mother-in-law’s amazing breakfast casserole.

No comparison

How does store-bought “pancake syrup” compare to pure maple syrup? Besides having an unbeatable taste, maple syrup is full of vitamins and minerals: *Antioxidants, Manganese, Riboflavin, Zinc, Magnesium, Calcium, & Potassium.*



Additionally, according to the Maine Maple Producers Association, maple syrup boasts 24 natural antioxidants, fights inflammatory diseases, may protect against cancer, helps skin health, improves digestion, and may enhance antibiotic effects.

And what does Mrs. Butterworth bring to the table? Here’s a look at her label:

[High fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, water, contains 2% or less of: cellulose gum, salt, cane syrup, caramel color, sodium hexametaphosphate, sodium benzoate and potassium sorbet

(preservatives), natural and artificial flavors, citric acid, molasses, lactic acid, mono and diglycerides.]

Mrs. Butterworth is not even a contender, nor are any of her “pancake syrup” competitors—such as Aunt Jemima or Hungry Jack.

Miller side note

In reading one of the *Little House* books, Dale and Gabrielle’s daughter was fascinated to learn that the syrup-making process hasn’t changed much in the last hundred years. But unlike Laura Ingalls, she hasn’t gotten to try sugar snow (hot maple syrup poured over snow). Maybe someday this fickle Michigan weather will leave enough snow on the ground during the syrup season for her to partake in the sugar snow experience.

The moment of truth

When leaving the Millers’ with a jar of their “liquid gold,” one can hardly wait to get home to griddle up some pancakes. When the moment comes to drench your fork and taste the syrup for yourself, it will be just as Dale described, “a cup of heaven.”

Next time you’re in the mood for pancakes and want a taste of the good stuff, or if you’re looking for other fresh-from-the-farm goodness, be sure to check out the Miller Family Farm & Market, 12328 Wilson Rd., in Fruitport.



Irene Schultz
5-13-21 - 3-26-25

Irene, 103, was born to her father (who left the family early on) and Kristina (Kuklis) Kubicek on May 13, 1921. Irene’s mother raised the children by herself. In her younger days she and her first cousin, Irene Kitchka, would hang out together and look for the boys! (According to a distant cousin!) Irene attended college for two years, and worked as a secretary at Sealed Power. Some time along the line she met and married Oscar Schultz, which ended up being a life-long relationship. She often went with Oscar where he called square dancing. They had four children: Peggy (Art) Iverson; Rodger (Julia) Schultz; Randy (Julie) Schultz; and Debbie (Kenny) Buikema. Grandchildren were: Jason Blackman, Katie (Mike) Johnston, Josh (Andrea) Schultz, and Terri and Traci (last names unavailable). The great-grandchildren numbered eight: Alex, Andrew, Aiden, Mason, Easton, a daughter by Terri, and a daughter and son by Traci. A 100th birthday party was given for her in 2021. Irene was preceded in death by her husband, Oscar, in 2009. Per Irene’s request there was no service.