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Early spring means it's time to tap for maple syrup

BY DAVID HAMMOND February 26, 2013 11:13AM

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In eastern Canada and adjoining sections of the United States, there's a culinary institution virtually unheard of in Chicago.

It's called a cabane a sucre, or "sugar shack," a traditional kind of rough-hewn dining spot named after the small shed where maple syrup is processed and food is sometimes served.

Maple syrup-making frequently begins in early spring, but this year's unseasonable winter warmth makes it possible to begin earlier.

Syrup is produced by tapping a maple tree for sap, which contains 2 percent sugar, and reducing it to a very sweet, distinctly flavorful liquid. Forty gallons of sap make about one gallon of maple syrup.

To reduce sap to syrup, indigenous North Americans used either heat to evaporate the water or cold to freeze the water, permitting it to be removed as ice, leaving behind just the concentrated, sugary liquor.

Worldwide, one principle holds true: if a region has a lot of one ingredient, that ingredient will be found in many dishes.

Thus, where there are many sugar maple trees, there is, unsurprisingly, a lot of maple syrup, and it's used on a lot of foods that normally wouldn't be dressed with syrup.

Last year I visited Chez Dany, a sugar shack in Quebec, where they dish up traditionally hearty lumberjack meals of eggs, beans, ham, pie and potatoes. Because there's a lot of maple syrup in this part of Canada, it's not uncommon to drench everything in it.

I enjoy maple syrup, but having it over eggs and everything else is not something you'd want to do often.

Still, a deluge of carbs probably is just the thing to eat before spending the day chopping down trees.

I prefer drizzling syrup into snow so it hardens into a cool, viscous lollipop.

Though rare in Chicagoland, maple syrup can be made here. On March 4, there's a sap-tapping party at Fullersburg Woods Nature Education Center (3609 Spring Road, Oak Brook); on March 24, North Park Village Nature Center (5801 N. Pulaski) holds its annual Maple Sugar Festival.

As noted in last week's Food Detective, Chicago is warming up to French-Canadian poutine. Could sugar shack dining be far behind?

David Hammond is an Oak Park writer and contributor to WBEZ (91.5 FM) and LTHForum.com. E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

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