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Quaint sugaring experiences in Quebec

By Elizabeth Warkentin

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Way back in the '70s when I was attending elementary school in Montreal, the teachers would take us on class trips to a cabane à sucre, or sugar shack, in the nearby Laurentians or Eastern Townships. I have especially fond memories of these outings, a simple time when sugarbushes and shacks were family owned and no more than 50 people could be accommodated in a rustic dining room to clog their arteries with home-cooked habitant foods such as baked beans, pea soup, mashed potatoes, cretons (salt pork), pancakes, and tourtière (meat pie). For dessert there was always sugar pie, followed by a tire d'érable session, when molten maple sap was poured onto snow packed onto purpose-built wooden tables to make maple taffy. Afterward, the dining room would be cleared and we would dance to the folky strains of the fiddler's tunes or select our own more contemporary melodies from the jukebox.

Times have certainly changed. Families and school groups still love to partake in the annual sugaring-off ritual and visit cabanes à sucre, but with the world's maple syrup production industry run by the cartel-like FPAQ (Federation of Quebec Maple Syrup Producers) and the liquid gold now a commodity more valuable than oil, the endearing mom-and-pop operations of old are being pushed out by the big guys. Many small maple producers have been forced to sell while others have become large commercial enterprises more akin to a carnival.

Yet, in spite of modernization and commercialization, some cabanes à sucre owners are working hard to accommodate large numbers while remaining as authentic as possible to the quaint sugar shack experience of the past.

Here are six worth visiting. Fees listed have been converted from Canadian dollars to US dollars.

Sucrerie de la montagne

Recognized as a Quebec heritage site, this delightful 120-acre érablière (sugarbush) owned by Pierre Faucher and his son Stefan, is the real deal. Father and son are still using old school

technology to produce their artisanal syrup and they bake their bread in a woodburning oven. Spread out like a small village, each building at the Sucrerie houses a different part of the operation: the maple syrup production shed, the sawmill, the bakery, the dining and dance hall, and the general store. Buffet meals featuring all the traditional dishes are accompanied by live folk music. There is also a more high-end restaurant serving bison, pheasant, deer with garden herbs, and wild rice dishes, followed by miniature maple delights. Guests can also rent one of the four rustic log cabins.

Dinner buffet adults, \$30; children ages 3 to 6, \$10; ages 7 to 12, \$15. Overnight cabins \$67 per night per person. (300 St-Georges Road, Rigaud, Quebec J0P 1P0 450-451-0831 www.sucrerie-de-la-montagne.com/en)

La pause Sylvestre

Vegetarians will squeal with joy to learn that no meat is served at the Pause Sylvestre. This adorable cabin nestled deep in the woods seats only 22 and serves Quebec classics with a vegetarian twist: millet pie, red bean pie, homemade sauerkraut, omelettes, and sweet crepes, along with maple sweets, all served in handmade pottery dishes.

\$25 per person. (58, 11e Rang, Dudswell, Quebec, J0B 2L0. Reservations essential. 819-828-0049.)

L'Érablière du Lac-Beauport

Located just 15 miles outside Quebec City, L'Érablière seeks to educate as well as appeal to your taste buds and sense of fun. There's a museum dedicated to the history of maple syrup production through the ages and, for those who aren't bothered by the thought of stuffed wild animals, another about the history of hunting and trapping in Quebec. During the meal, a traditional folk dancing troupe provides entertainment.

Weekdays, adults, \$15; children ages 6-12, \$10, ages 1 to 5, \$5.50; weekend brunch, lunch, or dinner: adults, \$20, children ages 6-12, \$12; ages 1-5, \$6.25. (200 Chemin des Lacs, Lac-Beauport, Quebec, G3B 1C4. 418-849-0066 www.erabliere-lacbeauport.com)

Domaine du Sucrier

A day trip from Montreal (90 miles east of the city), **Domaine du Sucrier** in **Quebec's** Mauricie region is a small family-run sugar shack that serves homemade meals and local microbrew beer. You make your own crusty bread on the wood stove while a fiddler will have you tapping your toes.

Adults, \$19.50; children ages 8-12, \$12; ages 3 to 7, \$7. (3400 Chemin du Lac in St-Boniface. 819-535-5322. domainedusucrier.ca)

La Maison Amérindienne

For a unique learning and dining experience, visit **La Maison Amérindienne**, a venue for dialogue and reconciliation between indigenous peoples and other populations through exhibitions, guided tours, workshops, and activities. Recognized by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a national benchmark for maple sugar cultivation, during maple season **La Maison Amérindienne** serves an indigenous-influenced meal featuring bannock, pumpkin soup, maple syrup marinated chicken, wild rice, Iroquois corn and herb salad, and the ubiquitous

sugar pie.

Adults, \$19.50; children ages 6-10, \$12; ages 5 and under, \$8. (510 Montée des Trente Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Québec J3H 2R8. Reservations necessary. 450-464-2500. www.maisonamerindienne.com)

La Cabane d'à côté

Montreal celebrity chef Martin Picard of **Au Pied de Cochon** gourmet gluttony fame has opened his second sugar shack venture only 40 minutes outside Montreal. Opened in February, the cabane has already received gushing accolades from restaurant critics for its gastronomic take on classic habitant fare. In true Pied de Cochon fashion, most of the savory dishes are flavored with foie gras, pork fat, pork broth, and/or bacon.

\$44 (3595 Montée Robillard, St-Benoît de Mirabel J7N 2S3. 514-281-1114. Reservations essential and can be made by e-mailing reservations@cabanedacote.ca, aupieddecochon.ca)

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Maple sap boils down in kettles at La Maison Amérindienne.