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by OLIVER STRAND

photographs by DOMINIQUE LAFOND



The Picard family (Nancy Guilmatte, Émile, Martin, and Charlotte) warm up at the Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon outside Montreal.

SPOT

Maple syrup is for more than pancakes in Canada. Just ask Montreal chef **Martin Picard**, whose countryside "sugar shack" lures crowds for sap-happy takes on everything from doughnuts to apple pie





MON

QUEBEC, MAPLE SYRUP

isn't just something you drizzle on pancakes. It's an excuse to sit down for a feast at a *cabane à sucre*—or sugar shack—where just-tapped maple sap is boiled until it's transformed into sugary syrup.

Hundreds of sugar shacks lie just outside Montreal and Quebec City, and many have massive dining halls, where

families sit at communal tables and are fed an endless parade of simple (and satisfying) country cooking: pickled beets, pancakes, fried eggs, sausage and bacon, split pea soup, pork cracklings, meat pie, maple syrup pie. Between rounds of food, a band or a DJ might take the stage. It's an afternoon that's part Thanksgiving, part VFW social.

Because the *cabane à sucre* is one of the most Québécois of institutions, the Montreal chef Martin Picard set out to reinvent it. It's not the first time. When Picard opened his restaurant, *Au Pied de Cochon*, in 2001, he wanted a place that was loud and bawdy, a nightly party where he could celebrate the muscular food of Quebec. He ended up creating one of the most influential restaurants in the world.

The classically trained chef quickly gained fame for his version of the Canadian favorite *poutine*, slapping a lobe of foie gras on a plate of gravy-soaked fries with cheese curd—a gimmick that, admittedly, tastes pretty good. But his real gift was to take the impeccable sourcing of *Chez Patisse* and apply it to dishes that have the tact of a hockey fight: guinea hens roasted whole in the wood-burning oven, blood sausage and potato tart topped with cured foie gras, a roast pig's head with a lobster popping out of its mouth. *Au Pied de Cochon* treats Québécois ingredients with respect and serves them in liberal portions. Take that. »



Clockwise from top: The highlight of any sugar shack outing is *tira*, hot maple syrup poured on snow and twirled up like taffy. • Chef-owner Martin Picard bides his time at the meat smoker. • Maple sugar is spun into cotton candy. • **Maple Syrup-Soaked Doughnut Holes** (recipe on page 70). • The restaurant's logo is familiar to fans of Au Pied de Cochon in Montreal. *Opposite*: Head shucker John Bill unpacks the oysters of the day.







Clockwise from above: Jean-Michel Bourassa, chef of the 2011 season. • Picard's pigs, • **Pea Soup with Foie Gras** (recipe on page 70). • The room adjoining the restaurant is part prep kitchen, part cooks' hangout during the sugaring season. • Opposite: The hearty **Tourtière du Shack**, Picard's take on the traditional Quebecois meat pie. Granted, our adapted recipe (page 71) omits the pig's trotter.

While the artery-clogging scale of Au Pied de Cochon's dishes is impressive, what Picard really did was to make the emphatic point that Quebec has a cuisine worth exploring. It was a hard argument to make a decade ago. If it's easier today—Montreal, home to other renowned restaurants like Joe Beef and Le Club Chasse et Pêche, is now considered one of the world's best eating cities—Picard deserves much of the credit.

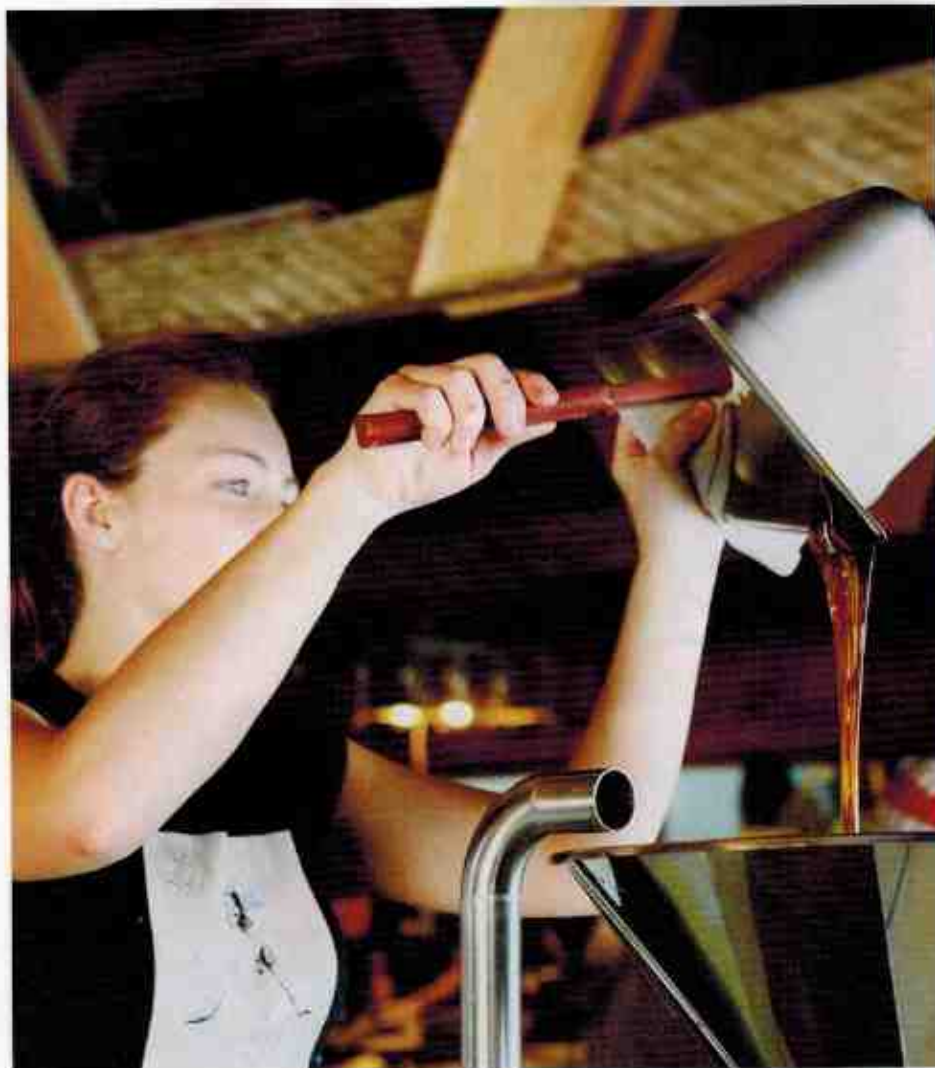
In 2009, he transformed a run-down Renaissance-themed restaurant 30 minutes from Montreal into Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon. At first, it seems like any of the dozens of sugar shacks outside Montreal. There's the icy parking lot in front, the steam rising off the evaporateur, the wood tables for ten and booming conversation.

But look at the food and all comparisons stop. There's pea soup fattened with foie gras, whole-beast meat pie with homemade ketchup, pancakes fried in duck fat and slicked with Picard's own maple syrup. (If the pigs and ducks taste particularly sweet, it's because Picard sometimes feeds them syrup, too.)

"Until recently, I only had the pleasure of transforming maple syrup," says Picard. "Now I produce it and transform it. To do the sugaring season and prepare the meal during that time is a great pleasure. It's one menu per year, and the only limit is the one I impose on it. There's a lot of production and *énormément de convivialité*. Making syrup that people travel for: it's pure happiness."

Oliver Strand, a frequent contributor, is writing a book about coffee to be published in 2012.





Clockwise from above: Pastry chef Gabrielle Rivard-Hillier pours just-made syrup into the maple butter machine.

• **Duck Fat Pancakes** • **Maple Tarte Tatin** (recipes on pages 70, 71). • *Below:* The sugaring room, where sap is boiled into syrup. • *Opposite:* Frozen Nougat with Maple Cotton Candy, the recipes for which can be found in Picard's new *Sugar Shack* cookbook. Enter for a chance to win a copy; see page 71.



TAPPING INTO SYRUP

Maple syrup is made by boiling down the sap of sugar maple trees. That doesn't happen until early spring, when the ground is still snowy but the sun warms the trees so that the sap runs. **It takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup.** (Though the ratio changes depending on the weather—on cold days it might take 100 gallons, on warm days as little as 30.) Traditionally, maple trees were tapped with spigots that dripped sap into hanging buckets. It was labor-intensive: Sap was dumped by hand into barrels, pulled on sleds across the snow, then cooked down into syrup. Now, almost all syrup producers tap trees with plastic tubing that pipes the sap into holding tanks. Usually they'll hang a few buckets on trees out front for show, but if you look at the real operation, you'll come upon thousands of clear plastic lines threaded between the trees in something that resembles an art installation. Just follow one of the pieces of tubing behind Picard's sugar shack and you'll see.



HOW TO SHACK UP

With apologies to Vermont, maple syrup is a Canadian thing. Not only is 80 percent of the world's supply from Canada, but the affordable, gut-busting feast you get at a sugar shack has no counterpart in the States. **Hundreds of cabanes à sucre dot the maple belts close to Montreal and Quebec City** (unfortunately, there's no centralized Web site listing them). The season is typically March 1 through April 30, though Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon opens in late February. Give yourself a full day to visit a sugar shack. You'll want to eat, you'll want to dance, you'll want to rest. On a sunny weekend the lines can run out the door, and around Easter, the season's busiest stretch, it might seem like half the cars in Canada are also looking for a parking space. Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon takes reservations; just be sure to e-mail well in advance. cabaneasucreaupieddecochon.com

Maple Syrup-Soaked Doughnut Holes

MAKES ABOUT 30 These sweet doughnuts are bathed in maple syrup just before serving. For more on baking with maple syrup, see Prep School on page 102.

- ½ plus ¼ cup whole milk
- 1 Tbsp. plus 1 tsp. heavy cream
- ½ cup granulated maple sugar or white sugar plus more for yeast
- 2¼ tsp. (1 package) active dry yeast
- 2 large eggs, room temperature
- 3½ tsp. unsalted butter, melted
- 2 cups all-purpose flour plus more for surface
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 1¼ cups pure maple syrup
- Vegetable oil

INGREDIENT INFO: Maple sugar is available at specialty foods stores, natural foods stores, and kingarthurflour.com.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: A 1" round cookie cutter; a deep-fry thermometer

Heat milk, cream, and 1 Tbsp. water in a small saucepan until an instant-read thermometer registers 110°–115°. Transfer to a small bowl and stir in a pinch of sugar. Sprinkle yeast over. Let stand until foamy, about 10 minutes.

Using an electric mixer, beat remaining ½ cup sugar and eggs in a large bowl until pale and foamy, about 3 minutes. Gently stir in yeast mixture and melted butter. Add 2 cups flour and salt; stir until a very soft dough forms.

Cover bowl with a clean kitchen towel. Let dough rise in a warm, draft-free area until doubled, about 1½ hours. (Alternatively, cover bowl loosely with plastic wrap and allow dough to rise for 8 hours in the refrigerator.)

Punch down dough and knead several turns in bowl; form into a ball. Transfer to a generously floured work surface. Sprinkle dough with flour and roll out to ¼" thickness. Cut out doughnut holes with cookie cutter. Transfer to a floured baking sheet. Cover with a kitchen towel and let rest for 20 minutes.

Pour syrup into a large bowl. Attach deep-fry thermometer to the side of a large pot; pour in oil to a depth of 2" and heat over medium heat until thermometer registers 350°. Working in batches, fry doughnuts, stirring gently with a slotted spoon to keep doughnuts rotating, until golden brown, about 2 minutes per batch. Using slotted spoon, transfer doughnuts to bowl of maple syrup; let soak, turning as more doughnuts are added, until doughnuts absorb syrup, about 15 minutes.

Duck Fat Pancakes

MAKES 10 Duck fat makes for a special treat; you can also use clarified butter or ghee, available at specialty foods stores.

- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups plus 1 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup plus 1½ tsp. cornstarch
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. sugar
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- Duck fat or clarified unsalted butter, melted (about 1 cup)
- Pure maple syrup

INGREDIENT INFO: Look for rendered duck fat in the freezer section of better supermarkets, at specialty foods stores, and online at dartagnan.com.

Whisk milk and eggs in a large bowl to blend. Whisk flour, cornstarch, baking

powder, sugar, and salt in a medium bowl. Add dry ingredients to egg mixture; whisk just to blend. Cover and chill for up to 1 hour.

Melt duck fat in a large skillet to a depth of ½" over medium heat. Using a ¼-cup measure and working in batches, spoon batter into skillet. Cook until pancakes are slightly puffed and golden brown and bubbles form and begin to pop along edges; 1–2 minutes. Flip and cook until golden brown and cooked through; 1–2 minutes longer. Using a slotted spoon, transfer pancakes to a paper towel-lined plate.

Transfer pancakes to plates. Drizzle generously with syrup.

Pea Soup with Foie Gras

6 SERVINGS Rustic yellow pea soup goes upscale with a foie gras garnish.

- 2 cups dried whole yellow peas
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 medium carrot, cut into ½" dice
- 1 celery stalk, cut into ½" dice
- 4 oz. slab bacon, cut into ½" dice
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 oz. raw duck or goose foie gras, cleaned, cut into ¼" cubes (optional)
- Olive oil

INGREDIENT INFO: Foie gras can be found at specialty foods stores and dartagnan.com.

Place peas in a large pot; add cold water to cover by 2". Let soak overnight.

Drain peas; return to pot. Add onion, carrot, celery, and bacon. Add water to cover ingredients by 2". Bring to a boil over medium-low heat, stirring often. Continue cooking at a very low simmer, stirring every 15 minutes and occasionally skimming foam from the surface, until peas are almost

