

# Comparatives and Superlatives: Maple Syrup—A Great Canadian Tradition

READING  
TEXT

If you were to drive through the Canadian countryside in late March, the grays and browns of the landscape would convince you that the region's plant life was still in its wintry sleep. It would look like a regular winter day. But you would be wrong. It is not as wintry as you would think. The maple trees are stirring.

It was native North Americans who first discovered the secret spring life of the maple tree. Native legend has it that the Goddess of Spring sends north a message that the maple trees should wake up on the first warm southerly breezes of March. The trees always hear the message, and every spring the sap starts to run through them.

The sap is a clear liquid, which contains the sugars and minerals the tree needs to live. The slightly sweet sap is also the raw material for the production of maple syrup. The gathering of the sap is a simple process. The maple producer hammers a small tap into the tree. The tap is a small tube through which the sap flows out of the tree and either drips into a bucket or into a network of tubes. The bucket is traditional, the tubes modern. To empty the buckets, someone comes around with a tractor or horse-pulled tanker cart and empties the sap into the tank. In the tube method, gravity or a pump pulls the sap to the building called the sugar shack, where the maple syrup is made.

Once the sap arrives at the sugar shack, it is emptied into a large vat that sits over a wood fire. The sugar content of sap is low. It is not even as sweet as a watermelon or melon. So to make maple syrup the sap is boiled for a long time. As the water boils off, the sap reduces in volume, and it eventually becomes maple syrup. It takes approximately ten litres of sap to produce one litre of syrup! If the boiling process is allowed to continue, the syrup keeps thickening and first maple taffy, then maple butter, and finally maple sugar are the result.

Most maple stands are on rocky hillsides which are unprofitable or impossible to plant with other crops. Having maple trees is the most useful thing that can be done with the land. But the

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sugaring off is not just an important agricultural activity. It is also an important commercial activity. In the countryside around Montreal, Quebec in the heart of maple country, there are dozens of large commercial sugar shacks that sell more than maple syrup. Every March and April, hundreds of thousands of Montrealers make trips to the country to visit the “cabanes à sucre” as the sugar shacks are known in French. These people come to see the syrup production, to go for a sleigh or cart ride, to celebrate spring - and to eat.

They don't only consume maple syrup. Customers are served unlimited quantities of pea soup, scrambled eggs, sausages, bacon, pickles, French toast, ham, baked beans, bread, doughnuts, potatoes, and of course pancakes, maple syrup's traditional breakfast partner. The food may not be healthy, but it is the most delicious you will taste in Canada!

An army of waiters place bowls brimming with these items on long tables with military precision. Customers fill their plates with their favourites, and cover them all with maple syrup. Dessert is both predictable and a surprise. It is, of course, maple syrup, but now it is brought to a boil and then a large spoonful is poured onto hard-packed snow. As the hot syrup cools, it becomes sticky. Guests then roll this maple taffy called “sugar on snow” on popsicle sticks and eat it! It has been scientifically proven that everyone likes it. It is tastier than chocolate.

Maple syrup is an important part of the rural economy in Eastern Ontario, Quebec, northern New York, New England and the Maritime provinces. It is seen as a symbol of country life in Quebec and Vermont, the twin heartlands of maple production. Perhaps most importantly, maple syrup is the first harbinger of spring in a land in which winter is long and hard. The secret spring life of the maple tree brings a little spring sweetness to many northern lives.

*Circle examples of COMPARATIVES and SUPERLATIVES in the passage above.*

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*Write a sentence with each of the following words and expressions.*

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|-----|---------------------|-------|
| 1.  | <b>WINTRY</b>       | _____ |
| 2.  | <b>STIRRING</b>     | _____ |
| 3.  | <b>SOUTHERLY</b>    | _____ |
| 4.  | <b>GATHERING</b>    | _____ |
| 5.  | <b>BUCKET</b>       | _____ |
| 6.  | <b>TRACTOR</b>      | _____ |
| 7.  | <b>TANK</b>         | _____ |
| 8.  | <b>GRAVITY</b>      | _____ |
| 9.  | <b>CROPS</b>        | _____ |
| 10. | <b>VAT</b>          | _____ |
| 11. | <b>CONSUME</b>      | _____ |
| 12. | <b>SLEIGH</b>       | _____ |
| 13. | <b>CART</b>         | _____ |
| 14. | <b>FRENCH TOAST</b> | _____ |
| 15. | <b>BRIMMING</b>     | _____ |
| 16. | <b>RURAL</b>        | _____ |
| 17. | <b>HEARTLAND</b>    | _____ |
| 18. | <b>HARBINGER</b>    | _____ |

*Answer the following comprehension questions.*

1. Is it possible to see what is happening to the maple trees in March? What do you see?  
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2. According to legend, why does the sap run in the maple trees?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is sap?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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4. How is the sap gathered?

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5. Why are most maple stands on hillsides?

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6. How is maple syrup produced?

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7. What do visitors do at the sugar shacks around Montreal?

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8. Describe the type of food visitors eat at sugar shacks.

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9. Why does the hot syrup get sticky on the snow?

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10. According to the text, what is perhaps the most important thing about maple syrup?

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*Answer the following personal and opinion questions.*

1. Have you gone to a sugar shack? If so, comment on your experiences. If not, would you like to go? Why or why not? E.g. Do you like maple syrup?

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2. Why do you think the sugar shacks are so popular?

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3. The typical sugar shack menu contains many foods that were typical of Canadian diets in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Why do you think that this diet was so high in fat and calories?

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4. Why are Canadians so appreciative of spring?

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5. What does spring mean to you?

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6. Name some other spring traditions - either from Canada or other countries.

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7. The sugar shacks are commercial operations. This means that one of Canada's great spring traditions is a business. Does this bother you? Why or why not?

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