

The Story on Chef Martin Picard's Sweet 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.

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

In 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 Quebecois 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 Panisse 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 Quebecois ingredients with respect and serves them in lethal portions. Take *that*.

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 *évaporateur*, 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."

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