

Adventures in Maple!

The coming of spring in New Hampshire's White Mountains brings subtle harbingers of the season - long shadows cast on the snow at the end of the afternoon and the bright sunshine that warms up the woods, while the nights keep their frosty edge.

These signs that trigger the flow of sap in maple trees across the state and there to catch it are hardworking maple producers who boil it into what we like to call a "**Pancake's Best Friend.**" Producing maple syrup is a time honored tradition in New Hampshire, where the art is passed down through the generations. Each year, hundreds of the state's maple producers boil about 90,000 gallons of maple syrup - enough to cover all the pancakes and waffles you could ever eat!

While some maple houses are state-of-the-art, others are wonderfully old and if you find yourself inside one of those, it's likely you'll find a wall of penciled scribbblings from years ago - that's the way the producer kept records of what he made.

Although it is weather dependent, maple season usually kicks off in mid-March, when days are warmer and nights are cold, and visiting one of the local sugar shacks is a fun and informative way to spend a weekend, especially for families.

A sunny March day is a wonderful reason to take a drive and if you see plumes of steam rising over a stand of maple trees, follow it to one of the Granite State's many sugarhouses.

Maple Boiling Season is mid February through March, but some local producers with retail shops keep their sugar shacks open year round for sales and tours.

You can start your maple tour in Thornton, at Benton's Sugar Shack (www.nhmapleproducers.com) on Route 175 north, where the Benton family has been producing maple syrup for nearly 75 years. Along with watching the boiling process, plan to have breakfast, which is served every Saturday and Sunday.



If you follow Route 175 to where it meets Route 3, follow it into the pretty town center of **North Woodstock**, at the intersection of Routes 3 and 112. Here, the Fadden family has been boiling sap into maple syrup since the mid-1800s, collecting from their vast sugar bush in the hills outside of town. The New Hampshire Maple Producers Association declared Fadden maple syrup as the best in New Hampshire in 2008, awarding them the coveted Carlisle Trophy for the fifth time.

The Fadden's sugar shack (www.nhmaplesyrup.com) is open to visitors whenever Jim or his sons are boiling in the spring, and it's easy to tell - just follow the plumes of steam rising behind **Peg's Restaurant**, where you can enjoy a fresh drizzle of Fadden syrup on your pancakes or waffles.

There are no set hours for boiling, but for a real feel of life in this little town, drop by and visit in the evening, when the Faddens' friends and neighbors come by for a chat. You can purchase maple syrup right at Peg's Restaurant, or at **Fadden's General Store** right next door. The store is a charming experience and has boiling equipment set up year-round for you to view.

A short drive north on Interstate 93, through Franconia Notch, is **The Rocks Estate**, off exit 40, where maple programs will be offered on Saturdays, March 15, 21, and 28, 2009.

Fun for the entire family, The Rocks' maple sugaring experience shows the entire process of making maple syrup, from tapping trees to boiling, to even tasting it. It's a hands-on program, wrapped up with a horse-drawn wagon ride around the property.

The day's program costs \$10 for adults and \$7 for children, and one thing you won't want to miss is the curious culinary experience that features a taste of maple syrup, a bite of a pickle to cut the sweetness and a donut to reconcile the sweet and the sour. For more information, and to register, visit www.therocks.org.

About 25 minutes north of The Rocks, is Lancaster, where there are two large maple producers, **Christie's Maple Barn** at 246 Portland St. (www.christiesmaplefarm.com) and **Fuller's Sugarhouse** at 267 Main St. (www.fullerssugarhouse.com). Both welcome visitors during spring's high maple season.

In addition to learning about the maple production, the Christies have a delightful gift shop, where you can purchase everything maple. And you want to be sure to belly up to the bar - the maple bar, that is - where you can try all three varieties of grade A and grade B maple syrup.

The Fullers are fourth generation maple producers and their sugarhouse is right in downtown Lancaster. Visitors are welcome at this unique sugarhouse, where maple syrup is made, packaged and sold.