



Hello, sugar: Lunch is served family-style at the Sucrerie de la Montagne.

EXPERIENCE

Sweet Homecoming

A visit to a sugar shack in the maple forests of Quebec brings back childhood memories. | **By JODI HELMER**

WHEN I WAS EIGHT, sinking my teeth into a piece of freshly made maple taffy was even better than chomping the ears off of chocolate bunnies at Easter or scarfing multiple candy bars on Halloween.

Once a year, I boarded the bus with classmates or hopped in the car with my parents and traveled from the suburbs of Toronto into the dense woods of Ontario and Quebec where maple syrup was made. The best taffy was handmade at sugar shacks—family-run syrup operations, some of which have reception halls offering tours and home-style meals featuring pancakes doused in maple syrup.

I braved low temperatures and endured tree-tapping and sap-boiling demos just so I could watch the real magic happen: the moment when an expert hand poured the warm syrup over a plank of packed snow and with a few flicks of the wrist made a sublime confection on a Popsicle stick. One bite of the sticky, sweet treat, and frozen fingers and toes were forgotten.

Now, 30 years later, I travel from my adopted home in North Carolina to the Sucrerie de la Montagne in Rigaud, a village 43 miles outside of Montreal. I want

to find out if my childhood memories stand up to my adult sensibilities.

The long-forgotten but familiar scent of burning logs and frying sausages hits me when I enter the *cabane à sucre*, as sugar shacks are called in Canada's French-speaking provinces. In an era when most such enterprises have retired their galvanized buckets and mechanized the manufacturing process, Sucrerie de la Montagne still does things the old-fashioned way.

During a tour, co-owner Stefan Faucher explains the process of making maple syrup, from tapping trees and collecting sap from buckets hung throughout the forest to building a fire and boiling the liquid until it thickens into syrup. He tells tales of generations of families he has known who return year after year. I overhear a French-Canadian mother tell her daughter the same thing my own

English-Canadian mother told me—that she used to visit the sugar shack when she was little, too.

I've never been here before, but it feels as if I've come home. The essential experience hasn't changed. Draft horses still pull a sleigh through the snow, metal pails glint in the light of the winter sun, and the sweet smell of syrup and fresh wood waft from the log cabin. The adult me is far more interested in the syruping process than the child me was, but both grown-up and kid still delight in the sweet reward.

I get a chance to try the syrup when the lunch bell rings. In the dining room, servers wearing floral aprons bustle around oversize wooden tables to drop off carafes of syrup. I watch as diners pour the amber liquid liberally over their meals.

Lunch is a traditional feast that consists of maple-smoked ham, meat pies, mashed potatoes, baked beans, and pancakes. Sitting bottom-to-bottom on rough-hewn benches, I strike up a conversation with a tour bus driver and discover that he lives just five miles from the town where I grew up; he too has vivid memories of visiting sugar shacks as a child. On the other side of me, a family toasts my visit with glasses of caribou, a Québécois drink made of wine, whisky, and maple syrup.

As my stack of pancakes steep in syrup, Faucher stops by and motions to the stage where a man in lumberjack shirt plays a beautiful rendition of *La Bohème* using nothing but a saw and a makeshift bow. "He's good, eh?"

Indeed. The only thing missing is maple taffy, which can't be made properly without snow. Faucher promises to have a piece waiting on my next visit. The music compels some older couples to get up and dance. As the room empties, Faucher and I talk—about preserving tradition and dating and dogs.

It's a conversation I'd have with a big brother, not someone I have just met hours before. At this sugar house in the Quebec woods, everything from the crackling fire to the gut-warming liquor feels comfortable and sweet, like family. ■

From February through April, the Sucrerie de la Montagne offers a package that includes a full meal, tour, sleigh ride, and maple taffy for about \$30 (www.sucrerie.delamontagne.com).



Fresh maple taffy on a bed of snow.

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