Nature's Sweet Treats
- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

At this time of the year, the nights are cold (temperature dips down below freezing) and days are warm – that means it is comfortable to walk outside in Ottawa, Canada with a light jacket and if lucky, no snow-boots. Experts say that generally starting at the end of February, alternating freezing and thawing temperatures begin. Maple syrup-producers then drill small holes into the trunk and attach tubes to them. This alternate freezing and thawing pattern continues until early April, changes pressure in the fluid of the trees, and this causes the clear, sweet sap to flow through the holes. Usually buckets are placed under the tubes for the sap to drip in.

The best-tasting and most flavorful syrup is produced by Sugar Maple trees that also present a spectacular orange-yellow-red display of leaves in autumn or fall. Sugar Maple trees are usually found in some areas of Southern Ontario, in Quebec, in the Atlantic provinces of Canada and also in the New England States of America.

Believe it or not, Maple syrup – made by boiling the sweet sap, is nutritionally rich too, at least much more than sugar or corn syrup. Maple syrup is used by many to flavor pancakes or French toasts or waffles, to bake cookies and to make Maple-butter or delicious candies.

Nutritional information of Maple Syrup per 50 millilitre serving (copied from www.canadianmaplesyrup.com/maplehistory)

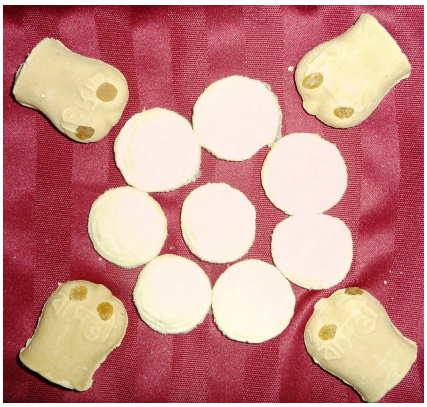
Maple Syrup has about the same 50 cal/tbsp as white cane sugar. However, it also contains significant amounts of potassium (35 mg/tbsp), calcium (21 mg/tbsp), small amounts of iron and phosphorus, and trace amounts of B-vitamins. Its sodium content is a low 2 mg/tbsp.

Energy	167 699	calories kilojoules
Proteins	0	grams
Fat	0	grams
Carbohydrates (sugars)	43	grams
Sodium	7	mg
Potassium	117	mg

Percentage of recommended daily intake

Calcium	6%
Iron	5%
Magnesium	2%
Thiamin	6%
Riboflavin	2%

Now let us travel to the other side of the globe, to a remote small town or village in West Bengal, India. And what do we find there? A similar sap is being gathered into earthen pitchers during the winter season by tapping date palm trees (Khejur) that grow abundantly in that region. The fresh sap is sold in villages in the early morning for a delicious, refreshing drink. Like Maple sap, the date palm sap too can produce alcoholic drinks when fermented. But mostly, delicious molasses are made by boiling the sap: some are kept in liquid form and are used almost in the same way as Maple syrup to soak up chapati or hand-made bread; and some sap is turned into solid rounds (patali gur). These molasses are used for making all kinds of desserts like rice-pudding and delectable Bengali sweets, as can be seen in this photo. Mmmmm good!!! Just ask anyone who was born in West Bengal!



(Photos by the author)