

Food

Sugar Rush. A Québécois chef heads to the forest to sweeten haute cuisine

By Hillary Brenhouse



MARTIN PICARD IS NOT AVERSE to pairing maple syrup with pancakes, though it depends on how you define a pancake. Case in point: the French-Canadian chef's Vinily sandwich, from his new cookbook *Au Pied de Cochon Sugar Shack*. Two thick flapjacks, fried in duck fat, act as doughy paperweights. Shreds of stout- and syrup-roasted pork belly, a maple-cream-cucumber-herb dressing and a layer of raw-milk goat cheese sit between them. The portly little pile is doused in syrup and staked with a Popsicle stick. In a footnote, the cook suggests tossing in two slices of salted foie gras: "If you're in the mood," he writes, "it's a nice variation."

Picard's Montreal restaurant, *Au Pied de Cochon*, a bastion of excess beloved by Anthony Bourdain and other gastronomes, was the first to proclaim Québécois cuisine worthy of world recognition and reinvention. It is a shrine to lard, a place that pays tribute to Grandma's classics and then smothers them in goose liver. Now Picard has built a shrine to sugar or, more specifically, to the sap that flows from the region's maple trees during "sugaring off" season, from February to May. In 2009 he started his own sugar shack (or *cabane à sucre*)—a wooden mess hall at St-Benoît de Mirabel, about an hour's drive from the city—and began boiling sap into syrup. "Some places have truffles, others olive oil," Picard says. "I love the idea of maple being our product, something that we can share with people all over the world."

Just outside the *Au Pied de Cochon Sugar Shack*, you'll see pigs injected with maple brine smoked whole in a great red drum; inside, you'll find a laboratory for maple butter, taffy and cream. More than 100 gallons of syrup went into the making of the recipe book; the maple nougat alone took pastry chef Gabrielle Rivard-Hiller 15 tries to perfect. (Warning: the photographs may induce diabetes.) "You can't simply substitute syrup for white sugar,"

Picard says, "just as you can't translate French words directly into English. To learn English, you need to start thinking in English, dreaming in English."

Picard is not alone in dreaming in syrup. "Go to a Starbucks in Tokyo and you'll find our maple sugar there," says Arnold Coombs, a seventh-generation maple farmer in Vermont. Trees near budding have been drained of their sap for as long as North America has been populated, but lately the market for maple syrup has ballooned. Michael Farrell, director of Cornell University's maple-research center, notes that the crop turned out by the U.S. last year—30.8 million lb.—was the largest since the 1940s; Quebec yielded 101.9 million lb. in 2011, up from 58.8 million lb. in 2008. The weather has been generous, as have new technologies for tapping trees, while demand for syrup—which finds itself at the fortunate crossroads of the natural, the artisanal and the local—is high. Maple is landing on more menus and then stealing across them into hors d'oeuvres and cocktails. As Picard says, "There doesn't exist a food that you can't mix with this stuff."

Of this, *Au Pied de Cochon Sugar Shack* is proof. All but one of its 100 recipes incorporate some variation of maple. There is a dish called maple pig's head and lobster, a pie that layers maple crème brûlée and almond cream, a daiquiri of syrup and brown rum. A chapter on the game hunted within reach of the sugar shack shows, in bloody detail, how to butcher and then stuff a beaver with maple-smoked ham, foie gras and its own braised tail. These pages showcase what Picard does best: make the simplest foods showy and immoderate, and haute cuisine comfortable and crass. As it turns out, maple syrup is the great equalizer. ■

It takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup

