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To make one gallon of maple syrup you need about 40 gallons of sap. Usually one tree can give you about a quart of syrup with its sap.

Maple syrup season brings back warm childhood memories

Maple syrup may be just the right topping for pancakes, but it also brings back vague, but warm, memories of my childhood.

I remember when I was very young my grandfather had tapped several maple trees on the 40 acres he owned in Gladwin. Some of the details of this time are fuzzy in my memory, but I can recall seeing some metal spigots attached to several trees around his home, with buckets hanging down from them.

Then, once a year he would collect the buckets and load them on his tractor. Those buckets would then be taken to some mysterious place, where the sticky sap inside was turned into sweet syrup that grandma served up on pancakes.

Lately I have been reading a lot of stories in the local media about maple syrup and how the sap is running. Those stories brought back those foggy memories of my childhood and made me want to look into how this wonder from nature is made.

David Parsons, of Parsons Farms in Charlevoix — which produces Harwood Heritage Gold maple syrup — was just the person to answer my questions. Parsons' Farm has been in business for several generations and David has been working it since 1968.

David told me not too many people collect maple syrup the way my grandfather did — using buckets.

Many, like David, use a system of tubes that run throughout the forest from tree to tree that drains all the sap into one

collection bin. The tubing system David uses keeps the sap free from impurities such as dirt and rainwater.

The trees are usually tapped around the first part of March, just in time for the sap run around the end of March and into early April. David said sometimes the sap does run in January or February, but he tries to avoid tapping at that time because the hole could freeze up.

Once the sap is collected in the bin, David pumps it into an old milk truck and takes it to his boiling operation. Here, the sap is boiled to get all the water out of the sap at about 7 degrees over the boiling point of water, thus producing syrup.

Once it is boiled down, the syrup goes through several filters until it reaches a finishing pan. Once in the finishing pan, David heats it up again to make sure the syrup has the right density. Then it is sent through another filter and bottled up.

To get one gallon of syrup, David said you need about 40 gallons of sap. Usually one tree can give you about a quart of syrup with its sap.

David has 1,000 taps at Parsons' Farms on about 3 to 4 acres of maple bush. Last year, he said he produced about 45 gallons of sap from these trees — which was down from his usual 100 gallons.

While learning about making maple syrup is interesting to me, I don't think I will be trying to make it myself anytime soon. It is much easier to support my local farmers by purchasing some real Northern Michigan syrup from a store or the farm markets.

To purchase your own Harwood Heritage Gold maple syrup from Parsons' Farms, visit www.harwoodgold.com or call 547-2038.

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