

The artisans went into the forest

...and they found buckets and buckets of maple syrup ripe for the gourmet treatment

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Saturday, May 1, 2010

Talk about time in a bottle. In 2004, Shelf Life reviewed eight brands of Canada's signature nectar; since then, much has changed. Like hockey and Hudson's Bay blankets, maple syrup has rediscovered its iconic status. These days, there are more artisans in the market, producing better quality, more satisfying products (Aunt Jemima, the tribe has spoken). Maple syrup and maple sugar have also made inroads in the kitchen, where they are much more likely to be used as a sugar substitute. And out in the streets, citizens are taking up the bucket. As The Globe and Mail notes, a growing number of city dwellers in sugar maple territory are learning the art of urban syrup-making, tapping trees in yards and public spaces and distilling their own liquid gold.

For those of us in the business of flavour, developments in the laboratory have made our job a lot easier. The newest tool in the tasters' vocabulary is a handy cut-and-keep guide called The Flavour Wheel For Maple Products, from Agriculture Canada (who knew?). As the name indicates, this is a scientific analysis of the myriad ways maple affects the palate, broken down into 12 main categories, from Spicy to Milky to Floral to Confectionery, further modified by an array of subcategories. For example, in the "Empyreumatic" (i. e., high-temperature deterioration) section, "Medium" includes caramelized cooked sugar, burnt wood, ground black coffee, brown coffee bean and chocolate. The designation "Plant: Herbaceous" features fresh herbs (stem, grassy shoot, bud), dry herbs (crushed leaves, nutshell), hay and fermented herbs and silage. Shelf Life is in nuance heaven. Black licorice, sulphur, chicory, rancid grease, vinegar, roasted dandelion root, anise, plus a whole wedge devoted to pollutants (solvents, soap and detergents, plastics and wrapping, petroleum and derivatives, mineral) and not forgetting Shelf Life's favourite descriptive term, "soiled mop" -- this directory amounts to taste-bud psychedelia for syrup lovers. (Google "Flavour Wheel For Maple Products.")

So thank you, government boffins, for the means by which we can name our pleasures. Out in the forest, syrup season is almost over, but the last words in flavour are just beginning.

Vowing to pester their MPs for more Flavour Wheels -- honey would be good, and cocoa -- are this week's expert judges: chef John Lee, proprietor of Chippy's Fish and Chips shops; Nick Liu, executive chef at the Niagara Street Cafe; and Mary Luz Mejia, food writer, food TV producer and food communications specialist, all in Toronto. Space limitations prevent us

from evaluating every brand in a given category; entries reflect the luck of the draw. Items are blind taste-tested and awarded between zero and five stars.

The Results: Each of these products offered its own kind of maple magic -- but some showed a bit more wizardry than others. By a slim margin, Mopure was judged the most purely awesome syrup.

Off the Menu: The winner of our previous maple syrup taste test was Jakeman's -- happily, it performed well in round 2. It remains Shelf Life's favourite brand, so we might just pack a bottle to the next public maple syrup contest. Recently, Toronto's Drake Hotel hosted a syrup face-off featuring duelling local chefs. John Lee picks up the story: "The idea was to come up with the best maple syrup recipe. I made chipotle maple chicken wings, which were genius, but Nick won with maple brulee and maple bacon jam." Nick: "Loved beating you, man." Whoa, boys: Where maple syrup is concerned, everyone's a natural-born winner. After all, as Stephen Colbert observed, we're a nation of syrup suckers. For more bottle, visit shelflifetastetest.com.