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# Travel

SPECIAL CANADA ISSUE

## Rise of Nations

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## TRAVEL: CANADA

### QUEBEC

# 'Sugar shacks' — from rustic tradition to fine dining

By Margo Pfaff

Spring traditionally kicks off in Quebec with a sunny weekend drive in March or April into an idyllic maple forest where the fresh country air masks the last vestiges of a long winter out of our veins. We then head inside to clog three up again with a high-cholesterol, all-you-can-eat meal.

When the sap starts running, maple trees are tapped and the watery liquid trickles into tin buckets to be boiled down in a nearby shack. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of maple syrup, and visitors are welcome to come and watch the "sugaring off" process, then dine on classic Québécois winter cuisine drenched in maple syrup at hundreds of restaurant shacks across the province.

Yes, pushing your way into a sugar shack at a cabane à sucre is a century-old spring ritual in this province that is the world's biggest producer of maple syrup, and I've merely missed one since moving here 20 years ago.

Recently, sugar shacking has taken on a trendy twist, with 100 chefs creating creative angles on the 400-year-old recipes served in rustic-chic downtown Montreal pop-up eateries. Existing restaurants are adding sugar shack menus or brunches throughout the brief season when the maple sap flows.

One of my favorite traditional sugar shacks is Sucrerie de la Montagne, a heritage site set amid a 120-acre forest of century-old maples atop Mont Rigaud, 30 minutes west of Montreal. A wagon pulled by a pair of Belgian horses slowly takes us from the parking lot back in time, past a stone barn where the aroma of crusty bread baking in a wood-fired oven mingles with the sweetness of boiling maple sap following clouds into the air from the evaporator.

Everyone boils from the waxes at the shack's front door, often welcomed by owner Pierre Faucher dressed in *couverture de bois* (ogling). The big log dining hall rocks with the fiddle music as adults and kids jig and sing along on the small dance floor. Rows of families and couples sit cheek-by-jowl at long, rough-hewn, communal wooden tables lined up in front of a large stone fireplace, passing along decades of old-time, soul-warming wine and whiskey.

The jolly atmosphere is as much part of the experience as the endless parade of shared platters delivered by waiters in period costume — thick pea soup with ham, morsels of Canadian back bacon, maple-smoked ham, wood-fired baked beans, moon-ball stew, country sausages, *farinier* (game meat pie), homemade pickles and *croûtes de Christ*, deep-fried ribbons of pork lard called "Christ's ears." These bottles of fresh maple syrup are poured over everything.

Desert is luscious warm maple sugar pie. Then everyone headlines it outside to finish off the event by swirling a *Popoia* stick around groups, warm maple taffy poured and cooled on a trough of snow.

Since it's such a time-honored francophone tradition, it was only a matter of time before someone tapped the cheesy sugar-shack ante and made it hip. That happened at the hands of Martin Picard, a local renegade chef, author and television personality who transformed Québécois cuisine in general in the early 2000s at his landmark Montreal restaurant, Au Pied de Cochon (The Pig's Foot). There he trotted humble pig's feet back into the limelight and took classic Quebec pasteurized-up-market by partnering it with fine gas. *Time* magazine calls it a "hauteur of excess"

in Anthony Bourdain, who wrote the intro to one of Picard's cook books.

And so it is with his lineup of over-the-top courses that make up a sugar-shack chow-down at his Cabane à Sucre in the forest of St-Jacques de Mirabel, 20 minutes northwest of Montreal. Caution: Vegetarians will starve to death here.

The menu changes seasonally, as does the string of chefs from renowned international restaurateurs keen to take part in the three-day event, which runs February through early May. Served beneath the gaze of tandem, the classic pea soup (openers might contain chunks of fat goat). A giant omelet is stuffed with maple-smoked sausage sprinkled with beef beetles, and half a maple-glazed chicken is perched atop a beef tongue on top. There might be maple-smoked roasted pig's head or a lobster pie with layers of cream brulee and almond croissant, all washed down with bottles of Quebec craft cider.

The last time I visited, dessert was a huge table-shared bûche split stuffed with maple sponge and bombarded with maple pomegranate and dark chocolate ganache clusters. Maple cotton candy and maple-sugar mille-boules were up next, along with maple-doused hotspots smothered in duck fat. *Bray*.

The sugar-shack revolution Picard started has inspired urban chefs to play with the traditional spring menu as well, and that's a good thing because landing a seat at Picard's shack has become akin to winning a culinary lottery. Reservations are accepted on its website from midnight Dec. 1 for tables between February and early May.

As a result, cabanes à sucre are popping up all over Montreal during the sugaring-off season. A full-on traditional sugar shack, complete with a wood-burning fireplace and shack decor — La Cabane Chez Jean — takes over the Beach Chalet in Parc Jean Drapeau on Notre-Dame Island in the St. Lawrence River, just a short Metro ride from the city. Popular Jean-Talon farmers' market in Little Italy becomes an urban sugar shack with a range of maple-centric treats offered by local producers. Even Montreal's Botanical Gardens and Arboretum get into the act with an annual sugaring-off exhibit, which includes the chance to try maple taffy pulling.

For three years, trendy Le Rich-muni restaurant in newly gentrified Griffintown has been hosting a much-loved Sage Shack Sunday Brunch during March and April offering creative takes on the traditional maple grub.

But downtown Montreal's most anticipated sugaring-off event is the "Chef à l'érable" — Maple Chef — pop-up restaurant at the La Scierie venue in the heart of the Old Port, an airy modern space with a rustic-chic ambience. For the past three years, one of the city's most celebrated chefs, Laurent Gauthier of Chez L'Épicier Restaurant in Old Montreal and a Canadian participant at Bocuse d'Or, an international cooking competition in Lyon, France, has created culinary magic with a five-course fine dining service that might include cauliflower stuffed with maple sausage and oysters baked with maple syrup.

Sugar shacking is a fun celebration of spring and a great way to experience and meet jovial Québécois during a communal table dining experience, but our arteries and waistlines are very grateful it only happens once a year.

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Fresh bread is pulled from the stone oven at the Sucrerie de la Montagne.



Photo by Sergio Pfluff / Courtesy of The Observer

## IF YOU GO

### COUNTRY SHACKS

**Cabane à Sucre Handfield:** 555 Rue Richelieu, Saint-Marc-des-Rochers, 40 minutes south of Montreal. (450) 584-2228 or (888) 578-2226, [www.alouise-handfield.com/en/](http://www.alouise-handfield.com/en/). Sugar shack. Offers regular as well as a vegetarian and vegan menu with an all-vegan service too. From \$20 per person. Also has an on-site country inn with accommodations. From \$190 for two, breakfast and dinner included.



**Cabane à sucre Au Pied de Cochon:** 11362 Rang de la Fresnière, St-Basile-de-Montbel. (450) 258-1732, [www.cabane-ausucresdupieddecochon.com](http://www.cabane-ausucresdupieddecochon.com). Open mid-February through early May, 45 minutes northwest of Montreal. Reservations for next spring's sugar-shack season can be made online from Dec. 1 at midnight at <http://cabane.ausucresdupieddecochon.ca/reservations-2/73a/g/en>. They sell out fast. Adults \$50, children 4-12 \$20.



**Butinerie de la Montagne:** 300, chemin Saint-Georges, Rigaud. (450) 451-0031, [www.sucresdelamontagne.com/en](http://www.sucresdelamontagne.com/en). Traditional log sugar shack 50 minutes west of Montreal with horse-drawn sleigh or wagon and maple taffy pulling. Open year-round. But the full shack experience is limited to mid-February through early May. All-you-can-eat feast from \$25 per person. Reservations advised. Stay in a rustic cabin with a fireplace on site. From \$90 per person.



### CITY SHACKS

**Un Chef à l'Étable:** Pavillon Jacques-Cartier, Montreal's Old Port. (514) 503-9602, <http://www.un-chef-a-l-etable.com/en/seasonal-events/un-chef-a-l-etable>. Renowned chef and Bocuse d'Or participant Laurent Godbout takes over the La Scène venue in Old Montreal for a chic and innovative take on all things sugar shack. Weekends in March and April. \$55 per person.

**La Cabane Chez Jean:** Beach Châlet, Parc Jean-Drapeau, Ste-Hélène Island, Montreal. (514) 382-7335, <http://chez-jean.jean-drapeau.com/cabane-chez-jean.htm>. A popular chalet on a St. Lawrence River island morphs into a traditional sugar shack just a short metro ride from downtown. Weekends through March and April. \$25 per person.

**Le Richmond:** 377 Richmond St., Montreal. (514) 508-8749, <http://le-richmond.com/en/brunch-levain-2>. Creative, contemporary Sunday Brunch à l'Étable — sugar shack brunches — March and April. \$40 per person.

### LEARN MORE

**Tourism Montreal:** [www.tourisme-montreal.org](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org)

