



*tree
to
table*

WHEN THE SAP IS FLOWING,
ONE CLOSE-KNIT, CREATIVE
FAMILY COMES TOGETHER IN UPSTATE
NEW YORK TO CELEBRATE IT.

EACH WINTER, THEY TAP,
COLLECT, AND BOIL DOWN THE
PRECIOUS LIQUID, THEN SETTLE
IN TO ENJOY THE SWEETNESS
OF THEIR LABOR.

photographs by John Dolan
text by Catherine Hong
recipes by Greg Lofts

**Buckwheat
Pancakes**



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John Dolan and Michele O'Hana hammer metal spiles, which act like spouts, into sugar maples on their property in Chatham, New York, and hang buckets for sap. "After the dark, gray months of winter, it's an outdoor activity we look forward to," John says. OPPOSITE Buckwheat pancakes layered with sausage and a fried egg get a generous drizzle of their homemade maple syrup. For recipes, see page 98.

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HATEVER YOU DO, DON'T SPILL THE SAP!

According to Michele O'Hana and John Dolan, that's one of the many lessons you learn when making your own maple syrup. The married couple—she's a ceramist; he's a photographer and a longtime contributor to both *Martha Stewart Living* and *Weddings*—have become experienced syrup hobbyists over the last eight years, tapping about two dozen sugar maples on their land in New York's Columbia County. But they've certainly made their share of mistakes. "One time I put two five-gallon buckets of sap on a sled and tried to pull it down the hill," says John, chuckling. "I never tried that again."

Tapping was the last thing on their minds when they moved from Manhattan to the 14-acre property with their three children in 2002. But when a neighbor invited them to a sugaring party, where guests chat and sip hot drinks around a big, bubbling pot of the stuff, they got to see the process firsthand. "The smell was heavenly, and we loved that it was another way of living sustainably," says Michele, who grows most of the family's vegetables. She and John soon learned that they had plenty of sugar maples on their property and decided to give it a go.

"It's an immense amount of work," John admits. There are heavy pails to lug up and down hills, long trudges through snow, fires that must be stoked for eight hours or more, and attendant mishaps all along the way. ("One time I singed my eyebrows on the flames," he says.) Sap also has its own inflexible timing, adding to the challenge; the liquid can only be tapped when the days are warm and the nights dip below freezing. Blink and you might miss the window. And perhaps most dauntingly, there's the issue of ratio. It takes 40 gallons of sap to render a single gallon of syrup. No wonder it's been called liquid gold.

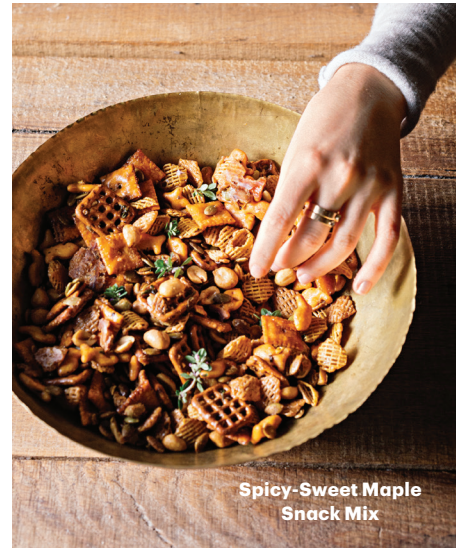
Still, the couple agree that the family ritual is priceless. Olivia, 23; Jack, 20; and Henry, 18, no longer live at home but often return to lend a hand. This, in turn, gives Michele an excuse to whip up some winter comfort foods, from buckwheat pancakes to shepherd's pie—dipping into their stock for any recipe that calls for sweetness. And if the time together is not reward enough, the intense process is "a revelation," she says. "It changes your relationship to the land and to the seasons."



STICKING TOGETHER

- ▶ ABOVE, FROM LEFT John, Michele, Olivia, and Henry celebrate the start of sugaring season with a round of maple water (aka fresh sap), served on crushed ice. "It's barely sweet," says Henry. "It tastes like you're drinking a tree!" BELOW Michele ferries two buckets full of sap toward the fire pit. "It's my winter workout," she says.





CREATIVITY ON TAP

- CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Michele in her ceramics studio. A twist on traditional Irish coffee, sweetened with "liquid gold." An addictive, crunchy snack mix, also featuring home-made syrup. Jack pitches in. Carbon steel knives, handmade by Jack. An assortment of Michele's porcelain bowls.



INDOOR FUN

- CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The family gathers in the studio for a hot, hearty lunch. A rich shepherd's pie topped with colcannon (a classic Irish side dish of mashed potatoes mixed with chopped cabbage) is balanced with the slight bitterness of a watercress-and-radicchio salad. Dollops of velvety maple cream fill the centers of crumbly pistachio thumbprint cookies. Olivia and Henry share a laugh.



**Colcannon
Shepherd's Pie**



**Watercress,
Radicchio, and
Radish Salad**



**Maple-Pistachio
Thumbprints**



SYRUP, STEP BY STEP

- 1 Michele walks down from the woods, carrying a bucket of sap to be boiled down.
- 2 Jack continues the process, consolidating individual pails of it into larger plastic buckets before taking them to the fire pit.
- 3 The sap is boiled outdoors on a wood fire for 8 to 12 hours, or until most of the water has evaporated. Additional sap is added to the pot as the liquid reduces. (Then it's finished indoors on the stove, to better control the temperature over the last half hour of boiling.)
- 4 The final elixir is poured into individual 16-ounce glass bottles—"the perfect size for giving to friends," says Michele.

