

Kids Korner

Maple Sugar Season Is Addictive, Says Matt

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(Somerset Co.) — Matt Emerick is 13 years old and in grade eight at the Meyersdale High School. He's been helping his dad and mom — Ed and Wilma Emerick — make maple syrup ever since he was a small kid around age seven.

That's when he was old enough to help them hand the metal keelers (buckets) on the trees to catch sugar water.

Ever since then, Matt has been crazy about making maple syrup. And every year in late winter or spring, when it's time to tap the maple trees, Matt is eager to get started.

To "tap" a tree means a little hole is drilled into the trunk and a spile (small spigot) is hammered into the hole.

Next, a covered keeler is hung where sap can drip into it from the spile. It drips fast when the tree gets warm during the day, especially after a very, very cold night.

The water has sweetness or sugar in it. After it is boiled a few hours the water evaporates into steam and the sugar part becomes maple syrup. It is a pure and natur-

al product because nothing else is added to it.

The Emericks make thousands of taps in big trees. They also attach a plastic tubing line to the taps besides using keelers. The water, or sap, is collected into huge tanks and hauled, by truck, to the sugar camp.

A sugar camp is the building where the boiling and filtering takes place. It's also where maple syrup is canned in jugs to sell to other people.

To "boil down" you need a roaring fire to heat the long silver evaporation pan. The Emericks use oil to fuel the fire. Many maple producers use wood fires.

"I know some kids would find it boring," Matt said, "but I enjoy it a lot. It's addictive," he added.

Six years of experience has made Matt skillful in the sugar camp. Now his dad knows Matt can do important tasks without help. For instance, in the last few weeks, Matt has boiled thousands of gallons of water by himself. That's a big responsibility.

Matt doesn't mind staying inside to track the progress of the syrup. He uses a device called a "hydrometer" to measure the "density."

While the water bubbles and evaporates, he reads books and newspapers and listens to the radio, because the syrup could be ruined if it was boiled too long. So he sits and watches and waits patiently.

Even when he goes to school, Matt is thinking about sugar making. He takes orders for maple candy and maple creams from hungry high school kids. Some of Matt's best customers are at school.

It's amazing that he can keep his grades up, but he sure does. All "A's" and "B's" on his report card, even during the maple season when it's hard for him to think of anything else.

Recently, the Emerick family (Matt's an only child), went to the center of the city of Philadelphia for Maple Syrup Days. Every year they go to give a sugar making demonstration to city folks.

Matt loves meeting all the people and telling them about the maple industry — just like they were old friends.

He made spotza for them by heating maple syrup to 240 degrees and pouring a little of it over ice in a Dixie cup. To eat it from their paper cup, each person used a wooden stick like the kind found in popsicles.

Spotza can be made with snow, too. That's probably how it was first done when spotza was made in earlier days.

Crumb sugar is another maple product that Matt knows how to make. Maple syrup is poured into a wooden trough that stands on legs. It is stirred and stirred until it turns to sugar granules. Usually, this takes about 15 minutes.

Crumb sugar is used for sweetening food and in baking.

"I have maple at least once every week," Matt says, adding that he doesn't eat so much of it that he gets sick.

He thinks that pancakes topped with maple syrup is a dandy breakfast to eat on a lazy Saturday morning.



Matt Emerick uses a tapper to tap a maple tree. He says this step is first in making maple syrup.



Time to fill the jugs with wholesome and pure maple syrup. Matt Emerick says this is the final step.



Matt Emerick and his mother, Wilma Emerick, stand behind the bass wood trough that they borrowed to make crumb sugar at a demonstration in Philadelphia.



Step Four is pouring sap into a gathering bucket. Matt Emerick's dad, Ed Emerick, is at the left.



Matt Emerick is up high, checking the outside holding tank where sugar water is tored until it's boiled down.