

Nature's Candy

Enjoying North America's Only 'Local' Sweetener

by Beth Dooley

It takes a lot of sweet sap from spring to make a bottle of maple syrup to embellish your pancakes in summer.

I know this for a fact, having helped with the maple harvest at a friend's cabin on Madeline Island.

It took about 40 gallons of maple sap to boil down (over a long, long time) into 1 gallon of sweet natural syrup.

Maple syrup is North America's only indigenous sweetener.

Domesticated honey bees, like those of America's livestock, were introduced by European settlers in the 1600s. Sugar, originally from sugarcane and today also from sugarcane is an immigrant, too.

Centuries ago, when the eagles flew to the Lake's shores in early spring, Native people here knew that maple sap would begin to flow, sometimes even when the snow left the ground.

They established sugar camps – some using sugarbush or *iswi-baakwa* (a type of sugar maple) or *Ojibwe*, according to Pierre Desrochers at [nativetech.org](http://www.nativetech.org) – in the past. They tapped trees with holes cut from cedar and collected the sap in a birchbark bucket before transferring it to a pot to boil into syrup or sugar. The pot was heated in red hot rocks pulled from a fire.



CYNDI PERKINS / MICHIGAN TECH

Students at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan, gathered at the university's Ford Forestry Center in April as part of a maple syrup management and culture class taught by research assistant professor Tara Bal. The class collected sap from the sugarbush maples growing at Alberta Village, a former sawmill operation built for Henry Ford. The students placed 73 taps to gather enough sap for 500 gallons of syrup or 12 dozen bottles. Tara, whose doctoral studies center on maple trees and who grew up in an Amish community that made syrup, says that tapping does not hurt the trees.

