

REGION

NEWS FROM NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

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Chris Luchenbill walks through a maple grove at Maple Acres checking the flow of maple sap into barrels. Later the sap will be pumped from the barrels and put into one of two 10,000 gallon holding tanks.



A friend of the Luchenbill family, Mike Culbreath, adds wood to the evaporator fire. "We still like to use the wood fire," Chris Luchenbill said. "We believe it gives our maple syrup a unique flavor."



Tom Scott pumps maple sap from a 55-gallon barrel to a 1,000-gallon tank. From there, the sap will be pumped into one of two 10,000-gallon underground storage tanks.



A section of a maple tree shows tap marks and scars after years of being tapped.

Family tradition

Making northern Michigan maple syrup has been a Luchenbill family tradition for more than 100 years.

The tradition started in the days when a pound of sugar was worth a full cord of maple wood, split and delivered to the Northport dock for shipment to Chicago. The family preferred to tap their own sap, boil it down and make maple sugar cakes in the spring to use all year as their main sweetener.

Today the family is located across Grand Traverse Bay near Kewadin about 50 miles from where it all began.

"Our first year here was in 1965 and we only had 75 taps," Lee Luchenbill said. "Today, we have more the 3,500 taps and hope to produce about 800 gallons

of our pure maple syrup. Of course, that all depends on the weather."

Temperature is a key factor in sap production and making quality maple syrup, said Chris Luchenbill, her son.

"We need cold freezing nights and warm days for the sap to run good, he said."

And the harvest time is short, his mother added.

"We have had seasons as short as six days and as long as six weeks," she said. "When the trees start to bud, we have to stop gathering sap."

When she and Chris get really busy, she calls in all her kids and grandchildren to help.

"At times we have had up to 20 people helping, including friends and neighbors," she said.

Photos and story by Douglas Tesner



Chris Luchenbill fills a bottle with pure maple syrup. The bottle was supplied by a customer for a special order of first-run syrup.