



Sugar shack

PIERRE FAUCHER'S TRADITIONAL 'SUGAR SHACK' FEEDS, SHELTERS, ENTERTAINS AND EDUCATES MORE THAN 150,000 VISITORS EACH YEAR.

Words **Jocelyn Pride**

Although maple forests dot the landscape of Quebec, where approximately 80% of the world's maple syrup is produced, few 'acericulteurs' still use the original tree tapping method. An exception is Pierre Faucher, considered the 'sugar' daddy of the industry, who has carved his business straight out of the forest.

A TRADITIONAL 'SUGAR SHACK'

Located 40 kilometres from Montreal, Pierre's Sucrerie de la Montagne (sugar shack) is like stepping into a fairy tale. Rustic buildings nestle amongst the towering trees, a lone wolf cries in the distance and the smell of bread baking in a wood fired oven fills the still air. To complete the picture, Pierre, a Santa-cum-lumberjack, stands at the entrance to the cosy dining room welcoming me with a big hug and a glass of 'maple' wine. Before I chance a sip, Pierre pulls me closer. "Do you want to smell a world first?", he asks, laughing raucously. "Attire-Moi is my latest invention." The unisex maple perfume made by famed Grasse French perfumer, Chantal Roux, is just one of Pierre's maple innovations.

Lunch is authentic 'sugar shack' fare with all the trimmings. Serving staff dressed in traditional full length frilly aprons bring platters piled with maple

Clockwise from top left: Sucrerie de la Montagne; Pierre Faucher, the 'sugar daddy' of the maple industry; Pierre and his son, Stefan.

smoked ham, salted back bacon, maple scented meatballs, country style sausages, wood fired baked beans, airy soufflé omelettes, and Quebecois tourtiere (meat pie). Splashing maple syrup over everything is encouraged and the food is washed down with a light white wine. Local musicians set a lively tone, Pierre dances and his look-alike son Stefan plays the spoons as they wind their way around the wooden slab banquet tables crowded with mainly European guests.

TAPPING THE TREES

Walking in the maple forest is one of the highlights of my overnight stay. Reds and oranges tinge the ends of the leaves and weak beams of autumnal sunlight poke through the branches. Although 'sugaring off' season is several months away, Stefan demonstrates the method of collecting maple water from the trees. "We drill a hole in each in the trunks to place a spigot," says Stefan, showing the scarring of holes from previous years. After setting up each of the 1500 trees on the farm, when the weather



conditions are right, the Fauchers attach a bucket to each spigot. "For the sap to flow, we need the snow covered ground to freeze overnight and thaw slightly in the day." Depending on the age of the tree, the yield varies from one to seven buckets each day. As each bucket needs to be collected by hand, sugar shacks like Sucrerie de la Montagne help maintain this 300+ year Canadian tradition.

After sleeping in a 'gingerbread house', the next morning Pierre shows the science behind turning the sap into syrup. "The skill of making the best maple syrup is the testing of velocity," he says. He demonstrates how the sap is cooked at exactly 4°C above boiling and goes through an evaporator to produce the syrup. In Canada, maple syrup is strictly labelled and graded according to quality. With less kilojoules than sugar, a higher concentration of minerals than honey, maple syrup is a US\$145 million a year growth industry. And as it takes 40 litres of maple water to produce one litre of syrup, it's easy to see why the symbol of Canada is liquid gold.