

A starling is building a nest in one of the silver maple trees in our yard. I heard—and then saw—two Canada geese fly over. There is a bit of water dripping from the east side of the hay barn's roof. And, yesterday, we tapped our “backyard” maple trees. The season is arriving for that yearly harvest of sugar from the farm. Sometimes, it is a long, productive season. During other years, we get only an abbreviated period of winter-to-spring weather that will be warm enough during the day for sap to run and cold enough during the night for freezing to occur—the conditions necessary for maple syrup production.

Some people think about maple syrup and sugar mostly during this season of year. Others find it on the breakfast table, or, for that matter, any time that pancakes or waffles are on the menu. And, there's certainly nothing wrong with that. We enjoy many meals of those compatible foods, and we never tire of them.

But, maple in cooking has a far larger application. Just to see what I would find, I looked at several recipes for “sweet and sour” foods—mostly vegetables. Nearly all of those I found included either sugar or brown sugar. And, any I have tried myself worked just as well with maple syrup.

As soon as the red cabbage heads are big enough and there are a few apples ready on some tree, we have some meals that feature sweet and sour red cabbage. Cider vinegar and maple syrup enhance the cabbage that has been sautéed in the fat from a few slices of our home-produced bacon. The bacon itself, in crisp bits, makes the dish even better. But, it is nearly as tasty with no bacon at all. It is that combination of the sweetness of the maple syrup with the tang of the cider vinegar.

One of our neighbors makes baked beans as his specialty. He uses lots of maple syrup in those. And, bean soup is also better with a little of that sweet-sour combination.

This past winter, though, I've taken my experiments a little further. Since I've discovered that granulated maple sugar isn't that hard to make, though it does take some considerable care in the “watching it NOT boil over” stage, I've been testing all kinds of recipes using the pale, beige, fine-grained sugar instead of white cane or beet sugar. So far, I've found no recipe that is less satisfactory when I have used the maple sugar.

I thought that perhaps meringue would rebel. It did not. Whipped cream can be as fluffy and light with maple sugar as with the “ordinary” kind. Cakes and cookies turn out the same as always.

Except for one thing—Maple sugar can be used, cup for cup, in any recipe I have tried. But, cookies and cakes don't taste quite as sweet. This might seem like it is a problem, since these baked goods are, after all, baked primarily because they ARE sweet. But, it is not. They just don't have that sometimes “cloying” quality of white sugar.

I am hoping to experiment a little more when summer comes. How will fruits look and taste sweetened with maple sugar? Can I successfully make jams and jellies with the maple variety? And, will maple sugar work in an angel food cake? I haven't tried that yet.

So, I am hoping for a good maple season this spring. Our supply from last year is still adequate, but testing recipes has become more and more interesting, both in the baking and in the consumption of the finished products. And now, Liesel Wandel's applesauce cookies—made with maple sugar and with walnuts and dried cherries—are waiting.