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Winter vacationers who seek their fun in the snow-covered mountains and warm country inns of New Hampshire and Vermont will have a bonus available beginning around the end of March: a chance to watch and enjoy that New England specialty, maple sugar making. For the farmers, "sugaring-off" is hard, tricky work, but for visitors, who only watch - and taste - the operation is pure enjoyment.

The warm maple aroma of sugaring-off has been rising from Vermont and New Hampshire fires since the days of the Indians. The Indians made maple sugar, too, and called the period of late winter-early spring the "sugar month" or "maple moon." When the sap began to run, the whole tribe collected it in birch-bark buckets, boiled it in hollowed-out logs, and held a big celebration. Even the braves, who never did camp work, would unbend at sugar time, and help the squaws collect sap. The early colonists learned the ways of sugar-making, and Vermont and New Hampshire dwellers with maple groves have been making it ever since.

Just when the "maple moon" shines depends on the weather. Freezing nights, combined with mild days, start the sap to running. The first sap (which makes the best syrup) runs when the snow is still deep on the ground. Visitors need boots or snowshoes for a sightseeing trip through the maple "bush" or grove, to see the sap collected in buckets, piped to the sugar-house, and turned into evaporators, to be boiled away over blazing fires until it is maple syrup. The syrup is then boiled, and stirred or beaten, until it becomes sugar (very much the same process as making fudge).

Maple syrup or sugar can be bought in stores, but only those on the scene for a sugaring-off can enjoy the delicacy known as "maple wax." This is made by ladling the fresh, hot maple syrup onto pans or banks of new-fallen snow. Those who have eaten it claim the taste is unique.

The delights of sugaring-off, plus the superlative skiing and winter sports which New Hampshire and Vermont offer, are easily reached. American Airlines operates several flights daily to Boston and Springfield, Mass., whence the short trip to Vermont or New Hampshire can be made by rented car, bus or train.