As the end of winter draws closer to the vernal equinox, the sun gets higher in the sky and mother nature ushers in another spring season. Folks start making plans for their gardens, digging for early ramps, and swapping out their skis for boats, bikes, and climbing gear. The transformation from late winter to spring also creates the perfect conditions for prized sap to flow from sugar maple trees. Sugarmakers all over the northeast eagerly collect the sweet sap to transform it into the amber-colored liquid gold commonly known as maple syrup.

If you’ve ever driven around the rural country sides of the northeast, you’ve probably seen buckets hanging from trees and blue tubing strung through the forests like a calculated matrix of webbing. These elaborate systems collect ample amounts of sap from the sugar maple (Acer saccharum). While these images are commonly associate
"West Virginia has more sugar maple trees than Vermont. The abundance of sugar maples throughout our steep hills and hollows is advantageous for collecting sap using nothing but gravity."

Although West Virginia has more sugar maple trees than Vermont, the Mountain State produced just 14,000 gallons of maple syrup last year.

That number, however, is on the rise. Several initiatives seek to boost production of maple syrup in West Virginia. Future Generations University in Franklin is working with local producers to harness the latest technologies to increase efficiency and production. Experience Learning, an outdoor education program located on Spruce Knob, runs Maple in the Classroom, a travelling program that fosters youth interest and teaches children how to tap trees and make syrup. The Eastern WV Community & Technical College works with the WV Maple Syrup Producers Association to host Mountain State Maple Days, a showcase for syrup producers. The fourth-annual event is being held on March 21 and coincides with the WV Maple Syrup Festival in Pickens, creating a state-wide celebration of all things maple.

Present-day methods of collecting and processing sap have significantly improved. Sugarmakers drill 1.5-inch holes deep into trees and install spouts (or spiles) to allow the sap to flow into a vessel or a tube system that runs downhill into a collection tank. The sap is then boiled and concentrated into syrup. It takes an average of 40 gallons of maple sap to produce one gallon of syrup, but just one tap in a tree can produce a few gallons of sap per day. Sap officially becomes syrup when its temperature reaches 219°F (7°F above the boiling point of water). Commercial syrup is tested for density to ensure it is 68% sugar content.

It's extremely easy to make your own little stash of syrup using only your kitchen stove. Although it may take a while, boiling five gallons of sap will produce about a pint of delicious, homemade syrup. On a positive note, you can humidify your home while you're at it!

If you love maple syrup and have access to a few maple trees, try and make your own. It's a fun family activity, and you may get enough of a sugar high to want to make more every year. Or head out to a local market and support one of West Virginia's great syrup producers. This ain't no Aunt Jemima!

Todd Romero runs Canaan Valley Maple from his home in the town of Canaan Valley, and he's willing to share his recipe with you. Maple sap is collected, tested for sugar content, pumped through a reverse-osmosis system, and boiled to become delicious amber nectar.