

Susan Reslewic Keatley

Black Gold

On a March morning in 1984, I learned that maple sap is, in fact, not sweet. I had waited in line behind the other children in bowl haircuts and puffer jackets in primary colors. When it was my turn, I held my finger under the spigot screwed into a maple tree. Clear liquid, the consistency of water, dropped onto my finger. I licked it. It tasted like nothing. Shock and disappointment clouded my six-year-old expectation that maple syrup itself bleeds out of a tree.

I was frustrated that morning, standing in melty snow. A myth of childhood was struck down. Forty years later, it would rival a quest for black walnut syrup that left my family and I empty-handed.

On a cold February morning, my husband, four-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter trudged through thick snow to a nearby nature center where we would witness how maple sugar was made. At the end of the tour, syrup would be available for purchase.

We listened to a young, enthusiastic woman tell us about a spile, the spigot screwed into a maple tree. It was easy to remember because it rhymed with smile. She showed us two metal spiles, and two kinds of drills. "The kind my dad has," my son said, pointing to the familiar yellow and black motif of the modern drill that sat next to an old-fashioned hand drill. She showed us the collection bucket, which would sit underneath the spile, and the cover which would keep rain from diluting the sap. I knew, from 1984, that sap was watery enough. She also showed us a ruler, and explained that the maple trees can't be tapped unless they are at least twelve inches in diameter. For every twelve inches, one spile can be inserted into the tree.

At the next station, a rotund young man in an unzipped windbreaker, was apparently unfazed by the twenty-nine degree temperature. He told us that each maple tree has a twin branch directly opposite it. "In fact," he said, "Only three different kinds of trees have this branch structure —maple, ash, and dogwood: the MAD trees." Maple branches tip up. From afar, a leafless maple tree appears to have a "tear drop" shape. "Like that one over there," he said, pointing to a small, squat, tear drop maple tree with a galvanized metal bucket attached to it. It was the only maple tree with a sap collection bucket I saw that day.

Of the ten species of maples, only the sugar maple produces maple syrup. *That sap would be even more disappointing!* I thought.

The sap from other trees can be used to make syrup. "The black walnut," he said, showing us a sample branch, and two lemon-sized dark brown objects. They were walnuts encased in their rinds. Instead of the fifty – sixty gallons of sap to make a gallon of maple syrup, one hundred gallons of sap are needed to make black walnut syrup.

Next, a woman dressed in a ski suit welcomed us, and let us identify a tree and tap it! She gave my daughter a ruler. Off she went, correctly identifying a maple tree, but it was not the requisite twelve inches or larger. She then found one big enough, but it was dead. Finally, with a little help, a robust tree was found. It had lines in its bark like those in the face of a grandmother who has laughed and smiled all her life. The woman pointed out, reverently, that we has selected a black walnut tree. And we could tap it.

My children drilled a two-inch hole, hammered in the spile, and positioned the bucket. We had altered the landscape. There was a vista before me of multiple black walnut trees sporting metal collection buckets.

Black walnut syrup was in our future. The woman described black walnut syrup as dark, nutty and rich. Delicious. I could almost taste it. Surely the *elixir* from the black walnut tree would be among the wares for purchase at the end of the tour.

Next, a women with a suede overcoat introduced us to a stuffed woodpecker. My children found it disturbing. Woodpeckers bore holes in maple trees, she explained. She showed us a frighteningly organized pattern of holes, made by a bird. The woman also mentioned that the rich black walnut syrup was delicious.

A collection of old milk jugs, attached to a rope tied between two black walnut trees looked like an art installation. It was a representation of how much sap was required to make just one gallon of maple syrup. Instructed to touch the bark of the black walnut tree, we could feel the temperature difference of twenty-five degrees between the south and north sides of tree. Native Americans made spiles out of a furry sumac, so the sap wouldn't drip down the side of the tree and we were given one as a souvenir. The docent at this display reached inside his messenger bag, and removed a small, maybe eight-ounce unlabeled hexagonal jar. "Looks like motor oil, right?" he asked. The midnight black color and thick consistency was black walnut syrup. "You have to try it," he said.

I pictured a whole display of them at the end of our tour. Maybe they'd be stacked in a pyramid. Free samples?

But I could barely hide my immense disappointment at what I saw in the gift shop. There were two offerings — plain old run-of-the-mill maple syrup, and honey. Honey! They weren't selling black walnut syrup!

"Do you have any of the black walnut syrup?" My husband asked them.

"Oh no," he was told. "It's impossible to get. You just can't find it."

We left the tour with an eight-ounce container of maple syrup. I carried it begrudgingly as we walked past black walnut tree after black walnut tree, back to our car. We wanted to go back to the guy making Native American spiles and find out where he got his. Maybe we could buy from him directly.

I couldn't find black walnut syrup anywhere, not even on Amazon, the marketplace of the world. But I must have seen a hundred black walnut trees that day, with buckets poised to collect the precious sap.

Perhaps the course of my sap-based disappointment will change, one day. I'll go just beyond the snowy hill, in the thick of the black walnut trees, where someone must be pouring nature's black gold into little hexagonal jars.

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Susan Keatley is a scientist and writer living in Phoenix, Maryland. She has written about science and other topics for the *New York Times*, the Simons Foundation, and the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, and has been a moderator at the Newburyport Literary Festival in her hometown of Newburyport, Massachusetts. She is the host of the Manor Mill Prose Night, and the creator and host of the Science Fare Podcast.

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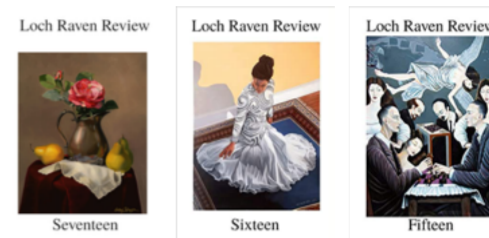
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