

# Birch Syrup, a Trendy Taste of Thunder Bay

#Tree the north: Local firm produces fine dining quality sweet brown goo

By Bonnie Schiedel | Billy

"You mean maple syrup, don't you?" That was a common comment 10 years ago, when the husband-and-wife team of Dave Challen and Beth Kuiper first started selling their award-winning birch syrup. Their company, [Boreal Birch Syrup](#), was the first commercial operation in Ontario. Made with sap harvested from white or yellow birch trees, birch syrup is (arguably) a more sophisticated and complex cousin to familiar maple syrup. It's dark brown, packed with minerals like calcium and manganese. It tastes somewhat like molasses with an almost savoury note, but isn't nearly as thick.

A decade later, the lesson is beginning to stick. People are increasingly familiar with birch syrup as it carves out a niche in the Ontario food industry. "We get vastly different reactions now," says Challen. "People know about it and they're proud that it's made in the north."

Birch syrup has a northern pedigree – traditionally it's been made by people of certain Nordic countries and First Nations. In North America, its commercial production started in Alaska during the Second World War, when sugar was hard to come by. Challen and Kuiper got hooked on making birch syrup when they lived in the Yukon and decided to bring the process home to Thunder Bay. Their timing was just right, as interest in local food and foraging was starting to kick into high gear.

The pivotal interval in birch syrup production is an intense two-week period in April when the birch tree roots have started to thaw, they and their staff collect sap from about 650 white birch trees from a stand near Thunder Bay. Those trees produce an incredible 3,000 litres of sap per day. The company's approach is a mixture of high and low tech: The trees are tapped with spiles, just like in maple syrup production, and the clear sap drips steadily into buckets that are carefully collected by hand. (Birch sap, also known as birch water, is currently having a "superfood" moment from Los Angeles to London, but Boreal Birch is leaving that to the large operators in the United States and Europe.) The collected sap is filtered via a reverse osmosis system, which concentrates the sap by removing almost half the water content. Next, the sap goes into a wood-fired evaporator, and is at last finished over a propane burner and gets one final filtering through a hand-operated press.

It takes about 100 litres of sap to make a litre of birch syrup. Maple syrup, in comparison, involves a 40:1 ratio. "When people learn that, they understand the price point because they appreciate the extra time and effort that goes into making birch syrup," Challen says. A 125-millilitre bottle sells for about \$15.

Does birch syrup have *terroir*? "I've tried birch syrups from all over the world and they're all slightly different, and I think that's because everyone makes them with a slightly different process," notes Challen. "Over the years we've refined our filtration system and our syrup has a pure and bold taste."

Several Thunder Bay restaurants serve fare made with Boreal Birch Syrup. The menu at perennial hot spot [Tomlin](#) changes often, but birch syrup was recently featured in its smoked carrots made with crème fraiche, horseradish and sesame granola.



Courtesy Tomlin

*Now will you eat your carrots?*

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At [Silver Birch](#), which serves northern-inspired cuisine, birch syrup has been on the menu since opening day with their birch syrup pickerel wraps. "We love it because it adds depth and a slightly more caramel flavour to the glaze, which also includes maple syrup," explains owner-chef Darlene Green. Not surprisingly, it's a staple in Challen and Kuiper's kitchen, where their favourite ways to use it are on barbecued fish or straight up over ice cream.

Boreal Birch Syrup is sold online at [www.birchsyrup.ca](http://www.birchsyrup.ca) and in several locations in southern Ontario, including a booth at the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto. Find it in Thunder Bay at the [Thunder Bay Country Market](#) (seasonally) as well as local food-lover locations like [Maltese Grocery](#), [Belluz Farms](#), [Thunder Oak Cheese Farm](#) and [The Cheese Encounter](#). And foodies take note: Boreal Birch produces only about 300 litres of syrup a year, so snap it up when you see it, and savour every last drop of a quintessentially northern flavour.

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