The sap is rising

I've a confession to make: although my long-standing interest in wild food cookery does add incredibly wild and nutritious versatility to my daily menu with respect to rich soups, unique salad combinations and intriguing side vegetables – all very health-promoting and worthy – in reality I'm still somewhat of a sugar addict! Yet, for the most part, sweet wild foods are associated with the abundant fruitfulness of summer and autumn – apples, pears, cherries, blackberries, mulberries etc, and, as delicious as such fruits are, their sweetness is always counterbalanced by varying degrees of acidity. Hardcore, unadulterated sweetness is hard to come by!

Yet, from as early as the final week of February until as late as mid-April that hardcore sweetness lies, quite literally, in untapped abundance, residing in diluted form within the trunks of some of our commonest trees: birch (Betula species), lime (Tilia species), sycamore (Acer species), walnut and various others. All can be successfully tapped for their sap, the first two providing the best results in my experience. The sap, which is actually about 95 per cent+ water, can be evaporated away to make a sublimely delicious, if somewhat energy-intensive, syrup – the absolutely perfect accompaniment to elderflower fritters!

Indeed, the only nearest equivalent you can buy is maple syrup. That is commercially viable because the ratio of sap required for a litre of syrup is 30:1, whereas for birch it is between 80 and 100:1. But don't let that put you off. Once you've tasted birch sap syrup, the effort required to make it will seem more than worthwhile. For those who are unconvinced there are several other excellent uses for the sap (once collected) as I shall explain...

Several possible methods

Firstly, though, how exactly is it obtained? There are several possible methods for doing this; here are just a couple. Between the end of February and mid-April – but especially in the second half of March – take a metre length of 0.5-1cm diameter plastic tubing, a 2-litre plastic bottle (keep the tops to put on the bottles when returning to pick up the sap), a drill with drill bit the same diameter as the plastic tubing, a piece of tissue or cotton wool, a lump of plasticine, a wooden bung and a hammer.

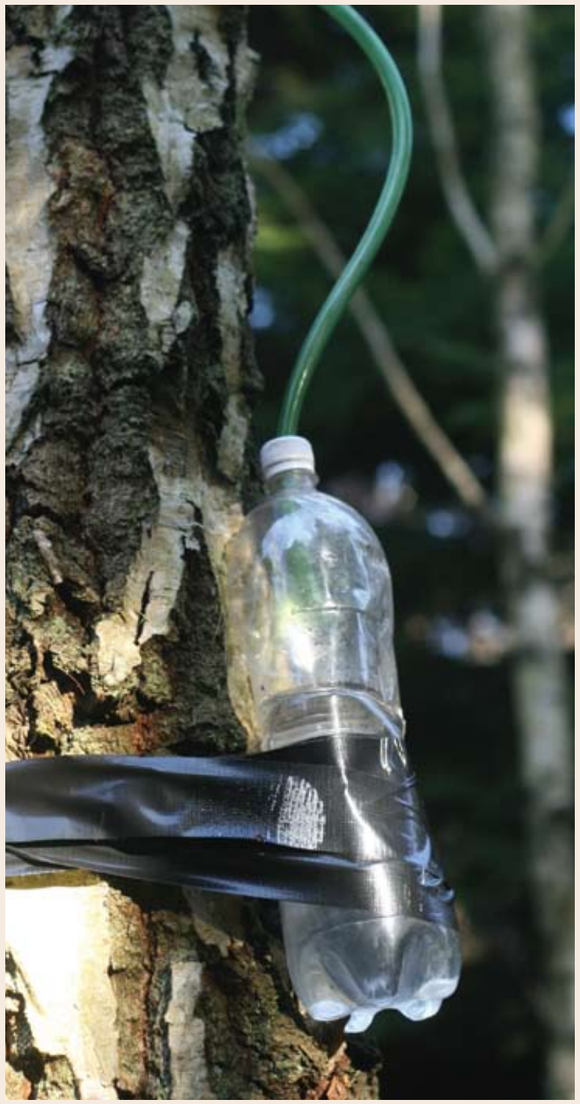
Select a suitably-sized and well-established tree – at least 8-10 inches across. Mark a spot 2-3 feet up from the tree's base. With the drill bit angled about 30˚ up from the horizontal, drill a clean hole about 5cm deep into the tree. Blow out bits of debris. Liquid should drip from the hole within 10-20 seconds at the rate of 1-4 drops per second at the peak of sap flow. If not, hammer in a wooden bung and try another tree. Push one end of the plastic tubing 1-2 cm into the hole so that it is held firmly in place. Place the other end into the collecting bottle, far enough in so that it can't slip out.

Keep insects out!

Gently pack tissue or cotton wool around the tube at the neck end of the bottle, allowing the air to escape as the bottle fills with sap – and to prevent insects from getting in. Scoop out a handful or two of soil at the base of the tree and place the bottle in the shallow hole created to prevent it falling over. As a precaution, to prevent any leakage, you can roll out and press a small piece of plasticine around the tube to make a perfect seal with the tree trunk. Leave for 12 hours, after which time the bottle will most likely be brimming with sap.

Alternatively, you can use a small length of tubing and allow the sap to drip freely into a collecting vessel such as a demijohn – preferable using a muslin-covered funnel to direct the liquid and prevent insects falling in. In mixed birch and pine woods where there are wood ants, the ants will amass around any exposed sap. Finally, plug up the hole to prevent infection of the tree, particularly from fungal spores.

Tapping one of 40 trees.



ABOVE LEFT: Trees can be tapped anywhere up the trunk - especially useful in an urban setting. ABOVE RIGHT: Another way to collect the sap: Note the muslin around the bottom of the funnel.

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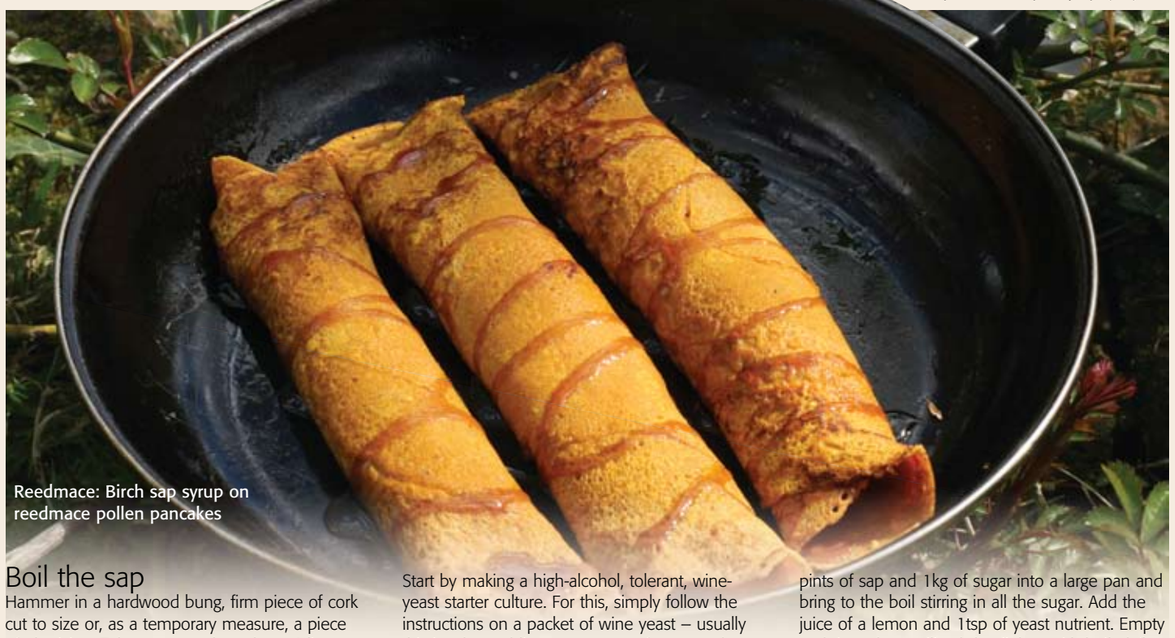
A hardwood bung seals the hole.

Birch sap wine and the syrup (right) compared to maple syrup (left).



Reedmace: Birch sap syrup on reedmace pollen pancakes

Boil the sap

Hammer in a hardwood bung, firm piece of cork cut to size or, as a temporary measure, a piece of plasticine. Take no more than about 4 litres per tree, and only tap the same tree on alternate years. Boil the sap until it is thick and dark, barely simmering at the final stages to prevent the disaster of burning. Alternatively, ask a friendly baker if you can place a large metal tray of sap on top of his bread oven, to evaporate slowly. If syrup-making seems too much trouble use the sap to make a lovely refreshing wine instead. It's easy and is definitely not a second-best alternative.

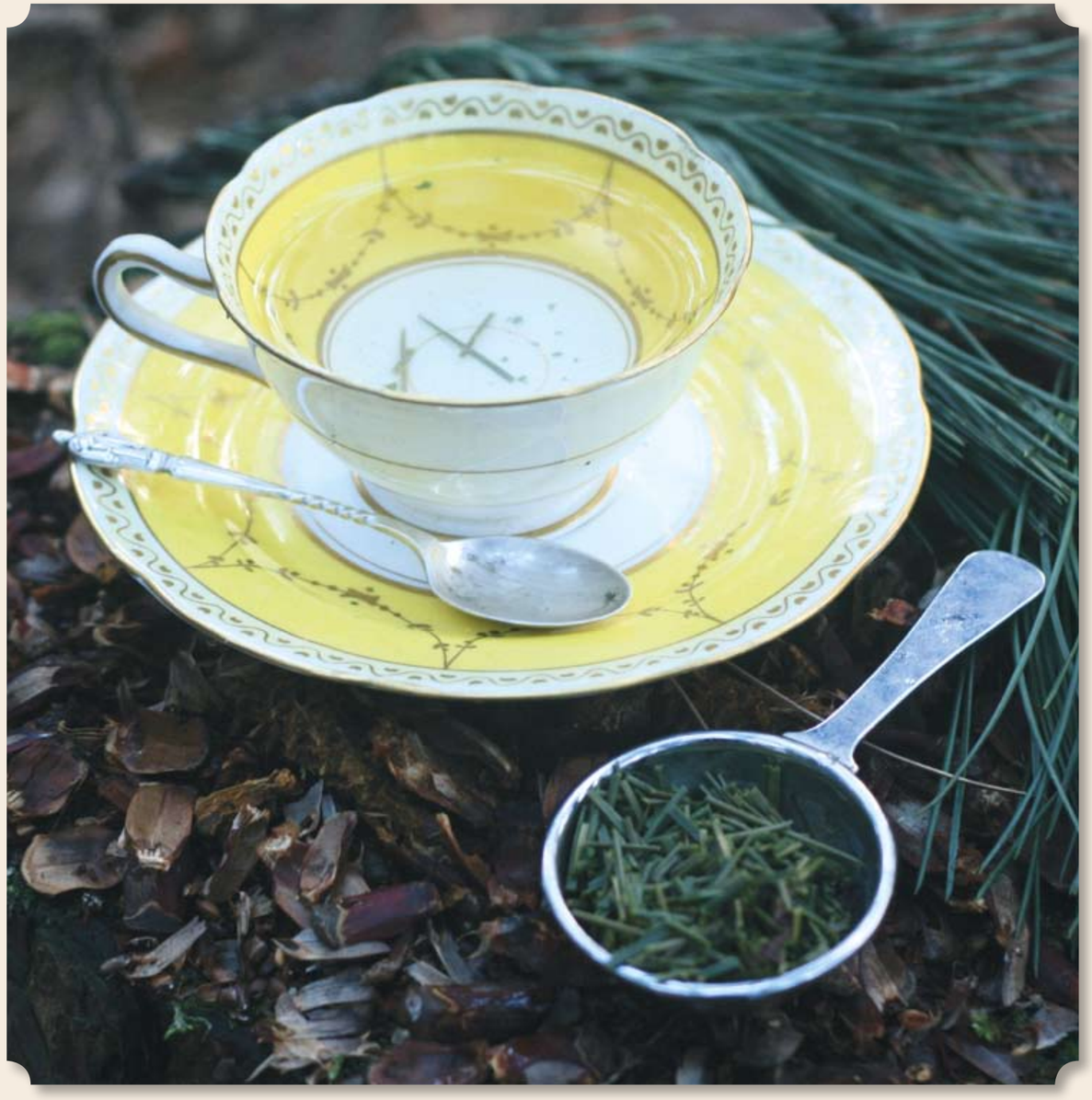
Start by making a high-alcohol, tolerant, wine-yeast starter culture. For this, simply follow the instructions on a packet of wine yeast – usually this involves adding a teaspoon of yeast and sugar to about 3 fl oz of boiled and cooled water that is then shaken in a clean sterilised bottle.

The top is loosely fitted on and the bottle left in a warm place for about four hours or until the yeast becomes active – you'll notice bubbles rising and a little froth at the top. Next, sterilise 2 demijohns, 2 rubber bungs, 2 air-locks and 1 plastic funnel – the products used for cleaning babies' bottles are fine for this purpose. Put eight pints of sap and 1kg of sugar into a large pan and bring to the boil stirring in all the sugar. Add the juice of a lemon and 1tsp of yeast nutrient. Empty and rinse the sterilised demijohns with boiled (but cooled slightly) water.

Divide the sap equally between the two demijohns, pouring in using the sterilised plastic funnel. Allow to become lukewarm before adding the yeast starter culture and fit bungs and air-locks. Leave in an airing cupboard for five days before transferring all the sap into just one of the demijohns. Ferment until no bubbles appear in the air-lock (1-3 months).

Pine-needle tea

A handful of fresh pine needles
Water
A squeeze of lemon (optional)
Sugar or honey to taste



METHOD

Pine needles can be gathered at any time of the year fresh from the tree, making this a lovely tea to drink straight or to experiment with. Scots or Austrian pine, Beach, Lodgepole and Monterey pines are the most frequently encountered, but any of the Pinaceae family are good to use. Pull a small handful of needles from the branch and cut or pull away the basal sheath – unless you prefer a more resinous tea. Finely chop or bruise the needles before pouring on boiling water and allow to infuse for five minutes. Incidentally, a strong cup of this tea added to birch sap for wine prior to fermentation makes for an interesting variation of that wine.