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The Drink

By Jenny Wisniewski

What's on Tap

Quebec's maple trees and sugar shacks give birth to a new spirit

The advent of any spirit tends to be tied to a regionally common natural resource—think of Mexican blue agave becoming tequila, or American corn giving rise to bourbon. In Canada, it was only a matter of time before maple trees got the same treatment.

Specifically in Quebec, which supplies more than 70 percent of the world's maple syrup, inventive distillers are now using the sap from those same trees to produce *acerum* (derived from *acer*, the Latin word for maple). The liquor is a close cousin of *eau-de-vie*, with a flavor profile somewhere between a fruit spirit and a rum, according to Joël Pelletier, cofounder of Distillerie du St. Laurent in Rimouski, north of Quebec City.



"Usually when you think about maple, people think pancakes and sweetness," Pelletier says. "But when you ferment and distill the maple, it reveals all of the subtle hidden tastes of maple."

Pelletier and his partner, Jean-François Cloutier, started experimenting with distillations in Cloutier's basement in 2013, beginning with several varieties of gin—including one infused with seaweed—before concocting their *acerum*. (They also make two types of whiskey.) Last year, they opened their current distillery, café, bar, and visitor center along the windswept St. Lawrence River waterfront.



The Rimouski pair aren't the only ones tapping into Quebec's bounty. A little more than 50 miles east of Montreal, Hugo Bourassa is producing two types of *acerum*—an unaged white spirit and a barrel-aged brown one—at Distillerie Shefford, using syrup he and his brothers, Patrick and Charles, harvest from their maple grove.

"When we ferment the maple syrup, we have a smell of apples and pears," Bourassa says. "At the end of the

[unaged] product, it's going to taste a bit like a Calvados or a tequila but smoother. The aged version we can compare a little bit to a Cognac or Armagnac."

These small-batch producers are serious about their product. Pelletier and Bourassa are founding members of the Union of Maple Spirit Distillers, which legally requires anyone using the *acerum* appellation to follow specific regulations. (The spirit must be distilled in Quebec, using sap exclusively from the province.) The Union's ranks are growing slowly but steadily—what started as a three-person organization in 2017 now has a membership of 12—and while *acerum* is currently available only in Quebec, Pelletier believes burgeoning interest could soon lead to distribution across the border.

"In 10 years—or maybe 20 or 30 years—it will be something that is renowned for its quality and distinctive taste," he says. "It's always cool to be a part of a movement."



Clockwise from above: tasting barrel-aged *acerum* at Distillerie du St. Laurent; a cocktail made with the maple-based spirit; a tapped maple tree in Quebec

Courtesy of Distillerie du St. Laurent/Sophie Corriveau (tasting); courtesy of Distillerie du