

BY BRET THORN

LEADER OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

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Philadelphia chef-restauranteur Jose Garces pitches his newest restaurant, Village Whiskey, as a classic American bar. So it needed a great burger.

It has a standard one — with Boston Bibb lettuce, New Jersey beefsteak tomatoes and house-made Thousand Island dressing, for \$9 — but Garces also wanted a hamburger that would be over the top in rich, all-American goodness, and that he could charge \$24 for.

So he and chef de cuisine Dave Conn developed the Whiskey King, which is a 10-ounce patty of sustainably raised ground beef from Maine, local blue cheese, apple wood-smoked bacon and foie gras.

Rounding it out is cipollini onion glazed in bourbon and maple.

That last ingredient, maple, is making its way into a lot of food these days, adding an extra dimension of flavor as well as a sense of wholesomeness, comfort and, with recent years' spikes in maple syrup prices, luxury.

With this past spring's successful sap tapping season, last year's price increases aren't likely to be repeated this year, but the flavor itself is still on the rise, with a growing number of appearances on chain restaurant menus and a generally higher profile, according to research company Datassential. The firm says maple is found on 20 percent more menus this year than two years ago, and that growth is across all segments. Datassential tracks close to 2,000 menus.

For the Whiskey King, maple syrup is part of the braising liquid for the thinly sliced onions, which are caramelized and left in the pan as it's deglazed with Tennessee whiskey. Then maple syrup, chicken stock, butter and a sprig of thyme are added and the onions are cooked until tender.

Conn says the maple gives the onions "an extra oomph," that's needed to stand up to the robust cheese and bacon used in the dish. Not to mention the foie gras.

"We also wanted to use as many American ingredients as possible," Conn adds.

Most of the world's maple syrup is actually Canadian, however. In fact, Citadelle, a maple syrup producers cooperative, says about 80 percent of maple syrup comes from Quebec province.

"It's my favorite sweetener," says chef Zoe Nathan of Huckleberry in Santa Monica, Calif., whose maple bacon biscuits are a hit among her customers.

"A lot of my ice creams are made with maple syrup. It's a great inverted sugar to



Maple matters

From burgers to biscuits, Canada's syrup sweetens many dishes



It or the land

of change, healthful choices

of items 25-percent lower in fat, sugar, sodium and calories; KFC rolled out its "Unfried" grilled-chicken product line; and Dunkin' its DD-ing items better-for-you additions to be

SEE **LIVING**, PAGE 22

sales declines for the first time ever. In addition, Technomic, which projects industry performance each year during events sponsored by the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association, said it doesn't expect a return to real sales growth until late 2011 or early 2012.

Yet while Technomic's

the economic recovery likely reflect whether one looks at the glass as half full or half empty, observers say.

"There are always some that are more optimistic and some that are less optimistic," said Janet McCullough, director, project operations at Technomic.

SEE **INDUSTRY**, PAGE 2

s: Breakfast catering offers mass appeal

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crative daypart, some operators find morning catering can help them recoup revenues lost as businesses cut back on lunch spending. Observers say

customers often can stretch their food dollars further on less expensive, but higher-margin menu items such as eggs, pastries and coffee.

"Catering is an often overlooked revenue stream for many restaurants," says Aaron D. Allen, founder at SEE **DOLLARS**, PAGE 2

use instead of corn syrup, and honey can be kind of cloying. I could shoot a tablespoon of maple syrup, and it's not too sweet for me, but if I did that with sugar or honey, I'd be like, 'Oh my God, get me a cup of coffee.'

She says she also likes to use it along with granulated sugar in cakes to help give them a better shelf life.

"It definitely helps keep things moist and kind of fun and gooey," she says. For her biscuits, she adds cooked, chopped bacon to biscuit dough. She tops them with fleur de sel.

"We pull them out, like, five minutes before they're done and drizzle them with maple syrup and put them back in the oven. So they're crispy and sweet and bacony," she says.

Bill Poirier, chef at Sonsie in Boston, is adding a maple-glazed shrimp dish to his menu this fall.

"Being a New Englander, I think of maple more in the springtime, when the sap starts to flow in the trees," he says. "But it has really become one of our pantry staples. It's an extremely versatile ingredient."

Poirier uses it in brines for pork chops, in desserts — he uses it instead of corn syrup

for his pecan pie — and as a condiment, such as the maple mustard that he uses on a grilled chicken sandwich on his lunch menu.

For the shrimp salad, he slices apple thinly on a mandolin and alternates the slices with spinach. He dresses the salad with olive oil and cider vinegar. The shrimp are grilled over wood and glazed with a mixture of warm maple syrup and butter. Bacon rounds out the dish.

"It's a nice combination, with sweet shrimp and salty bacon and cider; it's very New England."

Spring is, indeed, maple season. It generally lasts for six weeks, starting in early March and ending in the second half of April. That's when daytime temperatures in maple country go above freezing but dip below freezing again at night.

Later in the year, when it's above freezing 24 hours a day, the trees start to bud and the syrup takes on a sort of grassy flavor.

The cold winter of 2007-2008, followed by a rapidly warming spring, resulted in just a three-week tapping period and a harvest of just 55 million pounds, just over half

of the annual average global demand of about 100 million pounds, the Citadelle group reports. But this year the harvest was around 110 million pounds, so supply should be abundant and prices should calm down a bit.

That's good news for Clayton Miller, chef of the recently opened Trummer's On Main in Clifton, Va., who uses undiluted warm maple syrup as a poaching medium.

He'll take a fibrous cut of pork, such as brisket or belly, and drop it into maple syrup, heated to around 170 degrees Fahrenheit, flavored with a little cinnamon and clove.

"If you think about what bacon is made of, it's those flavors," he says.

He'll poach salmon in maple syrup, too, saying the flavor is not unlike cooking salmon on cedar planks.

"That's what maple is; it's sweet wood," he says.

Those preparations, Miller says, are more suitable to the fall than spring or summer, and so in the coming weeks he plans to add something poached in maple syrup to his menu, maybe pork belly that he sears and then drops into the syrup "for anywhere

from five minutes to half an hour." He'll either put it on his \$28 prix-fixe brunch menu, or maybe as a \$12 appetizer.

Maple's woody, smoky flavor is what attracts Joe Dobias to it. The chef-owner of JoeDoe in New York City only has electric heat, so the maple adds a smokiness that he wouldn't have otherwise. He uses a maple syrup from New York State in the marinade for his \$25 grass-fed hanger steak.

Also in the marinade are ketchup, hoisin sauce, Indonesian sambal spice and some Worcestershire sauce. He griddles the steak on a plancha. The sugary ingredients in the marinade are necessary for a good char, he says.

"The particular maple that we get I think has a smoky character to it, too. It has a definite sort of woods element, so when you cook with it, it almost has that open-fire flavor. And we definitely miss out on that, being all electric."

At Crabtree's Kittle House in Chappaqua, N.Y., executive chef Bradford McDonald likes to add about 10 percent maple sugar by weight to his sour cherries.

"Maple sugar has a bit of darker, unrefined essence that allows the cherries to

take on a deeper flavor themselves," he says.

Those are lightly sautéed and added to a salad of slow-roasted baby beet with peanut meringue, mâche and roasted peanut-and-balsamic dressing. The juice that comes out of the cherries is reduced and added to the dressing, McDonald adds.

Mary Grace Viado, corporate executive chef for Village Tavern, a 10-unit casual dining chain based in Winston-Salem, N.C., likes the color that maple adds to her pork chops.

She brines the whole loin for between 24 and 48 hours in a brine sweetened with brown sugar and maple syrup and spiced with coriander, black pepper, thyme, oregano and garlic.

Then the pork is cut into single chops, grilled and glazed with a combination of maple syrup, Dijon mustard, butter, Worcestershire sauce and honey.

"Maple gives a nice color to it," she says, "and it gives a fantastic sheen to the pork when you glaze it. It's really appetizing to the eye, and it doesn't taste like plain melted sugar." ■

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