Tree sap headed for beer taps

By Michael Hill, AP

CHATHAM, N.Y. — The maple sap bubbling away in Ron Davis' upstate New York sugar house is destined for pancakes, waffles, sweets and — for years now — beer kegs.

The local syrup adds a touch of woodsy sweetness to the maple amber beer made by nearby Chatham Brewing, one of a cadre of craft brewers nationwide bridging the gap between tree tap and bar tap. The amount of syrup destined for pint glasses from this spring's maple run is a relative trickle, but maple beers offer something for the growing numbers of local food lovers and craft beers aficionados.

"It's not sugary or something like a cider," said Will Richard, drinking a pint with friends at the brewery's bar near the Massachusetts line. "You have that almost like a hickory taste that you get from maple syrup but just not the overwhelming sweetness of it."

Maple beers fit into an artisanal age that sees craft brewers extracting flavor from bananas, oysters, Sriracha sauce and, inevitably, bacon.

Many maple brews are often offered seasonally to coincide with spring maple runs or autumnal leaf falls. In Green Bay, Wis., Hinterland sells its maple bock January through April. Chatham's maple amber is a year-round offering. And while craft brewers will add syrup at different points in the brewing process, Chatham head brewer Matt Perry pours it into to the maple amber after fermentation so that the syrup flavor comes through. He favors the darker, heavier syrup from later in the run.

In Vermont — the woodsy heart of America's syrup-making belt — brewer Sean Lawson of Lawson's Finest Liquids has become a

sort of maple maestro with brews like Sticky Ale and Maple Tripple Ale, which is brewed with maple sap.

“It’s amazing the way the maple flavor carries through to the finished beer,” Lawson said.

On a recent day at Chatham Brewing, Perry slowly poured some of Davis’ sticky syrup from a pitcher into a stainless steel carbonation tank, where it dissipated into the bubbling brew. Perry said the maple mixes better with a malty beer as opposed to the assertively hoppy beers popular now among craft drinkers.

“This is a really good gateway beer to craft for a lot of folks,” Perry said. “It’s a little bit more agreeable to the palates that aren’t used to craft beer.”

Chatham Brewery is in a rural area popular with weekenders from New York City and distributes its beers regionally. Davis is a retiree whose Blackberry Hill Farm is close by. He has been tapping trees since the early 1970s, even using metal buckets in the early days.

Maple tappers like Davis log long hours in the sugar house this time of year, when daytime temperatures creep higher amid cool nights. It took a little longer this year because of the frigid winter, but by the end of March, the plastic tubes spider-webbed from some 800 taps were flowing with clear, watery sap.

Davis boils an average of 150 gallons each spring in his sugar house in a wood-fired boiler that fills the small space with billowing steam. Most will still be bottled as syrup for local sales. About 25 to 35 gallons of syrup a year goes to the nearby brewery, an extra flow of business that Davis is happy to have.

“He takes it in five-gallon containers,” Davis said. “So it’s a lot less bottling.”