TEA FOR THREE

Throughout the years sassafras tea has been a favorite of the people of North America, and it was used in Europe as a cure-all in the colonial days. The mitten-shaped, three-lobed leaves and tender twigs are often chewed for their spicy flavor. Although this tree is usually small and grows like sumac, it can reach a height of six to eight feet.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Virginia Barnes, Delma Danner and Anna Kelly for their patience and for the information they have given us. Following are quotes from them on the making of sassafras tea.

VIRGINIA BARNES

“Well, there were two things I made in the spring of the year. The first one was soap. I made soap until I had it running out of my ears. I'd make it in a big iron kettle. It would come out in bars and it would be the prettiest white. I used to enjoy making soap. It wasn't hard work, it just took time.

“The second thing was sassafras tea. I'd take the root or bark and wash it, then scrub it with a brush. Then put some water on and bring it to a boil; drop the bark in, which has been cured out, you know, like you lay it out in the sun and let it cure. If you want weak tea, you don't boil it as long, and if you desire stronger tea, you boil it longer. Then you strain it and add some sugar in it just like other tea. Of course, you would have to strain the real kind anyway, but this store-bought sassafras tea, it's a lot faster. I like sassafras tea because it has a different kind of taste than the other tea.

“You know, another good tea that is good for your blood that we used to make was rhubarb tea. We made it by putting rhubarb slices into boiling water. We'd boil it for about 10 to 15 minutes, then strain the juice through a cloth or a strainer, put it on the back of the stove and heat it up again. Then we would put a stick of cinnamon in it. I suppose we could do like the old grandmas used to do. They used to take catnip and put it in their tea, and it seemed like the more they drank the harder they rocked!”

DELMA DANNER

“The old timers always said that sassafras tea was good to purify your blood and thin it in the spring so your blood isn't too thick for the summertime. When we were kids we always had to have a batch of sassafras tea in the spring to get us ready for the summer.

“First you cut the roots of the sassafras. Then you wash and scrub them until all of the mud and dirt is off.

“Put some of the roots into a pan and cover them with water. Put a lid on and then boil them. I don't usually boil them too long. Take the pan off the stove and let them sit in the hot water until the water cools. You can drink the tea hot or cold. Some people put sugar in and others don't. The bark can be taken off of the roots if the roots are a pretty good size. Boil the bark until it turns a pinkish color.

“I don't know where any grows around here but I know it does, because Papa used to go out and bring the roots home. He'd find it when he would be out squirrel hunting in the spring when it would be tender. He used to bring in the roots and if they were pretty good sized one's he'd peel off
the bark and if they were small roots he'd just put in the whole thing.

"If you get the tea too strong it tastes bitter. It tastes better sweetened; some people like it when it is not sweetened. If the tea is too strong or bitter you can add more hot water."

**ANNA KELLY**

"Well about all I ever knew about sassafras was that my folks, in the spring of the year, always planned to have sassafras tea in March. That's when you find it you know. My folks used to go to the Baldrige Drug Store in Milan, Mo., and buy the shavings in little plastic bags. You could always find it at Baldrige's and you could buy it by the bulk. It would be a real thick bark and it would always look sort of reddish.

"Now my mother had a home comfort range with six lids, and she always had a large kettle on it. She would wash the bark, put it in the kettle and pour a gallon of water over it. Then she'd set the kettle, which was about half full, sort of to the back of the range. She liked for it to simmer, slightly boil, but she'd cook it for four to five days. Of course, she would have to add water along just like with anything else that is boiled. It would simmer down, so she would add water and she'd boil it again through the second day, third day and it would be the fourth day before us kids would ever get to taste it. Oh, it would turn the prettiest shade of red.

"Well we all loved it. Mother loved it and we just liked it like you like Lipton tea or whatever. We grew up as little kids to love it and we could hardly wait until March to taste it. Chores were never a problem because they claimed it thinned their blood and would make you feel better. You'd be ready to ...well you'd feel more like working in the spring of the year.

*Story and photos by*  
*Susie Danner and Martha Kuchera*  

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**VIRGINIA BARNES**

Virginia Barnes demonstrates the old-time art of brewing sassafras tea. Making sassafras and rhubarb tea was an annual spring project, along with making homemade soap. After the bark or roots are washed and scrubbed, they are boiled for varying lengths of time, depending on the desired strength. Delma Danner said the oldtimers believed that sassafras tea was good for purifying and thinning the blood. Anna Kelly also attested to the belief that the tea made one feel better, saying that chores always seemed to go a bit easier in the spring after the first batches of sassafras tea.