

Assignment: Canadian Food in the 21st Century

Topic: The Cartel, Rebels and Thieves of Quebec's Maple Syrup Industry

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Gastronomy

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Like most people, I love a good underdog story and the Maple Syrup Bandits versus the Maple Syrup Cartel sounded like something that would pull right at my sugar addicted Canadian heart strings. When first introduced to the Maple Syrup Cartel I immediately assumed, as I am sure others would, that this group was inherently evil. That the Federation of Quebec Maple Syrup Producers (QMSP) were forcing small producers to sell farms that had been in their families for generations, charging unmanageable fines, and preventing people from having successful businesses. But through further investigation I now understand this to be a grossly ignorant generalization for what is actually occurring.

Maple syrup and Canada go hand in hand, and it's no wonder that so many people make this association as we are responsible for 71% of global maple syrup production, of which Quebec produces 92%.¹ This means that Quebec alone is responsible for contributing 63% (41.4 million kg) of maple syrup to the global market. Due to the fickle nature of maple syrup production it is impossible to control and maintain the same yield year after year which made it a difficult industry to make a consistent living leading up to the formation of the QMSP in 1966. During years when production was high the excess supply would drive down prices. These lower prices would result in buyers purchasing large amount of syrup at a reduced costs and storing until there was a need. The stockpiling of syrup meant that the purchasers would hold on to the syrup and when a year with a lower yield resulted in higher prices presented itself there would be no need to purchase the more expensive syrup². The QMSP was set up with good

¹ Werner, Leo H. "Maple Syrup Industry"

² Gagné, Isabelle. "Canada Maple syrup production in Quebec". Pg 8.

intentions to protect its producers by regulating the supply, increasing the value and stabilizing the price of syrup, providing a predictable income year after year through collective marketing and the Global Strategic Reserve³. The Global Strategic Reserve of maple syrup is where any syrup produced in excess of a producer's quota goes, the producers are not compensated for this syrup until there is a low production year when the syrup is then sold⁴.

There are some producers that would prefer not to participate in the QMSP although that is not an option. All maple syrup producers in Quebec are required to pay fees of \$0.14/lb sold to the QMSP to cover administration, quality control, market development and surplus production management⁵. Producers trying to evade the rule of the QMSP have been known to smuggle their maple syrup off their property in the middle of the night to the neighbouring provinces of Ontario and New Brunswick as well as the United States, to avoid their watchful eye. The QMSP has been known to send police and private guards to properties they suspect are trying to bootleg their syrup and the consequences of being caught are substantial. For example, Angele Grenier risked jail time and \$500,000 worth of fines for her efforts in the rebellion⁶. The fines for black-market sales in 2018 were \$1.20/lb, which at the time was 41.4% of the sale price⁷. I wonder if these fines are so substantial due to the great risk that they present to the

³ Werner, Leo H. "Maple Syrup Industry"

⁴ Producteurs et productrices acéricoles du Québec. "The Worlds Only Reserve of Maple Syrup".

⁵ Producteurs et productrices acéricoles du Québec. "Laws and Regulations".

⁶ Williams, Andreane. "Canada's Maple Syrup Rebels".

⁷ Edminston, Jake. Hamilton, Graeme. "The last days of Quebec's maple syrup rebellion"

QMSP and the maple syrup industry as a whole, as black market prices can directly effect the value of the syrup across the market that they have worked tirelessly to increase over the years⁸.

Though well known in Quebec the QMSP only gained worldwide recognition after the theft of \$18 million worth of maple syrup from the Global Strategic Reserve. It made headlines due to the almost whimsical sound of the crime combined with the fact that most people were unaware that such a stockpile existed. This crime became high profile and as a result so did the notoriety of the QMSP. Those opposed to the cartel saw it as a victory, a way to stick it to Big Maple. But is that really what it was? The Netflix docuseries *Dirty Money*'s episode "The Maple Syrup Heist" interviews a few of the convicted thieves as well some notable rebels and there is a major difference between the two groups. The rebels are fighting tirelessly for the right to produce and sell their own maple syrup as they see fit, while the thieves were trying to make money by stealing others work and selling stolen goods which are crimes no matter how you look at it.⁹

As someone who does not understand the complexity that is supply chain management I find it difficult to hold a firm opinion regarding whether I think that marketing boards like QMSP are in the best interest of producers and consumers. The more arti-

⁸ Charlebois, Sylvain. "The problem with Canadian marketing boards"

⁹ *Dirty Money*, Season One Episode Five, "The Maple Syrup Heist", directed by Brian McGinn, aired January 26th, 2018, on Netflix.

cles I read the more conflicted I feel. I can sympathize with those that feel that they don't have control over their own product, are crippled with fines, and would prefer to be compensated for their excess syrup immediately rather than waiting for it to be sold from the reserve. But I don't think it should be overlooked that the QMSP has increased the value of syrup and made the industry less volatile and therefore a more stable career. There is a part of me that feels that those that are against it would prefer to go about their business benefiting from what the QMSP has built without having to be personally inconvenienced by it. No one is excited to pay taxes, but we do it to cover costs for health care, education, and infrastructure which lift up our society towards the goal of making life better for everyone and I feel that the QMSP is trying to do but their iron fist approach to authority needs to be reworked. The deregulation of maple syrup and resulting free market provides much more risk for producers but could also lead to much greater rewards, and if history has taught us anything its that capitalism may drive progress but it also encourages monopolies which I don't think would be a desirable outcome for any of these producers.

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