Sweet Bedfellows

Continuity, Change, and Terroir in Maple Syrup

By: Michael Lange

The making of maple syrup is an important part of the livelihood and identity of many people in Vermont. It is almost impossible for a Vermonter to think of their home state without eventually calling to mind images of a stand of maples or a sugarhouse. Even for outsiders without personal experience of the state, Vermont is consistently linked to images of maple syrup, maple trees, and the maple leaf, even if the bottle of Vermont maple syrup on the kitchen table is their only connection to the state. Often, the image of maple syrup conjures up tropes of rurality and an old fashioned way of life. A sense of purity and authenticity is connected to the syrup, and eventually to Vermont itself. This article explores the connections between maple and the state, and between notions of purity and authenticity. I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork with sugarmakers all over Vermont for the past two years, meeting them in storefronts, in sugarhouses, in kitchens, and in their woods. I have spoken with people running operations of various sizes, from a hundred taps up through the tens of thousands. [1] Sugaring is done in every county of Vermont, on rigs from an open tub in the back yard to a fifteen-foot tall evaporator in a dedicated sugarhouse. Sugarmaking is woven throughout the landscape of Vermont, both conceptually and geographically, and maple connects inhabitants from all across the state. My ongoing fieldwork with sugarmakers delves into those connections. I have been asking sugarmakers themselves how purity and authenticity play a role in their own understandings of what they do and what they make. I have been learning from them how they see stasis and change as an inherent part of their lives. In this article, I explore the evolving nature of maple as a part of Vermont's identity in the face of technological, social, and economic change.

The sugarmaking process

Sugarmaking was handed down to settlers in what is now the northeast US and eastern Canada by the various Native American and First Nations indigenous to the area. [2] These groups practiced maple production for centuries before European contact. In Vermont, the Abenaki are considered the indigenous people of the region, and they are the ones who taught sugarmaking to the incoming settlers. The maple syrup production process, called "sugarmaking" by those in the know, is deceptively simple. Sugarmaking involves one ingredient, the sap from maple trees, and one process, boiling. There are many variations within that framework, but the basics of sugarmaking always include these two elements. [3] The sap used for sugarmaking is most often from the sugar maple (Acer saccharum), although other Acer species (silver maple, swamp maple, red maple) are sometimes used, depending on the region and local environment. The sap of the maple tree typically contains between 1% and 4% sugar in solution. The sap must have its water removed until the liquid is approximately 66% sugar in solution, [4] requiring approximately 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. The sap is collected by boring holes in the maple trees and catching the resulting sap flow in either buckets or a network of tubing. The collected sap is centralized in a sugarhouse, [5] a specially designed building dedicated to sugarmaking, where it is boiled in a large apparatus called an evaporator to remove water and concentrate the sugar. [6] Maple sap only flows in enough quantity for sugarmaking at a short time of

the year, typically late winter and early spring, in February and March. The flowing of the sap is entirely dependent on immediate weather conditions. Sap flows when the air temperature swings between freezing at night and above 40 degrees during the day. This relative unpredictability means that sugarmaking carries few guarantees from year to year in terms of yield.

Vermont produces the lion's share of the maple syrup made in the US, averaging better than double the amount from New York or Maine, its closest competitor the last four years. [7] The most recent USDA Census of Agriculture, tabulated for 2007, [8] records 1310 total sugaring operations in Vermont, with 923 of those having fewer than 2000 taps. Sugarmakers gauge the size of their operations by the number of taps, a tap being the physical spout inserted into the tree. Multiple taps can be placed on a tree, depending on its size, age, and ability to produce. There is no hard and fast standard, although rules of thumb abound, about how many taps equate to how many trees. Sap is measured in fractions of a gallon per tap, so the number of taps is the best benchmark for the size of a sugarmaker's stand. A sugaring outfit with fewer than 2000 taps would be considered a small operation by most sugarmakers. In 2007, only 135 sugarmakers (10.3%) set more than 5000 taps, but these large operations produced 371,891 gallons (57.7%) of the syrup made in the state.

Even in the case of some of the largest operations, sugarmaking in Vermont is mostly done by individual sugarmakers on a relatively immediate scale. Large-scale sugarmaking in Quebec is generally controlled by a cooperative and exists on a larger, more industrial scale, but all save the largest Vermont producers understand their sugarmaking as a personal process. While there are a handful of producers who employ large numbers of workers, the vast majority of sugarmakers work alone or nearly so, with at most the family and an immediate circle of friends involved. Stands of maple trees are not planted in any organized way because a maple tree can only be tapped when it is decades old. It is not a crop with quick turnover from planting to harvest. Because the sugarmakers go to the trees, rather than bringing the trees where they would like to be, sugarmaking is conducted mostly in rural areas where the trees grow. Historically, sugarmaking by European Americans has been undertaken by farmers, who utilized the maple trees near their cultivated fields and pastures, both to extend the productive cycle of the year and to maximize the harvests and income to be drawn from their land. Recent increases in price have drawn more people in Vermont into sugarmaking as a hobby and income source, so the demographics of the sugarmaker have expanded to include "the IBMer" [9] as well as the traditional farmer/sugarmaker. The demographic shifts aside, in the popular conception, sugarmaking still belongs in a rural setting, performed by old Vermont farmers in a traditional manner.

The twin idylls

Sugarmaking is strongly connected with a sense of rural tradition. This connection is not entirely without basis because many sugarmakers in Vermont are, indeed, farmers making syrup on their own property, with long family histories behind them. Despite the widening of the demographics of sugarmaking, though, the popular image of the Vermont sugarmaker is fairly uniform, as is the popular understanding of the sugarmaking process. Both exist in a pastoral idyll, where verdant fields abut majestic stands of maple that roll over hillsides. Two idyllic tropes are in play here: the pastoral and

the traditional. The pastoral idyll holds that Vermont is a clean, green, and serene place, [10] while the traditional idyll maintains that Vermonters do things in substantially the same manner that they've done them for years and generations. The traditional idyll is a far cry from the actual processes of tradition, of course. The popular understanding of tradition as a repeated artifact of the past is given lie by Henry Glassie, who reminds us that tradition "is a temporal concept, inherently tangled with the past, the future, with history" (2003: 180-181). The pastoral idyll of a clean, green, and serene place stresses the cleanliness of Vermont in terms of the purity of its land, its soil, and its products, but this idyll is no less complicated than the traditional (Howell 1994). The greenness of the place is indicated by its naturalness and uncorrupted physical environment. [11] The serenity is marked in the harmoniousness of the state, where everything works together in the oikos of the ecosystem. These traits are presented as both the epitome of Vermont and the antithesis of modernity, which is mechanistic, artificial, and fractured. Both idylls are intertwined, almost inextricable. Vermont is green and natural, whereas the modern (understood as represented by New York City, Boston, and other urban places) is somehow a departure from a more natural, more authentic place and way to live. The traditional is not simply tied to the pastoral; the two are nearly the same. Vermont is a clean, green, place because the people who live there are imagined as living in a non-modern way, without the fractious and corrupting influences of the modern world. Vermont is understood as a sort of ecosystem fixed in time (Howell 1994: 133).

As every good scholar of culture knows, authenticity is a hugely problematic concept. Regina Bendix explores how authenticity is artificial in her book, In Search of Authenticity (1997), wherein she argues that a place may construct a narrative historical justification of importance or validity. In a tourist situation, or any situation where those inside an identity and those outside an identity are interacting, the authenticity supplied by a narrative may be employed strategically. [12] There is a pretty straightforward process of romanticization here. I do not mean to imply that such narratives are false, but they are employed strategically to elicit a reaction from the other side of the boundary between the inside and the outside. This is no less true for Vermont, where sugarmaking straddles lines between Vermont and the outside world. Sugarmakers, and to a certain extent, all Vermonters, construct a narrative of cleanliness, greenness, and serenity, which bolsters people's expectations for the state and maple syrup as a product. Likewise, they emphasize in subtle and overt ways, the traditional aspects of Vermont, that the state does things an older, and implicitly better, way. If Vermont is clean, green, and serene, and if it keeps its traditions – if it is authentic – then the maple syrup that comes from the state is worthy of trust as a product of a simpler, more traditional place and way of life.

Reading the material culture of sugarmaking

A quick look at the literature of the maple industry or the material culture of maple syrup demonstrates the ways the pastoral and traditional idylls are maintained. The Vermont Maple Foundation, an independent, non-profit organization that promotes and educates about maple, produces a small cookbook, *The Official Vermont Maple Cookbook*, currently in its third edition. Inside the front cover, it proclaims:

> Pure Vermont maple syrup is 100% natural and the official “flavor of Vermont”. It is a delicious pure food product to cook with and to enjoy. Vermont has the ideal climate and soils for growing sugar maple trees […] Maple season in Vermont is a special time and steam billowing from sugarhouse roofs all around the state is a sign that sap is boiling. From the Abenaki to the modern operators of today, Vermont sugar makers have been refining the maple sugaring craft for centuries.

Likewise, a pamphlet produced by the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers’ Association (the umbrella body for the Vermont Maple Foundation) states that “The tree and the farmer are partners in producing maple syrup” (“The Story Time of Maple in Vermont”). These pieces of text emphasize the clean, green, and serene image, using words like pure, natural, ideal, and special, and they stress tradition by moving Vermont sugarmaking directly from the Abenaki to the “modern operators of today” (although it should be noted that there are plenty of Abenaki people living in Vermont right now). Harmony is evident in the trees and the farmers working together to make syrup. It is not a product of the land, or a product of human labor, but a result of the harmonious combination of the two.

The bottles in which maple syrup is packed for sale tell the same narratives of purity and tradition.

As can be seen in the photographs, red-checked flannel coats are evident on both bottles. Horses draw a sledge and a cart. Sap buckets hang from trees. The rustic sugarhouse sits among maples, and both bottles proclaim “Pure Vermont Maple Syrup”. One bottle even has the state of Vermont itself being tapped, with sap running into a wood stave bucket nestled against the state’s western border. The immediate connection between sugaring and Vermont could not be more obvious. The image of a pastoral, traditional idyll is made clear and uncomplicated by these visual depictions. Not only are the people inhabiting an idealized landscape of trees and rolling hills, but they are engaging in old fashioned sugaring processes, such as gathering sap by hand and hauling it by horse.

The technological and marketing realities

The actual processes of sugarmaking in Vermont are, unsurprisingly, more complex than the idylls might imply. A great deal of technology has always been incorporated into sugarmaking, as with all agricultural processes. Many sugarmakers are farmers, and farmers are often quick adopters of new technology, especially when that technology promises increased efficiency in an occupation with razor-thin margins. Plastic tubing now replaces most buckets, and sap drains to centralized collection points, instead of needing to be hauled away from every tree by horse and hand. Vacuum systems impart a slight negative pressure to tubing systems, urging more sap from the trees, instead of allowing gravity and xylem to do all the work. Check valves prevent sap from flowing back into the trees, keeping the bore holes from healing too soon, and reducing infections in the trees. Reverse osmosis (RO) rigs concentrate the sap before it ever hits heat, reducing the amount of water in the fluid and reducing the time and fuel needed to boil it down to syrup. Sugarmakers all over the state use these new technologies to increase their production, their efficiency, and their yields, while packing their syrup in containers bearing pictures of horse sledges and buckets. There is no hypocrisy on the part of the sugarmakers. They understand the pastoral idyll, and they employ that narrative in selling their syrup. For most sugarmakers, the authenticity of maple lays not in the sledge or the bucket, but in the purity of the two essential ingredients: sap and heat. Other trappings may come and go, but those two ingredients do not change. While many sugarmakers have a sense of nostalgia for “the old ways”, they understand that the old ways are just that – old. Nostalgia may be fine for dinner table conversation, but not for the bottom line. As one sugarmaker expressed,

> There’s the technology out there to get half a gallon of syrup per tree, and within reason, I’m able to put that together in my setup here. Ideally, the cheapest way is with buckets, wood evaporator, no RO, heck – you could make it in a sugarhouse with no electricity if you want and all that. And that’s fine, you know, and that’s a very traditional way to do it and some people, you know, that makes them happy. And I enjoy parts of that, but I also like the idea, if I can produce 300 gallons of syrup off my land instead of 20, with paying the same amount of taxes, with investing $20,000 to do it, you figure 300 gallons of syrup at fifty bucks a gallon, there’s $15,000 [per year]. (tl-H07012011) [13]

The traditional aspects of sugarmaking are always balanced with the bottom line because sugarmaking is not an activity of nostalgia. It is an economic activity. It is a hobby for some, but it is an income source for almost all sugarmakers. Whether that means enough money for heating oil in the winter, profit to plow back into their sugaring operation, or just disposable income on the side, I have met no sugarmaker who doesn’t cast at least a casual eye at their production efficiency. Indeed, conversations about amount produced per tap and amount produced per unit of fuel are commonplace among sugarmakers. A certain coyness is sometimes involved, with questions about the amount of syrup produced being answered with vague replies, such as “a good bit” or “enough”. However, just as often, I heard sugarmakers exchanging hard numbers with one another when describing their output. An overall sense of friendly competition pervades the sugarmaking community, and they talk to each other of different setups and systems, as well as the success, or lack thereof, they have had with different options and combinations of factors.

Sugarmakers are acutely aware not just of the efficiencies involved in making syrup, but also the best ways to sell their syrup for the highest prices. Again, sugarmaking as a farming activity is made obvious. Long gone are the days when farmers paid no attention to commodities markets, both near home and around the world, and sugarmaking is no different. Many, many sugarmakers talked to me about the state's efforts to promote maple and expand to new markets. More than a few talked to me about the rising interest in maple syrup as a product in Japan, for example. Maple syrup is only made in a small part of the world, and smack in the middle of that maple-producing part sits Vermont. This fact is not lost on any sugarmaker. Expanding markets outside of that small maple-producing range is a necessary process to keep Vermont maple viable. One of the ways Vermont is doing that is by reinforcing the valid connection between Vermont and maple, both practically and conceptually. Vermont promotes its maple with the traditional and the pastoral idylls. The literature and material culture of the maple industry draws heavily on those tropes, in order to meet the narrative expectations of the potential maple syrup consumer. By employing the idyllic narratives strategically, Vermont places itself at the center of the maple world in people's minds.

Selling syrup is not the only way Vermont connects idyllic narratives to income. As Tom Slayton explains, "much of Vermont tourism is based on the pastoral landscape and image that farmers have provided us (at no charge), along with the milk, cheese, apples, and maple syrup they produce" (Bellerose 2010: 13). Tourism is a significant part of Vermont's economy, and maple producers have made themselves a significant part of Vermont tourism. As Urry (2002) reminds us, tourists want to see a narrative that meets their expectations, while providing them with the novelty of first-hand experience. Vermonters are well aware of this seemingly contradictory desire on the part of visitors. One sugarmaker, who derives his income primarily from tourists visiting his farm and sugarhouse, rather than selling syrup he produces directly, discussed with me at length the necessary tensions between providing the tourist with what they want and giving them a "real" Vermont sugarmaker:

> You gotta sell, but you realize that, at least if you're me, you realize that too hard a sell is not going to enhance the promotion. You gotta be a back to the earth, Vermont stereotype, old hick farmer. So that necessitates putting on a show sometimes. You can't be hokey with it though, you gotta be real. They've got to believe you're making syrup, you're just a farmer making syrup here. You want to promote if you're smart, not just you but Vermont, because if we lose the Vermont image of maple, we've had it. All those things are equally important. (tl-M27052010)

There is a conscious appeal to authenticity involved here. He recognizes that tourists want a "more direct, visceral experience" by coming to his farm and seeing the story of maple (Robinson and Hartenfeld 2007: 166). They want to attach to the pastoral, traditional idyll because it feels more authentic to them. More than simply aping the role of the Vermont bumpkin of popular imagination, this sugarmaker is actively re-creating himself as a part of these idyllic narratives for the tourists. His juxtaposition of the "stereotype, old hick farmer" with being real is not a lack of understanding of the

seeming contradiction on his part. Indeed, it is a sharp awareness of the dual nature of the tourism relationship. He is able to provide the tourist with that old farmer because he is that old farmer. He is playing a role, but he is playing himself and the Vermont farmers and sugarmakers he represents, and he knows very well the complexities involved with inhabiting these multiple identities. By maintaining these roles and constructing the narrative in a way that feels more honest, he is doing his part to keep Vermont's maple industry viable. He knows that if the narratives are damaged, "we've had it." If a tourist's or a consumer's narrative expectations for pastoral, traditional Vermont and maple are violated, then the narrative loses meaning, and that dollar gets spent somewhere else, or on another product. In both instances of change, technological and marketing, sugarmakers have consistently adopted and adapted the new, making it a part of the old and keeping sugarmaking an evolving process. Interestingly, the tropes of authenticity that this sugarmaker uses are not unique either to Vermont [14] or to sugarmaking. [15]

Modernizing the market – terroir

Sugarmakers are constantly balancing between the purity and tradition of their process and product with the economic demands of the market and the industry. Rather than simplistically rejecting the old for the sake of the new, they deftly meld the two into a complex understanding of the roles of tradition and modernity. In so doing, they maintain and bolster their product and their own long-term viability. The negotiation of the old and the new, the pastoral and the technological, the traditional and the modern, is not a problematic thing for sugarmakers because it is a constant and a norm.

Many changes and improvements have been absorbed by sugarmakers since sugarmaking began thousands of years ago. On the technology side, tubing has been around for decades, and RO and vacuum systems for quite a few years as well. Pushing markets into far away countries has been a part of sugaring at the highest levels for many years. At each turn, sugarmakers negotiated the new additions while keeping the essential aspects of sugarmaking intact. I would like to turn to one of the most recent changes in sugarmaking, to explore a different type of negotiation with modernity. Recently, a collaborative research effort between the University of Vermont's Nutrition and Food Science Department and the state of Vermont's Agency of Agriculture, Foods and Markets has resulted in a "Map of Maple." This research project is an outgrowth of the research of Dr. Amy Trubek, and it has resulted in, among other things, a tasting chart specific to maple syrup.

the map of maple: off-flavors

Category	Source	Type	Description
mother nature	sour sap		ropey appearance citrus, soy sauce, fermented aromas sour taste thick, chunky mouthfeel
mother nature	metabolism		chocolaty, grassy aroma lack of maple flavor cardboard, popcorn, peanut butter flavors dry mouthfeel
mother nature	buddy		chocolaty aroma and flavors lingering aftertaste
defoamer	safflower and vegetable oils		vegetable aroma and flavor oily, waxy mouthfeel
defoamer	canola oil		spicy, peppery flavors walnut, pungent finish astringent mouthfeel
processing	burnt	scorch	burnt flavors (coffee, dark chocolate) thick body
processing	burnt	niter	burnt flavors (coffee, dark chocolate) leathery, spicy meat flavor chalky, gritty mouthfeel
processing	storage	fermented	yeasty alcohol aroma honey, fruity, spicy (soy sauce), vegetable flavors thin body foamy appearance (severe fermentation) effervescent mouthfeel
processing	storage	metallic	tin can aroma strong metallic flavor (affects back tongue and teeth)
chemicals	minerals / niter		fizzy, gritty mouthfeel
chemicals	chloride		salty taste
chemicals	acid / basic		acid or caustic odor (depending on chemical) pungent, burning sensations
others	musty / mold		moldy, yeasty, vegetable aromas and flavors lingering finish (affects back tongue and throat)
others	detergents		perfumy, floral aromas soapy flavor
others	lubricants / fuels		petroleum aroma and flavor oily mouthfeel astringent finish

filters — these defects could stem from misuse or mishandling of syrup filters

This tasting chart resembles diagrams created for wine, which is no coincidence. Dr. Trubek has been working with the notion of terroir and applying it to various American food production and consumption processes. [16] Terroir is a term from the French culinary world that defies simple definition. The word literally means “land” in French, although it also carries the meaning of “authenticity” when describing agricultural products. The concept encompasses the idea that the taste and flavor qualities of a food are direct reflections of the immediate environment in which it is grown. The mineral content of the soil, the slope, the sun, the moisture in a particular spot, all ultimately become elements in the flavor of a food item grown there.

When the French take a bite of cheese or a sip of wine, they taste the earth: rock, grass, hillside, valley, plateau. They ingest nature, and this taste signifies pleasure, a desirable good. Gustatory pleasure and the evocative possibilities of taste are intertwined in the French fidelity to the taste of place." (Trubek 2008: 9)

The French culinary world has long held the notion of terroir as an inherent aspect of understanding and appreciating food. In many ways, it is only natural to apply the concept of terroir to maple because sugarmakers pay very close attention to the immediate environment of their trees:

> Oftentimes, when we're in the woods, my brother and I, and sometimes my father, we can talk about different areas, every section of our woods has a different name. We've got places like the snake run or the brown bucket run, and that all represents something that was passed down […] The snake run, I think, you know its name probably derives from the little gathering trail, it's very twisted, it follows a brook, very snakey-like, I think. It's also kind of a southeast exposure, with a lot of ledge, and in the spring of the year, besides peepers and some other things coming to life, snakes get active. (tlB11062010)

Sugarmakers know their trees and the land in which they sit. Often, a sugarmaker would explain to me the slope, the soil, and the amount of sunlight a particular tree would get at a given time of year or day. Even the wildlife living around the trees is part of a sugarmaker's attention. That level of knowledge, of detail about the trees makes a concept like terroir a natural fit for sugarmaking. If terroir is a taste of place, then sugarmakers' intimate knowledge of their places has much to offer when trying to understand the tastes of maple syrup.

The "Map of Maple" chart is an attempt to capitalize on just that intimate knowledge. Introducing the idea of complex flavor notes and comparative tasting to maple expands the traditional (and legally prescribed) system of grading syrup as it currently exists. Vermont maple is divided into several categories: Fancy (the lightest in color, and generally the most delicate in flavor), A-Medium Amber (darker, with a more pronounced maple flavor), A-Dark Amber (deeper color and denser flavor), and B (the darkest syrup typically sold to the consumer, with a rich, powerful maple flavor). Interestingly, the grading is done entirely on the color of the syrup. Flavor differences are tendencies and generally correspond, but tasting is not a part of the legal grading process. Introducing complex tasting notes to maple syrup serves a two-fold purpose. On one hand, the air of sophistication and elegance that is often attributed to wine, especially to French wine, is attached to maple, raising the profile of the product. On the other hand, finer gradations of difference allow the creation and proliferation of the maple equivalent of the oenophile. In today's foodie-culture world, with celebrity chefs and multiple cooking-themed cable channels and blogs, both of these processes help to increase the marketability of maple. Words that appear on wine labels, such as "grassy", "buttery" and "floral", now can be used to describe maple syrup. Trubek explains how terroir becomes tasting note in a conversation with a friend named Mark, as the knowledge of the food comes to include the knowledge of its provenance:

> "By now this French orientation has moved far beyond France, and it has become a method for people like Mark to explore and explain taste experiences. According to Mark, if I wanted to understand the unique terroir found at Mas de Daumas Gassac in the Languedoc (one of Mark's favorite vineyards), I need to be where the grapes are grown and the wine is made. I need to go to France" (2008: 9-10).

Insider knowledge of source and product is prominent in her description, and the connection between the generation of a food item and its resultant flavor is made explicit and concrete. The best way to experience and understand terroir is to visit the place from which the taste comes. The same understanding can be applied to Vermont's maple tourism. As tourists visit a sugarhouse, they hear the story of maple and experience the traditional, pastoral idyll. It is not hard to understand that idyllic narrative as a part of the place. For Trubek, experiencing the terroir of a wine is not simply about where the grapes were grown, but also where the wine was made. The sugarhouse is the field where maple syrup is made. A visit to the sugarhouse is, at least in part, a journey in search of terroir.

By emphasizing the connection between place and taste, the new "Map of Maple" is trying to bolster Vermont's maple economy on the world scale. In terms of sheer volume of syrup, Vermont can never compete with Quebec as a worldwide exporter. The state must market itself and its maple as a specialty, niche product to convince the customer outside the area to purchase Vermont, rather than Canadian, syrup. Quebec's immense maple co-op system actually helps Vermont in this regard, as most Quebec maple that is exported is blended to produce consistency and a reliable flavor. The small-scale producers in Canada often market directly to the tourist industry, much as Vermont's sugarmakers do, but the majority of syrup exported from Canada comes through the Quebec co-op. Many Vermont sugarmakers sell their syrup wholesale to bulk packers, but Vermont has nothing on the scale of Quebec's co-op, and many Vermont producers sell their syrup directly to the consumer, both locally and abroad. Because a higher percentage of Vermont's exported maple is from smaller producers, the sugarmakers could advertise their eastern slope, their lime-rich soil, or whatever is particular to their sugarbush. Quebec syrup cannot do this sort of marketing internationally because the syrup from producers across the province is blended together. An easy parallel can be drawn to Scotch whisky, with blended whiskies being produced on a larger scale, while single malt whiskies are produced in smaller amounts. Blended whisky fans appreciate the consistency and reliability, while single malt aficionados tend to enjoy their particularities and unique aspects. By applying terroir and capitalizing on the current foodie trends, in terms of both health and specialized knowledge, Vermont maple can compete and remain viable against the overwhelming economic force of Quebec by marketing itself as a niche product through terroir.

A mixed reception

The reception of ideas of terroir within the sugarmaking community has been mixed, surprisingly enough. While many sugarmakers spoke to me of the potential to help the bottom line by using terroir

as a marketing tool, there was sometimes hesitance surrounding this shift. To be sure, some sugarmakers have dived headlong into terroir as a marketing tool. A small consortium of sugarmakers have even launched a marketing campaign under the heading of “Vermont Terroir”, and a look at their advertising demonstrates the degree to which they have integrated the old culinary notion into their current advertising:

> …distinctly rich, creamy, buttery, and full of maple warmth. Notes of brown sugar and medjool dates back up the sweetness that lingers on the palate.
>
> …hints of vanilla, nutmeg, and sweet melon.
>
> …the Dopple Bock of maple syrups. German dark wheat bread, molasses, burnt sugar, raisins, dates, and smoke.
>
> …baked apple and golden sugar notes are backed by a subtle but clear maple flavor.

Clearly, some sugarmakers are utilizing terroir to present their syrup as unique, special, and valuable to potential customers. While the example above is extreme, and the vast majority of sugarmakers are taking a “wait and see” approach to terroir as an advertising tool, it is indicative of the willingness on the part of sugarmakers to adopt that which they see as useful. Interestingly, the hesitance I have heard about terroir is not necessarily related to its being a new idea for maple. Indeed, terroir is a very old idea, with long tradition of its own, albeit a tradition not native to Vermont. That non-native status plays a small part for some, and terroir is almost seen as an invasive species (a concept sugarmakers are keenly aware of, with such threats as the Asian long-horned beetle). While not understood as destructive, the foreign concept of terroir is something to be at least wary of. More directly, though, terroir is understood by sugarmakers to be a part of the foodie movement, which is a phenomenon of the city. A parallel is drawn between terroir and the urban outsider who moves to Vermont for the “good life” without fully understanding all that life in Vermont entails. It is not modernity that makes terroir suspect, but urbanity. The ideas behind terroir are often explained as an already existing part of Vermont’s understanding of itself and its maple. The notion is not a threat; it is merely the importation of a foreign version of the notion. The foreignness comes not only from its French heritage, but also its perceived city roots. Indeed, Frenchness in Vermont is not that foreign, with Francophone Quebec at the northern border, and many people in the state having French ancestry. [17]

Conclusions

Vermont sugarmakers have a fine grasp on the intricacies of their state’s and their industry’s identity. Many theorists and ethnographers have discussed the groups they examine as employing notions of identity and face in almost unconscious terms. Sugarmakers, though, are very conscious of their role in creating and maintaining the integrity of maple syrup, both as a product and as a narrative. Sugarmakers across the board, from small backyard producers to large commercial operations, spoke to me of being conscious of the role purity and authenticity play in the quality of Vermont syrup. The quality itself and the perception of quality were both vital players in protecting their product’s

integrity. The pastoral and traditional idylls are an inextricable and vital part of that integrity, even as modernity and change are persistent parts of maple production and marketing. Through it all, sugarmakers have the constant of the syrup's two ingredients – sap and heat. Glassie warns us that tradition is a moving target, but sugarmakers know it, too. The constant tension between maintaining something that is essential and applying innovations that improve efficiency and profitability means that sugarmakers are always negotiating a balance. The balancing act is a constant, too, though. Terroir is, in this way, no different from, say, vacuum systems. When vacuum was first introduced into sugarmaking, there were a few early adopters, and the industry watched curiously and cautiously at the results of these early adoptions. Terroir has been accepted by a few sugarmakers, but many are waiting in the wings to see what happens. The concept of "organic" has been employed in the foodie world for a while longer than terroir, to the point that it is overused and beginning to lose meaning. Organic labeling has become a part of maple syrup as well, although there is much discussion of both the value and the validity of organic certification for one's syrup. For some sugarmakers, "organic" is simply a marketing term. Perhaps there is trepidation that terroir is simply another marketing tool. If this imported French culinary concept helps maple's bottom line though, chances are it will be incorporated into the traditional and pastoral narratives of Vermont's maple syrup industry and identity.

Notes

1. The distinction between "commercial producer" and "backyard sugarmaker" is nebulous at best. While there are certainly a few operations that derive the bulk of their income from syrup production, and there are certainly a handful of people who produce syrup strictly for their own consumption, these sugarmakers are a minute fraction of the producers in Vermont. The vast majority of producers, regardless of the scale of the operations, sell some of their syrup, even if only to friends and neighbors. Many sugarmakers derive income for only a portion of the year, having another money-making occupation (farmer, trucker, college professor, woodworker, merchant, and the list goes on) in addition to harvesting sap. Many sugarmakers (hobbyists and retailers alike) spoke to me of sugarmaking as a "way to pay the property taxes" on their land, house, and/or sugarbush. Sugarmakers themselves make distinctions mostly on the number of taps they set, and my fieldwork spans the range. Thoughts about the meaning of maple to the state are remarkably consistent, regardless of the size of operation.

2. There has been some debate among archaeologists whether Native North Americans made maple syrup or sugar before contact with Europeans. The debate is summarized in Thomas, Jackson, and Guthrie (1999). One of the recent antagonists to the idea of pre-European contact sugarmaking, Carol Mason, "stressed a more vigorous use of ethno-historic accounts as the sources of information" about Native North American sugarmaking pre-contact (Thomas, Jackson, and Guthrie 1999: 14), but decreed that "arguments from folklore are unacceptable" as evidence (Mason 1993: 291, quoted in Thomas, Jackson, and Guthrie 1999: 15). As someone who has made a living as an anthropologist, a folklorist, and an archaeologist, I find Mason's arguments interesting but ultimately unconvincing.

3. I have been told by some sugarmakers that, in addition to boiling with heated stones, some Native American groups used to concentrate the sap by freezing it and removing the ice, which would be mostly water, then re-freezing the remaining fluid and removing more ice, until the water content had dropped significantly. This same method is described in Deerr, reported from the middle of the 18th century: "Concentration of the [maple] juice was also effected by freezing

and throwing away the crust of ice that formed on exposure" (1950: 515). As far as I know, no one is practicing this method of syrup production in Vermont today.

4. More precisely, the syrup needs to be a certain number of degrees on the Brix scale, which measures sugar content as a percentage of the mass of a liquid. The exact numbers and percentages of what constitutes maple syrup vary slightly from standard to standard. Canada and the US each have their own regulations, while the state of Vermont has yet another set of standards, slightly more strict than either country's rules.

5. Other terms for this structure are known, such as sugar shack, sap house, or sugar shanty (in Quebec, the term is cabane à sucre, which translates literally to "sugar cabin"). While such terms, including the French-language version, are known varyingly widely among Vermont sugarmakers, the term "sugarhouse" is the name given to their structure by nearly every person I interviewed. Therefore, it is the term I use here.

6. There are many variations in evaporator technology, as well. Oil burners versus wood burners, steam injection, different sizes and styles of flue pans, even steam evaporators that function similarly to giant double-boilers…the variety is impressive. All of the variations achieve the same goal, however: the removal of water from the sap by converting it into steam, while leaving the sugar and other inclusions behind. This is not a technology unique to maple syrup production, of course. Deerr (1950) attests the use of evaporators in cane sugar and beet sugar production for centuries. The technology of evaporating the water portion of sugar-bearing liquid is old, and appeared in several places independently, including Native North America.

7. Production of maple syrup by state, in gallons: 2011 – Vermont, 1.14 million; New York, 564,000; Maine, 360,000. 2010 – Vermont, 890,000; New York, 312,000; Maine, 310,000. 2009 – Vermont, 920,000; Maine, 395,000; New York, 362,000. 2008 – Vermont, 710,000; New York, 328,000; Mine, 240,000. (New England Agricultural Statistics, 2008-2011 reports. Compiled and issued by the New England Agricultural Statistics Service, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Concord, NH)

8. The United States Department of Agriculture produces its nationwide Census of Agriculture every five years. The next Census is due out in 2013, tabulating data from 2012. Because of recent increases in the price for bulk maple syrup, the numbers of producers and the sizes of operations have doubtless increased from 2007 to today. The information in footnote 4, above, demonstrates the large and steady increases in yield in Vermont's maple crop, with 2010 a slight dip across the board. The season in 2010 was universally acknowledged by sugarmakers as a particularly bad year for maple. Regardless, many people have become newly involved in sugaring in Vermont in the past five years, and many existing sugarmakers have increased their operations during the same period.

9. IBM opened a large production facility in Essex Junction, Vermont in the late 1950s. The plant brought many new workers to Vermont, and provided new disposable income for newcomers and locals alike. The IBM worker who decided to take up sugarmaking as a backyard hobby became paradigmatic for the johnny-come-lately to sugarmaking, as opposed to the old-timer, whose family had been sugaring on the farm for generations.

10. I am borrowing this phrase from the head of the Orkney Tourist Board. Orkney, a small set of islands off the north coast of Scotland, also trade on a pastoral idyll. A peripheral place geographically, Orkney relies on that pastoral image to bring in tourists to sustain the economy. The parallels between Orkney and Vermont, in terms of population density and the understanding of the role of the places in relation to modernity and urbanity, are striking. For a fuller discussion of Orkney, see Lange 2007.

11. That "green" has become synonymous with "environmentally friendly" is not lost on Vermonters. Bumper stickers and t-shirts proclaiming "We were green before it was cool" are easy to find in many Vermont shops. To be fair, there aren't many places where "green" is ensconced in the name – the word itself, Vermont, comes from the French for "green mountain".

12. Goffman's discussions of "face" and the presentation of the self are both enlightening here, as are Urry's "tourist gaze" and Hewison's discussion of heritage.

13. Ethnographic interviews are cited according to my cataloguing system, to provide anonymity to my interviewees. The choice to keep the people who spoke with me anonymous is mine. While no one I have spoken with has wanted to hide themselves, I have kept everyone anonymous because Vermont is a very small state, and sugarmakers are a very close-knit community. I do not want to disrupt those bonds because they are an integral part of the identity of the place.

14. Many food industries in Vermont, such as Cabot cheese and Ben & Jerry's ice cream, trade on a perception of the verdant hills and more natural atmosphere of the state.

15. Likewise, the images of the sugarhouse and sugaring process are evoked in Quebec as much as in Vermont: "la cabane à sucre et les travaux du temps des sucres ont été des themes souvent exploités par les représentants de l'art pictural" (Dupont 1975: 11). There is much shared culture across the mostly arbitrary border between Vermont and Quebec, so the sharing of sugarmaking tropes should come as no surprise. Quebec's small-scale sugarmakers, who also market more directly to a tourist audience, try to provide an authentic experience to their customer as well. While I have not yet done any fieldwork among Quebec sugarmakers, they doubtless would see much to agree with in my interviewee's discussion. What constitutes an authentic experience can vary in the two places, though. Techniques such as hanging bacon or lard over the evaporator are apparently still practiced by small-scale sugarmakers in Quebec. The dripping fat rendered from the hanging meat helps control foaming and boiling over, while simultaneously perfuming the meat with maple aroma and flavor: "Cette petite branche était suspendue juste au-dessus de la bouilleuse, et dès que le gonflement du sirop avait lieu, elle avait la vertu d'arrêter le débordement. Une petite couenne de lard salé, de même que l'eau, le beurre, le lait ou la crème pouvaient aussi contrôler l'ébullition" (Dupont 1975: 77). In Vermont, strict hygiene regulation of even the smallest producer means that this technique has been replaced with a newer (perceivable as therefore less authentic) method of using chemical defoaming agents or a few drops of vegetable oil to achieve the same effect.

16. See Trubek's illuminating volume, The Taste of Place, for a fuller discussion of American terroir.

17. For another exploration of the complicated understandings of Frenchness in Vermont, see my article, "Teaching Identity through Ethnic Jokes: Shifting Cultural Touchstones in the Classroom".

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