



Where does the objective to double maple syrup production in five years come from and how was it established?

An interview with Richard Pelletier, agronomist, maple production delegate at MAPAQ and President of the Filière acéricole du Québec

by Élisabeth Shea, MAPAQ communication advisor, Outaouais region

(ES): Mr. Pelletier, in the last few months we have heard that one of the objectives of the maple syrup industry is to double its production within the next five years. Considering the fact that many maple syrup producers are worried when they hear of such an objective, could you describe where this objective comes from and under what circumstances was it pronounced?

(RP): The Quebec government, who wants to stimulate the economy and create jobs has identified the agri-food sector as having a lot of potential. At the Quebec agriculture and agri-food conference in March 1998, with Premier Lucien Bouchard and Agriculture minister Rémy Trudel as Honorary chairmen, the decision makers in the agri-food industry agreed to set common goals, which were: the creation of 15,000 new jobs, to invest \$7.5 million in the agri-food sector and to double Quebec exports. It is through this that the maple syrup industry came about setting its own growth objectives. This is how the objective to double the production within five years, from 1998 to 2003, was pronounced.

(ES): Mr. Pelletier, can you explain what is a "filière"?

(RP): First of all, let me go back to its origins. It was at the Quebec Agriculture Summit in June 1992, where the agri-food sectors first united to face the new challenges of world trade that the concept started. In fact, the theme which united the participants at this summit was to acquire new markets using this approach. It is a typically Quebec concept. It works like a network where every step of production is followed by another or like a big chain where each link is a step of production. The product can then be followed from production all the way to consumption. For the most part, the maple network was created in the summer of 1995. Currently, there are twenty six similar networks, all grouped around the same round table called the agri-food network where all the Quebec agri-food leaders meet.

(ES): Could you define the particular mission of the maple network?

(RP): Of course. The first step in the creation of such a network is to allow the different participant to know each other. In our case, this was done through the exchange of information. Then, we tried to develop a common goal which would please everyone. The next step was to establish concerted strategies to reach this common goal thereby stimulating a cooperative action between the members and then to create an achievable action plan. The ultimate objective being, of course, the growth of the industry.

(ES): Could you talk to us in detail about the strategic plan for the maple syrup industry and what will be at stake?

(RP): The strategic plan was launched in September 1998 by setting a goal of doubling production and markets between 1998 and 2003. This goal was not set spontaneously, but rather it was established after a long reflection and discussions between the members. The past performances show that maple syrup production has tripled in the last 10 years, and the development potential demonstrates that only a third of the maple trees in Quebec are currently tapped. The maple syrup industry has made a lot of progress in terms of development and maturity. In regard to this, what is at stake or the conditions necessary to achieve this goal are:

- 1) The product's image: As the image that is perceived abroad is one of purity and authenticity of a product originating from roots of 100 year old trees and that elsewhere it is one of heritage and tradition which prevails, it is essential to preserve these images at all costs.
- 2) Maintaining quality: When we have such an image to promote and maintain, it is more than necessary to invest in the quality of the product, which must be irreproachable from production all the way through to processing.
- 3) The position of the industry: It is necessary to position maple syrup products in relation with other, more regular, sweet products, as well as with other more refined products such as honey, etc. This is why we have to set market development strategies for international and domestic markets.
- 4) Monetary returns for everyone: According to the members, it is essential that each link of the chain gets its fair share of this development.
- 5) Functioning rules and discipline: A young industry, like the maple syrup sector, must give itself disciplinary rules and it all begins with the mutual respect of everyone's role within the industry.

6) The implementation of quality standards for maple syrup production equipment: The new Association previously mentioned undertook a standardization of different maple syrup equipment to avoid contamination from heavy metals or from synthetic products from plastics.

We also set three main priorities in achieving the strategic plan. For instance:

- The urgency to supply the industry with a practice guide for all production aspects of the industry which could then be followed by other guides for processing and the catering sectors;
- The necessity to maintain quality control for bulk syrup and to improve those used in retail;
- To improve knowledge about the markets and the supply by having a precise statistical study and to establish a marketing plan for both the domestic and international markets.

(ES): Thank you Mr. Pelletier for talking to us about the maple syrup industry, its goals, its challenges and its priorities. No doubt that our readers will find this information very interesting.

(RP): You are welcome, Mrs. Shea.