



Purity & Maple Syrup

Racism, Anti-Racism, and Food Products
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In the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, as witnessed by the world and subsequently sparking a wave of global protests, the food and drink industry was not far to follow suit in showing solidarity with anti-racism movements through social media statements and commitments to “do better.” Doing “better” in some cases took the form of removing well-known iconic figures from U.S. products, such as Uncle Ben from rice packets or Aunt Jemima from maple syrup bottles, as their personas are both symbolic relics associated with the Jim Crow era (1). Aunt Jemima was the idealized construction of the devoted slave “mammy,” and her image emerged against the backdrop of the creation of the American mass market, the rise of labour-saving household technology, and represented one solution to the “servant crisis” during the post-abolition of slavery period with this offer of a quick-fix pancake mix (2). Quaker Oats’

recent announcement of the planned removal of this character prompted an Ottawa journalist to [tweet](#): “if you are Canadian and eating Aunt Jemima, there is something seriously wrong with you”—pointing to a photo of our iconic 540 ml can of *Pure Maple Syrup* from Québec, draped in red and white colours, and featuring quaint and inoffensive pastoral scenes of a sugar shack emanating plumes of smoke in the sugar bush.

In Canada, however, early legislation ensuring the purity of maple syrup did in fact attract the attention of populist groups, such as the Native Sons of Canada. This particular episode in Canadian history highlights how discourses on pure food can become co-opted by political groups, more notably those with racist or xenophobic tendencies. This small vignette from the archives provides a learning opportunity and critical lens for examining racism/anti-racism discourses in food history. The history of food adulteration and standards reminds us of how food is inherently political, and I suggest there is at times a fine line between food nationalism (i.e. taking pride in food of your country), and food and racism (or food and populism/nativism). Alternatively, typically left-leaning proponents of food sovereignty and food justice arguably participate in a form of “selective patronage”—that is, as Hinrichs and Allen have suggested, movements such as of buy local or (or “buy Canadian”) can undermine social justice movements by unintentionally resulting in the marginalization and exclusion of others (3).

There have been moments in history when purity of food was used as a metaphor or rationale to mirror the desire for purity in race. For example, under Third Reich in Germany, additives and adulterated products posed a threat to the racial hygiene of the *volk*, and their rejection fit with National Socialists’ broader war against food additives and toxic agents that might cause cancer (4). The Nazis advocated for food standards, barred chemicals like pesticide and food additives such as the colour “Butter Yellow”—a campaign that later found great

support among German housewives and women’s organizations post-WWII (5).

In the 1920s and 30s, a debate was raging over the problems with adulteration of maple products in Canada, and the potential for regulations and standards to safeguard their purity. In the early days of the industry, maple syrup was sold primarily as maple sugar in a solid brick form, and was often found to contain more than just maple sugar: substances ranging from the cheaper cane or beet sugar, to other powdery substances like chalk or *Blanc d’Espagne*, a calcium carbonate and clay powder mixture (6). John Grimm, a Montréal-based wholesaler and manufacturer of evaporators, lobbied hard for cleaning up the industry. Alarmist exposés of how “The “Maple Industry is Menaced!” started to appear in broadsheets (7). Canadian producers were accused by American counterparts of providing “doped sugar,” although American producers were no less culpable (8). By 1930, after much petitioning from producers and lobbying from the Québec government, the federal Minister of Agriculture presented a bill to parliament which would pass into law: *The Maple Sugar Industry Act*. The *Act* defined the standards for pure maple sugar and syrup, forbade the adulteration of these products, and disallowed the use of the term “maple” on labels unless the product contained within was entirely pure. It also set out the powers of enforcement for inspectors, and the associated regulations that followed set definitions for different grades (i.e. for syrup: *Canada Fancy, Canada Light, Canada Medium, Canada Dark*) (9).

Praise for *The Act* came from many sources: producers, housewives, industry, and, curiously, a populist group called the Native Sons of Canada. Established in 1921 in British Columbia, and known for its aim of fostering “a national Canadian spirit,” the Native Sons was a movement that promoted Canadian jobs for Canadian people, vociferously opposed Asian immigration and, in the process of creating a heroic image of British Columbia, cast Aboriginal peoples as the “Other” (10). Its membership grew (to a peak of 150,000 by the mid-1950s),

and spread to Eastern Canada whilst spouting the slogan of “Canada First” (11). Regulations that supported Canadian industries were most welcome by the Native Sons, and in 1930 Secretary of the Ottawa Chapter, L.B Wright, pleased with the new maple syrup Act, wrote to then-Minister of Agriculture Hon. W.R. Motherwell about how “It is the consensus of our membership that this measure, besides protecting legitimate interests engaged in that line of manufacture, also protects that great unorganised body, the consuming public” (12). Motherwell politely acknowledged the Native Sons, and although the correspondence seemingly ends there, this endorsement of the *Maple Sugar Industry Act* does raise a curious eyebrow. It reminds us of how Canada was not, and is not, immune to protectionist and nativist elements, and a closer look at the stories behind every day foodstuffs can contribute to broader discussions on symbolism and meanings ascribed to these products, and the contexts in which they emerged before becoming established as a national iconic food.

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Notes

1. C. Bailin, “From Picaninny to Savage Brute: Racialized Images and African American stereotyping in turn-of-the-century American Advertising.” In Danielle Sarver Coombs and Bob Batchelor (Eds.) *We are what we sell: How advertising shapes American life...and Always Has* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2014), 87-101.
2. Maurice Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).
3. Hinrichs, C.C. and Allen, P. “Selective Patronage and Social Justice: Local Food Consumer Campaigns in Historical Context.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 21, 329–352 (2008).

4. Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 120-170.
5. Proctor, *Nazi War on Cancer*, 124; Heiko Stoff “Oestrogens and Butter Yellow: Gendered Policies of Contamination in Germany, 1930-1970” in: Teresa Ortiz-Gomes and Maria Santesmases (Eds.) *Gendered Drugs and Medicine: Historical and Socio-cultural Perspectives*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 23.
6. Brigit Ramsingh. “Liquid Gold: Tapping into the power dynamics of maple syrup supply chains.” *Dublin Gastronomy Symposium: Food and Power. DGS Proceedings*. 2018.
7. Anonymous. “Maple syrup is Menaced!” [Newspaper advertisement], Library and Archives Canada, c. 1928, RG 17 Vol 3217 Department of Agriculture No. 158–1. Ottawa.
8. Letter from George Cary to Mr. J.H. Grisdale, March 12, 1928, RG 17 Vol 3217 Department of Agriculture No. 158–1, Library and Archives Canada. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
9. *The Maple Sugar Industry Act and Regulations, 1931*, Ottawa: Published by the Department of Agriculture.
10. “The Native Sons of Canada” In: W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Canada*, Vol. IV, (Toronto, University Associates of Canada, 1948) p. 384; Forrest D. Pass, “The wondrous story and conditions of the country: The Native Sons of British Columbia and the Role of Myth in the Formation of an Urban Middle Class.” *BC Studies*, no. 51 (2006), 4.
11. Shirley Mair, “The Man who was too native for the Native Sons” *Macleans*, April 22, 1961.