



## Technology & Innovation

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### Birch Syrup: Premium Product in a Niche Market

By EduTransfer Design Associates Inc. & Haywire Creative

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Photo by Moose Meadows Farm



The emerging birch syrup industry in Canada is very small compared to the well-established sugar maple industry in eastern Canada. However, current demand far exceeds supply, so there is lots of room for expansion. "Birch trees grow everywhere in Canada,

from coast to coast to coast," says Heloise Dixon-Warren of Moose Meadows Farm in Quesnel, BC. "There is a huge potential for birch syrup production in Canada, and we expect this emerging industry to expand from the current 11 producers across Canada to many more."

For Dixon-Warren and her husband Ted Traer, both professional foresters, birch syrup production is just one part of their diversified operation. Traer, originally from New Brunswick, saw birch syrup as an option to bring the sugar bush tradition west. "Our goal is to 'farm with the seasons', and birch syrup adds a great component to our established agri-tourism operation," says Dixon Warren. The birch syrup industry is very labor intensive, but for a relatively modest investment offers a good diversification option for agriculture, agroforestry and agri-tourism producers.

"There is huge potential for the birch syrup industry, with demand far exceeding supply and prices as high as \$100 per litre."

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#### Birch Syrup Potential

Birch syrup is a premium product with prices averaging \$22 to \$25 per 250 ml bottle, and reaching as high as \$100 per litre. "Birch syrup has a bolder, caramel flavor that is very different than maple syrup," explains Dixon-Warren. Chefs love the unique flavor of birch syrup for gourmet cooking. "Birch syrup has a beautiful flavor with a wide range of uses, from desserts, baking and main dishes to beer, wine and spirit making." Birch sap includes beneficial components, such as vitamins, minerals, amino acids and proteins, and is consumed as a health beverage in some countries. "So far the health benefits are anecdotal, but we expect to see research that will substantiate these claims."

Compared to sugar maple, which has a ratio of 40 litres of sap to 1 litre of syrup, the ratio for birch is 80 to 120 litres of sap for every litre of birch syrup, requiring a longer evaporation process to achieve syrup. Another key difference is the sugars. In birch sap the sugars are primarily fructose and glucose, which have a much lower scorching temperature than sucrose, the primary sugar in sugar maple. "Therefore, the finishing process for birch syrup is quite finicky and more complex, but also results in a range of interesting flavors."

With an investment of about \$10,000, Moose Meadow Farm moved into full production in 2007. "We built a sugar shack for \$3,000 and bought a \$7,000 commercial evaporator," explains Dixon-Warren. "We tapped 165 birch trees for a final volume of about 40 litres of syrup." She notes their operation is quite small compared to others, some who tap upwards to 2000 trees. It takes three weeks in April of working 10-hour days to harvest the raw sap and move it to the shack in

large tanks. However, it's a family affair and an exciting, rewarding time. "It's also a great agri-tourism opportunity, as people are fascinated by the sugaring off process, which adds another value to our business."

### **Best Practices and Standards**

Dixon-Warren discovered there was little information available specific to birch syrup production in Canada, so in partnership with the Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation (QCEDC), developed the *Birch Syrup Production Manual*, the first of its kind in Canada. They were recognized in February 2008 with the first BC Investment Agriculture Foundation (IAF) Award of Excellence for Innovation in Agriculture and Agri-food.

This comprehensive manual includes sections on tree identification, sugar bush management, tapping guidelines, syrup processing and packaging, marketing and food safety. "We've developed best management practices for birch syrup that would provide some standardization for the industry," she explains. "We also identified some issues and gaps that need to be addressed." Unlike the maple syrup industry that is heavily regulated, to date there are no standards or regulations for birch syrup production.

"One of the most exciting things about the project was the enthusiasm of the producers and the willingness to share information and ideas," adds Dixon-Warren. "Based on this enthusiasm, we expect to see this emerging industry expand. The key to success is being a good marketer and approaching it as a business." For those interested in birch syrup production, QCEDC is holding a workshop on April 19 in Quesnel, BC, or to purchase a copy of the manual (\$40 plus shipping), link to: [www.quesnelinfo.com/birch.asp](http://www.quesnelinfo.com/birch.asp).

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