

Syrup producers still counting on nature

LAMBETH (Staff) — Good, sweet, maple syrup. What goes into it? Lots of work. And some help from Mother Nature.

About 125 maple syrup producers from the province's southwestern district met Thursday at the Greenhills Country Club in Lambeth to discuss new developments in the industry. The southwestern district is one of 12 districts across Ontario.

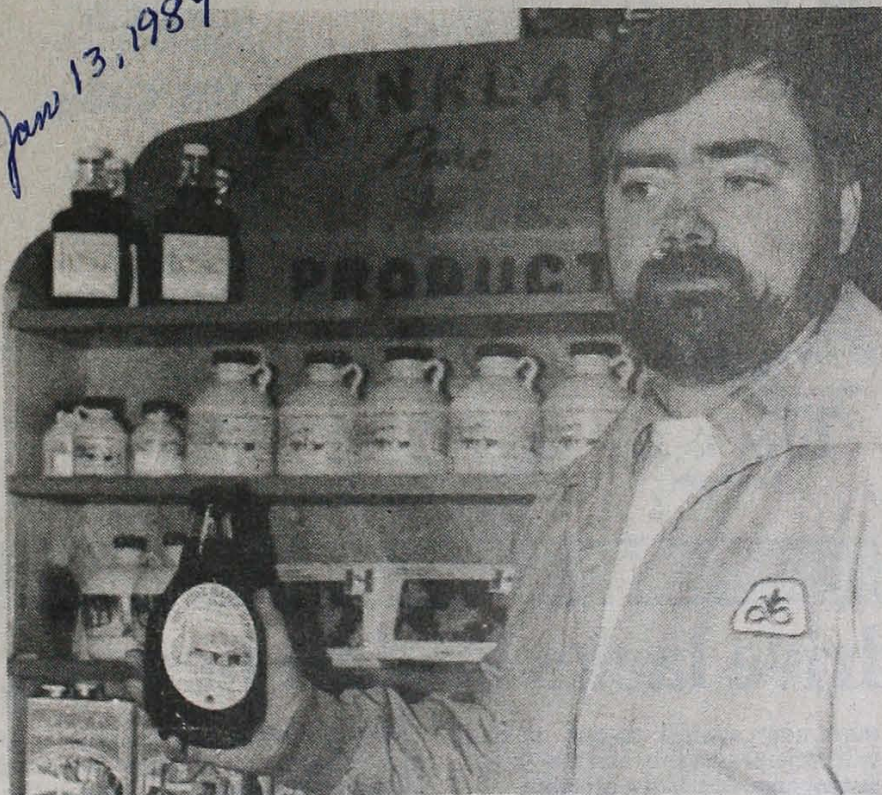
Bill Robinson, president of the Ontario maple syrup producers association has been making syrup for 20 years. Among the changes that he has seen are the decreasing number of producers.

"We have about 1,600 to 1,700 producers now where 20 years ago we had about 2,600. But we have about the same amount of trees. It's the technology that's improving."

He said the maple syrup industry is very precarious because of its dependency on the right weather conditions for success. The season begins in late winter, and runs for four to six weeks.

"The northeast part of North America is the only area in the world that has maple trees (for syrup). We have the world market. It's the combination of the climate and the four seasons," he said.

What's the process of making the syrup? The first step is to collect the sap from the trees to the sugar house when the weather warms and the sap runs. The ratio of sap to syrup is about 40:1. The sap is thin, barely sweet and colorless.



THE END PRODUCT — Mark Crinklaw, RR 4, London, shows maple syrup. Mr. Crinklaw has been in the maple syrup industry for 36 years. Southwestern Ontario producers met Thursday in Lambeth. —(T-J Photo).

The flow of sap is very unpredictable. The best sap runs usually occur after a night frost followed by a sunny day of about 5 degrees. He said most trees have one, two, or

three taps, depending on their size. Once in the sugar house, the excess water is taken out of the sap.

"This has been the most dramatic change we've seen in the industry. At

one time this process was accomplished by boiling. Now it is done with a reverse osmosis machine."

This machine filters the smaller water molecules, holding back larger sugar molecules and leaves a maple concentrate. This concentrate is then processed through an evaporator and filtered.

"It's the heating process which gives the syrup its unique flavor and color," Mr. Robinson said.

Different grades of syrup are made depending on the quality of sap and how long it's boiled and stored. Light syrup is processed as fast as possible. Heavier syrups are used for cooking and flavouring food products.

Mr. Robinson said the average number of taps on a maple syrup farm is 1,000, although there are some hobby farms with only 50 to 100. "There are a lot of producers who have other operations on their farm."

He said he enjoys making syrup despite its dependency on unpredictable weather conditions. "I'm not complaining. It's a lot of work, but you get out of it what you put in. The last two or three years have been good years."

The syrup is marketed in bulk among producers who package it into smaller quantities for individuals. "Here in Ontario it's all sold at the farm gate. Quebec has the market of the large supermarkets here in Ontario because they have a co-op to distribute it. They have the most trees," said Mr. Robinson.