

Food has historic roots

Consumers enjoy flavors from the past

TORONTO - The agriculture and food business in Ontario belongs to the 21st century: artificial insemination is standard on many Ontario farms; biotechnology is providing farmers with more, improved breeds of plants; and computers make farm management practises a great deal easier.

While the agriculture and food business in Ontario is thoroughly modern, some of the products it grows have histories which go back centuries, before Europeans ever landed or started to settle the wilderness of this vast province.

Perhaps the most important crop Europeans inherited from native Indians was corn - or maize - as it used to be known. Records from the 1600s show that the Huron Indians, accomplished agriculturalists, were growing nearly 190,000 bushels of corn a year, enough to feed more than 20,000 hungry mouths.

Corn was, and is, a versatile crop. The Indians used it to make bread, pudding, soup, and in the manner sometimes used today, roasted. The sweet corn we eat now, though, would not have been

planted by the Huron. It appeared as a genetic mutation in the early 1800s.

The market for sweet corn has changed dramatically in the last six years, with the advent of the supersweet varieties. These varieties are popular because, unlike all other corn, they do not convert sugar to starch. They have a sugar content of 30 to 45 per cent, compared to nine to 16 per cent in regular corn. As the name says, that makes them exceptionally sweet and gives them crisp, crunchy characteristics.

There are about 25 varieties of supersweet corn and because of their popularity, they now make up about 40 per cent of Ontario's sweet corn production.

High on the list of contemporary delicacies with a long past is wild rice, or as the Ojibway called it, Manomin. Wild rice is actually not rice at all, but a grain, and North America's only native cereal grain. The tall, ribbon-like grass grows in shallow waters and Ontario is one of the biggest producers of wild rice.

"The time of the wild rice moon"

- harvest - was an important social event for the Indians. The harvest method used then is still employed in some areas. Two people in a canoe glide among the plants, one paddling, the other beating the ripe stalks of rice into the canoe. Another harvest method involves use of speed heads, which are trays supported on the canoe bow and driven through the rice beds by an outboard motor. The stalks hit the edge of the speed head and the grains fall inside.

While in days past, the rice was processed in a colorful ritual, which involved dancing on the rice to remove the chaff, wild rice today is processed mechanically, and thousands of pounds can be handled in a single day.

Cranberries are another food harvested in wet areas, bogs to be precise. Ontario's native peoples depended on cranberries for a number of things. They used them for food in several ways, raw, dried or pounded into the legendary pemmican.

The juice of cranberries made an exceptional dye for cloth, and its acid quality gave it medicinal

qualities, as a poultice for wounds, for example.

In Ontario, cranberries still grow wild, but they are also cultivated commercially in several central Ontario bogs. While in days gone by, cranberries were harvested by hand with a wooden scoop, today they are picked mechanically.

In the wet harvest method, the bog is flooded and a small machine knocks the berries from the vines into the water. The berries float to the surface and are corralled to the shoreline with long booms.

Wild fruits, nuts and berries added variety, flavour and color to the Indian staples of corn, beans and squash. Acorns, chestnuts and walnuts were eaten as they were and were ground into flour. Besides cranberries, other favored berries included strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries and blueberries.

Some fruit, such as crab-apples, was preserved in that wonderful syrup which is practically synonymous with Canada - maple syrup. The technique for collecting the sap and converting into liquid

gold was learned from Canada's native people. Current techniques are based on the same principle of removing water from sap, but the equipment is different.

Historically, native people started the sap dripping by slashing the tree with an axe, and using a cedar shaving to direct the drip into the birch bark containers or hollow logs. They boiled the sap or heated stones over a fire, then plunged them into the sap to reduce the water content.

Today, collecting and evaporating equipment is made of steel or aluminum, and plastic tubing for collecting sap is also popular. In some operations, reverse osmosis machinery reduces the amount of time and energy spent boiling water out of the sap. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup.

The taste and high quality of Ontario's fine foods is now enjoyed world-wide. Little do contented consumers realize that as they relish the goods produced today, they are also enjoying a bit of Ontario's past.

Statistics recognize economic change

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OTTAWA - Flocks of Canadian "snowbirds" heading for Florida beaches in February - now there's a seasonal adjustment anyone who has lived through our winter can understand.

But seasonal adjustment and some of the other fine tuning that is done by statisticians can be somewhat less obvious.

The monthly report from Statistics Canada on how many people are employed or unemployed, for example, give the totals with the notation that they are seasonally adjusted. This means that certain big jumps or dips in these numbers, which recur on a regular basis, have been taken into account. Adjustments have been made to smooth out those abrupt peaks or valleys that would result if the raw numbers were plotted on a graph.

What sort of changes recur regularly? It's less true with today's techniques than it used to be years ago, but the construction industry still goes full blast in warm weather and eases off somewhat through the winter. Any business activity tied closely to tourism will have peak and off seasons. Students swell the employment rolls, and sometimes the ranks of the unemployed, each summer when they join the work force to earn back-to-school money.

Similar recurring factors which can lead to statistical adjustment are at work in other economic areas. For example, there's that huge bulge in retail sales generated during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Or the change in the number of "trading

days" from one month to the next. Five Sundays instead of the usual four can have quite an impact on many businesses.

What do these statistical adjustments achieve?

They could be compared to eliminating interference from a TV signal. With the static gone, other factors having an impact on the statistics - a quickening or a slackening in general economic activity, for example - will stand out and be identified. They won't be camouflaged by one of these regular seasonal variations.

Quick recognition of economic change is a must in today's complex business world. Seasonal and other statistical adjustments help ensure fast identification of such change. It becomes as easy to spot as that February mass migration of winter-weary Canadians.

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