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Laurier professor churns history of margarine and butter into book

Butter and margarine are welcomed to the kitchen table for their mild flavor, smooth texture, and melt-in-the-mouth quality. But their history in Canada has been marked by everything but. . . .

It has been churned with bootlegging and fraud, intensive lobbying by the rural vote, multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns, international trade agreements, Supreme Court decisions, and tales of horror starring margarine's ingredient list as villain.

Welf Heick, a professor of history at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., has chronicled the war between butter and margarine interests in A Propensity *to Protect: Butter, Margarine and the Rise of Urban Culture in Canada.*

Recently released by WLU Press, the 163-page book is the first full-scale study of the role of butter and margarine in Canada's history and probably that of any other country.

The book, which blends together politics, economics, sociology and technology, is the result of 10 years of research. Heick had set out to write a brief biography of the late William Daum Euler, a senator and MP for Waterloo North; but he became intrigued by Euler's papers that told of his crusade for an end to the prohibition against margarine.

Margarine, the name of which is derived from the Greek word for "pearl", was developed in France in the late 1800s to offset the large deficiency in the supply of fats in the diet of the poor, especially urban working-class people.

Instead of meeting the challenge of margarine through product innovation, the Canadian butter industry fought to create and maintain Canada's 1886 ban on margarine as a protection against deception of the consumer. The butter interests built on the public image of margarine as suspect to win support for the ban; they relied on the agrarian myth and the reputation of milk as the perfect food to bolster their own product.

"No other food has enjoyed such protection in the annals of the Canadian food history," writes Heick. He adds that Canada is one of very few national states to ban the product outright, rather than to control its use through taxes or regulations.

Temporarily lifted in 1917 to help meet wartime needs for food, the ban was reimposed in 1923 and ended only in 1948 under the pressure of a more urbanized society desiring a higher standard of living.

With responsibility shifted to the provincial level, some provinces prohibited manufacturers of margarine from adding color at the factory. And so, a generation of Canadians grew up kneading color capsules into margarine in a plastic bag.

Today, Ontario and Quebec are the exception with the controls they impose. Heick states that Ontario's regulations requiring color differentiation from butter are worth about $22 million a year to the industry or $3,000 for each dairy farmer in the province.

Margarine has become an alternative,-rather than substitute-food-primarily because of an expanding knowledge of nutrition and the margarine industry's versatility in meeting these new circumstances, writes Heick. "It is no longer the poor man's substitute for butter, but an alternative used by all classes."

In *A Propensity to Protect,* Heick says the butter industry may not be able to continue as a viable economic entity. Across Canada, supplies of industrial milk have not been able to meet the demand; the situation has forced the adoption of market sharing quotas and other devices to divide available supplies.

Heick says the dairy industry should concentrate on producing raw milk because raw milk cannot be substituted and it is the most profitable for the farmer.