



Learning by doing

It started as a hobby but Dick O'Brien has grown his maple syrup operation into a full time business, making maple products and selling supplies to others.

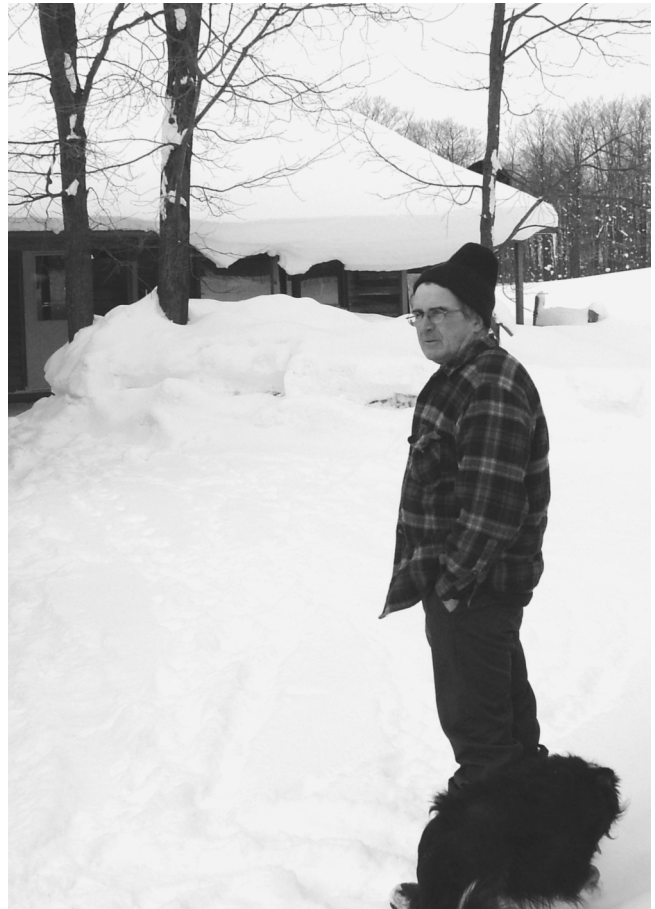
**Story and photos
by Keith Roulston**

It's mid-February and things are chaotic around Uncle Richard's showroom and production facility. It's perhaps appropriate to see Dick O'Brien's operation in the midst of an expansion program. There have been a lot of changes since he began tapping trees and making maple syrup for friends and family after buying a Durham-area farm 20 years ago.

Today Dick and Gale O'Brien have a 2500-tap maple syrup operation plus a supply business for maple syrup producers both large and small, but it all started as a hobby.

Buying the farm, he recalls, was his prescription to maintaining his sanity from his high-stress financial consulting job. Having bought the farm and realizing it was covered with maple trees, and being the entrepreneurial type, the idea of making maple syrup soon arose.

The early years, he recalls pointing over toward the bush, he boiled sap using a boiler made from a 45-gallon drum with the only shelter being a tarpaulin hung among the trees like a stadium with a retractable roof. Later he "expanded" to a boiler made from a 200-gallon oil tank with a tig-welded, stainless steel evaporator pan.



Dick O'Brien, seen above outside the show-room portion of his operation, has come a long way from the time he boiled sap over 45-gallon drum made into a boiler. Today Uncle Richard's make syrup from 2500 taps and sells syrup-making supplies to others.

That stainless-steel pan was an example of the willingness of O'Brien to adapt new technology. Back then most pans were lead-soldered but today nearly all pans are made from stainless steel that is tig-welded or silver-soldered.

"We have always used stainless-steel, welded equipment around here," he says.

Maple syrup making was a weekend activity back in the early days. He clearly recalls the moment he made the decision to abandon his makeshift arrangements for syrup production as he struggled to carry a big old pressure cooker filled with syrup that wasn't quite finished, from the bush to the road.

"I finally said 'fish or cut bait'," he laughs and decided it was time to get more serious about making syrup. He built the original sugar house. Since then there have been a number of expansions, continuing until the addition of what is now the show room in 2002. That room was filled with containers until the current renovation which will make it into a showroom to sell supplies and equipment to other producers and maple products for visiting consumers. "We've been trying to get in here," he says but it took evicting the tractor from the implement shed to make room for storing the containers to finally get the renovation underway.

In the background workers are scurrying about, insulating a room to house the reverse osmosis machines which remove water from the sap, and making other changes to help the syrup-making part of the operation run smoothly. The show room now includes a wide selection of stainless steel fittings and well as pumps, gauges and other supplies for making syrup and a selection of their own maple products.

The O'Briens operate about 2,500 taps on a 112 acres, not all of it tappable. They also have another property they lease which they hope to tap in future.

In general you can get 80-100 taps per acre, he says, though he advises people new to the industry to figure on 75-85. "I'm sort of conservative in some respects and an optimist in others."

Asked how much syrup he makes

O'Brien chuckles. "As much as the trees will give us," he says. Like most crops, yield vary. While the rule of thumb is that each tap will yield a litre of syrup, last year saw only about 50 per cent of normal. In other, really good, years that yield might be 125 per cent of normal.

Most of their maple products are marketed directly to customers. Gale has been responsible for getting them into selling at a lot of craft shows. "We're are most the top juried shows," Dick says.

Gale and their son spent seven days at the Royal Winter Fair this year selling their products. They've also done the Sportsman's Show for years.

They also market to such high-end customers as a couple of wineries in Niagara and The Old Mill restaurant in Toronto.

O'Brien is past president of the Ontario Maple Syrup Producers' Association and was president at the time the Seal of Quality designation was being introduced. The O'Briens' own operation has gone through the quality assurance steps necessary to become a Seal of Quality producer.

Back in the early days the maple syrup went mostly to friends and relatives and they called it "Uncle Dick's maple syrup". When he got more serious about marketing and began to think about labels, he suggested he use the name Uncle Dick's but he was advised to at least make it a little classier as Uncle Richard's. When he expanded into equipment, the name transferred there too.

It was five years ago that he got into the equipment side of the operation, taking over a small dealership in the area. He'd decided to take semi-retirement from his other job and make the operation full-time.

Producers seeking equipment in the past had to go to dealers in Collingwood and Orillia to get supplies.

"We provide supplies for the bigger producers, but what I found (as a producer) is that there was virtually no one around who made syrup who was a dealer who I could go to and get some really good advice from. I've already made most of the mistakes — though I'll

probably make more — and we're able to sit and talk to the smaller producer."

"One of our keys is we've made a lot of syrup. We've done a lot of work, knowing the problems making syrup. We still make syrup so we still learn.

"We probably watch production trends very intensely because we are producers as well."

O'Brien thinks the Ontario maple industry is very healthy. More people are taking up syrup-making as a hobby. The great thing about making syrup is that you can decide how big you want to be all the way from tapping a few trees for your own use to being a commercial producer, he says. You can design your operation to suit your own bush, unlike, say, dairy, when there are industry-wide regulations that must be followed.

As an equipment supplier he asks people what they want to do, both now and in five or 10 years time. He knows the decisions he made along the way that led to his expansion and he can talk to new producers about that process.

One of the big concerns among producers is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) requirement for nutritional labeling on food products. The issue isn't well understood, O'Brien says. Producers who sell through their own retail area or through farmers markets and craft shows, don't have to label their products.

Only those selling through retailers must label, and even then they're exempt unless they have over \$1 million in sales. If the retailer asks for labeling, however, the producer must provide them.

Even there, the Maple Syrup Producers Association has done the homework for producers, to get inexpensive approved labels. It had 1,100 samples of syrup across the province analyzed and a standard label was approved by CFIA based on the findings of testing. These labels are available from dealers like O'Brien.

"Just another one of those things an association does for an industry and more people in that industry don't understand their association does anything for them," he says philosophically.

The biggest headache with the labeling regulations is a complicated formula that requires a label to be a certain percentage of the overall surface of the container. Since there are so many different maple syrup containers getting standard labels is a problem.

Despite these headaches O'Brien isn't totally unhappy with nutritional labeling because maple is such a healthy product. His products used to have their own nutritional label that listed all the healthy properties of maple syrup such as being a good source of iron, potassium, magnesium, phosphorous and vitamins B2, B5, B6 and niacin plus having as much calcium as the equivalent amount of milk. (New labeling regulations meant that these ingredients must be listed in order of their percentage of the make-up of the syrup so they had to stop using their old labels.)

"Most people have no idea all those things are in maple syrup."

Naturopaths who put patients on a fast allow them to add maple syrup to their water because it gives them the elements to sustain themselves through the fast, O'Brien says.

O'Brien has also taken a lot of pleasure in innovation over the years. He does a lot of research into what others are doing. Through that he discovered the use of "sap ladders" which can lift sap eight to 10 feet uphill in vacuum systems.

Unhappy with the use of chlorine to clean sap lines (both for health concerns and also because squirrels bite into the lines to get at the salt of the chlorine solution) he discovered a system that uses a pump and an air compressor to create a surge cleaning system that uses only water.

"I've done a lot of experimenting," he says. Frustrated by the complicated filter-press systems used in the industry with multiple paper filters that must be inserted between plates of the filter, he worked to develop a stainless steel circular filter system with one simple filter that can be reused or easily replaced. He now offers these for sale.

It's all a lot different from those early days under a tarp in the bush, boiling sap over a boiler made from a 45-gallon drum.◇