

Review of:

The Meanings of Maple: An Ethnography of Sugaring

Michael A. Lange. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2017. Pp. xxxix + 191, preface, acknowledgments, introduction, epilogue, b&w images, notes, bibliography, index.

Review by: Lucy M. Long

Maplesugaring is the tapping of sap from trees, then condensing that sap into syrup, usually by boiling. Although a variety of trees can be used, sugar maples (*Acer saccharum*) are preferred, and those grow naturally in certain locations, such as Vermont, where the process is intertwined with the state's history, economy, and identity. In *The Meanings of Maple: An Ethnography of Sugaring*, Michael A. Lange explores these intersections and offers an in-depth look into why maplesugaring is a meaningful representation of the state. In doing so, he demonstrates how scholarly theories are used as lenses to shed light on a subject, and how that subject then can be used to illustrate, challenge, and refine theories.

Among those concepts are some that are particularly problematic in discussions of tradition, such as authenticity, commodification, heritage, and meaning itself. An important point Lange makes is that maplesugaring holds multiple layers of meanings rather than a singular one, and these layers overlap and impact each other. In this way, Lange illustrates the dynamic and constructed nature of meaning as well as the richness of maple as a signifier for a food product, a way of life, an occupational skill, an ethos, and a cultural identity. The fact that it has also become a highly effective motif for marketing and tourism has intensified those meanings, rather than diluted them, as some cultural critics might contend.

Lange bases the book on extensive ethnographic research, enabling him to present views of the sugarers, as they are called, in their own words. It also allows him to explore the ways in which individuals work within a larger community, and the sometimes messiness of defining that community and deciding who has the power and right to represent it. By acknowledging those issues, the book stays away from the romanticization of the place and the tradition that is frequently seen in popular representations.

The organization of the book reflects the multiple meanings of maplesugaring, with each chapter introducing larger theoretical questions that are then explored through ethnographic data. The Introduction sets a personal tone by describing Lange's brother's involvement in the tradition. It also neatly states the purpose of the book: "I want to delve into the many and varied ways that humans make meaning with the objects and processes in their lives" (xv).

The first of six chapters starts with economic meanings of maple. Lange points out that economics is not just about money; it is a system of exchange of social and cultural resources as well as products and labor. Within this framework, the bulk operations now

characterizing the packaging, distribution, and marketing of maple syrup are still considered aspects of a local economy because their scale is personal and individual.

Chapter 2 addresses culinary meanings, relying heavily on work by Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann on the contemporary “foodies” movement (2010, for example). Other forces at play in current interest in and support for maple syrup could be explored more here, and contextualization within the regional foodways ethos and aesthetic would also help explain what Lange identifies as local preferences for a lighter, more delicate syrup. He compares that preference to the French notion of terroir, the concept of food tasting of the place in which it was produced. He also adds an interesting description of other culinary traditions associated with the sugarhouse (the structure where sap is boiled into syrup), such as smoking bear meat, drinking sap, and frying eggs.

Chapter 3 follows with geographic meanings and the significance of Vermont as a physically bounded space, both legally and culturally. Physical motifs—the maple leaf and the state outline—publicly emphasize that place-based significance and mobilize it for marketing. Lange might also have addressed the customary shapes of containers frequently employed in packaging, since they are commonly used in the US for marketing moonshine, apple cider, and other “old-timey” styled foods, evoking similar meanings to those attached to the syrup in Vermont. The chapter ends with an analysis of a carving of Vermont’s outline from taphole maple (wood showing the holes made by taps) as demonstrating the inseparability of place, maple, and Vermont in the minds of sugarers as well as tourists.

Ecological meanings of maple are explored in Chapter 4 from the perspectives of three types of ecological thought: preservation, conservation, and sustainability. Lange sees sugarmakers as upholding the latter two, partly because their involvement in sugaring requires immersion in the physical world surrounding the trees. He describes a recently developed technology using younger trees and allowing for “plantations” of maples to highlight sugarers’ traditional attitudes but discusses how the new way “violates the Vermont sense of ecological awareness” (101) and threatens sugaring’s traditional ethos. Lange calls for a more holistic cultural ecology that recognizes the meanings given by people to interactions with the natural environment.

Chapters 5 and 6 complement each other, the first focusing on agricultural meanings, and the second on heritage meanings. Historically, sugarmakers were also farmers; they capitalized on what grows and had to be cognizant of nature’s cycles. While outsiders might see tapping sap as a form of gathering, the people doing it perceive of it as agriculture—they tend the trees and process the sap, challenging academic dichotomies between hunter-gatherers and farmers as well as popular assumptions that romanticize sugaring. Heritage in Vermont is commonly related to its agricultural history since small-scale agriculture has supported the state’s economy and shaped its culture. Lange discusses heritage as a question of what is considered “proper” (perhaps alluding to anthropologist Mary Douglas?) as well as property, which implies a sense of ownership and stewardship of the sugaring tradition. The book ends with a brief epilogue on maple as a vehicle for the state’s identity, both externally and internally.

The Meanings of Maple offers much food for thought and “is good to think,” as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss might say. It is an excellent foundation for examining scholarship relevant to food from both social science and humanities

perspectives. Lange's approach of starting with theories, then applying them to ethnographic data, then using that data to comment on the theories makes the volume useful for classroom teaching, although perhaps not as accessible to general readers who might find some discussions too nuanced or "philosophical." The book would pair nicely with other work on the meanings of food—folklorist Kathy Neustadt's study *Clambake* of the New England food event comes to mind. Overall, *Meanings of Maple* makes an insightful contribution to the scholarly exploration of the meanings of food, illustrating how meaning is intertwined with behaviors and attitudes. Perhaps more significantly, Lange demonstrates that understanding how meanings are constructed and used is crucial to understanding how and why some traditions not only endure, but also sustain local environments, economies, and cultures.

References Cited:

Johnston, Josée, and Shyon Baumann. 2010. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. New York: Routledge.

Neustadt, Katherine D. 1992. *Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.