



BC's AGRI-FOOD

Update



Honourable Pat Bell
Minister of Agriculture and Lands

Featuring News From the Agriculture Sector of B.C.'s Ministry of Agriculture and Lands

DECEMBER 2005

FROM THE DESK OF PAT BELL

Christmas will soon be upon us and with the sparkling lights of a B.C.-grown Christmas tree amid colourful B.C. poinsettias, it's a great time to reflect on the highlights of the past year, for the agriculture and agri-food industry, and on a personal level.

Probably the best day of 2005 occurred in August when the first shipment of B.C. cattle after the BSE crisis crossed the border into the U.S. just south of Osoyoos.

While the BSE crisis was an economic disaster, it served as a wake-up call for the industry and I believe we're seeing some good come from amidst the chaos. It taught us that we shouldn't place so much reliance on the U.S. market. It taught us that we should increase our slaughter and processing capacity here in B.C.

For the poultry industry, it was a time for recovering from the avian influenza outbreak of 2004. We learned a lot about the value of increased bio-security protocols and were able to apply those lessons to the recent outbreak at Fraser Valley duck farms.

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The Sweetness of Success

There's a popular truism that states: If life serves you lemons; make lemonade. It would follow that if it's birch trees; make birch syrup.

That was the simple philosophy that drove Kim McIvor to create and market a product that has had phenomenal success and launched her in a part-time career as a public speaker telling the inspirational story of how she pursued the idea of perfecting the taste of birch syrup.



Entrepreneur Kim McIvor with a bottle of her Sugar Spring Classic Birch Syrup.

On Oct. 21, she was honoured for her achievement when she was presented the Innovator of the Year Award at the Northern B.C. Today's Woman Awards banquet in Prince George. Pat Bell, MLA for Prince George North and Minister of Agriculture and Lands presented the award and congratulated McIvor on her success. Nominated for the award by Quesnel's Community Futures Development Corporation, the honour highlights this rural woman's quest to succeed. Earlier, Kim and her partner, Pete Thumand, had won the Quesnel Chamber of Commerce's Best Home Based Business of the Year Award.

The idea of making syrup from birch sap evolved after the couple bought a 100-acre property on the west bank of the Fraser River near the hamlet of Marguerite, about a 60-kilometre drive south of Quesnel. The benchland property has natural springs with clear water, fertile soil and lots of large, beautiful paper birch trees (also known as white birch); more than a thousand of them.

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On a personal level, I was gratified in May when the voters of Prince George North returned me to the ranks of government. And it's no secret that I was extremely pleased to be named B.C. Minister of Agriculture and Lands in June.

Dealing every day with the vital business of producing safe and sustainable food is a responsibility I relish. Of course, it wouldn't be possible without the patient and unflagging co-operation and hard work of each and every employee of the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and the people at the various agencies and organizations that support them.

During this festive season, I urge you and your families to take time to relax and enjoy some of the traditional delicacies associated with the season that are grown and produced right here in B.C.: delicious turkey or ham, all the vegetable trimmings, including B.C.-grown cranberries and of course, some of B.C.'s excellent award-winning wines.

On behalf of my family and myself, I wish each and every one of you a Merry Christmas and good fortune in the coming year.

Pat Bell

Minister of Agriculture and Lands

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Ministry of
Agriculture and Lands

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They knew that making birch syrup was possible because they'd read about the practice in rural areas of Russia but the secret eluded them. Their efforts evaporating the sap resulted in an unpalatable, bitter concoction. After many unsuccessful attempts they learned the secret. Where maple sap consists of almost 100 per cent sucrose sugar, birch is almost completely fructose. Sucrose will change form in the syrup-making process (allowing the creation of maple candy, etc) while fructose will burn once it gets past a certain state.

Once the couple had a product they knew was right, they bottled it and started the job of marketing it. Kim hit the farmers market circuit, giving away samples of the syrup on vanilla ice cream. She says she has given away more than 100,000 samples in the six years of her involvement and almost everyone likes the product, which she describes as "a very delicate and fine caramel-flavoured nectar."

Kim says the support she received in launching the product and creating a market for it was excellent. Peter Fofonoff, resource stewardship agrologist in MAL's Williams Lake office, was especially helpful, she said. The city of Quesnel began presenting small bottles of the syrup to visiting dignitaries.



Birch Place Farm is now producing between 6,000 and 7,000 bottles of varying sizes each year. They sell briskly at \$6 for a 125 ml bottle and \$15 for 375 ml. Gross sales are more than \$30,000 a year and that income is produced within the 25-to-30-day window while the sap is running. "You can't allow the sap to sit around very long once it's collected," said Kim. "Otherwise it starts to ferment." That fact gave the couple another brainstorm. Soon they were experimenting with a new product from their natural birch plantation – birch wine. It's a white wine, quite dry and Kim says people seem to like it. They have applied for a cottage winery licence.

Lately Kim has been leaving Pete at the farm "to keep the home fires burning" while she delivers her message as a motivational speaker. She was one of the featured speakers at the Concept to Commerce Conference sponsored by the BC Functional Food and Nutraceutical Network and the BC Food Processors Association in Prince George on Nov. 15. And earlier in the fall, she was a featured guest speaker at the B.C. Wilde event at Royal Roads University in Colwood.