

Commodity battleground

Once upon a time, European nations used to fight over borders, crowns, colonies and territory. The 12 members of the Common Market are still at each other's throats, but today they are fighting to the death over artichokes, grapes, wheat and olives.

Almost every country has a serious agricultural surplus. Denmark, with more cows than people, is awash in unsold milk. France and Germany have mountains of unused wheat. Spain and Portugal — the newest members — will now add billions of gallons to the existing "wine sea" of surplus French and Italian wines.

Each European nation coddles, indulges and subsidizes its well-off, politically powerful farmers — a process also painfully familiar in the U.S. and Canada. Any industry that is subsidized produces mounting surpluses. Just how to deal with these surpluses has mightily vexed the Common Market for the past two decades.

Members of the European Economic Community (EEC) — the more proper title — have spent uncountable hours wrangling over who can produce what, how many and at what price. The resulting negotiations are so monumentally boring and complex that, by comparison, they make Ontario elections look exciting.

Greeks withdrew veto

The entry of Spain and Portugal into the EEC last week was almost vetoed by the Greeks. They finally withdrew their veto of Spanish and Portuguese entry after getting nearly \$2.6 billion in baksheesh from the EEC. Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou claimed that cheap olives and tomatoes from Iberia would undermine Greek farmers; some Spaniards suggested Greece leave the EEC and go and join Libya.

Last year the French Navy opened fire on a Spanish fishing vessel that may have been affronting France's glory by stealing its sardines. The Icelanders and British have regular maritime clashes, replete with ramming and gunfire, over North Sea herring beds. French farmers recently attacked convoys of Spanish wine and olive oil, pouring millions of gallons into the ground.

Such reports bring tears to the eyes of those, like myself, who have had to buy olive oil or French wines at the LCBO. In Europe, they can't give the stuff away but here in Canada our "consumer-oriented" government manages to make such necessities of civilized living seem like liquid gold.

The issue of wine has caused some very sour grapes among EEC members. The French routinely accuse the Italians of exceeding agreed quotas. The French, who harbor deep distrust of anyone else who makes wine, keep referring darkly to the Great Wine Scandal of a decade ago, when the crafty Italians were caught red-footed making "wine" from a seething mixture of banana juice, ox blood and industrial chemicals, all blended in the holds of oil tankers. One suspects that some ersatz wine still finds its way past LCBO censors.

Such dreary squabbling has important political effects. British consumers nearly rioted in the streets when swinish EEC officials, the type who

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ate only croissants for breakfast, ordered that the price of English bacon go way up lest German pig farmers be hurt. "Who won the war?" demanded the Brits.

The answer is the French, who have replaced the Germans as Europe's most aggressive people — not over borders, mind you, but over the far more serious matter of food. The French nearly went to war with Denmark over "Danish Bleu Cheese" and were ready to blockade Spain's ports over attempts by the Iberians to label their bubbly wine, "champagne." Even Hitler did not dare call "Sekt," Germany's bubbly, by the sacred name of champagne.

Now Europe's members are forming battle lines over octopus from Spain, sardines from Morocco, Algerian wine disguised as French "vin de table" and exported to such rubes as Ontario; and endives from Belgium. Secret talks are now under way over foie gras as France defends its overstuffed goose livers against invaders from Germany and Holland.

While Americans and Russians use spy satellites to check one another's missile silos, Europeans use teams of inspectors to spy on their neighbor's vineyards and orchards. Woe to he who exceeds his acreage quota for white grapes or figs. The French keep an eagle-eyed watch on Sicilian vineyards, ever wary of a vinous surprise first strike from the aggressive Italians.

Diplomats argue & barter

I have met a few diplomats who have dealt with these negotiations. All are old before their time. Late into the night they argue and barter: "We'll lower our quota 1.7% on small artichokes if you will raise your price by 3.54% on macaroni. But your small artichokes are 2 cm. larger than our medium artichokes. Aha! Well, your macaroni is not really macaroni at all but penne. No, no, a hundred times no. Our penne is 3.1 cm long — and your macaroni only 72% durum flour while ours is ..." and so forth, year after tortured year.

Not all is gloom, however. Sometimes the EEC takes action. In response to the mammoth dairy surplus, European dairy farmers began killing milk cows. But this added over one million pounds of beef to the huge meat surplus. The EEC then tried to unload the beef in Asia, but only succeeded in enraging beef-exporting Australia which threatened to ban imports of EEC manufactured goods. So now all the frozen meat joins the mountains of butter, eggs, wheat, wine, olive oil and tomatoes.

How to solve this mounting problem that threatens the future of a united Europe? Probably the only way is for each European to eat a fourth meal each day, gain 20 extra pounds and so use up some of this awesome food surplus.