



FOOD & WINE

YES, WE cran!



THE STORY BEHIND MASSACHUSETTS' DAZZLING CRIMSON STATE BERRY

Story by Carol Goodman Kaufman
Photo by Allan Jung

Just as Kraft used to advertise their chewy caramels with the slogan, “It wouldn’t be autumn without ‘em,” it wouldn’t be fall — or winter — in New England without cranberries. Those tart little orbs that we turn into relish, jelly, pies, and cobblers, and string together with popcorn into garlands, provide a much-needed splash of scarlet to our typically gray winters, as well as a delightful zing to our menus. They are so beloved in Massachusetts, in fact, that the cranberry is our official state berry, and its juice the official state beverage.

But where did this delicious and nutritious fruit, relative of both the blueberry and huckleberry, come from? Back when the Ice Age glaciers were receding, they left huge craters in the earth, chock full of sand, clay, and other debris that formed the perfect growing medium. But that was only half the needed formula. Wet and marshy bogs provided the high

moisture necessary for cranberries to thrive. Those two requirements made only certain parts of the Northeast and Pacific Northwest amenable to growing the wild berry. But grow they did, in vast quantities. Here in Massachusetts, the vines spread through Cape Cod, the South Shore, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket.

Early uses

The bogs and marshes in early America were so large that Native Americans were able to harvest cranberries without having to cultivate them. In our neck of the woods, the Narragansett people used cranberries both for pemmican (a long-keeping dried meat or fish paste combined with melted tallow and berries) and for the beautiful red dye used in the weaving of rugs and blankets. Medicine men also used the berries in traditional healing rituals to fight a variety of ills, such as fever, sea sickness, and arrow wounds.

CRANBERRY APPLE CRISP WITH PISTACHIOS

Although the bulk of every cranberry crop today goes straight to the processor for canned sauce, juice, and dried berries (aka Craisins), there remains a big market for the fresh fruit that many of us prefer to use in our favorite holiday recipes. This is one of mine. The pistachios add great texture and a bit of protein to this dessert, perhaps lessening the guilt of overindulging.

6 Granny Smith apples, peeled and sliced

4 cups fresh cranberries

2 cup sugar

6 tablespoons all-purpose flour

Topping:

¾ cup shelled pistachios

1½ cup all-purpose flour

1 cup granulated sugar

½ cup packed brown sugar

1½ sticks unsalted butter, melted

Preheat oven to 350°. Combine apples, cranberries, sugar and flour. Pour into a well-greased 9”x13” baking dish. In a bowl, mix topping ingredients. Squeeze handfuls of topping together and coarsely crumble in chunks over the filling. Bake for 50-55 minutes or until fruit is tender and bubbling. Serves 10-12.

Native Americans so revere the fruit that they have commemorated the annual harvest of the wild berry for around 12,000 years. Today, the Aquinnah Wampanoags of Martha’s Vineyard celebrate Cranberry Day on the second Tuesday of October. October, by the way, is National Cranberry Month.

Now, not all cranberries are alike. The berry that we know and love here in New England is the *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, aka the large cranberry because it is, well, larger than the variety found in Central and Northern Europe. It is also juicier than its small cousin.

So, early colonists were not unfamiliar with cranberries, but they only knew the smaller, drier, and less tasty

European variety. That is, until 1550 when explorer James White Norwood wrote, in what is perhaps the first written reference to American cranberries, that when he first came ashore in “the land of Virginia,” Native Americans greeted him with birch bark containers filled with the crimson berries. The gift obviously made enough of an impression that he saw fit to chronicle the occasion in his diary.

The Pilgrims named the fruit “crane berry” because they believed the dark pink blossom on the plant resembled the head of the Sandhill Crane, a large wading bird. Over time the name was shortened. The earliest account of Pilgrims harvesting cranberries appears in 1633. But it wasn’t until 1816 that Revolutionary War veteran Captain Henry Hall became the first colonist to cultivate cranberries, which he did on Cape Cod.

An astute farmer, Hall observed that sand blowing over his bogs stimulated the berries’ growth, so he began to spread sand over the vines. The harvest on his Dennis farm was so successful that he was soon producing enough cranberries to ship as far as Boston and New York. Seeing his success, growers began copying his method of spreading sand over their own bogs. Before long,

farmers began cultivating cranberries as far away as Oregon and Washington State.

Declining crops

The cranberry plant depends on bees for pollination. Unfortunately, the population of native bees that is indispensable to the health of the crop is declining globally. Agricultural expansion, habitat loss, and climate change all threaten to harm the bees’ environment, making their situation even more dire than that of the much-publicized plight of honey bees.

The numbers tell the story.

Of the four largest cranberry growing states (Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and Wisconsin), all but New Jersey have seen significant decreases in crop yields. And although Massachusetts still produces an eye-popping 15,000 pounds of cranberries per acre, making it the state’s largest agricultural export, farmers witnessed a 15% reduction in yield per acre just between 2019 and 2021.

While there is no evidence that the colonists ever prepared pemmican, they did adapt the cranberry to the dishes they had enjoyed in Europe, such as in stuffing and puddings. In fact, cook-

books published as early as the 17th century included recipes for cranberry sauce, juice, and pies. One particular Englishman, John Josselyn, referred to cranberries in his 1671 book *New England’s Rarities*, discovered in *Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, and Plants of That Country*, writing that “the Indians and English use them much, boiling them with Sugar for Sauce to eat with their Meat; and it is a delicate Sauce, especially for roasted mutton. Some make tarts with them as with Goose Berries.”

As anybody who has ever tried to bite into a fresh cranberry knows, straight from the bog it is highly acidic, making the addition of sugar a necessity for any recipe. On the other hand, the high Vitamin C count makes the cranberry an excellent prophylaxis for ailments ranging from scurvy to urinary tract infections.

They also have loads of benzoic acid, a natural preservative, making storage — and shipping — economically feasible. One Samuel Hearne documented the process in his book *A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort in Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean*, and even mentioned the shipments’ ultimate destination. “They ... are annually sent to England in considerable quantities as presents, where they are much esteemed.” ■



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