

I Am THE
**FOOD
 ON YOUR
 PLATE**



Cranberries

A Healthy Fruit Celebrates Its Holiday

BY *Kate Lowenstein*
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A CRANBERRY LIKE me thinks of itself as the self-sufficient type. Millennia ago, as one of a handful of fruits native to North America (along with blueberries and Concord grapes), I eked out an existence in the sandy, acidic, waterlogged soil of glacier-formed bogs and other inhospitable spots in the continent's colder regions. In an environment that many plants would have found impossible, my shrubby vines flourished, my little green fruits turning white, then pink, then red as autumn deepened toward winter.

Native Americans picked my wild berries, eating them dried with deer meat, mashing them into antibacterial poultices for wound healing, and transforming the red skins into dye. When the Europeans arrived, my vitamin C helped them avoid scurvy.

Even after I became a cultivated crop (circa 1816), better-nourished modern humans benefited from the antioxidants in my skins and flesh, which offer anticancer, anti-heart disease, and antibacterial properties. I also help prevent urinary tract infections, thanks to my unusual abundance of chemicals called proanthocyanidins, which keep bacteria from sticking to the tract's inner surface.

Despite these attributes, my fame could have remained limited. After all, my raw flesh is an acquired taste, to say the least—so tart and tannic that it takes more than a small amount of sugar to make me palatable. I might



have been a mere novelty that shows up at the farmers market for a short season—the way, say, gooseberries or fiddlehead ferns do, stumping home cooks unfamiliar with how to incorporate them into a meal.

But in 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln was desperate to offer his war-torn country a small note of unity, he declared Thanksgiving a holiday (before then, it had been celebrated irregularly, on different days in different regions). When Gen. Ulysses Grant ordered Thanksgiving dinner for the troops the following year, he put cranberry sauce on his precedent-setting menu. With that, my place on the holiday table was cemented. I can only imagine what would have happened had he picked applesauce instead.

My sauce, by the way, nicely illustrates my self-sufficiency: Many other

THE SIMPLEST SAUCE RECIPE

Put your cranberries in a lidded pot. Add half an inch of water at the bottom, then a generous dose of sugar—one cup per 12-ounce bag of cranberries. Put the lid on and bring the water to a boil; when the steam starts to break things down, uncover the pot and stir occasionally. Cook until the sauce is at your desired consistency: If it gets too thick, add water; if it's not sweet enough, add sugar; if it's too sweet, add lemon juice at the end to balance. Season with a pinch of salt. To get fancier, start the cooking process with orange peel that you remove later, or add grated or finely minced fresh ginger. You can also sprinkle in cinnamon, clove, star anise, or tarragon, or spike the sauce with jalapeño or hot red chili pepper.

fruits require careful additions of pectin and acid to properly render them into jams and jellies—which is what this “sauce” really is—but I already contain enough of those two things. So with only water and sugar, any kitchen rube can easily cook me into a condiment that adds zing to an otherwise heavy holiday meal. I am the training wheels for the novice jam maker.

For decades, I enjoyed the spotlight during those six holiday weeks when 95 percent of cranberry sales took place. That would have been my lot forevermore if it hadn't been for the great cranberry scare of 1959, when the federal government announced that a crop from the Pacific Northwest had

been contaminated with a weed killer. With Thanksgiving two weeks away, my annual cameo was in grave danger. The two people running for president, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, appeared before the press to sip my juice and eat my sauce in an effort to assuage the nation's jitters. "Well, we have both eaten them, and I feel fine," Kennedy said, continuing drolly, "but if we both pass away, I feel I shall have performed a great public service by taking the vice president with me."

Sadly for me, the damage had been done. Even President Dwight Eisenhower skipped cranberry sauce that year. He ate applesauce instead.

The scare woke up the cranberry growers, the majority of which were (and still are) part of a cooperative of hundreds of small farms called Ocean Spray. There was a clear need to diversify, so Ocean Spray started promoting the cranberry in forms unconnected to the holidays. That's how cranberry juice cocktail, cran-apple juice, cran-grape juice, and eventually a

dried-cranberry snack called Craisins took off. The ubiquity of these products transformed me from a holiday specialty to a year-round staple, landing me in granola bars, boxed cereals, and even cocktails such as the cosmo.

My unlikely success story isn't without its kinks. There's currently a serious oversupply of cranberry crop, due to Americans buying less juice. And climate change is rendering the warm days and chilly nights of a northeastern autumn closer to a thing of the past. When temps aren't cool enough at night, I don't ripen as effectively.

Am I self-sufficient enough to weather changing market demand and shifting climate conditions? Only time will tell, but if you put your money on a persevering sourpuss that has overcome its share of challenges, I wouldn't blame you for a minute. **R**

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How Swede Is It?

Pop quiz: Which of these three didn't originate in Sweden?

1. ABBA. 2. IKEA. 3. Swedish meatballs.

The answer came in this tweet from none other than the Swedish government:

"Swedish meatballs are actually based on a recipe King Charles XII brought home from Turkey in the early 18th century. Let's stick to the facts!"

The truth dismayed many Swedes, including one who tweeted in response, "My whole life has been a lie."