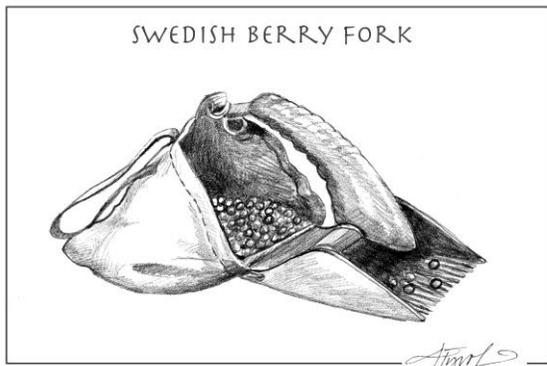


The Outside Story



The Color of Cranberries

By: Tim Traver

As a kid fidgeting at my grandmother's Thanksgiving table, I often wondered, what's the point of cranberries? She had a live-in Irish cook who insisted on serving whole cranberries suspended in a kind of gelatinous inverted bog. If I ventured to eat a berry I experienced the power of my gag reflex.

How times change! The humble American cranberry, *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, in my opinion, is worthy of a downright *homage*. I am a fan. Yes, cranberries are tart, sour, and even bitter, but that makes them both good food and strong medicine. The Wampanoag called them *ibimi*, meaning sour or bitter berries. They crushed them into animal fats and dried deer meat to make pemmican, a food full of energy and vitamin C for long winter trips. Mariners brought them on sea voyages to fend off scurvy. According to passed down knowledge, the Algonquin used the leaves of cranberry to treat bladder infections, arthritis, and diabetes-related circulation problems.

I became interested in cranberries when I discovered them growing above the tree line in the White Mountains years ago. These are mountain cranberries, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*. Smaller than their cousin *macrocarpon*, and nestled in with crowberry, bilberry, dwarfed birches and other alpine specialists, *V. vitis-idaea* is the same species Scandinavians call lingonberries. Rural Swedes gather lingon in mass quantities from their northern central valleys. They eat lingon sylt (cranberry sauce) all winter long. A dollop of lingon goes on everything from white fish to cabbage. The Finns eat lingon and mashed potatoes with sautéed reindeer. Russians preserve lingon in water and sometimes use it flavor vodka. The berries are so high in benzoic acid that, cooked down with sugar, they need no refrigeration.

My wife, who spent part of her childhood in Sweden, remembers going out with the family to gather lingonberries by the gallon. She used a tool shaped like a broad fork with teeth that separated berries from leaves and directed them into a canvas bag. Lingon sylt was kept in loose-lidded bean pots, served with school lunches and often eaten with blood pudding or other pork dishes.

All summer I watched the mountain cranberries, waiting for them to turn red so I could harvest and eat them. But they resisted turning uniformly until late in the fall. Instead, they exhibited a host of shades, mid-summer onward: porcelain white, verdigris, pale pink, and red as deep as my father's ruddy cheeks. (Crayola Crayons recognized the skin tone qualities of cranberry when in 2005 they changed the official color Cranberry, added in 1998, to "Blush"). Only that part of the berry most exposed to sun turns bright red early in the season.

The color reflects the production of anthocyanins in response to bright sun exposure. Anthocyanins give cranberry skin its apparent sun-blocking and cell damage repairing powers (the same is true for the delicate new leaves of sugar maple and many other trees in the spring, when they take on a reddish tone).

According to John Sauve, a wild berry marketing expert with the Food and Wellness Group in Portland, Maine, anthocyanin is “part of the health story,” used to promote the berry as a health food. It’s an anti-oxidant purported to reduce cell inflammation and prevent DNA damage, and perhaps lower the risk of some cancers. But procyanidins (PACs) are the main story. PACs seem to prevent bacteria from adhering to stomach and urinary tract linings and gums, suggesting they can help prevent ulcers, urinary tract infections, even gum disease. Cranberry juice has long been used as a treatment for urinary tract infections, although a recent study published by the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that cranberries did not decrease urinary tract infections in a nursing home population.

Whatever their health benefits, there is plenty of reason to appreciate these little red gems. When you sit down to cranberries at Thanksgiving, you will not be alone. At least when it comes to this holiday food, the country is unified. Nearly 80 percent of all the fresh cranberries consumed annually are around Thanksgiving tables. And cranberries can be fixed so that that even a finicky child can learn to like them, an Irish cook and her old world ways notwithstanding.

Tim Traver is an author and freelance writer. Previously, he served as executive director of the Upper Valley Land Trust and co-directed the social service organization COVER Home Repair. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine, and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: wellborn@nhcf.org. A book compilation of Outside Story articles is available at <http://www.northernwoodlands.org>.

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