

Oregon's cranberry renown must grow

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Put down the 12-ounce bag of Wisconsin cranberries, and no one will get hurt.

Such is my warning cry since learning this week that too many Oregonians are buying out-of-state fruit to grace their holiday tables despite living in a state that is the nation's fourth largest producer of the tart, nutritious red fruit.

Our faces should be berry-red in shame.

It's a bit like buying a yule tree made in Japan or grown in California when Oregon is the United States' top producer of fresh Christmas trees, sending more than 80 percent of its firs out of state and to the Pacific Rim, Mexico and Guam.

These purchasing oversights/practices do nothing to grow our economy, keep our neighbors in work or sustain Oregon's environment, where this state's cranberry growers typically farm with Salmon Safe and Food Alliance certification.

As consumers living in this verdant and beautiful agricultural paradise, it should be second nature for us to buy fresh and local first. It might cost a bit more, but we reap what we sow, literally.

Oregonians should be extolling the virtue of their fruit to anyone who'll listen, and demanding it for their tables to help nurture the crop's international reputation for being plumper, juicier and redder.

Scott McKenzie, a second-generation Oregon cranberry farmer from the South Coast of the state (Coos and Curry counties produce the bulk of the state's specialty crop), told me that Oregon's cranberry concentrate is prized the world over for its deep burgundy color and lower acidity (less tart taste).

Many Oregon farmers sell their crop to the long-recognized cranberry leader Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc., a cooperative with 750 members, 700 of whom grow cranberries and 50 who grow grapefruit. But not all Oregon cranberry farmers are lucky enough to be members of the cooperative; many can only sell their crop at commodity (read lower) prices to the world's largest cranberry processor. Other Oregon farmers, discouraged by vacillating prices, have turned to selling their berries independently or pushing them to brokers for the prized juice, which when combined with the weak pink-colored fruit of Wisconsin, makes a more vibrant and classic-colored beverage.

This means that those red, white and blue bags of fresh Ocean Spray cranberries might have a few pieces of Oregon fruit in them, but there's a better chance they contain berries from Wisconsin, Massachusetts and New Jersey.

New Jersey? Really?

As a card-carrying member of the Beaver State, I don't want to eat berries grown in the shadow of the Brick City (Newark) and hailing from the place that brought us Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino (via a TV show demeaning to Italian Americans).

We've got the best berries, so let's serve those to our families and friends, and talk them up to far-flung folks who only wish they could be enjoying Oregon's seasonal fruit bounty.

Consider it the Marionberry of the fall and winter seasons.

Earlier this week, Roth's Fresh Markets was selling yellow and maroon bags of Wisconsin cranberries. Wisconsin, according to Brent Searle, special assistant to the director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, is the largest grower of cranberries in the nation with 18,000 planted acres. Massachusetts has 13,000 acres; New Jersey, in third place, has 3,100; and Washington state has about 1,000 less acres than fourth-place Oregon's 2,700.

Michael Roth, president of Roth's Fresh Markets, explained that when his supplier first brought the company samples of Ocean Spray's berries this fall, the bags contained berries that were small and on the "greenish side."

"They weren't up to our standard," Roth said. "Our first choice always is to bring our customers highest quality produce from Oregon. If that's (Oregon's) not up to our quality standards, our second choice is to go with high quality produced in the U.S.A. That was the case with the cranberries."

So Roth was interested to learn that about six Oregon cranberry farm families, including McKenzie's, had between 70,000 and 100,000 pounds of the ruby red fruit languishing in refrigerated storage in Sheridan.

"That's exactly the kind of product we're looking for," Roth said.

He and his buyer contacted McKenzie and agreed to take 144 cases (eight clamshell containers per case) for his Salem and Keizer Roth's stores. They should be on shelves in the markets even as you read this column, ripe and ready for your grandmother's traditional cranberry and raspberry Jell-O-mold recipe.

Roth also promised to stay in touch with McKenzie to buy fruit for Christmas and next year.

These fresh, local berries will probably cost more than the Ocean Spray bags, but they'll be worth it. Much like the vino from Oregon wineries, the milk, cream and butter from Oregon dairies, hazelnuts, cherries — the list is too long to enumerate — our cranberries are unique. Some independent farmers even harvest them dry, unlike their out-of-state peers, which means the fruit doesn't get wet. Dry picking gives the berry a better taste and a longer shelf life than cranberries floated to the top of a flooded bog and machine harvested.

Our fruit processors know this as well.

Salem's own Truitt Brothers, Inc. last month introduced a new product called Cranberry Orchard Medley (available locally at Roth's and Fred Meyer stores). The shelf-stable pouch

contains only Oregon cranberries, Washington state apples, oranges, a spice blend and some sugar. Co-owner Peter Truitt said the company buys Oregon cranberries because a longer growing season means the fruit is less acidic (Wisconsin and Massachusetts have earlier freezes), and also because it helps the company honor its commitment to buying locally whenever possible. And it means we can support the people who believe in the same environmental practices as we do, Truitt said. He added that the cranberry medley will whip into a wonderful side dish for turkey, but is also irresistible served warm on top of ice cream or slathered over a stack of pancakes.

Drooling is permitted.

The story about Oregon's cranberry needs to be spread; no pun intended.

The state has already lost numerous cranberry growers due to low prices and the inability to get reliable pickers down to places such as Bandon and Port Orford. Others are selling their crop to canneries and juice producers exclusively for the extract.

Stepping up now and asking for fresh, local berries will help the state's cranberry farmers ensure that Oregon fresh fruit will always have a place on our tables.

And if you buy a bag or even a can of cranberries and other staples and donate it to those who struggle to put any kind of food on their table this season, may your Thanksgiving be twice blessed.