



The Family Bog

Forget Ocean Spray—an Oregon cranberry farm bets you'll spend \$8 for its juice.

BY DEEDA SCHROEDER | 503-243-2122 [June 2nd, 2010]

What would you pay 25 cents a fluid ounce for?

Oregon pinot noir? High-test gasoline? How about a mouthful of luminous, crimson-colored, Oregon-grown cranberry juice?

Tim Vincent is betting his life savings that Portlanders will say yes to the lively, tart-sweet flavor of the juice from his family's Bandon bogs. And not just because it tastes nothing like the juice in the bumpy plastic bottle with the famous blue wave logo.

It's a last-ditch effort to save the 70-acre farm his family's been working since 1957, a quarter mile from the beach. "You can hear the waves from the farm," Vincent says. Being so close to the ocean, he says, makes the temperature just a few degrees cooler than other cranberry farms in the area, pushing harvest later into the winter and yielding a deeper-red berry that's sweet enough to pop right into your mouth.

The Vincents are bottling their own blend of 63 percent cranberry juice with just blue agave and water—more than twice the pure fruit juice than any other blended juice on the market—which usually contain more apple or grape than actual cranberry juice—including the ubiquitous Ocean Spray. Soon, the family will roll out a line of cranberry goods—from dried sweetened berries and whole fresh cranberries to chutneys. The juice has already garnered die-hard fans in Portland, selling out at the Beaverton and Hillsboro farmers markets, and will debut in New Seasons on June 4.

It's been a while since the Vincent family has been this hopeful.

Tim's parents, father Bill Vincent and mother Kay "Golly" Vincent, have been making a roller-coaster living from 27 acres of cranberry bogs since Tim, 39, and his brother Ty, 41, were kids. The land has been used to cultivate the fruit since the early days of Ocean Spray.

The family was one of the earliest Ocean Spray cooperative members in the Bandon area, long before the company invented its now well-known "cranberry juice cocktail." The Massachusetts-based company is North America's leading producer of cranberry juice drinks, posting fiscal revenues of roughly \$1.9 billion in 2008. As of 2006, about 65 percent of all the cranberries in North America go to Ocean Spray. In

2008, Wisconsin grew over half of the 7.85 million 100-pound barrels produced, and Oregon came in fourth with 400,000 barrels.

“Before the juice there was just fresh fruit sold in wooden crates with the logo burnt on it,” Tim recalls. As a kid, he earned his allowance cutting tussocks (a.k.a. weeding) alongside Ty. The extended family, including twin uncles who were also cranberry farmers, would come together during the winter harvest, working together in the chill to flood the bogs one by one with the water from the property’s aquifer.

“It was kind of a magical time,” Tim says.

Fast-forward 20 years: Ty stayed on the farm to learn the family business and Tim is now working in senior management at a large software company and living with his wife and children in Beaverton. The land the family owns in Bandon has shrunk by about a third in an effort to keep from sliding deeper into debt.

That’s because around 2000, the Vincents broke away from Ocean Spray, hoping to get away from the co-op that had turned into a corporate nightmare. The giant company controls the price it pays its members every year, regardless of farms’ profitability.

“The price of a pound of cranberries this year is less than the average price 20 years ago.... This year it’s in the range of 18 cents to 27 cents for the independent grower,” Tim says.

Right now, cranberry prices are slightly lower than the cost of production, Ty says. Some farms in the Ocean Spray cooperative—there are currently 57 growers in Oregon—have become larger and more mechanized, enabling them to weather the extreme market fluctuations. After a decade trying to survive selling to the few smaller, non-Ocean Spray juice companies and processors, Tim Vincent watched as his family slipped deeper into desperation.



Left: **BOGMASTER:** Cranberry grower Ty Vincent in his Bandon bog. Right: **CROPPED:** The Vincent family harvests its winter cranberry crop. Photos courtesy of Vincent Brothers

Arun Hiranandani, director of Cooperative Development at Ocean Spray Cranberries, says smaller farms have struggled when there is more supply than demand.

“Recently, the industry has been dealing with an abundant supply, which tends to make the marketplace more competitive,” Hiranandani says. In such times, small individual farms that may not be able to convert their cranberries into products like juice or dried cranberries may find it difficult to conduct direct marketing, he says. But the Vincents didn’t agree.

One weekend, Tim Vincent walked into the Cedar Hills New Seasons Market to do some shopping and walked down the juice aisle. Retail prices for cranberry juice and blends kept going up, but the farmers’ profits seemed to be going down. Tim wanted to find a way to ratchet up that profit margin, in the hopes that his parents could see farming continue on the family land.

“Maybe we should make some juice,” Tim thought to himself. He spent the next year of nights and weekends finding a local processor, Dundee Fruit in McMinnville, to turn the fresh fruit into juice and package it into special decanter bottles similar to wine bottles. He researched bamboo-paper labels and tinkered with just the right amount of low-glycemic agave to make the tart liquid easy to love without being too sweet. He made plans for the Food Alliance to certify the berries this summer and worked on organic practices.

And finally, he connected with New Seasons to get the juice on the shelves. New Seasons produce buyer Jeff Fairchild says the Vincents’ juice and other products on the way fit perfectly into the market’s mission to support local family farms.

“We want to save family farms, and featuring them in the stores is the right way to do it,” Fairchild says. The stores sell Ocean Spray for about \$4 for a 64-ounce bottle, but will give the Vincents’ cranberry goods a special spot in the produce area. Fairchild agrees that paying \$7.99 for a 32-ounce bottle of juice or \$6.99 for an 8-ounce bag of apple-sweetened dried cranberries might cause some customers to balk, but considering the health benefits and the local, small-farm source, he thinks it’s a leap many will be willing to take. To keep the price reasonable, they’ve lowered the usual markup, he says. “We’re making very little because it’s the right thing to do,” Fairchild says.

The Vincent family is hoping shoppers will invest in a juice that tastes really good—and helps a small family farm in the process.

“There are eight grandchildren, and I’d love it if at least one of them had the option to do this and live here,” Ty says. “Cranberry farming is an incredible lifestyle—if you can make a living at it.”

MORE: Find Vincent Family Cranberries at the Beaverton, Hillsboro and Orenco Station farmers markets and at New Seasons (starting June 4). For info, call 575-5904 or visit vincentcranberries.com.