

Bittersweet

Southern Oregon, from near Bandon down to Gold Beach, is cranberry country. Growers in Coos and Curry counties produce about 95 percent of our state's 40-million pound cranberry harvest, which accounts for approximately 7 percent of the nation's total cranberry production. That's around 12,000 pounds of Oregon-grown cranberries — enough to fill an extra-large dump truck all the way to the brim — for every resident of Bandon: man, woman, and child.

Many Southern Oregon cranberry growers, like most cranberry growers in the nation, are members of the Ocean Spray Cooperative, a national agricultural cooperative that supplies the Ocean Spray brand. But not Vincent Family Cranberries. In 2010, this 60-year-old Bandon cranberry farm struck out on its own to launch its own brand of juices, dried cranberries, and fresh cranberries, all showcasing estate-grown fruit.

Commodity markets can be grueling for small farmers, and cranberries are no exception. In the 1980s, cranberries were selling, at times, for over 60 cents per pound. By the early 2000s, that price had dropped to 30 cents per pound or less, sometimes dipping as low as 15 cents.

Why such a huge price drop? In some ways, the cranberry industry was a victim of its own success. As demand for cranberry products grew (Remember the Craisins craze?), big farms were enticed into what was previously a small specialty industry. Those large-scale producers drove down prices with better economies of scale and their ability to afford more mechanized equipment. Small farmers just couldn't compete—including Vincent Family Cranberries.

"Our products were launched to save the farm," says Tim Vincent, Vincent Family Cranberries' sales and marketing manager. His brother, Ty Vincent, runs the farm in Bandon. Together they're the third generation of cranberry growers to work their family's land.

After hearing from his parents about the struggles of Southern Oregon growers, Tim started looking for ways to help. A regular Beaverton

Vincent Family Cranberries is on the cusp of becoming the West Coast's largest organic cranberry farm.

STORY BY MARGARETT WATERBURY
PHOTOS BY AUBRIE LEGAULT



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Farmers Market shopper, he became inspired by the grower-direct apple juices he saw every fall. “I thought, gosh, nobody is making a real cranberry juice out there, especially not direct from the grower. At the local natural foods store, you’d see a bottle of cranberry-blueberry juice, but cranberries and blueberries would be the fourth and fifth ingredients on the label. It became very apparent to me that there was an opportunity to develop a product that would allow us to communicate how special our fruit is.”

And Southern Oregon cranberries really are special. Here, the coast range is just the right distance from the ocean to accumulate rich deposits of sandy loam, a combination of organic matter from the forest and sandy ocean debris from millennia of periodic tsunamis. It’s exactly the kind of soil that cranberries love. Pair that with warm summers and mild winters, and you get a longer growing season that produces riper, more deeply colored fruit.

Southern Oregon growers routinely grow cranberries that are up to three times sweeter than cranberries grown anywhere else in the United States. Tim likes to tell a story to illustrate what he calls “the epiphany of the Oregon cranberry.” A chef at New Seasons Market called him one day to ask if he added sugar to his cranberries, because the batch of cranberry sauce he’d just made was way too sweet. But it turned out that the recipe, not the cranberries, was at fault. Oregon cranberries simply don’t need to be sweetened with as much sugar as berries from other parts of the country.

Striking out on their own was a risk, but Vincent Family Cranberries isn’t alone; Oregon’s cranberry growers are among the most independent in the nation. A 2014 report from Ocean Spray reported that 64 percent of Oregon cranberry farmers were not part of the Ocean Spray cooperative, the highest percentage of any state—and a vivid illustration of Ocean Spray’s dominance in the U.S. cranberry market. Chalk it up to Oregonians’ independent spirit, as well as a local market willing to support small growers. “We wouldn’t be able to do this in a marketplace that didn’t value their food the way Portland does,” explains Tim.

Although Oregon cranberries contain more sugar than other cranberries, they’re still bracing, especially to palates accustomed to conventional, heavily sweetened cranberry juice cocktail. To make their own version of cranberry cocktail, the Vincents lightly sweetened their cranberry juice with agave, not white sugar or grape juice concentrate. The result is a deep, ruby-hued juice with wine-like complexity and a satisfying sweet-tart flavor. And instead of popular cran-apple and cran-grape blends, the Vincents paired cranberries with Oregon fruits like blueberries and Marionberries.

Their products were first launched at farmers markets. “It’s the ultimate test environment,” says Tim. “You are physically there, handing people samples of something that tastes way more tart than what they traditionally have programmed in their brain as cranberry juice. There are some palates that simply reject it, because they’ve been conditioned

for sweet juice, but there are plenty of people who taste it and it really sings to them.” Now, Vincent Family Cranberries is distributed in several states through New Seasons, Whole Foods, and Amazon, as well as many local markets.

But they’re not done yet. The Vincent family is about to achieve another milestone, one that’s taken many years to reach: in just one more crop cycle, they’ll finally earn their full organic certification, six years after beginning the journey in 2011.

Earning organic certification for cranberries is extremely challenging. Damp growing conditions make fungal diseases commonplace, and cranberries are naturally a low-yielding crop without heavy fertilizer application. Cranberry plants also live a very long time. One corner of Vincent Family Cranberries’ farm holds the 80-year-old Leep-Eaton cranberry bog, one of the first bogs planted in the area. Today, those plants are still producing. That longevity makes history tangible in a very satisfying way, but it also significantly reduces farmers’ options when it comes to managing pests.

“Functionally, it’s so much easier to go organic with an annual crop,” says Tim. “If you start to see an invasive pest, a weed, or an insect, the act of re-tilling the ground is a great defense against those types of threats. Whereas, if we see an invasive pest introduce itself, we have to battle it without damaging the vine. If we damage the vine, it’s damaged forever.”

Achieving organic certification is even more significant in light of the fact that Tim was recently diagnosed with a terminal brain disease. He’s still involved with the farm, but he’s not sure what the future holds for Vincent Family Cranberries. “We’re not a big corporation, where if one key person leaves there are a host of other key people still making the wheels turn. Our wheel has just a handful of spokes. It’s hard to replace the vision and passion of somebody who was born on the farm.”

But no matter what happens, Vincent Family Cranberries has created a legacy for West Coast cranberry growers to follow. “Even though we’re not a big farm, once we’re certified, we’ll be the largest organic cranberry farm in the western United States,” says Tim. “It will really be a great emblem and example of what other cranberry farmers out here can do. I hope in my heart that I am alive to see that milestone, because our family has been looking forward to it for so long.” 

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