

THE LIVING KITCHEN





Photos courtesy of Manitowish Cranberry Co.

BY RACHEL ARROYO



BERRIED *Treasure*

THE STORY OF CRANBERRY
GROWING IN AMERICA IS (MAINLY)
A TALE OF TWO STATES.

It is estimated that Americans consume more than 400 million pounds of cranberries each year, with the non-profit Agricultural Marketing Resource Center reporting that 20 percent of that total is gobbled up during the week of Thanksgiving alone.

Americans are not the only ones who love the tart treats; the demand for this fruit native to North America has gone global, with the United States leading the way as the top producer of cranberries in the world.

Although Indigenous peoples of North America have enjoyed this perennial superfood rich in disease-fighting antioxidants for thousands of years, the cultivation of cranberries didn't begin until 1816. Revolutionary War veteran Captain Henry Hall of Dennis, Massachusetts, noticed that the wild cranberries in his bog grew better when sand blew over them. The revelation was the birth of the commercial cranberry industry.

Today, Massachusetts supplies one-third of the nation's crop, ranking second in cranberry production behind Wisconsin, which harvests more than half of all cranberries in the country. (New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington produce the rest.)

We met with two cranberry growers, one from Wisconsin and one from Massachusetts, to learn more about this nutrient-dense fruit in a good-natured "battle of the berries."

The Badger State

Despite Massachusetts' head start in cranberry cultivation, "Wisconsin is the nation's leading producer of cranberries, supplying 60 percent of the nation's commercial crop," says Mike Bartling, President of the Manitowish Cranberry Company, Inc., in Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin. Bartling's family was one of eight families who moved north from central Wisconsin to Manitowish Waters after WWII in the hopes of expanding cranberry production into the Northwoods.

Today, almost 80 years later, the family's 190-acre farm is one of five in Manitowish Waters. Since the late 1950s, the Bartling family has contracted with Ocean Spray—an agricultural cooperative owned by more than 700 farmer-families like the Bartlings—to process and sell their annual harvest, which ranges from 45,000 to 70,000 barrels (each barrel is equivalent to 100 pounds).

"I think a lot of people think cranberries grow in water—but they don't. We just harvest them in water," says Bartling, who began his cranberry-growing career on his family's farm in the 1980s alongside his brother Peter. "Cranberries are a wetland crop, so they need to be kept moist but not flooded, or they won't grow."

When harvest time rolls around in the fall, the Bartlings flood the bogs, causing the hollow, red fruit to float off the tops of their low-growing woody vines—a method called wet harvesting, which is how most cranberries are now harvested. Bartling's yearly crop, like 95 percent of the world's cranberry crop, is grown for processed cranberry products such as Craisins® and juice. Only five percent of cranberries are destined to be sold as fresh fruit, and those are dry-harvested using a hand-operated mechanical picker that combs the berries off the vine.



Photos courtesy of Manitowish Cranberry Co.

Mike Bartling's sons David and Steven have taken the helm of running the family's Manitowish Cranberry Company.



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Over his career as a farmer, Mike has served on the board of Ocean Spray. During that time, he has overseen the switch from growing the Searles variety of cranberries to the earlier ripening and higher-yielding Stevens variety. He has also crafted and fine-tuned farming equipment and addressed various challenges along the way.

Although Mike's brother Peter has retired from the family business, he still lends a hand during harvest season, and Mike, who considers himself semi-retired, maintains an advisory role. As fourth-generation cranberry growers, Mike's sons Steven and David now carry on the legacy, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the family business.

