

CRANBERRY

My favorite part of the Thanksgiving dinner is the cranberry. When I was a kid, you only got cranberries at Thanksgiving or Christmas, but thanks to the superior marketing skills of the folks at the Ocean Spray Cranberry Growers Cooperative, which handles 90% of all American cranberries, cranberry products are now eaten all year round. I often drink cranberry juice, and I frequently replace raisins in my cooking with dried cranberries. Ocean Spray's dried cranberries, called Craisins, even come in orange or cherry flavor these days.

Cranberries are a bunch of low, evergreen dwarf shrubs or trailing vines, with pink flowers, found in acidic bogs throughout the cooler parts of the northern hemisphere. They were originally called craneberries, perhaps because the stem or flower has the look of a crane's head, or because the berries native to northern European bogs were part of the diet of cranes.

The fruit is a berry, larger than the leaves of the plant, which is initially white but turns deep red when fully ripe. They're an excellent source of Vitamin C, as well as anti-oxidants, helpful in fighting cancers and heart disease. Cranberries also contain compounds that help prevent kidney stones and fight urinary tract infections.

Native Americans recognized the value of the cranberry as food—it's an essential ingredient of their trail food, called pemmican--and the Indians are said to have introduced it to the starving Pilgrims, who incorporated it into their Thanksgiving meal. Cranberries were first grown commercially on Cape Cod in the early 1800s. Cranberries are now grown in beds, and can be harvested either dry, or wet, by flooding the beds. 95% of all harvested cranberries are now made into juice drinks, canned sauce or jelly, muffins, or sweetened and dried. It's the other 5%, the fresh cranberries that I'm going to be talking about today.

At Thanksgiving, my father only liked cranberry jelly out of a can. No matter what nice relish or cooked cranberry sauce I made, he just wanted cranberry jelly from a can. If you have that problem at your house, just remember that you love them anyway and roll with the punches. To make homemade cranberry jelly, simply bring a cup of water and a cup of sugar to the boil in a non-reactive saucepan. Add the contents of a bag of fresh or frozen cranberries, bring back to the boil, reduce the heat and simmer for about 10 minutes, stirring from time to time.

Put a strainer over a mixing bowl and pour the contents of the saucepan into the strainer. With a wooden spoon, mash the cranberries in the strainer and push them through the strainer until virtually no pulp remains. Stir the contents of the bowl and pour into your serving container. Cover and let cool completely at room temperature, and then refrigerate until serving.

To make your basic whole cranberry sauce, just bring the cup of water and cup of sugar to the boil and add the bag of cranberries like before, and simmer for 10 minutes. Then just let them cool in the pan and then pour the sauce into a container to store in the refrigerator until serving. I like to add a good slug of bourbon into the water when I add the cranberries. Adding some chopped crystallized ginger is also tasty.

To turn it into a southwestern style cranberry salsa, simply pour the cooked cranberries into a mixing bowl. Add ¼ teaspoon of ground cumin, a finely chopped jalapeno chile, a teaspoon of lime juice, a chopped green onion, both green and white parts, and a tablespoon of chopped cilantro. Cover the bowl with some plastic wrap, let it cool, and refrigerate it until you're ready to serve.

And for your basic cranberry relish, my personal favorite, get out your food processor. Put in the contents of a bag of cranberries. Add a cup of sugar, or just a little less if you like things a little more tart. Take a nice naval orange, do not peel it but cut it into chunks and drop them in as well. Process the whole thing, using the on/off button, until the relish is very finely chopped but not pureed. Scrape it into a dish and serve. Actually, the relish is better if made a couple of days early and allowed to mellow out in the refrigerator. Leftover relish, mixed with some cream cheese, is wonderful in leftover turkey sandwiches. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.