



Cranberries being harvested in New Jersey. Flickr: USDA

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The Cranberry's Bitter History



History

Benjamin Goggin Nov 21 2017, 6:53 PM

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Cranberries are a primary flavor of Thanksgiving — from seasonal [Cran-Brr-Ritas](#) to [canned cranberry sauce](#). Now, the bitter berry tastes sweeter and comes year round thanks to something as American as Thanksgiving itself: Marketing. While the shift may be good for consumer's taste buds, its effects on the environment, the economy and small businesses might make you think twice about picking up your favorite can of ridged berry jello for Turkey Day.

In the olden days cranberries were a [natural choice](#) for America's fruity representative of the holiday season. [In 1816](#), they became the only fruit native to North America to become a commercial harvest. Naturally growing between September through November, the berries appeared right before families came together to celebrate what they [used to believe](#) was the peaceful first harvest of the Pilgrims.

The wet harvesting technique, where cranberry bogs are flooded to loosen the connection between the berry and the vine, was developed in the 1930s and made machine collection possible. This drastically increased the number of berries that could be harvested every year.

This increased yield but decreased quality. The overabundance of ugly cranberries made jellied, canned cranberry sauce the perfect Cranberry product for the industry, hence its legendary spot on Thanksgiving tables across America.



Unfortunately for Ocean Spray, the cranberry cooperative that's [cornered](#) the cranberry market since 1930, canned cranberry sales have been [declining](#) as consumers have started to demand (at least what appear to be) fresher ingredients.

That's where Craisins come in. The dried and sugar-infused cranberry product, originally [introduced](#) in 1993, has been the company's main source of growth as cranberry sauce sales decline and juice sales stagnate.² Ocean Spray [consistently grew](#) its Craisin business after a cranberry crash in [2000](#) by re-branding them as a healthy year-round snack, rather than a baking ingredient. In 2003, Ocean Spray turned 20 million pounds of cranberries into Craisins. By 2016, that number had multiplied twelvefold, growing to 250 million.

While the dried red berry product allowed Ocean Spray to continue growing, it's caused surprising ripples of controversy.

Cranberries are incredibly [difficult to grow](#) organically, due to their two-season growing cycle, so a host of pesticides are used. This has caused [alarm](#) among environmentalists. In 2006, the USDA found 13 different pesticides on cranberries they tested. One fungicide used on cranberries is [suspected](#) to be part of the disappearing bee phenomenon seen in recent years. While the number of pesticides used on cranberries actually pales in comparison to the 48 pesticides that the USDA found on a sampling of apples [in 2011](#), a [2008 report](#) gave cranberries the highest "Dietary Risk Index" score of all domestic fruit tested, based on the amount of pesticide used and its toxicity.

Multiple studies have found evidence that pesticides associated with cranberry bogs may affect health, but the results are far from conclusive. [One study](#) found that individuals who had ever lived within 2600 ft of a cranberry bog were twice as likely to develop brain cancer. The study called for "larger and more detailed" studies to further establish the connection. A 2004 study found no overall pattern of risk between pesticides and breast cancer but notes a "modest" (yet insignificant) increase in the risk of breast cancer associated with the aerial application of pesticides to cranberry bogs.

Making matters worse, cranberry growers in Wisconsin are also [exempt](#) from many federal and state water laws, meaning chemicals and pesticides usually kept out of the water supply are allowed to go straight back into the environment when cranberry farmers are done with their harvest.

In a phone interview, Ocean Spray's Director of Global Corporate Communications Kellyanne Dignan defended Ocean Spray Farmers, noting that many of Ocean Spray's farmers live on their own farms, and have been growing cranberries for generations, taking "great pains to take care of the environment." Despite this, groups like the Wisconsin Wetland Association argue that the creation of any artificial bog on natural wetlands disrupts biodiversity and wildlife. The EPA has [repeatedly](#) gone after cranberry growers who have created illegal bogs. In 2012, the EPA [settled](#) with a Massachusetts family who agreed to pay \$75,000 and restore 26 acres of wetlands after they illegally turned natural wetlands into bogs.

Scrutiny on the environmental impact of cranberries fits in with larger trend of increased focus on how our food systems are affecting our planet. The cranberry industry's semi-protected legal status opens the door for a unique type of polluting, but it's difficult to compare the environmental impacts of this specialty crops, to the destructive cash crop behemoths of [corn](#) and [sugar](#).

Even more surprising than the Craisin's effect on the environment is its effect on the fruit industry as a whole.

Just as Craisins were poised to hit the market in 1989, the raisin industry went into a panic. Since Armenians first began settling in California in the late 1800s, California has been known as the top raisin producer in the world (Turkey is [expected](#) to take the title in 2017 as it [did](#) in 1998 and 2005). In 1984, California Raisin Advisory Board, funded by farmers and the USDA, put millions of dollars into the now famous [California Raisins campaign](#) in an attempt to promote California raisins. The prospect of Craisins building off of the raisin industry's new investment into its name perturbed the raisin cohort.

Ernest Bedrosian, the president of the National Raisin Co., summarized the industry's gripe to [The Chicago Tribune](#) at the time: "all the millions we're spending (on advertising) to build the raisin industry, and they come along and use our name by putting a 'c' in front of it. It's like shirtiling on someone else's success." While California raisin growers [asked](#) the California Attorney General to consider filing a suit against Ocean Spray, the prospect of a formal dispute dried up. In 2004, however, a Canadian raisin company sued Ocean Spray for allegedly copying a drying process to produce Craisins. Ocean Spray [prevailed](#) in a federal district court and on appeal.

In 2012, well after Ocean Spray started pushing Craisins into the snack market, the raisin industry had had enough. The California Raisins Advisory Board [launched](#) a \$1.5 million ad campaign against Craisins called "Let's Keep It Real," featuring a series of videos showing moms' reactions to learning how much sugar is added to Craisins.³

Now, Ocean Spray says it wants harmony. Of the raisin-feud, Dignan told me, "there's a great place in consumers lives for both raisins and Craisins."

That didn't stop Ocean Spray from going on the aggressive with others in the cranberry industry, however. In 1999, the cranberry co-op sued dried fruit competitor Sunsweet for their introduction of "Cranlings," a dried fruit product similar to Craisins. Ocean Spray took issue with the use of "cran," which they have a trademark on, but also took aim at the company's packaging that [jabbed](#) at Ocean Spray with "cranberries first, not sugar."⁴ The companies [settled](#) the dispute a year later, with Sunsweet agreeing to change the product's name, which is now simply ["New England Cranberries."](#)

In the wake of the precipitous rise of the Craisin, cranberry farmers suffered. To meet demand for the dried fruit, Ocean Spray farmers massively increased cranberry production. In the dehydration process, all of the liquid is sucked out of the cranberry, and only a portion is re-added (along with sugar and flavoring). The majority of the liquid is then turned into cranberry concentrate which goes into juice products. Ocean Spray argues this creates two revenue streams for farmers, but with sales of craisins increasing, and juice sales stagnating, Ocean Spray was left with a massive surplus of cranberry concentrate.

In 2009, Ocean Spray began to publicly auction off its surplus concentrate, starting each auction at 85% of the previous auction's final price, driving sale prices down. Market-wide, the price of concentrate dropped from \$53 per gallon to \$33 per gallon. This left independent farmers not associated with Ocean Spray shut out of the Craisin profit, but stuck with an untenable new price on concentrate (it takes \$34 to create a barrel of cranberry concentrate). Ocean Spray is not accepting new members, leaving independent farmers in the lurch.

When asked about the precipitous price drop, "That's economics," Dignan told me. "If you have more of something, prices go down." In 2012, a group of farmers filed a \$2 billion lawsuit against Ocean Spray calling the auction price fixing. [The case](#) is still being heard in federal court, but has been curtailed. In 2015, [a Massachusetts judge ruled](#) that the case could proceed based only on its price-fixing claim, not its monopolization charge. In 2016, [a judge ruled](#) that the case couldn't be classified as a class action. Ocean Spray faced a similar [antitrust case](#) in 2002 from a Wisconsin competitor. The suit was [dropped](#) when Ocean Spray agreed to buy the company's processing plants.

For cranberry farmers outside the Ocean Spray pond, [the outlook seems grim](#). The Massachusetts Cranberry Revitalization Task Force, which was created to explore solutions for struggling cranberry farmers in the state, devoted [a third of its work](#) to designing an exit strategy for farm owners.

But Dignan says that at the end of the day, Ocean Spray is benefiting the industry and its farmers: "Oceanspray is ultimately owed by 700 growers and I think that's the piece that gets lost a bit," she says. "These growers have invested heavily for generations in the cooperative, in their marketing, and in their innovation."

¹ Ocean Spray invented the product during World War II. Rationing interfered with canning, so instead, Ocean Spray dehydrated cranberries. ↩

² Ocean Spray's juice cocktails, introduced in 1962, continue to be Ocean Spray's highest selling products. ↩

³ The videos have since been scrubbed from the web. ↩

⁴ A 12-ounce bag of Craisins has around 35 cubes of added sugar. ↩

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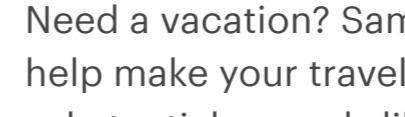


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