

A Tart Berry Reintroduces Itself



PUCKERERS Black, white, red and champagne currants.

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FEW Americans know the taste of fresh black currants: deep and musky with a slightly funky aroma, and a mouth-puckering sourness that needs to be tempered by sugar.



May Jennifer May

For much of the last century most states banned commercial cultivation of black currants, which were brought here by early English settlers, because the bushes can carry a fungus that is lethal for many pine trees.

But since New York's ban on black currant cultivation was lifted in 2003, a few farmers have started growing the dark purple berries, which are available in some farmers' markets for the next week or so, and some chefs have been cooking with them.

At Dressler in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the executive chef Polo Dobkin braises pork belly, slices and grills it, and then simmers the braising liquid with house-made black currant preserves. The browned meat, with a sumptuous ribbon of melting fat, is served over a frisée, arugula and orange salad, and drizzled with whole

[Greg Quinn worked to overturn a farming ban.](#)

black currants in a savory meat reduction.

“It lends itself perfectly to pork,” Mr. Dobkin said of the black currant sauce, which echoes flavors he remembers from childhood visits to his mother’s family in Austria.

Austrians often serve currant sauces with game, just as the British serve roasts with Cumberland sauce — currants, or currant jelly, stewed with port, orange juice and zest. Red currants are usually used in Cumberland sauce, but black currants have a deeper flavor.

“It’s perfectly balanced,” Mr. Dobkin said of the fruit. “It has a bit of sweetness and tartness to it, which cuts through fattier meats.”

Dalia Jurgensen, Dressler’s pastry chef, uses the berries to make a gorgeous purple sorbet. She simmers them with sugar and water and then strains them through a chinois before cooling and churning the liquor into a smooth tart ice that the restaurant serves as a refresher between courses and with pistachio biscotti for dessert.



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Customers have responded well to the black currant dishes on Dressler’s menu — “plates come back clean,” Mr. Dobkin said — but many are not familiar with the berry.

Black currants and their juice have been used around the world for medicinal purposes. They are extremely high in vitamin C and other antioxidants. But despite their popularity in Europe, black currants are rarely seen in the United States, other than on backyard bushes, or in the liqueur crème de cassis. Black currant cultivation is still banned in several states.

But Mr. Dobkin said that even if black currants become more common, they may not be a taste that is easy to acquire. “I’m not sure how much it appeals to the average American palate,” he said. “It might be too tart.”

Indeed, even when black currants were more widely grown in America, some regarded them to be “of a stinking and somewhat loathing savour,” according to a 1925 book, “The Small Fruits of New York.”

Red and white currants, the less tart, less complex and less nutritious siblings, were more popular. Still, red and white currants also lost their footing here over the last century.

In 1919, New York produced 3.3 million quarts of the nation’s 7.6-million-quart annual currant production. Now the United States currant crop is too small to be reported by the Agriculture Department, said Danny L. Barney, a horticulture professor and a fruit breeder at the University of Idaho who has been working to promote a currant industry in America. “People simply forgot about them,” he said. “There’s ignorance about what they are, and there are so many fruits available from all over the world at the supermarket.”

Dressler buys 5-pound bags of frozen black currants from Greg Quinn, an upstate farmer who lobbied successfully to overturn the black currant farming ban in New York. Mr. Quinn, who has

10,000 black currant bushes at his farm in Staatsburg, N.Y., along with almost 7,000 red, white and pink currant bushes, touts black currants' health benefits and hopes they will become a high-value niche crop.

“What I’m trying to do is create a crop that farmers can actually make some money on,” Mr. Quinn said as he strode along his rows of black currant bushes.

He has helped other farms start black currant crops. And he imports black currants for his nationally distributed juice, CurrantC — a way to “prime the pump,” he said, by introducing Americans to the charms of black currants.

Mr. Quinn sells his own currants to restaurants and [ice cream](#) companies, including Van Leeuwen Artisan Ice Cream in Brooklyn, and he sells bags of frozen red and black currants by mail year-round from his Web site, [currants.com](#). Five-pound bags are \$15, and home winemakers can buy 50-pound bags for \$275.

[Red Jacket Orchards](#), a farm in the Finger Lakes region, has been growing red and black currants since the New York ban was lifted. The farm sells fresh currants at its farmers' market stands, and buys black currants from a neighboring farm for an apple-black currant juice.

Another farm, Prospect Hill Orchards in Milton, N.Y., has been selling black, red and white currants at Greenmarkets in TriBeCa, at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and at Columbus Avenue and West 66th Street.

“I find that people don’t really know or understand them,” [Joe Nicholson Jr.](#), chief executive of Red Jacket, said of currants. “But every year we gain ground here.”

[Next Article in Dining & Wine \(3 of 20\) »](#) A version of this article appeared in print on July 22, 2009, on page D2 of the New York edition.