
A Home-Grown Idea for a Breakfast Drink

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By Gail Braccidiferro

If a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine, as Anita Bryant once told America, what is a day without black currant juice? It's a day that makes Allyn Brown of Preston unhappy.

Mr. Brown began planting black currants at his 160-acre Maple Lane Farms about six years ago, and with 65 acres of the fruit, he is one of the largest growers of it in the United States, according to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

He has hope that black currant juice, which is dark purple and tastes somewhat like cranberry juice, could supplant orange juice as America's favorite breakfast drink.

"It's higher in antioxidants than blueberries and it has three times the amount of vitamin C of citrus fruits," he said.

Mr. Brown, 50, became a farmer soon after he graduated from college in 1978. He grew up on a house on the property and after college turned the land into a farm. He opened Maple Lane as a Christmas tree farm, but over the years has added pick-your-own blueberries, raspberries, pumpkins and apples, among other fruits and vegetables. For a few years, the farm had a store that sold produce and local jams, jellies and baked goods.

"The farm is always evolving," he said. "We got away from the retail. And this was the first year without strawberries in 20 years."

About 20 years ago, Mr. Brown added oyster mushrooms to the mix, growing them exclusively for Franklin Mushroom Farms in Franklin, near Willimantic. At the time, specialty mushrooms like oysters, shiitakes or portobellos were little known, but now they are popular in both restaurant and home cooking, Mr. Brown said.

The ascent of such fancy mushrooms gives him hope for his black currant ambitions. He has bought a \$100,000 currant harvester from Finland, and has spent about \$260,000 to buy and plant some 130,000 currant bushes over 65 acres. He is setting up a \$300,000 bottling operation that would make Maple Lane the state's only farm to both grow currants and bottle them as juice on site.

"I don't want this to become a fad," he said of the farms' black currant juice that is now bottled once a week at Mansfield's Mountain Dairy. "I have the commitment for it to become a staple, like the cranberry."

The native black currant bush was banned in this country beginning in the late 1800's, Mr. Brown said, because it was thought to be a host for the white pine blister disease, which threatened white pines. Those trees are used extensively for lumber and cabinetmaking, as well as for Christmas trees.

But horticulturists later determined that black currant bushes in most cases did not spread the disease, and the ban was lifted in many states by the 1990's. Connecticut's agriculture department lifted the ban in 1986, according to Richard Macsuga, marketing representative for the agency.

"There were more studies and it was decided the black currants were

not too threatening," Mr. Brown said. "But it's still banned in some places, like Maine and Rhode Island."

Black currants are popular in Europe, Mr. Brown said, adding that Ocean Spray makes a black currant juice blend that it sells there. In England, for example, the fruit gained acceptance in World War II, when the shortage of citrus fruits led the government to encourage the cultivation of other crops high in vitamin C. Europeans consume black currants in juices, flavorings, jams and the popular liqueur creme de cassis.

"It is our No. 1 blend there," said Christopher Phillips, a spokesman for Ocean Spray in Lakeville, Mass., referring to Britain. "Over there, the black currant is a lot like apple juice is here."

Maple Lane has been producing some 2,400 gallons of black currant juice each week for the past year and a half, Mr. Brown said. It is sold in several supermarkets in the state, including Whole Foods and Shaw's, as well as in smaller stores that specialize in Connecticut-grown products, he said.

Mr. Brown said once his on-site bottling operation is up and running, he would begin experimenting with black currant juice blends.

"I'll probably first do a blend with apples, then with cranberries," he said. "Eventually, I want to do a blend with oranges because the black currant cuts the acidity of the oranges."