

Cranberry



Here we are, November, looking forward to Christmas festivities again...

Decorating our home, buying and wrapping presents and last but not least, shopping for and cooking the festive dinner! Apart from the classic ham, turkey, cake, pudding etc., cranberry sauce/jelly has now become another essential item on the food list, as it seems unthinkable to serve Christmas turkey without cranberry. Fresh cranberries are mainly associated with America and Canada where they grow in moors, bogs and mountainsides, where the soil is moist and acidic. The genus includes the blueberry, huckleberry, bilberry and whortleberry. The origin of the common name cranberry is not clear, apart from the suggestion that cranes like the fruits, or the resemblance was seen between the slender, curved stem of the vine and the neck and head of the crane. Originally the name cranberry was given to the two species *Vaccinium oxycoccos* and *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, the former is known as the small cranberry and the latter, which grows at higher altitudes is referred to as mountain cranberry. The native British cranberry, *Vaccinium oxycoccos*, which pops up among the sphagnum mosses in the south-west of Scotland, north-west of England and the wetter parts of Wales and Ireland is also found in North America and the northern parts of mainland Europe and northern Asia, where the fruits are not harvested commercially, but have been used as food and medicine by many Native American communities. There are various *Vaccinium* species in other parts of the world as well, which produce fruits comparable to the cranberry but of less importance.

When the Pilgrim Fathers arrived in North America they found the local cranberry *Vaccinium macrocarpon* (*macro* means large, *carpo* means fruit) larger in size than those familiar to Europeans and equally good, if not better in flavour. The native Indians ate these fruits fresh or dried. They used the fruits to make 'pemmican', a mixture of dried meat (most likely venison) and berries pounded into a pulp, shaped into cakes and dried in the sun, they also used the fruits as a medicine. In time, the taste for cranberries grew, today in North America and Canada, there are many varieties of the same genus, some grow wild and others cultivated on a commercial scale. Cranberry growing, canning, freezing, drying and the rest of it, is business now for a world market.

We Australians are more familiar with the large American cranberry *Vaccinium macrocarpon*; it is a trailing woody vine with stems and runners, from which short upright branches are produced and most of the fruits are borne on them. The berries are round and large under cultivation, the leaves are small and oval and the flowers are of a pale rose colour. The fruits weren't farmed on a large scale until the 1800s. At first, growers picked the berries by hand, then they developed a more efficient dry harvesting technique, later revolutionizing the process with an idea called wet harvesting. By flooding the bog with water, the cranberry's buoyancy allows the fruits to float to the surface, where they are collected. The berries were also called bounce-berries because of the way the ripe fruit jumps if dropped. Those for storage were selected by tipping them down a flight of stairs, the sound ones bounced and fell to the bottom while the damaged ones stayed on the steps. This method is still used in modern sorting machines. The fruits have waxy skin and contain large amount of benzoic acid, which is a natural preservative, they will keep for months without treating of any kind. This remarkable keeping properties enable them to withstand long sea voyages for export.

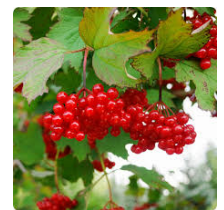


Kunzea pomifora, commonly known as muntries, emu apples



Astroloma humifusum red flower, green fruits

Other types of cranberries include the Cranberry tree (*Viburnum tribolum*), also called highbush cranberry or American Cranberry bush, botanically from a different family, it is a shrub bearing berries similar in appearance and quality to the cranberry proper but with stones inside. The Australian cranberry is the fruit of *Astroloma humifusum*, a woody plant with narrow ovate leaves and red flowers, with edible green fruits. Distribution: SA, TAS, NSW, ACT. *Kunzea pomifora* bears succulent green berries (commonly known as muntries or emu apples), with a tinge of red at maturity, which can be eaten raw or cooked. Distribution: VIC, SA.



Viburnum tribolum High bush cranberry

As their ideal conditions for cultivation include cool, wet summers and cold winters with consistent snowfall, cranberries are not commercially grown in Australia (as far as I know), imported fresh ones can sometimes be found in specialty shops, and dried ones have become popular and can be bought in regular shops all year long. We drink the juice, which reputedly has claimed qualities for curing bladder problems, some health authorities also claim cranberries could contribute to the prevention of the cardiovascular diseases and certain cancers (albeit some conflicting and unconvincing scientific reports). We also appreciate the vitamin C rich cranberry juice, we serve cranberry sauce /jelly with Christmas turkey, some of us like to include cranberries in our breakfast cereal, salads and other dishes as a substitute for dried raisins, sultanas and currents. We also enjoy cranberry champagne, served garnished with sprig of mint or rosemary, the very 'red and green' Christmassy looking and refreshing drink. But be mindful about the high content of sugar often added to dried cranberries (known commercially as craisins) to make up for the naturally tart flavour of the fruits.



Turkey and Cranberry jelly



Dried cranberries or Craisins



Cranberry champagne

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!