



Aylesford,
Nova Scotia

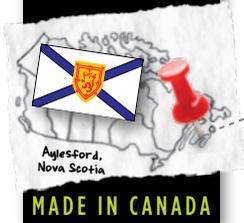
MADE IN CANADA



RED ALERT

It takes extra effort to get fresh cranberries into grocery stores. So add Nova Scotia farmer Blake Johnston to your list of things to be grateful for this Thanksgiving. BY VALERIE HOWES

Photography: iStockphoto.com (map, pushpin); Marc O. Finley/iStockphoto.ca (cranberries).



En route to the farm, a view of Cape Blomidon and the Bay of Fundy.

It takes just over an hour to drive from Halifax to Aylesford, a small community in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley. The drive takes you past vineyards, farmers' stands and orchards, with glimpses of the Bay of Fundy along the way, before you turn into the driveway at Bezanson & Chase Cranberry Farm to be met by two bouncy dogs whose exuberant welcome belies their senior years.

This is the property of Blake Johnston, a second-generation cranberry farmer from Muskoka, Ont. Since moving to Nova Scotia with his wife and children in 1997, he has become Canada's largest fresh-cranberry supplier, responsible for 30 percent of the global market. The word "fresh" is key: Johnston saw the potential in this market at a time when more and more farmers were switching to frozen.

"Over the two decades that I ran the family farm with my brother in Muskoka, the fresh-cranberry supply in grocery stores was becoming more and more inconsistent," he says. "Sometimes, the quality was awful; sometimes, the fruits were just not available."

Working with fresh cranberries is risky business. Storage is a bigger issue,

and the product has to be carefully transported and rotated on store shelves so it doesn't perish. Johnston saw the potential to rebuild the category and, working with a network of smaller-scale farmers from Canada and the U.S., supply fresh cranberries across North America and to international



Blake Johnston on his farm in the Annapolis Valley.

VARY YOUR BERRY

Not surprisingly, cranberries find their way onto Johnston's own dining table, and not just at Thanksgiving. "The fresh ones are so good to eat raw," he says. "They're great mixed with other fruit for dessert. I'll chop them up in savoury salads, too, for something sharp." He also likes them blitzed into a sweet-tart smoothie and boiled down into a chunky sauce to serve with pork, beef and turkey or slathered on toast.

Johnston is Canada's largest fresh-cranberry supplier, responsible for 30 percent of the global market.

markets in Europe, as well as Korea and Taiwan, where our traditional holiday berries are considered exotic fruit.

FLORA, FAUNA AND FAMILY

It's all hands on deck at Bezanson & Chase Cranberry Farm. Johnston's 13-year-old son, Walker, cuts the grass, builds boxes and works on the inspection line during harvest. Johnston's daughter, Amelia, 17, does all of the above and inspects the marsh for insects; regular checks mean any unwelcome ones can be handled early, with minimal spraying, to prevent infestations.

While baddies such as weevils, inch-worms and fruit worms need to go, good bugs are left to play their part in the farm's rich and diverse ecosystem. The dikes between the cranberry marshes are seldom mown, allowing natural environments to flourish both on top and down the sloping sides. "It keeps things in balance," says Johnston. As we drive between the fields, we spot nearly every native plant, from wild roses to daisies to bulrushes, and wildlife from dragonflies to ospreys to frogs.

MELLOW MARSH

Although nestled in a natural setting, the marshes are carefully constructed. Cranberry plants grow in marshes cleared of their natural vegetation. A laser-beacon system is used so bulldozers can create dead-level beds. The uniform surface enhances flooding down the road. The beds are surrounded by drainage pipes, so excess water is channelled into a pond for reuse; this takes care of any issues that might arise from drought.

In frosty weather, Johnston uses sprinklers to homogenize the temperature of the plants. Because of the natural sugars and salts in the fruit, the berries don't freeze until about -3°C, so a film of ice on



Bake an Apple-Cranberry Pie on page 44.

A thin layer of ice protects berries from freezing in cold weather.



Cranberry-Pear Relish

This easy fresh alternative to traditional cranberry sauce makes a tart side for turkey. It also tastes great on a cheese platter. *Recipe by Andrew Chase*

Ready in: 5 min | Serves: 6 to 12

- ¾ cup / 150 mL fresh cranberries
- ½ cup / 125 mL chopped, peeled and cored pear
- 2 tbsp / 30 mL granulated sugar
- ½ tsp / 2 mL dried mint
- Pinch each salt and cayenne pepper

1. In food processor, pulse cranberries, pear, sugar, mint, salt and cayenne pepper until minced. Let sit at least 10 minutes before serving.

Per 1 tbsp/15 mL: about 15 cal, trace pro, 0 g total fat (0 g sat. fat), 4 g carb (1 g dietary fibre, 3 g sugar), 0 mg chol, 25 mg sodium, 12 mg potassium. % RDI: 1% vit A, 2% vit C.



the berries and plants helps maintain a -1°C temperature and protects them.

To propagate cranberry shrubs, Johnston spreads a layer of tiny twigs from broken vines across each bed in spring, incorporates them into a layer of sand for protection and waters regularly. In three years, the twigs grow shoots and take root. Then, the trailing vines grow pink flowers, which are pollinated by the ecosystem's natural pollinators: small flies, wasps and bees. Next, they produce green berries that ripen into crimson fruit in early fall.

In late September, it's harvest time for the next two months. Flooding the marsh makes the fruit float while the vines stay submerged, so the mechanical harvesters can easily get the teeth of their five-foot-wide rakes in to detach the cranberries from their stems.

PICK OF THE CROP

The berries are transported via small boats, then big trucks, to the packing building and put onto a conveyor belt where they're mechanically washed, air-dried and triple checked.

They're loaded into a sorter, which spreads them uniformly over a conveyor belt and moves them into a free-fall chute to the inspection zone, where they're scanned by lasers for defects. Just a few milliseconds later, the cranberries fly across a four-inch gap at a speed of 480 feet per minute; in that brief window, the defects are hit by a powerful burst of air, sending them to the rejection zone.

"As a teen on my father's farm, when it was harvest time, we did all the sorting manually and I fantasized about a machine like this," says Johnston, as he shows off the high-tech system that uses visible light to identify debris and tiny twigs, ultraviolet light to distinguish between pink and crimson berries and a laser light to probe inside the fruit for signs of rotting. Then, even after all of those checks, there's an inspection by packers at the end of the line. "Nothing can beat the human element."

SMALL BERRIES BIG BENEFITS

Cranberries are so good for your health that they're practically medicinal. Drinking juice daily is a popular way to try to prevent urinary-tract infections. "Cranberries simply don't allow bacteria to colonize," says Johnston. "And bacteria could never develop a resistance to this fruit the way they have to antibiotics." Research shows that these berries may help prevent gum disease and cavities; studies also suggest that cranberries may help fight heart disease and cancer and may help prevent peptic ulcers. And they scored higher than strawberries, spinach and beets on one study's list of fruit and veggies that may provide protection against some chronic age-related afflictions.