

A Business That Likes to Be “In the Red”

Don Mercer

**Associate Professor, Food Science
Kemptville Campus University of Guelph**

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting a “farm” that is rather unique in our area. Upper Canada Cranberries on Stagecoach Road, just north of Enniskerry is owned and operated by Lyle Slater and his family. It is billed as “Ottawa’s Only Cranberry Grower”.

What I find most interesting on visits of this type is the ingenuity and creativity that goes into bringing various crops or food products to us. That is certainly the case at Upper Canada Cranberries. Unfortunately, I was not able to be there on a day when they were actually harvesting one of their fields, but Lyle did provide a thorough description of the process to me. With his permission, I would like to share the interesting story of how the cranberries find their way from his fields to your table.

The actual cranberry fields are one to two acres in size. Each field is surrounded by a raised berm to permit flooding at harvest-time. The cranberry plants themselves are quite short, growing only to a height of about six inches. To those of us not directly involved in the growing process, there is not really much happening during the growing season. All of that changes when Fall arrives and the berries begin to ripen. Looking out across an unharvested field, I expected to see a mass of bright red berries on the plants. It was a bit of a surprise to see only burgundy-coloured leaves. However, hidden by these leaves were the mature ripe red berries.

When the berries are ready to harvest, the field is flooded with water from one of several ponds on the property. It takes about sixteen hours to bring enough water into the field to create a sufficient depth for harvesting. This is where the creativity begins to show itself. Lyle has designed and built a cranberry harvester from a large riding lawnmower. Attached to the front is a set of beater-bars that dislodge the cranberries as he drives across the flooded field. The ripe cranberries float to the surface and are collected in booms which are pulled to one end of the flooded field. It is at this time that the bright red that we associate with the cranberry harvest becomes quite obvious.

The berries are scooped into wagons and taken to the processing facility. Along with the berries, there are leaves and bits of twigs that also floated to the surface during harvesting. These are separated from the cranberries in a series of washing steps. The clean cranberries are then conveyed to the top of a long inclined screen where air is blown through the bed of berries to gently dry them.

What comes next is a processing step that is simple in principle, yet highly efficient and effective - something that I had read about in food processing textbooks and was looking forward to seeing. Cranberry processors have always needed to separate the firm ripe berries from those that are soft and of lesser quality. Many years ago, an observant individual noticed that firm berries bounce much better than soft berries. He

reasoned that this could be an efficient way of removing the undesirable soft berries, and would replace labourious hand sorting. Basically, the sorting process involves allowing the berries to fall from the top of the sorting unit. On their downward journey, the berries strike a series of wooden steps. The firmer berries bounce over a barrier on one side of the step and are allowed to continue on to the next part of the process. The remaining berries go through a few more “bounces” to be sure to collect all of the firm ones. The softer berries that have failed the bounce test are then rejected and go for use as compost. A visual inspection of those berries passing the bounce test removes any that might be unacceptable due to colour or other such attributes. The separation unit at Upper Canada Cranberries was made in 1923 and is still going strong after more than 85 years!

After sorting, the cranberries can follow a number of processing routes. Whole cranberries are packaged in one-pound bags for sale as fresh cranberries. Other berries are frozen in preparation for juice-making or for making into snacks and other innovative products. The juices include a cranberry- honey-raspberry blend in addition to the more traditional cranberry-apple blend, and plain cranberry juice. One very enjoyable treat is the dried cranberries which come in a number of forms - sweetened, unsweetened, and even “diet”. Lyle’s staff also prepares a variety of cranberry-based jams, and sauces.

Upper Canada Cranberries markets their products at the Byward Market in Ottawa, the Farmers’ Market in Vanier, the Lansdowne Place Farmers’ Market, and the Carp Farmers’ Market. They also have an on-site store at the cranberry farm (2283 Stagecoach Road). For a closer look at what goes on at the cranberry farm, visit their website at www.uc-cranberries.com. You will find photographs of the cranberry harvesting and recipes for using cranberries, along with some interesting reading about the cranberry operation.



These cranberries will go through several processing steps before they are ready for market.