

OUR SPECTACULAR SEA OF RED



Harvesting the Cranberry Carpet

By Sheena Starky

The sky is blue and the sun is shining at BK Ranch in Richmond. Property manager Wade O’Neil deftly manoeuvres his dusty pickup along narrow roads that criss-cross the sunken fields. We’re making our way back to the farm’s main lot, having taken a peek at this year’s cranberry crop. The dull roar of a plane en route to YVR is barely audible over the clatter of the truck, but the pocket of skyscrapers on the horizon is a visual reminder of the city nearby.

“There’s Mr. Dhillon,” says Wade, catching a glimpse of the owner’s black Land Rover. In his dark suit and button-down shirt, Peter Dhillon may not match your mental image of a farmer, but he knows his way around a cranberry bog. He was just 11 when his father entered the business in 1978. Although the senior Dhillon had no knowledge of cranberry cultivation, he came from the Punjab region of India, an area noted for farming. “He had agriculture in his blood,” says Dhillon. In 1993, after a “fireside chat” with his father, the younger Dhillon cast aside a potential career in law to follow in his father’s boot prints.

BK Ranch is one of three BC farms owned by Dhillon’s Richberry Group. In all, the company employs more than 50 full-time staff and has nearly 1,000 acres of cranberries, the bulk in BC and the rest in Quebec. The Richberry Group is one of 80 farm families—some fourth generation—growing cranberries in BC today. Together, these producers harvest 75–85 million pounds of fruit each year, making cranberries the province’s largest berry crop by volume.

The province’s cranberry industry got its start in 1946, when former Royal Canadian Air Force pilot Jack Bell planted three acres. Before that, First Nations peoples traded cranberries with the Hudson’s Bay Company in Fort Langley, and West Coast sailors ate them at sea to prevent scurvy. Since 1965, all BC cranberry farmers have belonged to the BC Cranberry Marketing Commission, which regulates the transportation, processing, packing, storage and marketing of all cranberries grown in the province. The Commission works with the BC Cranberry Growers Association, a voluntary organization, to promote cranberries and conduct research on behalf of farmers.

Cranberries are a perennial plant and one of few commercially grown fruits native to North America. They thrive in bogs of peat, sand, gravel and clay, making our Lower Fraser Valley ideal. "A lot of people expect trees or shrubs," says Wade, who has worked more than 20 years in the bogs. In fact, cranberries grow on vine-like plants that carpet the ground. At BK Ranch, reservoirs around the farm's perimeter draw water from the Fraser River and feed into a sprinkler system embedded in the fields. Bees from borrowed hives—about two per acre—pollinate the blooms and trigger berry development.

But it's the harvest in September and October that gets everyone buzzing. Only a small portion of BC cranberries—those destined for the fresh market—is dry-harvested with a mechanical picker. The vast majority are gathered using a unique wet harvesting process that involves flooding the bogs and loosening the fruit from the vines with beating machines. The cranberries float to the surface, are corralled with booms, and then pumped into trucks bound for the nearest receiving station. "On a sunny day, when you see a field of cranberries, it's like a sea of red. It's spectacular," says Dhillon. "The most beautiful harvest you'll ever see."

Buying directly from farmers at markets is one way to support BC producers; however Geraldine Auston, Director of Communications for the BC Cranberry Marketing Commission, says that buying a well-known brand is another way to help. Ocean Spray is a farmer-owned cooperative, created to support the North American cranberry industry after the Great Depression, and more than 90% of BC farmers are members whose harvests hit retail shelves as various Ocean Spray products.

Dhillon, who sits on Ocean Spray's Board of Directors and whose farm has been grower-owner since 1978, sees the multi-billion dollar food and beverage cooperative as a key advantage for the cranberry industry. Another boon has been the growing body of research linking cranberry consumption to health benefits like improved circulation and the prevention of urinary tract infections, cardiovascular disease, stomach ulcers and tooth decay.

Perhaps it's not so surprising then that BC's cranberry farms continue to be passed down from one generation to the next. Dhillon explains it like this: "People absolutely love the lifestyle. They love the fact that there is family involved and they love the fact that they're producing a very healthy product." Auston echoes his sentiment: "It's a neat industry, a neat bunch of growers. They're just really, really proud of what they do."

Sheena Starky is a Vancouver-based writer/editor and author of *The Casual Baker*. She is looking forward to regaling her relatives with cranberry trivia over Thanksgiving dinner. www.casualbaker.blogspot.com