



JEROMEVA

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John Moss is the fourth generation to work at his family's farm known as Elm Lake Cranberry Co. During the harvest the red berries are raked toward the edge of the marsh to be loaded onto trucks.

Berry Nice

Visit Wisconsin's marshes to learn more about Midwestern cranberry country.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER



Hundreds of red berries bob on the surface of the flooded marsh as white, puffy clouds drift across a bright blue sky. John Moss, fourth generation of family-run Elm Lake Cranberry Co., strides through the water in hip waders, coaxing the berries toward shore with a flat, wooden rake.

A farm truck waits as a conveyer belt whirrs to life, filling its bed with crimson fruit. Once loaded, the berries will embark on their journey to Thanksgiving tables across America.

The autumn ritual plays out at more than 250 farms in Wisconsin, where most U.S. cranberries grow. Visitors watch the harvest spectacle on drives along the Cranberry Highway with stops for marsh tours, festivals, and tastes of Wisconsin's state fruit in its many flavorful forms.

NATIVE FOOD

Cranberries are a distinctly American fruit, and some contend that it's one of just three originally found only on our continent — along with blueberries and Concord grapes. In the U.S., cranberries grow in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington, but Wisconsin leads the pack, producing more than 60 percent of the nation's crop, enough for 26 berries for every man, woman, and child on the planet. In the past decade the state's cranberry industry has grown to a value of nearly a billion dollars, generating 4,000 jobs. Wisconsin's largest fruit crop circles the globe with exports to Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Why Wisconsin? Some 15,000 years ago, water from melting glaciers built up behind ice dams covering central Wisconsin up to 150 feet deep. When this glacial lake receded, it left behind a sandy lakebed, acidic soil perfect for growing cranberries, and a high water table with wetlands ideal for the ditches and dikes needed to flood the marshes.

Native Americans used wild cranberries for food, medicine, and dye for their clothes. When settlers came along in the 19th century, they began cultivating the crops. Some farms have remained in the same family for more than a century.

"We've been in one place doing the same thing for more than 140 years," says Mary Brown, who proudly introduces herself to visitors as the third-generation owner of Glacial

Upcoming Wisconsin cranberry events

- Warrens Cranberry Festival, Sept. 23-25, www.cranfest.com
- Stone Lake Cranberry Festival, Oct. 1, www.stonelakecranberryfestival.com
- Eagle River Cranberry Festival, Oct. 1 and 2, www.eagleriver.org



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Above: Mary Brown schools visitors on the facts about cranberries during tours of her farm, Glacial Lake Cranberries.



Left: Julie Birrenkott at Stevens Point Brewery serves cranberry hard cider.

bus to let visitors watch a bent tine harrower comb through a marsh, separating the berries from the vines. Once free of their tethers, the berries are corralled inside yellow inflated booms, similar to those used to contain oil slicks. The booms constrict around the floating fruit as workers rake berries onto machines lifting them into trucks bound for refrigerated warehouses or processing plants.

Only 5 percent of cranberries end up on store shelves as fresh fruit, with the rest used for juice, sauce, and sweetened dried fruit. The world's largest

Craisins® plant operates in Wisconsin Rapids under the Ocean Spray banner.

In Pittsville, Badger State Fruit Processing, the largest independent cranberry receiving station in the country, processes 2 million pounds of fruit a day. Cleaned and sorted, the berries go into a warehouse set at minus 10 degrees. Freezing makes the berries easier to slice.

Visitors at Glacial Lake hungry for more cranberry facts find them in the farm's visitor center, where a video production, exhibits, and a gift shop occupy a 1945-era workers' mess hall. Farm guests looking to spend the night find cozy accommodations in The Stone Cottage with a wood-burning fireplace, screened porch, and kitchen.

CRANBERRY HIGHWAY

More cranberry farms lie along a 50-mile route meandering southwest from Wisconsin Rapids through the small towns of

Cranmoor and Nekoosa. During the harvest season, motorists take a self-guided drive on this Cranberry Highway, stopping to see seas of red berries among the orange and gold of fall foliage.

They might also spot wildlife.

Cranberry marshes, not bogs, as they are called in other parts of the U.S., naturally attract birds, mammals, and aquatic creatures. Wisconsin's cranberry farms cover 180,000 acres, but the vines grow on just 21,000 acres. The remainder consists of support acreage, wetlands, and reservoirs used for irrigation and frost protection. Trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes flock to these open lands along with blue heron, loons, otters, badgers, and red foxes. Frogs croak in the reeds.

In Warrens, the "Cranberry Capital of Wisconsin," visitors check out the Wisconsin Cranberry Discovery Center on Main Street. They'll not only get their fill of facts as they tour the museum but will satisfy their taste buds in the test kitchen, which might be turning out cranberry pie, cranberry scones, or cranberry bread. An ice cream parlor serves cranberry ice cream. No worries; cranberries are good for health. Their naturally high levels of antioxidants benefit the immune system.

A cranberry feast awaits at the Warrens Cranberry Festival the last full weekend of September. Along with pancakes topped with cranberry syrup offered each morning, the festival makes room for more than 100 food booths and 100 farm market booths. Marsh tours and a parade, fish fry, and pie-eating contest draw 100,000 people over the three-day festival. Shoppers hunt for treasures at antique and flea markets and booths housing 850 arts and crafts vendors.

While central Wisconsin garners most of

Lake Cranberries, founded in 1873 about 15 miles west of the city of Wisconsin Rapids. During the harvest season, she and her husband, Phil, lead tours of their marshes on their 24-passenger Berry Bus, peppering visitors with facts about cranberry production en route. "We do this so people learn where their food comes from," she says.

Fact: Cranberries do not grow in water. This surprises most people who've seen pictures of workers standing in a cranberry bog, says Mary Brown. She explains that cranberries grow in flat beds of soil, on trailing perennial vines that, once established, produce fruit for decades.

Fact: Cranberries float. At harvest time — late September through October — growers flood the beds, making the red balls rise to the surface for picking. Brown halts the



Cranberry Apple Salad

- 3 apples, red and green, cored and chopped into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup celery, sliced on bias
- 3/4 cup sweetened dried cranberries
- 1/2 cup hazelnuts, toasted and coarsely chopped
- 1/2 cup yogurt, plain, low-fat
- 3 Tbsp orange juice concentrate, thawed
- 1/4 tsp salt

Mix apples, celery, cranberries and hazelnuts in large bowl; set aside.

Blend yogurt, orange juice concentrate and salt until well mixed. Pour over apple mixture and stir until blended.

Makes 6-8 servings.

Photo and recipe courtesy Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association

the attention of cranberry lovers, the fruit actually grows in 20 Wisconsin counties. In northern Wisconsin, farms around Manitowish Waters give marsh tours, and both Stone Lake and Eagle River put on cranberry festivals in early October.

During the harvest season, chefs in restaurants throughout Wisconsin's cranberry country incorporate cranberries in their menu items. Father Fats Public House in Stevens Point adds the berries to its flatbread of the day and serves a cocktail made from muddled cranberries, elderflower liqueur, and Champagne. Menus change according to season.

Beer lovers seek out the Stevens Point Brewery, founded in 1857 and one of the oldest privately owned breweries in the nation. It makes 44 products, but in autumn visitors line up to taste its only cranberry product: Ciderboys Cranberry Road hard cider.

Within just a day's drive from Missouri (six hours from the St. Louis area), travelers can enjoy a sweet fall weekend to savor Wisconsin's cranberries. •

Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Ill.

BEFORE YOU GO

For more information, contact the Wisconsin Rapids Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, (800) 554-4484 or www.visitwisrapids.com; Stevens Point Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, (715) 344-2556 or www.stevenspointarea.com.

To visit Wisconsin, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for



maps, reservations, TripTik® Travel Planners and TourBook® guides. A list of offices to serve you is on page 6 in this issue or visit AAA.com. Find more cranberry recipes you can try this fall at AAA.com/Traveler.

Among the many products made by Stevens Point Brewery only one contains cranberries, Cranberry Road hard cider.