

New and improved: The fruits that thrived in the hemisphere

Second in an occasional series on the foods of the New World.

By Peter Wynne
FOR THE INQUIRER

North America and the Caribbean islands are a cornucopia of native fruits and berries. A very abbreviated list might include avocados, black raspberries, blueberries, cranberries, pineapples and strawberries.

The New World's first citizens ate these and more, and when the first Europeans arrived, they quickly learned to enjoy this hemisphere's bounty. In most cases, the newcomers slowly managed to improve upon what they'd found.

Strawberries, for example, were known in the Old World, but today's cultivated berries came from the felicitous union of two New World species: the meadow strawberry, which is native to the Northeast, and the beach strawberry, which grows in temperate regions along the Pacific coast from British Columbia to Chile.

Blueberries of various sorts are found in the northern reaches of Asia, Europe and North America, but only on this continent has any effort been made to domesticate the blueberry, and that effort didn't begin until early in this century.

Elizabeth White had a blueberry farm near Pemberton and wanted to upgrade her plantings, so she offered cash prizes for wild, native plants that produced large fruit. In this way, she was able to collect dozens of superior plants.

In 1909, she and Frederick Coville, who was a botanist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, began a breeding program using the plants White had collected. They crossbred the wild plants and developed hundreds of new varieties, 18 of which they named and introduced into commerce. (One of those varieties, the Coville, is still available from nurseries and is a good one for home plantings.)

The Indians of North America made extensive use of blueberries and cranberries, two closely related species. Dried blueberries were added to cornbread to sweeten and flavor it. Cranberries could be added to pemmican, a long-keeping sausage-like mixture of dried meat, berries and rendered fat.

The Leni-Lenape Indians had a fascinating legend about the origin of cranberries: The Great Spirit created huge beasts (we'd call them mastodons) to be useful to the Indians, but instead the elephant-like creatures turned destructive.

All the other animals joined forces to attack the beasts, and the carnage was horrific. The battle ended only when the mastodons became bogged down in muck, where the Indians still found their bones on occasion. To compensate for the loss of this meat supply, the Great Spirit gave the Indians cranberries, which grow in bogs, and he colored them red as a



American Indians used cranberries extensively in their foods, but the fruit was not grown as a crop until the mid-19th century.

tions for cooked jams included with the pectin. Makes five half-pint jars.

This delightful strawberry dessert is adapted from a recipe in Fannie Farmer's original *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*, which was published in 1896.

Strawberry Mousse

- 1 pint strawberries
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 envelope (2 teaspoons) unflavored gelatin
- 2 tablespoons cold water
- ¼ cup boiling water
- 2 cups whipping cream

Hull, rinse and drain the strawberries, then crush them well in a stainless steel or other non-corrosive container. Add the sugar, mix well and set aside. After one hour, rub the mixture through a fine strainer.

- 1 cup (half-pint) whipping cream
- ½ cup sugar
- Green food coloring (optional)

Cut the avocado in half, remove the seed and scoop out the flesh into the bowl of a food processor. Add the lemon juice and salt and process to a smooth paste. Set aside.

Whip the cream, adding the sugar a spoonful at a time, until the cream forms soft peaks. Add the avocado puree and mix well. If desired, add 2 or 3 drops of green food coloring. Makes enough to top six to eight servings of fruit salad.

This steamed pudding was inspired by a recipe for "whortleberry" pudding in Lydia Maria Child's 1833 *American Frugal Housewife*. Whortleberry is one of several common names for an Old World fruit closely related to the American blueberry.

Steamed Blueberry Pudding

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The domestication of the cranberry began in the early 19th century, when a man named Henry Hall transplanted a number of wild vines to a marshy site near Dennis, Mass. Others took up Hall's approach, and soon the process began of choosing those plants that bore the largest and greatest quantities of fruit.

Over the years, dozens of selections were made from native stock, but there was no systematic breeding program until the late 1920s. Since then, about a half-dozen varieties have been developed and introduced into commerce, and one of them, the Stanley, is now grown from coast to coast.

It wouldn't do to write about native American fruits without a glance at some of the tropical sorts, especially the two that show up regularly in our supermarkets — the pineapple and the avocado.

The first Europeans to see and taste pineapples were Columbus and his men, when they landed on Guadeloupe in 1493. The fierce, man-eating Carib Indians grew pineapples on Guadeloupe, but the fruit apparently originated in Brazil and Paraguay and had been brought to the islands of the Caribbean by the Indians.

The Portuguese took the pineapple to St. Helena in the first decade of the 1500s and, by 1550, they'd brought it to Africa, Madagascar and India. By century's end, many islands in the South Pacific had joined the list and, to this day, Hawaii is a major pineapple producer.

The avocado is the fruit of a tree related to our native sassafras, whose powdered leaves are used as a thickener in Cajun cooking and called gumbo file. The avocado is a most unusual fruit. Ounce for ounce, it contains four to five times as much protein as an apple and about 15 times as much fat.

Alligator pears, as they're sometimes called, are so rich in protein that in Mexico and Central America, the region to which they're native, they're often eaten in place of meat.

Here are some recipes:

The flavors of pineapple and rum seem to have a special affinity for each other, and together they make a supremely rich jam. Pineapple jams can be slow to set, however, sometimes taking as long as a week. Just leave the jars undisturbed in a cool, dark place.

- 1 envelope (2 teaspoons) unflavored gelatin
- 2 tablespoons cold water
- ¼ cup boiling water
- 2 cups whipping cream

Hull, rinse and drain the strawberries, then crush them well in a stainless steel or other non-corrosive container. Add the sugar, mix well and set aside. After one hour, rub the mixture through a fine strainer.

Soften the gelatin in cold water, then dissolve in the boiling water. Add to the strawberry puree and chill in the refrigerator until the mixture just begins to set.

Whip the cream until thickened, but not stiff, and fold into the strawberry gelatin mixture. Spoon into a mold and put in the freezer for four to six hours before serving. At serving time, dip the mold briefly into cool water, then turn out the mousse onto a chilled serving plate. Makes 12 servings.

Most avocado recipes are savory rather than sweet and exploit the fruit's "meaty" qualities. Here's a sweet, avocado-based topping for fresh fruit salads, especially those made with citrus fruits. The recipe has been adapted from one found in the 1941 *International Edition of the American Woman's Cook Book*.

Avocado Cream

- 1 small avocado
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice
- Pinch of salt

servings of fruit salad.

This steamed pudding was inspired by a recipe for "whortleberry" pudding in Lydia Maria Child's 1833 *American Frugal Housewife*. Whortleberry is one of several common names for an Old World fruit closely related to the American blueberry.

Steamed Blueberry Pudding

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup cornmeal
- ¾ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 2 tablespoons molasses
- ½ cup (approximately) buttermilk
- 1 cup blueberries

In a medium mixing bowl, combine the flour, cornmeal, sugar and baking soda. Mix well. In another bowl, beat the egg lightly, then beat in the peanut oil, molasses and buttermilk. Beat together the two mixtures — the batter will be very stiff — and stir in the blueberries.

Turn into a buttered 5- or 6-cup pudding mold. Place a cover on mold or cover tightly with aluminum foil. Put into a large saucepan and add water until the water level is about two-thirds up the side of the mold. Bring water to a boil, cover the saucepan, reduce the heat to low and gently simmer pudding two hours. Serve with milk or light cream. Makes six to eight servings.

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