

Cranberries Paint This Town Red

By Sam Bleecker

Every October, there's one little town in New Jersey that metaphorically paints itself red — cranberry red, to be exact.

Like some ritual seasonal sacrament, Chatsworth bursts forth in fall with a two-day festival to celebrate the ruby-red fruit.

You might say cranberries spawned the town or at least resurrected it.

Ordinarily, Chatsworth's population hovers at around 1,200. But on a single autumn weekend, this year Oct. 18-19, nearly 100,000 visitors will bloat the town. They come for the annual cranberry fest, flocking by the carload to this cranberry oasis plunk in the heart of the Pine Barrens, a coastal plain of pigmy and pitch pines about 45 minutes northwest of Atlantic City.

In early fall, the scrubby low-lying landscape of the Pine Barrens erupts with a profusion of red, round, ripe cranberries the way Amsterdam spawns tulips in spring. In fact, the cranberry crop in Chatsworth — "capital" of the Pine Barrens — is the third largest in the United States, after those of Wisconsin and Massachusetts.

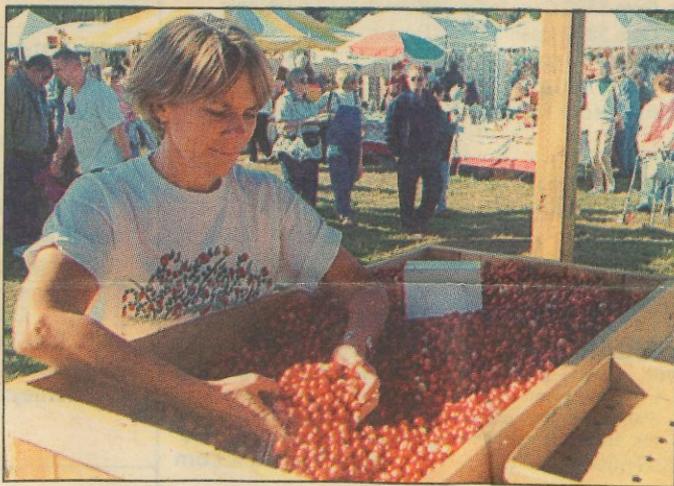
Back in the late 1700s, Chatsworth was known as Shamong, and its wealth derived from the rich iron deposits used to supply cannon balls in the Revolutionary War. Not until the mid-1800s did cranberries play a role in the swiftly growing economy. At that time, the town contained one church, two stores, one school, a wheelwright and blacksmith shop, a railroad station and about 20 houses. The population was 389.

Just before the Civil War, Chatsworth went upscale, becoming a destination for the scions of Astors and Vanderbilts and their ilk, who stepped out of railroad cars to vacation here or at the nearby Jersey beaches. Following the collapse of the iron and glass industries, the town increasingly relied on agriculture to secure its place in history.

Eventually, cranberries became Chatsworth's main staple, laying the seeds for its annual cranberry fest. Although the weekend event is mainly a street fair, the festival's true purpose is as a fund-raiser to benefit the ongoing restoration of the town's once-noble building. The long-neglected White Horse Inn — a clapboard, two-



Photos by Sam Bleecker



Workers on a farm in Chatsworth N.J., above, scoop cranberries onto a conveyor belt. Left, a portion of the harvest on sale at the annual cranberry fair, which opens its 20th year on Oct. 18-19.

historic Whitesbog, in nearby Browns Mills, a 10-minute drive from festival central. A \$7 fee nets you a two-hour gig that includes a 20-minute documentary before a spin in a 30-passenger vehicle for views of acres of berries bobbing gently atop the water.

Aside from touring the bogs, the festival's big event is the cranberry contest, a judged affair that runs the gamut of cranberryana. Categories include recipes for cakes, breads, salads, cookies, muffins, relishes, main dishes, candy, pies, jams and jellies, diet and low-fat, juice and teas, and various sinful desserts. Some yummy entries surely could win for creativity alone: a cranberry potato salad made with red potatoes, walnuts, dill, cranberries and mustard; or chocolate biscotti with cranberries and almonds.

If the festival promises all things cranberry, we wonder if anyone else notices that most of the commercially made treats sold here didn't hail from New Jersey at all, but from that other Cranberry Central — Cape Cod, Mass.

Never mind. For many, the festival sweetens a weekend getaway the way sugar sweetens cranberries. ●

Sam Bleecker is a freelance writer.

story structure on Main Street — was once owned by a Pine Barrens baron when the railroad still passed through here and the prominent proprietor hosted the high-hats.

On festival day, the town is abob with humanity, with many folks clad in cranberry-colored togs or shades thereof. By 10:45 a.m., traffic gluts Chatsworth's main drag.

Festival exhibitors, sporting cranber-

ry-hued aprons or T-shirts, line the streets like cranberries crammed in a can. More than 160 vendors ply everything from cranberries to crafts. Many of the divine baked goods tendered here — such as cranberry-apple dumplings in caramel sauce — actually are made in a bakery in nearby Medford.

For those interested in witnessing the actual harvesting of the "rubies of the Pine Barrens," tours can be had at