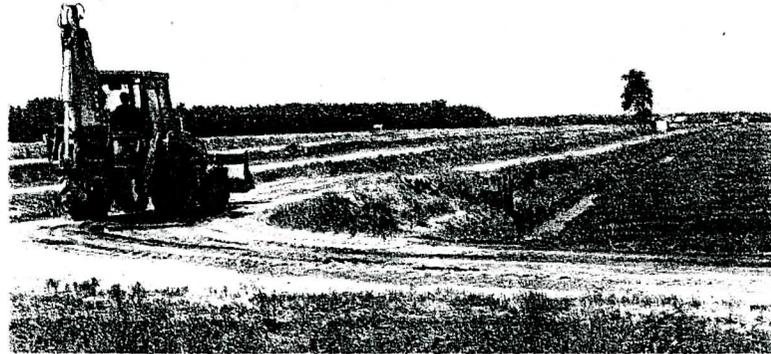


## A G R I C U L T U R E



With the cranberry industry in a deep slump, Ocean Spray's experimental white juice has growers harvesting early. Joseph W. Darlington, at right, will devote a quarter of his crop to the unripened white berries.



Photographs by David Hunsinger for The New York Times

## Immature Cranberries Called to the Rescue

By KIRSTY SUCATO

At this time of year, Joseph W. Darlington, a cranberry farmer in Pemberton Township, normally bides his time. Like four generations of family farmers before him, Mr. Darlington waits for the fruit to ripen in the cool of autumn before the harvest in October, when the berries are at their most brilliant red.

But this year, Mr. Darlington, like more than a quarter of the state's cranberry growers, is preparing to flood his bogs just after Labor Day to capture a river of immature white berries.

An experimental beverage is turning the state's struggling cranberry industry upside down. It is white cranberry juice, a new product from Ocean Spray that is not as tart as the dark red brew. And it doesn't stain clothes.

The drink, to be introduced nationwide in January, is part of an effort to increase consumer demand for cranberries and to lift growers out of their worst economic slump in 50 years. Ocean Spray is offering a bonus of up to 25 percent for the whitest fruit and, in the process, forcing some major changes in the cranberry industry.

About 30 of New Jersey's 45 cranberry growers are members of the Ocean Spray Cooperative, the largest cranberry cooperative in the country. Of those, about 14 will be taking part in the program.

"I guess it is the most changes occurring in a short period of time than any periods that have come before," said Mr. Darlington, the president of Joseph J. White Inc., the state's third-largest cranberry farm and a member of the Ocean Spray Cooperative. "This is certainly a period of more turbulence than ever before."

He will devote about a quarter of his crop to the white berries, falling back on a second harvest of red fruit at the end of October.

Growers are desperate for a way to increase prices, now the lowest since the 1950's. Last year, Ocean Spray growers got \$11.23 for a 100-pound



barrel of cranberries, compared with a high of about \$60 in 1997. Production costs range from \$15 to \$45 to a barrel.

Because of the hard times, Ocean Spray has laid off 40 workers at its manufacturing plant in Bordentown over recent months. Most farmers have not turned a profit in a couple of years and many did not even harvest last year because they could not afford to, said Edward V. Lipman Jr., a cranberry farmer and director of the Office of Continuing Professional Education at Rutgers University's Cook College.

"I think the large farmers that are commercially efficient will ride this out; they see an end to it in maybe five years," he said. "If that doesn't happen, there will probably be a larger shakeout than what we're seeing right now."

The problems date to the mid-1990's, when consumer demand was high, juice drinks were becoming fashionable, and medical studies showed that cranberry juice helped prevent urinary tract infections. Seeking to cash in on prices as high as \$80 a barrel, farmers rushed to open bogs in Wisconsin and Canada.

In New Jersey, where expansion is limited by state wetlands protection regulations, growers increased yields by introducing hardier varieties of plant, like the commonly used Stevens variety.

But the growers soon produced more than they could sell, and in 1998, prices fell to \$25 a barrel. This

year, they are expecting to receive \$17 to \$22, with the white berries bringing an extra \$1 to \$6 a barrel.

In an effort to reduce the glut, the United States Department of Agriculture ordered farmers to cut their production by 15 percent last year, and by 35 percent this year. For some, it will mean destroying hundreds of barrels of good fruit. Others will simply grow less. But it is still a painful remedy.

"If we could have grown all of our acreage rather than setting aside, we probably would have had a record-breaking year," said Holly H. Rivera, the president of the American Cranberry Growers Association, whose family owns Haines & Haines Inc. in Chatsworth, the largest cranberry farm in the state.

"It's kind of heartbreaking for a farmer to say 'We could have had a record-breaking year.'"

New Jersey is the third-largest producer of cranberries in the nation after Wisconsin and Massachusetts, harvesting 3,700 of the 36,600 acres nationwide. Last year, the state's farmers produced 489,000 barrels, according to the New Jersey Agricultural Statistics Service.

For now, farmers are hopeful that the new white cranberry juice will improve their fate. A pilot growing project in New Jersey two years ago gave Ocean Spray enough white berries to create three new cranberry juices, one a peach blend, one a strawberry blend and one a basic white cranberry. The juice tested well with consumers in California, said Marguerite Copel, Ocean Spray's vice president for corporate communications.

But the project also revealed the danger of changing the age-old farming cycles. When farmers flooded the bogs for harvest in September, young vines died off. Farmers suspect it was the warmer water. This year, growers will flood only mature bogs early in the season, Mr. Lipman said.

The new system, he said, is "a crap shoot."

But farmers are willing to take the gamble.

"We're saying, Hey, Ocean Spray is giving us really good innovation," Mrs. Rivera said. "We're willing to take that leap of faith."