

Currant CUISINE

A much-overlooked superfood takes a long overdue bow, but beware of impostors.

For good health, look for the real deal.

By Laura Pensiero, RD



W

With so much being said about nutritionally packed, health-promoting foods, it's surprising that hardly anyone is talking about black currants. The best-selling *Super-Foods Rx: Fourteen Foods That Will Change Your Life* by Steven G. Pratt and Kathy Matthews and numerous other fabulous ingredient-driven health/cookbooks, such as *12 Best Foods Cookbook* by Dana Jacobi, *Nutrition For Life* by Lisa Hark, PhD, RD, and Darwin Deen, MD, and *Wellness Foods A-Z* by Sheldon Margen, MD, all fail to bring this antioxidant darling into the discussion. I'm guilty, too. I completely overlooked currants in my own work, *The Strang Cancer Prevention Center Cookbook*, which highlights powerhouse foods that protect against cancer and promote wellness.

WHY THE SILENCE?

With double the antioxidants of blueberries, as much as four times the vitamin C of oranges, and more potassium than bananas, why have black currants been so neglected? The answer starts with the law. Commercial cultivation of many varieties of currants was illegal in many parts of America for almost a century. Settlers brought currants from Europe in the 1700s, and they remained part of the American landscape and table until 1911 when Congress banned much of the cultivation to protect the lumber industry.

A botanical disease called *white pine blister rust* was thought to spread from currants to white pines. The ban was shifted to states' jurisdiction in the 1960s during

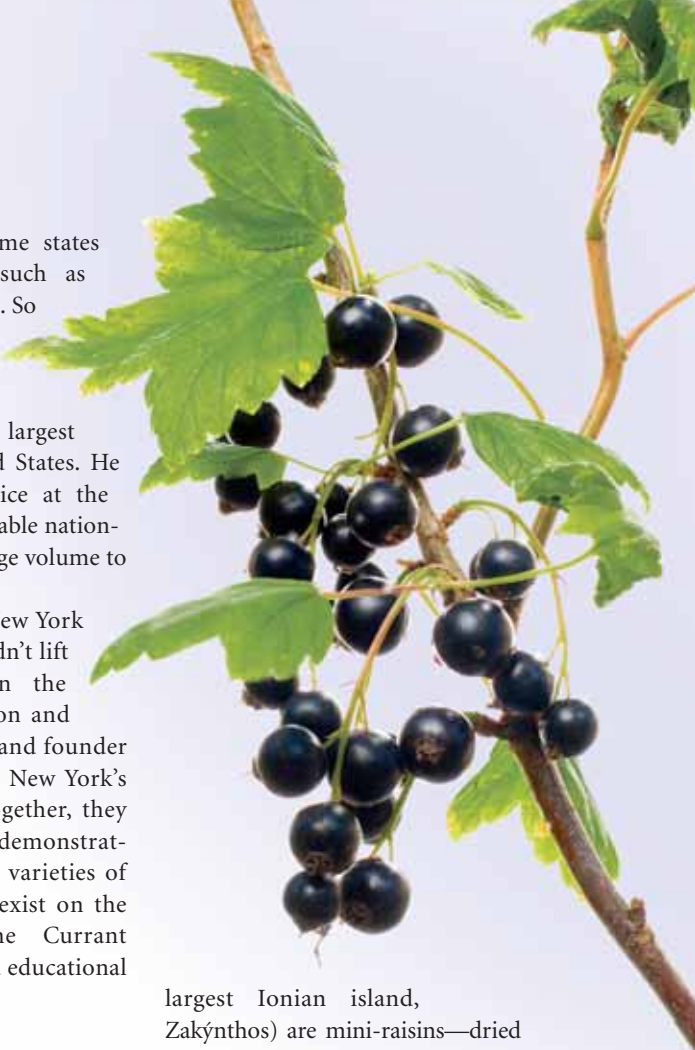
legislative housecleaning. Some states adopted the ban. Others, such as Connecticut, simply ignored it. So Allyn Brown added 80 acres of black currants to Maple Lane Farms in Preston, Connecticut, making him the largest currant grower in the United States. He offers a pick-your-own service at the farm, bottled juice that is available nationally, and frozen currants in large volume to wineries and spirit producers.

In the early 20th century, New York led currant cultivation but didn't lift the ban until 2003, when the Cornell Cooperative Extension and Greg Quinn, a horticulturist and founder of The Currant Company in New York's Hudson Valley, prevailed. Together, they conducted a feasibility study demonstrating that previously outlawed varieties of currants could peacefully coexist on the New York landscape. The Currant Company and a much-needed educational campaign were born.

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

Because they've been out of the public eye—and off grocers' shelves—for so long and have rarely been used on the culinary scene, currants have been overlooked as a superfood.

Adding to the slight, those hard raisin-like fruits that we've been calling currants and tossing into quick breads, couscous, pilafs, compotes, and braised vegetables are, in fact, not currants. Zante currants ("Zante" is an abbreviation of the third



largest Ionian island, Zakýnthos) are mini-raisins—dried grapes that grow on vines. But currants grow on bushes.

The English word *currant* has been used since 1550 to describe these raisins. The misconception began with the first shipment of dried Black Corinth (Zante) grapes from Greece. Corinth was mistakenly translated to "currant" at the receiving dock. Now, an untold number of cookbooks and other forms of published recipes list currants in the ingredient list when they really mean raisins.

Know Your Currants

Currants may be red, black, pink, or albino. While all have delicious culinary possibilities and are rich in vitamin C, black currants far surpass the others in antioxidant properties.

Red currants: equally delicious eaten fresh or cooked into jams, jellies, preserves, and pies, red currants make great dressings for salads and sauces (think Cumberland) for game or patés.

White currants: an albino form of red currants and a bit of a novelty, they're less tart and can be eaten out of the hand, mixed into salads, and used to top tarts and other desserts.

Pink currants: intermediate between red and white types in

degree of pigmentation, their skin is colorless and their flesh is pink. Like white currants, they're less tart and acidic and can be eaten fresh or mixed into raw foods.

Black currants: too astringent to eat raw, but they have great culinary potential. They make delicious juices, jams, preserves, sauces, ice creams, and sorbets and can add nutrients and vibrant color to baked goods. Their acidity, which can be mellowed with a bit of sugar, honey, or maple syrup, makes black currant sauces the perfect accompaniment to full-flavored rich foods, lamb, and game.



Lamb Chops With Black Currant Barbecue Sauce

This barbecue sauce is lower in fat and higher in nutrients than traditional barbecue sauce. Use it for grilled or seared beef tenderloin medallions or the whole tenderloin, chicken, or even salmon.

Makes 4 servings

Black Currant Barbecue Sauce

¼ cup finely diced shallots
1 pint fresh black currants
¼ cup water
¼ cup rice wine vinegar
¼ cup brown sugar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
½ to ¾ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon butter
Salt

Lamb Chops

8 loin chops, about 2 to 3 ounces each after trimming
2 tablespoons olive oil
1½ tablespoons lemon juice
2 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and pepper to taste

Over the last two decades, the intense study of phytochemicals—naturally occurring plant chemicals that promote wellness and prevent disease—has brought currants back into the American discussion. (They never left the conversation in Europe.) While blueberries have been crowned the “king of antioxidants,” researchers have shown that black currants have far greater antioxidant properties, a result of their high levels of vitamins A, C, and E, and particularly anthocyanins, which give black currants their deep purplish hue.

A fairly consistent rule of thumb with fruits and vegetables is the deeper the color, the greater the amounts of nutrients and phytochemicals. That’s certainly the case with black currants. Their anthocyanins have also been shown to diminish oxidative stress, a syndrome that causes some neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s, as well as certain cardiovascular diseases. Anthocyanins are a subclass of the broad polyphenol group of phytochemicals found in foods such as apples, blueberries, broccoli, cabbage, celery, cherries, coffee, cranberries, dark chocolate, grapes and red wine, legumes, olive oil, onions, parsley, strawberries, tea, whole grains, and, in varying amounts, in many other fruits and vegetables. The amount of anthocyanins in black currants and the resulting antioxidant levels far surpass those of most other foods.

A better-known nutrient—the mineral potassium—is another reason to celebrate black currants. Harvard School of Public Health researchers studied the diets of more than 43,000 men and found that those eating diets rich in potassium and magnesium (also

continued on page 44

In a medium saucepan, combine the shallots, currants, water, vinegar, brown sugar, mustard, and cayenne pepper and stir to combine. Bring to boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes, stirring often. Remove from heat and stir in the butter. Purée the sauce in a blender or food processor until smooth. Strain through a fine mesh strainer using a rubber spatula to push as much sauce as possible through the mesh. Season the sauce to taste with salt.

Combine olive oil, lemon juice, and garlic. Brush over the surface of the chops. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. Prepare medium-hot charcoal fire in a grill or preheat a gas grill. Season chops with salt and pepper and place on hot grill. Cook on both sides for 1½ minutes, then slather on currant barbecue sauce and cook another minute per side or until medium rare.

Calories: 460 (16% from fat); Fat: 18 g (Saturated Fat: 5 g, Monounsaturated Fat: 9 g, Polyunsaturated Fat: 4 g); Protein: 52 g; Carbohydrate: 52.7 g; Fiber: 3 g; Cholesterol: 164 mg; Iron: 5 mg; Sodium: 325 mg; Calcium: 83 mg



Rosemary Wine Cake With Currants

Chill the leftover wine and sip it with this exceptional cake. Serve it plain as an afternoon treat or with some fresh berries and a dollop of fresh whipped cream for a simple but elegant evening dessert. Some tasty variations include a hazelnut topping instead of walnuts or the use of white dessert wines such as Vin Santo, Moscato d'Asti, or Malvasia della Lipari in place of the red wine.

Makes 6 to 8 servings

2 cups all-purpose unbleached flour
½ teaspoon salt
1¼ teaspoons baking powder
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, room temperature
¾ cup granulated sugar
⅓ cup extra virgin olive oil
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

1 teaspoon vanilla extract
¾ cup sweet red wine (such as Brachetto d'Acqui, Marzemino Dolce, or Fragolino)
1 cup black currants (fresh or frozen)
2 teaspoons fresh rosemary leaves removed from their sprigs

Topping
2 tablespoons crystal sugar
½ cup crushed walnuts

Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat oven to 350°. Lightly butter a 9¼- X 3¼-inch Bundt pan. Dust with flour; tap out excess.

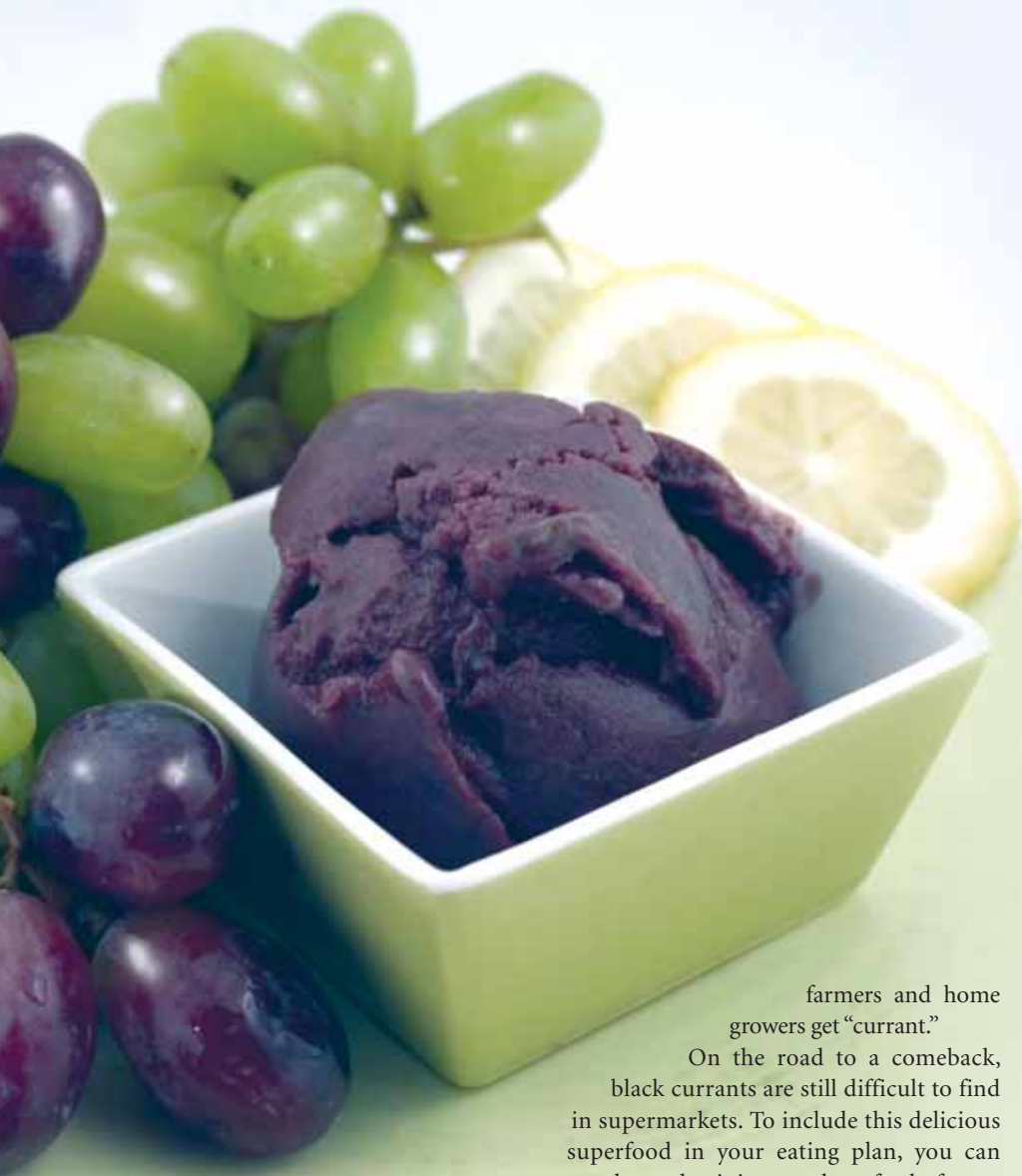
Sift the flour, salt, and baking powder into a bowl. Set aside.

In the bowl of a mixer (or in a large bowl, by hand), beat the butter with the granulated sugar and olive oil until light and creamy. Add the eggs, one at a time (beating

with each addition), the lemon zest, and the vanilla. Stir in one half of the flour mixture. Then add one half of the wine. Repeat using the remainder of the dry ingredients and the wine, mixing just until smooth. Fold in the currants and rosemary.

Turn the batter into the prepared pan. Using a rubber spatula, evenly spread the batter. Sprinkle one half of the sugar over the top, followed by the nuts, then the rest of the sugar. Bake for 50 minutes until the cake is browned and springy to the touch. Cool in the pan on a wire rack.

Calories: 345 (41% from fat); Fat: 7 g (Saturated Fat: 4 g, Monounsaturated Fat: 7 g, Polyunsaturated Fat: 4 g); Protein: 5 g; Carbohydrate: 41 g; Fiber: 1.5 g; Cholesterol: 52 mg; Iron: 1.7 mg; Sodium: 146 mg; Calcium: 48 mg



found in currants) had a reduced risk of stroke. The FDA has recently allowed potassium-rich bananas to be marketed with a health claim highlighting potassium's link to the prevention of high blood pressure and stroke. With almost double the potassium of bananas, black currants seem to be another tasty way to get that nutrient.

In addition to promoting wellness and lending themselves to numerous delectable culinary uses, currants may help preserve precious farmland. They are a high-yield, fairly easy-to-grow, and relatively profitable crop that could help some farmers resist selling to developers, which is Quinn's mission in New York State. In addition to starting his own currant farm and product line, he's developed a nursery and helps

farmers and home growers get "currant."

On the road to a comeback, black currants are still difficult to find in supermarkets. To include this delicious superfood in your eating plan, you can purchase the juices or buy fresh frozen berries online. The Currant Company ships fresh frozen black and red currants in consumer-friendly sized 2- to 5-pound bags, a nationally available currant beverage (CurrantC nectar), and seedlings.

If your geography permits it, consider growing your own. Currants thrive in humid summers and cool regions with significant winter chilling. Most currant growers and nurseries are found in the Pacific Northwest and northeastern United States. To see if your area is suitable for currant growing, check the USDA Hardiness Zone Map and confirm that your planting area is within zones 4 through 7 (www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/ushzmap.html).

Currant bushes are low maintenance and can add a bit of European joie de vivre (and nutrients) to your summer. When

properly frozen and packed, their fruit can be enjoyed throughout the year. 🍷

LAURA PENSIERO, RD, owner of Gigi Trattoria in Rhinebeck, New York, and Gigi Market in nearby Red Hook, is founder and director of Chef4Life (www.chef4life.com), a nutrition and culinary consulting service. Since 2000, she's been on the professional staff of Healthy Children, Healthy Futures, a Strang Cancer Prevention Center initiative that promotes healthy eating and physical activity and operates nationwide in urban after-school programs. In 1998 and 2004, she coauthored *The Strang Cancer Prevention Center Cookbook*.

She was a consultant to the Culinary Institute of America and culinary coordinator for the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Prevention and Wellness Program.

Black Currant Sorbet

Makes 8 servings

1 cup + 2 tablespoons sugar

½ cup water

½ cup currant juice

1 quart fresh or frozen black currants

Juice of 1 lemon

In a medium saucepan, combine sugar, water, and currant juice; bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes to completely dissolve sugar. Let cool. Transfer the sugar mixture, currants, and lemon juice to a blender or work bowl of a food processor; purée until smooth. Freeze according to instructions (home ice cream/sorbet machine) until smooth, firm, and frozen.

Calories: 150 (0% from fat); Fat: 0 g (Saturated Fat: 0 g, Monounsaturated Fat: 0 g, Polyunsaturated Fat: 0 g); Protein: 1 g; Carbohydrate: 38 g; Fiber: 2.9 g; Cholesterol: 66 mg; Iron: 0.8 mg; Sodium: 4 mg; Calcium: 31 mg; Potassium: 190mg



FREEZING CURRANTS

Spread currants in one layer on a tray and place in the freezer. When they are frozen—about one hour—transfer them to an airtight container or freezer-storage bag and seal; do not overpack. Store frozen for up to one year.

Gigi Black Currant Cosmopolitan

Yin and yang—high antioxidant currants with a combination of ingredients that should be consumed moderately. This is one of my restaurant's most popular summer drinks.

5 ounces Absolut Citron
2 ounces Cointreau
1 ounce black currant juice (suggest CurrantC)
Squeeze of fresh lime juice
Fresh lime slice to garnish

Shake vigorously with ice. Serve in a chilled martini glass.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Currant Company
Phone: 1-800-Currantc
www.currants.com

Maple Lane Farms
Phone: 860-889-3766
www.maplelane.com