

# Squeezing the health benefits from cherries

BY BENJAMIN PEEK

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The use of cherry products to ease pain caused by arthritis, gout and other ailments has long been part of folk medicine, yet a deeper knowledge of the beneficial properties of cherries has only recently become available. Early research has given a basket full of evidence that cherries contain a number of beneficial chemicals and nutrients. The health benefits of cherries, best obtained from the consumption of concentrated tart cherry juice, has changed the cherry industry and its marketing approach.

The trend toward understanding the health benefits of cherries began with the introduction of PlevaLean by Ray Pleva. The lean meat products appealed to a large group of fat-conscious consumers and encouraged the industry to explore other possible health benefits which might result from the consumption of cherry products.

Montmorency tart cherries, the primary variety of cherry grown in Northern Michigan, were studied scientifically, to determine what, if any, benefits could be derived from their consumption. Early research performed by Michigan State University and the University of Texas Health Science Center, has yielded encouraging results. The Montmorency tart cherry has been found to contain numerous antioxidants, anti-inflammatory agents, and beneficial nutrients.

One antioxidant found in tart cherries, melatonin, has been shown to help in the prevention of cellular damage caused by free radicals. Over time, damage from free radicals can cause aging and death of body cells, as well as increase the risk of cancer and heart disease. The sleep cycle is also regulated by melatonin in the body. At night, dark conditions encourage the body to produce melatonin, which promotes sounder sleep, as well as sharper mental acuity while awake. Oftentimes, aging and

stress hinder the body's natural production of melatonin, which in turn causes insomnia and restless slumber. Consumption of this chemical, which is found in high levels in tart cherries, may be beneficial. According to Dr. Russel Reiter, who headed the research team at the University of Texas, "Tart cherries, specifically the Montmorency variety, contain an extremely significant quantity of melatonin, enough to produce positive results in the body," said Reiter.

Another beneficial class of substances, called anthocyanins, have been found in Montmorency tart cherries. Anthocyanins are natural dyes, which are responsible for the dark red skin and flesh of cherries. More importantly, these chemicals inhibit signals in the body which cause pain and inflammation. The anthocyanins found in tart cherries are comparable to ibuprofen and naproxen at stopping certain specific substances which cause pain and inflammation in the body.

Tart cherries also contain nutrients, such as potassium, calcium, and phosphorous, which are beneficial to one's overall health.

Cherries have been made into many different forms,

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**Glenn LaCross, Leelanau Fruit, Suttons Bay**

such as pie-filling, frozen, dried or juice. Traditionally, cherry pie has been a favorite food item. However, dried cherries have become a growing favorite, used as a substitute for raisins.

"Not only are they good for you, dried cherries are a tasty snack," said Nels Veliquette, of Traverse City's Atwater Foods.

He pointed out that dried cherries are natural, with no additives, or fat, and can be convenient to eat.

Surprisingly, concentrated tart cherry juice has become the product of choice when consuming cherries as part of a health regimen. Not long ago, concentrate was almost entirely unavailable for public consumption.

"Until recently, cherry juice concentrate was sold primari-

ly to the industrial food market as a flavoring in juice, gum, candy and confectionery foods," said Jane Baker, marketing director of the Cherry Marketing Institute in Lansing.

Today, cherry juice concentrate has become available in many grocery stores. It can be mixed with water and drank like juice, or mixed in to other food preparations around the home.

"Twenty-two pounds of cherries produces one quart of concentrate," pointed out Glenn LaCross, owner of Leelanau Fruit in Suttons Bay. He advised that the average consumer using concentrate as part of a health regimen, needs about one quart of cherry juice concentrate each month, which in a year is equivalent to consuming 264 pounds of cherries, much higher than the one pound of cherries consumed by the average American each year.

"If they have arthritis, if they have gout, if they have chronic headaches, consumers often get relief in three to four weeks of using this product,"

added LaCross.

A new potential has emerged for the health-related use of cherries and the vast market of opportunity has caused excitement and enthusiasm among cherry growers throughout Michigan.

"The outlook is excellent. The more people are educated about these products, the more they are turned on to them," noted Veliquette.

"[Health benefits] are having a big effect on us," remarked, John King, owner of King Orchards in Central Lake. "Down the road, I think it's the driving force on how the cherry crop will be marketed."

The health benefits message has begun to energize, if not revolutionize the cherry industry's approach to sales and marketing of their products.

"We have never had this kind of market for our products," noted LaCross. "Health benefits of cherries have changed the cherry industry forever."

**Benjamin Peek is a local freelance writer.**

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