The Ocean Spray brand name, tied since inception to the cranberry, is the single most potent force behind its corporate parent’s rise to prominence as the largest domestic seller of canned and bottled juice drinks. Through a series of pioneering marketing strategies begun in the early 1960s, the tart red berry, once served only as a sauce at special holidays, has demonstrated such enormous versatility that its product line of fresh fruits, juices, and value-added products continues to unfold as new flavor and food combinations are discovered. Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc., parent company of the Ocean Spray brand, harvests, processes, packages, promotes, distributes, and sells almost all the cranberries grown in the United States and Canada. Ocean Spray’s trademark blue and white logo can be found on supermarket shelves in many countries worldwide; since 1976, it has graced a number of non-cranberry products, including fresh grapefruit and grapefruit juice. By continuing to emphasize quality products that appeal to consumers looking for healthy, low-calorie alternatives to soft drinks, Ocean Spray has maintained its leadership in the still-expanding packaged juice industry.

A Cranberry Primer

Cranberries and blueberries are the only fruits indigenous to America’s unique wetlands environment. There are over one hundred different cranberry varieties, many hybridized over the past hundred years from wild vines native to low-lying bog areas. Cranberries once provided the North American Indians with a rich source of Vitamin C and were a main ingredient in pemmican, a high-energy cake of crushed cranberries, dried venison, and melted fat. Indians also used the red berries to make dyes and poultices. Gifts of the fruit were made to the pilgrims as a sign of peace, and the red berries were very likely on the menu during the first Thanksgiving feast in 1621. Early colonists named the unusual fruit “crane berry” because of the resemblance of the cranberry bush’s flower to the head of a crane.

The fruit became popular and was exported by New England colonists to Europe in the eighteenth century. Whaling ships often carried barrels of cranberries in their holds to supplement the crew’s diet; the fruit’s high Vitamin C content helped ward off the scurvy that plagued sailors during long months at sea. However, it wasn’t until 1810 that they were cultivated on a large scale. Captain Henry Hall of East Dennis, Massachusetts, noticed that wild cranberries growing near his home flourished after the wind blew a covering of sand from the nearby dunes over young spring growth. The sand covering caused the new shoots to root and the vines to spread more rapidly. Hall experimented by transplanting some of the vines and covering them with sand. The process worked, and wholesale cranberry cultivation began soon after.

Cranberries are a perennial crop, and cranberry vines will survive indefinitely. In fact, certain vines growing in Cape Cod’s ideal conditions have been yielding fruit for over one hundred and fifty years. The unique requirements of the cranberry vine—acidity, peat soil, moist conditions, and a long growing season extending from April to November—considerably limit cultivation. The “bogs” in which cranberries take root are the result of glacial deposits and, in their commercialized state, consist of low beds lined with clay and constructed of peat and gravel, sandwiched between layers of sand. Consequently, cranberry production continues to be limited to selected regions in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin, as well as parts of Canada (particularly British Columbia). Of the 26,000 acres currently under cultivation, 12,500 are in Massachusetts. Because of this, it was natural that the New England coastline would one day be the “cranberry capital of the world.”

Brand Origins

In the early 1900s, a Boston lawyer named Marcus L. Urann developed a recipe for cranberry sauce that could be preserved in tins. Urann began marketing his creation in the Boston area in 1912 under the catchy name “Ocean Spray.” Limiting his product line to either whole or jellied cranberry sauce, he acquired a reputation as an expert promoter and producer, and he soon became known as the “Cranberry King.” A shrewd businessman, Urann foresaw the benefits of joining with other cranberry growers to market and sell cranberry products to the general public. In May 1930 he approached John C. Makepeace, owner of the Makepeace Preserving Company of nearby Wareham, as well as another competitor in the cranberry market, Elizabeth F. Lee, director of the Enoch F. Bills Company of New Egypt, New Jersey, with a monumental proposal. Urann told the other cranberry growers that competition between the three was hurting each business and suggested that they form a partnership. The incorporation papers were filed the following month, but a point of contention soon arose between Urann and Makepeace that almost destroyed the efforts of the three business owners. Makepeace was concerned...
over Urann’s delay in transferring ownership of the widely recognized Ocean Spray name and trademark. Fortunately the matter was resolved with the transfer of the Ocean Spray name on August 14, 1930, and Cranberry Canners, Inc. was born.

Although the newly formed grower cooperative was able to combine resources to everyone’s advantage, the cranberry business remained a seasonal operation that ended when the tinned sauce arrived on grocery store shelves in time for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. Urann was quick to see that opportunities for growth could be found in developing new uses for the fruit. Enthusiastic over the future of the young cooperative, he composed an encouraging letter to Massachusetts cranberry growers. “Work as you must, worry as you will,” he wrote, “kill bugs and flow for frost, still your profit depends upon the supply and demand for cranberries. . . . Let us Cape Codders throw out our chest, take pride and every day boost and blow for Ocean Spray Brand Cranberry Sauce. Ten million people will visit Cape Cod this year and they shall not pass without seeing, feeling, hearing and tasting cranberries.”

Early Marketing Strategy

In 1933 Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice Cocktail first appeared. Its advertising proclaimed it “A pleasant, smooth drink with delicious flavor and sure relief from faintness, exhaustion, and thirst. A glass when retiring promotes sleep and a clean mouth in the morning—even to the smoker.” Although its claims of healthfulness and smoothness were perhaps a bit exaggerated, Cranberry Juice Cocktail proved a reasonably successful forerunner of its sweeter contemporary. Six years later the company introduced Ocean Spray Cran, a more agreeable tasting cranberry syrup intended as a mixer with alcoholic beverages. Urann saw his market for cranberry products broaden and the profits of his cooperative continue to grow.

Throughout the 1940s, as the benefits of membership in Cranberry Canners became apparent, growers from other states joined the collective. By 1941, the cooperative stretched westward from the bogs of Cape Cod to the wetlands of Oregon and Washington. Growers could now benefit from the exchange of regional cultivation techniques as well as the pooling of advertising and processing expenses. Cranberry Canners had fifteen processing plants nationwide by 1943, thereby keeping pace with yearly harvests. During this decade, Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice Cocktail was improved by the addition of corn syrup sweetener to appeal to consumer tastes. The company’s creativity helped it during World War II, when shortages of sugar and the tin used to can cranberry sauce became rationed. The November 1943 cranberry harvest was dehydrated, packaged, and sent to the troops overseas. The company marketed Ocean Spray Cranberry-Orange Marmalade for domestic consumption until the war was over and sugar was again available. Because of its willingness to supply the war effort, Cranberry Canners received the Achievement “A” award from the War Food Administration. Following the war, the company returned to normal production with a fresh perspective. As an outward demonstration of its newfound spirit, the company changed its name to National Cranberry Association (NCA) in 1946, reflecting a growing national profile.

In addition to changes to the collective’s name, its advertising, and its product line, the years following World War II marked the start of the company’s international operations. In 1950 Canadian growers joined the collective; this step would open the door to new markets for Ocean Spray. By 1980 the company had opened its fourth foreign packaging operation in Melbourne, Australia, and its continued investment in the growing international market has helped transform it into a sophisticated global organization.

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

The 1950s saw many changes for the NCA. Of greatest impact were the retirements of Marcus Urann as president and general manager at the age of 81, and Makepeace as secretary-treasurer at age 84. The collective found itself with new leadership for the first time since its inception. Meanwhile, the NCA continued its trend toward product innovation. Ocean Spray Fresh Cranberries made their way onto store shelves several weeks before Thanksgiving in 1946. By 1951 the product line also included Ocean Spray Cape Cod Cranberry Sundae Topping, as well as a line of dietetic cranberry products, each bearing the Ocean Spray brand. In 1957 the company took its first step into the frozen foods market with the introduction of Ocean Spray Frozen Cranberries and Ocean Spray Frozen Cranberry-Orange Relish. Near the close of 1959, Ocean Spray had posted sales of $25 million.

The cooperative underwent yet another name change, this time to Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc., to more closely identify itself with the popular brand name devised by Urann. Sales for the holiday season were promising, but two weeks before Thanksgiving the U.S. Department of Health announced that the herbicide atrazine, used by some growers to kill poison ivy in cranberry bogs, caused cancer in laboratory rats. Grocers swiftly pulled “cancerberries”—as they were dubbed by consumers—off store shelves, and sales for that year’s crop plummeted.

The start of 1960 dawned for Ocean Spray with the realization that it was too dependent on a single product line and needed to diversify. Although the U.S. government granted a subsidy to growers for fruit not treated with atrazine, the supply of cranberries far outpaced the demand from still-cautious consumers. Ocean Spray set out on the road to recovery as the result of an idea by Hal Thorkilsen, an MIT chemical engineer and executive at Philip Morris, to turn excess cranberries into a line of juice drinks. The advice of Thorkilsen, who would later become the company’s CEO, paved the way for the introduction of Ocean Spray Cranapple, Grapeberry, and Crangrape bottled juices.
Ocean Spray based each of its new juices on its core product, Cranberry Juice Cocktail. The combination of new products, an aggressive marketing program, an overhaul of production facilities, and a renewed commitment to quality control set the cooperative back on its feet. After 1968, the supply of cranberries from growers once again equaled the demand of the marketplace: by 1971, cranberry harvests topped 100 barrels per acre for the first time in the history of the collective.

**Drenching the Competition**

In the years that followed, increasingly health-conscious Americans started looking for replacements for soda pop. Ocean Spray had the answer, and marketed its juice line with the slogan “It’s good for you, America!” In 1976, responding to America’s still-growing concern over healthy diets and the company’s desire to diversify its product line, Ocean Sprays joined with citrus growers in Florida’s Indian River to market the first shelf-stable citrus beverage, Ocean Spray Grapefruit Juice, in glass bottles.

As the company moved into the 1980s it continued to develop and market new products. Cranstastic, its first multijuice drink, appeared on supermarket shelves in 1981. Two years later Ocean Spray introduced its popular Mauna-La’i, a concoction of exotic guava juice blended with the tartness of lemon. In 1983 Ocean Spray introduced a liquid concentrate version of its best-selling Cranberry Juice Cocktail, another innovation designed to compete with the frozen juice market. 1991 saw the introduction of Ocean Spray Ruby Red Grapefruit Juice, promoted as a low-acid, “not too sweet” cousin to the company’s other popular grapefruit juice products.

In addition to mixing cranberry juice with other flavors, the company also made an addition to its food product line by introducing Ocean Spray Cran-Fruit Sauces—crushed strawberries, raspberries, apples, and oranges which added sweetness to the tart cranberry. Packaged in convenient plastic tubs, the new products were an outgrowth of the desire to keep sales up during normally slow periods between holidays. 1989 saw the introduction of Crains, the second non-drink product to bear the Ocean Spray brand label. These dried cranberries, lightly sugared to diminish their naturally tart flavor, were sold as a snack food, as well as an ingredient in processed foods for such companies as Pepperidge Farm, Campbell Soup, Lender’s, Tyson, and Kellogg.

Ocean Spray Refreshers burst onto store shelves in 1990 as an “escape from sugary sweet.” In flavors such as citrus cranberry, orange cranberry, and citrus peach, Refreshers was directly aimed at the lucrative Baby Boomer market, who at 37 percent of the population was then the target of only 19 percent of juice industry advertising.

**Advertising Innovations**

The first few years after World War II found the company putting renewed energy into advertising and publicity for its broadening product line. The 1948 Massachusetts Cranberry Festival was enlivened by a humorous skit depicting the “marriage” of cranberries and chicken. According to a company publication entitled “The History of Ocean Sprays,” “In a colorful ceremony that brought to a close the cranberry festival . . . the Little White Hen and the Little Red Cranberry became flavor-mates forever and vowed always to appear on the dinner tables of the nation. The wedding climaxed a year-long romance between chicken and cranberry sauce—a romance fostered by NCA in an effort to make chicken and cranberry sauce as inseparable as lamb and mint jelly, pork and applesauce.”

The 1950s were the Golden Age of television and the Ocean Spray product line was one of many to take advantage of the new medium: a commercial promoting the chicken/cranberry sauce combination ran in key cities twice a week beginning in 1952. By the early 1980s, surveys showed that the Ocean Spray brand was perceived by consumers as an emblem for health-conscious and “natural” products, and sales of Ocean Spray Cranberry Sauce, which hadn’t been advertised since 1970, were down by two-thirds, encroached on by private label products. Echoing its earlier ad campaign, the company boosted its cranberry sauce with the slogan, “It goes with a lot more than just turkey.” Eighty-five percent of the advertising budget was sunk into TV spots, while packaging innovations such as “paper bottles” added to the company’s health-conscious image and made its “take-along” juices appeal to a more active consumer. The company’s most memorable TV ad was the 1989-91 campaign positioning popular jazz musician Bobby McFerrin dancing against a colorful Caribbean background of beach, surf, and sun, and singing “So tangy, so crisp, so cool . . . Ocean Spray . . . it’s music to your mouth!” The ads accentuated the “full, quirky cranberry-osity of the drinks,” according to Barbara Lippert of Adweek’s Marketing Week, and their slant was unusual—a challenge to customers to break from the mundane. By such innovations Ocean Spray became the biggest seller of canned and bottled juice drinks in the United States.

More recent advertising strategies have found Ocean Spray wrestling prized shelf space away from other brands at the local supermarket. In 1988 it became the sponsor of the national tour of the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. Discount tickets were offered through visible store displays that attracted consumers due to joint advertising on television and radio and in print media. The venture proved successful as sales of Ocean Spray products rose during the promotional period. In another promotional effort, the Refreshers juice line was marketed through summer concert and festival sponsorships. In 1991, in the company’s home state, Ocean Spray Refreshers became the “official juice drink of the 95th Boston Marathon”; over 40,000 free samples of the beverage were given away to spectators.

**Environmental Concerns**

By 1987 Ocean Spray was faced with a favorable yet troubling consequence of its successful marketing and advertising program: supply couldn’t keep pace with the increasing demand for the cranberry. Strict environmental controls were limiting bog expansion in the company’s home state, and the concerns of local environmentalists proved valid the following year when the company pleaded guilty to illegally dumping cranberry peeling and other acidic waste into a Massachusetts river and sewer system. Ocean Spray accepted responsibility, paid the fine, and donated water treatment equipment to the town of Middleboro.

Although cranberry production involves many acres of endangered wetlands, the land includes 85 to 90 percent more land than is actually used in production. These fields, forests, streams, ponds, and reservoirs supporting the actual cranberry bogs provide a refuge for many species of plants and animals, including bald eagles, blue herons, osprey, Canadian geese, coyotes, bobcats, and cotton grasses. One of Ocean Spray’s major marketing battles has been to align itself with rather than against environmentalists.
over wetlands-related issues. Growers see their role in preserving a substantial portion of this endangered area as actually aiding environmental causes.

**Looking to the Future**

"Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc. has managed to take the homely, tart-tasting little cranberry beyond the familiar sauce of the holiday season to a range of products like sherbert and yogurt, cookies and muffins, and even bagels," proclaimed the *New York Times* in late 1992. "It's amazing what a little cran can do" carried Ocean Spray into the 1990s, and the company's forward-looking marketing strategies would seem to bear this out. Looking well beyond the traditional supermarket venue, Ocean Spray has begun packaging juice products specifically for the food service market, which account for one-third of total juice sales. The company continues to discuss ways that cranberries can be integrated into new products conceived by other major food corporations.

The cooperative's primary focus has always been to create an image of quality for its brand name, and to aggressively develop new markets. "As Ocean Spray enters its seventh decade, our business is sound and the future is full of promise," corporate leaders stated to shareholders in the 1991 Annual Report. A vending agreement between Ocean Spray and beverage giant PepsiCo that was signed the following year seems to have made good on that promise. The gain from Pepsi's expert marketing of single-serving cans through vending machines, convenience stores, and other traditional avenues will result in rising sales for Ocean Spray, and the juice manufacturer's health-conscious image will be an asset for the carbonated beverage manufacturer in a time when healthy products are held in high regard. Due to this unique venture, Ocean Spray predicts that single-serving juice sales will account for one-third of the company's revenue by the year 2000.

Where else will the company look for ideas? "You always see people at parties mixing Cranberry Juice Cocktail and sparkling mineral water," remarked a beverage consultant for a 1992 issue of *Adweek's Marketing Week*. The joint venture between PepsiCo and Ocean Spray has the potential for far more than shared shelf-space in the corner vending machine. The only limitation directly facing the company as it approaches the next century is the shortage of fresh fruit due to limited wetlands. However, with the ingenuity, creativity, and energy characteristic of this New England corporation, no problem seems insurmountable.

**Further Reading:**


—Jay P. Pederson