

Black currant: The latest fad in food

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I knew that black currant was trending. Its vivid purple was showing up in ice-cream, cheesecakes and fruit syrups. Health faddists touted its high vitamin C levels and general benefits. But I knew it had really arrived when I saw that an Indian condom brand had launched a Black Currant flavoured variant.

What wasn't clear though was what all these were meant to taste like. While I must admit I haven't tasted the condom, the other black currant items I have tried have varied quite a bit. They all had a general tangy fruitiness but it ranged from quite sweet to rather sour to even a bit medicinal. Apart from the colour, there didn't seem to be a standard for what black currant was like.

The mystery was solved when I saw a packet of dried black currants that announced they had been harvested in Greece. They were then the original small seedless black dried grapes from Corinth, west of Athens, which were the origin of the term 'currant'. Huge amounts had been exported from there since antiquity to lend their concentrated sweetness and slight winey taste to cakes and puddings.

But blackcurrants, spelled as one word, also referred to the berries from a shrub, *Ribes nigrum*, which grew in the cold of northern Europe and Asia. They had nothing to do with the grapes, apart from looking a bit like them when dried. They were a great deal more sour, too much so to be pleasant eaten raw, but had a darkly delicious tang when stewed with sugar.

Perhaps the confusion came from an attempt to pass off the northern berries for the sweet southern fruit, or perhaps English was just lazy about making the distinction between blackcurrant and black currants. The French, more precisely, call the berries 'cassis' and the dried grapes 'raisins de Corinthe'. They use the first in a liqueur, crème de cassis, which makes for one of the best wine cocktails when added to white wine to make Kirs (and to champagne to make Kir Royales). The second go in desserts. The vitamin C loaded ones are blackcurrants.



During World War II, when Britain was besieged by the German navy and ran short of imported citrus fruits, the government promoted blackcurrants as a substitute. Small children were given free doses of blackcurrant syrup and that gave generations of British kids a taste for blackcurrant which, like Enid Blyton books (in which the kids often have a weird sounding drink of blackcurrant jam dissolved in water), percolated to India, but not the USA.

This explains the differences in taste. The sweeter flavours come from the dried grapes, the sourer, medicinal ones from the berries. The condoms, confusingly, show the dried berries on their packs, though arguably grapes, the fruit of Dionysus, god of wine and sensuality, would be the better fit. But it is definitely the edgier flavour of the berries that contrast better in rich desserts — and offer the bonus of a boost of health.