

Jumping on the blackcurrant bandwagon

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The kitchen walls are splattered with black splodges, the refrigerator is stacked with jellies that haven't, and if I totted up the cost of making one smallish bottle of cassis, I'd get a headache. It's blackcurrant season.

I haven't had a thing to do with blackcurrants since we moved from the quarter-acre section, but a new spirit of enthusiasm among the cheffy brigade, not to mention health nuts, persuaded me to give the tart wee things another whirl and try them in gelato, coulis (a good use for fruit jelly that refuses to set), desserts, salsas and boozy beverages.

The first known planting of blackcurrants in New Zealand was in 1827, when a settler put cuttings from a far-away English garden in her Paihia garden. By the late 1860s, the first commercial crops were growing in Canterbury.

It wasn't until the early 1940s that blackcurrants became a viable fruit crop. The government encouraged Glaxo Ltd, a small New Zealand dried-milk business that grew into a pharmaceutical giant, to develop a fruit drink with high levels of vitamin C.

The drink was Ribena, and it remains an important brand for GlaxoSmithKline, notwithstanding the scandal that erupted when two college students discovered cartoned Ribena contained low amounts of blackcurrant juice and no detectable traces of vitamin C.

The multinational company addressed the issue, but in the meantime consumers realised that health claims by even respected food and beverage manufacturers can be spurious, if not downright false. And yet there is such a wealth of evidence surrounding the potential health benefits of blackcurrants that it is difficult to ignore.

David Eder, of Omihi, who has been growing blackcurrants in Canterbury for 35 years, established Just The Berries (JTB) in partnership with United States scientist Dr Eddie Shiojima to research and manufacture products using New Zealand blackcurrants. "We're a health and wellness business," he says, "and we wrote the bible on the health benefits of blackcurrants."

JTB's research on the benefits of the antioxidant group known as anthocyanins was of particular interest to Meiji Seika, a giant Japanese company specialising in nutraceuticals (products claimed to have a medicinal effect on human health). JTB, along with other blackcurrant grower-exporters, is now a big player in the worldwide nutraceutical industry.

Eder has 450ha in the Omihi area in blackcurrants, with another 40ha being readied in Waipara. This, he says, makes his blackcurrant farm "the fourth or fifth-largest in the world".

More than 75 per cent of Eder's crop is exported to Japan and the US, and the resultant products include dietary supplements, cosmetics, beverages and snack foods.

Eder says not only is there extensive research proving the medical benefits of New Zealand blackcurrant anthocyanin levels, technologists are excited about its skin and beauty benefits – one target is under-eye bags and black circles, another is the production of day-long true-to-colour lipsticks.

Eder is also looking forward to the first batch of dried blackcurrants infused with sugar. "They will be more successful than Craisins," he says with certainty.

In the meantime, fresh blackcurrants are on the market, and those with a taste for seasonal fruit that has, in the words of food consultant Bill Floyd, "a sweet, earthy taste ... with fresh gooseberry and passionfruit flavours and hints of raspberry, combined with the aromatic notes of carnations and roses" are in berry heaven.