

Maraschino Cherries

By Inara Verzemnieks

Some people say that the maraschino cherry—that neon-red garnish plopped in cocktail glasses and atop sundaes—was invented in Oregon. That is a bit of an overstatement. What we can say is that Oregon is the birthplace of the modern maraschino cherry industry, for it was here that the process of making the preserved cherries was perfected.

The father of the modern maraschino cherry was an Oregon State University professor named Ernest H. Wiegand (1886-1973). Not long after Wiegand arrived at OSU in 1919, he was approached to help solve a problem vexing Oregon cherry growers: the type of cherry that thrived here—the Queen Anne—spoiled quickly and took on a mushy consistency when preserved. Wealthy Americans had brought a taste for the preserved cherries back with them from travels through Europe, where the maraschino is said to have originated, and growers wanted to compete in the growing maraschino cherry market.

From 1925 to 1931, Wiegand threw himself into developing a new preservation process. His final solution, which included adding calcium salts to the brine that the cherries soaked in, was revolutionary and is still the standard used in maraschino production today.

As a result of Wiegand work, Oregon is now a headquarters for maraschino-cherry research and development and a world-player in the maraschino cherry industry. Local food-scientists who trace their lineage back to Wiegand are responsible for such developments as a "green" cherry (actually bright red, but colored with only natural vegetable juices) and, conversely, a bleaching process that allows the cherries to be dyed other-worldly colors.

Two of the leading maraschino cherry producers call Oregon home: Gray & Co., with factories in Forest Grove and Dayton, and Oregon Cherry Growers in Salem. Together, they are responsible for most of the neon-red cherries glowing on store shelves or bobbing about in cocktail glasses at bars and restaurants.

Sources

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