

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Making liqueurs at home

Is it just me or are the holidays creeping closer and closer to Halloween? I can remember ushering in the Christmas season the day after Thanksgiving. I was strolling the mall while getting my oil changed Nov. 1 and was shocked to see Santa Bears, trees bedecked in holiday regalia and a red stocking booth announcing the mall's opening for the '90 holiday season. Even my Christmas Club check was mailed out and received Nov. 2.

All this from one of life's greatest appreciators of procrastination. I purchased the James Gang Halloween pumpkin on the eve of Oct. 30. Of course, it's still sitting on the front porch. I'm kind of hoping it will disintegrate and just blow away, like the majority of my leaves.

But surprise! As the old saying goes, stick around long enough and things are apt to change. If for any reason, just out of boredom. So it is with this column that I welcome in the holiday season with tips to prepare a variety of homemade liqueurs that, if made within the week, will be ripe and ready for holiday consumption.

Before beginning the shopping trip to the liquor and grocery store for the basics, spend an hour or so soaking up the holiday spirit while visiting your favorite local gourmet retailer for empty jars and storage containers. Last year, during the post-holiday clearance sales, I picked up several unique cork-stopped bottles from Pier One Imports that will make dandy presentations for this year's batch of homemade Irish cream liqueur.

THE NEWLY OPENED Cargo Express should offer somewhat of a selection. Kitchen Glamour also stocks a trendy variety of jars that could double as liqueur bottles, homemade vinegar bottles or flavored oil holders. If you happen to be out Ann Arbor way, check out Hertler Bros. old-time hardware downtown. If you absolutely hate to shop, clean mason-type jars with tight-fitting screw-on lids will suffice, especially if topped with plinking scissor-cut material secured with a holiday ribbon. Jars should be washed and sanitized before filling.

As far as the basics are concerned, these recipes are definitely not for the weight-conscious. Pick up some real granulated sugar (not dextrose). When the recipe calls for liquor, if you can tell the difference between a premium brand and a house pour. Rest assured that the taste difference will be as significant in the liqueur. The cheapest liquor will only make the liqueur harsh and not as smooth, and when you find that the recipes all make almost a fifth, the two or three extra dollars spent on upgrading the liquor will prove most beneficial, taste-wise.

If the recipe calls for chocolate extract, use extract and not flavoring. The alcohol content in the extract makes a difference, trust me.

LASTLY, AND probably most important, try to refrain from tasting and allow the liqueur to mellow out as long as the recipe calls for. The recipes listed will produce the most accurate resemblance to their commercial counterparts only if followed exactly and for the correct amount of mellowing time.

No need to run around crowded malls looking for just the right gift. If you start now, you can enjoy the holidays with easy entertaining gifts and luscious additions to your home bar, with minor time expenditures.

As always, know when to say when, and if you do drink, please don't drive.

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CRAN- BERRIES:

Keep plenty on hand for the holidays

By Carl Rinschler
special writer

THE NOTION PERSISTS that we celebrate Thanksgiving the way our Puritan forebears did, but the truth is that this annual feasting day has melted over the centuries into the pot of the American experience. No one is absolutely certain of the dishes shared by the Indians and Pilgrims in 1621 but we do know that during their festival, venison, wild game birds, pumpkins, squash, corn and berries were on the menu.

The brilliant red cranberries which have become a symbol of Thanksgiving were most likely among the berries served since they are native to North America, especially in the Cape Cod area. According to Beatrice Buszek, author of "The Cranberry Connection" (1980, Cranberry Cottage Publishers, Nova Scotia, Canada), it was the Pequot Indians who introduced the cranberry to the Pilgrims. The Indians called the berry "ibim" meaning bitter berry, but the new settlers chose to call it "craneberry" because its pink blossoms resembled the head of a crane. It's uncertain when the word cranberry was contracted into its present form.

As the wild berries were readily available, the colonists prepared them in condiments, jam, tarts and sauce in a similar fashion to those prepared with grapes in England. To compensate for the berries' natural tartness, the colonists

initially sweetened them with syrup made from pumpkin pulp, and later with honey and maple syrup.

IF YOU HAVE wondered why cranberries are only available in autumn, it is because they don't ripen until mid-September. That is when the bogs are flooded and the berries are wet-harvested mechanically. As the berries float to the top, they are collected and sorted later.

How do you judge a top-quality cranberry from an inferior one? Well, you may find this hard to believe, but cranberries are graded by their bounce. Commercial separating machines were designed with four-inch hurdles, allowing the berries seven chances to bounce over. Those that can't make it over are rejected.

If you are anxious to view the cultivated cranberries on site, it is recommended that you do so either in June when the vines are covered with their graceful pink blossoms or in mid-September during the harvest. Although most of the berries are grown in Eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, they also are cultivated in New Jersey, Wisconsin (near Kenosha), Washington and Oregon, and British Columbia and Nova Scotia in Canada.

Because the cranberry is a very tart fruit, its distinctive flavor enhances many condiments which accompany poultry and game or fruit desserts and breads containing sugar. They often can be substituted in baking recipes that call for blueberries. Either slice them in half with a knife or rough chop them briefly in a

food processor. Then roll or dredge them in granulated sugar before adding to a batter.

FROZEN CRANBERRIES can be cooked without thawing and can be ground more easily as well. Thaw frozen berries only when they are to be incorporated into a recipe that doesn't require cooking. To freeze cranberries, rinse, sort and double wrap. They will keep in a deep freezer nine months to a year. In a refrigerator, they will keep about a month before deteriorating. Store them unwashed but covered since moisture hastens spoilage. The natural color of the cranberry will vary from bright to dark red, depending on the variety. Although nearly 100 varieties have been noted, only four of them are cultivated commercially.

If you are experimenting with new recipe ideas, cranberry flavor blends well with oranges, pineapple, lemon, banana, apples and raisins. Adding a little fresh mint into a cranberry sauce will alter its character enough to be served with roasted leg of lamb or chops.

Traditional pumpkin pie spices such as cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and allspice will all add interest and dimension to a cranberry recipe such as Spicy Cranberry Sauce or Cape Cod Apple Crisp.

Here's hoping this year, you will be inspired to take a little extra time and prepare a Thanksgiving dish with fresh cranberries instead of opening up that handy little can.

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From woods to freezer

By Larry Janes
special writer

Gazing into the Department of Natural Resources crystal ball, hunting season this year should rank as one of the best in Michigan's history. An abundant supply of deer, coupled with a growing buck population and the speculation of above-average snowfall, should produce a record kill.

Being an avid fisherman and hunter, every year I look forward to a week in the woods with friends. Whether it be on the Big Manistee cranking for salmon or combing the woods for that elusive buck, listening to the snarl fall, I enjoy the great Michigan outdoors and feel that somewhere along the line, a little bit of Mort Neff's blood must have mixed with mine.

In all honesty, though, when it comes to deer hunting, I would much rather sit in a blind shooting my M107A rather than my Winchester. My avid hunting buddies, however, seem to have more luck with their rifles, and we usually end up in a 32-degree garage with our knives and hacksaws cutting up the bounty for the chest freezer that must grace every deer hunter's basement.

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AT THE MARKET on Ford Road just east of Merriman Road, Anton and his family will process your prize buck or doe for about \$10. This price is quoted for a deer coming in at about 125 pounds. It includes

skinning and cutting the deer, utilizing what Anton claims is an extra-fancy cut that will transform the deer into freezer-wrapped packages of roasts, chops, spare ribs, steaks, rumps and ground venison.

Larger kills increase in price as does the making of the meat into a very popular hunting staple also known as venison sausage.

It takes Anton and his barrage of butchers about one hour to completely cut up and wrap an average-size deer. This process is done after all the regular meats are cut in the morning at the Standard Market and usually keeps his butchers busy during hunting season into the evening. After the deer is processed, all the equipment must be cleaned and sanitized according to Health Department regulations before any regular beef can be returned to the cutting room tables and saws.

Anton was secretive when responding to the exact number of deer processed at the Standard Market. "It really depends on the weather conditions" was his somewhat pat response to the numbers question. During bow season, he might do a few deer but the numbers steadily

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