

Anatomy of a Food Trend: Are Wild Maine Blueberries the Next Big Thing?

by [Lisa Elaine Held](#) Jul 6, 2016, 3:00p



Gabe Souza/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images
Don't miss stories. Follow Eater

[×](#)

How a hyper-local crop ends up on menus nationwide

In June, the East Coast's most well-known fast-casual lobster roll restaurant introduced a new offering for summer. The Wild Blue Salad at Luke's Lobster includes a lobster tail on top of arugula, roasted sunflower seeds, cannellini beans, shredded red cabbage — and a pile of tart, juicy wild Maine blueberries.

"We were looking for a salad that was really healthy and screamed 'summer,' and we met the folks from [Josh Pond](#) and heard about their wild blueberry fields and the way they harvest," says Luke's Lobster VP Ben Conniff, who loved the berries since visiting Maine as a child. "The same storytelling we bring to our lobster, we want to bring to wild blueberries."

"These berries are the epitome of the saying 'Good things come in small packages.'"

It's likely a story that's about to be told in many ways, since wild blueberries are what locavore foodie dreams are made of — and more chefs, restaurants, and packaged food companies are catching on. Only grown commercially in Maine and eastern Canada, they can't be planted (hence, "wild") and are often hand-harvested in scenic fields, where different plants produce tiny berries that vary in shades of blue and tartness. They're only in season for just over two months and can't be shipped fresh because of delicate, thin skin.

The wild Maine variety is one of the reasons people wait in line to try Clinton Street Baking Company's wildly famous blueberry pancakes; Colicchio & Sons' pastry chef Stephen Collucci considers it an "extra special treat" when he can get his hands on some for summer desserts. "Maine blueberries are coveted little gems of sunshine for me and the pastry team," Collucci says. "I absolutely love the taste and aesthetics of these berries; they're the epitome of the saying 'good things come in small packages.'"

But how did these niche berries start to **expand beyond their uber-local environment** — and will you be seeing more of them on your plate soon?



Photo: Dina Rudick/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

ORAC (Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity) scores were one of the biggest things that ever happened to wild blueberries, says Todd Merrill, a fourth-generation wild blueberry farmer and president of both [Merrill Blueberry Farms](#) and the [Wild Blueberry Association of North America](#). The USDA used the system to rate foods based on antioxidant capacity, a measure that is associated with cancer prevention and other benefits, which contributed to the emergence of antioxidants as the next big **health buzzword**. And on the ORAC scale, [wild blueberries came out on top](#) of other fruits and veggies. In fact, their score was almost twice as high as regular, cultivated blueberries, which are much bigger, plumper, and sweeter.

Still, blueberries, in general, entered the spotlight for their health benefits, and the production of cultivated blueberries increased dramatically worldwide to meet demand, Merrill says. "That was a huge message and really helped our industry at the time, but a lot of people were forgetting and thinking it was just blueberries in general," he explains. "Demand is growing and it starts with education, to explain to restaurants and consumers that there's a difference between wild and cultivated."

Which is where the Wild Blueberry Association of North America comes in. The trade association, created in 1981, has worked hard to educate the public regarding that difference, specifically in terms of wild blueberries' culinary uses and superior health benefits. Since 1997, they've hosted a Health Research Summit dedicated to the berries' polyphenol superpowers, and they regularly issue press releases on new research linked to wild blueberries and things like [heart health](#) and [Alzheimer's prevention](#). In February, the WBANA brought renowned [Maine locavore chef David Levi](#) and expert Mary Ann Lila, Ph.D., director of the Plants for Human Health Institute at North Carolina State University, to New York to host a dinner for editors and influencers that showcased wild blueberries' story.

One challenge in telling that story is that since the berries have such a short season and can't be shipped fresh, they're nearly impossible to find fresh outside of New England in the summer months. Instead, the vast majority are frozen using IQF ("individual quick freezing"), a technology that freezes each piece of fruit separately (as opposed to in one large block), which keeps fruits closer to their natural freshness and doesn't add moisture that turns to mush later.



[Takahiro Nagao](#)/Flickr

Ed Flanagan, president and CEO of [Wyman's of Maine](#), said one thing that has helped contribute to a huge bump in consumers buying wild blueberries is the recent increased interest in smoothies as part of a healthy diet. Suddenly, frozen fruit was more in demand. "As a result, the crop supply has more than doubled since the mid-'90s, from an average crop of 125 million pounds to the last four-year average of 275 million pounds," he says.

And the frozen variety are popular in packaged foods and at national chain restaurants. Panera uses them for [Wild Blueberry Scones](#), Clif Bar has a brand new [Wild Blueberry Almond Trail Mix Bar](#), and [Stonewall Kitchen's Wild Maine Blueberry Jam](#) is a longstanding best-seller.

In the mid-'90s, the industry produced 125 million pounds per year. In the past four years, that number jumped to 275 million pounds.

Even some chefs don't mind the frozen version, like the aforementioned Clinton Street Baking Company's chef Neil Kleinberg. "They don't stick together or get mushy, and all the juices come out of them in our sauce," he says. "The wild have a very concentrated, nice burst of blueberry flavor more than the cultivated ones. When we get them fresh in the summer, we'll do a crumb pie or use them in our fruit bowl and our blueberry milkshakes." And that fresh moment — generally the last week of July through mid-September — is when many others get excited, especially since they're not nearly as sweet as their more popular farmed cousins, so are popular in **savory dishes and drinks**.

Tyler Kinnett, the executive chef at [Harvest](#) in Cambridge, MA, says the concentrated flavor pairs perfectly with pork. "One of my favorite things to do with them is to make an agrodolce for meat dishes," Kinnett says. "I would marinate the pork in fennel and garlic, char it on the grill, and then top it with the blueberry agrodolce and fresh basil." After discovering the berry while vacationing in Maine, Erika Clark, the beverage director at [Tako](#) in Pittsburgh, has wild blueberries shipped to her house for her home bar and baking. She likes to sip a [Bar Harbor Blueberry Ale](#), made with the berries, and throw a handful of the fresh ones in the glass, during summer. At the restaurant, she makes shrubs with them to use in cocktails throughout the year.

Another big reason this moment belongs to the Maine blueberry industry? As more eaters are thinking about how their food choices affect the environment, industry advocates are positioning the berry as a more sustainable crop than most.



Doug Jones/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images

Since they don't grow in rows, explains Flanagan, farms don't have to till the soil. "The number-one sustainability problem in agriculture is soil erosion, or carbon loss. Wild blueberries do not have to deal with this," he says. "Instead, the 'barrens' of Maine received that name because the soil is poor, and thus we mulch the plants after harvest and leave it as compost on the field." Wyman's does a lot of work to help restore the honeybee population as well, and Flanagan says the overall industry was an early adopter of integrated pest management practices that reduce the amount of pesticides used.

Some farms, like Josh Pond — where Luke's Lobster sources its berries — are certified organic and adhere to traditional harvesting methods. "The farmers only harvest in the early morning hours," explains Conniff. "It's colder at night so the berries are firmer, and they hand rake them so it preserves the skin and prevents bruising and the quality is better." In addition to the Wild

Blue Salad, Conniff also included six recipes that feature wild blueberries, from bruschetta to gazpacho, in the cookbook he published with partner Luke Holden, *Real Maine Food*.

And while you may see more dishes like that on menus soon, like any darling ingredient (say, truffles?), the wild nature of these blueberries, which makes them so compelling, means they also won't go mainstream in a flash. (It's perhaps also a reason to watch for imitators using cultivated blueberries slapping "wild" on menus and labels to capitalize on the excitement, similar to what has happened with grass-fed.)

"It's **very slow growth**," Merrill explains. "With existing blueberry fields, it takes 20 years for those berries to creep into new areas of the field. You let the berries grow naturally and they will propagate new areas of the field but it takes a long, long time. That's the time frame that wild blueberry farmers have to deal with."

[Lisa Elaine Held](#) is a journalist based in New York City.