

Whistler Survival Guide // Blueberry Cocktails

Vancouver

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Blueberry Fever

More antioxidants than any other fruit or vegetable. Better than meds at reducing cholesterol. No wonder a local company hit it big with blueberry juice.

By Chris Gonzalez

"IF, FOR HEALTH PURPOSES, you could only choose one fruit to eat," came a voice from the television set, "it would be the blueberry." Puttering around his West Vancouver home one Saturday afternoon in 2004, waiting for Hockey Night In Canada to start, Ralph McRae perked up his ears. Here was a nutritionist on TV suggesting that he was on the right track. A friend with prostate cancer, seeking natural alternatives to conventional treatments, had already made McRae aware of the emerging health benefits of blueberries. The USDA had affirmed that blueberries contain more antioxidants than any other common fruit or vegetable, and further research had shown that they could be more effective than prescription medication in reducing cholesterol.



Inspired, McRae and the company of which he was (and is) CEO, Leading Brands, began researching the blueberry in earnest. The Lower Mainland is one of the leading growers of blueberries on the continent and, like most Vancouverites, McRae had grown up anticipating the fresh crop every summer. If only there was a way, he thought, to create a tasty beverage from this abundant berry without sacrificing its health benefits.

At the time, there was no widely available blueberry juice of any kind. The last juice to be introduced nationally was cranberry, more than 70 years ago. Unlike cranberries, blueberries are naturally sweet, requiring none of the high fructose corn syrups that cranberry juice needs to make it palatable. Surely a drink that was sweeter, healthier and produced with fewer calories would have mass appeal.

Does it ever. Since it first came off the bottling line three years ago, TrueBlue blueberry juice has hit that sweet spot in the public consciousness. Unlike cranberry juice, where health conscious parents buy it but the kids don't touch it, this juice has been a big hit with almost everyone who tries it. Proper marketing, stellar business acumen and a delicious product made it an immediate success. And it didn't hurt that just after its release, a renowned dermatologist on Oprah recommended a steady diet of blueberries for their anti-aging benefits. Most recently TrueBlue won Best Beverage of 2006 at America's Best Food Show and was judged best beverage in the people's choice awards at the event.

Riding this wave of scientific research and good press, TrueBlue, now available in six flavour combinations, has taken the continent by storm. Originally stocked only in local grocery stores, it now has prominent shelf facings in major chains like Wal-Mart in Canada and Albertsons in the United States. In 2005, Leading Brands' plants in Richmond and Edmonton produced some 230 million bottles.

Where blueberry juice hasn't yet shown up is on cocktail lists at local bars and restaurants. Eager to rectify that oversight, we asked four of Vancouver's top mixologists to create cocktails that could be prepared at home. With the holidays approaching, it never hurts to have a new trick up your sleeve. Nick Devine from George Lounge, Scott Moriarty from La Terrazza, Sean Sherwood from Fiction and Mark Brand from Republic all rose to the challenge.

"The most important element in making a great cocktail is balance," says Brand. "As in a fine wine, you want concentrated flavour, with balanced acidity, that doesn't attack the palate. The blueberry-blackberry blend, shaken with a nice Polish vodka and fresh citrus, is a perfect example. The striking violet colour is visually pleasing, the alcohol hits the mid palate, and the distinctive blueberry flavours linger for a satisfying finish. And those antioxidants," smiles the shaker-wielding Brand, "ought to help with the hangover. It's like having the poison and the cure in the same glass."

CHEERS!

These original cocktails by Vancouver mixologists are sure to put some kick into the holiday season.

Pomegranitini

By Scott Moriarty, La Terrazza

- 1 1/2 oz Absolut Citron vodka
 - 1/2 oz Cointreau liqueur
 - 2 oz TrueBlue blueberry-pomegranate juice
- Splash fresh pressed lime juice. Shake and strain into martini glass

The Spoilt Bison

By Nick Devine, George Lounge

- 8 fresh sage leaves
 - 1 1/2 oz South Gin
 - 1/2 oz Chambord
 - 2 oz TrueBlue blueberry juice
 - Large pinch ground black pepper
 - Dash fresh lemon juice
- Shake vigorously and fine strain into a chilled martini glass.
Garnish with a sprig of sage and a couple of blueberries and serve.

Nightshade

By Sean Sherwood, Fiction Gastropub & Wine Bar

- 1 oz TrueBlue blueberry juice
 - One sugar cube
 - Lime wedge
 - 1/2 oz Sour Apple liqueur
 - 1/2 oz Anejo tequila
 - 2 fresh twists of orange
- Muddle blueberry juice with the sugar and lime wedge in a rocks glass. Add liqueur and tequila and orange twists (or zest), top with ice and a splash of soda water. Shake vigorously and serve ice cold. Garnish with fresh blueberries.

Blueberry Caipirinha

By Mark Brand, Republic

- Muddle half a lime with a handful of blueberries, a table spoon of raw sugar and half a stalk of lemongrass.
 - Add 2 oz Cachaca (origin of your choice)
 - 1/2 oz TrueBlue blueberry juice
 - Shake until frost forms.
- Fill a rocks glass with crushed ice to the top (if your fridge doesn't do this, double bag a Ziploc baggie and break out the meat tenderizer). Strain over top and garnish with the other half of the lemon grass stalk, which will act as an aromatic stir stick.

Brand's Van mag Original

By Mark Brand, Republic

- Advance preparation: Fill an ice cube tray four-fifths full with a dry sparkling wine (a cava or brut is preferable), and drop two blueberries (sliced in half) in each. When the mixture begins to crystallize, add a squirt of Oscar's organic Canadian blueberry syrup to each cube (it adds a nice vein of colour). Also, infuse a 750-mL bottle of Wyborowa vodka with 2 stalks of cinnamon.
- Muddle 1 kaffir lime leaf with 10-12 fresh blueberries, a quarter lime halved, and a dash of grain sugar for friction. (If you don't have a muddler, use the end of a wooden kitchen utensil.)
 - Add 2 oz TrueBlue blueberry-cranberry juice
 - 1 oz cinnamon-infused Wyborowa vodka to shaker
- Shake until shaker has frost and double strain (cocktail strainer and fine strainer to remove chunks) into rocks glass filled with four of your pre-made ice cubes. Top with a few curls of orange or lemon zest, and garnish with a kaffir lime leaf.