The Oregonian

A cherry on top

If you think pinot noir put Oregon on the map, wait until you read about the marischino cherry. Now that's a fruit!

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We're in a bar, sitting across from each other, fiddling with our empty glasses. I can sense that you need to get going, but I'm just getting started. I am just getting warmed up. I have a story to tell you -- and no, it's not the whiskey talking; it's the cherry. Yes, the cherry, sitting forlornly in the bottom of my glass, as bright red as the sign outside the Alibi.

Stay with me here, because I am about to tell you something you did not know, something that will amaze you as much as if I took that cherry in my mouth and tied the stem into a knot with my tongue (which in truth, wouldn't be all that amazing; bartenders tell me they find them scattered throughout the bar at the end of the night all the time).

What if I told you that I've got a pretty good idea where that cherry came from? Because, really, in this country, there's one place where more than half of all maraschino cherries are made.

If I gave you one guess, what are the odds you'd say Oregon?

Don't look at me like that. I swear: It's true.

You live at the spiritual and physical heart of the modern maraschino cherry industry.

This is not just another bar story. This is an Oregon story. This is our story.

I can promise intrigue, invention, pioneer gumption, man's triumph over his environment, drunkenness, temperance, squishy fruit, sleepless nights, single-minded dedication, radishes, globalization, the struggle of the American farmer and more than a bracing dose of sugar.

Who would have thought a maraschino cherry had so much to say?

Before we go any further, there is the small matter of pronunciation, which is really a big matter.

How to say it?

Mara-sheeno.

Mara -skeeno.

Take your pick.

I've always been partial to mara-sheeno; it sounds to me the way the cherry looks -- like the name of woman who is not afraid to wear leopard-print skirts and costume jewelry, who likes the way she looks and couldn't give a rip what other people think.

But mara-skeeno: That gets us closer to the cherry's past.

The great-great-great-great-great grandmother of today's maraschino cherries was the marasca, a small, sour, black cherry that grew wild in Dalmatia, on the coast of present-day Croatia.

There's still the tiniest bit of family resemblance if you squint just right.

Back then, say a few hundred years ago, there really wasn't a good way to preserve fruit, so as one story goes, anyway, after pickling the cherries in seawater, the locals would marinate them in a liqueur called maraschino, made from the marasca's juice, pits and leaves.

And lo, the first maraschino cherry was born.

Please don't tell me you thought maraschino cherries grew on trees. (Not that you'd be the first to think that.) No, maraschino cherries are something made, transformed. They have always been about starting out as one thing and ending up another.

Eventually, well-heeled folks throughout Europe developed a taste for these maraschino-soaked cherries, and it wasn't long before imitations started cropping up. Remember what I said about transformation?

The French, writes John Mariani, in "The Dictionary of American Food and Drink," "flavored and colored their own local cherries bright red and called them maraschinos." And then rich Americans tasted maraschinos in Europe -- the Dalmatian original? The bright red French coquette? Who knows? -- and took the taste home with them. Some got into the import business, but others decided to try to make their own version of the version they had tasted. The maraschino cherry that arrived here in the late 1800s was already becoming something else.

By the early 1900s, maraschinos were all the rage in the United States, largely bobbing around in cocktails like the Manhattan. A New York Times story from Jan. 2, 1910, captured the nation's maraschino-cherry mania: "A young woman engaged a room at a fashionable hotel and, after ordering a Manhattan cocktail, immediately sent for another. Soon she was ordering them by the dozen. The management interfered and someone was sent to expostulate with her; also to find out how she had been able to consume so many cocktails. She was found surrounded by the full glasses with the cherry gone."

Members of the country's growing temperance movement weren't too hot on a hooch-soaked cherry -- especially when it started landing atop kids' ice-cream sundaes -- but manufacturers were using all sorts of things other than alcohol to make maraschinos, long before Prohibition passed. (So many cherries were being made with everything but the traditional maraschino liqueur, in fact, that in 1912, the Food and Drug Administration felt the need to decree just what could be called a maraschino cherry.)

By 1915, cherry consumption in the U.S. had gone through the roof because of "the fashion of adding preserved cherries, as much as for ornamentation as to give flavor, to many drinks and ices," wrote U.P. Hedrick in a report of the New York Agricultural Experiment Station.

At that time, the maraschino lolling in your glass was more than likely made at a factory on the East Coast, from a brined cherry imported all the way from Italy.

That is until the day a tall, kindly man sporting a pencil-thin mustache arrived at Oregon State University, and that's when everything changed.

Now seems like a good time to hit the road. Head down to Corvallis.

Yes, you heard me. Corvallis.

If Oregon is the spiritual and physical heart of the modern maraschino cherry industry, then Corvallis would have to be its honorary capital.

Maraschino Cherry Central. I kid you not. People write theses on this stuff down there. Really. Here's one from OSU's library, called "Science, Service and Specialized Agriculture: The Re-Invention of the Maraschino Cherry," submitted in 1998 by one J. Christopher Jolly.

At some point, in the mid-1800s, Jolly writes, Oregon farmers figured out that the state has the perfect climate for growing cherries -- light-skinned, sweet cherries such as the Royal Ann in particular -- and by

the early 1900s, they had gone on a bit of a tear, planting acre after acre of trees.

Unfortunately, cherries happen to be the fruit world's equivalent of high-maintenance movie stars. They are temperamental, demanding, bruise easily. And without refrigeration, or some other kind of preservation, they quickly turn into a mushy, rotten mess.

That presented the Oregon farmers with a real challenge. Obviously, rotting fruit doesn't sell too well at the grocery store. So how could they get the most out of their growing harvests? They had to find some other uses for it. Pickling the cherries in brine, and then turning them into maraschinos, seemed the perfect solution.

There was just one problem: Maraschino cherry manufacturers on the East Coast weren't playing. They claimed the Oregon cherries were too squishy, icky; only imports from Italy would do.

So this was the world that Ernest Wiegand, the man with the pencil-thin mustache, walked into when he arrived at OSU, then known as Oregon Agricultural College, in 1919.

Wiegand was a horticulturist who had also tried his hand at canning, brewing, running a citrus farm and overseeing poultry production in Kansas before coming to Oregon. One of Wiegand's old colleagues, Bob Cain, still lives in Corvallis. Cain is pushing 90 now. He and Wiegand were close; Wiegand, known to everyone as "Prof," recruited Cain to join the faculty of OSU's food science department.

"Now the story I've heard," about how Wiegand's path came to intersect with the maraschino cherry, Cain says, "goes something like this:"

The college president's wife had a brother who just happened to be a cherry grower. The two of them were visiting one day, when the brother told his sister about the little problem of the squishy cherries.

"She told her husband," Cain says. "And then he gets on the horn to the horticulture department and says to Prof, 'Why don't you see what you can do about this problem?' "

From 1925 to 1931, Wiegand makes it his mission. He works every angle, burning through pounds of cherries, scribbling formulas in notebooks. And then, the great "aha!" moment: Wiegand realizes that if he adds some calcium salts to the brine these cherries soak in, it will firm them right up.

There's some other tweaking, but that's the big news.

It might not sound like much, but Wiegand's simple solution -- still used by maraschino manufacturers today, with a few minor adjustments -- was a miracle as far as Oregon cherry growers were concerned. It meant that they could finally tell those East Coast manufacturers what to do with their Italian cherries.

And then, along came a tariff that just happened to make those foreign cherries super-expensive to import.

It's funny, isn't it, the way seemingly random events line up in just the right way?

A man tinkers with brine. The government approves a tariff. And 70-some years later we end up with:

A building on OSU's campus named Wiegand Hall (where Wiegand's kindly-looking portrait -- his thin mustache arches in the faintest smile -- hangs just inside the front doors).

A class at OSU called Maraschino Cherry 102, which examines the "historical, technological and scientific aspects of maraschino cherry production."

And the two biggest maraschino manufacturers in the nation -- not to mention a third smaller, but still significant player, right here in Oregon.

Remember those old, grainy films you used to watch in elementary school -- like "The Cell: The Structural Unit of Life" -- where the narrator's voice always sounded garbled, and about halfway through, the picture inevitably started jumping around higgledy-piggledy until someone got up to fix the projector?

Imagine you are about to watch one of those films right now. This one is called, "A Tour of Oregon's Maraschino Industry."

The first shot is of the industrial-looking exterior of a large factory complex in Forest Grove. This is Gray &

Company, which is headquartered in Portland. They also have a factory in Dayton.

The next shot is of a large factory complex in Salem. This is Oregon Cherry Growers, a grower-owned cooperative, with another two factories in The Dalles.

The camera cuts to a man in a sweater and khakis sitting behind a large, polished desk. This is Ed Johnson, president and CEO of Oregon Cherry Growers. His co-op and Gray & Company are "the two 900-pound gorillas in the industry," he says.

Getting exact numbers out of these guys is difficult because these are privately held companies, and they hold their cards close to their chest. But everyone seems to agree on this much:

Gray & Company, which also has a factory in Michigan, basically owns the retail market; go to the grocery store or Costco, look around, and chances are the maraschino cherries you see are theirs. Oregon Cherry Growers is king of the food-service market; a majority of bars, restaurants, cafeterias, nursing homes and hospitals serve their cherries.

Both outfits are dealing in millions of pounds of cherries a year. Their products are being shipped around the world, to Mexico, Dubai, Russia, Indonesia, Korea.

Cue familiar factory scene: flickering fluorescent lights, humming machinery, industrial-size jars of maraschino cherries sailing past on conveyor belts, tended by women in hairnets, wearing blue gloves and long lab coats.

"All this," says Josh Reynolds, vice president and general manager of Gray & Company's fruit division, "allows us to produce what I think of essentially as a piece of candy."

This is an important point. Nobody's pretending that maraschinos are something they're not. The word "fruit" is studiously avoided.

"Maraschino cherries are not an everyday item in the kitchen," is how Bob Cain, the old maraschino man from Corvallis, puts it. "They're not like a can of beans."

"I like to tell people a maraschino is the nutritional equivalent of a Lifesaver," Reynolds says. "You wouldn't call it healthy, but it's fine" for a treat.

Reynolds is standing in a large room, filled with massive redwood containers that look remarkably like hot tubs. Except each one is full of 85,000 pounds of cherries, swimming in a brew of red food coloring and corn syrup. This is the room where cherries officially begin their transformation into maraschinos. It all feels a bit like a spa: dark, quiet, calm.

Let's zoom in on one of those hot tubs. You'll notice that all the cherries roiling around inside have their stems still attached.

These are the movie stars of the maraschino world -- the most desirable kind, destined for greatness in some swanky cocktail, or the pinnacle of some zaftig sundae. And they most likely came from Oregon.

How do I know this? Oregon actually supplies a good chunk of the cherries that ultimately become maraschinos, along with Michigan. But in Oregon, unlike Michigan, which uses machines to harvest cherries, most cherries are hand-picked, leaving the stems intact.

So far, all you've seen are red maraschinos. And maybe you thought that's the only color a maraschino could be.

But now up pops a hand holding a maraschino as bright as saffron.

The cherry, and the hand, belong to Craig Bell, president of Eola Cherry Co., located in the middle of a vast cherry orchard in Gervais. Eola has a smaller share of the food-service market, but not an insignificant one -- second, according to Bell. Eola, which exports cherries to 16 nations, has distinguished itself by creating electric blue, yellow, pink and orange maraschino cherries.

"The silver," Bell says, "we're having a problem with."

This ability to dye cherries almost any color is another Oregon invention.

Remember Wiegand's friend, Cain?

In our grainy film, we would see him in a white lab coat, bending over a piece of paper scribbled with formulas. After Wiegand retired, Cain spent a number of years perfecting his mentor's work.

One of the things that he worked on was a "secondary bleaching process," which allowed manufacturers to turn cherries as white as snow, a blank canvas on which they could apply any color they wanted.

A beloved student of Cain's once jokingly used the process on some plums, which he then dyed bright red and labeled, "Texas Cherries."

They never did take off.

I haven't mentioned it yet, but storm clouds have been brewing at the edge of this story.

They started, really, the moment the maraschino cherry went from being a quaint delicacy picked and pickled by Dalmatian peasants to something a bit more industrial-strength.

"It is a tasteless, indigestible thing, originally to be sure, a fruit of the cherry tree, but toughened and reduced to the semblance of a formless, gummy lump by long imprisonment in a bottle filled with so-called maraschino," groused a 1911 editorial from The New York Times.

Ninety-four years later, the Times was still complaining. "The culinary equivalent of an embalmed corpse," sniffed a recent magazine piece, which instructed readers how to make their own approximation of the "ambrosial perfection of the original maraschino."

That is, of course, the highfalutin take. Ambrosial? So just for balance's sake, it seems only right to seek out someone from a real bar, where real folks drink. When asked about whether he hears complaints about maraschinos, Angelo Puccinelli, owner of Portland's Matador, referred to affectionately in one bar guide as "Dive with a capital D," quickly turns apoplectic. "If any one of my kids complained about maraschino cherries, I'd restrain them right there. Anybody that's poured a fair share of drinks in their life would never complain about a maraschino cherry . . . it's like getting mad at soda water. Get mad at somebody wanting sugar on the rim of their glass. Don't get mad at the existence of the maraschino cherry. That makes no sense."

So far, the maraschino has endured the knocks against it, but fashions change. Public perceptions shift.

One day, everyone's knocking back Manhattans and grooving on the way that neon-red cherry contrasts with electric green Jell-O.

The next, they're signing up for health clubs, limiting themselves to no more than 2 ounces of liquor a night, buying only organic, natural ingredients and pining for an artisanal past.

If you're a maraschino cherry man in Oregon, you're watching all this and getting a little worried.

Adding to your stress:

Farmers in Washington and Oregon are discovering they can make a lot more money planting cherry varieties such as Bings than the cherries used to make maraschinos. You watch as they start swapping out trees, and the supply of marashino cherries begins shrinking -- by one-third during the past four years, according to Ed Johnson of Oregon Cherry Growers, which two years ago started importing cherries from overseas to make up the difference.

Then the day comes when you're wandering the aisles of the grocery store with your family and you happen to notice an unfamiliar jar of maraschino cherries on the shelf. You look at the label: "Made in China."

"That was an, 'Oh, crap' moment," says Josh Reynolds of Gray & Company.

It all leads to some pretty scary questions if you're a maraschino man.

Could the day be coming when the heart of the maraschino business moves from Oregon, perhaps for

somewhere overseas?

Worse yet, could the day be coming when the ubiquitous red cherry, perfected here more than 70 years ago, is no more?

This last question in particular has led to a development I'm going to bet few people ever expected to hear, something that could happen only in Oregon:

The greening of the maraschino cherry.

You heard me right. The maraschino cherry has gone natural.

At Oregon Cherry Growers, the research and development team has figured out how to make a maraschino cherry colored with a blend of radish and carrot juice and flavored with natural almond oil and lemon juice. It contains no sulfites, no processed corn syrup. (Of course, this means you will no longer be able to tell who swiped the cherry from your glass by their bright red tongue, but that's another matter altogether.)

"I used to dream about how we would do this," says Carl Payne, the soft-spoken R&D chief at Oregon Cherry Growers (and Cain's beloved student of the "Texas Cherry" fame). Payne doggedly pursued the idea for 20 years despite "a lot of failures": colors that faded to an unappetizing, pruney brown; cherries that disintegrated.

Finally, a couple of years ago, his team hit it on the right formula.

"If people are turning away from additives, I wanted to make sure this industry has a viable alternative," says Payne, who has worked with maraschinos for 40 years, but says nothing's ever gotten to him quite like his quest to make a natural cherry. ("Just ask my wife.")

Oregon Cherry Growers processes and packs the natural cherry for Trader Joe's under their label.

"Now we are ready," he says.

Of course, it doesn't end here. There are still other things to worry about.

Like figuring out how to keep farmers interested in planting the kinds of cherries that can be made into maraschinos, even when the economics are telling them not to. Or taking trips to China to figure out just how far along their maraschino operations really are. (Not very, appears to be the consensus, at least for now.)

I cannot tell you yet how our story will end.

No one yet has linked eating more maraschino cherries with the cause of saving Oregon agribusiness. (But wouldn't that just be so Oregon if they did? Can't you just imagine those Family Suppers, the Gourmet stories breathlessly wondering if "maraschino cuisine" is the restaurant world's "new frontier?")

For now, the factories in Forest Grove and Salem and Gervais keep humming along.

Maraschino cherries made here make their way to Mexico, Dubai, Indonesia, Korea.

Eola's Craig Bell keeps working on his silver cherry.

Wiegand Hall still stands at OSU.

And, if you look closely, you'll see my tongue is stained bright red. I close my eyes, the room spins and I swear I can taste Oregon.

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