

## There's Been A Black Currant Resurgence, And Here's Why



By Abby Luby

How do you rescue a fruit from a century of obscurity, turn it into a local farming industry and sell it as a power drink?

That's the first question I asked Hudson Valley black currant farmer **Greg Quinn**, the mastermind behind the black currant resurgence, and a company, **CurrantC**.

"It's always been a labor of love," he explains. "You have to understand, currants are a totally

different animal, different from grapes or raisins. For centuries they've been popular in Europe and aren't well understood in the U.S."

Quinn pours me his most popular product, a high energy, health elixir called All Natural Black Currant Nectar. When I took my first sip I was struck by its rich, tangy-sweet flavor. It was the quintessential thirst quencher fortified with antioxidants, Vitamin C, Calcium, Iron, and Magnesium. As I imbibed, Quinn told me the amazing tale of the black currant.

And boy, is he a great storyteller; energized and passionate, the right stuff needed to overturn an arcane law banning black currants. Seems in the early 1900s, black currant bushes were plagued with the fungal disease white pine blister rust that aggressively spread and killed white pine trees, a key staple for the logging industry who successfully lobbied for the ban. Congress allowed each state to adapt the law in any way it saw fit.

Quinn shakes his head as he explains that, although the federal ban ended in the 1960s, New York State kept the law on the books. In 2002 he took on the state and became a dogged fixture in the Capital halls brandishing updated research showing a new fungal-resistant bush which ultimately swayed the powers that be to lift the ban. Up until then, there were only about 15 New York farms growing small amounts of currants but five years later that number grew fourfold and some 67 farms reported growing black currants; 20 were in the Hudson Valley.



The market demand was there and Quinn literally ushered in a new wave of agriculture. “This region is ideal for black and red currants,” he says. “The rocky, shale-infused soil plus the 1,000 hours of cold they crave makes it perfect.”

He became a full time black currant farmer on his Walnut Grove farm, a 145-acre farm in Staatsburg, New York that he and film producer **Carolyn Marks Blackwood** purchased in 1999. Quinn’s was the first commercial currant farm in New York State with 10,000 black currant bushes on 18 acres along with 60,000 seedlings sold to regional farmers. “I wanted to create a crop that farmers can actually make money on,” he says. “There’s a potential \$20 million industry in black currants.”



Marketing and distribution of the highly nutritious currant was a walk in the park for Quinn. “Within five years after the ban was lifted we were selling our products in about 4,000 super markets country wide and in Canada as well,” Quinn recalls. “We also opened a bottling plant on the west coast.”

Quinn, 66, an avowed foodie, refined his palate in the 1970s as a military officer and translator stationed near the Bavarian border. A fearless opportunist, he opened a small restaurant and discovered Europe’s native black currant bushes growing in the kitchen garden, which soon became a tasty ingredient in sauces and dressings. Back in the U.S. Quinn plunged into cuisine and horticulture, careening between teaching botanical classes at the New York Botanical Gardens and enticing gardeners on Fox TV

News as ‘The Garden Guy.’ A born storyteller, he penned eight children’s books about nature. His interest in black currants never waned; he saw the infinite culinary possibilities.



CurrantC is Quinn's product line and CurrantC™ All Natural Black Currant Nectar, his signature product, is the original American-made Black Currant beverage. Other CurrantC products include frozen black currants, black currant concentrate, CurrantC Black Currant Syrup; many were selling to local and New York City restaurants, ice cream companies and home winemakers.

By 2008 Quinn was about to contract with Starbucks that would have exclusively sold his juice in the ubiquitous coffee shop. But then the economy tanked and it was a whole new ball game. "We were really on the threshold of going global," says Quinn. "But the bottom fell out, the Starbucks CEO fired all of our contacts and everything fell apart." CurrantC dwindled down to almost nothing, but Quinn was undaunted. "We knew we had a good product so we had to reinvent the company to an



eCommerce model." The online business kept CurrantC alive and as the economy improved, there was an uptick in the demand. "We've built ourselves back up and now we're back in many local stores and restaurants," says Quinn. "People who used to buy from us are coming out of the woodwork."

According to Quinn, CurrantC products are now in **Adams Fairacre Farms** in Poughkeepsie, many local health food stores, and restaurants including **Gigi Trattoria** in Rhinebeck, **The Corner in Hotel Tivoli** in Tivoli, and in Brooklyn, **Meadowsweet** restaurant. A CurrantC cocktail was served at this summer's Spiegeltent at Bard.

Quinn has lived through an amazing business arc that began with a single taste overseas to a one-man fight in a political arena to growing and successfully selling a unique product. As he poured me another chilled glass of velvety nectar, he beams, saying that Meadowsweet is using CurrantC juice in a new drink. "They have named the drink after me. It's called the Mighty Quinn."