

Pit Stop

Orasella produces premium maraschinos from the nation's top cherry-producing state.

STORY BY TERESA GRISWOLD

Everything is better with a cherry on top, right? Not exactly. Those artificially bright-red cherries, reminiscent of soda-fountain sundaes and Shirley Temples, may conjure up memories of sweet goodness and celebrations, but those nearly florescent orbs are anything but that. They are a completely unnatural product, soaked in calcium chloride, which bleaches and hardens the cherries. Then they go through a pitter, are dyed, and are sweetened with corn syrup. Stems made of molded plastic are injected into the cherries. They look pretty, but are essentially inedible. At best, they are a festive-looking ornament, which is why some Seattle bars use original maraschino cherries sourced from Italy and France.

That is, until Anne SanGiovanni and Heidi Stender, co-founders of upstart Orasella Maraschino Cherries, combined their love for preserving fruit and passion for all things local to create premium maraschino cherries

in Seattle. Made from Bing cherries sourced in Washington — the nation's top cherry producer — Orasella introduced a high-quality, all natural maraschino cherry that rivals those from Europe.

The former college friends, who now live within walking distance from one another, had routinely put up 450 jars of apples, cherries, peaches, and other fruit with the abundance of produce supplied to them from Anne's brother, who has a farm in Yakima. They canned everything from apple sauce to cherries drenched in liqueur and spices.

When the pair discovered that their homemade maraschino cherries were better than those the local bartenders were using, they came up with the idea for what is now Orasella Maraschino Cherries. "Everything is done by hand," Anne says. "The way your grandmother did water-bath canning is basically the same way we do ours."



Original maraschino cherries hail from Italy and are made from the Marasca cherry, native to Croatia. It is a small, sour fruit. Because Washington-grown cherries are sweeter than the Marasca, there was quite a bit of testing done to come up with the perfect balance of flavors.

“We were comfortable with canning, but learned a massive amount — and all the things that go along with it,” Anne says. “That first year, we got a ton of cherries. I picked them at my brother’s farm, and we did recipe testing on those.”

Some recipes they tried used a sugar syrup. An amazing preservative, sugar is often used in canning fruit, but it made the cherries taste more like candy. There had to be a balance between sugar and acid to maintain shelf stability. Other recipes called for a salt-water brine. Some used maraschino liqueur, a derivative of the Marasca cherry, or other liqueurs.

So began the experimenting to refine the ingredients and measurements and get it just right. There was a batch that had too much alcohol. Other recipes did not have the right syrup versus alcohol equation. There also had to be the correct blend of lemon juice, almond extract, and spices.

It was a scientific process. “I am really lucky that Heidi is an aerospace engineer,” Anne says of her business partner, who also helped design a mechanical cherry pitter. Last year, it pitted 2.5 tons of cherries.

The pair tested and tasted and tested some more. When they got close to something good, they enlisted their family members for tasting. “That year, our families were really sick of cherries!” Anne says.

It also took time for the batches to age, so it was a slow process. But 250 pounds later, they came up with their perfect batch.

With their product perfected, it was time to go to market. Neither partner had pitched a sale before, and they nervously approached the folks at Seattle-based Barnacle. When they got a yes on their first try, Anne and

Heidi launched Orasella, a combination of their two maiden names.

“People are incredibly open here to giving someone a chance,” Anne says. “We’ve had some amazing partners as a result of that.”

Before those delicious, jewel-colored cherries make it to Orasella’s jars, they are grown to succulent ripeness in Washington orchards. Orasella works exclusively with Washington farmers, and for the past three years, most of their cherries were sourced from Martin Family Orchard in Orondo. The cherries are hand-picked and sorted by size, with the smaller cherries making their way to Orasella.

“Cherries are different than grapes in that the flavor profile doesn’t change,” Anne says. They have been bred to be a Bing, and their sugar level is tested before they are picked. This is done with a refractometer that measures the juice taken from 8 to 10 cherries that are mashed together. The juice from the sample is dropped on the lens of the refractometer which measures the sweetness in brix and determines when they are ready to harvest, says Rick Martin, owner of Martin Family Orchard.

Using local, freshly picked cherries is important to Anne and Heidi. They’ve done tests with frozen cherries and even did a test batch on cherries from Chile when the local cherries were out of season. “The quality is visibly less because it is coming from so far away,” Anne says. There is a dimpling in the fruit, and the color is speckled. “As you make concessions on where you are getting your fruit from, the quality degrades.”

Because of this, Anne and Heidi only do preserving during the Washington cherry harvest, around June. Everything is fresh and natural, just cherries and syrup. The cherry season lasts 8 to 12 weeks.

“We believe in a product that only uses ingredients that we’d be comfortable feeding to our families,” says Anne. “Hence, we never use dyes, preservatives, or artificial ingredients. And, not shockingly, if you use deep-red cherries and a natural preservation

process, you don’t need artificial colorants to make the product a garnet hue. The natural color of the cherry dyes both the cherry and the clear syrup.”

Orasella’s maraschino cherries are adapted from a traditional Italian recipe of sugar syrup, maraschino liqueur, and spices. They’re held in their jars until they develop a deep burgundy syrup, yielding cherries that are rich in texture and flavor. Unlike with imported cherries, Seattle bartenders like Orasella’s syrup just as it is, often using it in cocktails along with the cherries.

Spirit in the Bottle Bar at Marmite, named one of Bon Appétit’s “Best New Restaurants in America” in 2017, created a seasonal drink for the winter from Orasella’s maraschino cherries, using the juice and the cherries, called “Cherries in Snow.” comprised of equal parts Pisco, cherry juice, Bénédictine, and lime juice with a frothy egg white and cherry garnish.

The recipes incorporating Orasella Maraschino Cherries do not stop with drinks. The London Plane uses Orasella’s cherries in cocktails and in a cherry-filled chocolate brioche. Local 360 Cafe & Bar uses the cherries at the bar and as a filling for an Orasella Cherry and Theo Chocolate French Macaron, made by pastry chef, Tanya Emerick, which is served as an occasional treat in the café.

Orasella Maraschino Cherries can be purchased online at orasella.com or from the following Seattle retailers: DeLaurenti Specialty Food & Wine in Seattle’s Pike Place Market, Barnacle, E. Smith Mercantile, Cone & Steiner, Sugarpill, Copperworks Distilling, and QFC’s liquor store. *eS*

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