

# RAMBLES >



## Fruits of Labor

Wild Alaska blueberries.

Berry picking and gold digging yield more than just quantity

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD



**I** kneel on the slope below Newton Peak, outside of Nome. One hand cupped in berry bushes, I receive the land's ample gifts.

Sunshine massages my shoulders while incense of crushed Labrador tea rises from the warm tundra. Claret-colored blueberry leaves, orange dwarf birch, and bearberry, crimson as freshly spilled blood, mingle in fall's high-latitude quilt. I delicately strip berries from twigs, letting them roll into my palm before placing handfuls into a yogurt container. This late in the season, the plump flesh bursts easily, staining my fingertips purple. The fruits' scattershot growth pulls

me farther and farther as hours slip away unnoticed.

Lulled by the meditative activity, I pop a few berries into my mouth, where tartness explodes between my palate and tongue. Most blueberries sold in stores pale by comparison; obese and engineered into blandness, they betray an obsession with quantity, a disregard for season and place. One Fairbanks friend crushes such cultivars to dye skeins of wool, which hardcore gourmets consider the only use.

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Inupiat berry pickers in Nome between about 1900 and 1930.



Not a good berry year, this one—few sunny days in the past months. My bucket fills very slowly. Blueberries are selling for \$20 a quart through our town’s online exchange network, often to locals too busy or impatient to pick. Regardless of the shortage, I shun berry combs, the plastic-and-steel gadgets that mimic bear claws, because they bruise fruit, damage bushes, and collect too much debris. They keep me from handling the velvety spheres, and their efficiency strikes me as semi-industrial. Berry picking appeals to me for its humbling pace, its quiet thrills. It requires no fancy tools—no fishing rods, four-wheelers, high-powered rifles, or outboard motors—and no logistics or permits, just an old bucket and a strong back.

Far out, afloat on sheet-metal glare, barge-like gold dredges sift Nome’s ancient beaches, submerged when ice sheets melted and the sea repossessed land at the end of the Pleistocene. Belches and growls from heavy machinery waft up with an onshore breeze. A

belt of scars girdles foothills below, outlining an even older beach and placer-rich stream gravel buried beneath glacial till. Earthmovers and caterpillars are scraping the gold-bearing layers, throwing up molehills of human industry. Dwarfing all present-day efforts, long-necked, turn-of-the-century dredges wallow in marsh ponds like doomed brontosaurus.

Fortunes made, fortunes missed, lives spent pawing the ground, and a few miners breaking even. Stuffy and dark as animal dens, the bars along Front Street stay busy, as does the town’s only bank, handing out berry buckets with its logo as if promoting frugality. The payback as well as the scale of extraction differs, but diggers and pickers like myself equally feed desire, not need. Secretive and territorial, we move on when the yields no longer warrant the effort. Quitting is hard. As the year tilts into winter, the berries turn mushy; earth and sea harden to human intrusion; frost and ice put our ambition on hold.

Back home, I carefully pick leaf litter from

my loot before freezing the berries in Ziplocs. The local Inupiat stored their berries in skins bloated with seal oil, preventing spoilage and scurvy. Our stash likewise provides precious vitamins where produce is airlifted in and therefore expensive. In the bleak pit of December, when snow buries porches and winds moan like errant souls, our berry-inked lips mock those dark from hypothermia. We fold them into muffin and pancake batter, fill jam jars and piecrusts, or spoon them directly from a bag as a substitute for sorbet and lost daylight. Cocooned in our kitchen, we relish summer’s dense flavors, memories of lush life, nuggets of sunshine. ▲

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