



By Peggy Crum, RD, Health4U Nutritionist

Hold up your hand—either one will do—with your thumb pointing to the right. Cherry country is located near the tip of your ring finger. With breezes off Lake Michigan to moderate the temperatures, this region of Michigan's Lower Peninsula offers prime growing conditions for cherries, both sweet and tart. Michigan leads the nation in tart cherry production, hands down.

The two main varieties of tart cherries grown in Michigan are Montmorency—the familiar pie cherry, first planted on Old Mission Peninsula in 1852—and Balaton—native to Hungary, introduced in the US by MSU horticulture researcher Dr. Amy Iezzoni in 1984. Sweeter and darker than Montmorency cherries, Balaton cherries have red pigment from skin to pit. When ripe, the Balaton cherry stem pulls free from the fruit and the opening self-heals. This trait along with its larger size and firmness makes it possible for this sweeter tart cherry to be shipped fresh for eating out-of-hand.

Tart cherries are in high demand year round for their lip-smacking goodness. They are available as juice concentrate, frozen, canned and, perhaps the most versatile, dried. Dried cherries are frequently combined with other dried fruits, nuts and grains to make trail mix. They can be used in savory dishes such as oatmeal, salads, rice and sauces or rehydrated for use in desserts.

The process for drying most tart cherries includes soaking in a sugar bath until they reach the peak of sweetness. Due to their naturally sweeter disposition, Balaton cherries do not need as much added sugar as Montmorency cherries. Unsweetened dried tart cherries also are available.

Store your dried cherries in a cool, dry place in a tightly sealed container. They will keep in the pantry for 12 months or in the freezer for 18 months—always ready to add a pop of color and a punch of flavor to your dish.

RECIPE for health

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featured food:

DRIED CHERRIES

Dried Cherry Granola Bars

Recipe developed by Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski

- ½ cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup sliced almonds
- ½ cup chopped walnuts
- ¾ cup coarsely chopped dried cherries
- 2 cups old fashioned oats
- ½ cup roasted unsalted sunflower seeds
- 2 Tablespoons ground flaxseed
- ¼ cup canola oil
- ½ cup honey
- ¼ cup light brown sugar
- ¼ cup pure maple syrup
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon cardamom
- Pinch of nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt

Preheat oven to 375° F. Spread nuts on a cookie sheet and toast them in the oven for 6–8 minutes or until they just begin to brown.

Place cherries in small bowl; add warm water to barely cover and soak for a few minutes. Mix oats, sunflower seeds, flaxseed and nuts in large bowl. Drain cherries and stir them in.

In a small saucepan, mix the remaining ingredients and cook over medium-high heat. Stir to avoid burning. Once the syrup comes to a light boil, cook for another 3–5 minutes until it begins to thicken. Add to the large bowl and mix until the syrup evenly coats everything.

Pour the warm granola mixture into an 8" x 8" baking dish generously greased with butter. Use a spatula to pat down until evenly compacted. Place parchment paper on top; using your fingertips, press firmly all over (this will help the bars hold together).

Bake for 20 minutes, rotating the dish after 10 minutes for more even baking. Let cool to room temperature. Refrigerating for a bit will make cutting easier. Cut into squares or rectangles.

Try **Dried Cherry Granola Bars** for lunch at The Gallery at Snyder/Phillips, Brody Square and Riverwalk Market at Owen on February 20.