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## Chicago Poles Find, Savor Local Aronia

by Mildred L. Culp

CHICAGO — Whoever would have thought there was an aronia farm near Chicago where Poles could pick buckets-full of aronia? They'd surely know what to do with the fruit.

Margaret Jemiolo of Arlington Heights picked for the first time. "My

friends shared with me and there was never enough," she says. "I made jam, juice and syrup for waffles, French toast and cheesecake. I froze some for smoothies and I'll be making wine."



Magdalena Fraczek, who has no aronia recipes but does have "a really good juicer," wanted to make juice for her son and daughter; so she froze all of her berries. "I was reading about aronia and it's one of the most healthy fruits in the whole world," she comments.

For some Poles, the berries connect

with their business. Chicago's Ewa Bielska, licensed esthetician and owner of beauty salon Bi-oLife Organic Spa, focuses on health. "I picked the berries, because they're natural produce, very healthy and very beneficial to the skin and healthy living," she says. "I put them in the freezer and have a few in the morning with a shake."

Agnieszka Ostrowska-Walawski, an Arlington Heights distributor for Forever Living.com LLC, who also froze berries, made juice. "Every day I have a shake or smoothie," she reports, "all different kinds." She makes her smoothies with aronia, other fruits and green vegetables.

"My eight year old son doesn't like smoothies," she remarks. "I use a Forever Living product for him, a vanilla shake with banana, strawberry and aronia."

Magda Urbaniak of River Grove froze her berries and blended some of them with pears in preserves. Also, she says, "I'm eating them every day with my cereal. Plain."

**THE FARM.** Nestled in the Kankakee River Valley outside of Mokenca, Coldbrook Farm (ColdbrookFarm.net) grows aronia in America's heartland, surrounded by sod, corn and soybeans. The grower, John Pilcher, left his family farm in western Illinois for college. He couldn't get the farm out of his system.

While living in Seattle, he encountered a wide range of food crops and fell for berries of all kinds. He learned about aronia berries after returning to Illinois. Their uniqueness intrigued him. They'd been grown commercially in the United States for only about 20 years. He bought some land, planted aronia bushes in 2009 and installed drip irrigation to assure table quality fruit.



**CHICAGO-AREA RESIDENTS** Magdalena Fraczek (left), Krystyna Ostrowska (center) and Agnieszka Ostrowska-Walawski (right) show their bounty from picking aronia in the rain at Coldbrook Farm in Mokenca, Ill.

Unlike most farms in Poland and the U.S., his non-GMO fruit grows sustainably, with no herbicides or synthetic insecticides.

**THE POLISH CONNECTION.** Three years ago, Grazyna Muszynska of Barrington was searching

the web for aronia and found Coldbrook Farm. She bought a case of frozen berries for juice. Last summer she called again to ask if she could pick fresh aronia with friends. When she arrived, she walked over to a bush, picked a berry to taste and smiled.

Muszynska's first group included eight friends, thrilled to know about self-pick aronia close to Chicago. Seven of them, Polish-born, had eaten aronia in their first country; some had picked there.

The guests had their choice of berries, acres of them. Everyone, bright orange bucket in hand, chose the younger patch. The men and women teamed and talked as berries fell into the buckets. They spoke Polish the entire time, enjoying the moment. One woman kicked off her sandals and walked barefoot between the rows.

The picking lasted three hours. Afterward, everyone stood around in a circle, sharing Polish deli meats and cheese and their beloved first language. Some of the guests proved to be serious pickers. Two left the field with 60 pounds; a third, with 30.

One woman said she'd dried aronia. She didn't know that everyone would be leaving with a small tub of Coldbrook Farm's own dried sweetened aronia berries to remember their visit.

Before they packed up and went home, Pilcher promised the ones who return this year a discount if they bring a friend. The friend will also receive the discount.

The next day, Muszynska emailed that she had a group of 20 or 25 who'd like to come. "What do you think?" she asked.

They, too, would have a Polish moment and put aronia on the table – and in the freezer!

PHOTO: COLDBROOK FARM, INC.