



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on July 26, 2011

Blueberry Economics

SEA ISLE, N.J. — I should be worrying about how the politicians are killing the nation financially, but that's on the back burner today because the 25th annual Red, White and Blueberry Festival is right up the road and they're estimating that 10,000 of us will show up and eat a million blueberries. That works out to just 100 blueberries each — a piece of cake. Or a nice stack of blueberry pancakes with blueberry syrup and a side of blueberry sausages.



The party is in Hammonton, N.J., the "Blueberry Capital of the World." What lobsters are to Maine, what wings are to Buffalo, that's what blueberries are to Hammonton, home to sandy soil and dozens of blueberry farms.

Check the blueberries in your refrigerator or at the supermarket, and it's a good chance they're from a farm in Hammonton (and now's the time to buy, with supplies at their peak and prices down in half from the \$3.95 per pint in June).

"Festival items for sale this year include blueberry bagels, blueberry loaf, blueberry cannoli and blueberry pie, along with crates of just plain blueberries," reported *The Press* of Atlantic City.

There's also blueberry mustard and a classic car show featuring "blueberry cars" — vintage cars painted in blueberry colors — plus a big "four-tiered blueberry masterpiece," a supersized cake baked by the celebrity chef of the cable-TV show "Cake Boss."

Economically, blueberries are big business in South Jersey, a welcome boost for a region with a current unemployment rate of 13.4 percent, 46 percent higher than the national rate.

"Agriculture officials say New Jersey's blueberry crop is worth \$62 million per year," reports The Associated Press. "There are nearly 300 farms that devote roughly 7,500 acres to blueberry cultivation, yielding approximately 6,980 pounds per acre."

The hitch, in terms of employment, is that blueberry picking doesn't seem to be much done by the locals either because Americans don't want to do that kind of work anymore or because it doesn't pay enough.

"What's the price to escape torment?" asked a recent article in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*. "Ask Anthony 'Butch' DiMeo Jr., who owns Columbia Fruit Farm, a 300-acre blueberry farm. He'll tell you \$1.54 million — the amount he and his cousin William DiMeo spent to improve living conditions for the 300 Haitian workers now picking blueberries the size of marbles on their farm in Hammonton."

Said Butch DiMeo, "They were tormenting us," referring to the U.S. Department of Labor inspectors who routinely dropped by his farm. "They just torment you."

DiMeo had to add new dormitories, shower facilities, toilets, lockers and a kitchen.



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There were overcrowding violations — 151 people living in a camp designed for 130, for example — because, explained DiMeo, “the workers sometimes brought along family members.”

The end result might be automated harvesting equipment.

“Down the road, they’re not going to use pickers,” said Rutgers professor Gary Pavlis, Atlantic County’s agricultural agent. “If they’re going to be hassled constantly, they may as well move on to something else.”

The DiMeo cousins are “good men and respectful to their workers,” said Pavlis.

CATA, a farm workers group in Glassboro, N.J., provides the activism and pressure in support of applying the \$1.54 million mandates to business owners like DiMeo.

Founded by migrant farm workers in southern New Jersey in 1979, CATA’s mission is to be “actively engaged in the struggle for better working and living conditions,” based on “the belief that only through organizing and collective action can farm workers achieve justice and fullness of life.”

If CATA’s organizing and collectivism is successful enough, the unintended consequence might well be that the Haitian pickers will find themselves back in Haiti, replaced by International Harvester and worse off than they were in Jersey.

As I’m writing this, my son is getting his best fishing gear in order and preparing to head out 35 miles into the ocean off Sea Isle in search of tuna. A good one can run 100 pounds.

“Don’t worry about eating them all,” explained the boat’s owner. “The Chinese are out there on the water paying \$10 a pound.”

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