

Gorge Delights

Oregon

Gary Willis, fruit grower in Oregon, decided several years ago, that he and other fruit growers in the area were going to have to do something different, or there was not going to be enough profitability in the business for his son and other next generation orchardists to return to the farming operations. Hoping to improve the financial prospects for Pacific Northwest, Gary and another like-minded farm family, the Goes, started a company that processes fruit into fresh-cut slices and is making a pear nutrition bars. The new firm - Gorge Delights - was started in 2002.



"We can't rely on shippers to pack and move our fruit and return a profit to us," he said. "We have to market our fruit in a manner that the consumer wants," said Willis.

The fruit slicing and packaging was the first aspect of the business to be developed. The firm then teamed up with a product development company, who connected them with a USDA technology, which converted low-value pears into flakes. This technology was patented by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists in California and represents more than four years of study and \$4.5 million investment in research. Ron Wherry of HR Mountain Sun, Inc., worked with and became a partner with the growers in Gorge Delights to further develop and adapt the work of the USDA scientists. The firm spent more than a year both perfecting the product and the process, which required special-built equipment and technology adaptations.

Gorge Delights opened for business in 2002 in Hood River, Ore. The plant is a 19,000 square foot manufacturing facility, which meets all regulatory specifications for food grade manufacturing. The company, which has 20 employees, is strategically located next to interstate access.

Pear bar

The all-fruit bars are fat-free, made without any artificial preservatives or flavorings, and have the equivalent of two pears in each bar. The bars come in a variety of flavors, including cranberry, pear and blueberry. Other flavors will be added.

Willis explained that any variety and grade of pears could be used in the bars. He envisions a new market for fruit that's been cosmetically damaged from wind or frost, excessive russeting, or insect scarring. The demand for less-than-perfect fruit will add value to what was once a discounted grade.

The marketing of the product has been and will continue to be the most important aspect of the success of the project. The company recently received a contract to sell the bars to several larger Oregon public school districts. "One of the niches for us is to be a supplier of low-cost, high quality nutritional products for children," says Willis.

The bar is also finding a growing market in the health and fitness sector. The bar was featured in Shape magazine and there has been significant interest by the military and the NASA program.

The bar is in more than 400 Albertson's Stores in the northwestern and western United States. "However, Willis stated, "It is not our focus to be in retail. Slotting fees and the retail market is so competitive, that we are putting most of our efforts into the specialized niche markets."

Sliced fruit

Gorge Delights is also a pioneer of fresh-cut pear slices, according to Willis, as they are the first processor to handle pears. "Nobody else is using pears because the industry has been told by the experts that it can't be done. But it can."



Gala apples and d'Anjou and red d'Anjou pears are sliced and placed in institutional and individual packages. The individual serving packages consist of clamshells to give added protection to the fruit. The pears have an 18-day shelf life, and the apples last 21 days.

Schools in the Portland area so far have been their biggest customers of the sliced fruit. About 15,000 pounds or 15 bins of fruit are processed and marketed weekly.

Product for both the sliced fruit and bars currently is sourced from the Hood River area. He plans to purchase pears from Washington State when their processed volume increases.

Willis thinks the ready-to-eat sliced pears will appeal to consumers who are unfamiliar with how to ripen winter pears.

"Consumers don't want to ripen their fruit. It's our responsibility to get the product ripe and deliver it to them."

Grower return

Willis embarked on this new course to provide better returns to growers. He recognizes that growers must get more involved in marketing if they wish to remain profitable. He sees the pear bars and sliced pears as a way to complement traditional pear marketing.

"Packed boxes are still a part of meeting the consumers' demands, but we need to take our product to them in different ways," he added. "Our vision is to be able to return back to the grower the value that's in his or her product. I hope this will help revitalize the community and help keep the Hood River area in farming."

Willis thinks of the new treat as more than a personal project. "I see the Pear Bar as the industry's bar, not our company's bar," he said. "I'm hopeful it will be a very positive thing for the industry."

Sources:

Holz-Clause, Mary, Personal interview with Gary Willis, Lake Chelan, Washington, December 9, 2003

Hansen, Melissa, "Oregon company turns lower-grade pears into fruit bars," Good Fruit Grower Magazine, March 1, 2003