

Gorge Delights marketing new fruit products

Oregon company turns lower-grade pears into fruit bars.

BY MELISSA HANSEN

New all-fruit treat

A small company is hoping to improve the financial prospects for Pacific Northwest orchardists by adding value to apples and pears--processing fruit into fresh-cut slices and making pear nutrition bars.

Gary Willis, orchardist and president of Gorge Delights, is convinced that growers must take their future into their own hands. He shared his plan to help the tree fruit industry survive with growers attending the annual meeting of the Oregon Horticultural Society.

"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."

When Willis's son returned home from college a few years ago with intentions to be involved in the family orchards, he realized it was time to do something different. After many family meetings and discussions with another like-minded farm family, the Goes, the concept for Gorge Delights was conceived.

Gorge Delights opened for business last fall in Hood River, Oregon, to turn pears and apples into fresh-cut slices, market customized gifts of fruit bowls during the holiday season, and manufacture Pear Bars. Gorge Delights has the exclusive license to develop and market the patented fruit bars. With office headquarters in Hood River, the processing plant is located on the Washington side of the Columbia River in North Bonneville. There are currently 20 employees at the plant, with plans to increase to 100 employees by the end of the year.

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 will come in a variety of flavors, including cranberry, blueberry, and possibly tropical fruit in the future.

The process for making the bars was developed and patented by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists in California. The technique represents more than four

years of study and \$4.5 million investment in research. Willis noted that his company has additional clout from licensing a USDA patent if anyone tries to infringe on their product, because government officials will help ensure that USDA patent rights are respected.

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 bars have gained the interest of the military and the NASA program. School lunch programs are also interested, as are retail companies.

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.

He admits that the amount they're selling each week is miniscule compared to large Washington apple processors in Yakima and Wenatchee. "But it helps pay for the Pear Bar marketing development costs."

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.

"Despite all the efforts by the Pear Bureau Northwest to educate the consumer on how to properly ripen d'Anjou pears, it's been a total waste of time and money," he said. "We still have a flat pear market and consumers who don't know how to ripen pears.

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

Reaching pear consumers with a message is an expensive proposition, said Dennis Anderson of Green and Green, Inc., a firm specializing in product development.

"It takes about \$20 million today to reach every consumer and educate that consumer," Anderson said regarding industry efforts to teach consumers about ripening. "The amount of money needed to educate consumers about ripening, to that fine a degree, must come from a very deep hole. The industry has set upon an impossible task to reach and educate the consumer about ripening."

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. I'm not in competition with local shippers, even though I could offer more money for fruit than they do."

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."