



TREES FULL OF FLAVOR

Hanford company brings innovative fruit to market

By Joshua Tehee
Staff Writer

You've heard of designer drugs and designer jeans? Maurice Cameron deals in designer fruit.

The Flavor Tree Fruit Company blends agricultural and marketing know-how to create innovative products that get people excited about fruit.

Take the company's Cherry Bombs, for example.

The dark, crunchy cherries are left on the tree until they are so mature, so bursting with sugary goodness that they lose their stems. Stemless cherries aren't new, but no one has really marketed them like this — with a catchy name, cool logo and packaging and a Facebook campaign. Suddenly, you've got something that people want.

"The only complaint we've heard is that they tasted so good people ate 3 pounds of them and got sick," Cameron says.

The Flavor Tree started in 2009 as a partnership with the Warmerdam family, who have long been on the cutting edge.

In fact, the family was one of the first to start planting cherries in the area, back in the 1980s. Cherries, especially those that were harvested early in the season, didn't do well in the South Valley because of the rain. So, the Warmerdams made a deal with a plant grower to create a proprietary variety — the Sequoia — which could be picked early in the season and was resistant to rain.

"Having a cherry that didn't crack in the rain was huge," Cameron says. "You didn't lose your crop."

Now, more than 50% of their crops are proprietary varieties and there's a 10-acre test block on the company's farm dedicated to these innovations. There are more than 40 varieties of cherries out



Photo: Wayne Hutchison

Rows of Sequoia cherry trees grow at The Flavor Tree Fruit Company in Hanford. The Sequoia, exclusive to The Flavor Tree Fruit Company, is one of the first cherries out in the market in United States. In fact, in both 2007 and 2008, it was the first commercial cherry to be harvested in California, the earliest cherry-producing state.

there that may someday come to market.

Partially, this is a survival tool.

In the Central Valley, there are maybe a dozen key players in the stone-fruit market, Cameron says. And cherries come the middle of the season, when everything else is being harvested.

"How do you compete with someone who has five times the volume you do?"

Well, you diversify your

varieties. You grow 160 acres of organic cherries. Then, you come up the Cherry Plum.

As the name implies, this fruit looks like a cherry, but is big like a plum, with a tartness in the skin and a sweetness in the meat. Because of its cherry traits, it has close to 8% more sugar than the average plum. The company released the fruit this year after doing extensive research with customers at places like the

Vineyard's Farmers Market in Fresno.

"We really wanted to talk to people who eat fruit all the time," says Donna Gavello, director of marketing for the Flavor Tree. "Was this a crop that will be commercially viable?"

Turns out that yes, it probably is.

From a marketing standpoint, there's a lot of opportunity, Cameron says. Because this is its

first year, there were only a few hundred pounds harvested, so the company released them to one store, in one upscale grocery chain in Dallas. Just one.

That exclusivity makes the fruit appealing, he says.

He wants consumers to have that sense of need.

The fruit he sells may be around for 10 days. That's the season.

"If you don't buy it, that's your loss."

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