

Perfect for drying

Posted: Thursday, May 26, 2016 4:58 pm

Sweet, plump and in demand, Santa Clara Valley dried fruits continue to make taste buds tingle after all these years.

For discerning consumers, their taste and quality are second to none.

“It used to be a commodity product, they would dry tons of it and ship it across the world, but now there is hardly any,” said Andy Mariani, one of the valley’s remaining orchardists and owner of the nationally acclaimed Andy’s Orchard in Morgan Hill.

“There’s a few in Hollister that still dry Blenheim apricots and in the Central Valley, but for the most part, California Blenheim apricots are a specialty product.”

The paving over of much of Santa Clara County to make way for the industrial parks and housing of Silicon Valley, along the international trade deals that flooded the domestic market with cheaper, “Mediterranean” dried apricots are just a couple reasons why Blenheim apricots, once so common in the valley are now a sought-after treat.

“My parents always picked the ripest fruit to dry,” said Mariani, who has carried on the family orcharding business at his 60-acre Morgan Hill farm. “If you get something fresh that is outstanding, the dried product will be outstanding.”

Mariani’s family farm produces artisanally grown tree-ripened stone fruits, including cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, plums and pluots, with a focus on heirloom varieties like Blenheim apricots and Elberta peaches.

Over the summer, Andy’s Orchard at 1615 Half Rd., hosts fruit tastings, tours and harvest walks where folks can savor the sweetest fruits, warmed and ripened by the California sun.



Basket of flavors

Andy Mariani of Andy’s Orchard in Morgan Hill displays his dried fruit, including California Blenheim apricots. Mariani is one of the valley’s last remaining orchardists. Photo: Robert Eliason

“These are high-quality, flavorful fruit, and very nutritious,” added Mariani, whose fresh and dried fruit have been covered by the likes of Sunset Magazine and the New York Times.

To get the biggest bang for his buck, Mariani sells at the farmers market in Santa Monica, where his heirloom varieties are best-sellers.

“It is arguably the best farmers market in the nation,” said Mariani, who received a special invitation by the organizers to sell there.

Understanding the market for dried fruit was changing, he had to switch up his portfolio if he wanted to remain in business. Mariani diversified in the 1980s and began to grow and sell a greater variety of fresh fruit.

“I go look at the market, see what people want, and grow that,” explained Mariani. “It’s a more modern approach.”

Peter Van Dyke, owner of Van Dyke Ranch in Gilroy, can attest to the value of providing a niche product in today’s highly competitive agricultural market.

One of the first certified organic growers in Santa Clara County, Van Dyke carried on his family’s tradition of growing and drying stone fruits.

Van Dyke’s organic farm produces apricots, walnuts, cherries and, in a signal to the growing industry, wine grapes.

While labor-intensive, he dries a variety of pears, peaches, plums and nectarines.

Started by his grandfather in Cupertino and continued by Van Dyke in Gilroy, he said his organic certification and no-sulfur treatment have provided him a niche market, allowing him to continue in agriculture.

Citing climate change, which he says has shifted optimal growing conditions (cool nights and warm days) northward, the recent drought and trade deals like NAFTA and GATT, Van Dyke said it’s not easy to be a small farmer these days.

“The big guys can bend and weave with this and they can outsource and do all that, us little guys are stuck on this land and are just getting hammered.

“My organic niche has saved us,” he said.

Transformation

Once spread out across the Santa Clara Valley so widely, the stunning annual bloom of the region’s orchards would draw tourists from miles around, with day trippers eager to eat their picnic lunches beneath trees filled with pink and white blossoms.

Before the business parks and companies selling computer hardware and software made Silicon Valley a household name, it was the region's prunes, peaches, plums and apricots that made Santa Clara Valley the envy of the world and made fortunes for its farmers.

Mariani saw first-hand the decades-long transformation of the valley from a fruit capital to the home of companies like Twitter, Facebook and Google.

The site of his family's former farm in Cupertino is across the street from Apple headquarters.

"We were right in the middle of it," said Mariani of the late-'50s Silicon Valley boom. After dividing the Cupertino property amongst relatives and selling up, Mariani's family moved to Morgan Hill in 1957 to continue farming.

Before the valley was remade by progress, millions of trees were carefully tended year-round by tens of thousands of small, mostly family-run farms in a valley whose climate was destined to grow the sweetest, most luscious fruit.

Of all the fruits, it was the prune and apricot that became the top-sellers of their day, thanks to a pair of brothers who left France to seek riches in the Gold Rush and who, like many thwarted adventure-seekers, found their real treasure in the fertile soils of California's coastal valleys and started a lucrative nursery business in San Jose.

Pierre and Louis Pellier introduced the French prune to the Santa Clara Valley in the late 1850s; its sweet and tender flesh was perfect for drying, a necessity in the time before refrigeration.

As it happened, the Mariani family's new Morgan Hill property, 30 miles from Cupertino, was once owned by a nephew of Louis Pellier who operated one of the first prune dehydrators on the farm.

Helping to make the Blenheim apricot a signature Santa Clara Valley crop, Henry W. Coe, a cattleman whose ranch would form the basis of the state park that bears his name, started drying apricots using sulfur, which protects the fruit's flavor and color as it dries.

By the mid-20th century, the Santa Clara Valley was the largest fruit-producing region in the world, with the majority of the product being processed—canned, frozen, or dried—before reaching customers.

When President Dwight Eisenhower signed the nation's Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, authorizing the construction of the interstate highway system, 41,000 miles of paved roads opened up places like Santa Clara Valley to the world.

Then a pioneering firm, an off-shoot of a camera equipment company, developed the first commercially viable integrated circuit using silicon, an innovation that would eventually turn the agricultural region into what we know as Silicon Valley.

Soon, the factories and canneries that processed tons of fruit each year in the valley were replaced

with countless buildings and new housing to support the region's booming semiconductor industry.

Wide-scale rezoning efforts across small towns like Cupertino and Mountain View meant families living on acres of land, sometimes for generations, would sell to a developer, and where orchards once grew, entire neighborhoods were built.

"It was a beautiful valley," said Van Dyke, who has distant relatives in common with the Marianis; both families originated in Croatia. "They were all farmers and fishermen and barrel makers and shipbuilders and they came out here, worked hard, got money and they got land to farm because it was a great business."