



GARBANZO'S GIFT.
Fresh Nature Foods hummus comes from young, green chickpeas farmed or sourced by the Davenport family.

AGRICULTURE

RETAIL FARMING

More growers see the benefit of selling their products directly to the consumer.

by Treva Lind

WASHINGTON STATE FARMERS are moving upstream in the retail chain to develop and sell food and drink products and also capture customer appetites for farm-to-table meals. TRIDEC, the Tri-Cities Economic Development Council, annually produces the FABREO food and beverage trade show in Pasco. This year's show — FABREO stands for Food and Beverage Retention and Expansion Opportunities — increased educational sessions for growers on food production and retail topics, says Gary White, TRIDEC's director of business retention and expansion.

"A lot of farmers are moving it up the value chain," White points out. "I think they're doing it to diversify their companies but still stay in the food business. It's a bold move. Not every farmer is comfortable with being in food processing and retail. It's two different worlds — the whole marketing side, food brokers, food distributors, how they mesh together."

As they move into retail, farmers must consider pricing, food safety and packaging as they create broader regional products sourced close to where crops grow. Some are even marketing internationally. Here's a look at three.

FRESH NATURE FOODS

Spokane

EASTERN WASHINGTON farmer Ryan Davenport could be driving a tractor one afternoon and boarding a jetliner the next to see retail executives about the products of Fresh Nature Foods. The family-owned company directly cultivates creation of edible items made with its specialty crop: fresh young chickpeas grown on family acreage and at contracted Pacific Northwest farms.

Harvested while green and moist, the chickpeas go into such products as Fresh Nature-branded hummus at grocery stores or frozen pan-fried falafel cakes for food service operators and deli sections at Whole Foods and Haggan supermarkets.

"I quite regularly go straight from the fields to major cities across the United States marketing and selling our finished products," says Davenport, company president and part of a three-generation family farm.

“We’re intimately involved, from putting the seed in the ground to the point it’s sold. We work with third-party copackers who make our finished goods, but we’re very involved. We do all the direct sales and have worked with customers to position the product for sale.”

Fresh Nature Foods started selling fresh-frozen young chickpeas five years ago to food service operators like delis, restaurants and hospitals, which use them for salads and hummus, and as an ingredient in other preparations. Its Fresh Nature-labeled hummus premiered a year ago in stores such as Fred Meyer, Whole Foods and Safeway — in classic, jalapeño and falafel flavors, with garlic available soon. This fall, grocery stores will sell retail packages of its falafel cakes in freezer sections.

Davenport’s family originally grew chickpeas in rotation with wheat. It began experimenting in the early 2000s when overseas sales for the traditionally hardened chickpeas declined. Now, the family grows only the young chickpeas. In August, Davenport heads to Hong Kong to market newer products in Asia. Sales now span across North America, including Canada, with some international customers, he says.

“Our company in Washington state is the only one we know of growing young chickpeas and actively taking them to market,” Davenport says.

ROWLEY & HAWKINS

Kennewick

FROM THE COLUMBIA BASIN, Rowley & Hawkins Fruit Farms and its subsidiary, FreshPicksWa Smoothies & Fruit Store, have grown multiple retail channels by diversifying.

Landon Rowley, FreshPicksWa manager, works with majority owners — his dad and two uncles. Parent company Rowley & Hawkins has 800 acres in Basin City, mainly in cherries, plus 200 more acres in Othello. It now also grows peaches, apples, apricots, pears, plums, grapes, raspberries, blackberries and asparagus. The Kennewick fruit store launched four years ago.

“My kids are seventh generation,” Rowley says. “Since we’ve had the store, we’ve become more diversified. It’s a way for us to get closer to people and there’s a big difference in the quality. It’s fresh-picked brought right to you from field to your dinner table.

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JUICE DISPENSER.

At its orchards in Basin City, above, TPG Enterprises produces cherries for its line of concentrates and other products. It even sells cleaned and dried cherry pits.

People have a greater desire to know where the product is coming from.”

Rowley & Hawkins’ range is ever expanding: apple cider, cherry-apple cider, chocolate- and caramel-covered apples, dried cherries, dark chocolate-covered cherries, edible fruit bouquets, frozen pies, frozen pitted pie cherries, smoothies, jams and jellies.

Two years ago, the company started a Pasco farmers market and now sells items to natural- and fresh-food stores from Auburn to Spokane, and recently expanded into Montana and Utah. Adding stores required food-safety navigation and processing certification, but the company rose to the challenge, Rowley says, while adding in-house fresh-packing lines for sweet cherries and apples.

“We’re becoming our own packer in a small way. Before, we’d have the produce in a regular box or bag, and the store would have to pack them up. For a lot of stores, that takes more effort. If it comes to them prepackaged and ready to sell, they’re more willing to take that.”

Another Rowley & Hawkins subsidiary, Northwest Tart Cherry, offers pie cherries, concentrates and juices. “Again, this is where parent Rowley & Hawkins decided to become their own processors,” Rowley says. That started in the 1990s, but new efforts will ramp up processing, in part for international sales. “We process roughly 8 million pounds of tart cherries a year,” Rowley notes. “We have plans to increase that in the next three to five years to 16 million pounds.”

Adding products gives more options for family members to stay in the business or return. Having fewer in-between handlers

cuts costs so customers are charged less.

“The more you can vertically integrate your processes,” he explains, “the more profitable you can become. It’s motivated us to try to sell more of our products ourselves.”

TPG ENTERPRISES

Othello

WITH GENERATIONAL-farming roots, TPG Enterprises has ramped up marketing of its natural cherry concentrate products with a focus on the health benefits, gaining ground in the natural food industry. Marketed under the name Tart Is Smart, the business produces cherry concentrate sold in different bottled sizes or in bulk, with labels explaining the fruit’s multiple antioxidants and natural melatonin.

While the processing plant and offices are in Othello, the family’s Basin City orchards are under fourth-generation farmer Ivan Taylor, company president.

Overseeing processing, sales and marketing is son-in-law Jake Shaw, 33, vice president. His wife, Hannah, one of Taylor’s daughters, handles finances. In the past five years, TPG

Enterprises has made more inroads into natural and health food markets and with online sales. Tart Is Smart started as a strategy just over 10 years ago. Back then, it was more about frozen cherries, Jake Shaw says. “In the past three to five years, we’ve really gone to the concentrate market. We provide 100 percent all-natural concentrate; there is only one ingredient, the Montmorency tart cherry.”

The company doesn’t sell ready-to-drink juices, focusing instead on the concentrate along with dried cherries and some frozen cherries on an as-needed basis. Most of the farm-grown cherries go toward concentrate now. “That’s what gives our concentrate one of its better qualities,” Shaw says. “We’re not using the bottom-of-the-barrel fruit. We’re using the best-quality cherries.”

He adds, “We grow the tart cherries and we process them, so it’s really a start-to-finish process. We know our tart cherries, and we know where they’re coming from.”

The cherries’ natural melatonin can help with sleep, he says, and 2 tablespoons of the concentrate can be mixed with any 8 ounces of liquid — water, tea, lemonade or even in a cocktail before bed. Tart Is Smart products are sold in shelf-stable bottles in juice sections, then refrigerated after opening. Outlets include Amazon, Sam’s Club, Sprouts Farmers Market and Huckleberry’s Natural Market.

Shaw says his biggest challenge in marketing is educating potential buyers about the health benefits, along with staying on top of market trends.

“There’s a lot that goes into it,” says Shaw, but he and his wife plan to take the enterprise to the next generation. **SB**