

Fruit Dynamics sets new stone fruit standards

By Don Schrack
Staff Writer

FRESNO, Calif. — Fruit Dynamics Inc. is something like a middle-aged couple's unexpected pregnancy. It was definitely not planned.

Eric Gaarde decided to strike out on his own in 1993. Among the first to knock on the door of his newly formed Gaarde Foodsource and Service Inc. was a major baby foods manufacturer.

"They wanted someone who could source fruit for them, someone who could make certain the fruit met a minimum brix-acid ratio before the fruit was harvested," he said.

It was an easy enough task for Gaarde, who had just spent more than a dozen years with Wawona Frozen Foods Inc., Clovis, Calif. What he didn't realize at the time was that the task would evolve into a full-blown addiction.

"I guess I'd have to call it obsessive curiosity," Eric Gaarde said.

There was so much more to stone fruit than just sugar and acid content.

He began compiling data on varieties, soil and water quality, dry matter content, weather events, shelf life and even the fruit's place-

ment on trees, Eric Gaarde said. The data was not limited to domestic crops. Statistics were obtained from several other continents, he said.

"I wanted to find a reason why stone fruit consumption was decreasing," Eric Gaarde said.

One major reason, he said, was inconsistency. Shoppers should know what to expect when they buy a peach, he said, just as everyone knows that a Big Mac bought in California will taste like a Big Mac bought anywhere else. It's always what you expect, he said.

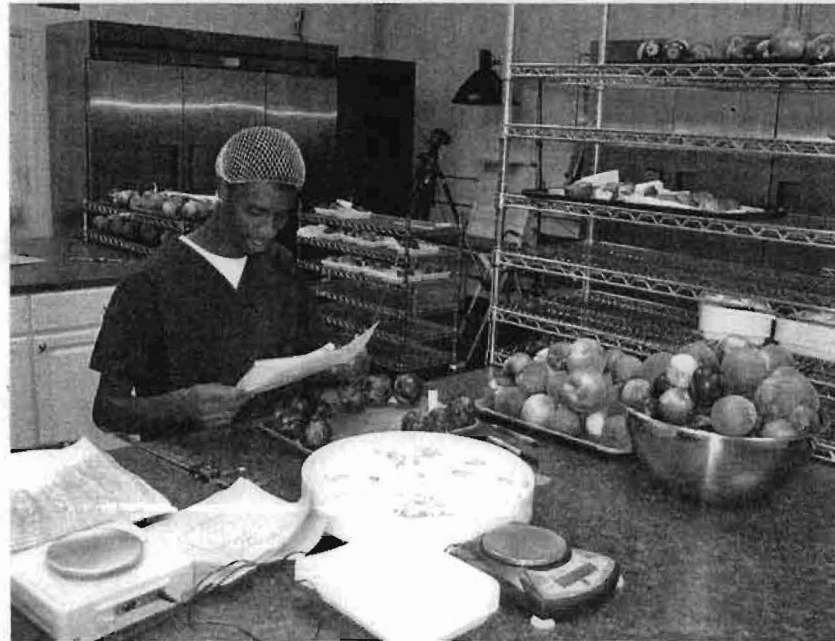
"Within a few years, he had a stack of data that was at least three feet high," said Kim Gaarde, Eric's wife, who joined the company as chief financial officer after nearly 20 years of running the business affairs of a California stone fruit grower-packer-shipper. She made the first attempt to compile all of the information in a computer database, even as Eric continued to collect more statistics.

"After two years, she threw up her hands, and we hired a couple of database professionals," Eric Gaarde said.

The fruit looks the same regardless of whether it's sub acid, low acid or light acid, he said, so the Gaardes converted a break room into a laboratory and continued to collect data, eventually establishing 13 unweighted, measurable standards for stone fruit.

The tested fruit goes into several categories. The fruit that merits rave reviews is the top category.

"We asked ourselves what we



An employee prepares to test fruit in the Fruit Dynamics Inc., Fresno, Calif., laboratory against more than a dozen standards determined by the company's FruitSpan database.

could do to use these data to help the stone fruit industry," Kim Gaarde said. "It was not a noble social calling. It was more of a frustration to think we had the tools to help lots of people."

The capacity of the program to filter data is amazing, she said.

It didn't take long for word of the database to leak to the California stone fruit industry.

In short order, the Gaardes' operation mushroomed from a small lab with one part time employee to a full service laboratory analysis and evaluation service with a staff

of 22, Eric Gaarde said.

The Gaardes faced a crossroads.

"Our lab and database had become the child that was feeding off the parent, Foodsource & Service," Kim Gaarde said.

Fruit Dynamics Inc., an independent third party auditing labora-

tory, was formed in 2004 with Eric as chief executive officer. Today, its clients include breeders, nurseries, growers, marketers, processors and retailers, he said. Those clients have access to FruitSpan, the company's proprietary database.

Fruit Dynamics pays special attention to breeders, Eric Gaarde said.

He makes weekly and often more frequent visits to breeders experimenting with unreleased fruit varieties, he said.

Trinity Fruit Sales Co. is a believer. Trinity has retained Fruit Dynamics to test its fruit and has created a new label, FlavorZone, for the fruit that passes muster.

The standards measured by Fruit Dynamics are seasonally flexible. The flavor band goes up with the season, Eric Gaarde said. But the standards are very stringent.

"We have rejected more fruit than we have approved this season for Trinity," he said.

The efforts of the Fruit Dynamics staff are not limited to growing and production. In development are educational programs for retailers to help them understand the intricacies of stone fruit, Kim Gaarde said.

The critical component of the industry, however, remains the grower, Eric Gaarde said.

"The stone fruit industry must get back to growing consistently great-tasting fruit if they don't want to get down to 20 million cartons a year," he said.