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Stars, stripes, and strawberries

Stockton packer salutes Old Glory

By Howard Lachtman

Watching San Joaquin Delta fireworks on the Fourth of July, G.R. "Chip" Arnett, Jr., saw inspiration in the heavens...

And the fields, too.

President of Stockton's Mister Spear Gourmet Produce, Mr. Arnett's freshly shipped assortments of Central Valley fruits and vegetables are homegrown calling cards to the rest of the nation. As "the rockets' red glare and bombs bursting in air" illuminated the July evening over his head, he envisioned the national banner, Old Glory, in a totally new light.

"I thought it would be fun to design an American flag out of Central Valley fresh fruit," he said.

The result, just out on the market, is "FlagFruit." It comes in a gift box decorated with an American flag and edged with American stars. Raise the lid and you find a second flag—composed of either 1.5 pounds of Bing cherries or 1.5 pounds of strawberries, as the customer wishes.

Seven precise rows of bright fruits alternate with six white foam racks that hold them securely in place. In the upper left corner, a half-pound of packed blueberries

present a solid field of blue to accentuate the white stars on the lid of their container.

"FlagFruit's" debut is perfectly timed for Flag Day, Father's Day, the Fourth of July, and summer picnics and parties.

Mr. Arnett likes the patriotic theme and the eye-popping appeal of his creative concept.

"You open the box and you can't help saying wow!" he said.

Priced at \$34.95, with a portion of each sale marked for donation to the U.S. Marine Corps Memorial Fund, FlagFruit is a unique offering from Mister Spear. The mail order company specializes in providing hand-sorted, custom-packed fruits and veggies that have proven popular alternatives to flowers and candy. The company services major distributors such as Harry & David, for whom it supplies spring artichokes and asparagus as well as winter strawberries, and its client list includes Martha Stewart.

The son of Ray Arnett, director of the California Fish and Game Department under Ronald Reagan and assistant Secretary of the Interior during the Reagan

Stars

continued from Front Page

presidency, Mr. Arnett worked in the cattle industry before joining Bill DePoli and Dan Nomellini as a partner in Mister Spear. The company was then limited to jumbo asparagus shipments.

"The concept was good, but no one knew about it," Mr. Arnett said. "Bill and Dan asked me to take it to the next level. I suggested we form a Mister Spear corporation and develop items in a catalogue, using the same quality concept, but applied to other fruits and vegetable assortments. That way, we could have products available all year round."

Today, Mister Spear customers can choose to send or receive a gift package for each month of the year. Assortments of avocados, strawberries, asparagus, artichokes, sugar snap peas, Bing cherries, super sweet corn, tomatoes, summer beans, Shiitake mushrooms and imperial Fuji apples are priced from \$21.95 to \$34.95.

"We became a popular holiday and corporate gift item," said Mr. Arnett, who acquired Mister Spear for his Arnett Enterprises last year when the corporation dissolved. "It's a safe choice and an effective way for business people to keep their name in front of their clients."

It also supports the local agricultural community by providing "healthy gift alternatives" from the Central Valley.

"We are America's gourmet gardeners and that's what makes it special. It doesn't travel the usual channels of a grocery store."

Pleased as he is that his flag concept has—no pun intended—borne fruit, and has patents pending for its design and utility, Mr. Arnett said he can't be certain how it will fare in the marketplace.

"But that's what's exciting," he said. "I know we're on to something, but I don't know what's going to happen now. I'm gambling it will be successful. The word is getting out that it's creative and has a clever assembly."

Initial reaction has been positive, judging by indicators such as a Maryland customer who wrote the company about her experience with the product.

"She went into absolute orbit," the customer said of her daughter's reaction to FlagFruit. "She was overwhelmingly impressed with the entire package, including the verse that came with the gift."

That verse, presented in a keepsake sheet inside the package, was written by Howard Schnauber, a Marine veteran of the horrific battles at Guadalcanal and Pelelia, who stood as one of the guards of honor at the funeral of President Franklin Roosevelt. Schnauber's moving tribute to the flag and the sacrifices of his generation made a deep impression on



President of Stockton's Mister Spear Gourmet Produce, D.R. "Chip" Arnett

Journal Photo

Mr. Arnett. He felt gift recipients would cherish the poem long after the fruit shipment was history.

"It's a constant reminder of what the flag is about," Mr. Arnett said. "I was looking for an appropriate insert and I was inspired by it."

Mr. Arnett now hopes to enlist corporate sponsorship to send FlagFruit gifts of fresh fruit to American troops overseas. Imagine their surprise when cherties or strawberries from home arrive in the desert of Iraq or mountains of Afghanistan.

"I'm amazed at the ideas that Chip

comes up with for presenting the harvest of the San Joaquin Valley," said Stocktonian Marion Jacobs, a customer who sends Mister Spear products every year to friends around the country. "It's very innovative and does a great job in promoting the fruits of our valley."

FruitFlag is the latest example of that, Mrs. Jacobs said, a product that's inspirational as well as edible.

"It's a great concept—the most impressive thing he's come up with so far," she said. "I really don't know what he can do to top it."