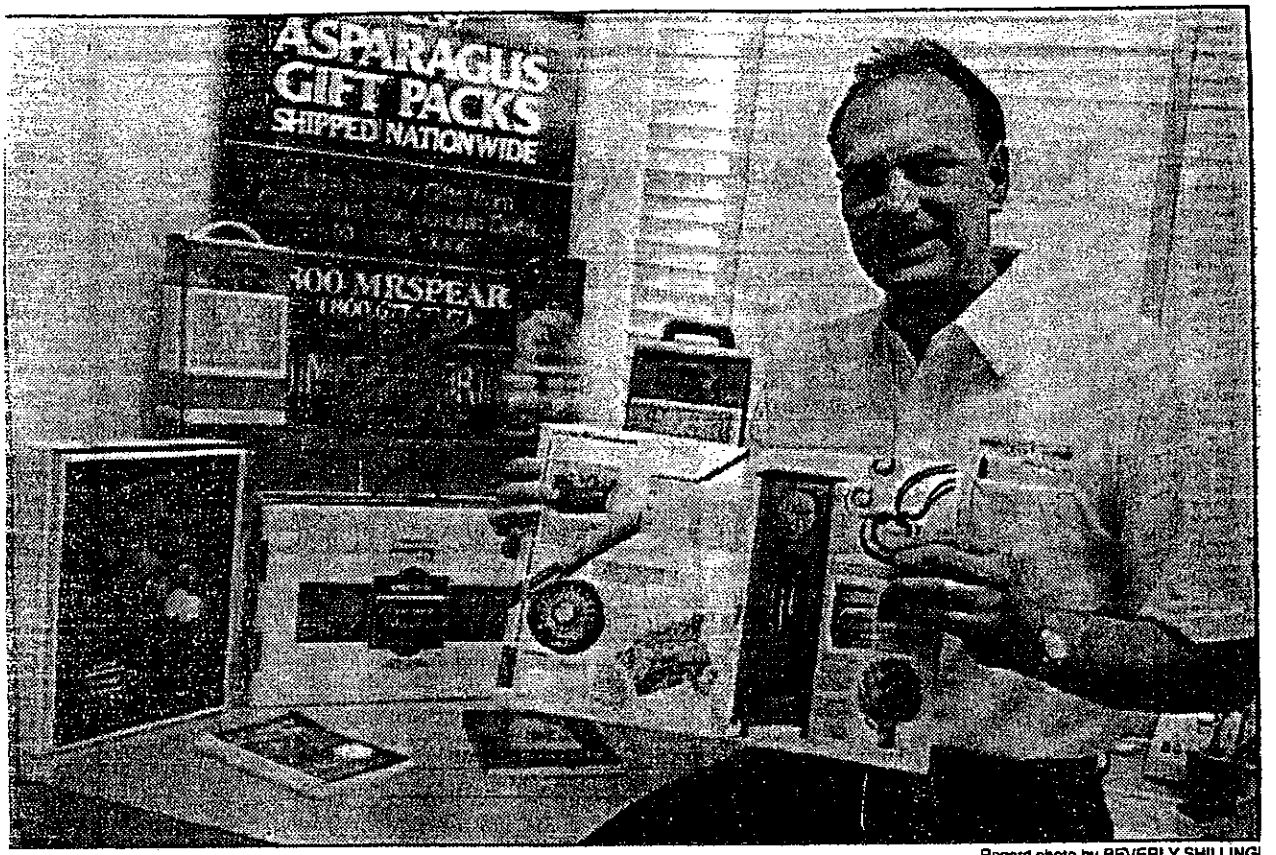


Record photo by BEVERLY SHILLING

Chip Arnett Jr., president of Mr. Spear, shows off the issue of Money magazine that includes Mr. Spear's artichokes as one of the 50 great values in the nation. Arnett said the subsequent national attention has been overwhelming.

Local firm spears publicity

By Carol Whipple
The Stockton Record

A small Stockton gourmet-food company has hit the big time after readers of a top personal-finance monthly magazine rated its artichokes one of the country's best values.

In its June issue, Money magazine devotes 10 illustrated pages to 50 "great values" chosen by readers.

Prominently displayed was a giant artichoke from Stockton's Mr. Spear Inc., which got its start by shipping only the freshest, biggest and most perfect asparagus spears by overnight mail to gourmet veggie lovers around the world.

At $29 for six 1-pound artichokes, it's obvious that Money readers don't mean "cheap" when they talk about value.

"It was such a privilege for us to be chosen," said Mr. Spear president G.R. "Chip" Arnett Jr. "We were sitting right there next to products like Harley-Davidson (for its XLH Sportster 883 motorcycle. Cost: $4,775) and Orvis (its Rocky Mountain fly-fishing rod sells for $285)."

The publicity was great, Arnett said, but a little too late.

"We were getting calls from all over the country. Unfortunately, it came out in the June issue after the asparagus harvest was over and just as the artichoke season was ending. We had thousands of orders we couldn't fill."

"We only ship things we can see and we make sure it's the right quality," he said. "Our customers don't mind paying, but they want what they paid for."

The fresh asparagus, artichokes, vine-ripened beefsteak tomatoes, Fuji apples and other produce from San Joaquin and other nearby counties are shipped the same day they're cut, Arnett said.

Next year, they're considering expanding their product line to add "peewee potatoes" and Bing cherries.

Among Mr. Spear's customers: Ronald Reagan, who served it at a San Francisco luncheon for Mikhail Gorbachev a few years back.

Billionaire Robert Bass, owner of American Savings Bank, sent Disney boss Michael Eisner a crate of Mr. Spear asparagus to thank him for a free trip on the Concorde to attend Euro-Disney's grand opening in Paris.

Now Eisner is a customer, too.

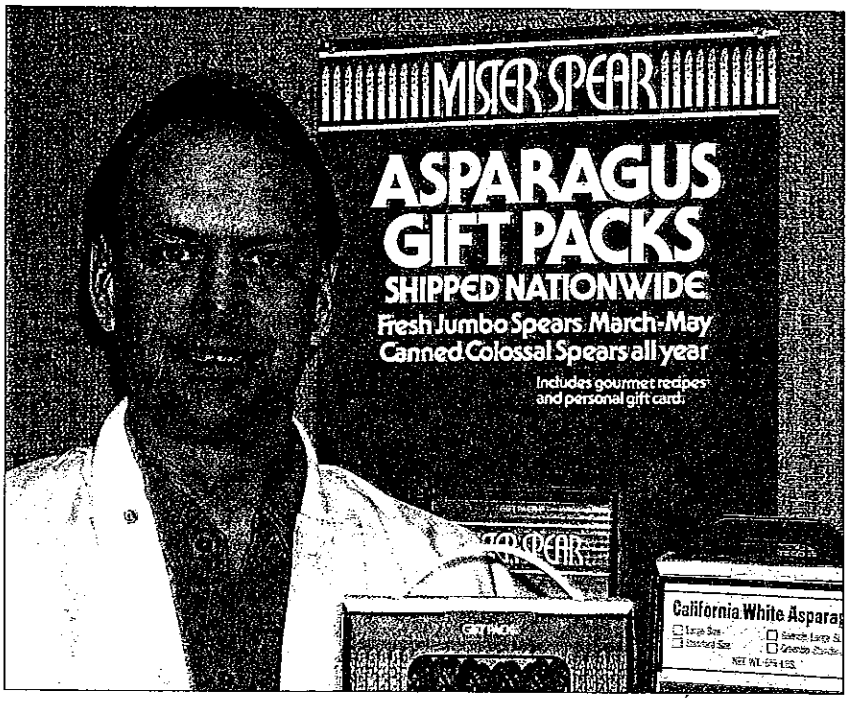
The Money magazine recognition may have come too late for the people who tried to order giant artichokes, but it came just in time to boost sales of the company's new public penny-stock offering, Arnett said. Minimum purchase: $12,500 for 31,000 shares.

The money will be used to pay for the company's advertising and promotion.

"(The publicity) is not only reflective of us, it is reflective of the growers who we buy the products from," Arnett said.

"The real heroes are the growers."

Profile



Chip Arnett Jr., president of Mr. Spear, with a box of his mail-order asparagus

Meet the Mr. Behind Mr. Spear

Here's a unique Mother's Day idea; instead of flowers or candy, how about giving Mom a box of asparagus?

Seem a little offbeat? Yes, but there's a certain logic to it if you talk to Chip Arnett Jr., president of Mr. Spear, a mail-order purveyor of fresh asparagus. "Your mother has been making you eat vegetables all your life," he says. "You can return the favor by sending *her* a box of vegetables."

Besides, these aren't just *any* asparagus, Arnett explains. Mr. Spear only sells "jumbo" or "colossal" sized asparagus which Arnett says are the most tender and which rarely appear in supermarkets. The jumbo or colossal size, he explains, represent just 5 percent of the crop and are produced only when the plants are young.

Arnett, who started his Stockton business as a hobby 13 years ago, graduated from San Diego State University with degrees in political science, English and economics. He spent eight years in the cattle business and then "I fell in love with agriculture. I was a pre-law student, and I got interested in this. I like fine food and kind of fun products," he says.

Growing up in an agricultural community he learned early that the tenderest asparagus spears were the large ones. "As a grower and as somebody who's been around it all your life, you know what's the very best, and you hate to see it sloughed off in other grades."

He started thinking, "What if you could segregate the best .. . and allow people to buy what we (in the agriculture business) personally would grab," he says. From those musings a prosperous full-time mail-order venture has developed that supplies fresh asparagus to restaurants, caterers, businesses and private customers all over the country. Mr. Spear asparagus has been served at White House banquets and at the dinner given for Mikhail Gorbachev at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel in 1990, according to Arnett.

Freshness, he explains, is another important factor in the quality of his product. "It can take anywhere from 10 days to two weeks to get asparagus from the ranch to the local grocery store. When it dehydrates it deteriorates. We reduce that time. We cut the asparagus in the morning and ship in the afternoon so it arrives in about two days.

"When a young plant is healthy enough to produce a big spear, and if that spear is delivered to you the same day or the day after it's cut, it is a real dining pleasure," he asserts.

Mr. Spear asparagus is available fresh, in 3 to 15-lb. boxes, or canned. White asparagus, a delicacy popular in Europe, also is offered. Prices range from $18.50 for four 15-oz. cans of colossal green spears, to $22.50 for 3 pounds of fresh jumbo green spears, up to $125 for 30 pounds of fresh jumbo green spears.

Things are busiest at Mr. Spear from March to early June when asparagus is in season, at which time some 30 people are involved in the operation. Arnett is exploring the possibility of expanding the business to offer artichokes, vine-ripened tomatoes and avocados so it will be more of a year-round venture. ◆