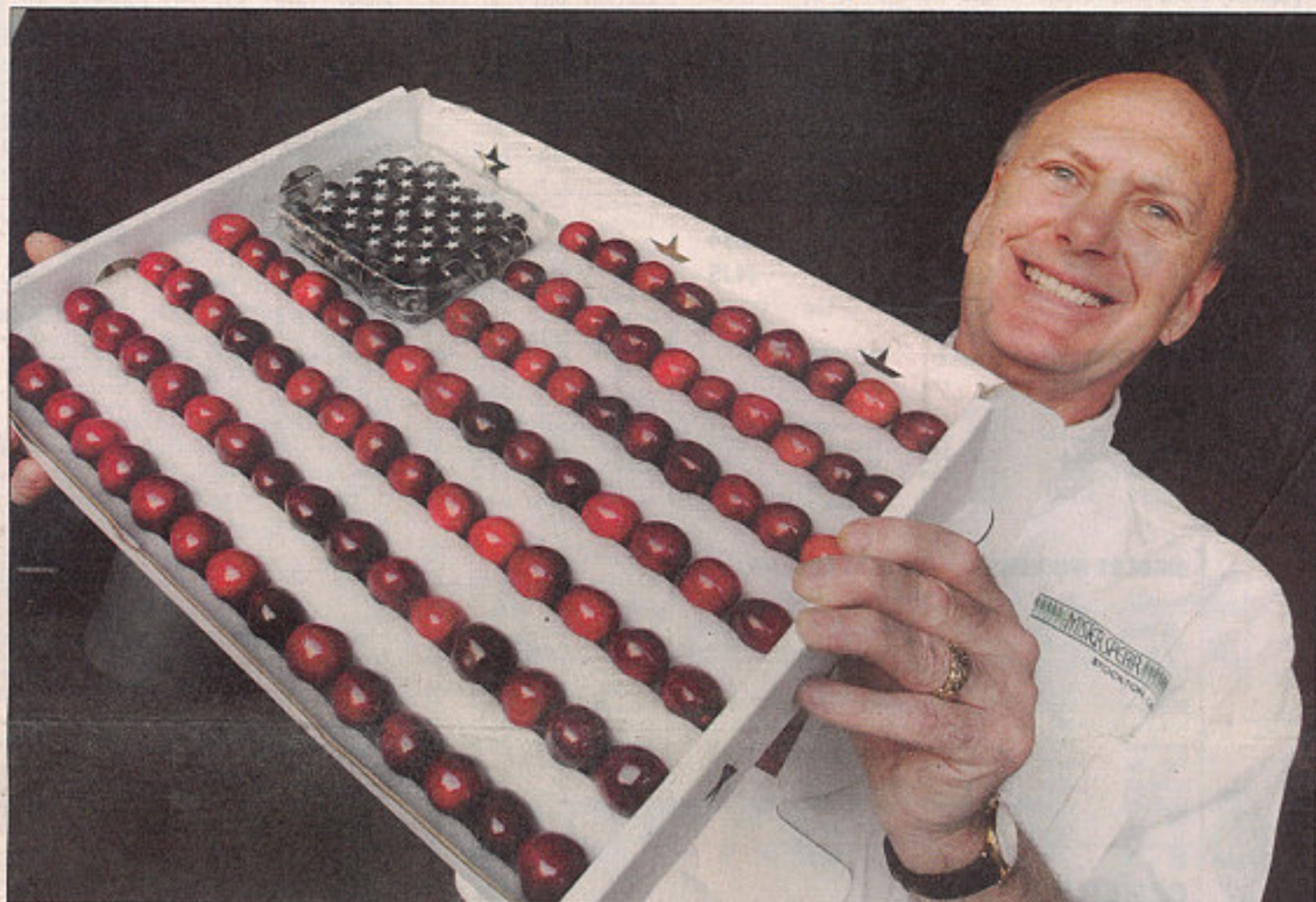


The red, white and blueberry



MICHAEL McCOLLUM/The Record

Chip Arnett, owner of Mr. Spear in Stockton, displays the new FlagFruit product at his Harding Way facility Wednesday morning.

Local fruit shows patriot colors

New offering in mail-order gifts great for summer

By Reed Fujii
Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON — Businessman Chip Arnett hopes to run cherries, strawberries and blueberries up a flagpole and get the country to salute.

Arnett owns Mister Spear, which for 27 years has made and sold mail-order gift packs of top quality fruit and vegetables, such as its signature March shipments of jumbo green asparagus.

His latest offering — the result of three years of brainstorming, testing and package design — brings together red cherries or strawberries

nestled in rows of white plastic foam and a star-studded clamshell of blueberries to form Old Glory in fresh fruit.

He expects it to be a great gift for Father's Day, Fourth of July celebrations and a summer corporate gift.

"This is something, not only from our Valley, but something you've never seen anywhere," Arnett said Wednesday in his office off Harding Way. "It's going to have a 'wow' effect for any recipient."

He's already got 800 to 1,000 orders for FlagFruit, primarily from fliers distributed last winter, at \$34.95 per package plus shipping. Arnett also is working on a deal to supply 5,000 copies to the QVC shopping channel for a seasonal products program.

"This is going to blow up," he predicted.

Arnett's expectations, however, have been snared by unseasonable rain and cold weather in March and April that struck Central Valley cherry orchards during the critical bloom period, as well as late May thundershowers that damaged ripening fruit. The result is a small crop of cherries that show uneven ripeness and quality and high prices for what fruit is available.

Growers have struggled to bring in consistently top-quality fruit, said Jim Culbertson, executive manager of the California Cherry Advisory Board.

On Wednesday, he said, "We're in the heart of the deal as far as what California has to offer this year."

Harvest could wrap up in another six to 10 days.

Arnett could alternately tap cherries from orchards in the Pacific Northwest as they come into season. But finding the right fruit is only the latest challenge in bringing FlagFruit to market.

After coming up with the concept three years ago, Arnett said he's worked with numerous suppliers in developing the right package, which now includes a cardboard box with star-shaped vent holes, classic flag graphic, protective sleeve and suitable-for-framing print of the poem, "My Name is Old Glory," by U.S. Marine veteran Howard Schnauber.

Particular pains were taken in developing the right container for the blueberries — standard clear plastic boxes were too small and deep and,

SEE FRUIT, PAGE D4

FRUIT: Special machine made to cut the foam

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1

of course, are not decorated with white stars — and the foam insert needed to cradle the strawberries or cherries to form red-and-white stripes.

"We tried a million different things," Arnett said. "It's taken a lot of work from a lot of people to make it go."

One of those people was Mark Deiro, a Stockton resident and sales representative for MacFarlane Group, a Scot-

tish company with a subsidiary in Union City that provides foam packaging for electronic parts and medical equipment, as well as produce.

Initial attempts included punching holes into plastic foam as well as a variety of channel forms.

"The process to make this part is very cumbersome as well," Deiro said. "It requires a special machine to cut the foam."

Deiro said he made the extra effort partly because of his acquaintance with Arnett and previous product sales. But he also believes FlagFruit will prove popular.

"I just can't see how this particular fruit flag is not going to be successful," he said. "... It's a slam-dunk as far as I'm concerned."

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