

BLACK NUGGETS OF CALIFORNIA

Then ho, brothers, ho,
To California go;
There's plenty of gold in the world we're told
On the banks of the Sacramento.

-Ho For California, Hutchinson, Jesse Jr., 1849

The Search For Gold (1850-1870)

Gold in California - a shout which was answered by thousands of men; men ill prepared to turn from their professions or trades to the back bending work of gold panning; men who met disappointment, not success, in the hardships of the Western Gold Rush. Although failure to find hidden riches came to many in the gold fields, there were those among the newcomers who found a different kind of gold. Men of agriculture, whose hands knew the feel of a plow far better than the unfamiliar miner's pan, caught the scent of the soil and the wealth which lay beneath the furrow. Louis Pellier was one such man. A French vineyardist, he recognized that California had a wealth of land for the taking, and in 1850 he acquired a tract of rich top soil near Mission San Jose. He called his small kingdom Pellier's Gardens. Here, where the warm sun brought to life the growing seasons, Louis began experimenting with the growing of dried plums which established the famous and profitable California dried plum industry. Louis Pellier was not a novice as an orchardist. He had lived in a country famous for the Pruneaux d'Ente, grown in the Agen district of his homeland. New challenges beset him in this land which he farmed with his brother, Pierre, and together the men struggled to find an orchard crop suited to this undeveloped valley soil. Pierre left the raw West for a visit to his native France and returned in the year 1856 bringing his new wife. Before leaving the District of Agen, he carefully packed choice cuttings of the famous dried plum known throughout Europe. After months of travel the carefully tended shoots arrived at their new home and the brothers hastened to graft the cuttings on wild plum trees which grew in the valley. As the seasons turned, the patient work of the Pellier brothers began to bear fruit and a great industry was born, an industry from which the bulk of today's dried plum crop is derived making California the largest dried plum producing area in the world.

The California Boom (1870-1890)

By 1870, there were 650 acres of plum trees (the variety which can be dried) in the State of California. Development of the California dried plum industry was slow until the mid 1880's when a glut of the principal fruits, apples and pears, prompted growers to look for alternatives. Noting the growing imports of dried plums from Europe, which had reached as high as 22,000 tons one year during the 1870's, growers rapidly shifted their plantings to plums. Supporting this growth were nurserymen like California's own Luther Burbank who filled a rush order for 20,000 plum trees by introducing the technique of June budding. The tremendous growth of the industry would not have been possible without the favorable environment of California's valleys, with their ideal climate, soil and water. Impetus for dried plum sales growth came from the opening of the trans-continental railroad in 1869 which expanded markets for dried fruits in the more populous Midwest and East. The continuing Western population migration also fueled sales growth in the West. California succeeded in

displacing imported dried plums which reached a high of 46,000 tons in 1887. The expansion of California dried plum acreage caused an increase in dried plum processing plants since plants had to be within horse-and-wagon hauling distance of growers. There were an estimated 85 dried plum packing plants spread throughout the California growing area in 1900.

The California Boom - The California Bust 1900-1920

Following a rapid expansion and profitability of the late 1880's and 1890's the industry was faced with overplanting and overproduction. By the turn of the century crop acreage had extended itself to 90,000 acres in the California valleys. This led to an oversupply situation which was compounded by the large number of dried plum sellers who had no coordination in their marketing efforts. In 1905, one grower thought he had the answer to rising labor costs. He would import workers that required room and board, but no pay! He brought 500 monkeys to the Santa Clara Valley from Panama to pick plums. Organized into gangs of 50, with a human foreman overseeing each crew, the monkeys were set loose into the fields to scamper up the trees and do their work. Unfortunately, the monkeys picked according to plan but the grower never saw the harvest since the monkeys ate the fruit as fast as they could pick them, with nothing left over. Quality standards were non-existent and eastern packers bought 100-pound bags of dried plums, packed them and sold them in competition with California dried plum packers. Their quality was usually lower, as were their prices, which created havoc in the marketplace. Quality problems overseas were even greater as both standard and substandard natural condition dried plums were shipped to Germany where packing plants sometimes blended sub standards into their regular packs and even blended in French and Yugoslavian dried plums. These were still sold as California dried plums to the frustration of California exporters. This led in 1908 to the organization of the Dried Fruit Association of California (now the DFA of California) to deal with sales contracts, transportation, pure food laws and legislation. Later, the DFA set up an independent inspection service to certify the condition of dried fruit on the dock before shipment. While this change initially met resistance from importers, it was adopted and resulted in much better protection for California packers.

Innovation... (1920-1940)

While dried plum processors once acclaimed California dried plums as being dried in God's pure air and sunshine, sun drying of dried plums was converted to mechanical dehydration with the development of commercial dryers in the 1930's. In 1932, prune juice was introduced after several years of development and testing. The following year, tenderized dried plums, a high-moisture, tender fleshed product packed in cartons were introduced. This was the beginning of the movement by the industry to sell softer, moister, ready-to-eat dried plums. In early 1934 the industry's first automatic bulk pack line consisting of an automatic wax paper liner inserter, an automatic scale and box filler, and an automatic lidder were introduced. The California dried fruit industry was in danger of collapsing in the latter half of the 1930's depression. In an attempt to stave off bankruptcy, the industry sent a series of committees to Washington D.C. to solicit government aid or propose programs requiring government participation.

World War II (1940-1946)

When Adolf Hitler came into power in Germany, trading policies changed dramatically with Yugoslavia and Bulgaria becoming the beneficiary of declining California dried plum imports. In 1940 the rest of Europe began to curtail dried plum purchases with devastating results on the industry. With the drop in export demand, the industry turned to developing the domestic market. In March 1940, radio, newspaper and magazine advertising were launched featuring consumer contests. Service men were hired to encourage retailers to build dried plum displays. In late 1940, an independent grower organization was formed to entice consumers to eat more dried plums and thereby improve grower returns. The onset of World War II in December 1941 stimulated the heaviest buying of dried fruit in history. This brought higher prices and ended the need for prorate as the government requested much of the crop for four years with the civilian market eagerly buying the rest. This period was not without problems, however, in the forms of farm labor shortages, limited inventories of farm equipment and supplies and rising costs. In March 1943, dried fruits were added to the list of rationed foods which prompted many American housewives to discontinue their purchase of dried plums with their limited ration points.

The Creation of The California Dried Plum Board and Industry Technological Advancements (1947-1960)

Following World War II, the California dried plum industry was faced with production far exceeding demand. The Federal government spent over \$40 million from 1947 through 1951 to aid the industry. Government programs accounted for the disposal of over 323,000 tons of dried plums which was 38 percent of total production for these five years. To deal with the oversupply problem, the industry turned to variations of pre-war programs. It adopted the Federal Marketing Agreement and Order for dried plums in August 1949 to establish volume and quality controls. The State Marketing Order for California Dried Plums followed in January 1952 to expand the market through trade promotion, consumer advertising, education and research. Both programs have operated continuously ever since. Plantings peaked at 171,330 acres in 1929. The increased food requirements of World War II kept dried plum acreage stable at about 139,000 acres, but by 1951 acreage had dropped to 107,000 acres. Major changes to the industry followed as urbanization pushed orchards out of the Santa Clara Valley. Prior to World War II, there were two methods of harvesting this fully tree ripened fruit. The fruit could either drop naturally or the branches would be gently shaken with poles. Of course, the ground around the trees was prepared to make it as soft as possible for the falling fruit. Pickers then gathered them and placed them in lug boxes, being careful not to bruise or break their skins. However, rising labor costs prompted the industry to replace lug boxes with bulk bins for both fresh and dried plums about 1946. Mechanical bin dumpers followed as did adaption of warehouses to bin storage which allowed the process to be totally mechanized. It was at this time that a variety of shakers (cable, pneumatic, hydraulic and mechanical.) and harvesters (pick-up machines, tractor-drawn, self-propelled catching frames) were introduced. Emphasis on stimulating demand for dried plums intensified, since American consumers had a staggering variety of over 10,000 different food products available to them by the mid-1950's. Sellers were now competing with large volume, high margin foods that permitted large-scale advertising and promotion programs.

Increased Competition (1960-1970)

Increasing sales demand for dried plums was critical since non-bearing acreage was climbing rapidly as was the average yield per acre as new acreage in the Sacramento Valley more than offset the old orchards being pushed out in the Santa Clara Valley. In 1960, for the first time in history, Sacramento Valley dried plum production exceeded that of the Santa Clara Valley. While the industry had marketed pitted dried plums on a very limited basis since early in the century, they were not well known to consumers. In the early 1960's, a more attractive pitted dried plum was successfully test-marketed. Pitted dried plums are the most popular variety sold today. In the early 1960s, the California Dried Plum Board's programs featured radio advertising, supermarket display contests, tie-in promotions with food manufacturers and recipe releases to food editors.

Plum Good Marketing (1970-1990)

From 1975 through 1979 funding for marketing programs was discontinued but resumed in 1980 when industry shipments and retail sales began to recover. Fueling this recovery was an increase in both domestic and export sales. In 1985, the California Dried Plum Board launched a new positioning for California dried plums as The high fiber fruit in its advertising, sales promotion and public relations programs. This campaign capitalized on the multi-million dollar advertising efforts behind high fiber cereals which touted their ability to reduce the risk of cancer. The high fiber fruit campaign plus increased handler marketing support contributed to four consecutive years of domestic shipment growth. In 1986, the California Dried Plum Board launched its Targeted Export Assistance (TEA) program with funding from USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service. Beginning in Western Europe and expanding to Japan and other Far Eastern export markets, this program led to four consecutive gains in total exports. In September 1988, the first California Dried Plum Festival was held in Yuba City, which unofficially bills itself as the Dried Plum Capital of the World. This festival was so successful that it has become an annual event attracting over 30,000 people.

The Versatility of Dried Plums (1990- present)

During the 1990's the California Dried Plum Board began looking for other applications for dried plums. Research demonstrated that dried plum puree can be used as a successful fat-substitute in baking. Further research showed that dried plum puree could be used as a meat-moisture enhancer called Plum Juicy.™ Plum Juicy enhances taste and increases juiciness in hamburgers, hotdogs and other meat products. Throughout the 1990's there has been an increasing trend of dried plums on restaurant menus across the United States. Now more than ever, world-renowned chefs recognize and tout not only the well-known health benefits but also the great taste, texture and flavor of dried plums.