

Frieda's Global Fruit Stand

How one small California wholesaler gave us a taste of the global market.

by Sophie Donelson



"We change the way America eats" is the company slogan at Los Angeles specialty wholesale produce distributor Frieda's. From kiwis to cherimoyas, Frieda's has elevated our national palate — and farmers' incomes — in the process.

In 1962, a telex arrived at the Los Angeles wholesale produce market from a New Zealander seeking a buyer for his "Chinese gooseberries." It was routed to Frieda Caplan, who had earned a reputation by selling fresh California mushrooms to grocers who had only seen them tinned. Caplan nicknamed the furry brown fruit "kiwi" (after its homeland's national bird) and began a nearly 50-year crusade to enliven the American palate.

Caplan started out in a now-distant era when year-round imported grapes were considered exotic. She hedged her bets on her first order of 2,400 pounds of kiwifruit, which took six months to sell at a priced-to-move \$.10 each. (Americans now consume 140 million pounds a year.) She took a bath on that order, but in doing so served notice to growers worldwide that she had found a market for their produce.

Today, Frieda's imports around 80 to 100 tropical fruits from growers and dealers in 20 to 30 countries and brokers a win-win situation: Americans regularly discover flavors they never imagined, while growers worldwide have been granted

access to a real-time, global farmer's market that didn't exist as little as 30 years ago. The Frieda's network now includes approximately 200 suppliers. Frieda's is credited with single-handedly introducing nearly 200 exotic species-turned-staples: passion fruit, shallots, seedless watermelons, sugar snap peas and habanero peppers. You're tasting Frieda Caplan's legacy every night at your table.

Her daughter Karen was a baby when Frieda started selling kiwis; now she's the CEO, tangling with giants like Chiquita and Dole for access to the next big thing. Dole is suddenly nimble enough to be hawking chayote, a tropical cousin of the cucumber family, but Frieda's still has an edge over its vastly bigger rivals. Karen Caplan's own kiwi moment may have come in 2007, when the \$45-a-pound mangosteens listed on Frieda's Web site sold out within hours of a *New York Times* bulletin touting their arrival stateside. The Thai import with a taste even accomplished food writers find literally indescribable had barely cleared Customs before Caplan made her bid. Until then, pest concerns had kept the small peachy fruit out of the country.

The family-run business is still discovering new fruits all the time, as strange specimens appear the moment once-remote orchards become accessible via air. "We're importing cherimoya from Chile," Caplan says of the South American

fruit also known as the "custard apple" for its sherbet-like consistency. "The airport is in Santiago but our dealer had to go to La Serena, four hours north, and there wasn't a smooth road to get there. It was a great product, fabulous taste, but it took years for roads and the cold storage to be effective."

And while worldwide farmers now have the benefit of a country full of newly sophisticated palates clamoring for once-exotic fruits and vegetables, you really only need to look as far as your local farmer to see the economic impact of Frieda's legacy. In southern Oregon's Klamath County, grower Dan Chin had been raising Klamath Pearls, a tiny potato (less than two-inches in diameter) that wowed the top San Francisco chefs who received his care packages. But his limited exposure kept his specialty farm in a financial bind: "We wanted to be in specialty retail chains but we didn't have the connections," says Chin. So he turned to Frieda's, who convinced him that going totally organic would catapult his crop into the American mainstream. Chin made some changes around the farm, and today Klamath Pearls stock shelves at Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, while his profit margin has increased 25 percent. Suddenly, finding tiny potatoes (or prickly pear cactus or star fruit) at the grocery store means a lot more. As Chin, who credits his 30 percent rise in revenue to his Frieda's connection, puts it, "She has definitely kept us busy."



1962
Introduces the Chinese Gooseberry to the U.S. from New Zealand, renaming it Kiwifruit



1975
Brings the yellow strands of Spaghetti Squash to the U.S. market



1978
Red Bananas from Costa Rica hit stores



1979
Widespread distribution of the Sugar Snap Pea from Twin Falls, Idaho, begins



1984
Imports of Kiwano, or Horned Melon, from New Zealand arrive



1986
Jonut Peach from China begins widespread distribution



1988
Coquito, a tiny palm-size coconut-like fruit, arrives from Chile



1990
Habanero Chiles, 100 times hotter than the jalapeño, arrive from Mexico



2006
Echalions, or Banana Shallots, a cross between an onion and a shallot, arrive from France



2007
Super Fruits line comes to supermarkets; includes Dried Goji Berries, Dried Omega 3 Cranberries and Dried Black Currants