

# Creating and Marketing Value-Added Orchard Products

## Final Report for FW08-030

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2008: \$15,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2009

Region: Western

State: California

Principal Investigator:

[Nicholas Salle](#)

Salle Orchards

Co-Investigators:

[Billie Jean Salle](#)

Salle Orchards

## Project Information

### Abstract:

The Salle family works hard to create a viable farm enterprise that can be passed down to another generation of farmers. In light of current economic pressures caused by factors such as increased labor and gas prices and decreased consumer demand, the project "Creating & Marketing Value-Added Orchard Products" has contributed significantly to the financial viability of our farm. The goal was to preserve foods by drawing on family traditions and natural methods to can, dry and flavor our crops and then market the value-added product to specialty stores, as well as through direct sales. We approached each project with the enthusiasm of a promising new future.

Ironically, our lack of knowledge probably helped make it a successful venture. Otherwise we would of been overwhelmed by the regulatory requirements and start-up costs. As of today, we have launched a very beautiful web site, designed literature and labels fitting for our product line, perfected our marketing practices and, most importantly, created several value-added products that have brought added income and recognition to our farm.

We have created a learning tool for other small farms by chronicling our process through a blog. Most importantly, the project has revitalized our passion for farming and ensured the future of Salle Orchards.

### Project Objectives:

- Establish project documentation on blog to discuss farm branding and product marketing including advertising, pricing and distribution, as well as other topics
- Meet with local gourmet stores and schools to assess interest in purchasing

value-added products

Construct fruit drying racks and upload “how-to” tutorial online

Decide on custom processors (e.g. to make honey roasted walnuts)

Hire graphic designer/marketing communications consultants to prepare product labels and promotional materials

Begin production of value-added products

Launch website to increase awareness and visibility of farm and products

Announce blog content to key contacts and through media releases

Finalize preliminary promotional materials (business cards, product labels, product fact sheets, recipe cards, etc.)

Test email marketing as promotional tactic

Continue to identify and assess new market opportunities, including e-commerce

## Cooperators

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## Research

Research results and discussion:

This grant is about sharing knowledge and experience. Since our mode of sharing is through our relaunched blog, it is difficult to tell how many have benefited from our project. One thing is very clear to us: fruit loss has decreased while our sales window for fruit products has increased into the off-season, creating much needed revenue for maintaining the future crop.

We have an abundance of raw walnuts, but a limited amount of demand for raw product at farmers’ markets. Now our nut sales have increased by a third by offering the many flavors of gourmet nuts. The extra revenue is going back into increasing the value-added product line and securing the necessary state and health permits to allow internet sales and specialty store sales.

With the addition of our Value-Added Product, our farm has seen an increase in revenue each year with a decrease in product loss. Our seasonal workers have enjoyed extended time of employment to support their families. Our family will be better prepared to continue a legacy for our children as they assume leadership roles in the family business. With added diversification in our revenue stream, our farm’s future is more secure.

Producer Adoption

At this point we can't determine the actual adoption by other farmers, but we do foresee that our blog, with its valuable insights, will positively affect other producers for some time to come.

#### Reactions from Producers

During farmers' markets or festivals, we receive positive comments and interest from other farmers/vendors all the time. We feel we have an outstanding product that deserves an outstanding presentation. If your product is treated as the ultimate gourmet item, it will be received as such. I will say that in the last two years I have noticed an increasing improvement of display from my fellow vendors as well. With that observation, I suspect others are paying closer attention and giving more thought to their presentation.

### **Participation Summary**

## Educational & Outreach Activities

### **PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:**

Education/outreach description:

As previously mentioned, our project is chronicled on our online blog. A media release (attached) publicizing the blog is being sent to several ag publications including Farmers' Market Today, Growing for Market, Ag Alert, Fruit Growers News, Vegetable Growers News, Small Farm Journal, Progressive Farmer, Farm Journal and Good Fruit Grower.

## Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

We researched and selected a blogging service provider as the educational engine for our Creating & Marketing Value-Added Orchard Products blog. For two years we chronicled the progress and trials of our journey only to have the blog site close down and much of the material lost. This was a huge setback and very time consuming to recreate.

We've relaunched the blog at <http://salleorchards.blogspot.com>, and we anticipate that it will be a helpful resource to other farmers who are considering a similar venture.

Locating a commercial kitchen for canning the tree fruit was not a problem. However, the typical home canners were not acceptable, and cost of commercial canners are prohibitive at this time. A line of gourmet canned fruit is still in the plans for future expansion.

We did spend a lot of time compiling information on other value-added products such as jams and jellies and chocolate-covered nuts, even pies from our tree-ripened fruit, but for these we also need commercial grade equipment and special "secret" recipes. I had a chef lined up to help with the recipes, but the proper equipment and supplies will have to wait due to the cost and the building of an on-site commercial kitchen.

We have found specialty stores to market our products with initial success, but we didn't realize we needed to become a permitted handler to sell our Value-Added Products. So the avenue of expansion to include internet sales and specialty store sales has been shelved until the required on-site certified kitchen or at least a separate stainless bagging facility has been met and certified. We need to have separate storage facilities for each product as well. However, these strict regulations do not apply to on-site farm sales and farmers' markets, where we continue to sell our product.

During our first year we focused on the development of a pleasing line of flavored walnuts. We were able to work with Cache Creek Foods out of Woodland, CA. They agreed to use our own walnuts and custom make a very high quality line of five flavors of gourmet nuts. At our request, they substituted real flavorings and butter for imitation ingredients, which we thought would devalue the final product. We had some initial trouble in judging the correct quantities to make at one time because of shelf life issues with processed walnuts. The walnut oil becomes unstable when processed and breaks down more quickly. This meant some losses for us initially. Rather than sell an off-flavor product, we discarded them or donated to local charities. Also, it is hard to judge the two-week turnaround time of processing and bagging to coincide with display and sales needs. We also need to factor in the perishability of walnuts during the different seasons and exposure to sun and heat. We learned so much that first year and were able to fine tune the following year.

Meanwhile we were following leads on used drying trays for the fruit. Lucky for us, a farmer was retiring and we were able to purchase wood trays for an excellent price. Again, being inexperienced, we misjudged the quantity of trays needed to rotate out enough finished product to meet market needs. We had no idea the profound flavor difference sun-dried fruit (peaches, nectarines, pears, Asian pears and apples) has as opposed to the commercial mass-produced fruit available in grocery stores. Our first season was a pleasant surprise, and we sold out quickly. The next year we built additional trays for drying, but it was a cooler-than-normal summer and the drying time slowed down significantly, preventing us from drying as much fruit as we would have liked. But we did increase our variety of products, adding apricots, figs, oranges and mixed fruit. We will build additional trays this year to expand our ability to dry more at one time. Storage is not a problem because we have a cold storage facility available to accommodate the added inventory.

We realized the importance of "first impressions" and took great care in working with a graphic designer to perfect the design of our logo and labels. You have only an instant to grab your potential buyer and that instant needs to count. In the two years since our initial exposure, our logo and labels have become recognizable as a trusted and consistently quality product.

We have sold most of our candied walnuts and dried fruit at farmers markets' or special events with great success. We have also tried marketing them at various specialty stores and other retail outlets but with a much slower turnover rate. When we were able to demo the product and sample it, our sales were always significantly higher, even triple the amount.

We have started a website as well as an email newsletter featuring farm happenings and seasonal products. I was surprised at the concern of our customers when I wrote about our ag pump breaking down and realized people loved sharing a little slice of farm life. I occasionally included customers' helpful hints and recipes. This seems to bring a family feel and involvement to our "family " of customers.

To further our brand recognition we had hats, T-shirts, sweat shirts, aprons and banners made. Through logo recognition and a consistently high-quality product we are frequently being told, "No thank-you, I know your produce is always good" when

we offer samples. The increased customer feedback has validated our investment in the logowear and signage.

Recommendations:

## Future Recommendations

Our biggest mistake with this project was not knowing all the current regulations or even knowing where to find these updated requirements before starting. We were way off base assuming the old-fashioned way of processing dried fruit would be accepted in today's regulatory environment. The best place to start getting answers is with your local farm advisor and health department. I can't stress enough to do a better job researching your particular county or state standards. We now have a better understanding of the process and a clearer road to success.

Hiring a graphic designer and marketing consultant was one of our better investments. Our graphic designer, Arlene Graham, created a professional quality family of branded labels, flyers, signs and banners that represented our farm and product line. Christina Abuelo, our marketing consultant, created copy and provided art direction for marketing materials, email newsletters and media releases, created and updated the farm's website, contributed product recipes and conducted research for supply purchases. Together, they ensured that our product labels included all the required components (bar codes, country of origin and nutritional facts, etc) and looked great too.

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