

ChicoER

Family finds niche in kiwi industry



Jatinder "JT" Kullar checks fruit in his family's kiwi vineyards in early November. Each bin holding 900 pounds of fruit is headed to Sunrise Kiwi Packing in Gridley. (Ashley Gebb/Staff Photo)

By ASHLEY GEBB-Staff Writer

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CHICO -- As it pushes against the pump station and casts a tall shadow over sprawling rows of kiwi trellises, no one in the Kullar family can bring themselves to cut down the cedar tree in heart of their original vineyards.

When Jasbir Kullar purchased the property in 1996, the evergreen was just a mere sapling. He let it stay with the idea it would one day provide some shade, and as the tree grew, so did the family's farming operation.

What began as 20 acres is now 200, and Sunrise Kiwi Packing remains one of the last large-scale kiwi operations in the area, as not only a grower but also a packer and shipper.

"We've fallen in love with growing the fruit," said Kullar's son, Jatinder "JT" Kullar. "It's the only thing we know and it's the best thing that we do."

His parents came to the United States from India in 1977 and labored as migrant farmworkers for more than a decade. Working his way up the ranks, Jasbir Kullar eventually managed to lease four acres of kiwis in Yuba City.

As the fruit grew in popularity, the market spiked and so did plantings, resulting in oversupply. Many farmers then switched to capital-intensive rice or competitive stone fruit and nut markets, but Jasbir Kullar's feet stayed planted firmly in his vineyards.

"He decided, 'Hey, I can make this work if I really go at it,'" J.T. Kullar said.

He bought his initial acreage and then more, eventually realizing it would be best to broaden operations. He bought used equipment at an auction and turned a shuttered shed into a packing facility, which was used for many years.

Today, the Kullars own their own packing facility on Larkin Road, and 90 percent of what they pack they grow themselves. "We control the fruit from the field to just about the fork," J.T. Kullar said. "People would say there is no dream here anymore — this is totally the American dream."

As harvest finished in recent weeks, workers ducked and bobbed under the vineyards, plucking the fruit from above their heads by hand and dropping it into bags on their chests, to then be dumped into bins to go to the packing shed. The last of this year's velvet-skinned fruit with its bright green and black-seeded flesh is en route to store shelves or in cold storage.

By storing the kiwis in 32-degree warehouses, the Kullars can keep the fruit from ripening for months. As kiwi growers, they compete with the Italian market to provide a fresh supply from October to April, and Chile and New Zealand support demand during opposing seasons.

In recent years, the kiwi market has remained strong, Kullar said. He attributes it to a growing fascination with the fuzzy fruit.

"More people are concerned or becoming aware of what they eat and how it affects their mood and physical ability," he said. "I don't think kiwis get enough attention."

A known superfood, kiwis boast more vitamin C than oranges, more potassium than bananas and a wealth of other vitamins and antioxidants.

J.T. Kullar estimates he eats two or three kiwis every day. His favorite way is over ice cream, but his wife loves them in smoothies and his children cut them in half and scoop the flesh straight into their mouths.

J.T. Kullar and David Barry, the family's longtime sales and operations manager, both reminisce that Butte County was at one time home to the largest kiwi producer in California, and signs at each end of Gridley welcomed drivers to "the Kiwi Capital of the U.S.A."

After their introduction in 1934, the "mother" and "father" kiwi plants are still at the Genetic Resource and Conservation Center in Chico and remain the oldest producing kiwi in the country.

Though kiwis have fallen far from their crop dominance decades ago, they still remain a vital part of Butte County industry. At just 676 acres, kiwis ranked 13th among all Butte County crops in 2012, with a value of \$5.6 million.

Barry, who has three decades of kiwi packing under his oversight, said he got his start while attending Chico State. He took a part-time job hoeing weeds in vineyards and has found himself entrenched there ever since.

"I didn't know what kiwis were but they fascinated me," he said. "It's in my blood now."

Reach Ashley Gebb at 896-7768, agebb@chicoer.com or on Twitter @AshleyGebb.