

## SEASONAL VARIATION IN MEXICAN CACTUS PEAR PRICES SHIPPED THROUGH McALLEN TEXAS

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While working for the Pillsbury Co. in Washington State, I had only sold vegetables. We started selling fresh asparagus from Mexico. The grower/shipper then offered the other commodities he packed, which included fresh broccoli, spinach, snow peas, and tuna. One day, looking at the bill of lading, I saw that they had shipped 120 cartons of "tuna". The first thing I said was "fish"? When I found out that "tuna" was a cactus pear, the next question was "What is a cactus pear"? That first year, I sold about 10,000 cartons of the tuna. I tried to learn as much as I could about them, but there was not much information offered.

In 1990 I was transferred by Pillsbury to McAllen, Texas to be closer to the shipping point. Little did I know that the volume would increase that second year to almost 30,000 cartons. At the beginning of 1991, I left the Pillsbury Co. and went to work for Empacadora G.A.B., Inc. This year our goal is to handle 40,000 to 50,000 cartons. At this time we are only shipping the red variety, but are thinking of including the yellow variety for next year.

Our tuna season starts the first of July and ends in the middle of September. We pack 10 pound cartons, with each pear wrapped in tissue paper (The wrap also includes instructions on how to open the skin to get to the fruit). Other packers/shippers pack 12, 14, 15, 20 and 40 pound cartons, some with wraps and some without. Customers will buy all the different size cartons but what is most important to them is the sizing. They want to know how many fruits there are per pound. In our 10 pound cartons, the jumbo has 18-20 pieces of fruit, the large 24-30, medium 36-44, and the small about 60-66 pieces. Each fruit is uniform in size.

The price starts out very good in July, the market can be as high as \$18.00-\$20.00/10 lb carton. In August, as the volume increases, and California begins production, the market for the Mexican product will start falling and can go as low as \$5.00 for a 10 pound carton. Most of the customers in the United States prefer the product from California and will pay \$2.00 over the Mexican product. The highest market I have found is in March and April when we do not have product. Of course, the main reason for the high market, \$30.00-\$40.00, is because the tuna volume is very low with only California area shipping.

There are only a few shipping areas that take a high volume of the tuna. Canada takes straight loads of the tuna, with all sizes. The other big markets are Los Angeles,

San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. It is surprising that Texas is not a heavy volume user. Texas may buy only 30-40 cartons per week versus the other areas that can take 1000 cartons per week.

The big question is how to get more people buying the tuna. One problem, is that very few people know what a tuna is, or if they know what they are, what do you do with them? We need to work together to find ways to inform the public on this wonderful product. A collection of recipes from different areas, that also include their nutritional value, would be helpful.

I look forward to working with the Texas Prickly Pear Council on finding new ways to sell the product. If you have any helpful ideas, please contact me.