

## **EXPERIENCES OF A PRODUCE WHOLESALER IN OBTAINING AND SELLING NOPALES AND TUNAS**

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I asked Jay McCarthy, a world-famous chef called the "Cactus King" in some circles, to relay some of his favorite dishes made from prickly pears he's served folks over the past couple of years. These are but a few: nopale lasagna with cactus cocktail sauce, frilled quail with cactus seed mole, cactus chicken tequila sausage, cactus batter shrimp with mango salsa and cactus puree, cactus-cured duck breast on field greens with ancho lime dressing, and wild boar blue corn posole with spicy nopales and lime relishes (the list went on and on). Many creative chefs across the nation are enamored of the "lowly" tuna and nopale and are incorporating them into their menus with delight.

If you had told my grandfather 50 years ago about this conference, he would have been, as they said back then, "tickled." My old granddad was both a cattle rancher and a diabetic. I remember watching him burn his fields to rid them of this nuisance—I remember getting hundreds of tiny stickers in my legs. Now, 20 years after his death, I wish I could serve him a Cactus Rita and tell him it could cure his disease.

When I spoke to the Texas Prickly Pear Council, I saw my name sandwiched among doctors, biologists, and scholars on the program, and I got a little nervous. My story regarding the cactus plant is certainly different from the topics of most of my fellow speakers. I may not be unlike a lot of you sitting out there in the audience because I, like many of you, am a risk taker. When I began my produce business eight years ago, I had the idea that there was a good market for "weird stuff." I started in 1986 with an office, one truck, half of a small walk-in cooler and a little knowledge of the high-end produce market. I spent a third of my time on the phone with chefs in Austin and San Antonio who were dying for a product no one else had, a third of my time trying to find the product, and the other third delivering it.

The chefs I sold to taught me what to buy and I began the treasure hunt I am still on to this day for the newest, most innovative fresh produce items. At that time, I flew almost everything in on air containers from Los Angeles. Then, I got the wild idea to try to get Texas growers to grow some of these unusual items. I began speaking at Texas agricultural marketing conferences.

One of my early challenges, one that completely frustrated me, was about cactus pears. The Four Seasons Hotel, which opened in August 1986, had Red Cactus Pear Vinaigrette on their menu. At first, I had no problem getting cactus pears from the Los Angeles Market. However, I was totally unprepared when right around Christmas they disappeared completely! The hotel had a big banquet and needed 10 cases—I went berserk trying to find them, but was told that all the Mexican growers quit shipping at certain times of the year because the market for cactus pears in Mexico increased dramatically due to holiday usage. This was one of my first major crises as

a produce buyer and you can bet I remember it to this day.

Now, because of this great tenacity I seem to have inherited, my company, Heart of Texas, has about 140 high-end customers in Austin and San Antonio and we're blowin' and goin' six days a week. We have approximately 300 items in our inventory at any time—fresh chanterelles from the Northwest, baby field greens from Northern California, gooseberries, French beans, teardrop cream peas, Japanese cukes, yellow tomatoes, dried wild mushrooms, tropical fruits, and chiles of all descriptions. These are just a few of the many items on our list, but each one had a story.

I love the story of the nopales and cactus pears. For the last three or four months I couldn't get my hands on a single cactus pear and I had about 6-8 chefs clamoring for them! The crop in Mexico was very late getting in due to weather problems and we're still having problems getting product. The first cases I bought from the Los Angeles Market about three weeks ago cost \$22.50 for 10 pounds. They were #1 grade and quite expensive for the uses most of the chefs I deal with put them to. The Hyatt Hill Country Resort in San Antonio is a big user; they immediately bought a bunch despite the cost. The Zuni Grille in San Antonio also didn't balk—they have been out of the puree for their \$7.00 a pop Cactus Ritas for some time and were very anxious for the pears. Catering by Rosemary wanted them to make those "hold up hearts and flowers" out of cactus. Of course, Jay McCarthy, the Cactus King, grabbed a box right off the bat as well.

Now, I want to tell you what the volume of cactus and cactus pears is before you get the wrong idea. As I said, Heart of Texas sells 300 products, a full line of produce, and this is only one item in that number. I can't concentrate my energy on any one item for very long, or the many others suffer. I am a relatively small distributor, dealing only with food-service establishments. Many of my customers ask for 5 pounds and think that's a lot! My suggestions for reaching this market are tied to how much product you have, how far you are from major market areas, and how much you have to invest.

The way I perceive it, there are at least four ways you can market nopales or cactus pears:

1. Mail order—many small growers have had great success by advertising in magazines such as the *Whole Chile Pepper Magazine*, which caters to individuals.
2. Direct to wholesalers like me—If you have large amounts, find big companies in major areas like Houston or Dallas, and truck them to market yourself or use the bus or other common carrier.

(I have been buying the amazing 1308 nopalito direct from the Micks near Kingsville. They put them on the bus in the evening; we get them the following morning. This is a lot of trouble and I can get nopales from Mexican distributors in San Antonio for about half the price; but once the chefs experienced the Micks' product, those from Mexico brought complaints.)



3. Find a broker on one of the coasts specializing in product for this particular market. How do you find them? It's a real trick sometimes and may require some time and effort. There are national organizations, such as United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable and Produce Marketing Associations, which hold annual meetings. (The next one will be in October in Washington, D.C.) Thousands of growers, shippers, brokers, packers, and truckers are looking for opportunities. I have found most of my contacts the tedious way: by word-of-mouth and networking with suppliers who know other suppliers. I recently came across a broker in New York who handles only lines of a specialty market and has customers mainly on the East Coast. I told him about this conference and he was quite intrigued. He's most interested in well-packaged high-quality pears and nopales for the New York City and East Coast markets. He got even more excited when I told him there were many colors of pears available. So, the word-of-mouth deal works. He's ready to go to work selling cactus.
4. Market direct to retail store chains. I've had very little experience doing this and don't feel that I can speak knowledgeably about this market.

Beside lack of availability, I've encountered problems of packaging and quality. As I said, I buy most of my nopales from the Micks (no quality problems there). There are problems with quality in the Mexican nopales, such as stickers. The cactus pears are another story. I put them on a truck I consolidate twice a week in Los Angeles. I never know what I'm going to get from the small Mexican packers—sometimes 10 pounds, sometimes 15 pounds, no quality standards, etc. When D'Arrigo is packing, you can count on high quality—actually, too high for my clientele, who, unless they are using them for garnish, are most likely going to puree. When possible, I always buy the second-label D'Arrigo packs. The chefs don't need the tissue-packed Andy Boy brand, which is packed with recipes for retail. I'm always pleased when Andy Boy and Page Boy pears hit the market, because the name on the box means I can count on quality.

I believe there is tremendous potential for #2 grade products. For example, Jay McCarthy has experimented with the seeds -- drying them out and extracting the oil using a process similar to that for extracting sesame seed oil. This produces a chocolate cumin taste he uses in molé. He has used skins to flavor the sugar glaze for quail and the juice can be used in Cactus Ritas and chocolate tamales, adding a phosphorescent, unnatural natural color.