

Stiebs boosts production of pomegranate seeds

By Don Schnack
Staff Writer

MADERA, Calif. — For nearly seven decades, Lamanzuzi & Pantaleo has been a fixture in California's table grape and raisin industry. The future for an offshoot of the company, however, is focused on a wholly different commodity, pomegranates.

The subsidiary, Stiebs Pomegranate Products, began by producing pomegranate juice. It has now kicked off its second season of packing fresh pomegranate arils — or seeds — and it has launched a new product, quick-frozen pomegranate arils in bags.

"We're pretty much a pioneer in training," said Jerry Pantaleo, co-owner of Stiebs Pomegranate Products.

The fresh pomegranate arils are packed in 8-ounce clamshells, 12 clamshells to a carton. The shelf life of the fresh arils is a maximum of 14 days, co-owner Brad Miller said. As is the case with nearly all fresh produce, maintaining the cold chain is imperative, he said. Stiebs is moving to widen the distribution of the fresh pomegranate arils.

"When I began marketing the fresh arils last year, many retailers hadn't seen the product before," Miller said.

The fresh arils are going to re-

tailers and distributors in California, Oregon and Washington. Foodservice is a looming target, Miller said.

"We just have to find more good produce distributors," he said.

Miller declined to provide specific figures, but said the 2008 volume of fresh seeds will double the output of the 2007 season. Plans call for continued significant expansion over the next few years, he said.

"We're finding very good acceptance everywhere we go," he said.

Most retailers are pricing the clamshells at \$5.99 each, Miller said.

Stiebs is designing retailer specific point-of-sale materials, which are available upon request, Miller said. The company also has introduced a book of recipes that are being used at in-store restaurants and delis, he said.

"The seeds are perfect for salads, added to yogurt and cereals, in baking and other obvious uses," Miller said, "but the recipe book includes meat dishes, such as a stuffed pork tenderloin, plus glazes and marinades."

Stiebs began packing the fresh pomegranate seeds in late October. Supplies will be available through February. So far, all of the fresh seeds packed at Stiebs have been

from domestic orchards.

"Our goal is to have fresh pomegranate seeds available to our customers 52 weeks a year," Miller said.

That goal will mean importing some fruit, he said. Negotiations have begun with offshore growers, and Miller said he has planned the trips for face-to-face meetings with the growers in the next few months.

More yield per acre

Stiebs is experimenting with new growing techniques to increase yields.

California growers have traditionally planted pomegranates rows 16-18 feet apart, Pantaleo said. The new approach at Stiebs is to plant the rows 12 feet apart and to narrow the distance between trees to just 7 feet.

"By using the more dense planting approach, we increase the number of trees per acre from 100 to more than 500," Pantaleo said.

New pruning techniques limit the height of the trees, so pickers don't need to use ladders, he said. Stiebs uses only foothill and wonderful varieties, Pantaleo said.

While other varieties may be considered in the future, the primary concern is the quality of the fruit, Miller said.

The company's on-site laborato-



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Stiebs Pomegranate Products, Madera, Calif., is using giant plastic bins to transport fruit from the orchards to the packinghouse. The new approach eliminates the need for forklifts and reduces energy costs, says Brad Miller, co-owner of Stiebs. The fruit falls into a water-filled flume that minimizes bruising and cleans the pomegranates, he says.

ry tests for sugar and acid content and other quality issues, Miller said. Fruit that fails to meet specifications is diverted to the juicing operation, he said.

The company moves the fruit from the orchards to the Madera packing plant in giant plastic bins also used to transport grapes to wineries. Other growers use smaller plastic bins that require forklifts for loading and unloading and bin dumpers at the start of the packing line.

When the pomegranates arrive at the processing/packing facility, the bins are tipped and the fruit falls into a water flume that mini-

mizes bruising and cleans the fruit as it move to the packing line, Miller said.

To separate the fresh arils from the pomegranates, Stiebs imported technology from Israel, Miller said. Each pomegranate is sliced in half.

"We use two lines each with a different technique. One uses mild vibration and the other uses air extraction to pull the arils from the fruit," Miller said.

The extraction packing lines are stainless steel throughout, he said. More information about the company's products is available on its Web site, www.stiebs.com.