

Oregon Fruit Products taps into fermentation market

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

When Max Gehlar founded Oregon Fruit Products in 1935, he was just looking for a way to stabilize the revenue of his cherry and plum orchard in the Eola Hills northwest of Salem. He likely never imagined that his modest canning operation would last for the better part of a century, buoyed by Oregon's world-famous fruit industry.

From modest beginnings, the business grew, employing dozens of local workers and buying fruit such as strawberries, cherries and cane berries from local farmers and orchardists. Over the de-

acades, Oregon Fruit Products started looking farther afield to source its fruit, building an international base of suppliers while retaining their Northwest grower network.

The business remained in the Gehlar family until 2011, when it was sold to Ed Malletis, the former owner of Portland-based beverage distribution company Columbia Distributing. He brought on Chris Sarles, also formerly of Columbia Distribution, to be the new CEO.

Under Sarles' leadership, the company has dramatically expanded its fruit for fermentation program while also pursuing new products for foodservice — although they



Courtesy Oregon Fruit Products

Cherries arrive at the Oregon Fruit Products processing facility.

assure customers that their iconic black, illustrated cans aren't going anywhere.

Fruit for fermentation, a line aimed at the craft brew-

ing, wine, spirits and kombucha market, consists of fruit purees in a wide range of flavors, from classic apple and cherry to exotic seasonals

such as guava and gooseberry.

Sarles attributes the category's growth to wider industry trends, as well as Oregon Fruit Products' ability to deliver a broad selection of flavors. "Like anything, when you have some experience, you recognize where opportunities might exist," says Sarles. "For me, it was 'go with what you know.' How could we be more relevant to the evolving craft beverage scene?"

From his past work, Sarles knew that seasonality was important to brewers, so he introduced rotating, seasonal fruit products with relatively limited availability. He says it gave the company "the opportunity to bring innovation to the brewer, to make them think about what they're going to produce next."

Sarles is also excited about market opportunities he sees in food manufacturing. "As I go to different trade shows, I see fruit popping up in all different product types, even areas you wouldn't have thought of before ... when you walk the

aisles, first you're in cheese, then you're in chips, then beverages, and every one has a tie somehow to fruit," he says.

For potential suppliers, Sarles notes that documentation, especially in light of the new Food Safety Modernization Act, will continue to be essential. "We want to make sure that the people we're buying from are thinking forward and doing all they can to be compliant ahead of being required to be compliant," says Sarles. "(All our clients) want proper documentation, and that's certainly very important to us."

As demand for fruit products continues to grow, Oregon Fruit Products is optimistic about the future. "As an 82-year-old company, all of us feel very fortunate to be where we are," says Sarles. "We're the caretakers of what some incredibly bright, hardworking people have built over all these years. It's our responsibility to carry it forward for the next generation, so somebody else can celebrate the next 80 years."

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