

## Grapes in cups? Just the latest in Kern's value-added ag market

By COURTENAY EDELHART, Californian staff writer, [cedelhart@bakersfield.com](mailto:cedelhart@bakersfield.com) | Saturday, Oct 25 2008 12:00 PM

There's a new healthy snack food option for the lunchbox crowd — grapes packaged in small, disposable cups.

On the Go brand grapes are an attempt to create new demand for Delano Farms grapes, and the latest entrant to Kern County's booming value-added agriculture industry.

Value-added agriculture is the term for creating new products from meat and produce, adding value to what farmers and ranchers grow. "It's a natural tendency as markets get more crowded to try to differentiate your product," said Ray Hansen, interim director of the value-added agriculture division of Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, a national nonprofit organization based in Ames, Iowa. The trend has driven sales of other commodities for years, so Hansen was not surprised to hear local grape growers are toying with creating new markets. "Grape growers for a long time were mostly targeting the wine industry, but there's been a lot of growth in grape production over the years outside of wine," Hansen said.

Grapes are Kern County's second biggest agricultural commodity, a \$579,378,000-a-year industry, according to the Kern County Department of Agriculture and Measurement Standards. Delano Farms rolled out On the Go grapes for the first time this season, placing them in Safeway and Sam's Club stores, to start. "The reception's been pretty good," said Scott Jones, director of convenience packaging for Delano Farms. "Each week, the volume increases." The product has done well enough that the company is considering importing Chilean grapes to keep it going over the winter. Delano Farms isn't the only local grower aggressively creating new markets for its product.

Value-added agriculture has a Kern County workforce of nearly 55,000, according to the Kern Economic Development Corp. After growing slowly in 2006, the sector added 3,942 jobs for an annual growth rate of 7.7 percent last year.

**Jennifer Rogers Etcheverry is part of the trend. Rogers Etcheverry started selling 5-ounce bags of flavored almonds five years ago in an effort to move more of the almonds grown on her husband's 180-acre farm.**

**"Like a lot of family farms, we were struggling, and at one point I said to my husband, 'What do I have to do? Sell your nuts for you?'" she said.**

**That's exactly what Rogers Etcheverry did.**

**My Husband's Nuts, as her Bakersfield company is known, has expanded rapidly since. It has shipped 3.5 tons of nuts so far this year, and projects it will have shipped as much as 5 tons after the holidays, when gift basket sales surge. The sales estimate is probably conservative, as it predates a food critic plugging the snacks before a national audience on ABC's "The View."**

Other local value-added agriculture players include Bakersfield-based Bolthouse Farms, which produces a line of yogurt-based salad dressings to help market its produce. And both Bolthouse and rival Grimmway Farms, also based in Bakersfield, sell carrots in every conceivable form, including chips and baby carrots.

Wasco-based SunnyGem processes almonds that are then sold in bulk to food processors in a variety of forms: diced as an ice cream and frozen yogurt topping, sliced for use on cakes, in slivers for use in green beans. "It helps a lot if you have a product that is versatile, and almonds are particularly versatile, which is why so many people are growing them now," said SunnyGem president and chief executive Rick Meredith.

The increasingly busy schedules of consumers are helping drive demand for such products, said Mike Young, president of the Kern County Farm Bureau. "People don't have time anymore to make anything from scratch or cut up things themselves, so they'll pay a little extra to have someone else do that for them," he said.