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It began as a garage brand

SAVE AND SHARE

I was at the health food chain the other day buying the pricey dried fruit that our daughter eats like popcorn when a nearby toddler pleaded with his mother to "buy the peas for me!" in the tone that brings to mind the candy aisle.

This was a familiar scene. When Jocelyn was in a high chair, she craved the pale-green dried peas produced by a company whose founder started in 1985 by selling dehydrated tomatoes out of her garage.

Much to her own surprise, Karen Cox is now the head of a multimillion-dollar enterprise that has 50 employees and a 10,000-square-foot plant.

And the "Just Tomatoes" company isn't just tomatoes any more. Cox's additive-free dehydrated or freeze-dried products, which are sold nationwide in clear plastic tubs, include cranberries, peaches, carrots, persimmons, pineapple, bell peppers, corn and, most recently, pomegranate seeds.

Cox tells her story this way:

She, her husband, Bill, and her two children, ages 12 and 10, were living on the family's 1,000-acre tomato farm in Westley, Calif., population 700, when the imported Italian sun-dried-tomato craze hit the United States.

"I tried one and it tasted like a dirty old shoe," Cox recalls.

She slow-roasted a few in her oven and soon sold some in a nearby shop. One thing led to another. She ended up buying 100 home dehydrators for about \$10,000 and setting them up in her garage after a fan suggested that she open a mail-order company.

Cox still chuckles when she thinks of those days, when she had no plan to create a major business. She and a handful of other mothers would don their bathing suits and jump in the swimming pool in between turning over thousands of tomatoes.

Aside from being preservative-free and having no added sugar products, the "Just" brand differs from traditional, big-company dried fruit in that all varieties are crisp and dry - not sticky and somewhat moist. Cox says her fruit and vegetables are taken down to 3 percent water weight, whereas the sticky type log in at approximately 6 percent.

As the mother of that pea-loving 3-year-old confirmed, this makes the "Just" brand perfect for toddlers on up.

Cox, who does all of the artwork for the company, including its fruit-and-vegetable-caricature labels, attributes her success to hard work and timing.

"People are becoming more aware that we must be good to our bodies and make better choices in food," she says.

- Joyce Gemperlein

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