

So long, citrus: Noni fruit's moving in

Juice made from the smelly fruit, touted for its nutritional benefits, will be produced at a former citrus packing plant. Officials hope sales take off.

By CHUIN-WEI YAP
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DADE CITY - The humble orange, it seems, has been replaced by a fruit that resembles a bulbous, pockmarked grub with a cheesy smell.

But noni - pronounced noh-nee - is said to be one of the most nutritious fruits in the world, and it even comes with a controversial past.

Now, it's become the centerpiece of a manufacturing operation that moved from Norco, Calif., to an east Pasco landmark that used to be home to a citrus packing plant.

"Our network is here," said Scot Ballantyne, president of the South Pacific Trading Co. "Our business contacts are here. We get three times the space here for the same amount of money than in California."

Based at the redeveloped Pasco Beverage plant on U.S. 301, South Pacific Trading Co. imports the fruit from Costa Rica. It pasteurizes, bottles and distributes pure noni juice to organic food giants such as Wild Oats Markets Inc. and United Natural Foods Inc., the country's largest publicly listed organic foods wholesale distributor.

The company has a 17,000-square-foot plant in the business center. Half of the center's available square footage has already been taken up, said Bryan Kamm, the project manager who helped Ballantyne set up there.

"We're the largest distributor of pure noni in the country," Ballantyne said.

In Pasco, South Pacific is only 4 months old, but sales are building up toward \$100,000 a month, Ballantyne said.

If it takes off, the payoffs could be huge.

Noni juice's biggest manufacturer, Utah-based Tahitian Noni International, made more than \$6-million in 1996, its first year selling a blend of the juice. Ten years later, TNI is said to be making \$500-million a year.

But here's where the fruit gains some controversy.

Noni is said to detoxify the body, stimulate the immune system and maintain digestive systems.

But its most ardent proponents go further, with claims that it cures everything from cancer to hepatitis and herpes - usually perking up the ears of health fraud watchdogs on the lookout for false claims.

TNI, which uses multilevel marketing techniques, played a role in spreading these claims.

Under such schemes, the more people one recruits to sell a product, the more one stands to gain in commissions. Multilevel marketing techniques typically make for a highly aggressive sales approach.

TNI agents' claims of noni's healing powers attracted attention from regulators in Texas, California, Arizona, New Jersey, and European countries including Finland and Switzerland.

Settlements for false claims followed.

"Multilevel schemes are not illegal in themselves, but false claims are," said Clara Lawhead, Pasco County's health fraud expert. "As far as noni's claims of miracle cures, wouldn't that be wonderful? But to date, we have no such miracle cures."

Ballantyne is more than aware of noni's checkered past.

South Pacific Trading Co.'s promotional literature for noni conspicuously steers away from cure-all claims. It even cautions readers that claims by researcher Ralph Heinecke, one of noni's earliest advocates, are not confirmed, describing them as "speculation."

"We're not multilevel marketers," Ballantyne said. "We sell to retail stores and health food stores, either directly or through distributors. If someone orders it, we do mail directly, but we don't take commissions."

Ballantyne acknowledges the dangers of TNI's multilevel marketing techniques.

"When it's individual people trying to make a buck, they don't necessarily worry about the rules and regulations of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration," he said. "They are saying it will cure anything."

Still, Ballantyne stakes his personal belief in noni, enough to attach a 30-day, 100 percent money-back guarantee on its sales.

Focused more on helping South Pacific Trading Co. secure space and tax incentives, including corporate tax refunds, the Pasco Economic Development Council wasn't aware of noni's recent history, Kamm said.

Ballantyne, a former pastor of 20 years, took the job when he decided to step full time into the business world last summer.

He had been a financial planner on the side. His clients included the Nicklaus family of Pinellas County, owners of the Sirata Beach Resort and South Pacific Trading Co., then based in California.

In July last year, the Nicklauses brought Ballantyne on and sent him to lead the plant in California, he said. He brought it back to Florida at the Nicklauses' behest; they still own the company.

With just five employees now, South Pacific hopes to expand its payroll to at least 10 people in the first year, and 25 in the next couple of years, Ballantyne said.

The company's machines, which arrive in July, will package 30 to 60 32-ounce bottles a minute. South Pacific will also sell noni in pill form.

Ballantyne said he intends to use the machines to pack other juices and wines to make up for capacity.

The plant also distributes organic coconut oil as a health product.

But the company's star product, noni, may just become the next fruit to put the Dade City plant back on the map.

"A lot of people lost jobs at the Pasco Beverage plant when the industry went down," Ballantyne said. "It's neat to see it coming back."

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NOTES ON NONI: Technically called *Morinda citrifolia*, the fruit can be found on South Pacific islands, as well as Tahiti, Hawaii and Costa Rica.

It has a sharp, astringent taste and smell. In Australia, noni is called cheesefruit.

Noni is said to detoxify the body and stimulate the immune system.

Studies at research institutes in the United States, Europe and Asia have confirmed that noni helps the immune and digestive systems and provides analgesic effects.

Noni is rich in vitamins, minerals, enzymes and amino acids.

The fruit's active constituents have not been definitively identified.

Research claiming healing effects for illnesses is speculative. Source: South Pacific Trading Co.

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