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Chowchilla almond grower branches out

By CAROL REITER
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For 50 years, the Zinke family in Chowchilla has been growing almonds.

Now the family is known for more than just tasty nuts. They have turned part of their orchards to organic, and are producing a rival to peanut butter.

"Almond butter can be used just like peanut butter," said John Zinke, grandson of the original owner, Henoch Zinke.

John Zinke, along with his father, Harvey Zinke, grow almonds on more than 500 acres. More than 50 of those acres are organic.

The farm was founded in 1950, and originally Henoch Zinke grew row crops, planting almond orchards in 1960.

The owners of Zinke Farms Inc. are both growers and processors, John Zinke said.

"To be an organic processor, we had to go through very intense checking by California Certified Organic Farmers," John Zinke said.

Even on the nonorganic acres, the Zinkes try to moderate their use of insecticide and pesticide sprays. "We try to use as little chemicals as possible," John Zinke said.

In 1984, the Zinke family decided to direct market their almonds. They sell bulk 50-pound and 25-pound boxes, along with marketing roasted and diced almonds in 25-pound boxes.

It's the almond butter that sets the Zinkes apart from some growers. There's nothing in the butter except almonds.

"There is no sugar, no oil -- just almonds," John Zinke said.

The Zinkes use a dry roast pasteurization on their almonds, which makes the almond butter 100 percent organic. The Zinkes put in new processing equipment in 2006, and the almond butter is made on a completely automated system.

"We are one of very few, possibly the only one, who has certified organic almond butter," Zinke said.

Almond butter and jelly sandwich, anyone?

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SUN-STAR PHOTO BY LISA JAMES
"I always knew I wanted to take over" says John Zinke, right, of Zinke Orchards shown here with his father Harvey in their Chowchilla almond orchards. The organic producer of almonds and almond butter has been a family operation since it began in 1960.
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