

# Madera company taps growing superfruit market

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By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

A Madera company that specializes in processing pomegranates is tapping the growing market for beverages supercharged with health benefits.

Stiebs Pomegranate Products has added exotic "superfruits" including acai, mangosteen and goji to the products it sells to food and beverage makers around the country.

The fruits have gained popularity among health-conscious consumers because of their high amounts of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Although the names of Stiebs' buyers are closely guarded by the company, they are among the major players in the industry.

"If you walk down the grocery store aisle and see juices and drinks with ingredients including pomegranates, acai, mangosteen, goji, blueberry and kiwi juice, that is who we sell to," said Brad Miller, a partner in the company.

Industry analysts say the value of foods and beverages that provide an added health benefit beyond basic nutrition was \$30.7 billion in 2008, up 6% from 2007 sales of \$29 billion.

Called functional foods, this category of products is expected to grow at a steady pace through 2013, reaching \$43 billion, according to the New York-based Packaged Facts, a leading industry source of market data, trends and consumer trends.

As a well-known supplier of pomegranate products ranging from juice to seed oil, Stiebs was well positioned to branch out in the superfruit market, said company spokeswoman KC Pomeroy.

"You have to stay keyed in on the emerging trends and finding out what your customers' interests are," Pomeroy said. "And that is what we have done."

It also helped that one of their biggest customers came to them several years ago looking for specific products.

"When one of the two largest beverage companies in the world comes and asks you to spend some time developing an ingredient for them, it's usually in the best interest of your company to oblige," Miller said.

With an added priority for the company, Miller packed his bags and began traveling the globe sourcing new fruits.

He has been everywhere from China for goji -- a small orange-red berry -- to Brazil for acai, a dark purple fruit from the acai palm.

He has traveled to at least 10 foreign countries, checking on farmers and suppliers, and to ensure quality control.

Miller worked for three years to finalize the deal for goji berries from China.

"We have a pretty extensive filter, and we won't move forward until we have done our due diligence," Miller said.

Stiebs imports the fruit, which is shipped to Madera, where it can be processed in several ways, including juice or blended with other fruits.

While other local agricultural companies are also involved in supplying ingredient makers with items such as grape seed extract, Stiebs appears to be one of the few supplying as many different products.

"They are very unique," said Julia Berry, executive director of the Madera County Farm Bureau. "And they are expanding at a time when consumers are paying more attention to the types of foods they are eating."