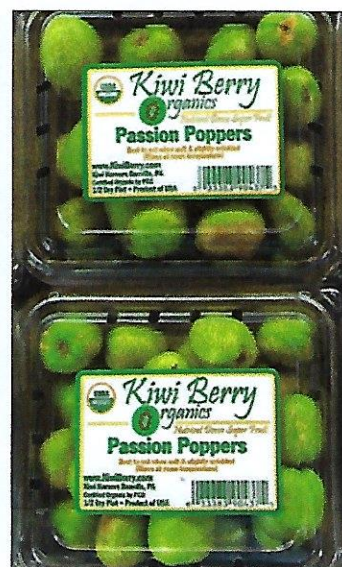


# 'We're the only one in the world'



**S**ix-ounce packages of kiwi berries, above, are filled and ready to ship at Kiwi Berry Organics outside Riverside.

**Dave Jackson**, in photo at left, shows off a vine of the fruit at his farm Thursday morning.

PHOTOS BY KEITH HAUPT

## Farm outside Riverside grows and develops unusual kiwi berries to sell along East Coast

By **CHRIS KREPICH**  
Press Enterprise Writer

**RUSH TWP.** — Dave Jackson used to create music, but now he's creating unusual fruit — and trying to spread it across the country.

He's a kiwi berry farmer. His most popular strain of the fruit tastes like cotton candy, and the only place to get it is from his small farm outside Riverside.

He and Holly Laubach operate Kiwi Berry Organics, selling the unique fruit to distributors on the East Coast.

In fact, Jackson coined the term "kiwi berry," and registered it as a trademark, he said. But he later gave up rights to the name, freeing it for everyday use, because he hated the generic term "baby kiwi" that sprang up to describe the fruit.

The kiwi berry is a small, vine-growing fruit with an interior texture and seeds

similar to kiwi.

But the bite-sized berries don't have to be peeled and are eaten whole, like grapes.

Each variety has its own flavor. Some taste like pineapple, others strawberry-banana. His flagship Passion Popper variety tastes like a "cotton candy melon ball."

Jackson said his berries have a higher sugar content than any other kiwi berries and are packed with vitamin C.

They're also unique among Pennsylvania berries because they're the only berries that ship across state lines, he said. Jackson's farm is the world's only certified organic breeder, grower, packer and marketer of fresh kiwi berries.

### 'More miss than hit'

Over the years, Jackson has developed his own hybrids, seeking to perfect the

combination of taste, sweetness, texture and appearance in a manageable and commercially-viable plant.

About a quarter of the farm is dedicated to research and development.

"We're the only one in the world set up for management and genetics," Jackson said. "We grow what we breed at the farm. We don't buy our plants; we create them."

He says 99 percent of his trials end in failure because the berries are too tart, too bitter or not sweet enough.

Other times, test plants drop berries too early or can't hold up well to pests or the climate.

"It's a lot of hit-and-miss," he said. "A lot more miss than hit."

But that work will give him the next variety that will carry the farm for the next 40 years, he says.

He started raising kiwi berries in 1988. It takes vines 10-14 years to mature and



Press Enterprise/Keith Haupt

**JOHNNY SUERTA**, left, and **Chris Tallon** start the process of pulling out kiwi berries that aren't good enough for packaging on Thursday.

produce fruit, so he started selling the berries in 1998.

Jackson said he "limped" his way to a commercial crop and has since learned how to cut the growing time down to about three years.

Jackson says his current crop, farmed over 20 acres, was produced by combining the best U.S. genetics with

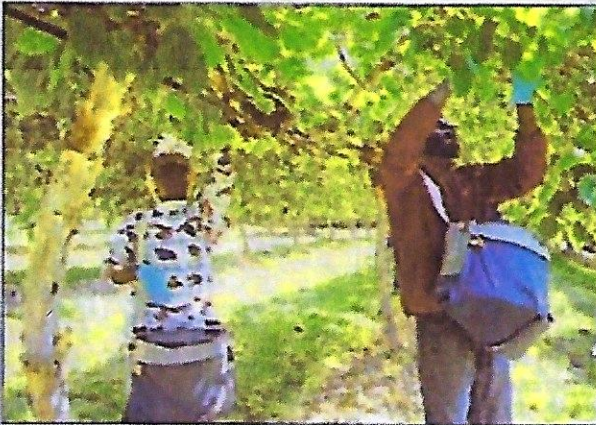
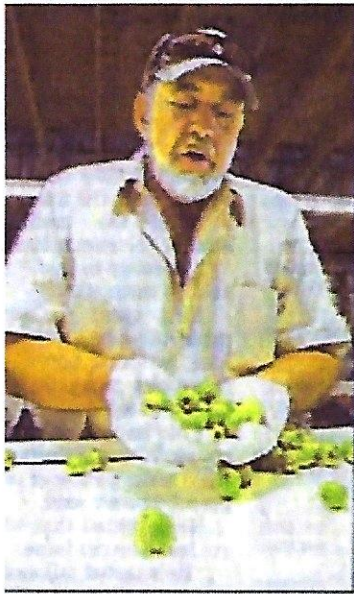
the best genetics from New Zealand, where the berries are also grown.

"Like music, there's a lot of trial and error to see what works," said Jackson, 70.

There are thousands of varieties of the fruit, he says, but only about 10 that are commercially viable.

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**T**he production line in Kiwi Berry Organics, above, consists of 14 people who pick through all the berries before packaging.

**Dave Jackson**, in top photo at far left, holds a handful of kiwi berries on the sorting table Thursday morning.

**Coco Jaen**, in bottom photo at far left, dumps a load of kiwi berries into a crate so they can be moved to the processing plant outside Snyder-town.

**Guerda Severe**, at left in photo at immediate left, and **Jacques Etienne** pick kiwi berries Thursday morning.

PHOTOS BY KEITH HAUPT

### Worldwide demand

The harvest started this week. Jackson uses 20 local helpers and a professional picking crew of 20 from the South to bring in the berries in a few days. He says it's difficult to find enough local help.

Growing the berries is very labor intensive, he says. The vines must be pruned three times a year to keep them from growing together and creating a canopy that blocks sunlight.

The berries are then hand-picked and packaged for sale, which takes about three weeks.

Once picked, the berries sit in cold storage for a few weeks to ripen before they are picked up by buyers.

The closest seller is Wegman's in Williamsport and Wilkes-Barre. A package sells for about \$5.

Laubach said the company has reached out to Giant and Weis Markets about selling the fruit, but haven't received any interest.

With its current outlets, the farm sells out each year before the berries are even picked. Still, they would like to have a local outlet for the fruit, they say.



The berries are well-known and sought after along the East Coast, Jackson said, and he's had inquiries from countries from Russia to Malaysia. But locally, they are still relatively unknown.

### **Long life**

Jackson has land to grow more than the 3,000 plants he harvests from now, he said. But he said he makes a comfortable living and isn't really interested in expanding.

The existing vines produce about 30 pallets of berries that hold 1,872 half-pint containers each.

All the berries are packed in plastic "clamshell" cartons, but Jackson says they overpack each one "significantly" to protect the berries and offer more value. The fruit has a shelf life of three weeks.

"That's better than any berry I know," he said.

At the end of the season after the first frost, the leftover berries that were skipped over in picking will soar even more in sugar content. They are "strip picked" and sold to wineries and breweries, such as Spyglass Ridge Winery near Sunbury, which uses them to make its Kiwi Ice wine, says Jackson.

### **Music was too 'brutal'**

A drummer who worked with the bands Haji and David Rose Band, Jackson said he turned to growing kiwi berries after realizing the music business was too "brutal" of a career.

He prayed for the right career path that would allow him to still create something original that people have never experienced before while making a living, he said, and he found kiwi berries.

As with music, he said, he wants to create something that mankind has never seen or tasted before.

The plants that yield kiwi berries originated in China and Korea and were brought to the U.S. about 150 years ago, either as ornamental plants or for the fruit.

Several farms have started on the West Coast since Jackson got started, but he said they mainly grow for exports.

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