

# Drying precious fruits of the harvest

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Drying fruit has a long tradition in the orchards around Vacaville and Fairfield.

Early on, ranchers decided not to risk their whole profit just on the fresh fruit market. Many things could go wrong before the valuable cargo finally reached its destinations on the East Coast, or else the harvest was just too bountiful to ship in its entirety.

Drying, on the other hand, preserved fruit for the winter months when prices were much higher. In an age when fresh fruit truly was a seasonal item to be cherished for only a few months each year, dried fruit played an important part in people's diet throughout the rest of the year.

The drying process for apricots and peaches has not changed much over the years.

Charles Roy Mason, who farms in the Suisun Valley, described it:

"Every ranch had a dry yard where they had fruit trays. They still use the fruit trays to dry the fruit. We had little tables where you would put the tray. You'd put the boxes of fruit by the side of the tray.

"You'd stand there and cut the fruit and lay it on the tray. After you get three or four trays on your table, they would come and take the trays and put them on a little car that was on rails.

"They'd stack those up 22 or 23 trays to a car and then push them out on the rail and put them in the sulphur house. Put some sulphur in the sulphur shed and let it burn for eight or ten hours. Then take the fruit out. That would cook the fruit. The juices would come to the top. This is why it was so important to lay the fruit flat and cut it all the way around, so it wouldn't have any tears on it," he explained.

"Then you would take the cars out to the dry yard and the men would take the trays off, one or two at a time, and lay them on the ground. They would stay out in the sun for probably three or four days. It was always very warm. Then you would stack the fruit and it would stay in the stack for another week or so.

"It would still have a lot of moisture. Then you would come and take the trays and lay the boxes down side-by-side and scrape the fruit into the boxes. That was your dried

fruit.”

Vacaville orchardist Jim Moriel added that sulphur was burned in a pit and that causes hydrogen sulfide, which bleaches or cooks the fruit. “It sanitizes. It does everything,” he said. “It makes it a really beautiful color whenever the sunshine gets through with them.

“For the person who has to open up the bleacher early in the morning, they get a whole lung full of sulphur. It was a healthy experience. It would clean out your sinus,” Moriel said.

Prunes underwent a different process than apricot and peaches. Due to their high moisture content, they were difficult to dry in the sun.

To prevent prunes from bloating and bursting their skin, elaborate steps had to be taken to prepare them for the dry yard.

Orchardist Bob Hansen, who grew up in the Suisun Valley, said: “When I was really young, the family dipped the prunes in a hot dip, ran them over the prickle board, put the fruit on the trays and hand-spread them out in the dry yard.

“You’d boil the water with the lye, dump the prunes from their boxes into a metal basket that was lowered to the water. Then you’d dump the prunes out of there onto the shaker. That ran off an electric motor and it would shake the prunes down to a single layer.

“Then the prunes rolled over this real fine prickle board and dropped down onto the trays. The prickle board would break the skin just enough on the prune so that when it dried, the moisture could get outside the prune without stewing it,” he said, noting prickle boards were through the ‘40s.

Then dehydrators became the preferred tool to dry prunes, making the task less labor intensive. After the prunes were dried, they had to be scraped off the tray and either stored for the winter or hauled off to market.

While drying outside, the trays were exposed, not only to the sun, but to all the elements. Rain was the most dangerous threat to prunes and many a farmer remembers getting up at night and spending hours at the dry yard stacking trays to protect the fruit.

Jim Moriel explained why: “Prunes we stacked, but rain wouldn’t have hurt the apricots. I don’t remember stacking apricots in the rain. Prunes are a whole different

matter.

“Farmers used to have heart failure when it rained. You’d go out and stack the prunes in a big hurry. If you let a drying prune get wet, it rots. Apricots do not rot when they get a little bit of water because they have been sulphured.”

To get fruit to and from the sheds and the drying yards, many ranches built a track system on which miniature carts carried the trays.

The carts were pushed manually and accidents were common. One of the most astounding ones happened to Benjamin Matsuura’s father in the 1920s.

“The tracks were very small. They were in sections, so all you had to do, we just buckled them together and laid them on the ground. That is how my father got hurt. He broke his neck. Right after the crop was in, everybody got happy. My cousin was pushing the cars and my father fell in between and broke his neck. The nerve or whatever was the only thing that was hanging.

“He went to the doctor in Vacaville and they give him liniment. We took him to my doctor in Suisun. He told my father to raise his arm and he couldn’t do it. He said, ‘Oh, you got a broken neck.’

“We put him on a train and brought him to Stanford Hospital in San Francisco.”

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