

Hoshigaki: Preserving the Art of Japanese Hand Dried Persimmons

prepared by
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this project is to identify ways to preserve the Japanese art of hand-drying persimmons in Placer County through increasing its economic viability. The information contained in this document is intended to provide Joanne Neft, Director of the Placer County Agricultural Marketing program, with an assessment of the current production and marketing systems as well as specific recommendations for improving the producers' economic returns. Specialty fruit producers and marketers, agricultural development practitioners, and others involved in targeting niche markets for agricultural products may also find valuable information in this document.

This report is organized into four sections. The first section provides a brief history of agriculture and persimmon production in Placer County. In addition, it contains a description of Japanese hand-dried persimmons and the cultural context of its production. The second section contains an assessment of the current production and marketing systems based on interviews with four Placer County *hoshigaki* producers. The third section is comprised of an analysis of opportunities for increasing the economic viability as well as a review of strengths and limitations. This section also includes a survey of six regional farmer's market managers in Northern California. The fourth section contains specific recommendations, which take into account the Placer County producers' goals and preferences.

The Japanese hand-dried persimmon, also known in Japan as "*hoshigaki*," is a traditional Asian high quality dried fruit food product. Japanese immigrants brought the Oriental persimmon and the traditional drying technique to California in the late 1800s, but today only a handful of artisans in California, most of whom reside in Placer County, still practice the drying method. Producers peel each persimmon by hand, hang the fruits in the sun, and periodically massage each fruit by hand for several weeks to ensure even drying. Because the drying technique is both time and labor intensive, both the product

and traditional processing method have become endangered not only in California, but throughout the world.

Hoshigaki has a long history in Placer County and is intimately associated with Japanese immigrants, their culture, and values. Because the drying process is deeply influenced by Japanese values of hard work, perfection, and dedication, the resulting product is distinct from dehydrated and oven-dried fruit products.

Hoshigaki producers in Placer County produce relatively small quantities of dried persimmons, usually less than 1,200 pounds (dry weight) annually per producer. Producers currently sell *hoshigaki* to wholesalers, retailers, and directly to consumers. Direct marketing outlets include farmer's markets, selling "on- farm," and through mail order. Labeling and specialized marketing strategies are used minimally.

Several opportunities exist to increase the profitability of *hoshigaki* production. Because today's consumer actively seeks information about products and is increasingly interested in healthy, nutritious, and "environmentally friendly" foods, *hoshigaki* is likely to be well-accepted beyond the traditional Asian *hoshigaki* consumer. In addition, *hoshigaki* is currently receiving unprecedented publicity. The recent film, 'Red Persimmon,' documents the drying process. In addition, the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity is publicizing *hoshigaki* as a food with special traditional and cultural significance.

At the same time, *hoshigaki* producers face serious challenges passing on the drying technique to future generations. Finding interested young people, hiring affordable labor, and competition from substitute products are serious barriers. Additionally, agricultural land in Placer County is increasingly being sold for suburban development. As more farmers reach retirement age and the Placer County population continues to explode, the existence of agriculture-related activities in Placer County is continually threatened.

From our perspective, the key to preserving the art of *hoshigaki* relies upon three initiatives: preserving the integrity of the drying process, education, and increasing profitability. Preserving *hoshigaki*'s unique heritage and the values associated with its production are critical to maintaining a unique, high-quality product. Educating consumers about *hoshigaki*'s positive qualities and the traditional drying process is essential to encouraging *hoshigaki* purchases by non-Asian consumers. Drying persimmons must be profitable for producers. From our analysis, it appears that increasing the sale price and diverting sales from wholesalers and retailers to direct consumer sales could increase profitability. Several opportunities for increased direct marketing are available. Collective efforts among producers may allow producers to take advantage of direct marketing opportunities with smaller overhead costs.

Preserving Placer County's tradition of *hoshigaki* production is certainly feasible in light of today's consumer preferences and the high quality of the product. Perhaps the greatest

strengths of the producers are their friendliness, strong work ethics, desire for perfection, and generosity. The implementation of any recommendations in this document must be carefully weighed against the eroding effect they might have upon the positive human characteristics of the *hoshigaki* producers themselves. Unlike other food products in today's American market, the integrity of the production process, which involves a close relationship between human beings and food, is central to maintaining the quality of the product. The distinctiveness of *hoshigaki* makes it a food worthy of saving as part of Placer County's agricultural tradition.

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