



Vail resident Will Burke shows off some dried fruit from Sol Simple, a local business he started with his wife, Maria. Sol Simple's organic dried bananas, pineapples, mangos, cashews, honey and coffee are in area stores like Village Market and Freshies Organic Foods in Edwards. Avery Cunliffe photo.

No power? No problem for local dried fruit business

Pineapples, mangos and cashews come here from Nicaragua

By Beth Potter
Mountaineer Staff Writer

It's tough to start a business when you're in Nicaragua, and the electricity goes out for eight hours every day.

On the other hand, it's more easy to do things the "green", or environmentally friendly way, since you're probably going to need to build your own machinery and there's plenty of relatively low-cost labor.

That's what Vail resident Will Burke and his wife Maria found, anyway, over the last three years as they've worked on getting their dried fruit business Sol Simple off the ground.

"It's one of the things you dive into headfirst, and there's no turning back. There have been a lot of bumps, but we have smooth sailing now," Burke says of the enterprise.

When he started, Burke financed his idea with an equity line of credit on his Vail home. The couple splits their time between Vail and Managua, with wife Maria working as a schoolteacher at the U.S. Embassy.

No electricity

"We had rolling blackouts in Nicaragua for about a year. We use hand processing for production, but we still need electricity to run the lights, the fans, the dryer and the computer," Burke says.

In response, Burke looked into getting a generator run on methane, a biofuel created from animal waste. He then built what he bills as the biggest hybrid solar-powered fruit dryer in Central America with solar panels from Canada.

Now, Sol Simple's organic dried bananas, pineapples, mangos, cashews, honey and coffee are in area stores

like Village Market and Freshies Organic Foods, both in Edwards.

Unified Grocers, a West Coast independent grocery store association doing \$5 billion in business per year, recently decided to stock the items, and Whole Foods also is considering them.

"If we see what we think would be a good local product, we try it," says Charlie Spurgeon, store manager at Village Market. "It's a quality product. It seems like it will be a good item for us."

Busting roadblocks

Other roadblocks have popped up, Burke says, from making sure the fruit meets U.S. Department of Agriculture standards and organic standards to convincing Nicaraguan customs officials that his company does not give bribes.

"You have to be patient, and it will happen," Burke said of the customs snarls. "That's how it works in these countries. We have a policy not to bribe anybody, so we haven't."

Long shelf life

The packages of dried fruit sell for about \$3. They have a shelf life of about a year. Burke doesn't expect the products to start paying for themselves for the next five years however, given how long it takes to convince stores to stock them and all of the start-up costs associated with running the new plant in Nicaragua.

The former teacher isn't worried, though.

"A lot of this process has been off of gut feeling and knowing that the market is ready for something like this," Burke says.

Burke originally went to Nicaragua to teach school. He later got interested in business, meeting with Nicaraguan government officials and U.S. aid agencies. The cashews are produced by a small women's cooperative; other farmers he works with are now involved



Burke's packages of dried fruit sell for roughly \$3 and have a shelf life of about a year. Avery Cunliffe photo.

in getting organic certifications. Six interns from Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern College in Illinois have signed on.

Fair wages

"I was out of my league when I started ... but as their project, they do marketing for me, and they're also consulting with me on the finance end," Burke says.

It's Burke's enthusiasm that seems to work the best with potential distributors, though.

"It's good to see there are people like Will out there who really try to make life better for people every-

where. That's the lifestyle we support — fair wages for growers," says Delling Zing, who calls himself the "conductor of tranquility and glee" at Freshies. "And it's a sustainable project that helps single women out there."

Burke and his wife also own a hotel on the beach on Corn Island in Nicaragua, where there is no electricity, no cars, and phone and Internet service is available by satellite.

For more information about the hotel, go to: www.casaiguana.com. For more information about the dried fruit, go to: www.sol-simple.com.

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4H SHOOTS FORWARD

They even learn how to give constructive criticism.

"You sandwich the correction between two positives," says Hammond. "It works very well."

Oppenheimer specializes in archery and teaches dozens of kids how to do it properly and safely.

Interested in shooting something?

For information on shooting sports or any other 4-H activity, call the CSU Cooperative Extension at 328-8775.

"No matter what their skill level going in, they'll be taught the same skills going out," he says.

Sportsmen and activists alike

The Whistling Bullets shooting sports club hosts a hunter education course for

kids every year in late February.

"Two of my daughters went through it. One is an avid hunter and one is an animal rights activist," said Eagle County school board president Scott Green. "They came out of it with increased respect for each other's views."