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## California raisins moving up consumption ladder once again

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It has been almost 15 years since Ben Indasun, Justin X. Grape and Tiny Goodbite strutted their stuff on television and theater screens; yet, if asked, most Americans would likely say they saw the trio on the screen just last week.

You know the trio better as the California Dancing Raisins. Their rendition of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" while promoting the virtues of California raisins made them into an icon still considered one of the top 10 advertising symbols of all time.

They retired in 1994 when the California Raisin Advisory Board (CALRAB) folded. They made a comeback from bureaucratic purgatory four years later when the grower-funded California Raisins Marketing Board (CRMB) was formed to fill the void left by CALRAB's demise.

When CALRAB closed, the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) became "managers" of the famous raisins since CALRAB was a state marketing commission and therefore state property.

When the grower-only directed CRMB picked up raisin promotion efforts, CDFA gave the new organization permission to use the famous dancing raisin icons once again.

However, they have not been in the limelight like they were from 1986 until 1994 when the claymation creations starred in their own Emmy-nominated TV special, had their own Saturday morning cartoon series, and even spawned claymation versions of Ray Charles and Michael Jackson.

They became so popular that one year they made more money than all California raisin growers combined.

The claymation raisins were television stars when CALRAB was collecting \$20 million per year for raisin promotion activities from growers and packers. CRMB has a total budget of just \$6 million, funded by a \$20 per ton grower assessment. So for now, the Motown raisins are used as costumed characters at special events promoting raisins.

The creation, retirement and now revival of the claymation figures is just part of the past two tumultuous decades for California raisin producers. Prices were all over the board during that span, but mostly low. Huge vineyard acreages have been pulled, replaced almost totally by non-grape permanent crops like almonds because of the economic malaise in the raisin and wine industry. Raisin shipments fell from more than 200,000 tons in 1990 to less than 160,000 tons for the 1999-2000 crop year. A year later, the industry produced 432,000 tons, leaving the industry with a huge surplus and still more economic bloodletting.

Over the years there have been a variety of industry-sponsored programs to reduce crops. There have been industry-financed vine removal programs. Growers were once paid in surplus raisins to spur prune traditionally cane-pruned Thompson Seedless vines so they would not produce grapes. Surplus raisins were virtually given away for school lunch programs. They were distilled into high-proof alcohol and even sold for cattle feed.

Raisins have been overproduced for years, according to Ron Worthley, president of CRMB and general manager for the Raisins Administrative Committee (RAC). The RAC is a federal marketing order that manages the raisin supplies each year.

However, for the first time in many years, supply and demand are very close to being in balance and there is light at the end of a long, long tunnel for surviving producers of raisin-type grapes like Thompsons.

The 2007 crop will total about 330,000 tons after some reconditioning of weather-damaged raisins from about 234,000 acres of raisin-type grapes, a bit up from last year's crop of 308,000 tons. This is significant because the crops represent back-to-back stable supplies.

About 200,000 tons of raisins are sold domestically each year and about 100,000 tons are exported. About half of that export tonnage is sold at industry-subsidized prices lower than domestic prices to reduce excess tonnage. Actual export demand, according to some industry experts, is about 50,000 tons.

About 250,000 tons is what the industry can sell at a profit to growers, and Worthley is looking forward to the day it reaches that level so he can hang a "Sold Out" sign on the RAC door and proclaim the crop to be 100 percent free tonnage with no reserve tonnage.

CRMB's efforts on behalf of the state's 3,500 raisin producers are a big reason raisin supplies are getting close to that elusive balanced position with demand.

Created a year before raisin shipments hit their lowest level, the industry has seen almost a 21 percent growth since the 1999-2000 season when the industry packed only 157,000 tons.

"We expect strong demand for California raisins to continue this year. This healthy 2007 crop, coupled with solid marketing activities planned by CRMB, will make 2008 a great year for California raisins," said Worthley.

There are about 60 marketing orders, commissions, advisory councils and the like funded by crop assessments in California. The big ones are the Almond Board of California and the California Milk Advisory Board with budgets of more than \$30 million each.

Raisins are a little different. Huge production increases are ahead for almonds, milk, and cheese products — with more trees and cows producing more almonds and milk. If anything, raisin tonnage may increase only slightly over the next few years, and most likely will remain steady to lower than current production levels.

Since it is highly unlikely that California will be producing appreciably more raisins in the near future, CRMB's goal is to grow the domestic market and get more money for the growers with that increased demand.

"Our goal is to grow the domestic market to maintain strong prices for growers," said Larry Blagg, CRMB senior vice president of marketing.

Fortunately, Blagg, Worthley and Karla Stockli, vice president of marketing, can work toward that goal with a commodity that is a well-established part of the American consumers' diet that is healthy and nutritious.

"Raisins are a very safe, healthy, and natural food. They're almost bulletproof," said Blagg.

Stockli grew up in Madera, Calif., and spent plenty of time in her family's vineyards. "My grandmother is 97-years-old and still a raisin farmer. It is hard work, and I know what growers must do to produce a crop. That is why I am dedicated to using my marketing expertise to make sure they get a return for their efforts."

California produces 45 percent of the world's raisins, all within a 60-mile radius of Fresno.

CRMB's promotional efforts are focused in two areas, as a healthy family snack food and in the food service and baking industries. About 40 percent of each year's crop is sold to consumers. The other 60 percent is sold as ingredients.

The raisin industry has two nationally known fitness and nutrition experts extolling the virtue of raisins. One is Julie Jones, a board certified, licensed nutritionist and professor of nutrition at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn. According to Stockli, she speaks at domestic and international conferences on nutrition, and raisins are often part of her presentation.

Valerie Water, a Los Angeles-based fitness trainer, has 17 years of experience working with celebrities getting ready for movie roles, events, magazine layouts and other high profile activities. She is also a national spokesperson for raisins.

Other board activities include back-to-school promotional and give away programs featuring raisins, online recipes, celebrity chefs, and ethnic markets — like the Hispanic, Indian and Asian food markets. The board buys both consumer and trade advertising promoting raisins.

"We have had very good responses to our message. For example, we had more than 100 million media impressions for our back-to-school media campaign. More than 80,000 consumers entered a sweepstakes we ran on Loveyourraisin.com," she added.

"We are getting a lot of response from the Internet."

Stockli said the board's consumer promotional efforts are focusing on women with children. Families are busier than ever as well as more focused on nutrition, and raisins fit well into that lifestyle, according to Stockli.

With a limited budget and an established food product, Worthley admits it has been a formidable challenge for the new CRMB to prove itself.

"Competition is fierce," admits Worthley. California raisins are somewhere between David and Goliath. Goliath is the non-fruit mega brands funded by Super Bowl-sized advertising budgets. The other element in the marketplace is the newness of things like Goji berry and pomegranates.

"For California raisins to have a true renaissance, we must not get caught up in focusing on what we do not have, but rather we must play to our strengths and focus on what we do have," said Worthley.

For Worthley, that is focusing on raisins as a healthy on-the-go snack with natural sweetness, wholesome nutrition and "healthful deliciousness."

"The positioning of California raisins is all about helping our target consumers and related industries recognize how perfectly California raisins fit into their lives and their work. It is all about getting consumers and other users to look at an old favorite in a new way that works for them right now."

CRMB's board also recognizes where the \$6 million comes from and also earmarks \$200,000 annually into raisin research, much of it showcased at a grower symposium held last January.

With more than 3,000 bosses and subject to renewal referendums every five years, marketing orders and commissions like CRMB are constantly working under a "what have you done lately" microscope.

As part of the state law, the first renewal came three years after CRMB was approved by growers. That was almost an automatic since the marketing order was just getting started well with its promotional efforts.

However, the renewal referendum in 2006 was another story.

It had been five years since the last vote and with the sometimes rancorous history of raisin marketing efforts, CRMB's staff was not sure of the future.

"We heard questions about whether the marketing board would continue. There were rumblings about where things were going with our program," said Blagg. "We laid out to growers where we had been and where we are going and the referendum passed with a 96 percent yes vote. We almost fell over," said Blagg.

California's raisin industry has been through tough times. Many raisin grape growers have gone out of business or switched to more stable crops. It has been a bloody two decades of economic readjustments. However, it looks like the industry is finally turning around with supply and demand coming into balance with each season. It has come at a high personal price for many, but those who remain are looking at a far brighter picture than they were eight years ago. And CRMB obviously is playing a key role in moving the industry forward.

The numbers are good this year for the industry. Through seven months of the 2007-2008 marketing year, exports are up 25 percent and domestic sales have increased 3 percent. There are reasons for the California Dancing Raisins to lay their jive down as only they can.

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