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Agricultural Partnership**

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Dehydrate Apple Slices

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Canada

Orchard finds sweet success with dehydrated apple slices

The first thing you notice when you enter the commercial kitchen at Top Notch Farms in Milton Station is the warm, sweet scent of apples. It smells terrific.

Mark Richardson points to the source, a dehydrator the size of a portable fridge. He opens the door and pulls out a rack of light brown slices of dehydrating Honeycrisp apples.

“Our customers love them,” says Richardson. “We played around with the settings and settled on a dehydration time of 21 to 23 hours, depending on the time of year. What we get isn’t dry and crumbly. Our dehydrated slices are chewy with a pleasant taste and mouth feel.”

The resulting \$3 and \$10 packages of apple slices have become such a hit for the high-density orchard and market garden that 60 pounds of apples will go through the dehydrator three times a week for the next four or five months.

And for Richardson, who is still a year away from full production from his 3,600-tree, 3.5-acre orchard, it’s been a lesson in how to pull extra value from all parts of his production.

“We started planting the orchard five years ago with some high-value varieties like Honeycrisp, Ambrosia and Gala and we’ve since expanded into Liberty, Ginger Gold, Cortland, Sunrise and some other varieties that are popular with the public,” says Richardson.

“That’s a big investment, so we needed to get as much value as we could from the apples. That’s why we invested in the commercial kitchen.”

Because Honeycrisp is one of their most popular varieties, they felt they had a secondary market there for some value-added products.

They started making fresh apple cider weekly with apples that were slightly blemished, known in the industry as seconds or culls. They also found a market for the imperfect fruit itself with customers



Mark Richardson of Top Notch Farms, his dehydrator, and the latest batch of Applecrisp slices. Purchased with help from the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, the dehydrator has allowed the high-density orchard to create extra value from blemished apples that might normally be worth pennies each as cider apples.

who welcomed the opportunity to get premium apples for a bargain price.

That’s when they heard that some of these customers were dehydrating their seconds and loving the results.

“We got a \$150 dehydrator and started dehydrating apple slices five pounds at a time,” says Richardson. “We couldn’t keep up with demand.”

Knowing they had a hit on their hands, he found some funding support from the federal-provincial Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (SCAP) to invest in an industrial-sized dehydrator.

“When you have already gone through the outlay of capital for the orchard and the kitchen and all the supplies, you really have to choose carefully where you put your money next,” says Richardson. “Sustainable CAP just de-risked it a lot for us and made it easier to make another capital purchase.

“It’s allowed us to produce this really nice secondary product from something that is often discarded. And because it’s got a shelf life of six months to a year, it’s given us a product we can sell year-round.”

In fact, instead of settling for a few cents per apple used in cider production, Richardson can get up to a third of the value of fresh Honeycrisp with his dehydrated rings.

"It's really nice to have that extra cash flow when so many of your costs are fixed," he says.

He acknowledges that preparing the apples for dehydration is labour intensive. But they've made it a family activity. Richardson and his wife Jolene peel and slice a bushel of apples for each dehydrating session, and their three daughters pitch in to load the dehydrator.

The Richardsons sell their products to a variety of markets, including direct sales and farmers markets. They also sell through Growers Station, a produce distribution hub run by Island growers as per Chris' comment that supplies PEI stores and restaurants.

Richardson, who grew up on a pig and beef farm, became interested in apples when his parents bought a nearby orchard from a retiring neighbour. But he admits he's been on a steep learning curve establishing his own orchard and developing secondary products. But he says he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm happy to be here and my family is happy to be here," he says. "We've got a nice little market garden and chickens that are more like pets than anything for my girls and I'm involved with the apple industry. It's a good place to be."



Mark Richardson with a package of dehydrated Honeycrisp apple rings. His high-density orchard in Milton Station has found new value with imperfect Honeycrisp apples that can't be sold on the fresh market.