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IMPERIAL FROZEN FOODS
A COMPANY THAT KEEPS HEATING UP

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A Company that Keeps Heating Up

Produced by Sean Barr & Written by Kellie Ducharme

Big things often have small origins. Such is the case with Imperial Frozen Foods, the brainchild of Peter Skolnick's father Sam, a Russian immigrant more than 80 years ago. What began as a hobby in a Brooklyn, New York grocery store has become a multimillion dollar frozen fruit business.

During the 1930s Peter Skolnick's grandfather made fresh jams and jellies in the grocery storeroom. The canning business grew quickly and Skolnick's grandfather bought a nearby factory and manufactured juices and jams during the war for the government and local grocery companies. The firm, at the time called Fruitcrest, continued to operate in Brooklyn for many years. Imperial Frozen Foods, was born under the umbrella of Fruitcrest in 1957. Sam, who had experience as a fruit buyer, separated

Imperial from the Fruitcrest label then moved the new Imperial Frozen Foods to Great Neck, NY.

A New Era

Imperial Frozen Foods was one of the few frozen fruit brokers in the United States for much of its initial existence. The Empire State remained Imperial's base of operations for close to 40 years, until the younger Skolnick took over in 1995 and moved the company headquarters to Monterey, California, with an eye to expansion (a branch office in New York still handles sales and logistics). Returning to the West Coast and the Pacific Ocean was a sort of homecoming for Skolnick, who remembers spending long periods of time on the west coast of Mexico, where his

family owned a villa in the popular resort town, Puerto Vallarta, which was close to the growing and processing areas in Jalisco.

Imperial purchased a strawberry processing plant in central Mexico in 1962, and was one of the first companies to establish a multinational food manufacturing facility, says Skolnick. “[My father] felt bringing the quality standards that he knew from manufacturing in the U.S. to Mexico and also creating a bigger supply-base for strawberries in the United States ... would be successful.”

Intermex (the Mexican plant) and Imperial Frozen Foods became one of the largest exporters of frozen strawberries from south of the border. At its peak, Imperial exported 80 million pounds of frozen fruit a year. At the time, Imperial sold most of its fruit to yogurt, ice cream and jam companies, but it also produced a brand of strawberries (packaged in milk

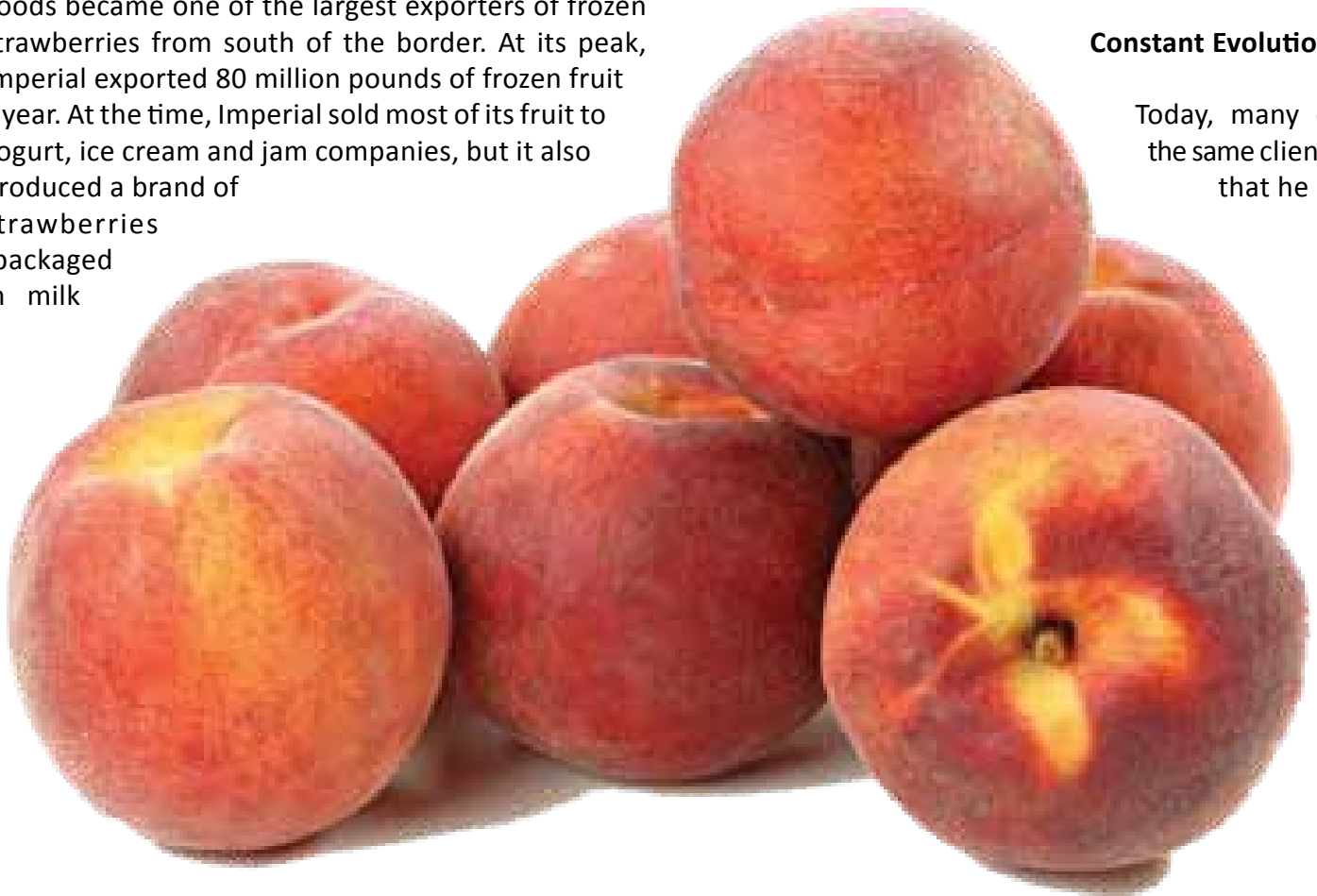


cartons) called SunVale, which was widely sold to southeastern and Texas supermarkets. “He had high standards, which made the Mexican strawberries acceptable to U.S. markets,” explains Skolnick.

Skolnick learned the basics of the business at an early age. At just 12 years old, Skolnick remembers sitting on the floor in Great Neck office and stuffing envelopes with newsletters for his father. “Since my family has been in the business so long, I’m working with the sons and daughters of the people my father did business with for decades,” Skolnick says. “I have a memory of many of the customers as I used to see all the names on the envelopes.”

Constant Evolution

Today, many of the same clients that he





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[My father] felt bringing the quality standards that he knew from manufacturing in the U.S. to Mexico and also creating a bigger supply-base for strawberries in the United States ... would be successful..”

Peter Skolnick, President



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sent newsletters to all those decades ago remain loyal to Imperial. Currently, Imperial offers a biweekly email newsletter that goes out to 1,000 key executives in the frozen food and supermarket industry. "One of the real areas of growth in our business has been through the newsletter," explains Skolnick, adding that each newsletter has a direct link to his email so potential clients can communicate with him at the click of a button. "It's been terrific for our business, for new customers and for our credibility."

Imperial is a member of the American Frozen Foods Institute, a trade organization that promotes the interests of both United States and international frozen food providers. The firm participates in AFFI's annual tradeshow on the West Coast. Imperial's Web site, www.imperialfrozenfoods.com, is another great tool companies who are interested in Imperial can use;

Skolnick says the Web site has been a very useful marketing method.

Imperial is always interested in gaining new customers, but also maintaining and enhancing the relationships



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it has with existing clients. "I like to grow the existing business and get new customers," explains Skolnick. "Sometimes your existing customer base is your best opportunity for growth, because you know their business and already have experience with them."

Imperial has focused efforts developing and supplying many private label retailers across the US. Skolnick explains that the private-label frozen fruit business is dominated by sales representing 75 percent of supermarket frozen fruit sales. Imperial has business relations with manufacturing facilities in the Pacific Northwest, southern Michigan and upstate New York. These widely placed locations give Imperial a distribution service advantage for their customers. An exclusive 25-year sales and marketing



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relationship with National Commodity Sales, based in Atlanta, Georgia, has resulted in solid private label distribution to a wide market. The private label industry has been experiencing constant growth and has been a beneficial market for Imperial.

Imperial's SunVale brand has evolved from the humble milk carton of frozen strawberries to a full line of frozen fruit, including frozen whole strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, berry medleys, peaches and rhubarb (which many people will be surprised to find out is a vegetable not a fruit).

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Imperial also has close-knit relationships with many of its suppliers and factories. The company contracts with processors of blueberries from Michigan, strawberries from California, and raspberries from the Pacific Northwest and Chile. "We've done business with them for decades," explains Skolnick, who adds that a lot of the factories are family-run American businesses. "They are known for their quality and their dedication to us, they work hard to make the whole package work."

Skolnick guides the company as a whole with focus on quality and value. Under his leadership, this family-run company continues to expand as one of the nation's leading manufacturers of frozen fruit. "I see double-digit growth," explains Skolnick, who works with his dedicated team to assure both suppliers and customers can depend on Imperial Frozen Foods products. What started in the back of a single corner grocer has now found its way throughout the nation's shelves thanks to decades of measured decisions; but there's a reason they always say that slow and steady wins the race. ■



COMPANY AT A GLANCE

Established : 1944

Imperial Frozen Foods Employees : 6

President/Owner : Peter Skolnick

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