

# Watsonville / Largest frozen vegetable-producing city in nation



One of the workers at Watsonville Canning makes final inspection.

By KEITH MURAOKA  
Sentinel Staff Writer

**WATSONVILLE** — When one mentions Watsonville, thoughts of farming, apples and the Mexican heritage usually comes to mind. Little do most people realize that this community of 24,000 — just a straight shot down Highway 1 — is the largest, single frozen vegetable-producing city in the nation.

Three of the largest processors are located here. Names like Green Giant, Richard Shaw and Watsonville Canning spew effluent steam night and day. The county's largest work force cleans, cuts and packages such million-dollar crops as Brussels sprouts, beans, cauliflower and broccoli.

Watsonville Canning was a tour stop of the recent 11th annual Farm-erama. This particular day more than a million pounds of broccoli was being processed, keeping some 2,000 workers busy.

"More than 400 million pounds of vegetables are processed and frozen here a year," said Smiley Verduzco, executive vice president of the Conco Corp., the parent company of Watsonville Canning.

Packages bear the names of literally hundreds of brand names commonly seen in frozen food departments of supermarkets across the nation. There's even a separate warehouse just to house the various labels — more than a million dollars worth of labels alone!

There are 40 acres of buildings at Watsonville Canning, more than 100 acres over-all, according to president David Munnich.

A typical PG&E bill — to run the mountains of machinery and so-called "freezer tunnels" — costs well over \$100,000 a month, he added.

Broccoli, which was being processed the day of the tour, is brought to

the plant by trucks or rail car. Verduzco said the amount of produce brought in by truck or rail is split evenly.

It is all precisely hand cut in the field, he said. Broccoli, for example, must be at least six inches long since they are packaged six at a time — each spear, 5½ inches long.

Out of every 100 million pounds, about 20 million pounds is wasted. The plant, however, doesn't waste the waste, said Verduzco. Almost all of it is given away free to farmers who use it as cattle feed.

The broccoli is washed outside and travels by conveyor belt inside where workers do all the trimming by hand. Workers stand lined up like tin soldiers, expertly cutting and slicing to the right length.

The broccoli continues by conveyor belt where it is washed and blanched for three minutes at 190-degree temperatures.

"People always ask whether we add anything to make it so green," said Verduzco. "All we do is steam blanch it to kill the enzymes. When you do things right, you don't have to add anything."

The product is then packaged, labels are put on automatically. Other machines weigh each package, shooting packages off the conveyor with a giant blast of air when the weight isn't right.

From there, the broccoli is immediately put into huge freezer tunnels where packages are kept at a cool 40 degrees below zero. The packages sit there for one to four hours, depending on how long it takes to get 50 degrees below zero, added Verduzco.

This goes on nearly every hour of every day at various Watsonville plants. The city has to retain its title of being the top frozen vegetable-producer in the country, even though little do most people realize it.



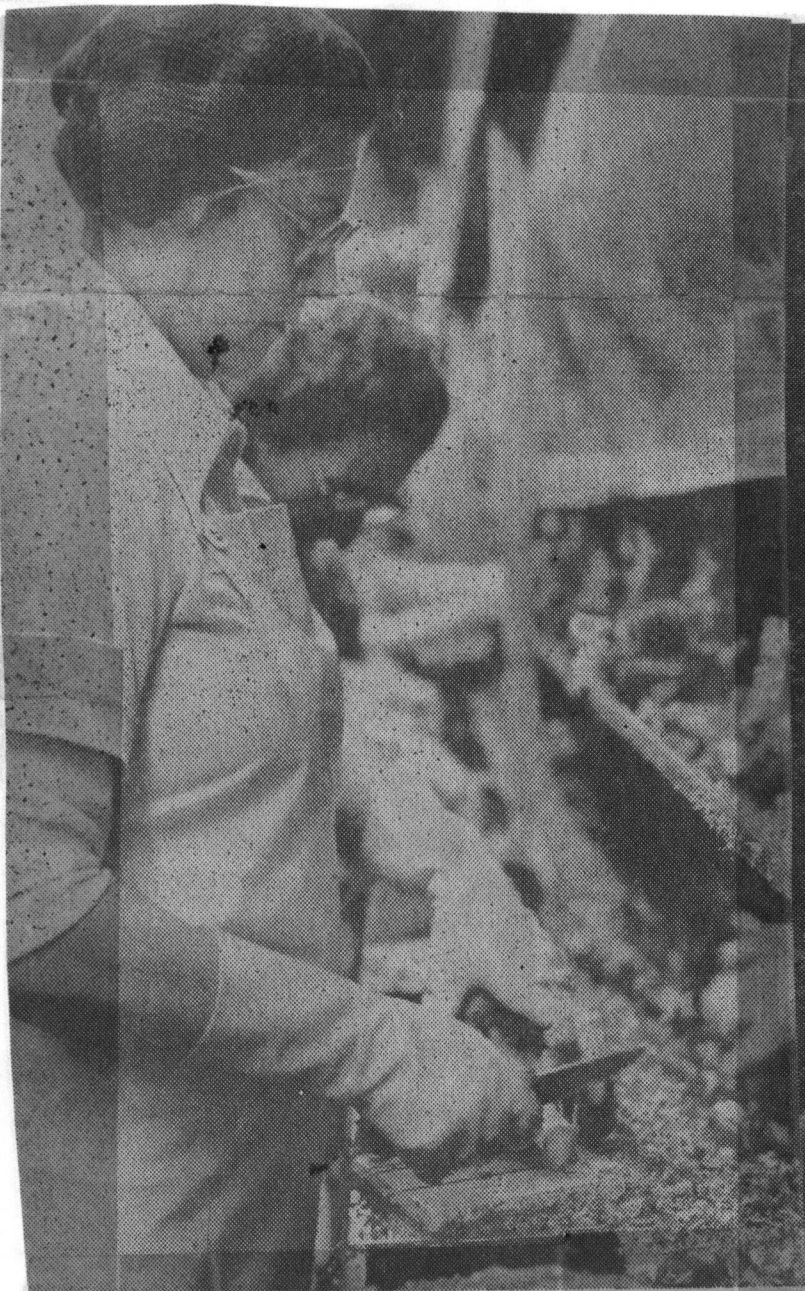
County ag advisor Ron Tyler looks at broccoli.

Photos by  
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*Before packaging, broccoli is sized.*



*After sizing is done, broccoli is packaged and sent on conveyor.*



*The broccoli assembly line at Watsonville Canning.*