



California Giant CEO Bill Moncovich holds the first-of-its-kind strawberry juice.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

# S.J. takes on O.J.

## Local grower blazes trail in strawberry juice market

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### WATSONVILLE

✓ After 30 years in the berry business, Bill Moncovich knows strawberries. "I'd done everything possible with strawberries," he said.

As co-founder of California Giant Berry Farms in Watsonville, Moncovich and his team started by brokering berries. Cal Giant is now the third largest strawberry grower and shipper in the nation. With more than 900 acres in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys alone, the privately owned company also farms strawberries in Santa Maria and Oxnard.

"We ship 13 to 14 million fresh cartons of strawberries (annually)," Moncovich said.

Last fall, the Watsonville native was appointed to the state Board of Agriculture by then-Gov. Gray Davis and spends several days each month in Sacramento.

Still, he wanted to try something new.

"I have a passion for the industry. I love it," he said. "I wanted to do something outside the box."

### The idea guy

Enter Pete Mattson, who Moncovich calls the "idea guy." Chairman of Foster City-based Mattson & Co., Mattson's the largest developer of new products for the food and beverage industry. Successes include Starbuck's frappuccino and the Boca burger, a meatless version of the hamburger.

"Bill (Moncovich) wanted to explore what might be possible," Mattson said. "Cut fruits are a big growth industry, but with reduced shelf life. They also lack three

things: portability, consistency and convenience.

"We found that Americans, in dollars, drink more fruit than they eat," Mattson said.

Orange juice is a \$3.5 billion industry while oranges account for a relatively scant \$500 million.

Cal Giant wanted a piece of the pie.

Mattson & Co. discovered strawberries were the least used fruit in juices.

"You see strawberries with banana, strawberries with kiwis, and it's the smallest portion of the juice. People were using pulp in small quantities."

### Low-carb wave

In March, the company launched Just Strawberries. Mattson credits Lucky Westwood, operations manager at Cal Giant, for the name, though Westwood himself insists it was a team effort.

"The name reflects what was most important about the drink," Westwood said.

At 16 carbs per 12 fluid ounces, Just Strawberries is 60 percent fruit juice and 40 percent purified water. The juice is flash pasteurized, resulting in a 40-day shelf life.

Rather than using simple sugars, the development team added Splenda, an artificial sweetener, "to add sweetness and lower caloric density," Mattson said.

"It's a growing trend in beverages. Both Coke and Pepsi have introduced soft drinks with Splenda. Even Minute Maid is adding in more orange juice and less sugar to their product."

Because his juice contains 62 percent less carbs than orange juice, Moncovich points out it is perfect for people with diabetes or on special diets who might



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### Just Strawberries

**WHAT:** First strawberry-only juice drink.

**WHO:** California Giant Berry Farms, the third largest grower/shipper of strawberries in the country. Headquartered in Watsonville with operations in Santa Maria and Oxnard.

**WHERE:** Available locally at Sunnyside Produce in Soquel and Deluxe Foods in Aptos.

**COST:** \$1.89 for a 12-ounce bottle (Sunnyside Produce), \$6.99 for a half-gallon, \$3.99 for a quart, \$1.99 for 16-ounce bottle (Deluxe Foods). Available year-round.

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# Juice

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otherwise be unable to drink other fruit juice because of high sugar and therefore, high carbohydrate content. Product development not only considered "tartness" tests, but viscosity and opacity of the juice.

"Just Strawberries is the low-carb alternative to orange juice," Mattson said.

## Best in show

Research revealed consumers "loved" the mere idea of a strawberry drink, while the drink itself rated "off the charts."

Moncovich completed a two-week Costco road show himself for feedback and to "listen to kids. Unbelievable response."

In mid-May, Just Strawberries garnered coverage from the Today Show's Phil Lempert during the Food Marketing Institute's show in Chicago, introduced as "one of the hits of the show."

Moncovich boasted, "We were right there next to Pepsi and Coke."

Cal Giant is leveraging existing relationships with retail grocers to get the new juice on shelves in the fresh produce section year-round. For now, it is in the testing phase at several major regional grocery chains.

Just Strawberries is available locally at Sunnyside Produce in Soquel and at Deluxe Foods in Aptos.

Moncovich makes no secret

about his ambitions for Just Strawberries: "I'd like to have it sell like orange juice. It would be great for the (strawberry) industry."

Idea guy Mattson sums it up: "S.J. instead of O.J."

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