

*By Fresh Fruit Portal editor Matthew Ogg*

Visit any PMA Fresh Summit and it's likely Frieda's Specialty Produce will have one of the most colorful and inviting stands, plucking a few items from the cornucopia of exotic fruits and vegetables stacked along the wall for tasting sessions; not from an outsourced chef, but someone who works with the group every day and can explain the product in detail.

The recent documentary 'Fear No Fruit' about the company's founder Frieda Caplan is in a similar vein - an educative family affair that makes you stop to appreciate and discover the rich diversity of produce this world has to offer, meanwhile delving deeper into how the now commonplace was once as foreign as the term 'Chinese gooseberry'.

  
Frieda Caplan

That's kiwifruit by the way - a fact that may not be the case if it weren't for Frieda's popularization of the fruit and the word, originally coined by Turners and Growers chairman Jack Turner in 1959 due to the fruit's resemblance to New Zealand's kiwi bird. This touch of marketing nous was to make this exotic crop a mainstay, along with many of the 200 produce items Frieda's has introduced to the U.S.

"Mangoes, papayas, Asian pears, things like that would not be where they are today if it wasn't for Frieda and her organization," industry veteran Dick Spezzano notes in the film.

The implications of these market introductions are manifold, not just for U.S. consumers but growers domestically and in far fledged lands. Undoubtedly, the group's high-volume commercialization of once scarce products has had flow-on effects to the warehouses and supermarket shelves of other nations too. A key take home-from the documentary is how much of Frieda's success grew from not taking obstacles too seriously, finding opportunity where others saw barriers.

Aside from one reference to a child running in fear from a Buddha's hand, the message of the film is not so much about having no fear of trying new fruits but about believing in the market potential of a new item if it has taste, food value and shelf life. Consumers can easily be educated, moreover captivated, by a new crop if the right strategy is in place.

Are they confusing Sunchokes with ginger? Simple solution, put them in a package. That's exactly what Frieda did, pioneering produce industry packaging in the United States and bringing the concept of recipe-based marketing in the process; a strategy that any produce

organization worth its salt is doing nowadays.



With its purple motifs and eccentric job titles like 'forager', the distributor has come along way since when Frieda began her career at the Los Angeles Wholesale Market, back when mushrooms belonged in the 'specialty' category. The reason she chose the industry was to help look after her daughter Karen, who is now CEO and a prominent voice throughout the film alongside her sister Jackie Wiggins and daughter Alex Jackson.

Another key commentator is the eccentric pomologist David Karp, who clearly thinks the world of the entrepreneur.

"That was the Mad Men era. Women didn't run their own businesses, particularly in the produce business which is a tough trade. There'd be guys cussing and it was not a business for a polite woman," he says, highlighting Frieda was a polite woman but "tough enough to make it in that field".

Mixing dad jokes like 'Mangosteen, it's not a Jewish mango' with a devoted enthusiasm for what lies behind the fruit we eat, Karp's commentary will resonate with anyone in this sector who has found themselves to be the eccentric person at social gatherings dropping fruit facts as if everyone ought to know them.



He embodies the consumer curiosity that saw so many of Frieda's introduced products grow in popularity, combined with the culinary experimentation amongst chefs that also helped put these products on the map

The documentary has upbeat music and slick visuals, intermittently presenting fruits and vegetables to the screen like sports stars before a match, complete with descriptions which before the age of the internet used to be the only way to plug these new items.

With a strong marketing and operational focus as well, the documentary also serves as a kind of 'produce industry 101' for the uninitiated, ranging from how buyers get the lowdown on supply issues from the market floor to the types of instruments used to test fruit quality. The narrative goes in-depth with water issues in California, the social aspects of making sure suppliers are sustainable, and the advent of farmers markets.

And like any good flick 'Fear No Fruit' has something of a twist, albeit a small one, involving

a fruit that does not spoil easily.

As far as being a hagiography for the great woman and providing insights for produce industry professionals, this documentary ticks all the boxes and is a must-see. For the general movie-going public though - and perhaps some produce people too - I'd say it could have had greater depth in the storyline about the challenges and obstacles of bringing in new products, painting more of a picture of the cultural and practical issues Frieda had to overcome. At times everything feels a bit too perfect, and I'm sure there were countless interesting stories and narratives that were left on the cutting floor to stay within time.

This is probably because the documentary seeks to take on multiple themes - much like the company imports such a wide portfolio of products - while simultaneously telling the story of Frieda, her family and the changes she has forged in the produce industry. Nonetheless, 'Fear No Fruit' is historically relevant and thought-provoking for modern times. For that, I'll give it 3.5 stars.

*'Fear No Fruit' premiered at the San Luis Obispo International Film Festival in March, and will be released in Video on Demand (VoD) format on June 23 across the following formats: : iTunes, Amazon Instant Video, Google Play, Vudu and XBOX. The film is represented by FilmBuff.*

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