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Figs are elixir for Western Fresh's Kragie

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It might be a bit of an exaggeration, but figs are the reason George Kragie is still in the produce industry today and not contemplating retirement.

"I'm 71 years old and still love managing the fig deal," said Kragie, president of Western Fresh Marketing, based in Madera, CA. "They are the reasons I continue to work at the same pace."



Fresh whole and cut Calimyrna and Mission figs from Western Fresh. Of course he also mentioned that he just finished planting four acres of Asian pears on his Michigan ranch that morning to go along with his 38 acres of apples and four acres of concord grapes. The apples are Michigan staples. He considers Asian pears a great crop for the future and he said there is still a lot of interest in the seeded Concord variety of grapes, the vintage variety from

which Welch's grape juice is made. However, it is the fig that seemingly brings Kragie the most joy. "I'm very excited about this upcoming season. Figs are sexy and they are getting a lot of coverage in the press."

He rattled off the names of several famous chefs with television shows and noted that every time he turns on one of those shows figs are being used in one innovative recipe or another. Kragie and his wife, tropical sales manager Susan Bidvia-Kragie, split their time each year between California and their Michigan farm. In late April the couple had recently arrived in Michigan for their summer stay after touring the fig crop in the California desert. Kragie's son, Chris, manages the operation back in California and the elder Kragie said his son is steadily acquiring the ownership shares of the family-run company.

While the vast majority of California figs are produced in the San Joaquin Valley in the center of the state, Kragie is the main marketer of the earlier volume originating in the desert. "We're excited for the season to start. The crop looks really good."

Western Fresh is expected to market its first figs in mid-May from the desert. Those will be Breva crop figs, so named because they are the first figs of the season produced on last year's fruit wood. They will quickly be followed by Black Mission figs from the same area. By the end of May, he said fig growers in Kern County in the southern San Joaquin Valley would begin production and Kragie expected to have California figs for the following six to seven months. "Last year, we weren't finished until after Christmas."

Because of the increased popularity of figs, the company is increasing its production of both conventional and organic product. Kragie said several growers are in transition to organic production with their acreage "so in the next three years, we are going to have more supplies."

Kragie said the biggest challenge with figs is that they are a labor-intensive crop. He said fig trees are typically picked every day, which requires a large labor force. He added that the labor shortage and immigration issues are combining with the labor laws in the "crazy state of California" to force fig producers to hire more labor or pay overtime. "Our costs are going up," he said. "Luckily we have a crop with increasing demand."

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