

## Fresh-cut apples' popularity spreads

By MAI HOANG YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

A sign at **Tree Top's** new fresh-slice facility declares that sliced apples are "giving sliced bread a run for its money."

Indeed, apple slices are being served alongside bread in school cafeterias nationwide, boosting sales for the Selah-based cooperative of fruit growers.

**Tree Top** officials said Tuesday that they expect the sliced apple market to grow significantly, so the company moved its apple slice operation from its Milton- Freewater, Ore., plant to a newly constructed facility in Selah that can accommodate growth. The Oregon plant, which employs about 80 and processes other fruit, is expected to close Friday, spokeswoman Laura Prisc said.

Sixteen new employees began working at the Selah plant three weeks ago. The facility could create up to 40 new jobs once it runs at full capacity, said **Tree Top** CEO Tom Stokes.

"There's a tremendous amount of excitement around these products," Stokes said. "There are people in every channel and outlet interested in fresh cut fruit."

Its existing markets include 550 McDonald's restaurants throughout the Northwest and Alaska, and food service facilities nationwide.

Ned Rawn, **Tree Top's** fresh slice director, said that the company is looking into new areas where it could sell its products. There are plans to begin selling apple slices in several retail markets, including warehouse clubs and grocery stores.

A year and a half ago, **Tree Top** began selling its sliced apples, which are sealed with a vitamin and mineral blend that includes calcium ascorbate to prevent the fruit from turning brown. There are several competitors in the apple slice market, including several that distribute to McDonald's.

"We solved the riddle - we kept the apples from turning brown," Rawn said. "With that riddle solved, it opens a plethora of opportunities."

There's also an opportunity to grow in its existing markets.

Sliced fruits and vegetables have become more prominent in cafeterias as school directors look for nutritious foods for student lunches, said Erik Peterson, spokesman for the School Nutrition Association, an organization of school food service and nutrition directors based in Alexandria, Va.

According to a survey of 1,500 school food service directors, 75 percent of high schools, 71 percent of middle schools and 78 percent of elementary schools said they offer fresh fruits and vegetables daily.

Peterson said anecdotal data show that children are likely to eat fruit slices rather than the whole piece of fruit.

"Kids tend to prefer the fresh over the canned or frozen," he said. "They tend to prefer things that are easier to eat."

Peterson said demand for more cut fruits and vegetables will increase as more schools serve fruit and vegetables more frequently. Several schools nationwide began serving fresh cut produce during other times of the school day or at after school activities.

"If kids have easy access to free veggies and fruits to snack on, they're less likely to snack on things that aren't good for them," Peterson said.