



From left to right: Rusty Justus, Debbie Weidemann, Laura Coburn, Steve Stratton

# Justus For All

By C. Wayne Dawson

**A thriving Georgetown startup company shares its scrumptious secrets and its story.**

**H**idden in a prefabricated building in an industrial park a block away from Shell Road resides one of Georgetown's fastest growing businesses, Justus Foods. Chamber of Commerce President Mel Pendland hails the five-year-old company as "Georgetown's Ben and Jerry's" when the firm won the Chamber's award as 2009 Georgetown Small Business of the Year

Unlike the moist, chewy flavor of dehydrated food carried by major chains, Justus' freeze-dried fruit tastes light, crispy, and so sweet that one customer describes it as "fruit crack." That's because the company freeze-dries ten pounds of fruit for every pound it packages, producing a sharp sweetness many



people find addictive. Justus uses no GMO products, and the only added ingredient is a little cinnamon sugar in its apple product.



"We don't use sulfite preservatives like dehydrated food manufacturers do," says Rusty Justus, the company's founder and CEO. He also shuns supplies from China and insists on maintaining high standards. "We lab-test our fruit after freeze-drying it and get a certificate of analysis," he explains. "Everything is regulated by the Texas State Health Department and meets FDA standards."

Justus Foods shares fruit processing duties with a supplier company in a highly regimented procedure. First, the supplier extracts moisture from the fruit in a temperature-controlled environment under -118 degrees Fahrenheit, a necessary step to meet the classification of producing a 'raw' food. Then the supplier ships the freeze-dried fruit to Georgetown, where Justus Foods removes powder and small pieces, and packages it.

Justus Foods distributes freeze-dried pineapple, Gala apples, peaches,

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and strawberries, but the company isn't stopping there. It's considering whole-kernel corn that will taste roasted. It sells its delicious fruit to 48 states, Canada, Australia, and U.S. military bases abroad through the web.

"The appeal of our product is that children, who would normally steer clear of fruit, love the taste of our product and want to snack on it. That delights their mothers," Rusty says. "Our target customer is a mother between 25–45 years of age with a household income of \$100,000 plus."

Financing was the biggest problem Justus Foods faced as it was starting up, says Rusty. When he started out, Rusty knocked on many bank doors only to hear the same

question: "Why should we lend you money when 80 percent of small businesses fail?" Eventually, he had to seek out non-commercial funding sources.

"I hate to see how many local businesses are failing," Rusty says. "Banks need to understand that viability doesn't happen overnight. We had to struggle for four years until we finally saw a noticeable increase in business."

The company also had a minor problem with consumer perception. "We originally marketed our product under the 'Today's Farm' label, but found that it led people to believe we were selling some kind of candy," says Rusty. "Now, we've added 'Fruit So Right' at the top of our packages so that people will get an accurate impression."

Before Rusty took that giant step of starting a business, he spent his career learning about produce. Rusty was a successful produce buyer for Tom Thumb Food & Drug out of Dallas, a 70-plus store chain in Texas.

He came up with the idea of marketing freeze-dried fruit while backpacking. After sweating over the summits of Mt. Rainier and the Cascades, Rusty began to think about the advantages of lightweight freeze-dried foods. After some research, he noticed that the major food manufacturers only used the process for granola and cereal.

So Rusty seized the market opportunity, and Justus Foods was born. ■

