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## Red Jacket Orchards hopes to expand season with new juice facility

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These days, the busiest intersection in Geneva isn't somewhere along Routes 5 and 20.

Brian Nicholson, president of Red Jacket Orchards, says it may be right inside the warehouse attached to his family's farm market.

Observers might agree once they see two forklifts negotiate a one-lift-wide path between pasteurization equipment and the juice bottling area to load apples, cider and other fruit juices into tractor-trailers.

The drivers perform a constant and intricate ballet, while some 150 workers around them size, sort and pack fruit or bottle fresh fruit juice blends, a niche product that Red Jacket is riding to national acclaim.

This is the busiest time of year at Red Jacket because it's the height of the apple harvest. But a \$3.7 million juice-processing facility that Red Jacket hopes to open in January will spread the bounty of the season around to some of the other 10 months of the year.

"We're ... at about the half-million gallon mark," Nicholson said of the fresh fruit juices that Red Jacket produces annually. With the new building, he said, "we're going to quadruple that."

What started as a quaint roadside farm stand 51 years ago is today an interstate distribution network that brings Red Jacket Orchards fruit and its premium juice products to dozens of farm markets in the New York City area and two grocery chains with stores from Washington, D.C., to Boston.

To supply that growing network, Nicholson and his twin brother, Mark, the company vice president who works in the Virginia area, said they had to beef up the company's infrastructure, still anchored by 600 acres of farmland in eastern Ontario County — some of which has been growing fruit since 1917.

Surveying the fruit-packing area in Geneva one recent afternoon, Brian Nicholson likened the activity to a beehive, where the workers crawl over each other to perform their tasks.

"The patience our crew has with each other is immense," Nicholson said.

The new 21,500-square-foot juice-processing plant, carved out of an orchard behind the farm market, will give the worker bees elbow room.



Maria Jesus Mendoza of Geneva packs apples for distribution at Red Jacket Orchards in Geneva. The company tries to manage almost all the steps between farm and consumer. (ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer)

With 10 years of tax breaks and rebates on green initiatives, the expansion will also create 15 jobs.

It will include space for cold storage of apples on site, making it easier for Red Jacket to press apple juice year-round and then blend it with berries, plums and apricots, which are harvested in the summer and frozen until they're needed for juice.

The Nicholsons are hoping to gain Leadership in Energy and Environmental and Design certification for the building.

Red Jacket juices — which differ from most other products on the market because they're not made from concentrate and don't contain added sugars or water — have been a hit in New York City farm markets, Whole Foods grocery stores and Wegmans stores.

They've earned thumbs up from *The New York Times'* Florence Fabricant and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

"The flavor is what is getting them the distinction," said Olga I. Padilla-Zakour, director of the New York State Food Venture Center at the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva.

Instead of making a shelf-stable juice, which would require high-temperature canning processes, the Nicholsons are committed to making a perishable product "that maintains a fresh flavor profile," she said.

"People in the metropolitan areas are already happy with their produce, and now these juices are a natural extension for them," Padilla-Zakour said.

While the company has grown 10 percent to 25 percent a year over the last six or seven years, juices increased 50 percent in the last year alone.

"It's like riding a bull. We just hold on and try not to fall off," Mark Nicholson said.

Although the family farm has 450 acres of apples, they've always raised or developed other products to fill out the farm stand.

"We're always kind of harvesting something to be able to have something on the shelf," Mark Nicholson said. The season begins with strawberries in the spring and continues with other summer fruits until fall. With 30 acres of apricots, Red Jacket is the largest grower of apricots in the East.

Last week, apple picking and packing were in full swing, but the pears and plums were coming in, too. One production line was filling recycled plastic four-packs with Empire apples destined for an online produce delivery service in New York City. Another line was packaging late-season plums into green quart containers for the Green Market in New York, bulk boxes for corner grocery stores in the Big Apple, and one-quart plastic clamshells for Wegmans.

Mark Nicholson said Red Jacket also tries to manage nearly all the steps between farm and consumer, capturing the income generated at each step.

"We grow it, we pack it, we process it, we ship it and we sell it," he said.

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#### Additional Facts

To learn more

The apple season is in full swing now and lasts through the beginning of November. To find places to buy or pick local apples, go to the New York State Apple Association online directory at [www.nyapplecountry.com/pick.php](http://www.nyapplecountry.com/pick.php).

For more about the 51-year history of Red Jacket Orchards, go to [www.redjacketorchards.com](http://www.redjacketorchards.com).

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