

# Bar Harbor Times: Caucasus fruit benefits from Maine drying process

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Bar Harbor —An entrepreneur who lives in Bar Harbor and runs a specialty food production plant in Hancock traveled to the Republic of Georgia in February to share his expertise in the production and marketing of dried fruit.

Craig Gladstone traveled with the United States Agency for International Development-funded Farmer-to-Farmer Program, which provides voluntary technical assistance to farmers, farm groups and agribusinesses in developing and transitional countries, to promote sustainable improvements in food processing, production and marketing.

“In a lot of ways, Maine and Georgia have a lot of similarities,” Gladstone said at his Hancock plant recently. “There’s a lot of poverty and a lot of unemployed people. A lot of these concepts would be putting people to work.”

Gladstone was recruited to help a food producer who had begun to experiment with drying and marketing “bilberries,” which are similar to one of Maine’s premier products — blueberries.

For the past two years, Gladstone’s company, Gladstone’s Under The Sun, has been conducting a pilot project, funded by a Maine Technology Institute seed grant and a matching development grant that uses an infusion process to dry blueberries in a way that concentrates their natural sugars to sweeten them, as opposed to other methods that add high-fructose corn syrup as sweetener.

Gladstone’s company produces award-winning organic snack mixes and spreads that feature wild Maine blueberries, as well as other dried fruits such as cranberries and cherries, and nuts and dark chocolate.

He contributed his knowledge and expertise to Ramaz Khvadagiani’s processing company, which produces tea and dried bilberries and other fruit in the Georgian village of Anaseuli. He introduced his host to modern fruit drying equipment and suggested they should obtain organic certification to make their products more appealing to Western markets.

With his wife, Rosemary, Gladstone started the company in 2001 after a career in biotechnology that brought him to the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor in 1999.

“I got to the lab and thought it would be a slower pace of life,” he said. “But it wasn’t. I was traveling all over the place.”

Gladstone gave up that hectic pace and the couple opened up a farm and garden market in Otter Creek. Business slowed considerably after Sept. 11, 2001, so they reinvented themselves.

“One of the things we learned doing the business was that people wanted snacks to take on their hikes, and they wanted to know the best places to hike. That’s when we came out with our Maine Munchies line,” Gladstone said.

The Gladstone line of healthy snacks – which features various mixtures of dried fruits, nuts and chocolate nibs – were also distinguished by their labels, which were printed with information about the area’s trails and sightseeing spots, and with topographical maps.

The couple decided to see whether people might like dried blueberries, so they tested them at a New England trade show, calling the product “the caviar of Maine.”

“Everybody loved it and wanted to buy it,” he said.

The two Maine Technology Institute grants awarded the company allowed it to develop a new drying process and build a pilot processing plant. Gladstone continues to package a snack line, and the company also sells both dried and frozen blueberries to other manufacturers for use as ingredients in other products such as baking mixes and granola.

Gladstone’s Georgian host, he said, dries fruit using a heat process, which reduces nutrients and flavor. He was interested to learn about the infusion process, Gladstone said.

In Georgia, Gladstone found a country with an infrastructure devastated by the most recent outbreak of violence with Russia in 2008.

“After Georgia separated from Russia, all the Russians picked up and left,” he said. “The Russians were the ones who had all the factories. Twenty percent of the population was Russian, so they lost 20 percent of their population and they took all their manufacturing capabilities with them. They left the buildings.”

But the buildings and machinery left behind are in terrible decay, he said. And although the country is reputed to enjoy 100 percent literacy, there are very few jobs, he said.

On the other hand, he said, the region is rich with fertile land. Gladstone said he came across huge tea plantations and farms producing bilberries, persimmons, kiwi, and stevia; and all of the produce is organic, he said.

His host had more than 65 people working for him.

“He doesn’t live lavishly,” he said. “His thing is to help the people there.”

When Gladstone arrived, he was loaded into an old Russian-made Lada, complete with bald tires and a cracked windshield. He was soon impressed by the sight of cows, pigs, goats, water buffalo, horses, and chickens freely roaming the fields and road for forage. Although most of the people had cell phones, they were forced to bundle up in coats inside their offices and shops because of lack of heat, he said. They still hand-dip water from their wells.

Most impressive, though, was the hospitality he received. Wine flowed freely and many toasts were made.

“In Georgia, they look at visitors as a gift from god,” he said. “They treat you very, very well. You’re eating and eating and drinking and drinking.”

Gladstone plans to return to the Republic of Georgia this summer to further assist with the development of processing facilities, and with marketing. In the meantime, he is developing market connections for Georgian farmers in Maine through his company. And on a stop at a trade fair in Dubai on his way back from Georgia to Maine, Gladstone presented potential buyers with a list of products available from Georgian farms. He plans to further advise Georgian farmers on expanding the market for their products into both American and European markets.

Gladstone was also in Dubai to represent Maine producers, at the request of the Bangor office of the Maine International Trade Center.

“The main thrust was to sell Maine blueberries overseas,” he said. “We had a very good response. Our stuff was sitting with the royal families of Jordan and Dubai; they were very impressed.”

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