

Florida's OJ QUEEN



Marygrace Sexton leads her company to national prominence for the flavor of its orange juice

BY SUE-ELLEN SANDERS
PHOTOS BY ED DRONDOSKI

On a crisp winter day in 1989, Marygrace Sexton pulled her baby daughter, Natalie, in a red wagon through the orange groves, posing the child for a picture that became the label for Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company.

The groves surrounding them were Vero's Sexton Groves, trees heavy with Indian River fruit. They called the juice Orchid Island because of the orchid color on the packaging — something different from the traditional bright orange and green orange juice packages.

Creating a product that used the world's best fruit to produce the best fresh-squeezed juice had been on Bobby Sexton's want- to-do list for years. Sexton, a fifth-generation

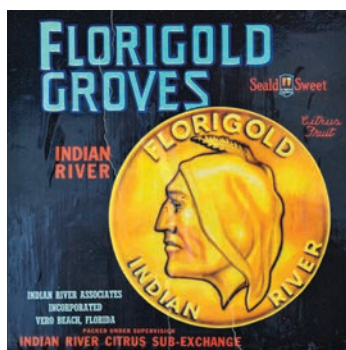
citrus man and grandson of citrus pioneer and legendary developer Waldo Sexton, had graduated from the University of Florida and was busy running the family's packinghouse.

His bride, Marygrace, was determined to take his idea to fruition — so the planning began. Bobby knew the citrus industry inside and out and Marygrace was a perfectionist with an intense business background. "Other businessmen told me, no one's ever made money from selling fresh-squeezed juice," Bobby says. "For us, it was a labor of love."

Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company began in a building in Vero across from the packinghouse, with Marygrace and her brother John Martinelli as its only full-time employees. From marketing her fresh-squeezed juice to the Miami fruit market in the middle of the night to borrowing a refrigerated truck to deliver the first order of fruit juice Thanksgiving week in 1990, Marygrace was unwavering in her plan to put her fresh-squeezed juice on everyone's table.

"The difference in our juice is that it's fresh-squeezed, every day," says Marygrace, 50. "We squeeze our juice to order. It's more expensive that way, but we know it's worth it."

At the start, the company used only Indian River fruit grown in Sexton >>



Above, the Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company logo depicts the Sextons' daughter, Natalie, as a young girl. She's now 20. The Indian River Heartbrand label, left, was the first label for Oslo Citrus Growers Association, founded by Bobby Sexton's grandfather, Waldo Sexton. The label, owned by the Sexton family, represents fruit from the heart of the Indian River growing region. The Florigold label was packed by Indian River members of Sealdsweet Growers. Sealdsweet Growers represented many packinghouses joining together to market their fruit.

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Gallon plastic jugs travel through an assembly line and are filled at the Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Company plant near downtown Fort Pierce.

Groves; with the sweet juicy Valencia orange its mainstay, adding Hamlin and Pineapple oranges into the blend to produce all year round. Today's juice mixture includes other Florida citrus, carefully vetted for quality and taste, with Valencia oranges (called by Bobby Sexton the Rolls Royce of juice oranges) still the main fruit.

NIGHT WORK

There were many nights, in those early years, that baby Natalie would sleep in her car seat aside the conveyor belt

while the juice was being squeezed, remembers Marygrace. "We always squeeze juice at night so we can get the refrigerated trucks out fast. Moving the juice out quickly and getting it to market in a timely manner is imperative in the fresh-squeezed juice business," she adds. "Now, baby Natalie is 20 and all grown up."

So is the juice company that bears her name.

NATIONAL ACCLAIM

Relocating to the old Dandee Bread bakery in downtown

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Orchid Island's management team are, from left, Bil Martinelli, John Martinelli, Bobby Sexton, Marygrace Sexton, David Cortez and Frank Martinelli.



Gallon jugs are filled with fresh-squeezed juice as Osse Laguerre packs the juice in cartons.

Fort Pierce in 1996, the Sextons found the city welcoming Chief Engineer Bil Martinelli, another brother, turned the old bread factory on U.S. One into a state-of-the-art juice production plant and never has missed an order deadline.

Orchid Island now offers grapefruit juice, lime and lemon juice as well, the latter on a seasonal basis. When the FDA began requiring warning labels on unpasteurized juice and strict bacterial control measures, OIJC began to use flash pasteurization. The company also pays for two different inspectors on site every day: one from USDA and the other from the Department of Agriculture.

Orchid Island's fresh-squeezed pasteurized juice is now carried in grocery stores and fruit markets everywhere. The juices are served everywhere around the country and the world, including in the White House kitchen.

Last spring Cook's Illustrated, the nation's premier cooking magazine, voted Orchid Island's gourmet pasteurized juice as the best-tasting juice in a taste test and then took their test to the "Today" show where anchor Lester Holt agreed.

"I couldn't watch the show live," admits Marygrace, "I was so nervous." The publisher of Cooks Illustrated Christopher Kimball, has become one of the juice's biggest fans.

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"He drinks our juices all the time; they always have the juice on their public television show," Marygrace says.

Tasters praised Orchid Island's fresh taste and the "superior blend of both sweet and tart flavors," while panning the other super-premium juices in the taste test. Orchid Island credits the high ranking and great taste of its pasteurized juices to its method of flash pasteurization.

"We do six seconds at 170 degrees and then drop the temp down to 33 degrees immediately," Michael D'Amato, OIJC's director of sales, told Cook's Illustrated. Other companies, he shares, bring the juice up as high as 200 degrees and "cook the heck out of it."

FAMILY OPERATION

The juice company remains a family operation. Marygrace oversees the direction and daily affairs and Bobby handles the finances. Brothers John, Bil and Frank Martinelli all continue to take lead roles: besides Bil as chief engineer, John oversees the national sales director and three salesmen for national sales and handles international sales and Frank runs the juice operations and fruit procurement.

Compared to the lean early years, when Marygrace didn't take a salary, today's business is booming. The company produces more than 3.6 million gallons of juice per year and employs some 75 people.

Some things will never change, though. "Our commitment to the consumer is that we take nothing out of our juice and



Valencias are the primary oranges used in Orchid Island's award-winning orange juice.

put nothing extra in — it's just juice straight from the fruit that God provides," Marygrace says. The company keeps some fresh fruit up in cold storage in a facility that keeps it at 33 degrees, in order to offer the best tasting juice all year around. But even when the fruit is stored, the juice is not.

"We squeeze fresh juice to order every day," Marygrace says. "That's what makes the difference in our taste. Our flavor will change a little throughout the year — so you know you are getting fresh squeezed juice." *RP*

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