

Miracle Berry Makes Life Sweeter

The first time Charles Lee popped a miracle berry tablet into his mouth and then bit into a lemon, he was stunned. The lemon tasted naturally sweet.

“I don’t know if it even sunk in,” says Lee, a 2009 finance graduate. “It was a shock. I wasn’t sure it was the same lemon I’d tried before.”

It was, thanks to the fruit that is taking the world by storm.

Miracle berries, which resemble elongated cranberries, temporarily alter the taste buds so that sour and bitter foods taste sweet. The berry has become a novelty at parties, where guests eat the fruit and then sample a variety of foods (such as Brussels sprouts,



CHARLES LEE, '09 Finance

vinegar, pickles, tequila, beer and citrus) for an experience that fools the tongue into perceiving sweetness.

The sensation lasts an hour or so.

After reading a *New York Times* article about the berry in May 2008, Lee was intrigued. He was ready to graduate with an eye on entering law school but lacked the money for tuition. Maybe the miracle berry could prove a financial miracle for him.

Lee is a self-proclaimed food lover and believes that the pleasures of food are best shared with friends and family. He envisioned enjoying the miracle berry not only by himself but with a food-curious community.

Having taken a rigorous course in supply chain management and with his background in finance, Lee began to explore the possibility of importing the miracle berry—“Its actual name,” he says, “just like apple or peach.” The fruit is grown only in the world’s moist, tropical climates. Florida had a few farms cultivating the berry trees but with each berry priced at about \$3, acquiring the fruit in bulk was prohibitive.

Fresh berries had to be shipped overnight, further boosting the cost, and the wait for shipment was as long as two months, given its sudden popularity.

Lee discovered that a Taiwanese company was processing the berry as a freeze-dried tablet.

“That made the berry shelf-stable and convenient,” he says, as well as affordable.

In July 2008, Lee founded mberry, a company that imports miracle berry in both its fresh and tablet forms. Lee immediately had orders from distributors around the world. In its first year, mberry

had gross sales of \$500,000 and a net income of \$100,000, most of which has been reinvested in the company. Now, partnered with the company in Taiwan, mberry has been repositioned as not only an importer and distributor but also a sales and marketing firm.

Originally, the miracle berry packaging from Taiwan was “too Asian,” he says, too unfamiliar to an American market. It needed to be rebranded and repackaged, which is now taking place. A Web site, www.mberryy.us, has been established.

Lee has also sold fresh berries from Florida, but he doesn’t see his future in the fresh fruit industry. In fact, he never thought he’d be in the fruit business at all.

“When I started out as a finance major, I never thought I’d be selling berries,” he says with a laugh.

Lee’s education has proved useful in running a small business, especially when it comes to dealing in foreign currency, he says. He lost one deal, for instance, when the British pound dropped 25 percent in three months. The British company couldn’t afford to take a risk and neither could Lee.

“Finance is all about risk management – risk and return,” he says.

Lee hasn’t lost sight of his dream to attend law school. Even if he doesn’t practice law, being an attorney would be beneficial to running a company because he wouldn’t have to be completely dependent on outside legal counsel.

But for the next year or so, juggling his role as CEO and being a law student is out of the question. He feels a responsibility to those he employs as well as potential investors, whom he hopes to attract for a much needed cash injection. mberry has a staff of about five, most of whom are connected virtually, including his creative director in Canada.



“The berry has a lot of potential to increase the quality of peoples’ lives,” Lee says. “To a person who has lost their taste for food, it’s everything. A lot of good can be done with the berry.”

He’s also hoping to earn a grant from ASU’s Edson Student Entrepreneur Initiative, which helps young people fund innovative ventures.

Lee’s vision for the miracle berry goes beyond wanting to host Tupperware-like parties where the fruit is simply a parlor game. Its sweetening properties could bring back the pleasures of food for diabetics, who must regulate their sugar intake. Many cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy suffer a lingering metallic taste from treatment, which ruins the taste of food. Miracle berries could be the solution to both problems.