**Digging the baby carrot**

By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

They're sold in single-serving packs with ranch dressing for dipping on the side. They're passed out on airplanes and sold in plastic containers designed to fit in a car's cup holder. At Disney World, burgers now come two ways — with fries or baby carrots. (**Related quiz:** [Take our carrot quiz](http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-08-11-carrot-quiz_x.htm))

And when the nation's schoolchildren return to classes, many moms — hoping to weasel at least one fresh vegetable into their children's day — will drop a bag of the tiny carrots into lunch boxes.

But there's a twist to this great beta-carotene success story: Baby carrots aren't babies at all. They're grown-up carrots cut into 2-inch sections, pumped through water-filled pipes into whirling cement-mixer-size peelers and whittled down to the niblets Americans know, love and scarf down by the bagful.

"I was shocked when I first discovered that," says Jeanne Ambrose, a food and entertainment editor at *Better Homes and Gardens*. "I'd wondered how they got them all so perfectly matched to grow all the same shape and size."

The miniatures — the brainchild of a California farmer tired of discarding imperfect vegetables — have taken a steadily larger market share and now make up a third of sales of fresh carrots, says Philipp Simon, a plant breeder and geneticist who directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture's vegetable breeding program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The popularity of low-carb diets has taken a toll on carrot consumption in recent years, but Americans still are eating a lot more carrots each year than their parents did. In the 1960s, the average American ate more than 6 pounds of carrots a year; today, we eat almost 10½ pounds — a bright spot in a national diet often a few vegetable servings short of the recommended five a day.

The public has "pretty much adopted them as a snack food. They eat them raw. They're in convenient single-serving packages, which makes them easy to take to work or lunch or soccer games," Ambrose says.

Says Walter Willett, a nutrition professor at Harvard University: "Often people just want something to munch on, and carrots are a great alternative to a calorie-laden pastry or treat."

Baby carrots have remade the carrot. It's not just that Americans are eating more of them — the carrots themselves are better. Consumer demand has pushed carrot producers to take the sometimes bitter, sometimes woody carrot and breed it into a crisp, sweet powerhouse.

**An idea begins to germinate**

It all began about 16 years ago when Mike Yurosek of Newhall, Calif., got tired of seeing 400 tons of carrots a day drop down the cull shoot at his packing plant in Bakersfield. Culls are carrots that are too twisted, knobby, bent or broken to sell. In some loads, as many as 70% of carrots were tossed. And there are only so many discarded carrots you can feed to a pig or a steer, says Yurosek, now 82 and retired. "After that, their fat turns orange," he says.

Yurosek has always been a "think outside the carrot patch" guy. In the 1960s, Yurosek and Sons was selling carrots in plastic bags with a Bunny-Luv logo, a cartoon that got the farmers in trouble with Warner Bros., which was protective of its Bugs Bunny brand.

Instead of bringing in lawyers and spending a fortune, Yurosek recalls, "I said to my wife — she's a pretty good drawer — 'Hey, draw me up about 50 bunnies, would you? Then we'll send 'em to Warner Bros. and ask *them* to tell *us* which ones we can use.' "

The entertainment giant picked one, and Bunny-Luv lived on for the price of a pencil.

The farmer continued growing carrots — and throwing them out — for decades. But in 1986, Yurosek had the idea that would change American munching habits.

California's Central Valley is dotted with farms, fruit and vegetable processors, and freezing plants. Yurosek knew full well that freezers routinely cut up his long, well-shaped carrots into cubes, coins and mini-carrots. "If they can do that, why can't we, and pack 'em fresh?" he wondered.

First he had to cut the culls into something small enough to make use of their straight parts. "The first batch we did, we did in a potato peeler and cut them by hand," Yurosek says. Then he found a frozen-food company that was going out of business and bought an industrial green-bean cutter, which just happened to cut things into 2-inch pieces. Thus was born the standard size for a baby carrot.

Next, Yurosek sent one of his workers to a packing plant and loaded the cut-up carrots into an industrial potato peeler to take off the peel and smooth down the edges. What he ended up with was a little rough but still recognizable as the baby carrot of today.

After a bit of practice and an investment in some bagging machinery, he called one of his best customers, a Vons supermarket in Los Angeles. "I said, 'I'm sending you some carrots to see what you think.' Next day they called and said, 'We only want those.' "

The babies were an economic powerhouse. Stores paid 10 cents a bag for whole carrots and sold them for 17 cents. They paid 50 cents for a 1-pound package of baby carrots and sold them for $1. By 1989, more markets were on board, and the baby-carrot juggernaut had begun.

**California is tops in carrot production**

Today, these babies come from one place: Bakersfield, Calif. The state produces almost three-quarters of U.S. carrots because of its favorable climate and deep, not-too-heavy soil. Every day, somewhere in the state, carrots are either being planted or harvested — last year to the tune of 20 million pounds, says Jerry Munson of the Fresh Carrot Advisory Board.

Which is why Bakersfield is home to the nation's top two carrot processors: Grimmway Farms and Bolthouse Farms. In the early 1990s, Yurosek sold his company to rival Grimmway.

The Bunny-Luv logo still can be found on Grimmway's organic carrots. But it's Bakersfield's other carrot producer, Bolthouse, that carries on the Yurosek tradition. Yurosek's grandson Derek is Bolthouse's director of agricultural operations.

Minis — what they're called in the industry — have brought about a carrot-breeding revolution, says the USDA's Simon, who also teaches horticulture at the University of Wisconsin.

Carrots originally were sold in bulk, straight from the farm. The first advance was the "cello" carrot. Introduced in the 1950s, these were washed and sold in newfangled (at the time) cellophane bags. "Cello carrots had to look like a carrot, and that was enough," Simon says.

Enter the baby carrot. Suddenly carrots were "branded." Instead of just carrots, they were Bunny-Luv or Bolthouse or Grimmway carrots. Consumers could remember the name, and if they got a bad carrot, they wouldn't buy that particular brand any more. Breeders got to work, getting rid of woodiness and bitterness. They also bred for enhanced length, smoothness and a cylindrical quality that lets processors clip off as little of the tip as possible.

Balancing these with the desirable sweetness and juiciness is a delicate task, Simon says. The faintly bitter taste is essential to what makes a carrot taste like a carrot. "I've had carrots that have more of a flavor note of peas or corn," he says.

Get the carrot too juicy and it breaks in the field. "There are some carrot varieties so succulent they're amazing, but they're like glass," Simon says. "Consumers like juicy carrots, but if they're all broken, you can't sell them."

None of this was done with fancy genetic engineering. "You just grow lots of carrots and look at them and taste them," Simon says. Breeders started experimenting with seed from varieties culled in the past for being too long to fit into the plastic bag.

"Prior to baby carrots, the ideal length for a carrot was somewhere between 6 and 7 inches," Simon says. Now they're typically 8 inches long, a "three-cut" that can make three 2-inch babies. And breeders are edging toward fields of even longer carrots. "You make it a four-cut, and you've got a 33% yield increase," Simon says.

**Far from going to seed**

Today, Yurosek is a contented man. He spends his days going sport fishing with his grandkids and trying to persuade his wife to make his favorite carrot recipe: her Bunny-Luv carrot cake.

"When you've done something you're proud of and it's been acknowledged, it's a dream come true."

http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-08-11-baby-carrot\_x.htm#