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Navy officer, optometrist, professor ... turned chestnut farmer?

By Sora O'Doherty



A carpet of chestnuts Photos Sora O'Doherty

There is a saying, "If you want something done, ask a busy person." Weylin Eng seems to be proof that this is true. At 77, the Orinda resident is currently in his fourth successful career. He has been an optometrist and local business owner, a captain in the U.S. Navy, a professor and Special Assistant to the Dean at UC Berkeley, and now with his wife Rose he is the owner and operator of Winters Chestnuts, a chestnut farm in Winters, California.

Eng says, "People are always amazed that we can grow chestnuts in California; actually we are the primary supplier of locally grown chestnuts in the Bay Area from Vacaville to San Francisco, Oakland to Fremont." The Engs harvest their Italian Colossal Chestnuts in the fall, and deliver them personally to gourmet markets such as Berkeley Bowl, Monterey Markets, to Chinatown shops in both San Francisco and Oakland, as well as to Korean markets and to Japantown.

"Unfortunately, we are too busy to do the local farmers' market anymore," Eng says. "That really was a lot of fun, meeting many people from all walks of life." He adds, "Also, we are not set up to sell roasted chestnuts on the sidewalks at SF Union Square and Ferry Building, which are so popular in the East Coast and Europe." When the Engs retired from their professions in optometry and education in 2004, they started farming. They have operated their 18 acres of chestnut trees since 2008. Their trees were planted in the late 1990s under the supervision of the late Professor Kay Ryugo from UC Davis.

The farm also produces prunes and plums for Sunsweet, as well as a variety of produce, from peppers to tomatoes, figs to tomatillos. They run the farm with the help of Arturo Marischal, their full-time supervisor. Eng says they are trying something new this year: freezing chestnuts. One of biggest customers is Berkeley Bowl. The owner told them he was going to freeze the chestnuts. Eng would love to capture the market for the Christmas holiday, so they are currently doing research.

Weylin Eng was born in Oakland, to a Chinese family that had been in the United States for many generations. His great-grandmother was an orphan, who was found alone at 4 or 5 years old in a Chinese camp that had burned down. She knew her family name was Yee, and was taken to a family outside Marysville with the same surname. Eng's grandfather was born in 1884 in Marysville, and his grandmother was born in 1867 near Nevada City. His father was born in 1911 and became the first Chinese-American elected to high office, serving four terms on the Oakland City Council in the mid-1960s. Rose is from Hawaii, a third-generation Japanese-American. The couple have four daughters, all born and raised in Orinda.

In his career choices, Eng has been influenced by the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was enacted in 1882 and repealed in 1943. In 1942, after Pearl Harbor, Eng's uncle went to join the Navy, but he was turned down because he was Chinese. His name was Timothy Lennoy Eng, but,

determined to succeed, he changed his name to Timothy Lenneau and grew a mustache. Returning to the enlistment office, he said he was French. This time he was accepted. For the next 37 years, Eng recalls, he was a chief petty officer nicknamed "Frenchy."

Eng's older brother followed their uncle into the Navy, and so did Eng in 1965. Both brothers rose to the rank of captain, which in the Navy is just below admiral. Eng served 30 years of total active and reserve service in the Navy, including Desert Storm, and considered it a fantastic career. He was recalled to active service when he was in his 50s. A full-time professor at Berkeley, he was at the State University of New York on business, when he was summoned to a telephone call. Although no one there knew about his Naval career, a staff member came into the room and asked him, "Are you Captain Eng? You have a telephone call." He was given 48 hours to report for duty. He served about six months on the admiral staff in Desert Storm, but was never in harm's way. One of his duties, he recalls, was to estimate the number of body bags needed for the hospital ship, the USS Mercy.

Eng is very connected to his family's long and colorful history in America. "My two daughters," he notes, "received college grants to Wesleyan and Carlton. Because it was unusual that there were so many generations of their family in America, they studied their family history. Eng has a collection of articles that helped them trace the family. "In 1882," Eng explains, "my great grandmother, at the age of 14 or 15, was married to this rich merchant Lennuey, also spelled Lennoy. The Marysville Record said they had the biggest marriage reception the town ever had, spanning four or five restaurants." The bride had bound feet and was carried on a sedan chair. In 1884 Eng's grandfather, James Lennoy Eng, was born.

"I feel that we are American, like my grandfather," Eng says. "He was accused of being a banana: yellow on the outside but white on the inside." Eng feels strongly that his children should be good Americans, but shouldn't be ashamed of their heritage.

Eng always wanted to buy farmland. One of his Lennoy ancestors was a merchant who went into farming but was not allowed to buy the land, Eng guesses, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, so he leased it. Because of that, Eng bought a walnut farm in 2004, and two years later the chestnut farm came on the market and he bought that too.

Eng also followed in his father's footsteps. In the 1930s, he says, "Dad was the only Asian in the Cal Marching Band." Since Cal was a land grant college, his father was in the ROTC, but because he didn't want to carry a rifle, he played the drums in the band. Eng was very active in the Cal band during his student years, playing the clarinet. He also followed his father and his aunt into optometry. His brother followed their grandfather into dentistry, but the path for Chinese dentists hadn't been smooth. Eng's grandfather graduated from dental school, but was not allowed to take the boards because he was Chinese. He then went to Portland, Oregon, and obtained a law degree in 1908 or 1909. He then returned to California and threatened to sue the State Board. They settled and gave him his license.

If four careers aren't quiet enough, Eng has plenty of other interests. He is a Mason and rides in the mounted patrol. His latest hobby, Eng says, is philanthropy.



Chestnuts are poured into the sorting machine. Photos Sora O'Doherty

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[back](#)

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