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Chile powder, packed by hand, led to the birth of the Santa Cruz Chili and Spice Co. in 1943. Its fresh, fiery blend is sold to restaurants and distributors nationwide, but available in grocery stores only in Southern Arizona (yes, that includes Tucson).

Santa Cruz Chili and Spice Co.

It began as a failure.

At least that's the word from Jean England Neubauer, whose rancher father, Gene England, started planting mild Anaheim chiles at his farm near Amado in the early 1940s.

When buyers failed to appear, he dried and ground the chiles into a powder that local grocers quickly snapped up.

That was the beginning in 1943 of Santa Cruz Chili and Spice Co., whose products — including a chile paste England also developed — are sent to distributors and restaurants all over the country, but are sold in grocery stores only in Southern Arizona.

"We process 200,000 pounds of fresh chiles in a season," says Neubauer, company owner.

The chiles are now grown and processed in the Sulphur Springs Valley through a partnership with the Curry Seed and Chile Co., which specializes in chile genetics.

A warehouse and a chile grinder remain at Amado, and chile powder and spices are also packed at the company's spice center in Tumacacori.

Here, visitors can sample various salsas made by the company, purchase a wide variety of gourmet foods, cookbooks, spices and herbs, and browse the Western museum that

documents the area's rich history, including that of Neubauer's family.

In 1931, Gene England came to Arizona with a résumé that included cattle wrangling, wildcatting in the oil fields, stunt riding in early Western movies and flying his own airplane.

He put up that airplane, as well as a set of pearl-handled pistols, as collateral for the Rock Corral Ranch, on the eastern slopes of the Tumacacori Mountains.

In 1942, he married Juliet "Judy" Kibbey, who came from a prominent Mexican ranching family. Her father, William Beckford Kibbey, a one-time Harvard student, came West at the turn of the 20th century and went to work in the mines near Cananea, Sonora.

In Sonora, he went into partnership with Ramón Elias as owners of the 60,000-acre Rancho El Alamo.

To guard against roaming bandits, Kibbey built a castlelike fortress to protect his family.

In 1912, he married Josefina Mix y Escalante. Their daughter, Juliet — Neubauer's mother — attended Bryn Mawr College, then returned home, where she met and married Gene England.

"It was my mother who created this little museum in the early 1970s," says Neubauer. Do drop in.



Family heirloom posters and an original calendar adorn the museum in the Santa Cruz Chili and Spice Co.

DETAILS

Santa Cruz Chili and Spice Co., 1868 E. Frontage Road. Open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, switching to 3 p.m. summer Saturday closings after Memorial Day. Closed Sundays. 1-520-398-2591.