

WATERMELON  
"PICTURES"  
PRESENTS



A FILM BY **YASHA LEVINE**  
AND **ROWAN WERNHAM**

EXECUTIVE PRODUCED BY  
**THIERRY JUTEL** AND **ADAM MCKAY**

WATERMELON PICTURES AND PISTACHIO PRODUCTION LIMITED  
PRESENT A FILM BY YASHA LEVINE AND ROWAN WERNHAM  
"PISTACHIO WARS" MUSIC BY MAXWELL SCOTT EDITED BY ADAM-LUKA TURJAK  
MOTION GRAPHICS BY BEN EXLER AND STUDIO 46'S EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS THIERRY JUTEL AND ADAM MCKAY WATERMELON PICTURES

**PRESS KIT**



## *SYNOPSIS*

Journalist Yasha Levine follows a lead on a water sale between a farmer and a small desert town – and discovers a hidden side to California’s healthy snack industry.

At the center of the story are Stewart & Lynda Resnick. They’re billionaires. They live in the flashiest mansion in Beverly Hills and have a monopoly on the pistachio trade.

They’ve taken control of California’s water – draining rivers, building plantations in the middle of a desert, leaving a trail of environmental collapse.

Towns ravaged by drought, farms built on oil fields, mass extinction, a water heist straight from the plot of Chinatown, and...war with Iran?

It’s a road trip into the dark heart of the American Dream.



Stewart & Lynda Resnick, Wireimage Video / Getty Images

### THE RESNICKS

Stewart and Lynda Resnick live in one of the flashiest mansions in Beverly Hills. She's a child of Hollywood (her father produced 'The Blob'), and a marketing protege. He got his start with a janitorial business, and a security company with ties to the mob. They're America's biggest farmers, the billionaire owners of The Wonderful Company.

Lynda met Stewart doing PR for his company American Protection Industries – a few years before their guards got busted smuggling blocks of heroin through LAX.

Lynda had had her own troubles with the law – she dated Anthony Russo, a RAND corporation employee who leaked the pentagon papers along with Daniel Ellsberg. They used her photocopier to duplicate the documents, and she almost got indicted by the feds.

Once they married, they started buying up companies together. They got into farming kinda by accident, acquiring land in the 1970's as a hedge against inflation – but it wasn't long before Lynda tried her hand marketing some of the crops that happened to be there, Pomegranates, Citrus, and Pistachios.

The Resnicks launched Wonderful Pistachios in 2008 with celebrity endorsements and Super Bowl commercials. The campaign was such a success, it created a boom around Pistachios, and an explosion of new plantings in California.

To secure their business, the Resnicks have monopolized a huge chunk of the state's water – their company alone uses more water in a year than the population of Los Angeles.

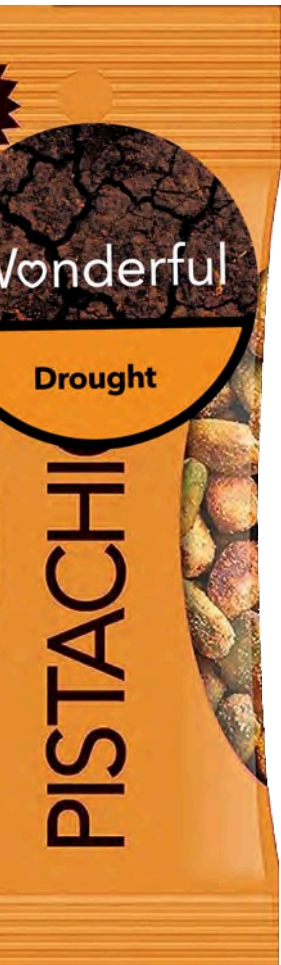
Even during California's record drought, the Resnicks massively expanded their business, growing their exports to countries like China by 230 million pounds a year.

Stewart and Lynda maintain a glossy image as philanthropists, and are considered to have liberal social politics. They give big to LA's art museums, got glowing press for renovating their company town 'Lost Hills', and they have Stephen Colbert as their brand mascot.

But as Pistachio Wars will reveal, the Wonderful Company's cash crop empire runs much like other extractive industries – draining water for short term profit, lobbying hard against environmental protections, and perhaps most surprisingly, has allied with America's neoconservative middle east war machine.



Wonderful Pistachios, superbowl commercial featuring Stephen Colbert



## WATER ISSUES

Unlike annual crops (most vegetables), nut trees require a constant supply of water.

The nut industry creates a 'hard demand' for water that increases pressure to abandon environmental protections, and continue diverting water for cash crops, even during times of record drought.

To feed its multi-billion dollar business, the Wonderful Company has monopolized water on a scale that competes with California's largest cities.

They have taken control of public infrastructure such as the Kern Water Bank, and at the same time lobbied to privatize California's water system – selling water to real estate developments, and sometimes back to the state at a profit.

The residential population uses around 20% of California's water, with the other 80% consumed by agriculture.

California has the world's biggest network of dams and aqueducts. But before water can be pumped south to farms and cities, most of it flows through 'The Delta' – a river estuary that feeds the San Francisco Bay.

The development of this water system has pushed life in the area – the biggest estuary on the west coast of the Americas – to the brink of collapse.

Despite this, the Wonderful Company has lobbied to extend the aqueducts – they used their political connections to deny environmental impact reports, and they astroturfed a huge PR campaign, run by a firm best known for lobbying on behalf of the tobacco industry.

As the Wonderful Company gains control of more water by expanding its farmland, some say water privatization is the future of their business – their stake in the water bank has been estimated to be worth over a billion dollars.





*Nut orchards in the Central Valley*



*The California Aqueduct, carrying water to arid parts of the Central Valley*



Despite marketing their products as healthy, large areas of the Wonderful Company's orchards are planted on land they purchased cheaply from the oil industry.

Waste water from oil drilling is known as 'produced water'. In an effort to cheaply dispose of it, Chevron and other companies began the practice of diluting it into the agricultural water system.

In 2015, the water was found to contain Acetone, Benzene and Methylene Chloride.

The Wonderful Company has acknowledged that this water is used to irrigate their crops, but denies there are any health risks, and continues to use the water.

Oil industry by-products like Acetone and Benzene are endocrine disrupting chemicals which are understood to have serious long term effects, even with exposure at low concentrations.

### *INDUSTRY RIVALRY WITH IRAN*

The world's other big pistachio producer is Iran. California's industry didn't really take off until the 1980's when the Iranian revolution (and the US embassy hostage crisis) spurred an embargo that blocked the import of cheaper Iranian nuts.

The industry is conscious that sanctions protect their profit margins, and lobbies against steps to normalize relations between the US and Iran.

For over a decade, the Resnick's have been on and off the board of a major middle east policy think tank – The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP).

WINEP has notoriously pushed for war between the US and Iran, and was an ideological base for many of the key architects of the Iraq war.

The details of their involvement with this think tank are not public, but at minimum, its neo-conservative politics contradicts their liberal image.





*An oil slick on an irrigation canal next to a Wonderful Company orchard*



*Kim Jong Un impersonator nukes Denis Rodman in a Wonderful Pistachios Commercial*

## ADDITIONAL TOPICS

**Inequality** – There's obviously a massive wealth disparity between Resnicks and their company's workforce, the Resnick's have recently stepped up their union busting efforts to keep wages low.

**Corporate Philanthropy** – The company has garnered praise for investing money back into its worker town 'Lost Hills', but why are the company's workers living in such poverty that they need charity in the first place?

*The Wonderful Company* is profiting from farm labor, and natural resources in central California, they don't put money in, they take it out.

**California's Green Image** – California is often held up as a leader in environmental policy, but in reality, its politics are dominated by concessions to industry and lax enforcement. The oil industry dumps waste all over California with impunity, and environmental protections for freshwater species are constantly compromised by corporate agriculture's demands for more water.

**Overdevelopment** – The current nut boom is the latest in series of bubbles that have transformed California – the gold rush, oil, suburban sprawl.

The exploding pistachio industry is just one example of how irrational and destructive market capitalism can be – a snack food driven mass extinction crisis, with demand created by gimmicky marketing, and profit margins protected by a corporate monopoly and geopolitical conflict / economic sanctions.

**Market Amorality** – The only thing guiding this industry is the quest for profits and endless growth. Farms take risks with polluted water for irrigation, drain lakes and rivers, and even lobby for war. It's like *The Blob* (a cult film produced by Lynda Resnick's father), mindlessly expanding, destroying everything in its path.



IT EATS  
YOU ALIVE!



## THE FILMMAKERS

**Yasha Levine** is an investigative journalist. He has covered California politics for almost two decades and is the author of *Surveillance Valley*, a book about the forgotten military history of the Internet.

He's runs the popular *Nefarious Russians* newsletter.

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**Rowan Wernham** Rowan Wernham is a New Zealand born designer & filmmaker. *Pistachio Wars* is his debut feature. It premiered at Doc Edge in 2024 where he was awarded 'Best New Zealand Emerging Filmmaker'.

His animated short *x.o.genesis* screened at numerous festivals including Slamdance, Maryland, and Glasgow, and was a prize winner at the LA New Wave film festival.



*Yasha Levine on location in Central California*



*Rowan Wernham, filming in Central California*

## THE ORIGINS OF THE STORY

Yasha Levine migrated to San Francisco when he was 9.

After growing up in Soviet Russia, California seemed like a sunny paradise. Later in life, working as a journalist in the desert suburb of Victorville, he began to see the place differently.

At the time he was tracking a local story – the town was purchasing water for new real estate developments from an agricultural ‘water bank’, owned by wealthy farmers who lived in Silicon Valley and Beverly Hills.

It led him to something bigger, a long form piece about the hidden power (and dirty underbelly) of California’s farming dynasties – [A Journey Through Oligarch Valley](#).

At the time, there hadn’t been a lot of critical reporting on the Resnicks, who were featured in this story. His piece preceded stories in Mother Jones, the LA Times, and Forbes.

The narration for Pistachio Wars was largely written during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At that time, Levine was living in Los Angeles, it was a hot summer and everyone was stuck indoors. On top of the pandemic, for months at a time, opening the windows would let in smoke from forest fires.

An instinctive revulsion towards the polluted, industrially developed environment of California’s central valley, and a sense of systemic crisis amplified by the wildfires and pandemic, informed the tone of the film.

## PRODUCING THE FILM

Filmmaker Rowan Wernham approached Levine with an idea to make a film about the Resnicks, and from this, *Pistachio Wars* was born.

After filming for several years (self funding the production), money for post production was raised via [Kickstarter](#) and [Gofundme](#).

The film was [picked up for distribution by Watermelon Pictures](#), and [Adam McKay signed on as an EP](#) to help boost the films reach.

## FESTIVALS / AWARDS

### Doc Edge

National Premiere – June 2024, New Zealand (Winner: Best New Zealand Emerging Filmmaker, Special Mention: Best New Zealand Feature)

### Ji.Hlava

International Premiere – November 2024, Czech Republic (Winner: Best Film on Knowledge)

### Middlebury New Film Makers Festival

North American Premiere – August 2025

## EXISTING MEDIA / PROMOTIONS

**Hollywood Reporter** - Watermelon Pictures to Release Environmental Doc 'Pistachio Wars' Worldwide

**Defector** - 'Pistachio Wars' Tells The Story Of California's Terraforming

**Chapo Trap House** - Nut Up

**TruthDig** - Meet the Pistachio Barons Who Control California's Water

**Behind the News** - The Billionaires Killing California w/ Yasha Levine

**Dominion Post** - LA fires put Kiwi's film on pistachio barons back in focus

**Variety** - Russian Bricklayer, Slovakia's First Woman President and Pistachios in California Among Subjects at Ji.hlava Documentary Festival

**Radio War Nerd Podcast** - Pistachio Wars

**Undiplomatic Podcast / Bang Bang Podcast** - Pistachio Wars

**Radio New Zealand, Kim Hill** – Kiwi film-maker lifting the lid on California's Pistachio Wars

**Otago Daily Times** – A Nutty Case of Geopolitics

**Film Fest Review** – "One of the hottest world premieres of the 19th Doc Edge Festival was Pistachio Wars"

**QAA Podcast** – The Wonderful Conspiracy

**The Dollop** – Killing California for a Snackfood

**Bourse and Bazar** – Californian Farmers Waged 'War' on Iranian Pistachios and Won

**The Gray Zone** – 'Pistachio Wars': How the Resnick billionaires' snack food fortune is fueling the assault on Iran

**HyperAllergic** – Pistachio Billionaires Accused of Artwashing California's Water Crisis

**New York Times** – Giving Big, a California Couple Gets Gratitude and Scrutiny



## RECOGNITION

*"We wanted to specifically honour this documentary for its deep investigative reporting. At a time when we are seeing news organizations struggling worldwide, we deeply commend the filmmaking team for their rigorous independent investigation. Their commitment, persistence and tenacity in uncovering corporate malfeasance and making sense of a complex interplay of legal greed and environmental collapse, endangering people and planet, is worthy of special recognition."*

– Doc Edge Jury Comment



*"Plays like a Chinatown for the age of global warming – complete with mystery, political corruption and at the center of it, the question we've confronted since civilization began: who gets the water?"*

– Adam McKay

Director of *Don't Look Up*



## *ADDITIONAL RESOURCES*

### A Journey Through Oligarch Valley

Yasha Levine, June 2013, NSFW Corp

### Water Heist How Corporations Are Cashing In On California's Water

John Gibler, 2003, Public Citizen

### Meet the California Couple Who Uses More Water Than Every Home in Los Angeles Combined

Josh Harkinson, August 2016, Mother Jones

### The Extinction Crisis Devastating San Francisco Bay

Jimmy Tobias, April 2020, The Nation

### Agriculture is 80 percent of water use in California. Why aren't farmers being forced to cut back?

Jeff Guo, April 2015, The Washington Post

### These Industries Are Sucking Up California's Water

Mark Schlosberg, February 2022, Food and Water Watch

### California farmers could save a lot of water – but their profits would suffer

Rachael Becker, March 2024, Cal Matters

### Will this California drought result in another expansion of water-thirsty orchards?

Stuart Leavenworth / Mark Arax, September 2021, Los Angeles Times

## *PISTACHIO WARS SOCIAL MEDIA*

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/pistachiowars>

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/pistachiowars>

## *MEDIA FILES*

Get all the stills, posters, and other promo images from Dropbox:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/qi02j9lumpi6ctd8toefu/>

[ACV6rMDOzNqLW-Ox-pfXwkU?rlkey=m3ikl326emc9pkvpxlrzitinvt&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/qi02j9lumpi6ctd8toefu/ACV6rMDOzNqLW-Ox-pfXwkU?rlkey=m3ikl326emc9pkvpxlrzitinvt&dl=0)



Suburbs in Victorville CA



Yasha Levine in Victorville CA



Aqueduct in Victorville CA



Los Angeles hills with forest fire smoke



Industrial farms in the California Central Valley



Documenting skin problems from water in Lost Hills



Nut silos at the Wonderful Company plant



An oil field overlaps with an orchard near Lost Hills



Wonderful Halos sign for orchard next to oil field



Oil slick on irrigation canal



Oil slick on irrigation canal



Oil waste build up at Cawelo intake



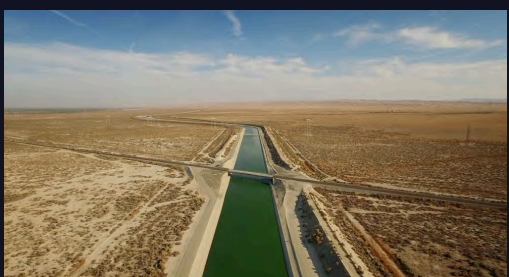
Pistachio Harvest



Pistachio Harvest



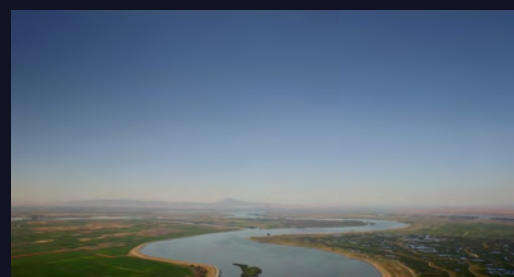
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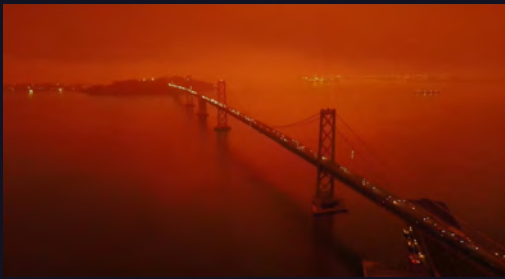
The California Aqueduct



Nut Orchards



The Delta



*Forest fire smoke over San Francisco , 2020*



*Yasha Levine at Owens Lake*



*Owens Lake, California*



*Wonderful Company Headquarters in LA*



*Porterville resident with no running water*



*Porterville resident with no running water*



*Farm worker tells how a company has diverted water*



*Dry river in Porterville CA*



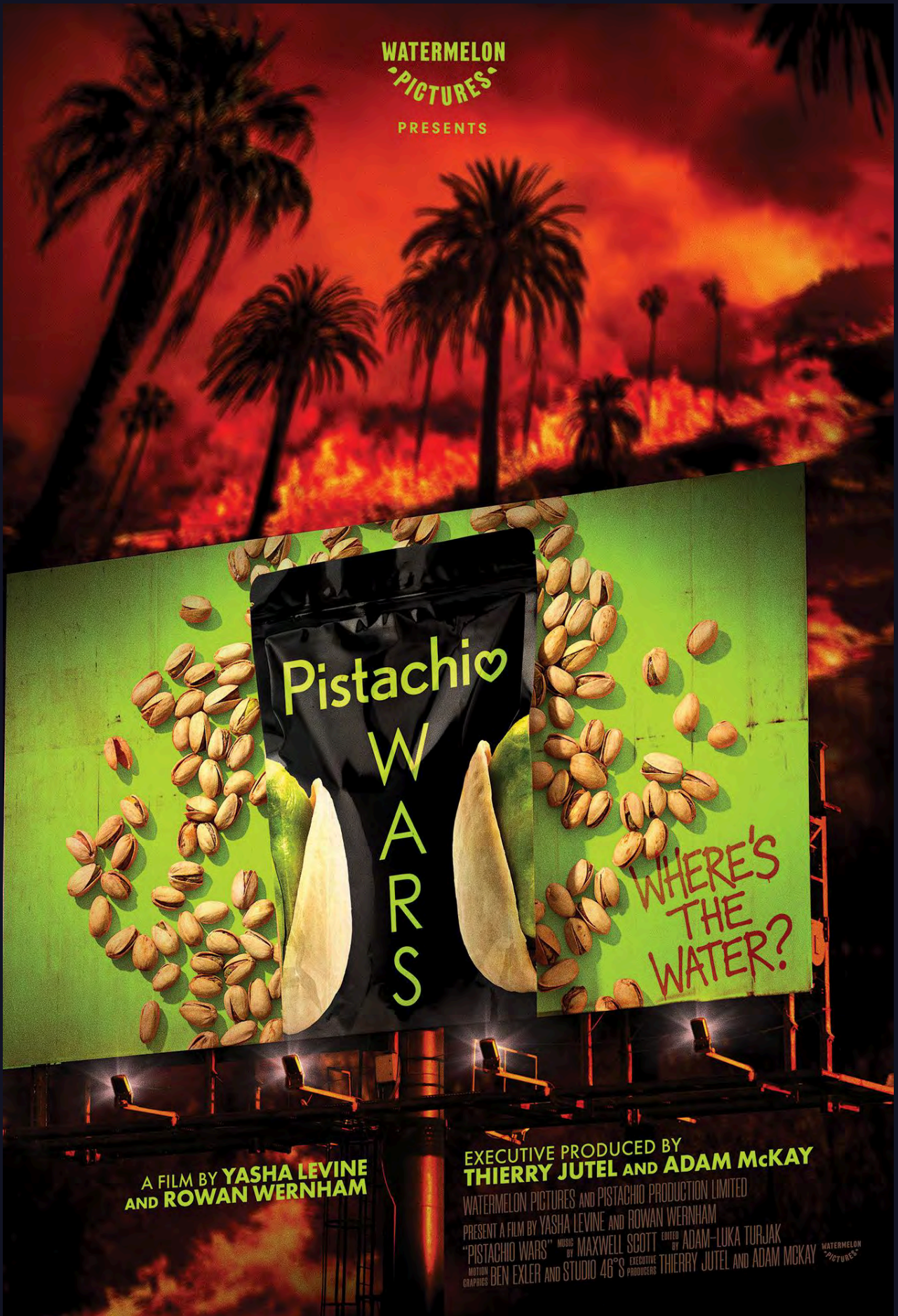
*Visiting the site of the 'secret dam' in Porterville*



*New nut plantings*



*American Pistachio growers convention*



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Pistachio  
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WHERE'S  
THE  
WATER?

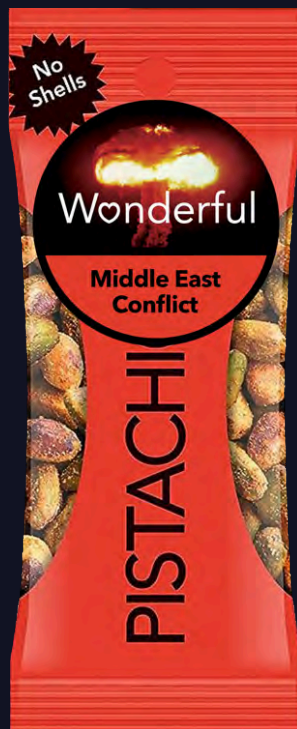
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NEW FLAVORS

Parody Wonderful Pistachios Packaging and Website – [Dropbox Link](#)



KICKSTARTER ART

Postcards from Oligarch Valley & Pistachio Wars Tour of Duty Poster – [Dropbox Link](#)

