

Fresh Digest

A Publication of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council

Spring 2021

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BRISTOL FARMS'
PAUL DZIEDZIC

FOLLOWS OWN PATH TO PRODUCE DIRECTOR



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Fresh Produce
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Fresh Digest

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Volume 49, Number 1
Spring 2021

Fresh Digest (ISSN-1522-0982) is published quarterly for \$15 of FPFC membership dues; \$25 for annual subscription for non-members by Fresh Produce & Floral Council; 2400 E. Katella Avenue, Suite 330, Anaheim CA 92806. Periodicals postage paid at Anaheim, CA, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Fresh Digest, 2400 E. Katella Avenue, Suite 330, Anaheim CA 92806.

EDITOR'S VIEW

By Tim Linden



I'm Grateful for...

There are many things I missed in this year of the pandemic, but one of them was not the annual ritual of declaring at Thanksgiving for what I was grateful. I never liked doing that as a kid and I haven't foisted it upon my children as an adult. Still with a typically large Thanksgiving gathering, there

is seemingly always someone who poses the question. With a tiny Thanksgiving gathering in 2020, it didn't come up. This wasn't a good year for many, many people and families across the globe, including mine. We suffered a very close COVID-19 loss like many others as well as unemployed family mem-

bers, shuttered schools, and life disruptions.

Still the calendar has turned, our country is taking this seriously and though the total death and illness counts are literally off the charts, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. And for that, I am truly grateful. I am also grateful for...

- ...aging into some very good things: Social Security, Medicare and most importantly, THE vaccine.
- ...the explosion of excellent ready-made meals. A must do for empty nesters living thru a pandemic.
- ...a grand niece that sells Girl Scout cookies.
- ...wine clubs.
- ...diet tonic, limes and fermented grain.
- ...video conferencing. It got old, but sometimes you just have to see people.
- ...masks and mask wearers.
- ...online grocery shopping. Not my thing but it kept others out of the stores.
- ...packaged salads.
- ...cocktail hour.
- ...the state of California. (Let others bash us. We know we are in the Promised Land.)
- ...cherry tomatoes & feta cheese. (See TikTok for the recipe.)
- ...podcasts & documentaries & Netflix & Hulu. The lifeblood of 2020 living.
- ...airpods. (An exercise necessity.)
- ...taxes, which are used to maintain all the great parks and hikes in this great state, not to mention the things in grateful statement #1.
- ...white noise machines.
- ...Amazon Prime (Hate to admit it.)
- ...guacamole & chips.
- ...old people rock music (as my youngest calls it).
- ...a career tailor made for a virtual world.
- ...and living in a very long house with offices at each end, which has allowed my wife and me to survive 24/7 for 365+ days. 🌻

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EXECUTIVE NOTES

By Don Gann



Challenges Continue but Plans are in the Works

I am settling into this new position with a lot of enthusiasm for what lies ahead, but with open eyes about the challenges that are also present. It's no secret that the coronavirus pandemic knocked out most of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council events over the past 12 months. But we were able to connect with our membership through a couple of golf tournaments and some on-line activities. And we were also able to complete a robust Apprenticeship Program, which we celebrated in February with an on-line graduation for our 2020 class.

That event was held in conjunction with an online Retail Panel webinar featuring three top notch Southern California retailers. An article on that panel is featured in this issue. We will be holding another webinar in April honoring the women in our produce and floral industry. California has been a leader in bringing women to the forefront in our industry and we will celebrate that.

In 2021, we are expecting to start opening up again and holding the events that make membership in the Council so valuable. We are the premier networking organization in our industry, and we plan

to hold our Expo in late June in concert with the United Fresh Produce Association. We also have the August City of Hope Luncheon on the books and are currently finalizing the plans for our two golf tournaments that will be held in late summer and early fall.

But more importantly, the FPFC leadership is taking this forced pause in activities as an opportunity to reevaluate our offerings, re-establish our role and redefine our mission. We have created a new Membership Committee that is focused on retaining and engaging with current members, bringing back old friends, and determining what others out there are looking for.

There are 2,200 related companies in our marketing area of California, Nevada and Arizona. We are focused on finding value for those companies within our programs and activities. What are they yearning for and what can we provide? The membership luncheons have been the backbone of the FPFC for five decades. We anticipate that they will continue to be an important element but what do you think? What events might serve you best? These are the questions we are

focused on.

Our immediate goal is to open up responsibly and once again facilitate some great networking events. Each of the retail panelists recently gave a blaring endorsement to the resumption of face-to-face interactions. We are working on that.

But just as importantly, we are working behind the scenes to develop a full program of activities for 2022 that clearly addresses the needs of the industry and provides great value to membership in the FPFC. We have established a relationship with a handful of other regional organizations around the country sharing our thoughts, learning from each other and determining what synergies can be achieved through formal or informal partnerships with these groups. Collaboration is a valuable tool that we are employing.

During this long year, it has often been said that "normal" is gone forever. It is the "new normal" that will replace it. Please reach out and let me know what you would like to see that new normal look like. We are intent on revamping the best Fresh Produce & Floral Council that there can be. 🌱

AVOCADOS

The best avocados
have California in them.



Shoppers anxiously anticipate the California season because there is a California difference. In fact, 80% of avocado shoppers said it's important that the avocados they buy are grown by California farmers. They value the care our nearly 3,000 growers put into nurturing each avocado to ensure they get that creamy California avocado taste with every slice.

Keep up with the demand and give your shoppers the consistent quality, freshness and homegrown taste they anticipate—all season long.



Source: 2020 California Avocado Tracking Study QC1. Price and ripeness are sometimes important factors in purchasing avocados. How important are each of the following when purchasing avocados? (Grown by California farmers.)
Answers: extremely/very/somewhat important.

For Customized Marketing Support:
CaliforniaAvocado.com/Retail

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Some winter weather events combined to reduce the expected volume of the California avocado crop, but marketers are still anticipating an average size crop with most of it being sold in the April through August time frame.

Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission, told the *Fresh Digest* in mid-February that the CAC Board had just completed re-assessing the crop as the result of wind and other weather impacts and projected that volume would fall just shy of 300 million pounds for the 2021 season. “This is in the range of an ‘average’ crop and is about 8% smaller than CAC’s preliminary handler forecast,” she said. “Compared to many parts of the country, California has had a very mild fall/winter, but there were some weather events, including wind, that impacted the very early season harvest. That shortfall seems to be behind us, and we are expecting promotable volume starting in late April, with a range of sizes and excellent quality for the rest of the season.”

the country that are California avocado devotees, and they continue to play an important role in CAC’s promotional plans.

In its promotional efforts, CAC is targeting what it calls Premium Californians. This is an attitudinal designation rather than a geographical one. A ‘Premium Californian’ can live anywhere. That person has bought an avocado in the past six months, will pay more for quality, is brand conscious, likes adventure, honesty is an important attribute in their sphere and she is environmentally conscious. About 53% of the time, the person is female. Her household income is above \$100,000, is most likely married, has children and over indexes with regard to college education. Avocado super users are a key subset of the Premium Californians group. Those are huge consumers of avocados and are specifically targeted by CAC’s promotions.

This shopper also over indexes on their use of media with a heavy dependence on video such as YouTube and Netflix, live television and social media

California Avocados

Good Volume Anticipated Into August; Multiple Platforms Will Carry Promos

By Tim Linden

The veteran avocado marketer said that most growers were holding back their fruit during the first couple months of the year, with most observers noting that a soft market was the root cause of that action. But with supplies from Mexico expecting a seasonal decline in the spring, California production will pick up. There were already signs of that in late February as the f.o.b. price started to rally.

DeLyser said that for many years CAC has focused its promotional efforts in the West with a tiered approach targeting retailers and foodservice accounts that have shown an affinity for selling and promoting the fruit from the Golden State. This has resulted in a majority of the volume staying within California, but she reminded that there are specific retailers across

platforms. Consequently, CAC is relying heavily on digital and social media platforms to promote avocados to this audience. DeLyser explained that digital media refers to banner ads, online radio ads and video pre-roll ads. Social media or community-based advertisement is defined by platforms that allow for two-way conversations such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn.

Besides these internet-based platforms, CAC will again utilize billboards in the four major California markets: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego. DeLyser said “high impact” graphics, including a “double wallscape” on a San Francisco building, will be used to spread the California avocado message. The commodity marketing group will also

use Spotify and Pandora to reach consumers by allowing them to “purchase” uninterrupted music for a set time by listening to a CAC pitch.

Sharing recipes through social platforms as well on specific recipe-sharing sites is another strategy the commission will employ.

The videos, artwork and messaging CAC will utilize ties directly to the California vibe, as it has for several years. For example, one of the taglines exclaim: “The best avocados have California wonder in them.” Similar taglines feature other catch words that evoke a carefree California image.

The commission has allocated about \$4 million for its promotional budget with digital streaming accounting for \$2.7 million of it or 67%. The remaining \$1.3 million is split among audio, search engines, social and outdoor advertising in descending amounts. The audio and digital advertising will be confined to the March through August time slot. Social media and search engine promotions take place on just about a year-round basis.

On the consumer public relations front, CAC uses a variety of strategies to increase the use of California avocados, including recipe contests, cooking classes, grower videos, social media brand advocates, and website artwork and graphics.

DeLyser said the commission appeals to the industry through merchandising and marketing information. She revealed that in California in 2020, California avocados received a 7% premium in f.o.b. price

on average with that premium rising to almost 30% in late August. She said that is the continuation of a four-year trend with California avocados receiving an average of 16% premium in the f.o.b. price over that period. The gap tends to be greater in the second half of the California season as its supplies dwindle. At the retail level, California avocados receive a 17% premium during their roughly 26-month marketing year.

In the foodservice arena, CAC is hopeful for the opening of more restaurants as the pandemic’s hold on the nation decreases. CAC has developed a “Flavor Pairing Kit” to help educate foodservice operators about the many uses of California avocados and how the versatile product can enhance the menu.

The commission is also dipping its toes in the export market with a sampling program in South Korea and the hiring of an in-country representative in China. 🌱



Jan DeLyser



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FPFC RETAIL PANEL REVEALS LEARNINGS FOR THE YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

By Tim Linden

While the coronavirus pandemic presented many challenges to the retailing of fresh produce and floral products, the important role flexibility plays in the sector might have been the biggest learning from this consequential year.

That was one of the takeaways when three Southern California supermarket executives participated on a retail panel webinar sponsored by the Fresh Produce & Floral Council on Feb. 18. The panel consisted of Bristol Farms Director of Produce Paul Dziejdzic, Vallarta Supermarkets Floral Director Paige Venable and Produce Sales Manager Ryan Sanchez of the more than 300 Albertsons and Vons stores in Southern California. The trio represented a diverse cross section of the area's supermarket industry as Bristol Farms is an upscale retailer with 14 stores, while Vallarta's 52 stores skew heavily toward the Hispanic demographic in the Southland, while Albertson/Vons expansive list of stores dot the landscape, virtually covering every sector in the community.

"This is a change business," said Venable.

She noted that when the coronavirus first began impacting consumers, leading to shelter-in-place orders, Vallarta's floral sales plummeted almost overnight. She cut way back on SKU's and watched the business that she has built at Vallarta in her three year's there evaporate. Quoting her boss, she said

it was like painstakingly building a sandcastle at the beach and having a wave knock it over in an instant. As Mother's Day approached in May of last year, Venable said sales started to build again and they have been climbing ever since.

She indicated that the key to Vallarta's success was adapting to the change. She concentrated on the top five sellers in each category, adding that the 80/20 rule defines floral sales: 80 percent of sales come from 20 percent of your products. "We went back to our 'A' game and merchandising 101." In-store, Vallarta emphasizes great signage, great displays and offered the products at a great price.

Venable said there is no substitute in the floral game for offering a product at a great value that makes people happy. When it delivers, they come back and buy it again.

Dziejdzic said the key to success for Bristol Farms when the pandemic hit was to implement the plan it had devised to make sure it had a continual supply of products that customers wanted to buy. Because the pandemic seemingly made people skittish about shopping and searching for that perfect fruit or vegetable, Bristol Farms greatly enhanced its packaged produce offerings putting as many things that they could in bags and expanding the ready-made section. He said produce items associated with good health such as ginger and garlic flew off the shelves but so did old-fashioned staples like bagged onions and potatoes. "Almost anything in a bag sold well," he said.

Over the past year, the Bristol Farms executive said the retailer has carried SKUs that it had never carried before and has greatly enhanced its in-house tote bag program, as well as the value-added products chopped and wrapped in the back room. "We have sold 10 or 20 times more produce in tote bags than we ever did before," Dziejdzic said.

He mentioned that even a tropical promotion featuring lychees in a tote bag resulted in huge sales gains. "Lychees promoted in a tote bag brought in \$20,000 in just a couple of days," he marveled.

Sanchez agreed that it was executing a solid plan that allowed Albertsons/Vons to keep its produce shelves stocked. The produce team expanded its sup-



Paige Venable



Fresh Produce & Floral Council

Thank you to our February 18th
Retail Panel and 2020 Apprentice Class
Graduation Sponsors!



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Ryan Sanchez

plier list and tried to anticipate and accommodate the needs of its customers. He said bagged products were great sellers and mentioned that for the first time the chain started offering bagged nectarines and peaches. It was such a hit that they added the offering to their daily lineup. He said that organic produce sales skyrocketed as did anything with vitamin C and everything with an immunity connection.

“Potatoes sales were off the charts,” he added.

All three panelists agreed that there are challenges when dealing with e-commerce but also agreed that those sales will continue to increase. Sanchez said the online orders for Albertsons and Vons are still increasing and he expects that will continue even beyond the pandemic when many people come back to the stores. He said consumers are buying into the concept and that won't go away.

Dziedzic concurred, noting that even almost a year later, online sales continue to increase each month. He said the selling online occurs around the clock and if you check out a Bristol Farms in the morning, the aisles are filled with Instacart shoppers.

Venable said that shopping for groceries and floral online is a “natural extension of the Amazon-world” we live in. While older shoppers might have been slow in embracing e-commerce, they have adapted and Vallarta's sales continue to climb using that platform.

The online sales make it difficult to capture impulse sales, which are such a huge part of produce and floral on a daily basis. But the trio of speakers agreed that it is merchandising 101 in the store and online that helps generate those sales, even during a pandemic. “You have to make sure what you are offering on-line is exactly what the customer is going to get when they come to the store,” said Venable, who added that for a supermarket floral shop “all of our sales are impulse buys.”

Dziedzic indicated that the online platform can capture some impulse buys by making suggestions to the shopper as they move through the list of products. If a user clicks on a product that isn't in stock, apparently the online program recommends an alternative.

Venable, Dziedzic and Sanchez acknowledged that they have learned to adapt to online meetings and presentations with suppliers. And Dziedzic admitted that working from home on occasion and not fighting the Los Angeles traffic is a plus. But they also agreed that they miss those personal connections.

“I'd go back to face-to-face meetings yesterday if I could,” said Sanchez. “You can't replace that.”

He said this year has proven that you can get by with those video calls and he expects that they will continue at some level beyond the pandemic. “We have learned we can do that, but let's get back to face to face as soon as we can.”

Dziedzic said it is not only supplier presentations that have been sorely missed but tours of grower operations. He said that is an excellent way to familiarize Bristol Farms' produce people with the local fruits and vegetables that they sell. “We haven't been able to do that. That's a huge loss for us.”

Venable looks at those face-to-face meetings at trade shows and luncheons as an important part of who she is. “There are people I have done business with for a long time and they can send me a photo and a price and I can give them a yes or a no,” she said. “But I am eager to get back and visit with those people who have embraced me and raised me in this industry.”

The panelists also discussed the future of the retail industry and what supermarkets might look like a decade from now. Each of them agreed that having a dedicated hub for online shoppers is an idea that has great value. Dziedzic also envisions a hybrid store that offers fewer SKUs concentrating on the top sellers when it comes to produce. But he said larger stores that offers greater variety and big displays will also continue to be part of the landscape. He also likes the idea of drive-thru windows for supermarkets, which have started to appear during this past year.

Sanchez likes the hub idea but he believes that online shoppers might also be accommodated in a special area dedicated to them in each store. “We might see larger stores with smaller sales spaces to accommodate a fulfillment center within the store,” he said.

Venable went back to her answer at the very beginning of the panel discussion. “This is a change business. In our industry there is change all the time.”

She indicated that it is those who can adapt to the change that will survive whether it be drive-thru windows, e-commerce hubs or hybrid supermarkets. 🌱

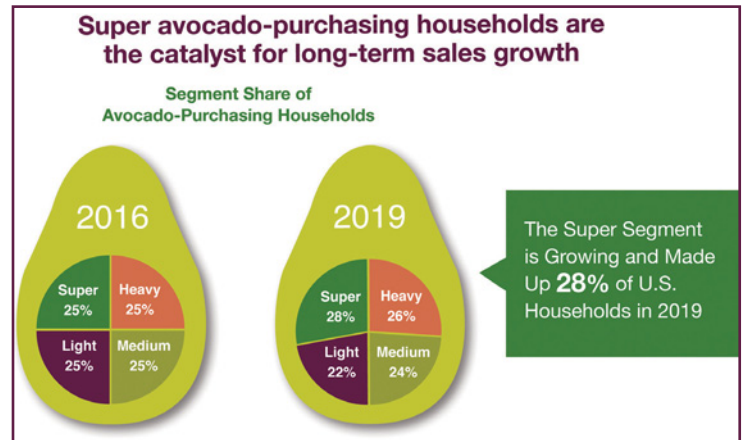
HAB Explores the Super Avo Shopper

The Hass Avocado Board recently released a study to identify data-based insights and growth opportunities for the avocado category based on the long-term purchase trends of retail avocado shoppers. Specifically, this study measured the impact of heavily involved avocado shoppers on long-term category growth compared to shoppers that are less involved in the category. Additionally, this study uncovered the underlying purchase trends of Hispanic and Non-Hispanic avocado shoppers and examined their current and future roles in the growth of the avocado category.

Executive Summary

The avocado category has experienced substantial retail sales growth over the past four years and ranks as one of the largest categories in fresh produce. This growth comes in the form of new shoppers entering the category and shoppers making additional trips to the retailer to purchase avocados. These category dynamics are pushing avocado shoppers “up the ladder” to greater purchase levels as their annual spend per household increases.

The avocado category saw an increase of +\$250M in purchases from 2016 to 2019. Super avocado-purchasing households drove 94% of this increase and



Heavy user households drove 6%. Medium and Light households saw a decline in purchases over the long term.

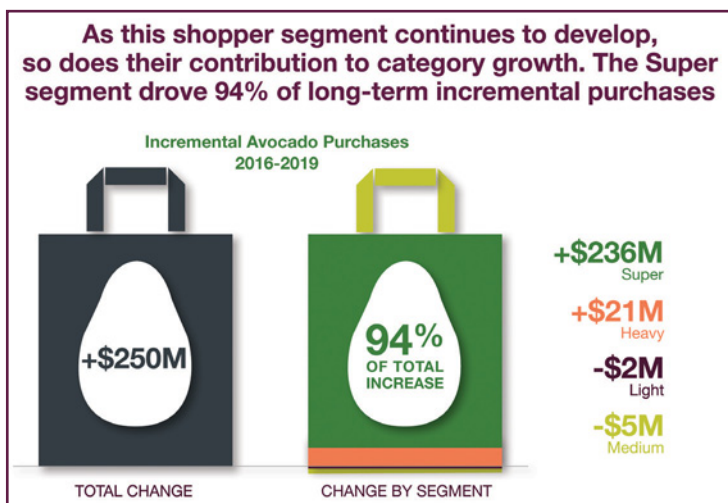
The increase in Super household purchases was driven by two factors:

*Shoppers moving up the purchase ladder. The Super segment grew by +3.2M households, accounting for 28% of all avocado-purchasing households in 2019, up from 25% in 2016. One of the primary drivers of this trend is frequency of purchase. As shoppers move up the ladder, their purchase trips increase. Purchase trips increased +9%, while spend per trip increased +3% (Spend per trip may be impacted by pricing dynamics in the marketplace).

* Annual spend per household increased +5% for the Super segment. This annual spend increase was driven by an increase in spend per trip (+2%) and purchase trips (+3%).

Super households also spend more in store on all items in the market basket than other groups. Supers spend \$74.43, which is +3% more than Heavy households and +13% more than Light households. Despite this additional spend, avocados comprise a greater proportion of the Super group’s market basket than they do in other segments. Avocados comprise 4.6% of Super baskets, but only 2.4% of Light baskets.

These trends make the Super segment increasingly important to the growth of the avocado category





Develop marketing activities that attract new shoppers to the avocado category

One Additional Point of Household Penetration is Valued at **\$29M** per Year



and a particularly important shopper segment to retailers and the industry.

Hispanic shoppers are a high-value segment of the avocado category. This shopper group is more likely to purchase avocados than Non-Hispanic households. They purchase avocados more often, and they spend more per trip. However, the growth in incremental avocado purchases from 2016-2019 (+\$250M) was driven by Non-Hispanic households.

Non-Hispanic households drove 76% of long-term category growth over the last four years. This group comprises a much larger proportion of households and their purchase trends increased at a faster rate than Hispanic households: Non-Hispanics account for 83% of total U.S. households and their average annual household spend increased +14%, while Hispanic spend increased +9%.

The primary driver of the growth in annual household spend was an increase in category purchase

trips: Non-Hispanic purchase trips increased +10%, while Hispanic purchase trips increased +6%.

As marketers and retailers look to the future of the avocado category, the data suggests a significant opportunity for growth, particularly in the Non-Hispanic shopper group. Non-Hispanic household penetration was 61% in 2019, compared to 85% for Hispanic households. However, the potential for growth in Non-Hispanic penetration is greater than the potential for Hispanic penetration: The growth potential of a +1-point increase in Non-Hispanic penetration is an additional +\$24M in annual purchases, compared to +\$4M for Hispanic households.

These trends signify the value of Hispanic and Non-Hispanic avocado shoppers. Hispanic shoppers may be a smaller household group, but they are a high-value segment in the category. Non-Hispanic households show significant potential to drive new category growth as the industry looks to the future. 🌱

Trigger additional purchase trips for avocados

One Additional Trip per Household is Valued at **\$241M** per Year



Chef Bruno fighting Coronavirus with pasta.
Feeding thousands of kids every day.

The Fresh Produce & Floral Council held its Annual Charity Auction virtually in December. The auction was able to raise a total of \$44,065 in support of Caterina’s Club and Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County.

The auction started off with a few words from the FPFC’s Interim Executive Director Don Gann, who introduced Angela Fraser of California Avocado Commission, who sang the National Anthem – in usual FPFC luncheon fashion. Harald Herrmann of Second Harvest Food Bank gave surprising statistics to the audience – the food bank served 620,178 people and distributed 4,057,636 pounds of food in November alone. He stated that unemployed and under-employed residents have increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, causing more families in Orange County to need assistance.

Chef Bruno stated that Caterina’s Club is serving 25,000 meals per day in Orange County and surrounding areas. He echoed Herrmann in saying that the need has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and Caterina’s Club is continuing to spread love, hope and warm meals to those in need.

The comradery that is ever-present between Michael Schutt of Raley’s and Mihae Finnie of Del Monte Fresh did not disappoint attendees – there were smiles and laughs all around. Keeping the tone of the normal FPFC luncheons, attendees had the opportunity to win gift cards throughout the auction.

Finnie stated how pleased she was that the auction went off without a hitch. “Without having any

history on how a Zoom Live Auction would be, we were nervous on participation levels. But the FPFC did not disappoint and everyone who participated came fully prepared to provide tremendous support for Caterina’s Club and Second Harvest! It was an honor to be asked to be co-auctioneer with the great Mike Schutt and had a great time seeing everyone’s faces again even if it was on screen. I’m very proud of our FPFC family!”

The FPFC is very appreciative of the personal donation of retailer time and support of 99 Cents Only Stores, Albertsons, Gelson’s, Grocery Outlet, Raley’s, Smart & Final, and Stater Bros. Markets. The live auction items included many outings with FPFC member retailers – Jacob Cadwallader from Stater Bros. jokingly told attendees that lunch was on him at In-n-Out and how happy he was to support the FPFC and these organizations “It is a true honor and great privilege to be in a position to help these two great causes, Caterina’s Club and Second Harvest! In years past, I have typically been on the sidelines during the auctions, wanting to help in a bigger way, and now my time has come to give back a bit and I couldn’t be more thrilled. I was also relieved when people started to bid and we heard more than crickets chirping! I hope those that won the bid are cool with a double-double from In-N-Out, along with stimulating conversation of course!”

The FPFC is grateful to its members for their support and participation in the auction to support the powerful work Caterina’s Club and Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County are doing. 🍌



Bristol Farms' Paul Dziezic Follows Own Path to Produce Director

By Tim Linden

Though he started in the retail business like many others as a box boy at his neighborhood market in the 1980s, Paul Dziezic's career has been anything but a straight line. The director of produce for 14-store Bristol Farms in Southern California has spent most of his career in produce retailing but he has also launched a wholesale beverage company, marketed dragon fruit and even worked on a coffee plantation in Hawaii.

Dziezic grew up in many different cities, including some overseas tropical locations as he was the son of a career member of the United States Air Force. "I was born in Puerto Rico and we lived in Guam in my younger years," he said, noting that the tropical upbringing has impacted his produce career. "I love featuring tropical fruit. We recently had

a lychee promotion (at Bristol Farms) where we sold \$20,000 worth of lychees in a few days. That's quite a few lychees."

His family did eventually settle in Sacramento where Paul went to high school and was introduced to produce retailing. He joined the Bel-Air Market at Arden & Eastern in Sacramento as a young man when it was still an independent retailer. In fact, that location was opened shortly after the Wong family opened its first Bel-Air Market in 1955. In 1984-85, Paul played baseball at Sacramento State University and helped finance his education by bagging groceries. He recalls that it was only a few months into his part-time employment that he was attracted to the produce department. The produce manager took him under his wings and taught him a lot. By 1991, Paul became

a produce manager with the Fair Oaks store being his first assignment. “Bel-Air had a very good produce team,” he said, noting that Greg Corrigan, who recently left the top position at Raley’s after a long career there, was a member of that Bel-Air team.

He also remembers Bill Wong, one of the Bel-Air founders, having a passion for retailing and for the produce department. Mr. Wong had a philosophy that Paul said matches that of Bristol Farms. “The Bel-Air market was a high-end retail operation and Bill Wong would always say ‘carry everything and people will come to you.’”

Raley’s bought Bel-Air in the mid-1990s and Paul stayed with the expanded retail presence. “Raley’s handled it very well. They gave opportunities to all of us who were working for Bel-Air.” Paul worked as both a produce manager and merchandiser opening new stores for the chain.

But in 1999, with a wife and two young kids, he longed for the

tropical weather of his youth. “We spent a couple of years in Hawaii doing some different things. I worked on a coffee plantation and I also worked with a grower marketing what he called the next big item: dragonfruit.”

He loved the experience. Initially, the family lived out of a camper on the Big Island, did a lot of ocean swimming and fishing, and Paul even worked at a produce stand. He might still be in Hawaii today, but his father became seriously ill and Paul and his family wanted to spend quality time with the family patriarch. They lived on the same Sacramento area property and he is grateful they made that decision. “We really enjoyed living with my parents and helping them through that process,” he remembers.

Back in California, Dziezic rejoined Raley’s, working in the warehouse in quality control, and then he ran the chain’s Nevada produce division of 19 stores. His next stop was a four-year stint at Scolari’s Food and Drug in Nevada



PRODUCE DONE RIGHT

WJL Distributors, Inc. is a produce distributor to the greater Los Angeles area. Established in 1996 the company has grown from a three man office to a thriving hub of salesman and staff that supplies fruit to multiple retailers, food service, as well as the LA Wholesale Market. President Bill Laliberte and the sales team at WJL are committed to **INFORM** customers of the current markets, **ENSURE** excellent product and price, and **DELIVER** the product on time.



www.wjldist.com

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from 2009 to 2013, where he was the director of produce. He totally changed the produce department as a one man show, and also fell in love with Reno, where the family still maintains its home.

But then Paul took another hiatus from retailing, working for an organic ingredients wholesaler and establishing a wholesale beverage distribution company with his son. That company still exists. In 2015, Paul joined Whole Foods as a produce coordinator and then moved to Bristol Farms in October of 2019 as the director of produce. His first order of business at Bristol Farms was to hire a senior buyer and moved another produce buyer to the store level. He defines Bristol Farms and its five-store sister operation, Lazy Acres, as high-end stores. “Every time I walk into a Bristol Farms store, I flash back to Bel-Air. They are both top of the line stores with nothing cookie-cutter about them. We try to be unique...



stand out...be different.” He calls Bristol Farms and Bel Air old-school retailers.

On the produce front, Paul said the goal is to always find the best of the best. He loves to merchandise very large pieces of fruit. “We offer value to our customer at a higher price,” he said. “We offer a fair price, but we are a high-end shop with high-end products so you should expect to pay more.”

Bristol Farms is a big proponent of organic produce as it fits its philosophy. Dzedzic said at least 75% of the produce sold at Bristol Farms is organic. Conventional SKUs are only utilized when organic is not available or when the chain gets an item that it can promote at a good price point for its customers. He said the organic market share continues to expand, and he expects it to top 90% in the not-so-distant future.

As mentioned above, Paul loves to feature tropical items and also strives to do business with local growers, though local has to get stretched a little bit as the agricultural footprint in Los Angeles is pretty small. He notes that Bristol Farms and Lazy Acres Markets are part of Good Food Holdings, which is owned by South Korea’s largest retailer. “We are in a growth mode with two Lazy Acres, two Korean markets and another Bristol Farms on the books to be built soon.”

Paul is excited about having a hand in designing the produce offerings for the two Korean markets. He noted that the past year, with COVID-19 playing a huge role, was a unique year with many new factors coming into play in the business of retailing fresh produce. Produce sales increased, on-line ordering exploded and any produce item in a bag experienced an increase in sales. He also noted that items associated with better health also saw big sales gains. In that category, he placed ginger, turmeric, organic produce and anything that could be labeled citrus, with its great reputation for being a healthful product high in vitamin C. “The kiwi berry just killed it,” he said, noting the fruit is associated with offering immunity from some ills. In fact, he said any item that has an immunity play is flying off the shelves.

Diedzic said one big takeaway from the pandemic buying that took place in the first couple of months in March and April of 2020 is that consumers focused on core items. Bagged potatoes and onions both sold in huge numbers for example. He can envision a store format with a smaller footprint that would focus on only top sellers such as the top 50 produce items. He



admits that flies in the face of the advice he received from Bill Wong at the start of his career but believes it could fill a niche. “It’s hard for me even to talk that way but it could work,” he said.

In fact, he added that the two sister Korean markets being designed for the Los Angeles area will follow that model as they will have a scaled down assortment of products.

As he looks back at the pandemic-laced year, Dziejcz said it has been a bit of a struggle from a business relationship point of view. He noted that the produce industry is a tight knit community. “One of the fun parts of the industry is getting out and getting together,” he said. “Zoom calls save time but I am looking forward to getting back to normal.”

He added: “I am doing today what I was born and raised to do.” He loves the reality of being a true produce professional. 🌱

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JIM LEIMKUHLER OF PROGRESSIVE PRODUCE RETIRES AFTER 35 YEARS

Jim Leimkuhler, chief executive officer of Progressive Produce LLC, has retired effective March 31st, after 35 years in the produce industry. The last 25 years have been spent with Progressive Produce in Los Angeles where he was instrumental in building the company into a well-respected produce operation that serves national and regional grocery chains, and foodservice companies throughout the United States.

“My life and career at Progressive Produce have meant so very much to me,” stated Leimkuhler. “I feel so blessed to have been given the opportunity to come here in 1995 as the chief financial officer, to be named its president in 1996, and to become a part-owner of the company in 2003.”

What many people don't know about Leimkuhler is that he began his career in the newspaper business after getting his degree in journalism from the University of Missouri in 1977. His very first job out of college was with The Packer and he was hired to write stories and sell advertising. In fact, on the very first week he was sent to Wisconsin to work with another writer that was reporting on the potato fields that were soon to be harvested. Little did he know that years later he would end up running a produce company in Los Angeles that would become a prominent player in the fresh potato business throughout the United States. Fast forward through a seven-year career in the book publishing business in Iowa, an MBA in accounting from Drake University and working as a Certified Public Accountant, fate stepped in and led him back to produce. In 1986, he joined Chiquita Brands International's finance department in their corporate headquarters in Cincinnati. He was then transferred to Miami in 1989 to work for John Thatcher, as vice president of finance for Banana Supply Co., a newly acquired subsidiary of Chiquita.

“John Thatcher taught me so much about humbleness, hard work, integrity, and how to be a leader. It was all through an example of how he lived his life. I will always be grateful for that opportunity,” says Leimkuhler. Working for Thatcher

gave him a real thirst for working in a small business where he could get his hands around everything. If Hurricane Andrew hadn't hit, Leimkuhler probably would have stayed in Miami.

But it's been 26 years since he picked up his family, moved to Los Angeles, and began using the leadership skills he learned from Thatcher to build Progressive into what it is today.

Caring for the business like he owned it came naturally to Leimkuhler long before he and his now-retired partners, Jack Gyben and Victor Rodarte, orchestrated the management buyout of Progressive from Chiquita in 2003. The goal of owning the company was the biggest reason he made the decision to move to Southern California in the first place back in 1995.

When he got there, it was an early morning business — going to the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market and seeing buyers for coffee or breakfast at 4:00 a.m., followed by a busy day in the office with the phones ringing and pagers going off. “I could never have imagined how much Progressive, and the produce industry, would evolve over the next 25 years,



Jim Leimkuhler

and I feel fortunate to have been part of the journey,” Leimkuhler said as he reflected on his early days at the company.

Even though the company is now much larger, it still maintains a small business mentality. Leimkuhler would always emphasize to his team that the way to success was to always get better. Leimkuhler explained, “Getting better was an easier goal than saying we had to grow by 15% every year, which is tough in a commodity business. I just boiled it down to getting better. And if we got better, we would get bigger. And if we got bigger, well we just had to deal with it.”

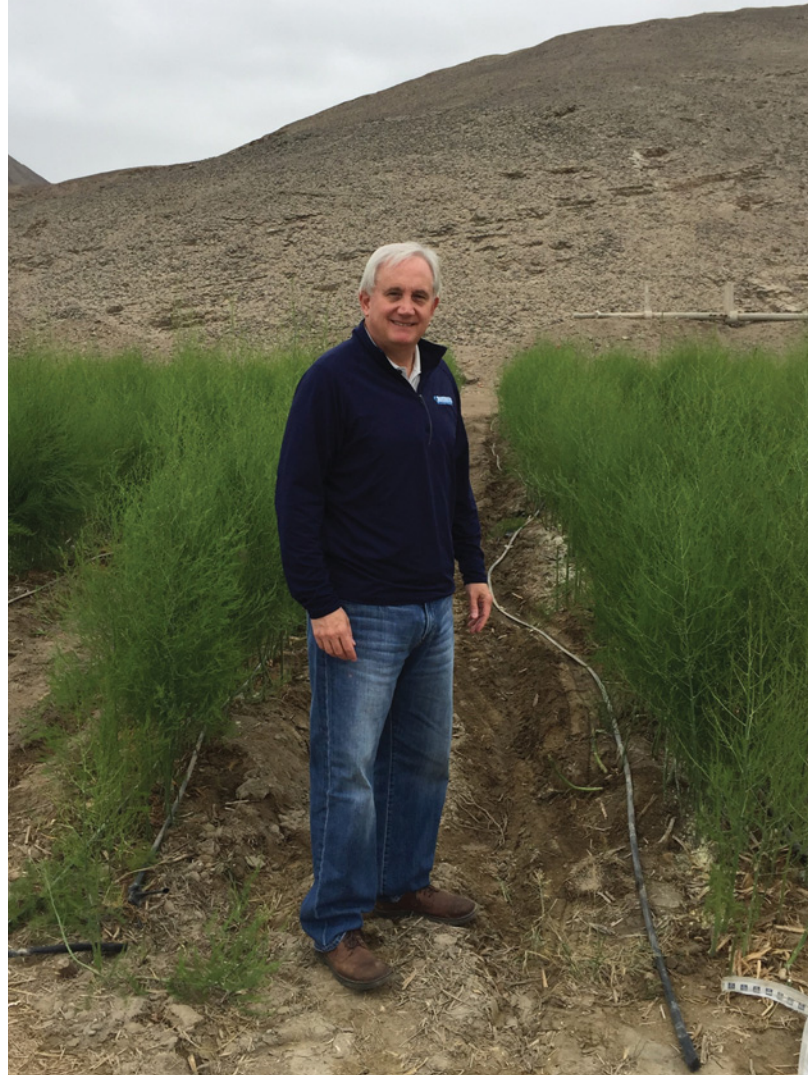
With this philosophy, Progressive grew from a local Los Angeles produce company into a year-round grower/packer/shipper. Today, Progressive’s product line consists of organic and conventional asparagus, potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, citrus, and chili peppers grown throughout North and South America. The company has sales offices in Los Angeles, Washington, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

After many years of excellent stewardship and success, Leimkuhler, Gyben, and Rodarte sold a majority interest in the company to TOTAL PRODUCE plc in February 2016. Subsequently, one year later it merged with its longtime sweet onion and asparagus business partner Keystone Fruit Marketing of Greencastle, PA, and the company grew overnight. Marty Kamer, who was previously president of Keystone, was named president of the Progressive business in October 2018. Kamer will continue to lead the company into the future, together with a well-respected team of industry veterans. “My first and lasting impression of Jim is leadership personified. His inspirational leadership is rooted in his integrity and his relentless pursuit of excellence,” said Kamer.

“Jack, Victor, and I had a unified goal that the last of us wouldn’t leave until we were sure that the new management team could lead our great company to even greater heights. I am very pleased to say that that time is now,” stated Leimkuhler.

Scott Leimkuhler, vice president of sales at Progressive had this to say, “It has been a special time in my life to get to work with and learn from my dad. He cares deeply about the people at Progressive and the produce industry as a whole. I will miss working with him. His legacy of integrity, leadership and kindness makes me proud.”

When asked about what he will miss most, Leimkuhler is quick to reply that he’ll miss the people of



Progressive, who have always been his motivation to work hard. He often said that people are what makes this industry great and to never lose sight of the fact that we need people, and we need to keep relationships strong in everything we do.

In fact, you can ask anyone at Progressive, and they’ll tell you about a time Leimkuhler called to check in and say how grateful he was that you were part of the team. Jeannie Berger, vice president of Human Resources and Administration said this: “Jim is one of the most inspirational people I have ever met. He is a true visionary with a compassion to make everyone’s life better.”

As Leimkuhler prepares for retirement, he offers some advice to the next generation of leaders and those starting their careers in the industry, “Always look for where you can add value and make a difference. If you love your job, ‘own it’ and grow with it. And don’t forget to take some risks. I started out in a journalism job, became a CPA and ended up in produce. It’s rarely a straight line for anyone. Go out there and follow your dreams.” 🌱



NEW MEMBERS EXPLAIN THEIR OPERATIONS

The following new members of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council submitted information about their companies and the services they provide to introduce themselves to the FPFC membership, or the information was culled from their website.

Buchalter, A Professional Corp

Buchalter is a full-service business law firm that has been teaming with clients for eight decades, providing legal counsel at all stages of their growth and evolution, and helping them meet the many legal challenges and decisions they face. Our clients are engaged in a diverse global economy governed by complex laws and regulations, and they trust us as advisers and business partners because we are involved in their world. They rely on our forward-thinking to help them resolve problems before they arise.

Our founding principle—providing our clients with the best business solutions—continues to lead us. We value each client relationship, recognizing that their success is our success. Our overarching goal—getting the best results for the client in a timely manner with sensitivity to cost—has engendered client loyalty, and the firm has grown from that loyalty.

Our lawyers are accessible, resourceful, skillful and adept at responding to change. Our technological capabilities keep case law and rule changes at our fingertips and client communications current, enabling us to create efficient, superior outcomes. We strongly believe that technology is a tool that furthers the practice of law and have used that belief to develop a cutting edge platform for our firm.

Buchalter lawyers are also active members of the communities in which they live and work. Leadership is a value the founding partners practiced and passed on to the current generation of attorneys. Our lawyers sit on the boards of prominent organizations, teach and lecture frequently. We actively participate in many associations and groups including the Public Law Center, San Francisco Legal Aid Society, Practicing Law Insti-

tute, California State Bar Association, the Los Angeles County Bar Association and the LACBA Domestic Violence Project, the Sojourner Center, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Phoenix and many others.

Buchalter is consistently ranked among the leading law firms by Chambers and Partners, Best Lawyers, The Daily Journal and the Los Angeles Business Journal. It is also ranked among the leading firms nationally by American Legal Media and the *National Law Journal*.

Giddings Berries USA

Giddings Berries USA, a subsidiary of Giddings Fruit, has opened a Monterey, Calif., office. Ian Grigg is the chief operating officer for Giddings Berries USA. He has been involved in the fresh-cut flower industry for 15 years. He also was in business development and operations for berry company Sun Belle Inc. for more than five years.

Helena Beckett, director of sales, joined Grigg in the new Monterey office. She most recently was retail sales account manager for California Giant Berry Farms, and before that she was senior sales director at Tanimura & Antle. Beckett was also at Fresh Express for 3 ½ years.

Founded in 1985 in Santiago, Chile, Giddings Fruit is a fully vertically integrated supplier with an extensive breeding program, along with growing and packing operations ranging throughout North and South America. The California location allows the company to be closer to customers and simplifies the supply chain, and to ensure consistent qualities that meet U.S. standards.

“We have assembled a great USA team and anticipate significant expansion opportunities in the

North American market for our premium fruit,” said Julio Giddings, founder and chief executive officer of Giddings Fruit. “Our mission is to provide premium-quality fruit with the greatest level of customer care, to integrate our growing operations with the U.S. market, and to work closely with our customers ensuring consistent quality, agility, and commitment. We look forward to working with American buyers.”

The company’s primary products are conventional and organic blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, cherries and red currants. The company ships to the U.S., China, Asia and Europe from Mexico, Peru and Chile.

Veritable Vegetable

Veritable Vegetable is a women-owned and led organic produce distribution company based in San Francisco. Established in 1974, we source and deliver the freshest and highest quality produce, with unmatched service. Powered by a zero-emission green fleet and driven by purpose, we put our values in action to build a sustainable and equitable food system.

Veritable Vegetable supports organic farmers, increases access to fresh produce, and strengthens diverse communities. We create a healthier world through our essential work. Our unique, values-driven business model encourages political change, impacts food policy, and demonstrates a radically different approach to distributing organic produce. Sustainable and regenerative systems increase energy and resources and are life-affirming. We envision our environment, our economy, and our communities as sustainable systems.

As a women-led business, we take a forward-thinking and innovative approach to solving complex problems. We create a fair and dynamic workplace through cooperative and collaborative leadership. We deeply value the people who make up our community of staff, growers, customers, and community partners; our collective labor is fundamental to the organic trade.

We strive for excellence in our work, transparency in our relationships, and integrity through our actions.

Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella, Inc

Setton Pistachio, which is the second largest pistachio processor in the United States, has been growing and processing pistachios in the Central Valley of California since 1986. Setton Pistachio has ownership in more than 10,000 acres of planted pistachios and currently has the capacity to process over 110 million pounds of pistachios owned by the company and its grower partners. The nut producer provides pistachios to more than 50 foreign markets, and through Setton International Foods Inc., distributes a variety of nuts and dried fruits to wholesalers and retailers throughout the United States.

Located in the heart of the San Joaquin valley in California, Setton attends to each detail of growing, harvesting, processing, manufacturing and packaging pistachios. As a family owned and operated pistachio company, we take great pride in our tradition of excellence, making us your preferred California pistachio supplier. Our impressive processing and storage facility spans 500,000 square feet, incorporating the latest technologies in each stage of production. Our ability to focus on every step of the process ensures the top quality and value of our products for our customers.

Setton Pistachio operates one of the most sophisticated food-safety programs in the entire nut industry and the quality and wholesomeness of our pistachios is universally unparalleled. Setton Farms is our premium brand, as well as the corporate identity of our numerous pistachio orchards.

Our #1 priority is to treat our customers right. This extends not only to the final consumer who will enjoy the taste of our pistachios, but also to our family of growers with whom we partner to bring those pistachios to market. We believe that producing the highest quality products and building relationships with our customers will not only win the taste buds of consumers, but also keep them coming back. This philosophy was bred the day we began business and remains steadfast today. Being successful means keeping our extended family of employees, growers and customers excited about producing the best tasting pistachios. 🌱



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FPFC MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council is to connect members to the information, education and professional network they need to increase knowledge, grow their businesses and collectively advance the industry.

THE FPFC WELCOMES THE FOLLOWING NEW MEMBERS

Nicole Mason
Veritable Vegetable

Joseph Setton
Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella

Joseph Welch
Buchalter, A Professional Corp

Helena Beckett
Giddings Berries USA

FRESH PRODUCE & FLORAL COUNCIL TO HOLD VIRTUAL WOMEN'S ROUNDTABLE

Exploring the impact of this past year of pandemic from a produce woman's perspective will be the subject of a virtual event sponsored by the Fresh Produce & Floral Council in early April.

Rachelle Schulken of the Renaissance Food Group is the co-chair of the FPFC's Luncheon Committee, which is charged with finding interesting programs to replace the networking luncheons that have not yet returned to action. In February, a panel of retailers explored the past year and looked ahead to report the impact and learnings of 2020 from a retail point of view. This "Women's Roundtable: Celebrating the Fresh Future of Women in Produce and Floral" will explore the ever-present coronavirus impact and how it affected women in the produce and floral industry.

It was a year with both kids and moms at home trying to learn and conduct business remotely. How has the coronavirus impacted the lives of produce and floral women? How has the past year refocused women's commitment to themselves, reshaped their careers and shifted their priorities for 2021? With the theme, "Power of Passion, Persistence and Perseverance", those topics will be explored by Moderator Kristen Reid of Mixtec and her panel of four dynamic women: Kyla Oberman of Cal Giant Berry Farms, Amber Rossi of Whole Foods, Sheryl Salazar of Albertsons and Shonna Williams of Cardenas Markets.

The event will be held virtually at noon on Wednesday, April 14. 🌻

FRESH PRODUCE & FLORAL COUNCIL GRADUATES 2020 APPRENTICES; ANNOUNCES PROGRAM FOR 2021 CLASS

On February 18, 2021, the Fresh Produce & Floral Apprentice Class of 2020 was honored prior to the council's virtual retail panel. Each member had received a diploma via mail and were introduced during the event. In addition, apprentice Allie Fafard of Frieda's Inc. served as the class representative by relaying the group's experiences and the beneficial impact the program had on her personally.

As the class was graduating, the deadline was approaching for applications for the 2021 class. Rachelle Schulken of Renaissance Food Group is the chair of the Apprentice Committee and told *Fresh Digest* that 2021 is expected to be a hybrid with both in-person and virtual meetings. She reminded that in 2020, the Apprentice Class had just been chosen when the coronavirus appeared "throwing everyone for a loop."

Initially, the FPFC pushed the start date back a few months to reassess the program and determine how to proceed. Schulken said the 2020 program appears to have been every bit as valuable as the preceding years. The apprentices all found value and said they would do it again, which does serve as a ringing endorsement.

This year, the FPFC leadership is going into the year with its collective eyes wide open. During March, the Apprentice Committee will review the applications, interview applicants and chose a diverse class representing many different segments of the industry. Schulken said many of the time-tested events will again be part of the educational effort. "We will kick the program off in April with a meet and greet and our PACA

(Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act) session as we do every year," she said.

A Public Speaking Session, featuring experts in that learned skill, will be utilized to help each of the apprentices gain confidence in his or her ability to effectively communicate in a public forum. That effort concludes with each apprentice giving a presentation to a panel of experts. There will be five educational session throughout the nine-month program with the fervent hope that some will be able to be help in-person. Schulken said these sessions will cover such topics as leadership skills, food safety/crisis communications and transportation/logistics. "The goal is to give our apprentices a well-rounded view of the industry," she said.

One of the learning from the year of COVID is that virtual tours can cover a wider swatch of firms and geographic locations than in-person events. "The virtual tours were very successful in 2020," Schulken said. "We realized we could be in an apple orchard in Washington and a lettuce field in Arizona on the same day."

Four tour days have been planned for 2021 with the expectation that each day will include a tour of two different operations.

The apprentices will also participate as a group at the United Fresh/FPFC Expo, which is currently slated to be an in-person event in late June. If all goes well, the class will also participate at some other industry events, including the City of Hope's produce walkathon in the fall. And an in-person graduation is tentatively scheduled for the 2022 FPFC Dinner Dance. 🍌



Five Crowns & Gloriann Farms to Open New Facility

Brawley, CA-based Five Crowns has announced the opening of its new facility in Tracy, CA with partner GloriAnn Farms. The new facility will expand the value-added corn program and offer regional distribution of other core products. Scheduled to open in April 2021, GloriAnn Farm's new state-of-the-art processing facility will more than double capacity to produce their value-added line of products.

"If 2020 taught us anything, it's to expect the unexpected," said Mark Bacchetti, co-owner of GloriAnn Farms. "Last year we faced numerous obstacles that hindered our ability to keep up with significantly increased demand for packaged corn. Needless to say, we will be ready with this new facility and look forward to continuing to grow the value-added sweet corn category with our retail partners."

In addition to housing the Northern California sales staff, the multipurpose facility will also allow Five Crowns to increase its acreage on both bulk corn and melons by providing the cold storage capacity to cool and ship more product regionally.

"This new facility sets us up to handle the additional volume that we will be growing, giving us the much needed capacity to cool and ship from Northern California," said Joe Colace, co-owner of Five Crowns Marketing. He also added, "One of our goals as a company is to be as sustainable as possible while maintaining efficiencies, and we

look forward to adding solar to this new facility just as we did with our Brawley property." 🌱

Calavo Announces Changes in Structure

Calavo Growers, Inc., a global leader in the avocado and value-added fresh food industries, has announced changes to enhance the organizational structure within the company's operations department. Under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer Jim Gibson, Calavo is working to synergize all segments of the business by creating a "one-company vision", wherein Calavo and its subsidiary, Renaissance Food Group (RFG), join forces to optimize and elevate the Calavo name. "Through the merging of our internal divisions, we are able to leverage the legacy and expertise of the Calavo brand with the innovation and influence of RFG to form one cohesive, industry-leading enterprise," said Gibson. "The combined talents of the Calavo and RFG teams will help realize our vision and strengthen the future of our company."

"As Calavo seeks to streamline business initiatives under our 'one-company vision', one of our core strategies is to continue developing and investing in our people, as well as building a strong, integrated team to support and drive our growth goals," stated Chief Operations Officer Mark Lodge. "We are committed to becoming the leader in operational excellence, food safety and quality, and sustainability

within the industry; these strategic changes across Calavo Operations support our long-term business objectives for all segments of the business."

Among the notable changes to Calavo's organizational structure is the promotion of Cheryl Enlow to vice president of food safety and quality assurance, where the industry veteran will now oversee food safety and quality programs for all Calavo business units, including the company's avocado and guacamole divisions and Renaissance Food Group. With a degree in Food Technology from Iowa State University, Enlow's career centers on produce, holding positions in production and quality for various grower and fresh-cut companies and Safeway Corporate, where she was responsible for quality of perishables.

In addition, Omar Martinez is promoted to vice president, continuous improvement, where he will lead Calavo's Environmental Health and Safety (EH&S) and Workers Compensation (WC) teams. Martinez will also help implement the company's environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics. For the Calavo fresh avocado business, Marc Fallini is promoted to vice president of fresh operations and will oversee all fresh avocado operations in the US.

Don Johnson, a veteran of the industry and longtime leader at Renaissance Food Group, will lead Calavo's purchasing and logistics initiatives which will centralize packaging, purchasing and domestic logistics for Calavo's business units. 🌱



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