

Fresh Digest

A Publication of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council

Spring 2022

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SANCHEZ

CALIFORNIA

AVOCADO SEASON
GETS OFF TO FAST START

LALIBERTE

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Fresh Produce
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EDITOR'S VIEW

By Tim Linden



The Best “Secret” in the Produce Department

The modern day produce department is quite a bit different than the one I worked at in college. Though I never counted the number of SKUs, then or now, it is a given that today's produce department in a major supermarket has at least three times the number of SKUs that were commonplace a couple of generations ago.

At first glance, today's produce department has a similar look as yesteryear though larger. There are big displays of bananas, potatoes, onions and apples, and at least two tables devoted to other fruits, usually citrus and grapes, but also melons and stone fruits, from one part of the world or another. And, of course the wall of wet vegetables has been a produce department mainstay forever.

But upon closer examination, there are also significant differences. There is now a dry rack devoted to organics and another loaded with many different tomato options as well as a huge display of avocados. The other side of the produce department is now also part of the section with a huge wall of packaged salads and value-added items, as well as many fresh-cut options prepared in the backroom. Also getting a prominent position nearby are packages of tofu, refrigerated dressings and dips, juices and packaged dry fruit. All of these items are easily viewed and allow for impulse buys which is the lifeblood of a produce department.

And then there are the “secret” displays that don't get much fanfare and

are out of the line of vision of the casual shopper. There are a host of items displayed under the main floor tables. I get the need to use every available parcel of real estate in the department, but these items are not getting a fair shake.

I am not a casual shopper; I do almost all my family's grocery shopping and I have for decades. I do most of the cooking and I like to be creative, so I am always looking for items.

But I have been ignorant of this entire sub-culture of produce items living below the main displays. Recently, I was doing a story on fresh dates and one of the newer companies revealed that only 6-8 percent of shoppers ever buy a fresh date. Dates are super healthy, very tasty and can add panache to a variety of recipes. But I have to admit that almost 100 percent of my date consumption has come from eating elsewhere or bringing home a package of dates from an FPFC luncheon. This item has never made my shopping list and I've never been tempted to buy because of a beautiful display.

In fact, when this grower-packer-shipper was telling me about the low penetration of the category, I quickly scanned a mental image of my regular supermarket, as well as the other couple I frequent, and could not recall ever seeing a date display. “They are out of sight,” he said. “They are below one of the other displays.”

On my next trip to the supermarket, I searched them out and found

organic dates below the organic table with conventional dates under the hard squash table. I bought a couple of packs and have been creating away ever since. There are many great uses for dates. I have been mostly using them as a great afternoon snack, but I did serve a stuffed Medjool date as an appetizer (not wrapped in bacon) and added them to a charcuterie board recently. I also substituted them for raisins in a saffron rice recipe. I rarely bake but have plans to create something substituting dates for the granulated sugar and avocados for the butter.

As I was searching for the date rack, I also discovered all of their friends living below vision level, including pumpkin and sunflower seeds, assorted pearl onions and other small onion packs, cooked polenta, packages of croutons, and jars of sun-dried tomatoes and crushed garlic.

I get it...every item wants to be in the produce department, even if they have to settle for less desirable space. It's like living a few blocks from the ocean with a view if you hang out over the balcony and look between two houses at the right angle. It would be great if we lived in a world where each of us got a rotation at the beach, but that's just not the way it works.

But next time you go to the supermarket, give those less visible items some face time. As my list above reveals, some of the best-tasting and healthiest products live below deck. 🌱

The only thing better than
California weather...



is a *California* spud

EXECUTIVE NOTES

By Don Gann, FPFC President



Light at the End of the Tunnel

It's been a tough two years for all of us in the produce industry in California. But that light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter and brighter.

In this space over that time period, I have continually updated you on the upcoming events of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council for two very important reasons. First, in these challenging times, whether you are going to hold an event and how you are going to do it is still top of mind. It is what everyone is talking and worrying about. We have been cautious, mostly staying outdoors and designing our events to take advantage of our temperate climate in a way that is safe for the attendees. We are fortunate that we have good weather most of the time and have been able to hold several golf tournaments in both 2020 and 2021 and an outdoor luau as well as incorporate a few virtual events. In fact, our most recent luncheon was held completely outdoors at the beautiful Langham Hotel in Pasadena. We know many of you are still weighing your options and are still not quite comfortable interacting face to face. But it appears that we are returning to a time when the coronavirus will no longer dominate every decision we make and coming to an FPFC event will be an easy no brainer decision, as it always was.

That brings me to the second reason that I continually focus on our up-

coming people-to-people gatherings. We are an event-driven organization. It is what we do, and I dare say, we do it better than any other organization in the fresh produce industry. I know of no association in our industry that hosts as many networking events as we do. Pre-pandemic, the FPFC hosted around 15 events per year. Even with a slimmed-down schedule, we are anticipating as many as 10 events this year.

Now maybe more than ever, these networking opportunities are vital to the success of your business. We all know the industry has gone through some profound changes even before coronavirus. Retailers continue to streamline their buying procedures with fewer and fewer touch points with their suppliers. Purchase orders are given and taken in a much different manner. In person sales calls are few and far between. In fact, the pandemic and streamlining the business has changed that dynamic possibly forever.

But we're still here bringing buyers and sellers and allied industry members together to talk business or to just talk about sports, the weather, or family. These connections have always formed the backbone of the FPFC and made our industry special. There is nothing that can replace the relationships I've made at FPFC events...and I am sure it's true for you as well.

Our next three events on the cal-

endar in quick succession are the 2022 FPFC Expo on April 6 at the Anaheim Convention Center, the FPFC Northern California luncheon on May 11, and the FPFC Annual Dinner Dance, which will be held at the Langham in Pasadena on May 21. None of these events can happen without your participation and the tremendous support we receive from dozens of sponsors. I need to stop here and pause for a round of applause for those sponsors. They have always been vitally important to the success of the FPFC and we don't thank them enough. Please be cognizant of who is sponsoring the FPFC events and thank them when you get the opportunity.

On the horizon, we have scheduled two summer golf tournaments, our annual City of Hope luncheon and another FPFC Luau. Each of these offers you the opportunity to greet and meet your colleagues in this great industry.

We can feel the burgeoning excitement. During the first two months of this year, we welcomed many new members to the FPFC. Some are returning veterans; others are brand new. We have listed these new members elsewhere in this issue. Please welcome them when you see them at the next event. This is an exciting time to be in the fresh produce industry and to be a member of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council. 🌱

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FPFC DINNER DANCE SET FOR MAY 21

The Fresh Produce & Floral Council will hold its annual Dinner Dance at the Hotel Langham in Pasadena, CA, on Saturday, May 21, from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m.

The event, which was originally scheduled for February 5 was delayed because of the significant increase in coronavirus cases late last year. The dinner dance typically serves as the formal passing of the gavel from the outgoing FPFC Chairman of the Board to the incoming new one. This year the gavel was passed at the beginning of the year with 2022 Chair Kori Martin of The Oppenheimer Group taking over for Sean McClure of Professional Produce.

Lynnie Nojadera of Great West Produce Company, Commerce, CA, is the chair of this year's dinner-dance, and said the Langham Hotel venue in Pasadena has been home to several FPFC dinner-dances in the past and it has always received great reviews. This year's event is called "A Speakeasy at the Langham Pasadena" and will attempt to revive the ambiance of the Roaring 20s of a century ago.

The event will feature a VIP Reception, as well as an opening reception and dinner and dancing in the Langham Ballroom. "We will also have door prizes, a \$20,000 raffle with other cash prizes and a photo opportunity for guests," Nojadera said. 🌱

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.

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2022 FPFC EVENTS

April 5th

Center for Growing Talent - PMA Collab
Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim, CA

April 5th

Exclusive Retailer/Membership Networking Event
Splitsville, Downtown Disney, Anaheim, CA

April 6th

FPFC Expo

Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim, CA

May 11th

FPFC Membership Luncheon

Northern California

Crow Canyon Country Club, Pleasanton, CA

June

Family Event - TBD

July 19th

FPFC Golf Tournament

Tustin Ranch Golf Club, Tustin, CA

August 17th

FPFC Membership Luncheon - City of Hope

Southern California - Location TBD

September 24th

FPFC Luau

Newport Dunes, Newport Beach, CA

October 5th

FPFC Golf Tournament

Wente Vineyards, Livermore, CA

December 7th

FPFC Membership Luncheon - Charity

Southern California - Location TBD

THE FPFC WELCOMES THE FOLLOWING NEW MEMBERS

San Miguel Produce
Megan Ichimoto

Fusion Marketing
Steve Muro

Keystone Natural Holdings
Holly Tuczany

Evergreen Floral Farms
Andy Cedano

Prima/Wawona
Lisa Corrigan

Lakeside Organic Gardens
Marliese Myers

Prime Source Floral
Sophia Farfan

Lawrence Distributing
Perry Lawrence

Five Crowns Marketing/GloriAnn Farms
Daren Van Dyke/Katie Veenstra

Tristan Michelle Marketing
Tristan Simpson

Sunshine Bouquet
Laura Hoy

FloraLife
Georgena Sampat

Rollin R Enterprises
Rolando Navarro

Ippolito Int'l
Dan Canales

Sun Valley Floral Farms
Rodi Groot

Babe Farms
Ande Manos

Rich River Produce
Edgar Duarte

Glad-A-Way
Dan Vordale

BCMA CA GROWN
Connie Stukenberg

Produce Careers
Lisa Wilberding

Cynara
Melissa Elms

Albertsons' Ryan Sanchez

By Tim Linden



Ryan Sanchez didn't fall far from the tree. He was born and raised in Eagle Rock, CA, the son of a retailer who had a 42-year career with the Safeway/Vons company. Ryan began his career for the same retailer as an 18-year-old courtesy clerk, and today is going on his 28th year with that company, which has since merged with Albertsons.

He appears expert at playing the hands he has been dealt over the years. "A lot of people think that the road to happiness is working hard, becoming successful and then you'll be happy. My philosophy is if you are happy, you will work hard and you will be successful."

It is with this bias that he is constantly looking

for the next Albertsons' employee to promote. "I'm always looking for talent in the store...the person that is going to be my next ops specialist (operation specialist). A lot of it has to do with personality. I like seeing someone who is having a good time, smiling and upbeat. You can teach produce," he said, indicating it's much harder to teach someone to have the right attitude. As Sanchez looks back at his own career, he is convinced that it was his love for the job – regardless of what it was – and his interest in the work that served him well and has helped him move up the ladder. And he is not yet done climbing.

While he did not know he was going to spend his career in the retail grocery business, Sanchez said he did grow up considering it to be a good job



Ryan & Sandy Sanchez with their three children



Magic Johnson and Ryan Sanchez

with good pay and good benefits. “I was born into the grocery business,” he said. “My father worked long, hard-working days as he often had already gone to work when we got up and he didn’t get back home until 6:00 or 6:30 each night. But he was also able to raise me and my brother and sister, and we had a good life.”

Ryan went to Eagle Rock High School and then on to Pasadena City College without a clear definition as to his career goals. He started at the Eagle Rock Vons store as a courtesy clerk in 1994 as he was graduating from high school. “It was a summer job,

then I kept getting promoted and here I am 27 years later,” he quipped.

But in reality, it wasn’t too long after that first promotion from courtesy clerk to working the juice bar that he considered it could be a career destination. “Back then – in the 1990s – working in a grocery store was a good paying job with good benefits. The insurance was great.”

The juice bar job led to a position as a produce clerk, which he kept for about five years before becoming a produce manager at the the Pavilions Pasadena store. In fact, Sanchez recalls that it was his

father who urged him to move over to Pavilions banner when he was a courtesy clerk. He thought there was more opportunity in that more upscale subset of the Safeway/Vons family of stores. Besides his father, Sanchez credits Enrique Mesa, his first produce manager when he became a produce clerk, as helping guide his career and giving young Ryan a great produce foundation. “Back then you would shadow the produce manager for an entire month. When he went to the restroom, I went to the restroom; his days off were my days off. I got a great education,” he recalls.

Sanchez said it was Mesa who first took him to a Fresh Produce & Floral Council Expo in the late 1990s at the Disneyland Hotel. “Ever since then I have never missed an Expo. I look forward to it every year. It is my favorite show.”

Sanchez was a produce manager for about five years, serving at various locations and under a couple different banners. About a dozen years into his career, he was moved to the corporate headquarters as a produce operations specialist.

After a couple of years there, Sanchez got the opportunity to move laterally and become a floral operations specialist. “I’ll admit when they first approached me, I didn’t love the idea...but it was the



Derek Carr of the Raiders and Ryan Sanchez



best thing that has happened to my career. Floral helped me move up in the company...and I loved every minute of it.”

In floral, he had the opportunity to shine...and he took advantage. By 2013, he had been a floral ops specialist for four years when the floral sales manager slot opened. He was promoted and worked that position for seven years. In March of 2020, right before the coronavirus hit, Sanchez applied for the produce sales manager position for Albertsons Southern California Division when Sheryl Salazar was promoted to director of fresh for the division. “I wanted to get back into produce and I decided my time is now. I threw my hat into the ring and was promoted.”

Recently, Salazar was again promoted but Sanchez did not apply for the director of fresh spot. “It’s not my time yet,” he said, noting that he has followed his gut during the entire length of his career and he will know when it’s right. But Sanchez promises he is not finished striving for that next promotion. “I’m not sure what it will be...maybe director of fresh or vice president of marketing and merchandising. There could also be positions at Boise corporate. I don’t know right now. I will know when the timing is right. I still have more to do where I am at.”

Ryan and his wife, Sandy, have been married for 16 years and have three children: Melanie, 15; Ryan, 11; and Emily, 6. The family recently moved to Menifee, which is about 80 miles southeast of Los Angeles in the middle of Riverside County. Ryan has about an hour commute to the Fullerton office of Albertsons’ Southern California Division. “We love it down here,” he said. “You get a lot more house for your money. It’s a bit of a drive to the office, but I don’t mind that.”

And it’s a bit closer to Las Vegas...in fact, Sanchez says it is only 3 hours and 15 minutes from Allegiant Stadium where his beloved Raiders play their home

football games. “I am a die-hard Raider fan. We go to a lot of games, especially me and my son. We went to six games this year. In fact, my son’s middle name is Raider.”

When Ryan was growing up in the 1980s, the Los Angeles Raiders, as they were then known, were playing in the nearby Coliseum, and he became a big fan. When they moved back to Oakland for the 1995 season, Sanchez did not give up his fanaticism. In fact, he often flew up to Oakland from the Burbank Airport on Sunday mornings, with a plane full of Raider fans, to watch them play in that city. While the Raiders’ new stadium in Las Vegas is clearly an upgrade from their Oakland Coliseum days, Sanchez admits that he misses that game day atmosphere that Oakland fans were famous for.



Three generations of the Sanchez clan

He notes that his whole family roots for the Raiders (“You have to, to live in my house!”), but he also spends a good deal of his spare time participating with his children in their passions. He added the kids are involved in quite a few sports, and his daughters love dance.

As far as how the retail produce business is currently progressing, Sanchez said it is still pandemic strong. Sales began to spike as the nation was shutting down in the spring of 2020, and while they may have dropped off a bit, he said people continue to love cooking at home and are keeping fresh produce sales up. Of course, there are also the challenges of rising prices as almost all inputs have seen price increases. “Setting the right retail price is always a challenge. You have to try to be at that price where you don’t lose volume and can continue to grow.”

He added that finding and keeping good workers is another huge challenge. Sanchez recalls that when he was working in the stores as a teenager and in his early 20s, lots of co-workers saw it as a career. He said that’s not the case anymore, as there are fewer in-store workers focused on that opportunity. But he does have ideas as to how that can change. He’d like to see more training in the produce department like he had in the 1990s. He admits that is very expensive, but he is working on some ideas. “Maybe instead of a month, you can shadow a produce manager for two weeks,” he said. “People are the most important part of our business and we have to invest in them.”

Sanchez believes the best thing about the produce industry is the relationships that you forge. “My best



friends are in this industry...people I met when I was a courtesy clerk, produce clerk, working in floral, my produce family today which includes my produce team, vendors and suppliers. For example, my mentor, Enrique Mesa, is now a merchandiser at Charlie’s Produce. He is one of my closest friends.”

Sanchez said it not difficult at all to have your best friends be in the same business as competitors, suppliers or vendors. “As long as you can separate work from friendship, there’s no problem,” he said, noting some people have difficulty doing that, but he does not.

“Go Raiders, Dodgers and Lakers!” he urges, as a parting cheer. 🍌



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CALIFORNIA AVOCADO SEASON GETS OFF TO FAST START

By Tim Linden

Several factors enabled California avocado growers to get the season off to a fast start with about four times the shipments expected by the time March rolled around.

Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission, told the Fresh Digest in early March that about 40 million pounds of California avocados were marketed in January and February because of extremely good marketing conditions and a short hiatus in avocado shipments from Mexico in mid-February.

Typically, a few smaller California retailers try to get a jump on the season by offering avocados from the Golden State in time for Super Bowl promotions. This year the Super Bowl was held as late as it ever has been (February 13), which helped that effort. In addition, the market price on avocados was in the high \$40s-\$50s, which DeLyser said was in record territory for that time of year. This convinced more growers to size pick or even strip a grove or two that might be in a vulnerable position, due to environmental challenges such as wind or lack of water. Whatever the reason, California avocado growers sent more than five million pounds to market the last week of January and have continued greater-than-expected shipments ever since.

CAC did support this activity by connecting with West Coast retailers who wanted to build Super Bowl displays featuring California fruit. “We are definitely keeping an eye

on the marketing situation this season to see if we need to adjust our promotion schedule,” DeLyser said.

As an example of an earlier-than-expected promotion, DeLyser noted that King Soopers in Denver ran a California avocado promotion in late February, which marked the beginning of its switch to California fruit. She added that there are retailers all over the country that remain loyal to California avocados and do promote them during the spring through summer period.

DeLyser believes the expected peak shipping period of April through August is still valid as growers move this year’s crop, which has been estimated at more than 300 million pounds, a 15 percent increase over 2021. She said it remains to be seen how much fruit will be available during the later stages of the season in September and October. However, she did note that some growers, especially in more northern growing districts, strategically shoot for the end of the season when California fruit is in short supply and the market price is usually pretty strong.

To increase demand for California avocados by both consumers and retailers, the commission does offer an integrated marketing approach. DeLyser said the efforts begin before the season starts and last into the fall. The program includes consumer and trade advertising, public relations outreach, influencer marketing, and a robust social media campaign.

Once again, CAC’s promotional efforts will feature “The



best California avocados have California in them” advertising campaign. The strategy utilizes California lifestyle images, such as the sun and the surf, to connect the state’s avocados with their point of origin. The consumer promotion plan targets avocado shoppers who are willing to pay a higher price for the domestically grown fruit, which has long been in line with the commission’s premium positioning strategy.

The ads and content are shared with consumers across a wide range of channels, including: social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok; streaming channels including Hulu, Tremor video and YouTube; and audio stations such as iHeart radio, Spotify and Pandora. For digital advertising and custom content, CAC is using The Kitchn and Food52. During the peak of the season, billboards will carry the message in California’s top media markets.

DeLyser said a solid public relations program is another avenue CAC takes to build demand and create awareness for the California season. On March 31, consumer media, influencers, retailers and trade media have been invited to a virtual cooking class hosted by charcuterie board expert and food stylist Meg Quinn. And on May 14, CAC is hosting a California avocado grove open house also for local media, influencers and trade guests. The CAC executive said in the past, annual grove tours have been limited by time

constraints but this season they have scheduled more time for these media professionals to interact with growers and CAC staff to answer all their questions. Celebrating the 10th anniversary of California Avocado Month in May, the commission will conduct media outreach efforts and share new recipes crafted by celebrity chef and Top Chef alum Nyesha Arrington.

DeLyser said CAC will continue to work with influential brand advocates and registered dietitians as two more ways to build the California avocado brand. Along that same line, the commission has developed a new retail-ready avocado bag that touts California avocados on the header and includes care and handling tips. DeLyser said the bag has been designed to allow handlers to include their own logo or another identifying mark. She noted that the sale of bagged avocados continues to trend upward and this allows California growers to capitalize on this sales opportunity while touting their local point of origin to consumers.

Coronavirus restrictions and concerns have kept CAC staff, like everyone else, grounded for most of the past two years, but 2022 will include more in-person opportunities. CAC sponsored the FPFC March 16 luncheon and is making plans to exhibit at “The Global Produce & Floral Show” in Orlando in October, which is the inaugural convention and trade show for the new International Fresh Produce Association. 🌱

Laliberte Produce Roots Run Deep

By Tim Linden



Four generations of Lalibertes

Bill Laliberte of WJL Distributors has been a mainstay in the Southern California produce industry for almost 50 years. He admits to starting to slow down which works well as his son, Adam, has been working with him for the past decade and a half and is ready to take the reins.

That distinguished produce lineage has one more impressive link. Arthur Laliberte, Bill's father, just celebrated his 104th birthday in his native Minnesota and lays claim to starting this wing of the family down the produce path.

Arthur Laliberte was born on January 13, 1918, in Minneapolis. A good portion of his youth took place during the Great Depression, which helped hone the work ethic that is of particular pride to the family. The elder Laliberte gradu-

ated from De La Salle High School in his native town and found his first job as a bookkeeper for a trucking firm. But it wasn't too much later that the United States entered World War II and Arthur answered the call to serve his nation. "During the war, I was stationed in San Diego and Frisco (San Francisco)," he recently told the *Fresh Digest*, as he is still active, drives a car and retains his patriarch title in the Laliberte Family.

He spent most of his Navy tenure in the South Pacific with frequent stops in Guam. After the war, Arthur returned to Minneapolis and worked several different jobs. At one point, he sold office goods; another time he was involved with selling supplies to butchers. That was a sales job calling on young Arthur to travel throughout the upper

Midwest “eating dust in 90-95 degree weather on all dirt roads” is how he recalls it. It was during one of his trips to Aberdeen, South Dakota, that he became acquainted with the produce industry as he had a brother working in that town for Gamble Robinson.

Soon thereafter, Mr. Laliberte found a job with Gamble Robinson in Minneapolis unloading boxcars. “That worked into a sales job where I did quite well,” he said.

He moved around a bit in the late 1940s selling produce for several different companies, including a vegetable co-op called 10,000 Lakes Farmers Association, before finding a permanent home at American Fruit & Produce Company in Minneapolis. “I was a manager there for 23 years,” he said, retiring after the company was sold in the early 1970s.

Arthur and his wife, LaVerne, were married in 1939 and were the proud parents of seven sons. “All my boys worked for me at one point or another,” Arthur said, noting that he would hire them to unload trucks at American.

But none of those sons followed Dad into the produce industry, except Bill, who was born in 1948. Bill explains that after high school, he went to St. John’s University, got his bachelor’s degree and was planning to go to the University of Minnesota Law School, but the United States was entrenched in the Vietnam War and duty again called for a member of the Laliberte Family.

Armed with his college degree, Bill was sent to the Naval Communications Center in San Diego, which is where he served the entirety of his three-year hitch. He was discharged in 1973 and did have designs on heading back to Minnesota for his law degree, but he wasn’t quite sold on the idea of moving back to the Midwest.

Bill Laliberte describes growing up in Minnesota as “a tough gig” not so much on he and his brothers but definitely on his father. He said it wasn’t until he was about 10 years

old that the family was able to live in a house big enough for all of them. “Before that we lived in a 900 square foot house with two bedrooms,” he said, adding a colorful description of the sleeping arrangement he and his brothers had.

In the late 1960s, Bill did drive a truck for American and did his fair share of unloading produce weighing 75 pounds or more. He recalls cantaloupes were the top dog at 90 pounds with a lug of pears typically topping 75 pounds.

“When I got out of the Navy, I wanted to figure out who I was,” he said. “Up until then I was doing what everybody else told me to do. Who is Bill Laliberte?”

His Dad, who purchased a lot of produce from C.H. Robinson, a Minneapolis-based company, suggested that Bill try to hook up with the nationwide company’s Los Angeles office. Bill, in fact, was hired by Bill Bennett and John Taylor, who were running the office. Laliberte recalls that at that time, the L.A. office was loaded with young Turks who would all eventually make a name for themselves in the Southern California produce industry. “Allen Lund ran the trucking department; Bill Vogel and Bob Franks were in that office and Richard Flamminio was right down the hall.”

The CHR office was located in the string of offices above the Seventh Street Market. In fact, Bill recalls that the Fresh Produce Council of Southern California, as it was called then, was in the office right next to CHR with Joel Nelsen, the FPFC’s first top executive, spearheading the effort of the fairly-new association.

Laliberte worked for CHR for three years before moving to Cal Pine Distributing, which he ran for most of the next two decades with Kent Pidduck. In 1996, William J. Laliberte established WJL Distributors, using his initials as the company’s moniker.

Adam Laliberte worked for his dad as he was going



Bill with four of his brothers and his dad at Arthur’s recent 104th birthday party.



Bill and his family

through college. He started at his father's alma mater, St. John's in St. Cloud, Minnesota, but transferred back to California and received his undergraduate degree from Pepperdine. Adam then went on to the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena and did work as a minister for several years. But with a grow-

ing family, he reunited with his father and joined WJL in 2006. He became a partner three years ago and Bill said his son is now ready to takeover. "I'm stepping aside, sooner than later," Bill promises.

He noted that he became very involved in the City of Hope, which is the Los Angeles produce industry's collective charity of choice, in 1977. He helped establish the City of Hope Golf Tournament and has served as chair of that committee ever since. "This year's tourney is on February 22, and it is going to be my last year as chairman," Bill said. "I'm slowing down. Ginny and I have been married 46 years and it's time to enjoy what we built. And I do mean 'we'. Without my wife none of this would have happened."

The couple's two kids, Amy and Adam, have seven children between them, which will give Bill and Ginny plenty to do once he does retire.

Of course, Bill points out that longevity does run in the family. Arthur's stated keys to his long life are staying active, walking a lot and constantly exercising. "He likes to say 'if you sit, you lose,'" Bill revealed. 🌱



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the Historic and the Future;
Honesty, Integrity, and an
Insatiable work ethic.

MEET THE 2022 FPFC APPRENTICES

The 2022 Apprentice Class of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council have been named and will hold its first get together in conjunction with the FPFC Expo on April 5/6 at the Anaheim Convention Center.

To introduce the FPFC membership to these potential future leaders, *Fresh Digest* asked each apprentice to answer a few questions about themselves and their personal journey to this place on their path.

Jared Bernardi

Sales – Account Manager

Bonduelle Fresh Americas

Los Angeles, CA



Background – I was born in the Central Valley of California in Turlock but grew up moving back and forth between Turlock and Tucson, AZ. My dad (Joe) is a second generation produce broker after taking over our family’s company, Bernardi & Associates, from my grandfather, Al Bernardi. Having the opportunity to live in two different places for six months out of the year was a unique experience. I had two different homes, two different schools, and different groups of friends. Having that experience definitely influenced the person that I am today.

I attended Chapman University where I majored in International Business with a minor in Political Science. I was also on the men’s water polo team at Chapman and was involved with other on-campus organizations. My junior year I had the opportunity to study abroad in Rome where I learned so much about the culture and got to experience so many new things. During my senior year, I started an accelerated MBA program that I completed in the summer of 2021. Throughout college, I interned with many different agricultural based companies, including a walnut processor, cheese manufacturer and agricultural investment firm. I began working for Bonduelle Fresh Americas as an intern on the customer development team in June of 2020 and was hired full time as a business analyst at the end of the internship in September 2020. As of March 1, 2022, I became a part of the sales team as an account manager. I am looking forward to the new challenges and expanding my experience in the produce world.

FPFC Connection – I first learned about the Fresh Produce & Floral Council when I began working at Bonduelle Fresh Americas a year and a half ago. I just recently learned about the Apprentice Program from a boss and was very impressed with all the activities and work they do to continue to expand people’s careers and knowledge about the produce industry. I want to continue to expand my exposure to the produce world. As we see many different industries and companies continue to face supply chain issues, I am interested to learn how organizations have continued to be successful during these challenging times. I am also looking forward to meeting and learning from so many knowledgeable people that have tremendous experience in the produce industry.

Fun Fact – Any sport involving a board is a passion of mine. I love wakesurfing, wakeboarding, snowboarding, and surfing. I love to spend my summers on Lake McClure in Northern California and my winters at Dodge Ridge in the Central Sierras. One of my earliest memories is getting a wakeboard for my 4th birthday and having my dad and his friends pull me across the pool for practice!

Charles Rowland
Sales Executive
Fowler Packing Company
Fresno, CA



Background – I was born and raised in Fresno, CA, and have been in the produce industry for eight years. I started at Fowler Packing while I was in college at Fresno State University. During my time as a Bulldog, I studied Agricultural Business. For one of my classes, I needed an internship to complete the course and was hired by Fowler Packing. I have been here ever since, working my way up from quality control to assistant production coordinator to where I have settled today as a sales executive.

FPFC Connection – I came to one FPFC event at which my boss, Sean Nelsen, was a presenter. I learned more about the Apprentice Program and heard it was a great program from Sean. I applied to the program to expand my knowledge of the produce industry.

Fun Fact: Outside of work, I love to hangout with my family and friends. I just got married last May and we are expecting our first kid on May 22nd. It's a boy!

A collage of four images. Top-left: Fowler Packing logo with a green leaf icon above the text 'FowlerPacking' and 'CONGRATULATIONS CHARLES ROWLAND!' in green and white. Top-right: peelz logo with a green leaf icon above the text 'peelz' and an image of peelz mandarin products in bags and a box. Bottom-left: A circular portrait of Charles Rowland with the text 'Wishing you much success in the 2022 FPFC Apprentice Program!' below it. Bottom-right: SAMSONS logo (a circular emblem with a grape cluster and 'EST. 1950') and images of SAMSONS produce bags (grapes, raspberries, blueberries) and SORBET grape products.

Bailey Slayton
Sales Associate
Country Sweet Produce
Bakersfield, CA



Background – I was born and raised in Bakersfield, CA. After graduating high school, I moved to the coast, where I studied Agricultural Business and minored in Fruit Science at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. From my first day on campus to my first class, Ag Business 101, my passion for agriculture grew immensely. The hands-on practices Cal Poly provided created an invaluable learning experience. We weren't just learning how to grow fruit in California from a Power Point presentation, we were out in the fields doing it ourselves! After Cal Poly, I went on to work for E & J Gallo Winery where I was a part of their Vineyard Management team in Sonoma County. Driving through beautiful vineyards every day and getting to learn all the inner workings of wine growing was truly an incredible experience. I spent two years there, then decided I was ready to move back home. I missed my family, the Central Valley and coast, and I was ready for a change in my career. I love working with people and building meaningful relationships, so sales seemed like a great fit and so did the Country Sweet Team. I am so excited to be back and working in "the sweet spot" of California. I have been at Country Sweet for a year now and am looking forward to many more!

FPFC Connection – I heard about FPFC and its Apprentice Program through my co-worker, Rae Molumby. She participated in last year's program and spoke so highly of it. Although I am not new to agriculture, I am very new to the produce industry, so this opportunity was a perfect way for me to learn as much as I can about all the

different aspects of it. I am so looking forward to getting started and meeting the rest of my apprentice class!

Fun Fact – Outside of work, you can find me outside! I love exercising, hiking, and being on the lake or in the ocean. Anything under the sun. Summer is by far my favorite time of the year. I frequently find a hilltop or lookout to watch sunsets with friends, often accompanied with delicious food. I am a self-described foodie! Good food makes me dance!!



John Grecco

Director of Business Development

Produce Business magazine

San Mateo, CA



Background – Originally from New York, I currently call San Mateo, CA home. I’ve worked at small B2B publishers, a big consumer media company, a boutique marketing firm, and a digital product agency. I was fortunate to join Produce Business almost a year ago, where I do advertising sales for the magazine and its digital properties, including the online Perishable Pundit, PerishableNews.com and ProduceBusiness.com. I’m also involved with our events, traveling to the The New York Produce Show and The London Produce Show, and have participated in executive share groups. I’ve really enjoyed meeting people in the industry and learning from them. It makes me excited about the opportunity to build a career in produce.

FPFC Connection – My First FPFC event was the 2021 NorCal Golf Tournament. The founder of Produce Business magazine, Jim Prevor, encouraged me to attend. I was impressed with the turnout, enjoyed the golf, and made a lot of great contacts. From then on, I knew I wanted to participate in more FPFC functions, so I signed up to receive emails from the council. When I read about the Apprenticeship Program, I mentioned it to Jim, and we were on the same page—an apprenticeship would strengthen my industry knowledge, help build relationships, and offer a foundation for continued success in this industry.

Fun Fact – Prior to joining Produce Business magazine, I lived in Tokyo, Japan for nearly three years, along with my wife and dog. My wife and I love seeing the world and travel as often as we can. Outside of work, I enjoy watching baseball and going to games, dining out as often as possible, and taking hikes in Northern California.

Katie Gagnon

Associate Buyer, Produce

Grocery Outlet

Emeryville, CA



Background – I was born and raised in Sherman Oaks, CA with my twin sister. I grew up in a family retail business as my mom has had her store for over 30 years. I went to the University of Delaware and majored in Fashion Merchandising, graduating in 2019. I started working at Grocery Outlet’s corporate office straight out of college and I was an assistant buyer on the general merchandise team for a little over two years. I really love the company, and I want to keep growing with it and learning more. An opportunity opened on the produce team and I wanted to go for it. I have no previous produce experience, but the industry really interested me, and I can’t wait to learn more. I love my team and their passion for produce is something I really admire.

FPFC Connection – I learned about the Fresh Produce & Floral Council through my team. I have not attended any events yet, but I will be going to the FPFC Expo in Anaheim in April. I heard about the Apprenticeship Program through my coworkers that were previously a part of it and had such great experiences. I applied to this program because I really want to immerse myself in the produce industry and know more about the different facets of it. I am a very curious person, and I always want to know more. I also am looking forward to making those new connections and building relationships with people in this industry.

Fun Fact – I love to cook! It is one of my favorite pastimes, and I will whip anything up in the kitchen. It is such a great outlet for me, and I love being able to share that with my friends and family.



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& Floral Council

JOHN GRECCO

Director of Business Development

**Congratulations on being named to the
2022 FPFC Apprentice Class!**

Kyle Morris

Quality Control Inspector

Albertsons

Brea, CA



Background – I grew up in Vallejo, CA and started my grocery career there with Safeway as a courtesy clerk. I moved down to San Diego to attend San Diego State University in 2004 and graduated in 2007 with a BA in Communication – emphasis in Advertising. I worked at Vons throughout college as a produce clerk and decided to take some time for myself and to travel upon graduation. My friend and I took a cross-country road trip from San Diego to Washington, D.C and back. I also went back to the Bay Area to visit family and friends among other smaller trips. A year later as I was looking to get started in a new career, the Great Recession of 2008 hit. I decided to pursue a promotion to produce manager instead and achieved that goal in 2010. I worked my way up to progressively bigger volume stores until I was managing the biggest produce departments in San Diego County. In 2019, I got a notice from my district supervisor that they were looking for a new quality control inspector in the warehouse in Brea. I jumped at the chance even though it was an hour away from where I lived. I got accepted into the position shortly after and made the long drive for a year until we were finally able to move nearby. I have been in this position for the last two years and am now trying to become a buyer.

FPFC Connection – I had heard of the FPFC Expo when I was a produce manager, but never got the chance to attend. I became more exposed to the council when I became a QC. My current supervisor, Bryan Presley, is on the FPFC Board of Directors and he talked to me about all the benefits, networking opportunities and exposure I could gain by getting involved. He introduced me to the Apprentice Program thinking it would be good for me to learn all the facets of the produce industry, to meet the people who we work with daily, and to get involved in the community while developing some professional skills in areas like public speaking. I was able to attend the FPFC golf tournament last year and look forward to attending many more events the council puts on every year.

Fun Fact – My biggest passion is baseball. I grew up playing the game, mostly as a catcher, and I am a diehard Oakland A's fan. Baseball is how I spend a lot of my free time in the summer - either by playing, watching games on tv, attending games in person, or playing fantasy baseball with friends. It seems like it consumes my life for most of the year.

Luis Alan Gonzalez

Sales and Marketing

SunFed

Rio Rico, AZ



Background – I was born in Tucson, Arizona but raised in Nogales. I am a second generation produce salesman. I have worked in several different fields of the produce industry. I have worked as a sample puller and forklift/pallet-jack operator. I can probably load a truck faster than anyone reading this. I started a pallet company in high school: buying, fixing, transporting, and selling used pallets. I graduated from the University of Arizona, majoring in Agribusiness Management and Economics. I worked as an Arizona Department of Agriculture inspector and went from sample pulling grapes to stamping boxes as a “produce policeman”. I currently work at SunFed, a shipper company based out of Rio Rico, working in sales and marketing. I am 23 years old, and this is only the beginning of my produce career.

FPFC Connection – I came across the FPFC Apprentice Program from a post I saw in LinkedIn. Immediately I thought this was a great opportunity to further my knowledge in the produce industry and also network with like-minded individuals that have a true passion for produce. I have not attended any events, but I am looking forward to them all, especially the live tours.

Fun Fact – One of my favorite hobbies outside the produce industry is race horses...more specifically, fast quarter horses. My grandfather has a couple horses and I always enjoy going to the track and getting lucky. I also dabble in the stock market and consider myself a cigar enthusiast.

Sandra Aguilera
Sales Assistant
Calavo Growers
Santa Paula, CA



Background – I was brought to the U.S. by my parents at the age of five and was raised in Ventura, CA. Their job here was picking strawberries and they worked in the strawberry fields until I was in high school, so I knew what a hard and strenuous job it was. My first job out of high school was working for a movie manufacturing company but a few years later they moved out of the county for cheaper labor. In that time, I took some time off and finished college and luckily, through a staffing agency, I got a job in a strawberry processing facility. Speaking to field owners and people in the agriculture industry, I found out a lot of their kids were not interested in agriculture, but instead wanted to go into industries like technology, medical and business. I personally really enjoyed the people and working with produce. The fact that I had no idea how much was behind getting the food to our tables made it appealing to me; there was so much to learn and it opened my eyes to a whole new world of possibilities. Throughout the years, I bounced around different departments in different strawberry companies. I worked in administration, inventory, and accounting. I then moved to Calavo and worked in logistics. About three years ago, I had the opportunity to work as an assistant in the sales department. I was completely blown away about how much different and challenging sales are. I have considered it a personal challenge to become a good salesperson and I look forward to evolving and growing in this field and this company.

FPFC Connection – Calavo has been a continuous supporter of the FPFC for years and one of my colleagues was in the program this past year. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to attend any of their events. I heard about the Apprentice Program through Kyla Maxfield, a senior sales manager at Calavo. I know she felt it was a great opportunity for me to gain exposure and knowledge of the produce industry and encouraged me to apply. Thankfully I was accepted. I can't wait to meet new people and am really looking forward to learning. I feel fortunate to be part of this 2022 class.

Fun Fact – Outside of work I enjoy doing sports and outdoor activities. I use to do it much more when I was younger but had a knee injury that caused me to slow down a lot. But now I finally feel better and love getting back into the outdoors. I live in Ventura County, which has great hiking trails by the beach and water spots like the Punch Bowls in Santa Paula. I love riding my bike at the beach and enjoy stopping at local places for food. The weekend farmers market is a great way to get out and at the same time interact with people in the community. I like to help walk dogs at the local dog shelter here in town. They are a nonprofit that does so much for abandoned animals.



Joseph Cowle
Sales/Buyer
B&C Fresh Sales
Orange, CA

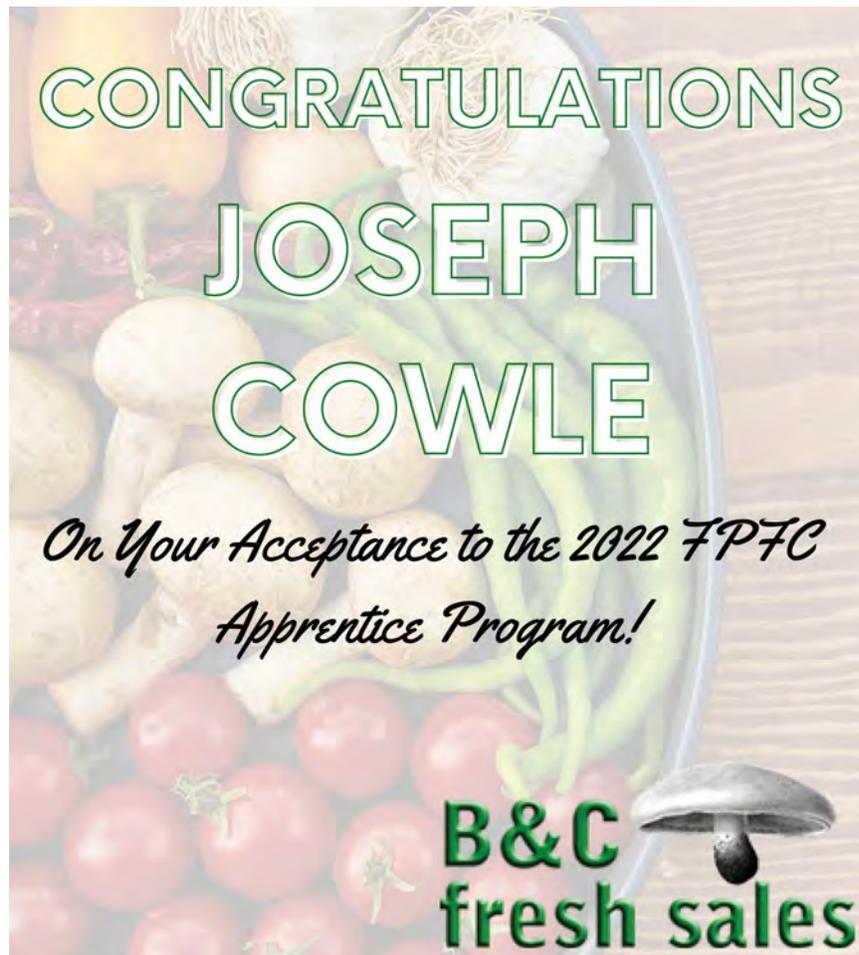


Background – I grew up in Rancho Cucamonga where I lived with my parents. I was introduced to the produce industry by my father who had worked in the industry his entire career. He would include me in yearly produce-oriented activities and when I began working, I started with my father at an entry level position in the industry. Once I started college and picked a career path, I decided to stick to the industry. While I attended college, I worked my way into a food safety position, which I continued throughout my time in college. When graduation neared, I began talks with a few produce companies and focused on B&C Fresh Sales. After I graduated from Cal Poly Pomona with my bachelor’s degree in Agribusiness and Food Industry Management, I was ready to move to the next step in my career. I really enjoyed the environment that was presented at B&C. I knew that I would have great leadership in the industry, and I felt that I fit right in with the team. Although it has been less than a year in this position, I have felt like it has been home for longer.

FPFC Connection – I first learned about the Apprentice Program when I was in college. My father told me that this program was a great opportunity for me to learn more about the industry. Since then, I have been waiting for the right moment to apply for the Apprentice Program. I have attended three FPFC Expos in Anaheim

and two luncheons and at each of these events I learned more produce knowledge and connected with more people. I applied to the program to expand my experience within the industry and to connect with more industry individuals.

Fun Fact – I am a gear head outside of my business realm. I enjoy tinkering with engines, boats, and cars. If it has some sort of power plant, I am interested in how it works, how it can be modified/improved, and how can it go faster. I enjoy outside activities such as boating, exercising, fishing, and just spending time with family and friends. Learning is very important to me, and I always look at something as what else can I learn from this or, what is something I don’t know that I would like to learn.



Kathleen Ezell

Account Executive (Sales)

Wonderful Citrus

Delano, CA



Background – I was born and raised in Bakersfield, CA and have come back to my hometown where I currently reside. I attended Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, CA, but transferred after one year to Whittier College in Whittier, CA. I graduated from Whittier with a BA in Sports Marketing and set off into a career I thought was my “Dream Job”. I worked in Minor League baseball for three and a half years from a summer working for the Bakersfield Blaze to moving out to Omaha, NE to work for the Omaha Storm Chasers.

In the back half of my time in Omaha, I realized this was not the career I saw myself in long-term and chose to move back to Bakersfield to sort out what my next move would be. After some searching, I applied for work in the sales department at Wonderful Citrus. I have been here for almost three years, and this job has exceeded my expectations. It is where I see myself long-term in my career.

FPFC Connection – I learned about the FPFC just in the last year from Wonderful Food Service Director Nancy Johnston, when she mentioned the apprenticeship to me. I have not attended any events at this time but am excited to have the opportunity in the upcoming year. I applied to the program because I feel it is important to grow from many experiences. I am still new to the produce industry and am always eager to learn more. I am ecstatic that there will be others in the program; I’ll get the opportunity to network with and gain a better understanding of the overall produce industry from different experiences. There is so much more for me to learn from a personal standpoint as well. While I love to talk and have typically no issue public speaking, I feel the public speaking aspect will elevate my skills. In the area of public speaking, I have always done well in a school setting, but have little experience in the professional world, which I believe will be a major benefit of this program for me.

Fun Fact – I am an avid baseball fan, more specifically of the Los Angeles Dodgers. I enjoy watching the game and following the leagues with my Mom who introduced me to the sport at a young age. I enjoy playing golf (not well) and have learned how to make my way through 18-holes from my Dad and fiancé. I had to learn quickly to have fun with it since it quickly tested my patience. I have a great love for working out and a healthy lifestyle (most of the time). I work out 1-2 times a day and look forward to it as my “me time” to clear my mind and escape for a little bit each day while improving my overall health.

Congratulations to all of the
2022 FPFC Apprentices!



Wonderful citrus™

Kyle Lane

Sales Manager

Westfalia Fruit Marketing USA LLC

Los Angeles, CA



Background – I was raised on a small farm outside of Bakersfield, CA, where I learned firsthand the growing aspects of the produce industry. After college, I worked in the entertainment industry as a production manager where I was able to travel and see many different things this amazing country has to offer. After a period of time, I realized that I needed to come home to what was near and dear to my heart: produce. Starting my career out in the produce industry, I worked the night shift buying off the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market where I was able walk the market to learn and touch all varieties. This allowed me to really sink my teeth into the industry confirming my passion for produce and the complexities within it. For the past three of the 12 years I have been in the industry, I have been working alongside the amazing team at Westfalia Fruit.

FPFC Connection – I have known about the council for some time participating at luncheons along with the Expo over the years. Westfalia has always been a supporter of the Fresh Produce and Floral Council and it was our president, Raina Nelson, who mentioned to me that I should apply. She has known a few colleagues who participated in the program that had it deeply enriched their lives and thought I would be a perfect fit. I am looking to learn a variety of skills from unfamiliar aspects of the produce industry and meet new and interesting people to help build my foundation to where I can one day give back to those looking to expand their horizons.

Fun Fact – I enjoy cooking for family and friends where we all come together sharing in each other's company. During the COVID shutdown, we became campers where we enjoy being outside in nature away from the city. As my girls are growing up so quickly, we want to try to slow down what we can to maximize on being together as a family. Whenever I have a free moment, I find myself at the beach. Whether it be in the water surfing or just sitting still watching the waves crash on the shore. I also enjoy pretending to know how to play golf.

Daniel Rosinski

Warehouse Manager

Progressive Cold Storage

La Mirada, CA



Background – I went to various elementary schools in Los Angeles until I moved to Las Vegas where I completed middle school and graduated from Valley High School in 2007. I moved out of my parents' house right after and held a job at Georgia Pacific until the recession eliminated the shift I worked in. I moved back to Los Angeles. Within a month, I got a job working at Progressive Produce in Commerce, CA. I went from making boxes all day to becoming a satellite warehouse manager by my sixth year, and was stationed at the City of Industry. My knowledge of our warehouse management system and quick learning ability had me in a position where I was someone who would wear many hats and if not given a task, I was in the background helping my peers complete it. After holding the manager position for five years, the opportunity presented itself to become the warehouse manager for our newly located facility in La Mirada. I still wear many hats but now I get to focus on one warehouse. I've helped develop SOPs (standard operating procedures) and with the pandemic I am now focusing on improving efficiency in production, shipping times and leading my team through these tough times we are in. What started off as job has now become a career that I am glad to have and hope to continue to grow with the company.

FPFC Connection – I first learned about the Fresh Produce & Floral Council through word of mouth at the beginning of this year. I hope to develop better public speaking skills along with learning how other operations work to get a different perspective on how to run an operation. Being at Progressive for so many years, I want to step outside my comfort zone and strive for perfection.

Fun Fact – I have been told I am an excellent "Dog Dad". In my spare time I like to train them. When possible, I also like to go to new places and hope to expand my exploration to more than just Mexico and the United States.

CONGRATULATIONS KYLE LANE!

Wishing this #AvoExpert
success in the 2022
FPFC Apprentice Program



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