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Globalization of Fresh Produce, Lafayette Style

By Sophie Braccini



Hank Miller Photo provided

You might be thinking that Lafayette, with its community garden and farmers' market, is all about local food. Think again. There is a flourishing business in Lafayette - The Fresh Connection, owned by Orinda resident Hank Miller - that has been exporting fresh fruits and vegetables all over the planet for years using every means of transportation available, and is so successful that it is now moving into a new 7,000-square-foot location on Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

Miller doesn't oppose the 'buy local' movement, but when landless states like Hong-Kong want California grapes or fresh lettuce, or Australia wants citrus off-season, he is there to find it and ship it to them. "We are only about exporting," he explains, "from growers in California, Washington, Florida, Arizona, but also from Chili, Peru, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. We just don't import into the United States."

"(Buying local) is a nice idea but it is not realistic," he adds. "We can't feed the masses by going local because it is too expensive, and people can grow only certain things in certain areas."

This man who once wanted to become a farmer when he was a student at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, but went into international business instead, says that dealing with fruits and vegetables is like no other business. "There are no contracts," he says, "almost everything is done on a handshake; it's purely a relationship business." And it is through handshakes that he has built a company that's one of the top three exporters in its field, moving thousands of containers by sea (70 percent of the business), by air or truck, dealing with a large number of farmers, large wholesalers or supermarkets who have trusted him for years.

Over the last 20 years Miller has witnessed the long-term dominant trends of his sector and has developed some skepticism regarding other aspects of the fresh food market.

"We have not seen a huge growing demand for organic produce," says Miller, "but there is a growing demand for fresh fruits and vegetables and what we are producing in the United States is more consistently higher quality and safer than what is found in less well regulated countries." Miller says that the bigger benefit the organic movement has brought to the industry is lowering the amount of pesticides used in conventional agriculture.

Fresh fruit and vegetable commerce is not immune to political decisions that sometimes have nothing to do with agriculture. "There might be a disagreement between China and the U.S. over something (not related to agriculture) that will result in changes in the rules for certain products," he says. Countries can also change the rules to protect their budding agriculture, such as South Korea when it subsidized its strawberry farms to gain new market share.

Miller says that it takes at least three years to train someone to operate as an international fruit trader. "There is no school for that," he says. "It is very detailed and changes every year with the fluctuation of the weather patterns." Of his 30 employees, some are located abroad, such as his South African inspector who buys from local farmers there .

Finding fresh water is one of the biggest challenges affecting Miller's business and farming in general. "Look at our region," he says, "the population has grown so much, and we have not done anything to our water supply for 30 or 40 years." He would like to see more water storage built, rather than seeing farmers in the Central Valley lose their water rights and let their trees die.

The second bottleneck is labor. "Some production, like nuts, can be managed by a small number of people, but stone fruits, many vegetables, and small fruits require a lot of manpower. There are not enough people and it will continue to be a problem until we deal with the immigration issue."

The epidemic that has devastated the bee population is also of concern.

"I think that for the next 5 to 10 years the market will continue to grow," says Miller, who is very cautious and does not want to seem too optimistic.

He has invested in the new commercial building on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, saying "we were crowded in our

cottage on Dewing." And while he acknowledges that the process was long and sometimes frustrating, Miller and his team are looking forward to completing their move by February and celebrating the 20th anniversary of The Fresh Connection.

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