

# 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.

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

## Celebrating an Anniversary?

If your business is celebrating a significant anniversary (5, 10, 20 years or more ...) send us a photo of your business, the owner(s) or the staff with specific information about your business and what you're celebrating, and we'll include it in an upcoming issue.

## Compost Bins Home Composting For Busy People!

Using the right equipment will make composting easier and faster. The *Home Composting for Busy People!* program is pleased to offer reduced price compost bins designed to help improve your efforts to compost.

Call the **CCCSWA Home Composting Information Line** at 925-906-1801 x306 to request additional information or visit [www.wastediversion.org](http://www.wastediversion.org).

### Ordering Information

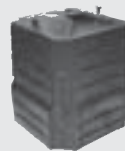
**Soilsaver:** Available for Online Purchase at [www.wastediversion.org](http://www.wastediversion.org) or call 925-906-1801 x306 to request a mail-order form. Delivery time is 2-4 weeks.

**NatureMill:** Available by Online Purchase at [www.naturemill.com](http://www.naturemill.com) or call 800-613-6629 to speak to a customer service representative.

**Wriggly Wranch Worm Bin:** Available for purchase by calling 925-906-1801 x306 to request a mail-in form, or print from [www.wastediversion.org](http://www.wastediversion.org)

**IMPORTANT:** To purchase a compost bin, purchaser must reside in CCCSWA service area (Danville, Lafayette, Walnut Creek, Orinda, Moraga and unincorporated areas including Alamo, Blackhawk & Diablo).

### Soilsaver



- Latching handles and self watering holes on lid
- 2 sliding bottom access doors
- 86 gallons / 11.5 cubic feet
- Dimensions: 28" L x 28" W x 30" H
- Normally retails for \$110.00

Available for ... **Only \$62.00** Shipped!

### Wriggly Wranch Worm Bin



- Holds up to 17,000 worms
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- Dimensions: 22" L x 15" W x 25" H (fully assembled)
- Snap fit construction, no tools required
- Recycled content plastic
- Patented 2-tier stacking design allows for easy harvesting
- Spigot to easily dispense liquid fertilizer

Available for ... **Only \$89.00** Shipped!

### NatureMill Composter



- Automatic Mixing
- Perfect for apartments/condos and homes
- Food waste only - no yard waste. Usually produces compost in two weeks
- Dimensions: 20" high by 20" deep by 12" wide
- Normally retails for \$299.00 and up

Online Coupon for ... **\$30 OFF** Plus tax & shipping!

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## business briefs

### No-Work Fundraisers and Events

**Maui Wowi Hawaiian Coffees and Smoothies Does It for You**  
(415) 200-6748

[tikitastes@mauiwowi.org](mailto:tikitastes@mauiwowi.org)

Matt Coy purchased a Maui Wowi franchise in October and is running events and fundraisers in the East Bay. The father of three young children, with seven years of sales experience, lives in Moraga; his parents still live in the Orinda home where he was raised, and his wife went to Campolindo High School. A real Lamorinda family, they decided that this business opportunity was right for their way of life. "We love the Aloha spirit of Maui Wowi's founders, Jeff and Jill Summerhays," says



Matt Coy with his Maui Wowi business stand during the Dam Jingle Bell Dash 5k/10k run at the San Pablo Dam Reservoir on Dec. 14, 2013.

Photo provided

Coy. "They embrace a healthy and carefree lifestyle that we want to bring to local events." Maui Wowi offers fruit and yogurt-based smoothies as well as coffee drinks made with Kona beans from Hawaii. "People here love Hawaii and our delicious smoothies have been a great hit at all the events we been to," says Coy. At this time of the year he also offers hot chocolate from San Francisco. "We go to corporate and private events with our tents and cart; this is a mobile business," says Coy. "For fundraisers, we give a percentage back to the cause." He adds that for adult events he can prepare alcoholic beverages with his fresh fruit and juices. "We are already booking for events for the summer," he says. "In the future, I plan to add a permanent kiosk to the mobile business." Look for Maui Wowi at the coming Fourth of July events and local business fairs.

### Moraga Chamber Seeks Businessperson of the Year Nominations

The Moraga Chamber of Commerce is soliciting nominations for the 2014 Moraga Businessperson of the Year. The chamber gives the annual award to an active chamber member who fulfills the following requirements: practices good business strategies; supports the Moraga community; serves as a good business model; has good customer relationships; and demonstrates ethical business practices. Local citizens can nominate any businessperson they feel may be deserving of the honor; the chamber is accepting nominations through the end of this month. Past winners have included Bill Snider of Moraga Hardware and Lumber, Brad Noggle of 5A Rent A Space, Grant Stubblefield of Neighborhood Computers and Mike Lawrence of CVS Pharmacy. Nomination forms can be downloaded at [www.moragachamber.org](http://www.moragachamber.org), and will be accepted through Jan. 31. Completed forms can be mailed to the Moraga Chamber at 1480 Moraga Road, Suite I #254, Moraga or faxed to (925) 247-1072. The award dinner is scheduled for Monday, Feb. 24 at the Moraga Country Club.

### Lamorinda Home Expo '14

Don't miss the Lamorinda Home Expo '14 featuring remodelers, builders, and design professionals who will be available to answer questions and discuss new trends from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26 at the Lafayette Events Center (Lafayette Veterans Building) 3780 Mt. Diablo Blvd.

### Moraga Employee of the Month for December



From left: Frank Melon, Atu Anitoni, Candice Moses, and Nora Avelar.

Photo provided

Atu Anitoni, who has been serving local seniors as a lead medical technician at Aegis of Moraga for the last decade, has been selected as the Moraga Employee of the Month for December, as announced by the Moraga Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club of Moraga. Anitoni, who began her work at Aegis in 2004, has served in various care giving roles at the senior facility and currently oversees a staff providing medication to residents as well as basic first aid and addressing various illnesses or injuries. "Atu is just such a great person to help our senior residents," said Aegis Executive Director Candice Moses. "Everybody here really likes her because she goes above and beyond the call of duty when there is a need. She is so attentive to their needs and always willing to help. Plus, she loves what she does and our residents can feel her warmth."

### News from the three Chambers of Commerce

#### Lafayette

Entrepreneur's Club meets at 8:30 a.m. Thursday, Jan. 16 in the chamber conference room.

Ribbon Cutting for Alicia Cervenka Photography at 5 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 21 at 3614 Mt. Diablo Blvd. # C.

Green Committee meeting at noon Tuesday, Jan. 28 in the chamber office.

#### Moraga

Save the date for the first chamber business meeting of the year at 7:30 a.m. Friday, Jan. 31 at the Hacienda de las Flores.

#### Orinda

Save the date for Orinda Comedy Night on Friday, March 7.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)