

Grower Profile



A Long History in California Avocados

By Tim Linden

It was in 1868 – almost 150 years ago – that Andrew Bailard settled in the Carpinteria area of California and started to grow beans to feed his growing family. Bailard eventually had 10 children, which created many branches of the Bailard family in the area.

One such branch was headed by Ed Bailard, one of Andrew's kids. His grandson is also named Andrew, though the current California avocado industry knows him as Andy, a former member of the California Avocado Commission (CAC) Board and an active avocado grower and advocate, even as he hits the age of 80. "I'm still very capable of doing everything I have to do to run my ranches, along with my ranch manager, Rick Shade, (the current chairman of CAC). Eventually my three children will take over ownership, but we're not ready for that yet," he said, speaking of himself and his wife Carol.

Bailard continues to operate Bailard Citrus Company, though the name is an ode to the past rather than represen-

tative of the company's current product line. "My grandfather (Ed Bailard) and my Uncle Donald, who everyone called 'Dude,' are the ones that started the company," Andy says. "From the 1930s to the 1950s, they grew mostly lemons."

It was in the 1950s that the company started to transition its acreage from lemons to avocados. Ed Bailard died in the 1950s, leaving Dude Bailard to run the operation until his passing in 1990. At that point, Andy inherited the company and has been running it ever since.

"I was born and raised in Carpinteria and went to high school here. I started college in Illinois and then transferred to Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo) where I got a degree in agricultural business management."

But with his uncle running the operation, Andy pursued other activities, mostly in the banking and financial world. In fact, he was living in Orange County when he took over the operation of Bailard Citrus Company in 1990. A couple of

years later he hired Shade as the manager and continued to run the company from his home in Orange County.

He retired in 2000, but continued to work on a part-time basis in trust and estate planning. In 2002, Andy and Carol moved up to Carpinteria to take more of a hands-on, active role in the operation. His ranch actually consists of three parcels that combine for a total of 47 acres. In addition, his three adult children — Karen, Jeff and Brian — own a 16-acre avocado ranch that came from another branch of the Bailard family. That operation is called Bailard Avocado Company. Andy expects his son Jeff, who is currently in the financial business world just as he was, to eventually take over management of the operation. “Our ranches aren’t going anywhere. We are keeping them until we are done and I’m sure my kids will do the same.”

Bailard said his ranches are in the agricultural preserve program so they can’t be transitioned back into other uses without a 10-year waiting period. He said the avocado industry has been very good financially for his family so he sees no reason to change that dynamic. “I’ve replaced all the trees over the years on a systematic basis. We are operating very well. Last year we averaged about 17,000 pounds per acre.”

But it has not always been a bed of roses. “My worst year was my first year,” he said. “In December of 1990, we had the worst freeze ever. I lost the entire crop for both 1991 and 1992 and I also lost 115 new trees.”

But in 1993, his groves bounced back to produce what he called a “humongous crop” and it has been a good ride ever since, though there obviously have been some years much better than others. “We have level land, good soil and our own wells,” he said, ticking off his inherent advantages.

“I replace some trees on an ongoing basis about every five years. It takes about five years once you replant to get a good crop again. I just replanted five-and-a-third acres this year.”

Though others have touted high density planting, Bailard admits that he is “not into high density.” With the outstanding yields that he currently gets, he’s just not interested in tempting fate and changing his grove configuration. After two very strong years, he said production in 2017 will be about half of what it was last year, which puts his ranches in the same category as most of the others in California. Total California avocado production in 2017 is only expected to reach about half of that of 2016. “We are just starting to pick this week,” he said in mid-May.

Bailard was very excited by the high prices currently being quoted by his packer, Index Fresh. “Today they are quoting \$1.28 to \$1.34 on 70s ranging to \$1.90 to \$1.96 on 48s.”

While those field prices won’t make up all the revenue lost because of the smaller crop, he does expect that they will make 2017 a profitable year.

Looking forward, Bailard sees the water situation as the big-



gest challenge to being a profitable California avocado producer. This year, his ranches received 22 inches of rain, which was a shot in the arm after four to five years of drought. He said the rain did an exceptionally good job of washing the salts out of the soil and creating a high-quality piece of fruit. But he can’t count on that every year. “Right now we are drilling a new well so we can go deeper when we need to.”

He said other major future challenges include the always-lurking threat from wind and frost, and the ever-increasing costs associated with producing a good crop. Bailard said increased costs of harvesting and fertilizing the crop, as well as the higher prices on trees themselves, present additional challenges. “And competition is always an issue.”

But he praised the area he is in and says it has several natural advantages over other production areas in the state. The weather is typically mild, with nice ocean breezes and the water situation is better than in most areas. Bailard is particularly bullish about the 2018 crop. “I see a lot of bloom out there. We should have a very good crop next year,” he said as he optimistically surveyed the future. 🍷