

Grower Profile



Andy Sheaffer: A Man of Many Talents

By Tim Linden

Andy Sheaffer is clearly a guy who likes to figure things out. This is a skill that has served him well during a varied career doing underwater construction projects, rock excavation on cliffs, and, most recently, transitioning conventional avocado orchards to organic production.

Sheaffer was born in 1968 in Carpinteria, CA, and grew up in the pleasant coastal town with a relatively bucolic childhood. “My dad was a boatbuilder and very creative and mechanically inclined, so I grew up around lots of interesting projects and people and was always encouraged to try new things and not be afraid of challenges. I became a certified diver when I was 16 and after high school, I went to college at UCSB (University of California, Santa Barbara) on a partial athletic scholarship and competed on the track and field team. I was an average student in college and really didn’t know what I wanted to do,” he admits. “I majored in geography with an emphasis on hydrology. I also took a lot of history classes.”

He did have a college experience that would eventually become a very important reflection point in his life. “While in college, I was on the track and field team as a hammer and discus thrower,” he said. “I had a successful throwing career and earned first team all American and competed in the 1992 Olympic trials in New Orleans.”

His athletic experience led him and a handful of teammates to spend a summer in Europe competing in track meets. “At one point we were near Zermatt, Switzerland. Perched on the side of the slopes leading up to the Matterhorn, I saw this machine that fascinated me. I spent an entire day hiking up to it to see what it was.”

It was fascinating, but not yet life changing.

Finishing his studies in 1990 when the U.S. economy was

in bad shape, job prospects for the newest geography grad were not great. “The only jobs available were working in an office for a county somewhere processing data,” he recalls. “That didn’t appeal to me. I was always mechanically oriented and I wanted to work outside.”

Through a family connection, Sheaffer found employment as a laborer with a marine construction company in Newport Beach. He stayed with the company for six years. “I learned a lot about marine construction and did a lot of construction-oriented diving,” he said. “We built sea walls and docks and rebuilt piers, moorings and marine railways. The company worked primarily in Newport Beach, Huntington Harbor, Dana Point and in some local lakes.”

While he gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and learned how to do a lot of new things, Sheaffer did not see a long-range future with the company. “It was a small family company, and they had a daughter that was going to take over and I wasn’t that interested in settling in Orange County,” he said. “I didn’t think there was a lot of room for me to advance.”

Instead, he secured his contractor’s license with the help of his employers and started his own company in which he operated tractors and did a lot of unique jobs such as demolition and backhoe work in difficult environments. Over the years, that machine on the side of the hill in the Alps continued to



intrigue Sheaffer. In 1996, he found what he had learned was a walking excavator for sale and bought it. He brought that back to his parents' property and began figuring out how to operate it. He soon became an expert and started a company featuring the walking excavator and what he calls "spider work".

The spider excavator allowed for work on steep hillsides which led to opportunities for rockfall mitigation work, including hanging wire-mesh drapery, building rockfall and avalanche fences, and stabilizing steep slopes. He eventually owned eight of them and trained many different employees how to operate and use this mechanical spider. "We took jobs all over the country," he said. "We worked in Malibu, Big Sur, Hawaii, Kentucky...all over the place."

Indirectly, the "spider" also got him into the avocado business. "The only connection is that people who knew me thought I'd be a good fit for this avocado ranch that we ended up buying. The property is challenging and big and steep. And they knew I did a lot of work on steep hills."

In 2008, Andy and Kathy Sheaffer did buy the 750-acre ranch situated between Ventura and Carpinteria that is called Vista Punta Gorda. "It is a challenging piece of property," he reiterated. "It rises from sea level to 1800 feet and has a complicated water system. It requires a lot of flexibility."

He noted that the idea of farming always appealed to him. "I don't have much background in farming though I did participate in the FFA (Future Farmers of America) program in high school. In the back of my mind, I wanted to own a place, but land prices were expensive, and I didn't seriously consider it when I was younger."

When the husband-and-wife team bought the property, they had been married about a half a dozen years and had three kids – a daughter and two sons. At this point the rockfall mitigation company was doing well and Sheaffer set about to improve the ranch.

"It had a lot of old trees," he remembers, with about 60% of the ranch under cultivation. "It was about two-thirds avocados and the other third lemons."

The Sheaffers' ranch has gone through many changes over their 15 years of ownership. Today, there are about 330 acres of avocados and 90 acres of lemons. For a while, Andy experimented with bananas and a few other tree crops, but they were not very lucrative and distracted from the main business of selling avocados and lemons.

After he took over the operation of the property in 2008, Sheaffer studied it for a few years before making major changes. "When we took over, it was being run conventionally," he said, noting they maintained the status quo for three years as they studied farming practices as well the possibility of transitioning from conventional to organic farming practices.

That concept was considered in direct relation to Kathy de-



After the Thomas Fire, the Sheaffers applied hydromulch on the slopes above the town of La Conchita before the heavy rains came to prevent soil erosion.

veloping autoimmune problems, which were quite debilitating. The couple started researching the issue and found lots of information connecting glyphosate (the active ingredient in some weed-killer herbicides) to autoimmune problems.

They immediately stopped using glyphosate products and began the transition to regenerative, organic farming practices in 2011/12. "I learned a lot," he said. "I took seminars and classes and read hundreds of books on how to farm regeneratively. Most of the books and information involves broadacre and row crops so I had to glean the information and figure out how to apply it to tree crops and specifically avocados."

Sheaffer did learn a lot...information that he is very willing to impart to others. One big learning is that it is much more difficult to transition an old tree from conventional to organic practices than to start off on day one using only organic techniques. "The old trees are used to being fed conventional products and it is harder for them to adapt," he said.

"You can't farm organically by replacement," he explained. "You can't expect to replace a conventional NPK unit with an organic one; it doesn't work for several reasons but mainly because it will break the bank. When you are growing organically, you have to pay closer attention to balancing nutrition and using synergistic inputs because you can't rely on rescue chemistry to save you."

Sheaffer pays very close attention to the soil and the leaves, frequently taking tissue samples and having them analyzed by a lab in what is called a "sap test."

He suspects that very few avocado growers – conventional or organic – use this tissue sampling practice. He explains it in detail but it is impossible for this writer to relay the concept in



about 39,000 new avocado trees,” he said. “They are filling out to the point that it is now easier to manage weeds. This year, with all the rain, they are looking great.”

Like virtually every other California avocado grower, Sheaffer is resigned that 2023 is a difficult year. “The market is tough this year. Nobody is making money this season,” he said in early June. “We size picked about 15% of our fruit earlier in the season and we are going to start picking again soon. Mexico has had a big crop and they have a big flora loca crop this summer. I don’t think our market is going to get much better.”

But he reminds himself that 2022 was a very good marketing year, even though he only had about 100 acres

anything but the broadest terms. The leaves are ground down and pressed to extract the sap which is then tested with sophisticated equipment. It is relatively expensive and, in fact, Sheaffer said the test is difficult to interpret. But the measurements let him know how his trees are doing and where their nutrient deficiencies or excesses lie. Each end of the spectrum can reduce your yields, with high yields being the ultimate goal for any avocado grower. Sheaffer takes a sap test two to three times a year for every block in his grove.

He appears to have figured out the art of organic farming as his yields have consistently been in the 8,000 to 12,000 pounds per acre range.

In 2015, after about 18 years in the construction business, Sheaffer sold that company and began concentrating all of his work energy on his ranch. “That business required me to be gone a lot,” he said. “I did have other people who ran those machines but on the most difficult jobs, I had to be there. It required me to be gone a lot and we had three young kids at home. I was missing out on a lot of things. I promised my wife that when the opportunity to get out arose, I would.”

For a couple of years after selling the construction company, life was good as his trees improved and he continued stumping old trees and converting lemon blocks to avocados.

But in December of 2017, the Thomas Fire delivered a tremendous blow to Ventura and Santa Barbara County growers. Vista Punta Gorda lost 200 acres of trees. “Those were primo trees,” Sheaffer said. “It was a devastating blow for us.”

Five years later, all the trees have been replanted with the ranch increasing the density on most acres from 120 trees per acre to between 170 and 200 trees per acre. “We’ve planted

in full production. “That makes it a bit tougher,” he said. “You are still farming 400 acres but only getting returns on 100.”

Sheaffer believes the future is bright for California growers that have decent volume and especially bright for California organic avocados. He said California fruit, including organic avocado, deserve the premium they typically command. “California organic avocados will certainly deliver a premium,” he believes. “Consumers have more confidence in U.S. organic certification than in organic fruit certified in other countries.”

Sheaffer is not yet ready to make a prediction about the 2024 crop, but the bloom was excellent and he said there is a possibility, it could be a big California crop.

Though they didn’t come from a farming family, Andy and Kathy Sheaffer are creating one. While Andy is on the ranch working with the crops, Kathy helps on food safety and organic certification paperwork. And all of their children enjoy working on the ranch and helping out when they can. He reported that his oldest child, Olivia, who attends Iowa State studying for a degree in fashion merchandising and design, is home from college, and at that moment was out in the groves collecting tissue samples for the ranch’s next sap test. His middle son, Augie, is at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo pursuing a degree in ag engineering. His youngest son, Eli, is still in high school.

The Sheaffers are also passing this love for agriculture onto their nieces and nephews. “During COVID we had nine nieces and nephews hanging out at the ranch and staying with us for five months or so,” he said. “They did their studies and also worked in the groves. They all learned something and had a great time.” 🍷