

Grower Profile



Sculptor, Builder, Author, Avocado-Maker

By Tim Linden

A few years into their marriage, when Emily and Bradley Miles started growing avocados on some family land in Santa Barbara County in the 1970s, it represented a bit of a homecoming for both of them.

Emily's grandfather first planted avocados in Carpinteria in the 1920s as one of the pioneers of the avocado industry. And when Bradley was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s north of Santa Barbara, he had a hands-on relationship with avocado tree grafting.

"We lived in an isolated canyon east of Goleta where there were only three houses and lots of lemons," said Bradley. Lemons were not a particularly hot crop in those years and many growers started converting to avocados. "Nobody knew which variety was going to be a good one so there was a lot of experimenting and grafting. I learned how to graft at a very young age."

Bradley's dad was a physician and not in the avocado business but with many burgeoning groves in the area, grafting provided the younger Miles with the opportunity to earn some cash as a teenager.

Miles graduated from high school in 1962 and had a couple of false starts in college before joining the Army. Always a creative type, after his stint in the military, he returned to college and eventually finished his studies at the Art Institute earning both a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's in Fine Arts with an emphasis in sculpting and ceramics. Armed with the degrees, he thought he would become a college professor but couldn't find suitable work. Instead he started building wooden boats and slowly built a career in the construction business. Today, and for many years, he has kept what he calls "his day job" as a construction consultant.

But back in the late '60s as he was slowly making progress on his educational endeavor, he was also slowly court-

ing Emily Brown. "Her brother was my roommate for a time in college so that's how I knew her. Then she and her brother went to Spain at the same time I was in Europe so I ran into her there as well."

Eventually, back in Santa Barbara the two began dating and the rest, as they say, is history. They got married in 1971 and about a year later they officially began their life-long affair with the avocado. Emily's family had some acreage that included an 18-foot trailer on the property. The young couple lived in that trailer and took care of the grove. Eventually Bradley built them a proper home from the barn on the ranch.

As he discusses his avocado-producing career, Miles quickly jumps over the next 30 years, clearly excited about when his avocado industry education really began. Along the way, he and his wife were involved in agricultural pursuits with several of her brothers, growing other crops, such as cherimoya and partnering in a packing operation. But by 2006, Bradley and Emily had retired from those partnerships, sold a 43-acre avocado ranch they owned and settled in making their nine-acre avocado grove a laboratory for better growing techniques.

For the past decade, they have been experimenting with several different cultural practices and have successfully built what Bradley believes is a better grove. He said the size of his grove is perfect for conducting experiments. It's large enough to try different ideas, and small enough to do it yourself. He gives a great deal of credit to former California Avocado Commission Research Program Director Jonathan Dixon, quoting him often during a conversation on his cultural efforts. "We still Skype each other often...although I have to call him at 11:30 at night to get a hold of him" as the New Zealand-born Dixon is back in the general vicinity

of his origin.

One of the projects he is obviously most proud of is the effort to lower the height of all his trees so they can be picked from the ground. "I told Emily I don't ever want to see a ladder in my grove again."

Miles said the appearance of a ladder means two things: broken limbs and a picking surcharge. He wants neither.

It was actually a freeze in 2006 that started Miles on his mission to shorten his trees. After stumping affected trees because of the freeze, he noted a robust growth pattern ensued. He reasoned, with Dixon's help, that by constantly pruning the trees and creating an open space in the middle, he could still produce a heavy set with easy picking access. In addition, the much smaller trees would need less water. "We are still in the middle of what could be a seven-year drought – and water is very expensive – we have to think about that."

Miles said the constant pruning has worked. His trees are no larger than eight to nine feet tall and he has cut his water use from 180 gallons per tree to 110 gallons, which is pretty close to a 40 percent reduction. He said the water savings pays for the extra pruning. Like many growers, he had a light crop in 2015 –reflecting the alternate bearing properties of his grove – but the trees are loaded for 2016. "I have more bloom and the trees look very healthy. And I have used less water and less fertilizer."

That brings him to his second big project: constant fertigation. Again working with Dixon, he devised a plan that would constantly give his trees fertilizer in small doses rather than shock them and then starve them, which is what he calls the normal practice. "It's the Chinese meal theory: after you eat a Chinese meal, a few hours later you are hungry again. So are the trees."

Consequently, Miles makes sure his trees get enough nutrients through fertigation and constant mulching. "Jonathan said you should look at an avocado tree in its natural environment, which includes lots of mulch."

As Miles is constantly pruning his trees, he is shredding the branches and allowing them to serve as mulch. When he scrapes below the surface of his trees, he notes a white root system, which tells him the trees are getting plenty of nutrients.

Though Bradley Miles was the only one interviewed for this story, he insists that the Miles operation is a family affair. "I take care of the maintenance on the grove and Emily takes care of the irrigation and the accounting."

He said she keeps meticulous notes each time she irrigates and fertigates and keeps on top of the schedule. It is a clockwork operation.

Miles is confident that California can continue to compete in the world avocado industry. He said growers have to be efficient and mind their costs, especially in the southern part of the state where water costs are going through the



roof. But he believes there will always be room for home-grown, California avocados. He said the fruit has "standing" in the marketplace and can get a premium price. "But growers have to pick for quality. We never harvest until we see a woody stem."

He said foreign production areas, because of the transportation time, just don't have the ability to leave the fruit on the tree as long as California growers can. They often harvest green fruit, he says, that has not been tree-ripened. "We will always have that local market."

Miles likes to quip that if you grow avocados "you should keep your day job." He has done that and has never lost sight of the many facets of his personality that keep him ticking. "I've always had a creative side...building boats...building our house. And for the past 18 years I have been writing."

He has mostly written short stories and has had a few of them published over the years. Currently, he is working with an editor on a memoir that he wrote about a particularly challenging time in his life. "When I was 36, we were dead broke." A captain of a 1924 schooner offered him the opportunity to spend six months at sea fishing for albacore. Miles kept a journal of this amazing voyage and has committed the story to paper. Each chapter begins with an old fishing superstition ("Don't bring a banana on board." "Don't leave port on a Friday.") and includes stories of the adventure.

"Right now I am working with an editor to make it more readable," he said.

Don't be surprised if *Jigging on the Havana* by Bradley Miles makes it to Amazon.com one day. 🥑