

# Grower Profile



## A Shot of Java Is a Shot in the Arm

### For this California Avocado Grower

By Tim Linden

Jay Ruskey has no doubt that specialty coffee farming can become a very important factor in allowing California avocado growers to profitably ply their trade.

He has been growing coffee plants on his Santa Barbara area ranch for more than a dozen years, and believes the future is bright for a niche California coffee industry. And coffee plants, he says, work perfectly as a companion crop with avocados in many locations. He said a grower can realize an additional profit of at least \$5,000-\$8,000 per acre by adding coffee plants under the avocado tree canopy.

Ruskey, who operates his farming entities under the company name Good Land Organics, has been in the avocado business for about 25 years. The family farm is located in the foothills of Santa Barbara at an elevation of about 650 feet, where the acreage has a warm southern exposure.

Ruskey grew up in Hollywood and went to Cherimoya Elementary School, which he said must have been a precursor to his future profession as today he is also a cherimoya grower. As a kid, his first introduction to farming was observing the flower farms in the Carpinteria area when he was surfing. He eventually had a job with a flower grower, which led to enrolling in agricultural business management classes at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

Simultaneously, his parents were purchasing an avocado ranch in the hills near Goleta, CA. "I went to Cal Poly to learn the business side of agriculture. I actually tried to

switch to horticulture but a lot of the classes didn't transfer so I stayed with ag business."

It was the early 1990s and Ruskey became the proprietor of the family farm. The ranch had a variety of crops, including cherimoyas. The avocados were marketed through Calavo, as the previous owner had done, but Ruskey sold the other items at local farmers' markets, no doubt utilizing his ag business schooling.

By the early 2000s, he was running the family ranch as well as several others, and playing around with alternative crops. Besides cherimoyas and avocados, he planted some finger limes and coffee to supplement his all year production and thus keep a labor force active all year. The cherimoyas are a winter to spring crop; avocados go from spring to summer; coffee is harvested from the summer to fall; and finger limes are a fall crop.

By having this year-round production, Ruskey said he can keep a good cash flow and provide steady work for his employees. Though he has a 42-acre parcel spread among his crops, he likes to talk in terms of trees rather than acres. He has about 2,000 avocado trees and about 1,500 coffee plants though 500 more are about to be planted. He also has five acres of cherimoyas and three acres of finger limes.

The coffee plants are spread among 13 different varieties, which he said is very compatible with his avocado groves.

“Avocados like a companion crop and coffee and avocados share a lot of similarities.”

Ruskey said the crops have the same needs with regard to soil pH, nutrients and water. And the coffee plants love the shade and shelter that the avocado trees provide. Depending upon the configuration of the grove and its spacing, Ruskey said you can plant as many as 500 coffee plants per acre in an avocado grove.

If you double plant an acre of avocados with coffee plants, Ruskey said a grower will probably use 20 percent more water and additional nutrients, which are good for both the coffee and the avocados. But the coffee plants will also use water and nutrients that otherwise would be wasted. You have created a more efficient grove and that extra cost will be easily offset by extra profits.

He is in the business of selling specialty coffees, which go for five to 10 times more per pound than the commodity coffee that is grown in abundance in Central and South America. So far Good Land Organics has sold most of its coffee beans to Asia at a rate of \$60-\$80 per pound. Last year, Ruskey harvested 500 pounds of coffee beans and this year he is expecting 1,000 pounds. Industry average is a pound of beans per tree but Ruskey said he has had some trees yield as much as 10 pounds of beans. He said a grower should be able to net a profit of at least \$10 per tree with the coffee plants.

While Ruskey sells most of his beans to Asia he is intent on creating a specialty coffee industry in California utilizing locally-grown beans. He and Jim Shanley, of Shanley Farms in Morro Bay, have partnered in the development of a nursery designed to primarily produce companion crops for avocados such as coffee, passion fruit and dragon fruit.

Both men said the California coffee industry is like the wine grape industry was 50 years ago. “In the early 1960s, California red wine largely consisted of burgundy,” said Shanley.

Over the years, growers increased their plantings of varieties and a specialty wine industry has developed that takes a back seat to no other production area in the world. The same can be done for coffee, Ruskey and Shanley believe.

“If you start with superior genetic material and better varieties, you can achieve excellent yields,” said Ruskey. “And consumers are starting to recognize the differences in specialty coffees.”

Shanley said Starbucks has introduced the entire country to higher quality coffee and he believes many consumers are ready to take the next step. He believes that California avocado growers are uniquely situated to capitalize on the movement.

As he sees it, there is plenty of land available to avocado growers where they can efficiently plant coffee, as well as other crops, with no additional land costs and only minimal additional cultural expenses. If a grower can truly make an



*Coffee plant underneath an avocado tree in Santa Barbara.*

extra \$5,000 to \$8,000 profit per acre, it would seem like a no brainer.

But Shanley cautions that the goal has to be to produce top quality product. “Gourmet coffee is a winner economically,” he said, adding that it would not be a winner to produce commodity coffee and try to compete against the huge coffee plantations of Central and South America. In that situation volume is king and the low per-pound market price reflects that.

For this reason, Ruskey said the duo is looking for only top notch growers to help launch the California coffee industry. Basically, he said if a grower isn’t doing a great job on his avocados, it’s not likely he is going to spend the time, energy and resources to produce a great coffee crop. Just as the California avocado industry is trying to carve out a premium price for its avocado, so will the California coffee industry take that route as it proceeds on its journey.

Ruskey and Shanley are currently trialing coffee plants from Oceanside to San Luis Obispo to find the best land and climate on which to grow coffee. In addition, Ruskey said work is now being done on a coffee manual that will provide a grower with a good guide on how to grow the crop and produce a great cup of coffee and, in the process, help preserve the California avocado industry. 🥑