

Grower Profile



Chuck & Pete Dal Pozzo: Enjoying Their Second Careers

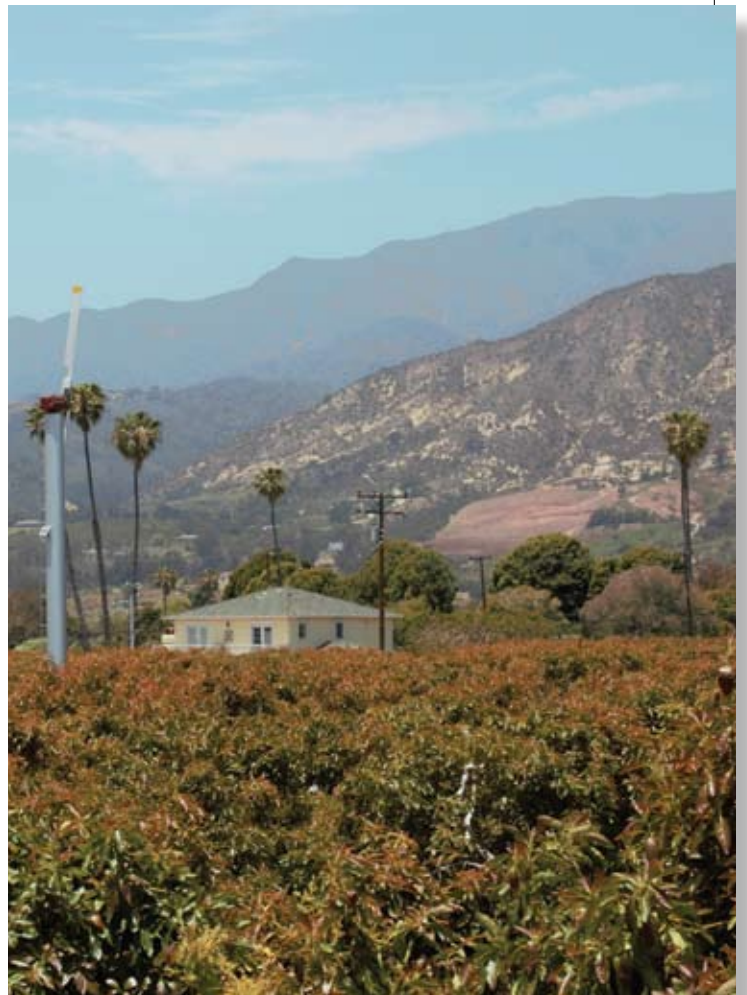
By Tim Linden

It is in retirement that Chuck and Pete Dal Pozzo have fully embraced the joys of farming and growing avocados. The two brothers are third generation growers on the California coast, but both enjoyed long careers before settling into running their Carpinteria ranch full-time.

The family farming history dates back to Charles James Dal Pozzo, the grandfather of the aforementioned pair of growers, who started farming in the Goleta area, north of Santa Barbara, in the 1920s and 1930s. When his son, Charles Francis Sr. (Charlie or Chuck Sr.), came back from World War II in 1945, they purchased a large ranch in Refugio Canyon in Goleta. Charlie (Chuck Sr.) contributed his military earnings to the new ranch and as partners, Charles James and Charlie grew a variety of crops, including tomatoes and lemons, in those coastal rolling hills. The father/son team farmed for the next 18 years at this location.

It was in 1963, as Charles James was phasing out of the business, that Charles James and Charlie (Chuck Sr.) sold the Refugio ranch property and bought the current 45-acre spread in Carpinteria, dubbed Dal Pozzo Ranch. "When our Grandpa and Dad bought the Carpinteria ranch in the early '60s, it was pretty rundown and mostly planted in lemons," said Pete. "As our Dad fixed it up, he started planting avocados between the lemons. People in the area thought he was crazy. They said it was too cold to grow avocados in Carpinteria."

The ranch, in fact, already included about five acres of avocados planted in the 1940s, so Charlie (Chuck Sr.) believed they could thrive. In fact, some of the rootstock from the original



Dal Pozzo Ranch looking northwest. Notice the height of trees in relation to the wind machine.



From left to right are Pete Dal Pozzo, Nick Florido Lopez, Chuck Dal Pozzo.

avocado plantings are still in play today. “We have rootstock that is 75 years old,” said Pete, explaining that the rich, alluvial soil is great for avocado production. Combined with the natural shelter from wind and cold offered by the ranch’s specific southeast Carpinteria location on Casitas Pass Road, the Dal Pozzos believe they have a perfect spot for avocados, despite the warnings of the early naysayers.

Chuck Jr., who was born in 1956, is two years older than Pete. “We grew up in Carpinteria and went to school here,” he said. “Our father was a full-time farmer.”

Chuck Jr. liked the agricultural industry and went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo where he received a degree in agricultural business management. He spent more than 25 years as a pest control advisor and sales representative for several different agricultural chemical companies, and lived most of those years in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pete went to the University of Arizona and received a degree in hydrology. He came back to the California area from which he was born and spent much of his career working for the United Water Conservation District in Ventura County.

As Charlie (Chuck Sr.) aged and fell ill in the early 2000s, running the farm’s finances fell on the shoulders of his wife, Sally Dal Pozzo. Work on the grove was done then and still today by ranch foreman Nick Lopez. The two Dal Pozzo brothers helped out in the managing of the operation but did not

yet have a hands-on connection. Being in nearby Ventura, Pete was a constant presence, with Chuck Jr. being a bit less so from his Bay Area perch.

Charlie (Chuck Sr.) passed away in 2007 and hands-on management became more important. In the ensuing years, both the Dal Pozzo brothers have moved back to the area and are involved in the day-to-day management. However, they both repeatedly said they could not run the operation without Lopez and Bartolo Montiel, another ranch hand. Lopez has been working on the grove for more than 40 years and lives on the ranch. Montiel is a 25-year employee.

“We are so indebted to Nick,” Chuck said. “In fact, during the Thomas Fire we thought we were going to need all the help we could get if the flames got too close and so his kids drove up here to help out just in case. We ended up not having a problem but that meant a lot to us.”

In fact, the Dal Pozzos list Nick’s eventual retirement (he is in his 60s) as their biggest concern moving forward. “Nick is my age and those will be very big shoes to fill,” said Chuck.

Pete added that Nick’s retirement may cause the brothers to turn over the ranch to outside management as they do not know if they are up to starting fresh with a new ranch foreman. “Is our system sustainable?” Chuck asks. “Nick isn’t going to be here forever, and it may not work without him.”

They credit the ranch’s longtime business model of doing



Dal Pozzo Ranch looking southwest. Shows some of the trees stumped in February-March 2021, a few of the trees stumped last year and a few of the new trees planted in April 2021.

most of the work in-house for making it a profitable operation. “Nick and his crew do all the pruning for us, and he also hires pickers as we do the picking ourselves,” said Pete. “Nick and his crew also do all the spraying.”

The Dal Pozzo Ranch yields an average of 15,000 pounds per acre, which the company’s owners credit to great grove management and their excellent location. “We are in the Napa Valley of avocado production,” said Chuck. “This is the perfect place to grow avocados. We have lots of water, little wind, no heat issues, good soil and flat topography. We don’t have an alternate bearing issue. It’s just the luck of the draw.”

Pete added, however, that it wasn’t just luck that they are located where they are. “Dad knew it was good soil,” he said, adding that his father always bragged about it.

As far as grove management is concerned, the Dal Pozzos believe their pruning regimen is one of the most important things they do. “We top all our trees at 12 feet every year and open up windows in the trees to allow sunlight to get inside,” said Pete.

He said it is a time-consuming hand task every year as there are no mechanical toppers suitable for avocado trees. It takes Nick and his crew several months to complete the pruning once they begin the effort following Labor Day. The

crew tops about 100 trees a day so it takes the better part of two months to prune all 5,000 trees on the 45-acre ranch. Chuck said the topping offers many advantages including the crop is easier and safer to pick and the trees need less water. “It also means our trees produce larger fruit,” he said.

Pete noted that the grove was originally planted on a 20-foot by 18-foot spacing scheme, with his father thinning out the trees over time. As they replant, they are reverting to the original spacing which their topping allows. Over time, they are expecting that more trees could produce a greater yield per acre.

While they have some concerns about how they will carry on without their foreman, the brothers Dal Pozzo have no doubt that avocado production in California will continue to be a solid investment with good returns. “I am optimistic about the future going forward,” said Chuck. Pete added: “Avocados are a good product and this is a good industry.”

Speaking to *From the Grove* in mid-May, Dal Pozzo Ranch had not yet begun its harvest. They were planning to start picking the crop in June or July and were very optimistic about this season. Markets are good and Chuck said: “This is supposed to be an off year (for the industry) but we have a full crop.” 🥑