Shanley Farms: Premium Produce that People Care About

Maggie Andrada*         Bryce D’ Arelli†
Melissa Gurvis‡
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Maggie Andrada, Bryce D’ Arelli, and Melissa Gurvis prepared this case study under the supervision of Dr. Wayne Howard in AGB 462 Applied Agribusiness Problems.

Jim Shanley

How It All Got Started

Jim Shanley grew up in the San Joaquin Valley with no background in the agriculture industry. He graduated from the University of Illinois, and worked his way to Chief Operating Officer of a large commodity trading and feed supply company in the San Joaquin Valley. Jim was successful in his career, making many great business relationships and successful decisions for the company. According to Shanley Farms, the story goes like this: “Jim Shanley initially began farming as part of his retirement plan. In 1998 he purchased Morro Canyon Ranch in Morro Bay, California. Soon after moving to the central coast, he became invested in the challenging and rewarding aspects of farming. The first planting of avocados went in the next year. Soon after the avocados began producing in Morro Bay, Jim decided to grow his passion by purchasing Venice Hill Ranch in Visalia, California in 2003. When Venice Hill Ranch was acquired it was already in production growing avocados, oranges, lemons, and kiwis. For several years various packing houses would manage all aspects of sales and marketing for Shanley Farms products. In 2004 Jim attended a Citrus Exhibition hosted by a group of researchers from UC Riverside. At this exhibition he fell in love with this new and exotic fruit, a finger lime. The finger lime is native and grows wild in Australia but this micro citrus has yet to enter the US market. Jim envisioned the endless opportunities for the finger lime and he quickly purchased and planted the first finger lime trees in 2006. After 5 years of careful maintenance the trees were ready to be picked and the US consumers were ready for the finger lime”.1
Since Jim began farming, he has not stopped. According to Jim, he built a legacy at the previous company he worked for, and is now aiming to build his own legacy for himself and his family for generations to come.

**Industry Overview**

*Specialty Food*

Foods that have high consumer value, are available in small quantities, are usually more expensive, and have exceptional health benefits, are considered specialty foods. The Specialty Food industry is a thriving community of food artisans, importers, and entrepreneurs who bring craft, care and joy to the distinctive foods they sell.\(^2\) Specialty food sales topped $100 billion for the first time in 2014, with retail and foodservice sales reaching a record of $109 billion. The small-business-fueled industry now boasts 15 segments that exceed $1 billion in sales, including cheese; coffee; meat, poultry and seafood; chips, pretzels and snacks; candy; and yogurt.\(^3\) The “local” food movement is also intertwined in the specialty food industry, where “foodies” can interact with retailers and consumers of this category.

*Avocado Industry*

The avocado industry is experiencing a phenomenon that it has never experienced before. With demand rapidly surpassing supply, and import and retail prices on the rise, avocados are not surprisingly considered America’s new favorite fruit.

The demand for avocados has steadily increased over the past 10 years due to the increasing consumption in Mexican food and year round availability due to increasing exports from Mexico, California, Chile and Peru. Consumption per capita has also followed an increasing trend since the 1980’s. Consumption in 1989 was about 1.1 pounds per capita, while 2011 data shows that consumption per capita hit a record of 4.5 pounds.\(^4\) (Exhibit 1). A record of 1.5 billion pounds of avocados were consumed by the U.S. in 2012.\(^5\) As of June 2014 annual U.S. consumption of avocados surpassed 2 billion pounds.\(^6\) Avocados have become widely
popular because of their daily health benefits and iconic presence in American holidays. The 
California Avocado Commission celebrates Cinco de Mayo as the largest consumption day for 
California Avocados, followed by 4th of July and Super Bowl Sunday.\(^7\)

While import prices have increased, Haas Avocados prices have also generally increased 
due to booming demand and a limited supply. The value of avocado imports into the U.S. 
increased over the past two decades, reaching $913 million in 2011. Of this total amount, $17.2 
 million was organic avocados. Economic Research Service data from 2012 show imports 
accounted for 71.1% of the domestic fresh avocados consumed in the U.S. in 2011. Domestic 
avocado production increased in 2010 from $479.1 million to $492.1 million in 2011. The total 
volume amounted to 226, 450 tons, an increase of more than 52,120 tons from 2010 \(^4\).

Two driving factors of the rise in popularity of avocados are the marketing of avocados 
as healthy dietary food and the growing Hispanic populations, who have incorporated avocado 
into their food culture. One whole medium sized avocado has about 15% of saturated fat 
(“healthy fats”), which is the FDA’s recommended daily amount. Avocados also contain three 
vitamins; Vitamin B, Vitamin E, and Vitamin K and also have 60% more potassium than 
bananas (Exhibit 2). Most cuisines have adopted avocados to spice up their food; they are 
commonly used on salads, sandwiches, or topping for Mexican food in guacamole form. In 
Central America, avocados are paired with white rice. In the Philippines, Jamaica, and Indonesia, 
avocados are used in a dessert drink. And in Brazil, Vietnam and Taiwan avocados are added to 
ice cream and milkshakes. \(^8\)

Marketing efforts behind this fruit are also a contributing factor for spiking demand. The 
Hass Avocado Board decided to support all avocado promotions in 2003. An assessment fee of 
2.5 cents per pound of all Hass avocados sold in the U.S. market are supported by a fund and 
collected by the Hass Avocado Board. This fund allocates 15% toward nutrition programs and 
research, and 85% toward promotional activities and other various programs. For example, the 
California Avocado Commission promotes California grown avocados in many forms of 
advertising and partnerships with retailers and food chains such as Subway, Chipotle, and 
Denny’s. \(^9\)
**Finger Lime Industry**

The finger lime is a micro-citrus native to Australia, with a couple hundred varieties currently growing in Australia. The finger lime is a seasonal item from roughly September to January. Jim Shanley is credited with making this crop marketable in the U.S. Shanley Farms was the first U.S. farm to commercially produce finger limes starting in 2010. That year, about 40 acres were been planted in California. In 2010, Shanley Farms owned 1,500 finger lime trees, and Mud Creek Ranch of Santa Paula had just 12 trees. Current finger lime production is around 10 tons per year. The demand for finger limes is greater than the U.S. supply, so prices are very high. Europe and Asia have rapid growth in the demand for finger limes, where a finger lime is sold for a little more than $0.50 per unit, while the U.S. is currently being sought out and expected to be strong in the near future.

At present, demand for finger limes is concentrated in the restaurant and bar industry, but the industry is still small. Many high end restaurants utilize the finger lime, and many high end bars use the finger lime for cocktail garnish.

Finger Lime health benefits range from pharmaceutical to nutritional, but the research available is limited.

**Shanley Farms Background**

**Shanley Farms: Produce For People Who Care**

Shanley Farms is a first generation family farm. Shortly after setting his roots in Morro Bay, Jim Shanley hired his daughter Megan to return home and develop a sales and marketing branch of the family farm. The other few employees that work for Shanley Farms also live on the property, and might as well be extended family members. The team devotes more than a day’s work into the company, and truly aims to grow produce for people who care about food.

Their mission is to grow and market fruit and products to people who value high quality, innovation, and adventurous eaters, or “foodies”. The Shanley Farms team is dedicated to
forming relationships with retailers and customers who share this goal. The Shanley Farms company is small, currently operating with a full time staff of approximately 5-8 employees with a few part time consultants. They sell roughly 6 million pounds of avocados and 40,000 pounds of finger limes annually.

Jim Shanley works with a creative and passionate team to grow and market Morro Bay Avocados and Citriburst Finger Limes. Morro Bay avocados, known as “late season” avocados are unique to the central coast due to the microclimate of Morro Bay. Shanley Farms also markets the smaller avocados on the tree as Gator Eggs, a half dozen carton of single serving avocados. Shanley Farms also proudly grows the finger lime. While this artisan fruit is still finding its roots in US grocery stores, more people are falling in love with the finger lime each day. In 2012 Shanley Farms branded their finger limes as Citriburst Finger Limes and currently sell young plants at retail level. Shanley Farms also grows Sierra Sweet Kiwi’s; however, they are discontinuing the product this year. 12

Products

*Morro Bay Avocados*

This late season premium Hass avocado is the most popular item of Shanley Farms. The buttery avocado leaves a memorable taste for consumers and is only available a couple month of the year. Morro Bay is the northern most county growing avocados in California; it has the coolest micro climate in California, therefore fruit on the tree is harvested last. Due to the avocados extended time on the tree, these avocados are extremely rich, creamy, and smooth. They are only available for an 8-10 week time period starting at the beginning of September through November. Consumers of these avocados know the premium taste is unique to this late season avocado, and wait anxiously all year for them to reappear on store shelves.

Morro Bay avocados are grown on Morro Canyon Ranch. Shanley Farms also purchases Morro Bay Avocados from other neighboring farmers. Shanley Farms sends the harvested avocados to be packed and shipped by Del Rey Avocado Company in Fallbrook, California.
Whole Foods and Gelsons Market are the primary purchasers of Morro Bay Avocados. These avocados have a richer taste than imported Mexican avocados or other California grown avocados, and consumers are willing to pay a premium price for this. Jim noted that his Morro Bay Avocados are the highest priced avocados at Whole Foods, however consumers anxiously wait season after season for shelves to be stocked with this delicious fruit (Exhibit 3).

_Gator Eggs_

An avocado tree produces a range of fruit sizes, from size 84 (smallest) to size 28 (largest). It was thought that the size 84 avocado was unsellable because of its small size. In the first few years of business, Shanley Farms picked the smallest size avocado, size 84, and practically threw them away, by selling them to restaurants for a very cheap price. Then Megan Shanley came up with the idea to market them as single serving avocados, and sell them for market price. She came up with the term Gator Eggs, to describe the avocados perfectly to match their packaging (Exhibit 4).

Gator Eggs are now sold throughout the nation in a half dozen egg carton; each avocado is meant for single time use. These avocados are ideal for those who cook solo meals and can therefore avoid leaving the other half of the avocado to get brown in the fridge. Gator Eggs are perfect for single women, mothers who make lunches for their kids, and single parent homes.

Gator Eggs can be found at BJ’s Wholesale Club stores, select Whole Foods Markets, New Seasons, Mollie Stones, Hy-Vee, Brookshires, and Fresh Direct. For the past year and a half, Shanley Farms has shipped weekly to 220 east coast stores and is constantly expanding their consumer base. Gator Eggs are successful in the wholesale and club stores because these specific shoppers are unbiased towards shape and size of the produce, they are simply looking for a good deal. Whole Foods identifies with the single serving and zero waste message that Gator Eggs display, and are looking into selling Gator Eggs at select Whole Foods stores in the near future. Shanley Farms is excited about this process being finalized because they have a great relationship with Whole Foods and are certain that this product will be highly successful.
The finger lime is a caviar like micro citrus that is semi-new to American markets, however Jim believes that within 10 years the finger lime will be considered “ubiquitous” rather than a specialty item.

In 2004, Jim attended a citrus variety show at UC Riverside. Towards the end of the show, nothing had caught his eye. Almost giving up hope, he rounded the last corner and spotted the finger lime. Like many unknowledgeable consumers, he was unsure of what the finger lime was, but after seeing a demonstration of how to cut it open and use it, Jim was immediately intrigued by the finger lime. At the citrus variety show he purchased some plants to bring back to the Morro Bay ranch (Exhibit 5).

He immediately saw the potential of this exciting new citrus, and took it to the Visalia Ranch where he ripped out existing orange trees with no value, and started planting finger limes. By 2010, his first finger lime trees were producing bountiful fruit. More recently, finger limes were planted in the Morro Canyon Ranch. Shanley Farms is now the largest grower and marketer of Finger Limes in America. As of 2014, Shanley Farms owns 4,000 trees and markets for about 10,000 of competitor's trees. They also purchase finger limes from other growers to sell to their own markets.

The finger lime is one of a kind; it can be used similar to how one would use a lemon or a lime. However, Jim believes that it will never take over the lemon or lime industry, but will be recognized as its own product. It has a similar lemon/lime/grapefruit taste that is bursting with citrus pearls when split open (Exhibit 6). Finger limes are very popular in the restaurant industry and are working its way into specialty markets and ideally conventional grocery stores.

Shanley Farms Citriburst Finger Limes cater to foodservice, retail and direct orders. Chefs understand how unique this product is and how to best utilize the citrus caviar. It can be topped on seafood, salads, Mexican food, and even some desserts and cocktails.
Citriburst Finger Limes can be found at Artisan in Paso Robles or at Giovanni’s in Morro Bay. It has been noticed by the Specialty Food Association in 2013 as an exceptional product. Citriburst Finger Limes are also sold limitedly at select Raley’s and Mollie Stone. They can also be ordered directly online from the Shanley Farms website. This year Shanley Farms is marketing the product in a new package that holds 5-8 limes and is designed to retail at about $4.99 (Exhibit 5). Every once in a while, a Shanley Farms team member ventures down south to attend the Santa Monica Farmers Market to sell finger limes.

The story behind Shanley Farms Citriburst Finger Lime is a gateway to another exciting chapter for Shanley Farms. Whole Foods Market is always looking for the latest and greatest taste to bring to their stores, so they came to Jim to learn about the Citriburst Finger Limes, but the Morro Bay Avocado stole the show.

Sierra Sweet Kiwi

Sierra Sweet kiwis are unique to Shanley Farms because they keep the kiwis on the vines much longer than traditionally done in California. Most kiwi farmers in California harvest kiwis with a sugar level of 6.2. However, Shanley Farms harvests Sierra Sweet Kiwis in late November, producing kiwis with sugar levels between 11.5 and 12.5 brix points. They are popular in the local community, but due to the transition from conventional to organic growing and low demand, they are being discontinued.

Whole Foods Contract

The story behind the Morro Bay Avocado is unique to the company. Whole Foods Market seeks people who are hungry for better food for their bodies, or simply food curious. The director of purchasing for Whole Foods in 2012, Jeff Biddle, approached Jim about learning more about the finger limes. He came up to Morro Canyon Ranch to look around the farm, when Jim mentioned in passing that it was a shame that California grown avocados weren’t available to consumers late in the summer. Jeff took notice to this comment, and started asking more questions. One thing led to another, and within the month a contract was made with Whole
Foods and Shanley Farms. The first year Shanley Farms sold about 60,000 boxes of avocados to Whole Foods. The contract is renewed each season with increasing order sizes. About half of the Morro Bay Avocados produce at Shanley Farms are sold at select Whole Foods, in addition to about 10% of other products from Shanley Farms.

Morro Bay Avocados are the most expensive avocados to ever be sold at Whole Foods. A single Morro Bay Avocado can range from $1.49 retail price to $2.49 depending on the size and season. They have reached a record of $2.99 per avocado. A box of Morro Bay Avocados can also be purchased online from the Shanley Farms website for $30 a box.

Sales, Production, & Distribution

Shanley Farms owns and operates on two farms, Morro Canyon Ranch in Morro Bay California, and Venice Hill Ranch in Visalia, California. Morro Canyon Ranch produces Morro Bay Avocados, Citriburst Finger Limes, passion fruit, dragon fruit, and California Coffee. The Visalia ranch produces Sierra Sweet Kiwis (being discontinued) finger limes, lemons, raspberry figs, fresh goji berries, and cherries.

Morro Bay Avocados are sold to select Whole Foods and Gelsons Markets. Gator Eggs are sold to BJ’s Wholesale and Sam’s Club stores. Citriburst Finger Limes are sold to Raley’s, Mollie Stones, and sold online through Shanley Farms website. Morro Bay Avocados and Citriburst Finger Limes are packed and shipped by Del Ray Avocado Company in Fallbrook, California.

Marketing

Megan Shanley is the director of sales and marketing at Shanley Farms. She designs products and packaging, manages sales and social media content, and everything in between. Shanley Farms grows premium quality and specialty fruits, and therefore aim to sell to wealthier and educated consumers who are willing to pay the price for their premium products. Jim noted that the typical consumer of a Morro Bay Avocado is a “foodie” who is looking for a different
and original experience in what they eat, and are willing to pay a higher price for this experience. Megan manages 18 accounts in the Bay Area because it is a premium niche for consumers of the Morro Bay Avocado. Megan maintains excellent relationships with these accounts through positive social media content and availability in specialty stores where these premium consumers shop.

Megan manages all forms of social media for Shanley Farms including the Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram, and The Vine (produce platform). The Shanley Farms website also hosts a blog, where recipes are readily available for ideas on how to use their products. This is especially useful for consumers of the Citriburst Finger Limes, since it is a new product that many people are not familiar with. The key to Megan’s successful marketing objective is to have constant contact with consumers to keep them engaged and interested by creating campaigns, flyers and sending emails.

**Community Involvement**

Shanley Farms participates in community events to personally meet their loyal customers and competition and to keep learning about new opportunities in the industry. Shanley Farms participates in events such as the Earth Day celebration at Pastor Cellars and the Morro Bay Avocado Festival. Shanley Farms also visits international trade shows in California, such as the annual Produce Marketing Association show in Anaheim and the Fancy Foods Show in San Francisco (Exhibit 7).

Participating in these trade shows encourages Shanley Farms to get their name out there, become noticed by retailers and wholesalers, and show off their unique product and company.

Shanley Farms participates in local farmer markets, but it is not a breadwinner for the business. They participate to show community involvement, interact with local consumers and educate new consumers, and sell overflow fruit that didn’t make it into a grocery store.
Challenges

One challenge Shanley Farms faces is the current drought in California. A few years ago, farms in Morro Bay were mandated to cut down trees to decrease water usage. Jim’s farm was fortunately the last one to not be mandated to do so. However, he is aware of his water usage, and as the drought continues and his farm operation expands, he is unsure about the future. Jim has considered organic farming, but is doing what is “best for the farm and the trees and economically feasible at the moment”. He mentioned that is in no rush to convert Shanley Farms to an organic farm completely, though some of his practices are already considered organic.

It remains a constant effort for Shanley Farms to find more consistent high end retailers, especially for the Morro Bay Avocados, with little room for discounted prices. It is just as important to maintain a consistent consumer base for the Morro Bay Avocados. Jim noted that the target consumer for his products is a foodie seeking delicious and better foods for him/her. With health trends constantly changing, the market for healthy and specialty foods reacts very quickly to it, and Jim must remain ahead of this trend. Creating and selling to that premium niche is important to Shanley Farms, and maintaining differentiation is the key to keeping the consumer base for Morro Bay Avocados consistently flourishing.

Currently, Megan’s biggest hurdle is finding the consumer demand for Citriburst Finger Limes. The product is extremely eye catching, tasty, and unlike anything else on the market. However, most conventional grocery shoppers don’t know they exist. The finger lime needs to be physically seen by a consumer for one to see the uniqueness of the product, which is a challenge when consumers haven’t heard of it. An upside to this situation is that the finger limes have no real competitors in the U.S. market. Therefore, the key to success with this product is educating consumers about the product and how to properly use it, and the Shanley Farms team has faith that demand will rapidly follow.
Company Culture

People

Shanley Farms prides themselves on a very close knit, family environment. In fact, Shanley Farms is composed of mostly family members, with a couple of employees who might as well be family members. Jim Shanley's daughter, Megan, lives with her husband on the farm along with their newborn baby. Because there are only 8 full-time employees with a few part-time consultants, Jim says there is no need for team-building exercises or activities because they are already inclined to spend quality time together, both on and off the job.

Jim’s goal of having his daughter on the team is to mentor her to eventually run the business as CEO, at which time he will truly retire and let Megan take the reins. When the business was first taking off, Jim says he brought his daughter on board fully intending to pass his personal legacy onto her. Megan started her education at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo then transferred to Cornell shortly after to receive her degree. After gaining very valuable industry experience at Driscoll’s, Megan was offered the position as Marketing Director at Shanley Farms, where she would learn everything she needed to know to run a successful business.

Hiring

Jim Shanley is a tried and true business man, with a very impressive career creating immeasurable value for other companies. For this reason, Jim has a very rigorous process by which he hires on new team members. He hires very few new people, but when he does, he is certain that they are a perfect fit for the needs of him and the company. After very in depth and extensive interviews, candidates are submitted for a personality test using Wonderlic, a test which measures his or her ability to make important decisions under pressure. The Wonderlic Cognitive Ability Test (formerly known as the Wonderlic Personnel Test) is a popular group intelligence test used to assess the aptitude of prospective employees for learning and problem-solving in a range of occupations. The Wonderlic is available in 12 different languages and is
often used in college, entry level jobs, and team making efforts. It consists of 50 multiple choice questions to be answered in 12 minutes.\(^\text{15}\)

Jim’s main reason for going to such great lengths to find the right employee is simply that his aim is not just to hire, but rather to set someone up for success. He wants to assure that a candidate will be able to thrive in that environment, succeed, and carry the necessary workload without wasting the time of Jim and the other employees. As for other qualifications, Jim requires a formal resume and five or more years of industry experience. Unfortunately, college graduates do not have the skill sets that Shanley Farms is looking for in employees.

**Future for Shanley Farms**

Shanley Farms has many other exciting projects in the works besides just their wonderful avocados, finger limes, and kiwis. Jim Shanley has both the means and the business acumen to be able to pursue other ventures which he both enjoys and thinks would be profitable. He is the owner of Diversitree nursery in Goleta, where is partner, Jay, runs the day to day operations. This cohesive partnership is important to both Jim and Jay to help grow their respective businesses. At Diversitree, finger lime trees are grown and sold for purchase under the Shanley Farms name.

*Coffee*

Many people are not even aware of the fact that some of the highest quality coffee is produced right here in California. Jim is in the process of joining this industry and has just recently sold a high-valued coffee tree to an undisclosed celebrity living in the Santa Barbara area. Although the celebrity chose to remain anonymous, Jim assured us that it was someone noteworthy.

As a matter of fact, Jim hopes to produce 6,000 pounds of coffee in the next five years and has earned his title as the northernmost coffee plantation. His partner, Jay, was also awarded with the honor of producing the 27th best coffee in the world, selling at $100/pound.
At this point in time, Jim is working with Jay to supply Truffle Oaks, Goji Berries, Dragon Fruit, and Passion fruit. Currently, they are not being sold to consumers at the retail level through Diversitree, but are sold at the commercial level to other growers. Coffee trees and finger lime trees are the only plants sold directly to consumers as of now. Jim has planted his first round of Dragon Fruit in his farm in Morro Bay (Exhibit 8). The plant has a symbiotic relationship with avocado trees. He planted them on low producing avocado trees, and is hoping to start selling the Dragon Fruit in the next couple of seasons.
End Notes


Exhibit 1

## NUTRITION FACTS CHART

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### VITAMINS

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<th>5 servings about 1 whole avocado</th>
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### MINERALS

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<td>Magnesium (mg)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manganese (mg)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phosphorous (mg)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc (mg)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 3

Source: Melissa Gurvis

Exhibit 4

Exhibit 5

Exhibit 6


Exhibit 7

Exhibit 8

Source: Melissa Gurvis.