

IT'S NOT EASY
BEING GREEN



TWO CAL POLY AG ALUMS PROVIDE EXPERTISE, EXPERIENCE TO A BELEAGUERED INDUSTRY



BY JO ANN LLOYD

IT WAS A ROCKY FOUR MONTHS FOR CALIFORNIA FARMERS.

First, in September tainted spinach from a California farm sickened hundreds of people across the country, virtually shutting down the spinach industry across the United States, Canada and Mexico for nearly a month.

Then, in January several days of freezing temperatures literally sucked the life out of many California crops, from artichokes and avocados to citrus and lettuce.

The incidents were deemed disasters, and two Cal Poly alumni found themselves smack in the middle of the fray: **Steve Barnard (AGB '75)**, president and CEO of Mission Produce Inc. in Oxnard, and **Ed Boutonnet (CRSC '62)**, president and CEO of Ocean Mist Farms in Castroville.

Barnard is a leading grower and processor of avocados, whose company supplies all the frozen guacamole for such fast-food chains as Del Taco, Taco Bell and McDonald's.

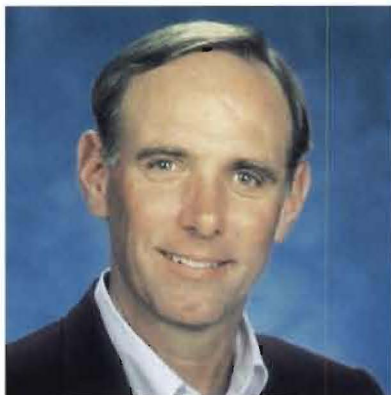
Boutonnet is the world's largest artichoke grower, supplying most of the artichokes in North America. He also grows a variety of other crops at locations throughout California, in Yuma, Ariz., and in Mexico.

Mission Produce suffered significantly from the freeze; Ocean Mist was hit hard by both events. But Barnard and Boutonnet's leadership and foresight in creating such diversified companies helped them survive.

AVOCADOS ANYTIME

By importing produce from other countries and planting crops in varying climates, Mission Produce and Ocean Mist provide seasonal produce year-round. They have literally changed the way growers do business and the way consumers plan meals. Fresh, ripe avocados are as easy to find in December as they are in August.

continued on next page...



(Left) Ed Boutonnet (Right) Steve Barnard

In 1984 Mission Produce was the first company to import avocados from Chile. The company now also imports from Mexico, New Zealand, Peru and South Africa, and owns orchards in San Luis Obispo and Ventura counties. The company recently ventured into the asparagus business, importing the low-calorie, nutrient-rich vegetable from Peru.

In addition to providing ripe avocados all year, Mission Produce revolutionized the industry when it opened ripening and distribution centers across the United States.

Ripening is a very technical, computerized and sophisticated process, Barnard said. The fruit is picked before it is ripe, then it is heated, humidified and treated to enhance ripening. Machines detect the degree of ripeness and package the fruit in groups accordingly. "Restaurants need ripe fruit right now; markets may want the fruit to ripen in a few days' time," Barnard explained.

All that work wouldn't be necessary, though, if people all over weren't eating lots of avocados. The average U.S. citizen eats about 3 pounds of avocados annually; the average Mexican citizen eats nearly 22 pounds a year. Barnard, who still sports the lanky build of a college student, says he eats up to 50 pounds. That's a lot of guacamole.

And why not? Avocados don't just taste good, they're good for you. They're filled with fiber and nutrients, with only five grams of fat per serving – mostly monounsaturated fat, "the good kind."

Boutonnet took over as president of Ocean Mist in 1990, leading the company's growth from modest acreage to a whopping 24,000 acres. When he took over, the company basically had two crops – artichokes and broccoli – in one geographic region – the Castroville area. Except for a few artichokes, the company literally shut down every winter.

Boutonnet changed all that. The company is now diversified in land base and product, he said. In addition to artichokes, the company grows asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower, celery, fava beans, onions, lettuce, spinach and more.

Diversification is one of the keys to the company's success. The other keys are rooted in four basic values: integrity, quality, passion and success. "Darn few growing and shipping companies are 83-years-old," he boasted.

The company's longevity is partly linked to Boutonnet's



"THE ECOSYSTEM IS
BETTER BALANCED
AND BETTER MANAGED
NOW THAN IT WAS 20
YEARS AGO. I THINK THE
FUTURE IS BRIGHT."

— ED BOUTONNET

ability to adapt to change. Whether the issue is food safety, freezing temperatures, or protecting the fragile ecosystem, he stays ahead of the curve.

Farmers are very good stewards of the land, he said. "The ecosystem is better balanced and better managed now than it was 20 years ago. I think the future is bright."

Even for the artichoke market, which Boutonnet calls "flat." But that could soon change, thanks to recent research revealing the artichoke's extremely high antioxidant content. "Plus, they're just plain fun to eat," he said.

If the antioxidants aren't enough to whet people's appetite for the thorny thistle, Boutonnet has another plan. He aims to make them easier to prepare. He and Cal Poly horticulture and crop science Professor Wyatt Brown are looking at ways to prevent the leaves from oxidizing, or turning brown, after they are trimmed. Boutonnet says they are close to marketing trimmed artichokes that won't oxidize, in a ready-to-micro-wave package.

Barnard is also energized by bringing new ideas to life. "I came out of Cal Poly with a great sense of confidence," he said.

"I'm not afraid of challenges; they pop up every day. You just have to have the right frame of mind. Heck, what did I know about asparagus?" □

FROZEN ASSETS

STEVE BARNARD'S MISSION PRODUCE, including its partners in Mexico and Chile, supplied about 210 million "fresh pounds" of avocados last year. This year and next, that figure will drop as dramatically as the temperatures did in January.

Several straight days of freezing temperatures wreaked havoc on California crops, creating what some are calling the worst-ever freeze disaster.

The California avocado industry lost about 30 percent of its crop, with some Northern California areas losing as much as 100 percent. "This is a minimum of a two-year loss," Barnard stressed. "The freeze damaged the bud wood that provides the bloom for the 2008 crop."

Virtually all of the produce-growing regions in the West were affected, including Cal Poly and its 70-acre avocado orchard, planted by Mission Produce almost five years ago. This "living classroom" was designed to be a profitable, commercial business and a model for the latest and best orchard management techniques. While the campus orchard was heavily damaged, it seems to have survived better than most. □

HARVEST HAZARD

THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY changed forever on September 14, 2006, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued its first alert about the spinach E. coli outbreak.

"After 9/14, we made the decision to be a leader," said Ed Boutonnet, president and CEO of Ocean Mist Farms. "Many people wouldn't talk to the media. We talked. We were on national news and ready to face criticism even though we weren't responsible."

Before 9/14, Ocean Mist and other growers practiced voluntary guidelines known as "good agricultural practices" (GAP). "We did a great job, but because it was voluntary, not everyone was as diligent in their growing practices," said Joseph Pezzini, vice president of operations at Ocean Mist.

"Then people got sick," Boutonnet said. "The bad spinach was eventually traced back to one entity, but what one grower does, affects the whole industry."

Ocean Mist has since adopted new, stricter production and processing standards. But growers decided it was time to adopt mandatory guidelines.

California produce companies and governmental agencies formulated the Proposed California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, which could become law. But, Pezzini cautioned, there is still much work ahead to get the whole thing off the ground. Food safety has been mainly of interest in California. If the agreement is adopted, Boutonnet hopes it could become an FDA model for the United States, Canada and Mexico. □

