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THE PRODUCE NEWS

Henry Avocado Delivers on Founding Philosophy

By Rob Bryant

Although Henry Avocado saw the promise of avocados from Mexico and beyond to become a year-round distributor in 1990, its focus never wavered from its local business model. Having literally delivered on its customer promise to be always on-time, always fresh and always just ripe as an Escondido based grower, packer and shipper for more than six decades, Henry was committed to the concept especially as it expanded its markets and resourcing.

“We always considered we were in the fresh business,” Ozzie Figueroa, Henry’s marketing and customer service director, explained. “Our product was avocados but we specialize in creating an unsurpassed fresh supply chain wherever we go, and it is in place, whether the customer wants hard, custom ripened or bagged avocados.”

Henry’s first regional distribution center opened in Phoenix in 1994, and the strategy to emphasize freshness was implemented for the first time away from Henry’s Escondido processing facility. Its unqualified success guided the development of the next five centers across the country that followed. “We take to minimize the time from the harvest to customer delivery wherever we’ve gone,” Figueroa emphasized.

Among them is location. All distribution centers are near major highways and interstate arteries that serve the select regional market. A fleet of GPS/temperature monitored tractor trailers are maintained as another key element of the fresh supply chain.

Experienced sales and ripening personnel staff are an essential part of each regional center, too. They know the requirements of their local customers and are empowered to provide the custom order the Henry way - on time and in peak condition.

The center's proximity and rapid access to the customer base provides two important benefits. First, the fruit is delivered with optimal appearance to accelerate sales and reduce shrink; and second, special order delivery on short notice can be accommodated without question.

The first distribution center to handle the fruit from Mexico opened in San Antonio in 2008. It has 19 forced-air ripening rooms and can process more than 40,000 cartons each week.

Houston opened seven years later to service additional foodservice and retail customers for Henry's Bravocado and Green Goddess brands in the mid-Atlantic states. It features 27 ripening rooms that can accommodate 334 pallets during peak season. A sixth generation Texan, Jon Ullich has managed sales for both centers since 1997.

The marketing shift to year round distribution and opening regional distribution centers, however, was preceded by a momentous development in 1983 when Gil Henry created the industry's first forced air ripening room. It enabled the company to offer a competitive advantage for itself and its customers with a custom-ripe product.

With custom ripening there was a capability to sell more than hard avocados. Custom ripened fruit was a welcome addition for retailers, foodservice and growers as menu planning was facilitated creating greater overall demand and reducing shrink appreciably.

Today custom ripening represents 75% of Henry's organic and conventional orders and the company has a total of 120 ripening centers at its seven distribution centers. In addition, all facilities are Primus Labs certified and meet or exceed federal state and industry Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) guidelines.

Two centers are located in Escondido where Henry has its headquarters. The others are in Phoenix, Milpitas, San Antonio, Houston and Charlotte. All have installed Oxyion air

purification systems that reduce bacteria, viruses and mold to provide the safest, most sanitary fresh chain environment possible.

A one-page Hass Avocado CustomRipe Ordering Guide, a marketing fixture in the industry for two decades, is available from any of Henry's marketing and sales offices listed on its website. The Guide has helped inform nearly a generation of avocado buyers about the five separate and distinct stages of ripening that are available from Henry's distribution centers.

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