

Grower Profile



David Ross:

Walking in His Grandfather's Shoes

By Tim Linden

Moorpark avocado grower David Ross credits his grandfather often when discussing his entry into the avocado business and the knowledge he has acquired about growing the crop.

And for good reason.

As a kid growing up in Thousand Oaks, Ross spent countless hours swimming in the pool on his grandfather's ranch and running through the groves. After he graduated from college several years ago, Ross called it a "dream come true" when his grandfather Gene Mabry asked him to come help him out on Mabry Ranch, which includes 25 acres of avocados, 25 acres of lemons and the aforementioned ranch house with pool.

Ross had just graduated from Azusa Pacific College in Southern California with a degree in business administration. His grandfather was approaching 80 years of age and needed help. That was in May of 2011. "He brought me along slowly, first teaching me the basics and then we moved into some of the administrative tasks."

Today, with his grandfather's guidance, Ross is running the operation and using what his grandfather taught him to offer his grove management services to other growers in the area. "I started with irrigation, checking the lines and checking the soil moisture to see when we should irrigate. Then I moved into pruning and picking," Ross said.

He said his grandfather showed a great deal of patience



David Ross and Gene Mabry

as it was a steep learning curve and he needed to master it in a relatively short period of time. "I think the most important thing we have going for us is my grandfather's record-keeping. He has very good data, keeping track of everything he has done over the past 24 years. They say 'knowledge is power' and that couldn't be truer than in managing an avocado grove. He has kept track of everything including how much water and fertilizer he has used



View from the Ranch House

every year on every block.”

Ross explained that his grandfather has examined the records over the years and changed the things that were not working and emphasized what does work.

Ross said Gene Mabry’s career as an avocado grower began in 1989, which was coincidentally the same year his grandson was born. “I’m 24 years old and the ranch is 24 years old,” he said.

Mabry was a mortgage lender in the Los Angeles area for much of his career before transitioning into real estate investments with a portfolio of apartment buildings. That gave him the freedom and the steady income to change his lifestyle by moving to Moorpark and planting avocados and citrus.

Ross described the Mabry Ranch growing philosophy as simple and straight forward. “If the tree needs it, give it to it.”

Armed with 24 years of data and constantly monitoring the trees, they know when to irrigate and fertilize and they are very aggressive in their pruning practices. “We also girdle the trees. We’ve been doing that for three years and this year it is really paying off.”

He explained that girdling is the process of restricting the flow of sugars from the tree’s canopy to its roots, which naturally happens when the trees are stressed by cold weather. “The theory and science behind girdling is that if you keep the sugars in the canopy when the tree is ready to push blooms, the sugar is already there and you get a better bloom and a better fruit set. The first two years we did it we noticed no difference. But this year, when I walk through a grove and look at the fruit on the trees, I can tell without looking which trees have been girdled,” Ross said.

Once again, he said tracking this information and writing it all down is the key to success. “We do a lot of things by trial and error and keep track. If it works, we do it again.”

The Azusa Pacific graduate said it is in this facet of grove management where his college education and degree come in handy. “Record-keeping is very important, also creating and keeping a budget as well as managing people and the products you put on the tree. There are many factors involved in agriculture and the business administration base I have is very important.”

In fact, Ross believes the complicated aspects of farming are what doom many of what he calls “gentlemen farmers.”



Grove Road

He said real estate brokers sell them a ranch and they just don't know how difficult it is to make a crop.

It is for this reason that Ross, who also has a real estate license, is starting to specialize in ag land. "When someone asks me what it costs to plant an avocado grove or to water it, I can look at our records and tell them exactly what we did."

This is also the reason he is offering his ranch management services. Because of the education he has received from his grandfather and the data they have collected, Ross believes he is perfectly positioned to offer help to others. He is currently managing another grove beside Mabry Ranch's three blocks and is in discussions with others. And he said, he and his grandfather are always looking at other land in an effort to expand. "Any grove worth purchasing is either priced too high or not for sale," he quipped.

Ross said there are dilapidated groves for sale that have not been maintained but usually it is because they don't have access to affordable water. He said that is key to being profitable in the avocado business. "We just completed putting in a well on our third block. Now all three of our blocks have well water."

Besides being much less expensive — as they draw from the Fox Canyon aquifer — Ross said the water from the aquifer is higher quality and produces much better tree and fruit growth. On average, he puts 2.5 acre feet of water on each of his acres of avocados. "I've heard of some people getting by on two acre feet but that's cutting it close. What we are doing is maximizing the use of the water by higher density plantings."

During most of the life of their avocado trees, Ross said the data shows an average yield of 6,000-7,000 pounds per acre. But in the last five years, the average has climbed to 8,500 pounds per acre. Part of that, he explained is from the higher density planting, but the rest is from adopting cultural practices that the data says work.

This year, like other growers, Ross said yields are way down because of the alternate bearing properties of the trees. "It's definitely an off year. It's too early to tell exactly what our yields will be but I am estimating around 4,000 pounds per acre."

That will be offset somewhat by the higher field prices being paid. Mabry Ranch has sold its avocados through Calavo for many years and Ross sees no reason to change.

“The packing houses are very competitive so there is not much price difference between them. When you stick with one, you get a lot of good advice from your field representative (from the packing house) and that has been very helpful to us.”

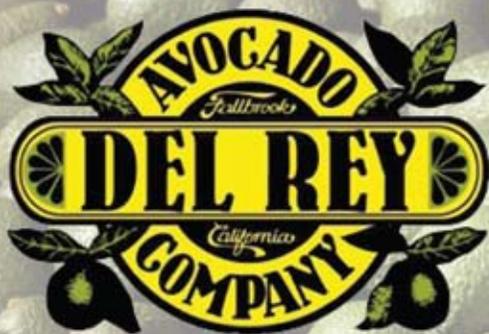
Last year, he said they received an average of 70 cents per pound for their fruit. This year it is almost double at about \$1.30 per pound. They have been picking since February and Ross expects to finish up harvesting in time for the Fourth of July promotions being run by the California Avocado Commission.

He said while the California crop is down, Peruvian fruit has come into the marketplace. “But I like what Lee Cole (president of Calavo) told us last year during a grower meeting. He said: ‘Don’t look at other countries as the enemy. They are our friends. They are increasing demand for avocados and that helps us all.’ You just can’t beat the California quality. So if the demand is there that is good for us.”

Besides his grower and real estate hat, Ross is “passion-

ate about conservation.” He is on the Advisory Committee of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, helping to come up with policies to encourage the survival of wild-life in those mountains. One area in which his role with that group has impacted his farming techniques is in the use of rodenticides. He explained that rats love avocados and lots of growers use blocks of rodenticide to keep the rats away. Unfortunately, other animals — including owls, coyotes, bobcats, even mountain lions — eat those rodenticide-filled rats and can die. “For the last three years, we have been working to get our ranch off of rodenticides and we have been successful. We have put in owl boxes and bird perches as alternatives, and are keeping rat poisons out of our groves.”

By doing that, Ross said Mabry Ranch is helping to maintain the circle of life, which pretty much is the same theory that can be used to explain Ross’ excitement in continuing the work his grandfather started the year he was born. 🥑



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