

Grower Profile



Double H Avocado Ranch is a Family Affair

By Tim Linden

When Dave and Kathy Hendrickson partnered with his sister and her husband, Carolyn and John Heitzenrater, to buy a 13.5-acre ranch in Morro Bay in 1986, they had no plans to become avocado growers.

In fact, they were not farmers and were merely looking for a nice rural piece of property that could be home to their animals and their families. There was one house on the ranch and they built another. For about a decade, they raised their kids and animals, grew hay for their horses and enjoyed Morro Bay living. “As the crow flies, we are two miles from the beach. You can see the top of the Morro Bay Rock from my sister’s house,” said Dave, who is the manager of what has become Double H Avocado Ranch, a 6.5-acre parcel of the original property that is now home to about 650 trees. Last year Double H produced an average of 23,000 pounds per acre, said Kathy, who is the operation’s bookkeeper.

While that’s a remarkable statistic from a 2019 season that produced only about a half a crop for most growers, the transformation of the four relatives to impressive avocado producers is a relatively simple one.

Dave and his sister grew up mostly in Los Angeles County, with their father being employed by the California Highway Patrol. John and Carolyn, who are five years older than Dave, were the first family members to move to the Morro Bay area. Dave moved to the area in January of 1974 when his father transferred to CHP’s San Luis Obispo facility, where

he served as the office’s mechanic.

Dave went to Cuesta Community College, played a little basketball and considered becoming an auto mechanic. He did somewhat follow his father’s footsteps and became a correctional officer for the state of California. “I met Kathy in 1980, while she was a student at Cal Poly and we were married in September 1981 after she graduated,” he said.

Dave and Kathy were renting an apartment in San Luis Obispo when the two couples started talking about buying a piece of land big enough for the two families. They looked for the property together and finally found a parcel outside of town, in Morro Grange on Little Morro Creek Road. “At the time, I don’t think there were any avocados in the area,” said Dave. “We were looking for a place for our animals.”

Kathy was in banking before the birth of the couple’s son and then became his homeschool teacher through high school. Carolyn was a registered nurse working in a doctor’s office in Morro Bay. And John oversaw the paint shop at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

For the first decade, they dry farmed the ground and bailed hay. It was a break-even proposition as they earned enough to feed their horses for free. While Dave was not a farmer by trade, it is in his blood as his grandfather did own a cattle ranch.

As the years went on, the Hendricksons and Heitzenraters watched the area around them transform. Several avocado ranches started to develop. “One neighbor put in 1,000

trees in 1992 and had six trees leftover,” Dave said.

Those leftover trees, in fact, were the beginning of Double H Avocado Ranch. Those six trees did well, and the foursome decided to become avocado growers. In 1998, they devoted part of their ranch to avocados and planted 650 trees. By 2002, they had their first crop.

“We planted it as supplemental income for retirement,” said Dave. “We are fortunate in that all of us have some kind of a retirement plan and we don’t have to rely solely on the income from the grove. But it has been better than expected.”

Dave learned to be an avocado grower by doing it. He read publications, talked to other growers and observed what they did. He said the University of California Agricultural Extension program was a great help as it offered publications and classes. Over the years, he has relied heavily on Ken Warren, his pest control advisor, and Gabe Filipe, the area representative for Mission Produce, which is the packer that Double H uses. The six-foot, seven-inch grower jokes that he literally doesn’t have to look up to any other avocado grower, except Ed McFadden, the former California Avocado Commission chairman of the board who is equally gifted in the altitude department.

Dave notes it has been a learning experience. Over the last three years, he said the grove has produced three exceptional crops — including the 2019 record-breaker — and the return has been better than they ever expected. In the early years, he said it was not highly profitable to be an avocado grower, but more profitable than bailing hay. The ranch does have its



Photo courtesy of Eric Hendrickson.

own well, which has been extremely beneficial over the years. “I don’t think we ever showed a loss except during the freeze year of 2007,” he says.

Asked how he explains the excellent production from 2019, Dave first says he can’t explain it. But then he adds that the four owners have taken very good care of their trees over the years, with everyone helping when they can. “We’ve also made the hard decision of pruning every year,” he said. “We find there is a payoff for good pruning and good fertilizer practices.”

Dave said as difficult as it is to do, its advantageous to prune the appropriate branches every year even when they are loaded with potential fruit. At 65, he still does the pruning himself. “Twenty-two years ago nobody knew much about pruning,” he said. “But we have researched it and learned a lot.”

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He added that he has gone to many California Avocado Commission-sponsored workshops and field days over the years.

Even though there were talks about high-density plantings when the four owners put in their grove in 1998, Dave said they settled on the more traditional 20 by 20-foot schematic in a diamond pattern. While Dave is in charge of the day-to-day operations and makes daily decisions, he does consult his partners on the big expenditures. He called it an informal structure with the foursome getting together to discuss the ranch's needs and coming up with a solution.

They have utilized Mission Produce to sell their fruit every year. "Mission delivers empty bins and we hire a labor contractor to pick the fruit," he said. "We like dealing with Mission. They are globally connected and have their thumb on the pulse of the avocado deal."

In late April, when this interview was being conducted, the avocado market was very strong with an f.o.b. price in the \$40s for the most desirable fruit and the field price was equally respectable. But Double H had not yet considered harvesting its fruit. "We won't seriously think about it until August," said Dave.

He said that several years ago when the drought was at its peak, Double H did pick its fruit early to take stress off the trees. But that was an outlier. Morro Bay growers believe they produce the tastiest avocados in the industry largely because of the extended amount of time the fruit stays on the tree because of the long, cool growing season that defines the region. They are always the last district in the state to have avocados on their trees, with the harvest often extending into October. "I do believe the Morro Bay avocado is the best tasting avocado there is," Dave says.

As he discusses the path the Double H partners took, Dave said it was truly a blessing. "We've always thought that God led us to this property and we do pay it forward. We donate



Photo courtesy of Eric Hendrickson.

to the missionaries every year," he said. "We don't have one particular missionary that we send to each year. We have so many family members involved in different ministries and missionaries that our church supports that we usually give to a different person or group each year."

In late April, COVID-19 was at its peak in California, but Dave said it had not impacted their operation and was only of minimal impact personally. "It's not uncommon for us to go three to four days without seeing anybody," he quipped. "We are missing our friends at church and at the 4-H club. But I'm not just cooped up in the house. We have a shop on the farm and I do the maintenance on the equipment. I've always liked to dive into something," he said, referring back to his teens when he wanted to become an auto mechanic.

He was very hopeful that the Morro Bay Avocado & Margarita Festival, scheduled for September, would still be held. "We've been active in that for many years working in the CAC booth along with Dave Cruz and April (Aymami). We really enjoy that."

Though the two Double H Ranch couples have children, Dave said none of the offspring have expressed interest in taking over the operation. "When we decide we can't do it on our own — and we're all slowing down a bit — we will come up with a plan. We have thought about sharecropping — keeping the ranch and let someone else come in and handle the business."

But Dave has lived a very active life and believes he is still up for the task. He utilized his height in his younger years and played in many city basketball leagues. And both he and his wife played softball and senior softball. "We recently discovered pickle ball. It's a lot of fun," he said of the game that combines the elements of tennis, ping pong and badminton on an undersized court.

And they greatly enjoy their avocado trees and the richness they have brought to their post-career lives. 🥑