

# Grower Profile



## Camlam Farms:

### Deep, Deep Roots and a Promising Future

By Tim Linden

**K**nowing that the origin of the name for Camlam Farms comes from a combination of Camarillo and the Lamb family, it would not be a reach to suspect that the agricultural entity was named after the city in which it is located. But in fact, it is the city of Camarillo that was named after the farming operation.

Today Camlam Farms grows crops on about 1,000 acres in Ventura County that were part of a 10,000-acre Spanish land grant called Rancho Calleguas, bought by Juan Camarillo in 1876. Mr. Camarillo's great-great-grandson, John Lamb, co-owns the operation with other descendants of the Camarillo family, and is the president of Camlam Farms Inc. His great-grandfather Adolfo Camarillo is credited with establishing and naming Camarillo, along with his brother Juan Jr., in about 1910. The town became an incorporated city in 1964.

Lamb says from the very beginning Rancho Calleguas was a farm with walnuts, lima beans, sugar beets and cattle as its main crops. Over the years, most of the acres were sold off and developed but the current acreage has remained in the family for 150 years. Robert Lamb, John's father, was the proprietor of the farming operation in the 1970s when avocados were first planted on its slopes. "They planted citrus and avocados around 1977," Lamb recalls.

While his father was managing the operation through the 1980s, John Lamb was an active certified public accountant in Arizona. In 1989, John moved back to California about the time of his mother's death. She was the direct descendant of the Camarillo family. A couple of years later, Robert



*John Lamb*

Lamb met his second wife at the World Avocado Congress in Mexico. She was from Spain and the two began splitting time between Spain and California.

It was at this point that John and his two brothers, Robert III and David, who were part owners of Camlam Farms, began running it. John took over the reins as his brothers pursued

other interests though they remained in ownership positions. In the early '90s, the farm consisted of about 120 acres of avocados and 20 acres of citrus, with other land leased out to row crop growers.

The operation has expanded over the years and now has 300 acres of avocados, 175 acres of citrus dominated by lemons, and about 65 acres of row crops. There is still room for expansion and it is an ongoing project. "We've discovered that avocados love the volcanic soil on our mountain slopes so we have continually added avocado plantings," Lamb said.

Camlam Farms has been one of the more supportive operations regarding the California Avocado Commission's breeding program. In fact, the Lamb Hass is so named because the variety was discovered during a trial conducted on the family farm. "My father started varietal research in the late 1980s," Lamb said. "Over three years in the late '80s/early '90s, we planted 18,000 seedlings in our groves. The research program developed the Lamb Hass, GEM, Surprise and Marvel in our groves."

Lamb is cautiously optimistic about the prospects for the GEM. "Some people think it's the answer," he said. "We have 4,500 GEM trees in the ground."

He added that the ability to plant a lot of GEM trees per acre is a plus but he's not sold on the 500-600 trees per acre that some growers are trying. "I do think 250-300 is doable," he said.

Not surprisingly, Camlam Farms has made the Lamb Hass an important part of its program with 40 acres devoted to that variety. John said the Lamb Hass tree produces a larger piece of fruit in a later time frame, which fits in well with the company's effort. It is also planted in a high density configuration with 225 trees to the acre.

Camlam currently has a number of rootstock trials being conducted on its property. "We've always been very interested in the work being done by the PRC (CAC's Production Research Committee). I hope they keep it going," he said. "We are only going to get better if we keep producing better varieties."

Because Lamb had been running the operation for 30 years, and is now in his mid-60s, he and his two older brothers decided several years ago that they needed a succession plan. They discussed it among themselves and with the next generation of the family, and subsequently offered Robert's daughter, Maureen Cottingham, the opportunity to join the family business as the eventual leader of Camlam Farms. "We looked at logical successors and Maureen made the most sense," said John. "She had executive experience and the passion and smarts to get it done."

At the time, Maureen was the executive director of the Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers Alliance. She explained that she earned her degree in agricultural business from Cal



*Maureen Cottingham*

Poly San Luis Obispo, where she did an internship with a San Luis Obispo winery. That led to the position in Sonoma where she served for 17 years. "I never thought I'd come back to the ranch," she said. "But it is an incredible opportunity. We love the idea of raising our kids on the family ranch."

She and her husband, Adam, talked it over and decided to make the move. He is a contractor so he stayed up in Sonoma for most of the first year finishing up projects while she moved back down to Camarillo in May of 2021. Though she claims she knew little about agriculture when she arrived, John said she has been a quick learner and a great asset. The succession plan called for a five-year transition in which John would slowly pull away and Maureen would take on increasingly more responsibility.

"Initially, I took a deep dive into everything," she said. "I've looked to our ranch foreman for his help and am trying to be a sponge learning everything he has learned over the past 50 years. I have also been learning about the players and learning the lingo."

John noted that he took a similar path when he came aboard 30 years ago. "I called it management by wandering around," he quipped.

Maureen said her current strategic plan has been to divide what she needs to know into sections and tackle one at a time. "In 2023, I'm taking a deep dive into the financial aspect of running this company."



*Camlam Farms*

She said there are many elements involved on the business side and she is concentrating on those elements this year.

When asked, John didn't call Camlam Farms "a well-oiled machine" but instead joked that it is "moderately lubricated."

But kidding aside, he said running a 1,000 acre ranch is big business and it deserves a dedicated manager with lots of energy. Currently, he said the ranch is on a five-year plan to automate the irrigation process, including all the valves. "That's a significant investment," he said. "It's like trying to figure out how to eat an elephant. We have 20 blocks of avocados and about 10-12 blocks of citrus."

Over the years, John said the avocado acreage has yielded an average of 7,500 pounds per acre. The farm has several water sources, including moderately priced water from its water district, which helps the economics of growing avocados and citrus. "It helps to have both citrus and avocados," John said, noting that over the years if one crop doesn't have a good year, the other one does.

He added that one cultural practice that Camlam Farms adopted from Chilean growers, after he visited avocado growers in that country, was to girdle its trees. "We girdle half the tree per year which helps avoid alternate bearing years."

Maureen recently joined the CAC Board. John served on

the board for many years and was the chairman for several years as well. He also served on the task force that hired Jeff Oberman as president late last year, replacing the retired Tom Bellamore, who was with CAC for about 30 years.

Both John and Maureen are very bullish about the future of the California avocado business, and believe CAC is in very good hands. Maureen was pleased with the hiring of vice president of marketing, Terry Splane, who has now replaced the retiring Jan DeLyser. "We have an awesome trifecta running CAC with Jeff, Ken (Melban) and Terry," she said. "I'm excited about the future."

John chimed in that while 2023 might be challenging, growers received record returns in 2022. Maureen added that CAC's marketing strategy is a winning one. "Our consumers want to know where their fruit is coming from and that serves us well during the California season," she said. "We continue to get a premium price for our fruit selling to the West Coast. And the other sources of avocados allow year-round availability, which I'm learning is a very good thing for us."

It appears that Camlam Farms' strategy is also a winning one with a 150-year rich history in the rearview mirror and a steady hand in place to navigate the future. 🥑