



# Foodservice Firm Visit Focuses on Food Safety Practices

By Ken Melban

*Director, Issues Management*

In July the California Avocado Commission hosted representatives from Brinker International, owner of Chili's and Maggiano's restaurants, as they traveled to California to learn more about our industry's food safety practices.

Three senior Brinker staff and one from FreshPoint (the largest foodservice distributor of fresh produce in the country) spent two days visiting groves in both Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties along with a packing facility. The purpose of their visit was not to scrutinize our food safety program, but rather to learn about the Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) growers are implementing.

"I appreciate the time the Brinker representatives spent with us in our groves to see first-hand how we grow our fruit," said CAC Chairman Ed McFadden, and host for one of the grove visits. "There is nothing like a hands-on, 'muddy-boots' walk-through of a beautiful avocado grove to see how special what we do every day really is, especially to

those who are seeing it for the first time."

So, what did they think? In a nutshell, they were impressed, and so were we! We were impressed that a food-service company the size of Brinker (Chili's has more than 1,400 restaurants, and there are another 50 Maggiano's locations) would take the time to come to our groves and

learn about our food safety practices. It demonstrates that Brinker, which purchases more than 20 million pounds of fresh avocados annually, is working to ensure its suppliers take food safety serious.

"We (Brinker International Supply Team) greatly appreciated the time the California Avocado Commission and their growers took to educate our restaurant company on the current avocado industry and standards in place," said Colista Yates, Brinker senior manager for global quality assurance. "Thank you for sharing your in-depth knowledge and best practices with our group!"

The visit provided the first opportunity to get a major foodservice operator into our groves and have a dialogue, not only about our food safety practices, but equally important, their expectations. "They were delightful people who asked very intelligent questions," said Bill Coy, a Cayucos grower. "It was a great learning experience for all of us."

As the commission continues to assist growers with implementing GAPs, we are also working to facilitate discussions such as this with foodservice and retailers to educate them on the low risk nature of our fruit. We are communicating our willingness to demonstrate applicable safety measures, but will continue to resist efforts that create ar-



duous expectations on growers that in no way improve the safety of our fruit.

The increasing concern for the safety of fruits and vegetables sold in the United States over the last few years is undeniable. In 2011 Congress passed the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requiring growers, harvesters and handlers demonstrate that measures are in place to mitigate possible contamination. Many in the avocado industry question the rationale for including avocados as they are arguably a "low-risk" commodity. In reality, though, under FSMA, all produce that is consumed raw in the United States must show compliance. The commission has proactively worked to prepare California's avocado growers for the pending FSMA requirements through the development of an avocado-specific GAP manual, along with providing training and financial incentive. With more than 35 percent of California's acreage GAP-certified, it's obvious that many growers are accepting the pending requirements and taking action. Some growers, however, have not been quite as motivated to pursue GAP certification. Although no buyer to date is demanding only GAP certified fruit, this visit from Brinker International is yet another indication that retailers and restaurateurs are serious about having GAP-certified fruit.

More information on the CAC GAP program and rebate may be found at this link: [www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/growing/gap](http://www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/growing/gap).

The commission sends our thanks again to the Brinker International representatives: Senior Manager, Global Quality Assurance Colista Yates, Quality Assurance Manager Jessica Kojder and Produce Buyer Cathy Leffingwell; along with Fresh Point National Account Manager Trish Davies, for taking the time to come and learn about our great industry. 

## Upcoming California Avocado Commission GAP Educational Seminars

Tuesday, December 10

9:00 am – 11:00 am

**Grand Tradition Estate & Gardens**

220 Grand Tradition Way, Fallbrook, CA 92028

Wednesday, December 11

1:00 pm – 3:00 pm

**Museum of Ventura County**

100 East Main Street, Ventura, CA 93001

Thursday, December 12

9:00 am – 11:00 am

**SLO Veterans Memorial Building**

801 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93403