

# Grower Profile



## To Fillmore... ...via Costa Rica

By Tim Linden

**M**anuel DuBon has a bachelor of science degree in agronomy and has had decades of experience working with coffee plants and other crops, but had never worked with avocados at all when he began managing a small California avocado grove in Simi Valley about a dozen years ago.

Today, he is an avocado veteran and said growing high quality avocados are not that different from growing high quality coffee beans. "Twelve years ago when I was hired to grow avocados I had no avocado experience but I had managed a 4,000 acre coffee plantation," he said. "I discovered that all that experience I had with coffee could be applied to avocados. In fact, in some ways, it is harder to grow coffee beans. Growing coffee plants is similar to growing grapes that will then produce wine."

He explained that a coffee plantation can look great, but a successful plantation has to do with the quality of the coffee beans themselves. He said the price paid for the coffee beans fluctuate greatly depending upon the quality so it is very important that the plantation manager pay very close attention to all the small details that help produce a superior coffee bean. In much the same way, DuBon said it is the many small details that differentiate one wine grape from another.

His story begins in El Salvador where he was raised by multicultural parents of Australian nationality. DuBon's name notes his French heritage. He received a Bachelor of Science in agriculture from University of El Salvador and continued his studies at the University of Adelaide in South Australia where he majored in farm management.

Armed with extensive agricultural education he went back to Central America and began his agriculture career in a coffee plantation. Over the next 25 years he worked in the coffee industry for several different companies in Central America and South America. Eventually he met his wife, Lupe, in Costa Rica, who happened to be a U.S. citizen. Because of an economic depression that hit Costa Rica in the late 1990s, he found himself out of work and he and his wife decided to move to California. "We moved to Simi Valley and three months later I found myself managing a 20-acre avocado grove for The Orchards at Legacy owned by the Jaeger family."

He made contacts in the industry as he improved his technical skills and worked on better ways to irrigate the crop. Next he began managing a 65-acre grove for Rancho Codo and the Bruce family in the same general vicinity. Eventually he hooked up with MVP Farms in Fill-



more, where he has been for the past eight years with the Mummaneni family. The 200-acre partnership farms 110 acres of organic avocados, and 33 acres of conventional avocados as well as 40 acres of organic citrus and 2 acres of dragon fruit.

DuBon said it is more expensive to grow avocados organically as the yield tends to be a bit less and inputs can be more expensive. But he said organic avocados return a higher price “so you can do well if you get good production.” In 2012, production was off because of some cultural and weather issues but he said that as they improve their techniques “we expect to harvest about 15,000 pounds per acre and we will be very happy with that.”

He said the grove has an excellent water situation with costs of less than \$148 per acre foot. “Our water is very cheap. We have a good well producing about 1,000 gallons per minute.”

However, he is currently in the process of changing the entire farm’s irrigation system including a new pipe system design, new water filters and micro sprinklers. DuBon said the ranch has also installed a crop nutrition monitoring program with three nutrient monitor stations in place and one more in the process of being added. “We test for nitrate, sulphate, phosphate, potassium, carbonate levels and more. We also test our irrigation water seven times per year

and we test our tree nutrient levels with seven foliar analyses per year.”

Currently MVP Farms has 2,000 new trees on order which it will use to create some high density acres within its groves.

DuBon said the other new endeavor of the operation is to build its own grading operation, which is currently underway. By next year, the company wants to pack its own fruit. DuBon said the avocados will still be sold by established sales organizations in the industry, but the grower group wants to have control over the packout. “Recently we sent avocados to two different packing houses. They were the same avocados from the same groves. I was 100 percent sure that they would pack out at at least 70 percent 60s or larger. One of the packing sheds packed them at 75 percent of 60s or larger but the other one came in at only 35 percent of 60s. I am not going to name the packing houses but we want to pack them ourselves. That difference means a lot of money. Sizing is a very simple thing to do. We think we can do it.”

Moving forward DuBon said the MVP Farms partnership is committed to continue to expand its presence in the California avocado industry. He said their groves are good producers and should continue to be profitable. 🥑