

Grower Profile



GREAT VIEWS Led to Avocado Career

By Tim Linden

JIt's not quite fair to say that Jim Shanley is an accidental avocado grower, but neither was it a goal in his life. In fact, if it wasn't for the love of great ocean views that he shares with the fruit, he would probably be doing something else today...but be sure it would be innovative with an esoteric justification.

Shanley grew up in Northern Illinois and received a degree from the University of Illinois. His first career-type job was as a runner for the Chicago Board of Trade, which did set him on a fairly direct path to Morro Bay. He learned about commodity trading during that first job which led to a career in the feed and grain manufacturing business. He soon found himself in Visalia, where he settled into a fairly long career with a family owned company that he says "did very, very well."

Shanley found his niche in senior management and the owners treated him like family, even to the point that they let him use their beach house in Cayucos...and thus a love affair with the Morro Bay area began.

The financial success he achieved with the grain company allowed him to help his brother start a medical equipment start-up. The company eventually went public again giving Shanley some capital as well as the opportunity to

pull the trigger on an early retirement a few years later.

While he does credit his financial success for allowing him to retire early and fast start his progression in the avocado business, he believes he would have arrived at the same place eventually one way or the other. "When I first started coming to Cayucos I quickly set a goal of figuring out how to make a living while living in this place."

He did quite a bit of research and eventually narrowed his choices to farming either wine grapes or avocados. He planned to continue working while he built up his farming credentials to create an income stream that could subsidize his retirement. He bought a 113-acre parcel, which he called a "train wreck" as it had basically been abandoned by the previous owner and was littered with three barns, two trailers, a duck pond and even a goat. He spent quite a few dollars getting it in farming shape and chose avocados over wine grapes as his crop for the future.

His decision was based on his grasp of economics and his observation that while wine grapes can be grown just about anywhere, avocados need specific micro-climates that tend to be coveted by homeowners as well. Seeing a potential scarcity of California avocados, Shanley planted his first 4,000 avocado trees in the spring of 1999.



By the time he started getting significant production around 2004, he had retired and moved to the area full-time.

He did hire a grove manager to handle the day-to-day management while he was still in Visalia, but Shanley said his nature is to be "impossibly curious" so he was always a hands-on grower.

Like many entering the farming business, the spread sheet projections were a bit optimistic. "We had two frosts in the first seven years so the economics I had penciled out didn't quite come to pass."

But by that time Shanley was hooked. He had achieved a dream. "One day early on, circumstances had me sitting on my deck all alone with a glass of wine in hand one evening looking out over a beautiful vista. I knew I had taken a damaged piece of land and turned it into something beautiful. It felt right."

He readily admits that when he planted his avocado acreage, he did not know that local growers laid claim to producing the best tasting avocados in all of California. But early on he talked to other local growers and learned that this had been an "open secret for years."

The Morro Bay area has different growing conditions than any other area in California. Shanley said the temperature is typically 15 degrees cooler than any other district, and often the differential is 20 or 25 degrees. He said this creates a longer gestation period with the fruit staying on the

tree for as long as 15 to 18 months. Shanley said the result is a higher oil content, which, combined with other traits, leads to a better tasting avocado in the September, October, November time frame.

"Some local people think we have better tasting fruit all year long, but I don't agree. I wouldn't want to run a taste test against Fallbrook right now," he said on May 22. "In July and August we can compete with anybody but in September, October and November we will win every taste test."

And he said at that time of year, the fruit is far superior than the early season imports coming in from Chile and Mexico. With Shanley's encouragement, many of the Morro Bay growers have banded together to brand their particular growing region and have started the process of marketing those avocados to retailers. Shanley fully expects that within 10 years, Morro Bay avocados will enjoy the same lofty perch as Vidalia onions or Copper River salmon.

However, he said, from a grower's viewpoint, there is a price to pay for the fruit being on the tree so long. A tree has to use more energy supporting two crops at one time and yields suffer. While there are years where yields are off the charts, Shanley said a good grower in Fallbrook can average 12,000 to 15,000 pounds per acre, while a great grower in Morro Bay will do well at 10,000 pounds.

While the Morro Bay region does not have the same water price concerns as the southern growers, Shanley said "water is always a concern" and this year Mother Nature did not fill the local reservoirs.

Of course, any discussion of water leads to a discussion of the economics of growing avocados. This Morro Bay grower sympathizes with his brethren down south as he said starting out any balance sheet with a water bill in the \$6,000 per acre range makes for a tough hill to climb.

He believes that one way to improve the economics is to engage in some out-of-the-box thinking with regard to crop land utilization. U.S. producers of most crops have long adopted a "mono-culture" method of farming, but Shanley believes there are opportunities to grow other crops on the same acreage...as vines on border fences, under the canopy of a mature orchard or even as fruit vines climbing a tree past its prime. He has tried these various options on his land with good results. In fact, he has entered into a nursery partnership to provide some of the trees and plants necessary to move down this path.

He said crops that have shown some promise sharing space in an avocado grove include passion fruit, dragon fruit and even coffee plants. He said both dragon fruit and passion fruit are climbers while coffee plants have done well planted between trees in the open space.

"Some of our groves are under-utilized resources. I am interested in doing anything I can to make it profitable to grow avocados, especially up here in Morro Bay," he said. 