

CAC Salutes International Women's Day

Trade and Consumer Public Relations Features Female Farmers

To keep California avocados top of mind among trade customers and avocado shoppers while California avocado season ramps up, a California Avocado Commission trade and consumer public relations program was created in honor of International Women's Day (March 8). The outreach features six female California avocado growers who had photography and biographical information available to CAC. (See "Growers Help Tell the California Avocado Story" on p. 21.)



Jessica Hunter

"The Commission is happy to celebrate International Women's Day and the many women involved in the California avocado industry," said California Avocado Commission Online Marketing Director Zac Benedict. "In March our public relations team conducted outreach to consumer and trade media outlets to share stories of a few of these hard-working farmers."

Jessica Hunter was the first third-generation family member to join the family business after college. After 20 years, she is now CEO of Del Rey Avocado, her family's avocado growing and packing company located in San Diego County. Her daily duties include managing the California avocado procurement team and the operations of both the packing and distribution centers on the West Coast. She also manages more than 100 acres of the company's avocado groves. Jessica serves on the Executive Committee of the California Avocado Commission board of directors and is an active spokesperson for the California avocado industry.

Maureen L. Cottingham is a sixth-generation member of a farming family in Camarillo, California. After almost two decades of working with the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers, a marketing and educational trade organization, Maureen has joined their family business where she is proud to be continuing their family's farming tradition as well as learning the various business and farming aspects of an avocado and citrus operation. Maureen currently is serving as a board member of the California Avocado Commission and member of the California Avocado Commission's marketing committee. Locally,



Maureen L. Cottingham

Maureen serves as board director of the Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business. Maureen and her husband Adam live in Camarillo with their three young children – Quincey (8), Cash (6) and Charlie (20 months).

Catherine Pinkerton Keeling's family has been growing California avocados for more than half a century, but that didn't make her a farmer. After college Catherine (and her

husband Travis) volunteered for the Peace Corps in Costa Rica, helping women become economically independent as part of a rural development program. She later became a licensed clinical social worker in the Midwest. In late 2017 when the devastating Thomas Fire destroyed her parents' home and about 70% of their avocado ranch, Catherine and Travis felt a calling to help her family rebuild their farm. A passionate advocate for California avocados and sustainable agriculture, Catherine served as an alternate on the California Avocado Commission board of directors. In November 2022 she also was elected to the board of directors of the United Water Conservation District.

Rachael Kimball Laenen is the sixth generation of her family to farm in Ventura County and the fourth to grow avocados. Before farming she worked in international motorsport spending six years working for the Mercedes AMG Petronas Formula One Team where she won three World Championships and rose to the rank of Head of Events and Hospitality. Rachael then returned to California to work for her father, growing avocados on 150 acres. Their grove was devastated by the Thomas Fire in 2017 and she has been on a steep learning curve ever since as the ranch recovery operation continues. Rachael is responsible for food safety, workplace safety, employee relations and grant applications as well as being intimately involved in crop nutrition programs, water management and harvest scheduling. Rachael is currently the Vice Chair of the California Avocado Commission board and has been a member of the Hass Avocado Committee, Market-



Catherine Pinkerton Keeling



Rachael Kimball Laenen

ing Committee, Sustainability Taskforce and Succession Taskforce. She is married to Andrew, a British photographer, and they have an infant son Eugene.

Tara Axell Rosenthal is a fifth-generation California farmer and third-generation California avocado grower. She grew up on the Axell family avocado grove but it wasn't until 2020, after her father's passing, that growing avocados became her profession. Her mother, Joanna Axell, is the owner of the family ranch, Rancho Rodoro. In order to help her mom and the avocado groves, Tara, her brother, Brandon and her husband Ryan work together to keep everything running smoothly.



Tara Axell Rosenthal



Hilary Kitzman Wilkie

Hilary Kitzman Wilkie was introduced to growing avocados on her parents' beautiful avocado grove in Morro Bay, California. She received her degree in computer science and then home-schooled four children. In 2016 when Hilary's father decided he was getting ready to retire, Hilary and her husband Andrew, who love the farm and had looked forward to assuming responsibility for it, started learning to grow California avocados. Now they manage day-to-day operations. Hilary is proud that the family avocado farm (Kitzman Fair Haven) utilizes a variety of environmentally responsible practices, including using natural leaf mulch and solar energy.

"The stories of these six women are helping to highlight the roles of women in agriculture," said Benedict. "With more female California avocado growers being available and willing to share, CAC is able to feature their stories on CaliforniaAvocado.com, social media, in marketing materials and retail programs."

The consumer PR program is an ongoing effort that started before the March 8 celebration date and continues during the California avocado season. The team crafts story content about the featured women and pitches the idea to publications that targeted avocado shoppers are likely to read. Including the story idea in these publications would remind consumers of California avocado season timing and help dimensionalize the profiles of California growers.

On the trade PR side, CAC issued a press release on March 6, 2023, noting that the California Avocado Commission, which represents growers farming on about 50,000 acres in the state, is sharing profiles of some female avocado farmers to showcase the role of women in the industry. The release stated that as with all farming, women have long been active in growing California avocados. Many California avocado growers come from multigenerational farming families, and with generational transitions happening, increasingly women are taking on avocado grove management and ag industry leadership roles. It also included an update about California avocado season expectations. Pick up of the press release leading up to and on International Women's Day was very strong, garnering more than 350,000 impressions in the first three days. Articles appeared in *And Now You Know*, *Fresh Fruit Portal*, *Fresh Plaza*, *Perishable News*, *PMG*, *The Packer*, *The Produce News*, *The Produce Reporter* and *The Shelby Report*. 🥑