

Grower Profile



Michelle Voisenat: Passion Grows from Need

By Tim Linden

Michelle Voisenat was a busy and stressed, but happy, corrections officer for the Sheriff's Department of San Luis Obispo County when health problems gripped her mother and stepfather and she had to step in and take over the family's avocado growing operation.

It is a story with sad undertones but seven years later Michelle has emerged as a fulltime and full-fledged avocado grower, driving a tractor, managing 16 acres of avocados and doing a good enough job to bring in sufficient revenue to upgrade the operation and produce very respectable yields. It all points to a very bright future for Creekside Avocados LLC in Morro Bay, CA.

Michelle's parents, Steve and Barbara Erden, purchased the Morro Bay property in the mid-1970s, when Michelle was about 8 years old. She and her two sisters grew up on the ranch. (Mr. Erden was her stepfather but throughout the interview, Michelle referred to him as "Dad".)

"My dad and my uncle put in the avocados sometime in the 1980s," she said, noting that the ranch at one point included 60 acres – three parcels of 20 acres each. Steve Erden and his siblings each owned a parcel and did farm together for a time, though now the groves are managed separately.

"My dad wanted me and my sisters to have different careers, so he didn't share a whole lot about the farming operation," Michelle recalls.

She admits to being a "surf bum" without a clear career path as she exited her teen years. Her extended family owned several small businesses in Morro Bay, including a restaurant and

a gift store. And in fact, Steve and Barbara were in the bail bond business as well as being avocado growers. "I worked in the family businesses. I worked in the restaurant as a hostess, busboy and dishwasher."

It was a connection from her family's bail bond business that led Michelle to take a test to join the correctional staff at the county jail. "I finished #3 out of 180 applications," she recalls. At 21, she was hired and began working in the women's jail. "I stayed there 30 years, and was promoted up to sergeant, which was my position when I retired."

The job had its stress points, but Michelle liked it. She was a correction officer, but she was also part psychologist, drug therapist, teacher and confidant.

In 2014, Steve Erden became ill, went into the hospital and never fully recovered. He died in early 2015 at age 67. Barbara Erden fell ill later that same year and died at age 72 in November of 2015.

When her dad first became ill, Michelle stepped in and helped her mom run the operation. After her mother passed, Michelle and a ranch hand shared the duties. In 2017, Michelle retired from the Sheriff's Office and took over complete management of the ranch. "I had a lot of mentors that helped me out and told me what to do," she said. "The first year, I have to admit, we had a horrible crop."

Michelle and her two co-owner sisters, Melissa Voisenat and Ashley Erden, briefly discussed selling the ranch but instead they decided to devote their time and energy – and all the revenues – into improving the property and upgrading the business. Michelle said it has been an uphill battle. Her

parents didn't share much about the operation nor did they write it down. Michelle has relied on a cadre of local avocado experts to tell her what to do and when to do it.

The property has three wells, but it had no holding tanks. "That's the first thing we had to add," said Michelle. Over the last few years, Creekside has added a couple of holding tanks, a filtration and fertigation system, and automated the irrigation system. "I got tired of turning the system on and off all the time," Michelle said.

She and Ashley live on the property while Melissa, who serves as chief financial officer, lives in Fresno as part of the Fresno County Sheriff Department. Ashley is in college heading toward a master's degree in sociology. She is not actively involved in the operation but may well be in the future as Michelle has designs of turning Ashley's soon-to-be-husband into the farm manager so she can do a little traveling and enjoy retirement.

But that's going to have to wait a bit. Michelle still has work to do on the ranch. A pruning project has been in the works over the last three years with the final six acres pruned about 18 months ago. Michelle began the pruning work herself but found it to be very strenuous and eventually hired workers for that task. She has also hired laborers for some weeding and of course, the crop is harvested by picking crews. But for the most part, Michelle has been working the ranch these past six years.

When she first inherited the ranch, she actively sought others in the industry who could give her advice. Michelle singled out Ken Warren, a local pest advisor and farm manager, as being a game-saver over these last few years. He has been quick to help and offered Michelle great advice on many farming tactics. "In the beginning, Ken asked me 'What do you know about avocados?' I told him I could make great guacamole, and that's about all I know."

Michelle reiterated, "My dad taught us nothing. He was passionate about farming and was a beekeeper, but he did not pass any information on to us. He wanted us to do something else."

Michelle added that San Luis Obispo County UC Farm Advisor Mary Bianchi has been a great help, as has Tim Spann, research project director for the California Avocado Commission for the past decade.

"My sisters and I decided we would put every penny back into the ranch, and that's what we have done," Michelle said. "It's only been the last couple of years that I have taken anything out at all."

She said the most critical need was the addition of the holding tanks as they needed a much easier way to irrigate the groves. Pruning was equally important as the trees had gotten out of control.

As those projects have moved toward completion, Michelle



said Creekside has had a couple of very good years. Last year, the ranch harvested about 185 bins of fruit on what was effectively nine acres of bearing acreage. Michelle revealed that because of the pruning effort and terrible winds, about half the acres did not produce much of a crop.

As she spoke to *From The Grove* in early June, the trio of owners was trying to decide when to pick this year's crop. "The prices have been really good," she said. "We have been keeping the fruit on the trees to let them size, but we are getting close to picking."

She added that her local expert, Job Popoca, has estimated that she has about 80 bins of fruit this year. "He has been very accurate in estimating the last couple of years," she said, adding that she is currently waiting for the rest of the trees to flower to get an idea of what next year's crop will yield.

While the three sisters get together on a regular basis to discuss the upcoming projects and make joint decisions about everything related to the ranch, Michelle said she is given a lot of leeway when it comes to on-farm decisions such as when to harvest.

Michelle said when she can slow down and start turning over some of the day-to-day work to her future brother-in-law, she is going to travel. She loves the ocean and still enjoys surfing and paddleboarding. Michelle has spent time in Baja California and Costa Rica surfing and would like to do a few more of those trips within the next several years. But she has caught the farming bug. "It took me about six months to like the job, but I do love it now. And I love Morro Bay. My house sits on the ranch and I have an open view of Morro Rock and no traffic in front of me. I love it."

She added: "It's been challenging but also very rewarding. 🥑"