

Grower Profile



Back to the Future: Couple Return to Farming Roots

By Tim Linden

Lizzie MacKenzie and Fred Jackson both grew up literally in the shadow of avocado trees. They also were married under one several years ago. And now, after spending the last decade elsewhere, the couple has returned to their roots in North San Diego County and joined the ranks as California avocado growers.

“My parents bought an avocado ranch so they could live in a beautiful place,” said the 30-year-old Lizzie. “We want to do the same thing.”

As an only child, Lizzie grew up in the Vista/Bonsall area on a five-acre avocado ranch. Her parents made their living in the landscape business and treated their avocado parcel as more of a hobby ranch. Over a 20-year period they built their house on the ranch and tended to the avocados, coaxing the operation to pay for itself. For the most part, they have been successful.

Lizzie grew up on the ranch and has very fond memories of running through the groves and playing among the trees. After high school she went to the University of California at Santa Barbara and ended up staying in the area for 10 years. Along the way, she and Fred, a Fallbrook native also with avocado ranching in his family background, married and entered the working world.

In early 2016, they made the decision to move back down to the North County to be closer to family and try to recreate the bucolic environment in which they had grown up. They both have full time jobs, with Lizzie working in San Diego every day as a partner in a software startup called AppFolio, while Fred works at Hobie in their manufacturing facility in Oceanside. All along they have been contemplating entering into the avocado business with groves of their own.

Opportunity knocked when family friend and longtime San Diego County avocado grower Katie Wild started to scale

back her avocado holdings.

Lizzie said a seminal moment occurred in June of 2016. Katie gave the young couple an opportunity to purchase a 6.81-acre parcel. "At the time, we weren't ready. We didn't have all our ducks in a row," Lizzie said.

But the situation presented itself again a couple of months later and in mid-August the deal was completed. To Lizzie it was a huge step. Most of her college friends are still living in apartments in Santa Barbara and she's a landowner with avocado acreage.

But she said, it fits the couple's M.O. "We never follow the grain. We converted a bus into a house when we lived in Santa Barbara. Now it sits in our grove as our world headquarters."

A year later, they have survived their first harvest, have what they believe is an excellent crop on their trees for year two and have immersed themselves in everything avocado. Fred works four 10-hour days and spends every Friday tending to the trees and doing whatever work needs to be done. Lizzie has set out to learn the avocado business in the same fashion that she tackled the software industry. She reads everything she can get her hands on, took a class in avocado farming from extension specialist Gary Bender and is asking questions of anyone who will listen.

"I'm doing everything I can to learn about the industry. Who are the key players? How does it work? I'm trying to get involved in the community."

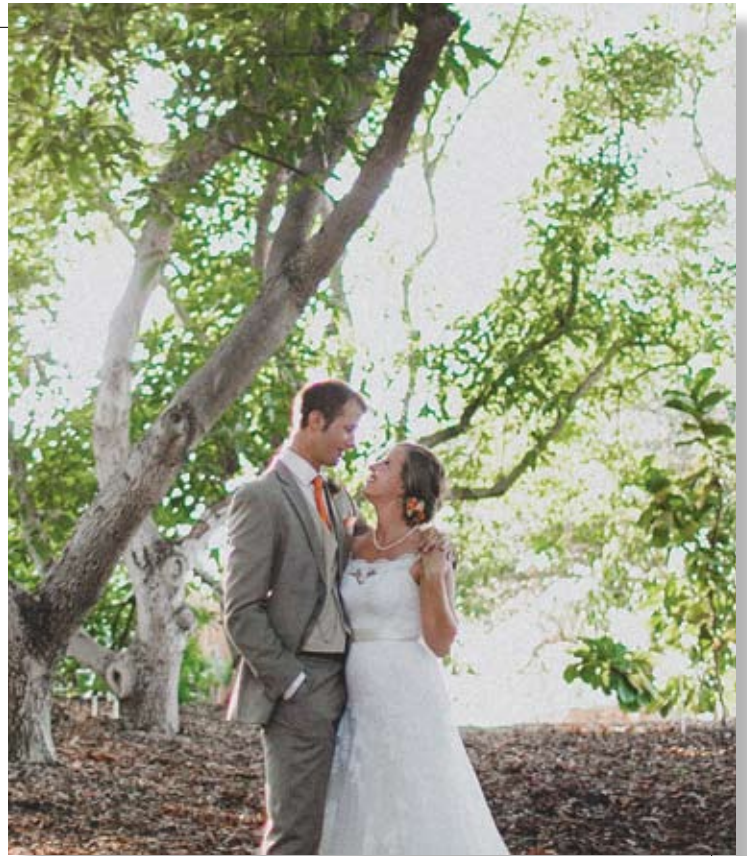
Toward that end she sought out the California Avocado Commission, attended meetings and talked to board members and staff. "What CAC is doing is awesome. I love the new marketing campaign and the effort on Instagram. They are doing a great job. I saw Jan DeLyser at the meeting and just had to go up and introduce myself."

Lizzie said for the most part, fellow growers have been open and more than willing to discuss their efforts and challenges. She said there are some that no doubt look at her as an upstart or one who doesn't quite belong. But those are few and far between and not representative of the industry as a whole.

The Jacksons have named their operation Avohill Farms LLC, and she admits that total tonnage harvested this year was a disappointing 9,000 pounds, after averaging 25,000 to 35,000 pounds most seasons under the previous owner. But this year was a small crop across the board and they were completing the transition to organic production on the acreage.

She's expecting a much better yield for the 2018 season. "I see it on my trees. I only have one year to compare it to but the trees look so full, so saturated."

There is no hesitation at all when Lizzie lists the chief challenge Avohill Farms faces in its quest to be a legitimate and profitable avocado operation. It was also the biggest looming factor on the negative side of the ledger when the Jacksons



decided to take the plunge a year ago. "Water. We know that water is always going to be the biggest challenge. Last year (after we bought) we got one scary water bill and then another that was okay and then the rains came. And we had no bills for quite a while."

The Jacksons do not expect to be that lucky this year. Currently, being millennials and tech-savvy, they are exploring technologies in the irrigation space that can improve their water efficiency and cut their costs in other ways as well. Lizzie said that while they will give organic avocado production a good college try, it will have to make economic sense. "If it doesn't make sense for us, we will take a more common sense approach to farming and sustainability."

She noted that the couple is continuing their day jobs and have low expectations in the short run for the acreage to produce them a living wage. "This is not our full-time occupation, but it is a way that we can live in a beautiful place," she said, adding that the Jacksons are expecting their first child and she loves the idea of watching that child grow up among the avocado trees as she did.

On the other hand Lizzie and Fred Jackson are not adopting the "hobby" concept. They are big admirers of the previous owner, who had about 150 acres of avocado groves at her zenith, and Bob Jackson, Fred's uncle, who also makes his living with groves throughout San Diego. "We are taking it one year at a time, but we called our ranch Avohill Farms for a reason," Lizzie says. "We do plan to have more than one!" 🥑