

# Grower Profile



## Bryce & Elaine Bannatyne Take Circuitous Route to their Newest Passion

By Tim Linden

**V**entura County growers Bryce and Elaine Bannatyne each have a family history with agricultural roots, but their path to the avocado industry was anything but a straight line. In fact, it snaked through California, several art history eras and the education profession.

Nonetheless, under the company name Rancho Resplandor, the duo farm 375 acres in and around Santa Paula with half of that land devoted to avocados and the other half to lemons. And today, the Bannatynes are big promoters of the Gem variety, believing it holds great promise for the industry and can be a sought-after niche variety, much like a top-shelf wine.

But first the history and geography lesson. Elaine's family traces its California and agricultural lineage to the late 1800s when her grandfather Margarito Veyna came to the United States from his native Mexico and went to work for Orange County Nursery in Southern California. In fact, he eventually bought that nursery. Mr. Veyna, his children and grandchildren ran the wholesale nursery for more than a century with avocados and citrus trees being two of their major crops in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The operation eventually resettled in Ventura County and though it remains in the family, it is no longer an operating nursery.

Bryce Bannatyne was born in Napa where his family had two ranches. He explains that was before wine grapes took control of the region. His grandfather grew Bing cherries and melons on the land.

Bryce and Elaine met in college at Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles. Elaine was an art and Spanish major heading toward a career in education, while Bryce was a graduate student studying industrial technology. They married and spent the next three decades pursuing careers in educa-



tion and the art business.

Elaine started as a bilingual teacher but spent most of her career as a resource teacher and as an administrator. She started her educational work life at the Los Angeles Unified School District, spent many years in the public school district in Richmond in the Bay Area and finished her career at the Santa Monica Unified School District. Along the way, she earned a master's degree and a law degree.

Bryce explains that in the early '70s he migrated into the art business, owning a gallery that specialized in historical pieces of artistic value purchased by museums, collectors and businesses. "Over the years we sold art to 30-35 museums all over the world," he said, explaining that they were period pieces from the 19<sup>th</sup> through mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The initial gallery was in San Francisco, which Bryce and Elaine owned with his parents. In the late '80s, they split off from that operation and opened a gallery in Santa Monica.

The Southern California gallery had a little different focus specializing mostly in American and British furniture from late 19<sup>th</sup> century through mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, like Frank Lloyd Wright and Green and Green pieces.

Along the way, they also raised two children, one of whom is in the art industry while the other is in the wine and spirits trade. At this point neither are involved in the family's avocado pursuit, but neither were Elaine and Bryce at a similar time of their lives.

Becoming growers came to them as an offshoot of Elaine's family nursery business. The nursery had relocated to Ventura County, which acquainted them with the area. In 2004, the couple bought a 42-acre ranch in Fillmore that was in a distressed state. They started rehabilitating the ranch and discovered it was a full-time job. That led to the end of their longtime careers and began the transition to full-time fruit growers. Over the next few years, they closed down the art gallery, Elaine retired from teaching, they moved to their ranch in Fillmore and bought six more ranches.

"It was a sharp learning curve," Elaine said. "We didn't know very much about farming. We attended a lot of seminars, talked to other growers and learned by trial and error."

But the original purchase turned into their business model for Rancho Resplendor. "All of the ranches we have purchased have been rehab properties," Bryce said. "We look for properties that have been mistreated or at least not farmed with good farming techniques."

The Bannatynes pay very close attention to cultural practices, making sure they apply the right amount of water and fertilizer. They also pay close attention to research and new practices being studied and adopted. Bryce said they got into farming as a business proposition. They are avid learners and want to be involved, volunteering their time and efforts where needed. Bryce is an alternate on the California Avocado Commission (CAC) Board. He is on CAC's Production and Research Committee and is Chairperson of the California Department of Food and Agriculture Avocado Inspection Committee. Elaine has served on the Hass Avocado Board.

It is this involvement that led to their fascination with the Gem variety. "We first were introduced to it at the World Avocado Congress in Lima, Peru, about four years ago," Bryce said. "There were presentations on two new varieties and Gem was one of them. It attracted my curiosity. I decided if I had a chance, I'd try Gem."

Since then, the Bannatynes have planted about 10 acres of Gem avocados at three different locations. They have used a semi-high-density planting pattern and are very pleased with the results. The plantings were completed in June of 2015. The first fruit for commercial consumption was harvested in 2018 and they are looking forward to this year's crop. They also are anticipating planting five more acres of Gem trees

this year.

Bryce has a checklist of reasons why he likes this variety and thinks it has great promise:

- It produces larger fruit than a Hass.
- It lends itself to high-density plantings because the tree's natural growth pattern takes up less space.
- It also lends itself to hillside plantings because of its cylindrical shape. "It is only eight to 10 feet in diameter," he said.
- The fruit has excellent flavor.

Elaine expounded on the last point. "The fruit tastes very good and has a very good texture," she said. "And the exterior is very protective."

Bryce added that when he shares the variety with friends and family, everyone comments on the taste, without prompting. And, he said, it is the only variety about which people have commented on how good the exterior looks. "It's a handsome piece of fruit," he said.

He added that the Gem variety is already being sold in Europe in relative volume and it is gaining a premium in the marketplace over Hass. As a practical matter, he believes their Gem trees will produce more fruit per acre than the Hass, and he says it's easier to pick as the fruit grows on the interior of the tree. He added that because of the smaller vertical size of the Gem trees, pickers do not need poles to harvest the fruit, which is another big advantage in this era of labor shortages and high workers' comp insurance rates.

The Bannatynes are bullish on the future of the California avocado industry. They are impressed with the members of the industry and their dedication to producing a great piece of fruit. While it has proven to be a tough business, Elaine said, "We have no regrets. We have a tremendous amount of respect for the people in this industry. They are a highly-educated, sophisticated group of people that are very down to earth."

Bryce said the commercial avocado is unique in the fruit business. He noted that many other fruits, such as apples and grapes, have many different varieties and colors, but the avocado stands by itself. It has no substitute nor equal. He added that its nutritional content also allows it to rise above others.

While the pair has left their earlier professions, they still have an affinity for specific periods of art. Their house contains paintings and furniture of the Mexican Colonial period. "My wife really likes Mexican Colonial while I like California history, including when California was part of Mexico," Bryce said.

In fact, their abode at Rancho Resplendor, which translates to radiance or glowing in Spanish, has hosted several art programs because of their fine collection. Elaine said the company name itself ties together many of their interests, including her Mexican roots and their love of the avocado. 🥑