

Grower Profile



Sayer Returns to Ranch After Navy Career

By Tim Linden

Like his father before him, Chris Sayer made his mark in the “outside” world before returning to his geographic and farming roots to take up the family business as a Southern California grower.

“I grew up right where I am sitting now in Saticoy, CA,” he told *From the Grove* during a November interview. “My family has been farming in this area since the late 1880s. I am fifth generation.”

It was his great, great grandfather that started the tradition growing sugar beets, lima beans and walnuts. “He also owned the hardware store in town. His son got the hardware store and his daughter got the farm.”

Petty Ranch, as it is now called, has been in the family ever since. Sayer explains that his mother married into the family after she met the late Don Petty as the single mother of a very young Chris. Chris has adopted the family history as his own. “The farm came to our family through my grandmother,” he said.

While many generations have owned and worked the ranch, they have followed a similar path, which Sayer calls “sequential careers.”

“Dad was in the aerospace industry in the ‘60s before he came back to the farm in the early 1970s, when he was in his thirties,” said Chris, who was only about six at the time.

Sayer grew up in Saticoy, graduating from the local high school and then going off to college at prestigious Northwestern University in the Chicago area. He was a political science major with an international focus, but his first career was predetermined when he joined the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corp (R.O.T.C.) while in college. That secured him a great

education as well a spot in flight training school in Pensacola, FL, and an eight-year commitment in the Navy. Pensacola also is where he met his wife, Melissa.

At the Naval Air Station, Sayer was trained to fly the Lockheed P-3 Orion, which is an anti-submarine and maritime surveillance aircraft. He served in the Navy from 1988 to 1997, with his final tour of duty in Northern California, where he served as a Navy recruiter attempting to convince the professionals the Navy needs (doctors, dentists, lawyers) to join the service. That also led to his first post-service career as an executive recruiter in the technology-heavy world of Silicon Valley. “At the time, Melissa was a corporate lawyer and so we made the decision to have her career dictate where we live,” he said. “It was a case of playing our strongest hand.”

As the new millennium dawned, Melissa and Chris Sayer were working in the tech world in Silicon Valley, had two young sons and, very importantly, owned a house in that fast-appreciating market. “Before the bubble burst (the DotCom bubble), we were talking about relocating to Ventura County and getting back involved in the family farm.”

As the only son in the family, and knowing the career path his father had taken, the idea of running the ranch was always in the back of Sayer’s mind. In 2000, many factors aligned to make it a possibility, not the least of which was the growing equity the couple had in their Bay Area home. “Our two sons were each at the age where they were changing schools, and Dad was turning 65 which meant there was room for me in the operation. We talked about it a lot and finally determined that there were more reasons to leave than to stay.”

The Sayers sold their home in 2001 and used the proceeds

for a down-payment on a 20-acre ranch in Santa Paula. “Interestingly, the sale of our ranch was supposed to close on 9/11 2001,” he said, noting that the tragic events of that day held up the sale for another 10 days. “That date is a huge milestone in our lives.”

Once he settled in the area, Sayer spent the next couple of years being mentored by his father and Carlos Ortega, who served as foreman for Petty Ranch from 1972 until his death in 2018. He called Don Petty “a great dad and a great avocado grower.” Of Ortega, he said the grove manager was a wealth of information “who taught me so much about farming. Those two are with me every day.”

Though the family operation had included an avocado ranch in Carpinteria in the ‘70s and ‘80s, by the time Sayer came back the 52-acre Petty Ranch was almost entirely lemons. “They had two windrows of avocados, covering 1.25 acres, that served as a shelter for the lemons,” he recalls.

But some of those lemon trees were 50 years old and soon needed to be replaced. “We wanted to diversify and hedge our bets,” Sayer said.

Relying on the knowledge garnered from being in the avocado business before, the operators of Petty Ranch decided that the avocado was a good option. “Our first big planting was in 2006. We replaced a lemon block with a block of Hass. Those trees are now 14 years old and in peak production,” he said. “Several years later, we followed the same pattern and replaced another block of lemons with Lamb Hass. I have another 10-acre block that I soon have to make a decision on.”

Sayer said the ranch currently has a 60/40 split with lemons getting the lion’s share. He has been very involved in avocado research, including working with the California Avocado Commission on a four-acre rootstock trial. Both crops have done well for the family farming operation. “This year has been a weird one with avocados faring better than lemons during the pandemic,” he said.

A majority of lemon production is sold through foodservice outlets, so it is understandable that this has been a tough year with that sector suffering from pandemic-related shutdowns and capacity limitations. “This was also the first year our Lamb Hass produced at their full potential. Our Lamb Hass produced 20,000 pounds per acre and so even though prices were down, we did very well.”

Sayer added that he has added density to his Lamb Hass acreage with interplanted young trees, which will eventually mean 200 producing trees per acre. On the density scale, “we fall into the moderate density camp,” he said. “Potentially, we think that acreage can produce above 20,000 pounds per acre.”

Based on those numbers, Sayer appears to be leaning toward increasing his avocado acreage, but he is still working through the decision process. While he was focused on the Saticoy-

located Petty Ranch for this interview, he indicated that he is also making planting decisions for the 20-acre Santa Paula Sayer Ranch. “That ranch is a bit further inland and I am a bit worried about the weather. Twice in the last couple of years, we have experienced 120-degree temperatures.”

He said the young strong trees on that ranch have survived, but it does give him pause. He said the Petty Ranch is closer to the coast and did not register such high temperatures. The Petty Ranch is a very good piece of avocado land as it has ample water from the ranch’s own well. And the soil and microclimate allow the avocados to flourish with less irrigation than most groves need. “We have been able to keep them happy with only 1.25 acre feet per year,” he said.

Surveying his trees in late 2020, Sayer expects a good crop in 2021 though not as heavy as in 2020. He said his Lamb Hass had an on-year this past season while his Hass acreage had an off year. So, in total, he expects a solid year. “I think my Lamb Hass acreage will produce about 10,000 pounds per acre, and if that’s an off year, I’ll take it.”

Last year, on the fifth anniversary of his father’s death and several months after Mr. Ortega passed away, Sayer reflected on his agricultural path in a blog he writes (SaticoyRoots Weblog), further solidifying the decision to return to the ranch almost two decades before. “Today, we completed a major replant in our orchard,” he wrote. “Hundreds of young avocado trees are now rooted to the ground, standing proud in the spots they will occupy for the next three, four, or maybe five decades. It has been an exciting project, a plan that was put in motion 12 years ago as Dad and I tried to make sense of the future ahead of us.”

He continued: “Today that work is finished. And I find myself feeling...what? Somber? Reflective? Aware of my own mortality? Planting an orchard is a time of new beginnings. And yet it can also be an act of finality. I will spend the rest of my career planting trees, and this block of avocados that we completed today will outlive me. It will be part of the legacy that I leave to my family and to this land.”

Sayer’s two sisters are partners in Petty Ranch but Sayer



Chris Sayer



runs the operations with the help of a full-time employee and labor crews when needed for harvesting, planting and pruning. Melissa has her own corporate law practice, and his two sons have careers of their own that they are passionate about. But at 30 and 24, neither have yet reached the age where Chris and his dad chose to come back to the ranch.

Sayer is convinced that if either does choose that path, there will be a vibrant agricultural community to join. He likes to tell the story of his grandfather adding four adjacent acres to the family holdings in the 1950s. "My grandfather did a little horse-trading to get those acres because they had railroad frontage. As anyone would have told you in the mid-1950s, ag was on the way out in this area, but frontage land on the railroad would be very valuable."

The railroad tracks are still there and about once a week, Sayer is reminded of that story as that is how often they are used. "People are always forecasting the end of agriculture in California, but year after year, we continue to thrive. I don't know how, but history suggests that we will continue to muddle through and deal with the many challenges including more competition and regulations."

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