



Tours Serve Slice of Avocado Life To Retail, Foodservice & Media Influencers

By Tim Linden

Connecting with the people who grow their food is an increasingly important part of the purchasing decision for many consumers and has been a key component of the California Avocado Commission's (CAC) marketing strategy for the better part of a decade. One important tactic in pursuing that concept is California avocado grove tours that connect retailers, foodservice operators, media and other influencers with how

the fruit is grown and packed.

This summer CAC hosted four different tours that brought key representatives to the groves where they interacted with growers and gained hands-on knowledge about the California avocado. In early June, a dinner for San Diego-based registered dietitians and food bloggers was held in a Valley Center grove. Later that same month, members of the Ralphs Grocery Company's marketing and advertising team were treated to a tour and other goodies at a Somis, CA

grove. In early August, CAC hosted two of its most ambitious endeavors. First, a media tour for nearly two dozen influencers that included several avocado-centric meals with stops at a packing shed, grove and nursery in Ventura County. Days later, 28 chefs and other personnel from top restaurant chains across the nation attended CAC's foodservice "AvoTour" in San Diego and Orange counties.

Dinner en Green

On June 4, Valley Center, CA, avocado growers Mike Sanders and Chris Ambuul promoted California Avocado Month by hosting a "Dinner en Green" at their Rancho Santo Tomas avocado grove. The growers led San Diego-based bloggers and Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDN) on a tour of the grove. The guests enjoyed a spectacular dinner in the grove created by Chef Trey Foshee of George's at the Cove and Galaxy Taco, located in San Diego County. California avocados were featured in every course.

Katie Ferraro, a registered dietitian (RD), added value to the event by contributing a post on CAC's The Scoop blog, highlighting the care local avocado growers take with the crop and showcasing the fruit's versatility in meal preparation.

Ralphs' Influencers Visit Somis

On June 30, led by Marketing Director Alli Green, six social media influencers working with Ralphs Grocery Company's advertising team toured grower John Grether's grove in Somis. Joining John in discussing the California avocado industry were CAC Board Member Rick Shade and Dana Thomas, president of Index Fresh, a Ralphs' avocado supplier. All three industry representatives, along with CAC staff, presented the Ralphs' group with an overview of avocados from grove to grocer and discussed the importance of "locally grown" to consumers.

The tour group had lunch at Grether's home and participated in a "Guac-Off" in which each attendee created fresh guacamole using the provided ingredients. Each Influencer left the event with a California avo-

cado gift bag as well as a Ralphs gift bag.

Media Tour

From August 5-6, about two dozen bloggers and other consumer influencers, retailers, foodservice operators and trade media toured several different Ventura County sites, and enjoyed a number of meals as they were inundated with the joys of the California avocado.

This first stop on the tour encapsulated the changing world in which we live. Just as an avocado packing shed

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Two bloggers – Katie Quinn and Megan Roosevelt – take a video of avocado picking at Randy Axell’s grove in Ventura County.

– complete with its highly computerized equipment – is much different than the facilities used a generation ago, the media members participating in this tour were only distant cousins of their predecessors from a generation before.

As Mission Produce Vice President Robb Bertels toured the company’s state of the art facility and explained the advanced technology utilized in packing avocados, his audience included millennial bloggers armed with equally technologically-advanced video devices that captured his every word for replay later.

When Bertels discussed the steps involved in packing and, later in the day, Ventura County grower Randy Axell sat on a cart in his grove and talked about avocado farming, the media took it all in with video cameras. Note taking was minimal.

Katherine Quinn, who reports as “The Q Katie” on her YouTube channel, turned the camera on herself and shared what she had seen with her followers using Facebook Live. She also quickly walked through the grove creating what became vlogs (video blog) on her digital platforms.

During that same grove tour, Registered Dietitian Michelle Dudash, a CAC RD Ambassador who entertains her followers on several social media platforms under the title of “Dish with Dudash,” conducted a live Facebook feed from Axell’s packing shed. She used her video device to record Chef Pink preparing an avocado feast for the tour participants. The CAC-sponsored chef created several dishes featuring the star of the day including California avocado gazpacho soup, an avocado-watermelon sashimi and avocado ice cream “cooked” with nitrogen oxide. Axell participated by demonstrating how California avocados are harvested. Dudash’s video was watched live by 1,500 people logged on to Facebook during lunchtime, and of course, many others tuned in later to see the piece and can still see it on both her own and CAC’s Facebook page.

These opportune postings can live on for perpetuity in cyber space, which is one of the reasons that CAC courts social media food and wellness bloggers, editors and writers and invites them to the media tour. This year, the media included several influential registered dietitians, supermarket representatives, photographers, writers and editors who are employed by or contribute to many different digital and print outlets. That list includes *Good Housekeeping*, *Epicurious*, *FoodBeast*, *Food & Wine*, *Men’s Journal*, *The Today Show*, and *Southern California Life*. Christine Tran, who writes Los Angeles Goodie Girl, also participated, as did Megan Roosevelt — whose YouTube channel is called Healthy Grocery Girl.

At the Mission Produce facility in Oxnard, Bertels was able to take the crowd through the facility and explain the various steps the avocado goes through on its journey from field bin to carton. The group learned of the relationship between fruit size and pack count, Mission’s predilection for hydrocooling its fruit, avocado ripening and bagging operations.



An expert at Brokaw Nursery demonstrates to the crowd the painstaking grafting every commercial avocado tree must endure.

A trip to Axell’s Rancho Rodoro 40-acre ranch was next on the agenda. His family first started planting avocados in Ventura about 65 years ago. This year his acreage produced about 450,000 pounds of fruit with an average yield of 14,000 pounds per acre. He told the media reps that 2016 gave a heavy crop and next year he expects a yield of less than half that volume. Axell noted that an average tree has about one million blooms that result in a fruit set of about 250 avocados per tree, indicating just how difficult it is for a bloom to eventually become a piece of fruit.

The group got a hands-on feel for picking avocados as each tour member was allowed to pick and take home some Lamb Hass avocados using clippers or a so-called telescoping “cherry picker” that demonstrated the difficult art of picking.



Joanna and Randy Axell flank CAC's Jan Delyser, who presented the pair with a framed avocado poster for hosting the Media Tour lunch

Nearby Brokaw Nursery was the next stop where CAC Research Director Dr. Tim Spann explained the arduous process of starting with an avocado seed and ending up with a commercial avocado tree after several grafts, time in a dark room and 18 months of growth. That process, he said, is why an avocado tree costs about \$30 wholesale. Spann also noted that there is about a two-year lag time between ordering and delivery of avocado trees. "You need to order now for delivery in 2018," he told the media members.

The group also was shown the art of grafting by one of the Brokaw workers. Kat Sacks, an assistant editor at *Epicurious*, took a stab at grafting and discovered just how difficult it is. The Brokaw staff does that painstaking work on 300,000 avocado trees per year.

The day-and-a-half media tour featured four avocado-infused meals that this group of self-avowed foodies found irresistible. James Beard Award Winner and Hollywood Bowl Chef Suzanne Goin launched the food fest Friday night. Chef Pink served lunch the next day and Chef Ari Taymor of the Alma restaurant in Hollywood capped the gastronomic feast Saturday night. Each of the chefs specifically touted California avocados for both their superior taste and their geography. Chef Pink said the richness of a California avocado cannot be matched by those of other origins and she noted that her commitment to serving only products within close proximity to her Solvang, CA, Bacon & Brine restaurant makes the California avocado a natural ingredient in many of her dishes.

The dinner was preceded by an avocado demonstration with Registered Dietitian Bonnie Taub-Dix who works with CAC as an RD Ambassador. Taub-Dix revealed what she called "exciting news" regarding the USDA announcement that the recommended serving size of an avocado has changed from one-fifth of a piece of fruit to one-third. This is important to the avocado industry because with a larger

serving size now it can be said that one-third of a medium avocado (or 50 g) is a good source of fiber and folate.

On August 7 and 8 CAC's foodservice "AvoTour" took place in the Valley Center, Murrieta and Newport Beach areas. Personnel from restaurant chains across the nation met California avocado growers and toured groves and packing houses. Attendees sampled a wide variety of California avocado dishes designed to showcase the depth and breadth of California avocado menu applications. American celebrity chef Jet Tila (who has appeared on *Chopped*, *Cutthroat Kitchen* and *Iron Chef America*), conducted live demonstrations.

Each of the tours was successful in serving up California avocado facts to an impressive list of retailers, foodservice representatives, digital media people, the trade press, Registered Dietitians and bloggers. This information is sure to find its way to the all-important consumer over the next several years. 🥑



Robb Bertels of Mission Produce gave a tour of the firm's state-of-the-art packing facility.



Chef Pink and partner Courtney Rae served an avocado-infused lunch to the group.