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Baker & Murakami welcomes 'normal and smooth' start to '20 season

By

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September 25, 2020

Noting an early and smooth start-up after favorable growing conditions, Baker & Murakami Produce COO Cameron Skeen said the 2020 onion shipping season has also been greeted with good supplies as well as demand.

The Ontario, OR-based grower-shipper, one of the biggest in the nation, is also seeing good quality in all three colors, he added.

“Our start-up has been very normal and smooth with steady demand and consistent supplies,” Skeen said in mid-September. “We were able to start our season a week earlier this year due to variety selection and some help with Mother Nature.”

The company's five grower-partner entities are multi-generational farms run by lifelong onion growers who work closely with the warehouse and sales teams throughout the year to meet customer needs. The veteran sales group includes Jerry and Steve Baker/ The father/son team formed Baker Packing in Ontario during the late 1990s. That company evolved from the Idaho-E. Oregon onion division of DeBruyn Produce, and Jerry Baker had been with it for nearly 30 years prior to Baker

Packing. Steve, too, had a long career with DeBruyn before the two started their own onion operation.

Working with the Bakers in sales is veteran Trish Lovell, who has 30 years' experience in the industry.

Overseeing the finance department is Grant Kitamura, who had headed Ontario-based Murakami Produce prior to the Baker Packing/Murakami Produce merger in 2017. Kitamura is CEO/Finance of Baker & Murakami, which is one of the Northwest's biggest onion shippers packing out of a state-of-the-art facility.

Skeen said in September all three colors were available since the start in August, and he noted, "Overall volume has been as expected with sizing coming in very heavy to jumbo, a bit smaller than the historical norms. Mediums seem to be a little higher percentage than normal, and jumbo size has been a higher percentage as well. Colossals and supers have been elusive. Overall quality has been good so far, and demand has been steady for us, increasing week over week since we started."

While foodservice overall had slowed as a result of COVID-19, Skeen said, "Foodservice business for us has been very normal and right with past years."

Regarding food safety, Skeen said, "We make sure we have full traceability of all of our onions packed and that food safety standards are being met up the supply chain. We also test all of the onions we pack for pesticide residuals as well as microbial testing to ensure the onions we ship are consumer safe."

A perennial issue, transportation is once again tight, Skeen said. "It's always hard to predict what could happen in the future, but odds are that transportation could be tough throughout the season."

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