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Berry People sees significant jump in supplies

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As Berry People LLC matures in its third year in business, the Hollister, CA-based company is experiencing a significant uptick in its supplies of the four main berry types, with organic production leading the way.

“We have new organic summer raspberry supplies out of Baja this year, and our organic blackberry volumes out of Washington are set to grow substantially,” said Jerald Downs, company president. “Also, we are offering more organic pint blueberries out of Peru and Chile, starting in September and going into April.”

Berry People was formed by Downs and two long-time grower colleagues from Mexico. “The three of us bring together our experience, resources, and relationships to create an intelligently integrated company with a unique combination of grower ownership and retail supply-chain expertise,” he said.

The company was formed in 2017, after the three partners worked together commercially over the previous eight years. Downs said that during those years, the colleagues established a trust that only comes by working through both the good and bad times over the years.

“The company’s supply is comprised equally of fruit from shareholder ranches and from third-party growers, with a decided strategic base in Mexico, where we see the best long-term potential for the volume, quality, and continuity of supplies that our retailers need,” he said.

Organics are central to the company’s product lineup as they represent close to 60 percent of their total offering. The company was started with a full line-up of organic berries for the entire Mexican season out of Central Mexico and Baja (September through June).

“This was sort of the occasion for our launching the company,” Downs said, “with an intent to build around that core business, filling in the product and seasonal gaps over time. Since then, we have steadily built our summer organic berry program out of Coastal California, Baja, and Washington. We also have a budding organic blueberry supply out of Peru.”

In fact, as Downs went through his list of organic berries, each one represented impressive gains in volume over the previous year. The organic blueberry crop is expected to have a sharp peak in early July out of Washington, and then again in September out of Peru. The company’s volumes are up more than three times over last year. Organic blackberries are expected to peak in August and September out of Washington, and will be up at least two times over last year. Organic raspberries out of Baja will have five times the volume of 2019 and are predicted to peak between July and September.

“Our organic strawberry supply will be steady through the summer and fall out of both Watsonville and Santa Maria, with volumes up three-four times over last year,” Downs said. “We will have a slight July-August lull out of Santa Maria, and then come back strong for September-November with all California regions in play until we transition into Central Mexico.”

With those healthy volume increases, the Berry People president predicted, “we should have ad volumes on all four organic berries for most of the summer, perhaps with some hiccups on organic blacks and strawberries for July, organic blues for August, and organic raspberries for September.”

The company’s client list is diverse, including a range of organic clientele, including exclusively organic regional retail and wholesale businesses, as well as national retailers with growing organic footprints. “Some of our higher end regional retailers have made the cross-over on certain berry items, merchandising primarily organic, with conventional as a back-fill or substitute during supply shortages,” he said.

Downs added that by next year Berry People is planning to provide a full range of point-of-sale material to its retail customers. “We are still a young company, having started in 2017, but with a clear vision of our full product and service offering for the future,” he said.

As the company grows it continually adds to its staff and develops its approach to the industry. It recently hired a chief financial officer and further boosted its administrative staff of professionals.

“We are also growing into more segregated duties in our sales department, with dedicated category and account management, as well as more dedicated grower-facing account management,” Downs said. “Our brand promise is to provide a year-round, balanced portfolio of berries and avocados, in brand, and with an organic core business, and conventional fruit as a complement.”

Speaking to the current coronavirus issue that has gripped the nation and the world, Downs said: “Our business has been minimally impacted by the COVID-19 matter to date, with some pricing volatility from mid-March through Mid-April, and some labor and supply chain constraints (less agility, longer-lead times) since then. We’ve also seen a slight impact to organic pricing, with the spread to conventional being less. Things have gradually normalized since mid-May, however.”

He said the company continues to work with industry partners “to mitigate supply-chain constraints with better planning on packaging and sales plans to minimize in-season changes.”

It has also budgeted for possible disruptions in supply, but Downs said, “we expect our volumes to

be substantially up from previous years.”

He also noted that “the impact from COVID-19 on South American (including Peruvian) supply could be material for the September-November window, so we are watching that closely.”

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