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The Produce News Roundtable: CAC women helping to guide the future

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The designation of March as Women's History Month perfectly aligns with the start of this year's California avocado season, which presented the concept to interview the three women that currently sit on the California Avocado Commission.



Jessica Hunter

Jessica Hunter, secretary of CAC, joined the family-owned farming and packing operation — Del Rey Avocado Co. — almost 20 years ago. She has been on the board for five years. Rachael K. Laenen is assistant ranch manager of Santa Paula, CA-based Kimball Ranches - El Hogar, and is the fourth generation of avocado growers in her family. She joined the CAC board in 2020. Daniella Malfitano, host and producer of the Disney California Adventure Food and Wine Festival, has been on the CAC board since 2018.

The Produce News sat down (virtually) with these women to discuss their service to the avocado industry.

What interested you about serving on the California Avocado Commission?

Rachael Laenen: My family has been growing avocados in California for four generations and I really believe our industry is strong and vibrant. I've had a chance to see CAC in action through several market projects and admire its passion and tenacity. I also have great respect for my fellow directors and knew being a part of the commission would be a great chance to learn more about our industry and have input for our future direction.

Jessica Hunter: Former CAC board member Carol Steed was a mentor to me. She made a huge impact on the California avocado marketing campaign. She was the original pioneer of the California Grown campaign and the effort to sticker California avocados with the state's name. She advocated that the consumer really cared where their fruit was grown. I shared that same vision, and when she passed I wanted to fill her seat and continue promoting what she believed in. Being a mom and a full-time business owner did not lend to a lot of extra time, but I felt compelled to volunteer and try to make an impact at CAC.



Daniella Malfitano

When in the room, who are you representing?

Daniella Malfitano: I am representing the farmers and farm families who have grown avocados for generations. I am also representing the consumer to help educate them on the value of this premium California product and the many benefits of buying and enjoying this nutritious fruit!

Hunter: Specifically, I am representing the growers in North San Diego County. I am speaking for the farmer-owner, especially the smaller growers.

Laenen: On the board, I believe my responsibility is to represent the growers in my district and California growers. Beyond that, I represent the next generation of avocado growers and multigenerational farming operations.

What attributes do you bring to the table?

Laenen: I have a background in marketing and activation so am able to understand and appreciate what it takes to create and implement the complex strategy that goes into securing a premium price for California avocados. I also think the fact I'm hands-on with every aspect of our operation ensures I understand the challenges we growers are facing today.

Malfitano: I am a chef of 15 years, and in 2019 I decided to go back to school to study nutrition. I have been in the world of media, TV, and culinary education and content development for the past decade. I have produced and hosted my own PBS cooking and travel series, do radio and TV bits, and have become a host and producer of inspirational stage shows about cooking and healthy eating. I have also created an online cooking show. I bring my awareness of education and entertainment in media and the power of this incredible medium to the table.

Hunter: My background is in a family business. I learned the business from the ground up. My strong suits are that I am caring and compassionate and can relate to people of all backgrounds.

What are the benefits of having a diverse commission, including gender diversity?

Laenen: The strength of any board comes from directors with diverse backgrounds and CAC is no different. The structure of two directors from each district ensures geographic diversity but beyond that, we represent the diversity of our industry — small growers, commercial growers, new farmers, the next generation, conventional, organic etc. Robust discussion among us ensures we hear a wide variety of perspectives before we make our decisions.

Malfitano: Like in any successful industry or organization, gender diversity is paramount to ensuring that everyone has access to a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. Only then, can and will the whole picture be represented appropriately, and only then can a goal be achieved to the best of its ability.



Rachael K. Laenen

Is there a specific advantage to having women on a board like the California Avocado Commission?

Laenen: I don't look around the room and focus on how many women directors there are or offer a "female perspective." There might have been a time when that was more valuable, but we are now seeing the avocado consumer fairly evenly split between men and women. I certainly aspire to being a good listener, working collaboratively and minimizing confrontation, regardless of being a woman, and I think those are worthy aspirations for any serious director on any board.

I have built my career in male-dominated industries — Formula One racing and now in farming. I have never aspired to be the best woman or expected special treatment. I always worked hard, earned respect, and pushed myself to be the very best, regardless of gender. On our ranch, there are no boy jobs or girl jobs. There are just jobs, and we work as a team to get them done.

Hunter: I do not see my gender as an advantage or a disadvantage. I feel my gift is to connect with people on a personal level, but I do not see that as being a gender specific trait. I bring that to the CAC board meetings. I want to get to know other growers and industry members to then know what they might be concerned about and then address that topic in a certain way. I have read a book called *Men Are Like Waffles -- Women Are Like Spaghetti*. I do think that has some validity. It

basically relays that men are more focused on a specific issue at hand while women are more multi-faceted thinkers and take a broader spectrum approach intertwining with an issue, much like spaghetti.

I don't think my gender has ever been an issue in this industry. I am a confident person and I have gone into each new situation eager to learn but very confident in my abilities. I was in the industry for 14 years before I joined the board and I do not believe there were any issues because I am a woman. There were trailblazers before me, like Carol Steed, that might have had a different experience, but mine has always been nothing but positive.

Malfitano: I've noticed that my female perspective comes to the forefront when considering the value of educating the consumer about the nutritional value of this fruit, where specifically it is grown, and who grows it. Bridging the buying gap from farmer to handler to packer to consumer is all about telling the California avocado story from the heart to illustrate in a meaningful way the many lives that are impacted for the better when supporting California avocados.

I have found that women in business tend to give their ideas and support freely and collaboratively to professional conversations and business opportunities perhaps out of practice in all other aspects of a woman's life; it is a learned and engrained behavior. In business this can have many benefits when utilized with appropriate balance, authenticity and self-awareness.

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