David J. Elliot & Son brings 160 years of experience to California pears
David J. Elliot & Son has a long history of working with California pears, especially Bartlett pears, with the Elliot family having farmed pears for six generations.

“We look forward to continued growth in our pear acreage with more Bartletts and varietals coming into conventional and organic production in the coming year,” said Richard Elliot, owner of the Courtland, CA-based company.

Success, he noted, comes from quality and consistency for both shippers and retailers.

The company remains one of the last family-owned-and-operated pear grower-shippers in California.

“The Elliot family only farm and pack what they grow, which allows them to control quality and safety from the orchard to the store shelves,” said Larelle Miller, sales manager for David J. Elliot & Son.

“The Elliot family farms over 1,600 acres of pears, cherries, almonds and kiwi, though the majority of their acreage is pears.”

Having been involved with farming pears in the state for more than 160 years, the Elliot family obviously knows more than most.

“The evolution of California pears started in the late 90s, when most farmers started changing their farming practices for fresh market and not canneries,” Miller explained.

However, since the mid-2000s, the pear category as a whole has been falling behind and Miller believes the industry needs to find a new way to get the next generations to get excited about pears in general.

“Pears are a unique fruit, unlike apples that ripen the same, certain pears ripen different than other pears, and we need to educate the next generation of produce buyers and consumers,” she said.

“When pears don’t ripen properly and they are out there 12 months out of the year, it causes confusion on what a ripe pear should be.”

Historically, California Pears have been marketed as a summer fruit, but that’s no longer the case.

“We now lie somewhere in between the summer fruits and the fall fruits,” Miller said. “California pears have lost some of their relevance within the industry due to a number of factors; imports and Northwest d’Anjous that sit on the shelves for longer than they should. We need to get back to educating the consumer on what a good pear tastes like and that Bartlett pears are a summer fruit.”

At the retail level, she’d like to see bigger displays, signage, sampling, and more education for the
consumers on the different varietals and how they ripen.

Not surprisingly, the company did feel the impact of the pandemic, as it struggled a bit to navigate the COVID-19 effect.

“The 2020 crop overall was down, so navigating was easier,” Miller said. “We struggled with labor and there was uncertainty with the retail demand. Foodservice demand decreased considerably. The added expense for COVID-19 prevention protocols was also felt at the farming/packing level.”

But things are looking better for 2021.

“The overall pear crop looks great and it is definitely a bigger crop than 2020,” Miller said. “We are personally seeing an increase in organic Bartlett tonnage for this year. Another positive for California Pears this year is the reduced volume of imports. With the COVID-19 effect at the ports, a lot of retailers are looking forward to starting with fresh crop California pears and getting away from the logistical nightmares the imports have been causing.”

Bagged produce has been a positive impact on the pear business and an area where David J. Elliot & Son sees the biggest opportunity for growth.

“While bagging is a little more labor intensive at the packing shed, it reduces some labor at retail, and provides an easy and convenient way to shop whether it’s in person or on-line,” Miller said.

*Photo: The Elliot family: Kirstin (Twink) Elliot, Ryan Elliot, Becky Elliot, Richard Elliot, Rachel Elliot and Rich Elliot Jr.*