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**Being a difference-maker, goal of Ocean Mist Farms' CEO
Chris Drew**

By

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Chris Drew, who was named president and CEO of [Ocean Mist Farms](#) in October, joined the company in the early 2000s with high ambitions. His goal wasn't to necessarily reach the corner suite; it was to have an impact.

He achieved that over the years, which no doubt earned him his new position. The 45-year-old still wants to make a difference as he guides Ocean Mist Farms into the future. He doesn't see revolutionary moves on the company's near horizon, but he does expect change as the Ocean Mist team leans into consumption trends and adds new items to its portfolio.

Drew sees the top executive spot as one from which to see the big picture, analyze the data and follow the trends. "We are already very diversified, but there is no doubt the commodity business is difficult. We want to understand and respond to consumer trends and the underlying cause for those trends. At this moment, I can say that we know we need to focus more on value-added products."

Like many in the fresh produce business, Drew knew he wanted to pursue a career in agriculture, but it was not because he grew up in the business. "I grew up in South San Jose. My parents are retired educators," he said.

He was introduced to farming by his paternal grandfather. "He grew corn and soybeans in the Midwest," Drew said. "From the first time I visited that farm, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in agriculture."

The farm is still in the family and is now operated by Drew's father, who didn't follow the ag path. Though he lived his early life in Illinois, Drew's dad spent his youth in California far from the farm. He did go to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo — a well-known agriculture school on the West Coast — but pursued a teaching credential, not an agricultural degree.

Nonetheless, the young Drew was drawn to the industry while living in San Jose. "In those days, San Jose was still an ag mecca."

It was the elder Drew's connection as a high school teacher to families in the ag business that gave Drew his first chance to explore his chosen career. "My dad got me a job at Headstart Nursery, a vegetable transplant operation."

Drew worked with Headstart through his college career — also at Cal Poly where he was a crop science major. Following graduation, he stayed with the company, moving to the Coachella Valley working in the nursery's desert operation. It was there that he became familiar with Ocean Mist Farms, which has its winter production program and a cooling and distribution facility in the Coachella

Valley.

Almost 20 years ago, he joined Sea Mist Farms, a production affiliate of Ocean Mist Farms, as a production assistant. There he learned the business — literally from the ground up. He was schooled in every aspect of growing a crop, including the importance of producing that crop at a very efficient cost. It was mostly a commodity business, and the need to move the crop from field through post-harvest at the lowest cost possible was always front of mind. “If you drive by a few gas stations, you will always see the longest line at the one with the lowest price. That’s an important lesson.”

Drew stayed in production for about a dozen years before moving to the operations side as vice president in 2016. In this position, new lessons needed to be learned. Again, once the system is perfected from a quality standpoint, cost is the factor that gets most of the attention.

Moving the product from the field through the cooler to the customer is often an unsung aspect of the business, but a make or break part. In making the move, Drew needed to learn everything about the operations side, which included scheduling all aspects of the logistics as well as just moving the forklift through the cooler. “Operations is where the forklift tire meets the cooler floor,” Drew quipped.

In working through operations issues, Drew made sure the workers were materially involved. “You can come up with a way to change the forklift route in the cooler, but you have to listen to the team that drives the forklifts if you want it to work. The best ideas come from those who spend eight hours a day doing the job. They know what the impact will be if you change the forklift route.”

Drew said those details are very important and are often the key to making a much more cost-efficient operation. “I am passionate about working with the folks that make it happen. You could say that I am inspired by that collaboration.”

He added that he truly appreciates the operations side: “It is where you really get to understand the business.”

Again, he saw his main goal in that position as making a difference. “How can I help the CFO succeed in cutting costs?” was the question he tried to answer every day.

The operations side is also where execution is paramount. Drew said as CEO his new challenge involves “analyzing, stepping back and looking at the big picture.” He believes this is a particular area of strength for him and melds well with his skill set.

While he wasn’t ready to reveal any news-breaking products for Ocean Mist, he did indicate some directions where the eventual news will be made.

Though artichokes aren’t the company’s biggest volume item, they are at the core of Ocean Mist’s foundation and he expects the firm to find new ways to increase the consumption of this flagship item. “We are the largest producer of fresh artichokes in the United States.”

Drew said consumers are looking for new ways to prepare and eat artichokes, such as grilling them, and Ocean Mist wants to help facilitate those trends. “I expect our value-added footprint will expand,” he said.

Responding to questions about an even bigger picture, Drew said California as a production area does present challenges in the regulatory arena that can make it more difficult to succeed. On the

other hand, the state is unique in that it is situated like none other in which to succeed culturally with its many microclimates and other advantages. “I see California continuing to play a major role in our business. There is no other place where you can grow year-round.”

He is also aware of trends such as local farming in indoor environments. Drew said the rising cost of transportation is making producing crops on the East Coast an intriguing idea. “We need to be creative. We are certainly keeping our eye on the local produce movement.”

Drew is aware that a successful business must adapt. “Adapting to change is how we survive,” he said. For Drew, this daily adaptation is the impact he expects to make to company and industry that he has dedicated his professional life to.

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