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Bernardi optimistic about foodservice tomato sales

By

Tim Linden

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Joe Bernardi is one guy happy to see companies reopening their official work places and employees coming back to the office.

Tomatoes are the bread and butter of [Bernardi & Associates Inc.](#), headquartered in Nogales, AZ, and it is one of the fresh produce commodities that gets hit particularly hard when there is a decline in dining out. “We are still not back up to the pre-Covid volumes,” he said. “Not all the fast casual restaurants have opened again. A lot of them went out of business.”

Bernardi revealed that more tomatoes are used in restaurants than are consumed at home. He said virtually every restaurant serves a slice of tomato on almost every sandwich and burger. “That’s just not the case at home. We do better when people are eating out more often,” he said of tomato movement.

Bernardi said it is the office worker that fills the cafes, sandwich shops and fast casual restaurants during the day. “I’m happy to hear more talk about companies bringing their work force back in person,” he said. “That’s good for us.”

The Bernardi & Associates team has settled into new office and warehouse space in the Rio Rico

district of Nogales, with the same team that has been on board for many, many years.

“We are pretty boring,” said Bernardi. “We just keep doing the same thing year after year.”

That same thing means sourcing tomatoes from many different districts during the year with quality control people on the ground in each district.

“Our core customers have been with us for more than 30 years,” he said. “And every year, we add a few new customers.”

Bernardi said there are still lots of retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operators that appreciate the services that a broker can provide.

“We have Q.C. people on site checking the product every day,” he said. “And the tremendous volume we buy also adds value.”

Speaking to ***The Produce News*** on Jan. 30, Bernardi said the tomato crop has had six to eight weeks of heavy volume, producing great quality fruit that has been on the large end of the size spectrum.

“We believe the size curve will normalize over the next 10 days,” he said.

He said there has been good movement with both round tomatoes and Romas, with plenty of promotional opportunities.

“We should have good volumes from Nogales at least through March barring adverse weather patterns,” he said. “Usually if we get to the first of February without bad weather, we will be in good shape through the rest of the season.”

From the Sinaloa area in Mexico, Bernardi will begin sourcing from Baja California and Florida in April and on to California in early June. There are also many other more regional U.S. deals the company works during the late spring through summer period, such as volume from Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio... many states have tomatoes during the summer months. Bernardi said those deals offer built-in sales opportunities for locally-grown, farm-to-table promotions.

Bernardi marvels at the number of tomato SKUs at the typical supermarket these days, which he said is many more than it was even just 10 or 15 years ago.

The date of the interview with the tomato veteran also coincided with the Kayla Bernardi Bee Positive Foundation’s 8th Annual Bee Positive 5k Fun Run-Walk in Turlock on Jan. 28. Bernardi’s youngest child succumbed to leukemia in 2015, and the family has kept her spirit and positive message alive ever since with this annual event.

“We really had an absolutely glorious day this year,” Bernardi said. “The weather was great and we had the most signups we have ever had with over 800 people participating all over the country. We even had one runner in Barcelona. We had 500 people show up on site in Turlock. We haven’t finished totaling up everything but it’s going to be the most money we’ve ever raised for our charities.”

Bernardi said produce people throughout the country supported the event, which he said was partly

related to some stories about it that have appeared in ***The Produce News***. “We really thank you guys for all your support,” he said.

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects

of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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