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Southern Innovations drops the checkered flag

By

Gordon M. Hochberg

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CHARLOTTE, NC — A huge number of people from all over the country came here in mid-September to participate in Southern Innovations 2023, the [Southeast Produce Council](#)'s annual trade show and conference that focuses on the latest innovations in the fresh produce industry.

This year's event was held Sept. 14-16 in a new location, Charlotte, NC, known as the Queen City. And according to SEPC executives, exhibitors and attendees alike, the new venue was extremely popular and well received.



The SEPC

executive board's Kristin Yerecic Scott, Mike Roberts, Tim Grass, Sloan Lott and David Sherrod open Southern Innovations.

On Thursday, Sept. 14, at Southern Roots, the council's leadership program for women in produce, attendees heard from Shannon Spake, a veteran sports broadcaster for FOX Sports. In the evening, everyone gathered to enjoy the Welcome Reception.

On Friday, during the educational session, attendees had the opportunity to hear from Anne-Marie Roerink, president of 210 Analytics LLC, who revealed the results of a study commissioned by the Southeast Produce Council. The session was set up to allow discussions among small groups of

attendees as Roerink detailed each part of the study.

Next up was the general session and keynote luncheon, where officers on the SEPC board of directors gave updates on different aspects of the council's activities. The Fresh Chef Scholarship recipients were recognized, as were the members of the STEP-UPP graduating class.

Unfortunately, keynote speaker Darrell Waltrip, a member of the NASCAR Hall of Fame, was unable to attend. He was scheduled to fly to Southern Innovations from Nantucket, MA, but a combination of Hurricane Lee and his plane's mechanical issues made that impossible.

But as David Sherrod, the council's president and CEO, said near the close of the event, "We're produce people, and we learn how to pivot." So Kristin Yerecic Scott, one of the officers on the board, and Shannon Spake came on stage, where Yerecic Scott interviewed Spake about her broadcasting career in sports.

"They just ran with it and did a great job," said Sherrod.



The winning team in the Founders Memorial Golf Tournament consisted of Bill Pollard (second from left) of Dollar General, along with Chandler Grimes, Dug Schwalls and Zac Goodno of Southern Valley Fruit & Vegetable Inc.

The trade show, which included the council's interactive Silent Theater, was held in the afternoon.

At the Chairman's Dinner Dance that evening, Tim Graas of Associated Wholesale Grocers and outgoing chairman of the board of directors, handed the gavel to incoming Chairman Mike Roberts of Harps Food Stores, who was joined by Kristin Yerecic Scott of Yerecic Label as vice chairman, Sloan Lott of Bland Farms as secretary, and Gary Baker of Merchants Distributors LLC as treasurer.

On Saturday, attendees could choose to participate in either the Founders Memorial Golf Tournament, the Martin Eubanks Sporting Clays Classic or the local tour. The winning team in the golf tournament consisted of Chandler Grimes, Dug Schwalls and Zac Goodno of Southern Valley Fruit & Vegetable Inc., and Bill Pollard of Dollar General.

The Ultimate Tailgate Experience was held in the afternoon and evening, as always. During this closing event, Sherrod offered his initial thoughts on Southern Innovations.

"Over all, the show exceeded our expectations with so many highlights," he said. "The responses that we've gotten from the attendees were very positive. They felt like the show was growing, and each and every year we're making strides to bring more and more retail buyers and more foodservice buyers to the show. And I think it's showing."

He continued, "People are seeing the results of our hard work of our Attendance Committee to get all these buyers here. And I think that at this point they're seeing that this is not just a small venue anymore, it's almost like a mini-Southern Exposure at this point. It grew up and got its own identity: to showcase new innovations and technology. It's something our industry is really needing. I hear from so many exhibitors and others who walked the floor that they were able to see new items; and coming into the new year, it's a great time to introduce them to new technologies that are out there."

Sherrod added, "We're coming off back-to-back retailers" serving as chairman of the board. "The SEPC has always wanted retailer input and foodservice input to tell us what they want, instead of us building something that we think they want. So we're building our programs around what the retailer needs and what the foodservice buyer needs. I believe that to be the secret to our success."

Roberts was looking ahead to the next 12 months with excitement as he takes the helm as chairman of the board.

"I feel very blessed to be the chairman of such a great organization, one I care very, very deeply about," he stated. "Being on the board for seven to eight years and part of the council for 12-plus years — I'm very humbled and looking forward to this next year, looking forward to our platform of 'the unseen heroes' and looking forward to all the great things that the Southeast Produce Council does in between shows. We're much more than just two shows a year."

Referring specifically to Southern Innovations, Roberts stated, "It is really great to see all of our sponsors, all of our attendees, to watch everybody reconnect and network. Just another great show over all."

He is looking forward to working with the rest of the Executive Committee during the next 12 months, "as well as with the SEPC staff, and of course David Sherrod, who guides us all."

The Produce News spoke to some of the exhibitors, who shared their thoughts while the expo was still going on.

Charlie Eagle of Southern Specialties said, "We always enjoy exhibiting at Southeast Produce Council shows, and we're proud to be a longstanding member of the organization. This year as in other years, we get the opportunity to socialize with, spend time with, those people we've been doing business with, and also find opportunities to develop new relationships."

He added, "Our booth has been well attended, and we've had an opportunity to show our entire lineup. We like to bring different members of our staff to become exposed to trade shows and to meet some of their customers — and we've had a great opportunity to do that."

Falon Brawley of Onions 52 said, "The show's going great; the traffic has been wonderful, we're in a wonderful spot here. We love the SEPC shows, they're always very interactive and educational, and you get a lot of takeaways. One of the reasons why we love this show, for Southern Innovations we get to showcase some products that we worked all year to create as far as our marketing and branding."

She added, "One of things that I love about Southern Innovations is, we get to see customers and new faces, and just connect with a lot of people that we don't usually get to see on a day-to-day basis."

Tim Harrington of Stemilt Growers said, "It's been a great show, a great mix of folks from all parts of the country. We had a terrific time last night [at the Opening Reception] and had some great meetings this morning. It's been fast and furious from the start of the show at 1 o'clock and continues to be busy right through now."

He continued, "It's a large enough show to see a lot of really, really great retailers and suppliers alike, and it allows you enough time to have a nice conversation to show your new offerings and what the crop is unfolding like this year. It's a great time to let them know your story and what to expect for the upcoming season."

Asked about the new location, he replied, "It's a great venue, close to airport, easy in and out. The convention center is very clean and modern, easy to get product in and out."

Jesse Capote of J&C Tropicals was "loving the show," adding, "It's intimate, it's personal. The quality of the people is fantastic, but more importantly, it's full of old relationships, a great chance to catch up, show off what's new. So far it's been great. I thought the Opening Reception was well attended, the lunch today was great, and the show in general has been very good."

He continued, "What I like most [about Southern Innovations] is it forces us to pivot and focus on innovation and what we are doing new. A lot of times, if it's just a trade show, you just show up with what you're doing on a regular day-to-day basis. So it's not really pushing you to think out of the box."

Noting that he will be at Southern Exposure in March, Capote stated, "Candidly, and not just because you're interviewing me, I believe that this is the best organization in produce right now. We're biased, we're from the Southeast, but the relationships that we built here over the last 20 years are very

deep, and I feel like the retailers get that, and they really enjoy coming here. So I think it's hands-down the best show in the industry right now."

Maclaren Oglesby of Sbrocco International stated, "We've had unbelievable traffic both at the booth and at all the events. We've been able to really discuss with prospective and current customers some of the innovations that they've seen — some things that they like, some that they're curious about. That helps us to make good decisions for the future."

He continued, "This has just been a really good and relaxed environment that is approachable and personable and personal. You're really able to make meaningful connections here."

Asked about the new venue, he stated, "I've had a lot of feedback from all of our partners that are here. The city is clean, it's accessible, it's easy to get in and out. Everything's here in one spot. It's been really well received."

Talking about the council itself, Oglesby stated, "SEPC does a tremendous job. David and his team are top-notch. Every time we come, we have record-setting attendance, but we have continued success [regarding] how personal and how close it is. That's because the team and group are really focused on making this trade show what it is about, and that is the people who are here. So we're thankful to be a part of this, thankful to have the opportunity to see our friends in person, and really grateful that the SEPC stays focused on what makes its edges so sharp."

Cal Parker of L&M Cos. said, "It's been a really good show for us. We've seen some folks that we don't normally get to catch up with." He was seeing "a lot of retail and foodservice partners that are a valuable part of our business." He noted the "intimate setting" of Southern Innovations and said, "You get a lot more one-on-one time, you don't feel like you're in such a hurry."

He added, "I'll be at the Chairman's Dinner Dance tonight, and I'm looking forward to the golf tournament tomorrow. And I think the tailgate event is one of the coolest things at any show in the country. You know the South, we love college football, and to get together in a room full of people pulling for [so many] different schools is just a lot of fun."

The council's next major event is Southern Exposure, and as Sherrod noted, "Now we're looking forward to seeing everybody in Tampa in March. I think it's going to be bigger and better than we've ever seen before. We've already opened registration, and we've seen a big response."

The council's marketing plan declares, "Together, We Grow Higher," Sherrod point out, "and we keep that in mind on everything we do. Everybody's going to be coming together at SE. We want each generation to know that the SEPC is here to support the produce industry."

[Gordon Hochberg](#)

About Gordon M. Hochberg |

Gordon M. Hochberg was born in New York City, and grew up in Westchester County, NY. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in history from Lafayette College in 1973.

He started his career at The Produce News in the late 1970s, and has been with the publication ever since.

He served on the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Agricultural Society from 2012 to 2018. He currently serves on the Southeast Produce Council's Board of Governors.

He enjoys music, theater and reading (American and ancient history are his favorites). And he's been a lifelong fan of the New York Yankees since attending his first game in the late 1950s. He and his wife, Kathi, have been married since 1974.

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