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**Same outstanding team maintains momentum at Baker & Murakami**

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By

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Since its inaugural shipping season in 2017, [Baker & Murakami Produce Co.](#) has been one of the Northwest's largest turnkey onion operations, bringing decades of experience to operations and sales as well as advanced line technology to the 20,000-square foot finished product/shipping structure.

Add to the equation lifelong farmers who select the seed, plant the onions, maintain the fields during growing season, harvest and store the onions before taking them to the shed, and the upshot is assurance of consistent supplies and excellent quality in famed Spanish Sweets from the Treasure Valley.

It's worked well for six years, and going into the seventh season, Baker & Murakami CEO/Sales Steve Baker said there have been no major changes in the past year to the operation, with the "same outstanding team members" returning.

The team includes Steve, his father Jerry and Trish Lovell in sales. Grant Kitamura is chief financial officer; Brian Forsythe is plant manager; and Jessica Hernandez is transportation manager.

"The only changes are some shuffling of responsibilities among key employees. These small changes will help with efficiency," Baker said.

Last year the company saw three long-tenured team members retire: Laura Hiramatsu in HR/food safety departed after 34 years; Tonia Erskine, transportation, had been with the company 43 years; and Jerry Mackey, plant manager/facility operations had logged 40 years.

Longevity, experience and efficiency are hallmarks of Baker & Murakami Produce Co., which itself came from the merger of Baker Packing Co. and Murakami Produce. Prior to joining forces, combining volume and packing from a single shed, the two companies each shipped from their individual and centrally located packingsheds in Ontario, OR. Each was already a major player in the Idaho-E. Oregon onion industry, and they had been friendly competitors for decades.

The merger, a year in the works before the first shipments left the shed in 2017, resulted in a driving force in the Northwest, and the Bakers and Kitamura were managing partners.

In addition to having established themselves as big-volume shippers over the years, each of the parent companies also brought a high level of respect to the table. Murakami Produce was started in 1969 by the late Sig Murakami as the packing and shipping division of Murakami Farms. Kitamura joined the company in 1980, three years before Murakami Farms ceased operations. Later, as a packer/shipper, Murakami Produce entered a joint venture with Idaho Falls, ID-based Potandon

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Produce for sales.

Several years ago a number of growers in the Treasure Valley area formed Murakami Growers and became part owners of Murakami Produce.

Baker Packing began as a division for Zeeland, MI-based DeBruyn Produce in 1972, 38 years after DeBruyn started marketing onions. The Ontario branch was headed by Jerry Baker and operated out of a 7,200-square foot warehouse — the same land that is now home to Baker & Murakami. Steve joined his father in the business in 1984, and the company became Baker Packing in 1997.

Also bringing experience and a long history in the onion industry to Baker & Murakami Produce is Sales/Procurement Coordinator Trish Lovell. Lovell has well over 30 years in onions and other crops.

Her career in onions began in 1986 when she joined Jerry and Steve Baker in Ontario, OR, at what was still DeBruyn Produce. Over the course of her career she has worked with a variety of produce operations. When she “came home” to the Treasure Valley in 2020, she said, “I was mentored by the best, and now I’m back with the best.”

To ensure quality and consistency in product, the operation’s grower-partner group is made up of individual entities that are multi-generational Treasure Valley farms and longtime farmers. These growers have mastered the art of planting, growing and harvesting the unique Spanish Sweet storage onion, which are expertly packed and shipped from the Ontario, OR, facility.

Working together in different aspects of the business, the Baker & Murakami team maintains 21st-century momentum while retaining well-established practices.

At the outset of the merger, the new shed was very efficient with its automation and high-tech grading, and all Baker & Murakami onions have been packed there since 2017. The technology that first year was put to use in a line that could grade and pack in eight hours the same volume that both the old Baker shed and Murakami shed combined did in eight hours.

Baker said in the past year several new tech upgrades have been made to the shed, including expansion of the consumer line.

“We added a new Volm 12-scale weigher,” he said. “We also put in a new Volm Clipper to increase production on three-pound bags. And we were able to make some significant adjustments — with the help of Ellips — our internal camera capabilities.”

Other shed upgrades were also made, Baker said. “We also made some adjustments with our Modesta extraction systems. These changes with extraction will increase our cleanliness throughout the packing shed.”

Noting that the 2022-23 season was less than ideal, Baker said, “It was a very challenging year for the growers and sheds. Even though the prices were higher on jumbo sizes and larger onions than previous years, the decreased yields and sizing still affected profits.”

He went on to say that certain sales programs were affected.

“In my opinion the most impactful event in 2022 came from the challenges brought by the planting/growing season. Because of the uncertainty with higher grower input costs and potentially

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lower yields, it made it extremely difficult to go out and lock in programs and pre-season contracts with buyers.”

The melded resiliency of the merged companies prevailed, and Baker was optimistic about the 2023-24 season. In July 2023 he was looking ahead to harvest, storage and getting onions to buyers.

He was also pragmatically looking at ongoing issues, two in particular that the industry faces year after year.

As the 2023 Farm Bill and other legislation continued to get attention from various industry individuals and associations during the summer months, Baker said Baker & Murakami’s focus on efficiency will increase to offset labor shortages.

“Labor will continue to be a hurdle we will have to overcome in the 2023-24 shipping season,” he said. “Finding the right people will always be a key factor having an efficient company. This is why we continue to look at new ways we can incorporate automation in the packingshed.”

The second perennial issue is transportation, with availability tight at times and trucking rates on an upward trajectory over the past few years.

Baker and other shippers said availability during the 2022-23 shipping season was better than the previous year, and he added, “We hope that availability will continue to be adequate for our needs in 2023-24 as it was for 2022-23,” he said.

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## About Kathleen Thomas Gaspar |

Kathleen is a Colorado native and has been writing about produce for more than three decades and has been a professional journalist for more than four decades. Over the years she's covered a cornucopia of crops grown both in the United States and abroad, and she's visited dozens of states – traveling by car from her home base in Colorado to the Northwest and Southeast, as far as Vancouver, BC, and Homestead, FL. Now semi-retired, Kathleen continues to write about produce and is also penning an ongoing series of fiction novels. She's a wife, mother of two grown sons and grandmother of six, and she and her fly fisherman husband Abe reside in the Banana Belt town of Cañon City.

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