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Frank Donio stays true to form with its blueberries

By

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Getting involved in the family blueberry business at [Frank Donio Inc.](#) had an inauspicious start for Annie Pape, a member of the company's sales and marketing department and pretty much jack of all trades around the office. Fortunately, things worked out very quickly.

“One of my earliest memories is posing for a photo for an article about blueberries when I was around 3 years old,” said Pape, a fourth-generation operator at the 91-year-old company. “I famously said I didn't like them then, which as you can imagine got some laughs and head shakes from my family, but I love them now. There's nothing like fresh Jersey blueberries picked that day”

Now in her 11th year of working full-time for the company, Pape is not the only one who feels that way about Donio blueberries. The Hammonton, NJ-based operation has developed a long and well-earned reputation for its blueberries that has gained the respect of its customers, near and far.

“What sets us apart is our deep-rooted history and commitment to quality,” said Pape, who noted that she was the first of the fourth generation of the family to get involved in the business. “We've been part of the New Jersey agricultural community for generations, and our name is synonymous with trusted, high-quality produce. We are proud to showcase our local roots since we represent one of the largest volumes of blueberries in the state and we're able to provide the best Jersey Fresh blueberries.”

She noted that the current blueberry season is shaping up well and company officials expect to have strong, promotable volumes throughout June and July. “Our new varieties are also coming into their own and, barring any major weather events, everything points to a successful season,” Pape added.

She added that berries, in general, are one of the top movers in the produce section and blueberries definitely follow suit. “This season, we are seeing a slightly early start due to some early heat, which means we will have promotable volumes all the way into July, perfect for the Fourth of July celebrations,” Pape noted. “We are heavily focusing on organic blueberries, having tripled our organic volume over the last seasons to keep up with customer

demand.”

She added that the dominant variety in New Jersey is Duke, followed by Blue Crop. However, she added that Donio also has and continues to invest in new varieties like Top Shelf, Calypso and Drapers. “These new varieties are maturing nicely, and we expect larger volumes from these varieties this season and beyond,” she said.

Donio’s history intertwines closely with the blueberry industry. The company was formed in the early 1900s with its founder, Frank Donio, who was an entrepreneur at heart, began by delivering fresh produce to urban markets from a single, unrefrigerated truck. Pape said that over time, he built strong relationships based on trust and respect, and the business grew steadily.

“Blueberries naturally became a part of our offerings due to our location in Hammonton, — the blueberry capital of the world,” she added. “Blueberries were first cultivated in New Jersey right around the time that my great grandfather started this business, so we have always been right in the thick of the blueberry industry since its inception. The company has remained in my family for four generations, with each generation building on Frank Donio’s legacy of hard work and innovation.

With a rich history, everyone is planning ahead. Pape says that Donio officials are excited about the growth potential in the organic segment and the introduction of new blueberry varieties. They are investing in sustainable farming practices and advanced agricultural technologies to enhance the yield and quality.

“Of course, we face challenges like any other business — from unpredictable weather patterns, rising input costs and market fluctuations,” she said. “We have taken a very scientific and data-based approach to our farming in the past years when it comes to inputs, soil health, and more to really dial in what’s best for our fields and our plants. We try to be very purposeful with our time and supplies and really make sure that what we’re doing is achieving the outcomes we’re looking for. Our strong foundation, innovative spirit, and commitment to quality keep us lined up for continued growth.

Photo: Annie Pape with her mom, Judy Pape.

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