

Oké USA president Nicole Vitello expects the company's first fair trade, organic avocados to hit U.S. shores next week, sourced from grower co-operative Pragor in Michoacán.

The move expands on the Equal Exchange subsidiary's existing import business for fair trade bananas from Ecuador and Peru.

"You're seeing avocados everywhere, and now that they have become more ubiquitous it's easier to differentiate with fair trade - you're seeing more options," she told www.freshfruitportal.com.



Photo: Jessica Jones-Hughes

"It used to be just conventional but now you're seeing organic; it used to be just one size but now you can get five in a bag; there are just more opportunities out there to tell a story about avocados.

"Maybe now is a good time to say to the American consumer, 'you're willing to pay US\$1-1.50 for an avocado - how about paying a little bit more but knowing that money is going back to the people who are actually growing these.'"

She said the season was a little bit earlier for Pragor's growers who would hopefully be supplying the company through to March.

"They will go through our normal channels and distributors who sell to co-ops and natural food stores. We're mainly shooting for the same target audience as our bananas, and it's another way to make a connection with small farmers engaged in fair trade with products that aren't available domestically," she said, adding that Oké USA would avoid clashing with local supply.

Heading south



Photo: Jessica Jones-Hughes

She said the company was recommended to work with Pragor by Canada-based Discovery Organics, and the first talks with growers took place in October last year.

"We started talking to them last year. They had product to sell and wanted us to buy it, but I said, 'look, I know this seems like the best idea right now, but I think it's better to wait and do a full season program, get to know each other'.

Vitello visited the co-operative in June with her colleague Jessica Jones-Hughes, in order to get a better understanding of its operations and growers, as well as the challenges they faced.

She said the transition from accumulating fair trade premiums to developing a strong co-operative structure took time, which was why long-term relationships were so important. Co-operatives like Oké's Ecuadorian partner El Guabo use the premiums to build health care clinics and schools.

While fair trade importers do not have a say in where these premiums go, Vitello expected avocado sales would likely go toward retirement and social security programs for Pragor members, as well as farm improvement. She highlighted the company had certifications from Fair Trade (FLO) International and ICEA.

✘ She added drug trafficking continued to be a big challenge for growers in Michoacán.

"So it's very insecure in the region, particularly further in the south where there's more land and less city, less population. Some of the producer groups are actually located in that area and it's very difficult for them to even sometimes move around to get product to a packing area.

"Luckily where Pragor is based in Uruapan, security isn't as much of an issue, even though in all of Michoacán it might be. It's actually really important for people to have an alternative to the drug trade because it's basically pilfering a lot of people off of farms.

She said the co-op comprised around 20 growers who shipped their produce to market from a packing shed in Tingüindín.

"They farm generally around 10-20 hectares at the most and most of the avocado trees are well established. The oldest trees might be 60 years old. They're mostly the Hass variety, but some of them are grafted onto other rootstocks that are hardier in the region."

Oké USA will be distributing materials to give retailers and consumers background about its growers.

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