

Bill Smittcamp: Fresno Food Expo: a regional catalyst for economic growth

By Bill
Smittcamp

Looking back to March 11, 2011, 65 food and beverage companies and 200 buyers participated in the first Fresno Food Expo. That day, something truly special happened in our city that would serve as a catalyst for economic growth in the San Joaquin Valley the years to follow.

Now, four years later, as we approach the fifth annual Fresno Food Expo that will welcome 130 Valley-based food and beverage companies and more than 750 pre-qualified regional, national and international buyers, we reflect on the tangible impact that the Fresno Food Expo has had on our food production industry and our region.

The Expo has served as a launch pad for innovators like Deb's Gourmet with its sweet, smoky flavored jalapenos that debuted at the 2011 Expo and is now in approximately 400 retail stores in six states and, as of September, has expanded into 40 Save Mart stores.

More than just a food show, the Expo is a liaison, creating key industry connections that has led to opportunities for businesses of all sizes as was the case with Brazilian cheese bread maker P*de*Q. In 2013, Costco approached P*de*Q after connecting at the Expo to bring their product in-store but, because of the start-up company's facility size, they could not meet the demand. However, P*de*Q formed a co-packing relationship with our company, Wawona Frozen Foods, as a result from meeting at the Expo that enabled P*de*Q to not only meet the production demands of Costco, which now has their product in 23 warehouses in Northern California, but also led to the creation of a new joint product.

At the 2013 Expo, Bella Viva Orchards based in Denair in Stanislaus County met eight new buyers from Asia, which helped significantly increase existing exports of their naturally dried fruit there. Then last year, La Tapatia met with six distributors from China, three of which were interested in private labeling. Private labeling is a big business growth opportunity for La Tapatia, especially in the China market where their product is heavily distributed already.

Each of these recorded "wins" is not just a company win; but a bigger win for the Valley. The Fresno Food Expo has banded together an expansive industry — fresh produce, processors, manufacturers, beverage and industry service providers — to create a unified effort and a unified voice to increase awareness of what exactly we produce here in the San Joaquin Valley, its quality and diversity, and the value of that to the world.

The New Product Awards, first added in 2012, receives 40 plus new products or packaging entries annually — further demonstrating the breadth of innovative, quality products found here.

Since our first Expo, there has been a 250% growth in total number of buyers. The Expo has drawn national and international attention within the food buying industry, which is evident in the continued increase of qualified buyers across varying categories with high purchasing power who now attend each year. Since 2012, we have up to 25 international buyers attend each year through a partnership with the Centers for International Trade Development. This year's buyers from Southeast Asia, South America and Mexico will be attending in search of grapes, peaches, plums, nectarines, kiwi, berries and citrus, in addition to garlic, nuts and other shelf-stable products.

Another key facet to the Fresno Food Expo is the public event, which is something not seen at other food shows. The public event creates a sense of pride within the community, as well as helps build a heightened awareness among the local consumer base, creating a deeper level of brand recognition, driving consumers to seek out local product on grocery store shelves and restaurant menus. We encourage the public to discover our thriving food industry and

support Valley businesses at this year's Expo on July 23 at the Fresno Convention Center New Exhibit Hall.

New, innovative businesses have emerged. New industry collaborations have been formed. New buyer connections have been made. A new, heightened awareness of our vibrant food production industry has been realized — both among industry buyers and our own community. And in turn, there is new economic growth for the San Joaquin Valley's food production industry that continues to develop.

Don't miss the opportunity to take part in this year's Fresno Food Expo — it is just one part of the catalyst for change and economic growth in the San Joaquin Valley, but it is a significant part that has had a big impact on Valley businesses. If you are a San Joaquin Valley food or beverage producer interested in exhibiting at the Expo, reach out to us at info@fresnofoodexpo.com.

Bill Smittcamp is president of Wawona Frozen Foods, Fresno Food Expo Advisory Committee member and founding exhibitor.

Fresno Food Expo Public Tasting

Date: July 23

Time: 5-8 p.m.

Place: Fresno Convention and Entertainment Center.

Tickets: \$42.90 online at www.fresnofoodexpo.com or, while supplies last, for \$30 cash only at Cumulus Media, 1071 W. Shaw Ave. Office hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.