

# Deeply Rooted

With expansive growing capacity and high-tech food safety programs, Church Brothers Produce stakes its claim as a progressive fresh produce supplier. **By Brooke Infusino**



>> Church Brothers Produce grows, packs and ships fresh, in-season produce from California and Arizona. The company has approximately 18,000 crop acres in production.

**P**ossibly the most interesting aspect about Church Brothers Produce LLC is the high-quality, fresh produce it offers, and the organizational structure that dictates the company's success in the marketplace. Today's company represents a vertically integrated operation where customers can not only purchase commodity produce items, but also pre-cut and packaged produce, Vice President of Operations Steve Church explains.

## company profile

### Church Brothers Produce & True Leaf Farms

[www.churchbrothers.com](http://www.churchbrothers.com)

2009 revenues: \$180 million

Headquarters: Salinas, Calif.

Employees: 550

Specialty: Produce

Steve Church, VP of Operations:

"The Leaf Greens Marketing Agreement is going to be the model for what growers are going to use moving forward."

"We like to say that we are one-stop shopping here where [customers] can pick up their commodities and processed items," Church says.

Church Brothers supplies a wide variety of fresh vegetables to processors, foodservice customers, retail customers and the international marketplace. Products include varieties of lettuce, romaine, green leaf, cauliflower, celery, broccoli, spring mix,

spinach and cabbage. Church Brothers is also a partner with True Leaf Farms, a processing entity producing a variety of spring mixes, spinaches and whole leaf singles of romaine, green leaf, red leaf lettuce as well as fresh cut items. True Leaf processes 100 SKUs on a daily basis.

Brothers Tom and Steve Church launched a growing, sales and marketing operation under Church Brothers Produce in 1999.

Eventually, Tom and Steve made a connection with Neil Milburn, who launched True Leaf Farms in 2001. In 2004, Church Brothers became the exclusive sales agent for True Leaf, and today, Milburn, Tom and Steve Church, Jeff and Brian Church, Vince Ballesteros, Jay Brown,



>> During harvesting season, Church Brothers employs about 20, 20-person crews and provides them with an accurate assessment of prime harvest dates, potential yields and best end-product usage.

Tim McAfee and David Gill serve as the board of directors for the company.

Both Church Brothers and True Leaf sell a majority of products to the foodservice industry, although True Leaf also targets club-level retailers and private-label industry. In addition, Church Brothers is involved with some commodity private-label products. Both brands are distributed nationally, as well as internationally to Hong Kong, Canada, Mexico and occasionally to Europe when demand is high.

Church Brothers Produce grows, packs and ships fresh produce items in season from California and Arizona growing regions. In addition to its headquarters in Salinas, Calif., Church Brothers operates two cooling and processing facilities near its growing fields. The True Leaf processing plant operates seasonally in San Juan Bautista, Calif., and Yuma, Ariz. The company has roughly 18,000 crop acres

in production, some of which it farms on its own or works with contract growers.

## Unmatched Operations

Church Brothers employs its own harvesting crews, who are managed by Director of Production Brian Church, Tom Church's son. During harvesting season, it employs about 20, 20-person crews, Steve Church says. Field personnel get an accurate assessment of prime harvest dates, potential yields and best end-product usage. Final irrigation dates are arranged with the grower to ensure the produce is at its peak maturity.

Prior to harvest, Church says they adhere to strict planting schedules created by long-term partner/employee Jim Storm. It also hired Mike Vanoli who specializes in seed varieties.

Harvest crews employ the most modern, safe and efficient means of select-

ing, trimming and carefully placing the produce into bags or cartons. Twenty percent of these crews travel to production areas in California and Arizona.

## Safe and Sound

The foundation of Church Brothers' and True Leaf's methods and procedures in the field and in processing plants is built on safety and quality. Director of Food Safety Julio Loaiza is responsible for ensuring every standard operating procedure upholds food safety standards in the plant. Megan Chedwick and Herman Cossio ensure methods and procedures are upheld in the field.

The companies operate under strict HACCP guidelines. Harvest crews, processing facilities, cooling facilities, ranches and water testing are monitored, inspected and audited routinely by various industry-approved agencies such as Primus Labs and AIB Labs.

"We test in the field for salmonella and E. coli and do not cut a field unless we see those negative results," Steve Church says.

As proof of Church Brothers' commitment to food safety, it committed itself to the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement (LGMA) of 2007. The LGMA, operating with oversight from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, is a method for verifying through mandatory government audits that farmers follow LGMA-accepted food safety practices for leafy greens.

Adhering to the agreement proves that Church Brothers' leafy greens are grown under a unique and rigorous system that consists of audits, pre-season and pre-harvest assessments and water and soil testing and record-keeping. "LGMA is going to be the model for what growers are going to use moving forward," Church maintains. **FD**

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