

WOMEN THE PACKER

Lucky Lee | Lucky's Real Tomatoes

By Fred Wilkinson
Managing Editor

Lucky Lee, vice president of sales for New York-based Lucky's Real Tomatoes, found her way into the produce industry by way of the music business.

Lee's family were traveling entertainers who performed around the country at diverse venues, including children's hospitals and nursing homes.

She and her sister sang Top 40 tunes and other popular songs, backed up by a six-piece band and managed by her father, Tony.

Originally from New England, the family eventually settled in Florida and soon learned to appreciate the fresh, seasonal produce available, including vine-ripe tomatoes, Lee said.

A job lured Lee's mother, Linda, to New York City, and trips from Florida to New York to visit convinced the family to take a truckload of tomatoes north to sell to restaurateurs in the city.

"Our specialty has been foodservice for 30 years," Lee said.

The business remains a family affair.

Lee's brother Alan Marcelli (who handled sound and lights for the musical review) is president of Lucky's Real Tomatoes, and her brother Marc Marcelli is director of food safety.

Lucky's specializes in vine-ripe, field-grown red and yellow beefsteak tomatoes, Lee said, which are raised in Florida nine months out of the year and North Carolina for three months, with some production in Georgia and South Carolina, as well.

"We don't pack green or gas anything," she said.

Lucky's also supplies greenhouse-grown and specialty tomatoes for some customers, Lee said.

While the company retains its New York City roots, its business relationship with foodservice clients has helped expand its reach across the U.S.

Lucky's has supplied tomatoes to New York restaurant giants such as Palm and famed chef Jean Georges Vongerichten, Lee said. As chefs who got their start in New York moved on to places such as Chicago, Dallas and Las Vegas they brought demand for Lucky's tomatoes with them to new markets, particularly in the white-tablecloth sector.

"They never forgot these tomatoes," Lee said.

Lee also enjoys working with the Culinary Institute of America to educate future chefs about tomatoes.

One of the company's newer offerings is the Tasti-Lee tomato, developed by Bejo Seeds Inc.

The Tasti-Lee boasts 50% more lycopene than normal tomatoes with a sweet flavor and hardy shipping qualities, she said.

In her free time, Lee enjoys reading, Latin dancing, tennis and playing the violin.

She also enjoys giving back to the city that helped launch her business.

Lee credits her father for instilling in her the importance of helping the needy in the community.

After Hurricane Sandy struck the New York area last year, Lucky's pitched in to help with food relief.

"Our North Carolina farmers dedicated two skids on every trailer for Sandy relief," Lee said.



Lucky's Real Tomatoes has specialized in foodservice for 30 years.

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