

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the SNACK

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From the creators of *AndNowUKnow*



Near the horn of South America, a cabin boy dreamed of gold.

Only 14 years old, Thomas Cyle Mathison didn't know that his journey from Scotland to San Francisco, California, meant he was about to arrive to the Gold Rush 20 years late. On this 1860s ship bound for the Americas, he was dreaming at a larger-than-life pace, and as the bow carved through the sea, it didn't matter if gold lay at the end of his journey.

What mattered was that he started the journey to begin with.



LEGENDS IN THE MAKING

I often wonder how many of us would consider adding “legend” to our resumes.

Kyle Mathison sits across from me in his signature overalls, trading quick words with his sons Tate and West as they flit in and out of the office. He wouldn’t look out of place sitting next to his great-grandfather, both of their sights set on gold and land. He’s exactly the type of man who deserves to add such a bold word to his character, and one who’s dared to live up to the connotations associated with it.

One might associate the legends of old with the revolutions they sparked, and in Kyle’s case, his revolution came in the form of growing fruit with less harm done to the environment.

“I always wanted to be a revolutionary,” Kyle tells me, laughing a bit as he recounts his signature look from the ’60s and ’70s, long hair and all. “The revolution I thought I could lead was in the way we grow fruit, and I wanted to do it more organically.”

Revolutionizing this space wasn’t easy, as Kyle recounts, likening it to balancing the ugly baby with the beast. The ugly baby, in Kyle’s brilliant and

somewhat irreverent use of metaphor, is the byproduct of innovation. It’s the mistakes we make as we search for excellence. Kyle directs me to a fitting example: the first organic pears he ever grew. They might not have been pretty, but they drove him toward feeding the second half of his metaphor—the beast.

The beast is the business. It’s the nuts and bolts of the day to day, and sometimes it rushes the growth of innovation because it needs sustenance.

You may laugh at the descriptor, but we all know that innovation isn’t always pretty. It requires resolve, spirit, and grit. The question we often ask ourselves is this: What do you need to transform the ugliness of innovation into brilliance?

You need guts, is the instinctive answer. You need a legend.



ROMANCING THE TREES

Just a little bit higher. Just a little bit higher.

Perhaps this was the refrain Kyle chanted to himself as he trekked 2,600 feet above sea level in search of the land needed for his high-altitude orchards. The differential that this land would soon afford A Half Mile Closer to the

Moon® cherries is something that’s become near-mythical in its proportions.

“We transformed a pine forest into a cherry forest,” Kyle says, speaking of the acreage in Wenatchee, Washington. “The best cherries are going to come from where they naturally want to grow in nature, and we found the higher elevation made for the type of cherry that’s going to kick in a consumer’s ‘caveman instinct,’ as I like to call it. I want the cherries to click in the most primitive part of the human brain. If a caveman had good fruit, he went back to the same bush to get it. What I get up in the morning to do is build memories in our consumers. When they eat my cherries, they’re going to say, ‘That was the best fruit I ever ate.’”

Stemilt’s A Half Mile Closer to the Moon cherries, now in their 10th year, are kicking in this instinct for those who try them, and it is thanks to Kyle’s steadfast determination that they’ve been brought to market.

A fourth-generation farmer on Stemilt Hill, Kyle’s belief in the ugly baby is partially responsible for the differentiating factors that are Moon cherries. The lengths he went to execute the vision included digging miles of ditches to lay pipelines to irrigate the soil with water from the Columbia River and

creating an organic compost that is best likened to a witch’s brew—as Kyle shares with me.

“I romance the trees,” is how Kyle phrases it. “I gain the trust of the environment so that my two sons can romance the telephone, the computer, and the pig iron.”

Romancing the trees is an apt description of the process behind A Half Mile Closer to the Moon cherries. Farming with the moon reads like a love letter to the environment, and it’s one Kyle has been penning far longer than I have been writing.

“I think we probably farm much differently than anybody else. Growing the compost in the ground with the new moon, when the lunar gravitational pull is strongest on the Earth—that’s what makes our Moon cherries kick off that primitive instinct,” Kyle emphasizes. “We can harvest cherries any day when they are ripe, but the best cherries are harvested during the full moon because the lunar gravitational force pulls the sugars, aromatics, flavors, and firmness up from the roots into the fruit.”

Not everyone could do it, I think to myself, making notes about Kyle’s compost that he likens to a “rich organic soup,” one that has been brewed under five months of snow—which keeps the soil temperatures nice and warm. Up at 3,500 feet, Stemilt’s highest farming elevation yet, the compost percolates like a rich amino acid brew.

Not everyone could bring this level of romance to a part of farming some may take for granted, but, then again, not everyone is World Famous.

Retailers in turn have come to learn a lesson that pertains to this World Famous motto: every week in cherries matters.



“If you skip a week at the end, you’re losing a lot of dollars to your category. The consumer has really come to know that Moon cherries are the finale to cherry season. Essentially, we save the best for last,” Kyle outlines. “The brand has a lot of momentum with both the consumer and the retailer because the mystique of Moon cherries is only available in August and September.”

A finale worthy of applause promises to be epic—and it comes down to romancing the trees.

“World Famous is our journey, one where we will never fully reach the destination. I’m always striving to make the product better by romancing the trees,” Kyle emphasizes.



THEY SHINE LIKE RUBIES

The “World Famous Fruit” adage goes back generations, and Kyle’s pride in producing fruit that garners such a distinction is a palpable thing.

“The only way to have a sustainable, competitive advantage is to do something nobody else will do,” he says, sharing details of Stemilt’s earlier days. “That was when I said, ‘It’s got to be our location. We need to paint ourselves as the Napa Valley of the cherry business.’ This unique climate, the higher temperature days where it gets really warm and all of the sugars get into the leaves, and then the cold nights that shock the trees and push the sugars into the fruit. It’s like Mother Nature is kissing each of these cherries with sweetness.”

The location figured prominently all the way back in 1964 when Kyle’s father, Tom, got serious about investing in a cold chain from the tree to the consumer—especially as Stemilt was looking to send its cherries to Hunts Point Produce Market in New York City.



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“One guy who bought our cherries came back on the train all the way from New York City. He said, ‘I had to see where these cherries come from, because when they’re on the auction floor, they shine like rubies,’” Kyle recalls.

The Napa Valley of the cherry world indeed.




A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

The 10th anniversary of A Half Mile Closer to the Moon cherries is a remarkable feat in a long list of accomplishments. Although Kyle jokes that experimenting with organics meant he created more than his fair share of ugly babies, I know he sees himself as a pillar of all that Stemilt has accomplished.

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KYLE MATHISON,
4th Generation Cherry Grower, Stemilt




“It’s not official, but I feel like I’m the spirit of Stemilt. You’ve got to have that person willing to roll the dice on new stuff, willing to try and raise cherries where no man’s ever gone before. That’s me.”

the legacy so I can continue romancing my trees. That’s what I want to do, all the way to the bottom line: continue to make a better product and build a better memory and trust with our consumers,” he affirms.

THE SPIRIT OF STEMILT



A living legend, a mystical moon-man, a farmer who has a go-to concoction of organic compost: all of these I could easily attribute to Kyle Mathison. But what sticks with me the most is this idea of destiny, this spirit of Stemilt that traveled to the Americas and would one day resonate in the heart of a man dedicated to making the food we eat as beautiful as possible. It may be Kyle’s proclamation, but the cherries support his words with a truth of their own.

Stemilt’s cherries are spirits, too—and they would not be here without a man such as Kyle to guide them. 

“It’s not official, but I feel like I’m the spirit of Stemilt. You’ve got to have that person willing to roll the dice on new stuff, willing to try and raise cherries where no man’s ever gone before. That’s me,” he says with a smile. “I want to be the innovative one. I’ve traveled a lot, and the places I find most unique are locations like Machu Picchu, where these civilizations had this revolutionary spirit and worked with Mother Nature. I feel that same spirit inside of me.”

Although he officially retired as Vice President of Research and Development

last year, Kyle is very much in the mix at Stemilt. He is still running and working his orchards, and that’s what he’s most excited to continue. He knows he’s leaving the business and the executive side of things in good hands, as he passes the figurative cherry branch down to his sons.

“I have so much confidence in West and Tate, that they’re going to continue

