

BANANAS MARKETING

Oke USA Fruit Co. adds co-op

By [Tom Burfield](#) October 09, 2015 | 12:53 pm EDT



Oke USA Fruit Co., the importing arm of the Equal Exchange brand, markets organic Fair Trade bananas from growing cooperatives who source product from small producers in Ecuador and Peru, says president Nicole Vitello.

Photo by Oke USA Fruit Co.

West Bridgewater, Mass.-based Oke USA Fruit Co., the importing arm of the 30-year-old Equal Exchange brand, has added a new producer group from Peru, said president Nicole Vitello.

The 10-year-old company markets organic Fair Trade bananas, banana puree and avocados produced by small-scale grower cooperatives.

The new Peruvian cooperative, Grupo Hualtaco, like the other co-ops the company works with, helps small producers “reach a certain level of quality and functionality for export,” Vitello said.

Producers grow bananas, but then they need a pack area, boxes, certification and technical people to complete the process, she said.

“Grupo Hualtaco acts as a facilitator that helps small growers survive and thrive on their own,” she said. Oke USA now buys from three groups. Besides Grupo Hualtaco in Sullana, Peru, which has 400 producers, the company sources from Cepibo’s 80 producers in Sullana and Asoguabo’s 150 producers in Ecuador.

Sourcing from different areas enables the importer to reach more producers and to maintain some security of supply, she said. Peru is a newer growing area than Ecuador, where the company sources most of its bananas, and it has a drier climate, Vitello said.

“The quality of the organics is very high, and the ability to offset disease is better,” she said.

Equal Exchange built its reputation importing Fair Trade coffee, tea and chocolate and launched its banana program 10 years ago.

The company’s mission is “to connect small farmers and consumers with products not available locally,” Vitello said. The company deals with organic bananas exclusively, she said, and works only with small farmers in co-ops. Through the co-ops, each farmer grows bananas, but the fruit is collectively distributed and exported. “Bananas are grown on a large scale, so a co-op model is good way for them to work together to reach the outside world,” she said.

The co-op model also creates a whole tier of jobs in the community that includes more than just agricultural positions, and that can help persuade college-educated sons and daughters of the small producers to remain in the local area. “There’s not much motivation to come back to a rural area where not a lot of professional jobs exist,” Vitello said. “The co-op has a whole tier of logistics jobs, certification people, accountants and agricultural technicians.”

When people talk about Fair Trade, it’s often about the price of bananas or the social premium, she said – the \$1 per box that goes back to the producers.

“For us, it’s also a business model and a way of trading with partners who have control over their own business,” Vitello said. “It’s a partnership and a long-term relationship with a group of farmers instead of having (to go through) a lot of middlemen.”

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