

100 Years Later, Core Values Remain Vital to John Vena Inc.'s Success

In 1898, John Vena immigrated to the United States from Gangi, a small farming community in Sicily, with his parents and three sisters. In order to help his family earn money, Vena began selling wine grapes on the Dock Street Market in Philadelphia and by 1919 he had established the foundation of the family's produce business, John Vena Inc. (JVI).



Since JVI was founded 100 years ago, the business has changed radically, but not in all aspects. The core values of the specialty produce distributor, importer and wholesaler – integrity, dedication, initiative, collaboration, learning and humor – remain vital parts of the company's philosophy and business model. According to John Vena III (JV III), the company's current president, these core values are why the family-owned business has been able to survive and thrive over the past century.

The business evolved through several iterations, focusing on Eastern vegetables and potted plants in the 1950s and 60s as John's grandfather, father, aunt and uncle worked to build a reputation as a reliable wholesale partner in the terminal market.

When JV III joined the family business after college in 1976, he recognized that the

produce industry was changing and the status quo would not be enough to help the small firm survive in the long term. Five years later, after the passing of his father, John Vena II, JV III took the helm. He handled responsibilities on the floor while his aunt and uncle, Anita and Sonny Fiorella, supervised the office.

"We needed to find a niche in the market that would differentiate us," JV III explained. "It was a challenging period for me, but deep down I knew that we had something unique to offer, and I was willing to experiment to get there."

The opportunity to exercise that innovation would come in the late 1980s when JVI had the chance to work with Agrexco, an Israeli company looking for a Philadelphia distributor, to expand the market for its cut flowers. JV III sensed the potential for a mutually lucrative partnership.

Little did he know that the relationship with Agrexco would lead to many other opportunities to sell Israeli- and Holland-grown items such as tomatoes on the vine, greenhouse bell peppers and specialty melon that were rarely seen in the U.S. market.

JVI was indeed developing a niche and soon began exploring additional ways to innovate, launching a line of ethnic and tropical items that catered to the growing Asian, Indian and Latino populations in the Philadelphia region.

By the mid-1990s the flower business had virtually disappeared, and JVI was developing new programs to expand into a wider range of services. In the decades to follow, the company would invest in other future-focused programs such as a year-round fresh herb import business and an avocado ripening facility, both of which fit nicely into the company's portfolio.

"Because we had established ourselves as a knowledgeable and dependable specialty produce wholesaler and partner, the added services really cemented us as the 'go-to' guys

in specialty," JV III noted. "We worked very hard to build that reputation, and we wanted to keep the momentum going by making sure we were keeping our customers ahead of the curve."

The strong work ethic and focus on customer service at JVI is still a core part of JVI now, as was substantiated by Emily Kohlhas, director of marketing, who has been with the firm since 2015.

"Produce is a challenging and competitive business," said the University of Pennsylvania graduate who first joined the company as sales and marketing coordinator. "What sets John Vena Inc. apart isn't just the willingness to work hard, it's the focus on being a trustworthy partner no matter the cost. People here truly care about making sure their customers – and their suppliers for that matter – are successful. That's a strategy that can seem risky in the short-term, but John has always understood how important it is in the long term."

In 2003, John's son, Dan, joined the business, marking the fourth generation of the family to be part of a business that began when Woodrow Wilson was President. Dan Vena currently serves as director of sales.

Today, JVI and its team of 85 operates out of approximately 30,000 square feet of space on the new Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market (the current PWPM facility opened in 2011, replacing the Philadelphia Regional Produce Market which had been home to JVI since the building opened in 1959).

The company now handles well over 500 varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs (representing 1000s of SKUs) and caters to



John Vena Inc., now under fourth generation leadership, is guided by president John Vena (III) and Dan Vena, director of sales.

both retail and foodservice channels. It also supplies other wholesale distributors with specialty products. The company's primary service area ranges from Maine to Virginia (although it services some customers farther afield).

During the past few years, JVI has developed a new channel – meal kits. It currently serves as a key produce supplier for some of the industry's largest meal kit marketers. According to JV III, the meal kit business has seen fits and starts, but as the sector begins to stabilize, he sees it as a good growth vehicle for the company. "Because we have been involved since the beginning, we have a unique set of skills. I don't know that any other company can match our level of experience as a produce partner for the sector."

As JVI moves into the next chapter of its storied history, JV III believes that change is inevitable.

"We know that technology will play an ever-increasing role in our business, but even the product itself is bound to evolve. New varieties, new growing methods, new flavors are part of what keeps us motivated every day," he said. "We have many challenges to conquer – just like our customers. Their businesses have become more complex and sophisticated, and we have to mirror that – be it in product selection or operational excellence."

As he views the business going forward, JV III remains candid about the possibilities.

"Do we acquire, do we merge, do we launch something new?" he pondered. "Change is occurring quickly in the wholesale world and we'd be foolish to take any possibility off the table. Running a business successfully requires constant self-evaluation."

That ability to analyze and adapt has been a hallmark at John Vena Inc. for 100 years. "My family has always tried to be the most trusted partner for growers and for buyers. I'm excited to work with our current team to find new ways to be of value in the next century."



LEFT: Emily Kohlhas (l), director of marketing, and avocado specialist Tyler Domingo assess the status of ripening avocados at JVI's facilities in the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market.

ABOVE: The JVI sales team (l-r) Manny Herrero-Torres, Andrew Powers, Marco Matta, Joe Killian, Sal Dolce, Dan Capone, Tom Allen, Dave Carroll, Kelly McCoy, Kelsey Rose, Dan Vena and Katelyn Repash.