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Kaplan family involved in L.A. produce scene for a century

BY RAND GREEN

The Kaplan family has been involved in the produce business in Los Angeles since horse-and-buggy days, literally, according to Ted Kaplan, president of Professional Produce Inc., which today is located in the Los Angeles suburb of Vernon.

"My grandmother started with a horse and wagon in downtown Los Angeles in 1908," a century ago this year, said Mr. Kaplan. Initially specializing in potatoes and onions, Dora Kaplan "built up a big company" called Kaplan's Fruit & Produce that continued to the second and third generation. "She was a woman pioneer in produce in Los Angeles," he said.

"I started working with my grandmother and my father [Milton Kaplan] at a very young age," around 1966, Mr. Kaplan said. During his junior high school and high school years, before the days of pallets and pallet jacks, he worked in the Los Angeles Terminal Market

pushing hand trucks.

In the early 1980s, Mr. Kaplan's father and uncles closed Kaplan Fruit & Produce. Subsequently, "I started a



company called Produce Place, and then when Produce Place sold, I started this company [Professional Produce]," Mr. Kaplan said. That was about 15 years ago.

Mr. Kaplan's father, who now works for Professional Produce, still comes to work "every day," Mr. Kaplan said. "He is 84." That work ethic is one of the great lessons he learned not only from his father, who "had a tremendous work ethic" and "still does," but also from others in the produce industry who were his role models and mentors when

he was growing up, he said.

"The lesson you learn is that the one thing that continues to go forth in the produce

industry and the Tarribas" and to others in the industry who influenced him in his early life.

"Growing in the produce industry, as a

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business is the hard work and the diligence of doing it every day and showing up. I have learned that if you want to be successful in the produce business, you've got to have staying power. You've got to show up every day even when you don't want to." Also, "you have to love the produce business to be successful at it," he said.

"I pay homage to my grandmother and my father" for lessons taught and examples set, said Mr. Kaplan. "But I really give credit to the Perricones, the Gilfenbains, the LaLon-

de and the Tarribas" third-generation produce man," he said, those were "the heroes I had."

Norman Gilfenbain, currently an owner of Eclipse Berry Farms LLC in Oxnard, CA, was formerly president of Cal Fruit, which according to Dunn & Bradstreet was at one time among the 50 largest companies headquartered in Los Angeles. "Norman helped me out" after the closing of Kaplan's Fruit & Produce, he said.

Sam Perricone was founder of Sam Perricone Citrus, which, at the time of its acquisi-

tion by Fresh America Corp. in 1998, was one of the larger citrus wholesalers in the country. Mr. Perricone continues to be involved as a partner in several produce companies, and according to Mr. Kaplan, "at 85 years old, Sam Perricone still walks the market every day."

The Tarriba family own Agricola Tarriba, a farming operation headquartered in Sinaloa, Mexico, and Farmer's Best, a produce distribution company in Nogales, AZ.

Don and Art LaLonde are president and vice president of Valley Fruit & Produce, which has been a full-line produce wholesaler in Los Angeles since 1920. They are "probably two of the most respected men in Los Angeles," according to Mr. Kaplan. "Their integrity and work ethic are beyond reproach," he said.

"I give a lot of credit to guys like that" who "helped me learn" the produce business, he said. "It takes a lot of people to help you get here."