CONFIANZA EN LA FRONTERA:
A CULTURAL GLIMPSE AT THE NOGALES PRODUCE INDUSTRY

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Amidst the dramatic backdrop of Southern Arizona’s big skies, mesquite bosques, and saguaro cacti, lies an industry of major cultural, historical, and nutritional significance. Its warehouses line the southern stretch of Interstate 19, a highway that connects the town of Nogales, Arizona at the international border with Sonora, Mexico to Tucson. Names like SunFed, Farmer’s Best, Omega Produce, and Ciruli Brothers proclaim these family businesses, which reach north to the small town of Amado, where tomato glasshouses gleam from the roadside.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, in 2017, 333,941 trucks crossed the border in Nogales, hauling over $2.5 billion worth of fresh fruits and vegetables,¹ making it one of the top three ports of entry. The produce comes mostly from the northwestern states of Sonora and Sinaloa. Some of that produce will have a short American journey, traveling just 33 kilometers north to a grocery store in Tucson. But most of it ends up beyond Arizona—in California and even across the Canadian border in Vancouver.

As a newcomer to the borderlands, I became curious about where my avocados, squash, and tomatoes came from and about what it takes to move Mexican produce on a day-to-day basis. I conducted fieldwork between August and December 2015 and interviewed 29 individuals. Most interviews took place in Nogales, Arizona or in nearby Rio Rico, where many historic produce operations have located for closer proximity to Interstate 19. The majority of my interviewees were male and over age 50. Several were in their eighties and nineties; a few were in their twenties. The majority of them headed their own companies or had retired from their family business. Many firms were multi-generational, and workers expressed pride in being able to continue the family lineage. While I was not able to interview as many entry-level workers or women as I would have liked, the existing study of brokers and distributors offers a glimpse into the industry.

Those who work to bring produce across the border are part of a historic tradition spanning over 100 years. Whether on the floor of a warehouse, as a sales manager, or a distributor, the working traditions within this industry are multi-generational, multicultural, and often familial. Like many other occupational traditions, produce work in Nogales is considered lifeblood for both families and the community as a whole.

My work explored how produce is transported, sold, and marketed, and chronicled stories of industry workers. Occupational narratives reveal how workers make sense of their own lives and experiences as well as help preserve local history and institutional knowledge. These narratives also expose larger public concerns such as food safety and local food movements. Overall, they provide a localized and community-based response to a global understanding of where our food comes from and how it arrives to us.

This paper highlights these narratives, focusing primarily on three areas: 1) the industry as a familial occupational tradition; 2) the role of trust in the industry; and 3) historic and current challenges faced by produce industry professionals and strategies used to overcome them.

The produce industry in Nogales traces its historical roots to 1905, when the first rail cars of cantaloupes and tomatoes crossed the border from Mexico. Over time, the brokering, selling, and distribution of produce became an occupational tradition that now spans three generations of families representing a wide diversity of cultures.

The early Nogales industry saw multi-generational families of Hispanic, Greek, and Italian descent who remained involved over the course of the last century. Nick Gatzionis, a third-generation produce professional with CAB Produce, recalled his family’s heritage in the industry:

“A Family Tradition

Family ties in the produce industry were often extended by marriage. Walter Ram, Sr., a retired produce broker living in Tucson, recalled his work with his father-in-law’s operation, in which various family members took on different roles:

“PART 1

A Greek by the name of Harry Georgelos had his brother go down to Culiacán and grow tomatoes. He had a sales office here in town, Nogales, and there he would sell them. But at that time, it was a lot different. Today everybody’s got a warehouse. At that time, they had just an office, no warehouse, no workers, nothing. Just an office with a salesman and a secretary. And they sold their tomatoes by telephone. If they happened to get in, say, five cars of tomatoes at a time, which was a lot at that time, they would sell maybe one or two cars, and then they had to move the other ones because tomorrow they would get some more. So what they would do, they would roll them open without sales, mainly to Kansas City, which was a staging area with ice and instructions for the road. Ice in Nogales, ice in El Paso, and so on. And then as they sold it, they would divert it. They would go to the railroad company here in Nogales, and they’d put in a diversion order to ship the car going to Kansas City, get it and ship it up to Denver, or ship it up to the Carolinas, or wherever they happened to sell it at (Ram, Sr. 2015).”

Walter Ram Sr., 94, is a World War II veteran who was captured and held by the Germans. In 1952, Ram moved to California and began transporting pink tomatoes from Baja California to Los Angeles. Eventually he formed RGR Trucking in Nogales, AZ. His son Walter Jr. now works in the produce industry.

“My grandfather came from Greece. Instead of going to Ellis Island, they went down south toward Cuba. A lot of the pioneers of the produce industry here in Nogales went from Veracruz on the West Coast, and started growing in Culiacán, in Sinaloa, Mexico. And a lot of them are the immigrant families from Greece … who saw these fertile lands, and realized that there’s access to shipping (Gatzionis, Gatzionis and Valenzuela 2015).”
Family involvement in the industry tends to begin young, before the end of secondary school. Nick Gatzionis and his brother, Thano, were often responsible for tasks as boys. Nick recalled going to Mexico on work trips with his family, where he would pack boxes, make pallets, and prop up falling plants. It was common for children to work alongside their parents in the industry, a practice that continues today.

Many children start off answering phones and running errands then moving on to “bird-dogging,” an industry term for learning the trade. Jerry Wagner, a retired sales manager for Farmer’s Best, remembered working as a teenager and the liberty it afforded him:

“The stuff didn’t cross the border until the afternoon, so after high school I’d go to warehouse to warehouse, following my father’s trucks around, watching the merchandise for our customers throughout the United States. It was wonderful, being in high school, not having the curfew. Nobody knew if I was working ’til 8 o’clock and 3 o’clock in the morning. It’s a wonderful way to be a teenager (Wagner 2015).”
Today, on-the-job experience is supplemented with college studies in areas such as agribusiness or management. Nick Gatzioumis, for example, studied business at Arizona State University. Several other professionals had extensive education in the areas of agriculture or business.

Still, many in the business claimed that no amount of academic learning could substitute for day-to-day work experience. Prescott Vandervoet said understanding the industry was a lifelong process:

"Like in many fields, the only way to really learn it is just to do it. And in that sense, you can't really learn it until you've spent a certain amount of time in it. So you're never done learning. I've been here four-and-a-half, almost five years. Other folks who've been here for twenty, thirty, forty years have just seen so much. And there's no way I will ever match up to them until they're retired and out and I'm in forty years. And at that point, those forty years will be so different from the previous forty years you probably won't even compare them (Vandervoet 2015b)."

As the industry has remained multigenerational, family members have witnessed changes over time. For example, the transfer of knowledge has remained consistent, but shipping, transportation, and other tasks have become more mechanized and regimented. Changes have also come in working hours and access to remote workspaces.

Walter Ram, Sr. spoke of the early years, when there was less mechanization and longer work hours:

"Nothing was palletized. Everything was by box. The warehouses in Mexico, when they loaded a truck, if a package was ready, they'd put it on the truck. So when they got here, you had to unload package by package. You needed a lot of space because you had to separate the sizes, then you had to separate the colors. The ones that had the most color, you had to sell closer by. We'd put in 16 to 18 hours. Lots of times. I remember a couple of times we slept on our desk. It was almost light in the morning, we were so tired to go home, we slept on the desk. And then when we could break in the daytime, we'd go home and shower, change, and come back again" (Ram, Sr. 2015)."
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Holm Tomatoes are packaged in the Walter Holm & Co warehouse in Nogales, Sonora. Walter Holm & Co warehouse and fleet of trucks in Nogales, AZ. This produce company was started in 1946 by Walter Holm. Nogales historian Axel Holm holds up an image of his father Walter Holm and himself as a child. He is standing in the dining room of his family home in the downtown area of Nogales.

Long hours were such a common part of the business that multiple workers expressed gratitude for shorter, 12- to 14-hour days. In more seasonally based enterprises, 80- to 100-hour weeks were common. While working long hours has its challenges, new technology like mobile phones, laptops, and improved communications have created a high level of locational flexibility for brokers. For some, this has made working from home a possibility.

Since its origins, many innovative technologies in the industry have emerged from Nogales-based companies. Among the best-known local innovators was Walter Holm, whom many consider a produce industry legend. Holm introduced cellophane-wrapped cartons of tomatoes to the public and was among the first to utilize refrigerated truck transportation for produce transport.

Walter’s son, Axel, a historian of the produce industry, remembered his father’s repacking plant as one of the catalysts for a full-time produce industry in Nogales:

“Why rely on a strictly seasonal business? Why not make it an annual produce business? In that case, he built a repacking plant across from City Hall—still has his name on it—in 1946 to receive the produce by rail in Nogales, as usual, and then unload the tomatoes at the plant and repack them according to size, quality, and state of maturity. He would pack them under the Holm label. They lost their identity from Mexico in that case. He decided he would continue in this tomato-packing plant year-round. So when the season ended in Mexico, then he would buy tomatoes from California, and from Texas, and have them shipped into Nogales, and repacked. And he would continue year-round employment for the employees, and a year-round supply for the produce markets (Holm 2015).”
The Nogales fresh produce industry quickly became industrialized with streamlined production and distribution methods. However, much of it remained rooted in traditional forms of practice based on informal vernacular education and community-based reciprocity. This is particularly true for the industry’s financial and trade dealings.

According to Robert Alvarez, Jr.’s 2005 study of trucking and the borderlands produce industry, Mexican shippers, or comerciantes, “draw on and elaborate a cultural repertory of interpersonal relationships, including that of confianza (trust) … as a means to secure relationships of loyalty with workers, other comerciantes, and even the North American buyers with whom they do business” (Alvarez, Jr. 2005:50-51).

Anthropologist Carlos Velez-Ibañez defines confianza as the “willingness to engage in generalized reciprocity,” which involves a verbal agreement between many parties.

**INNOVATION MEETS TRADITION AND TRUST**

Employees load palettes of produce with a forklift. Palettes and forklifts allowed for faster and more efficient distribution processes in the industry. This truck contains around 22 palettes full of cucumbers and squash.

This confianza lies at the heart of the Nogales industry, inherently tangible, as Maribel Alvarez points out, yet not always acknowledged in “official” accounts of the industry:

> ...embedded in each transaction—yet nearly impossible to capture in official reports—is another form of exchange equally and, arguably, more important than any cold cash at stake: the tenuous and fundamental sense of trust—confianza—that what is expected to happen will happen when it is supposed to happen (Alvarez 2012:32-33).

Chris Ciruli, a third-generation broker with mango distributor Ciruli Brothers, explained that most loads of produce are traded by verbal agreements rather than paper ones:

> We trade millions and millions of dollars of product every day, and we have no signed contracts. They’re verbal agreements, word-of-mouth, on the phone. And people still can’t fathom it. If you’re going to buy a car, a $30,000 car, you’ll be signing twenty pieces of paper before they even let you touch the thing or get it out the door. But buy a $40,000 load of product from us: we just have to know who you are, or we have to know someone who knows us. It’s a matter of a gentleman’s agreement that establishes this price (Ciruli 2015).

For retired sales manager Jerry Wagner, trust was always a critical part of the industry. He “could wake up in the morning, and pick up the telephone, and by word-of-mouth, sell $4 million worth of produce and say, ‘Okay, bye,’ and hang up the phone, and never see a paper trail. It is such an honorable business in that, if people don’t trust you, you go broke” (Wagner 2015).
As a produce broker, you have to sell yourself, too. And then as a salesman, you’ve already learned to sell yourself. So you develop relationships. Those relationships are important, because there are no signed contracts. I have to have relationships with people. You have to know all about them. (Sykes 2015).

Many professionals use the Produce Blue Book, a guide that includes evaluations of professionals based on their credit quality and trustworthiness and helps many companies protect against being taken advantage of. But what ultimately keeps highly skilled brokers in business—and eliminates unreliable companies—is accountability to the community and to trading partners.

Reputation and the cultivation of relationships are incredibly important to the industry, even as people brokering deals sometimes never meet face-to-face. Bill Sykes, a longtime produce broker in Rio Rico, said many successful salesmen went on to become brokers because of their ability to cultivate a strong sense of worth, one bolstered by strong relationships:

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The willingness to build trust, promote skill and product, and develop long-standing business relationships with growers and other produce professionals, are critical practices within the produce industry. While commercial and technological innovation help streamline the industry, traditional expressions of trust and community accountability are what keep it going.
I went to try my trailer brakes, and I had no brakes.

When I was going to school in Los Angeles, when I’d come down home, anyplace that I could make a dollar, I’d do it. My brother had a couple of trucks. He had a load of watermelons that he was taking to El Paso. I don’t know where he got them from, but he was going to El Paso. So I volunteered to drive the truck. I didn’t know how to drive a truck. I volunteered to drive the truck because he was going to pay me, I forget what it was, thirty or forty dollars, and to me, it was a lot of money. So I took off. The truck didn’t have air brakes, it had vacuum brakes. I went to Tucson, fueled up then took off for El Paso. No freeways or nothing like that. The truck had hydraulic brakes, they didn’t hold anything. The trailer had a little handle for the trailer brakes. At one o’clock in the morning, I went to try my trailer brakes, and I had no brakes. So I had developed somewhere along the line a leak, and there wasn’t vacuum anymore. I thought of jumping out, but I was going too fast and it was pitch black. I’d probably kill myself, so I figured I’d ride it down. And luckily I knew how to get through Benson. You had to make a right turn, and a left turn, and go under a bridge. If you went straight, you would hit a railroad embankment. And if I were to jump that curb or whatever, and I had that embankment, the watermelon load would come up and crush me. So I had no choice. I had to try and make the turn. I could feel
the truck tilting, but I couldn’t straighten it out. The only way I could straighten it out was to go straight. I couldn’t go straight. So I kept on going, going, going, until finally, wham! It went on its left side. It went sliding almost down to where it started going under the bridge. It blew the top of the trailer off completely. It blew all the watermelons off. Me, I was hanging onto the steering wheel, and the door opened. If I had gone out through that door, you know, I would have been made sausage.

-Walter Ram, Sr., recalling a 1949 truck accident

Indeed, outbreaks of foodborne illness, especially those coming from fresh produce contamination, pose a continuous challenge for the industry. Food safety affects both individual businesses and the industry as a whole. Many brokers, distributors, and others noted that food safety regulations and inspection have become more stringent over time.

Walter Ram, Jr., whose father recounted that harrowing truck incident above, is food safety director for a grape company based in California and Arizona. He remembered a time in which produce handling was more lax:

“When I was a boy, my dad had, among other things, snow peas, sugarpeas. The buyers would come in, look at these 40-pound crates, throw them on the warehouse floor to inspect them make sure that there wasn’t any subpar peas on the box. Then they would put the peas back in the box. They would go crate by crate, and do a whole bunch of them like these. Of course, you’d never get all 40 pounds back in the crate, for one reason or the other. They’d buy those and all the rest of them. Well now, I would never think of throwing something on the floor and selling it as a food product. So our industry’s really gotten more professional (Ram, Jr. 2015).”

Part of selling, distributing and promoting produce requires a willingness to not only trust others in the industry, but also accept the risks that come with the cultivation and transportation of produce. In the contemporary era, this means driving and other transportation-related risks, as Alvarez notes:

“On the road from Ensenada or Los Mochis through Nogales to Chicago, however, many a thing can go wrong along the way. The risk of decaying fruit on a truck, with money payable a month later and only upon satisfaction of the buyer’s expectations, can make anyone anxious. It behooves us all to know this: The industry that put that fleshy red bell pepper in our salad yesterday is a nervous system, and contrary to popular perceptions, salmonella is one of the easiest manageable risks (Alvarez 2012: 33-34).”

A food inspector from the USDA inspects a box of zucchini, checking for quantity, quality, and uniformity in size.

Photo by Alex Jimenez
Walter Jr. also noted the changes that came as the media began to publicize outbreaks of foodborne illness from both produce and meat:

"Around the late 1990s, food safety started rearing its ugly head. Not that food safety's ugly, but the need for it was. We started detecting outbreaks before they were detectable. It wasn't that they weren't there—we can't say whether they were or not, I have to assume they were—but they just never pointed the finger back at fresh produce. No one knew that fresh produce wasn't good for you. It still is. The first big outbreak to get consumer attention to fresh produce was undoubtedly the spinach-related outbreak in 2006, out of California. That was a watershed for our industry because it changed the focus greatly (Ram, Jr. 2015)."

Not surprisingly, those in the industry view outbreaks of foodborne illness as major disasters with potentially serious consequences for multiple parties. Such disasters can impact the supply chain, taking contaminated products off of the market, and can also adversely affect consumer perceptions of regions and workers.

In her 2004 book, *Once Upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception*, Diane E. Goldstein describes contamination narratives as "one of the most common forms of contemporary legend" that articulate a "distrust of information authorities, resistance, logical reconsideration of issues through independent thinking, or suppression of 'facts' in favor of other kinds of truth" (Goldstein 2004:39-40). Those in the Nogales produce industry both affirm the industry's efforts towards food safety and highlight the consequences of not being vigilant.

In September of 2015, Stewart Parnell, former CEO of Peanut Corporation of America, received a 28-year prison sentence for his role in knowingly shipping peanut butter contaminated with salmonella. The contamination led to 9 deaths and 714 accounts of illness in 2008. While some level of contamination might be out of produce professionals' hands, the emphasis in this case is the word "knowingly."

Veronica Kraushaar, a produce marketer in Nogales, said an openness about contamination is necessary for industry survival:

"You cannot lie about the issue. If you've got a contamination issue and it emerged from your plant because you were negligent, then you must say so. We were negligent. We admit. If you try to hide that, then all hell's going to break loose. And you deserve what comes to you (Kraushaar 2015)."

It's always easier to blame the voiceless. A foreigner tends to be more voiceless than somebody local. Mexico's definitely dealt with those kinds of stigma in the past few decades, related to food and food safety and quality and cleanliness of food. I think it's completely unfounded. The largest retailers contract a massive range of different varieties of fruits and vegetables grown in Mexico for their U.S. and Canadian retail outlets, because they know it's some of the best (Vandervoet 2015)."
One of the things that people don’t know about Mexico agriculture specifically, it’s very advanced. The people that are doing it right, the people who are successful, are extremely sophisticated. They’ve put systems up before the American farmer even considered them, and that’s something that you don’t realize. And when you go to look at some American farming operations, they are surprised. The Mexicans are surprised how backwards they are. I think that’s very interesting (Kraushaar 2015).

In her research on contaminated food legends, Goldstein writes that stigmas following contamination incidents impact the produce industry in similar ways that they impact the fast-food industry. Narratives about contaminated food create a vernacular distrust toward large food operations (Goldstein 2004:37), as they often attribute incidents to a lack of institutional attention to food preparation (Ibid, 40).

Produce workers respond by emphasizing the need for professional standards and better food safety education for those who handle produce. Bill Sykes recalled a well-known illness outbreak caused when a hotel cook used a chicken knife to cut cantaloupe. He said the responsibility often lies with the consumer—in this case, the hotel restaurateur—to ensure that food remains safe once purchased. “People have to learn to wash their produce. Know that you can’t use a knife that you’re cutting chicken with to cut the fruit up with. The cutting board—use a different cutting board. It’s just common sense stuff. And people will continue to get sick” (Sykes 2015).

In the current era of reported foodborne illnesses, contamination fears, and disconnect between farmer and consumer, produce professionals stress that growers, brokers, and consumers should learn as much as they can about their food, in part, to re-cultivate the relationship between the three. Some are even adopting new practices to help with this kind of education.

At Wilson Produce in Nogales, for example, all pepper packages from Sinaloa-based farms have tracking codes so customers can learn precisely where the peppers come from. Although the distance between farm and table can be vast, there is more potential for connectedness than ever before.

Produce professionals’ role in connecting people to their food also invites cross-cultural learning, calling on professionals and the public to understand culture and business practices in Mexico. According to Veronica Kraushaar, an overall lack of understanding about contemporary Mexico sometimes impacts how people interpret Mexican produce quality:

Vandervoet also noted that an outbreak of foodborne illness in one Mexican-grown crop can adversely affect another crop’s success. Education, while helpful, does not completely reduce stigmas:

Recently, there was an issue related to cilantro grown in the state of Puebla. The identifiers of that headline were “Mexico” and “cilantro” in a negative way, because there was an outbreak. That kind of resonates throughout the nation, throughout all Mexican produce. So it’s frustrating when that happens because somebody who grows table grapes can’t really go and try to be responsible for the cilantro growers across the country. But it affects the table grape growers too when the cilantro has an issue. So in a perfect world, all the consumers would be ultra-knowledgeable. But that’s not going to happen. There’s just too much information to digest (Vandervoet 2015).

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Kraushaar said part of this advancement comes from Mexico’s willingness to partner with other nations on agricultural innovation. More than one broker told me about the extensive cooperation between northwest Mexico and Israel, countries with similar climate and geographic similarities. Kraushaar emphasized this cross-cultural collaboration of Mexican farmers:

"The consumer is very sheltered and very myopic about what really goes on. The Israeli cooperation, especially in Sonora, has been tremendous. It has revolutionized the grape industry. They brought in the trellis systems. Their universities are fantastic and their university training. The other thing that has helped is the partnerships with Chile. That’s created some culture issues. But in the end, Mexico has been very open-minded. This is one of the things that Americans don’t realize. Mexico has been very open-minded in teaming up with Cubans, Brazilians, Chinese, Syrians, Egyptians, whatever. Whoever has the technology and who can partner with them, they’ve partnered. They don’t have the political issues that we have here. I think that Mexico, you know, has broadened the acceptance of other cultures, starting with the Greeks. Starting with the Chinese (Kraushaar 2015)."

Through high-tech innovation, global partnerships, and local engagement, the Nogales produce business is extending traditional community practices by participating in a multicultural, multinational industry. Moving forward as a community and holding onto cultural practices involves looking beyond the local to improve and enhance the known.

CONCLUSION

The folkloristic elements of the produce industry on the Arizona-Mexico border are complex and multi-layered. The industry reflects a multicultural, multinational practice that relies largely on family and community connections in the development of local economies. Produce professionals learn their trade in a community-based and experiential way and conduct business following traditional norms. Local and long-term relationships create a system of confianza that allows for high levels of trust and accountability. Issues related to food safety and stigmas against Mexico are dealt with professionally, out of concern for consumers and the industry as a whole. Nogales produce brokers and distributors balance a commitment to build local community and uphold local culture with an obligation and drive to deliver fruits and vegetables to a large population.
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