

Bland Farms remains big in Vidalia onions

By **Keith Loria**

Staff Writer

In 1948, Raymond and Rubye-Jean Bland began a 50-acre farm in rural Georgia. Following his father's passion, Raymond's son Delbert envisioned the company becoming the preeminent grower, packer and shipper of the renowned Vidalia Onion. So, in 1980, father and son began growing Vidalia sweet onions on just five acres at Bland Farms in Glennville, Ga.

The once-seasonal operation is now multinational, with operations in Peru and Mexico. Bland Farms' domestic operations span the nation, including Georgia, Texas, Washington and California.

Today, Bland Farms boasts 2,000 acres of Vidalias domestically, 660 hectares in Peru, and 400 hectares in Mexico and is one of the largest growers, packers and shippers of sweet onions in the United States. Bland Farms represents roughly one-quarter of the entire Vidalia sweet onion volume and has among the largest controlled-environment storage capacities in the industry.

"Our strategically located operations produce the highest quality, freshest, and sweetest onions available to consumers and retailers today," said Troy Bland, CEO of the company. "Recognizing and acting on the rising demand for sweet onions enabled us to expand production, forming strategic growing partnerships that have proven extremely valuable and supply sweet onions year-round."

In 2022, the category performed very well and the Bland team was pleased with the results and look forward to a successful 2023.

"To succeed in this industry, you must keep up with the demand for your product, consistently find eco-friendly practices, focus on sustainability, and offer support to retailers to increase sales," Bland said. "One way we do this is by constantly asking ourselves, 'how?' How can we deliver a more consistent product? How can we provide a better customer experience? We also challenge our ways of doing things by asking ourselves, 'what?' What do our customers want? What is coming next?"

Despite weather adversities on the front end that impacted some plant stands of the Vidalia Sweet Onion crop, Bland Farms has recovered very nicely.

"We expect another excellent quality Vidalia season and can't wait to start shipping in April," Bland said.

As the industry pushes for sustainability, eco-friendly practices, and the preservation of natural resources, Bland Farms is constantly searching for ways to live up



to its mission of "Innovation Through the Generations." Part of that is contemplating, innovating and applying new ways of doing things to preserve the ecology.

For example, in 1990, Bland Farms took an innovative and bold step by building and utilizing the latest fresh produce preservation technology, controlled-atmosphere storage rooms.

"These rooms extended the availability of Vidalia sweet onions from two months to four months," Bland said. "Five years later, Bland Farms entered the frozen food market by offering frozen onion rings and chopped onion bits, quickly becoming the nation's third-largest distributor of such

products."

In 2008, Bland Farms opened a new cross-docking facility in Donna, TX, Bland Distribution Services, a cold storage and distribution center for fresh and dry goods. It specializes in consolidating loads, layer-picking shipments, reconditioning-repacking, quality-assurance inspections and other quality services.

Bland Farms continued its quest for innovations in 2021 with a state-of-the-art packing facility. The state-of-the-art facility is entirely CA (controlled atmosphere). There is nothing like it in the sweet onion industry. The onions will remain in CA from the moment they come in from the field until they are loaded for delivery which results in less damage, improved appearance, increased pack-out and longer shelf-life.

"For Bland Farms, sustainability and innovation are not just buzzwords, they are what drive our core values and allows us to adapt to the needs of the industry as a whole," Bland said.

The company is always looking for ways to offer marketing and promotional support to retailers and one way it has accomplished that is with themed promotions.

"Each year we kick off the season with an exciting promotion," Bland said. "This year we are partnering with country music star Billy Currington for our Southern Stars Promotion. Through special packaging and a robust social media program, retailers will be able to offer customers a chance to win fabulous prizes, including tickets to Billy Currington's 2023 concert tour and of course, Billy's favorite Vidalia recipes."

