



For Evelyn and Batista Sr., it all started in 1958, the year they were married. Batista Sr. said, “1958 was a great year for two reasons, I married my college sweetheart, and we started our own produce business, The Madonia Produce Exchange, based out of Erie, Pennsylvania.”

The Madonia Produce Exchange packed and shipped tomatoes that were grown by local farmers. In order to create a larger customer base they decided to make their product available in the winter months as well. Batista Sr. said, “I remember in 1958, our first year in the business, we started buying tomatoes in Florida. They would ship them to our plant in Erie where we would sort, hand-pack and send them to markets in our area which included Buffalo, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Cleveland.”

He recalls that meager beginning when he struggled to unload the tomatoes from the delivery trucks by hand and in a blizzard. Six years later, in 1964, they bought their first packinghouse near a primary growing region in Pennsylvania.

Their operation expanded to Florida for the winter months. For a number of years they would move back and forth from Pennsylvania to Florida. Soon, the second generation of Madonia’s started working in the business. Steven Madonia, their son, was a pre-med student at Gannon College in Erie, his father’s Alma Mater, when he decided to change his major and pursue and receive a Bachelors Degree in Business.

A few years later East Coast Brokers and Packers bought 17 acres near the Lakeland airport. In 1985, they had an

opportunity to open a packing and shipping plant in West Virginia. It was an old apple storage shed made of brick with an ammonia refrigeration unit.

Their oldest son, Steven, holds the position of Vice President and oversees all growing operations. Laurie, their oldest daughter, upon graduating from Florida Southern with a Bachelors Degree in Business, is now a sales representative with the medical firm of Nova-Nordisk.

Their youngest son, Batista Jr., a student at Florida State, where he excelled in football, and Florida Southern College, earning his Bachelors Degree in Business, was also able to join the family business. Batista Jr. started the sales department for the company in 1987, and now holds the position of Vice President and Sales Manager. Batista Senior and Junior make up the sales department, while Steven takes care of the production side of the business.

Their younger daughter, Rosemary, also a graduate of Florida Southern College, who holds a Bachelors Degree in History with a minor in Political Science, had a desire to become an attorney. She, due to her strong desire to also work in the family business, joined the company upon her graduation from college and currently is the Vice President and Controller. Rosemary works very closely with the migrant community in our area.

From the very beginning, Batista Sr.’s wife, Evelyn Madonia, has been a very important part of the business. Evelyn attended Mercyhurst College and Villa Maria where she received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in English with Minors in

French and Latin.

Evelyn, along with her husband, oversees the daily operations of East Coast Brokers and Packers, Inc. It was Evelyn, in fact, who designed the logo for the company’s “King Choice” brand in 1959. That logo continues to be used to this day!

Moving back and forth between Pennsylvania and Florida, Evelyn was able to put her teaching degree to work. Evelyn home schooled their children during the time they were in Florida. In 1980, Evelyn and Batista Sr. made Florida their permanent home.

Things really started to move over the next decade. One of their largest expansions took place in 1998, when they bought a packing house in Mappsville, Virginia. With several expansions the operation now includes a 250-load storage capacity.

It wasn’t long after the Virginia purchase that they acquired 1200 acres in eastern Polk County. This plant is a state-of-the-art packing operation with one of the latest computerized, optical tomato sorters in the southern United States. The load storage capacity of this packing facility is 280.

In the spring of 2006 the Madonia’s put together a new growing agreement with Live Oak, which ties in nicely with their other Florida operations close to the Ruskin Vegetable Corporation packing facility, near Stewart and Parrish, locations they currently farm.

Their latest venture was the construction of ten greenhouses for growing tomatoes, located near the

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