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UNITED FRESH AISLE BY AISLE BOOTH REVIEW



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THIS MONTH'S WINNER



Thomas Nichols
Owner
Harry's Supermarket
Pittsfield, MA

Thomas Nichols began working in his father's store when he was a young boy. "I started as the cleanup kid and eventually became the meat manager. When my father retired, I took on the whole store. One day, one of my produce guys was out, so I started dabbling a bit in the produce department, and now I love it."

With Tom at the helm, Harry's is a now a third-generation store, which opened in 1914. A second location, not too far from the original in Pittsfield, opened about 10 years ago.

Tom grew up in his dad's store, and rightfully, couldn't imagine working anywhere else. "I love keeping things fresh in the produce department, and I love the feedback from the customer. We'll exchange recipes and such. Our customers love local produce, so we are affiliated with Berkshire grown, a group of farmers that got together to provide local, farm-fresh produce to nearby retailers."

Tom has been reading the PRODUCE BUSINESS for nearly five years. "It was coming to our produce manager here, and one day, I just picked it up. I always gain new ideas from it and learn about the latest trends." **pb**

How To Win! To win the PRODUCE BUSINESS Quiz, the first thing you have to do is enter. The rules are simple: Read through the articles and advertisements in this issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, and either cut along the dotted line or photocopy the page, and send your answers along with a business card or company letterhead to the address listed on the coupon. The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our June issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS. The winner must agree to submit a color photo to be published in that issue.

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QUESTIONS FOR THE APRIL ISSUE

- 1) How many years has Anthony Marano Company been in business? _____
- 2) What company ensures Curry & Co.'s onions are Certified Sweet? _____
- 3) Name three varieties of grapes grown by Farmer's Best. _____
- 4) Who is the Food Safety Manager at Grower Alliance LLC? _____
- 5) What is the name of the category manager in Idaho Potato's "Field Force" comic strip ad? _____
- 6) On what date does Paramount Farm's new "Get Crackin'" campaign begin? _____

This issue was: Personally addressed to me Addressed to someone else

Name _____ Position _____
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Encore Performance



On Air April 25th
2011



UNITED FRESH SEES HIGH COSTS AND LITTLE VALUE IN USDA MICROBIOLOGICAL DATA PROGRAM

By Ray Gilmer,
Vice President of Communications,
United Fresh Produce Association

In this time of government cost-cutting, United Fresh believes a regulatory program that duplicates efforts among government agencies, overreaches the scope of its original mission and burdens the industry, while yielding little benefit to the public, should be retired. The Microbiological Data Program (MDP), started by USDA in 2001, is a prime candidate for such cost-cutting reform.

The MDP subjects the produce supply chain to multiple layers of product testing and surveillance for pathogens of concern to the public health. These tests are being conducted by state and local agencies, the FDA at points of entry, retail establishments and the USDA. The original objective of MDP was to provide data on microbial presence to establish a baseline to assess the risk of contamination, if any, in the domestic food supply. The data is used to establish “benchmarks” by which to evaluate the efficacy of procedures to reduce or eliminate foodborne microorganisms.

However, the MDP is practiced in only 11 states.

From 2001 to 2010, MDP tested more than 90,000 domestic and imported samples of six commodities: alfalfa sprouts, cantaloupe, lettuce, cilantro, spinach and tomatoes for Salmonella, E. coli 0157:H7 and Shigella. The current practices now include the following:

1. According to MDP procedures, state officials take three produce samples from the same box at a customer distribution center, collect all identifying information and test for specific pathogens.

2. If any sample is positive for any target pathogen, State /USDA notifies FDA and State Health departments.

3. Without investigation of the source of contamination, FDA and State Health Departments contact the source farm and request that all related products be recalled.

In all situations, when a positive is found in a ready-to-eat produce sample, we understand that FDA requests documentation of the brand

owner’s produce suppliers and then sends investigators to the farm, assuming that the contamination occurred there. Further, we have seen FDA request that the grower recall all produce from the source field. We have also seen FDA request the farm’s records of who else received produce, and request that those customers recall product sourced from that field. All of this is based on the finding of a single positive sample at retail.

The farm operations and handlers being targeted, that we know of, have all had food safety programs in place. In none of these cases has FDA reported evidence of gross contamination that would warrant further recalls. The farms and handlers themselves report that

USDA’S ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH BASELINE DATA HAS MORPHED INTO REGULATORY OVERSIGHT.

their records demonstrate all was in order, and the contamination, if it occurred on their field, was likely a single random event, limited to the lot that tested positive.

In addition, FDA now assumes that, in the absence of a cause of the contamination, the contamination occurred at the farm, all product from that field is potentially contaminated, and all product made from that field should be recalled. These requests for recalls are being made despite no further evidence of adulteration beyond the one sample collected several steps away in the supply chain. FDA reports they are taking such action “to be proactive.” Such action, based on speculation, will continue to cost the industry millions, without demonstrable protection of public health.

Finally, a single positive test result does not provide a “reasonable probability” that produce from the entire farm source is unsafe. In fact, during the last three years products recalled due to a single positive test result from

MDP sampling have not been associated with any reported foodborne illness or outbreak.

Just this past week, the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee recommended to the Secretary of Agriculture to “cease using the MDP sampling activity as an enforcement tool for which it was not scientifically designed.” We would agree with this approach.

From USDA’s perspective, the intent of MDP was to develop a baseline of pathogens in high risk commodities. The samples were to be collected anonymously from distribution centers and tested. Since the samples were collected without identifying information, there was no consequence to the industry. However, that changed recently. MDP is now collecting all brand and lot code information from their samples and, if positive, are notifying FDA, which then calls the company and requests a recall on

the basis of the single sample. Companies are not notified of the sampling unless the results are positive. Since the samples are tested in state laboratories, the results have as much credibility as if FDA tested them.

From the industry perspective, these tests are a duplication of expenses among the agencies since the testing is not a coordinated effort. The test results are not shared between the participants, rendering the test results less relevant in establishing baseline trends or giving visibility to multi-geographical events. Last, but not least, these test programs increase the burden on the supply chain with little apparent benefit in product safety being realized. In particular, USDA’s MDP program has ceased to be purely research to collect baseline data and morphed into a regulatory oversight. USDA does not have the statutory authority to become a regulatory arm for produce food safety, nor has FDA authorized USDA to utilize MDP as a regulatory enforcement program.

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Though Stacked With Talent, Can A Consolidated Delhaize With Diverse Banners Meet Its Overall Strategic Goals?

FROM JIM PREVOR'S PERISHABLE PUNDIT 02.28.2011

Our piece — *Delhaize Advises Vendors Of Plan To Consolidate Procurement: Is This A Win Or A Loss For Delhaize...And For The Broader Industry?* — brought many comments. Dave Diver, who had been vice president of produce at Hannaford and is currently a contributing editor to Pundit sister publication, *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, has a lot of faith in the team at Delhaize:

The Delhaize transition should be a challenging and exciting time for the company associates and the produce industry. The culture at Hannaford has always been one of staying on the cutting edge after thorough investigation, which, from what I have heard during the last year, is the process followed in this instance. The organization is blessed with hardworking smart people who get better every year.

Change brings uncertainty, but we have seen it in all parts of the produce industry for as long as I can remember. The biggest challenge for those outside is having to cope with changes not of their own making.

May everyone move forward to a more productive result.

— David Diver

Former vice president of produce
Hannaford Brothers

Another former retailer also has faith in the team at Delhaize, but his experience indicates that in the long run, these things tend to develop a momentum of their own:

I just finished reading your article on Delhaize and its plan regarding the consolidation of procurement. As always, you are right on mark, and thank you for the honorable mention. I agree with you that Delhaize has



David Diver



Dick Spezzano

some very talented produce people and will be lead by the talented and well-respected Jim Corby. I know Steve Williams and Will Wedge, and they are also high quality produce people. Jim Corby and the Delhaize executive team have the ability to look at how the big guys have executed their buying consolidation and hopefully will not make any of the same mistakes.

No doubt, there will be pain for the people, and at least in the short term, the consumer may suffer a bit. You hit on all of the points that contradict the senior management's motivations to centralize as the cost-saving and ability to buy better and cheaper that they project may not be realized. When most all of the big chains centralized, sooner or later they stripped the operating divisions of any buying responsibility. I have always believed that you can create a hybrid centralization with at least one buyer left in

the divisions. This one buyer can buy those items that are a pain for a centralized buying operation; this buyer could handle the shorts, the local deals, etc.

All of the centralized chains say that they have people in the operating divisions to be the eyes and ears of headquarters both as to the quality of produce arriving and in terms of staying close to the consumer. They say that they have a big voice back at corporate and they will get what they want. This may be true at the beginning, but as time goes by and new people take over those merchandising positions, they will have little interest or the skill sets necessary to be the "gate keepers" for quality and the information flow to corporate. Simply, they will have their hands full trying to do their jobs of selling whatever the centralized buyers buy. Don't get me wrong, these buyers usually do a good job, but they almost never get to

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see the product or what the division is competing against locally.

— Dick Spezzano

Former vice president of produce, Vons
President, Spezzano Consulting Service Inc.

We appreciate that both Dave and Dick took the time to share their perceptions with the trade. It seems to us that the short-term impact of consolidation is substantially muted by the seeding throughout the new organization of people who worked at Hannaford.

Long term, though — and Dick Spezzano alludes to this in his letter — the make-up of the organization creates its own imperatives. If one was a new junior buyer who joins the organization after this consolidation is complete, it is unlikely that you would see the path to a maximally successful career as being the protector of Hannaford or Bloom's particular niche in the market.

The very talented management team at Delhaize may make it all work. But

with. The issue here, for Delhaize, is whether the company is giving its own people the tools they need to succeed.

Will Wedge, for example, was given a new title and new job: Hannaford/Bloom Banner Merchandising — Fresh. *[Editor's note: Will Wedge will soon move on to be an independent store operator of Shop 'n Save, in Dover-Foxcroft, ME, an independent store supplied by Hannaford.]* This is clever and appropriate. It indicates a recognition that Hannaford and Bloom are significantly different than many of the other Delhaize operations.

The issue, of course, is this: If you know that these divisions are different and are going to market them as different, shouldn't you back up that "difference" and that "marketing" with differential procurement? In other words, logically, shouldn't Will have a buying team to execute the promise that is going to be made to the consumer?

Dick Spezzano's letter suggests a divisional buyer to handle shorts and local

uct available, the consolidated buying team will be more interested in setting up its own programs direct with shippers.

When one thinks about Delhaize, the bigger issue is whether this plan actually is sufficient to meet the need or achieve the goals. If one were a fly on the wall in Belgium, one of the concerns has to be that a chain such as Hannaford has been relatively isolated from much competition from Wal-Mart. Delhaize has an obligation to its shareholders to think about how it can thrive if Wal-Mart, as it eventually will, opens more stores that compete with Hannaford.

The history of consolidation in supermarkets over the past 20 years is, to no small extent, a history of retailers thinking about how to compete with Wal-Mart and deciding that the key was to reduce procurement costs.

In our last piece, we dealt with a lot of reasons why such a reduction in procurement costs might not occur, but even if it does, isn't that too little, too late to deal with Wal-Mart?

How much could additional consolidation of procurement actually save a chain such as Hannaford? Two percent seems like a very high number if one is not going to sacrifice quality. But even if it was 5 percent — how is saving 5 percent on produce procurement going to position Hannaford to defeat Wal-Mart in its market if the Bentonville behemoth starts rolling out Supercenters in Hannaford's market area? The answer is that it is not.

In fact, the opposite is true. The best approach would be for Hannaford to accentuate its local roots; to seek to buy brands and from growers that are too small for Wal-Mart; to monopolize the local produce suppliers; to handle better stuff in bigger variety than Wal-Mart; to let the local wholesale markets know that if they have something exceptional or an exceptional value, they have a customer.

So the issue is whether this consolidation really serves the strategic goals, properly understood, of Delhaize. This is a very different question from whether the particular individuals employed right now can successfully execute the plan.

We thank both Dave Diver and Dick Spezzano for helping us elucidate these matters.

The issue, of course, is this: If you know that these divisions are different and are going to market them as different, shouldn't you back up that "difference" and that "marketing" with differential procurement?

there is, to us, a kind of logical flaw in the new organization. The problem is not consolidation, per se. If Delhaize owned, say, Hannaford and Wegmans, both chains that try to buy the best product, consolidation might pose few problems.

The issue is consolidating Hannaford and Food Lion, which buy different product. Obviously, some things can be bought well on a consolidated basis, and, in fact, Delhaize probably did buy things such as bananas on a company-wide basis before this initiative. But that is because there is only really one product and less than a half-dozen companies to speak

buying. Not a bad idea. But we would stand with the idea that no matter where the buyer is located, the crucial thing is that the buyer be fully vested in the banner and the consumer it serves.

Hannaford buyers, of course, care about price but, by and large, they really try to get the best product in the stores. Food Lion has other priorities. How do you mesh this and make consolidated buying work?

Right now, Hannaford is very open to buying both direct and from the terminal markets in Boston. It is highly likely that even if a wholesaler has a superior prod-

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Conference Management: Canadian Produce Marketing Association, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
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Email: vmarcu@cpma.ca
Website: www.cpma.ca

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Email: nepc2@rcn.com
Website: www.newenglandproduce.com

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Website: www.unitedfresh.org

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Conference Venue: Palais Des Congres De Montreal, Montreal, Canada
Conference Management: Imex Management, Inc., Charlotte, NC
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Email: Erich@ImexManagement.com
Website: www.imexmgt.com

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Conference Venue: Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Centre, Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Conference Management: Overseas Exhibition Services Ltd., London
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Email: hofex@oesallworld.com
Website: www.hofex.com

May 18 - 20, 2011**SIAL CHINA 2011**

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Pudong, Shanghai, China

Conference Management: IMEX Management, Inc., Charlotte, NC

Phone: 704-365-0041 • **Fax:** 704-365-8426

Email: erich@imexmanagement.com

Website: www.imexmgt.com

May 21 - 24, 2011**NRA SHOW 2011**

The National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show is the largest single gathering of restaurant, foodservice and lodging professionals in the Western Hemisphere.

Conference Venue: McCormick Place, Chicago, IL
Conference Management: National Restaurant Association, Chicago, IL
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Phone: 703-934-4700 • **Fax:** 703-934-4899

Email: aff@naylor.com

Website: www.nasdatradeshows.org

May 25 - 29, 2011**THAIFEX - WORLD OF FOOD ASIA 2011**

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Conference Venue: Impact Exhibition & Convention Center, Bangkok, Thailand

Conference Management: Koelnmesse Pte, Inc.,

Phone: 656-500-6711

Email: l.how@koelnmesse.com.sg

Website: www.worldoffoodasia.com

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INDUSTRY CONCERNS SHOULD TRUMP ASSOCIATION CONCERNS IN MERGER TALK

By James Prevor
President & Editor-in-Chief



The question of whether the Produce Marketing Association and the United Fresh Produce Association ought to merge has vexed the industry for decades. This year, the industry is confronting this decision once again, behind closed doors.

It is not an obvious or easy decision. The gist of the problem is that PMA has come to own the largest trade show in the industry. It is an exceedingly successful and profitable business and throws off virtually all of the trade's communal free cash flow. Yet, United, as the trade's primary representative in the halls of Congress, has the bulk of responsibility for priority industry expenditures.

If we study the matter and ask what functions the trade most needs from its associations, we consistently get two answers: The trade needs representation before the government and other influencers in society, and the trade needs promotional assistance with consumers at large.

When he was Chairman of PMA, Bruce Peterson — who now serves on the Board of United — often would pose this challenge to all industry associations: “If this association didn't exist, would we invent it today?”

Though it is often alleged that merger has been blocked by the egos of various executives, and one can never entirely dismiss these concerns, it is also true that this influence can never be definitive in the face of a resolute board of directors. The truth is that there are substantive difficulties to merger that have never quite been satisfied. Most notably, the question of the scope of the industry has been unclear.

Both United and PMA have traditionally had a vertical membership including retailers, foodservice operators, wholesalers, distributors, processors, shipper, growers and others. This is terrific for discussions on things such as PLU standardization or traceability, but those types of discussions, though perhaps enriched by relationships built in association work, can often be done through ad hoc committees.

When it comes to representation, the vertical association model has challenges. Most recently, on the Food Safety Bill, it is notable that both PMA and United, in the end, opposed the bill with its exemption for small growers. Yet both FMI — representing supermarkets — and NRA — representing restaurants — endorsed the bill.

The matter was decided hastily during the Lame Duck session, and there weren't any opportunities for our trade associations to testify before Congress during this time. But Reggie Griffin, vice president of produce and floral procurement and merchandising at The Kroger Co., is in line to become Chairman of United at its convention this May. It is unlikely that if such an issue were to arise during his term at the helm of United it would make sense to have him testifying before Congress

strongly opposing such a bill, only to have his testimony followed by, say, Kroger chairman and CEO Dave Dillon, speaking on behalf of FMI, strongly supporting the legislation.

At the same time, the desire for merger makes a lot of sense. On government relations, there is the sense that multiple voices weaken the trade's influence in D.C. On hopes for consumer outreach, a unified approach is more likely to be a success. There also is a sense that there is a great deal of efficiency that could be gained by merger. Some of this is through the elimination of duplicative overhead — we don't need two association CEOs, etc.— and some is from the notion that both associations vie to remain relevant, and so, inevitably, duplicate one another. Also in the background of all this is that we have many local and regional associations, some with a great deal of heft.

Our experience has been that most members of the boards of directors of national associations take their responsibilities seriously. But elections to these boards are not contested, and so the members “represent” the trade in only the most

random way. There are also countless members of the trade who may not have the time or interest to give sustained involvement by serving on a board, but who have much insight to share on crucial issues such as industry governance. In addition, many

ex-members of boards, who served their time and are not currently active on boards, have much insight to share.

The worst possible thing is to one day have a press conference to announce a merger, or that merger talks have collapsed, without giving the trade an opportunity to review the relevant facts and suggest appropriate structures. It is a recipe for discord down the road and the splintering of any newly merged associations. It is better if everyone who cares to do so gets to review the data and speak up before decisions are announced. The Internet and social media make this easy to do, and for the associations looking to maximize the value for the industry, transparency should be foremost in their operations.

The key is for association board members to see their roles in a specific way. Most industry members really care about the industry, not the association. Put another way, they support the association because they think it will make for a better industry, not because they care about the association itself. If one focuses on the industry, one will be thinking about how decisions impact the future profitability of the trade.

In the end, the discussion needs to go past each association's proprietary concerns and come back to Peterson's question: “If this association didn't exist, would we invent it today?” By opening and bending the process, we will focus more on the best interests of the trade at large. That is really our goal, and that is really what most industry executives care about. There is no reason to run a closed 20th century process to achieve 21st century goals.

pb

**By opening and bending the process,
we focus more on the best interests
of the trade at large.**

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Connecting The Dots Between Produce and Health

BY BILL BISHOP, CHAIRMAN, WILLARD BISHOP LLC

Who's doing the best job of connecting the dots between produce and health? Based on recent field research, the answer may just be Whole Foods Markets. Under their Health Starts Here program, founder John Mackey sees as a key driver in repositioning the retailer from "whole paycheck" to a retailer-focused on shopper health. Whole Foods is doing as good a job as we've seen in putting produce first in its health and wellness campaign.

At the core of its effort is a powerful but simple idea with a lot of appeal in today's obesity-obsessed culture; i.e., a nutrient density index. Simply put, the nutrient density index scores products in terms of the amount of nutrition they deliver per calorie. Products are rated on their aggregate nutrient density including an extensive range of micro-nutrients that includes, but isn't limited to, vitamins, minerals, vitamins and anti-

oxidants capabilities. The index ranges from 1,000 on the high end to 1 on the low end.

All this sounds complicated until you see it through the eyes of a Whole Foods shopper. As shoppers enter the produce department, which is already very visually appealing, there are not only signs calling out the Health Starts Here Program, but also easy-to-read lists of the vegetables and fruit ranked tops in terms of nutrient density. Below left is a sample of what we found listed throughout the store, as well as on pocket guides available free at their Health Starts Here reading center.

And the information continues on through the store including meat, fish, cheese and other dairy products.

So how does a shopper use this information? It's simple to say, but it takes a little will power to do; i.e., eat more of the high indexing foods first at each meal so that you satisfy your nutritional needs while consuming a lower amount of calories. After trying it, I can tell you that it really isn't that hard to do if you concentrate, and use some of the recipes made available through the program.

Not surprisingly, the program is the creation of a leading physician, Dr. Joel Fuhrman, M.D., Chief Medical Officer of Eat Right America, who has treated more than 10,000 patients over the past 15 years and recently written a peer-reviewed article in the journal *Alternative Therapies*, reporting an average weight loss of participants in his program of 53 lbs over a two-year period. So it appears you can manage your weight,

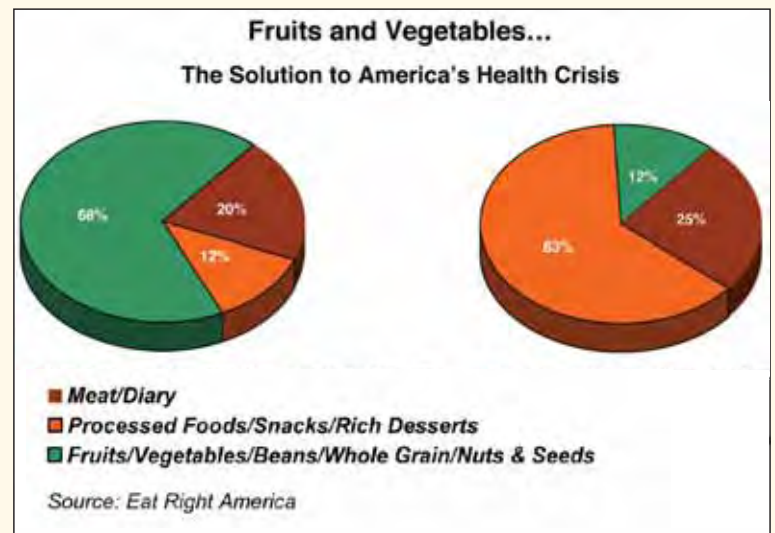
get the nutrition you need and not have to be hungry all the time by eating a lot more fruits and vegetables.

The Whole Foods brochure invites shoppers to use the Eat Right America nutrition prescription — the nation's only online personal nutritional assessment and eating plan by visiting the retailer's Web site or the Eat Right America Web site.

Turns out that more than 25,000 customers have already taken the personal nutritional assessment. Based on an analysis of more than 7,000 of the assessments, there's a clear difference between the diets of shoppers with a high risk for diabetes vs. those who follow a diet that includes more high nutrient density foods.

Unconfirmed reports are that Whole Foods has seen measurable increase in pro-

The Whole Foods Nutrient Density Index	
Green Vegetables:	Index Value
1. Mustard/Turnip/Collard Greens	1,000
2. Kale	1,000
3. Watercress	1,000
4. Bok Choy	824
Non-Green Vegetables:	
1. Radish	554
2. Bean Sprouts	444
3. Red Pepper	366
4. Radicchio	359
5. Turnip	337
Fruit:	
1. Strawberries	212
2. Blackberries	178
3. Plum	157
4. Raspberries	145
5. Blueberries	130
Beans:	
1. Lentils	104
2. Red Kidney Beans	100
3. Great Northern Beans	94
4. Adzuki Beans	84
5. Black Beans	8



duce sales as a result. This was particularly true for green vegetables.

It's common knowledge that it makes sense to eat more vegetables and fruit, and now at least one retailer is helping customers see the direct connection to better health and customers are apparently rewarding them for this. Sounds like the way it should work.



Willard Bishop is a consulting firm working with retail and foodservice companies to solve business problems and identify opportunities to drive profitable growth. For over 30 years, we have helped clients in the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Latin America implement go-to-market strategies that improve both top-line sales and bottom-line profits.

Will It Work Outside Of Whole Foods?

BY JIM PREVOR, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PRODUCE BUSINESS

The produce industry has little to complain about regarding the Whole Foods “Health Starts Here” program — it probably has helped boost produce consumption, specifically, consumption of healthy greens. Alas, man does not live by mustard, turnip and collard greens alone, and so the Nutrient Density Index is not really all that useful.

An item can be chock full of particular nutrients and people will drop dead if that is all they eat. Nutritional diversity — getting needed fats, protein, various vitamins and minerals, etc. — is much more important than nutrient density.

Besides, there is a real question about the wisdom of a retailer hanging its hat on a program with so little evidence of effectiveness. Yes, there is a peer reviewed study that does show a loss of 53 lbs. over a two-year period. It is worth noting, however, that this statistic only applies to 19 — yes, 19, count ‘em — people! In fact the study started out with 56 people, and only 19 showed up for their two-year weigh in. We don’t know, but it seems reasonable to surmise that the other folks were not as proud of their weight loss accomplishments.

The truth is, the whole study is not really projectable to the general population. The 56 people who started in the study were people motivated enough about weight loss to go visit a doctor for the specific purpose of getting weight loss counseling. So the study is dealing with highly motivated people with the means to access medical care — and, even so, almost two-thirds of the people dropped out before the two-year mark.

This is one of the great dilemmas of public health. If we tell people they should eat only fruits, vegetables, whole grains and a little fish, we might be giving them good advice. But if nobody will follow that advice, how helpful are we really being?

The Whole Foods customer is very atypical — with higher incomes, higher educational levels, and greater interest in health and wellness — than the general

population. Perhaps this program, with a need for highly motivated consumers, will be useful to those Whole Foods shoppers and thus to the chain and its suppliers. Yet it seems unlikely to appeal significantly to the Wal-Mart shopper.

Whatever its impact with specific shopper groups, the whole issue of marketing based on health and nutritional content begs the question of whether such pleas actually motivate consumers. There is a kind of Aristotelian certainty in thinking that if people know something is good for them, then they will do that thing. But the evidence that this is true is scanty.

Due to family illness, I’ve had a lot of time recently to interact with doctors. Many doctors are obese. If doctors working in direct contact with the effects of obesity and with access to information and education far beyond that of the general public are not motivated to change their own habits, it seems highly unlikely that signage in stores or produce industry marketing efforts are going to prompt such behavioral change.

We do have indications that as education and income increase, better dietary habits become more common. It is not 100 percent clear what to make of this, however. After all, it could be that those with better dietary habits are healthier, and thus, better able to complete school and work productively. It is also possible that the traits that lead one to do well in school and at work — an ability and willingness to absorb information and act on the implications of that information — also lead individuals to understand and act upon dietary advice.

Note that none of this seems to indicate that nutritional education is likely to change behavior of the great majority of people. This is especially true if the change is likely to be unpleasant. In other words, we may be able to switch people from one sweet fruit to another based on the idea that one is more healthful than another. We have zero evidence that the reason people buy

Haagen-Dazs rather than Mustard Greens is that they don’t realize the ice cream is more likely to promote obesity.

What the industry could actually use is some controlled trials that test what actually motivates consumers to buy fruits and vegetables. Let us assume our goal is to sell more berries. Which would be a more effective commercial: one that features a group of doctors detailing the beneficial attributes of berries, or one that shows beautiful berries bouncing onto mounds of ice cream and being enjoyed by beautiful young children at a family picnic celebrating Grandma’s 80th birthday?

We should do a lot more research before endorsing such a medicinal approach.

We don’t really know the answer to that question because, to my knowledge, the test has either not been done, or if done, the results were not released to the public. But this author’s money is going down on the side that says that selling delicious flavor and an emotional connection to friends, family and good times will beat out the doctors every time.

Perhaps this approach will work for Whole Foods, but the chain has atypical customers and its interests are more about repositioning the chain from a place that sells pricy food to a place that sells good food. That is a different task than simply selling more produce to the general public. We should do a lot more research before endorsing such a medicinal approach.

TRANSITIONS

REDLINE SOLUTIONS SANTA CLARA, CA

Pat McDonough was hired as Southern California territory manager. He is a seasoned professional with extensive experience in supply chain applications. He brings strong customer focus and supply chain experience that will help the company better serve its Southern California grower/shippers.



COASTLINE SALINAS, CA

Chris Arias was promoted to assistant sales manager. His primary responsibility will be to provide increased focus and direction to the company's various market segments while optimizing the internal sales processes and workflows. He possesses 18 years of produce experience and has worked for Coastline since 2007 when he was hired as a sales professional.



PRO*ACT MONTEREY, CA

Max Yeater was promoted to president. An industry veteran with 17 years of experience with Pro*Act, he previously worked as the chief operating officer. Prior to that role, he was vice president of procurement. He will be taking on all day-to-day responsibilities and accountability for Pro*Act, focusing on long-term strategic planning.



COAST PRODUCE COMPANY LOS ANGELES, CA

Vince Maggio was hired as vice president of sales and procurement. He brings 32 years of experience as an accomplished procurement and category manager. His duties will include providing strategic direction to the sales and procurement teams that will maximize sales and gross profit. He will also be responsible for streamlining and improving buying practices.



MANN PACKING CO. SALINAS, CA

Chip Callahan was hired as foodservice regional sales manager for the Eastern United States. He brings 22 years of sales experience with seafood, frozen and fresh produce, as well as distribution experience. His duties will include driving sales and providing valuable insight into the factors that motivate the company's distributor customers.



RED BLOSSOM SALES SALINAS, CA

Greg Phelan was hired to the grower and farm management team. He previously worked for Bien Nacido Vineyards, Solomon Hills Vineyards, Solomon Hills Berry Farms and Rancho Tepusquet Orchard. A graduate of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, he is a California licensed pest control adviser.



NEW PRODUCTS

SEEDLESS MANDARIN ORANGES

LoBue Citrus, Lindsay, CA, has launched Ribbitz, a new brand of seedless mandarin oranges in bold, kid-friendly packaging. Ribbitz are sweet, easy to peel and just the right size for on-the-go snacking. Supplies are expected through May. The new brand follows the recent introduction of Heritage Reserve Navel oranges.



KID-FRIENDLY MANDARIN ORANGE PACKAGING

Cecelia Packaging Corp., Orange Cove, CA, introduced Dimples, a children's character featured on new Golden Nugget Mandarin Orange packaging, to encourage healthful eating among children. Dimples Mandarins are simple to peel, seedless, work well in children's lunches and make for an excellent addition to any diet.



SALAD KITS

Dole Foods, Monterey, CA, introduced two new vinaigrette-based All Natural Dole Salad kits, Endless Summer and Spinach Cherry Almond Bleu, set to ship in April. Endless Summer blends romaine lettuce with shredded carrots, red cabbage, shredded cheeses, roasted sunflower kernels, croutons and herb seasoning. Spinach Cherry Almond Bleu combines tender, robust baby spinach leaves with bleu cheese crumbles, dried whole cherries and sliced almonds.



SALAD BLEND

Dole Foods, Monterey, CA, introduced a tangy new Dole Salad blend, a robust Arugula that is scheduled to launch in April. The new 5-oz. blend caters to consumers looking for a tangier, bolder taste experience. It satisfies a unique consumer niche, performs equally well as an entrée or side salad and is growing in popularity at both retail and restaurant levels.



ANNOUNCEMENTS

ALL STATE PACKERS FORMS RIVERMAID TRADING COMPANY

All State Packers, Lodi, CA, assembled an expert team to become Rivermaid Trading Company. Rivermaid is a legacy label of All State Packers dating back to the 1930s. Rivermaid Trading Company's brands will include Rivermaid, Blue Anchor, Golden Glow, Joe Green, Pixie Pears, Quercus Lake and Redwood Empire.



NPPGA HONORS RON OFFUTT WITH SERVICE AWARD

The Northern Plains Potato Growers Association, East Grand Forks, MN, presented Ronald D. Offutt (pictured) the 2011 NPPGA Meritorious Service Award for his leadership, vision and innovation. Offutt's Fargo, ND-based business operations employ more than 4,300 people, and include the R.D. Offutt Company and RDO Equipment Company.



Produce Watch is a regular feature of PRODUCE BUSINESS. Please send information on new products, personnel changes, industry, corporate and personal milestones and available literature, along with a color photo, slide or transparency to: Managing Editor, PRODUCE BUSINESS, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail us at info@producebusiness.com

ANNOUNCEMENTS

UTAH GROCER BUILDS GIANT POTATO DISPLAY

Fresh Market grocery store in Spanish Fork, UT, built an Idaho potato display using 240,000 russet potatoes as part of the Eagle, ID-based Idaho Potato Commission's Potato Lover's Month. To kick off the display, 10-lb. bags of Idaho potatoes were on sale for 59 cents. It took 40 pallets of potatoes, five hours and dozens of people to complete the display. IPC provided marketing support and promotional materials for the display. The IPC offers retailers extensive marketing and sales support for all types of promotions.



NATIONAL MANGO BOARD FOCUSES ON FOODSERVICE PROMOTIONS

The National Mango Board, Orlando, FL, experienced another year of success with its dynamic foodservice efforts. The NMB sponsored The Flavor Experience, a 3-day conference geared toward chain operators and chefs. In 2010, the NMB also implemented many strong chain promotions, including a partnership with BJ Restaurants, which has 102 locations.



PERI & SONS PACKS NEW LOOK

Peri & Sons Farms, Yerington, NV, is retiring its Mustang, Wabuska Whopper, Purple Passion and Mother's Love brands, and marketing all Peri & Sons Farms' onions, both conventional and organic, under a single Peri & Sons Farms brand. This transition will be seen in the new look of its recently released packing cartons.



ROYAL ROSE RADICCHIO ANNOUNCES POWER PARTNERS

Royal Rose Radicchio, Salinas, CA, announced "Power Partners," foods with pungent flavors with which to pair radicchio. Pungent flavors are found in mustards, anchovies, many ripe cheeses, smoke-flavored food, cured olives, horseradish, sulfurous vegetables and freshly ground black pepper. Pairing pungency with radicchio's bold bitterness makes for a head-on "strong meets strong" flavor marriage.



CF FRESH CELEBRATES 20 YEARS OF ORGANIC ARGENTINE PEARS

CF Fresh Inc., Sedro-Wooley, WA, is celebrating 20 years of importing certified organic pears from Argentina and working closely with visionary Argentine organic pear grower and exporter, Agro Roca S.A. CF Fresh's organic import program has grown significantly over the years, and today receives shipments of 200-400 pallets at a time.



FRONTERA PRODUCE EXPANDS MELON PROGRAMS, OPENS SALES OFFICE

Frontera Produce, Edinburg, TX, partnered with Santa Rosa Produce, an Arizona-based melon grower. Frontera also opened a new sales office in the Greater Cincinnati area. The new branch office, which is managed by Don Johnston and supported by three other sales staff, has almost 60 years of combined industry experience.



CUTIES DEBUTS TELEVISION ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Cuties, a Los Angeles, CA-based joint venture between Paramount Citrus Association, Sun Pacific and Fowler Packing, launched a new television advertising campaign with the tagline: "Kids Love Cuties. Because Cuties Are Made For Kids." The mom-targeted ads are aimed at increasing category awareness and brand preference.



DUDA FARM FRESH FOODS TEAMS UP WITH FDOC

Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL, partnered with the Florida Department of Citrus to include a coupon for a free Florida citrus cookbook on the company's Florida citrus bags. The cookbook is filled with 34 recipes and color photos including contemporary citrus dishes and traditional favorites. The coupons must be redeemed by May 31.



VOC HONORS GROWER OF THE YEAR, HALL OF FAME RECIPIENTS

Vidalia Onion Committee, Vidalia, GA, named Delbert Bland of Bland Farms, LLC, Grower of the Year for overall achievement and success as a Vidalia Onion producer. The VOC also announced its latest 2010 Hall of Fame inductee, Delwin Dowdy of Dowdy Farms, whose wife Mary accepted the posthumous award for her late husband.



MANN PACKING TO PROMOTE GRILLING FOR EASTER

Mann Packing Co., Inc., Salinas, CA, is partnering with the makers of Reynolds Wrap Foil on a springtime cross-promotion to encourage grilling for the Easter holiday. Starting March 21, one million IRCs for \$1-off Reynolds Wrap Heavy Duty Aluminum Foil will be affixed to all Mann's packages of Vegetable, Butternut Squash Cubes, Sweet Potato Fries and Sweet Potato Cubes.



PAIA NAMES NEW EAST COAST CHAIRMAN

Peruvian Asparagus Association has named Walter Yager (pictured) as its new East Coast co-chairman. He will be working closely with PAIA's West Coast chairman, Chris Martin of Gourmet Trading. PAIA has begun 2011 emphasizing its commitment to advancing the asparagus industry and focusing on objectives that will enhance and benefit the overall trade.



CORRECTION: In the February issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS, there was an error in the Toronto Market Profile. Sal Sarraino is the CEO of Fresh Taste Produce.

Produce Watch is a regular feature of Produce Business. Please send information on new products, personnel changes, industry, corporate and personal milestones and available literature, along with a color photo, slide or transparency to: Managing Editor, Produce Business, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail us at info@producebusiness.com

UNITED FRESH AISLE-BY-AISLE BOOTH REVIEW

BOOTH #409

SORMAC B.V.

Venlo, Netherlands

Sormac is a leading supplier of onion peeling equipment. The distinctive feature of the peelers is the supreme ease of operation and the perfect peeling quality. Furthermore, it has low energy consumption, while it uses less compressed air, and has an incredibly low noise level.

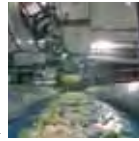


BOOTH #415

BEST SORTING

Heverlee, Belgium

BEST (Belgian Electronic Sorting Technology) is an innovative company specializing in manufacturing sorting machinery for the food and non-food industry. Separating foreign objects, discolorations or imperfections is BEST's corporate objective. Thanks to a wide range of technologies (laser, camera, LED, X-ray, or a combination) BEST is able to resolve many sorting challenges.



BOOTH #420

CHARLIE'S MACHINE & SUPPLY INC.

Boulder, CO

We specialize in fresh-cut vegetable/fruit processing equipment including peeling, washing, cutting, drying, packing, scales, conveyors and sanitation solutions. Additionally, we can also custom-design a variety of equipment including dryers, cutters, wash systems, packing tables and more. We pride ourselves on "small machines doing big jobs and big machines at small prices."



BOOTH #427

KMT WATERJET SYSTEMS

Baxter Springs, KS

KMT Waterjet is the sanitary cutting solution for food manufacturers requiring maximum production. Faster pure-water cutting offers the greatest added value of uninterrupted production by cutting food in a bacteria-free and hygienic environment. KMT is a global manufacturer of pumps and nozzles for high-speed cutting in the food industry.



BOOTH #434

HERCULES POLY INC.

Eclectic, AL

We are a one-stop shop for all your plastic bagging needs. Established in 1993, we manufacture from our plant in Eclectic, AL. We will do small, medium or large runs and we can print on the bags as well.



BOOTH #509

ROBBIE MANUFACTURING

Lenexa, KS

We will be displaying Fresh N Tasty Produce Pouches for fresh-cut produce, designed with custom-laser microperforation technology to improve the consistency of produce quality throughout its shelf-life. Pouches offer consumers value-added benefits, including a handle, resealable zipper and large viewing window.



BOOTH #513

HEAT AND CONTROL INC.

Hayward, CA

We offer weighing, inspection and packaging equipment, including conveyors, weighers, metal detectors, X-ray inspection and tray sealers. We also offer a wide variety of equipment for fresh-cut salads, fruits and vegetables and frozen foods. Additionally, we build produce unloading, transfer, storage, washing and peeling systems.



BOOTH #531

WEBBER/SMITH ASSOCIATES INC.

Lancaster, PA

We have been designing only refrigerated food manufacturing and distribution facilities throughout the United States for more than 32 years. We are a full-service engineering/architectural firm with all required disciplines in-house to perform all aspects of plant design from totally new facilities, expansions/remodels and master planning for future growth.



BOOTH #609

ESI GROUP USA

Hartland, WI

ESI is an industry leading design-build firm focused on the new construction, expansion and renovation of foodservice facilities. Our "single source" approach streamlines the building process allowing the team at ESI to remain focused on the needs of the customer, the success of their project and their financial bottom line.



BOOTH #630

PAKSENSE

Boise, ID

About the size of a sugar packet, PakSense Ultra Labels are a new class of temperature recorder. Contact and wireless models are also available and can be recycled.



BOOTH #633

NEW LEAF FOOD SAFETY SOLUTIONS

Salinas, CA

New Leaf Food Safety Solutions, a subsidiary of Taylor Fresh Foods, presents The SmartWash™ Solution, a revolutionary food wash enhancer that boosts and stabilizes the pathogen-fighting power of standard wash systems. When combined with chlorine, SmartWash maintains optimal levels of free chlorine to completely eliminate cross contamination.



BOOTH #660

USDA NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE

Washington, D.C.

The USDA's NASS conducts hundreds of surveys every year and prepares reports covering virtually every aspect of U.S. agriculture. NASS is committed to providing timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture.



BOOTH #701

URSHEL LABORATORIES INC.

Valparaiso, IN

Engineered to produce continuous precision slices with extensive detail given to key elements throughout the machine, the new E TranSlicer joins the production-proven TranSlicer series in the Urschel line-up. This new machine demonstrates the company's engineering-driven spirit, which has been key to the company's 100 years of success.



BOOTH #704

APIO INC.

Guadalupe, CA

Visit our booth to find out how we can help increase the shelf-life of your fresh produce with patented BreatheWay modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) technology. We offer custom solutions to your fresh fruit and vegetable packaging challenges. Plus, learn about our new Clearly Fresh produce bags.



BOOTH #706

ECOLAB INC.

St. Paul, MN

Our comprehensive approach includes plant-wide cleaning and sanitation solutions, a broad range of food surface antimicrobial treatments, industry-specific water management expertise and pest elimination services.



BOOTH #829

CALIFORNIA GIANT BERRY FARMS

Watsonville, CA

It's a win-win with California Giant Berry Farms. Today, consumers are just a click away when scanning QR codes on our berry clamshell labels. They can meet our growers, download recipes, learn tips on selection and storage and win prizes. Stop by to learn more about our products and programs.



BOOTH #842

POLYCONVERSIONS INC.

Rantoul, IL

For more than 15 years PolyCo has been providing produce growers and processors with strong, durable, cost-effective and USA-made personal protection solutions. Stop by our booth to see PolyCo's complete line of VR Protective Wear including sleeves, aprons, gloves, gowns, rainwear, shoe and boot covers.



BOOTH #905

PURA VIDA FARMS

Scottsdale, AZ

Pura Vida Farms is committed to providing the highest quality melons, citrus and pineapple to retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operators throughout North America. Stop by our booth to learn more about our new citrus and pineapple programs and to meet our team of experienced professionals.



BOOTH #911

PRODUCE PRO SOFTWARE

Woodridge, IL

Produce Pro provides sales order entry, purchasing, inventory management, routing/logistics, accounting, E-commerce, analytics and warehouse management features specifically designed for our clients' unique needs. Our powerful software solution, together with our perishable food industry experts and business consulting services, allows our clients to take their company to the next level.



BOOTH #945

NORTH SHORE LIVING HERBS

Thermal, CA

North Shore Living Herbs are packaged with the roots still intact, providing an extended shelf-life and less shrink. Our greenhouse-grown herbs are available year-round.



UNITED FRESH AISLE-BY-AISLE BOOTH REVIEW

BOOTH #1029

MUCCI FARMS

Kingsville, Ontario, Canada
Mucci Farms is a gourmet greenhouse vegetable grower, packer and shipper committed to quality, food safety and the needs of the consumer market. This year, we will spotlight our extremely popular Bella Sweets™ mini peppers and newly released Sun Drops™ grape tomatoes.



BOOTH #1043

**FRESHERIZED FOODS/
WHOLLY GUACAMOLE**

Fort Worth, TX
Showcasing our full selection of all-natural Wholly Guacamole, Wholly Salsa & NEW Wholly Queso. Taste the difference in our Fresherized products and why Wholly is top ranked.



BOOTH #1115

VOLM COMPANIES INC.

Antigo, WI
A worldwide provider of produce packaging, Volm is known for high-end graphics capabilities and innovative products like the revolutionary new, eco-smart Ultratech™ Mesh. It offers substantial material and energy savings and runs smoothly on existing equipment — especially on Volm's Ultrek 320 high-speed vertical form, fill and seal bagger.



BOOTH #1143

PECO PALLET

Yonkers, NY
PECO Pallet is a national leader in pallet rental services. More than 95 percent of retailers throughout the United States currently utilize PECO's signature red wooden pallets.



BOOTH #1221

**DEL MONTE FRESH
PRODUCE N.A. INC.**

Coral Gables, FL
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For the past 27 years, N2N Global has been an end-to-end food supply chain software solution provider. This focus has led to innovative solutions for Agri-ERP, food safety management and Agri-Business Intelligence, allowing us to deliver traceability, PTI compliance and increased value for all the participants of the food supply chain.



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BOOTH #1604

PRODUCE BUSINESS

Boca Raton, FL
PRODUCE BUSINESS is the No. 1 publication reaching produce buyers around the world. Covering marketing, merchandising, management and procurement issues that affect sales of produce and floral items, PRODUCE BUSINESS uniquely "initiates industry improvement."



BOOTH #1604

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Boca Raton, FL
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UNITED FRESH AISLE-BY-AISLE BOOTH REVIEW

BOOTH #1604
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Boca Raton, FL

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Tracey Bloom



Holly Clegg



Kevin Gillespie



Ingrid Hoffmann



Nathan Lippy



Allen Susser



Ming Tsai



Martin Yan

Super Chefs Sing In Praise Of Produce

Top toques focus on keeping produce on consumers' minds, and their plates.

COMPILED BY JENNIFER LESLIE KRAMER

AMERICA HAS BECOME A NATION OF FOODIES. Whether we are tweeting shots of our latest culinary adventures, investigating new ingredients or reading the newest food magazines, we are constantly on the lookout for new and different products to incorporate into our diets. Often, we rely on super chefs for inspiration and exciting new ideas. But there's more to today's top toques than a crisp pair of chef whites. Starring in nationally broadcast cooking shows, writing best-selling cookbooks and helming critically acclaimed restaurants, these culinary constellations are the tastemakers of a nation. And as America faces an obesity epidemic of epic proportions, their guidance is needed more than ever before. When they talk, people listen.

With that in mind, along with the initiative put forth by the National Restaurant Association and Produce Marketing Association to double produce usage in restaurants by 2020, *PRODUCE BUSINESS* interviewed nine of today's top chefs on the important role produce plays in today's meals. They include Jon Ashton, food correspondent for "The Daily Buzz;" Tracey Bloom, seventh season cheftestant on Bravo's "Top Chef;" Holly Clegg, best-selling cookbook author; Kevin Gillespie, sixth season "Top Chef" cheftestant; Ingrid Hoffman, host of the Cooking Channel's "Simply Delicioso;" Nathan Lippy, star of Ustream channel's "Food, Drinks and Rock & Roll Live;" Allen Susser, executive chef and owner of Chef Allen's Seafood Grill and Taste Gastropub; Ming Tsai, executive chef and owner of Blue Ginger; and Martin Yan; founder of China's The Martin Yan Culinary Arts Center. (See biographies on page 30.)

What is your favorite fresh produce item and how do you use it?

Jon Ashton: Being a chef, it would be unfair to single out one particular item. Each gem in the garden adds its own special blend of vitamins and nutrients and can be customized to fit the recipe I am preparing that day.

Tracey Bloom: Right now, pea shoots are my favorite fresh produce item. I have been using them as a garnish, in salads, cooked with other delicious produce, and most recently, I have been juicing them for my own "super green juice," which I drink daily.

Holly Clegg: I love sweet potatoes — the extraordinary versatile and delicious Louisiana yam. Living in Louisiana, I appreciate the natural sweetness of our Louisiana yams, and have created many different dishes using them as an ingredient! We know the yam is delicious as a baked side or cut as French fries, but the sweet potato can also add a nutritional boost to any recipe. From salads, breads and biscuits, to soups and stews, and even desserts, I have created recipes and shown people that this is a ver-

satile vegetable. Believe me, once you try the outstanding Yam Trifle you are hooked!

Kevin Gillespie: Vidalia onions — I love them marinated and grilled, and used in salads next to meat. It enhances the smokiness and gives a sweet quality.

Ingrid Hoffmann: My favorite is the Chilean Hass avocado, which has the most plant fat, giving them much more flavor than other avocados. I use avocados in everything, starting in the morning on my toast and egg whites, in my salads, in my pastas, etc. I use them as a weight loss tool because they fill me up so I feel satisfied longer. I also use them as a hair conditioner, when they start going bad!

Nathan Lippy: As a Floridian, I have always loved the versatility of using fresh citrus in my cooking. Specifically, limes are my favorite. They can add beautiful tart and sweet flavor profiles to savory dishes, plus they are good lookin'!

Editor's Note: A few of the chefs included herein serve as paid representatives for produce commodity boards. They include: Kevin Gillespie for the Vidalia Onion Committee, Ingrid Hoffmann for the Chilean Avocado Importers Association and Allen Susser for the National Mango Board.

Allen Susser: I'm a little crazy for mangos. They just fit my cooking style. In Miami, we have great cultural diversity along with tropical heat. I use mangos in a variety of ways, from Mango Mojitos and Red Hot Curried Mussels to Mango- or Pistachio-Crusted Grouper with rock shrimp, leeks, mango and coconut rum. Then there are still condiments and desserts!

Ming Tsai: I use ginger to season a stir-fry, as a base of sauces and in braising. Ginger is a great enhancement to cocktails, and easily fits into

desserts, too.

Martin Yan: I love Napa cabbage. It's versatile, nutrient-dense and readily available. I like to add it to salads, stir-fries and soups. It can also be used as wrappers for cabbage rolls, pickled like kimchi in Korean cuisine, or chopped up and added to a dumpling filling for added crunch. It is an all-in-one, one-for-all, good tasting, healthful vegetable.

What trends do you see with regard to chefs using fresh produce? Which produce items are you hearing about most?

Jon Ashton: Chefs are creating hyper-local menus using fresh produce from neighborhood farmers' markets across the country. Menus reference these farms to promote organic or fresh seasonal offerings. Beets seem trendy at the moment.

Tracey Bloom: As far as trends go, I don't see much change with the chefs around me. It has always been rule of thumb to buy as much local and seasonal produce as possible. Of course, using Heirloom vegetables when available is hot.

Holly Clegg: I think chefs have more of a local, seasonal focus because of availability and cost, which is great because it keeps a focus on our important local farmers. With the different produce blends, new innovative vegetables and edible garnishes pop on the plate.

Kevin Gillespie: I'm hearing a lot about lettuces. You have to have them, and it seems mundane, but there are so many great varieties now. It used to be hard to get good, consistent quality, but now farmers are growing Heirlooms that are hardier.

Ingrid Hoffmann: I definitely see chefs using more and more fresh produce. I also think people are more aware of the importance of eating

food that is non-processed! I'm hearing a lot about avocados, mangos and all green leaves.

Nathan Lippy: I see a lot of regional and seasonal cooking becoming the trend recently. I think it's great. Support the local farmers and fall in love with local and regional cuisine. It's a "when in Rome..." mentality. For example, if I'm in the South, I want some awesome slow braised collard greens.

Allen Susser: Local, local, local — and seasonal are the buzzwords. Tropical fruits and tropical vegetables are very high on the chef list today.

Ming Tsai: Many root vegetables are becoming more popular, such as sunchoke and golden turnips. We are also seeing lots of micro greens and herbs. International citrus like yuzu is another popular item.

Martin Yan: Chefs really demand the highest quality, freshest ingredients. With such exceptional product available, chefs make the fruits and vegetables the star on their menus. Asian and Chinese cuisines have traditionally been vegetable-heavy with the protein as the condiment or side dish, and I see the same thing happening across the country today.



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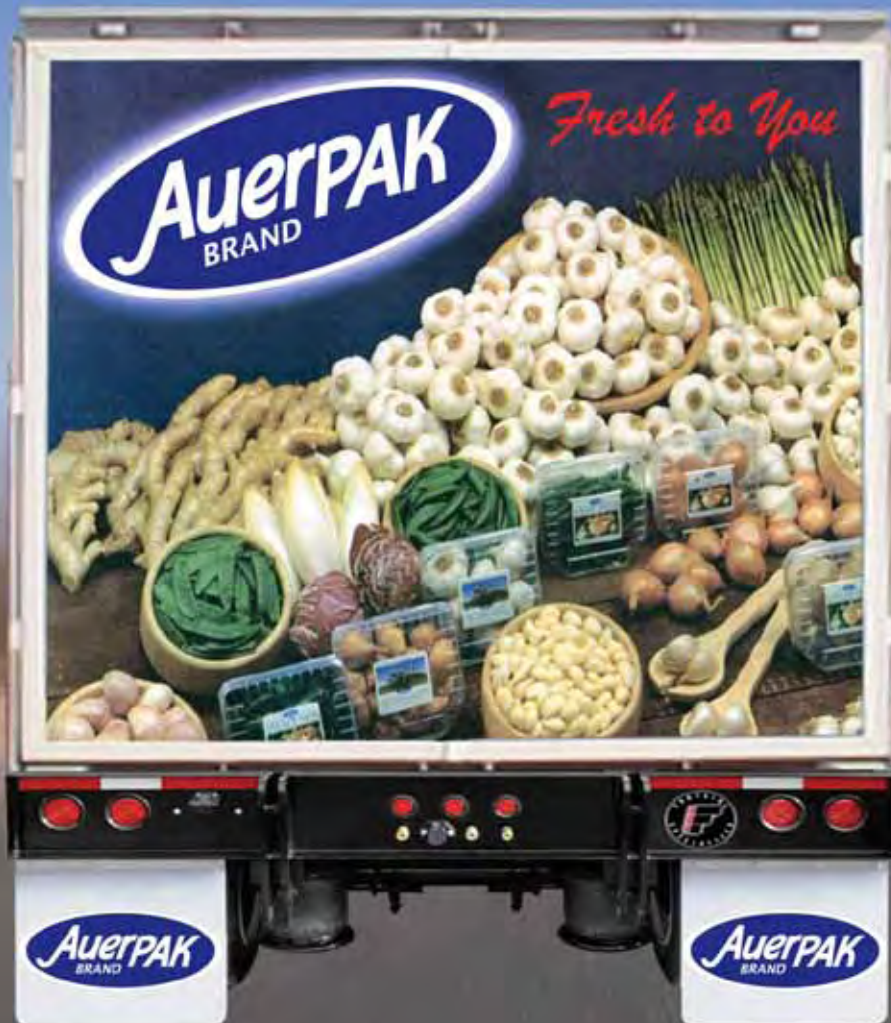


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As a percentage of the plate, how much space should fresh produce occupy?

Jon Ashton: At least 75 percent. I try not to eat more than three ounces of protein per sitting. Vegetables and fruits are so much more exciting to consume.

Tracey Bloom: At least 70 percent of the plate. There are obvious exceptions with salads, desserts and some appetizers. In a main dish, I even sometimes will make a sauce or relish out of veggies.

Holly Clegg: I think there is another way to approach the issue of including more produce in your diet. Think of adding produce to whatever you are eating instead of focusing on what portion of the plate includes produce. Fresh produce can easily be incorporated into everything you eat, such as fruit in your salads and cereals. Clean out the refrigerator and use veggies in pastas, pizza toppers, soups, salad toppings and sandwiches. For example, I never throw out leftover roasted veggies; I freeze them to be used in another dish. Before you know it, you will have consumed more produce throughout the day and adjusted your lifestyle to including produce into your daily meals.

Kevin Gillespie: That's a really complicated question. Not every plate is the same. It depends on the focal point — it could be almost all of the plate. I guess a traditional composition would be 20 percent.

Ingrid Hoffmann: For me, 75 percent, and by that I mean even my starches come from non-processed sources like potatoes, yucca, plantains etc.

Nathan Lippy: I love fresh fruit and veggies and try to incorporate a lot of both in my cooking. I would say 50 percent.

Allen Susser: I use fresh produce for about 45 percent of the plate.

Ming Tsai: I use 33-50 percent. In Asian cuisine, vegetables are a very important part of the dish. So for me, produce plays a major part and isn't just a garnish.

Martin Yan: In typical Chinese and Asian meals, we use mostly vegetables in a variety of dishes, particularly in the main dish. I would say about 60-65 percent of the plate is composed of vegetables.

DOLE'S CELEBRITY TWIST IN THE "ART" OF SALAD MAKING

Recent research done by Monterey, CA-based Dole Fresh Vegetables Inc., has found that in addition to being health-conscious and convenience-focused, packaged salad users consider themselves true culinary artists when it comes to creating salads. "More than anything, our research found that today's packaged salad consumers are most passionate about salad creation, and see an empty plate or bowl as the blank canvas and the lettuce and salad ingredients as their tools for creation," reports Ronda Reed, vice president of marketing for Dole Fresh Vegetables, in a forthcoming press release. "It's a new way of looking at salad that opens up new conversations about in-kitchen creativity and experimentation — not just with Dole Salads, but with the limitless other possibilities for product pairings."

As such, Dole has embarked on a comprehensive, research-driven marketing campaign — one of the first for the company, as well as the produce industry as a whole — that will focus as equally on the "art" of salad making as on the finished product itself. "Find Your Inspiration" uses professional celebrity artists from various genres to inspire consumers to new heights of salad creation and culinary creativity using Dole's line of 38 salad blends and all-natural kits. Candice Olson, host of "Candice Tells All" on HGTV, will kick off the campaign on April 25 as the first in a series of non-food VIPs who apply their distinctive art form to in-kitchen salad creation. Olson was selected by Dole because of her love for salads and the strong affinity that salad enthusiasts have for her and HGTV. Other artists to be spotlighted in the campaign include fashion designers, musicians, photographers and dancers. "Since salad-making is truly a form of art, Dole wanted to explore how some of the best-known professional designers and artists express themselves in the kitchen," explains Reed.

"Find Your Inspiration" will combine extensive digital and mobile advertising, in-store promotions, coupons and a consumer sweepstakes — where one Grand Prize winner will receive a one-on-one kitchen design inspiration session with Olson in her home city of Toronto, and up to a \$50,000 kitchen remodel budget to implement the inspired results — with dedicated Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages spotlighting the celebrity artists.

According to Chris Mayhew, director of marketing for Dole Fresh Vegetables, "We're devoting the campaign entirely to digital media including digital advertising, mobile marketing, social media, search engine optimiza-



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOLE FRESH VEGETABLES INC.

Dole's "Find Your Inspiration" campaign uses celebrity artists from various genres to inspire consumers' culinary creativity. Pictured is HGTV's Candice Olson.

tion, email marketing and the development of new web assets. This will represent a more integrated, concentrated digital effort than in years' past, and will even include 'digital takeovers' — when Olson, Dole Salads products and other campaign elements will dominate popular culinary, food and lifestyle online sites important to our target such as HGTV, Food Network and WebMD. We expect to reach 79 percent of our target audience this way and generate more than 400 million impressions."

In addition to the extensive social media campaign, there will also be a coordinated in-store campaign when "Find Your Inspiration" breaks in late April. "In-store POS will initially spotlight Candice Olson, and eventually our other featured celebrity artists," details Mayhew. "This in-store program will be the first in Dole Fresh Vegetables' history to include an integrated shopper market element. QR (quick-response) codes on most collateral pieces will link users directly to Dole Salads coupons, recipes, pairing and serving suggestions and other product information via their mobile devices. We're even developing a separate mobile version of our salad-specific Web site to support demand by salad lovers for handheld information."

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What motivates you to add fresh produce in unconventional ways in your cooking, and how do you introduce new produce items to your clientele?

Jon Ashton: Staying simple and seasonal ignites my motivation. The gifts of nature, both generous and rich in flavor, constitute the largest and the most precious part of my pantry. Savoring each season is exciting. In spring, our gardens awaken again after their long winter slumber. Is there anything better than seeing ramps, fava beans and asparagus?

Tracey Bloom: One thing I do often is *sous-vide* my veggies [or cook them in a vacuum-sealed bag in a water bath at a low temperature for a long period of time]. This maintains the integrity of the ingredients, and a lot of customers find that intriguing and try it. I love to introduce new flavors to my customers, sometimes just by adding a simple spice or herb to heighten the intensity of a produce item. Or I like to use fruit in a savory manner with the main course.

Holly Clegg: Like I said, I love to eat and I really try to fill my plate with nutrient-dense foods, as I know it is important for our health. But these healthy foods are also really delicious, and I try to share with others how good-for-you foods can turn into your family's favorite meal. With quick and simple dishes, and a well-stocked kitchen of produce and pantry staples, my message is to show how easy it is to eat well — health-wise and taste-wise. Simply adding sliced avocado to sandwiches or chopped sweet potatoes to soups provides a nutritional boost, as well as incredible natural flavor!

Kevin Gillespie: We try to make dishes with very focused flavor profiles. Our seasonings and flavors are intense. You can do this with fresh vegetables and keep the intensity without making it heavy or fat-laden. We want our guests to have some form of comfort with the dish, but we like

to have a newness too — like using a product in a way they haven't seen. or using varieties they aren't aware of. We have had a tomato dish with six different kinds of tomatoes, which may be new to many of our customers.

Ingrid Hoffmann: It starts with me and my desire to eat real, clean food and to have variety in my meals without it being too complicated to make. Also, I love being able to introduce my audience to new flavors, open them up to new cultures via my recipes and having them experience an ingredient they would have otherwise never tasted.

Nathan Lippy: It's all about flavor profiles for me. I make Bacon Fried Bananas with Candied Bacon and a Maple Rum Sauce. I think adding the bananas, because of their subtle sweetness, pairs perfectly with the smoky flavor of the bacon. I also do a Lager Battered Pineapple with an Avocado-Chipotle Cream. The bitterness of the beer creates this burst of sweetness from the pineapple and I love that!

Allen Susser: I am a contrarian when it comes to creative foods. I like to create unusual combinations based on the culture and origin of the produce.

Ming Tsai: I like to use seasonal offerings to infuse oil and make sauces. I also like to experiment with produce using different cooking techniques that may not be typical to bring out different flavors.

Martin Yan: I cook dishes from a variety of cuisines, and I experiment using an assortment of fresh produce to add texture, color and flavor to a dish. In my cooking demonstrations, I encourage people to use fresh produce to create a dish that is more appealing and nutritious.

Do you have any suggestions that would encourage kids to consume more fresh produce?

Jon Ashton: I have been working with children for the past 10 years, and in the that time, I have found getting them involved with growing and cooking produce helps connect children to the food.

Tracey Bloom: Make it fun. Get the kids involved in creating healthful menus and in executing them. This way, they will have a voice in what they eat and take pride in making it.

Holly Clegg: I have always thought that kids should be taught to eat with color, which makes it more fun for kids of all ages. Try getting them involved at the grocery store and in the kitchen — letting them choose a new fruit or vegetable to try that week. Also, if kids are involved with the process, they are more apt to eat their creations.

Kevin Gillespie: The most effective way I've seen of encouraging kids to eat more produce is to let them be involved in the production. Let them plant, water and grow the produce and they will eat it! I have seen this in multiple scenarios. They need the excitement.

Ingrid Hoffmann: Eliminate the whole idea of "kids food" in your home. Introduce them to real food and have them try everything at least once. Make it colorful and fun so they can learn to enjoy it. Teach them where it comes from and its history so they can connect with it and have

them help you cook, too. Making them part of the process will entice them to eat it.

Nathan Lippy: When I was a kid, my mother would encourage me to play with my food, and it's become kind of like a mantra for me now. Add something sweet to something salty; add something soft to something crunchy; combine cold and hot; get messy and have fun. Food and flavor can be an exciting adventure that goes far beyond "Hey, I'm hungry," to "I can't wait to try this or that."

Allen Susser: Keep it simple. Use the produce in common dishes. Have them taste small amounts with some of their favorite foods.

Ming Tsai: Start off by sautéing garlic and onions in oil. The smell alone will entice them.

Martin Yan: Most restaurants and home cooks serve protein and vegetables separately. Most of the time, kids only eat the meat and shy away from the vegetables. I often cut up a variety of colorful vegetables and stir-fry it so that the bite-sized pieces of meat and vegetables are all mixed together. The kids would just eat it all up. It worked for my twin boys when they were growing up and as young adults they eat a wide variety of foods and love their fruits and vegetables!

The National Restaurant Association and Produce Marketing Association have an initiative to double fresh produce usage in restaurants by the year 2020. Do you expect this to succeed?

Jon Ashton: I actually do. National attention is being focused on organizations that promote more healthful eating, such as the First Lady's "Let's Move" project. Additionally, chefs are taking ownership of their culinary responsibilities to help make changes in our daily diets. We should all feel obligated to encourage our own friends and family to eat more fresh produce.

Eating fresh produce is one of the keys to a more healthful future. I believe in the advice Hippocrates, the father of medicine, gave 2,500 years ago: "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food."

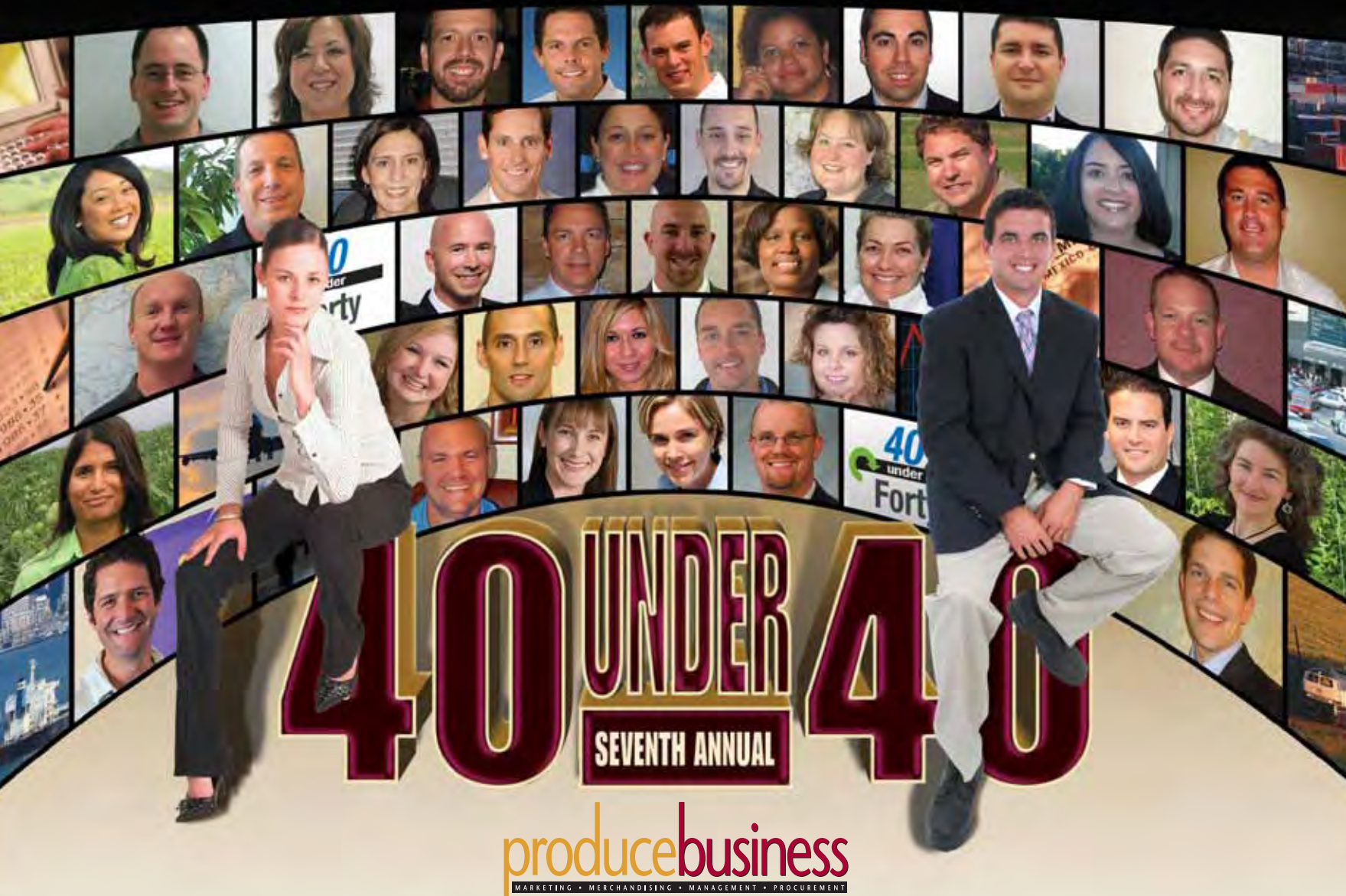
Tracey Bloom: No.

Holly Clegg: Yes, I do because there is a national focus on health and

obesity, and produce is an important element in continuing good health and battling obesity and disease. Also, produce is more accessible and available. People understand the concept about eating locally and seasonally more than they did in the past. If you can appeal to the mainstream person, making fresh produce readily available and cost effective, then there is definitely a chance of success.

Kevin Gillespie: Yes. I know that in my 10 years of being a chef it's changed dramatically. Produce was lower quality and less fresh. A lot of chefs have demanded higher quality. I believe this trickles down.

Ingrid Hoffmann: Sure I do, because I believe it is the way of the future. I also think consumers are becoming more aware and educated



PRODUCE BUSINESS is accepting nominations for its Seventh Annual 40-Under-Forty Project, which recognizes the produce industry's top young leaders.

Honorees will be selected based on their professional accomplishments, demonstrated leadership and industry/community contributions. To be eligible, nominees must be under the age of 40 as of January 1 (People born after January 1, 1971).

To nominate someone, please fill out this form by May 2, 2011, and fax back to 561-994-1610.

Once nominated, the candidate will receive forms from us to fill out asking for detailed information. A candidate only needs to be nominated one time. Multiple nominations will have no bearing on selection.

ABOUT THE NOMINEE:

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In 100 words or less, describe why this person should be nominated:
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Nominee's Professional Achievements:

Nominee's Industry/Community/Charitable Activities:

ABOUT THE NOMINATOR:

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Nominator information is for our use only and will not be shared with candidate or have a bearing on selection.

For more information email: info@producebusiness.com

about it. It is the most effective prevention of disease.

Nathan Lippy: I certainly hope so. I think the more kids begin to understand how gratifying cooking can be, they will naturally grow up with a sense of appreciation, not only for produce, but for farmers and local culinary delights.

Allen Susser: It sounds like a good goal and we should work toward

it. Pushing food trends is not easy. It is the guest that tells us what they want to eat and when.

Ming Tsai: Yes

Martin Yan: If they expect the initiative to succeed, they should promote and introduce more people to Asian cuisine — it is delicious and healthy. **pb**

As a young boy, **Jon Ashton** learned about the joy of cooking through his grandmother's warm, cottage kitchen. Creating recipes with Granny Ashton opened the door to home economic classes at school where Jon became further intrigued by the art. In 1994, Jon graduated from St. Helens College in Great Britain and worked in several noted restaurants including the Derby Lodge Hotel's French restaurant and as sous chef at The Kirkfield Hotel's restaurant. Jon has appeared on the British cooking shows, "TV Dinners," as well as "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno," and the "TODAY Show." He is currently the food correspondent of the nationally syndicated Morning Show "The Daily Buzz," seen in over 160 stations. He is also the executive Chef for *Relish Magazine*. Jon has had the honor of working with many A-list celebrities and culinary icons including, Vince Vaughn, Seth Green, Andy Garcia, Rachael Ray, Paula Deen, Emeril Lagasse, Martha Stewart and Giada De Laurentiis, to name a handful.

Chef **Tracey Bloom** describes her culinary style as modern American with European influences, which she implements into the menu as the executive chef of Ray's at Killer Creek. Bloom began working in the restaurant industry as a way to earn extra money, but soon found she had a true talent and passion for the culinary arts. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Bloom has worked in several of the Atlanta area's finest restaurants, including Sia's Restaurant, 103 West, Asher, Oscar's, and Luma in Winter Park, Florida. She was the executive chef at Table 1280 in Atlanta before becoming a contestant on the seventh season of Bravo's "Top Chef" in 2010. Bloom currently resides in Atlanta. In her spare time, she enjoys camping, boating and spending time with her family.

Holly Clegg is the author of the best-selling Trim&Terrific cookbook series, which includes the newly released women's lifestyle cookbook, *Too Hot in the Kitchen: Secrets to Sizzle at Any Age, Trim&Terrific Diabetic Cooking* and *Eating Well Through Cancer*. With 1 million copies sold, Holly has promoted her healthy lifestyle recipes on national shows including Fox & Friends, NBC Weekend Today and The 700 Club. She partnered with Wal-Mart to help them develop healthful and affordable meal solutions with cooking videos on the company's Web site. With her user-friendly, pantry-friendly and time-friendly cookbooks, she has garnered a national reputation as the healthy "Queen of Quick!"

As a partner and the executive chef of Woodfire Grill, **Kevin Gillespie's** true passion lies in incorporating the use of fresh, organic and sustainable ingredients in all of his dishes. Gillespie graduated from the Art Institute of Atlanta and went on to hold positions at several well-known Atlanta restaurants including Atlanta Grill at The Ritz-Carlton, TWO Urban Licks. In 2009, Gillespie earned a spot on Bravo's award-winning series "Top Chef" for the show's sixth season in Las Vegas, and stood out as one of the season's final three chefs-estants who competed for the "Top Chef" title. Gillespie was a semi-finalist for the James Beard Foundation's "Rising Star Chef of the Year" award in February 2010. During his time at Woodfire Grill, the restaurant has

been featured on CNN and in *Travel + Leisure*, *Food & Wine* and *Men's Health* as a dining destination. Gillespie is currently working on two cookbooks in partnership with best-selling cookbook author David Joachim that are scheduled for fall 2012 and fall 2013 publication.

Ingrid Hoffmann hosts "Simply Delicioso" on Cooking Channel, along with her clever 60-second food and entertaining tips, "Un Minuto Delicioso," which air daily on Galavision. Her cookbook has been published in two languages, *Simply Delicioso: A Collection of Everyday Recipes with a Latin Twist* and *Delicioso: Una Coleccion de Mis Recetas Favoritas con Sabor Latino*. Hoffmann has developed her own Latin-influenced cookware line, Simply Delicioso by Ingrid Hoffmann. She writes a monthly column in *People en Espanol* and appears weekly on the No. 1 Spanish language morning show "Despierta America." Ingrid has also made appearances on "Ellen," "Oprah," "Martha Stewart," "Regis & Kelly," "The Today Show," "The Early Show," and "Good Morning America." Ingrid's success has afforded her the opportunity to give back to the community. She is currently a board member of New York City's Food and Education Fund and Miami's Amigos for Kids, as well as an active supporter of Manhattan's Food and Finance High School, Believe for Colombia Foundation and the Humane Society of Greater Miami.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee, and raised in Tampa, Florida, **Nathan Lippy's** childhood exposed him to an eclectic mix of blues, rock 'n roll, down-home-cooking, "Floribbean Cuisine" and beachy favorites like all-you-can-eat crab legs and shrimp. In the fall of 2000, Nathan began his formal education at the Culinary Institute of America, where he was exposed to a world he had never before experienced. After graduation, Nathan joined the restaurant scene in New York City. When he wasn't working in the kitchen, the music scene kept him occupied and his Punk/Rock band played many of the major venues throughout the city. Combining his two passions, his highly successful weekly interactive Ustream channel, "Food, Drinks and Rock & Roll Live" was born. Nathan has also kept very busy as a regular in the Food and Wine Festival circuit all over the country, headlining the Tampa Food and Wine Festival and the Atlanta Food and Wine Festival, and participating in The South Beach Food and Wine Festival. Nathan is also a regular at Viking Classic Events, participating alongside Emeril Lagasse and Tyler Florence.

James Beard Award recipient, Chef **Allen Susser**, owner of the acclaimed Chef Allen's Seafood Grill in Aventura, is putting his stamp on the gastro pub genre with Taste Gastropub, in Delray Beach, Florida. Susser rose to prominence in 1986, when he opened his eponymous Aventura restaurant showcasing fresh, regional ingredients. Last year, he modified the landmark restaurant's concept; creating Chef Allen's Seafood Grill, a more accessible, local-friendly restaurant and continued to garner rave reviews. Chef Allen has been featured in *Bon Appetit*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine* and *Food Arts*, among many

others. Allen has been a frequent guest on "NBC Today," the "CBS Early Show," PBS and the Food Network. From 1987 to the present, Chef Allen has been chairman of Share Our Strength/Taste of the Nation (SOS/TON). He's also an active board member of the Daily Bread Food Bank, which helps the SOS/TON distribute food to the needy. Susser began his culinary journey by earning degrees from New York City Tech, Florida International University and Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. He worked at the Bristol Hotel in Paris and at the original Le Cirque in New York. A talented writer, he is the author of *New World Cuisine and Cookery*, *The Great Citrus Book* and *The Great Mango Book*.

Ming Tsai spent his junior-year summer at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, before graduating from Yale University with a degree in mechanical engineering. He then earned a Master's degree in Hotel Administration and Hospitality Marketing. In 1998, Ming opened Blue Ginger in Wellesley, MA. In its first year, Blue Ginger was named "Best New Restaurant" by *Boston Magazine* and *Esquire Magazine* honored Ming as "Chef of the Year 1998." The James Beard Foundation crowned Ming "2002 Best Chef Northeast." Ming is the host and executive producer of the public television cooking show, "Simply Ming." His Simply Ming video podcasts, the first of their kind, feature tutorials on everything from filleting fish to food allergy basics. Ming began cooking for television audiences on the Food Network, where he was the 1998 Emmy Award-Winning host of "East Meets West with Ming Tsai" and "Ming's Quest." In addition to television, Ming is the author of four cookbooks: *Blue Ginger: East Meets West Cooking with Ming Tsai*, *Simply Ming*, *Ming's Master Recipes*, and *Simply Ming One-Pot Meals*. Ming is proud member of Common Threads, the Harvard School of Public Health's Nutrition Roundtable, Big Brothers Big Sisters, The Cam Neely Foundation, Squashbusters.

As the celebrated host of over 3,000 cooking shows, broadcast worldwide, **Martin Yan** enjoys distinction as a certified Master Chef, a highly respected food consultant, a cooking instructor and a prolific author. His diverse talents have found expression in 30 cookbooks. Born in Guangzhou, China, to a restaurateur father and a mother who operated a grocery store, Chef Yan's formal induction into the culinary world began at age thirteen, with an apprenticeship at a popular Hong Kong restaurant. He refined his natural talent at the Overseas Institute of Cookery in Hong Kong, and then pursued an MS in Food Science at The University of California/Davis. In 1978, he pioneered a daily TV Chinese cooking show: the now classic "Yan Can Cook." Chef Yan has taught at The Culinary Institute of America, Johnson & Wales University, The California Culinary Academy and The Chinese Cuisine Institute in Hong Kong. In 1985, he founded the Yan Can Cooking School in California and in 2007 founded The Martin Yan Culinary Arts Center, a unique international culinary academy for professional chefs in Shenzhen, China. Also a restaurateur, his Yan Can and SensAsian Restaurants offer inventive pan-Asian menus.



Following an Avocados from Mexico promotion, average retail sales of avocados increased 157 percent.

Cash In On Produce Rings In Canada

Retailers' recognition of Canadian cultural diversity increases produce consumption, no matter where it comes from. **BY BARBARA ROBISON**

Canadians really enjoy their fresh produce, with per capita consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables continuing to rise. In 2003, average daily consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables per capita in Canada was six to seven servings, compared to 3.6 servings in the United States, according to a study cited in a 2005 article in the *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*. There are a number of reasons for greater Canadian consumption, one of which is Canadian retailers, who play a major role in satisfying consumers' increased demands for produce quality and variety.

"Canadian cultural diversity has created a demand for food items not traditionally sold in supermarkets," acknowledges Jim DiMenna, president of Jem-D International Partners LP, based in Kingsville, Ontario. "Canadian retailers recognize the opportunity to capitalize on this demand and source a wide variety of exotic items from as far away as Europe, Asia and Africa."

Produce suppliers to Canadian retailers agree that fresh produce consumption is driven by culture and ethnic backgrounds, and Canada has a very large and diverse immigrant

population. "Comparatively higher fruit and vegetable consumption in other countries is crossing over with new Canadians and is being shared with the mainstream," says Walt Breden, Western Canada and citrus category sales manager at The Oppenheimer Group, based in Coquitlam, BC, Canada. "More recent immigration into Canada is not only from Europe, but also from India, China and Southeast Asia. In Western Canada, specialty Asian retailers, such as T & T Supermarkets and Kin's Farm Market, cater to neighborhoods with concentrations of this ancestry, and it crosses over into more traditional European neighborhoods. The array of Asian produce items has been universally recognized in Canada longer than in the United States and has gained considerable popularity."

The OK General Food Store Ltd., with two stores in Calgary, Alberta, features East Indian and Caribbean foods. "Although we cater to East Indians and those from the Caribbean, our customer base is actually mixed," reports Laddie Boparai, store manager/buyer.

"Canada is a younger country where many city dwellers are only two and three genera-

tions off the farm," explains Dan Dempster, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), headquartered in Ottawa, Ontario. "We have, to some extent, taken those fruit-and-vegetable-rich eating habits with us. Many people in the United States have never seen a farm and are several generations deep as city dwellers. Expansion of produce departments and new non-conventional formats, such as Shoppers Drug Mart, and ethnic markets also have helped increase produce consumption," he adds.

According to Virginia Zimm, president of Mississauga, Ontario-based Faye Clack Communications Inc., 52 percent of Canadians shop for their produce once a week, but close to 23 percent shop for produce three times a week. "This could stem from their ethnic roots, where produce was always purchased daily," she reasons.

Produce Variety Is Key

"Our diverse cultural population expects stores, be they grocery chains or specialty shops, to carry a wide range of products from all over the world," comments Tom Boncheff,

vice president of Boncheff Greenhouses Inc., based in Toronto, Ontario. "Consequently, you will find almost anything fresh that you need."

To satisfy the growing demand for more produce diversity, Canadian retailers are carrying more SKUs. Zimm reveals, "Some stores in major retail chains stock 27 different SKUs for one commodity to satisfy consumer needs. Popular produce items include persimmons, cherries, avocados, kiwi, berries, artichokes, okra, kale, ginger and sweet potatoes."

"Fresh produce assortment is the key," asserts Breeden of the Oppenheimer Group.

"One item that illustrates this is the greenhouse-grown long English cucumber. About 96 percent of Canadians prefer these to field-grown cucumbers. However, only about 8 percent of Americans purchase them. This has to do in part with U.S. retailers stocking primarily field-grown cucumbers, but also corresponds to a Canadian preference for the greenhouse cucumbers."

Canada has a significantly larger greenhouse industry than its U.S. counterpart. The light levels during spring and summer months and moderate climates are ideal for hydroponic

production. "We grow some items 10 months per year indoors, and with artificial light sources, some Canadian farms have migrated to year-round availability," reveals DiMenna of Jem-D International Greenhouse Vegetables. "Even with incremental costs, Canadian consumers still choose to buy Canadian-grown greenhouse vegetables during the winter."

Fresh herbs have increased in popularity as many consumers realize how easy it is to add flavor and appeal to any food. "At one time, fresh herbs were only available during summer in most grocery stores, but this is not the case anymore," reports comments Boncheff.

A northern country with a relatively short local growing season, Canada looks primarily to the United States for a large portion of its fresh fruits and vegetables. "With 89 percent of Canadian shoppers purchasing tomatoes regularly throughout the year and per capita consumption continuing to trend upward, six tomato varieties drive 85 to 90 percent of retailer's total category sales volume and category performance," reports Samantha Winters, director of promotion and education for the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee (FTC). "Key tomato varieties are a field-grown Florida tomato and a vine-ripened Florida tomato in the winter and spring months. Though a plethora of new greenhouse- and/or hothouse-grown tomatoes have entered the marketplace in the past decade, a large contingent of Canadian shoppers still prefer the taste, flavor and texture unique to U.S. field-grown tomatoes."

The Affect Of Canadian Import Regulations

All fruits and vegetables, whether considered exotic or not, must meet the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) regulations for entry into Canada. One notable difference between the United States and Canada is that Canada does not grow exotic fruits or vegetables. Therefore it does not set trade boundaries where such items as citrus, avocados, papayas, guavas, etc., are concerned. "The risk of a pest problem spreading from an imported item to domestic production is very small," reports Breeden. "It's a benefit to Canadian retailers and consumers because untreated fruit often enjoys a longer shelf-life, and some say, a better flavor."

"There are various rules and regulations for different products," adds Julia Inestroza, marketing and merchandising manager for Los Angeles, CA-based Gourmet Trading Co. "We need a phytosanitary certificate for all products we ship to Canada. Fresh asparagus and blueberries are both items that grow in Canada, and we know when Canada has domestic pro-

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FAST FOODS OFFER MAJOR COMPETITION

Michael Mockler, director of produce operations at Thrifty Foods, a 26-store chain headquartered in Victoria, BC, Canada, believes that one reason his produce departments are successful is because his Canadian consumers have a preconceived idea of eating more at home. "I have traveled across Canada and the United States and I've seen awesome produce displays everywhere," he says. "However, our biggest competition isn't the store down the street. It's the fast food restaurants and ready-made foods, even though we don't have as many in Canada as they do in the United States. A higher percentage of income, fifty-five cents of every dollar, is spent on restaurants and ready-made foods in the United States, while in Canada it is forty-five cents out of each dollar."

Terry Tomm, owner of Hometown Big-way Foods, a single-unit store in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, agrees. "We don't have the fast food operations like Americans do. We are basically an agricultural community and our customers live differently. Canada has a huge rural population and they cook more at home; they can and make jams and jellies, and like more staple produce items," he explains. "We know our customers well and try to provide them with the produce selections they desire. However, it is more challenging now due to inclement weather in many of the supplying areas." **pb**

duction, consumer desires for imports are almost nonexistent. However, our ability to provide asparagus and blueberries to the retailers for year-round availability has increased their sales. Customers become accustomed to seeing the products in stores all the time."

Produce Health Benefits Help Build Sales

Another reason for Canadians to purchase fresh produce is their health benefits. A 2008 Canadian Community Health Study found that among those Canadians, ages 12 or older, 43.9 percent reported consuming fruits and vegetables five or more times a day. In Quebec, over half the population (54 percent) consumed five or more fruits and vegetables per day. Lower consumption in Canada's far northern regions may be reflected in cultural differences in diets or to the availability and expense of fresh produce.

Much of the Canadian consumer knowledge of fresh produce benefits can be attributed to the Canadian government's Health Canada programs, which began in 1942. Today, *Canada's Food Guide* recommends four to 10 daily servings of fruits and vegetables per capita, depending on the age and sex of the individual. Health Canada also offers an Eat Well and Be Active Educational Toolkit.

The Food Guide also mentions snacks, an important area for expanding fresh produce purchases. "Happily, growers and food processors are providing retailers with more fruit and vegetable formats that address the convenience requirement and kid-friendly factor without compromising nutritional value and taste," states Zimm of Faye Clack. "As mandated by our government, schools are required to make fruits and vegetables accessible to students during school hours."

British Columbia's Agriculture in the Classroom program lessons are built around locally grown fruits and vegetables. This gives students a taste for locally grown items, but also some knowledge about nutritional benefits. "Children are the consumers of the future. We've all seen how kids' preferences influence a family's purchasing patterns," says Breeden of Oppenheimer.

The CPMA supports building young people's produce consumption habits through *Freggie Tales*, a comic book-style newsletter that presents fruits and vegetables in an entertaining manner. The CPMA also shares Freggie, a mascot with a distinctive broccoli shaped head, with organizations and schools to teach kids why fruits and vegetables matter. "We have an excellent opportunity for volume growth with more awareness and focus on healthful eating. Our Fruits and Veggies-Mix It Up! and Freggie children's programs are well placed to drive the message to Canadian consumers on how to increase produce consumption in the home, dining out and at school," reports CPMA's Dempster.

Global Weather Conditions Affect Retail Produce Operations

Weather plays an important role in consumer demand for produce. As the seasons change, consumers eagerly look forward to the seasonal and local fresh fruits and vegetables appearing in markets. Each province has a provincial body, such as the Ontario Produce Marketing Association, which promotes local bounty and produce consumption, in general. Specific regional offerings like peaches, pears, cherries and plums from Niagara, Ontario asparagus, new potatoes, tomatoes and sweet corn or apples can entice consumers to pur-



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Weather can also have a dramatic effect on produce quality and availability. "Educating the customer about produce conditions due to bad weather is essential," says Michael Mockler, director of produce operations at Thrifty Foods, a 26-store chain headquartered in Victoria, BC, Canada. "Why prices increase or decrease and why quality may not be up to usual standards needs to be explained to consumers so they know the retailer is supplying them with the very best produce available," he adds.

Marketing Tools Help Retailers Succeed

Canadian retail produce departments are often mentioned as unique, and merchandising certainly plays a key role. Proud to display their fruits and vegetables, retailers use a variety of means to entice the customer. Storage and preparation videos, harvest tables conjuring the farmer's market feel, attractive bin wraps, themed/ethnic displays and recipe brochures are all invitations to purchase. "I believe the more beautifully merchandised a produce department is, the longer a consumer will linger turning that ring into higher profits for retailers," states Zimm of Faye Clack.

While linear space devoted to fresh pro-

duce may not have increased markedly, in-department merchandising vehicles/displays, including multi-decks, have added vital merchandising space for the proliferation of packaged salads, organic products, fresh-cuts, snacks and other items that continue to be introduced in departments. "North American retailers are running more interesting promotions than ever before," remarks DiMenna of Jem-D. "In Canada, for example, many retailers ran Chinese New Year ads with pages devoted to Asian SKUs."

"Display to delay," is the motto Mockler of Thrifty Foods likes to use. "Capitalize on the palate of colors fresh produce provides and the customer will spend more time in your department," he suggests. "Don't drop price points. Make shopping in the department a pleasure, and help consumers menu plan as they shop. Many don't know what they'll serve for dinner. The department can help build the meal, beginning with a salad, a vegetable and a potato. Finally, the consumer will make the protein selection to accompany the produce chosen."

"There is very strong marketing support from provincial and federal government agencies," states Boncheff of Boncheff Greenhouses. "An example is Foodland

Ontario, which heavily advertises local produce year-round."

Fresh produce suppliers and communications consultants add another tool for the produce retailers to call on for educating consumers about individual produce items. A case in point is the "Applescopes" public relations campaign conducted by Faye Clack on behalf of the Ontario Apple Growers. Its primary goal was putting more apples into the hands of consumers in the winter. The program focused on educating and engaging the media and consumers alike.

An Avocados from Mexico promotional campaign in the fall of 2009 generated consumer awareness about avocado selection, usage and storage. Average retail sales in Ontario's major retail markets increased 157 percent, demonstrating the value that such programs can provide to produce retailers.

In addition, suppliers and retailers have some very effective tools, such as scan data, IRI (Information Resources, Inc) data and demographic analysis, available to help solve fresh produce marketing problems. "At Oppenheimer, this approach has become a blend of art and science that we're putting to help our customers across North America get the most out of our products," states Breedon. **pb**

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A grape study revealed that when promoted during the winter/spring period, retailers reported sales lifts of up to 370 percent.

Retail Guide To Spring Grapes

Short but sweet chance to profit with spring grapes. **BY JODEAN ROBBINS**

The spring grape season has long been a profitable way to kick off spring and summer fruit sales. “The Spring Deal kicks off the entire grape season from May through the fall, so establishing and maintaining grape retail space early is crucial,” says Jim Llano, sales manager for Castle Rock Vineyards, based in Delano, CA.

“Grapes are always a large part of our produce program, and in the spring we typically see a spike in grape sales,” reports Andrew Brehmer, produce supervisor for Skogen’s Festival Foods in De Pere, WI, with 17 stores. “Grapes can help a lot in sales and are a good ring at the register.”

Josh Leichter, East Coast vice president and grape category director for The Oppenheimer Group, headquartered in Coquitlam, BC, Canada, adds, “Though the spring grape deal does tend to have some challenging price volatility, steady retail pricing and strategic promotions can result in spring grapes delivering a nice boost to the retailer’s bottom line.”

Spring grapes offer unique opportunity for winter-weary consumers. “The first grape of spring has an advantageous freshness position that should be maximized at retail,” says Veronica Kraushaar, president of Viva Global Marketing LLC, based in Nogales, AZ. “A Sonora

grape study we conducted a few years back also revealed that when promoted during the winter/spring period, retailers were reporting sales lifts upward of 370 percent.”

“Since all the product is new crop it displays well on the shelf,” states Stephen Yubeta, vice president of sales for Farmers Best International LLC, located in Nogales AZ.

“We carry only organically grown table grapes and so many of our customers await the spring grape season with great anticipation,” reports Matt Landi, produce coordinator for New Leaf Community Markets, a six-unit retail chain, in Santa Cruz, CA. “They’re one of those instant top tier items in terms of volume.”

Timing And Pricing

Pricing and promotion success is directly related to the timing and available volumes of the deal. “A delayed start could bring about higher FOBs,” warns Leichter. “Working to manage retail pricing will be important to ensure product does not back up when the volumes do kick in. Also, the timing of promotions will be important to maintain steady sales.”

“Price is a huge factor for today’s cost-conscious consumers,” advises Tom Wilson, Chile/CA grape manager for Giumarra Bros. Fruit Co. Inc., headquartered in Los Angeles,

CA. “They are looking for value in the produce department.”

“We keep our grapes line-priced throughout the deal,” reports Skogen’s Brehmer. “The key is to show a good value and be the first to market in the spring season.”

An aggressive stance toward promotion can result in profitable results. “As soon as promotable volume is available, we tend to jump on it,” says Landi. “In my experience, having a favorable price perception early on in the season can help drive sales right through summer and into the fall grape season. If you can lock in some seasonal or long-term pricing with your main supplier, you can afford to promote aggressively while maintaining a solid gross profit.”

“Prices should reflect a level that moves a good volume of product in a small period of time,” advises Yubeta.

Consistency on the retail floor with selected ad focus, especially around holiday periods, is a good bet. “Steady retail pricing with strategic promotions pulsed in throughout the season tends to work well,” advises Leichter of Oppenheimer. “Also, Memorial Day promotions and ads are a very good fit for the spring grape deal.”

“The holidays that can factor into desert grape promotions are Memorial Day and

Fourth of July,” concurs Llano of Castle Rock. “Typically, there are promotable volumes for the Fourth.”

“Other ideal promotion times include the last week in May through the first three weeks in June for red and green seedless,” details Wilson. “Red Globes and green seedless will also have promotable volumes during late June through early July.”

Variety And Color

Offering variety to customers has proven results. “As with all grape varieties, promoting multiple varieties simultaneously is most advantageous,” says Llano. “Although grapes are becoming a standard item on shopper’s lists, they are also still an impulse item for many.”

Leichter adds, “Shoppers can have pretty specific preferences when it comes to grapes, so we suggest that our customers stock four grape SKUs: red, green and black seedless, as well as red seeded varieties like sweet red Globes.”

Retailers can be assured of the availability and success for promoting multiple colors. “Both the red and green seedless varieties will have enough volume to promote individually, and together,” says Wilson. “Research shows that some of the most



“Shoppers can have pretty specific preferences when it comes to grapes, so we suggest that our customers stock four grape SKUs: red, green and black seedless, as well as red seeded varieties like sweet red Globes.”

— Josh Leichter, *The Oppenheimer Group*

successful promotions feature three colors of grapes at the same price.”

Harley of Anthony Vineyards states, “We have three main colors during our season — green seedless, red seedless and black seedless. All of these make good for promotions.”

Stores should also be sure to promote newer varieties and colors. Giumarra’s Wilson reports, “Consumers are becoming increasingly open to black seedless grapes, and can be encouraged to purchase through sampling and education.”

“Both regions continue to increase production of black seedless varieties, which, when combined at retail with other colors, offer an attractive display,” reports Castle Rock’s Llano. “The consumers need to be made more aware of the delicious eating quality of these Black varieties.”

Focusing on educating customers in the department will drive sales. “It is helpful to have a knowledgeable person in the produce department who can answer consumers’ questions,” suggests Giumarra’s Wilson. “Consumers are interested in the differences in varieties and the ‘story’ behind each variety.”

Display And Merchandising

The excitement and novelty of the arrival of the spring crop can be emphasized with large, vibrant displays. “Large displays in high traffic areas with multiple varieties tend to attract shoppers looking for fresh grapes in the springtime,” says Leichter.

“We try to make large impactful displays in

good locations within our departments,” agrees Brehmer of Skogen’s Festival Foods. “The bigger the better, and when they are on sale look to move them to a high traffic area in your department.”

“A large display will draw consumer attention and should be supported by promotions and ads to sustain demand,” agrees Wilson. “There should be ample supply of product and labor to properly maintain the display. This means fresh product to entice consumers.”

Spring grapes present tremendous potential for promotion. “It’s a great opportunity for spring sales and promotion,” says New Leaf’s Landi. “While grapes become a staple item in the heart of summer, spring grapes are special in that many organic consumers haven’t seen them in five to six months.”

Wilson adds, “Good promotion strategies include allocating adequate space for a large, visible display in the produce section. Retailers can also plan contests and in-store radio spots during promotions.”

The greatest potential to drive grape sales is likely with existing grape customers. “With more than 86 percent of U.S. consumers already eating grapes, conversion by non-users is a tough sell,” explains Kraushaar of Viva. “Instead, retailers should focus on what we call ‘day part’ increases or, getting consumers to eat more grapes throughout the day. Selling more volume to current grape consumers can be achieved with Grape-&-Go type promotions to push impulse sales, such as secondary displays, multi-color packages,

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sampling boxes, as well as providing ideas for grape usage beyond just snacking. Proclaiming the health benefits of grapes, such as resveratrol, is also highly recommended.”

Premier shippers are increasingly working new creative promotional opportunities and partnerships with retailers to help move extra volume. Kraushaar explains, “For example, we’re seeing more use of in-store media, such as on-cart, mobile phone apps, radio, etc., which, at the right frequency, message and/or offer, can drive strong impulse sales. With

more than 65 percent of shopping decisions made in store, the ability to instantly capture the consumer is key.”

Packaging And Differentiation

Though the majority of grape sales occurs in bags, packaging options continue to grow. “Packaging continues to be a hot topic with grapes,” says Giumarra’s Wilson. “We pack clamshells, wrapped, plain pack and slider and ziplock-style poly bags. Poly bags are still by far the most common type of packaging for most

“The first grape of spring has an advantageous freshness position that should be maximized at retail. A Sonora grape study we conducted a few years back also revealed that when promoted during the winter/spring period, retailers were reporting sales lifts upward of 370 percent.”

— Veronica Kraushaar, Viva Global Marketing LLC

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varieties. The cost of material and labor is below that of other types of packaging. We are seeing that consumers are increasingly concerned about the recyclability of their packaging.”

“While there are those with a preference for clamshells, certainly bags continue to be the most common grape packs across virtually all varieties,” contends Leichter of Oppenheimer. “Some retailers like to mix things up by bringing in clamshells for special promotions as an alternative to their bag programs.”

“I do think the clamshells are the way of the future,” says Skogen’s Brehmer. “Right now, it seems to be a little ahead of its time and slow to catch on. Customers prefer the most for their dollar — they are used to the bag and comfortable with it.”

Retailers can take strategic advantage of packaging options. “Packaging is becoming a way for both a retailer and growing entity to differentiate their offerings,” says Llano of Castle Rock. “The quality of product and market segment will dictate which pack style should be used. As retailers segment their stores, the opportunity to offer boutique-style packs increases.”

“Our customer base is looking for a variety of choices in packaging,” says Wilson. “Different customers require different pack styles. Aside from major retailers, we supply food service, export and club store customers who all have specific packaging needs.”

Retailers may want to keep their eyes posted for some newer packaging options, including some changes to the standard bag. “There is some change to reconfiguring the standard 2-

SPRING GRAPES: SMALL WINDOW WITH BIG OPPORTUNITY

Spring grapes enjoy a very small window yet offer tremendous opportunity, with a season normally running from mid-May through the end of June. “The bottom line of spring grapes is great quality, big volume and a short window,” says Stephen Yubeta, vice president sales for Farmers Best International, located in Nogales AZ.

Producers and shippers put a great deal of effort into making the season as perfect as possible, knowing they have only one shot to get it right. “All of us in Coachella spend a lot of time and money throughout the year to produce a superior product for all the retailers across the country,” asserts John Harley, sales manager for Anthony Vineyards Inc., located in Bakersfield, CA. “We have a very short window to market this product.”

The spring deal stretches from California to Mexico, where producers are also committed to quality. “Mexico grows high quality products and our growers are intimately involved in what they produce,” says Tom Wilson, Chile/CA grape manager for Giumarra Bros. Fruit Co. Inc., headquartered in Los Angeles, CA. “The Mexican season is timed to fill gaps in supply between the Chilean and California seasons. The supply offers promotional opportunities during the warmer season when consumers want grapes and are looking for consistent supply.”

ALL ABOUT TIMING

One big concern with the beginning of the Spring grape deal is the potential effect of the end of the Chilean shipments. “There could be an overlap of product from Chile (mainly red seedless Crimson) but only if the Chilean marketers are unable to sell their volumes prior to California and the Mexican deals starting,” reports Harley. “If they’re unable to sell or setup promotions to move their crimson crop, it could affect the start of the California and the Mexican grape deals, resulting in a glut of grapes at that time, which would influence pricing in a negative manner.”

“This year, the Chilean fruit is moving well, so we don’t think Chile will overlap too much with the spring deals,” says Josh Leichter, East Coast vice president and grape category director for The Oppenheimer Group in Coquitlam, BC, Canada.

Though the deal begins slowly, it ramps up quickly. “The beginning of the deal is typically light in volume and volume increases toward the end of May,” explains Wilson. “June should see good volumes of green seedless, red seedless, black seedless and Red Globes. Production for California and Mexican seasons is usually timed close together, and it’s often too early to tell which area will begin first.”

Timing could be affected by Mexico’s weather, but producers don’t expect to see grave differences. “Mexico and Coachella have both experienced freezing temperatures this winter, which could impact the timing somewhat,” reports Le-

ichter. “At this point, we anticipate that Mexico may start slightly ahead of California.”

“We should be the first company to start shipping grapes from California, and at this point we’re looking at around the 15th of May, give or take a few days,” estimates Harley. “The Coachella deal normally finishes around the last week of June or first week of July, which should be the case this year. There should be ample product and good pricing for plenty of promotions out of the early California grape deal starting at the end of May and all through June.”

PARADE OF VARIETIES

Savvy retailers who understand the peaks and work closely with suppliers will have significant promotional advantages. “To start, the most prevalent variety will be Flame seedless (red seedless),” states Harley of Anthony Vineyards. “This should start May 15th and the best opportunity for promotion on this variety should be the first week of June. There will be many opportunities throughout the month of June to promote this variety. The next variety will be the Sugraone (green seedless) variety. The first opportunity for promotion on this variety should be the second week of June based on history. That said, this variety will be in good supplies all through the month of June.”

Wilson adds, “The month of May will see Perlettes and Flame Seedless, with some Sugraones and Black Seedless. During June, there will be Flame Seedless, Sugraones, Black Seedless and Red Globes.

More specifically, Yubeta of Farmers Best explains, “Perlettes will be early May to late May. The Sugraone come late May to late June. Flames are mid-May to late June, and Red Globes are late June to mid-July

“Both regions continue to increase production of black seedless varieties, which, when combined at retail with other colors, offer an attractive display,” says Jim Llano, sales manager for Castle Rock Vineyards, in Delano, CA.

New varieties will also make their presence known and can provide additional opportunities for building consumer interest. “Both Mexico and Coachella have invested in newer varieties over the past several years in reds, greens and blacks,” explains Llano.

“We have a new variety to the desert deal called the scarlet royal (red seedless),” reports Harley. “This is a new variety produced by the USDA and mainly a fall variety when planted in the San Joaquin Valley. For Coachella, this variety will be available the third week of June.”

“We are fortunate to have a new early green variety called Early Sweet,” shares Giumarra’s Wilson. “We expect an increase in volume from last season, and it will likely be one of the earliest varieties in production.”

pb

lb. bag to a ‘stand-up’ style with subtle attractive graphics,” reports Llano.

“In our conventional grape category we offer special packs in clamshells for two, three and four pounds when ordered in advance,” states Harley of Anthony Vineyards.

Packaging options in the organic grape category may also offer some advantages. “In our organic grape category we offer mainly bags, but we do offer clamshells in two and three pounds as well as a 2- and 3-lb. bi-color,” says Harley. “We are doing a lot more in clamshells

in our organic grapes.”

New Leaf’s Landi adds, “Though the clamshell hasn’t really hit the organic market as of yet, one exception is the Champagne variety. Since it is much more delicate, it is sold in standard 1-lb. clamshell packages.”

pb



MEXICO: A LONGSTANDING COMMITMENT TO FOOD SAFETY

As a major supplier to the U.S., Mexico's government and its producers take very seriously their role in providing safe, flavorful and healthy produce. Producers have long held great pride in their com-

mitment to food safety and quality assurance. Both government and private sector cooperate together to ensure the highest quality and safest produce reaches both domestic and export markets.

A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

Like the United States, Mexico has a comprehensive food safety/phytosanitary regulatory regime. It includes nearly 250 mandatory compliance regulations covering a wide range of agriculture production activities, including animal feed, organics, additives, packaging, insects/pesticides, processing, and transportation. There are a number of federal agencies with responsibility over food safety, including the Ministries of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food (SAGARPA); the Environ-

ment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT); and Health (SS).

Many Mexican growers have voluntarily implemented Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), and Mexican processors have implemented Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPS). In 2007, the Mexican Congress enacted an initiative strengthening the authority of Mexico's Agriculture Ministry to further enhance compliance with GAPs and to ensure the safety of food products grown in Mexico.

PRIVATE SECTOR PROGRAMS

The Mexican private sector is also diligent in harnessing food safety programs for specific needs. One of Mexico's most comprehensive quality and food safety certification program is the Mexico Calidad Suprema (Mexico Supreme Quality or MSQ). MSQ is a private, non-profit organization operating under a Mexican Federal government program. It was formed by the principal associations in the country for the purpose of collaborating with the federal government on actions promoting certification and branding of Mexican food products.

Some producers are going beyond the government organized efforts and implementing even more specific programs. The Mex-

ican Association of Protected Agriculture AMHPAC (Mexico's National Association of Protected Horticulture) represents 200 growers with members involved in production, packaging, distribution and marketing of fresh produce grown under greenhouses and other covered structures. They are currently aggressively working a project based on the SQF Program (the food safety and quality certification system endorsed by the Food Marketing Institute). In the case of avocados, APEAM (Growers and Exporters of Avocados from Michoacán) has undertaken the commitment that all exporters associated with their organization will be certified by MexicoGAP (GlobalGAP) in two years.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As Mexico pushes forward in the food safety arena, government and private sector are moving to develop additional systems for improvement in the food safety arena. Training, promotion, documentation, field studies and technical support are the

main components of the future programs. Recognition of participant growers will also be a continuous tool to enhance participation in and maintenance of programs.



For more information:

Please contact the Agricultural Office at the Embassy of Mexico:

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Don't miss your chance to see things first-hand. Mexico's Ministry of Agriculture is organizing at least five trade missions in 2011 focused on improving and building business with Mexican suppliers. These custom-made missions include all logistics and itinerary planning and participants receive reimbursement for hotel and travel costs. For more information contact the Agricultural Office at the Embassy of Mexico.

TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MEXICO SUPREME QUALITY

Mexico Supreme Quality (MSQ), a food safety certification program, provides a framework for certifying good agricultural practices on farms so that consumers are assured their foods are produced safely and responsibly. MSQ works with independent certification bodies to make certain that producers comply with international and Mexican food safety regulations.

Here are ten things you need to know to become more familiar with the quality and safety of products certified with MSQ, and to see a snapshot of how MSQ fits into the larger scope of quality control for Mexican produce.

1. Certified producers must be audited by an independent certification body to assure compliance with food safety and quality issues.
2. The certificate covers all aspects of a product, including farm inputs like feed or seedlings and all farming activities until the product leaves the farm.
3. MSQ standards are equivalent to those of MexicoGAP which itself is equivalent to Global GAP.
4. MSQ has signed a collaboration agreement with the SQF Institute to promote certification with both standards.
5. MSQ covers fruit, vegetables, beef, pork, dairy products, honey and oil from over 300 producers.
6. MSQ certification requires: implementation of quality control systems, documentation of procedures, sampling of products, calibration of equipment, monitoring of temperatures and relative humidity levels, training of staff, internal self-evaluation based on ISO-19011, and compliance with NOM and Mexican Labeling Standards.
7. MSQ certification requires implementation of GAP food safety practices in fields and implementation of Good Packaging Handling Practices.
8. When all requirements, protocols and controls are completed, MSQ issues a certification document.
9. MSQ supports 50 percent of the certification cost.
10. MSQ provides consulting and training to help producers obtain certification with a network of 174 consultants throughout Mexico.

For more information visit: www.mexicocalidadsuprema.com.mx

VIEW FROM MEXICO

Interview with Juan Ruben Barrio Aguirre, President of Mexico Supreme Quality (MSQ)

Q: Why is MSQ important for US buyers?

Food safety is a must-have for everyone involved in the food business. Buyers must be able to offer food safety assurances to their customers not only on what they do but on what their suppliers are doing. MSQ provides a way for buyers to develop the certified suppliers they need in Mexico. Mexican growers and suppliers can get any certification they require with technical assistance from MSQ. Additionally, 50 percent of the cost of certification is supported by the program so that means no price increases because of added certification costs.

Q: Is interest by Mexican growers in the MSQ program growing?

We see steadily increasing interest because of the growing recognition of the importance of food safety. Growers need a program where they can comply with various certifications and not just those required by one country, auditor, client or scheme and MSQ gives them that option.

Q: How can US buyers ensure their suppliers are certified by MSQ?

Buyers can ask growers to show them their certification. Our growers are proud to have a food safety program like MSQ and of the investments they've made in food safety in their operations. In addition to asking for the MSQ certification, buyers should be sure to talk to their suppliers about specifically what their food safety program entails."

Q: What else should US buyers know about MSQ?

MSQ has no conflict of interest as long as the audits are done by an independent body which complies with an impartial entity. The Mexican government does not do the audits, but rather supports the certification costs through the MSQ organization. The recognized equivalence with other certification systems gives us the support as an international certification program.





PHOTO ABOVE COURTESY OF FRESHERIZED FOODS.
PHOTO IN CENTER COURTESY OF CALAVO GROWERS INC.
PHOTO AT RIGHT COURTESY OF CONCORD FOODS INC.



Whether fresh-made or a dry spice mix, the produce department has plenty of options for guacamole lovers.

Guacamole Fans Find Convenient Offerings In Produce Section

Despite a serious shortage of fresh-market avocados, processors of ready-made guacamole and dry seasoning mixes continue to attack the category with creative marketing and merchandising.

INTERVIEWS COMPILED BY JENNIFER LESLIE KRAMER

It's no secret that fresh avocados are experiencing an international supply shortage. This is due to a number of reasons that begin with California's off-bearing crop year, which, according to some industry experts, is 50 percent less than last year's record-breaking production. Additionally, an unseasonable freeze in Chile and a continued recovery effort from the earthquake earlier this year has affected the country's fresh-market avocado crops, also by about 50 percent. This has left Mexico, where production is also on the low side, to supply the lion's share of avocados to a large portion of the world. A full recovery is expected by August or September of this year.

These mitigating factors have led to record market pricing of fresh avocados, which are twice the price — or more — compared to the same time last year. Inevitably, pricing constraints will trickle down the line to retailers and consumers, both of whom

should prepare themselves for an increase in the price of fresh-market and processed product. Any product that includes avocados as an ingredient will certainly be affected in the coming months.

Nonetheless, health-conscious and time-starved consumers, as well as those preparing for at-home gatherings, remain very interested in ready-made or ready-to-make guacamole products. Shippers and marketers of these products are using myriad techniques to keep their products front-and-center in produce. PRODUCE BUSINESS spoke to three representatives of the top companies in the prepared guacamole category to get a better understanding of where the category is headed, including Al Ahmer, vice president of sales and production, Calavo Growers Inc., Santa Paula, CA; Charles Olins, vice president of sales and marketing, Concord Foods Inc., Brockton, MA; and Jay Alley, Fresherized Foods, Fort Worth, TX.

What is fueling the rapid expansion of prepared guacamole/guacamole seasoning mixes in the produce department and who are the target customers?

Calavo: The guacamoles we sell in produce are made using Ultra High Pressure (UHP) technology, which destroys any potential bacteria that could lead to spoilage or oxidation issues. Because this process is basically a "kill" step, the use of preservatives is unnecessary. All of our guacamoles are 100 percent fresh-made with Hass avocados and all-natural ingredients. Since the UHP process applies equal pressure to the products, the integrity of the ingredients — tomatoes, onions, avocado chunks, etc., — remains intact.

Our target customers are consumers shopping for more healthful and natural food choices, and our products definitely fulfill that criteria.

Concord: Three factors are driving the growth of guacamole-related items. First,

increased awareness of the great taste of avocados and guacamole in non-traditional areas, such as the Northeast and Midwest, where household penetration of avocados (and guacamole sales) has been low. It is also due to the increased availability of ripe/ready-to-eat avocados, which encourages new consumers.

As consumers become attracted to avocados as a category, they quickly learn about dry mixes and prepared guacamole. Increased awareness of the health benefits of avocados is generating demand. Awareness has increased via POS material and the work of the various marketing boards. The convenience factor is also an important consideration. It is easy for consumers to make fresh guacamole from seasoning mixes. The taste is guaranteed and consistent, so making guacamole is no longer difficult.

The target consumers fall into two categories: The year-round consumer (usually the stay-at-home mom) who wants guacamole on a regular basis and just needs a bit of help making it consistently; and the occasional "celebration" consumer — an important sector of the market that drives sales during the events mentioned above.

Fresherized: Avocados are a functional food; they contain 20 minerals and vitamins. We offer a value-added item that is always ripe and ready to be consumed with ingredients you can pronounce. They are all-natural as well as Kosher. No longer do consumers have to struggle picking out four or five avocados only to get them home and be disappointed they are not ripe enough or unusable due to hidden bruising. U.S. consumption is now estimated to be in excess of 1.1 billion pounds or 4.3 pounds per person per year, up from 3.8 pounds in 2009 (a 13 percent increase). We do not see this trend slowing down anytime soon.

Snack packs are the hot items with the retailers and consumers. We have seen great growth in this category as consumers learn that they can use our product as a healthful convenient snack, such as in lunchboxes. They also make a great addition to a burger, chicken sandwich or even your omelet in the morning.

Target consumers are Moms with children who are looking for a nutritious snack; health-conscious adults who love fresh avocados; and those simply looking for a great-tasting and convenient product.

What are your suggestions for optimal merchandising?

Calavo: Merchandise the product in the refrigerated produce section along with Calavo's exciting new line of all fresh and natural salsas.

Concord: Display the seasoning mixes as close to the avocados as possible. It is clear that "adjacency is the key to success." We provide a variety of options for retailers to display our mixes next to the avocados, such as mini-display/cut in racks, baskets, clip strips and custom-built fixtures, which fit directly on avocado tables. Retailers will at least triple sales when they display our guacamole mix right next to the avocados. This should be the permanent position for the guacamole mixes. We like to remind our retailers that whenever they sell a packet of our guacamole seasoning mix, they will also sell two avocados, so there is a huge benefit to merchandising the items together. We also supply football-themed shippers for Super Bowl.

Fresherized: Retailers need to make sure the product is displayed in cases that are between 34-38° F. By doing this, both retailers and consumers will get the full benefit of the shelf-life.

How are retailers familiarizing consumers with the product? Are they using POS materials, advertisements, etc.?

Calavo: Typically, product introduction is

accomplished through promotions/cents-off normal price. In stores where we have both guacamole and salsas, we have done promos like buy a guacamole and get 50-cents off on salsa or vice-versa.

Concord: We provide promotional pricing at key points in the year to encourage trial of our guacamole mix. Last year, in conjunction with the Hass Avocado Board, we ran a successful instantly redeemable coupon (IRC), which generated a lot of interest from selected retailers and consumers. We will continue with this type of couponing.

Fresherized: Some retailers use the POS we send them, which we ship quarterly with a seasonal theme. We have also partnered with Disney to help bring awareness on DVD releases. Additionally, we have four to eight national free-standing inserts (FSI) that help retailers familiarize their consumers with our product. We have also done social networking with some of our retail partners to bring awareness to consumers. Some stores do sampling on the weekends. We are working with many retailers to build destination categories of Wholly Guacamole, Wholly Salsa and Wholly Queso, which offers consumers a one-stop shop for their party and snacking needs. **pb**

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More than just peaches, the southern fruit season begins with Florida strawberries in December.

Southern Fruit: Let The Parade Begin

Strawberries, peaches, melons and blueberries are just a few of the Southern fruit favorites making their way into eager produce consumers' hands. **BY BOB JOHNSON**

The Southern fruit season begins with the Florida strawberries that dominate the East Coast market through the winter and early spring, and continues until the last peach is picked and shipped in September. In between, Southern growers supply much of the country with virtually every common fruit. "The South grows the basics. We start around the middle of May with the first peaches, and it usually wraps up with peaches in the middle of August," reports Nickey Gregory, owner and president of Nickey Gregory Co. LLC, based in Forest Park, GA. "Blueberries have a short season from May until June, when the heat gets us. We have watermelons and cantaloupes, too."

The extent to which it makes sense to merchandise this parade of fruits as from the South, or even as from a particular state, depends on your customer base and on the fruit itself.

How Local Do You Get?

While many consumers desire local pro-

duce, the meaning of "local" depends on your consumer base. In Tennessee, where tomatoes are the state fruit, locals can be fiercely partisan about tomatoes from a particular county, according to Gregory. But few people outside of the state pay a great deal of attention to these highly local distinctions.

The importance of a regional label depends largely on the reputation the region has earned over time. "I believe consumers want fruit from the region known to grow them best, such as Washington apples, Georgia peaches and Vidalia onions," reasons says Duke Lane III, vice president of sales at Lane Southern Orchards, headquartered in Fort Valley, GA. "Shoppers feel more comfortable buying fruit from the best-known regions. Consistency is extremely important to consumers of fresh produce."

No group of growers in the South benefits more from their reputation than Georgia peach farmers. The Byron-based Georgia Peach Council commissioned the Perishables Group, a food marketing and research firm based in West Dundee, IL, to survey consumer

preferences for Georgia peaches. The survey covered three distinct regions — Southeastern states near Georgia, Northeastern states including Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, and Midwestern states including Michigan, Illinois and Indiana. The Georgia peach brand name held serious clout in all three regions.

"Almost 80 percent of the respondents to the survey from all of the regions said they would prefer peaches from Georgia," reports Will McGehee, marketing committee chair of the Georgia Peach Council and a fifth generation peach farmer with family-owned Pearson Farm in Fort Valley, GA. "People see us as a good quality brand. We recommend that retailers merchandise us as Georgia peaches, rather than Southern or Eastern peaches."

Georgia harvests around 12,000 acres of commercial peaches, and more than 80 percent of them are grown within a four-county region. South Carolina has at least 50 percent more peach acreage, but is still playing catch up when it comes to brand recognition.

"Most of the stores market them as Southern peaches, but one of our goals is to promote

“Marketing peaches by variety is not important. Because our varieties are only available for 10 days, you never get enough traction for a particular variety.”

— Amy London, South Carolina Peach Council

South Carolina peaches as South Carolina peaches,” says Amy London, executive director of the Columbia-based South Carolina Peach Council. “We have some great retail partners and we provide them with POP materials. We know consumers always want to have a consistent quality fruit that tastes good.”

However, most South Carolina peach growers still market their fruit as Southern, rather than South Carolinian. “I believe the industry is regional,” declares Chalmers Carr, president and CEO of Ridge Spring, SC-based Titan Farms. “Our sales agent sells peaches from both South Carolina and Georgia, and a lot of other agents do, too. Peaches are a Southern regional fruit. I think of Southern peaches as from the middle of Georgia to North Carolina. They grow low chill varieties in Florida, but it’s not the same.”

Carr begins his peach harvest around May 15 and does not end until around September 10 with late varieties such as Sunny J, Big Red and Autumn Prince. He believes the region is as good as it gets for growing peaches. “I think the taste has a lot to do with our growing environment, the soils and the weather,” he says.

Generally, the preference for local fruit usually means a preference for fruit from the South, rather than from a particular state. “We’re a regional produce distributor throughout the South,” says Randy Lineberger, executive vice president of General Produce Inc., based in Forest Park, GA. “We’ll ship as far west as Louisiana and Mississippi, and as far north as Kentucky and West Virginia.” He believes there is a consumer preference throughout that vast area for fruit from the South.

Peach industry insiders are working to spread the word that, wherever they are from, peaches are nutritional powerhouses. “I’d like to see the consumers’ knowledge of the antioxidant and other health qualities of peaches increase so we become known as a super fruit,”

states London. “They have antioxidants, cancer fighting abilities, beta carotene and vitamin A. It’s a powerful punch.”

Peach Of A Season

The fresh peach season should begin in early May with fruit out of South Carolina, and continue until late in the summer. The South Carolina harvest extends all the way into September with late varieties like Autumn Prince, while the Georgia harvest begins a few days

later but it, too, extends for months as dozens of varieties take their turn on the stage.

“Our first variety is Lobo; it’s a cling peach of a pretty good size,” details Frank Funderburk, executive director of the Georgia Peach Council and a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension agent in Peach County. “It is usually ready about May 15 to May 20. Parade is the last variety, which harvests at the end of August. It’s a free-stone and being on the tree all season, it has good size and taste, but it’s not

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one of the big names. There are only a couple growers still doing it because there was a gap of about two weeks between Parade and the next to last variety and people didn't want to have to keep their crews on. Most everybody is done on August 15," he concludes.

For most Georgia peach growers, the last variety is August Prince, one of many varieties that bear the name of former USDA peach breeder, Jim Prince.

While the heart of the season comes in late May, numerous varieties begin to overlap throughout the summer, guaranteeing an abundant supply. "Georgia Peaches are usually available in promotable volumes for Memorial Day ads, and last all summer long until mid-August," Lane of Lane Southern Orchards says.

The key to the long season for fresh peaches from Georgia and South Carolina is the sequential harvest of dozens of varieties. "We're up to 48 different varieties," reports McGhee of the Georgia Peach Council. "Most of those varieties are the yellow-flesh type."

Because there are so many peach varieties, and each is available for only a short time, the variety is not an important consideration. "Marketing peaches by variety is not

"I believe consumers want fruit from the region known to grow them best, such as Washington apples, Georgia peaches and Vidalia onions. Shoppers feel more comfortable buying fruit from the best-known regions. Consistency is extremely important to consumers of fresh produce."

— Duke Lane III, Lane Southern Orchards

important," declares London of the South Carolina Peach Council. "Because our varieties are only available for 10 days, you never get enough traction for a particular variety." South Carolina growers ship more than 40 varieties of peaches.

"I don't think people buy peaches by the variety," agrees Funderburk. "If you ask most people to name a variety they would say Alberta, but we don't grow it anymore." The Alberta peach was first made popular by Samuel Rumph, generally considered to be the father of the commercial peach industry in Georgia. In the late 1800s, Rumph, a world traveler and avid horticulturist, was given the gift of peach seedlings from China. He grew them out and named his favorite after his wife, Alberta.

Customers who stopped at roadside peach stands in Georgia would ask vendors if they had the Alberta variety, according to Funderburk of the Georgia Peach Council. Regardless of the season and whether the Alberta variety was actually available, roadside vendors would always assure the customer that the peaches were indeed the coveted Albertas. But this famed variety had a fatal flaw that led to its demise. "It had a real sharp point and when you packed it in the box you would end up with peach soup," describes Funderburk.

There is work underway on breeding new peach varieties that will look more like peaches did decades ago. "Consumers always bought peaches on looks alone, and the industry invested heavily in developing good-looking varieties," notes Funderburk. "The emphasis has moved away from the pretty red peaches, and now we're getting back to peaches that are peach-colored."

Consumers can also look forward to peaches that can be grown efficiently with fewer chemicals because they have natural resistance to important pests and diseases. "We have been doing a ton of research on varieties," reports McGhee. "A lot of it has been on color,

but we're also looking at varieties that are pest- and disease-resistant so we can apply fewer insecticides. The consumer has said that matters. I'm a fifth-generation farmer and my grandfather didn't have the benefit of seeing breeding efforts like this."

This year, the peach trees should benefit from a winter that was consistently cold, but rarely extremely cold. "We had the best winter in the South in the past 25 years, at least," says Titan's Carr. "We had 1,200 chill hours by February 10."

The winter chill that was advantageous to the peaches, however, is just one piece of the complex of weather conditions that determine the quantity, quality and timing of the fruit. Another piece of that puzzle is the unseasonable warm spell that hit most growing areas of the South in the middle of February, which has some growers nervous. "The peaches need the cold and they've had that, but they don't need it this warm this early," explains General Produce's Lineberger. "It's 70 degrees out there in the middle of February. If the peaches start blooming and then we get another frost, it will kill the flowers."

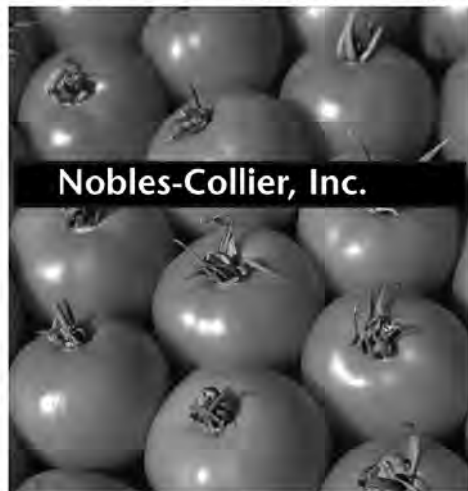
More Than Peaches

Peaches may be the headliner of the show, but they are not the only stars when it comes to Southern fruit. "There are windows when the Southern product is the most available in the whole country," notes Keith Mixon, president of Sunnyridge Farm Inc., based in Winter Haven, FL. "Southern berries are shipped all up and down the East Coast. Some strawberries go West, and blueberries and blackberries from the South go all over the world." Sunnyridge Farms grows and ships a full line of berries — strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries.

"Blackberries start in Georgia and Florida in June and July, and California comes later," continues Mixon. "Blueberries will be the major product line out there in April. Florida blueberries will start in March or

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early April; and Georgia blueberries in May. Clearly, blueberries have become a major industry in the South.”

In fact, Joe Cornelius, chairman of the Waycross-based Georgia Blueberry Commission, which was formed in 2008, reports Georgia has risen to the third highest production state for both frozen and fresh-market blueberries. “This past year, Georgia produced 52 million pounds, and in the next five years, we expect that number to increase to somewhere between 72 and 100 million pounds,” he details.

The Georgia Blueberry Commission, which recently released a new logo, has just completed an in-flight video for Delta Airlines, which will be promoting Vidalia onions and blueberries during the month of May. “In June, we’ll switch to peaches and watermelons,” says Cornelius. “We’ve been teaming up with the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association to spread the word about our Southern blueberries. Our Web site is scheduled to be up this month — www.georgiablueberries.org — where we plan to have plenty of recipes and information for consumers.”

The Southern fruit season actually begins with Florida strawberries, which are abundant from December until April, according to Mixon.

Melons are also prominent in the portfolio of Southern fruits. “The watermelons and cantaloupes are most important after the peaches,” according to Lineberger. “The South Georgia deal starts after Memorial Day. The Florida deal won’t start until the end of April; if they have good weather, maybe mid-April.”

A special Southern treat is Muscadines, a large variety of grapes that are native to the Southeast. “Muscadines are a small category, but generally are available in the late summer and early fall,” says Lane of Lane Southern Orchards.

In addition to shipping fruit from throughout the Southeast, the Atlanta State Farmers’ Market also serves as a hub for produce wholesalers who distribute fruit from throughout the hemisphere. “We have fruit from Washington and Chile,” reports Mike Jardina, president and CEO of J. J. Jardina Co. Inc., based in Forest Park, GA. “Just because we’re in the South doesn’t mean the fruit is from the South. Cantaloupes and watermelons from the South start in the middle of May or early June and go through the whole summer until September. Strawberries start from the middle of March to the first of April and it’s a short season, lasting about a month.”

Even in tough times there is increasing

demand for some varieties of organic fruit from the South. “There’s good demand for organics,” recognizes Mixon. “We grow organic blueberries and some blackberries. We started three years ago; every year there’s more supply and it’s getting sold.”

Sunnyridge Farms plans to add raspberries to its organic program next, and then fill out the organic berry menu with strawberries in the next few years. “People are thinking more and more about what they are putting in their

bodies, and some consumers want ultra-pure product,” explains Mixon.

Many people these days also think about where their food, in general, and fruit in particular, came from. “A lot of people ask for Georgia fruit specifically,” shares Jardina. “People ask for Georgia peaches, cantaloupe, strawberries and apples. Our business is in the Southeast and a lot of people request Georgia specifically because they want local fruit. South Carolina peaches are requested a lot, too.” **pb**

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AN ALLY FOR YOUR NEEDS: GROWER ALLIANCE

Grower Alliance, LLC. was formed by Jorge Quintero (sales), Luis Caballero (head of Mexican operations), Mario Alvarez (a grower in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico), and Ramon Mendez (a grower in Guasave, Sinaloa, Mexico) in August of 2007. The idea behind the company was to partner with a variety of Mexican fruit and vegetable growers, import these

products and then reach out to retailers, foodservice, wholesalers, distributors, and brokers in the U.S. and Canada. Partnering up with a variety of growers provided the ability to have production through the whole Nogales season which typically runs from October through June. This alliance consisted of the fall crop with Agropecuaria Jam in Hermosillo from

October through December, which overlapped into the winter crop with Agricola Mendez from December to April, and finished in the spring with a return to Agropecuaria Jam from March to June. The partnership allows for "guaranteed package volumes" on which business could be built and grown.

A GROWING BUSINESS

As Grower Alliance began to ship product in September of 2007, they contracted additional growers to give more volume in their first season, resulting in shipment of an estimated 800,000 packages. The second season brought even more contracted growers to increase their production schedule. At that time, Jorge Quintero, Sr., was hired as sales manager and became the fifth partner of the company, having previously been sales manager at Rene Produce for about 10 years. Grower Alliance shipped an estimated 1.3 million packages in their second season and the third season totaled 1.8 million packages. Last year also marked the first time they

shipped in a district other than Nogales, with some product crossing through McAllen, TX. They now ship out of Nogales, McAllen and Yuma, AZ.

In this, their fourth, season they are projecting to receive about 2.5 to 2.8 million packages but anticipate some reduction in that number due to the freeze that hit in early February. They plan to offer customers a steady supply of core items year round including watermelons, honeydews, green beans, cucumbers/euro cucumbers, Italian/grey/yellow straightneck squash, eggplant, and green bell peppers. Besides these core items they also ship hot peppers (jalapeno, Caribe, Anaheim, pasilla,

serrano), carrots, Roma tomatoes, mini watermelons, pickles, snap peas, sweet corn, and fava beans. At the moment they are handling carrots and fava beans shipping out of Yuma, AZ. Carrots started shipping January 24th and fava beans start March 19th. They will begin to ship snap peas around March 25th.

This season also marks a move to their own building where they have their own dispatch/shipping employees, the ability to stage orders, and the opportunity to give the customer the utmost attention in the loading phase of the business. The facility is Primus Labs certified and allows them to offer "in and out" services to customers.

DEDICATED FOOD SAFETY

Grower Alliance has high dedication to food safety standards. Since the inception of the company, they have made every effort to stay on top of their food safety programs and make ensure delivery of a product which is virtually free of any food safety issues. They employ two employees in Mexico who work with all of their growers to ensure that food safety is a priority in all areas: Senen Castro and Ricardo Araiza. Castro was previously employed by Primus Labs and uses his extensive knowledge of food safety programs to benefit the growers. Araiza works with their grow-

ers to prepare them for GAP and GMP certifications. Both employees continuously perform audits at all growers' packing sheds and make certain they are up to par with food safety standards. Grower Alliance currently has about half of their growers both GAP and GMP certified, and all growers fields' have been certified for pesticide residue with either Primus Labs or Scientific Certification Systems.

Grower Alliance currently uses a traceability program through their produce software Optima Produce since the start of this season. Each of their growing areas

and in turn each of their growers has a specific code for identification. Each field and even each lot also has its own code. A sticker with a code is placed on each box to identify the following information at box-level: area, grower, field, lot, date harvested, date packed. Their software can also provide a report showing when the product was received in their warehouse and when it was shipped out to the customer. Their website contains a page where customers can enter the code from the box and receive the pertinent information.



KEY PEOPLE TO KNOW

Following are the key people involved with Grower Alliance who can be an asset to your business:



Jorge Quintero, Jr.
Sales, Managing Member
(daily sales, contract planning and advertising)



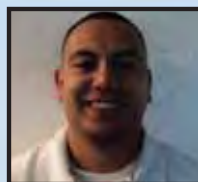
Jorge Quintero, Sr.
Sales Manager, Managing Member
(marketing director, daily sales)



Luis Caballero
Mexican Operations, Managing Member
(contracting growers, planning production schedule, grower relations)



Jaime Martinez
Head accountant & grower relations



Frank Hernandez II
Sales Assistant



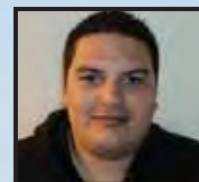
Sandra Betancourt
Accounts Payable/Accounts Receivable



Fernando Gamon
Warehouse Foreman



Armando Robles
Quality Control



Jose Villareal
Dispatcher

GROWER PROFILE: AGROPECUARIA JAM

Location: Costa de Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico (Hermosillo Coast)

Agropecuaria Jam was created by Mario Alvarez, Agustin Romo, and Jorge Alvarez (partners in Agroquímicos JAM) in 1998 when they acquired "Campo Dolores" (Dolores Field). Agroquímicos JAM, their primary operation, distributes seed, pesticides and other grower material. Upon acquired the Campo Dolores field, they entered the growing side of the industry. Today they have two different growing operations in two different locations on the coast of Hermosillo (Dolores and La Choya) and produce from 150 to 800 hectares (approximately 370 to 1,977 acres) of vegetables and grains.

They market under the labels Dolores, Laura, and Santa Ana. Products include Italian squash, grey squash, yellow straightneck squash, honeydew melons, watermelons, mini watermelons, chili peppers, bell peppers, eggplant, sweet corn and table grapes. They produce during the months of September to December and March to July.

Key People in the growing operation include:

Mario Alvarez, President
Agustin Romo, General Manager
Audelio Lujan, Growing Manager
Esteban Rivera, Field Operations
Jazael Valenzuela, Field Operations
Guadalupe Figueroa, Food Safety Manager

GROWER PROFILE: AGRICOLA MENDEZ SPR DE RI

Location: Ejido Batamote, Guasave, Sinaloa, Mexico

Agricola Mendez started exporting in 2000 with Roma tomatoes. After a very bad season, caused by diseases in the crop due to heavy rain, the grower changed to producing 25 hectares (62 acres) of green beans. Since then production has increased to 350 hectares (865 acres) of just green beans as well as additional acreage of other products such grains and other fresh vegetables.

Agricola Mendez's packing house has the ability to pack in cold and regular temperature. The majority of the green bean program is on drip irrigation systems which allow better yield and quality. The company markets under the label Agrícola Mendez and current products include green beans, honeydew melons, Roma tomatoes, and pickles.

Key people in the operation to know include:

Jesus Ramon Mendez, President
Jorge G Anaya, General Administrator
Ramiro Lopez, Packing Supervisor
Senen Castro, External Consultant and Food Safety Coordinator
Ricardo Araiza, Food Safety and Quality Control Assistant

Grower Alliance, LLC

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Gold and green kiwifruit, as well as a large variety of pears, are just some of the popular items that come from Australia and New Zealand.

Produce Delights From Down Under

Australian and New Zealand fruit gets a warm welcome from American retailers and consumers. **BY JULIE COOK RAMIREZ**

When most Americans think of New Zealand and Australia, their minds instantly fill with visions of kangaroos, koala bears, meadows of sheep and vast expanses of unadulterated nature. For the produce industry, however, you can add succulent kiwifruit, juicy oranges and crisp, delicious apples and pears to that picture.

A Bounty Of Produce

Over the past two decades, these “lands down under” have become known for their ability to produce high quality fruit that is increasingly desirable to U.S. consumers and retailers. In large part, that’s because it is mostly counter-seasonal to domestic product. However, there are also several varieties that are unique to this specific part of the world.

Take the Envy apple, for instance. Only available commercially in the U.S. since 2009, New Zealand-grown Envy apples are known for being large, bright red and sweet, and for boast-

ing a crisp flesh. In conjunction with Zespri International, the Coquitlam, BC, Canada-based Oppenheimer Group expects to import 45,000 boxes of Envy apples this year. According to David Nelley, director of pipfruit and pineapple categories, they are ideal for the U.S. market.

New Zealand also boasts ample supplies of Taylor’s Gold, Bosc and Comice pears; Jazz, Fuji, Gala, Braeburn and Granny Smith apples; and Meyer lemons, which Jason Bushong, sales manager for Wenatchee, WA-based Giumarra of Wenatchee calls a “unique niche item.”

While many of the varieties coming out of New Zealand and Australia are also available domestically, Nelley says many American consumers prefer the imported product because it is wax-free and hasn’t been treated with Smart Fresh, a product used to help maintain freshness and quality. “That’s why we have quite a good organic business as well as a conventional business,” he explains. “It appeals to that kind of consumer.”

Of course, no discussion of New Zealand produce would be complete without kiwifruit.

Oppenheimer imports both gold and green kiwifruit in both organic and conventional varieties. While organic sales have been growing at a much faster rate than the category as a whole, the quality of all kiwifruit coming out of New Zealand is top-notch, according to Steve Woodyear-Smith, category director for kiwifruit and mangos. “New Zealand puts out a very consistent piece of fruit,” he says. “There are very strict demands and rigors placed on the growers, as well as a great deal of guidance given to them on how to grow product to impart the best flavor.”

When it comes to Australia, it’s all about citrus, according to Stu Monaghan, national sales manager at Fort Pierce, FL-based DNE World Fruit Sales. DNE focuses on citrus from all parts of the world, including Australia. Primarily, that entails navel oranges, Mineolas, and three different varieties of tangerines — Fallglos, Daisies and Ellendales. While some consumers are concerned that buying imported citrus may be taking away American growers’ livelihoods, Monaghan assures them there’s

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“Anyone who thinks Australian citrus is taking away from California isn’t aware of the way the seasons work — Northern Hemisphere versus Southern Hemisphere. Australia starts early- to mid-July when California finishes, and we finish up mid to late October when California starts up again.”

— *Stu Monaghan, DNE World Fruit Sales*

nothing to worry about. “Anyone who thinks Australian citrus is taking away from California isn’t aware of the way the seasons work — Northern Hemisphere versus Southern Hemisphere,” explains Monaghan. “Australia starts early- to mid-July when California finishes, and we finish up mid to late October when California starts up again.”

Furthermore, most U.S. retailers are determined to stick with domestic product as long as possible, only turning to imported product as a last resort. At Eden Prairie, MN-based Supervalu Inc., imported produce is “only used to fill quality and variety gaps,” according to

Mike Siemienas, spokesperson. “If Washington Galas are still eating well and hitting all of the quality requirements, we would stay with the domestic item,” he assures. “But having the ability to move to new crop product when necessary and to add new varieties to a category helps maintain the strength and integrity of our program.”

Filling the Gap

Consumer reaction to Australian and New Zealand fruit is overwhelmingly positive, according to Neil Cullen, produce buyer for the Phoenix, AZ-based Sprouts Farmers Market

LLC. In fact, he says such product is typically considered a premium item, and as such, commands a premium price. For the consumer who wants a specific variety of pear when none are available domestically, however, Cullen says they are more than willing to pay that premium price. “Our customers understand these are products from halfway around the world,” he says. “That’s why we promote it at 99-cents instead of 49-cents.”

According to Woodyear-Smith, many U.S. retailers have found that New Zealand kiwifruit is a must-have, even during times when “cheaper options” are available. That said, Oppenheimer strives to be respectful of U.S. growers by focusing on the East Coast later in the season in order to “open up the West Coast for California fruit.”

For Lakeland, FL-based Publix Super Markets Inc., Australian fruit is cost-prohibitive, according to Maria Brous, director of media and community relations. However, the chain does carry apples from New Zealand once the domestic supply dries up. While consumers respond favorably to New Zealand apples, Brous says Publix does little in the way of promotional activity due to the

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“If Washington Galas are still eating well and hitting all of the quality requirements, we would stay with the domestic item. But having the ability to move to new crop product when necessary and to add new varieties to a category helps maintain the strength and integrity of our program.”

— Mike Siemienas, Supervalu

higher retail prices.

Supervalu shoppers also react positively to New Zealand and Australian fruit, according to Siemienas. In large part, that’s because the quality is comparable to domestic product. In

fact, he says, it is often superior. That’s because it is fresh, whereas remaining domestic product may have been in storage for a while. “Domestic growers have come a long way over the past few years in extending the eating quality of

their fruit through enhancements in their storage protocols, but there are times when storage apples do not meet our specs for quality,” explains Siemienas. “This is when we turn to imported product to fill the quality gap.”

Oppenheimer’s Nelley recommends that retailers seize on the freshness of imported produce and use phrases like “Fresh Crop” in their merchandising. “They need to point out that these fresh crop apples are four to six weeks old, compared to apples that may have been sitting around for eight to 10 months,” he asserts.

Cullen agrees that the ready availability of New Zealand and Australian fruit helps ensure retailers continue to have top quality product available, even as they approach the



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off-season. "There are plenty of processors for the very tail-end of the domestic deal so that once the Australian imports come in on citrus or the New Zealand product comes in on apples, you are not having to force certain grades or bend your specs to accommodate domestic items that might not look and present as nicely," says Cullen.

While critics might argue that U.S. retailers should continue selling domestic product as long as it is available, Cullen says many American suppliers let out a sigh of relief once product from New Zealand and Australia lands on our shores because it lets them off the hook for providing produce during a time when quality might begin falling off. That's particularly true among citrus suppliers, Cullen notes. "If

anything, we get a sense of relief from the domestic suppliers that says, 'Okay, we don't have to be concerned about rejections due to late seasonal elements, be it dry-sell or what have you,'" he notes.

Other Challenges

Other than pricing, the only significant challenge plaguing sellers of New Zealand and Australian fruit is the fact that it is coming so far. As a result, many factors may delay shipments, making it difficult to promote such produce. "When you are working with fruit that comes in on a vessel crossing an ocean, there are weather patterns that may delay it," explains DNE's Monaghan. "You are depending on fruit to be there for ads that are running

at a particular time, so vessel timing is always something we keep an eye on."

Oppenheimer works closely with Zespri to help retailers put together tailored promotions. The company also keeps its customers apprized of approximate arrival dates, so that ads and other promotional activity can be timed appropriately. That's good news to retailers like Sprouts' Cullen, who stresses the importance of ensuring that product is available when it is promoted. "You really have to be sure when you commit to some sort of promotion that you feel good about vessel arrival dates because there is no other place to get it," he says. "It's not like you can readily fill in when you've gone out and promoted Australian navel."
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Seven Ways To Sell More Sweet Onions

With a year-round supply of sweet onions, growers, shippers and retailers alike have more opportunities than ever to wow consumers with a subtly sweet and mild-flavored onion. **BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD**



Suppliers have created a 52-week availability by expanding the sweet onion crop offshore to countries such as Mexico, Peru and Chile.

A variety of sweet onions keeps retailers and customers satisfied all year long. According to David Burrell, president of National Onion Labs Inc., headquartered in Collins, GA, “A sweet onion, when eaten raw, has a mild and pleasant flavor that leaves a lingering impression of sweetness and should be free from pungent, bitter, metallic and other off flavors.”

Consumers today are indeed embracing onions that fit this definition. In 2010, the dollar contribution of sweet onions to total onion category sales at retail was 29.5 percent, up 11.7 percent since 2005, according to the Perishables Group, a West Dundee, IL-based market research firm that tracks and analyzes retail sales data of fresh foods.

Scot Olson, director of produce and floral for Grocery Outlet Inc., a third-generation, family run chain in Berkeley, CA, says, “More people have been exposed to sweet onions on TV cooking shows and they are buying them because they’re cooking more at home due to the economy. The result is that, for us, sweet onions are a growing item in the onion category.”

1. Know Your Sweet Onions

What makes a sweet onion sweet? Sugar content may seem like the simple answer, but the true explanation is far more complex. Matthew Curry, president of Curry & Co. Inc., in Brooks, OR, says, “Sweet onions have a higher sugar level, or Brix, than regular or storage onions. However, it is the ratio of Brix to pyruvic acid that is measured to determine sweetness levels in a sweet onion.”

It is pyruvic acid, and the sulfur in this acid, as well as other natural compounds in onions, which causes the pungent taste and tears associated with a traditional onion. Thus, sweet onions are grown in locations where there are low amounts of sulfur in the soil. Derrell Kelso, Jr., owner and president of Onions Etc. Inc., in Stockton, CA, reports, “Sweet onions mainly come from districts where the soil is sandy or volcanic, both of which have low sulfur levels. That is why onions are named after areas and not varieties. For example, Vidalias, Walla Wallas, Peruvians, Texas and Mexico 1015s, OSOs come out of the volcanic soil of Chile, and Mauis are grown in volcanic soil in Hawaii.”

Curry details, “Sweet onions typically have pyruvic acids less than 5 percent, while standard onions tend to be in the 10 to 13 percent range. A sweet onion also has a higher water content, which lends to its sweetness, as it can dilute the effect of the sulfur and increase mildness.”

Variety is also important. John Shuman, president and director of sales at Shuman Produce Inc., in Reidsville, GA, says, “True sweet onions are of the flat-shaped Granex variety. It creates confusion when a globe-shaped onion with dark brown skin is marketed as ‘sweet.’ However, this is why it’s important to educate customers about what to look for if they want a sweet onion, because they buy with their eyes.”

“In spite of location and variety,” says Derek Rodgers, sales manager for the Sweet Onion Trading Corp., in Melbourne, FL, “the flavor of sweet onions can vary by field.”

“In the end, grower management is the single most important factor in assuring a sweet onion is sweet,” asserts Burrell of the National Onion Lab.

2. Offer Year-Round

Sweet onions were once a seasonal offering

at Grocery Outlet, says Olson. “We didn’t carry any unless we were in the heart of the Vidalia or Walla Walla season. A growing awareness and demand by customers has led us to now carry a sweet onion year-round,” he reveals.

Similarly, Kathy Joe Hansen, produce manager at the Custer, SD, location of Lynn’s Dakota Mart, a five-store chain based in Pierre, SD, says, “Sweet onions were something we carried in the spring and summer. Now we order them regularly.”

Fifty-two week availability is something that the industry has worked hard to achieve over the past several years. Suppliers have done this by growing sweet onions in Mexico and offshore in Peru and Chile during the fall and winter, and cultivated sweet onions in states such as Georgia, Washington and Nevada during the spring and summer.

Curry & Co.’s Curry says, “There was a time when you would have a gap in the fall between the last of the domestic sweets and



High graphic labels are crucial for bagged sweet onions so consumers understand the price difference.

the start of imports, but with the continued growth of the domestic sweet onion in the fall in numerous growing regions, that gap has been filled. In addition, storage technologies continue to increase, extending the season of the many established sweet varieties. So for the most part, you can get sweet onions year-round with little difficulty, barring any extreme weather events.”

Some growers not only source sweet onions throughout the year, but have embarked on a year-round branded program based on a proprietary or unique seed variety that is cultivated in multiple locations. For example, Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa’s/World Variety Produce Inc., in Vernon, CA, shares, “This is the fifth year we’re offering our Perfect Sweet, which is grown in California, Texas, Arizona and Mexico.”

Two years ago, the OSO Sweet brand also went to 12 months, branching out from solely growing sweet onions in Chile in the winter to cultivating them in Texas, Georgia, California, New Mexico and Peru the remainder of the year.

3. Market By Brand & Growing Region

Some in the industry recommend merchandising sweet onions by brand, others by the region in which the onions are grown, and still other by both methods. “The brand is most important,” asserts Richard Pazderski, director of sales and marketing at Bland Farms LLC, headquartered in Glennville, GA. “With a consistent brand, consumers know if they buy it, the onions will be sweet no matter where in the

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“The benefits of displaying sweet onions with complementary items such as tomatoes and avocados are that it offers a great color break, suggests usages and makes the sweet onions easier for customers to see than if they were merchandised next to other onions.”

— Ira Greenstein, Direct Source Marketing

world they are grown.”

Mike Kemp, chief operating officer at Market Fresh Produce LLC, in Springfield, MO, agrees. “Growing areas do not always mean every onion is a sweet onion, therefore consumers will begin to rely on the brand to confidently buy a sweet onion.”

On the other hand, at Grocery Outlet, Olson promotes sweet onions by growing region. “When customers think of sweet onions, Vidalia is the number one name that comes to mind,” he contends. “Walla Walla is a close second and 1015s are also highly recognizable. Beyond that, I don’t think as many customers equate Chile and Peru with sweet onions.”

Marketing by geography offers promotional opportunities, believes David DeBerry, onion category manager at Frontera Produce Ltd., based in Edinburg, TX. “I think customers appreciate knowing what is ‘just in’ or fresh out of a certain growing region. Retailers can capitalize on this in an ad and signage.”

Ira Greenstein, president and owner of Direct Source Marketing, in Mount Kisco, NY, says, “In my opinion, the two regions that produce the sweetest onions are Georgia and Peru. This means in the spring and summer retailers can promote Vidalia onions around grilling occasions such as Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Then in the fall, promote Peruvian onions for big cooking holidays such as



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Thanksgiving. The arrivals of sweet onions out of Peru peak in November.”

Regional marketing also ties into the locally grown trend. With so many consumers preferring local options, Curry & Co.’s Curry reasons, “It makes sense to promote local programs as much as possible. If you have a retailer that strongly supports all things local and you receive the right local quality, it seems like the right way to drive sales.”

Sweet Onion Trading’s Rodgers markets by brand and by growing area. “However,” he notes, “I don’t think shoppers care much about where their sweet onions come from. They only care that they are sweet.”



4. Assure Your Sweet Onions Are ‘Sweet’

“The single biggest issue the industry faces,” according to Marty Kamer, Northeast office sales manager for Keystone Fruit Marketing Inc., in Greencastle, PA, “is to deliver a truly sweet onion.”

“Over the past few years there seems to be more and more produce growers jumping on the sweet onion bandwagon, with products that don’t live up to consumer expectations,” says Teri Gibson, marketing

and customer relations manager for Peri & Sons Farms Inc., headquartered in Yerington, NV. “This practice of not-so-sweet onions being marketed as sweet onions has eroded consumer trust. That’s not good for growers, buyers or retailers. In the end, it’s going to come down to trust.”

Paul Kneeland, vice president of produce and floral for Kings Super Markets Inc., a 25-store chain based in Parsippany, NJ, notes,



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“Establishing relationships with suppliers is one way we try to assure that the sweet onions we buy are actually sweet. In addition, our buyers stay on top of the different seasons and where the onions are coming from. We also perform QA checks at the warehouse.”

Many growers test to assure the sweetness of their onions. Bland Farm’s Pazderski reveals, “We conduct regular in-house pungency testing as well as conducting third-party audits.”

Rodgers reports, “Sweet Onion Trading has

all of its fields tested by National Onion Labs. Then, according to test results, each lot is certified according to its flavor profile, and the best will be marketed as ‘CertifiedSweet’ or ‘CertifiedExtraSweet.’

Communication is key, says Curry. “The level of sweetness can vary from season to season. Therefore, retailers should have an open dialogue with their suppliers; ask what the Brix levels are and how the crop is doing overall,” he suggests.

“Announce in your ads, ‘Your favorite sweet onions are arriving just in time for BBQ season.’ Tie headlines directly to sweet onions. Give recipe suggestions. If you’re promoting local or regional product, have a picture of the grower and his family. Take advantage of the social media opportunities and tweet that you just received fresh-packed sweet onions from your favorite local farm.”

— Matt Curry, Curry & Co. Inc.

Direct Source Marketing’s Greenstein agrees. “Every grower is required to test onions for pyruvate,” he asserts. “Retailers can request to see results of this testing.”

“The best way to assure onions are sweet is to taste them, just like consumers do,” says Onions Etc.’s Kelso.

5. Sell Bulk And Bag

Many retailers sell jumbo- or colossal-size sweet onions in bulk. “Most of our sweet business is for jumbo-sized product because sweets are typically sliced for hamburgers, sandwiches, or grilling,” explains Peri & Son’s Gibson. “The majority of customers still want a 40-lb. jumbo carton. In order to put jumbos in a bag, it would need to be at least five pounds or more, and many households may not be able to consume this quantity of onions so they opt to purchase one or two onions from the bulk display. This seems to be the trend for higher-end traditional retail stores, but several of these retailers have been promoting our 3-lb. bagged sweets more aggressively because this is an area that they want to grow.”

“The economy has led to more bagging,” acknowledges Curry & Co.’s Curry. “We’ve

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seen our numbers increase 10 to 15 percent. Bags are often associated with value, so we see customers searching those out.” He adds, “We find that 2-, 3- and 5-lb. bags work well in most retail outlets with some of the club and large format stores finding a niche for a 10-lb. bag also.”

However, Margret De Bruyn, president of De Bruyn Produce Co., in Weslaco, TX, says, “We’ve seen the economy really drive 2-lb. bags of sweet onions.”

Bulk or bag, it’s important to identify an onion as sweet, both so consumers know what they are buying and to assure the right ring at the register as sweet onions are generally sold at a premium, anywhere from 30-cents to \$1 more per pound over storage onions. For example, bulk onions typically have scannable PLU stickers, while consumer packs identify the onion and growing region.

Sweet Onion Trading’s Rodgers reports, “The biggest trend I’ve seen is bar codes and scanning of both bags and individually tagged bulk produce. Consumers are checking themselves out at the grocery and some can actually read these codes on their cell phones.”

Bags used to merchandise sweet onions should ideally catch customer’s attention.

Gibson suspects “the weakened economy has hurt bagged product a little, because consumers don’t always see the difference between a bagged sweet and a bagged yellow, and the price point for a bagged yellow is less. Therefore, we are in the process of releasing a new high-graphic, wrap-around label for our 3-lb. bags and believe it is going to boost sales by differentiating our sweets from the yellows.”

Consumer packs are also potent merchandising aids. Onion’s Etc.’s Kelso reveals, “Our consumer packs are cross-merchandised with citrus via photos and recipes on our bags that promote sweet onions, avocados, radishes and citrus.”

“This type of packaging,” acknowledges Grocery Outlet’s Olson, “makes selling sweet onions easier for us. The grower takes the first step in providing information and the story about the product and we follow it up with POS signage.”

Bags are one of the primary ways retailers can take part in the Vidalia, GA-based Vidalia Onion Committee’s (VOC) American Favorites! promotional campaign that will kick-off May 1. The slogan heralds collaboration between the VOC and Universal Music

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Group, Nashville. Wendy Brannen, executive director of the VOC, says, “Both country music and Vidalia onions share a strong southern heritage. Beyond this, country music has national appeal, with 45 percent of the country listening to this type of music and top country music markets ranging from New York City to Los Angeles. At the same time, Vidalia onions are also a bi-coastal product that are sold from the Carolinas to California.”

Shippers will offer bags of Vidalia onions

with photos of favorite country singers such as Vince Gill, Billy Currington, Gary Allan and Ashton Shepherd; recipes from these stars; a chance to enter a jingle contest; and get access to free music downloads. Brannen says, “Retailers should talk with their shippers now about packaging, bins and other display materials.”

6. Display & Cross-Display

The entire onion category is displayed

Sweet Onions Defined — What Will It Take?

What is the legal or official industry definition of a sweet onion? There is none.

Sweet onions do have their own PLU codes. For example, sweet onions are 4165, Vidalias 4159 and Walla Walla 4163. There are different PLU codes for Red, Spanish, White and Yellow onions. However, PLU codes are identification numbers administered by the International Federation for Produce Standards for inventory control and are not based on scientific testing.

What will it take to define a sweet onion? Michael Havey, USDA-ARS onion breeder and professor of horticulture for the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, WI, says, “It will take consumers or retailers to draw a line in the sand. There’s no advantage for a grower. Self-policing has come up short. After all, there’s a lot of money to be made, or lost, if the pyruvate in an onion, for example, is a four versus a six.”

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together at Dakota Mart, says Hansen. “We’ll use a header card that comes in the box to make the sweet onions stand out from the flock.”

Sweet Onion Trading’s Rodgers advises, “Display bulk sweet onions near the bags.”

Sweet onions get extra display space during the peak of the season at Kings Super Markets. “We’ll build big bountiful displays and cross-merchandise them with sauces and dressings,” details Kneeland.

Curry & Co.’s Curry declares, “Create excitement for the customer. Mark sweet onions clearly in your department with appropriate signage, and when possible, provide usage suggestions and health benefits. This past year we had several opportunities to offer POS materials to retailers, who recognized the higher dollar value they were receiving and wanted to really educate their customers.”

Sweet onions are displayed on an end-cap next to potatoes at Grocery Outlet, notes Olson. “Also, we’ll feature them in a front-end promotion with tomatoes and avocados.”

Direct Source Marketing’s Greenstein says,



Vidalia is one of the recognized brands of the sweet onion family, among others, such as Walla Wallas, OSO Sweets and 1015s.

“The benefits of displaying sweet onions with complementary items such as tomatoes and avocados are that it offers a great color break, suggests usages and makes the sweet onions easier for customers to see than if they were merchandised next to other onions.”

“Some retailers have used small stand-alone displays of sweet onions in the meat department during grilling season and cross-promoted sweets next to barbecue supplies or other traditional grilling foods,” notes Peri & Son’s Gibson.

7. Price-Promote

“Sweet onions are promoted in-store with a big starburst calling attention to the special price,” says Grocery Outlet’s Olson. “In addition, we hold big sidewalk or tent sales outside in the spring and summer, and sweet onions are always part of these promotions.”

“Promoting once a month is a ‘given’ during the appropriate seasons for Peru, OSOs, Vidalias, Spring Sweet 1015s and Walla Wallas,” Onions Etc.’s Kelso.

Curry recommends, “Announce in your ads, ‘Your favorite sweet onions are arriving just in time for BBQ season.’ Tie headlines directly to

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New From Vidalia Country

BY BILL MARTIN

Many people will argue the name Vidalia is the most recognizable name when it comes to sweet onions. Over the years, a great deal of effort has gone into this marketing campaign, and the 2011 season, which is just starting, is no different. Whether it is new growing techniques, equipment and packaging, or marketing and merchandising efforts with retail supermarket chains, these all add up to making Vidalia the recognizable name among consumers.

According to Sarah Seebran, marketing manager for Bland Farms LLC, located in Glennville, GA, a growing favorite among produce merchandisers is a seasonal promotion like the Vidalia Onion Committee's 2011 campaign, American Favorites: Sweet Vidalias & Country Music. This offers piqued interest and a fresh appearance in the produce department through packaging, POS material and added value via trendy recipes, free-giveaways and contests for consumers and retailers, she says. "But don't discount the old faithful," Seebran adds. "We are seeing a resurgence of some of the tried-and-true methods of marketing and merchandising. Demos, coupons and cross-promotions are just a few tactics buyers and merchandisers alike are requesting. They are looking for anything that can add value to their store shopping experience and dollars spent in their store."

Bo Herndon, president of L.G. Herndon Jr. Farms Inc., in Lyons, GA, has seen the design and layout of sweet onion displays in retail stores make a difference. "When shoppers walk into the produce department, a good display really sells product. When customers buy a tasty sweet onion, they'll come back for more," Herndon observes.

John Shuman, president and director of sales for Shuman Produce in Reidsville, GA, founded Produce for Kids in 2002, working with two supermarket chains. Since this time, more than \$3.1 million has been raised for the Children's Miracle Network and its affiliated hospitals. "Produce for Kids has greatly expanded and will have 17 retail partners this spring, making it the largest campaign yet. This includes more than 65 fresh produce companies as sponsors from 25 states. All of this money stays in the local communities where it is raised and the consumers and retailers know it makes a difference locally," Shuman says.

At G&R Farms in Glennville, GA, principal, Robert Dasher, was recently named 2010 Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year by Swisher Sweets Sunbelt, which includes 10 states in the Southeastern United States. He believes, especially in these tough economic times, sweet onions should not be priced too high. "Brand Vidalia sweet onions and separate them from the regular, or storage onions," he advises. "If they are priced right, they will sell. Retailers need to capitalize on the Vidalia name and take advantage of it."

While branding, good displays and other features are more obvious measures to move more sweet onions off retail shelves, there are other efforts contributing to quality product, which also results in more sales and repeat business. For example, at Hendrix Produce Inc., in Metter, GA, vice president Kevin Hendrix says the company has added six drying rooms this season, increasing its drying capacity by 20 percent. This allows the grower/shipper to bring in more

product from the field and dry more sweet onions on a daily basis.

At Shuman Produce, general manager, Mark Shuman, says the company is updating and redesigning its consumer packaging. "It will introduce some creative concepts and is available this season," he notes.

Shuman marketing coordinator, Adam Brady, points out a new compact grading machine has been added to size onions. There also is a new Sinclair labeling system to go with the new grader. Finally, Brady says the company is adding 101,000 units of storage and 30,000 units of drying capacity. "The additional storage adds much-needed supplies through the summer months and helps ease the transition to our California and Peruvian deals," Brady says.

Brandon Parker, Shuman sales manager, adds the operation is fully compliant with produce traceability. "We've greatly expanded our traceability programs from the field through distribution," he notes. "We are 4-star rated with Primus Labs and 100 percent compliant in all areas."

While marketing and merchandising Vidalia sweet onions is critical, it cannot be effective without a crop to back it up. The Vidalia growing district should have another quality crop, which should produce average supplies for buyers.

Omar Cruz, produce manager for Bland Farms, says the crop has started showing a good recovery from a colder than normal January winter this season. "All the fields are evenly green and progressing in vegetative growth every day. The early-planted onions started to show the first signs of bulb swelling, and you can find onions of 1½ to two inches in diameter already. The late planted onions were more affected, but at this point they are catching up on growing," he says.

Steve Roberson, president of Roberson Onion Corp., in Hazlehurst, GA, shares he is expanding his sweet onion business to a year-round deal with seasonal supplies from Mexico, South America and the Northwest, in addition to his Vidalia crop. He notes the Vidalia early, middle and late season sweet onions are looking good, despite lower than normal temperatures during much of the fall and winter growing season. "It appears to be a normal volume crop of onions, and there should not be much change in the overall Vidalia sweet onion deal," he concludes.

While Roberson may be new to a year-round onion deal, Hendrix at Hendrix Produce has been offering 12-month onion supplies for several years. "The retailers like the year-round onion supplies," he says. "They don't have to be changing around at different times of the year with different suppliers."

At L.G. Herndon Jr. Farms, there is a different view of handling sweet onions year-round. He believes the sweet onion crops outside of Vidalia tend to hurt the image and sales of Vidalia sweet onions. "These other sweet onions often are not as sweet as Vidalias," he contends. "I have eaten some good onions from other parts of the country, but our loyalty is with Vidalia sweet onions and that is what we should push," Herndon emphasizes. While he handles a very limited amount of onions from other places, his emphasis is on growing other crops such as sweet corn, as well as some other ventures outside of produce.

pb

sweet onions. Give recipe suggestions. If you're promoting local or regional product, have a picture of the grower and his family. Take

advantage of the social media opportunities and tweet that you just received fresh-packed sweet onions from your favorite local farm. Sev-

eral of the sweet onion commissions have great promotions as well, giving customers the opportunity to win fun prizes."

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Plenty of options, eye-catching displays and smart storage and handling keep tomatoes popular in the produce department. **CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD**



While clamshell packaging is extremely popular, bulk remains the most common method of merchandising tomatoes at retail.

It's easy to pigeonhole a tomato as a tomato. But such a shortsighted view defeats the great strides the industry has taken over the past two decades to keep the category fresh. The mature green growers, hothouse specialists and vine-ripe shadehouse farmers can all take credit for feeding unique products into the market. What this lip-smacking bounty means to retailers is the opportunity to maximize sales by convincing customers that one size doesn't fit all.

Paul Kneeland, vice president of produce and floral for Kings Super Markets Inc., a 25-store chain based in Parsippany, NJ, says, "The way to grow tonnage is to encourage multiple buys. It all comes down to how we position, and perhaps re-define, the category. That is, as slicers, salad fixings, ingredients and snacks, rather than just as slicers."

This multi-ring tactic could certainly boost sales of the already strong tomato category, which contributed 6.3 percent of total produce dollars in 2010, according to the Perishables Group, a West Dundee, IL-based market

research firm that tracks and analyzes retail sales data of fresh foods.

1. Stock Best Sellers: Rounds, Romas And TOVs

Deciding what tomato varieties to stock can be mind-boggling.

Mark Munger, vice president of marketing for Andrew & Williamson Sales Co. Inc., headquartered in San Diego, CA, offers this solution: "View the tomato category as a three-layered pyramid," he explains. "At the base, or foundation, are value tomatoes such as round field and Romas. Next are premium tomatoes like tomatoes-on-the-vine (TOVs) that command a higher ring and reach a more specialty audience, but still sell in good volume. Finally, at the top, and the smallest part, is gourmet or new specialty varieties that deliver real excitement in terms of flavor."

Field and Roma tomatoes collectively contributed the largest dollar sales percentage to the category in 2010, at 31.9 percent, according to Perishables Group data. In addition,

while field dollars were down 4.1 percent, Roma sales were up 15.2 percent.

Tony DiMare, vice president of DiMare Inc., based in Homestead, FL, asserts, "The best selling tomatoes at retail are field rounds followed by Roma tomatoes; these are the category drivers. This is because both of these varieties have multiple uses, such as in salads, sandwiches and salsas."

"Rounds and Romas," adds Bob Spencer, vice president for Palmetto, FL-based West Coast Tomato LLC, "are especially popular in Northeast markets."

Greenhouse-grown TOVs are second to field rounds and Romas in sales, contributing 30.8 percent of category sales in 2010, up 8.2 percent from the year prior, according to Perishables Group data.

Flavor plays a big role in the TOVs' rise to popularity with consumers over the past decade. "To capitalize on this quality," says Tim Cunniff, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Backyard Farms, a 42-acre greenhouse in Madison, ME, "we leave the tomatoes

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— Sabrina Pokomandy, Jem-D International Partners LP

on the vine as long as possible, and we can do this because we limit how far we ship. We sell primarily in New England and down as far as New York and northern New Jersey.”

Sabrina Pokomandy, marketing and public relations manager for Jem-D International Partners LP, headquartered in Leamington, ON, Canada, adds, “Versatility is a main reason for the TOVs broad consumer appeal. It can be eaten right out of hand or sliced and used in sandwiches, burgers, or salads. Clusters also add great flavor to sauces, braising liquids and roast very well.”

Beyond this, greenhouse-grown tomatoes, in general, have evolved from a pricy specialty

product to a more affordable category staple. “A climate-controlled growing environment has taken a lot of the volatility out of the marketplace and made these products stable, promotable items 12 months a year,” reasons Pokomandy. “Unlike open-field, low-tech, or shade cloth production, we are able to lessen the blows often dealt by Mother Nature and continue producing fruit.”

The strength of the greenhouse production has certainly been shown this year when winter freezes in both Florida and Mexico shorted supplies and sent wholesale prices for round field tomatoes to over \$30 per 25-lb. — double the norm — in mid-February.

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Tomatoes — The Latest Snack Food

Move over baby carrots and celery sticks; the new kid on the snack shelf is bite-sized super-sweet tomatoes. Mark Luchak, director of produce and floral at Rice Epicurean Markets, a 5-store chain based in Houston, TX, says, “Some of the new smaller tomatoes are so sweet you can eat them like candy. They’re addictive. We cross-merchandise them in the snack area with chips and popcorn for consumers looking for a healthful snack.”

In addition to a sweet flavor, many tomato growers have made their products easier to eat thanks to convenient packaging. For example, San Antonio, TX-based Desert Glory Ltd. took a page from the consumer product group industry with the launch of SunBurst, a super sweet yellow cherry tomato in a 10.5-oz. resealable container. Similarly, Philadelphia, PA-based Procacci Brothers Sales Corp. has bundled its Santa Sweet grape tomatoes into a 1-pt. resealable pack under the name SweetRipes. The pack fits in a car cup holder and doubles as a colander for rinsing the product prior to eating. Yet another example is Kingsville, ON-based Mastronardi Produce Ltd., which puts its Mimi Candy tomatoes in 3-oz. ready-to-eat packs aimed at kid’s lunch boxes.

The question becomes how to best position these products. Paul Kneeland, vice president of produce and floral for Kings Super Markets Inc., a 25-store chain based in Parsippany, NJ, admits, “Our downfall as an industry is that we haven’t done a good job of marketing produce for snacking.”

Some innovative retailers have created ‘snack sections’ that contain items such as sliced apples, celery sticks, baby carrots with dip, and now, snack-sized tomatoes. The potential of snacking tomatoes for capturing greater market share is huge, says Mark Cassius, vice president of sales for Eurofresh Farms, in Wilcox, AZ. “They’re healthy, good tasting and convenient; basically they’re a one bite solution.” **pb**

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“Clamshells are, by far, the most popular form of packaging utilized in tomatoes. They best show the product, provide POS exposure for recipes and branding, enhanced levels of food safety and also protect the product going home to the kitchen counter.”

— Joe Sbrocchi, Mastronardi Produce Ltd

Alberto Maldonado, general manager for Nogales, AZ-based Plain Jane Produce, which opened greenhouse operations in Mexico last year, admits, “The early February freeze in Mexico created huge losses for open-field tomatoes, while we had almost no damage and only a minor delay in production.”

2. Offer Multiple SKUs

“Snack-size and cocktail, as well as big beefsteak, follow field-grown rounds, Romas and TOVs in terms of tonnage,” says Doug Kling, senior vice president of sales, marketing and fulfillment for Village Farms LP, headquartered in Eatontown, NJ.

The numbers back this up. According to Perishables Group data, snacking and greenhouse-grown round tomatoes contributed 25.7 and 11.5 percent, respectively, to tomato category dollar sales in 2010, with sales up 2.5 percent for the snack-size and 1.8 percent for the greenhouse rounds over the year prior.

Consumer demand underscores this clamor for assorted sizes, too. For example, one of the top-selling tomato varieties at Rice Epicurean Markets, a 5-store chain based in Houston, TX, are grape tomatoes, according to Mark Luchak, director of produce and floral.

Like TOVs, grape tomatoes are another example of a specialty turned commodity. This

has led growers to develop unique products. For example, Philadelphia, PA-based Procacci Brothers Sales Corp. grows its Santa Sweets grape tomato from an exclusive hybrid. Rick Feighery, in organic sales, says, “The Santa Sweet is much different in consistency, flavor and Brix than a typical grape tomato. As a result, it’s become a sales workhorse for us.”

Cocktail tomatoes, or those that range from grape to ping pong ball in size, are also gaining in popularity. An example is the Campari tomato grown and marketed by Mastronardi Produce, headquartered in Kingsville, ON, Canada. Joe Sbrocchi, vice president of sales and marketing, says, “We consider the Campari our best selling tomato.”

“Colors such as yellow and orange are becoming significant in the cocktail segment, as are cocktail on-the-vine tomatoes,” adds Peter Kroner, director of corporate development for Eli & Ali’s Organic & Specialty Produce, in Brooklyn, NY.

“On the other end of the size spectrum,” says Jem-D’s Pokomandy, “we see beefsteak making up some ground it had lost to TOVs over the past several years and feel that this trend will continue. There are regions in North America that are currently experiencing a revival, if you will, of a big, flavorful beefsteak tomato.”

3. Sweeten The Ring With Specialties

Andrew & Williamson’s Munger contends five varieties make up the lion’s share of tomato sales. “However,” he notes, “the remainder comes from specialty types such as Heirlooms and new superior flavor varieties.”

“Heirloom tomatoes are a huge trend this year, especially local, organic Heirloom varieties,” acknowledges Kings Super Market’s Kneeland. “In fact, we’ll be featuring Heirlooms in a summer promotion, which will include in-store sampling by local agricultural school students from Rutgers University. It will be a great way for these students to gain immediate feedback that will help them with their tomato breeding research. It will also be a fun experience for our customers to be able to meet and talk with the students about the different types of Heirloom tomatoes.”

There are more than 60 varieties of Heirloom tomatoes, reveals Melissa’s Schueller. “Brandywine is the most popular, but Zebra tomatoes are gaining,” he details. “We offer a variety pack that includes mixed colors such as brown, red, green and yellow. The Zebra tomatoes are great in salsas.”

New tomato varieties launched in the past year are focused on extreme sweetness. Bobby

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Patton, vice president of marketing for Desert Glory Ltd., in San Antonio, TX, says, “Our Sun-Burst yellow cherry tomatoes are so sweet that they eat more like a fruit.”

Similarly, Mastronardi Produce’s new line, Zima, an orange-colored grape tomato, is marketed as being ‘seriously sweet.’

4. Don’t Forget Organics

Organics are a niche, but popular segment in the tomato category, recognizes Dionysios

Christou, vice president of marketing for Del Monte Fresh Produce N.A. Inc., headquartered in Coral Gables, FL. “From 2007 to 2010, the organic tomato category grew almost 10 percent,” he reports.

In 2010, organic tomatoes represented 3.7 percent of category dollar sales, according to the Perishables Group. While organic tomato sales as a whole were essentially flat, sales of organic TOVs, greenhouse-grown round and field tomatoes grew by 42, 22 and 11 percent,

respectively. On the other hand, sales of organic Roma and snacking tomatoes declined 7 and 4 percent, respectively.

Munger notes, “The cost to produce organic tomatoes averages 20 percent more than conventional. In spite of the higher price, and even in the worst of economic times, we never saw the segment move backwards.”

Some companies are, in fact, going forward in developing new organic tomato products. Eli & Ali’s Kroner reveals, “We recently introduced an organic grape tomato. We’re also working on an organic red beefsteak tomato.”

5. Mix Up Bulk & Packaged

“Bulk is the most popular way tomatoes are merchandised at retail,” notes DiMare’s DiMare.

“However,” says Del Monte’s Christou, “more retailers are seeking the standard footprint display-ready carton and/or RPCs, depending on the specifications of the store and/or the particular plan-o-gram for that chain. At the same time, packaging is an area of continuous innovation for us.”

In 2009, 24.3 percent of tomato volume sold was packaged, according to the Perishables Group. “The popularity of packaging can be attributed to the numerous specialty varieties requiring UPC codes, which makes packaging a must,” explains Jem-D’s Pokomandy. “The core items carry PLU codes, but smaller or specialty varieties that are deemed commercially viable and offered to a retailer must be placed in a bag or clamshell if they do not have PLUs assigned to them. Food safety and fruit protection are also driving the recent advancements in packaging.”

“Clamshells are, by far, the most popular form of packaging utilized in tomatoes,” asserts Mastronardi’s Sbrocchi. “They best show the product, provide POS exposure for recipes and branding, enhanced levels of food safety and also protect the product going home to the kitchen counter.”

Mark Cassius, vice president of sales for Wilcox, AZ-based Eurofresh Farms, says, “I’d like to see a reduced use of plastic packaging, and instead, cardboard trays with overwrap as they do in Europe with TOVs, beefsteaks and Romas on-the-vine.”

Backyard Farms packs its cocktail TOVs in a 10-oz. recyclable cardboard box. “This type of pack,” says Cunniff, “is environmentally friendly and it conveys the freshness of the product.”

Packaging can also be used to convey usage suggestions. For example, Eli & Ali’s Kroner notes, “We developed a beefsteak box that has

“Increase the produce ring by adding other produce items to the tomato display to create a one-stop-shop where customers can find all of the ingredients for their favorite tomato recipes.”

— Dionysios Christou, Del Monte Fresh Produce N.A. Inc

two to three tomatoes with steak sauce that is perfect for the summer grilling season. In the future, we may experiment with a 3-lb. box that has a couple of TOVs, cucumber and peppers and possibly an onion for merchandising as a barbecue pack.”

6. Handle With Care

Good receiving and handling practices are important parts of a successful tomato program.

Christou asserts, “There are several components retailers should follow and maintain in order to make sure tomatoes are kept at their best. Starting with receiving, retailers should inspect product dates and product package integrity upon arrival. Tomatoes are best when stored at temperatures between 55 and 60°F, and it is important to promptly place tomatoes in unrefrigerated displays or storage to avoid extreme temperatures.”

“Don’t stack tomatoes on display more than two to three high,” warns Jem-D’s Pokomandy, “or this could damage or bruise the fruit.”

Displaying them stem-side up enhances the shelf-life of tomatoes, adds Andrew & Williamson’s Munger. “The fruit breathes through the stem,” he explains. “Enabling it to respire helps to maintain its quality longer. However, if the display turns once or twice a day, it’s fine to place the fruit stem-side down for an enhanced visual appeal.”

“Always take the first loss,” Sbrocchi recommends. “Refraining from culling out anything you wouldn’t take home to your family will hurt sales as well as make the beautiful product you may have in the back age needlessly.”

7. Build Destination Displays

Tomatoes are displayed in one primary location in the produce departments of Kings Super Markets. Kneeland notes, “This includes bulk and packaged tomatoes, as well as organic and conventional. This way, customers can see all of their choices at once, and hopefully decide to trade up.”

Similarly, Rice Epicurean Markets also features destination tomato displays. “We have areas within the display designated for different varieties, which include our top-sellers as well

as seasonal or specialty products,” he details.

“Displaying tomatoes by sub-category or variety,” says Del Monte’s Christou, “can be more visually appealing.”

It’s crucial to offer the right, and enough, variety. “The selection about what to display depends on the individual retailer, their marketing strategy and the demographics and price-point needs of their shoppers,” explains Village Farm’s Kling.

“As for variety,” adds Munger, “twenty years ago, most retailers carried five types, and that was on a good day. These included beefsteak, round, Romas, cherry and maybe something else. Today, the average retailer carries 12 to 14 SKUs of tomatoes.”

It’s critical to category sales to maintain, and even enlarge, this shelf space, according to Eurofresh’s Cassius. “At a time when some U.S. retailers are deleting SKUs, retailers in Europe are expanding,” he reports. “For example, one retailer I visited recently in London had 18 different SKUs of tomatoes — all sizes, colors and packaging — each aimed at particular usages or household size.”

Featured or new category additions should be easy to identify. “For example,” says Jem-D’s Pokomandy, “when greenhouse tomatoes are promoted, we find that large, stand-alone displays have the most impact at retail level.”

“Simple signage is also effective,” says Andrew & Williamson’s Munger. “Write words such as ‘super sweet’ or ‘new variety’ on a 3x5-inch card or on a starburst sticker on a price card to call out specific tomato products.”

For his part, Christou “encourages retailers to use information brochures, price cards and recipe cards to their full potential in order to attract and educate consumers.”

8. Offer Shelf-Level Solutions

Three-fourths of consumers know what type of tomato they will purchase before they enter the store, according to May 2010 Perishables Group consumer research conducted on behalf of the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee (FTC). The lucrative trick is to get consumers to springboard off their shopping list and increase their tomato purchases. The way to do this is to cross-merchandise and offer impulse-grabbing shelf-level meal solutions.

“Consumers need to be educated to, for example, pick up a beefsteak for slicing on their hamburgers, TOVs for salads, Romas for cooking and grape tomatoes for snacking,” says Cassius. “Displays can even be segmented by usage occasion.”

Merchandising around a usage theme is as eye-catching as it is instructive. For example,



Retailers can maximize sales by convincing consumers one size of a tomato does not fit all. For every variety, there is a specific and preferred usage.

at Kings Super Markets, ice bins are set in the middle of tomato displays to hold fresh mozzarella. Fresh basil and olive oil are displayed nearby. “These items add color breaks and all the ingredients needed for a Caprese Salad,” says Kneeland.

Del Monte’s Christou recommends, “Increase the produce ring by adding other produce items to the tomato display to create a one-stop-shop where customers can find all of the ingredients for their favorite tomato recipes.”

“Avocados and white onions are ideal to display next to tomatoes,” shares DiMare’s DiMare. “Not only are all three popular in Hispanic cooking, but all three are optimally displayed without refrigeration.”

Lettuce, broccoli and asparagus are also served often with tomatoes. “However,” warns Andrew & Williamson’s Munger, “these vegetables are refrigerated and under the misters, two things you want to avoid with tomatoes. It can also confuse customers about how to properly store tomatoes at home. Instead, set up a free-standing display of tomatoes next to these vegetables.”

“Tomato shoppers want recipes,” says Samantha Winters, the FTC’s director of edu-

cation and promotion. “This fact was clear in the Perishables Group consumer research study we commissioned last year. It showed that 40 percent of consumers want to see recipes in the tomato displays, 25 percent want storage and handling tips, and about the same number would like usage ideas. For this reason, we’ve had three tomato salsa recipes developed, which are available on tear-pads. The recipes come with a full-color photo of the recipe on one side and ingredients and directions on the other.”

Cross-merchandise tomatoes both in and outside of the produce department. At Rice Epicurean Market, Luchak sets up “secondary satellite displays of tomatoes in the bakery, deli and even the grocery aisle next to the pasta and olive oil.”

Mastronardi’s Sbrocchi adds, “In-store demos are a great way to get people to try different varieties at the point-of-purchase where they would typically pick up a standard beefsteak or TOV.”

9. Promote Creatively

Tomatoes are spotlighted in a big way in the spring and fall at Rice Epicurean Markets,

says Luchak. “We’ll merchandise all different types, including locally grown beefsteak, Romas and Heirlooms, and offer a price advantage on each one. It’s a very popular promotion with consumers.”

On an everyday basis, Munger recommends, “Sell value tomatoes like field rounds and Romas at an everyday low price. These don’t make good ad items because they will cannibalize sales of higher priced tomatoes. More premium tomatoes, such as TOVs, as well as new or specialty tomatoes, are good ad items because a price reduction gives consumers an invitation to buy.”

Promote frequently and around periods of peak supply and demand. Jem-D’s Pokomandy acknowledges, “Our retail partners do an amazing job in growing the category and it’s reflected in the frequency of their promotions. We are also fortunate to have retailers who will run 99-cent ads in January and June that have vaulted greenhouse tomato sales to the No. 1 or 2 position in total produce department sales, not just the tomato category.”

Most peaks in demand occur right before holidays or events such as Thanksgiving, Super Bowl, Christmas and the Fourth of July, reports Del Monte’s Christou. “Roma tomatoes, for example, have a higher demand around Cinco de Mayo because of the growing Latin consumer segment in the United States, who might use the fruit for salsas. Slicing tomatoes have a higher demand during some summer events like the Fourth of July, when it is high season for barbeques and consumers like adding them to their hamburgers.”

“Interestingly,” adds Procacci’s Feighery, “the week after Thanksgiving is a great time to promote tomatoes and a time when the rest of the department sales may be slow since everyone is making turkey sandwiches.”

Consumers generally buy one variety of tomato per shopping trip. However, according to Perishables Group consumer research, 60 percent of consumers surveyed said they would consider purchasing another type of tomato if it were on sale. “For this reason,” says Andrew & Williamson’s Munger, “we recommend putting two types of tomatoes on ad at the same time. For example, a TOV for salads and a Roma for cooking.”

Advertising multiple greenhouse tomatoes during the same week allows consumers to mix and match varieties for the same price, remarks Pokomandy. “In the past, we ran tomato varieties in alternating weeks, now greenhouse ‘family’ ads are increasing with many retailers.”

The Pursuit Of Flavor

Consumer’s craving flavor is what’s driving varietal development in the tomato category today. According to research conducted in May 2010 by the Perishables Group for the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee (FTC), 47 percent of those surveyed said the primary reason for purchasing tomatoes is flavor.

Mark Luchak, director of produce and floral at Rice Epicurean Markets, a 5-store chain based in Houston, TX, agrees. “When we decide whether or not to bring in a new type of tomato, the first question is always, ‘How well does it eat?’”

“Over the past decade, there’s been a change from what the grower wants, such as disease-resistance and yield, to what the consumer wants, and this has resulted in the focus on flavor,” explains Mark Munger, vice president of marketing for Andrew & Williamson Sales Co. Inc., in San Diego, CA. “Breeders are looking at varieties out of countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Israel and talking about flavor in a passionate way. It will be the consumer who will ultimately reap the benefits.”

Del Monte Fresh Produce N.A. Inc., in Coral Gables, FL, will soon be introducing new specialty tomato varieties with more flavorful profiles, reports Dionysios Christou, vice president of marketing. “We are also developing ‘fun’ varieties that have exotic flavor profiles,” he says.

“The focus is not only on intensifying flavor,” says Jim DiMenna, president of Jem-D International Partners LP, in Leamington, ON, Canada, “but on consistency. Or, in other words, recreating the same eating experience each time the fruit is consumed whether it’s a cherry, beefsteak or specialty tomato.”

“Some of the best innovations are still to come,” acknowledges Munger, “especially in the small varieties. However, the old approach of planting it and then finding a way to sell it is over. Retailers want to know where a new variety fits. Bargain? Premium? What justifies its introduction and what should it replace? That’s the big challenge.”

pb

pb

New Varieties Encourage Increased Melon Sales

A recovering economy, projected good season and strong demand bode well for producers and retailers. **BY MEREDITH AUERBACH**



PHOTO COURTESY OF DULCINEA FARMS LLC

On a per-pound or per-serving cost, watermelon is one of the most inexpensive items in the produce department.

The arrival of warm weather still signals to consumers that melon season is about to start. It's not that they don't see, buy and enjoy melon at other times of the year, but warm weather dramatically increases sales volume.

The February freeze in Mexico caused concern, but it appears most of the extreme weather has passed. Wes Leifer, CEO of Scottsdale, AZ-based Pura Vida Farms LLC, comments, "Over the past several years, there seem to be more extremes in the weather patterns. This year, our crop is looking good. Cantaloupes are not yet mature, but they are bigger than normal for this time of year."

Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Co. Distributors, a full service grower/shipper located in Nogales, AZ, concurs, and reports, "We don't see any impact on our planned production. We grow under plastic tunnels, which helps insulate the plants from cold and helps control pests and diseases. We just need the good, long, hot and sunny days to bring the melons on. Melons love 100° F."

Producers and retailers alike expect melon demand to increase as the economy continues to improve. There may be upward pressure on pricing that often accompanies more demand.

Agricultural inputs from fuel to fertilizer, employee benefits and use of land are likely to also boost costs. Steve Martori, managing member of Martori Farms, located in Scottsdale, AZ, points out, "Melons are an annual crop and not necessarily an easy one to grow. With rising prices on commodities such as cotton and soy, there might be decreased acreage producing melons. True melon guys will stay in the business; others might not."

Variety Mix

The standard category mix has not changed much over the past several years. As Joe Burnett, director of floral and produce for the member-owned distributor, Baton Rouge, LA-based Associated Grocers Inc., says, "Watermelon and cantaloupe drive the wagon." Along with honeydew, these melons are the foundation of the category year-round. Traditional large watermelon, mini watermelons, cantaloupe and honeydew can be sourced from either domestic producers in spring through fall and imported during the winter.

The domestic crop starts in South Florida in April and gradually moves north and west as the weather warms into summer. Ken Kodish, melon sales manager at Ayco Farms

Inc., headquartered in Pompano Beach, FL, offers a reminder, "The best time to sell any melon is at the peak of season, which can be in the middle of winter or the middle of summer. The key is a good working relationship between retailer and shipper to identify what is the right timing for the store's customers."

Beyond the basics, newer varieties bring interest to the category and satisfaction to customers. Few consumers can name individual varieties of popular melons such as watermelon and cantaloupe, but growers keep working to identify varieties with specific characteristics for flavor sweetness, or Brix, and texture, even size and weight. Many are niche varieties, still small in volume but growing.

"We're in our fifth year of production with our branded Tuscan melon," reports John McGuigan, vice president sales and marketing for Dulcinea Farms LLC, in Ladera Ranch, CA. "Taking into account all domestic production, availability runs May through November, with a high-quality, consistent melon. We also brand our Pureheart personalized-sized watermelon and the large Ruby Bliss seedless watermelon. With the graphic stickers and boxes, outdoor advertising, coupons and radio tie-ins, consumers are coming to know the brand and depend on

“Cut melons allow customers to see what the fruit looks like inside and encourages trial of less familiar melons in an easy convenient way. Department personal need constant awareness that cut product like sliced cantaloupe may only have three to four hours of shelf-life, even when displayed in refrigerated multi-deck cases.

— Dean Holmquist, Foodtown.

the consistent quality and flavor,” he says.

“Think of a lemon drop cocktail, and you get a sense of our new white-fleshed melon we call Lemon Drop,” describes Martori. “It’s sweet and juicy with plenty of citrus overtones. We did trials on it last year and are moving ahead with production. It looks like a honeydew with light netting. We also are seeing increased popularity for Tuscan-type cantaloupes. They will be more available this year.”

Lou Kertesz sings praises for the Harper variety of cantaloupe. The vice president of Fresh Quest Inc., a vertically integrated producer of cantaloupe, honeydew, seedless watermelon and other fruits and vegetables located in Plantation, FL, says, “Great tasting

fruit is what leads to increased consumer demand. The Harper has excellent flavor and consistent appearance with excellent shelf-life. It has higher Brix than most cantaloupe and works well for fresh-cut processors.”


Another rather unique cantaloupe is the Athena, grown by Rosemont Farms, in Boca Raton, FL. Daniel Whittles, director of marketing and product development, comments, “With Athena melons, retailers are typically able to feature a larger sized melon and hit a nice price point for the consumer and the store. Such high Brix melons, along with the non-desert like conditions of the western growing areas, have been limited to mostly regional distribution.”

Effective Melon Programs

“There are so many components that make up an effective melon program at retail,” contends Dean Holmquist, director of produce for the 66 stores that make up the co-op Foodtown, based in Avenel, NJ. “You need to determine the balance between cut and whole at different times of year; have consistently high standards at store level to be sure all product is safe; the right equipment; knowledge of your customers and their needs, which can be different from store to store.

“Cut melons allow customers to see what the fruit looks like inside and encourages trial of less familiar melons in an easy convenient way,” continues Holmquist. “Department personal need constant awareness that cut product like sliced cantaloupe may only have three to four hours of shelf-life, even when displayed in refrigerated multi-deck cases. We don’t use ice at all. We also insist that displays get set up early, because in most of our stores, customers are stopping by on the way to work or school to pick up lunch or snacks. For us, these approaches have made a big difference in results.”

The choices available in melons, forms and sizes give retailers ample opportunities for differentiation, especially when melons become a des-



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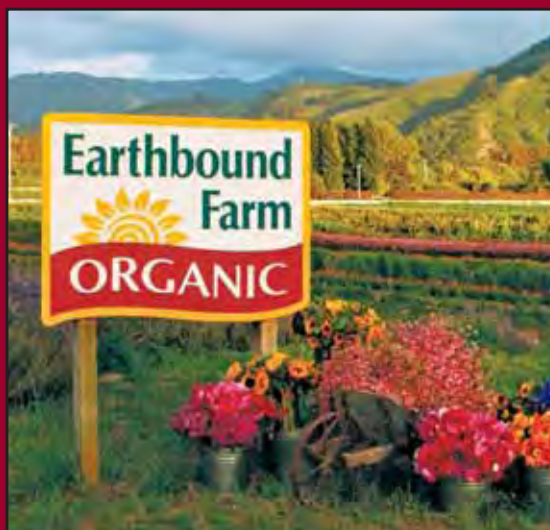
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There's An App For That!

With a final nod to technology, there's an iPhone app that sounds warning to all producers and retailers of melons. Gordon Hunt, director of marketing for the Orlando, FL-based National Watermelon Board, reveals, "We're in contact with a group in Israel who have developed an app called Iwatermelon to judge the ripeness of a watermelon. It has to do with sound waves and involves placing an iPhone on the melon and knocking the melon several times. We've checked it out and it works!" **pb**

Continuation in the produce department. Pura Vida's Wes Leifer recommends adding new or different melons to the display as they become available, but cautions that sugar and flavor are critical issues. "We monitor sugar levels daily before picking," he reveals. "Variety melons such as orange-fleshed honeydew, Casaba and Crenshaw can make every display custom for the area."

Fresh Quest's Kertesz agrees and says, "Each melon has a niche. Getting it right requires flexibility on everybody's part, especially sizing and best pricing to keep demand high. Regular promotion generates consumer excitement."

Promotion Is Key

The Orlando, FL-based National Water-

melon Promotion Board focuses exclusively on watermelon, but there can't help but be spillover to other melons as well. Gordon Hunt, director of marketing, points to new programs designed to keep the watermelon message fresh and compelling. "We're kicking off a new Web site this spring and now have the experience and dedicated staff to make more effective use of social media to appeal to a younger demographic. Additionally, as research points to a stronger wellness impact, especially in areas of cardiac and hypertension control, we will communicate the value of watermelon with a heart-shaped watermelon logo for heart health. We will also continue work with Weight Watchers."

Dulcinea's McGuigan shares, "Our approach is to work closely with retailers on

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flavor and consistency and let the promotion board tell the nutrition story.”

Watermelon Board sales tracking data shows serious sales opportunities in mini watermelons and fresh-cut melon, despite relatively flat sales the past two years. The strongest growth areas are in the Great Lakes, Northeast, South Central and Southeast. Whole seedless watermelon is still the biggest segment with more than 60 percent of retail sales in 2010; cut sales follow with about 24 percent of sales, while minis trail with almost 12 percent.

Mike Tipton, director of produce and floral for K-VA-T, reports, “Our chunk sales go up in winter, and for the first time this year we did a successful, full-bin, whole melon promotion. But generally speaking, the hotter the better for

melon sales. We are developing a new distribution center and a fresh-cut area will be part of it. Summer is the ideal time for strong promotion at retail: hot weather, a primed consumer, best supply and cost.”

Hunt reminds both retailers and consumers, “On a per-pound or per-serving cost, watermelon is about the lowest cost fruit in the department.”

Nonetheless, pricing is a point of contention in different geographic areas. How do you price melon? In the East, pricing tends to be on a per-pound basis, while the West leans toward unit or whole melon pricing. Burnett of Associated Grocers comments, “We price by the pound and promotion is very important, but quality is the seller. Make it visible — say 4x4

feet or five shelves — in summer and it sells.”

The Watermelon Board believes that promotionally, holidays take care of themselves; many shippers look at the summer holidays of Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day as ideal promotions to drive bigger volume. Harrison of Al Harrison thinks \$5 is a magic number for whole melons most times of the year, while Kertesz of Fresh Quest and McGuigan of Dulcinea find peak season promotions of 2-for-\$5 a bigger volume driver.

Melon size can make a difference in the calculation for promotion. Club stores often prefer larger sizes; Canadian store often want smaller sizes. Harrison knows, “As a grower, we can work closely with retail customers to be sure we sell what they want.” **pb**

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The Los Angeles Produce Market Adapts To Changing Landscape



The recession may not be completely over, but things are looking up among LA's wholesale produce market. **BY AMY SAWELSON**

If ever there was an industry that is defined by its challenges, it's the produce industry. Considering weather, labor issues, government regulations, transportation and fickle consumers and a recent weak economy, it's easy to assume that everyone from executives to warehouse employees would find it difficult to face the day each morning. However, among Los Angeles produce wholesalers, distributors, shippers and consolidators, business has been quietly on the uptick. There is a refreshing amount of optimism about the business along with levels of innovation that may have been considered a luxury a couple of years ago, when survival was the priority of the day.

The Evolving Retail Environment

Part of the positive direction of the business is the local industry's adaptability to the changing retail landscape. Dale Firman, vice president and chief financial officer at Vernon, CA-based Coosemans L.A. Shipping Inc., says, "Many retailers have their own test kitchens and chefs, so they're pretty sophisticated. They'll provide feedback on new items that gets passed along to packers, who, in turn, add value. Since we do business with many of those packers, we have to be agile when it comes to supplying items that meet both the packers' and the retailers' needs." Firman continues, "Today's retailers don't want to be without any item at any time."

Richard Flamminio, president Umina Brothers Inc., cites that in his experience as a wholesaler involved in both foodservice and retail, "The main difference I see in the current retail landscape is the rise in club stores, niche stores and ethnic stores. The giant club stores generally go direct, but the large ethnic stores still mostly utilize the market. Niche

stores walk the market, but we also have to be good at maintaining telephone and email relationships."

Emily Fragoso, formerly vice president marketing manager for Los Angeles, CA-based Coast Produce Co. Inc., now with Status Gro, of South Pasadena, CA, has observed many changes over the past 10 years, "There is more centralized buying, for one," she notes. "Retailers expect more support from wholesalers in the way of POS, recipes, merchandising and back room training."

Forty miles south of the Los Angeles wholesale market in Fullerton, JBJ/Veg-Land Inc., marketers of organic produce, suggests that one of the biggest changes in the retail landscape is the rise of independent stores including Northgate, which has units in Orange County south through San Diego County. The modestly sized, 30,000 square-foot stores have remarkably high volume. Says Alex Duprè, director of the fresh-cut division, "Northgate's customer base includes second generation Hispanics, who are more assimilated and educated than their parents. That means a demand for more innovative products and more time-savers like fresh-cut, packaged produce. We'll pick a specific customer and work with them to carefully roll out a new product. The large independent retailers and the emerging chains are ideal for this."

Nearby in Brea, CA, Wes Leifer, CEO of Pura Vida Farms LLC, has a slightly different perspective. "With the economy the way it's been, competition is pretty fierce," he acknowledges. "On top of that, retail is now competing with fast food for the consumer's dollar."

Leifer works closely with retailers to assist them with the timing of their ad campaigns and helps them determine which items are at their most favorable price at a given time. "Stores contact me every week to

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find out when they should run their ads. As a shipper-grower, we're ideally positioned to advise them when to promote."

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Even with the positive direction of the produce industry in Southern California, certain characteristics of the business climate have not always been sunny. The seemingly massive opportunities at the club stores can come at a steep price. While doing business with them can result in enviable volume, the size of these outlets can make them the proverbial "800-pound gorilla," wielding their clout by making demands that can put wholesalers at a disadvantage.

Jim Krouse, president of Eureka Specialties Inc., which markets fresh herbs, notes, "The successful business is the one that can navigate between the powerful entities negotiating lower and lower prices and the added costs of complying with food safety and other regulations."

Despite growth and innovation among most of the chain stores, there have been closures in Southern California's typically solid grocery industry. A few have experienced setbacks due to a combination of factors related to the weak economy as well as internal conditions. Albertson's closed nine stores in 2009, while Vons and Ralphs opted to reduce workers' wages. These actions were an effort by mainline grocers to retrench and maintain sales in response to cash-strapped consumers, who took their business to discounters to save money.

Tesco's Fresh & Easy experienced the challenge of opening in Southern California in late 2008, just as the recession was emerging in earnest. The business conditions, as well as miscalculations in their approach to the American marketplace, hindered anticipated growth. Tesco — Great Britain's largest retailer — sensibly targeted busy consumers looking for artisan breads, healthful, preservative-free foods and freshly prepared meals. However, many customers found the concept confusing with a limited (compared to American stores) selection of brands and choices available. Another stumbling block was that the labels on perishable items indicated a product expiration date of



Alex Dupre,
JBJ Distributing/
Veg-Land, Inc.



Emily Fragoso,
Status Gro



JBig Jim Matiasевич
JBJ Distributing/
Veg-Land, Inc.

within one or two days of purchase. Partly because of Fresh & Easy's commitment to freshness while avoiding preservatives, the company requested daily produce deliveries to their warehouse, often located 1½ hours away from their wholesalers. This resulted in a situation where it became difficult for the wholesalers to make their money selling produce to Fresh & Easy. Instead, many wholesalers found themselves making more money from their logistics services rather than sales of produce.

Bristol Farms, until recently a subsidiary of SuperValu Inc. but now independent after a buyout, is a 14-unit upscale supermarket chain based in Carson, CA, with extensive produce departments and service delis. As a high-end retailer, the chain also suffered under the weak economy, ultimately closing underperforming units in Mission Viejo in 2009 and Valencia in 2010.

Growth Of Independent And Ethnic Chains

According to Robert Stauffer, executive vice president and vegetable department manager for Tavilla Sales Co. of Los Angeles nearby the L.A. produce market, "A number of independent stores are showing strength these days." Whole Foods continues to expand as a destination for organic produce, meat, dairy, grocery items and an expansive selection of prepared foods. In the Hispanic category, there is San Fernando, CA-based Vallarta Supermarket, with 35 units in 10 Southern California counties and growing. Jon's International Marketplace has 17 stores in the Los Angeles area, where the company is based, and is a family-owned chain founded in 1977. Their strategy is to serve the diversity of L.A. by providing a wide assortment of foods from around the world, as well as prod-

ucts and services specific to the needs of each community.

A growing member of the independent retailer scene is Anaheim-based Super King markets. With three units, Super King is known for their extensive produce departments, which receive daily deliveries. In their advertising, the company proudly points out that, "Super King customers say that our produce is the No. 1 asset to the store." Another chain that is changing the retail landscape is 99 Ranch based in Westminster, CA, in 1984. With more than 30 stores in Northern and Southern California, Nevada, Texas and Washington State, 99 Ranch caters primarily to an Asian clientele, but this being Southern California, its customers are as diverse as the region itself.

The Role Of Brands

The trend toward brands in the produce industry has become a factor in the past couple of decades and continues to grow. Flamminio of Umina Bros. says, "As a shipper, national brands are still important to our business, but ultimately, it's the quality rather than the name that matters to the customer."

Frieda's Inc., about 40 miles south of Los Angeles in Los Alamitos, pioneered the branding of specialty produce by merchandising in supermarkets with recipes, special packaging and education at the retail level. Today, the Frieda's brand is found in supermarkets throughout North America. Frieda's also has a strong presence in foodservice, and supports both channels with online resources including a twice-weekly market report on what's new in the produce industry. *Crop Connection* is a bulletin that reports on seasonal opportunities and offers downloadable images, fact sheets, promotional planning guides and a comprehensive listing of every Frieda's item with product name, pack size and code number.

Melissa's/World Variety Produce Inc., based in Vernon, CA, is another highly visible national brand among both retailers and foodservice. Director of marketing, Bill Schneider, notes, "Some of the changes in the dynamic between wholesalers and their customers are that customers are watching their inventories



Back row left to right: Brian Murai, Wes and Jeff Liefer
Front row left to right: Bobby Van Ligten, Debbi Allen and James Murray of Pura Vida Farms



Nick, Rick and Elana Lejeune, Heath & Lejuene Inc.



Jimmy Matiasovich, Jimmy Matiasovich III and Johnny Matiasovich, JBJ Distributing/Veg-Land, Inc.

very closely. Also, it's expected that we'll assist managers in merchandising our products by means of recipes, demonstrations, signage and training. Helping retailers and their clientele understand the products is part of the value of the Melissa's brand."

Other wholesalers have partnered with retailers to handle store merchandising and there are also companies such as Johnson O'Hare, which sends teams into stores to monitor displays and ensure that product is pulled through. Melissa's is heavily involved in this aspect of the wholesaler/retailer relationship with a number of regional salespeople covering Southern California.

Repacking is another value-added service that many wholesalers provide. Schneider points out that it has added to the success of

their business. "It provides convenience and additional variety for the ultimate customer. We determine items for repack based on consumer input, store input and as a way of expanding on our product line in the stores," he says.

The growth of the JBJ/Veg-Land fresh-cut division has been fueled by the expansion of custom-cut organic and conventional fruits and vegetables. "Fresh-cut was the next logical step for us," says president and director of sales, Jimmy Matiasovich. "The added value of fresh-cut vegetables in microwaveable bags complements the commodities we are already handling such as asparagus, green beans, zucchini and bell peppers, in addition to our organic packaged fresh-cut fruit, melons and pineapple."

Duprè adds, "The environment right now is very receptive to new ideas."

Additionally, many wholesalers provide load consolidation to their customers and are expanding this service. Heath & Lejeune Inc., a Los Angeles, CA-based certified organic produce company providing distribution, consolidation and storage services for the organic produce industry, entered the consolidation business when wholesalers and retailers asked them to source organics. David Weinstein, sales and procurement manager, explains, "This is an important service we provide to our customers who otherwise would have difficulty building full trucks. Retailers today stock smaller quantities of many more items than in the past. Companies ranging from national retail chains to small independent health food stores come to us because they know we'll provide the best quality on the items they consolidate." However,

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David Weinstein, Heath & Lejeune, Inc. and Sharon Lech, Urban & Environmental Policy Institute



Bill Schneider and Aaron Marsh, Melissa's/World Variety Produce Inc.



Terri Mouton and Karen Caplan, Frieda's, Inc.

consolidators don't necessarily make the actual deliveries. In fact, it's more common that the wholesaler or chain will send their own trucks to pick up and deliver the load.

An Encouraging Future

While the economy appears to be recovering, spiking oil prices may create a few detours that impede steady growth. Nevertheless, the mood among those in the Los Angeles produce community is positive. As wholesalers expand their services, they see more opportunities for success and the role of the wholesale market is more important than ever. Firman of Coosemans says, "In major cities, wholesale markets are the way to get a lot of products and new items to the public. Most retailers don't have the resources to buy directly from farmers. They need those links to get produce efficiently from

field to store."

Wholesalers provide myriad services to their customers at each level of the food chain, including consulting, communication about products and market conditions, sampling, acting as a warehouse and promoting food safety with a chain of accountability. Flamminio adds, "Growers and shippers need a place to sell. Everyone does what they do best. For us, that means sourcing and warehousing."

In the case of grower/shipper PuraVida Farms, Liefer says, "Filling orders is our No. 1 priority. If there is a shortage, we have the flexibility to purchase outside our own grower network. We'll do whatever it takes to keep customers supplied."

Tavilla's director of sales and marketing, Dan Lawton, states, "We go out of our way to serve customers with the right quality, a consistent

supply of commodities and a knowledgeable staff that cultivates dialogue with growers so they can provide in-depth information. Despite the economy, our business is strong."

Melissa's Schneider attributes his company's increased growth over the past year to "working harder, smarter and using our talents to get new business. We're successful because of our product mix, high quality, the unique way we bring products to market and our collaboration with the customer," he asserts.

Jimmy Matiasevich III, the 11-year-old son of JBJ's Jimmy Matiasevich II, is no stranger to the produce business, and expresses the can-do attitude of the industry today, "I want all kids to eat more fruits and vegetables," he declares. "If they do, I think JBJ/Veg-Land is going to be a really big company." The voice of the future has spoken. **pb**

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Beyond the Grotto — Produce Secrets of the Playboy Mansion



William S. Bloxson-Carter, executive chef/food and beverage director at the Playboy Mansion.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLIAM S. BLOXSON-CARTER



Fresh produce reigns supreme at the Playboy Mansion. BY AMY SAWELSON

When he answered a blind want ad in the business section of the *Los Angeles Times* in March of 1986, Chef William S. Bloxson-Carter thought he was applying for just another executive chef position. Twenty-five years after accepting the job, he's been on a unique journey that could safely be described as one of the most enviable jobs in the world for any culinary professional. The tall, silver-haired Connecticut native has spent the better part of his career as the executive chef/food and beverage director for the Playboy Mansion in the posh Holmby Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles.

A Hotel For One

The Playboy Mansion operates much like a luxury hotel with one permanent resident. On an annual basis, 100,000 — 120,000 guests come through the property for various corporate and charity events. Comparable or “peer” properties in the area are the Bel Aire Hotel, The Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills, The Montage in Beverly Hills and the Beverly Hills Hotel. “When comparing the food and beverage operations in terms of size, menu, services available and capabilities, these are the properties in our league,” explains Carter.

A small army of employees reports to work at the property in during each 24-hour period. Of those, 20 report directly to Chef Carter on a daily basis with another 65 or so brought in for large events. The Mansion is the site of more than 40 charitable events throughout the year, ranging from Pay it Forward to the Susan G. Komen Foundations. In addition, a number of large corporate events and Mr. Hefner's personal functions are held on the property. These events host anywhere from 20 guests for one of Mr. Hefner's intimate gatherings such as “Card Night,” or “Men's Night”

for his gentleman friends, to black tie galas for 600 to the annual Halloween party with 2,300 revelers.

“Fresh produce is at the heart of the food operations here at the Playboy Mansion,” notes Carter. Large refrigerated trucks filled with fresh fruits and vegetables deliver to the property six days a week. “Our typical produce invoices are hundreds of dollars each,” reveals Chef Carter. “Invoices for deliveries when we have our largest events can be for nearly \$1,000.” Carter and his staff plan the menus about a month in advance. For example, “It's the first of the month right now and we have a corporate event for 650 guests and a charity function for 950, both at the end of the month. Those menus are being completed as we speak,” he reveals. “When we're planning a large event, we'll place our order with the produce supplier about 10 days out. We'll have a light delivery four days before the event and then the bulk of the delivery is scheduled for the day before. This way, there is plenty of time to correct any shorts or source hard-to-find items.”

The produce checklist for the Playboy Mansion consists of nearly 140 items, not including specialties such as chanterelles or Key limes, which come up on an as-needed basis, depending on the menu of a particular event. But you will find items such as fennel, leeks, dozens of fresh herbs and fruits — preferably in season — on the list. “All of our produce is hand-inspected and hand-cut on site. I feel it's vital to be involved personally in the quality control of what comes into the Mansion, because of the mandate by Mr. Hefner to give every guest a premium experience,” says Chef Carter. “Great produce plays a huge role in that.”

Flavors, Ingredients And Produce Reign Supreme

The man in the middle of these staggering statistics operates out of a

3,200 square-foot space, which includes the main kitchen, an ancillary kitchen and a pantry. The facility is certainly much larger than the average household kitchen, but remains modest considering the size, complexity and number of the events hosted at the Mansion. The space looks much as it must have back in 1927, and can be described as a 'vintage working kitchen.' No granite countertops or fancy pendant lighting here.

Nonetheless, under Chef Carter's direction, what comes out of that kitchen is remarkable. "Mr. Hefner's philosophy is that all the parties and buffets at the Playboy Mansion must be opulent and fresh from the moment the first guest arrives until the end of the evening, which can be 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning," Chef Carter details. That means bringing out the best flavors in the food from start to finish with an uncompromising standard of excellence. "To that end," he adds, "we rely on the principal that there is no substitute for fresh and that strong, memorable flavors enhance the guest's experience." For instance, simply steamed asparagus is never served at the Mansion. Rather, "We'll roast it with lemon juice, olive oil and thyme to intensify the flavor and texture of the asparagus," describes Chef Carter. The high-impact flavors served at Mansion events help to reinforce the Playboy image of style and sophistication, which is indispensable to its reputation as a highly coveted venue. Carter's philosophy when it comes to produce is that fruits and vegetables



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLIAM S. CARTER

"I eat very little red meat, but I'll really splurge on fresh fruits and vegetables of all kinds. To me, well prepared produce is the most glorious part of the meal!"

— Chef William Bloxsom-Carter

must be utilized at the peak of their harvest. As such, he and his staff continually inspect and monitor the produce deliveries as they arrive.

As food and beverage director, Chef Carter is always mindful of his audience. For nearly every event, he offers vegan or vegetarian entrée options. He tailors the menus to the clientele, whether it's a gathering of the NFL, a luncheon and fashion show for local Brentwood ladies or one of Mr. Hefner's Sunday afternoon "Fun in the Sun" parties, which showcase spa cuisine using dynamic flavors and top-quality ingredients.

Asked how he works in healthful foods at the Mansion, Chef Carter explains, "Our menus feature 'luxury and health.' We try to keep carbs to a minimum and emphasize fresh produce and protein items. For example, at Mr. Hefner's last New Year's Eve party for 400, we served carved lamb, salmon with prawns, roasted asparagus and a composed salad of baby greens. With a menu that highlights fresh, top-quality produce and premium meat and seafood items, no one misses the starch."

Chef Carter has also been charged with assisting Mr. Hefner in following doctor's orders to reduce sodium and cholesterol by altering the ingredients in his favorite breakfast of bacon, eggs and white toast by replacing them with scrambled egg whites, turkey bacon, whole wheat toast and fresh fruit. Thankfully for his health regime, Mr. Hefner is particularly fond of apples and strawberries.

Chef Carter describes himself as, "almost a vegetarian. I eat very little red meat, but I'll really splurge on fresh fruits and vegetables of all kinds. To me, well prepared produce is the most glorious part of the meal." When asked what excites him most about fresh produce Carter enthuses, "It's the aroma."

Management By Collaboration

Managing a sizable staff and the scores of events held at the Playboy Mansion requires a chef with the commanding presence of a four-star general and the resolve of a benign dictator. William S. Bloxsom-Carter stands out as a confident leader who rules his kitchen more by carrot than stick. He believes in collaboration with his staff and trains them to make the right decisions. He encourages them to take on responsibility by means of a "think first, act second," approach.

Besides mentoring his own staff to take on additional responsibilities, Chef Carter is doing his part to bring along the next generation of executive chefs by hosting an internship/externship program with culinary schools nationwide. His program at the Playboy Mansion has earned the reputation as one of the outstanding host facilities for students. He gives them the oppor-



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Designed in 1925 by Southern California architect, Arthur Kelly, for Arthur Letts as a gift for his son, Arthur Letts Jr., the mansion was completed in 1927 and was inspired by Gothic castles in the senior Letts' Scottish homeland. Heir to the Broadway department store fortune, Letts Jr. lived in the mansion, which today sits on nearly six acres of the original 3,000-acre property, until his death in 1953. The house remained empty until industrialist, Louis D. Statham, purchased it in 1961. By the end of the 1960s, Statham was no longer living at the property and a philanthropic organization, Les Dames de Champagne, used it to house visiting dignitaries. In 1971, Hugh Hefner, Chairman of Playboy Enterprises, spotted the property on a trip west from his Chicago headquarters and fell in love with it. After purchasing the property, Mr. Hefner made a number of improvements to the mansion including the addition of a tennis court, aviary, game room and the pool with the famous grotto. The rest is history.

tunity to run a party to demonstrate their leadership capabilities as well as their skills at writing menus and managing food costs.

Carter is a master at delegating and developing new talent, but he can do this because he is extremely organized and detail-oriented. No plate or tray leaves the kitchen without his inspection, and like a ship's captain, he keeps a detailed log that records all menus, any equipment breakage, any staff illnesses or any unusual events or circumstances.

It takes nearly 100 staff members to keep the many activities running smoothly at the Playboy Mansion. For security reasons, once employees begin their shift, they cannot leave the premises

until their shift is over. This presents the challenge of feeding scores of employees daily in four meal parts: 9:30 a.m. break, 12:00 lunch, 7:30 dinner and 12:30 a.m. "breakfast." Chef Carter has high quality meals prepared for the staff because "Mr. Hefner wants them to be happy in their jobs. He treats them well and is a generous employer."

Chef Carter's style could be called, 'management by collaboration.' This extends to his produce suppliers as well individuals under his supervision. He purchases some food products from farmers in some of the outlying areas of Los Angeles, such as Ventura County and around his home in the Conejo Valley. He also peruses local farmers markets for inspiration and

fresh local produce. As for specifying organics for Mansion menus, Carter admits it's not a huge priority, but says, "It balances out."

Carter relies on trusted distributors and wholesalers for produce, as well as separate vendors for meat, seafood, dairy and specialty cheese. He likes to stay connected to his purveyors by phone to learn what's new and at its best in any given season. Often, he'll contact a supplier regarding a new item he has seen or heard about. The vendors that get his business are those who go the extra mile to find out about the item and follow up with information and ideas. "In dealing with suppliers, it's a two-way relationship," he says. "We need to make one another look good. If there is a problem with a shipment, I'll politely let the supplier know. It's not an adversarial situation. I know they'll take care of me and they know I'm fair. It's to everyone's advantage to work together to meet the high expectations here at the Playboy Mansion."

The genial Chef Carter is clearly a man who loves his job and wants everyone around him to love theirs, too. "My primary responsibility is that the staff is satisfied; secondly, that Mr. Hefner is satisfied and finally, that the guests are satisfied," he declares. "I really do dream of food and want what we do here to make everyone happy. I have the best job in the world; I get to practice the high art of culinary artistry every day and teach it to others." **pb**



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Vicente Foods: A Neighborhood Store With A World Of Choices



Pristine produce shines for a high-end clientele at Vicente Foods. **BY AMY SAWELSON**

Part town hall, part grocer, part fancy food emporium, Vicente Foods has been serving customers in the upscale Brentwood neighborhood in West Los Angeles for more than 60 years. Located in its current classic mid-century building since 1960, walk the aisles of this compact 10,000 square-foot store and you'll see wealthy matrons, young housewives in yoga wear, the occasional retired CEO, Latina nannies with their charges and private chefs on the prowl for unusual ingredients to wow guests at the next dinner party. Each of these customers influences the product mix at Vicente Foods. The success of the store is that the management listens to its customers and bends over backwards to satisfy their requests. The produce department epitomizes the culture of premium quality, service and innovation that keeps customers loyal even in the face of other encroaching high-end retailers.

Demographic Determines Product Mix

To understand the long-term success of Vicente Foods, it's necessary to understand its environment and clientele. The Los Angeles "West side" location is primarily Anglo, heavily Jewish with a small but influential number of African Americans, Asians and Latinos. The area is affluent, and populated by professionals such as doctors, lawyers, executives as well as a substantial number of people involved in the entertainment industry, including a fair concentration of celebrities. Proximity to UCLA means that students and professors will make their way to the store for its consistent high quality and unique offerings.

The common denominator of this mix of customers is that they are generally well heeled and sophisticated. Many have traveled or are from

abroad, experiencing different cuisines that they want to recreate in their own kitchens at home. A significant number of households employ private chefs who seek specialized ingredients most often associated with ethnic or high-end dining. Vicente Foods is known to consult with customers, make recommendations, provide samples and recipes. The store will also frequently stock special requests on a trial basis. This is reflected in the extensive variety items such as gourmet salts, exotic Asian sauces and specially sized Granny Smith apples, perfect for garnishing apple martinis.

Attention To Detail

A walk through the produce department exemplifies Vicente Foods philosophy of "specializing in service and quality." The first impression of the well-planned two-aisle department is one of lush variety, order and cleanliness. The dozen varieties of apples are displayed in perfect formation, strategically angled to stay in place. Onions and scallions are peeled and trimmed before appearing on shelves. The lettuce and spinach are pre-washed and trimmed before display, too, and each clamshell of berries and cherry tomatoes is inspected to ensure every piece of fruit is perfect. Says general manager, Robert Inadomi, "The produce is cycled out every day, inspected, trimmed when needed and returned to the shelves. Our produce stays fresher longer because of expert timing, handling and purchasing practices. Our customers could shop our produce department blind-folded and go home with the high quality fruits and vegetables they expect — unconditionally guaranteed."

Servicing the customers in this manner is labor-intensive. Vicente Foods employs a total of 110 individuals with 16 in the produce depart-



Produce manager Ray Akol

Louis Perez of Melissa's/World Variety Produce Inc. and Vicente Foods' general manager Robert Inadomi

“The produce is cycled out every day, inspected, trimmed when needed and returned to the shelves. Our produce stays fresher longer because of expert timing, handling and purchasing practices. Our customers could shop our produce department blind-folded and go home with the high quality fruits and vegetables they expect — unconditionally guaranteed.”

— Robert Inadomi

ment alone, including one person exclusively dedicated to berries. Longevity is the rule, with many employees — known as ‘associates’ — with tenures of 20, 30 or 35 years at the store. The store pays well over scale, believing it is worth the expense to keep good people. “Our customers represent three or four generations of local families, so we have an investment in the community,” states Inadomi, in between greeting several customers by name.

Produce manager Ray Akol, who started as a box boy 20 years ago, explains that fresh produce arrives at the store almost daily. “Our buyer goes to the wholesale market at 1:00am to select and inspect the produce. Once it arrives at the store, it’s inspected again before being readied for appearance on the shelves.”

The personal relationships with produce distributors and wholesalers built by Vicente Foods’ staff over the years are key to the superb quality and extensive variety found on the shelves in the produce department. Specialties such as fresh hearts of palm or black garlic

find their way to the shelves as a result of two-way exchange between the store and the suppliers. Often, a private chef will request a specific item that the buyer will source and bring into stock; or suppliers will make recommendations of unique items they believe would do well among the store’s clientele. Value-added specialties are important to the department, which features items such as packaged cooked lentils or baby beets.

Not all of the produce that winds up at Vicente Foods is destined for the shelves in its original state. Items that are not cosmetically perfect wind up as fresh cut fruits and vegetables packed in containers and displayed for sale among branded value-added produce items. A large volume goes to the kitchen that supplies the service deli where it is transformed into fresh salsa, guacamole, fruit salad and homemade applesauce.

Survival In A Rarified Environment

What is it about Vicente Foods that keeps it

competitive in a marketplace that includes other high-end retailers such as Whole Foods and Gelson’s? Inadomi explains, “Our store is a comfortable environment that offers the best in every category — gourmet groceries, service deli, the freshest, highest quality meat, seafood and regular and organic produce. We micro-manage the buying to the point that we even have a buyer just for soft drinks. Other stores may have a larger selection of organic produce, but the quality and variety of our regular produce meets the needs of our customers most of the time. The collaboration between our produce buyers and our suppliers is such that we can source the best and most unique items to make available to our discerning customers. Ours is a highly personal approach with great attention to detail. Having been in the area so long, we are connected to our customers. — they are like family.” **pb**

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Mushrooms On The Menu

As a vegetarian and cost-efficient option, usage of mushrooms in foodservice is increasing at breakneck speeds. **BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD**



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUGO'S

Mushroom Tamales is an example of a classic dish where chefs are replacing meat with mushrooms.

Fresh mushrooms are one of the fastest growing items on restaurant menus today. “Flavor is without a doubt the most important quality contribution that mushrooms bring to a dish,” says Robert Okura, vice president of culinary development and corporate executive chef for The Cheesecake Factory, a 146-unit restaurant chain based in Calabasas Hills, CA. “They add richness and depth to the flavor profile of a recipe and create a full, round middle to the combination of all other flavors involved, which has been referred to as the ‘umami’ affect. Mushrooms also increase the level of eye appeal to any dish, making it look more appetizing and exciting. Although not necessarily intended, they also lend to the guest’s perception of value.”

These factors are why mushrooms on the menu have increased 12.5 percent since 2005, according to Chicago, IL-based market research firm, Technomic Inc. In addition, category incidence of mushrooms in a number of market sectors has jumped by double digits from 2006 to 2009, according to MenuMine, a menu information database published by the Oak Park, IL-headquartered Food Research Institute (FRI). More specifically, according to FRI’s report, *Versatility of Mushrooms*, mushroom

mentions increased 35 percent in fast casual, 17 percent in cutting-edge independent, 9 percent in QSR (quick-serve restaurants) and 7 percent in casual dining chains between 2005 and 2009.

According to Bart Minor, president of the San Jose, CA-based Mushroom Council, “The depth and breadth of the chains that are featuring mushrooms on their menus illustrates a strong picture of how mushrooms have appeal at virtually every chain, in every region and on every part of the menu.”

Variety And Versatility

Foodservice operators use approximately 40 different types of mushrooms on their menus, according to the FRI’s report. The variety used depends on the type of operator; however many chefs make use of several types of mushrooms. For example, Okura reports The Cheesecake Factory uses “fresh white, cremini, portabella and shiitake mushrooms. I would probably use more varieties, such as maitake, but they are expensive. However, we have recently introduced a small plates menu, where we have been able to use higher priced seasonal mushrooms due to the small portion size.” Three of the 14 small plate menu items incorporate mushrooms. One example is a Wild Mushroom Crostini with Garlic, Herbs

and Madeira Cream Sauce.

“White mushrooms are the leaders due to cost pressures on restaurants,” reports Gary Schroeder, president and CEO of Oakshire Mushroom Sales LLC, in Kennett Square, PA. “They are less expensive than other varieties.”

Ida Shen, assistant director and executive chef for Cal Dining, at the University of California at Berkeley, says, “We use a lot of white mushrooms. In addition to price, there’s a stable year-round supply, and this is important considering we feed 14,000 to 15,000 people daily.”

Sautéed over steak, sliced on pizza and stirred into pasta are some of the ways white mushrooms are incorporated into menus. Jane Rhyno, director of sales and marketing for Highline Produce Ltd., in Leamington, Ontario, Canada, adds, “In QSR, we have noticed an increase in the usage of mushrooms on burgers as chains continue to target items for adult tastes.” Examples of this are McDonald’s Mushroom & Swiss Angus Burger and Burger King’s Mushroom and Swiss Steakhouse Burger.

Similarly, other QSR chains have incorporated brown or portabella mushrooms into their burger offerings. Wendy’s has its Gourmet Mushroom and Swiss Burger, while Carl’s Jr. sells a Portabella Mushroom Six Dollar Burger. Burgers have definitely become a pop-



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"Sliced white mushrooms continue to be one of our most popular items, and sales of our portabellas are also on the rise. Clearly, this is an indication that foodservice providers are looking for labor-saving solutions."

— Greg Sagan, Modern Mushroom Farms Inc.

ular vehicle for mushrooms. According to FRI's report, *Versatility of Mushrooms*, overall mushroom use on burgers increased 18 percent between 2005 and 2009. "In spite of the downturn in the economy and the popularity of 99-cent meal deals, this proliferation of mushroom burgers shows that customers are still willing to splurge on something that costs \$4 to \$5," explains Fletcher Street, director of marketing and sales for Ostrom Mushroom Farms, in Olympia, WA. "It shows people like mushrooms and are starting to think about them as something more than as a garnish on steak."

"The industry impact of more mushrooms on QSR menus is huge due to the volume sold in these chains," acknowledges Paul Frederic, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Avondale, PA-based To-Jo Fresh Mushrooms Inc.

"Brown mushrooms, such as portabellas, have caught the interest of the casual dining segment as well," reports Kevin Donovan, national sales manager of Phillips Mushroom Farms, based in Kennett Square, PA. "This is because of their rich meaty flavor, and is in spite of being priced higher than whites." An example of this is the Grilled Dijon Chicken & Portabella entrée served at Applebee's, a Lenexa, KS-based casual dining chain.

Rhyno adds, "The meatiness of the portabella's texture has made it a popular ingredient in stuffed mushrooms and side dishes and a staple in vegetarian main courses."

Joe Caldwell, vice president of Watsonville, CA-based Monterey Mushrooms Inc., adds, "An appetizer and bar menu trend is portabella fries, or portabella mushrooms cut into thin strips and fried. Despite its popularity, the portabella's large size has limited its applications. Therefore, we're seeing more use of cremini or baby portabellas on menus."

Papa John's, based in Louisville, KY, offers cremini mushrooms as a choice of pizza topping. "In addition to their smaller size, cremini are 10 to 20 percent less expensive than portabellas, but have the same rich flavor," says Harvey Mitchler, director of sales and marketing for Champ's Mushrooms Inc., in Aldergrove, BC, Canada. "This is especially cost-effective in dishes where you don't really see the whole mushroom."

The Keg Steakhouse & Bar, based in Vancouver, BC, Canada, capitalized on this fact in a recent menu revamp, points out Mitchler. The eatery swapped out pricier portabellas for button-sized baby portabellas in a popular side dish where the mushrooms are served sliced and sautéed.

"In addition to white and brown mushrooms," says Greg Sagan, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Avondale, PA-based Modern Mushrooms Sales Co., "Specialty mushrooms such as chanterelles, shiitake and porcini continue to grow among chefs and consumers. Driven by key trends, chefs are creating more meat-free dishes and using more naturally occurring flavors."

Highline's Rhyno adds, "We have also seen more wild and exotic mushrooms emerging in the fine dining arena, with dishes like mushroom risotto and mixed mushroom crostini with fresh herbs and shaved Parmesan."

"Shiitakes especially," says Oakshire's Schroeder, "are finding their way into fine dining due to their wonderful flavor profile." For example, celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten features shiitake mushrooms in soups, sides and seafood entrées such as Steamed Red Snapper with Shiitake Mushrooms, Ginger, Scallion and Tarragon in his downtown Manhattan restaurant, Spice Market.

"To help operators include more specialty mushrooms on the menu," says Ostrom's Fletcher, "we offer shiitake and oyster mushrooms in small quantities such as 1-lb. bags or 2½-lb. cases."

Buying & Back-Of-The-House Tips

Fresh mushrooms are readily available year-round from foodservice distributors as well as direct from mushroom growers. Annie Somerville, executive chef at Greens Restaurant, an upscale vegetarian eatery in San Francisco, CA, says, "We are lucky to have three fresh mushroom sources. Two are produce companies that also sell mushrooms and one is a specialty mushroom company. Each deliver on different days, which assures freshness and quality, and the specialty mushroom supplier provides educational opportunities to our chefs, such as bringing them on field trips and

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PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL DINING

Cal Dining, at the University of California at Berkeley, uses a lot of white mushrooms, due to the stable price and year-round supply, such as in this Fennel Salad.

identifying the various mushrooms, their characteristics and suggested usages. They also e-mail, fax and phone us when seasonal varieties become available.”

Joe Salvo, president of Ponderosa Mushrooms & Specialty Foods, in Port Coquitlam, BC, Canada, says, “We keep our chefs very much in touch with seasonal changes in availability, quality and prices. They are continually changing their menus to adapt to the seasons.”

“Fresh mushrooms are highly perishable,” warns Phillip’s Donovan. “Most problems we see are when the cold chain isn’t maintained. For example, you can’t set a 10-lb. box of mushrooms out on the counter for three or four hours and then put it back in the refrigerator later. This will greatly diminish product quality. The remedy is to take out less product at one time.”

The Mushroom Council recommends mushrooms — both bulk and packaged — be refrigerated at between 34 to 38° F with 85 to 90 percent humidity. They should be stored in their original containers and away from pungent items, as mushrooms may absorb strong odors. When ready to use, any dirt should be brushed off with a damp cloth or soft brush.

Cal Dining’s Shen reveals, “We train our



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Delicious Opportunities

Mushrooms are so versatile and flavorful that their use in place of meat, in different day parts, ethnic cuisines, holiday dishes and healthful offerings are endless.

MEATLESS MEALS Meat-free is a big trend according to Epicurious.com, which states, “In the United States, roughly 12 percent of women under 35 don’t eat meat, while 3 percent of the total adult population call themselves strict vegetarians (no meat, fish, or poultry).” Add to this fact campaigns like Meatless Monday, and the food-focused Web site predicts that eating meat-free will be on the calendar more than once a week this year.

Annie Somerville, executive chef at Greens Restaurant, an upscale vegetarian eatery in San Francisco, CA, explains, “Mushrooms play an important role in vegetarian cuisine because of their satisfying meaty flavor and texture and ability to make a dish special and elegant.” Entrées on Greens’ vegetarian menu that include mushrooms include Wild Mushroom Shepherd’s Pie and Mesquite Grilled Brochettes.

There’s a cost as well as trend advantage to using mushrooms in meatless meals. According to Bart Minor, president of the San Jose, CA-based Mushroom Council, “Mushrooms provide the meaty earthiness that makes meals heartier without the need for more expensive proteins. Operators can use mushrooms to replace meat in popular dishes like Stroganoff, Bolognese, Pot Stickers, Egg Rolls and Fajitas.”

BREAKFAST, LUNCH & DINNER Fresh mushrooms fit into every day part. For example, breakfast sandwiches rank as the sixth most popular way mushrooms appear on menus, according to FRI’s *Versatility of Mushrooms*, up 5 percent from 2005 to 2009. “Mushrooms are a great untapped side to the breakfast menu,” acknowledges Jane Rhyno, director of sales and marketing for Highline Produce Ltd., in Leamington, Ontario, Canada. “Offer them grilled or baked with a slice of tomato and cheese, or use them as the topping to a breakfast sandwich. For lunch, try the addition of the beautiful and delicate enoki mushroom to provide crunch and flavor to wraps, salads and soups.”

According to FRI’s Report, the top five ways mushrooms are offered on menus are prepared entrees, pizza, center-plate,

hot sandwiches and burgers.

ETHNIC CUISINES Italian cuisine menu items account for 26 percent of all mushroom mentions, according to the FRI’s Report, with other leading cuisines including American Traditional, Healthy/Light, Atlantic Seaboard, and Mexican/Tex-Mex. “Mushrooms are used in Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai and Korean dishes at the University of California at Berkeley,” reveals Ida Shen, assistant director and executive chef for Cal Dining, at the University of California at Berkeley.

Joe Caldwell, vice president of Watsonville, CA-based Monterey Mushrooms Inc., acknowledges, “A major trend is the use of mushrooms in Hispanic cuisine. Mushrooms are indigenous to many traditional Latin dishes.” For example, Cheese and Mushroom Stacked Quesadillas, Mushroom Chilaquiles and Fried Eggs with Portabellas and Ranchera Salsa were served at the Culinary Institute of America’s Latin Flavor conference last year, which took place at the school’s San Antonio, TX-campus.

The substitution of mushrooms for a portion of meat in culturally favorite recipes can provide a significant cost savings. For example, according to Mushroom Council calculations, Carne Asada made with 80 percent mushrooms and 20 percent ground beef rather than all meat results in a food cost of only \$1.38 versus \$2.46.

Rhyno believes, “The demographic shifts in North America will help increase the usage of exotic mushrooms. For example, U.S. census reports the Asian population has grown close to 30 percent in the past 10 years. Shiitake and oyster mushrooms are used throughout Asian cuisine, and this has helped boost the popularity and sales of these varieties.”

HEALTH & WELLNESS The mandate for nutrition labeling on chain restaurant menus means big opportunities for mushrooms. Minor reports, “Mushrooms provide less than 20 calories per serving, are fat- and cholesterol-free, and are naturally low in sodium.” On the sodium front, Minor continues, “Some operators are creating mushroom bacon to accompany omelets, pancakes and waffles as an alternative to higher sodium proteins such as bacon or sausage, while others are combining mushrooms with pasta sauce to multiply the effects of umami in both mushrooms and tomatoes, which can help reduce the need for added salt.” **pb**

staff not to soak mushrooms in water. There’s a tendency to want to fill up a big tub and toss the mushrooms in to clean them.”

“Foodservice buyers should work with their chefs to match the mushroom application to the particular mushroom products in terms of sizing, pack size, flavor profile and whole versus sliced for both efficiency and profit,” says Modern Mushroom’s Sagan. “The decision to buy fresh whole versus sliced mushrooms depends on a number of factors,” he adds. “These include a restaurant’s food mission, food volume, culinary training and availability of staff.”

The Cheesecake Factory’s Okura, reveals, “Our preference is to bring in whole mushrooms and then deal with the slicing and dicing ourselves. We prepare everything in-house and that includes all fresh vegetable prep. The quality level is better for us that way.”

On the other hand, Cal Dining’s Shen explains, “It really depends on what location we’re buying for. If it’s where we feed 3,000 students, then we go with pre-sliced because it’s a cost-effective way to handle the volume. However, if it’s a location where we feed 500 to 600, we prefer to hand-cut because it’s a quality issue.”

“Labor continues to be a problem for most service-based businesses including restaurants,” acknowledges Modern Mushroom’s Sagan. “Sliced white mushrooms continue to be one of our most popular items, and sales of our portabellas are also on the rise. Clearly, this is an indication that foodservice providers are looking for labor-saving solutions.”

Size is a big factor when it comes to food cost per serving, explains Monterey’s Caldwell. “This is why mushrooms uniformly pre-cut to the specifications desired by the operator can decrease waste, maximize yield and lower food costs.”

The added cost of pre-sliced mushrooms versus whole is minimal, adds Ostrom’s Fletcher. “The technology to slice mushrooms is available for a reasonable cost. This means that a 10-lb. case of sliced mushrooms costs from 50-cents to \$1 more than whole. However, the technology isn’t there yet for quarter-cuts and we still do this by hand, so this form is more expensive.”

National pizza chains are big users of pre-sliced mushrooms, reports Alan Kleinman, sales manager for Avondale, PA-based Gourmet’s Finest. “Consider that a 10-lb. case of white sliced mushrooms costs \$15 and these mushrooms are sold for \$1.50 per topping. This makes them a big profit item.”

However, fresh-cut mushrooms are even more perishable than whole. To-Jo’s Frederic notes, “Shelf life is eight days from pack date

“Mushrooms are a great untapped side to the breakfast menu. Offer them grilled or baked with a slice of tomato and cheese, or use them as a topping to a breakfast sandwich. For lunch, try the addition of the beautiful and delicate enokie mushroom to provide crunch and flavor to wraps, salads and soups.”

— Jane Rhyno, Highline Produce Ltd..

or 10 days if handled under perfect conditions. This means operators need to turn product quickly or shrink will be high.”

Foodservice Successes

Fresh mushrooms help foodservice operators attract customers and increase profits in a variety of settings, from fine dining to chain restaurants and university foodservice. For example, the offerings on the menu at Greens Restaurant used to change often. That was before the downturn in the economy and drop in foodservice business. “Now” says Somerville, “we’ve become more efficient in that we look for ingredients like mushrooms

that can be used in multiple applications. We use everything from the most basic white mushroom, which is great for sautéing, grilling and making vegetable brochettes, right up the ladder to brown mushrooms grilled and in soups, and cultivated mushrooms such as maitake, trumpet, beach, oyster and abalones in a variety of dishes. For example, we serve a wild mushroom omelet for brunch and a grilled polenta dish made with grilled wild mushrooms such as trumpet or maitakes cut into big pieces as a first course.”

When Somerville started as a chef with Greens 32 years ago, mushrooms were a limited commodity. “It was a big deal to get a

portabella back then,” she remembers. “Now, there’s an explosion of availability.”

Mushrooms won first place in the Cheesecake Factory’s Great Glamburger Challenge contest last year where patrons were asked to name their favorite burger topping. Okura details, “We received thousands of suggestions and they all fell into four to six general categories. Mushrooms were one of them. As a result, we just introduced our new Mushroom Burger, which uses a combination of domestic, cremini and shiitake mushrooms.”

Mushrooms are featured in a special promotion each September in the Cal Dining services at the University of California at Berkeley. “Students create materials that explain the different mushroom varieties, provide a picture and describe how they are used,” describes Shen. “We follow up by using mushrooms in several ways on the menu. For example, one dish might be a ragout of mushrooms that contains several varieties in one dish. The benefit is that it keeps it fun. After all, students become jaded about eating in a dining hall. It also educates the consumers of the future about a healthful product like mushrooms.” **pb**

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New Produce Packaging Promotes Healthy Eating

Packers and processors of fresh-cut produce are helping consumers stay healthy on the go with convenient snack packaging and at-home cooking options. **BY K.O. MORGAN**



Consumers looking for nutritious alternatives to salty and sugary snacks will find plenty of fresh-cut options in the produce department.

Customer demands for easier ways to include more produce in their diets are leading to new trends in the packaging industry. While the FDA recommends five to seven servings of fruits and vegetables a day, this is often a hard-to-achieve requirement for many consumers. New products and packaging are helping people meet these goals.

“Consumer interest in more healthful eating and a renewed interest in fruits and vegetables are driving many of the new trends,” says Mike Celani, executive vice president of sales and marketing and research and development of Ready Pac Produce Inc., located in Irwindale, CA.

Tony Freytag, director of sales and marketing at Crunch Pak LLC, located in Cashmere, WA, agrees. “I believe there is more importance being put on healthful eating and snacking, from parents to school lunch programs,” he says. “We hear daily of the issues with childhood and adult obesity. This is having an effect on the awareness level of consumers.”

Lorri Koster, vice president of marketing for Salinas, CA-based Mann Packing Co., Inc. reveals, “We’re having great success with our sweet potato spears and butternut squash —

products that are appearing more and more on restaurant menus and gravitating to the retail shelf. Ease of preparation makes these items popular. Also, the media is calling out these foods as super foods and kid-friendly, when in the form of items such as sweet potato fries.”

“More consumers are seeking convenient, fresh and healthful snack products that address their busy lifestyle needs,” says Dionysios Christou, vice president of marketing at Coral Gables, FL-based Del Monte Fresh Produce. “Del Monte Fresh Produce has developed an entire range of single-serve fresh-cut products designed specifically for busy, on-the-go consumers. In 2010, we introduced our single-serve Del Monte Gold Extra Sweet Pineapple Spear that offers consumers a refreshing and delicious healthy snack with less than 50 calories, and comes in an easy-open package. Our pineapple spear was voted by parents and children alike as one of kid’s favorite nutritious snacks for 2010 in *Parent’s* magazine.”

“Many families are eating on the go, in between their busy schedules of meetings, work and kids’ soccer practices or gymnastics, but they don’t want canned or processed foods,” explains Merle Axelrod, president of Supreme Cuts LLC, in Mahwah, NJ. “Con-

sumers want healthful alternatives but may not have time to clean and cut vegetables. They want quick and easy, but quick and easy should not mean unhealthy. Buying prepared vegetables, that is, vegetables that are washed and cleaned and ready to cook, such as our trimmed green beans, encourages families to eat more produce, without having to take the time to wash, clean and prepare it.”

“Great new recipes offer fun easy ways to incorporate vegetables into a regular grocery shopping list,” says Cali Tanguay, director of marketing and technology at Guadalupe, CA-based Apio Inc. “Apio offers a recipe database on our Web site at www.eat-smart.net.”

Convenience Is Key

Salad and meal kits help consumers take advantage of nutritious meals, not just for themselves, but also for their children, who lead much busier lives than children of the past. “Convenience and consumer demand are always huge motivators to any new trend in packaging,” acknowledges Christine Jackson, new product development and procurement coordinator at Walter P. Rawl & Sons Inc., located in Pelion, SC. “Salad kits and meal kits are two ways we meet this need to lead a more



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PHOTO COURTESY OF CRUNCH PAK LLC

Crunch Pak, a licensee for Disney, uses a co-branding strategy to attract kids' attention and pique their interest in healthful snacks.

healthful lifestyle.”

“We’re seeing more and more items being produced in kid and snack sizes, which are categorized as packaging under five ounces,” says Freytag of Crunch Pak. “Just two years ago, less than 40 percent of our product mix fell into this category. Today, however, that number has risen to more than 50 percent, and we have had approximately 40 percent total growth in our production in that same period. In fact, today it accounts for more than one million packages per week in this category.”

“Organics are another perceived nutritious option,” states Celani of Ready Pak Produce. “Packaging in this area continues to expand, but at a slower pace.”

Customer awareness about healthful snacking is also driving trends in packaging. “Our goal is to move the ‘nag factor,’ the term used for when kids are bugging their parents for a particular item such as sugary sweetened cereal that has been heavily advertised to them, to the produce aisle where the selections are more nutritious,” adds Freytag.

“Consumers who don’t have time for a meal will use a healthful snack as a substitute,” says Celani. “Brown bagging has also become a popular trend. We are seeing a significant number of people opting out of restaurants and into bringing lunch to work or school.”

“With the ability to produce sliced apples that was pioneered by Crunch Pak, it is very easy for consumers to take along a healthful snack,” notes Freytag. “Our product doesn’t brown and stays nice and crunchy for 21 days from production. This makes it convenient for the retailers as well as the consumers.”

“Some of the new trends include grape tomatoes being sold in resealable bags instead of a clamshell,” reveals Michael Purvis, director of produce at J.H. Harvey Co. LLC, a retail

chain of 70 units headquartered in Nashville, GA. “We’re also seeing some suppliers packaging grape tomatoes in conical packaging that sits flat on a desk. The middle of the lid is hollow with a piece of resealable tape that encourages easy snacking.”

Crunch Pak is producing packaging that makes on-the-go snacking easier for consumers. “We will be producing small, single-type servings in rigid containers in the coming months,” Freytag reveals. “These single servings will contain apples, apples and grapes, carrots, and other great produce snacks in them.”

“We are also starting to see increased interest in multi-pack fresh-cut items,” says Christou of Del Monte. “The multi-packs of single-serve, fresh-cut fruit are very popular for daily school and mid-day office snacks. Del Monte is continuously developing innovative packaging to meet changing consumer and retailer demands. Adding lift tabs and providing plastic spoons or sporks with some of our items have made it easier for consumers to enjoy our fresh-cut products while out and about. In addition, vending continues to offer a new venue for our fresh-cut single-serve items. Finally, while convenience remains a key priority, consumers are once again focusing on “greener” and more environmentally friendly packaging,” he adds.

Driving Trends

“Packaging visibility and sustainability are two of the biggest trends right now in the industry,” asserts Andrew Ciafardini, spokesperson for Fresh Express Inc., a subsidiary of Chiquita Brands, International Inc., located in Salinas, CA. “Consumers and retailers want greater visibility of the fresh product inside the package and seek more environ-

mentally friendly packaging. Chiquita and Fresh Express consistently seek to design packaging and labeling that is less cluttered and allows for more ‘window-space’ so the consumer can better see the fresh product inside prior to purchase. Plus, we continually seek ways to offer packaging that uses less plastic and is made from recycled materials. This is particularly true of the NaturSave Artisanal Salad packing Fresh Express introduced last year, which won a 2010 Packaging Innovation award from United Fresh Produce Association. This packaging maintains product quality and shelf-life of similar Fresh Express blends, while using 50 percent less plastic than the 2009 Fresh Express Spring Mix bag.”

Chris Mayhew, director of marketing and new product strategy for Dole Fresh Vegetables, based in Monterey, CA, shares, “Our new, nothing-to-hide, clear, open packaging design allows customers to inspect the blend top to bottom, to ensure quality and freshness. This new packaging design uses 26 percent less ink so all the freshness shines through.”

“We’re seeing a number of standup and reusable bags that our customers seem to like, particularly the reusable bags because they’re perceived as being more ‘green,’” reports Rodney Borden, director of fresh produce and floral at Festival Foods, a 7-unit retail store in Vadnais Heights, MN. “Another popular packaging trend is produce packaged in clear bags, which gives the customer a sense that there’s nothing to hide and there is no bruised or undesirable produce hidden. Clear bags have definitely replaced the brown bag.”

“Combining fresh-cut products with other foods for an exciting new taste is one new trend in packaging,” says Celani of Ready Pac. “For example, you’ll see fruit combined with yogurt and granola to make fresh parfaits, or fresh-cut veggies with hummus dip. We are also receiving requests for both smaller, lower price point and family value sizes of products.”

Ciafardini of Fresh Express states, “We introduced a new Pear Gorgonzola Kit salad that has a very different flavor profile versus any of today’s major competitive kit offerings. “This is part of a limited-time-only program that changes throughout the year to deliver unique new flavors on a regular basis, similar to the Strawberry Fields Salad Kit that was introduced in 2010.”

Quality combined with convenience is also meeting the packaging demands of both retail customers and those who buy for restaurant chains. “Convenience and fast food are the biggest trends,” says Axelrod of Supreme Cuts. “We do pre-cut vegetables in the bag and we

“Value is being defined not just by quality/price at one store versus another, but eating out versus eating in. Many consumers will trade up to a better eat-at-home meal, if it saves them versus eating out. It also has to provide convenience. Offering combinations of fresh-cut foods that are more difficult or expensive to make at home is especially popular.”

— Mike Celani, Ready Pac Produce Inc.

sell to foodservice and retail companies. The pack sizes are different depending on whether it's going to a foodservice company or a retail chain. We do something different in that we sell our pre-cut vegetables in microwavable steamers so the item stays fresh. Typically, you have to pierce holes in bagged vegetables that are cooked in the microwave, but with ours, there's no need. This way, it retains its vitamins and doesn't overcook.”

“I would say convenience, especially for promoting produce as an alternative and healthful snack, is what is driving new trends in packaging,” states Purvis of J.H. Harvey. “To be able to reseal the package so that the product stays fresh is very helpful to both consumers and those in the foodservice industry.”

“Convenience continues to drive value,” agrees Tanguay of Apio. “For example, our 12-oz. Eat Smart Trimmed Brussels Sprouts in a bag has been very popular this year. Eat Smart offers simple cooking instructions right on our bag for those unfamiliar with using Brussels sprouts at home. We also offer peeled and cubed butternut squash in a re-sealable tray. Apio has taken a vegetable that can be difficult to prepare at home and made it easy to use on a daily basis.”

“One of our latest products is our new 4-oz. 4-pack fruit cup,” reports Del Monte's Christou. “Increasing in popularity are fresh single-serve snacking alternatives. Most single-serve items

tend to be for convenience stores or vending machines, but there is increasing demand from consumers for these items to be offered in multi-packs for weekly consumption.”

“Value is being defined not just by quality/price at one store versus another, but eating out versus eating in,” explains Celani. “Many consumers will trade up to a better eat-at-home meal, if it saves them versus eating out. It also has to provide convenience. Offering combinations of fresh-cut foods that are more difficult or expensive to make at home is espe-

cially popular. Salad kits with premium condiments and dressings, fruit bowls with premium fruits, fresh-cut fruits/veggies with dips, fresh-cut meal prep veggies, etc. are ways to offer the restaurant experience at home.”

Freytag agrees. “We continue to offer more selections in packaged produce, such as apples, apple/grapes combinations, just grapes, etc.,” he details. “Our goal is to keep our packaging interesting, exciting and inviting. We do this by studying what goes on in the rest of the store, not just the produce department.”

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“You’ll see more pre-portioned packets as the size of two person households continues to grow with the aging Baby Boomer population. However, we do have an aggressive on-pack promotion calendar with 10 events per year promoting other produce brands as well as our own. The ‘save now’ offer takes away the sticker shock sometimes and spurs purchases by the consumer.”

— Lorri Koster, Mann Packing Co. Inc.

Signature Packaging Means Individualized Branding

New trends in packaging also include ways to make retailers or food distributors stand out from the crowd. “Private label versions of fresh-cut products are growing fast,” says Celani of Ready Pac. “In supermarkets, we are seeing private labels replace national brands as both supermarkets and foodservice establishments look for signature items, such as salads or desserts, that their customers can only buy from them. Consumers trust in the name that’s on the door. This new packaging gives retailers the ability to promote their brand across the store. It’s a way to differentiate a retailer or foodservice establishment from the competition.”

“During the past few years, Del Monte has put a great deal of emphasis on developing and expanding our best in class merchandising and category management capabilities to support our customers in growing their business,” says Christou. “This year, we are also planning to expand our national promotional campaigns that bring excitement to stores and grow our interaction with consumers and their communities.”

“You need to keep your packaging interesting, so that it stands out on the shelf,” states Freytag of Crunch Pak. “For example, we are a licensee for Disney, so we use a co-branding strategy that includes both our logo, as well Disney’s. We also do things such as an assortment of characters in each clamshell of our Disney product, so that it stands out to the kids at home. We partnered with Disney on the Phineas and Ferb brand because it has broad appeal to kids that encourages them to eat produce. We hope to debut many more Disney themes in the months to come.”

Mayhew acknowledges the importance of branding and packaging at Dole. “The big trend at Dole Fresh Vegetables is the integration of packaging into the overall marketing

effort,” she says. “While we continue to see an explosion of on-pack recipes, serving and pairing suggestions, there is now a definite move in the industry to use social media, Web sites and QR (quick response) codes to link consumers directly to serving and pairing information that they can access right in the store. In-store POS is also starting to include this information. Our new DOLE Salads “Find Your Inspiration” campaign for 2011 heavily leverages this complete integration of on-pack, digital and in-store media.” [See related side note on page 26.]

“We’ve seen a demand for tamper-evident packaging,” says Jackson of Walter P. Raul and Sons. “Consumers are also demanding country-of-origin labeling on the packaging.”

Quantity Versus Quality

The slow economy has caused many consumers and foodservice distributors to look for the greater value in packaging. “Many consumers are looking for value, and I think it’s easier to see value in a larger package or size,” says retailer Purvis of J.H. Harvey. “On that end, consumers are seeking the larger size. Sometimes we package our own produce in 2- to 3-lb. family tray-packs.”

On the flip side, Festival Foods’ Borden reports, “Where we used to have 16-oz. packaging, now we’re seeing 12 ounces. In the slower economy, that’s what customers want.”

“We continue to see a group of consumers seeking value in larger sizes as they know they can save by buying larger sizes at a lower cost per ounce than smaller size options,” explains Ciafardini of Fresh Express. That’s why our most popular Fresh Express salads also now come in family sizes.”

Christou of Del Monte agrees. “Since 2008, there has definitely been a shift in package sizing in the produce industry,” he says.

“Consumers have become more cost-conscious when purchasing fresh-cut produce. Some retailers also noted these shifting consumer buying habits and began to offer products with a lower price point in smaller packages.”

Dole has also recognized the need for larger packaging. “Our new 11-oz. clamshells, introduced last year, are a direct result of consumer research showing growing demand for larger, family-sized packages,” reports Mayhew.

Koster of Mann Packing expresses opposing thoughts. “We haven’t seen the economy impact package size,” she says. “You’ll see more pre-portioned packets as the size of two person households continues to grow with the aging Baby Boomer population. However, we do have an aggressive on-pack promotion calendar with 10 events per year promoting other produce brands as well as our own. The ‘save now’ offer takes away the sticker shock sometimes and spurs purchases by the consumer.”

“I think it’s two different audiences,” states Axelrod of Supreme Cuts. “In times of difficulty, consumers don’t go out to eat as much and today are eating more at home, so we offer different sizes such as 12- and 32-oz. packages. It really depends on the number of people in a family and how that particular family is doing in these slow economic times.”

Tanguay of Apio agrees. “People are willing to spend for the convenience and quality of fresh-cut bagged vegetables for ease of use in cooking at home,” she contends. “We have seen an increase in the sales of our bagged products as people continue to create great in-home dining solutions. Over the winter holidays, sales of our larger vegetable trays were very strong.”

“We have actually seen a steady increase of more than 20 percent in the demand for quality packaging,” reports Freytag of Crunch Pak. “We believe that the value and the quality have to be there every day — not just during promotions.”

“Right now, the value package gives more bang for the buck, although if the produce is grown locally, many customers still prefer to pick out the produce themselves,” states Borden of Festival Foods.

“Apio recently launched an IRC promotion on our new Traditional Southern Greens line of products offering consumers an instant savings of \$0.75 per bag during one of the peak greens consumption seasons,” says Tanguay.

“Perhaps more important than package size is hitting a key price point and offering a perceived value,” adds Celani of Ready Pac. “That really should be the motivation behind new packaging trends.”

pb

Walnuts Make For Healthy Sales

More than just a baking staple, retailers find increased rings with eye-catching merchandising and smart promotions on walnuts. **BY PAULA HENDRICKSON**



When compared to other nuts, sales of walnuts are close to 3-to-1.

When you see walnuts listed among recipe ingredients, it's usually followed by the word "optional." While walnuts add new layers of flavor and texture to both sweet and savory dishes, many of those dishes turn out fine without nuts. With consumers around the world trying to economize — and cut calories — you might assume walnut sales would be down. But you'd be wrong.

According to the Folsom-based California Walnut Board and Commission, California's walnut crop has doubled since 2000. "In 2010, we came in just shy of 502,000 tons, compared to 2000, when the final production was 239,000 tons," reports Jennifer Getz, domestic marketing director. She says sales of in-shell walnuts dipped 9.5 percent last year, but their shelled counterparts saw an increase of 13.2 percent.

"This past year, about 54 percent of walnuts were exported, representing three-quarters of the world trade in walnuts," says Michelle McNeil, senior international marketing director for the California Walnut Board and Commission.

Worldwide sales constitute a big part of walnut sales, with in-shell sales performing better overseas than in the United States and Canada. "In-shell walnuts, even here in the States, still have some play, especially in some

of the East Coast markets with some European influence and older generations if you will," acknowledges Richard Sambado, director of domestic sales at Linden, CA-based Primavera Marketing Inc., located in Linden, CA. "As far as export, in Europe it's predominantly Italy, a little bit to Germany, and Spain, where they are buying in-shells because it's such a tradition, as well as China and Turkey, which also are heavy in-shell buyers — this is where the walnut market has been so terrific in the past few years."

On a retail level, walnuts tend to outsell pecans, almonds and other popular nuts. "In the baking season — Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter — there is no other nut sold in produce that can compare to the sales of walnuts," says Dick Stiles, director of produce and floral operations at Redner's Markets Inc., a 39-unit chain based in West Lawn, PA. "Sales have to be close to 3-to-1, when measuring walnuts over other nuts."

Walnuts are also strong sellers across the border in Canada. "Walnuts rank as one of the top five sellers in the nut category in our produce departments in the West," reports Tom Rohovie, merchandising manager for produce and floral at Sobeys, in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, Canada. "We've seen an increase in walnut sales over the past year, and sales continue to grow."

Health Benefits Spur Sales

Convenience is the main reason shelled walnuts are more popular than in-shell walnuts, since both possess the same shelf-life and nutritional benefits. Those purported health benefits are perhaps the biggest reason shelled walnut sales are surging, even as consumers are cutting back on spending. "We believe more of our consumers are taking their nutrition very seriously now, and walnuts definitely are part of their diet these days," Stiles says.

"One of the biggest differences between walnuts and other nuts is that walnuts are made up of predominantly polyunsaturated fats, whereas a lot of other nuts are primarily monounsaturated fats," explains Getz.

"Walnuts are the only nut with a significant amount of alpha linolenic acid [ALA], an omega 3 fatty acid," adds Virginia Zimm, president of Faye Clack Communications Inc., in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. "ALA is an essential fatty acid that can't be produced by the body and must be consumed through a proper diet. A 1-oz. serving of walnuts provides 2.7 grams of ALA."

Health studies have shown the regular consumption of walnuts may help with heart and bone health, weight management and may even help control Type 2 diabetes. "We have two decades of health research that has resulted

“In-store sampling is a powerful marketing tool that can positively change behavior and generate more sales. Product demonstrations create in-store buzz and allow you to entice, engage and educate customers. It’s an opportunity to convert behavior and create new customers.”

— Virginia Zimm, Faye Clack Communications Inc.

in the heart health claim,” reports the Walnut Board’s Getz. “We’re also exploring some interesting, promising areas dealing with cancer and cognitive function. We do believe that the walnut is a package of nutrients that work well together to promote your health. From our research, we know that 87 percent of consumers believe walnuts are healthy, which is driving a lot of the purchases right now.”

Those healthy fats also impact the shelf-life of walnuts. “Polyunsaturated fats can go rancid pretty quickly, so we always recommend people either refrigerate or freeze walnuts until they’re ready to eat them,” Getz says. “If you were to open a package and keep them in the pantry, we’d recommend one month on that, but if you put them in the fridge they’ll last about six months, and about a year in the freezer.”

Beyond Baking

Not long ago, walnuts were relegated to the baking aisle of most supermarkets, but they are now a common sight in most produce departments. “While walnuts are carried in the baking section, the produce department is the optimum location,” asserts Sobey’s Rohovie. “It is a natural tie-in that blends well with other nutritious items.”

“You could make a good argument over both locations — the baking aisle or the produce department, but in many cases there just isn’t enough room anymore in the baking aisles so the produce department makes a good destination area for nuts,” Redner’s Stiles says. “We display our walnuts in a highly visible area in our produce departments, which make them easier for customers to find, and we cross-merchandise with other key produce items to make the walnuts easy to find.”

“With the popularity of walnuts as a healthful substitute for croutons, it’s logical that they are in close proximity to the fresh greens,” says Zimm. Walnuts also pair well with many fresh fruits.

“Walnuts bode a healthy food option,” Pri-

mavera’s Sambado says. “They combine well with salads and can be a healthful snack choice. I think the produce department is the right place for walnuts because it conveys a nutritious freshness.”

Given the nutritional benefits alone, consumers are looking for new ways to incorporate walnuts into their diets. “With people being more aware of walnuts’ health benefits, they want to do more with them besides bake,” Getz says. “They’re looking for other ideas, whether it be a salad, or as a crust on a piece of fish, or tossing them into a pasta dish.”

“The mild flavor and soft texture make California walnuts a versatile ingredient that is ideal in a variety of recipes,” Zimm of Faye Clack notes.

Turning A Holiday Treat Into A Year-Round Favorite

Despite the popularity of walnuts, some people — even some retailers — still consider them to be a holiday product. In-shell walnuts are a holiday tradition throughout much of North America and Europe, but Sambado points out, “There’s not a big play of in-shell past the holiday months.”

While in-shell nuts lend themselves to eye-catching holiday displays, shelled nuts need a little help the rest of the year, especially since they’re often sold in simple bags or clamshells. Since today’s consumers are looking for deals, special prices and coupons, even loyalty card rewards can encourage purchases of what is sometimes considered a pricey extra.

“Even I walk into a grocery store and look at those walnuts and think, ‘I’m not paying \$8.99 for 12 ounces,’” admits Sambado. “Walnuts are certainly more nutritious than a bag of potato chips, but we’re going to have to find ways to sell them a bit more inexpensively. Get a little creative with ads and displays — whatever it takes to move the product through.”

“On the retail side of things, we tend to be quite aggressive with POS and working with the trade to make sure walnuts are readily available,” says the Walnut Board’s McNeil.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FAYE CLACK COMMUNICATIONS INC.

Not too long ago, walnuts were relegated to the baking aisle, but today, they are a common sight in the produce department.

“That includes a lot of merchandising and POS materials for consumers.”

Offering consumers access to nutritional information, recipes and special deals all help boost sales, but giving them a free taste works wonders. “In-store sampling is a powerful marketing tool that can positively change behavior and generate more sales,” asserts Zimm. “Product demonstrations create in-store buzz and allow you to entice, engage and educate customers. It’s an opportunity to convert behavior and create new customers.”

Zimm adds that offering delicious free samples while educating shoppers about walnuts’ healthful properties and versatility by providing recipe cards and health brochures is a persuasive combination. “Typically, demos are leveraged against flyer advertising,” she specifies. “Consequently, flyer ads make it compulsory for all stores within a banner to order and merchandise the advertised product, regardless of whether they are one of the selected demo stores. Astute produce managers will further capitalize on, and support, this opportunity by creating secondary and/or enhanced display placement.” Results of a well executed promotion will continue long after the event itself.

“Walnuts’ dynamic combination of health benefits and versatility makes them a year-round time staple and provide retailers with a strong value proposition for marketing potential,” Zimm says. “They easily transcend multiple grocery departments. Merchandising walnuts within produce, snacking and baking departments reinforces their versatility, leading to greater potential for purchase.” **pb**

TRANSITIONS



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William Riley is the new general manager of the premium mulch products company, which is a division of Lykes Bros Inc., and brings more than 30 years of experience. He has held positions as president, executive vice president, general manager, vice president operations and plant manager at multiple sites in the United States, Panama, Guatemala and Costa Rica.



**7L BRANDS LLC
LAKE PLACID, FL**
Michael Waldron joins as sales manager. He brings nine years of horticulture sales experience to the company and has served in several industry leadership roles, including state director for the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA) Board of Directors for six years.

NEW PRODUCTS



TIME FOR POTTING
Lambert Peat Moss, Riviere-Quelle, Quebec, Canada, introduces ready-to-use potting mixes for indoor and outdoor use. The all-purpose mixes are ideal for starting seeds and can be used in hanging baskets and for vegetables and herbs. The mini-bale is Lambert Potting Mix 350 compressed inches (one Peck) and yields 11 dry liters. The Bale labeled Lambert Potting Mix 800 compressed inches (three Peck) yields 24 dry liters.



TINTED GERBERAS
Verdifratti Inc., Miami, FL, introduces three tinted Gerberas in its extensive line of cut Gerberas. The Avatar (blue), Hulk (green) and Pupa (purple) Gerberas were showcased March 8-10 in the Guatemalan grower's booth at the World Floral Expo in Miami, FL. The grower and distributor offers more than 30 different colors of cut Gerberas.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



CANGC CELEBRATES 100 YEARS
California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers (CANGC), Sacramento, CA, will celebrate its 100th anniversary June 8, 2011, at the Long Beach Convention and Entertainment Center in Long Beach, CA. Decorated with memorabilia and old-time equipment, the 9:00 am to 5:00 pm event will feature educational sessions and two trade expositions — the California Grown Show and The Nursery Mart.



WHAT'S GROWING IN CANADA?
Flowers Canada Growers, Vineland Station, Ontario, Canada, has published the 2011 *Ontario Greenhouse Growers' Directory & Buyer's Guide*. The 18th annual edition, with a distribution of 7,000 copies, lists greenhouse growers, distributors, wholesalers and suppliers. The directory is available to buyers, suppliers, government agencies and trade and industry associations interested in sourcing Ontario greenhouse products and supplies.



FLOWER LIBRARY UNVEILED
Mayesh Wholesale Florist Inc., Los Angeles, CA, has updated its Web site to include the addition of the Flower Library — a fantastic resource for all floral professionals. The company's Flower Library is a database of flowers with more than 4,000 beautiful photographs and includes relevant information such as detailed product descriptions and care and handling tips.



FLORAL PROGRAM LAUNCHED
Associated Growers, Doral, FL, launched its full service floral program as a first-time exhibitor at the Southeast Produce Council exposition March 3 in Orlando. The "Turning Headaches Into Profits" program offers a wide selection of products and services and is specially designed to meet the needs of self-distributed supermarkets and the produce distributors wanting floral products but not the challenges.

Miniature Marvels

Grand floral displays are appealing, but savvy retailers will delight customers of all ages by offering whimsy and variety with collectable miniature flowers and plants. **BY PAULA HENDRICKSON**



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICKY'S MINIS

William Garratt, greenhouse manager for Chalet Nursery in Wilmette, IL, proudly shows off the miniature plants grown by Micky's Minis.

If you thought the reason so many supermarkets position floral departments within eyeshot of the main entrance was because the windows offer good light, you're only half right. The other reason is visibility. "We've had success merchandising the minis up front by the checkouts and right when you walk in the front of our stores," reports Dick Stiles, director of produce and floral operations for Redner's Markets Inc., in Reading, PA.

Especially dramatic or eye-catching plants help draw shoppers' attention and spur impulse purchases. When properly grouped, miniature plants make distinctive — if not dramatic — displays that can cause people to stop in their tracks. "One of the biggest problems we have is when retailers want to decorate their shops by spreading them around," explains Bill Byland, manager at St. Louis, MO-based Micky's Minis. "They look nice spread around the store, but to get the full impact, they really need to be kept together."

Miniature versions of both foliage and flowering plants appeal to a wide cross-section of consumers because they can fit almost anywhere. "They're great for party favors, on desks-tops and windowsills, or for hospitals," remarks Byland. "Wherever space is at a premium and you don't have room for a big plant or flower arrangement, minis work very well."

"It's something unique and different," says Eve Johnson, owner of Eve's Garden Inc., in Land O' Lakes, FL, which specializes in bonsai trees and lucky bamboo. "People are going into a grocery store to shop for an occasion or a dinner party, and it's something they can grab quickly and works well as a gift to anybody — male, female, adult or child. Everybody can give a plant, but if it's something different, it's something they'll remember."

Minis might make great gifts for almost anyone, but Stiles says the demographic group purchasing minis tends to be women aged 35 and older.

Live plants may require more care than cut flowers, but they can last for many years, one reason Johnson considers them a perfect gift. "That's the difference between cut flowers and a bonsai or a lucky bamboo," Johnson says, adding, "Lucky bamboo needs no care whatsoever — water it and put it in a darkish spot in your house. It's so easy to maintain. You cannot over-water it, and it doesn't need any light."

Quick Turnaround Means Minimal Care

While the lucky bamboo needs little care from consumers or retailers, bonsais need slightly more attention. "Bonsais need a little more light and need to be kept nice and moist," Johnson says, adding they aren't as fussy as

some people assume. "They don't mind a draft at all. They're very hardy plants."

While The Pinery's tabletop Christmas trees and rosemary plants are larger than your average mini [see sidebar], they tend to be fairly resilient. "They can take dry conditions, but not much freezing," says Brad Blaes, sales and new product development manager for the Escondido, CA-based company. "Most floral departments have people who know how to water, so things don't get too dry. For the rosemary, they need a middle range of water, because rosemary won't tolerate any standing water and needs to have good air circulation and as close to full sun as they can get."

Micky's Minis' Byland admits that 2-inch florals are a bit fussier than their full-size counterparts, and if allowed to dry out, they won't bounce back as readily as larger plants. "The biggest problem is people tend to overwater minis because they're so small," he explains. "A 2-inch pot is not half the size of a 4-inch pot; they're more like 25 percent the size. So the biggest problem is how much water you give a miniature plant and forgetting to come back and drain it if it's in a ceramic pot."

Byland believes keeping minis in a high visibility area will help floral employees know if they need to be watered. High visibility usually results in swift sales, prompting Johnson to add, "Our

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What Makes A Mini?

Ask five industry experts to define what constitutes a “miniature” plant and chances are you’ll get five different answers. That’s because it depends on what type of plant you mean.

Micky’s Minis in St. Louis, MO, specializes in miniature floral plants. “For us, ‘mini’ means a 2-inch pot,” says manager Bill Byland. “It’s actually 2½ inches, but we call it two. We used to grow a 1-inch plant, but it didn’t last. It required what we call a desktop well because it needed water all the time. As soon as it dried out, it died. The 2-inch seemed to catch on a bit better in the marketplace.”

The definition of miniature is a bit different at The Pinery LLC, in Escondido, CA, which is known for its live tabletop Christmas trees. The company has recently expanded its offerings to include rosemary plants in 6-inch pots as well as assorted herbs and perennials, which are “the upper reaches of miniature,” according to Brad Blaes, sales and new product development manager.

Bonsai are tinted evergreens. Blaes emphasizes The Pinery’s plants are small, conical-shaped pine trees, not bonsais. “Bonsai is the art of training, trimming and caring for small plants and trees to mimic the way they look in nature, but on a much smaller scale. They’re very tiny. We’re not trying to mimic nature.” **pb**



product doesn’t stay in the store long enough for them to worry about taking care of it.”

“Ideally, the majority of plants are sold in seven days or less,” Byland notes. “It depends partly upon the season and where they display them, but if they’re displayed in a high-traffic, high-visibility area they should move fairly quickly.”

Colorful blooms or striking foliage can prove more attention-grabbing than signage, so perhaps the most popular — and practical — POS materials tend to be display stands, which Stiles says always help sales. Micky’s Minis encourages retailers to group their plants together by offering a display tray, complete with header, with a footprint that’s less than one square foot. “Some retailers buy into that, but some would rather keep their prices down,” he admits.

Eve’s Garden’s tries to keep POS costs down by using basic displays that can easily be customized to retailer requests. “We have in-house designers do anything we need, so we can make something for them,” Johnson says. “You have to design like that in today’s market because each buyer wants something different and you need to cater to their needs.”

One might assume mini-Christmas trees sell themselves during the holidays, but Blaes strives to make them faster and easier to sell. The Pinery is in the process of developing a new vertical display case capable of holding 10 miniature pine trees (in 6-inch pots) that maximize valuable floor space. “The cases are compartmentalized so you can stack them three high, utilizing the cover of one of the boxes as a base,” he explains.

Delivering Results

When it comes to handling live plants, the

ability to get the plants to the stores quickly is important. With some minis — like those in 2-inch pots — swift delivery is crucial. That’s why most growers provide multiple delivery options. “We offer Direct Store Delivery (DSD) on every product we have, but we also offer shipping every way possible — via airlines, truck lines, UPS, Post Office, etc.,” Eve’s Garden’s Johnson boasts. “About 10 percent of our customers use it,” and the majority of DSD shipments are re-orders placed by retailers that had previous orders delivered by truck to distribution centers.

Stiles says Redner’s orders all go through corporate. “Micky’s Minis is about 50/50,” Byland reports. “The real large retailers tend to want everything to go through their warehouse, and we can certainly do that, but smaller retailers seem to enjoy the direct store delivery. This way, the plants get onto the shelf and to the consumer that much faster.”

Miniature pinetrees come with their own issues. “With live plants, the size and weight is pretty significant, so it’s more expensive to ship even something fairly compact that has a higher dollar volume, like CDs,” Blaes of The Pinery says. The Pinery can do Direct Store Delivery if requested, but Blaes says it’s not too common. “For the supermarket trade we do a lot of warehouse deliveries,” he reports. “We have some supermarkets that back-haul — they’ll have trucks in the San Diego area picking up something and are heading back to their warehouses that will swing by to pick up a shipment.”

Certainly, shipping costs play into the retail price of miniature plants, but basic economics do, too. While Eve’s Garden has some bonsais

that retail for under \$10, other minis can cost as much as larger plants. “Everyone is living with smaller margins, but I think our product is well suited for the economic downturn,” acknowledges Byland of Micky’s Minis. “Growers lowered their prices on 4-inch products, making them — in some cases — cheaper than the minis.” Letting retailers know incremental sales was the ultimate goal helped make a difference. “From a cost standpoint, our costs are similar to — and in some cases, more expensive than — a 4-inch product. So a retailer can’t place them next to a 4-inch crop or the perceived value won’t be there. A 4-inch looks four times the size, but the price is practically the same, so you’ve got to keep them separated and appeal to those customers looking for a smaller size plant.”

Miniatures do, however, work well when it comes to multiple sales. “I encourage retailers to do something like 2-for-\$5 or whatever they think the magic number is for them,” Byland advises. Stiles says the two-for or even three-for approach has proved successful at Redner’s.

While sales typically spike around Mother’s Day, Christmas and Valentine’s Day, Byland says minis sell well for Teacher’s Appreciation Day, Administrative Professional’s Day and even Halloween. Bonsais and lucky bamboo do well year-round, but mini Christmas trees are highly seasonal. Blaes notes The Pinery is diversifying with spring products. “This is the second year we’ve had rosemary plants for sale in the spring, and we’ve branched out to include some perennials and herbs,” he reveals. “We’re growing Spanish lavender, aspidospermums, argyranthemums, and we have a bulb crop including the calla lilies you see around Easter time.” **pb**

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION



During the produce department dark ages, around the mid-twentieth century, acres of trees were lost providing paper for the columns arguing the merits of first- or last-aisle location of retail produce departments. At the time, the relatively limited variety count provided an also lackluster share of store sales. However, most analysis showed first-aisle traffic flow departments generated superior produce

sales results at an above-average profit rate contribution. Gradually, the location of produce departments began changing, and the next consideration was first aisle front or rear of the store. With the majority of stores having rear-of-building receiving docks, the desire for minimized handling time and cost often resulted in first aisle rear-of-store produce department selling floor locations.

As produce variety and consumer demand for an increasing amount of fresh fruit and vegetables grew, suddenly produce was becoming one of, and eventually, a major reason for consumers selecting a store to do the majority of their shopping.

More and more departments were being located so as to be the first area the consumer encountered upon entering the store. Then the challenge became how to arrange equipment to provide the best traffic flow presentation.

Because of its overall size, Wal-Mart provides one of the more interesting examples of old-style entry aisle produce departments, which have recently been reorganized, while still maintaining some of the initial general layout characteristics. One side of an aisle is a long high-level refrigerated case with tables parallel across the aisle. The question is what length is sufficient, without detracting the consumer from wanting to explore product located on the tables nearly invisible on the opposite side.

Even more important is how the department is operated. My visit to a brand new, sizeable Wal-Mart the second day after opening found, as expected, a well maintained produce department. Two weeks later, just prior to noon on a Wednesday, I discovered the worst appearing produce department seen in Savannah in years. Perhaps the delivery was late, but the only worker said the truck was there when he arrived and he didn't know when any additional help would be arriving. To be fair, an early afternoon visit at a later date revealed improved, but only passable presentation with several prices for display table product not agreeing with the checkout charge. So much for location...

Some chains have even rearranged entry locations to provide the customers' first produce exposure to be at the front-and-center of the department providing the feeling of being surrounded by produce. While all of this sounds like an easy decision, this macro-conclusion is only a portion of the battle. The next step is the analysis of sales data to determine product allocation. In comparison to overall sales experience, is penetration by category in keeping with that of stores experiencing similar shopper demographics?

For some, this is only one step in the drive to maximize the location effect. Next is an analysis of how consumers shop the department. What is the best way to locate product within the department to take advantage of traffic flow patterns and how the customer goes about efficiently exploring locations for their needs while also being exposed to those items with the highest impulse value.

Even with all of this evaluation, there are still other product locations to be analyzed. Organics, which were barely a sales blip two decades

earlier, have now risen to being a highly recognized group. The majority of stores position organics either all together or in their respective groups of fresh fruit and vegetables. However, in a few instances, organics may be found integrated within each fresh category. Which method provides the greatest sales return, and at the same time, achieves improving turnover with lowering shrink levels is just another question to

be explored regarding location issues.

Regardless of location, one needs to remember this factor only sets the stage for the parameters with what may be achieved after analyzing all of the pros and cons about location.

Some may agree that produce being the first impact the customer encounters is primary because produce scores at the top of consumers' choices. However, there are equally important other factors that may impact the implementation of a retailer's overall marketing strategy.

Certainly a strong case may be made for a strategy having bakery or deli the first department consumer's encounter. If customer contact and friendliness are among the top priorities, certainly either of these provide far more one-on-one interaction. Not to be overlooked is how specific demographics of the customer base include a sizeable portion of the clientele making quick-service or to-go/ready-to-eat foods a priority.

Location, location, location is important, but the keys suggest being in tune with consumer demographics surrounding individual locations as one maximizes the combined contribution of customer satisfaction, operations and merchandising.

pb

Location, location, location is important, but the keys suggest being in tune with consumer demographics surrounding individual locations.

By Dave Diver

Dave Diver is the former vice president of produce at Hannaford, and a regular columnist for PRODUCE BUSINESS.

HOW EUROPE PLANS TO BOOST FRUIT CONSUMPTION

Freshfel Europe recently announced a new program to boost fresh produce consumption in Europe. In the concluding part of this interview, Philippe Binard, Secretary General of Freshfel Europe, in Brussels, Belgium, discusses the details of organization's plans to increase fruit consumption across the continent.

Interview conducted by Mira Slott



PB: Will you be integrating promotional and marketing programs, partnering at the retail level, etc.? Will you take advantage of the Internet?

Binard: Hopefully, our press releases and awareness messages available on our Web site will be echoed in the media. We want our Web site to be recognized as a tool and reputable source of information when something is coming up in the fruit and veg-

etable sector; to help the media generate story ideas and provide accurate information when it publishes stories. It is critical to stop the media from providing distorted information to the public.

We want to raise the profile of our organization so it can be recognized by the general media that we normally don't address. There is a lot of misunderstanding arising in the market and in the foodservice arena that produce should be inexpensive because it's coming from nature. We need to do a better job of explaining the logistics and complexities of the supply chain.

PB: Do you also envision consumers accessing the site?

Binard: Over time, consumers could go to our Web site to find information on nutritional value. The site can also be used as a platform for those running campaigns. By linking all these various campaigns, we are creating a network for communication.

The reason why we don't want to go directly to the consumer is largely due to language barriers, and there are already a number of organizations representing various countries talking to consumers. Another part is that the approach needs to be different based on the culture. You don't do the same promotional program for Spanish people as you do for Finnish people.

Our goal is to be assisting those making the campaigns and harmonizing sources of information. Through our press agencies, we indirectly reach local media, and hopefully it gets translated properly. In the United States, campaigns are much more national in content, while in Europe, they are more segmented to relate to different cultures.

PB: Is this strategy really new? Haven't you done these kinds of things before?

Binard: This is the first time we are trying to centralize information in a broad public forum across Europe. Previously, most of the information was internal and within the sector. The board of Freshfel felt something needed to be done at a larger level. For several years, our committee on promotion and image had been gathering research and identifying issues and weaker areas that needed to be addressed. We

thought now is the time to take another step.

PB: Do you have evidence that the approach is effective? For instance, did the news you circulated on the misleading labeling generate any actions? Did media pick up on the story? Are companies changing their labeling? Is the European Union responding?

Binard: How successful the campaign will be, I don't know. I could tell you that at the end of November when we sent out the press release, *Where is the Fruit?* we had press agencies in Brussels translating the news in an number of languages. Results have been quite interesting. There have been a number of radio interviews in different countries, information into the general press, and an increased interest on our Web site where research was available.

It's become a part of our lobbying activity with the European Commission. Some pieces of legislation are still under discussion, particularly the threshold of 50 percent. Impact assessment material is being reviewed. We have been using the press coverage as leverage. We are starting to see a number of companies not mentioning the name of the fruit but referring to the flavor of the fruit. Based on that limited experience, we view this as a success.

PB: In a way, it's ironic that consumption of fruits and vegetables is stagnant, yet these large food companies see value in promoting to consumers that their products are filled with them.

Binard: It is a bit contradictory that consumption is low. One of the motivations of our campaign is that consumers perceive fruits and vegetables as fresh, colorful and healthy and mention that they want to eat more produce. We see that all the competing products know how to use images of fruits and vegetables to convey freshness, diversity, color and health benefits in their products.

PB: In a low margin industry, marketing campaigns can be costly. It sounds like you are trying to get the most bang for the buck by using the media as catalysts to get your message across...

Binard: We feel it is our duty to even the playing field. The produce industry can't compete on marketing budgets; studies show a fruit and vegetable company invests one Euro compared to 100 Euros for a large food company — a ratio of 1 to 100 is no match. We need to use a different way of communicating. Beyond limited marketing, we also have a fragmented sector, and not as much brand. We'll not change everything with this campaign, but hope to raise awareness by changing the information that is currently available. We want to call attention to the misperceptions and provide the facts. This campaign has a cost, but it's not a high budget campaign. A core component is developing a Web site to centralize information and provide a means to proliferate our message.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE INDEPENDENT STORE



Slumping sales across the retail spectrum was big news, particularly when the news focused on leading price retailers. An example was a front page story in the February 22 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, with this headline: “Wal-Mart Tries to Recapture Mr. Sam’s Winning Formula.”

Moreover, positive signs showed confidence that food sales can contribute to growth and profitability. Adding a new dimension to the fiercely competitive retail food marketplace, Walgreens revealed plans to offer fresh fruits and vegetables in its drug stores, and the 7-Eleven convenience store chain announced the launch of new “Signature” fresh food items, while reducing emphasis on the sale of cigarettes. Together, Walgreens and 7-Eleven boast nearly 10,000 stores across the country — a powerful potential in drawing customers away from established, traditional retailers.

In all of this activity, two important new directions emerged for independent grocers from the National Grocers Association’s 2011 Consumer Survey Report, sponsored by ConAgra Foods and presented by Phil Lempert, The Supermarket Guru:

- The public appreciates stores beyond price.
- Differentiation will be a key to success in 2011.

Functioning together, the new directions can work effectively for NGA members in the development of new marketing strategies. The Report noted, “Since price battles hurt all competitors, it will be fresh, distinctive approaches that lead marketplace wins. Retailers with the will to command markets now will have new ideas to emerge from the economic quicksand and push back forcefully against price retailers.”

A wonderful example of “fresh distinctive approaches” was the initiative of NGA member Pat Burns, president and CEO of The Fresh Grocer, in his dedication to bring a new store to an underserved community in North Philadelphia, with support from the White House’s “Healthy Food Financing Initiative.” Burns’ efforts were capped on February 19 when First Lady Michelle Obama, accompanied by Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, visited the store to promote the First Lady’s “Let’s Move” campaign to reduce childhood obesity.

Identifying key issues that motivate consumers to select a primary store has been a paramount, long-term interest of grocery retailers. In the past decade, “price” and “high-quality fruits and vegetables” were the 1-2 combination that topped consumer surveys. Our 2011 Report delivered a surprise — with “price” replaced by “a clean neat store,” and the ranking of “high quality fruits and vegetables” moving up to “very important” by 91 percent of the respondents.

The recognition of fresh produce as a motivator in primary store selection prompted an invitation to leaders of the two leading trade

associations to offer comments about the impact of produce departments — Tom Stenzel, president of United Fresh Produce Association, and Bryan Silbermann, president of Produce Marketing Association.

Tom Stenzel: “The fresh produce department provides independent retailers an unparalleled opportunity to build customer loyalty, increase sales and drive profitability. Both large chains and independent retailers know they need to create attractive produce departments that appeal to shoppers. “But, more than large chains, independent retailers are ideally positioned to take advantage of the rapidly changing dynamics of the fresh produce industry.

“First, independents pride themselves on local knowledge and understanding their shoppers’ preferences better than anyone. Nowhere is this more important than in setting the produce department. Retailers can set specific product mix of ethnics, specialties, organics — or even large displays of bulk commodities.

“Second, independents have the flexibility to take advantage of spot market opportunities, sometimes to increase revenues and sometimes to increase margins. In a time when many companies are seeking to bring predictability to the high-flying produce department, independents can turn on a dime when a produce supplier is long on product.

“Finally, independents can use produce to enhance their connection in their communities, thus building personal loyalty that can even exceed price.

Bryan Silbermann: “Three decades ago, futurist John Naisbitt coined his *Megatrends*,

including ‘High Tech, High Touch.’ As high tech became so pervasive in everyday life, produce’s high touch has rocketed to retail prominence — creating fresh image, store differentiation, repeat traffic and strong product profitability.

“The very best fresh produce departments always combine merchandising artistry with produce science. So efficiencies of scale are just one piece of the puzzle; artistry and passion are just as critical. An independent retailer with a talented produce manager has the flexibility to ride consumer demands by:

- Sourcing from local farmers
- Catering to the specific demographics of the store
- Taking advantage of the inevitable market opportunities that the varieties in produce supply offer a smaller operator who is able to make an opportunity buy
- Using the story-telling ability of independent operators not burdened by corporate constraints
- Riding the social wave where consumers search for greater connections with their community and environment.

As we emerge from “economic quicksand,” we see that fresh produce can be a differentiator — a key to success in 2011. You can bet that successful independent grocers across the country will use the power of produce to their competitive advantage against large price-driven chains. **pb**

As we emerge from “economic quicksand,” we see that fresh produce can be a differentiator — a key to success in 2011.

By Peter Larkin

Peter Larkin is the president and CEO of the National Grocers Association (N.G.A.), the national trade association representing the retail and wholesale grocers that comprise the independent sector of the food distribution industry, representing over \$225 billion in annual domestic sales.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

ON BEHALF OF APPLE GROWERS

At the 1987 International Apple Institute's 16th Annual Conference, held in Grand Rapids, MI, Patrick Lejeune was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from Derl Derr, president of the IAI. At the time, Lejeune was the president of Heath & Lejeune Inc., and made his mark as one of the original "in town" brokers, representing the interests of the apple growers.

David Weinstein of Heath & Lejeune recalls, "There was a need for people in L.A. whose job it was to represent the interests of the apple growers. If the receivers got apples they didn't like, it wasn't feasible for growers to hop on a plane to inspect the load or view it in a digital photo via e-mail. They needed someone on the other end to be their eyes and ears. He had the trust of both parties in the transaction. Buyers could count on him to tell them if he had what they wanted, and growers could count on him to accurately describe the condition of their products. Unfortunately, that was not always the case, so he was really an example in the industry of honesty and integrity.

"The award Patrick received was a testimony of the consistency with which Heath and Lejeune operated its business. In addition to the apple industry, Patrick was a valuable asset to the trade as a whole, as his experience helped move the industry forward."

Though the apple industry lost one of its greats in 1996, Patrick's legacy lives on in his son, Rick Lejeune, who now runs the company.

The *Blast from the Past* is a regular feature of *PRODUCE BUSINESS*. We welcome submissions of your old photos, labels or advertisements along with suggested captions. Please send materials to: Editor, *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail info@producebusiness.com



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Country Fresh Mushroom Co.	82	610-268-3043	www.countryfreshmushrooms.com	Ponderosa Mushrooms	97	800-575-4373	www.ponderosa-mushrooms.com
Curry & Company	65	800-929-1073	www.curryandco.com	Primavera Marketing, Inc.	34	209-931-9420	www.primaveramarketing.com
DeBruyn Produce Co.	64	800-733-9177	www.debruynproduce.com	Produce for Better Health Foundation	55	302-235-2329	www.pbhfoundation.org
Del Monte Fresh Produce	116	800-950-3683	www.freshdelmonte.com	Produce Pro Software	36	630-395-9600	www.producepro.com
Dole Fresh Fruit Company	2	818-879-6600	www.dole.com	ProducePackaging.com	32	800-644-8729	www.producepackaging.com
Dole Fresh Vegetable Co.	101	800-333-5454	www.dole.com	PuraVida Farms	92	480-588-7012	www.puravidafarms.com
Double D Farms	82	559-884-0107	www.doubledfarms.com	PuraVida Farms	80	480-588-7012	www.puravidafarms.com
dProduce Man Software	96	888-PRODMAN	www.dproduceman.com	Ray Farms, Inc.	66	800-692-3093	www.rayfarms.com
Duda Family Farms	61	561-804-1477	www.dudafresh.com	Rivermaid Trading Company	35	209-369-3586	www.rivermaid.com
Earthbound Farm	81	888-624-1004	www.ebfarmtrde.com	Roberson Onion Co.	67	912-375-5760	
Eclipse Berry Farms, LLC	56	310-207-7879	www.eclipseberrysfarms.com	Ruma Fruit & Produce Co., Inc.	24	800-252-8282	www.rumas.com
Eureka Specialties, Inc.	90	213-488-6470	www.eurekaspecialties.com	SAGARPA - Embassy of Mexico	42-43	202-728-1727	www.mexicocalidadsuprema.com.mx
Family Tree Farms	35	866-FLAVOR-1	www.familytreefarms.com	Shuman Produce, Inc.	63	912-557-4477	www.realsweet.com
Farmer's Best	39	520-281-1411	www.farmersbest.com.mx	State Garden, Inc./Olivia's	12	617-884-1816	www.stategarden.com
Florida Department of Agriculture	47	850-488-4303	www.freshfromflorida.com	Stemilt Growers, Inc.	35	509-662-9667	www.stemilt.com
Fresh Farms Products, Inc.	40	229-924-4744		Sweet Onion Trading Company	67	800-699-3727	www.sweetoniontrading.com
Fresherized Foods	45	817-509-0626	www.eatwholly.com	Tavilla Sales Company of L.A.	87	800-421-9626	www.tavillasales.com
Giant Steps Toronto/York Region	36	905-713-4502	www.twpa.ca	Trinity Fruit Sales	35	559-433-3777	www.trinityfruit.com
Gills Onions	68	800-348-2255	www.gillsonions.com	Uesugi Farms, Inc.	57	408-847-9403	www.uesugifarms.com
Giorgio Fresh Co.	97	800-330-5711	www.giorgiofoods.com	Umina Bros., Inc.	88	805-488-6658	www.umina.com
The Giumarra Companies	54	509-663-4409	www.giumarra.com	United Fresh Produce Association	99	202-303-3400	www.unitedfresh.org
Global Organic Specialty Source, Inc.	81	877-952-1198	www.globalorganics.ws	United Fresh Produce Association	49	202-303-3400	www.unitedfresh.org
Grower Alliance, LLC	56	520-761-1921	www.groweralliance.com	The USA Bouquet Co.	109	786-437-6502	www.usabq.com
Grower Alliance, LLC	50-51	520-761-1921	www.groweralliance.com	Village Farms	76	888-377-3213	www.villagefarms.com
Heath & Lejeune, Inc.	88	213-614-1909	www.heathandlejeune.com	Well-Pict Berries	57	831-722-3871	www.wellpict.com
Hendrix Produce, Inc.	69	800-752-1551	www.hendrixproduce.com	West Coast Tomato, Inc.	74	941-722-4537	www.westcoasttomato.com
L.G. Herndon Jr. Farms, Inc.	64	912-565-7640		Zespri International	53	650-368-2870	www.zesparikiwi.com/retail
I Love Produce LLC	91	610-869-4664	www.iloveproduce.com	Kurt Zuhlke & Association	32	800-644-8729	www.producepackaging.com



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