

producebusiness

MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT



Jermy Engel & Heather Goldberg
"The Spork Sisters"

4th Annual
Super Chefs
DISH ON FRESH PRODUCE



Darren Brown



Eliana de las Casas



Joey Eleniero



Linton Hopkins



Joseph Lenn



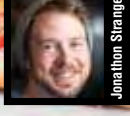
Sarah McIntosh



Clifford Pleau



Susan Spiccar



Jonathon Stranger

INSIDE:

THE PUNDIT LOOKS AT IMMIGRATION REFORM
CONSUMERS' PURCHASING HABITS • GELSON'S MARKET
CANADIAN RETAILERS • GUACAMOLE TRENDS • SPRING GRAPES
AUSTRALIA/NEW ZEALAND FRUIT • SWEET ONIONS
MUSHROOMS ON THE MENU • WALNUT MERCHANDISING
US APPLE EXPORTS TO EU AND RUSSIA • CALIFORNIA DROUGHT IMPLICATIONS

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Dole's "Peel the Love Summer Tour"
is coming back with even more stops and
promotional opportunities than last year.



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provide you with materials and help
you schedule a Peel the Love event.



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 Today's consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it's grown and how it's prepared. These culinary innovators tackle the challenge.

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 Explore the category and discover opportunities to increase sales in Produce.



THIS MONTH'S WINNER



Stephen Armellini
Vice President of Sales
Armellini Logistics
Palm City, FL

Since 1945, Armellini Logistics, a family owned perishable logistics business headquartered in Palm City, FL, has specialized in the transportation of flowers.

Stephen Armellini has been working at his late father's (Jules Armellini, who passed away last August) company for 38 years, and now runs the sales team.

Armellini loves working for his father's

company.

"It is very much my future, life and retirement," says Armellini.

Having read PRODUCE BUSINESS for more than 20 years, Armellini is a big fan of the magazine. "It's very informative for me as far as contacts and what's going on in the business. We've had the commitment to floral, and that won't, change but we are making a concentrated effort to broaden our services to include more produce," declares Armellini.

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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.

WIN A TOWER FAN

This summer, be prepared to amaze and cool any warehouse or office staff members with this three-speed, 90-degree oscillating tower fan. Generating 390-feet-a-minute of air speed, quietly moving the highest volume of air and distributing it evenly across a room, the set of three independently controlled fans measures 42" H x 13" W and weighs a little more than 9 pounds. The fan includes a remote control and a timer for convenience.



QUESTIONS FOR THE APRIL ISSUE

- 1) What are the two company locations listed for Prime Time Produce? _____
- 2) What is the website for Nickey Gregory Company? _____
- 3) What year did C.H. Robinson start providing its services? _____
- 4) What company offers SunGold Kiwifruit from New Zealand? _____
- 5) What company is behind the Dandy Brand? _____
- 6) What two other brands make up the "three amigos" in the Cinco de Mayo ad for Avocados from Mexico? _____

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

Name _____ Position _____

Company _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

Photocopies of this form are acceptable. Please send answers to:
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WIC RULES MEAN MORE FRESH FRUITS AND VEGGIES FOR KIDS

By Tom Stenzel
United Fresh Chief Executive

Throughout my career in Washington, there are not many moments that one can truly call landmarks. We usually measure progress in bits and pieces, often two steps forward and one step back.

But on March 3, “landmark” is the only appropriate word for the USDA’s publication of the final regulations implementing new rules for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Since the early 1970s, this program played an important role in providing supplemental foods to low-income pregnant and nursing women, as well as their young children. But for most of those years, fruits and vegetables were nowhere to be seen in the WIC program.

Well-meaning officials focused more on individual nutrients than the overall quality of food choices. As far back as the Clinton administration, officials knew they needed to include fruits and vegetables in WIC, but struggled with an entrenched food lobby and confusion about which produce items to choose.

It’s been 11 years since then United Chairwoman, Karen Caplan, testified before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry to urge the inclusion of fruits and vegetables in WIC. Instead of picking a handful of fruits or vegetables, she advocated that WIC moms and kids should have access to a wide variety of produce, enabling them not only to choose foods today but also to learn to make healthy choices for a lifetime. The concept of giving WIC moms monthly vouchers that they could use to buy fruits and vegetables was born.

Our quest began to convince the Congress and USDA to include a wide variety of fruits and vegetables in WIC to enable moms and their kids to make new and better choices. Long story short — Congress finally approved that change, and we began to collaborate with USDA to establish program criteria to make it work. USDA first imple-

mented fruit and vegetable vouchers for WIC moms in 2009 with its preliminary regulations for the program.

Today, WIC moms receive almost \$1 billion in annual vouchers to choose fruits and vegetables, helping transform the lives of these moms and their kids.

Since this program was implemented, we saw a greater impact on health than most of us imagined. Just a few weeks ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a new study showing a significant decline in obesity among children, ages 2 – 5 years old. The authorities point to fruits and vegetables in WIC as an important factor in that change. Think about this: more than half of all American babies are born to WIC-eligible moms. Fruit and vegetable vouchers in WIC are one of the most important public health initiatives in the country today. They are helping start infants and toddlers off with fresh fruits and vegetables in an effort to reduce the risk of obesity and chronic diseases that plague so many in this population, and cripple our national budget.

The new rules (made final in early March) will help continue those gains. USDA upped the cash value of vouchers for 33 percent of children, from \$6 to \$8 per month. The final rules allow WIC moms to receive a voucher for fresh fruits and vegetables instead of jarred baby foods for their infants. And, the rules will encourage WIC moms to choose more produce, enabling them to add cash at check out rather than leaving the fruits and vegetables that go a few cents over the voucher. All of these provisions have been high on our priority list and will increase fruit and vegetable consumption among WIC moms and kids — adding an estimated \$100 million a year in fruit and vegetable purchasing power for WIC recipients.

There remains one disappointment in the final rule — a mistake that we continue to believe needs fixing. When USDA first

proposed the changes to WIC several years ago, they chose to exclude white potatoes from the fruit and vegetable voucher program. We argued at the time that some nutritionists were confusing the impact of food preparation, such as adding fat and salt in cooking French fries, with fresh white potatoes that are highly nutritious and affordable vegetables. We haven’t won that debate yet, but are encouraged that USDA intends to take another look at today’s nutrition science, rather than cling to old prejudices. The Institute of Medicine [an independent, nonprofit organization providing unbiased advice to the public] will do a scientific review, and we will argue aggressively for white potatoes to be recognized as a fine nutritional choice for WIC moms. So there’s still work to be done.

The fact that these landmark WIC rules were published on March 3 was not a coincidence. That date also happened to be the 40th anniversary celebration of the WIC program, and we had planned a Capitol Hill celebration that night with our partners at the National WIC Association.

Unfortunately, our late-season snowstorm forced a postponement of the celebration. As much as I wanted to celebrate that landmark day, there are still future landmarks we want to set. So, I was on my way to Detroit for a different kind of celebration — a press conference celebrating the donation of four more salad bars to schools, this time sponsored by the Dole Food Company and Meijer.

Our work on WIC shows the power of a vision, and the power of perseverance. Together, we placed more than 3,000 salad bars in schools and are transforming school food environments every day.

The nation depends on us to bring them the healthiest, safest and highest quality fresh fruits and vegetables. Nowhere is that more important than serving the kids who will lead our country and become our consumers of tomorrow.



THE LONDON PRODUCE SHOW AND CONFERENCE

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THE FRESH PRODUCE CONSORTIUM
AND PRODUCE BUSINESS

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PRODUCE WATCH

TRANSITIONS

SUN WORLD INTERNATIONAL COACHELLA, CA

Sun World International names **Tom Clark** director of southern facilities and operations in Coachella where he will have responsibility for managing all packing and cold storage operations and staff. Additionally, Clark will be responsible for supporting the company's Southern California grower base. Clark has an extensive background in managing citrus packing and cold storage operations throughout California's San Joaquin Valley.



Sun World International appoints **Joe Sanchez** its North American director of grower relations and licensing. Sanchez assumes responsibility for all sourcing and licensing activities in the San Joaquin Valley and in Mexico. Sanchez, who will be charged with management of Sun World's California stonefruit licensing business and supporting the company's central California base of grape growers, will also oversee the company's Hermosillo, Mexico grower relations and licensing staff.



ALLEN LUND COMPANY LA CAÑADA, CA

The Allen Lund Company announces the promotion of **Keith Curtis** to assistant manager of the Information and Technology (IT) Department. Curtis has been with the company's IT Department for over eight years and has implemented several EDI projects successfully. His new role will be to coordinate electronic integration with company's trading partners and to drive growth and efficiencies for the company.



BABÉ FARMS SANTA MARIA, CA

Judy Lundberg-Wafer, co-founder and owner of Babé Farms, Inc., is stepping aside as president. Her son, Jeff Lundberg, will now serve as president and chief executive of the company. Lundberg-Wafer will now assume the role of chairman of the board.



Babé Farms also is naming **Chris Cordero** as its company vice president. Cordero, who will report to Jeff Lundberg, has been with the company in various capacities since mid-1990 and previously served as vice president of operations and sales.



FRESH SOLUTIONS NETWORK SACRAMENTO, PA

Kathleen Triou accepted an offer as president and chief executive to lead Fresh Solutions Network, LLC, a dedicated marketing services organization committed to the advancement of the fresh potato, sweet potato and onion categories. Triou was previously vice president of domestic marketing of the U.S. Potato Board and most recently chief marketing officer of Avocados From Mexico.



READY PAC FOODS IRWINDALE, CA

Ready Pac Foods, Inc. names **Tristan Simpson** as vice president, corporate communications. In this newly created position, Simpson joins the Ready Pac executive leadership team, and will lead the company's communications efforts. Her responsibilities include executive messaging, stakeholder outreach, public and media relations, digital media and internal associate engagement.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



READY PAC INTRODUCES NEW SALAD BOWL

Ready Pac Foods, Inc., Irwindale, CA, introduces the latest addition to its line of Bistro Bowl Salads, the Baby Kale Turkey Cranberry Bistro Bowl. This complete salad bowl is inspired by gourmet restaurant menu trends, featuring baby kale, diced turkey, sliced almonds, whole cranberries and red apple poppy seed dressing. The new bowl launched this month, and is available nationwide.



POTANDON PRODUCE PARTNERS WITH GETCROCKED.COM

Potandon Produce, LLC, Idaho Falls, ID, is pleased to be teaming up with Jenn Bare, host of GetCrocked.com, to offer consumers new crock-pot recipes. Potandon will also be airing Tips and Tricks videos with Bare, which will offer information on how to take care of cook-ware, how to keep food from burning, and how full to fill the crock for optimal cooking.

FRESHWAY FOODS ASSOCIATES EARN CERTIFICATE

Freshway Foods, Sidney, OH, announced that several key members of the company's operations management team earned certificates in Food Systems Management from Wright State University. Through a partnership with the school, the Freshway associates attended classes at the company's headquarters and at Wright State University's Lake Campus in Celina, OH.



FRESH SOLUTIONS NETWORK LAUNCHES NEW GOURMET POTATOES

Fresh Solutions Network, LLC, San Francisco, CA, launches Side Delights Gourmet Petite Potatoes. Side Delights Gourmet Petite Potatoes are available in six varieties, each in a 1.5-pound heat-sealed, stand-up pouch bag with a grab-and-go handle and resealable zipper closure.



Produce & Floral 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

AWE SUM ORGANICS' PEAR SEASON BEGINS

Awe Sum Organics, Santa Cruz, CA, is extremely excited about the quality of its organic pears coming from Argentina this season. Awe Sum Organics is able to provide customers with a seamless Southern Hemisphere organic pear program with all varieties and pack styles throughout the import season.



SOUTHERN SPECIALTIES INTRODUCES "SOUTHERN SELECTS"

Southern Specialties, Pompano Beach, FL, announces the introduction of "Southern Selects" Asparagus Tenders in a stand-up microwave steam pouch. European designed packaging technology allows the asparagus to actually steam in the pouch while being microwaved. Southern Selects Asparagus Tenders in the steam pouch is available in either six- or 12-count boxes.



FRESH CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS RISE AND SHINE AT BREAKFAST

Fresh Avocados topped the "prominent produce" category to capture "2013 Ingredient Of the Year" in the Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators Conference "State of the Plate" presentation. While breakfast standards, such as California Avocado Scramble, will always be popular, a new style of culturally diverse, morning warm-ups are appearing on menus to tempt both early risers and customers who enjoy breakfast.



FULL SPUD AHEAD

In a new survey by the Idaho Potato Commission, 97 percent of Americans said they eat potatoes, and more than 81 percent enjoy them as a side dish, snack or main course an average of three days per week. Conducted prior to Potato Lover's Month (February), the survey polled 1,000 nationally representative Americans aged 18 and over, and delivered unambiguously pro-potato results.



LOCUS TRAXX WORLDWIDE'S NEW SMART-TRAXX UNIT

Locus Traxx, Jupiter, FL, announced the creation of a revolutionary new device, the Smart-Traxx GO. The

SmartTraxx GO is now available for purchase nationwide, offering a real-time replacement for old-time, unreliable temperature recorders. Locus Traxx Worldwide gives customers access to critical data, at any time, and from any location.

FRESH QUEST INTRODUCES HONEYMOON MELONS

Fresh Quest, Inc., Plantation, FL, is proud to announce the successful development and distribution of a new melon variety. Fresh Quest's Guatemalan farms are able to produce Honeymoon from late December through April with peak volume availability in March and April. Honeymoon is the first of three new melon varieties that Fresh Quest plans to launch in North America over the next year.



WISH FARMS RELEASES CHILDREN'S BOOK

Wish Farms announced the launch of its first children's book, *Misty the Garden Pixie*, which is available for purchase on their website. This children's book is entertaining while at the same time helps raise awareness about farms, as well as promotes healthy eating of fruits and vegetables to kids. The book will be available at select stores in Plant City, FL.



TV STAR PARTICIPATES IN PANEL FOR U.S. Highbush BLUEBERRY COUNCIL

Alison Sweeney, actress, author and host of "The Biggest Loser," participated in a panel discussion at the U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council's annual meeting in Southern California. Sweeney co-presented with Eric Ernest, executive chef at USC, and Tom Avinelis, California blueberry grower and chief executive of Agricare and Homegrown Organic Farms. The group discussed the role blueberries can play in helping more Americans reach their healthy living goals.



RAINIER FRUIT'S EMPLOYEE PROGRAMS VERIFIED BY SUREHARVEST

Rainier Fruit Company, Selah, WA, recently completed a rigorous assessment of its employee programs to verify that it has happy, healthy employees and a stable, supportive workplace. SureHarvest worked with Rainier over the course of 2013 to examine Rainier's wellness programs using its proprietary "5Ps of Sustainability" verification process.

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



**APRIL 2 - 4, 2014
CANADIAN PRODUCE
MARKETING ASSOCIATION (CPMA)**

The annual convention and trade show provides a unique chance for industry leaders to connect with peers and enhance business opportunities in Canada.
Conference Venue: Vancouver Convention Centre, Vancouver, British Columbia
Conference Management: Canadian Produce Marketing Association, Ottawa, Ontario
Phone: (613) 226-4187 • **Fax:** (613) 226-2984
Email: cbrault@cpma.ca
Website: cpma.ca

**APRIL 2 - 4, 2014
SIAL CANADA**

Conference Venue: Palais des Congres de Montreal, Montreal
Conference Management: IMEX Management, Inc., Charlotte, NC
Phone: (704) 365-0041 • **Fax:** (704) 365-8426
Email: EricH@ImexManagement.com
Website: imexmgmt.com

**APRIL 9, 2014
FPFC NORTHERN CALIFORNIA EXPO**

Conference Venue: Alameda County Fairgrounds, Pleasanton, CA
Conference Management: Fresh Produce & Floral Council, La Mirada, CA
Phone: (714) 739-0177 • **Fax:** (714) 739-0226
Email: carissa@fpfc.org
Website: fpfc.org

**APRIL 13 - 14, 2014
NORTHWEST FOODSERVICE SHOW**

Conference Venue: Washington State Convention Center, Seattle, WA
Conference Management: Washington Restaurant Association, Olympia, WA and Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, Wilsonville, OR
Phone: (800) 645-7350 • **Fax:** (503) 682-4455
Email: info@nwfoodserviceshow.com
Website: nwfoodserviceshow.com

**MAY 13 - 15, 2014
SIAL CHINA 2014**

15th International Food, Beverage, Wine & Spirits Exhibition
Conference Venue: Int'l Expo Centre, Shanghai, China
Conference Management: IMEX Management, Inc., Charlotte, NC
Phone: (704) 365-0041 • **Fax:** (704) 365-8426
Email: EricH@ImexManagement
Website: imexmgmt.com

**MAY 17 - 20, 2014
NRA SHOW 2014**

Conference Venue: The International Foodservice Marketplace McCormick Place, Chicago, IL
Conference Management: National Restaurant Association, Chicago, IL
Phone: (312) 853-2537 • **Fax:** (312) 853-2548
Email: nraregistration@restaurant.org
Website: restaurant.org/show

**JUNE 4 - 6, 2014
THE LONDON PRODUCE SHOW
AND CONFERENCE**

The first show of its kind to be staged in the U.K. for the fresh fruit, vegetable and flower industries.
Conference Venue: Grosvenor House Hotel, London, England
Conference Management: PRODUCE BUSINESS, Boca Raton, FL and FRESH PRODUCE CONSORTIUM, Peterborough, England

Phone: US - (561) 994-1118;
 UK - 44 (0)20 3143 3222
Email: info@LondonProduceShow.co.uk
Website: londonproduceshow.co.uk

**JUNE 10 - 13, 2014
UNITED FRESH 2014**

Conference Venue: McCormick Place, Chicago, IL
Conference Management: United Fresh Produce Association, Washington DC
Phone: (202) 303-3424
Email: jtoner@unitedfresh.org
Website: unitedfresh.org

**JUNE 10 - 13, 2014
FMI SHOW 2014**

Conference Venue: McCormick Place, Chicago, IL
Conference Management: Food Marketing Institute, Arlington, VA
Phone: (202) 452-8444 • **Fax:** (202) 429-4519
Email: fmi@fmi.org
Website: fmi.org

**JUNE 10 - 14, 2014
INTERNATIONAL FLORICULTURE EXPO**

Conference Venue: Ernst Morial Convention Center, New Orleans, LA
Conference Management: Diversified Business Communications, Portland, ME
Phone: (207) 842-5313 • **Fax:** (207) 221-1471
Email: kgilbert@divcom.com
Website: floriexpo.com

**JUNE 24 - 25, 2014
PRODUCE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM**

Conference Venue: Island Hotel, Newport Beach, CA
Conference Management: The Center for Produce Safety
Phone: (530) 757-5777
Email: cpsinfo@cps.ucdavis.edu
Website: cps.ucdavis.edu

**JUNE 29 - JULY 1, 2014
SUMMER FANCY FOOD SHOW 2014**

Conference Venue: Jacob Javits Convention Center, New York, NY
Conference Management: Specialty Food Association, New York, NY
Phone: (212) 482-6440 • **Fax:** (212) 482-6459
Email: erivera@nasft.org
Website: fancyfoodshows.com

**JULY 15, 2014
FRESH PRODUCE AND FLORAL COUNCIL EXPO**

Conference Venue: Disneyland Hotel, Anaheim, CA
Conference Management: Fresh Produce & Floral Council, La Mirada, CA
Phone: (714) 739-0177 • **Fax:** (714) 739-0226
Email: carissa@fpfc.com
Website: fpfc.org

**JULY 25 - 27, 2014
PMA FOODSERVICE CONFERENCE
TOURS & EXPO**

The PMA Foodservice Conference & Exposition is the only event focused exclusively on fresh produce in foodservice and is widely rated by attendees as one of the industry's best values for learning and networking.
Conference Venue: Convention Center at Portola Hotel & Spa, Monterey, CA
Conference Management: Produce Marketing Association, Newark, DE
Phone: (302) 738-7100 • **Fax:** (302) 731-2409
Email: jhillegas@pma.com
Website: pma.com

To submit events to our Forward Thinking calendar, please e-mail info@producebusiness.com.



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SPOUSE PROGRAM



FLORAL



CULINARY STUDENT PROGRAM



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**CELEBRATING
FRESH**

Conscious Consumerism Goes Mainstream

AUTHORS: ALISON DASILVA, EVP, CONE COMMUNICATIONS

Americans are willing to sacrifice variety and dollars in order to eat more consciously, according to the 2014 Cone Communications' Food Issues Trend Tracker. A number of specific health and sustainability issues rose to the top as most important when hitting the grocery aisles, including food safety (93%) and nutritional value (92%). But at least two-thirds of Americans prioritize a variety of other issues as significant factors when deciding what makes it into the shopping cart, including:

- 74% locally produced
- 69% sustainable packaging
- 69% animal welfare
- 67% non-GMO
- 65% protects/renews natural resources

Consumers Are Willing To Pay More To Eat Local

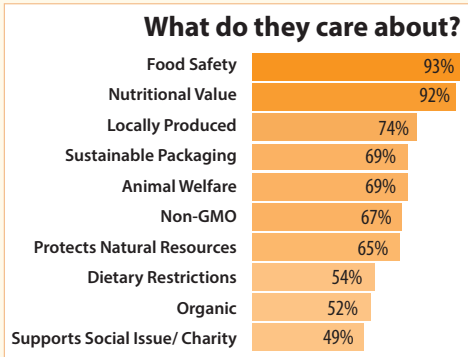
Nearly nine-out-of-10 Americans (89%) consider where a product is produced when making food purchasing decisions, and two-thirds (66%) would pay more for food that is produced close to home. Although locally sourced food provides environmental, economic and health benefits, consumers state supporting local businesses (64%) is the primary reason for buying local.

Americans' convictions are so strong in their commitment to purchase locally produced foods that nearly half (46%) would sacrifice variety to do so.

As the local food movement goes mainstream, it's not just about the "mom and pop shop" or farm stand. Even large companies have a role to talk about where they source food and the respective impacts on local communities. Using local as a broader value proposition helps companies of all sizes talk about the social and environmental benefits of responsible sourcing.

Americans Seek Sustainable Food

More than eight-in-10 Americans (83%) consider sustainability when buying food



and would like to see more options available that protect the environment (81%). Their motivations span from the altruistic to the self-serving, including:

- 43% of Americans want to do their part to protect and preserve the environment
- 39% believes the quality/taste is better
- 38% wants to show their support for companies that are doing the right thing
- 27% believes the products are healthier
- Consumers look to companies to help them understand the broader implications of their food purchasing decisions, with nearly three-quarters (74%) stating they want companies to do a better job explaining how their purchases impact the environment.

"Although consumers are shopping with an eye toward sustainability, they are equally motivated by personal needs and a desire to improve society," says Liz Gorman, senior vice president of sustainable business practices at Cone Communications. "Messaging must be two-fold. Companies must clearly demonstrate the impact consumers' purchases are having on the environment, while reinforcing health, taste and quality attributes."

GMO Confusion Persists: Consumers Look To Companies For Information

Eighty-four percent of consumers want companies to disclose information and educate them on GMOs in products because more than half (55%) say they

don't know whether GMOs are good or bad for them. Despite this confusion, three-in-five Americans are on the lookout for non-GMO-labeled foods when shopping. Reasons include:

- 39% believes non-GMO foods are healthier
- 32% worries about the effects on the environment
- 24% questions the ethics behind the use of GMOs

"The GMO debate is dominating media and social channels," says Gorman. "Consumers are confused and the onus is on companies to help them understand GMOs and be transparent about if and how GMOs are used in the products they are buying."

Key Takeaway

Grocery shopping decisions no longer hinge on price and taste alone. Consumers worry about where their food is made, what's in it, and how it affects the environment. The stakes are higher for companies to not only provide food options that meet consumers' modern needs but communicate attributes in a clear and transparent way. To view and read additional research, visit ConeComm.com/2014-food-issues.

About the Research

The 2014 Cone Communications Food Issues Trend Tracker presents the findings of an online survey conducted February 3-6, 2014 by ORC International among a demographically representative sample of 1,003 adults, comprising 500 men and 503 women 18 years of age and older. The margin of error associated with a sample of this size is 3% at a 95% level of confidence. Some figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

About Cone Communications



Cone Communications is a Boston, MA-based public relations and marketing agency known for igniting brands with high-impact strategies and programs based in deep insights, unique subject matter expertise and innovation. Focusing on key areas such as consumer product media relations, social media, cause branding and marketing, corporate social responsibility, nonprofit marketing, corporate communications and crisis prevention/management – the agency is positioned to help clients achieve both business and societal outcomes. Cone Communications is a part of Diversified Agency Services, a division of Omnicom Group Inc.

Product Satisfaction Comes First

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

It is useful when reading research such as this to remember that, by far, the largest restaurant chain in the United States is McDonald's, and the fastest growing large food retail segment is the deep discount sector, with companies such as ALDI, Save-A-Lot and Dollar stores front-and-center. Or put another way, it is useful to remember that when confronted by survey data where consumers say one thing and their food-purchasing activity is the polar opposite, the reasonable thing to do is to ask why consumers choose to say such things.

Part of the reason is probably that these responses are like "Mom and apple pie" of an earlier age. To say one doesn't care about sustainability, supporting the local community, eating healthy, etc., is to say one is abominable. The fact that this was an online study might also play into it. Perhaps consumers fear that permanent records of their responses could be kept and one day come back to haunt them, so they especially want to say the right things.

In the face of hard numbers that say consumers don't actually procure with the priorities expressed in surveys such as this, we need to try to understand the consumer psyche better.

One possibility is that the consumers questioned in this survey are not necessarily doing the procurement for their families. This is a survey of "a demographically representative sample of 1,003 adults, comprising 500 men and 503 women 18 years of age or older." That is not the same as being a sample base of "primary grocery shoppers." It may well be that adults who are not responsible for handling a household food budget — from a college student on a meal plan to a wealthy matron who has the maid buy the groceries, to a befuddled husband who just picks up take-out — are freer to express their values than those who actually have to feed the family on the funds available.

The results also are not weighted by food purchasing volume. Today only about

half of U.S. adults are married. So if all the single people express a willingness to pay more for, say, local, and all the people who are buying for a spouse and brood of kids say they won't, the survey may accurately report that 50 percent of respondents say 'yes' but that would not be reflective of spending activity. Of course, today many non-married people have children, so the breakdown is not going to be simple.

A big part of the answer can be found in other parts of this study, the 2014 Cone Communications Food Issues Trend Tracker. Although it contains all the earnest sounding exhortations that Ms. Dasilva highlights, it also contains other information. For example, when consumers were asked what factors are important when deciding which food products to purchase for their families, they ranked many factors as important, but the factor with the highest ranking for "Very/Somewhat Important" was "Family satisfaction — the products my family or I most enjoy eating."

Indeed, when asked to select only one top concern when deciding what food products to purchase for their families, Sustainability received just 5 percent, whereas Family Satisfaction received 54 percent.

Responses such as this put the results highlighted by Ms. Dasilva in perspective. Assuming they are speaking the truth and not just saying what they think is the "right" answer, they are still adding a big caveat. They may be willing to pay more for local, they may want to have sustainable options, they may wish to avoid GMOs, etc., but they will only use these purchase criteria after the "products my family or I most enjoy eating" criteria are satisfied. If you were to translate these ideas into the restaurant world, it almost implies that these consumers would really like it if McDonald's would make them feel better about their purchases there by posting signs explaining that the beef on a Big Mac is raised sustainably.

Very often in consumer research,

consumers express many opinions, and these opinions need to be interpreted shrewdly. So in evaluating stores as shopping venues, consumers always rank price, cleanliness and variety as most important factors. The problem is that translating this

This survey reminds us that the ante for participating in the mass food market is producing and selling products that people and their families enjoy eating.

into useful information for a retailer isn't that easy. Typically the results do not mean that stores should triple their cleaning staff or double their assortment, for example. The problem is that well known facts tend to be acted on by all stores and so having reasonably clean stores, for example, becomes the ante to play the game and it becomes difficult to get a competitive edge here.

This survey reminds us that the ante for participating in the mass food market is producing and selling products that people and their families enjoy eating. To some extent, that may be influenced by "feel good" metrics such as sustainability but, mostly, this is taste and flavor. Only after our products meet the taste and flavor characteristics consumers want to eat can we expect other factors to move sales our way.

DESPITE POSITIVE PRODUCE AFFILIATION WITH CHEFS, COLLABORATION IS STILL NEEDED

By James Prevor
President & Editor-in-Chief



Cracking the “Chef Code” is essential if the produce industry is to achieve its consumption goals and if the nation is to achieve its public health goals. We now know that simple admonition to consumers to eat more produce won’t boost consumption, so we have to focus on creating produce-rich meals that are so delicious people choose to eat more produce by accident.

It is popular in the industry now to note that the trade went astray, focusing on breeding to increase yield and ease of transport, while neglecting taste and flavor. There is something to this, and today many breeding programs are focused on flavor. However, focusing on practicalities does keep costs down, and that is important to increase consumption as well. In any case, boosting consumption through better tasting produce achieved through breeding programs is a very long-term proposition. It is not uncommon for a quarter century to pass between the initiation of a breeding program and commercial quantities of a more flavorful produce item.

Much more likely to have an impact in the short term is culinary technique and culinary focus. If we can get chefs to focus on the produce, rather than the protein, meals will change and consumption will increase.

However this is no small task. On the positive side, what the industry has going for it is that chefs really like produce. They like the variety, the flavor, the color, the textures, the culinary options . . . In a world where chefs get beaten up by health messages — use less salt, butter, fat, etc. — the produce message is positive: Use more produce!

There is quite a lot on the negative side. First, although chefs like produce, they are not quite as fond of the produce industry. They like foraging through farmer’s markets and chatting with farmers they know. There are exceptions, of course, but many chefs are not at all focused on the kinds of institutional safeguards on things such as food safety that the produce industry brings to the table.

Second, chefs are seen as authorities on food, but culinary education programs often do not educate much on supply chain issues. Many chefs have idiosyncratic views on everything from pesticides to

farm labor. Third, most chefs are focused on developing recipes that meet the expectations of their clientele, not changing those expectations. This means it is difficult to overcome deep cultural expectations such as the primacy of protein in meal planning.

Making the problem worse, the produce industry is not the best at interfacing with foodservice operators. The industry is fine at selling off-the-shelf products and even does OK at customizing pack sizes. However, what is really required to work with chain foodservice is a collaborative approach at menu and product development. Few produce companies have the capacity to do this, mainly because

they don’t have the R&D chefs necessary to interact with foodservice operators.

More than this, the economic structure of a commodity-based industry has made growers and shippers hesitant to invest in this approach. After all, a broccoli shipper that somehow persuades McDonald’s to sell a broccoli-rich dish is not guaranteed a path to fame and fortune. McDonald’s might just buy it

from another vendor for a nickel less. In fact, McDonald’s may buy frozen broccoli instead.

In addition, many shippers are interested in developing their own brands and getting premiums for their products. Yet products typically lose their brand identity when served at foodservice establishments. So foodservice doesn’t mesh well with the strategic direction of many produce companies.

Yet change is afoot in produce, and it may come through those very breeding programs that, at first glance, didn’t seem like the path to increased consumption. Proprietary product — such as those Driscoll’s sells or the various “club” apple varieties or Sun World’s licensed programs — limit the amount of acreage devoted to particular varieties. This means that increases in demand for the varieties can result in higher prices, and because the varietal characteristics are distinctive, other varieties can’t be easily substituted.

Put another way, these proprietary varieties can allow the margin that will enable investment in collaborative menu development and foodservice programs. The old-fashioned profit motive, played with a new age genetic twist, just might be the code necessary to incent the industry to maximize the opportunities in the foodservice channel.

That would be good for operators, for the produce industry and the health of the American people.

pb

The old-fashioned profit motive, played with a new age genetic twist, just might be the code necessary to incent the industry to maximize the opportunities in the foodservice channel.

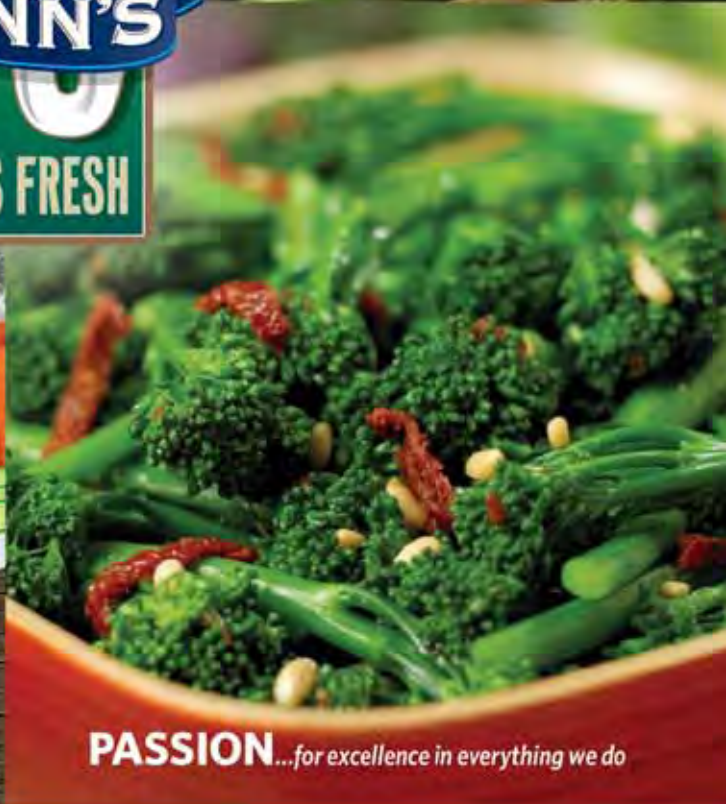
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When A Deal Is Not A Deal: Immigration Reform Likely To Stall Longer Because Republicans Question If The President Will Execute Any Compromise

FROM JIM PREVOR'S PERISHABLE PUNDIT 03.03.2014

The United Fresh Produce Association recently sent out an announcement that it is still trying to prod immigration reform along:

United Fresh joined forces with 636 business organizations, representing multiple sectors, to send a letter to Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, to request House Republicans, who are the majority in the House of Representatives, move forward on immigration reform this year. United Fresh and the other businesses urged the House Republican Conference to use the Standards for Immigration Reform, released by the House Republican leadership in January, as a guide to developing more effective national immigration policies that can be passed by Congress. That document, which laid out principles for immigration reform, specifically cited the needs for a stable agricultural workforce.

"We sent the letter to make sure the House leadership knows that we are not giving up on getting immigration reform passed. Our industry has already suffered greatly because of outdated, dysfunctional immigration policies. By joining with a broad cross-section of businesses that are affected by these policies, we show that the economic consequences of no action will be huge," said United's Robert Guenther, senior vice president of public policy. "We will do everything we can to work with the House leadership, and all members of Congress, to formulate policies that meet the needs of the fresh produce industry but are also politically feasible. We understand this is a very sensitive issue for members of Congress, but a lack of action is the one thing our members cannot withstand."

The letter asserts that if immigration reform is developed, and implemented properly, it will deter illegal immigration, protect and complement our U.S. workforce, while at the same time generating greater productivity and economic activity, and respecting family unity.

We had written a piece pointing out that farm labor shortages are a global concern in developed countries. Here in the United States, the failure of the different branches of government to agree on a program of immigration reform has been frustrating.

Since the Democratic-controlled Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill, much of the trade's ire has been directed at the Republicans — as they control the House and have not advanced a bill that would lead to a conference between the House and Senate.

Tom Stenzel, president of the United Fresh Produce

Association, expressed the exasperation of many in the produce industry who are focused on this issue when he was speaking to United's Salinas membership this past summer. After urging the trade to reach out to Republicans, he explained how his own approach had changed:

"We started out six months ago telling House members, 'Here's what we want . . . this is what the content should be in the bill.' I don't even say that anymore. I say, 'Pass anything you damn well please. Pass a bill.' Because if they don't pass anything, we'll never have a chance to get to a final comprehensive immigration bill. Keep up the pressure."

At one point it looked like the House would pass separate bills related to different aspects of immigration. First, Speaker Boehner had stated that the House Republicans "have no intention of ever going to conference" on the Senate bill. Then it looked like the House would come out with a comprehensive bill; indeed House Republicans announced they would. When the Republican members reacted to the announcement, the Speaker decided it was wise to temper expectations.

There are a lot of reasons for this. Some are rooted in substantive differences as to what immigration policy should be. Others are rooted in the politics of the situation.

We would say, though, that the way Obamacare has played out has been the death knell for this approach.

During the debate over Obamacare, then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi famously declared that ". . . we have to pass the [health care] bill so that you can find out what's in it . . ."

Though widely mocked for the phrase, she was absolutely right. These comprehensive bills are so large — typically, final versions are passed very quickly after multiple changes are made and, even then, they depend so much on what regulations are put in to enforce them — that it is virtually impossible for any individual to really be confident he knows what the full implications of the law would be.

The Senate's immigration bill is 1,198 pages. This is before a conference with the House that would undoubtedly lengthen the bill even more. This is also before they slip in last minute "favors" to different Representatives and Senators. We doubt many members of Congress have actually read the whole bill, much less truly understand its implications. Even fewer — probably not one — will have read the whole text of any final bill that might ultimately be passed.

We would think the collapse of Obamacare has soured the populace on the whole idea of these large comprehensive bills; bills where you have to pass the bill to find out what is in it.

There is another complication that is going to make it

**In the United States,
the failure of the
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FOURTH ANNUAL MEXICAN PRODUCE EXPORTER OF THE YEAR AWARD

PRESENTED AT THE AMERICA TRADES PRODUCE CONFERENCE ON MARCH 12, 2014
BY PRODUCE BUSINESS, FPA AND TIPA

GONZALO AVILA



Gonzalo Avila of
Malena Produce and
Ken Whitacre of
PRODUCE BUSINESS

Highly-respected. Hard-working. Well-spoken with an ability to see both the big and small pictures. These are just a few of the ways colleagues, co-workers and competitors describe this year's Mexican Produce Exporter of the Year.

This is an honoree that you — the members of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas and Texas International Produce Association have chosen — and that PRODUCE BUSINESS is pleased to honor.

Like the first three recipients of this award — Martin Ley, Cesar Compañía, and Dan Edmeier — this year's award recipient showed a passion for produce at an early age. You might say he was born into the business. Both his maternal Greek and paternal Mexican relatives uniquely had deep roots in the agricultural industry.

This year is extra special for our winner. His family celebrates the company's 30th anniversary as a shipper and more than 60 years as a grower. The firm was founded in the 1950s, marrying Mediterranean agricultural tradition with American productivity to become what is now one of the leading eggplant suppliers in North America.

Our honoree's grandfather, who was growing produce in northwestern Mexico and shipping it through Nogales, formed the distributorship in 1984. Today, the company's Mexican production includes more than 10 packing operations, dozens of grower partners and hundreds of workers. The organization's eggplant, as well as bell peppers, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, chili peppers, grapes and melons, are shipped to the U.S., Canada, Japan and China.

In the words of our honoree, during a presentation he gave as a member of United Fresh's Grower-Shipper Board, his company's current mission is "to be an international model for socially responsible and sustainable produce operations, and offer premium quality to their customers."

You might think that with such a successful family history our honoree easily walked into the chief executive's seat. No such luck.

Sadly, he lost his father when he was a child. He moved with his

mother, the company's current president, to San Diego and visited grandparents in Mexico on vacations.

In 1996, he graduated from the University of Arizona. Initially he worked outside of the produce industry in the financial sector for firms in San Diego and Mexico City. Then in 2002, he entered the family business on the growing side, working out of Culiacan.

In his first year, he faced a monumental challenge when five of the company's largest growers left. He started anew and astutely sourced new growers. In so doing, he earned himself a promotion to the operation's U.S. headquarters in Nogales, where he worked in sales and marketing.

Our awardee quickly climbed the corporate ladder to general manager and then vice president in a series of well-deserved promotions. Last year, he became chief executive of the three-generation family-owned company.

Our honoree enjoys the respect of his peers. He's been on the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas' Executive Committee for many years. In addition, a colleague had this to say about him: "He speaks carefully and in an intelligent way. He's developed his company's brand in the same way."

Another colleague commented, "He's built quite a program around creating a quality pack." Finally, a friend, and competitor, adds this, "If the future of the produce industry were in the hands of our award-winner, it would definitely be bright."

Outside of work, our honoree is a force to be reckoned with on the tennis court. He's also an avid fitness fan, works out in the gym daily and has passed this love of physical activity on to his three children.

He and his wife enjoy family time attending their children's sporting events. Family remains a constant theme. His younger sister and brother work in the company in administrative and sales positions.

We congratulate the 2014 Mexican Produce Exporter of the Year: Gonzalo Avila, chief executive of Malena Produce.

Excerpt from the speech by Ken Whitacre, publisher and editorial director of PRODUCE BUSINESS

increasingly difficult to pass immigration reform.

Not long ago President Obama issued an announcement that the government would not enforce the law prohibiting the sale of individual insurance policies that do not conform to the new Obamacare standards. This followed an outcry as people learned that the President's often-made promise that under this program "if you like your current insurance, you can keep that insurance" was not being kept. In fact, the law required insurance companies to stop offering non-complaint insurance, even if people liked their policies. Now they had to buy more comprehensive, and more expensive, policies.

Politically this was supposed to be a big win for the President as he could now say that he had authorized people to keep their insurance, and if they couldn't, say because the state insurance commissioners wouldn't allow it or because the insurance companies wouldn't offer it, it is their fault, not that of the President.

In reality, of course, the President's move is very problematic. Offering these policies is illegal, and the President does not have authority to make them legal. Perhaps he can exercise prosecutorial discretion and not enforce the law — although even that is questionable as Article Two of the Constitution requires that the President "take care that the laws be faithfully executed." This has been traditionally interpreted as meaning that the President has no lawful authority to suspend the enforcement of laws.

As a practical matter, whether the federal government prosecutes criminally is only part of the issue. There are state laws that still stand, and the consequences of doing illegal things remains unknown. Suppose someone purchases one of these now illegal policies and gets sick and the illegal policy does not provide coverage for the illness, but the legal requirement is to provide coverage. That purchaser will file a lawsuit saying he was sold an illegal policy. The federal government's failure to file criminal charges won't protect the insurance company.

And the consequences of all this are severe. Virtually all the people who will want to keep their less expensive insurance policies are healthy. The ones who will want the comprehensive and expensive policies have illnesses. Obamacare was specifically designed to force every individual policy purchaser into the exchanges so the healthy buyers would subsidize the sick purchasers. If they allow the healthy to stay out of the exchange marketplace, and still compel the insurance companies to accept all comers in the exchanges, companies that priced their policies on the assumption of a mixed pool will wind up losing a fortune.

The significance of all this to the farm labor and broader immigration issues is that the President did not go to Congress to negotiate a change in the law. He acted unilaterally to suspend enforcement of the law.

This is not the first time. Earlier he suspended the employer mandate of the Affordable Care Act. The director of Stanford University's Law School's Constitutional Law Center explained:

President Obama's decision last week to suspend the employer mandate of the Affordable Care Act may be welcome relief to businesses affected by this provision, but

it raises grave concerns about his understanding of the role of the executive in our system of government.

Article II, Section 3, of the Constitution states that the president "shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed." This is a duty, not a discretionary power. While the president does have substantial discretion about how to enforce a law, he has no discretion about whether to do so.

This matter—the limits of executive power—has deep historical roots. During the period of royal absolutism, English monarchs asserted a right to dispense with parliamentary statutes they disliked. King James II's use of the prerogative was a key grievance that led to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The very first provision of the English Bill of Rights of 1689—the most important precursor to the U.S. Constitution—declared that "the pretended power of suspending of laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal."

To make sure that American presidents could not resurrect a similar prerogative, the Framers of the Constitution made the faithful enforcement of the law a constitutional duty.

A year earlier, on immigration itself, the President announced that the Department of Homeland Security would not enforce immigration laws against certain people:

They came to the United States at an age younger than 16 and are currently under 30, have not committed any major crimes, are in school or have graduated or served in the armed forces, and have

resided in the U.S. for at least five years. Such aliens — who may number as many as 800,000 — may now seek work permits for two-year periods without fear of deportation.

"It makes no sense to expel talented young people who for all intents and purposes are Americans," the president said at a Rose Garden press conference. Obama no doubt acted from a variety of policy and political motives, some of them likely admirable. But his move has pushed executive power beyond all constitutional limits — even in the view of this writer, an academic defender of a vigorous presidency and a Justice Department lawyer in the Bush administration.

The President has many motivations, some admirable and some not, for declining to enforce these laws. But in the context of the immigration battle, the failure of the President to enforce laws makes the likelihood of compromise much more difficult. After all, compromise means the President and his opponents will each agree to things they would prefer not to have in the law. If members of the House and Senate feel that they can negotiate a deal, and then the President — asserting some independent authority not to enforce the law — can simply decide not to enforce the things he didn't like, then what is the point of negotiating?

We suspect that Mr. Stenzel, and the produce industry, will be waiting quite a while for a comprehensive immigration bill.

In the context of the immigration battle, the failure of the President to enforce laws makes the likelihood of compromise much more difficult.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GELSON'S MARKET

Gelson's Markets

The retailer gives 'discerning customers' a reason to shop produce. **BY OSCAR KATOV**

“Most people dislike shopping, but I believe the lure today of beautiful flowers and chocolate covered strawberries will make quite a difference,” asserts Mark Carroll, senior director of produce and floral, purchasing and merchandising for Gelson's Markets, as he welcomes early Valentine's Day customers to the Long Beach, CA store.

“Of course, there are ways to deal with the 'no-shopping kind.' Whenever we're aware of an approaching special day or a holiday period, we jump on it with a promotion plan for stimulating customer traffic — for example, today, when we sell an enormous amount of tulips and orchids, which attracts a much larger volume of customers than the usual Thursday rush.

“I believe the real challenge for a retailer — beyond always offering customers the best in product quality and variety — lies in innovation. Do something unique when an opportunity presents itself.”

For Carroll, that “something unique” is the location of the Long Beach store. “Let me show you how we dealt with the rooftop,” he says, walking closer to a view of the nearby marina choked with boats and the picturesque Pacific Ocean sparkling in the sunshine.

“When we started to build this store,” he explains, “we recognized the opportunity to transform the rooftop into a great customer attraction. We created a small dining area to eat lunch, to have a cup

of coffee, to even enjoy it in the evening with a fire pit when it gets cool. For late shoppers, we're open until 11 p.m. Our customers love it — with boats and the ocean right in front of them.”

Now in its 62nd year, Gelson's operates 17 stores in the three popu-



Gelson's produce supervisor, Darin Okimoto, performs demos with rambutan and a buddha's hand and engages with customers.



“I believe the real challenge for a retailer — beyond always offering customers the best in product quality and variety — lies in innovation.”

— Mark Carroll, senior director of produce and floral, purchasing and merchandising

lous counties in southern California — Los Angeles, Orange and Santa Barbara. The 18th store will open in the next few months in La Canada, in the foothills above Los Angeles.

“We’re not only adding stores,” says Carroll, “but we also have a new chief executive, Rob McDougall. He spent a good portion of his career in the supermarket industry, with a large part of that in produce — which relates to our continuing growth objectives, in all areas of our fresh program — from satisfying our traditional customers as well as reaching out to our newer customers.

“The vision at the outset with the first

store was to create an extraordinary shopping experience for what the founding Gelson’s family called ‘discerning customers,’” says Carroll. “We are pleased by our reputation for the highest quality produce, the highest quality meat, the highest quality seafood, and topped off by the highest level of service — the cornerstone of everything we do.”

When asked to elaborate on Gelson’s produce operation, Carroll says, “Just about everything is locally grown. On a grand scale, more than half of America’s fruits and vegetables are grown in the state’s Central Valley. Our location in Southern California presents a

unique opportunity to see close up what is growing — and to be able to choose the very best for our customers.

“Since most of everything here is just a few hours away (or less), our business model is built around a platform system. The majority of the produce items we procure comes into our distribution center in Commerce City, and is delivered to our stores within hours.”

Veteran Produce Buying Team

“Our emphasis is on fresh,” says Carroll. “Our DC [distribution center] receives product six days a week; and we deliver to our stores, six days a week. Almost 100 percent of our fresh produce is bought by our produce buying team, and flows through the DC. Also, our buyers go to the Los Angeles Terminal Market every morning, Monday through Friday, to inspect produce and interact with suppliers.

“The head of our produce purchasing has been with our company for 42 years, and is a legend in the produce market. In addition, we have two retail supervisors and a produce manager at every store. Although we have access to an extraordinary variety of produce in our state, we also source large quantities from the Pacific Northwest, Arizona, Texas, the Eastern U.S., Mexico and Canada.

“The sourcing program also involves imported products from Chile, Ecuador, Australia, and New Zealand. Being quality conscious, we have a significant portion of our imported produce coming in by air,” says Carroll. “There may be a higher cost, but the positive impact on quality is significant and well worth it for Gelson’s ‘discerning customers.’”

pb



Brothers Eugene and Bernie Gelson celebrated the opening of their first Gelson's supermarket in Burbank, CA in July of 1951.

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Jonathon Stranger

By Carol M. Bareuther, RD

Today's consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it's grown and how it's prepared. This is reflected in the National Restaurant Association's *What's Hot in 2014* culinary forecast, where nearly 1,300 professional chef members of the American Culinary Federation ranked 209 foods, cuisines, beverages and culinary themes as to whether they were a hot trend, yesterday's news or perennial favorites. For the produce sub-category in particular, 79 percent of chefs surveyed ranked locally-grown and 61 percent cited organic as hot trends. What's more, when chefs were asked if they were making efforts to adjust dishes/recipes to be more healthful by methods, for example, such as incorporating more fruits and vegetables, a whopping 92 percent answered either "yes always" or "I try."

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hardest
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With this in mind, PRODUCE BUSINESS interviewed 11 of today's top chefs about the key role produce plays on their menus. Included are **Darren Brown**, executive chef at Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver, BC; **Eliana de Las Casas**, 13-year-old celebrity chef, cookbook author, and radio show host; **Joey Elenterio**, executive chef at the Wayfare Tavern in San Francisco, CA; **Jenny Engel & Heather Goldberg**, the Spork Sisters, owner/operators of Los Angeles, CA-based gourmet vegan food company, Spork Foods; **Linton Hopkins**, chef/owner of Restaurant Eugene, in Atlanta, GA; **Joseph Lenn**, executive chef of The Barn at Blackberry Farm, Walland, TN; **Sarah McIntosh**, chef/owner of épicerie Café & Grocery in Austin, TX; **Clifford Pleau**, senior director of culinary for Darden Restaurant's 42-unit Seasons 52, based in Orlando, FL; **Susan Spicer**, chef/owner of Bayona and Mondo, in New Orleans, LA; and **Jonathon Stranger**, chef/owner of Ludivine in Oklahoma City, OK.



Chef Darren Brown

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

Brown: Sunchokes. I use sunchokes a lot. I bought up all the sunchokes I know of being grown in British Columbia. I make a soup that I'm excited about. It's the only soup in my life that I've made with no onions, no mirepoix, just a clean confit of sunchokes. It's all about the vegetable. I've had amazing success putting this soup in front of people. Currently, I'm working with a brewer to make a sunchoke-infused ale.

Las Casas: My favorite fresh produce item would have to be different varieties of cauliflower, like purple and gold cauliflower.

I like to roast cauliflower with a little olive oil, garlic, salt, and pepper. It's delicious!

Elenterio: Arugula is probably my favorite fresh produce item. I use it as a substitute for black pepper. Its peppery brightness is great for any dish.

Engel & Goldberg: Dark leafy greens like collards and Swiss chard, because they taste good and are so diverse to cook. We like to slow cook fresh greens comfort-food style, roast them, or sauté them quickly so they retain their crunch.

Hopkins: Vidalia onions. I love cooking them whole in clay pots with chicken stock, butter, salt and pepper.

Lenn: Tomatoes, preserved for later use, confit, in sauces. We use lots of tomatoes because our garden provides many varieties, and we get them minutes after they are picked.

McIntosh: Artichokes. We get them in Austin from Two Happy Children Farm. We steam and grill to order and serve with a remoulade.

Pleau: Avocados. I like avocados for a

couple of reasons. First, botanically as a stone fruit. Second, its rich green color and how it changes over time. One of my favorite ways to use avocados at Seasons 52 is in a salad cut in chunks with tomatoes, cilantro and a dressing made with the soft dark green part of the avocado closest to the skin (we call it the avo dermis). Then mix it with salt, black pepper and red wine vinegar to make its own sauce.

Spicer: Eggplant. We primarily serve international cuisine at my restaurants. Eggplants are great, because they are so versatile. There's everything from the small purple Japanese eggplants to the big Black Beauty globes. At Mondo we serve a Szechuan Eggplant Stir Fry with Japanese brown sticky rice, bok choy, mushrooms and peanuts as a main dish on the dinner menu.

Stranger: It's hard to choose one favorite, but if I had to, I'd say sunchokes. They're a part of Oklahoma food culture. They grow wild, and the Native Americans ate them. My favorite way to cook sunchokes is to poach them whole in court bouillon, then roast them seasoned with butter, herbs and chilies, or serve them with an aioli or hollandaise sauce.

2. Where do you get your ideas for great dishes incorporating produce?

Brown: I let the ingredients lead me. When I worked on a yacht in the Mediterranean, I might have 10 guests on board. I'd have an hour or two to go ashore to the market, find what was there and make dinner that night. Every day the "black box" was the local food.

Las Casas: I get ideas for my dishes by going to the farmers market or grocery

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1. Darren Brown, executive chef, Fairmont Pacific Rim, Vancouver, British Columbia. Home-grown and internationally travelled, Brown has always had food and family woven into the fabric of his life. Born and raised in Coquitlam, British Columbia, Brown's first kitchen duty began in the '90s working with chef Deb Connors at Horizons. Brown caught the travel bug and discovered an appetite for French cuisine. What better place to start than Antibes, France onboard Merv Griffin's 150-ft yacht? During summer in the Mediterranean and winters in the Caribbean, Brown cooked for celebrities such as the Princess of Spain. In 2002, Brown joined Rumjungle at Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas. In 2005 he was appointed assistant executive chef of Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino. He later moved back to Vancouver with his wife Alison, and joined

Glowbal Restaurant Group where he most recently was corporate executive chef. After all of his globetrotting, Brown believes it is fate that brought him to the iconic Fairmont Pacific Rim as executive chef, and he knows his experience traveling around the Pacific Rim is paying off.

2. Eliana de Las Casas, author, radio show host and personality, New Orleans, LA. Kid Chef de Las Casas is an award-winning, 13-year-old celebrity chef, cookbook author, and radio show host. Her first cookbook, *Eliana Cooks! Recipes for Creative Kids* debuted in 2010. Her second Parents' Choice-Approved and Award-winning cookbook, *Cool Kids Cook: Louisiana*, was released in 2013 and her third cookbook, *Cool Kids Cook: Fresh & Fit*, released in 2014. Her weekly radio show, "Cool Kids Cook," on VoiceAmerica Kids won a Taste Award. The show

includes such notable guests as: chef José Andres; chef John Besh; White House Executive Pastry chef, Bill Yosses; and food television personality and chef, Andrew Zimmern. Named the Kids Ambassador for the Southern Food and Beverage Institute, de Las Casas's mission is to encourage kids to eat fresh and become culinary explorers.

3. Joey Elenterio, executive chef, Wayfare Tavern, San Francisco, CA. Elenterio's culinary career was launched while attending the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. He began working for Wolfgang Puck's Spago in Palo Alto, CA, as a stage. Elenterio credits Spago's then chef, Aram Mardigian, with seeing his potential and paying special attention to him; as well as teaching him everything he knows about being a restaurant chef. Elenterio was promoted steadily



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“We actually do have locally-grown produce 365 days a year. It just varies greatly depending on the season, and therefore so must our menu. The challenge lies in changing the belief system that everything should be available all of the time.”

— Linton Hopkins, Restaurant Eugene

store. I look to see what produce is in season and create a dish in my head from there. I also garden and like to cook farm to table.

Elenterio: Usually my crazy brain. I grew up in California and have produce year-round at my disposal. At my last job, we had a garden in the back of the restaurant and seeing everything from seed back to seed was life-changing.

Engel & Goldberg: We constantly think about what we would like to eat. That might be what crazy, new or seasonal fruits or veggies we find at the farmer’s market here in Los Angeles. Or what we find on our travels. We traveled to Greece, Italy, Costa Rica, Japan, Mexico and last year to Jamaica. The Rastafarians in Jamaica have a vegan cuisine they call Ital. It was fun to see how they incorporated local ingredients like callaloo leaves, breadfruit and mangos into their recipes.

Hopkins: I am always talking to farmers and reading seed catalogues; that keeps my mind close to the source. I read cook books for inspiration. I love historical cookbooks from our region, but I also enjoy

the fresh perspective of contemporary books such as Alain Passard’s *The Art of Cooking with Vegetables*.

Lenn: Most of the time, our garden. We walk up and down the rows and decide how we want to incorporate them in a dish.

McIntosh: Walking around farmers markets, looking at what’s available and what looks best. Then, we base our menu items around that particular produce item.

Pleau: I like to take a rustic, or farmer’s, approach to food preparation. That is, do as little as possible and not mess with what is already perfect. For example, grilled carrots in their skin, or roasted golden beets, or steak-cut cauliflower grilled with curry.

Spicer: I get my ideas all over: travel, research in books and on the Internet, other chefs and co-workers, and eating out at other restaurants.

Stranger: I get my ideas from all walks of life. My grandmother, the Internet, wild foraging with friends. There are endless places where I get my inspiration.

3. In your opinion, what is the

next big produce trend?

Brown: I see the chef market going toward grittier, more base-flavored, back-to-the-roots types of vegetables. I think radishes are something to keep an eye on. There’s a huge variety of radishes. We’re seeing them pickled, used in charcuterie, grated and served like wasabi, and even cooked.

Las Casas: Cauliflower. I’ve seen it on many restaurant menus, such as The Purple Pig in Chicago and Borgne in New Orleans. I’m seeing different types of cauliflower in farmers markets and grocery stores. I’ve even used cauliflower to make a pizza crust!

Elenterio: Roots are making a strong comeback — pickling them, roasting them, confit them, raw, and juiced.

Engel & Goldberg: Heirloom anything. Heirloom carrots, tomatoes and even heirloom grains. Heirloom seeds are saved for generations, their flavor is amazing, and they aren’t GMO.

Hopkins: I think root vegetables will continue to move into vogue simply because they have the largest diversity of preparation methods — far more than any other vegetable class — making them so fun to work with and interesting to eat.

McIntosh: Okra. It’s a very versatile vegetable. Pretty hard to mess up. Any application of cooking can be done with it. We pickle, fry, roast — really anything with it.

Pleau: It’s not an item, but preparation. There’s a trend toward minimum processing. Millennials are looking for ethnic flavors, sharable portions and relatively inexpensive choices.

Spicer: Cauliflower is really enjoying a

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during the next three years at Spago, starting as a saucier and leaving as banquet chef when the restaurant closed in 2007. He then worked for Rolland Passot and Brian Berling as executive chef of Tanglewood on Santana Row in San Jose, CA, before starting with Chez TJ as sous chef in 2009, becoming executive chef in 2011. While chef at Chez TJ, Elenterio received 1 Michelin Star in 2011 and 2012, *Zagat’s* 30 under 30, and the *San Francisco Chronicle’s* Rising Star Chef award. He’s now running Tyler Florence’s flagship restaurant, Wayfare Tavern, in the heart of San Francisco.

4. Jenny Engel & Heather Goldberg (the Spork Sisters) are owners of Spork Foods, Los Angeles, CA. Engel, who owns and operates the gourmet vegan food company with sister Goldberg and believes that vegan cuisine is maturing,

trained at the Natural Gourmet Institute for Food and Culinary Arts in New York City and attended the University of California Santa Cruz, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies. Goldberg, who has a decade of experience in the environmental nonprofit world, embraced veganism while living in San Francisco 13 years ago. The sisters’ delicious, innovative cuisine emphasizes organic, local, and seasonal ingredients. They are the Chef Ambassadors for GO Veggie! Foods. Engel and Goldberg also offer organic vegan cooking classes, in-home healthy eating consultations, private cooking parties, corporate trainings and demos, team-building cooking classes, vegan recipe or menu development, video content and television representation for vegan food companies as well as vegan nonprofit organizations.

5. Linton Hopkins, chef/owner of Restaurant Eugene, Atlanta, GA. A graduate of Emory University and the Culinary Institute of America, Hopkins honed his skills at restaurants in New Orleans and Washington, DC, before returning to Atlanta to open Restaurant Eugene in 2004, fully realizing his unique vision of hospitality and community-driven cuisine. Hopkins subsequently opened Holeman & Finch Public House and H&F Bread Co. in 2008, followed by H&F Bottle Shop, in 2011. In 2009, Hopkins was crowned one of *Food & Wine* magazine’s Best New Chefs, and after several James Beard Award nominations for Best Chef – Southeast, he took home the prize in 2012. In 2013 he was named one of *Food & Wine’s* 25 Best New Chef All-Stars and won a competition sponsored by the magazine to become the newest

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Stranger: To me, it's more preparation trend than a particular fruit or vegetable. There will be less messing with the ingredients and more using fresh produce as is. Not breaking it down, but instead, serving it whole and prepared in a rustic way — such as over an open wood flame.

4. **What do you think are the biggest operational challenges in having produce year-round on the menu?**

Brown: You have to position yourself well in the whole supply and demand chain. If you know what you want, you have to go after it early and secure what you can, and if you're right about a trend, then it's going to be hard to get. You've got to be ahead of that curve.

Elenterio: Fortunately enough, I live in California and we do have locally grown produce year-round. I'm spoiled.

Engel & Goldberg: For us, it's getting

hold of something seasonal for a photo shoot before its available locally in season. Luckily for us (here in Southern California), this doesn't happen that often.

Hopkins: We actually do have locally-grown produce 365 days a year. It just varies greatly depending on the season, and therefore so must our menu. The challenge lies in changing the belief system that everything should be available all of the time. There is a reason tomatoes are only featured on our menus during a certain time of year. We also use a variety of preservation methods to stretch the main growing season's abundance through the year.

Lenn: Variety for guests. Some guests want strawberries in the middle of winter, and when you honor that request, it can be frustrating when they complain about how the strawberries were not that good.

McIntosh: Weather really affects all of our produce. Texas really has its own set of seasons. It's all pretty fragile. We do our best at épicerie to make menu changes based upon what our farmers have in stock, so that we can showcase what's seasonally available. It just makes sense, and of course

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Pleau: Our challenge is that because we don't have any verbal specials and our menu is printed, we need our produce to span a certain time frame of availability like the spring, and we need a consistent size and volume for our size chain.

Spicer: We're lucky because we have a year-round growing season in southern Louisiana. In the winter, there's citrus (like our local Satsuma's); in the spring, it's greens and lettuces; and in the summer and fall, there's zucchini and a whole variety of peppers.

Stranger: When we first opened our restaurant, we faced the challenge of what we were going to limit ourselves to use. It's possible to get virtually anything from anywhere in the world, but relying 100 percent on local is limiting. Local food in Oklahoma is at a crawl — a standstill. Our first year, local meant pretty much potatoes and turnips. We reached out to several farmers to start growing for us, and now we have local produce 365 days a year. The big challenge has been to get it. We have one small distributor who goes around to the farms in his pick-up truck. There's also been days I've gotten up at 5 a.m. to drive a few hours to pick up some things. That's hard, but it's also a welcome break from the kitchen and a good time for inspiration.

5. What motivates you to add fresh produce or dried fruit and nuts in unconventional ways in your cooking, and how do you introduce new produce items to your clientele?

Brown: We've done a tremendous amount of work helping to serve innovative



The Spork Sisters, Jenny Engel and Heather Goldberg

food to those who are limited by dietary restrictions. That means always seeking what is freshest that day and being creative.

Las Casas: I like to inspire families to incorporate fresh, in-season produce to kid-favorite foods such as pizza and tacos. I also like to challenge myself to use produce in new recipes such as my watermelon gazpacho topped with homemade oregano oil and fresh feta.

Elenterio: It's my job as a chef to expose as many ingredients as possible to my clientele. It's fun for me to go to the farmers market and try something that is time-stopping. A perfect plum, apple, a pea. I want to let people taste what I get to.

Engel & Goldberg: Working as culinary teachers, we see how easy it is to get into a rut. Because of that, we are constantly thinking about how to use

produce creatively in recipes or different types of produce. For example, we taught a class where we used yard-long beans. Most of our students had never seen these beans, and they were inspired to buy them, after we showed them what they were, how to prepare them and how to use them in creative ways.

Hopkins: America loves a steak, but there are few methods we employ to cook one. There are so many ways to cook with fresh produce that we are afforded unbounded creativity in doing so. We are motivated by the unlimited development of techniques in expressing these ingredients to their fullest, whether it be through traditional preparations or new ones we continue to dream up.

Lenn: Produce is a big part of our menu — being that we have a garden here on

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member of Delta Air Line's culinary team. Hopkin's latest endeavors include 3 H&F Burger outposts in Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves, and Eugene Kitchen, a proprietary food and beverage development company that will make many of the from scratch-pantry products that have made his restaurants so distinctive available to retailers and foodservice operators. Hopkins is especially committed to celebrating the rich bounty of Georgia farms through his meticulous and loving house-made preparations of natural meats and fresh, local produce. He helped found the Peachtree Road Farmer's Market, and is a member of a number of good-food movement committees — including Georgia Organics and the Atlanta Local Foods initiative. Hopkins served as the President of the Southern Foodways Alliance during

2012 and worked with Michelle Obama to celebrate the First Lady's Chef's Move to Schools initiative.

6. Joseph Lenn, executive chef of The Barn, Blackberry Farm, Walland, TN. Lenn leads his team in providing the Foothills Cuisine for which Blackberry Farm has come to be known. A Tennessee native and graduate of Johnson & Wales in Charleston, SC, Lenn is garnering national attention for his talents in the kitchen. He joined the Blackberry Farm team in 2005 as sous chef, and in 2007 reopened the Main House Restaurant as chef de cuisine before becoming executive chef of the Barn. Here, Lenn and his team prepare beautifully served multicourse menus, inspired by seasonal, farm-fresh products and produce grown just a few feet away in the gardens. In 2013, Lenn was

awarded the prestigious James Beard Award for Best Chef Southeast and was a nominee for the award in 2012. Also in 2012, he was included in the running as one of *Food & Wine's* The People's Choice Best New Chef: Southeast. In 2011, he was honored to receive the title of Grand Chef by the Relais & Chateaux organization, as well as a nod by *Food & Wine* as one of the top, up and coming new chefs.

7. Sarah McIntosh, chef/owner épicerie Café & Grocery, Austin, TX. Growing up in Shreveport, LA, McIntosh had always loved blues and soul music, LSU football, and particularly, the culture of food in the southern, and Cajun cuisine-rich, state. Her family was very much food-oriented, and celebrations were often met with great food and wine. McIntosh was inspired to take her passion to the



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property. When we have an abundance, we have the luxury of our preserve kitchen taking the excess and making something that we can use in our kitchen when it is not in season.

McIntosh: Take garbanzo beans, for example. Most think you can only make hummus or an iteration of that. But we get ours from the market and roast them in the shell and serve them with lemon and Parmesan as a starter item. Taking a vegetable and using a different cooking application, or something as simple as just leaving it in the pod, is a great way to showcase the vegetable's versatility. It really surprises people as well.

Pleau: My inspiration comes from experience. From working in restaurants where the produce was so fresh that it never hit the refrigerators. I've found that there are two key ways to make produce appetizing for customers. One is to make sure it tastes as good as it should, like fresh fruit in season. Secondly, is to add new intrigue or flavors. For example, I've been experimenting with reconstituted Washington-grown, dried Bing cherries and using them on the bottom of a crême brûlée.

Spicer: It's the produce itself. When we plan a menu, we'll usually start by listing the proteins like seafood, rabbit, duck or lamb, for example. Then we'll make a list of all the fruits and vegetables that are available. Since this list is usually longer, the produce drives lots of our menu. We look at what's available seasonally and what flavors, colors and texture the produce can add to the plate.

Stranger: I love the diversification of flavor and what fresh produce brings to a dish. Produce can take a dish in so many

directions — French, Italian, Asian, that's the fun of it. There's no one homogeneous flavor note. So you never get bored coming up with ways to incorporate fruits and vegetables into a dish.

6. Do you or your restaurant participate in Meatless Monday? Do you think it is helping to raise awareness that vegetables can be center-of-the-plate items?

Brown: We don't target a particular day. The culture isn't here — not in our city that I've seen. But it's always top of mind, and we always have alternatives for those who don't eat meat. The best example is our vegan sushi: faux ahi made with a slice of compressed watermelon, faux unagi with sweet potato and avocado nigiri.

Las Casas: In my family, we often have meatless meals but not necessarily on Mondays. My eggplant lasagna and Creole pasta primavera from my new cookbook, *Cool Kids Cook: Fresh & Fit*, are great meatless dishes. Vegetables can definitely be the center of the meal when they are well-seasoned and properly prepared.

Elenterio: No, unfortunately we are a tavern, and we sell a lot of meat. Our fried chicken is our No. 1 seller. However, I love cooking vegetarian food. We just put on the menu a pulled mushroom barbecue sandwich.

Engel & Goldberg: Veganism is such an exciting concept. It's really critical to our health and the health of the planet. Putting vegetables at the center of the plate instead of animal protein really makes you think differently about your meal. It's important to take flavor cues from other cultures around the world (such as Indian and

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next level and did so by graduating first in her class at Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School in Austin, TX. She worked at the renowned Bouchon and Ad Hoc in Napa Valley, served as the sous chef at Austin's beloved Olivia restaurant, and a few other small restaurants during her 10-year tenure in kitchens. She eventually brought to life her own vision of an uncomplicated café and grocery in one, with épicerie, which roughly translates to "grocer's shop." Patrons can always expect something new and fresh from McIntosh, from her mouth-watering boudin, to the house-made, seasonal pasta on her always-evolving menu.

8. Clifford Pleau, senior director of culinary and beverage at Seasons 52, Orlando, FL. Award-winning Pleau orchestrates the unique menu and overarching culinary philosophy at Darden

Restaurants' Seasons 52. Pleau graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1981, then apprenticed with SBM Hotel Group in Monte Carlo. From Chef de Partie at the world famous Ritz Carlton in Boston, to executive sous chef at the Boca Raton Resort in Florida, to the prestigious role of executive chef at the Mayfair Regent Hotel in Chicago, Pleau thrived as a culinary perfectionist in the demanding service industry. In 1991, he was named one of eight new chefs to "Keep an Eye On" by *Food & Wine* magazine and was selected by Euro Disney to open the Disneyland Hotel in Paris, as well as 65 different restaurants as a member of the Disney development team. Pleau then moved onto his next challenge, assuming the role of executive chef at Bradley Ogden's Lark Creek Inn, where he gained invaluable knowledge and exposure to focusing

Asian) where meat isn't the centerpiece of the meal.

Hopkins: I am a vegetable chef, and our menus have made vegetables center-of-the-plate items since day one. We have an entirely vegetable-based tasting on the Restaurant Eugene menu every single night of service. I love protein and fat and we use those things to make vegetables even more interesting, but they never outshine the fresh produce they accompany.

Lenn: Typically not, because we have many different vegetable-driven dishes on our menus all the time.

McIntosh: No. But we have vegetarian options available at all times.

Pleau: Meatless Monday isn't something that's in our arena. We try to be the right kind of restaurant for everyone every day.

Spicer: We are a very vegetarian-friendly restaurant. We used to do a vegetarian entrée, but one vegetarian entrée doesn't fit all. Today, we ask customers what are their two to three favorite vegetables from what we have on hand, and we create a customized dish. It's like a mini challenge. It didn't use to be this way in New Orleans. In the past, I can remember customers saying that they'd been in town for three days and my restaurant was the first where they saw a vegetable on the plate.

Stranger: No. The top sellers for us are chicken and dumplings or rabbit and dumplings. These are great comfort foods, but in their traditional sense, you take a few bites and your tastebuds get bored quickly. Instead, we'll add baby carrots, morels, tomatoes and collard greens to the broth.

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on pure ingredients of the highest quality and freshness, which would serve him well a decade later at Seasons 52. Walt Disney World tapped Pleau in 1994 to be the lead executive chef for the California Grill restaurant. He also played an integral role in the food and beverage development of other Disney concepts, including Animal Kingdom, Boardwalk, Tokyo Disney and the Disney CruiseLine. A few years later, Darden Restaurants recruited Pleau to help launch a new upscale concept called Seasons 52. With a focus on creating a seasonally inspired menu prepared with fresh ingredients and using natural cooking methods (such as wood-fire grilling and brick-oven cooking), Pleau helped open the first Seasons 52 on Sand Lake Road in Orlando, FL, in early 2003 and has played an instrumental role in every Seasons 52 opening since.

It's not meatless, but the addition of the vegetables gives customers a different taste with every bite, and it makes them want to come back for more.

7. **What are your preferences regarding produce grown locally vs. organically vs. imported, or purchased through a distributor or local program?**

Brown: I have a pretty solid view on this. I source locally on everything I can. If it's not available locally, then I reach out.

For example, I know I'm not going to get hearts of palm from BC, so I'll have it flown in.

Las Casas: I love fresh, local in-season organic produce, but I also like to experience exotic fruits and vegetables that are sometimes only available in my local Asian market. The key to a good meal is using quality fresh ingredients whether they are local or imported.

Elenterio: I want the best produce available whether it's from 5 miles, 50 miles, or

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Engel & Goldberg: That's a tricky question, because it's not all black and white. It's important to buy organic for something like berries that have a thin skin, where pesticides can get in the fruit. But, organic isn't as important for something like onions that release sulfuric acid and don't need a lot of pesticides. You need to look at each item and do the best you can.

Hopkins: I prefer locally grown produce from farmers I have personal relationships with. We started a farmer's market down the street from Restaurant Eugene in order to bring more fresh produce to our community, and to also provide these producers direct access to consumers and eliminate waste. We work closely with our producers to generate mutually beneficial partnerships and ensure they will continue to supply us with their wonderful fruits and vegetables.

Lenn: We like to grow as much as we can at Blackberry Farm, but sometimes we simply do not have the space to grow enough for our restaurant. That is when we use the local farmers, but we also buy produce from a local produce market, because they have some great resources too.

McIntosh: I prefer sourcing locally. Anything that is government regulated (such as 'certified organic') doesn't really mean much to me. I think it is always better to know where you are getting your food. Plus, it only helps put money back into our community. There are lots of urban farms in Austin, and I really love working with all of them.



Chef Joseph Lenn

Pleau: I look for whatever is freshest, tastiest and most interesting. That's, most often, what's in season.

Spicer: The first and best choice is local organic. Then local pesticide-free. We try to source most of our staples locally. But we do use bananas, and I like quince — these obviously have to be imported.

Stranger: Local and organic is my first choice. Then local, followed by imported organic. Really, at the end of the day, I'm looking for the freshest and best tasting.

8. **If given the chance, what city inside or outside of the U.S. would you most want to work in? Why?**

Brown: Barcelona, they have an amazing food culture. Or, Sonoma, California, because of the farming environment.

Las Casas: I love my own city of New

Orleans. We are a gastronomic city with a rich cultural heritage. If I had to move, I would choose a coastal city such as Los Angeles, New York, or Miami. I love the beach and access to fresh seafood. Plus, there are so many inspiring chefs in those cities.

Elenterio: I don't want to go anywhere. I love California.

Engle & Goldberg: We travel all over, but our work in teaching health through food isn't done yet here in Los Angeles.

Hopkins: Other than Atlanta, which I love, I am fascinated with the discipline and purity of Japanese food. I would love to learn to cook perfect rice with the sushi masters of Tokyo. Their dedication to the perfection of every aspect of food is honorable and inspirational.

Lenn: Probably in Napa Valley or the surrounding area. The produce, wine, cheese and other products produced in that area are some of the best in the country.

McIntosh: Montreal. Their growing zone is really great. They actually have four seasons, plus a really cool food scene.

Pleau: I studied in Provence, France, and enjoyed my time there. So, I'd have to say Monte Carlo or Nice.

Spicer: Mexico City. I love Mexican cuisine. There's a lot going on in that city now. I'd love to see how the many well-traveled chefs working there are translating their knowledge and skills into Mexican fine dining.

Stranger: Probably Ethiopia, or Liberia or Cameroon. Also there is such a deep-rooted influence of the South cooking here in Oklahoma. I'd like an opportunity to understand it from its source. I'm a hands-on kind of guy. **pb**

BIOS

9. Susan Spicer, chef/owner of Bayona and Mondo restaurants in New Orleans, LA. Spicer began her cooking career in New Orleans as an apprentice to Chef Daniel Bonnot at the Louis XVI Restaurant in 1979. In 1990, she formed a partnership with Regina Keever and opened Bayona in a beautiful, 200-year-old cottage in the French Quarter. With solid support from local diners and critics, Bayona has earned national attention and has been featured in numerous publications from *Food & Wine*, *Saveur*, and *Food Arts*, to *Travel & Leisure*, *Bon Appetit*, *The New York Times* and more. Spicer has been the guest chef at The James Beard House, The Oriental Hotel in Bangkok, and Lanesborough in London, Cunard and Crystal Cruise Lines, as well as appearing on local and national television — including an appearance on the finale of the popular Bravo

series *Top Chef* in 2009. In May of 2010, Spicer was inducted into the James Beard Who's Who of Food and Beverage in America. One month later, she opened Mondo, a casual, fine dining restaurant in her neighborhood. The author of the award-winning *Crescent City Cooking* cookbook, resides in New Orleans with her husband, Chip, two stepchildren, three cats, a dog and two chickens.

10. Jonathon Stranger, chef/owner of Ludivine, Oklahoma City, OK. Stranger developed an interest in cooking early on. As a child, he spent weekends at his family's farm in Chandler, OK, where he would help his grandma prepare dinner using items found in the country. Those fond memories stoked a lifelong passion that took Stranger from the food mecca of New York

City — where he worked under two of the world's finest, Jean-Georges Vongerichten and David Burke — to Germany, Houston and Oregon before eventually returning him to his hometown of Oklahoma City. Along the way, he spent three years studying under renowned chef Paul Wade. Stranger's culinary approach — innovative but unfussy — owes much to his mentor. "The man turns you into a culinary tornado whether you like it or not," he says. As for Stranger, he loves what he's doing at Ludivine and has been able to direct his talents toward helping the community, whether it's fundraising for May 2013 tornado victims (OK Chefs Relief) or helping diners reconnect with the land (Outstanding in the Field). "There are no restrictions to what we can do in the kitchen," he says, "and we have the opportunity to help and educate people here."



PHOTO COURTESY OF COLEMANS



Recent statistical data shows Canadians ate 56 percent of their fruits and 78 percent of their vegetables in fresh form, while Americans consumed only 49 percent of their fruits and 47 percent of vegetables fresh.

Why Canadians Eat More Produce: Lessons For U.S. Retailers

Understand the consumer and get an inside scoop on how our retailer brethren to the north market and merchandise for increased consumption. **BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD**

There may be a back-to-back border between the U.S. and Canada, but where the divide is especially wide between these two neighboring countries is in their citizens' consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Canadians eat an average of nearly four servings of fruits and vegetables daily, according to a 2013 consumer survey by the Ottawa, Ontario-headquartered Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA). This compared to American adults of whom only 32.5 percent eat two or more servings of fruits daily and only 26.3 percent eat three or more servings of vegetables each day, based on information provided in the Atlanta, GA-based Centers for Disease Control's 2010-published report, *State-Specific Trends in Fruit and Vegetable Consumption among Adults – United States, 2000-2009*.

What's even more interesting is looking at fresh intake. In 2009, the last year comparative data was available from both Statistics Canada and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cana-

dians ate 56 percent of their fruits and 78 percent of their vegetables in fresh — not canned, frozen or dried — form, while Americans consumed only 49 percent of their fruits and 47 percent of vegetables fresh.

There are several factors to consider when comparing American and Canadian consumption of fruits and vegetables.

"The complexity of fruit and vegetable intake is not linked to any one reason," says Ron Lemaire, CPMA president. "Cultural influencers, immigration policy, the economy, access and food education are all factors."

These points alone aren't wholly responsible for driving Canadian's produce consumption. Equally important is what the country's retailers do to capitalize on this information. Here's a crucial point where U.S. retailers can learn from their Canadian counterparts.

Serving Melting Pot And Mainstream Customers

"One reason Canadian consumers eat more produce is our country's ethnic diversity," says

Frank Pagliaro, vice president of produce procurement for Brampton, Ontario-headquartered Loblaws Supermarkets, one of the largest retailers in Canada with 580 corporate and 472 franchised stores located coast-to-coast under 22 banners. "Many of our customers are culturally accustomed to buying fresh produce."

More than 200 ethnic origins were reported among Canadian residents in Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey. The majority of residents were of European descent. However, 13 different ethnic origins had surpassed the 1-million mark in 2011 — including Chinese, First Nations (North American Indian), Ukrainian and East Indian. What's more, the top 10 countries for newcomers to Canada from 2006 to 2011 included the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Iran, South Korea, Colombia and Mexico. This is an amazing diversity considering that Canada's population is 35 million or roughly one-tenth that of the U.S.

"Like all of Canada, our market is a melting

“We might have 40 SKUs of potatoes, 30 of tomatoes and more than 20 for mushrooms. Even six or more for items such as asparagus green, purple, white, organic green, locally-grown, tips.”

— Michael Mockler, Thrifty Foods

pot made up of many different ethnic backgrounds,” says Mimmo Franzone, director of produce and floral for the 26-store Longo Brothers Fruit Markets, based in Vaughan, Ontario. “We strive to cater to all the communities we are located in, and assortments vary from store to store based on the demographics in that market. Varieties will sell differently in certain stores based on the demographics of the area. In a heavily populated Eastern European market, we will sell four to five times the heads of cabbage or root vegetables, and in a saturated South Asian market we can sell 10 times the okra.”

Similarly, at Pete’s, a Halifax, Nova Scotia-based three-unit specialty supermarket — whose owner, Pete Luckett got his start in produce tending a fruit and vegetable stall in his native England at Nottingham’s Victoria

Centre Market — there is international demand especially at the Halifax location.

“We have just about every ethnic group shopping this store,” says Dwayne Butler, Pete’s manager. “We are keen to serve our customers’ needs. We do this by having conversations with them and staying in touch. What they suggest, I try to source even if I’ve never heard of it before. Such items included breadfruit, jackfruit, durian, Saskatoon berries and just about every type of tomato.”

At the same time, some of the most popular fruits and vegetables retailed at Canadian supermarkets are similar to those sold in quantity in the U.S.

Byron Bellows, produce merchandiser at Colemans Food Centre, a 12-store chain headquartered in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, confirms the similar purchasing patterns. “Our

top sellers include berries, grapes, potatoes, bananas, citrus and tomatoes.”

SKU Proliferation

An average Canadian supermarket’s produce department boasts a great deal of variety.

“The first thing I notice when I travel to the U.S. is that the produce departments have significantly less variety than we do,” asserts Loblaw’s Pagliaro. “On average, our stores will have 600 to 700 fresh produce SKUs on any given week.”

This SKU count more than doubles to 1,500 SKUs at certain times of the year at Thrifty Foods, a 29-store chain based in Victoria, British Columbia, and a banner of Sobeys Inc. The average SKU count is still an astonishing 900 to 1000 throughout the general sales year at Thrifty Foods.

“We might have 40 SKUs of potatoes, 30 of tomatoes and more than 20 for mushrooms,” explains Michael Mockler, produce director. “Even six or more for items such as asparagus green, purple, white, organic green, locally-grown, tips.”

These considerable SKU counts dictate larger space produce departments. As a result, quite frequently, fresh fruits and vegetables are

CATERING TO DAILY SHOPPING

What people buy is influenced by cultural heritage — so is how they shop. Customers in Quebec, as well as across the country, tend to shop European-style — that is, daily,” says Frank Pagliaro, vice president of produce procurement for Brampton, Ontario-headquartered Loblaw Supermarkets, one of the largest retailers in Canada with 580 corporate and 472 franchised stores located coast-to-coast under 22 banners.

Dwayne Butler, manager of Pete’s, a Halifax, Nova Scotia-based three-unit specialty supermarket agrees. “Shoppers come in three, four, and five times a week. They tend to grab baskets rather than carts.”

“Buying smaller quantities more frequently ties into Canadian’s growing concern over food waste,” asserts Ron Lemaire, president of the Ottawa, Ontario-headquartered Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA). “While just more than 80 percent of

Canadians tell us they use all the fresh produce they buy before it goes bad, many noted that they are cognizant of the waste at home, and their purchasing behavior is influenced by the waste factor. In fact, 72 percent of respondents stated that they would purchase more if it were available in smaller portions.

Lemaire says grocers, and the rest of the produce industry, are listening to consumer demands about food waste concerns and providing solutions with new consumer packs, meal solutions, variety and a year-round-fresh program that provides a wide selection of quality produce throughout the seasons.

Shopping times are also more spread out through the day, says Michael Mockler, produce director of Thrifty Foods, a 29-store chain based in Victoria, British Columbia, and a banner of Sobeys Inc. “In the U.S., between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. are the busiest times in-store. In Canada, we see a rush at 9 a.m. after the kids are dropped at school, another rush at lunchtime, and others

before school lets out, after school is out, and after work in the evening. The big question customers have when they come into the supermarket is ‘what do I eat for dinner tonight.’ It’s up to us to provide that answer,” he says.

Rather than destination merchandising — where all items in a category are grouped together — Mockler believes in creating displays that “do the talking” and paint an instant meal solution in shoppers’ minds. Examples include merchandising baby white potatoes, French green beans and mini-peeled carrots together to make a side dish.

Mockler calls this technique “barrel merchandising.” “We put roma tomatoes at one end of the display and yellow lemons on the other with garlic, shallots and fresh oregano in the middle. That’s five items in a space normally occupied by two. Tie in meat or seafood and you’ve given yourself multiple produce rings and the shopper gets a \$10 to \$15 answer to, ‘What’s for dinner?’

pb

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PHOTO COURTESY OF LONGO BROTHERS FRUIT MARKET

one of the most profitable sectors. According to data provided by the CPMA, produce slightly outperforms its retail space with a percentage of total sales of fresh produce accounting for approximately 21 percent in major retail stores, while only enjoying 19 percent of the dedicated floor space. Compared to the U.S., in 2011, produce represented 10.84 percent of total store sales according to Key Industry Facts, prepared by FMI Information Service and released in October 2012.

Yet, Canadian retailers remain challenged to find display space. This hurdle led to produce department displays being arranged vertically and not horizontally. "There is increased demand for value added items like bagged salads, cut and cleaned cooking greens and even peeled and cut squash," explains Longo Brother's Franzone. "Since our customers' needs vary from person to person, we continue to carry the traditional SKUs and also the value-added offerings. As a result, we moved to 5-deck refrigerated coolers on the perimeter of the department in order to maximize linear feet on packaged produce items."

Tantalizing Taste Buds

It's one thing to carry a large variety of fruits and vegetables. It can be quite another to get customers to buy and try all of this bounty, especially for those items which they are unfamiliar. That's why retailers capitalize on Canadian's adventurous side. A recent CPMA survey, says Lemaire, "showed that three out of four Canadians are eating fruit and vegetables that they were not consuming five year ago."

Pete's Butler has seen this trend in action.

"Ten years ago, it was hard to sell a carton of avocados. Now, avocados are consistently the No. 2 or 3 seller in our Halifax store. Kale is another item. I use to bring in a case to decorate the meat case. Now I sell it by the pallet."

Travel, food TV and celebrity chefs are opening up Canadian consumer's taste buds for new produce items. The country's retailers are leading the charge too, thanks to aggressive taste sampling and other merchandising techniques.

Ethnic fruit and vegetables have been a rewarding challenge for Loblaw's Pagliaro. "For example, we built sales of lychees and dragon fruit from next to nothing to mainstream in the past five to 10 years. We've done this by making the products available and exposing customers to the new tastes."

Longo Brothers offers a weekly promotion called "Why Not Try." "We feature a new and/or unique product to the market in our flier and marry it up with all day weekend demos," explains Franzone. "Our own team members are doing the demos, so they are very close to the product and can educate our customers on the items featured, and also give them cooking and handling tips as well."

Fruits featured in Longo Brothers "Why Not Try" promotion have included Fuyu Persimmons, Mahana apples, Thomcord grapes and fresh-water coconut.

In addition, says Franzone, "throughout the year, we also have a corn fest, strawberry fest, peach fest and many other celebrations featuring different commodities. At these events, we put an aggressive one-day price on the featured item and store teams sample. It tends to attract a lot of customers and is very successful in selling more produce."

The Desire For Quality And Enough Dollars For Purchase

Price, while it is important, is not the driving factor to a Canadian produce purchase, explains CPMA's Lemaire. "Canadians are looking for a convenient location to shop and then focus on the selection of produce available and the quality. Those who spend the most on produce are less likely to be worried about location and significantly more likely to be worried about produce quality."

This desire for quality is matched by the dollars to buy it. The median family income for Canadians translates to about \$76,000, according to a 2013 report released by Statistics Canada, while U.S. Census Bureau data for 2008-2012 reveals that American's median family income is only \$53,046.

Pagliaro says large retailers like Loblaw's assure quality, specifically taste, in a couple of ways. One is to work with growers to develop new varieties. Two, is to work with seed companies on new items.

Virtually all Canadian retailers look to sourcing methods to assure the freshest produce for their customers. Colemans' Bellows explains, "We have a unique procurement system in place, which allows fresh product hitting our province to be in our stores the very same day."

"California to Nova Scotia, for example, is a long way. However, we tend to receive our produce more quickly than the big guys," assures Pete's Butler. "That's because we're nimble. It takes three days from California to get to the Ontario Food Terminal in Toronto. There's 25 houses there, so if I can't get something direct from a grower, I have lots of help in sourcing. Then, I pay extra to get the produce trucked from Toronto to Nova Scotia. It's about 20 hours. That means we have fresh produce from California on our store shelves within 5 days."

The cost between what Canadians and Americans spend on produce is not only due to Canadian's greater consumption, but it also reflects the rising costs required to import and transport fresh fruits and vegetables to Canada. According to *Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's July 2010 Market Analysis Report*, titled Comparative Consumer Profile – Canada and the United States, Canadians spend U.S. \$681 for fruits and \$559 for vegetables compared to \$296 on fruits and \$482 for vegetables by Americans.

Yet, price hasn't curtailed Canadian's appetite for often-times higher priced produce such as organics and locally-grown.

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“Organic has become a large part of our produce sales over the past five years,” says Pete’s Butler. “I think this is due to people wanting to eat more healthfully and increased availability. In the Halifax store, we have almost as many organic as conventional SKUs.”

There’s more than 100 SKUs of organic items in the produce departments at Longo Brothers. “Organics has been a great part of our business and continues to grow for us,” explains Franzone. “We have experienced double digit growth for the past three years, and this year we committed to ramp up our assortment even further.”

Locally-sourced produce plays a massive role in driving sales and consumption when in season, says CPMA’s Lemaire. “Canadian retailers are building strong local grower relationships. Retail is doing this because 97 percent of Canadians believe that Canadian-grown produce supports local farmers and economies, and they believe the crops were grown under better environmental and labor conditions than those from abroad. This consumer opinion, combined with a strong program between the grower and retailer (which transitions from imports to domestic), are instrumental to the year-round supply of quality, fresh produce.”

Canadian retailers from large to small embraced locally grown. For example, Loblaw’s hosts its “Grown Close to Home” campaign. “From late April or early May to late fall, we have more than 400 growers across Canada that we buy from — many of whom we had relationships with for 10 to 30 years,” explains Pagliaro. “During peak season, up to 40 percent of produce sales are represented by locally grown. It’s definitely a big part of what we do.”

Longo Brothers also created a signature branded local program called “Taste Ontario.” “We have a dedicated magazine promoting our local growers and their commodities along with in-store point-of-sale material with farmer features and recipe takeaways,” says Franzone. “We also collaborate with other departments and create a destination for local meal solutions for ease of shopping.”

“Newfoundlanders are staunchly loyal to products grown in Newfoundland,” says Coleman’s Bellows. “Our local products are limited to fall harvest. With new technology, the island’s growers are currently working on extending their season’s harvest.”

Education Stays Ahead Of The Curve

Canadian private and public sector organizations recommended a bounty of produce intake to their citizens for several years. For

example, when the U.S. encouraged consumers to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables daily, Canada was calling for 5 to 10 servings.

Health plays a factor for the primary shopper and meal preparation in Canada, explains CPMA’s Lemaire. “When asked, consumers told CPMA that they feel they have prepared a healthier meal when they use fresh produce. More than half (52 percent) of consumers also say they consider a food item’s healthy aspects (benefits, requirements for their own health) when shopping for produce items.”

Retailers jumped onboard the bandwagon to promote the health benefits of fresh produce and other foods storewide. Loblaw’s launched its “Guiding Stars” program in 2012. “This provides an impartial nutrition rating system that helps customers make better food choices,” says Pagliaro. “Needless to say, fresh produce scores well.”

“When we asked produce managers what they needed to sell more produce, they told us more information from producers, suppliers, and marketers to train employees and encourage consumers to try new produce.”

— Ron Lemaire, CPMA

“Guiding Stars” was developed for U.S. supermarket chain Hannaford Bros. in 2006, and Loblaw’s has rights to the program in Canada.

Last summer, Sobeys Inc., a 1,500-plus-store chain headquartered in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, announced its partnership with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver that is designed to educate, inspire and empower Canadians to eat better.”

Mockler at Thrifty Foods, one of Sobeys banners, says, “Stanchion sign posts are storewide and showcase Jamie as our spokesman for healthy eating. Customers can download his recipes from our website or pick up recipe cards in store.”

In October, Quebec, Ontario-based Metro

Inc., which operates a network of nearly 600 supermarkets under several banners, introduced its “My Healthy Plate with Metro” program. Designed by the chain’s registered dietitians, nutritionally dense foods are called out with a smiley face. One of the four pillars, upon which the program is based, calls for shoppers to “cook fresh and unprocessed ingredients while including as many fruits and vegetables as possible on your plate.”

Even smaller chains promote health and wellness. “Colemans has long promoted a healthy lifestyle to families in Newfoundland through its two annual programs, ‘Kids Eat Healthy’ and ‘Kids Get Active Programs,’” says Bellows. “Funds from these two programs go to schools across the province to support healthy breakfast programs and sports equipment. We also host tours for children in our stores, visit local schools and avail customers to the services of a registered dietitian that we have on retainer. They often bring groups of all ages to our stores and focus heavily on the promotion and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.”

“Product knowledge and food skills are two key factors that influence an increase or decline in fruit and vegetable consumption,” says CPMA’s Lemaire. “This extends to retail staff as well. When we asked produce managers what they needed to sell more produce, they told us more information from producers, suppliers, and marketers to train employees and encourage consumers to try new produce. Consumer produce food literacy levels are directly correlated to the consumption of produce. This literacy could come from family members, the community, multi-media and a range of other sources, including CPMA itself.”

Canadian retailers promoted a variety of CPMA’s programs such as the Freggie Children’s Program (the youth component of Fruits and Veggies – Mix It Up), as well as Mix it Up, which is a social marketing initiative aimed at helping Canadians eat more fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy diet and active lifestyle to better their health. In April, CPMA rolled out Half Your Plate.

“Half Your Plate is a new program that is seeing a very positive reaction from all levels of the produce supply chain,” explains Lemaire. “Retailers, growers, various health organizations and even Health Canada (nationalized healthcare system) are working together on this consumer marketing program. By cooperating on one, expansive and integrated program, we feel we will be able to have a measurable impact on produce consumption habits in Canadians.”

pb



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Experts agree, in-store guacamole bars provide shoppers with fresh product and a fun experience as well as generate good margins for retailers.

Guacamole Reinvented

The avocado-based dip is no longer just for chips. BY KEITH LORIA

With strong sales during Fourth of July and Super Bowl — but being virtually ignored the rest of the year — guacamole was once thought of as a twice-a-year star. Produce insiders insist that's no longer the case, as fresh guacamole is selling strong in supermarkets nationwide.

While reports of California's lingering drought had some concerned that the avocado and guacamole industry could suffer, industry representatives say sales are doing just fine.

"Both the guacamole category and produce department sales are growing, and both stem from the increased awareness of eating healthier foods, specifically fruits and vegetables," says Dan Walton, executive vice president of the Los Angeles, CA-based Yucatan Foods, makers of Yucatan Guacamole. "Guacamole is a healthy alternative to other snacking or condiment items; it adds good fats and nutrients to any dish."

Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing at the Irvine, CA-based California Avocado Commission, says consumer demand for all things avocado has been steadily increasing for years, absorbing a huge increase in supply in the marketplace of both fresh avocados and processed guacamole.

"Many retailers have guacamole bars, where fresh guacamole is prepared and packaged hourly. Shoppers can then select the amount of guacamole they want to purchase as it is sold by weight," she says. "This provides consumers with the freshest product and the retailer with desired margins. It also creates a unique experience for the shopper and a point of difference for the retailer."

Ed Mackowiak, vice president sales and marketing for Hoffman Estates, IL-based FreshLook Marketing Group, which provides scanner-based information on the sales of perishable products, shares that the avocado segment as a whole comprised more than \$1 billion in sales last year, an increase of 12.4 percent from 2012. A large reason for the increase is a rise in fresh guacamole products.



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TARGET CUSTOMERS

Guacamole sales are rapidly expanding in the produce department as companies target younger consumers and those more concerned with its health benefits.

“Our target market is women 35 to 45 making about \$75,000+ annually, but this isn’t an exclusive set. Millennials are a group that loves to snack. Our minis are perfect for these types of eaters,” says Tara Murray, senior marketing manager for Saginaw, TX-based Fresherized Foods. “Flavor and convenience drive this category. By expanding our flavor options and packaging/size options, we’re able to be a go-to product for our fans.”

Dan Walton, executive vice president of the Los Angeles, CA-based Yucatan Foods, makers of Yucatan Guacamole, says today’s consumer is more aware of the health benefits of avocados and guacamole as a health snack or condiment.

“Target customers range from traditional shopping moms to children’s lunches,” he says. “Guacamole is becoming much more of an everyday item versus an impulse buy.”

Kristyn Lawson, vice president of retail sales for Good Foods Group, LLC, a marketer for fresh refrigerated-food products based in Pleasant Prairie, WI, says shoppers seeking fresh foods and convenience really enjoy picking up their favorite guacamole in the produce section where they can find quick and healthy alternatives.

“The biggest selling point with consumers today is an appeal for products with health benefits, and that’s our target demographic,” she says. “With more attention being placed on ingredient decks and consumers seeking items that offer nutrition and wellness. Good Foods Guacamole is a perfect solution to eating right, and having fun doing it with a culinary focus.” **pb**

Rick Joyal, national sales manager for Calavo Growers, based in Santa Paula, CA, says Calavo fought tooth and nail to get guacamole in the produce aisle and out of the deli section. “In the produce section, it is a completely different set of customers who buy the product,” he says. “Not all shoppers who shop in produce shop in deli, and this approach puts it in front of the health-conscious shoppers.”

Meet the Players

Tara Murray, senior marketing manager for Saginaw, TX-based Fresherized Foods, home of Wholly Guacamole, says the brand has always been in produce, even early on when it was branded as AvoClassic.

“When it comes to products like ours — that are all natural with no preservatives — consumers expect to find us in the produce department, surrounded by the very ingredients that make up our product,” she says. “If you are looking for sour cream-based ‘guacamole’ or ‘guacamole flavored’ dips, well, these are the dips you can find in the shelf stable aisle or with the sour cream dips. If you see ‘guacamole’ in quotes, you may take a look at the ingredient list and see how far you get before avocado or avocado powder shows up.”

According to Murray, sales aren’t just increasing with the guacamole category, but

surrounding the avocado category as a whole. Both avocado and guacamole usage is up — and not just as a dip. “Consumers are becoming much more savvy about the use of this fruit and finding it as a nutritious replacement for mayo and ranch,” she says. “Guacamole on a burger, in chicken salad, even deviled eggs. Avocado and guacamole are also regular staples on restaurant menus. On top of that, you have social media sites such as Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram that are filled daily with new ideas and recipes that consumers are sharing with each other.”

J.R. Simplot Co., headquartered in Boise, ID, entered the guacamole game last year with four pulp packs manufactured by its Simplot’s Culinary Fresh line.

Kristyn Lawson, vice president of retail sales for Good Foods Group, LLC, based in Pleasant Prairie, WI, says the company is offering its new Tableside Chunky Guacamole in 2014, a culinary-inspired recipe, which includes: fresh avocado, tomato, onion, red onion, lime juice, sea salt, garlic, and cilantro. It also expanded its guacamole line with innovative flavors like Greek Yogurt, Pineapple Poblano and Southwest Guacamole.

Charles Olins, vice president, sales and marketing for the Brockton, MA-based Concord Foods, Inc., says his company manu-

“Consumers are becoming much more savvy about the use of this fruit and finding it as a nutritious replacement for mayo and ranch.”

— Tara Murray, Fresherized Foods

fatures a dry spice guacamole mix, to which consumers add two fresh avocados to make homemade guacamole in seconds.

“We are very much part of the huge increase in avocado/guacamole sales which the sector is seeing at the moment,” he says. “We also produce a bulk version of our item which many retailers are using in their stores to produce their own ready-to-eat guacamole in the store. This item is really taking off.”

Calavo recently incorporated a line of individual 2-ounce guacamole packs to appeal to the grab-and-go nature of the product.

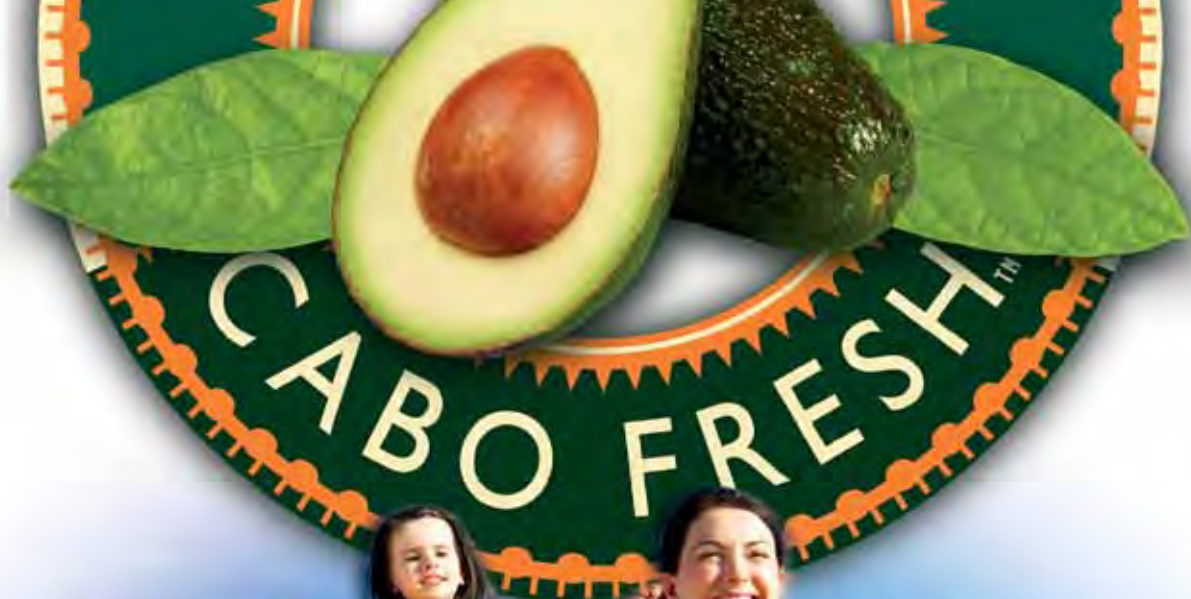
Staying Fresh

The unopened shelf life for Wholly Guacamole is about 30 days, and it can be frozen up to three months. But, once opened, its all natural, no preservative product oxidizes like fresh avocados would.

“Wholly Guacamole is always ripe and always ready to eat. This is where the advantage over fresh fruit comes in to play,” says Fresherized Foods’ Murray. “Individual avocados can be expensive. If consumers buy several that are under ripe and are not able to enjoy them during the peak of ripeness, they are out the money with an inferior product. Our avocado pulp and guacamole products are consistent and give the consumer options on times of usage.”

All Good Foods’ products are made fresh daily and never frozen. “We hand scoop avocados and never add evaporated cane juice, ascorbic acids, vinegars, or other ingredients like bell peppers, that are not typically found in traditional guacamole,” says Lawson. For 2014, Great Foods added new labels on its guacamole products that feature key ingredients in bright colors to encourage consumers to look at the nutrition statements.

“We realize that customers are attracted to convenient packaging, and as a result, we are using HPP (High Pressure Processing) in a tub for consumer appeal and pull through sales on



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the shelf,” says Lawson. “We make all of our guacamole products in a variety of flavors and sizes including a four pack of 2.5-ounce single serve for really good ‘guac on the go.’”

Shining the Spotlight

POS and store fliers definitely help get the guacamole name out there, but retailers can do a number of things to shine a light on the product. Some brands have found success and support from supermarket dietitians, who give tours and interact with consumers in the store.

REFRIGERATION POSES CHALLENGE, BUT RETAILERS FIND WAYS TO SELL MORE

Since guacamole products must be refrigerated, it can be a challenge to cross promote. “Secondary displays can be added next to refrigerated cut carrots and celery, and small refrigerated display cases

can be added to displays of salty snacks,” says Jan DeLyster, vice president of marketing at the Irvine, CA-based California Avocado Commission. “Some retailers have refrigerated snacking sections, and processed guacamole can fit there as well.”

Wholly Guacamole found great partners that allow the company to participate in holiday booklets with coupons, on-pack IRCs with salty snacks, and wine neckers (or bottle neck hanger tags) on wine displays promoting entertainment ideas and recipes.

“In return, we offer information on our packaging, which allows these brands to play in produce and gain extra brand awareness in another area of the store,” says Tara Murray, senior marketing manager for Saginaw, TX-based Fresherized Foods, home of Wholly Guacamole. “We are fortunate to work with great, flexible brands.”

Raul Gallegos, director of produce and floral for Bristol Farms, headquartered in Carson, CA, says the store tries to tie guacamole into its avocado displays.

“We refrigerate it, but we can put it on ice to help cross-merchandise,” he says. “It sells as well as salsa. Sales are better with the younger customers, and the past year has been our best ever.”

Teaming With Salsa

When most consumers think pre-made salsa — they think chip aisle — or with other Mexican-themed foods. It may not even occur to them to seek out salsa in the produce section.

“The expectation of finding refrigerated salsas in the produce area is that it will be fresh-tasting and have homemade flavors — and that’s what we really strive for in our salsa products,” says Murray. “We are able to build on the brand equity of the Wholly name, and when our products are offered side by side, consumers are willing to purchase both and enjoy them together.”

pb

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“Secondary displays can be added next to refrigerated cut carrots and celery, and small refrigerated display cases can be added to displays of salty snacks. Some retailers have refrigerated snacking sections, and processed guacamole can fit there as well.”

— Jan DeLysler, California Avocado Commission

“They may have special in-store events or social media and blog content that they manage,” says Murray. “By offering them the things they need, like recipes and images, coupons and door prizes, we’re helping them be successful; they, in turn, help us.”

Yucatan Foods’ Walton says successful merchandising tactics include traditional TPRs (temporary price reductions), IRCs (instant redeemable coupons), in-store or electronic coupons as well as cross promotions with chip companies, salsas, sour creams, tortillas and other Hispanic food items.

By providing the consumer with a variety of flavors and packaging options, consumers can increase their usage and purchase

frequency. Murray says retailers who create product bundles and destinations can easily show customers new ways to enjoy guacamole beyond the chip.

Two ideas she offers are to bundle 100-calorie minis with baby carrots for lunchbox and snacking options; and pair Wholly Guacamole with iceberg lettuce and all the other fixings you would need for taco night.

Yucatan has been working with a chef and nutritionist to develop recipes that offer consumers healthy, innovative ways to eat its Cabo Fresh guacamole.

“We have a fantastic product line that appeals to all consumers. We offer two conventional sizes, 12-ounce and 7-ounce, as

well as a 100 calorie, 2-ounce Snack Pack,” says Jessica Brown, marketing manager for Yucatan Foods. “Our guacamole comes in a variety of styles, allowing consumers to eat it as a snack with their favorite chip or veggie, add it to any meal, or use it as a base and add in additional veggies.”

Many retail stores are featuring guacamole on end caps along with cut vegetables and cut vegetable party trays as the “entertainment zone” for healthy snacks and lifestyles. It’s also often displayed near dressings and other dips to provide incremental sales for the value added produce shopper looking for ultimate nutrition and flavor.

Not all guacamole is created equal. Brown compares it to hummus in that there are many different styles and flavors. “I would encourage retailers to add more SKUs and selection of guacamoles,” she says. “When looking at the produce value-added section as a whole, I think retailers should look at what each SKU of guacamole brings in sales versus other dips, salsas and dressings and eliminate redundant items, slow movers and high-spoil items. This will make room for more variety in guacamole offerings.” **pb**

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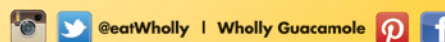
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Shipments from Down Under fill the vital role of providing the highest quality of selected fruits at a time when U.S. growers are not harvesting.

Australia and New Zealand: The 'Rolls Royce' of Counter Seasonal Fruit

Strong currencies and competition from Asia can push prices up for American retailers. **BY BOB JOHNSON**

In the middle of North America's summer, Australia ships citrus that rivals the best quality Florida and California offer.

Apples coming from New Zealand at the end of winter pass muster with shippers from Washington and gain favor with consumers starved for fresh fruit.

"Pretty soon we will get the Braeburn apples from New Zealand, and some people will say they like the New Zealand better than the Washington. I remind them the Washington ones were really good back in October," says Jim Weber, produce director at Econofoods, Brillion, WI.

Econofoods, a chain of a half dozen supermarkets in Wisconsin and Minnesota, is a subsidiary of *Fortune 500* firm SpartanNash, which distributes food to military commissaries and independent grocers in addition to its network of more than 175 markets.

Shipments from Down Under fill the vital role of providing the highest quality of

selected fruits at a time when U.S. growers are not harvesting.

"Perceptions about fresh fruit from Australia and New Zealand are very positive. The countries are viewed by many as clean and green, where food is produced responsibly and safely," says Karin Gardner, marketing communications manager at The Oppenheimer Group, Vancouver, British Columbia.

There are generally no conflicts with maneuvering more locally grown fruit; although Australia can overlap U.S. citrus at the beginning and end of their season, and New Zealand apples can pose an issue for U.S. harvest coming out of storage.

The 'Rolls Royce' Of Fruit

According to U.S. Census Bureau trade data, fruit shipments from these two countries increased 13 percent in 2013, to top the \$130 million mark.

The greatest challenge for American retailers regarding Australia and New Zealand fruit may

be simply getting enough, as the strength of their currencies and competition from Asia can make supply scarce and expensive.

Citrus coming out of Australia from June to October earns rave reviews even from shippers in Florida.

"Australia is known for its excellent quality. It is the Rolls Royce in terms of color, taste, and overall appearance. If you were to compete on quality, they would be the ones you would want to compete with," says Mayda Sotomayor, chief executive of Seald Sweet International, Vero Beach, FL.

The Aussies have become particularly adept at growing a number of citrus varieties.

"Australia excels at the production of certain citrus types, like Navels and W. Murcotts. Consumers are accustomed to seeing these late-summer/early-autumn favorites promoted for back to school," says Gardner.

Nearly \$15 million in Australian summer oranges are shipped to the U.S., and the fruit



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“Anything Australian to the U.S. consumer has a certain 'cache' to it.”

— Stu Monaghan,
DNE World Fruit Sales

enjoys a reputation for high color and great eating. “Every variety we receive from Australia consistently zings with flavor and has a bright appearance,” says Stu Monaghan, who manages the Australian citrus program for DNE World Fruit Sales, Fort Pierce, FL.

There is a long tradition of importing citrus from Australia mid-summer.

“While our archives show Oppy sales of Australian oranges dating back as far as the 1930s, we have renewed our focus on Down Under citrus in recent years with a well-structured, comprehensive program including such favorites as Navels, Cara Caras and Daisy Mandarins,” says Gardner. “We are anticipating good volumes of fruit grown by Seven Fields and other leading Australian citrus growers this summer and fall.”

That trade route was reinvigorated by new merchandising efforts nearly a quarter century ago. “In 1991, our Pacific Rim export salesman Bob Egan met with a representative of Horticulture Australia, which is similar to our Department of Agriculture. They came up with the idea of bringing in Australian citrus and developing a summer citrus market here in the U.S.,” says Monaghan from DNE.

Merchandising the fruit as “from Australia” makes sense, because the country has developed a brand identity in most of the U.S.

“Anything Australian to the U.S. consumer has a certain ‘cache’ to it. All the varieties are clearly marked Australian on the PLU sticker or the bag. Couple that with deep orange color and great flavor, and it’s easy to see why consumers’ reactions are so positive for Australian citrus,” says Monaghan.

New Zealand also scores a spot on the brand recognition bandwagon, with ample fruit offerings in mid-winter. “New Zealand sends apples, pears and kiwi fruit, and retailers highlight the merchandise as fruit from New Zealand. I think New Zealand kiwi fruit is probably perceived as the best in the world. A combination of soil and climate has made them one of the premiere producers,” says Tom Richardson, vice president for global

development at Giumarra, Escondido, CA.

Many consumers hankering for the taste of a fresh apple are delighted when the first fruit from New Zealand ends the long winter.

"We get citrus from Australia — Cara Cara, blood oranges, and tangelos. We get apples from New Zealand. We promote them as premium product from New Zealand, and we promote them as new product," says Econofoods' Weber.

Apple varieties originally from New Zealand developed strong followings in the U.S. "We are very excited about the foothold the JAZZ apple — an original New Zealand variety — has established over the past decade. Once a niche variety, it is now among the Top 10 most popular apples at mainstream retail," says Oppenheimer's Gardner. "Following closely behind is Envy, a naturally non-browning sweet apple. As we work toward year-round supplies of Envy, it is scoring high in consumer focus groups throughout the U.S. for its appealing appearance, crisp texture and memorably sweet flavor."

New Zealand apples are by far the highest volume fruit from Down Under, surpassing the \$50 million mark last year.

"The Northern Hemisphere spring presents

terrific opportunities to shift into new items like fresh apples from New Zealand. Apples have to be super tasty to compete with the fruit available in the summer and Jazz, Envy and Eve offer that in spades," says Gardner. "Many retailers embrace this opportunity because they are eager to offer the freshest products available, or capitalize on the unique flavors only available for a limited time."

New Zealand kiwis have a lock on name recognition, and fairly little U.S.-grown competition.

"Zespri [based in Mount Maunganui, New Zealand] also has a strong organic green kiwifruit program in place for 2014. Zespri organics are acknowledged as among the best in the industry," says Gardner. "Another difference is assortment. For example, some items, like SunGold kiwifruit, are not produced domestically. SunGold is a new yellow-fleshed kiwifruit that has a sweet, mellow flavor with just a hint of tang. We anticipate good volumes from Zespri this season."

Apples and kiwi from New Zealand, and citrus from Australia, almost sell themselves.

"Consumers enjoying a New Zealand apple or an Australian Navel orange will quickly acknowledge a flavor that stands out from

others during the warm months. While this has much to do with timing — these items are far fresher in the spring or summer compared with their domestic counterparts — it also has to do with the art and science of proven growing practices and the microclimates chosen to produce the best fruit," says Gardner.

If you can get fruit from Down Under, merchandising is easy, but not quite complication-free.

Rising Above Conflict

Because fruit from Down Under competes with other counter-seasonal fruit from below the equator, there are few conflicts with U.S. product.

"I can only speak for Aussie citrus on this topic. I've been asked this question many times over the years. My response has always been the same. Since California normally finishes the Navel season in June, Australian Navels aren't in competition. The Aussie citrus season runs from late June to mid October. Exactly when California is not in production," says Monaghan.

The question is a little trickier with apples, which U.S. growers can hold in storage long after harvest. "New Zealand apples have always

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THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD MARKETS

The greatest challenge in merchandising fruit from New Zealand and Australia can be navigating world markets to get an adequate supply at reasonable prices.

"You still have freight costs. I don't know that I've seen any great change in volumes coming in. I know there's some interest in supplying mangos from Australia," says Richard Owen, staff liaison to the Australia/New Zealand affiliate and senior director of global business development for the Produce Marketing Association, Newark, DE.

An even greater challenge than shipping costs can be issues posed by the currency exchange rate.

"Transportation costs don't play as large a role in the equation as one might think because they're affordable at the moment. Far more important is the currency exchange rate," says Stu Monaghan, who manages the Australian citrus program for DNE World Fruit Sales, Fort Pierce, FL. "Our prices exchanged during a time when the U.S. dollar is strong mean more Aussie

dollars to the exporters and the higher likelihood our volume will remain consistent."

Product coming to the U.S. from other areas in the Southern Hemisphere can drive the price down to the point that growers with the highest quality fruit cannot receive the premium they believe they need.

"In order to be paid for the premium quality they provide, they need a certain price level, but with the volume of citrus coming in from Chile and South Africa, they have to compete on price," says Mayda Sotomayor, chief executive of Seald Sweet International, Vero Beach, FL. "When the Australians first started coming in, they were the only game in town."

Supply is complicated further by the development of important markets that are far closer to home for growers in Australia and New Zealand.

"The volume hasn't increased, and Australia has had the opportunity to ship to China and the Asian markets," says Sotomayor. **pb**

been perceived as a quality counter-seasonal fruit. The window is smaller than it once was because we store our domestic apples longer, but they find a nice home between May and August," says Giumarra's Richardson.

The preferred strategy for maneuvering this conflict between stored U.S. apples and imported New Zealand fruit varies by region and by retailer.

"There is always a conflict between New Zealand apples and stored domestic apples. You'd have to ask the retailers how that works out," says Richardson.

Econofoods' Weber (located in the upper Midwest) works out conflicts by moving the fresh fruit from New Zealand front and center as soon as it arrives.

"We promote the new product. We want to get into the new product so bad I tell my stores not to order any more apples from Washington because I don't want the Washington apples on the shelf when the new ones from New Zealand arrive," says Weber.

The challenge comes when fruit stored in U.S. warehouses has to compete with fruit just picked and shipped from New Zealand.

"Some retailers differentiate themselves by offering locally grown produce in season. The

challenge occurs when the local produce is not in season, but instead stored for great lengths of time before shipping. The flavor and texture of an apple that has sat in a controlled atmosphere warehouse for months has trouble measuring up to one that was just picked. Discerning shoppers may choose local first, but the well informed will know the quality and flavor of imported apples and oranges in season delivers a better eating experience," says Gardner.

Regarding apples, there is reason to believe that the important "brand" is the variety, not the country or region.

"Recent research indicates that once consumers find their favorite apple, country of origin becomes less important than continuously being able to buy their 'go-to' apple," says Gardner.

When it comes to kiwis, New Zealand has something approaching a monopoly.

"Kiwi is not grown in substantial quantity in the U.S., so there is not much of a conflict there," says Richard Owen, staff liaison to the Australia/New Zealand affiliate and senior director of global business development for the Produce Marketing Association, Newark, DE. **pb**





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According to recent statistics, in 2012-13, bags and pouches represented 84 percent of the total volume for grapes.

Spring Into Grape Season

What the Mexico and California ‘desert’ deals mean for the industry. **BY KEITH LORIA**

Unlike last year, when cold weather in both California and Sonora, Mexico, held up the harvest for most spring grape varieties by up to two weeks in virtually all of the growing areas, projections for 2014 are that production will actually start sooner than normal.

Early analysis forecasts little overlap between the end of the spring grape deals out of Sonora and the desert, and the start of the summer grape harvest in Central California’s San Joaquin Valley. Still, retailers need to be prepared to market the grapes as soon as they are ready.

Gordon Robertson, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Sun World International, LLC, headquartered in Bakersfield, CA, says both Mexico and Coachella appear to be early, and the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) is on a normal schedule.

“With strong domestic demand and increased export activity for Sun World varieties in the Coachella Valley, we are not anticipating significant overlap at this time,” he says. “As of March, the crop is looking very good and should offer the retailer promotional opportunities out of both areas in the May-June time period on all three colors.”

John Pandol, director of special projects

for Delano, CA-based Pandol Bros., explains the desert business is different in two fundamental ways than grapes during the rest of the year. “One is that we are required to manage two transitions in an eight-week period,” he says. “The other difference is we are selling from projected harvest flow rather than known inventory.”

Pandol expects the front-end transition Chilean supplies to be lighter than the past few years, and certainly lighter than 2013. Although it is unknown at press time, the desert to SJV has the potential to overlap — despite the substantial reduction in early July. A few growers will rush their harvest because they didn’t manage their water supplies well.

Tony Illiano, sales representative for The Oppenheimer Group (Oppy), says its primary focus for spring grapes from Chile is the premiere Thompson grape program from the Lepe family farms, which runs through March and April.

“Thanks to an ideal climate and weather conditions, combined with meticulous growing practices, Lepe-brand Thompsons are highly sought after as the highest quality late grapes from Chile,” he says. “The grower, Esteban Lepe, travels from Chile and works alongside the Oppy quality control team in Delaware and Pennsylvania each season, care-

fully monitoring grape quality and assuring the very high level of integrity these grapes deliver.”

“Spring grapes” at Oppy means the wrap up of its Chilean season and the full extent of its Mexican season.

Marc Serpa, director of domestic grapes for the company, says Oppenheimer will market the Perlette, Flame, Summer Royals, Sugarone, Red Globe and Autumn Royal varieties from Mexico this season, increasing its 2014 volume by 250,000 packages over last year. Flames and Sugarones from Pesqueira, Brazil and La Costa, CA represent the largest boosts.

“Winter and spring have been very warm in Mexico, so the crop will be lighter on the front due to low chill hours. That said, we expect the season to start as much as eight to 10 days earlier than last year,” says Serpa. “We will have grapes the first week of May. Although it’s very early to tell on total production, early reports of small bunch size on Perlettes and Flames could also have an impact on early volume.”

Perlettes are expected early- to mid-May; Flames are expected mid-May through June and Sugarones from late May through June.

John Ledebor, director of international business development for Columbia Marketing International (CMI), headquartered in Wenatchee, WA, says the company will

be setting up its spring grape programs with Mexico and Coachella in April; as well as shipping to various Southeast Asia countries and Hong Kong for retail and wet-market trade.

“For the past two years, the biggest buzz centered on Sun World’s Midnight Beauty Seedless grape variety. This is a proprietary variety of theirs — having by far the best flavor and color of all early black varieties,” says Ledebor. “Once again this year we expect to see growing business for this variety despite it being possibly the highest priced spring grape. Our customers will be lined up to get Midnights. They absolutely love this grape variety.”

In addition to Midnights, CMI will also be shipping Sugarones, Thompson Seedless, Princess, Flames, Red Globes and Scarlett Royals. Red Globe grapes account for the majority of what CMI exports, along with some seedless grapes from Mexico’s Sonora growing areas.

“Retailers will likely face higher prices for spring grapes compared to cheap aging stock from the Southern Hemisphere,” says Ledebor. “Thus, promoting the freshest and best eating grapes available is our best strategy.”

Jerry Havel, director of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms, headquartered in Rio Rico, AZ, agrees that if the weather continues with above-normal temperatures, the Mexican crop could be a little earlier than normal.

“Usually, we don’t really get started until around May 10. If the weather holds this season, we could be harvesting grapes anywhere from May 1 to May 5,” he says. “In our season, the main green varieties are Perlettes, Prime Seedless, and Sugarones. Red seedless is the Flame Seedless. Black Seedless is the Summer Royal and Chilean Black Unknown. Seeded grapes are the Red Globes.”

Fresh Farms is in the process of changing a larger percentage of its Perlette green seedless into the Prime Seedless as the taste is a little sweeter and it gained a lot of popularity over the past two seasons.

Jeff Klitz, assistant director of marketing for the Fresno, CA-based California Table Grape Commission, notes that with more than 80 varieties of table grapes, California grows 99 percent of the commercial table grapes produced in the U.S. The varieties are grouped into three color classifications — red, black and green — and each variety has its own characteristics and seasonality.

“The wide range of varieties allows consumers with an array of taste preferences to enjoy grapes from California from May through January,” he says. “In 2012-13, the

Consumption data shows that promotions in the early season have the potential to drive the most volume lift, up to 360 percent, when grapes are on promotion five times per month.

Top 15 varieties represented 91 percent of the total crop.”

Raul Gallegos, director of produce and floral for Bristol Farms, headquartered in Carson, CA, says for the most part, it jumps right into California grapes and sources from different suppliers, and holds them as long into fall as it can so it can have a domestic program.

Advertising Advantage

Retailers should promote grapes early and

frequently. Consumption data shows that promotions in the early season have the potential to drive the most volume lift, up to 360 percent, when grapes are on promotion five times per month.

“We sell both loose and zip-lock bags to merchandise,” says Gallegos. “We start advertising around late May; they are very promotable and always popular sellers.”

Maria Brous, director of media and community relations at Publix Super Markets, located in Lakeland, FL, says since consumers have been waiting all winter for the strong quality that comes out of the Mexico and California growing regions, early promotions will make consumers aware that the quality they are seeking has arrived, driving early sales and repeat sales throughout the season.

“Right around May, we need to determine where the next grapes will come from. Depending on the flavor profiles and when the season begins in California, there may be a period of time where the grapes will come from Mexico,” she says. “However, if California starts early enough and the taste is of high quality, then we stay within the U.S. for our sourcing needs. At times, there may be an opportunity to receive product from Mexico

PACKAGING TRENDS

When it comes to packaging, in 2012-13, bags and pouches represented 84 percent of the total volume for grapes, according to the California Table Grape Commission. This was led by zip-type bags at 34 percent of the total, followed by slider bags at 24 percent, non-sealable bags at 14 percent and pouches at 11 percent.

“Clamshells have seen a slow but steady increase in market share from 2008 to 2012, and represented 12 percent of the total volume in 2012, while plain packs represented four percent of the total,” says Jeff Klitz, assistant director of marketing for the California Table Grape Commission.

Fresh Farms offers grapes in plain bags with an approximate weight of 2 pounds. It also packs the new style handle bags with colorful graphics.

“For certain retailers we pack a fixed weight pouch bag,” says Jerry Havel, director of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms, headquartered in Nogales, AZ.

“Fresh Farms packs a large volume of grapes in clamshell packaging. We can pack a 2-, 3-, 4- or even 5-pound clamshell. We recommend that a retailer offer both a bag and a clamshell for each of their stores. It moves more grapes at a time when the market is craving new crop fresh grapes.”

The Oppenheimer Group will pack much of its 2014 production out of Mexico in pouch/handle bags, although it will also pack in RPCs, as well as 4 x 4-pound, and 6 x 3-pound clamshells.

“These bags worked well last season, and we have enjoyed strong demand for the pouch/ handle bags out of Chile during the Southern Hemisphere grape season,” says Marc Serpa, director of domestic grapes for the company. “The bags are very attractive and display very well at retail. Our customers have commented that the convenience and appealing displays of the handle bags have increased sales for the grape category.”

and California.”

Additionally, retailers should enhance their black grape offerings if they have not already done so, Sun World’s Robertson notes. “While retailers should continue to strongly promote red and green seedless, as these are the lead color offerings in the category, black grapes experienced the strongest growth in 2013 with dollar sales increasing 16.7 percent and volume increasing 9.3 percent,” he says.

Research shows that advertising grapes every week from May through August will have

the largest volume impact on the grape category and when creating ads, multiple items are better than one.

“Including the entire grape category, featuring all three colors — red, black and green — in a promotion event is a good strategy to gain visibility for the category and allow consumers to choose the grape they prefer,” says California Table Grape Commission’s Klitz. “Make your grape ads attract attention by advertising grapes on the front page as front page ads resulted in higher

volume impact on the category.”

According to Serpa, the Mexican grape deal is very fast-paced; so a retailer needs to take advantage of ad opportunities to promote Mexican grapes in June since, typically, 25 percent of the industry production comes off in May and 75 percent the following month.

“June is a great month for promoting Mexican grapes,” he says. “Late May/early June is a great time period to promote Flame seedless, followed by Sugarones in mid-June and continuing through the month.”

Fresh Farms’ Havel says a savvy retail strategy is to find out when the crop will peak by variety and plan an ad well in advance to hit that peak week heavy with volume at a promotable price.

“Fresh Farms works very closely with our retail partners to plan advance ads and set up programs with promotable prices,” he says. “They should understand that 20 percent of the Mexican crop comes off in May and 80 percent in June, so obviously the time to plan most ads would be during the weeks of June. June ads ensure a better price at a time when there is a larger supply for grapes that are in their peak of flavor.”

Retailer Mistakes

Retailers like to set their ads three weeks or more in advance, and Pandol warns that this isn’t always the best idea when it comes to spring grapes.

“May is a time to be flexible and order on shorter windows. The week of Memorial Day weekend (this year Wednesday, May 21 to Tuesday, May 27) may or may not be in play for promotional volumes. But I would bet, yes,” he says. “A desert player who may be reluctant to book large ad volumes in the last days of May loses out to a Southern Hemisphere importer who has a cooler full of grapes and is more than happy to cover the order.”

Of course, those grapes aren’t as fresh and won’t sell with the velocity at retail that was originally expected. A retailer who had the flexibility to wait had fresh desert grapes and sold better volumes.

For example, Perlette has a bad reputation, from years of irresponsible and undisciplined growers rushing to market. A mature Perlette is one of the best eating grapes out there, despite some of its visual deficiencies. Numerous niche retailers have done well offering Perlette as an heirloom variety; it goes big with the farmers market crowd.

“Desert grapes are the freshest at retail, and there’s something about the eating experience of fresher grapes that drives repurchase,” says

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GETTING THE WORD OUT ABOUT CALIFORNIA GRAPES

In 2014, the Grapes from California global campaign will reach consumers in both English and Spanish through television, magazines, radio and social media throughout the season with special promotions during summer, back to school, and the holidays.

“Season kickoff begins in May with a national media blitz on Win-Win Radio, Daily Buzz TV, newspaper outreach in both the U.S. and Canada, and a social media contest on Pinterest featuring Food Network star Ellie Krieger,” says Jeff Klitz, assistant director of marketing for the Fresno, CA-based California Table Grape Commission.

“Ellie will play an important role promoting Grapes from California throughout the season. Ellie will also create a series of videos this year highlighting the many ways consumers can use grapes, from snacking, to salads, sides, meals, desserts and drinks,” says Klitz.

In addition, Grapes from California will serve as a sponsor for her new show on PBS “Real Good Food.”

The season will also kick off with the introduction of the grape blogger network, consisting of five bloggers who will spend

the season blogging, tweeting and posting about healthy living and eating with Grapes from California. Additionally, nutritionists, dietitians and other health and wellness influencers will be reached through a series of articles in the largest nutritionist e-newsletter in the country.

Late summer, early fall promotions will have a back-to-school theme as a Spanish satellite media tour with Food Network star Marcela Valladolid is planned. A second social media contest kicks off in September on Facebook with a healthy Halloween theme. In fact, all throughout the season, Facebook fans can participate in a series of mini-contests and sweepstakes on the Grapes from California page.

“As we approach the holidays, there will be several promotions to remind consumers that Grapes from California are still in season,” says Klitz. “Bloggers will participate in a Thanksgiving recipe contest, newspaper articles will appear in the U.S. and Canada, nutritionists will be targeted at FNCE (Food and Nutrition Conference and Expo), the largest nutritionist conference in the U.S., and a ‘Holly Jolly Grape Holiday Challenge’ will take place on Facebook.” **pb**

Pandol. “Another thing, all grapes do not transition the same week. White grapes should transition first followed by red, followed by blacks then Red Globes. On the desert-SJV, red grapes should transition first, followed by whites and blacks and lastly Red Globes.”

Mexican retailers such as Wal-Mart and the Chedraui Group (owners of Southern California-based El Super grocery stores) use Sonoran grapes through August and even into September; consequently some in the industry are still baffled as to why many retailers assume the Sonoran deal should end in June.

On Display

Industry studies show that grapes generate \$95 per square foot during the months of May and June. Therefore, displays more than 25 square feet can generate up to 63 percent more dollars than displays less than 18 square feet during the months of May and June.

For those who purchase grapes, the top items found in their grocery carts are bananas,

milk, bread, salty snacks, cheese, yogurt and soft drinks. “Placing grapes in a prime location in the produce department will be a good investment,” says Klitz. “Placing an incremental display next to any or all of those items can generate extra sales. Most importantly, make sure the grape display is continually restocked because consumers can’t purchase grapes if the display is empty.”

Havel recommends touting the spring grapes in large displays with eye-catching signs. “Because our grapes are very fresh, compared to the imported grapes from South America that have just finished their season, we recommend big end displays with the message being ‘Fresh New Crop Table Grapes from Mexico,’” he says.

New Varieties

Industry insiders point out there have been lots of testing of the so-called “new varieties,” which in reality should be called prototypes.

The industry has somewhat of a love-hate

Displays more than 25 square feet can generate up to 63 percent more dollars than displays less than 18 square feet during the months of May and June.

relationship with the new varieties. In the past, most varieties have been broadly available to a large number of growers who figured out how to make the varieties work. Today many genetics programs restrict the number of growers permitted to plant, therefore the trial and error required to make the variety successful in different climates doesn’t take place.

“The California-based genetics programs are in a full court press to get Mexicans to plant their new varieties. Sometimes it seems there are more new variety offers than growers to plant them,” says Pandol. “Retailers might have a better shot at an ‘exclusive’ or at least a less widely distributed variety, but the variety itself may not be as good as it could be and, in reality, consumers may be better off with a standard variety done right.”

Fernando Soberanes, sales manager for Giumarra Companies, located in Bakersfield, CA, says the company plans on starting harvest earlier than last year as the crop is looking good and weather has been favorable.

“We will have grapes available beginning April 28, week 18,” he says. “We are starting with green seedless, Perlette variety. Shortly thereafter, we will start harvest on Early Sweet and Flame varieties.”

Sun World will have additional volume out of Mexico available this year. It is also planting two new early-season varieties this year, which will come into commercial production in 2015.

“The first is an ultra-early black seedless variety harvesting two to three weeks earlier than our flagship black seedless Midnight Beauty brand grapes. This new variety has large, round-shaped berries with a naturally deep black coloring and high brix with a nice tropical aroma,” says Sun World’s Robertson. “The second is a large oval-shaped red seedless grape, that also develops color fully and naturally, and will be available around the same time as Flame seedless. This variety will also be planted in the San Joaquin Valley to provide consistent availability through September.” **pb**

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PRODUCE BUSINESS is accepting nominations for its Tenth 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, 2014 (People born after January 1, 1974).

To nominate someone, please fill out this form by April 12, 2014, and fax back to 561-994-1610 OR go to our website at producebusiness.com and look for the 40 Under Forty icon to link to the online application.

Once nominated, the candidate will be interviewed by one of our editors, and will receive forms to fill out asking for detailed information. A candidate only needs to be nominated one time. Multiple nominations will have no bearing on selection.

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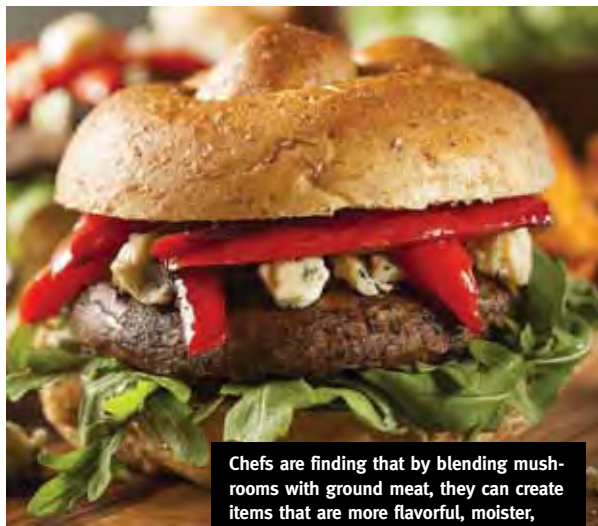
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Mushrooms Are Movin' On Up

Foodservice executives and mushroom suppliers discuss how the vegetable is captivating consumers with new uses and applications. **BY PAUL FRUMKIN**



PHOTO ON LEFT COURTESY OF THE MUSHROOM COUNCIL



Chefs are finding that by blending mushrooms with ground meat, they can create items that are more flavorful, moister, more nutritious and have a better texture.

Once regarded chiefly as a topping for pizza, or a supporting ingredient in fine-dining kitchens, mushrooms today can be found in many varieties across the foodservice spectrum, in all segments and all dayparts.

Mushrooms are rapidly appearing on menus at breakfast, lunch and dinner, as a key component in appetizers and main dishes, as well as starring in other selections. In addition, chefs are finding that by blending mushrooms with ground meat, they can create items that are more flavorful, moister, more nutritious and have a better texture.

Nor are menu makers limiting their use of mushrooms to one or two common varieties. While the ubiquitous white button mushroom continues to dominate retail and foodservice sales, the use of such newly popular varieties as portobellos, baby bellas and creminis are growing at a rapid pace.

“Restaurants are using mushrooms for everything under the sun,” says Gary Schroeder, president of Oakshire Mushroom Farms in Kennett Square, PA. “The creativity we’re seeing is very broad. It’s exciting to see that anyplace folks can slip mushrooms in, they’re doing it.”

Dennis Lombardi, executive vice president-

foodservice strategies for WD Partners, a marketing and design agency in Dublin, OH, calls the mushroom “a very versatile ingredient” and one that is gaining in popularity. “We’re seeing them on more menus all the time,” says Lombardi. “They can go from being a ‘plain Jane’ ingredient to being incredibly exotic. They are popular with consumers, and an intriguing but safe ingredient. They can also provide a range of flavors and strengths.”

The trend toward utilizing fresh products on menus is also helping to drive the use of mushrooms. “In 1980, fresh mushrooms accounted for less than 20 percent of the volume,” says Schroeder. “Now 85 percent of the mushrooms in the U.S. are grown fresh.”

Mushrooms rank as one of the fastest-growing items on foodservice menus, according to 2012 Datassential Menu Trends (a food industry market research firm out of Chicago, IL), which says 81 percent of all restaurants serve mushrooms in one dish or another.

Datassential also points out that mushrooms are served by 98 percent of all fine-dining restaurants, 89 percent of casual-dining operations, 85 percent of mid-scale locations, 66 percent of quick-service restaurants and 63 percent of fast-casual chains.

Mushrooms are showing up in a wide variety of preparations, too. Red Lobster serves

Wood-Grilled Chicken with a portobello sauce; Applebee’s Neighborhood Grill & Bar offers a 7-oz. sirloin with sautéed mushrooms and a Marsala wine sauce; Panera Bread includes roasted mushrooms in its Spinach Power Salad; Corner Bakery Café, headquartered in Dallas, TX, features mushrooms in its Farmer’s Scrambler; and Wendy’s offers a Bacon Portobello Melt on Brioche.

“Blending” Right In

Many suppliers see mushrooms’ ability to blend with other ingredients — notably proteins like beef or turkey — as fueling the next big industry trend. Kevin Donovan, national sales manager for Phillips Mushrooms in Kennett Square, PA, says the blendability trend “is gaining traction throughout the industry. It will be big in the future.”

The result of a collaboration by the Culinary Institute of America, the University of California at Davis and the mushroom industry, the blendability program was launched about two years ago, when chefs found that replacing a percentage of ground meat with mushrooms added volume while creating a juicier, tastier and more healthful product.

Given the current high cost of beef, it also helps to keep costs in line. Since then, culinarian-

ians have found the blending of mushrooms also works well in meatloaf, taco meat, meatballs and sauces.

“Mushrooms lend themselves to the

blending process because they contain an abundant amount of glutamate, a naturally occurring compound directly linked to the taste sensation known as umami,” the Mushroom

Council says. The distinctively “meaty” flavor found in mushrooms, together with their texture, explains why they so successfully stand in for meat in vegetarian dishes, experts say.

How Restaurant Chains Are Using Mushrooms

PRODUCE BUSINESS takes a look at some creative dishes containing mushrooms around the foodservice industry.

Applebee's Neighborhood Grill & Bar

Marsala Mushroom Sirloin: 7-ounce sirloin topped with mushrooms sautéed in a Marsala wine sauce and served over a creamy Parmesan rice blend with diced onions.



Red Lobster

Wood-Grilled Chicken with Portobello Wine Sauce: Served with mashed potatoes and a choice of sides.



The Cheesecake Factory

SkinnyLicious® Grilled Turkey Burger: Made with fresh mushrooms, garlic and spices, and served with grilled onions, lettuce, tomato, mayo and a green salad.



Bertucci's Italian Restaurant

Filet Mignon with Chianti Sauce: Grilled beef tenderloin finished with Chianti sauce and roasted mushrooms and served with green beans and roasted red potatoes.



Epic Burger

Portobello Sandwich: Portobello mushroom cooked with olive oil, sea salt and black pepper.



Panera Bread

Spinach Power Salad: Fresh baby spinach, a roasted mushroom and onion blend, hard-boiled eggs, applewood-smoked bacon and frizzled onions with smoky Vidalia onion vinaigrette.



Ruth's Chris Steak House

Mushrooms Stuffed with Crabmeat: Broiled mushroom caps with jumbo lump crab stuffing sprinkled with Romano cheese.



Marie Callender's

Oven-Roasted Vegetable Platter: With zucchini, yellow squash, red peppers, roma tomatoes, red onions, cauliflower, broccoli, baby carrots and portobello mushroom marinated in olive oil, balsamic, herbs and garlic and oven-roasted. Served with roasted baby potatoes and Mediterranean dressing for dipping.



Wendy's

Bacon Portobello Melt on Brioche: A quarter-pound beef patty, two slices of American cheese, portobello mushrooms and a melted Cheddar sauce served on a brioche bun.



Cosi

Stuffed Portobello Bowl: With hearth-roasted vegetables, fresh mozzarella, basil, tomato sauce, balsamic vinaigrette and grains.



Uno Chicago Grill

Aged Cheddar & Mushroom Burger: Topped with aged cheddar, sautéed mushrooms and ultimate burger sauce.



Corner Bakery Cafe

Farmer's Scrambler: Freshly scrambled eggs with bell peppers, mushrooms, onions and cheddar cheese.



Panda Express

Shanghai Angus Steak: With thick-cut slices of marinated Angus top sirloin, crisp asparagus, freshly sliced mushrooms, wok-tossed in an Asian steak sauce.



Champps Americana

Blackened Chicken Alfredo: Fettucine, spinach, garlic, mushrooms, red peppers, and housemade asiago Alfredo sauce.



Umami Burger

The Springbird: Turkey patty, ricotta and fresh goat cheese, marinated portobello, braised kale and apple crema.



Burtons Grill

Vegetable Medley Risotto: Fresh zucchini, mushrooms, spinach and peppers combined with risotto and Reggiano Parmesan.



Mimi's Cafe

Classic Spinach Salad with Grilled Salmon: Grilled Atlantic salmon served on top of fresh spinach, sliced mushrooms, green onions, fresh tomatoes and chopped egg, tossed in bacon balsamic vinaigrette.



Shake Shack

'Shroom Burger: Crisp-fried portobello mushroom filled with melted Muenster and cheddar cheeses, topped with lettuce, tomato and Shack-Sauce.



Strong Growth in Browns

Part of the growing interest in mushrooms can be traced to the availability of different varieties. While 60 percent of all mushrooms sold at the retail level are white button mushrooms, brown and specialty mushrooms are growing at a faster rate. Peter Wilder, marketing director at To-Jo Mushrooms in Avondale, PA, says, “typical sliced white mushrooms are king, but browns are showing the biggest growth.”

Browns, in general, “are hot,” he says, with creminis showing the greatest growth recently. “We’re seeing a lot more penetration on menus. We’ve seen thousands of articles calling mushrooms ‘super foods’ over the past six months or so, and the message is getting out there. It’s a great opportunity for chefs to add a healthy item that has better flavor and texture.”

But while white and brown mushrooms are generally selling well, specialty mushrooms such as shiitake, maitake, king trumpet and oysters have yet to hit their stride, notes Kathleen Preis, marketing coordinator for the San Jose, CA-based Mushroom Council. However, she notes, shiitakes are starting to move beyond the menus of white tablecloth restaurants and into more casual and fast-casual restaurants.

According to Datassential, the incidence of white button

mushrooms on menus has remained basically flat since 2006. And while portobellos featured on menus grew only 2 percent since 2011, they increased 29.5 percent since 2006. Creminis, on the other hand, increased 31 percent since 2011 and a considerable 89 percent over the past six years.

Overall, total U.S. dollar sales for mushrooms at the retail level for the 52-week period ended Dec. 29, 2013 rose 3.9 percent.

Certainly, part of the increased usage stems from the fact that mushrooms tend to pair well with many other ingredients. For example, Datassential says mushrooms rank No. 3 as a topping on pizza, trailing behind only onion and tomato. They also rank third as a vegetable addition to hot sandwiches and are the No. 1 ingredient with pastas and No. 3 vegetable topping for burgers.

Foodservice operators and consumers alike also continue to view mushrooms as a key component when building a good burger. But while many operators rely on traditional white button mushrooms, others are getting more adventurous. Wendy’s, the Dublin, Ohio-based quick-service chain, pairs a quarter-pound burger with portobello mushrooms. Los Angeles-based Umami Burger menus its namesake burger with shiitake mushrooms, caramelized onions, roasted tomato, Parmesan crisp and umami ketchup. **pb**

Distinctive ‘Meaty’ Flavor

Tests have demonstrated that when meat-and-mushroom blends were introduced to

lunch programs in schools, as well as colleges and universities, kids like the blended burgers better — a positive sign as chefs and nutri-

tionists search for new ways to reduce the amount of fat and calories in school lunches.

“This is a huge opportunity for foodser-




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vice,” says Schroeder of Oakshire Mushroom Farms, which markets the Dole brand in North America. “It looks like a grand slam.”

The blendability trend already began to extend beyond school and college feeding. Commercial foodservice operators are also introducing menu items that feature blended meat and mushrooms. The Cheesecake Factory in Calabasas Hills, CA, menus a SkinnyLicious Grilled Turkey Burger, which combines ground turkey with fresh mushrooms, garlic and spices. It is served with grilled onions, lettuce, tomato and a green salad.

“We handmade our SkinnyLicious Grilled Turkey burger patty in our restaurants,” says David Overton, founder, chairman, chief executive and president of the casual dining chain. “Mushrooms pair really well with poultry — they help to accentuate the flavor of the turkey.”

Atlanta-based Flip Burger Boutique also offers a blended burger. The Earth +Turf features a patty made with a mushroom-beef blend, topped with caramelized onions, Gruyère cheese, pickles and mushroom mayo. Barry Mills, co-owner of the four-unit Flip Burger, says, “Meat and mushrooms have always gone well together from a taste and texture profile. They are also interchangeable with each other as a protein source, so why not have them together?”

“Creating a burger with mushrooms and meat can cut calorie and fat intake while adding veggies and nutrients without sacrificing taste or hearty portion sizes.” And, he adds, “It’s a fantastic seller for us.”

Meanwhile, the practice of blending mushrooms with meat is increasing. “We expect it to explode in 2014-2015,” predicts the Mushroom Council’s Preis. She also predicts that it is expected to eventually spread to the retail marketplace.

“Everybody wants to know what the next big thing driving the industry will be,” Wilder says. “Blendability could be that thing.”

High-end Inspiration

In the interim, many menumakers at chains continue to look to chefs at the high-end of the restaurant industry for new ideas with mushrooms. David Burke, executive chef and owner of the New York-based David Burke Group that includes David Burke Townhouse, Fishtail and Primehouse, says mushrooms are increasingly taking the center-of-the-plate position at upscale restaurants.

“You’re seeing more king mushrooms, hen of the woods, and lobster mushrooms being used — not just in slices or garnishes or a

ragout — but as the main point of the dish itself,” says Burke. “They are presented in clusters or as mushroom steaks in heartier pieces.”

Chefs and diners have new respect for mushrooms, he continues, “so we’re seeing lots of vegetarian items move onto the menu. We might offer three different kinds of mushrooms in something similar to a charcuterie board. Maybe we’ll offer a confit of portobello mushrooms, or grilled King oyster mushrooms with garlic and shallots, or pickled mushrooms.”

Pickled mushrooms, in fact, are getting

increasingly popular among fine-dining chefs, he adds. “You might see pickled mushrooms with crudo or carpaccio, or even on a charcuterie board.”

Meanwhile, Burke says his restaurants continue to feature mushrooms as an accompaniment for other items. “We shave white button mushrooms on salads at table side, which adds fresh and raw components to a dish.” He says he also makes mushroom chips by slicing them and frying them in clarified butter.

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more matters

Where's The Beef?

Shake Shack in New York removes the beef altogether for its vegetarian 'Shroom Burger, which features crisp-fried portobello mushroom filled with melted Muenster and Cheddar cheeses, topped with lettuce, tomato and Shack-Sauce.

And the Umami Burger chain menus another vegetarian sandwich called the Earth Burger, which contains a mushroom and edamame patty, white soy aioli, truffled ricotta, cipollini onions, lettuce and slow roasted tomato.

Mushrooms, in fact, are increasingly making appearances on menus as a substitute for meat-based burgers. Epic Burger in Chicago features a portobello

mushroom sandwich that has built its own following. "The portobello mushroom sandwich was created as a non-meat option for our customers," says David Friedman, founder and chief concept officer of Epic Burger. "It sells well enough that it has maintained its place on our very limited menu since 2008, and we liked the idea of the mushroom sandwich over a vegan-style patty.

Also, Friedman adds, "We had not been able to find a pre-made vegetarian patty that we felt made the grade, and we did not want to bring in the numerous ingredients necessary to produce on our own." **pb**

Burke says he uses a variety of mushrooms at his restaurants, including shiitake, portobello, oysters, chanterelles, morels and occasionally enoki.

Growing Trends

One chef-driven trend to which mush-

rooms readily lend themselves is the movement toward sustainability and buying local, says the Mushroom Council's Preis. While the majority — about 60 percent — of mushrooms are raised in two counties in Pennsylvania — Chester and Berks counties — buying local is possible almost anywhere,

she says. "Mushrooms are grown everywhere."

She also says the council is currently developing a sustainability study for mushrooms and adds, "It's a very sustainable industry."

An interest in organically raised products also is contributing to an increase in sales, although that growth remains modest. "Organic continues to grow, but the interest tends to be in retail sales," says Preis.

Nevertheless, Donovan of Phillips Mushrooms says his firm has been raising organically grown mushrooms for a decade, and the business has been getting larger every year. "Most everything we raise conventionally we raise organically too," he says.

But while he says the organic sector of the business is indeed growing, it also tends to be costlier than conventionally grown product.

In the meantime, suppliers and restaurateurs alike are looking for the next big trend in the mushroom business. "The main trend right now simply is that mushrooms just keep gaining traction everywhere," says Donovan.

Preis sounds a similar note. "Consumers are becoming more food literate about what they're eating, and this movement is driving interest in mushrooms," she says. "This is a good time to be in mushrooms." **pb**

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Challenges & Opportunities For Selling More Sweet Onions

Experts offer ways to meet challenges and build on growing momentum. BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWEET ONION TRADING COMPANY

Sweet onions generally have a higher dollar per square foot return for retailers than yellow onions.

Sweet onions continue to hold strong to their position in the overall onion category. Data for the 52-weeks ending December 28, 2013 as provided by the Chicago, IL-based Nielsen Perishables Group shows that premium-priced sweet onions account for more than a quarter (27.3 percent) of retail onion sales.

“Sweet onions have become very popular, in fact a year-round item with our customers,” says Jason Kazmirski, director of produce/floral and merchandiser for Tukwila, WA-headquartered North West Grocers, which serves 70 independents under the banners of Thriftway, Red Apple Markets, IGA and Payless Foods.

Yellow onions remain the volume and dollar leaders in the onion category. However, John Shuman, president and director of sales at Shuman Produce, Inc., in Reidsville, GA, explains, “Demand for sweets continues to drive the overall onion category at retail. In fact, they boast the highest household penetration of any item in the onion category.”

The craving for sweet onions comes from consumers, says Greg Smith, marketing communications manager for Bland Farms, in Glenville, GA. “From our perspective, and from the feedback we received from our retailers, consumers appear to be replacing conventional yellow onions [storage onions] with sweet onions.”

“That makes good sense for a couple different reasons. For one, sweet onions are more versatile due to their mild flavor — making them a superior everyday cooking onion,” he says. “Consumers recognize the value in their versatility and flavor. Secondly, sweet onions are viewed as a premium quality product in comparison to conventional yellow onions. So, when prices of sweet onions and conventional onions fluctuate to a point where they are roughly the same in-store, consumers appear to be choosing sweet onions.”

Sweet onions generally have a higher dollar per square foot return for retailers than yellow onions. Therefore, “In order for retailers to maximize their overall onion category they

need to have a strong sweet onion program,” says Matthew Curry, president of Curry & Company, in Brooks, OR.

Retailers can make sure sweet onion sales are steadily rising by recognizing merchandising challenges and realizing the opportunities.

1. Stock ‘Em And Call ‘Em Out

There are three major challenges retailers face in making sure to provide their customers with truly sweet onions and then assuring customers can find them. Firstly, sweet onions don’t all look alike by shape or color.

“Some growers hold with the idea that consumers recognize a flat-shaped onion as a sweet onion,” says Cindy Elrod, sales and new business development for Peri & Sons Farms, in Yerington, NV, which grows and markets its Sweetie Sweet onion. “In talking to many consumers directly, we are finding that it’s the texture and color of the skin that consumers are looking at when selecting sweet onions.”

Indeed, “Not all sweet onions are of the

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“We noticed that our retail partners consider sweet onions a Top 20 produce department item and are consistently displaying the sweet onions on an end cap or utilizing stand-alone displays.”

— Cindy Elrod, Peri & Sons Farms

flat Granex variety. Flat sweets can't grow everywhere due to a multitude of limiting factors. A portion of our crop is flat and another portion is semi-globe in shape," adds Bland Farms' Smith.

"Varietal choices from seed breeders are constantly evolving, therefore getting that right mix of disease resistance, yield, appearance and flavor," says David DeBerry, director of category management—onions, for the Edinburg, TX-headquartered Crescent Fruit & Vegetable, LLC. "Bulb shape (flat versus rounder) is a factor in some markets, but both shapes share marketability to consumers, and consistency is the most important factor."

Beyond shape, Derrell Kelso, Jr., owner and president of Onions Etc., in Stockton, CA, says, "In my opinion, the sweetest onion in the world, or should I say the best flavored onion, is the Red Italian Sweet onion grown in California."

Secondly, there is no single industry standard as to what constitutes a sweet onion. Kim Reddin, the National Onion Association's (NOA) director of public and industry relations, explains, "When the industry initially tested onions for sweetness they measured sugars. Now, we know that there are many nuances of flavor. It's not something that is cut and dried."

Several sweet onion growers are proponents of a third-party 'sweet' certification.

Peri & Son's Elrod says, "For the past couple of years, we have been working to provide our customers — especially retailers — with information that shows the difference a commitment to a sweet-certification process can make. Some are very receptive to the message, but many are just hoping that the producers will regulate and monitor what is being offered as a sweet onion."

The opportunity for retailers is to be as hands-on by playing as active a role in sourcing sweet onions, as for other produce items. This includes periodically taste-sampling the onions, especially at the start of harvest in a new growing area, and then buying them from suppliers who deliver a consistently sweet onion. The rewards are repeat sales.

Third, it can be a challenge for consumers to find the sweets — especially in bulk onion displays with poor signage.

"Call attention to the sweets," advises Bland Farms' Smith.

"We noticed that our retail partners consider sweet onions a Top 20 produce department item and are consistently displaying the sweet onions on an end cap or utilizing stand-alone displays," says Peri & Son's Elrod. "They are also not carrying a bulk conventional yellow onion in the same size profile as the sweets. So when the consumer is looking for a jumbo or large jumbo-size onion, the consumer selects the jumbo sweet onion."

"Secondary displays of sweet onions are a great way to take advantage of incremental sales during seasonal peaks in supply and at holidays," says Shuman Produce's Shuman. "Based on recent research we've conducted with the Nielsen Perishables Group, there are a variety of great cross-merchandising opportunities for sweet onions and related products within the produce department. Some examples include offering cross-department 'meal deals' and creating cross-promotions featuring a recipe or full meal to promote purchase of the products. Shopping baskets with sweet onions are roughly 40 percent larger than the average produce buyer's basket."

Grower/shippers and retailers alike find benefits from participating in national promotional campaigns organized by federal marketing orders.

Bland Farms' Smith says, "We participate in the Vidalia Onion Committee's Vidalia-specific promotion during the season. Each of these annual promotions has proven to be successful in increasing sweet onion sales, but the extent of that success is largely dependent on the retailer's desire and ability to execute at the store level."

This season, "We'll be working with the Vidalia Onion Committee to bring its 'V' is for Vidalia" campaign to market during Vidalia season," adds Shuman Produce's Shuman.

"When an effort is made to properly display and bring attention to sweet onions in-store, the sales will follow," says Bland Farm's Smith.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHUMAN PRODUCE

2. Create More Display Space

Shelf space is a top challenge in the produce department. The opportunity to gain more of this valued real estate for sweet onions is by adding SKU's. This means bulk plus packaged sweets on the shelf.

"Sweet onions are traditionally sold in bulk. That's the most popular way retail customers of North West Grocers merchandise them," says North West Grocers' Kazmirski. "Some-

times, during the peak, we'll sell the Walla Wallas in a 10-pound box."

"Yet recently, there's been an uptick in demand for bagged product," explains Bland Farms' Smith. "By our estimations, we've seen at least a 30 percent increase over the past three-year period in packaged product as a percentage of total sales. Ten years ago, bagged product made up just 15 to 20 percent of sales, at best. These days, 50 percent of our sales

consist of bagged product."

Significant sales increases "are in the consumer packaged lines including 2-, 3-, 4-, 5- and 10-pound bags," adds Crescent Fruit & Vegetable's DeBerry.

Barry Rogers, president of the Sweet Onion Trading Company, in Grant, FL, says, "Onion packaging is many times based on price. When we are in peak production, and price is usually at its lowest for that particular season, bag size moves up. For example, customers using 2-pound bags move to 4-pound bags, 5-pounds go to 10. Customers enjoy the bigger ring; the consumer gets a better perceived value."

"The benefits of packaged sweet onions are many," says Bland Farms' Smith. "Retailers are getting a bigger ring at the register on bagged product versus bulk. They are also moving more products through the store, because consumers are naturally taking more sweet onions home per trip when compared to bulk product."

In addition, Mark Breimeister, national sales director for the Savannah, GA-based Saven Corporation, which markets OSO Sweet-brand onions, says there are other benefits to bagged product.

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packaged product. Plus, it's an advantage at the register in order to get the right ring; something that's a problem if the sticker comes off on a bulk sweet."

Marty Kamer, sales manager for the Northeast office of Keystone Fruit Marketing, Inc., in Greencastle, PA, says packaging isn't what it used to be. "Today's innovative packaging includes usage tips, recipes, and nutrition details. Growers, shippers and retailers continuously strive to develop state-of-the-art packaging to catch the eye of the consumer, at the same time providing information on nutrition and utilizing products to boost sales."

3. Get Consumers Out Of Their Comfort Zone

Shoppers can get in a rut when it comes to how they enjoy sweet onions. Maybe it's always sliced in a salad or used solely as a burger topping in the summer. Retailers can tempt their customers to try something new and buy more sweet onions as a result by taking a cue from foodservice. In other words, look at how every foodservice sector from white tablecloth to quick-serve restaurants — plus food TV and celebrity chef shows — are using sweet onions and put these ideas out in-store.

The Vidalia, GA-headquartered Vidalia

Onion Committee has several high profile celebrity chefs on its Chefs Advisory Board including Spike Mendelsohn, executive chef/owner of the Good Stuff Eatery, in Washington, D.C., who uses Vidalia's onions when in season to make his famous onion rings.

The Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee, in Walla Walla, WA, will host its third annual Sweet Onion Restaurant Week in July. Last year, more than a dozen restaurants participated. Menu items included Walla Walla Sweet Onion Sandwich with heirloom tomatoes and avocados, caramelized Walla Walla sweet onion, lamb and blue cheese on grilled

Promotable Volumes for Retailers

With court removal of April 21 packing/shipping date, does it really matter?

BY BILL MARTIN

Back in December at the New York Produce Show, Delbert Bland, president and principal at Glennville, GA-based Bland Farms, expressed confidence to *PRODUCE BUSINESS* he would be successful in challenging Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black and the Georgia Department of Agriculture, which ruled that Vidalia sweet onions could not start packing and shipping before April 21. Bland opposed the ruling expressing he has onion fields in the southern-most part of the Vidalia onion district — which usually mature before any others in the district.

One fact is certain in the Vidalia onion season every year; it is the uncertain of what will take place. Even though there has been talk of production being down as much as 25 percent from lost plantings, most shippers in the district say there will be enough volume for good retail promotions this season in May.

John Shuman, president of Shuman Produce of Reidsville, GA, says despite a tough winter for all the growers, he sees a promotable crop for retailers. "Everyone says the crop will be down, but my question is, what is it going to be down from? We are going to be down from maximum production and yields, which is what we plant for, but we don't know what that will be yet," he stated.

As for the ruling in favor of Bland on the April 21 packing date by the Atlanta Judicial Circuit of the Superior Court of Fulton County, Shuman stated, "I think it is going to be a moot point this year, because we are looking at a late crop anyway. The

[packing] date may have significant long-term effects, but for 2014, I think the judge's ruling is going to be a non issue."

However, Bland may disagree. In a press release shortly after the ruling, he states, "Mother Nature will decide when our Vidalia sweet onions are ready to ship, not an arbitrary date on the calendar . . . but there remains the possibility that onions could potentially be available by Easter." Easter is April 20.

Johnny White is director of sales at Hendrix Produce in Metter, GA. He says the earliest packing date since 2005 has been April 19; the latest has been April 25.

While he believes the Vidalia industry may have lost 20 to 25 percent of its crop, he remains encouraged. Part of the reason is because Hendrix Produce reduced its onion acreage in recent years from 900 to 800 acres. But due to improved growing practices and planting procedures, onions are actually harvesting more product on fewer acres. The company also grows 300 acres of seedless watermelons.

Danny Ray is a principal in Ray Farms of Glennville, GA. His only concern having the April 21 packing date is "Vidalia onions have always been No. 1, and we want to keep the quality. It is better to leave the onions in the field a little longer and let them mature."

In a step to further that quality this season, Ray Farms replaced the roof on a shed at the facility with a higher roof to allow better airflow through the onions.

At Roberson Onion in Hazlehurst, GA, principal Steve Roberson says even with a

20 percent loss of onion stands, "there should still be promotable volume for retailers."

Roberson's operation has steadily grown to a year-around sweet onion deal — handling product not only from Georgia, but Mexico, Texas and Peru. Additionally, he now sells blueberries, sweet potatoes, apples, and watermelons.

Sales manager Brent Bryson, who came to Roberson from Wal-Mart three years ago, feels there is a good Vidalia marketable crop. "Onion samples on March 21 measured 2.5 inches to 3.5 inches in size and taste fantastic just as a Vidalia should," Bryson says. He also notes there will be onions ready for packing and shipping prior to the overturned start date of April 21, while others will need more time to mature which is typical of any season.

Shuman marketing coordinator, Adam Brady, observes every year each crop has its own problems as well as its own attributes. "You really do not know for sure what is there until the digging of onions start."

Mark Shuman, general manager at Shuman Produce described last year's Vidalia crop as a "humbling experience" and a "rough bull ride" being very hard to predict. However, the crop ended up with enough volume for good retail promotions. He says he is optimistic about this year, and then quotes from The Bible, Malachi 4:2: "But for you who revere My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves." **pb**

“Candy onions are the newest craze. They’re a large sweet onion grown by our local Amish farmers. They come in during July, right after the Vidalia’s start to finish. We’re hoping we can get a larger volume this summer, so we can build big displays and host in-store taste demos.”

— Dennis Chrisman, Dorothy Lane Markets

flatbread and a Walla Walla Sweet Onion Stuffed Burger.

The NOA recently worked with chefs and developed six foodservice sandwich recipes. These include Uptown Grilled Cheese with Sweet Onion Jam, Chicken Cobb Club with Onion Bleu Cheese Spread and a French Dip with Glazed Onions.

Sweet onion grower/shippers such as Keystone Fruit Marketing have embraced this connection and hired a corporate chef. “We set up in-store demos with Chef Dave Munson where shoppers are selected to participate as we introduce new recipes and emphasize the quality, flavor, nutrition and food safety of

authentic sweet onions,” explains Kamer. “After all, usage is one of the key decision drivers at point of sale. Thirty percent of consumers say they would buy and eat more fruits and vegetables, such as sweet onions, if they knew how to use them.”

4. Keep It Fresh

“Sweet onions were once strictly a seasonal crop sourced domestically,” says Curry & Company’s Curry. “Now, there are several varieties available during the course of all the various seasons.”

The challenge with year-round availability is that consumers get used to seeing sweet


onions on the shelf. Yet, because this availability comes as a result of several ‘seasons’ in many growing areas, there is an opportunity to keep the spotlight on sweets by highlighting each growing area as it begins.

“As certain geographic growing regions successfully extend their production windows, other less efficient areas trend down in volume,” explains Sweet Onion Trading Company’s Rogers. “I always start with Vidalia, which is still the most important. Next we have California, Washington and Nevada. In the fall and winter, we move to Peru and Mexico. Finally, South Texas comes on to finish our annual season.”

Chile, and to a smaller extent, Nicaragua also export sweet onions to the U.S.

“We have ongoing R&D projects in a variety of other countries throughout South and Central America, Europe and others,” says Keystone’s Kamer. “Future availability of authentic sweet onions from these emerging markets is yet to be determined.”

The well-publicized cold weather in Georgia this winter could potentially make the start of the season a bit tight, says Curry & Company’s Curry. “But, we expect a full season of Vidalia onions and are making promotional plans with our partners.”




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Crescent Fruit & Vegetable's DeBerry says, "We can always count on Vidalia's taking over significant volume late in the spring and the other, smaller, local deals will follow throughout summer."

One of these is Walla Walla sweet onions. Curry & Company's Curry explains, "Walla Wallas are predominately a West Coast deal. It starts in late June and overlaps with Vidalia's. We start our Hermiston Sweet onions, grown in the Columbia River Basin, in August and Hermiston SweetReds later in the fall."

Experts say retail opportunity to capitalize on domestic locally or regionally grown sweet onions is continuing its trend. Stressing the seasonality of sweet onions, the ability for consumers to buy "fresh" and alerting them to the fact that these particular onions are only available for a short time, can help drive sales. For example, many Northwest grocers will spotlight Walla Walla onions in large displays and promotions as part of a summer-long locally-grown theme.

To assist retailers, Keystone Fruit Marketing will kick off a consumer awareness campaign for the Walla Walla Sweet Onion season mid to late June. The campaign includes outdoor and radio media.

Similarly, at Dorothy Lane Market, a three-store chain in Dayton, OH, Candy onions are promoted each summer. Candy onions are large globe-shaped day-neutral onions whose sweet flavor gives them their name.

"Candy onions are the newest craze," says Dennis Chrisman, Dorothy Lane Market's vice president of human resources and produce director. "They're a large sweet onion grown by our local Amish farmers. They come in during July, right after the Vidalia's start to finish. We're hoping we can get a larger volume this summer, so we can build big displays and host in-store taste demos."

"There are several regional sweet onions," explains the NOA's Reddin. "For example, South Carolina grows a sweet onion that's available from mid-April to June."

Grand Canyon Sweets are grown in Arizona and harvested in May and June, NuMex sweet onions out of New Mexico are available from June to August, and California Imperial Sweets from April to September.

The latest trend on the sourcing front is consumer demand for year-round availability of sweet onions grown in the U.S.

Saven Corporation's Breimeister explains, "We are growing more of our onions in Cali-

fornia and Nevada now in order to extend the domestic season."

Likewise, Bland Farm's Smith asserts, "From May until the end of the year, we'll have Western sweet onions available for customers. These sweet onions originate out of California and Nevada."

Peri & Sons staggers its growing season. "Our Sweetie Sweet growing season is staggered with one harvest in California and one in Nevada," says Elrod. "Our summer Sweetie Sweets begin in July and should extend into the first week or so of August depending on yields and demand, even though we cut back on total planted acreage because of severe drought in California. Sweetie takes a short 3- to 4-week break as we transition over to Nevada. Then, Sweetie makes her fall debut the second week of September and will be available through December."

"The time period of January through early March seems to be the most difficult time of year to find domestic storage supplies of sweet onions," adds Elrod. "Seed companies are aware of this need for domestics and are working to grow varieties that will produce a mild sweet flavor after having been in long-term storage." **pb**

Tomatoes: An Old Favorite Takes Many New Forms

Examine consumer habits and taste profiles to increase sales. BY BOB JOHNSON



Experts agree, tomato sales begin with a display artfully composed and meticulously culled to maintain visual appeal.

This old favorite is diversifying as tomato consumers discover more uses and more varieties, each well suited to a multitude of meal creations.

“Some consumers choose their tomatoes based on purpose — salad, snacking, or slicer. Others may go for flavor, which can vary based on individual tastes. Yet, others look for the healthy factors, all natural, greenhouse grown, and/or local,” says Douglas Kling, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at Village Farms, Heathrow, FL.

Snack Or Slice

If there is a single mega trend driving change in tomatoes, it is the desire for convenience. This translates into the popularity of varieties that can be popped into your mouth without taking time to slice.

“Consumers are looking for snacking and bite-sized products. They are also looking for convenience in packaging. Consumers’ eating habits have changed somewhat. The traditional family meal is giving way to less structured eating habits,” says Fried De Schouwer, president of Greenhouse Produce, Vero Beach, FL. “People are on the move and want convenient

food. Snacking tomatoes are the future — grape tomatoes, cherry tomatoes and the packaging that goes with them to make them available to consumers.”

J. Michael Joergensen, marketing director at NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX, agrees: “Our research shows that consumers desire a certain tomato for a certain usage occasion. For example, in salads, the No. 1 usage occasion for fresh tomatoes, consumers prefer a small tomato for its high flavor and ease of use with no slicing. Same for snacking. For sandwiches, however, consumers prefer a tomato that can be sliced.”

While the rise of snacking varieties is the greatest trend in tomatoes, there is also a continuing trend toward more diversity in the slicing tomatoes, as consumers expect to see hothouse, tomatoes on the vine, and even heirloom varieties in the display.

“Greenhouse tomatoes are probably more popular than two or three years ago,” says Jim Munguia, sales manager at Del Campo Supreme, Nogales, AZ. “The retailers are trending toward hothouse tomatoes rather than field grown because of the consistency, color, sizing, and food safety.”

The growing popularity of snacking toma-

atoes, especially the assorted grape tomatoes, coupled with greater diversity of slicing varieties makes today’s tomato display more varied and complex than just a decade ago.

“I probably put out 18 to 25 tomato SKUs,” says Jeff Cady, produce and floral manager for TOPS Friendly Markets, Buffalo, NY. “Ten years ago, it would have been half that, but you have all the different grape tomatoes — the yellow, the sweet, the cocktail, the medley and others.”

Within that mixed display, the slicers still command a majority of total sales at TOPS, at least for now. “It’s probably 60 to 40 percent or 55 to 45 percent for the slicing tomatoes, including the tomatoes on the vine and the hothouse tomatoes,” says Cady.

According to Cady, the growing complexity of the category means that for an effective tomato program, 20 or more varieties must be sourced, displayed, culled and promoted well.

“We see retailers that align their assortment with consumer preferences and shopping habits have the best success,” says Joergensen. “They avoid having too much stock of slower-moving items, and they set their displays to drive sales of the highest-value items. In addition, successful retailers provide usage ideas

at the point of sale and regularly rotate their product to maximize shelf life of the tomatoes they have on hand.”

Displays, Promotions And Taste

Tomato sales begin with a display artfully composed and meticulously culled to maintain visual appeal.

“The majority of produce purchases are impulse driven, so tomatoes have to be appealing to the eye. Freshness of the vine or

calyx in the case of Beef or TOV, or bright colors with shiny skins indicate a fresh tomato is on display,” says Jim DiMenna, president and chief executive of JemD Farms, Leamington, Ontario.

Dionysios Christou, vice president for marketing at Del Monte Fresh Produce, Coral Gables, FL, agrees, “Consumers consider visual appeal to be an important part of a quality produce department, so retailers should remember to keep their tomato displays full,

“The majority of produce purchases are impulse driven, so tomatoes have to be appealing to the eye. Freshness of the vine or calyx in the case of Beef or TOV, or bright colors with shiny skins indicate a fresh tomato is on display.”

— Jim DiMenna, JemD Farms

clean, and well organized at all times. Red, ripe tomatoes should be placed in the front of displays since they move quicker, and bruised or overripe fruit should be removed.”

Promotions can move the product, especially in the hot summer months when the harvest is most abundant.

“Price is very important in driving sales. We use ads for retailers to boost purchases and to fuel promotion,” says Lyle Bagley, sales and marketing team member at Pacific Tomato Growers, Palmetto, FL.

But a beautiful display of tomatoes priced to move will fail if tomatoes don’t pass the taste test.

“Price will always play a factor in driving sales, but if the tomatoes don’t deliver on flavor and freshness, your tomatoes could be free and you’d still experience disappointing results,” asserts JemD’s DiMenna. “Aggressively priced tomatoes might influence a shopper to try a new variety, but if there’s a poor eating experience associated with them, our data indicates it will be 21 to 28 days before that same shopper will even consider buying that item again.”

Just as there are many varieties to suit many uses, tastes abound as well. “Tomatoes deliver several different flavor profiles from sweet to savory as well as texture nuances that are ideal for specific applications,” says DiMenna. “For example, our Heritage and Cocoa tomatoes have flavor profiles and textures that can elevate a BLT sandwich or burger to a whole new level. Our cherry tomatoes, Chef’s Tomato Collection, or grape tomatoes can turn a simple salad or pasta recipe into something truly special with the depth of flavor and textures our tomatoes add.”

Flavor is so important that most consumers



will pay a little more for tomatoes they know will pass the taste test. "A hot price may drive a sale to a given consumer one time. However, consumers that have a bad experience will not be back — they are more sensitive to waste than to price," says Joergensen. "Over time, we are seeing consumers gravitating to higher flavor tomatoes. This past year, the average price per pound consumers paid for fresh tomatoes rose 12 percent. This number has been increasing year over year for several years now."

The priority of taste over price is particularly important for grape, heirloom and organic tomatoes. "When referring to bulk purchases, price has a great impact on sales. Price has less of an impact on grape tomato sales because they tend to be relatively price-inelastic, and consumers who prefer grape tomatoes will purchase them regardless of cost," says Christou.

Demand for great tasting tomatoes figures to increase as more consumers think they have turned the corner on their personal finances.

"It's a matter of making the product taste good enough so that the consumers come back. Produce sales have stabilized. We're coming out of the downturn with better consumption of

"Price is very important in driving sales. We use ads for retailers to boost purchases and to fuel promotion."

— Lyle Bagley, Pacific Tomato Growers

fruits and vegetables," says Greenhouse Produce's De Schouwer.

Keep 'Em Moving

The key to keeping the display looking good and reducing shrink is to keep the tomatoes moving. "Providing menu ideas and serving suggestions are critical to sales growth. Millennials and Gen Xers are groups most likely to experiment with new foods and recipes, so if you provide shoppers with ideas on how best to use the tomatoes, you will experience much higher sales," says JemD's DiMenna. "Collaborative recipe demos that provide complete and simple meal solutions to support sales are a

great avenue to pursue."

Demonstrations can play an important role in promotion. "Some retailers cook dishes in-store and let consumers sample foods to boost sales of each individual ingredient. Tomatoes have been a large part of these promotions," says Bagley of Pacific Tomato Growers.


Signs can also help spread the word about the cooking possibilities and nutritional benefits of this versatile fruit. "Retailers may place small signage around the product describing the health benefits, nutritional information and proper handling instructions. We encourage retailers to use information brochures, price cards and recipe cards to their full potential in order to attract and educate consumers," says Del Monte Fresh Produce's Christou.

In today's markets, the most effective signage is often on the Internet. "Retailers can utilize social media, websites, recipe cards at sampling stations, or recipes on the back of register receipts. The more unique the delivery, the more powerful the response," says Village Farms' Kling.

But velocity starts with sourcing reliably high quality tomatoes. "The key to avoiding shrink is quality and rotation. If retailers focus

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Heirlooms And Organics Still Thrive In Hard Times

BY BOB JOHNSON

Demand for premium-priced heirloom and organic tomatoes continue to grow, even in hard times.

“We are doing a much larger business than a few years ago. Anyone that buys heirloom tomatoes knows tomatoes,” says Peter Kroner, director of business development at Eli & Ali’s, Brooklyn, NY. “There aren’t that many shippers of heirloom tomatoes and that has been one of our core products for a long time.”

Consumer demand for the heirlooms increases as more people learn about the special varieties, which may have been left behind because they lack high yields, disease resistance or shipability.

“Demand is across the board. Of course it is strongest in your upscale demographics, but even in your middle class stores there is demand for heirloom tomatoes,” says Kroner.

Even stores with relatively modest demand for heirlooms find interest

increasing. “Organic and heirloom tomatoes are growing, for sure. You get more requests for heirlooms as more people know about them. We’ve doubled our heirloom tomatoes in the past three to five years, but we weren’t doing that much to begin with,” says Jeff Cady, produce and floral manager for TOPS Friendly Markets, Williamsville, NY.

The heirloom tomatoes continue to gain favor, even when displayed at a premium price. “If we have slicers at \$3-a-pound, we try to price heirlooms at \$4-a-pound,” says Cady.

According to Eli & Ali’s Kroner, the premium for organic heirlooms is typically 40 to 50 percent, but can be as little as 35 percent.

These sales are uniquely not driven by price.

“We don’t promote heirlooms. We try to stay away from the commodity driven market,” says Kroner.

The heirloom varieties have such striking visual appeal that the display sells itself. “Heirlooms are unique. You can cross merchandise them with oils or other products, but they pretty much stand alone. The colors are what’s intriguing,” says Kroner.

Spring and summer time are when heirloom tomato lovers look for their sun-kissed favorites. “In the summer, everybody wants heirloom tomatoes. In the winter, people want them because there is a carryover from the summer, but they don’t have that summer flavor because they are greenhouse,” says Lucky Lee, owner of Lucky’s Real Tomatoes, Brooklyn, NY.

Kroner agrees, “Demand at this time of year is lighter than in the spring, summer or fall. The heirlooms grown in greenhouses look beautiful, but they don’t taste as good as the field grown. We concentrate on the field grown.” **pb**

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first more on purchasing a quality tomato than they will have less shrink in their stores. Once there, they need to rotate,” says Christou.

Developing relationships with growers who can supply reliable quality is key. “Shrink reduction is a concern that should be commonly shared by both growers and retailers. Choosing the right tomato supply partner is the first step,” says DiMenna. “Tomatoes are the No. 1 vegetable in produce dollar sales and tonnage, so there are a wide variety of SKU’s to support demand. Grower/shippers have to work closely with their retail partners to make certain the right assortment is on display to maximize turns and keep shrink in line.”

Sourcing tomatoes from growers closer to the store can help improve quality and reduce shrink. “One method of avoiding shrink would be buying local, fresher product with less of a carbon footprint, and picked fresher off the vine if it is a true, all-natural, greenhouse product,” says Kling.

Despite the proliferation of varieties that make the category ever more complex, tomato merchandising is still simple.

“You see tomatoes packaged in different ways, but it’s still the same tomato,” advises Alberto Maldonado, manager at Melones Internacional, Nogales, AZ. “Be fair in the price, and have good quality tomatoes.” **pb**



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Mini Melons Embraced In A Big Way

Opportunities abound for savvy merchandisers. **BY LIZZ SCHUMER**



According to NWPB's data, watermelon purchases have been much higher than other melon types, hovering at around 68-73 percent of all purchased melons, while cantaloupes clock in at 57-77 percent and honeydew at 29-37 percent — the lowest of all measured fruits.

Retailers can capitalize on melon popularity by stocking all shapes and sizes — including the sensational mini melon — using bright, colorful displays that tell customers what they want to know: why melons are great for heart health and fitness refueling.

Lycopene-rich watermelons, palate-pleasing cantaloupes and honeydews may be the nation's next superfruits, if health-conscious consumers who crave their vitamin-rich flesh and range of sweet flavors have anything to say about it.

With the introduction of mini melons and the rise of value-added, cut fruit in stores, retailers have more ways to get these summer favorites off the shelves and into homes across the country.

Season's Forecast Feedback

Watermelon purchasing is highest during

the summer, to the tune of between 89 and 93 percent from 2008-13, according to data collected by Rose Research LLC for the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB).

As for this year's watermelon crop, Gordon Hunt, director of marketing and communications for the NWPB, points to the droughts in California and a rough winter throughout the country as potential hiccups for this year's start. The spring season is already kicking off for Mexican watermelon.

In May, watermelon production moves stateside, to the western United States, namely Arizona and the California Imperial Valley. It will continue in parts of Central and Northern California until Labor Day.

Eastern watermelon production will start in Southern Florida in mid-April. According to Michael Martori, vice president of East Coast sales for the Scottsdale, AZ-based Pura Vida Farms, Inc., Southern Florida's growing condi-

tions have been better than last year, when "poor weather had a significantly negative impact on the crop."

Florida will produce watermelon from mid-April until mid-June, with some areas continuing through the Fourth of July. Most of the Eastern watermelon production in June comes from Georgia, but there will also be fruit available in Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina.

Production in these areas will continue through July, then Indiana, Illinois, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Missouri will start production in late July to early August, running through Labor Day.

Western cantaloupe, also grown primarily in Arizona and California, typically starts in early May and continues until about the first of December.

This year, according to Pura Vida's Martori, "Growing conditions have been



favorable, and with the warm temperatures we've had during the growing season, it's likely Western production will start on the early side — perhaps as early as the first week of May, but certainly by the second.”

Eastern cantaloupe are grown in most states east of the Mississippi, with the majority of production coming from Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Indiana. Eastern cantaloupe are available from mid-April through November, with very little production after Labor Day. The growing conditions have also been favorable in the East, and good volume and an early start is projected.

Martori says there are some honeydew and variety melons grown in the Eastern United States, but the vast majority of production is the same as Western cantaloupe, and availability mirrors that varietal accordingly.

Off The Shelf

So how to get these melons out of the fields, onto the shelves and into the hands of consumers?

Milas Russell, president and marketing director of Sandstone Marketing and Melon Company out of Yuma, AZ, says it's often all about teaching consumers how to use melons in recipes.

“Vegetables are a planned purchase, but fruits are impulsive,” he explains. “People buy vegetables because they're going to cook with them, but they buy fruit because it tastes good fresh.”

His company has a chef to develop recipes to utilize Sandstone's specialized melon varieties, including the sweet, “melt in your mouth” Sugar Kiss and the dense, smoother Autumn Kiss. According to Russell, once

“We max out our displays, with bins of the 6-pounders in the center, 16 to a bin. We tried all different sizes, and we usually have some specialty melons on bins to the sides of the bigger ones, to show variety.”

— Daniel O'Connor, TOPS Friendly Markets

people taste the specialty varieties, they'll keep coming back.

Daniel O'Connor, assistant category manager at TOPS Friendly Markets, a supermarket chain with over 100 stores throughout New York and Pennsylvania, says he found the “traditional, 6-pound melons are what people keep coming back to, because that's what they know,” but he tends to stack displays to create a “fresh-market” image.

“We max out our displays, with bins of the 6-pounders in the center, 16 to a bin,” he says. “We tried all different sizes, and we usually have some specialty melons on bins to the sides of the bigger ones, to show variety.”

O'Connor also runs ads that feature “Melon Madness,” to get customers into the store and picking up the fruit, although he hasn't found sampling in-store has made much of a difference in sales.

According to the NWPB's data, watermelon

purchases have been much higher than other melon types, hovering at around 68-73 percent of all purchased melons, while cantaloupes clock in at 57-77 percent and honeydew at 29-37 percent — the lowest of all measured fruits.

“Melons have an image problem,” asserts Sandstone's Russell. “A lot of people think cantaloupe doesn't taste as good as watermelon, that they're not as sweet. And well, it just isn't true.”

Martori says he's in favor of the “pile them high and watch them fly” strategy when it comes to selling melons — since consumers are drawn to bountiful-looking, colorful displays. “Building large displays of melons, either on table displays or in bins, creates the best presentation and attracts the most customer attention,” he says.

“Melon sales typically peak around the holidays; Memorial Day and Fourth of July see some of the heaviest promotional periods among retailers. But as the temperatures rise, and summer activities commence, melons are featured on a near-weekly basis in produce departments. Many retailers have an annual melon promotion, where they bring in large amounts of all the different melons and aggressively promote the category as a whole,” says Martori.

Other than those peak melon-eating holidays, Martori says, the best time to promote sales is at the top of each crop, when the fruits look lush, prices are lower and retailers can promote the fruits as locally grown.

Cut fruit sales have also increased in recent years. “Think about it,” says NWPB's Hunt, “If you're a city person, and you live in an apartment, what are you going to want to lug home: a 60-pound watermelon or a 6-pound box of



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To better serve customers, Grower Alliance has added various services in addition to product sales. The company offers consolidation services for com-

panies outside of Nogales that want to load in one location as opposed to picking up in different warehouses. Three years ago, Grower Alliance began shipping through McAllen, TX to better serve customers and keep a fluid working relationship with them. "Utilizing McAllen as a shipping point allows us to continue servicing our customers through both the McAllen and Nogales seasons," says Jorge Quintero Jr., a co-founder of Grower Alliance.

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Grower Alliance is dedicated to quality and food

safety standards. Since the inception of the company, it has made every effort to stay on top of food safety programs and ensure delivery of a product virtually free of food safety issues. All Grower Alliance growers are both GAP and GMP certified, and all fields have been certified for pesticide residue with either Primus Labs or Scientific Certification Systems. Grower Alliance also uses a traceability program through its produce software, Optima Produce.

The company puts great emphasis on honesty and integrity in business. Grower Alliance takes seri-

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Tomatoes, cucumbers and greenhouse bell peppers from Nogales and McAllen.

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watermelons, mini watermelons, honeydews, cucumbers, Italian/grey/yellow straightneck squash, green bell peppers, cucumbers and hot peppers.

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greenhouse-grown beefsteak tomatoes, Roma tomatoes and bell peppers (through McAllen)

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watermelons, mini watermelons, honeydews, cucumbers, Italian/grey/yellow straightneck squash, and hot peppers (starting late September through Nogales)

WINTER *(mid-November)*

watermelons, mini watermelons, honeydews, cucumbers, Italian/grey/yellow straightneck squash, green beans, euro cucumbers, eggplant, and green bell peppers.

ously its role to ally top-notch growers with successful customers to benefit all parties and provide the end consumer with excellent product. "I believe Grower Alliance has grown and been successful due to our honesty and our relaxed approach to getting the job done with excellence," says Quintero. "Our customers know us for our integrity and are comfortable working with us. We understand that there is a time and place for everything, just like there is a market for everything. We strive to be upfront and transparent with our customers about everything - so we stay on the same page and work together. I truly feel blessed by God in our business

and pray and praise Him every morning for it."

SUPPORTING GROWERS

Grower Alliance's success is founded in the support it provides its growers, helping them grow and prosper and promoting loyalty. By helping growers expand operations and investing in the growing communities, the company ensures high quality, consistent product and good working conditions among its producers.

A major area of support given by Grower Alliance is in expansion of infrastructure. Grower Alliance has been able to purchase and install several cold rooms

at growers' packing sheds. The company has also assisted its growers in the acquisition of more land. It also supplies growers with drip irrigation systems and cover for their plants and assists them with the purchase of shadehouse systems.

Another crucial area of producer support for Grower Alliance is in the area of food safety programs and audits. Grower Alliance has two employees who facilitate the audits for its growers. Additionally the personnel help growers set up their sheds and fields on par with current standards.

YOUR ALLIES



BACK ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Frank Hernandez II, Luis Alcantara, Jorge Quintero, Jr., Jaime Martinez
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“We’re pushing heart health. We’re telling retailers to have it on hand, and think of it for Sweetheart’s Day, for weight loss, for winter. People like it for taste, but they’re buying it for health and that sector gets larger every year.”

— Gordon Hunt, National Watermelon Promotion Board



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watermelon chunks? You’re gonna go for a mini melon or cut fruit, every time.”

Plus, he says, “People’s houses are getting smaller. We don’t have the fridge space we used to. That’s where smaller varieties and cut fruit comes in.”

Martori also recommends slicing the fruit as part of party trays or mixing — this adds to its appeal. Retailers can also use fruit that may not be attractive enough to display whole, or may be slightly riper, to promote in-store cutting, which would otherwise be shrunk out of displays and thrown away.

“Cut fruit is rising in popularity, not only due to the convenience factor, but also because consumers can see the quality of the fruit,” explains Martori. “It removes the risk that a customer will buy a melon, take it home, cut it and realize that it is over-ripe, under-ripe, or of poor quality.”

He adds many customers find it difficult to determine whether a melon is ripe, and they tend to perceive cut fruit as riper, in general. But Martori, Hunt and Russell all agree cut fruit isn’t just a sales method; it’s a marketing tool, as well.

A Marketing Tool

“Many retailers will display melons that have been cut in half and wrapped in plastic on their entire melon displays. For display purposes only, these samples give customers some of the same visual information they would get from cut fruit and inspires confidence in the quality of the whole melons,” says Martori.

A representative from Hannaford Bros. Co. says the chain doesn’t typically deal much in the fruit except when in season, and when it doesn’t look its best, stores cut it up and make it look better. He said stores located in “melon country” may have longer seasons, but in New England (where Hannaford is based) the window for great melons can be brief, so the melon displays have to make it count.

The NWPB’s data shows that customers are drawn to not only the eye-popping color of the fruit, but the health benefits, as well. About half

of the customers surveyed say they want to see nutritional information displayed on bins, in keeping with trends toward healthier eating, nationally.

Fortunately for those health-conscious shoppers, melons make the cut. Watermelons are the lycopene leader among fresh produce, and also contain high levels of vitamins A and C, and a high level of vitamin B6. It’s also an excellent source of potassium.

Research conducted at several universities show rats that were fed watermelon were more active, lost weight, and the fruit had a tremendous affect on the cardiac system.

“The body converts [an amino acid present in watermelon] into nitric oxide, which relaxes blood vessels, arteries in particular,” says NWPB’s Hunt. “It reduces the incidence of hypertension, what we used to call hardening of the arteries, which is going to kill most men. Doctors are going to start prescribing more watermelon year-round.”

But that’s not the only benefit of the fruit. “It’s great for muscle recovery, after a long run or exercise session,” asserts Hunt. “A lot of long-distance runners are starting to use watermelon juice instead of sports drinks because it’s all-natural, it tastes great, and it doesn’t have all the extra chemicals those other things have. It’s a major impact.”

In addition, the fruit is low in fat and calories yet high in fiber and water, as well as great-tasting all year long, according to NWPB’s Hunt.

“We’re pushing heart health. We’re telling retailers to have it on hand, and think of it for Sweetheart’s Day, for weight loss, for winter. People like it for taste, but they’re buying it for health and that sector gets larger every year.”

So, whether stocking mini melons for easy carrying, larger melons to serve a crowd or specialty melons for versatile cooking, the many melon varieties provide unique benefits.

Sampling, providing recipes, health and nutritional facts and ensuring the display is big and bright enough to draw impulse buyers are all ways to make melons fly off the shelves, just as fast as you can say “Melon Madness.” **pb**

Merchandising To Match Walnut Demand

Explore the category and discover opportunities to increase sales in Produce. **BY MICHELE SOTALLARO**



When it comes to the handling of walnuts once in-store, retailers should practice good inventory management — including rotating stock and limiting excess inventory beyond what can reasonably turn.

Walnuts are the oldest tree food known to man, with records dating back to 7,000 B.C., according to the Folsom, CA-based California Walnut Board and Commission. During recent years, the nut has quickly grown in popularity with production holding steady against almonds and pistachios — especially in the export business.

“The lion’s share of about 80 percent of walnuts is exported, and roughly 20 percent is used here in the U.S.,” says Rich Sambado, president of the Linden, CA-based Primavera Marketing, Inc., which grows, packs and markets walnuts in addition to cherries and apples.

“The entire world is hungry for walnuts right now,” echoes Paul DeFranco, president of Los Angeles, CA-based fruit and nut packer and shipper, DeFranco & Sons. “There is a huge demand, and [as a California state industry] we are at the highest level of export prices this year. In fact, prices are at the highest level in the history of growing walnuts in California.”

DeFranco explains that current acreage for commercially grown walnuts is around 200,000 acres throughout the Central Valley and in coastal valleys (spanning from Redding in the North to Bakersfield in the South).

It’s no wonder that the Central Valley of California is the state’s prime walnut growing region. According to the website of Winters, CA-based Mariani Nut Company, the area’s mild climate and deep fertile soils provide ideal growing conditions for the California walnut, and account for 99 percent of the commercial U.S. supply, and two-thirds of the world supply.

According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, walnut production in 2012 (at 470,000 tons) was up 2 percent from the previous year. The record-breaking value of 2011’s walnut crop was \$1.3 billion. China and the U.S. account for more than 75 percent of total output.

Industry members share their thoughts on how to maintain this demand for walnuts through retail outlets and promotions for consumers. Experts agree that care with storage and handling is important before the product even hits the sale’s floor. Unique merchandising approaches and creative uses will help capture consumer attention when shopping the produce department.

Merchandising Creativity

With strong storage and handling methods in place, on the front and back end of inventory, consumers will consistently have great

quality product to choose from. Then it’s a matter of deciding the best ways to highlight the product for shoppers to consider purchasing walnuts for a variety of uses.

The California Walnut Board is taking the nutritional route by providing retailers (including Hy-Vee, Wegmans, Target, Kroger, Safeway, Meijer and Raley’s) with marketing collateral this month to support May’s Mediterranean Diet Month.

“With walnuts being a traditional component of the Mediterranean Diet, California Walnut Board is challenging supermarkets across the U.S. to go ‘walnutty’ in their stores,” says Jennifer Olmstead, marketing director for the domestic division of the California Walnut Board. “There’s been a growth in grocers hiring in-store dietitians who can help customers make decisions about what they feed their families. In essence, supermarket dietitians are natural in-store ambassadors for healthy eating.”

The initiative challenges registered dietitians to decorate their stores with walnut flare, provide walnut demos, as well as utilize newsletters and social media to offer customers helpful information for incorporating walnuts into their diets. The stores demonstrating the most walnut-involvement could win up to \$1,000.

“There are many opportunities to promote

walnuts in the produce section of grocery stores,” says Howard Brandeisky, senior vice president of global marketing and customer solutions with Elgin, IL-based nut processor and packer, John B. Sanfilippo & Son, Inc.

“Our Orchard Valley Harvest brand offers turn-key promotional tools to help retailers promote the brand in the produce section by offering produce relevant consumer incentives and salad recipe ideas.

“The most impactful merchandising comes from product displays. Walnut consumption skews to the holidays, but periodic displays during other times of the year can also be impactful — as they drive impulse purchase, whether as a recipe ingredient or a nutritious snack,” asserts Brandeisky.

“Salad recipe ideas represent the best cross-merchandising opportunities for walnuts in the produce section. They add crunch, flavor and protein to any salad, and they can help drive impulse purchases throughout the year,” says Brandeisky.

Primavera’s Sambado agrees that cross-merchandising walnuts in the bagged salad section is smart. “The 1-pound bagged walnuts are most popular for retailers.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA WALNUT BOARD AND COMMISSION

Walnut consumption skews to the holidays, but experts say periodic displays during other times of the year can also be impactful to drive impulse sales.

Stephanie Blackwell, founder and president of Orange, CT-based Aurora Products, is a fan of this merchandising tactic as well. “A Waldorf salad would be a great item for the summer [to promote]. Mix walnuts with celery, apples and raisins.” She also reports that Aurora does well with shelled walnuts in retail packs.

“We carry bulk in-shell walnuts from a bulk vendor — Hopii Organic Farms out of Dove Creek, CO,” says Maroka Kawamura, produce

director of the seven-store Santa Cruz, CA-based retailer, New Leaf Community Markets. “The shelled do better overall, in-shell are very popular for the holidays, and we display the in-shell in a barrel or free standing display.”

Inspiring Recipes

In addition to the traditional snacking and the ever-popular salad usage, the walnut industry is spreading lots of creative ideas and uses for walnuts and produce pairings, as well as promoting more varieties.

“The Chandler variety is one of the newest and clearly one of the most desirable walnuts,” says Aurora’s Blackwell. “They are very light in color and large with thin shells that produce a high half-count percentage. California Red Walnuts have a vibrant red color and taste similar to Chandlers. They are fairly scarce. Walnuts sourced from the Middle East and India are grown for the most part in natural groves. These old trees retain many old growth traits not found today in the newer western varieties.”

“With the cost of pine nuts so astronomical, walnuts are a good substitute in pesto,” asserts New Leaf’s Kawamura.

“There are many simple and delicious ways to enjoy walnuts,” says the California Walnut Board’s Olmstead. “A serving of walnuts can be a delicious topping with fruit on Greek yogurt to add texture and taste; garnish soups with a handful of walnut pieces for added surprise and texture; toss a few walnuts into your morning smoothie to boost your daily protein, fiber and omega-3’s; add some crunch to your stir-fry by tossing in some walnut pieces.”

Olmstead also explains that a handful of walnuts 30 minutes before eating provides satiety, which can help prevent overindulging, and before a gym session, or outdoor activity, can fuel the workout.

Storage And Handling

“**W**hen it comes to the handling of walnuts once in store, retailers should obviously practice good inventory management — including rotating stock and limiting excess inventory beyond what can reasonably turn,” says Howard Brandeisky, senior vice president of global marketing and customer solutions with Elgin, IL-based nut processor and packer, John B. Sanfilippo & Son, Inc.

“Retailers can help maintain product quality by keeping walnuts in a temperature-controlled environment,” says Brandeisky. “It is not necessary to refrigerate walnuts, but heat is not a friend of walnuts.”

“Walnuts are an oily nut. Ideally, they should be kept refrigerated,” says Stephanie Blackwell, founder and president of Orange, CT-based Aurora Products. “As this is impractical in an ambient retail environment, stores should order walnuts as needed and carefully rotate their shelves. Store operators should not expose the walnuts to direct sunlight as this will cause fading of color and hasten

rancidity. Back-room storage should not be in a high-humidity location. Stores should also be careful to let their stock run low at the end of a crop year to make space for the new crop.”

“It is best to avoid hot warehouses or hot storage conditions, particularly in the summer months,” advises Brandeisky. “The air-conditioned environment of a typical retail grocery store is fine.”

If a retailer is working with storage space, Rich Sambado, president of the Linden, CA-based Primavera Marketing, Inc., which grows, packs and markets walnuts in addition to cherries and apples, says 40°F is ideal to maintain freshness.

“For storage up to six months, refrigerate at 32°F to 41°F at 65 percent relative humidity,” says Jennifer Olmstead, marketing director for the domestic division of the California Walnut Board. “For storage longer than six months, freeze at 0°F. Store in air-tight packaging away from foods with strong odors, such as cabbage and onions, and practice FIFO (First In, First Out) product rotation.”

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DO WHAT YOU SAY!



In the world of retail, strategies often are dictated by the desire to be on the cutting-edge of the industry. Management is always looking for new ways to entice the consumer to shop the store. The mentality of “what have you done for me lately” permeates the organization. It often results in a hectic chase from one direction to another — resulting in neither objective reached. Many times, I witnessed an organ-

ization driven by senior management make statements heading in one direction only to change course without completing the initial effort. I always encourage management to finish one operation before beginning another to show consistency and confidence to the consumer, but “They just don’t get it!”

Produce is often at the forefront of these initiatives, and staff is asked by management to say certain things — even make promises to suppliers, to convince them to support the initiative. To their credit, suppliers nearly always agree to the proposal and throw the full support of their operation behind the direction provided by retailers. They do this time and time again, despite the outcome of previous initiatives. They show remarkable resiliency when asked to deliver various aspects of the initiative and then are called upon again to change direction on a dime. It speaks well of companies that are so willing to deliver what they say respond quickly to the demands, and adjust to opposite directions from retailers.

Retailers have lots to learn from the follow-through and integrity of the actions and compliance from the suppliers. I have long argued with retail management about the need to complete an initiative before changing direction and heading off toward another sunset. The attitude is often totally indifferent to the suggestion, and the mindset is “the suppliers will do whatever we want them to do, whenever we want them to do it.”

The most progressive retailers do not have this mindset and actually work very hard to honor every request made of the suppliers. Needless to say, they enjoy a much stronger and cooperative rela-

tionship with their supplier base. The strategy of these retailers is to simply do what they say they’re going to do, when they say they will do it. It’s not a novel concept and can pay tremendous dividends down the road in any future interactions.

To change this mindset does not require a quantum leap of faith. All that is needed is an adjustment to the retailer’s attitude, which can be demanding and oftentimes arrogant, to one that follows through on its commitments. This can be a painful process, at times, when management clings to the old belief that the retailer has the upper hand in these negotiations and can ask for anything it wants.

Many forward-thinking retail companies have done this with great success, and as a result, happen to be some of the most innovative in the industry. They pair strong supplier relationships with an attitude to accept new ideas and concepts suggested by suppliers, that may or may not be in their present thinking. While this may be in direct competition with conventional thinking, it represents an opportunity to move forward by stepping out of a comfort zone and into a new world of cooperation and collaboration.

I am confident that suppliers would welcome this change and embrace the opportunity to work on an even playing field.

This action would also help to

ease the suspicion and tension between retailers and suppliers that is evident, and seems to permeate the entire industry. Changing this seemingly one-way street into a free flow of information, ideas, and commitment could not help but move the industry forward.

There is an old adage in the produce industry that your reputation is only as good as your word. Adhering to this principle catapulted the reputation of many industry icons into history as great, innovative, and compassionate leaders who cared about everyone in the industry, and tried to make every situation a win for all. Perhaps the industry could benefit from a glance into the past to observe the integrity and commitment, which helped to build the industry into the entity it has become. Everyone can benefit from returning to a time when your word was your bond, and you carried out what you said you would. I am certain it would be a better industry to work in, allowing us to continue to grow as a complete industry, and advance to the next level.

pb

Retailers have a lot to learn from the follow-through and integrity of the actions and compliance from the suppliers. I have long argued with retail management about the need to complete an initiative before changing direction and heading off toward another sunset.

By Don Harris

Don Harris is a 40-year veteran of the produce industry, with most of that time spent in retail. He has worked in every aspect of the industry, from “field-to-fork” in both the conventional and organic arenas. Harris is presently consulting on all subjects of retail, category development and sales strategies, among others. Comments can be directed to editor@producebusiness.com



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US APPLE EXPORTS TO THE EU & RUSSIA: STILL POTENTIAL, BUT NOT STRAIGHT FORWARD



The U.S. still remains one of the biggest apple producers in the world at around 5 percent — after China, which dominates at a massive 48 percent — and is closely followed by Poland, Turkey, India, France and Italy. However, while world production has grown by just over 20 percent in a 10-year period, from 57 million to 69 million tons, U.S. production has fallen from 4.6 million to 4.2 million tons — a fall of some 10 percent.

In terms of overall exports from the U.S., these have increased over the past 10 years from around 660,000 tons to more than 890,000 tons. While traditional, “close to home” NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) markets still account for a high percentage of international sales, much of this export growth has been driven by new markets in South East Asia and the Middle East.

Europe, the U.K. in particular, has always been an important part of the overall U.S. exports mix. But in recent years, volume has fallen considerably. Exports to other EU markets, especially in Scandinavia have normally been relatively modest and seen as a useful “add on” to business for the U.S. industry to have rather than a fundamental driver. Growth in exports to Russia has acted as some counter balance to the fall in U.S. exports to Europe over the past 10 years, but has not been rapid enough to compensate for the overall fall in exports to the EU 28 [member states].

Russia still remains a difficult place to do business for many. With almost 150 million consumers, and the economy still growing strong, there are clear opportunities for the U.S. apple sector. With the current tense situation, the Ukraine might impact the appetite of U.S. exporters to do business there in the immediate future.

Does the decline in U.S. exports to Europe mean we have fallen out of love with the U.S. apple sector? Not necessarily. It is as much a reflection of the fact that U.S. fruit production has been falling. At the same time, U.S. growers and exporters have spotted the increasing demand for their fruit from Asia and the Middle East and taken full advantage of it. One might say something of a double whammy, in

effect. U.S. exporters have been quick in developing new markets in these parts of the world.

Having said that, improving quality from suppliers such as Italy, Poland and Turkey, especially in the all-important German market, has put pressure on the U.S. position in the EU market. And while the EU Common Agricultural Policy has gone through a fundamental reform in the past 12 months — and the fresh produce sector has a relatively light policy regime — for many outside the EU, it sometimes feels as if the basic position in Europe is to still keep out imports from third countries, not encourage them. Trade support for U.S. apples, especially in the key U.K. market, is still strong. But uncertainty caused by EU legislation on maximum residue levels for fruit coatings and then DPA (diphenylamine) treatments for scald have meant that U.S.-based packers had to run dedicated export packing lines to handle the EU market. Packers that invested in packing lines have invariably done well.

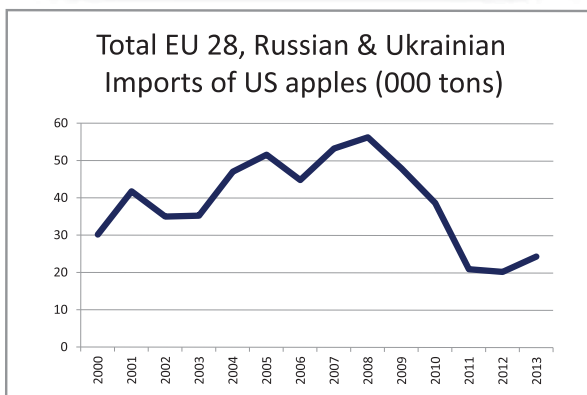
Europe is still, however, a fundamentally attractive place for U.S. apple exports. It is still one of the most expansive produce markets in the world — 500 million consumers, in 28 countries with relatively high levels of consumer affluence, legal and banking systems that work, good communications and physical infrastructure, and transparent routes to market.

EU retailers, such as Tesco, Carrefour, Casino, ALDI and Lidl, will also be highly influential in the development of retailing in the emerging markets and will take their knowledge, expertise and supply chain disciplines from Europe with them. For U.S. exporters, even if not trading in the EU, the influence of how EU retailers operate is clear to see.

The U.S. industry has had to increasingly focus on its high quality, premium position in international markets. Europe should fit the bill here, but while the other NAFTA markets are of extreme importance, the real growth for U.S. exports is coming from emerging markets. Europe is probably on the back burner, but should not be ignored. Building export markets to the EU has taken a good deal of time and effort in the past. Re-establishing exports to the U.K. and Scandinavia, as well as building on the success in Russia, will not always be easy. But a genuinely well-balanced, export portfolio for the U.S. sector would surely take this into account.

pb

Does the decline in U.S. exports to Europe mean we have fallen out of love with the U.S. apple sector? Not necessarily.



By John Giles

John Giles is a divisional director with Promar International, a leading agri food value chain consulting company and a subsidiary of Genus plc. He is also the current chair of the Food, Drink & Agricultural Group of the U.K.-based Chartered Institute of Marketing, he can be contacted at: john.giles@genusplc.com.

CALIFORNIA DROUGHT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY



Over the years there have been lots of conversation concerning the drought conditions in California and its implications on the produce industry. Clearly, this year's drought has exceeded all past concerns as conditions have been forecasted as the worst in the past 100 years.

As a result, there are many significant implications for the industry. While 90 percent of California is in severe drought, the area that I would like to use as an example for what's happening to production is in the Central San Joaquin Valley. In this growing region, water is sourced two ways: by well and by canal, which is controlled by the California State and Regional Water Resources Control Boards.

In the case of growers, wells are drying up fast. Due to the high demand for deeper wells, it's often taking up to a year to obtain a new, or deeper, well drilled. When it comes to canal water, allocations are being cut back, and additional water is available only by purchase at a high cost. What this means to the "permanent crops," such as citrus, grapes, stone fruit, almonds, pistachios, and other nuts, is many growers are having to make tough choices when evaluating their next steps — based on water allocations.

No situation is the same, but decisions are ranging from not planting new trees this year, to installing more efficient watering systems, and allocating water to only keep their newest trees (as well as most productive orchards) alive. For the "row crops" like cantaloupes/melons, tomatoes and lettuce — which are heavily dependent on canal water from the Water Control Boards — the amount growers are going to plant will be based on how much water they expect to be allocated. The bottom line is: due to this drought situation, growing costs are expected to rise and supplies are expected to be going down — in some cases, significantly.

In many cases, farmers will not have enough of a water supply to meet their total business needs. To support this situation, the State of

California issued a drought emergency and is allocating funding. One of the biggest concerns for many farmers is they are the lowest in priority for funding, and the long-term improvements to the water supply have yet to be addressed.

A real concern for the long-term impacts of drought is happening now in Chile. This South American country could be viewed as a year or two ahead of California, experiencing successive years of unprecedented drought conditions. In Chile's situation, the supply of many of these same crops is down significantly in drought areas. In many

cases, growers have had to make tough decisions about the future of their orchards.

In California's situation, the drought is going to have a significant impact when marketing this year's crop. Produce markets are all about supply and demand, and everything is pointing to a tightening supply with increased costs on production from California. In order for a California grower to have a good year, it's going to be about keeping core customers as well as how to balance water and growing costs with production.

It's also about if and how growers can effectively pass on the incremental costs to produce.

For retailers, foodservice providers and wholesalers, this year is going to be about partnering with the right growers — ones that will provide a consistent supply at a fair price. Pricing this product to "sell" to the consumer is also a key factor. Produce needs velocity, and managing inflation properly — with a sell-through pricing strategy — will be critical to driving the true profit on these items during the summer selling period.

Another big opportunity in this situation is for "row crops" growers in other growing regions to understand how they might work with customers to become an effective regional or local solution during this drought period.

In my opinion, the California drought situation is one of the biggest challenges the industry is going to face this year — and for years to come. How you plan and prepare for its impact on your operation will be critical to the ongoing success of your organization. I hope that as an industry, we are able to find a long-term solution. **pb**

The California drought situation is one of the biggest challenges the industry is going to face this year — and for years to come. How you plan and prepare for its impact on your operation will be critical to the ongoing success of your organization.

By Craig Carlson

Craig Carlson is a 30-year veteran of both the retail and foodservice industries. He is presently consulting in all matters of the produce supply chain, strategy and business development. For questions or more information, visit carlsonproduceconsulting.com.

TRIED AND TRUE TRIO

On an afternoon in 1968, the Sambado brothers, Rich (in striped shirt) and Tim (in Mickey Mouse shirt), took a stroll with their father, Lawrence, through the cherry orchards of their family farm. The boys would often take these ritualistic walks with their dad to inspect the fields and bond.

“The photo was taken right behind our main offices,” says Rich Sambado, president of Linden, CA-based Primavera Marketing. “That cherry orchard and most of those trees still exist today.”

Lawrence inherited the cherry orchard and walnut ranch (known as A. Sambado & Son) from his father, Alex Sambado — who emigrated from Italy in the 1920s and initially ran a corner grocery store in San Francisco. Then in the mid-1940s, at age 47, Alex decided to move to the California countryside and found the land in Linden (a farming community in the Northern San Joaquin Valley).

At the time of the photo, Rich says his dad emphasized how farming was a monumental responsibility and hard work. Lawrence always encouraged his sons to each find their own niche in life and bring the same values to their vocations.

The boys did just that. Rich graduated from Santa Clara University in 1987 with a marketing degree, and Tim graduated from Stanford University in 1986 with bachelors and masters degrees in industrial engineering. After gaining work experience outside of the industry, Rich and Tim combined their formal educations and practical experience with their family farming knowledge. The result spawned the Primavera Marketing company and Prima Frutta packing company. Together with A. Sambado & Son, the three entities make a vertically integrated growing, marketing, and packing business.



“We each have our own domain within each company,” says Rich. “We grow the fruit, pack it and market it. My brother and I had an opportunity to start the two companies as an extension to the farming, expand the operation, and take it to a new level.”

“We grow the fruit, pack it and market it. My brother and I had an opportunity to start the two companies as an extension to the farming, expand the operation, and take it to a new level.”

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