

producebusiness

30
YEARS
INITIATING
INDUSTRY
IMPROVEMENT

MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT

ASIA RISING & ITS IMPACT ON THE GLOBAL PRODUCE MARKET



INSIDE

PUNDIT EXAMINES THE SHIFTING SANDS OF COMPETITION
REGIONAL MARKET PROFILES: BOSTON & LOS ANGELES
LUCKY'S SUPERMARKET • SUPER BOWL MARKETING • MEXICAN PRODUCE
HEALTH INITIATIVES • CHILEAN FRUIT • POTATOES & ONIONS
SQUASH • ORGANIC IMPORTS • PEPPERS & CUCUMBERS • ALMONDS
SPECIAL: 30-YEARS OF IMPROVEMENTS PART III



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Chop It!



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Cook It!



Cranberry Apple Stuffing

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*In Home Use Consumer Guidance Panel, July 2015.

DOLE AND RELATED MARKS ARE TRADEMARKS OF DOLE FOOD COMPANY, INC.



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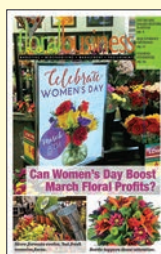
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CORRECTION

In the Ascendent Independent profile on Green Zebra Grocery in the October 2015 issue, Lisa Sedlar's title on page 54 was misidentified and should have been chief executive. Our regrets for the error.

In the Holiday Baking article in the November 2015 issue, the photo on page 186 was misidentified. The photo is of pecans from Young Pecan, Inc., a division of Florence, SC-based King Ranch. Our regrets for the error.



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From the publishers of:



produce quiz

THIS MONTH'S WINNER



JOHN M. BENEDETTI
Vice President of Sales
Pro Organics
Burnaby, British Columbia,
Canada

As a loyal PRODUCE BUSINESS reader for about 10 years, John M. Benedetti, enjoys learning about growing practices and reading retail profiles. Much of what Benedetti enjoys about his job and the produce industry echoes the subjects of these types of articles.

“Working with farmers and growers is exciting,” he says. “There is a story behind the products we sell, and everyday presents different challenges and opportunities.”

As vice president of produce for the Canadian distributor, Pro Organics — which specializes in high-quality certified organic

produce, dried fruit, nuts, as well as grocery items — Benedetti manages a sales team of five representatives and is the coordinating liaison for the company’s warehouse operations, accounting, and grower relations in addition to his sales and marketing responsibilities.

Prior to his 13 years with Pro Organics, he worked for Capers Community Markets (a Vancouver-based small chain of natural foods stores, which was eventually bought out by Whole Foods Market), and he began his produce career at Safeway in 1974.

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 February issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS. The winner must agree to submit a color photo to be published in that issue.

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Be the master of ceremonies with this conversation piece! The Levitating Bluetooth Speaker floats mystifyingly over its electromagnetic base to deliver crisp, clear wireless sound in your home or office. It pairs easily with a smartphone or a tablet for up to four hours of uninterrupted music. The touch-free power mechanism allows you to simply blow into it (like a candle) to turn it on or off. The device is compatible with all iPhones, iPads, Samsung Galaxies and all other Android devices.



QUESTIONS FOR THE DECEMBER ISSUE

- 1) What color is the packaging for Dole’s new Premium Celery Hearts? _____
- 2) What are the names of the four produce brands from A.J. Trucco, Inc.? _____
- 3) What company distributes Suavo Avocados, Darling Clementines and Citrus? _____
- 4) What kind of new salad pack that includes Greek Green Olives is Taylor Farms highlighting in its ad? _____
- 5) What kind of seedless vegetable is Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers promoting? _____
- 6) What company is shipping Melonheads (or mini seedless watermelons)? _____

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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Transportation Bill Keeps Things Moving, But Challenges Remain For Produce Industry



BY JULIE MANES,
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

This summer and fall, the House and Senate collectively accomplished something that hasn't taken place in nearly a decade – passage of multi-year federal transportation reauthorization legislation. For just as long a period of time, the fresh produce industry has been advocating for long-term transportation funding, most recently when more than 500 produce executives participated in face-to-face meetings with members of Congress during our Washington Conference in September. An early Christmas gift for highways, roads, businesses and communities across the country dependent on infrastructure upgrades, the transportation reauthorization legislation, however, still provides challenges for America's fresh produce industry.

While the good news is that Congress is finally taking action on meaningful legislation, the debate on the transportation reauthorization still might be a bumpy road. For example, during consideration in the House of that body's transportation reauthorization bill, known as the Surface Transportation Reauthorization and Reform Act of 2015, one particular proposal that is a top transportation priority for our industry was not approved. Representative Reid Ribble (R-Wisconsin) offered an amendment that would have allowed states to increase truck weight limits on their respective interstate highways, thereby increasing efficiency in a safe manner. Unfortunately, Ribble's amendment was defeated, primarily due to fierce opposition from other sectors that was often based on inaccurate information. United Fresh, however, remains committed to exploring legislative options to afford

states such flexibility – of paramount importance to the fresh produce industry providing Americans, safely and quickly, with an abundant and nutritious supply of fruits and vegetables.

Representatives John Duncan (R-Tennessee) and Dan Newhouse (R-Washington) also addressed key produce industry priorities by proposing amendments regarding federal motor carrier hiring standards and data collection of port operations and performance. Currently, produce providers utilizing motor carriers have to “second-guess” the safety ratings provided by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). Duncan's measure would have addressed vague FMCSA ratings, thereby providing the produce industry with clarity as it goes about selecting motor carriers.

Newhouse, whose state's ports handle seven percent of U.S. exports and 6 percent of all imports, sought to require the Department of Transportation to collect data on port operations and performance. Without basic information about operations at America's ports, it can be difficult (at best) to assess the impact of slowdowns like the one that occurred earlier this year along the West Coast. Such data and resources would be helpful to the fresh produce industry in mitigating the disastrous impact of port shutdowns and stoppages, so that perishable products are not idling on land or offshore.

While these two amendments were also subject to opposition lobbying based on inaccurate information about safety implications, thanks to advocacy efforts by United Fresh members across the country, it's likely they will again be considered

during the reconciliation process – when members of both the House and Senate combine their respective bills into one comprehensive piece of legislation before sending it to the president for his signature. For years, Congress has had the public image of being overrun with partisan bickering, resulting in getting little done. But, for once, it looks like Congress is on the verge of making progress on a critical issue.

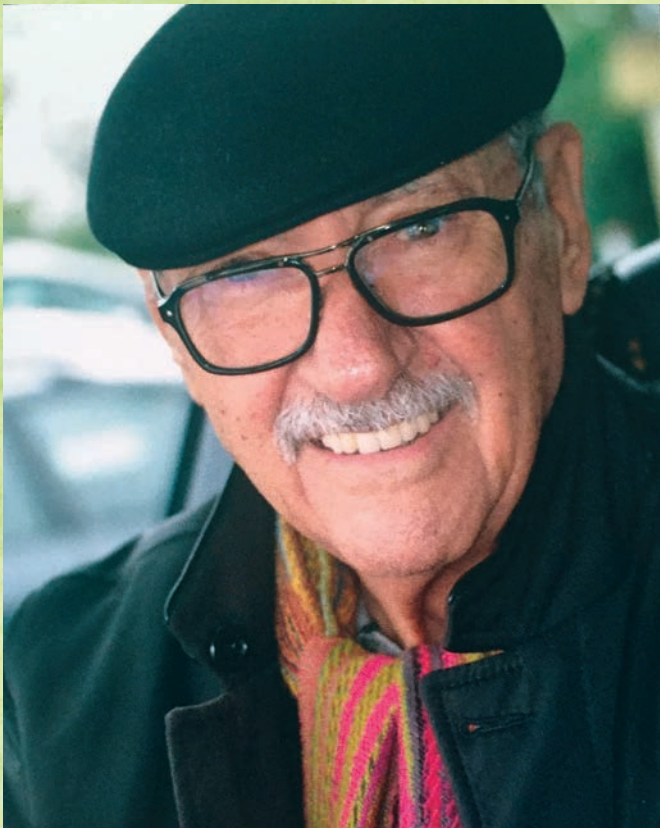
In the coming weeks and months, Congress' ability to reach across the political aisle will be tested again, when it votes on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multi-national trade agreement between Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam. In October, President Obama signaled his intention to sign the agreement, which will now be up to Congress to either approve or reject. As the legislative calendar continues to tick away, and more attention turns to next year's presidential election, a truly bipartisan approach is needed in the near future and long-term to effectively implement such trade deals that would introduce other regions of the world to the diverse selection of fruits and vegetables grown in the U.S.

While Congress has a deserved reputation for bickering and inaction, there are glimmers of hope that it will take action on legislation that actually has the potential for positive impacts on fresh produce. For more information on these and other issues, as well as how you can help promote our industry's policy priorities, visit United Fresh's newly enhanced Grassroots Action Network at www.freshaction.org.

In Memoriam

Nathan Esformes

October 8, 1932 – October 5, 2015



Nathan Esformes (or Nate as friends and family called him), former founding partner of Palmetto, FL-based Pacific Tomato Growers, brought tremendous passion to any project. Whether he was developing plans for a packinghouse, building business in Mexico, or establishing a research institution for juvenile diabetes, “you knew if Nate Esformes was involved, then there would be a lot of energy surrounding it,” says Jon Esformes, co-chief executive and operating partner of Pacific Tomato Growers.

“You never worked *for* my dad; you worked *with* him,” says Nate’s son, Jack Esformes, board member and general manager of West Coast Operations for the company.

“Yes, Uncle Nate was the patriarch of the family,” says Jon.

When Nate’s daughter, Elizabeth, was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 9, he searched for the best resources available. He was dissatisfied with what he found, and he gathered a group of like-minded people who were in similar situations. Together they helped establish the Diabetes Research Institute Foundation at the University of Miami by partnering with Dr. Daniel Mintz, Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Scientific Director Emeritus of the Diabetes Research Institute.

“It was a labor of love to pull out all the stops to ensure help could be given to children like Elizabeth,” says Jon. “At the time of her diagnosis, the average lifespan after prognosis was 27 years, and Liz is now in her 50s and leading a healthy life with a family of her own.”

In addition to his charitable efforts with diabetes, Nate and his brother, Joe, helped develop an annual golf tournament to

raise money for a scholarship program out of the University of South Florida that supports the children of migrant workers. That scholarship continues to expand and raise money — providing academic opportunities for families.

Knowing he was playing a role in the employment of the families of these migrant workers’ through the Esformes’ family business and supporting their children through scholarships brought great joy to Nate, says Jon.

“We’re a collaborative family,” he says. Nate and his insightful visions drove the powerful energy behind the company’s culture. “He really loved planning the next operation,” says Jon.

Even when Nate and his brother, Joe, set out to expand the family’s operation into Mexico during the 1950s, Nate was at the helm of production and Joe managed sales and marketing. It was the first major operation the brothers were responsible for.

“As you can image, at the time of the late 50s, Mexico was like the wild west, and we had some interesting adventures down there — to put it mildly,” says Joe Esformes, partner and board member of Pacific Tomato Growers.

“We established a rapport with Mexican growers, which continued for the past 55 years,” says Joe. “We’re quite proud of that and our enduring relationships. It was a great joy to work together and to achieve what we did over the past 50-plus years.

“We were one of the pioneers of the growing and establishing Roma tomatoes in a 12-month span in the United States,” says Joe.

“My uncle’s and father’s careers together were transient,” says Jon. They spent their careers on the road. They moved with the crops. When we talk about ‘Sunripe-certified brands following the sun, leading the quality’; the ‘following the sun’ aspect was a true lifestyle for my father and uncle.”



A Step Backwards, To Move Forward

BY JIM PREVOR, PRESIDENT & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As 2015 heads to a close, we find ourselves living in uncertain times. The attacks in Paris brought a sense of danger and unease closer. Yet, for all the challenges of our times, the world moves relentlessly to become more closely integrated.

The final numbers aren't in yet, but do you know what company seems on track to be the largest exporter out of Chile this year? That would be Wal-Mart.

And the American, British and Australian retailers still don't know what to do about the persistent growth of the German-owned Aldi with Lidl.

The great changes on the production end of the industry are proprietary varieties. These are developed all over the world — Israel, New Zealand, Spain, America and elsewhere — and then carefully grown either directly or through licensees in a global network — with growers in Australia, Peru, Chile, South Africa, Egypt, Italy and elsewhere — designed to create 365-day-a-year availability.

Healthy products are on trend and marketed all over the world using unique packaging and flavor profiles: for example, Love Beets is in the U.K., in America and in Australia — plus exporting to various markets from these places.

On a macro level, France or any country may close its borders for a while; but in the end, if it doesn't want to be a backwater, it will once again reach out to the world.

Even many debates that seem like important prerogatives of national policy — say whether GMOs should be permitted — will, in the end, turn more on global proclivities than one nation's politics. If GMOs create more productive farmers, then to compete in the global economy, farmers everywhere will wind up growing GMOs. Countries that resist will simply become, again, a backwater.

This new world is a clarion call for leadership at all levels. On the global stage, we look at enemies such as ISIS and Al Qaeda, and we seek leaders who are wise, who transcend petty politics and jockeying for political advantage. We seek leaders who see a higher path toward making America, and the world, both safer and capable of moving to a better place.

While, on a more micro level, our employees, customers, vendors and investors seek those leaders who can navigate the shoals of difficulties and take our companies and people through to — not just safer places — but places that can serve as points of embarkation toward building the businesses and the industry we can imagine ahead.

Sometimes things get worse before they get better. As our political leaders look at places such as Syria, there is the possibility that all-out war is in the offing. Or, we might fail to be aggressive enough, and attacks on all we hold dear — by terrorists or nation-states such

as Iran — may mean many will lose everything.

So we have to fight for good leaders, and we have to fight for the kind of culture that calls for good leaders to rise. If one thinks back to the American founding, it is incredible that there were so many gifted leaders — Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, Hamilton and more.

Yet it is even more extraordinary that the political culture of the time pushed these people into positions of prominent leadership. It is uncertain whether we have such gifted and learned people in the masses of Americans today. We certainly do not have a political culture that would cause such people to: A) be attracted to public life and B) be promoted by the people to positions of high leadership.

For the great many of us who have no desire to be the next President, it still falls on us to lead. If we run entities, we have to guide our teams through perilous times. For we proceed through adversity not in the macro, but in the micro. Each day, we have to see further. We need be neither optimistic, nor pessimistic, neither brave nor cowardly. We need to be competent and confident that if we conduct our lives and our business well, we can transcend adversity and not merely endure, but prevail.

Just as countries think decisions that are their own are often not, we, as individuals, have impact we often underestimate.

If you watched the news in the past month, you've seen college students protesting. Beyond the substance when one sees videos, for example, of students at Yale cursing faculty and staff, one has to realize that we are part of the culture that made that behavior acceptable, and only we can make it unacceptable.

We often worry about making sure children get enough fresh produce, and three cheers for that. But the culture is not supporting standards of civility that would allow us to all speak together and move things forward.

Yet, if we insist on taking actions to deal with the real problems of today, we will later be free to devote our time and attention to focus on passions and produce. As John Adams wrote: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."

We may have to take a step backwards to move forward. **pb**

We need to be competent and confident that if we conduct our lives and our business well, we can transcend adversity and not merely endure, but prevail.



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*Nielsen latest 13 wk ending 8.22.15





TRANSITION

**OCEAN MIST FARMS
CASTROVILLE, CA**

Ocean Mist Farms' board of directors names **Joe Pezzini** as its incoming president and chief executive. Pezzini, who has been with Ocean Mist Farms for more than 32 years, will succeed

Ed Boutonnet, who has been president and chief executive since 1990. The transition in leadership will occur over the next 12 months. Boutonnet will remain as chairman of the board. Ocean Mist Farms is a fourth generation family-owned business and one of the largest grower of fresh artichokes in North America.

TRANSITION

**J&J FAMILY OF FARMS
LOXAHATCHEE, FL**



J&J Family of Farms announces the addition of **Shane Rogers** and **Carl Ream** to their sales team. Rogers has nine years of experience in the produce industry specializing in retail account management, sales and procurement. Ream, a veteran in the produce industry, is green bean commodity manager. J&J Family of Farms specializes in growing cucumbers, bell peppers, squash, tomatoes and eggplant with operations in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Texas, Arizona, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.



ANNOUNCEMENT

**NATURAL DELIGHTS
HOSTS BLOGGER SUMMIT**

Bard Valley, CA-based Natural Delights, the nation's leading Medjool Date brand, hosted its second bi-annual blogger summit, attended by food bloggers and registered dietitians in September 2015. As part of the program, growers shared their stories with influencers to equip them with the information needed to engage and educate consumers.



**SUNFED,
RIO RICO, AZ**

SunFed fresh produce company announces the promotion of **Matt Mandel** to chief operations officer. The company's former vice president of sales and marketing, Mandel has been with SunFed for nine years. In his new role, Mandel will be "focusing my attention on the things that have always made SunFed great — operational excellence."



TRANSITION

**BRIGHTFARMS
NEW YORK, NY**

BrightFarms announces the appointment of **Abby Prior** as vice president of business development. The former marketing executive for Bimbo Bakeries USA, Prior will spearhead BrightFarms' business development and marketing efforts. BrightFarms finances, builds, and operates local greenhouse farms in partnership with supermarkets, cities, capital sources, and vendors. The process is



designed to quickly and efficiently eliminate time, distance and cost from the food supply chain.

TRANSITION

TRANSITION

**POTANDON PRODUCE LLC
IDAHO FALLS, IDAHO**

Potandon Produce LLC announces the addition of **Karen Durvin** to the sales department. Durvin is working in the Idaho Falls office for an extended training period before being permanently stationed in Virginia. Potandon Produce is one of the largest marketer of fresh potatoes and fresh onions in North America. Potandon holds the exclusive



licensing rights to the Green Giant™ brand for fresh potatoes and onions in North America.

TRANSITION

**FRESHWAY FOODS
SIDNEY, OHIO**

Freshway Foods announces the promotion of **Steve Collins** to vice president of operations. In his new role, Collins will lead daily operations at the company's production and distribution facility in Sidney, OH. Collins, who joined the company in 2014 as project manager, replaces Larry Schultz, who will retire in early 2016. Freshway Foods is a fresh fruit and vegetable processor, repacker, distributor, and logistics provider.



TRANSITION

ANNOUNCEMENT



Keith Kandt, NatureSweet's Director of Marketing; Photo by Dean Barnes

**NATURESWEET INTRODUCES
CONSTELLATION MEDLEY**

NatureSweet Ltd., San Antonio, TX, takes the medley concept one step further with its Constellation tomato product. This colorful 100 percent recyclable clamshell pack, available in 1.5-pound retail and 2-pound club packs, provides a consistent offering of tomatoes for every occasion. The medley includes Cherubs for salads, SunBurst for snacking, Jubilee for slicing, Glories for cooking and new versatile chocolate tomatoes.

ANNOUNCEMENT

DOLE EXPANDS CHOPPED SALAD LINE

Dole, Monterey, CA, expands its line of chopped salad kits and blends with two new kits that combine the bite-sized taste and texture of DOLE Chopped Salads with the on-trend appeal of shaved



Brussels sprouts for added nutrition and crunch. Continuing Dole's proven success at mixing fresh vegetables with dressings and toppings, the new kits give consumers two more opportunities to enjoy a healthy, flavorful salad experience at home.



PACIFIC TOMATO GROWERS UNVEILS NEW NAME, LOOK, PRODUCT LINE

Fourth generation, family-owned Pacific Tomato Growers, based in Palmetto, FL, announces the company's newly established brands, Sunripe Certified Brands (U.S.) and Suncoast Certified Brands (Canada). The addition of "certified brands" to the name emphasizes the company's commitment to its land, environment, employees and customers. Sunripe and Suncoast also announce the addition of fresh strawberries to their product lines, which will be available across the U.S. and Canada Nov. 2015 through April 2016.

ANNOUNCEMENT

TWANG PARTNERS INTRODUCES NEW PRODUCT

Twang Partners, headquartered in San Antonio, TX, introduces ZAS! Super-Seasoning spice blends that add global flavor to any dish. ZAS! seasoning is available in 4 oz. jars, in four flavors: Chili Lime, Tamarind, Hatch Chile and Mango Chili. The seasonings are gluten free, kosher, low-sodium, and made without artificial ingredients. Placed in the produce section, ZAS! can increase purchases and inspire shoppers to prepare fruit and vegetables in fresh new ways.



ANNOUNCEMENT

BRIGHTFARMS UNVEILS CAPITOL GREENHOUSE

NYC-based BrightFarms unveiled its Capitol Greenhouse in Culpeper County, VA, its third large-scale greenhouse farm in the U.S. When the 150,000 square-foot greenhouse is completed in December, it will provide nearly 1 million pounds of baby greens, basil and tomatoes per year exclusively to its grocery partner, Ahold. BrightFarms finances, builds, and operates local greenhouse farms in partnership with supermarkets, cities, capital sources, and vendors. The process is designed to eliminate time, distance and cost from the food supply chain.

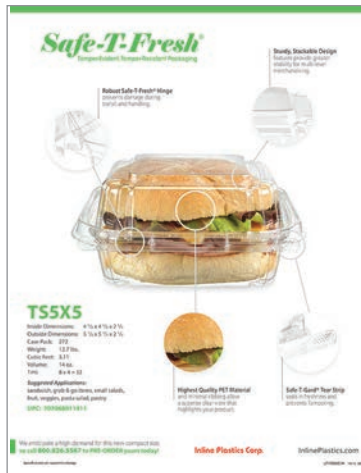


(L-R) Governor Terry McAuliffe and Paul Lighthof

Produce & Floral Watch are regular features of PRODUCE BUSINESS. Please send information on new products, personnel changes, industry, corporate and personal milestones and available literature, along with a high resolution image to: Managing Editor, PRODUCE BUSINESS, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail us at info@producebusiness.com

INLINE PLASTICS CORP. LAUNCHES GRAB AND GO CONTAINER

Safe-T-Fresh brand introduces its newest grab-and-go container. Shelton, CT-based Inline Plastics announces the arrival of the TS5X5 PET square clamshell food container, the newest member of the company's breakthrough Safe-T-Fresh line of patented tamper-evident products. This handy container is the perfect size for single take-out servings of sandwiches, snacks, salads, veggies and dessert.



ANNOUNCEMENT

WAL-MART TO UTILIZE IFCO WOODGRAIN RPCs

IFCO North America, a member of the Brambles family of companies, announces it will provide Wal-Mart with a new generation of woodgrain Reusable Plastic Containers (RPCs) for wet and dry produce. Under the agreement, IFCO's Wood Grain RPCs will be used to pack and ship dry produce, including apples, potatoes, onions and citrus items. IFCO RPCs are claimed to be more efficient, protect and cool product better, and are more environmentally sustainable than one-way packaging.



ROUNDY'S

ROUNDY'S JOINS EPA'S GREENCHILL PROGRAM

Milwaukee-based Roundy's, Inc., announces its inclusion in the EPA's GreenChill program, which is a partnership between the EPA and food retailers to reduce emissions and decrease impact on the ozone layer and climate change. In 2014, Roundy's became the first grocery store in Wisconsin (and the third store in the U.S.) to utilize a transcritical CO2 refrigeration system, which eliminates the use of ozone-depleting hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). Roundy's operates 150 retail grocery stores and 100 pharmacies in the Midwest.

ANNOUNCEMENT

READY PAC FOODS LAUNCHES NEW BRAND

Ready Pac Foods, Inc., located in Irwindale, CA, launches its new Elevate brand, a collection of non-GMO certified salads that are gluten free and ready-to-eat. The product line of superfood salads includes Blu-Rugula, Go-Go-Gogi and Kale Caesar, as well as organic recipes like Organic Power Grains, Organic Nutty Cranberry and Organic Spinach Pow.



ANNOUNCEMENT



BRANDT FARMS INTRODUCES FUYU PERSIMMONS

Brandt Farms, Inc. of Reedley, CA, announces the launch of its newest product, Simple Simmons Fuyu Persimmons. With the roll out of Simple Simmons, Brandt Farms is hoping to increase the exposure of the apple-like fuyu persimmon as a delicious super-food that is high in fiber, low in calories, and easy to eat.

ANNOUNCEMENT

TAJIN CELEBRATES 30 YEARS

Tajin Seasonings, launched in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1985, was the vision of company president Horacio Fernandez, who enjoyed the long-held national tradition of seasoning fruits and vegetables with mild chili peppers, lime and salt. Tajin started exporting to the United States in 1993, primarily to Hispanic focused stores across the country. Today, Tajin is distributed across North America to ethnic, local, regional and national retailers and in club stores, and primarily sold in produce departments.



THE RISING STAR RECEPTION

On Saturday, October 24, at the PMA Fresh Summit convention in Atlanta, GA, PRODUCE BUSINESS in conjunction with sponsors, MIXTEC Group and Ocean Mist Farms, hosted the 12th Annual Rising Star Reception to celebrate this year's 40-Under-Forty* class. In addition to the class of 2015, attendees included members from previous classes as well as many movers and shakers of the produce industry. The students and faculty from U.S. and international colleges, who were participants of the Pack Family/PMA Career Pathways Fund, were also honored guests.

**40-Under-Forty, an annual feature of Produce Business, honors the produce leaders of tomorrow, all of whom have been chosen by industry mentors for their industry and community accomplishments. Please see this year's winners by visiting www.producebusiness.com and clicking on our June 2015 issue. You can also nominate candidates for next year's class by clicking on the 40-Under-Forty icon.*



The 2015 Class



(L-R) Chuck Sardo of Marie's; Max Scannapieco of Organicgirl; Kelly Jacob of Pro³Act LLC; Josh Padilla of Alpha 1 Marketing/Krasdale Foods; and Jonathan Steffy of Four Seasons Produce, inc.



(L-R) Manuel Velazquez of VP Fresh; Juan Suarez and Hector Suarez of Suarez Brokerage Company



(L-R) Stacey Miller and Wendell Christoff of Litehouse



(L-R) Candi Fitch of USA Onions and Tom Stenzel of United Fresh



A packed house awaits the awarding of 40-Under-Forty plaques to this year's recipients.



(L-R) Matt Royer, Alison Kellogg, Erik Eaton and Anthony Sciotti of Litehouse



(L-R) Wayne Hendrickson of Four Seasons Produce, Inc.; Dan Brennan of Sunrise Logistics, Inc.; David Hahn of Four Seasons Produce, Inc.



(L-R) Jeff Brenning, Stephanie Blackwell, Paul Bellacero and Sue Hartnett of Aurora Products Inc.,



(L-R) Jim Prevora of Produce Business; Cathy Burns and Alicia Calhoun of PMA; Marty Craner of B&C Fresh Sales; and Bryan Silbermann of PMA



(L-R) Zan Chow and Steven Moi of Fresh Direct Produce Ltd.



(L-R) Scott Chapman, Vicki Gilbert and Rob Wofford of Nickey Gregory Company



(L-R) Rebecca Meyers and Stephen Tursi of Robinson Fresh; Kevin Delaney of To-Jo Mushrooms



(L-R) Michael Strock of S.Strock & Co. and Job Villanueva of Giumarra



(L-R) Trish James, Amanda Keefer and Shannon Cloversettle of Produce For Kids



(L-R) Hunter Winton of Robinson Fresh; Patrick Andres Kelly of Kelly Brothers Inc.; and Julie Myhre of Robinson Fresh



(L-R) Jerry Butt of Mixtec Group, Miriam Miller Wolk of United Fresh Produce Association, and Kevin Moffitt of USA Pears



(L-R) Chris Lafferty and Ray Hoffman of Locus Traxx; David Moquist and Ted Kreis of Red River Valley Potatoes

The Power of Produce Part 1: Before They Shop

BY RICK STEIN, VICE PRESIDENT OF FRESH FOODS, FOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE

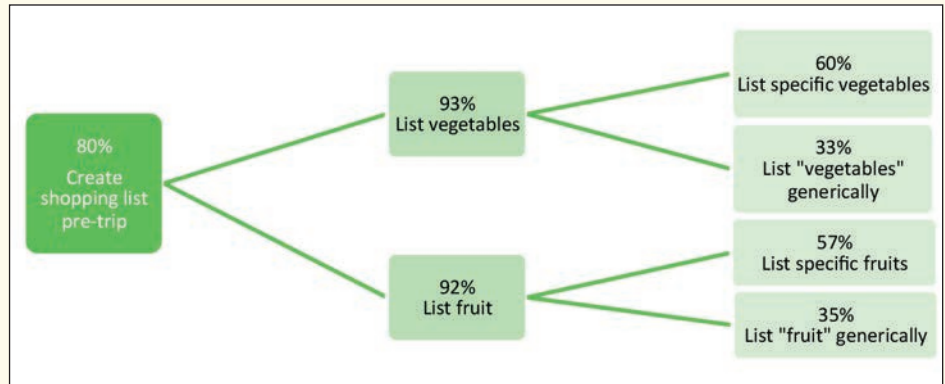
Food retailers spend tireless hours and millions of dollars on selecting the right items, at the right prices, for weekly circulars, Facebook promotions and flash sales. For most, produce is front-and-center of these promotions. Why? Along with meat, produce is one of the most researched categories in preparation for food shopping — and importantly, a key driver of store loyalty among primary shoppers — as well as a prime way to attract shoppers of other channels and banners. Get produce right, and a store's success is largely guaranteed.

While in-store execution is the ultimate step in "getting produce right," the process starts long before shoppers enter the store. Eight in 10 shoppers typically create a list before heading to the store. This list may be on the back of an old envelope or compiled by using the store's app on a smartphone, but for more than 90 percent of these shoppers, produce is a standard shopping list item. Simply put, seven in 10 shoppers walk into your store with a list containing produce.

Of those lists where produce is specified, 59 percent of the lists contain exact produce items (such as apples or broccoli), whereas roughly 34 percent of shoppers list the need for fruit and/or vegetables generically.

This leaves us with 20 percent of shoppers who don't make lists and purely make produce-purchase decisions in-store. This scenario underscores the importance of clear communication of promotions and prices — since missing price information is one of the top shopper pet peeves in the produce department.

For many decades, the paper circular has been the top source for shoppers to browse sales promotions. This remains unchanged today, although shoppers now often alternate using the paper circular with other ad vehicles. More than seven in 10 shoppers review the paper circular at home — especially those shoppers who list exact items. Another 42 percent pick up a copy in-store.



Eight in 10 shoppers typically create a shopping list before heading to the store. Simply put, seven in 10 shoppers walk into your store with a list containing produce.

These numbers are likely to change rapidly during the next few years as retailers shift ad dollar allocation, and more shoppers, especially Millennials, integrate mobile and online research to create their lists and add online grocery ordering to their shopping routines. Apps, in particular, are rising stars for pre-trip planning.

Connecting with shoppers pre-trip can help build the basket or even lead to increased spending for items across the store. Inspiration may include: recipe ideas, ideation for juicing or snacking, a Sunday picnic, and other ways to use produce beyond the traditional meal occasions. Parents, in particular, welcome any such ideas in their efforts to ensure their children eat sufficient fruit and vegetables.

Shoppers not only review a variety of ad vehicles for produce promotions, they also compare promotions across different stores. No less than six in 10 compare prices frequently or even every time they shop for produce. Especially in areas such as the Northeast, with a ubiquity of conventional supermarkets, shoppers are in the habit of comparing produce promotions across stores. This means in a world with an increasingly scattered grocery landscape, no store is guaranteed the produce purchase, and ad planning along with in-store execution have to be right week after week.

In addition to a trip driver and well-re-

searched category, produce generates its fair share of impulse sales too. Nearly six in 10 shoppers say they almost always (23 percent) or frequently (34 percent) purchase additional, unplanned produce items when in the store. Shoppers most susceptible to impulse produce purchases are Millennials (64 percent). Others likely to make unplanned produce purchase include shoppers with kids and higher-income households. On the other hand, shoppers aged 65-plus are twice as likely compared with Millennials to stick to their shopping lists.

Being both a planned category and having opportunity to drive impulse sales is quite unique. Through visibility, appealing displays and cross-merchandising, produce will not only be a great driver of traffic and sales, but also a great way to grow the basket.



Source: *The Power of Produce 2015 — Shopper research by the Food Marketing Institute, made possible by Yerecic Label and implemented by 210 Analytics.*

Food Marketing Institute is a trade association that advocates on behalf of the food retail industry. FMI's U.S. members operate nearly 40,000 retail food stores and 25,000 pharmacies. Through programs in public affairs, food safety, research, education and industry relations, FMI offers resources and provides valuable benefits to more than 1,225 food retail and wholesale member companies in the United States and around the world.

It's What's In Store That Counts

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

This study gets to the core of what makes produce such an absolutely vital category for the supermarket. Produce is simultaneously a “must-have,” “pre-planned” staple and an exciting “impulse opportunity” for new trial and indulgence.

Although it is not surprising to learn that senior citizens are more inclined to stick to their shopping lists than Millennials — one presumes that over the course of a lifetime, the older shoppers know they like broccoli — even this is overstated. If the industry provides new and innovative products, say pomegranate arils, so senior citizens don't have to use a knife on an unwieldy pomegranate, senior citizens will change their purchase patterns as well.

One factor PRODUCE BUSINESS research has identified is an increasing willingness on the part of consumers to switch their shopping habits to include multiple venues. Some of this is due to the growth of private label that truly offers distinctive products. So this columnist's wife may go to Trader Joe's specifically, because they offer meatballs that our children love.

One wonders if the future for produce could not take a similar path. Much has been written regarding proprietary produce; companies such as Driscoll's and Sun World built important businesses around these concepts. But these proprietary efforts are typically marketing-restricted only on the business-to-business end — only Driscoll's can sell Driscoll's; only licensed Sun World marketers can sell its varieties.

Generally though, with the possible exception of low-volume-launch years where a retailer may get exclusivity, any retailer can sell these, and many do. Yet, perhaps this is leaving value on the table. If consumers are willing to go to Trader Joe's because they think the flavor of its meatballs or puttanesca sauce for pasta are superior, why wouldn't they go to Kroger or Costco or Walmart to get a proprietary variety of grapes or apples that they prefer?

One solid approach is reaching out with ideas and information before the consumer gets to the store, but enhancing the produce shopping experience is really a prime industry responsibility.

The challenges are obvious. The meatball factory produces 100 percent perfect meatballs, or it reprocesses the imperfect ones that are returned. The Good Lord causes produce to grow in various grades and sizes. Still, one could imagine Costco having exclusive retail rights to a variety — indeed, Costco could own the variety — and for those sizes and grades Costco doesn't want, the grower could sell for foodservice and processing and export.

Another key variable increasing the importance of produce is the growth of Internet shopping. In the U.K., especially in London, one sees a pattern developing where large-size stores are being devalued, because consumers increasingly buy their staples — including plenty of produce — online. They are especially buying heavy and bulky non-perishable items (such as water or paper towels) online.

But, they are not shopping less. They are actually going into smaller, more local stores on a frequent basis. This leads the focus to being on retail/foodservice, bakery and departments such as produce.

One can see a world where the shopping list as we know it ceases to exist because a list is all taken care of in one's pre-established online-shopping order. This preemptive step frees the consumer to walk into local stores with minimal requirements. Typically just replenishment of a few perishables or dinner for tonight. The consumer's expectation is for the store to entice and to delight them.

These transformations may also mean that stores are merchandised incorrectly.

Space allocations, typically based on historical sales, may under-index for the new responsibility of enticing and delighting. If attracting consumers to a store requires an interesting produce department, then giving new, innovative and propriety lines a small row won't have the impact required.

Perhaps produce retailers need to think more like car dealerships where the focal point is always the red sports car convertible — even though the bulk of the business is blue sedans. Perhaps that tasty new beet or innovative new blend needs front-of-the-department, larger, showcase space, because stores need to brand their department as interesting, fun and always offering something special.

We would urge a different perspective when noting that many consumers do not deviate from their lists. Yes, certainly, one solid approach is reaching out with ideas and information before the consumer gets to the store, but we would also say that enhancing the produce shopping experience is really a prime industry responsibility.

Everyone will buy on impulse if what they are offered is an extraordinary opportunity. All too often, the only incentive retailers offer is a lower price. That matters, but most people do not spend a large percentage of their family expenditures on fresh produce, so it is an ineffective way to boost long-term demand.

We have to give consumers interesting products to buy — produce that is delicious, is convenient and that makes life better. Then, whether they put it on a list or buy on impulse, it is all but certain they will buy. **pb**

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DECEMBER 1 - 3, 2015

NEW YORK PRODUCE SHOW & CONFERENCE

Conference Venue: Jacob Javits Convention Center,
 New York, NY

Conference Management: Eastern Produce Council,
 Short Hills, NJ and PRODUCE BUSINESS, Boca Raton, FL

Phone: (561) 994-1118 • Fax: (561) 994-1610

Email: info@nyproduceshow.com

Website: newyorkproduceshow.com

JANUARY 7 - 10, 2016

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL FRUIT & VEGETABLE CONFERENCE

Conference Venue: Savannah International Trade
 and Convention Center, Savannah, GA

Conference Management: Georgia Fruit & Vegetable
 Growers Association, LaGrange, GA

Phone: (877) 994-3842 • Fax: (706) 883-8215

Email: skilgore@asginfo.net

Website: gfva.org

JANUARY 12 - 14, 2016

POTATO EXPO

Conference Venue: The Mirage Hotel, Las Vegas, NV

Conference Management: National Potato Council,
 Washington, D.C.

Phone: (202) 682-9456 Fax: (202) 682-0333

Email: hollee@nationalpotatocouncil.org

Website: potato-expo.com

JANUARY 14 - 15, 2016

UPPER MIDWEST REGIONAL FRUIT & VEGETABLE GROWERS CONFERENCE & TRADE SHOW

Conference Venue: St. Cloud River's Edge Convention
 Center, St. Cloud, MN

Conference Management: Minnesota Fruit & Vegetable
 Growers Association, Ham Lake, MN

Phone: (763) 434-0400 • Fax: (763) 413-9585

Email: mfvga.msn.com

Website: mfvga.org

JANUARY 17 - 19, 2016

WINTER FANCY FOOD SHOW

Conference Venue: Moscone Center, San Francisco, CA

Conference Management: Specialty Food Association,
 New York, NY

Phone: (212) 482-6440 • Fax: (212) 482-6555

Email: erivera@specialtyfood.com

Website: fancyfoodshows.com

JANUARY 20 - 22, 2016

TROPICAL PLANT INDUSTRY EXPOSITION (TPIE)

Conference Venue: Broward Convention Center,
 Ft Lauderdale, FL

Conference Management: Florida Nursery Growers
 & Landscape Association, Orlando, FL

Phone: (407) 295-7994 • Fax: (407) 295-1619

Email: shaines@fngla.org • Website: fngla.org

JANUARY 24 - 26, 2016

SWEET POTATO CONVENTION

Conference Venue: Chattanooga Choo Choo Hotel,
 Chattanooga, TN

Conference Management: United States Sweet Potato
 Council, Columbia, SC

Phone: (803) 788-7101 • Fax: (803) 788-7101

Email: USSPCouncil@gmail.com

Website: sweetpotatousa.org

JANUARY 26 - 28, 2016

HOTEL, MOTEL & RESTAURANT SUPPLY SHOW OF THE SOUTHEAST

Conference Venue: Myrtle Beach Convention Center,
 Myrtle Beach, SC

Conference Management: Leisure Time Unlimited, Inc.,
 Myrtle Beach, SC

Phone: (843) 448-9483 • Fax: (843) 626-1513

Email: info@hmsss.com

Website: hmrsss.com

FEBRUARY 3 - 5, 2016

FRUIT LOGISTICA 2016

Conference Venue: Messe Berlin GmbH, Berlin

Conference Management: Messe Berlin GmbH, Berlin

Phone: +49(0)30/3038-2020

Email: fruitlogistica@messe-berlin.de

Website: fruitlogistica.de/en/

FEBRUARY 10 - 13, 2016

BIOFACH

Conference Venue: Exhibition Centre Nuremberg,
 Nuremberg, Germany

Conference Management: NurnbergMesse GmbH,
 Nuremberg, Germany

Phone: +49(0)9 11 86 06-83 25

Website: biofach.com

FEBRUARY 21 - 25, 2016

GULFOOD

Conference Venue: Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai,
 United Arab Emirates

Conference Management: Dubai World Trade Center,
 Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Phone: 009-711-43321000

Email: gulfoodmarketing@dwtc.com

Website: gulfood.com

FEBRUARY 24 - 27, 2016

NATIONAL WATERMELON CONVENTION

Conference Venue: Hyatt Regency, New Orleans, LA

Conference Management: National Watermelon
 Association, Inc., Lakeland, FL

Phone: (863) 619-7575 Fax: (863) 619-7577

Email: bobm@nwawatermelon.com

Website: watermelon.ag

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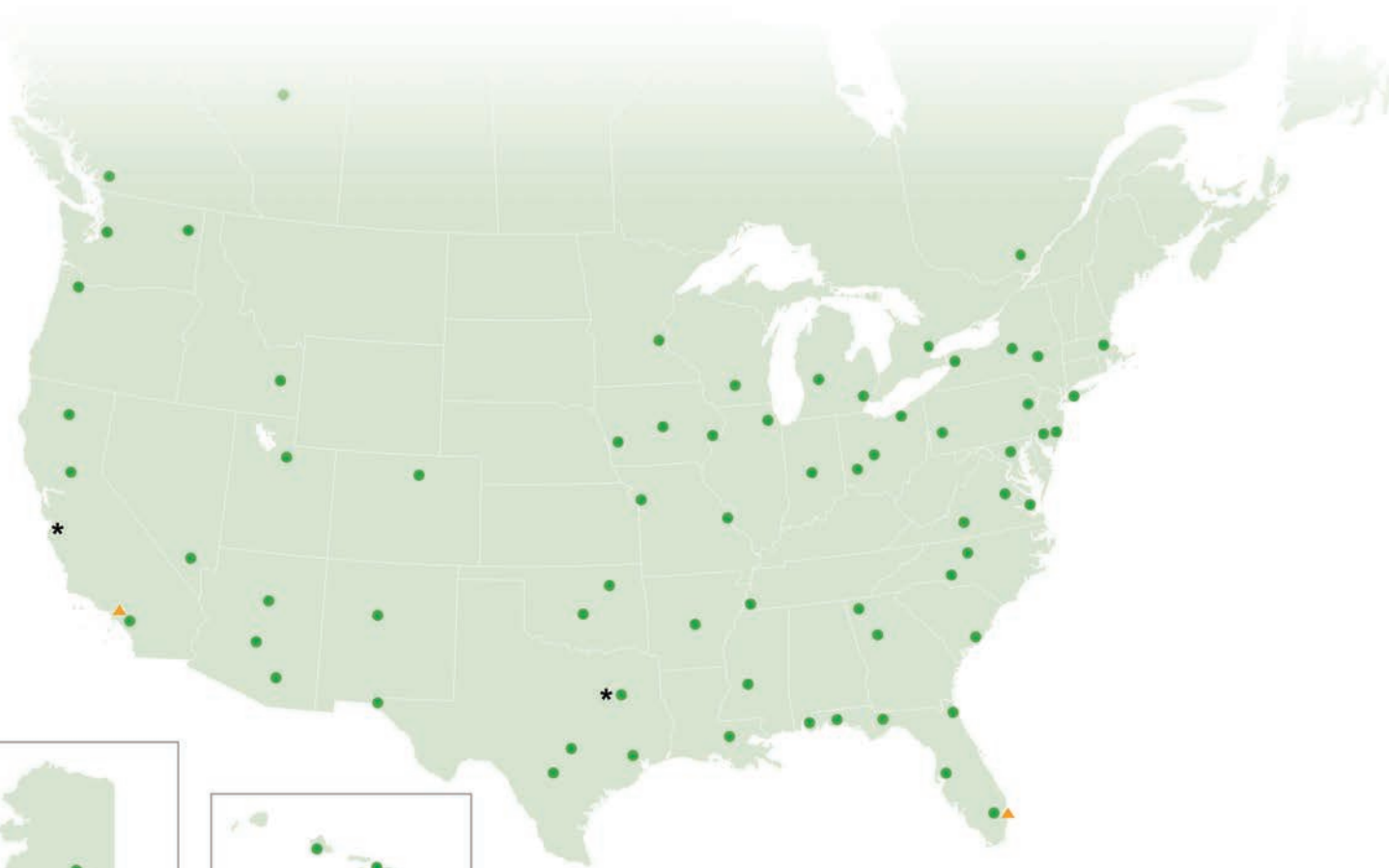
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Kailua-Kona, HI 96740
808-331-2601

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Kahului, HI 96732
808-871-6232

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Canada L4Y1R6
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651-487-8000

Capitol City Produce

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315-735-8365

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206-625-1412

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Anchorage, AK 99515
907-258-1412

547 Delta Way
Dutch Harbor, AK 99692
907-581-3366

3530 East Ferry
Spokane, WA 99202
509-535-7393

City Produce

239 Main Street
Destin, FL 32541
850-654-4404

Costa Fruit & Produce

18 Bunker Hill Industrial Park
Boston, MA 02129
617-241-8007

Family Tree Produce ^M

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Anaheim, CA 92807
714-696-3037

Foster-Caviness Foodservice

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Park Drive
Charlotte, NC 28278
704-329-7260

2914 Sandy Ridge Road, Bldg I
Colfax, NC 27235
336-662-0571

Freedom Fresh ^M

8901 NW 33rd Street,
Suite 100
Miami, FL 33172
305-715-5700

Fresh Forward

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Edmonton, Alberta,
Canada T6E 0T1
780-450-6545

Food Service of America Loveland

5820 Piper Drive
Loveland, CO 80538
970-613-4333

General Produce Company

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916-441-6431

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214-426-5666

9715-B Burnet Road,
Suite 100

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512-451-8757

Hardie's Fresh Food (cont.)

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888-451-8757

3137 Produce Row
Houston, TX 77023
713-926-4445

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Hanover, MD 21076
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Canada H2K2T9
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500 46th Street
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309-786-0969

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Pacific Coast Fruit Company

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503-234-6411

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412-621-2626

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928-526-2492

1859 West Grant Road
Tucson, AZ 85745
520-628-2039

Sunrise Fresh Produce

2208 West 21st Street
Jacksonville, FL 32209
904-366-1368

4229 Michael Avalon Drive
Jackson, MS 39209
601-213-4008

T&T Produce

124 Park Industrial Boulevard
Ringgold, GA 30736
706-866-5955

Tarantino Foods

530 Bailey Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14206
716-823-6600

Van Eerden Foodservice

650 Ionia Southwest
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
616-475-0900

Vinyard Fruit & Vegetable Company ^{M S}

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A Tale Of Two Supermarkets: Whole Foods and Fairway Illustrate Shifting Sands Of Competition



James J. Prevor

JIM PREVOR
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Story One:

The gist of this story is that organic and natural foods are available all over now, and consumers don't need to go to Whole Foods to get these products. In fact, they can get them elsewhere more conveniently and less expensively.

The *New York Times* highlights the problems of Whole Foods in an article by Stephanie Strom, "Wall Street Sours on Whole Foods Market":

Sales of organic and natural products are soaring — but you would never know it from the share price of Whole Foods Market, the premier purveyor of such merchandise.

Shares are almost 50 percent lower than they were in February, the high point of the year.

Investment analysts are almost uniformly negative on the company, worried that competition from mainstream retailers, which are increasing the amount of organic and natural items in their mix, will impede the growth of Whole Foods.

Costco, for instance, claims to be the biggest seller of organic foods, and Walmart now sells Wild Oats, a brand of organic products, at the same price as similar conventional brands.

"Conventional retailers can get it into their stores more cheaply, and they can be more predatory on pricing," said Mark Retzlaff, a pioneer of the natural and organic

foods retail business. "If one of those stores is just down the street from a Whole Foods, there's a big segment of their customer base that isn't going to shop at Whole Foods anymore."

The encroachment of traditional retailers onto turf historically dominated by Whole Foods has reminded consumers of the old nickname for the chain, Whole Paycheck, Mr. Retzlaff and others say.

"Their single biggest problem is their price image," said Meredith Adler, who follows the company for Barclays Capital. "Sure, Whole Foods is working to lower prices in produce — but if it's also selling fish that's \$45 a pound, it will be hard to convince people that prices are good."

Story Two:

The gist of this story is that epicurean options are available all over now and consumers don't need to go to Fairway to get these products and, in fact, can get them elsewhere more conveniently and less expensively.

The *New York Times* highlights the problems of Fairway in an article by Julie Creswell, "Fairway Slumps as Epicure Options Grow":

In Fairway Market's grocery store on Manhattan's Upper East Side, shoppers bustle past a colorful array of squash, peppers and cucumbers. A bulb of fennel or a bright red pome-

granate can be picked up for \$2.99. The scents of ground fair-trade coffee, pricey imported French cheese and fresh-baked loaves of artisanal bread waft through the store.

Just around the corner, at Whole Foods, shoppers bustle past a colorful array of squash, peppers and cucumbers. A bulb of fennel or a bright red pomegranate can be picked up for \$2.99. The scents of ground fair-trade coffee, pricey imported French cheese and fresh-baked loaves of artisanal bread waft through the store.

Fairway's motto may be "Like No Other Market," but these days, a lot of grocery stores are awfully similar. When Whole Foods opened on the Upper East Side earlier this year, Fairway said sales immediately slumped at its store there.

Now, Whole Foods has been trying to get out of this box by claiming its products are better than those of others selling organic. In the same article, Walter Robb, Co-Chief Executive of Whole Foods, is quoted:

He said he recently purchased four certified organic steaks at a



JIM PREVOR'S

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mainstream retailer and had them analyzed. The steaks, he said, came from organic dairy cows that had been decommissioned at about 40 months — most beef cattle are slaughtered by 24 months for taste and food safety reasons.

“Sure, those steaks technically meet the organic standards, but in terms of taste and flavor, they’re not the best example of organic meat,” Mr. Robb said.

Whole Foods has built a big national consumer campaign around Sustainability, which we have previously critiqued in this column. Its *Responsibly Grown* campaign was, in fact, specifically designed to persuade consumers that Whole Foods was a brand in and of itself, with a standard above that of organic or anything sold elsewhere.

In contrast, the CEO of Fairway, Jack Murphy, acknowledges the competitive sands are shifting:

On Thursday, Mr. Murphy said Fairway needed to respond not only to competitive pressures from traditional and upscale grocery stores, but also to e-commerce sites like Fresh Direct and Blue Apron, which deliver directly to the home. Fairway, he said, is starting its own e-commerce site for a limited test audience next week.

“There is an e-commerce thing going on. There is more competitive pricing pressure going on than ever before,” Mr. Murphy said. “Stores are popping up everywhere you look. Everybody is rushing to open a store on top of a store on top of a store. It’s more competitive than I’ve ever seen it, and everybody, quite candidly, is upping their game.”

Surely the key point here is that product is not a sufficient differentiator to ensure long term success. It is just too easy for other retailers to add any product that consumers are demanding.

It is also true that narrow specialization exposes any business to price competition. If a produce shipper only sells cucumbers, it is likely to have competition willing to sell cucumbers at break even or even a loss. These competitors can crush a competitor and live off



the profits of selling peppers or other products.

So retailers living off a reputation in one product category are vulnerable to retailers that can live without profits in that category.

Of course, the other fact is that some retailers, in their ambition to grow, stretch their concept beyond its limits. Should there really be a Whole Foods in Detroit?

Now the big bet by Whole Foods is its new small store 365 banner. It is supposed to be a smaller, more economical concept.

One wonders if Whole Foods can really execute.

Consumer insights firm iModerate has a new study out (released October 2015):

Can 365 Reinvalidate the Whole Foods Brand?

Whole Foods is taking aim at Trader Joe’s, as well as big-box stores such as Walmart and Costco, with its 365 concept that hopes to appeal to

budget-minded Millennials, but will it be well received when it launches in early 2016?

iModerate found that consumers are excited at the prospect, but with a caveat – they expect Whole Foods to deliver its renowned quality at traditional grocery store prices. The top unique benefit identified (36 percent) was the ability for more consumers to take advantage of healthy foods thanks to the lower price-point.

“365 is Whole Foods’ chance to pivot from its elitist image and reach a new segment of shoppers that’s paying closer attention to their waistlines, but can’t afford premium prices,” said Rossow. “Giving this population access to healthier food could create immense brand loyalty for 365 and carry over to the larger Whole Foods brand. That said, if 365 turns out to be an equally expensive or lesser-quality version of Whole Foods, the concept will backfire entirely.”

The problem is that we know several potential non-produce vendors who have been approached by the 365 buying team — none of these vendors are going to fit the “traditional grocery store” price profile.

To us it sounds like the concept is already starting to blur, and what markets seem to be demanding now is clarity — Aldi means value, Trader Joe’s means a delicious epicurean approach. What will 365 mean?? It is unclear and thus, perhaps, not able to help Whole Foods.



Lucky's Market

The remote store in picturesque Jackson, WY, is forced to get creative when sourcing and establishing a wholesome-food community.

By Kristen Pope



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LUCKY'S MARKET

Produce isn't just a component of Lucky's Market in Jackson, WY — it's the heart of the market. "Produce is king in our store," says Bob Millsap, store director for Lucky's Market, who notes the 11,000-square-foot store devotes a quarter of its space to produce. "When you walk in, there's a farmers market feel."

The store is just one of a chain of Lucky's Markets across 11 states, which span from Florida to Wyoming to Ohio to Kentucky. The stores all focus on healthy and natural food at an affordable price point. The chain formed in 2003 by two chefs from Boulder, CO: Trish and Bo Sharon.

The chain's tagline is "Organic for the 99%," and the Jackson market certainly delivers. The market works with local suppliers whenever possible and strive to source local and farm-fresh ingredients. Its website even has a link where local farmers and vendors can apply to be featured in the store.

Fresh And Local

"We like to use local products at every

opportunity," says Millsap. "That's hard to do in Jackson." The town is nestled at the base of the Teton Range in northwestern Wyoming. Winters are long in the small mountain town, which sits at more than 6,200 feet above sea level. The growing season is short there, and the surrounding mountains typically receive around 500 inches of snow a year. With temperatures that regularly plunge to -20 or -30, or lower during the winter, the frost-free growing season is relatively short.

However, Lucky's still strives to source local produce and other products. They feature a number of unique local and regional produce items, including micro-greens from Cloud Nine Farm in Wilsall, MT, and organic basil from Big Piney, WY-based Wyomatoes Organic Farm. The market also sources unique items from farther-flung locations, including organic rainbow carrots from Washington.

The store's produce manager is responsible for much of the produce purchasing, though many decisions about products and pricing are set by the home office. The store does not use a distribution center, and it sources produce

from a handful of suppliers, including both large and small distributors as well as local farms. Local branches of Lucky's, such as the Jackson store, have some autonomy in terms of working with local vendors and sourcing locally grown items. Millsap says that, depending on the time of year, the market typically carries up to 10 percent locally grown produce.

This percentage of locally grown produce may soon rise as the Jackson-based Vertical Harvest agri-business project comes to fruition. The vertical greenhouse is scheduled to open this winter with the aim of producing 100,000 pounds of produce a year to supply local individuals, restaurants, and businesses with fresh, local produce. Lucky's is very involved in this effort and initially donated \$10,000 to the project. The market plan's on sourcing produce from the greenhouse once it opens.

Walking into Lucky's, it's easy to see the farmers market aesthetics and to experience the fresh produce prominently on display. The produce section is to the right of the front entrance. It occupies about a quarter of the 11,000-square-foot store. Beyond the



The produce department of Lucky's Market occupies about 25 percent of the store's square footage.

produce department, to the right, is the meat and seafood section. Toward the back of the store is the bulk section packed with spices, grains, candy, and coffee.

Over half of the store's produce is organic, according to Millsap. "We sell a lot more organic than a typical Lucky's does."

Handwritten signs display sale prices in the produce department, marking down seasonal merchandise and a wide variety of organics. Upon entering the store, a customer can quickly see cross-merchandising in action with a wide menu of changing items enticing customers — from baby back ribs to fresh-cut corn. Honeydew halves also greet customers, packed with blueberries and blackberries to make a healthy, ready-to-eat breakfast.

Each shift, produce department team members replenish the merchandise, culling produce that's past its prime. Produce employees also roam the department poised to answer any question and spray down items with hand-held misters.

A large fresh-cut selection includes fruit cups with all different fresh-cut combinations, freshly cored pineapples, juice made in-house, and fruit-infused waters. Lucky's also has a salad section with organic "pick your own" loose leaves of lettuce and salad mixes. People can

also find broccoli, sprouts, coleslaw, julienned carrots, and a wide variety of dressings for all their salad needs.

The produce goes beyond its section, and items are frequently cross-merchandised throughout the store. Limes are near beer, bananas are with cereal, and berries are often found by the granola.

Focus On The Seasons

In addition to promoting local producers, the store also focuses on seasonal items, which are featured prominently in sales and fliers. It's not uncommon to see great deals, such as two cantaloupes for \$1 during the right time of year. For example, in the fall, displays are packed with autumn merchandise, showcasing apples (including Honeycrisps, McIntoshes, and Galas). Seasonal sales include organic merchandise, featuring squashes (such as Butternut, Acorn, and Spaghetti). And a fall harvest display would feature mini pumpkins, gourds, and caramel dip packs.

In a small town, most people are familiar with local shopping options, but the store always makes sure to distribute the weekly sales flier widely, both in the town of Jackson and in surrounding communities. Millsap notes produce is a key driver in advertising. "The

front page of the ad is almost all produce," he says. The market also distributes sale and flier information via e-newsletter in addition to interacting with customers via social media on Facebook and Instagram.

A Centerpiece Of The Community

Community is a key part of Lucky's mission. The Jackson store partners with local nonprofits in a variety of ways, for example donating food to local nonprofits, such as Hole Food Rescue (which re-purposes excess food and keeps it out of landfills, distributing it in the community or to local farmers as animal feed) and the Jackson Cupboard (which is a local food bank). "We believe food should not go in a landfill," says Millsap.

Each quarter, the market invites community members to vote via Facebook to select a number of nonprofits to participate in the store's reusable bag program. Each time a customer brings in a reusable bag, they have the option of either crediting 10 cents to their purchase or donating the 10 cents to a local nonprofit. Customers who choose to donate the change to a nonprofit are given a wooden coin to deposit in one of several boxes at the front of the store then select the box that matches the nonprofit of their choice. The store matches the donations.

In addition to the ongoing reusable bag program, Lucky's also holds an Impact Day every few months where 10 percent of the store's total sales go to a local nonprofit. One recent recipient was the Jackson-based Center for the Arts.

Participating in the community and encouraging philanthropy is important to Millsap, who sees the market not just as a place to grab a gallon of milk and a bunch of bananas. "We want to be a cornerstone of this community," he says. "This is where people meet and see each other. It's truly a community market and hub, and it's important to give back." **pb**

30
YEARS
**INITIATING
INDUSTRY
IMPROVEMENT**

Deconstructing 30 Years of Industry Improvements

In celebration of 30 years in the produce industry, the editors of **PRODUCE BUSINESS** select 30 revolutionary topics and 30 industry influencers who share their expertise and experiences.

This third and final series features the following topics and industry influencers.



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Willard Bishop



SMART PACKAGING
Chip Bolton



HEALTH MOVEMENT
Don Harris



**TRANSPORTATION
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Jim Lemke



SOCIAL MEDIA
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ONLINE GROCERY
Eric Stone



MARKETING BOARDS
William Watson



**FOODSERVICE
BUYING GROUPS**
Tim York

Category Management 'Laying Groundwork for Product Differentiation'



BY BILL BISHOP
FOUNDER OF WILLARD BISHOP
& CHIEF ARCHITECT OF
BRICK MEETS CLICK

The evolution of category management (CM) and the application of retail technology to produce began 30 years ago, changing the paradigm of the produce world. We still struggle with the body of data (magnified by some 1,000 items in the produce department), but it's a different world now, and I believe new advances in technology applied to CM could be the industry's Holy Grail.

In the early days of CM, we saw an opportunity to replicate the model of CM in grocery, but there was a fair amount of resistance in produce. I want to give thanks to Bruce Axtman (now CEO and President, Nielsen Perishables Group, West Dundee, IL) and Mark Degner (now CEO and President, FreshLook Marketing, Hoffman Estates, IL), who were my colleagues. One interesting aspect of what was happening in 1985 was that the two people – Bruce and Mark – who ultimately turned out to be the main providers of perishable data to the grocery industry, were both working together on the initial aspects of this opportunity at Willard Bishop. Bruce

“If there is significance in all the fascinations we went through in the past, it’s that CM was a great big step forward in relation to where the produce business was compared to the other departments in the store.”

decided to take the FreshFacts component that became part of Nielsen. Mark Degner, who was the computer brain back in the day, eventually went to IRI and then started perishables.

I don't think there is any question that perishable departments in general, and produce in particular, lagged behind other parts of the supermarket in adopting new technology. The advent of CM was a great step forward. It really brought produce executives and the performance of the produce department in line. If there is significance in all the fascinations we went through in the past, it's that CM was a great big step forward in relation to where the produce business was compared to the other departments in the store.

CM had a framework or template, and in produce with very modern concepts of test-and-learn, we had a newfound ability to determine things like the value of tree-ripened fruit. We had a lot of stone fruit and were not sure what to do with

it, and then we were able to document the value of ripened fruit's marketing and merchandising appeal. That's an example of consequential learning done within CM that wouldn't have happened otherwise. CM helped lay the groundwork for product differentiation. Prior to that, every apple was an apple, maybe not as simple as that, but in most cases a product was a product. The leadership of the Washington Apple Association had a vision of how to create more value for retailers by focusing not just on their own product, but on the entire apple category. And as we worked with Washington Apple, other commodity groups and growers saw how well it worked and joined the category management initiative.

Today when you take a look at apples, not only do you have a lot of varieties, but you've got major differences in price points. You can spend \$1.29 a pound and you can spend \$3.50 a pound. That's sophisticated retail pricing – what the packaged goods side would call good, better, best pricing.

You can now divide the market. CM allows you to reward novelty and to generate more gross profit. That kind of thing was encouraged and enabled by having CM, and it's driving merchandising decisions today.

I stress those examples because in today's world, the people doing better are the ones doing a good job of testing and learning, proven approaches to being a better innovator. If you go to some of the advanced technology companies, they'll say you better learn how to fail fast and get on to the next idea. Until you system-



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atically test something and really stage it and move on, you're likely to be bogged down on an idea that should have been killed a long time ago.

The ongoing parts of the DNA of the produce department today are enabled pretty much by the creation of CM. I don't want to overstate it, but it's hard for me to imagine how people would do it if they were managing the business in a pre-CM way.

As we evolved CM, we had to improve our ability to track item sales; that meant first getting better at the Price Look Up (PLU) system. Then it meant energizing those products, and actually using the standard data to develop benchmarks. We now have a fairly decent confidence moving to scannable labels, where we read the data from the checkout system. If we didn't have that, which is parse and parcel of CM, we would ship in pieces of product, measure the number of products, try to estimate what the sales takeaway was, and probably wouldn't do it because it was too much work, to compare it to the control situation.

Having the data makes it possible to test and control market situations. The objective is to find out if your new thing is measurably better than what you did before. It's discipline. Today, almost everyone is trying to manage the business with more facts and good numbers. It's really an important component.

To put a top spin on this, the business is much more efficient and productive because of CM. For instance, there are retailers today that calculate the amount of product on the shelves with days of supply, a concept that came out of CM and shelf management. When you do days of supply, you only put the amount of product out there in relation to how fast product is selling. You will see shrink improve, probably variety increase, as people adopt it. We're awed by the rainbow of colors and the beauty of the fresh product. Working with the numbers and the days of supply, you can still be artful but reduce your shrink significantly and improve the quality of the product the customer takes home. It can have a lot of real benefits if you embrace the scheme of being artful and fact-driven,

“You have some categories important for profits, some important for traffic, and some important as differentiators to get the desired result. In contrast, without that, you're just managing items, selling what you bought fast, and the items not selling as fast as they used to you're throwing out.”

but you can't be fact driven without the facts.

CM helps the retailer operate each category like a separate business unit. Then the approach is to have a series of small independent businesses, and start managing the department as a portfolio of categories. You have some categories important for profits, some important for traffic, and some important as differentiators to get the desired result. In contrast, without that, you're just managing items, selling what you bought fast, and the items not selling as fast as they used to you're throwing out. You would just have apples, buy them and mark them up a little or a lot. Now it's a much more thoughtful approach on what changes you can make to grow the category and department in sales and profits.

If CM is implemented properly, there shouldn't be an issue of one well-managed category cannibalizing another. When you have standardized benchmarks, not only do you have percentage distribution for apples to bananas, but also sales per square foot and inventory turns. With the facts you should always be striving to get each category performing at a top tier.

Usually a category manager will manage a number of categories, but not all the categories in the department. You may have your category manager that does greens, one for stone fruit, and one

for melons and related products, etc., depending on the size of the company.

You have to specialize because of the different issues with seasonality and supply chains. You really have to know these businesses. It's hard to imagine one person doing all that. It's not just number-crunching. Many in the better-run retailers have a category analyst to serve the number-crunching and leave the time and energy of the category manager for the more creative side.

One of the insights on the impact of CM is the reduction of shrink. Mushrooms are a very big category, but, also like bananas, shrink at a very high rate. That doesn't mean there's still not a lot of shrink there, but I've worked with people on packaging, on display, on the amount and way inventory is put out. Any category will have sales, profits, shrink and several other metrics, and now with CM, you can take action because you can see what's happening and manage it.

The other revelation I watched and was intriguing to me was when we got into packaged salads. We shifted from the time when we would cull products to make things look good. It's not easy, but you can really merchandize bagged product effectively next to loose items, but at first it was hard to do, and a lot of product got thrown out, up to 30- to 40 percent. It took a new approach, and involved a learning curve.

Normally you'd cull different green lettuces, pull off the bad leaves and remove the bad heads; everyone knew how to do that and the case would look great again. But with bagged salads, you couldn't do that. As strange as it seems, no one looked at sell/use-by dates to rotate products, so for an initial period of time no one knew how to handle the category to keep product fresh.

Back in the day, this problem was significant. People were very frustrated with the category, but then they saw the value of pre-packed product and that consumers really liked it, so retailers found it necessary to learn how to manage pre-packaged items alongside the peppers and tomatoes. It became justifiable because you could see the numbers, and you had to get it right. **pb**

Smart Packaging 'Where Necessity Drove Innovation'



BY CHIP BOLTON
PACKAGING INDUSTRY CONSULTANT

There is an unmistakable energy and sense of anticipation that pulses through the modern supermarket produce department. Immediately, the sheer scope of the department's expanse and its sweep of rainbow colors from a gazillion SKUs lure us into our own fresh garden space. Meandering through, we spot arrays of value-added

“As the produce industry has matured, packaging’s critical contribution to improving produce — and extending shelf life — remains unchanged.”

salads, greens and vegetables – cut, bagged and ready-to-eat or cook – 100 percent usable and no waste. Clamshells filled with Muscadines, dates, figs and fresh berries – produce from the familiar to the exotic – dot the garden scape. Cut fruit, diced onions, and celery along with spicy pico de gallo and creole mix in rigid plastic containers all scream fresh, diverse, appetizing flavors. Give packaging a hefty portion of the credit for making this fresh playground possible.

Thirty years ago produce departments were dominated by bulk presentations. There were no value-added products. Packaging’s potential and sway were unknown and unrealized with no Big Bang moment to trumpet its arrival. There were just entrepreneurial manufacturers looking for new opportunities. Some of

the early entrants made simple, polyethylene bread bags and, as it happened, had connections within the produce industry. Bread bags offered some breathability, but not much abuse-resistance. All the same, they helped make possible those first baby steps of bagged whole potatoes, cucumbers, squash, and the like.

Shrink film makers soon took note and, along with West Coast and Florida processors, began examining how to increase produce shelf life using their existing film products. Thankfully, shrink films were inherently breathable and abuse-resistant, critical factors for the successful marketing, distribution, and retail merchandising of pre-packaged fresh produce. The initial applications, more or less, mirrored those with bread



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bags, either unitizing whole produce or shrink overwrapping it in a foam tray. Next, it was time to see if those shrink films could be converted into bags and their permeability and protection characteristics tweaked so they conformed to more applications. The upshot was the introduction of bagged pre-cut lettuce followed by increasing numbers of salad blends, mixes and kits.

Suddenly, processors recognized the branding opportunities. Fortunately, packaging manufacturers were experienced in printing shrink-based films so produce packaging was not a huge leap. Quickly, retail went to multicolor trap print to enhance the retail presentation of colorful, appealing graphics and nothing was the same again. Foodservice, led by fast food chains, jumped in because pre-cut produce solved some very real back-of-the-house problems by reducing labor, waste and safety issues.

“If fresh-cut produce was to become more than a regional business, the key to extending shelf life had to be found. The seminal moment came with modified atmosphere packaging (MAP).”

Momentum was established, but if fresh-cut produce was to become more than a regional business, the key to extending shelf life had to be found. The seminal moment came with modified atmosphere packaging (MAP). It was the answer to pushing shelf life out to an essential 18 to 21 days for bagged salads. Now produce shipped eastward from the West Coast could still have the requisite quality and shelf life to satisfy consumers.

Driven by some food safety incidents, unprecedented legislation focused around how produce was grown, washed,

cleaned and cut, put the industry under scrutiny. Like never before, education and training were needed. Universities – like UC-Davis – located in the growing regions were already on the case conducting groundbreaking research in areas like post-harvest physiology. Short courses and direct consultation helped raise awareness about best practices in processing that manifested themselves in clean and cold plants with sharp knives that improved processing and, also, helped extend shelf life. Education remains a touchstone for the industry.

Over time, produce packaging became the by-product of sophisticated engineering. Films and bags possessed oxygen transmission rates specific for almost any application. But, with all of the players coming under margin pressures, manufacturers found they could take a less expensive base material like polypropylene and manage the varied permeability demands of produce through laser perforation. Necessity, again, was driving innovation. Rigid plastic containers (such as clamshells) became essential for items that bruise, like fruits, anything soft or products that need to be microwaved. Despite early concerns over clamshells' less-efficient use of space during transportation compared with more familiar roll stock film and storage issues for unused inventory, they became cut fruits' go-to package.

As the produce industry has matured, packaging's critical contribution to improving produce – and extending shelf life – remains unchanged. So many product options, such as kale, spinach, arugula, fresh herbs, and organics, would not be available in small-town America without effective packaging. Now retailers are willing to give products a chance because after 30 years, packaging's performance has earned their trust and confidence.

pb



The Health Movement

‘The Big Bang: How Health Impacted Produce Sales’



BY DON HARRIS
DIRECTOR OF PRODUCE
FEEDING AMERICA

Grocery chains such as Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods Market and Sprouts Farmers Market were either in their infancy or nonexistent 30 years ago. The reason these are so successful, and why conventional retailers like Safeway/Albertsons, Food Lion and Publix Supermarkets are ranked

“Grocery chains such as Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods Market and Sprouts Farmers Market were either in their infancy or nonexistent 30 years ago. The reason these are so successful ... is all due to the health movement that had its beginning in the fitness craze of the 1970s.”

among the top 10 of America’s Healthiest Grocery Stores by *Health* magazine, is all due to the health movement that had its beginning in the fitness craze of the 1970s.

The big bang of how health influenced the produce industry came in the 1980s. This is when mainstream retailers decided to capitalize on consumer’s demand for the healthful foods that went along with their daily gym fix by increasing the size of produce departments. This led to more SKUs, more variety and more year-round availability. For example, the onset of Chilean imports happened in the late 1980s. This was also a time when generations born in the 1960s became parents and wanted to live life more naturally.

Photos of produce departments in the 1970s and early 1980s look so antiquated compared to less than a decade later. Not only did the SKU count double or triple, but we started to see a change in fixtures with a more farm-stand look like canopies and orchard bins.

The second evolution began when the FDA passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 and the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service implemented a National Organic Program in 2002. These leveled the playing field and established a common ground. Consumers wanted to know what was in their food. Plus, the grape scare in 1989 when some grapes from Chile were tainted with cyanide at the port gave a



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boost to the organic movement. In the 1990s too, the National Cancer Institute and Produce for Better Health Foundation's national 5 A Day for Better Health program began, as did the California Department of Food & Agriculture's California Children's 5 a Day - Power Play! Campaign. That led us at retail level to initiate programs like Safeway's 'Eat Like a Champion' program that utilized U.S. Soccer team players such as Mia Hamm to promote healthy eating and regular exercise to school children. Schnucks is another good example with its 'Get Fit with Five' nutrition education campaign with Olympian Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

The third wave of the health movement may be spurred from the Millennial Shopper. This portion of the population suffers from a lack of education. Many of our schools over the last 15 years have stopped teaching home economics. That's why this group has really latched onto local and the ability it gives them to learn where their food comes from, who grew it and how it was grown.

Hunger may be another driving force in the future. In 2014, 48.1 million Amer-

icans lived in food insecure households, including 32.8 million adults and 15.3 million children. Food banks are making a big switch to less processed and more nutritious foods. This is being driven by the childhood obesity epidemic and the rise in chronic health problems like diabetes and heart disease. The produce

industry is in a great position to help. We at Feeding America estimate that more than 6 billion pounds of fresh produce go unharvested or unsold each year. If those fruits and vegetables instead went to food banks, think of how many people – especially children – we could turn into regular produce consumers. **pb**

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BY JIM LEMKE
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
C.H. ROBINSON

When I reflect back on how much the produce industry has changed throughout the past 30 years, I am astounded and extremely proud to have built my career in such a resilient industry.

I vividly remember a time when folks would hold their breath in anticipation every time a highly perishable product was put onto a truck for transport. They hoped that despite a plethora of variable conditions, such as a potential refrigerated unit breakdown, improper temperature consistency, and mishandling at multiple points throughout the journey, product would arrive at its final destination on time and still in optimal condition.

In many of my conversations with business leaders, regardless of the part they play in the food supply chain, their challenges are often directly correlated to the volatile and delicate nature of goods we work with. In addition, sometimes rapid and frequent changes in government and international trade regulations affect

“Today there is an increased level of confidence, speed, and knowledge in dealing with the complexities of transportation and logistics within the perishable space.”

most organizations’ abilities to easily and safely source and supply food from various parts of the world.

Despite all of these factors seemingly working against us, today there is an increased level of confidence, speed, and knowledge in dealing with the complexities of transportation and logistics within the perishable space. And no one can discount the part that technology has played as one of the main drivers of this change. Improvements in GPS monitoring, temperature recording devices, RFID and other innovative tracking methods have directly contributed to faster and more efficient movement of fresh goods.

As a result of these advancements, our industry is able to explore capabil-

ities that were previously not thought possible, such as the idea of virtual warehousing. In today’s world, product can be tracked and traced throughout its journey from the field, to the truck, to warehouses, and finally on shelves. In this way we are able to create efficiencies and value that ultimately benefit consumers with a fresh product that has a longer shelf-life.

That’s good news as we have seen a heightened interest of food experimentation among people around the world. Individuals across all generations are embracing farmer’s markets, or raving about new “foodie” restaurants that specialize in developing interesting dishes and introducing new flavors. The media has even picked up on this trend, featuring food experience shows, such as Food Network’s *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* with Guy Fieri.

General interest in fresh foods, coupled with constant communication and engagement through the Internet and social media channels, has had a direct impact on the increase in consumer demand for year-round product availability. Just a few years ago, asparagus used to primarily be a holiday-driven seasonal produce item. Now, an airplane full of fresh asparagus travels from Peru to New York and in less than two days, is in grocery stores for daily consumption. Now that’s significant change!

The complexity of supply chains continues to create more challenges and opportunities in order to achieve success in this business. I’m proud to reflect on these changes, acknowledge their undeniable impact, and am eagerly anticipating the future state of the industry. **pb**



Social Media 'Don't Take it for Granted'



BY DAN'L MACKAY ALMY
PRESIDENT & CHIEF EXECUTIVE
DMA SOLUTIONS, INC.

“Social media has revolutionized the way we communicate with each other, and virtually no business or industry has been left untouched.”

social media has revolutionized the way we communicate with each other, and virtually no business or industry has been left untouched. Suddenly, brands and companies of all sizes have an avenue to reach their audiences on a more personal level – far beyond what a billboard or newspaper ad could ever accomplish alone. In 2006, *Time Magazine* named “YOU” the “Person of the Year,” signifying the rise of the information age and importance of user-generated content. For fresh produce, the door had opened.

Eating has always been a social experience, but social media provided consumers with a new resource and outlet to socialize about food. In fact, food has so much power on the Internet that food-related searches on Google have increased by over 45 percent since January of 2010. Social media sites such

as Pinterest have risen in popularity over just the past 5 years, and guess what the most popular category is? FOOD.

Social media has given fresh produce brands an outlet to provide the consumers buying and eating their products with information directly from their farms – sharing their unique stories and the passion and care that goes into the growth of each and every fruit or vegetable. Plus, social media has given us access to better information about the foods we eat, bringing awareness and positive change to societal issues like obesity, hunger and natural resources.

The “big” food marketers are nervous – and they should be. Over the past 10 years, more and more voices have risen in favor of fresh vs. processed, and as a result, consumers have invited fresh produce brands to take a seat at the “food marketing table.” Social media is one of the most essential and effective vehicles to create personal relationships with consumers, by answering their questions and solving their food-related dilemmas instantly.

The reality is that social media is here to stay, and in a big way. The way we market has changed more in the past 12 months than in the last 10 years because of the amount of strategy that is required to be relevant to consumers’ news feeds. It is a powerful platform that produce companies need to utilize in order to take advantage of the positive impact that social media has had in the industry.

If there’s one thing that I could express about the changes that I’ve seen in social media since its inception, it would be this – don’t take it for granted. **pb**

Thirty years ago, food marketing was something that only big-budget brands like Coca-Cola and Frito-Lay could successfully execute. This mindset continued for the better part of the past 30 years until the introduction of social media changed everything. Since its inception around 2003,



Foodservice At Retail 'A New Extension of the Home Kitchen'



BY MICHAEL SANSOLO
RETAIL FOOD INDUSTRY CONSULTANT

Whe endless evolution of the supermarket (and the consumer) means we don't see startling shifts daily or yearly, but over a period of three decades, the landscape can change dramatically.

When *PRODUCE BUSINESS* debuted, the supermarket industry was a far different place. Hybrid warehouse stores, such as Cub Foods were the cutting edge. Whole Foods Market was a small business, and Wal-Mart was just starting to experiment with hypermarket formats.

Within stores, product merchandising was far different than today. Products – especially produce – were usually sold “as is,” leaving consumers to handle preparation and cooking at home. It's not that way any more.

Today all food stores – from service-laden stores such as Wegmans to price operators such as Wal-Mart or even drug stores like Walgreens – have evolved into extensions of the home kitchen. Meal solutions or home meal replacements come in many ways especially in produce.

Cooking today takes a number of

“Thirty years ago, retailers might have questioned whether consumers would ever pay for such conveniences. Now we know the answer is yes Today all food stores ... have evolved into extensions of the home kitchen.”

forms from ready-to-eat to step savers to traditional scratch cooking. Products for each approach are evident and essential in the produce department.

Today's stores feature a wide range of products that are ready for immediate consumption such as cut and washed fruits and vegetables. Many stores today feature ample eating areas where consumers can enjoy a wide range of products including produce as part of hot and cold food bars. (Those eating areas frequently include Wi-Fi Internet access – an innovation unimaginable in every way 30 years back.)

And that's not all. Most preparation work is done in the store, but some products such as salads or carrots feature products that are fully washed and ready for eating. In-store prep might

include melons, berries and other fruits all cleaned or cut for immediate eating. Fruits and vegetables are juiced and sold at premium prices.

Thirty years ago retailers might have questioned whether consumers would ever pay for such conveniences. Now we know the answer is yes.

Meal solutions also extend to meal assembly – products ready for the customer to use in cooking or serving. This includes items such as vegetables diced, sliced and chopped for the customer, simplifying preparation time. At times, these pre-prepped produce items are packed with meat, chicken or fish, giving the shopper the ability to “cook” an entire meal with barely any work in the kitchen.

Of course, scratch cooking hasn't disappeared entirely nor has the traditional marketing of produce items. However, today's department is highly likely to feature product information helping shoppers understand how to select, prepare and serve various produce items for maximum benefit.

The reality is that the consumer has evolved in the past 30 years. Today's households are far more diverse than in the past, and usually the person in charge of meal preparation is also working outside the home. That time pressure led to the strong growth of eating meals away from home, which caused supermarkets to react with step-saving and meal-simplifying ideas.

And in the process, the produce department changed dramatically. **pb**



Demographic Marketing 'Mainstream Retail Finally Recognizes Niche'



BY ROBERT SCHUELLER
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
MELISSA'S/WORLD VARIETY PRODUCE

Dragonfruit. Yuca Root. Thirty years ago, you wouldn't have found these items in the produce departments of mainstream American supermarkets. Back then, Asian and Hispanic fruits and vegetables were sold by suppliers like Melissa's/World Variety Produce almost exclusively to mom-and-pop ethnic markets. Twenty years ago, when I started working in the industry, we were just beginning to get calls from mainstream retailers asking for items for their new minority shoppers. I had lists of produce preferred by customers of Russian, Polynesian (and the Pacific Islands), Pakistani, Mexican and Asian/Indian descent. Fifteen years ago, my lists expanded to produce from the Philippines, Japan, the Middle East and – not just South or Central America – but specifically, for example, El Salvador, Peru, Brazil and Colombia.

Times have certainly changed. Together, Hispanics and Asians now represent nearly a quarter of the U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Every retailer in the country caters to these strong and growing consumer

“This move toward varietal development and category expansion, as well as an ever increasing volume and variety in Hispanic and Asian sets, should move produce to nearly 20 percent of total store sales in the next decade.”

markets. This is why mainstream retailers have added entire sections of Hispanic and Asian produce, rather than integrate these items into existing sets – as they did for produce like Italian Rapini and Belgian Endive. Twenty years ago, the Hispanic set had jicama and cilantro, then over time expanded to include vegetables like Yuca root and dried and fresh chili peppers. Likewise, the big four in the Asian set used to be Napa cabbage, Bok Choy, Daikon and maybe ginger. Then, retailers started adding Chinese broccoli (Gai Lan), Gai Choy, lemongrass and Galangal root. The sets have grown bigger and bigger with 25 or more SKUs in some stores.

Mainstream retailers today want to build sales of specialties to their ethnic

and crossover or foodie customers. Education is crucial to drive awareness of these items. You can't assume that just because an item is on the shelf that it will sell. Signage, point-of-sale and other educational efforts are important. So is having these products year-round. We source from more than 40 countries in order to provide 1,200-plus items during as many months of the year as possible. As for promotion, promotional pricing helps at first. Or, offer seasonally themed promotions. For example, Seville oranges are big in January and February for making marmalade. Hatch chilies are currently only available in August and September. We partner with several retailers for Hatch chili roasting events in the storefronts.

Specialties, I believe, will be the driver of the produce department's size and sales in the future. Take potatoes for example. Thirty years ago, 90 percent of the category was represented by Russets with the remaining 5 percent made up of 5 or 6 varieties of specialties. Now, Russets are only 75 percent and specialties are 25 percent represented by over a dozen varieties like baby Dutch yellow, Yukon Golds and Fingerlings. In 10 years, I think we'll see the potato category at 50 percent Russets and the other 50 percent comprised of 25 or more specialty varieties. This move toward varietal development and category expansion, as well as an ever increasing volume and variety in Hispanic and Asian sets, should move produce to nearly 20 percent of total store sales in the next decade. **pb**



Online Grocery 'Making Quality Perishables Digitally Accessible'



BY ERIC STONE
PRODUCE CATEGORY MANAGER
FRESHDIRECT

FreshDirect launched in 2002 with a simple mission: to make great, high-quality food easy to get. Recognizing the inefficiencies of the traditional supermarket model and the growing consumer demands for fresh, our pioneering model

“With carefully sourced and curated daily produce, sophisticated logistics and technology, and a unique approach to customer engagement, we remove much of the friction presented by a traditional grocery store”

was conceived to leverage technology, relationships and analytics for a superior food and shopping experience. FreshDirect disrupted the traditional grocery model by building unique partnerships with the best growers and producers around the world, and innovating around delivery, supply chain and sourcing of the freshest food.

Winning the trust of discerning customers meant providing a consistent, delicious product that met and exceeded customer expectations, especially when it came to produce.

So, how do we do this?

We align with farmers dedicated to flavor and freshness, rather than those optimizing for transport and yield. We

help with logistics like transport and packaging, allowing farmers to do what they do best: farming. We create opportunities for farmers to market their businesses and obtain real-time feedback from consumers.

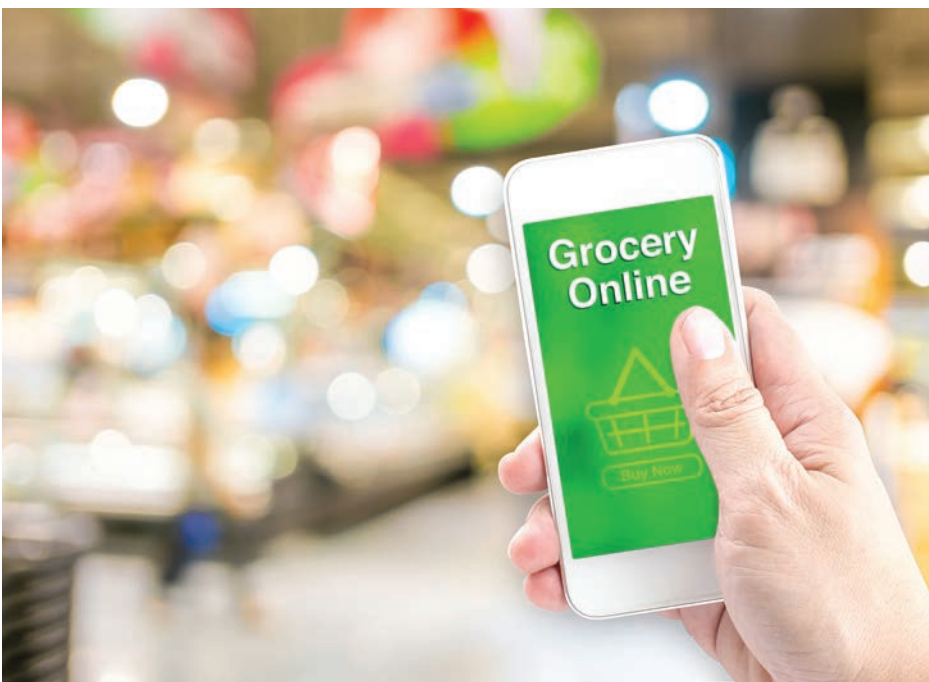
Like our sourcing model, our operations focus on maximizing quality and fresh. For example, it allows for us to sell product before it's even in the “store,” moving inventory faster and shortening the supply chain, thus removing or minimizing considerations of shrinkage and spoilage.

Unlike the traditional produce department that is temperature-controlled for the comfort of shoppers, our facility is designed for the comfort of the food, with temperature-controlled zones and storage conditions that are unique to each produce category.

Our data-driven approach provides valuable analytics and real-time insights into customer shopping behavior, with the ability to measure customer response to new products, and overall drive a more intuitive and personalized shopping experience. And tools like our star-ratings program enables customers to easily shop a selection of “what’s good” based on our expert daily tastings.

With carefully sourced and curated daily produce, sophisticated logistics and technology, and a unique approach to customer engagement, we remove much of the friction presented by a traditional grocery store, and fulfill our brand promise of providing consistently fresh and flavorful product and a seamless way to get it.

pb



Marketing Boards

‘Emergence of National/International Marketing Boards’



BY WILLIAM WATSON
PRESIDENT
THE FRESH APPROACH

When produce industry members come together to create and invest in an agriculture marketing group to promote its product, everybody wins. In addition to the U.S. Potato Board and U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council, the National Watermelon Promotion Board, the National Mango Board and the Hass Avocado Board are examples of agriculture promotion groups that have become critical to their respective industry’s marketing efforts. Producers are incredibly independent, so when they do come together to create a movement to help their industry develop a marketing board, it is a big deal.

Take the National Watermelon Promotion Board, for instance. Since 1990, the NWPB has invested and managed industry funds to increase watermelon consumption in the United States and expand exports to other markets. As a result, more consumers are enjoying watermelons more than ever before. The NWPB didn’t just happen. National Watermelon Association leaders Bruce Price and Buddy Leger guided their peers through the development stages

“Producers are incredibly independent, so when they do come together to create a movement to help their industry develop a marketing board, it is a big deal.”

of creating a federal law that would give the industry the NWPB.

Like others in their industry, watermelon producers are an independent bunch. After a few years of discussion and negotiations with the watermelon producers and shippers, the National Watermelon Association (NWA) submitted a formal proposal to create the NWPB. After the watermelon producers and shippers approved of the creation of the NWPB through an industry-wide referendum, the Secretary of Agriculture appointed 28 watermelon producers and shippers as board members in 1989.

This occurred when seedless watermelons were beginning to reach consumers for the first time. Consumer loved them. Seedless watermelons became a major seller. Once consumers enjoyed a seedless watermelon, they demanded more which drove many watermelon producers to change production and packaging practices in

order to be competitive.

The NWPB and seedless watermelons came together at the same time and the industry is better for it. The NWPB has been a great tool to develop industry leaders along with the NWA. Meeting the demand of seedless watermelons pushed the industry to become more consumer-friendly and efficient.

Mango importers emulated the watermelon industry’s efforts to create an equally impactful marketing program for mangos in the United States. The NMB is unique in that U.S. mango production is significantly lower than mangos imported from other countries. The NMB was the first formal agriculture promotion group to have representation of producers of foreign countries as board members. Here too, once the mango industry voted to approve the NMB, the Secretary of Agriculture appointed 19 producers and importers to the board.

The NMB has been key in educating



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consumers about the benefits of mangos since 2006. As a result, its consumer public relations and marketing campaign reached American consumers 2.2 billion times in 2014. By the end of 2014, the impact of NMB's programs was \$279 million at FOB level. The NMB board invested mango resources in quality and

food safety, and stands ready to tell the mango story on behalf of the mango producers and importers. After all, if you don't tell your story, who will?

Like the NWPB, the mango industry benefited from the NMB in many different areas. From learning new production practices to better understanding



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harvesting, grading and packing, the mango industry is in a much stronger position with the NMB in its toolbox.

As the U.S. avocado industry learned, there is a strong demand for its product among consumers who are less interested in country of origin and more interested in convenience, nutrition and taste. The Hass Avocado Board works with avocado producers, shippers and importers from across the nation and abroad to advance the avocado industry in the U.S. and Canada.

Having avocado producers from multiple countries agree with U.S. shippers and importers on how to invest avocado funds to impact consumer behavior is no small feat. The California Avocado Commission has also been instrumental in driving avocado demand here. In fact, avocado producers in California were promoting their fruit to consumers as early as 1971.

As former executive director of two different agriculture promotion groups, it's clear to me that industries working together can effect change with much more impact than those who don't. These programs are managed and funded by the shareholders who drive the bus. I also learned how critically essential agriculture promotion groups are at developing industry leadership. To see producers, shippers and importers work together with staff to develop and execute programs that increase quality and teach consumers about their respective products is a dream. The only thing better is seeing an industry member's face light up when new knowledge, funded by the board, fuels their success.

pb

Foodservice Buying Groups

'1985: Foodservice Produce Comes of Age'



BY TIM YORK
PRESIDENT
MARKON

“The year 1985 saw the birth of many innovations in foodservice distribution. But one in particular stands out among all the rest. This was the formation last November of Markon, Inc., a distributor-owned produce purchasing and marketing organization.” So began the article by Robert Civin, editor of *ID Magazine* in its March 1986 edition.

The foodservice distribution business looked vastly different 30 years ago. Sysco, now a \$47 billion distributor, had sales of \$2.5 billion. Markon members' total sales then were \$1.1 billion, today it's \$26 billion. Of the Top 50 distributors in 1985, only seven exist as independent companies today. The intervening years have been ones of consolidation and industry transformation.

In 1985, multiple retail companies had centralized purchasing offices located in California, including Topco, Kroger-Wesco, Safeway, and A&P. These offices were charged with representing the interests of their stores, were able to meet with suppliers, choose the best lots of produce, and assure that their needs

“The surge in produce interest was a relatively recent development — driven in part by the phenomenal rise of the salad bar in the mid to late 1970s.”

were met.

Most folks in the produce industry of 1985 had no idea what this new entity — foodservice — meant or the size of the market. Yet, in 1985 the typical operator spent 10 percent of its food purchasing dollar for fresh fruits and vegetables, with estimates of 25 percent of total produce volume for the food-away-from-home market.

What were even then referred to as broadline distributors were in many cases just evolving into fresh produce. Shamrock Foods in Phoenix entered produce in 1981, Miller Cascade in 1982, and Ritter Foods in 1978. *ID Magazine* noted that in 1974 only two of the Top 50 distributors carried fresh produce, in 1985 it was over half. The surge in produce interest was a relatively recent development — driven in part by the phenomenal rise of the

salad bar in the mid to late 1970s. So too, mounting consumer interest in “fresh and healthy” was playing out in both retail and foodservice.

Almost all foodservice distributors had internal repack operations to ensure the quality and pack size their customers needed, as the produce industry was geared toward meeting the needs of terminal markets and retail buyers. Foodservice operators that made guacamole didn't need #1 grade avocados; 100# WGA crates of Napa were too unwieldy, and rubber bands on broccoli were a nuisance and potential food contaminant, Iceberg lettuce didn't need all the wrapper leaves that only became kitchen waste for an operator. Clearly the needs of foodservice were different than retail, and those needs could most effectively and efficiently be met at source.



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Foodservice needed a voice, and it came in the form of purchasing groups. CODE, led by Dave Eldredge, was the first purchasing group for foodservice produce; it folded shortly after its two largest members, Ritter Foods and American Fruit and Produce joined Gordon Foods, Miller-Cascade, and Shamrock Foods to form Markon. Sysco opened a Salinas office in 1986, and US Foodservice followed in the early 1990s.

So too, produce specialists realized they needed a voice and a presence, and

groups including Pro*Act, and Produce Alliance were formed to meet their needs. Though these and other foodservice groups had disparate charters – but they were all geared toward meeting the produce specific needs of broadliners, specialists and operators.

Many of us can thank Joe Stubbs (Sunkist), Dave Stidolph (Mann Packing), and Dave Stafford (*ID Magazine*) for teaching us about the foodservice industry. So too, the Produce Marketing Association began the Foodservice

Conference in the early '80's to meet the needs of this growing segment.

Total foodservice sales in 1985 were \$178 billion, with retail sales of \$290 billion. In 2015, the total consumer spend on food of \$1.4 trillion is evenly split between foodservice and retail. Technomic predicts total consumer food spend in 2025 of \$2.07 trillion, with a 50-50 split between retail and foodservice. What thirty years ago was a novelty, is now a critical part of the produce industry distribution channels. **pb**



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RETROSPECTIVE

VETERAN RETAILER **DICK SPEZZANO**
 WEIGHS-IN ON NEARLY 60-YEAR
 PRODUCE CAREER

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

Retailers were losing money due to checker inaccuracies when Dick Spezzano chaired the Produce Marketing Association's (PMA) Produce Electronic Identification Board nearly 30 years ago. The creation of UPCs, PLUs and case coding for the fresh floral and produce industry solved this problem.

Spezzano, then vice president of produce and floral at Vons, which at the time was a 69-store chain headquartered in Arcadia, CA, brought an abundance of experience and expertise to the post. After all, it had been almost 30 years before this, in 1958, when he started his retail career working part-time for Star Markets on the East Coast. Five years later, he moved to Southern California where he held positions from produce manager, assistant store manager, area field merchandiser and produce buyer before being named vice president.

In 1997, he founded Spezzano Consulting Service, of which he is now president. Spezzano spent countless hours giving back to the industry by volunteering for organizations such as the Fresh Produce and Floral Council of California, United Fresh and PMA. He was recognized by PMA as the 2014 Robert L. Carey Leadership Award winner.

Where were you in 1985?

I was at Vons in Los Angeles.

What was the produce department like in 1985?

SKUs were about 150. It was relatively seasonal back then, with short seasons, even in our area. Chile was just emerging with grapes and tree fruit. There were no apples or avocados yet out of South America. Mexico didn't have much in

the way of grapes, and what they did have was seeded, which wasn't what our customers wanted. Pineapple, from Hawaii, was the white variety. We sold four times more when the gold variety came out. Fresh-cut meant coleslaw and chop suey. There wasn't the technology to extend shelf life. Three days was tops. The cold chain wasn't what it is today. We had an open dock where the temperature could get as high as 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Yet, you didn't really hear of food safety problems.

Organics were primarily sold in 10,000-square-foot health-food stores with 25 SKUs of fruits and vegetables — maybe 45 during peak season. It wasn't until the 90s that we put Pavich organic grapes in all of our stores as a second variety to conventional. After that, we started to add items such as carrots,

beets and turnips mainly in the upscale or university stores.

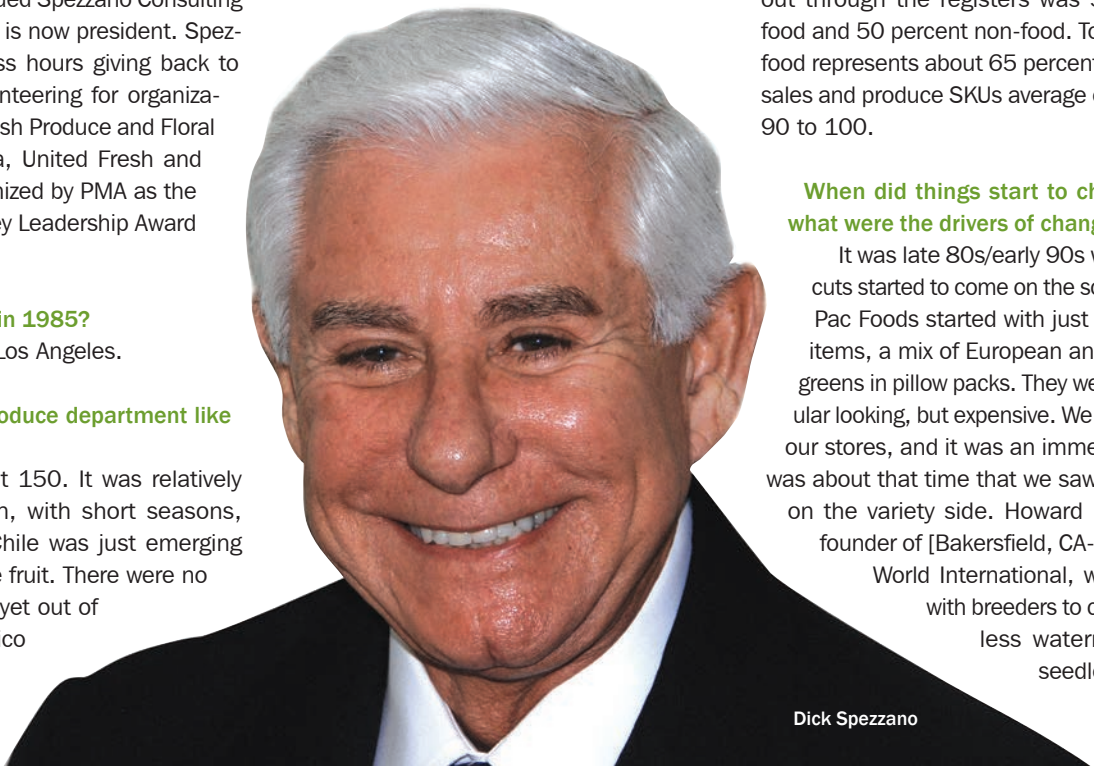
The big deal with PLU codes is that before this era, we could lose up to \$1 or more per pound on organics since they looked the same as their conventional counterparts to the front-end checkers.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment 30 years ago?

It was very competitive in Southern California. Most supermarkets were privately held and family-owned. We had about 20 chains in our area, each with anywhere from 20 to 50 stores. Only three had more than this. We were one of them. The other two were Ralphs and Alpha Beta. Price Club, which became Costco, was just starting in San Diego. I remember going for a visit. It looked like a store specializing in all electronics and televisions. Then, they told me that what went out through the registers was 50 percent food and 50 percent non-food. Today, I think food represents about 65 percent or more of sales and produce SKUs average only around 90 to 100.

When did things start to change, and what were the drivers of change?

It was late 80s/early 90s when fresh-cuts started to come on the scene. Ready Pac Foods started with just a couple of items, a mix of European and American greens in pillow packs. They were spectacular looking, but expensive. We put them in our stores, and it was an immediate hit. It was about that time that we saw innovation on the variety side. Howard Marguleas, founder of [Bakersfield, CA-based] Sun World International, was working with breeders to create seedless watermelon and seedless grapes.



Dick Spezzano

Driscoll's developed its own varieties of strawberries, as well as using those developed at universities. At the same time, supermarkets went from 25,000 to 60,000 and 75,000 square feet before settling on an ideal space averaging 50,000. That's when category management migrated from center store to produce enabling us to manage margins and profits.

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry during the past 30 years?

Sustainability. The price of oil increased in the late 90s and 2000s, and that factor raised prices for farming. Our industry has been good about cutting down on water; for example, some growers invested in solar. We could do more with solar. We haven't done much with wind yet.

How would you describe the produce department today?

There's been a significant increase in linear footage today, four times what it was in 1995,



with SKUs approaching 600 to 700. Many new items are packaged, which lend themselves better to today's shelving systems rather than bulk produce.

What do you think was the greatest lessons you learned during the past 30 years, both as a retailer and as a consultant?

I learned how to be a better partner with

suppliers. A good retail partner should be forgiving when weather events occur, because leading-edge vendors will reward you for your loyalty by coming to you first with their newest varieties and latest ideas.

What do you think will drive the produce industry in the next 10 to 20 years?

I think it will be the new consumer. Produce is important to Millennials. This age group is better educated, and they have greater access to the Internet to make informed purchase decisions. The produce industry needs to adjust to this new consumer with smaller stores, online shopping, as well as pick-up and delivery options. My granddaughter is in college, and she shops AmazonFresh for all her produce. She tells me they deliver what she wants, it's good quality, and fairly priced.

What are the challenges holding the industry back?

There are pressures on margins that make it hard for the supply side to develop new products. Except for products like Pom Wonderful and Cuties, for example, you don't see a lot of TV advertising for produce. Even Dole and Del Monte are pressed on margins.

What are your thoughts on choosing produce as a career today?

I've enjoyed mentoring college sophomores and juniors at PMA's Fresh Summit as part of the Pack Family Career Pathways Program. What these students are most surprised at is that produce company chief executives are on the floor selling. Sure, the students could go to work for a big company like ConAgra Foods, and likely make more money than in produce, but I tell them they won't be as happy. It's harder to get to the top in big companies because of all the layers. In the produce industry, it's easier to move up — especially if you work hard. I remind my students to always follow up with emails to executives they meet at shows.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?

Get as much education as you can. Then, be sure to aim for opportunities that will put you in hands-on positions at retail. To be successful, you'll need to be able to crunch the numbers from your college education and have intuition from store-level, hands-on experience with customers. Never stop being a student of the business from farm to retail. **pb**

RETROSPECTIVE

SEASONED RETAILER **DON HARRIS**
 TALKS ABOUT 40-PLUS-YEAR
 PRODUCE CAREER

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

Supply and demand meant trading crops with neighbors when Don Harris grew up on a farm in Idaho. His father and grandfather put produce in Harris' blood from birth. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Business Marketing from the University of Idaho, he traded the field for retail by holding a series of leadership positions with Safeway, where he worked his way to director of corporate produce merchandising and marketing.

This followed a career with natural and organic retailer, Wild Oats, where Harris served as vice president of produce and floral, creating a buying team that supplied more than 100 stores nationwide with organic produce. Then, after five years working on the supply side as director of category development for Estero, FL-based Naturipe Farms, Harris started his own business, Harris Consulting Solutions.

In May of this year, he embarked on another interesting facet in an illustrious produce career by becoming director of produce supply for Feeding America, the Chicago, IL-headquartered nonprofit organization that operates a nationwide network of foodbanks. Over the years, Harris served two terms on the Produce Marketing Association's Board of Directors. He currently writes a monthly column in *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine.

Where were you in 1985?

I had just moved into Safeway's corporate offices in Pleasanton, CA, in March of 1985.

What was the produce department like in 1985?

The big deal in the 1980s was the awaking of the importance of produce. It was a time when we at Safeway said, "let's differentiate ourselves by making produce a star." We saw concepts like Loblaws in Canada that really focused on fresh, and we took inspiration



Don Harris

from what we saw in other concepts across the country from both regionals and smaller independents.

This meant purposeful layouts designed to entice the shopper rather than patchwork displays of produce. In addition, we reset the department with fixtures; for example, orchards and field bins under canopies with track lighting. Imports from South America and convenience products like bagged salads were getting their start at the same time. I remember stapling labels onto the first bags of lettuce. New stores were being built to carry 300 to 400 and even 500 produce SKUs.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

It was competitive for us. In Northern California, there was Raley's and Fred Meyer; in Southern California, Vons and Ralphs; Giant in Maryland; Ukrops in Virginia; King Soopers in Denver; Fry's Food Stores in Phoenix; and Tom Thumb, H-E-B and Randalls in Texas. Safeway was not in the New York and Chicago

markets at the time. No one pushed produce as much as we did. We wanted to be on the front of the wave.

When did the industry start to change, and what were the drivers of change?

FMI Trends surveys in the 1980s showed that while customers didn't generally like supermarket shopping, they did enjoy the produce department. In fact, the quality of the produce was the primary criteria they used for selecting where to shop. That's one of the reasons produce was moved to the front of stores. We had floral at our entrances. Sales-wise, floral wasn't that big a part of department sales, but our boss at the time thought that walking through floral put customers in a good mood to shop. We took this concept from some of the budget shops in San Francisco.

How would you describe the produce department today?

You have some of the best cutting-edge retailers out there and others not worth a darn. Unfortunately, we've seen a plateau, a repeat of the same old thing and even sacrificing in presentation and flair due to economic pressures on labor. The creativity we do see is coming from the smaller regional retailers, such as Wegmans that don't have to answer to Wall Street. Some retailers today forget the rules that the old-timers in the industry taught us. For example: "You can't save yourself into a profit"; "You don't take a percentage to the bank, you take dollars."

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry during the past 30 years?

The explosion of variety is certainly one of them. But it became hard to keep all the prices in your head, and it took too long to keep checking a list for prices. PLU codes

then came to the rescue. At first, we put the PLUs on in the back room and it was a very labor intensive process.

Then, Washington apples and Sunkist citrus were the first to put PLUs on product before shipping it to us. PLUs led to category management. Allocating shelf space was the old way of thinking. Now, we were armed with data that could drive category

growth and compare ourselves to others.

The new pre-cut salads were a perfect fit for category management. They were the first product that we eventually put into one section — the singles, the blends, the kits, created destination categories. The magic came in not selling as many categories as you could, but what percent of the market you captured compared to the competition.

What led you to the consultant side of the industry?

I wanted to move into something different since I'd done just about everything on the retail side. As a consultant to the supply side, I was in a position to provide invaluable insight by being about to see both sides of the industry.

What do you think was the greatest lessons you learned about retailing over the past 30 years?

The importance of education and continuing education. If you stop learning, you're dead.

What do you think will drive the produce industry in the next 10 to 20 years?

There's a need to learn from the past. What's old is new again. I see it with chains like Whole Foods Market and Wegmans. They're putting up bigger displays, at the same time, others are pulling back on big displays due to fear of shrink. On the other hand, we have to look into the future and decide how we fit with non-traditional ways of selling produce, such as online shopping.

What are the challenges holding the industry back?

We as an industry are at the same cross-roads we were at 30 years ago. That is, everyone is doing the same thing. We need to analyze our way out of this and look for new and innovative ways to sell produce. The challenge is that innovation means investment, and there is a severe penalty on profitability today for failure.

What are your thoughts on choosing produce as a career today?

Produce is different. It's for someone who wants a career that is challenging and ever-changing. No two seasons in a row are the same.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?

Two things: First, listen to the customer. Don't do things to please yourself or the sellers because you think the customer wants it. Second, you need to have a great training program. Labor is expensive and controllable. If you invest in training over the long run, then you'll see a return. After all, it takes a lot of good to make up for a bad experience.

pb



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RETROSPECTIVE

FROM AUSTRALIA TO BRITISH COLUMBIA, RETAILER **MICHAEL MOCKLER** SHARES INSIGHTS FROM 45 YEARS IN PRODUCE

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

Mom-and-pop shops, corner stores stocked with staples and green grocers who knew each customer by name. These were the retailers, a then 5-year-old, Michael Mockler remembers as the customers who purchased the 100-pound burlap bags of potatoes and onions his father bought each week on the terminal market outside of Sydney, Australia.

Mockler's produce career started more than a decade later as manager of a local fruit barn. In 1989, he moved to the Canadian province of British Columbia where he became produce specialist at Thrifty Foods. Since 1995, he has held the title of director of produce operations for this Victoria, BC-headquartered 26-store chain that's now a banner of Sobeys Inc. Mockler served the industry as Exhibit Committee Chair for the 2010 and Co-chair of Sponsorship Committee for the 2013 Canadian Produce Marketing Association Annual Convention & Trade Show, both held in Vancouver.

Where were you in 1985?

I was the buyer/merchandiser/operator of the Fruit Barn in Kempsey, a town located about 250 miles north of Sydney. Fruit Barns are like large retail produce departments located on the side of the road.

What was the produce department like in 1985 compared to now?

There were no computer or PLU systems. You had to memorize the price for 100 items and the prices changed twice a week. I didn't see PLUs until I was at Thrifty. PLUs led to categories and category management. Today, we have 400 to 500 PLU items in our departments — not counting private label and UPC products.

Speaking of UPCs, I remember seeing the first bagged coleslaw and thinking "that's crazy,



Michael Mockler

who would buy this?" Back then, cabbage was 3-pounds for 30-cents. A package of coleslaw was one-quarter of this weight and sold for 50-cents.

Organics were practically non-existent. My wife and I flew to Los Angeles shortly after arriving to British Columbia, and I remember driving 12 miles to find a supermarket that sold organic produce. There was no certification. It was a personal guarantee from the farmer. Poor quality was the norm: gnarly potatoes or apples with worm holes. It was in the 1990s when we started with organics at Thrifty. We had to make a concerted effort to understand this customer. That meant focus groups. Back then, organics were two to three times the cost of conventional.

In general, it was all about selling customers what you wanted to move. Now, it's all about giving customers what they want to buy.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

In Australia, there were plenty of corner fruit shops. These were 30-foot storefronts with a house attached on a neighborhood block. Shoppers could buy staples like onions, potatoes and bananas in a flash. Knowing shoppers' names was part of the customer service and a competitive advantage. Then, the big chains and the 40,000 square-foot fruit barns came in. Consolidation of the supermarket chains happened next, which were driven by the consumer's desire for one-stop shopping.

When did things start to change, and what were the drivers of this change?

The 1990s is when we took a hard look at what direction we wanted to take. We realized that while everyone wanted to drive an SUV, not everyone wanted the same SUV. With apples, for example, we could sell 10-pound boxes cheap or assorted varieties of extra fancy at a higher price. We went with the latter option and partnered with growers across Canada that had the same philosophy. Since then, I travelled to California, Hawaii, Mexico, Chile and Japan, to name a few places, to identify growers that can provide us with the quality and variety our customers want.

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry over the past 30 years?

It's the expansion of varieties beyond our wildest dreams. We're selling whole categories now instead of single products. This has given us incremental sales, which were not available 30 years ago. Ten years ago, I had the opportunity to buy square-shaped Japanese watermelon. I loved it! My boss asked me how much I could sell, and I said probably one at \$100 apiece. So he asked why I wanted to spend \$20,000 on air freight to

bring them in. The point of something like this isn't the immediate sales, it's the media storm that results. We always try to offer something different. Today, we carry 6 SKUs of kale, 12 of peaches, 24 of tomatoes and 40 of potatoes. Our customers take this for granted, but what we want is for them to tell their friends where they shop for produce.

What do you think was the greatest lesson you learned about retailing over the past 30 years?

There are two. First, my Dad taught me to always leave money on the table. In other words, you need to allow for a fair return to your supplier if you want to buy from him tomorrow. You won't get the cheapest this way, but you'll get product 24/7. Second, never allow a customer to leave your department without getting a "wow." You've got to impress the customer every day. Freshness. Variety. Selection. Price point. Service. If it's a hot day, dazzle them with a big chilled display of watermelon. They may not have thought they wanted watermelon when they walked in, but they do now.

What do you think will drive the produce industry in the next 10 to 20 years?

Packaging, especially coming from the food safety side. In Europe, shoppers aren't allowed to touch the produce. In the U.S., customers want produce they can touch. Think about it though. They don't let you touch the meats in the meat department. The other side is variety. Coke has seven formats, why not five for blueberries. Berries in a single-serve tube for snacking, for example, or 4-pounder for pies. In 1985, we got in 10-polund boxes of blueberries that customers shovelled themselves into smaller boxes. They would injure half of them in the process; displays got dirty fast; and shrink was sky high. Packaging helps both the grower, the retailer and the consumer.

The problem of food waste will also drive our industry. There's waste from the field level to transportation and handling, market level, and at home. We don't have enough resources to keep going this way, because food waste means we also waste the water used to grow that produce. We don't have the luxury of abundant water in prime growing areas like California anymore.

What are the challenges holding the industry back?

Food safety. Government regulations aren't consistent. Bureaucracy sometimes doesn't allow all facets of the industry to work together. The low cost of goods. It all sets us up for foodborne outbreaks. To tell you the magnitude of this problem, when the spinach scare hit in 2006, sales of spinach even fell off in Australia.

What are your thoughts on choosing produce as a career today?

Produce is a wonderful profession to meet interesting people — your customers. Customers who are appreciative of your knowledge on how to pick a ripe melon, for example. It's a career where you can meet up to 300 to 400 new people in a week. People skills and making that personal connection are everything. It's way beyond the kind of experience you get in a typical office job.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?

Impress the customer first. If you impress the customer, you'll impress your boss. **pb**

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The poster features a tropical theme with palm trees, hibiscus flowers, and photos of a resort building. At the top, a red banner with white text says "Register at seproducecouncil.com". Below that, two cartoon crocodiles dressed as a surfing man and a hula dancer are shown. The main title "SOUTHERN EXPOSURE Produce in Paradise 2016" is centered, with "SOUTHERN EXPOSURE" in large, bold, orange letters and "Produce in Paradise" in a script font. Below the title, a green banner with white text says "MARCH 3 - 5, 2016". Underneath, "Hollywood, Florida" is written in a cursive font. At the bottom center is the Southern Exposure Produce Council logo, which includes a map of Florida. Two photos of a resort building are placed on the left and right sides, with large orange and red hibiscus flowers in the foreground.

RETROSPECTIVE

TOM MURRAY GIVES PERSPECTIVE ON NEW ENGLAND'S RETAIL SCENE

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

The ability to constantly seek and embrace change has served Tom Murray well during his 41-year retail produce career. Murray, who got his start as a clerk with Roche Bros. Supermarkets in 1974, continues to work for the 21-store chain headquartered in Wellesley, MA. He has held a number of progressive leadership titles from produce manager, produce merchandiser and produce director to store operations director, vice president of store operations, and since 2007, vice president of produce and floral. Roche Bros. has earned the *Boston Globe's* "Top Places to Work" award for seven years running (2008 to 2014), and stands out for the longevity of its employees such as Murray. Murray also serves as first vice president of the New England Produce Council.

Where were you in 1985?

I was the produce manager at our Sudbury, MA, store. This was our first store to feature a bulk produce department immediately at the entrance. Perishables were featured prominently around the perimeter with a strong fresh concept throughout the shopping pattern.

What was the produce department like in 1985 compared to today?

We first expanded the produce department around 1985. In 1974, when I started, produce was considered a "tunnel aisle" — in the center of the store — and pretty sterile. There wasn't much bulk produce. I remember we would trim and wrap our own iceberg lettuce, weigh it, and write the price on each bunch of bananas with a magic marker.

Today, there are so many more SKUs compared to

the 1980s. Most categories are available 52 weeks per year. Instead of novelty being driven by seasonality, we now offer more local, convenient, and exotic items that are new to the customer. For example, we now sell more dragonfruit in one-week then we previously did in an entire season.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

New England in 1985 was a fairly competitive retail environment, with more independents and fewer chains. Star Market, Shaws, Stop & Shop, and Market Basket were the large operators. Today, you also have Whole Foods Market, Wegmans, Target, Big Y, Hannaford, BJ's Wholesale Club, Trader Joe's, Price Chopper and Wal-Mart to add to the list of competitors in the region — all with little

growth in population. Today, New England also has a strong local farmstand business with growing interest in CSAs.

When did things start to change, and what were the drivers of this change?

In the late 1990s, customers started to purchase more healthfully, which drove demand for more fresh produce offerings. Organics also emerged in the 1990s, became more prevalent by the 2000s, and move at a strong pace today.

Customer interest in novelty and variety also created change. Today, the Food Network, Rachel Ray and Dr. Oz are such powerful influencers of demand that you must stock what they are featuring, because that's what shoppers want to buy.

Convenience is another driving force, but not at the expense of freshness or health. Fresh-cut fruit and vegetable sections continue to have strong growth. Consumers are looking for easy alternatives that fit their busy lifestyles.

As a member of the Chandler Copps' share group of independent retailers, I learned about new merchandising ideas, products and technologies. This was a great way to stay on the cutting edge, especially since I was from a small New England company. After our group visited Randalls in Texas, we changed our merchandising to Euro tables, which gave us a great farmstand look.

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry over the past 30 years?

Produce traceability and its contribution to food safety has been a game changer. Imagine what traceability would have



Tom Murray

done for the spinach business during the E. coli outbreak in 2006. We could have identified the source of the problem much faster — limiting the cases of illness and saving sales for other producers across the spinach business.

What do you think was the greatest lesson you learned about retailing over the past 30 years?

To be open to change. Don't be afraid to try new things. Bagged salads, avocados and mangos are some of my favorite examples.

I remember when bagged salads were first introduced; I didn't think they would go far. Then, consumers — and I, personally — realized bagged salads made it so much easier to prepare a healthy option for their family, multiple times per week. We also saw a strong lift from sales of salad add-ons: cucumbers, tomatoes, dressings, etc. This category has evolved even more today, with many new mixes and varieties. Kits, chopped salads, and organic offerings are currently the strongest

Now, avocados are one of the top-selling items in our stores. I never would have predicted that fact 30 years ago.

areas of growth in the category.

In the 1990s we were lucky to sell two cases of avocados a week. Then came pre-conditioning, awareness of avocado's health benefits, and popularity of guacamole. Now, avocados are one of the top-selling items in our stores. I never would have predicted that fact 30 years ago.

Similarly, 30 years ago, very few consumers in the Northeast understood what to do with a mango, if they could even find one. Now, consumers come in looking for specific varieties, and the category has become a staple of the department with strong growth.

If you stay the same, you'll get run over in this business. Customers are always interested in what's new.

What are your views on "local"? Is it a trend or here to stay?

Local is one of our customers' top priorities, and it is here to stay. Customers want local produce, and they keep asking for it. As a second-generation, family-owned business, local is also core to our company's philosophy.

During our primary growing season, we push every local item we can to satisfy the abundant demand. Off-season, we have to get more creative, but found great products by working with local growers using climate-controlled options such as greenhouses, hydroponics and even retrofitted shipping containers.

What do you think will drive the produce industry in the next 10 to 20 years?

Our younger consumers are even more focused on health, sustainability, organics, variety, convenience and quality. This keeps us at the top of our game in finding offerings to meet their needs, but also drives tremendous excitement and variety in our assortments.

What are the challenges holding the industry back?

Drought in California is a major concern for the industry. Climate and weather also challenge us at every turn; and at times, the produce industry needs to turn on a dime to react. I joke that the produce industry is like the weather in New England — wait 5 minutes and it will change.

What are your thoughts on choosing produce as a career today?

If you want to work hard to do the right thing for your customers and your company, choose the produce industry. Retail can be especially tough, but rewarding, if you are driven, and welcome change. My produce industry colleagues are "down to earth," pun intended. I have met some great people and life-long friends in this business.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?

My advice would be to find a mentor that will give them support, advice, and help them to learn and grow in the business. **pb**

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ASIA RISING & ITS IMPACT ON THE GLOBAL PRODUCE MARKET

A fusion of fundamental elements creates a perfect environment for increased exports to Pacific Rim Asia, but how will this opportunity affect other markets?

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

China and other markets in Asia's Pacific Rim are picking up speed as major buyers of quality produce from around the globe. As market access loosens up and logistics advances support the business, these markets have been transformed from a role of complementary sales to major competitors for global and especially U.S. supply.

"The proliferation of trade agreements and economic changes in Asia has resulted in these markets becoming more consistent," says Richard Owen, vice president of global business development for the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) in Newark, DE. "They have become regular customers instead of occasional customers. Approximately 55 percent of the world's consuming population is located in the Pacific Rim. Whether you sell to that market or not, it will have an

influence on global supply and demand."

The intersection of Asia's population rates and consumption patterns has led to intensified interest in Pacific Rim markets. "Asia accounts for 66 percent of the global food consumption," states Bobby Yavari, director of global expansion for Driscoll's in Watsonville, CA. "You have a market with high population and high consumption of food — naturally this makes Asia a good target market."

According to USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) data, U.S. produce exports to Asia have grown from approximately US\$3.8 billion in 2010 to US\$5.6 billion in 2014. "As a percentage of total U.S. produce exports to the world, the Asian region accounted for 31 percent of total exports in 2010, peaked at 37 percent of the total in 2012, and dropped back to 33 percent of the total in 2014,"

reports James Christie, president of Bryant Christie Inc. in Sacramento, CA. "Overall, Asia accounts for about one-third of U.S. produce exports by value in a given year."

BURGEONING INFLUENCES

The growing middle class in many Asian countries, and its resulting buying power, is credited for the significant market potential. "The most important markets in Pacific Rim Asia are attractive because they recognize quality and are willing to pay for it," says Christie. "There is more room for growth as countries in the region continue to experience GDP per capita and middle class growth."

A simple measure of top markets follows economic trends. "The following top markets have exceeded U.S. GDP growth per capita from 2010 to 2014: China, Taiwan, India,



Vietnam, South Korea, and Hong Kong," explains Christie. "Not surprisingly, these are some of the most attractive markets for U.S. produce over this period."

In 2011, the Washington Apple Commission pointed to Southeast Asia, China and India as its three areas of focus. "This is where we've seen and proven the economic middle class growth," explains Todd Fryhover, president of the Washington Apple Commission in Wenatchee, WA. "Recent opening for full varietal access to China and the increasing middle class has influenced our exports."

Growth of the middle class translates into demand for better products. "As these consumers move into the middle class, their buying power grows and they want higher quality, healthier food," relates Dick Spezzano, president of Spezzano Consulting Service, Inc. in Monrovia, CA. "U.S. products are perceived as high quality in these markets."

The evolution of modern retail formats is another factor in market development, even though a majority of produce is still sold via the corner wet market (50 percent or more in the case of China, according to PMA). "Throughout Asia, China and Southeast Asia, we see growing emergence of the traditional modern supermarket chains," reports PMA's Owen. "They look for trends and ways to reach consumers not unlike what we see in the West."

More modern retail formats mean more favorable logistics and handling for imports. "The development of the modern retail trade across many countries of Asia, bringing cold chain management with it, has been especially important for perishable fruits such as California table grapes," explains Susan Day, vice president international marketing for the California Table Grape Commission in Fresno, CA.

Food safety and political bias also favor U.S. imports and contribute to import demand. "Asia Pacific Rim consumers with the ability to choose are moving to products they feel are safe," says Fryhover. "U.S. products are perceived as food-safe. Since China experienced some food safety issues, there is some level of distress from consumers about Chinese product. Also, the political environment within Vietnam results in a certain distrust about Chinese product, so we've seen greater interest in and acceptance of U.S. product there."

As these factors stay in play, Asia will continue to grow as a market. "Populations



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEALD SWEET

Growth of the middle class translates into demand for better products.

are rising in the region and there is development pending in most Asian export markets, whether it be economic, retail or cold chain," suggests Day. "The California Table Grape Commission believes there are still considerable growth opportunities in Asia."

Lantao, one of the largest importers of premium fruit from around the world into China, has seen continuing growth. "The Asian market is nowhere near its long-term capacity," says John Wang, chief executive of Lantao in Shanghai, China. "The middle class and population growth in Asia will exceed more developed markets in the world."

RISING MARKETS

According to USDA data, Hong Kong has received the largest value of U.S. produce exports to Asia in recent years, with much of that product likely finding its way into China and other Asian markets. "The top five markets for U.S. produce have remained fairly consistent since 2001, with Hong Kong replacing Japan as the top market, and South Korea and India moving up," reports Christie. "South Korea, which was helped by the U.S./Korean Free Trade Agreement in 2012, has been growing as a destination for U.S. produce ever since."

Experts in the region categorize the markets into several distinct groups. "Japan and Korea are fairly developed economies," explains Owen. "The distribution and sourcing system is fairly stable. Those are high value premium markets, and they will continue to grow but not at the pace of the

developing markets."

The second segment includes fast emerging markets, such as China. "China has a growing market because of a fast growing middle class," says Owen. "There are 1.3 billion people ready to buy product and in some cases pay a premium for it."

Another exploding segment is the developing markets. "These include countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. They have traditionally purchased from other countries in the region. They are growing, but not as fast as China," says Owen.

Vietnam and Malaysia are mentioned as particular shining stars. "Vietnam, which wasn't in the top 10 until 2009 in terms of Asian export destinations by value, moved into sixth position in 2014," says Christie. "If the Trans Pacific Partnership or TPP is implemented, we expect both Vietnam and Japan to grow as markets as tariffs on imported produce come down. In 2001 Malaysia received the fifth largest value of U.S. produce exports to Asia, but by 2014 their relative ranking had fallen to eighth. TPP implementation will eliminate many of their tariffs on produce items, creating opportunity for greater U.S. produce exports."

Southeast Asia, with the greatest recent growth in U.S. produce exports, is likely to remain an attractive market. "Income growth has allowed consumers in Southeast Asia to purchase a wider range of agricultural products," says Christie. "A shift of consumer demand to higher value products will create strong demand from the region for consum-

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er-oriented imports. USDA forecasts economic and middle class growth in Southeast Asia to outpace the global average until 2023. This, along with continued urbanization, is expected to result in rising retail food sales."

However, valuation of the U.S. dollar could affect U.S. competitiveness. "The U.S. dollar's recent rise against most Asian currencies will challenge exports to the Asian region," cautions Christie.

Spezzano further explains the affect of exchange rates on the strength of U.S.

"The U.S. dollar's recent rise against most Asian currencies will challenge exports to the Asian region."

— James Christie, Bryant Christie

exports. "A strong dollar makes our products more expensive to those in other countries," he says.

Seald Sweet reports already experiencing some repercussion in this area. "Recently, the Japanese market has been consuming less due to the exchange rate and the strong dollar against the yen," shares Jo Ann Carbone, export manager for Seald Sweet in Vero Beach, FL.

AFFECTING AVAILABILITY

A lingering question is whether growing demand in Asia and the market's willingness to pay top dollar affects supply to the North American market in terms of availability and quality. "Demand in Asia does have an effect on availability from source countries," claims Spezzano. "A country like Argentina is going to look at dollar value and other factors and may say 'we get a better return when we ship to Korea than to the U.S.'"

The sheer size of the Asian market is sure to have some impact. "While we don't export to Asia, the growth there does affect our business," says Victor Savanello, director of produce and floral at Allegiance Retail Services in Iselin, NJ, a member-owned food cooperative serving 90 stores under independently owned supermarket banners. "The market for certain items, especially specific sizes of certain commodities, has been greatly strengthened by the Asian market demand. Items such as imported cherries, where the largest and best fruit goes to the Asian market, can be affected and cost the U.S. consumer more at the cash register!"

Anecdotal evidence supports the phenomenon of shorter supply resulting in higher prices because demand/price in another country is higher. "As demand for produce grows in Asia and they buy good produce from Mexico, then the cost of that same Mexican crop in the U.S. may go up because of the additional competition for it," relates Spezzano.

The question also remains as to how demand in the Asian market affects products such as garlic and ginger imported from China to the U.S. "The growing demand for domestic produce in China has impacted the world market for these commodities," reports Jim Provost, president of I Love Produce in West Grove, PA, and vice president of North American sourcing for Chinese importer Lantao. "Because of demand growth, ginger exports from South and Central America have increased to the U.S., and garlic from Spain has increased as well."

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BALANCING DEMAND

To counterbalance increased demand from various markets, sophisticated suppliers adjust production volume and other factors. "No matter where you produce or what you produce, you will develop your product to meet demand," states Spezzano. "If demand increases for blueberries, a supplier country will produce more blueberries."

Long-term suppliers credit relationships and experience with their ability to balance market needs. "With a long history of exporting to Asia, the California grape industry has built ongoing relationships with buyers across the region over the course of many years," says Day. "Shipments and marketing programs are planned well in advance taking into account overall volume and allowing for adequate supplies to be provided to customers around the world."

Driscoll's emphasizes long term strategic planning. "This helps us anticipate global demand and balance it with our different supply regions across the globe," explains Yavari. "One of our core competencies is in meeting the ever-changing global demands."

Demand in Asia doesn't necessarily cannibalize good fruit from U.S. consumers. "In



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEALD SWEET

More modern retail formats in Asia mean more favorable logistics and handling for imports.

most cases, there is plenty of good product," advises Spezzano.

At the Northwest Horticultural Council in Yakima, WA, the staff recognizes that variety, size preference and other factors play a role in leveling markets. "Given the unique taste profiles associated with different apple varieties, varied consumer preferences from country to country, and the inherent difficulties associated with export

business, the U.S. market will remain the market of choice for Washington apples," reports Mark Powers, executive vice president of the Council. "Roughly 70 percent of the apples produced in Washington state are sold in the U.S."

Serving diverse markets and unique customer demands allows for a broadening of the production portfolio. "Exporting to Asia gives growers access to one of the

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PACIFIC RIM MARKETS COMMAND A VARIETY OF PRODUCTS AND SOURCE COUNTRIES TO MEET DEMAND

By Jodean Robbins

Asia represents an important export market for a variety of U.S. products, including California table grapes, citrus and berries. “According to USDA data, Asia represented 43 percent of total grape exports in 2014-15,” says Susan Day, vice president international marketing for the California Table Grape Commission in Fresno, CA. “This is an increase of 23 percent versus the same period five years ago. Ten of our industry’s 15 top export markets are in Asia.”

The Asian market may be the foremost export market for fruits around the world, with China leading the pack. “Chinese consumers are trying new things, and imported fruits have enjoyed a growth trend in general,” describes Jim Provost, president of I Love Produce, in West Grove, PA, and vice president of North American sourcing for Lantao (one of the largest importers of premium fruit into China). “The biggest growth areas are avocados, growing at a 400 percent rate, lemons at a 100 percent rate and blueberries, growing at a rate of over 150 percent.”

Seald Sweet reports the Asian market

as a robust consumer of Florida citrus, primarily grapefruit and oranges. “Japan has always been a strong market for Florida citrus, specifically white and red grapefruit,” reports Jo Ann Carbone, export manager for Seald Sweet in Vero Beach, FL. “Also, Korea has been a growing market and increasing in demand.”

Driscoll’s forecasts rising berry opportunity. “We still see growth in berries in mature markets like Japan where there are years and years of experience of consumption,” says Bobby Yavari, director of global expansion for Driscoll’s in Watsonville, CA. “We also see growth in markets such as China — very underdeveloped for berries. Consumers in China haven’t really been exposed to blackberries or raspberries, but the average consumer there likes to try new things. In the coming years we see those categories as continuing to grow.”

Washington State apple growers, packers and shippers exported more than 11.5 million (40-pound) cartons of apples to Asia during the 2014/15 crop year, according to the Northwest Horticultural Council in Yakima, WA. “This volume of exports was roughly

8 percent of the crop and represented a 10 percent increase in shipments from the previous crop year,” says Mark Powers, executive vice president at the Council.

Pacific Rim countries extend a hand to an expansive fraternity of sources in addition to the U.S. “Mexico ships a lot of berries into China and throughout Asia,” says Richard Owen, vice president of global business development for Produce Marketing Association (PMA) in Newark, DE. “Canada ships cherries, apples, blueberries, potatoes and mushrooms as well as some small volumes of greenhouse vegetables into Asian markets.”

Southern Hemisphere countries also represent good sources for Asia. “Australia and New Zealand in particular have free trade agreements with some of the Asian countries and enjoy preferential treatment as well as shorter transit times than many other suppliers,” reports Owen. “Chile and Peru in particular have been very aggressive in getting market approval for exporting produce into the Chinese market that the U.S. doesn’t yet have — for example, avocados and blueberries. South Africa is shipping quite a few products into Asian markets, mainly citrus. **pb**

largest markets in the world and the ability to diversify their supply base,” says Craig Carlson, president and chief executive of Carlson Produce Consulting LLC in Chicago. “Having a healthy supply base is also good for the U.S. marketplace.”

However, exporting is not a simple supply-demand equation. “U.S. produce suppliers will sell their highest quality produce to those most willing to pay for that quality,” says Christie. “But, other aspects of the marketplace are not always equal. I would suggest it is probably easier to sell to a domestic buyer than a foreign buyer. In such conditions, if price is equal, suppliers are just as likely, if not more likely, to sell that level of quality to the domestic buyer.”

BUYER RECONNAISSANCE

As suppliers rejoice in new opportunities presented by Asia, North American produce buyers must reflect on what the changing global dynamic means for them. “A U.S. buyer must be aware they’re operating in the global marketplace, and it’s becoming more global every day,” advises PMA’s Owen. “Who

else is fighting to buy that case of apples? What do you need to do to continue to have the supplier sell that product to you instead of China or Mexico?”

As new markets emerge, buyers are encouraged to be a student of them. “Know where you buy your offshore blueberries from and where else they’re developing markets,” advises Spezzano. “You want a feel for what the overall business looks like.”

Buyers are urged to be mindful of the high demand for products such as California grapes during season and make commitments early. “U.S. buyers are aware 40 percent of the table grape crop out of California is typically exported, and the last quarter of the year is a time when competition for California grape volume is high,” explains Day. “U.S. buyers tend to be pretty aggressive about getting early commitments on fruit and promotion support from the commission.”

As U.S. buyers broaden sources, a global perspective is tantamount to success. “Understanding the complexity and advantages/disadvantages of these new sourcing options is critical to making buyers successful within

their operations,” relates Carlson.

Spezzano notes, though most chains are not direct importers, they should still focus on a few key areas. “Talk with suppliers and understand the dynamic of the global marketplace,” he says. “Be aware of where production is growing and developing. Make trips to see your exporters. Understand what is going on with their business. Look at new products, new packaging and special labeling to encourage customized business.”

Savanello agrees with the importance of partnerships in managing global supply fluctuations. “Make longer-term, reliable commitments to volumes and develop stronger relationships with growers,” he suggests. “More U.S. retailers are sending representatives into regions such as Chile and Peru to build stronger ties.”

Driscoll’s Yavari recommends U.S. buyers ensure their sources are a long-term strategic supplier. “The key to sustainable success is to have an integrated supply and demand plan between supplier and buyer,” he explains. “This helps mitigate supply availability and quality issues in the future.” **pb**

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PLAYS FOR SUPER BOWL MARKETING SUCCESS

The sporting event of the year is the golden ticket for increased produce sales.

BY JOHN LEHNDORFF

Nobody knows which team will walk off the field with the Lombardi Trophy on February 7 at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, CA, but produce retailers can earn a win before the kickoff of Super Bowl 50 (yes, for the first time in Super Bowl history, the game will be branded with the Arabic numeral 50 instead of the Roman Numeral 'L') — America's greatest day of national nibbling.

It's hard to overestimate the impact of the Super Bowl on the food industry. American shoppers spend more on groceries the week of the Super Bowl than any other week of the year, reported the *Washington Post*, and that includes the weeks before Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"The Super Bowl has become so pervasive; it appeals across generations, income levels, ethnic groups," says Phil Lempert, who is known as the Supermarket Guru and is a Santa Monica, CA-based grocery business trends expert.

"In general, consumers are looking for healthy, convenient and fresh snacks," says Kim St George, director of marketing and communications at Salina, CA-based Mann Packing. "We have a new Fiesta tray that features a dual dip of Garden Ranch and Jalapeno Ranch and mini sweet peppers. This is a larger size tray that offers something different than the traditional vegetable tray with Ranch dip."

During each Super Bowl season for three decades, headlines announced that vegetables — not onion dip, pizza or Buffalo wings — crown the Top 10 list of most eaten foods on Super Bowl Sunday. But closer scrutiny reveals that only about 25 percent of viewers said they consumed any kind of vegetable at all during

the game with an emphasis on baby carrots and celery sticks, according to NPD Group, the Port Washington, NY-based independent market research firm.

THE PRE-GAME SHOW: SEASON OF SNACKING

The weeks prior to Super Bowl are a critical opportunity for supermarket produce sales, but the game is really the exclamation point at the end of a three-month season. "If you take a look at the figures, it's a sales season that starts at Halloween and continues to the Super Bowl, and that's the busiest time annually for U.S. supermarkets," says Lempert. It's also prime time for produce managers to cater to health-focused consumers and other game day viewers with items to freshen up the fare.

Retailers tend to start their Super Bowl push by December 30 before the NFL playoffs begin, although the planning began many months earlier.

The biggest fresh produce star in Super Bowl marketing is typically guacamole. Avocado growers transformed a regional and ethnic food into an all-American football game day necessity.

Last year Avocados from Mexico (AFM) aired the first Super Bowl ad ever for fresh produce reaching more than 114 million viewers. For the Super Bowl 50 broadcast on CBS, AFM placed a guacamole ad to air during one of the first, prime commercial



breaks after the game begins, reports Lempert.

"This is the most important time of the year for avocado sales and one our main peaks of marketing," says Alvaro Luque, president of AFM, the Irving, TX-based marketing group for the Mexican Hass avocado industry.

"Last year, the two weeks prior to the Super Bowl were our two largest importing weeks in history. We shipped 50 million pounds each week," says Luque.

The avocado promotion "Guac Nation" kicks off nationally Jan. 4, 2016 with 2.5 million coupons distributed, trade advertising and 17,000 additional cardboard displays for retailers. "These will be located on the perimeter of stores in addition to avocados displayed in produce sections," says Luque.

MVPs: BUFFALO WINGS, CELERY AND FRUIT

Foods naturally associated with cities of the teams in the game are popular year to year, as is fare from the host region. Some



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foods have become inseparable from the game experience itself.

St George, of Mann Packing agrees that sales increase in the region where the teams are best supported. For example, Seattle sales increase when Seattle is in the Super Bowl, she reports.

“For the Super Bowl period, we recommend highlighting the vegetable trays in produce along with larger size (2- to 3-pound) ready-to-eat bags where the consumer can make their own vegetable tray,” advises St George. “In many cases, retailers will run a refrigerated dip promotion with vegetables, which drives incremental sales of a make-your-own vegetable tray at home.”

“This is one of the peak parts of the season for us — that’s why we SKU very high before the Super Bowl,” says Chris Hannigan, vice president of marketing-retail for Brea, CA-based Ventura Foods, makers of Marie’s

dressings and dips.

The uptick in sales of Marie’s products starts before Thanksgiving and has a series of peaks around Christmas and New Year’s and ends with the Super Bowl. “We really get three kicks at the can,” says Hannigan.

Not all the things being dipped in Marie’s dressing are wings, vegetables or pizza crusts. Consumers are choosing pre-cut and ready-to-dip fruit, including pineapple, strawberries, grapes and melon. “Use of dressings on fruit is becoming more popular. We have a poppy seed dressing that goes well with melon balls. It’s another way to get fruit into the system,” says Hannigan. Marie’s is introducing two new fruit-forward light dressings: Mango Chardonnay Vinaigrette and Pomegranate Blueberry Vinaigrette.

HUDDLE AROUND THE WATERMELON HELMET

“Among our greatest strengths is watermelon’s strong association with summer,” says Stephanie Barlow, senior director of communications for the Winter Springs, FL-based National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB).

Even though the availability of watermelon is usually good in late January, “the media’s receptivity to winter watermelon uses can be frosty,” says Barlow. According to a NWPB study, only 19 percent of consumers said they purchased watermelon in the winter compared with 95 percent in the summer.

The NWPB countered these perceptions with a clever Game-Day promotion featuring a simple football helmet carved from a watermelon. Consumers can carve it and use it to serve a melon-based fruit salad as an alternative to typically heavy tailgating fare. Retailers can leverage the Super Bowl focus by using carved watermelon footballs as an eye-catching melon

sampling attraction in the produce department.

Barlow notes that an image of the carved watermelon football was a social media hit in 2015 with nearly 50 million impressions on Yahoo! Sports and other media outlets. It doubled traffic at watermelon.org with a spike on Super Bowl Sunday. The post included links to recipes such as Fire and Ice Salsa and Watermelon-glazed Barbecue Meatballs.

REACHING MILLENNIALS: OTHER DIPPERS

The hummus and bean dip boom driven by health-focused shoppers and Millennials proved there is still room to expand the dip market along with the dippers.

Hummus didn’t come with a long chip tradition — it was traditionally eaten with pita bread. Vegetable dipper-produce items that don’t bring extra calories, fat and salt to the table have become the go-to edible utensil.

While chips-and-guacamole may seem permanently wed in shoppers’ minds, Luque of AFM suggests another sort of chip may soon go viral as a guacamole dipper: ruffle-cut fresh carrot chips.

“They are easy, they have that crunch and they don’t get soggy. It’s just stepping back a little from tortilla chips,” he says. “The younger generation are the ones asking that these fresher options be made available.”

Consumers looking for healthier, high-protein snacks are a major driver in increased pistachio sales before the Super Bowl, says Joseph Setton, vice president of domestic sales for Terra Bella, CA-based Setton Farms, one of the largest pistachio processors in the U.S.

“Pistachios always were a popular nut during football games, but they became bigger as consumers looked for healthier snacks that weren’t a taste compromise,” says Setton.

While the act of shelling pistachios has become part of the ritual of enjoying them, the availability of shelled pistachios made them a favored ingredient. High-protein, low-carb diets popularized pistachios as a plant-based protein source in appetizers, baked goods, salads and main courses, says Setton.

Setton Farms targets the whole season that peaks with the Super Bowl. “We offer promotional displays that key in on long-term buying behavior with health- or taste-oriented messaging. They are assembled and ready to pull onto the floor. They allow extra display space for pistachios without occupying any shelf space,” says Setton.

Pistachios (including shelled and chocolate-covered versions) are often slotted into holiday and Super Bowl displays next to pome-

■ TIPS: CATERING TO THE LAST-MINUTE, GRAB-AND-GO SHOPPER

Increase fresh produce sales on game day and the day before by positioning last minute grab-and-go displays outside of the produce department at the entrance or in the meat and the prepared foods departments.

Stock hot, ready-to-eat chicken wings in various flavors and heat levels next to pre-packaged trays of vegetable dippers, hot sauces and blue cheese dressing.

As a fresh pizza alternative to delivery, stock a produce refrigerated case with

portioned plastic clamshells of fresh pizza dough and/or a freezer unit of ready-to-bake gluten-free crusts with a nearby display of ready-to-use fresh basil, sliced mushrooms, onions, multi-color bell peppers and pineapple, as well as sauces, meats and grated cheeses.

Stock premium vegetable and dip combos with low-fat yogurt- and bean-based dips and jicama, bell pepper chunks, sugar snap peas, broccoli or cauliflower, green onions, whole baby cucumbers, etc. **pb**

granates and chestnuts.

Millennials and others demand ease of use and don't necessarily want to follow a recipe, especially at the last minute.

"The week before the Super Bowl is one of the top selling weeks of the year for the guacamole mix," says Samantha McCaul, marketing manager of Brockton, MA-based Concord Foods. The supplier of retail food products and ingredients offers companion items for fresh produce including packets of guacamole and salsa seasonings.

Concord's in-store promotion is seasonal, focusing on the entire NFL and college schedule. "We have a football-themed floor display this year for supermarkets that holds 144 units (of guacamole and salsa mixes). It's usually right next to the avocados," says McCaul, adding that the salsa and guacamole mixes are generally "impulse buys."

In her tours of supermarket produce sections she noticed one approach that clearly boosts pre-game sales. "What I've seen a lot is bringing the Super Bowl party into the produce department and adding some fun [elements to displays]," says McCaul. That includes signs, balloons and posters, along with prime displays of party goods, avocados, tomatoes, peppers,



PHOTO BY DEAN BARNES

onions, cilantro, lemons and limes plus other ready-to-eat vegetable and fruit packs.

HALF TIME: SEASONAL PRODUCE PUTS ON A SHOW

Lempert of Supermarketguru.com says he would like to see a more creative approach to merchandising ready-to-eat produce items. "Right now, it's mostly party trays with celery and carrots. Produce has a huge opportunity to introduce less familiar fruits and vegetables (like those distributed by Frieda's and Melissa's)," says Lempert. "At any one time, the

average produce department has about 400 SKUs. Most people only buy 10 leaving a lot of room for growth."

Lempert adds that premium produce can sell during a season when shoppers are willing to splurge a bit, but active merchandising is required.

"Beyond doing a lot of sampling, education in the store is critical. Have colorful signage with a description of how the fruit tastes, how to use it and nutritional information," he says. "Sometimes it's not so much 'what' is being

Continued on page 65

■ VEGGIE PLATTERS SCORE POINTS WITH SUPER BOWL WATCHERS

BY MARK HAMSTRA

Who will win the big game this year? Will it be carrots, the perennial favorite? Or will it be the ubiquitous cauliflower, or maybe the surging celery? In all likelihood it will be a team victory, shared by a colorful array of vegetables uniting to form a party platter of healthy choices for Super Bowl enthusiasts.

"As long as consumers are looking for fresh, healthy options, veggie platters will continue to be a popular addition to the Super Bowl smorgasbord," says Tristan Simpson, chief marketing officer, Ready Pac Foods, Irwindale, CA. "Trends indicate bulk vegetables, veggie platters and vegetable-focused snacking significantly increase over Super Bowl weekend."

Citing data from Chicago-based Nielsen Perishables Group, she said sales of veggie platters during the 2015 Super Bowl were up 26 percent versus the previous year.

She explained carrots are historically the most consumed vegetable during Super Bowl weekend, with ranch dressing as the preferred dip. Twenty-eight percent of consumers watching the Super Bowl between 2008 and 2013 ate carrots, according to Nielsen, and carrot products account for more than 90 percent of total bulk vegetable sales, noted Simpson.

It's not all about carrots, however. "Cauliflower is still a huge item," says Rick Antle, chief executive at Tanimura & Antle, a Salinas, CA-based grower. "The demand for cauliflower has not dropped, and we see it continuously being included in ads over the course of the year. We're also still seeing a lot of roasted, spiced items, not necessarily served hot, with various dip options."

As for the big game, Antle says variety and customization is key for consumers. "Veggie trays with variation will probably be an increasing trend, as well as the movement to tap more into the 'do-it-yourself-ers.'"

"Our best selling items for the Super Bowl are the Mann Vegetable Trays," says Kim St George, director of marketing and communications at Salinas, CA-based Mann Packing. "During the Super Bowl timeframe, we see tray sales increase by 50 percent."

The 18-ounce and 40-ounce trays in-



clude Mann's Vegetable Tray with Beef and Cheddar, Veggie and Hummus Tray, and Organic Veggie Tray with Ranch Dip that includes broccoli, snap peas, grape tomatoes, baby carrots and celery sticks.

Fresh-cut fruit and veggie trays have been a very popular item this fall for Del Monte, reports Dionysios Christou, vice president of marketing, Del Monte Fresh Produce, Coral Gables, FL.

"A key trend we have seen for this product line has been using vegetables such as tomatoes, bell peppers, onions and potatoes as grilling items," he says. "Grilling Del Monte Gold Extra Sweet Pineapple or bananas is also an easy way to add a healthy, sweet and delicious dessert to the menu."

Del Monte's fresh-cut kabob kits are also popular, he says. These mixes can include pineapple; green, yellow and red peppers; grape tomatoes and red onions, and are designed to slide easily onto a skewer for grilling with meats. Del Monte Fresh Guac is another popular tailgate item, notes Christou.

NEW CELERY ITEM

CarrieAnn Arias, vice president of marketing at Dole Fresh Vegetables, Monterey, CA, has placed her big game bet on celery. Specifically, on Dole's new Premium Celery Hearts, a proprietary variety offering "a mild flavor, satisfying crunch and a less-stringy texture," she says.

"With the most popular months for celery consumption right around the corner, Dole is promoting a number of holiday-appropriate celery recipes and serving suggestions featured right on our product packaging," says Arias.

Dole is also enjoying success with its Chopped Salad Kits, a line that is being expanded to accommodate demand among salad eaters for more chopped salad fla-

vor variety and nutritious ingredients like shaved Brussels sprouts. The company also launched Take Aways salad meals, which combines traditional Dole salad greens with ancient grains, nuts, beans and other ingredients in an innovative box that doubles as a salad bowl.

"The grab-and-go packaging of Dole Take Aways makes them a convenient, healthy option to pack for at-the-game tailgate parties and other gatherings this fall," says Arias.

Dole developed several new recipes specifically for tailgating parties and other game day celebrations, including a Grilled Zucchini Rolls recipe, featuring Dole spinach and Dole green onions.

RETAIL PROMOTION

At New York-based FreshDirect, the online retailer delivering to consumers in the New York-Philadelphia region, veggie platters are a key piece of the company's tailgating promotions.

"This year — as in years past — we're promoting freshly-cut crudité platters as part of our tailgating assortment," says Lisa Kolodny, vice president, brand and communications, FreshDirect. "Additionally, we also feature produce and lighter fare ideas for customers via our social outlets."

Produce suppliers say eye-catching displays and knowledgeable retail staffers are keys to scoring points with Super Bowl customers.

"High attention to the cold chain and a significant level of training for detail-oriented produce managers [are important for retail success]," says Antle of Tanimura & Antle. "In-store displays and demonstrations with cross-promoting of the produce section — such as 'how to make your own veggie tray' — is another example of what some of our retail partners are starting to do more of."

Simpson of Ready Pac Foods says retailers should feature veggie trays in their fresh produce sections and perimeter areas, where consumers pick up last-minute items for parties.

"Our Ready Pac Veggie Platters feature bold flavors and condiments that complement the vegetables' crisp and crunchy texture," she says. "The Ready Pac Spinach

Continued from page 63
sold, but 'where' it's being sold."

THE POST-GAME SHOW: THE REAL DIET SEASON BEGINS

Luque from AFM says he has seen increasing interest among other produce groups to piggyback on AFM's Super Bowl success and co-promote other guacamole and salsa essentials including cilantro, jalapeños, tomatoes, limes and various vegetable dippers.

With all those avocados in circulation, AFM

has seen a new trend in the week following the Super Bowl. "We learned what you can do the day after the game," says Luque. "A lot of the retailers have avocado sales that week. It's an important day in terms of volume and price."

The day after the big game also becomes the day that launches a million diets and weight loss resolutions put off since December 31. "We started the 'Fan-wich' promotion to encourage the use of avocado as a sandwich spread and to emphasize its nutritional advantage over mayo and other spreads," says Luque. **pb**



Parmesan Party Platter is the perfect addition to any Super Bowl party, with its baby carrots, broccoli florets, grape tomatoes, cheddar cheese cubes and spinach Parmesan dip. Additionally, Ready Pac's Buffalo Ranch Party Platter takes the flavor up a notch with a spicy buffalo ranch dip to pair with baby carrots, broccoli florets, grape tomatoes, and celery sticks."

Christou says Del Monte works closely with its retail partners to develop promotional and merchandising activities geared toward maximizing sales and educating consumers.

"This might include development of eye-catching POS for shelves, in-store demos, and improved labeling information about the product on-pack," he says. "We also advised retailers to promote tailgating use on their social media pages.

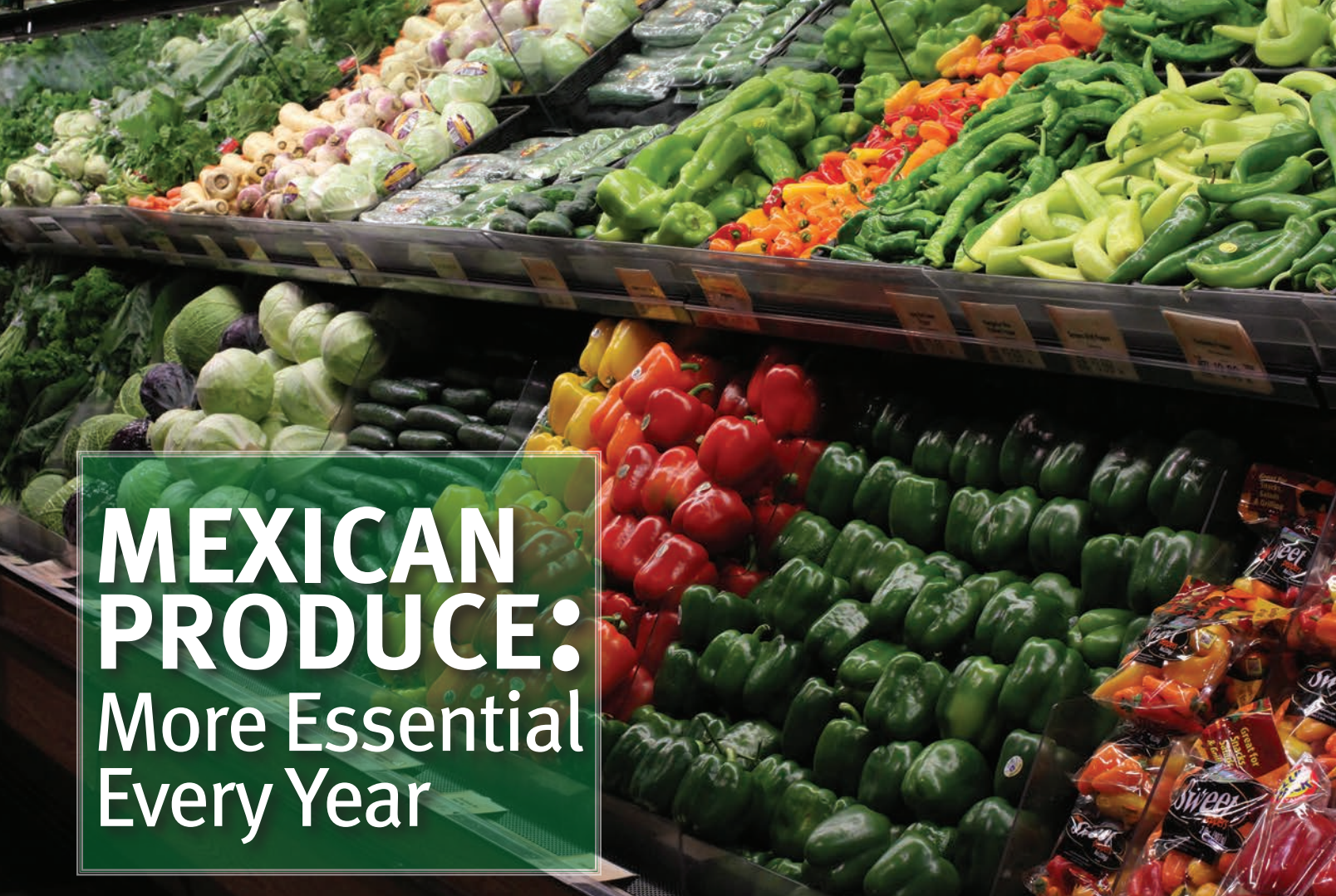
"Del Monte category managers and merchandisers are constantly communicating with our retailers and their produce personnel about the best strategies for driving produce sales during Super Bowl."

Likewise, Dole also works closely with its retail partners to encourage in-store marketing and merchandising that emphasize healthy eating and snacking, as well as the increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, says Arias.

"Since shoppers love to experience a fully stocked, beautiful produce section, our best advice to maximize salad sales is to keep the produce and packaged salad department stocked with a robust display of fresh produce," she says. "This is definitely important during the holiday season, football playoff season and other key occasions when consumers are looking for fresh produce for quick recipes or healthy snack options." **pb**

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MEXICAN PRODUCE: More Essential Every Year

Counter-seasonal shipments keep shelves stocked.

BY BOB JOHNSON

Produce from Mexico has come to occupy such a regular seasonal slot in North American supermarkets that few customers notice where it is grown, but these imports play an essential role in keeping fruits and vegetables available and affordable year-round.

Shipments of tomatoes from Mexico through Nogales nearly tripled over the past two decades to more than \$600 million, according to Nogales, AZ-based Fresh Produce Association of the Americas president Lance Jungmeyer, while the value of bell and chili peppers increased fivefold to well over \$500 million.

The import value of cucumbers, grapes, squash, honeydews, and watermelons entering the United States tripled over the past two decades, while mangos and eggplants roughly doubled in value.

"Tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, watermelon and squash are huge," says Jungmeyer.

"They are delivered all throughout the U.S. and Canada, from San Diego to Alaska, from northeast Canada to Florida."

Since its formation during World War II, Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA) has grown to represent more than 100 companies involved in growing, harvesting or shipping produce from Mexico to the U.S. and Canada.

"We're keeping prices low, and keeping produce available when it can't be grown domestically, like avocados, tomatoes and bell peppers," says Jaime Chamberlain, owner of J-C Distributing in Nogales, AZ. "All imported fruits and vegetables have value whether it's from New Zealand, South America, or Mexico. The growth of Mexican agriculture is helping consumers by keeping prices down. If you didn't have imports coming in, consumers would pay much more."

J-C Distributing ships a variety of tomatoes, peppers, squash and cucumbers from Mexico.

The flow of produce from the fields of Mexico to the supermarkets of North America figures to expand, as grower-shippers look for opportunities to produce even more.

"Across the board there will be increases," says Steve Yubeta, vice president of sales at Farmer's Best International, Nogales, AZ. "We planted more acreage in new areas in Central Mexico. We were mostly in Western Mexico. We're increasing because of the consistency of our programs, and we're expanding the window on many of our products."

Farmer's Best ships a wide variety of produce including green and red bell peppers, cucumbers, Roma and vine ripe tomatoes, Italian, yellow and gray squash, melons, mangos and table grapes, says Yubeta.

LENGTHENING THE SEASON

The season for fruits and vegetables from Mexico should continue to start earlier and end later because, in addition to expanding acreage,



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many grower-shippers are expanding their use of shade houses, which increases supply by opening up new areas for production and extending the season.

“We continue to push more shade houses,” says Chris Ciruli, chief operations officer of Ciruli Bros. in Tubac, AZ. “It’s allowed us to grow product farther south and farther north. It means we can start earlier and end later. One hundred percent of our tomatoes are shade house, and half the vegetable crop.”

The season is already significantly longer than it was a few decades ago, as the parade of produce from Mexico now begins in late September with zucchini and yellow squash, according to Ciruli, and will continue into the late spring.

“In October you’ll see eggplant and green peppers,” says Ciruli. “In November you add colored bells and green beans, and tomatoes as we hit December. Every week we see more and more, and by the second week in November we are really up and going. We have product into May and June on vegetable items, and later on fruits. In the 1960s, by April the season was over.”

In addition to a longer season, growers also find the shade cloth provides protection from the elements and a more consistent harvest.

“I’m increasing production, mostly with protected agriculture,” says Chamberlain. “When you’re not in the open field you don’t have the same problems with disease and weather. It gives you more confidence. Mexican produce is growing big time, and it will continue to grow as long as there is demand. There’s still an appetite for Mexican produce, and there are still niches. We ship to every single state in the U.S., and to Canada.”

Avocados from Mexico are already available 12 months of the year, and they continue to increase.

“Mexican avocados are imported from Michoacán, Mexico where the microclimate to grow delicious avocados is ideal as the timely rainfall allows our fruit to have a natural supply of water in 70 percent of our orchards,” says Alvaro Luque, president of Avocados from Mexico in Dallas. “Consequently Avocados from Mexico is the only brand that can supply the U.S. with more than 1.5 billion pounds of avocados from January to December. Our avocados are always fresh given our distribution system, which allows us to deliver to the market within a few days. With this continuous supply of high quality creamy avocados, our focus has been to successfully highlight the story and benefits of our fruit to our clients and consumers. This will reinforce our leadership



brand position and accelerate the growth of the category in the U.S.”

Avocados from Mexico coordinates the marketing activities for two groups representing growers who ship avocados to the U.S. in the billions of pounds — the Mexican Hass Avocados Importers Association, and The Association of Growers and Packers of Avocados from Mexico.

Much of the increased production of Mexican produce for export is devoted to specialty varieties of mainstream produce items like tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers.

“Colored bell peppers, watermelons, long English cucumbers, mini cucumbers, tomatoes, and winter squashes, including Spaghetti, Acorn, Butternut, and Kabocha, are most prominent in the winter months,” says Cesar Pacheco, sales manager at Giumarra in Nogales, AZ.

Giumarra, a nearly century old company, ships a wide variety of conventional and organic fruits and vegetables from fields in both Mexico and the U.S.

“Consumers are enjoying mini cucumbers as a fresh snack item,” says Megan Schulz, marketing and communications manager at Giumarra Companies. “They are becoming increasingly aware of the abundance of fruits and vegetables Mexico has to offer.”

Specialty items figure to increase in volume as grower-shippers from Mexico seize the opportunities.

“What I see gaining ground are specialty items from high-tech producers in Mexico, such as mini bells, Cocktail and specialty tomatoes, mini eggplant, Persian cukes,” says

Alejandro Canelos, chief executive of Apache Produce Imports in Nogales, AZ. “Tomatoes, bell peppers, and cucumbers are most prominent during the winter months.”

Apache ships tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers from Mexico under the Plain Jane label.

CHANGING THE U.S. MENU

Many fruits and vegetables widely grown in Mexico have become more popular in recent decades as our neighbors to the south have heavily influenced our produce preferences.

U.S. per capita consumption of avocados, for example, has quadrupled since 1970, according to USDA statistics, because of the growing Hispanic population and the general increasing awareness of their nutritional value.

“With new access to the U.S. market, Mexico — the biggest avocado producer and exporter in the world — has surpassed Chile to become the dominant foreign supplier of avocados to the United States,” says Sophia Wu Huang, USDA agricultural economist. “In addition to being closer to the U.S. market than other producers, Mexico has the advantage of being a year-round grower of avocados. By volume, Mexico accounted for 81 percent of the U.S. market for imported avocados in 2010-12, compared with Chile’s 14 percent.”

Avocados from Mexico is aggressively promoting the nutritional value of its product.

“We will launch a bold advertising program that will generate more than 2 billion brand impressions this year and a new health and wellness platform that will be first to market for produce and will take our brand and category

to the highest level of digital engagement,” says Luque. “We also will connect with the Hispanic Nueva Latina consumer through our Avocado Club and new programs where we can deliver the nutritional message of consuming avocados in new generations of Latinos using schools and soccer as anchor platforms.”

U.S. consumption of bell peppers is also up to more than 10 pounds per person, according to USDA statistics, and chili pepper consumption is more than 7 pounds per person.

Even per capita consumption of tomatoes increased measurably in the last decade of the 20th century, according to USDA statistics.

“The rise of diversified households, growing popularity of food and travel television programs, and social media (particularly image and video sharing applications) have played a huge role in multicultural inspired flavors,” says Kayla Espinoza, media and communications manager at Wilson Produce in Nogales, AZ. “Consumers are gaining more experience with a wider variety of foods and cooking styles. They’ve become willing to experiment with new dishes, including a variety of fresh produce like peppers, avocados, etc.”

Wilson Produce, a third generation family

“As the Mexican population has grown in the U.S. over the years, Anglo cooking in the United States has naturally incorporated more and more of the ‘Mexican flavors.’ It’s only natural — Mexican food is just plain great.”

— Alejandro Canelos, Apache Produce Imports

farm, grows and ships tomatoes, beans, peas, corn, eggplant, peppers, squash and melons.

Changing U.S. demographics have also influenced the produce ingredients used in cooking.

“As the Mexican population has grown in the U.S. over the years, Anglo cooking in the United States has naturally incorporated more and more of the ‘Mexican flavors,’” says Canelos. “It’s only natural — Mexican food is just plain great.”

Cooking shows, food blogs and other opinion shapers have helped some of the produce items gain entrée into regular mainstream use.

“The culinary experts have generated excite-

ment with using all types of fruits and vegetables into our meal choices,” says Dan Acevedo, director of business development at West Pak in Murrieta, CA. “In addition to the many health benefits of avocados that appeal to the health-minded consumers, avocados are also very versatile, and can translate across many genres and across all meals including breakfast, lunch, dinner, or as a stand-alone snack.”

West Pak is a California avocado grower-shipper that formed a substantial subsidiary in Mexico two decades ago.

Mexico has been a major source of these trending vegetables, shipping 450,000 metric tons of bell peppers, more than 100,000 tons of chili peppers, and better than a half million

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tons of tomatoes just through Nogales.

"Mexican watermelon and vegetables are prevalent, and it's important to educate consumers about the benefits of Mexican produce in winter," says Pacheco. "These benefits include flavor and availability."

■ PROMOTING MEXICAN AVOCADOS

A look at the latest trends in marketing campaigns.

BY KEITH LORIA

The Mexican Hass avocado industry has experienced rapid expansion in the United States, with the total volume of avocados increasing from 802,976,829 pounds to 1,763,593,888 pounds in a decade. Those impressive figures were released by Avocados From Mexico (AFM), the marketing arm of Mexican Hass Avocados Importers Association, MHAIA and The Association of Growers and Packers of Avocados From Mexico.

The robust program of the AFM brand yielded 1.6 billion media impressions in 2014-2015, and is rapidly blazing trails within the produce category. "America is in love with avocados and our company plays a key role in that because we supply almost 80 percent of the U.S. market and we are the only brand that has year-round availability of fruit," says Alvaro Luque, president of Avocados From Mexico.

Dan Vena, who handles sales for John Vena, Inc., based in Philadelphia, says in 2015, the company anticipates sales to be 25 percent more than last year, attributed partly to the increased consumption in the Northeast, but mainly to the strength of its own preconditioning program.

"As new areas in Mexico are opened for export to the U.S., we anticipate an increase in supply to help offset growing demand," he says. "Hopefully that will help keep prices at reasonable levels so that retailers can continue to promote."

Robb Bertels, vice president of marketing for Mission Produce, Inc., headquartered in Oxnard, CA, notes Mexico is experienced a very large Flor Loca crop last summer.

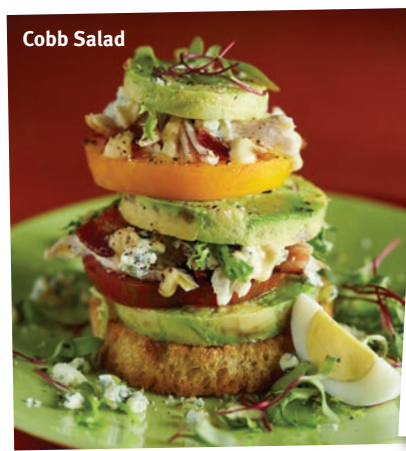
"The volume of the fruit being produced was exceptional, as was the sizing," he says. "We're seeing many more size 48s than is typical with the Loca crop, and fewer smaller sizes (60s & 70s). This creates an

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN DOESN'T REALLY MATTER

Mexico is another regular part of the rotation that provides year-round supply of tomatoes, peppers, squash and other key produce items, which are rarely merchan-

dised as from a particular place.

"Kitchen staples like tomatoes, cucumbers,



AFM's "Echale" (the word in Spanish encourages people to "go for it" and add avocados to meals) campaign coincides with the launch of its Hispanic website, AguacatesdeMexico.com. The site features the "Mi Avo Club," an online community where Hispanic avocado fans can connect with exclusive promotions, recipes, tips and lifestyle content.

interesting, yet temporary, market condition where smaller fruit sells for nearly the same price as larger fruit."

As the Flor Loca crop wraps up and the industry moved into the new crop in the fall, Bertels expects continued consistent volume from Mexico.

Promotions On Tap

Luque says for the 2015-16 crop season, Avocados From Mexico is planning bold marketing and trade programs that will keep the volume growth for avocados and bring good value to its clients and network, becoming the benchmark for the fresh industry in the U.S. in terms of marketing, trade, foodservice and digital activation.

"We will feature a robust lineup of partner promotions with potential leading national brands like Coca-Cola, Rotel, Old El Paso, Bimbo Bakeries and Tabasco," he says. "In addition, we will roll out an innovative merchandising program that will educate and promote our brand at the point of sale. We are the first produce brand to have intelligent in-store displays that are connected to a test group of more than 20,000 consumers who interact with AFM through their mobile devices."



AFM will also launch an advertising program that is expected to generate more than 2 billion brand impressions this year and a new health & wellness platform that will be first to market for produce and will take the brand and category to the highest level of digital engagement.

It is also connecting with the Hispanic Nueva Latina consumer through its Avocado Club and new programs where it can deliver the nutritional message of consuming avocados in new generations of Latinos using schools and soccer as anchor platforms.

Are You Ready For Some Football?

Without question, the most prominent marketing campaign by the Mexican Avocado Board is centered around football and its ads surrounding the Super Bowl.

"Being the first fresh produce brand to advertise during the biggest TV watching event of the year was a defining moment for our brand," says Luque. "Football is the number one sport in the country, so it was a natural fit for Avocados From Mexico, the number one brand of avocados, to align its marketing program with the sport. I think the Big Game was a very positive investment for us, and it helped drive category

and peppers which require warm temperatures and abundant sunlight to grow are popular Mexican exports during the winter months," says Espinoza.

Because standards for quality and food safety are virtually the same in Mexico as in

the U.S., the origin of this winter produce generally does not matter to consumers.

"Most consumers do not notice a difference," says Jungmeyer. "This is because Mexican produce is grown to export standards, and it meets and often exceeds horticulture standards

in the United States."

Avocados are one produce item in which Mexican-grown shows potential as a marketing campaign.

"We are committed to deepening the U.S. consumers' emotional connection to our

growth this past year."

AFM currently has a team of savvy marketers and agencies working full time in some major events that will make history again for the produce industry in the upcoming months, including a new ad for the Big Game in February.

A Healthy Choice

There are two main drivers in avocado consumption and growth: education and nutritional benefits. Vena says to be sure to have materials in and out of the store to teach consumers how to pick, preserve and control the ripeness of avocados at home, and to highlight the fruit's nutritional benefits — most notably that it contains good fats and has no cholesterol.

AFM has recently teamed with PHA (Partnership for a Healthier America) to advance consumer education about the benefits of avocados and their important role in a nutritious diet.

"We got involved with PHA to help more people, especially moms, understand how fruits and vegetables can play a bigger role in their families' lives," Luque says. "As evidenced by our own success, produce marketing works."

Improving Sales

Avocados are available year-round thanks to Mexico, so keeping them in the circulars reminds shoppers to purchase. Frequency of promotions is more important than the depth of the promotion.

Maggie Bezart Hall, Avocados From Mexico's vice president of trade & promotion, says AFM supplies customers with strong promotional support through major seasonal promotions that include but not limited to consumer outreach through powerful TV, print and social media campaigns, product and partner couponing, secondary merchandising vehicles, in-store consumer and produce employee training materials, and retail specific programs that support individual customer goals and loyalty programs.

"Last year we saw customer performance increase with each promotional



Chef Pati Jinich

effort, sales increases during our retail programming from 26 percent in regional chains to 35 percent in national chains," she says. "Each market is different but retailers are really seeing the value in promoting Avocados From Mexico as they are available 365/24/7."

According to IRI/Category Partners, for the 52 weeks ending 5/17/2015 avocado's were one of the best performing items in produce posting an 11 percent increase in volume and a 10.3 percent increase in dollars.

"While the Western and South Central states continue to be the strongest avocado regions, the Northeast, Southeast, Great Lakes, Mid-South and Plains state regions experienced double digit volume growth, and the Southeast, Great Lakes and Mid-South regions saw double digit dollar growth," says Hall. "The popularity of avocados is growing from coast to coast and border to border."

Mission's biggest tip for driving retail sales is to provide the consumer with options. "Ripe avocados tend to outsell hard avocados at a 3-to-1 pace, and our national network of ripening and distribution facilities allows us to service retailers with fruit ripened to customer specs," says Bertels. "We operate eight North American ripening and distribution centers that are geographically placed to meet customer

needs for delivering ripe avocados to fit retail distribution needs."

A.J. Thibodeaux, produce/floral merchandising manager for Associated Grocers, Inc., based in Baton Rouge, LA, says display timing is important.

"Offering a range of ripeness can increase your sales and ensure repeat sales," he says. "If customers are able to buy the avocado at the right stage for when they plan to use it, this will make for a much more positive experience, and therefore increase the chances they will buy avocados again."

Vic Savanello, director of produce and floral for Allegiance Retail Services, LLC, based in Iselin, NJ, notes cross merchandising is a sound way to sell more avocados.

"Display avocados next to items they partner with in meals and recipes. As an example, merchandise avocados next to tomatoes, onions, lemons and limes," he says. "This reminds customers to purchase these items, and provides a beautiful color contrast as well. But don't stop there, a secondary display near bagged salads, or near the deli can help drive plus sales."

It's not just retailers who need to work on promoting avocados from Mexico, wholesalers, trade organizations and distributors all play a part in getting the word out.

According to an Avocados from Mexico Market Basket Study from Perishables Group, consumers who buy Hass avocados spend, on average, a total of \$103 per shopping cart — that's more than double the average sales of non-buyers. Hall says that while the avocado category has grown, shelf space has not increased to keep up with the growth.

"Retailers should increase shelf space to expand assortment by offering small, large and bagged avocados, providing consumers with more choice and price points," she says. "Top-tier markets average more than double the retail shelf space as mid-tier markets — 14 sq. ft. vs. 6.6 sq. ft. Expanding shelf space will increase avocado contribution."

pb

delicious green fruit, and we have adopted a marketing approach similar to that of consumer packaged goods brands in order to develop this delicate produce,” says Luque. “Our strategy has helped the AFM brand break the traditional mold and stand out in ways that are synonymous with big, ‘center of store’ household brands.”

Avocados from Mexico made a bold step in purchasing television advertising during the last Super Bowl, a national viewing and eating celebration, where guacamole with chips rivals the game itself in importance.”

There are other rare situations in which some retailers merchandise a particular variety from a specific area in Mexico.

“The display depends on what part of the country you’re in,” says Ciruli. “If you’re in San Francisco, Texas, Chicago or another place where you have customer awareness, you might see markets promote product from a particular state, like peppers from Oaxaca.”

The stores in which consumers look for produce from a particular area in Mexico, much like they look for Italian or Asian foods in the deli, are the exception.

“If you go into mainstream supermarkets

“End-cap displays for salsa and guacamole are one option, including items like tomatoes, onions, avocado, hot peppers and cilantro. Mexican avocados have been very aggressive with cross-merchandising and POS and their sales are exploding.”

— Lance Jungmeyer, Fresh Produce Associations of the Americas

in most of the country, you won’t see them promote the origin,” says Ciruli.

These mainstream items are generally best merchandised without attention to their geographic origin.

“U.S. and Canadian consumers become more accustomed to products from Mexico; they don’t have much of a choice,” says Canelos. “The produce goes mostly to the West and Midwest, it goes to the East Coast if market conditions are favorable to do so. The best ways to display Mexican product are the same as the best ways to display any other product. I don’t think the fact that it’s from Mexico should have any bearing on how it’s displayed.”

A few shippers have a wary eye out these

days for the impact of political rhetoric pointing a blaming finger at Mexico, and all people and things Mexican, as the source of problems in the U.S.

“As long as we have a political climate like we do now, where certain people in positions of authority and influence are loudly proclaiming that most of America’s problems are being caused by immigration from Mexico, there will continue to exist a certain segment of the population that is prejudiced against produce from Mexico,” says Canelos. “I think it will take another generation of assimilation for that lingering effect to disappear. Very few consumers realize how much they benefit — on a daily, if not hourly, basis — from trade



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with Mexico.”

Although few retailers will find the origin brings merchandising advantages or disadvantages, there are, however, many opportunities for effective display and merchandising of the produce from Mexico.

“End-cap displays for salsa and guacamole are one option, including items like tomatoes, onions, avocado, hot peppers and cilantro,” says Jungmeyer. “Mexican avocados have been very aggressive with cross-merchandising and POS and their sales are exploding.”

While consumption continues to increase, many consumers have no idea that most avocados in U.S. supermarkets are from Mexico.

“The Avocados from Mexico marketing team does a great job of positioning avocados in the marketplace at retail,” says Acevedo from West Pak. “Today you will see prime time commercials featuring Avocados from Mexico. More than 70 percent of the avocados consumed in North America are from Mexico.”

Customers are increasingly aware of the flavor, versatility and nutritional value of avocados.

“Avocados are an extremely popular item with consumers due to their versatility and health benefits,” says Giumarra’s Schulz. “Consumers are continuing to adopt them in recipes and cuisine outside of guacamole and other traditional Mexican dishes. They are great for breakfast and with salads and sandwiches.”

There are numerous seasonal opportunities to promote avocados that correspond with the harvest.

“Winter is peak harvest time for avocados from Mexico, so quality and supply is there to support frequent retail promotions with themed tie-in opportunities such as, Thanksgiving, New Year’s celebrations, college football, and NFL Sundays that lead up to the Super Bowl,” says West Pak’s Acevedo. “Point of sales materials act as a silent salesman in stores and can be very helpful in conveying the desired message. Cross-merchandising can be very helpful in educating consumers on different ways to use produce as well as putting more items in their basket.”

Many of the opportunities to promote produce from Mexico correspond with seasonal holidays and other events during the winter harvest.

“Certain winter holidays and sports events also impact the consumer demand and availability of certain produce items,” says Wilson Produce’s Espinoza.

There are even opportunities to use Mexican melons to bring a touch of summer cheer to winter salads.

“Watermelon is a great way to brighten up winter salads that feature pecans or walnuts with cheese,” says Schulz. “Cross merchandising and point-of-sale materials can be useful tools to introduce consumers to new uses for their favorite items. For watermelons, we recommend high graphic bins that highlight the colorful product and note the nutritional benefits of watermelons. They are high in vitamins A and C.”

There are also opportunities to promote

the nutritional value of other produce items coming in from Mexico.

“Colored bell peppers are a consumer favorite,” says Schulz. “They are an excellent source of vitamin C, which is helpful to promote during winter months. Consumers looking to increase their produce consumption seek ideas for new ways to use it. One example is using point-of-sale materials to highlight recipes that feature fresh produce as the main ingredient, such as stuffed peppers.” **pb**



This fall, Dole hosted bloggers and RDs from across the country for the first-ever health summit at the North Carolina Research Campus, home of the Dole Nutrition Institute (DNI). FRESH Fest (Finding Reasons to Eat Simply Healthy) provided attendees with a sneak peek at new research from Dole, a first-hand look inside the Dole Research Labs, and unique culinary experiences that elevated the presentation and taste of fruits and vegetables.



To schedule a tour of the Dole Nutrition Institute or find out how DNI's world-class fruit and vegetable research and culinary nutrition can help your customers eat healthier, contact us at DoleNutrition@dole.com

The Dole Nutrition Institute



WHAT'S NEW AT THE DOLE NUTRITION INSTITUTE?

Q: What's the latest research from DNI?

A: We just published ground-breaking research explaining a new way antioxidants from fruits and vegetables may work in the body. We also just finished a study investigating bananas as an energy source during exercise, and have plans to expand on this research this winter.

Q: Where can I learn more about DNI?

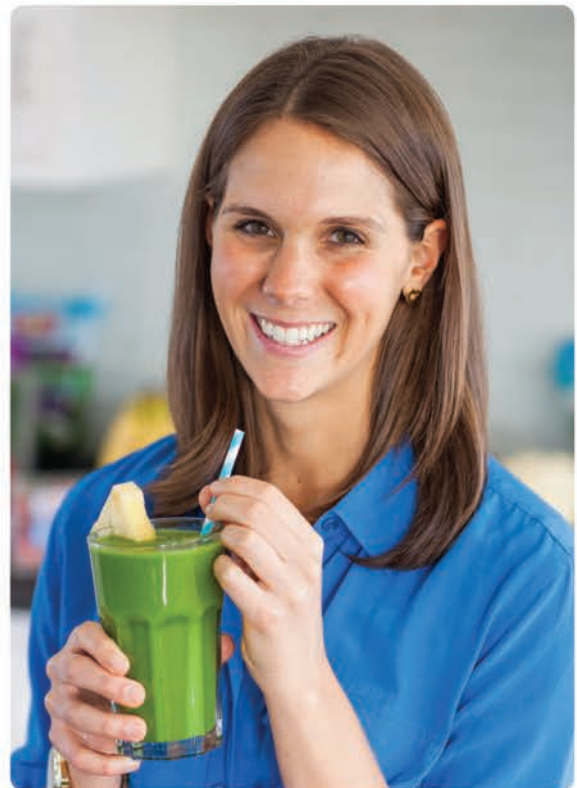
A: *Dole Nutrition News* is a monthly newsletter that details the latest fruit and vegetable research findings from the Dole Lab. It also includes the latest health research from other institutions, healthy living tips, and delicious Dole recipes.

Q: What are some resources DNI has for customers?

A: In addition to the newsletter, we have a variety of educational materials available. We can also work directly with your supermarket RDs to support store nutrition education.

Q: Can I visit DNI?

A: Just let us know you'd like to visit! We love to give customers an inside look at where we study the science behind fruits and vegetables. Contact us at DoleNutrition@dole.com for more information.



Jenn LaVardera, Dole's Registered Dietitian

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To participate, send us the following for each entry:

1. Your name, company, address and phone.

2. Type of business.

3. Names and dates of promotion (must have taken place between June 1, 2015 and June 1, 2016).

4. Promotion objectives.

5. Description of promotion.

6. Promotion results (sales or traffic increases, media attention). What made this program a success?

7. All support materials used in the promotion – such as POP, ads, posters, TV commercials.

High-resolution images to illustrate the promotion are encouraged. (Please do not send any produce)

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To nominate someone, please fill out this form by April 15, 2016, 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.

ABOUT THE NOMINEE:

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 Company _____
 Position _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Postal Code _____
 Country _____
 Phone _____ Fax _____
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Nominee's Professional Achievements:

Nominee's Industry/Community/Charitable Activities:

In 100 words or less, describe why this person should be nominated:
 (You can use a separate sheet for this)

ABOUT THE NOMINATOR:

First Name _____ Last Name _____
 Company _____
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHILEAN FRESH FRUIT ASSOCIATION

Marketing The Fruits Of Chile

Experts examine the best ways to boost sales.

BY KEITH LORIA

As one of the world's largest exporters of grapes, plums, apples, blueberries, nectarines and peaches, according to figures released by the Santiago, Chile-based Chilean Fresh Fruit Association (CFFA), the country accounts for approximately 60 percent of Southern Hemisphere exports.

Here in the United States, during winter months, Chilean fruit is the primary player when it comes to red and green grapes, stone fruit and cherries. As a result, retailers have a significant opportunity to make profits by erecting intriguing displays and targeting consumers with savvy marketing.

Karen Brux, managing director of North America for the CFFA,

says due to freezes during the 2013-14 season, there was a big drop in volume last year, but things have picked up considerably since then.

"While other markets are certainly growing, North America is clearly the largest market for Chilean fruit," she says. "In the case of Chilean blueberries, 67 percent of all volume comes here."

Steve Monson, senior sales representative at Robinson Fresh, headquartered in Eden Prairie, MN, notes there is a substantial amount of volume and variety of fruit available from Chile during winter in the United States, but only recently has there been significant increases in blueberry volume as well as a record cherry crop.

"Chile is one of the largest exporters of off-season produce from

the Southern Hemisphere, and it provides an abundance of quality produce when the U.S. is experiencing its winter season," he says. "There has been a steady growth in blueberries and cherries, an increase in nuts such as almonds and chestnuts, and a decrease in avocados, citrus, and grapes."

Vic Savanello, director of produce and floral for Iselin, NJ-based Allegiance Retail Services, which supplies Foodtown Stores in the Northeast, says his Chilean fruit experience has changed over the years.

"Our stone fruit business has fallen off, especially on the imported peaches, but our grape business gets better every year; while blueberries, Navels and the entire citrus category grows at double digit growth percentages," he says. "We dedicate a lot of space to Chilean fruits during their seasons. The grapes and blueberries get front-page promotion throughout their seasons, and primary merchandising space during those times. The citrus is included in almost every one of my ads during their peak seasons."

TRENDS TO FOLLOW

Evan Myers, executive director, South American imports, for Vancouver, Canada-based The Oppenheimer Group (Oppy), says there's a lot of excitement surrounding many of its products coming out of Chile.

"Notably, volumes of Enza Jazz and Envy apples, produced by San Clemente, are growing each season. These highly popular varieties are helping meet ever-increasing demand in North America alongside their New Zealand counterparts in the spring and summer months," he says. "Another interesting observation is the change in variety mix in the grape and stone fruit categories. Growers are producing newer varieties of peaches, nectarines and plums that deliver higher color and brix while also storing and traveling well."

Additionally, Myers has noticed a huge rush of new grape varieties, as growers in Chile trial California varieties.

"With different soil composition and growing conditions, we're learning if the varieties will grow as well in Chile and how well they travel to the North American market," he says. "Demand strengthened for stone fruit; peaches, plums and nectarines flown in all season long, provide consumers with excellent eating experiences. While expensive, our customers are discovering that the pull-through on these items is consistently strong at the store level, because the flavor is very good and inspires repeat purchase."

Myers anticipates seeing greater quantities

"There is great interest in finding fruit varieties that are larger, higher in color, low acid, and have a long shelf life that will make the two week trip from Chile."

— Dionysios Christou, Del Monte

of organic kiwifruit from Chile, and enhancements that will positively impact overall kiwifruit quality. "Kiwifruit consumption continues to grow in North America, and Chile plays a role in this during the summer. The 2015 Chilean kiwi volumes bounced back nicely to 2013 levels, following the frost of 2014," he says. "Chilean citrus is growing, with easy-peel varieties, such as W. Murcotts hitting their stride. Easy peelers are extending the season for most grape and stone fruit growers, and also helps keep the pack house actively engaged. No new Clementine plantings are underway, so W. Murcotts remain the growth vehicle."

Chilean blueberry plantings are also on the upswing. They hit the market when the demand is high, filling the gap in domestic production and offering the customer year-round availability.

Dionysios Christou, vice president marketing for Del Monte Fresh Produce, Coral Gables, FL, says the upcoming seasons should continue to see new grape varieties that consumers will love.

"Researchers are currently focusing on developing new varieties of stone fruit and grapes, and there is great interest in finding fruit varieties that are larger, higher in color, low acid, and have a long shelf life that will make the two week trip from Chile," he says. "Exports in fresh produce from Chile to the U.S. increased steadily over the past five years as we see new products/varieties coming from Chile. In addition, the Chilean export business is now a global marketplace, and buyers need to know they are competing with other international markets for the same fruit."

While North America will always be a destination for Chilean exports, there are other parts of the world, such as Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America receiving higher quantities of exports from Chile.

SHOWING SUPPORT

One of the missions of the CFFA is to provide support for retailers to better market

produce from Chile.

Savanello notes that the organization provides Allegiance with fantastic POP and POS materials. "This year CFFA became much more engaged with social media support, offering videos about the products and recipes to promote sales," he says. "I myself visited Chile as part of a retailer tour three years ago; it was an incredible experience, and I fell in love with the country in the process."

Robinson Fresh's Monson says consumers tend to forget fresh fruit is available from Chile during this time. He says U.S. retailers should take advantage of the opportunity to promote these items in order to drive year-round sales.

Brux says the CFFA focuses its marketing activities on the trade, working with retail chains across North America on tailored, customized promotions.

"Our tagline is, 'A taste of summer. Fresh from Chile,' and many chains like to promote this with bright, summer displays that bring sunshine to the grey, gloomy days of winter," she says. "Because we offer such a large range of commodities, there are organizations like DeCA (Defense Commissary Agency) that run massive Chilean fruit festivals at hundreds of commissaries throughout the U.S., and these events incorporate maps and other parts of Chile into the displays."

For commodity-specific promotions such as blueberries, grapes or cherries, the CFFA runs joint demonstrations, such as Chilean Cherries and Bing Cherry Juice or Chilean Blueberries with yogurt. Varieties that are new to consumers are also of great interest to retailers, so it had success developing in-store promotions around items such as Muscat grapes and lemon plums.

"We work with retailers not only to develop customized promotions, but also customized promotion materials, whether posters, POS cards, recipe pads, or something else," says Brux. "We don't mass produce anything but rather develop and produce based on what our customers want. We have three merchandisers based in the U.S. and Canada. Their key focus is on supporting the retailers, wholesalers and importers within their regions."

She also notes display contests are very popular, recalling a chain that ran one for blueberries, with the winning entry centered on *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. "Remember the blueberry girl, [Violet Beauregarde]? They even had Oompa-Loompas within the display," she says.

Myers of Oppy commends the efforts of the CFFA with promoting the categories, while also keeping The Oppenheimer Group's



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business development team well informed about the resources available for presentation to retailers.

“Educating consumers about what they are buying and eating is always important. Most people are interested in knowing where their food comes from and understanding the person who grew it or the place where it was grown,” he says. “If the farmer is in Chile or just down the road, it seems right to let the consumer know a bit of their story. Retailers can capitalize on it by making people aware of the beauty of the country and the sophistication of the pack houses and growing processes.”

SIGN OF THE TIMES

At Allegiance stores, the produce departments utilize a great deal of the signage that the CFFA sends, with most signs touting Chile’s season, climate and products.

“We definitely bring attention to the fact the produce is imported from Chile,” says Savanello. “The mention of ‘imported from Chile’ does not have any negative connotation that goes along with it. Product from Chile is perceived to be fresh, tasty and most of all safe, by most U.S. consumers.”

According to Oppy’s Myers, an attractive,

eye-catching display will always sell more fruit, especially with big beautiful shots of the growing regions, and some explanation of what makes Chile a special place to grow produce. As always, he notes, nutrition information and usage ideas are helpful to shoppers.

“On the merchandising front, we’re starting to see the trend moving away from the high graphic bags that enjoyed tremendous popularity in recent years to simpler stand-up pouch bags that allow shoppers to see the fruit inside,” he says.

Christou advises retailers to be on the lookout for another trend — new and innovative packaging. “At Del Monte, we are continuously researching and introducing packaging that allows us to keep up with the changing consumer demands and preferences, but also offers sustainable solutions and help retailers reduce shrink,” he says. “Clamshells and fixed weight bags, as well as grapes packed in a carry bag, are becoming more popular every year.”

Christou’s best advice to retailers is that during the heart of the season, regular displays in retail stores should be in a cold or refrigerated display about 8-foot by 4-foot. When on ad, this is accentuated with an endcap at the entry of the produce department.



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"The POS and signage for Chilean fruit should be informative on product quality, new varieties, seasonal products, nutritional information, recipes, etc.," says Christou. "Del Monte offers a variety of POS material showing nutritional value and benefits, as well as recipe cards that not only attract consumers' attention but also educate them on the product."

MONEY MATTERS

In Savanello's opinion, pricing less is pricing best. "Being able to get to those magic retails that drive volume on those commodities during their domestic seasons is the key," he says.

Myers of Oppy notes that more retailers are driving sales with per-pound pricing on kiwifruit, instead of "by the each," which has long been an established practice. This can take the form of a value-added clamshell or other pack, or just loose with per-pound pricing.

"This takes away the exact cost per each for the consumer who will tend to pick up more per shopping experience," he says. "Another way to boost kiwifruit sales is a bulk display with multiple-pricing to encourage multiple fruit purchase, such as 5 for \$3."

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

When it comes to encouraging the notion of purchasing Chilean fruit before consumers even get to the store, Brux says the organization is ramping up its social media campaign.

"Over the past few years, we had exponential growth in social media promotions, working with chains of 10 stores to 1,000 stores on social media posts and contests that encourage consumer engagement and participation," she says. "You'd be surprised how many consumers will share their usage ideas for Chilean fruit in exchange for a chance to win a NutriBullet or other prize."

Additionally, retailers want holiday and season-specific ideas and images, so the CFFA will be developing new assets that showcase creative ideas for everything from New Year's to Valentine's Day. The organization will also offer consumers easy-to-use bullet points on nutrition and usage ideas.

SUPERMARKET DIETITIANS & FOODSERVICE

The CFFA has sponsored numerous Supermarket RD programs run by Produce for Better Health. This year, the Chilean Blueberry Committee sponsored the RD program at the PMA's Fresh Summit.

Over the course of the convention and expo, the organization held individual meetings and

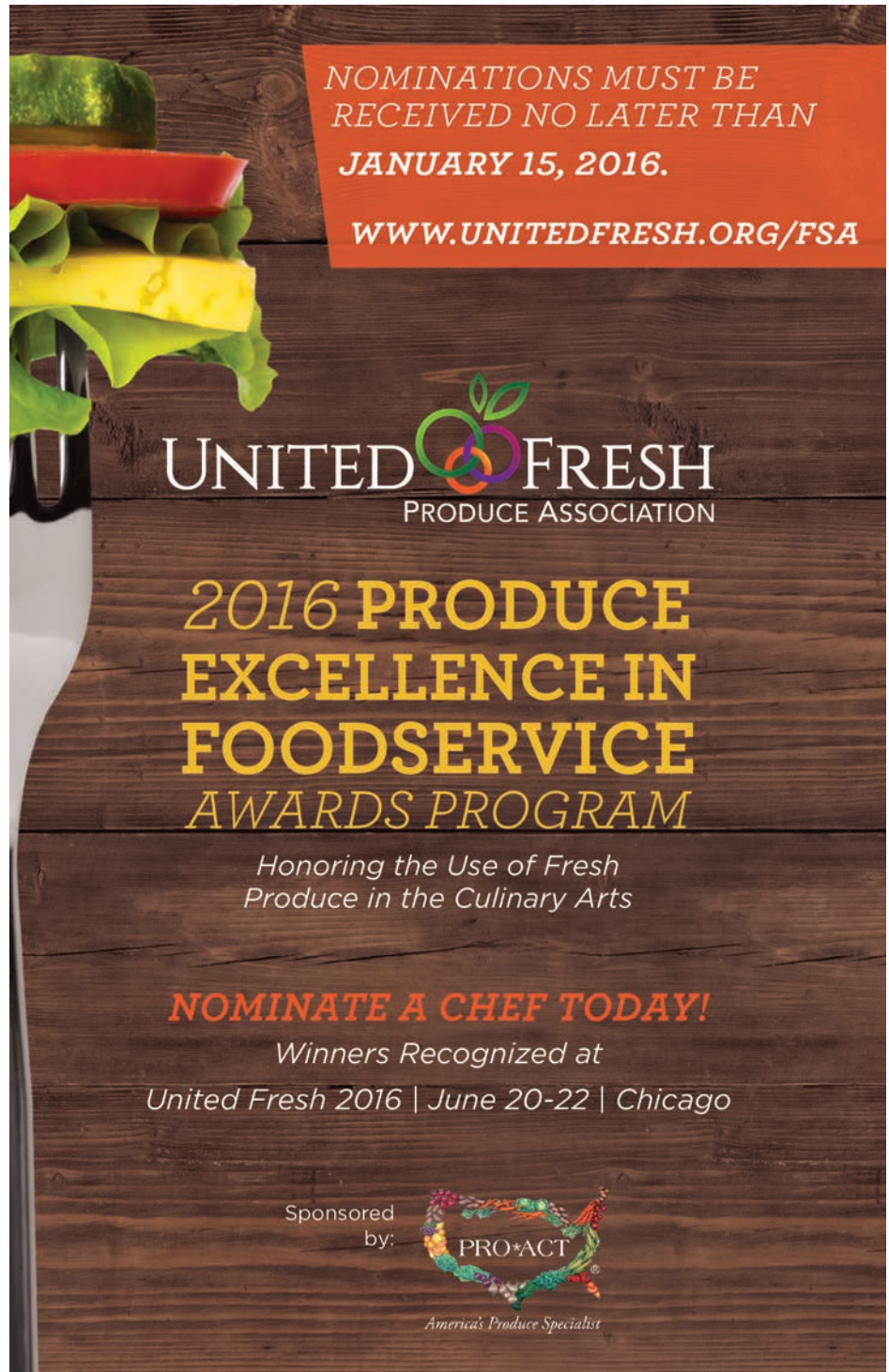
numerous networking opportunities with more than 20 supermarket RDs from throughout the U.S. and Canada.

"With Fresh Summit leading up to the start of the main Chilean fruit season, this was the perfect opportunity for us to showcase the story of Chilean fruit and put programs in place with this influential group of people," says Brux.

According to Brux, the 2015-16 season will see a small but very focused foodservice program for Chilean fruit as well.

"We'll continue to sponsor the annual convention of IFEC (International Foodservice Editorial Council), and our team of foodservice experts will partner with a chef to develop blueberry-centric menu options for restaurant chains interested in enhancing their menus with Chilean Blueberries," she says.

"We're also sponsoring a new program of the Culinary Institute of America called Appetites & Innovation, which will explore growing opportunities in the area of retail foodservice. This takes place in January of 2016." **pb**



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A DYNAMIC DUO

An examination of potato and onion category management.

BY KEITH LORIA

There's probably no more comforting flavor match, in any season, in any weather, than potatoes and onions. The combo's popularity is evident when you search online and see there are more than 16 million recipes for the duo, which means the opportunity to spark consumers' imaginations is an opportunity to spark sales.

Basket affinity data from Nielsen Perishables Group shows onions are nearly four times as likely to be purchased when potatoes are in the shopping basket, and the same applies to potatoes when onions are in the basket.

Don Ladhoff, president of FreshSmartSolutions, says it's a no-brainer to market potatoes and onions together because they are so frequently purchased and used together.

"Since shoppers have a strong tendency to pick up one product when they are buying the other, retailers can effectively influence the purchase of both products through their planograms, merchandising activities and circular advertising," says Ladhoff, who is also a retail programs consultant for the United States Potato Board, headquartered in Denver. "Consumers love eating both pota-

toes and onions, and are willing to purchase and consume them more frequently when given new ideas for recipes and preparation techniques. It all comes back to the power of suggestion."

For instance, few consumers think of grilling potatoes but are surprised at how easy and delicious this preparation method can be.

John Shuman, president and director of sales for Shuman Produce, based in Reidsville, GA, notes he's seen onions and potatoes merchandised near one another throughout the year and it just makes sense.

"It's a natural fit, when you take into consideration that both products are staples in consumers' kitchens," he says.

Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's Produce, based in Los Angeles, notes since both onion and potatoes do not require refrigeration, and are typically items that go together in recipes, it makes sense to team them together in a retail environment. Additionally, they both need storage at home to separate them from other product items and they both need to be kept away from light, in a cool, dry place.

Teri Gibson, director of marketing and

customer relations for Peri & Sons Farms, based in Yerington, NV, says year-in-year-out onions continue to be a household staple.

"The key is to continually provide consumers with new and interesting ways to incorporate, and even feature, onions in the meals they prepare as the seasons change — and that often involves potatoes," says Gibson. "All of our onion packages offer consumers access to a wide variety of recipes and tips just for joining our free Onion Obsession Club online; there's even an easy-scan QR code that leads to info and recipes."

MERCHANDISING MATTERS

Potatoes and onions have a natural advantage as staple items on most consumers' shopping lists and benefit from joint merchandising.

"Placing both on a display is sure to increase the ring at the register especially during holidays when meal planning and purchases provide an incremental sales bump," says Shuman. "When a purchase is made of one, the other usually follows."

Ladhoff says the most successful in-store merchandising uses a strategy of "Stop-Hold-Close," where the display provides

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some element that stops shoppers in their tracks. This might be scale (e.g. world's largest potato display), smell (the aroma of onions cooking really stands out in a grocery store environment) or other sensory stimuli such as color or audio.

"The 'hold' element provides intellectual engagement, such as recipe ideas, cooking tips or 'did you know?' nutritional facts," he says. "The final element closes the sale by encouraging shoppers to put potatoes and onions in their cart, often with the use of promotional pricing although this can also be achieved through consumer offers (e.g. buy potatoes and onions and get an apron or oven-mitt free)."

■ IN THE STORES



PHOTO COURTESY OF WHEATSVILLE FOOD CO-OP

Wheatville Food Co-op, the only retail food cooperative operating in Texas, is a natural foods grocery store that has been serving the central Austin community since 1976.

"We've always believed they pair well. Any onion that is caramelized pairs well with any potato," says Dana Tomlin, Wheatville's fresh manager. "There are a lot of varieties — purple and Avalanche potatoes, Cipollini onions — the selection is endless. And there are a lot of recipes that can be made: potato soups, gratins, hash that pair these two veggies, and you can up the ante on any of these by changing out the potatoes and the onions. For example, use shallots and leeks in place of yellow onions and you change your flavor profile."

Ralf Hernandez, Wheatville's produce coordinator, notes since potatoes and onions store similarly, they therefore display similarly, usually a part of a non-refrigerated "savory" set, which could include garlic and shallots.

"The flavors play well together and the end product of each is usually comple-

Out of all the out-of-the-box ideas he has seen in his years in the produce world, industry vet Ladhoff reveals he has witnessed strong results from handmade signs that evoke a farmers market theme.

Shuman warns not to merchandise both products in the same location and in the same way all year long.

"This leads to purchases focused simply on restocking staple items in consumers' pantries," he says. "We suggest utilizing secondary displays with both products included to create some excitement in both categories and maximize their sales potential at different times throughout the year."

mentary to each other," he says. "Both are staples, so merchandising them near each other can make it easier for customers to shop our department."

Victor Savanello, director of produce and floral for Allegiance Retail Services, LLC, headquartered in Iselin, NJ, says it only makes sense to keep the items together as it makes customers think about recipes that have both, and usually you don't buy one without the other.

Erik Levi, director of produce for Green Zebra Grocery, based in Portland, OR, notes it has always seemed like a good idea to have these items together because of the pairing of these items in so many recipes, so cross-merchandising in your own department is important.

"A retailer should really evaluate the movement of each product in order to have the right volume out on display. Or have each item dummied according to its movement," he says. "I hear people talking about the purple potatoes a lot and we get requests to carry them, however Russet potatoes continue to move the best." **pb**

SAVVY DISPLAY TACTICS

While merely displaying potatoes adjacent to onions will increase sales of both products, it's the belief of many in the industry that the effectiveness of a joint display can be dramatically elevated through suggestive selling.

Retailers should consider using signage that prominently features an image of a prepared dish using both potatoes and onions. This has been proven by the U.S. Potato Board and Nielsen Perishables Group to drive greater incremental volume lift.

"And ideally the image should present an innovative recipe idea that is a bit adventurous, such as a caramelized potato and onion flatbread," says Ladhoff. "This approach is also effective when utilized in circular advertising as well as in web content and social media posts."

There are plenty of opportunities for pairing sweet onions and potatoes — both separately and together — with additional produce items to create excitement and increase ring at the register.

When it comes to secondary displays for sweet onions, a wide variety of vegetables in the produce department can be considered potential partners, says Shuman.

"We suggest changing up secondary displays to celebrate holidays or the season. Sweet onions can be paired with tomatoes, bagged salads and potatoes for a great cook-out-themed display in the summer months and holidays like Memorial Day and Independence Day," he says. "During the fall holidays, build displays including sweet potatoes and onions to take advantage of the popularity of both items in fall meals."

Because sweet onions and potatoes are both available all year round, it's important to call attention to both during peak seasons or holidays or seasonal events to create excitement around either product. Pairing them together and promoting a recipe or meal solution using both products is a great place to start.

"Utilizing our high-graphic RealSweet bags, including the recipes printed on the back of every bag as a part of a promotion will drive sales of sweet onions as well as the products used in the recipes or meal solutions suggested in merchandising materials," says Shuman. "It's a good idea to pair sweet onions with additional items throughout the year to encourage sales through cross promotion or build an additional display during peak season to increase ring at the register."

During the week and leading up to holidays (Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year), Schueller recommends the use of end caps of volume staple varieties like Russet and white

potatoes, and white and red onions, as well as specialties around the perimeters.

“Staples are everyday sellers, specialties are typically more purchased for holiday and special events throughout the year,” he says. “Display with variety to offer a one-stop shop experience for shopper of potatoes and onions.”

In 2015, Peri & Sons Farms offered retailers bright, eye-catching display-ready cartons and POS materials as part of its Bloomin’ BBQ Onion promotion (a low-fat alternative to the traditional deep-fried onion) and it did very well.

“Our individually-wrapped colossal onions include a QR code tag that leads to cooking instructions and to healthy dipping sauces,” says Gibson. “Add-on items included fresh herbs, foil and olive oil.”

COLOR BLOCKING TO MERCHANDISE

Both potatoes and onions should be merchandised in one location, with like types grouped together including bulk with bags.

“The inclusion of different packaging forms within one potato/onion type creates a natural visual break with the adjacent type, making shopping easier for customers,” says Ladhoff. “Color blocking further enhances this effect, but the most important aspect is grouping all offerings of the same type together.”

Taking advantage of color blocking can play a vital role in selling more.

“Fingerling potatoes and baby purple make great color blocks in the variety potato categories,” says Schueller. “Variety Pearls (white, red and gold) along with Variety Boilers (white, red and gold) are most impactful for color breaks.”

The same can be true for onions. “Using packages of onions, such as any one of the many colorful high-graphic 3-pound packs we offer, can break up displays of bulk product and can help the display look colorful and clean,” says Gibson. “The more a retailer can differentiate the sweet onions from the yellow onions, whether it’s with signage or separate positioning, the better.”

Victor Savanello, director of produce and floral for Allegiance Retail Services, LLC, headquartered in Iselin, NJ, says to make sure to have nice color breaks to bring attention to the items. Also, items like olive oil, garlic and shallots complement the product and the display as well.

“Both have red, yellow, and white varieties,” he says. “The more you carry, the easier to break up the color.”

Erik Levi, director of produce for Green Zebra Grocery, based in Portland, OR, says the colors are on the mild side so the breaks

are not as striking as an apple set.

“The white onion is nice to drop in the set but price vs. movement does always work so I find it nice to cut in garlic here if it is not already in a tomato lemon set somewhere,” he says. “We have a small department where we carry red, yellow and Russet potatoes. We will rotate through other potato varieties to drum up interest, different Fingerlings and Creamers. We do carry shallots and Cipollini onions when in season.”

THINKING HEALTHY

Research shows many consumers remain strongly focused on health and nutrition as well as flavor when it comes to their food purchases. Shuman says that’s one of the reasons sweet onions sell so well.

“Sweet onions are loaded with a variety of inherent benefits to your health and our bags are clearly marked to educate on these facts as well as nutritional information,” he says. “We think it’s important to call out these benefits using POS, especially during the first few weeks of the new year when many consumers are considering a new diet or lifestyle change.”

Potatoes and onions are both naturally healthy, and both are good sources of fiber

and vitamin C; potatoes in particular are a superior source of potassium.

“Both potatoes and onions are low in calories, and are sodium, fat, and cholesterol free,” says Ladhoff. “But a significant share of shoppers do not understand how nutritious both potatoes and onions are, and retailers can boost their sales by including nutritional benefits in their shopper communications.”

According to Ladhoff, consumption trends overall are relatively flat, although colored potatoes are outpacing the overall category average and sweet onions are performing similarly in their space.

As more and more people are preparing meals at home so they can better control portion size and the amount of salt and oils, onions and potatoes are both great for consumption.

“Being such a versatile, year-round product, that is also ethnically diverse, onions transcend most veggie trends,” says Gibson. “Every season presents opportunities to incorporate white, red, sweet or yellow onions into whatever’s on the menu and with so many colors, sizes and varieties of potatoes also available, the combinations are endless.”

She says the company is encouraged by



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research indicating even the Millennial generation sees cooking from scratch as an opportunity to eat healthier, be creative and experiment.

“We just need to keep it interesting by providing simple, easy recipe ideas, they can easily access online and on their mobile devices, throughout the season,” she says.

TESTING THE THEORY

The U.S. Potato Board recommends retailers give the potato its own space in the produce department so the retailer can merchandise all potatoes together to showcase the full range of offerings available. The board advises organizing potatoes by type and size (for example, all Russets together, all reds together, etc.) as opposed to bag and bulk.

Sarah Reece, global marketing manager for the U.S. Potato Board in Denver, recommends placing specialty potatoes first in shopper traffic flow to generate impulse purchases. However, avoid the wet rack because misting can cause potatoes to breakdown faster.

Reece says while the organization doesn’t “recommend” merchandising potatoes and onions together, she recognizes the two vegetables are frequently in shoppers’ basket together. In fact, research has shown that onions are in

“Every season presents opportunities to incorporate white, red, sweet or yellow onions ... We just need to keep it interesting by providing simple, easy recipe ideas, they can easily access online and on their mobile devices, throughout the season.”

— Teri Gibson, Peri & Sons Farms

its target consumers’ baskets 27 percent of the time when they purchase potatoes.

Because of this, the Potato Board conducted a pilot program a few years back to determine the extent the two can work together to increase category sales. During the recent test, it partnered with the National Onion Association to co-promote the potato and onion categories. The tote bag included potato and onion recipes as well as additional facts.

“Our objective was to determine the impact of a custom printed tote bag on driving bulk potato and onion sales, and quantify any increases in bulk as well as total category sales due to tote bags merchandised at the

potato table,” says Reece. “For the test, potato and onion tote bags were placed in 79 test stores over a six-week period. The test drove incremental bulk and total category sales for both potatoes and onions. In addition to the custom printed tote bags the two categories were promoted together in circular ads and at special in-store displays.”

Kimberly Reddin, director of public and industry relations for the National Onion Association, based in Greeley, CO, was happy with the pilot project and thought it produced some eye-opening results.

“The pilot program was very successful as onions and potatoes both saw about a 7 percent interest in sales volume thanks to the promotion, vs. the same time period a year prior,” she says. “That was during the six weeks just prior to Thanksgiving and clear through the December holidays, which is always swifter movement because people are doing more in-home preparations. To have an uptick in sales like that, we both felt really positive.”

Despite the promotion’s success, the two organizations have not done any follow-up.

“There wasn’t a retailer that was really involved after the pilot project that was invested in that with a shipper, so nothing has been continued,” says Reddin. “There are certainly pros and cons to marketing anything together but it makes sense from a retail operation perspective because they are both dried-storage type of items with definite nuances between the two of them.”

Reddin does see lots of merit in doing cross-promotions between the two vegetables in the future.

Merchandising potatoes and onions together encourages purchase of both items as a simple pantry item. Using secondary displays or placing them on opposite sides of an aisle or section at different times of the year to merchandise them differently based on the season creates excitement, increases exposure and produces plenty of opportunity for new cross-promotional purchases.

pb

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Winter Squash Moves Beyond A Thanksgiving Staple

Industry experts advise on how to extend the bounty of the vegetable into the New Year.

BY CHRIS AUMAN

With the exception of apples, there probably isn't a fruit that is more associated with the fall season than winter squash. From the ornamental gourds and carving pumpkins that start showing up in produce departments in the weeks leading up to Halloween, to the pumpkin pies that are just as much a part of Thanksgiving as the turkey itself, the arrival of these hearty squashes are highly anticipated. Despite the name, however, winter squashes are grown in warmer weather.

The origin of the frigid-sounding name is owed to its durability, which made it a staple in diets since before recorded history. With so much of such a versatile commodity available until January, retail executives aim to keep winter squash on the minds and shopping lists

of consumers well after the jack-o'-lanterns are thrown on the compost heap and the last of the Thanksgiving leftovers are consumed.

The year-end holiday season provides retailers with several opportunities to merchandise winter squash. Robert Schueller, assistant marketing director at Melissa's/World Variety Produce headquartered in Los Angeles, points out that of the five target marketing times for winter squash, three of them fall after the Thanksgiving holiday. Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's all provide retailers with opportunities to sell squash varieties to shoppers looking to create delicious offerings for their holiday events.

"After Thanksgiving, you start to see that stores don't stock as much winter squash, but typically they carry it all the way through New Year's before they disappear when the season

starts to end in January," says Schueller. "That's when you go from 16 different varieties to four varieties starting in February and March."

VARIETY AND VERSATILITY

From the nuttiness of acorn squash to the sweet flavor of butternut and creamy goodness of spaghetti squash, these varieties may be most familiar to shoppers, but the list of winter squashes is extensive, and each has its own unique flavor profile. Delicata squash is great for desserts, and while pumpkins are champions in pies, there are myriad ways winter squash can be cooked, baked and consumed. Butternut squash can even be eaten raw, grated and dressed as a part of a salad along with root vegetables such as carrots and beets. "There are so many different varieties, if a consumer thinks they all taste the same, are cooked the same,

and have the same texture, they're definitely wrong," says Schueller. "Some squashes are nutty, some are earthy, and some are sweeter than others."

Debra Boyle, director of business development for Fresh Direct Produce, based in Vancouver, BC, Canada, points out something that mothers have always known about squash: "Babies eat so much squash," says Boyle. "It's an item that needs to stay front and center in a retail produce department."

It's not just a hit with babies, however. "People eat a lot of squash all winter long," says Boyle. "It's a hearty food. They put it in soup or they mash it up for little kids, especially the butternut."

As with other produce items, organic varieties appeal to consumers looking for a healthy option. Joe Watson, vice president, domestic business development of the Newark, DE-based Produce Marketing Association and formerly director of produce for Thibodaux, LA-based Rouses Markets, sees this trend as well.

"The availability of organic winter squash is also becoming more prominent with many specialty retailers and some conven-



Many retailers suggest creating squash displays that emphasize the colors of fall and winter.

tional retailers alike," reports Watson. "Some retailers will carry as many as 10 to 12 varieties throughout the fall season and early winter."

Even after Thanksgiving gives way to the year-end holiday rush, winter squash is available to add beauty and bounty to the

table. As Watson notes, "Varieties such as Turban, Hubbard, Banana and other large winter squash varieties also sell well during the autumn decorating season. The squashes have long shelf lives and add a lot of unique color to outdoor or indoor displays."

■ BRINGING SQUASH OUT OF ITS SHELL

There is no doubt winter squash makes for a beautiful display in produce aisles. However, the bright colors, bumpy textures and irregular shapes of many varieties can be intimidating to shoppers. Many home cooks may be unsure of what to do with squash. Cutting through the hard shell of what can at times be a rather odd-shaped fruit is also intimidating. With a reputation that very few varieties taste good raw also presents a challenge for retailers trying to educate consumers about the great taste of winter squash.

Joe Watson, vice president, domestic business development of the Produce Marketing Association recognizes this challenge as well. "Yes, winter squash preparation can be daunting to some consumers," he says. "Printed recipe cards play a big part in creating demand for these harder to sell varieties. If you have a dietitian on staff, have them prepare suggested recipes and create POS to call attention to those ideas. Many retailers and consumers typically overlook the fact that winter squash varieties (such as Delicata squash) are great for desserts."

Job Villanueva, organic sales/QC manager at Los Angeles-based Giumarra, says,

"Vibrant signage with recipe ideas and nutrition facts can help retailers promote squash purchases. Because squash complements a variety of dishes, there are opportunities for creative cross-promotions, such as pie crust for butternut squash pie, or pasta sauce for a spaghetti squash 'pasta alternative' dish." Villanueva also recommends offering samples to educate consumers about new uses for squash.

Veronica Kraushaar, an industry consultant and managing partner at Nogales, AZ-based Viva International Partners, Inc., acknowledges the challenges retailers have with promoting squash. "More work needs to be done to educate the American consumer on how to maximize use of hard squash varieties (such as Kabocha and Acorn) beyond Thanksgiving. There are maybe 20 different varieties of squash out there, and the hard-shelled varieties are the hardest sell, but offer the more versatile, cost-efficient solutions as a complete meal."

Squash is also easy to eat and comes in its own all-natural container. "You don't even need a plate," says Kraushaar, noting that squash can be cooked and eaten right out of the shell for a fast simple meal. **pb**

CROSS-MERCHANDISING OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

While winter squashes make a great addition to hearty soups, desserts and side dishes, communicating this message to shoppers is key. "It is important to give winter squash a new home after Thanksgiving," says Watson, "otherwise consumers will lose interest in this category. Once Thanksgiving has past, retailers focus on the key Christmas items and give them front-and-center position. Therefore, winter squash displays will be reduced in size, so placement and cross-merchandising are important to keep customers interested in buying."

What can retailers do to cross-merchandise squash and keep it on shopping lists after Thanksgiving? "Soups come to mind," says Watson. Placing winter squash in the soup ingredient section of the produce department is a good way to cross-merchandise squash with other produce with a POS that calls out the fruit's versatility. "Obviously not all types of winter squash are great for soups, so be particular about which varieties are merchandised for this purpose."

SIGNAGE & DISPLAY

"A large, mixed, bountiful display of hard squash is one of the more beautiful sights in a produce department," says Simcha Wein-

stein, director of marketing, Albert's Organics, headquartered in Swedesboro, NJ. Winter squashes hold up remarkably well on display and help create a look of abundance that can be appealing as the lean winter months approach.

With such an array of varieties to choose from, how do shoppers know which varieties to choose? Albert's Organics provides retailers with an especially useful piece of signage. This shopper's guide, when paired with a large mixed display, helps consumers understand the different varieties and gives them ideas on

how to choose and prepare them. "Over the years, our retail customers found this sign to be helpful and effective," says Weinstein. "It allows them to display the squash as one large mixed squash display, rather than as rows of individual varieties."

Job Villanueva, organic sales/QC manager at Giumarra based in Los Angeles, echoes this sentiment. "The winter holidays are a good time to promote the flavorful varieties of winter squash, several of which are excellent sources of vitamins A and/or C. Their versatility —

"The winter holidays are a good time to promote the flavorful varieties of winter squash, several of which are excellent sources of vitamins A and/or C."

— Job Villanueva, Giumarra

cubed, sliced, mashed — makes them good additions to salads, soups, and side dishes. They can be prepared sweet or savory. We recommend displaying all squash varieties together to promote volume purchasing."

For Schueller at Melissa's, signage is an important tool in communicating to shoppers. "We always believe in offering our retail partners customized signage to educate the consumers, while at the same time educating produce managers and buyers." While signage helps educate shoppers, it's the display that draws them in. Schueller recommends shipper bins for visual appeal.

"The shipper can be filled with hundreds of pounds of squash and dropped down with a forklift and refilled as needed," he says. "It doesn't require refrigeration, and you don't have to put a mister on it." Schueller also recommends placing winter squash as an endcap close to onions, potatoes and other soup ingredients. "You don't want to stack them too high," he warns, "Probably three layers, depending on the size."

PACKAGING & PRICE

Squash varieties come in different shapes, textures and flavor profiles. The most popular varieties have the best price points per pound because of their availability. According to Schueller, these are Acorn, Butternut, Kabocha and Spaghetti. Schueller notes many retailers prefer a line price per pound for all varieties so consumers can choose an amount adequate to feed their families large or small.

There is an alternative to pricing by the pound, as Veronica Kraushaar, managing partner at Nogales, AZ-based Viva International points out, "Although most retailers price by the pound, there is a strong trend toward packaged squash with multi-varieties in one bag. The UPC pricing should help counter the recent lower prices in the bulk commodity."

Kraushaar advises pricing in accordance with the store's demographics by offering bulk and value pricing as well as higher points for the premier, pre-washed products. **pb**

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CUISINE SPECIALTY: VEGAN FINE DINING



Andrew D'Ambrosi, the chef at Avant Garden, lets the produce take center stage in each of the vegan restaurant's menu items.

"We pretty much highlight the produce items for what they are and for what they do," he says.

Rather than turn produce into imitations of meat items, Avant Garden's approach is to create dishes where the vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, herbs and spices work in combination to

stand on their own as entrées.

"Even the roasted cauliflower dish is not being called a cauliflower steak," says D'Ambrosi, who gained notoriety as a participant on Bravo's *Top Chef*. "We're just taking a main vegetable, and figuring out what goes with it."

The roasted cauliflower includes raisins, pine nuts, capers and parsley – a common combination, he says, but it is seldom featured as a main dish.

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New York Food Scene

In some cases, the vegetable dishes are treated somewhat like meats. For the marinated mushroom dish, for example, King Oyster mushrooms are brined – a treatment more typically undertaken with pork or chicken – to enhance flavor.

“The mushrooms are meaty by themselves, but we take it one step further,” says D’Ambrosi, who is also executive chef at three other restaurants in Brooklyn and New York City.

The menu is divided into three

sections – toasts, cold dishes and hot dishes, with just a handful of carefully crafted items on each.

The mission of the restaurant, according to its website, is to “raise the bar on high-end vegan dining in New York and beyond.”

Avant Garden sources much of its produce from the Union Square Farmers Market, and also buys a few items from local farms and others through Baldor Specialty Foods.



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D’Ambrosi says he likes to use local items in season, but he also incorporates high-quality produce from further away.

“I am supporting the farmers market as much as possible, and working with some small farms, but we’re not strictly local,” he says. “We’re a global community – if there’s great pineapple available, why shouldn’t I use it?”

The menu evolves with seasonal availability. For example, tomato toast featuring local tomatoes was a popular item on the summer menu.

When fresh, local items are in season, however, D’Ambrosi lets them shine on the Avant Garden menu.

“If it is in season, and it’s the best it can possibly be, then I want to do as little as possible to change it, and really showcase it,” he says.

– MARK HAMSTRA

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CUISINE SPECIALTY: FARM-TO TABLE FINE DINING



Blenheim is the farm-to-table fine-dining creation of restaurateur and farmer Morten Sohlberg, who also operates the Crepes du Nord chain of fast-casual bistros in the city, two Scandinavian restaurants, and a farm in New York's Catskill Mountains area.

Unlike many other farm-to-table restaurants, Blenheim is one of the few that actually operates its own farm, growing not only much of its own produce but also breeding and

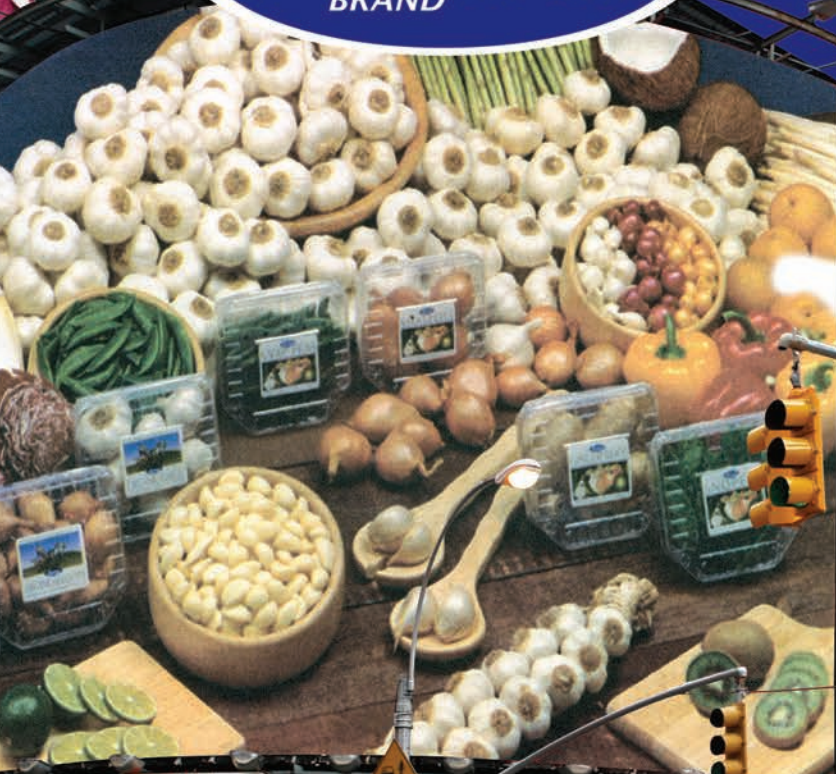
producing its own livestock.

The 150-acre Blenheim Hill Farm grows 260 types of produce and also operates a hydroponic greenhouse – fueled entirely by firewood – that supplies lettuce greens, herbs, tomatoes and other produce year-round for the restaurants.

"We started the restaurants first, then in 2010 we started farming in upstate New York," explains Sohlberg. "Then as a result of the farming, we opened Blenheim a year and a half



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New York Food Scene

ago as an outlet for the finest of what we produced on the farm."

The restaurant sources a limited amount of produce, including citrus and other products that cannot be grown on the farm, from a range of other produce suppliers. Sohlberg also buys occasionally from the Union Square Farmers Market, not far from the Greenwich Village location of Blenheim.

The menu at Blenheim changes in subtle ways daily based on the produce that's available, and undergoes more dramatic, seasonal change four to six times per year, says Sohlberg.

"Day to day, it might be the same meat and the same sauce that we had the day before, but we might change it up when we get something new from the farm, and substitute squash for beets, for example," he explains. "There's a constant change and flux based on what's fresh and what looks good."

Recent items have included a flatiron steak with sunchoke from the farm, and a Blenheim Farm salad featuring lettuces and greens from the farm's greenhouse.

Sohlberg says he tries to calibrate



production at the farm to meet the needs of the restaurants precisely, and is not interested in getting into the business of supplying other restaurants from his farm.

"We do not get involved in distribution," he says. "That becomes a very, very different logistical challenge, and it's not part of our vertically integrated model."

He says one of the goals of Blenheim's

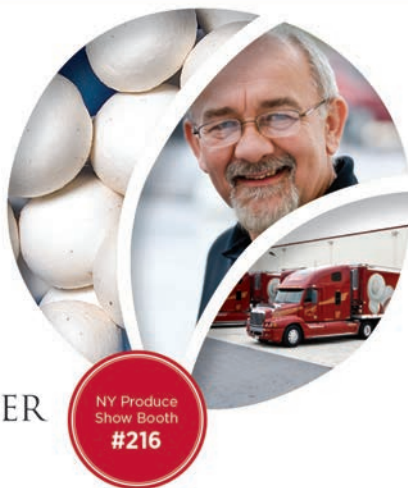
model is to reduce the use of middlemen as much as possible to keep menu prices low for customers.

"Our primary focus is to highlight and feature the things we produce ourselves, so we do differ quite a bit from many other farm-to-table restaurants," says Sohlberg.

— MARK HAMSTRA

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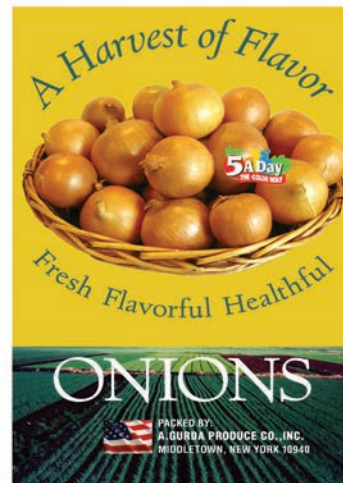
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CUISINE SPECIALTY: GOURMET GROCERY



Brooklyn Fare is a grocery store that does such a masterful job incorporating prepared foods in its offering that its original store includes a three-star Michelin restaurant.

Founder Moe Issa says the company's dedication to quality runs throughout the organization, including its attractively displayed produce departments at its two retail locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

"Our approach [to produce] is very simple," he says. "It's

having fresh product, and it's having good product. I taste everything that comes in. I have a very high standard, and that's what I want to offer in my store.

"I don't want an apple that tastes like cardboard. I want an apple that tastes like an apple."

Issa says every single case of produce that comes in the door at his grocery stores is checked for quality.

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New York Food Scene

don't do it that way," he says. "If it is up to our standards and our satisfaction, we accept it, and if it is not, we send it back."

Issa himself, who was raised in the Brooklyn neighborhood where his original store is located, makes several visits back and forth to the two Brooklyn Fare locations every day, six days a week.

He says he tries to buy from local providers as much as possible, and his produce managers make two trips to the Hunts Point Produce Market every week.

Brooklyn Fare buys from an estimated 40 to 50 different produce suppliers, says Issa.

"They each have their own specialties," he explains. "Some have better greens, some are better with citrus, some have better vegetables, so we buy the best from the ones who specialize in those items."

Issa says the stores carry a lot of organic produce to meet growing demand, and he's noticed that the price gap between



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conventional and organic items seems to be narrowing.

"Organic is here to stay," he says. "A lot of people are asking for it."

Brooklyn Fare also carries an extensive collection of fresh-cut produce, which it processes itself in each of the two locations.

"People like that convenience," says Issa.

The stores also do a brisk lunch business, he says, and have a strong deli program offering sandwiches, salads and a variety of prepared hot and cold items for grab-and-go shoppers.

The Chef's Table restaurant, an 18-seat fine-dining venue inside the store's Brooklyn location, features tasting menus of 15 courses or more, changing daily based on seasonal availability of products.

– MARK HAMSTRA

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CUISINE SPECIALTY: VEGGIE-CENTRIC FINE DINING



Kevin Adey, chef-owner of Faro restaurant in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, sees produce as the catalyst that drives his menu items.

"It's always the vegetable first," he says. "I don't really like to fill the menu with proteins."

Faro, which means "lighthouse" in Italian, opened in May with a focus on seasonal cuisine featuring house-made pastas, organic produce, sustainable local seafood and humanely

raised meats. Adey operates the restaurant with his wife Debbie – both veterans of other fine-dining destinations – and their partner, Daniel Blumberg.

Adey says he tries to work with as much local produce as possible, but it becomes challenging in the winter months.

"There's seven months where there's really not much available, then it's an embarrassment of riches the rest of the year," he says.



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New York Food Scene

Faro sources some produce through Bronx-based Baldor Specialty Foods, and Adey has longstanding relationships with many area farmers that supply meat as well as produce items, such as apples. The restaurant also procures grains from upstate New York that Adey mills himself to make flour for the restaurant's acclaimed pastas.

"I try and work with people who I know," says Adey.

He works closely with Brooklyn

Grange, a rooftop farming company through which Faro sources the bulk of its vegetables, including tomatoes, greens, carrots, turnips, radishes and other items. In addition, Adey says he ventures into Manhattan to visit the Union Square Farmers Market once or twice a week.

"When I go to the farmers market, I start with what I can smell, then I look visually," he says. "If I find something I like, I think, 'What can I do with this?'"

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ways each day based on what's fresh and available, and undergoes larger changes seasonally.

Some of the recent offerings have included a Roman gnocchi with Swiss chard, cream and a cured egg, and a fire-roasted Butternut squash with whipped Chèvre, sage oil and oat crumble.

Environmental responsibility is an important aspect of the menu at Faro, explains Adey. One of the reasons he limits meat offerings is because of the greater impact livestock have on the environment, compared with vegetables.

"I'm not anti-meat or pro-vegetable," he says. "I'm pro-environment, and I'd like to have some land left to grow a radish for my kids."

— MARK HAMSTRA

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brands in New York, now has 13 locations in Manhattan, with plans for more.

“Our menu is seasonally driven, so we are always speaking to local farms about what they are harvesting,” says George Tenedios, fresh&co’s co-founder. “Our culinary team then develops several offerings and we have the fresh&co team taste and vote on favorite items.”

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New York Food Scene

signage and through its social media platforms. The goal is to drive awareness among customers about the best foods nature has to offer at that particular time of year.

Among the signature items at fresh&co are its quinoa bowls, which come in an array of varieties based on availability of ingredients.

"Our quinoa bowls really benefit from the seasonality of fresh produce," says Tenedios. "Exciting flavors from items



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such as Brussels sprouts, eggplant, zucchini and peppers, as well as our homemade signature dressings, make the quinoa bowls a real crowd pleaser."

Local and seasonal ingredients also make their way into other items, including sandwiches.

"Our culinary and R&D team is always looking forward to surprising our guests," says Tenedios. "For example, our Figgy Turkey panini is made with New York State Granny Smith apples, New York cheddar and a harvest-friendly fig jam.

"We also create a seasonal salad marrying the items with local greens and a chef-designed dressing that helps profile their flavors."

Tenedios says he works with several local farms to procure fresh produce, including Satur Farms in North Fork, NY, which harvests exclusive product for fresh&co, such as Russian kale and mixed greens. Other local providers include Red Jacket Orchards and Bald Eagle Farms.

Fresh&co also buys produce through Baldor Specialty Foods to procure the best seasonal fruits and vegetables.

"Their extensive network of 1,000 farms, of which 80 are local organic purveyors, allows us to cast our net a bit further when necessary," says Tenedios.

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Grace's Marketplace has been a culinary destination on Manhattan's Upper East Side for 30 years.

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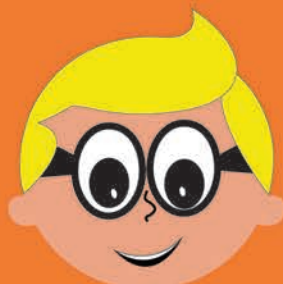
"We get produce in five days a week, Monday through

Friday," says Joseph Doria Jr., one of the owners and director of operations at the Manhattan location. (Grace's has a second store on Long Island, in Greenvale, NY.)

He says Grace's buys much of its produce from the Hunts Point Produce Markets, but also procures directly from some local farmers and from Bronx-based Baldor Specialty Foods, which itself carries produce from several local growers.

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New York Food Scene



buyer for 25 years," explains Doria. "We give him our order every night. He's out there around midnight, and then we get our order first thing in the morning."

The Manhattan store, which recently relocated from its longtime location on Third Avenue a few blocks away to Second Avenue, features an in-store restaurant with counter seating, which

is part of its extensive prepared-foods offerings.

Doria says Grace's procures the same produce for both its prepared-foods and retail operations.

One of the biggest trends lately has been strong demand for processed produce items, he says.

"A huge part of my produce business

is pre-packed – anything that's cleaned and ready to go," he says. "It's a huge business right now. Everything from butternut squash to carrots to onions, all kinds of fruits, cut up and cleaned and ready to go."

Doria says Grace's processes "about 90 percent" of its produce in-house, which he prefers because he can ensure product freshness.

"We can make a fresh batch every day, and I know it's going to sell," he says. "It's a lot more controlled."

Grace's tries to carry as much local produce as possible, but Doria says he also needs to be conscious of price.

"We had some local blueberries in here, but they were twice the price of Driscoll's [brand], and they just wouldn't sell," he says. "People just grab the Driscoll's if it's \$2.99 instead of \$4.99."

Items like tomatoes from local growers in New Jersey and corn from Long Island farmers will always be available at Grace's, he says.

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CUISINE SPECIALTY: HEALTHY FINE DINING



Little Park, inside the Smyth Hotel in Manhattan's TriBeCa neighborhood, is a recent creation from acclaimed chef Andrew Carmellini that leverages his longtime partnerships with local farmers, ranchers, foragers and other producers.

The 85-seat venue, with additional seating for 65 in a private dining room downstairs, is described as comfortable, elegant and affordable. It features small and mid-sized plates of modern American fare meant to encourage sharing, with a strong

focus on seasonal ingredients, particularly local and organic vegetables.

"We try to stay true to what's there," says Min Kong, Little Park's chef de cuisine. "In the winter, as you can imagine, it's just cabbage, potatoes and all root vegetables, so we're semi-local then. We accommodate a little bit out of necessity just to keep things interesting. If there's something cool at the market that starts to come up, then you know it's time to start using it."

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Some recent, produce-centric menu standouts have included stuffed eggplant with spicy peppers and couscous; big eye tuna with market vegetables, white beech and red Fresno pepper; charred broccoli with blood orange, radish and ham; and crispy Brussels sprouts with smoked parsnip and apple cider.

The restaurant is open for breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner, and features fresh-pressed juices on the menu for the early meals. Recent juice offerings included kale with spinach, cucumber and green apple; pineapple with agave; and beet with carrot, grapefruit and pomegranate.

Kong notes the kitchen plans its menu knowing certain vegetables will come into season about the same time every year.

"Once we start seeing them a little

bit more bountiful, the plan we had already set can really come into action," she says. "Ideally, we're going to change the menu every season. Within that, if something looks really cool at the market, we can swap one thing out for another, so it will be constantly changing."

Some of the local farms Little Park works with to procure produce include Eckerton Hill, Campo Rosso, Mountain Sweet Berry and Stokes.

The restaurant also sources produce through some local suppliers, including Brooklyn-based Avanti Specialty Foods; Englewood, NJ-based Riviera Produce Corporation; SOS Chefs in Manhattan; and Regalis Foods in Brooklyn.

Little Park also has sourced produce items through Evan Strusinski, a professional forager.

– MARK HAMSTRA

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Zeytuna is a grocery store that takes its prepared-foods business seriously. The two-level, gourmet-food destination in Manhattan's Financial District features a full grocery on the main level, and a 200-seat restaurant and food court downstairs. The restaurant offers a global selection, including Mediterranean fare like pitas and gyros, a





South of the Border station, pizza, sushi and other items ideally suited for the neighborhood's grab-and-go lifestyle.

The store undergoes two surges in customer traffic each day, says Oner Hoca, the store's manager.

"We get very busy at lunchtime, with people grabbing snacks, and then after 5 we get the residential basket shoppers," he says. "We try to make them all happy."

Zeytuna also does a brisk business with prepared-foods delivery in the evenings, sending pizzas, cooked vegetables, pasta dishes and other fare throughout Manhattan.

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New York Food Scene



The retail and foodservice sides of the business uses the same produce, much of it procured from vendors at the Hunts Point Produce Market in the Bronx. Zeytuna has a representative at the market every morning picking out the best fruits and vegetables.

"Our guy knows the people there, and he only brings in produce from the people he trusts," says Hoca, who notes all of the produce used in the restaurant side of the business is fresh.

The store also often picks up items from area farmers who stop in offering produce, provided it meets Zeytuna's high standards for quality. "We try to

support local business," says Hoca.

In addition to the retail and foodservice operations, Zeytuna also has a thriving catering business and a gift shop featuring items from Europe and the Mediterranean region.

The store promotes itself as an eclectic mash-up of the best international tastes and flavors.

"We like to say we have all of your favorite foods from around the world," says Hoca.

Zeytuna also has a location in Nyack, NY that operates with the same high standards, he says.

— MARK HAMSTRA

SALUTE TO THE NEW YORK MARKET SHIPPER SHOWCASE

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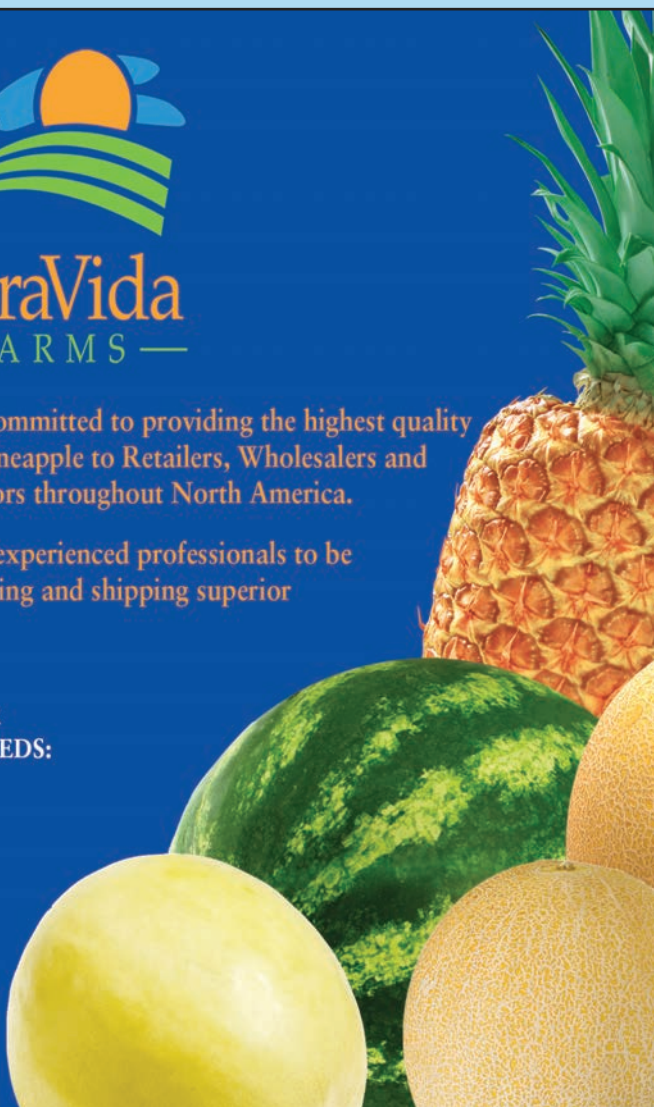
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The Boston Market Renaissance

EVOLVING FORMATS IN RETAIL AND TRENDS IN FOODSERVICE KEEP NEW ENGLAND WHOLESALERS BUSY AND INNOVATIVE.

By Jodean Robbins

Historically known for persistence and creativity, Bostonians continue to employ these traits at the Boston Terminal Market and the New England Produce Center. Boston area produce companies continue to work hard and grow business even in the midst of marketplace changes. “We are seeing growth all around,” reports Patrick Burke, co-owner of Garden Fresh Salad Co., Inc. “We have consistent business in all our categories and are bullish on our future.”

One of Boston’s advantages is its prime location as a major market in a diverse region. “We always served customers from the Canadian Maritimes to Southern Connecticut,” explains Steven Piazza, president and treasurer at Community-Suffolk Inc. “Despite changes in the marketplace, we are able to maintain sale and package counts and continue to serve the same region.”

The market’s broad customer base serves as its foundation for success. “It behooves any market to serve a larger variety of customers,” says Peter John Condakes, president of Peter Condakes Co. “If you’re only serving one channel, then you have a problem. You need to have your fingers in as many of those distribution channels as possible.”

Savvy marketers see Boston’s diversity as potential. “Our very diversified population creates great opportunity,” says Jim Ruma, president of Ruma Fruit & Produce Co., Inc. “The ethnic communities are strong and growing, and they are great produce consumers. Then there are also students, academics and professionals, all adding a different dimension to the food industry and consumer demands.”

Another major shift in the Boston area is in customer format, evolving from large chains to smaller retailers and increased representation



of foodservice. Condakes reports his customer base breaks down to around 60 percent foodservice wholesaler and 40 percent retail. “We service both small retailers and some very big retailers,” he adds. “Large retail customers do a lot of fill-ins, but most of the small retailers do all their shopping here.”

Merchants link the increase in foodservice business to consumer trends. “Foodservice is growing more than retail,” states Kevin Maher, vice president at Coosemans Boston. “Consumers don’t have as much time to shop and prefer to eat out. The foodservice share of our business is probably around 80 percent, whereas retail is 20 percent.”

CUSTOMER CENTRIC

The diversity of Boston’s customer base has led Boston merchants to an even greater depth of customer service. “Success comes down to

keeping all your customers happy on a daily basis,” says Burke. “It’s about adapting to what your customers need.”

An increasingly competitive marketplace requires higher customer interaction. “We see a lot of the same customers coming in with different attitudes,” says Jackie Piazza, director of citrus sales at Community-Suffolk. “They are a lot tougher on price than usual. It’s a tougher marketplace from the end user to the distributor. This environment means we need to be a very client-specific business to meet each set of needs.”

Meeting a variety of customers’ needs requires continual communication. “The relationship between us and our regular customers is collaborative,” says Butch Fabio, treasurer at J. Bonafede Co., Inc. “Customer goals are important to us. We talk to them, find out what they want, and serve them. They want to come

BOSTON MARKET PROFILE



Steven Piazza –
Community-Suffolk



Joe Gelardi –
Community-Suffolk



John Bonafede –
J. Bonafede Co.



Gene Fabio –
J. Bonafede Co.



Steve LaFauci –
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Butch Fabio –
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Patrick Burke –
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John Whitney –
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Maureen Hurney –
Garden Fresh Salad Company



Jim Ruma –
Ruma Fruit & Produce Co.



Anthony Sharrino –
Eaton & Eustis Co.



Ron Dugas and Dana Campo –
Community-Suffolk



Kevin Maher, Doug Gordon and Maurice Crafts –
Coosemans Boston

in, get quality produce, at the right price and have a positive experience doing so.”

Boston wholesalers see themselves as a conduit between customers’ needs and shippers’ offerings. “Constant communication between our customers and shippers, who happen to be some of the best in the industry, allows us to consistently meet the needs of our customers,” says Dominic Joseph Cavallaro III, general manager in charge of sales at John Cerasuolo Co., Inc.

While new developments facilitate some aspects of the business, merchants report the importance of maintaining some old-school philosophies as well. “There’s no secret to this business,” emphasizes Anthony Sharrino, president of Eaton & Eustis Co. “It’s economics 101. You try to get the customer the best quality you can, and then you follow markets. It’s about

supply, demand and customer service.”

This holds true with technology as well. “Where traceability and our office functions are concerned, we implemented the necessary technology,” says Burke. “But on the floor, we’re still old fashioned; for example, we write tickets by hand. We focus on taking orders over the phone or in person, which ensures a personal touch.”

Meeting customer needs requires several Boston businesses to follow and anticipate trends. “We step up to the challenge of keeping up with trends,” states Ruma. “Chefs and buyers have specific demands, so they can be innovative and competitive. We need to be able to provide what they need. We deliver and provide outstanding customer service, and we also react quickly.”

Coosemans reports being customer-centric

often translates into a unique product search. “We get feedback from our customers as to what consumers are looking for,” says Maher. “Chefs are constantly exposed to new items and request them from us. Sometimes we can find it easily; other times it’s more challenging.”

Baldor Specialty Foods encourages working with and developing new trends and customers. “Every time a restaurant or new independent store opens the chance for success grows,” says Glenn Messenger, general manager of Baldor Boston LLC. “That is how we have grown — with a single chef or store; as they grow we grow. There are 10 to 12 restaurants opening every month here in Boston.”

CHANGING PRODUCT MIX

The changing customer base resulted in a changing product mix for many Boston

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companies. One of the biggest influences on both mix and volume is the changing ethnic demographic. "Our produce mix shifted to serve the growing ethnic customers," says John Bonafede, chairman of J. Bonafede. "As an example, in 1968 there were only one or two receivers selling mangos. One load would satisfy the demand for a week. Now many companies are handling mangos, and just our company alone can sell two loads a week. Our ethnic customers represent about two-thirds of foot traffic on the market now."

"Boston has had quite an influx of a variety of ethnic groups in recent years. The small ethnic stores are an important and growing produce customer."

— Steven Piazza, Community-Suffolk

Community-Suffolk witnessed the rise of customer diversity. "Boston has had quite an influx of a variety of ethnic groups in recent years," says Steven Piazza. "The small ethnic

stores are an important and growing produce customer."

Bonafede adjusted its mix of products to reflect what customers ask for. "The increased demand from Southeast Asian and Hispanic customers resulted in our carrying a variety of eggplants including Chinese eggplant and Indian eggplant," says Butch Fabio. "We consider ourselves a 'customer house,' because we focus on what the customer wants."

Eaton & Eustis reports handling more items as a result of ethnic demand. "We're seeing growth in garlic, ginger and pearl onions," says Sharrino. "In-shell peanuts are also growing because of our ethnic customer demand."

Adjusting the mix to customer demand means catering to taste as well. "I have a large mango clientele," explains Butch Fabio. "Often mangos at retail are not the best quality. The bulk of mangos coming into the traditional marketplace look great but don't eat well. We are handling a new variety, called Palmer, now coming from Brazil. This variety eats well and is less stringy. My ethnic customers love them, because they taste good."

Foodservice trends affect product mix for many merchants. "There is continued growth in Mexican restaurants, so Hispanic food lines are increasing in popularity," says Gene Fabio, president of J. Bonafede. "Avocado sales are growing steadily as consumption by mainstream America grows."

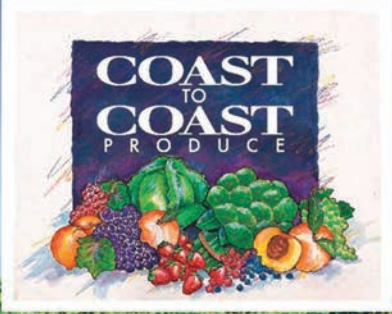
"We're also seeing more of a push in Asian ingredients because of the rise in Asian restaurants," adds Baldor's Messinger.

Baldor reports a drive toward having more variety. "We must offer four or five different varieties of potato," reports Messinger. "Chefs are more particular and want to have specific product. There are just so many options now. Years ago, kale was a garnish, now it's an ingredient — we even have baby kale."

SPECIALIZING IN SPECIALTIES

The need for variety includes a wide array of unique, new or seasonal items. "Chefs are always looking for a different type of salad mix," reports Messinger. "We still sell a lot of microgreens — even though they've been around for a while now. Also, we see an uptick

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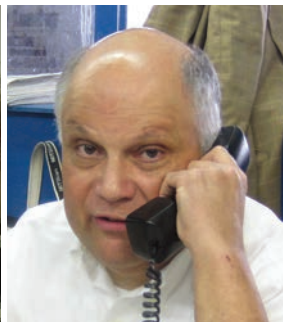
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Tommy Piazza – Community-Suffolk

in seasonal items; for example, over the summer we sell a lot of heirloom tomatoes. In fall, we see more hard squashes.”

Terminal market businesses report increasing popularity and acceptance for many specialty items. “We see growth in specialty citrus items, such as Clementines, Minneolas, Mandarins, Meyer lemons and Blood oranges,” says Jackie Piazza. “Customers aren’t afraid to spend the money on those.”

Travers Fruit Co. reports seeing continued growth in blueberries. “With production coming into the U.S. globally, pricing has come down and movement is increasing,” says Richie Travers, owner/treasurer. “The whole berry

category is trending up in volume.”

Ruma specializes in wild Maine blueberries and is recognized as a leader amongst the industry for fiddlehead ferns. The company uses this positioning to launch other unique products. “These are niche products, and we are known as reliable niche suppliers,” states Ruma. “We continue to see growth in fiddleheads every year. We also moved to selling ramps, since they’re compatible products.”

To further penetration of fiddleheads in the retail marketplace, Ruma recently introduced a retail packaged product. “We are packing 8-ounce bags and an 8-ounce overwrapped tray,” explains Ruma. “This [packaging solu-

tion] will prevent customers from rummaging through displays and help retailers better merchandise and manage fiddlehead sales.”

Garden Fresh, processing a full line of cut vegetables and bagged salads, is promoting its newest success: broccoli coleslaw. “Our processing business grew out of our desire to serve our customers,” says Burke. “We’re always looking to incorporate new products. We’re seeing increased sales in broccoli slaw and are increasing production in accordance with increased customer demand.”

NEW MARKET CHANNELS

In addition to new products, the Boston

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marketplace is also benefiting from a diversity of market channels. “We are currently serving a wide array of customers at this time from chain stores to non-traditional retailers to wholesalers and also cash customers,” says Dominic Cavallaro III of Cerasuolo. “We are aggressively pursuing all avenues to generate and retain new customers.”

The advent of non-traditional produce retailing presents particular business benefits for wholesale merchants. “Increasingly a lot

of outlets that historically haven’t handled produce are now offering produce,” says Ruma. “We are in a prime position to service these types of businesses.”

A wide variety of non-traditional food formats seek product from the NEPC. “We have a good stream of non-traditional businesses including food trucks, pop-up restaurants, and small ethnic markets,” says Steven Piazza. “Many of these businesses don’t have a warehouse or a backroom, so they rely on us.”

Non-traditional customers range from convenience stores to open-air markets. “C-stores are now selling everything, and they, or their distributors, shop the market regularly,” says Gene Fabio. “We’re also seeing more open-air ethnic stores — establishments with tarps and three walls. We also see an increase in food truck business.”

Most recently, the market is celebrating the success of a unique format — a traveling produce bus. “We sell to a mobile produce

INTO THE FUTURE

by Jodean Robbins

The Boston market prepares for the future with technology and “green” adaptation.

Though rooted in history, the market is forward thinking as it moves into the next era of customer service. “There are fewer customers around due to retail consolidation so we need to be better at what we do,” says Steven Piazza, president and treasurer at Everett, MA-based Community-Suffolk Inc. “We are embracing technology and looking toward the future to better serve our customers.”

Current movements at the Boston Terminal Market and the New England Produce Center are oriented toward making the market greener and include changes in lighting, conservation and refrigeration. Community-Suffolk is in the process of changing all its warehouse lights to LEDs and putting in a pallet chipper. “We also connected with a local pig farmer to give him what we can’t sell or donate,” reports Steven Piazza.

Piazza describes a conservation effort the NEPC has undertaken with MIT. “Experts at MIT designed a structure to attract chimney swifts to nest,” he explains. “We have several of these located around the market now. This is part of our efforts to promote conservation.”

Travers Fruit Co., Chelsea, MA, reports investing in more efficient refrigeration units. “It’s been a continual process,” says Paul Travers, president. “Every year we’ve been investing with the goal of maintaining product quality and food safety.”

Merchants also emphasize the market’s commitment to moving to all electric storage trailers to increase air quality. “We converted from 100 percent diesel to about only 15 percent diesel now,” says Richie Travers, owner/treasurer of Travers.

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY

Though many merchants still practice traditional sales on the floor, they are also embracing technological changes. “Between the cell phone and Internet, everyone has become more accessible,” says Steven Piazza. “Our hours lengthened because we’re on-call 24/7 due to technology. Customers want to do business when it’s most convenient for them.”

Wholesalers credit technology for making sales and customer communication more efficient. “Most of our business with chefs and buyers is conducted through technology,” says Glenn Messinger, general manager of Baldor Boston LLC. “We see more customers ordering online or via email.”

Baldor also uses technology to track the location of trucks and the temperature of cargo. “When the trucks come in, we can download the information and see how they were running,” explains Messinger. “All our trucks have GPS, so I can go on my phone to see where the driver is. If a customer calls to find out where an order is, I can immediately tell them.”

MEETING CHALLENGES

Merchants point to logistics as the principal challenge facing the market in the future. “Rail service is not optimal, and getting good trucks is a continual trial,” says Anthony Sharrino, president of Eaton & Eustis Co. “*The Wall Street Journal* recently reported on the shortage of drivers. Good drivers are working very hard, but we need more good drivers.”

Developments in rail service offer some respite for certain products. “Piggyback

trains are taking some of the pressure off the driver shortage,” says Peter John Condakes, president of Peter Condakes Co. “Historically, we haven’t done a lot of piggybacks, but we have done more this year than in the past. Some products, like tomatoes, can be challenging, but I had reasonable success with loads.”

Community-Suffolk is an advocate of rail. “With the vegetable line we carry, we’re one of the few receivers who can still use a large quantity of freight cars,” says Steven Piazza.

However, rail doesn’t work for all of Community-Suffolk’s business. “Rail transport doesn’t really work for our citrus line because of delivery times,” reports Jackie Piazza. “I maintained trucking, because the times are better and it’s faster. We will spend the extra dollars because it benefits the product and my customers.”

Boston area companies are also experiencing logistics challenges in the form of road construction. “The state of Massachusetts is spending a tremendous amount of money building new roads and bridges,” reports Dominic Joseph Cavallaro III, general manager in charge of sales at John Cerasuolo Co., Inc. “While in the short term the process is proving to be a logistical nightmare, in the long term, the new and improved infrastructure should be a benefit to all.”

Some buyers are dealing with the construction by changing their schedules. “As the construction continues, we see companies entering the market earlier, so they can get out earlier to avoid some of the traffic congestion — especially at peak commuter times,” explains Cavallaro. **pb**



Abdul Samake, David Bannister, Glenn Messinger, Teddy Ceasar and Todd Rama – Baldor Boston



Phil Silva, Paul Travers, Richie Travers and Nick Spinale – Travers Fruit Company

store called Fresh Truck,” explains Condakes. “It’s a bus that’s been retrofitted as a traveling produce store and serves the neighborhoods in Boston underserved by stores. The owner/operator purchases produce here and re-sells it to those underserved areas. They’ve done so well, they recently started operating a second bus.”

Baldor reports a huge growth with juice bars and other non-traditional venues. “Juicing is a huge trend and of great benefit to our business,” says Messinger. “Juice outlets buy in bulk and have really helped our organic program. Grab-n-go products in Starbucks or other

small shops are also big movers. These outlets have food assemblers who put the products together, and they source from us.”

Boston merchants see a current trend of retailers opening smaller footprint stores. “Roche Bros. and Stop & Shop diversified to the urban, smaller-scale store concept,” says Richie Travers. “These stores carry the basics. They’re returning to the old-fashioned way of serving specific neighbors.”

BENEFITS FOR ALL

As the marketplace shifts to varied formats

and channels, Boston merchants continue their legacy of providing advantages for customers. “The quality, freshness and availability found on the Boston Market is a huge benefit to non-traditional and traditional retailers,” says Paul Travers, president of Travers Fruit.

Quality at the best price is a clear objective for most buyers on the market. “Buyers who walk the market can inspect product and buy the best quality,” explains Bonafede. “This is the advantage the independent stores and ethnic buyers are getting today. They are seeing the product and know they are getting the best

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value for their money and customers.”

In a nod to decades past, merchants report how buyers for the ethnic markets are skilled in walking the market, comparing, and negotiating. “Some of the buyers actually walk together and negotiate as a group so they can get a better price,” says Steven Piazza.

The availability of so many products in a small area is another benefit touted by market companies. “This is a one-stop shopping opportunity,” says Richie Travers. “We have a wide range of product and offer full service.

Non-traditional formats specifically benefit from the convenience of getting everything in one place.”

Off-market distributors enjoy the same advantage. “We use the produce market to service our customers with a limitless number of products in addition to the unique products we source directly,” states Ruma.

The convenience of using the market as a de-facto warehouse is increasing among the newer formats as well as established customers. “Our market serves as a warehouse for small

format and non-traditional outlets,” says Condakes. “We also serve huge wholesalers who don’t want to carry the inventory. Some of them come in and buy 50 cases of tomatoes a day. They could buy three pallets, but they don’t want to inventory them.”

Merchants point to the just-in-time aspects of the market and its advantage in the new marketplace. “Many of Garden Fresh’s customers now order and pick up the same day,” says Burke. “They don’t have to guess five days in advance as to what they need. It takes

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In Loving Memory

Kenneth J. Cavallaro

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As a businessman, Ken (as friends called him) Cavallaro was a “numbers guy,” no-nonsense, smart and a leader. He studied engineering at Tufts University, then switched to business at Suffolk University and graduated second in his class. He initially had no plans to follow in his father’s and brother’s produce footsteps, but eventually found his stride as a leader and logistics man for the family businesses — first as the manager of an Arlington, MA-based produce and deli market called C&C Country Farms, and then when the family sold the retail outlet, he became treasurer and secretary for John Cerasuolo Co., a wholesaler at the Chelsea, MA-based New England Produce Center.

“My brother was the decision-maker, the go-to-guy when you needed something done, and he was smart,” says Ken’s older brother, Dominic “Skip” Cavallaro Jr., president of John Cerasuolo Co. “He scored a 1560 on his SATs; he was too intelligent for this business.”

As a family man, Ken was selfless. “He was the type of guy who would give you the shirt off his back,” says his daughter Kara Rullo, accounting and IT manager at the company. “He always put others first.”

Ken would regularly support local churches and nuns that were organizing food banks and charitable causes by donating produce for various occasions. In the mid-2000s, he represented John Cerasuolo Co. to accept the “Food Donor of the Year” award from the Greater Boston Food Bank.

A few nuns from the local Little Sisters of the Poor charity attended Ken’s funeral, and one of them told Skip, “Don’t you worry, he’ll be in heaven before he even gets to the cemetery.”

He was also generous and instrumental in supporting his four grandchildren: 3-year-old, Massimo; 6-year-old, Francesca; 10-year-old, Miabella; and 14-year-old, Arianna.

Kara says her mom, Debbie, and her father were like second parents to her daughter, Francesca and son, Massimo. “For the past six years, our family lived with my parents ... so my mom (who is still with us) and dad participated in school events, breakfasts in the morning, and things like that.”

“My father never missed a dance recital or a sporting event for the kids,” says Ken Cavallaro Jr., transportation manager for the company — or “Junior” as people on the market refer to him. “There’s only one Ken, and that was my dad.”

Junior says one of his fondest and best memories was being with his dad and family to witness the Boston Celtics win the championship in the 2008 NBA Finals against the Los Angeles Lakers. His dad was a season-ticket-holder, and Junior went with him to as many games as possible for about 30 years. “There’s nothing like that experience we shared together,” he says.

“I feel blessed to be working together as a family and grateful that my sister’s kids and my kids got to have a relationship with my dad,” says Junior.

“We miss him dearly,” says Kara.

“May he rest in peace,” says Skip.

“P.A. (pay attention); ‘Do the right thing’; and ‘If you’re not aggravated by your work every once and a while, then you’re not accomplishing anything’ — that’s what my dad used to tell me when I was having a tough day. It’s advice I’ll follow for the rest of my life,” says Junior.



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ACCOMMODATING CUSTOMER NEEDS

In addition to relying on their fundamentals, many market merchants began looking for new avenues of service to increase business. Bonafede recently started importing directly from the Dominican Republic. “This saves us in freshness and time,” says Butch Fabio. “By flying it directly from the Dominican Republic to Boston, the shipment arrives here only days after being picked — as a result, it sells better.”

Some companies provide additional services, such as preconditioning of fruit. Bonafede, with a history of ripening bananas, now preconditions a good volume of fruit — especially avocados and notes the rise in demand for this service.

“Correct preconditioning as a tool is important — particularly with avocados, because the product might feel hard but can actually be in different stages of ripening,” explains Gene Fabio. “The magic pressure for retail is one at which they can be handled without damage, but it will be ready for consumption shortly after being put on display.”

However, Fabio notes different demands depending on the customer. “Foodservice needs ripe avocados,” he points out. “We specialize in always having ripe avocados, so foodservice customers can rely on us for the product.”

Repacking presents another opportunity for service. Coosemans allows for customized mixes in its repacking services.

“Our four-pack mixed chili peppers is very popular with a lot of customers,” says Maher. “They can specify what peppers they want, or don’t want, in the box. They appreciate the customization.”

Condakes repacks with specialized labels to meet specific customer requirements. “We are putting labels on customer product as requested,” says Condakes. “These are mostly tracking labels for the foodservice customers right now. We have a very reliable traceability system.”

Traceability and food safety are additional selling points for Boston merchants. “Garden Fresh stresses its food safety and traceability,” says Burke. “Our customers always want to be sure they can trace product back to the farm. We are ahead of the learning curve because we are processors. We had to comply with a lot of regulations because of the processing end of our business.”

pb

Moonshine 152

WORKING BY THE LIGHT OF HER “MOON,” CHEF MEI INFUSES BRIGHT FLAVOR INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

By Jodean Robbins

As a historically blue-collar neighborhood, South Boston now permeates with young professionals. Chef Asia Mei is doing her part by elevating the typical neighborhood joint to a new level. Her restaurant, Moonshine 152, serves Modern-American, bi-coastally inspired cuisine featuring seasonal outtakes with a definite focus on produce.

Chef Mei draws influence from growing up in California, with access to some of the world's best produce and locally sourced street food. Moonshine offers a full menu until 1:30 a.m. every night as well as a fun and eclectic bar scene. The establishment has become a neighborhood fixture for great food and casual conversation since it opened six months ago.

The sleek environs of the 60-seat interior steadily fills to capacity during the evening hours. The restaurant draws a diverse crowd from young professionals who live in the area to restaurant industry people getting out late from work.

“Our ambition is to provide a space for those patrons who simply want to hang out and relax in a comfortable atmosphere with high-quality food — without breaking the bank,” says Mei.

THE INTEGRITY OF INGREDIENTS

Since Mei believes in as little manipulation as possible, all her dishes start with quality ingredients and arrive with accentuated flavors to the table. Sourcing the best ingredients is a must.

“Produce is so important to our menu,” she reports. “It’s the first thing we look to every season before we change a menu. We talk to the food distributors and farmers, and work off availability lists to determine which direction we want to go for the next few months.”

Moonshine spends about \$5,000 per week on produce — mostly from local sources and distributors. “We try to source as much as

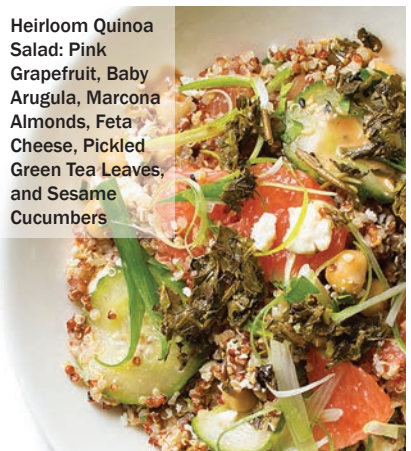


Lobster Mac and Cheese with Creamy Parmesan Bechamel, Green Onions, and a Poached Egg

Late Night Dirty Fried Rice: Chinese Sausage, Spicy Pickled Radish, Scrambled Egg, Scallions, Ginger, and Garlic



Heirloom Quinoa Salad: Pink Grapefruit, Baby Arugula, Marcona Almonds, Feta Cheese, Pickled Green Tea Leaves, and Sesame Cucumbers



we responsibly can from local purveyors and farms,” says Mei. “Much of it comes via Baldor, since they have access to some of the best contacts in the area — including the wide array of products on the Boston wholesale market. Sourcing from local contacts allows us to have full confidence in the product and stand behind the quality when it comes to serving it to our customer.”

Mei weighs sourcing decisions based on seasonality, duration of availability, quality of product and consistency, and potential appli-

cation of the product. “I always want to ensure I can do something with the product for our guests and that the product is special enough to highlight it,” says Mei.

Moonshine’s focus on the integrity of the ingredient is a perfect fit for produce. “Produce is always interesting, fresh, clean, and bright,” explains Mei. “With high-quality produce, you don’t have to recreate the wheel or manipulate much to really make a plate memorable. There aren’t many other food groups that can offer such an abundance of flavors and character-



istics. You're not going to find sour, sweet, salty, crispy, juicy, and umami in naked meats or seafood."

APPROACHABLE FOOD

Close to 75 percent of Moonshine's menu is produce (or has a produce component). The menu uses produce as the focus of refreshing appetizers and entrees, as well as accompaniments to highlight and play off proteins, such as meat and seafood. "We also use it to draw in clientele who are interested in eating sustainably for their own health as well as the environment around," says Mei.

The menu is approachable and fun. Diners may think they recognize typical fare, such as burgers and nachos, but are in for an unexpected twist when the dish is delivered. Moonshine's menu begins with "Order Fire"—small quickly prepared plates: Conch Ceviche with celery, olives, and sherry vinegar; Tamago, a rolled omelet made with Shishito peppers and crispy rice cakes; a Fried Olives and Homemade Pickle Plate; and Dani's Cheese Picks accompanied by addictive sweet, tart pickled cherries and garnished with mint leaves.

For "Starters" the menu features items such as: a smooth Chilled Beet Soup with Dill Crème Fraîche and Cucumber Ribbons; an Heirloom Tomato and Watermelon Salad paired with Serrano Ham and Basil; Grilled Calamari and Octopus incorporating Cara Cara oranges, baby spinach and citron butter; and Throwback Korean BBQ Tacos built with tender boneless beef shortrib, a savory Asian Pear Kimchi and Candied Ginger Aioli.

Entrees challenge the diner to think beyond

"We also use it [the menu] to draw in clientele who are interested in eating sustainably for their own health as well as the environment around."

— Chef Asia Mei

the norm. Portobello Frites feature a meaty grilled Portobello served with thin-cut cornmeal-battered zucchini strings delicately fried and topped with fresh spicy sautéed tomato. Grilled Skirt Steak Nachos raise the bar, covered with thin slices of mouthwatering sliced skirt steak and Pepper Jack cheese, topped with a perfectly fried egg and served with two outstanding salsa frescas — a green made with pureed fresh herbs and a second from red cabbage.

Pan Seared Scallops come paired with a fresh Street Corn Salad of grilled corn, Cotija cheese, lime aioli, and cherry tomatoes. The outrageously flavor-packed Burger of the Month is topped with smoked Gouda cheese, truffle aioli and crispy Maitake mushrooms.

Sides continue to showcase Moonshine's clean and produce-focused palate offering up Broccolini with apricot-thyme vinaigrette and fried House-Cut Fries as well as a Kale Salad.

The desserts keep a smile on your face with the Warm Double Chocolate Bread Pudding accompanied by fresh, sweet berries. The Blackberry Jamboree fuses house-made lime curd and blackberry jam with toasted almond shortbread. The Kalamansi Lemon Sorbet incorporates Champagne macerated fruit.

Moonshine changes its menu from four to six times a year. The restaurant has won "Best in Boston" multiple times and received accolades for its use of Cremini, Shiitake, and Portobello mushrooms in its Mushroom Tofu Burger.

"We combine those wild mushrooms with tofu to offer a juicy, thick, delicious vegetarian burger option," explains Mei. "For me, the biggest test in vegetarian food quality is whether non-vegetarians will repeatedly come back to eat it. Our Mushroom Tofu Burger has done amazingly well with everyone, and that says a lot."

pb

Moonshine 152
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Guaranteed Fresh Produce

A RETAIL STORE WITH WHOLESALE ROOTS AIMS TO GIVE ITS CUSTOMERS THE BEST VALUE FOR THEIR DOLLAR.

By Jodean Robbins

Adam Weiner, owner of Guaranteed Fresh Produce (GFP) in Hyannis, MA, began with a different vision of his store compared to other produce markets. An already established produce wholesaler and foodservice distributor to the food industry, he received constant queries from neighbors and friends about selling to them. In 2008, he took hold of the vision and opened a retail store aimed at selling to the public at true wholesale prices.

“When we moved into our current facility, I realized we have pallets of produce and dairy in stock at all times,” explains Weiner. “Since we have all this inventory, it made sense to set up a retail section and offer these products to the public at wholesale prices. We market the store as wholesale to the public.”

Weiner started the wholesale business 20 years ago with one truck. “I had the idea of going to the Boston market each day to pick up fresh produce and deliver directly to restaurants on Cape Cod,” he says.

Over the past 20 years, GFP has grown to operate a larger facility with 10,000 square feet of cooler space. It now employs 60 people between the wholesale and retail operations and runs 20 trucks.

The customers of the retail operation are a diverse collective, which include large families buying in bulk, retired people on a budget and small businesses. The company’s wholesale customers consist of restaurants, hotels, country clubs, institutions and retail outlets.

“We are a major player in the foodservice business throughout Cape Cod, Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island — partially because of our product line,” says Weiner. “Over the years, we became a full-service dairy company in addition to produce, and we offer a full line of frozen items, oils, canned goods and baking needs.”

The business sells a wide variety of produce ranging from everyday items to a full line of baby vegetables, baby lettuce, micro greens and



fresh-cut items. “The selection is constantly growing due to trends in the business,” relates Weiner. “A few years ago, nobody ever asked for baby kale; today it is one of our hottest items.

A PASSION FOR PRODUCE

A zeal for great quality produce characterizes GFP. “Everyone at GFP is passionate about what they do,” declares Weiner. “There is not a single employee at GFP not familiar with produce. Someone from accounting could pick up the phone and help a customer with an order.”

GFP formed a relationship with the New England Produce Council and the Boston Terminal Market during Weiner’s first days selling from one truck. “We have great relationships with merchants on the market,” he shares. “They helped us build our business. People, like Steven Piazza, really supported us when we were only buying a few cases. He believed in us, and the support from him and others like him contributed greatly to our success.”

Weiner views the Boston market as an extension of his business. “I talk to some of the merchants there everyday,” he says. “Sometimes I don’t even realize a certain item is short in supply, because these guys know my needs and

cover me no matter what.”

The Boston market also allows GFP to better manage product quality and variety. “The beauty of using the Market is how we can pick and choose the best,” explains Weiner. “If product doesn’t come in good, it’s not our issue. We can buy the best product. Sourcing there also works in our favor when we have a special request for an item or just need a small quantity of a particular product. I can have someone throw a layer or a few boxes on an existing order.”

GFP does direct-source some products from Hawaii and Holland. The company is fortunate to have Holland-born general manager, Olav Meeuws, to not only oversee general operations but to work with imported product. “We pick up air freight at the airport on a daily basis,” says Meeuws. “We focus on offering the highest quality, freshest product, and there are just some items we source directly.”

A DESTINATION FOR VALUE

Upon entering the GFP retail store, customers are greeted with an open farmers-market feel. Handwritten pricing signs emphasize a market ambiance. Perfectly



(L-R) Rick Paige, Olav Meeuws, Adam Weiner, Chris Rodes – Guaranteed Fresh

appointed displays boast a bountiful selection, hand-stacked for optimal quality and attractiveness.

The store displays about 100 different produce items in approximately 1,000 square feet and represents a destination for many of its customers. “Our customers come here to save money and get good quality produce,” says Weiner. “Additionally, we have the advantage of pulling product from our wholesale operation in the back if a customer requests something not on the retail shelves.”

Produce accounts for close to 95 percent of the sales of the retail store by volume. The store is banked by a 12-foot dairy case, a 24-foot refrigerated produce case, and an 8-foot packaged product and fresh-cut case. The packaged product case features a wide range of items including Olivia’s salads, dried fruit, berries and other salad mixes.

Bridging the space between the exterior cases are two rolling 12-foot angled table displays of non-refrigerated produce including onions, potatoes, squash, apples and citrus.

Additional freestanding displays of seasonal or promotional product boast melons, grapes and local apples.

GOING BEYOND FOR CUSTOMERS

The principal goal for GFP is to service its customers, regardless of size or needs. “As I started to learn the business, I never wanted to say no to a customer,” remembers Weiner. “This philosophy is still in place today with all of my employees. Customers may ask for strange ingredients or an ethnic product we don’t have, and we are glad to source it for them.”

GFP concentrates on building an individual relationship with each customer. “If we ever get so big we cannot treat every customer with our personal touch, then we are not doing our job,” emphasizes Weiner. “I don’t want anyone to be just an account number.”

Weiner and his team strive to help customers, both retail and wholesale alike, understand the best value for their dollar. “It’s

often tough to educate end users about differences in produce,” he explains. “They may see two different prices on the same items and simply think they are getting ripped off. For example, they could be looking at Yukon Gold potatoes from Canada out of storage versus a shiny brand new crop from out West, or a small chopper pepper compared to a jumbo pepper. It’s our job to help our customers understand the difference and what they’re getting for their money.” **pb**

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Los Angeles Market: Produce As Diverse As Its Population

LARGE AND GROWING HISPANIC AND ASIAN GROUPS ARE REDEFINING MAINSTREAM.

By Bob Johnson

The urban area including Los Angeles now has more residents of Asian ancestry than any other metropolis in the U.S., according to the U.S. Census. Not surprisingly, The City of Angels is also second in the world, only to Mexico City, in its number of residents of Mexican ancestry.

The produce network among the diverse populations that define Los Angeles, and Southern California as a whole, has matured to the point that Mexican farmers are growing Far Eastern favorites, such as jackfruit and rambutan, and shipping harvests to the terminal market in downtown Los Angeles.

"We're starting to bring in a lot of jackfruit," says Jim Alvarez, president of Olympic Fruit and Vegetable, Los Angeles. "It's a signature Asian item, and we can't get enough of it. We found a better source for it in Mexico. They've been growing Asian fruits in Mexico and in the Fresno area for a while."

Olympic Fruit and Vegetable is a sister firm of Coast Citrus Distributors, Coast Tropical, Coast Tropical San Francisco, Coast Tropical Texas, Coast Tropical Florida and Importadora y Exportadora. Formed in 1950 by Roberto R. Alvarez, the company is a major wholesaler of fruits and vegetables in both the United States and Mexico. This firm has six facilities in California, Texas and Florida, and an additional five in Mexico, but Los Angeles is the hub.

"In the Los Angeles Produce Market, you can find almost anything, from rambutan, to lychee, to apples," says Alvarez.

The city is on the cutting edge for shifting eating habits in the West, and even in the entire country. "I think consumers are more diverse on what they consume," says Donald Souther, vice president of marketing and sales development at Vision Produce, Los Angeles. "Mangos are a prime example; they have been on a steady increase in consumption during the past decade. The Los Angeles



Produce Market is the heart of distribution, of trends and is the pulse for the western region of the United States."

A mix of people found in the nation's second largest metro area — the U.S. Census estimates nearly 5 million Hispanics and 1.5 million Asians live in the county — are at work every morning browsing, buying and selling at the 29-acre wholesale market on East Olympic Boulevard near downtown.

"Diverse," says Jeff Weisfeld, president of Fruit Distributing Corp. of California, Los Angeles, when asked to describe the wholesale Market. "From the people who work there, to the products they sell, and the customers, it's somebody from every corner of the earth."

During the three decades he has been there, Weisfeld has seen a dramatic change in the mix of produce available at the market. "When I started back in 1985, mangos and bell peppers were exotic — now they are mainstream," says Weisfeld.

'THE MELTING POT OF THE WEST'

The ethnic diversity of the city is mirrored in the wholesalers and customers who come every morning to the Olympic Boulevard market to cut produce deals.

"You have every ethnicity bargaining at the market," says John Geges, partner in G&K Distributing, City of Industry, CA, "and it works."

Wholesalers generally celebrate this growing diversity and embrace the challenge of supplying many markets.

"Los Angeles is the melting pot of the U.S., and it seems as if each of the various ethnic neighborhoods is expanding and thriving," says Karen Caplan, president and chief executive of Frieda's Specialty Produce, Los Alamitos, CA. "In the past 10 years, we saw South Central LA turn into one of the hippest areas in Southern California.

"Initially, newly arrived immigrants and their families were the primary shoppers at ethnic markets," says Caplan. "Now, it doesn't matter what your ethnicity is; if you want authentic ingredients, you go to a specialized market."

The challenge of produce wholesaling in the Los Angeles area begins with learning to meet the needs of the diverse and changing population, says Alan Pollack, general manager at Coosemans LA Shipping, Los Angeles. "The change has been more dramatic in the past 10 years than in the past 30." He says there is an increase in the Asians, Korean and Chinese demographics. "They seem to be using the wholesale market more."

Since 1982, Coosemans specialized in sourcing unique fruits and vegetables for shipment out of Los Angeles to supermarkets, foodservice distributors and restaurants throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Demand for Asian produce items is creating

additional markets for Los Angeles wholesalers. “People are looking for more exotics; they have become more mainstream,” says Talia Shandler, sales rep at the family-owned Shapiro, Gilman, Shandler (SGS Produce), Los Angeles. “Thai coconuts used to be an ethnic variety that wouldn’t have been mainstream, but now they are. With the exotics going more mainstream, it gives us an opportunity to bring something to the customers.”

Wholesalers find the increased demand for Hispanic produce, in particular, extends to include mainstream supermarket chains.

“There has been an increase in Hispanic consumers,” says Jack Gyben, vice president of Progressive Produce, Los Angeles. “Produce for the Hispanic market is in every supermarket, and in the independents. Southern California has always been an interesting market, with produce not only from the Central Valley, but also from Mexico. We have chilis and fresh fruits and vegetables from the north and south of Los Angeles. Chilis are grown in Santa Maria, Bakersfield and Mexico. Ethnic produce is coming in year-round.”

LAND OF MICRO-MARKETS

Although mainstream supermarkets throughout the metropolitan area carry Hispanic, Asian and organic produce, the region’s growing diversity also spawned the development of more specialized outlets and wholesalers.

“There are a lot of small Latin markets now,” says Ray Davis, owner of Pacific Sun, Los Angeles.

Because of the proliferation of markets serving ethnic communities, retail consolidation is less important in Los Angeles than it is in most of the country.

“For every large chain that merges, there tends to be a new player that comes in to fill the void,” says Souther from Vision Produce. “Markets tend to always have a flux in market share.”

According to a report published in the 2014 *Chain Store Guide*, Kroger is No. 1 with more than \$7 billion in sales (which include 200-plus Ralph’s and Food 4 Less stores), and Safeway and Albertson’s are No. 2 and 3 with combined sales of more than \$5 billion in sales in the metropolitan area. But Bodega Latina, Vallarta, Numero Uno and Tawa Supermarkets all crack the region’s Top 25, each with between \$130 million to more than \$700 million in sales at between 10 and 27 stores each.

“Retail consolidation has not affected outlets for Melissa’s,” says Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Melissa’s Produce,

Los Angeles.

Other Los Angeles-based specialty produce wholesalers also find they are generally not affected by the trend toward retail consolidation.

“Retail consolidation has not really limited our outlets,” says Caplan.

The emergence of Hispanic and Asian independents at the expense of major supermarket chains is accelerating.

It is so difficult to serve all the communities within this diverse area that, in just the last year, two fairly substantial supermarket chains have retreated from the Los Angeles metropolitan area entirely.

“Haggen bought about 150 stores from Albertson’s and Safeway after the merger,” says Jeff Liefer, vice president of West Coast sales for Pura Vida, Brea, CA. “About 80 to 85 of those stores are in the Los Angeles area. They’re in the process of closing those stores; they’re going back to just the Northwest.

Produce retailing is characterized by relatively small independent chains serving distinct communities, rather than by large corporate retailers selling throughout the entire region.

“Los Angeles has a lot of independent markets that really serve their customers well,” says Liefer. “Los Angeles is different; there are a lot of micro-markets. You can go just a couple miles down the street and the neighborhood is completely different ethnically. At the same time as it is competitive, it gives you great opportunity.”

Wholesalers must be on their toes to serve the large number of stores serving specific ethnic communities.

For some wholesalers, this network of independents and small chains has become their core business.

“I sell much more to ethnic chains than I ever did,” says Fruit Distributing Corp.’s

Weisfeld. “It’s all of our sales to chains and about 40 to 50 percent of our total sales. We also go to the processors, restaurant purveyors, and the wholesalers. We are brokers; we find a home, and send it there.”

The diversity of outlets created a highly competitive environment for wholesalers as well as large retail chains.

“It all rolls downhill,” says Liefer. “You have to be more competitive and work on a thinner margin. You might have a short market, and if the price goes up the chains might not carry that item. They’ll wait until the price goes back down. In the past that didn’t happen, but it started the last year-and-a-half to two years.”

These independents that serve ethnic communities within the Los Angeles area have enjoyed significant growth.

“The independents are different,” says SGS Produce’s Shandler. “They used to be five, six, seven to 10 stores. Now it’s independents of 60 to 70 stores.”

The diverse markets in the Los Angeles area are going a long way toward introducing new fruit and vegetable varieties to the country.

“The demographics have changed, and the product line follows the demographics,” says Richard Flamminio, president of Umina Bros., Los Angeles. “You have more Asian vegetables; and with the Hispanics you won’t sell a lot of mushrooms, but you will sell a lot of mangos. It’s become slightly more diverse the past decade. If you go back three decades, you have more ethnics in total. You have more Hispanics, and you have more Asians. Thirty or 40 years ago you had at least 20 chains in Los Angeles. Now you have Hispanic chains, Asian chains, and independent chains. The ethnic markets are separate from each other.”

NEW VARIETIES AVAILABLE

“New varieties of fruits and vegetables that



The ethnic diversity of the city is mirrored in the wholesalers and customers who come every morning to the Olympic Boulevard market to cut produce deals.

have never been available in the U.S. market are becoming more available through the LA market," says Schueller.

"More Asian, including Indian, and Latin ethnic products are seen in the market. There is separation at the LA market ... from a Hispanic market segment to an Asian market. And then there are categories of exotic fruits and commodity type varieties and specialty offerings."

With a population of more than 6 million Asian and Hispanic residents, Los Angeles County played a major role, for example, in introducing mangos to the mainstream.

The mango has already crossed over into the orchards of the Coachella Valley, a few miles east of Los Angeles in neighboring Riverside County.

"One of the new things we're seeing is different varieties of mangos," says Schueller. "There's a tree ripened mango called Esquire, and another called the Valencia Pride. Both Esquire and Valencia Pride are grown in the Coachella Valley, in addition to Mexico. They are very popular with the Hispanic market, but we are also shipping them throughout the country."

The next fruit to cross over from the Los Angeles area Hispanic and Asian markets, according to Schueller, could be papayas.

"I think the papaya shows a strong increase beyond its ethnic market," says Schueller. "The Brazilian strawberry papaya is showing a strong increase. It is sweeter and smaller, only about a pound, compared to the Maradol papaya, which is 3 to 5 pounds."

Even the expansive 30-year-old wholesale market near the heart of town is not always large enough to meet the diverse produce needs of this city.

As Coosemans' Pollack looks out from the new market at Olympic and Alameda, which first opened in 1986, he sees a smaller collection of wholesale operations that cater to a specific sector of the diverse community.

"There's a bunch of satellites around," says Pollack. "There are guys who got an old warehouse and just do Asian vegetables, or chili peppers, or herbs and specialty vegetables."

With the growing importance of numerous smaller outlets to serve Hispanic or Asian communities, and variable desire for organic produce, there is also no longer a retail mainstream in Los Angeles produce. "The middle," as Gyben puts it, "has become less important."

ORGANIC IS SURGING

Based in the City of Commerce just outside Los Angeles, Heath & Lejeune, a California

Certified Organic Farmers-certified wholesaler committed to green options in the field, in transportation, and in packaging, is enjoying particularly brisk business these days.

"We are getting more requests," says Charlie Kay, chief financial officer at Heath & LeJeune, which specializes in organic produce. "The increase is double digits. We have a pretty broad-based clientele. I think it is fairly broad based all across the U.S."

Other wholesalers are also enjoying surging demand for organic fruits and vegetables.

"For my company organic is the fastest growing category, and the margins are decent," says Hoffman.

"Consumers are requesting more and more organic. A distributor in Denver will ask us for both organic and conventional items, and we can consolidate them on a single pallet."

And just as mangos and chilis enter the mainstream, there are signs organic produce will find customers among the immigrants' children and grandchildren.

"The crossover of organics into ethnic

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markets is starting," says Jim Matiasevich, Jr., salesman at JBJ Distributing, Fullerton, CA. "The second and third generation Hispanics see the value in organics, and they're just starting to move. There's also more organic produce coming out of Mexico."

"We source from the major growing areas throughout the West, and we grow ourselves in Orange County," says Matiasevich. "We're partners with the Tanimura family on about 100 acres, which are mostly strawberries. Our organic acreage is increasing in Southern California."

Los Angeles is, for both organic and conventional produce, an excellent location for consolidators.

"We are a distributor," says Pacific Sun's Davis. "We do mixes; we consolidate and ship all over the country."

Wholesalers are taking advantage of the large volume of organic fruits and vegetables available from fields just a few hours away from Los Angeles.

"We expanded our domestic organic availability," says Broc Bengard, vice president at Bengard Marketing Inc., Dominguez Hills, CA. "We see organics as a strong, growing trend. The past two to three years it's been gaining momentum."

THE GLOBAL CITY

Coosemans has specialized in exotic produce since company founder Herman van den Broeck, a Belgian immigrant, drove to the Los Angeles airport in the 1970s and loaded up the trunk of his Cadillac with shipments of imported Belgian endive for delivery to specialty restaurants.

The company still wholesales Belgian endive, but today also sources an entirely new menu of Asian and Hispanic produce varieties.

"They're looking for different tomato products, different varieties," says Pollack. "They're also looking for Persian cucumbers, which everybody is using now. The demand is pretty good for us, because my salespeople listen to what the customers want."

"There's a lot more produce coming into L.A. from other countries," says Bruce Hoffman, general manager at California Specialty Farms, Los Angeles, CA. "Right now we're starting the Australia and New Zealand season. I just had a grower here today from New Zealand to talk about feijoa, tomatillos, and passion fruit."

California Specialty Farms, a wholesaling subsidiary of Coosemans, is a year-round fig supplier.

"Our local season in figs is done," says

Hoffman. "The Chilean season will start up, and then a New Zealand season runs up until we start again in late May. We're national; 99 percent of our business is national."

Other wholesalers also find this city an ideal location to source popular specialty crops over a long season.

"The demand for blueberries is on the rise, and has nearly doubled in the past nine years," says Sana Kear, marketing manager at Gourmet Trading Company, Redondo Beach, CA. "As consumers become more health conscious and associate the health benefits of blueberries to longevity of life, the demand will continue to grow."

Los Angeles is well-situated to extend the blueberry season by sourcing them from throughout the Western Hemisphere.

"We are currently experiencing great sales going through the Argentinian season," says Kear. "The market will remain short until New Year, but we feel we are in a good spot thanks to the partnership with growers along the import program."

"We are succeeding with supply from Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and Chile. We are enthusiastic about the expected growth our company will have in Peru and Chile these next few months," says Kear.

Other wholesalers also do a rich trade in counter seasonal fruits and vegetables shipped in from below the equator.

"About 70 percent of our volume is imports that we put in our warehouse in Rancho Dominguez Hills," says Bengard. "We have just a few kiwi fruit and pears still coming in, and our next window for the imports will be cherries."

The Bengard warehouse is more than 20 miles from the terminal market on Olympic Blvd., but it's a stone's throw from the largest import-export port, by volume, in the world.

"We are not downtown; we are close to the Port," says Bengard. "A lot of the produce we sell is out of state. About 70 percent of it goes to the western U.S., but we also go to Philadelphia."

Bengard sources grapes and stone fruit from South America, giving the firm a year-round supply for shipment to the east as well as Southern California.

"The LA Market has a wide variety of produce from all over," says Schueller. "It is a logistically advantaged area with the LA Port, Union Train Station, LAX and surrounding airports. You need to be aware of certification of product location, and doing business nationally with retailers, you need to have strong traceability to product of origin."

pb

Giving Veggies Their Due

FAMED LOS ANGELES CHEFS SHARE THEIR LOVE AND CREATIVITY FOR PRODUCE.

By Bob Johnson

A few years ago, a handful of chefs at progressive trend setting restaurants in the Los Angeles area began moving vegetable dishes to the center of the plate.

This bold experiment in using proteins as a garnish, sauce, or flavoring started a trend, called “veg-centric cooking,” that food researchers believe is about to sweep the nation.

“Veg-centric cooking is not so much of an emerging trend as a movement,” says Jet Tila, a restaurateur and frequent guest on Food Network shows including *No Reservations* and *Iron Chef America*, who first learned about food through his parents’ Los Angeles area Thai restaurants and grocery stores. “Chefs are bringing vegetables directly to top of mind. They’re thinking about vegetables as the entrée.”

Tila shared the stage during the Produce Marketing Association foodservice conference in Monterey in July with chef Gerry Ludwig, who visits new restaurants opened by chefs in the trend setting cities of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago for Wyoming, MI-based Gordon Food Service in order to get the earliest information possible on developing food trends.

“Veg-centric is really about treating fresh produce as an equal-opportunity ingredient in the center of the plate,” says Ludwig. “Chefs are holding produce in an entirely higher regard. Veg-centric cooking is going to be a huge mega trend.”

Chef Travis Lett is credited with being the first to boldly try veg-centric cooking at his Gjelina restaurant on Abbot Kinney Blvd. in Venice Beach, CA.

A recent lunch menu at Gjelina included, for example, roasted sweet peppers with Gaeta olives, white anchovies and capers, or braised lima beans with tomato confit, and black lime and crispy prosciutto.

Along with other chef-driven restaurants in the Los Angeles area, the veg-centric trend is embraced, and Tila believes the trend will



spread quickly throughout the country.

This is not vegetarian or vegan cooking, which both Tila and Ludwig believe will remain the choice of only 2 or 3 percent of the population, because animal proteins are used to enhance the flavor of the vegetables.

“The center of the plate might be sautéed Russian kale, but it’s garnished with house-made chorizo,” says Tila. “The dish isn’t vegetarian, but it is vegetable centric. Meat is going to be a garnish or as broth or stock.”

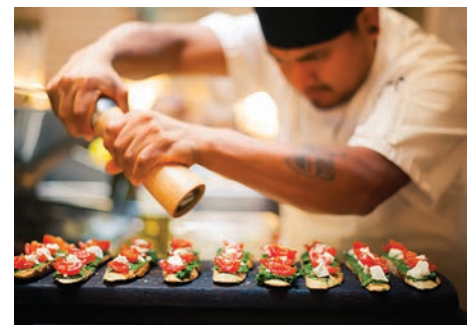
“It’s not like you’re going to miss the meat,” asserts Ludwig. “The last thing you want to do is steam a vegetable now.”

One of the creative chefs Tila and Ludwig discussed poaches cauliflower in chicken stock, then removes the chicken skin, freezes it, and shatters it into a “salt” he uses to put a blizzard on the cauliflower.

The veg-centric cooking that started in Los Angeles has the potential to be a mega trend, according to Tila and Gordon, because it has many positive attributes — it is healthy, relatively inexpensive, and brings a light footprint to the environment.

Healthy California cuisine has recently made kale and Brussels sprouts mainstream, and Tila and Gordon believe the next vegetables poised for advance are carrots and cauliflower.

There are already candidates to be the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GJELINA

next big thing in vegetables coming out of the cuisine born in Southern California.

“One veg that is kind of niched at this point, but I’m telling you spigarello is going to be growing,” says Ludwig. “We’re starting to see it big time in the Midwest and New York, and of course it was LA-born and -bred. When you get people to try it, they fall in love with it.”

Spigarello is an heirloom variety with thin stems and a sweeter taste than the more familiar broccoli. Tila thinks there is a general trend in vegetables that is about to become important.

“What you’re looking for is something that gets sweet when you cook it,” says Tila. “That’s what will be the hot trend. I think it starts with the familiar, and that means seasonal fruit, such as stone fruit and greens like cabbage.”

Many of the independent restaurants and markets around the metro area give a tantalizing taste of the country’s produce future. **pb**

Wholesome Choices In Suburban Irvine

AT THE WHOLESOME CHOICE STORE IN SUBURBAN IRVINE, LESS THAN AN HOUR SOUTH OF THE LOS ANGELES MARKET ON HIGHWAY 5, THE PRODUCE SHELVES REFLECT THE LOCAL IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY.

By Bob Johnson

While the store carries the conventional fruits and vegetables found in mainstream supermarkets, the shelves also provide a rich offering of produce from foreign lands.

“We carry rambutan, tumeric, Persian grapes, fresh dates, and cherimoya,” says Manny Gamino, produce manager at the Wholesome Choice store in Irvine, CA. “A lot of these items are grown in local farms.”

The U.S. Census shows the residents of this Orange County suburb to be split almost evenly between whites and Asians, with a significant Hispanic minority. What the Census does not show, however, is the size of the Persian community in the neighborhood surrounding the Wholesome Choice at Culver and Michelson Drives.

“We have a large Persian demographic for this area,” says Gamino, who has been produce manager at the store for two years. He says the shopper ethnicities are primarily Persians and Indians with few Hispanic and Caucasian guests.

A few miles up the road from Wholesome Choice is a shipper promising to *Deliver the Global Market*.

“I go with Melissa’s; they can get me what I want,” says Albert Garcia, produce buyer for the three Wholesome Choice stores.

The food court at the Irvine store offers fare from India, Italy, China, Thailand, America, Mexico, and Arabia, but the headliner is the Persian food featuring a variety of kabobs and other Middle Eastern dishes.



PHOTOS BY DEAN BARNES

This independent chain of three stores in suburban Orange County promises *Natural Foods from Around the World*, but the front page of the weekly ad features mainstream produce items at fabulous prices.

The circular for the Irvine store offers Mexican papaya at 2 pounds for a dollar; yellow onions or cantaloupes at 4 pounds for a dollar; and large eggplants and red or black plums at 69 cents per pound.

“The buyer gets those prices through different companies at the Los Angeles market,” says Gamino. “The items in the ad change every week. We carry everything from tomatoes, to onions, to international products

that grow here or get imported here.”

The bargains for the circular come from the Terminal Market, but the shopping method is strictly new school.

“I get those prices through emails to all the people at the Terminal Market,” says Garcia. “We might have different prices, but we use the same items for the ads in all three stores.”

At the Anaheim Hills and Laguna Niguel stores, the cantaloupe is 8 pounds for a dollar; the papayas 3 pounds for a dollar; and the eggplants and plums two for a dollar, as these areas have slightly different demographics and are a little less upscale than the neighborhood surrounding the Irvine store.

pb

Organic Imports' Meteoric Rise



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MANGO BOARD

To meet the growing demand from U.S. and Canadian consumers, the organic import market continues to expand and diversify.

BY LISA WHITE

As the organic segment continues to grow in the United States and Canada, sourcing produce has become more challenging.

Like conventional produce, in the off season, more items are being imported to keep produce department displays stocked and meet the increasing demand for these items.

"Imported organic produce is now in every U.S. supermarket and will continue to grow," says Mayra Velazquez, president of San Diego, CA-based buyer/distributor, Organics Unlimited. "Having these items available year-round makes the segment stronger. The only way to accomplish this is through importing from around the world."

In 2015, the increase in sales of organic produce worldwide was 11.5 percent, according to the USDA, with Mexico exporting \$103 million worth of organic fruits and vegetables to the U.S., a 20-percent annual increase.

Of the organic produce tracked by the U.S. Department of Commerce between 2011 and

2015, the top items were bananas from Ecuador and Colombia; apples from Argentina; mangos from Mexico and Peru; and avocados from Mexico.

"The USDA has a program to allow Mexican authorities to certify farms and packing operations as organic, and this program continues to reap benefits for the industry," says Lance Jungmeyer, president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA), based in Nogales, AZ.

SEGMENT GROWTH

Sales for imported organic produce, including cucumbers, bell peppers, zucchini, tomatoes, avocados, mangos, pineapples, citrus and asparagus, continue to grow annually.

"There are a few organic items, such as mangos, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini, bell peppers and avocados, that have now become what we would consider staple items," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Melissa's Produce, an organic produce supplier located in Vernon, CA.

Shelf life and logistics play a part in which items are more prevalent. For example, apples, pears, avocados and mangos are all items that ship well over long distances, enabling suppliers to create options for year-round programs.

Since the plateau of organics in 2009 due to the U.S. economic collapse, there has been an increase of organic imports, particularly

from Mexico and South America.

One exception has been organic blueberries from Chile, which have been absent the past three seasons due to a European Grapevine Moth infestation. Although the region has been quarantined, the fumigation renders the crops as non-organic.

"From 2010 through this season, organic imports have grown every year between 12 and 15 percent," says Jim Roberts, vice president of sales at Naturipe Farms LLC, based in Grand Junction, MI. "We were seeing double-digit growth in the early 2000s due to this being a newer category, but even now that it has matured, there are still additional consumers entering the category."

In particular, there has been increased demand from middle to upper income level consumers who are not only looking for organic products, but also are concerned about sustainable growing practices and food origins.

As a result, labels such as 'local,' 'fair trade' and 'responsibly grown' are increasingly sought after.

"This demand is especially strong in Europe, but is growing here in the U.S. and in Canada," says Jorge Alvarado, international supply chain manager at Valley Fruit & Produce Co., based in Los Angeles. "Growers are responding globally to this increased demand, but have not been able to keep pace with this in expanding the organic production."

To accomplish this, significant investments

continue to be made on the supply side to convert more of the production from conventional to organic. However, there are many challenges, in addition to costs, in making this transition.

“It has been difficult to meet organic protocols in many microclimates,” says Alvarado.

“There also are generally smaller yields from organic crops and, while organics can carry premium prices, this prevents any but the larger, more efficient and better-funded growers to move to organic crops in many commodities and growing areas.”

It also can be more challenging with some produce items than others. For example, organic mangos make up just 2 percent of all mango sales in the U.S., an increase of just .5 percent since 2010.

“The trend is positive, but the volume is still quite small,” says Rachel Muñoz, director of marketing at the National Mango Board, located in Orlando, FL.

To expand the organic imports segment, a number of growers, including Driscoll’s of the Americas, based in Watsonville, CA, are trying to get supply more year-round like with conventional produce.

“Where we’re lacking are the times of year when we import, which has been slow to develop but is starting to catch up,” says Soren Bjorn, Driscoll’s executive vice president. “Organic produce imports in general are growing four times the rate of conventional imports.”

With many international growers becoming organic, Frieda’s Specialty Produce in Los Alamitos, CA, is better able to import these items. “With Peru and China exporting organic ginger to the U.S., we are able to have the product available regularly to clients,” says Alex Jackson, Frieda’s account manager.

MISCONCEPTIONS WITH ORGANIC IMPORTS

During months when most of Logan Township, NJ-based Albert’s Organics regional farms are inactive, grocery store produce sections in the United States are filled with fresh fruits and vegetables – much of which comes from Mexico.

“Unfortunately, there are far too many misconceptions and misunderstandings about Mexican-grown produce, even when it’s raised organically,” says Simcha Weinstein, Albert’s Organics’ director of marketing.

The fact remains that organic imports from Mexico and other countries must meet USDA organic standards under the National Organic Program (NOP). This program has been in existence since October 2002, when the U.S. implemented the Organic Food Production Act.

Under the NOP, produce must be grown without the use of toxic synthetic pesticides, artificial fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically-modified organisms or irradiation. It also must be certified by a USDA-accredited agency, which inspects farm fields and processing facilities; keeps detailed records of what

inputs were applied to the land; and, if needed, conducts soil and water testing.

“Currently, at least 15 separate organic certification agencies operate in Mexico,” says Weinstein.

In February 2006, the Mexican government published its own Law of Organic Products with similar regulations as the NOP. On-farm audits and regular border inspections are a big part of Mexico’s organic certification and food safety testing.

There are farms in Mexico that are certified both as organic and for food safety by U.S.-based companies that conduct microbiological testing for E. coli and salmonella and chemical testing for pesticides. In addition, the USDA started regular and extensive testing at border inspections to fight against food safety threats.

Mexico is estimated to have more than 110,000 organic farmers, more than any other country, according to Weinstein.

“More than 90 percent of these growers farm on less than 9 acres and sell their products collectively,” says Weinstein. “And 90 percent of the organic food grown in Mexico is being raised for export.” **pb**

Organic Produce Imports 2014

Product	Country	Lbs.
Strawberries	Mexico	18,410,000
Bananas	Dominican Republic	10,430,000
Avocados	Mexico	7,060,000
Mangos	Peru	4,220,000
Bananas	Peru	3,030,000
Garlic	Argentina	1,950,000
Mangos	Haiti	1,930,000
Apples	Chile	1,600,000
Bananas	Colombia	1,440,000
Bananas	Honduras	990,000

Source: FPAA with USDA – AMS data

MAIN EXPORTING COUNTRIES

There are a number of countries supplying organic produce to the U.S. and Canada.

The largest imported organic items Melissa’s handles are bell peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, avocados, citrus and grapes from Mexico; mangos from Ecuador, Peru and Mexico; apples from Chile, Argentina and New Zealand; and pears from Argentina.

Although the majority of organic product comes into the country either by truck, plane or ship, depending on the product and exporting country, organics tend to be flown in more often than conventional produce.

“With organic blueberries from Argentina and Chile, half comes in by air and half by boat, while 75 percent of conventional blueberries come in by boat,” says Roberts of Naturipe. “Unlike with conventional produce, there are still some production gaps with organics, which causes seasonality.”

Where overseas growing conditions are concerned, there also can be more climate issues with sub-tropical temperatures and winter rains, unlike in U.S. growing regions.

Newer growing technologies have helped compensate for the weather, but have also added upcharges to organic imports in the process.

“With organic produce, growers have to put more into it to make it successful,” says Driscoll’s Bjorn. “Plus, because we don’t have



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organic marketing ► imports

as large a base of suppliers growing organics, we've learned that certain growers are better at supplying these products than others."

Some countries, like Chile and Argentina, have created a more favorable environment for organic production.

Also, other regions have become more specialized in certain organic products, like Ecuador, which has long been a large supplier for organic bananas.

"Many mango growers in Brazil have organic certification and are positioning them-

selves to expand organic production," says Valley Fruit's Alvarado. "Also, Costa Rica has been successful in recognizing the opportunity to provide organic products and currently exports organic bananas, pineapples, melons, papaya and star fruit. More recently, Peru made great strides in both infrastructure and funding to expand organic production in that country."

LOOKING AHEAD

Due to the growth in this segment, more overseas markets are getting into organics.

"Organic produce imports in general are growing four times the rate of conventional imports There is more pressure to increase the supply, but it is not happening as fast as consumers are demanding."

— Soren Bjorn, Driscoll's

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Still, there are challenges to overcome, including land availability, climate issues and pest infestations. "For example, the Spotted Wing Drosophila or SWD made its way into a majority of growing regions, which has made producing organic products more challenging," says Roberts.

As more mainstream retail and club stores adopt organic produce as part of the mix, and Kroger and Costco lead the way as the largest organic retailers, the demand curve continues.

The biggest issue in the years ahead will be making sure the supply keeps up with the increasing demand.

Suppliers such as Driscoll's have had to get creative. Next year, the company will source 90 percent of its organic strawberries out of Mexico's Baja California, where the growing conditions are more favorable.

"The data reveals all organic fruit and vegetables are growing, even imports, but supply and land are limited," says Bjorn. "There is more pressure to increase the supply, but it is not happening as fast as consumers are demanding."

This has not been the case in Canada, which has seen the demand for organic imports flatten due to the high exchange rate.

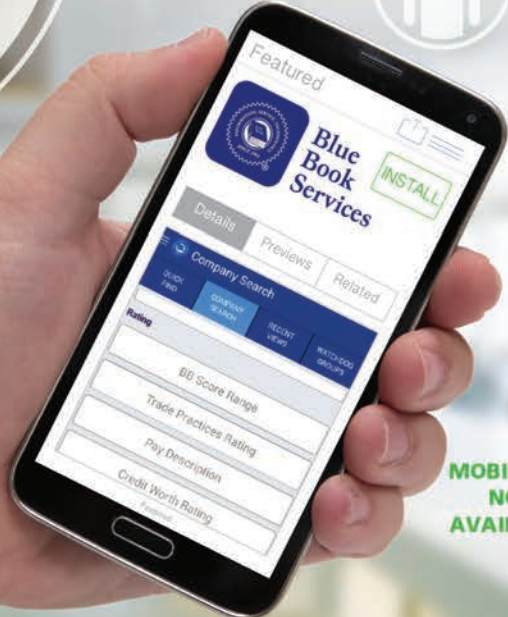
"The 20 percent drop in the Canadian dollar has impacted sales of organic imported berries, in particular," says Bjorn. "The price is just too high."

With continued growth predicted in the imported organic produce segment, both in supply as well as demand, it is only a matter of time before this segment catches up to, and possibly surpasses, conventional fruits and vegetables. It's up to suppliers to keep retail displays full and up to retailers to meet the needs of consumers.

pb



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Peppers & Cukes: A Brilliant Match



(L-R) PHOTOS COURTESY OF GROCERY OUTLET AND VILLAGE FARMS

How to successfully care for and merchandise this dynamic duo.

CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Peppers and cucumbers go together in salads like peanut butter and jelly on bread. These two veggies are staple high-volume sellers that in the 52-weeks ending August 29, 2015 contributed 4.4 percent to produce department dollar sales, according to the Chicago-based Nielsen Perishables Group's FreshFacts data.

"These two vegetables combined ranked seventh in best-performing classes in the vegetable category. They are definitely mainstays for us," says Scot Olson, director of produce and floral for the southern division of Grocery Outlet, an Emeryville, CA-headquartered discount retailer whose 229-stores are each independently owned and operated.

The big opportunity to boost pepper and cucumber sales lies in capitalizing on hot trends affecting both, such as new flavorful varieties, culinary uses, novel packaging and healthy snacking.

REGISTER-RINGING BELLS

Green bell peppers remain king of the category, contributing 29 percent of dollar sales, according to Nielsen Perishables Group data. Red bells are not far behind at 24 percent of category sales, followed by orange (6 percent), yellow (5 percent) and all of the other colors of bells combined (25 percent).

"We buy exclusively field-grown green peppers and often find that field-grown reds offer a good value," says Grocery Outlet's Olson. "The biggest growth we see in greenhouse- or protected agriculture-grown are orange and yellow bells."

Some customers express a preference for cultivation methods because of the resulting vegetable qualities.

"Greenhouse-grown peppers are more uniform and have thicker walls on the reds, oranges and yellows," says Jay Schneider, produce director at Acme Markets, a 183-store chain based in Philadelphia, and a wholly-owned subsidiary of AB Acquisition LLC, the parent company of Albertsons.

Sales of greenhouse-grown peppers are outpacing those of field. "Nielsen data for the 52-weeks ending June 27, 2015, shows that while pepper category volume is up 3 percent, greenhouse volume is up 8.9 percent

versus field at 1.3 percent," says Doug Kling, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at Village Farms' U.S. headquarters in Heathrow, FL. "True, greenhouse peppers are coming from a smaller base, but not that small. Of the 611 million pounds of peppers sold during that time period, 143 million of this was greenhouse-grown."

Greater availability of greenhouse-grown peppers are on the horizon. For example, companies such as SunFed, in Rio Rico, AZ, are transitioning its field-grown green peppers to protected agriculture over the next one to two years. This is due to benefits such as quality, yield and consistent production.

Industry sources say green bells won't be displaced in popularity by their other-color counterparts anytime soon, since they are so versatile in cooking.

However, Steve Williams, new business development manager at L&M Companies, headquartered in Raleigh, NC, says, "Consumers are buying more red, orange, yellow and orange bells. This is due to eye appeal and a price gap that isn't too much more than the green. Stoplight packs — red, yellow and green bells — really boosted sales of the reds and yellows in recent years."

L&M recently introduced a 6- to 8-count

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value pack of small-sized green bell peppers in a resealable bag for retailers who differentiate themselves as low-price leaders.

Packaging can perk up field-grown pepper sales.

“Packaged field-grown bell peppers are up 1.1 percent in volume versus bulk, which is up 0.6 percent. On the other hand, packaged greenhouse peppers are up 4.5 percent in volume, while bulk is up 10.9 percent in volume,” says Village Farms’ Kling, citing Nielsen data.

SEEDED & SEEDLESS CUKES

Field-cultivated (or slicing cucumbers) and greenhouse-grown (or seedless long English cucumbers) are offered for sale at Grocery Outlet. Slicers outsell English five to one — even though close-out price opportunities are available on the seedless variety throughout the year, according to Olson.

“Some shoppers prefer a regular slicing cucumber, because it’s what they know and what

they grew up with. Yet, long English cucumbers are doubling in volume for us every three to four years,” says Matt Mandel, SunFed’s chief operating officer.

Industry experts say that the thin un-waxed edible skin and seedless convenience are why long English cucumbers are experiencing a bump in demand.

“English cucumber dollars totaled \$246 million (up 9 percent), while field-slicer dollars registered at \$470 million (up only 2.9 percent),” says Kling, citing Nielsen data.

More packaging is coming to the cucumber category, says L&M’s Williams. “This includes six or seven in an over-wrapped tray or in a pouch bag.”

SNACK-SIZED MINIS

“There is a very big demand for mini sweet peppers. We’ve been displaying them in clear bags, along with greenhouse-grown mini cucumbers,” says Acme’s Schneider.

Parents shopping for healthy snack options for themselves and their children are driving interest in mini veggies.

“This is why mini cucumbers and peppers have seen strong success in the produce department,” says Gina Garven, category insights manager for Robinson Fresh, headquartered in Eden Prairie, MN. “According to Fresh-Look IRI data, mini cucumbers saw an annual growth rate of 32 percent, while mini sweet peppers grew almost 40 percent annually landing each item a spot in the Top 5 category sales drivers, respectively. In fact, in 2014, mini sweet peppers generated almost as much volume as jalapeños, historically a more popular pepper.”

Mini sweet peppers are a mainstream must-have at the limited SKU Grocery Outlet. “There are two reasons for this. First, there’s the packaging. The mini peppers are packed in convenient zip-lock, resealable bags that are beautiful and show off the peppers well. Second, there’s the culinary side. Food magazines and TV-cooking shows feature a lot of great recipes using these peppers,” says Olson.

This popularity translates into more retail space. “Two to three years ago when I worked in retail, we had 1-square foot of mini sweet peppers. Now, in most stores I visit, it is not uncommon to see four to six rows on the shelf,” says L&M’s Williams.

The real bonus is incremental. “Fifty percent of all mini sweet pepper shoppers are new to the pepper category,” says Joe Sbrocchi, vice president of business development and strategy for Mastronardi Produce, Ltd, in Kingsville, Ontario.

Industry experts say snack-sized veggies are poised to grow with the addition of new varieties such as mini bell peppers and cocktail-sized cucumbers, which are smaller than mini cucumbers.

DISPLAY MEAL AND SNACK SOLUTIONS

Selection is key to increasing sales of peppers and cucumbers. At Acme Markets, pepper SKUs include field green; greenhouse yellows, oranges and reds; and mini sweets. Cucumber SKUs feature bulk field, English, and tray packed mini seedless.

“Cucumbers are best displayed with items such as zucchini squash; whereas peppers are better with items such as avocados and onions. To offer even more convenience, retailers should consider displaying cucumbers and peppers with items that can be used together in meals in conjunction with recipe ideas. This is a great way to take the pre-planning out of the equation, which benefits the busy consumer,”

‘MOVE THE CUCUMBERRR’ — KEEP THIS VEGGIE OUT OF THE COLD

Long English cucumbers sell best, and shrink less, when displayed out of refrigeration at 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. This is the message the Leamington, Ontario-based Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OGVG) want retailers to know, and it is getting the word out with its ‘Move the CucumbeRRr’ campaign.

“We move nearly 53 million pounds of long English cucumbers annually, so they’re a significant seller for our Canadian retailers. In fact, rumor has it that they outsell potatoes in some stores,” says OGVG’s Jacquie Trombley-Turato, marketer liaison officer. “East Coast retailers in the U.S. do well mainly because they display cucumbers out of the cold and next to the tomatoes. However, in retail tours through the mid-southern states in the U.S., we noticed sales were slow and retailers put long English cucumbers in refrigerated cases at 32 to 36 degrees.”

The first problem Trombley-Turato discovered when attempting to change this chilling practice was a general lack of awareness by store level staff about the differences between field and greenhouse-grown long English cucumbers. First, the English are larger and thinner than the often shorter and stubbier field counterparts. Second, English cucumbers are seedless. Third, field cucumbers have



PHOTO COURTESY OF ONTARIO GREENHOUSE VEGETABLE GROWERS

a thick bitter skin that is waxed to prevent dehydration, while the English cucumbers are not waxed but wrapped in plastic. If water from misters gets under the plastic, English cucumbers will decay quickly.

“We did tests and looked at a variety of temperatures. Too warm, and the cucumbers got soft too fast; too cold, and they suffered chill injury. We determined the optimal temperature was 50 to 60 degrees for best shelf life and taste,” says Trombley-Turato.

The Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers launched its ‘Move the CucumbeRRr’ Campaign this fall. In 2016, the organization will offer educational sessions and a merchandising page on its website with downloadable display and storage tips, as well as point-of-sale materials designed to educate consumers about long English cucumbers such as recipe brochures.

“Our goal is to reach the retailer first, followed by consumer awareness,” says Trombley-Turato. **pb**

says Robinson Fresh's Garven.

Cross-merchandise peppers and cucumbers within the produce department next to bagged salads, salad fixings and other snack packs of value-added vegetables.

"Tie peppers and cucumbers in with head lettuce and tomatoes on an end cap display. Bring croutons over from the bakery department and place them on one side of the vegetables with a popular salad dressing like ranch on the other. Use suggestive signage and offer a recipe. Grower-shippers are great sources for recipes. These extras really put a cherry on top of the display and catch shoppers' attention, plus appeal to their craving for convenience. At the same time, it's a great way for the retailer to get a six-item ring," says L&M's Williams.

Outside of produce displays, peppers with meats for steak toppers as well as shish kabob, fajita and stuffed-pepper fixings. Cucumbers pair well in salsas and sauces for chicken or fish.

"Place a stand-alone display of cucumbers in the bottled water aisle. Cucumbers are very refreshing and good for hydration, plus they have a lot of vitamins and minerals," suggests Stephen Yubeta, vice president of sales and marketing, for Farmers Best International, in



Rio Rico, AZ.

PROMOTE BY CENTS AND SEASONS

By the "each" and multiples can be an effective way to promote peppers and cucumbers. "We started selling extra-large greenhouse

red, yellow and orange peppers by the each, like 10/\$10 about five years ago. They sell very well this way with a substantial increase in sales — especially when combined with a colorful attractive display," says Acme's Schneider.

Olson at Grocery Outlet likes to merchandise field cucumbers in multiples. "To do this, we have a range of specs — plain, select, super select. Field grown are often a better value, but not always. When greenhouse product is flush, we jump on these and utilize them rather than field. This helps the grower/shipper move the crop and gives our customers a value," says Olson.

He adds, "When we can sell cucumbers for 3/\$1, we'll set up a spillover display. If we can do more aggressive pricing, and depending on the demographics of a store, then we will move the cucumbers out in front in a field bin display."

Year-round availability makes peppers and cucumbers ripe for promotion at any time. Holidays provide a chance for seasonal excitement. "Holidays where there are vibrant colors in décor, such as Christmas, Easter and Fourth of July, are ideal for promoting peppers," says Village Farms' Kling. **pb**

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Demand Heats Up For Almonds



Positive attributes paint a healthy halo around the category — boosting demand.

BY JULIE COOK RAMIREZ

With the media awash in stories about the unhealthiness of American consumers — complete with soaring rates of obesity and related ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease — it would be easy to assume ours is a nation of soda-swigging, burger-gobbling couch potatoes. While reporters and anchors often seem all-too-eager to expand on the slovenly, fat-seeking habits of the populace, another story remains largely untold: a growing percentage of consumers who are actively seeking to improve their health by adopting an array of healthy habits.

If there's any doubt in your mind, take a look at the surging sales of wearable activity trackers, such as FitBit, Samsung Gear Fit, Vivofit by Garmin, and Jawbone. Clearly, Americans are making a concerted effort to increase their steps walked, calories burned, and minutes slept — thus giving a boost to their overall health. That awareness of the

importance of nutritional eating has led to a growing interest in almonds.

“The news is spreading about the health attributes of almonds,” says Robert Rocha, sales manager, public relations for P-R Farms, Inc., an almond grower/packer/shipper in Clovis, CA. “More people are incorporating almonds into their diets as they recognize almonds taste good and they will be rewarded for eating them. That’s good news for almond producers, growers, and retailers.”

According to the Nielsen *U.S. Retail Product Movement* study published in the *British Journal of Nutrition*, participants who ate almonds as part of a heart-healthy diet improved a number of key factors associated with heart disease risk. For every 30 grams of almonds consumed daily, participants reduced their 10-year coronary heart disease (CHD) risk score by 3.5 percent.

According to Molly Spence, regional director, North America, for the Almond Board of California, consumers are aware of almonds’ nutritional profile, ranking the nut high for its delivery of nutritious attributes. She cites a North American Consumer Attitudes, Awareness and Usage (AAU) study by the Boulder, CO-based Sterling-Rice Group, which found 90 percent of consumers consider almonds an excellent source of nutrition, while 50 percent said almonds help with weight management.

GROWING CONSUMPTION

The result is a surge in demand for almonds and the surprising headline that almonds have overtaken peanuts as the most-eaten nut in the U.S. Americans now consume more than 10 times as many almonds as they did in 1965, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service. Per capita consumption of almonds stands at just more than two pounds today, compared to just more than a half-pound 50 years ago. Americans’ consumption of almonds increased 220 percent since 2005 alone.

Linda Johnson, vice president of retail sales for Dover, NJ-based International Foodsource LLC, says the industry built a “health halo” around almonds, leading Americans to seek the nut not only as a standalone item, but as an ingredient in consumer packaged goods, such as snack bars.

With so much interest in almonds, one might think the nut would simply sell itself, but that kind of fast-track growth is not achieved without a significant amount of effort. The Almond Board of California, almond producers, and retailers all worked together to boost awareness, provide serving suggestions and recipes, and ensure easy access to a variety of almond options for every need.

While demand has been decidedly on the upswing, the lion’s share of almond sales still

take place during the fourth quarter when cooler weather and holiday gatherings spur consumers to engage in more at-home cooking and baking. The challenge lies in keeping almonds at the forefront of their minds so they will add them to their shopping cart on a more regular basis throughout the year.

According to Marc Marchini, vice president of operations, J. Marchini Farms, Le Grand, CA, the “main target” is a young female consumer he calls “Jane.”

“She wants to eat healthy, be healthy, and live a healthy lifestyle,” says Marchini. “Almonds fit right with her buying trend. Also, Jane has cash to spend, since she is likely educated and has a full-time job. She can afford almonds and doesn’t mind spending a little extra to maintain a nutritious lifestyle.”

AN ALMOND FOR EVERY TASTE

Almond suppliers stepped up to the “plate” with a slew of new offerings to entice “Jane” and other consumers to buy and eat more almonds.

According to Maria Brous, director of media and community relations for Lakeland, FL-based Publix Super Markets Inc., snack packs, honey-glazed, dry-roasted, smoked, vanilla, coco-dusted, cinnamon, and salt and

vinegar varieties joined traditional raw, natural, salted, and lightly salted varieties sold in the stores’ produce departments. New to the mix are spicy flavors, including jalapeño, Sriracha, and Wasabi.

According to Rocha from P-R Farms, Inc., his company’s development has gone “hand-in-hand with the consumer.” That means responding to increased consumer demand for “on-the-go” packages — making it convenient for consumers to eat almonds anywhere.

“If someone is going to be at a ballgame, they want a pound pouch in a sealable zip-lock, because they may be providing for their whole family,” says Rocha. “Some of the smaller packaging is more appropriate for someone wanting to put it in their purse or lunch pail.”

In the retail setting, boosting sales of almonds is centered on two primary strategies: secondary displays and cross-merchandising. International Foodsource offers an open-box display for secondary placement in stores to capture additional sales. These displays are of interest to retailers, such as Coborn’s (an employee-owned and -operated chain with about 40 locations throughout the Midwest), which relies on in-and-out shipper displays

with recipe cards when suppliers provide them.

The retailer also places slivered almonds with bagged salads and plays up the holiday baking season by placing almonds near chocolate chips, flour, sugar, and other complementary items.

ADDRESSING THE DROUGHT

One challenge that may cause the thriving almond business to stumble is the historic California drought. According to Rocha, the record lack of precipitation resulted in lower yields for almond producers and higher prices for consumers.

Fortunately, suppliers responded by offering smaller, low-priced packages of almonds, says Mike Gaetz, senior category manager for St. Cloud, MN-based Coborns Inc. “While shoppers may not go home with the amount of almonds they hoped to buy, the option of a smaller package enables them to take almonds home nonetheless. For processors and retailers alike, that’s what it’s all about.”

“We work hard to educate people on the healthfulness of almonds, and we don’t want them to stop, slow down, or buy less,” says Rocha. “We are committed to doing whatever we can to keep almonds affordable.” **pb**

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Reflections On My 30th PMA

BY DON HARRIS

This month I thought I would reflect on the PMA convention in Atlanta and stray from my usual theme of the fact that retail produce management “just doesn’t get it” when it comes to various aspects of produce operations. I have been attending these conventions since 1985, and I always marvel at the spectacle our industry promotes at these gatherings. The faces and names have changed throughout the years, but the anticipation and expectation of the premiere produce show remain high.

It is difficult to pinpoint the time during the show’s evolution where things began to change. In the early years of my attendance, during the first 10 PMAs, the show was still manageable in terms of being able to see everything in one day. This ability had certain advantages where you could visualize the entire show and make your notes for follow-ups the next day to be sure you didn’t miss any of your initial intuition about new products or services.

Following those first 10 years, this show grew so fast it became a behemoth that required careful planning and a number of people to cover the floor. Since that time, the show only got bigger, more diverse, exceptionally complex, and unfortunately less of a showplace for the produce industry. In the growth pattern of PMA, these large scale operations lost some “personality” and have become a must-attend networking session and scouting mission for new customers. While this type of networking is not altogether a bad thing, it does take away from the overall appeal of the wonder of the produce industry.

At the latest show in Atlanta, I was determined to see if I could find out what was driving my perception of change at Fresh Summit. The first element I noticed missing compared to previous conventions was the smell of fresh produce. That beautiful aroma of all the varieties of produce used to permeate the venue, and it is one of my most pleasant memories of the show. To me, it reflected all of the best things in produce, the abundance grown by the nation’s farmers helped by Mother Nature. Occasionally there were pockets on the floor that had some of that familiar aroma, but the overall floor lacked any consistency.

The second element I noticed missing, which probably was the reason why there was no aroma, was the lack of large, bulk displays

of produce commodities. It seemed that every booth there was a limited amount of product available on display as if it was not the most important part of the booth’s presentation. In fact, there were some booths with very little fresh produce and the booth screamed marketing, meetings, and networking.

Over the years, the booth design has been changed by all of the various exhibitors to provide more space for meetings and discussions of sales and marketing. But they were always set within the confines of the booth and the star of the booth was the product itself. This lack of product on display help to create the somewhat “sterile” look of the overall show. Replacing the bulk displays were packaged product of every size and description. The high-class appearance and technical advances in packaging and technology was everywhere.

The third and major change I observed was the atmosphere on the floor. The “vibe” was no longer one of awe and the anticipation of discovery of new items and new varieties, but one that was replaced with an emphasis on margins and profitability. This can only be a reflection of what are the priorities within the industry. Product and appeal of fresh produce has been replaced by the drive for target percentages and department gain. While these have certainly been important things through the years, the PMA has always been a facilitator of the promotion and expansion of fresh produce.

Perhaps I am living in the past. I dwell in the time when produce was a vibrant, exciting, growing, and a FRESH business. I left the PMA not feeling the euphoria of seeing the industry at its best, but with the sadness of experiencing the industry on display that was a mere shadow of its former self. I fervently hope that the industry will cast a reflecting eye upon itself to see where it is heading and look for what might be learned from the success of the past.

pb

I always marvel at the spectacle our industry promotes at these gatherings. The faces and names have changed throughout the years but the anticipation and expectation of the premiere produce show remain high.

Don Harris is a 40-year veteran of the produce industry, with most of that time spent in retail. He worked in every aspect of the industry, from “field-to-fork” in both the conventional and organic arenas. Harris is presently consulting and is director of produce for the Chicago-based food charity organization, Feeding America. Comments can be directed to editor@producebusiness.com.



Recognizing Your Strengths And Weaknesses As A Wholesaler

BY ALAN SIGER

Operating a wholesale produce business used to be a relatively simple task; note that I wrote simple, not easy. Rent some space on a terminal market, hire good traders, fill it with hard-working, honest laborers and administrative staff, and you were in business. If you and your sales team knew how to buy and sell produce and were willing to work long hours, then the sky was the limit. I'm not trying to minimize what my father's generation accomplished, but today's successful wholesaler requires a skill set that was not necessary in the past.

In the early 1970s, when I entered the produce business, terminal-market wholesalers were largely trading companies. Most companies bought or sold product from growers and shippers on consignment, and resold the product in its original packaging to service wholesalers, retail chain stores, or independent retailers. At that time, repacking at wholesale level was mostly limited to potatoes, onions, citrus, and consumer packs of tomatoes. Most repacking was done away from the terminals by companies that were repacking specialists rather than traditional wholesalers — though some were affiliated with terminal market firms.

If they want to do business with many of the foodservice distributors and discount grocers, today's wholesaler must also be a repacker. Foodservice distributors require "splits" or "breaks," which are smaller packages to send to the restaurant and institutional customers; while discount grocers require consumer-sized packaged product to minimize store labor.

Similarly, no one thought much about food safety or maintaining the cold chain 40 years ago. Those companies fortunate enough to have some cold storage used it for more perishable commodities and left items (such as potatoes, onions, and hard squash) to sit at ambient temperatures. Temperatures on the terminal market varied from freezing in the winter to the upper 80s in the summer. I can remember some competitors saying that refrigeration was for those who were lousy salesmen: "I'm in the produce business, not the storage business."

For today's wholesaler, success requires large capital investment and a variety of skills, no customer of any significant size would even consider buying from a supplier that was not capable of maintaining the cold chain. New construction costs on a refrigerated warehouse are somewhere around \$150 per square foot, so even a modest sized 35,000-square-foot building would cost more than \$5 million. Retrofitting an older building to meet food safety standards is an alternative, but the conversion still requires a major capital investment.

Most customers also require a vendor to have a certified food safety plan and to submit that plan to independent audits. Larger

customers require vendors to use some form of electronic data interface for billing and ordering; this, along with product traceability for food safety programs, requires sophisticated computer hardware and software that often costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. Labor law, pension plans, worker safety policy, and employee benefits all require either an internal human resources expert or outsourcing those services.

In the 1970s, most customers walked the terminal market, bought from several vendors, and hauled purchases back to their places of business on their own trucks; a wholesaler could get by with a few trucks to handle the occasional customer that requested a delivery. Today, most customers require the wholesaler to deliver orders on refrigerated equipment. One tractor-trailer combination can cost far more than \$100,000; thus, a wholesaler is faced with a significant capital investment or substantial lease payments to build a fleet to service a growing customer base.

Finance, human resources, food safety, information technology, and fleet management are but a few of the areas for management to master to be successful as a produce wholesaler in today's world. A chief executive would probably not attempt to build a warehouse without an architect, or design an IT system without outside help. Other areas like transportation and packing lines usually grow more slowly from one unit into a fleet of trucks or a full blown repack operation. When these major expense areas grow organically, rather than by strategic design, there's a strong likelihood investing in an expert's analysis will streamline the operation and cut costs.

As my former company's repack business increased, we realized to compete in this space, we had to maximize our efficiencies. In response, we brought in an expert in production efficiency; by working with our team, he was able to cut production costs per unit by more than 50 percent. The acknowledgement that we did not know everything about our business was not easy, but bringing in someone with valuable knowledge and expertise paid dividends.

Former chief executive of Avis rental cars, Robert Townsend, once described a consultant as someone you loan your watch to so they can tell you what time it is. He may be correct, but if you can't read a clock, it's probably a good idea to bring in someone who can. **pb**

Alan Siger is chairman of Siger Group LLC, offering consulting services in business strategy, logistics, and operations to the produce industry. Prior to selling Consumers Produce in 2014, Siger spent more than four decades growing Consumers into a major regional distributor. Active in issues facing the produce industry throughout his career, Siger is a former president of the United Fresh Produce Association.

I'm not trying to minimize what my father's generation accomplished, but today's successful wholesaler requires a skill set that was not necessary in the past.



Pink Giraffes Maraud Through European Supermarkets!



BY MICHAËL WILDE

Firstly, let me start with an apology. Although the title suggests otherwise, this column is not about pink giraffes or any other colorful marauding animals. This column is about the importance of healthy soils. However, if I had chosen for a title that included the world soil, chances are that you would not be reading this piece. Why? Because Soil is not sexy. It is one of the world’s most important yet neglected resources, and it is not sexy. Seeing that December 5 is World Soil Day, and 2015 is the International Year of the Soils, I hope you bear with me and read this to the end. I guarantee you will learn something.

Let’s start with a few interesting facts and figures.

1. More than 95 percent of all our food comes directly and indirectly from the soil
2. Soils store 10 times more carbon than forests
3. Soils host a quarter of the planet’s biodiversity
4. Soils store and filter water improving our resilience to climate change
5. There are more organisms on one table spoon of soil than people living on this planet
6. Soils are under threat: every minute we are losing the equivalent of 30 soccer fields of fertile soil.

There are numerous reasons why soil is under the threat including urbanization, pollution deforestation, but the main cause is wind and rain erosion caused by irresponsible farming techniques. The way farmers manage their land has a huge impact on how susceptible the soil is to erosion. When chemicals in the form of artificial fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are used in abundance, soil life dies and the soil structure becomes fragile. Furthermore, when soils are left bare for a long period — for example after harvesting the crop — the soil is an easy target for the elements and is quickly washed or blown away.

EFFORTS IN GERMANY

Soil degradation is an issue that affects us all. Germany for example, has lost more than 30,000 km2 of fertile soil, which is almost 10 percent of the countries surface. The worrying aspect is the rate

that Germany is losing soil, which is 20 times faster than that the country is “building” soil.

The negative effects of soil degradation became much more visible to the broad public in April 2011 when a freak dust storm caused a massive car pile up on Highway 19 in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. More than 80 vehicles were involved, 10 people were killed, and hundreds were taking to hospital. Obviously, this is not something that happens on a daily basis, but the magnitude and impact of the storm is waking people up.

Another element causing concern is the urbanization factor. Every 20 minutes, one hectare of soil is lost to concrete and if you extrapolate that to Europe, every year the equivalent of the surface of Berlin is being sealed up — or as the German’s call it *betoniert*.

SO WHAT IS THE “SOILUTION”?

According to the FAO (Food & Agricultural Organization of the United Nations), Sustainable Soil Management is the only way to preserve this massively important delicate resource. The organization advises farmers to cultivate more in harmony with nature and to adopt techniques such as conservation agriculture, organic, agro forestry, agro ecology, and no tillage agriculture.

Just as important is consumers and retailers also start demanding more soil-friendly products so that there is a clear business case for farmers willing to switch to a more natural form of agriculture. Basically, it all starts with awareness and communications, we need to explain to children that the brown stuff on carrots is not dirt but soil.

Considering that soil is a non-renewable resource, its preservation is essential — not only for food production and a sustainable planet — for us and also for pink giraffes. **pb**

Michaël Wilde is the communications and sustainability manager at Eosta B.V., a Netherlands based international distributor of fresh organic fruits and vegetables. Eosta is not only known for its innovative Nature & More trace-and-tell system but also for its effective campaigns. Currently, with 200 partners (including the FAO), the company is raising awareness about soil through the Save Our Soils campaign.



Produce Matters

BY AMY MYRDAL MILLER MS, RDN, FAND & CHEF SUVIR SARAN

Together we've been exploring the world of produce for nearly 10 years, discussing and debating strategies for creating deliciousness. We've done this on stage at professional conferences and offstage during leisurely meals or long phone conversations. We often discuss how to get every American to willingly and eagerly make half his or her plate fruits and vegetables. How can we encourage industry members of retail and the culinary world to take produce more seriously?

Here's some of what we discussed and discovered:

Flavor matters. For years the produce industry has been seeking perfect produce, but now that stores across the country are celebrating "ugly" produce — the imperfect and misshapen — we believe it's time the industry focuses more on what's inside.

What more can be done to improve flavor on the plant, vine, or tree? How can growers, retailers, chefs, and others work with plant breeders and seed companies to maximize the flavor potential?

We know breeders and growers are already working on bringing broccoli with more sulforaphane, melons with higher brix content, peppers with less capsaicin, and onions with lower sulfur content and less pungency to market. But we know there's even more the industry can do to enhance flavor through breeding, agronomic practices, and proper handling throughout the supply chain.

We also understand there are economic pressures involved. Being the first to market with stone fruits may have a short-term economic benefit, but if the fruit quality is not optimal, that disappointed shopper will bypass the peaches on her next trip to the store. And then what happens to the category over time?

Words matter. What we say about fruits and vegetables has an impact on people. When we say, "Food is medicine," are we doing ourselves a disservice by making people think fruits and vegetables are medicinal instead of craveable and delicious? Who looks forward to a big swig of cough syrup compared to everyone who understands the allure of a sweet, juicy, aromatic nectarine.

When a marketer puts "non-GMO" on a produce item, are we creating unnecessary confusion in consumers' minds? There are only three produce items in any store today that may possibly be GMO — papaya, zucchini squash, and sweet corn. (Yes, soon we may have GMO apples and potatoes in our stores.) But if consumers become wary and believe there's more GMO produce out there, are we scaring away potential consumers? We need to be truthful and not misleading

with our marketing claims. The Food & Drug Administration requires this, and our shoppers deserve transparency.

Culinary techniques matter. We can't count the number of times we texted each other from restaurants or cavernous hotel ballrooms when a plate with steamed vegetables appeared in front of one of us. Steamed vegetables are sometimes okay but rarely great.

Roasting vegetables enhances flavor, caramelizing the natural sugars, and makes the texture more desirable. Roasting vegetables is easy. We want to see more K-12 schools across the country offering

roasted vegetables to students. Yes, salad bars are great, but they're most often filled with raw fruits and vegetables. There's a whole world of flavors and textures we need to introduce to students if we want them to love fruits and vegetables in all forms.

Deep-frying has become a culinary swear word. In K-12 schools across this country, deep-fat fryers have been banned. From a health perspective, all calories matter. But if you're deep fat frying in a non-hydrogenated vegetable oil, you're creating flavors and textures that will get nearly any American to take a bite of a vegetable. So let's fry more vegetables. Let's batter some okra, crisp up some Brussels sprouts, and devour some green beans.

Looks matter. We all know we eat first with our eyes, but our appreciation of produce begins when it sits in front of us. We'll reach over the bruised apple for the shiny apple. We'll push aside the browning cauliflower for the bright white head. Anyone in retail attempting to move ugly produce knows it takes more than a price reduction to get consumers to take a second look at the "uglies" and convert purchases. Yes, some shoppers will gladly take home the lower-priced produce knowing

they got a great deal on something that will eventually get peeled or chopped. But most shoppers are trained to seek perfection. How do we get more consumers to care less about looks in the store and care more about looks at home?

We have to recognize the importance of flavor. We have to revert to our words and culinary techniques. And we have to truly believe that produce matters. If we don't, who will? **pb**

We have to revert to our words and culinary techniques. And we have to truly believe that produce matters. If we don't, who will?

Amy Myrdal Miller, MS, RDN, FAND, is a farmer's daughter from North Dakota, award-winning dietitian, culinary nutrition expert, and founder and president of Farmer's Daughter Consulting LLC. Suvir Saran is an award-winning chef and restaurateur. Born in Delhi, India, today Suvir lives on a farm in upstate New York. His next restaurant is scheduled to open in San Francisco in 2016.



Planning For Successful ERP Implementation

BY RON MYERS

Andy Kyte, vice president and Gartner Fellow (an information technology research and advisory company based in Stamford, CT) has said, “An ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) system that is not sufficiently flexible to meet changing business demands is an anchor, not a sail — holding the business back, not driving it forward.”

ERP software can provide a whole raft of benefits from boosting efficiency or assisting with forecasting and planning to providing essential traceability data and managing quality control requirements. A produce industry specific ERP solution will enable growers, packers, shippers, importers, exporters and foodservice firms to manage all aspects of their business from production, distribution and marketing through to the point of sale.

To realize these benefits, any organization about to embark on an ERP selection and deployment process must carefully match its immediate and long-term business needs with the correct ERP solution, and meticulously plan and prepare for the implementation process.

Here is a list of what to consider for ERP implementation:

1. Is the software suited to the needs of your business?

There are a variety of ERP solutions on the market, many of which have important differences. You might be tempted to judge based on price as there is a belief that the most expensive ERP software will also contain the most features, but are they the features your business needs?

As the integration of ERP software involves all aspects of your business, it is imperative to find software which is suited to the requirements and goals of your business.

2. Establish clear project goals.

To assess the effectiveness and success of any ERP implementation you must have clear, measurable goals. For example, your driver for implementing an ERP solution might be part of an ongoing initiative to establish common practices, standards, and systems throughout your business. Or a key objective may be to provide a single system for the management of produce movements from intake through to dispatch. Or your goal may be to provide key reporting metrics and KPI's throughout the business (e.g. produce from grower A is more profitable than from grower B). Alternatively, you could be looking for a solution to manage traceability and regulatory compliance, such as the Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI).

3. Involve users from the start.

Implementing ERP software will introduce new or different processes, which will affect everyone in your business, not just management or IT. It is important to that ensure all users know why the ERP software is being implemented, what benefits it will bring to the business and what benefits it will bring to them. For example, it is important to a Quality Control operative to

understand the benefits of moving from a paper-based manual recording system to a real-time electronic data capture solution, and why this is beneficial not just for them in their day to day role, but for the whole business.

4. Assign ownership for the integration of ERP software.

Put someone in a position of accountability for the successful roll out of ERP software in your business. Without assigning responsibility over ERP to anyone, you run the risk of implementation becoming rudderless — a situation which can easily transform into delays and disillusionment. Ideally, this person should have knowledge and insight into each area of your business. It is also their job to ensure that the project is kept to scope, timescale and budget. For example, what is the impact of deploying our new ERP solution to the pack-house in August, or is there a better time?

5. Have realistic expectations.

It's no secret that the successful and effective implementation of ERP software is not a quick process. Return on investment is unlikely to be instantaneous. That is why it's important to set and communicate clear goals from the very start of the process. Benefits can be realized with investments in the range of tens of thousands of dollars, but to really maximize the potential, establishing a project budget up front that is proportional to the efficiencies you are looking to achieve will provide the most satisfying payback time, and the highest realized value of overall benefits.

The cost of ERP systems very much depends on the size of your organization, the existing IT infrastructure and the breadth of functionality required. You may choose to take a ‘big bang’ approach and try to harness all the benefits of the new system in one hit, or to take an incremental approach, with gradual transition over a longer time frame in a ‘continuous improvement’ style of implementation.

With modern ERP platforms, the cost to implement systems dramatically fell in recent years. However, expect the overall cost to be between 1 and up to 5 percent of revenue. Keep focused on the return on investment — as this should always be at the forefront of any decision. By keeping to this principle you are likely to be delighted with your results and payback can be as little as 12 months, but typically less than three years.

These proven success factors will help ensure your ERP implementation leads to material business improvements and delivers the results expected.

pb

Ron Myers brings nearly 25 years of solution sales and business management experience to LINKFRESH. He is responsible for the company's go-to-market strategy, industry and product branding, new and existing customers and professional services delivery.

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I Love Produce LLC	121	610-869-4664	www.iloveproduce.com	Vega Produce	54	305-285-1235	www.vegaproduce.com
Idaho Potato Commission	83	208-334-2350	www.idahopotato.com/retail	Village Farms	106	888-377-3213	www.villagefarms.com
International Fruit				Western Fresh Marketing	122	559-662-0301	www.westernfreshmarketing.com
Company LLC	80	609-878-3113	www.internationalfruitcompany.com	Wholesum Family Farms	147	520-281-9233	www.wholesumharvest.com
IPR Fresh	73	520-281-2351	www.iprfresh.com	Wonderful Company	7	877-328-7667	www.wonderful.com
Johnston Farms	42	661-366-3201	www.johnstonfarms.com	Kurt Zuhlke & Association	110	800-644-8729	www.producepackaging.com



OFF THE BANANA BOAT

In 1912, Joseph Bonafede recognized a business opportunity and seized it. He saw big potential in bananas when they first arrived into the U.S. through the ports of Boston. His brother, John, later took over the company, and eventually, his two sons, John and Peter joined — bringing to fruition, J. Bonafede and Sons.

John Bonafede, director of the wholesaler located in Boston-based New England Produce Center, has memories of the beginning footprint of his uncle's journey. "J. Bonafede Company started buying bananas right from the boat, and we supplied them to the retailers," he says. "Shipping bananas back then was before refrigeration and we would have to store them in the basements of the warehouses."

Eugene (Gene) Fabio (center of the photo) is the nephew of John Bonafede and current president of the company. The day the photo was taken in December of 1986, Gene remembers it was a slow day. The reason, he explains with a chuckle, they had time to take the photo. Standing next to Gene on the left is Kenny Natorelli (from Roslindale, MA-based Baby Nat's Fruitland), and on the right is Jerry Aiello, who, at the time, worked for DeLuca's Market. Gene recalls, "We were friends back then, and although Jerry hasn't been in the produce business for a while, he is still

in the Boston social scene. Kenny is still a customer and always calls us to place his orders. Once-in-a-while, he will come into the market."

Gene finds it incredible how fast time has gone by and notes how much the company has grown in the past 30 years. Bananas have always been the company's primary commodity; however, the company offers much more in the line of produce focusing more now on tropicals such as mangos and avocados. The addition of these products helped J. Bonafede and Sons grow from two bays to a four bay space in the New England Produce Market.

John also mentions how shipping methods have changed since the photo was taken. "They used to come in on the boat just box by box (as seen in the photo's background)," he explains. "We had to put all the bananas on the pallet. Now they come in already organized on pallets."

The Bonafede family enterprise has persevered during the years as the produce industry expanded. "In December of 1986 there were six to eight banana businesses in New England," reports John. "Now there are about four or five. We were a small market catering to the small businesses, so I think that is why we survived."

pb

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