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# produce**business**

MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT



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**REGIONAL MARKET PROFILES:** Atlanta & Los Angeles  
**PROCUREMENT GUIDE:** Florida Fall Produce  
**MERCHANDISING:** Apples, Root Vegetables  
**FEATURES:** Wholesaler Report, Consumer Packaging,  
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**ORGANIC MARKETING:** Peppers  
**DRIED FRUITS & NUTS:** Pecans  
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# ORGANIC



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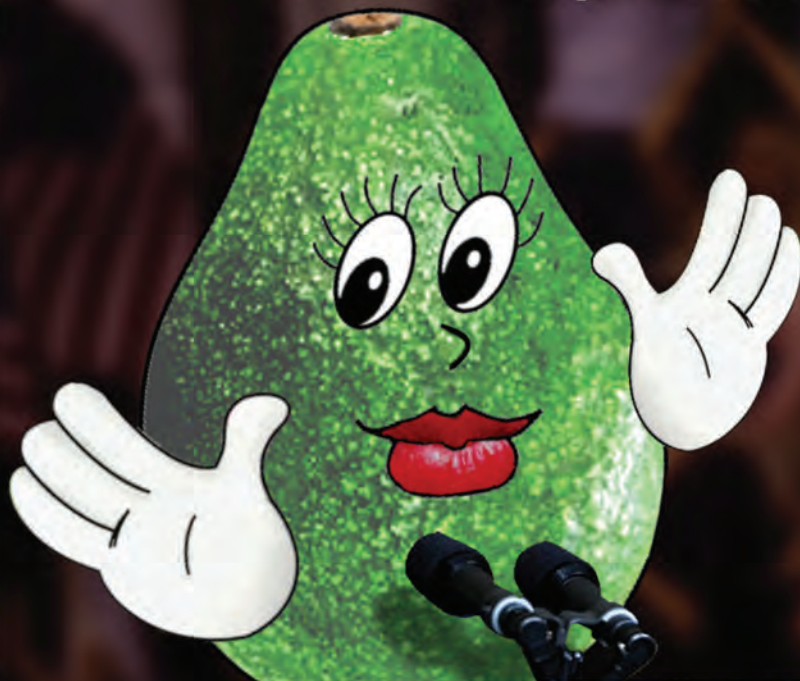


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**THIS MONTH'S WINNER**

**RYAN ELLISON**  
Produce Category  
Manager  
K-VA-T Food Stores  
Abingdon, VA

Ryan Ellison began his career in the produce industry when he was just 14 and in the eighth grade. He says he “just never got away.”

Ellison never thought he would continue to work in the industry after receiving his bachelor’s degree, but a produce job opened the same week he received his degree.

He has been at his current job as produce category manager for nine years, and in the industry for 20 years. He works in the Food City support center in Abingdon, VA. He says the majority of his day is spent in procurement, but he also plans ads and connects with retail stores. Typically, he travels to

stores every Wednesday and Thursday.

He says K-VA-T Food Stores, the corporate banner for the Food City supermarket chain, has about 140 stores in Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and they are expanding into Georgia and Alabama.

He wishes consumers knew about the produce industry, and knew how many moving parts there are. “It’s more complicated than consumers realize. There are so many aspects of the supply chain.”

Ellison says in his free time he watches a lot of college football. His favorite team is The University of Tennessee. (Go Vols!) He also referees high school football on Friday nights.

Ellison says the thing he likes most about PRODUCE BUSINESS is the merchandising tips. “It’s a good way to keep up with the industry as a whole. The magazine is full of good ideas.”

As this month’s winner, he will receive a \$200 Amazon gift card. **pb**

**How To Win!** To win the PRODUCE BUSINESS Quiz, the first thing you must do is read through the articles and advertisements in the print or digital issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, scan and send your answers to the address listed on the coupon by Nov. 15. **If you wish to fill out the questions online, please go to: [www.producebusiness.com/quiz](http://www.producebusiness.com/quiz).** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our December 2024 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

**WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD**

Is there anyone in the industry who wouldn’t want \$200 to buy something fun on Amazon? Or better yet... pass the card on to someone in need and make the world a better place!



**QUESTIONS FOR THE OCTOBER ISSUE**

- 1) What is the headline for Fresh From Florida’s advertisement? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) What is the website address for the Nickey Gregory Company? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) What is the new brand being marketed by SL Produce? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) What is the phone number for the Produce Distributors Association? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Who is Avocado from Mexico’s “ambassador of good times”? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) In our Merchandising Review article, how many ways are there to Sell More Apples? \_\_\_\_\_

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

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_  
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Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

Please send answers to one of the following: (1) email: [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com)  
 (2) snail mail to: OCTOBER PB QUIZ • P.O. Box 810425 • Boca Raton, FL 33481 or (3) Fax: 561-994-1610

Answer and submit your entry online at [www.producebusiness.com/quiz](http://www.producebusiness.com/quiz)



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## WHAT'S YOUR CALLING?

**I**t seems like yesterday when this author attended his first PMA Convention in San Francisco ... 39 years ago. There is a photo in my archives of Bruce Jenner (now Caitlyn Jenner) and Soap Opera Star Emma Samms cutting the ribbon to open the trade show, and there are fond memories of being introduced to some of the industry's giants, particularly Bob Backovich and Don Harris of Safeway (later Wild Oats and Whole Foods), Frieda Caplan of Frieda's, and Jack Pandol of Pandol Bros.

One night, our small team loaded up taxis with boxes of PRODUCE BUSINESS — air-shipped “hot off the presses” to the SFO Airport — and we proceeded to drop magazines under every door of the main hotel across from Moscone Center. It was truly a miracle that we accomplished this task without being caught or charged, but even today, we still have magazines delivered to each hotel room — now at a heavy cost but without the strain on our backs! (You might even be reading this Special Note in your hotel room now.)

For a kid of 23 who changed career paths — dropping out of grad school — because his best friend from college persuaded him that the produce industry was far greater than any other, that moment in San Francisco — Oct. 19, 1985, to be exact — was the moment I found my destiny.

Jim Prevor was right ... The produce industry, especially the people in it, is one of amazement. Every day is unique because of the very perishable nature of the products we sell. That dynamic alone creates a unique breed of people willing to take risks and live in the

*“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”*

— *Mark Twain*

*“The things you are passionate about are not random. They are your calling.”*

— *Fabienne Fredrickson*



moment. And it is the people making it all happen that attracts me the most.

Everyone has a story to tell. Whether it is their own journey, or the journey of their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents, the narrative is so rich that books can be written on almost every company in the trade. Throughout the next 12 months, as PRODUCE BUSINESS approaches its 40th anniversary, I invite you to tell your story in the pages of this magazine and online at ProduceBusiness.com.

If you have a story you'd like to share about yourself or your family, I invite you to send it to [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com).

I am looking forward to learning more about each and every one of you. **pb**

*Ken Whitacre*

Ken Whitacre  
Publisher/CEO



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## TRANSITIONS

### Fresh Connect LLC

Fresh Connect LLC, Chicago, IL, appointed **Katie O'Connor** as vice president of marketing. This announcement is part of the company's ongoing efforts to expand the reach of its brand, The Essential Mixologist, known for its dehydrated produce and cocktail crystals designed for both foodservice and retail sectors.



Katie O'Connor

O'Connor came from Produce Alliance, acquired by Buyers Edge Platform, where she concluded her role as director of marketing for the Fresh Division, which includes both produce management brands, Produce Alliance and Fresh Concepts. She played a pivotal role in combining creative vision with strategic insight to drive brand growth.

The Essential Mixologist offers a unique blend of dehydrated produce and artisanal cocktail rimmers, with items ethically sourced from Guatemala. The Essential Mixologist's commitment to sustainability and zero-waste initiatives has made it a leader in the dehydrated garnish cocktail industry.

### Rice Fruit Company

Rice Fruit Company, Gardners, PA, promoted **Alexandra Roberts** to vice president of culture and compliance. In this role, Roberts will ensure food safety and foster a responsible and sustainable company culture.



Alexandra Roberts

Roberts first joined Rice Fruit Company as food safety manager, spearheading food safety and compliance activities. Her role also involved collaboration with local farm families and orchardists to implement and maintain efficient, good agricultural practices.

Prior to her time at Rice Fruit Company, Roberts gained experience in the fresh slice and snack food sectors, with positions at Appeeling Fruit and Savor Street Foods. Before re-entering the agricultural and food industry, Roberts worked as a civil attorney, advocating for individuals facing social, economic and racial challenges. She holds a bachelor's in food science from Pennsylvania State University and a Juris Doctorate from Villanova University School of Law.

### Church Brothers Farms

Church Brothers Farms, Salinas, CA, has added **Jennifer Lind** as director of business intelligence and analytics. Lind brings over 20 years of produce industry experience to this newly created position, blending expertise in sales operations with data-driven decision-making.



Jennifer Lind

She will lead the advancement of the company's AI-driven processes in demand planning, customer segmentation and revenue optimization. She will

also be essential to integrating diverse data sources and refining business intelligence tools to support long-term forecasting and strategic decision-making for the organization.

In previous roles at Misionero, Mann Packing and Earthbound Farm, Lind led significant business intelligence transformations, while spearheading sales planning processes.

Lind has a degree in managerial economics from the University of California, Davis.

### Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers

Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OGVG) board of directors named **Steve Peters** as the successful candidate to fill the role of OGVG chair. Peters replaces George Gilvesy, who advised the board he would not be renewing his appointment at the conclusion of his term ending Oct. 31.



Steve Peters

Peters comes to the OGVG, based in Leamington, Ontario, as a lifelong resident of St. Thomas, Ontario, and has been actively involved in his community for more than 35 years.

He is the former executive director of Food and Beverage Ontario, and manager of a farm market and bakery that provided learning opportunities for clients of the Canadian Mental Health Association. He also is a regular volunteer for the St. Thomas Elgin Food Bank that his partner Karen manages. Peters will take over as the new OGVG chair effective Nov. 1.

### Sun World International

Sun World International, Bakersfield, CA, appointed **Gerardo Lugo** to the new role of chief commercial officer and promoted Global Licensing Directors **Pablo Ramirez** and **Petri van der Merwe** to vice presidents of global licensing. These moves reflect Sun World's growth and the opportunities triggered by the company's acquisition of Biogold.



Gerardo Lugo



Pablo Ramirez



Petri van der Merwe

Lugo brings three decades of agricultural experience to Sun World, primarily with Monsanto and Bayer's row crop and vegetable seed businesses, where he held numerous senior commercial and strategic roles, both at the regional level leading operations in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, as well as at the global level.

Ramirez and van der Merwe join recently appointed vice president of global licensing Viresh Ramburan. These executives will manage the company's licensing activities and staff.

### Fischer Farms

Fischer Farms has strengthened its board and food credentials with the appointment of **Chris Kirke** as chief executive.

Kirke joins from Moy Park, where he was chief executive for over six years. He also spent over a decade with Greencore US, holding both managing director and chief executive roles.

Kirke will manage the day-to-day operations and focus on the strategic direction of the business. He will also play a key role in nurturing relationships with existing and new customers.

**Tristan Fischer**, founder of Fischer Farms, will move into the group chief executive role. Fischer will work closely with Kirke and John Stapleton, (chairman), to grow the existing Fischer Farms business, as well as expanding opportunities with Fischer Farms Foods and Fischer Farms Technology.



Chris Kirke



Tristan Fischer

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Avocados From Mexico Selects First Produce Ambassador

Avocados From Mexico has selected chef **Pati Jinich**, star of Pati's Mexican Table, as the brand's culinary spokesperson. She will share avocado tips and recipes.



PATI JINICH AVOCADO CULINARY AMBASSADOR  
Avocados From Mexico  
SUSTAINABLE. BETTER. TOGETHER.

Known for drawing inspiration from her Mexican heritage, Jinich brings her passion for family, education and community to life through food. Her dishes, found in her many top-selling cookbooks, reflect all the comforting tastes she grew up with, with avocados as an essential ingredient.

Jinich will be serving up creative twists classic Mexican recipes, including: Ginger and Pistachio Guacamole (a twist on guac made with ginger, honey, dried piquin chiles and chopped pistachios); Enchiladas de Suelo with Avocado (open-faced enchiladas with avocados and chorizo); and Avocado and Coconut Ice Cream (a unique sweet treat made with avocado and coconut).

With Jinich as the first-ever avocado culinary ambassador, the brand will encourage innovation with fresh avocados for shoppers and culinary professionals. This new title follows a years-long partnership between Jinich and Avocados From Mexico. In addition to developing educational content and recipes for the brand, Jinich led a culinary showcase at Guac Heaven, the brand's first experience at the National Restaurant Association Show designed to inspire operators on the versatility of guacamole.



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## Peck's Markets Join Allegiance Retail Services



Allegiance Retail Services says four Peck's Markets have joined the co-op through their parent company, PSK Supermarkets. The sale of Peck's Markets to PSK occurred in September 2024, expanding PSK's reach in New York State.

PSK Supermarkets, a member of the Allegiance co-op, currently operates 14 supermarkets in the New York City area, and Dutchess and Columbia counties in New York State under the banners of Foodtown, Freshtown and Pathmark. The addition of Peck's Markets in Sullivan County, NY, brings PSK's total markets to 18 under ownership and management.

The four Peck's Market locations are:

- Peck's Market of Callicoon  
9 Lower Main St.  
Callicoon, NY 12723
- Peck's Market of Livingston Manor  
29 Main St.  
Livingston Manor, NY 12758
- Peck's Market of Jeffersonville  
4897 state Route 52  
Jeffersonville, NY 12748
- Peck's Market of Eldred  
9 Proctor Road  
Eldred, NY 12732

## Bobalu Berries Achieves Sustainability Milestone

As the fall berry season approaches peak season in Oxnard, CA, a milestone has just been achieved by the Food Safety team at Bobalu, LLC. The company received their latest Audit and Certificate with a clean 100% score on the Module 9: IPM Identifier.



IPM is a term used quite often in explaining on-farm cultural practices. However, a complete summary of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a science-based approach to managing key pests through a combination of biological, cultural, physical, and chemical methods to reduce pest damage, while minimizing risks to human health, beneficial and non-target organisms (pollinators), and the environment.

Understanding that definition, the food safety team at Bobalu assessed the complete program at the company and visualized each component to develop a systematic guide to achieving 100% on farm sustainability.

## Sprouts Farmers Market to Feature AutumnCrisp Grapes



Sun World International, Bakersfield, CA, launched a retail partnership to bring AutumnCrisp grapes to select Sprouts Farmers Markets this fall in California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Colorado and New Mexico.

As part of its ongoing commitment and investment to their licensee community and retail partners, Sun World International is collaborating with Sprouts to drive shopper excitement around AutumnCrisp grapes through a robust omnichannel marketing campaign.

The Sprouts partnership will feature AutumnCrisp branded store displays, influencer collaboration and

other integrated marketing efforts to drive shoppers into Sprouts stores to experience this grape variety while they're at the peak of the season.

## Florida Department of Citrus Selects Padilla as Marketing Agency



The Florida Department of Citrus (FDOC), Bartow, FL, an executive agency of Florida government charged with the marketing, research and regulation of the Florida citrus industry, has selected Padilla as its marketing and communications partner.

Padilla is now the agency of record for the department's consumer marketing and issues management programs. Padilla is supporting FDOC's mission of maximizing consumer demand for Florida citrus products and ensuring the sustainability and economic well-being of the growers, the industry and the State of Florida.

The agency will raise awareness for FDOC as an industry leader and drive consumer engagement through paid media, influencer partnerships, digital advertising, social media, retail activations and more.

Padilla began working with FDOC in July 2024, and both the consumer marketing and issues management assignments are two-year terms with an option for renewal.

## One United Floral Mixer Unites Industry Leaders



That Flower Feeling Foundation held a One United Floral Mixer, in Carlsbad, CA, within the CalFlowers Fun 'N Sun Convention recently.

The event raised over \$30,000, with 145 attendees from across the floral industry supporting the That Flower Feeling Foundation. These funds will play a role in future marketing efforts to increase floral consumption in the United States.

That Flower Feeling is a mission-driven organization dedicated to making fresh flowers a regular part of people's lives.

## Baldor Specialty Foods Opens New Facility



Baldor Specialty Foods, a distributor of specialty produce, meat, fish, dairy, and grocery items in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, expanded its restaurant and foodservice capabilities with the opening of a new facility in the Washington, D.C. area Sept. 17. Located in the Hargrove Industrial Campus, Lanham, MD, the new 100,000-square-foot warehouse is 12 miles away from metropolitan Washington, D.C. and in close proximity to major highways.

The new facility, which includes 35 dock doors and state-of-the-art refrigeration and frozen storage capabilities, will enable Baldor to scale its operations, increase delivery efficiencies and continue its tradition of sourcing fresh, local products. The facility will also support local employment, with 140 employees, and the company plans to hire more, including drivers and warehouse staff.

The Lanham facility will serve as the fourth hub for Baldor's operations, joining the company's headquarters in the Bronx, NY, and regional hubs in Boston, MA, and Philadelphia, PA. Baldor first launched in the area in 2012, with a small cross-dock facility in Jessup, MD; demand grew quickly, with the facility ultimately serving 1,000 of the company's 14,000-plus total customers.

## Side Delights Offering Retailers Solutions



Due to the cumulative impact of ongoing economic challenges and rising food prices, dining out is estimated to be four times more expensive than eating at home. Side Delights, Newport Beach, CA, is encouraging retailers and foodservice operators to promote Amazables! as the answer.

Amazables! are oven-crisp-style microwavable potatoes that are ready in 6 minutes and come with custom gluten-free sauces by Litehouse: The Loaded Potato sauce and Buffalo Ranch sauce. Both were created to complement the taste of a russet potato and leverage top foodservice flavors.

Other quick-to-cook Side Delights potato products, such as Bakeables or Steamables, can be enjoyed right out of the package or in creative recipes, such as Roasted Russet Dipping Wedges. Even the leftovers can be upcycled for Quick Steak and Potato Tacos with Poblano Chilies.

## Bako Sweet Poised for a Standout 2024 Harvest

Bako Sweet, Bakersfield, CA, is announcing a promising 2024 sweet potato crop, which has benefited from favorable growing conditions, despite challenges posed by extreme summer heat.



The harvest, now underway, has produced excellent quality sweet potatoes in a variety of planted colors, including orange, red, white, and purple, ensuring consistent supply to meet growing consumer demand.

The combination of a cool spring and successive days of 105-degree heat slowed the timing of harvest slightly, but Bako Sweet's approach to harvest management has allowed the company to mitigate potential negative impacts. The team has leveraged additional harvesting capacity and closely monitored water, shredding, and harvest schedules to ensure product quality and sizing consistency.

## Agroberries and BerryWorld Group Combine to Create the Second Largest Berry Company

Agroberries, Vitacura, Santiago, a global grower, marketer and distributor of fresh berries, has acquired BerryWorld Group Holdings Limited, Europe's largest berry marketer.



The combined company will commercialize approximately 150,000 metric tons of blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries per year, sourced from both its agricultural-production footprint that spans over 3,000 hectares (7,400 acres) and from associated growers across 30 countries. The vertically integrated company boasts unique proprietary breeding programs and long-term partnerships with leading breeders around the world to sustainably produce berries.

Continental Grain Company (Conti), a global food and agribusiness investor, first invested in Agroberries in 2022 and increased its investment and commitment to the company in connection with the transaction.

Jorge Varela, co-founder and chief executive officer of Agroberries, will serve as global chief executive officer of the combined entity. Adam Olins, co-founder and chief executive officer of BerryWorld Group, will continue to lead BerryWorld Group.

## ZAG Technical Services to Offer Free Cyber Insights Reports at Global Show

ZAG Technical Services, San Jose, CA, will be at the Global Produce and Floral Show in Atlanta, GA, from Oct. 17-19, providing cybersecurity support to the ag sector.



At the show, ZAG will be offering free Cyber Insights Reports, each valued at \$600. A total of 50 reports will be given away.

The Cyber Insights Report helps ag businesses understand their current cybersecurity posture, identify vulnerabilities, and offers actionable steps for protection against rising threats.

In addition, ZAG will be hosting in-booth "Ask ZAG Anything" (AZA) sessions, where attendees can learn more about Syncrova, ZAG's solution for the leading Ag ERP, and get direct IT, data, analytics, and cybersecurity advice from ZAG's experts.

The AZA sessions will be held in ZAG's booth C1115: Oct. 18, 1-2 p.m., and Oct. 19, 1-2 p.m.

## Sunkist Launches New Merchandising Options for Citrus Season

California citrus season is just around the corner, and Sunkist Growers Inc., Valencia, CA, is unveiling a fresh set of merchandising options for retailers.



These new offerings provide versatile, real estate-efficient solutions that align with the retailer's in-store display needs, and showcase the full range of Sunkist fresh citrus options.

In response to the growing demand for sustainable and uncluttered in-store environments, Sunk-

ist's new merchandising options are designed to be sleek, functional, and easily adaptable to various retail footprints. The buildable display solutions maximize shelf space while maintaining structured and eye-catching citrus destinations for Sunkist Navels, Caras, Bloods, lemons, California mandarins, grapefruit and multi-variety pack options.

Sunkist marketing worked closely with its sales team, surveying team members and measuring customer feedback relevant to its merchandising toolkit and shopper-marketing programs. With limited floor space often being a primary challenge, the new space-efficient displays are engineered to fit seamlessly into any store layout.

## More Than 80% of Consumers Fail to Store Pineapples Correctly

More than eight in 10 consumers (81%) have admitted that they don't know the correct way to store pineapples, inadvertently eating them later than ideal.



The research from global tropical fresh fruit producer, Fyffes, London, England, coincides with the launch of Fyffes' new "crownless pineapples" to Europe.

Fyffes assessed the consumption habits, awareness and knowledge surrounding pineapples among over 1,000 United Kingdom and Ireland consumers, to reveal that only 19% know that the best way to store a pineapple is to chop it up and put it in the fridge, with almost a third (31%) leaving a pineapple to "ripen" in a fruit bowl — a common misconception as Fyffes pineapples are always ready to eat.

For retailers, crownless pineapples present the opportunity for reducing carbon emissions significantly as more than 30% more crownless pineapples can be transported as they take up significantly less space. The removed crowns are replanted in the pineapple fields or shredded and given to local farmers to be used for animal feed. For consumers, crownless pineapples minimize organic waste and reduce time and effort involved in preparation.

Further findings from the research include:

- Over half (54%) of respondents have increased their fruit consumption in the last six months.
- Freshness (32%), price (17%), and ripeness (17%) are the most important factors for consumers when purchasing pineapples.
- 79% of consumers are satisfied with the quality of pineapples available in their local shops.

## Mission Produce Hosts 12th Annual Golf Tournament Fundraiser

Mission Produce Inc., Oxnard, CA, held its 12th annual golf tournament to raise funds for The Mission Foundation. This year's event took place at the Moorpark Country Club in Moorpark, CA, and gathered 160 participants from around the globe to raise more than \$100,000.



This year's winners of the three-course, 27-hole tournament were the RWB Trucking team: Jon Weston, James Rehak, Ryan Walsh and Landon Stone.

The Mission Foundation is Mission Produce's charitable organization dedicated to supporting the communities of Ventura County and the farming industry. In 2024, The Mission Foundation

supported Casa Pacifica, the Boys and Girls Club of Santa Clara Valley and the Ventura County Farm Bureau, among others.

## California Table Grape Growers Offer Scholarship Opportunities

For 40 years, California table grape growers have been providing scholarships to graduating high school seniors from the table grape growing regions of California.



Three categories of scholarships are available again in 2025. Two scholarships are available to fieldworkers and their families. The first, the Field Worker Bridge Scholarship, is a \$14,500 scholarship for students who will attend two years at a community college and transfer to a four-year university.

The second Field Worker Scholarship is a \$25,000 scholarship for students who will attend a four-year university. The third scholarship is a \$25,000 Agriculture Scholarship available for students interested in building a career in the California table grape industry and investing their undergraduate years of study in academic areas related to the industry.

Three scholarships from each category are available. Applicants for all scholarships must plan to attend a California college or university. The deadline to apply for all scholarships is Feb. 7, 2025.

## Bard Valley Natural Delights Celebrates Successful Harvest Tour

Bard Valley Natural Delights recently hosted 15 customers from across North America and Australia for its annual Harvest Tour, Sept. 9-11 in Yuma, AZ. The immersive event gave attendees a hands-on experience of the Medjool date harvest, as well as an inside look at the brand's farm-to-shelf process.



The tour kicked off with a private dinner prepared by celebrated local chef Alex Trujillo, who curated a menu featuring Medjool dates in every course. Participants ventured into the date groves to experience harvesting first-hand.

After the grove experience, attendees visited Natural Delights' state-of-the-art sorting, grading, and packaging facilities. The day concluded with a "Celebrando la Cosecha" dinner alongside the growers.

## Lakeside Organic Gardens Salutes Essential Workers

Demonstrating their gratitude, Charlie Hong Kong, a renowned Santa Cruz, CA, eatery, visited Lakeside Organic Gardens,



Watsonville, CA, to bring a special meal directly to the fields. For over 24 years, Lakeside Organic Gardens has supplied Charlie Hong Kong with organic kale, chard, and other products that the restaurant blends into its inspired organic rice and noodle bowls. This event marks a farm-to-table journey that comes full circle as restaurant cooks and staff served those who make it all possible.



## Worldwide Leaders Meet with Compost Organizations

Price Look Up (PLU) stickers were center stage in a first-ever, worldwide meeting between the fresh produce industry and compost organizations in Niagara Falls, Canada, Oct. 1, with the objective of establishing a global compostable standard for PLUs.

PLUs, integral in helping accurately and effectively identify fresh produce for traceability, inventory control and pricing at retail, are predominantly non-compostable. These stickers end up being difficult to remove, physically contaminating the organics recycling process and adversely impacting the finished compost quality and value.

In an effort to accelerate the development and transition toward compostable PLUs worldwide, both the fresh produce and organics recycling industries met to develop the framework to create this global standard.

## Equitable Food Initiative Extends Course to Full Industry

Equitable Food Initiative, Washington, a workforce development and certification organization that partners with growers, farmworkers, retailers and consumer groups, is extending its Facilitation 101 and 102 courses to the entire fresh produce industry. The courses give attendees the tools to foster a more productive and inclusive work environment.

The Ethical Charter on Responsible Labor Practices outlines 13 guiding principles, ensuring workers throughout the produce industry are treated with dignity and respect. One of its key principles emphasizes the importance of direct communication between management and employees as the most effective way to resolve workplace issues. Registration for Facilitation 101 closes Oct. 29.



## Ocean Mist Farms Participates in Relay for Life

Ocean Mist Farms, Castroville, CA, took part in the American Cancer Society's annual Relay For Life event Sept. 21 in Salinas, CA. In less than 50 days since joining the cause, Ocean Mist Farms climbed to fifth place in charitable rankings out of 77 participating teams.

With nearly 20 employees walking at the event — and a weeklong company-wide fundraising campaign — the team quickly mobilized a series of engaging fundraising events to support this cause. These included contests, raffles, scavenger hunt,

bake sale, pizza lunch, freshly made tacos and a homemade salsa sale.

Ocean Mist Farms went all out to show its support, decorating its corporate office inside and out. At the Relay For Life Walk, the company mascot "Arti" made a special appearance.

### NEW PRODUCTS

## Five New Salad Kit Offerings From Taylor Farms

Taylor Farms, Salinas, CA, dropped five new salad kit flavors just in time for fall.

Joining the Taylor Farms chopped salad kit and mini kit lineups are:

- Pizza Ranch Chopped Kit
- Maple Bourbon Mini Chopped Kit
- Sweet Kale Mini Chopped Kit

Taylor Farms is also launching two new salad kits:
 

- Honey Balsamic Salad Kit
- Everyday Ranch Salad Kit



## Highline Mushrooms Unveils New Oven-Ready Stuffed Mushrooms

Highline Mushrooms, Leamington, Ontario, launched its new value-added product lineup, Sizzlin' Hot New Stuffed Mushrooms.

Featuring three new flavors, each stuffed mushroom promises to elevate any meal or gathering:

- Roasted Goodness Red Pepper & Feta — A blend of roasted red peppers and creamy feta cheese.
- Sup-HerB Basil Pesto Mozza — A combination of basil pesto and mozzarella.
- Mmm Mmm Spinach & Artichoke — A rich and creamy mix of spinach and artichoke.

Sizzlin' Hot New Stuffed Mushrooms come in an oven-ready PETE tray and can be enjoyed in 15 minutes. The stuffed mushrooms are now available at select retailers across the U.S. in the fresh mushroom section.



## Bobo's Expands Oat Bars with New Fig Bar Option

Bobo's, the Loveland, CO-based maker of wholesome oat bars, is launching its newest product line, the "Fig-Tastic" Fig Bars. The addition to its oat bar collection launches in October, bringing two new flavors to fans. The new fig bar line features two flavors: Original Fig and Blueberry Fig.

Bobo's products are: certified gluten-free, non-GMO and kosher; vegan and free from dairy and soy; made with 100% whole grain oats.

Bobo's Fig Bars will be available at retailers

nationwide starting in November, with five-packs for \$5.99.

## Fresh Del Monte Offers New Dessert Pudding Cups

Fresh Del Monte

Produce, Inc., Coral Gables, FL, is launching Del Monte Dessert Pudding Cups, a new line of single-serving desserts that shipped recently to supermarkets, convenience stores and other retailers across North America.

Del Monte Dessert Pudding Cups combine real, fresh-cut fruit with chocolate or vanilla pudding and whipped topping-garnished with sweet ingredients, such as granola, graham crackers, chocolate chips and cinnamon streusel — all in a single-serving, 5.5-ounce package.

Available in four bakery-inspired flavor varieties — Pineapple Streusel, Chocolate Berry Truffle, Mango Mix and Apple Crisp — Del Monte Dessert Pudding Cups combine an indulgent taste with 2 ounces of real fruit, all in one convenient package.



## NatureSweet Debuts Vibrant Trio of Tomatoes on the Vine

NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX, unveils its latest varietal, D'Vines Medley. This vibrant collection of red, orange, and yellow greenhouse-grown cherry on-the-vine tomatoes is the latest offering in the D'Vines portfolio, proudly harvested and packaged in the USA.

The D'Vines Medley tomatoes are the perfect addition to any charcuterie board, meal, or snack, elevating culinary creations with their colorful appeal and fresh taste.

D'Vines will debut at the International Fresh Produce Association's The Global Produce & Floral Show on Oct. 17, in Atlanta. It will be available at retailers such as Aldi, Wakefern, Harris Teeter, Albertsons and Meijer, in early December.



## Little Leaf Farms Introduces New Sesame Ginger Salad Kits

Little Leaf Farms, Devens, MA, has added a Sesame Ginger variety to its fast-growing Salad Kits line, first launched in 2023 with Crispy Caesar and Southwest varieties.

Featuring Little Leaf Farms' fan-favorite Baby Crispy Green Leaf lettuce, the new Sesame Ginger Salad Kit includes Thai seasoned wonton strips, sliced almonds, toasted quinoa and sesame ginger dressing.

Little Leaf Farms Sesame Ginger Salad Kits are available at select grocery stores in the Northeast in 6.5-ounce packages with an MSRP of \$4.99.





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# Getting Hypocritical Consumers to Eat More Produce

BY JIM PREVOR, ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 2018

Consumer behavior ... it is as Winston Churchill said of the actions of Russia: "A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Yet, Churchill said there might be a key to understanding, because he saw the behavior of the Russian government as one rooted in Russian national interest.

It may be that the key to understanding consumer behavior, in which so much of what is said differs from what is done, is best summarized in another famous phrase, "hypocrisy is a tribute vice pays to virtue," which was penned by La Rochefoucauld, a 17th-century French author noted for his memoirs and maxims.

After all, the problem with asking consumers about produce consumption is that it is not a neutral question. Questions, such as what one eats and where one shops, are really detecting aspirations and class anxiety. Whether one shops at Walmart or Whole Foods is, again, not a neutral question.

Plus, in many cases, we are not actually doing survey work; we are getting impressions filtered through the media.

It doesn't take a belief that the media is reporting the au courant "Fake News" to realize that certain stories are more interesting to report. Beautiful pictures of fresh items; interesting techniques that turn old standbys into new items, like noodles made from vegetables; products with stories such as locally grown or organic; and interesting entertainment, such as "vegetable butchers" sure beat reporting on people buying canned green beans.

Walmart is by far the largest food retailer in America. Aldi is the fastest-growing supermarket chain. Yet these facts seem as odd as a martian landing on earth to many Americans. And if we depend on the media for reports, one would certainly expect that Whole Foods/Amazon and Internet services account for almost all the food sold in America — though the reality is these concepts have minuscule shares of the market.

Yet it may be that Churchill's assessment of the Russians — that they do things in their own interest — is true of consumers as well. And the problem is that consumers view their interests in a more complex way than researchers often do.

A recent study by the National Center for Health Statistics, Division of Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys reported on fast food consumption in America:

## KEY FINDINGS

### Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

- During 2013-2016, 36.6% of adults consumed fast food on a given day.
- The percentage of adults who consumed fast food decreased with age: 44.9% aged 20-39, 37.7% aged 40-59, and 24.1% aged 60 and over.

• A higher percentage of non-Hispanic black adults consumed fast food than non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Asian and Hispanic adults.

• The percentage of adults who consumed fast food increased with increasing family income.

• Among those who consumed fast food, men were more likely than women to eat fast food at lunch, but women were more likely to report eating fast food as a snack.

All the stereotypes of fast food being for poor people are incorrect. As family income increases, consumers eat more fast food. Don't people want to be healthy? They say they do in surveys and claim they are trying to eat better. So where is the disconnect?

Consumers probably do want to be healthy, but that is not the only thing they want. And the urgency of other things, say feeding the kids before soccer practice or play rehearsal, drives behavior in other directions.

Industry efforts to use health as the great motivator for purchase have failed time and time again. Part of the problem is the effort is

weak. Restaurants and supermarkets may want to be seen as on the side of the angels, so they may engage in some "pro-produce" efforts, but they really are agnostic on the matter. Their function is to sell the foods consumers want to eat, not to alter the dining habits of the whole country.

But even with very enthusiastic backers, efforts to boost consumption through health promotion suffer from the fact that almost everyone already identifies produce as healthy. They were taught as little children by their mothers. So, education has limited impact.

But, mostly, consumers think of many factors when purchasing food. Produce fails in many of these areas. For example, produce is not uniform in taste and flavor, prices can fluctuate dramatically, and many of the healthiest items require preparation, which means time and effort.

If the produce industry wants to get consumers to eat more produce, it shouldn't have to rely on convincing consumers that it is good for them like some kind of medicine. The industry needs to produce consistently delicious items, often fresh-cut in a way that makes them convenient, and it has to do this at a price that is seen as advantageous to other options.

Concentrate on taste, quality, convenience and economy. Let the healthfulness be a bonus, and sales will soar. **pb**

*Produce industry icon Jim Prevor, who founded PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine in 1985, died Nov. 7, 2022. To honor his legacy as a maverick thought-leader, this space spotlights the best of Prevor's "Fruits of Thought" column, which garnered more than 200 awards in business journalism.*

**Consumers think of many factors when purchasing food. Produce fails in many of these areas.**



# What Do Today's Produce Consumers Want?

By Rick Stein

**W**hat are consumers thinking at the point-of-sale, and how can you get them to make the move and put a certain produce item in their cart, either in the store or online? That's an age-old question, but the advent of personalization technologies and the abundance of data can help produce businesses get closer to delivering what people want, how they want it, and when they want it.

It's not rhetorical anymore, and that makes it an exciting time to be in this market. From year to year and season to season, we can learn more about today's shoppers, and how we can best meet their needs and tastes, while optimizing produce sales.

The marketplace certainly remains dynamic. If nothing else, the first half of this decade has shown that growers, grocers and others in the farm-to-table chain have learned to adjust to external circumstances that affect supply and demand.

FMI regularly conducts research to identify and assess the impact of market factors on consumers. Many factors offer opportunities to boost sales, critical in broader fruit and vegetable categories that have been somewhat flat in recent years.

## SATISFYING CRAVINGS

Snacking is one notable trend and opportunity for produce companies and retailers. Our research affirms that most adults snack three or four times a day and reach for a variety of foods and drinks.

Produce and produce-based snacks check a lot of boxes for today's consumers. For one thing, people are looking to cut dining costs and many budget-focused households are scaling back on big meals.

In addition, many produce items considered snacks are healthy and convenient, something that's increasingly important to shoppers, as they have resumed on-the-go lifestyles. Pre-cut fruit has emerged as a standout product at retail, according to *The Power of Produce 2024* from FMI. This report finds that 73% of shoppers buy value-added vegetables "sometimes to always," and 57% purchase value-added fruit that often.

On the vegetable side, cucumbers have become increasingly popular as a snack. *The Power of Produce* revealed cucumbers are one of the few produce items with positive unit and volume growth over the past year.

Younger consumers, who have strong purchasing power, are especially into produce snacks. *The Power of Produce* showed the growth in spending among Millennial and Gen Z shoppers underscores the opportunity for produce snacking, especially compared to older cohorts like Baby Boomers, who tend to eat vegetables during lunch and dinner. Parents also continually look for ways to give their children nutritious snacks.

**Research says 51% of consumers would like tips on new ways to incorporate fresh fruit and vegetable snacking into their daily routine.**

These opportunities open up new paths for growth. *The Power of Produce* shows among consumers who eat produce daily, 45% eat fruit for a morning snack, and 26% turn to veggies in the early hours of the day. For afternoon snacks, 46% eat fruit and 36% opt for a vegetable. Dinner snacks have become a thing, too, with 44% of survey respondents reporting they consume fruit as a late-in-the-day snack, and 27% noshing on vegetable snacks.

Shoppers are hungry for more ideas for produce snacking. According to FMI's research, 51% of consumers would like tips on new ways to incorporate fresh fruit and vegetable snacking into their daily routine. Produce companies and grocers can provide those tips in a variety of ways, such as packaging, social media, signage touting convenience, main and secondary displays and recipe ideation across occasions.

## DRINK UP

In addition to snacks, suppliers and retailers can generate excitement and sales with fresh-squeezed juices. Several retailers around the country, including chains and independents, have done well with in-house juice bars where consumers can order a variety of beverages.

One of FMI's latest reports, *The State of Fresh Foods 2024*, found these areas can be

successful. Of the 14% of stores that had a juice bar last year, 44% gave that feature an 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale.

In addition to offering made-to-order and ready-to-drink juices from a bar or kiosk, grocers and suppliers can promote fresh juices by merchandising those products in the produce sections. Available in a range of sizes and formats, these packaged juices lend a colorful visual appeal and provide a point of differentiation.

## 'TIS THE MERCHANDISING SEASON

Growers and retailers can also leverage some of the latest customer insights to create displays that engage shoppers.

In addition to spotlighting fruits and vegetables that are in season, retailers can merchandise produce in more places across a store. *The Power of Produce* report found seven in 10 shoppers are interested in breaking down department silos, and appreciate finding things like value-added produce and kits in the deli and prepared foods areas.

Beyond focusing on and responding to key trends, those who provide and sell produce to today's shoppers are deploying more technologies that reach shoppers at various points on their journey. Those forms of technologies vary and there are certainly many success stories.

Social media is one way — low-hanging fruit, if you will — to grow sales. This year's *Power of Produce* confirms the influence of such platforms, with 48% of Gen Z consumers reporting that they draw meal inspiration from TikTok, versus 12% of Gen Xers.

As people get accustomed to scanning QR codes, that technology can be valuable as well. FMI's data affirms that half of today's shoppers are interested in using QR codes to find recipes and/or nutrition information, and six in 10 can see themselves using the tool to learn how to extend the shelf life of produce items at home.

The sheer amount of data and emerging technologies may seem daunting when it comes to determining what and how to use it to grow sales, but, as always, it comes down to knowing your customers and finding more ways to give them what they want. **pb**



Rick Stein is vice president of Fresh Foods at FMI — The Food Industry Association.

# producebusiness

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*Congratulations to the Winners of 2024*

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## FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Friends,

For nearly four decades under the leadership of Jim Prevor, PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine has been a leading industry influencer in the effort to increase overall produce consumption, whether by one commodity at a time or through educating the entire produce buying sector about ways to sell more fruits and vegetables.

**PRODUCE BUSINESS renews this commitment, and we invite you to help us continue our mission!** In addition to devoting even more editorial pages to assist the industry in moving the needle on consumption, we invite you to nominate key players we can highlight in our pages for the industry to learn by their examples.



### Here's how:

Throughout the year, we will be selecting companies and people exemplary in selling and marketing fruits and vegetables to consumers. Introduced through 4 new cover stories that are based on industry nominations, we will showcase award-winning examples of companies and individuals doing superb jobs in consumer engagement.

**PLEASE LOOK FOR LINKS ON OUR WEBSITE TO ACCESS THE NOMINATION FORMS FOR THE FOLLOWING AWARDS:**

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Innovations  
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**Most  
Innovative  
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Retailer  
2025**



Our team of award-winning editors will select the top recipients based on your nominations and descriptions of each company's contribution to increase produce consumption.

We urge you to participate in our recognition awards as often as possible so we all contribute to the success of this program to raise the bar on produce consumption.

If you would like to reach me, my telephone number is 561-994-1118, extension 101. Again, thank you for your support.

Ken Whitacre  
Publisher/Editorial Director  
kwhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

**P.S.** As we enter the next phase of Jim Prevor's mission to "initiate industry improvement," we encourage your input and hope you will contact us to discuss ways to increase produce consumption. Our regular-appearing "Voice of the Industry" column, for example, is just one way to express yourself to help increase produce consumption.



# Neighborhood Stalwart Transformed: ShopRite of Drexeline

This complete rebuild's abundant produce section wows loyal and new customers.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

**S**hopRite of Drexeline, part of Burns' Family Neighborhood Markets, has been serving the community in Drexel Hill, PA, for 43 years. In September 2023, it celebrated a well-earned grand opening of a new store, and enjoyed a successful first year.

Tim Brown, chief operating officer for Burns' Family Neighborhood Markets, says the ShopRite of Drexeline was a replacement store for the original company headquarters.

A member of the Wakefern Food Corp., store owner Patrick J. Burns currently operates five Fresh Grocer supermarkets and two ShopRite supermarkets throughout the Greater Philadelphia area. The new Drexel Hill store was a complete teardown and rebuild.

Burns' Family Neighborhood Markets specializes in providing high-quality perishables in urban and suburban environments.

"We are committed to understanding the needs, tastes and traditions of the communities in which the stores are located, and make it a priority to offer an assortment of products and services to meet those various needs," says Brown. "We are also committed to improving food access and to promoting the health and wellness of our customers, associates and communities."



The new ShopRite of Drexeline, Drexel Hill, PA, is about 72,000 square feet, with a produce department of approximately 4,000 square feet.

PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS DUARTE

## GREATER SUCCESS

The new store is about 72,000 square feet total, with a produce department of approximately 4,000 square feet. "Our new produce department is about double the space of our old store, allowing for expanded variety of both traditional and organic produce offerings," says Brown.

The produce department is a standout department that has seen a tremendous lift in sales compared to the prior store, explains Brown. "The department is doing very well, ahead of store trend, and sometimes double the volume of our old location," he says. "Our new location allowed for the installation of state-of-the-art equipment, a far better layout to provide

a better shopping experience, and the addition of promotional space to present better value for our customers."

The store considers produce a department that sets it apart from the competition from both a value and freshness perspective, says Brown. "By offering both value and freshness, we find that our customers have increased basket size and confidence in our other fresh departments."

The department moves around 5,000 cases per week. It procures 100% of produce from Wakefern and takes delivery six days a week from the Wakefern warehouse. "In order to drive the success of the overall co-op and keep produce as fresh as possible coming out of the warehouse, it is important to procure as much of our goods as possible from our co-op," says Brown.

The store emphasizes quality and value. "Yes, you can accomplish both," says Brown. "Some people think you have to sacrifice one to achieve the other, but the goal for our company's produce departments is to be able to turn product to keep freshness and drive quality perception."

## A PRODUCE BOUNTY

The sweeping, bright department carries around 1,000 SKUs between fresh produce, juice and dry goods. "Our new space allows for an open floor plan, with the interior of the department designed with field bins and mobile refrigerated units from JSI," says Brown. "Space is the



The displays at ShopRite of Drexeline, Drexel Hill, PA, boast built-in shelves underneath for cross-merchandising shelf-stable products, such as jarred garlic, sauces and salad toppings.

PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS DUARTE



PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS DUARTE  
The ShopRite of Drexeline, Drexel Hill, PA, has several 7-by-4 foot refrigerated wood-themed cases that display cut fruit and some specialty items, including Frieda's ready-to-go whole coconut.

one premium we picked up in this new store to help allow for a more comfortable shopping experience, increased variety, and better grouping and categorizing of commodities.”

The new store makes great use of the amount of space it now enjoys. Upon entering the store, shoppers are greeted with several 12-by-5 foot field bins full of seasonal produce. Several 7-by-4 foot refrigerated, wood-themed cases display cut fruit and some specialty items.

The department utilizes combinations of moveable displays to build large 16- to 20-foot combinations throughout, simulating a farm-market style. Angled corners and a small second shelf add character and functionality to some displays.

Other displays boast built-in shelves underneath for cross-merchandising shelf-stable products, such as jarred garlic, sauces and salad toppings. The fresh wall is 52 feet long, with an additional 36 feet of doors for bagged salads and soy products.

The store carries a full variety of both conventional and organic produce. “The good thing about opening a replacement store is that you have a sense of who your current customer is, can expand on what you already know you did well, and build on it to help engage new customers,” says Brown. “Additionally, we are constantly trying new items and varieties and continue to carry those items our customers connect with.”

## ENGAGING SHOPPERS

Promotional items are highlighted at the front of the department to drive a value and price image. The store offers a weekly circular, both traditional and digital.

The department cross-merchandises and offers tie-in items accordingly to help showcase variety. “Additionally, we have a meal solutions program that our stores design weekly,” says Brown. “They are encouraged to tie in a few fresh produce items, along with meat, seafood and dairy items.”

Most of the produce managers have come up internally in the company as rising stars. “They have worked their way up through hard work

and dedication and are very in tune with the preferences of the communities,” says Brown. “I don’t want to leave anyone out, but would like to specifically thank Freddie, Kevin, Darnell, Dan, Jake, Jose, and Minh for all of their hard work in making our company successful.”

Being locally owned means the company is involved with the communities it serves. “It is important to support the community, and in turn, hope that the community continues to support our company and our employees,” says Brown. “We have a very diverse customer base, and we try to cater to everyone’s tastes and needs.

We aim to make a difference every day by being good corporate citizens, good employers, good operators and good people.” **pb**

### FACT FILE

## SHOPRITE OF DREXELINE

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BY SARAH LOUISE KLOSE

**W**e've rounded up a selection of companies that provide new technology to retailers and consumers. The innovative software and hardware is designed to improve store operations and the customer shopping experience. It can update prices, check inventory, restock produce and other labor- or time-saving efficiencies.

For example, digital solutions, AI technology and data-driven insights assist independent and national grocery stores. QR codes tell shoppers about farm workers who picked their produce. An app allows shoppers to buy surplus retail produce at a discount. An in-store robot traverses store aisles to check inventory.

Electronic Shelf Labels (ESL) reduce paper waste — FMI members estimate the average supermarket changes 7,000 price tags a week by hand — and improve customer checkout, because the register price will match the shelf price. Retail loyalty programs reward customers with points, and special deals via the store's app.

Let's get started.

## RETAILERS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS

### SCHNUCK MARKETS, INC.

At Schnuck Markets Inc., headquartered in

Saint Louis, MO, customers can earn 2% back via the Schnuck Rewards app. At checkout, shoppers enter their phone number or scan an in-app barcode to earn points and redeem rewards/digital coupons. The same benefits apply for curbside and delivery orders.

"From personalized, digital coupons to personalized weekly ads, our Schnucks Rewards Program is helping customers build weekly shopping lists, locate items in our stores, and identify savings and promotional offers specific to what they purchase the most," says Paul Simon, communications lead for Schnuck Markets.

Schnucks offers a range of recipes in the app and on its website. Customers can add favorite recipes to a personal list, with ingredients automatically saved. They can find the ingredients courtesy of Schnuck's ESL system from Aperion.

"Once in the store, customers can use the search feature in the app to find the exact aisle, 4-foot section, and shelf of products in the recipe. From there, customers can tap 'Flash Digital Shelf Tag' that will light up the electronic shelf tag in front of the product," says Simon.

Customers can join Schnuck's Healthier Habits program and receive insights, recipes and special offers. Shoppers look for the Dietitian Pick icon (which includes a thumbs-up logo) via shelf tags at the store or

**"Over time, this will be a game changer for the industry. It will give independent stores the same opportunities that larger chain stores have."**

—Randy Bohaty, B&R Stores, Lincoln, NE

the product guide on the app. Spoon Guru, an AI nutrition company, helps Schnucks curate the 5,000 dietitian-approved items in the store.

### NORTHEAST GROCERY, INC.

Northeast Grocery, Inc. began a four-month pilot program with Simbe Robotics. The traditional grocery has 300 locations (Tops Friendly Markets, Price Chopper/Market 32). It deployed a Tally robot at 10 New York stores, to traverse the aisles three times a day, using four cameras and superior sensing to scan shelves and process data.

"It will advise what is in stock, whether there are out-of-stocks, whether the price tag is correct," says Scott Kessler, executive vice president and chief information officer at Northeast Shared Services in Schenectady,



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NY. “Tally has messaging that says ‘I am checking inventory.’ Kids love it; people take pictures with it.”

Tally sends information to the cloud via Wi-Fi and generates downloadable reports. Based on the data, grocery store staff can replace price tags, change supplier mix and negotiate with vendors. Tally helps with marketing and merchandising, too. Currently, Tally does not scan fresh produce, as the robot only reads vertical refrigerated units, (i.e., in the frozen aisle).

“But in the future, Tally could tell us whether produce needs to be turned or removed based on its aging on the shelf. Using computer vision (CV), we could potentially use Tally robot to correct produce pricing, and for picking optimization for online grocery order fulfillment,” says Kessler.

## B&R STORES

B&R Stores Inc. is a regional chain with 30 independent grocery stores in Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri. Its brands are Russ’s Market, C&R and Supersaver. B&R offers customers a loyalty program and a convenient mobile app.

“The more you push people digitally, the less labor you use to get the sale. If they buy online, the sale is done, and you transfer the labor to filling the order,” says Randy Bohaty, director of produce for B&R Stores in Lincoln, NE.

B&R is a developmental partner for EmpowerFresh. The store worked with the produce platform’s software solutions, developing behind-the-scenes engineering for smooth retail operations. EmpowerFresh’s Ad Writing projects B&R’s gross mix before an item is placed in an ad. Alert System advises when an item or category will miss its preferred gross margins. AI Ordering suggests



PHOTO COURTESY SCHNUCK MARKETS

At Schnuck Markets, Inc., Saint Louis, MO, customers can use the search feature in the app to find the exact aisle, 4-foot section, and shelf of products in recipes on its website. From there, customers can tap “Flash Digital Shelf Tag” that will light up the electronic shelf tag in front of the product.

what to order, based on data from past sales and current inventory.

“Over time, this will be a game changer for the industry. It will give independent stores the same opportunities that larger chain stores have. It will help the independent retailers be more efficient and will make their job easier,” says Bohaty. The result will be better inventory, higher sales and improved store operations.

Produce is a challenging commodity because it is fresh. Since experienced labor is

harder to find, EmpowerFresh offers B&R produce managers digital training (on items, categories, pricing and merchandising), and provides reports to associates (on historical data and competitive prices), so they can do research on an iPad.

“With produce, so many things can change from field to consumer. As the retailer, we are the last line of that chain. The more we can rely on technology, and the more we can do to get the consumer the freshest produce, the better off everyone is,” says Bohaty.

## TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

### EMPOWERFRESH

EmpowerFresh Company in Kansas City, MO, provides AI technology and data-driven insights to independent grocery stores. The software streamlines processes, optimizes fresh operations and improves the customer experience.

The company helps retailers prioritize labor hours, so work is done efficiently. Its training materials are a win for independent grocers who struggle with labor challenges. The alert system, an added feature, gives parameters and margins by category. If a store is dumping a produce item, an alert goes off and educational tips will kick in.

“My favorite is eggplant because I love eggplant,” says Anthony Totta, founder. “Let’s say you buy 88 eggplants a week and only sell 20. So, you are losing a lot of eggplant. Are they under misters? Because they should not be. What is the temperature of the case? If it is a 33-degree case, it is too cold, and that is destroying the eggplant.”

Empower also offers Category Optimization (CAO). Using AI,

it suggests orders based on ads and history. This leads to better sales and profits by category, without increasing waste and out of stocks.

Independent Grocers Alliance (IGA) in Chicago, IL, partnered with EmpowerFresh to “provide our members with innovative technology solutions to help them thrive in an increasingly competitive market environment,” says Michael La Kier, vice president brand development.

“We set out to put in the hands of retailers — by notebook, PC and phone — real time actionable data. The end result is they reduce their shrink and increase their turns,” says Totta.

With EmpowerFresh, retailers place supplier orders and manage in-store fresh cuts. The software integrates competitive data, so retailers know they are not priced too high or too low. The company’s ad writing tool helps retailers have the right mix of ads at the right time and shows (sales) lift.

“And for the consumer, the product is fresh and there is less out of stock. The customer is happy because the retailers keep a product in stock that would otherwise be out of stock,” says Totta.





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## VUSIONGROUP

VusionGroup provides digital solutions that improve retail store performance, manage planogram compliance and optimize inventory performance.

“Our Computer Vision AI monitors shelves for discolored, expired or low-stock inventory. Every 15 minutes, it can send a notification to the cloud to restock,” says Cody Smith, head of marketing, North America for VusionGroup in Chicago, IL.

The company’s ESLs show product information, promotions, QR codes — and prices that can be updated in real time.

“Whether you have one or 50 store locations, you can make updates simultaneously from one single location. This reduces labor cost and increases shop accuracy,” says Smith.

VusionGroup’s electronic tags can withstand water, refrigeration and high heat. They have a 10-year battery life, can be as thin as a credit card, and come in black, white, yellow and red. ESLs range from 1.2 to 7.4 inches wide, and can fit any store rail or stand.

“We have a wide variety of tag sizes that any retailer can use. Say you want to put Bartlett pears on sale, you can use a larger 4.2-inch tag,” says Smith.



Hy-Vee implemented VusionGroup’s digital solutions at 230 stores. Shifting to ESLs allows it to offer intra-day promotions on perishable items and in-store order fulfillment via flashing LEDs.

VusionGroup can help retailers support companies, such as Wonderful Pistachios and Avocados from Mexico, via larger tags and added sales. Its software enhances the customer experience, too. “We can integrate with store apps and loyalty programs to show deals or discounts. We can customize tags: red if on sale, yellow for loyalty members,” says Smith.

Hy-Vee implemented VusionGroup’s digital solutions at 230 stores. Shifting to ESLs allows it to offer intra-day promotions on perishable items and in-store order fulfillment via flashing LEDs.

“Partnering with VusionGroup helps us streamline multiple operations in our stores, and makes the labeling process significantly

better for both our customers and our employees,” says Brian Young, senior vice president and chief information officer of Hy-Vee.

Walmart is testing VusionGroup’s digital labels and LED lights, and plans to expand it to 2,600 stores in two years. The test includes simplified stock replenishment for staff with “Stock to Light,” and faster order picking for Instacart shoppers with “Pick to Light.”

Walmart associate Daniela Boscan says ESLs “allow us to update prices at the shelf using a mobile app, reducing the need to walk around the store to change paper tags by hand and giving us more time to support customers in the store.”

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## AFRESH

Afresh, San Francisco, CA, has software that 2,600 U.S. retailers use to order produce and maximize shelf life. Retail customers include national chains, plus regional chains such as WinCo Foods, Heinen's and Fresh Thyme Market. The company uses AI to forecast demand and inventory and leverages the store's past sales data by looking at price, promotion, day of week and holidays.

"The produce manager uses an iPad or Android and goes through a workflow: check inventory on the system, look at items that have higher shrink," says Matt Schwartz, chief executive and co-founder. "We have 95 to 97% store adherence to what our system recommends."

The proprietary technology by Afresh makes sense of a plethora of imperfect information. For example, with strawberries, it will consider different suppliers, clamshell vs. kraft containers, various package sizes, 12- versus 16-ounce weights — plus cold chain compliance, new barcodes and more — to make the right decisions on ordering.

Afresh relies on its intuitive software to empower produce managers, but steps in as needed.

## Afresh relies on its intuitive software to empower produce managers, but steps in as needed.

"We partner with our customers to be sure they are successful at scale and that their employees are successful at solution," says Schwartz

While Afresh uses AI to automate as much as possible, it incorporates boots-on-the-ground learning, too. "Grocers said when SNAP benefits (food stamps) come out, there can be a rise in demand. And the shopping demand pattern is different if Cinco de Mayo falls on a weekday vs. a weekend. So, we believe you need insight from store employees to do the best job possible," says Schwartz.

The software benefits shoppers, too. "The food is fresher and should have one to two extra days of shelf life through faster inventory turnover. And when you go in the store, you'll see the item is in stock," says Schwartz.



PHOTO COURTESY FLASHFOOD

FlashFood in Toronto, Ontario, helps grocery stores reduce food waste by identifying surplus or produce near its best-by date through an app that directs shoppers to stores with discounted food. It offers, for example, a "Produce Box," a 10-pound box of mixed produce that costs \$5 and feature a random assortment of fruits and vegetables depending on each store's stock.

## FLASHFOOD

Flashfood, based in Toronto, Canada, has an app for consumers to purchase discounted food from U.S. retailers. It has partnered with 2,200 grocery stores in 21 U.S. states, including Lucky, Kroger, Giant, Stop & Shop and Piggly Wiggly. The Flashfood mission is to "feed families, not landfills."

"Flashfood's retail partners populate the app daily with high-quality groceries in surplus or near their best-by date, which includes fresh fruits and vegetables," says Calli Brannan, head of customer success at Flashfood. "The product is uploaded to the app with a photo, a best-by date, and a price, often up to 50% off."

Shoppers look at a map on the app to find stores near them and

browse store items that are posted throughout the day. Flashfood often sends promotions and offers.

"Our 'Produce Box,' a 10-pound box of mixed produce, is the most purchased item on Flashfood. All produce boxes are \$5 and feature a random assortment of fruits and vegetables depending on each store's stock," says Brannan. A photo of the box is posted so the shopper can see whether it's fruit-heavy, vegetable-heavy, or all avocados, for example.

Flashfood helps grocery stores reduce food waste, recover lost profits (by reducing shrink by an average of 27%), drive in-store foot traffic, and drive incremental sales.

"On average, Flashfood shoppers spend \$20 in additional in-store purchases per month," says Brannan.

## PROCURANT

Watsonville, CA-based Procurant is a strategic platform for perishables that focuses mainly on growers, shippers and warehouses. It offers an integrated solution, so retail grocers can procure produce, and manage costs and quality. Procurant serves retailers, including Albertson's and Associated Food Stores (AFS).

Online grocery shopping is expected to grow from 17% to 24% of retailer business by 2027, according to a 2022 Wharton School study. As e-commerce grows, more suppliers and retailers need to collaborate on catalog photos. Broccoli can be pictured in someone's hand or on a white background, but the photo has to come from somewhere and rest somewhere.

"The product name, description, images — that is not our primary business, but it is an offshoot of the inventory we are handling," says Kevin Brooks, chief revenue and marketing officer at Procurant. "Anecdotally, we are noticing an uptick in our system being a source for that information. Although each retailer has different standards, it is logical for the images to rest in Procurant."

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Salad kits are an above-average performer in dollar growth, according to data shared by 210 Analytics, San Antonio, TX. Salad kits are now a \$2.2 billion category, up 3.6% year-over-year, according to Circana in the MULO+ universe.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

# The Scoop on Fresh-Cut Salads

Salad kits are now one of the top 10 sellers in the produce department.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Just when you thought the fresh-cut salad category had reached its peak in permutations of forms and flavors, there's something fresh for the customer craving what's new.

It's the perfect example of crafting a product that didn't exist until the late 1980s and building it into one of the top 10 sellers in produce. Salad kits alone, only one segment of the category, ranked ninth in the top 20 of vegetables, with over half (52%) of U.S. households purchasing these products in 2023, according to household panel data by Circana, a Chicago, IL-headquartered market research and technology company.

Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL, sees two separate distinctions in the products it carries. "One is blends, like spring mix or a mix of spinach, arugula and baby lettuces. We're seeing more interest in baby lettuce blends on the organic side,"

says Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations. "Secondly are the kits, including the heartier chopped kits. These offer convenience, something shoppers grab to add to their dinner.

"The next product in this category we look to add is the blends and kits made with hydroponic lettuce with freshness and 365 availability."

The fresh-cut salad category is rapidly evolving, driven by several key consumer trends, says Lindsay Gammon, brand manager for Mastronardi Produce Ltd., in Kingsville, Ontario. "Consumers are increasingly prioritizing health, seeking fresh, nutrient-rich options, and busy lifestyles are pushing demand for convenient, ready-to-eat options. These trends influence manufacturer innovation in the salad category."

Here are the newest fresh-cut salad products and ways to sell more in this crowded category.

## SINGLE GREENS & BLENDS

Value-added lettuce can be broken up into different areas, says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal of 210 Analytics LLC, a food retail market research firm based in San Antonio, TX. "Thinking about meal-ready romaine, shredded lettuce or pre-washed lettuce leaves, sales total a little over \$1 billion in Circana's MULO+ universe."

Both dollars and units of these products are virtually unchanged compared to year-ago levels, adds Roerink.

"Hand-cut leaf options are emerging in popularity, as they provide a convenient ready-to-eat option when making fresh salads, but also offer versatile options in the way of lettuce wrapping a burger or crafting low-carb tacos in the romaine leaf," says Mastronardi's Gammon.

Earlier this year, the company introduced a 10-ounce pack of Hand-Cut Romaine and

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Salad kits provide a quick, all-in-one meal solution, especially for those seeking easy, flavorful options.

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4-ounce Hand-Cut Butter Leaf under its Backyard Farms-branded lettuce line.

Misionero has expanded its Garden Life brand of washed, trimmed, ready-to-use single greens and includes 7-ounce Lettuce Boats and 5-ounce Deli Leaf packs. Under the Monterey, CA-headquartered company's Earth Greens label, there are 7-ounce packs of organic romaine and organic green leaf.

"Organic options remain in demand, particularly among health-conscious consumers," says Nicole Minnich-Zapata, marketing director.

Most fresh-cut lettuce tends to be nonorganic, which is typical of the entire value-added category, says Roerink. "Yet, if we look at it demographically, we see a big overlap between organic shoppers and value-added consumers, both skewing to higher-income households. This is something the meat department is responding to with a lot of innovation in organic, value-added products. I think this is still a gap in the market for produce."

Growth in this segment is driven by new products that deliver on taste and smaller portion size, i.e., 4 ounces rather than 5 ounces, as well as organically grown, according to Bryan Jaynes, vice president of product development and marketing at Taylor Farms, in Salinas, CA. Under its

Earthbound Farm label, the company has introduced a 4-ounce Limited Harvest Wild Red Arugula, with an exclusive variety of the green.

Boskovich Farms' fresh-cut processing company, Fresh Prep, expanded its product line with the introduction of its Green Fork and Fair Earth packaged salad lines, according to Robert Spence, executive vice president of sales and marketing for the Oxnard, CA-headquartered grower/marketer.

Green Fork is a conventional line of blends and kits with new recipes inspired by high-end restaurants, while Fair Earth line is an organic line of blends and kits in the only BPI (Biodegradable Products Institute) certified home compostable packaging.

### SALAD KITS

"The advantage of salad kits is that they provide a dinner solution in a bag. We've seen a ton of innovation in this category," says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie's Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers in the Pacific Northwest as Metropolitan Market, as well as larger chains such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts.

Salad kits are an above-average performer in dollar growth, according to data shared by 210 Analytics. Salad kits are now a \$2.2 billion category, up 3.6% year-over-year, according to



Circana in the MULO+ universe. Grocery stores sell more than 170 million salad kits per year, which is up 2.2% versus last year.

“Both salad kits and straight value-added organic salad greens remain popular with consumers, each appealing to different needs,” says Kori Tuggle, vice president of marketing and product development for Braga Fresh Family Farms, in Soledad, CA, which markets its organic salads under the Josie’s Organic brand.

“Salad kits continue to see strong demand due to their convenience,” Tuggle adds. “They provide a quick, all-in-one meal solution, especially for those seeking easy, flavorful options.”

Salad kits with protein, such as chicken pieces, generate a little more than \$650 million annually. While unit sales are up 3.1% year-on-year, deflation is pulling down dollars below year-ago levels, according to Circana data shared by 210 Analytics.

Additionally, according to the Southeast Produce Council’s *What’s New 2024* study, released in September, 21% of households in the U.S. struggle with fresh fruit and vegetables sold in quantities that are too much, thus leading to waste.

These protein and packaging trends combine in FiveStar Gourmet Foods’ new single- and two-serve salad line called Simply Fresh Shakers, packaged in a patented “salad shaker” bowl system that makes mixing easy. Three flavors in the eight-item line include chicken: Chicken Caesar, Southwestern Style and Crunchy Asian Style.

“Our newest is the Caprese Pasta Salad Shaker,” says Tal Shoshan, chief executive officer of the Ontario, CA-based company.

### CHOPPED SALAD KITS

Consumers want great-tasting, fresh-cut salad products that deliver convenience, health, and value. Increasingly, they also want meal



PHOTO COURTESY OLIVIA'S ORGANICS

The continued growth of chopped salad kits mirrors broader food trends, offering a balance of traditional, cultural, and crave-able choices to provide unique flavor experiences.

solutions in the form of chopped salad kits, according to Taylor Farms’ Jaynes. The value-added salad category is up +3.3%, driven by the chopped kits segment, which is up +13% (Circana, 26 weeks ending 9-8-24).

New sizes and new flavors are driving growth in the chopped kits segment, too, Jaynes adds.

Taylor Farms has added to its mini (single-serve) chopped salad kit line with the introduction of Sweet Kale, which comes with pepitas, cranberries and a creamy poppyseed dressing, and Maple Bourbon, with a vinai-

grette of its namesake flavor with chopped vegetables and diced almonds.

The growth of chopped salad kits mirrors broader food trends, offering a balance of traditional, cultural, and crave-able choices to provide unique flavor experiences, according to Bil Goldfield, director of corporate communications for the Dole Food Company Inc., in Charlotte, NC. “Our three new chopped salad kit flavors were developed through extensive research processes to deliver the popular flavors to consumers.”

One is Spicy Cashew Salad, with greens,



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veggies, cashews, honey sesame sticks, and a creamy cashew dressing, based on research showing interest in cashews as an ingredient is up 72% in dips and dressings.

The second is Baja Ranch Salad, a Mexican-inspired twist on a classic ranch, combining chopped greens with thick-cut cheddar, roasted corn, crispy jalapenos and a tangy sweet lime seasoning. Third is Hummus Crunch, which ties into the Mediterranean diet and “Blue Zones” trend for longevity, with a hummus-style dressing with chopped greens, red bell peppers, feta cheese, pita chips, and savory tomato-basil seasoning. Each comes in an 8.2-ounce bag.

“We recommend creating a brand block with optimal shelf placement to create a visual cue for shoppers,” says Goldfield.

While traditional flavors continue to dominate salad kit sales, Braga Fresh is actively tapping into the rising interest in global flavors, says Tuggle. “We’ve recently introduced new flavors to our chop salad kit line, such as Josie’s Organic Basil Crunch (kale, red cabbage, carrots, radicchio, a basil and garlic vinaigrette, Parmesan cheese and crispy quinoa), and Jalapeno Ranch (green cabbage, romaine, carrots, cilantro and green onions paired with tortilla strips, pepitas and a jalapeno ranch dressing).”

### GREENHOUSE-GROWN BLENDS & KITS

According to Mastronardi’s Gammon, greenhouse-grown lettuce continues to grow +38% in the lettuce category, which is overall flat year-over-year in retail sales. “Spinach still accounts for about 30% of leaf lettuce sales, but volume is down year over year. We are still seeing growth in kale and arugula. One of our new products is a washed and ready Kale Spring Mix.”

State Garden, in Chelsea, MA, has introduced its greenhouse-grown lettuce blends called Locally Known. Two SKUs are greenhouse-based varieties, and the other three are a blend of greenhouse-grown and field varieties.

“We found consumers are really interested in their salad’s ‘crunch’ factor, but are still seeking the varieties they love. We validated this theory in quantitative and qualitative research and invested in a greenhouse farm, North Country Growers, based in Berlin, NH, to help us make Locally Known a reality,” says Tom Thompson, chief revenue officer.

Gotham Greens, a hydroponic lettuce grower in Brooklyn, NY, recently introduced a Baby Spinach Mix, says Viraj Puri, co-founder and chief executive officer. “This is a blend of baby spinach paired with other favorites we grow, like butterhead and green leaf, which is exclusively available at select retailers in the Midwest at this time.”



While traditional flavors continue to dominate salad kit sales, many companies have been tapping into the rising interest in global flavors.

PHOTO COURTESY FRESH EXPRESS

The company has also launched a new line of salad kits featuring green leaf, which come in three flavors: Green Goddess, Southwest Ranch and Caesar.

The latest innovations for BrightFarms, an indoor farming company headquartered in Irvington, NY, are two new flavors to its Crunch Kit salads: Southwest Chipotle Crunch Kit and Mediterranean Crunch Kit. Both use the company’s signature Sunny Crunch lettuce as the base.

“Indoor grown is exploding in popularity. All the growth in the salad category is coming from the indoor segment, while organic continues to decline and conventional, field-grown lettuce has remained stagnant,” says Jess Soare, senior director of marketing.

“According to a recent study we commissioned with GutCheck on salad consumers’ attitudes and usages, 67% of consumers say the No. 1 factor in choosing which premium leafy green they would purchase is ‘freshness of leaves.’ We locate our greenhouses close to where our consumers live. In fact, our greens arrive at grocery stores in as little as 24 hours after harvest.”

Consumer education of the indoor, greenhouse-grown salad segment is essential, Soare adds. “We’ve had lots of success utilizing point-of-sale to draw consumers’ eyes to our products, as well as using digital media to educate consumers further about the brand.”

### HOT-COLD SALAD MEAL KITS

Fresh Express is creating a new category with its Hot or Cold Salad and Noodle Meal Kits, which leverages global culinary cuisines with convenient meal solutions. The first three flavors, which became available nationwide in late September, are Teriyaki, Sweet Asian Ginger and Korean Sesame.

“The kits bring the familiarity of a salad

**“Hand-cut leaf options are emerging in popularity, as they provide a convenient ready-to-eat option when making fresh salads, but also offer versatile options in the way of lettuce wrapping a burger or crafting low-carb tacos in the romaine leaf.”**

— Anne-Marie Roerink, 210 Analytics LLC, San Antonio, TX

kit to a new format,” says Fabian Pereira, vice president of marketing, innovation, and international for the Salinas, CA-based company. “The kit features a blend of chilled, freshly chopped vegetables, ready-to-eat pre-cooked noodles, gourmet dressing sauce, and crispy toppings that can be eaten hot or cold for two meal options in every bag.”

Fresh Express is supporting the launch of its new Hot or Cold products with an IRC coupon on each bag, which will be supported by digital media, PR, in-store POS and advertising.

“What we heard from retailers is that the new kits provide better-for-you, relevant meal options for their shoppers, especially when compared to takeout restaurant meals,” says Pereira. “Additionally, the product packaging includes tips and tricks for enhancing the meal, such as adding your favorite protein for a complete meal, thereby promoting products in other store departments and helping to increase the overall basket size and ring at the cash register.”

pb

# WHOLESALE SHIFTING GEARS

Wholesalers are using technology to better serve customers.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS



PHOTO COURTESY HEARTLAND PRODUCE



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMPOWER FRESH

Destiny Bowers uses the Empower Fresh app at Russ's Market in Lincoln, NE. Empower Fresh provides AI-assisted ordering, ad writing and pricing tools and real-time data.

**T**echnology is everywhere in the produce industry, and wholesaling is no exception.

“What used to happen with pen, paper and endless binders on desks is now all digital,” says Hutch Morton, senior vice president for J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario. “We use our ERP for virtually everything in our operations. What it can’t do, we find solutions that can be layered on top of it.”

Technology has been positively impacting the industry for years, adds Stefanie Katzman, executive vice president at Katzman in Bronx, NY. “As a wholesaler/distributor, we have seen its effects up and down the supply chain. We have seen improvements in science at the growing level, better refrigeration in coolers and trucks, and more digital ads and in-store displays at retail.”

Technology implementation by wholesalers significantly enhances efficiency in interactions and transitions for Redner’s Markets in Reading, PA, with 44 stores. “Through advanced digital platforms, wholesalers

streamline order processing, reducing manual entry errors and accelerating order fulfillment,” says Mark Coté, regional produce supervisor. “Real-time inventory updates and automated stock alerts ensure we’re always informed about product availability, minimizing delays and out-of-stock orders.”

Wholesale technology gives customers tools to stay competitive. “As a produce supply chain partner to independent retailers and natural food stores that are not self-distributed, we need to implement technology solutions that keep us cost-efficient, accurate, compliant with regulations, and help prevent or solve problems for those customers,” says Jonathan K. Steffy, vice president and general manager at Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA.

Ryan Dietz, president of Heartland Produce Co. in Kenosha, WI, explains it’s important for wholesalers to look for ways to service customers at a higher level by harnessing technological tools. “As we move into the future, I would expect to see wholesalers taking advantage of tech tools and AI to

start assisting in sales and procurement tasks, such as inventory projections, purchasing optimization and data analytics,” he says.

Wholesalers taking the extra step to ensure best arrival of product are the ones using available technology, says Talia Shandler, director of sales at S.G.S. Produce in Los Angeles, CA. “Apps and online ordering, traceability, and truck tracking are the heavy-hitting technology for us,” she says. “To evaluate if it’s worth the cost, we look if it saves us labor or helps our product keep or arrive better.”

Technology has pros and cons, says Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce in Bronx, NY. “It makes us more efficient in some areas, but for some aspects of our business, it just doesn’t work. There’s a reason some things have been done a certain way for so long. You can’t put everything on technology.”

### STREAMLINING ORDERS

A major use of technology in wholesale is online ordering. “The overwhelming majority of customers expect to be able to order online or via an app,” says Billy Itule, chief executive



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**It's important for wholesalers to look for ways to service customers at a higher level by harnessing technological tools.**

PHOTO COURTESY HEARTLAND PRODUCE

Heartland Produce Co., Kenosha, WI, uses analytics software for greater insight into customer, vendor and commodity trends.

at Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ. “This is how chefs, GMs and corporate procurement want to engage us.”

Customers want more convenience, so online ordering has become more prominent with bigger wholesalers, says Johnny Karrat, director of sales and operations at Capital City Produce in Troy, NY. “We see online ordering becoming the mainstream way of ordering through a wholesaler in the near future,” he says.

Though RubINETTE Produce Market in Portland, OR, is a small retailer with minimal tech needs, online ordering is key. “Our needs are primarily in the areas of accurate inventory

management, online ordering and logistics information,” says Josh Alsberg, owner.

Online processes help ensure accuracy. “The accuracy of taking and giving orders is light-years ahead of where it used to be,” says Gabriela D’Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications at D’Arrigo New York in Bronx, NY. “The system will stop the order if things don’t match up, for example, if the customer is over the credit limit or if the order doesn’t match what came in. It’s still the same process at the core, but the implementation of technology in that same process makes it more efficient.”

An important change at J.E. Russell in the past few years is how every order is entered

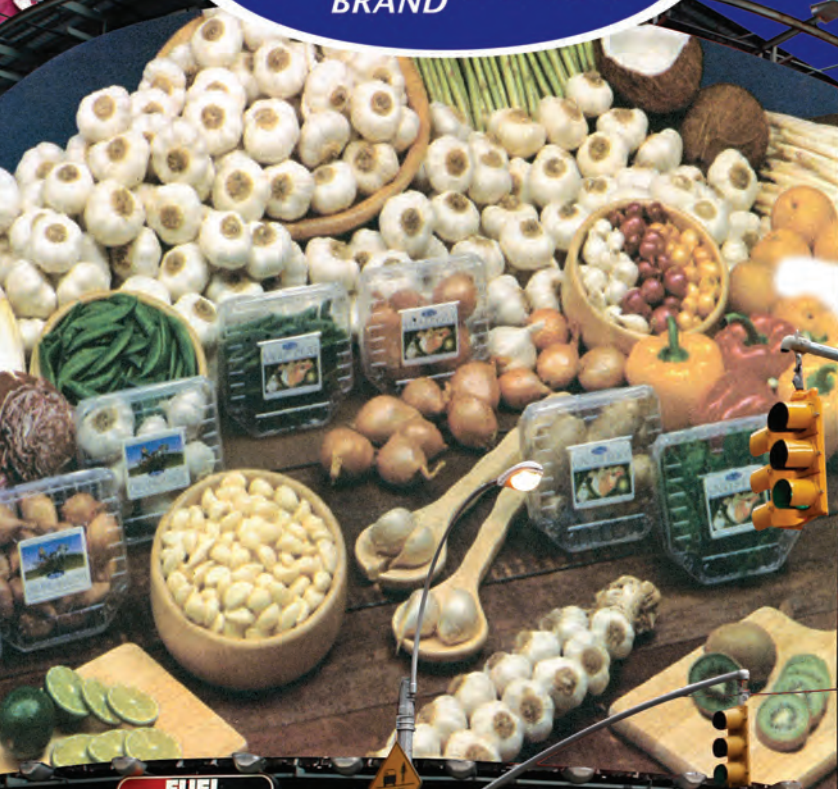
directly into the system by a salesperson with a constant view into inventory and availability, explains Morton. “Gone are the days of calling a customer who has already left the terminal to say we shorted their order,” he says.

Indianapolis Fruit, Indianapolis, IN, is launching a new online app, Pepper. “The produce manager can use it in-store on their phone or at a computer,” says Tony Mitchell, chief revenue officer. “They can see inventory and pictures on items. It’s a new level for us; as we’ve added more companies under our umbrella, we need new technologies to better service our customers.”

D’Arrigo New York launched its online



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“Wholesale markets are based on volume, both on how fast it’s moving and how much is actually left to sell, so having this information live and easily accessible is paramount to our success.”

— Stefanie Katzman, Katzman, Bronx, NY



Jose Duran, produce inventory supervisor, Katzman, Bronx, NY, counts inventory using a software system, which has been a game-changer in wholesale markets.

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

ordering platform about two years ago for select customers. “This has been a more streamlined process for a lot of our independents with multiple stores,” says D’Arrigo. “Every order is still reviewed and there are still conversations taking place, but it makes the process more efficient. It’s linked to our inventory so customers can see what’s available and their ordering history to help them better plan their orders.”

Compatibility of systems is a key consid-

eration. “We must deliver a technology experience to customers that’s easy to use, reliable, and works seamlessly with the systems national restaurant brands use,” says Itule.

Rick Feighery, vice president of sales for Procacci Brothers Sales Corporation in Philadelphia, PA, mentions the increase of purchase order transmission programs such as iTrade, Petal and Procurant. “Each group uses their own portal system, and we as wholesalers, adapt,” he says.

## BEYOND ORDERING

Technology linked to electronic ordering and fulfillment provides additional support. “Software that transitions buy-sell functional transactions from phone calls, spreadsheets, or emails to digital integration via EDI or portals/apps is something we’re excited about,” says Four Seasons’ Steffy.

“But, digitizing cannot be done at the expense of person-to-person relationships,” he cautions. “Done right, digitizing has the



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potential to give busy buyers and sellers more time to invest in the collaborative aspects of customer-supplier partnerships.”

Katzman notes many customer requests around technology are related to EDI invoicing. “Customers no longer want to receive paper or even emailed invoices,” she says. “They want to securely receive invoices directly into their systems.”

Indianapolis Fruit uses the Billfire app, where customers can go online, look at their invoices and pay. “We’re trying to get as many of our independent customers on it as possible,” says Mitchell.

To effectively service the technology-driven customer, Galera Fresh in Chicago, IL, focuses on accurate inventory. “That means constant software upgrades to include the ever-evolving commodities, sizes and weight,” says Francine Cossyleon, chief communications officer. “We want to provide our buyers the most up-to-date information so they can make the best decisions.”

Heartland uses analytics software for greater insight into customer, vendor and commodity trends. “This helps our sales and buying teams make better decisions and gives them appropriate insight to help guide them forward,” says Dietz. “We will be working on a solution to move invoices and BOLs to



Al Crumedy, Katzman, Bronx, NY, QC specialist, uses a refractometer to assess the sugar level of strawberries.

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

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electronic documents. Customers will have the option of signing drivers out on a tablet or other mobile device, and then receive an electronic invoice.”

A particular technology Four Seasons thinks could be helpful to multi-store independent retailers and wholesale partners is Empower Fresh. “It provides AI-assisted ordering, ad writing and pricing tools, real-time data, and more,” Steffy says.

Empower Fresh of Kansas City, MO, is a SaaS solution to optimize produce departments in independent retail grocery stores, as well as produce operations within the suppliers that distribute to them. “The retail product is currently in 50-plus stores over five independent retail groups,” says Robert Austin, president. “The wholesaler product is about to enter pilot phase with a few different wholesalers. The product will lend major benefits to wholesalers of all sizes, focusing on ordering for their customers and optimizing the process.”

Bashas’ Family of Stores in Chandler, AZ, with 118 stores, uses Afresh to improve in-stock conditions and inventory control. “Afresh is an AI-powered ordering system made for grocery store fresh departments such as produce,” says Darin Eastridge, Bashas’ senior category manager of produce. “It helps manage produce inventory at store level and predict how much product is needed to make ordering easier by

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Nickey Gregory Company, Forest Park, GA, uses technology to process images on packaging.

considering the unique challenges of fresh items.”

Joseph Procacci III, Procacci vice president of business development, explains their technology has been evolving to predict customer needs and ordering patterns. “This enables us to be better prepared to service customers,” he says. “And, we can use forecasting models for items based on ordering patterns that automatically populate purchase orders for vendors.”

Nickey Gregory Company in Forest Park, GA, just implemented another upgrade with its operating system, Produce Pro/Apteen, according to Andrew Scott, vice president of business development and marketing. “We upgraded our online ordering, updated our wireless picking and pulling of live/real-time orders, and revamped retail functions to give our customers better pricing tools,” he says.

Digital capability has benefited sales staff at John Vena Inc. (JVI) in Philadelphia, PA. “Our customers can call the store number, but get linked to a salesperson working remotely,” says Dan Vena, director of sales. “The salesperson has access to all information and inventory they need wherever they are. This remote capability has allowed us to keep people on staff when they can’t be in the office all the time.”

### EFFICIENT PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Wholesalers implement technology to improve how they handle product. “The produce business moves so fast that doing things with a pen and paper just doesn’t cut it anymore,” says Capital City’s Karrat. “Higher volume requires better recordkeeping and inventory management systems. A better grasp of in-house operations means a better and more efficient output to customers. At Capital City, we are working on an in-house warehouse management system to coincide with our food safety program.”

By integrating advanced solutions such as inventory management systems, real-time data analytics, and automated ordering processes, retailers and wholesalers can achieve greater efficiency and accuracy, says Redner’s Coté.

“Wholesalers benefit from streamlined logistics and improved communication channels, facilitating timely replenishment and reducing out-of-stocks,” he says. “Additionally, using technology to manage supply chain operations ensures transparency and traceability, fostering trust between partners.”

Computer systems have been a game-changer in wholesale markets, according to Katzman. “With the amount of products we sell now, tracking inventory on paper wouldn’t be possible,” she says. “Wholesale markets are based on volume, both on how fast it’s moving

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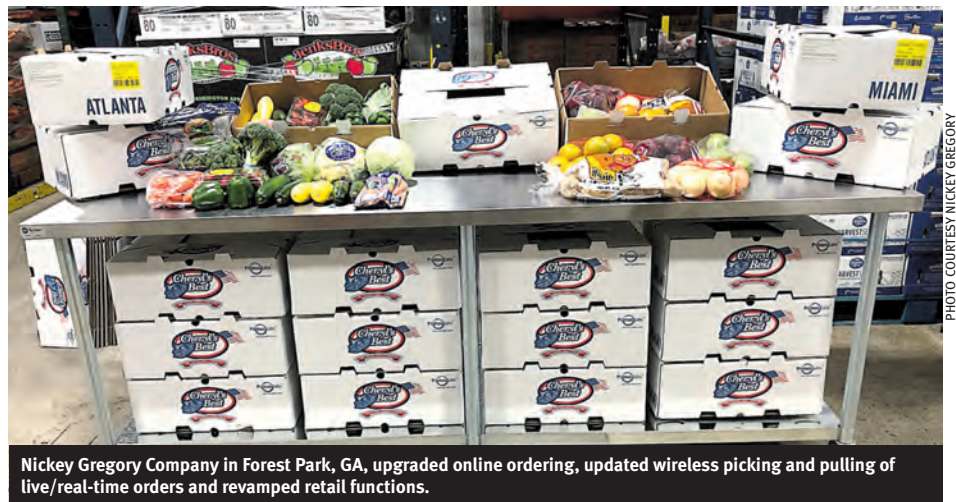


PHOTO COURTESY NICKEY GREGORY

and how much is actually left to sell, so having this information live and easily accessible is paramount to our success."

Procacci uses an ERP system called ProducePro, which the company has adjusted to the changing needs of the business and industry. The operating system handles all aspects of sales, purchasing, traceability, accounting functions, and order selection, says Feighery.

"With the volume of items and demands of our customers, I cannot imagine operating without a real-time reliable system," he adds. "The biggest change coming in the next few months on the operational side is achieving the goal of going completely paperless with scan guns, as all departments integrate into our WMS."

Indianapolis Fruit uses scanners to receive and all its internal selectors have a screen system on their wrist, according to Mitchell.

Galera Fresh implemented a warehouse technology process, including high-speed internet to give pickers the ability to scan orders and boxes. "It has created an environment for accuracy," says Cossyleon. "Scanning allows for less human error, and a better, more streamlined process for traceability."

Morton points out inventory management and eliminating shrink is a key operational tenet at every link in the supply chain, but possibly no more important than at wholesale. "Having our 'available to sell' in the order-taking process eliminates all questions about stock levels for customers and salespersons," he says. "We are looking to a more direct connection to customers through an app to provide immediate promotional opportunities when product must go."

### MANAGING LOGISTICS

Technology enables wholesalers to have a better handle on inbound and outbound deliveries. "Whether it's shipping trucks expected to our warehouse or our own trucks making deliveries, this is an absolute necessity," says D'Ar-

riego. "You're flying blind if you don't have it."

Procacci's in-house truck tracking system pinpoints when and where they're making a delivery, and routing platforms suggest the most efficient way to put loads together based on delivery. "We use a GPS system for our merchandising visits to route out stores needing a visit," says Procacci. "This helps our merchandisers line up their day. It pulls potential customer visits based on possible issues or if they've recently ordered."

This year, J.E. Russell launched fleet management and monitoring. "When a customer asks when the truck will arrive, the answer is only a few clicks away rather than multiple phone calls," says Morton. "Customers have nudged us toward solutions to improve the customer experience. At the end of the day, that's everything for our business."

S.G.S. Produce is able to know all about the truck in real time. "This includes how long it's been waiting at a specific location and if the reefer is active and at the right temperature," says Shandler. "We're always exploring how we can use technology to enable us to ensure our product arrives at our customer and in the right condition."

Technology in the ripening arena is also boosting wholesaler efficiency. Vena remarks on JVT's increased ripening ability due to technology. "We're constantly ripening because with the new technology, we don't need someone physically present all the time," he says. "Our ripening platform allows our ripeners to log in, view all the specs, make decisions based on how the fruit is ripening and change the settings — all from a phone or computer."

### MAKING FOOD SAFER

Technology provides opportunity in food safety and quality control, particularly with compliance. "As we work toward FSMA 204 compliance, we will all need to lean heavily on technology to implement solutions that



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don't cost huge dollars in new processes to track the required data elements," says Heartland's Dietz. "We partnered with ReposiTrak for food safety vendor compliance, and it has helped lower our costs in management of this process."

D'Arrigo speaks to the unique position of the wholesaler in traceability. "We reach back to supply and forward to the customer," she says. "We keep a digital live database that can be traced back to details at the grower, and traced forward to the details of the customer."

Katzman's computer system has box-level traceability, allowing the company to track all product through to customers. "We have our customers' food safety contacts and preferred methods of communication so our food safety team can execute quickly if needed," says Katzman.

Warehouse management technology allows Willie Itule Produce to respond quickly when recalls are issued. "The data allows us to connect with impacted customers and provide them with granular details about the recalled product they may have in their possession," says Itule.

Traceability is a major benefit of J.E. Russell's robust ERP system. "Tracking a product from procurement to sale through all of the operational flows between has dramatically simplified our traceability," says Morton. "Creating and sharing QC reports and photos is another wonderful by-product of a digital world."

Nickey Gregory's food safety team uses its operating system to perform quarterly mock recalls. "We also store current food safety information from our vendor partners and COI updates as insurance expires," says Scott.

## HARNESSING DATA

Wholesalers are using tech to provide useful information to customers. "Data analytics and reporting features provide valuable insights into purchasing trends and inventory needs, enabling more strategic planning and forecasting," says Redner's Coté. "This technological interaction simplifies logistics and strengthens our collaborative relationship, driving mutual success and operational excellence. For retailers, technology provides insights into consumer behavior and stock levels, allowing for better demand forecasting and personalized marketing strategies."

Information from D'Arrigo New York's platforms provides order history and market trends. "This gives us a better idea of where the market should be and what items we should focus on," says D'Arrigo. "It's been good for our customers because we have a bigger picture and better idea of where their business is."



Joe Menei, ripening manager, John Vena Inc., Philadelphia, PA, uses a pulp sensor on Mexican Hass avocados.

PHOTO COURTESY JVI

Produce Pro houses a helpful sales analysis tool that Nickey Gregory uses for customer and vendor reviews. "The analysis dives into buying patterns and past movement of our customers and helps our sales team better serve our accounts," says Scott.

Galera Fresh relies on data. "Staying afloat of feedback is essential in identifying trends and can really help maximize efficiency in every department," says Cossyleon.

In the future, Shandler hopes to use systems resulting in actionable data. "There is a lot of hype about AI but, at the end of the day, accessing the data isn't always in the format we need," she says. "I've been looking

for a good AI tool to help get more insight or have a fresh perspective of the data."

AI functionality is already being integrated into ERP, procurement, WMS, and sales software, describes Itule. "Getting value out of next-gen functionality is an area wholesale produce businesses should spend time thinking about," he says. "There are use cases in customer service, food safety, traceability, and business operations that can add enormous value. It's reasonable to think that within five years AI-centric customer experiences and traceability standards will be table stakes in the same way that online ordering and WMS technologies are now." **pb**



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# Los Angeles: Gateway to a World of Produce



PHOTO COURTESY CITY FARMERS MARKET 2

The Los Angeles, CA, market is a produce hub for the entire country, with Los Angeles International Airport, Union Station and Los Angeles Harbor. Los Angeles is a natural breeding ground for meteoric growth of produce distributors meeting the shifting needs of the changing population.

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BY BOB JOHNSON

**W**hen Sharon and Joe Hernandez started their modest specialty produce business in 1984, they could only afford to rent a small warehouse lunchroom with four chairs and three telephones. They named their business, which sold produce to

Southern California retailers and restaurants, after their young daughter Melissa.

Today, Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Inc. has grown to occupy a 330,000-square-foot facility in Los Angeles, CA, and is reputedly the largest distributor of specialty produce in the country.

Los Angeles' diversity made it a natural place to build a specialty produce business.

"His family had been in the produce business in El Paso, and when they came over to the Los Angeles area, they wanted to grow their family and their business here," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melis-

sa's. "It's been over 40 years that Melissa's has been in business. The Los Angeles market was such a multicultural community."

## ETHNIC RETAIL BOOM

The 4.8 million Latino residents of Los Angeles County are more than the entire populations of Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis and Boston combined, and the Asian American population of 1.5 million is three times the entire population of Miami.

Numerous large and thriving independent supermarket chains serve the enormous ethnic populations.



PHOTO COURTESY DEAN BARNES

Numerous large and thriving independent supermarket chains serve the enormous California populations. Gelson's Markets, a 27-store upscale chain, is headquartered in Encino, CA.

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In July, Superior Grocers acquired the 22-store independent chain Numero Uno. The deal gave Hispanic warehouse giant Superior 69 stores in the Southern California area.

Southern California-based Vallarta Supermarkets has grown to 55 stores throughout California, and Ontario, CA-based Cardenas Markets has grown to 58 stores in California, Nevada and Arizona.

There are also numerous Southern California-based independent chains catering largely to Asian American consumers. For example, the 40-year-old Tawa Supermarket Inc. has grown to 54 stores, serving customers in 10 states.

The plethora of independent stores has kept the world of produce retailing diverse in this age of corporate consolidation.

“Retail consolidation has changed the landscape dramatically versus 10 or 20 years ago, when a larger number of retail buyers frequented the market,” says Carrie LaLonde, chief executive of Valley Fruit and Produce, Los Angeles, CA. “The customer base has changed, but there are still many small, independent markets and independent foodservice companies that buy off the market to compete with the larger chains.”

Valley Fruit and Produce has 165,000 feet of refrigerated space in the Los Angeles area, and is the largest distributor in the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market. The century-old company serves customers throughout California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Idaho.

“In our LA Market location, we service independent retailers, foodservice purveyors and neighboring distributors. Valley operates the majority of its business out of our warehouse a few blocks away in the Alameda Trade Center,” says LaLonde. “As a whole company, Valley serves three primary sales distribution channels, including retail, foodservice and K-12 schools. Continental Export is our export division that services customers by air and sea.”

As the United States grows more diverse, Los Angeles is a natural breeding ground for meteoric growth of produce distributors

meeting the shifting needs of the changing population.

### GATEWAY TO US

Barely more than 100 miles north of Mexico, and other sources of fruits and vegetables from Latin America, Los Angeles also has the nation's largest port, which offers access to foods from Asia.

The 7,500-acre Port of Los Angeles, with 43 miles of waterfront, is the largest container port in the country, with seven major container terminals. And it is adjacent to the Port of Long Beach, a 3,200-acre facility with 25 miles of waterfront. These two ports also have access to the Alameda Corridor, a 20-mile rail system that connects the ports to the nation's major rail shippers.

Interstate Highway 5 connects Los Angeles to the farms of the state's Central Valley, points north, and goes south as far as the Mexican border.

### GROWTH AND EVOLUTION

Valley Fruit has expanded its selections to serve diverse markets. "I can speak for Valley's lineup and how it has evolved over the last 10 years," says LaLonde. "Now, we carry over 300 organic SKUs, specialty and exotic fruits and vegetables. These are changes that reflect consumer demand, and our desire to offer a more comprehensive lineup to our various customer segments."

Melissa's is not the only specialty produce wholesaler to flourish in Los Angeles after humble beginnings — Coosemans Worldwide Inc. began with produce sold to Southern California restaurants out of the trunk of a Cadillac.

In the late 1970s, diamond importer Herman Van den Broeck responded to a slump in the diamond business by importing Belgian endives, which he sold directly to high-end restaurants in the greater Los Angeles area out of the back of his Cadillac. That endive operation was the beginning of Coosemans, a global specialty produce importing company with 22 locations around the world.

"Its diversity and economics made Los Angeles favorable to exotic and specialty produce," says Alan Pollack, who was with Van den Broeck at the beginning, and still serves as general manager of Coosemans Los Angeles. "That made Los Angeles a good place to start Coosemans, and it is still true today."

Some Los Angeles-based wholesalers thrive by serving specific ethnic markets.

"There is a large Latino population in Los Angeles, and we are near the border," says Erick Carranza, sales manager for EV Produce International, San Ysidro, CA. "Los Angeles

and Texas are where we sell."

EV Produce imports and ships limes and chayote, which is a gourd widely used in Latin cuisine. "All of it is from Mexico," says Carranza.

### HOUSING CRUNCH, PRODUCE BOOM

The high cost of living and housing are reshaping who can live in Los Angeles, and who cannot. In 2022, the cost of living was

**"Los Angeles is getting back to what it was. It's a one-stop shop, instead of having to send your trucks to Mexico, the Central Valley and Canada."**

— Francisco Clouthier, Maui-Fresh International, Los Angeles, CA



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Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Inc. occupies a 330,000-square-foot facility and is reputedly the largest distributor of specialty produce in the country. Pictured are the Melissa's Hatch pepper roastings in front of Smart and Final in San Pedro, CA, in August.

rated as 'very high' compared to the average in the U.S. The median price for a house or condo was more than \$900,000, which was high even by California standards, and the median gross rent was nearly \$1,800 a month.

These high housing costs are the main reason 75,000 people left the city in 2023.

While the population may be declining, Los Angeles' role as a produce hub is enjoying a revival. "Los Angeles is a consolidation hub for a major part of the country," says Francisco Clouthier, owner of Maui-Fresh International, Los Angeles, CA. "In the last five years, we've seen more companies coming to Los Angeles for consolidation. Los Angeles is getting back to what it was. It's a one-stop shop instead of having to send your trucks to Mexico, the Central Valley and Canada."

The Clouthier family started farming tomatoes and peppers in the Sinaloa Valley 60 years ago, and Clouthier started Maui Fresh at the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market 20 years ago.

While the company is true to its name, with Hawaiian papayas and pineapples, Maui Fresh has a line of fresh produce with a distinct Hispanic flavor, including tomatillos, limes, eggplants, chiles, bell peppers, squash, tomatoes, beans, melons and pickles.

"The Los Angeles market is a produce hub for the entire country, with Los Angeles International Airport, Union Station and the Los Angeles Harbor," says Schueller. "And California is one of the few places you can grow 12 months of the year."

"With the LA Market's proximity to the

ports and freeways, and the concentration and diversity of the supply base in Los Angeles, it is a key hub in the produce supply chain," says LaLonde. "I think the market is more diverse, as the number of tenants has increased over the years. It used to be occupied by mostly owner-operators, and now most of the owners sublet to a higher number of operators, which results in greater diversity of products offered and customer segments served."

But even shippers who serve the entire country also find major markets in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

"About 50% of our produce stays in Southern California," says Clouthier. "You have 15 million people in the area, plus San Diego, Ventura and Santa Barbara. That's 20 million people."

pb

# Diversity Drives Produce Demand in Atlanta

POPULATION GROWTH, SPORTING EVENTS AND CONCERTS DRIVE INCREASED DEMAND FOR FRESH PRODUCE.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**D**iversity drives demand for fresh fruits and vegetables in Atlanta, GA. This is especially true on two fronts. First, there's the ethnic makeup of urban-based Atlanta citizens and suburbanites living in the sprawling 28-county Atlanta Metropolitan Area. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics for 2023, the area is now the sixth largest metropolitan region in the U.S., with a population of 6.3 million. Mexico, India, Jamaica, South Korea, Vietnam, China, Nigeria, Guatemala, El Salvador and Colombia were the top 10 countries Atlanta's immigrants hailed from as of 2019, based on U.S. Census Bureau information.

"The Atlanta Metro market is unique in the U.S. due to its blend of a cosmopolitan nature and Southern roots. This fusion drives a high demand for a wide variety of fresh produce, catering to both traditional Southern tastes and international cuisines," says Matthew Kulinski, director of marketing for the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA), in Atlanta.

"Over the years, the volume and variety of produce have expanded significantly. Atlanta's growth as a multi-ethnic hub has increased demand for a range of fruits and vegetables, alongside staples like peaches and Vidalia onions."

The Atlanta Regional Commission, a regional planning and intergovernmental agency, predicts the Atlanta Metro market's population will hit 7.9 million and become even more diverse by 2050. Hispanics and Asian Americans are expected to represent more of the total population.

"Our customer base is mostly Hispanic, so we focus more on Hispanic, as well as Asian produce," says Ricky Cho, general manager at City Farmers Market 2, Inc., a six-store chain in the Atlanta Metro market. "Roma tomatoes are one of our biggest items."

Cho advertises 20 fruits and vegetables



Atlanta's growth as a multi-ethnic hub has increased demand for a range of fruits and vegetables, alongside staples like peaches and Vidalia onions.

each week in the chain's flyer. During the last week of July, these items included Mexican mangos, jicama, yuca, Thai guava, ong choy, red shen choy, bananas and black plums.

Second, there's economic diversity. As of 2024, the Metro Atlanta area is the headquarters of 16 Fortune 500 companies, according to the Metro Atlanta Chamber, in Atlanta. The top five in descending order are The Home Depot, UPS, Delta Air Lines, The Coca-Cola Co. and the Southern Co.

"Atlanta's booming economy and increasing affluence have led to higher spending power, enabling more people to dine out frequently and seek high-quality, fresh ingredients in their meals," says Stephanie Fischer, president and chief executive officer of the Atlanta-based Georgia Restaurant Association (GRA).

More recently, the movie business has boomed in Atlanta, ignited by a 2008-implemented 20% to 30% tax credit for filmmakers. Several Marvel Studios films, Netflix's *Stranger Things*, and Disney productions filmed here have given Atlanta the nickname "Hollywood of the South."

"This influx of the movie business with its

stars and studio staff has led to a growth in the number of fine dining restaurants," says Bryan Thornton, general manager of Coosemans Atlanta Inc., a specialty produce wholesaler since 1993 at the Atlanta State Farmers Market in Forest Park, GA.

"In terms of fresh produce, chefs want what is in season, which constantly changes. Blood oranges, fresh figs, and baby beets when the weather cools. Mixed baby kale combined with watercress is a new trending item, and so are freeze-dried fruits we source from South America as mixology garnishes," Thornton says.

## SUPPLIERS & BUYERS

The Atlanta Metropolitan area stands out as a unique fresh produce market for wholesalers, retailers, and foodservice operators, according to Sarah Mitchell Wagner, chief executive officer of the Little Giant Farmers Market Corp., a five-store chain based in Atlanta.

"Atlanta's location makes it a prime hub for fresh produce distribution," says Mitchell Wagner. "Our principal produce sources include single suppliers and our wholesaler,

**“Atlanta’s booming economy and increasing affluence have led to higher spending power, enabling more people to dine out frequently and seek high-quality, fresh ingredients in their meals.”**

— Stephanie Fischer, Georgia Restaurant Association, Atlanta, GA

each playing a crucial role in ensuring a diverse and consistent supply of high-quality products.”

The Nickey Gregory Company, founded in 2000, is a full-line distributor of more than 500 commodities.

“We’ve been expanding our specialty items like French beans and 5-pound carrots with the tops on due to demand from chefs,” says Andrew Scott, vice president of business development and marketing for the company, which operates two warehouses totaling 150,000 square feet at the Atlanta State Farmers Market, and has recently expanded to retail distribution in Georgia and Alabama.

Nickey Gregory delivers to the Atlanta area and 11 states, north to Virginia and the Carolinas, and south to Alabama, Louisiana and Florida. “Since we own our trucks, we’ll pick up import items like Chilean citrus in Florida as a backhaul to Atlanta. A good interstate system means it’s possible to go from Atlanta to South Florida in less than a day.”

Organic produce continues to be of some interest, but isn’t a fast-growing category due to price and shelf-life issues, says Matt Jardina, vice president of sales at the 1925-founded J.J. Jardina Company, Inc., three-generation wholesalers on the Atlanta State Farmers Market. “Our organic business is good, but we are moving more toward a PO basis than a speculative mindset.”

Demand, however, is excellent for locally grown fruits and vegetables, adds Jardina. “We have relationships with several local growers who provide unique product opportunities for our customer base. We were in a regional peach season in July and then moved into Muscadine and Scuppernong season.”

The GDA’s Kulinski says Atlanta’s large diverse population serves as an ideal market for Georgia-grown produce. “Top items in this market include traditional favorites like peaches, Vidalia onions, and collard greens, as well as rapidly growing products like blueberries, mandarin oranges and olives. Niche



Restaurateurs and culinary professionals are exploring new menu trends and sourcing premium ingredients to maintain Atlanta’s status as a global culinary destination. One example is the brunch-served Roast Vegetable Frittata at the Spanish-cuisine Gypsy Kitchen, which is made with cauliflower, caponata mix, eggplant, shallots, garlic and crispy potatoes.

PHOTO COURTESY BRANDON AMATO

items such as specialty peppers and heirloom tomatoes also find a dedicated customer base in Atlanta.”

## RETAIL

Large national chains dominate the retail landscape in the Atlanta Metro area. Kroger (26%), Walmart (22.5%) and Publix (19.2%) made up over two-thirds of banners in 2023, followed by Costco (6.7%), Sam’s Club (3.8%), Ingles (3.8%), Target (3.7%), All American Quality Food (Food Depot) (1.9%), Dollar General (1.7%), and Lidl (1.6%), according to data by the Tampa, FL-based, Chain Store Guide.

Kulinski says small retailers and specialty stores are more focused on variety. “They seek unique and seasonal items to differentiate them from larger chains. These retailers often feature heirloom tomatoes, specialty peppers, and other niche products that appeal to customers looking for something different.”

According to Wagner, the best-selling fresh fruits and vegetables at Little Giant Farmers Markets are bananas, iceberg lettuce, white seedless grapes, green cabbage, green bell peppers, avocados and tomatoes. “We also sell a variety of lesser-known fruits and vegetables to meet all our customers’ needs — chayote, plantain, white yam, aloe vera leaves, yucca root, papaya, dragon fruit and coconuts.”

Small and/or ethnic retailers also “look for the lowest price possible, deals, good quality and good service,” adds Jardina.

Underscoring this point, City Farmers Market 2’s Cho adds, “We sell by an everyday low price, but the quality must be there.”

## FOODSERVICE

On the foodservice front, Atlanta is home to numerous high-end restaurants focusing on classic and contemporary culinary styles, says the GRA’s Fischer.

“Due to the high volume of restaurant

openings and national attention from the Michelin Guide and the James Beard Foundation, restaurateurs and culinary professionals are exploring innovative new menu trends and sourcing premium ingredients to maintain the city’s status as a global culinary destination.”

One example Fischer provides is the brunch-served Roast Vegetable Frittata at the Spanish-cuisine Gypsy Kitchen, which is made with cauliflower, caponata mix, eggplant, shallots, garlic and crispy potatoes. Another is the Heirloom Beets at the Woodall, a mix of candy stripe, blackened yellow and red beets.

Fast casual, health-forward chains like Chopt, Kale Me Crazy, Salata, and Gusto have recently expanded into the metro area. Full-service vegan and vegetarian restaurants are also gaining in popularity — Atlanta’s La Semilla was a finalist at the 2023 GRACE Awards and was recently named one of the best new restaurants in the U.S. by *Eater Magazine*.

There are several farm-to-table experiences in Atlanta’s foodservice space, says Fischer. “Every year, we proudly announce a class of Georgia Grown Executive Chefs in partnership with the Georgia Department of Agriculture’s Georgia Grown Program, which celebrates exceptional culinary professionals who support the state’s agribusiness sector by integrating local produce into seasonal menus.”

While J.J. Jardina doesn’t work directly with chefs, the company does have good relationships with many of the foodservice operators in this area, says Jardina. “We help fill in shorts and provide diverse products to these customers who deal with higher demand from restaurants and school systems.”

Looking ahead, Jardina adds, “Atlanta is a growing city and is a vibrant market for fresh produce. Population growth, sporting events, concerts, and other regional events drive increased demand for fresh produce from our market.”

pb



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# Canadian Supply Chain Healthy and Evolving

There is a stronger emphasis on diversification and sustainability in the industry.

BY MIKE DUFF

The supply chain for produce in Canada is healthy and evolving, as members deal with challenges of inflation, globalization, and the changing demands of consumers.

What's happening in the Canadian produce supply chain is somewhat different than what's happening in the U.S. — take the example of Canada's proposed plastics ban — but a lot of similarities exist.

In response to the inflationary pressure on food that has been a factor in the produce industry in the U.S. as well, Loblaw Companies Limited, Brampton, Ontario, has introduced a new supermarket concept to deliver low-priced mainline food. Characterized by the company as a pilot, “No Name” will operate in three Ontario markets.

In introducing the No Name store concept, Melanie Singh, president of Loblaw's hard discount division, says the No Name store will be up to 20% less than the regular retail price of a comparable product at discount grocers in that local area, and the stores will have a limited selection of 1,300 products.

## DIVERSIFICATION A NEW STANDARD

Ron Lemaire, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, says inflation continues to have an influence on how shoppers spend, but many consumers are finding ways to cope, including focusing on retailers who can help them meet budgets.

“Discount banners have been very successful in meeting consumer demand, and retail is adjusting,” he says.

Lemaire mentioned No Name as among the initiatives Canadian supermarket operators are trying. “It's in these innovations where retail is listening and meeting the Canadian market.”

“I see optimism as we see where the next year is going to take us, but all of that could change quickly with a wildfire, a flood, a drought,” he adds. “Even on that, what's exciting to see is how the pandemic has taught us to improve the diversification of our supply chains.”



Canadian consumers have become more diversified, so global products such as Asian vegetables are in more demand.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

In the post-pandemic period, Lemaire explains, Canadian businesses have reengaged locally, but with more emphasis on near-shoring, as they look at what the U.S., Mexico, and South America might provide.

At the same time, Canadian tastes have become more diversified, he says.

Weather incidents prompted Canadian produce suppliers to broaden their approach to sourcing. For example, citrus from Israel is getting attention, as they make backup plans to keep the supply chain humming.

“Over the past 12 to 24 months, there has been a shift with Canadian consumers toward value. That is seen in the data across the entire store, but has been especially pronounced in the produce aisle,” says Hutch Morton, senior vice president, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto. “Consumers have moved from premium store banners down toward value and low cost.”

Although price has become a more important factor, Lemaire says it's quality that's really driving the market.

“Because we've done such a good job on the discount banners and driving quality and freshness through discount, the goal now is ensuring that the spec and the shelf life of product is meeting a very stringent consumer expectation,” he says.

Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, senior director of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, says the

produce supply chain in Canada appears to be “evolving with a stronger emphasis on diversification and sustainability, particularly in response to consumer demand for locally grown and organic options. Crops like greenhouse-grown vegetables and berries are gaining prominence in many parts of the country, while climate adaptation is influencing crop choices toward those better suited to changing conditions.”

Although consumer demand and food retail economics tend to drive supply chain development, Charlebois says, from a government policy perspective, the development of a carbon market requires new thinking about freight and transportation.

## CONTINUED COST SQUEEZE

“There's a lot of optimism in the industry right now,” says Stewart Lapage, vice president of supply chain and logistics at Oppy, Vancouver, British Columbia. “With so much attention on food scarcity and rising costs, people are really focusing on where our food comes from, and how we can control costs. I think we're seeing more energy around things like sustainability and precision growing to manage those pressures.”

At the same time, cost has become a greater challenge and one that businesses are forced to address, says Lapage.

“Every link, from growers to retailers, is



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feeling the pinch on costs,” he says. “Input costs, labor, transportation — it’s all adding up and everyone’s working hard to find efficiencies. So, it’s not that the supply chain itself is changing drastically, but there’s a constant push to control costs and keep things running as smoothly as possible.”

Charlebois points to fuel price fluctuation, regulatory fees and tariffs, which “significantly impact the movement of produce and the development of cross-border supply chains.

“Rising fuel costs directly increase transportation expenses, while varying tariffs and regulatory standards across these countries add complexity and potential delays, affecting the efficiency of trade routes,” Charlebois adds.

### PRODUCT MOVEMENT

The Canadian produce supply chain is vast, but also fairly consolidated, with major retailers and wholesalers as dominant forces. The major importers in Canada are the big food retail chains, including Loblaw and Sobeys, says Lemaire, followed by major importer/exporter wholesalers, such as Courchesne Larose, Canadawide Fruit, North American Produce Buyers, Fresh Direct and Thomas Fresh.

Beyond that, the major wholesalers on the terminal markets in Toronto, Montreal

and Vancouver are substantially involved in import/export operations. And some companies operate across borders, such as Oppy.

“Canada’s biggest exports are still root crops, greenhouse vegetables, pipfruit and berries,” says Lapage. “On the flip side, we’re importing a lot of tropical fruits, citrus, leafy greens, avocados and berries. It’ll be interesting to see if those trends hold with rising costs and inflation.”

Morton of J.E. Russell Produce says a change that continues at the Ontario Food Terminal “is the increase in how far afield the import business is moving. It is no longer just our North American neighbors to the south that feed Canadians. We are seeing produce from just about every part of the world coming.

“It speaks to the multi-cultural society in Canada and the stores that serve them, but also to the improvements made in freight and logistics. These are improvements that ultimately serve the consumer with more options and better access.”

He says wholesalers on the Ontario Terminal Market and elsewhere need to unlock opportunities.

The complexity of the Canadian supply chain means all companies must remain ready with a response to changing conditions.



PHOTO COURTESY CANADAWIDE

Major wholesalers on the terminal markets in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are substantially involved in import/export operations.

“Innovation in technology helps us find efficiencies, and we implement them into our processes to ensure we’re operating as smoothly as possible,” says Julian Sarraino, chief operating officer at Fresh Taste Produce, Toronto. “Government policy/regulation sometimes changes. This is something that we all have to adapt to. Weather challenges are still the wild card. This is what plays the biggest role in product security and fill rates.” **pb**

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PHOTO COURTESY CMI ORCHARDS

# Six Ways to Sell More Apples

A recipe for growing apple sales into a bigger piece of the produce pie.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

One are the days when apple growers and retailers valued fruit that looked good and lasted long on the shelf. For the last two-plus decades, varietal development has focused on flavor and fracture, and for this, the apple industry earns an A-plus for building better-tasting apples and lots of them.

“Shoppers do look for and buy the better-tasting varieties of apples like Honeycrisp, Jazz, SugarBee, SnapDragon and Cosmic Crisp,” says Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations for Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL.

Yet, a stark reality exists: Fresh apple consumption is flat, and it has been for

40-plus years. Retail per capita availability of fresh apples was 16.5 pounds in 1970-71 and 15.8 pounds in 2022-23, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service data.

What will it take to really and consistently move the needle on apple sales and consumption? Here are six bites for thought:

## 1. MORE THAN AVAILABILITY

Crop size, or the sheer availability of apples, plays a significant role in sales and consumption. The 2024-2025 season is forecast to deliver nearly 259 million bushels, according to the August 2024 outlook from the U.S. Apple Association, in Vienna, VA.

“After the record crop and 99-cent per

pound deals last year, we should see prices at a more normal \$1.49 to \$1.99 a pound and higher. This should help boost dollar ring,” says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie’s Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers in the Pacific Northwest (Metropolitan Market), as well as larger chains, such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts.

On the varietal front, fewer Honeycrisp, one of the main drivers of the apple category and among the highest price-per-pound apples on the market, will be available this season, according to USApple’s Outlook Report data. There will be greater volumes of Gala, the No. 1 selling variety in the U.S., and Cosmic Crisp, a newer variety that’s a cross between Honeycrisp and Enterprise.

“With Honeycrisp down, there is a big opportunity to replace sales with something with Honeycrisp parentage, like Cosmic Crisp,” says Brianna Shales, marketing director for Stemilt Growers LLC, in Wenatchee, WA.

SnapDragon is also a Honeycrisp cross, and this year’s crop volume is expected to be up by about 20%, compared to last year due to acreage planted in recent years coming into production, according to Jessica Wells, executive director of Crunch Time Apple Growers, in Lockport, NY.

“We will likely sell out of SnapDragon earlier than we did last season,” Wells predicts. “Even though volume is up, demand for SnapDragon continues to increase.”

The apple industry has cracked the code in storing high-quality apples until spring and summer. Yet the fact remains that the fruit is six to nine months or more post-harvest by this time. Plus, winter, spring, and summer are seasons when new crop of fruits like citrus, berries, stone fruit, melons, and grapes are vying for the shopper’s share of stomach. Perhaps not just availability, but sourcing areas might help boost apple consumption.

“Quality trumps quantity,” says Don Roper, vice president of sales and marketing for Honeybear Brands, in Elgin, MN, and a leading apple importer from the Southern Hemisphere. “One of the most impactful ways to maintain strong apple sell-through at retail is to ensure consumers purchase the freshest fruit available.

“With so many summer fruit options, consumers must have a great eating experience to keep apple demand strong all summer. Incorporating imports in the fresh fruit mix is a smart long-term strategy, as many domestic apples begin losing flavor and that crisp eating experience after months in storage.”

## 2. TRY ‘EAT AN APPLE A DAY’ 2.0

There are now marketing organizations dedicated to promoting new apple varieties. Yet, with that extra manpower and commendable creativity, apple consumption is flat.

“It might be a good idea to go back to the basic ‘eat an apple a day’ recommendation, not tied to any particular varieties,” says Austin Fowler, vice president of sales and marketing for Fowler Farms, in Wolcott, NY. “We are so keen to get consumers to purchase particular varieties that I think the industry has taken their foot off the fight of simply getting shoppers to buy and eat more of all apples.

“At the same time, growers have been keen to keep throwing new varieties out there, and I think consumers are the victim of confusion. So we’re fighting ourselves and disconnecting from the consumer.”

First, this means building “buy me” apple-a-day destination displays at retail to entice shoppers.

“Nailing the right SKU mix is crucial for maximizing variety and profitability without sacrificing sales to cannibalization,” says Joel Hewitt, vice president of sales at CMI Orchards LLC, in Wenatchee, WA. “Having a diverse, yet focused, selection that hits all consumer segments is key — striking that perfect balance between shelf staples like Gala and Honeycrisp and high-flavor standouts like Ambrosia Gold and Cosmic Crisp.”

Secondly, it’s all about telling shoppers

about the variety in front of them and doing so quickly and simply.

“Spotlight and educate consumers on different flavor profiles and varieties. Our proprietary apple flavor tool, Flavogram, makes it easy for shoppers to compare apples to apples and discover new favorites, building confidence and driving trial and, ultimately, sales and repeat sales,” says Danelle Huber, senior marketing manager for CMI.

Manned sampling demos are another effective tool to educate shoppers on the differences in apples on display, adds Jennifer Miller, executive director of the Next Big

# THE BIG FLAVOR



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Thing Grower Cooperative, in Emmaus, PA, which manages the SweeTango variety.

“Choices between commodity (Red Delicious, Granny Smith, Gala, Fuji) and managed varieties (SweeTango, Rave, SnapDragon, Envy) are all slightly different and appeal to different consumers. It is important to call out that diversity and innovation to help consumers get to the type of apple they like.”

### 3. SIZE (OF PACK) DOES MATTER

Bulk apples will always have a place on the shelf, says Kaci Komstadius, vice president of marketing for Sage Fruit, in Yakima, WA. “Consumers like to be able to have control over the number of apples or the number of pounds they are purchasing.”

However, she adds, “when it comes to bags, we have seen a considerable increase in demand for retail-specific, private-label designs. For the organic category, bags outsell bulk, and focusing on newer varieties in bags can certainly help tell the story.”

New York apple shippers offer a good mix of sizes and packaging this year, says Cynthia Haskins, president of the New York Apple Association (NYAA) Inc., in Fishers, NY. “We have seen an increased interest in poly, paper, and tote packaging, and the grab-and-go offerings are a good way to attract a solid price point in just one ring-up.”

Three-pound packaged apples have been a standard for years. Now, there’s been more of a trade down to 2-pounders to offer a better price point for higher-cost organic and new varieties of apples. Two-pound bags can leave a pound of apples on the shelf unsold with every purchase, while larger packs can promote greater sales of apples.

“We recently had a retailer request a 4-pound bag of apples. We now carry 3-, 4-, 5-, and 8-pound bags, and the larger packs can sell a lot of apples,” says Fowler Farms’ Fowler. “Totes too can move a lot of fruit, as these average 4.5- to 5-pounds of fruit.”

Beyond size, sustainable packaging may give some consumers a reason to pick up apples.

“We have an exciting premium offering that will be available in a 6-count compostable carton that is made from apple pomace,” says Honeybear Brands’ Roper.

### 4. OUT OF HAND IS ONLY HALF THE SALES

Eating a fresh apple by itself as a snack is probably the top way most consumers eat this fruit. However, sales and consumption could theoretically double if every shopper bought enough apples to eat out of hand and use as an ingredient. Apples in meals received a boost this fall from Cracker Barrel, a 600-plus unit



Give shoppers options. Consumers like to be able to have control over the number of apples or the number of pounds they are purchasing.

PHOTO COURTESY CMI ORCHARDS

### “Having a diverse, yet focused, apple selection that hits all consumer segments is key.”

—Joel Hewitt, CMI Orchards LLC, Wenatchee, WA

restaurant based in Lebanon, TN. The casual chain declared that apples, not pumpkin spice, were its go-to flavor this fall. The four new apple-centric menu items are a Signature Fried Apple French Toast Bake, Southern Apple Cobbler, Granny Smith Apple Mimosa, and Granny Smith Apple Tea.

“Capitalize on opportunities to cross-merchandise, suggesting specific apples for cheeseboards, baking, saucing, or snacking depending on flavor profiles. Also, pair apples with seasonal must-haves like baking essentials and charcuterie items in the fall and salad kits in the spring and summer. Amp up engagement with QR codes linking to recipes, turning a simple purchase into an immersive experience that keeps customers returning to buy more,” says CMI’s Huber.

CMI’s Bohm adds that this year, retailers can join campaigns like “Bye-Bye Traditional Apple Pie,” positioning Kanzi as the ultimate baking apple. “It’s the perfect opportunity to inspire consumers to elevate their holiday recipes and try something new.”

Cross-departmental is another way to convey apple use as an ingredient. A retailer in the Northeast takes any bruised SweeTango apples to its bakery department, makes SweeTango bread, and puts the apple variety’s logo on the loaf.

### 5. HARNESS THE POWER OF PROMOTION

Creativity by apple growers, marketers and state associations is off the charts, and retailers can use these to drive customers to the apple display, whether participating in-store or echoing out-of-store promotions.

In-store, after the initial fall push, Rive-ridge Produce Marketing Inc., in Sparta, MI, moves into its Bite into a Healthier You initiative, according to Trish Taylor, marketing manager.

“Consumers think of apples in the fall, but as the year goes on, retailers can provide tips and suggestions to consumers. We have video, photos, and other assets retailers can utilize to highlight the great benefits of apple consumption.”

Outside the store, the NYAA hosts a way to get apples into consumers’ mouths. Started in 2012 and held each October, the FarmOn! Big Apple Crunch challenge encourages apple lovers and New York school students and teachers to simultaneously bite into a New York apple to promote local healthy eating. Hundreds of thousands participate each year.

Game time can also send customers to the store for apples.

“Our partnership as the official apple of the Buffalo Bills has certainly contributed to increased SnapDragon apple sales in the New York market,” says Crunch Time Apple Growers’ Wells.

This year, Honeybear Brands has partnered with professional women’s hockey star Taylor Heise during hockey season, which runs from December through May, according to Roper.

“During the ‘Assist Second Harvest’ campaign, we will donate 600 pounds of apples each time Heise feeds a teammate an assist, otherwise known as an ‘apple’ in hockey. Retailers carrying Pazazz benefit from this



partnership halo via social media, public relations, and in-store assets, as Pazazz gets extra ice-time with hockey fans all season.”

### 6. DIGITAL IS INDISPENSABLE

Beyond the old standby of enticing customers to buy in-store, retailers today must be ready to capitalize on customers driven to the produce department via digital advertising and social media. The last five feet is everything when it comes to the path to purchase.

“Geotargeting digital advertising plays a significant role in promoting New York apples, along with specifically targeting markets for social media ads. We see more consumers are using digital couponing,” says the NYAA’s Haskins.

For Diane Smith, executive director of the Michigan Apple Committee, in Lansing, MI, it’s essential to reach consumers where they are. “Our target audience is women ages 25 to 54 who are the primary shoppers in their households. These individuals are particularly active on social media, Instagram and Pinterest. This fall, we are implementing a robust social media marketing campaign to increase the consumption of Michigan apples. For harvest 2024 and beyond, we are increasing our involvement with social media influencers to broaden our reach.”

Social media takes engagement to another



PHOTO COURTESY NEW YORK APPLE ASSOCIATION

The 2024-2025 season is forecast to deliver nearly 259 million bushels, according to the August 2024 outlook from the U.S. Apple Association, in Vienna, VA.

level, says CMI’s Huber. “With recipe ideas, snacking tips, and health benefits on tap, we’re not just selling apples — we’re creating a community around them. Seasonal promos, behind-the-scenes peeks, and influencer partnerships amplify this reach, fueling trial and

loyalty. Digital and social merchandising offer limitless possibilities, multiplying touchpoints that strengthen brand identity and position apples as the go-to choice. This new wave of apple merchandising is no longer just an option; it’s a game-changer.” **pb**

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Although there is demand year-round for root vegetables, there is a high demand in the Easter and spring seasons.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

# Root Veggies Add Variety

Root vegetables are familiar, but spotlight new uses in the produce department to reinvent consumption.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Looking for something new in vegetables? Root vegetables have been tagged as familiar and old, yet new versions and new uses of this versatile group can be the spotlight within a produce universe that thrives on the latest innovations.

“Root vegetables have traditionally not been flashy, but a basic, stable product,” says Todd Miedema, director of marketing, Miedema Produce Inc., Hudsonville, MI.

“Restaurants started reinventing the consumption pattern,” he adds. “I recently ordered fish, and the chef prepared fish encrusted with parsnips. It was fantastic. What an example of an old-time veggie with a new-time use.”

Matt Hiltner, marketing manager, Babé Farms Specialties, Santa Maria, CA, agrees. “Foodservice chefs, particularly those in white tablecloth restaurants, are familiar with these products and feature them. Retailers need to pick and choose these varieties, while social media help educate more consumers.”

## VARIETIES ABOUND

Rediscovered colors brighten the palettes of beets and carrots. Market swings in popularity lead to greater demand for red and

yellow potatoes and onions, rather than the typical white ones. Varieties from other nations, particularly those from Asia, prompt the expanding U.S. market for radishes and sweet potatoes.

Fresh-cut technology facilitates quicker preparation and less cooking time for many root vegetables, often creating diminutive baby potatoes. Fancy nibble-size quick snacks highlighted by vivid packaging call for grab-and-go purchases.

The convenience desired by today’s consumers has modified preparation efforts for several root vegetables. Their versatility amplifies the demand: They can be prepared in numerous culinary ventures, plus they can often serve as a substitute for one another.

## USING ROOT VEGETABLES

Of the 50 vegetables his company grows, Miedema says Miedema Produce began by growing bright and crisp radishes, “which is now our hallmark product.” Today, matchstick radish chips “provide nutritious snacking, and the resealable package provides convenience.”

Rob Giragosian, sales manager for Kern Ridge Growers LLC, Arvin, CA, says the current carrot market has been steady, although the heat wave that came through

this summer did affect yields. But, he says, “Snacking has been gaining on the conventional carrots and holding steady on the organic. This is mostly due to there being more options on the conventional snacking carrots.”

A year-round shipper and leader of carrot production, Kern Ridge Growers recently expanded its lineup and launched carrot coins, crinkle coins and carrot chips. These are available in 12-ounce and 5-pound bags.

“Carrots are always in demand,” Hiltner points out. Babé Farms Specialties brings show-stopping shades of orange, yellow, pink, red, purple and white carrots to all types of restaurants and foodservice establishments, plus produce departments. He says the best-sellers are the hand-pulled French pack and the mixed pack, which includes multiple colors.

“Year-round demand is stable, and color is available any time of the year,” he says.

Babé Farms’ retail display of Cherie Belle, Cincinnati, Easter Egg, French Breakfast, Icicle, Pink Dragon, Pink Ninja, Purple Ninja, Purplicious, and Watermelon radishes spotlight assorted root colors and frilly or leafy foliage. A slice of Watermelon’s bright pink and/or Purplicious adds to the striking effect.

Hiltner warns, “radish flavors are all different, but all have a peppery bite.” His

flashy concoction of roasted radishes accented with celery root, in his terms is “amazing.”

### DEMAND VARIES

Although 90% of Babe Farms Specialties supply year-round, Hiltner notes an Easter and spring demand for root vegetables, including Tokyo turnips, red and green kohlrabi, celery root, and red, gold, and striped beets.

Heading into the fall and winter season, Hiltner is optimistic. “The outlook is positive, and we have strong supplies. Winter is the busiest time for us, shipping to Canada and the East Coast.”

Kevin Partida, manager vegetable department of Vision Produce Company, Los Angeles, CA, forecasts some root vegetables near-term demand. “There is very seasonal demand for radish, parsnips, turnips, beets and rutabaga. Cold weather increases consumption for stews and soups.”

“Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Passover are the biggest drivers in regards to ethnic demand.”

Dennis Diekemper, manager of J.R. Kelly, Collinsville, IL, says horseradish demand is stable, “but it increases in the Passover season where it is used in the bitter herb platter, the Passover Seder plate.”



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

“Root vegetables have traditionally not been flashy, but a basic, stable product,” says Todd Miedema, director of marketing, Miedema Produce, Inc., Hudsonville, MI. “Cooking channels established the new reaction by the public. Now people make fries from parsnips, and cook rutabaga in an air fryer.”

“Horseradish is looked at as a condiment, rather than an ingredient now,” he adds. “Consumers can grate it in a blender.”

Partida notes, “Although the Asian community uses both turnips and beets, parsnips and rutabagas are not part of their diets. This could be because they are used more often in European dishes as a puree. Radishes have a wide application, from eating fresh on salads and garnishes on

Mexican and Asian cuisines, to pickling to enhance the flavors.”

Partida says chefs prefer to promote these root vegetables on menus when in season, from fall to early spring, although they can be used year-round. Vision markets very small potatoes, ginger and shallots, as well.

Kay Rentzel, executive director of the U.S. Sweet Potato Council, Dillsburg, PA, assures customers that sweet potatoes are available,

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despite some adverse weather reports in a few regions. “There is adequate supply currently. We are pleased to offer uninterrupted supplies.”

She points out that sweet potatoes are being used more as ingredients. The industry continues to inform the public about the considerable health benefits and that they are convenient all year, not just for Thanksgiving.

Jesse Reisnyder, assistant produce manager, at the West Seattle store of Metropolitan Market, Bellevue, WA, agrees. “We have sweet potatoes all the time on the dry table. During the holidays, we stock the Japanese and purple ones.” Metropolitan Market has 10 locations across the Seattle area.

Rentzel says the orange skin and flesh sweet potatoes are grown primarily in the Southern states, while the white and purple ones are produced in California.

**MORE VERSIONS OF ROOT VEGETABLES**

Although other crops are grown on their 7,000 acres, Gumz Farms, Endeavor, WI, are noted for their potatoes and onions on their muck soil, and these staples are still “a great value for the customer,” says Tom Bulgrin, manager.

“It seems like people are still cooking more,” he adds. “They are looking for quality and easy-to-cook staples.”

The market has changed toward yellow potatoes. Accordingly, Gumz now grows just yellow and red potatoes, and red and yellow onions. “Red onions have a place, but they are more expensive, as they are harder to grow,” he says, “and yellow onions are preferred.”

“We try to match consumer desires. Now, customers want smaller bags, most now are 5 and 3 pounds. Bags of 15 and 10 pounds are not in demand.”

Jeff Brechler, sales representative for Little Bear Produce, Edinburg, TX, describes their golden beets as “milder in flavor, a way to introduce palates, a good starter to graduate to red beets as well. We still sell more red than golden beets.”

Their Beta Sweet Maroon carrots are exclusive. “There’s nothing like them,” Brechler explains, “Texas A&M stumbled on them when they were breeding carrots for texture and crunchiness.” With high amounts of both beta carotenoids and anthocyanin, Brechler says, “You get two for one.” He notes that it is not a cooking carrot, but is better consumed raw.

Brechler also recommends an air fryer for kohlrabi cut in french fry style, and also turnips. The company also produces sweet onions and radishes.

Drew Clowser, marketing manager, Lake-side Organic Gardens, LLC, Watsonville, CA,

**“Roots are Old World crops with very mature, established applications and business models.”**

— Kevin Partida, Vision Produce Company, Los Angeles, CA

also calls attention to red and gold beets. “Red is more popular nationwide year-round due to their versatility in juices, salads and roasted dishes.”

“Gold beets are more niche and valued for their milder flavor and vibrant color,” Clowser adds. “Demand spikes in the colder months due to their heartiness. Interest is especially strong in regions focused on healthy foods.”

Carrots are sought year-round — Nantes for their sweetness, and rainbow for urban markets focused on trends, Clowser reports. Celery root is popular for low-carbohydrate alternatives to potatoes, especially in gourmet markets. In the colder months, it is used in soups and stews, which increases demand.

Sales are strong in the Northeast and Midwest, especially during fall and winter, although he cautions celery root may require additional trimming at the market.

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Colorful root vegetables warrant large, abundant displays in the produce department.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMIEE TENZEEK PHOTO

Lakeside's new item, scarlet turnips, is gaining attention for gourmet cooking, particularly in the Southern and Midwestern states, with peak demand in fall and winter.

Korean radish appeals to health-conscious consumers year-round, and for traditional dishes like kimchi and stews. Red radishes, Clowser notes, enjoy strong demand, especially high in the spring and summer when fresh raw vegetables are demanded.

"One of the primary draws of watermelon radish is its vibrant pink and green interior, which adds a splash of color to dishes." He adds that it is less spicy than red radishes, and is often featured in salads, roasted vegetable medleys and garnishes in cooler months.

Solely organic, Lakeside Organic Gardens produces over 50 crops year-round, and ships across the U.S. and Canada. Clowser advises that beets, turnips and radishes should be stored at 32°F with high humidity to avoid dehydration. He recommends retaining the greens for better presentation. Carrots, celery root and watermelon radishes should be stored at 32–34°F with high humidity to maintain crispness.

At Offshoot Brands, Conshohocken, PA, Love Beets' latest launch is the Classic Beet Kit, which can be enjoyed with or without greens, as a side, or with added protein for a full meal, according to Maggie Scott, brand manager. This kit consists of peeled and cooked beet wedges, goat cheese, walnuts and a balsamic vinaigrette.

"Love Beets Perfectly Pickled Beet and Marinated Baby Beet packaging design features a transparent window with prominent usage suggestions, a flavor descriptor, and fun illustrations that provide clear cues to the consumer," she adds, and the peel-and-reseal package generates praise from the users. Love Beets provides POS materials and conducts in-store demos.

Reisnyder says that Metropolitan Market

refrigerates turnips and radishes. He adds, "We bunch the tops of beets and trim them. Typical potatoes are sold at the dry table; the creamers are sold by the pound and prebagged. We bring the fingerlings out at Thanksgiving." He notes that basic root vegetables are stocked year-round, but adds, "We can source specialties. Technology now allows efficiency."

### **DISPLAYS, DEMOS, PROPER HANDLING ATTRACT SALES**

Many of these colorful root vegetables warrant large, abundant displays. Hiltner notes that items, such as watermelon radishes should be displayed and demonstrated when cut to spotlight the bright pink interior, but they must be protected from drying out. Keeping the tops on, provides color contrast as well.

Demos include a less common root vegetable, such as celery root, Hiltner suggests air frying slices and accompanying them with hummus or ranch dressing. Roasted radishes, too, share examples of versatility.

Gumz Farms' Bulgrin suggests displays should be "highly visible and eye-catching. Also, the package has to have flashy material."

For promotions, cross merchandise. "Have a sale on steak, and advertise a giveaway of the potatoes." Bulgarian notes that consumers who live near grocery stores shop more frequently than those in rural areas, so he recommends lowering the package sizes.

To maintain the moisture in horseradish roots, Diekemper advises retailers keep it unexposed. "Mist or wrap before storing on shelves, and keep it cold."

"Roots are Old World crops with very mature, established applications and business models. Many are used in traditional, cultural cuisines," Partida says. "As the U.S. becomes more racially diverse, I believe promotions and education at the retail level will play more important roles to increase consumption." **pb**

# We Want Produce Packaging That Does it All

Single-use, sustainability, branding, food safety: Today's produce packaging is as important as the product.

BY MIKE DUFF

In July, Kroger introduced a new fresh produce private label dubbed Field & Vine, spotlighting blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries grown by farmers in the United States. In doing so, the grocer illustrated what packaging can do in fresh produce.

Kroger, based in Cincinnati, OH, wanted to emphasize the product line developed from local sourcing. As such, the branding on the clamshells became an eye-catching way for the retailer to present Field & Vine and its all-American sourcing to its customers.

"Field & Vine features berries grown in the fields of American farmers that are picked, packed and delivered in stores during peak seasonality," says Dan De La Rosa, Kroger's group vice president of fresh merchandising when introducing the product line. "Harvesting at just the right time during the U.S. growing season allows us to provide our customers with an enhanced fresh experience."

In an age where consumers are bombarded with messaging from an array of media, Kroger demonstrates grabbing the customer's attention can often be best accomplished in the store, which means that packaging can play a substantial role in product success.

## IT'S COMPLICATED

But branding is only one facet of packaging that connects with consumers. Concerns about handling and food safety were elevated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to more packaging, yet sustainability and recycling concerns have since returned to the forefront.

Elizabeth Callinan, assistant brand manager at Inline Plastic, Shelton, CT, says consumer packaging use in produce departments increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to safety concerns and a desire to get in and out of stores quickly.

"In the aftermath, grocers seem to have scaled back a bit, in part due to the continuing preference for bulk produce among some



There is a little bit of a push toward paper and paperboard packaging, but it's a little more expensive and is mostly used in organic or unique varieties of produce.

consumers, and in part, to address environmental concerns some customers have raised," she says.

Jeff Dolan of The Dimare Co., Newman, CA, — whose family has been in the wholesale and repack business for almost 100 years — says, from the perspective of a grower/packer/shipper, issues related to fresh produce packaging preferences ebb and flow.

"Plastic clamshells are always a double-edged sword," he says. "They are relatively cheap, easily obtained and commonly accepted by the public. But, of course, environmental issues are always a concern. Use of cardboard as a replacement has not worked as well. It isn't as sturdy, and I think the customer wants a transparent container in order to see what they are buying. Corn-based plastic packaging is an option, but it hasn't taken off. But it is biodegradable, as long as it is exposed to the sun."

Even within individual commodities, packaging varies. "Some tomatoes, grapes, cherries, TOV lend themselves to consumer packaging," Dolan says. "Larger round and roma types generally are bulk items that the customer wants to touch, squeeze, and smell. Of course, retailers also like to have 4-packs or sleeves of tomatoes as another SKU and an alternative offering."

Although he's skeptical about how much single-use packaging can extend shelf life or support freshness in general, he admits pack-

aged grapes and cherries "have less shrink and less liability with packaging."

To make considerations even more challenging, companies have to weigh the recognition factor, especially given the marketing dollars growers can afford.

"Packaging does have the advantage of providing easier farm identification," Dolan says. "But, we aren't Coke or Oreo. Our marketing/advertising is pretty ineffective and really not even worth doing."

Steve Greenfield, director of sales and marketing at NNZ Packaging, Lawrenceville, GA, says he's somewhat surprised how fast some of the behaviors learned in the pandemic have been abandoned, resulting in a slide back to bulk fresh produce from packaged. A slight, but detectable, movement in material is happening, too.

"There is a little bit of a push toward paper and paperboard," he says. "It's a little more expensive. It's mostly in organic or unique varieties of produce."

## CONVENIENCE VS. SUSTAINABILITY

"As we emerge from the COVID-19 era, our bustling lifestyles have resumed, driving the continued growth of the prepackaged meal prep sector in response to increasing demands for convenience and health-conscious options," Inline Plastics' Callinan says. "This shift reflects consumers' desire for efficient meal solutions that free up valuable time for personal and family connections."

At the same time, she adds, “we’re witnessing a rise in environmentally conscious consumers who prioritize retailers offering sustainable packaging alternatives, including recyclable, post-consumer and compostable materials, as well as options with reduced plastic content. Looking ahead, the packaging industry is poised for ongoing innovation in sustainable solutions, aiming to meet evolving customer expectations while contributing positively to environmental preservation.”

Victoria Lopez, marketing and business development manager, Fox Packaging, McAllen, TX, says the company has been in the thick of developing sustainable and innovative produce packaging solutions.

“Consumers are increasingly seeking eco-friendly options, and regulatory bodies are implementing stricter environmental guidelines,” she says. “Over the next few years, we anticipate a continued emphasis on sustainability, with advancements in biodegradable materials and smart packaging technologies that extend shelf life and reduce waste.”

It’s a tricky balance. For instance, Lopez adds, while paper sacks are widely used, their environmental impact is still a topic of discussion. “Similarly, the convenience of grab-and-go products must be balanced with the ecological footprint of single-serve beverage



Addressing sustainability concerns can make produce packaging more acceptable to more consumers.

PHOTO COURTESY SERV-REND

bottles. Our commitment is to continually evaluate and improve our packaging solutions to meet today’s sustainability challenges.”

Addressing sustainability concerns can make produce packaging more acceptable to more consumers.

“It’s not just about using responsible packaging. It’s also about guiding consumers with the right information to ensure the sustainability cycle is completed,” Lopez says. “Proper labeling educates on the importance of correct sortation

and recycling, enabling consumers to become active participants in environmental stewardship.”

Callinan says plastic packaging producers are making strides in sustainability by optimizing material use and incorporating post-consumer content to minimize waste and conserve virgin resources. “They are also enhancing recyclable product development and improving communication about recycling practices, which collectively contribute to a reduced environmental impact.”

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Consumer preferences are shifting notably, she adds. Paper sacks are becoming more popular for bulk items due to their eco-friendly properties, while single-serve, grab-and-go options remain favored for their convenience.

“These convenient packaging options extend product shelf life, which is a key part of their sustainability story. However, communicating this benefit effectively is challenging due to the complex, and often controversial, nature of their end-of-life disposal and overall lifecycle impact. Therefore, the challenge with anything made of plastic will continue to be the sustainable aspect, and balancing consumer needs with environmental responsibility.”

Sustainability ought to be an internal consideration, stresses Mark Hoppenjans, vice president of sales and sustainable business, Serv-Rend, Collinsville, IL. “We focus on being crystal clear on cost to adopt, legislation, infrastructure and our own habits as a manufacturing company,” he says. “We rate to Ecovadis every year and track water, waste and carbon closely. We work at it, and there’s still things to learn and improve.”

#### MATERIAL DIFFERENCES

For her part, Rachel Kenyon, senior vice president, Fibre Box Association, Itasca, IL, says, while the pandemic had a profound effect on consumer packaging, other changes in the marketplace are having their own impact.

“The pandemic triggered changes in consumer attitudes and preferences, and many started prioritizing healthier and more sustainable habits,” she says. “Meanwhile, a steady flow of alarming news about the environment is leading many people to consider how they can minimize their personal impact on the planet.”

Kenyon says another trend to watch is advancing use of automated technology in supply chains. “Machines are programmed to perform repetitive tasks with consistent results, eking out process improvements and efficiencies that are good for business. As more automated systems come online, they will invite the development of new packaging solutions that are designed to optimize productivity and adapt to changing times.”

Although demand for more sustainable packaging is often a point of discussion, the reality is a higher cost may be involved.

Hoppenjans says consumers are price-sensitive and evaluate things based on their own personal economics and convictions.

“Consumers have shown they will not pay more than 3% additional for a sustainable package,” he says. “Our industry has done a good job getting people excited about sustain-

able options and, at the same time, a poor job of being direct about the cost to adopt and working to drive the cost of sustainable materials down versus conventional.

“Between now and 2035, I expect to see a gradual upward line toward more sustainable materials and bulk where the whole field-to-kitchen transit makes sense,” Hoppenjans adds. “It will be a jagged line though. You’ll see dips based on legislation and cost. More younger consumers coming into the market and starting households will be part of this gradual trend. They’ll be active in 2050 and

2060 and are much more tuned into the whole life of the products they buy.”

He says the immediate future is focused on recycled content and recycling rates.

“This makes the most sense for cost and making small improvements now,” Hoppenjans says. “New materials that are compostable are still two to four times the cost of conventional. For produce, that can only make sense in a few, very high-margin products.”

It’s going to take some time to improve materials and scale to drive cost down, he adds. “The supply for conventional sources, paper

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and plastics, and the equipment are both set and very efficient. Displacing these with newer materials is not going to be sudden, especially at slightly higher costs.”

Compostable packaging is getting “very little traction in produce because of cost,” he also notes. “Very few compost facilities take compostable packaging. About 100 of 5,000 nationally. Recyclable and recycled content are both gaining.”

Although sustainability concerns are broadly felt today, many factors influence the development of produce packaging.

“It’s sales, marketing and compliance that are driving new approaches,” Hoppenjans says, noting that packers/distributors “want packaging and suppliers that support their targets for material and data.”

### NAME GAME

Packaging has multiple functions including, for many growers and retailers, as a way to make their products stand out. Fox Packaging’s Lopez says packaging is about a lot more than just protection.

“We understand the critical role branding plays, with key principles like clarity, authenticity and consistency driving our approach to packaging design,” she says.

Clarity, she explains, ensures a brand is

“instantly recognizable and stands out in a fast-paced retail environment, while authenticity creates a genuine connection with consumers.”

“Consistency across all packaging graphics reinforces brand identity and fosters customer loyalty,” Lopez adds. “By focusing on clear and consistent branding, we help influence consumer perception and choice, supporting the broader goals of responsible packaging and conscious design.”

Kenyon, with the Fibre Box Association, says brand recognition connects consumers to products they trust.

“Packaging is an obvious medium for branding messages,” she says. “Packaging can be used as a promotion vehicle, a branding platform and an information source for consumers who want to know more about the brand, the product, and the package. Sometimes the package itself attracts shoppers.”

Since it can include QR codes and online links, packaging can help companies engage consumers in new ways. Hoppenjans says because branding “does play a role, investments here must produce a return in the form of repeat orders and loyal customers. In the long run, sustainable materials will be used for brand loyalty with younger consumers. You’ll see this gamified on mobile devices to increase

use.”

The use of packaging to deliver fresh produce, along with a statement of the advantages that a brand offers, can be key to gaining traction with consumers.

“In today’s competitive marketplace, effective branding is crucial for making packaging stand out and attract consumer attention,” Callanan says. “Ultimately, thoughtful branding transforms packaging into a powerful marketing tool that deeply resonates with and influences consumers, turning the humble package into a storytelling medium that can make or break a sale.”

NNZ has come up with something called a pop-up pack for round fruits and vegetables. It’s a high-graphic paperboard tray that can be readily branded, easily used and comes in sizes for two, four or six pieces of fruit, and it has some properties peculiar to itself.

“It comes flat,” Greenfield says. “You just push down, and it pops into its structure. Then you can hand pack. We’re selling it with the idea that you can start small, pack by hand, maybe for a pilot with a retailer. Then, if it takes off, there is another level that’s semi-automatic. It’s inexpensive machinery. You can automate it a little bit. Then if it really scales, there are some high-speed machines that can affect it quickly and label it.” **pb**

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# A Relationship That Works

Nogales, AZ, continues to benefit from its strategic location.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL



PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Although land ports in South Texas and California have also gained justified fame, Nogales, AZ, has retained its position as a premier import hub.

**L**ocated almost halfway along the U.S.-Mexico border, Nogales, AZ — which has a sister city of the same name across the frontier — is a name synonymous with fresh produce. Although land ports in South Texas and California have also gained justified fame, Nogales has retained its position as a premier import hub.

Benefiting from a close relationship with growers south of the border, Nogales has also experienced many of the fluctuations passing through the produce trade at the current time. How it deals with them could point the way forward for much of the industry as a whole.

Established and still headquartered in Nogales, the Fresh Produce Association of Americas (FPAA) has long been a vital advocate for the city's importers, fighting to protect companies against the threat of tariffs and

helping lobby for infrastructure improvements.

At its head, FPAA President Lance Jungmeyer has overseen the expansion of the association over more than a decade, taking the organization beyond Nogales and along the length of the entire border region.

However, despite the FPAA's years of hard work, he says there are still a lot of people in the U.S. — with particular reference to politicians — who don't understand the value of trade. "One of the shared things we see is a push for tariffs and/or other trade restrictions, really from both parties these days and that's a difference from five to 10 years ago," says Jungmeyer.

"When you look at the overall balance of agricultural trade between the U.S. and Mexico, U.S. agricultural exports have grown a lot and Mexican agricultural exports have grown a lot too, so both sides are doing well

**One challenge facing importers in Nogales is not the process of bringing produce over the border, but rather in sourcing it in the first place from Mexico.**

under the trade agreement that we have with the USMCA."

#### **USMCA REVIEW**

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) is up for review during 2025/26, and Jungmeyer says one key FPAA objective during negotiations will be ensuring



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION/JERRY GLASER

Arriving commercial vehicles wait in line to pass through the Multi-Energy Portal (MEP) system at the Port of Mariposa in Nogales, AZ.

market access remains open and that quotas or tariffs are not imposed on imported produce, especially from Mexico.

“It’s a slippery slope. Once you start out with one ag commodity, the other nation responds and it gets messy quickly,” he says. “The truth is, we need each other a lot more than we think.”

“If you look at the increase in storm activity that’s happening in the Gulf of Mexico, these storms are growing in frequency and intensity, so the chance that a storm will wipe out all or half of Florida and the Southeast’s production is not unfathomable.”

Given this threat, Jungmeyer says maintaining good relationship and trading program with Mexico is important, emphasizing that FPAA’s role is making sure that relationship continues.

One example is the Tomato Suspension Agreement, which growers from Florida are seeking to remove and replace with tariffs. The FPAA, which represents importers and shippers, says it is focused on maintaining it to ensure its members can continue to trade.

“If companies have to pay duties, which are not refundable necessarily, it creates quite a difficult situation to do business in — if you can’t sell the produce, if you can’t get across the border to do the commerce, you’re not in business,” argues Jungmeyer. “Market access is really one of the key tenets of the FPAA.”

### PRODUCE FLOWS BOTH WAYS

One challenge being faced by importers in Nogales is not so much concerned with the process of bringing produce over the border, but rather in sourcing it in the first place from Mexico.

Jungmeyer says the unpredictability of water supply in areas such as Sinaloa, combined with a generalized shortage of labor, has caused some smaller growers to cease operations. “Right now, a lot of water levels in reservoirs in Sinaloa and Sonora are below where we’d like them to be.”

On a more positive side, there has been an upsurge in products not typically associated with Nogales passed through the port, such as berries and tropicals. “We’re getting more and more year-round and we’re all seeing more potatoes going from the U.S. to Mexico through Nogales,” says Jungmeyer.

“This is important because it creates more trucking capacity. If you’ve got more trucks going southbound through Nogales, they want to pick up going back up. This symbiosis between U.S. and Mexican produce is crucial for keeping trucking at capacity.”

### MAKING ALLIANCES

One such company benefiting from

this symbiosis is table grape and vegetable importer Fresh Farms, based in Rio Rico, AZ, the importer hub to the north of Nogales. Currently growing at between 20% to 25% year-on-year, around 60% of Fresh Farms’ business is drawn from grapes, and most of these are from the company’s own farms, according to general manager Juan Pablo Molina.

“We source mainly from our own production in Mexico, but we also grow grapes in the San Joaquin Valley, so we can grow in both countries, allowing us to harvest for around eight months,” he says. “We also have

some excellent alliances in Peru and Chile to continue year-round programs with national retailers.”

The other 40% of Fresh Farms’ business comes from squash, cucumbers, bell peppers, hot peppers, pickles, corn and eggplant, as well as some watermelon and melons grown in different regions of Mexico.

Looking ahead, Molina says good supplies of table grapes from California for the rest of 2024 appear likely, with South America also delivering a good start. On watermelon and vegetables, which started from mid-October,

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# TENDERLAND:

**F**or companies across Mexico and wider Latin America, the challenge of differentiating your offer in a crowded marketplace has typically focused on branding bags of particular varieties, fruit sizes or sources with catchy names, designed to entice consumers to pick them up from shelves and displays.

Los Mochis, Sinaloa-based grower-exporter SL Produce decided to take a different approach. For many long-standing producers the length and breadth of Mexico, the concept of responsible – or sustainable – agriculture has taken on increasing importance over recent years in the face of not just consumer and retailer demands, but also the need to respond to the challenges posed by a changing climate.

These concerns have led to the birth of what the company believes is a new concept in brand marketing for produce, called Tenderland. The brand emphasizes care and respect for the land and the people that work it, as well as an exacting attention-to-detail, complete traceability and quality, which runs from planting through selection to final delivery.

The branded bags and packs, which feature green beans (conventional and organic), bell peppers, slicer cucumbers, sweet corn, and squash, will be supplied to retailers and food-service customers across the U.S. and Canada with weekly deliveries and year-round availability.

Unlike many existing produce labels, Tenderland seeks to turn the focus on SL Produce's responsible production methods and guarantee of dignified working conditions for employees, including housing and education.

It also marks the culmination of two decades of hard work for the grower-exporter.

## More Than A Brand

A vertically integrated company, from fields to delivery, SL Produce uses state-of-the-art greenhouses for cultivation – in addition to open field production – followed by rigorous selection and packaging processes; all with the aim of delivering

added value with its vegetables.

Its origins can be traced back to 2007 when founder Selman Tachna – a third-generation grower started his own green bean enterprise, SL Agrícola, with business partner Jorge Angulo. The name, incidentally, was taken from the initials of Tachna's wife, Sandra Luz. Joinly, Selman Tachna and Jorge Angulo count on over 40 years' experience in the produce industry.

The modern iteration of the company, SL Group, really came into being when the next generation – Jorge Angulo Jr, Luis Tachna and Selman Tachna Jr – entered the business.

According to SL Produce's Marketing and PR Manager, Ivonne Lugo, the arrival of this fourth generation into the industry gave SL a huge injection of energy, bringing with it fresh ideas, a raft of new, enthusiastic recruits, and a more formal way of managing the company.

One of the first moves was to establish a new U.S.-based commercial import arm for SL Agrícola, called SL Produce. With locations in Nogales, AZ and McAllen, TX, SL Produce imports green beans, bell peppers, American slicer cucumbers, sweet corns and squash.

From this point onwards, SL Produce started to grow in leaps and bounds. Production was expanded across Mexico, east to Torreón, and south to Jalisco and central Guanajuato region. This growth in production was accompanied by greater production volumes and an increasing number of contacts signed for exports.

But while SL Produce may not be alone in being an ambitious company undergoing expansion, it has long been notable for its emphasis on social and agricultural responsibility.

"We have a very low turnover of workers," explains Lugo. "Many of our employees have been working here for 20 or 30 years and the second generation has now joined them.

"What this means is we have a very solid stable base that allows us to concentrate on supplying very high quality products, and the gentleness with which we farm the land from seed to harvest is reflected in the results of our work – agricultural products full of life and taste."



Left to right: Selman Tachna Jr, Luis Tachna, Selman Tachna, Jorge Angulo and Jorge Angulo Jr



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PHOTO COURTESY U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement is up for review during 2025/26, and Fresh Produce Association of Americas President Lance Jungmeyer says one key FPAA objective during negotiations will be ensuring market access remains open and that quotas or tariffs are not imposed on imported produce, especially from Mexico.

supply also looked positive, despite rising production costs.

“The cost of growing in the U.S., as well as in Mexico, has increased for a lot of reasons,” says Molina. “We could talk just about this subject for over an hour, but we need to make sure retailers understand the reasons for this and try to raise the cost.”

One such reason is the fact that labor is a “shrinking commodity everywhere,” according to Molina, and it is here that organizations like the FPAA have a big role to play. “I think our industry associations do a very good job of representing at the government levels,” he says. “We definitely need and have been asking for immigration reform for labor workers and, of course, this is spotlighted in our political arena as we approach elections this November.”

On a more positive note, Molina says Fresh Farms continues to expand its grape volumes

**“When you look at the overall balance of agricultural trade between the U.S. and Mexico, U.S. agricultural exports have grown a lot and Mexican agricultural exports have grown a lot too, so both sides are doing well under the trade agreement that we have with the USMCA.”**

— Lance Jungmeyer, president, Fresh Produce Association of Americas



and varieties year-round, and has recently moved beyond fresh into Fresh Farms Frozen Cotton Candy, a product that he says is having huge success and will likely lead the company in new directions.

#### MEASURED GROWTH

Also based in Rio Rico, AZ, SunFed special-

izes in zucchini, yellow and grey squash, American slicing cucumbers, eggplant and bell peppers, sourced from multiple regions across Mexico.

Although the importer-marketer continues to experience what it describes as “strategic measured growth,” SunFed’s Vice President of Sales and Marketing JC Myers says he is “optimistic, yet realistic” about the availability,



volumes and quality for the remainder of 2024.

“Late summer growing conditions have been normal, and we expect production to start up soon,” he says, adding that access to labor, the water shortage, and inflation impact on input costs continue to be top of mind for SunFed’s growers in Mexico.

Myers says there is a need for suppliers to listen closely to their growers’ needs and communicate that through the supply chain. However, he also urges other produce companies to do more to support industry associations, arguing that time and money are needed to make such organizations effective.

As a specialist in the dry veg space, Myers says Nogales’ proximity to growing regions in Baja California, Sonora and Sinaloa make it an excellent choice for distribution of the freshest products. This proximity, he adds, is allowing SunFed to continue to expand in dry veg, and also consider complementary items that are beneficial to both growers and customers.

### EXPANDING SOURCING

IPR Fresh is another Nogales-based, specialist importer, this time with a principal focus on conventional and organic colored bell peppers, although the company also imports a variety of other products, including melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini and squash. IPR brings bell peppers in from Sinaloa and Jalisco in Mexico during the majority of the year, and from the Netherlands during the summer.

With the company recently expanding its warehouse to accommodate the growing demand for bell peppers, IPR president José Luis Obregón says the past 12 months have been “challenging, but rewarding.”

Although IPR expanded its bell pepper offerings and strengthened relationships with customers, water shortages in key growing regions continue, which is likely to lead to lower volumes, tempered by the possibility of record prices.

However, while production costs have risen steadily since the pandemic, Obregón says product prices have not kept pace, and the strong Mexican peso has also created challenges for exporting growers.

Despite the mixed outlook, Obregón says IPR aims to maintain a steady supply of high-quality peppers throughout the season, benefiting from Nogales’ proximity to key growing regions and major distribution centers across the Western U.S.

Another positive point is the beneficial work being done by the FPAA, an organization Obregón says has been in maintaining fair trade by protecting against protectionist efforts from other trade groups. “Continued support like this is essential,” he says. **pb**



PHOTO COURTESY SUNFED

Based in Rio Rico, AZ, SunFed specializes in zucchini, yellow and grey squash, American slicing cucumbers, eggplant and bell peppers, sourced from multiple regions across Mexico.



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# Florida Fall Produce

For retailers, there are many benefits — and challenges — in procuring Florida’s fall produce.

BY K.O. MORGAN

**T**he fall season — smack dab in the middle of hurricane season — can be challenging for Florida farmers when it comes to getting their produce to the market.

“Supply interruptions due to weather and ‘act of God’ events are always a concern to both farmers and retailers,” says Tony DiMare, president of both DiMare Fresh, headquartered in Arlington, TX, and DiMare Homestead, based in Homestead, FL. “This past year was very challenging for Florida farmers — as it was for most growers in North America — due to extreme weather events.”

## PRODUCE CORNUCOPIA

Florida is one of the few states that produces and supplies fresh fruits and vegetables between September and May.

“Florida offers a diverse array of fresh produce in the fall and winter months, including snap beans, squash, cucumbers, bell peppers and leafy greens, which can complement Florida tomatoes and sweet corn in seasonal recipes,” says Susie McKinley, director, division of marketing and development at Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Tallahassee, FL. “Florida also offers a variety of specialty citrus and strawberries, with supply steadily increasing as the season progresses.”

DiMare Fresh will offer grape, Roma and round tomatoes from its Ruskin, FL, location during the Florida fall season, which starts in mid-October and continues until the end of the year, says DiMare, as well as round tomatoes from its Homestead, FL, operation through the winter until mid-April.

“But the fall season in Florida can be very challenging from a growing standpoint because of the hurricane season.”

Justin Rowe, produce category business manager at Tops Markets, Buffalo, NY, says in the fall, Tops Markets offers Florida produce, including green peppers, zucchini, yellow squash and cucumbers, as well as citrus in October and strawberries in November.



DiMare Fresh offers grape, Roma and round tomatoes from its Ruskin, FL, location for the Florida fall season, which starts in mid-October and continues until the end of the year.

“All of these categories are very important to our produce department,” he says.

The Florida fall produce that is grown and available through Kroger Delivery includes collard greens, kale, mustard greens, turnip greens, cilantro, celery, lettuces, such as iceberg, romaine hearts, green leaf, red leaf and romaine, red, green, bok choy, napa and savoy cabbages, green onions, curly and Italian parsley, leeks, spinach, turnips and green beans, according to Krystal Diaz, e-commerce corporate affairs and communications manager, Kroger, headquartered in Cincinnati, OH.

And don’t forget citrus. “We handle grapefruit, juicing oranges, navel oranges and tangerines,” says Derek Rodgers, director of sales and marketing at Florida Classic Growers Inc., a grower, packer, shipper and

marketer based in Dundee, FL. “We have a very nice crop all the way around. The grapefruit and juice orange sizing are a little on the small side, but the quality is excellent.”

## INFLATION IMPACT LINGERS

Inflation is another challenge facing produce growers and consumers during the fall and winter, and Rodgers says everyone is feeling its effects. “What we growers, retailers, and wholesalers must do is make sure we are putting top quality products on shelves. At these prices, consumers expect only the best.”

Rowe agrees. “Inflation is very real and sometimes an unavoidable fact. We do as much as we can to avoid passing along the cost increases from our suppliers, however, we can only absorb so much.

“In these times, it is important that our



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMIEE TENZEK PHOTO

East Coast retailers like the option of sourcing Florida produce items, such as citrus and berries, from Florida instead of California, taking miles out of the supply chain.

customers feel they have received value for their purchases. If we gain the trust from our customers that our Florida fall produce is top quality and fresh, then we think we have provided that value.”

DiMare says Florida helps retailers across the country stay competitive by providing fresh and locally grown products. “As a key supplier in the supply chain, Florida fills the

needs of retailers with competitive pricing through a steady supply of products.”

Florida’s East Coast location gives it an advantage. “Imports from overseas and Mexico always create downward pressure on Florida farmers during the fall and winter,” says Jon Alderman, sales manager, Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL. “But we provide celery, leaf lettuce, corn, and radishes to the East Coast

with less freight. That increases freshness with shorter transit.”

As an East Coast retailer, Rowe agrees. “Being able to take miles out of the supply chain is always top of mind. Having the option to source these important items, such as citrus and berries from Florida, instead of California, cuts our miles on the road by more than half,” he says. “The cost savings that

## ■ HELP IS ON-HAND

Retailers can drive sales of Florida fall produce by tapping into organizations set up to help stores push sales. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), headquartered in Tallahassee, FL, partners with retailers via its “Fresh From Florida” brand, which is supported by an annual consumer advertising campaign.

“With brand awareness at the consumer level at an all-time high, retailers can benefit from the targeted campaign, which includes a media mix of radio, TV, digital display, social media, online shopping platforms, cashback apps, retail floor graphics, shopping cart advertising and more,” says FDACS director, Susie McKinley. “The campaign is designed to increase the Fresh From Florida brand awareness and keeps Florida products in the minds of shoppers.”

“Fresh From Florida does a great job in coordinating with growers and partners with POS materials and promotions. This makes it easy for consumers to spot local, fresh produce at the retail level with in-store signage and the Fresh From Florida

label,” says Jon Alderman, sales manager, Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL.

“Fresh From Florida has an extensive recipe listing that we can pull from to use in our weekly ads for callouts in fresh fruits and vegetables,” adds Justin Rowe, produce category business manager at Tops Markets, Buffalo, NY.

Retailers can drive sales by sourcing Florida produce and engaging in Fresh From Florida branded promotions. “With over 1 million followers and more than 400 recipes on FreshFromFlorida.com, there is significant consumer interest in cooking with fresh Florida ingredients,” adds McKinley.

The Florida Department of Citrus is also another resource and works with retailers to promote Florida produce. “They assist with in-store demos, point-of-sale materials, and many other ways to push Florida Fall produce sales,” says Derek Rodgers, director of sales and marketing at Florida Classic Growers, Inc. in Dundee, FL.

Tony DiMare, president of both DiMare Fresh, headquartered in Arlington, TX, and DiMare Homestead, based in Homestead, FL, recommends the Florida Tomato



IMAGE COURTESY FDACS

Committee. “It partners with Canadian retailers through a MAP grant, which promotes and markets Florida tomatoes during the Florida tomato season.” **pb**

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“Retailers can set prices at reasonable price points and offer sales on Florida produce that will allow consumers to take advantage of the abundance of fruits and vegetables from Florida.”

— Tony DiMare, DiMare Homestead, Homestead, FL

come with shorter transit times help us to stay competitive with our retails.”

### FLORIDA FILLS THE GAP

Fall is a time of year when some U.S. growers are winding down their produce availability, so retailers can count on the abundance of Florida produce to pick up the slack. Florida’s temperate weather, from September to March, makes the Sunshine State one of the largest producers of fruits and vegetables from fall through spring.

“Retailers can set prices at reasonable price points and offer sales on Florida produce that will allow consumers to take advantage of the abundance of fruits and



PHOTO COURTESY FDACS

Retailers can drive sales by sourcing Florida produce and engaging in “Fresh From Florida” branded promotions. The campaign includes a media mix of radio, TV, digital display, social media, online shopping platforms, cashback apps, retail floor graphics and shopping cart advertising.

vegetables from Florida during this time,” says DiMare.

“Promotions can be customized and may include a combination of circular ads, in-store announcements, merchandising assets, recipes, social media campaigns, sampling events and more,” adds McKinley of FDACS.

“We encourage retailers to run promotions on abundant sizes and pack styles,” says Rodgers, of Florida Classic Growers, Inc. “We offer an aggressive price along with promotable volume.”

Diaz says Kroger customers can browse

fresh Florida fall produce at Kroger.com or via the Kroger app. “We market Florida fruits and vegetables through various digital media outlets, as well as through traditional media platforms.”

Other ways that retailers can push Florida fall produce sales is through autumn-themed displays. Fruits and vegetables from Florida can be placed on displays and shelving that feature fall items, such as pumpkin pies, nuts, pumpkins, apples and candied apples, and spices, such as cinnamon and pumpkin pie spice.

pb



PHOTO COURTESY NOBLE CITRUS

Consumers yearn for a taste of summer in the winter. The Fresh From Florida campaign is designed to increase the Fresh From Florida brand awareness and keeps Florida products in the minds of shoppers.

# Demand for Organic Peppers Growing

Peppers are the No. 2 organic vegetable and rising.

BY BOB JOHNSON

**O**rganic pepper sales stood at \$174 million in 2022, according to Category Partners research, in second place behind lettuce among organic vegetables at the nation's retailers, but it will take continued promotion to regain that spot.

Organic Produce Network statistics show, for 2024 first quarter, 11 of the top 20 categories posted increases, with apples seeing the largest increase in organic volume at 16.6%, followed by bananas at 13.2%. The network is a coalition of major corporate retailers and organic growers large enough to supply them.

But other produce categories saw losses during Q1, including organic prepackaged salads, lettuce, kale, and squash all seeing declines in both volume and dollars. And, according to the Organic Produce Network, organic bell peppers saw the biggest drop in volume at almost 15%, down from last year at the same time.

Organic bell pepper sales declined the most in the Northeast region.

## SUPPLY AND DEMAND BASICS

"The prices were high at retail because the supply was short," explains Francisco Clouthier, founding owner of Maui Fresh International, Los Angeles, CA. "It's getting a little better with the supply coming in from Mexico."

Clouthier's family started farming tomatoes and peppers in the Sinaloa Valley over 60 years ago, and, soon after, opened San Rafael Distributing — a sales company in Nogales, AZ. In 2004, Clouthier opened a wholesale company in Los Angeles, and in 2007, created Maui Fresh International, a major national shipper of peppers. According to Clouthier, around 20% of the company's peppers are organic.

Other industry insiders look for demand for peppers, especially organic varieties, to grow as consumers prioritize fresh, healthy options and seek convenient packaging. "The



By promoting peppers year-round and providing educational information about the health benefits, different varieties, and flavor and heat profiles, retailers can encourage consumers to try different types and incorporate them into their meals.

outlook for pepper production is strong, with continued growth in various pepper varieties and pack sizes to meet increasing consumer demand," says Raul Acevedo, sales representative for Fox Packaging, McAllen, TX.

"Most pepper growers in the United States are concentrated in key states like California, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico and Texas," Acevedo adds. "Additionally, a significant portion of peppers are imported and packed just across the Texas border."

Organic peppers have rebounded from the recent modest slump, which was caused by supply issues.

"Markets have been good for the last six months, but a year ago, they were hit pretty hard," says Javier Vargas, president of Cache Produce LLC, Winters, CA. "Right now, there is demand for organic bell peppers. Green is the most popular color, followed by red and yellow."

Cache Produce harvests 2 million cartons of organic vegetables a year from fields in the Sacramento Valley, Salinas, Santa Maria and Mexico.

California and Florida lead bell pepper production in the United States, along with Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina and Ohio helping fulfill demand.

Imports have become more important as demand for peppers continues to grow. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service statistics, bell pepper imports from Mexico during the winter increased 69% from 2008 to 2020. Imports from Mexico are lowest during the summer when most of the U.S. crop is harvested. But the USDA reported those imports, too, increased 742% from 2008 to 2020. Spring and fall imports more than doubled from 2008 to 2020.

Despite the recent modest slump, caused by supply issues, analysts are bullish on the prospects for peppers, both conventional and organic.

"Global bell peppers market is anticipated to rise at a considerable rate during the forecast period, between 2024 and 2031," according to 360 Research Reports. In 2023,



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## Peppers ◀ organic marketing

the market grew at a steady rate, and “with the rising adoption of strategies by key players, the market is expected to rise over the projected horizon.”

### RIDE THE MINI WAVE

The market for organic peppers, in particular, appears strongest among retailers serving generally well-off demographics.

“We sell more organic than conventional,” says Karim Wahhab, produce manager for Draeger’s market in Los Altos, CA. Draeger’s is an independent chain with four markets serving upscale neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Green, red, and yellow bell peppers are the largest sellers, but the colorful packages of organic mini peppers have also carved out an important niche. “The mini peppers are also very important,” says Wahhab.

Organic mini peppers are also important in the produce department at Grove Market, a small independent store serving the affluent coastal community of Pacific Grove near Monterey, CA.

“We do a bag of mixed organic mini peppers only,” says Steve Mason, produce manager at Grove Market. “We sell a case of 12 1-pound bags a week.”

### MERCHANDISING

Retailers need to know their own customers to answer the age-old “display with other peppers or display with other organic produce” question. One additional strategy is to display organic peppers next to other items that would also be in salads, entrees, or other dishes.

“Effective merchandising includes creating colorful displays and cross-promoting organic chile peppers with complementary products like ingredients to make salsa — garlic, cilantro, onion, tomato and even avocados,” advises Victoria Lopez, marketing, and business development manager at Fox Packaging.

“Organic peppers also merchandise well near salad displays or hummus, to appeal to a clean lifestyle demographic. Fox’s Stand-Up Combo bags provide breathability, supporting freshness. Providing educational information on packaging about the health benefits of chile peppers will help boost sales.”

The best companion products depend on the variety of peppers. “Cross-promote chile peppers with salsa ingredients, stir-fry vegetables, taco ingredients or soy sauce,” says Lopez. “For bell peppers, consider pairing them with onions, garlic, herbs and spices. Packaging with recipes that promote meals, and pairing combinations can further drive sales.”

Merchandising can encourage consumers to try more varieties of peppers, and to use them in new ways.

**“Demand for peppers, especially organic varieties, continues to grow as consumers prioritize fresh, healthy options and seek convenient packaging.”**

— Raul Acevedo, Fox Packaging, McAllen, TX

“By promoting peppers year-round and providing educational information about the health benefits, different varieties, and flavor and heat profiles, retailers can encourage more consumers to try different types and incorporate them into their meals,” says Lopez.

Lopez says seasonal promotions play a key role in boosting chile pepper sales throughout the year. “In the fall, chile peppers can be featured in Sunday football game-day promotions as an essential ingredient for fresh salsa. During the winter, highlight chile peppers in Super Bowl promotions for salsa and guacamole recipes. Spring brings an opportunity to promote chile peppers as part of Cinco de Mayo celebrations, while in the summer, chile peppers can be marketed for grilling season, adding a spicy kick,” she says.

### VALUE-ADDED PACKAGING

A trend worth following is convenience packaging for organic peppers, according to the *State of Organic Produce 2022* report.

“In 2022, there was increased attention to the role of value-added packaging for organic peppers,” according to the report. “We expect this to continue, given shoppers want to save time with a quick grab-and-go option.”

“Peppers, which come in a variety of vibrant colors, need proper packaging to maintain freshness and visual appeal,” stresses Fox Packaging’s Acevedo. The package should display the peppers, promote shelf life, and deliver information.

“Fox Packaging’s solutions support the product shelf life by incorporating our mesh into the design, allowing the product to naturally respire and last longer,” says Acevedo. “Flexible packaging solutions like Fox Packaging’s Fresh Mesh and Stand-Up Poly bag cater to this demand, offering convenience while extending the product’s freshness.”

For the last 15 years, Fox has produced Fresh Mesh produce bags in sizes from 1 to 5 pounds. These bags breathe and can even be misted.

Some major organic pepper shippers report they continue to sell bulk boxes. “Most of our organic peppers are in 11-pound boxes,” says Clouthier. “Demand is steady.” **pb**

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# Pecans: A Better-For-You Snack

Pecans are getting more attention with solid demand.

BY MIKE DUFF

**P**ecans are getting the attention of more consumers, whether in their natural state or flavored, particularly given their potential as a better-for-you snack or easy meal substitute.

Karim Wahhab, produce division manager, Draeger's Markets, South San Francisco, CA, says demand for nuts continues to be strong. Although they're more closely associated with the southern U.S., pecans are also popular in the Bay Area.

"There's a lot of demand for pecans right now. We're doing a lot of glazed pecans. A lot of people who were more familiar with the walnuts have started using pecans because they are a little sweeter," says Wahhab.

Tiernan Paine, owner of Tree-Ripe Fruit Co., Milwaukee, WI, has a particular take on pecans, in part because of his unique approach to selling produce to consumers. Tree-Ripe uses multiple trucks to visit scheduled locations and sell to consumers directly from the vehicles.

"We'll show up with a semi loaded up with peaches, pecans, and pistachios, all of our products, and we'll sell for about an hour and a half, tear down, move to the next town and do that over and over again."

## DEMAND IS BRANCHING OUT

The pecan part of the menu has been getting more attention, Paine observes. "We've done pecans for quite some time, probably 25 years or so. What we've seen over the last five, six years is a ton of growth in pecans. It used to be something that was geared once toward an older demographic. In comparison to other nuts, it's been our top seller."

This year, the company added flavored pecans from Genuine GA. He said online sales, which Tree-Ripe does in addition to the truck-based operation, have slowed somewhat, but flavored pecans have done well in face-to-face retail.

"I was shocked at the enthusiasm for the flavored varieties at our physical locations," he says. "We didn't really promote them. We sampled them a little bit. We sold through our supply. It's something we are definitely going to keep going with and expand that program."

Tree-Ripe Fruit Co. offers three flavors — cinnamon, Southern praline and maple. "We found cinnamon to be the No. 1 flavor," says Paine.

Daniel Zedan, executive vice president of sales and marketing, Pecan Grove Farms, Cedar Creek, TX, says, compared to other nuts, pecans are doing fairly well, but the past three years haven't been the easiest in the overall sector. Still, he said, pricing over the past year in general has been pretty stable, but below production cost for the most part.

However, in the summer, a degree of shortage helped elevate pricing. "We're seeing that slowly turn around here," he says. "Whether that's a long-term turnaround or simply a reaction because the inventories have finally gotten so short that we have to replenish them."

The fall will tell if the trend has traction. Some buyers have come back into the market to buy "some pretty significant quantities because their consumption is up domestically, or they didn't purchase enough up front. That has been a plus," says Zedan.

Pecan Grove Farms typically sells to major



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Some retailers have cut back on bulk nuts and are offering shoppers more packaged nuts out of necessity. The snack approach is another way the health benefits of pecans can get in front of consumers in the produce department.

U.S. retailers on a business-to-business basis.

Will McGehee, a partner in Genuine GA, in Fort Valley, GA, says his company is looking to give the pecan business a boost by making products that are more consumer-friendly.

McGehee says pecans haven't gotten a fair hearing in much of the country because other nut producers, those selling, for example, pistachios and almonds, have been backed by more expansive promotional campaigns. To put pecans on a growth trajectory, Genuine GA is going straight to retail as a snacking product. The idea is not only to sell more pecans as a company, but to raise the profile of the nut and generate more consumer attention.

## AMERICAN PECAN PROMOTION BOARD DEVELOPS MARKETING CAMPAIGN

Genuine GA isn't alone in seeing snacking as important to the future of pecans. In June, the American Pecan Promotion Board (APPB), Fort Worth, TX, announced that, as part of its mission to advance the way consumers in the United States purchase, it had developed the Surprisingly Snackable Pecans marketing campaign.

At the campaign's launch, the organization noted U.S. consumers still view pecans in a traditional way, typically as a holiday baking nut. APPB, with its snacking-oriented campaign, is determined to

focus on pecans as a delicious and nutritious snack option.

APPB asserts that 90% of U.S. adults snack up to three times per day and 81% of nuts get consumed as a snack. As such, the opportunity to position pecans as the go-to snack that delivers both flavor and function is evident.

"As snacking grows more functional, people still want to have tasty choices. With their buttery taste, natural sweetness and good-for-you nutrients, pecans are a perfect snack option," according to

Serena Schaffner, APPB managing director of global marketing.

To get the campaign going, APPB partnered with branding agency Signal Theory and creative studio SixTwentySix to create a campaign targeting audiences across generations. The Surprisingly Snackable Pecans campaign launched with spots available on CTV and streaming platforms, as well as strategies for e-commerce, in-store activations, influencer marketing, social media promotion, digital initiatives and out-of-home billboards.

## SNACK ATTACK

"The bright spot is Pecan Nation, our retail snacking brand," says McGehee. "We are actually growing, +27.8% in the latest data pull," he says, citing Circana's Total MULO plus Convenience data, ending July 14. "We made the decision six years ago to pivot from bulk pecans into the snack nut category, and we couldn't be happier."

Pecan Nation offers five core flavors: cinnamon, honey-roasted, maple, roasted and salted and natural. "I would say our cinnamon is the most popular at the moment, but maple is catching up," says McGehee. "Our newest introduction, honey-roasted, is showing early signs of being the favorite."

"We are exploring some savory flavor options, but again, sweet/more indulgent flavor varieties tend to do the best," he says. "We also have a pumpkin spice flavor for the holidays and a milk chocolate for Valentine's Day/Easter."

Flavor and creating products that have characteristics appealing to specific consumer groups is a way to build pecan sales. Tess Mercado, founder and principal of Nutridge Farms, Chino, CA, points to her date sugar pecan product as an example. The product, with the simplest slate of ingredients, is gluten-free, adding only date and cane sugar.



While positioning pecans as snacks is a key to boosting sales, don't overlook quantities bakers love.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZER PHOTO

"There is nothing in the market like it, and people are willing to pay the price," she points out, and, Mercado adds, "People like the date sugar because it has a low glycemic index value."

Mercado also sees the opportunity holidays provide, and so developed pumpkin spice date pecans for the fall. She also makes the point that, both for holidays and every day, pecan merchandising and promotion should include serving recommendations. Although snacking may be pecans' most familiar use outside of

pies, Mercado says stores should encourage consumers to use pecans in salads.

The snack approach is another way the health benefits of pecans can get in front of consumers in the produce department, particularly younger consumers who more closely associate food and health than older shoppers.

Zedan says that snacking is one way for pecan producers to catch the eye of younger consumers. "They seem to be more health conscious if the item can be made more ready to eat, if they can grab it on the run," he says.

Genuine GA still offers bulk pecans in-shell, cracked and natural halves/pieces, but the company's primary business and focus is on the branded operation in snack sizes, 1 ounce, 2.25 ounces and 4 ounces.

In addition to the snack-size packages, the 4-ounce is available in a resealable bag, as is a larger 8-ounce size. Then Genuine GA also offers a 16-ounce pillow bag primarily through e-commerce operations.

McGehee says part of taking a branded product to retail is matching size to channel. "We are focused on the optimal pack size per channel," he says. "We just launched a 2.25-ounce bag primarily for the convenience channel. With snacking, smaller is better. Plus, it allows us to hit lower retails to encourage trial." **pb**



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# From Fine Dining to School Food

BY STEFANIE KATZMAN

Seven years ago, I was introduced to a philanthropic organization called DREAM. DREAM started in 1991 as an after-school baseball program for underprivileged youth in East Harlem, and since has expanded into a network of charter schools servicing low-income communities throughout New York City.

DREAM is committed to the “whole child” model, supporting all of its students’ needs, including academic, social-emotional and physical. As DREAM has grown, so has Katzman’s relationship with the organization, and today I’m proud to serve on its board.

Last school year, DREAM reached one of its biggest milestones to date — the launch of a new school in the South Bronx that was built specifically with DREAM’s “whole child” commitment in mind, including a state-of-the-art scratch kitchen. For some DREAM students, the only guaranteed meals they can count on each day are provided at school, so creating a school food program with delicious, nutritious offerings is essential to DREAM’s success.

DREAM’s goal for the program is to ensure its students have access to healthy and delicious food, and learn about why that’s important, instilling lifelong good habits from an early age. If DREAM can do this year after year, decade after decade, supporting children through early adulthood, it hopes to drive transformational, generational change.

I’m pleased to share that last year’s launch of DREAM’s new school, scratch kitchen, and school food program was successful, and DREAM has expanded its from-scratch cooking program to its second school in the Bronx, which opened in August. This is due in large part to our partnership with Brigaid.

Brigaid is a coast-to-coast network of professional chefs who apply their culinary and operational expertise to help school foodservice programs achieve their goals. Founded by Dan Giusti, former head chef at the No. 1 world-renowned restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, Brigaid’s work spans school districts throughout the country. It believes that everyone deserves good food.

The process of working with Giusti and Brigaid was seamless. We reached out to Dan as soon as we knew that we wanted to operate a scratch kitchen in the new DREAM school, and he helped us set up the kitchen, equipment and infrastructure for a successful school food program. He also helped us find a head chef, the amazing Chef Perse Vordokas, who has been a perfect fit for the role, and has staffed the school food department. Then

Brigaid’s regional chef, April Kindt, helped to train the staff, and has stayed with DREAM as it has rolled out the school food program, ensuring its success.

Each day, DREAM serves breakfast, lunch and snacks at no cost to its students. In the past year since DREAM launched its scratch kitchen, it has seen a 31% increase in lunch participation, and approximately 75% of students expressed satisfaction with the quality of food and service.

I’ve experienced firsthand during lunch how Chef Vordokas continually interacts with the students and asks for feedback on what they’ve eaten.

To achieve a successful school food program, the food needs to not only be nutritious, but also taste good to the students and their young taste buds. And as Chef Vordokas will tell you, the students do not hold back with their feedback!

The kitchen is continuously evolving and improving, with a goal of 100% student participation. To engage the support of the students’ families, DREAM also invites parents and families to come for lunch, and experience the food program themselves.

So, if you’re a wholesaler/distributor looking to learn more about institutional foodservice, Brigaid is a great resource to keep in mind.

Children are our future, and we have to invest in them now. It is so important for youth to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and it’s been incredibly rewarding to see the work DREAM has done over the past year thanks to Brigaid. **pb**

**Children are our future, and we have to invest in them now. It is so important for youth to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.**

*Stefanie Katzman is executive vice president and fourth generation in her family’s 100-year-old produce wholesale/distribution business, Katzman. Headquartered in New York City, Katzman is SQF-certified and sources nationally and internationally to provide a full line of fresh fruits and vegetables, services and offerings throughout the Northeast United States. Stefanie is also the co-owner of MamaMia Produce, a grower/shipper based in New Jersey with farms in the Dominican Republic. Stefanie is chair of the IFPA Wholesaler-Distributor Council and is on the IFPA Board of Directors. Passionate about children’s nutrition, she sits on the board of directors at DREAM, a public charter school and youth development organization based in NYC, and she is also on the New York Advisory Board for Sharing Excess, a philanthropic organization that redistributes between 1 and 3 million pounds of food every week to provide equitable food access to communities.*

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BY ANANDA ROY

# Europe's Largest Grocery Markets Stir Up Demand as Inflation Dust Settles

As the inflationary dust begins to settle across Europe's largest grocery markets, demand patterns are shifting, presenting a blend of opportunities and challenges for retailers and manufacturers alike.

While inflation has eased, affordability remains a key barrier to demand recovery. The post-inflationary landscape is marked by uneven volume sales recovery, distinct growth drivers, and a renewed focus on promotional effectiveness and innovation.

## EMERGING TRENDS: BEYOND PRICE COMPETITION

The return to volume growth is far from uniform across Europe's grocery markets. Spain, Germany and Italy have shown solid performance, while the United Kingdom and France lag.

This unevenness is due, in part, to range development and innovation being pared back too far. Where Spain has led, with a notable 4.5% increase in unit sales driven by private labels, France has underperformed, due to soft performance across all categories, with only marginal gains in ambient foods and a significant reduction in SKUs on shelves across the EU6 market.

The strategic key lies in going beyond price competition to focus on category innovation, range development and distribution expansion.

Retailers must embrace the full marketing toolbox to unlock growth. Price remains crucial, but it is no longer the only lever. With demand increasingly driven by emerging consumer trends, brands and retailers can win by being proactive with innovation, distribution and promotions.

Effective pricing strategies must now be complemented by carefully curated product ranges and new product launches to stimulate demand. The reduction of SKUs seen across several markets may hinder retailers from meeting evolving consumer needs, particularly as consumption becomes more conscious and purchase decisions more deliberate.

## GROWTH AND LAGGING CATEGORIES

Europe's grocery sector is showing clear signs of recovery, with certain food and non-food categories driving growth. National brands have made headway in reclaiming lost ground, growing 0.2% in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) unit sales, buoyed by edibles growth of 0.4%. However, non-edibles continue to lag at -0.9%, despite improvements year-to-date (YTD) and compared to the moving annual total (MAT).

Categories like chilled and fresh, ambient, and frozen have performed well in the YTD, contributing to overall volume growth.

## PROMOTIONAL SURGE AND PRIVATE LABEL SLOWDOWN

Promotional activities have surged to a five-year high, with unit share on promotion now at 25.4%, a 3.2 percentage point

increase compared to two years ago. This surge has been instrumental in driving recent growth, particularly for national brands, which have narrowed their YTD unit sales decline to -0.7% and even posted a 0.2% growth in the last few months.

Despite this, private labels remain dominant, although their growth rate has slowed, indicating that the promotional focus may need fine-tuning. Private labels saw YTD unit growth of 2.5%, which decelerated to 2.0% in the L13W. This suggests that while private labels have been a key driver of FMCG recovery, their growth might not be sustainable without further innovation or range expansion.

It is critical to note that an increase in promotional activity does not guarantee a positive sales impact across all categories and segments, as some are undergoing a generational transition.

**Retailers must embrace the full marketing toolbox to unlock growth. Price remains crucial, but it is no longer the only lever.**

## OUTLOOK FOR 2024 AND BEYOND

As we head into the final quarter for 2024, I have a cautious, yet optimistic, outlook. We're forecasting value sales to continue rising, though at a slower rate, given the anticipated inflationary pressure in Q4, due to geopolitical instability, rising transport costs, and poor harvests in key markets like Italy and Spain.

Volume sales will return in an uneven fashion, with promotional activity likely to be focused on core staples, inching up to 1% by the end of the year, with more robust growth forecasted in H2 2025, reaching 2%, close to pre-pandemic levels.

However, growth drivers will differ from those seen pre-pandemic, with emerging categories such as well-being, snacking, and beverages increasingly blurring traditional category lines. Retailers must stay agile, with a sharp focus on promotional effectiveness and category innovation to meet shifting consumer preferences.

## A FINAL WORD...

Europe's grocery market recovery is underpinned by an uneven, but resilient, demand resurgence. While inflationary pressures have eased, the challenges of affordability, range development, and consumer behavior shifts remain.

Retailers that leverage the full marketing toolbox — beyond price competition — by innovating and refining their promotions, product range and distribution strategies will be well-positioned to capitalize on the opportunities ahead.

The path forward requires a nuanced approach, with careful attention to emerging consumer trends and the evolving dynamics of both national brands and private labels. **pb**

*Ananda Roy is the senior vice president of strategic growth insights at Circana.*



## Local, Seasonal Sourcing: A Tale of Two Chefs in Two Cities

BY AMY MYRDAL MILLER

**P**rofessional culinary schools often train students to celebrate fresh produce, focus on seasonal sourcing, and support local growers as much as possible. This model can work well in independent restaurants that can change menus frequently, but it works differently depending on where the chef and restaurant are located.

A chef in Northern California, for example, can walk the local farmers market in early October, decide what to feature that week or month, and have local farmers bring produce to the back door of her restaurant, or, if she's lucky, have all produce delivered by her local produce distributor.

Managing the logistics of local sourcing is a big challenge for chefs. Local produce distributors who assist with local sourcing are the unsung heroes of my chef friends across the country.

Meanwhile, a chef in Boston can also walk the local farmers market in October, decide he needs more options, call his produce distributor, and opt to buy seasonal produce grown in California. They are both seasonally sourcing produce, but only one can do local sourcing.

That same chef in California may want to feature a specific variety of yellow potatoes on her menu in October, but she is disappointed to learn she'll need to buy potatoes from Washington or Idaho, the only two states with fresh harvest potatoes of a variety that doesn't store well. If she chooses to feature small creamer potatoes, she can get them from the Bakersfield area any time of year, with California being the only state harvesting potatoes year-round to fill the growing demand for those darling smaller potatoes. She's struggling to decide whether to change her menu or change her mind on the importance of local sourcing.

Back in Boston, the chef is eager to feature red potatoes on his fall menu, pairing them with his many seafood offerings. He knows a local farmer who grows them, but the farmer sold nearly his entire crop at the local farmers market. The chef can buy 20 pounds for a one-day special, or he can turn to his produce house, which says they can possibly source from Maine, but more likely from Michigan, Minnesota or North Dakota.

He's upset he can't get what he wants from a Massachusetts farmer because he doesn't appreciate the complexities of potato-growing regions and seasons, but he's delighted with the quality he gets after deciding to source from North Dakota, the top-producing state of dryland red potatoes. The chef is now committed to sourcing from North Dakota each fall to offer his customers the best flavor from potatoes paired with fresh-caught New England seafood.

The California chef's next dilemma is cost control. Her silent

partner is putting pressure on her to reduce food costs to offset increasing labor costs. How is she going to continue to offer the produce-centric seasonal menu her customers love while reducing food costs by 5%?

Her not-so-silent partner suggests she source from a larger produce distributor that sources globally, offering more competitive prices. She opts to keep a few farmers' names on her menu, featuring their much-loved produce items, like tomatoes and peaches on her menu, while sourcing other produce from whoever will give her the best quality and the best price.

As we move into January in Boston, the chef is considering adding another restaurant to his portfolio, this time a lunch spot in Cambridge that features salads, but he doesn't feel good about buying leafy greens from California. How can he offer locally grown leafy greens to his tech clientele in Cambridge who are willing to pay more for their food?

He opts to buy lettuces and other leafy greens from companies in the Northeast that grow in indoor controlled environments. His tech clientele loves the tech story of indoor vertical agriculture, and the chef loves that he can continue to celebrate seasonal and local throughout the year.

It's now February in California and the chef wants to feature strawberries on her menu for Valentine's Day, but vocal team members are saying, "It's not strawberry season, is it, chef?"

The chef learns California farmers can harvest strawberries year-round, but she wonders if that means strawberries are no longer relevant to a seasonally driven menu. Maybe she should just focus on chocolate desserts and forget the fruit, she ponders.

The Boston chef also has strawberries on his mind, knowing he can get them from Florida just in time for a new salad that features strawberries on this winter menu. He knows winter in New England can get long, and his Cambridge customers are yearning for signs of spring. The Florida berries are just the answer. Maybe next year he can get them from a controlled indoor environment in New England, he ponders.

**pb**

**Local produce distributors who assist with local sourcing are the unsung heroes of my chef friends across the country.**

*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, Inc. She is the retail nutrition marketing and foodservice partnership specialist for the Buy California Marketing Agreement/CA GROWN, a member of the Texas A&M Institute for Advancing Health Through Agriculture AgriLife External Advisory Board, a member of the Bayer Vegetable Seeds Horticultural Advisory Council, and co-author of Cooking à la Heart, a 500-recipe cookbook based on plant-forward eating cultures from around the world. You can learn more about her business at farmersdaughterconsulting.com and follow her insights on food and flavor on social media @alaheartamy.*

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Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Inc.	41	(313) 841-8300	benbdetroit.com
Cal Fresco, LLC	28-29	(714) 690-7700	calfresco.com
Capital City Fruit Co., Inc.	26	(515) 981-5111	capitalcityfruit.com
Carb Americas	28-29	(954) 786-0000	carbamericas.com
Classic Yam Inc.	68	(209) 891-2001	
Coast To Coast Produce, LLC	44	(203) 271-2006	ctcproduce.com
Crystal Valley Foods	28-29	305 591-6567	crystalvalleyfoods.com
D'Arrigo New York	37	(718) 991-5900	darrigony.com
Dole Food Company, Inc.	2	(610) 521-9190	dole.com
Equifruit, Inc.	26	(514) 993-7736	equifruit.com
EV Produce International, Inc.	53	(956) 215-8872	evproduce.com
Farm Direct Supply, LLC	28-29	(561) 910-4341	farmdirectsupply.com
Farm Pak Products, Inc.	68	(252) 459-3101	farmpak.com
Farmer's Daughter Consulting	70	(916) 564-8086	farmersdaughterconsulting.com
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.	43	(718) 893-1640	fiermanproduce.com
Five Crowns Marketing	28-29	(760) 344-1930	fivecrowns.com
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	83	(850) 617-7333	fdacs.gov
Fox Packaging & Fox Solutions	70	(956) 682-6176	foxbag.com
Fresh Innovations, LLC. (Yo Quiero Brands)	21	(817) 822-8055	freshinnovationsllc.com
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas	82	(520) 287-2707	freshfrommexico.com
Fru-Veg Marketing, Inc.	28-29	(305) 591-7766	fruveg.com
Gourmet Trading Company	28-29	(310) 216-7575	gourmettrading.net
Grimmway Farms	67	(661) 845-5200	grimmway.com
Heartland Produce Co.	46	(262) 653-1000	heartlandproduce.com
Hydroponic Premium Crops Inc	80	+52 81 8253 4099	hyfood.com.mx
International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA)	9	(302) 738-7100	freshproduce.com
IPR Fresh	77	(520) 377-5710	iprfresh.com
Italian Produce Co.	59	(416) 259-7641	
J. E. Russell Produce Limited	60	(416) 333-0834	jerussell.ca
J. R. Kelly Co.	70	(618) 344-2910	jrkelly.com
JAB Produce, Inc.	42	(312) 226-7805	jabproducecompany.com
Jacobs Malcolm & Burt (JMB)	28-29	(415) 285-0400	jmb-produce.com
John Vena Inc.	49	(215) 336-0766	johnvenaproduce.com
Kurt Zuhlke & Assoc., Inc.	72	(800) 644-8729	ProducePackaging.com
La Galera Produce, LLC	47	(773) 446-6165	lagaleraproduce.com
Latitude 36 Foods	74	(831) 758-6425	latitude36foods.com
Maui Fresh International	52	(213) 688-0880	https://www.maui-fresh.com/
Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	28-29	(201) 206-6307	auerpak.com
Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	39	(201) 206-6307	auerpak.com
Miedema Produce, Inc.	69	(616) 669-9420	miedemaproduce.com
MIXTEC Group	26	(562) 652-2299	mixtec.net
Nash Produce	68	(252) 443-6011	
New Jersey Department of Agriculture	23	(609) 913-6520	findjerseyfresh.com
New York Apple Association, Inc.	63	(585) 924-2171	applesfromny.com
Nickey Gregory Company LLC	57	(404) 366-7410	nickeygregory.com
North American Produce Buyers Ltd.	61	(416) 255-4436	naproduce.com
O.C. Schulz & Sons, Inc.	67	(701) 657-2152	ocschulz.com
Pacific Tomato Growers/Sunripe Certified, LLC	81	(520) 281-4927	sunripecertified.com
Prime Time Sales, LLC	28-29	(760) 399-4166	primetimeproduce.com
PrimusLabs	100	(805) 922-0055	primuslabs.com
Produce Blue Book	93	(630) 668-3500	bluebookservices.com
Produce Distributors Association	50	(202) 441-8935	producedistributorsassociation.org
S. Katzman Produce, Inc.	45	(718) 991-4700	katzmanproduce.com
Seneca Snacks	33	(208) 313-5391	senecasnacks.com
Seven Seas/Tom Lange	28-29	(217) 786-3300	tomlange.com
SL Produce S.A de C.V. -- Tenderland	78-79	+52 687 897 1971	slproduce.mx/tenderland
SORMAC INC.	80	(567) 200-8420	sormac-inc.com
Southern Specialties, Inc.	28-29	(954) 784-6500	southernspecialties.com
Square One Farms, LLC	28-29	(561) 614-2813	sq1farms.com
Strube Celery & Vegetable Co.	46	(773) 446-4000	strube.com
SweetTango (Next Best Thing Coop)	65	(866) 716-3428	sweettango.com
Taylor Farms Retail, Inc.	31	(831) 206-7731	taylorfarms.com
The Foundation for Fresh Produce	96	(202) 303-3435	freshproduce.com/membership/FoundationforFreshProduce/
The Perishable Specialist Inc.	28-29	(305) 477-9906	theperishablespecialist.com
Thermal Technologies, Inc.	5	(803) 691-8000	thermaltechnologies.com
Topashaw Farms Packing	68	(662) 682-7733	topashaw.com
Trucco Inc.	27	(718) 893-3060	truccodirect.com
Volm Companies, Inc.	73	(715) 627-4826	volmcompanies.com

# Ratto Bros.: A Tradition of Innovation and Family Values



In 1905, Antone L. Ratto started a vegetable business on Bay Farm Island near Oakland, CA, where he delivered produce to customers from a horse-drawn cart.

PHOTO COURTESY RATTO BROS.

For more than 100 years, Ratto Bros. has been a name synonymous with quality and tradition in the agricultural industry. Grounded in hard work and Old-World Italian family values, the farm possesses a rich history that most companies can only dream of.

In 1905, Antone L. Ratto, son of Italian immigrants, started a vegetable business on Bay Farm Island near Oakland, CA, where he delivered produce to customers from a horse-drawn cart. Antone had five sons who followed in their father's footsteps to become farmers.

Collectively, the brothers formed the Ratto Bros. partnership in 1957. Looking to expand their operations in 1962, Ratto Bros. gravitated to the fertile San Joaquin Valley near Modesto, where they added several hundred acres of prime farmland to their operations.

Over the past century, the company has quietly grown from its humble beginnings into a highly respected leader in the produce industry, which continues to enjoy a wide variety of quality Ratto Bros. specialty greens.

But what has set Ratto Bros. apart from its competition? How has it survived through the years, and what drives its continued success? According to Raymond A. Ratto, chairman of Ratto Bros., the answer lies in the company's unwavering commitment to both tradition and the need for continual innovation.

"What's always set us apart is our dedication to quality," says Ratto. "From the very beginning, we've focused on producing the best products, whether it was the herbs my grandfather grew or the leafy greens we specialize in today."

This dedication has been the foundation of the company's success. But as the market evolves, so, too, does Ratto Bros.

Looking ahead, new Chief Executive Officer Geoffrey Ratto is establishing his vision for the next decade. "We've always been a company that looks to the future, and the next 10 years will be about sustainability, technology, and maintaining the high standards our customers expect from us."

The company has already begun to implement new technologies to improve efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

"It's about preserving the land for future generations. We want to ensure that what we're doing today will benefit the family and the community tomorrow," adds Anthony Ratto, operations manager, highlighting their long-term commitment to sustainable farming practices.

In addition to its forward-thinking approach, Ratto Bros. has always emphasized the importance of family. For President Frank Ratto, his earliest memories are deeply personal.

"My first chore here was packing herbs

with my dad. I was maybe 8 years old, and I remember feeling so proud to be contributing to the farm," he recalls. "One thing my grandfather always said was, 'Never compromise on quality,' and that's something we still live by today."

When asked what drives the company's ongoing success, Andrew Ratto, sales, says, "At the end of the day, it's about trusted relationships with our customers, suppliers and employees over the years. That's what keeps us moving forward."

The company's goals are ambitious, yet grounded in the same principles that have guided them for over half a century.

"We want to continue growing, of course, but growth for us isn't just about getting bigger. It's about getting better, making sure that we're improving every aspect of our business — from the fields to the packaging process to how we interact with our customers," says Nick Ratto, harvest/facility manager.

In a competitive industry, this focus on continuous improvement will undoubtedly set Ratto Bros. apart. As Ratto Bros. continues to evolve, one thing remains constant: their dedication to quality, family, and the future.

"We're a family business, and that means something special. It means that everything we do, we do with the next generation in mind," says Matthew Ratto, vice president of sales.

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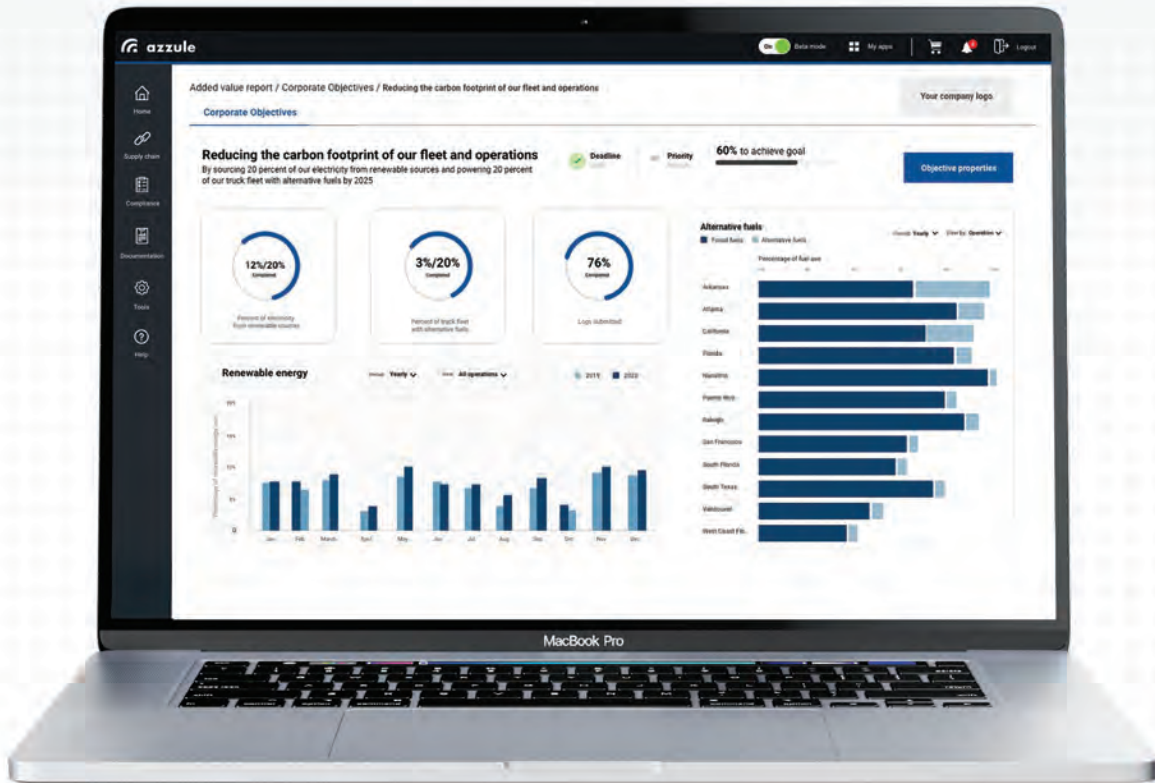
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