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TIME CRUNCH

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SPECIAL SECTION

20th ANNUAL MASTERS OF MERCHANDISING

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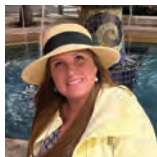
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THIS MONTH'S WINNER

STACY SPETH
Store Manager
Kodiak Commissary
Kodiak, AK

Stacy Speth loves to be outside and enjoy nature, on land or sea. She says, "Nowhere is better than Alaska for this!"

Speth has a unique job in Alaska. She is the store manager at the U.S. Armed Forces' Commissary in Kodiak, and she oversees each department the commissary is comprised of — grocery, meat, front end, finance and produce.

"At a commissary on an island in Alaska, there are no typical days, considering weather, and especially logistics," she says.

American military commissaries provide discounted groceries and household goods to active-duty, Reserve and Guard members of the uniformed services, retirees of these services, authorized family members, DOD civilian employees overseas and other designated categories.

Speth has been a military spouse and

shopped at commissaries for more than 25 years. She also managed a small gourmet market in Virginia. "After being stationed in Kodiak with my family, I decided to change careers and joined the federal government to serve our deserving military families," she says.

Speth says the commissary sources locally grown produce. "With the reduction in transit time, we get the freshest produce. Perishables demand the most attention to detail and are challenging."

When she isn't running the commissary, she makes pottery and tends to her 125-gallon saltwater aquarium. "I have always had an extensive garden while living outside of Alaska, but due to the climate, greenhouses are required for gardening here."

When asked what she likes best about PRODUCE BUSINESS she says, "I like to learn new things, read about different perspectives, and see if I can apply any new concepts to our business. It takes a village, as no one person can be successful alone."

As this month's winner, Speth 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. **If you wish to fill out the questions online, please go to: www.producebusiness.com/quiz.** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our May 2025 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

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QUESTIONS FOR THE MARCH ISSUE

- 1) How many companies are sponsoring this year's Masters of Merchandising Supplement _____?
- 2) What are two of the major produce brands carried by Italian Produce Company Limited _____?
- 3) Which company has the slogan: "Sweet green, gold & red kiwifruit. Always fresh, always Kiwistar" _____?
- 4) According to Shuman Farms, which variety of onions is the "Champagne of Onions" _____?
- 5) Which company offers "Better food for a better world" _____?
- 6) What are the three main components of "The Texas Produce Advantage" _____?

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TRANSITIONS

Hess Brothers Fruit Company

Hess Brothers Fruit Company, Lancaster, PA, added **Karly Shaubach** to its sales team. Shaubach brings experience from the nonprofit sector and joins the Hess team as it continues to grow the footprint of its proprietary premium apple, WildTwist.

"We are excited to add Karly to our team," says Andy Figart, president of Hess Brothers Fruit Company. "She brings a background of extensive customer service experience, and we look forward to her assisting with our current stable of clients, as well as pushing us to grow bigger and bigger."



Karly Shaubach

ships, providing complete category management, and launching new product innovations.

Before joining Masser, Readinger led the preventive business unit at Dentsply Sirona, a leader in dental technology and medical devices.



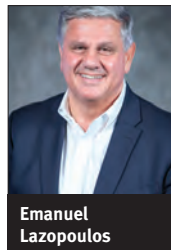
Tiffany Readinger

Church Brothers Farms

Church Brothers Farms, Salinas, CA, announced that, after 15 years of service, **Robert Thurber** is retiring from its board of directors. In a new chapter of leadership, **Emanuel Lazopoulos**, a seasoned veteran in the produce industry, will join the board.

Lazopoulos has spent his entire business career in agriculture, most notably as senior vice president for Del Monte Fresh Produce, where he led the North America team for over 17 years. He was also a founder at both Pessagno Winery and NewStar Fresh Foods, and served as vice president at DNA Plant Technology and Dole.

Lazopoulos has served on multiple produce industry association boards, including the Produce for Better Health Foundation, Produce Marketing Association, and United Fresh Start Foundation, where he served as a director and chairman. In 2020, the United Fresh Produce Association awarded him its Lifetime Achievement Award.



Emanuel Lazopoulos

Produce Distributors Association

The Produce Distributors Association (PDA) has appointed **Joseph Procacci III**, vice president for business development at Procacci Holdings Company in Philadelphia, as a new member on its board of directors.

Procacci replaces Mike Maxwell, who spent many years helping PDA rise from a grass-roots advocacy group to become the leading organization representing wholesale receivers across the U.S. Maxwell recently retired as president of Procacci Bros. after more than 40 years in a variety of leadership roles.

His successor on the PDA board, Procacci, joins a leadership group representing distributors that includes Chairman Matthew D'Arrigo of D'Arrigo Bros.; First Vice Chair John Vena of John Vena Inc.; and fellow members Carole Shandler (SGS Produce); Rob Strube (Strube Celery & Vegetable Co.); William Class III (The Class Produce Group); John McClelland (Liberty Fruit Co.); and Ken Whitacre (PRODUCE BUSINESS/Phoenix Media Group).



Joseph Procacci III

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mushroom Council Hosts Industry Marketing Summit

The Mushroom Council, Lees Summit, MO, hosted more than 40 mushroom industry marketers and executives in San Antonio, TX, in February for the 2025 Mushroom Marketing Summit. Scheduled alongside the council's board meeting, the summit provided an opportunity for industry members to collaborate, share insights and discuss strategies to drive fresh mushroom demand.

Summit highlights included presentations on consumer trends, new consumer segmentation data, and retail merchandising insights, as well as retail tours of H-E-B and Central Market and a culinary presentation at Pullman Market by acclaimed local chefs from Mixtli, Fife & Farro, Mezquite and Isidore.



Giumarra Elevates DulceVida Nectarine Program with Unique PLU Codes

In advance of the 2025 California stone fruit season, the Giumarra Companies, Los Angeles, CA, introduced unique PLU codes for its exclusive DulceVida branded nectarine program. The new PLU codes will allow retailers to simplify inventory management and differentiate premium DulceVida nectarines at checkout.



The DulceVida program includes three signature nectarine brands: DulceVida Twilight Edition white flesh nectarines, featuring new PLU code 3558; and DulceVida Sunrise Edition and DulceVida Midnight Edition yellow flesh nectarines, featuring new PLU code 3559.

The nectarines will be shipped in single-layer Euro cartons featuring DulceVida branding. In addition to a single-layer Euro carton, the nectarines are available in high-graphic 2-pound handled bags, providing a grab-and-go option. The branded bags carry UPC codes for precise checkout differentiation.

Giumarra offers retailers customized merchandising signage and graphic assets to support in-store and online promotions. The company expects to begin shipping DulceVida nectarines this June.

California Giant Berry Farms Announces Availability of Jumbo Blueberries

California Giant Berry Farms, Watsonville, CA, is spotlighting its GIANT Blueberries, large (20mm+) and flavorful berries now available in a new label design, selected by California Giant's consumer audience.

California Giant's GIANT Blueberries are available in good volume from March through August, with peak availability in April and May. Sourcing begins in Mexico, shifts to California, and then moves to the Pacific Northwest as the growing season progresses.

The GIANT Blueberries are sorted for color, firmness, size, and other quality indicators using a state-of-the-art Unitec sorting line at the Santa Maria facility, ensuring only the highest-quality berries make it into each clamshell.

Grapetech 2025 Coming to Chile

Santiago, Chile, will be the site of the first-ever GrapeTech, June 18, 2025, at the Casino Monticello Events Center.



Organized by UvaNova, a benchmark in Chilean grape research and development, and Yentzen Group, a world leader in information and events for the fruit and vegetable industry, GrapeTech aims to be the most important technical event in Chile focused solely on table grape production.

After facing years of challenges that include plant aging, slow varietal replacement, water and logistics crises, coupled with increasing costs, the Chilean table grape industry has begun to adapt successfully, thanks to the consolidation of new varieties and a renewed focus on global competitiveness.

The event will address such topics as new, more productive and resistant varieties, methods to increase production efficiency, strategies to optimize resources and reduce costs, and tools to maintain global competitiveness.

Titan Farms Expands into Organics

Titan Farms, Ridge Spring, SC, grower, packer, and shipper of fresh peaches in the Eastern U.S., is announcing a partnership with Watsonia Farms and the Watson Family. This collaboration marks an expansion of Titan Farms' offerings, introducing certified organic peaches to its premium portfolio.

Titan Farms will offer organic peaches in multiple pack styles, including two-layer cartons, 2-pound bags, and clamshell packaging, which is available with a pre-season commitment.



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Passion for Cooking, Passion For People and Passion for Sourcing Food

Charlie Eagle
Vice President, Business Development
Southern Specialties Inc.
Pompano Beach, FL

I started in the produce industry growing fresh herbs in greenhouses and I quickly learned there was demand, for not only fresh herbs, but specialty produce.

I was introduced to a lot of chefs, both European and American, at a time when the celebrity chef movement, the California cuisine, was really

starting to take over. My passion for cooking, my passion for people and my passion for sourcing food all came together and the produce industry turned out to be the ideal home for me.

So, for the past 45 years, I've been involved in one aspect or another of growing, sourcing, and distributing fresh produce, not only to foodservice customers, but retailers and club stores as well.

We're located in Pompano Beach, FL, and we grow in the Americas. That means we source products from 10 different countries located in Central America, South and North America, including Mexico, the United States and Canada.

It's been a great ride. I've met some of the best people you can imagine, and I keep on coming back. Our industry is one-of-a-kind.



Food That's Fresh and Good For You

Carter Bray
Vice President/General Manager
Potandon Produce
Grapevine, TX

My entire family has been involved in food and foodservice in some way — and as a kid, I worked on my grandparents' poultry farm. As an adult, I worked for a couple of large organizations, both in consumer-packaged goods and foodservice, and then ultimately found a home at Potandon Produce.

I really love the passion of the growers and the distribution systems, and the people. It's just been another iteration in my journey around food and good food for consumers.

One person who was instrumental in bringing me to Potandon is Mel Davenport. Mel has been in farming and fresh produce his entire life. He's a third-generation potato and produce farmer, and his son, who's on my team, Sean Davenport, is a fourth generation, fresh produce person. Mel has really been my mentor and helped me make the transition from consumer-packaged goods to the fresh produce business.

When you listen to what consumers tell you, they want really fresh, really good food, and they want it super fast, super convenient. So, our focus at Potandon, and certainly my personal passion, is around really fresh food, food that's good for you, better for you than some of the other alternatives. Food that is convenient and is fast and as easy to prepare as possible, but still delivers high-quality food.



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Global Food Trends Influence the Produce Department

By Sharon Olson

As consumer tastes evolve and become more adventurous, supermarket produce departments have an unprecedented opportunity to lead the charge in bringing global flavors to everyday shoppers. While many grocery stores have long offered imported center-store items from international regions, the produce department stands uniquely positioned to provide fresh, versatile ingredients that let consumers recreate global dishes in their own kitchens.

Culinary Visions recently conducted “Visioning Panels” with leading authorities on global food trends for Les Dames d’Escoffier International (LDEI). These panels, combined with insights from Culinary Visions surveys, reveal that international flavor exploration is more popular than ever. A remarkable 98% of LDEI survey participants agreed that interest in global flavors has grown, underscoring a powerful trend that is reshaping shopping and dining habits alike.

A CULINARY ADVENTURE THROUGH PRODUCE

According to Culinary Visions research, 83% of consumers expressed a strong desire to explore new cultures through food. The produce department plays a vital role in satisfying this curiosity by offering fresh, culturally significant ingredients that serve as the foundation for international dishes.

Consumers crave not just the flavors, but also the stories behind the food. Seventy-three percent of Culinary Visions respondents indicated they appreciate learning the story behind sampled items when trying something new. This creates an opportunity for produce departments to engage shoppers through tastings and storytelling, highlighting the origins and traditional uses of specific fruits, vegetables and herbs.

Beyond sampling fresh produce, prepared items using a few key international ingredients can also capture consumer interest. Imagine a simple tasting station featuring mangos and limes alongside a jar of salty, chile lime seasoning or quick recipes showcasing Asian greens with an easy sauce from another aisle. These offerings encourage shoppers to experiment and build their culinary confidence.

EXPLORING REGIONAL AND MICRO-REGIONAL FLAVORS

While interest in global cuisine is nothing new,

Research points to the produce department as a cultural gateway.

the focus has shifted toward deeper exploration of regions and micro-regions. Among LDEI experts surveyed, Mediterranean (99%), Asian (97%), and Latin American (96%) flavors ranked as the most popular global culinary influences.

Emerging regions are also gaining momentum, with 82% of experts noting a growing interest in foods from African countries and 64% acknowledging rising enthusiasm for Native American-inspired dishes.

Produce departments can meet this interest by curating ingredient collections that are culturally significant to these regions. For example, Mediterranean fare might feature artichokes, eggplants and citrus fruits, while Latin American-inspired selections could highlight tomatillos, yucca and tropical fruits like papaya.

THE RISE OF THIRD CULTURE CUISINE

A fascinating offshoot of global flavor exploration is the rise of third-culture cuisine, a culinary style that intentionally blends elements from disparate food traditions. This trend is driven by chefs who creatively combine ingredients and techniques from different cultures to craft entirely new dining experiences.

An astounding 98% of LDEI experts agreed that this type of creative fusion is growing in popularity. Many of these inventive dishes are plant-based, which aligns with the increasing consumer preference for sustainable, healthy eating. The produce department is the perfect space to support this trend by showcasing versatile vegetables and herbs that are integral to modern fusion cooking.

CULINARY TOURISM AND ITS INFLUENCE

International travel has regained popularity post-pandemic, with culinary tourism emerging as a key motivator for many travelers. Food and culture exploration remains at the heart of these trips, with 96% of LDEI survey respondents confirming that culinary tourism is thriving.

Travelers return home inspired to recreate

the flavors they experienced abroad, turning to local supermarkets for authentic ingredients. This provides an opportunity for produce departments to capitalize on demand by featuring global staples like Asian greens, Latin root vegetables and exotic fruits.

THE ROLE OF CULINARY DIPLOMACY

Culinary diplomacy, the practice of promoting a country’s culture through its food, continues to gain traction. LDEI survey results indicate that 91% of respondents see countries actively exporting their culinary heritage to foster greater understanding and interest in their cultures.

The produce department has a pivotal role to play in this form of diplomacy. Many of the key ingredients for healthful, globally inspired meals are already found in these departments. By featuring specialty items, promoting seasonal offerings, and collaborating with cultural organizations, retailers can elevate the produce section as a gateway to international cuisine.

Global food trends are reshaping consumer expectations, and the produce department is uniquely suited to lead the way in providing fresh ingredients for diverse international dishes. By tapping into the desire for culinary exploration, storytelling, and authentic flavor experiences, retailers can turn their produce sections into vibrant hubs for cultural connection.

As Culinary Visions research and insights from LDEI experts reveal, the future of food is global, adventurous and fresh. By embracing these trends, supermarkets can cultivate loyal customers who see the produce department not just as a place to buy fruits and vegetables, but as a destination for culinary inspiration. **pb**



Sharon Olson is executive director of Culinary Visions, a division of Olson Communications Inc. based in Chicago, IL. Culinary Visions is a food-focused insight and trend-forecasting firm that provides original consumer and culinary professional research for companies in the food industry. She is an active member of Les Dames d’Escoffier International and has worked on the LDEI trend report since its inception in 2018.

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Martin's Serves Up Freshness and Value

AWARD-WINNING SUCCESS SHOWCASES QUALITY AND LOCAL, BACKED BY A STELLAR TEAM IN MARYLAND.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Nestled along the banks of the Susquehanna River in northern Maryland and surrounded by farmland stands the Martin's of Rising Sun, MD. In operation since 2008, it's a banner of The Giant Company.

Chris O'Brien has been the produce manager at the location since June 2024 and says the Rising Sun store is a regular branded Martin's, with selling space of just over 54,000 square feet.

Last year, O'Brien was one of 20 produce managers recognized by the 2024 Retail Produce Managers Award Program from the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA).

He's not new to the produce department nor The Giant Company, which he joined 20 years ago. He's worked in several stores throughout southern Chester County, PA, most recently at the Kennett Square Giant, located in "the mushroom capital of the world."

The Giant Company, as a whole, is known for its produce, explains O'Brien. "In fact, it's considered our signature department," he says. "We offer a wide variety of items, including organic, at great prices. With the support of the team back in Carlisle, we look to bring in new items and innovative solutions to meet the needs of our customers."

STAYING TRUE TO PRODUCE ROOTS

Farms surround the Rising Sun store, and its ability to source local produce is huge for customers, O'Brien says. "Anyone who has ever farmed or who has had a grandparent or parent that farmed truly appreciates the hard work it takes. So, having fresh produce that is sourced as locally as possible is a big reason why customers come here over other options."

Produce is the first visible department when customers come in the door because the impact of fresh produce is second to none, he adds. "This allows us to offer our freshest and



Produce is the first visible department when customers enter Martin's of Rising Sun, MD. Produce Manager Chris O'Brien says the "impact of fresh produce is second to none."

PRODUCE BUSINESS/JDUARTE PHOTO

best deals as customers start their shopping trip."

"Our main merchandising principles focus on product and price. It's hard to beat a nicely hand-stacked display that is priced to sell."

Produce accounts for about 10% of the total store selling square footage. Quality and freshness play an important role in store image and profits, according to O'Brien.

"Having the freshest available produce, with a great and knowledgeable produce team, will make people drive past another store to yours," he says. "If you are doing all that right, produce can be a very profitable area of the store. Every day, we try to have the freshest produce available for our customers. While it sounds simple, it is hard work daily."

The store typically carries over 1,000 items and the mix changes all the time. "For example, avocados and Honeycrisp apples were only available occasionally when I started, and now are available pretty much year-round," says O'Brien. "New customer favorites have also entered the mix, such as Cotton Candy grapes and gold kiwi. In addition, the convenience market has changed to meet customers' changing lifestyles. We used to have a handful of varieties of packaged salads available, but now it's closer to 100 different SKUs."

The store makes changes seasonally as a brand. "I personally try to keep areas within the department changing, using a variety of tactics," says O'Brien. "We set seasonal displays, as well as areas for our best deals, which change weekly."

AMPLE OPEN SPACE

Walking in the front door, customers are met by a refrigerated island display showcasing berries and cut fruit, with additional stackable shippers on each side. "The refrigerated berry displays pay huge dividends," says O'Brien. "In addition to the case upfront, we also have a 12-foot closed-air berry case. They really maintain berry quality longer and bump our sales."

The expansive department uses a variety of 12- and 16-foot slant tables, front and back, to display most of its produce items. "We want our produce displayed for customers to easily see and select the products they are looking for," says O'Brien.

The department's size means wide spaces between the displays allows for bin and stackable shippers to highlight special buys or seasonal products. The left side boasts a lengthy refrigerated wall case. The first section holds 36 feet of juices, fresh cut, dips and salsas. Next, there are 24 feet of salads, followed by 40 feet of wet rack vegetables.

The entire department has ample signage indicating various areas including organic. "Additionally, we use attractive educational signage on some product groups, such as tomatoes, hot peppers and tropicals, to explain more about the flavor profiles or differences in the items to shoppers, as well as how to use," says O'Brien. "We have found that offering education and storytelling at the point-of-sale drives customer trial, helping families find new favorites."

SEASONALITY, VALUE AND PEOPLE

The store sources produce in a variety of ways. Category teams source the majority of products, and when seasons allow, they try to source produce from vendors as close to the store as possible, however, sometimes it is necessary to get imported produce, says O'Brien. "At the store level, the team is encouraged to find local partners. In the summer and fall, we source the freshest products from nearby farmers."

The main criteria when sourcing include safety and freshness. "Food safety is the most crucial, after that quality and freshness," says O'Brien. "Of course, with so many options out there, price also comes into play."

Seasonality, freshness, and value are significant when determining produce promotions. "Our category teams do a great job of promoting the most seasonally relevant items and great prices," says O'Brien. "The weekly circular still plays an important role in highlighting these deals, and our super-engaged teams and great signage are the key to selling."

Though high-quality fresh produce is the heart of what makes the store stand out to customers, O'Brien says the highly involved and trained team is a close second. "We look for team members who are engaged," he says.



Martin's of Rising Sun, MD, offers a scale in the produce department for shoppers to weigh their produce and print a scannable label.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/JDUARTE PHOTO

"We want to get it right for our customers every time."

Training of produce personnel is multifaceted. "There is a lot that goes into it," says O'Brien. "For me, it goes back to when I was a 16-year-old kid in produce. I knew the basics — that's a banana, that's strawberry — but, right out of the gate, I was hit with so many questions I didn't know. Product knowledge training has to be daily, whether it's what's in season or how to tell if something is fresh."

"As a brand, we have changed the way we

train to ensure our teams have what they need to be successful. But, even after 20 years of experience, the learning never stops." **pb**

FACT FILE

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Undercover shoppers search for convenience in value-added produce.

Time-strapped shoppers seek convenience in the produce department, and many are looking to get their veggies and fruits in a quick and easy way. This is where value-added produce, such as pre-cut or fresh-cut fruits and vegetables, comes in.

The average American has less than an hour daily to prepare and eat meals, and a third have less than a half hour, based on the fifth annual *U.S. Snack Index* by Frito-Lay North America and The Quaker Oats Co., so fresh-cut fruits and veggies can fast-forward food on the table.

This year, PRODUCE BUSINESS sent its mystery shoppers to investigate what value-added products are available in the produce department.

For more than 35 years, PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine has devoted a cover story to informing supermarket retailers about the perceptions shoppers may experience in their produce departments. This year, we wanted to learn how this category is faring across the country, and explore how stores merchandise value-added produce.

We wanted to know what fresh-cut displays look like. What is the location within the produce department? What types of fruits and vegetables are available as value-

added? Is there in-store signage? Does the store offer anything that boosts your meal creativity with value-added items (ex. tie-ins or recipes, QR codes)? What is pricing (ex: per pound)?

What does the overall produce department look like? How long do fresh-cut vegetables and fruits keep? Is there a sell-by date on the packaging? What is the packaging? Does the store do any cross-merchandising to trigger value-added sales?

We unleashed our mystery shoppers, and here's what we found:

 **MYSTERY SHOPPER 1:**
NORTHWESTERN REGION
*PRODUCE EMPLOYEE DIDN'T OFFER
MANY SUGGESTIONS*

I visited a local store of a national chain. I noticed two workers in the produce department as I approached. One was working from a cart that was loaded with cardboard. As I started to approach this young man, he wheeled the cart into the back room, so I steered myself toward the other worker who was standing by the citrus.

As I approached, the man looked up, smiled and said, "Hi, how are you?"

I said, "I am in charge of providing snacks for a company-wide meeting at work. In

order to make the work as easy as possible for myself, I am looking for as much pre-cut fruits and vegetables as I can find, anything fresh, as much variety as possible."

He put the orange down that he was holding and walked a few steps toward the direction of the wall display of fresh-cut fruit. He pointed to the section, which was about 15 feet away, and told me the pre-cut fruit was my "best bet."

Then he pivoted and pointed to the display along the wall of the produce section, which he said had some prepared trays. I said, "thank you," and he turned to walk back to his workstation.

The veggie trays were prepared snack trays with baby carrots, grape tomatoes, celery slices and broccoli florets with a cup of ranch dip, priced at \$10.99 for 40 ounces. These were the same as the prepared trays I noticed when I first entered the produce section.

As I walked through the produce department before I approached him, I had also noticed a charcuterie fruit tray that contained cubed cheese, apples, grapes, and pretzels priced at \$14.99 for 32 ounces. The produce worker didn't direct me to these charcuterie trays, which would have been nice. If I hadn't noticed them on my own, I would not have known those were available.

I selected a 24-ounce clamshell of cut strawberries and berries for \$8.99.

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT



MYSTERY SHOPPER 2: MIDWESTERN REGION

PRODUCE EMPLOYEES FRIENDLY, ANSWERED QUESTIONS

I visited a national chain on a weeknight a couple of hours prior to closing. It is always buzzing with activity, and this night was no exception. The produce department had a mix of moms with their children, younger women and middle-aged men.

While produce items, such as apples, cantaloupe, oranges and bananas, were merchandised in island displays immediately upon entering the store, the fresh-cut items were less plentiful and more obscure in a refrigerated section along the left side wall.

Among the bagged salads, cut broccoli, mini cucumbers and sliced fruit, I came upon a well-stocked section of carrots. There were the quintessential bagged baby carrots, but alongside these were bags of multi-colored miniature carrots, something that I haven't come across very often. I was instantly intrigued.

I saw an employee by the refrigerated cases, possibly checking expiration dates on the nearby prepared salads, so I approached him. "Excuse me, I have a couple of questions for you," I said, and he stopped what he was doing, then was very receptive and friendly.

"I'm wondering if the pre-cut vegetables require washing prior to use." He quickly answered, "Yes, these should definitely be washed."

I then inquired whether the mini carrots needed to be cooked differently than the full-size carrots. The staff member didn't know, so we walked over to another staff member who was not sure about the cooking times, but said the larger the carrot, the longer the cook times.

I asked about the flavor of multi-colored carrots. "They are definitely sweeter, and each type has a different taste," he explained, while the first employee stood by me and nodded. "The carrots are very flavorful," he added.

I thanked both gentlemen, as they were friendly, took time to assist and answered my questions.



MYSTERY SHOPPER 3: SOUTHERN REGION

VALUE-ADDED ALMOST AN AFTERTHOUGHT

I stopped by a busy, new-to-me supermarket on a Tuesday mid-afternoon, and the store was bustling. Granted, there was an unusual winter weather prediction for the South, which had a lot of shoppers stocking

up with essentials in case they were snowed or iced in (which they ultimately were). This store is part of a regional, multi-state chain, and the banner is a wholly owned subsidiary of a national grocery giant.

The number of shoppers, however, added to a chaotic visit to the produce department, as the small-ish area and aisles couldn't easily accommodate two shopping carts side-by-side, so I was constantly looking ahead for "oncoming traffic," and had to park my buggy in a random space just so I could more easily check each side of free-standing display cases.

There was no produce employee to be seen, so I made a couple circles of the department, hoping one would appear. No one did. So, I guess I was on my own to explore value-added options.

There were a few lettuce/greens salad kits (many of the slots were empty) and bowls in an upright refrigerated wall, about a half-dozen branded microwaveable small potato options, and I finally found a value-added fruit section on an endcap near the front of the section and the store.

This area had cut fruit in clamshells, such as watermelon, pineapple, mango, mixed fruit, orange sections, and cups of grapes. There were also some cucumber slices (that didn't look too fresh). It was a small display case, grouped with the fruit and vegetable drinks.

If I was looking for quick meal inspiration, or ideas for convenient school or work lunches, or anything value-added to make my life easier or more produce-centric, I came to the wrong place.



MYSTERY SHOPPER 4: EASTERN REGION

A WIDE VARIETY OF PACKAGED SALADS

On a Sunday evening, the independently owned chain I visited was active, although relatively quiet, which was to be expected in this upper middle class suburban neighborhood.

The produce section has cold cases along the perimeter. Short floor fixtures ran perpendicular to the side cases. The short aisles made for lots of mini endcaps. The displays had various products, which included several examples of fresh-cut, value-added and convenience items.

One, for example, included cello packaged mushrooms, wrapped cauliflower and romaine hearts. Another included a wide variety of

branded and private label salads, including chopped salads.

The main fresh-cut fruit cases incorporated a range of branded cup, jar and clamshell items, along with tubs of store-branded products, including honeydew melon, cantaloupe, watermelon, mango, pineapple and a variety of mixed fruit tubs.

The store was particularly deep in branded and private label salads. Most of the major brands had representation, both conventional and organic. The salads, both bagged and clamshell, were in cases behind glass doors. Some plant-based, vegetarian and vegan products shared the cold cases that included the salads.

Fresh-cut vegetables also shared the cases, and behind the doors were a few branded items, but mostly private label tubs, with a few own-brand bagged items.

An employee in the produce department, one of two on duty, was very friendly when approached about the product in the fresh-cut fruit case. When asked about the preparation of the store-brand fresh cuts, she responded that the store does its own prep and packaging.

She said that some pineapple stocked in the produce section might be selected on a given day, then taken to the processing area to be chunked into fresh cuts, which then return to the produce department, just to a different case. She said fresh cuts go fast. "Every day I work here, it's gone and redone once a day at least," she said.

The employee made an interesting point. By way of linear feet, the store-branded fresh-cut presentation was small, in the range of 24 linear feet, but that's not an accident. Rather, the produce department employees keep an eye on the display and send fruit for processing regularly, ensuring that what's on the shelf is always freshly processed. And, she added, there are no "disasters" regarding people being disappointed or getting sick from bad product.

Overall, the store in general and the produce department in particular, delivered a nice shopping experience. The produce department offered clear sightlines, so it was easy to pick out product, and cold case doors were clear with well-arranged displays that made it easy to see what was stocked.

The store was clean, well merchandised and holes in the displays were few and far between. If the department deserves any criticism, it's due to narrow aisles and upfront block displays that made it tough for two shoppers to pass at a time.

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT



MYSTERY SHOPPER 5: WESTERN REGION

*THIS PRODUCE DEPARTMENT
IS ALL BUSINESS*

On a Sunday afternoon, we rolled into the spacious parking lot, which is best measured in acres, not spaces. There are no trees or shrubs in this expanse of asphalt. This lot is all business — the business of getting hands off steering wheels, on shopping carts, and then on wallets.

This giant market is on the busiest street in an upscale coastal town. Across the street is the border of a multi-ethnic working-class town that is also served by this supermarket. The store is large, even by corporate supermarket standards, and the produce department alone is at least 10,000 square feet.

An abundant supply of both conventional and organic fruits and vegetables is reasonably priced, as the department is run as economically as possible. We found only one worker in the department, a young man who was stocking a produce bin.

When we told him we were looking for fresh-cut fruits and vegetables for healthy snacks and meals for a heart-healthy diet, we quickly learned that he was amiable, but too new and untrained to be of much help. He suggested we could look at packages of mixed nuts and raisins.

After he said he had no idea how long the fresh-cut fruit was good after the package was opened, we spared this nice young fellow the embarrassment of asking how to tell if the fresh-cut cantaloupe is soft enough and if the watermelon is too soft.

He directed us toward the display of fresh-cuts, which was more than ample.

This store is less than an hour from the headquarters of the largest fresh-cut vegetable producer in the country and there was an admirable selection of fresh-cut squashes and mini salad kits small enough for one. We settled on two packages of fresh-cut pineapples and three salad kits of different varieties.

Even though the store, including the produce department, serves a diverse demographic, there was no educational or promotional material to encourage consumers thinking of crossing over to learn how other ethnicities eat.

I thought there were promotional opportunities lost, but then, we came away with two packages of pineapples, one of mixed berries, three salads, and change from our \$20 bill.



MYSTERY SHOPPER 6: MIDWESTERN REGION

*OVERALL, THIS PRODUCE DEPARTMENT
IS A DISAPPOINTMENT*

I started this year's journey at a local grocery store, but, upon arrival, quickly realized it was a bust. They had a very small (two short shelves) section with a couple of fruits. They were swimming in liquid, which, to me, signaled they had been sitting there awhile, and might not be fresh.

I headed down the street to another retailer. Immediately inside the door, I spotted signage above an oval cooler that read "Prepared Fresh Fruit," "Prepared Fresh Vegetables," "Party Trays & Dips," and "Grab and Go." Many of the items in that cooler were far too ripe, sitting in juices, and had "reduced for clearance" stickers.

I began looking for a produce employee. At that time, only one man was working a rather large produce section. I explained that I had recently had shoulder surgery, making it difficult to cut and prep meals. With working a full-time job and no budget for home meal delivery services, I was looking for some pre-cut produce.

I asked the employee when the fresh-cut items were packed. Just how fresh is fresh? He bluntly (and rather rudely) replied, "Well, we don't pack them here; they come in that way. They have dates right on them."

I then asked him if they had any preservatives on them, to which he replied, "How would I know? I just told you I don't pack them."

With that, I went to shopping the "fresh" section. The fruit side had mostly melons, but also pineapple and fruit mixes. The pineapple was either unripe or overripe, and had two sizes, a \$3.99 small, and the \$5.99 medium.

The dip end had salsa and not much else.

The party tray end had only one that wasn't marked clearance due to the date. The vegetable side was an even bigger disappointment. Most items were also marked with a red clearance sticker.

I looked for the employee to ask if by chance they had a fresher assortment in the back, but I could not locate the man. A couple I picked up to purchase were marked with reduced clearance stickers, and I had to pass on them. The matchstick carrots and the celery in the party trays, for example, had dried and browning ends.

I purchased a container of pre-cut sweet potatoes and pre-cut squash. When I got home and went to roast them, they were slimy.

Overall, I was disappointed with the selection, freshness, employee assistance, the price for the product, and the sheer amount of plastic that came home with me to save me a minimal amount of time in the kitchen.



MYSTERY SHOPPER 7: SOUTHERN REGION

EMPLOYEE SAVES MY DINNER PARTY

While visiting friends in another state, I explored a local supermarket, focusing on its value-added produce offerings. The store is part of a large supermarket chain, with more than 1,000 locations in seven states. I visited midmorning on a Thursday.

As you enter the store, the produce department follows the bakery and deli departments, and commands a large space. It is clean with unobscured sight lines, with refrigerated cases and wet racks along the walls, and slant tables of various configurations commanding the center.

I browsed for a bit, but there was an employee working, so I went up to him and said, "I need you to be a mind reader. I'm hosting a vegetarian at a dinner party tonight,

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Right now, and through July 1, 2025, we're taking entries for the 37th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards Program, presented by PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine. The awards recognize excellence in marketing in each of six categories: retail, foodservice, wholesale, shipping, commodity organizations and allied service/product providers. Promotion in print, broadcast and digital media are eligible to win.

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To participate, send us the following for each entry:

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 2. Type of business.
 3. Names and dates of promotion (must have taken place between June 1, 2024 and July 1, 2025).
 4. Promotion objectives. Description of promotion.
 5. Promotion results (sales or traffic increases, media attention). What made this program a success?
 6. All support materials used in the promotion – such as POP, ads, posters, Social Media Links, TV commercials.
- High-resolution images to illustrate the promotion are required. (Please do not send any produce)**

Fill Out The Form on [Producebusiness.com](https://www.producebusiness.com) or Send Entries To:
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551 NW 77th Street, Suite 101, Boca Raton, FL 33487

Deadline for entries is June 1, 2025
For additional information, call:
561-994-1118, Ext. 109

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

and I'm not a very good cook. What do you recommend that is pre-prepped and easy to put together?"

He thought for a little bit, and then took me over to an area where a lot of the tofu and plant-based meat items, including some made primarily from mushrooms, and said, "I've tried them. They're surprisingly good. We sell a lot of these."

Then, he took me over to the potato section and pointed to the Tasteful Selections, branded microwavable small potatoes with a seasoning packet. He also asked me what protein I would be eating.

All of a sudden, he looked up, like he had an epiphany, and quickly headed over to one section where the chain's chefs have created air fryer- or sheet pan-ready groupings of pre-seasoned vegetables. "You could use these, and do a second pan with your shrimp." There were several vegetable blend and seasoning options, all of which looked good.

The employee asked if he could help me with anything else, before returning to his stocking duties.

The traditional value-added, cut fruit and vegetable section (think clamshells) was very large, very clean and well stocked, but it was great to have an employee help me think out-of-the-box for menu options. Pricing was a little on the higher side, but all the produce looked fresh and high quality. I was happy to make a purchase at this location.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 8: **NORTHEASTERN REGION** *PLENTY OF FRESH CUTS AND ORGANICS FOR STORE SIZE*

On a Sunday afternoon visit to a local chain, a feature of the produce department that became immediately apparent was the abundance of fresh cuts and other convenience food.

The store has a grab-and-go section right in front, which includes various salads. A lot of the convenience products were labeled with the chain's brand name and offered items beyond produce, including chicken, soups, quiche, quesadillas and a spaghetti dinner. The produce department follows the initial convenience food section and a deli case.

The store belongs to a small local chain. The stores themselves are somewhat on the smaller side compared with the bigger regional banners, although they are full supermarkets, and they are immaculate and carefully stocked. The prices are somewhat



above average, but the well-stocked and fairly diverse selection in the produce department is a clear draw.

The stores offered fresh cuts in multiple displays. One, near the head of the section, featured fresh-cut vegetables. On the top shelf of the cold case were diced vegetables, including onions, celery, carrots and peeled garlic in tubs, as well as a variety of salsas. Below were larger clamshells that offered cut vegetables, including carrots, celery, cauliflower, peppers and broccoli. On the bottom shelf, were even bigger clamshells featuring the same vegetables in tubs large enough for a feast or party.

The cold case offered a shelf of cut, chunked and "spaghetified" carrots, zucchini and other vegetables, then cubed butternut squash and halved Brussels sprouts, clamshell salads, cello-wrapped mushrooms, romaine hearts, including some organics.

The next case offered bagged and clamshell salads, with the clamshells all offering organic greens.

At the top, were branded single-serve cups, but below were three shelves of ever larger fresh cuts in tubs. The first shelf held tubs that could be single-sized or serve two, with watermelon, pineapple, kiwi, mango and mixed fruit among them. A few parfait cups ended the run.

The next shelf held larger containers with pretty much the same fruits, with the addition of single mixed grapes and strawberries. More

of the same on the next shelf, but in family-sized tubs. Below were juices and platters of cut mixed fruit and watermelon.

The single produce department employee was working diligently attending to the section throughout the visit, leaving and returning multiple times as he replaced a few tired items with fresher-looking fruits and vegetables, and otherwise remerchandised the section to good effect. On approach, I commented on the section and said it looked nice, to which he smiled and said, "Thank you."

I began to ask him about the fresh cuts and how the store approached offering them. The overwhelming majority are labeled with the store name. And I asked him if the cut fruits and vegetables were all processed by the chain itself. Although the few branded items were noteworthy, he said that the chain did cut everything under the store brand, but not on-site. He said the processing did take place at a central location, with products delivered regularly to the store.

When I asked about shelf life, he said the fresh-cut products could last up to a week if properly refrigerated, in part because they sold through quickly.

I asked if they had problems with wastage, but he said that it wasn't usually the case because of the quick sell-through. He added that the workers in the department are careful to check the fresh-cut products and will immediately pull any product "if it's no good." **pb**



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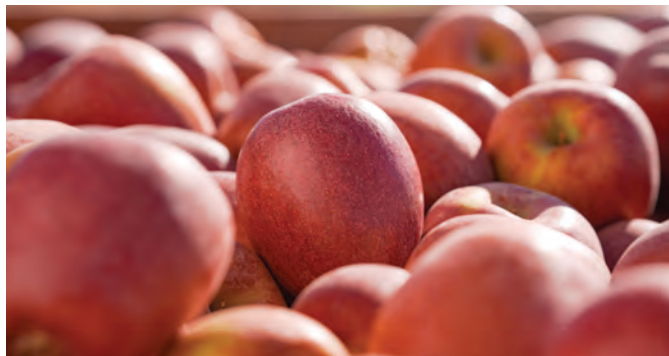
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ARTICHOKES

Ocean Mist Farms

Founded in 1924 by Italian immigrants who settled in Castroville, CA – the “Artichoke Center of the World” – Ocean Mist Farms began as the California Artichoke & Vegetable Growers Corporation. Headquartered in Castroville, this fourth-generation family-owned farming business is the largest grower/shipper of fresh artichokes in North America.

All of the company’s artichoke growing regions throughout Castroville and the Salinas Valley in No. CA, and Oxnard and the Coachella Valley in So. CA, are strategically located in areas that have prime soil and microclimate conditions, allowing this industry leader to grow and harvest artichokes year-round.

Beyond its signature Gold Standard artichokes, which Ocean Mist has been perfecting the art of growing for over a century, this innovative company is full steam ahead offering 30+ premium fresh vegetable commodities and value-added products, including its new award-winning Roastables Ready-To-Roast kits.

Artichoke Merchandising 101:




- Merchandise artichokes on their sides, stem-to-stem for easier handling
- Keep artichokes in the cold chain at/around 34°F while on display for optimum freshness and shelf life
- Do not retrim the stems; this can cause up to 30 percent loss in moisture
- Remove any damaged outer petals before merchandising your artichokes
- Cross merchandising artichokes with complimentary items like lemons, olive oil and bread crumbs help generate interest, and increase basket size

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Frost-Kissed artichokes are truly a specialty item, created naturally when temps drop into the 30s° and plants endure a frost. The artichokes’ skin darkens due to the freezing condition which is strictly cosmetic – similar to a sunburn – and peels off once cooked.

The outermost frost-bit petals of the artichoke in no way affect the eatability or quality of the artichoke and, in fact, seals in the flavor which has a distinctive nuttier taste. *Frost-Kissed POS also available



Important Tips For Artichoke Merchandising

- Build prominent displays that catch shoppers’ attention
- Consumers like variety; use a mixture of artichoke sizes and pack styles
- Make sure the product looks fresh and vibrant; make your display inspiring and memorable
- Your display should always look plentiful; half-full displays can translate as “old,” and nearing expiration
- Once display is built, keep products rotated and stocked

Use Marketing To Help Increase Consumption

- Consumers are more likely to buy artichokes if they know how to use them; help them by offering usage ideas on selecting, storing, handling, prepping and cooking artichokes
- Ocean Mist has videos, preparation suggestions, cooking tips and hundreds of delicious recipes available on its website
- Reach consumers before they get to the store using social media – one of the main conduits to dialog directly with them; this is a great way to entice them with a promotion, or simply provide helpful info to help demystify this unique vegetable
- Create fun signage welcoming consumers to take selfies in front of the display and tag you
- Ocean Mist Farms has POS resources available to help promote fresh artichokes (oceanmist.com/point-of-sale)



Peak Season

Though artichokes are available year-round, the traditional peak season is in the Spring (March-May) and around holidays including Valentine’s Day, Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Retailers see a sharp increase in volume and sales lift during these periods.



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Enjoy even greater sales and profit by showcasing and promoting fresh asparagus throughout the year. Asparagus from Peru, a principal supplier, allows retailers to sell quality to consumers looking for upscale meal preparation and convenience.

DISPLAY BASICS

Visibility Sells! Make sure displays are large, visible and prominent to encourage the most returns.

Make It More! Multiple displays catch shopper attention. Use isle displays and corner caps to draw particular attention to the product. Cross-merchandise a display in meat and fish departments for extra sales.

Add Convenience! Provide convenience options for a quick grab-n-go. Make sure shoppers know the ease and versatility of preparing asparagus.

MERCHANDISE FOR SUCCESS

Promote Year Round! Visibility all year long keeps asparagus on shopping lists. Offer a seamless, quality program with promotion year-round and ensure consumers buy a double portion. Promote heavy for Valentines, Summer BBQ, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Offer Choice! Shoppers want options! Display multiple sizes, packs and colors to add ring. Fresh asparagus is readily available in green, white and purple (all available from Peru). Include value-added, bagged or tray-packed fresh asparagus for quick grab-n-go purchases.

Tout Health! Healthy items are a major part of shopping lists. Providing simple signage on the health benefits of asparagus will get more into shoppers' carts. Asparagus contains a host of health benefits including: low in calories; naturally fat-and cholesterol-free; good source of potassium, vitamin A, & vitamin C ; rich in rutin and folacin.

ENSURE QUALITY

Looking Good! Make sure your product looks great on display! It should be bright with closed, firm tips.

Tips-Up! Product should be displayed tips up with butt-end cleanly cut and sufficiently hydrated.

Check Regularly! Store personnel should regularly check that asparagus displays are amply filled and ensure proper hydration.

Peruvian Asparagus



PERUVIAN ASPARAGUS IMPORTERS ASSOCIATION

817-793-3133
 priscillaprestige@outlook.com
<https://peruvianasparagusimportersassociation.com>

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 Importer and Distributor of Peruvian Asparagus
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AVOCADOS

Colombia Avocado Board

Ripeness Recommendations

- **Color and Feel:** Train staff to sort avocados by ripeness: bright green for firm, ready-in-a-few-days; dark green to black for ready-to-eat.
- **Ripeness Rotation:** Maintain a well-balanced display with avocados at different ripeness levels to meet various shopper preferences. Always rotate stock to ensure freshness and minimize waste.

Display Care and Handling

- **Gentle Placement:** Avoid overstocking or piling avocados to prevent bruising.
- **Temperature Control:** Keep displays at the ideal temperature of 68-75 °F to maintain freshness.
- **Daily Maintenance:** Remove overripe or damaged fruit promptly to maintain visual appeal.

Backroom Receiving and Preparation Procedures

Avocados from Colombia often come from farms committed to sustainable practices and community development. As a newer agroindustry, a clear set of Best Practices for Handling has been established to maintain the highest standards of quality. Work closely with your avocado partner to guarantee the right fruit and ripeness for your business.

- **Inspect Upon Arrival:** Check for firmness, color, and any signs of damage or over-ripeness.
- **Storage Guidelines:** Store avocados at 40°F in a well-ventilated area.
- **Pre-Ripening:** Consider working with your supplier to source pre-ripened avocados for immediate display.

Cross-Merchandising Opportunities

- **Salsa Station:** Pair avocados with tomatoes, onions, and cilantro for a DIY salsa station.
- **Breakfast Pairings:** Display near fruit, bread, and smoked salmon for breakfast ideas.
- **Healthy Snacks:** Place avocados alongside chips, crackers, or hummus for snack solutions.

Promotional Storytelling

Avocados from Colombia come with a compelling backstory. Avocados play an important role in rebuilding economic and community vitality in Colombia.

- **Highlight Country of Origin Themes:** Include recipes or culture compliments
- **Showcase the People Behind the Fruit:** Work with Avocados from Colombia to highlight the people and places that grow a nutritious superfood.



Merchandising Avocados from Colombia: A Guide for Fresh Produce Retailers

Avocados from Colombia have become a staple in the fresh produce section and have been experiencing triple digit growth thanks to the consistent Hass avocado quality and flavor consumers have come to expect. Beyond their delicious taste, Avocados from Colombia represent a commitment to sustainability and community development, making them a standout choice for retailers looking to meet the demands of today's demanding consumers that vote with their wallet and make more values based decisions when they shop.

The growing importance of avocados at retail cannot be underscored. This high value, high-demand product consistently attracts health-conscious and trend-savvy shoppers, making avocados a key driver of foot traffic and repeat purchases.

Recommended Display Ideas

- **Create Abundance:** Use large, tiered displays to showcase avocados prominently. A pyramid display evokes freshness and abundance.
- **Seasonal Themes:** Rotate displays to reflect seasonal promotions, such as summer barbecues or holiday entertaining.
- **Integrated Displays:** Position avocados near complementary products like salsa ingredients or salad greens.



Point of Purchase/Signage

- **Educational Signage:** Include signage that educates shoppers about the benefits of Avocados from Colombia, emphasizing sustainability and quality.
- **Shelf Talkers:** Use themed shelf talkers to highlight different recipes and eating occasions.
- **Iron Man Sign:** Add new signs bringing "flavor" to the fore front.

Promotional/Advertising Ideas

- **In-Store Promotions:** Run "Buy More, Save More" deals, such as discounts on multiple purchases and offer both bags and bulk avocados.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** Highlight Avocados from Colombia on your social channels to highlight richer background stories and connect with consumers.
- **Sampling Events:** Offer avocado tastings paired with other products like chips, dips, or bread.



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BANANAS DOLE



Bananas: Still Full of Surprises

Bananas remain one of the world's most beloved fruits — and among the most-purchased items in grocery stores across North America.

What's not to love?

Convenient, value-priced, full of nutrients, naturally sweet, just the right size for kids' lunches, and offering their own bio-degradable, easy-to-open packaging, they are practically nature's perfect food.

And DOLE® has been the brand that more customers have turned to during good times and bad for more than 125 years.

But even the iconic banana still has secrets to tell. Through a recent national survey Dole uncovered some Ripe Banana Facts that can help our retailers maximize their banana (and produce department) sales.

- 35% of Americans rank bananas as a must-have purchase — more than any other fruit or vegetable and sixth among all supermarket items.
- Bananas rank as the top impulse produce buy in the entire store.
- Bananas rank third as a sugar replacement in recipes and cooking behind honey and maple syrup but ahead of stevia, agave and monk fruit.
- 29% of your shoppers like eating bananas that are at least partially green. And one-half of banana lovers want perfectly yellow fruit with no green or brown spots.

So what does it all mean? Bananas continue to dominate — not just in the produce department but throughout the store. Their strong ranking as both a planned and impulse purchase gives you a multitude of display possibilities.

And since banana lovers increasingly want both green and yellow fruit, stocking a full color-spectrum is now more crucial than ever. Read on for



Expand Your Banana Horizons

Gone are the days when your shoppers wanted just conventional Cavendish bananas. Today's banana consumer is now more likely to also shop Organics, Plantains and Exotics.

Conventional Cavendish Remains King — at Least for Now.

While demand for the world's most popular banana is still down slightly from pre-COVID levels, sales continue to improve as the overall banana category expands. Shoppers will always turn to the tried-and-true King of Bananas even as they explore new varieties, tastes and unique ways to enjoy the fruit.

But Organic Bananas are Booming. After slow-but-steady increases the past several years, organic banana sales shot up almost 15% in the year ending 2/15/25. Now, more than ever, organic has hit mainstream as more shoppers are willing to pay a premium for health, wellness and peace of mind. Savvy retailers can leverage this trend by continually stocking organic bananas, creating all-organic produce sections, and offering organic recipes, serving suggestions and party tips.

And Plantains are More Popular than Ever. Plantains are growing almost as fast as Organic Bananas. For the 52 weeks ending 2/15/25, plantain sales were up more than 13%. This larger, starchier and less-sweet cousin of the banana can be baked, boiled, fried, grilled or steamed. Since shoppers are less aware of plantains' many benefits, including high levels of potassium and fiber, we recommend creating dedicated displays with sweet and savory recipes, cooking tips and product info.

Even Exotics are Expanding. Build-out your banana display with Baby Bananas, Red Bananas and Manzanos for added appetite and sales appeal.

In honor of this year's National Banana Bread Day, Dole conducted a blind taste test of identical banana

bread loaves made with Cavendish, Manzanos, Red and Baby Bananas. The winner? More participants



picked the loaf made with Red Bananas for its super-moist, creamy consistency and sweet, raspberry-like flavor. This shows that sharing the versatility beyond snacking is a winning recipe to expand category sales.

playful antics and boundless enthusiasm whether in person, on social media or through the Dole website, inspire people to embrace bananas as an essential ingredient of a balanced diet.

How do Americans spend and what do they prioritize when grocery shopping?
A recent survey of Americans grocery shopping habits revealed...

Grocery shopping on an empty stomach will cost you an extra **\$26** per trip, on average.

The average person makes two grocery runs per week and budgets **\$162** for their haul.

Americans rank food variety, quick and convenient foods, protein-rich foods and inexpensive foods as their highest food priorities.

39% of Americans are willing to pay more for brands that make their values known when it comes to transparency for sourcing, supply chain and environmental sustainability.

The most common "must-haves" for every grocery haul are:

- bread
- eggs
- meat
- milk or milk substitutes
- coffee
- bananas

When it comes to produce impulse shopping, respondents are most likely to snag bananas, grapes and apples on their way to the checkout line.

Data from a survey conducted by Ipsos on behalf of Dole. Research: 14 and Feb. 18, 2024, with a panel of 2,000 general population Americans.

Global Healthy Eating Icon

Standing taller than ever is Dole's iconic mascot, Bobby Banana. At 7-feet tall, this unpeeled DOLE® Banana is more than just a fruit; with his bright yellow skin and ever-present smile, he's a symbol of vitality, happiness, and wellness to audiences of all ages, embodying the essence of wholesome living and nutritious choices.

In fact after almost 30 years as the healthy-living, happy-go-lucky mascot of Dole Food Company, dedicated to rallying kids to live healthier lifestyles and diets rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, in 2024, Bobby was honored with a special display at the National Mascot Hall of Fame — the first corporate mascot to be displayed in the history of the Hall.

His presence as a beloved marketing asset to represent DOLE® Bananas to millions of families is an opportunity that can help retailers appeal and sell more bananas. Whether he's leading a school dance party, supermarket opening or other special event, Bobby's

Spread Ohana this Summer with Disney's Stitch



Dole has recruited everyone's favorite mischievous alien with heart to encourage Americans to spread kindness, love and affection — and help our retailers create added excitement for DOLE Pineapples, Bananas and other tropical fruit.

This summer, Disney's beloved Stitch will christen Dole's "Spirit of 'Ohana," a five-month in-store, digital and social media initiative focused on the long-established themes of hospitality, goodness, wellness and joy that tropicals bring.

The Hawaiian word for family, "Ohana" includes not just blood or adopted relatives but friends, neighbors and associates, and can be seen at gatherings throughout the Islands. This spirit will be captured through a destination website, character recipes, digital downloads, dedicated social and Disney's Stitch on millions of DOLE® Banana stickers throughout the U.S. and Canada.

To inquire about creating a campaign and in-store materials featuring Dole's Bobby Banana or Disney's Stitch, contact your Dole sales rep.



DOLE FOOD COMPANY

200 South Tryon Street, Charlotte, NC 28202
www.Dole.com

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THE FRESH FRUIT BRAND SHOPPERS LOVE AND TRUST



*Voted most trusted Fresh Fruit brand by American shoppers based on the 2025 BrandSpark® American Trust Study.

35%

Americans rank bananas as a must-have purchase -- more than any other fruit or vegetable.



**National Banana Survey by OnePoll*

29%

Shoppers like eating bananas that are at least partially green.



15%

Organic bananas up



**For the 52 weeks ending 2/15/25*

13%

Plantains up



So what does it all mean?

Bananas continue to dominate -- not just in the produce department but throughout the store. Their strong ranking as both a planned and impulse purchase gives you a multitude of display possibilities.

Contact your Dole Sales Rep today to boost your banana display with Organics, Exotics and a 2-color program!

DFFSales@dole.com





GARLIC

Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc.

Garlic has become a staple ingredient in most households with sales continuing to increase year after year. A few key merchandising tips will help garner more profits all year long:

Make It Visible

Make sure shoppers can easily find garlic. Build visible displays with a mix of whole bulbs, 5-bulb packaged garlic and jar garlic, as well as one or two SKUs of organic.

Educate Shoppers

Use signage to all attention to the display. POP material near garlic should always have a three-fold message:

- (1) Highlight specialty items such as elephant garlic to attract attention and spark consumer interest.
- (2) Promote health benefits of garlic: fat-free, saturated fat-free, sodium-free, cholesterol-free.
- (3) Provide recipes and usage ideas. Garlic sales directly relate to consumer use of recipes requiring garlic, so always have a recipe next to the garlic display.

SUGGEST THESE GARLIC USES!

- Create a make-your-own-pasta-sauce center with garlic, tomatoes and other ingredients.
- Promote garlic as a healthy alternative to butter and seasonings — an easy, healthy way to give food great flavor.
- Point out how garlic is great in salads, marinades, and rubs, and cross-merchandise accordingly.
- Display garlic next to ripe tomatoes, basil and cilantro to promote salsa.
- Showcase unique varieties — highlighting red or elephant garlic draws the attention of shoppers.
- Encourage adding flare to old favorites by including garlic in mashed potatoes or scrambled eggs.
- Suggest garlic for decorative purposes. Braided garlic or loose garlic can be used to adorn holiday wreaths and other holiday decorations.



Provide More Opportunity

Secondary displays increase sales! Put garlic next to meat and poultry to promote as a rub and even next to baguettes in the bakery.

Add Convenience

Offer a full range of garlic and complementary products. Convenience items include various processed and semi-processed forms, such as whole peeled garlic, diced garlic, and jarred products. Every garlic sale means the sale of additional items from produce and other areas of the store.

Ensure Quality

Pay frequent attention to the display to keep it clean and dry since skins of garlic tend to shed with handling. Fresh garlic sitting out for long periods will tend to dry out. Rotation is crucial! Store garlic in a cool, well-ventilated place and keep dry. Garlic should not be misted.

Provide Variety

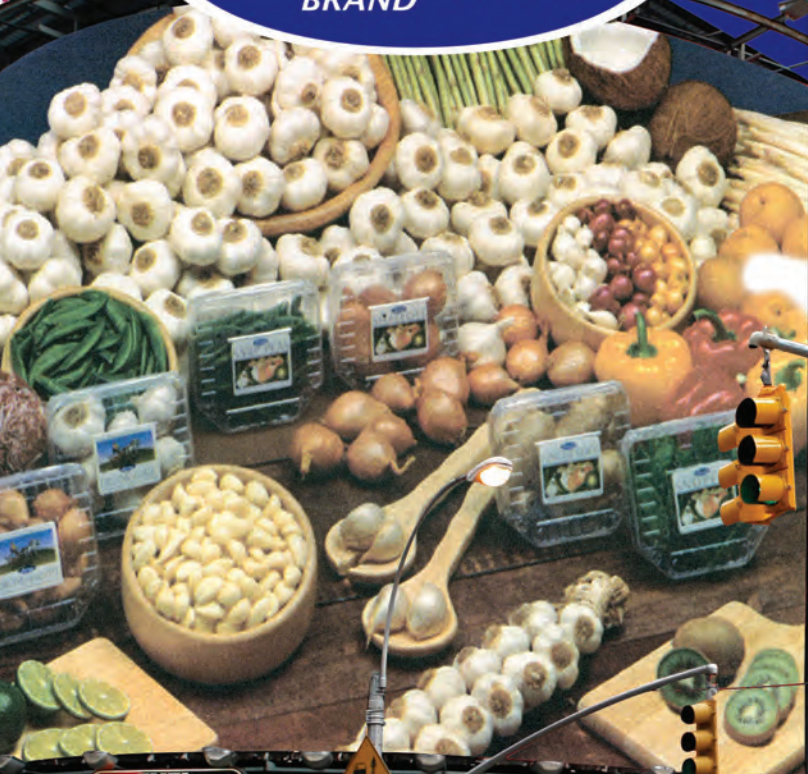
A variety of quality garlic is available year-round with supplies coming from California, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Spain and China. Stores can maximize garlic sales by promoting a diversity of items including red garlic, elephant garlic, peeled, packaged, braided and certified organic in addition to the standard bulk.



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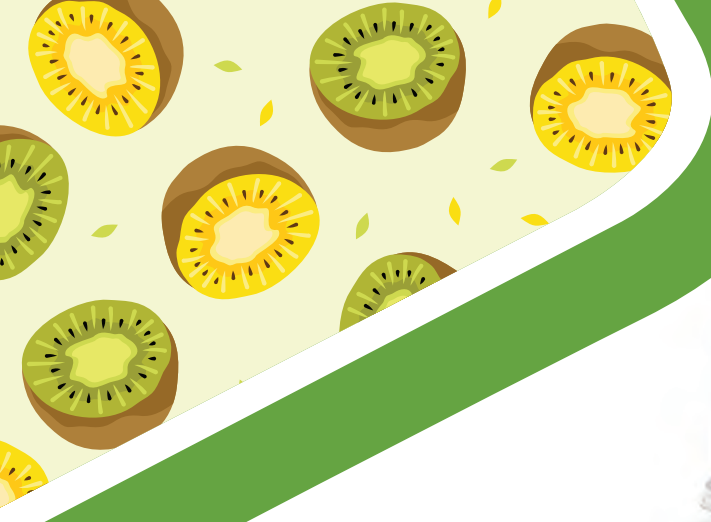
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KIWIFRUIT

Zespri™ Kiwifruit



Kiwifruit is the #1 Growing Category in the Fruit Bowl

Kiwifruit is taking the produce aisle by storm! This powerhouse fruit is skyrocketing in popularity, outpacing total fruit sales by an impressive +7 points making it the #1 growing category in the fruit bowl. Zespri is the #1 brand in the kiwi category, with Zespri™ SunGold™ Kiwifruit fueling a staggering 49 percent of total kiwi category growth in the past year. And the best part is, there's still massive untapped profit potential in the category. Maximize your department's sales by implementing these top merchandising strategies and watch your numbers soar!

Taste The Obsession



Zespri Kiwifruit is 100 percent grower owned and passionately dedicated to growing the best-tasting kiwifruit.

MAXIMIZE IMPACT WITH THE ZESPRI KIWIBROTHERS™

Eye-catching promotions are a powerful way to drive excitement and boost sales in the category. By partnering with Zespri, retailers can unlock creative and engaging campaigns that captivate shoppers.

This summer, Zespri proudly introduces the iconic KiwiBrothers to stores nationwide – on a mission to spread the Sweet and Juicy Obsession of Zespri Kiwifruit. From the lush orchards of New Zealand to the shelves of America, the KiwiBrothers are fueling momentum and reinforcing Zespri's position as the #1 brand in the kiwi category.

This dynamic duo is turning heads with their playful and unexpected personalities. SunGold, the quirky and curious one, brings the perfect touch of sweetness, while Green, the witty and energetic one, delivers a bold tangy punch.

The KiwiBrothers are set to create omni-channel buzz with their bold, attention-grabbing presence both in and out of store. Shoppers will encounter them through vibrant new packaging, high-impact displays, pole toppers, shelf talkers, standees, and dynamic digital assets – all designed to create an engaging and memorable shopping experience while driving increased sales.

Source: Circana Total US MULO; latest 52 weeks ending 12/29/24

Believe in Displays And Point Of Sale Materials

Make Kiwifruit impossible to miss! Shoppers are actively searching for both Zespri SunGold and Green Kiwifruit, so turn that demand into serious sales. The secret? Go big and bold with attention-grabbing displays. The impact is undeniable – a recent third-party study revealed that simply doubling your kiwifruit display led to a jaw-dropping 96 percent increase in dollar sales! More space means more sales, so stack it high, make it shine, and watch the product fly off the shelves.



Educate Consumers And Promote Nutrition

Education drives deeper engagement. It is critical to educate shoppers on the nutritional benefits of kiwi and unique taste profiles. Zespri kiwi's are packed with 20 plus vitamins and minerals:

- Zespri SunGold Kiwifruit is Sweet & Juicy and offers more than 100 percent of daily vitamin C and as much potassium as a banana in just one serving.
- Zespri Green Kiwifruit has a Tangy-Sweet flavor and is a good source of fiber.



Zespri™ Kiwifruit

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NOW SPOONING EVERYWHERE





MANGOS

Ciruli Brothers, LLC



Creative Displays

- Display abundantly in high traffic areas.
- Offer fruit at different ripeness stages, with softer fruit on top, and firmer fruit on bottom.
- Avoid stacking displays too high to prevent bruising.
- Promote multiple varieties between April and June.
- Do not mist or refrigerate mangos.
- Offer bulk fruit and specialty packs for value pricing.
- Mangos pair well with different products. Cross merchandise with other produce items, seafood, poultry, meat, and certain spirits.
- Rotate very ripe fruit for in-store sampling or fresh-cut packs to offset shrink.
- Use available POS resources.



COURTESY OF WHOLE FOODS MARKET

Find The Right Partner

One of the most important success factors in growing mango sales means having the right supply chain partner. Your supplier should provide the right variety, quality, and timely information during the year so you can make better-informed decisions about pricing and promotions.

Focus On Quality and Flavor

We believe a natural blooming cycle coupled with a proper pruning program allows trees to flower and develop exceptional quality fruit. When we support nature's way, trees are healthier, canopies are fuller, and this results in tree-ripened mangos that are high in brix with the proper acidity. This is essentially Mother Nature's recipe for better tasting, fragrant, and flavorful mangos.

With Ciruli Brothers, you can expect superior quality mangos that are uniformly packed in display-ready packaging designed with the consumer in mind.



CIRULI BROTHERS, LLC

- CiruliBrothers.com
- ChampagneMango.com
- info@cirulibrothers.com



Mr. Mango®

Super Mango®

Señor Mango®

Whether you are a seasoned industry pro or just joining the trade, read on for tips and resources to become a master mango merchandiser and accelerate category revenue. The formula to success is unique to your needs and depends on many factors.

Mangos 101

Assortment should focus on these areas:

- **Availability:** Mangos are available year-round with Mexico being the primary supplier between February to September.
- **Domestic Production:** Limited to select areas of Puerto Rico, California, Hawaii, and Florida.
- **Growth Potential:** Although widely produced worldwide and hailed the 'king of fruits,' U.S. mango consumption per capita is only 3.7 lbs. (USDA Economic Research Service). This is the equivalent of just a few mangos!
- **Variety:** Hundreds of varieties exist, yet only a dozen or so are offered in the U.S. Factors like size, color, shape, taste, and nutrient composition can vary by variety.
- **Ripeness:** The best gauge for maturity is firmness. Not all varieties change color as they ripen.
- **Temperature Guidelines:** To hold ripeness, store between 52-55F. To ripen, keep between 65-70F. Never store below 52F to avoid compromising quality, flavor, and sales.



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MUSHROOMS

Giorgio Fresh Co.



Recommended Display Ideas

Usage of color at the retail shelf helps enhance the visibility of mushrooms amidst the array of fresh produce options. Utilize signage or packaging to introduce vibrancy to the display. Considering the importance of mushrooms as a fresh produce category, make sure they are prominently positioned within the department.

Key Varieties

- White
- Portabella
- Baby Bella/Crimini
- Shiitake
- Oyster

Secondary Varieties

- Royal Trumpet
- Maitake
- Beech

QUICK TIP

To develop a signature fresh mushroom category, contact your Giorgio Fresh sales representative for additional information.

Mushroom Monday

Encourage shoppers to get creative with mushrooms by providing helpful ideas and information. Utilize the Mushroom Council's "Mushroom Monday" campaign promotions and point-of-sale materials to entice shoppers to incorporate more mushrooms into their weekly rotation. Mushrooms are not only full of flavor and extremely nutritious, they are also an eco-friendly food – making Mushroom Monday a guilt free, culinary tradition to be embraced in their home kitchens.

Display and Promotion Recommendations

Keep shelves stocked with fresh, high-quality products. A clean, organized and visually appealing display of fresh mushrooms will entice shoppers to purchase. Mushrooms left on shelves for too long will deter purchases.

Promotions should be a primary focus as they drive sales, attract customers, and help retailers differentiate themselves in the market. By strategically leveraging promotions, you can maximize the potential of mushrooms and create value for consumers and suppliers!

Cross Merchandising Opportunities

As the warmer weather approaches, retailers should cross-merchandise mushrooms with other grilled items to help inspire recipe ideas in shoppers' minds. Ideal pairing items include steaks, burgers and grilling vegetables.

Care and Handling

Using Giorgio's CARE Program will maintain the best mushroom quality:

- Cool the product to 34 degrees to provide maximum shelf life.
- Avoid spray misters and over-stacking (three high maximum).
- Rotate the product to keep the display case fresh.
- Entice your customers by keeping the product attractive.



Pepper Burrito "Bowls" (Stuffed Peppers)



Shiitake Mushroom Smoked Tofu Stir Fry



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ORGANIC SALADS

Earthbound Farm

A Fresh Approach to Organic Greens

IMPORTANCE OF ORGANICS

As health and wellness trends continue to expand interest in “better for you and the planet” products, retailers who prioritize high-quality, organic greens will provide value to this expanding shopper base. Organic salads attract the premium shopper, leading to larger basket sizes and more profitability for retailers. Earthbound Farm brand shoppers deliver the highest basket ring exceeding conventional salads and other national organic brands. Unique, flavor-forward items such as Earthbound Farm’s Limited Harvest Wild Red Arugula have increased organic sales by expanding sales of arugula. As more organic consumers continue to seek convenience from salad kits, Earthbound Farm is expanding its salad kit offering to include three new organic salad kits with dressings made with 100 percent organic avocado oil.

Sustainable Packaging

According to Nielsen NIQ Research, U.S. consumers hold brands, themselves and retailers to be most responsible for sustainable progress. By making sustainability an integral part of the produce aisle, retailers can drive sales, shopper trust, and long-term loyalty while reducing environmental impact.

Earthbound Farm brand is pioneering the sustainable packaging charge in the fresh greens industry introducing plant-based trays made from recycled plant fibers. This new tray is designed to deliver the freshest greens while using 95 percent less plastic than the standard clamshell package. This plastic-free, H2R-certified recyclable tray can be placed directly into the recycling bin once the lidding film is removed, making it easier for shoppers to make an eco-friendly choice.

Independent research showed that 92 percent of organic salad consumers surveyed were interested in purchasing the plant-based package developed by Earthbound Farm brand.



Merchandising Tips



- Merchandising organic salads effectively can boost sales and encourage repeat purchases. Maximize sales by placing Organic Salads in high-visibility locations within the refrigerated produce section.
- A well-stocked and organized display enables shoppers to easily find their favorite blends and identify new innovative products.
- Utilize color blocking and tiered shelving to create a visually appealing arrangement that highlights the vibrant freshness and variety of the greens. Earthbound Farm packaging is designed to create an

impactful, eye-catching destination for Organics that eases shopability for consumers.

Social Media Strategy & Influencer Marketing

Social media and influencers are vital in raising both awareness and driving conversion for organic products. Social media platforms are a valued direct line of communication with Earthbound Farm’s loyal customers to share its brand story through relevant and engaging content including recipes, cooking tips, and behind-the-scenes looks at how the products are grown. Through shoppable posts, both influencers and brand content can drive consumers seamlessly to purchase with just one click.



@dietitiancass

Driving Awareness & Conversion

Eye catching in-store signage, coupled with comprehensive, digital retail media programs, plays a crucial role in keeping organic salads top of mind for category shoppers while also enticing new households to the category. Through precise behavioral and interest based targeting, Earthbound Farm is able to serve relevant content to the appropriate audience at the right time.

Earthbound Farm leverages in-store digital displays to educate shoppers on the benefits of its products and new plant-based packaging.



Category Management

Through its Category Insights team, Earthbound Farm brings the expertise to optimize category assortment, maximize sales and shelf-efficiency.



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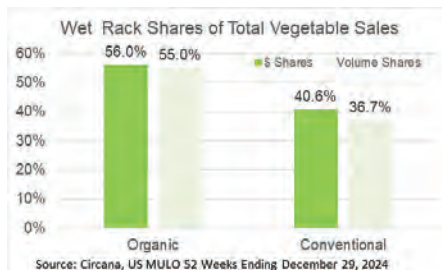


ORGANIC WET RACK

Cal Organic Farms (Grimmway)

Insights

The organic wet rack is the powerhouse destination for fresh organic produce sales. Data from Circana showed more than 50 percent of dollar and volume sales in 2024 spent by U.S. retail shoppers on organic vegetables



were selected from the wet rack. By comparison, sales of conventionally grown vegetables from the wet rack comprised 40 percent of dollar sales and 37 percent total conventional vegetable sales.

Retail sales from the organic wet rack were resilient last year with a

2.4 percent increase in dollar sales and a 5.7 percent increase in volume. This result outperformed total organic vegetable sales and total fresh produce dollar sales. The retail average price per pound for items on the organic wet rack decreased 3.1 percent in 2024 from the prior year, compared to flat pricing for total fresh produce.

Organic vegetable shoppers are very valuable to retailers.

The organic produce buyer is more likely to:

- Consume fresh produce every day
- Take multiple trips per week and spend more on a per person basis, with focus on healthy eating
- Be younger, either Gen Z or Millennial
- Shop at specialty/organic stores and online
- Have kids, particularly younger kids, ages 0 to 6 or 7 to 12
- In 2023, the average grocery shopper basket was \$45.90, while the average organic produce basket size was \$112.42. The average number of items in the average organic produce shopper's basket was more than double the number of items in average shopper's basket.
- Mid-October through May is peak season at retail for the organic wet wall. Backyard gardens and local farmers markets complement supply through the summer season. High volume periods are as follows:
 - January begins to annual uptick in volume as consumers start to think health and fitness.
 - Super Bowl, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, and Earth Day bring seasonal sales spikes in volume as households accommodate friends and family.
 - National Organic Harvest month in September is a time for retailers to connect with shoppers and to help them discover the many benefits of fresh organic produce.
- Thanksgiving sees the biggest spike in organic volume. Retailers should be well stocked across organic varieties to capture this opportunity.

Assortment

Assortment should focus on these areas:

- Volume Drivers – Cabbage, Cauliflower, Beets, Broccoli, Green Onions, Kale, Lettuce, Potatoes, Onions
- Growth Drivers – Baby Bok Choy, Cilantro, Dill, Parsley, Leafy Greens
- Regional Drivers – Adjust your variety mix for regional preferences
- Seasonal Drivers – Rotate seasonal favorites to encourage discovery and trial

Promotion

Broadcast to shoppers about the availability of organic vegetables with regular promotions featuring organic vegetable items to draw them into your store. Combine varieties to create themed recipe ideas.

Create an annual AD planner to support themed base promotions throughout the year while ensuring supply and minimizing out-of-stocks.

Merchandising

Sixty-eight percent of shoppers prefer retailers to display organic items in a separate section.

- Merchandise the wet wall in a visually compelling way using color and texture to create contrast and clean lines
- A variety of different vegetables and colors helps create a sharp-looking wet rack
- Keep displays well-stocked and rotate product to keep the freshest items arranged front and center
- Produce team members should learn as much as they can about the commodities displayed so they can educate consumers on usage and benefits
- Create visible product ID tags to highlight organic produce
- Supply organic marked purple bags to ensure proper scanning at checkout

Messaging

- Organic vegetables should be displayed in their own section clearly labeled with signage and channel strips
- Use signage to tell shoppers about the farmers who grew the vegetables and provide nutritional information and ideas to prepare the items
- Communicate the sustainable practices and level of care required to produce organic vegetables
- Display signage featuring trusted farms and farmers to develop a connection between the shopper and the grower
- Provide shelf talkers with inspiring recipes and cross promotional offers
- Use QR codes to educate consumers

RETAILER EXECUTION

Retailers should develop a strategic promotion plan to capture high-volume weeks and year-round opportunities. Evaluate your shopper demographics to ensure the right product mix across stores. Implement signage that highlights organically grown produce. Contact your Cal Organic Farms sales representative or distributor for serving suggestions, recipes, and merchandising ideas to draw more shoppers to your organic vegetable set.



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SWEET POTATOES

Bako Sweet

Sweet potatoes are a staple ingredient shoppers look for year-round with peak seasonal interest around holidays such as Easter. Engaging displays, cross-merchandising, and digital integration can enhance shopper experiences and drive sales.

DISPLAY IDEAS



Sweet potatoes are a versatile and nutritious addition to any meal.

- **Primary Display:** Feature a well-stocked, central display with a full product line, including tray packs, bagged, and bulk options, to give shoppers a variety of choices.
- **Secondary Displays:** Use high-graphic display bins in strategic areas, such as near fresh vegetables, salad kits, or protein sections, to encourage impulse purchases.
- **Seasonal Promotions:** Position Bako Sweet Single Sweet

near Easter displays, for example. These multi-colored sweet potatoes make a fun addition to seasonal baskets and brunch spreads.



Take advantage of Bako Sweet's vibrant packaging and high-graphic shippers to create eye-catching displays that highlight key trends and seasonal promotions.

BOOST SALES WITH CROSS-MERCHANDISING

Help shoppers see the possibilities of sweet potatoes by merchandising them alongside complementary ingredients:



- **BBQ Season:** Place tray packs near grilling items like marinated meats and BBQ sauces.
- **Healthy Eating Trends:** Display alongside Mediterranean Diet staples like olive oil, chickpeas, and fresh herbs.
- **Breakfast Inspiration:** Merchandise near eggs, bacon, and pancake mixes to promote sweet potato-based breakfast recipes.




Retailers have experienced a **240% sales lift** by utilizing our eye catching display bins in-stores!

CATEGORY MANAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Retailers can maximize sweet potato sales by ensuring strong visibility and strategic placement in stores:

- **Timing is Key:** Set up Easter-themed displays by mid-March to capture early holiday shopping traffic.
- **Leverage Store Fixtures:** Use secondary displays and shipper programs to keep sweet potatoes top of mind for shoppers.
- **Educate on Health Benefits:** Sweet potatoes are incredibly nutrient-dense, certified Heart Healthy by the American Heart Association, and an excellent source of fiber which makes them an ideal part of every meal.
- **Encourage Impulse Buys:** Highlight the versatility of sweet potatoes with in-store demos to showcase how easy they are to incorporate into every eating occasion. By implementing these merchandising strategies, retailers can enhance the shopping experience, drive sales, and encourage people to Sweeten Your Everyday™.

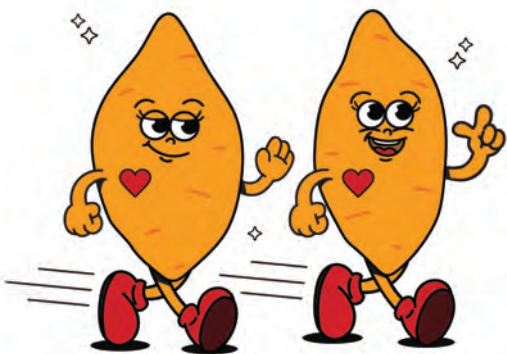


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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Every once in a while, the opportunity presents itself to do well while also doing good. Such is the case with our annual Masters of Merchandising supplement. The industry owes a tip of the hat to the collection of industry leaders who elected to invest with us in a marketing vehicle that is both promotional and educational.

Each vendor worked hard to impart their expert wisdom on how to more effectively merchandise the category at hand. By sharing knowledge acquired while working with North America's retailers, these vendors help retailers move more product and help the world by encouraging a more healthful diet.

Increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables is not only a matter of big industry initiatives, but consumption in general can only increase if sales of specific items increase. That means knowing how to build consumer trial and how to offer the most effective assortment; it means knowing how to

market produce on a day-to-day basis and how to do some out-of-the-box promotions just to keep consumer interest high.

Retailers, please take the time to review this offering carefully. When did you last think about how to increase sales of garlic? Or mangos? Or asparagus? Here is a chance to think of merchandising in a different way. When did you last really consider how to best sell bananas — was it when you were a produce department manager 10, 20 or 30 years ago? Here is an opportunity to revisit tactics with a different perspective.

The sponsors of this year's Masters of Merchandising section are a special breed. We spoke to many producers who declined to participate, saying they simply had no idea how to merchandise their own items effectively. When we offered to help them research the matter, we encountered all too many vendors who essentially said, "That is the retail-

er's problem; we just book loads."

Merchandising is everyone's problem, and in the produce industry, "The Times, They Are A-Changin'." Retailers today are in a position to expect more support from producers, and intellectual capital is just about the most valuable support one can provide. So kudos to our Masters of Merchandising sponsors.

As an added service to our retail readers, we're printing additional copies of this guide, so if you would like extra copies of the Masters of Merchandising 2025 supplement, fill out the form below, and scan/email or mail it to us. For the cost of shipping and handling, we'll send you up to five supplements (first-come basis). If you require larger quantities for distribution to store-level personnel, call our offices at 561-994-1118. **pb**



Ken Whitacre

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Produce Planning Guide For Cinco De Mayo

Retailers can garner a register-ringing olé.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Food is at the forefront of Cinco de Mayo festivities. Some 59% of Americans surveyed by National Today, a San Francisco, CA-headquartered advertising services company, say their favorite way to celebrate is by eating Mexican food. Moreover, nearly three-fourths of Americans (70%) say they observe this holiday.

It's a commemoration recognizing when, in 1862, outnumbered Mexican soldiers defeated French forces in the Battle of Puebla. While not a major holiday in Mexico, Cinco de Mayo has become phenomenally popular for food, friends and fiestas in the U.S.

Today, Cinco de Mayo is an excellent opportunity for retailers to sell more fresh fruits and vegetables. Case in point, it's second only to the Super Bowl as the most significant consumption occasion in the U.S. for avocados, with over 80 million pounds of fruit sold, according to Avocados from Mexico (AFM).

"Cinco de Mayo is a pretty big produce holiday, and a lot of retailers get behind it," says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie's Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers in the Pacific Northwest, such as Metropolitan Market, as well as larger chains, such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts. "This year, it falls on a Monday, which means pretty good sales on the weekend before and a nice bump the first of the month."

MARKET TO EVERYONE

Cinco de Mayo is a holiday that, while rooted in Mexican heritage and therefore authentic to Hispanic shoppers, has become widely celebrated by non-Hispanic shoppers in the U.S. as well, according to Ramon Ojeda, executive director of the National Mango Board (NMB), based in Orlando, FL.

"It's a great example of cultural exchange and a popular occasion for celebrations involving food, drinks and music. Therefore, a marketing strategy targeting both Hispanic and non-Hispanic shoppers is our most effective approach," he says.

The board develops marketing materials in English and Spanish, Ojeda adds.



Get creative with your Cinco de Mayo merchandising, and think beyond tomatoes, peppers and avocados (although those should be prominent). Promote corn for corn dip or elotes (Mexican grilled street corn), lemons and limes for drinks and that essential squeeze over entrees, and don't forget mangos or papayas for salads or dessert!

"This dual-language approach allows us to acknowledge the holiday's origins, while also welcoming everyone to the fiesta and the delicious flavor of fresh mango."

THINK DEPARTMENT-WIDE

Avocados are called for in two of the top 10 rated recipes for Cinco de Mayo on the Food Network's website. That's not all. There are almost 20 fresh fruits and vegetables listed as ingredients in those recipes. These range from avocados and tomatoes for guacamole and pico de gallo, to plenty of white, red and yellow onions; limes; garlic; cilantro; and bell and hot peppers.

"We'll have our in-house made guacamole, plus also sell avocados along with tomatoes, onions, cilantro and limes for customers who want to make their own," says Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations for Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL.

According to proprietary research from AFM, the unit and pound volume of avocados and guacamole for Cinco de Mayo had a 10% compound annual growth rate since 2019.

"It's an occasion that we see a lot of growth, one that we continue to focus on and one that we suggest retailers put on their annual promotion schedule," says Stephanie Bazan, AFM's senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution.

In 2024, avocado units reached 59.8 million, a +2% increase versus the prior year, while dollar sales soared +22% to \$68.5 million, according to the Sept. 3,

2024-released report, *Avocado Sales Back to Record-Breaking Highs During Q2 Holidays*, from the Mission Viejo-based Hass Avocado Board.

Small avocados drove unit growth during the holiday, contributing an additional 3.1 million units to the category.

Smaller-sized avocados are increasingly popular, particularly in bagged formats, according to Terry Splane, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission (CAC), in Irvine, CA.

He cites a 2024 avocado tracking study that revealed 44% of U.S. avocado shoppers prefer bulk purchases, 30% favor bagged options, and the remainder are flexible or have no specific preference. "Bagged avocados significantly enhance market basket value by an average of 107%," Splane says.

He adds that Cinco de Mayo falls in the heart of the California avocado season.

Like the fruit, Cinco de Mayo is the second largest selling holiday for guacamole after the Super Bowl, says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations LLC, in Rhome, TX, which markets the Yo Quiero Brand of dips. "Our top-selling items are always our guacs, followed by our queso dips and salsa. We also have bean dips, elote, and creamy jalapeño dips to create a one-stop dip destination."

According to the National Today research, nearly one-third (32%) of Americans who observe Cinco de Mayo drink margaritas. Lime is a key ingredient in this cocktail and a topper in beer.

PHOTO COURTESY DIVINE FLAVOR

A good reflection of this is that lime sales rose 50% in 2023 during Cinco de Mayo at Kroger stores, based on data from 84.51°, a subsidiary of the Cincinnati, OH-headquartered chain with over 2,700 stores nationwide, as reported in a May 3, 2024, article in *USA Today*.

“Persian limes dominate the category, accounting for over 95% of total volume and remaining the most promotable option during the Cinco de Mayo selling period,” says Zak Laffite, president of Delano, CA-headquartered Wonderful Citrus. “Bulk limes lead in

volume sales, while packaged limes command a 15% to 20% premium per pound. Similarly, conventional limes comprise more than 95% of total category volume, though organic limes are experiencing modest growth, earning a 50% to 60% premium per pound.”

Laffite cautions supply is relatively tight during the Cinco de Mayo period, as fruit costs remain on the higher side, “so there needs to be a balance between retailer pricing expectations and available promotional volume.”

Cinco de Mayo is one of the first major

“Cinco de Mayo is a pretty big produce holiday, and a lot of retailers get behind it.”

— Jason Kazmirski, Charlie’s Produce, Seattle, WA

promotional opportunities for the Mexican mango season.

“Tommy Atkins and Ataulfo mangos tend to be the best-selling at this time,” says the NMB’s Ojeda. “There is a natural tie-in for mangos, particularly with avocados, whether it’s guacamole, salsa, tacos and beyond.”

Tomatoes, especially Romas, are big sellers for Cinco de Mayo at retailers Charlie’s Produce serves. “There’s pretty good pick up on peppers, both sweet and chile peppers, too,” says Kazmirski.

Roma and beefsteak tomatoes ship out of Mexico’s Sonora and southern Baja California regions in May.

“There are so many ways to promote tomatoes for Cinco de Mayo, from use in dips and salsas, to snacking, to garnish on traditional dishes like fajitas,” says Alán Aguirre Camou, chief marketing officer for Divine Flavor, in Nogales, AZ. “We also have a variety of other hothouse vegetables available in early May, like bell peppers, organic and conventional, in yellow, red and orange, and long English and a cocktail variety of cucumber.”

Florida’s Sunshine Sweet Corn is in season through May.

“Most naturally think of Memorial Day when it comes to promoting Florida sweet corn, but there are several spring holidays like Cinco de Mayo where sweet corn becomes a flavorful recipe addition and offers several opportunities for cross-promotion in-store with tomatoes, bell peppers, jalapeños and onions for dips and salsas,” says Christina Morton, spokesperson for the Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida, and director of communications for the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, in Maitland, FL.

“Retailers who include recipe ideas, for example, a sweet corn, tomato, and avocado salsa or a sweet corn elote dip, along with eye-catching displays get customers excited about buying sweet corn.”

On the specialty side, include fresh peppers like habanero, serrano, and jalapeño in the mix; veggies like cilantro, jicama and tomatillos; fruit such as cactus pears and jackfruit; and value-added products like a tamale kit, recommends Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA. “We offer retailers point-of-sale promotional materials and signage to highlight Cinco de Mayo.”

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PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA'S WORLD VARIETY PRODUCE

Merchandise Cinco de Mayo ingredients together, including avocados, tomatoes, chiles, limes, lemon, garlic, and other festive guacamole and salsa items.

START EARLY

With a retailer's "why" and "what" now answered, it's all about "when" to start Cinco de Mayo produce promotions.

"What we know is that Cinco de Mayo is very much a last-minute occasion," says AFM's Bazan. "It's not one that shoppers are preparing for weeks in advance. We know through our proprietary research that about 48% of people decide to celebrate the day of the holiday, with over 50% of purchases made within three days of the event. That shows how spontaneous an occasion it is."

This year, AFM will launch its Guac Makes the Fiesta theme promotion. It's a message that puts guac at the center of this celebration as a food. Bazan says the idea is to create a longer runway leading up to the Cinco holiday and get shoppers thinking about buying fruit sooner rather than later, especially bagged avocados that may need a few days to ripen.

The AFM's retail promotional tools include standard stand-alone themed bins, floor displays in the shape of a *molcajete* (the traditional Mexican version of a mortar and pestle), and fiesta-themed bagged avocados offering shoppers a \$1.50 rebate at purchase. The organization also offers retailers a digital toolkit with Cinco de Mayo assets for circular ads, social media, and e-commerce platforms.

It pays to promote other produce items, like limes and mangos, two weeks or more in advance.

"This (time frame) allows for multiple promotional cycles, giving shoppers ample time to stock up as they plan their celebrations. Consumers typically prepare for the holiday by purchasing ingredients for festive meals and drinks, making it essential to position limes prominently in high-traffic areas," says Wonderful Citrus' Lafite.

The NMB's Ojeda agrees. "It's important to consider the broader retail landscape. This

year, for example, with Easter falling late on April 20, a two-week promotional period post-Easter is particularly strategic."

CREATE A SELLING FIESTA

Build one-stop-shop destination displays for Cinco de Mayo, suggests Peter Shore, vice president of product management at Calavo Growers Inc., in Santa Paula, CA. "Merchandise all ingredients together, including avocados, tomatoes, chiles, limes, lemon, garlic, and other festive guacamole and salsa items."

Place secondary displays of avocados near store entrances or adjacent to the produce department, the CAC's Splane adds.

Cross-merchandising for Cinco de Mayo can create the feeling of a fiesta store-wide, says Fresh Innovations' Murray. "From big cold cases at the front of the store with a mix of Cinco de Mayo dips, spreads, meats and drinks to small coolers around the store to remind consumers to grab their guac and salsas for their Cinco parties, retailers can create exciting displays that consumer engagement and drive sales."

pb

Sweeten Vidalia Onion Sales This Season

Vidalia onions dominate the sweet onion category.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Say the word “Vidalia,” and sweet onion instantly comes to mind. This mild-tasting, flavorful vegetable, discovered nearly a century ago by a South Georgia farmer, grew so popular it received a federal marketing order in 1989. This officially defined a Vidalia sweet onion as one grown only in a 20-county region notable for its sandy low-sulfur soils and ideal climate.

Today, Vidalias are Georgia’s No. 1 vegetable commodity, grown by 60 growers on nearly 11,000 acres annually, with over 200 million pounds harvested. About 70% of the crop is sold through supermarkets as a premium specialty item. Limited availability, which spans from mid-April to early September, adds to the sweet onion’s appeal, creating strong consumer demand and brand loyalty.

“Customers identify Vidalias as the centerpiece of the sweet onion category,” says Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations for Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL.

Shoppers also look forward to Vidalia season at Harps Food Stores, Inc., a Springdale, AR-headquartered chain, with 151 supermarkets in six states. “Vidalia onions hold significant seasonal appeal due to their unique sweetness and limited availability,” says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations. “We do some FOMO (fear of missing out) advertising on their availability and ensure that our younger or newer produce team members get an education on them before the season starts.

“The Vidalia season typically boosts category sales, as customers anticipate and specifically request them.”

SEASON & AVAILABILITY

The 2025 Vidalia onion crop is expected to be strong, with steady availability and good quality on par with previous years.

“Last year, we experienced an exceptional Vidalia onion crop, marked by strong yields and outstanding quality,” says Chelsea Blaxton Page, interim executive director of the Vidalia



Vidalia onions dominate the sweet onion category, representing over 60% of sweet onion sales. Retailers should showcase Vidalias beside tomatoes, peppers and avocados for fresh salsa recipes, and place them near baking potatoes or asparagus to inspire easy meal ideas.

Onion Committee (VOC), in Vidalia, GA. “This season, however, has faced weather-related challenges that initially impacted crop development.”

Despite these setbacks, Blaxton Page says the onions improve daily as conditions become more favorable. “Growers are increasingly optimistic, expecting an average harvest with a solid supply. We anticipate having ample volume to support sales and promotional efforts throughout the summer.”

The start of the annual Vidalia sweet onion season is determined by a “pack date” set by the Georgia Department of Agriculture. No onions can be sold as Vidalia before this designated pack date.

The start date in 2024 was April 17, but this year’s start date may be a little later, according to John Williams, director of sales and marketing for L. G. Herndon Jr. Farms Inc., in Lyons, GA.

Vidalia onions are available in three sizes: small (1 to 2-1/4 inches), medium (2 to 3 inches), and jumbo (over 3 inches).

“We will have a full range of sizes,” says Michael Blume, vice president of sales and marketing for Greencastle, PA-based Keystone Fruit Marketing, a division of

Progressive Produce LLC. “We’ll offer 40-pound Colossal and Jumbo cartons and all consumer bags.”

Bulk, 3-, 5- and even 10-pound bags of Vidalia onions are on display during the season at Harps Food Stores, says Roberts. “We offer everything we can. We even carry all the extras like seasonings, Vidalia Onion Petals and Bloom kits, Vidalia Sauce, you name it. We want to give the consumer plenty of options.”

Both conventional and organically grown Vidalia onions are available. Over the years, organic Vidalia onions have comprised approximately 3% to 5% of the crop.

“When customers began requesting organic options, we responded by introducing organic Vidalia sweet onions to the market,” says Troy Bland, chief executive officer of Bland Farms in Glennville, GA. “For 2025, organic Vidalia acreage will remain steady at approximately 120 acres.”

Vidalia onions are distributed nationally and internationally and have a stronger presence in various regions.

“Georgia’s transportation advantages play a key role in efficiently shipping Vidalia onions,” says Steven Shuman, vice president of sales for G&R Farms, in Glennville, GA. “With access

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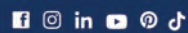
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to major interstate highways like I-75, I-95, and I-85, shipments can reach key Eastern markets, such as Atlanta, Charlotte and New York quickly and efficiently.”

Georgia’s deep-water ports, particularly the Port of Savannah, also provide an essential gateway for broader distribution, Shuman adds, and the state’s extensive rail network and proximity to major trucking hubs “ensure that Vidalia onions arrive fresh and on time, helping meet demand with reliable delivery.”

PROCURE PLENTY

Vidalia onions dominate the sweet onion category from a sales perspective, representing over 60% of sweet onion sales, says Bland Farms’ Bland, and that number continues to rise.

A big reason for this uptick is that Vidalias aren’t just your grandma’s sweet onion. True, 58% of Vidalia buyers were Baby Boomers or older, according to the demographics described in the July 2023-published research, in the *Journal of Food Distribution Research*. However, while Millennial and younger customers represented only 9% of buyers, this number jumped to 15% of potential buyers.

“Vidalia onions have strong brand recognition, particularly among older generations who have grown up cooking with them. However, as consumer demographics shift, it’s essential to engage younger shoppers — Millennials and Gen Z — who prioritize flavor, convenience and cooking inspiration,” says John Shuman, president and chief executive officer of Shuman Farms, in Reidsville, GA.

“These consumers respond best to edutainment — a blend of education and entertainment — through engaging content highlighting Vidalia onions’ versatility.”

There’s an even broader customer demographic for Vidalias that makes procuring enough volume, along with targeted merchandising and promotion, the key to maximizing sales and profits.

“For ethnic populations, emphasize the versatile use in various global cuisines, showcasing how Vidalia onions enhance traditional dishes,” says Bland Farms’ Bland.

Bland says for upscale consumers, focus on Vidalia onions’ premium quality and gourmet appeal, promoting their use in recipes and fine dining. For value-conscious consumers, he recommends offering budget-friendly meal solutions that incorporate Vidalia onions, demonstrating their value and flavor. These shoppers also respond well to bulk packaging and promotions.

RING UP THE SALES VELOCITY

Retailers can sell more Vidalias by ensuring the freshest product is always on the shelf. Do



The Vidalia season typically boosts category sales, as customers anticipate and specifically request them. Retailers should showcase the Vidalia brand to differentiate their onion offerings and increase basket size.

PHOTO COURTESY BLAND FARMS

this by promoting turnover and sell-through via high-velocity merchandising and promotion techniques.

“We encourage our retail partners to leverage the Vidalia brand to differentiate their onion offerings, increase basket size, and create engaging in-store promotions,” says Shuman Farms’ Shuman.

Cross-merchandise Vidalias in the produce department and throughout other high-traffic areas of the store with clear Georgia Grown branding to draw attention and highlight their quality, suggests Matthew Kulinski, director of marketing for the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA), in Atlanta, GA.

“Showcase them alongside tomatoes, peppers, and avocados for fresh salsa recipes, and place them near baking potatoes to inspire easy meal ideas,” he says.

Sampling and recipe cards can boost engagement, encouraging shoppers to experience their natural sweetness firsthand. “Since Vidalias are a limited-time seasonal product, retailers should emphasize a ‘get them while you can’ message to drive urgency and sales,” Kulinski says.

As for price promotion, Roberts notes Harps advertises Vidalia onions two or three times per month into July. “They are a needle mover in the ad flyer, both online and in the paper.”

RETAIL PROMOTIONAL SUPPORT

The GDA is partnering with key Southeast, Midwest, and Northeast retailers to boost Vidalia onion sales as part of the Georgia Grown spring advertising campaign. This includes in-store activations, retailer-specific co-branded promotions, social media giveaways, and consumer engagement campaigns, says Kulinski.

“We also host Georgia Grown events featuring Vidalia onions to reinforce their premium reputation,” he adds. “These efforts will maximize seasonal impact, drive sales, and strengthen the presence of Georgia Grown produce in key markets.”

This year, the VOC is refreshing its brand with a new, user-friendly website and a dynamic social media campaign, says Blaxton Page. “We’ll highlight what makes Vidalia onions unique, from their signature sweetness to the dedicated farmers behind them, while sharing rich stories, behind-the-scenes insights, and the heritage that sets them apart.”

As for grower-led initiatives, Shuman Farms provides marketing support to its retailer partners, including customized in-store promotions, digital marketing, and recipe development, says Shuman. “We continue to invest in consumer education through digital campaigns, social media engagement, and video content highlighting Vidalias’ versatility. Retailers can leverage these resources to create engaging in-store and online promotions that drive traffic and increase sales.”

This will be the fourth year that L.G. Herndon Jr. Farms will partner with the Gary Sinise Foundation, which benefits the nation’s veterans, first responders and defenders, for a promotion two weeks before Memorial Day and two weeks before the Fourth of July. The grower ships its Vidalias in co-branded 2-, 3-, 4- and 5-pound consumer bags printed with information on the back about the foundation, including a QR code.

Herndon also offers a high graphic-themed display shipper for retailers to showcase this partnership. Herndon Farms donates 5% of the gross sales from its Vidalia campaign, up to \$25,000, to the foundation. **pb**



PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Coordinated by the Texas Department of Agriculture, the GO TEXAN mark, a glowing brand in the shape of Texas, provides a branding boost. Many growers and shippers use the Go Texan logo on products, packaging and marketing materials, which helps retailers easily showcase Texas-grown options in their stores.

The Texas Produce Advantage: Location, Climate, Logistics

Future looks bright for fresh produce from the Lone Star State.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

The second-largest state in the U.S., Texas has a long-established history as an agricultural powerhouse, leading the country in livestock and livestock products. But while cattle may account for the largest share of agricultural revenue, the state is nonetheless a major producer of a range of fruits and vegetables, from onions and winter vegetables to watermelons, citrus and herbs.

The Texas Department of Agriculture says the state produces more than 60 commercial fruit and vegetable products and over 600

specialty crops, with Texas growers selling almost \$850 million worth of produce in 2022.

Harvested from late spring to early summer, watermelons account for the largest crop in Texas, with another major fruit crop — grapefruit, and especially the Rio Red variety — available from late fall through spring, according to Jed Murray, director of government relations at the Texas International Produce Association (TIPA) in Mission, TX.

On the vegetable side, kale, beets, collard greens, cabbage and broccoli are all plentiful during the cooler months, Murray adds, while cilantro and parsley are key crops for winter production. Bringing things full-circle, Texas 1015 sweet onions are the highlight of the spring-to-summer season, among a production cycle that also includes yellow, red and white onions.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

But while the Lone Star state continues to produce a wide range of products, Murray says the past 12 months have been marked by “a mix of challenges and successes” for Texas growers.

Although water scarcity remains a significant concern, he says growers have adapted by investing in water-saving technologies, shifting crop allocations, and working with organizations like TIPA and the Texas Vegetable Association (TVA) to advocate for sustainable solutions.

More positively, Murray says Texas produce is reaching more markets than ever, thanks to major marketing campaigns for Texas 1015 sweet onions yielding strong consumer engagement, and Texas grapefruit gaining access to the South Korean market.

Based in Mission, TX, in the epicenter of the South Texas citrus industry, Lone Star Citrus Growers is — in its own words — “the last independent, family-owned and operated Texas citrus packing house.”

Lone Star ships nationwide, primarily north and west, with some reach to the east. The company also recently began exporting Rio Red grapefruit — some 90% of Lone Star’s grapefruit crop is Rio Red — to South Korea following the opening of the market to the Texas citrus. Lone Star also produces oranges, such as early maturing Marrs, midseason Pineapple and Valencia.

According to marketing director April Flowers, the company experienced a good growing season in 2024, despite some challenging times over recent years.

“Recovery from the 2021 freeze continues to be stymied by the ongoing drought and a light freeze in January 2024 followed by another light freeze this year,” Flowers explains. “That said, we have an incredible team that has done a fantastic job of maximizing our available resources. Despite all challenges, we are on track to produce about 75% of a typical crop year.”

“While as a company, we continue to grow and acquire acreage, the industry as a whole is not,” she adds.

FAVORABLE LOCATION

Shipped nationwide and into Canada, Texas produce reaches consumers in the West Coast, Midwest, East Coast and Eastern Canada, benefiting from what Murray describes as its “strategic location, unique climate, and strong logistical advantages.”

“Texas can ship fresh produce quickly to the East Coast, Midwest and West Coast — making it a key hub for the U.S. fresh produce supply chain,” he says. “The state’s central location allows for faster, more efficient distribution compared to other winter production regions (California, Arizona and the South-east).”

Texas, Murray claims, also has a seasonality advantage, arguing the region’s optimal winter production climate allows for peak harvests when other states may struggle with cold weather.

The state also has what Murray calls a “commodity leadership.”

“Texas is the birthplace of all red grapefruit varieties, and its Rio Red grapefruit is known for being sweeter and less tart than competitors. The Texas 1015 sweet onion is also one of the most renowned onions in North America,” he says.

Flowers at Lone Star Citrus has a different

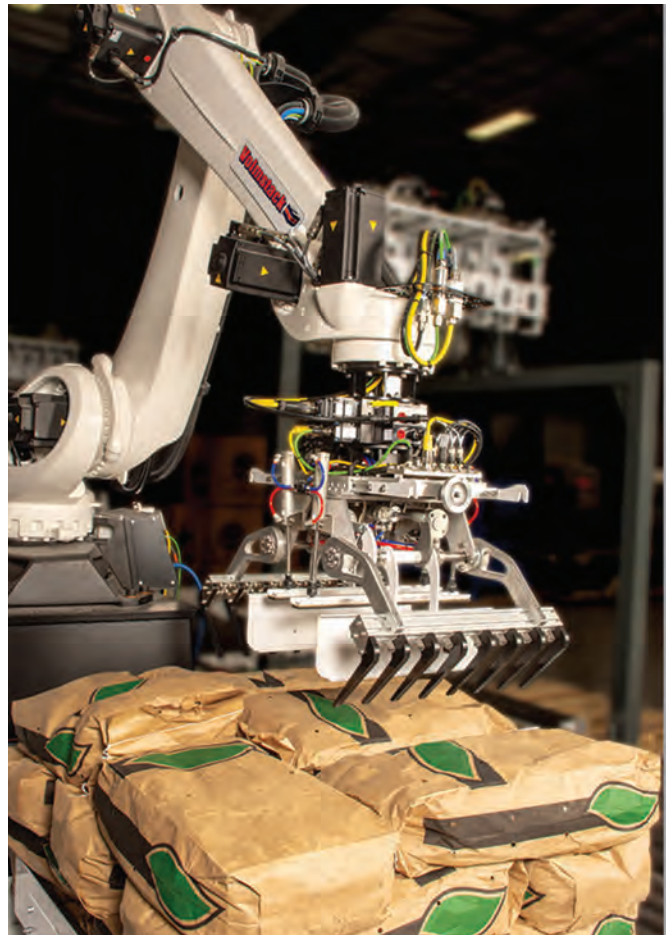


PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Texas 1015 sweet onion is one of the most renowned onions in North America and is the highlight of the Texas spring-to-summer season.

take when it comes to the domestic competition. Texas citrus growers, she says, don’t really compete with California producers, given their non-overlapping seasons (California in the winter, Texas in the summer).

Although Flowers concedes that Florida technically competes with Texas in grapefruit, she says the two serve different markets. “Florida has the freight advantage along the Eastern Seaboard, while we have the freight advantage in the central U.S. and West Coast. All things being equal, time and distance determine the customers we share,” she says.



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NEW DEVELOPMENTS

One organization working to expand seasonality in the Lone Star State is Texas A&M AgriLife, which is focused on agriculture and life sciences within The Texas A&M University System. According to Murray at TIPA, Texas growers, in partnership with A&M AgriLife, are continuously researching new crop opportunities that could extend growing seasons and improve sustainability. This includes new citrus varieties, improved onion strains, and potential winter vegetable adaptations as part of ongoing research efforts.

Even more than varieties, packaging is one of the biggest developments to the Texas produce trade.

Shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the prevailing industry trend was away from bags and toward bulk fruit, according to Flowers at Lone Star Citrus. However, as the virus spread, consumers began to strongly favor bagged over bulk because of the perceived added layer of protection.

But recent economic challenges and rising inflation appear to be reversing this trend. “We have seen a rebalancing of the ratio between bags and bulk, as customers look to save where possible by shopping bulk fruit,” says Flowers.

Consumer trends are continuing to signal a strong interest in sustainability and convenience, according to Murray, and growers in Texas have been responding with new developments in packaging designs and materials. This includes offering new options for pre-packaged produce, particularly in onions, citrus and herbs, while still meeting demand for bulk supplies for foodservice and wholesale buyers.

One significant packaging development, Murray says, is the increasing use of corrugated plastic boxes for transporting produce: white, lightweight, durable boxes made from polypropylene, which he says offer several advantages over traditional wax-coated cardboard.

Unlike traditional cardboard, corrugated plastic is impervious to moisture, ensuring packaging remains intact, even in humid or wet conditions, Murray continues. The durability of the boxes means they can also withstand the rigors of transportation, protecting delicate products in the process.

A further advantage is their reusability and sustainability. “Corrugated plastic boxes are reusable and fully recyclable, making them an eco-friendly packaging solution that aligns with industry sustainability goals,” says Murray.

PROMOTING TEXAS PRODUCE

As might be expected of an industry association, TIPA is heavily invested in promoting

Texan produce. One of the state’s best-known symbols for local products, Go Texan, has become a trusted symbol for consumers who want to support growers, Murray says.

“Our members proudly highlight Texas agriculture by prominently featuring the Go Texan logo on products, packaging and marketing materials,” he says. “This not only strengthens consumer confidence, but also helps retailers easily showcase Texas-grown options in their stores, whether it’s Texas 1015 Sweet Onions, Rio Red Grapefruit, water-

“Texas can ship fresh produce quickly to the East Coast, Midwest and West Coast — making it a key hub for the U.S. fresh produce supply chain.”

— Jed Murray, Texas International Produce Association, Mission, TX

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Harvested from late spring to early summer, watermelons account for the largest crop in Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

melons or winter greens.”

Beyond the Go Texan program, TIPA, TVA, and the South Texas Onion Committee (STOC) actively promote Texas produce through targeted marketing campaigns, research partnerships, and advocacy efforts that boost consumer awareness and drive market demand.

Recent campaigns have included the “Sizzlin’ Flavor” sweepstakes for Texas 1015 onions and the TX1015 Eat Sweet Restaurant Week — also for sweet onions — and the “Heroes of Summer” promotion for Texas watermelons.

Murray adds the expansion of Texas grapefruit into South Korea has been a major milestone, signaling the opening of international markets to the products, and cementing Rio Red as a sought-after citrus variety.

NOT JUST A PRODUCER

Beyond Texas-grown produce, Texas — and particularly the Rio Grande Valley — represents a major hub for fresh produce imports year-round, playing a crucial logistical

Texas produces more than 60 commercial fruit and vegetable products and over 600 specialty crops, with Texas growers selling almost \$850 million worth of produce in 2022.

role in the North American food supply chain.

“More than 55% of all U.S. fresh produce imports from Mexico enter through Texas land ports, totaling 325,467 truckloads valued at \$11.6 billion in 2022,” says Murray. “The volume of fresh produce crossing through Texas is projected to grow by 32.4% by 2030, further solidifying the state’s status as a key distribution center for North American retailers.”

Although based in San Antonio, TX, tomato grower, packer and marketer NatureSweet produces outside the state through



NatureSweet is located in Texas, but sources greenhouse-grown tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers from a broad area, including Arizona and Mexico.

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12 production sites located in Arizona and Mexico (principally Jalisco, Nayarit and Colima).

According to the company's vice president for external communications, Lori Castillo, NatureSweet produces approximately 170 million pounds of grape tomatoes every year, most of which are marketed under the "Cherubs" brand. The company also produces medium and large tomatoes, tomatoes on-the-vine, cucumbers, and sweet peppers and has an organic line.

"While Texas is renowned for its rich soil and favorable climate, which supports a wide range of commodities, NatureSweet's vertically integrated process allows us to bring the best-tasting fresh produce from greenhouses in Mexico and Arizona," says Castillo.

Over the past 12 months, she says NatureSweet has seen significant momentum across key areas of its business, with the snacking tomato and greenhouse vegetable segments delivering strong sales growth. This success, Castillo continues, reflects both increased consumer demand and the strength of the NatureSweet brand in the market.

At the same time though, she says the company has successfully improved its operational efficiencies, lowering costs while increasing production volume.

"Most importantly, after years of decline, we are winning in the market once again, demonstrating that our strategic focus on quality, innovation, and sustainability is paying off," Castillo adds.

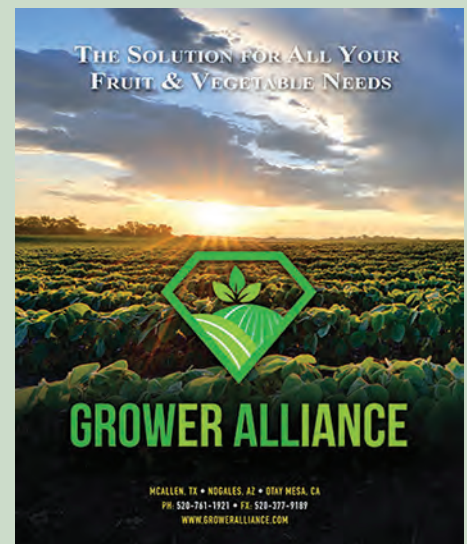
NatureSweet also appears to be well-positioned to take advantage of the current consumer preference for packaged produce.

"Packaged produce is experiencing significantly higher growth compared to bulk produce, with the packaged produce market projected to expand at a faster rate due to increasing demand for convenience and ready-to-eat options (like NatureSweet's Cherubs To Go, our NatureSweet Constellation seedless mini sweet peppers, and snack-size cucumbers)," says Castillo. "Bulk produce sales are generally growing at a slower pace, but are still holding a larger share of overall produce sales in some categories."

However, with Texas already well-established as a Top 10 domestic producer of more than 40 major commodities (including peanuts, pecans, and citrus, according to the Texas Department of Agriculture), it's clear that the state will always be much more than an importer.

In fact, with Europe, Asia, and the Middle East all now opening to Texas produce exports, the future looks bright for growers and exporters in the Lone Star State. **pb**

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Green & Gold Gems

Position kiwifruit as the next big thing in produce.

BY VANESSA SALVIA

In the crowded fruit aisle, where aromatic oranges and shiny apples vie for attention, the humble kiwifruit is often overlooked. Unassuming and brown on the outside, most people don't see the fresh green color on the inside.

Now, golden varieties of kiwi are gaining traction, and more consumers are discovering that this small, fuzzy fruit packs a powerful punch of flavor and nutrition. Across the country, produce retailers are uncovering kiwi's untapped potential to capture consumer taste.

Frieda Rapoport Caplan, who died in 2020 at 96, founded specialty produce company Frieda's Inc. in Los Alamitos, CA. Caplan is credited with introducing kiwifruit, then known as Chinese Gooseberry, into American markets in 1962. After she renamed the fruit to make it more consumer-friendly, Caplan began flying in kiwifruit from New Zealand.

PACKAGING MATTERS

Packaging plays a vital role in consumer purchasing decisions, says Alex Jackson, vice president of sales and procurement at Frieda's Branded Produce. "Selling kiwis individually allows customers to select their preferred quantity, catering to those who may want to try the fruit without committing to a larger purchase," she explains. "On the other hand, bagged kiwis offer convenience and can be more appealing to families or bulk buyers.

"Sales data indicates that both methods have their own advantages: individual sales attract first-time buyers and those looking for smaller quantities, while bagged kiwis can boost overall volume sales."

Josh Rector is produce category manager at Harps Food Stores, a regional chain of supermarkets based in Springdale, AR, with stores throughout Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri. Rector says Harps has traditionally sold bulk kiwi, but last summer introduced a 1-pound clamshell of green kiwi and 1 pound or less of golden kiwi, both from Zespri, which they place near berries.

"Not only did that reduce shrink, it upped our dollar sales, and also achieved that same idea of putting it somewhere more visible," he says.

When comparing individual kiwi versus clamshells or bags, all have their attractions. Audrey Desnoyers, director of business devel-



Retailers can create a tropical-themed display with kiwis alongside other exotic fruits such as dragon fruit and pineapples.

PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA S/ WORLD VARIETY PRODUCE, INC.

opment and key account management for produce distributor Oppenheimer Group, headquartered in Coquitlam, British Columbia, says clamshells are the best way to offer kiwifruit. "The graphics on the pack show off the beauty of the fruit's colorful center, and talks up the taste profile and many health benefits of kiwi," she notes.

Brianna Posner, marketing director for Awe Sum Organics, Santa Cruz, CA, an off-season importer of organic grapes and organic kiwifruit in North America, praises the clear packaging of clamshells. "For organic, it is important to highlight the fruit in an eye-catching color to indicate that the product is organic," she says.

PLACEMENT MATTERS

Sarah Deaton, North American marketing manager for Zespri, a New Zealand-based cooperative of kiwi growers, says that placing kiwi next to berries helps. Citing a third-party merchandising study (Kantar, *Everyday Shelf Market Research 2022*), Deaton says moving Zespri SunGold kiwi from the exotic section next to berries may result in a +64% total fresh fruit sales uplift, driven by higher basket spend.

"Placement of Zespri next to berries also has no negative impact on berries," she says. This discovery was based on a virtual study that recreated a store and invited people to come in as if they were shopping.

"We had kiwi in different places, and we looked at what they were putting in their basket," says Deaton. "When kiwi was with the berries, it did very well."

Rector says Harps has success with placing kiwi near bananas. "The banana table is probably the most frequented place in the department, so we use that to our advantage," he says.

In the Midwest, Rector says tropical fruits, such as mangos don't move as well due to lack of familiarity. "Tropical fruits in general have been a focal point of ours, because for the longest time it was just bananas and pineapple and occasionally kiwi or mango hidden somewhere on the fruit wall," says Rector.

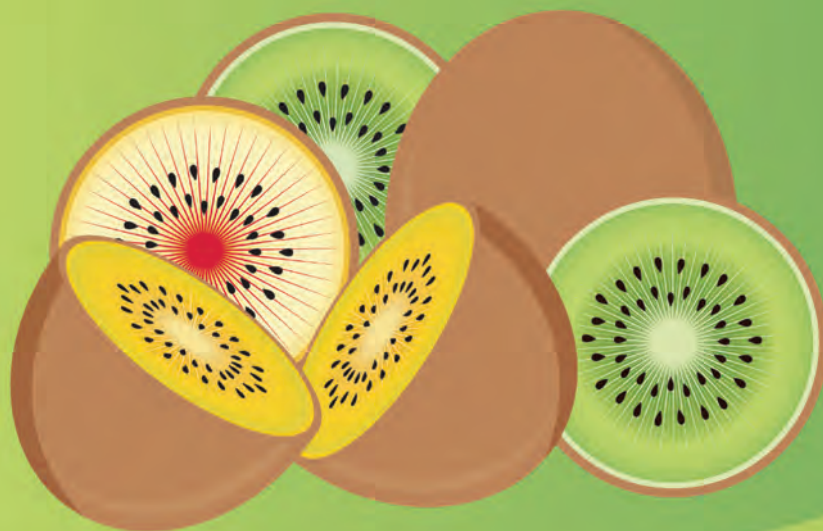
"We took a step back and looked at how we were merchandising kiwis and whatnot and took a deep dive on not having those fruits hidden on the fruit wall, moving them to the banana table, displaying them with the berries, and giving them more exposure overall. If you're used to selling half a case of something, and then you're selling two cases, that's a pretty big increase for your individual store, not to mention the company overall."

DISPLAYS & SIGNAGE

Jackson from Frieda's encourages effective display strategies, such as using vibrant colors, clear signage and strategic placement. "Signage should not only highlight the kiwi's origin and benefits, but also include engaging facts or recipes," says Jackson. "Position kiwis at eye



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level in high-traffic areas to maximize visibility and encourage impulse purchases.”

Seasonal displays capture customer attention by creating a sense of novelty and urgency. For example, in summer, Jackson says stores can create a tropical-themed display with kiwis alongside other exotic fruits, such as dragon fruit and pineapples. During the winter holidays, incorporate kiwis into festive arrangements, perhaps with suggestions for holiday recipes or gift baskets.

Desnoyers likes to use shipper bins to merchandise kiwifruit. “They help this special item that isn’t usually on the shopping list stand out,” says Desnoyers. “While apples, berries and bananas get many shoppers to the fruit aisle, kiwi are often an impulse purchase, so positioning them where they can easily catch their eye is key.”

Zespri has attention-grabbing display bins for SunGold, organic and green kiwi. Deaton says these displays make a significant difference in sales. “Retailers saw an 80% lift in sales average when a display was paired with a total price reduction (TPR),” says Zespri’s Deaton.

ADVERTISING & PROMOTION

Justin Rowe, produce category business manager at Tops Friendly Markets, says they advertise kiwi in their weekly circular once a month or more. Tops, headquartered in Schenectady, NY, recently merged with Price Chopper, and the parent company is now called Northeast Shared Services, which maintained Price Chopper’s headquarters in Buffalo, NY. Combined, there are 300 locations in New York, Vermont, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

“We’ve seen the most success when we pair kiwi along with something else that’s a little more mainstream,” says Rowe. “A ‘buy one get one free’ with berries and kiwi is probably one of the more successful promotions we run, and putting it in the ad helps increase volume.”

Another successful promotion is a four for \$3 mix-and-match deal, allowing shoppers to purchase any combination of kiwis with lemons, limes and navel oranges. “That has helped sales for bulk kiwi, which has also helped the package sales that helps graduate them into the 1-pound packages and to try the golden kiwi,” says Rowe.

Rowe says including kiwi in their advertisements encourages their stores to put kiwi on display along with whatever else is on sale. For the second year, Rowe says they have concentrated on increasing sales of golden kiwi by breaking it out from the home display and into its own display bins in about 80 to 90 Tops stores.

At Harps, Rector says they combine special placement for kiwi along with temporary



PHOTO COURTESY AWE SUM ORGANICS

A successful retail promotion might include a four for \$3 mix-and-match deal, allowing shoppers to purchase any combination of kiwis with lemons, limes and navel oranges, which helps sales for bulk kiwi.

price reductions. Harps highlights marked-down items with a bright pink tag, both for items in the circular or in-store specials. “Our customers have grown accustomed to looking for that sale tag, so that’s how they know there’s a value,” says Rector. “We’ve done some TPR pricing on kiwi to generate those pink tags, as well as giving kiwi the overall exposure by being in the berry cell.”

INCREASING FAMILIARITY

Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, Inc., Vernon, CA, offers four main kiwi products: traditional green flesh, golden kiwi, organic kiwi and kiwi berries. Golden kiwi represents about 5% of kiwi production, with potential for growth, says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa’s.

Traditional green kiwi has a fuzzy, brown exterior that is typically peeled away, although it doesn’t have to be. Golden kiwi has a smoother, less fuzzy skin. And kiwi berries, about the size of a quarter, have thin, edible skin. Melissa’s focuses more on organic kiwis and kiwi berries, which have fewer suppliers.

Consumers tend to purchase products they recognize and trust. Without the opportunity to sample less familiar items, such as kiwis, shoppers may be reluctant to add them to their shopping carts. Kiwis face an additional challenge: their brown exterior resembles a small, fuzzy potato, masking the vibrantly colored interior.

Desnoyers suggests that kiwifruit can be marketed through vibrant displays and cross-merchandising with complementary items, such as smoothies, yogurt and granola. Another option is to increase the amount of kiwi in cut fruit bowls and platters. Once customers taste and begin to recognize the kiwi as cut fruit, they may seek it out when it is on display.

“Position kiwis at eye level in high-traffic areas to maximize visibility and encourage impulse purchases.”

— Alex Jackson, Frieda’s Branded Produce, Los Alamitos, CA

DEMAND FOR ORGANIC & PRIVATE LABEL

Desnoyers says there is a definite interest in year-round private label options for kiwi, especially the green kiwi, with quite a few initiatives already in progress. “Organic green kiwis are also in demand, reflecting the growing consumer preference for organic produce,” she notes. “There is strong demand for both organic green and gold kiwi, with demand often exceeding supply. This highlights a significant market opportunity for expanding organic kiwi production and availability.”

Zespri’s Deaton says demand for organic kiwifruit is strong. One-pound organic SunGold accounts for more than half of the total Zespri organic sales this past season, while also driving the largest growth (+60%), according to Circana Total US, 2023. One-pound organic Zespri Green is the second best-selling organic Zespri item, growing +8% to a total of \$1.8 million in sales.

KIWIS OF THE FUTURE

Eric Ziegenfuss, category director of tropicals for Oppenheimer Group, points to innovative new products, such as Red Passion and Gold Passion kiwi varieties, which, combined with existing but less-familiar products, such as the kiwi berry, demonstrate the fruit’s untapped potential. Shoppers who are already familiar with kiwi are primed to explore and embrace a wider range of kiwi products, and those who are just discovering kiwi have much to keep them interested beyond the traditional green variety.

Looking ahead, the kiwi industry shows promise despite recent challenges. Ziegenfuss anticipates increased volume from Italy, Greece and Chile in coming years. While inflation has affected this traditionally niche fruit, kiwi is transitioning from a specialty item to a more mainstream choice.

Barring significant climate events, the outlook remains optimistic. As supply expands to match demand, the kiwi market appears poised for continued growth and wider consumer acceptance. **pb**

Promote Asparagus Year-Round

Steady growth anticipated for asparagus demand over the coming years.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Whether it's green, white or purple, asparagus adds taste and texture to casual or elegant culinary creations. Its unusual appearance and versatility fit innumerable events. Once considered only a seasonal delicacy, many suppliers of this unique vegetable now offer promotable quantities during the entire year.

"Although asparagus is more upscale than some typical produce items, it is generally very approachable for most consumers," says Charlie Eagle, vice president business development, Southern Specialties, Pompano Beach, FL.

Asparagus consumption is holding steady, and Shani Nir, marketing coordinator of Ayco Farms, Pompano Beach, FL, explains why. "This stability in demand highlights its consistent appeal among health-conscious consumers and it continues to grow."

Tim Ryan Jr., vice president of sales, Square One Farms, Sunrise, FL, agrees. "With the growing emphasis on healthy eating, fruits and vegetables are at the forefront of better dietary choices. As consumers continue to prioritize nutrition and wellness, we anticipate steady growth in asparagus demand over the coming years."

PROMOTE HEALTH BENEFITS

"Retailers and foodservice operators could help increase consumption by focusing on the health benefits of Michigan asparagus, given consumers' interests in health and wellness," advises Jamie Clover Adams, executive director, Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, DeWitt, MI. "Michigan asparagus is a nutritionally balanced vegetable. It contains no fat, is low in both calories and sodium, and is a great source of fiber. It is a good source of potassium and thiamine, as well as one of the richest sources of rutin."

Nir also recommends retailers promote the health benefits of asparagus. "Health benefits are a great way to gain sales. Retailers can provide recipes that will limit intimidation of buying asparagus. Creating fun recipes that are also easy will engage first-time buyers. In-store sample demos are a perfect way to do this."



Asparagus is a high-value item in the produce section, so retailers should use eye-catching displays, endcaps, and clear signage to attract customers.

IMPORTS SUPPLEMENT SUPPLIES

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports imports supply 80-90% of fresh asparagus consumption. According to the Economic Research Service's *Vegetables and Pulse Data*, Feb. 19, 2025, U.S. imports from Mexico were 349.8 million pounds in 2024, and 339 million pounds in 2023. Peru exported 155 million pounds to the U.S. in 2024, and 163 million pounds in 2023. The Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association has reported in news releases that the weather impacted 2023 imports negatively.

While domestic U.S. production has been steadily declining for decades, asparagus availability has been stable. To illustrate, using the reported data for 2022 and 2014, per capita availability at 1.68 pounds rose from 1.65 pounds. U.S. production, at 56.8 million pounds in 2014, shows a 33.5% decline compared with 37.8 million pounds in 2022.

LOTS OF VARIETY

Scott Walker, president of Walker Brothers Seeds and Plants, Pittsgrove, NJ, ships asparagus seeds all over the world, including Mexico, Peru, Spain and Italy. "Growers overplanted a few years ago, but now," he says, "all of a sudden, there's more demand. It's increasing except for domestic growers — there are labor problems in the U.S." He also notes that Mexico surpassed Peru six or seven years ago in acreage.

Alan Schreiber, executive director of the Washington Asparagus Commission, Eltopia, WA, explains how Washington asparagus differs from Peru and Mexico. "Washington grows temperate varieties. They look different. They have purple bracts and purple tips. They are strikingly looking. Another difference is that our spear diameter is bigger than that of Mexico. While I would like to say our quality is better, it is hard to say that it is that much different."

Schreiber says domestic asparagus' shelf life is longer than imports. "If Washington asparagus is consumed in the greater Northwest part of the U.S., it will have a longer shelf life than asparagus from Mexico. We start harvest in early April and go through mid- to late June. We pack Washington Extra Fancy, which is a higher standard from the rest of the market."

Likewise, Adams says Michigan asparagus "is a great value because it's closer to the consumer, so when they make their purchase, it's fresh and lasts longer in the refrigerator. Also, our harvesting method — snapping at ground level — results in more edible product and less waste."

Michigan growers raise primarily green asparagus, and start harvesting around May 10 and finish up at the end of June.

Adams adds that Michigan asparagus is a seasonal delicacy with a sweet, rich flavor. "The thicker spears have great texture and more

flavor because the fiber is less concentrated.

Southern Specialties' Eagle recognizes differences, "There is some variability in sizing. Although asparagus is sized within specific size ranges, one growing area may lean toward the top or bottom of any size range."

Square One's Ryan notes the year-round supply of Peruvian asparagus builds consistent demand, consumer loyalty and confidence in availability. "Mexico offers excellent promotional volumes in March, while Washington, Michigan, Canada, and New Jersey provide peak seasonal freshness with their spring to early summer harvests."

"Our primary focus is on green asparagus, both conventional and organic, as it remains the most popular choice among consumers," Ryan adds, although the company offers white asparagus when available, "catering to niche demand."

Katiana Valdes, marketing director, Crystal Valley Foods, Miami, FL, reports green asparagus is the most popular and common in the U.S., and they import it year-round, so it is more readily available than purple and white. "White asparagus is the most popular in the European market, and, although it is available in the U.S. most of the year, many U.S. consumers do not know about it or how to prepare it."

"Purple asparagus is more of a niche item, with limited supplies available seasonally," Eagle says, adding Southern Specialties is the largest grower/importer of white asparagus into the U.S., with most of the product going to foodservice distributors.

MERCHANDISE STRATEGICALLY

The Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board works with retailers to promote fresh Michigan asparagus. "We focus on the tactics that they find work best for them," Adams says. "Last year, we funded promotional pricing, in-store advertising, billboards, cooking demos and tastings, just to name a few."

Ryan suggests eye-catching displays, endcaps, and clear signage are key to attracting customers. "Asparagus is a high-value item in the produce section, making it an important focus for retailers."

"Displaying asparagus on endcaps will always attract attention and it is important to always keep these displays full and rotated," says Valdes. "Asparagus should also be refrigerated where possible. Some retailers use displays with bunches sitting in crushed ice. It gives an impression of 'freshness.' Crushed ice displays, however, should be minimal and well placed (endcaps) with projected sell through in a matter of hours to guarantee freshness to consumers."

Ayco Farms' Nir stresses that the No. 1



In the U.S., green asparagus is the most popular. White asparagus is the most popular in the European market, and although it is available in the U.S. most of the year, many U.S. consumers are not familiar with it.

thing a retailer should do is keep the product in a cold chain while delivered and stored. "The butt-end should be cleanly cut and sufficiently hydrated in the backroom. Keep asparagus cold (34–36°F) and moist (damp room) prior to display. To ensure quality, it is very important to display asparagus in water or on ice."

Eagle agrees. "Try not to break the cold chain from delivery to the sales floor. Display product on refrigerated shelves. If product is merchandised on a non-refrigerated island display, try to rotate asparagus as frequently as possible."

"When customers first walk into our store, they see the wall with asparagus stacked with the salads," says Sam Igou, produce associate of the West Des Moines, IA, Fareway Store. Fareway Stores, Johnston, IA, operates 137 stores in the Midwest.

Along with that refrigerated visual display, an island with asparagus in standing bunches of water greets customers in the produce department. Igou reports that customers often purchase asparagus for grilling in warmer weather. Their deli bacon-wrapped asparagus pulls brisk demand with their Mexican on-sale asparagus 1-pound bunches.

At Ingles Markets in Asheville, NC, Produce Manager Barry Fisher says his store gives asparagus good space, such as a 3-foot wide space that displays refrigerated racks of five bunches. "When it's on sale, we display asparagus on ice in square wooden boxes with drains."

Ingles' organic asparagus sells well on their wall at the store's perimeter. Ingles Markets, based in Black Mountain, NC, has 198 supermarkets in the Appalachian Region.

WELCOME SOCIAL MEDIA

Nir says social media is the best way to go direct to the customer. "Understand your target audience and how they best communicate with your store. The use of Instagram,

X (formerly called Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok can be a good method to increase ways to have recipes be seen online."

"Consumer education — whether through in-store signage, recipe inspiration, or pairing asparagus with ready-to-cook meal options — can significantly boost sales, particularly among high-end shoppers," says Square One's Ryan. "Additionally, social media trends, especially on platforms like TikTok, play a crucial role in driving interest and engagement with unique and upscale asparagus applications."

Crystal Valley's Valdes agrees. "Social media continues to be a great, easy and efficient way to promote fresh fruits and vegetables, asparagus included. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have opened a whole new world to recipe sharing."

PACKAGING CAN BOLSTER SALES

Ryan points out that offering a variety of packaging, such as family-size packs or pre-trimmed options, can enhance sales. "While value-added asparagus products are gaining traction, traditional bulk bunches remain the preferred choice among consumers."

"Many times, the convenience of a microwaveable bag that also helps to extend the shelf life calls for a premium at retail, too," Valdes notes.

Ayco Farms' Nir agrees packaging options are always a plus. "Packaging options that we have are a stand-up gusseted bag and a flowpack bag. Some shoppers like to buy the product in the bag, and others like to buy in bulk."

Eagle has seen demand for Southern Selects value-added asparagus increase over the last several years. "We offer value-added asparagus presentation in a number of pack sizes. This enables retailers to create options for the consumer without eroding sales of bunched asparagus." **pb**

PRODUCE BUSINESS/ANNEE TENZEK PHOTO

THE ASPARAGUS LEADER WITH THE RECIPE FOR GROWTH

Mention the name “Altar Produce” and to many in the produce industry, it will instantly bring to mind “asparagus.” As a company, Altar has produced and marketed asparagus for over 30 years, gaining recognition not just for its quality and service levels, but also as the biggest grower of asparagus worldwide with more than 25,000 acres of production in Mexico.

The family-owned business, which has been in operation since 1998, runs main offices in Calexico and San Diego, CA, and Fort Lauderdale, FL.

Altar’s roots can be traced even deeper. Although headquartered in the U.S, the first iteration of the business took shape with just 20 acres of land in Mexico in 1955. Decades since have witnessed enormous expansion, and the business now includes production sites across Mexico including Baja California; Baja California Sur; Sonora; Sinaloa and Central Mexico.

Looking back on the past 12 months, Soraya Pesqueira, General Manager of Altar and a highly experienced grower, acknowledges that while there were challenges, the overall experience was highly positive. “Despite the fact that the winter season in Caborca, Sonora is marked by high volumes over a short period of time, we have been able to diversify our product portfolio and exports to more than 25 countries,” she says.

“In addition to expanding our production across Mexico, our strategic alliance in Peru, established over 15 years ago, has strengthened our position as a reliable year-round supplier.”

The challenges for the recent winter season in Caborca came in the form of the unexpected climatic conditions and the late arrival of cold temperatures resulting in a much shorter crop than in previous years. However, the quality of the asparagus crop remained high, and Altar’s production is expected to be boosted by high volumes from Baja California, Baja Sur, Central Mexico and Peru during the summer months.

Sustainability and social responsibility

also play a key role in everything Altar does, with the company having plans in place to move increasingly regenerative agriculture, in addition to the SMETA and Fairtrade certifications that it already holds.

Pesqueira says the addition of the strategic alliance and plans for new plantings across Mexico will continue to ensure Altar’s status as the globe’s leading supplier of fresh asparagus in the years to come.



The advertisement features a large portrait of Soraya Pesqueira, General Manager, on the right side. To her left is the Altar logo, which consists of a red semi-circle containing three green asparagus spears, with the word "ALTAR" in large green letters below it and the tagline "Experience the Freshness" in red script. Below the logo is a photograph of two Altar asparagus packages. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a red banner with contact information for three locations: Calexico, CA (760-357-6762), San Diego, CA (858-412-4289), and Miami, FL (786-250-3374). The website www.altarproduce.com is also displayed. The bottom right corner of the banner features a cartoon asparagus character.

Berries Boost Basket Buys

Berries offer year-round opportunities to drive retail produce sales.

BY K. O. MORGAN

When it comes to fruit consumption among consumers, berries are near the top of the list. What makes them a favorite in the produce department is their year-round availability, their delicious and varied tastes, and their many health benefits — and produce managers should treat them as a precious commodity.

“Berries are consistently listed as the healthiest of fruits and they have tremendous flavor,” says Brian Klumpp, director of sales and marketing at North Bay Produce in Traverse City, MI. “That makes them hard to beat.”

Nick Wishnatzki, public relations manager at Wish Farms Inc. in Plant City, FL, agrees. “Consumers love berries because of their health benefits. But they also love them because they are delicious.”

“Our varieties are very flavorful with a strawberry aroma that the consumer will notice right away,” says Sue Harrell, director of marketing, Florida Strawberry Growers Association, Dover, FL. “Of course, most people love strawberries and they are such a healthy treat for kids. They are packed with vitamin C and potassium, so they are a nutrient-dense fruit. Children will eat a salad if you put strawberries in it.”

AVAILABILITY AND SEASONALITY

An attractive feature of berries as a product is their wide range of availability. Most berries have a season, but what is limited in some areas can be purchased from other parts of the country and even other parts of the world.

Florida grows fresh strawberries all winter long, says Harrell. Planted in October, a new crop is available starting in late November. “Volume and price determine when the season is over, usually around April, depending on Mother Nature,” she says.

Getting the fruit to market isn’t without its challenges, however, and “inclement weather in our receiving markets can be challenging,” says Anthony Gallino, vice president of sales at Bobalu Berry Farms, Oxnard, CA. “When you can’t get trucks to the East Coast due to blizzard conditions or flooding, that affects us all.”



Pushing organic berries is another way to increase sales. Capturing consumers who normally go for more affordable conventional berries can convert a customer to switch to pricier organics.

Although many consumers enjoy berries year-round, depending on the source, Wishnatzki believes consumers tend to be passionate and loyal to their local regions.

“Customers here in Florida look forward to the state’s winter strawberry season because they enjoy the texture, juiciness and flavor of Florida strawberries,” he says. “In fact, Plant City, FL, is the winter strawberry capital of the world for a good reason — Florida’s weather during this time hits the sweet spot for strawberry growing.”

However, he adds, Wish Farms provides berries all year, thanks to grower-owner farms of all four major berries — strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries — located all over the world.

Klumpp, of North Bay Produce agrees there are often regional differences, such as the Upper Midwest and the East Coast, which are strong growing regions for blueberries. “The consumers there are very loyal to their states. This is also true for Florida strawberries.”

North Bay Produce has grower-owner farms across the world. “This enables us to provide our berries each and every week of the year, all across the country.”

NEW TRENDS AND VARIETIES

Berries are fragile fruit. Packaging them in environmentally friendly ways is a challenge, as is keeping them fresh and attractive looking. Today’s shoppers also want to know what they are buying, where their food

“Berries are a destination item in the produce department.”

— Nick Wishnatzki, Wish Farms Inc., Plant City, FL

comes from, and who grows it. Providing information on packaging about the farm or company helps connect with consumers.

Wish Farms does this by communicating its story as a company that holds itself to a higher standard and that its berries are grown in responsible ways and live up to its “Feel Good. Eat Berries. Make a Difference” slogan. “Our mission as a company is, and always will be, to provide the best tasting berries,” says Wishnatzki.

“Sustainable packaging has been and will continue to be a focus for North Bay,” says Klumpp. “For example, our top seal punnets have reduced plastic usage, and are made more secure and protective for our berries.”

Variety in sizing can also boost sales. Harrell of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association says box stores will continue to offer larger family packs, “but we are also seeing a trend toward a smaller snack pack for kids’ lunch boxes and for eating on the go.”



New variety offerings are also on the table. “A few seasons ago, we introduced Pink-A-Boo Pineberries, which consumers are starting to discover,” adds Wishnatzki. “We



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call it the fifth berry and it has created quite a buzz with consumers and retailers. Since its sugar content is slightly elevated and it has lower relative acidity than traditional red strawberries, it has a delicate flavor finish that leaves the palate pleasantly refreshed.”

The pineberry, a white strawberry, was developed through traditional breeding techniques at the University of Florida, but the white strawberry variety is not new. “The red strawberries consumers enjoy today were crossed with a wild white strawberry many, many years ago,” says Wishnatzki.

“Our breeding program has expanded into the Florida red and white varieties,” says Harrell. “To add value to our program, the white varieties have a special niche in the marketplace, sparking an interest in foodservice and the curious foodies who like to entertain and are always looking for the unusual and tasty additions to their menu. We have varieties now that not only ship well, but have a strong berry flavor.”

Labeling on packaging can tip off consumers that new varieties of their favorite berries are available. Wish Farm packs its Pink-A-Boo Pineberries in a one-layer, 10-ounce container with an attention-grabbing label. “The label features a picture of a ripe pineberry and the phrase, ‘Ripe and Ready,’ to help educate customers on what to look for. The branded bright pink box holds six of these units and its vibrant color is eye-catching on display. We also decided to prominently display, ‘non-GMO’ on the label for further emphasis,” says Wishnatzki.

Harrell says consumers now recognize the “Fresh from Florida” campaign as a Florida and USA brand. “The address on the package



SUSAN CROWELL/PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Produce managers should treat strawberries as a precious commodity, since studies show consumers will include berries in their baskets every single time they visit retail stores.

is sometimes small and hard to see, so our organization, the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, pays for all of our growers to be members and to have access to the Fresh From Florida label on their packaging in order to catch the eyes of consumers in the produce department,” says Harrell.

RETAIL MERCHANDISING

Berries are particularly popular during the winter, reminding customers that spring is on the horizon.

“Berries are a destination item in the produce department, so stores have a great opportunity to capture and convert consumer demand beyond the healthy mindset of the consumer via creative displays and cross-promotion,” says Wishnatzki.

“Retailers are getting very good at what they do. They are getting very creative, both in the produce department and by displaying them in other areas in the store. Retailers particularly like large berry displays right in front to catch consumers as they enter the department. And they also keep them in refrigerated cases for longer shelf life,” says Harrell.

Wishnatzki agrees. Because berries are highly perishable, he recommends retailers display berries in refrigerated cases, and store associates should continuously rotate older products and remove any packages with spoiled berries.

Tony Wilson, produce manager at Global Foods Market, St. Louis, MO, says using promo materials from the various berry growers and suppliers is key to increasing sales of berries.

“Unfortunately, it isn’t always easy to get growers and suppliers to provide promotional information. Nobody is spending on advertising, and they are blaming the economy,” Wilson adds. “But when I am given tools to

work with, I use them to push berries. And that results in increases in sales.”

Cross-merchandising berries with other offerings can also boost sales. Showcasing dipped chocolate, cakes and pies using berries, as well as smoothie ingredients and recipe cards are some creative ways to boost berry sales.

“We have successfully co-promoted our berries with yogurt, oatmeal, cereal, nuts and even salads,” says Klumpp of North Bay Produce.

“We’re right around the corner of dessert cups for strawberry shortcakes. That means not just pushing strawberries, but also canned whipped cream,” says Wilson of Global Food Markets. “Pushing guacamole mixes and smoothies with fruit is another way to boost sales for all products involved. I’m all for helping, not just produce companies, but other vendors.”

ADD ORGANIC OFFERING

Pushing organic berries is another way to increase sales. Capturing consumers who normally go for more affordable conventional berries can convert a customer to switch to pricier organics.

“Some retailers display organic and conventional berries separately. But, an effective way to push organic sales is to display them both side-by-side. This can capture the attention of consumers who normally purchase conventional, but who might now make an impulse buy to try organics,” says Wishnatzki.

Wilson of Global Foods Market doesn’t like to mix the two. “I like to sell conventional and organic berries separately. For our customers, that works best. I have specific customers that will only buy organics, and they want to be able to go to displays where they don’t have to sort through conventionally grown berries to find the organics.” **pb**



PHOTO COURTESY CALIFORNIA GROWN

California blueberries are harvested and available to consumers mainly between April and June, with some organic and early-season varieties in March.

PRODUCE WHOLESALERS: Solving Customer Challenges Through Service

As retail and foodservice operators continue to feel the pinch of labor and supply chain issues, wholesalers step in to fill the gap.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

When Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce in Bronx, NY, started in produce over 45 years ago, customer service looked different.

“Most customers came to the market, picked up and handled it themselves,” he says. “They still relied on our expertise, but service was different and most of the houses specialized in one product. Now, customers expect a full-service house with a lot of logistics support. The customer relies on you to be good at everything and do more for them.”

Though rooted in the same foundations, services offered by wholesalers have evolved and become even more crucial in today’s supply chain. “Quality assurance, delivery, and additional support are so important to our customers,” says Gabriela D’Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications at D’Arrigo New York in Bronx, NY. “It’s about going the extra mile.”

For retailers, that extra mile is crucial. Price Mabry, vice president of sales and marketing



PHOTO COURTESY MAUI FRESH

Once specialists in a particular commodity, wholesalers now provide customer service by offering a wide line. And wholesalers increasingly fill crucial gaps for customers in multiple service areas.

at Roberts Company in Hattiesburg, MS, third-generation grocers operating 19 stores under the Corner Market and Grocery Depot formats, relays that their wholesaler is a game-changer for produce.

“The customer-first approach of Indianapolis Fruit is something we value deeply,” Mabry says. “We’ve built a solid, long-term relationship with them that continues to benefit us year after year.”

The exciting part of wholesaling, according to Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario, is the need to meet the market and customers where they are. “We have to adjust to be the best partner we can be,” he says. “The reality in a competitive market like ours is if we don’t step up to take care of our customers, someone else will.”

EVOLVING BUSINESS

Once specialists in a particular commodity, wholesalers now provide customer service by offering a wide line. And wholesalers increasingly fill crucial gaps for customers in multiple service areas.

Customer service differentiates produce wholesalers from broad liners, emphasizes Tony Mitchell, president of Indianapolis Fruit (a FreshEdge company) in Indianapolis, IN. “We focus on a lot of customer-facing



PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN PRODUCE

Communication and information is crucial to servicing customers. Anthony Andreani, director of walk sales at Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY, assists a customer.

services,” he says. “We have an outside team and inside sales team supporting our customers with ad planning, sales planograms, and space allocation in the department.”

Some of the challenges wholesalers step up to answer for customers include filling out-of-stocks, delivering on time, cross-docking and redeliveries, says Andrew Scott, vice president business development and marketing at Nickey Gregory Company in Forest Park, GA. “We also work as their value-added, fresh-cut processed partner, and provide training sessions with customer employees.”

“We’ve grown tremendously as a one-stop-shop for our customers,” says Anthony Andreani, director of walk sales at Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY. “Our customers needed more items to be available year-round, so we’ve increasingly sourced from all over the world to fulfill this demand. Our customers wanted more organics, and now we have a dedicated organics department. Our customers rely on us for convenience, so we’ve invested in logistics and the last mile to ensure we’re as reliable and consistent as we can be.”



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PHOTO COURTESY INDIANAPOLIS FRUIT

Offering merchandising services is more common and more important for wholesalers, who employ field and merchandising specialists who work directly with produce managers.

A significant change in the Ontario Food Terminal, according to Morton, is how many houses now have full lines. “Gone are the days of specializing in just a category or two.”

Management of multiple lines lets wholesalers help customers offer must-have variety.

“With the explosion of SKU counts in produce departments related to value-added, beverages, fresh cuts, salad kits, other convenience items, and organics, wholesalers work to use scale to support the burgeoning variety that helps customers differentiate,” says Jon Steffy, vice president and general manager at Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA. “We also help customers figure out what is best to offer and when, versus not.”

EMPLOYING TECHNOLOGY

Adapting technology in the wholesale environment allows wholesalers to more effectively — and efficiently — serve customers.

“These help us stay relevant to solve tomorrow’s problems for both customers and suppliers,” says Steffy. “The ‘capability bar’ related to compliance, efficiency and execution keeps getting raised. Yesterday’s processes need to change to support tomorrow’s marketplace needs. Partnering and collaborating with customers is where progress happens.”

Billy Itule, chief executive at Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ, explains foodservice customers continue to look for higher levels of technology from their wholesaler. “Especially with FSMA, being able to report and have full traceability from grower/shipper to end user is vital,” he says.



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Technology has also affected the way sales are done. "More and more buying is done off the street," says T.J. Fleming, vice president at Strube in Chicago, IL. "Customers now email or text an order rather than taking the time to walk the markets."

The increase in technology makes everyone even more responsible and accountable, explains Dominic Russo, buyer and sales manager at Rocky Produce in Detroit, MI. "Everyone is on 24/7 and we need to be available to service our customers that way."

For example, Indianapolis Fruit has

implemented an e-commerce platform called Pepper that allows customers to access the wholesaler through an iPhone, iPad or desktop, says Mitchell. "It shows product photos, and we have the ability to send messages to the app about opportunity buys."

Itule increasingly relies on technology to make logistics more efficient. "We deliver on tablets and we are paperless," he says. "The tablets serve as our routing capacity. Because it's wireless, we can make routes more efficient in real-time, and see on a large-scale map where we're hitting certain traffic patterns to

"The reality in a competitive market like ours is if we don't step up to take care of our customers, someone else will."

— Hutch Morton, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario

find if a better route exists for that customer. As a distributor, the name of the game is efficiency. Going paperless also helps with our sustainability initiatives to reduce our carbon footprint."

IN-STORE SUPPORT

Offering merchandising services is more common and more important for wholesalers.

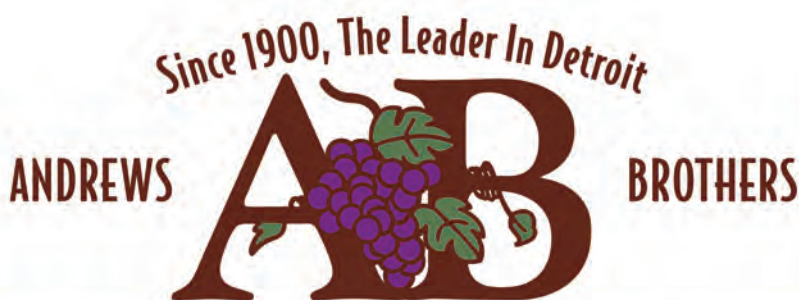
"Having this service for your customer is crucial," says D'Arrigo. "The customer may not have the labor, knowledge or time to do their own merchandising. Our accumulated knowledge helps customers have success. For example, knowing about placement of product and displays, or strategic use of banners and signage, are invaluable for customers. We also do complete resets for stores overnight and create a schematic they can use moving forward."

In-store support is especially important to independent retailers who might not have access to experienced teams of merchandisers in the field, says Brian Dey, Four Seasons senior merchandiser and natural stores coordinator.

"Retailers rely on us for writing ads, helping to develop merchandising plans and setting financial goals, as well as providing guidance and leadership for their produce staff and teams," Dey says. "Having dedicated sales reps, pricing teams and merchandising assistance available to our retailers has filled a big void for customers, helping them through challenges, and created opportunity for them."

One of the biggest challenges retailers face is labor, especially when it comes to training and ensuring consistency across stores. At Roberts Company, Mabry credits Indianapolis Fruit as an incredible partner in this area via their field specialists who work directly with produce managers.

"They help with everything from training on the ordering process to merchandising strategies," he says. "An example that stands out is how their buying team works directly with us to bring in an incredible variety of products from top suppliers like Driscoll's. Their weekly ad quotes help us draw customers in with a focus on high-quality, eye-catching produce that creates excite-



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ment in-store. They've helped us tackle every challenge a retailer could face in the produce department, and their expertise truly makes a difference."

Nickey Gregory recently started a Retail Support Division to service independent retailers across Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. "We work with the produce managers of these independents to set pricing each week, work up and create store sets and displays in the stores, and forecasting," says Scott.

Wholesalers provide in-store support in a variety of ways. "The wholesaler's role in merchandising really depends on the retail customer's needs," says Dominic Riggio, president of Riggio Distribution in Detroit, MI. "Wholesalers can provide full service to include merchandising, or simply supply product. We provide as much as needed, based on the needs of each customer."

Fierman offers merchandising services by working with some of the commissions and grower/shippers. "We're helping especially the smaller retailers with access to POP materials and advertising dollars," says Fierman.

J.E. Russell makes available display or merchandising materials from shippers. "We love to provide that value to our customers,"



PHOTO COURTESY NICKY GREGORY

Nickey Gregory Company, Forest Park, GA, recently started a Retail Support Division to service independent retailers across Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. They work with produce managers to set pricing each week and create store sets and displays in stores.

says Morton. "Our salesmen also talk with customers about best ways to merchandise and, as needed, provide tips for storage and display."

John Vena, president of John Vena Inc. (JVI) in Philadelphia, PA, relates the company recently provided product and financial support for in-store tastings for a customer. "It resulted in a successful promotion for a relatively new product," he says.

AN INFORMATION LINK

Communication and information is crucial to servicing customers. "Information is valuable," says D'Arrigo. "It strengthens the relationship with the customer, and creates a stronger bond of trust."

Brian Gibbons, produce director at Highland Park Market in Farmington CT, with three stores, relates a major area of customer service provided by wholesalers is nonstop



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communication. “This includes everything from ‘when I can expect deliveries’ to the minute, market trends on which produce items are going up or down in price, which new growing areas are coming up, new items and constant deals that they are offering to drive sales,” he says.

Customers want open communication, emphasizes Itule of Willie Itule. “When we, as produce experts, come in, we can save money and help in menu development, especially as customers assess budgets, ideation for menu creation, or look at how to optimize spend.”

Katzman is in constant communication with suppliers and customers, particularly when it comes to supply and demand. “We share actionable feedback up and down the supply chain,” says Andreani. “Our customers share which varieties and specs their shoppers prefer, especially at various points throughout the year, and we share that information back with our suppliers so they can produce more.”

PRIZED EXPERTISE

The extensive experience of produce wholesalers is an additional benefit in serving customers. JVI’s Vena explains part of the wholesaler’s job is to know the principal products inside and out.

“Retail and foodservice buyers are often



PHOTO COURTESY J.E. RUSSELL PRODUCE

Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario, says the need to meet the market and customers where they are is an exciting part of wholesaling.

stretched thin and, although they may know their items very well, it is still our job to help them avoid surprises and to support their planning, both long and short term, by ensuring they have the supply and quality information they need,” he says.

Riggio’s mix of old school and new school produce people, spanning three generations, helps suppliers and customers fulfill needs, adjust to supply and demand, and promote as much product as possible, relates Riggio. “Many of our customers have similar generational experience, we are all always learning and growing together as suppliers and customers.”

Roberts’ Mabry notes their wholesaler’s ability to quickly adapt to market trends and understand customer needs has helped drive impressive results. “Our teams work seamlessly together, and this partnership has been pivotal in pushing our business to new heights,” he says.

Wholesale expertise in sourcing from different areas becomes priceless in times of challenge. “The flexibility we have to shift from source regions in case of challenges is a real service we offer customers,” says Francisco Clouthier, owner and general manager of Maui Fresh International in Los Angeles, CA.



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“For example, if there are production issues in Mexico, we can go to Holland or Spain to supply customers.”

Dey explains Four Seasons’ training also produces results for stores. “Our team expertise comes out with the training we have done with retailers to help grow their sales through training,” he says. “Our training ranges from basic produce operations and merchandising on an entry level all the way through teaching and understanding department financials at a high level for manager/directors.”

The challenge of analytics is another area wholesalers fill with expertise. “Some of the larger independents have analytics, but smaller ones do not,” says Mitchell. “We share our analytics with customers to give them access to this information. We look at what categories are driving the business, what categories show the best gross profit, and where the best placement of that product is in stores.”

Wholesalers also harness expertise to ensure transportation. “We don’t experience gaps in transportation,” says Strube’s Fleming. “We use a handful of truck lines that we load all the time. They know what we need, so when transportation tightens up, they can plan ahead to ensure we are not without trucks.”

ESSENTIAL LOGISTICS

The wholesaler warehouse provides a high-value service for customers. “Since the New York City metro area doesn’t have a lot of space, retailers don’t have room to warehouse product,” says Fierman. “They depend on wholesalers to be their warehouse.”

In Detroit, Rocky Produce brings in so much fresh produce, its customers don’t have to buy so far ahead of time, according to Russo. “They can use our coolers and warehouse as a place to shop from and pick and choose,” he says.

Delivery has become another crucial service area. “Many of our customers now depend on us to deliver to save the cost of a truck and driver,” says Vena. “Frequent deliveries for some customers allow them to carry a little less inventory, producing a little savings in their warehouses or back rooms.”

FreshEdge recently launched 19L Logistics. “Logistics and freight play a major role in what we do,” says Mitchell. “By managing logistics, it helps us manage the supply chain. Our goal is to run our trucks as efficiently as possible and, ultimately, help the cost of goods.”

SIGNIFICANT SERVICES

The sector of the wholesale business as a service provider is increasing, including expansion of ripening, packing and cross-docking.

“Both retailers and foodservice operators

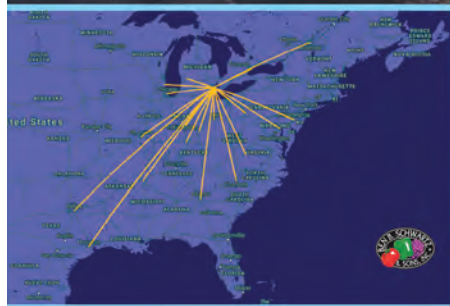
have need for extra services, the most obvious include pre-conditioning and repacking,” says Vena. “More and more, we are seeing demand for cross-docking and distribution. In some cases, we share a shipper with the customer and it makes sense to facilitate that as a service to both the customer and to the shipper.”

Roberts Company’s wholesaler offers a variety of services to help streamline its operations and enhance the customer experience, according to Mabry.

“We’ve taken full advantage of their banana program, which ensures a consistent supply of

“Yesterday’s processes need to change to support tomorrow’s marketplace needs. Partnering and collaborating with customers is where progress happens.”

— Jon Steffy, Four Seasons Produce, Ephrata, PA



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high-quality bananas, ripe and ready for sale,” he says. “Their pre-cut fruits and vegetables have been a huge hit with our customers who are looking for convenience and freshness. Additionally, their unique and hard-to-find varieties of produce continue to wow our customers and set us apart from the competition.”

More wholesalers are ripening multiple products. For example, in addition to bananas, D’Arrigo New York now offers ripening of avocados, mangos and other tropicals. “This service is not just for big box stores, but

also for smaller independents, and it’s more affordable,” says D’Arrigo. “For example, we can ripen and deliver six boxes. Previously smaller stores had to go to Costco or Restaurant Depot because ripened products were not available to them at wholesale. Now they are.”

Nickey Gregory ripens bananas and avocados for customers, and its company, Gregory Family Express, handles all inbound and outbound lanes, says Scott. “We also cross-dock and redistribute for customers without warehouse space.”

Cost and efficiency drive cross-docking.

“Some of our suppliers have closed DCs due to the cost of operating them,” says D’Arrigo. “These companies recognize the efficiency wholesalers offer. They ship everything to us and we break it down, stage it and deliver it for them.”

Highland Park Markets uses its main supplier, Shapiro Produce in Boston, to cross-dock additional vendors. “These are items such as pre-cut veg and packaged nuts and fruit companies,” says Gibbons. “It’s easier for them to deliver right to the Boston market as opposed to going to each of our stores.”

PACKING AND PROCESSING

As convenience and variety packaging increase in demand, wholesalers step up this service. “Wholesalers have taken repacking to a more sophisticated level,” says D’Arrigo. “We’re doing private label repacking for customers and in different pack sizes that aren’t more readily available in the industry.”

Maui Fresh provides repacking services in multiple pack types. “Customers ask us for all types of packing and we’re very flexible,” says Clouthier. “Our business is modeled so we can do things for our customers in a short amount of time, and be responsive to customers quickly. We do seven-day-a-week delivery, direct store drops, and minimize inventory with more frequent delivery.”

Value-added produce wholesalers are aiding retail and foodservice customers by offering fresh-cut produce to help ease the labor crunch.

“Restaurants and retailers want pre-cut, pre-washed, or specialty produce options to save on labor costs,” says Johnny Karrat, director of sales and operations at Capital City Produce in Troy, NY. “Wholesalers are offering pre-cut produce and customized blends, as well as custom packaging for the kitchens. We have created custom blends of items for stores or restaurants based on items they use or items that would fit well in a mix, stir fry, or sauté recipe.”

Wholesalers continue to expand their value-added processing lines, according to Karrat. “Customers have been proven to save time, labor and money by using value-added, fresh-cut produce in all types of kitchens,” he says. “Chefs are not wasting time or money on prep and are keeping their inexperienced prep staff away from knives and machines.”

Indianapolis Fruit’s in-house processing facility processes 400 different SKUs of retail packs. “We do some foodservice packs and support our intercompany folks,” says Mitchell. “It’s high on our list this year to help grow that category. People are looking for fresh food that is easy and convenient.” **pb**

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Montreal: Diversity Drives Demand

A MELTING POT OF NATIONALITIES TRANSLATES INTO A HUGE DEMAND FOR A VARIETY OF FRESH PRODUCE.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Two facts tell you right away that Montreal is a magnificent melting pot of a city when it comes to cuisine and the requirement for the freshest of produce ingredients.

First, over a quarter of Canada's best restaurants reside in Canada's second-largest city of Montreal, according to the 2024 Canada's 100 Best list. Second, there are 120 ethnic groups represented in this metropolitan area, according to Tourisme Montréal, underscoring the city's cosmopolitan character.

"The reason why Montreal has so much ethnic diversity is immigration," says Guy Milette, executive vice president of 1918-founded Courchesne Larose Ltd, a Montreal-based full-line importer and distributor of fresh produce.

This diversity translates into a demand for a wide variety of fresh produce.

"Demographics make our business viable. If consumers only wanted apples and oranges, it would be game over," says Christos Botsis, president and owner of Botsis Fruits & Vegetables in Montreal. "Instead, we are always hunting for what's new."

Botsis Fruits & Vegetables is a family-run wholesaler and distributor operating out of a 41,000-square-foot warehouse with commodity-specific temperature control rooms.

"Montreal has the highest per capita consumption of fruit and vegetables, at 3.4 servings, compared to Canada as a whole at 3.17 servings," says Ron Lemaire, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), based in Ottawa, ON.

"It's the cultural mosaic of the city that drives consumption, and this is reflected in an equally diverse landscape of mom-and-pop, independent and major retailers in the market."

On the foodservice side, Montreal has 4,525 full-service restaurants as of 2022, according to Association Restauration Québec.

WHOLESALE IS GLOBAL, LOCAL

Canada-wide, about 80% of fruits and 60% of vegetables are imported, according to 2023 information from the Ottawa, ON-based Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute. Operated by the Montreal Port Authority (MPA), the Port of Montreal is the largest container port in eastern Canada and the only container port in Quebec. It is a destination port served by the largest shipping lines in the world.

"In terms of logistics and freight, Montreal benefits from its access to multiple transportation modes and extensive distribution networks," says Britney Hawkins, senior sales planning and market analytics manager for Fruits et Légumes Gaétan Bono, one of the largest wholesalers in Quebec.

Capespan, with its Canadian main office in Montreal, imports fresh deciduous and citrus products principally from Southern Hemisphere sources in South Africa, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, as well as Morocco, Spain and Israel, according to Mark Greenberg, president.

"Our Canadian-destined fruit arrives by refrigerated container, and we sell our products to Canadian retailers in Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces. We also sell into the Montreal and Toronto wholesale markets."

Tropicals, such as mangos and papaya, are fruits that Maria Cavazos, owner-manager at MC Produce Inc., in Montreal, imports from Mexico via boat to the U.S. Port of Philadelphia, then plane to Toronto, and finally trucked a little over 300 miles to the northeast to Montreal.

Sourcing for customers, large to small retailers and foodservice operators, is also worldwide for Canadawide Fruit Wholesalers Inc., in Montreal. The company manages an average of 2,500 SKUs of fresh produce daily — everything from exotics to new varieties, both conventional and organic.

"At Canadawide Fruits, we take pride in playing a key role in supplying fresh produce to retailers and foodservice providers across Canada, mainly in Eastern Canada. Our particular Montreal market stands out in North America for its multicultural diversity, allowing us to explore products from around the world and continuously expand our offerings," says Chris Sarantis, senior vice president of business development.



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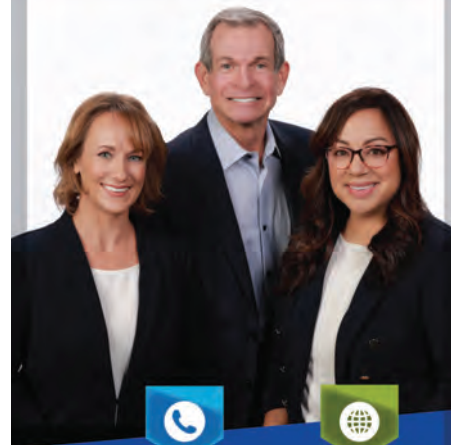
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Sarantis says recent challenges impacting the industry include the possibility of tariffs on U.S. imports, leading to finding alternative sources to maintain competitive pricing, without compromising quality. “Logistics remains a constant challenge, and we are always seeking the best solutions to optimize our supply chain and ensure fast and efficient transit times.”

Sarantis also says inflation and the economic slowdown are also shaping consumer expectations, with shoppers increasingly looking for the best value. “Canadian retailers are responding by identifying value-driven opportunities while maintaining high-quality offerings. Additionally, demand for local products continues to grow year-round, pushing us to strengthen our network of local suppliers while continuing to source the best products from around the world.”

To meet the needs of this changing market, Canadawide is expanding its selection of ethnic products, focusing on the Maghreb, Asian, Caribbean and Indian communities. “At the same time, we are leveraging new technologies to better promote these products to the broader consumer base, using packaging, informative labels, social media, and QR codes to educate shoppers on how to use them,” says Sarantis.



PHOTO COURTESY HELICO INC./TOURISME MONTREAL

Montreal has the highest per capita consumption of fruit and vegetables in the country, at 3.4 servings, compared to Canada as a whole at 3.17 servings.

As of 2020, Quebec reached 50% self-sufficiency for greenhouse-grown vegetables, as per Quebec’s Greenhouse Producers. In total, Quebec accounted for nearly one-third of all fruits and vegetables grown in Canada, according to Statistics Canada for 2024.

Eagle Export, in Saint-Remi, QC, specializes in selling produce grown in Quebec and Ontario, according to Alex Zenebisis, president. “The peak local market is between July and Halloween. We do veg like lettuces, zucchini, cucumbers, and hard squash in the fall; fruit like berries, and stone fruit from Niagara. We sell hothouse toma-

atoes, cucumbers, and peppers 52 weeks a year.”

Looking ahead, the Montreal market is poised for continued growth and innovation in the fresh produce sector, with a focus on quality, sustainability, and meeting the diverse needs and preferences of consumers, retailers, and restaurants alike, according to Gaétan Bono’s Hawkins.

“As suppliers, we will need to adapt to these changing dynamics by expanding our product offerings, embracing technology and sustainability initiatives, and continuing to provide exceptional service to our customers.” **pb**

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Eye on Fresh Produce in Ontario

THE ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL, CANADA'S LARGEST WHOLESALE PRODUCE TERMINAL, HELPS DRIVE GROWTH OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.

BY LISA WHITE

Toronto is Canada's largest city, with a 2024 estimated population of 2.8 million. The capital of Ontario, Toronto is located along Lake Ontario's northwestern shore.

The city has a diverse population, with 50.2% White, 12.7% East Asian, 12.3% South Asian, 8.5% Black, 7% Southeast Asian, and smaller percentages of Latin American, West Asian and Arab residents, reports World Population Review.

The Ontario produce industry contributes over one-third of Canada's total fruit and vegetable production, totaling more than \$4.2 billion and providing over 66,000 jobs to the economy, according to the Ontario Produce Marketing Association. Approximately 43% of this value is field grown and 57% produced in greenhouse operations.

Of the more than 125 different fruit and vegetable crops commercially grown in Ontario, the most common are potatoes, sweet corn, peas and field tomatoes. Fruit commercially grown in Ontario includes apples, grapes, peaches, apricots, blueberries, melons, cherries, nectarines, pears, plums, raspberries and strawberries.

Canada's largest wholesale fruit and produce terminal, the Ontario Food Terminal in the suburb of Etobicoke, ranks among the top four terminal markets in Canada and the United States by volume of produce distributed. With 1,053,612 tons, or 2.1 billion pounds, of produce distributed annually, this market supplies an average of 5.6 million pounds of produce and horticultural products distributed daily from this 40-acre site.

The self-funded terminal market, which was established in June 1954, is owned and operated by the Ontario Food Terminal Board, an operational enterprise operating under the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

This facility is open daily, 24/7, has a staff of 45, and employs approximately 100,000 people, with about 5,000 Ontario businesses



J.E. Russell Produce has been operating out of the Ontario Food Terminal since 1977. John Russell founded the business after following in his father's footsteps. The company has 12 multi-generational families of employees.

purchasing from the market. Produce is widely distributed, from Fort Albany in the far north of Ontario to Windsor in the south, and as far west as British Columbia and east to Newfoundland. Some buyers also do business in the U.S.

WHOLESALE CLIMATE

Stronach & Sons (2020) Inc., renamed when new leadership took over, has been located at the Ontario Food Terminal for more than 50 years. It is now owned and operated by Vince Bruno, Tony Morano and Joe Scali.

"Stronach & Sons (2020) Inc. took over operations with a strong commitment to ensure all our local growers and international shipper partners maintain the same environmentally sustainable practices we adhere to," says Scali. "Our company is a leader in our Toronto market when it comes to prioritizing local farmers/suppliers."

The company provides diverse fruits and vegetables from regions around the world and encourages a "pick your own" mentality.

"The terminal market has a slightly older demographic, however, there has been a

noticeable increased presence of younger adults entering the market, probably a result of our market's unique urban geographic location in Toronto," says Scali.

He says that locally sourced commodities continue trending, however, "new trends are constantly changing due to our city's multicultural diversity," he notes. "Some of these trends quickly become staples, others will just as quickly fade away."

Due to customer feedback, Stronach & Sons (2020) plans to develop a year-round citrus program and will continue building, improving and expanding its local grower/supplier relationships.

North American Produce has been working out of the Ontario Food Terminal for over 60 years and is one of the market's original businesses.

"This market is central to the downtown core of the city of Toronto, making it a hub that feeds Canada's largest city and most populous province," says Steve Moffat, vice president of finance at North American Produce Buyers. "We also are in close proximity to the Quebec markets, and, with the U.S. border crossing so close to Toronto, we



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also act as a hub to the western part of the country for the winter import season.”

Moffat says the biggest benefit of being at the Ontario Food Terminal is the daily interaction with customers. “[We receive] live feedback on price, quality and availability,” he notes.

Another terminal market vendor, Gambles Group of Companies, is a vertically integrated fresh produce provider that sources, imports, packages and distributes produce across Canada and the U.S. through a wide network of local and international growers, according to Tom Kioussis, vice president, sales, marketing and category management at Gambles Group.

“We feed every sector, big and small, from chain stores and independent grocers to wholesale and foodservice operations.”

Kioussis says it’s the historical significance that makes the market unique.

“Dating back to the 1950s, the Ontario Food Terminal has remained the hub for fresh produce in Toronto ever since its opening,” he says. “It’s a place where business owners and customers interact, socialize and maintain professional relationships within a setting that encourages the intersection of different sub-industries, such as mom-and-pop shops, large grocers and restaurant owners.”



PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Retailer Food Basics was created by A&P Canada to compete with No Frills’ warehouse-style supermarket operated by Loblaws. It was sold to Metro in 2005.

Kioussis adds that there has been a shift in the demographic from European buyers to those from East and South Asia.

“As demographics shift and new ones emerge in the market, we are seeing increased changes with regards to what items our customers are looking for,” he explains. “Many

companies have introduced a wide range of ethnic commodities, such as okra, habaneros, eddoes and lychee, to name a few.”

Prior to the pandemic, the market was often lively and saw lots of foot traffic. Unfortunately, there has been a slowdown over the past few years as customers were

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forced to find alternative ways to get their fresh produce.

“This increased our delivery service breadth, which continues to grow,” says Kioussis. “Going forward, we hope to bring this bustling energy back into our market and re-establish in-person connections with customers. We are also committed to growing and expanding nationally, in addition to the U.S. market operations continuing to be a focus.”

DIVERSITY DRIVES CHANGE

J.E. Russell Produce has been operating out of the Ontario Food Terminal since 1977. John Russell founded the business after following in his father’s footsteps. The company has 12 multi-generational families of employees.

“The terminal facilities continue to be updated and modernized, which makes operations easier,” says Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce Ltd. “The machinery and technologies that power our businesses have eased the physical aspects and made us more efficient. That said, the ethos and culture that have made our business unique and successful have remained consistent.”

As Canada and the Greater Toronto Area become more diversified, away from a European-centric society, the market has changed to meet these demands. “This directly leads to a diverse product offering that can meet the very unique cultural diet desires and requirements of our society,” Morton says. “It also leads to global fresh produce sourcing, which is exciting for our buyers and customers.”

He continues to see an increase in sales of tropicals and more greenhouse and controlled environment-grown products due to Canada’s winter weather.

In a recent development, two J.E. Russell Produce team members have taken on bigger managerial roles at the company after the sudden and tragic passing of Marco Corbo in the summer of 2024. James Meschino has moved into the role of buyer and category manager for berries, and Reid Warren now serves as operations manager.

Another wholesaler, Dominion Citrus Ltd., has been a part of the terminal market since its opening in 1954 and has expanded into eight divisions over the years.

“We have a tropical division with avocados, mangos and bananas and operate a farm that produces onions and carrots,” says Ted Cira, general manager. “Our packing division handles all the tomatoes for McDonald’s in Toronto, and we also have a company in Quebec.”



Today, many commodities, like citrus, are available at the Ontario Food Terminal year-round, instead of just at certain times of the year. This helps meet the needs of Toronto’s diverse ethnic culture.

PHOTO COURTESY GAMBLES GROUP

The company mainly deals with independent grocers, but also has chain store business, mom-and-pop fruit stores, restaurants and schools as its clientele.

“Toronto has a diverse ethnic culture, so there is more diversity with produce,” notes Cira. “Also, today many commodities are available year-round now, instead of just at certain times of the year, like citrus.”

He adds that competition has been the biggest challenge for produce wholesalers operating in and out of the market.

“People don’t want to get into the produce business due to long hours, and it has become harder to find younger people who want to get into this business,” he says. “But there is always a need, especially with people eating healthier, and Toronto is constantly growing.”

Fresh Taste Produce, run by co-chief executives and brothers Julian and Christian Sarraino, has been on the terminal market in Toronto since 1970.

“The market has always been unique because of the diversity of the customer base,” says Julian Sarraino. “We see a very wide range of fresh fruit and vegetable products flow through this facility.”

Christian Sarraino adds that the market is at an excellent location to fulfill the demands of Canada’s economic capital.

The company supplies fruit, wet and dry vegetables, global produce and tropical fruit. It is committed to moving toward improved

levels of waste management, recycling, upcycling and repurposing of production inputs and products.

RETAIL & RESTAURANTS

Toronto’s foodservice industry includes a wide range of restaurants, cafes and other dining options. The Toronto region’s food and beverage sector employs over 64,000 people and is known for having the most quick-service restaurant outlets in Canada.

It also boasts four Michelin-starred restaurants. These include DaNico and Don Alfano 1890, both Italian restaurants in downtown Toronto; Edulis, a Mediterranean restaurant in Toronto’s west end; and Enigma Yorkville, a contemporary restaurant also downtown.

All four eateries have unique and diverse menus that highlight a wide range of produce, from beets to kohlrabi to shishito peppers, oyster mushrooms, blackberries and bok choy.

In addition to Walmart, there are a number of supermarkets in Toronto with extensive produce departments.

Loblaws is large-scale and upscale, with a wide range of different fruits and vegetables to choose from. With the most locations in the city, Metro’s prices are more competitive and many sites are open 24 hours a day. No Frills is just as the name implies, a budget grocery chain featuring lower prices and savings. Sobeys is a chain with pricing similar to Loblaws, with smaller square footage and a more condensed offering. **pb**



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In the produce sector of the transportation industry, carryover from the COVID-19 pandemic, when rates spiked and many new drivers entered the market, continues to be a factor in depressing rates.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

Inflation, Low Rates Affecting Transportation Sector

Logistical technologies will see wider adoption due to FSMA.

BY MIKE DUFF

Inflation and low rates are impacting the produce trucking sector, but hopes are for better sector economics as 2025 progresses.

Fred Plotsky, president of Cool Runnings, Kenosha, WI, says that carryover from the COVID-19 pandemic, when rates spiked and new drivers entered the market, continues to be a factor in depressing rates.

Although his business continues to do well, he says the reality is that rates have been “crushed,” which limits the trucks going to the West Coast from his home base in the Midwest, and that’s where he needs vehicles to pull produce back.

The circumstance hasn’t undermined Cool Runnings’ business by any means, he clarifies, it just makes getting things done a bit tougher.

“The rates are below cost for carriers, and it’s a matter of going out of business or losing money, but still working. It’s hard for them to make a living. It’s got to turn around sometime, but it’s been like this for two and a half years at least.”

INFLATION IMPACT

Inflation has also pressured the transportation sector. “All costs of equipment, insurance, and drivers are affected, as well as office staff,” says Marshall Kipp, founder and chief operating officer, Advanced Transportation Services, Visalia, CA.

Kenny Lund, executive vice president, Allen Lund Co., La Cañada, CA, agrees, noting inflation is the largest factor impacting transportation.

“I think 95% of the issue with transportation is inflation, and here’s why: People are

“Labor shortages, particularly in the inland distribution segment, continue to be a concern, with the industry working on ways to attract new entrants in a tight labor market. In the short term, we’ll see a further tightening of transportation capacity, putting pressure on pricing.”

— Brian Robertson, Copeland, St. Louis, MO

spending about the same amount, but they bought 10% less stuff, so there were 10% less loads out on the road,” Lund says. “That doesn’t translate to a 10% drop in freight rates. That translates to a 30%, or we’ve seen since ’22, in some lanes, a 50% drop in freight rates.”

“Inflation has caused this freight recession, as some people call it,” Lund adds. “It’s just a freight slowdown. It hasn’t been a lack of spending, it’s been, ‘I can’t buy as much with the money I spent last year.’ I absolutely think that is the case.”

Kipp points to weather as having been problematic, but he added that technology helped the company cope.

“Both information and communication are key,” he says. “Taking action and using that info to produce positive results for customers and truckers.”

Breakthrough technology is turning the produce transportation scene on its head, Plotsky says. And it is the development of tracking and communications technology that allows Cool Runnings to do business more effectively.

However, despite technical advancements in tracking and tracing, Lund says it’s still

hard to know what’s going on with a load of strawberries, so existing technology could use improvement, whether technical or in application.

“There are so many players in the industry, it’s hard to get them all on a system that makes sense and is fair,” he says.

At the same time, more effective technologies that support relationships and generate additional data in areas, such as carrier evaluations that can be effectively analyzed, are having a positive effect. Developing more sophisticated ways of improving the basic performance of the business, like artificial intelligence, can also boost transportation operations.

FSMA EFFECT

Brian Robertson, vice president of global in-transit sales at Copeland, St. Louis, MO, says the company’s business has been growing with the appreciation of in-transit visibility in the produce industry, both with retailers and suppliers.

He notes that visibility is a more urgent concern due to Section 204 of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Safety

Modernization Act (FSMA) Food Traceability List regulation, which has been in effect for two years, but is approaching its implementation deadline in January 2026. The approach of the deadline is “further driving the adoption of technology to provide the necessary records in produce, including ready-to-eat salads, cheeses, shell eggs, as well as fruits and vegetables.”

“Copeland’s technology supports our customers in automating the standard operating procedures necessary under the regulation,” says Robertson.

As the FSMA deadline approaches, he adds, “helping our customers to supply produce identified in the Food Traceability List navigate the changes to their procedures will require our attention and necessitate integrating our technology to help automate their record-keeping. But the relationships and integrations we have across our customer base will position us well to be able to support them and meet the deadline.”

TECH IN DRIVER’S SEAT

Advanced Transportation Services’ Kipp agrees technology “has hugely helped drive transparency and efficiency.”

He adds technology that keeps information and communications ongoing as trucks move is an expectation of customers. So, firms in produce transportation need to have the capabilities, including on the human side of the equation, to meet customer demands.

“Customers demand transparency and live tracking, as well as status reports,” he says. “These customer demands can only be met with up-to-date technology, and the humans capable of using it to produce results,” says Kipp.

The question of AI’s effects is considered in almost everything, and Robertson notes the main AI effect his company sees “is the ability to extract meaningful information from the large datasets available. This is being used for time of arrival and on-time, in-full estimates, as well as demand forecasting at a more macro level.”

“In the end, AI benefits come down to enabling people involved to make better decisions, whether related to a single shipment, a specific growing season in a region, or the aggregate view of the maturity of a trade lane to bring produce to market in the best condition possible.”

Cool Runnings’ Plotsky warns, however, that technology, can only be effective for organizations that maintain an emphasis on relationships and communications that make the produce transportation system work. Sometimes, the latest thing is best, sometimes traditional methods are more effective, and companies need to use both.

“Nothing can replace a phone call,” he says.

Lund says he started with the company in IT, but acknowledges technology has to address primary needs. “I’ve always pushed that technology is a tool that helps build the relationship. If you’re not building the relationship with it, it will eventually go by the wayside.”

AI, while helping with backroom functions, is a couple of years away from having a major impact on produce transportation, as companies integrate it into more capabilities including in working with customers, he adds.

In a diverse, complex supply chain, especially in produce, relationships are still a critical issue with any transportation business.

“Relationships have been crucial to success with both customers and suppliers,” says Kipp. “While adjusting from the 2020 to 2022 COVID years, many customer relationships with transportation partners were tested. People that have been in this business for decades know that events happen that change the landscape, with increasing demand testing relationships,” he says.

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Copeland has seen “significant change over the last few years in the collaboration between suppliers and retailers looking to improve on-time, in-full deliveries and reduce food waste. Where previously retailers had mandated technology, their suppliers are now looking at the same information provided by this technology to work together on improving their trade lanes, controlling the quality and the shelf life of their produce.”

As the produce transportation sector continues to evolve, Robertson says improved compressor technologies that drive efficiencies and reduce emissions will see wider adoption.

KEEP ON TRUCKING

Lund notes that availability has been good, especially with refrigerated transport, but seasonal considerations are still a driving force in produce transportation, rather than cyclical considerations. Still, how produce moves is changing, with major retailers wanting certain commodities on their shelves 12 months of the year, supporting international movement, whether from Mexico, Canada or further afield. Lund says the overall system, even though it uses diverse methods of movement and relies within the United States on a web of brokers and small-scale trucking operations, is terrifically capable.

Although the labor issue may not be as acute today as it has been in the recent past, Robertson says recent events underscore the labor market remains tough.

“For the importation of fruits and vegetables, particularly on the U.S. East Coast, the tentative contract agreement, among the International Longshoremen’s Association and



Produce transportation labor shortages, particularly in the inland distribution segment, continue to be a concern, with the industry working on ways to attract new entrants in a tight labor market.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

the ports and shippers through the U.S. Maritime Alliance looks to have averted further action, following a three-day strike last fall,” he explains.

“But labor shortages, particularly in the inland distribution segment, continue to be a concern, with the industry working on ways to attract new entrants in a tight labor market. In the short term, we’ll see a further tightening of transportation capacity, putting pressure on pricing.”

Discussing driver availability, Lund says it’s more appropriate to talk in terms of churn rather than shortage, particularly in regards to big trucking companies. He says drivers start working for trucking companies and, when they learn the industry, many choose to go out on their own.

“Why did they get into the industry? Because they love the freedom,” says Lund. “They use that phrase, the freedom of the open road. When you work for a big company,

they tell you when to eat, when to stop. You’re on those hours, and it’s so tight, and you feel confined. So, what do they do, they go out on their own.”

For now, Advanced Transportation Services’ Kipp says, capacity and demand are pretty much in balance. “Capacity, for the most part, is on par. It can vary day to day, but is mostly on par.”

From his perspective, Lund says capacity still is somewhat above demand, citing fairly flat demand in the holidays as evidence that rates are likely to remain low at least for the immediate future.

However, he notes Class A truck sales are gaining, in part because the latest class of trucks is more energy and maintenance cost-effective, but the change suggests trucking companies and independent truckers believe demand will be there. As a result, Lund says he expects high single-digit increases in rates as 2025 proceeds. **pb**

■ FEDERAL POLICIES AND TARIFFS WILL INFLUENCE THE TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY

BY MIKE DUFF

Changes in U.S. federal policies may help the trucking sector.

“Hopefully, bringing manufacturing to the United States, products made in the USA, becomes the backhaul to get the trucks back to produce shipping areas,” says Marshall Kipp, founder and chief operating officer, Advanced Transportation Services, Visalia, CA.

Still, uncertainty around the issue of tariffs has businesses in the produce transportation sector trying to figure out how to adjust to potential consequences.

Kipp says, for the most part, if the federal government imposes high tariffs on imported products from Mexico

and Canada, one result could be lower demand for transportation from the border crossings, mostly McAllen, TX, and Nogales, AZ.

Kenny Lund, executive vice president, Allen Lund Co., La Cañada, CA, says the Trump administration, while using rhetoric to establish negotiating positions, is unlikely to sustain major tariffs with Canada and Mexico due to the importance of the trade and because it wants to tamp down imports from China.

Still, tariffs have the potential to complicate the immediate future of produce transportation, Robertson points out.

“We’ve seen expansion by integrated

growers moving into new growing areas, including cross-border into Mexico and further south,” he says. “This is part of an international trade that we also see in Europe and Asia. If additional tariffs were applied on cross-border trade into the U.S., we would anticipate a slowdown in these expansions for the U.S. market. And as we have seen previously in other geographical areas, we could expect produce to be diverted to other markets, depending on the level of tariffs introduced.”

Lund is hopeful that policy changes in Washington will result in lower fuel costs that will help balance the business scales in transportation. **pb**

Strategic Merchandising of Dried and Freeze-Dried Fruits

Retailers can drive growth in this profitable and expanding category.

BY VANESSA SALVIA

Dried and freeze-dried fruits stand out to consumers as a healthy and convenient snack. Not only are dried and freeze-dried fruits easy to toss into a lunchbox or briefcase, but they also have other uses, such as salad toppers.

And now, new technology is expanding the types of foods available in this category.

STRATEGIC PLACEMENT DRIVES SALES

Location matters significantly when it comes to dried fruit displays, according to Eric Healy, founder and chief executive of Bend, OR-based Branch Out Foods, who has observed varying success rates with different merchandising approaches. “I’ve seen a lot of produce departments place the dried commodity under the same fresh commodity,” says Healy. “They’ll have the bin of fresh pineapple, and then right under that display, they’ll have the pineapple chips.”

This strategic placement works because the produce department is the destination for fresh fruits and vegetables. This type of two-for-one display puts different formats of product in the location where shoppers already are. “The shopper is already kind of looking for products in that area,” explains Healy. “And in the case of the pineapple, it’s a different version — it’s like a snackable version.”

Healy says stand-alone displays positioned away from fresh produce tend to generate less visibility and engagement. Healy isn’t sure why that is, but it seems likely that if shoppers are seeking something like fresh pineapple, they would expect to have the different formats of pineapple near each other, rather than having to go to a separate display.

Robert Schueller, director of public relations, Melissa’s/World Variety Produce Inc., a produce wholesaler headquartered in Vernon, CA, emphasizes the importance of strategic timing and placement. “The biggest marketing opportunities we see in the dry fruit category are focusing on putting the products into the produce department during the lead-up to the peak holiday seasons.”



Clip strips are a convenient way to put dried fruits and vegetables in front of consumers, says Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, a produce wholesaler headquartered in Vernon, CA.

PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA’S/WORLD VARIETY PRODUCE

targeted at school lunches. “Each little pack is a couple servings of a fruit or vegetable,” Healy explains.

Melissa’s Produce is launching new organic offerings in early 2025, featuring clear clamshell packaging for easy stacking and merchandising. The clear packaging allows customers to see exactly what they’re buying, differentiating these products from traditional grocery aisle offerings. “It’s a huge product launch, with 13 new SKUs in that organic category of what we call snacks,” Schueller reveals.

Branch Out is now offering products, such as crispy Brussels sprouts, crunchy carrot sticks, red pepper sticks and color-retained banana products. “It’s a single ingredient dried banana, but we’re able to really retain the full color, whereas most dried bananas turn brown,” Healy explains.

LOOKING AHEAD

The dried and dehydrated fruits and vegetables category continues to evolve with new products and applications. Branch Out Foods is developing innovative salad toppers, including cherry tomatoes, mandarins and crispy avocado slices. “There hasn’t been a lot of innovation there,” Healy notes about current salad topper offerings. “For a long time, it’s just been traditional croutons and nuts.”

Meanwhile, Melissa’s Produce is expanding its organic line with new snack-oriented products launched in February 2025. This new line includes items such as dried mangoes and banana chips flavored with chile pepper. This expansion reflects growing consumer demand for organic options and convenient, healthy snacks.

According to Market Research Future, the market size of dehydrated fruits and vegetables was valued at \$25.9 billion in 2023. The dehydrated fruits and vegetables industry is projected to grow from \$27.08 billion in 2024 to \$38.689 billion by 2032.

This increase is being led by an expanding awareness of healthy eating. Consumers recognize that these foods are affordable, convenient and nutrient-dense. Storing shelf-stable dried and dehydrated fruits and vegetables is also perceived by consumers as being a way to stay ahead of price volatility. **pb**

CROSS-MERCHANDISING INNOVATION

Clip strips — hanging strips designed to support lighter items — have proven particularly effective for cross-merchandising dried fruits. “Some stores present a lot of our dry fruits on clip strips,” Schueller says. “The clip strips for dried cranberries are very popular, especially in the fourth quarter.”

This strategy works particularly well when positioned near complementary items, such as bagged salads, croutons and salad dressings.

The category’s long shelf life makes it ideal for filling dead space in produce departments without requiring refrigeration. “The dry fruit category is not a shrink category,” Schueller explains. “It has over a six-month shelf life at least, and so it’s a great way to fill in dead space.”

PRODUCT INNOVATION

New packaging innovations are helping drive category growth. Branch Out Foods is introducing a “produce pack” concept of larger bags containing smaller, single-serve portions



Uncertainty Over Tariffs

BY ERIN MITTELSTAEDT

Like any small business owner, I try to keep an eye on federal and state policies that might impact the company I run. There has been a lot to watch in the food industry lately as President Donald Trump settles into office and releases new executive orders.

Right now, my team and I are watching two orders closely: the 25% tariffs on many goods imported from Mexico and Canada. While they're on hold at the moment, they may still be executed in the future.

Our primary concern is for farmers and consumers. For farmers, these executive orders could have several different impacts.

1. Increased Costs for Farm Input. Farmers are buyers as well, and tariffs on goods from Mexico and Canada may raise their fixed costs. Potash, for example, is a key component in fertilizers that some farmers use. According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, 80% of it is sourced from Canada. A tariff on Canadian goods will most likely increase the price farmers pay.

2. Decreased Demand for Exports.

Some farmers who export their products are concerned about the impact of the tariffs (and any retaliatory tariffs that may come from both countries) on that business. I spoke with a Canadian recently who mentioned that his family doesn't want to buy U.S. products. He said, "My wife says she'd rather get citrus from Spain than the U.S." If the tariffs proceed, there may be lower demand for exports, which could negatively impact farms.

3. Increased Demand for Local Produce. It's possible that these tariffs could help some small farmers, particularly farmers who compete on price with produce grown in Mexico, like avocados. This could be a silver lining for some local growers if it can outweigh the impacts mentioned above.

For consumers, tariffs on Mexican and Canadian goods would probably lead to higher food prices. Mexico supplies a large chunk

of fresh produce consumed in the U.S., particularly when local U.S. harvests slow down. Canadian imports account for a smaller percentage of what we eat, but they still matter, especially when it comes to vegetables.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2023, "Mexico and Canada supplied 51% and 2%, respectively, of U.S. fresh fruit imports, and 69% and 20%, respectively, of U.S. fresh vegetable imports in terms of value."

In this industry, we know that the margin on fresh produce can be low. If tariffs raise prices, many outlets will have no choice but to pass those increases on to their customers, who will pass them on to U.S. consumers.

The impact on the food world may also go beyond fresh products to snacks and other food items that are either made in Mexico or Canada or made with ingredients from those countries. It takes suppliers time to remake their supply chains and find substitutes, so even if they move away from imported goods over time, in the short term, they'll be faced with the challenge of making up

their loss of margin. I think many will be forced to raise prices.

Overall, a lot of things in the food world are uncertain right now. Between these executive orders on tariffs, other orders on immigration, and the farm bill pending review, a lot of change could come to the industry in the coming year. No matter what comes, though, I know that my team at The FruitGuys will continue to do what we love: connect people through good food, feed those in need, and support small farms. **pb**

If tariffs raise prices, many outlets will have no choice but to pass those increases on to their customers, who will pass them on to U.S. consumers.

Erin Mittelstaedt joined The FruitGuys in 2007 as an operations manager at the newly opened Philadelphia facility. She became chief operating officer in 2015, acting chief financial officer in 2021 and chief executive in 2023. Prior to joining The FruitGuys, she worked as a manager at Trader Joe's in Berwyn, PA. She has a degree in music from the University of Pennsylvania. She lives with her wife and their two young children in San Francisco, CA.



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Onix Orange, Croptimus Win at Fruit Logistica

The Fruit Logistica Innovation Awards (FLIA) were presented Feb. 7 at Fruit Logistica 2025, held in Berlin, Germany. This year, the FLIA went to Amfresh's Onix orange. The orange impressed visitors with its beauty, versatility and resilience. The FLIA Technology went to Fermata for Croptimus, an image analysis technology for the early detection of diseases and pests in greenhouses.

Visitors to the trade fair for the global fruit industry chose the most innovative product. Five nominated companies each presented their developments, which were then evaluated in a public vote.

The Innovation Award went to Amfresh's Onix orange. The fruit impresses with its coloring — from bright flame orange to deep burgundy red. It also impresses with its seedless, velvety flesh that is rich in antioxidants and vitamins. Grown in Spain, the Onix orange offers a long shelf life. The innovation comes from Germany, while Amfresh Spain Citrus markets the fruit as a "sustainable citrus wonder."

More than half of the votes cast for the FLIA Technology, now in its second year, went to Croptimus from Fermata Technology. This image analysis technology enables farmers to detect diseases or pest infestations on vegetables in the greenhouse at an early stage. As a software as a service (SaaS), Croptimus requires no additional hardware and can work with both installed cameras and smartphone images.

According to the manufacturer, the innovation from Israel promises up to 50% less scouting effort, 30% less crop losses and 25% less input consumption.

ADDITIONAL FINALISTS

This year, around 70 innovations were submitted, from which a jury of experts selected the five finalists in each category. In addition to the Onix orange and Croptimus, finalists for the FLIA and FLIA Technology awards included:

The Organic Raingrown Avocado. The Organic Raingrown Avocado comes from the rainforest of Eosta/Nature & More, a company from the Netherlands. It is the first organic avocado that is available year-round — and the first to be grown without artificial irrigation, using only rainwater.

Aldina Strawberries. Under the brand name ALDINA, the discount supermarket chain ALDI SÜD is marketing a single strawberry variety in Germany — and guaranteeing producers purchases throughout the entire season. The concept's aim is to boost strawberry production in Germany.



More than half of the votes cast for the FLIA Technology went to an image analysis technology, Croptimus, from Fermata Technology. Pictured (L-R) are Kaasten Reh, director events & awards at Fruitnet Media International; Valeria Kogan, founder and CEO of Fermata; and Alexander Stein, director, FRUIT LOGISTICA.



PHOTO COURTESY FRUIT LOGISTICA/MESSE BERLIN GMBH

A breakthrough in the pigmented oranges segment, the Onix orange, which was introduced by AMFresh in 2024, won this year's FRUIT LOGISTICA Innovation Award, or FLIA. Celebrating the win are (L-R): David Alba Cubertorer, CEO, GENESIS FRESH; JuanFrancisco Ruiz Gil, CEO, Citran S.A.T.; and Patricia Sagarminaga, global director marketing & communications, AMFresh Group.

A mandarin for Halloween. Halloweena is a new mandarin variety in the shape of a pumpkin. It is easy to peel, practically seedless, and sweet in flavor. It is an ideal Halloween snack due to its shape and shiny skin, and represents a healthy alternative to the usual treats. The fruit is cultivated sustainably to strict standards in Spain and ripens just before Halloween.

Samantha savoy cabbage. Samantha is the world's first savoy cabbage with a pointed head (an innovation from Denmark). It weighs less than 500 grams (17.5 ounces) per cabbage, and has a compact shape, firm leaf structure and distinct color.

The finalists for the Fruit Logistica Innovation Award Technology 2025:

LiDAR-based drones. The Hungarian manufacturer ABZ Innovation equips drones for use in orchards and vineyards with a LiDAR-based situational awareness system. With the help of real-time 3D mapping, the drones recognize even minor obstacles, such as thin wires or hazards, and maintain dynamic height control. The GPS-free system maintains its distance to uneven tree canopies and optimizes the crop-spraying height. This results in less use of chemicals, which benefits farmers and the environment alike.

AI-based drip and runoff monitoring. The FarmRoad Irrigation Module from New Zealand helps farmers to optimize their water consumption. The dashboards are AI-driven and combine local climate data with sophisticated water demand models. Using automated drip and runoff calculations, farmers can adapt their irrigation planning to crop needs and local conditions on a daily basis. This innovation comes from Morocco.

RYPEN Case Liner. The RYPEN Case Liner keeps fruit in transport crates fresh and crisp for longer. RYPEN technology captures excess ethylene molecules inside the crates and binds their structure. It produces no chemical oxidation, emits no substances and does not affect the fruit.

Analyzing and adjusting fungicide content. The CATsystem from the Spanish manufacturer Citrosol is an intelligent consumption system for use in the post-harvest sector. The evaluation system measures concentrations of fungicides and other solution components in production facilities online and in real time and adjusts them immediately.

More than 2,600 exhibitors from 90 countries participated in the annual trade show, Feb. 5-7, in Berlin. Next year's event will be held Feb. 4-6, 2026.



The Challenge of Providing Fresh Produce to Disaster Zones

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

In the wake of natural disasters, like the recent Los Angeles fires, the urgency to provide relief to affected communities and first responders is paramount. In disaster scenarios, fresh produce often takes a backseat to urgent needs. However, as I highlighted in a recent opinion letter to the *New York Times*, access to fresh produce is not a luxury, but a necessity that supports both physical health and emotional well-being.

The logistical and operational hurdles in supplying fresh produce to disaster-stricken areas are immense. From securing willing donors of product and transportation to maintaining quality in adverse conditions, the path from farm to disaster zone is fraught with challenges.

MODELS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPACT

Organizations, such as Food Forward and World Central Kitchen, have developed innovative and practical solutions to these challenges. Food Forward, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit dedicated to recovering surplus produce and redirecting it to those in need, played a crucial role during the LA fires by coordinating efforts to provide fresh hand fruit to first responders stationed at command centers.

Their ability to mobilize quickly and connect local growers, regional suppliers and volunteers with disaster relief operations underscores the importance of having a robust infrastructure in place.

World Central Kitchen, known for its rapid, on-the-ground response, stepped in to ensure nourishing meals, including fresh produce, reached affected communities and first responders.

By capitalizing on vendor relationships with companies like Vesta Produce and their existing restaurant customers, local economies were maintained while feeding fire victims.

Fresh hand fruit, such as apples, mandarins, mangos and bananas, is particularly well-suited for disaster relief efforts. These fruits are nutrient-dense, require no preparation, and are easy to distribute and consume.

THE ROLE OF THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY

As someone with years of experience in the specialty produce sector, I have long advocated for bridging the gap between the field, kitchen and consumer. The challenges of sourcing and distributing fresh produce are especially relevant in disaster contexts.

In my January letter to the *New York Times*, I emphasized the importance of proactive planning and collaboration across the supply chain. “Disasters do not wait for perfect timing,” I wrote. “We need systems that allow for rapid deployment of perishable items without compromising quality or safety.”

This call to action resonates with the broader need for infrastructure that prioritizes fresh, healthy food alongside other emergency supplies.

The produce industry consistently rallies in times of disaster. From growers donating surplus crops to wholesalers reallocating

inventory and retailers contributing logistical support, the industry’s collective efforts have been instrumental in addressing immediate needs. This unity ensures that fresh, healthy food reaches those who need it most.

The distribution of fresh produce to disaster zones involves navigating a complex web of logistical challenges and may also need approvals from regional officials.

Other barriers include storage and transportation concerns, rapid deployment within narrow timeframes, maintaining safety and quality standards, and ensuring equitable distribution.

BUILDING RESILIENCE FOR THE FUTURE

To build resilience, stakeholders must focus on strategies that foster proactive preparedness and swift responses. Effective disaster preparedness hinges on pre-disaster planning, with partnerships and protocols established well in advance.

Community involvement, including the engagement of local growers, distributors and volunteers, ensures a steady supply of fresh produce and strengthens social bonds while minimizing feelings of helplessness. Additionally, policy advocacy is crucial to secure funding for infrastructure improvements and to incentivize growers’ participation in relief efforts.

Equally important is the role of personal networks and connections within the produce industry. In times of crisis, established relationships often enable swift action.

I am grateful for my network, as I worked closely with Raina Nelson and Christina Ward of Westfalia Fruit managing donations from Taylor Farms, CH Robinson, Fowler Packing Company and others. The Fresh Produce and Floral Council collaborated by distributing produce boxes through OK Produce in Fresno, CA. This human element underscores the need for ongoing collaboration and communication within the industry.

A CALL TO ACTION

The Los Angeles fires are a stark reminder of the critical role fresh produce can play in disaster relief. Meeting this need demands more than goodwill; it requires coordinated, cross-sector efforts and a commitment to treating fresh produce as a vital component of disaster response.

Relief efforts remain necessary in many disaster-stricken areas across the country. The lessons learned from these efforts can inform broader strategies to ensure fresh produce is a consistent and reliable part of disaster relief operations.

By prioritizing health, nutrition, and equity, we can create systems that not only respond to immediate crises, but also contribute to long-term resilience and well-being. **pb**

M. Jill Overdorf is founder and president of The Produce Ambassador, which provides strategic insight, brand development, and innovative solutions for the foodservice, produce, hospitality and culinary sectors.

Access to fresh produce is not a luxury, but a necessity that supports both physical health and emotional well-being during times of crisis.

A Century of Growth: CPMA's 100-Year Journey

Founded in 1925, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA) emerged from the need for a unified voice to represent the diverse sectors of Canada's produce industry.

Industry leaders came together with a clear goal: to create a platform for collaboration that would tackle shared challenges. In its early years, CPMA worked to establish standards for produce quality and safety — efforts that built trust between producers and consumers and laid the foundation for a flourishing industry.

Advocacy has been a cornerstone of CPMA's work. One of its earliest wins in the 1940s led to fair pricing regulations that protected growers and stabilized the market. In more recent decades, CPMA has played a crucial role in securing favorable terms for Canadian produce in international trade agreements and addressing labor shortages through supportive policies for domestic and migrant workers.

By the 1950s, CPMA's influence expanded across Canada and internationally. It began addressing broader issues like market access and international trade, solidifying its reputation as a trusted leader in the industry.

As the produce industry evolved, so did



The seventh annual Canadian Produce Marketing Association Convention was held in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1932.

CPMA's priorities. From the 1980s onward, the association championed numerous innovations in food safety and sustainability, establishing global standards for produce handling and distribution. The first national food safety program launched by CPMA set new benchmarks, improving consumer confidence and influencing international standards.

A milestone in CPMA's advocacy history was the launch of the Half Your Plate campaign in 2014, which successfully encouraged Canadians to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption — a significant achievement in both public health and industry support.

In 2018, sustainability became a central focus. CPMA's advocacy for recyclable and biodegradable packaging, alongside efforts to reduce agricultural waste,

demonstrated that environmental responsibility could align with economic growth.

In 2024, CPMA achieved a landmark advocacy win with the adoption of Bill C-280, the Financial Protection for Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Farmers Act. This legislation provides financial protection to Canada's produce growers and sellers in cases of buyer

insolvency, aligning Canada with similar protections in the U.S.

CPMA has been a key leader in the development of the new Canadian Grocery Code of Conduct, which will launch in 2025. This tool will provide better market stability and contractual certainty to all sellers within the food industry.

“Looking to the future, CPMA remains committed to fostering collaboration and navigating the evolving challenges of the produce industry,” says Ron Lemaire, president, CPMA. “With a forward-thinking vision and a strong community, CPMA is poised to continue driving progress in the next century and beyond. Thank you for your continued support. Together, we will build on this rich legacy and shape the future of Canada's produce industry.” **pb**

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Canadawide Fruit Wholesalers Inc.	79	514-382-3232	canadawidefruits.com	Maui Fresh International, LLC	70	213-688-0880	maui-fresh.com
Capital City Fruit Co., Inc.	73	515-981-5111	capitalcityfruit.com	Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	32-33	201-807-9292	mauriceauerbach.com
Chenail Import-Export	77	514-858-7540	chenail.ca	MIXTEC Group	77	562-652-2299	mixtec.net
Ciruli Brothers, LLC	36-37	520-281-9696	cirulibrothers.com	North American Produce Buyers Ltd.	81	416-255-4436	naproduce.com
Colombia Avocado Board	26-27	414-469-5524	avocadoscolombia.com	Ocean Mist Farms	22-23	831-240-7784	oceanmist.com
Country Sweet	44-45	661-858-1075	countrysweetproduce.com	Prime Time Sales, LLC	24-25	760-399-4166	primetimeproduce.com
Crystal Valley Foods	24-25	305-591-6567	crystalvalleyfoods.com	Produce Blue Book	11	630-668-3500	bluebookservices.com
Divine Flavor, LLC	49	520-281-8328	divineflavor.com	Riggio Distribution Company	74	313-843-0840	riggiodistribution.com
Dole	28-31	704-213-3478	dole.com	Rocky Produce, Inc.	76	313-841-7780	rockyproduce.com
EV Produce International, Inc.	55	956-215-8872	evproduce.com	Shuman Farms, Inc.	51	912-557-4477	shumanfarmsga.com
Farm Direct Partners, LLC	13	205-345-1030	farmdirectfruit.com	Skyline Potato Co.	59	719-754-3484	jsmithcompanies.com/skyline-potato.html
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.	73	718-893-1640	fiermanproduce.com	Square One Farms, LLC	24-25	561-614-2814	sq1farms.com
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	96	850-617-7343	followfreshfromflorida.com	Stronach & Sons (2020) Inc.	83	416-259-5000	stronachandsons.ca
Fox Packaging & Fox Solutions	56	956-682-6176	foxbag.com	SunFed	58	520-281-4689	sunfed.net
Fresh Innovations, LLC (Yo Quiero Brands)	59	817-674-9120	freshinnovationsllc.com	T&G Global	20-21	310-291-5583	tandg.global
Fresh Innovations, LLC (Yo Quiero Brands)	48	817-674-9120	freshinnovationsllc.com	Taylor Farms Retail, Inc.	40-41	813-754-1715	taylorfarms.com
Fruits Et Legumes Gaetan Bono Inc.	78	514-381-8679	gaetanbono.com	The DiMare Company, Newman	59	209-862-2872	dimarefresh.com
Gem-Pack Berries, LLC	67	831-320-8181	gem-packberries.com	The Foundation for Fresh Produce	5	202-303-3435	freshproduce.com
Genpro	87	201-729-9400	genproinc.com	Thermal Technologies, Inc.	2	803-691-8000	thermaltechnologies.com
Giorgio	38-39	610-301-4277	giorgiofresh.com	Trucco Inc.	61	718-893-3060	truccodirect.com
Gourmet Trading Company	24-25	310-350-5404	gourmettrading.net	Volm Companies, Inc.	54	715-627-4826	volmcompanies.com
				Zespri North America	34-35	612-703-4918	zespri.com/en-US

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 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:



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 the PRODUCE BUSINESS mission to "initiate industry improvement," we encourage your input and hope you will contact us to discuss ways to increase produce consumption.

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