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**40**  
YEARS  
INITIATING  
INDUSTRY  
IMPROVEMENT

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MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT



ANNUAL RETAIL  
SUSTAINABILITY  
**AWARD**  
  
2025

## Green Horizons: New Seasons Market Committed to Sustainability

**ALSO INSIDE**

**RISING RETAILER:** Sunset Foods  
**PLUS:** State Departments of Agriculture Marketing Efforts  
• Georgia Grown • Midwest Buying Season  
• Guacamole Merchandising • Mangos • Sweet Corn  
• Organic Salad Blends • Raisins  
**WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD —**  
**SEE PAGE 4**





How do you choose the  
perfect mango?



Look at  
the sticker.



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As 2025's Retail Sustainability Award recipient, New Seasons educates community, suppliers and consumers with initiatives.



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### THIS MONTH'S WINNER

**DORRAINE GAUGER**  
Sales/Food Safety  
Classic Yam, Inc.  
Livingston, CA

Dorraine Gauger has been employed at Classic Yam Inc. for 28 years — almost since the beginning of the company. Classic Yam has been in operation for 29 years and is owned and operated by the Silveira family.

Gauger has a sales and food safety position at Classic Yam, and begins each day early with calls to customers and answering emails for orders, and then lots of paperwork. “Early mornings are my favorite part of the day. I really enjoy speaking with my customers and taking their orders, and hearing about how their days are going — just talking to the people,” she says.

Gauger has lived in the San Joaquin Valley near Livingston, CA, most of her life. Previously, she was an animal groomer, so she says, produce was “a huge jump for

me. I have enjoyed my career in produce. I have met wonderful people, and I have no regrets.”

She has witnessed many changes in the produce industry over the course of her career, while learning about food safety. “I try to learn as much as I can about my customers. Some I deal with on a daily basis, and others through food shows and events that I have been fortunate to attend.”

When not working, she spends as much time as she can with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. “That is the most rewarding use of my spare time,” she says.

She is a loyal reader of *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, and she reads every issue cover to cover. “It stays on my desk for breaktime and lunchtime reading. I have taken trips locally because I read articles about local produce, and I wanted to see the farms. It’s just my favorite magazine.”

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



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### WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD

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



### QUESTIONS FOR THE MAY ISSUE

- 1) Champagne Mango is the brand of mango offered by which company \_\_\_\_\_?
- 2) Which company is announcing a “First-of-its-kind Salad Package” that “Protects Greens Inside, While Using 95% Less Plastic” \_\_\_\_\_?
- 3) What commodity does Altar Produce now offer year-round \_\_\_\_\_?
- 4) Which company offers “The Ultimate Dip Destination” \_\_\_\_\_?
- 5) What is the website address for Shuman Farms \_\_\_\_\_?
- 6) Fill in the blank: Produce=Health at \_\_\_\_\_?

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

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# Where **PASSION** becomes action

**Everyone in the produce industry has a story to tell — a story of beginnings, or detours, or family, or growth. And those stories are filled with passion. Your passion.**

**Molly LaForest**  
**Marketing Specialist**  
**Molly's Grape & Citrus Company/Molly Pop**  
**Bakersfield, CA**

Really, I think I have a unique story. This wasn't an easy thing — that I knew it was my destiny. Actually, my dad's been in the produce industry for 35 years. He loves this industry. He knew that it was his passion, and I was just fortunate enough that the company got named after me.

What's really great is, I think right now the running passion is, it's an industry of generations. You know, we have so much history, but Molly Pop here, we're trying to be innovative. We're trying to find something new, bring a new brand to the produce industry. Who does that?



**Michael DuPuis**  
**Manager of Quality Assurance and**  
**Public Relations**  
**Divine Flavor**  
**Nogales, AZ**

In all honesty, if you would've asked me 20 years ago, I wouldn't have thought working in produce would be a career path for me.

My current produce industry passion is just simply growing organic, healthy foods for our consumers and our retail partners. To us, it's very important that we're producing the healthiest foods for our consumers and our retailers, and making sure that it's done responsibly, organically and sustainably, just the way Divine Flavor is intending it to be.

Throughout my tenure in produce, my mentors have been leaders of Divine Flavor. Alan Aguirre, who is the current chief executive of Divine Flavor; Alan Aguirre Camou, who's the chief marketing officer, as well as Carlos Bon Camou and Jose Antonio Martinez. Having great leaders allows us to flourish in our current roles, and not only for my position, but across our entire company, whether



that's the warehouse, our logistics team, our sales team. So having great leaders definitely inspires and motivates us to be passionate workers.

Getting into this industry has been a very pleasant surprise. It's an industry that requires full dedication to be very passionate, and dedicated in what you do. For me, just being able to come to work every day, wanting to have the attitude to learn something more, and to contribute to this industry, is what makes it special for me.



Scan the QR code for information on how to share your story.



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# Lessons from Detroit: Unexpected Predictors of Produce Demand

BY JORDAN GRAINGER

**F**resh produce will always be a key import for any metropolitan area. However, while there may be some common signs that point to changing commodity needs in an area, there are unexpected ones as well.

Having operated out of Detroit for over 100 years since founding our company here in 1906, we've had a front row seat to how a city evolves. Here are some unexpected indicators that signal growth for fresh produce:

## HOLLYWOOD RIPPLES

Detroit is 2,000 miles away from Los Angeles, but it's still been home to several big-budget productions, like *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and five Transformer movies, when Michigan was offering filming tax breaks from 2008 to 2015.

*Batman v Superman* alone spent \$131 million filming in and around metro Detroit for 10 months — meaning a lot of craft service. These are the on-site catering services used to feed cast and crew for long days, months at a time, and on closed sets, all while accommodating a wide range of nutritional needs and dietary restrictions.

This means we can expect to see a spike in demand anytime a production comes to town or when an area is offering tax incentives to filmmakers — just like Atlanta is doing now.

## CENSUS DATA

Looking at the demographic makeup of an area is a great tool for predicting possible fluctuations in fresh produce demand. It can be a marker to show where to scale your business outside of your core community, targeting new markets for profitable expansion. It's what helped our business grow throughout the Midwest and Canada.

For example, new areas can experience explosive growth,

like we saw during COVID, as people left larger cities for more suburban areas — places that historically didn't have the existing infrastructure to service the influx.

But population numbers are only one metric. Another big measurement is diversity. Using our backyard as an example, Michigan's race and diversity index rose to 42.9% in 2020 from 39.1% in 2010, meaning it became more ethnically diverse. For our industry, that means that we can expect to see changes in demand for the types and number of commodities we supply.

As certain demographics become more prevalent in an area, that may point to trends for specific products and ingredients.

## COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Here in Detroit, we've been witnessing how commercial real estate fluctuations can have a big impact on our business. When the city was experiencing an economic downturn in the early 2010s, pricing for commercial space dropped considerably.

However, this afforded a new phase of exciting growth, particularly in hospitality.

Aspiring chefs and restaurant owners who were priced out of other markets were able to make their dreams a reality by opening their businesses in Detroit. At its peak in 2019 before the pandemic, nearly two dozen restaurants opened, helping to contribute to \$1 billion in revenue. As a result, the restaurant scene boomed, and the demand for fresh produce did as well.

There are many ways to future-proof our business — looking at historical data, sales numbers and more — but to be forward-thinking, it's important to consider the out-of-the-box factors that can impact demand as well.

**pb**

*Jordan Grainger is vice president of sales and business development for Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI.*



## TRANSITIONS

### Baldor Specialty Foods

Baldor Specialty Foods, Bronx, NY, appointed industry veteran **David McInerney** as its new president. McInerney, former chief executive and co-founder of FreshDirect, brings over 30 years of experience in food retailing, operations, and supply chain innovation to Baldor.

T.J. Murphy will continue as chief executive, focusing on future initiatives with McInerney.

McInerney spent two decades at FreshDirect, leading with a people-centric, results-driven approach. Prior to FreshDirect, McInerney trained as a cook under chefs like Bernard Loiseau in Burgundy and David Bouley in New York City.



David McInerney

### Ippolito International

Ippolito International, Salinas, CA, has added **David Soto** as senior supply chain manager. Soto, a produce veteran, comes to Ippolito International from Dole Fresh Vegetables, where he spent nearly two decades.

His experience includes developing sales programs, transportation management, pricing and contracts, carrier compliance, and systems implementation.



David Soto

### NatureSweet

NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX, has announced two strategic leadership appointments.

**Dean Taylor**, a seasoned agricultural strategist with over 15 years of executive leadership experience, has been named chief of staff.

Also joining the NatureSweet leadership team is **Josh McCallum**, appointed vice president of supply chain. He brings nearly two decades of experience leading procurement, food safety, and logistics operations.



Dean Taylor

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Viva Fresh Celebrates Sold-Out Show and Record Attendance

The 2025 Viva Fresh Expo commemorated its 10th anniversary this year in Houston, TX. With a sold-out show floor, attendee registration of 2,760 participants — including 438 buyers — the 2025 event is a testament to a decade of progress and purpose.

The show opened with speaker José Hernández, the former migrant farm worker who became a NASA astronaut. Educational sessions throughout the show delivered insights and sparked conversation, with a standout session on tariffs drawing overflow attendance.



### Mexican Avocado Industry Unites to Drive Sustainability

The Avocado Institute of Mexico launched its “Path to Sustainability,” a strategic initiative to

enhance environmental stewardship in the Mexican avocado industry.

With a new strategic vision, the Path to Sustainability will guide the industry’s commitment to sustainability and quality, from the orchards in Mexico to consumers’ tables, while achieving net-zero deforestation, well-being, and prosperity in the avocado landscape in Mexico.

The new strategic plan for the Mexican avocado industry encompasses all members of the Association of Avocado Exporting Producers and Packers of Mexico (APEAM) and the Mexican Hass Avocado Importers Association (MHAIA).

Developed collaboratively with industry stakeholders and environmental consultants, Pollination Group and Innovagro, the strategy is centered on four key priority areas: aqua/water, biodiversity, climate and deforestation.



### Crystal Valley Foods Unveils Redesigned Website and New Logo

Crystal Valley Foods, Miami, FL, launched a redesigned website and a new logo. The updates mark a step forward in the company’s commitment to innovation, accessibility and brand evolution.

The revamped website offers a user-friendly experience tailored to meet the needs of produce industry professionals, partners, customers and consumers. The new design has enhanced navigation, and responsive functionality across all devices.

Alongside the website launch, Crystal Valley introduced its new logo, a fresh take on the company’s identity. The refreshed logo incorporates some of the same imagery from past logos, including mountains, the valley and the sun, but simplifies the design with bright bold colors and a more modern look.



### Wish Farms Runs for Sweetness with Berry Bolt 5K Charity Event

Plant City, FL-based, Wish Farms, opened its headquarters for the first-ever Berry Bolt 5K Run For Sweetness. The company welcomed runners, sponsors and the public to their blueberry farm to raise money for its philanthropic efforts and the United Food Bank of Plant City.

The event kicked off the blueberry season in central Florida and raised over \$169,000 for the Wish Farms Family Foundation.

Forty-six companies and individuals contributed to the event, with top sponsors including Jerue, Farm Credit, Sweet Life Farms and Patterson Companies. An army of volunteers from the Food Bank and the Kiwanis Club of Plant City were on hand to make the event a success.

There were 150 runners who participated in the race, which featured a cross-country trek around the blueberry farm, lake, office, and treehouse of the scenic Plant City property. Families enjoyed the festive atmosphere of the race, face painters, and inflatable bounce houses, while having the opportunity to pick fresh blueberries.



### Heritable, CIV and Mastronardi Partner to Develop Precision Breeding for Indoor Strawberries

Heritable Agriculture, Paul J. Mastronardi, and CIV (Consorzio Italiano Vivaisti) have partnered to develop an advanced strawberry improvement program for greenhouse and tabletop varieties.

This partnership represents a trifecta of expertise, marrying the genetics and germplasm knowledge of CIV, the AI-driven breeding models and machine learning expertise of Heritable Agriculture, and the production assets, distribution network, and leadership in indoor strawberry production of Paul J. Mastronardi.

The partnership will use Heritable’s AI-driven predictive breeding technology to: predict crop performance through simulations before strawberries are planted; optimize traits that are important in greenhouse environments; develop varieties that streamline growth and management practices for indoor growers; and reduce breeding timelines, bringing superior varieties to market faster.

### Eataly Elevates Mushrooms in Spring Campaign

The Mushroom Council and Eataly launched a three-month promotion spotlighting fresh mushrooms as a star ingredient in seasonal cooking. Rooted in the growing momentum of Mushroom Monday, the partnership spans three locations: New York City’s Flatiron store in April, Eataly Chicago in May and Eataly Los Angeles in June.

Eataly is a high-end Italian marketplace that attracts food lovers, home cooks and chefs with its curated mix of restaurants, counters and retail offerings focused on seasonal ingredients and culinary discovery.

As part of the promotion, each month kicks off with the Mushroom Council presenting a Monday evening “Mushroom Celebration” reception at Eataly that brings mushrooms to life for area food media, culinary professionals and content creators. The first event took place March 31 at Eataly Flatiron’s rooftop restaurant, Serra on the Roof.

Eataly’s campaign will highlight multiple mushroom varieties and promote popular mushroom dishes across its restaurants, fresh counters and grab-and-go cases.





## Equitable Food Initiative Marks 10-Year Milestone

Equitable Food Initiative (EFI), the workforce development and certification organization that partners with growers, farmworkers, retailers and consumer advocacy groups, is celebrating its 10-year anniversary.

Since its founding, EFI has worked with 90 farming operations across five countries, improving working conditions for at least 65,000 farmworkers. Through training programs that emphasize communication, conflict resolution and continuous improvement, nearly 5,000 workers have been equipped with critical leadership skills, building a culture of collaboration that benefits both workers and businesses.

Over the past decade, EFI helped deliver more than \$25 million in worker bonuses, reinforcing its belief that safe, high-quality food begins with a skilled and empowered workforce. The organization has also elevated farmworkers' voices at trade shows, in legislative hearings and at the design table for new industry programs.

## Fyffes School Fitness Program Awarded

Fyffes, an Irish fruit importer, received a 2025 Gold Star Award at the annual APMC Awards gala ceremony held in Dublin recently, in acknowledgment of its Ireland's Fittest School initiative.

Developed in conjunction with TITAN Experience, a central feature of the program is a series



Sarah Murphy and Gary Donnelly, of TITAN Experience, pictured with the 2025 APMC Star Award in recognition of Fyffes' ongoing work through Ireland's Fittest School initiative.

of exercise routines — recorded by one of Ireland's best-known Olympians, sprinter David Gillick, alongside Irish fitness trainer, Sharon Flanagan — which competing schools can adopt as part of their PE curriculum.

Following a 10-week program, the top four schools from each province compete head-to-head across four live regional qualifier events, with the top school progressing to the grand finale.

### NEW PRODUCTS

## Grimmway Farms launches Carrot Fries Air Fryer Kits

Grimmway Farms, Bakersfield, CA, introduced a new air fryer product line. The line is the first carrot air fryer product on the market and will include two

flavors that complement the sweet, earthy flavor of carrots: Mediterranean Herb and Chipotle Maple.

Each kit includes fresh double-crinkle carrot sticks, and pre-portioned oil, cornstarch, and seasoning packets to create crispy, golden carrot fries in the air fryer in under 20 minutes.

The 13-ounce retail kit provides four servings per package, and with only 60 calories per serving, the crispy carrot fries are ideal for an easy, healthy side dish or snack.



## Cal-Organic Farms Adds Organic Fresh-Cut Vegetables

Cal-Organic Farms, Bakersfield, CA, is expanding into the organic value-added vegetable category with a new line of organic fresh-cut vegetables.

The new line converts Cal-Organic Farms' vegetables into a convenient, ready-to-eat format. The chopped greens line includes green kale, lacinato kale, collard greens and rainbow chard, and a blend of rainbow kale with shredded carrots.

Similarly, the chopped vegetable line offers organic broccoli, cauliflower, and baby carrots in a variety of blends, as well as a broccoli slaw mix.



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



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Right now, and through June 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.

## 2024 MARKETING EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

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### To participate, send us the following for each entry:

1. Your name, company, address and phone.
  2. Type of business.
  3. Names and dates of promotion (must have taken place between May 31, 2024 and June 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://Producebusiness.com) or Send Entries To:  
**PRODUCE BUSINESS MARKETING EXCELLENCE AWARDS**  
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**Deadline for entries is June 1, 2025**  
For additional information, call:  
561-994-1118, Ext. 109

# The Power of Posting: How and Why Social Media Can Drive Produce Sales

By Rick Stein

**J**ust how influential is social media on supermarket sales? I'll share one story.

A retailer came to me and said, "Rick, we are pulling our hair out. All of a sudden, our onions are going crazy. Asparagus went nuts, too. We had these huge numbers last year compared to the previous year, and we don't know why."

The short answer to his question is social media. Viral posts on TikTok and other social platforms have led directly to spikes in sales of particular products. In addition to onions and asparagus, we saw how cucumbers trended last summer, thanks to an influencer's widely shared cucumber salad recipe.

A broader response to that retailer's question is the need to recognize the impact of social media and leverage digital opportunities to boost produce performance. Often, the industry is on its heels in reacting to social media. For example, once a post takes off, you can start adding to your orders, but by the time you get through the supply chain, the viral fad is over.

I believe we should get more on our toes instead of our heels. We can create our own social media content that goes out widely, centered on items in the produce department, whether it's dragon fruit, frozen grapes or even simple green beans.

One caveat: For social media content to resonate and reach a broad audience of produce consumers, it has to be authentic. If it comes across as a way to merely boost sales, you will lose. The good news is that there are many genuine topics and a wide array of produce items that are fodder for this digitally driven marketing method.

To create content, grocers can tap into their own teams, especially younger associates who are on top of what works and what doesn't on social media platforms. It's not

only an easy and cost-effective way to stay current and relevant on socials, but it can be a boon for employee relations in terms of productivity and retention.

Don't forget about retail registered dietitian nutritionists who can help provide science-based produce messages and help educate shoppers about portion sizes and health benefits. Working together, produce department employees and store leaders can truly connect with shoppers and, importantly, reach potential new customers.

**By providing ideas in a direct and fun way, retailers and their grower partners can boost eating occasions for fruits and vegetables, which are key to growth.**

The recent *Power of Produce 2025* report, released by FMI, confirms the power of social media and, related to that, other forms of digital shopper engagement. According to that report, 94% of produce shoppers actively use one or more of the major social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, at least once a month. Nearly half (47%) of shoppers have discovered new ways to enjoy or prepare produce on social media. More than a third (36%) have found new fruits or vegetables that they had not seen before via socials.

As we move from our heels to our toes in creating content, we can also work toward seamless, integrated channel fluidity. Videos like the ones used on social media can also be used on e-commerce platforms. A customer can scroll past a photo of bulk romaine lettuce, but what about adding a dynamic video showing how to jazz up a salad with romaine and create a colorful, healthy meal with it? Videos can be created in-house, or you could ask your supplier to provide you with creative content about their products.

Shoppable recipes shared on websites are another way to make it easy for customers to move from inspiration to purchase and preparation. These digital tools provide helpful information to consumers, and the data also provides retailers with details about who their customers are and how they browse and buy.

These digital efforts can be linked back to the in-store experience, too. A display, including a shipper box or a retailer's own material, could have a QR code on it leading to social media sites or a YouTube page. In-store retail media networks are another way to generate interest and excitement at the point-of-sale.

By providing ideas in such a direct and fun way, retailers and their grower partners can boost eating occasions for fruits and vegetables, which are key to growth. A quick post on berries for breakfast or making kid-friendly snacks from vegetables can lead to an incremental sales lift, and fast.

Grocery stores have always been social places, in terms of being neighborhood hubs, and as that circle expands to social media, so do opportunities.

**pb**



Rick Stein is vice president of fresh foods, FMI — The Food Industry Association.





# Produce = Health at Sunset Foods

UPSCALE CHICAGO-AREA CHAIN FOCUSES ON QUALITY, VARIETY AND NUTRITION.

BY MIKE DUFF

**W**ith food price volatility making consumers more vigilant, even a supermarket chain that largely serves affluent customers has to be price conscious. But Sunset Foods, headquartered in Highland Park, IL, a suburb on the North Shore of the metropolitan Chicago area, won't cut corners at the expense of other key priorities its customers hold dear: quality, variety and healthfulness.

Vince Mastromauro Jr., director of produce operations at Sunset Foods, has things in hand. He and the produce managers throughout the seven-store chain know their customers well. Quality comes first, but Mastromauro's approach to generating produce sales and store traffic is to grab shopper attention with promotional prices, while providing fresh fruits and vegetables in a colorful choreography.

Yet, the presentation isn't the point, rather Mastromauro is intent on using promotion and visual appeal to underscore that what he offers tastes great and helps Sunset Food customers meet their wellness goals. Mastromauro says his customers are nutritionally and culinarily astute, and he spotlights products that are demonstrating particular strength, whether new to the marketplace or established.

"I promote what I feel, and what the industry says is trending healthwise," he explains. "I've been able to duplicate a lot of these items on the organic side, as with broccoli and cauliflower."

"There's been opportunities on the organic side, too, which has been nice," Mastromauro adds. "We've promoted kale a lot here recently. When I say promote: \$1.99 or \$2 a bunch is a pretty good price for fresh organic kale. And speaking of health, I've shifted all of our greens to organic and away from conventional."

Shrink factors may be a little more concerning with the organics, but Mastromauro says he wants to encourage the healthier purchase, given his customers' appreciation of wellness. With that being said,



Vince Mastromauro Jr., director of produce operations at Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, says tomatoes are a commodity that has expanded at Sunset, and he can merchandise the range of products in various combinations, such as placing bulk tomatoes and avocados together to drive volume.

choice is important, so he offers both organic and conventional baby carrots, for example, as well as apples and some other commodities.

"There are a few you can move that way, and you're not missing much in the resale," he says.

## PRODUCE IS MEDICINE

Sunset Foods customers, already cognizant of the health benefits of fruits and vegetables, are more aware today than ever before, Mastromauro says. "But the shift has gone toward a healthier mindset. You've got to use food, such as produce, as your medicine. I think that mindset has definitely resonated here in the last four or five years."

"We offer so much variety that your vitamins are here," he says. "You might as well take advantage of it. Your pathway to health is through the produce department."

Health has propelled produce at Sunset Foods to the top rank of departments in the company and, on an individual basis, has boosted various segment sales, especially berries.

"The berry category for us is the No. 1 commodity, sales category in the whole company," he says. "I'm so proud of that."

## CALENDAR CHANGES

Mastromauro notes a positive note to the early part of 2025 was that the prices available on organic apples and citrus gave him the chance to launch more promotions, with red and green leaf lettuce another commodity he could price and market to move. In combination, he was able to promote conventional and organic celery, as well as peppers.

"The pepper market was rough in the beginning. Now, we've been able to promote peppers, peppers in the bag and also all the bell peppers, organic and conventional. And that's the nice thing, I can go on ad and run organic and conventional, and I've convinced my managers that it's two different customers," Mastromauro says.

The inclusion of both organic and conventional in Sunset Foods promotion can maximize response to a product category. Then, with ads online, Mastromauro has been able to expand and call attention to more items and market to greater effect.

Still, quality is the key. "We're always going after quality first," he says. "Then, we give value. We rarely give things away. As long as we're holding up the quality aspect, we're good."





## GRABBING ATTENTION

Price volatility forces Mastromauro to watch the market carefully, ensuring he can properly entice consumers whenever the opportunity arises.

“We’ve just been trying to promote what’s actually promotable,” he says. “It was a rough start to the season, both for vegetables and fruit. With tariffs, it’s even more of a challenge.”

Recent promotions featured citrus — heirloom, navels, cara caras, Halos — and different vegetables, from zucchini to green beans, romaine hearts, head lettuce. There’s also been some tomato opportunities and strawberry as well.

“For me, it’s about tonnage. If I can get items that I can sell multiples of, that’s what I’m going to do. And I’ll run those for a few weeks, if I have to, just to get the traffic going through the department. I’d never want to just promote a seasonal item one time and skip it for two weeks. It’s gotta be weeks in a row to get the traffic.”

On the citrus side, he said demand for Sumo oranges has been particularly strong. “I didn’t even have to put them on sale,” he says. “I can’t keep them in stock. All seven stores.”

Tomatoes are a commodity that has expanded, and Mastromauro can merchandise the range of products in various combinations, such as placing bulk tomatoes and avocados together to drive volume. The winter tomato glut and corresponding deals allowed him to promote various tomatoes, including sleeve brown and heirloom.

“We have the bulk, and we build it up with the packaged,” he says. “You’re not going to leave the department without buying a tomato of some sort.”

The promotions are music to the ears of produce managers in Sunset Foods stores. “My guys love it, and we’ll tie in our Gotham green basil with that and try to get the extra sales on the other end,” says Mastromauro.

## SEEKING CONVENIENCE

As much as Sunset Foods is fastidious about the merchandising of its bulk and packaged whole fruits and vegetables, it also has evolved its fresh cuts presentation. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the company offered salad bars. It shut those down, but Mastromauro threw himself into building a deluxe assortment of fresh cuts in single and mixed varieties, creating 100 different recipes for stores to follow.



Vince Mastromauro Jr., director of produce operations at Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, says the demand for Sumo oranges has been strong. “I didn’t even have to put them on sale,” he says. “I can’t keep them in stock. All seven stores.”

Sunset also takes fresh cuts from its primary produce supplier, Anthony Marano Co., to provide even more choice.

“Convenience is what it’s all about,” he says.

And not just in the produce section itself. Convenience is an element included in the available product assortment no matter where it’s positioned.

“When we have things out front, it’s got to be grab-and-go,” he says. “It should be like packaged grapes. It should be berries. So, the customer doesn’t have to think about, ‘Oh, I’ve got to grab and bag it, it’s got to get weighed.’ It should be grab-and-go.”

## GLOBE TROTTERS

An advantage that Mastromauro sees for Sunset Foods on the flip side of the home-bound conditions associated with COVID-19, is that many of his customers are travelers. So, when they journey, they return home with a taste for new things. “They go on exotic vacations, and they see exotic fruit, or they see exotic vegetables. Then we’ve got to get them in,” he says.

Mastromauro says travel and away-from-home dining can generate specific demand, which may be behind shoppers paying more attention to broccolini. “That’s become a bigger thing here lately.”

“I’m trying to get the cost down so that we can promote it more often. It’s just those one-offs in each category that our customers see at a restaurant or see when they’re on vacation, and they want to see it.”

Of course, success requires work, and

Sunset Foods stores are meticulously merchandised with evident product excellence and consistent maintenance of displays, ensuring the right produce at the right quality is enhanced, instead of wasted.

“With my guys, you see a lot of attention to detail,” says Mastromauro. “They’re very proud of what they do.”

Mastromauro says help in selling is always a plus, whether it is promotional displays that helped spur interest in Sumo oranges or packaging on cherries that helps spur sales in the California season and, following, the turn to the Pacific Northwest.

“In cherries and even grapes, the graphic bags, the graphics on the bags that tell a little bit of the story about the product, I think that’s added a lot,” he said. “I think a lot of the growers have become marketers or have hired marketers to tell the story on their packaging.”

The graphics and the information provided alongside “really resonates with the customer. I think that’s what has helped a lot of our categories grow, the story on the packages,” says Mastromauro.

**pb**

### FACT FILE

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The 2025 PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year is New Seasons Market. New Seasons Market's newest store opened April 9 in Hillsboro, OR, at Tanasbourne Town Center. Pictured is the store's leadership team (left to right): Cindy Crawford, Autumn Seidel, Brandon Bovero, Travis Bertsch, Alethea Kreuscher, Amy Burke, John Walsh, Lyndsay Isaacson and Eric Badua.

ANNUAL RETAIL  
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**AWARD**  
2025

# GREEN HORIZONS: New Seasons Market Committed to Sustainability

As 2025's Retail Sustainability Award recipient, New Seasons educates community, suppliers and consumers with initiatives.

BY MIKE DUFF

**N**ew Seasons Market, Hillsboro, OR, is on a mission to provide consumers with organic and sustainably grown food, but also to educate consumers on the benefits of products and practices that benefit the environment. The initiatives are the reason PRODUCE BUSINESS tapped New Seasons as its 2025 Sustainability Retailer of the Year.

Celebrating its 25th anniversary, New Seasons just opened its 22nd store, serving Oregon and southwest Washington.

Although organics are a major part of the product assortment, New Seasons also offers

conventional groceries and popular food and beverage brands that may be favored by shoppers who haven't gone all in on organics. The company regards a mix of conventional and organic produce as an opportunity to spotlight the value and benefits of all sustainable products.

New Seasons, whose parent company is Good Food Holdings, rates as Sustainability Retailer of the Year because it works with the growing community, suppliers, and consumers to support a holistic approach to wellness and the environment, while encouraging shoppers and suppliers to explore developments that might even be better.

To demonstrate commitment to its principles, the company has achieved B Corp certification, which requires it to meet stringent standards for performance, accountability and transparency.

Not only that, but New Seasons puts its money where its intentions are, helping to find, and even provide financial support for local growers who are transitioning to organic production or who simply need help scaling up their operations.

Local is also a big part of New Seasons' focus, both to provide the freshest fruits and vegetables it can, while also cutting down on food miles and related environmental impacts.



# Earthbound Farm Plant-Based Trays Pioneer Sustainable Packaging

FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND SALAD PACKAGE PROTECTS GREENS INSIDE, WHILE USING 95% LESS PLASTIC.

Shoppers seeking sustainable convenience in fresh greens will easily find it with Earthbound Farm's plant-based trays. The plant-based tray was originally launched in the U.S. in July 2024, after more than five years of testing and numerous iterations. "Consumer response has been overwhelmingly positive with strong sales performance," says Jenny Panziera, director of product, organics and Earthbound Farm brand for Taylor Farms in Salinas, CA. "These trays are available in stores across the U.S. and Western Canada, with an expanded assortment available in June 2025."

Earthbound Farm heard from customers expressing a desire for plastic alternatives. "In fact, it's the number one request that we receive," says Panziera. "According to Nielsen NIQ Research, U.S. consumers hold brands, retailers and themselves 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."

The launch of the plant-based tray underscores Earthbound Farm's commitment to sustainability and innovation, while offering an eco-conscious solution aligning with growing demand. "Through independent research, we know that 92% of organic salad consumers surveyed are interested in purchasing a plant-based packaging solution," says Panziera. "This combination of sustainability and practicality makes it easier than ever for consumers to make an eco-friendly choice without compromising on freshness or convenience."

The tray is crafted from recycled plant fibers from FSC-certified sources with a food-grade coating and is designed to maintain the freshness of the greens, while significantly cutting down plastic usage. "The tray is H2R-certified recyclable and plastic free," says Panziera. "The entire package utilizes 95 percent less plastic than the standard plastic clamshell. The added convenience of peel and reseal film

technology ensures produce stays fresher for longer."

As a result of Earthbound Farm's recent sustainability initiatives, the brand has been voted the Best Organic Food Brand in 2024 by Green Matters, recognized

on Inc.'s 2024 Best in Business list for Sustainability, awarded the 2024 Science and Technology Circle of Excellence Award by the International Fresh Produce Association, and honored with the 2024 Innovation Award from Produce Business.

## Today's forecast: green



## From Earth to you.



## WHAT'S IN STORE

New Seasons began as an independent operation 25 years ago and became part of Good Food Holdings as 2019 ended, and is now part of a portfolio that also includes Bristol Farms, Lazy Acres Natural Market, Metropolitan Market and New Leaf Community Markets. Its newest store, a 27,000 square foot operation, is in Hillsboro, OR.

As part of its commitment to environmental stewardship, the Hillsboro New Seasons incorporates cutting-edge dry misting produce technology that creates an optimal high-humidity environment to preserve freshness, while conserving water and reducing waste.

As with all New Seasons Market locations, the Hillsboro store incorporates a free recycling center that accepts materials ranging from clamshells to clear plastics and plastic films, as well as other waste not often accepted in curbside bins.

Athena Petty, the company's senior manager of sustainability, says New Seasons customers have progressive ideas about food systems. They want to understand where their food comes from, and if it satisfies their preferences, both in terms of sustainability and health.

Although organics are critical, New Seasons has built a high level of trust over the years, so its customers have confidence the company will do all it can to deliver on their preferences for healthful, sustainable and local food. So, organics are important to New Seasons customers, but not a deal breaker.

"That leaves it up to us to really show up and work to continue to have that trust be something they can lean on," she says.

Petty says organic certified products make up about 69% of New Seasons' produce section when you look at the entire year. "Our



PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

As part of its commitment to environmental stewardship, the Hillsboro, OR, New Seasons Market operates a new, cutting-edge dry misting produce technology that creates an optimal high-humidity environment to preserve freshness, while conserving water and reducing waste.

customers have the innate ability to understand that there are also a ton of small farms that we work with directly, especially during ultra-high seasonal produce times where perhaps that farm hasn't received a certification. But they're doing organic practices on their farms, and they're very local.

"So, we've tried to support the organic movement, which is extremely important, and also tie our customers in with the folks who are actually growing their food," she says.

Although some growers aren't certified organic, New Seasons considers all that a farm has to offer when it is sourcing, with sustainability a key consideration.

"Some of the growers that we work with have just incredible practices," says Chris Harris, category director for produce and floral. "They're not certified organic. One of our berry growers has this great program where they work with the city of Hillsboro to get all the leaf mulch that's collected by the city, and the city, they were actually paying to take it to the dump, and now they take it to the grower for

free, so the city doesn't have to pay for it."

He says the grower composts it, and then uses it as a mulch, putting a thick layer of it at the base of their caneberries.

"It produces this incredibly rich, healthy soil that's got all kinds of microorganisms, real living soil. So, they don't have to put any fertilizer on their soil anymore. They're not certified organic, but it's just an example of the incredible kinds of sustainable practices that we're really interested in supporting," says Harris.

## THE LOCAL ANGLE

Local produce is a big deal to New Seasons' shoppers. "It's right up there with organic. I wouldn't be able to pick one over the other with our shoppers," says Harris. "The gold standard is local and organic, but we will carry both if we don't have a local organic option."

New Seasons is intent on building long-term partnerships with local growers.

"We figure out what works for us at New Seasons Market and what works for the grower, and then we try to build on that," says Harris. "We have a really robust planning program with our growers. Obviously, we're in communication a lot through the season, but then we meet in the off-season so that we can go over how the season went last year, what worked for you, what worked for us. How can we work together to find that partnership so that we both win."

The desire to help shoppers understand what goes into their food extends to New Seasons' private label Partner Brand, which is a foundation for company efforts to boost suppliers who align with its priorities.

"We call it Partner Brand because it's a more transparent and direct relationship-based brand when you especially look at other white label programs or products. We're talking about who our growing partner or producer partner is on the label. Quality, local and



PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

Local is a big part of New Seasons Market, the 2025 PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year, both to provide the freshest fruits and vegetables it can, while also cutting down on food miles and related environmental impacts.

sustainability are kind of the tenants that we're most proud of for our brand. It's not only dollar value," says Petty.

When the company established the Partner Brand, New Seasons wanted to create something that reflected the mission of the organization as a whole.

"What we did was we made a commitment to applying 1% of our sales of the Partner Brand to our partners to help essentially keep a really robust regional food system," says Petty. "These small growers have to go through so much. And not just growers, but producers, small brands, and to help kind of establish a no- or low-interest loan fund to help them get on their feet or get that next piece of equipment that will help them really scale up."

The program has developed over the past several years, with New Seasons establishing several loans and relationships with vendor partners to help them, for example, set up a packaging line.

Petty says the program helped smaller suppliers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Money dried up," she says. "They all of a sudden didn't have some of the restaurant partnerships that they might have had, so it played a really interesting role during that time."



New Seasons Market, the 2025 PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year, is a huge supporter of organic produce, and organic certified products make up about 69% of New Seasons Market's produce section when looking at the entire year.

PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

## SUPPORTING REGENERATIVE AG

Fast forward a few years, and New Seasons started to see, especially in the Portland area, a number of these loan funds were specifically focused on BIPOC producers (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), female underserved producers, and similar subsets of food makers.

"We started thinking about this elevated aspect of sustainability that we wanted to have in the Partner Brand and started to re-envision what our fund would look like," Petty

says. "So, we transitioned from a low-interest partner brand fund to our connection and collaboration with Zero Foodprint, where we're helping fund projects on farms and ranches to essentially implement organic and regenerative practices."

Zero Foodprint combats climate change by working with members of the food and beverage industry to support regenerative agriculture. As explained by Zero Foodprint, the organization operates by soliciting small dona-

## ■ WHAT IS B CORP CERTIFICATION?

B Corp Certification is a designation that businesses can meet based on high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency on factors from supply chain practices, and input materials to employee benefits and charitable giving.

To achieve B Corp Certifications, companies must demonstrate high social and environmental performance by reaching a B Corp Impact Assessment score of 80 or above and passing a risk review, as well as making a legal commitment by changing corporate governance structure in a way that makes the company accountable to all stakeholders, not just shareholders.

B Corp companies must embrace transparency by providing information about their performance that can be measured against standards of the certifying organization, B Lab. Then, they must make their standards publicly available on their B Corp profile on B Lab's website.

Athena Petty, senior manager of sustainability at New Seasons Market, Hillsboro, OR, the 2025 PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year, recently

completed the company's B Corp certification renewal. New Seasons first became a B Corp in 2013 when it was essentially a new concept.

B Corp standards are tough, Petty says. "It's complex. It changes, so it has evolved. There are now six versions, going on seven, and that's on purpose so that B Corps continue to have to evolve their standards and continue to become more progressive."

The standards are different depending on the version, says Petty, and none is specifically a grocery store standard. Grocery stores run on a complex business model, she says, with New Seasons having thousands of vendors supplying the store with tens of thousands of products, which makes it more difficult to account for and address the standards involved.

"It is a really difficult thing for our type of business," she says, but adds, "We have continued to be able to show up and show progress over time."

New Seasons has to continually consider how the business is addressing B Corp. requirements.

## WHAT THEY ARE

*Saying*

We had a visionary group of people who wanted to be able to use a third party to show and prove that we were doing all the things that we said that we were doing, and to have that outside verification and a standard framework that we could follow to help improve the business.

Athena Petty, New Seasons Market, Hillsboro, OR

"It's really that intentional coming back to how does this affect all the stakeholders, and how are we thinking about, not just the near term of our business, but how it affects those stakeholders mid and long term?" says Petty. "It is literally a conversation that comes up weekly, if not daily, about 'how does this affect B Corp?'"



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tions across the food system to fund farm projects that draw carbon from the atmosphere and store it underground, resulting in better food, thriving farms, and a restored climate.

In working with Zero Foodprint, New Seasons can help connect growers and ranchers to loans up to \$25,000, as it has shifted some funding emphasis to farm resilience and healthy soil practices.

"Regenerative agriculture is something that has gotten a lot of buzz over the last few years, and we've really been paying attention to what does that mean in practice," explains Petty. "What does that certification mean? How does it differentiate itself between organic, and what does that mean actually to our growers?"

"We're still gathering information about how the program works for our partners and for us," says Petty. "But it's been interesting to see how our support system has evolved now that it's called Restore Northwest, and in partnership with Zero Foodprint."

Katie Schoen, New Season's director of communications, points out that although the company has become more deeply involved in funding through Zero Footprint, it has not abandoned its own ongoing partner funding for those suppliers who New Seasons has supported.

## LENDING A HAND

One example of New Season's direct support of a produce partner is the work it has done with Unger Farms of Cornelius, OR, says Harris. Unger Farms has supplied berries to New Seasons since it opened the company's first store in Raleigh Hills in 2000.

As New Seasons Market expanded, it outgrew Unger Farms' capacity to supply all of its stores with berries, and that troubled Harris. New Seasons couldn't find another local grower who could provide the same quality, so New Seasons began working with Unger Farms on capacity, including providing it with a substantial loan, which generated a sweet return.

"They were able to buy some neighboring property and expand their farm to be able to supply all of our stores," says Harris. "They actually repaid the loan in berries during the season. It ended up being a real win for both New Seasons and Unger Farms."

## SHARING THE STORIES

Customers see New Seasons working with the same farms over and over, and telling their stories, says Petty, and New Seasons works to inform customers about farming's evolving landscape. "I think that we're seen as a place where, hopefully, customers can come and find information that's really relevant to the questions that they have."

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Harris says he's witnessed a continual evolution at New Seasons over the years, one that's been positive, both in pacing and leading change for a customer base that wants to learn and embrace practices and products they feel are better for them.

"I think one of the great things about this company, and one of the reasons we've been successful, is our ability to adapt and change over time," he says. "When we started the first store, our produce department was basically a dual-line department. We had organic and conventional side by side, pretty much on almost every product in the department."

They found customers were much more interested in the organic product. "So over time, we really reduced the amount of conventional produce that we had in the department," Harris says.

While the stores still offer conventional products, the majority are organic. "We really believe that organic is a more sustainable farming system. So, we continue to be huge supporters of organic, but we do have conventional produce."

New Seasons doesn't just stock conventional produce for the sake of having it in stores. Rather, it works with growers to help them when they want to try and make changes in how they operate, even when it's done incrementally.

"We work directly with those growers," says Harris. "We really understand their specific practices, and we really know that they're using sustainable practices. We've built a level of trust with our customers, and so we never want to betray that trust. They expect us to have those standards and to be delivering that kind of product to them. We've also taken chances on things over the years and some of them have been really surprising."

For example, New Seasons worked with a small local grower who had great blueberries, but didn't have a sophisticated packing line.

"They weren't able to pack their berries in traditional packaging," says Harris. "So, they pack them in bulk in 10-pound flats for us, and we decided to bring them to market and see what would happen. I had visions of blueberry goo oozing all over the produce department, but it was amazing how our customers reacted to it. They loved it. It was a huge success for us."

Shoppers look forward to the blueberries and the 10-pound flats. "It has become a huge signature event for us every year," says Harris.

"It really takes that direct connection, and so that's something that's always been really important to us, having that direct connection to the growers," says Harris. "We're not buying through third parties."

pb



New Seasons works with many of the same farms over and over, telling their stories to inform customers about farming's evolving landscape.

PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET



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# States Support Fresh Produce Consumption

State programs offer opportunities to meet market challenges and build sales.

BY MIKE DUFF

Departments of agriculture around the U.S. undertake a wide range of initiatives to support produce and other growers, and each provides an opportunity to meet market challenges, encourage fruit and vegetable consumption and build sales for the sector.

## NEW JERSEY

For example, the Jersey Fresh label is among the nation's best-established state promotional logos. As such, it helps the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), Trenton, NJ, keep consumers aware of the Garden State's abundance.

"More and more people want to know where their food comes from and how it is grown before spending their hard-earned money to purchase it," says NJDA Secretary Ed Wengry. "With our Jersey Fresh program being in its 41st year, it has become a brand known for quality produce that consumers trust, which means the products are from a New Jersey farm."

The program development has helped NJDA keep pace with consumers, as well as changes in the produce industry.

"Food as medicine is driving a lot of consumer choice toward local fresh produce as they seek to reduce dependence on processed foods," says Wengry.

"Programs, like our Jersey Fresh Farm to School Program, promote and encourage schools to become involved, in not only educating on the health benefits of eating locally, but assisting them in growing their own produce or purchasing produce from a local farmer," Wengry adds.

The Jersey Fresh marketing program has expanded consumer outreach in multiple languages and digital platforms, which helps NJDA provide more focused information to specific audiences, says Wengry.

A big part of the Jersey Fresh program is connecting the grower to food buyers, "to make connections that can benefit the farmer, the grocery store owner, and ultimately the consumer," he says.

The program also offers data, and visits



The Jersey Fresh program is among the nation's best-established state promotional brands.

retail food outlets to provide point-of-purchase materials so stores can clearly display where Jersey Fresh produce is available.

## NEW YORK

New York also has a program that supports growers and those producing food, beverage and related products in the Empire State, but faces a somewhat different challenge, says Richard Ball, commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Albany, NY.

A disconnect has long existed between the New York City metropolitan region and the rest of the state. A grower who became commissioner, Ball saw the disconnect firsthand. As a farmer, he recognized that New York City consumers knew little about the state's agriculture, even as he delivered to the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx.

"When I was asked in 2013 to consider being the commissioner, one of the things I was passionate about was making sure New York knows we have such a huge agricultural industry in the state," Ball says. "We rank in the top 10 in over 30 commodities. Certainly, vegetables and fruit are high on that list."

Ball says there are great resources in New York — good land, Cornell University and access to water, and "we've got the biggest and most diverse marketplace in the world."

"It was logical for me, coming in as a

farmer to this agency, to think: Let's connect the dots to consumers who don't know a whole lot."

The New York State Grown and Certified program developed in response to consumer concerns, like local food, food safety and environmental stewardship.

Then, Taste New York stores, which debuted in 2013, operate in key locations, including on major highways and in service areas throughout the Empire State.

"The whole idea was for travelers, whoever they were coming through the state — local people, people from out of state or out of the country — to actually try something from New York State and find out they liked it and find out where that farm was, and help drive business to our farms. It's just a fantastic success," says Ball.

Ball says at the 10-year anniversary, they hit over \$100 million in sales from over 1,200 small businesses, entrepreneurs and small farms.

"We've got close to 80 locations around the state now where people who are traveling through can find something, get exposed to something new, discover that we have that connection with agriculture in New York."

## NORTH CAROLINA

Sim McIver, assistant director, domestic marketing, North Carolina Department

PHOTO COURTESY NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE





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of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS), Raleigh, NC, says agriculture is the Tarheel State's largest industry, but it faces challenges from the loss of farmland, mandated environmental regulations, and weather, such as hurricanes.

The department's marketing gets behind local, regional and international programs meant to improve the prospects for North Carolina agriculture.

"Research continues to be at the forefront of the department's initiatives as we continue to figure out ways to do more with less," says McIver.

Food safety and the environment remain key issues, with many initiatives the department manages funded through North Carolina legislative support and some through local and federal grants. Some of the food safety and grading services are self-supported, according to Peter Thornton, NCDA&CS marketing director. "Also, many facilities, such as our state-run regional farmers markets are receipt-supported as well."

Events during the past year include January's Flavors of Carolina food show in Greensboro, NC, hosted by the department as part of its Got to Be NC program. The event connected more than 100 local food and beverage producers with more than 800 buyers from the retail, wholesale and foodservice industries. Got to Be NC also runs the NC Farm to School and Certified Roadside Farm Markets programs, and also promotes agritourism.

## ALABAMA

In Alabama, produce cultivation is gaining, with acreage increasing and growers introducing innovative production practices. Demand for local produce has also steadily advanced. In 1995, Alabama had 17 farmers markets, with 234 participating



The Indiana Grown program markets Hoosier State fresh produce.

PHOTO COURTESY INDIANA STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

growers. Today, the state has 169 farmers markets featuring 879 farmers, 247 value-added vendors and more than 250 craftsmen, according to Don Wambles, ag promotions director, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries (ADAI), Montgomery, AL.

Among the programs ADAI works on are the Federal Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program and the Farm to School program, which gets support from the state, as well as some federal aid. The department is also involved with such programs such as the Local Food Purchase Agreement, Local Food for Schools and the Resilient Food System Infrastructure programs. Farmers markets get both state and local aid.

Then there's Sweet Grown Alabama. "We initiated the state branding program, Sweet Grown Alabama, in 1999 to promote Alabama farmers and farm products and connect consumers to them," says Wambles.

The Sweet Grown Alabama website promotes agritourism, provides information about what's in season and offers recipes. The program also has active social media accounts.

## INDIANA

The Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), Indianapolis, IN, is also helping

growers succeed in an evolving marketplace.

"The produce sector is undergoing significant transformations driven by consumer preferences, technological advancements, and environmental concerns," says Caroline Patrick, director of Indiana Grown, which was developed by the department to promote products that are grown or crafted in the state.

"Key trends include the growing demand for organic and locally sourced produce, the adoption of value chain work for food procurement, and the rise of indoor vertical farming and environmentally controlled agricultural practices," Patrick notes.

Economic pressures like inflation and supply chain challenges are reshaping industry practices, she adds.

In response, ISDA is building relationships and partnerships within sustainability, technology and regenerative agriculture sectors to facilitate collaborations with Indiana growers. Technology, collaboration, branding to underscore health advantages, and investing in sustainable functions on the operational level can help growers advance, says Patrick.

The department also coordinates the Indiana Grown program, which markets Hoosier State produce.

## OHIO

The Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA), Reynoldsburg OH, maintains a close partnership with the Ohio Produce Growers and Marketers Association, says ODA Director Brian Baldrige, as it provides a view on what is happening in the fruit and vegetable sector across the Buckeye State.

"The Ohio Proud program, under ODA's Division of Marketing, has seen a steady need for locally grown and made products, including fresh produce," says Baldrige. "One of Ohio Proud's most popular events is the Ohio Proud Food Show, which connects growers and food

## ■ FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE ENGAGED IN OUTREACH

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) typifies a state engaged in both consumer and industry outreach, says Susie McKinley, director, division of marketing and development at FDACS, Tallahassee, FL.

The Fresh From Florida team attends in-person and virtual industry events, including commodity group meetings and international trade shows, she says. Fresh From Florida exhibits and hosts grower pavilions at industry expos, and in late 2024, Florida was the Spotlight State at the Sunbelt Ag Expo.

Consumer interaction occurs both in

person and online. "Consumers receive a monthly email newsletter as part of the Fresh from Florida Club membership, which includes seasonal shopping lists, new recipes and other original content," says McKinley.

Additionally, the brand partners with magazines, news outlets and influencers. "Our farm-to-table storytelling and interactive campaigns have seen fantastic success in building awareness, driving loyalty, and inspiring consumers to choose Fresh From Florida products," she says.

Through the Fresh From Florida

program, FDACS also wants to make certain people know about the importance of agriculture in the Sunshine State.

"Fresh From Florida is dedicated to promoting and protecting Florida's agricultural industry, while supporting growers, shippers, distributors, and retailers with the tools and visibility they need to succeed in a competitive market," she says. "Through marketing campaigns and educational programs, we connect consumers with high-quality, locally sourced Florida products. It's an honor to support Florida agriculture and share it with others."



PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Fresh From Florida program and logo raise the profile of Florida produce as a trusted brand.

makers directly to wholesale and retail buyers. Ohio schools are also very involved in attending Ohio Proud events and meeting with local growers in their community. Over the last five to six years, the program has built extensive relationships with our growers and Ohio's Farm to School programming."

Baldrige says Ohio Proud promotes all food and agriculture made or grown in the state, "from roadside stands and farmers markets to home bakeries and large-scale food processors."

The program works with grocery buyers, specialty retail markets and foodservice directors from hospitals, hotels and schools "to advocate for selling more local products in stores and using Ohio ingredients on menus."

## ILLINOIS

Kayla Graven, domestic marketing manager, Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), Springfield, IL, says the state's produce sector is rapidly evolving, influenced by changing consumer preferences, increasing demand for local and sustainably grown food, and technological advancements.

In response, the IDOA is supporting the produce sector through the Illinois Grown branding campaign and the Illinois Specialty Crop Block Grant.

"The preference for local and in-season produce aligns perfectly with the goals of Illinois Grown and the Illinois Product Farmers Market, held on the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield," says Graven. "The farmers market gives consumers direct access to produce that is grown right here in Illinois, from fruits and vegetables to meats, honey, flowers and artisanal products."

The Illinois Specialty Crop Block Grant Program funds projects that enhance the competitiveness of Illinois-grown fruits and vegetables, she explains. This includes investments in research, marketing, education and infrastructure.

As it looks to grab consumer attention,

IDOA has employed digital methods. "We've expanded our reach through video conferencing, social media and email to connect with a broader audience," says Graven. "Social media platforms allow us to engage consumers, promote Illinois products and share success stories, while email helps us stay in touch with our network of growers and retailers."

The department's approach now blends in-person events with digital tools, and "we've seen success in raising awareness and fostering a stronger connection between consumers and Illinois agriculture."

## FLORIDA

At the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), a key priority is the Fresh from Florida program, which capitalizes on the growing demand for local, in-season produce.

"With Chef Justin Timineri, Florida's state chef and culinary ambassador, bringing his expertise to the table, and over 400 inspiring recipes on our website, we help consumers discover the joy of cooking with fresh, Florida-grown ingredients," says Susie McKinley, director, division of marketing and development at the FDACS, headquartered in Tallahassee, FL.

"Our partnerships with retailers highlight seasonality through customized campaigns that put Florida produce in the spotlight."

She says the Fresh From Florida program and logo raise the profile of Florida produce, and "the Fresh From Florida logo remains a trusted brand, with nine out of 10 consumers preferring products labeled Fresh From Florida."

"And with more than 1.2 million followers on social media, we're connecting with more people than ever, celebrating Florida agriculture in creative, engaging ways. These trends are a wonderful opportunity to keep Florida-grown products front and center, bringing them into homes across the state and beyond."

The Fresh from Florida promotes the state's produce via TV, radio, digital, social and print advertising. "This season, along with traditional consumer advertising, Florida produce will be featured on grocery cart ads and floor talkers in produce sections of various retailers, reminding consumers to buy Florida produce while they are actively shopping," says McKinley.

The program also featured Florida produce on coupon and rebate apps the past few years, including Ibotta, Checkout 51 and most recently KickStart, and will continue to use these platforms, she adds. It also works with online platforms such as Instacart and

# WHAT THEY ARE Saying

We see an opportunity in continuing to highlight the high-quality, fresh products that come from our local farms, while educating consumers on the importance of supporting our state's agricultural products."

Kayla Graven, Illinois Department of Agriculture, Springfield, IL

Amazon Fresh to reach buyers on multiple levels.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services also partners with 100-plus retailers to develop customized promotions through the Fresh From Florida Retail Program, McKinley says.

## CALIFORNIA

Created in 2001, California Grown, also known as the Buy California Marketing Agreement, promotes the state's agricultural products.

"California Grown remains the only statewide agricultural marketing organization promoting all California-grown agricultural products on a year-round basis," says Cherie Watte, executive director, California Grown/Buy California Marketing Agreement, El Centro, CA.

"We build excitement and enthusiasm for California Grown products through creative marketing, effective storytelling and leveraging of the California Grown brand," Watte explains. "California Grown's message ensures consumers understand the value of buying high quality, nutritious California Grown agricultural products and the direct benefit to the state's economy, communities, farmers, ranchers and consumers."

California Grown celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2026, and a lot has changed since 2001.

"At that time, the organization did much of its marketing through billboards," she notes. "Today, we focus much more on digital promotions in all programs, which include retail and foodservice promotions, nutrition education, as well as social/digital marketing."

California Grown is funded through public and private contributions.

pb



# Beyond 'Buy Local': Georgia Grown Sees Successful Expansion

The Georgia Grown label carries weight far beyond state lines.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

**G**eorgia Grown is a brand promotional program and business development platform that has been successfully showcasing the best of Georgia's produce for over a decade. Recent seasons, however, have indicated that the program can work just as successfully outside Georgia's borders. Are there lessons to be learned for other states?

Developed by the Georgia Department of Agriculture, Georgia Grown is a platform that serves not just the fruit and vegetable industry, but also a range of related industries, including horticulture, seafood, agritourism, forestry, livestock, and the restaurant and retail trade.

For the fresh produce industry, the Georgia Grown program showcases Georgia's abundance and diversity of fresh fruits and vegetables and helps growers and value-added processors retain economic value within the state, says Sarah Cook, director of business development for the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA).

"We produce an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, much more than the entirety of the state can consume," Cook says. "So we're always looking at advocating and educating the public outside of Georgia about the wonderful produce that we have here in Georgia."

For the Genuine Georgia Group, a company based in Fort Valley in Georgia's



PHOTO COURTESY GEORGIA GROWN

Peach County, the benefits of being involved in the program have become even clearer over the past 12 months.

Founded in 2008 by three fifth-generation Georgia peach growers — Will McGehee, Kent Hoots and Duke Lane III — the Genuine Georgia Group offers pecans, and, more recently, mandarins, as well as peaches, all of which carry the Georgia Grown label.

"We have seen tremendous support with the current team at Georgia Grown. They truly understand what it means to help growers and marketers go out to retailers and customers and sell Georgia-grown product," says Lane.

"It's not just a marketing campaign for the department of ag. It's a marketing campaign to

help the growers, and they've been a tremendous help to our Georgia peach industry, citrus industry, and pecan industry."

Lane says a key objective of Georgia Grown is go beyond the state's borders to tout the high quality of the state's produce.

## GROWING STRONG

Genuine Georgia embarked on an ambitious promotional campaign with Georgia Grown in 2024 after experiencing what McGehee describes as "one of the best peach seasons ever."

"We really had a vintage year last year on peaches, and we're looking at repeating it this year: perfect weather, really great-sized crop, high-quality peaches, and we're excited to follow up a wonderful season with another one this summer."

Georgia Grown helped highlight Genuine Georgia peach boxes in Midwestern Kroger stores last summer, which Lane describes as an "absolute, huge success."

"It was a joint-branded box: it had the Kroger logo on it, but also the Georgia Grown logo right beside it," he explains. "We were everywhere from Indianapolis through Louisville, Cincinnati, OH, up to Detroit, MI. We went across the upper Midwest with this promotion, and they knocked it out of the park."

"We took this opportunity to Georgia Grown, they helped us partner with Kroger,



PHOTO COURTESY NICKY GREGORY COMPANY

The Nickey Gregory Company, Atlanta, GA, has the Georgia Grown logo on all of its trucks and trailers.



and the three of us came together and did this inaugural program last summer, and it was such a huge success that in September, they were already calling us again, asking, 'what are we going to do next year,' because they saw such a spike in their sales during that time."

Such outcomes rarely come together, according to Lane, but the result was a win for the retailer, a win for the grower, and a positive test for the Georgia Grown brand outside the borders of the state.

GDA's Cook says it's easy to track the success of partnerships like the one with Kroger and Genuine Georgia via sales, but the strength of Georgia Grown is also about "building relationships and realizing sales later on. Sometimes, when we're talking about building trade, it can take years of building relationships."

### SHOWCASE THE STATE

Headquartered in Glennville, GA, Bland Farms has the distinction of being the largest grower, packer, and shipper of another major Georgia crop, Vidalia sweet onions. The company is a proud participant in the Georgia Grown program, according to Chief Executive Troy Bland, using the Georgia Grown branding across all its Vidalia Sweet Onion packaging, marketing and point-of-sale materials.

"Bland Farms is deeply rooted in Georgia agriculture," he says. "Being part of the Georgia Grown program allows us to showcase that connection and highlight our commitment to locally grown produce."

Bland says the company integrates Georgia Grown branding across multiple Vidalia Sweet Onion touchpoints, from in-store displays and packaging to digital marketing and promotional materials.

"It's featured prominently on our Vidalia Sweet Onion bags and cartons, as well as on signage at retail to grab attention and tell the story of where our produce comes from," he says. "For us, it's more than a logo — it's a shorthand for quality, traceability, and Southern-grown pride. It helps retailers connect with customers who want to support local agriculture, even from miles away."

### AUTHENTIC IMAGE

But the positive impacts of the Georgia Grown program have not been felt just by growers, but also by companies that work on the service side of the industry.

Alongside the symbols of its own divisions and brands, the Georgia Grown logo features prominently on the webpage of Nickey Gregory Company, a distributor, repacker, and processor based at the Atlanta State Farmer's Market.

According to vice president of development and marketing, Andrew Scott, Nickey Gregory forms a "big part" of the Georgia Grown program as a platinum member. "We're big supporters of what's grown here, plus a lot of our customer base is in Georgia," he says.

To this end, Scott says the company features the Georgia Grown logo on the front of its headquarters, and on all of its trucks and trailers, as well as on packaging if it includes a Georgia-produced item.

"Georgia Grown helps our business — we're able to get fresher products with Georgia Grown items," he says. "We distribute to 11

states out of Atlanta, so a lot of those Georgia Grown products will be going all across the Southeast."

During 2024, the company created a new retail support division that services independent chain stores and retailers throughout Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. According to Scott, Nickey Gregory is expanding the new venture during 2025, as well as continuing to grow its Family Fresh Foods fresh-cut processing business.

Based in Cordele, GA, watermelon grower Leger & Son is another active member of the Georgia Grown program, making use of

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# WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*



As a Georgia-based family farm, it's incredibly rewarding to champion the product that represents the heart of Georgia agriculture.

John Shuman, Shuman Farms,  
Reidsville, GA

the branding on its website and watermelon bins. “The bins are a great way to display our Georgia Grown pride at retail,” explains director of sales and marketing, Jordan Carter.

Carter says the Georgia Grown platform provides an excellent tool for marketing and promotion, as well as being a hub for events and education.

It has become a major promotional tool for producers and retailers alike, “creating an authentic image,” she says. “Today’s consumer wants transparency, which is critical for building trust with a brand. Buying local means preserving communities while growing economies.”

Another high-profile participant in the Georgia Grown program is Reidsville, GA-based Shuman Farms. A third-generation run family business, Shuman Farms also specializes in Vidalia onions, which company president and chief executive John Shuman describes as being “at the core of who we are.”

“As a Georgia-based family farm, it’s incredibly rewarding to champion the product that represents the heart of Georgia agriculture,” he says.

For 2025, the company will be focusing on two initiatives — the trade-focused “Shuman Farms University” and the consumer-targeted “Champagne of Onions” campaign, which Shuman says are “designed to elevate the sweet onion category by improving in-store team knowledge and deepening consumer understanding of what makes Vidalias special.”

## BUILDING TRUST

The Georgia Grown label carries weight far beyond state lines. “Whether we’re shipping to the Northeast, Midwest, or West Coast,



Georgia Grown branding is used on Vidalia onions bags to grab attention and tell the story of where the onions come from.

customers recognize and trust the Georgia Grown brand,” says Troy Bland from Bland Farms.

“It signals authenticity, quality, and a direct connection to the source — and that resonates everywhere. It’s not just about pride in where we farm; it’s about giving people confidence in what they’re feeding their families.”

He also believes Georgia Grown is benefiting from being part of the wider “Buy Local” movement, which is helping connect growers with their own communities and regions.

“The ‘Buy Local’ movement has changed the way people shop. For producers, that’s a huge opportunity,” says Bland. “Whether you’re in Georgia or California, local branding helps tell a story that resonates with today’s

consumers. It builds trust, drives loyalty, and keeps dollars circulating in local economies. It’s not just a trend — it’s a shift in values, and it’s reshaping the way food is marketed and sold across the country.”

The Georgia Grown program works one-on-one with retailers, Cook says, “to tailor the collateral materials, because we know everyone’s produce section is going to be different.”

For example, Georgia Grown worked with Publix, specifically with their end caps for their buy local program, to identify products that are a good fit.

“We know our farmers face adversity every day due to circumstances beyond their control, and so we’re doing everything we can to help them bring that money back to the farm, to retain that money in the state of Georgia.” **pb**



Seven new executive chefs were named to the Georgia Grown Executive Chef program earlier this year. Now in its 16th year, the program fosters relationships between chefs and farmers while spreading awareness about the quality of locally sourced and grown products in Georgia’s restaurant scene.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMÉE TENZEL PHOTO

PHOTO COURTESY GEORGIA RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION/GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



# Midwest Produce Buying Season Kicks Off Strong

Wellness and healthy eating are driving Midwest consumers to buy local, fresh produce.

BY MIKE DUFF

**T**he produce sector in the Midwest is vast and diverse, and increasingly so with the expansion of controlled atmosphere growing. The region offers a cornucopia of opportunities to connect down the supply chain to the abundant resources it provides.

Although tradition remains important in the Midwest, wellness and healthy eating are increasingly driving consumers, making produce departments a health center for many shoppers, says Vince Mastromauro, Sunset Foods' director of produce operations.

Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, operates seven stores in the northern suburbs of Chicago, five under its own banner and two under the Grand Food Center brand, which the company acquired in 2021.

Mastromauro recognizes his Midwestern shoppers want to explore healthy options, and he has been expanding the proportion of organic products Sunset carries, including converting his entire assortment of greens. "When I say I'm pushing more with organic, it's when I see the opportunities that are being presented to me that are promotable," he says. "It just seems like in the first three months, it's been a lot."

Argus Farm Stop operates in the college town of Ann Arbor, MI, as part of an operation that focuses on locally grown food. Dani Cavagnaro, produce manager, says consumers continue to focus on local food, and, as spring began, Argus was gearing up with spring radishes and leeks after starting greens from hoop, or high tunnel, fields.

Because the company focuses on local product, root crops dominated its assortment in the cold weather months, but because of the proliferation of hydroponic and greenhouse growers in the Midwest, more produce is available year-round, and Argus taps that source until Michigan dirt farming starts to deliver.

"We use hydroponic and greenhouse when soil-based farms aren't operating, but we keep it balanced," she says. "When spring approaches, we have to give priority to soil-based farms."



The Midwestern states grow and ship a broad range of fresh fruits and vegetables, all within a day's drive of major population regions in the U.S. and Canada. For example, Michigan ranks first in asparagus production by state.

## WHOLESALE DEVELOPMENTS

The Midwest region faces challenges in line with the general produce community, but faces those challenges head-on.

In Detroit, MI, wholesaler Ben B. Schwartz & Sons recently launched a custom-built Enterprise Resource Planning platform, Ben B. Access, expanding its legacy system. The company developed the platform to expedite orders, deliver with greater precision, automate administrative tasks, and analyze data that helps the company better predict future purchasing decisions.

Technology can help keep the business moving forward effectively. Bill Loupée, chief

operating officer at Ben B. Schwartz, says the company's robust produce offering has provided a full range of fruit and vegetable commodities to customers and wants to keep doing so as effectively as possible.

"What has changed is the work behind the scenes, where we're finding new ways to build in additional value by implementing solutions to make sure we're only delivering the freshest produce, such as stripping our tomatoes to remove excess foliage to deliver the highest quality," says Loupée. "However, we're also implementing new tools and solutions, whether it's new packaging or custom ERP software, to alleviate customer pain points





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PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMEE TENZER PHOTO

A strong area of growth for North Bay Produce, Traverse City, MI, has been using state labels, which have been designed to look like the state where the produce was grown. This way, consumers can quickly identify which products on the shelf are local.

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where we can while also leaning into programs that give back to our local community.”

Jordan Vande Guchte, vice president of sales for Superior Produce, Hudsonville, MI, characterizes the company as having an alphabetically broad diversified produce shipping, packing, repacking, and sales organization, purveying everything from asparagus to zucchini.

Vande Guchte says the asparagus category continues enjoying growth. It’s the company’s “first harvest commodity and the strong lead into our season. Michigan ranks first in asparagus production by state, and we’re proud to lead that charge: hand snapped, all edible, sized true and fresher by miles. Grass that’s tender, juicy, with a bit of sweetness and balanced by mild, earthy taste.”

In the squash category, the spaghetti variety that ballooned over the past decade remains strong, but has fallen behind butternut, which reigned previously. Superior Produce adjusts its acreage continually to pace consumption trends and does so in squash, but Vande Guchte says he believes spaghetti squash will continue to duel with butternut, as people continue to try and eat healthier.

“I personally have faith it will surpass

butternut again at some point,” he says, noting, “it’s just a matter of when the next wave of health-conscious consumers realize the obvious noodle substitute comes in a hard shell.”

#### THE LOCAL ANGLE

Chad Buurma, president, Buurma Farms, Willard, OH, says Midwest demand has been consistent with the categories handled by the operation, including radishes, beets, lettuces, parsleys, southern greens, sweet corn, green onions and celery.

“There haven’t been major changing trends in the commodities we handle,” says Buurma. “There’s always some slight shifts here and there. We try to keep an eye on that, and we adjust our planning schedules accordingly.”

Buurma says his customer base likes homegrown produce. “We’re fortunate to have a nice number of retail chain stores in the Midwest, and we’ve been fortunate enough to be suppliers of many of those retail chain stores. They like getting that homegrown, that locally grown name out there. They post signage in their stores, and they promote that, and I think



that has really helped us out. It gives us an advantage in our growing season.”

Ken Korson, apple category manager and sales, North Bay Produce, Traverse City, MI, says good snow cover during a cold winter was helpful to growing conditions. Responsible for apples and asparagus, he says the cold conditions will lead to a somewhat late, but normal, bloom on the trees, but that the season still looks to be shaping up well.

Asparagus is having a normal start for North Bay. As for berries, early varieties of blueberries are starting to wake up, and the weather is warming up slowly. April and early May in Michigan can still have crop-damaging frost, but the big picture looks good. “We have to see what Mother Nature gives us,” says Korson.

Apples are one commodity the Midwest is known for, but the range of fruits and vegetables produced in the region is vast.

“Growers that we work closely with grow field corn, beans, wheat, sweet corn, and most notably, horseradish,” says Matt McMillin, business development specialist, J.R. Kelly Co., Collinsville, IL, which is a major horseradish provider. “Our region is a hotbed for horseradish and is unique with that vegetable only being grown in large quantities at a handful of places in the U.S.”

He says that since an important peak season in 2024, consumers have been keeping up their purchasing.

“Demand is fairly steady to maybe slightly increasing for our produce market grade root,” says McMillin. “We had a good peak season with Passover and Easter, but we’ve also started to see some increased demand in our shrink-wrapped packaging line. We’re not sure if it’s due to a prolonged shelf life or branding capabilities, but shrink-wrapped roots have picked up some steam this year.”

He points out that the fall-to-spring season for horseradish had been kind.

“Horseradish harvest begins around November and ends around May,” says McMillin. “We had a little bit of a wetter fall that combined with a freeze into February, leading to a busy spring harvest. So far, the weather in the spring has been good, and planting and harvest have been going strong in March.”

Gumz Farms, Endeavor, WI, grows and ships onions, red and yellow potatoes, peppermint, spearmint, carrots, field corn and soybeans, says marketing specialist Alex Gumz, and she adds that core products have been particularly good.

“Over the past few years, Gumz Farms has experienced growth in the retail sector with consumer interest particularly in their onions and potatoes,” she says. “They now



The Midwest region is a hotbed for horseradish, which is only grown in large quantities at a handful of places in the U.S.

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produce 40% of Wisconsin's onions and 20% of the state's potatoes, making them one of the largest producers of these items in the region."

As is the case with many Midwest growers, Gumz gets a lift from the loyalty Midwesterners have to their agricultural traditions.

"There has been an increased focus on locally sourced produce, reflecting a consumer shift toward supporting regional agriculture," she says. "With this, we have expanded our packing facility by approximately 40% to meet increased demand."

Korson says locally grown produce has become more important in the region. Many retailers still want to feature local products, and, with food prices higher, local may have an advantage as retailers and consumers recalibrate their expectations on what they spend and why.

He adds, though, that retailers are looking for more uniformity of packaging, and North Bay has responded by shipping goods, such as berries, with just one label.

"Especially on the berry side, North Bay Produce offers a few different labels, so we carefully consider which label will best excite customers and retailers. A strong area of growth for us has been utilizing our state labels that have been designed to look like the state where the produce was grown. This way, consumers can quickly identify which products on the shelf are local."

Buurma says his operation does some private label packaging, but in general, retailers want the local branding.

"They want to see the Buurma Farm or Holland brand label because that's what identifies it as homegrown," he says. "We try to put in our label as much as possible, and we get positive feedback from that."

## CHALLENGES

As elsewhere in the country, the Midwest faces the typical challenges, but some are unique.

"Over the past couple of years, there seems to be a tightening of prices or margins, probably due to the economy in general or inflation, which makes it tough on the farmers when their costs are also rising," says McMillin. "In our area, good farmland is becoming harder and harder to find, which makes it more competitive to rent or purchase ground that may be needed for future crops."

Nature underlies everything that emerges in the produce sector. Diane Smith, executive director, Michigan Apple Committee, Lansing, MI, says that although growing conditions have recently been fine, other factors influencing business have been a little tougher on growers.

"The weather so far has been good, as we always hope for a cold winter, then a gradual spring warm-up. The biggest factor in growers leaving the business is the cost of production, with labor costs being a huge chunk of that. Growers' production costs are exceeding their returns. I just returned from Washington, D.C., having attended USApple's Capitol Hill Day, and cost of production was just one of the topics we discussed with lawmakers." **pb**

## WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Michigan is the second largest producer of apples in the U.S., behind Washington. About 40% of the crop is processed into other products. Michigan apple slices and juice are two of the processed products that are seeing great success in the marketplace.

Diane Smith, Michigan Apple Committee, Lansing, MI

A majority of U.S. horseradish is grown in southwestern Illinois, so, while horseradish is popular in our area, we ship a large majority of our crop to the coasts, and it's distributed all throughout the U.S.

Matt McMillin, J.R. Kelly Co., Collinsville, IL

## ■ RETAILERS BRING NEW OPTIONS TO THE MIDWEST

In some cases, larger retailers are bringing new options to the Midwest, especially BJ's Wholesale Club, which has made the region a focal point for its growth. Although it stuck to the East Coast for many years, the past few years have seen extensive growth in the Midwest, making it a market where independent grocers, co-operatives, regional and transregional supermarket chains, supercenters and warehouse clubs all compete. Although Costco and Sam's Club are well established in the region, the more food-oriented BJ's is adding more clubs at a deliberate pace.

Meijer has been developing store concepts beyond its core supercenters and has introduced a new format to Independence Township, MI. Dubbed Independence Market, it is a smaller format store, at 50,000 square feet. The company developed a



Independence Market, the new neighborhood market concept by Meijer, opened April 30 in Clarkston, MI.

neighborhood market concept, first introduced in Detroit and later expanded in Michigan and then to Cleveland in 2023.

Meijer laid out the new Independence neighborhood market, which opened April 30, for ease of shopping, but with a broad assortment of everyday needs, but with an emphasis on local products.

"Independence Market is committed to serving our new neighbors with value and convenience that makes it easy to get in and out quickly," says Robert Lajcay, store director.

Still, Meijer hasn't given up on its core supercenter format, opening three in Ohio, May 8. It also has been expanding the grocery store concept outside of Michigan, with a new such store opening in Gary, IN, last spring.

Headquartered in Grand Rapids, MI, SpartanNash acquired Fresh Encounter, a 49-store supermarket chain serving Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky.





PHOTO COURTESY FRESH INNOVATIONS

# The 7 P's of Guacamole Merchandising

Applying the 7 P's of the marketing mix to prepared guacamole merchandising supports greater produce sales.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

**S**oaring avocado consumption is driving demand for prepared guacamole, and the produce department is a perfect fit for merchandising this fresh item.

Jay Alley, co-owner/vice president of sales at Fresh Innovations/¡Yo Quiero! Brands in Rhome, TX, says the avocado boom has contributed to the creation and sales of the prepared guacamole category. “Consumers purchase prepared guacamole because they don’t have to wait for avocados to ripen or spend time in the kitchen cutting, mashing and mixing.”

The refrigerated guacamole category has experienced significant growth over the last several years, with a four-year compounded annual growth rate for sales growth of 5.7% and 4.2% for volume, according to Chris Monahan, senior brand manager of refrigerated dips for MegaMex Foods (WHOLLY brand) in Orange, CA. “Promoting the category will help acquire and retain consumers to ensure continued growth.”

While guacamole is sold in both deli and produce, sales have steadily shifted to produce over the past 20 years, and “it now outsells

deli,” says Ardy Haerizadeh, senior vice president sales and operations at Calavo in Santa Paula, CA. “Placing ready-to-eat guacamole in produce aligns with shoppers’ fresh and healthy mindset, enhancing their experience and increasing basket size.”

Reyna Graves, director of merchandising vegetables and floral at Sprouts Farmers Market in Phoenix, AZ, with more than 440 stores, explains offering guacamole in the produce department makes it easy for shoppers to discover a ready-to-eat option. “By positioning guacamole alongside fresh avocados and complementary ingredients, we create a seamless shopping experience that highlights both convenience and inspiration.”

Focusing on seven key elements can boost the category.

## 1. PRODUCT

The prepared guacamole category offers a plethora of products. “Variety in both flavors and packaging sizes is essential to meeting the evolving needs of today’s shoppers,” says Graves. “Consumers seek options that fit their unique preferences — whether classic guacamole, a spicy kick, or a more adventurous flavor blend.”

Prepared guacamole has two types of packaged executions, explains Joshua Kusske, director of new product development, Fresh Del Monte in Coral Gables, FL. “These are HPP (high-pressure processed) versions and fresh-prepared versions. Fresh Del Monte provides fresh prepared guacamole, with or without pico de gallo, and no artificial ingredients, delivering homemade taste and creamy texture.”

GoVerden products, made in Plano, TX, are an example of the utilization of the HPP process, which allows an extended shelf life without the use of any chemicals or additives, explains Rick Joyal, vice president of sales. “GoVerden Guacamole and GoVerden Perfectly Ripe Avocado are also non-GMO Project certified.”

The Mango Habanero Guacamole of La Bonanza Avocados in Mission, TX, features a blend of two fresh fruits and a variety of spices. “This makes it an ideal fit for the produce category,” says Valeria Villaseñor, vice president of commercial.

Calavo’s flavors range from classic mild to chunky guacamole with fresh chopped veggies and an extra-spicy option for heat lovers, says Haerizadeh.



MegaMex's WHOLLY brand launched several new products in the last year, starting with WHOLLY Guacamole Extra Chunky Restaurant Style.

¡Yo Quiero!s guac flavors include Original, Chunky, Chunky Spicy Hatch Chile and Avocado Salsa Verde, according to Tara Murray, vice president of marketing at Fresh Innovations. "Our lightly branded products in fresh-cut containers match the products in the produce fresh-cut set," she says.

Mix pouches can be merchandised next to fresh avocados for shoppers making their own guacamole. "Concord's Fresh Success Guacamole Mix makes it easy to prepare perfectly seasoned guacamole," says Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager at Fresh Gourmet Company in Westlake Village, CA. "Our newest guacamole mix is organic."



PHOTO COURTESY MEGAMEX FOODS

Chris Monahan, senior brand manager of refrigerated dips for MegaMex Foods (WHOLLY brand) in Orange, CA, says the refrigerated guacamole category has experienced significant growth over the last several years, with a four-year compounded annual growth rate for sales growth of 5.7% and 4.2% for volume.

## 2. PACKAGING

Packaging supports different usage occasions, from single-serve portions for on-the-go snacking to larger sizes for gatherings and meal prep, states Graves. "By offering a range

of choices, Sprouts is not only enhancing shopper convenience and discovery, but also ensuring guacamole remains an accessible and versatile staple for all kinds of consumers."

Shoppers often evaluate the occasion when purchasing guacamole. "This determines the size of the product they want to purchase," says Monahan. "From single-serve minis, perfect for snacking or on-the-go meal occasions, to 7-ounce cups for a family taco night, to a 15-ounce cup for entertaining, each of these sizes plays an important role in delivering incremental purchases to the category."

Carrying more size offerings increases sales, agrees Jim Sullivan, produce merchandiser at Yoke's Fresh Markets in Spokane, WA, with 19 stores.

"The party sizes work for gatherings and the individual sizes for people to snack or take in lunches," he says. "The individual ones also work well for smaller household sizes that only need a single serving at a time. For New Year's, Super Bowl, Cinco, we promote 15-ounce tubs, but we promote 8-ounce tubs for regular fall football weekends."

Calavo has introduced a unique Guacamole Squeeze Pouch. "This newest product offers the convenience of a ketchup squeeze bottle, but in a clear pouch, allowing visibility and mess-free dispensing, and staying green for two weeks after opening," says Haerizadeh.

## 3. PLACEMENT

Successful merchandising places product for visibility, but also considers refrigeration requirements. "Merchandising requires a combination of visual appeal, freshness and strategic placement to attract customers and boost sales," says Nuno Baptista Miranda, Fresh Del Monte senior brand manager.

Since prepared guacamole requires refrigeration, Sprouts prioritizes refrigerated endcaps or coolers in the produce section to maintain peak freshness, according to Graves. "Guacamole kits, depending on their ingredients, may be displayed in ambient produce sections, but those with pre-cut ingredients require refrigeration."



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Consumers purchase prepared guacamole for convenience — they don't have to wait for avocados to ripen or spend time cutting, mashing and mixing.

Cross-merchandising adds ring and offers convenience to customers. Mixes, such as Concord Foods products, can be placed in fresh avocado displays. “Build displays with the customer in mind. What other items are they buying?” says McCaul. “The best placement is on the shelf, adjacent to relevant fresh produce items.”

Secondary merchandising displays, especially during key promotional times, create visibility for consumers and draw attention to the category, suggests Monahan. “Increasing visibility of the category during key consumption periods benefits continued category growth.”

Since prepared guacamole must be refrigerated, ¡Yo Quiero’s Alley recommends cross-merchandising by building around the product. “Create multi-product displays at the front of the store using refrigerated cases,” he suggests.

Sullivan at Yoke’s uses ice tables during big promotions, as well as refrigerated tables. “We capture extra sales by putting tables in a prominent position in the front of the store where there is heavier traffic,” he says. “You can tie in chips, salsas, and other sizes and flavors.”

#### 4. PEOPLE

Merchandising to specific demographics also builds sales. “It’s important to understand the specific audience and tailor promotions accordingly,” says Fresh Del Monte’s Baptista. “For example, younger generations tend to respond to social media campaigns and interactive content, while older audiences tend to prefer traditional media. It’s also important to tailor the messaging and design according to the target.”

Age-wise, Haerizadeh suggests focusing on fun, healthy snacking with convenient guacamole packs for families and children. “For Millennials and Gen Z, highlight trendy flavors, sustainability and convenience.”

For ethnic shoppers, focus on authenticity. “Hispanic consumers may respond well to

authentic flavors and traditional pairings,” says La Bonanza’s Villaseñor. “But, targeted promotions highlighting freshness, quality and flavor can resonate across various demographics.”

For seniors and health-conscious consumers promote health, says Concord’s McCaul. “Emphasize benefits such as heart health and brain function.”

#### 5.&6. PRICING AND PROMOTION

A variety of price and promotion strategies support the category. “Price promotions tied

to peak consumption events are most effective, including BOGOs, TPRs, social media and influencer campaigns, digital coupons, and Instacart promotions,” says Calavo’s Haerizadeh.

Use live demos and sampling to introduce shoppers to new flavors, recommends Villaseñor, and signage and messaging should emphasize freshness, quality and versatility. “In 2025, digital marketing will be a major focus for La Bonanza. Promotional strategies, such as targeted digital coupons, loyalty program discounts, and limited-time bundle deals can

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## WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Develop displays that guarantee freshness first, visual appeal and with proper and optimal placement near high traffic areas.

Nuno Baptista Miranda, Fresh  
Del Monte, Coral Gables, FL

help drive trial and repeat purchases.”

The WHOLLY brand engages consumers from traditional media outreach to social media content to digital ads. “For in-store activations, we recommend working with a sales representative to find the optimal utilization of trade dollars for stores,” says Monahan.

¡Yo Quiero!s push-pull strategy works well to increase trial and multiple purchases, explains Murray. “We provide trade deals allowing retailers to offer the product at a great price, then work with media networks to provide digital coupons to increase purchase incentives,” she says. “We do this at strategic times of year to drive sales and increase brand awareness.”

### 7. PROCESS

Though guacamole has peak holiday demand, stores should consider their process year-round. “Usually, we see peak promotional activities during key holidays and events that drive high demand,” says Fresh Del Monte’s Kusske. “Examples include football championship games, Cinco de Mayo, Easter, summer holidays, Mother’s Day and Memorial Day.”

¡Yo Quiero! focuses much of its promotion dollars on high avocado consumption holidays, says Murray. It provides retailers with “great deals to create excitement on the shelf,” she adds. “These holidays are very exciting at retail, and retailers do a great job highlighting just the right products.”

Though sales spike during these periods, avocados and guacamole are also key components of a healthy diet, Villaseñor notes. “This makes them a great option for year-round promotions alongside other better-for-you products, such as hummus and plant-based dips.”

Spring and summer are a constant growth period and hold for a longer time than major sporting events or holidays, asserts GoVerden’s Joyal. “Bathing suit season is ideal for creating long-term shopping habits for light, healthy and convenient food options.”

**pb**



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# Six Sweet Ways to Sell More Mangos

Retailers should offer variety, organics, value packaging, impulse-grabbing displays, and education to grow mango sales.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**M**ore mangos are finding a place on Americans' plates. While mangos represent less than 1% (0.79%) of total produce sales, as shared by the Orlando, FL-headquartered National Mango Board (NMB), the real story of this fruit's transformation from an exotic tropical into a kitchen staple is its intake and sales trajectory.

For one, per capita consumption of fresh mangos has almost doubled from 1.9 pounds in 2005 to 3.6 in 2023, based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service statistics. The NMB aims to double this again, targeting 7 pounds per person by 2030.

Secondly, dollar sales at retail have also nearly doubled from \$469.5 million in 2019 to \$776.8 million during the 52 weeks ending March 23, 2024, per Circana Integrated Fresh Market Advantage information.

Thirdly, in 2021, 22% of consumers purchased mangos, according to NMB data. This percentage grew to 23% in 2022 and 26% in 2023.

Steve Barnard, chief executive officer of Oxnard, CA-headquartered Mission Produce, hit the nail on the head last year when he wrote in an article on Mission's website, "Mangos are the next avocados."

The company, a world leader in Hass avocados, introduced its year-round mango program in 2021.

"Mangos are the world's most popular fruit," says Mathew Forbes, category manager at Weis Markets, a 200-plus store chain headquartered in Sunbury, PA. "We knew by promoting mangos, we'd appeal to a wide range of our customers."

Retailers can reap the benefits of consumers' mango mania by offering greater variety, organics, value packaging, impulse-grabbing displays, education, and promotion to grow fruit sales.

## 1. GO FOR GREATER VARIETY

Tommy Atkins is the variety Weis Markets offers most of the year. "A consistent flavor and eating experience allows customers to have



Mangos work well in large, vibrant, front-of-store displays. In the U.S., per capita consumption of fresh mangos has almost doubled from 1.9 pounds in 2005 to 3.6 in 2023.

PHOTO COURTESY CIRILLI BROTHERS

the same great experience every time they purchase," Forbes says.

At Big Y Foods, Inc., an 80-store chain headquartered in Springfield, MA, and the NMB's Mango Retailer of the Year for 2024, the main varieties stocked are Honey/Ataulfo, Keitt, Kent and Tommy Atkins, says Adam Hession, director of produce and floral. "We've also experimented with larger mangos."

Red mangos (Tommy Atkins) represent over half (57.3%) of mango sales, up 1.7% in the last year, according to data shared by the NMB. Yellow mangos (Honey/Ataulfo) are at 14.6%, down 0.8% from the year prior, while green mangos (Keitt and Kent) represent 7.5%, down 0.7%.

"Ataulfo sales have increased in the U.S. Northeast and Midwest due to this mango's creamy texture," says Annabell Vidal, chief executive officer of dVida, in Houston, TX.

Haden and Palmer are among the top varieties favored in South Florida for their local cultivation and freshness, according to Denise Gomez, marketing manager for J&C Trop-

icals, in Doral, FL, which sources fruit from seven Central and South American countries. "Sweeter varieties, like the Francis and Ataulfo, are more popular in the northeastern states."

It's becoming more common for retailers to offer both large mangos and smaller varieties, like the yellow Ataulfos, according to Cindy Swanberg Schwing, vice president of marketing for Splendid by Porvenir, in Nogales, AZ, which markets its yellow mangos under the Jaguar brand.

"They decide on the size that brings them the price point they need to set. As the industry has PLUs for different-sized mangos, checking out simply means scanning the PLU stickers, making measuring the volume of mangos sold in different sizes much easier."

In March 2024, Goldenberry Farms introduced its palm-sized Sweet Sugar Mangos to the U.S. market. Its marketing campaign, "We're Small, Sweet, and Easy to Eat," spotlights the fruit's distinctive qualities: small size, exceptional sweetness with a brix of 22, and ease of consumption.



## merchandising review

### ► Mangos

According to Michelle Anders, communications manager for the Miami, FL-based business, the small fruit is available from April to August, sourced from microclimates across Latin America, including Colombia and Ecuador.

Sugar Baby Mangos, sourced from Peru from March to May, are among the 14 mango varieties sold by Melissa's/World Variety Produce.

"There's an increase in mangos imported to the U.S. from countries like Vietnam and Australia," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for the Vernon, CA-headquartered specialty produce supplier.

For example, Pink and Golden Elephant, R2E2, and Hoa Loc mangos are all available year-round from Vietnam.

"The industry is seeing demand rise for varieties, like Mallika, Nam Doc Mai, and Kiew," says Nissa Pierson, sales and marketing direction for the organic mango program at Crespo Organics/RCF Distributors LLC, in Rio Rico, AZ. "These are flavor-forward, seasonal mangos the Crespo family grows in Mexico that offer something new to curious and health-minded shoppers."

#### 2. OFFER ORGANICS

According to NMB data, conventional mangos represent 95.6% of sales, up 0.4% from the year prior, while organic mangos are at 4.4%, down 0.4%.

Organic mangos are available year-round, with supplies from Mexico as the primary source from March to September, and Peru and Ecuador supplying from October to February. However, the availability may fluctuate due to weather conditions and certification processes, says Gary Clevenger, managing member and co-founder of Freska Produce International, LLC, in Oxnard, CA.

In April, Crespo Organics introduced its new promotion, Mango Wellness Month, which educates consumers on organic as part of a healthier eating, farming community, and soil. The company is one of the only direct-trade organic mango programs functioning at scale, delivering traceability and fairness in every box.

#### 3. SWEETEN SALES WITH VALUE-PACKS

Packaged mangos represent over one-quarter (25.2%) of retail sales, based on NMB-provided data.

According to the Numerator Shopper Comparison Report for the 12 months ending March 31, 2025, which Mission Produce shared, 19% of mango spending occurred at club stores in 2024. Shoppers are gravitating toward value-packed options.



PHOTO COURTESY WEIS MARKETS

The National Mango Board named Weis Markets Mango Retailer of the Year in 2023. The primary reason was for the retailer's mango education efforts. Weis had a team of dietitians that partnered with the National Mango Board and worked to educate customers via multiple information platforms. The team shared recipes, talked about health benefits, and shared information about mangos.

"We launched a retail-ready mango pack earlier this year. This pack features an in-season round mango variety in a 4-count or 3-count stand-up pouch. Easy to merchandise for the retailer and grab and go for the shopper," says Diana McClean, Mission's director of marketing and communications.

#### 4. BUILD IMPULSE-GRABBING DISPLAYS

Start with ripe mangos to build displays.

"We've pioneered custom ripe mango programs across the U.S.," says Jennifer Anazawa, Mission Produce's trade and category development director. "One retail partner saw household penetration and purchase frequency climb in regions with a ripe program versus those without."

Large, vibrant, front-of-store displays help sell more mangos, says J&C Tropicals' Gomez.

Don't limit mangos to only tropical displays, adds Crespo's Pierson. "Mangos work well in large, stand-alone displays and cross-merchandised next to other produce, like fresh herbs, to remind shoppers of how good they are in spring and summer salads."

Mangos are a stone fruit and belong with the other summer stone fruit displays.

"Merchandising mangos with peaches, plums, and nectarines encourages shoppers to shift their mindset, whether reaching for something familiar or discovering something new," says Mission Produce's McClean.

Also, pair mangos with avocados at retail. According to the Numerator Basket Affinity Report shared by Mission, baskets with avocados and mangos are 66% greater in value than the average produce basket for the 12 months ending March 31, 2025.

#### 5. EDUCATE WITH USAGE TIPS

According to the NMB, the main barrier to mango purchase is a lack of mango educa-

tion. Education was one of the primary reasons why the NMB named Weis Markets Mango Retailer of the Year in 2023.

"Our team was able to share recipes, talk about health benefits, and share information about the power of the mango," says Forbes.

The NMB offers retailers evergreen point-of-sale (POS) materials that showcase how to cut a mango, a ripeness meter for picking, and recipe ideation and usage information for mangos in everyday meals.

"We'll be introducing nutritional-based content soon," says Lavanya Setia, the NMB's marketing director.

Crespo Organics links display and education with its POS mango bins. Each is filled with QR codes that link to recipes, how-to's, social media contests, cooking classes, and general info on each variety.

"Innovatively, one of our favorite programs has been our grab-and-go recipe bundles. We visit stores to demo a mango recipe, then provide ready-to-go bags with all the ingredients featured in that dish. These bundles are a great way to cross-promote tropical produce alongside the retailer's private-label products — and shoppers love convenience and inspiration," says J&C Tropicals' Gomez.

#### 6. PROMOTE 12 MONTHS

There are two peak promotional periods for mangos when the volume is high, and pricing is typically low, says Freska International's Clevenger. "From May to July, Mexico has abundant supply to support aggressive promotions. In November and December, South American imports provide opportunities for holiday promotions."

Clevenger adds that effective mango promotions go beyond pricing, including storytelling of the fruit's journey from farm to table, health messaging, and tying promotions to cultural events that can increase engagement.

pb



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PHOTO COURTESY SPROUTS FARMERS MARKETS

Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida, Maitland, FL, holds a \$5,000 display contest each year. Retailers are challenged to build a display highlighting Florida-grown sweet corn with point-of-sale materials. Sprouts Farmers Market in Cumming, GA, took home the grand prize in 2024.

# Savor Summer Sweet Corn

Promotion and quality are the key to sweet corn sales.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

**S**weet corn is one of the delights of summer. Today, thanks to newer varieties, transportation and distribution systems with grower partnerships, quality sweet corn can

be enjoyed earlier in the season and is not limited to summer.

Plus, suppliers continue to package sweet corn with an eye toward greater convenience, as well as assurances to maintain quality.

## AVAILABILITY WIDESPREAD

Regional suppliers have networks of growers and distributors who, in turn, have associates who supply a wider area. For instance, Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of



Florida, Maitland, FL, includes over a dozen grower companies, as well as handler companies.

Stewart Mann, vice president/general manager, Pioneer Growers Cooperative Inc., Belle Glade, FL, says they are shipping all over the world, “with our corn hitting the shelf in every state in the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, and throughout Europe.”

“We are a year-round producer of sweet corn with growing regions in Florida, Georgia, Indiana, North Carolina, Virginia, New York and Honduras. While we have product 12 months of the year, we see peak production April 1 through Oct. 1.”

Christina Morton, director of communications at Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, on behalf of Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida, reports Florida sweet corn quality “is excellent this season due, in part, to factors such as favorable weather.”

At Twin Garden Sales, Harvard, IL, its network of growers allows for year-round supplies, according to Joel Hayes, president. “Here in South Florida, we’ll be shipping throughout May, and will have plenty on the Fourth of July. In mid-May, Georgia will be shipping.”

Cal-Organic Farms’ organic sweet corn is grown in the Southern California desert in Coachella and Thermal, as well as in Bakersfield, and is available May through June, supporting Memorial Day and July Fourth celebrations.

“Our corn ships from Lamont, CA, and can be consolidated on trucks with our full line of carrots, potato and vegetable items,” says David Bright, vice president of marketing, Cal-Organic Farms, Bakersfield, CA.

Nardelli Bros, Inc.-Lake View Farms, Cedarville, NJ., ships and tray packs corn year-round. “Our New Jersey harvest begins in late June, early July, and continues through late October before we transition to Georgia and Florida for the winter months and spring season,” says Bill Nardelli Jr., vice president of sales. At the New Jersey farm, Nardelli offers overnight shipping to many major cities.

## PACKAGING VARIES

Hayes says packaging often depends on retailers. “I have one grower who provides only trade packs. He goes to the largest chain stores. The size varies with the store — four mostly, five for some, and eight for the club stores.”

Bulk purchases of Florida sweet corn still represent the majority of volume, says Morton, but the popularity of tray-pack sweet corn continues to increase.

Hilary Long, vice president of sales and marketing, Frey Farms, Keenes, IL, points



The popularity of tray-pack sweet corn continues to increase, and consumers are willing to pay more for the husks to be removed.

out shoppers want convenience and value. “Consumers are willing to pay more for the husks to be removed.”

Frey Farms grows bicolor sweet corn in Bascom, FL, and will begin harvesting mid-May.

Nardelli has a good ratio between tray-pack sales and bulk corn sales, but says it can fluctuate depending on how the customer is marketing the corn. “As the weather warms up around the country, many retailers will offer bulk displays of corn to promote fresh harvested product, while still promoting and offering tray-pack options, as well for customer convenience.”

Pioneer Growers distributes in tray packs, bagged and bulk, depending on the customer’s needs, and also offer mini cob options. “The ways to eat sweet corn are endless,” says Mann. “The old favorites of grilling and boiling in the summer will always be a staple, but we offer microwave bags that are delicious and quick for the family on the go.”

Mann says Pioneer’s new elote (street corn) seasoning, found inside the tray pack, has been popular across all ages.

## QUALITY STIMULATES DEMAND

Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida’s Morton notes that sweet corn movement did

## WHAT THEY ARE Saying

We have seen that once a consumer sees sweet corn that does not have a green and healthy-looking husk, they will skip over the buying opportunity entirely, and we may not get them back.

Christina Morton, Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida,

The sweetness and quality of all three varieties is directly related to the timing of planting, harvesting, shipping and maintaining a cool temperature.

Hilary Long, Frey Farms, Keenes, IL



## procurement ► Sweet Corn

well last year, and there are some increases in retailers seeking out corn to tray pack, “so the quality of corn is continuing to meet retailer standards.”

Mann says over the past five years, they have seen “a large growth in the amount of sweet corn moving to our customers and recently started to get requests for a bit more organic.”

Morton observes when retailers run ads that have multiples of sweet corn and a comfortable price point, the consumer is going to pick up those multiple ears of corn instead of just one. “We also see that sweet corn might not necessarily be on a shopper’s grocery list every trip, but if the corn looks good and is priced right, they will buy it. When shoppers see it in the store, it’s tough not to buy Florida

sweet corn when the quality is as good as it is.”

Corn varieties destined for shipping have been characterized as having supersweet genes. The University of Florida’s breeding program has increased sugar content and a creamier corn taste by using a combination of genes.

Barry Rupp, sales manager of Rupp Seeds, Wauseon, OH, notes sweet corn breeders have done “an excellent job in improving eating quality and disease resistance.”

Wes Houghton, Seedway, Hall, NY, sweet corn and snap bean product manager, agrees. “Breeders have improved the quality of supersweets. In the last few years, they are more tender.”

### HANDLING AND PROMOTION

Sweet corn sold in the husk looks best when it is handled with care, including being

refrigerated and kept at a consistent moisture level, recommends Morton.

“We have seen that once a consumer sees sweet corn that does not have a green and healthy-looking husk, they will skip over the buying opportunity entirely, and we may not get them back.”

Keeping the husks looking green and healthy is achieved by storing it between 33 and 36 degrees Fahrenheit, keeping it at an ideal moisture level of 95%, keeping in a cooler on the retail floor or rotating it in and out of coolers for overnight storage, she advises.

Twin Gardens Sales’ Hayes also recommends consumers to keep it cold after buying. “Get the corn to the refrigerator in the house as soon as possible for the best flavor, vitamins, and eating experience.”



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Customers look at the color, kernel size, well-developed ears and whether it looks juicy when selecting sweet corn.

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The three types of sweet corn: bicolor, white and yellow have a similar sweetness and texture, while bicolor corn has more complexity due to the combination of colors, says Frey Farms' Long.

"Sweet corn has an optimal sweetness stage, and it's a short three-day window. We plant and harvest sweet corn more frequently based on this timeline, ensuring our corn moves quickly from the fields to our hydro-cooler, and with very little time or heat exposure to retail distribution centers," she says.

### LOOSE AND TRAY PACK

Adam Meier, produce manager, Cedar Rapids, IA, Fareway store, displays sweet corn in response to sales potential. When promoting for an event, summer holiday, or when the quality is especially appealing, the sweet corn is displayed at the first table in the produce section.

"The customers look for the color, kernel size, well-developed ears and whether it looks juicy. That's important to them."

Local corn arrives in July, and Meier displays it loose and in store-trimmed, five-count tray packs. The store stocks corn year-round, but he says in the winter, it is not displayed as prominently. The store's weekly flyer also illustrates their store-made fresh sweet corn salsa.

Family-owned Fareway, Johnston, IA, has 140 stores in seven Midwest states.

At the Champaign, IL, Niemanns store, Produce Manager Jeremy Williams reports customers buy sweet corn all year, "but it is more popular in the summer."

The store assembles tray packs of five ears, but bulk is available, as well. In the summer, Florida is the supplier, but in the off-season, the corn is shipped from Mexico. Niemann Foods, Inc., Quincy, IL, has over 100 stores in six Midwest states.

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The pull of organic, a move to more flavorful leaf combinations, and sustainable packaging, all presented in an easy-to-purchase format, can keep the organic salad blends category contributing to overall produce sales.

# Four Ways to Sell More Organic Salad Blends

The organic salad blends category continues to contribute to overall produce sales.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**S**mall, but still mighty, is a great way to describe organic salad blends.

Conventional packaged salads accounted for more than two-thirds (76.2%) of U.S. category revenues in 2024, according to the *Packaged Salad Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report, 2023-2030*, by Grand View Research Inc., based in San Francisco, CA.

However, the organic packaged salad market is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4% from 2025 to 2030. According to the report, consumers' desire for clean, wholesome eating experiences that are convenient, ready-to-eat, and meet taste preferences, plus environmentally responsible practices, fuel this growth.

"Organic salads are the largest part of most stores' organic offering, although organics in the Midwest are not as popular as in other parts of the country," says Mike Roberts, vice

president of produce operations for Harps Food Stores Inc., a Springdale, AR-headquartered chain with 151 supermarkets in six states. "However, we offer a good variety of organic salads in our stores, including the blends, and they seem to be popular with health-conscious customers and those seeking convenience."

More specifically, organic blends have stayed flat (+0.2%) over the last six years, with dollar growth of +1.9%, due to recent price increases, based on data shared by Fresh Express Inc., a Salinas, CA-headquartered fresh salad subsidiary of Chiquita Brands International.

Organic blend units increased by 11.7% in 2020, the first pandemic year, and then, over the next four years, decreased to 2019 levels. Overall, the organic blend share of the category has reduced slightly, with a unit share decline from 17% to 16% over the last few years.

The pull of organic, a move to more flavorful leaf combinations in these products, and sustainable packaging, all presented in an easy-to-purchase format, can keep the organic salad blends category continuing to contribute to overall produce sales.

## 1. STOCK BEST-SELLERS

The most popular organic salad blends at Harps Food Stores, says Roberts, are types that include spinach, baby kale, spring mix and arugula.

Spinach remains the driving force in the organic salad blends category due to its taste, health benefits, and incredible versatility, according to Jenny Panziera, director of product, organic salad and Earthbound Farm brand for Taylor Farms, in Salinas, CA. "Spring mix continues to thrive as a tried-and-true favorite for salad bases, side dishes, and up-leveling wraps and sandwiches," Panziera says.



Panziera notes arugula consumption is growing and stands out in the core organic set as a variety that attracts premium consumers to the salad category. “We’ve seen success expanding arugula sales by adding the unique, flavor-forward Wild Red Arugula varietal exclusive to Earthbound Farm. Its spicier flavor profile and unique red veining have made it a hit among consumers. We are seeing a 27%+ increase in total arugula sales at retailers where we have launched this item.”

## 2. TRY SOMETHING NEW

Superfood-infused organic salad blends are gaining popularity for their added nutritional benefits and versatility, says Nicole Minnich-Zapata, marketing director for Misionero, in Monterey, CA, which grows and markets its Earth Greens brand of organic salad blends.

“Packed with nutrient-dense ingredients, these blends appeal to health-conscious consumers looking for functional foods,” says Minnich-Zapata. “Marketed as multi-purpose greens, they can be used in salads and sandwiches, wraps, and other meals, making them a convenient and value-driven choice for shoppers.”

She adds that consumer preferences for crispier, crunchier textures are shaping the organic salad category. “This is driving manu-

facturers to incorporate heartier into their blends, offering a more premium, restaurant-style eating experience, aligning with evolving shopper expectations.”

There hasn’t been much innovation in organic packaged salads, notes Sonali Anand, director of category management for Fresh Express. “However, some organic players are entering CEA (controlled environment agriculture) production, or some CEA suppliers are vying for ‘organic’ labels for their salads.”

A good example is Hippo Harvest, a San Francisco, CA-based grower, packer and shipper of packaged salads from its greenhouse facility in Pescadero. Last October, the company introduced its USDA-certified organic packaged salad product line.

“Shoppers don’t understand CEA grown outside of the Northeast, but they do know organic. Therefore, we are focused on a set of leafy greens purchased with high frequency, the organic certification consumer’s trust, plus better flavor with less bitterness than field-grown leaves, quality with a 21-day shelf life versus the 13-16 days of field grown, and fewer days out of stock because we grow in a controlled environment,” says Ivonna Dumanyan, chief business officer.

“The advantage of greenhouse-grown organic salad blends is that they are available

year-round and fill a supply gap in field grown. As a retailer, you need always to have these products on the shelf for your customers,” says Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations for Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL.

## 3. CALL OUT GREEN PACKAGING

Sustainable packaging options are something consumers demand for products like organic salad blends.

“Earthbound Farm plant-based trays are off to a great start in over 800 stores, with continued expansion in the U.S. and Canada,” says Taylor Farms’ Panziera. “Velocities have been strong, consumer feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and total spinach and spring mix sales have grown everywhere we’ve launched these products.”

Julio Silva, produce manager for Taylor Farms, says in addition to reducing plastic by 34-44%, “our peel-and-reseal packaging has been phenomenal for quality and freshness, as it enables modified atmospheres tailored to the particular blends inside. We are also looking to expand our use of plant-based trays and pilot compostable film options.”

Boskovich Farms’ Fair Earth Farms brand of organic salad blends, which includes Spring Mix and Power greens, come packaged in fully

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# ORGANIC SALAD LEAF



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMIE TENZER PHOTO

compostable bags, according to Don Hobson, vice president of sales and marketing for the Oxnard, CA-based company. “The bags are made from plant-based materials and printed using water-based inks that will break down into organic soil.”

#### 4. SELL MORE

Organic bagged salads, including blends, are grouped together at many retailers served by Charlie’s Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers in the Pacific Northwest as Metropolitan Market, as well as larger chains such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts. According to Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist, they are either together on the left or the right of the bagged salad set, with a slight gap between to set them apart.

Harps Food Stores use doored refrigerated displays to showcase the blends at eye level, often adjacent to salad dressings or croutons for cross-merchandising, says Roberts.

The benefit of organic salad blends versus kits is that shoppers will buy other ingredients to build their salads, adds Sunset Foods’ Mastromauro. “That means sales of other produce, like organically grown cucumbers and tomatoes and organic salad dressings.”

Retailers should also consider sampling. “Crunch Test” sampling stations let

customers experience the crisp texture of the leaves,” says Misionero’s Minnich-Zapata.

Hippo Harvest utilizes a three-prong sampling approach to build purchases and repeat sales. “We do first-party demos using our staff. This has resulted in three times higher sales than a third-party sampling company or hiring hourly demo staff,” says Dumanyan.

“Then, we sample the leaves without dressing first so customers can experience the sweet taste without a bitter aftertaste. Finally, we’ll use three or four ingredients to demo our lettuces as a simple recipe to provide inspiration and a QR code to the recipe.”

Promotions of organic salad blends at Harps Food Stores include deals, in-store signage, and digital marketing emphasizing health benefits, says Roberts. “We are also working on ‘Buy One, Get One Free’ promotions.”

The retail price difference between 5-ounce organic and conventional salad blends should typically be 50 cents, both every day and on promotion, according to Fresh Express’ Anand. “However, this has been narrowing, leading shoppers to switch from conventional to organic blends. Since the pandemic, organic blends have been priced more attractively than conventional blends, which has furthered the decline of conventional blends.”

## WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

With a balanced combination of tastes, textures, and colors, spring mix provides convenience and a beautiful presentation on the plate.

Jenny Panziera, Taylor Farms, Salinas, CA

For larger pack sizes, organic blends could be \$1 higher than conventional blends, Anand adds. However, the family-size conventional blend business is only one-third the volume of the organic.

“We expect consumers to stay price sensitive in 2025, therefore promotions for organic salad blends should move from multiple deals (3 for \$X or 2 for \$Y) in prior years to single unit deals (50 cents off 1 unit) for a lower ring at checkout,” says Anand. “Additionally, meal deals like ‘salad + rotisserie chicken,’ or ‘salad with pizza/pasta for a family of 4 under \$x’ or cross-promotions like ‘salad with cherry tomatoes and dressing’ will perform well during these inflationary times.”

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# Rethinking Raisins: Strategies for Boosting Produce Sales

Merchandising and strategic positioning in the produce department can breathe new life into raisin sales.

BY JILL NETZEL

**R**aisins have long been a staple in households across America — a classic snack and baking ingredient that evokes tradition, nostalgia and simple goodness. Yet, in the highly competitive retail landscape, raisins can get overshadowed by trendier dried fruits or newer snack offerings.

But savvy merchandising and strategic positioning in the produce department can breathe new life into raisin sales. With their naturally sweet profile, affordability and versatility, raisins are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of value-conscious, health-driven, and convenience-seeking consumers.

## A LITTLE HISTORY

The year 1988 marked the peak of raisin popularity in the U.S., with per-person consumption reaching 2.5 pounds. This was likely influenced by the widespread appeal of the “California Raisins” commercial campaign, which debuted in 1986.

However, present-day raisin consumption is down. According to Circana household panel data, the percentage of households and buyers, both first-time and repeat purchasers, is declining.

Recent Circana data underscores the urgency of reinvigoration efforts. Year-to-date, total raisin volume (MULO+) is down by over 800,000 pounds. Notably, 64% of this decline stems from losses in incremental volume — a sign that promotional efforts can help refresh the category.

## MERCHANDISING THAT MOVES PRODUCT

Retailers are increasingly focused on solution-based merchandising — displaying products as part of a broader use occasion. For raisins, this could mean showcasing with oatmeal, yogurt or baking ingredients.

“Raisins are very versatile and can be used as a component of snacks, such as granolas, trail mixes and cookies,” explains Stephanie



There's sales potential for raisins when they are displayed and sold in the produce department, where health and impulse buys converge.

Blackwell, president of Aurora Products Inc., an Orange, CT-based packager of all-natural and organic dried fruits, nuts, trail mixes, salad toppings and granolas.

“They are fairly inexpensive, yet healthy. Dried cranberries, blueberries and cherries usually contain added sugar of some sort. Raisins, however, are naturally sweet and do not have any added sugars,” she says.

## NUTRITIONAL EDGE

Traditionally, raisins have been shelved in the baking aisle or center store. But there's untapped potential in treating them more like a perimeter snack item — especially in the produce department where health and impulse buys converge.

“Raisins can and should live in the produce department,” says Blackwell. “They complement fresh fruits and nuts and align with the same shopper mindsets.”

Morton Williams Supermarket, in Bronx, NY, sells raisins with its private label in the produce department, says Marc Goldman, produce director. “It does well there, but I think people tend to go more toward Sun-Maid and other popular brands in the grocery department.”

Small, eye-catching displays in the produce section — featuring raisins alongside apples, oranges or bananas — can encourage cross-category purchases. Trail mix kits or snack station endcaps are another winning tactic.

“Raisins are shelf-stable, nutritious and versatile. They fit right into the perimeter if you give them the right spotlight,” says Blackwell.

Aurora Products adds raisins to its all-natural Berry Nutty Mix and Cranberry Health Mix. “Raisins are probably the most-used ingredient in trail mixes,” says Blackwell.



“Most people like them. They are naturally sweet without the detailed processing and hydration with sugar or some other sweetening additive. They are also one of the less costly components in a trail mix that allows the snack to be more affordable to the consumer.”

Portion-controlled packaging is gaining momentum, particularly in the back-to-school season or among on-the-go shoppers. Single-serve boxes or resealable stand-up pouches offer convenience and help reduce food waste.

Clear or window packaging also builds trust, allowing shoppers to judge product quality for themselves. Sustainable packaging, whether recyclable, compostable or made from post-consumer materials, is increasingly a purchase driver, as well.

## NEW FLAVOR PROFILES

Sun-Maid Raisins, one of the largest raisin and dried fruit processors in the world, is a name synonymous with raisins and recognized by its iconic little red box. Sun-Maid remains the largest player in the category, with a 70%-dollar market share of raisins in retail, according to Steve Loftus, chief executive officer, Sun-Maid Growers of California, Fresno, CA.

“For over 100 years, Sun-Maid has continued to evolve, with the humble raisin at its core — expanding into organic offerings, specialty dried fruits, and premium snacks, like our newest line, Sun-Maid Farmstand Reserve,” says Loftus.

The Sun-Maid Farmstand Reserve product line is positioned as “the grown-up fruit snack” for its curated and unique selections of sweet, dried fruit. The collection includes Dried Mixed Berries, Sea Salt Chocolate Flavored Coated Banana Chips, Dried Whole Cranberries and Sea Salt Cocoa & Caramel Dusted Raisins.

According to a consumer response on their website, “The raisins are more delicious. The caramel flavor really pops ... I love the indi-



Aurora Products, Orange, CT, adds raisins to its all-natural Berry Nutty Mix (left). Sun-Maid Growers of California, Fresno, CA, has a product line, Sun-Maid Farmstand Reserve, that is positioned as “the grown-up fruit snack.” The line includes mixes like Sea Salt Cocoa & Caramel Dusted Raisins.

vidual packaging for the on-the-go snacking. Very happy with these.”

In addition to traditional California Sun-Dried Raisins, Sun-Maid offers other specialty dried fruit, like dried mango, dates and apricots, as well as yogurt-covered raisins in several flavors, says Loftus.

## UNDERSTANDING ORGANIC

There is a demand for organic raisins, however it doesn't match the enthusiasm seen for organic figs or dates.

“We supply both organic and conventional raisins, and, while there's some interest in organics, it's not as strong as you would expect. People seem to gravitate more toward organic figs and dates,” says Blackwell. “We're not sure why — perhaps it's consumer perception. Raisins already feel ‘natural’ to many.”

This opens a door for retailers to educate consumers. Using in-store signage or online content to explain how organic farming practices benefit soil, sustainability and health can help increase demand.

“We also sell private label organic raisins,” says Goldman. “The demand for organic is much less than conventional.”

Also, placing organic raisins near other

organic dried fruits, especially figs and dates, can promote trial. “It's about context,” says Blackwell. “When people see them together, it creates a halo effect.”

## COMPETING WITH PRIVATE LABEL

Private label volume share is increasing, but branded raisins can still win on quality, sourcing transparency, packaging innovation and consumer trust. According to Circana data, private label (28% volume share) is up in incremental volume (+33K pounds); however, down in base volume (-300 pounds).

“In our produce department, almost all the dry fruit and nuts are private label,” explains Goldman.

Blackwell says her “biggest competition is private label, particularly for commodity categories like raisins.”

To differentiate from private label, brands and retailers can focus on quality and emotional value. Consumers are increasingly label-conscious, so emphasizing non-GMO verification, organic certification, or family-farm sourcing can tilt purchase decisions in favor of branded options.

Retailers can use branded products as a tiered pricing strategy — offering value, mid-range and premium options to appeal to a broader shopper base. This also reinforces a perception of choice and quality in the produce aisle.

Raisins may be one of the oldest dried fruits at retail, but with new product innovations and on-the-go snacking demand for health-conscious consumers, raisins are the ideal product to move from the shelf and into the produce section.

With the right mix of merchandising, education, packaging and promotion, raisins can claim their rightful spot as a high-performing, health-forward, and impulse-worthy item in the produce department.

pb

## ■ TOP TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE DISPLAY & MERCHANDISING

- **Create destination displays:** Pair raisins with complementary products, like granola, trail mix components or breakfast items.
- **Use vertical blocks by brand or variety to create impact and ease decision-making:** Grouping organic and conventional raisins separately, while using color blocking to draw the eye, allows consumers to compare offerings and make quick decisions.
- **Highlight health benefits with signage:** Emphasize “no added sugar,” “natural sweetness,” or “high in fiber.”
- **Cross-merchandise with value:** Raisins can be positioned as a cost-effective alternative to pricier dried fruits.
- **Seasonal tie-ins:** Back-to-school, holiday baking, and healthy new year snacking are key promotional windows.





## Exceeding Expectations Should Be Standard

BY STEPHANIE TRAMUTOLA

It's Sunday night, and it's showtime at the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market in the Bronx, NY. Wholesalers are gearing up for the week ahead. Sunday is the busiest day, with inventory being restocked and trucks unloading the majority of the week's shipments.

Wholesalers diligently prepare orders for the upcoming days, dedicated to the mission of meeting every customer's needs by offering the highest-quality produce.

Warehouses should be continuously stocked and replenished, ensuring the freshest produce is always available at any given time. As the bulk of shipments arrive on Sunday, this is a crucial day for the sales team to execute.

"Sunday is full throttle for us. We've replenished our stock. It's Day One, our clean slate," says Mike Castro, fruit salesman at A&J Produce Corp.

Typically, the shift should begin by walking through the warehouse and evaluating each item. Because A&J's produce comes from all over the world, we thoroughly examine the condition of every pallet to ensure nothing was damaged during transit. Each package that arrives carries a story shaped by its origin, and it is our job to carefully inspect and preserve its quality.

This level of attention should extend into every interaction we have with the product. It's not enough to just look, we should engage all our senses by touching, feeling and smelling, using our hands and nose to guide us, thoroughly analyzing each item to guarantee it meets premium standards. For example, fresh tomatoes should have a sweet, earthy smell. If the smell is off or unpleasant, that's a red flag that the tomato may be past its prime.

It is our job to preserve and maintain the shelf life of each item, while never sacrificing quality. We assess scent, size, shape and color, each of which plays a key role in determining optimal taste.

Customers should always be at the forefront of a wholesaler's mind. They rely on us to guide their purchasing decisions — we are their eyes and ears.

We recognize that what works for one customer may not suit another, and we must find the ideal fit. Our goal is to match the right products to each customer's unique needs, carefully finding a home for each item. Whether we're suggesting products for a promotional campaign or addressing specific requests, we keep our customers' best interests at heart. We're always thinking ahead, reaching out with, "I saw this, and thought of you."

Sales representatives should go beyond simply making sales — we are consultants, photographers, and advisers rolled into one. A significant part of our job involves documenting the quality of the products we offer.

Salesmen's cameras are filled with photos to give customers a clear view of the product's quality before it reaches them. The more we can anticipate our customers' needs and take the work off their shoulders, the more business we build. In this role, we're not just selling produce, we're building lasting, transparent relationships with those who rely on us.

While building trust and anticipating customer needs is essential, the fast-paced, high-energy environment of the market requires the team to stay agile and responsive at all times. Phones are ringing off the hook, and the intercom is buzzing — it's a lively atmosphere with constant action. There's no time for calculators here; salespeople are doing the math in their heads with ease and efficiency. They're on call 24/7, taking

orders, not just at their desks, but from anywhere. "I'm with you" is a common phrase as they juggle phone calls.

Whether on the work phone or their cell phones, multitasking is taken to the highest level. Each team member knows which call to take and when, ensuring seamless communication and coordination. Action is second nature to them. They move before being spoken to, anticipating needs and responding instantly.

Furthermore, as trusted wholesalers, our customers count on us to think ahead, act with purpose, and deliver lasting value. Guided by the principle "we are nothing without our customers," we stay sharp and responsive, providing the right solutions at the right time.

With deep expertise and a strong understanding of the market, we build relationships rooted in trust, transparency, and a shared commitment to excellence because exceeding expectations should be standard.

**pb**

*Stephanie Tramutola is the first female in the family working at A&J Produce Corp., Bronx, NY. The company was started in 1977 by her grandfather, John Tramutola, and his partners. Today, A&J Produce is one of the largest wholesalers of fresh fruit and vegetables in the Hunts Point Terminal Market, servicing New York and the northeast region.*





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# The Flavor Factor: Increasing Fresh Produce Consumption Using Taste, TikTok and Trends

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

**A**s chefs, we understand fresh produce is the heart of a great dish, not because it's healthy, but because of flavor. In today's culinary environment, food trends rise and fall at the speed of a swipe, and, after viewing, it will be flavor and deliciousness that reign supreme.

Social media platforms, especially TikTok, have become our modern tasting rooms, shaping the palates of Gen Z and setting the stage for future menu favorites. The hashtag #Foodie has racked up over 300 billion views on TikTok, showcasing recipes that celebrate taste, just as much as health. For fresh produce, this is an opportunity — not a challenge.

Gen Z's digital fluency means they are constantly on the hunt for food inspiration, often turning to viral trends like the "watermelon pizza" or the ubiquitous "avocado toast" craze. These creative, flavor-forward ideas have the power to turn a piece of fruit or a head of lettuce into a culinary sensation.

But here's the rub: As social media reshapes perceptions, we must ask ourselves: Can flavor outweigh the traditional healthy message when it comes to what gets ordered off the menu?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), per capita consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables dropped in 2023 for the first time in over 40 years. As a chef, and as an industry, that's a wake-up call.

Research, from groups like Tastewise, tells us that over 50% of Gen Z diners prioritize flavor and variety above health claims when making food choices. That's our affirmation to reimagine how we bring fresh produce to life on the screen, on the plate, and on the menu.

It starts with menu language. Forget "grilled Asian vegetable salad," and say hello to "Charred Broccolini with Sweet Chile Glaze and Toasted Sesame Crunch."

A dish must sound as indulgent, delicious and exciting as it tastes. This isn't just semantics, it is about crafting an experience that resonates with the diner before the plate hits the table.

Presentation is equally important. Plates need to spark the urge to snap a photo.

As chefs, we know the power of visual storytelling. Social media has turned every meal into a stage, and we need to elevate our presentations and make our produce the star of the show.

Visually stunning, delicious and healthy are not mutually exclusive. A colorful platter of fresh produce might catch the eye, but it's the unexpected flavor combinations — black garlic and miso-glazed butternut squash, brilliant red strawberries with peppery arugula and tangy balsamic, spicy mango salsa, or roasted cauliflower with golden raisins and harissa — that keep diners coming back.

Social media creators who highlight bold, creative ways to use fruits and vegetables are elevating the menu game, and it's up to us to continue to set the stage (or the plate) for their celebration of our kitchens.

To dive deeper into this challenge, consider the role of cultural influences. Gen Z is the most diverse generation in history, and their food preferences reflect that. Dishes that draw inspiration from global cuisines — like Thai green papaya salad or Mexican esquites with lime and chile — speak to their adventurous palates and a generation of travelers.

Highlighting these flavors on menus not only elevates fresh produce, but also connects with the cultural curiosity of a new generation of diners.

Education also plays a role. Diners are more informed than ever, but they may not realize the story behind their produce. Menus that tell the story of locally sourced fruits or highlight unique varieties can spark interest and add value.

For instance, a dish like "Heirloom Peach Salad with Burrata and Honey-Thyme Dressing" not only tantalizes the taste buds, but also celebrates the uniqueness of the ingredients, creating a deeper connection with diners. THIS is the avenue to promote LTOs and true seasonal specialties for their uniqueness and delectable contributions to the menu.

Chefs can also leverage the power of partnerships with influencers and content creators. Imagine a TikTok video that breaks down a signature fruit-based dessert step-by-step, sparking interest and encouraging viewers to try it themselves or visit the restaurant to taste the original.

According to the recent FMI *Power of Produce* report, 94% of produce shoppers are actively using social media platforms, and 36% are discovering new fruits and vegetables through digital channels.

Another strategy to counter the decline in fresh produce consumption is to reimagine the role of fruits and vegetables in plant-forward dishes. While the plant-based movement often focuses on meat substitutes, there is a growing opportunity to center dishes on the natural brilliance of produce. Highlighting fruits and vegetables in unexpected ways can intrigue diners and reframe how they think about fresh produce.

The bottom line is this: To capture the attention and loyalty of consumers, we must focus on flavor first; taste is the hook. By leaning into versatility, creativity and, above all, the joy of eating, we can put fresh produce back where it belongs — at the center of the plate.

As an industry, it is our job to lead the charge, and show fruits and vegetables are irresistible and stop leading with health attributes. Through thoughtful storytelling, innovative techniques, and a willingness to embrace bold flavors, we can create menus that not only reverse the decline in fresh produce consumption, but also redefine what it means to eat deliciously. **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.*

**Social media creators who highlight bold, creative ways to use fruits and vegetables are elevating the menu game.**





BY HUW BIRRELL

# Fruit and Veg Report Reveals Resilience Amid Economic Challenges

**A**lthough news stories and data-rich reports frequently cover farm production and venue performance in the hospitality industry, the essential role of wholesalers can stay hidden from view. This is why Fresho developed an annual, comprehensive report to provide unparalleled insight into the wholesale sector that bridges producers and venues throughout the U.K.

Based on anonymous platform data and insights from industry leaders, the inaugural Fruit and Veg report reveals an industry that is not merely surviving, but evolving strategically.

According to Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) data, vegetable production declined 4.9% in 2024, down to 2.2 million tonnes, while fruit production has dropped by 12% to 585,000 tonnes. This has intensified reliance on imports, which now account for 47% of vegetables and 84% of fruits in the U.K. market.

Simultaneously, operational costs are rising across the board. The withdrawal of COVID-era government support has led to business closures. The imminent National Insurance increases, and rising minimum wages compound these pressures.

Our first Fruit and Veg Report gives an insight into how wholesalers are handling these challenges.

## ADAPTION THROUGH EFFICIENCY

The average number of lines per order has consistently declined across all categories, with fruit and vegetable orders decreasing from 10.31 lines in 2021 to 9.69 lines in 2024. This reduction in order complexity suggests that venues are streamlining their purchasing decisions in response to cost pressures.

Despite these challenges, the sector's growth trajectory remains positive, with wholesalers demonstrating remarkable adaptability. Four key strategies have emerged:

1. Strategic purchasing to manage costs: More targeted, consolidated ordering;
2. Increased technology adoption: Digital ordering systems improving operational efficiency;
3. Growth in prepared items: Orders with prepared items (cut, diced, peeled) increased by nearly 30% from 2023 to 2024;
4. Diversification beyond produce: Many wholesalers expanding into adjacent categories like dairy and bakery.

## PRODUCT PREFERENCES EVOLVE

The consistency in top-ordered items tells an interesting story. Cucumber has maintained its position as the most frequently ordered item by line count from 2022 to 2024, followed consistently by lemons and bananas. When looking at volumes, citrus fruits dominate, with lemons and limes holding the top positions since 2022.

What's particularly noteworthy is milk's persistent presence in the top products list for fruit and vegetable suppliers. This highlights the opportunity for wholesalers to expand offerings into everyday essentials.

**As we navigate 2025, the U.K. fruit and vegetable wholesale sector continues to demonstrate impressive resilience.**

## THE SUSTAINABILITY DICHOTOMY

Fisher and Woods, a wholesale supplier interviewed for our report, highlighted tension in the market regarding sustainability.

"There's an interesting dichotomy. While some customers want pre-packaged products for value, others are rejecting extra packaging entirely. Chefs are increasingly conscious of their environmental impact and prefer reusable options over cardboard boxes," says Kevin Stanbridge, sales director at Fisher and Woods.

This sustainability focus extends to sourcing practices. As Matt Gummer, director at fresh produce wholesaler Zest Food Service, observes, "I believe it's important to continue increasing the number of local and U.K. suppliers we use. Food sourced from growers using more sustainable growing practices is increasingly important."

## THE CHEF'S PERSPECTIVE

The report also captures insights from the venues themselves.

Craig Rogan, executive head chef at Herd Steakhouse, notes changing consumer preferences: "We are seeing increased demand for wellness-focused options and 'greener' dishes, with more people conscious of leading healthier lifestyles."

Looking ahead to 2025, Rogan anticipates "a big push on back to basics, simplification of menus and a big push on lunchtime offerings."

## EMBRACING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY

As we navigate 2025, the U.K. fruit and vegetable wholesale sector continues to demonstrate impressive resilience. Those who can balance cost management with innovation and service quality will be best positioned for success.

Technology adoption is being driven by rising costs, but the overall growth in the industry is a testament to hard work and adaptability. More venues are streamlining communications with their suppliers, giving more visibility to their order history and allowing for smarter decisions.

As Gummer notes, "Many of our customers are moving to third-party ordering platforms to better manage their procurement processes. This has led to a significant increase in email orders over telephone orders, with over 50% now placed electronically."

The critical bridge between producers and venues remains strong, continuing to ensure that fresh, quality produce reaches the U.K.'s tables despite the challenging economic landscape. **pb**

*The Fresho U.K. Fruit and Veg Report provides unprecedented visibility into the wholesale sector. To read the full report, visit the Fresho website.*

*Huw Birrell is the co-founder of Fresho, a global order management platform that brings fresh food wholesalers closer to their customers.*



# California's Vallarta Supermarkets Celebrates 40 Years in 2025

Since its founding in 1985, Vallarta Supermarkets has grown from a small, family-run *carnicería* (butcher shop) in Van Nuys, CA, to a beloved supermarket chain with over 59 locations across California.

Established by the Gonzalez family, Vallarta was built on a commitment to providing high-quality, authentic products that celebrate the rich traditions of Mexico and Latin America.

What began as a specialty meat market quickly turned into a wide range of fresh and traditional offerings, from produce and tortillas to *cevichería* and juice bars. Through dedication to customer service, integrity, and community engagement over the past 40 years, Vallarta prides itself on being a trusted destination for families seeking fresh, authentic ingredients.

With more than 8,000 team members, Vallarta still honors its founding principles, while evolving to meet the needs of the diverse communities it serves. For 40 years, Vallarta Supermarkets has been more than a grocery store — it has been a pillar of community, culture and tradition.

Produce has played a crucial role in Vallarta Supermarkets' success and longevity over the



Vallarta Supermarkets was established by the Gonzalez family in 1985. The chain has grown from a small family-run shop in Van Nuys, CA, to a beloved supermarket chain with over 59 locations across California.

PHOTO COURTESY VALLARTA SUPERMARKETS

past 40 years, helping the brand become a trusted staple in the communities it serves. Fresh fruits and vegetables are at the heart of Latino cuisine and culture, making high-quality produce essential to Vallarta's mission of serving its customers with authenticity and excellence.

Vallarta sources its produce from both local U.S. growers and premium farms worldwide to ensure the best selection and freshness. From everyday necessities and seasonal Latino favorites to exotic fruits and

the latest market innovations, Vallarta offers a wide selection of certified organic and ethically farmed options at competitive prices.

From traditional staples, like tomatillos, chiles and plantains, to seasonal favorites, the supermarket helps families maintain culinary traditions, while also promoting health and wellness.

Vallarta's commitment to sourcing diverse, high-quality produce has helped foster

customer loyalty and reinforce the brand's reputation for excellence.

Beyond simply offering fruits and vegetables, Vallarta Supermarkets engages with the community through special promotions and partnerships with local farmers and suppliers. This focus on freshness, cultural connection, and community-centered service has been instrumental in Vallarta's growth and continued success over the past four decades. **pb**

## information showcase

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**MAY 2025**

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# Call for Innovative Product Entries

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High-volume buyers of produce and floral are constantly in search of items that will differentiate their stores and restaurants from the competition. But what is truly innovative and what will disrupt consumer buying behavior?

We invite all produce and floral suppliers to send us their most innovative products of 2025. Let us know why you think this product is innovative in less than 500 words.

Our editorial team will select the Top 10 items for recognition in our **November 2025 Cover of PRODUCE BUSINESS.**

Once the Top 10 items are announced, the produce industry at large will decide which item is the MOST INNOVATIVE PRODUCE ITEM OF 2025.

The final winner will be announced at this year's **New York Produce Show and Conference** and will be featured in our January 2025 issue of **PRODUCE BUSINESS.**

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**Contact for more information: [KWhitacre@ProduceBusiness.com](mailto:KWhitacre@ProduceBusiness.com) Phone: 561-994-1118, ext 101**



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