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• Produce Displays and Misting Systems

• The Art of Labeling and Bag Printing

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PROCUREMENT: Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio

REGIONAL PROFILE: Chicago

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THIS MONTH'S WINNER



PETER LETSO
Retired Produce Buyer
Hillsborough, NJ

Peter Letso began his career at Acme Markets in North Plainfield, NJ, in 1974. It was his first real job. "I eventually wound up in the produce department as the produce manager, paraprofessional produce trainer, division produce specialist and division produce buyer, which ultimately defined my career," says Letso.

He spent 16 years of his 46-year career at Acme, followed by 13 years at Wakefern Food Corporation (ShopRite Supermarkets). Other supermarket industry stops included Twin County Grocers (Foodtown Supermarkets), and RLB Food Distributors (Kings Super Markets, D'Agostino). "I also gained valuable wholesaler experience at D'Arrigo New York."

He says his stint at SunBasket, a once-popular meal kit startup, was an "entirely unconventional and unique experience."

The last several years of his career were spent in the foodservice industry, with stops at

US Foods, Maximum Quality Foods and Ferraro Foods, all in the Garden State. "Nowadays, I'm offering my very particular set of skills as a produce consultant and specialist."

He says the favorite thing about his career was the sense of accomplishment he felt at the end of every workday. "Numerous steps must be taken in order to get fresh produce delivered to the hands of the American consumer, steps that many people are simply not aware of. Every day poses new and oftentimes difficult challenges."

Since semi-retirement, Letso enjoys watching movies with his wife, Cathy; sons, Tim and Chris; and daughter-in-law, Jackie. "Collectively, our world now revolves around our beautiful new granddaughter, Parker Mabel Letso."

"I like that **PRODUCE BUSINESS** is still an actual, physical magazine that covers all aspects of our unique industry from marketing, procurement, sales, merchandising, logistics, transportation, management, and every glorious product, from apples to zucchini. As a semi-retired produce professional, I look forward to receiving my monthly edition as much now as I did when I was a newbie."

pb

How To Win! To win the **PRODUCE BUSINESS** Quiz, the first thing you must do is read through the articles and advertisements in the print or digital issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, scan and send your answers to the address listed on the coupon. **If you wish to fill out the questions online, please go to: www.producebusiness.com/quiz.** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our August 2025 issue of **PRODUCE BUSINESS**.



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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 JUNE ISSUE

- 1) D'Vines on-the-vine tomatoes are marketed by which company _____?
- 2) "GROW WITH US" is the slogan for which company _____?
- 3) What is the name of the Perishable Preservation System delivered by Corrigan _____?
- 4) ProducePackaging.com is the website for which company _____?
- 5) Buurma has been in the Family Farming business since what year _____?
- 6) Which food category "is the Top Category in Organics" _____?

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

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Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

Please send answers to one of the following: (1) email: editor@producebusiness.com

(2) snail mail to: JUNE PB QUIZ • P.O. Box 810425 • Boca Raton, FL 33481 or (3) Fax: 561-994-1610

Answer and submit entry online at www.producebusiness.com/quiz



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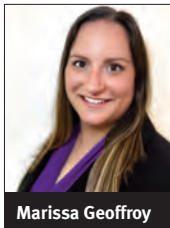
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TRANSITIONS

Kapi Kapi Growers

Kapi Kapi Growers, Miami, FL, announces team expansion with the hiring of a new director of supply chain, **Marissa Geoffroy**, a 17-year industry veteran. Geoffroy is now leading Kapi Kapi's logistics team, overseeing all inbound ocean freight, as well as outbound transportation to retail, foodservice, and wholesale customers across the U.S.



Marissa Geoffroy

Geoffroy brings nearly two decades of experience in produce distribution and international supply chain management, with expertise in importing from Central and South America. Most recently, as director of strategic development at Central American Produce, Geoffroy led key initiatives in ocean freight logistics, FSMA compliance, ERP implementation, and strategic growth planning.

Before that, she built Topco Associates' internal transportation department from the ground up, including the implementation of a transportation load building and tracking system, and helping customers consolidate LTL shipments.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Ocean Mist Farms Wrapping Up Successful Spring Artichoke Season

Ocean Mist Farms, Castroville, CA, is wrapping up a successful spring artichoke season as the company transitions into its Northern California summer season.

Ocean Mist Farms' spring and summer artichokes are grown from perennial plants that perform best in cooler climates and thrive in temperate weather environments, especially coastal areas, with a low risk of frost.

While the company's popular purple artichoke season has concluded until next winter, Ocean Mist expects steady volumes of globe artichokes over the next couple of weeks.

"There is typically a slight dip in supply as we transition into our summer crop, but with pre-planning, retailers can still take advantage of promotable volumes throughout the summer," says Ben Wilson, commodity account manager, Ocean Mist Farms.



Red Sun Farms Wins in Greenhouse Competition

The 2025 Greenhouse Competition in Leamington, Ontario, has announced its winners for this year's event. The Leamington, Ontario area is recognized as one of the largest greenhouse industries in North America, driving innovation in new products, technology and great flavors. This neighborly competition showcases some of the largest greenhouse producers in North America and awards their produce through various categories.

This year, Red Sun Farms' Sweetpops Tomatoes won Hottest Tomato — Best Bite Size Tomato, and Empress Purple Tomato won the People's Choice Hottest Tomato award.

All funds raised from the Greenhouse Competition go to R.E.A.C.H. International. This charity has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to build



schools and clinics, drill wells for fresh water, and sponsor and care for impoverished children in Africa.



U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins with California Walnuts' delegation at a U.S. agriculture industry roundtable.

California Walnut Commission Applauds USDA for Support of Walnut Growers

The California Walnut Commission, Folsom, CA, commends U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins for her leadership and advocacy during May's trade mission to the U.K., which highlighted significant opportunities for American agricultural exports.

The mission, Rollins' first since taking office, focused on advancing terms of a new U.S.-U.K. trade agreement aimed at reducing tariffs, eliminating trade barriers and expanding U.S. market access. The agreement is projected to generate a \$5 billion opportunity for U.S. agriculture exports, benefiting farmers, ranchers and producers across the country.

California Walnut Commission representatives Jack Mariani, chief executive of Mariani Nut Company, and Robert Verloop, executive director and chief executive of the California Walnut Commission, along with trade representatives Peter Meadows and Ian Forbes, from The Garden, joined other commodity groups for a roundtable discussion at the U.S. Embassy in London. The event provided a platform for key stakeholders to engage with Rollins and discuss ways the U.S. Department of Agriculture trade promotion programs can support U.S. agricultural exports to the U.K.

Sinclair's Home Compostable Fruit Label Up For 'Sustainability Initiative of the Year Award'

Sinclair has been announced as a finalist in The Grocer Gold Awards 2025. This nomination comes as an industry recognition for its breakthrough T55 home and industrial compostable fruit sticker, which has been considered by many as the future of fruit labeling.

The T55 label is the first fresh produce label to achieve dual certification for both home and industrial compostability. The certifications demonstrate that T55 meets global composting standards EN 13432, AS 5810 and NFT 51-800.

The achievement means that fruit labeling can already meet the future PPWR (Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation) requirements today. T55 will break down and decompose to safely become part of usable soil-enriching compost, as



well as meet rigorous food safety and operational standards.

Winners will be announced at the awards ceremony in London in July.

Orchard View Cherries to Deliver Standout Season With 30% Larger Crop

As cherry lovers anticipate the arrival of summer, Orchard View Cherries, The Dalles, OR, is preparing to kick off what promises to be a strong season, June 12. With more than a century of expertise growing cherries on the banks of Oregon's Columbia River, Orchard View is forecasting excellent quality, consistent large sizing and mature sugars, and a 30% increase in volume over last year.

With promotable volumes beginning the last week of June, ample supply will be ready for July Fourth celebrations and continue through the season. The team expects a smooth transition from California to Northwest fruit, ensuring uninterrupted availability for retailers and consumers during the peak summer season.

Oppy's Senior Vice President of Categories and Chief Marketing Officer James Milne shares that this is one of the most extended harvest periods seen in recent years. "With particularly rich volcanic soil, ample sunshine and a moderate climate that's only graced in The Dalles, Orchard View continues to deliver cherries that meet the highest specifications in appearance, taste and texture. With the wide spread of bloom between varieties and regions we're seeing this season, we'll have an extra five to seven days of fruit, which is exciting."



Wonderful Pistachios Launches 'The Don't Hold Back Snack' Campaign

Wonderful Pistachios, Los Angeles, CA, is turning up the flavor and the fun with its newest marketing campaign, "The Don't Hold Back Snack." Designed to fuel excitement and drive demand in anticipation of a record-setting California pistachio harvest this fall, the campaign features a simple and cheeky message: Wonderful Pistachios is the craveable snack that's too good to be "good" for you.

Through five new advertising spots directed by Harold Einstein and a bold, nine-market out-of-home blitz, "The Don't Hold Back Snack" is a fully integrated, 360-degree campaign.

As consumer behaviors shift toward personalized, content-driven experiences, Wonderful Pistachios will also advertise on celebrity-hosted podcasts.

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**JULY 31–AUG 1
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BOOTH REVIEW

THE FOODSERVICE CONFERENCE
JULY 31- AUG. 1, 2025
MONTEREY CONFERENCE CENTER
MONTEREY, CA

BOOTH #1006
80 ACRES FARMS
Hamilton, OH

80 Acres Farms is thrilled to welcome Kalera to its family, expanding its network across much of the U.S. They continue offering pesticide-free salads, herbs, and microgreens alongside clean-ingredient salad kits and dressings. Fresh, local, and delicious produce remains at the heart of what they do.



blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries set the standard for quality and consistency to provide foodservice with the best berry experience.

BOOTH #225
GEM-PACK BERRIES, LLC
Irvine, CA

Gem-Pack Berries, LLC is excited to welcome Tom Smith as vice president of foodservice. The newly established foodservice program provides partners with a year-round, one-stop shop for premium strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and raspberries. To learn more about this exciting opportunity, visit Booth #225!



BOOTH #616
ALTAR PRODUCE LLC
Calexico, CA

Altar Produce LLC is a family-owned business with 25 years of experience, dating back to 1998. Altar is the world's largest asparagus shipper of green asparagus.



BOOTH #102
CALIFORNIA GIANT BERRY FARMS
Watsonville, CA

California Giant Berry Farms' year-round supply of fresh strawberries,



BOOTH #203
HARVEST SENSATIONS
Miami, FL

Harvest Sensations is a grower-direct importer of core commodity produce and uniquely specialty ingredients for the foodservice industry.



BOOTH #100
MASTRONARDI PRODUCE
Kingsville, ON

Celebrate over 30 years of the SUNSET® Campari® Tomato with Mastronardi Produce! For over 70 years, they have proudly grown fresh, flavorful fruits and vegetables under the beloved SUNSET® brand. Come see why Campari® is the tomato lover's tomato and discover more SUNSET® products at the Mastronardi Produce booth!



BOOTH #218
MISSION PRODUCE, INC.
Oxnard, CA

Mission Produce is a global leader in the worldwide avocado business since 1983, known for pioneering advanced methods of producing and distributing Hass avocados and mangos year-round.



How To Make Things Grow

Whatever your role in the produce industry, the key to a blossoming bottom line is knowledge. About major trends and developments, and the people behind them.... About new sales opportunities around the world.... New packaging and transportation technology.... New ideas in marketing and promotion.... New retail strategies.... New equipment and services.... New techniques for managing individual businesses, and their personnel, more efficiently.

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BOOTH REVIEW

THE FOODSERVICE CONFERENCE
JULY 31- AUG. 1, 2025
MONTEREY CONFERENCE CENTER
MONTEREY, CA

BOOTH #200
NASH PRODUCE LLC
Nashville, NC



Nash Produce is committed to consistently providing customers with the highest-quality sweet potatoes year-round. They offer a variety of packaging options for both organic and conventionally grown produce at its state-of-the-art production facility.

BOOTH #303
THE NUNES COMPANY
Salinas, CA



The Nunes Company, Inc., will be an exhibitor at the 2025 IFPA Food Service Show, highlighting a selection of organic and conventional fresh vegetables under the Foxy and Foxy Organic brands, along with recently integrated Fresh Leaf Farms value-added items (Arcadian Harvest®, Better Burger Leaf®, Simply Singles®, etc.).

BOOTH #705
PRODUCE BUSINESS
Boca Raton, FL



PRODUCE BUSINESS is where retail and foodservice buyers turn for information and insights on marketing, merchandising, management and procurement.

BOOTH #610
PRODUCE CAREERS
Arroyo Grande, CA



Produce Careers is a leading and established (25+ years) executive search firm in the fresh produce, food and agriculture industries. The firm places talent within all job categories, ranging from C-Suite to midlevel, for grower/packer/shippers, importers, distributors, fresh-cut / food processors, foodservice operators, retailers, and industry suppliers throughout North America.

BOOTH #315
SPICEOLOGY
Spokane, WA



Spiceology is bringing the flavor to IFPA with its newest signature blends, and a top lineup of blends and hard-to-find ingredients. They source only premium, natural ingredients, with no fillers or funky stuff, providing the labor-saving solutions you need, with the easy availability that keeps your kitchen running.

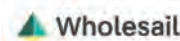
BOOTH #212
TOPLINE FARMS
Leamington, ON

Sustainably grown, deliciously fresh. At Topline

Farms, they combine cutting-edge technology and sustainable practices to deliver fresh, flavorful greenhouse grown produce year-round. Through innovation, they optimize yields, enhance taste, and conserve resources, providing high-quality fruits and vegetables from a dedicated family of growers.



BOOTH #812
WHOLESAIL
San Francisco, CA



Wholesail empowers distributors to reduce payment risk and grow sales with confidence. Wholesail helps customers get paid 35% faster, manage credit risk, streamline AR processes, accept payments, and enhance the experience — all from one unified platform.

SUMMER, 2025

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A Fresh Opportunity: 39% of Consumers Plan to Buy More Produce

By Carly Fink

Produce is having a moment. Nearly half of U.S. consumers say they plan to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables, while only 7% expect to cut back. That 39-point net gain marks a significant opportunity to capture a greater share of cart — and stomach — in the months ahead.

The finding comes from Provoke Insights' 10th wave of nationwide research, a biannual study that surveys 1,500 Americans age 21 to 65. The research provides a clear lens into how evolving values, inflationary pressures and shifting shopping behaviors are shaping grocery trends, especially within the fresh produce category.

The message is clear: Shoppers want more produce. But who they are — and what's getting in their way — offers critical insight into how the industry can convert interest into long-term loyalty.

HEALTH-MINDED SHOPPERS LEADING PRODUCE PUSH

Consumers planning to increase their produce purchases are doing so for a few key reasons: health benefits, better quality, and better taste than other foods. For these shoppers, produce isn't just a category, it's a lifestyle choice.

Notably, this group is also more concerned about what's not in their food. Compared to 2024, 69% of those planning to buy more produce have become more concerned about additives in food products. That's significantly higher than the general population, where only 47% express that level of concern. Among those buying less produce, just 32% are concerned about additives.

But on the other side, those pulling back on produce aren't doing it by choice. They point directly to higher prices at the grocery store and tight household budgets as the reason they're cutting back.

Fresh produce, while highly valued, is also perceived as expensive. While the median spend is \$40 per week, many shoppers report spending well into the hundreds. It's not age, gender, or even geography that predicts fresh produce behavior, it's financial footing and emotional mindset.

Among those increasing produce purchases:

Shoppers who want to eat more produce are eager to do so. The challenge is ensuring the price, presentation and availability align with that desire.

- 61% have household incomes above \$75,000

- 55% say they're actively saving money

- 81% are optimistic about the future.

In contrast, among those cutting back:

- 63% earn less than \$75,000

- 21% are falling further into debt

- 59% feel optimistic about the future.

This stark contrast reveals that the choice to buy more produce isn't just about taste or nutrition — it's rooted in how people feel about their financial and personal trajectory. For those with stability and optimism, produce is a priority. For those facing uncertainty, it's often the first to be reconsidered.

The group looking to buy more produce isn't just a passive trend; they represent a prime opportunity for supermarkets and produce brands to actively engage and capture loyal customers. Rather than viewing "buying more" as the end goal, marketers should position their offerings in ways that reflect this group's mindset: optimistic, health-focused, and willing to spend on quality.

Messaging should emphasize freshness, wellness benefits and premium taste, while promotions should deliver perceived value without discounting the product's appeal.

FREQUENT TRIPS CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES

Today's consumers aren't just making weekly trips anymore. Nearly one-third of Americans shop multiple times a week, especially Millennials, Gen Z, parents and urban dwellers. These shoppers are looking for freshness, flexibility and quick solutions, and produce is perfectly positioned to meet those needs.

That makes the category a powerful loyalty driver. When shoppers trust a retailer's produce section for consistent quality, value and convenience, they're more likely to return.

Retailers and suppliers can lean into this by offering seasonal bundles or mix-and-match deals, delivering targeted digital coupons through loyalty apps, sharing tips, and highlighting local sourcing, sustainability and health messaging.

Shoppers who want to eat more produce are eager to do so. The challenge is ensuring the price, presentation, and availability align with that desire.

The gap between those who want more produce and those who feel they can't afford it is one the industry can help close. That means communicating value without lowering quality perception, addressing inflation concerns head-on, and meeting shoppers at the intersection of health and budget.

With nearly four in 10 consumers planning to eat more fruits and vegetables, the potential is there. But capturing it will require empathy, smart pricing and innovative merchandising.

AI-driven grocery tools, such as list optimization, are another way to bridge the gap. Nearly two-fifths of consumers express interest in such features. These tools can reinforce healthy shopping habits, help streamline purchases and drive repeat produce buying.

When produce feels accessible and aligned with consumers' aspirations, it becomes more than just part of the cart — it becomes part of their lives.

pb

Provoke Insights conducted a 15-minute online survey among 1,500 Americans between 21 and 65. The study was fielded in March 2025. A random stratified sample methodology was used to ensure a high degree of representation of the U.S. population. Check out Provoke Insights for the latest category research, including fresh produce.



Carly Fink is the firm's president and head of strategy and research.



The Fresh Market is Booming in Chicago

FRESHNESS AND CONVENIENCE UNITE TO CREATE EXPERIENCE ‘UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN RETAIL.’

BY MIKE DUFF

With eight stores in the Chicago metro market, The Fresh Market is a specialty supermarket, primarily in upscale neighborhoods, known for its focus on fresh, high-quality foods.

The Fresh Market currently operates 172 stores across the U.S. The newest Fresh Market in Chicagoland, a 27,000 square foot location, opened in May in the suburb of Algonquin, IL, west of the Windy City. Earlier this year, The Fresh Market opened a store in Northbrook, another Chicago suburb.

As with other Fresh Markets, the Algonquin store combines upscale perishables and grocery with ready-to-eat food selections, including an in-house smoke-pit barbecue featuring fresh brisket, ribs and pork, and hot and fresh pizza. So, while consumers can focus on more traditional shopping trips, the Fresh Market provides choices for consumers who might need a little more convenience and can quickly pick up pizza, a bagged salad and some additional fixings.

EXPANDING MARKET

“The greater Chicago-area has presented us so many fantastic opportunities and we’re excited to bring our brand of impeccable hospitality to our new guests here in Algonquin,” says Fresh Market Chief Executive Brian Johnson in a company statement about the opening.

“The Fresh Market shopping experience is unlike any other in retail and I truly believe the community will resonate with what we have to offer, from our carefully curated selection of local and global products to our nationally recognized guest service.”

The Fresh Market in Wilmette, IL, got a new neighbor when Wayfair — the online home furnishings and decor giant — opened its first brick-and-mortar store in May 2024.

A spokesperson says The Fresh Market in Wilmette was one of the first in the Greater Chicago area. Between 2005 and 2011,



The Fresh Market operates 172 stores across the U.S. The store in Wilmette, IL, was one of the first in the Greater Chicago area.

The Fresh Market opened four locations in Chicago. Since 2024, however, the company has doubled its presence in the market, opening four more stores, with Algonquin being the latest.

PREMIER PRODUCE

As with Fresh Markets generally, produce is a significant and carefully merchandised department in the Wilmette store. In a March store visit, a display of bouquets topped off the produce department, merchandised with \$69.99 bottles of champagne.

The produce section was compact, but included a well-maintained assortment that ranged broadly, especially considering the space allotted. Displays were typical in some regards, but also included unique combinations of products. The abundance and obviously well-attended displays suggested that The Fresh Market adjusted produce to the relatively limited space by devoting more than an average amount of labor to ensure that the variety was merchandised with continual care.

Just behind the floral display, the store mixed off-season, in the form of berries, with seasonal produce. The on-the-floor, crate-style display of berries fronted a presentation under a sign reading “Seasonal Citrus,” one that included a variety of bulk and bagged items.

In a small, separate fronting display,

bagged Ruby Frost apples complemented the main display. Beside the apple display and before the cold case on one side of the department, grapes in various varieties trailed back.

Behind the apples, the floor displays got more eclectic, mixing bananas in with squash, bagged Yukon potatoes, kiwi, potatoes and onions, with apple and pineapple snacks in shelves underneath the produce. In front of the main display were multiple baskets of in-the-shell nuts.

Separate, but adjacent, was a full display devoted to tomatoes, bulk and packaged, with avocados, jars of minced garlic and bottles of olive oil.

Even more eclectic was the mix in the cold case, which included juices and other health drinks, followed by a 4-foot section of prepared food products. Packaged fresh mushrooms and herbs came up next, then bagged veggies and coleslaw mix. Bulk eggplant and artichokes followed, with cucumbers and ginger above adjacent to more tofu and squash.

Below stretched an expanse of head lettuce across 8 feet of space on the bottom of the case. The cold case proceeded with peppers, carrots, Brussels sprouts and greens loose and bagged in the case of Romaine hearts.

The case also featured bagged and clam-shell salads, including organics, along with an array of fresh cuts with fruit in various-size tubs, as well as bagged, clamshell and tray-wrapped vegetables. The array of products included convenience items such as steam-bag diced asparagus and various mixes.

The produce department provided variety in a quick-to-shop format, including bulk, convenience and complementary products that could satisfy the weekly needs of busy shoppers or a quick trip to grab the evening dinner.

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Produce is the Top Category in Organics

Organic produce is consumers' No. 1 gateway to the retail organic market.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Organic fruits and vegetables have moved from niche to need-to-have offerings for U.S. retailers.

This shift started nearly a quarter of a century ago when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) took effect, providing consistent national standards for organically grown produce and a federal regulatory program for enforcement.

Organic produce, which is consumers' No. 1 gateway to the organic market, remained the top organic category in 2024, valued at \$21.5 billion, according to the *2025 Organic Market Report*, released in April by the Washington, D.C.-headquartered Organic Trade Association (OTA).

"This sustained growth is largely due to consumer trust in the USDA organic seal, along with rising concerns around sustainability and pesticide residues," says Bianca Kaprielian, co-chief executive officer of Creekside Organics Inc., in Bakersfield, CA, whose flagship brands include Fruit World, Capay Organic and Creekside Organics.

As a category, organic fruits and vegetables accounted for nearly one-third (30.1%) of total organic sales last year, with dollars up 5.2%, based on OTA data. Looking at it another way, organic fresh fruits and vegetables represented 12% of total retail produce sales and 7% of overall produce volume, based on the *State of Organic Produce 2024* report published by the Monterey, CA-based Organic Produce Network (OPN).

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Organic represents 100% of the produce sold at Vitamin Cottage Natural Food Markets Inc., headquartered in Lakewood, CO, and known as Natural Grocers, with 169 stores in 21 U.S. states.

"That's not a rounding error, it's the foundation of our produce department," says Matt Fowler, category manager for produce.

"Our customers don't have to hunt for the organic options or worry about what's conventional — every fruit and veggie we carry is certified organic. Seasonally, we ride the same roller coaster as everyone in organic produce,



but we embrace that challenge. It keeps things fresh, literally and figuratively."

MARKET SNAPSHOT

While organic first took root in natural food markets and co-ops, conventional grocery retailers are now the main outlets for organic food sales. As of 2021, mainstream retail stores, club stores and supercenters accounted for over half (56%) of organic food sales to shoppers, according to *U.S. Organic Production, Markets, Consumers and Policy, 2000-21*, published in 2023 by the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS).

"There is continued growth in selling organic produce to conventional stores, as it's what the market demands," says Brian Dey, senior merchandiser and natural store coordinator for Four Seasons Produce Inc., in Ephrata, PA. "However, the natural and organic food stores and food co-ops have grown very strong. Many of our key partners in this format in our trading area in the Mid-Atlantic are adding stores, with more growth projected in the coming years."

Millennials and Gen Z are leading the charge in organic purchases, says Brian Antle, executive vice president of sales at Tanimura

& Antle, Spreckels, CA. "A focus on personal health, nutrition, and values-driven shopping behaviors drives this."

The organic shopper base has diversified, with more consumers seeking organic options for health and lifestyle reasons, says Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing for Sunkist Growers Inc., in Valencia, CA. "The narrowing price gap between organic and conventional produce has contributed to this trend."

THE ORGANIC TOP 10

Organic berries, as well as avocados, bananas and apples, are in high demand at Natural Grocers, says Fowler.

Similarly, berries are among the top-growth organic produce categories at Weaver Street Market, according to Carolyn Twisten, produce, meat, and seafood merchandiser for Weaver Street Market, a four-store chain headquartered in Carrboro, NC. "We twin-line organic and conventional in the berry category, but organic blueberry pints are still the No. 3 sales item for the year, and organic strawberries are No. 6. The availability of pints over 6-ounce containers from Peru and Chile has made a huge sales impact."

Berries ranked No. 1 among all other organic produce categories for the third year in a row, with dollars up 11.8% to nearly \$1.9 billion, based on the OPN's *State of Organic Produce 2024* report.

"To maximize sales and consumer engagement, retailers should offer a variety of pack sizes of berries to cater to diverse customer needs," says Tim Youmans, vice president of sales for Watsonville, CA-located California Giant Berry Farms, which offers organic strawberries, blueberries and raspberries.

The packaged salad category was second, generating nearly \$1.5 billion, although dollars declined by 5.5%. Apples placed third at \$708 million, up 6.8%.

"The progress on developing higher flavor varieties is driving apple consumption," says Chris Ford, business development and marketing manager for Viva Tierra Organic Inc., in Mount Vernon, WA. "So is having a new crop available. We bring core varieties, like Gala, Granny Smith, Fuji, Cripps Pink, and Honeycrisp, from the Southern Hemisphere from May through August. This year, we've partnered with Bayleaf Organics in New Zealand to bring in their super high-quality apples."

The fourth through seventh ranked organic categories are herbs and spices (\$494 million,



PHOTO COURTESY WEAVER STREET MARKET

Berries ranked No. 1 among all other organic produce categories for the third year in a row, based on the Organic Produce Network's report. To maximize sales and consumer engagement, retailers should offer a variety of berry pack sizes to cater to diverse customer needs.

+0.3%); bananas (\$492 million, +16.1%); carrots (\$446 million, +5.2%); and lettuce (\$382 million, +1.0%).

"Our Organic Artisan Romaine has been particularly successful, appealing to shoppers who value organic certification and specialty varieties at the grocery level," says Tanimura & Antle's Antle.

In eighth is organic potatoes (\$354, +9.2%). While this category represents russets, and red-, gold- and white-skinned potatoes, organic sweet potatoes are a top crop for ATV Farms, a family-owned root crop grower, packer, and shipper in Holland Landing, Ontario, which also owns Green Earth Organics.

"We added sweet potatoes two years ago and now offer 65 local, seasonal, and imported produce items that we either grow here in Canada or have growers in the U.S., Mexico, and South America that exclusively grow organics for us," says Travis Agresti, founder and president. "Since we founded Green Earth in 2015, some retailers have increased their purchase of organic produce by 10 times in volume."

Tomatoes (\$333 million, +4.7 %) and citrus (\$303 million, + 6.9%) round out the top 10 organic produce categories.

"Organic citrus items, such as mandarins, lemons and navel oranges, are among the best-sellers due to their convenience and nutritional



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benefits,” says Sunkist Growers’ Howard. “Organic Cara Cara oranges, blood oranges, and Valencia oranges are gaining popularity and becoming must-stock items for retailers. To meet demand, Sunkist has new organic specialty orange packaging available for retailers this season.”

Organic fruit and vegetable categories in the top 20 include avocados (\$270 million, +8.4%), cucumbers (\$208 million, +9.6%), and kale (\$104 million, +0.5%).

“Demand for organic avocados remains robust, even though supply has stayed relatively steady,” says Gary Caloroso, regional business development director for The Giumarra Companies, headquartered in Los Angeles, CA.

“For a typical 12-month period, organic avocados generally make up about 5% of total U.S. avocado availability. Producing organic avocados involves higher input costs for growers, which can limit supply growth. However, there has been a modest uptick in organic production from California, Mexico and Peru.”

Green kale, lacinato kale, and a blend of rainbow kale with shredded carrots are among items in a new line that converts Cal-Organic Farms’ vegetables into a ready-to-eat format, something made possible when parent company, Grimmway Farms, acquired San Miguel Produce in 2024.



PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

Educating shoppers, both in-store and online, is important. Retailers should use digital marketing and in-store signage to highlight the benefits of organic produce.

“The chopped greens line also includes collard greens, while the company’s chopped vegetable line offers organic broccoli, cauliflower, and baby carrots in various blends and a broccoli slaw mix,” says David Bright, vice president of marketing for the Bakersfield, CA, grower/shipper/marketer.

GROW ORGANIC SALES

The word “organic” elicits reactions of “healthier,” and “better for me,” says Sunkist Growers’ Howard. “Gaining more education about organics is the top reason consumers report switching to organic options, based on our *Sunkist Organic Shoppers 2024* report.”

At Weaver Street Market, organic and

conventional produce are displayed side by side, while adhering to the NOP standards to avoid contamination. “With 75% of our produce sales from organic produce, conventional items are the outliers that we carry, either due to lack of organic availability or price point,” says Twesten.

Four Seasons Produce’s Dey says he’s seeing stores move toward integration and, in some cases, changing conventional produce displays to fully organic.

“Wet racks have become a popular home for moving to an all-organic set, as have mushrooms. Organic salad and value-added selections and SKUs have increased in standard conventional stores,” he notes.

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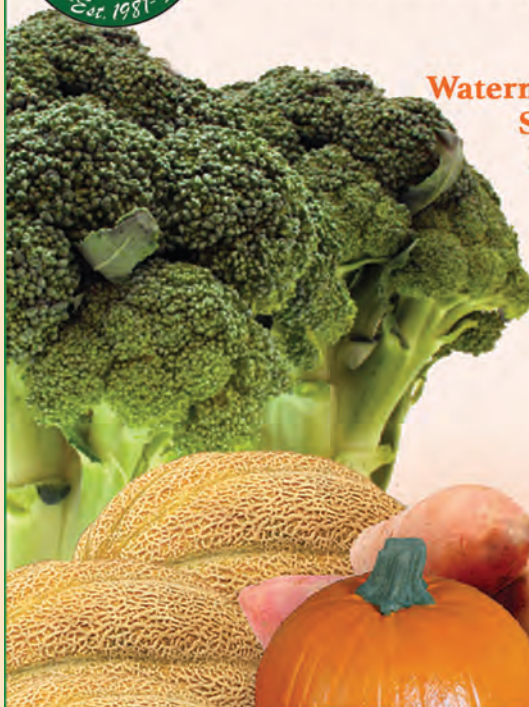
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RIPENESS A KEY DRIVER OF PRODUCE SALES

Ripening has become vital to meeting consumer demand.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

“Ripening” or “pre-conditioning” is a key element to getting optimally ripe fruits to supermarket shelves. But that step often passes under the radar for the vast majority of shoppers. Much like a magician pulling back the curtain to reveal how a trick is performed, ripening is a process that is little known outside of industry circles.

Solutions range from pressurized ripening rooms, where ethylene is used to spark the ripening process, to simpler, temperature-controlled facilities for products that do not respond to ethylene.

Based in the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market in Philadelphia, PA, M. Levin has been offering on-site customized ripening programs for the past 119 years, ripening and distributing approximately 30,000 cases of bananas up and down the East Coast on a weekly basis.

“Banana ripening has come a long way,” says M. Levin controller Tracie Levin. “In the mid-1900s, we ripened in ripening rooms using tarps and keeping the rooms ‘watered.’ Nowadays, we ripen in pressurized ripening rooms, where we can control the rooms by our smartphones, from anywhere in the world.”

Headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, FL, Chiquita Fresh North America operates a network of advanced ripening centers.

According to the company’s fruit supply chain director, Marcio Urban, Chiquita uses advanced monitoring to ensure bananas ripen uniformly to meet the exact color stage retailers expect. Invariably, this stage tends to be ready-to-eat bananas, with most consumers valuing convenience and immediate consumption.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Urban says new ripening technologies are reshaping the industry by improving quality and sustainability. These include intelligent cooling containers for precise control of temperature and atmosphere during transport, ensuring bananas arrive fresh and with extended shelf life.

Low temperature ripening is also advancing, Urban adds, enabling the process



To maintain banana quality and shelf life at the store level, proper handling and storage are essential. Storing bananas at room temperature and away from direct sunlight is recommended. The fruit’s appearance is damaged when temperatures fall below 55 degrees.

to be slowed to allow more flexibility in distribution and reduce waste.

Based in Charlotte, NC, but with operations throughout Latin and North America, Dole Fresh Fruit offers ready-to-market banana ripening services at the Port of Wilmington, DE. According to Dole’s director of corporate communications, Bil Goldfield, the company’s biggest advantage lies in its decades of experience in ripening and post-harvest handling, helping ensure freshness and shelf life.

Goldfield says the move to forced-air ripening rooms has enhanced consistency, allowing for more precision in humidity and temperature, and reduced energy consumption. More recently, early-stage efforts to integrate AI into ripening systems could further streamline operations and minimize waste across the supply chain, he adds.

Ripening technology innovators include Catalytic Generators, a company that invented the ethylene generator for ripening bananas, avocados, mangos and other fruits.

Its solutions include the Easy-Ripe generator, which, when paired with Ethy-Gen II Ripening Concentrate, enables ripeners to efficiently and safely introduce ethylene into ripening rooms, according to Catalytic Generators’ President and Chief Executive Greg Akins.

“Our goal is simplicity: Pour a liter of

Ethy-Gen II, set the ethylene conversion rate, and start the generator,” he says. “Within 24 hours, enough ethylene is applied to prompt fruit to produce its own, kicking off ripening.”

Similarly, Blythewood, SC-based Thermal Technologies, a designer and manufacturer of commercial produce ripening rooms, has debuted several recent innovations.

One of its best-received, according to vice president of sales, David J. Byrne, is the Tarp-Less ripening room smartphone application, which provides safe, fully functional operation and monitoring from a cell phone using secure VPN technology.

Byrne says the company’s RollSeal triple-layer, power-operated fabric doors have also proved popular, adding that Thermal Technologies will soon be introducing enhanced room monitoring, incorporating AI and sensor technology.

One Banana, a third-generation, family-owned business headquartered in Coral Gables, FL, with operations in the Netherlands and Guatemala, sources from sustainable farms in Guatemala, Ecuador and Peru. The company also recently opened a new ripening and distribution center in Wilmington, NC.

According to the company’s president, Rob Adams, the 19,800 square foot refrigerated facility will ripen not only bananas, but also avocados, mangos and pears.

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PHOTO COURTESY/JOHN VENA

John Vena Inc., located in the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market, conditions avocados, mangos, and plantains to meet customer color, pressure or Brix specifications.

WHAT CONSUMERS WANT

So, one side is the technology, but another is what consumers want when it comes to ripened fruit.

Adams believes most customers want quality and a consistent yellow color for bananas. “Better air flow means the fruit will ripen more evenly and to a better color.”

Headquartered in Santa Paula, CA, Calavo Growers operates four ripening locations for avocados and other products in the U.S. According to the company’s vice president of product management, Peter Shore, when it comes to avocados, consumers typically look for ripe fruit for consumption on the day of purchase or the next couple of days.

Shore adds, however, Calavo is working to spread the message that it’s OK to refrigerate avocados once ripe. “Ripe avocados can remain refrigerated for several days and hold the same ripe degree.”

Oxnard, CA-based Mission Produce supplies ripe avocados and mangos to retail, wholesale and foodservice in over 25 countries via a network of 14 ripening centers across the U.S., U.K., Europe and Asia.

Mission’s Stage 1-Stage 5 ripe programs for avocados and mangos are focused on meeting shopper demand and generating impulse purchases, according to senior vice president of sales, Brooke Becker. For foodservice, the company supplies stage 4 (“Firm-Ripe”) for slicing and dicing, or stage 5 (“Ripe”) for mashing and smashing, she says.

For retail in particular, Becker recommends displaying avocados at stage 3 or 4. “Shoppers consider ripeness the most important factor when making an avocado purchase, ahead of price, size, and country of origin.”

Ripeness is also a key driver in mangos, Becker says. “We’ve seen how ripening has reshaped the avocado category, and now we’re leveraging our expertise to drive the mango category forward. By bringing ripe mangos to the U.S. at scale, we firmly believe mangos are going mainstream.”

However, this is not to suggest all consumers are the same. According to Goldfield at Dole, consumer preferences vary

widely, and geography plays a significant role. “In more urban markets, shoppers tend to gravitate toward ready-to-eat fruit for immediate consumption,” he says. “Conversely, rural consumers often prefer greener fruit that can ripen at home and have an extended shelf life.”

KEY FACTORS TO SUCCESS

Also based at the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market, John Vena Inc. (JVI) conditions avocados, mangos and plantains to meet customer color, pressure or Brix specifications. The company installed some of its first mobile ripening units during the second half of 2024, enabling it to increase its capacity, and ability to monitor ethylene, humidity, and CO2 within the units, according to Ripening Manager Joe Menei.

Knowing the variety you’re working with and consistent collaboration with your supplier are the key elements to a successful ripening program, Menei says. “The bloom of the tree, dry matter, and growing region can all impact how a piece of fruit ripens, and we must be adaptable to all these measures to accurately ripen fruit to our specs.”

Byrne from Thermal Technologies agrees. “The better you can forecast your needs, the less shrink you will experience.”

A successful ripening begins with harvesting bananas at the right stage of maturity in order to ripen evenly and develop the best flavor and texture, says Chiquita’s Urban. From there, maintaining precise control over temperature, humidity and airflow throughout the supply chain is essential.

Calico’s Shore says ripening fruit is a science where different oil content, time of season, and country of origin all play into the length of time, temperature and amount of ethylene required to ripen.

“Avocados give off heat as they ripen, and if temperatures are not controlled, fruit can easily reach temperatures over 80F, which can over ripen or damage fruit and make it unsaleable.”

For Akins at Catalytic Generators, knowing the fruit maturity and overall quality is key to effective ripening. “These are extremely important in determining the ripening schedule needed for the fruit,” he explains. “Stage of harvest certainly plays a major role; fruit needs to be physiologically mature before harvest. Immature fruit may ‘ripe’ and go through a color change, but best eating quality will never be attained if harvested too soon.”

STORE LEVEL TIPS

Coral Gables, FL-headquartered Fresh Del Monte utilizes energy-efficient pressurized ripening rooms to ripen avocados and bananas. According to Walter Tordoff, vice

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Shoppers consider ripeness the most important factor when making an avocado purchase, ahead of price, size, and country of origin.

Brooke Becker, Mission Produce,
Oxnard, CA

president of global quality assurance, these can ripen anywhere from 20 to 42 pallets of fruit at once, equating to roughly 38,400 pounds of bananas.

He believes ripening is an essential process for many products at retail. “We believe ripening is helpful and, in many cases, necessary, to ensure certain produce commodities are ready to eat when purchased by consumers.”

With this in mind, he suggests keeping produce storage and display areas at temperatures that maximize the longevity of the ripened fruit. It is also important, he adds, to be careful while handling produce to prevent scarring and bruising, as well as frequently rotating to keep the ripest fruit at the front of displays.

At a store level, Tracie Levin recommends bananas be kept in a warm environment and not in coolers. Storing bananas alongside oranges in produce coolers is a “major no-no” according to Levin, who says chilling the fruit turns it brown and unattractive for sales.

Goldfield at Dole strongly recommends employee training, arguing the maintenance of fruit quality at retail depends on proper handling, particularly with delicate and temperature-sensitive products like bananas. “Retail teams that are properly trained in handling protocols can greatly extend shelf life and enhance the shopper experience.”

To maintain banana quality and shelf life at the store level, proper handling and storage are essential, according to Mario Padilla, senior distribution manager at Chiquita Fresh. Padilla also recommends banana hangers for display to reduce bruising and mitigate pressure.

Shore at Calavo recommends using a riper stage during high-volume promotional periods or weekends. “Avocados can be an impulse buy. If consumers find the degree of ripeness they are looking for, they’re going to buy multiple pieces of fruit, not just one.”

pb

Displays and Misting: Produce as Pretty as a Painting

Customers gravitate toward eye-pleasing displays and vibrant produce.

BY SARAH KLOSE

Beauty. People gravitate toward it. They seek it in many forms: nature, music, literature, and paintings, such as *Fruit Displayed on a Stand* by Gustave Caillebotte and *Basket of Apples* by Paul Cézanne. These artists used light and shading to depict various fruits displayed on wooden tables, woven baskets and white cloths.

Beauty is found at the supermarket, too. Think rows of leafy greens or tables of crunchy apples. Customers will gravitate toward crisp carrots, luscious lemons, and pretty peppers. To enhance the beauty of such produce, grocers can borrow from famous painters, and arrange lovely displays.

FIRE UP WOOD DISPLAYS

When it comes to display cases, wood adds a beautiful look and natural feel. This is why wood paneling is trending in produce departments.

“A lot of our customers wanted more of a barn look, with more wood,” says James Counouris, general manager and director of sales



Alco Designs, Gardena, CA, offers curved baskets, round display pedestals or pyramids for bananas. They also manufacture plastics for refrigerated and non-refrigerated.

for LemonTree Products in Erin, Ontario. “Our new Harvest Island tables (with wooden side panels) have a modern, sleek aesthetic. They have a 360-degree shop around, feature inclined sides, and have flat endcaps so you can pile them high with specials.”

LemonTree Products sells its display tables factory-direct to U.S. and Canadian grocery stores.

Wood display bins and tables that are

modular can be combined in eye-pleasing ways. They often include lower shelving for cross-merchandising. Supermarkets can also choose a wood finish that conveys a mood. Dark woods like ebony are current favorites.

“Our refrigerated Fresh Go Bins and Fresh Go Displays are quite popular. The wood exterior is stained to match the non-refrigerated displays. This can give a seamless look,” says Chris Schotsman, vice president sales and marketing at Cayuga Displays in Cayuga, Ontario.

Cayuga Displays products are designed in a Lego concept, with blocks and standard pieces. This lets retailers customize different height, lengths, depths, exteriors and finish options.

The Nilssen Group in Amery, WI, currently uses a select cherry stain, which makes the product stand out. “A few of our older stores carry clear oak,” adds Ted Eisold, produce director. “Most of our cases are open-air. It is easy for the customer to shop that way.”

Nilssen Group is comprised of independent retail grocers in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

MIST TO MAKE IT FRESH

Another way to ensure produce looks vibrant is to mist or fog the product. Adding humidity and moisture can also prevent produce from drying out.

“With any leafy greens, you want to avoid



Corrigan Corporation of America, Gurnee, IL, offers Preserve, a no-wetting dry fog with droplets of five microns. Preserve gives evaporative cooling, which reduces the temperature in the case.

PHOTO COURTESY CORRIGAN

PHOTO COURTESY ALCO DESIGNS

wilting. For zucchini, misting prevents shriveling and gives a 6% increase in weight. For carrots, without humidity, you can almost bend them. With humidity, you get crispy carrots, which is what you want,” explains Itamar Kleinberger, co-owner of Prodew Misting and Humidification in Marietta, GA.

ProDew serves chains like Aldi and Publix. Its directional fog comes out like a cloud and is silent. It says a system can pay for itself in three to four months due to reduced waste and water/labor savings (no more hosing down produce).

In general, flow rates range from roughly 25 to 150 microns per droplet for misting, and one to 10 microns per droplet for fogging.

UltraMist, the standard misting system from Corrigan Corporation of America in Gurnee, IL, has easy slide-on and off for individual nozzles, so retailers don't have to turn off the whole system. “Our low flow is 25 microns per droplet and 80 degrees of spray pattern (like a round cone),” says Emily Stavrou, vice president.

Corrigan Corp. also offers Preserve, a no-wetting dry fog with droplets of five microns. “The nebulization occurs at the nozzle, and that creates a closed loop, which means there is no introduction of bacteria,” says Stavrou. Preserve gives evaporative



PHOTO COURTESY PRODREW

cooling, which reduces the temperature in the case.

With fogging, the goal is to keep moisture within the product so it has brighter colors, retains more nutrients and vitamins, and has a longer shelf life.

FreshTech Solutions in Vancouver, WA, offers one to three micron droplets, which means the produce stays healthier and fresher

longer, says Mike Hartman, president and chief commercial officer. “With a wet rack, misting treats leafy greens and a few other items. When you are dry misting (fogging), you can expand that to peppers, apples, asparagus, mushrooms, herbs.”

“You can use FreshTech fogging on a dry case in the middle of the floor at the produce department. It is a fog, but not a real heavy fog,” adds Ken Brine, owner/partner of Advanced Equipment Sales Group (AES) in Sharon, MO.

AES is the manufacturer's rep for FreshTech Solutions, Boston Group (display case protection), ThermoSeal 1400 (glass doors) and others.

MAKE DISPLAYS POP

To make fresh produce look pretty, supermarket chains are creating elegant displays. And independent grocers are stepping up, too.

“Everything is getting really fancy. This drives more of a need for our products,” says Dave Lyons, marketing/creative director of Blanc Display Group in Dover, NJ. “We provided wall decor for a small store in Alabama, signage over the cases that says ‘homegrown’ or ‘straight from the fields’ — nice slogans that people will look at. This creates ambience.”

Blanc Display Group makes mobile units, wire displays, baskets, lighting and other display items.

To punch up store sales, manufacturers are eager to propose different, exciting ways to merchandise produce.

“For one customer, we placed leafy greens on beautiful curved vertical racks, and added a pepper section with LED lighting to make the colors pop. We filled the display from top to bottom, so it was a wall of produce,” says Mark Chenoweth, vice president sales and marketing

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for Alco Designs Inc. in Gardena, CA. "Their produce sales per store went up 28%, and their shrink went down 9%."

To make it pleasing to the eye, produce can be arranged on shelves that are the same length, or get progressively longer.

"Having thin shelves gives a merchandising effect. A longer bottom shelf gives a waterfall effect. You have heavier products at the bottom and lighter products on the top," says Richelle Fermanich, marketing content manager of Carlson AirFlo in Brooklyn Park, MN.

ADD TRAYS AND TOPPERS

Aside from adding pizzazz to produce displays, grocers have to address practical concerns. Consider matting, trays and shelves to extend the product life of fruits and vegetables.

"Our Anti-Bruise Foam Matting has become quite popular for stone fruits and bananas — it helps reduce shrink. Produce Trays help keep it organized. They come in handy when you have a variety of products," says Schotsman of Cayuga Displays.

Shelves from Carlson AirFlo feature a unique 33%-hole pattern that allows cool air to circulate around the product. For misting/fogging, its aluminum material holds the temperature better than steel or plastic. "Our shelf material is made of anodized aluminum material, which is engineered to keep produce fresher, longer and prevent it from deteriorating," says Fermanich.

"Aluminum is the best material to use. We go into the grocery stores with temperature guns to prove the temperature is consistent," says Brine of AES.

For easy organization, choose acrylic dividers and custom upper shelves.

"All of our tables come with a full divider system, which aids the produce team in keeping it organized. The dividers move around, so you can have a larger or smaller tomato section, for example," says Countouris of LemonTree Products.

For farmers market style displays with multiple table heights, add step displays. That way, shoppers will easily see all of the produce.

Alco Designs offers curved baskets, round display pedestals, pyramids for bananas. "We manufacture plastics for refrigerated and non-refrigerated. Any merchandise can go on this. In the dry area, anything from onions to peppers to stone fruits, you name it," says Chenoweth.

And when it comes to ESLs (Electronic Sign Labels), add toppers to make them more noticeable.

"Some ESLs are so small that people can't see them. In the wet case, it can be hard to read the label information for green onions, loose carrots, kale. That is where we can do

toppers; we can show a product is organic, for example. Our display would go around the ESL like a picture frame," says Lyons of Blanc Display Group.

FILTER THE WATER

Reverse osmosis filters water and is highly recommended for displays that add humidity to produce. Misting/fogging companies sell their own systems, or work with stores that already have one.

"We developed a special reverse osmosis system that ensures we have enough water

from one misting cycle to the next cycle. It removes calcium and other minerals from the water so it doesn't create build-up on the cases. So, you spray vegetables with just pure water," says Kleinberger of Prodew.

"Our reserve osmosis removes minerals in water that can produce a white film. This improves the purity of the water by 99.9%," says Stavrou of Corrigan Corp. To maintain the system, the manufacturer recommends retailers wipe nozzles every three months and change filters every six months. The ozone in the system disinfects faster than chlorine. **pb**

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Ride the Grape Wave

Shoppers love grapes: The bigger, the crunchier, the sweeter, the better.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Table grapes continue to thrive, despite ongoing inflationary pressures. U.S. per capita consumption reached 8.64 pounds in 2022/23, up from 8.49 pounds the previous 12 months, according to analyst Statista.

Furthermore, a 2024 survey of more than 1,000 consumers carried out by market researcher Forward Insight on behalf of fruit breeder Bloom Fresh found that 30% of surveyed shoppers were willing to pay more for premium grapes that promised better flavor and freshness.

That's positive news for companies like TMK Produce, a wholesaler based in the Philadelphia Produce Market in Philadelphia, PA, which regularly stocks 75 different types of grapes, varying in size, color shades and flavor, even within the same variety.

"Grapes can be expensive and there can be quite a price difference between them," says President Tom Kovacevich. "Knowing

our customers, and our customers' customers, enables us to properly place each lot into a store where it will sell best."

"Grapes are an item that gives retailers a chance to set themselves apart," he says. "Give your customers a quality experience in every way and they will come back and back. It's fun to watch our customers so excited over how their customers are repeat buying."

RETURN TO NORMAL

Although based in Delano, CA, Fruit Royale markets grapes, not just from the Sunshine State, but also from Peru, Chile, Mexico and Egypt. Managing Partner Louie Galvan describes the past 12 months as "interesting," with demand outstripping availability from early Peru programs.

That was followed by an overlap with Chile, creating a backlog Galvan says has only recently cleared up. Next on the calendar — expected "fantastic quality" from Fruit Royale's next producing region, Northern Sonora.

Closer to home, California's table grape growers experienced a return to normal, according to the California Table Grape Commission. California table grape growers shipped 91.5 million 19-pound boxes of table grapes to 56 markets around the world, and conditions look promising in early-season Coachella Valley, says Nick Nakashian, the Fresno, CA-based commission's director of content development.

Fresno, CA, grape shipper Bari Produce finished its 2024 season around Thanksgiving, and experienced what Justin Bedwell, president, calls a decent year in terms of yields and quality. "We had to work around some weather in the final third of our season, but nothing out of the ordinary, and nothing like the weather event of 2023."

For Delano, CA, grower Pandol Bros. Inc., California grapes provoked a "stronger pull" in 2024, with central California volumes selling 15% above historical rates during late summer and early fall.

"It lasted too long and too strong to just be the absence of competing products," says John Pandol. "Neither the retailers or the shipper have put our fingers on it."

SPECIALTY APPEAL

For Alán Aguirre Camou, chief marketing officer for Nogales, AZ-based Divine Flavor, the past 12 months have been good in terms of volume, even if the weather doesn't always cooperate.

The company, he says, benefits hugely from being able to source year-round from California, starting in August, followed by Peru, Chile, and Jalisco, Mexico, in March. Sourcing then moves to Sonora, Mexico, between May and July.

Divine Flavor's varieties include Autumn Crisp — a "popular green grape with very good shelf life" — high-flavor Cotton Candy, red Gummy Berries (Candy Snap), and black Candy Dreams (sold as Jelly Berries).

Although red grapes have reigned supreme during recent years, Aguirre says green is gaining ground in North America. "Consumers want more crunch in their grapes," he says, referring to the company's success with Autumn Crisp.

Bedwell says Bari is best known for Autumn King green grapes, but has introduced more Great Greens and Sweet Globes to the market. The company has also seen an uptick in specialty varieties, especially Thompsons, Black Corinth, and natural Thompsons, which are available from late July.

But although newer varieties are on the rise, TMK's Kovacevich says some traditional grapes, like Crimson and Autumn Royal, have not lost a step. At the same time, he emphasizes that regional and seasonal differences can play a major role.

"Every growing area has shown to produce the new varieties with somewhat different qualities," he says. "We have learned we cannot expect Autumn Crisp from an early region, like Copiapo, Chile, to develop the same as one grown in a later growing region like Ica, Peru. These nuances make buying a bit tricky, as a Cadillac is not always a Cadillac."

Pandol Bros. specializes in Sugar Crunch, Sweet Globe and Autumn Kings on the green side, and Flames, Sweet Celebration and Allisons on the red. At the same time, the company has between 10-20 varieties in evaluation, although John Pandol says the policy is "caution-first" after seeing several companies fail with new varieties.

One major trend has been the introduction of good green varieties to replace Perlett and Thompson Seedless after what Pandol calls "30 years of mostly red introductions." Autumn King is the oldest and most produced of this group.

Galvan at Fruit Royale says Sweet Globe in green and Sweet Celebration in red are now front-runners in new varieties for spring supplies. But far from resting on its laurels, he says the company has other new varieties popping up at a rate that is "too fast to track."

SHIFT AWAY FROM LEGACY

The past 12 months have also seen advances being made by varietal developers, among them Bakersfield, CA-headquartered Sun World International.

According to the company's director of

global marketing insights, Elena Hernandez, Sun World is expanding its licensed grower network, with increased acreage in key production regions, including Latin America, Australia and Europe.

Hernandez says Sun World is also seeing success for its newest release, the early-season seedless red Sugraffitythree, marketed under the Ruby Rush brand.

"Specialty grapes — particularly those with standout traits like unique flavor or extra-large berries — continue to perform well when backed by brand recognition and merchan-

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dising support,” says Hernandez, citing the success of Autumn Crisp.

“Retailers and buyers are demanding distinctive, branded grapes that offer consistent quality, differentiated flavor, and extended availability windows,” she says. “There’s a shift away from legacy varieties toward premium, IP-protected varieties in consumer brands that support storytelling, shopper loyalty, and margin growth.”

Based in Pasadena, CA, Sun Pacific grows several grape varieties in the San Joaquin Valley, including Sun World’s Autumn Crisp and Ruby Rush, all of which it markets under its own Air Chief brand.

“We have seen really great results with Autumn Crisp and Ruby Rush,” says Sun Pacific’s director of marketing, Sarah Deaton. “Consumers are starting to understand there aren’t just green, red and black grapes. They are starting to recognize there are different varieties within the category because of their unique flavor and high-quality attributes.”

HANDLE WITH CARE

When storing grapes, Kovacevich says it is important to keep them cold, but when that is not possible, increasing the frequency of deliveries should be considered. “In our operation, being in Philadelphia and adjacent to the main

ports, we are able to hand-select the lots on the piers. This way, we are never surprised, and we can be a reliable source for customers.”

Likewise, California Table Grape Commission’s Nakashian recommends immediately placing grape boxes in a refrigerated cooler, ideally at 30-32°F with 90-95% humidity.

“Grapes should be gently stacked in a produce cooler so air can circulate around them. However, they should not be stored in a direct air path to avoid accelerated dehydration,” Nakashian says. “Grapes tend to absorb odor, so it is best to avoid storing them next to green onions or leeks.”

Pandol agrees. “If you want it sold, keep it cold.” He also recommends never building a bigger display than a store can maintain, and making sure signs are in the right places.

When it comes to procurement and handling, Pandol recommends choosing the right type of supplier for your scale and capabilities. This, he says, might be a wholesaler that can offer a quick product turnaround, or it may be through cultivating relationships with suppliers. Pandol also suggests working with as many partners as possible to avoid being left with shortages if one goes out of business.

According to Hernandez from Sun World, temperature abuse and rough handling are

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

Grapes are an item that gives retailers a chance to set themselves apart.

Tom Kovacevich, TMK Produce,
Philadelphia, PA

the biggest threats to grape quality. “Carve out time to educate in-store staff on the value of premium branded grapes,” she adds. “The more they know about how branded grapes drive traffic, demand and increase cart sizes, the better they’ll merchandise and rotate product.”

Deaton from Sun Pacific says effective handling not only maximizes shelf life, but also helps grow a category that shows no signs of slowing down.

“According to Circana, the grape category added more dollars (+35%) than all other fruit types since 2020, and we’re proud to be a part of that growth,” she says. “We continue to bring proprietary grape varieties to market that are high quality and full flavored, which brings shoppers back for more.”

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Although red grapes have reigned supreme during recent years, green grapes are gaining ground in North America.

PHOTO COURTESY SUN WORLD INTERNATIONAL



40 Under Forty: The Next Network

2025 40 Under Forty Winners Building Networks in Fresh Produce

Congratulations to this year's winners of the annual PRODUCE BUSINESS 40 Under Forty awards!

This year's 40 Under Forty class celebrates the next generation of entrepreneurs and leaders who are redefining what it means to succeed in the fresh produce industry.

These standout individuals are strengthening the industry through the power of connection — they're intentional about finding the right people, actively expanding

their networks, showing up at key events, offering support, and building trust along the way.

Each honoree brings a unique blend of drive, vision, potential and determination — qualities that will continue to shape and elevate the industry for years to come.

Individual candidates were contacted to discuss their key company, industry, community and personal accomplishments, sharing meaningful examples of their roles, as well as goals and aspirations. We are so proud of all the winners, who will also be recognized in

person Dec. 2 at the 2025 New York Produce Show!

NOTE: If you were not chosen this year, or if you nominated someone who was not selected, please understand the process is highly selective, and we encourage you to resubmit updated information in 2026. We welcome suggestions of well-deserving candidates throughout the year. Simply email us at editor@producebusiness.com. We look forward to honoring outstanding 40 Under Forty leaders again in 2026.

Congratulations to all the winners!

Sofia Acón, 36
President
Kapi Kapi Growers
Miami Beach, FL



Hometown: Originally Costa Rica, now Boston, MA

Hobbies: Painting, Traveling, Music, New languages

Family/Community: Married, Books for All project

Motto in life: Kindness leads, trust unites, and together we drive change.

Carrying forward 35 years of family experience growing pineapples and bananas for major brands, Acón created Kapi Kapi Growers to bring fresh, premium, and sustainably grown tropical fruit directly to customers year-round. As founder and president, she introduced a new tropical brand to the North American market. Over the last five years, she has led her company in achieving global distribution for the Kapi brand and presence across 50-plus customers, including retailers, processors, foodservice distributors, and wholesalers in the U.S. In 2024, the company added plantains and organic bananas to its product portfolio.

Acón's ability to provide both hands-on and strategic guidance in the areas of business development, marketing, and supply chain has been instrumental in the company's continued success. She began her career in the arts and design space, leading projects that blended consulting, branding and storytelling for both emerging and global brands. After earning her MBA, she became interested in building something new, and her vision led to the creation of Kapi, launched in 2020. Since then, she has played a pivotal role in evolving the business into a vertically integrated company, managing everything from sourcing and logistics to marketing and distribution.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Ever since my family started in agribusiness over 35 years ago, I've grown up

in the produce industry, and it's always been a natural part of my world. Over the years, I've come to deeply appreciate not just the work, but the relationships and dedication behind it. I've come to value the complexity of the supply chain, the human connection behind it, and the impact fresh food has on people's lives.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I've learned the most valuable ideas and breakthroughs have come from moments of uncertainty and challenge. Looking back, what felt overwhelming was actually a defining moment in our company's growth.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

It's an exciting time to rethink how we grow and connect people to fresh produce. I'm passionate about questioning assumptions, designing better systems, and finding new ways to work.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The industry has had to become more agile, with a growing recognition that collaboration and open communication are essential to maintaining consistency in today's rapidly changing environment.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

One of the biggest challenges the industry faces is increasing unpredictability — driven by climate volatility, shifting global logistics and geopolitical events. By leveraging technology and innovation, the industry can become more agile, enhance collaboration across the supply chain, and better respond to the growing demand for healthier, more transparent, and sustainable food choices.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

What I value most in my career are the relationships I've built along the way. I feel truly fortunate and proud of the team I get the opportunity to work with. Everything we do is possible because of a collective effort and the trust of our industry partners.

Michael Armata, 34
Buyer/Sales
E. Armata Inc.
Bronx, NY



Hometown: Cold Spring Harbor, NY

Hobbies: Boating, Traveling, Trying new restaurants

Family/Community: Engaged

Motto in life: Don't stop until you're proud.

Armata started working on Hunts Point when he was 10, going to work with his father, Chris Armata. He swept and leveled pallets until he was old enough, at about 14, to make deliveries to customers in the market. He would build the orders and bring them to their trucks. When he wasn't doing that, he was unloading trailers or rail cars. He worked in these roles until he was about 18. Eventually, he learned how to properly receive products in the company's system and move product. In 2012, when he was about 21, he started in the sales booth, listening and learning to sell tomatoes. Soon enough, he moved to the night shift and started to grow a clientele. Since moving to the buying side, he transitioned through different departments, learning all aspects of sales and buying. He started buying blackberries, eventually taking over the berry department.

In 2021, he took control of the hot-house specialty department, as well as most of the tomato department.

His role grew from learning how to buy to overseeing the day and night sales. He was also involved heavily in revamping the company's website in 2018 and in putting together the company's new logo in 2024.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I would see my father go to work and wanted to be just like him, my uncle, and my grandfather. As a boy, I would go to the market with my father.

He would tell the foreman that he was in charge of me and then go upstairs to work. Working downstairs doing manual labor was the best learning experience I could have asked for. I got to learn how to do things the right way by dedicated, hardworking people.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be consistent and patient. It takes time to develop relationships. Once you do, it's well worth it, and you will love talking to your growers/shippers every day. They will become like family.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

I have seen a change in the off product being moved. The customers now find it very difficult to move product that may have scarring or any imperfection. It has made the salesman's job much more difficult to push and keep the rotation going.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

There are challenges with any business. But for us right now, I would say it's getting orders in a timely manner. This business isn't a nine-to-five, so you really do not have set times for anything. This makes it difficult at times to get trucks out and on the road. We make sure to prioritize our trucking orders, but it is still a challenge.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

I believe the average consumer really appreciates a nice package. They like to see bags and clamshells designed for the end consumer with beautiful colors and designs. I think we will be seeing more of that as time goes on. COVID made people really think twice about how many hands touched the produce. By putting them in a sharp retail pack, you can really see the increase in sales.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of being able to continue my family's name and legacy in the produce world. My family has worked very hard for many years to establish a good reputation. It really is an honor just to be considered part of that team and be able to do this with my family.



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and D'Vines® Medley Cherry On-the-Vine Tomatoes (12 oz).



Nathan Aaron Avedian, 33
Senior Manager—Sourcing
Walmart
Bentonville, AR



Hometown: Kingsburg, CA

Hobbies: Snow Skiing, Golf, Boating, Web3, Working with AI

Family/Community: Single, Trex Fraternity, Sigma Chi Fraternity, Volunteer St. Gregory Church

Motto in Life: Help others whenever possible and always assume good intent.

A third-generation farmer, Avedian grew up in the produce industry. He began his career in agriculture at Avedian/Hagopian Farms in 2001, working in various positions and gaining extensive industry knowledge while assisting with his family's businesses throughout high school.

From 2010 to 2014, while attending college, Avedian owned a blueberry brokerage, selling California blueberries for juice and by-product manufacturers. Over four years, he successfully grew the company and eventually sold it in 2014. During college, he also interned at Bee Sweet Citrus. After graduating from Fresno State, Avedian joined Walmart as a project manager while completing his master's in agricultural economics from Kansas State. In 2017, he advanced to the role of senior planner at Walmart, overseeing bids for various categories and developing new tools and reports for the company. In 2020, Avedian transitioned to the position of senior sourcing manager for avocados and stone fruit at Walmart. In late 2023, he shifted commodities and became the senior sourcing manager for berries.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry?

Growing up in a third-generation farming family, I developed a passion for fresh produce at a very young age. I experienced all aspects of the industry, helping on the family farm and learning

the various roles in production agriculture. Through internships and running my own blueberry brokerage, I gained insight into the sales and marketing side of fresh produce. This journey led me to Walmart, where I have been employed for 10 years.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Agriculture is never boring. The industry is constantly evolving, presenting new opportunities to learn and achieve success.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about making the industry a better place. I want farming to be a viable career path for future generations, so I am committed to ensuring the industry makes sustainable choices.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The industry has continuously adapted to new technologies and innovations, making it an exciting field. I enjoy seeing new minds enter the industry with fresh perspectives on problem-solving. The agricultural sector is on the brink of transformation through the utilization of AI technologies.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am proud of my overall continued growth. My goal is to become a leader in the industry and leave the fresh produce sector in a better state than when I entered it.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be curious and passionate about your work. Remember that everyone in the agricultural industry plays a crucial role in providing healthy food for families.

Q: What do you see as a critical issue facing the industry in the next decade and why?

The fresh produce industry will always encounter new hurdles and obstacles. It is essential to adapt and keep the needs of farmers and consumers at the forefront.

Mari Barascout, 31
Director of Sales and Operations
Fresh Pro, Inc.
Longwood, FL



Hometown: Cincinnati, OH

Hobbies: Spending time with family, Hiking, Pilates

Family/Community: Married

Motto in life: Always give 110%, 100% of the time.

Barascout started her career in the produce industry in 2011 as a sales associate at a Florida citrus company, where she built a solid foundation in sales and customer service. Her passion for fresh produce led her to Topco in 2015 to senior category coordinator, overseeing the melon category with a special focus on watermelons. Through this role, she developed and demonstrated key skills in category management, vendor relations and retail collaboration.

In 2019, she joined Fresh Pro, where she has taken on a multifaceted role including sales, operations, logistics, and food safety. In her position, she manages essential relationships with growers and retail partners, oversees transportation and compliance across several locations, and leads training programs for new employees. She is responsible for managing some of the largest volume accounts in North America. She has been recognized for her adaptability and hands-on approach.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My interest was sparked as a little girl when I went to work with my mom, who worked for a citrus company in Fort Pierce, FL. Between the smell of the citrus running through the belts and the citrus trees planted at my childhood home, I knew I would always have a thing for the produce industry. Once I graduated high school, I wanted to work for the same citrus company. After a few years, I left the industry and quickly

found out I needed to find my way back. Returning in 2014, I found my niche in the watermelon industry.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

The industry is big, yet so small, and relationships are everything. With hard work and dedication, success will follow.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

The produce industry is constantly changing and evolving, always keep an open mind and ask questions (lots of them). Don't be afraid to get out of your comfort zone and take a leap of faith; you never know where you will find success.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Food safety and customer expectations are top of mind. Today, it's more important than ever for all growers and shippers to meet both food safety and social compliance standards. With grocery stores and farmers markets competing for market share, the demand for top-quality produce continues to rise. Everyone wants to stand out, and that means raising the bar on quality.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Two of the most pressing challenges facing the industry are labor shortages, including those related to the H-2A program, and the ongoing impacts of climate change. The agricultural sector continues to struggle to attract and retain a stable workforce, which can lead to significant delays in planting and harvesting. At the same time, climate change is an undeniable reality, with extreme weather events becoming more frequent and disruptive to production.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Better produce and greater convenience through expanded fresh-cut produce options.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

The greatest accomplishment in my career has been the strong relationships I've built. The people I work with trust and believe in me and truly enjoy collaborating with me.

Drew Callaghan, 35
Executive Vice President
RPE, LLC
Bancroft, WI



Hometown: Yardley, PA

Hobbies: Golf, Running, Hunting, Fishing

Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Southeastern Produce Council Committee Member, Paul Anderson Youth Home, Fellow at the Richard W. Riley Institute at Furman University, Furman University Young Alumni Council

Motto in life: Never stop saying thank you. Never stop being grateful.

Over the past 13 years, Callaghan's career trajectory has been marked by consistent advancement into senior leadership roles that require strategic insight, operational excellence and maturity. He

has a proven track record of driving growth, building high-performance teams and leading strategic transformation across the produce and consumer packaged goods industries. He began his produce career in 2012 as a broker for Acosta Sales & Marketing, representing various produce lines.

In 2017, he joined Apio, and subsequently led the corporate divestiture of the "Eat Smart" brand of value-added products to Taylor Farms in December 2021 and the sale of fresh guacamole and dips portfolio of branded products under the Yucatan and Cabo Fresh brand names to Flagship Food Group.

In 2022, he joined RPE as vice president of business development and has played a role in designing and executing a strategic growth plan that enhanced the company's national retail presence, strengthened key customer partnerships, and elevated RPE's standing within the produce category. At RPE, he helped lead a new era of sales growth, driving a 25% increase in revenue. He also led the creation of an international joint venture, RPE Canada, expanding RPE's reach beyond the U.S. borders, where he currently

serves as a named member of the board.

In 2024, he was named to his current position as executive vice president at RPE, where he leads a \$600 million business unit and oversees integration efforts within a PE-backed portfolio (Grimmway Farms, RPE, San Miguel, Tasteful Selections, Cal-Organic). His leadership experience spans sales, finance, marketing and operations and building cross-functional alignment to deliver sustained revenue and EBITDA growth. He is a graduate of Acosta Sales & Marketing Leadership Development Program, SEPC Next Generation Leadership Academy and IFPA's Executive Leadership Development Program.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began my produce career as a broker for Acosta Sales & Marketing, representing product lines at retailers. I started my work in Virginia Beach, stocking shelves on military bases in the Commissary and Exchange stores. This drove a deep sense of service, while instilling a desire to bring high-quality products to shelf.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Get comfortable with unpredictability and never forget that relationships matter. Our industry is constantly changing. You need to be comfortable in that environment — get excited by change. Relationships will make or break you in this industry. No matter how much technology we have, you cannot forget what it's like to look someone in the eye, shake their hand and deliver on a commitment.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Fact-based selling has become more important in produce. This has traditionally been something that CPG and center store have relied on, but as space has become constrained in the perimeter and shelf space productivity more closely monitored, the ability to leverage data to drive sales while putting the right items on shelf has become more important. Relationships remain critical, and the knowledge of veterans is not something that can be replaced, but balancing data with "feel" seems to be the future recipe for success.

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Jordan Carter, 39
Vice President Sales and Marketing
Leger & Son, Inc.
Cordele, GA



Hometown: Cordele, GA

Hobbies: Fitness, Gardening, Reading, Spending time with family

Family/Community: Married, 1 son

Motto in life: Live simply. Love fiercely. Accept what is.

Carter is a proven leader and passionate advocate for the future of agriculture. Since 2013, she has excelled at Leger & Son, building strong business relationships and leading marketing efforts for the company's watermelon program. In her role at Leger & Son, she is responsible for market analysis, customer relations, and sales and marketing. Her career at Leger started with logistics and administrative assistance. After only two years with the company, she took over sales and marketing as the company's director. In 2022, she was named vice president.

Carter has made history as the first female president of the National Watermelon Promotion Board, serving for six years. She is now shaping the next generation by helping launch the first Women's Committee for the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

She served on the board of directors for the National Watermelon Promotion Board (2018 to 2024). She is the vice president of the National Watermelon Association, as well as the chair of the Grades and Standards Committee and Promotions Committee. She is on the board of directors for the Georgia Watermelon

Association and serves as second vice president. She also serves on the board of directors for the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, on the IFPA Political Advisory Committee and on the SEPC Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital Committee.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

By chance — the right place at the right time. I was looking for a job after completing my MBA. A friend and family member recommended me to Greg Leger, president and owner of Leger & Son. I landed the job, and here I am today. I did not come from an agricultural background, but it did not take me long to realize agriculture was home for me. I love what I do, and I am proud to be a part of this industry.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Live in the present moment. Do not worry so much about the future, and never dwell on the past.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Ask for what you want. If you do not ask, the answer is no.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Dedication to the meaningful work that I do every day gives me a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Buy local was and still is trending. However, now it seems consumers are more curious than ever. They want transparency from seed to store. For them, it builds trust and loyalty.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Becoming vice president and a stakeholder at Leger & Son.

Ryan Cuttler, 32
Chief Operating Officer
Cuttler Produce
Eatontown, NJ



Hometown: Tinton Falls, NJ

Hobbies: Basketball, Pickleball, Amateur Winemaker, NY Jets, Knicks, Rangers fan

Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters, Supporter of Little League Baseball, Elementary school events, High school football team

Motto in life: Successful people do what unsuccessful people are not willing to do.

Cuttler grew up in the produce industry and is a fourth generation. He has greatly innovated a decades-old family business by bringing in new technology, but his professional path did not begin in the industry. After attending Drexel University in Philadelphia, he worked for the PGA Tour for three years. In 2016, he returned to the family business to take on an administrative role as a general manager. He introduced new software, credit card processing, and other systems to continue to grow the business.

In 2020, after the passing of his uncle, he stepped up from an administrative/operations role to an operations/executive position. As chief operating officer, he oversees all aspects of the business, handling day-to-day operations, as well as the sales team, payroll and HR. He designed and developed the company's app, which allows customers to place orders, create order guides, and make payments. Under his guidance, the company has grown the business to over \$40 million this past year, secured major contracts and is in the process of building a new facility.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

Quality and service. We pride ourselves on providing the best quality you can find. Anyone can charge a cheaper price, but can they charge

that competitive price without sacrificing quality? Service is something no one can beat us on. In our prime Jersey Shore location, many of our clients are weather-dependent. We offer same-day delivery that not one of our competitors can say they do. It's a service like no other, and we pride ourselves on it.

Q: What would you like consumers to know about the industry?

The industry changes daily. Pricing changes daily, and numbers are constantly flowing. The produce industry is so dependent on many factors, such as labor, supply and demand, and weather. These factors force you to always be on your toes and ahead of the game because missing the boat can be the difference between making money and losing money.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of my ability to secure the Jersey Mike's Subs contract for the state of New Jersey. To be in the home state of Jersey Mike's corporation, you are constantly under the microscope. It was a feat in itself to secure the contract, but we have been able to fulfill the contract with flying colors and can see where the future is headed with new contracts coming available.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Work hard. This is an industry that requires long hours and 110% commitment: 60 to 80 hours per week, early days, late nights, working on holidays. People will always need to eat. Expect to lay it all out there if you want to be successful.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

The biggest challenges are increasing regulations and requirements that continue to add more costs to a company's bottom line, making it harder to be successful. We are continually looking for new ways to add revenue, but also ways to cut costs and become more efficient. There are a lot of opportunities opening up each year. Different aspects of the market continue to become available, whether institutional work, government programs, or regional and national chains opening up in our delivery zones.

Maile Frelinger, 32
Director of Business
Development
Fowler Packing Company
Fresno, CA



Hometown: Bakersfield, CA

Hobbies: Tennis, Pilates, Wellness, Travel, Reading, Cooking, Podcasts

Family/Community: Certified Pilates, Barre and TRX instructor, Kern Behavioral Health and Recovery Services volunteer, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) volunteer, Bakersfield Memorial Hospital Foundation Fundraising Event Committee Member

Motto in life: Comparison is the thief of joy.

Frelinger began her career in the produce industry while attending UC

Davis, where she participated in IFPA's Pack Family Career Pathways Program and attended Fresh Summit in 2013. After graduating in 2014, she joined The Wonderful Company as a customer-service representative, but quickly transitioned into sales, earning selection for the company's LEAD executive leadership program and a seat on its Leadership and Development Committee. The Wonderful role laid the groundwork for her expertise in sales, branding, and customer strategy.

In 2019, she moved to Fowler Packing Company as a sales executive, helping launch Peelz — now one of the fastest-growing citrus brands — and leading sales for Samsons, the company's California table-grape program. Through IFPA, she completed both the Emerging Leaders Program (University of Arizona) and the Executive Leadership Program (Cornell).

In 2025, she was promoted to director of business development at Fowler, where she now shapes the company's go-to-market vision, forges strategic partnerships, expands distribution channels, and steers cross-functional growth initiatives.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

While studying at UC Davis, I interned

at Sunview Vineyards. That hands-on experience opened the door to a broader network within agriculture. I later joined IFPA's Pack Family Career Pathways Program and attended PMA Fresh Summit in 2013, which sealed my passion for produce.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That this industry is built on relationships more than transactions. Long-term success comes from trust, follow-through, and knowing how to show up for people when it matters most.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Stay curious, ask thoughtful questions, and never underestimate the value of showing up prepared. This industry rewards hustle, but it also values humility.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I'm passionate about building things, with the right people, telling a story, and

leading with authenticity. Peelz wasn't just a label — it was a vision brought to life through cross-functional collaboration, storytelling, and relentless consistency. But the heart of it all is people: recognizing we're humans first, each on our own journey, and placing mental and physical wellbeing at the core.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

The next wave of growth will come from balancing authenticity with innovation. Customers want scalable solutions, but consumers crave connection. The challenge is delivering both without compromising values.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Leading the launch and growth of Peelz during a pivotal time in my life — balancing personal challenges while spearheading a brand that quickly became a market leader — was both demanding and rewarding. It stands as a testament to resilience, dedication and the power of a clear, purpose-driven vision, and it is forever a tribute to the guidance and legacy of my late mentor, Sean Nelsen.

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Rob Gibson, 35
Chief Operations Officer
Gibson Produce and
Watermelon Sales
Gibson Farms
Vero Beach, FL



Hometown: Vero Beach, FL

Hobbies: Golfing, Hunting, Spending time with family

Family/Community: Married, 1 son and 1 on the way, Trinity Episcopal Church

Motto in life: Do it right the first time.

Gibson is a dynamic leader and advocate in the watermelon industry, blending hands-on experience with strategic vision. As COO of Gibson Produce and part-owner of Gibson Farms (in Arcadia, FL), he oversees every step of production. His leadership at the Florida Watermelon Association has modernized marketing strategies and expanded outreach. His influence spans multiple state and national boards, and his service has earned industry accolades.

He began working in agriculture in 2006 with his father, gaining hands-on experience in nearly every role of watermelon shipping. Since 2008, he has worked in operations at Gibson Produce.

In 2017, he received the Future Watermelon Farm Leader Award from the National Watermelon Association. He has served on the National Watermelon Association's promotions and research committees since 2018 and was a member of the Florida Watermelon Association (FWA) board of directors from 2018 to 2020.

He was promoted to his current position at Gibson Produce in 2020, and that same year began serving as FWA second vice president (2020–2022). In 2021, he joined both the Georgia Watermelon Association board of directors and the National Watermelon Promotion Board,

where he served on the executive committee. In 2022, he became FWA's first vice president and chaired the marketing committee. That year, he also co-founded Gibson Farms with his father, where they now grow their own melons. In 2023, he was elected president of the FWA, joined the National Watermelon Association board of directors, and received the FWA Outstanding Service Award.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began working for my dad in 2006 as a forklift driver, and it just became something I loved and wanted to continue doing. His passion and dedication to quality have inspired me for my entire career. I wouldn't be the man I am today without his guidance.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I knew patience. Everything comes with time. It takes time for fruit to grow to maturity, to grow professionally, and as a person.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I am definitely most passionate about quality. At Gibson Produce, we don't strive to be the biggest, but we do strive to be the best. Our quality is a direct reflection of our team and our work ethic. I am passionate about maintaining this standard.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Consumers will desire more fresh-cut watermelons because of its ease of use. As an industry, we strive to promote all of the benefits of using the entire watermelon, but people like convenience.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of being nominated as an officer of the Florida Watermelon Association. To be trusted by my fellow industry members to lead our industry in the best direction is truly an honor.

Phillip Giles, 35
Chief Operating Officer
Western Sky Produce
Monterey, CA



Hometown: Stockton, CA

Hobbies: Golf, Fishing, Family

Family/Community: Married, 2 sons, First Tee — Monterey County, 11-99 Foundation, Equine Healing Collaborative — Monterey

Motto in life: Just do it.

Before embarking on his career in the produce industry, Giles participated in IFPA's Pack Family Career Pathways Program. Shortly after graduating from college, he began his career at C.H. Robinson, joining the fresh procurement division. During his time at C.H. Robinson, he gained experience managing one of the company's major accounts, which led him to his passion for sustainability in the supply chain. Giles worked closely with the warehouse team within the C.H. Robinson network to identify by-products and culls, which were then redirected to local juice and pet food companies. This initiative proved to be both environmentally sustainable and beneficial to the company's financial performance.

In 2020, Giles co-founded Western Sky Produce with Wyatt Meiggs, whom he met and worked with during his time at C.H. Robinson. As vice president of the company, Giles played a pivotal leadership role, overseeing the day-to-day operations, driving business development, and shaping the strategic direction of the organization. He successfully led a team of 10 professionals, ensuring seamless operational efficiency, fostering a high-performance culture, and driving significant sales growth.

His leadership contributed directly to the company's rapid success, transforming it into a respected and profitable produce brokerage within just four years. In 2024, FreshEdge acquired Western Sky, and Giles was instrumental in negotiating the sale. Post-acquisition,

he continued to serve as chief operating officer. He participated in IFPA's Leadership Program, Class 27.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I first began working in the produce industry when I was invited to participate as a student in the IFPA (PMA) Pack Family Career Pathways while attending CSU Monterey Bay. This experience was a turning point for me. Through the program, I met incredible professionals and gained exposure to the complexities of the produce supply chain. I was struck by the challenges the industry faced and how integral it was to global food systems. The passion and drive of the people I encountered inspired me to want to be a difference maker in the field.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Go all in. Embrace every opportunity to learn and grow, and don't be afraid to put yourself out there. The produce industry thrives on relationships, and it's a field that is incredibly receptive to individuals who demonstrate a strong work ethic and a willingness to connect. Networking is key — whether it's with colleagues, growers, or customers — and being proactive in making those connections can open doors to invaluable opportunities.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

I believe consumers will increasingly prioritize transparency, convenience and sustainability in the products they purchase. With a growing shift toward healthier lifestyles, these values are quickly becoming central to consumer preferences. This evolution is already reshaping the landscape of our industry, and it's essential for us as professionals to adapt.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

My biggest accomplishment to date has been the successful creation, growth, and sale of our business in just four years. Throughout this journey, I am particularly proud of our ability to maintain and nurture the unique, community-centric culture that sets us apart. Despite the challenges of scaling and ultimately selling the business, we remained steadfast in our commitment to building strong relationships.

Deanna Gonzales, 32
Product Manager
Taylor Farms
Salinas, CA



Hometown: Soledad, CA

Hobbies: Traveling, Gardening, Fitness, Wine appreciation

Family/Community: Married, 3 step-children

Motto in life: Work hard and be nice to people.

Gonzales' career in agriculture started in 2015 when she began working as a food safety coordinator for Dole Fresh Vegetables, a part-time position as she wrapped up her bachelor's degree in molecular biology at Cal State, Monterey Bay. In 2016, after completing her degree, she was promoted to FSMA specialist, and she helped lay the groundwork for FSMA compliance at Dole.

In 2018, she stepped into a more technical role as a regulatory compliance and technical innovation specialist. She worked on wash water antimicrobial studies, including collaboration with North Carolina State University on the assessment of sodium acid sulfate as a potential antimicrobial for the washing of vegetables. In 2020, she was promoted to the FSQA non-vegetable supplier program manager.

In 2022, she decided to pursue a position in research and development as the R&D product development manager. In this position, she worked on ideation, development and launch of new packaged salads and bowls. In 2022, she completed her master's in food safety at Michigan State.

She began her position at Taylor Farms in 2023 as a product manager for retail salads, where she is now responsible for executing new product launches for Chopped Salad Kits.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry?

I was born and raised in the Salinas Valley, and agriculture has been a part of my family for generations. My grand-

father, Bernardo Vasquez, built a career for himself as a field supervisor for Merit Packing. He later went on to start his own harvesting company in retirement. My grandfather is a big reason I've chosen to pursue a career in agriculture. He was hardworking and driven, and I wanted to follow in those footsteps. He would be very proud to see where I am in my career today, working with many of the companies that he worked with so many years ago.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

During my time at Dole, I was fortunate enough to attend the Women's Food Service Forum. There, I attended a seminar on the topic of communication. I have always prided myself on my soft skills, but little did I know there are so many ways of communicating. Not all people communicate, or give information, in the same manner, nor do they receive it in the same way. I wish I had learned that earlier in my career.

Q: What would you like consumers to know about the industry?

How much work goes into the bag of salad they find at their local grocery store. From planting, growing and harvesting in the field, to cutting, washing, and packaging at the processing facility, the process is complex, yet executed impeccably every day. Please think of all that hard work the next time you prepare a prepackaged salad for your family.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

When I began my career in the produce industry, there were very few people in their early 20s working within the company. Now, we see more young professionals entering the industry. Not only is this key to the continued success of our industry, but also helps us remain relatable to our younger consumer demographics.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Establish a healthy work-life balance early on in your career. The produce industry is so fast-paced, and feeding people is a demanding job, so don't forget to prioritize your health and self in the process.

Erin Gorman, 40
Vice President Customer Success
Pepper
New York, NY



Hometown: Itasca, IL

Hobbies: Spending time with family, Fitness, Being a total sports mom

Family/Community: Married, 2 children, Member of St Peter's Apostle Catholic Church

Motto in life: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain." — Vivian Greene

Gorman has more than a decade of experience spanning supply chain, distribution and customer success. From managing over \$4 billion in fresh produce distribution at Produce Alliance to shaping distributor relations at Buyers Edge and now driving success at Pepper, she has consistently elevated operational excellence and strategic partnerships.

She began her career at Giant Eagle in 2008, soon moving into a buyer's assistant role where she got her first exposure to suppliers, inventory management, food safety and vendor relations. From there, she moved into supply chain coordination roles, first at Armada Supply Chain Solutions in 2013 and then at Produce Alliance in 2016, where she honed her skills in logistics and operational efficiency and building core relationships. Her experience continued to grow as she took on leadership roles of supply chain manager and eventually served as the director of custom distribution at Produce Alliance and director of distributor relations at Fresh Alliance.

In June 2024, she joined Pepper in her current role. She focuses on strengthening long-term industry relationships while integrating e-commerce solutions. In 2024, she served as part of the IFPA Supply Chain Council.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My first job in the produce industry was reconciling PODs to invoices for accounting. While it may sound like a number's role, it really opened my eyes to the complexity of the produce world. I quickly became familiar with a wide variety of produce items, suppliers, inbound schedules and inventory patterns. It was a behind-the-scenes look that opened my eyes to supply chain and distribution.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

No two days are the same in produce and distribution. The constant ebbs and flows keep you on your toes and are challenging, but it is also what is so rewarding. Learn from mistakes or issues, fix them for the future, keep evolving.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Never stop learning, always stay open-minded, and understand that relationships are key. This industry moves fast, new challenges pop up daily, and what worked yesterday might not work today. Think outside the box for solutions, collaborate with team members to find the best possible outcome. Most importantly, build strong relationships with suppliers, coworkers and customers. Trust and communication are everything!

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

One of the biggest advancements has been in technology — everything from real-time inventory systems to data-driven forecasting and improved traceability tools. Sustainability has not only been a buzzword, but also a new model that has affected the way consumers eat and shop. With all of these factors, there's a core relation to the complexity of supply chains, and it has become more imperative than ever that the right product and quantity gets to the right place on time and in good condition. Technology, communication and relationships will continue to play a large role in the produce industry as we continue to evolve.

Matt Hiltner, 31
Marketing Manager
Babé Farms
Santa Maria, CA



Hometown: Santa Maria, CA
Hobbies: Atlanta Braves fan, Tennis, Traveling and visiting food spots
Family/Community: Married, USTA tennis team (seasonal leagues)
Motto in life: “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take — Wayne Gretzky.” — Michael Scott (The Office)

Hiltner represents the new era of marketing in specialty vegetables, blending innovation with visual storytelling. He is known for his work of elevating specialty vegetables through strategic social media engagement and elegant print ads, driving both brand visibility and market growth. As the marketing manager at Babé Farms, his role includes managing social media, email and ad campaigns, web design, content creation, and new product development. He collaborates with photographers and influencers, oversees digital asset organization, and designs graphics and point-of-sale materials across various platforms. He also represents Babé Farms at industry trade shows. During his tenure at Babé, he played a key role in the award-winning “Best Product Promo” for Honey Cone Cabbage at the IFPA Foodservice Conference. His products are also a two-time recipient of product innovation awards at the New York Produce Show.

Before joining Babé Farms, he earned a bachelor’s in business administration with a marketing emphasis from Chapman University in Orange County. He is involved in community outreach, playing a vital role in planning and coordinating Santa Barbara County Farm Day — an event that strengthens the connection between farmers and the local community. He also collaborated with Veggie Rescue (a local nonprofit) to establish a partnership with Babé Farms, ensuring that surplus produce was collected and redistributed.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

After completing an internship at Fearless Records, I returned home to Santa Maria and began searching for my next career opportunity. Around that time, my dad, Loren Hiltner (who worked for Babé Farms for 28 years before retiring in 2022), mentioned the company was looking for someone to manage their social media part time. At the time, I hadn’t seriously considered a career in the produce industry, but I’m incredibly glad I took the leap. I was brought on full time not long after. Nearly a decade later, I’m still with Babé Farms and like to think I have grown a lot both personally and professionally. The culture and family atmosphere at Babé Farms is something that resonated with me from the beginning and is a big part of why I have stayed all these years.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Network as much as possible and build genuine relationships. The produce industry is a tight-knit community, and those connections often lead to unexpected opportunities and collaborations.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

One big change is the evolution of specialty vegetables in the mainstream marketplace. Since I started at Babé Farms, items such as watermelon radish, rainbow carrots, and even Romanesco cauliflower have burst onto the scene. Consumers today are more knowledgeable and adventurous than ever, and social media has played a major role in propelling niche vegetables into mainstream markets.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One accomplishment that’s especially meaningful to me is establishing our partnership with Veggie Rescue, a nonprofit that reduces food waste by redistributing surplus produce. Because our customers are primarily fine-dining chefs with stringent quality and sizing standards, not all of our harvested produce fits their specifications. Through this partnership, we’ve been able to donate that excess to organizations throughout Santa Barbara County. Being able to help connect Babé Farms with a cause that reduces waste and supports. Our community has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my career.

Madison Hopper, 39
Creative Content Manager
Equifruit
Montréal, Canada



Hometown: Toronto, Canada
Hobbies: Woodworking, Snowboarding, Hiking, Building really bad robots
Family/Community: Married, 1 daughter
Motto in life: Courage is contagious.

Hopper is known as the creative engine behind Equifruit’s disruptive communications and marketing strategy and has long had a passion for fairness in business. In graduate school, from 2016 to 2018, she studied business and the environment, focusing on fair trade. During this time, she co-founded the Green Campus Cooperatives, a student- and faculty-owned cooperative that launched and managed two businesses on campus — a Fairtrade-certified clothing company and a campus café. During her graduate studies, she served her first term on the board of Fairtrade Canada, where she was introduced to Equifruit.

After graduating in 2018, she joined Equifruit part time doing special projects, and in 2019, she transitioned to a full-time role as marketing coordinator. In 2021, as Equifruit underwent a major rebrand, Hopper played a role in bringing that vision to life. In 2024, she was promoted to creative content manager after her experiential marketing strategies garnered major attention at trade shows across North America.

She is currently serving her second term on the Ontario Produce Marketing Association (OPMA) board of directors, and was a founding working committee member and multi-term chair of the OPMA Young Professionals Committee. She also sits on the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) Marketing Council.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I joined the Equifruit demo team in 2016. I was that person handing you a banana chunk on a toothpick at the trade show. But what hooked me wasn’t the fruit, it was the mission and the company’s president, Jennie Coleman. Jennie was a leader I admired instantly, and, over time, she became someone I call a mentor and a close friend.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That your network is more than LinkedIn connections. For a long time, I thought knowledge lived only in books and reports. But in the past two years, I’ve made it a priority to get to know my colleagues, peers, and mentors in the industry. I’ve learned that wisdom lives in hallway conversations, panel debates, WhatsApp group chats, and shared laughter. My network has made me a better marketer, a better teammate, and a more creative problem-solver.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

When Equifruit signs a new contract, it is an eruption of joy. We know that more business means more Fairtrade pay and premium for farmers. We get to watch communities thrive, soils rejuvenate, and new social innovations take root, such as living wage benchmarking. We see farming communities build water infrastructure where there was none before and install toilets in their children’s schools. We see farmers emerging as leaders, representing their communities on a global stage at Fairtrade International or running for local office. I am most passionate about the long game, the continuous push to correct this market, I love to witness the unlocking of human potential at the farm level, simply because farmers are being paid what they should be for their products.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I’m proud of how we’ve made Fairtrade bananas cool — from Vogue-inspired photo booths at trade shows to viral social campaigns and edgy point-of-sale signs. But more than that, I’m proud that this creativity is working, it’s getting attention, driving sales, and pushing the entire category forward.

Matt Hubbard, 38
Director of Sales
Local Bounti
Hamilton, MT



Hometown: Boise, ID

Hobbies: Traveling with family, Golf, Scuba diving, Hunting

Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters, Afterschool Marine enrichment program volunteer instructor

Motto in life: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go as a team.

With over 14 years of experience in the fresh produce industry, Hubbard has built a career grounded in innovation, strategic growth, and a passion for specialty products. He started in 2011 with Wonderful Brands. While at Wonderful, he maintained relationships and increased revenue through in-store merchandising for over 150 retail stores in Southern California.

In 2015, he joined Frieda's Specialty Produce team as an account manager, overseeing the foodservice channel, while also building new programs in retail and the Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Programs (FFVP). Hubbard helped expand the FFVP program nationally as one of the top specialty program offerings in the nation, along with increasing and bringing on new exotic national and regional programs with retailers. One of his highlights at Frieda's was building a \$5 million specialty program at Sprouts Farmers Market in under two years.

During COVID, he relocated his family to Boise, ID, working remotely with Frieda's. Then, in May 2023, he joined Local Bounti as director of sales. He leads foodservice and away-from-home channel, while also building new national partners through business development. In just two years, he has brought in an estimated \$6 million in new business sales, with many new projects on the horizon within the coming year through Local Bounti's six U.S. farms.

In March 2025, he graduated from the yearlong Southeast Produce Council Next Generation Leadership Academy (Class 2). He also sits on the Step UPP foodservice committee.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be open-minded and active. The industry moves a thousand miles a minute, and it can be easy to get sucked in and lose focus.

Be patient, ask for guidance, lean on peers. I have spent many late nights in warehouses and hours behind the phone, but that experience only makes you better adapted and prepared in the long run.

Secondly, get involved and be active. Sign up for mentorships and leadership programs, ask around to see where you can volunteer with expos. I came into the industry knowing no one and had no family produce background, so I learned a lot of things the hard way.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Relationship building. I have learned this industry is all about the people and relationships you create that make it happen. The rapport I have built with industry colleagues has helped me become a better mentor and leader, and to learn more about this industry. No other industry cares about each other and supports their peers like produce. The saying goes "people buy from people they love."

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

The biggest challenge I see in the future is food scarcity. We are only growing in population, and land and water is only becoming less and less available. By 2050, the world will need 70% more food. Part of the reason I came to Local Bounti was the company's passion for sustainability and technology to innovate new ways to feed the population.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

My biggest accomplishment has been graduating from the Southeast Produce Council Next Generation Leadership Academy (Class 2) in March. Being one of 12 selected, followed by the most rewarding yearlong leadership program, will always be a highlight of my produce career. Also, to be the first person from Local Bounti to attend the program was a tremendous honor.

Jessica Johnson, 39
National Account Manager
Tanimura & Antle
Salinas, CA



Hometown: Salinas, CA

Hobbies: Reading, Concerts, Traveling, Watching her sons' sports

Family/Community: Married, 2 sons

With over 15 years in the produce industry, Johnson is a respected leader, mentor and advocate for fresh produce. As a national account manager at Tanimura & Antle, she manages major retail partnerships. She started her career in the produce industry after graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in 2008 with a degree in agricultural business. She began as a replenishment manager at Tanimura & Antle where she quickly developed an understanding of supply chain logistics, inventory management, and the importance of consistent product flow in the fresh produce industry. Over the years, she advanced within the organization, increasing responsibilities and broadening her perspective on customer relationships, operations and strategic planning.

In 2018, she was promoted to her current position, where she oversees several key national accounts.

She played a pivotal role in developing Tanimura & Antle's vendor-managed inventory program for Walmart, a key initiative that streamlined supply chain efficiencies and strengthened the company's partnership with one of the nation's largest retailers. Her strategic approach and industry expertise helped optimize inventory management, ensuring a consistent supply of fresh produce to consumers.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I was the first in my family to want to do something different — to carve my own path and pursue a career that blended business with something meaningful. After graduating from Cal

Poly San Luis Obispo, I knew I wanted to return home to Monterey County, where I could stay close to family and friends.

Growing up, I was aware of the agricultural industry since it was basically in my backyard, but it wasn't until college that I truly began to understand its scale and opportunity. Through four years of classes, experiences and a summer internship, I developed a strong appreciation for the impact of the industry, both locally and globally. That experience validated my interest and opened the door to my first role with Tanimura & Antle. From that point on, I've never looked back.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That I'd be waking up early, every single day, because produce never sleeps. I didn't fully understand just how demanding and fast-paced this industry is until I was in it. But it's rewarding being part of a business that feeds people every single day and that makes it worth it.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Get out into the fields, greenhouses, and processing facilities whenever you can. There's no substitute for seeing first-hand how produce is harvested, handled and prepared for market.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Attracting and retaining young talent. As more industries offer remote work, competitive benefits, and greater work-life balance, the next generation will naturally be drawn to those opportunities. Those of us who have grown up within the produce industry understand and embrace the fast pace and demands that come with it, but new talent will have different expectations. To stay competitive, the industry will need to adapt — offering more flexible career paths, modernizing workplace cultures, and communicating the sense of purpose and community that agriculture provides.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of the most rewarding parts of my journey in this industry has been the relationships I've built along the way. Throughout my time at Tanimura & Antle, and across the broader produce community, I've had the privilege of working alongside some truly incredible people. Many have become not just colleagues, but lifelong friends.

Angelica Kaprielian, 34
Chief Financial &
Operations Officer
Creekside Organics, Inc.
Bakersfield, CA



Hometown: Reedley, CA

Hobbies: Reading, Hiking, Nature, Yoga, Ballroom Dancing, Traveling, Learning new languages

Family/Community: Street Dog Hero volunteer, Bend Parks and Rec Ice Hockey supporter

Motto in life: Real success is staying true to who you are.

Kaprielian is a dedicated finance and operations leader, playing a vital role in her company's mission to keep family farms thriving. As a steward of her fourth-generation farming business, she ensures efficiency, financial stability, and long-term sustainability. Her operational excellence and behind-the-scenes leadership make a meaningful impact on her team and the produce industry.

She began her career in 2012 as a mechanical engineer at Syska Hennessy Group. After excelling in this sector, she transitioned into the finance world in 2017, joining Fruit World Company, where she eventually took on the role of finance and business operations manager. Over more than six years, she led budgeting, forecasting and strategic financial initiatives, driving profitability and operational efficiency. In January 2025, she led the successful merger of Fruit World and Creekside Organics, and assumed the role of chief financial and operations officer.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I grew up on a tree fruit orchard, so produce was a part of my life from the beginning. Encouraged to pursue a career outside of farming, I built a career in engineering and project management. After six years in that space, I was ready for a change and my sister convinced me to help with some part-time accounting for Fruit World, our family's produce sales

company. I didn't realize she was slowly roping me in to eventually take over the finance department, and become an owner of the company. It's been incredibly rewarding to combine my technical and management background with my passion.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had known that your career path doesn't have to be linear to be successful. Early on, I felt pressure to follow the engineering trajectory since that is what I went to university for, but some of my most valuable growth came when I pivoted. I've learned that it's OK to evolve, follow your instincts, and let your values guide your choices.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about advancing sustainable and organic agriculture, and its impact on the health of people and the planet. Working within a company whose values are rooted in sustainability and stewardship gives my work a sense of purpose. Every decision we make — from the way we grow our fruit to how we package and distribute it — has the potential to support healthier ecosystems and communities. I believe in the power of organics not just as a business model, but as a commitment to future generations.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Consumers will increasingly seek transparency, sustainability, and a deeper connection to where their food comes from. They'll want to understand the impact their purchasing decisions have on the environment and their health.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of the accomplishments I'm most proud of is leading the successful merger of Fruit World and Creekside Organics. It's been a complex process that requires aligning financial systems, company cultures and operational strategies, while keeping the business running smoothly. I've been working closely with both ownership teams to ensure transparency, clear communication, and a shared vision for the future.

Jena Carpenter Klatt, 38
Chief Operating Officer
Silver Creek Software
Boise, ID



Hometown: Boise, ID

Family/Community: Married, Soloist and Resident Company Member of Opera Idaho, Vanderbilt University Reunion Committee

Motto in life: The best leaders serve first.

Carpenter is a dedicated professional with over 15 years of experience in the produce industry. Working alongside her family's software company, she has helped wholesalers, distributors, growers, packers, and shippers improve PTI traceability compliance, inventory management and overall operations. Her expertise, problem-solving skills, and deep industry knowledge have guided many companies toward greater efficiency and regulatory success.

While earning her master's degree, she worked part time at boutique organic grocery store, Alnatura, in Germany. After earning her master's, she spent five years performing as a classically trained opera singer before transitioning into the world of ERP software. Upon returning to the U.S., she began working at Silver Creek Software in 2013 as a project assistant in ERP software implementations. Within a year, she led her first full project launch. Over the next few years, she progressed to head of sales and then chief business officer.

In 2019, she took the position of chief operating officer, where she manages department heads and ensures cross-departmental collaboration, tracks customer experience initiatives and project launches, oversees the day-to-day administrative and operational functions of the business, and helps identify and implement technological trends that can impact operations. She has served as a member of the IFPA Business Solutions Provider Roundtable since 2023.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I have been involved in the produce industry for as long as I can remember — since I was old enough to answer phones and type. My parents founded Silver Creek Software in the early 1980s, and I naturally grew into the business. Over time, that early exposure sparked a deeper interest in both the produce industry and the role technology plays in supporting it.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Helping our customers grow. I genuinely enjoy identifying opportunities for process improvement and developing technology-driven solutions that support our clients' growth, while preserving the unique strategic advantages that set them apart. Being part of their success stories is incredibly rewarding.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

One of the biggest challenges facing the industry is the ability to adapt quickly enough to meet evolving consumer demands. Advancements in technology, automation and data-driven processes require significant investments of time, resources and capital. While these innovations present opportunities for efficiency and growth, they can be difficult for smaller companies to implement. The opportunity lies in finding scalable, accessible solutions that allow businesses of all sizes to modernize without losing the qualities that set them apart.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Consumers will continue to seek the highest quality products at the best possible value. Beyond quality and price, they will increasingly demand greater transparency about the foods they consume.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Making time for two professions: opera and produce software. Both require a high level of dedication and discipline, yet nurturing both passions has kept me grounded, energized and focused. I'm also deeply proud of the work we've done to continuously identify and implement solutions that meet our customers' evolving needs.

Matthew Krehbiel, 32
Senior Manager—Procurement,
Planning, and Continuous
Improvement
B&G Foods Inc. — Green Giant
Parsippany, NJ



Hometown: King City, CA

Hobbies: MTB, Gardening, Fishing, Hiking, Swimming

Family/Community: Married, 2 sons, Follower of Jesus Christ, Board member at non-profit Crossroads Mission in Yuma County

Motto in life: Don't jump ship when the waves get choppy.

Krehbiel's career began with Growers Express in 2013 as an intern, leading to a full-time position in 2014 where he was tasked with expanding and enhancing the value-added vegetable program across multiple facilities, states, and countries supporting the Green Giant Fresh brand. He quickly advanced, earning a management promotion in 2015 to improve customer fulfillment, gain efficiencies within the facility, reduce waste, and increase raw material yields.

In 2016, he led the setup and implementation of a production module within the company's ERP system and was subsequently appointed department lead on Standard Cost Implementation and onboarding a newly acquired facility in Maine. He continued to refine and aid in growth of the value-added line of business for Growers Express over the next few years.

Following the sale of various business units in 2019 and 2020, Krehbiel remained with Growers Express, earning a promotion to director of sourcing and planning. In September 2020, he relocated to Yuma, AZ.

Following B&G Foods' acquisition of Growers Express in May 2022, Krehbiel served as the site lead, overseeing the integration of the Yuma facility into B&G's systems and operational processes. In 2023, he capitalized on the increased scale

and expanded commodity portfolio of B&G Foods by internalizing additional commodities, unlocking new synergies, and enhancing the Yuma site's contribution to the broader vegetable business unit. In 2024, he was entrusted with managing Green Giant's global vegetable ingredient supply. He also led strategic cost-reduction efforts across warehousing, freight, inventory planning, and commodity rotation; initiatives that consistently delivered measurable value.

Krehbiel works closely with partners to improve yields, optimize efficiency, and advance sustainable practices in vegetable production. His innovative mindset and dedication to continuous improvement have also created new revenue streams by aligning additional services with existing operational capabilities. In 2025, he earned his Executive MBA from the University of Arizona.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My grandpa farmed in King City, CA, so growing up in the Salinas Valley is how my passion for produce began. With God's help, I landed an internship at Growers Express in Salinas, CA. Growers Express offered me a position once I graduated, officially kicking off my career representing Green Giant.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about understanding the "why," not just the "what," and looking at things differently to create opportunities that bring growth to the business.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

To have more patience with people, crops and circumstances. To realize that not all things are within your control, regardless of how much you work. To plan and prepare as best as possible, stay proactive and react wisely.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm proud of the relationships I've been blessed with — working with and learning from growers, harvesters, carriers, operators, FSQA teams, packaging suppliers, and many more.

Jim Leach, 32
Director, Foodservice &
Southwest Sales
Oppy
Coquitlam, British Columbia



Hometown: Salinas, CA

Hobbies: Spending time with fiancé, friends and family, Cooking, Golfing, Exercising, Following the stock market

Family/Community: St. Theresa Catholic Church, Houston

Motto in life: Treat others how you would like to be treated. To whom much is given, much is expected!

Leach was born in California's Salinas Valley, the seventh generation of his family to be raised in Monterey County. He spent his high school summers working for Taylor Farms. While studying agricultural economics at Purdue University, he worked during the summers both for Taylor Farms in Nashville and PepsiCo in Chicago.

Upon graduation, he joined BASF in its professional development program in Raleigh, NC. He transitioned to Yuma, AZ, for a sales role with BASF. With a desire to be more connected to produce, he took a position with Oppy in September 2016 as a business development representative. Soon after joining Oppy, he was accepted to participate in the Fresh Produce and Floral Council Apprenticeship Program. In 2017, he took the opportunity to transition to Oppy's sales team and then decided to pursue his MBA at Pepperdine University through a night program.

After graduation, he obtained an open position in Houston, TX, to manage Oppy's sales office and South-Central U.S. After two years as sales manager, he was promoted to lead all sales for the entire Southwest U.S. region, in addition to managing the entirety of Oppy's national foodservice sales, for which he now serves as director.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry?

I grew up in the industry, and I have had a love for produce since I was a child. My grandfather, Howard Leach, was a grower-shipper with several produce companies in the 1970s and 1980s, and my father, Alec Leach, worked for several companies, including with my grandfather, and then joined Taylor Farms in 1997 and is still there.

I did explore opportunities outside of the industry, but at the end of the day, there is nothing like produce. The passion for produce that people in the industry have is unlike anything I have ever experienced. It is not an easy industry, but the people make it all worthwhile.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Not only has the industry transitioned to providing more digital experiences at the retail and restaurant level, consolidation on the supply side has also been widespread. Additionally, the faces of the industry have changed and will continue as younger professionals progress into managerial and leadership roles.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of going to graduate school while still working full time. I knew taking two years off wasn't an option, considering I didn't want to put my career on hold, and so I chose to pursue both simultaneously. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleagues at Oppy who covered for me when I was periodically unavailable; my family and friends for their support; and of course, my classmates.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

No day is going to be the same, but if you approach it with the right attitude, you can do anything. At the end of the day, if you do everything within your control, are honest and dependable, I believe you can go far. Produce is an industry comprised of the best people in the country, and it really is unlike anything else. Some advice I was given by my grandfather is that your reputation can take 30 years to build and 30 seconds to burn, be mindful of that and carry out each day with that in the back of your mind.

Salvatore J. Marchese, 30
Chief Operating Officer
Cut Fresh LLC
Milwaukee, WI



Hometown: Oconomowoc, WI

Hobbies: Cars, Hunting, Fishing, Nature walks with son

Family/Community: Husband, 1 son, St. Jerome Church in Oconomowoc

Motto in life: It is what it is.

Marchese worked from the ground up to become COO of his family's fresh-cut company. He is known as someone who leads by example and is often seen working side by side with his production crew. He began in the family business in 2013, working on the lettuce line, and he worked through every position from 2013 to 2018, from machine maintenance to quality control. From 2018 to 2022, he worked as a shift production supervisor until 2022 when he became COO where he is now responsible for all facets of the production operations.

During his professional journey, he learned new skills to develop new cuts and collaborated with customers on new blends to meet business needs. He has created numerous products through collaborations with a variety of chefs and businesses to find the best, cleanest, and most efficient versions of recipes that have ultimately saved countless dollars (labor, liability, product yield) to the businesses he works to support.

As COO, he also finds creative ways to reduce waste, since the nature of pre-cut produce is to gain as close to 100% yield as possible. He is a huge advocate for employee safety and ensuring the company's people are as well taken care of as customers. He also maintains a clean facility, with high Primus GFS Audit Rankings year-by-year and minimal safety issues.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My father is Jack Marchese and, for

as long as I can remember, it has been my dream to follow in my father's footsteps. I wanted to learn the ropes and take over from my father once the time is right. Eventually, I hope to leave this legacy to my children and keep the family business of 91 years running for 91 more years.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Don't be afraid when you don't know the answers right away, lean on your counsel, and trust your team. They will carry you farther than you think.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Quality, customer service, and treating my staff fairly. I like to lead by example and provide a happy environment, so people are happy to work with me at Cut Fresh. I like to avoid the standard "corporate" work environment as much as possible. I grew up working with my family and I want my crew to feel like we are all family, too.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

I see many opportunities in making fresh produce more easily accessible to people within their own homes. I am aware of food deserts and want nothing more than to provide safe, clean, and healthy produce to those who would benefit from the added convenience that delivery or pre-cut options provide. Food safety is always a challenge that will add more layers to an already complicated process, but I am passionate about food safety, first and foremost, so we rise to the challenge and try to lead the way in food safety. Two back-to-back 100% scores on our Primus GFS Audits speak for themselves.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Starting as a production worker on the food line at the beginning of my career, I never believed that I would work my way up to COO. I am infinitely grateful and proud of the mentors, colleagues and friends that allowed me to step into this position and guided me through all facets of this business so I could learn and thrive.

Craig Matsinger, 40
Operations Manager
Pacific Trellis Fruit
Los Angeles, CA



Hometown: National Park, NJ

Hobbies: Fishing, Football, Camping

Family/Community: Married, 2 sons

Motto in life: Let's go!

Born and raised in South Jersey, Matsinger started his produce career in 2009, answering an online ad for a produce inspector for Fresh Pro Inspections, working primarily out of Lucca Cold Storage in Vineland, NJ. Over the next few years, he gained knowledge of produce, but also warehousing and the supply chain.

In 2014, he joined A.J. Trucco as their outbound quality coordinator within the same location. At Trucco, he oversaw the company's quality control program, ensuring specs and conditions were to customer standards. By 2018, he was promoted to general operations, managing all departments and successfully helping move the company to its current independent facility. Then, in 2020, he took a position in operations at Pacific Trellis Fruit.

In 2022, he moved to his current position, where he now handles day-to-day port operations and coordinates warehouse DCs and logistical providers. He manages a team of three

for the company's East Coast operation, importing millions of boxes per year.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

It was completely by chance. I answered a job post on Craigslist, not knowing exactly what to expect. From the start, I saw the potential this industry has for those who are dedicated, and was immediately drawn in.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Patience, as that alone can make or break a situation.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Don't burn bridges; this industry is close-knit.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Working through complex issues with my team and solving problems. I have a great team. We all have each other's backs.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Regulations and hair nets were nonexistent when I started. Also, there is more technicality and emphasis placed on product spec, quality, and storage than when I first started.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Operational costs are rising, and there will be an opportunity in the development of new strategies to mitigate and lower.

Kyle McMillan, 36
Director, Trade Shows
International Fresh
Produce Association
Washington, DC



Hometown: Newark, DE

Hobbies: Traveling, Sailing, Reading

Motto in life: Stay curious

With over 13 years of experience at the International Fresh Produce Association, McMillan has built her career at the intersection of logistics, creativity, and people-first leadership. She started as a trade show planner in 2011, cutting her teeth on exhibitor communications, database management, and behind-the-scenes logistics. Her knack for streamlining processes and building strong exhibitor relationships earned her a promotion to trade show manager in 2016, where she managed logistics for more than 1,400 exhibitors annually, implemented Buyer Roundtables into IFPA events, and led initiatives that generated over \$300,000 in revenue.

When the world shifted in 2020, she pivoted into a marketing and events execution manager position, gaining vital experience in communications and virtual programming to keep the association's audience connected and its events thriving. She returned to her trade show roots in 2022 as event manager, bringing a more holistic, cross-functional perspective to event strategy. In 2023, she was named director of trade shows where she is responsible for delivering large-scale experiences that exceed expectations, drive results, and bring the industry together in meaningful ways.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I took a course on conventions at Virginia Tech and instantly knew I was meant for large-scale events — not weddings, not galas, but the kind of experiences that bring thousands of people together with purpose. Once I

made that shift, I came across a job posting at PMA (now IFPA), just down the street from where I grew up. It felt like fate. My first day on the job was PMA's Fresh Summit. Talk about a trial by fire. The energy on that show floor was electric. I was blown away by the creativity of the booths, the innovation on display, and, of course, the incredible flavors I got to taste. I remember walking the floor wide-eyed, thinking, "This is it. This is where I want to be."

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That you don't have to have all the answers to be successful, you just have to be willing to ask great questions and surround yourself with people who inspire you to grow. Early on, I thought leadership meant having everything figured out, but I've learned it's really about listening, adapting, and building strong, trusting teams.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Giving back to the community is hands-down what I'm most passionate about. Each year, we partner with local food banks to donate as much fresh product from our show floors as possible. In 2024, I extended that mission to floral, partnering with 20 nonprofit and charity organizations to donate 8.5 tons of flowers. From DIY activities in senior centers to churches, Girl Scouts, hurricane victims, and single moms, it was amazing to be able to spread the joy of our show throughout the community. Knowing that our events can have a meaningful ripple effect beyond the show floor is incredibly fulfilling — and it's a tradition I plan to grow every year.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

One of our biggest challenges is also one of our greatest opportunities: keeping up with rapid change while staying true to our roots. From shifting consumer preferences and supply chain pressures to climate impacts and labor shortages, our industry is navigating a lot. But with those challenges comes incredible opportunity — especially in innovation, sustainability and storytelling.

Trey Miller, 35
Chief Operating Officer
Melon 1 Sales Corp
Punta Gorda, FL



Hometown: Branford, FL

Hobbies: Watermelons, Racing, Golf

Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Orchard Community Church

Motto in life: Don't be busy, be productive.

Miller comes from a produce family, and grew up in produce. His father, Doug Miller, was a watermelon farmer, and his mother's side (Chastain family) has been growing produce for seven generations in Florida and South Georgia. In 2007, Miller started at Melon 1 as a warehouse employee. During his time in the warehouse, he drove a forklift, helped fix equipment, and learned about the hard work needed to bring a watermelon to local grocery stores.

In late 2008, he moved to a logistics position that involved booking freight, order processing, and inventory management. During that time, the growing company was able to take on interns who Miller trained in logistics, resulting in some becoming full-time employees.

In 2012, he was given the opportunity to take on a role in operations and sales. In this position, he was successful in signing on some key accounts for the company. He was also able to oversee some of the company's smaller operations, allowing him to manage employees throughout daily production.

In 2020, the company recognized the need for a chief operating officer, and Miller was offered the position. While he still works in produce sales, operations are the bulk of his day-to-day

responsibilities. During his tenure at Melon 1, he brought in new technology credited for improving daily efficiencies, and the company became able to do in 12 hours what used to take 16 to 18 hours during the busy summer months. Now the largest watermelon shipper in the country, the company has grown to five times the size since Miller started.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Produce is about patience. I didn't have much of that at the beginning of my career.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

You never stop learning in this industry. Soak in all the knowledge you can get.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Being able to provide a quality product to consumers that they will enjoy.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The amount of technology we have to use now to get produce from farm to table has grown exponentially during my time.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

As we have already seen in certain trends, consumers are going less toward pre-packaged process goods and more toward fresh produce.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

We travel during the growing season and are away from home five months out of the year. My wife Katelyn and I have been able to build a family around my career, and we are able to spend summers together away from home. It's been a great accomplishment to have our family together during those months away from home.

Christina Monnin, 39
Owner
Farm to Market Consulting/
Blueberry Hill Farm
Clermont, FL



Hometown: Wauchula, FL

Hobbies: Travel with family, Snorkeling, Crafting

Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters, Local Chamber of Commerce,

Motto in life: Do the next right thing!

Monnin has more than 19 years of experience in customer development for grower/packer/shippers across the Eastern U.S. Her work spans multiple commodity sets, where she has successfully led a variety of business development initiatives within the produce industry. In her most recent role, beginning in 2021, as director of business development at Cottle Strawberry Nursery, she significantly increased sales volume and profitability by developing upgraded customer relationships, managing procurement processes, and expanding the vegetable program to cover customers' year-round needs.

From 2018 to 2021, she served as director of business development at Van Solkema Family Farms, where she played a key role in rebranding the company, developing training programs, and building sales strategies for the company's growing team. She also worked in account management at Duda Farm Fresh Foods, beginning in 2011.

In January 2024, Monnin founded Farm to Market Consulting, a grower-focused sales and supply chain service agency. The company's mission is to build direct connections between farmers and buyers while building an organizational strategy to enable generational growth and profitability.

Monnin's passion also led her to establish Blueberry Hill Farm, a 105-acre organic farm in Clermont, FL, in 2023, with a dual focus on commercial growing and education-focused agritourism. She also volunteers on the Foodservice

Committee as well as the Scholarship Committee for the Southeast Produce Council.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My first job in the industry was with Clear Springs Packing in Winter Haven, FL, around 2006. I had no prior experience in produce and didn't grow up in it, but once I started working there and learned more about blueberries, packing, and sales, I became addicted to the industry. I fell in love with produce and from that moment on, I accepted every opportunity that came my way. I set up their food safety program from start to finish with Primus, developed a process for the packing line to custom pack to order, and ensured that the correct products were received by the right customers. Ultimately, I had leadership tell me that I would excel in sales. I had the best mentors anyone could ever ask for in sales, and I owe them an immense amount of gratitude for taking me under their wing.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

I enjoy connecting with those who are new to the industry because I remember what it was like for me. I always tell newcomers that it's essential to take ownership of their work. It's crucial to ensure that your word is never in question — protect your word and your integrity, as these are the most important things to safeguard in life.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about helping farmers take control of their own destinies while addressing a significant need in the industry. I believe that customers can reduce their retail costs by having a direct source for products, which will also increase returns for growers. Unfortunately, I see many farms struggling to survive, leading to a gap in supply and preventing farmers from passing on their wisdom and knowledge to the next generation. One of the main reasons we purchased Blueberry Hill Farm was to be part of the solution in Florida through farming, and to teach our daughters, Lily and Laila, how to feed themselves and support their communities.

Claudio Oviedo, 39
Sourcing Specialist
Pro*Act
Monterey, CA



Hometown: Salinas, CA

Hobbies: Running, Staying active, Home projects, Spending time with family

Family/Community: Married, 2 children

Motto in life: "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." — Nelson Mandela

Born and raised in the Salinas Valley by migrant parents, Oviedo was driven to carve his own path, leading to a diverse career trajectory. After early roles in banking, sales, and a brief period in law enforcement, he transitioned into the agriculture industry in 2016, joining Markon Cooperative at age 30. Starting in a support role, he collaborated with major broadliners, such as Gordon Foods and Shamrock, managing daily account operations. His dedication and adaptability led to a promotion as product manager in 2018, where he oversaw key commodities including warm vegetables, carrots, tomatoes, melons, limes, and specialty items, leveraging strong supplier relationships to ensure operational success.

In 2021, he joined Pro*Act as sourcing specialist to develop and implement new commodity programs across warm vegetables, tomatoes and limes, supporting a vast network of distributors and national accounts. Drawing on his procurement expertise and supplier network from his time at Markon, he spearheaded these initiatives, strengthening Pro*Act's supply chain and market presence. For four years with Pro*Act, he has been recognized for his contributions to expanding commodity programs, reflecting his commitment to excellence and collaborative achievements within the agriculture and foodservice industries.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I've been surrounded by produce for most of my life. Both of my parents, in some form, always worked in produce; my father retired from his own freight company a year ago, hauling for several well-known companies in Salinas and Yuma. About a decade ago, my now-wife (who also works in produce) encouraged me to consider pursuing a career in the field. Inspired by her support and my upbringing, I began researching entry-level opportunities and enrolled in agricultural courses at a local college. There, I connected with an instructor who specialized in produce marketing and introduced me to Markon. That recommendation led to my first role in the industry, and I haven't looked back.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Dive into the supply chain, understand the growers, logistics and end-users. My time at Markon taught me to be adaptable, whether managing daily accounts or navigating supply disruptions. Build a strong network; relationships are everything. Finally, stay curious about technology — tools for traceability and inventory are transforming the industry.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Building resilient supply chains that deliver quality produce consistently. Knowing my work supports farmers, while feeding millions, drives me.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Consumers will demand transparency, wanting to know where their produce comes from, especially with trade shifts post-2025. Sustainability will be huge. Convenience, such as pre-prepped warm vegetables, will grow in foodservice. Health-focused and plant-based options will keep expanding.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Proud of coming to Pro*Act and leveraging my supplier relationships to establish commodity programs across the U.S. Being recognized for expanding these programs over the years feels like a testament to my Salinas Valley roots.

Florent Philippot, 38
Chief Executive Officer
ZGROUP USA LLC
Miami Beach, FL



Hometown: Paris, France

Hobbies: Cooking, Traveling, Generative AI and software engineering, Outdoor adventures with family

Family/Community: Married, 1 son

Motto in Life: Small improvements each day lead to big results.

As the chief executive of ZGROUP USA, Philippot is the leader behind the company's expansion into the U.S. and Canadian markets. He brings over a decade of international experience building innovative cold chain and postharvest solutions for the fresh produce industry. Born and raised in Paris, Philippot holds dual master's degrees in corporate finance and financial instrument management.

He began his career in China, where he learned Mandarin and immersed himself in startup culture, quickly expanding his role beyond finance into operations, legal and procurement. In 2013, he moved to Peru, where he joined ZGROUP to specialize in cold chain logistics for exporters. He later launched the Peruvian operations for SNETOR CHIMIE, a French polymer trading company, where he was tasked to develop a local distribution network from the ground up. He returned to ZGROUP in 2020 to lead the company's international expansion and modernize its commercial structure.

In 2022, Philippot launched ZGROUP USA to bring modular cold storage, forced-air cooling, and ripening solutions to growers, wholesalers, and retailers across North America. Under his leadership, the company has delivered high-impact projects for clients such as Driscoll's and Wonderful Citrus, including a 16-container modular facility in Hawaii and the first mobile forced-air cooling units. Philippot speaks four languages

and continues to bridge cultures, industries, and technologies to build a more agile and sustainable future for the global food supply chain.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My journey into produce began in Peru, where I helped exporters overcome logistics challenges by designing a flexible modular solution. Seeing small entrepreneurs becoming major actors, thanks to our solution, made me realize I could solve real problems by bridging technology, logistics and agriculture.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That agility beats perfection. In a fast-paced, perishable industry, speed matters more than over-engineering. Early on, I thought everything had to be flawless; now I know the best solutions are those that can be deployed quickly and improved over time.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Listen first. The produce industry is built on relationships, trust, and understanding what's at stake, from growers to retailers. Dive into the field, visit the farms, and learn what drives each player in the chain.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

Transforming postharvest logistics with modular, mobile solutions. I'm passionate about giving growers and distributors tools they can deploy in days, not months, to preserve quality and reduce waste without investing all their resources.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

ZGROUP is a family business that I'm proud to be part of. I'm especially proud to have built a bridge between the founders' vision and innovation with the North American fresh produce industry. Launching ZGROUP USA and earning the trust of top-tier clients, such as Driscoll's and Wonderful Citrus, shows that our dream of accessible, agile postharvest solutions is becoming a global reality.

Gianna Piazza, 25
Citrus Saleswoman
Community-Suffolk, Inc.
Chelsea, MA



Hometown: Boxford, MA

Hobbies: Working, Horses, Relaxing in the sun, Exploring gluten-free places to eat

Motto in life: Everything happens for a reason. Always be humble, and kind.

Piazza is a fourth-generation produce wholesaler and a stand-out on the New England Produce Center (NEPC). She started working with her father about five and a half years ago, first learning the basics in the office, including billing customers, managing inventory, and understanding freight. Before long, she began to work alongside him in the warehouse, learning and dealing with pricing and logistics behind every item the company sells. She built solid trust with customers and cultivated a deeper understanding of the lime market — a category that, at the time, the company only minimally stocked.

With her father's support, she began expanding the company's lime offerings, turning a few pallets into a full inventory line and eventually earning her own desk and lime program. She has now taken over the buying and sales of limes entirely, offering every size to meet the needs of both retail and foodservice customers. Today, she is known as "The Lime Queen" in

Boston. What started with a few pallets of limes has grown into an operation requiring two to three full truckloads weekly to meet the demand of a loyal and diverse clientele.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Stop trying to control the trucks' arrival — they will show up when they show up, you can't change it.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Sleep when you can. You will thank yourself later.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

How many different customers and companies rely on me to supply them with limes and avocados, and truly how far I have come in the past six years.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Community-Suffolk is lucky enough to have two different warehouses/locations. One is inside the NEPC (bays 126,127,128) and the other is at 95 Market St. We recently just completely renovated bays 126-128. It looks absolutely gorgeous, and we are so lucky to have been able to finally do this. It looks like a whole new building.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Customers will continue to desire top quality and freshness when it comes to produce.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Being known as Boston's Lime Queen.

Josh Rector, 36
Produce Category Manager
Harps Food Stores
Springdale, AR



Hometown: Fayetteville, AR

Hobbies: Golf, Barbecue, Landscaping, Interior home projects, Family time

Family/Community: Married, 2 children

Motto in life: Everybody love everybody.

With hands-on experience from clerk to produce manager, Rector has spent several years excelling as a category manager at Harps Food Stores. His 16 years of retail grocery experience, all in fresh produce, have led him to be an accomplished leader for Harps and its produce operations. He specializes in all things retail, from ad writing and managing retails, to buying and merchandising. His deep industry knowledge, strategic vision, and commitment to excellence have made him an invaluable asset to the company and the produce industry as a whole. Known for his exceptional relationship-building skills, he thrives in promoting products from Harps' valued vendor partners. His strategic approach to merchandising and branding sets him apart as one of the brightest minds in the industry. He has a keen eye for innovation and growth. His dedication to professional growth is evident in his industry development.

He is a graduate of the Southeast Produce Council's STEP-UPP Program (2016), the Southeast Produce Council's Next Generation Leadership Academy (2024), IFPA's Emerging Leaders Program (2017), and IFPA's Leadership Program (2023).

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I started when I was 19, in my local Harps store. I was in search of a steady paycheck, but more importantly a career. I was hired to work in the produce department and never spent a minute working in any other area of the store. I loved how the produce department invoked all of your senses — the smells, the seasonal tastes,

the colors and the constant changing of the department. I've heard that once you get into the produce industry, it doesn't let you leave, but honestly, I've never wanted to.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Your word, and the relationships you make, mean everything. Partnerships are stronger than POs. Continue to hone your skills as a buyer/merchant-diser/marketer, but also put a strong emphasis on the relationships and connections you make.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

We feed people. During the pandemic we were deemed "essential" because the world needed us to continue providing food. Not only are we feeding people, but we're feeding people healthy foods. We're providing people healthy options that can truly change their lives for the better.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Food insecurities, food deserts, and keeping children fed are the biggest opportunities for change that we can make. Also, the lack of labor, from the fields to the produce departments, as well as the increasing presence of technology, from AI to digital shopping to robotics.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Desires for fresh fruits and vegetables will only continue to grow. Healthy options, food as medicine, and the increasing attention to make America healthy again will benefit our industry in the short term, and if we can capitalize on our opportunity, it can continue into the long term as well.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am extremely grateful that I had the chance to participate in the industry development programs, but what I am most proud of are the relationships and friends I've made while in those programs and throughout my journey in the produce industry. The entire industry feels like one big family.

Ryan Reilly, 38
Account Manager/Grower
Relations Manager
Naturipe Farms
Esterro, FL



Hometown: Battle Creek, MI

Hobbies: Golf, Baseball, Notre Dame Football, Going to the beach, Time with family and friends

Family/Community: Parishioner at Ascension Church, Volunteer at Recovery Church, Youth baseball coach

Motto in life: Play like a champion today!

Reilly began his career outside the industry, working successfully for five years in various sales and account executive positions. In 2017, he joined HLB Specialties as a business development rep and client acquisition, where he gained a quick education in the produce business. He was a key contributor to the growth at HLB, most notably growing the Canadian market.

In 2021, he moved to become a key account manager at Naturipe Farms. Since joining the Naturipe team, he has become a major asset, evidenced by his sales book growth of 50% since 2022. In his first three years at the company, he created over \$10 million in new business and brought on new retail accounts to help strengthen the company's core customer list. He was also a key member of the Premium Product line launch at NF Farms. As a member of the sales team, he has a unique role that allows him to work closely with some of the company's growers. He is a participant of IFPA's 2024 Emerging Leaders program.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

It was by sheer chance and seizing of an opportunity. An old boss knew a connection, and the rest was history. I was fortunate enough to be taken under the wing of Homero Levy D'Barros, HLB's founder and chief

executive. He taught me the ins and outs of the produce industry, from seed to table. I started with minimal knowledge, and I think it was better that way because there is a lot to learn. Once the foundation was established, I was able to thrive.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Be passionate about what you do. Ask yourself: Am I passionate about this? If the answer is no, then keep searching for something that motivates you beyond the dollars and cents.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be bold and be curious. This industry is very welcoming and full of great folks with a ton of knowledge. Don't be afraid to make a few mistakes, and don't be afraid to approach industry veterans with questions. They will be happy to talk, and you'll build your network. This industry is about connecting people with opportunities.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

It has certainly become more digital. We are in the age of AI and ChatGPT, and the industry is starting to latch onto these new approaches. For an "old school" industry, I believe we've got some good momentum, even with the newer technology.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Premium quality. With the investments and improvements in the genetics of fruits and vegetables, the consumer will want the very best they can get. We have already seen this in many cases, but it will be even more prevalent in the future.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Being selected for IFPA's Emerging Leaders program in 2024. I was nominated by Naturipe's board of directors, and it was a really nice way to be honored for my hard work and success. It was an incredible opportunity to be around a group of like-minded individuals in our industry who all have the vision and desire to lead the future generations of produce.

Kelsey Rose, 34
Sales Team Leader
John Vena Inc. (JVI)
Philadelphia, PA



Hometown: Ambler, PA

Hobbies: Running, Cooking, Reading, Spending time with family

Motto in life: You are confined only by the walls you build yourself.

Rose began her journey with JVI in 2016 with no produce experience, but a passion for food. After graduating with a food marketing degree from St. Joseph's University in 2012, she began working at JVI in 2016 as a sales support specialist. After moving to sales team leader in 2018, she took on new responsibilities including a larger customer base to manage, as well as buying responsibilities. As she progressed in the role, she became responsible for managing a team, focused on supervising a team of sales support specialists, tracking and growing sales within the teams' customer base, managing scheduling, and taking on more buying responsibilities. During her tenure at JVI, she has managed customers in retail, processing, meal-kit, and foodservice.

She was selected to be a member of the Eastern Produce Council Leadership Class in 2021, and has also taken on the mentorship of JVI's college interns from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

After working two unrelated jobs out of college, I was ready to focus on a career that would lean more toward my food marketing degree in 2016. A close friend from college worked at JVI, and I was intrigued by the family-oriented aspect of JVI, as well as the specialty produce focal point. Since beginning with the company, I have learned so much about specialty produce and its important role in daily life, cultural celebrations, holidays, etc. Being able to

source product for customers looking for the perfect item to enhance a dish or bring a sense of home to their table is so rewarding.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

At times, the produce industry can be unforgiving. We are dealing with perishable products and also products that have very specific seasonality and growing regions. Weather events, gaps in availability or an unexpected early end to a season are all inevitable factors that challenge our day-to-day. I recommend focusing on how to handle these situations and to not let it break you down. Staying informed and finding comparable substitutes to offer customers in times of need is so important. The produce industry won't always go your way, but building trust with your customers and learning how to handle the gaps and disappointments makes that unpredictability a lot easier.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about teamwork and contributing to a positive culture within our business. We are all working together to achieve the same goals, so working well as a team and creating systems that make everybody's day-to-day run smoother is imperative.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

JVI is located within a wholesale produce market and, prior to the pandemic, business was non-stop. COVID-19 really forced the stores on the market to reevaluate their shopping hours, as well as put some constraints on the way we fulfill customer orders. In my opinion, this has allowed us to focus more on customers' needs.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Learning how to manage a team and be a better leader has been extremely rewarding. As an introvert, a lot of the responsibilities that come with being a supervisor can seem daunting. However, getting the experience of teaching, evaluating and mentoring fellow teammates has been such an exciting and rewarding part of my role.

Shane Ryan, 37
Carrier Relationship Manager
Sunrise Logistics Inc.
Ephrata, PA



Hometown: Yardley, PA

Hobbies: Golfing, Coaching youth sports, Home improvements

Family/Community: Married, 3 children, JDRE, Foundation for Hope, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Fly High 22

Motto in life: Those who endure more are rewarded most.

With nearly a decade of experience in transportation and logistics, Ryan has built a career marked by strategic leadership, operational excellence, and data-driven decision making. Beginning as a transportation broker at NAPA Transportation, Inc. & Northeast Logistics Services in 2016, he progressed by managing the transportation of key accounts, such as Hershey, Danone, Mondelez and Nestlé.

Known for developing targeted sales strategies and optimizing pricing models, he helped expand business lanes across the U.S. and was awarded Top Performing Broker in 2017 and 2018. In 2019, he transitioned to Paul Miller Trucking & Lean Logistics LLC, where he launched and led the brokerage department, achieving record-breaking sales within six months and ultimately earning promotion to director of logistics. In this role, he oversaw customer service and brokerage teams, optimized performance metrics, national account relationships, and drove customer satisfaction and operational growth.

Since October 2020, he has served as carrier relationship and sales manager at Sunrise Logistics, a logistics arm of Four Seasons Produce. Working within a vertically integrated supply chain that includes a 400,000 square foot refrigerated warehouse and a dedicated produce import company, Ryan plays a vital role in supporting the fresh produce community.

He has led carrier strategy and pricing for both national and niche produce accounts, collaborating with premium brands, including Driscoll's, Organic Girl, The Little Potato Company and Family Tree Farms. His contributions have directly impacted the reliability and efficiency of produce distribution networks, and he is regarded as a trusted logistics partner within the produce community.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had fully understood the value of cross-functional knowledge across the supply chain. Early on, I was focused strictly on transportation and brokerage, but stepping into the produce world taught me how important it is to understand warehousing, ripening, packaging, and even the customer-facing side of the business. That broader perspective makes you a more strategic partner and problem solver.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be open to learning and stay curious, especially about how each part of the supply chain connects. Produce is a living, breathing commodity with tight timelines and no margin for error. Building strong relationships, staying proactive, and truly understanding the product's journey from farm to shelf can set you apart early in your career.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about being a bridge between logistics and fresh produce, ensuring that what gets grown with care arrives with the same quality at its destination. Playing a part in that journey, especially when it involves strategic problem-solving and improving supply chain efficiencies, is incredibly rewarding.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the role I've played in transforming carrier strategy and fraud prevention at Sunrise Logistics. Being able to contribute meaningfully to a growing organization while helping elevate standards across the produce logistics community is something I take great pride in.

Stevie Shandler, 32
Global Sustainability Director
Grubmarket, Inc.
Director of Growth and
Sustainability
Shapiro-Gilman-Shandler Co.
Los Angeles, CA



Hometown: Los Angeles, CA

Hobbies: Reading, Traveling with family and friends, Advocacy, Viniculture

Motto in life: Treat others — and everything you do — with the same respect, care, and intention you'd hope to receive.

Shandler comes from a family legacy in produce. She serves both as global sustainability director for GrubMarket and as director of growth and sustainability at Shapiro-Gilman-Shandler (SGS Produce), a GrubMarket company, where she has implemented and maintained transformative programs.

At SGS, she oversees sustainability, food safety, compliance, risk management, marketing, and operational strategy. She led the adoption of new fleet technology, secured multiple food safety certifications, and the company's TRUE Zero Waste Platinum certification. She also managed GrubMarket's FarmBox program.

Focused on reducing supply chain waste and expanding equitable access to fresh food, she continues to push for industry-wide change through sustainable innovation and collaborative leadership, focusing on business-smart approaches. She sits on the IFPA Sustainability Steering Committee, co-chairs the IFPA Food Loss and Waste Working Group, and serves on the advisory boards of food recovery organizations Food Forward and Sharing Excess. Through all her roles, she remains committed to advancing food accessibility, environmental stewardship and operational excellence.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Although I grew up around the

produce industry, I didn't initially see myself working in it. I had built a successful career in education when the COVID-19 pandemic struck and spotlighted the critical importance of our food systems. I felt compelled to use my skills to make a tangible difference by joining my family's multigenerational produce business, allowing me to honor my roots while strengthening access to fresh food at a time of urgent need.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Like many newcomers, I entered the industry with gusto — full of ideas for improvement and innovation. I was fortunate to have strong support and latitude from leadership, which allowed me to explore those ideas. What I wish I knew then is that, while change can be positive, it must also be thoughtful. In a legacy company, many systems exist out of necessity, and often for good reason. I've learned that real progress requires persistence more than perfection, and that influencing change is just as much about listening and adapting as it is about advocating and leading.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I am fortunate to have had my passion guide my professional choices. Once I understood the power the produce supply chain holds in solving inefficiencies, from production to distribution, it became clear that there was a significant opportunity to make a real difference. Preventing waste not only supports food security and access for those who need it most, but also helps protect our planet's limited resources. Every improvement — whether operational, technological, or cultural — moves us closer to a system where healthy food reaches more people with less environmental impact. It's incredibly rewarding to know that small changes, scaled over time, can create meaningful and lasting impact while prioritizing business efficiencies.

Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the work I've done — and continue to do — to be a strong advocate for both people and the planet within the produce industry.

Brandyn Six, 35
Director Strategic Accounts
Robinson Fresh
Eden Prairie, MN



Hometown: Savage, MN

Hobbies: Birding, Camping, Basketball, Softball, Fishing, Traveling

Family/Community: Married, 1 son, Annual agriculture guest speaker at the University of Tennessee.

Motto in life: The difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do.

Six had an unconventional route to reach his career in the produce industry. He began his professional career as a wildlife biologist in 2012, where he managed several thousand acres of wildlife habitat in the Pacific Northwest. He found an aptitude for growing crops and transitioned into agriculture in 2015, working at Mercer Ranches in Prosser, WA. There, he led the farm's organic growing operation, exceeding expectations on yield and profitability. He also developed the farm's sustainability program, resulting in awards, such as the Environmental Stewardship Award and Wildlife Habitat Farmer of the Year.

In 2020, Six parlayed his farming background into his current career with Robinson Fresh, taking a position to lead the sales strategy on cold vegetables to Walmart and Sam's Club. His ability to understand how commodities grew allowed him to help grow the business as a strategic partner quickly. He participated in CH Robinson's Key Account Sales Program in 2022 and by 2024, was promoted to director of strategic accounts, leading all of Robinson Fresh's business with Walmart and Sam's Club.

He serves as one of the company's experts in sustainability and helps manage CH Robinson's ESG reporting annually. He continues to leverage his experience to develop long-lasting

sustainable programs for his customers. His vision is to continue to feed the world through complex supply chain solutions that result in geographic diversification, surety of supply, and always giving the grower a voice.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Buckle up and be confident, but stay collaborative. The produce industry is full of challenges and incredibly talented individuals. Things move fast and you need to move faster to be ahead of the game, but you need to have meaningful relationships to solve the world's fresh produce problems.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about seeing a piece of produce I helped deliver to a customer end up in a store. The supply chain associated with a harvest, pack, ship, and delivery is a tremendous amount of work. Seeing the tangible result in a store while shopping with my nephews and hearing them say "Uncle did that" is a wonderful feeling.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

I believe consumers will desire more and more at-home delivery. Between the growth of omni-channel marketing, the increase in screen time for individuals, and the logistics capabilities of many of the largest retailers, delivering product directly to people's homes will be in higher demand and easier to execute. We, as an industry, need to be prepared to showcase produce in a way that is realistic to online shoppers.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the impact I've made with our largest customers. Rather than stating a tangible accomplishment, the most meaningful thing to me is creating lasting relationships that result in deep partnership and innovation. I'm lucky to work with some of the most talented and wonderful people as my customers. Jointly creating a solution that is beneficial to both parties, resulting in an item available for a customer in store is something that makes me proud every day.

Marianna Skrine, 37
Second Vice President
Nickey Gregory Company Inc.
Forest Park, GA



Hometown: Senoia, GA

Hobbies: Gardening, Fitness, Fishing

Family/Community: Married, 3 children,
One Church in Fayetteville

Motto in life: Keep going.

As part of a family produce company, Skrine grew up in the produce business on the Atlanta State Farmer's Market with her parents and learned every facet of wholesale produce. She has been working for Nickey Gregory for the past 20 years, starting at 16.

Typical of produce kids, she has worn a lot of hats, including inventory control, buyer, salesperson, controller and human resources. In 2005, she officially began working for the company in the accounting department. After graduating in 2006, she started working full time in accounts receivable and payables. She became office manager of the accounting department in 2010.

In 2013, she and her siblings established Gregory Family Express (GFE), holding the position of president. In 2015, she helped establish Gregory Family Express Brokerage (GFEB), where she controlled its accounting department.

In 2017, she became vice president of administration for Nickey Gregory Company, responsible for human resources, while still holding her positions in both GFE and GFEB. In 2023, she was promoted to second vice president of Nickey Gregory Co.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began working at Nickey Gregory Co. the moment it opened. Nickey is my father, so I spent every school break and summer at the market doing whatever I could to help. We started in the old gas

station on the market and have moved four times since, and I have been there for each one. Working on the market always felt like it was what I was meant to do.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

One thing I have learned with all these moves and different positions is that things are always changing — especially now, with all the food safety regulations and new products. You have to be open-minded to the challenges, and try to figure out what is the best decision for your company.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

To continue the sense of family my father has created within our company. If you know Nickey Gregory, he does not think of his employees as a name on a sheet of paper. From the moment they begin to work with us, they are considered family. Each day, we have to consider hundreds of families, not employees. I want to continue to make Nickey Gregory Co. a place people want to work, not a place that is just a paycheck for them.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Organics. They are what everyone seems to be most passionate about, including myself. Technology has also changed drastically over the years, and that is only going to continue. It can be a blessing, but also a curse, because we are losing the sense of community in the produce business.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am proud to be able to say I have been a part of this company since day one. I have been through every season of life with Nickey Gregory Co., and there have been highs, but also many lows. My siblings and I created a successful transportation company that we have now merged with Nickey Gregory Co., and over the last two years, we have made administrative changes that I am confident will contribute to having a successful future.

Kirk Soule, 39
Chief Executive Officer
Blue Book Services
Chicago, IL



Hometown: Stanton, MN

Hobbies: Family, Church and community

activities, Cycling, Gardening, Cooking
Family/Community: Married, 1 son,
Church of the City, local community/
neighborhood events

Motto in life: The proof of the pudding
is in the tasting.

The first half of Soule's career was focused on retail and grocery. He started working as an analyst at Target and then transitioned to consulting for produce, meat, and seafood departments in grocery chains across the country. Notable accomplishments include creating standardized category reporting for buyers and suppliers at SuperValu/Albertsons, sourcing and negotiating about \$500M in annual spend for A&P's fresh department and launching a new fresh private label brand at South-eastern Grocers. He completed his retail tour when he interned at Walmart in graduate school and developed a strategy to expand small-format stores — parts of which are deployed today.

The second half of Soule's career to date was focused on operations and technology. Most of his time was starting, building, and operating the data analytics platform for a Fortune 100 company's global operations — sourcing, supply chain, distribution, and customer success. At the end of his tenure, the platform created over \$2 billion in value for the company.

In 2023, he arrived to Blue Book Services taking the CEO position. At Blue Book, he has spearheaded significant projects to modernize and invigorate Blue Book's products and services. He is known for leading by example, fostering a collaborative environment, encouraging associates to push beyond their current skillsets to seek what can be instead of what is. He serves on IFPA Supply Chain Council.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I grew up on a small farm in southern Minnesota. After college, I "returned to my roots" when I consulted for SuperValu/Albertsons' Produce department. As a consultant, I worked on reporting and business unit strategy with suppliers and buyers. I love how tangible produce is — absolutely everyone shops produce.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I more fully appreciated the multi-generational nature of the industry. In many cases, this is not just a job, but it is a family calling with deep connections to the land and the products. It provides a much deeper perspective on the industry that extends well beyond a growing season.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Enjoy it. Produce is the most beautiful segment — it's fresh, it smells good, it's good for you, it's authentic, it's unique ... it really is the best.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Among many changes, what stands out is the explosion of different varieties of commodities. It makes shopping and trialing different fruits and vegetables so much more fun.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

The industry heavily relies on instinct, so the challenge is how data can augment and enhance someone's experience (not replace it).

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of team wins, so I am thrilled with what we've accomplished so far at Blue Book. Blue Book has an incredible legacy that spans 125 years. On any given day, we serve five different generations of users — from The Silent Generation to Gen Z, with vastly different expectations and experience levels. Over the last few years, we've made significant investments in technology and enhancements to user experience, so I am excited about how this will enable us to better serve all our customers over the next 125 years.

Garrett Stolz, 32
Export Marketing &
Communications Manager
Sunkist Growers, Inc.
Valencia, CA



Hometown: Exeter, CA

Hobbies: Pop culture enthusiast, Sharp humor, Excellent wine

Motto in Life: Often imitated, never equaled — because in a world chasing trends, staying true to your brand and values is what really sets you apart.

Stolz brings nearly a decade of marketing and communications expertise to Sunkist Growers. A graduate of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, with a degree in agribusiness, Stolz honed his passion for brand storytelling early on, winning a national marketing championship with the National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) and interning at Frieda's Branded Produce.

In 2016, he began his career at Oracle in Santa Monica, where close collaboration with senior marketing executives fueled his interest in strategy. He joined Sunkist Growers in 2018 as a marketing and communications specialist, his first full-time role in the produce industry. He was promoted to senior specialist in 2022. Ahead of the 2025 California citrus season, he was elevated to export marketing and communications manager, where he now leads the cooperative's international marketing efforts.

In his current position at Sunkist, Stolz oversees public relations, media relations, advertising and digital content creation. He also leads grant writing and administration, securing USDA funding for global marketing programs. Stolz has been instrumental in refining the cooperative's brand voice through press campaigns and trade storytelling. He guided Sunkist through rapid market shifts, launching its JD.com storefront in China, leading Lunar New Year activations, and reintroducing pop-up and offline events across the APAC region.

His work on regional product launches, such as High-Brix oranges and the branded

Cali mandarin program, strengthened Sunkist's premium perception among younger consumers through e-retailer partnerships and celebrity chef collaborations. During the pandemic, he pivoted swiftly, spearheading the award-winning "Sunkist Crossing" campaign with Nintendo, and hosting livestream cooking shows. Always looking ahead, he expanded the brand's social media presence, launching animated citrus characters and cultivating an influencer network that repositioned citrus as a premium, everyday essential. Recognized for his leadership, Stolz serves on the company's Learning & Development Advisory Team and is a member of the IFPA Emerging Leaders Class of 2024-25.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I grew up in California's Central Valley. Summers were spent helping my grandma on her citrus ranch, and in college, I studied agribusiness and interned in growing operations. Like many from a small town, I dreamed of the glitz and glam of city life and moved to Los Angeles after graduation. While working in tech, I realized how much I missed both marketing and my agricultural roots. When the opportunity at Sunkist, headquartered in LA, came up, it felt like the perfect way to blend my background with my passion.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Early on, I was quick to think I had all the answers, but the landscape moves fast, and staying adaptable has proven far more valuable than being "right."

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Produce is more than what's in the box — it's about the journey from grove to table and the people who make it possible. I love finding creative ways to connect consumers to that bigger story.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

Genuine connection, paired with fresh and personalized experiences. In produce, that means breakthrough storytelling, packaging, and innovation that makes your brand memorable, even in a category where new product launches are rare.

Allie Wainer, 36
Regional Vice President,
New England
The Chefs' Warehouse and
Sid Wainer & Son
Ridgefield, CT



Hometown: Mattapoisett, MA

Hobbies: Running, Cooking, Travel

Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters

Motto in life: With challenge comes change, and with change comes opportunity. Be purposeful.

Growing up a fourth-generation industry professional, Wainer traveled to farms and producers worldwide, developing a strong foundation in food sourcing and distribution. After earning a degree from the school of hospitality at Boston University, she built a diverse background working in restaurants, hotels, and event management in Boston, London, Sydney, New York City and Nantucket.

She joined the Sid Wainer distribution business in 2013, gaining experience across all departments before stepping into leadership as executive vice president. Following the company's integration into The Chefs' Warehouse in 2020, she took on her current role, continuing to drive innovation, quality and service excellence. As the regional vice president of New England for The Chefs' Warehouse and Sid Wainer & Son, she oversees sales, procurement and logistics for produce, specialty, protein and broad-line foods across the region. She has sat on many industry boards over the years, including United Fresh, Mass Restaurants United, the New Bedford Workforce Development Board and The Marion Institute Board.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Growing up, I watched my father work tirelessly, often visiting farms and suppliers with him. I witnessed

firsthand the passion and dedication of the people in this industry. That passion is contagious and drives me every day to find better, more sustainable ways to support our producers, just as the generations before me did. Continuing my father's legacy and being part of something that's been built over decades is truly an honor.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

The importance of valuing your return on energy. We often hear about the return on investment, whether it's time, money or resources, but the same principle applies to how we invest our energy.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Stay hungry and humble. The world of produce moves quickly, with constant opportunities to learn about seasonality, supply chains, and customer needs. Take initiative, solve problems on the fly, and embrace challenges as learning moments. Focus on sourcing quality, understanding sustainable practices, and building strong relationships across the supply chain.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

As a leader, my passion lies in showing up — being present for our customers, our teams, and our partners at every stage of the journey. Every detail matters to me, from the quality of the products we source to the way they reach a chef's hands. Relationships are at the heart of what we do. For me, success isn't just measured in sales, it's in the trust we build, the partnerships we strengthen, and the way we consistently deliver on our promise to our customers.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Almost every part of the business has changed in the last 10 years. Digital platforms have transformed how we go to market, from e-commerce to real-time product updates. Mergers among small businesses have created challenges and opportunities for suppliers to scale, while staying flexible. There's been a stronger focus on diversification in products and sourcing, with an emphasis on sustainability.

Joe Weber, 29
Co-Founder/President
Four Star Mushrooms
Chicago, IL



Hometown: Hoffman Estates, IL

Hobbies: Running, Swimming, Biking, Fishing, Camping, Cooking, Traveling

Family/Community: Member of the Chicago food ecosystem

Motto in life: All problems have solutions.

Weber has been a trailblazer on a mission to create a profitable model for urban indoor controlled environment agriculture. Concerned about ecosystems, biodiversity loss, soil damage, erosion, climate change and the impact commercial agriculture had on them, he learned that regenerative agriculture was one method to address these concerns. His passion for sustainable agriculture and ecosystem regeneration led to the inception of Four Star Mushrooms in 2019, a year after he graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in integrative biology. Four Star Mushrooms, a controlled environment agriculture company, produces premium specialty mushrooms in the heart of Chicago. Weber and his partner, Sean DiGioia, bootstrapped and hustled over five years to become the premier mushroom producer and distributor in Chicago with over a million dollars in sales in 2024 and even greater growth projected for 2025.

The tenacity to bring this business to life exemplifies his entrepreneurial spirit and resulted in his company becoming a supplier to Chicago's top restaurants/chefs. Four Star Mushrooms was recognized in StarChefs 2024 Chicago Rising Star Awards, the only food grower to be featured in the Chicago 2024 Stars. Weber was also selected for Newcity's Big Heat 50 of 2023.

He also partners with and supports local urban farms and community gardens by providing spent mushroom

substrate free to fuel their soils. Four Star Mushrooms most recently partnered with Christy Webber Landscapes to provide spent mushroom substrate at scale for new tree plantings all around Chicagoland.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began working in the produce industry in 2019 when I started Four Star Mushrooms. I was primarily focused on producing fresh, premium-quality specialty mushrooms for Chicago chefs. At the time, most chefs I encountered were buying mushrooms from other states or countries, the quality was poor, and the variety was minimal. I began producing and bringing multiple varieties into the Chicago market that were previously not available or of low quality. I found tremendous fulfillment in helping chefs create unique and memorable dining experiences.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

We are most passionate about our mission: to accelerate the transition to a regenerative food system. We believe that improving our food system will benefit human health, ecological health, and our resilience to a changing climate.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

A year after I started Four Star Mushrooms, COVID shut down the world. I think this had a profound effect on the restaurant and retail industry and the following five years have not been easy. I think the survivors of the past five years have proven that they are resilient and innovative.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

The U.S. produce industry is threatened by imports and a changing climate. We need to create a more resilient food system that doesn't just produce more, but produces food with greater nutrient density. The local producers will be the ones who change our food system. Chefs and consumers will adopt these producers and allow the local food movement to scale.

Thomas Wescott, 38
Chief Operating Officer
Honeybear Brands
Elgin, MN



Hometown: Elgin, MN

Hobbies: Music, Hunting, Fishing, MTN biking, Swimming, Yoga, Basketball, Hiking, Sing and play guitar in band "Thomas and the Shakes"

Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Board member—EcoFest Foundation

Motto in life: Work hard, play hard. Be nice to people and the planet.

Wescott is a third-generation grower, shipper, marketer with his hands in all aspects of a growing apple, pear and cherry business.

He began his official position with Honeybear Brands in 2010 as account operations and logistics where he successfully executed 100% on-time shipments, fill rates and quality. In 2012, he moved to account management, where he strategically built, strengthened, and expanded the company's customer relationships by executing shared business strategies.

In 2015, he took a position in sales and business development, and during this time, he brought new products and strategies to the market. In 2018, he took on sales and commercial management, responsible for overseeing company global sales. In 2020, he became director of sales and operations. In 2023, he moved to his current position as COO, where he now implements company strategies and oversees daily operations. He is considered an expert when it comes to supply chain management, and is a respected partner among growing partners in Chile and Argentina, as well as the U.S.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I was raised on a 40-acre apple orchard my grandfather planted in the

late '70s and my father started building the business around in the early '80s. As a kid, my afterschool and summer jobs were picking and packing apples, or something in between. After high school, I studied business at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, and then got involved in the family business. I wanted to be a part of the family business and work on something that would bring joy to people — high quality, healthy food.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

I am most passionate about being part of a 100% family-owned, vertically integrated, global produce business, and working with some of the most talented, innovative and hardworking people in the industry. I am passionate about bringing the best apples, cherries and pears from around the world to consumers around the world. And I am passionate about the long-term, sustainable success for our four key stakeholders: our grower partners, our customer partners, our employees, and our planet.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Some challenges include oversupply, consumption and consolidation. A decade of over-planting orchards has led to supply outpacing stagnant demand. Growers are not profitable and are leaving the industry. Land and family-run businesses are being purchased and consolidated by private equity. Third-, fourth- and fifth-generation institutional industry knowledge and experience are exiting the industry at a staggering pace. In times of turbulence and uncertainty there is often opportunity. Sometimes you must be willing to run toward the fire. Thankfully, we are working with the original superfood. The opportunities around high-quality, healthy food are endless and ever changing.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

In the last 15 years, in an industry where many privately-owned, family businesses are disappearing, I am most proud of being part of a team and company that continue to persevere, grow and thrive through challenge and adversity. **pb**



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PHOTO COURTESY SINCLAIR INTERNATIONAL

Sinclair International, Queensbury, NY, is reinforcing its commitment to sustainability through continued innovation and collaboration in the fresh produce industry in developing environmentally responsible labeling solutions, with a particular focus on the company's certified compostable T55 PLU sticker.

Labeling and Bag Printing Play a Role in Sales

Packaging offers an opportunity to connect with retailers and consumers.

BY MIKE DUFF

Packaging is more prominent today in the produce sector, but beyond product protection and the convenience of grabbing a favorite fruit or vegetable item quickly, labeling and bag printing are becoming more important as sales tools.

Packaging has to sell product, so labeling and back printing will take a more prominent position in the overall picture. In addition, at a time when many consumers want more information about what they're eating, graphics are more important, not only in terms of providing information and storytelling, but by providing links through QR codes.

THE BIG PICTURE

According to Grand View Research, the value of the global food packaging market was worth \$400.29 billion in 2024, and it's likely to grow at a CAGR of 5.9% from 2025 to 2030.

The market researcher is among those observers crediting the surge in online grocery

shopping, meal kit subscriptions and food delivery services as fueling the demand for durable and temperature-controlled food packaging solutions.

BRIGHT IDEAS

In some cases, graphics can pique consumer curiosity at just the right time. For example, Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations at Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, says the packaging presentation of seasonal and promotable items has given several commodities a lift, such as cherries and grapes.

When seasonal fruit arrives at the store, the extra attention packaging can provide ensures customers are aware that a fresh addition to the store has rolled in. However, it doesn't end with seasonal items. In the tomato segment, he says, a bright solar logo with the Sunset identification and slogan "Inspired by Flavor," along with product information, "really resonates with the customer."

Mark Hoppenjans, vice president of sales and sustainable business, Serv-Rend, Collinsville, IL, says produce packaging and graphics have to complement with product, and provide a good look at the product.

"Visibility is still really important," he says. "As you're walking through a retailer, you have your bulk areas where people still like to touch. But in the packaged space, visibility of the fruit is really, really important as well. And you're balancing that with these questions as you're moving through: How can we differentiate ourselves, and how can we put a graphic on there?"

REGULATIONS

Eva Almenar, associate professor at the Michigan State University School of Packaging, says it's important to recognize the governmental regulations that apply to packaging can also apply to labeling. Regulatory pressure will drive labeling and bag printing in the direction of more recyclable and

compostable materials and inks, in that case, with the dyes based on natural ingredients.

As legislation and recollection drive compostability and recycling, labeling and bag printing will have to change in compliance. However, that's not necessarily an easy task, as there are different requirements for industrial and home composting.

Sinclair International, Queensbury, NY, provides both home and industrial on-product PLU labeling as part of an ongoing product development process. The company started with stickers for industrial composting in 2019. In February, Sinclair announced that its T-55 labels have successfully achieved certification from the Compostable Materials Certification Scheme. At the time of the announcement, Duncan Jones, senior marketing manager, said, "Achieving this certification is a testament to our ongoing dedication to producing certified compostable fruit labeling solutions. It provides additional validation and assurance of Sinclair-T55 labels to our customers, by reinforcing their end-of-life performance, and it meets home and industrial composting standards."

At Mucci Farms, Kingsville, Ontario, packaging development has included Linerless Label, a series of trays made from 100% recyclable Clay Coated News Back paperboard or micro-fluted kraft board. It is fastened by a one-piece linerless label made from food-ap-



PHOTO COURTESY MUCCI FARMS

At Mucci Farms, Kingsville, Ontario, packaging development has included Linerless Label, a series of trays made from 100% recyclable Clay Coated News Back paperboard or micro-fluted kraft board. It is fastened by a one-piece linerless label made from food-approved black label material.

proved black label material, and uses 80% less glue.

"We've been moving toward recycle-ready materials and have adopted mono-material bags to future-proof our packaging," says Fernanda Albuquerque, packaging development manager. "While flexible packaging isn't widely recycled yet due to lack of a viable

collection system, we're making sure we're ready when that changes."

BEYOND THE TACTICAL

Michigan State's Almenar advises companies to approach packaging and associated labeling strategically. For example, being able to see the products is critical.

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GROWTH FOR COMPOSTABLE FRUIT LABELS

Sinclair, the US produce label specialist, has announced its recently-launched T55 certified compostable fruit label has been shortlisted for major sustainability award; signaling the increasing adoption of sustainable labeling across the globe. Sinclair - T55 is now used by more than 300 companies in over 13 markets, Sinclair's Senior Marketing Manager, Duncan Jones, explains why the time is right for compostable fruit labels.

How has the T55 compostable fruit label been received?

Duncan Jones (DJ): The reaction has been positive and adoption of T55 has been strong. We are also proud to announce the Sinclair T55 has been short-listed for a 'Sustainability Initiative of the Year' at The Grocer Gold Awards 2025.

The appetite to adopt is there but we are seeing discussions focus on aligning with longer-term planning depending on market requirements – usually new packaging requirements targeting a reduction in single-use-plastics.

What Sinclair innovations are making life easier for your clients?

DJ: We continue to innovate with our compostable label development. We are meeting customer and retailer targets for 19+ fruit and vegetable types, but, as with conventional labels, there is always room for improvement.

For instance, we just completed a successful trial in Australia, working with a customer to trial T55 through irradiation and fumigation. This was essential for in-market food-safety requirements. I am delighted to say it was another label application performance trial that T55 successfully completed.

What are the most important trends in produce labeling?

DJ: The requirement for fruit labeling remains the same in many markets and we are seeing growth in many. The key trend is legislation which is at varying stages globally. An ideal world would have all markets adopting a harmonious approach for mandating industrial or home compostable fruit labels. While

each market approach is different, some brands, like Zespri Group, are making the environmental choice to changing to compostable labels now.

How important are factors like sustainability and traceability?

DJ: Very. One of the benefits of fruit

labels is they provide traceability with a minimal packaging approach. Our systems operate at high speeds to provide operational efficiencies for our customers. This can now happen with compostable labels, which is important for sustainability and the future of fruit labeling.

The advertisement features a dark blue background. At the top right is the Sinclair logo with the tagline 'LABELS | MACHINES | SERVICE'. In the center, the words 'Certified compostable fruit labels' are displayed in large, bold, white text, with 'Certified' and 'fruit labels' in a white box and 'compostable' in a white box. Below this is a large image of a hand holding a red apple with a white circular label that says 'Compostable' and features a green leaf icon. In the bottom left corner is a QR code. In the bottom right corner is the URL 'sinclair-intl.com/go-compostable'. At the very bottom, there are four certification logos: 'OK compost' (green), 'TUV AUSTRIA INDUSTRIAL S0728' (black), 'HOME OK compost' (green), 'TUV AUSTRIA HOME S0728' (black), 'DIN Geprüft 9P0189' (blue), and 'Home Compostable AS 5810 ABAP 20322' (green).

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Illinois-based Serv-Rend has created bioAble packaging materials, tags and labels that break down to zero micro-plastics. The plastics begin to biodegrade in 24 months in landfill and compost environments. The printable area offers plenty of space for logos and other information.

PHOTO COURTESY SERV-REND

When consumers aren't shopping in stores, Almenar says, "the label is going to be what is catching that essence."

At the same time, the consumer desire to understand more about diet and health is making labeling a bedrock issue. If they don't understand what is and isn't in a product, consumers may not buy at all. Transparency is such an important issue that Fox Packaging recently blogged about it, saying today's consumers are more informed, curious and discerning than they ever have been, particularly when it comes to their produce. They want to know what they're buying, where it comes from, how it was grown.

The company cited a Food Industry Association study demonstrating that 64% of shoppers express a willingness to switch from their preferred brand to another that offers more transparent and detailed product information. Fox emphasizes a point: Transparency is not just nice, it's a fresh produce differentiator.

GOING THE NEXT YARD

Almenar says labels and bag printing as a means of providing information about consumer wellness interests is a starting point that can be taken in many different directions if food retailers look at graphics as an opportunity.

"They can put on something about the farm or the grower," she says. "You want to get more information to the consumer via packaging."

With available resources, food retailers and their vendor partners can create links via QR codes or a social media tag for those consumers who use their smartphones.

To take it a step further, the graphic presentation of a label that helps establish a brand can become the basis of seasonal and other promotions. Almenar points to heart-shaped clear packaging Driscoll's created as a Mother's Day gift item. The combination of reputation, label recognition and unique packaging can lead to

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

We do believe that QR codes could be impactful at the store level on in-store signage, leading to links offering product information and general consumer education on greenhouse-grown products.

Fernanda Albuquerque, Mucci Farms, Kingsville, Ontario

a successful promotion that satisfies customers and gives the brand an additional boost.

"Some of the produce brands are really moving forward and getting more progressive, and they recognize they have to engage their consumer so that they can become regular customers," says Serv-Rend's Hoppenjans.

"I don't think the brands thought as much about themselves as connecting with those consumers, and now they're recognizing they have to compete in that space," he says.

"The challenge lies in the limited label space, especially for products from Canada, where bilingual labeling in both English and French is required," says Mucci Farms' Albuquerque. "This takes up significant real estate on the packaging while retailers continue to request greater transparency with and emphasis on product visibility."

Even some of the labeling basics can be complicated. "Nutritional labeling on fresh produce is voluntary, and it's tricky for us because the Nutrition Facts tables are different in the U.S. and Canada. Including both isn't practical from an inventory standpoint," says Albuquerque.

pb

Produce Purchases Driven by Culture in Chicago

CHICAGO IS KNOWN FOR ITS DIVERSE PRODUCE OFFERINGS.

BY LISA WHITE

One of the largest cities in the U.S., Chicago is known for its architecture, but also its agriculture, specifically its diverse produce offerings.

This metropolis is also known for its restaurants, driven by the varying cultures of its many neighborhoods. From Chicago Restaurant Week in the winter to Taste of Chicago in the summer, residents and visitors can sample food from some of the top eateries in the country. The city also has its fair share of Michelin Star restaurants, the best of the best.

BENEFITS OF THE LOCALE

When it comes to produce, Chicago benefits from its flourishing restaurant industry, as well as its central location. Farmers profit from a growing season that stretches from March to November, which provides the necessary period for growing and harvesting a wide range of fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, sweet corn, peppers, melons and cucumbers.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA-NASS), as of 2024, Illinois had more than 70,000 farms that cover 26.3 million acres.

This region isn't just known for its quality fruits and vegetables, but also for affordability in terms of pricing. Those who do business here focus on supporting local, which has led to a burgeoning farm-to-table foodservice business. With the focus on locally produced fruits and vegetables, restaurants and retail outlets are able to operate more sustainably, provide fresh, high-quality products and support farmers in the area.

THE CIPM & AGRICULTURE

The hallmark of Chicago's produce business is centered around the CIPM (Chicago International Produce Market), which has been the prime wholesale market for fruits and vegetables since it was known as the South Water Market in the 1920s and 1930s.

At that time, it was recognized as the place for those seeking the freshest, highest



When it comes to produce, Chicago benefits not just from its burgeoning restaurant industry, but also from its central location. Farmers profit from a growing season that stretches from March to November, which provides the necessary period for growing and harvesting a wide range of fruits and vegetables.

quality produce. The market outgrew its location, and the Chicago Planning Commission approved a relocation in 2003 to a state-of-the-art building in Chicago's Pilsen Industrial Corridor. Today, this central location is ideal for wholesalers and produce buyers.

The CIPM is a 450,000 square-foot facility that includes sophisticated loading docks and convenient refrigeration space. It is designed for food safety and product quality, focusing on maintaining the cold chain.

SELLING IN CHICAGO

Despite increasing competition, produce sales in the Windy City and surrounding areas are booming.

La Hacienda Brands Inc., which has been in business since 1973, is a distributor focused on Mexican produce. Its top sellers include papayas, tomatillos, limes, cilantro and hot peppers.

"We have a variety of customers of many different ethnicities from a wide range of Chicago neighborhoods," says Adolfo Vega Jr., produce manager. "Wholesalers and growers from the region where we buy are opening up warehouses and coming directly to sell their items."

Because of La Hacienda's history and relationships in the region, increased competition has not impacted sales.

"We've been in business for more than 50 years for a reason," says Vega. "We provide reasonable prices, but also offer grocery and dairy items. We have more than 3,000 items available, so consider our company a one-stop shop."

Chicago Food Corp. is a wholesaler that

also owns four retail stores called Joong Boo Market — two in the city and two in surrounding suburbs, Schaumburg and Glenview. The company focuses on Asian produce, such as napa lettuce, radishes, Korean pears, Asian sweet potatoes and garlic.

"Anything Asian-focused, we do a lot with," says Chong Suh, president. "Asian produce is more versatile than it has been in the past."

He adds that produce is one of those things everyone can enjoy and is not reserved for a specific demographic. "Everyone consumes it, retail is strong and it doesn't have a barrier, as produce is ubiquitous," Suh says, adding that seasonal items sell well, since customers realize they have a limited time to purchase these items.

Although Chicago can be a tough place to do business, Suh says its geographic region is beneficial.

"Geographically, we have to truck in produce from around the country," he says. "California has easier access to produce, and we bring in a lot of West Coast items. The East Coast, Canada and Mexico are easily accessible."

Despite being centralized, logistics can drive up prices because of added freight costs, which includes fuel expenses.

"Because we have a variety of products, we can keep up with the costs," says Suh. "We carry everything you'd expect to find, and are well-positioned for consolidation. This is because we work with many vendors from all over the country."

"We're always thinking about the next growth opportunity, as we want to make sure

ADOBE STOCK PHOTO

we're part of the community and are servicing them with that focus in mind."

The Ruby Co. is a national fresh produce supplier and distributor that has been in business since 1966. Josh Wolff, vice president of growth and strategy at the company, says much has changed in the last decade, with Ruby Co.'s expansion into new regions and segmentation, servicing customers across the country. Today, the company services large-scale national and regional retail systems, national foodservice chains, independent restaurants, broadline distributors and packers of private label products for distributors, wholesalers, retailers and packers.

Its core items are potatoes and onions, but the company also sells large amounts of sweet potatoes and apples, as well as processed items, which are all significant growth areas for the company.

"For us, the Chicago business is a small piece of our overall pie, although we've been solidified and based out of Chicago from the start," says Wolff. "It's been important to maintain our legacy at the produce terminal to support long-standing local retail and food-service business. On top of having a terminal presence, it serves a secondary purpose as a Midwest hub we utilize as a redistribution



The hallmark of Chicago's produce business is centered around the Chicago International Produce Market, which has been the prime wholesale market for fruits and vegetables since it was known as the South Water Market in the 1920s and 1930s.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

point for the East, Northeast and Southwest."

The CIPM adds value outside of the sales and operational aspect, he says, and having warehouse and storage facilities at the market serves other purposes from a corporate entity.

Wolff adds that being centrally located is a huge benefit to having a steady inventory of potatoes and onions.

EXPANDING LINES, REGIONS

The Ruby Co.'s subsidiary, Sweet Mama Produce, started as a growing operation for watermelons and quickly expanded into pumpkins.

"We're now approaching the summer watermelon season, which we are excited about, as well as the fall for pumpkins," notes Wolff. "These are large commodity areas for us as a company."

The company is also growing, shipping and packing onions and lettuce under the Sweet Mama label.

"As of 2025, we are shipping out of 10 different facilities across the country," says Wolff. "We established an operation to grow and pack fresh onions in California and also are expanding into New Mexico with another strategic packing operation. This is a large facility with a lot of runway. Overall, there is a lot of momentum for our core company Ruby and Sweet Mama businesses, and we are continually focused on reinvesting back into the businesses to support our growth path."

Ruby's strong sales are attributed to its customers, which are diverse and growing. "Our company is customer-driven and services more than 600 commercial purchasers across the country," says Wolff. "Our goal is to



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expand and grow existing customers, many of which are national, which requires expansion into new regions for freight savings and to capitalize on new markets or regions.”

With the industry continuing to consolidate, Wolff says the strategy is to look for ways to differentiate and expand service offerings.

“We’ve looked at the growing side as a big opportunity,” says Wolff. “Over the last couple of years, we’ve been reinvesting a lot into the ground and assets to propel our service offerings.”

Consolidation and competition in the marketplace have created a price-shopping mentality, especially because this is a dense geographic region.

“People are, in some cases, more focused on price and savings versus establishing consistent relationships in the market and leaning into legacy relationships,” Wolff explains. “We are focused on volume and packages to be a low-cost option on the terminal for potatoes and onions. This requires staying in front of people and getting your hands dirty.”

Still, Wolff is happy with the company’s position in the marketplace. “We like our position being the go-to for potatoes and onions,” says Wolff. “During summer, we always have fresh watermelon with fresh pumpkins in fall;



The Chicago International Produce Market is a 450,000 square-foot facility that includes sophisticated loading docks and convenient refrigeration space. It is designed for food safety and product quality, focusing on maintaining the cold chain.

both are seasonal commodities for us. With so much retail density in Chicago, it’s a great climate to sell seasonal commodities.”

MIDWEST IS STRONG

Basciani Group of Companies, a grower, packer and shipper of mushrooms, is currently celebrating its 100th anniversary. The fifth-generation, family-owned business was founded in 1925 by Emedio Basciani.

“Our company has been farming for 100 years, and we established business in Chicago in the late ’80s,” says Michael J. Basciani Sr., chief executive. “We sell 2 million pounds of fresh mushrooms a week.”

Basciani says doing business in the Midwest is fruitful. “We are big in foodservice, so our company grew in the Chicago area with distributors; we know everyone out here,” he

says. “We like the way Chicago people eat, and the Midwest is a loyal customer base.”

It also means the company has good proximity to everything with its central location. “We can bounce off other states easily, as we are a central hub,” Basciani notes.

Due to its reputation, Basciani sales are consistent. “Mushroom prices don’t fluctuate, so business has remained pretty stable,” says Basciani. “A good mushroom buyer wants a good supplier, and customers only reach out to us if there’s a problem; fortunately, that’s rare.”

Basciani Companies is positioned as a foodservice expert, so the goal is to get its products on as many menus as possible.

“We want to give restaurant operators opportunities to make their menus bigger,” Basciani explains. “We pride ourselves on our on-time deliveries and stability.” **pb**

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■ MEIJER MAKES ITS MARK IN CHICAGO

BY MIKE DUFF

Meijer, a Michigan-based food retailer, operates its signature supercenters throughout Chicagoland.

Chicago is a famously crowded retail market, but Meijer has an interesting history in the metropolitan area.

Meijer made a place for itself in Chicagoland with its traditional supercenter format, and now operates about 15 stores in the region, stretching from the Wisconsin to Indiana borders. It's a top 10 food retailer in the Chicago market.

The store in Rolling Meadows, IL, in Chicago's northern suburbs, is well established and offers shoppers a produce assortment that focuses on providing a large variety of quality produce.

The produce section at the Rolling Meadows Meijer, during a recent store visit, reinforces the value image with a line of mobile slant tables that included sales signage and featured packaged fruit on special, including clamshell berries, as well as bagged apples and mandarins.

The first wave of tables gave way to citrus and apple displays in the same



PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

fixtures, which Meijer featured across the sales floor.

The produce department presentation centered on the most popular produce commodities, but some categories got special callouts. Cucumbers and bell peppers got their own signage above slant table presentations on the floor, as did bulk tomatoes and avocados presented side by side.

Tomatoes also had a dedicated endcap.

Likewise, the store identified tropical fruit and melon displays in adjacent configurations.

An on-the-floor refrigerated case included fresh-cut fruits and vegetables. The endcap featured party trays and dip with clamshell and tub fruit above.

On the floor, refrigerated low-profile cases featured vegetables with signage calling out cauliflower, broccoli, carrots and celery.

Also noteworthy at Meijer Rolling Meadows, was a major organic display, including dry and refrigerated cases. An organics endcap featured an easy-to-grab assortment of everyday favorites, including head lettuce, carrots and cabbage.

The easy-to-navigate department was low-profile through the center, and the signage was clear so consumers could easily shop the department at speed. **pb**

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An endcap at the Rolling Meadows, IL, Meijer features a variety of hot peppers, as well as bagged tamale kits, Pasta Para Duros, Tamarindo and like items from Melissa's.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

Five Reasons Why New Jersey Punches Above its Weight in Supplying Fresh Produce

Garden State farmers grow over 100 varieties of fruits and vegetables.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Each summer, shoppers find a market within a market at McCaffrey's Food Markets. The nine-store chain, headquartered in Langhorne, PA, with locations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, features a one-stop shop destination display filled with locally grown and Jersey Fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Our farm stand display, which sits at the front of the produce department, is a customer favorite," says Tony Mirack, produce director of operations. "By July, we'll have a good volume of product, including tomatoes, corn, zucchini, summer squash, bell peppers, blueberries and peaches. Local has always been important, especially in New Jersey, but the demand has taken off over the past five to 10 years."

Here are five reasons the Garden State punches above its weight when supplying fresh produce:

1. LOCAL & GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION

New Jersey, which ranks 47th in size but 11th in population, may not seem like a fresh produce-producing powerhouse. But fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs and more flourish on 15% or 712,000 acres of state land, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2022 Census of Agriculture, released last year.

"New Jersey-grown produce makes up between 3% to 4% of our total volume," says Stefanie Katzman, chief executive officer for Katzman, based at the Hunts Point Produce Market, in Bronx, NY, one of the largest produce wholesaler distributors in New York City, with 75% of its customers retail and distribution from Massachusetts to Maryland. "Some of our largest volume fruits and vegetables from New Jersey include blueberries, cucumbers and peaches."

Marco Matta, buyer and account manager



Jersey Fresh, launched in 1984, is a state-funded agricultural marketing campaign. A 2016 marketing survey showed two-thirds of consumers are more likely to purchase produce bearing a Jersey Fresh label.

for John Vena Inc., located at the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market, in Philadelphia, PA, says they move a great deal of New Jersey produce when in-season. "Our main product line from New Jersey consists of leafy greens and bulk box herbs. Occasionally, we will bring selected fruit and vegetables to broaden our line and expand the selection so that customers can source such products locally."

New Jersey's Mid-Atlantic position is within a few hours' drive of about 50 million customers.

"We're able to sell direct to retailers with multiple deliveries each week, which is fresher than product coming from out west," says Jay Schneider, executive vice president of sales at Consalo Family Farms based in Vineland, NJ. "We also sell to customers as far north as Canada and south to Florida and Puerto Rico."

2. BEYOND BLUEBERRIES AND TOMATOES

New Jersey farmers grow over 100 varieties of fruits and vegetables, according to Joe Atchison III, assistant secretary of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), based in Trenton, NJ.

"The state ranks in the top 10 production of eggplant, squash, peaches, peppers, blueberries, cranberries, sweet corn, asparagus ... the list goes on. Our microclimates and great soils, combined with the dedication of our farmers

and the department's food safety team, guarantee the freshest, most flavorful, and safest produce retailers can offer their customers."

The Garden State's growing season spans almost eight to nine months.

"New Jersey asparagus starts mid-April and runs through mid-June," says Fran Hancock, co-owner of Sheppard Farms, in Cedarville, NJ, and of the family's sales company, Eastern Fresh Growers. "Asparagus is our core product. After decades of producing this crop commercially, we are happy with our current varieties that grow and yield extremely well."

Hancock adds their bell pepper season is July 10 to Oct. 20, and they plan to increase bell pepper acreage to meet expected demand for fresh and processing markets. Cucumbers are available from June 20 to Oct. 20.

The sweet corn season is from July 4 to Sept. 4. "We hand-pick, cool, and ship sweet corn to retailers and processors in the area to ensure freshness and a superior sweet flavor," she says.

Retailers take advantage of the relatively long season to offer customers the freshest local produce.

"New Jersey farmers annually provide our family-owned stores with high-quality fruits and vegetables," says Ross Farnsworth, vice president of produce and floral for the Keasbey, NJ-headquartered Wakefern Food Corp, the largest retailer-owned cooperative in the U.S. "In the springtime, customers can

PHOTO COURTESY NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

PHOTO COURTESY WAKEFERN



NJ-headquartered Wakefern Food Corp is the largest retailer-owned cooperative in the U.S., with banners in nine Mid-Atlantic and New England states. In July, it is hosting a Local Produce Supplier Summit where growers can showcase their offerings and be considered as potential suppliers for Wakefern.

find assortments of Jersey-grown leafy greens, herbs, and cabbage. During the summer months, our stores carry fresh, juicy corn, blueberries, peaches, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, green beans, tomatoes and more.”

The cooperative has invited local and regional growers to apply through RangeMe for its Local Produce Supplier Summit July 9 at the New Jersey Convention & Expo Center, in Edison, NJ. At the Summit, growers can showcase their offerings, connect with Wakefern and ShopRite produce procurement teams, and be considered as potential suppliers for Wakefern.

What people eat has changed over the last few decades, and growers like Nardelli Bros. Inc. – Lake View Farms, in Cedarville, NJ, have adapted.

“There’s been increased demand for ethnic produce, like cilantro, napa and bok choy,” says Bill Nardelli Jr., vice president of sales. “We offer 80 commodities from April to November. This enables us to assemble a cross-mix of items, and deliver it overnight, which offers our retailers a big advantage.”

This season, Sheppard Farms is also growing a variety of hot peppers in conjunction with a specialty marketer/producer, says Hancock.

3. ORGANIC PRODUCTION

New Jersey has 81 USDA-certified organic farms, as of the 2024 Census of Agriculture, representing over 2,700 acres.

“We’re seeing an increase in organic products out of New Jersey, which has been great for keeping up with our increasing customer demand,” says Katzman.

Consalo Family Farms’ Schneider says organic production is a recent trend. “We have 20 products grown organically, such as beets, green onions, kale, parsley, cilantro, red and green leaf lettuces, Swiss chard, collards and dill. We’ve also increased our acreage on organic blueberries.”

Eastern Fresh Growers also has 200 acres of organic land under the Jersey Legacy Farms label. Organic offerings include grape tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, asparagus, squash, bell pepper and lettuces.

4. CUTTING EDGE GROWING, POST-HARVEST & SALES

Farmers must adapt to changes in the industry, both natural and manmade. A good example on the growing end is Consalo Family Farms, which will celebrate its centennial in 2027. The operation uses an automated transplanter where veg seeds are dry-sown via a proprietary tape and sent to a nursery. At the nursery, seeds germinate inside the tape after they are watered.

On the farm, the transplanter unspools the tape from the trays, cutting each transplant loose and placing it into the ground. The machine can do 2-7 acres per hour, significantly reducing labor and time, says Chelsea Consalo, president. “We have also trialed the Stout Smart Weed Cultivator, which uses AI to cultivate and weed fields using mechanical blades. The Smart Cultivator clears 1 to 2 acres per hour, depending on soil conditions.”

The grower is also testing new blueberry varieties, says Consalo, a New Jersey Blueberry Advisory Council member and treasurer for the New Jersey Blueberry Growers Association.

“The new varieties are Arabella Blue, Peachy Blue and Pink Lemonade, some of which we will market with a variety-specific label per a retailer’s request.”

On the post-harvest side, Sheppard Farms, which can trace farming this land back to nearly a century before the U.S. was founded in 1776, has a cutting-edge operation.

“Our facility has multiple packing areas, dedicated break rooms, and a full assortment of precooling capabilities. The packing area is also temperature-controlled, and the

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Local has always been important, especially in New Jersey, but the demand has taken off over the past five to 10 years.

Tony Mirack, McCaffrey’s Food Markets

produce and employee flow are optimized for food safety,” says Hancock. “Currently, we are in the process of installing a large ground-mounted solar field to power this facility. We hope to have it active within the 2025 growing season.”

In 2023, the Vineland Cooperative Produce Auction, which operates live and remotely simultaneously six days a week from April through November, installed a new hydro-vac cooling unit. The cooler recently received approval to cool and store organic produce.

On the sales side, the co-op has upgraded its auction and computer systems over the last two years. “Buyers can now bid from their office, and we have had buyers from as far south as North Carolina. These upgrades have made it easier for the remote buyers to access the auction,” says Carol DeFoor, manager.

5. A MARKETING PROGRAM WITH BRAND RECOGNITION

Jersey Fresh, launched in 1984, was the state’s first state-funded agricultural marketing campaign. A 2016 marketing survey showed that 79% of consumers are aware of the Jersey Fresh brand and 80% have an excellent or very good opinion of the brand. Also, two-thirds of consumers are more likely to purchase produce bearing a Jersey Fresh label.

“The Jersey Fresh logo seems to carry more weight with shoppers than just the words ‘locally grown,’” says McCaffrey’s Food Markets’ Mirack.

Every season, the NJDA offers its retailer partners point-of-sale materials, such as banners, bin wraps, price cards, aprons and more, to promote the Jersey Fresh brand in-store.

“Retail buyers should always remember that their consumers want locally grown produce and have their shelves stocked with produce that will support local growers and fair wages for workers in our area,” says NJDA’s Atchison.

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Ohio's Proud Produce Sells

Farms deliver fresh variety.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

With its enviable trade position in the Midwest, Ohio produce offers abundant choices for both local and far-reaching retailers. The variety and quality accommodate the most discerning aficionados.

Ohio producers cover an extensive range of growing methods: Vegetables in fields and greenhouses, large and small fruit in orchards, greens and seeds in indoor hydroponic houses — they all contribute to familiar or specialized in-demand products.

What's more, the Ohio Department of Agriculture's marketing program, Ohio Proud, helps consumers find food and agricultural products made and grown in the state.

SUCCESS OF OHIO PROUD

Ohio Proud offers an affiliate program where any retailer or foodservice operator can use the Ohio Proud logo for marketing or selling products from Ohio Proud partners, according to Meghan Harshbarger, chief of communications, Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA).

"Additionally, we host events throughout the year, such as the Ohio Proud Food Show, to connect retailers directly with our local partners who are growing or processing an Ohio product," Harshbarger adds. "These events allow us to create a one-stop shop for grocers and retailers who are looking for new products that fit their operation."

VEGETABLES APLENTY

From May to October, Buurma Farms Inc., Willard, OH, grows 30 distinctive fresh summer vegetables on close to 2,500 acres. Then, they market about 2 million packages throughout the eastern U.S., and distribute even more vegetables from their Gregory, MI, farm during the season.

"We've been doing it a long time — it's in our blood," says President Chadd Buurma.

Buurma believes the interest in produce will continue to grow. "It's a standard of life," he says, "Eat and be healthy."

With his vegetable items, he singles out good sellers, "All lettuces, red and green, romaine, and butter — good movers," he adds, "Herbs and parsley, too, will continue."

To adapt to the market, he dismisses one of his first crops, celery, as not good for fresh market sales now. But this season, he has a



The Ohio Department of Agriculture's marketing program, Ohio Proud, offers an affiliate program where any retailer or foodservice operator can use the Ohio Proud logo for marketing or selling products from Ohio Proud partners.

PHOTO COURTESY OHIO DEPARTMENT OF AG

contract with a processor for juicing celery. Another of his favorites — radish — "is leveling off from a narrow big movement." He blames the packaged salads' influence. "Radish can turn brown and not be appealing."

Another Willard, OH, farm owned by the descendants of another of the swamp-clearing team of early farmers, Holthouse Farms of Ohio, Inc. also grows an assortment of summer vegetables. The May through November availability listing shows dozens of basic varieties, while a profusion of squash and pumpkins reveals numerous choices as well.

"Our bread-and-butter products are green bell peppers and chile, jalapeño, and banana peppers, plus zucchini and yellow squash," says fifth-generation co-owner, Kirk Holthouse. Holthouse's popular value-added bag features jalapeño, Hungarian wax and Cubanelle, plus a small pack of select green and red peppers, and "retailers can choose six- or 12-count cartons."

He handles and distributes his partner's hydrocooled green beans with snapped-ends packages. "Most people desire convenience. They don't want to shuck corn, for instance."

Holthouse believes produce demand will expand. "Fresh vegetables make people feel better and they want to be healthy. Fully ripened red peppers, in particular, have antioxidants and vitamin C, and they make you happy."

Cabbage Inc., Vermillion, OH, also has locations in Michigan, Georgia and Florida that "significantly reduce food miles to our

markets in the Eastern U.S.," says Mark Jewell, sales and grower relations manager. In each of their farms, they ensure freshness with 35 degrees F cooling, and same-day-as-harvest shipping.

Red, green, savoy and napa cabbages are marketed for processing, and fresh cut for restaurants and retail stores. "The cabbage markets are steady," Jewell notes, "Green cabbage leads the sales by far."

Interestingly, kale, which had been experiencing a dip in sales following an earlier boom period, has been surging recently. Jewell notes, "Kale is picking up, due to the new popularity of grocery stores' salad mixes."

GREENS AND SPROUTS

John Bonner, owner, Great Lakes Growers, Burton, OH, produces a full line of greenhouse hydroponic fresh-cut and living lettuces year-round. They reach foodservice operators and retailers in five states with their just-harvested varieties of lettuces and herbs.

Bonner reports Living Green Butter, Icicle, Batavia, and romaine lettuces as the most popular, while romaine and Sweet Crispy Crunch lead fresh-cut. "We always have new and improved varieties in the works with the seed breeders."

Ed Sauer manages Sunsprout Farms of Central Ohio, Columbus, OH. Family-owned and -operated, it grows herb and vegetable sprouts hydroponically indoors.

"Sprouts are younger than microgreens.

They last longer, generally about a week,” Sauer explains. “Grown without any soil or soil substitute, sprouts involve the entire plant.” Along with individual alfalfa, broccoli, clover, mungbean, radish, onion and legume sprout seeds, Sunsprout Farms offers blends, such as colorful Spicy Mix, with clover, radish and mungbeans.

Because they test and wash every batch, customers need not rinse, as the hulls are removed, Sauer says, adding buyers can “eat right out of the package or sauté. Retailers should display samples with crackers and cheese.”

FRESH ORGANIC CO-OP

Green Field Farms, Wooster, OH, offers a range of certified organic produce and raw sauerkraut. Chief Executive Officer Leon Wengerd says the farms’ different sizes help retailers differentiate conventional from organic products.

Sales Representative Jim Hudeck reports zucchini, cabbage, kale and all varieties of tomatoes are the most popular. For retailers’ organic promotions, he recommends featuring items “when most people don’t have them in their gardens at home.”

ORCHARD FRUIT

Ohio also has a rich history of orchards that remains strong. Bryce Bauman, vice pres-



At the Zanesville, OH, Riesbeck’s store, produce manager Marie Wilson says customers prefer Ohio items, and customers will not buy apples unless they are Ohio-grown.

ident, Bauman Orchards Inc., Rittman, Ohio, just added a new packaging house, bigger apple sorter, and planted more trees. “I hope, and absolutely believe, brighter sales for fruit growers will increase.”

Bauman Orchards wholesales apples and peaches, and also maintains three farm markets, and delivers plums, pears, berries and melons regionally.

The two dozen varieties of apples, include the early-ripening Paula Red, Ginger Gold, Transparent, and Earligold, along with Gala and Honeycrisp later in the season. White

peach varieties stand out with Red Haven and about a dozen more. Plums include Stanley, Methley, Shiro and Santa Rosa.

CUSTOMERS LIKE LOCAL

With 13 stores in Ohio, Riesbeck’s, St. Clairsville, OH, enjoys the opportunity to obtain the freshest produce. At the Zanesville, OH, store, Produce Manager Marie Wilson reports how customers prefer Ohio items. “We get apples all year, but people will not buy if not Ohio-grown.”

Local sweet corn, in particular, is demanded. “Customers can tell the difference; it is sweeter and bigger. We shuck it and package five ears on a tray.” Riesbeck’s tried suppliers’ tray packs, but they were not sellers. “Our customers know what we package is fresh,” she explains.

The Oberlin, OH, Independent Grocers Alliance (IGA) store participates in the Ohio Proud affiliate program. Store Manager Bob Kritz shares his customers’ preference, “They definitely like a lot of local products. In summer, especially, the farmers in the region come by and demonstrate them.”

“We label the organic products,” says Kritz. “They are better sellers.”

Family-owned local grocers of the IGA, Chicago, IL, operate about 1,600 stores in the U.S.

pb



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Demand for Michigan Produce Stays Strong

Michigan's geography boosts fresh produce quality.

BY MIKE DUFF

Like counterparts across the country, retail in Michigan has been evolving for both chain and independent stores as they cope with changing consumer demand and operational challenges. But being surrounded by lots of produce production and other key links in the food chain provides an advantage.

Busch's Fresh Food Market, a family-owned supermarket operation with 16 stores in southeast Michigan, is celebrating its 50th anniversary year with initiatives, including a local tasting event in its two Ann Arbor stores, giving customers the chance to meet local food providers and sample their products.

Local products are a focus for Busch. The company emphasizes consumers will find a broad assortment of local and specialty products across its fresh produce department. As the company characterizes it, every store, which ranges in size from 26,000 to 51,000 square feet, operates as a full-service, premier grocer.

Over the past few years, Busch has been involved in a store remodeling program. Last year, its Novi, MI, supermarket expanded into an old Rite-Aid space, adding about 12,000 additional square feet, which allowed Busch to upgrade the produce department.

"Our annual investments in store improvements are about more than just enhancing the shopping experience: They're about deepening our connection to the communities that have supported us for half a century," says Busch's Fresh Food Market President Bobby Turner. "As we celebrate this milestone, we remain focused on delivering quality, service and local impact well into the future."

Each day, Busch's buyers hand-select produce directly from the Detroit Produce Terminal. It also partners with more than 20 Michigan farmers.

"At Busch's, our produce department is more than just a place to shop, it's a reflection of our commitment to freshness, seasonality, and strong partnerships with local growers,"



Michigan is the top asparagus-producing state, and it helps kick off seasonal produce from the state.

Turner says. "We take pride in delivering the kind of hand-selected quality and hometown service that has defined us for 50 years."

LOCAL BUY-IN

Also in Ann Arbor, with its three operations in town, Argus Farm Stop has built its business by working directly with local growers who work on a modified consignment arrangement designed to maximize their return. Dani Cavagnaro, produce manager, says that, as winter played out, the retailer was preparing for local spring radishes, green onions and asparagus. Spring also means greens from local hoop houses or high tunnels.

For years, Argus, which only uses local Michigan produce, had to content itself with root vegetables and storage commodities in the winter. Now, greenhouses and other controlled atmosphere growing facilities that can produce fruits and vegetables in the winter are providing lettuce, kale and herbs, in addition to some other commodities, like mini cucumbers. However, because of its mission to support local growers, Argus gives priority to soil growers as soon as it can in the warming weather.

As prices for produce rose recently under the influence of the economy and Mother Nature, Argus gained some advantage as it competes with other food retailers.

"My perception of it is, because grocery prices have generally gone up, at some point

it closed the gap," she says. "If you're going to a big box store and buying produce, you're paying more now. It doesn't seem like you have to pay more for local produce. And local produce helps your local economy."

Argus wants to support growers who use organic production methods, but recognizes not all small growers can afford the costs associated with organic certification. As a result, Argus embraces growers who grow using sustainable and organic methods, even if they aren't certified.

"Certification is expensive and intense," says Cavagnaro. "Many of our farms operate organically, but can't afford certification. We have personal relations with farmers. We're only concerned with how they operate. We don't care about having a sticker."

MARKET DEVELOPMENTS

In the wholesale sector, Bill Loupée, chief operating officer, Ben B. Schwartz, Detroit, says the company provides a full range of fruits and vegetables with greater efficiency than ever. At its Detroit Produce Terminal location, the company has worked behind the scenes to devise solutions that can add value by offering high-quality produce that's ready to display.

"Demand in Detroit has remained consistent," he says. "There is a strong market here because of a blend of independent grocers and large-scale retailers. For a large city, there is a

PHOTO COURTESY MICHIGAN ASPARAGUS ADVISORY BOARD

big sense of local pride and community here, and consumers like to support small businesses that deliver, so we see that independent grocers who deliver top-quality produce are thriving.”

Ben B. Schwarz has installed a custom Enterprise Resource Planning platform, dubbed Ben B. Access. It expands the company’s legacy system to expedite orders, improve delivery and automate administrative functions while aiding in data analysis that yields better purchasing forecasts.

At Riggio Distribution Co., a Detroit Produce Terminal wholesaler, President Dominic Riggio says the company is expanding to satisfy customer needs, but isn’t stepping back from its long-term partners. “Riggio Distribution continues to add products, labels, and new items to offer to our customers, while at the same time remaining loyal to the suppliers that we have relationships with for decades.”

In its business, Riggio is also working with particular consumer preferences. “Local produce is something that is supported by many in Michigan. At Riggio Distribution, we work with many local growers, and have for many years,” says Riggio. “We started with Michigan asparagus at the end of April. It is always a great time of year to start with one of the first locally grown crops.”



PHOTO COURTESY BEN B. SCHWARTZ

Ben B. Schwarz, Detroit, MI, provides a full range of fruits and vegetables with greater efficiency than ever. At its Detroit Produce Terminal location, the company has worked behind the scenes to devise solutions that can add value by offering high-quality produce that’s ready to display.

SPRING STARTERS

Jordan Vande Guchte, vice president of sales, Superior Produce, Hudsonville, MI, notes that asparagus continues on the upswing as it helps lead seasonal produce from the state. Michigan is the top asparagus-producing state.

Ken Korson, apple category manager and sales, for North Bay Produce, Traverse City, MI, says good snow cover during a cold winter gave growing conditions a boost after a couple of years when flakes were rare.

With responsibility for apples and asparagus, he says that the cold conditions were leading to a somewhat late, but normal, bloom on the trees, but in an early season that seemed

to be shaping up well. Despite the chilly conditions, asparagus was looking at a normal start for North Bay.

Trish Taylor, marketing manager for Sparta, MI-based Riveridge Produce Marketing, describes the year’s cold stretch as beneficial.

“It was an ideal winter for us in Michigan,” she says. “We had the snow cover needed, and fruit trees were able to go dormant. They’re certainly waking up ready to go with the recent warm temperatures. With apples, we are evaluating bud development to determine thinning needs, and anxiously watching nighttime temps for the development of the cherries.”

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Riveridge is focused on being a full-year source for apples, says Taylor. “In recent years, we’ve been better able to provide fruit year-round. This is important to our customers because they want to try to provide the most local fruit to their consumers.”

Besides apples, Riveridge offers sweet cherries and prune plums. “Also, we’ve expanded by marketing more commodities, namely Midwest vegetables,” Taylor says.

She contends that Michigan sweet cherry volume looks to ramp over the next few years as acreage expands. “Michigan has the climate for it, and it saves on freight for Midwest and Eastern retailers. Those are savings passed directly to the consumer.”

Geography creates conditions that make Michigan apples the best in the world, insists Diane Smith, executive director, Michigan Apple Committee, Lansing, MI. The Great Lakes surrounding the state provide ample moisture and create a buffer that can mitigate extreme weather conditions.

Nutrient-rich soil and topography also give apples a leg up, with long winters, gradually arriving springs and sunny summers acting as flavor enhancers.

“In Michigan, growers adapt to consumer demand,” she says. “We are

seeing many older, less popular varieties getting pulled out of orchards while the varieties consumers like best — Honeycrisp, Gala, Fuji, EverCrisp, Ambrosia — are increasing in production. Some growers may also participate in managed variety programs.”

Smith says social media marketing campaigns have proven successful, with steady increases in followers and engagements for the last 10 years. “In addition, we are doing more outreach with consumers thanks to partnerships and event sponsorships that allow us to have face-to-face interactions with our audience, sharing the attributes of Michigan apples.”

Nancy Nyquist, executive director of the Michigan Blueberry Commission, Grand Junction, MI, and of the Michigan Tree Fruit Commission, Lansing, MI, says things were going well for both commodities early this spring. The blueberry commission’s main focus is on industry-driven research.

“We have our own grant program and also participate in other grant programs, such as the Specialty Crop Block grant. We just started a relationship with the Michigan Ag Council and also work with Michigan Farm Bureau’s Farm Crate program for school-aged kids.”

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

People want to know where their food comes from, how it’s grown, and even who is growing it. They want to know they’re supporting a local, family operation.

Trish Taylor, Riveridge Produce Marketing, Sparta, MI

Our produce department is more than just a place to shop, it’s a reflection of our commitment to freshness, seasonality, and strong partnerships with local growers.

Bobby Turner, Busch’s Fresh Food Market, Ann Arbor, MI



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Asparagus



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ABUNDANT BRANCHES

To support the May to June core growing season, the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, a grower-funded state-authorized checkoff, keys on improving the economic position of the state's asparagus growers by supporting research and creating greater marketing opportunities.

"MAAB accomplishes this by supporting research for production practices and asparagus varieties, as well as implementing advertising and promotion programs, and assembling and disseminating market information," says Jamie Clover Adams, executive director, Michigan Asparagus, Okemos, MI.

The board offers fresh asparagus retail promotions and point-of-sale materials to retail buyers. On the consumer side, it uses on-trend recipes, influencers, CTV advertising, and an active social media presence to create excitement and get asparagus on consumer shopping lists.

"This year, we are working on tasting demonstrations with retail partners and are also focusing on retail dietitians as a way to help consumers discover the superior freshness and flavor of fresh Michigan asparagus."

BUSCH'S FRESH FOOD MARKET PRIORITIZES LOCAL

Starting in June, Busch's Fresh Food Market, based in Ann Arbor, MI, is renewing its annual commitment to local through the return of the Hyper Local Farm Program. The initiative partners Busch's with farms located near its stores.

At the recently remodeled store in Novi, MI, Busch's transformed the produce department by building a 20% footprint expansion, resulting in a brighter, more shoppable space. A new layout improves visibility in the expanded fresh wet vegetable element, while spaced displays create an easier shopping experience, the company says.

Busch's also broadened the assortment, including an 8-foot section dedicated to in-house freshly cut fruits and vegetables.

Additional improvements include the installation of a 36-foot refrigerated vegetable case, designed to maintain peak product condition. The upgrades also feature the addition of an in-store fresh squeeze juice program, allowing Busch's to provide freshly squeezed juice daily.

In Michigan, Nyquist notes, the blueberry crop grows mostly in the state's southwest, with the season starting in early July and running through September for fresh varieties, with local considerations pacing the growing season.

The Michigan apple harvest season occurs mostly in the state's western half, but includes growing areas elsewhere, including in the southeast. The season generally runs from late summer into the fall, with most varieties ripening from August to October.

Michigan blueberries and tree fruit are widely distributed, but, as with other crops in the state, support near home is significant. "Buying local is important, consumers want to know where their food comes from," says Nyquist.

Taylor concurs. "Every season, we hear directly from more consumers," she says. "People want to know where their food comes from, how it's grown, and even who is growing it. They want to know they're supporting a local, family operation, and we can answer questions that come to mind." **pb**



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Sell More Walnuts: Shift Focus From Holidays to Every Day

Walnuts sell faster, look fresher in the produce department.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Nuts in general, and walnuts in particular, were named one of the Top 10 Superfoods of 2025, according to the What's Trending in Nutrition survey of nearly 900 registered dietitian nutritionists by Pollock Communications, in New York, NY, and *Today's Dietitian*.

"Consumers are increasingly seeking foods that energize and nourish both body and mind," says Christine Lott, director of integrated communications for the California Walnut Board, Folsom, CA. "Walnuts fit this trend, offering a versatile ingredient that fuels vibrant lifestyles with health and indulgence."

As a result, "retailers are increasingly interested in featuring walnuts year-round in the produce department."

Raw walnuts, a mix of walnuts and raisins, and walnuts in trail mixes are some of the over 100 selections featured in a several-foot-long bulk, buy-by-the-pound display at Morton Williams Supermarkets' 2015 Broadway and 68th Street location, which opened in January 2024.

These fixtures stand ready daily to satisfy shoppers' daily snacking, meal-making, and baking needs, according to Marc Goldman, produce director for the 17-store retailer headquartered in the Bronx, NY. "Customers know we carry a big variety of dried fruits and nuts, and it brings them in."

SUPPLY & DEMAND

California grows nearly all (99%) of all English walnuts grown in the U.S. After a record high crop of 824,000 tons in 2023, walnut harvests in 2024 dropped 19% to 670,000 tons. A warm winter followed by extreme summer heat was among the causes.

"Demand for walnuts is through the roof, so we'll see higher prices until the next crop harvest in September," says Chris Large, sales manager at Torn & Glasser Inc., in Los Angeles, CA.

A May 1, 2025, update from the California Walnut Board reports outstanding



Cross-merchandising with walnuts is a proven sales strategy. Research shows that 76% of shoppers are more likely to purchase walnuts when displayed with fresh fruits and vegetables, according to the 2021 Attitudes & Usage Study Wave II Quantitative Report.

PHOTO COURTESY DIAMOND WALNUT GROWERS

early-season conditions and a positive outlook for the 2025 season's crop.

While there's interest in commercial production of black walnuts, most of this variety is harvested from trees in the wild in the Midwest.

"We're seeing more interest in wild, foraged, and locally grown foods," says Jacob Basecke, executive vice president of Hammons Black Walnuts, in Stockton, MO, the largest processor and distributor of black walnuts in the U.S. "Consumers are discovering black walnuts as a high-protein, uniquely American nut in the produce department."

WHAT'S HOT, WHAT'S NEW

Shelled walnuts are the best-sellers in the produce department for Diamond Walnut Growers, says Lenzi Leonard, marketing manager, Stockton, CA, "because they are versatile and pair well with many fruits and vegetables. They can also be used whole in DIY trail mixes, charcuterie boards, snack plates and homemade sauces like pesto. They are also great chopped up as a topping on oatmeal, salads, or baked in your favorite banana bread recipe."

However, Lott at the California Walnut Board notes unshelled walnuts remain an important seasonal and specialty offering, "particularly during the fall and winter holidays when shoppers seek more traditional formats."

New walnut products focus on flavors,

packaging and out-of-the-box uses, such as salad toppers.

"Our latest walnut products come from our sister company, Crazy Go Nuts," says Mariana Guillen, sales representative at the Poindexter Nut Company, in Selma, CA. "We offer a range of flavored coated walnuts, including banana, coconut, buffalo, chocolate espresso, garlic parmesan, Hawaiian BBQ, maple, oatmeal cookie, orange, rosemary, pink salt and regular sea salt. Plus, we have matching walnut butters for each flavor, making it easy to pair them together."

Unbound Snacks, in Yuba City, CA, sells roasted and seasoned walnuts and recently launched a new line featuring walnuts blended with functional mushrooms, tapping into trends around functional foods and wellness. Go a Little Nuts, in Los Molinos, CA, has launched yogurt-covered walnuts, which bring a fun, snackable twist to the category, says Lott.

"These innovations show the versatility of walnuts beyond traditional snacking and baking, positioning them as a dynamic, on-trend produce item."

Hammons Black Walnuts is testing grab-and-go packs and black walnut trail mixes.

"Our newest brand is HIKE Performance Snacks," says Basecke. "Packaged in 5-ounce resealable bags, they meet the demand for smaller, convenient formats and provide consumers with a natural, clean snack with no artificial flavors or preservatives."

The line includes three trail mixes: Hunter Gatherer (black walnuts, almonds,

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Innovations show the versatility of walnuts beyond traditional snacking and baking, positioning them as a dynamic, on-trend produce item.

Christine Lott, California Walnut Board, Folsom, CA

whole dried cherries and organic pepitas), Maple Mountain (black walnuts, organic maple, whole dried cherries, pecans and cashews), and Trail Magic (black walnuts, dried blueberries, organic dark chocolate and cashews).

Diamond Walnut Growers' newest product for the produce department is Crunchy Nut Toppers, launched in February 2024. These are plant-based, ready-to-use salad toppers made with bite-sized walnut pieces seasoned with simple ingredients. They come in four distinct flavors: Bacon-free Smoky Bacon Walnuts, Dairy-free Garden Ranch Walnuts, Glazed Walnuts and Glazed Pecans.

"What makes Crunchy Nut Toppers on-trend with consumer demand is their alignment with current eating habits," says Leonard. According to a 2022 Study Finds survey, the average American eats salad four times per week, "and about 70% of salad eaters state that no salad is complete without toppings. We developed these Crunchy Nut Toppers as a better-for-you alternative to popular options like croutons and bacon bits."

GO NUTS WITH CREATIVITY

Walnuts sell faster in the produce department, according to Stephanie Blackwell, founder and chief executive officer for Aurora Products, in Orange, CT. "They (walnuts) get lost in the grocery and don't look as fresh."

Research shows that over three-fourths (76%) of shoppers are more likely to purchase walnuts when displayed with fresh fruits and vegetables, according to the *2021 Attitudes & Usage Study Wave II Quantitative Report* results, which the California Walnut Board shared. "This makes cross-merchandising a proven strategy," says Lott.

Pairing walnuts with complementary produce creates a one-stop department for shoppers to get all their fresh ingredients, says Diamond Walnut Growers' Leonard.

"For example, our Crunchy Nut Toppers

are often merchandised near fresh or packaged lettuce. Seasonal pairings, like nuts with ingredients for banana bread, apple crisp, and green bean casserole, during Q4, the holiday baking season, are effective."

According to Torn & Glasser's Large, walnut sales have become less seasonal and more of a staple. "We do business 365 days a year; however, there is still a bump for the holidays."

The fall and winter holidays are a prime sales time, agrees Hammons Black Walnuts' Basecke. "Price promos work, but storytelling

sells — shoppers love that black walnuts are wild, U.S.-grown, and protein-packed. We've seen a lot of success with co-branded campaigns and recipe content to support in-store promotions."

Year-round, there are plenty of registering ways retailers can promote walnuts.

"In-store, there are 'buy and get' promotions, such as buy a pre-packaged salad mix and get a small bag of chopped walnuts for free, and product demonstrations that show shoppers how to easily serve and incorporate the product into their meals and snacks," says Leonard. **pb**

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EU Reset: The Biggest U-Turn to Date

BY MIKE PARR

In 2016, 52% of the U.K. voted to leave the European Union in what is now referred to as the Brexit referendum. According to Parliament U.K., a referendum is when a question is decided by putting it to a public vote. Referendums are an example of direct democracy. Clearly, we no longer live in a democracy.

The May 19 EU reset announcement makes a mockery of the last nine years. During this period, businesses in the supply chain associated with the fresh produce industry have put a huge amount of time and effort — not to mention significant financial investment — to establish appropriate protocols within the new Brexit trading landscape.

Producers, logistics suppliers, industry stakeholders and government representatives attended countless meetings to work toward a solution that would allow a fair and seamless transfer of produce into and out of the U.K.

To say this has been a difficult road to travel is an understatement. The challenging number of U-turns, the persistent failure to listen to those working within the sector, the inability to meet deadlines, the constant whitewashing to suit each government's agenda, I could go on.

Many companies, including PML Seafrigo, have worked tirelessly to try and remain ahead of the curve and to be “Brexit fit.”

In our case, we went as far as investing in a transport and logistics hub with remote HMRC/Defra-approved Border Control Post status to enable a faster transit of consignments out of the Port of Dover. The site incorporated specialist inspection amenities for Defra personnel. We addressed the need for best-in-class facilities for drivers to match the fundamental services available to them in other European countries. We were at the front of the queue to apply for training to acquire Authorized Operator Status.

Just two weeks ago, discussions were held regarding the much-anticipated plant health border checks, due to commence July 1. Baroness Hayman insisted there was to be no easement on the deadline and that the new required checks would be rolled out — this despite the issues the industry has repeatedly flagged concerning Sevington's inability to cope with the required level of inspections.

We also voiced our concerns regarding the absence of a definitive list of produce classified as Medium Risk, the lack of clarity regarding the Common User Charge and the unacceptably long evaluation of the pilot Authorized Operator scheme.

And now the prime minister has acted unilaterally to reset the rules without consulting the nation. Whatever your political persuasion, the fact remains that Brexit was the choice of the U.K. population, and this maverick behavior is inconsistent with the notion that Britain is a democracy.

We are now faced with the biggest U-turn of them all — without any firm guidance to those affected most. There are no specific timings on when the new SPS protocol will start, which will cause further bedlam at the border.

In the absence of clear guidance, do we default to the original BTOM plans due to come into effect July 1, or are we able to kickstart the Authorized Operator Status scheme? Is the government planning to roll out official inspections throughout a 24/7 window?

No thought has been given to the negative impact of inspection checks for non-EU fresh produce, which, as Nigel Jenney, chief executive at the Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC), correctly states, accounts for 50% of fresh produce imports.

These are countries that have stood by the U.K. during what can only be described as highly turbulent times. We've forged excellent working relationships with non-EU suppliers to maintain the year-round supply of produce.

How can it be fair to now penalize those who have helped us simply because the government has failed miserably in its attempt to deliver on a cohesive border strategy? Has the government given any thought as to how businesses might be reimbursed for all the time and money spent on working toward the original Brexit plan?

The consumer will be oblivious to all the preparations made by those in the supply chain following the EU exit, to ensure compliance with the government's instructions. They may be about to find out with the chaos that is about to ensue.

I truly despair as to what the future holds.

pb

Mike Parr is the chief executive at PML Seafrigo, U.K. and Ireland.

No thought has been given to the negative impact of inspection checks for non-EU fresh produce, which accounts for 50% of fresh produce imports.



BY NOVELLA LUI

Food Upcycling: Giving Edible Food Waste a Second Life

As a professional in the produce industry, you are probably familiar with the term “food waste.” According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food waste accounts for 30% to 40% of the food supply. Globally, food loss and waste cost \$1.2 trillion in 2020, according to the World Bank Group.

A United Nations Environment Programme report in 2024 notes that addressing food waste requires individual and systemic changes. This recommendation isn’t surprising, as household food waste accounts for 60% of all food waste, while the foodservice sector and the food retail sector make up 27% and 13% of food waste, respectively. The same report also recommends strategies to reduce food loss and waste need to be country specific.

The good news is that food upcycling is a growing industry in North America, and it is one of the technical solutions to decrease food waste. Food upcycling involves transforming food waste into edible ingredients.

Adopting food upcycling is also about supporting a circular economy and moving toward a more sustainable ecosystem. If this is your first time hearing about food upcycling, you may wonder how produce byproducts could become upcycled ingredients and how upcycled ingredients benefit consumers.

UPCYCLING AND THE FOOD MENU

In a foodservice setting, upcycling ingredients means adopting zero-waste cooking by creating more with what we already have. For example, vegetable stems and leaves could be used in soups, stews and stir-fries, while fruit peels and cores could be made into jams and jellies.

Using every possible part of the produce could help lower food costs, decrease the volume of food scraps becoming waste, and encourage chefs and cooks to create new and delicious dishes.

UPCYCLING AND HEALTH

From a food manufacturing and processing perspective, upcycling vegetable and fruit byproducts is a huge opportunity, reducing waste and potentially positively influencing health. For instance, produce scraps could be added to staple foods, such as gluten-free staples — bread, pasta and noodles.

Adding these plant-based waste-turned-into-ingredients could boost the dietary fiber and overall nutritional value of these gluten-free products, increasing the number of menu options for people with celiac disease.

UPCYCLING AND SENSORY EXPERIENCES

Another aspect to consider is that upcycled ingredients is an opportunity to introduce new flavors, textures, and colors to food,

enhancing and diversifying consumers’ sensory experiences.

For example, using nutrient-rich grape pomace from wine production could enrich the sensory quality of yogurt and cheese. The pulpy residue could also be transformed into grape pomace flour for biscuits in snack foods.

UPCYCLING AND MARKET APPEAL

With the rise of food prices and cost of living, making upcycled food products appealing to consumers to choose over their conventional counterparts could pose challenges. Nonetheless, the demand for upcycled food products is growing.

According to Innova Market Insights’ January 2025 report, one in five consumers in the U.S. and Canada consider sustainability as a dietary value, and turn to brands and companies that focus on sustainable practices. Specifically, Generation Z is considered the most environmentally conscious and is particularly interested in knowing where their food comes from.

Being transparent with customers about your products helps build trust. Food manufacturers could get their product upcycled certified through Upcycled Certified Standard, a third-party certification program that enables food companies to inform consumers that their product includes safe-to-consume upcycled ingredients.

THE FUTURE OF UPCYCLED FOODS

This rapidly growing global industry was valued at \$54.5 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach \$94.6 billion by 2032, according to the *Asia Food Journal*.

While upcycled food can easily become a new food product category, further research and product development are needed to uncover the unknowns of sensory quality and acceptability. Also, depending on the nature of the byproduct and the processes required to transform it into a useful ingredient, food regulations may need to be revised.

Consumers, though, ultimately seek food that tastes good, is affordable, benefits the environment, and offers a positive experience. Understanding consumers’ perceptions and behaviors toward upcycled foods could help make an upcycled food product successful in the competitive food market.

pb

Novella Lui, RD, MHS is a registered dietitian, and a freelance food, nutrition, and health writer in Canada who combines her interest in food science, evidence-based nutrition, and health education through content creation. She is passionate about seeking new ways to bridge the communication gap between the business and the health side of food. As a foodie, she loves to travel around the globe to learn about how food connects with people’s culture and way of life. Connect with Novella at info@livetounourish.com for work samples and collaboration opportunities.

Using every possible part of the produce could lower food costs, decrease food waste, and encourage chefs and cooks to create new and delicious dishes.



The Power of Relationships

BY JACK MARCHESE

In the wholesale produce business, you can't rely on luck to last nearly 100 years. You have to rely on people and the relationships you have with them.

At V. Marchese, we've learned a lot since we were founded as a family-run wholesaler in 1934 in Milwaukee, WI. Our longevity is rooted, not only in delivering the freshest produce, but also in the strength of our relationships. Strong relationships are the most resilient supply chain of all. And in today's climate — marked by inflation, labor shortages, and tariff uncertainty — that truth has never been more important.

TRUST IS BUILT EVERY DAY

Trust should drive everything a wholesaler does. If you promise a load of strawberries on a Sunday morning, it had better show up on time and cold. That kind of follow-through builds loyalty — not just when things are going smoothly, but especially when they're not. When extreme weather, market volatility, or supply chain snarls hit, don't scramble to chase the cheapest option, lean on relationships. We adapt, we communicate, and we support one another. That loyalty runs both ways.

Just like food safety, trust requires daily vigilance. Sanitation protocols only work if you inspect them firsthand, day after day. Relationships work the same way — they're built through consistent effort, transparency, and doing the right thing, even when it is not openly apparent.

Strong relationships don't form behind a desk. They're forged in the warehouse, on delivery routes, at the loading dock, and face-to-face with customers. It's important to build a hands-on culture where everyone — from leadership to the third-shift sanitation crew — takes ownership.

That mindset is central to both how we serve our customers and how we operate internally. We believe food safety is a matter of pride, not just compliance. A well-sanitized facility is more than a checklist item; it's a reflection of our respect for the product, the people we serve, and each other.

Whether it's helping a chef build a seasonal menu, delivering in a snowstorm, or offering a creative substitution when something's out of stock, a wholesaler's team should be empowered to go above and beyond. That approach creates customer loyalty, and it's especially critical in times of crisis.

SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS THAT WITHSTAND THE STORM

Our relationships with growers and suppliers are just as important as those with customers. In fact, they're often what

enables us to serve our customers at the level we do.

We treat our suppliers as partners, not commodities. We've worked with many of them for decades. That stability creates a level of mutual understanding that no contract can replace. When markets shift or disasters strike, we work together to find solutions. Like food safety professionals who lead by example and care deeply about the work, we believe in a boots-on-the-ground approach to partnership. We show up, listen and collaborate.

It's this kind of proactive engagement that ensures quality never takes a back seat to cost. When availability gets tight, don't panic — pick up the phone. That's the power of long-term trust.

Relationships don't stop at the edge of the loading dock. We're deeply rooted in the Milwaukee community, and we believe that when our community thrives, we all do.

These community ties reinforce the values that guide us: integrity, accountability and heart. They're not just part of our company culture — they're the foundation of our identity.

THE RELATIONSHIP ADVANTAGE

In the produce industry, freshness, speed, and quality are essential, but they're not enough. The real advantage is relationships. They're what transform a transaction into a partnership. They require care, attention to detail, and pride in performance, just like a food safety audit or a perfect pallet.

We've weathered nearly a century of economic downturns, supply chain chaos, labor shortages and shifting regulations. What's carried us through isn't just great logistics — it's people. When you invest in them — whether they're employees, growers, or customers — they invest in you.

Never lose sight of what matters most: delivering not just produce, but peace of mind. Providing not just service, but support. Building not just business, but bonds that last.

Produce is perishable. Relationships, when nurtured, are not. It's the strength of your relationships. And those, we believe, are what truly keep the business growing.

pb

Jack Marchese, managing partner of V. Marchese and Cut Fresh LLC, Milwaukee, WI, learned the family business at V. Marchese, working alongside his father on a delivery truck. As soon as he was able, Jack began full-time at V. Marchese and learned about the family business from the ground up, serving in multiple capacities, always with an eye on quality and building strong relationships with customers. Jack is a dedicated family man (one must be to run a family business!) and is an avid outdoorsman in his free time.



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V. Marchese's Legacy of Freshness and Forward Thinking

What started as one man's vision in 1932 has grown into a respected and reliable fresh food supplier. V. Marchese Inc., now a cornerstone in the Midwest's food supply chain, has stayed true to its roots, while evolving to meet the needs of a modern, dynamic industry.

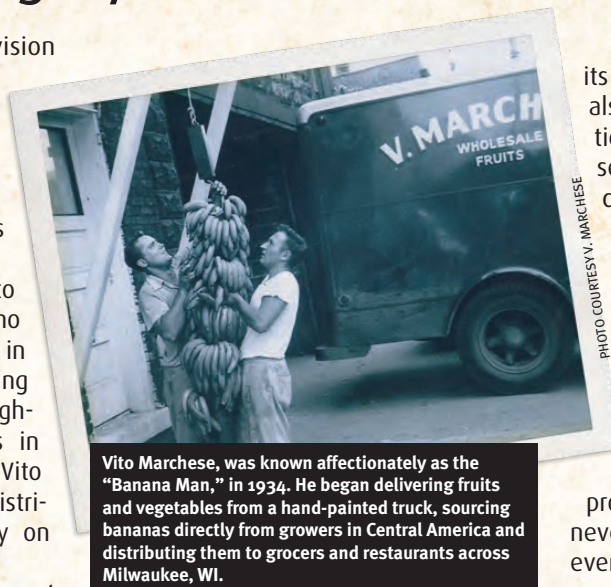
V. Marchese's beginnings trace to Sicilian immigrant Vito Marchese, who moved to the U.S. in the late 1920s in search of opportunity. After working various jobs, he saw a demand for high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables in Milwaukee, WI. In the early 1930s, Vito unofficially started his own small distribution company focused exclusively on produce.

With his drive to succeed and a respect for quality produce, Vito, known affectionately as the "Banana Man," began delivering fruits and vegetables from a hand-painted truck, sourcing bananas directly from growers in Central America and distributing them to grocers and restaurants across Milwaukee.

"He wasn't just selling bananas, he was building relationships through service and integrity," says Jack Marchese, managing partner of V. Marchese and grandson of Vito. "That foundation still guides us today."

By the 1940s, V. Marchese had expanded its offerings to include a wider variety of fruits, like oranges, lemons and limes. Investing in refrigerated trucks, Vito ensured freshness and reliability that set his business apart in the local market.

In the 1970s, Vito's son, Jake Marchese, added a touch of character to the fleet



while detailing the company's delivery trucks — introducing the now-iconic banana mascot "Jack." To this day, the smiling banana remains a beloved symbol of the brand's warmth and personality.

BUILT ON SERVICE, POWERED BY INNOVATION

From a single truck to a sophisticated logistics operation, V. Marchese has scaled its business, while remaining committed to service. Today, the company has over 250 employees and distribution capabilities across Wisconsin and Illinois, with ongoing expansion expected in neighboring Midwestern states.

Its customer base spans convenience stores, educational institutions, foodservice, grocery stores, hospitality providers, restaurants, golf courses and other industries.

While V. Marchese has expanded its product range over the years, it also provides transportation, logistics, ripening, and other value-added services for retail and foodservice customers.

"What's always set us apart is our ability to stay nimble, even as we've grown," says Jack. "We're constantly investing in technology, cold chain logistics, and process improvements, but we never lose that personal touch with our customers."

For over 90 years, V. Marchese has called Milwaukee home. "We're proud of where we come from, and we never forget it," says Jack. "Our name is on every box we ship. That means something — not just to us, but to our customers."

He notes that, as the company grows, partnerships with local growers and a focus on sustainability are becoming even more important. "We're working to reduce our carbon footprint and shorten the supply chain. It's about doing right by our customers and our community."

LOOKING AHEAD: THE NEXT 10 YEARS

As V. Marchese approaches its centennial, the leadership team is sharply focused on the road ahead.

"Our goal for the next 10 years is to double our operational capacity while staying grounded in what got us here — quality and service," says Jack. "We're looking at strategic growth, infrastructure upgrades, and continuing to lead with innovation in food safety and logistics."

pb

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