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JULY 2025
VOL. 41 • NO. 7 • \$9.90

producebusiness

MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT

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YEARS
INITIATING
INDUSTRY
IMPROVEMENT



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UMass Amherst Dining Services
Wins PRODUCE BUSINESS
Most Innovative Dining Outlet Award



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THIS MONTH'S WINNER

VINCENT GAMBARDELLA
Account Manager
Bozzuto's, Inc.
Berlin, CT

Vincent Gambardella began his produce career at Stop & Shop in the late 1990s. At Stop & Shop, he worked his way up to produce manager and produce merchandising field specialist. He then joined the Bozzuto's team in 2022. Today, he is an account manager for Bozzuto's, where he facilitates ordering, manages new item opportunities, and works with customers' needs daily.

"My favorite thing about my career is aligning goals with my customers/accounts, as well as great daily communication that helps lead to success," he says.

Gambardella has seen many changes in the industry in his over 20 years of experience. He says there have been many initiatives to introduce more eco-friendly packaging.

In the past decade, he's witnessed a dramatic growth in interest and demand for organic produce. "I believe the demand is geared mostly by consumers trying to make more health-conscious dietary choices."

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 September 2025 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

More recently, artificial intelligence has been introduced into many aspects of the produce industry, including warehouse functions, as well as crop management, he notes. "Some growers have now introduced drones to assist with crop monitoring. I believe this is a path to the future with these drones now in play. It makes it easier/more efficient for more frequent and detailed monitoring, which could help in identifying potential problems or issues earlier."

Gambardella says he is an avid sports fan of the New York Mets and Florida Gators. "I play basketball and golf as some of my hobbies. I have two daughters who are very active in sports, which keeps me very busy. Daylene (16) does track and field, softball and basketball. Avery (13) does track and basketball, as well."

He says PRODUCE BUSINESS "keeps me in tune and up to date with all things in the produce world, which are always changing. I look forward to all the new editions to see what is new and ever-changing in the industry."

Gambardella also will be attending the New York Produce Show and Conference with his colleagues, Dec. 2-4.

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

pb

WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD

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



QUESTIONS FOR THE JULY ISSUE

- 1) What is the website URL for giving donations to **Brighter Bites** _____?
- 2) **Spice World** has been providing **Quality Garlic** since what year _____?
- 3) Which company says, "**Make Every Day Feel Like Vacation with Year-round Kiwi freshness**" _____?
- 4) What is the **Booth #** for **Earthbound Farms** at this year's **OPS** _____?
- 5) **Berry Brilliance** is the slogan for which company _____?
- 6) Which city on Long Island is **Wegman's** newest store _____?

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

Name _____ Position _____
Company _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Phone _____ Email _____

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: JULY PB QUIZ • P.O. Box 810425 • Boca Raton, FL 33481 or (3) Fax: 561-994-1610

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



JULY 2025 • VOL. 41 • NO. 7 • \$9.90

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Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425
PH: 561.994.1118 FAX: 561.994.1610
PRODUCE BUSINESS is published by
Phoenix Media Network, Inc
Ken Whitacre/CEO
P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425.

Entire contents © Copyright 2025
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Printed in the U.S.A.
Publication Agreement No. 40047928





Where **PASSION** becomes action

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

'I Love Going to Farms'

Mark Cassius
Director of Sales and Marketing
Marengo Foods Company
HQ: San Juan, TX



When I was a kid in high school, I was working in a produce department, and I was like many people who thought fruit came from a box, until I realized it was bigger than that, with all the farming involved in it. You sit there and you just say, "wow, I'm stocking these shelves, and where does this

stuff come from?" So, it really got my passion started for getting involved in produce production and distribution and getting into the farm level, to where I could really understand the business — from seed to the table that I was filling at retail level.

Early on, when I was with Del Monte, Bryce Edmonson played a big role in developing me and helping me with my skill-sets. And then, while I was at Eurofresh Farms, Dwight Ferguson was a great influence — kind of smoothing out some of the rough edges. And

there's a great individual who I learned a lot from in terms of strategy, and that's Julie Krivanek, whom I hold in high esteem, and I still talk to.

I absolutely love going to the farms, and meeting with the teams, the production teams, the operation teams. They're the ones that make it really all happen. They get their hands dirty every day, and I have a lot of respect for what they do. To go to the farms and see the amount of production, it's very humbling when you see what goes into it, how big the industry truly is, and what it takes to bring fruit into the U.S. and Canada to feed people. And the thing I love about that is we're feeding people healthy, nutritious foods.

Huge Opportunities For Fresh Produce

Steven Trede
Consultant/Semi-Retired
Richmond, IN



My father was a chain store and independent grocery store manager in Iowa, so I snagged a lot of store door vendor fill-in projects at a very early age, when the vendor left inventory for me to merchandise. It started out grocery (chips, snacks, soda, etc.), but then when employees called off, and I was in the store anyway, I started stocking ads, which led to dairy, and then as fresh produce grew as a category, I was trained by a "real old-time produce manager," who was a perfectionist. I hated doing the wet rack! He went over my work on each occasion, like my life depended on it.

But, as much as I dreaded it, in the begin-

ning, I became impressed with his professionalism, knowledge and especially his passion. I remember telling my dad, that "if I could get as good at baseball as Frank Grossman was at fresh produce, I would be rich man!" If you look up "produce manager" in the Red Book in Heaven, there is probably a picture of Frank.

I had other aspirations to be in food technology, but one seems to gravitate to what one enjoys and is good at, and, while I ultimately started my post-college career as a route salesman selling deli meats, I never forgot how much fun produce was, with new seasons and new types of fruits and veg in new packages, and always felt I would be back in produce at some point.

It did happen. Somehow, eventually, I landed an interview with the California Strawberry Board, and learned a whole new realm about

growing and marketing fresh produce. That led to other positions with Fresh Del Monte, Nature-Sweet, a couple of failed start-ups, and ultimately back to berries with Driscoll's, where I learned category management, and used my previous grocery skills to build the berry category for select retailers.

I am semi-retired now, doing some part-time gigs (this business is hard to get into, as well as out of). I see huge opportunities for fresh produce, especially in practicing category management, and expanding consumption. Newer varieties of all types of fresh fruits and vegetables are providing new opportunities to help retailers sell more, and help the consumer indulge in great-tasting food that doesn't have a lot of harmful additives. Flavor and condition sell (obviously, availability is key, as well).

I think being brand or commodity advocates is helpful to establish trial, and build community. Driscoll's category management programs stressed that, and I still think it works.



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



We invite you to tell your own story with us, too. Please visit ProduceBusiness.com, or scan the QR code to the left. A select few will be featured in our pages and online.

TRANSITIONS

Idaho Potato Commission

After nearly 17 years with the Idaho Potato Commission and over 50 years in the food industry, **Armand Lobato** has retired.

Lobato began his career in 1974 as a courtesy clerk in Denver, CO. From those early days, he steadily advanced through retail and foodservice before joining the IPC as foodservice promotions director, West.

Along the way, Lobato earned undergraduate and graduate degrees and wrote for agribusiness publications for nearly 20 years.

Lobato looks forward to spending more time with his wife Michelle, their two grown children and three grandsons. He also plans to continue writing and hopes to teach journalism or creative writing in the near future.

"It's been a remarkable ride, one I recommend highly," says Lobato. "It is my hope that someday, someone will open a carton of fresh Idaho potatoes and say, 'You know, I had a good friend that worked there, years ago.'"



Armand Lobato



ANNOUNCEMENTS

Markon Welcomes Customers to the Salinas Valley

As part of its ongoing commitment to transparency, education, and customer connection, Markon, Salinas, CA, hosted a Customer Tour series in Salinas Valley, June 9.

During the Summer of Salinas tour, Markon invited restaurant owner-operators and member representatives to see the care and expertise behind the fresh produce they sell and serve.

The second tour is scheduled for July, and the final in late August. Each tour offers a unique look into the heart of produce production. Guests typically visit active harvests of romaine or iceberg lettuce, strawberries, broccoli or cauliflower, artichokes, and a value-added fresh-cut processing facility. Walking through these fields alongside the farmers, participants gain a deeper appreciation for the craftsmanship, food safety, and sustainability practices behind every carton of Markon produce.

Pazazz Donates 12,000 Pounds of Apples to Second Harvest Heartland

Honeybear Brands, Elgin, MN, and its exclusive brand Pazazz teamed up with professional hockey standout Taylor Heise to "Assist Second Harvest Heartland" during the 2024-25 hockey season. The partnership paid off big time – with the Frost winning their second Pro Women's Hockey title, and Pazazz donating 12,000 pounds of apples to the Second Harvest Heartland food bank.



Honeybear Brands donated 600 pounds of apples each time Heise fed a teammate an assist – otherwise known as an "apple" in hockey – during Frost hockey games this season, running December through May. Heise broke last season's assist record of nine assists – with a total of 20 assists.

Throughout the hockey season, Heise helped promote the campaign to her followers on social media – marking each "apple" and resulting donation. Honeybear amplified the campaign on its Instagram and Facebook platforms in markets where Pazazz is on shelf.

Avocados From Colombia Launches Retail Campaign with Weis Markets

The Colombia Avocado Board (CAB) partnered with Weis Markets, Inc. to launch the Heart of Colombia Avocado Display Contest, a retail campaign designed to drive consumer excitement and increase impulse avocado purchases. Running from March 27 through April 23, the promotion was activated in 200 Weis stores across three regions, combining custom display bins, point-of-sale materials, and team incentives to generate consumer excitement and spark impulse purchasing.

Produce managers were challenged to create eye-catching displays that placed Avocados From Colombia at the center of their department. With up to \$7,200 in gift card prizes on the line, store teams brought their creativity to life, by leveraging cross-merchandising with lemons, mangos, and other complementary produce to highlight avocado versatility and drive sales.

The campaign timing aligned with key spring holidays including Easter, Earth Day and Cinco de Mayo.

The campaign also marked the beginning of the Traviessa season, one of Colombia's two harvest seasons that support year-round availability. The natural rainfall helped produce a high-quality crop, making the promotion a celebration of both a new harvest and a growing market presence.

"Our stores were excited to introduce Colombian avocados into the category in the last year, and to promote its rich flavor and versatility," says Mathew Forbes, avocado buyer at Weis Markets, LLC. "The contest energized our stores and encouraged collaboration across departments. More importantly, it gave our staff the confidence to highlight the story of Avocados From Colombia and helped them better connect with customers."



Village Farms International Announces Transaction to Privatize its Fresh Produce Business

Vanguard Food LP, a privately held produce industry joint venture between Kennedy Lewis Investment Management, Sweat Equities, and Village Farms International, Delta, British Columbia, announced the closing of a transaction that created a new, emerging leader in the North American produce industry.

The previously announced transaction privatized certain assets and operations of Village Farms International's fresh produce segment, leveraging decades of leadership in the cultivation, sales, marketing and distribution of produce with the intention of creating a premier branded CPG foods company, supporting healthy lifestyles and sustainable farming practices.



The parties expect to support Vanguard with additional capital resources to execute a roll-up strategy of other North American produce brands and assets, and plan to expand product categories and offerings for customers through M&A.

Michael A. DeGiglio, chief executive officer of Village Farms and interim chief executive officer of Vanguard Food LP comments, "Today's announcement reflects the beginning of a new era for the legacy produce business of Village Farms, and we're excited to begin building our shared vision for the future. This partnership makes us stronger, provides more resources to drive innovation and value for customers, and will serve as a catalyst for future growth and expansion."

Rafael Teran Melchor Named 2025 Farmworker of the Year

Rafael Teran Melchor of Stemilt Growers has been named the 2025 recipient of the Farmworker of the Year Award, a national recognition program that honors farmworkers for their exceptional leadership, contributions and impact on the fresh produce industry.

Now in its second year, the award was created by the Equitable Food Initiative to shine a spotlight on the people who form the backbone of the agricultural workforce. This initiative ensures that the underrecognized voices and accomplishments of farmworkers are elevated and celebrated.

Rafael, who has worked at Stemilt Growers for nearly 17 years, has been in agriculture for 23 years and is widely respected for his thoughtful mentorship and calm, solutions-oriented approach.

Working in the sanitation department, he goes above and beyond what is asked of him by participating in numerous trainings, such as first aid, CPR, forklift, chemical handling and safety response, as well as attending the Food Safety & Sanitation Workshop.

Finalists included: Franklin Rolando Carrillo Rodas, Windset Farms; Guadalupe Huerta de Jesus, Frutos de Huerta Real for Sunset; Rene Orozco, Lakeside Organic Gardens; and María Bárbara Reséndiz Martínez, Sierra Farms for GoodFarms.



Rafael Teran Melchor (left) and West Mathison, president of Stemilt Growers.

Del Fresco Pure Secures Title of the Overall Coolest Cuke

Del Fresco Pure took home impressive hardware from the 18th annual R.E.A.C.H. International Greenhouse Competitions that took place May 23 in Kingsville, Ontario, which included: first place (cucumber category), Del Fresco Pure Organic English Seedless Cucumber; first place (yellow bell pepper category), Del Fresco Pure Yellow Sweet Rainbow Pepper; three-time winner, first place (tomato on the Vine category), Del Fresco Pure Tomato on the Vine; and second place (beefsteak category), Del Fresco Pure Beefsteak Tomato.

Along with the wins, there were top honors in the Overall Coolest Cuke category, where it secured the title with their Organic English Seedless Cucumber.



Call for Innovative Product Entries

***Entry is Free of Charge.
Just send us your product by
September 15th and give us the
reason why you think it is innovative.***



2025 INNOVATION AWARDS

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

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

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

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

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

Contact for more information: KWhitacre@ProduceBusiness.com Phone: 561-994-1118, ext 101



The winning team was Four Seasons' Foursome: Wayne Hendrickson, Wes Jones, Pat Campellone and Mark Pentek.

Eastern Produce Council Hosts 50th Annual Golf Outing

The Eastern Produce Council (EPC) hosted its 50th annual Golf Outing, June 10, at Fox Hollow Golf Club in Branchburg, NJ.

EPC Board Member Rich Martin served as the master of ceremonies following the round of golf. He recognized sponsors of the event, including Gold Sponsors (Dayka + Hackett, Dole Fresh Vegetables, Genpro, Giorgio Fresh, Katzman Distribution, Taylor Farms/Earthbound Farm, and Trucco, Inc.), Silver Sponsor (Produce Experience), Bronze Sponsors (A&J Produce and Affinity Sales), Putting Contest Sponsor (Decas Farms), and a host of many others highlighted around the golf course.

The winning team was Four Seasons' Foursome: Wayne Hendrickson, Wes Jones, Pat Campellone and Mark Pentek. The second-place team consisted of Josh Minton, Alec Arena, and Mark Sanginetti of Donio, and Peter Machala of Wakefern.

Closest to the pin winners were Nick Leonard, Bob Saters, Brandon Bentley and Pat Campellone. The ladies longest drive winner was Sarah Matejowsky. Mens longest drive winner was Tyler Hiriak, and Tony Abbatemarco won the putting contest.

Next up on the calendar for the EPC is a tailgate event at MetLife Stadium Sept. 16.



Market 32 and Price Chopper Launch Summer Shines Here

At Market 32 and Price Chopper, based in Schenectady, NY, the summer shopping experience is getting a splash of sunshine. Running through Labor Day, Summer Shines Here is a new initiative from Market 32 and Price Chopper to transform the customer experience with a light, uplifting look and feel across all stores and an expanded lineup of seasonal offerings that highlight the best of the season.

From fresh local produce to grilling favorites and sweet treats, customers can make the most of summer while stretching their budget with added savings thanks to the new Summer Doubler program.



New BrightFarms Greenhouse in Georgia

BrightFarms celebrated the opening of its newest greenhouse in Macon, GA. BrightFarms and its parent company Cox Farms, a Cox Enterprises company, invited Macon leaders and other distinguished guests from across the state to explore the future of greenhouse technology.

The grand opening event featured interactive tours of the new Cox Farms Discovery Center, an expert-led panel discussion on the future of food and an inside look at how BrightFarms is redefining freshness, innovation and accessibility.

The Macon facility, powered by advanced, state-of-the-art greenhouse technology, and now fully operational with eight acres under glass, began shipping produce to retailers in late 2024. It represents a significant investment in Georgia's agricultural industry and workforce.

At present, the Macon site is designed to produce approximately 22,000 pounds of lettuce per day, helping reduce food miles and improve food security in the region. It currently houses eight acres of growing space, with an additional 24 acres to be developed on the property as demand builds. This will add to the more than 700 acres of indoor farming in operation by Cox Farms, the largest greenhouse operator in the U.S. and Canada.



FMI Announces 2025 Store Manager Awardees

FMI — The Food Industry Association, Arlington, VA, unveils recipients of the 2025 Store Manager Awards.

After receiving more than 170 nominations, the field was narrowed to 11 finalists whose stories have been showcased on FMI's website.

The 2025 Store Manager Awards recipients:

Category A: Russell Blais, Roche Bros. Market-place

Category B: Jason Johnson, K-VA-T Food Stores, Inc., Food City

Category C: Ramatoulaye Diallo, Jewel-Osco

Category D: Tahjae Welch, The MarketPlace Limited

Heath Redman of Harris Teeter LLC, is the "People's Pick" recipient of 2025, garnering more than 1,300 social media votes.

NEW PRODUCTS

GoVerden Launches New Premium Homestyle Guacamole

GoVerden, Laredo, TX, the maker of all-natural, ready-made guacamole, has announced the launch of its new Homestyle Guacamole. This

latest product, crafted by third-generation avocado farmers, is now available exclusively at Sam's Club.

Large chunks of ripe avocados are combined with sizable pieces of fresh tomatoes, onions, cilantro, jalapeno pepper and lime juice, creating a guacamole that satisfies both the convenience of ready-made guacamole and the taste of homemade. Five six-ounce trays of guacamole will be sold together as a pack.

GoVerden's Premium Homestyle Guacamole is now available at Sam's Club locations across the West, Midwest and Southern territories. Starting in July, GoVerden will also release a 12-ounce Homestyle Guacamole option nationwide.



Cucumber Coating Could Spell End to Single-Use Plastic Wraps on Supermarket Shelves

Akorn Tech-

nology, Berkeley,

CA, has launched

a breakthrough in

sustainable shelf-

life extension for

cucumbers — an

edible coating that

is set to revolutionize

the way cucumbers

are packed, distributed,

sold and consumed

by replacing

single-use plastic wraps.

Akorn Natural Advantage

for English cucumbers

and bell peppers, which

forms a natural, invisible

barrier that mimics the

protective function of

plastic, eliminates the

need for single-use plastic

on long English cucumbers,

while maintaining fresh-

ness and quality. Akorn's

plant-derived coating

has all the advantages of

plastic wraps, but with

none of the negative consequences

and costs associated with

single-use plastic pollution.

Hailed by retailers who

have found it meets or

exceeds the efficacy of

plastic, the coating's

commercial potential

is such that it has been

selected for a grant from

the 2025 Fresh Field

Catalyst Accelerator cohort,

a program led by the

Foundation for Fresh Produce

(FFP) and the International

Fresh Produce Association

(IFPA).



Lacerta Launches New Seal N' Flip Packaging Design

Continuing its commit-

ment to environmental

sustainability in pack-

aging, Lacerta Group, LLC,

Mansfield, MA, announced

the rollout of its newest innovation,

Seal N' Flip packaging.

Coming at a time when

food retailers and brands

are focused on their bottom

line, the Seal N' Flip

design is estimated to

reduce packaging costs

by up to 25%. Unlike

anything else available,

the new design flips

the script on traditional

packaging, placing the

lidding film on the

bottom. This results

in a product-forward

display that is eye-catching,

elevates shelf appeal

to consumers, and is

estimated to reduce

the use of plastic by

up to 50%.

It is ideal for showcasing

cut sandwiches, wraps,

hoagies, snacks, and

other ready-made offerings.



Peeling Open US Fruit Consumption Trends

By Sabrina Young, Hayden Stewart,
Anne T. Byrne, Linda Kantor and
Diansheng Dong

For a healthful and nutritionally adequate diet, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) 2020-2025 advises individuals to consume about one cup-equivalent of fruit for every 1,000 calories, with some variations for children and adolescents based on sex and physical activity.

For example, the guidelines recommend that adolescents 14-18 years old with an 1,800-calorie-a-day diet consume 1.5 cup equivalents of fruit a day and that members of the same age group with a 3,200-calorie diet consume 2.5 cup equivalents a day.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services release a new version of the Dietary Guidelines every five years. Since 2005, recommendations for fruit have remained consistent.

About 80% of the U.S. population consumes less than the recommended amount of fruit. The DGA 2020-25 defines fruit to include fresh, canned, frozen, and dried products as well as 100% juice. Eating or drinking a cup equivalent of each fruit type counts equally toward recommendations, although juice should not account for more than half of total fruit intake.

Given the importance of this food group to diet quality and the extent of underconsumption, the USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) recently examined U.S. fruit consumption patterns and trends.

U.S. consumers have been eating and drinking less fruit, on average, since the turn of the 21st century. Estimates from the ERS Loss Adjusted Food Availability Data show per capita U.S. total fruit availability declined from 0.95 cup equivalents per person per day in 2003 to 0.82 cup equivalents per person per day in 2021, a 14% drop.

Loss-Adjusted Food Availability data can be used as a proxy for national consumption, with estimates going back to 1970 and available for total fruit, as well as for fresh fruit, canned fruit, dried fruit, frozen fruit and fruit juice. The ERS data measures the availability over time of more than 200

food commodities.

ERS researchers then adjust the supply estimates down to account for food spoilage, plate waste and other losses. Estimates of U.S. per capita consumption are calculated by dividing the amount of a commodity that is available for human consumption after adjustment by total population size.

Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), collected at the individual level, similarly show total fruit intake in the United States declined 7% from 1 cup equivalent per person per day in 2003-04 to 0.93 cup equivalents per person per day in 2017-18.

In-school meals drove the increase in fruit consumption among children.

Participants in this survey are asked to report all foods and beverages they consumed over two nonconsecutive days, as well as their income, demographic details and health status. Nutritionists use these data to study diet quality. About 5,000 individuals complete the NHANES each year of collection, and about 9,000 to 10,000 take part in every two-year survey wave.

A person's nutritional needs and food consumption habits tend to change with age. Researchers at ERS and the University of Georgia used NHANES data to compare fruit consumption trends among children and teens aged 2 through 19 years, working-age adults aged 20 through 64, and seniors aged 65 or more. The researchers focused on the proportion of an individual's overall diet, measured by calories, that is made up of fruit.

Children were found to fare best. The fruit density of children's diets increased from an average of 0.55 cup equivalents per 1,000 calories in 2003-04 to 0.74 cup equivalents per 1,000 calories in 2017-18.

In-school meals drove the increase in fruit consumption among children. The fruit density of children's diets when eating at school increased from 1 cup equivalent per 1,000 calories in 2003-04 to 1.36 cup equiv-

alents per 1,000 calories in 2017-18. USDA's National School Lunch Program requires that children in kindergarten through eighth grade be offered 0.5 cup equivalent of fruit per day. The requirement for high schoolers is 1 cup equivalent per day. For all ages, the School Breakfast Program requires offering 1 cup equivalent per day.

Seniors and working-age adults do not fare as well as children in terms of meeting dietary guidelines for fruit. In 2017-18, seniors consumed 0.59 cup equivalents of fruit per 1,000 calories, which is 0.16 cup equivalents less fruit per 1,000 calories than they consumed in 2003-04.

In addition to average fruit intakes, ERS researchers also studied the distribution of fruit intake. Researchers used NHANES food consumption data to assess the percentage of U.S. children and adults at very low fruit consumption (less than 25% of federal recommendations) and high fruit consumption (fully meeting federal recommendations).

Both children and adults, including seniors, consistently have fallen short of Federal guidelines. Only 23.2% of children and 14.7% of adults met the DGA's fruit recommendations for their age and sex group in the period covering 2017 to March 2020. In that same period, 28.8% of children and 40.3% of adults consumed less than a quarter of fruit recommendations, representing an increase in little to no fruit intake from 2005 to 2008 for those age groups.

ERS researchers also sought to understand how individual and societal factors relate to being in the low- or high-consuming groups. They found the largest factors in predicting high consumption are health behaviors, including engaging in physical activity and not smoking, as well as health knowledge captured by awareness of USDA's MyPlate.

On the other hand, those who have these healthy behaviors and knowledge were less likely to be low fruit consumers. Researchers also found income and fruit prices did not have a strong association with low or high consumption.

pb

Sabrina Young, Hayden Stewart, Anne T. Byrne, Linda Kantor and Diansheng Dong are all economists for the USDA.



Harvest Forum & Fair

THE FPFC HARVEST FORUM & FAIR: A NEW ERA FOR BUYER-SUPPLIER ENGAGEMENT

Retail buyers in the produce and floral industries now have a must-attend event on their calendar: the newly reimagined **FPFC Harvest Forum & Fair**, taking place August 7–9, 2025, at the Hyatt Regency Long Beach and Convention Center. Formerly known as the FPFC Expo, this event has been redesigned to deliver unparalleled value through a powerful blend of education, networking, and direct business engagement.

Buyers can attend entirely free of charge—with complimentary access to all sessions, meals, and networking events, plus reimbursement for travel and lodging for qualified participants. This makes the Forum & Fair one of the most inclusive and rewarding events in the industry.

The event unfolds in two parts: **The Forum** spans the first two days with in-depth educational sessions covering timely topics like FSMA 204, labor solutions, merchandising strategies, and sustainability. A keynote address from a top industry leader sets an inspiring tone. Complementing the learning are **tailored one-on-one business meetings**, where buyers are strategically paired with suppliers that meet their specific sourcing goals—maximizing the relevance and impact of every conversation.

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The FPFC is led by a volunteer Board of Directors and Executive Committee representing all sectors of produce and floral, supported by a dedicated staff in Southern California. True to its mission—to connect members to the information, education, and networks they need to grow—the FPFC Harvest Forum & Fair delivers a must-attend experience that advances both individual business goals and the collective success of the industry.

We're excited to share our growing list of confirmed buyers who will be attending this year's Harvest Forum & Fair!





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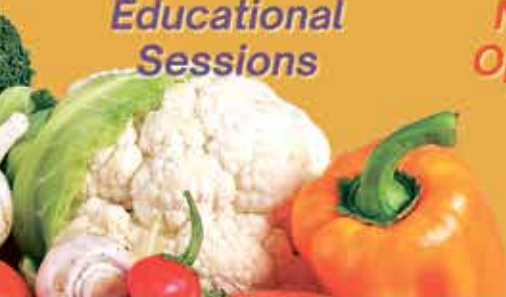
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Lake Grove: First Wegmans on Long Island

RETAILER EXPANDING
PRESENCE IN THE NEW YORK
AREA AND EASTERN U.S.

BY MIKE DUFF

With its store opening earlier this year in Lake Grove, NY, on the eastern end of Long Island's Suffolk County, Wegmans Food Markets has established a presence across the most densely populated part of the New York City region.

In the thick of it, a rough line of Wegmans stores proceeds from Woodbridge, NJ, just beyond the New York borough of Staten Island, to lower Manhattan, Brooklyn and now Lake Grove. Then, not far beyond, Wegmans locations in Harrison, NY, and Parsippany and Bridgewater, NJ, fan out in a curve around New York City in the deeper northern and western suburbs.

The Wegmans in Lake Grove is in a major retail center, including an indoor mall, outdoor malls and single-unit operations including Costco, so the draw to the vicinity is deeper than Wegmans would normally enjoy by itself.

CONTINUED EXPANSION

Although it hasn't announced immediate



The tomato display at the Lake Grove, NY, Wegmans was large and included red and yellow varieties in a presentation that fell back from cherry to vine-ripened and bulk, all finally backed by cucumbers.

plans for additional New York supermarkets, Wegmans has revealed plans for a Norwalk, CT, store, about 30 miles from the northern New York City border. Norwalk will be the company's first store in Connecticut. In January, Wegmans and Sippel Enterprises LP announced plans for a new Wegmans store in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania

— the company's first entry into the Pittsburgh region. The regional supermarket chain now has 112 stores located along the East Coast.

In geographical terms, Lake Grove is the first Wegmans store on Long Island.

The 100,000-square-foot Lake Grove supermarket is a slightly scaled-down version of the 120,000-square-foot stores the company has lately opened, including the one in Harrison, which debuted in 2020 and came in at 121,000 square feet.

Wegmans is renowned for its larger supermarkets, with extensive prepared food sections and perishables departments, which, of course, have a heavy emphasis on produce. The Lake Grove store includes the major product categories and services Wegmans offers, just at a slightly smaller size. Indeed, all three stores Wegmans has slated for 2025 openings are on the smaller side of the portfolio, with Norwalk at 92,000 square feet and Rockville, MD, at 80,000 square feet.

HOT ZONE

During a March store visit, the produce section opened with crate-style displays of citrus, and boasted a display topped with "Hot Zone Prices" signage. Hot Zone displays featured easy-to-grab bagged items, including yellow onions, Haas avocados, red



Signage is a big part of Wegmans' merchandising. The cold case at the Lake Grove, NY, Wegmans included top signage stating, "Grown Near Our Stores Working With 125+ East Coast Farms."

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and yellow peppers, mini cucumbers and russet potatoes.

Displays in the Hot Zone vicinity combined tomatoes, peppers, clamshell salads, artichokes, asparagus and peppers, combining value and quick-stop convenience across the range of popular commodities.

Although it has a full range of groceries typical of Wegmans, the store made convenience and value-added products conspicuous.

Take the fresh-cut presentation, for example. Fresh-cut fruit with signage surrounded a processing area, demonstrating the store is committed to ensuring quality. The layout made it easy to pick up a tub of product and promoted impulse purchasing.

Although the domestic berry season was weeks off, Wegmans offered a floor display of berries on promotion adjacent to a refrigerated case with neat rows of packaged product.

The tomato display was grand in scale and included red and yellow varieties in a presentation that fell back from cherry to vine-ripened and bulk, all finally backed by cucumbers. Close by, a floor display of tropical and exotic fruit included pineapples, kiwi, mangos, coconuts and tubs of tamarind.

The selection of potatoes and onions, with some carrots thrown in, was relatively comprehensive and included deeply merchandised presentations that housed multiple varieties of each commodity.

In an interesting piece of cross-merchandising, rising from the bulk potatoes was a small table display of Wegmans' Gruyère cheese. Although not the first combination consumers might expect, the Gruyère display was a link to the adjacent cheese section.



The new 101,000-square-foot Wegmans in Lake Grove, NY, which opened in February, is the first of the chain's stores on Long Island.

SIGNAGE, MERCHANDISING

Signage and related merchandising are a big part of the store's product presentation. Signage over the cold case, for example, includes proprietary banners declaring "Near Our Store Reducing Food Mile Emissions" and "From Family Farms Near Our Store."

Some of the identifying messages were more specific. For example, Wegmans topped a special merchandising section of clamshell greens and salads in the cold case with a green frame that delivered a central message emerging under an arc and reading "New! Greenhouse Grown." Just beyond that in the cold case was a selection of clamshell prod-

ucts signed "Organic Salad Leaf," followed by "Salad Blends."

The cold case on the opposite side of the section included more top signage stating, "Grown Near Our Stores Working With 125+ East Coast Farms," and below that was an extensive display identified as "Fresh Cut Vegetables" and "Cooking Vegetables."

In an independent cold case display, signage called out "Carrots & Celery" and "Salad Kits." The low-profile floor displays and demonstrative signage combined to make the Wegman's Lake Grove produce section easy to view and navigate.

As is commonly the case at Wegmans, the Lake Grove store is well-kept and organized and provides shoppers with a lineup rich in quality and at a fair value.

Although not exactly bordering New York City, the store not only boosts Wegmans' place in the Big Apple region, but it also taps another major market opportunity, demonstrating Wegmans wants to be a significant presence in the New York area.



Displays marked with "Hot Zone Prices" signage feature easy-to-grab bagged items, including yellow onions, Haas avocados, red and yellow peppers, mini cucumbers and russet potatoes.

FACT FILE

WEGMANS LAKE GROVE

3270 Middle Country Road
Lake Grove, NY 11755
631-285-1300

wegmans.com/stores/lake-grove-ny



The UMass Dining team (L to R): Mike Donatini, Pamela Adams, Garrett Distefano, Caleb Pham, Clarissa Gonzales Reyes, Paul Provost, Jeffrey MacDonald, Emily Thorpe, Bob Bankert, Alex Ong, Christopher Howland and Ken Toong.

GOLD STANDARD FOR CAMPUS DINING



Serving 50,000 Meals Each Day, UMass Amherst Dining Wins PRODUCE BUSINESS Most Innovative Dining Outlet Award.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Walk into any of the four dining commons on the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst campus, and you'll find fresh produce on the menu.

There are bountifully stocked salad bars and made-to-order stir-fry stations where students can choose from a buffet of veggies to customize their meals. Vegetables, such as leafy greens, culinary herbs, tomatoes, bok choy, leeks, and, more recently, strawberries, grown in the UMass Amherst Hydrofarm adjacent to the Franklin Commons, are regularly incorporated into meals.

Produce is also at the heart of global cuisine selections, such as those from the

tandoori Indian kitchen at the Worcester Dining Commons, as well as noodle bowls, hand-rolled sushi, pasta bars, authentic street food, Mediterranean fare, vegetarian options, and more, all featured on each of the commons' menus.

That's not all. The produce-rich, plant-forward approach, inspired by Ken Toong, associate vice chancellor of auxiliary enterprises, and his team, extends to the 12 eateries at the campus center, over 20 cafes, the University Club, retail concessions, two food trucks, and the university's catering department, which collectively serve approximately 50,000 meals a day.

"Our vision is always healthy, sustainable

and delicious," says Toong, summarizing UMass Amherst Dining Services' (UMassDS) mission to enhance the campus experience by providing healthy and flavorful locally and globally inspired meals, incorporating produce from local farms and value-added suppliers, while also prioritizing sustainability and environmental consciousness.

It's no wonder that UMassDS has earned the coveted No. 1 spot on *The Princeton Review's* list of Best Campus Food for an unsurpassed eighth consecutive year. Consider that in fiscal year 2024/2025, annual per-student produce consumption reached 215 pounds, compared to the average U.S. consumption of 150 pounds per person annually, and it's easy to

see why UMassDS has also been named the Most Innovative Dining Outlet for 2025 by *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine.

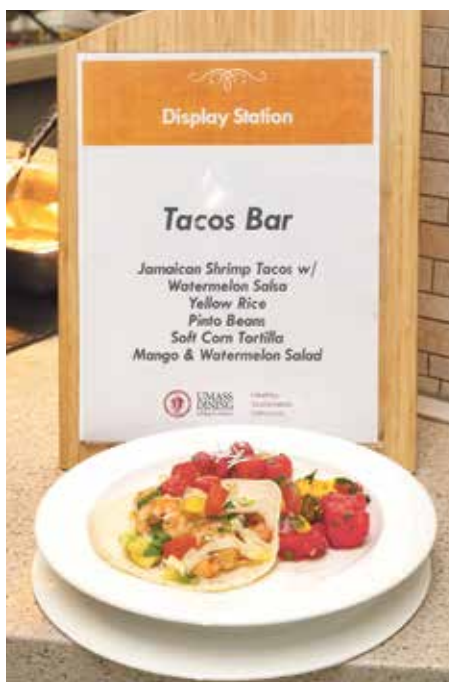
“Data over the last decade shows the consumption trend is to eat more produce and plant foods and less meat, especially among Gen Z,” says Toong. “Today, some 80% of ingredients on our menus are plant-based, and we’ve reduced portion sizes of protein like red meat, poultry or seafood to 2 to 3 ounces. Nobody has complained.”

Student menu input and close collaboration with the local and global produce industry are a few of the ways the university’s exceptional foodservice operation has become a key recruiting tool for the university. Three-fourths of students who choose UMass say food is a very important factor, up from 72% two years ago, according to Toong, who started at UMass in 1998.

STUDENT INPUT DRIVES MENUS

Over one-third (36%) of UMass Amherst’s 31,000-plus undergraduate students identify as African American, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American (ALANA) ethnicity, and nearly one-quarter (21%) are first-generation students. Similarly, a quarter (24%) of the over 1,900 faculty represent ALANA demographics.

“Our plant-forward approach has become even more culturally driven over the last two to three years,” says Toong. “About half of our international students are from India, and the other half are from Vietnam and China. We also have students from Thailand, Japan and Korea. On any given day, we are serving 15 world cuisines in our dining facilities, whether it be on the three-week cycle menu or as specials.”



Watermelon plays a major role in the University of Massachusetts Amherst Dining Services’ offerings. Dining services partnered with the National Watermelon Promotion Board, Winter Springs, FL, to create Jamaican Shrimp Tacos with Watermelon Salsa to showcase how they’ve woven watermelon into a savory and globally inspired dish.

The UMassDS team makes a point to work with all student groups representing various countries.

“For example, our Indonesian Student Association asked for certain classic Indonesian dishes for their events,” says Christopher Howland, chief procurement officer and senior director of procurement and strategy. “If we are familiar with their cuisines, we take the lead and prepare dishes, such as Gado-Gado, which is an Indonesian vegetable salad with peanut sauce. However, if we are not familiar

with their cuisines, we work with the students to build a recipe and have them teach us how to prepare the recipe, so the flavors stay true to their culture.”

It’s a formula that satisfies the taste preferences of over half of the students who hail from the state of Massachusetts.

“The way kids are raised these days, they’re eating global cuisines in their homes from a young age. You’d be amazed at how many U.S. students are getting a stir-fry or street food at the world cuisine stations, while students from China, for example, are lining up for pizza and pasta,” says Robert “Bob” Bankert, executive chef of residential dining and chef de cuisine.

BUYING, SERVING LOCAL & BEYOND

Summer is the peak harvest for fruits and vegetables in New England, a time when students aren’t on campus. This hasn’t stopped the UMassDS team from sourcing as much local produce as possible during the fall to spring months, growing from a limited quantity of root veggies 26 years ago to nearly 30% of its produce purchases from local farmers.

The university defines “local” as within a 250-mile radius of campus, giving priority to produce grown in Massachusetts.

“I like to split our year into three sections for utilizing local produce,” says Howland. “In the fall, menus are full of summer vegetables, as they are still in peak season locally. This includes tomatoes, zucchini, lettuce, eggplant and peppers, among others. By late October, after the first frost, we switch some of our menu items to utilize hearty greens and vegetables, like kale, collard greens, Brussels sprouts, carrots and daikon radishes, and start to incorporate local squashes and sweet potatoes.”

Once in full winter mode, they add more

■ THREE TIPS FOR PRODUCE COMPANIES TO SELL TO UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE DINING

Many produce companies are retail-focused on marketing their fruits and vegetables. University and college dining is a distinct entity. Helping its local and global produce companies bridge this gap and dialing in what this foodservice sector needs is something UMass Amherst Dining Services’ (UMassDS) has helped to educate its vendors.

Alexander Ong, UMassDS’ director of culinary excellence, offers three top tips:

1. LOCAL HAS GREATER IMPACT THAN ORGANIC

The team excels at creating meaningful connections between local farmers and the students. While organic remains relevant, it lacks the immediacy and relatability that local sourcing offers. A certi-

fied organic item may travel thousands of miles, while locally grown products foster a tangible, regional connection.

2. LEVERAGE THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Every supplier — large or small — has a story worth telling. Unfortunately, while national growers often receive media attention in trade publications, those stories rarely reach the end users in college and university dining programs. Students are increasingly curious about the origin of their food and value transparency.

“We’ve found that sharing farm stories, especially those rooted in family entrepreneurship, drives stronger engagement,” Ong says. “There’s a clear oppor-

tunity for producers to enhance their outreach to the higher education market by communicating their values, history, and impact more effectively.”

3. NATIONAL BRANDS MUST PRIORITIZE PRODUCE STORYTELLING

Despite the prominence of national brands in consumer goods, branded produce often lacks similar visibility in campus dining environments.

“At UMass, we’re proactively working with national brands and commodity boards to bring their stories forward — connecting students to the people and processes behind the food. These organizations have the tools and resources to craft compelling narratives; it’s a missed opportunity not to utilize them.”

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Friends,

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

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



Here's how:

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

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



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

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

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

Ken Whitacre
Publisher/Editorial Director
Kwhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

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



During a November 2023 event, over 5,000 University of Massachusetts students engaged with California walnuts through Harvest Market tabling events and a dinner featuring a cooking demonstration at Worcester Dining Commons. Dishes on the menu included an Oyster Mushroom Milanese Sandwich with Tomato-Walnut Pesto, Walnut and Lentil Plant-Based "Meatballs" with Roasted Spicy Eggplant Purée and Coconut Yogurt, and Roasted Butternut Squash and Walnut Soup.

winter squashes, potatoes and root vegetables, and they scale back on fall greens. "Once spring starts, we will continue to use as many storage crops as possible, but will start to incorporate more green vegetables back into our menus."

On the fruit front, UMassDS hosts its Apple Week each fall. There are apple-inspired menu choices, and a dozen-plus varieties of Eastern apples are available daily in all the dining commons for tasting. Each is signed with highlights of the grower. Local apples are also served daily for most of the year, usually lasting until April.

UMassDS has its own warehouse and cold storage facilities on campus. Produce is delivered here, with local farmers assigned their own unloading dock, as well as directly to the dining commons.

With the goal of purchasing 30% of locally sourced produce from area farms, the university has partnered with Joe Czajkowski, a third-generation vegetable farmer in Hadley, MA, for over two decades. What Czajkowski doesn't grow on his 420 acres, 100 of these farmed organically, he sources from other area farms in the Pioneer Valley.

"We sit down with the UMass chefs, go over the menu, and choose the varieties they would like," says Czajkowski, who owns Joe Czajkowski Farm and Lakeside Organic. "Then, from August to October, I email them a list of up to 30 fruits and vegetables in season. In the spring, Hadley asparagus

harvests just before commencement, and they'll buy up to 1,000-plus pounds or more. We also add value to products for them by processing peeled and chopped butternut squash and carrot and zucchini sticks."

UMassDS's purchase of hydroponic greens has soared due to freshness and quality, according to the dining services team. Little Leaf Farms, headquartered in Devens, MA, with a total of 40 acres of baby greens grown in Devens, MA, and McAdoo, PA, is a major supplier. The university began buying from Little Leaf during the pandemic and established a solid supply chain.

UMassDS is large enough to negotiate its own supply chain deals independently, allowing it the freedom to adjust menus within a day to take advantage of seasonal availability. However, they do partner with FreshPoint, one of North America's largest produce distributors, which has a distribution facility 70 miles to the east in Hartford, CT, for items not available locally, such as oranges and pineapples.

ASSISTANCE FROM COMMODITY BOARDS & COMPANIES

Produce commodity boards and companies that UMassDS has partnered with on special events include the National Watermelon Board, the National Mango Board, The Wonderful Company, the National Peanut Board and the California Walnut Board and Commission.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Eighty-two percent of students told us they will continue their dining habits after graduation. That is a powerful inspiration for us to be able to help students create healthy, sustainable, delicious eating behaviors that can impact them for the rest of their lives.

Ken Toong, associate vice chancellor of auxiliary enterprises, University of Massachusetts Amherst

"We like to work with commodity boards because they can do the marketing and promotion, and they are experts in the produce they represent," says Toong. "For example, students love slices of watermelon, but most hadn't tried pickled watermelon rind. We started using mango as fresh slices and then incorporated it into our sushi program."

"The boards are so easy to work with," Toong adds. "I wish all our peers could realize that they're here to help promote the product and also to help us innovate and make fresh produce more fun for our customers."

Watermelon plays a creative role in UMassDS's offerings, according to Megan McKenna, senior director of marketing and foodservice for the National Watermelon Promotion Board, in Winter Springs, FL. "Recipes like Jamaican Shrimp Taco with Watermelon Salsa, Mango & Watermelon Salad, and Slushy Coconut Watermelon, made with frozen watermelon, coconut milk and honey, showcase how they've woven watermelon into savory and globally inspired dishes."

Jason Hernandez, consulting chef for the National Mango Board in Orlando, FL, says the UMassDS culinary team has not only embraced fresh mango across its menu matrix, but also understands how to bring it to students in meaningful and memorable ways.

"One standout concept was a Thai Mango Noodle Salad featuring shredded mango pickles, mango-peanut dressing, and crunchy toppings — crafted to highlight both technique and global flavor integration. These types of applications are amplified through targeted activations, such as pop-ups and take-

over events. Our joint marketing efforts bring these concepts to life across social platforms, reinforcing brand affinity and increasing student awareness,” he says.

Staff from Wonderful Citrus, in Delano, CA, and part of the Los Angeles, CA-headquartered The Wonderful Company, connected with Toong at an industry event, where he mentioned how much he enjoyed Wonderful Halos mandarins and expressed interest in bringing them to campus. The company developed a relationship with UMass’ produce distributor, FreshPoint Connecticut, to make it happen. Since then, Wonderful has successfully supplied hundreds of boxes of Halos to both the dining halls and on-campus markets.

“Each April, we partner with UMass Dining to host ‘Wonderful Day’ cook-off, an annual campus-wide culinary competition that takes place in the dining halls,” says Nancy Johnson, senior director of foodservice business development and sales. “For this event, each dining hall team is challenged to create a menu featuring Wonderful Pistachios and Wonderful Halos, highlighting their creativity and culinary skills. The meals are judged by both a panel and the student

■ UMASS DINING SERVICES’ 12 TOP FRUITS & VEGETABLES USED BY VOLUME TO PRODUCE 50,000 MEALS DAILY

Produce	Pounds
1. Bananas, Fair Trade	110,600
2. Cucumbers	108,950
3. Apples, Farm Local	103,620
4. Broccoli Florets, 6/3 pound	99,414
5. Banana, Organic	88,440
6. Seedless Watermelon, Case	84,205
7. Red Potato, Diced	76,940
8. Avocados, Ripe	75,330
9. Red Peppers	63,130
10. Onions, Yellow Jumbo	59,400
11. Zucchini Squash, Medium	58,200
12. Potatoes, Chef Local	54,250

CREDIT: UMASS DINING SERVICES



UMass Amherst Dining Services’ guest chefs bring in traditional or a California-influenced style of cooking to students in the dining commons. Pictured Chef Hoss Zare (a San Francisco-based chef known for his Iranian cuisine) made an onion petal stuffed with rice pilaf.

body, creating an engaging and interactive experience.”

Johnson says this year, more than 1,100 students participated by tasting and voting for their favorite dishes, making it one of the most well-attended supplier collaborations of the academic year.

A special “Peanut Day” menu in April in the Berkshire Dining Commons featured dishes, such as Paneer Curry with Peanuts & Aloo Mutter with Roasted Peanut Butter, Shrimp Tostadas with Peanut Mole, Lemon-grass Pork Chops with Peanut Sauce, Crispy Tofu with Sambal Peanut Dressing and Peanut Acai Cups.

“While UMass has long had robust training and sourcing protocols in place, we brought added value through student-focused engagement and marketing support,” says Lauren Highfill Williams, communications director for the National Peanut Board (NPB), in Atlanta, GA.

For example, the NPB co-hosted a high-impact peanut promotion event that featured interactive student activities.

Williams says UMass executive sous chef, Caleb Pham, co-led a culinary demo with a Mississippi peanut farmer and NPB board member, giving students a firsthand look at the peanut’s versatility and origin.

California Walnut Board and Commission staff connected with UMass director of culinary excellence, Chef Alexander Ong, at the International Fresh Produce Association’s (IFPA) Consumer Connection Conference. In the fall of 2023, the board launched a one-year campaign to promote California walnuts to the nearly 25,000 students enrolled in university meal plans.

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TOP PRODUCE Star On The Border Register



The National Peanut Board co-hosted a high-impact peanut promotion event at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Dining Services that featured interactive student activities, sampling and snacking support from partner brands, on-campus marketing support, and assisted in a chef demo.

During a November 2023 event, over 5,000 students engaged with California walnuts through Harvest Market tabling events and a dinner featuring a cooking demonstration at Worcester Dining Commons. Dishes on the menu included an

Oyster Mushroom Milanese Sandwich with Tomato-Walnut Pesto, Walnut and Lentil Plant-Based “Meatballs” with Roasted Spicy Eggplant Purée and Coconut Yogurt, and Roasted Butternut Squash and Walnut Soup.

In a survey of 288 students conducted after

the event, more than 58% expressed interest in adding the walnut dishes to the regular menu; over 86% said the recipes made them consider using walnuts in ways they hadn’t before; and 93% stated that the dishes would increase their likelihood of ordering menu items with walnuts.

“As a result of student demand, UMass added packaged walnut products to campus retail stores for anytime access and incorporated walnut-focused recipes into dining hall menus,” says Jennifer Olmstead, senior director of U.S. marketing and communications for the California Walnut Board and Commission, Folsom, CA.

GOING ABOVE & BEYOND

Sustainability, a guest chef program, and an annual culinary conference are just a few additional points that earn UMassDS the Most Innovative Dining Outlet for 2025 award.

In the fall of 2022, UMassDS was the first university dining program to launch a Carbon Rating System on its four dining commons menus in partnership with My Emissions.

This stemmed from a survey of over 800 students the previous year, with three-quarters wanting to reduce their food-related carbon footprint. The rating is determined by a food’s farming methods, processing and production, transportation distances and packaging impact. The result is creatively using more low-carbon plant-based foods, such as tofu, nuts, vegetables and legumes, and less of high-carbon ingredients, including beef, lamb, cheese and chocolate.

The guest chef program also increases fresh produce visibility.

“Guest chefs bring in traditional or a Californian-influenced style of cooking to our students in the dining commons, who mostly have not had much experience with foods from these regions. For example, Chef Hoss Zare (a San Francisco-based chef known for his Iranian cuisine) made an onion petal stuffed with rice pilaf. It is simple yet elegant,” says Ong.

Each June, UMassDS hosts its Chefs Culinary Conference. This year’s weeklong event featured acclaimed chefs, including Alice Waters, who founded Chez Panisse in Berkeley and originated California Cuisine; Dan Barber, owner of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, co-founder of Row 7 Seed Company and advocate for sustainable agriculture and ethical eating; and Jessica Harris, who has authored a dozen cookbooks.

“Eighty-two percent of students told us they will continue their dining habits after graduation,” says Toong. “That is a powerful inspiration for us to be able to help students create healthy, sustainable, delicious eating behaviors that can impact them for the rest of their lives.”

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Keep Fruits, Vegetables Flowing to K-12 Schools

Opportunities abound for businesses to build strong alliances with schools and help drive up fresh produce consumption.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

There's a fourth "R" in U.S. schools today. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and reaching for more produce at breakfast, lunch and snack time.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 aligned school meal programs with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, thus requiring fruits and vegetables to be served in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Programs (SBP). The USDA's Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program (FFVP), first established in the 2002 Farm Bill and expanded nationwide in 2008, provided school foodservice directors with another avenue to offer fruits and vegetables to students in the classroom.

"The combination of updated guidelines, access to programs like FFVP, and our department's investment in produce-centered menu strategies has led to a noticeable increase in student consumption of fruits and vegetables," says Kashish Patel, MSPM, marketing manager for the food and nutrition services at Boston Public Schools, in Boston, MA.

Schools are the "largest restaurant in town." Consider that 31 million children participate in the NSLP, and the program requires schools to offer both fruits and vegetables as part of a reimbursable meal. This meal, in addition to the SBP and the FFVP, presents a significant opportunity for the produce industry to partner with K-12 school foodservice buyers to meet these fruit and vegetable needs.

NUTS & BOLTS: LUNCH & BREAKFAST

For producers, shippers, and distributors to effectively sell to the K-12 foodservice segment, the first step is to understand the requirements of the NSLP and SBP.

"Currently, students must take at least one-half cup of fruit or vegetable at breakfast or lunch for the meal to be reimbursed," explains Mollie Van Lieu, vice president nutrition and health policy for the International



PHOTO COURTESY RICK BRADY

Schools are the "largest restaurant in town." Consider that 31 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program, and the program requires schools to offer both fruits and vegetables as part of a reimbursable meal. This meal presents a significant opportunity for the produce industry to partner with K-12 school foodservice buyers to meet these fruit and vegetable needs.

Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), headquartered in Washington, D.C. "Since HHFKA was passed, meal patterns have been further strengthened, most recently in April 2024, and there are set minimums for how many cups of fruits as well as vegetables must be offered per week. Research has shown that with these produce-forward updates, consumption of vegetables increased 16% and fruits 23% at lunch."

At lunch, schools must offer weekly servings of red/orange and dark leafy green vegetables.

"Carrots fulfill the red/orange vegetable subgroup requirement in the school lunch programs, and as a result, we have witnessed significant growth in carrot sales over the past several years," says Lisa McNeece, vice president of foodservice and industrial sales at Grimmway Farms, in Bakersfield, CA.

These subgroup color requirements also extend to breakfast.

"For breakfast, schools often choose our convenient individual packs of sliced honeydew, cantaloupe and oranges. While vegetable options see lower demand in the morning, these fresh fruit offerings are a perfect fit for early meals," says Henry Webb,

national school specialist for Taylor Farms, based in Salinas, CA.

Beginning in SY 2025-26, schools substituting vegetables for fruits at breakfast two or more times per week must offer at least two vegetable subgroups, namely red/orange and dark green leafy.

Beyond carrots, other red/orange vegetables recognized in this subgroup include acorn and butternut squash, cherry peppers, Hubbard squash, orange peppers, pimientos, pumpkin, red chili peppers, red peppers, salsa (made with 100% vegetables), spaghetti squash, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, winter squash and yams.

Dark leafy green vegetables count as arugula, beet greens, Bok choy, broccoli, broccoli rabe (rapini), broccolini, butterhead lettuce (Boston, Bibb), chicory, cilantro, collard greens, endive, escarole, fiddleheads, grape leaves, kale, mesclun, mustard greens, parsley, spinach, Swiss chard, red leaf lettuce, romaine lettuce, turnip greens and watercress.

Additionally, new rules limit added sugars and sodium in school meals. By the 2027-2028 school year, schools will also need to ensure that less than 10% of weekly calories in school lunches and breakfasts

come from added sugars and that there is a 10% sodium reduction in breakfasts and 15% in lunches.

“The USDA’s sugar and sodium limits have opened doors for school nutrition teams to add more protein-and-vegetable-packed and savory breakfast items to the menu, such as mushrooms,” says Adriane Rippberger, director of marketing for the Mushroom Council, headquartered in Lee’s Summit, MO.

“For example, the Richland-Bean Blossom School in Ellettsville, IN, wanted to bring back a student favorite, biscuits and gravy, without high sodium levels. The school nutrition team collaborated with a dietitian and a chef to create a scratch recipe for cauliflower mushroom sausage gravy paired with a Jalapeno Cheddar Biscuit.”

Produce on NSLP and SBP can be purchased fresh, frozen, or canned.

“Schools know students enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables and try to offer as much fresh produce as possible to encourage consumption and minimize waste,” says Diane Pratt-Heavner, director of media relations for the School Nutrition Association (SNA), in Arlington, VA.

In just the past six months, Taylor Farms sold hundreds of thousands of pounds of fresh blueberries to schools. “The response from students was overwhelming — they loved them so much that we could barely keep up with demand. At one point, we were selling blueberries faster than they could be harvested,” says Webb.

New Buy American regulations for the NSLP and SBP, taking effect this month on July 1, 2025, are a benefit to U.S. producers and encourage farm-to-school programs. However, these rules cap the purchase of non-domestic foods at 10%. Only 5% of total food purchases can be non-domestic starting July 1, 2031. Two exceptions are: 1) when a product is not produced in the U.S. in sufficient and reasonable quantities of satisfactory quality and 2) when competitive quotes, bids, or proposals reveal the cost of a U.S. product is significantly higher than the foreign product.

“This year, we’ve seen more schools’ RFPs focus on buying local produce and increasing scratch cooking. This is partly due to the availability of additional funding and partly due to an increased focus on the Buy American provision. Although the Buy American provision has been around since 1998, when it was added to the National School Lunch Act, it’s been the subject of state and national policy changes in recent years,” says Erin Mittels-taedt, chief executive officer of The FruitGuys, a South San Francisco, CA-based supplier of fresh fruit, produce, and snacks to businesses,



The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s sugar and sodium limits have opened doors for school nutrition teams to add more protein-and-vegetable-packed items to the menu, such as mushrooms. Roasted Eggplant Lasagna, pictured, is served at Florence Schools in South Carolina.

PHOTO COURTESY MUSHROOM COUNCIL

homes, organizations, and now over 75 school districts with more than 300,000 students.

Boston Public Schools offer a good example of translating nuts-and-bolts requirements to the plate. “At breakfast, we serve only fresh fruit, such as bananas and apples daily, along with smoothies that blend fruits and vegetables,” says Patel. “At lunch, we offer a daily rotating salad bar including Greek, Fiesta, and Cobb, giving students variety and choice while encouraging them to enjoy more fresh produce throughout the day.”

ARTICHOKES TO ZEBRA EGGPLANT

While the NSLP and SBP are designed to provide a full serving of domestically grown fruits and vegetables at breakfast and lunch, the FFVP allows eligible schools to offer a variety of fresh produce, both domestically and non-domestically grown, during the school day. Additionally, the FFVP is a grant that schools must apply for and is awarded based on the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch programs.

“The FFVP can introduce unique or new fruits and vegetables to students like dragon fruit, pink pineapple, starfruit, mangoes and more,” says the IFPA’s Van Lieu. “Coupled with nutrition education, students are introduced to a new-to-them produce item in a classroom setting versus seeing something for the first time in the cafeteria and perhaps not understanding how to eat it or what it is. Research shows that among students in schools participating in FFVP there was an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption of one-third cup per day, compared to students in similar nonparticipating schools.”

From a production standpoint, the requirements for FFVP align closely with those of NSLP and SBP, says Webb of Taylor Farms. “We apply the same rigorous food safety standards, including HACCP protocols, USDA

inspections, and third-party audits. What sets our approach apart is the time we’ve spent understanding the unique needs of students and schools. We’ve developed a comprehensive year-round FFVP menu designed not only to nourish, but also to educate and excite students about fresh produce. As a result, our FFVP offering is experiencing rapid growth. This year alone, we supplied schools with items such as Gooseberries, Dino Melon and Whole Sweet Peppers.”

DNO Produce, a wholesaler in Columbus, OH, created its SnackTime Explorers educational toolkit in partnership with Pilot Light, a local food education nonprofit based in Chicago, IL, and Freshealth, for which DNO is the exclusive fresh-cut produce supplier.

“There’s been a gulf between the lunchroom and classroom and how to execute that education. SnackTime Explorers is a turnkey solution to that,” says Alex DiNovo, president and chief operating officer. “We’ve received several anecdotal stories about kids taking their parents to the supermarket’s produce aisle to find what they tasted that day.”

OPPORTUNITY FOR PRODUCE

From a procurement perspective, the Boston Public Schools’ food and nutrition department focuses on partnerships that support its operational needs and mission, according to Patel.

“We rely on USDA DoD Fresh, a primary distributor, and a local distributor to meet our volume and variety goals. Our most effective suppliers consistently maintain high quality, understand seasonal availability, and are candid about any limitations, such as stock or pricing. These relationships enable us to plan more efficiently and provide consistent, high-quality produce, even when sourcing from smaller farms. The flexibility and responsiveness of our suppliers have been critical to our success.”

pb

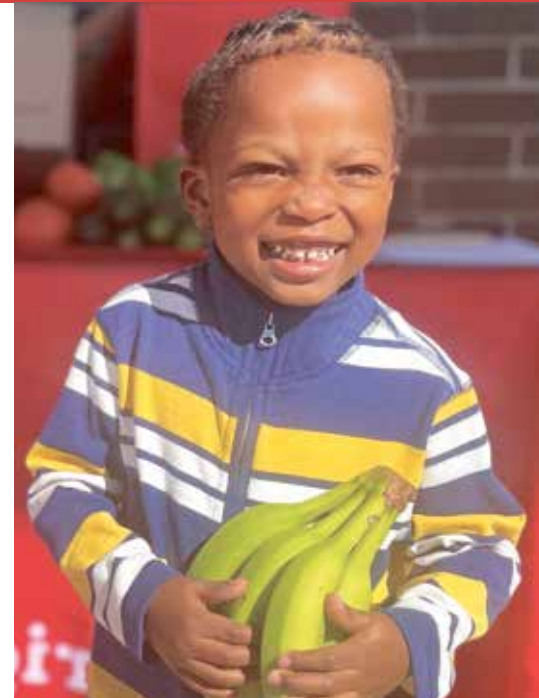


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Deli and Prepared Produce Combos Continue to Expand

Retailers should cross-merchandise items from various departments and consider easy meal solutions to entice customers.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Offering a fresh experience with none of the fuss or messy associated with peels, seeds or fruit skins, fresh-cut and ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables are now standard in deli and prepared food departments and offerings nationwide. But what is driving this category and where are the opportunities for further growth?

In order to fully understand the key trends that are driving produce merchandising in deli and prepared food areas, Rick Stein, vice president of fresh foods at the Arlington, VA-headquartered FMI-The Food Industry Association, believes it's necessary to step back and look at how shoppers define value.

"We find shoppers have an expanded definition of value to include price and quality but also experience, relevance and convenience," he says. "At the same time, shoppers today are focused on 'eating well,' which can have various meanings from person to person. As shoppers seek to 'eat well,' we find certain purchase drivers, including health, entertainment, enjoyment and convenience, that encourage shoppers to pay a bit more."

Both the produce and foodservice departments play into these purchase drivers, especially when it comes to health and convenience, Stein says, although he suggests entertainment and enjoyment can also be offered with colorful displays and exciting culinary offerings.

"Food retailers that lean into these purchase drivers as they develop their foodservice strategies are going to win shopper loyalty and be seen as a solution provider for shoppers looking to solve their different eating occasion needs," he adds.

According to Sharon Olson, executive director of Chicago, IL-based food insight and trend forecaster Culinary Visions, culinary tourism driven by post-pandemic international travel has emerged as a key motivator for many consumers.

"Travelers return home inspired to recreate



Featuring produce options in the deli is one way to increase assortment and entice shoppers who want to continue to eat at home with new options, convenience and enjoyment.

the flavors they experienced abroad, turning to local supermarkets for authentic ingredients," she says. "This provides an opportunity for delis to provide international recipes that can be challenging to prepare at home."

Olson believes produce departments can capitalize on this demand by featuring global staples, like Asian greens, Latin root vegetables, and exotic fruits, to complement the experience.

Another important trend, Olson continues, is seasonal events that explore culinary heritage.

According to Culinary Visions research, 78% of consumers surveyed say they like to share foods that reflect their heritage, and 84% say they like to create their own food traditions when they cook for friends and family.

"Sampling authentic prepared food recipes created by home cooks make it easy for shoppers to bring home a genuine experience," adds Olson.

MERCHANDISING FRESH

When it comes to merchandising produce in the foodservice department, Stein recom-

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mends retailers lean into the colorful, enticing experience produce brings. “The produce department really amplifies the senses visually,” he says. “Produce also has a strong health halo and can be used in the deli and foodservice departments to help amplify the assortment of options that meet shoppers’ health and well-being needs.”

There are also plenty of opportunities for cross-merchandising. With Stein estimating that 54% of shoppers create hybrid meals — a mix of scratch cooking and semi or fully prepared items — he says retailers can pair fruits and vegetables with deli items to offer complete meal solutions for shoppers.

To capitalize on the interest in global flavors, Olson recommends starting with a simple merchandising tactic: a tasting station, featuring mangos and limes alongside a jar of salty, chile lime seasoning or quick recipes showcasing Asian greens with a prepared sauce.

These offerings, she says, encourage shoppers to experiment and build their culinary confidence.

Citing a Culinary Visions study, which showed 80% of consumers would like more information about the sources of the fresh items, Olson recommends adding augmented label technology that enables shoppers to see the story behind a product via point-of-sale touch screens.

“These types of digital displays require a significant investment, yet even without the latest technology, it’s important to make it easy for customers to get the information they want about the source of the ingredients in their meals,” she explains.

THE TASTE IMPERATIVE

A clear area of opportunity, according to Phil Lempert, a food marketing expert and author also known as “The Supermarket-Guru,” is both cutting down the number of SKUs retailers carry, while also committing to a renewed focus on fresh.

“A lot of the produce philosophies have gotten lazy,” he argues. “It’s really easy to put up six or seven boxes full of apples, even though they have been in storage for a year and a half.”

Instead, Lempert advocates focusing on produce that’s in season. “If we start merchandising and selling produce that’s in season, the price is going to be lower, the taste is going to be better, and the nutrition is going to be improved.”

Rather than carrying huge numbers of SKUs, Lempert advocates for retailers highlighting “what’s in season and what’s really great.”

This logic applies equally to cut fruit and prepared produce, according to Lempert, who



Fresh-cut and ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables are now standard in deli and prepared food departments and offerings nationwide.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

claims that too often retailers focus on convenience to the detriment of taste. “I happen to be a consumer of cut fruit and when I get cantaloupe that’s in season, it’s fabulous,” he says. “When I get cantaloupe that’s out of season, it tastes like Styrofoam.”

“We need to put in the produce managers’ heads that it’s all about taste, it’s all about flavor — that’s going to be what gets consumers coming back.”

Another merchandising problem Lempert has identified is packaged produce stock not being rotated on a regular basis. A case in point is packaged salads.

“I’m a consumer of packaged salads, but I’ll go into a store and the packaged salad will have a shelf-life in two days, and I’m not going to consume all of that in two days,” he says. “I don’t think some stores are taking as much care with the merchandising aspect, instead opting for just getting it out there.”

Lempert also recommends making sure packaging types and sizes are appropriate by understanding your consumer base in any given area. “If you’ve got a lot of singles or retirees versus big families, make sure the packaging is appropriate for that customer,” he says.

Maeve Webster, president of Arlington, VT-based food and beverage industry insight provider Menu Matters, believes retailers have an incredible opportunity to offer multi-sensory experiences for consumers that also educate and empower them to make great decisions.

By incorporating more information that goes beyond origin or variety, she says retailers can excite shoppers about the possibilities they

can create at home, and to experience food on a more emotional and visceral level.

Webster argues consumers are becoming increasingly overwhelmed by the breadth of options they have not only in the produce area but across retail. “In reality, consumers need retailers and suppliers to help them make better decisions and feel more confident in the decisions they are making,” she says.

PACKAGING INNOVATIONS

Shopper demand, according to Stein at the FMI, leans strongly toward foodservice packaging that displays tamper-evidence, is easy to handle, and allows the contents to be viewed. In addition, microwave-safe, added shelf life, and oven or freezer-ready options are also preferred.

“The packaging is really an opportunity to play into both convenience and the expanded definition of value for shoppers,” he adds.

According to Olson, when it comes to packaging, “less is more.” Consumers, she says, want sustainable packaging alternatives when they shop for groceries.

Although some retailers are swapping plastic for more environmentally friendly paper or cardboard, and others are providing more information on how best to use the product and what to pair it with, more innovation is required, according to Webster.

On the flip side, she argues some packaging “goes a bit overboard” with concepts, such as individual apples in beautifully designed boxes.

“I do believe Americans should become more mindful of quality, but that type of excessive packaging flies in the face of environmentally conscious packaging,” she says. “It’s a balance — designing packaging that will help high-quality produce stand out without becoming so excessive that it is as much a deterrent as it is a benefit.”

AVOCADO APPEAL

Avocados currently play a substantial and growing role in deli and prepared food departments, according to Terry Splane, vice president of marketing at the Irvine, CA-headquartered California Avocado Commission.

Their usage, he says, has expanded far beyond the produce aisle, appearing in everything from fresh guacamole to prepared salads, wraps, bowls, and even fried avocado slices at in-store deli cases.

“These are great items for consumers to look for while in store, especially during the California avocado season (April through September), when these locally grown and sustainably farmed flavorful fruits are incorporated into seasonal deli recipes,” says Splane.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Leaning into produce's health halo is another opportunity to meet shoppers' expanded definition of value in the foodservice department.



Rick Stein, FMI — The Food Industry Association, Arlington, VA

The departments should work together to help teach consumers not only what's new and exciting but how to use it, why the retailer decided to offer it, when it's in season, and what makes it special.



Maeve Webster, Menu Matters, Arlington, VT

At the same time, Splane believes there is significant room to grow avocado usage at in-store deli and prepared food counters through innovative product development and targeted seasonal promotions.

He suggests creating new deli offerings like avocado-based hummus, deviled eggs, or even smoothies to appeal to health-conscious consumers seeking novelty and convenience.

Key seasonal events — such as Labor Day and Fourth of July — which occur during the California avocado season, also offer natural platforms for boosting avocado sales, according to Splane. “Our retailer partners have found that strong coordination between produce and deli departments can ensure optimal supply for fresh-prepared recipes,” he adds.

Such recipes include deli-made guacamole, utilizing avocados that are too ripe for display in produce sections, thus reducing waste while offering a fresh-made product. Retailers, Splane adds, also see increased purchases when cross-merchandising with complementary products, such as chips, tortillas or salad ingredients.

Stephanie Bazan, senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution at Irving, TX-based Avocados From Mexico, recommends leveraging other “fresh” areas in the

store to help boost overall avocado sales, highlighting meat and packaged bakery as key areas to expand the avocado category.

Bazan likewise advocates cross-merchandising, suggesting pairing avocados with complementary products, such as tomatoes, onions, cilantro, peppers, tortillas, and even tortilla chips. “Over 65% of shoppers state that the way avocados are displayed influences their purchase decisions,” she adds, citing an Avocados from Mexico survey.

Packaging innovations are another major trend, according to Splane, with convenient formats, like portion-controlled packs and squeeze pouches, gaining popularity. Such formats, he says, make avocados easier to enjoy on-the-go.

Bazan adds that the avocado bag or packaged segment has also shown incredible growth over the past years and is still growing.

WHERE NEXT?

But in this already well-developed category, where are the opportunities for further growth?

With the eating-at-home trend continuing — the FMI estimates eight in 10 shoppers prepare dinner at home at least four times a week — shoppers are seeking meal solutions

for their households, offering an opportunity to offer expanded value to shoppers, according to Stein.

“Featuring produce options in deli and foodservice is one way to increase assortment and entice shoppers who want to continue to eat at home with new options, convenience and enjoyment,” Stein adds.

“Don't forget about the 63% of shoppers who put some or a lot of focus on nutrition/healthy items when shopping. Leaning into produce's health halo is another opportunity to meet shoppers' expanded definition of value in the foodservice department.”

Olson adds: “Making it easy for customers to assemble a meal at home with ingredients that are curated in a display gives them the satisfaction of making a home-cooked meal without the hassle of cooking in the old-fashioned way.”

Webster at Menu Matters advocates strongly that there should be more opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration. “If new produce is pulled in, the deli and/or bakery should find ways of promoting it,” she argues. “The departments should work together to help teach consumers not only what's new and exciting, but how to use it, why the retailer decided to offer it, when it's in season, and what makes it special.” **pb**

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PHOTO COURTESY GUAN'S MUSHROOM

The versatility and value of mushrooms make them a staple in every chef's kitchen, from traditional restaurants to supermarket foodservice.

There's Gold in Having Mushrooms on the Menu

Foodservice benefits from value of mushrooms while staying on trend, reducing labor, and meeting wellness demand.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Mushrooms deliver umami, versatility and align with current dining trends. They contribute to classic menu items, but also play a huge role on plant-forward plates.

"Mushrooms are one of the most unique and delicious produce items chefs can use to enhance their dishes and recipes," says Jack Guan, vice president of business development

at Guan's Mushroom in Commerce, CA. "As more consumers look for healthier options, we see restaurants add more mushroom dishes to their menus."

Cristie Mather, vice president, marketing at The Mushroom Council in Portland, OR, shares Datassential statistics showing mushrooms have a consistently strong presence across all restaurant segments, with 75% of restaurants featuring at least one mushroom dish. "That number jumps to 87% in fine dining and 84% in casual dining," she adds.

"We're seeing increased use of mushrooms in supermarket foodservice in grain bowls, soups and hot bar offerings. Their adaptability, health halo and culinary appeal make them a smart choice for operators looking to meet shopper demand for both flavor and wellness."

FLEXIBILITY WITH MENU

Mushrooms are having a real moment in foodservice for good reason, adds Kelsey Coon, marketing specialist at Highline Mushrooms in Leamington, Ontario.

“They check all the right boxes of flavor, nutrition, sustainability and versatility,” she says. “But just as important to culinary teams is something that doesn’t always make the menu — consistency and repeatability. Foodservice needs ingredients they can count on. Mushrooms are a smart, scalable solution across both restaurant and retail foodservice.”

Mushrooms are gaining traction, not only as a classic ingredient, but also as a plant-forward protein alternative. “We’re seeing them used in everything from upscale entrees to grab-and-go items, especially in wellness-driven and globally inspired menus,” says Allie Wainer, regional vice president for The Chefs’ Warehouse/Sid Wainer & Son in New Bedford, MA. “Their adaptability makes them ideal for both traditional restaurants and supermarket foodservice looking to meet evolving consumer tastes.”

Phil Bartocci, general manager at Coosemans Philly in Philadelphia, PA, agrees the industry is seeing more mushrooms offered as plant-based options. “Mushrooms are versatile and can be substituted for many center-of-the-plate offerings.”

The versatility and value of mushrooms makes them a staple in every kitchen. “Packed with umami flavors and meat-like texture, they are a delicious stand-in for proteins on the plate while beef, pork, chicken, and seafood prices continue to climb,” says Deena Ensworth, senior content manager at Markon in Salinas, CA.

“Whether chefs are interested in adding an extra punch of flavor to burgers while reducing overall fat and cholesterol, giving vegetarian and vegan dishes more satiety, or lending seasonal flavors to appetizers and sauces, mushrooms can do it all.”

HARNESSING TRENDS

Several trends drive mushroom use. “Plant-forward menuing remains strong, with mushrooms playing a key role in vegetarian and flexitarian offerings,” says Mather. “We’re seeing more chefs turn to mushrooms and other vegetables to create plant-forward offerings, as seen at restaurants like Tacology in Miami or Fresh Kitchen’s basil mushroom bowl.

“Operators are also leaning into premiumization; spotlighting specialty varieties such as maitake, oyster and king trumpet to bring something unique to the plate.”

Mushrooms are all across foodservice, including retail, playing a lead role in deli-pre-



Mushrooms on the menu are showing up in a variety of ways, like this mushroom pate with pickled onions.

PHOTO COURTESY MARKON

pared meals, protein pairings, and hot bar solutions, says Coon.

“At Highline, we’re supporting these trends through sliced gourmet blends, ready-made stuffed mushrooms and bulk packs to streamline prep and inventory,” she adds. “We’ve designed SKUs with foodservice in mind, whether for prepping in a commissary kitchen or a back-of-house retail operation.”

Mushrooms also see movement in pizza. “According to the 2024 *Slice of the Union* report, mushrooms are the No. 2 pizza topping in the U.S., beat only by pepperoni,” says Mather. “At the 2025 International Pizza Expo, we saw incredible creativity, from pies using specialty mushroom blends to new pairings with other produce.”

Most recently, the Mushroom Council partnered with Toppers Pizza on a limited-time Wild Mushroom pizza, featuring portobello, shiitake and white button mushrooms on a garlic sauce base.

“Toppers is showing how craveable mushrooms can be when they are the star of the show,” says Mather. “And we supported the promotion with digital ads and influencer partnerships in key Midwest markets.”

Retail foodservice is also seeing a pizza boom. “Eataly’s grab-and-go Pizza alla Pala with crimini and white mushrooms is becoming one of their top sellers,” says Mather. “Our Mushroom Monday promotion with Eataly in New York, Chicago and LA highlights mushroom-rich dishes across their restaurants, take-home cases and cooking classes.”

Wellness trends also boost mushroom

demand. “The wellness sector continues to grow exponentially each year, with global estimates as high as 9 trillion by 2028,” says Markon’s Ensworth. “Highlighting the type or variety of mushrooms on the menu is a smart move, as they are one of the ingredients dining customers are trying to increase in their health plans.”

Specialty mushrooms, especially lion’s mane, are proven to have health benefits, says Bartocci. “They are riding the wave of being a super food, and customers are now looking for these mushrooms for their overall health.”

AMPING UP VARIETY

A plethora of available mushroom varieties helps expand menu use. “We’re seeing more unique varieties, including lion’s mane, king trumpet, and blue oyster show up on menus, as controlled-environment and indoor farming make them more accessible year-round,” says Wainer.

“Foodservice operators should keep an eye on the rise of locally cultivated specialty mushrooms. Technology has expanded year-round access to unique varieties, such as maitake, chanterelle, and enoki mushrooms that once had limited seasonal availability.”

Guan explains they have seen tremendous growth in the foodservice sector with their king oyster mushroom. “King oyster mushrooms are unique due to their very thick and meaty stem with a small cap,” he says. “This larger stem allows for much versatility in how they can be cooked — sliced to make steak cuts, cut horizontally to imitate scallops, or diced for any dish.”

Japanese varieties are very much on trend too, says Ensworth. “Enokis and shimejis are integral to ramen and other noodle soups,” she explains. “Shiitakes and matsutake are popular in stir-fries and meat dishes, and varieties, such as maitake, king trumpet, and wood ear, are prized for adding deep flavor notes to fall and winter dishes.”

Organic and sustainable options contribute to demand, and are gaining ground in foodservice, says Coon. “While current sales through broadline distributors still represent a small percentage, just 0.1% of total pounds, the growth rate of organic mushrooms is outpacing conventional, with a 65% increase over the past three years, according to the Mushroom Council and Circana Supply-Track.”

Local and sustainable are two drivers in the foodservice industry this year, according to Ensworth. “As customers take more care about what they put in their bodies and how ingredients affect the earth, Markon is focused on providing these options for our cooperative’s member distributors and their foodservice customers.”

ADDING VALUE

Advances in value-added mushroom products help foodservice operator efficiency. “There’s growing interest in pre-sliced, ready-to-cook formats and bulk packs that streamline prep in high-volume kitchens,” says Wainer.

Stuffed mushrooms are a game-changer for foodservice, adds Highline’s Coon. “They bring elevated presentation with zero prep time, meaning significant labor cost savings.



Operators are leaning into premiumization, according to Cristie Mather, vice president, marketing at The Mushroom Council in Portland, OR, spotlighting specialty varieties, such as maitake, oyster and king trumpet, to bring something unique to the plate.

For prepared foods, they work beautifully in oven-ready trays or hot bars and deliver a premium feel with minimal touch points. Our gourmet sliced blends and sliced portobello and mini bella formats are designed to reduce prep and boost consistency. They allow teams to execute on-trend offerings, such as mushroom risotto or mushroom flatbreads, quickly and without waste.”

Coosemans’ Bartocci says there has been exciting innovation in mushroom products over the years, including mushroom jerky, shredded mushrooms for barbecue, and dried mushroom chips. “Growers and manufacturers are continuing to push the limits of what can be done with their product.”

Mather notes strong interest in marinated or pre-seasoned mushrooms. “These are great for high-volume kitchens looking to add bold flavor while saving prep time.”

BROADER MENU USE

Mushrooms on the menu are showing up in a variety of ways. “Mushrooms can be positioned as both a culinary enhancer and a functional ingredient,” says Mather. “They add rich flavor and texture, not just as an option for people seeking more plant-based or plant-forward dishes, but as a sought-after ingredient in their own right. In retail foodservice, we’re seeing mushrooms in vegan stroganoffs and roasted mushroom bowls, but they shine just as much in blended dishes or alongside meat.”

Mushrooms offer a unique opportunity to enhance menus with both flavor and presentation, explains Wainer. “Beyond the basics, exploring unique varieties can add texture, visual appeal, and a culinary point of difference.”

Indeed, mushrooms contribute to business distinction. “They’re a great way to differentiate a restaurant’s menu,” says Guan. “We are seeing more creativity in how people are cooking with and using mushrooms. An example would be frying whole maitake and whole beech mushrooms to make them look like fried chicken.”

Mushrooms are being used far beyond traditional produce placements, says Coon, especially in retail foodservice. “We’re seeing growth in grab-and-go, hot bars, salad kits, and oven-ready meals. Whether it’s a stuffed mushroom tray, a mushroom grain bowl, or a sautéed mushroom topping bar, this ingredient is helping foodservice teams bring more value, nutrition, and crave ability to every offering.”

And, operators can look beyond the plate as well. “Mushrooms are even being used in coffees and teas — reaching out of savory food menus and into the beverage industry,” says Markon’s Ensworth.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Foodservice needs ingredients they can count on. Mushrooms are a smart, scalable solution across both restaurant and retail foodservice.

Kelsey Coon, Highline Mushrooms in Leamington, Ontario, Canada.

Thanks to advances in indoor and climate-controlled growing, [mushroom] supply has become far less dependent on seasonality or weather disruptions.

Allie Wainer, The Chefs’ Warehouse/Sid Wainer & Son, New Bedford, MA

CONSISTENCY IN SUPPLY

Foodservice can rely on mushrooms as a consistent ingredient. “Mushrooms are one of the few produce items grown year-round consistently,” says Guan. “There is an issue with the shift in demand between summer and winter months, which could cause a few weeks of shortages, but with sufficient planning, providing mushrooms year-round is no issue.”

Mushrooms remain one of the most stable and consistent produce items in the market, agrees Wainer. “Thanks to advances in indoor and climate-controlled growing, supply has become far less dependent on seasonality or weather disruptions,” she says. “This makes mushrooms a reliable ingredient foodservice can confidently plan around.”

While most produce prices change on a daily basis, Bartocci says mushrooms, for the most part, remain stable in pricing. “This is a wonderful advantage for restaurants to know food costs and have predictability when putting mushrooms on their menu.”

Producers are working to amplify the consistency of supply. “Highline offers a year-round supply with multiple farms strategically located to support regional distribution across North America,” says Coon. “We’re also expanding capacity with a new farm, giving us even more flexibility to meet volume surges.”

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GET CREATIVE WITH SUMMER SALAD FIXINGS

Four ways to entice shoppers who love salad to add variety, produce into baskets.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Summer and salads go together. Witness the rise in the share of discussions across social media, menus, and recipes for “summer salads” that starts between March and April, hit a peak in July, and return to baseline by the end of October, according to Tastewise.io, an AI-powered consumer data platform for food and beverage brands, based in Tel Aviv, Israel.

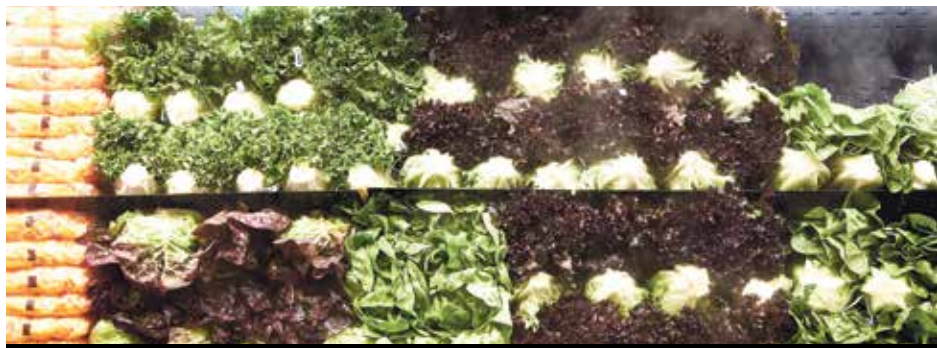
Getting in shape for bathing suit season is one reason why some shoppers have salads on their minds.

“Health-conscious young adults, leading the ‘food as medicine’ movement, are turning to salads for their versatility and customizability. Salads burst with fresh, seasonal ingredients, offering endless flavor combinations and going far beyond the side dish,” says Kyla Oberman, director of marketing for California Giant Berry Farms in Watsonville, CA. “We have found a shift for berries to be incorporated throughout salads rather than just sprinkled on top as a garnish or topping. For example, berries can be tossed with leafy greens or cooked and/or used as an ingredient in dressings.”

A second recurring trend, propelled whenever there is a rise in the cost of dining out, is the consumer’s desire to make chef-inspired, restaurant-quality salads at home.

“High-end ingredients have never been more accessible, and shoppers are more frequently using specialty produce items to add sophistication to summer salads,” says Matt Hiltner, marketing manager for Babé Farms Specialties in Santa Maria, CA. “Beyond bagged salad kits, we see an increased willingness from consumers to use fresh components like baby head lettuce, colorful bunched carrots, and specialty radishes in their salads.”

Third, there’s the simple DIY desire to custom-make a salad. “Many of our shoppers are passionate about creating salads from scratch. The summer season offers the perfect opportunity for us to encourage them to explore the fresh, local, and vibrant produce



Many shoppers want to create salads from scratch, and the summer season offers the perfect opportunity for retailers to encourage them to explore the fresh, local, and vibrant produce available.

PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

available,” says Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager for New Seasons Market, a 21-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR.

Charis Neves, vice president of salad kits for Taylor Farms Retail in Salinas, CA, says there’s been a rise in the company’s DIY salad kits, which shoppers customize to their liking.

“Shoppers are interested in seasonal, colorful, and nutrient-rich ingredients and experimenting more with flavor combinations, texture contrasts, and globally inspired dressings. Shoppers are also interested in salad greens beyond romaine, such as arugula, kale and spinach. Finally, grilled vegetables — think barbecue season veggies — like corn on the cob, zucchini, mini potatoes and bell peppers, are also making their way into summer salads, often as leftovers from weekend cookouts.”

Some of the company’s top sellers during the summer include Chopped Salad Kits, like Avocado Ranch, Sweet Kale, Mango Lemonade and Mexican Street Corn.

“Our newest Taco Ranch Mini salad kit makes a great on-the-go salad for travelling to the lake or beach,” says Neves. “Overall, salad toppings have expanded over the years. Croustons are still popular; and we have seen new ingredients deliver on ‘summer-time salads,’ including dried corn, dried mango, fresh pasta, chips, nuts and fruit-forward vinaigrette dressings.”

While consumer interest in health, restaurant quality, and customization are top reasons retailers should take time and effort to promote a summer salad theme, the real payoff comes in two ways. First, inspire shoppers to get creative in their salad fixings. Second, make it easy for them to build their basket with salad ingredients.

“Salads start as an empty canvas,” says Alex Jackson, vice president of sales and procurement for Frieda’s Branded Produce in Los Alamitos, CA. “Show shoppers it’s all about experimenting.”

1. START WITH THE LEAVES

The popularity of Caesar salad has made romaine a favorite green.

“We have a product called Mediterranean Hearts. It’s a combination of two stalks of romaine and one of treviso in a 1-pound pack, ready to chop and enjoy in a salad,” says Bruce Klein, director of marketing for Maurice A. Auerbach Inc., in Secaucus, NJ.

Beyond typical leafy salad greens like romaine, iceberg, baby spinach, and spring mix, says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA, “Radicchio, watercress, baby arugula and Belgian endive have increased in sales.”

Endive is a leaf that requires education, according to David Moen, sales manager for California Endive Farms in Rio Vista, CA. “It’s a great item that fills the gap between lettuce and celery. The leaves can carry ingredients like blue cheese and walnuts or be used instead of tortillas to make a keto-friendly nachos salad. The white and red make it stand out on the shelf in a sea of green.”

The company grows red and white, conventional and organic, endive year-round.

“Our ripe local tomatoes and radishes are options for customers looking for fresh, colorful additions to their crisp summer leafy green salads,” says New Seasons Market’s Salchenberg.

Watercress also continues to expand beyond everyday recipes, and its versatility makes it a great addition to a salad. “Its excep-



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tional nutrient density — packed with over 50 essential vitamins and minerals — makes it a natural fit for health-conscious consumers and evolving wellness categories,” says Anna Klawitter, marketing manager, B&W Quality Growers, LLC, Fellsmere, FL.

2. THINK OUTSIDE THE SALAD BOWL

Leafy greens have long been the focus when it comes to bountiful salads. However, Hiltner at Babé Farms Specialties says, “We have noticed a shift in mindset in recent years to where lettuce is not required in a salad, can even take a back seat, or removed altogether. Instead, other veggies have been taking center stage on salads.”

Hiltner says these include root vegetables like raw baby beets, specialty radishes, and colorful carrots shaved, coined, or julienned for a salad. Shaved fennel adds a fresh, licorice-like flavor profile and aroma to a salad. Fennel fronds can also be incorporated into a salad for added flavor or aesthetically pleasing garnish. Whether shaved, matchstick, or julienne cut, kohlrabi adds crunch no matter how you slice it.

“Grilled vegetables can be added to salads to create a vibrant and appealing plate, making it more fun and attractive for kids,” recommends Randee Perea, marketing coordinator for Prime Time International in La Quinta, CA. “Asparagus is known as a grill item, but we want to also have it be incorporated in salads and not just as a stand-alone item.”

According to Noah Robbins, chief executive officer and founder of Ark Foods in Brooklyn, NY, grilled shishito peppers also add flavor to a salad. “Our selection of peppers, which range from mild to spicy, can also be a great addition to coleslaw, potato, and macaroni salads.”

3. DON'T FORGET FRUIT

“We are always looking for a way to encourage our customers to add fresh Oregon berries to their mixed greens, with perhaps some nuts to add some crunch,” says New Seasons Market's Salchenberg.

Similarly, “We're seeing a rise in salads featuring flavors worldwide. Think Fattoush Salads with fresh berries, Mediterranean Barley Salad with Pickled Blackberries and Blueberries, and Strawberry Caprese Salad. The global inspiration found in these salads also drives the demand for other items in the produce department, as many of their ingredients haven't been considered a mainstay in the more traditional salad,” says California Giant Berry Farms' Oberman.

Fresh strawberries can double the basket's total value, adds Oberman. When

strawberries are included, the basket value increases by an average of 49%, according to Fusion/IRI 52-week data ending January 1, 2023.

Employ the excitement of “in-season” fruit to encourage shoppers to buy more to prepare as well as eat out of hand, recommends Brianna Shales, marketing director for Stemilt Growers LLC, in Wenatchee, WA. “Cosmic Crisp apples won't brown once cut and work well in a salad. Cherries are a fruit that is still seasonal, and customers want to enjoy as much as they can during this short window. Peaches and nectarines can mix and match with other fruits in salads.”

Dragon fruit is also in season during the summer.

“Cut and combine our yellow Honey Dragons, red Fire Dragons, and white Snow Dragons for a refreshing salad,” recommends Frieda's Jackson.

4. BUILD A SALAD DESTINATION

Cross-merchandising in-store and out-of-store is one of the easiest and most effective ways to get shoppers to pick up multiple ingredients for a summer salad.

“We suggest retailers create a designated area in the produce section for summer salads. This could be a table or endcap that features fresh ingredients with recipe inspiration located nearby that's easily visible to consumers. We also encourage cross-merchandising products, such as mini displays of berries next to packaged salads or placing whole head lettuce with berries,” says Oberman.

Salad toppers, like Diamond Foods' Crunchy Nut Toppers, are an ideal tie-in to cross-merchandise with salad ingredients. The plant-based product features walnuts, pecans, and seasonings and comes in four flavors, including bacon-free Smoky Bacon Walnuts, dairy-free Garden Ranch Walnuts, Glazed Walnuts, and Glazed Pecans.

“A 2022 survey found that the average American eats salad four times per week, and about 70% of salad eaters state no salad is complete without toppings. Our new Crunchy Nut Toppers were a response to the need for new salad topping options that were a better-for-you alternative to popular options like croutons and bacon bits,” says Doug Kozlow, senior marketing manager of Diamond Foods, in Stockton, CA.

One challenge when merchandising around a summer salad theme may be getting that point across to shoppers. One idea is a recipe card via QR code next to the produce display, recommends Hiltner. “To remain current, this QR code should be updated according to the season. In the



Salad toppers are an ideal tie-in to cross-merchandise with salad ingredients.

PHOTO COURTESY DIAMOND FOODS

summertime, for example, a colorful and refreshing beet salad recipe could be loaded onto a QR code next to the display of Babé Farms red, golden, and striped beets.”

Retailers can encourage multi-ingredient purchases by sampling demos featuring the final dish. In June 2024, California Endive Farms hosted manned demos at two Raley's locations where the retailer's signature Golden State Chicken Salad was served on white and red endive leaves.

“Sometimes the best way to market a food product is through its taste and quality, especially if it's unfamiliar to consumers. Endives are crisp and deliciously bitter when enjoyed raw. They pair beautifully with creamy, savory toppings like chicken salad. As the summer heats up, people are searching for easy, refreshing meals, which makes this combination perfect for a quick, nutritious option or a wonderful addition to a backyard barbeque,” says Faith Garrard, executive director for fresh at Raley's, a West Sacramento, CA-based chain that operates 121 grocery stores.

Cross-merchandise salads and salad fixings outside of the produce department, for example, in a freestanding display at the front of the store, or in other departments, such as the deli.

“Create a ‘Summer Salad Station’ display in-store, combining bagged salads with complementary items, like rotisserie chicken, feta cheese, croutons, fresh fruits, or bottled lemonade and iced teas,” says Taylor Farms' Neves.

Lastly, one way to turn a summer salad promotion into a year-round basket builder is to make it easy for customers to buy ingredients while they look at retailers' website recipes. The Fresh Market, a 161-store chain headquartered in Greensboro, NC, is a master at this.

For example, there are online recipes for a Watermelon and Peach Summertime Salad and a Summer Panzanella Salad. One click on each ingredient adds watermelon, peaches, lime, jalapenos, fresh mint, garlic, tomatoes, cucumbers, red onion, and fresh basil to their cart. That's a hot buy.

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Hunts Point Wholesalers Keep a Close Eye on Quality, Food Safety and Service

NEW YORK'S REGIONAL PRODUCE SUPPLIERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS FOCUS ON THE CONSUMER.

BY MIKE DUFF

The Hunts Point Market remains a critical, and underappreciated, food resource for New York City. It serves the region's retailers large and small, but particularly independents who rely on it to feed the city, where keeping up with change is far from easy.

The market consistently works to become a better resource for both retailers and foodservice operators, but a critical question is what will that support system look like a few years from now?

The produce market's lease is up in 2031, and the long pursuit of a refreshed facility in the Hunts Point neighborhood is not over, both in terms of wholesaler determination to upgrade the physical plant and the difficulty in nailing down all the elements (and dollars) that will bring plans to fruition.

Retailers recognize the importance of the market and the advantages that it provides their businesses.

Marc Goldman, produce director, Morton Williams, Bronx, NY, with one store in its



native borough, one in Jersey City, NJ, and 15 stores in Manhattan, says the bulk of the company's produce comes from the market, and he still has a Hunts Point buyer loading and his own trucks hauling produce from the facility.

"They do a good job for us," says Goldman. "I've been with the company for 30 years, and it's always been like that."

Goldman says as business technology has evolved, so have some facets of Morton

Williams' association with Hunts Point wholesalers, such as communication through emails and texts, without undermining the rapport that has been important to the business affiliations.

"A lot of it's email, it's text, but I'll make a phone call. You've got to do both," says Goldman. "I have relationships with a lot of guys down there. I've got the buyer, but I still talk to everybody myself. They let me know what's going on in the market."

Harry Celentano, managing partner, Super Foodtown, in the Bronx neighborhood of Throgs Neck, says almost everything that comes into the store is through Hunts Point. "I have a guy in the market buying for us. It's definitely cheaper when you have someone on the market doing the buying."

The price and quality equation go together, Celentano says. Because he shops multiple wholesalers, his buyer can get deals on better quality produce, which allows Super Foodtown to promote fruits and vegetables that will better satisfy its customers.

"It's night and day," says Celentano. "I like to have the better product in the store, not the cheapest product. You're not going to make friends with lower quality. With the market, you can get better product in the store and can lower the cost to the consumer."

For example, he notes that, due to a buy





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on the market, he could offer quality grapes at \$1.99 that might be \$3.99 elsewhere. “You’re buying so sharp, there’s an offset,” he says, “I was able to buy right.”

NEW MARKET HORIZONS

The issue of revitalizing the market has become bigger than ever, as wholesalers continue to negotiate for additional funding beyond the \$295 million in grants New York City and the state have offered.

Although a significant amount of money, the total is insufficient for the full market

rebuild that many Hunts Point wholesalers prefer. As envisioned, the price tag for the full rebuild was originally set between \$600 and \$650 million.

Most of the parties involved see the Bronx market location as right for the future of produce distribution in New York, given its position relative to the city’s five boroughs and the immediate suburbs. However, building on the present site comes with its own set of complications because the market will have to continue functioning during any project construction.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying



Everybody’s focused on healthy eating, and nothing’s healthier than fresh fruits and vegetables, so I think it’s been really great to see people just getting back and getting excited, whether it’s about organics or fresh fruits and vegetables in general.

Stefanie Katzman, Katzman,
New York, NY

A substantial market investment and upgrade would seem to be in the city’s best interests, some Hunts Point wholesalers point out.

“I couldn’t imagine anyone not being an advocate for this,” says Stefanie Katzman, chief executive, Katzman. “We’re the biggest market in the country, the biggest one in the world, if you’re looking at just produce. We supply one of the most highly populated parts of the country, support so many small businesses, so many consumers, employ so many New Yorkers and those from right outside the New York areas.”

Cary Rubin, vice president at Rubin Bros., says negotiations with the city are ongoing, and any market revitalization initiative must factor in the critical need to keep the market operating during redevelopment.

“It’s definitely challenging, and it’s definitely ongoing, and no one’s giving up by any means,” says Rubin.

The aging facility originally opened in 1967 and was not designed to accommodate today’s technology. The inadequacies make doing business more difficult, something Hunts Point operators generally attest. As such, pushing for a market upgrade is a necessary effort.

With the future of the market a topic at hand, Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce Exchange, would prefer a broader reconsideration of Hunts Point as an institution. He says that, while there is no obvious fix, incorporating a means to revitalize the street trade could contribute to the market’s long-term health.

As it is now, Fierman says costs and complications are keeping a significant number of former market customers from shopping the facility, which means wholesalers

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WHAT THEY ARE Saying



Harry Celentano,
Super Foodtown, Bronx, NY

The situation is dynamic. Some wholesalers have been investing in facilities off the market to expand their capabilities, often with specific goals, such as direct importing or servicing specific customers or sectors of the marketplace. In that way, the Hunts Point business is already reconfiguring, but beyond the market in the Bronx.

Michael Armata, buyer and salesman at E. Armata, says when ups and downs in produce availability have been especially pronounced, wholesalers become an especially valuable resource.

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WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*



We keep increasing every year — more stores on board and more volume. We're doing more sales two weeks out, further commitments with customers, if that helps them.

Michael Armata, E. Armata Inc.,
Bronx, NY

"A lot of the spikes have been very drastic, and it makes it very difficult for the retailers," says Armata. "It's hard for them to predict and promote. So, we have to make sure we're really on top of it, talking to our shippers and making sure we're relaying the information properly to our customers."

At the same time, Hunts Point customers have been asking for more support as they struggle with issues ranging from high rents to scarce labor. As a result, the demand for delivery has become a bigger issue, Armata says.

"We're tremendously expanding in delivery," he says. "We keep increasing every year — more stores on board and more volume. We're doing more sales two weeks out, further commitments with customers, if that helps them. We're trying to be creative to help them with the swings in the market so that we can be an asset to them. There's a lot of times when pricing out of New York could be very good and aggressive, and it can be a great opportunity. And when it's short, you know we'll have it."

THE CHANGING SCENE

At D'Arrigo, the company remains focused on what has always made the operation successful, says Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications, D'Arrigo New York. "Ever since our company was founded, it's always been incremental change and incremental growth that made us successful."

"We're chugging along, looking at the incremental growth and what changes make sense right now," she adds. "Every year, you have to reevaluate, look in the mirror, and say, is our vision still realistic? Is the atmosphere of the industry, is the atmosphere of New York City, is the atmosphere of the market still the same? Do we need to make adjust-



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Hunts Point Produce remains essential to the produce buying community, offering unmatched access to one of the world's largest consumer markets. As an open terminal market occupying 113 acres and housing 27 merchants, it allows buyers to source fresh produce from a diverse network of trusted growers and shippers from around the world.

The combination of location, sourcing, and experience makes Hunts Point an irreplaceable resource in today's produce industry. "Many businesses are family-owned and operated, bringing generations of hands-on experience, deep product knowledge, and trusted relationships to offer buyers added value," says Stephanie Tramutola, director of marketing and administration at A&J Produce Corp.

The sheer volume and pace of Hunts Point means freshness and value for buyers. "We turn our inventory three to four times a week," says Ira Nathel, president and owner of Nathel & Nathel. "We're all about the turn. We don't wait for the market to react - we sell what we have today because we have more coming tomorrow."

FIVE KEY AREAS HIGHLIGHT THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF THOSE WHO SHOP HUNTS POINT

ACCESS TO FRESH PRODUCT

Hunts Point's location means it's accessible to the entire Northeastern U.S. region. "We are centrally located in a region with a large, concentrated population," says Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce and co-president of the Hunts Point Wholesale Market Board. "We serve an extensive geographic area from New York City to upstate New York to Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and even to Boston."

Nathel explains with increasing delivery service offered by many Hunts Point merchants, buyers who don't want to drive to New York City can call in and order. "We ship it to them," he says. "We are their warehouse and being their warehouse, we are also their eyes. They trust we'll send them good product."

Product availability is a critical component of procurement where timing and freshness equal money. "Our customers benefit from instant access to product, whether filling last-minute orders, replacing delayed shipments, or responding to demand spikes," says Tramutola. "When dealing with perishable items, especially during peak seasons, holidays, or weather disruptions, this level of product availability is what truly sets Hunts Point apart. As wholesalers, it's our duty to ensure our customers keep their shelves stocked and operations running smoothly."

The cost of warehousing is tremendous in New York City and the boroughs, explains Fierman. "The beauty of Hunts Point is our customers can shop multiple times a week and have continual availability of fresh product on a daily basis without the cost of storing it."

FIVE REASONS TO SHOP HUNTS POINT

1. Expect Great Quality
2. Immediate Product Availability
3. Variety
4. Generations Of Experience
5. Personalized Service

PRODUCT VARIETY AND VALUE

The market provides everything from staple to specialty items. "Product variety is extremely



important,” says Tramutola. “At Hunts Point, the breadth of offerings is unmatched from traditional, staple items to specialty produce.”

Hunts Point also provides choice in who the buyer does business with. “If I sell a buyer some strawberries and they don’t like my berries today, then tomorrow they can go to someone else on the market,” says Nathel. “That’s another great benefit for them.”

Buyers can find quality product for a reasonable price on a consistent basis. “The market has always been economics 101 — supply and demand,” says Fierman. “We always have good supply and demand with competitive pricing. And, another difference between Hunts Point and direct is that buyers only take what they need. It reduces shrink dramatically.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE

In the city that never sleeps, Hunts Point also rarely sleeps, with many merchants offering almost 24/7 available service. “In general, the market pretty much runs from Sunday morning until Friday late continually,” says Fierman.

Offering great service to support customers is a Hunts Point tenet. “The customer is our friend,” says Nathel. “We want to give the highest customer service, so buyers want to shop with us.”

Hunts Point merchants offer specialized services, including delivery and repacking, to meet the unique needs of each customer. “As wholesalers, we act as trusted middlemen, bridging the gap between growers and buyers with flexibility and precision,” says Tramutola. “This level of support helps cus-

tomers streamline their operations, reduce waste, and keep shelves stocked with fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables.”

Delivery service is common in the market, including different types. “In addition to our bigger trucks, we use sprinter vans to deliver small fill-in orders,” says Nathel. “It’s a lot more efficient, and we can still take care of the customer.”

Some market merchants offer in-store retail services. “We, along with a few others, offer retail merchandisers for customers,” says Nathel.

GENERATIONAL EXPERTISE

The knowledge customers gain from Hunts Point merchants is incredibly valuable, offering real-time insights into market trends, pricing, and availability. “We guide customers to make informed decisions,” says Tramutola. “This expertise helps buyers manage inventory, adapt quickly to demand, and uphold quality standards. In a fast-paced industry, this level of guidance provides a clear competitive edge.”

The products available at the market reflect the expertise. “We know what’s available at any given time and what’s going to be good for our customers,” says Fierman. “We’re sourcing and offering products based on our experience. It’s what we’ve done generationally.”

Many Hunts Point companies are family-owned and operated and in the third or fourth generation of management. Nathel shares that particularly the newer generations at the market are vested in sharing information. “They’re very savvy about post-

ing product information on social media,” he says. “For example, when our Sycamore honeydew label becomes available or cherries are going to hit a great-buy price, they let customers know it’s a great time to buy and promote.”

STRONG SOURCE RELATIONSHIPS

Daily contact with customers, shippers, and growers around the world allows Hunts Point merchants to stay ahead of changes in market conditions. “As wholesalers meeting constant demand, Hunts Point merchants are fortunate to have strong relationships with growers and shippers,” says Tramutola. “This allows us to source fresh produce during any given growing season. Our global network ensures our customers can depend on us for consistency, quality, and variety every day of the year.”

Wholesaler relationships with shippers keep the market in supply, adds Fierman. “Without relationships, at any given time, someone can be sold out,” he says. “But I know if I call my shippers even if it’s a hot market, they’ll give me product based on our relationship. We’re never without product. We really value our grower-shipper relationships. Those growing product put a lot of blood sweat and tears into the farms, and we admire what they do.”

Market pricing on average is cheaper than most direct-buy pricing, according to Nathel, due in great part to grower relationships. “Although there are fluctuations at times,” he says. “Our great pricing is due to how we work through our relationships with our shippers as well as the volume we buy. We also work with shippers to help negotiate special sales or deals for specific customers at certain times for promotion.”





WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*



Every year, you're having to reevaluate, look in the mirror and say, is our vision still realistic? Is the atmosphere of the industry, is the atmosphere of New York City, is the atmosphere of the market still the same? Do we need to make adjustments? It's been a year of making revisions as markets have changed and buying habits have changed.

Gabriela D'Arrigo,
D'Arrigo New York



ments? It's been a year of making revisions as markets have changed and buying habits have changed."

Even if some customers do, and will continue to, walk the market, others don't.

"Delivery is going much heavier, which we were prepared for," says D'Arrigo. "But it's now how do we build out our systems to be sophisticated enough, yet simple enough, for all our customers to use, to be able to place orders online, then go immediately into our inventory so we can be as efficient as possible. The foot traffic is going to become less and less."

Delivery includes opportunities, but also challenges. "It makes it more complicated," says John Thomas Bonomolo, director of operations and administration, A&J Produce Corp. "We have seven trucks and try to fit it all into a reasonable route and time slot. It's not easy to make that route."

As it considered how the market is evolving, Katzman decided to add a full organic department. "That's been our biggest operational change, so we have a full line of organics now, fruit and veg," Katzman says. "We've gotten to work with some new suppliers, which doesn't happen often since we've been doing this for a bit on most commodities, and we've also gotten to expand our line with some of our current suppliers, where we were only buying conventional, maybe a little organic before, and now we can carry a full line. It's been quite a fun year that way."

Katzman says the growth of organic sales to consumers has been good to see, as are improvements on the growing end that have

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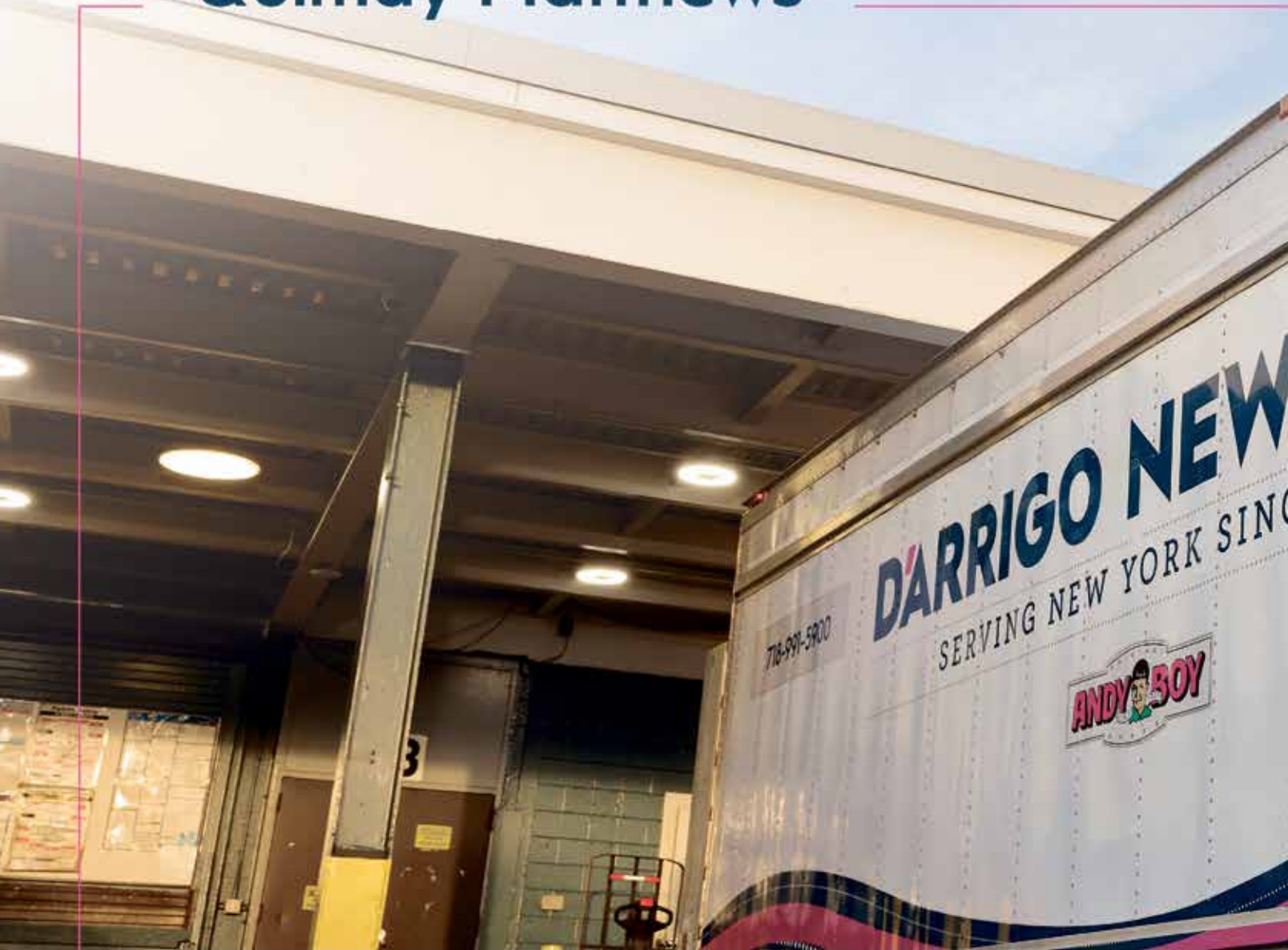
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PRODUCE BUSINESS / JULY 2025 / 51

Meet the Team

Quimay Matthews



Driving
Efficiency



Firm and organized, our Logistics Foreman, Quimay Matthews runs a tight dock. During his twenty years at D'Arrigo New York, he worked his way up from porter to truck driver to his current logistics management position. "The impact that I would like to leave is through hard work and dedication you can move up at D'Arrigo." If you need a problem solved, Quimay handles it.

D'ARRIGO
NEW YORK

narrowed the price difference between organic and conventional produce.

"Everybody's focused on healthy eating, and nothing's healthier than fresh fruits and vegetables, so I think it's been really great to see people just getting back and getting excited, whether it's about organics or fresh fruits and vegetables in general."

As part of its business, Katzman has actively helped customers with merchandisers for more than a decade, but when the company recently launched a distribution center in central New Jersey, it expanded that part of the business. The company will coordinate with retailers to create point-of-sale materials, as well as work with growers to market certain brands it sells.

"We have a bunch of merchandisers who work out of that facility," she says. "That's all focused on independent retail."

EYE ON ENVIRONMENT, NEXT GEN AND TECHNOLOGY

Emissions are another market issue, so A&J Produce Corp. has added electric containers to the operation as a more environmentally friendly storage alternative, but they are also more efficient, which saves the company fuel expenses.

In early spring, A&J accepted its first electric container, and Bonomolo says the company has six more coming.

Spring was busy with A&J, which also planned a June 27 charity event with the Hunts Point Alliance for Children, which included bringing kids in to tour the A&J Hunts Point facility and teaching them about the food supply chain and how a wholesale operation works.

Stephanie Tramutola, director of marketing and administration for A&J, characterized the initiative as a first and something A&J was excited to pull together.

On the technology side, Tramutola says Hunts Point market wholesalers have been looking at Pepper, an AI-based ordering system, and A&J has met with the company as it considers new and more effective ways to conduct operations.

Fierman says his company is launching a new app to give customers the ability to shop online. "It's sort of like shopping on Amazon."

With the app, customers who come in can place an order for pickup beforehand and not have to browse around the docks or wait until an order is organized. And they can also schedule a delivery.

New York wholesalers are also featuring more prepared items. For example, Rubin Bros. keeps adding items from existing and



new suppliers. More commodity vendors, Rubin says, are getting into the value-added arena and sending prepped items along so they can get the push through to retail.

In addition, CJ Brothers is working to upgrade systems in part to get ready for FSMA compliance. The challenge of being able to trace any product, not only back to a specific farm but to the section where each box was picked, is a challenge that is substantial, says Justin Leis, director of business development. Figuring out how to establish a tracking system, particularly on a market that still has a substantial number of cash customers, is no easy feat.

FURTHER AFIELD

Leis says the company has also become more global. "Imports are a big new focus for us," he says, explaining they're doing citrus, some mangos and dragon fruit.

"Citrus is from all over," says Leis. "Citrus is Morocco, South America. We're looking into South Africa, although South Africa has kind of been eliminated as a supplier to the U.S. because South Africa's got a 32% tariff, whereas Peru and all South America, it's just the base 10."

Dragon fruit is gaining generally and quickly, he says, with production in Ecuador and Mexico providing product. CJ is focused on off-season mangos, avoiding the Mexico season, then delving into Brazil in the fall and into Peru for the winter, an approach that is paying off.

On the restaurant end, tariffs have had an impact on the cost of goods coming in, as many New York foodservice operators offer cuisines and food from Europe and elsewhere in the world. As such, trade issues do have an impact. For Coosemans New York, which focuses on foodservice, 20% to 25% year-over-year price increases on some items have emerged due to tariffs.

"We're still moving the volume," says Peter Faraci, buyer/sales manager, Coosemans New York. "The volume didn't decrease, it increased."



Despite U.S. diners' fondness for world cuisine, supporting local farmers has become more prevalent in the New York restaurant sector. Ray Hernandez, buyer for Coosemans, says that supporting local agriculture was strong in New Jersey, where the department of agriculture is aggressive in its Jersey Fresh campaign, and more in restaurants.

"Within the last few years, you've seen the restaurants doing that," he says. "Farm to table, locally grown."

Charlie Badalamenti, operations manager, Coosemans, says many people regard local as being fresher and healthier. "And, at the same time, they're helping to support their communities," he says. "If you go out on Long Island, you see that everywhere."

For Coosemans, serving the foodservice trade is a matter of keeping up with the times. "It's a matter of expanding on what we've been doing," says Badalamenti, "reach out to new customers."

Given that Coosemans customers are heavily weighted toward foodservice, what the company offers has to be consistent, and the need to have a high level of trust has always been critical.

"As a company, we've concentrated on having a QC department and really getting the best product out of the store as is possible," says Faraci. "We have to know what is good, and what we can send to which customers. It's a customer service industry, last year and the last 30 years."

If anything, customer service is becoming an even more demanding part of the business, he says. "You're basically in control of their business, and what you do on a nightly basis to get their order out the door affects them tremendously. The trust factor is huge."

"The salesman we have working downstairs build up that rapport, not only by texting, but getting on the phone and speaking to the actual customers to service their needs. That's huge."

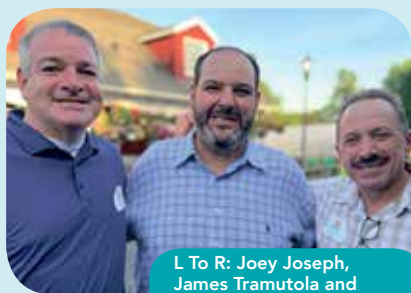
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John 'Jeff' Young

Buyer/sales, A&J Produce



Jeff Young



L To R: Joey Joseph, James Tramutola and Jeff Young at an EPC BBQ



L To R: Jason Weiler, Jeff Young, Joey Joseph and Victor Joseph at an EPC Metlife event

Highly respected and well-liked. A gregarious personality made every sales transaction an adventure. A person for whom business wasn't just about transactions — it was about people. These are a few of the ways colleagues describe John 'Jeff' Young, who passed away April 1, 2025, after a 28-year career with A&J Produce Corp., a wholesaler on the Hunts Point Produce Market in Bronx, NY. Born and raised in Pompton Plains, NJ, moving later to build a life in nearby Newfoundland, NJ. Young graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing from William Paterson University of New Jersey in 1984. He first worked in the produce industry as a sales manager for Johnson Associated Fruit Company in Rockaway, NJ, from 1987-1997. Then, he embarked on a successful career in buying and sales at A&J Produce, focusing on citrus and stone fruit, from 1997 until his passing at age 62.

"Thirty-five years a friend," says Myra Gordon, A&J Consultant and former executive administrative director of the Hunts Point Produce Market. "Jeff and I ate lunch together at Noon around the large kitchen table each Tuesday. I spent time with him at the Eastern Produce Council's Dinner Gala every year I attended. Everyone in attendance came to chat with Jeff. On the phone, it was obvious from his conversations that the knowledge he provided about the items' quality, pricing, and availability came from a "straight talker." It was obvious from his conversations that not only was he highly respected, but he was well-liked by all who had dealings with him."

Brad Blaine, sales manager for Sunkist Growers, at the citrus grower/shipper's Long Valley, NJ, location, says, "Jeff was a true friend and partner to Sunkist and all our growers during his time with A&J. He had an in-depth knowledge of the citrus industry and an innate ability to read markets and trends, thus always putting his company in a strong position. His gregarious personality made every sales transaction an adventure, and his storytelling abilities are legendary."

Incredibly fortunate to have called Young a friend and colleague is how James Tramutola, buyer/sales at A&J Produce Corp., says he feels. "For 14 years, I had the privilege of working alongside him every single day. He taught me so much about the produce business, but more importantly, he showed me the value of building genuine connections. For Jeff, business wasn't just about transactions — it was about people. His passion for what he did was undeniable, and he made the work feel easier simply by being himself. Jeff was also an incredible storyteller. He had a way of turning even the most routine conversations into something memorable. Whether we were in the office or at a business dinner, he brought laughter and warmth to every moment. One of the things I admired most about Jeff was his incredible memory. He never forgot a face, a story, or a detail about anyone he met. Walking through a convention with him was like accompanying a celebrity — he couldn't go more than a few steps without running into someone he knew. And the remarkable part was, he always remembered everything about them. The office will never be the same without Jeff. But the lessons he taught me, the stories he shared, and the kindness he showed will stay with me always."

Al Weiler, Thomas, James, and John Robert Jr. Tramutola, A&J Produce Corp. owners, say Jeff wore many hats. "He was our doctor, stockbroker, newscaster, colleague and friend. Anytime we needed anything, we went to Jeff. He knew everything about what was going on here at A&J and outside. His wisdom and guidance were a constant source of support. Whether we needed professional advice or just a friendly ear, Jeff was always there. His kindness, generosity, and humor made him more than just a colleague — he was truly a part of the family. We will miss him dearly."

Young leaves behind his wife, Connie, and their two daughters, Jillian and Cassidy.

Area Companies Serve Clients By Keeping Eyes On The Prize

NEW YORK METRO PRODUCE COMPANIES SHAPE SERVICES FOR RETAIL AND FOODSERVICE CUSTOMERS THROUGH A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE END CONSUMER.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Moving beyond the duties of receiving and jobbing, New York and New Jersey's distributors and importers provide a wealth of support to help their customers serve the final consumer.

"We should always have the end consumer in mind when building programs to drive sales through distribution," says Vic Savanello, vice president merchandising and business development for Katzman Distribution in Burlington, NJ. "This means we need to deliver top-quality products that drive increased sales and reduce shrink for our customers."

An understanding of the end consumer is crucial, agrees Jonathan Steffy, vice president and general manager at Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA. "The more each of us in the supply chain can understand or anticipate the



Katzman Distribution, Burlington, NJ, offers a multitude of retail services, such as in-store merchandising guidance, execution and training, and has a boots-on-the-ground merchandising team.

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN DISTRIBUTION

needs and notions of consumers, the more we can help growers/shippers connect their products with the right market niche," Steffy notes. "We can help retailers delight their target shoppers with the right grades, sizes, variety, price points, attributes, and merchandising strategies for those products."

Being adaptive in the sales approach to help cater to the target consumer is also important, says Angela Fessler, vice president of sales at Vision Global Group in Wyckoff,

NJ. "At the end of the day, every single one of us is a consumer of fresh produce — what drives our purchasing decisions?"

Ami Ben-Dror, chief executive of BDA/Dorot Farms headquartered in Melville, NY, looks at the end consumer and then works backward. "I'm constantly figuring out what we need to develop to best meet their needs," he says. "I go into the stores and visit customers, talking with each one to find out what their customers say. By learning about their business, it gives me a great perspective. At the end of the day, the end customer is the expert."

Having a touchpoint with the consumer helps distributors stay focused on what works for their customers. "We're in the people business, not the produce business," says Anthony Serafino, president of EXP Group in North Bergen, NJ. "When you're in the people business, your goal is to understand the clientele. We need to understand the entire supply chain and that involves understanding the consumer. In the end, our business is to help our customers serve their customers."

Ben Friedman, owner and CEO of Riviera Produce of Englewood, NJ, explains it feels good to be in touch with what consumers are doing. "Whether helping with a seasonal menu change or connecting customers with a farmer who has a great product, we strive to be that connection between the dirt and the plate."

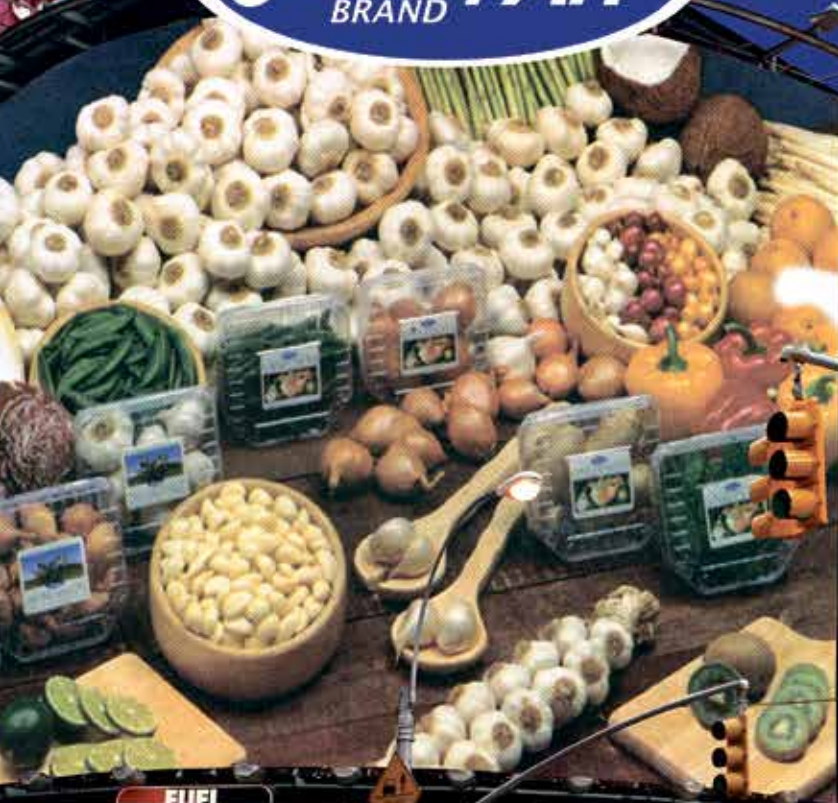


Assisting stores at point-of-sale with merchandising, promotion or ad planning is also an important service that distributors and importers offer retailers. This photo shows the work of Four Seasons Produce, Ephrata, PA, in the Rising Tide Natural Market, Glen Cove, NY.

PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS PRODUCE



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INFORMATION LINK

Being connected to the consumer, as well as the rest of the supply chain, means developing communication channels. “The more information I get, the better to help me communicate with produce managers and customers,” says Marc Goldman, produce director for Morton Williams Supermarkets in New York City with 17 stores. “When our produce managers call our distributor, they’re finding out how the product is and what we should know about it. It’s good information, and it helps us

better serve our customers by being knowledgeable.”

Fessler says consumers’ purchasing decisions are based on many factors, such as weather, seasonality trends, holidays, special occasions and economics, and Vision Global Group offers comprehensive market updates on each commodity to help inform customers about crop trends and future forecasts that impact pricing, availability and quality.

“The more you know, the more you sell,” she says. “We work with our customers to take advantage of peak-seasonality trends — tran-

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

In the end, our business is to help our customers serve their customers.

Anthony Serafino, EXP Group,
North Bergen, NJ

sitioning sourcing regions, varieties, and sizing to cater to all the factors impacting consumers’ purchasing decisions.”

To get consistent supply, you must have great communication, agrees Ben-Dror. “Good communication is needed all the way through the chain, from the grower through supermarket,” he says. “It’s very important to be in touch with the farms to know exactly what’s going on. Then we can better help our customers know what is happening and how it might benefit or affect their business and customers.”

Serafino says when EXP staff visits customers, “we get to know them and their customers.”

“We help them grow their business because their success is our success. It’s truly a partnership. Produce is a team sport. Everyone has to work together to provide the best supply chain, ultimately for the end consumer.”

Riviera has become valuable to customers for its constant communication with the chef or purchasing manager, says Friedman. “Every week, we check in to find out what their pain points are and where they specifically need help. We offer a solution to the chef and purchasing agent to get through constant supply chain hiccups.”

FINDING PRODUCT

Providing a wide variety of products based on an understanding of the consumer marketplace is also key. “Product variety and availability are vital to our business,” says Goldman. “There are certain things we need our wholesalers to provide, such as organics, to have the variety we need to satisfy our customers. We rely on our wholesalers to know what we need and provide it to us consistently.”

Lamberto Jose Martinez, head of produce at Twin City Supermarket in Plainfield, NJ, with 10 stores, says his supermarket must carry almost everything. “Our customers require a lot of variety and especially items from their specific country of origin,” he says. “Our distributors do a good job of having the variety

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Auerback has prominent placement at the Stew Leonard's store in Paramus, NJ. "We highly value always being able to give our customers a high-quality product, and our customers know that," says Bruce Klein, marketing manager of Maurice A. Auerbach.

we need. It's important to the competitiveness of our store to have the variety our customers want."

Helping customers procure the right products to meet consumer needs is a valued service. "We constantly help customers help find unique items," says Bruce Klein, marketing manager for Maurice A. Auerbach in Secaucus, NJ. "For example, we may have a customer ask for specialty radicchio, and we procure it for them on a special order basis. That's one thing we do really well. Another example is black garlic, which is especially demanded by our foodservice customers because chefs often want something unique."

According to Savanello, Katzman has strong relationships with leading growers, which allows the distributor to access difficult-to-find assortments and varieties. "We've been asked to source many specialty items for our retail partners and pride ourselves on delivering on our promise to be a partner that gets it done," he says.

"We also partner with many of our industry's category leaders as forward distribution partners, to bring their nationally recognized products to the New York market."

Four Seasons Produce helps retailers access a huge selection of items across both conventional and organic offerings. On the conven-

tional side, that could be high-end varieties of berries, grapes, apples and tropical fruit, says Steffy. On the organic side, the variety expands broadly with special, unique, or heirloom vegetables, tomatoes and citrus. "Retailers can tap into this broad variety that Four Seasons Produce offers in a low-risk way to experiment with what their customers will respond well to."

CUSTOMIZING ITEMS

Friedman of Riviera says the demand for unique and specialty produce is booming. "The increase of Mediterranean trends, especially in foodservice, is amazing. We're carrying a lot of different products to meet that demand."

Dorot offers rainbow carrots especially for foodservice companies. "Colors are very trendy now," says Ben-Dror. "These unique items are important because they provide additional options for the category, giving our retail customers more to offer to shoppers, and our foodservice customers something fun and unique to offer their chefs."

One of Dorot's biggest foodservice sector items is its jumbo carrot. "The quality, size, color and food safety of this product is very important for our foodservice customers," says Ben-Dror. "Our consistent supply, with consistent quality product, is crucial so customers



Ben Friedman, president of Riviera Produce of Englewood, NJ, is known as "Produce Master" on Instagram. He posts on social media twice a week to talk about what's new and what's trending in the world of fresh produce.

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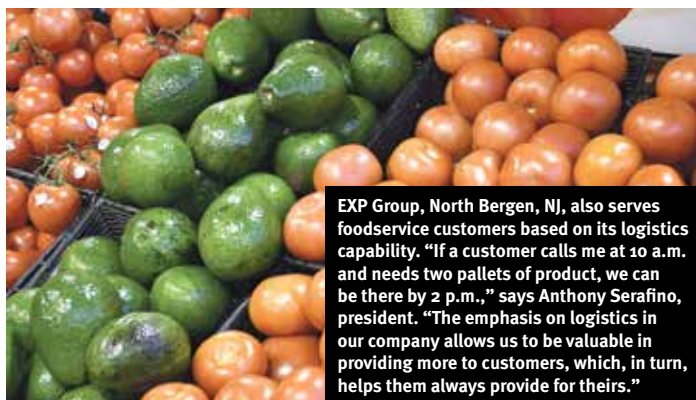
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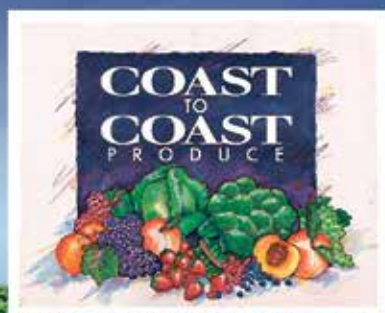
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PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTOS

EXP Group, North Bergen, NJ, also serves foodservice customers based on its logistics capability. "If a customer calls me at 10 a.m. and needs two pallets of product, we can be there by 2 p.m.," says Anthony Serafino, president. "The emphasis on logistics in our company allows us to be valuable in providing more to customers, which, in turn, helps them always provide for theirs."

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WHAT THEY ARE Saying



At the end of the day, every single one of us is a consumer of fresh produce — what drives our purchasing decisions?

Angela Fessler, Vision Global Group, Wyckoff, NJ

can count on product being the same size, quality, color and taste as what they expect."

Variety also comes in the form of local offerings. "We're filling the need to deliver local produce on a refrigerated truck right outside the restaurant door," says Friedman. "With our local program, our customers let us know what they want to incorporate in their local program. We call ourselves the friend of the farmer. For example, in the summer, we carry over 30 different Jersey Fresh items."

Variety also relates to packaging options. Auerbach offers private label packs for some customers, and a variety of packaging options, including net bags, plastic trays, form-filled bags and more, to help serve the needs of all their customers, says Klein.

FREEING TIME WITH DELIVERY

By offering delivery, distributors free time for stores and operators to focus on customers. "Delivery is a huge portion of how we serve customers," says EXP's Serafino. "Adequately serving our customer means helping them efficiently receive the products they need for their customer."

"The service of delivering directly to our supermarket and maintaining a good temperature is very valuable," says Twin City's Martinez. "This helps us easily have high-quality product to offer our customers."

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Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA, can help retailers with the right grades, sizes, variety, price points, attributes, and merchandising strategies for products. This photo shows a SugarBee Apple display at Nanuet, NJ, A Matter of Health, store.

Katzman delivers products to its retail partners every day of the week through a fleet of refrigerated trucks with real-time temperature monitoring and GPS tracking.

Off-day deliveries, such as on a Saturday or even holiday, are important. “For example, our distributor, Four Seasons, makes deliveries to us even when other companies are closed,” says Goldman of Morton Williams. “Knowing we have reliable delivery allows us to focus our attention on the customer and not worry about our product coming. Especially if a customer requested something, we want to be sure it’s going to come.”

Flexibility is another aspect of the business. “More and more customers want delivery because it helps them better serve their customers,” says Klein. “They can focus their time in the store or operation and they have flexibility because they’re not planning so far in advance. For most retail customers, we offer next-day delivery.”

To help foodservice customers serve their patrons, Riviera runs second and third deliveries, Saturday deliveries and advance booking Sunday deliveries. “This is key to helping our customers service their customers because they can inventory less, but still have fresh, available product,” says Friedman. “By responding on a dime and sending extra deliveries, it keeps our customers in product for their customer.

We also tailor the delivery time to what the customer wants. They may not want to wait for a 2 p.m. delivery for all their product, so we will deliver at 8 a.m., or vice versa.”

EXP also serves foodservice customers based on its logistics capability. “If a customer calls me at 10 a.m. and needs two pallets of product, we can be there by 2 p.m.,” says Serafino. “The emphasis on logistics in our company allows us to be valuable in providing more to customers, which, in turn, helps them always provide for theirs.”

IN-STORE SUPPORT

Assisting stores at point-of-sale with merchandising, promotion or ad planning is also important. “We help advise retailers on ad options since we know the product,” says Klein.

Four Seasons Produce offers merchandising services to many of its partner customers that can range from consultative visits and trouble-shooting — such as shrink, margin, sales, flow, assortment — to equipment recommendations to department resets to trainings to display builds and more.

“Ad writing, SRPs, promotional support, and display contests are offered to our partner retailers,” says Steffy. “Additionally, annual planning calendars, quarterly seasonal merchandising content, and weekly market

news updates help produce directors, buyers and managers peak around corners so they can plan and execute at a high level.”

Katzman Distribution also offers a multitude of retail services, such as in-store merchandising guidance, execution and training, says Savanello. “Our boots-on-the-ground merchandising team is made up of long-time produce professionals with experience working for many of the top retail organizations in the country. Whether it’s transitioning a department at change of season, or helping a retail partner execute a refreshed go-to-market strategy, we are the partner you want to have.”

Vision Global Group supports customers with a variety of tools. “We provide a wide range of value-added options, hot-buy pricing and promotional periods for high-volume movement, as well as marketing material outlining product specifications,” says Fessler.

OPTIMIZING QUALITY

Customers need to know their end consumers are receiving quality product. “At the end of the day, customers find value from us because they know where the product is coming from,” says Serafino. “Quality merchandise is the most important thing for us. Whether you’re dealing with foodservice or retail, quality is reputation. So, do customers



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PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN DISTRIBUTION

Katzman Distribution, Burlington, NJ, delivers products to its retail partners every day of the week through a fleet of refrigerated trucks with real-time temperature monitoring and GPS tracking.

want to trust their reputation to just anyone? No. Our customers know what we stand for: quality, service, brand, culture. These are the four pillars of our company.”

The 70,000 square foot state-of-the-art Katzman Distribution facility in Burlington, NJ, is divided into three separate temperature zones with full truck and railroad receiving capabilities, according to Savanello.

“All products are inspected for quality, spec and grade at point of receiving and throughout their brief period of time in our building,” he says. “We are FSMA compliant, with complete case-level traceability, and SQF-certified, following the strictest protocols to ensure food safety. Our strong commitment to inbound quality and maintaining an uninterrupted cold chain throughout our distribution process ensures the best quality available on our retailers’ stands and in the consumers’ refrigerators at home.”

Dorot Farms starts by ensuring the quality and taste of its Fresh & Sweet carrots, so its customers are happy. “When you have control of all aspects of the product, from farming to logistics to customer service, you have a better understanding,” says Ben-Dror. “There is a lot to pay attention to and handle the right way to ensure quality, consistent product.”

One of the ways Four Seasons Produce helps retailers and their customers is by aggregating demand across many multi-store groups and scores of single stores. “This allows all of those grocers to benefit from fast inventory turns for excellent freshness and strong fill-rates from all of the arrivals coming in on a large scale,” says Steffy. “Better freshness

means longer shelf life for the consumer and more trust and repeat sales for the retailer.”

Auerbach brings in full truckloads of product and amortizes the freight cost over different items. “That allows us to be price competitive while still offering excellent quality,” says Klein. “We highly value always being able to give our customers a high-quality product, and our customers know that.”

Confidence in the product delivered is a significant factor for customers who don’t want to disappoint consumers. “If you’re buying from California, you won’t get it for five days, but if you’re buying from us, you get it the next day,” says Klein. “Quality control is a huge consideration. You’re getting product that’s been screened through our screening process. We back up the product we send out.”

EMPLOYING TECHNOLOGY

Distributors and importers increasingly use technology to connect with customers and even consumers. Auerbach uses some of the proprietary systems of its customers to ensure orders are seamless, which allows for streamlining of orders, says Klein.

EXP is on social media and uses an app for its clientele to order digitally. “We are working on more strongly emphasizing this area,” says Serafino. “We have invested a lot in technology that benefits our customers, from ERP to quality control to ordering. The business is so much more than just selling merchandise, and technology is an increasingly important tool for us.”

Vision Global Group has a presence on various social media platforms, highlighting its product line and branding. It also shares

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Good communication is needed all the way through the chain, from the grower through supermarket. It’s very important to be in touch with the farms to know exactly what’s going on.

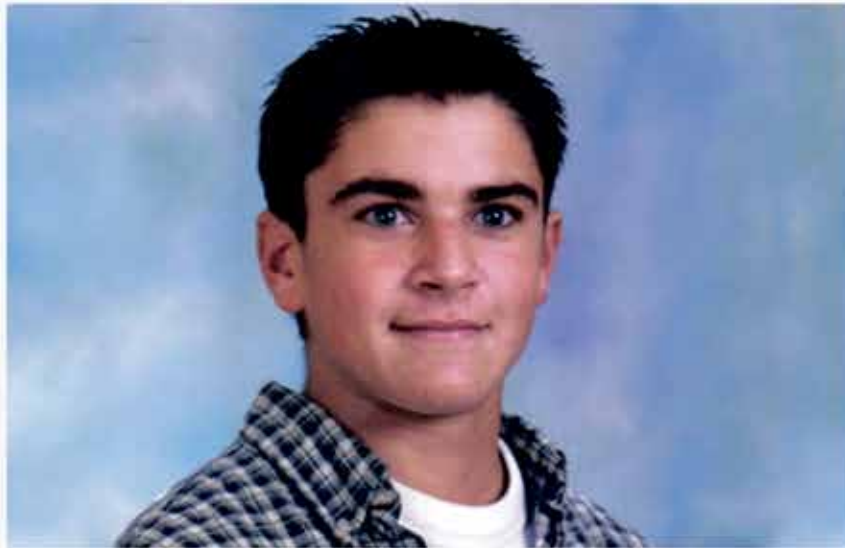
Ami Ben-Dror, BDA/Dorot Farms, Melville, NY

promotional material and market updates to keep the public informed, says Fessler.

“Engagement is the goal. In addition, our branded bags and boxes include a QR code linked to our company website, where consumers can directly access our content to learn more about the beautiful produce they’re enjoying.”

Riviera Produce uses a variety of online tools. “We work with Pepper to drive our website and mobile app,” says Friedman. “Our app gives customers information on what’s available. I’ve become known as ‘Produce Master B’ on Instagram. I’m posting on social media twice a week to talk about what’s new and what’s trending. It’s important to keep the customer updated through social media as well as the old-fashioned method of having our sales staff reach out directly to customers.”

pb



Louis J. Acompora died on March 25, 2000 from a condition known as commotio cordis, which resulted from a blow to his chest while playing lacrosse during his first high school game. He was only 14 years old.

BE AWARE. BE PREPARED.

Undetected and Unexpected Sudden Cardiac Arrest (SCA) is Claiming our Youth

Cardiovascular disease is the second leading medical cause of death in children and adolescents in the United States. Data estimates that 1 in 300 youth have an underlying heart condition that could lead to sudden cardiac arrest. Affected youth usually appear healthy and normal...until they have an arrest. The good news is that early detection is possible. Heart conditions are treatable and young lives can be saved. Knowledge of the observations and actions that can make the difference between life and death is key to a successful outcome.

Early detection is crucial. The Louis J. Acompora Memorial Foundation promotes the early detection of heart conditions in youth through heart screenings. Frequently, the warning signs and symptoms of a heart condition in youth go undetected. Look for screenings in your area www.parentheartwatch.org. The increased availability of publicly

These steps will save a life. Please take the time to know them and learn CPR.

1 Early Recognition

- Collapsed and unresponsive
- Seizure-like activity
- Gaspings, gurgling, snoring or labored breathing noises

2 Early Access to 9-1-1

- Call 9-1-1 and follow emergency dispatcher's instructions

3 Early CPR

- Begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately

4 Early Defibrillation

- Immediately retrieve and use an automated external defibrillator (AED) as soon as possible to restore the heart to its normal rhythm

5 Early Advanced Care

- Emergency Medical Services (EMS) responders begin advanced life support including additional resuscitative measures and transfer to a hospital

accessible automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in schools and at school-sponsored athletic events will dramatically increase the probability that youth and adults alike will survive a sudden cardiac arrest. Knowing and properly executing the critically time-urgent links of the Cardiac Chain-of-Survival can help save a life.

Along with increased accessible AEDs and implementing Emergency Action planning protocols, preparedness will be greatly improved. In June of 2002, Governor George Pataki of New York signed Louis' Law, which requires AEDs in all New York public schools. To date 127 lives have been saved as a direct result of this law. Each time a vibrant, seemingly healthy child suffers a SCA, the Louis J. Acompora Memorial Foundation mission of protecting youth from SCA and preventable Sudden Cardiac

Death (SCD) becomes even more critical. We know it happens and we need to collectively ensure others realize it by sharing our mission and vision.



House.....Units.....Phone

A&J Produce Corp.	126-144, 450-463	718-589-7877
Armata, E. Inc.	106-125,149-151	
	369-370,372-376	718-991-5600
Best Tropical Produce	237, 400-402	718-861-3131
Cochran Robert, T Co., Inc.	408-412	718-991-2340
C and J Brothers, Inc.	238-241, 258-259,	
	266-268	718-991-5050
Coosemans New York, Inc.	242-244, 249	718-328-3060
D'Arrigo New York... ..	301-320, 323-330,	
	332-336	718-991-5900
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.....	247-248, 250-257	718-893-1640
Food Barn / Fitz & Pal.....	31B.....	718-617-3800
FresCo LLC.....	153-157	718-589-5000
Georgallas Tomato & Produce	447-449	718-842-6317
Gold Medal Produce.....	163-168	718-893-5554
Grub Market /		
Mendez Int'l. Tropical Foods	152,158-162	718-893-0100
Henry Haas, Inc.	424.....	718-378-2550
Issam Kanawi	331.....	718-542-2217
Lee Loi Industries, Inc.	234-236	718-542-4115
Mabijo	271.....	718-893-1640
Margiotta, J Company, Inc.	100-105	718-378-5800
Nathel & Nathel, Inc.	347-350, 352-365, 367-368.....	
	464-468	718-991-6050
National Farm Wholesale Corp.	437.....	718-617-6229
Pan Hellenic Food Corp.	434-436, 440-444	718-328-8654
Porricelli.....	342.....	718-893-6000
Renella, J. Produce, Inc.....	351.....	718-991-4210
Right Choice Papers Inc.....	366.....	718-328-0011
Rubin Bros. Produce Corp.	147-148, 269-270, 272-274.....	718-589-3200
S. Katzman Produce, Inc.....	200-233, 260-265,	
	403-407, 423-433	718-991-4700
Top Banana LLC.....	413-420, 438, 439.....	718-328-6700
Trucco, Inc.	337-341, 343-344	718-893-3060
Yola Produce	371.....	516-292-8821



Hunts Point Produce Market

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In the U.S., peaches are one of the top impulse items in the produce department, with a shopper purchasing about 4 pounds of peaches per year.

Peaches Make Autumn Sweet

Fall peaches are an impulse item that retailers should capitalize on.

BY K.O. MORGAN

U.S. fall peaches are known as late-season peaches and are harvested outside the peak peach season, from late September to mid-October.

Fall peaches are primarily grown in states with warm climates and a longer growing season, such as California, Georgia and South Carolina, which allows for consumers to enjoy a continuous supply of the fresh fruit.

No shortages of fall peaches are expected this fall, but that can be hard to predict since weather and growing conditions can impact availability. All growers and retailers can do is closely monitor the situation and adjust accordingly.

"We have a long way to go until fall peaches are harvested, but on paper, we are planning to harvest them through mid-October. So far, this spring, peaches have been

flavorful, and the overall quality has been excellent. Hopefully, Mother Nature is kind to us and this trend will continue into autumn," says Kevin Steiner, director of business development, Mountain View Fruit, Reedley, CA.

"2025 is shaping up to be a banner year for Georgia peaches. Thanks to excellent growing conditions and a strong bloom, we're expecting a robust harvest of high-quality fruit," predicts

Matthew Kulinski, director of marketing, Georgia Department of Agriculture, headquartered in Atlanta. "Georgia growers are reporting healthy yields, rich flavor profiles, and the kind of vibrant color and firmness that retailers and consumers have come to associate with our peaches. It's a perfect year to bet on Georgia," he says.

"In our market area, we rely heavily on



Mountain View Fruit, Reedley, CA, has developed the Autumn Ripe label so that retailers can transition displays from the Summertime and Summeripe brands to Autumnripe. Mountain View can provide retailers with a full complement of autumn-themed merchandising bins, materials, and digital tools.

southern peaches,” adds Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations, Harps Food Stores, Inc., Springdale, AR.

Fall peaches tend to be an impulse item that retailers should capitalize on. Choosing tried-and-true peach variety favorites and introducing consumers to new varieties are important in order to drive sales.

“This fall, you should see a strong presence of popular freestone varieties, such as Flame Prince, August Prince and Autumn Prince,” says Kulinski. “These varieties are known for their exceptional juiciness, full flavor and versatility, from fresh eating to baking. And this year, they’re arriving with great size and quality.”

Roberts says many of Harps’ fall peaches come from Titan Farms, and their Lori Anne variety is a customer favorite for consistent quality and flavor.

“We’ve also seen growing popularity with white flesh peaches, which offer a sweeter, lower-acid experience that appeals to a wide range of shoppers. And we look to finish the fall season strong with the Wawona variety, formerly known as Prima Gattie. It’s a fantastic late-season peach that gives us a great quality option to close out the season on a high note,” he says.

Steiner, of Mountain View Fruit, predicts that the big volume fall peaches will be Flame and SF 34 in September, Autumn Flame and

Prima Gattie in late September, and Autumn Rich through mid-October. There may also be new varieties in the works.

“We are constantly testing new varieties. But it’s important that the fruit is flavorful, and the timing must be right,” he says. Mountain View Fruit participates in breeding programs, with test blocks and a tasting center just steps away from its team office.

According to Kulinski, Georgia growers continuously work hand-in-hand with university researchers and horticulturists to develop more resilient, flavorful varieties that extend the harvest window. “There’s a growing interest in heat-tolerant peach trees and varieties that can better withstand unpredictable weather, while still delivering the signature Georgia flavor. Innovation is always rooted in taste, and Georgia remains at the forefront,” he says.

PUSH PEACH SALES AT THE RETAIL LEVEL

It is important for growers and distributors to work closely with retailers because produce managers are familiar with which peach varieties are most popular and what shoppers look for in a peach.

“In the United States, peaches are one of the top impulse items in the produce department, with a shopper purchasing about 4 pounds of peaches per year. At Mountain View Fruit, we want to make sure we have the right varieties shipping in the right windows to ensure the best quality and experience for the consumer. We are here to partner with and learn from our retailers, and this takes all of us working closely together to grow consumption. If we can help drive extra purchases with late-season fruit, this is a win for both the category and the retailer,” says Steiner.

Quality is the driving force when stocking peaches in the retail store. “Above all, we need a ripe peach,” says Roberts of Harp’s Food Stores. “Customers want fruit they can enjoy the same day they bring it home, and if the peach isn’t ready to eat, it creates disappointment. We recommend avoiding cold storage when possible and keeping peaches in the backroom, as opposed to the cooler. This helps to maintain the proper temperature for ripening.”

Fall offers many opportunities for retailers to push peach sales. Cross-merchandising is one approach, such as pairing peaches with fresh berries; bakery items, such as pound cake, shortcakes and pie shells; cheese from the deli; center store staples, such as honey, granola and canning supplies; and even wine.

“Cross-merchandising is key to increased peach sales in the fall,” says Kulinski. “Think peach salsa pairings, grilling displays with Georgia-grown poultry and Vidalia onions, or



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMIEE TENZEK PHOTO

Customers want fruit they can enjoy the same day they bring it home, and if the peach isn’t ready to eat, it creates disappointment. It is recommended that retailers avoid cold storage and keep peaches in the backroom, as opposed to the cooler.

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

In the United States, peaches are one of the top impulse items in the produce department, with a shopper purchasing about four pounds of peaches per year.

Kevin Steiner, Mountain View Fruit, Reedley, CA

If you can get that sweet smell in the air, it lifts not only peach sales, but the entire department.

Mike Roberts, Harps Food Stores, Inc., Springdale, AR

bundling peaches with shortcake and whipped cream for dessert-ready baskets.”

“Since peaches are such an impulse item, demos always help, and display location is crucial. Having a full, fresh display that is rotated frequently in a high-traffic area is a way to capitalize on additional sales,” adds Steiner.

In-store tastings, recipe cards using peaches, and seasonal signage are other ways to turn browsers into buyers. Planning promotions around peak harvest windows and working with trusted suppliers who understand retail needs and volume expectations can also increase fall peach sales.

Tote bagging peaches is another way to drive sales. “It’s one of our go-to strategies because it’s simple, effective, and increases both units and dollar sales. It’s convenient for the customers and boosts the overall ring at the registers,” says Roberts.

Educating shoppers on the sources of fall peaches can also increase fall peach sales. “Don’t underestimate the power of storytelling, so posting the history of a peach source can create loyal customers,” says Kulinski. “Our peaches from Georgia, for example, are tree-ripened, hand-picked, and shipped quickly to preserve that just-picked flavor. We encourage retail buyers to plan promotions around peak harvest windows and to work with trusted suppliers who understand retail needs and volume expectations.”

“There is a multitude of creative ways we



can partner with retailers to help push peach sales. As Labor Day approaches, Mountain View has developed the Autumn Ripe label so that retailers can transition displays from our Summertime and Summeripe brands to Autumnripe. We also have a full complement of autumn-themed merchandising bins, materials, and digital tools to help communicate to

the consumer that it’s still stone fruit season and our later peach varieties are full of flavor,” says Steiner.

But Roberts believes that one of the most effective selling tools is simply the aroma of ripe peaches. “If you can get that sweet smell in the air, it lifts not only peach sales, but the entire department,” he says. **pb**



There are many types of garlic products that retailers can offer, including fresh, elephant, purple garlic, plus both conventional and organic in peeled, minced, roasted, chopped, squeezable, and in olive oil garlic assortments. Chopped, packaged garlic is becoming more popular for convenience.

Promote Garlic for Taste and Convenience

International and ethnic cuisine popularity boosts demand for garlic.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

With its complex taste and easy availability, garlic continues its starring role as an essential ingredient.

Garlic's contribution can be spicy and pungent, savory and sweet, bold or subtle. Regardless, as an affordable flavor enhancer, garlic cannot be beat.

"Year after year, we traditionally see our sales expand at a natural growth rate of 3% to 5%, and we expect that trend to continue between 2025–2026," reports Ken Christopher, executive vice president, Christopher Ranch, Gilroy, CA, which provides U.S.-grown garlic across the country.

MARKET DRIVERS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports garlic market demand is driven by culinary trends, health considerations and convenience products.

The popularity of varied meal preparations, triggered by growing awareness of international and ethnic cuisines, continues to boost the demand for garlic flavoring.

"Garlic consumption continues to grow as home cooks continue to experiment with different cuisines, and regional flavors," explains Mike Smith, senior vice president of sales and marketing, Spice World Inc., Orlando, FL. "Consumers love garlic, not only its flavor and versatility, but also for

the affordability and the health benefits of garlic."

Consumers who follow TV and food recipes also drive sales, says Bruce Klein, director of marketing, Maurice A. Auerbach Inc., Secaucus, NJ. "There is no substitute for garlic."

Consumers are using garlic for both its flavor and health benefits, and demand shows no sign of slowing. "I have been in the garlic industry for 34 years in 2025, and I continue to see the demand for garlic grow," says Jim Provost, co-owner, I Love Produce LLC, West Grove, PA. "But perhaps not at the pace in the 1990s when the growth of garlic was double digits."

Culturally, he believes garlic is a "hip food with Gen Z and Millennials."

VARIOUS TYPES SPUR DEMAND

While overseas 70 years ago, Spice World's founder experienced garlic's flavor, and began sharing it. Today, Spice World offers fresh, elephant, and purple garlic, plus both conventional and organic in peeled, minced, roasted, chopped, squeezable, and in olive oil garlic assortments.

Smith says Spice World has experienced steady growth in all of its forms of garlic. "Many generations of consumers desire convenience when selecting produce products. When preparing meals at home, easy is the key factor consumers seek."

Customers of Maurice A. Auerbach have

an array of choices, from various sizes of bags, bulk, netted sleeves, peeled, elephant, to woven decorative braids. Klein notes convenience products, such as chopped packaged garlic, "are becoming even more popular as consumers feel more comfortable with garlic."

At Christopher Ranch, fresh garlic packed in sleeves is their biggest seller to retailers across the country. "In offering a sleeved/branded item, consumers are able to instantly identify country of origin, and retailers are best able to scan for their produce sales," Christopher notes.

At Melissa's World Variety Produce, Mount Vernon, CA, various sizes of minced, roasted, peeled and chopped products, and the jumbo, elephant and colossal specimens are offered. "Value-added minced and peeled are the category drivers," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations. "These jarred garlics are shelf stable."

Melissa's also offers mild-flavored Spring Garlic seasonally. Plus, Schueller says black garlic is a specialty. "Its unique complex flavor and aroma has a rich, tangy, molasses-like flavor, a perfect mix of sweetness and melt-in-your-mouth texture, and is surprisingly rich."

ORGANIC GROWTH

Organic produce has seen steady growth over the last five years, and Smith at Spice World expects that trend to continue. "Much like conventional garlic, organic garlic offers

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PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Garlic and garlic products are versatile. Cross-merchandising is an important part of sales, and there are many options, such as placing garlic items next to complementary foods, such as pasta and sauces.

great flavor and is reasonably priced for consumers choosing organic offerings.”

Schueller agrees there has been recent growth in organics. “Both the conventional and organic refrigerated peel garlics continue to grow. The flavor is more pronounced.”

PRODUCTION AND IMPORTS

California accounts for the majority of U.S. garlic production. The April 15, 2025, *USDA Economic Research Service Vegetables and Pulses*

Yearbook reports 2023 garlic production at 402 million pounds, and imports of 357 million pounds. Trade flow will likely be shaped by factors such as tariff adjustments, cold chain development and private label growth.

“While controversial, it is important to note that tariffs on foreign produce, like garlic, have a major impact on the domestic garlic industry,” says Christopher. “As tariffs increase on foreign goods, we see a corresponding increase in demand for our American-grown garlic from both retails and restaurants.”

Christopher Ranch’s California heirloom garlic is grown within a 100-mile radius of Gilroy, CA, the garlic capital of the world. Christopher says they ship their heirloom garlic across all 50 states, as well as Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Mexico.

PROMOTE USAGE

Many retailers bolster garlic sales with in-store signage and demonstrations, coupled with social media activities.

“Most retailers do a great job of making products available and attractive to consumers,” says Smith. “In the summer, we often see retailers pair our garlic with onions, tomatoes and fresh herbs as a suggested salsa display.”

Klein says cross-merchandising can be accomplished by placing the garlic items next to complementary foods, such as pasta and sauces. “Garlic is so versatile, it can pretty much be used all over the store. Cross-merchandising is an important part of sales, and there are lots of choices in the produce department. Also, we support stores, which can be on a daily basis, to help their efforts.”

Appearance plays a role. “The better the appearance, the better the sales,” Klein adds. “Be sure the products are nice and clean — no skins on the bulk garlic, for instance.”

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

The interesting thing about garlic is its cross-generational appeal, ranging from Generation Alpha all the way through the Greatest Generation.

Ken Christopher,
Christopher Ranch, Gilroy, CA

Consumers love garlic, not only its flavor and versatility, but also for the affordability and the health benefits of garlic.

Mike Smith, Spice World, Inc.,
Orlando, FL

Christopher says Christopher Ranch has found that when retailers cross-merchandise garlic with items like tomatoes and avocados, you can amplify sales for all three, while offering consumers optimal convenience for blending flavors.

“We’ve found this approach to be most effective around Super Bowl, Cinco de Mayo and Fourth of July, when these items can be blended to make the perfect salsa and guacamole.”

I Love Produce’s Provost agrees. “Red tomatoes and white garlic always look great together and complement each other in



The better the appearance of garlic in-store, the better the sales. Retailers should be sure the garlic is clean with no skins on the bulk.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Mexican and Italian cuisines. People love garlic memes, and social media is a great way to promote garlic."

Merchandising is a critical part of making Spice World garlic products available to consumers. "Our in-store merchandising carries our messages of flavor, freshness and convenience exactly where consumers are looking for information as they shop," says Smith.

HANDLING GARLIC

For merchandising, fresh garlic prefers an ambient temperature. Peeled garlic needs a cold temperature, 36 degrees F, or colder. "Displaying in other refrigerated sections in the store, such as mushrooms, fresh-cut vegetables or dressings works well," adds Provost.

Christopher advises storing fresh garlic

in a cool, dry environment. "Often, garlic lovers may make an accidental mistake and store it in their refrigerator, which can lead to rapid sprouting, or in their freezer, where ice crystals can form. Left in the proper dry environment, fresh garlic can last up to eight weeks."

RETAILERS' SALES TECHNIQUES

William Reinoso, produce manager of the Market Basket store in Somerville, MA, says the store sells lots of garlic. "The largest sellers are the whole cloves in the produce section."

Peeled garlic is in the refrigerated aisle. Cinco de Mayo is the busiest holiday, he says, and adds, "Our customers know how to use garlic in lots of ways. At that time, we display garlic with avocados, onions, jalapeño peppers and plump tomatoes."

Market Basket, Tewksbury, MA, has 95 stores in New England.

While the Food City store in Radford, VA, near Roanoke, enjoys the company's Food Club minced and chopped garlic items, assistant store manager Marcus Goins reports that bulk whole cloves are the most popular.

Also, he notes, "holidays, including Thanksgiving and Christmas, bring higher sales."

To boost frequent sales, Goins says they cross-merchandise by placing garlic baskets beside steaks in the meat department, "and bottled garlic along with French or Italian bread so customers can make their own homemade garlic bread."

Supermarket chain Food City, owned by K-VA-T Food Stores, Abingdon, VA, owns over 150 stores in the Southeast. **pb**

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Leaning on Broccoli's Benefits, Versatility Can Lift Sales

Despite declining production, vegetable remains steady go-to for shoppers.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Broccoli has been cultivated commercially in the U.S. for just over 100 years, although its presence in North America can apparently be traced back to Thomas Jefferson in 1787. California — where that first commercial crop was planted in 1924 — still dominates supply, accounting for around 92% of volumes, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) figures.

However, broccoli producers haven't had an easy time of late, and the overall picture points to a gradual decline. A 2024 USDA Vegetable Market report revealed that production in 2024 totaled 13.5 million cwt, down 3% from the previous year. The overall planted area also fell by 3% to 99,500 acres. In fact, total U.S. broccoli production dropped by 32.3% in the five years between 2017 and 2021, according to ProducePay.

But while the overall picture signals declining volumes, producers themselves remain upbeat about the product's appeal.

Ashley Kaslin, director of marketing at Salinas, CA-based Tanimura & Antle, says broccoli remains a category mainstay with health-conscious consumers helping drive more positive sales growth. "Consumers increasingly seek clean-label, nutrient-dense vegetables that deliver versatility," she says. "We've seen strong performance across pack types."

In fact, Kaslin says the company has enjoyed a strong 12 months, maintaining "reliable production and consistent quality despite shifting weather patterns and stagnant markets."

Growing primarily in California's Salinas Valley and the Yuma, AZ, region in the winter months has allowed Tanimura & Antle to optimize seasonality and climate advantages to achieve 12-month supplies, she adds.

Another Salinas, CA, grower that has experienced a positive 12 months is Ippolito International, which sells its products under the Queen Victoria (QV) Produce brand. Jacob Abramson, the company's sales and commodity manager for broccoli, says Ippolito has sustained steady, consistent business and growth, especially on the value-added side, while its foodservice business has also seen good growth.



When it comes to broccoli merchandising, retailers should maintain two to four facings, depending on the store format, with added display locations during peak seasons. Best practices include maintaining cold chain integrity, rotating stock frequently, and using secondary displays during promotions.

Ippolito grows broccoli from April through October in Salinas, and November through March in Yuma, AZ, and Mexico through grower partners. "We are set up in diverse growing regions to make sure we are fully supplied to keep our customers with consistent quality and coverage," adds Abramson.

According to Joe Angelo, director of sales at Castroville, CA-headquartered Ocean Mist, broccoli has become a staple food item among U.S. consumers, particularly in recent years, and regularly ranks high in surveys in popularity, consumption, nutrition and versatility.

"While retail broccoli sales over the past several years may not have experienced a significant increase, our sales have generally remained steady with our core customer base," says Angelo. "When there have been supply chain disruptions due to adverse growing

conditions, we have generally been able to meet customer demand."

Ocean Mist grows broccoli in Castroville and the Salinas Valley in the spring and summer months, before moving production further south to Coachella for the fall and winter.

Looking toward the summer season, for which Ocean Mist has ample supply and promotable volumes, Angelo expects the company to benefit from excellent quality and steady demand, adding that he doesn't anticipate any inclement weather that could adversely affect quality.

CATEGORY TRENDS

As well as a growing interest in value-added products, Abramson says Ippolito has benefited from an increased interest in mini florets from the foodservice sector. The item, he says, is suitable for a range of different applications, fitting naturally with fresh preparations, such as salads, while larger florets tend to be stir-fried or roasted.

Organic is another area of the category that is gaining traction. According to Kaslin, consumers are continuing to show willingness to pay a premium for organic when the quality meets their expectations.

Abramson agrees, revealing demand has increased for pre-washed, pre-cut, and packaged organic broccoli.

Similarly, based in Salinas, The Nunes Company sources broccoli year-round from California, Arizona, Nevada, and Mexico, which is marketed under its Foxy and Foxy Organic brands.

According to sales manager John Amaral, Nunes' broccoli program has increased over the past decade, with small increases year-over-year. "Our sales and distribution have been increasing in broccoli crowns every year," he says. "The last 12 months continue to show this growth."

Already increasing in acreage, Amaral says Nunes hopes to increase organic sales further with a move to The Walker River Cooler in Yerington, NV, where he says the company will benefit from superior quality products that are closer to its customers.

"The location easily saves a day and a half in transportation time with carriers not having to come in and out of California, saving 600

miles,” he says. “This gives our customers fresher product with less shrink.”

IN-STORE BROCCOLI TIPS

When it comes to merchandising, Kaslin recommends maintaining two to four facings depending on the store format, with added display locations during peak seasons. Best practices that she also recommends include maintaining cold chain integrity, rotating stock frequently, and using secondary displays during promotions.

Kaslin believes broccoli can be effectively paired with complementary items, such as stir-fry kits, cheese sauces, dips and grilling vegetables. Cross-merchandising with health and wellness displays, especially during peak resolution season, also drives interest and purchases, she says.

According to Abramson, shelf space varies among retailers, with some preferring regular stalks in bulk, while others include crowns in bulk displays. “The bulk section of the store is complemented by the options in the packaged, value-added section,” he says. “I would suggest that this is where you would define best practices: having fresh, unpackaged options along with the washed and pre-cut packaged options.”

Abramson adds that Ippolito is seeing growth in smaller, 10-ounce and 12-ounce value-added packs, as well as larger family pack sizes.

To keep a broccoli display looking fresh, Angelo at Ocean Mist recommends storing and merchandising in refrigeration at temperatures between 32 to 36 degrees, as well as removing any items that look damaged, shriveled or dry to maintain visual appeal. Raw broccoli, in particular, should be merchandised under misters to help maintain freshness and prevent moisture loss, he suggests.



To keep a broccoli display looking fresh, retailers should store and merchandise in refrigeration at temperatures between 32 to 36 degrees, as well as removing any items that look damaged, shriveled or dry to maintain visual appeal. Raw broccoli, in particular, should be merchandised under misters to help maintain freshness and prevent moisture loss.

Angelo also recommends adding variety by incorporating different broccoli options, including pre-cut florets, and naked and wrapped crown options to make displays more interesting, while he suggests using color blocking to add visual excitement. Signage, recipe cards or QR codes, he adds, which allow consumers to gain selection tips, nutrition ideas, and usage ideas, also help make the display more interactive for consumers.

Retailers, Angelo continues, can further take advantage of broccoli's considerable versatility by cross-merchandising broccoli bunches, crowns or florets with items like dips, dressings, sauces and hummus. Cheeses,

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

Consumers increasingly seek clean-label, nutrient-dense vegetables that deliver versatility. We've seen strong performance across pack types.

Ashley Kaslin,
Tanimura & Antle, Salinas, CA

While retail broccoli sales over the past several years may not have experienced a significant increase, our sales have generally remained steady with our core customer base.

Mike Smith,
Spice World, Inc., Orlando, FL

including cheddar, mozzarella and feta, also pair well with broccoli, according to Angelo, while florets should be cross-merchandised with other vegetable mixes and noodles for stir-fry options.

According to Kaslin at Tanimura & Antle, broccoli sees seasonal lifts during the holidays, health-focused January resets, and summer seasons. At the same time, she says promotions are becoming more integrated with in-store signage, and cross-category pairings that support cart building.

Likewise, Abramson says promotions typically take place in the summer and fall to coincide with greater availability, as well as the tendency for consumers to roast vegetables as the weather cools down.

But is broccoli suffering shrinkage due to tightening consumer budgets? Although Kaslin agrees shoppers are price aware, she believes quality and brand values are more central to driving purchasing choices.

“They seek out fresh produce that looks premium and aligns with their personal standards,” she says. “Visual freshness, optimal head size, and minimal yellowing are critical, but so are the values behind the brand. Shoppers are increasingly loyal to companies that are sustainability conscious, care for their people, and uphold high standards across the board.”

pb



Retailers can take advantage of broccoli's considerable versatility by cross-merchandising broccoli bunches, crowns or florets with items like dips, dressings, sauces and hummus.



Properly Manage a Food Recall to Protect Public Health and Your Brand Reputation

BY ROGER HANCOCK

Numerous recalls are impacting the produce industry, including tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots and more. These come after two widespread recalls involving contaminated produce — onions tainted with E. coli served on burgers and cantaloupe sold at grocery stores — made national headlines and raised consumer concerns last year.

As produce recalls continue to occur, a recent study found a 57% increase in fruit, vegetable, and legume recalls in the first four months of 2025 vs. the same time period last year. In fact, produce products are among the most frequently recalled items. Consumer trust in food safety has dropped to an all-time low.

So, how do produce businesses maintain high safety standards, boost consumer trust, and protect public health?

First, understand that recalls happen, even to food businesses that consistently follow gold-standard food safety procedures. It's as important to be prepared for a recall as it is to invest in preventing them.

Second, a well-managed recall will help your company minimize damages, protect public health, and maintain your brand reputation. Here are the steps to accomplish this:

Plan ahead. During the chaos of a recall is not the time to figure out a game plan. Since recalls happen at any time, create a plan now so you're properly prepared. Focus on defining roles and responsibilities, outlining communication protocols, and identifying the systems and data you'll rely on.

Run mock simulations. Train your team about recall protocols so they're well-prepared and confident to manage an incident. Hold regular mock recall simulations that include your trading partners (or participate in your suppliers' practice simulations), so everyone understands processes and protocols. Mock simulations also help identify and fix process gaps before they become an issue.

Identify product info. Gathering product and customer data is often the hardest — and slowest — part of a recall. Have systems in place ahead of time so you can quickly access product names, SKUs, lot numbers and production dates, customer and distributor contact details, ingredient sources, and shipping logs. Use traceability software that links ingredients, production, and distribution data in one place. Correctly identify the product(s) impacted so you (and your trading partners) can quickly and accurately pull these products from the marketplace and supply chain.

Scope the problem. Determine what happened, why it happened, how widespread the problem is, and how many customers were impacted. Gather accurate information before sharing it with retailers and other key stakeholders. While it's important to communicate quickly, it's also critical to share correct

information. Without a complete and accurate understanding of what happened, the products that were impacted, and the scope of the issue, messages can be cloudy or incomplete, hindering recall efforts, causing confusion, and prolonging public health risks.

Coordinate with trading partners. Use tech tools to facilitate info sharing with your trading partners, and to increase collaboration, transparency, accuracy and traceability. This allows you to pinpoint exactly where tainted products are located and work together to pull recalled products from store shelves, consumers' homes, and across the supply chain. Tech solutions accelerate these efforts at a time when every moment counts.

Boost communications. Communicate quickly and accurately, tailoring messages to specific audiences (e.g., retail partners, regulators, consumers). Disseminate clear, direct messages that drive specific actions. Be honest and transparent, explaining what happened and how to respond.

Track progress. Monitor product recovery, returns, and destruction. Track what's missing and follow up. Adjust communication and/or expand the recall, as necessary. Rely on a tech platform that automates response tracking, re-notifications, expansion, and progress reports for regulators, your team, and your trading partners.

Meet compliance. Document everything. Create a recall report that includes all details of the incident, including information about the item(s), reason for the recall, recalled products located and recovered, etc. Use digital reports to boost efficiency and accuracy, instead of relying

on manual data collection.

Wrap up. Post-recall, debrief with your internal team and trading partners to share key learnings and identify what could be improved. Update your plan and processes accordingly.

While these are principles of a well-managed recall, they may be applied differently depending on where your company is in the supply chain, size of your company, etc.

Recalls are inherently stressful, but if you handle them properly, you can minimize the associated damages. While you can't always prevent a recall, you can follow these steps to significantly reduce risks, protect public health, and maintain your brand reputation. **pb**

Roger Hancock, chief executive of Recall InfoLink is one of the world's foremost experts on recalls, with experience that spans the retail, tech, data, regulatory and supply chain. Recall InfoLink makes recalls faster, easier, and more accurate across the supply chain to protect consumers and brands. As the only company focused entirely on recalls, Recall InfoLink's solutions drive immediate action, streamline the recall process and simplify compliance. Recall InfoLink helps brands become Recall Ready by standardizing data, collaborating with their supply chains, and practicing recall simulations.

Understand that recalls happen, even to food businesses that consistently follow gold-standard food safety procedures. It's as important to be prepared for a recall as it is to invest in preventing them.



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Leading What's Next: Legacy, Collaboration and Change

BY MARISSA DAKE

As the global produce industry grows more complex, the leaders steering it must grow more connected. They must be bridge-builders: able to connect sectors, generations, cultures and priorities. And they must do so while honoring a legacy rooted in stewardship, ingenuity and resilience.

This is the heart of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) Leadership Program, a yearlong journey designed to grow the next generation of leaders in produce and floral. Being part of the program over the past year has pushed me to think more deeply about what kind of leadership the produce industry needs right now, and what it will need next.

I've had the opportunity to learn alongside a cohort of exceptional professionals spanning the entire supply chain. I would like to share a small cross-section of their perspectives to demonstrate how the landscape of produce leadership is evolving, and just how bright the future can be.

CARRYING THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

Bianca Kaprielian, president and co-chief executive, Creekside Organics, understands that carrying on a family legacy also calls for evolving to meet the moment. As a multigenerational grower-shipper, she's intimately familiar with the traditions that built the industry: hard work, integrity and trust-based relationships.

"Honoring tradition means protecting the values that built our business — integrity, stewardship, and relationships rooted in trust — while staying open to new ways of doing business," she shares. It has become necessary in an industry shaped by shifting consumer expectations, climate realities and workforce changes.

Kaprielian doesn't see innovation as a break from tradition, but as a way to preserve it. "The best way I can honor my family's multigenerational business is to keep it thriving into the future."

That future, she says, depends on a new kind of leadership. "In the next 5-10 years, we need leaders who understand the unique dynamics of our industry and have the insight to thoughtfully evolve industry practices, while honoring what has come before."

SUSTAINABILITY IN BUSINESS STRATEGY

For Wyatt Maysey, director of sustainability at Taylor Farms, sustainability shouldn't be a "feel good" consumer marketing lever but a strategic imperative for the future of our industry. Building a smarter, more resilient system, one that can withstand the growing pressures on agriculture today, is imperative.

He's quick to point out that intentions aren't the issue — alignment is. Too often, requests from downstream partners don't reflect the operational realities upstream. "Even with good intentions, a sustainability request may disrupt operations in ways the retailer doesn't fully understand," he says. "We need to be prepared to have proactive conversations — not just 'yes' or 'no' responses, but real dialogue about what's feasible and why."

For Maysey, progress hinges on clearer communication and agreed-upon definitions. He believes the industry needs

internal collaboration and alignment to move away from treating sustainability as a vague concept and toward focusing on real, measurable environmental and social outcomes. "Sustainability is contextual. We should talk about it in terms of continuous improvement. Are you reducing your impact year by year? Are you even measuring it?"

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

One of the clearest examples of cross-sector collaboration I've seen came from a simple, but powerful campaign, centered on watermelons. When the National Watermelon Promotion Board set out to reduce food waste, they began to promote creative uses for watermelon rinds.

Megan McKenna, senior director of marketing and foodservice, explains, "Promotion boards do so much more than serve as marketing arms of an industry. We are cross-segment collaborators."

Her team even invested in nutritional analysis to better support new uses for watermelon rinds, a step that brought together research, marketing, and supply chain strategy.

Daniel Baldin, senior category manager for produce and floral at Longo Brothers, experienced that collaboration firsthand. "Partnership does not end with selling into a retailer; we have to be thinking about selling through. We look for trust, open communication, and effort. It has to be a mutual partnership."

He recalls one promotion that brought together growers, retailers, and in-store teams: from big displays to a watermelon-eating contest that engaged kids and families. "That's the kind of collaboration that drives real results."

McKenna believes the key is authenticity and collaboration in good faith. "Produce owns authenticity. There is nothing more authentic than providing fresh fruits and vegetables. Every time I tour a grower, shipper, importer or processor, I am blown away by the care and joy in the work our industry does."

LOOKING AHEAD, TOGETHER

The future of produce leadership will be shaped by those carrying forward core values, while navigating the demands of a changing world and collaborating across the global supply chain.

As we look ahead, I encourage leaders at every level to ask: What kind of leadership will our industry need next? Have that conversation, not just within your company, but with your vendors, your customers, and your peers. The bridges we build today will shape the resilience, relevance, and success of our industry in the years to come.

pb

Marissa Dake is the vice president of brand and people at DNO Produce in Columbus, OH. Dake began her career in Washington, D.C., working in food and agriculture policy on and off Capitol Hill. Raised in a farming family, she is no stranger to wrangling cattle, driving a tractor, and fighting off unruly roosters. She is passionate about ensuring that all people have access to fresh produce, regardless of their income or ZIP code.



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How Shipping Containers Are Shaping Urban Vertical Farming

BY ANDREW THOMPSON

Our global food systems are under siege, with climate change, natural disasters disrupting supply chains, and conflicts affecting agriculture in vulnerable regions. Add to that a booming population — set to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050 — and the math becomes startling. Experts predict we'll need 70% more food to sustain humanity.

But here's the problem, soil quality is deteriorating fast, and we're on track to lose most of the fertile ground we rely on. Traditional farming methods, while vital, seem ill-equipped to meet the challenge alone.

Urban vertical farming has emerged as an innovative solution — by growing crops in stacked layers within highly controlled environments, these systems use less land, water, and pesticides — with shipping containers offering a sustainable, space-efficient answer to the global food crisis.

Eddie Rees, conversions manager at Cleveland Containers, Middlesbrough, U.K., a supplier of containers, says, “Repurposed shipping containers are rewriting the rules of farming. Their durability and modular design make them ideal for urban vertical farms, enabling sustainable, year-round fresh produce in urban settings while optimizing limited space — scaling up or down, based on demand. Unlike traditional greenhouses, container farms are also highly insulated and can be outfitted with vertical racks, LED lighting, and climate-control systems.”

RETHINKING URBAN FARMING WITH CONTAINERS

The concept of turning shipping containers into farms may seem futuristic, but it's happening today in cities like New York, Tokyo and London. Freight Farms, for example, has developed container-based farms capable of producing leafy greens and herbs year-round, regardless of weather conditions. These farms rely on hydroponic systems, which use 90% less water than traditional methods, making them especially appealing in regions facing water scarcity.

Cities consume the majority of the world's food but rarely produce it. This disconnect leads to long supply chains, wasted food during transit, and a heavy carbon footprint. Shipping container farms are changing that dynamic by utilizing overlooked urban spaces.

Take, for example, an unused parking lot in London or an abandoned industrial site in Tokyo. These spaces can house container farms, producing fresh food right where it's consumed. Companies like Square Roots in New York are stacking containers in repurposed warehouses, turning underutilized real estate into thriving agricultural hubs.

“In cities, space is a luxury,” adds Rees. “Shipping containers

make the most of what's available. You don't need vast fields — just a bit of creativity and a vision for the future.”

INTEGRATION WITH INFRASTRUCTURE

Data from the United Nations highlights that one-fifth of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted globally, amounting to 1 billion meals a day, much of it due to spoilage during transit. Container farms, located within city limits, address this problem directly.

They don't just fit into urban spaces; they actively enhance city infrastructure. By positioning farms near restaurants, schools, or community centers, cities can reduce food miles — the distance food travels from farm to table.

In York, an indoor urban community farm in a shipping container, “Grow It York,” is supplying hyper-local produce to the surrounding businesses and locals. Located right in the heart of the city, in a vibrant cultural hub, the “Grow It York” project grows salad greens in a highly efficient, compact system, proving that farming can coexist with urban development.

Also, renewable energy sources, such as solar panels or waste heat from nearby buildings, can power their systems. Nutrients can even be sourced from urban organic waste.

In Kent, for example, GrowUp Farms provides a model of this integration by locating its operations alongside a bioenergy plant. This reduces their reliance on external resources and cuts emissions.

CHALLENGES

Container farming comes with its own set of challenges. Setting up a fully operational system demands a considerable upfront investment, with high-tech features like climate controls and hydroponic systems driving up costs. While these farms excel in efficiency, their energy requirements can be significant — particularly in colder climates where heating is essential.

However, progress in renewable energy is starting to tip the scales. Solar panels, wind turbines, and energy-saving LED technology are paving the way for more sustainable and affordable solutions.

Shipping container farms are more than a clever idea — they're a glimpse into the future of food production, proving that sustainable farming doesn't require endless fields or ideal weather. As cities grow and farmland shrinks, these compact, efficient farms offer a path forward. They reduce food waste, cut carbon emissions, and bring agriculture closer to the communities it serves. **pb**

Andrew Thompson is chief executive officer at Cleveland Containers, Middlesbrough, U.K.



BY M. JILL OVERDORF

Get Your Boots Dirty: Benefits of Field Visits for Chefs, Produce Managers and Buyers

In an era where transparency and authenticity are key drivers of consumer trust, the connection between the field and the fork has never been more critical. For chefs, produce managers, and buyers, visiting the fields where their fresh produce is grown provides an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the agricultural processes, enhance their storytelling, and align with growers on shared values of sustainability, innovation and quality.

Field visits enable culinary professionals and buyers to observe agricultural innovation firsthand. Sarah Evanega, vice president of business development, Okanagan Specialty Fruits, emphasizes the impact of such experiences, “As the adage goes, seeing is believing. Opening our orchards and operations to customers allows us the opportunity to showcase the innovative and sustainable practices we are implementing.”

Grower visits offer chefs, produce managers, and buyers an opportunity to engage directly with the people behind the produce, and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by growers.

Modern agriculture is a fascinating blend of tradition and cutting-edge technology. Jamie Phillips, director of food services, Del Mar Union School District, San Diego, CA, recounted his experience during a grower visit: “Witnessing the future of agriculture in action, particularly the self-automated drones, was absolutely fascinating — it’s incredible to see such advanced technology streamlining crop monitoring.”

Technology in agriculture extends beyond drones. Innovations like precision farming, automated harvesting equipment, and climate-controlled greenhouses showcase how science and engineering are transforming the agricultural landscape. Seeing these innovations in action provides a broader context for understanding the complexities of modern farming and the effort required to produce high-quality, consistent crops.

TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

Transparency in the food industry is not just a trend but a necessity in today’s marketplace. Consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it is grown, and whether ethical and sustainable practices are followed.

Field visits empower chefs, produce managers, and buyers to answer these questions with confidence, backed by firsthand experiences. This transparency can become a powerful marketing tool, differentiating brands and establishments in a competitive market.

Field visits also serve as a powerful tool for relationship building where everyone can exchange insights, discuss challenges, and collaborate on solutions. These relationships often translate into stronger partnerships, better communication, and a shared commitment to delivering the highest quality produce to consumers.

Partnerships forged in the fields often go beyond transactional relationships. For example, chefs may provide feedback on flavor profiles or presentation aspects that are valuable in creating new

varieties or refining existing ones. Growers can educate chefs and buyers about the nuances of specific crops, such as optimal storage conditions or preparation techniques, ensuring the produce is showcased at its best.

CULINARY CREATIVITY

For chefs, walking through the fields can spark inspiration, offering new ideas for menu items that highlight the unique qualities of fresh produce. Understanding the seasonality, flavor profiles, and growing conditions of specific crops can lead to innovative dishes that tell the story of the farm’s journey to the table.

The sensory experience of visiting a farm — seeing the vibrant colors, smelling the fresh soil, and tasting produce straight from the vine or the field — can ignite a chef’s imagination.

These experiences translate into menus that are not only delicious but also deeply connected to the origins of their ingredients. Highlighting these connections on menus or in retail settings, through storytelling or visual aids, can enhance the dining experience and create a deeper appreciation for the food being served.

SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

Sustainability is a core focus for both the agriculture and food-service industries. Field visits provide an opportunity to observe sustainable farming practices in action.

Chefs, produce managers, and buyers can take these lessons back to their own operations, incorporating sustainability into their practices and advocating for environmentally responsible choices.

Ultimately, the value of field visits lies in the ability to connect the field to the table in a meaningful way. By bridging the gap between growers and buyers, these experiences create a shared understanding and appreciation for the journey of fresh produce.

The produce industry thrives on authentic connections, and field visits are a vital link in this chain. As industry leaders have shown, these experiences are invaluable for chefs, produce managers, and buyers, providing them with knowledge, inspiration, and a renewed appreciation for the work and science of farming.

In turn, these connections elevate the dining experience, foster consumer trust, and reinforce the shared commitment to sustainability and innovation.

Field visits are not boondoggles; they are transformative experiences that shape the way chefs, produce managers, and buyers approach their work. By understanding the origins of their fresh produce ingredients, they can craft menus, displays, and stories that build trust with consumers, advocate for sustainable practices, and highlight the shared effort behind every bite.

Field visits offer a unique opportunity to connect with the heart of food — the land and the people who nurture it. Go get your boots dirty!

pb

M. Jill Overdorf is founder and president of The Produce Ambassador, which provides strategic insight, brand development, and innovative solutions for the foodservice, produce, hospitality and culinary sectors.

A&J Produce Built on Family Values and Relationships

A&J Produce Corporation has served the produce industry since May 1977, when it was founded by three friends, Al Weiler, Joe Levantino and John Tramutola, who collectively brought over 75 years of sales experience in the wholesale produce business.

In 1987, Weiler and Tramutola acquired full ownership of the company and began a new chapter of growth and expansion. A&J began its wholesale operations with just three units on Row A of the Hunts Point Terminal Market in the Bronx, NY. Over the past 48-plus years, the company has steadily grown to become one of the largest wholesalers of fresh fruits and vegetables in the region.

What truly sets A&J apart are its people — a multi-generational team that brings decades of experience, hustle, and hands-on leadership to every aspect of the business.

"The company is built on deep family values and long-standing relationships, many of which began with a handshake from my grandfather," says Stephanie Tramutola, director of marketing and administration and the first female in the family business. "A&J has earned its reputation by delivering consistent quality and meeting customer needs with reliability."

John Thomas Bonomolo, director of operations and administration, started working in the family business at 13 during the summers as a porter — sweeping floors, working in the store, leveling boxes, and unloading trucks.

"I was getting up before dawn with a regimented routine, learning what it meant to show up on time and be



The original produce market, Washington Market in New York City, was home to Tom Tramutola Corp. before relocating to Hunts Point. The father of John Robert Tramutola Sr., owner of A&J Produce, owned Tom Tramutola Corp.



Founders (L-R): Al Weiler, Joe Levantino and John Robert Tramutola Sr.

dependable. Those early experiences taught me the value of hard work, discipline, and understanding finances from a young age," Bonomolo says. "It wasn't just about earning a few dollars, it was

about building a foundation. That work ethic shaped who I am today."

Jimmy Tramutola, head fruit salesman, also remembers working for A&J at 16. "My dad made me unload railcars full of carrots. I'll never forget the brand name Bunny Luv — the bags weighed more than me. Early on, I learned the terminal market is a tough business, and if you want to succeed, you have to start at the bottom and work your way up."

Today, A&J occupies 31 units on Row A and Row D, servicing a broad customer base across New York and the greater Northeast region.

Looking ahead, Stephanie Tramutola says the company's continued success will be driven by its ability to adapt without compromising the core principles that built the business. "That means investing in operational efficiencies, embracing technology, and ensuring leadership continuity while staying connected to the daily grind of the business."

The company's vision for the next decade, and beyond, is rooted in the same values that built A&J — quality, trust and service, while adopting innovation to meet the needs of future generations. "At our core, we feed people, and that responsibility drives our commitment to delivering the freshest, highest quality produce every day," she adds.

Built on a foundation of experience, integrity and strong relationships, A&J Produce — now a proud third-generation family business — remains a trusted name in the wholesale produce industry, committed to delivering quality, freshness, reliability and service. **pb**

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Genpro	58	201-729-9400	genproinc.com	Spice World, Inc.	75	407-851-9432	spiceworldinc.com
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