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Mexico







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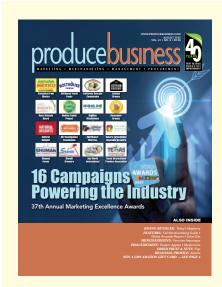
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pb quiz



THIS MONTH'S WINNER

BRAD ROBERTSON Oppy Senior software developer Surrey, British Columbia

Brad Robertson spends his days as a senior software developer at Oppy, designing, building, and maintaining the software that supports Oppy's business operations. Working at the company since 2005, he says he works with different teams to troubleshoot issues, gather specifications, and come up with solutions that improve efficiency and make systems easier to use.

Robertson graduated from Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia, in 2000 with a degree in computer science. "I've always been drawn to software development as it lets me be creative through problem-solving," he says.

He says his first job gave him experience with the Microsoft ecosystem for software development, and in his second job, he worked with a niche development platform called Progress OpenEdge. "Since Oppy uses both, when I wanted to move from my small town to a bigger city, it just felt like the right fit."

"There's a lot that I love about my job; choosing just one thing is hard. Since I have to pick one thing, I'd say it's the challenge. The produce industry moves fast and is full of complex problems to solve. Every day is different, and that keeps things interesting."

When Robertson isn't working, you may find him gaming. "I enjoy all types of games — video, board, roleplaying, card, etc." He has also been collecting and assembling Star Wars Lego sets since 2005 and currently has 23 of them.

Robertson says the thing he enjoys most about PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine is the profiles of the people in the industry. "They give insight into those who keep businesses running and are shaping the future of the industry."

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

How To Win! To win the Produce Business Quiz, the first thing you must do is read through the articles and advertisements in the print or digital issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, scan and send your answers to the address listed on the coupon. 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 October 2025 issue of Produce Business.

WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD

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



1) Which Chicago-based company is "Now in Atlanta"	
2) "Meals Taste Better With Flavor You Can Trust" is the slogan for which company	
	?
3) Which month is National Fruits & Veggies Month	
4) What is the website address for Highline Mushrooms	
5) Which item is featured in our Dried Fruits & Nuts article	
6) Which mushroom company is making a "Focus on Organics"	
	?
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Where PASSICM 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.

Rooted in Success and Trust

Andrew Garcia III Key Account Sales Ruskin Packaging Inc.

I fell in love with the produce industry when I worked in my family's business from 1987 to 2006. During those 19 years, my father, Andy Garcia Jr., and my uncle Ernest (Cookie) Garcia were the two best mentors. We serviced the state of Florida with packed salads, spinach and coleslaw. Winn-Dixie and Publix were big supporters of our products because we packed fresh and delivered to them daily.

After being in the family business, I worked with some good grower/shipper companies, where I could build great, consistent business. My relationships enabled me to transition from

one company to the next, and I was always told that they would support me, as I was a good, honest account manager they could trust.

Seeing how much my customers valued relationships, and recognizing the impact of my hard work

in making their jobs easier was incredibly rewarding. They relied on me for consistent quality, fair pricing, and the assurance that I would always stay on top of their orders.

Later, I had the opportunity to give back to the industry by serving as a mentor for the IPFA Career Ambassador program. This allowed me to share my hands-on experience with college students preparing to graduate and enter the field. Additionally, I was honored to be selected for a two-year term on the USDA/FVIAC committee.

As I've grown in this business, I've developed

a strong passion for education and mentoring. Giving back is important to me, and I do so by sharing my experience in ways that complement what others already know. There's no substitute for hands-on knowledge.

This business is challenging, but deeply rewarding. Long-term success comes from strong partnerships, and I believe that we all rely on each other to achieve that.

My passion has always been to build a career rooted in success and trust, and to pass those values on to the next generation.

Success in the produce industry depends on many factors — weather, delayed arrivals, and countless other moving parts. Navigating these challenges is simply part of the puzzle. If you're not comfortable with constant change, this isn't the industry for you.

Produce Feeds Body and Soul

Melody Anderson Co-Owner Monday for Wednesday

I got interested in produce in my early 20s, when I started learning more about food politics and distribution systems. As a vegan, I saw how important it is to help people get excited about vegetables — not just as an alternative to animal proteins, but as something worth celebrating on their own. Over time, I realized that produce is one of the clearest entry points for understanding global politics, culture and power. Through my sourcing work and community-building efforts, I've found that sharing produce and learning about the people and practices behind it is what keeps me grounded.

I'm not sure you ever get a single moment that confirms your work is making a difference — but donating produce to mutual aid programs and seeing it land in the right hands feels meaningful. It's especially gratifying to

see the relief on the faces of organizers when they get the support they need.

It's also really rewarding when chefs "land" a dish they've been visualizing for weeks — when the right produce shows up at the right time, and it all clicks. Being part of that process, even behind the scenes, feels good.

Transparency is one of the most exciting parts of this work — being able to offer context and insight that helps chefs and restaurants make

smarter, more ethical decisions. A lot of folks don't always have visibility into how the supply chain works. Helping people understand how to buy feels like a valuable piece of the puzzle.

Learning about new vegetables — and tasting them — brings me real joy. It's a two-way experience: sharing something like a Mamey apple with someone who's never had it can be powerful, but I also get to be transported in the process. I love digging into how different ingredients are used in specific cultural contexts. Produce carries memory, technique, and identity all in one

My partner Aja and I co-founded Monday for Wednesday, and the business itself is the result of our overlapping passions — passion for local sourcing, food justice, creativity, and care.



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.



Blue Book Services Empowering Global Agriculture

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TRANSITIONS

FMI

FMI — The Food Industry Association, Arlington, VA, has named Jessica Tanner as its director of legal operations. In her role, Tanner will advise FMI on legal operations, regulatory strategy and policy. Specifically, she will work alongside FMI counsel and Safe Quality Food Institute (SQFI) and FMI leadership to ensure compliance with relevant regulations and governing bodies.





Jessica Tanner

Rachel Anderson

She received a juris doctorate from Washington & Lee University and a bachelor's degree from Harvard University.

The Safe Quality Food Institute (SQFI), a division of FMI, appointed **Rachel Anderson** vice president of business development. Anderson brings more than two decades of leadership in strategic sales, marketing and supply chain operations.

Prior to joining SQFI, Anderson served as executive director of strategy at Gamer Packaging.

Fresh Del Monte

Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc., Coral Gables, FL, appointed **Miles Fraser-Jones** as vice president of sales and product management, deciduous and citrus (international).



Miles Fraser-Jones

Fraser-Jones will oversee North American sales and lead international sourcing and

product management for the company's deciduous and citrus categories. He will report directly to Danny Dumas, senior vice president of sales, product management, and marketing for North America.

With over 25 years of experience in global sourcing, procurement, and new business development, Fraser-Jones has held senior leadership positions at AMFresh, Tom Lange International and Sierra Produce.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Avocados From Colombia Brand Debuts in the U.S. Market

The Colombia Avocado
Board (CAB), Orlando, FL, has
launched the "Avocados From
Colombia" brand in the United

States. The debut comes at a pivotal time for the industry, as shipments of Colombian avocados to the U.S. have reached their highest volume to date, with 85 million pounds in the first half of 2025, more than doubling the previous midyear record of 41 million pounds set in 2024.

The new branding provides a consistent identity that reflects Colombia's unique growing regions. The launch includes a refreshed website, updated trade show materials, new educational and promotional resources, and a strong digital presence. Imagery of rain, sun, mountains and trees highlight the natural elements that support Colombia's avocado-growing ecosystem and help tell the story behind the fruit.

Gem-Pack Berries featured in Bringing It to The Table Docuseries

Gem-Pack Berries, Santa Monica, CA, has been featured in *Bringing It To the Table*, a farm-to-table docuseries produced by Reighn World Entertainment. The show offers an inside look at the agricul-



tural industry, connecting viewers to the farmers and lands that grow their food.

The second episode of the docuseries, featuring Gem-Pack Berries, premiered Aug. 3 on Cox's Cable YurView Channel.

In the episode, viewers join the host and executive producer of the show, Dan Reighn, and the Gem-Pack team on a journey from the strawberry fields through every step of the supply chain. The episode offers a behind-the-scenes look at how fresh berries reach the market, while also showing Gem-Pack's commitment to sustainable farming practices and its support for the local community.

Katzman Produce Announces Organics Department

Katzman Produce,
Bronx, NY, part of
Katzman's family
of companies, has
announced its expansion



into organics. The 100+ year old wholesaler, based on the Hunts Point Produce Market, has created a dedicated organics department to better service its customers.

Katzman Produce's Organics Department has been operating since 2024 and includes a full line of over 200 SKUs of organic fruits and vegetables that are sourced locally, domestically and internationally.

In addition to offering a wide range of organic products, the Katzman Produce Organics Department also provides expertise and services to ensure its customers' success, including walk-up and delivery service, merchandising, ads, trainings, and insights on projections, seasonality and market trends.

Duda Farm Fresh Foods Expands Georgia Sweet Corn Facility

Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL, has expanded with an on-site

fresh-cut corn processing facility within its Georgia sweet corn operations.

The new facility mirrors the same technology and processes used across all of Duda's existing corn processing locations in Florida, Michigan and Indiana. This value-added model trims each ear of corn, shucks it, and packs it into a variety of pack sizes. Having the corn grown and packed in the same region drastically improves shelf life.

California Prunes Signal Tight Supply

The California Prune Board (CPB) announces its official estimate for the 2025 crop at approximately 65,000 short tons — a smaller volume compared to recent seasons, with implications for supply and

trade planning in the months ahead. While growers report a lighter fruit set this year, fruit quality remains strong and consistent.



California remains the global leader in premium prune production, Shipping prunes to over 60 international markets. Harvest is expected to begin in August and conclude by mid-September.

More Michigan Sweet Corn on Market

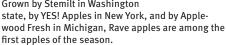
Todd Greiner Farms Packing, LLC. (TGF), Hart, MI, announced the beginning of its 2025 sweet corn season, with peak volume expected the week of Aug. 17.



This season, TGF is offering premium bi-color sweet corn, commonly known as "butter and sugar" corn. With the company's recent expansion into full-scale sales and marketing services, retail partners can expect enhanced support, consistent communication, and seamless order fulfillment.

Rave Backed by Freshness and Influencer Buzz

Retailers looking to kickstart the apple category this fall can look no further than Rave. Grown by Stemilt in Washington



Rave is a natural blend of Honeycrisp and the MonArk apple, a variety from Arkansas. The MonArk matures early with a bright, fuchsia red color, making it ready for harvest in August, a few weeks before other apples. Rave's season is brief, running through October, fitting perfectly for back-to-school and fall apple promotions. Stemilt, Wenatchee, WA, is teaming up with handpicked influencers to generate excitement about the apple's flavor qualities.

Rave apples will be available in bulk and bags, with 2-pound pouch bags and poly options. Stemilt also has a paper-based package that sells Rave in a four-count scannable unit.

Calavo Highlights Jumbo Avocados with PLU Stickers

Calavo Growers, Inc., Santa Paula, CA, announced the introduction of distinctive new PLU stickers for its largest avocado sizes. These oversized labels



are designed to prominently feature Calavo's "Super Jumbo" avocados, enhancing their visibility and appeal on retail shelves.

The new labels measure 36mm by 26mm, a size specifically chosen to correspond with the larger fruit. Featuring a bright pink color, the stickers prominently display "Super Jumbo" at the top, making it easy for consumers to spot them. The stickers will be applied to Calavo avocados of 36 count or larger, carrying the 4770 PLU number.

This update comes as Calavo's Peruvian imports from longtime partner Viru Group peaks on 36's and larger, while also anticipating a more typical size curve from its upcoming Mexican crop, with a greater abundance of 32- and 36-count fruit.

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

KEYNOTE Announcement



STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

CATHY BURNS

International Fresh Produce Association



GENERAL SESSION: LEADING THROUGH TURBULANCE

SARAH ROBB O'HAGAN

Executive, Entrepreneur, Author, and Founder of Extreme Living



GENERAL SESSION: THE "NO BARRIERS" LIFE

ERIK WEIHENMAYER

World-Class Blind Adventurer



BREAKING BARRIERS & OWNING THE HUDDLE: LEADERSHIP WITH AMY TRASK

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AMY TRASK

Former CEO of the Raiders and Current CBS Sports Analyst



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REGISTER NOW

National Brand or Private Label? 72% of Consumers Can't Tell the Difference

By Viki Zabala

nce seen merely as budget-friendly alternatives to national brands, private labels — branded products retailers sell exclusively in their own stores — have quietly transformed into trusted staples embraced by shoppers well beyond the cost-conscious consumer.

According to First Insight's *The Quiet Takeover of Private Label*, 84% of shoppers now say they trust the quality of store brands as much as, or more than, national ones. This shift is no accident, but driven by the increased investment retailers are making into the quality, appearance and marketing of their private labels. This includes everything from elevated product design to amplified in-store marketing strategies.

The distinctions between national and store brands have become so subtle that most consumers can't even tell them apart. While 71% of shoppers surveyed believed they could recognize a private label, 72% were unable to do so when shown side-by-side images of national and store-brand products.

The disconnect between what people assume private labels look like and what they actually find on shelves underscores exactly how much these products have evolved over the years.

First Insight's new report reveals three major ways the private label landscape is evolving — and how it's reshaping what consumers value and expect.

DUPE CULTURE IS DRIVING PRODUCT DISCOVERY

Dupe culture, or the trend of actively seeking out affordable alternatives to premium or designer products, has become a major driver of how consumers discover private label brands.

What once might have been dismissed as a cheap knockoff is now celebrated as a savvy find. Shoppers aren't just open to alternatives — they're actively seeking them out, especially when they feel like the quality of the product rivals the original.

In fact, nearly half (47%) of consumers say they've tried a private label product because it was marketed as a "dupe" of a high-end product. And this growing interest in dupes isn't limited to budget-conscious

Today's shoppers aren't sticking with familiar names out of habit or because they've bought a brand for many years — they're actively choosing what delivers the best quality, value, availability and overall experience every time they shop.

shoppers, but a mindset that spans all income levels. Seventy percent of consumers earning \$150,000 or more per year say they're more likely to try a store-brand product if it's marketed as a dupe.

The search for dupes is fueling increased attention on private labels. A well-executed private label "dupe" isn't seen as a compromise — it's a smart alternative.

PRIVATE LABELS ARE A BADGE OF SMART SHOPPING

The rise of dupe culture also reflects a broader shift in how consumers are redefining value. Consumers are becoming more intentional and discerning with their purchases, and instead of defaulting to familiar brand names, they're comparing options and choosing products that offer the best value. And increasingly, what they value goes beyond price and includes the right balance of quality, design and usefulness in a product.

As more private label products deliver on those expectations, sometimes even outperforming national brands, the stigma once tied to store brands has largely disappeared. More than three in four consumers (77%) say they're not concerned about how they're perceived for buying store-brand products.

As consumers increasingly choose to purchase from private labels for their value, their loyalty to the retailers behind those products is also growing. One-third of shoppers (34%) say a retailer's private label offerings are the reason they shop with the retailer. Store brands aren't only driving shopper preference and foot traffic—they're a source of serious revenue growth for retailers as well.

Brand loyalty isn't what it used to be, and shoppers are more willing to switch than ever.
Whether it's the fading stigma of private

labels, the rise of dupe culture or broader changes in consumer priorities, one thing is clear: National brands can no longer count on loyalty by default. Today's shoppers aren't sticking with familiar names out of habit or because they've bought a brand for many years — they're actively choosing what delivers the best quality, value, availability and overall experience every time they shop.

When private labels deliver on shoppers' expectations, they earn both trust and repeat business. More than seven in 10 (71%) consumers say they'd be willing to try a private label if their preferred national brand was out of stock. And once they make the switch, many stick with it, as 45% say they've permanently converted to a private label product after finding it met or exceeded expectations.

That willingness to switch — and stay — signals that these private brands can more than fill availability gaps, but grow to be a go-to product for consumers when they consistently meet their needs for quality and value. And if consumers like one item from the brand, it can open them up to the larger product line and translate into a lasting relationship with the private label.

Private label brands aren't a fallback for shoppers anymore — they've become, instead, a first choice for many. As consumers get more value-driven and open to alternatives, store brands are stepping up.

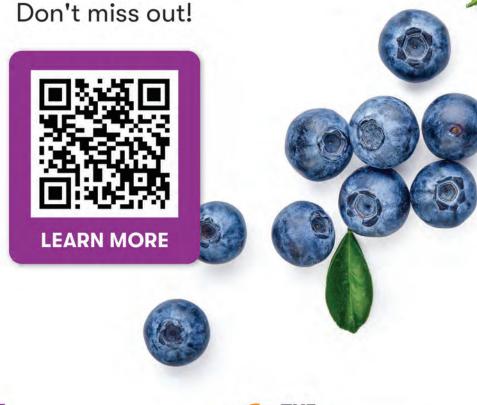
With quality, design and price all in the mix, a brand name matters less than the value of the product itself. For more and more shoppers, it's no longer about who makes a product, it's about what they get. **pb**



Viki Zabala is the chief marketing officer at First Insight, a global retail platform that uses its native AI to turn real-time customer feedback into profitable strategies for more than 600+ brands and retailers. It is based in Wexford, PA.



It's time for the produce industry to rally together to drive demand for fruits and veggies.









Raley's in Reno: Award-Winning Innovation

A SMALL STORE YIELDS BIG SALES WITH INNOVATION IN PRODUCE MERCHANDISING.

BY IODEAN ROBBINS

aley's Mayberry 103 in Reno, NV, opened Nov. 29, 1976, and has steadfastly served its community for decades. In 2024, the store was remodeled to update its look and feel, in addition to expanding fresh offerings for customers, including easy meal solutions.

Upholding the Raley's philosophy of "Making shopping easier, healthier, and more personal," Produce Manager Sean Logan took advantage of the remodel to create a produce department that upholds the company philosophy — and earned him a 2024 International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) Retail Produce Manager Award.

The store is a small-format store with only 22,000 square feet of sales floor space and only 1,600 square feet dedicated to fresh produce.

"Fresh produce contributes 10 to 15% of overall sales for the store," says Charles Hunt, district operations for Raley's, an independent, family-owned American grocery company headquartered in West Sacramento, CA. "From the beginning, Raley's has always been known for freshest availability of fine produce and meat and that reputation still holds true today."

Founded in 1935, Raley's Family of stores has grown to operate 118 stores in northern California and Nevada. "This operating company is now part of a larger enterprise, The Raley's Companies, formed in 2021 with the acquisition of Bashas' Family of Stores," says Hunt.

GRABBING ATTENTION

The Mayberry store captures customer attention and imagination with eye-catching displays as customers enter the store by using lobby displays at each entrance.

"Sean's displays are always fully stocked with seasonally relevant, fresh, and abundant fruits and vegetables," says Hunt. "He knows seasonally fresh produce will drive sales and, in most cases due to abundance, he can showcase value by promoting this product."

For example, this spring, the store



The Raley's store in Reno, NV, carries dual lines of conventional and organic in many produce items, giving customers more options. The organic penetration is almost 20% of the department sales and averages 4% to 5% higher than the rest of produce departments in the district.

showcased Sumo citrus in bulk and bags, Avocados from Mexico cross-merchandised with tomatoes-on-the-vine, and lunch box favorites, apples and oranges, all in the front lobby.

Seasonally, Logan uses the store's covered patios to build out farmers market-style displays to capture customer attention. "He does this all the way to street level, utilizing color and a wealth of fresh fruits and vegetables to draw customers into the parking lot," says Hunt. "During the summer months, these outside tables are filled full of seasonal favorites and bulky items such as melons."

Use of the patio space is most notable in the fall when the store heavily promotes pumpkins, squash, gourds and Indian corn in front. "Sean has been creating his pumpkin patch for so long, he has a following and the store is known as one of the best spots in Reno to select a pumpkin," says Hunt. "On top of creating a pumpkin patch, he is also supporting one of our longtime local growers, Doug Avanzino. Doug knows he can count on Sean to sell lots of pumpkins and brings in fresh loads daily. This year, the store sold over 2,000 large pumpkins off the front porch!"

MAXIMIZING SPACE

Raley's Mayberry is an older store with limited space, even though it has been remodeled several times. "Due to this aspect, the produce department does not have any moving parts," says Hunt. "It has one produce table, and the rest of the produce department is merchandised on vertical racks. Both sides

of the department are lined by wet racks and value-added cases."

Space is a major challenge, yet Logan devised creative ways to maximize his department's space. Hunt explains the incredulity of building a high volume produce department with limited space and only one display table. "I personally would have a hard time imagining having success in this scenario," he says. "However, Sean signed up for this challenge with enthusiasm. His imagination has transformed a small produce department into a sale-driven and impulse buying zone by changing the typical way of thinking."

Logan started out by evaluating the entire department, looking for opportunities in every area, and instead of merchandising horizontally, he started thinking vertically, says Hunt.

"Inspired, he took it upon himself to design and build several custom displays using wood and Plexiglas to help merchandise vertically," Hunt adds. "His table, for example, has a custom-made wooden display for apples, citrus, and pears. He measured, drew, cut, and built every display by hand."

These efforts to help merchandise vertically expanded his display space and variety by almost 20%, according to Hunt. "This creative change in setting up the department using vertical display cases gained a 2% sales increase and a 3.5% margin increase this past fiscal year."

Logan believes in making the shopping experience easier and has built sets that are easy to shop and inspired by cooking techniques and recipes. "He has built a vertical



Raley's Produce Manager Sean Logan (center) — winner of a 2024 IFPA Retail Produce Manager Award — started his grocery career in 1994 as a courtesy clerk, and found his true passion in produce. He leads the team, which includes Joseph Johnson (left) and Dena Walker, at a Raley's store in Reno, NV.

tomato set that includes all items to make a one-stop fresh salsa and guacamole center," says Hunt.

Logan has also devised some unique methods to offer more variety even within space constraints. "Only so much product will fit on a side table in produce, and it will go empty quickly if there is not enough product out on it," says Hunt. "To combat this, Sean has designed custom-built Plexiglas boxes that look almost like a fish tank. These allow the department to hold more product than if building off a flat surface. Once again, he is thinking vertically."

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH VARIETY

Raley's produce team leaders have access to over 1,000 produce SKUs, and Logan carries as much variety as possible, as well as dual lines of organic and conventional product. "He believes by having choice in his department, his customers are more likely to be 100% satisfied," says Hunt. "I think that's why Sean's organic penetration is almost 20% of the department sales and averages 4% to 5% higher than the rest of produce departments in the district."

Building sales in produce is not limited to fresh. "Packaged nuts, dried fruit, and seeds can be powerful drivers to sales," says Hunt. "During the holidays, Sean will heavily promote the sales of nuts for holiday baking and converts spots in his department to push sales. He also looks at upcoming sporting events to build sales. He'll use his lobbies to promote CPG items such as Wonderful Branded pistachios for key events such as the Super Bowl and March Madness."

Produce items are selected by Raley's merchants based on seasonality relevance and market price, explains Hunt. The merchants promote the product by showcasing promotional pricing in weekly printed and digital circulars, as well as promoting product using EDLP known as Raley's Dailies.

"Our produce team leaders can sample any item they choose to for their customers. Often, passive samples are used to promote in-season product or new and innovative CPG products to the customers."

Logan also uses every opportunity he can to go after incremental and impulse sales. "This year, he teamed up with Melissa's produce to go after tropical sales," says Hunt. "Knowing the power of product placement, he has placed the Melissa's product in the front of the department on a stand-alone display to draw added attention."

GROWTH THROUGH OPPORTUNITY

Logan started his grocery career in 1994 as a courtesy clerk, working through various roles, including clerk, cashier, utility clerk, night crew, and then produce. "While working produce, he discovered his true passion and place in the store," says Hunt. "Soon after, he found himself promoted to produce manager. He celebrated his 30th anniversary with Raley's in April."

Logan upholds Raley's team member promises by leading his team with purpose and passion. "He has built a relationship with his entire team encompassing stability, compassion and trust," says Hunt. "He's quick to celebrate his team with meaningful recognition and gratitude. He thanks his team throughout the day for their achievements and hard work, and also believes in promoting a healthy work-life balance for his team."

FACT FILE

RALEY'S MAYBERRY 103

1441 Mayberry Drive Reno, NV 89509 Phone: 775-786-0270 Hours: Open daily, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.







he 16 winning entries in the Produce Business 37th annual Marketing Excellence Awards program are going beyond traditional marketing strategies to energize and elevate their brand's presence in the fresh produce industry.

These produce marketers successfully reached consumers, created brand awareness, and increased sales through social media, media outreach, retailers, influencer events, advertising, mailers and other creative channels. Marketers in the produce industry let loose a little bit with their latest marketing efforts, creating unique brand

This year's Produce Business 37th Annual Marketing Excellence

storytelling moments, while having some fun in the process.

Awards program celebrates breakthrough innovation, digital transformation and community engagement. These marketers ignited their brands through displays, social media, influencer partnerships, videos and other traditional and nontraditional paths.

Special thanks go to all the entrants for taking the time to submit and share the required material and results for judging. The record number of imaginative and compelling entrants made the judges' task especially challenging, and we encourage those companies that did not win to apply next year. In celebration — and for inspiration and learning — the top 16 campaigns awarded with Marketing Excellence are presented on the following pages.

Call for Innovative Product Entries

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

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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 2026 issue of **PRODUCE BUSINESS**.

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



Avocados From Mexico

PROMOTION

Always A Good Play

STRATEGY



Avocados From Mexico (AFM) capitalized on the association of avocados, specifically guacamole, and gatherings throughout the football season. AFM was the first fresh produce brand to advertise in the Super Bowl, and the brand made history again in 2024 as the first fresh produce brand to partner with the College Football Playoff (CFP). AFM launched the Always a Good Play campaign to boost its football association, maximize marketing opportunities, and drive avocado consumption through digital media and in-store packaging, displays and shopper savings.

RESULTS

AFM's Always a Good Play campaign resulted in increased brand awareness and preference compared to the previous year. Offer redemptions at retailers were above average, and paid media saw 231MM+ impressions as a result of successful digital marketing tactics. Avocado purchases grew among CFP viewers, and AFM's four major accounts participating in the CFP campaign saw positive results.





Bolthouse Fresh Foods

PROMOTION

Bolthouse Fresh Rebrands: Elevating Carrots for the Modern Consumer and Modern Roots

STRATEGY

In October 2024, Bolthouse Fresh Foods launched its new brand, Bolthouse Fresh, alongside a bold packaging refresh designed to modernize the carrot category and reimagine how consumers interact with fresh produce. The launch introduced a vibrant, color-forward packaging system with clear occasion-based cues. Each pack featured simple icons, usage suggestions and QR codes that connected shoppers to seasonal digital content. recipe inspiration, and tips for maximizing freshness at home. In August 2024, Bolthouse also unveiled a rebranding campaign, "Modern Roots," a celebration of its century-long carrot farming legacy.



RESULTS

In 2025, Bolthouse Fresh Foods was named one of Fast Company's Top 10 Most Innovative Companies in North America, praised for disruptive packaging, consumer-driven innovation and digital engagement. The packaging also earned honors in Graphic Design USA's 61st annual awards. The results weren't just symbolic. In a post-rebrand internal study, one national retail partner experienced a sales lift of over 20% in its premium carrot segment. The Modern Roots rebrand was successful because it was built with intention. collaboration, and an understanding of the retail landscape and consumer expectations.



California Avocado Commission

PROMOTION

What's Inside a California Avocado: Year 2 Campaign

STRATEGY



Building on a successful 2023-24 integrated marketing program, the second year of the "What's Inside a California Avocado" campaign is exceeding California Avocado Commission expectations. While the 2024 advertising campaign brought to life the special story California avocado growers have to tell, the 2025 campaign helped bring consumers into that narrative. On Nov. 1, 2024, the California Avocado Commission, in partnership with the marketing communications agency Curious Plot, launched its year-two campaign to continue to raise awareness and increase demand for California avocados during the 2025 spring through summer season. With a focus on the key messages of fresh, locally grown and sustainably farmed, the campaign included retail support, like signage, display bins and customized programs, as well as foodservice partnerships throughout the western region.

RESULTS

From November 2024 through mid-June 2025, the campaign reached targeted consumers more than 200 million times. Social media content performance soared, with a 174% year-over-year increase in engagement rate for content on Facebook, and views for select TikTok videos in the millions.



Gotham Greens

PROMOTION

G is for Greens

STRATEGY



Gotham Greens partnered with Sesame Workshop to encourage families to eat more plants and learn about cooking in fun, convenient and memorable ways. By tapping into nostalgia and joy, the collaboration aims to inspire kids and adults to embrace eating their greens by incorporating fresh, greenhouse-grown leafy greens from Gotham Greens into meals and snacks. The six-month, limited-edition packaged salad line and marketing campaign bring Sesame Street characters to meals: Cookie Monster Crunch Lettuce, featuring Cookie Monster; Crispy Green Leaf Lettuce, featuring Elmo; Butterhead Lettuce, featuring Oscar the Grouch; and Romaine Lettuce, featuring Big Bird. Gotham Greens brought the campaign to life across digital channels, social media, shopper marketing, influencer and field marketing, and public relations with giveaways, recipes, downloadable activity books, and gardening and planting guides.



RESULTS

This partnership inspires greener, more nutritious choices for kids' meals and makes cooking more fun for families.



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DEADLINE JUNE 1, 2026



Hass Avocado Board

PROMOTION

Avocados — Love One Today and Invest In Your Health

STRATEGY



The "Invest in Your Health" campaign launched in 2024 and tackled a key perception barrier: that avocados are too expensive. By reframing avocados as a smart investment in long-term wellness, the campaign highlighted their role in supporting better health outcomes. The campaign helped consumers see that the real cost is in not making healthful choices, and featured cardiologist Dr. David Sabgir, a prominent voice in preventive medicine who directly confronts the complications and fatal outcomes of heart disease in his practice. Most recently, over 1,600 registered dietitians from the Food & Culinary Professionals (FCP) group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics joined the campaign, creating creative recipes. Through Avocados — Love One Today, the campaign highlighted avocado versatility, while encouraging Americans to make simple, lasting changes for better health.

RESULTS

HAB's program with the registered dietitians drew over 9,700 subscribers, sessions, and page views, reached over 5,200 users, and received 975 unique clicks and contest entries, with 400 page views on their channels, more than 40 highly qualified entries, and over 133 million national press release impressions. E-blasts delivered a surge of engagement, racking up over 2,000 unique opens across just three deployments.



Healthy Family Project

PROMOTION

Carry the Cause

STRATEGY



Healthy Family Project's Carry the Cause initiative is a blend of cause marketing, consumer engagement, and community impact designed to drive fresh produce awareness and help fight hunger year-round. Launched in late 2024, this program challenges the idea that giving back is only for the holidays, proving instead that generosity, just like fresh produce, belongs on our tables all year long. At the heart of the campaign is a reusable tote bag. Sold online and in select retail stores, the Carry the Cause tote offers a tangible way for families to support hunger relief. Every bag purchased directly benefits Feeding America. Initial retail partners included Harps Food Stores. This year, Carry the Cause will expand to Town & Country Supermarkets. Key brand partners (Village Farms, Shuman Farms, and RPE) have played a pivotal role.

RESULTS

From a marketing perspective, Carry the Cause is a multifaceted initiative with measurable results. In its first season, the campaign provided thousands of meals, generated national visibility through Healthy Family Project's social and email platforms, and created a model that blends commerce, cause, and community outreach.



Highline Mushrooms

PROMOTION

Be Super: The Highline Mushrooms Rebrand & National Rollout Campaign

STRATEGY



Highline Mushrooms set out to shake up the industry with a bold rebrand and an omnichannel marketing approach that demanded attention in every aisle, ad and post. They didn't just repackage mushrooms — they gave them a new identity. To drive consumer excitement, they planned a surge of content to coincide with the in-store rollout: Instagram giveaways to boost exposure and follower growth, influencer content timed to share recipes using Highline mushrooms, and bold reels and carousels showing off the new look and packaging benefits. To build excitement ahead of the launch, they kicked off pre-promotion at the IFPA Global Produce & Floral Show in October 2024 by unveiling a new trade show booth. At retail, they had eye-popping shelf strips, floor stickers, cold chain posters, and educational POS kits.

RESULTS

The campaign achieved 500,000 digital impressions; +60% MoM social engagement growth; +18% traffic to store locator pages, with direct sales lifts of up to 23% during geo-targeting promotions; and onboarded new retail partners.



PROMOTION

Put Hunger on Ice

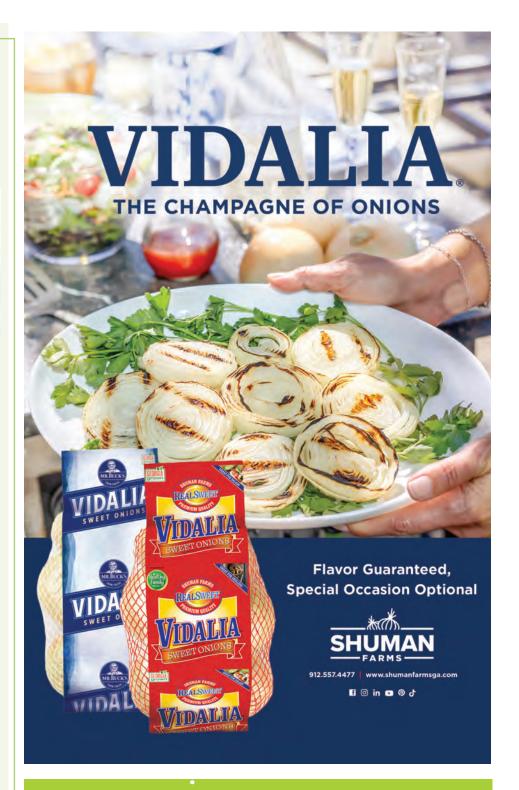
STRATEGY



Pazazz apples teamed up with Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) superstar Taylor Heise of the Minnesota Frost to assist Second Harvest Heartland during the 2024-2025 hockey season. Pazazz donated 12,000 pounds of apples to the 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. "Taylor Heise has been an amazing ambassador this season. Not only does she genuinely love apples, but as an elite athlete she has helped educate her followers on the importance of fueling their bodies with healthy options," says Kristi Harris, brand manager, Honeybear Brands. "Just like Heise, Honeybear is passionate about giving back to our community. We were thrilled to see Taylor amplify our Pazazz brand of apples in a genuine spirit of filling the need to alleviate hunger. It's been a win all around."

RESULTS

Paid and organic social media campaigns generated more than 7 million impressions. Heise has a large fan base that engaged with her posts, which included baking with Pazazz apples and regular tallies on donations as they climbed throughout the season. Heise also educated her young, athletic audience, creating new Pazazz fans over the health benefits of apples.



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Natural Delights

PROMOTION

Nationwide Dietitian & Media Campaign to Support Retailers

STRATEGY



Natural Delights launched an effective media campaign by partnering with media dietitians to host more than 40 local and national TV segments. These segments capitalized on seasonal flavor trends and expert health insights to showcase how Natural Delights products can be used in everyday snacks and meals. By featuring retail availability on-air, the campaign helped drive consumer interest in key markets and boosted sales across all major retail partners. In addition to broadcast outreach, the brand engaged consumer media throughout the year to promote new innovations, including Medjool Date Strips with Tajín and Organic Coconut Mini Medjools, alongside its core products — most focused on driving growth with organics. These personalized media connections led to high-impact placements in top-tier outlets, significantly amplifying brand awareness and credibility.

RESULTS

The media segments resulted in 5.9 billion impressions and had an advertising equivalency of \$4.3 million in value. Additionally, the brand is up 13% YOY in sales, with a 147% increase in organic product sales — one of the key goals in this campaign.



NC Sweetpotato Commission

PROMOTION

The Sweet North Carolina Sweetpotato Sweepstakes

STRATEGY



The Sweet North Carolina Sweetpotato Sweepstakes proves that when strategic storytelling meets creativity and purpose, fresh produce can take center stage in modern food culture. Developed by the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission in partnership with FullTilt Marketing, this campaign set out to do more than promote a vegetable — it aimed to inspire behavior change, increase consumption, and reframe sweetpotatoes as a contemporary, craveable staple. Content lived on Instagram and other social platforms, but also drove consumers to the campaign landing page to vote for their favorite dish and enter a sweepstakes. The grand prize? A trip to Charlotte, NC, and a starring role in a sweetpotato-themed recipe photo shoot during Sweetpotato Month.

RESULTS

Website traffic rose by 149% in July and 98% in August, totaling nearly 49,000 page views during the campaign — over 10,000 on the sweepstakes page alone. Thousands entered the contest, hundreds subscribed to the newsletter, and engagement across platforms skyrocketed. On Instagram, the influencers' content generated over 1,750 interactions and reached more than 30,000 users organically.



Northwest Cherries

PROMOTION

#MonCherry

STRATEGY



In 2024, in the face of ongoing grocery price concerns, Northwest Cherries developed a campaign to help shoppers see the value of adding fresh cherries to their cart by emphasizing the superfruit's health benefits. Inspired by vintage French food posters and summery shades of pink, the campaign drew on the Paris Summer Olympics and a serendipitous pop culture moment. The #MonCherry campaign incorporated a broad selection of global marketing communication tactics, ranging from influencer partnerships, recipe development, press efforts, and a restaurant partnership to out-of-home advertisements in Thailand.

RESULTS

The 2024 #MonCherry campaign reached a total potential audience of nearly 425 million through a surroundsound content strategy; this total does not include retailer promotions. Domestic influencer partnerships, focusing on simple recipes audiences can recreate at home, resulted in 318,800 views on Instagram and TikTok. Globally, Northwest Cherries targeted the India market, generating 3 million views. A PR box containing fresh Northwest-grown cherries and cherry-themed items was sent to 16 top-tier U.S. influencers, collectively reaching more than 4.8 million users. During the campaign months, the Northwest Cherries Instagram page generated more than 43,300 engagements and 76,000 click-throughs, with 81% of annual website visitors accessing the site during peak fresh season. Northwest Cherries distributed a press release and two MAT releases, achieving a total potential audience reach of 416 million.



Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers

PROMOTION

Greenhouse Goodness Digital Campaign

STRATEGY



The OGVG Greenhouse Goodness Digital Campaign leveraged a comprehensive content-focused strategy to engage consumers and promote the benefits of "Greenhouse Grown" vegetables. A key component was the Greenhouse Goodness microsite, developed to create a user-friendly experience where visitors could explore the benefits of greenhouse vegetables, find easy-tomake recipes, and connect with brand ambassadors. Social media played a role in driving engagement, with curated content spreading awareness across platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The campaign used multichannel advertising, including digital ads and print media.

RESULTS

The Greenhouse Goodness campaign had a 450% performance increase in seasonal comparison to the previous year, with 279,841 visitors to the unique seasonal landing pages that offered curated recipes on interactive tables, children's activities, influencer partnership showcases and educational posters. The landing pages received 323,885 total sessions on the site, during which 977,537 events were tracked, indicating an average of three events per session.





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Shuman Farms

PROMOTION

Shuman Farms University

STRATEGY



For the fourth consecutive year, Shuman Farms has expanded Shuman Farms University, the edutainment-based platform designed to educate produce department teams across the country about sweet onions, especially the unique qualities of Vidalia onions. In 2025, they took Shuman Farms University to the next level with a fully redesigned and reimagined website experience. The updated platform is now more interactive, mobile-friendly, and contentrich than ever before. To launch the new platform, they debuted Shuman Farms University with an interactive booth experience and featured presence in the Fresh Ideas Bright Arrivals showcase at SEPC's Southern Exposure. The launch campaign included a multi-touchpoint promotional strategy to reach and activate retailer partners and industry stakeholders, with eye-catching stickers with scannable QR codes, sent colorful postcards (also QR-coded) directly to retail partners, and deployed an e-newsletter campaign introducing the refreshed university.

RESULTS

To date, the university has welcomed over 300 "graduates" who have earned their Degree in Flavor, complete with a printable certificate, from retailers across the country. New participants continue to sign up each week, helping build a strong community of produce professionals who are better equipped to drive Vidalia sales at retail.



Stemilt Growers

PROMOTION

Jewel's Blast Off



Jewel's Blast Off with Stemilt apples and pears was a month-long promotion that brought together multiple components and channels to create excitement and sales lift on apples and pears during the late season in February. Traditionally, large apple and pear displays and themed promotions around these items happen in October and November. However, apples and pears still represent a large presence in stores in February and are a yearround staple. The Blast Off promotion tied the theme of outer space with Cosmic Crisp apples and included a consumer sweepstakes with multiple prize levels, billboards, themed ads, and themed store signage combined with expanded feature displays. The grand prize winner is booked for a trip to Cape Canaveral in January 2026.

RESULTS

The results were a 900% increase in Cosmic Crisp apple sales and a 107% increase in the Lil Snappers bag program for February.



Sun World International

PROMOTION

AutumnCrisp Grapes And Ruby Rush Grapes Retail Collaboration

STRATEGY

Sun World International collaborated with Giant Eagle Inc. and Sprouts Farmers Market for an omnichannel marketing campaign encouraging shoppers to sample and purchase AutumnCrisp and Ruby Rush Grapes. The goal was driving awareness and premiumization of the grapes.

RESULTS

Sun World's collaboration with Sprouts Farmers Market resulted in more than 3.8 million impressions. Sun World's collaboration with Giant Eagle resulted in more than 1.7 million impressions. These strategic partnerships with retailers continue to drive awareness, conversation and sales of AutumnCrisp and Ruby Rush grapes, shaking up the table grape category and inspiring consumers to look for branded produce. Sprouts brand keywords had highest click-through rate of 9.37%, which means those who searched for Sprouts-related searches had a higher likelihood of clicking the ad. Ruby Rush digital banners across Giant Eagle's website engaged shoppers, driving more than 110K impressions. Programmatic display ads drove more than 500K impressions.



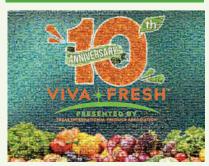


Texas International Produce Association

PROMOTION

Viva Fresh Expo's 10th Anniversary

STRATEGY



The branding for the Viva Fresh Expo's 10th anniversary was fresh, inviting, and focused on celebrating the people and progress of the last decade. It was designed to reflect not just how far the event has come, but where it's going. The look and feel of the event were updated to be brighter and more modern, using clean designs and colors inspired by fresh produce. One of the most powerful parts of this branding was the 10th Anniversary Mural, with more than 4,000 photos from previous Viva Fresh events, showcasing real people, real moments and genuine memories. It was more than decoration, it told the story of Viva Fresh through the faces and experiences of the community that built it. People found themselves searching for familiar faces, pointing out favorite memories, and sharing stories. It brought a sense of connection and pride, showing just how much the event has grown and how many people it has touched over the years.

RESULTS

The mural and the overall branding worked together to highlight the heart of Viva Fresh: community, health, and the power of fresh produce. It helped remind everyone that this event is about more than business — it's about making a difference.



The 2025 Fall Produce Guide: Everything You Need to Maximize Seasonal Sales

Look for fall sales opportunities with apples, pears, potatoes, pumpkins, gourds, fresh pomegranates, beans, Brussels sprouts and onions.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

owhere in the supermarket is a bountiful fall harvest portrayed better than in the produce department. There's new crop apples, pears and potatoes, as well as seasonal pumpkins, gourds and fresh pomegranates. Add the holidays from Labor Day to Halloween and Thanksgiving and themes like back-to-school and tailgating, and fall is a register-ringing season.

How much? "We expect to see an 8-12% jump in sales during the fall, which encompasses so many seasonal promotions," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's Produce, in Vernon, CA.

Keep fall displays fresh by using produce to tell a story and gather input to come up with themes, recommends Brian Dey, retail and merchandising innovation manager at Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA.

"Talk with everyone from your shipper and wholesaler to your in-store team. No one person has all the ideas, and collaboration is a good way for everyone to feel they've contributed to a successful promotion," Dey advises. "In general, keep displays fresh, clean and fun. If hosting a display contest, consider changing the criteria, creative flair or prizes. Everyone likes to win something."

BACK TO SCHOOL

"Back-to-school season is a key time when families look for healthy, packable snack options, and apples fit perfectly," says Mathew Blair, produce category business manager for Northeast Shared Services, based in Schenectady, NY, which supports the retail operations of Price Chopper, Market 32 and Tops Friendly Markets.

Stemilt Growers positions its Rave apple as the back-to-school apple because it harvests in early August, says Brianna Shales, marketing director for the Wenatchee, WA, apple grower, and Starkrimson and Bartlett are two pear varieties available in August.

"We're encouraging a lot of Little Snapper back-to-school ads on those two varieties, as well as apples harvested from mid-August to mid-September, such as Gala," Shales says. "Retailers can plan an early ad campaign



According to Frieda's Branded Produce, shoppers are willing to trade up for purple sweet potatoes, and 79% say they're willing to pay more for them than traditional orange varieties.

around Gala apples, alongside red pears and Bartlett pears."

Apples are one ingredient in Reichel Food's Dippin' Stix, single-serve produce snacks, with peak promotional times aligning with the back-to-school season.

"To drive sales, we recommend placing Dippin' Stix and our PRO2snax near lunchbox items, grab-and-go coolers, or produce endcaps," says Kathy Puckett, vice president of sales and business development for the Rochester, MN-based company. "Use messaging like 'Lunchbox Favorites,' or 'Snack Smarter This Season."

Each fall, the Healthy Family Project, a nonprofit cause marketing campaign, collaborates with retailers to showcase a variety of produce that complements back-to-school routines and cooler weather.

The annual Back to School program is "a cornerstone campaign," says Amanda Keefer, senior director of marketing and communications for the Reidsville, GA-based initiative, "featuring partners like Bee Sweet Citrus mandarins, Jazz apples, Consalo Family Farms blueberries, Nature Fresh Farms Lil' Chills mini cucumbers, Yo Quiero! guacamole minis, Del Monte fruit cups, and Sunset Sprinkles tomatoes."

The Healthy Family Project team, including registered dietitians, creates blog posts, recipe videos, and social content around these items.

LABOR DAY

This holiday, which falls on Sept. 1 this year, sits at a produce crossroads between summer and fall.

"Labor Day weekend is a great opportunity for increased summer fruit, berry, and melon sales," says Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager at New Seasons Market, a 21-store chain based in Portland, OR. "Melons, peaches, berries, and corn are the big categories for us for that holiday. Having multiple bins of both large and mini seedless watermelons in front of the stores is a great way to show off the season."

On the East Coast, Labor Day kicks off fall-themed merchandising, says Northeast Shared Services' Blair, "giving apples a strong early push as part of 'local harvest' promotions."

SPORTS-GATING SEASON

Several sporting seasons kick off during the fall harvest. College football commences in late August/early September, the National Football League (NFL) starts in early September, and the National Basketball Association (NBA) begins in mid-October.

"Feature sweet potatoes, as sweet potato fries, wedges, or chips as healthy game-day snacks," says Jeremy Fookes, director of sales for A.V. Thomas Produce, in Atwater, CA. "From September through November, California sweet potatoes are in peak availability."

SnapDragon apples are the official apple of the Buffalo Bills, an NFL team based in Buffalo, NY. Last fall, Crunch Time Apple Growers, the Lockport, NY-based marketer of SnapDragon and RubyFrost varieties, partnered with Progressive International and utilized Progressive's 16-slice apple slicer in an in-store demonstration, which resulted in increased sales of apples and slicers.

"Retailers can prominently display our bright green, eye-catching packaging alongside tailgate displays to take part in this promotional effort," says Jessica Wells, executive director.

NATIONAL APPLE MONTH

October's National Apple Month is a time when retailers create larger apple displays and position them at the front of the department.

"One of the most successful displays we've seen was the opposite of what you may think," says Wells. "A retailer, rather than placing apples of different varieties side by side, broke up the displays by placing products that pair well with apples between the varieties. For example, they put peanut butter, caramel, and apple-related kitchen tools, such as slicers or corers, between each variety of apples. This helped to create a visual break between the apple varieties, making the selection less overwhelming, while also cross-promoting multiple products."

Wells adds that Crunch Time has recently redesigned its display bins to include a smaller, Euro-sized offering, allowing for a visual display that takes up less floor space in the produce department.

"We run aggressive ads on apples throughout the season," says Blair. "You will see multiple cover ads featuring our 3-pound New York bags as a buy-one, get-one (BOGO) promotion, and we pair those with six-pack apple cider doughnuts as well."

Multi-variety ads are the way to set new levels of sales on apples in the fall, says Stemilt's Shales. "It's easy to promote the top-selling apples, but that can hurt other aspects of the category, especially the quality and freshness that consumers would experience. Promoting multiple varieties at a time, while also helping educate shoppers about, for example, why you'd use a Granny Smith in a pie, but maybe eat a Honeycrisp fresh out of hand, are great opportunities to help sell the whole category at once."

HALLOWEEN

"Halloween provides great opportunities for fun, kid-friendly displays, especially with small varieties like bagged snack apples or mini packs," says Blair of Northeast Shared Services. "We usually will run a tote apple ad and tie in apple cider, a natural for Halloween."

New Caramel Apple Pops, a miniature caramel apple exclusive to Tastee Apple Inc., in Newcomerstown, OH, have been a hit with consumers, according to Chad Hackenbracht, president. "We are packaging these into a two-pack this season to offer a lower-priced

WHAT THEY ARE

Connect asparagus, Brussels sprouts, and green onions with seasonal themes like Thanksgiving side dishes by featuring quick, easy-to-prepare recipes to inspire shoppers and highlight how these items fit seamlessly into every day and holiday meals.

Manuel Ochoa, Altar Produce, Fort Lauderdale, FL



We expect to see an 8-12% jump in sales during the fall, which encompasses so many seasonal promotions.

Robert Schueller, Melissa's Produce, Vernon, CA





tomatoes



Mature Green and Roma Tomatoes

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Sales: 209-862-2872 Cell: 209-505-9500



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ring that retailers have been looking for."

Hackenbracht suggests displaying the company's caramel and chocolate-coated apple products off refrigeration in high-traffic areas.

Halloween is all about jack-o'-lanterns and decorative gourds at New Seasons Market.

"Jack-o'-lanterns, specialty pumpkins, and decorative gourds are the focus for this holiday," says Salchenberg. "The last five years have seen a huge jump in specialty pumpkin sales. Varieties like knucklehead, white, popcorn, and variegated are very popular with our customers. We go big with our pumpkin patches to show off the cool varieties and draw customers in."

Quite a few retail customers have added the Candy Corn pumpkin to their fall mix, according to Sarah Frey-Talley, chief executive officer of Frey Farms, in Keenes, IL.

"Known for its fiery colors and long shelf life, the Candy Corn grows into a very consistent size of approximately 10-14 pounds," Frey-Talley says. "Our Autumn Couleur and Heirloom Stacker varieties continue to grow year after year. They're known for the unique colors and textures to decorate, but the fun fact is, most are edible."

Promoting freaky-looking tropical fruits is the latest Halloween produce trend, as this is



Jack-o'-lanterns, specialty pumpkins, and decorative gourds should be the focus for the fall season. Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager at New Seasons Market, Portland, OR, says, "The last five years have seen a huge jump in specialty pumpkin sales. Varieties like knucklehead, white, popcorn, and variegated are very popular with our customers. We go big with our pumpkin patches to show off the cool varieties and draw customers in."

one of the most creative and playful holidays of the year, according to Melissa's Produce's Schueller.

He says the top-performing tropicals for a Freaky Fruits promotion include dragon fruit, buddha's hand, aloe vera, pomegranates, rambutan, quince, goldenberries, cherimoya, kiwano melon, star fruit, blood oranges, finger limes and passion fruit.

NATIONAL POMEGRANATE MONTH

Fresh pomegranate season in California kicks off at the end of October, and National Pomegranate Month is celebrated in November

"We see a strong resurgence in sales for our pomegranate arils and fresh pomegranates, especially tied to the seasonal holidays," says Jennifer Hirano, vice president of marketing for POM Wonderful, a brand of The Wonderful Company, in Los Angeles, CA

"Pomegranates are an impulse purchase," Hirano adds. "Therefore, leveraging merchandising and having a strong display section is a great way to optimize sales and let consumers know that the fresh pomegranate season has started."





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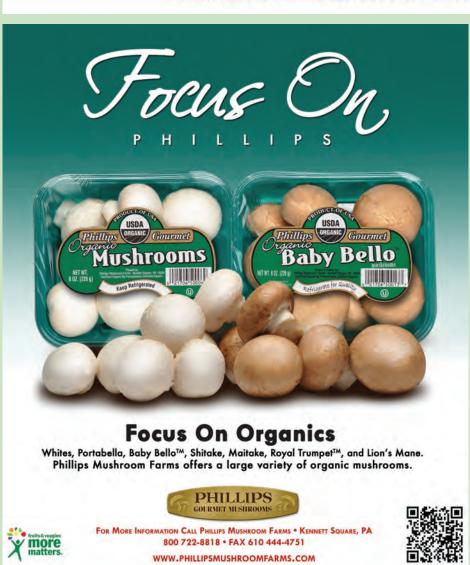


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THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving, Nov. 27, 2025, is big for all the traditional staples: Brussels sprouts, green beans, celery, potatoes and onions, says New Seasons Market's Salchenberg. "Other than the main staples, we go big with local chanterelle mushrooms, as well as new crop stem and leaf satsumas for Thanksgiving."

"Connect asparagus, Brussels sprouts, and green onions with seasonal themes like Thanksgiving side dishes by featuring quick, easy-to-prepare recipes to inspire shoppers and highlight how these items fit seamlessly into every day and holiday meals," says Manuel Ochoa, marketing and purchasing coordinator for Fort Lauderdale, FL-based Altar Produce, which is working to extend the Brussels sprouts season to achieve year-round supply and retail customers' ability to plan promotions beyond the traditional fall window.

Thanksgiving is the top promotional holiday for green beans. Promotions tied to this holiday are seeing strong movement and high shopper engagement, according to Ivonne Lugo, in sales and marketing at SL Produce, headquartered in Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez, Sinaloa, Mexico, with export and distribution facilities for its Tenderland-brand green beans in Nogales, AZ, and McAllen, TX.

"To sell more, launch a 'Fresh for the Feast'

campaign during November with themed recipe cards or QR codes linked to holiday cooking ideas. Or offer a 'Build Your Own Side Dish' station featuring green beans alongside other fall vegetables like Brussels sprouts and butternut squash," says Lugo.

Gumz Farms, the largest onion and red and yellow potato grower in the Midwest, offers peak availability on both from mid-October through mid-December, says Jared Gutierrez, director of sales, marketing, and business development for the Endeavor, WI-based grower. For Thanksgiving promotions, Gutierrez recommends, "offer 3- to 5-pound packaging on both potatoes and onions."

Retailers should display North Carolina sweet potatoes at the front of the store, including in bins with a QR code linking to recipes, and feature signage with recipes and nutrition information, according to Michelle Grainger, executive director of the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, in Benson, NC.

"Cross-merchandising strategies include positioning them with other root vegetables, such as onions and carrots," she says.

Stokes Purple Sweet Potatoes, sold by Frieda's Branded Produce, remain a top performer from September through November, with strong volume and a reliable supply, says Alex



Complementary fall products, like caramel or chocolate-covered apples, add breaks to typical produce displays and encourage impulse buys.

Jackson, vice president of sales and procurement for the Los Alamitos, CA-based company.

"Knowing retailers need to dedicate significant floor space to orange, red, and white varieties, our merchandising bin shipper, which features a scannable recipe QR code and simple usage ideas, creates the additional merchandising space needed to highlight this variety and creates practical inspiration for how consumers can elevate their Thanksgiving meal," she says.





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- Foundational Excellence Future Leaders Program
- Booth Setup
- Rising Star Reception
- Opening Cocktail Reception

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 3, 2025

- Keynote Breakfast & Awards Ceremony
- Trade Show
- Buyer Connect Program
- Connect With Fresh
 Consumer Media Luncheon
- Chef Demonstrations
- Industry Insights Stage

THURSDAY DECEMBER 4, 2025

- IdEATion Fresh Foodservice Forum
- Industry Bus Tours



Prepare to Profit With Peruvian Asparagus

Focus helps retailers capitalize on the transition from summer asparagus to fall/winter product.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

eruvian asparagus represents significant potential for profit during the fall and winter when production is at its peak.

Highlighting Peruvian asparagus

Highlighting Peruvian asparagus ensures consistent availability, freshness, and customer satisfaction, explains Mark Cotê, produce supervisor at Redner's Markets in Reading, PA, with 44 stores. "Merchandising it well during these months boosts sales, drives seasonal interest, and positions the store as a reliable source for premium produce yearround," he says.

According to the Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association's (PAIA) 2025/2026 Fresh Asparagus Category Management Stats & Key Purchasing Trends Report, Peru accounted for 41% of fresh market asparagus imports to the U.S. in 2024.

"Peru's reliable, year-round supply of highquality asparagus ensures consistent availability, especially during fall and winter when domestic and other production wanes," says Katiana Valdes, marketing director at Crystal Valley Foods in Miami, FL.

Carlos Solf, vice president procurement for Southern Specialties in Pompano Beach, FL, and co-chair of PAIA, notes Peru is a reliable source in the U.S. fall and winter months, providing consistent quality and volume.

"Fall and winter are a peak time of year for Peruvian asparagus since we typically have strong production," says Solf. "The many holidays and gatherings present great sales opportunities."

Focusing on a few key areas will help retailers increase shopper interest and drive sales. "Stores should strive for ample asparagus displays and marketing during the fall and winter," says Craig Rolandelli, president and chief executive at Jacobs, Malcolm & Burtt (JMB) in San Ramon, CA, and PAIA co-chair.

TRANSITIONING SEASONS

The move into fall vegetables should include asparagus. "Asparagus continues to



Retailers should make sure the butt-end of asparagus is cleanly cut and hydrated. In the backroom, keep asparagus cold (34 to 36 degrees F) and moist prior to display. To ensure quality, it is important to display asparagus in water or on ice.

grow in popularity at both retail and foodservice level," says Priscilla Lleras, executive director of PAIA. "Continued and planned emphasis on asparagus during the fall and winter will yield profitable results."

At Rubinette Produce Market, an upscale independent in Portland, OR, the store emphasizes the seasonal break to differentiate product for customers. "Typically, we let displays gap before putting up imported asparagus," says Josh Alsberg, owner/operator.

"This allows our customers the understanding that asparagus is a seasonal item, and that it is in season now from Peru. We also make sure to always check quality before we stock it to make sure it tastes fresh and not bitter."

Securing a consistent, high-quality supply is essential in preparing for the fall/winter season, according to Cotê. "Planning ahead with reliable growers, monitoring weather impacts, and aligning promotions with peak availability ensures freshness, reduces shrink, and supports strong sales during a season when quality and continuity can vary significantly."

Asparagus has evolved from a seasonal specialty to a year-round staple, says Valdes. "This is largely due to consistent imports from Peru combined with seasonal sourcing from other areas. The supply chain has helped make asparagus widely available and promotable."

Peruvian product provides a long window for sales. "Stores should plan to start really promoting in September and go all the way through until spring," says Rolandelli. Though year-round asparagus merchandising has grown, the product still sees spikes during key holidays. "The big holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July, Memorial Day and Labor Day, are all great holidays to promote asparagus," says Shani Nir, management at Ayco Farms in Pompano Beach, FL.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's particularly are prime times to "up the ante," according to Redner's Cotê. "Stores should build attractive displays, promote easy holiday recipes, and cross-merchandise with seasonal proteins and sauces to boost sales," he says. "Highlighting freshness, versatility, and premium quality can position asparagus as a must-have side dish during winter celebrations."

STRATEGIC DISPLAYS

Visible asparagus sells. "Seeing is buying," says Lleras. "Consumers love asparagus, and having a visible display in the produce department will encourage them to put it in their cart."

Stores can build strategic asparagus displays by placing them in high-traffic areas near complementary items, such as lemons, hollandaise sauce, or fresh proteins, suggests Cotê. "A compact, yet well-stocked, display, around 3 to 4 feet, keeps the product fresh and visually appealing," he says. "Use vertical stacking and clear signage to highlight quality, origin, and usage tips, encouraging impulse and repeat purchases."

When promoting asparagus, retailers are



urged to highlight asparagus with special displays to entice sales. "Endcap displays, or additional refrigerated display fixtures placed in high-traffic areas, offer best results," says Nir. "This provides a destination, thereby driving incremental sales and attracting new customers to the item."

Display size and placement may vary depending on timing and promotion. "Larger, more prominent setups are recommended during peak times, such as holidays when demand and interest are higher," says Valdes. "These displays should be kept full, fresh, and frequently rotated to maintain visual appeal and quality."

MAINTAINING QUALITY

Displaying quality product is essential to increased sales. "Especially in today's economy, having clean, fresh displays affects sales even more than price," says PAIA's Lleras. "Produce staff should check the display regularly because shoppers only want to buy high-quality, fresh-looking product."

Handling prior to and during display are both crucial. "Of prime importance is keeping the product in the cold chain while being delivered and stored," says Ayco's Nir. "The butt-end should be cleanly cut and sufficiently hydrated. In the backroom, keep asparagus cold (34 to 36 degrees F) and moist (damp room) prior to display. To ensure quality, it is very important to display asparagus in water or on ice."

Crystal Valley's Valdes recommends keeping asparagus refrigerated whenever possible to extend shelf life. "Some retailers enhance the perception of freshness by using crushed ice displays, especially on endcaps, but these should be limited in size and designed for quick sell-through within a few hours."

OFFERING CHOICE

Options provide more opportunities to spark consumer interest. "Peru provides a variety of options in fresh asparagus, including color," says JMB's Rolandelli. "More and more shoppers are looking for something unique, especially to use at holiday gatherings. Displaying all three colors — green, white and purple — will help stores pick up extra sales."

Rubinette's Alsberg finds that promoting all three colors boosts sales in the whole category. "During months when we have access to full color variety, we promote heavily through sale pricing and strong front-and-center merchandising."

The colors of Peruvian asparagus offer visual appeal and culinary versatility. "Displaying multiple colors together creates a destination in the produce section, especially during holidays when shoppers seek unique ingredients," Valdes says.

Consumers seek variety in asparagus sizing, as well, she adds. "Standard to large dominate due to cost-effectiveness, but upscale retailers can offer XL or Jumbo sizes for grilling enthusiasts during fall and winter gatherings."

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE

Retail shelf packaging for asparagus is gaining popularity. "Consumers now see washed, trimmed bunches in resealable bags, microwave-ready trays, seasoned kits and mixed veg bundles," says Redner's Cotê. "These convenient, value-added formats appeal to busy shoppers. With demand rising for ready-to-cook produce, this trend is set to grow further in the coming years."

Value-added packaging is gaining traction for convenience-focused shoppers, agrees Valdes. "These options extend shelf life and appeal to busy consumers," she says. "Trends indicate continued growth in packaged asparagus for quick meal solutions."

The Peruvian industry is innovating in value-added, says Solf of Southern Specialties. "Importers and distributors now offer a variety of fresh asparagus value-added options. These products provide convenience for the shopper as well as easier handling for the retail staff."

EDUCATING SHOPPERS

To boost Peruvian asparagus sales in

WHAT THEY ARE

Consumers love asparagus, and having a visible display in the produce department will encourage them to put it in their cart.

Priscilla Lleras, Peruvian
 Asparagus Importers Association



Endcap displays, or additional refrigerated display fixtures placed in high-traffic areas, offer best results.

Shani Nir, Ayco Farms,
 Pompano Beach, FL

fall and winter, retailers should feature bold signage. "Highlight origin and freshness, offer bundled promotions, sample recipes, and cross-merchandise with hollandaise sauce, proteins, and roasting vegetables," suggests Cotê. "Eye-catching displays near the entrance or meal solution areas also help attract attention and encourage impulse purchases."

Sharing recipes and usage information also drives sales. "Creating and promoting recipes with asparagus increases the opportunity for a customer to try it out," says Nir.

Starting in mid-November, Rubinette's staff communicates asparagus usage ideas to shoppers. "We will typically find holiday or holiday-type recipes that one could substitute with asparagus and promote these in-store," says Alsberg.

Cross-merchandising is another great way to promote asparagus. "For example, post a picture of asparagus next to a steak or add salads, oils and dressings to the display," says Nir. "Stores can also build small asparagus displays in the deli, meat and seafood departments."

In-store demos are another great way to boost sales of both white and green asparagus. "This gives shoppers the opportunity to taste the product prepared in creative ways they might not have considered," says Valdes. "Retailers can inform consumers about the uses and health benefits of asparagus through traditional point-of-sale materials, as well as content on their websites and social media platforms."

The 1-2-3 Way To Sell More Eastern Apples

Eastern states rank among the top 10 US apple producers.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

merican pioneer nurseryman, John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, planted his first nursery south of Warren, PA, in 1797. Today, while Washington, New York and Michigan are the top three U.S. apple growers, Eastern states, such as Pennsylvania and Virginia, rank among the top 10 U.S. producers of this fruit, according to the USApple Industry Outlook 2024 report by the U.S. Apple Association in Falls Church, VA.

"This season is expected to be robust, with about 250 million cartons across all regions for fresh consumption. About 40% will be grown east of the Mississippi," says Myles Chasser, fruit buyer for Four Seasons Produce Co., in Ephrata, PA, which sources apples predominantly from New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

This backyard supply is good news for East Coast retailers, as nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of the U.S. population reside east of the Mississippi River, according to 2022 U.S. Census Bureau data.



Wild Twist, a high-flavor cross between Honeycrisp and Cripps Pink, was introduced by Hess Brothers Fruit Company, Lancaster, PA, in 2020. The apples are harvested in late October, stored as flavor develops, and last into July.



Displays are key to spotlighting Eastern apples. Myles Chasser, fruit buyer for Four Seasons Produce Co., Ephrata, PA, which sources apples predominantly from New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia, says this apple season is expected to be robust.

"The East Coast is extremely important to our apple program, especially during the fall," says Mathew Blair, produce category business manager for Northeast Shared Services, based in Schenectady, NY, which supports the retail operations of Price Chopper, Market 32 and Tops Friendly Markets.

"New York-grown apples are a seasonal highlight for our stores," he says. "Their proximity enables faster delivery, better freshness, and lower transportation costs, which we can pass on to customers through competitive pricing."

Selling more East Coast apples at retail is all about knowing the seasonal forecast, what's available, and the best way to promote.

1. 2025-2026 AVAILABILITY SNAPSHOT

New York State is expecting a larger crop than last year's total of 31 million bushels, which was up 5% over the state's five-year average, based on data shared by the New York Apple Association (NYAA) in Fishers, NY.

"New York State experienced a lot of rain

earlier in the spring, followed by warmer temperatures, and apple sizes are shaping up nicely in the orchards," says Cynthia Haskins, president and chief executive officer. "Apple harvest will begin in mid-to-late August and continue through the first week of November."

Despite a brief April freeze, bloom and thinning conditions rebounded in Pennsylvania, supporting a strong fruit set in key apple varieties, according to Penn State Extension at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

"By all indications, we expect a large crop of apples, similar to two years ago," says Chris Sandwick, director of marketing for Hess Brothers Fruit Company in Lancaster, PA.

U.S. Apple reported Pennsylvania's 2023 crop at 13.1 million bushels.

"During peak harvest time, apples are picked, packed and shipped within three days, something that our coastal partners highly value," says Valerie Ramsburg, in sales and marketing at the Rice Fruit Company in Gardners, PA.

Eastern apples benefit from strong packing, storage, and controlled-atmosphere technology, enabling extended availability.

"Pennsylvania apples, with proper storage, can remain in fresh-market supply close to seven to eight months annually, often from August through March," says Michael Keefe, commodities program manager for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA), Bureau of Market Development, in Harrisburg, PA.

Virginia's 2025 apple growing season began challenged by a frost event in April, which is likely to result in a 40% to 60% crop loss of some of the earlier-maturing varieties.

"The loss is not even across the state, and some of the areas that have later maturing varieties were less impacted than other regions," says Jim Atwell, marketing specialist in the office of domestic marketing, Southwest Virginia, for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and Virginia Apple Board, Charlottesville, VA.

"The previous two growing seasons were above average in production, and the carryover of apples in cold storage has been a challenge for some larger growers to move," he says.

"Even with the lower production expected this year, I believe there will be adequate volume, and apple growers will probably shift even more apples toward the fresh market instead of processing."

Lower volumes of North Carolina apples are expected this year due to freeze damage, says Laura Levene, executive secretary of the North Carolina Apple Growers Association in Edneyville, NC, and the Blue Ridge Apple Growers Association in Hendersonville, NC.

Also, Levene says widespread hail, especially in Henderson and Polk counties, in the southwest part of the state, has affected quality. "Last season was a large crop overall, although some did not get harvested due to the hurricane midharvest."

North Carolina produces, on average, 4 million bushels of apples annually, according to NC State Extension Homegrown data.

2. SWEET CHOICE OF SKUS

East Coast retailers continue to rely on core varieties, like Honeycrisp, Gala, Fuji and Granny Smith, says Rice Fruit Company's Ramsburg. "These varieties deliver on both consumer demand and grower performance, and they remain the foundation of our program, offering flavor and consistency."

Some varieties, like SnapDragon, Ruby-Frost and EverCrisp, were bred specifically for performance in Eastern growing conditions, Ramsburg adds. "Their natural fit with our climate, combined with growing consumer curiosity, makes them compelling additions to the apple category, especially during fall and winter promotions."



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Wild Twist, a high-flavor cross between Honeycrisp and Cripps Pink, was introduced by Hess Bros. in 2020. The apples are harvested in late October, stored as flavor develops, and last into July.

"While not quite mature, we continue to have additional volume every year to support the growing retail sales," says Sandwick. "This past season, we made it into 49 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, missing only Hawaii. Wild Twist gives our retail partners a premium apple in a time of year where the category (and category dollars) tends to flag a little."

McIntosh, Empire and Cortland are apples predominantly grown on the East Coast, and they are top sellers. Older varieties, such as York and Stayman, are still popular in Virginia.

"A niche apple in our region that garners its namesake from within our state is the Albemarle Pippin, a historic ode to Colonial times that is still revered in cult-like fashion today," says Joseph Strippoli, in horticulture and sales at Shenandoah Valley Orchards, which works closely with wholesaler, Bowman Fruit Sales, both in Timberville, VA.

Along the East Coast, "there is an increasing demand for organic apples, but bugs and fungus prevent most commercial organic production," says Four Seasons Produce's Chasser.

Approximately 40% to 42% of Eastern apples are sold in pre-packaged bags or pouches, versus 58% to 60% in bulk, a shift that mirrors national trends, says the PDA's Keefe. "Pouch-style bags (e.g., 3-, 4-, 5-pound) are gaining traction for their grab-and-go convenience and protection — perfect for snack-sized or premium apples."

The East Coast is a little slower to adapt to new packaging, due to the smaller nature of family-owned farms and the associated production costs, adds Chasser. "One of the trends we are seeing from out west is fourpack recyclable cardboard trays. We also see companies trying to use better-for-the-environment plastics in their bags."

3. MARKETING & PROMOTION

Marketing and promotion of Eastern apples on the Eastern Seaboard is especially important to the industry, says Shenandoah Valley Orchards' Strippoli. "We ship from New York to South Florida and as far west as Mississippi, and continue to grow our geographic area, focusing on the coastal regions. This is possible due to our high-quality standards and the East Coast's reputation for the best-tasting apples."

Displays are key to spotlighting Eastern apples.



The New York Apple Association, Fishers, NY, offers custom-designed display shippers and signage as part of "The Big Flavor" campaign to promote New York apples. These displays are used to showcase a variety of apple packaging, including totes, poly bags, pouches and bulk displays.

"We often create large, high-impact, front-of-department displays during peak season, using bins and décor to create visual interest," says Northeast Shared Services' Blair. "We also cross-merchandise apples with caramel dip, apple cider, and apple cider doughnuts when in season. Signage featuring the farm name or state of origin helps create a local connection and boosts impulse sales."

The NYAA offers custom-designed display shippers and signage as part of "The Big Flavor" campaign to promote New York apples. These displays are used to showcase a variety of apple packaging, including totes, poly bags, pouches and bulk displays.

The campaign also includes digital bill-boards, mobile billboards on buses, and social media marketing to target consumers in New York City and other markets where New York apples sell.

Promoting "locally grown" is not a side note — it's a competitive edge, and its importance has only increased over the past decade, says the PDA's Keefe. "Locally and regionally grown has become a core marketing and promotional pillar for Eastern U.S. apples, especially those from Pennsylvania. Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern chains like Giant, Weis, Wegmans, Redner's, and Whole Foods often highlight 'Local Apples from PA' during seasonal promotions."

Virginia-grown apples are featured at Food City, a 130-store supermarket chain owned by K-VA-T Food Stores, Inc., headquartered in Abingdon, VA.

"Part of Farm to Food City, a program that focuses on providing our customers with the freshest ingredients, is sourcing Virginia apples," says Joe Greene, vice president of produce and floral operations. "We source Gold Delicious, Fuji, Granny Smith, and Pink Lady in 3-pound bags and Gala and Red Delicious in 5-pound bags, and

WHAT THEY ARE Saying



Shoppers are also drawn to locally grown items, so Eastern apples help us tell a strong local story in the produce department.

Mathew Blair, Northeast Shared Services, Schenectady, NY



Locally and regionally grown has become a core marketing and promotional pillar for Eastern U.S. apples, especially those from Pennsylvania. Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern chains like Giant, Weis, Wegmans, Redner's, and Whole Foods often highlight 'Local Apples from PA' during seasonal promotions."

Michael Keefe, Pennsylvania
 Department of Agriculture, Bureau of
 Market Development, Harrisburg, PA

display them at the front of the produce department, which we call our 'fresh first' display. There are placards with names and photos of the apple farmers and their families. We'll carry Virginia apples from early September to the first of the year, because that's what customers look for."

SHOWCASE eastern apples



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Flavor, Trend and Profit: Mushrooms Are Moving Up

Merchandising and promoting mushrooms can generate sales.

BY MIKE DUFF

s trends reshape food retailing, mushrooms are gaining new prominence — thanks to shifting supply dynamics, rising consumer demand for their nutritional benefits, and evolving produce section layouts. For retailers, that means securing supply, merchandising mushrooms prominently, and promoting them effectively can lead to strong returns.

Wegmans is among those food retailers that merchandise mushrooms prominently and deeply in its produce sections. Still, the company is aware that it has to bulk up when customers are particularly anxious to purchase mushrooms.

"During Thanksgiving, we'll go through cases and cases of mushrooms," says Alex Secory, produce department manager at Wegmans, Brooklyn, NY.

He adds that, overall, baby bellas are the top-selling mushroom in the store, with shiitake and white mushrooms also favorites. He adds, though, that Brooklyn shoppers are espe-

cially fond of sliced white mushrooms for their ease of use.

Wegmans carries specialty mushrooms, such as lion's mane, but they don't drive the business, says Secory. Yet, he points out having variety is important because shoppers who visit Wegmans expect to have a range of choices. The key is having enough of the big drivers and just enough of the specialty mushrooms that consumers expect to be in the store, while not stocking so much to generate expensive shrink.

MUSHROOM CONSUMER

Today's mushroom consumer is diverse, representing all life stages and a range of incomes and circumstances, from singles to households with families, according to Cristie Mather, vice president of marketing, Mushroom Council, Lee's Summit, MO. Still, certain tendencies emerge in the council's research, and food retailers might want to evaluate such trends in building assortments and merchandising.

In the Mushroom Council's research, heavy-frequency mushroom shoppers tend to be Baby Boomers and Gen X.

"They are more immersed in a foodie lifestyle," Mather says. "They eat a range of mushroom varieties and incorporate them into all meals of the day. These important shoppers place a high value on mushrooms and believe that they make their meals tastier, healthier and more sustainable. Retailers can continue to keep these shoppers engaged by ensuring a range of mushroom varieties are available on display at all times."

Lighter frequency mushroom shoppers tend to be younger, including Millennials and Gen Zers.

"They enjoy cooking, but don't always have the time or the know-how," says Mather. "They prioritize convenience and primarily shop for the most common mushroom varieties, such as white button and cremini. Retailers can help drive sales with these shoppers by offering sliced mushrooms, as well as ready-to-cook options, such as stuffed mush-





Focus On Organics

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procurement ► Mushrooms

rooms. Quick and easy recipes also are of value for these particular shoppers."

Mather says the Mushroom Council has lots of free recipe resources for retailers to use to appeal to this audience. "These shoppers also prize mushrooms for special occasions, so take advantage by merchandising mushrooms for holidays all year-round."

WHAT'S SELLING?

The best way to look at the development of the mushroom sector is to skip all the noise of shorter time periods, and compare today's sales patterns to those of a decade or more ago, says Anne-Marie Roerink, of 210 Analytics, who works with the Mushroom Council.

"Compared to 2013, white mushroom sales have decreased from 66% of total fresh mushroom dollars sold at retail to 49% in the past year," she says. "Today, a broader diversity of mushrooms is going into shoppers' baskets, including cremini and portobello mushrooms, as well as specialty mushrooms, led by shiitake."

She cites Circana data that shows cremini/brown mushrooms going from a 30% dollar share in 2013 to 43% for the 52 weeks ending June 15. In that same timeframe, specialty mushroom sales have gone from a 3% to a 7% dollar share.

Yet that isn't the whole story.

"Sold at a lower price per unit, white mushrooms represented 72% of all fresh mushroom pounds sold in the produce department in 2013," says Roerink. "Today, that is down to 56%, while the share of brown mushrooms has increased to 42% [from 26% in 2013]. Because specialty mushrooms fetch higher prices on a per unit and per pound basis, dollar share is far higher than its volume share at 2%. Still, that has doubled since 2013."

Mixed packages, often referred to as chef blends or gourmet blends, also grew in share, says Roerink.

In the specialty mushroom arena, she says shiitake is the largest seller, adding that the past five years, shiitake has grown from 3.6% of dollar sales in calendar year 2020 to 4.5% over the past year.

"Specialty mushroom sales are especially strong in Asian retail, stores such as H-Mart, and they typically go untracked in the big, syndicated data firms," she adds.

Roerink is also watching what she calls "an interesting trend" in specialty mushrooms. "Typically, white mushrooms are the 'starter' mushroom for people who first come into the category, as it's often what the family recipe calls for," she explains. "As consumers start getting more into mushrooms, they broaden their selection to brown mushrooms."

Foodies are driving specialty mush-room sales. "In recent years, the emergence

of specialty mushrooms in everything from supplements to coffee and cookies has more consumers moving directly into the specialty mushroom segment," Roerink says. "This is one of the reasons behind the growth in specialty mushrooms, such as lion's mane."

DOLLAR SENSE

As it stands at midyear, the outlook for mushroom price and supply is positive, notes Mike Stephan, vice president of sales and business development for Monterey Mushrooms, Watsonville, CA.

"The mushroom industry is entering the second half of 2025 with abundant supply and stable pricing," he says. "Thanks to expanded growing capacity and efficiencies across key producing regions in the U.S. and Mexico, consumers can expect consistent availability and attractive promotional activity, especially in brown and specialty mushrooms, where demand continues to grow."

Stephan says that, although fresh mushrooms are effectively in season year-round, "demand picks up in November and stays strong all the way through April due to the holidays and comfort food cooking."

Summer lifestyles focused on grilling and salads suggest opportunity exists between Memorial Day to Labor Day, he says, adding Monterey Mushrooms has just rolled out a lineup of specialty mushrooms to that end.

"Mushrooms are increasingly showing up in warm-weather dishes — grilled skewers, salads, and meatless meals — suggesting a growing opportunity to promote them between Memorial Day and Labor Day as a summer staple," he says. "Our year-round production across multiple regions ensures consistent supply and quality no matter the season, giving retailers flexibility to promote mushrooms 12 months a year."

Jim Garsow, chief marketing officer, Caputo & Guest, Kennett Square, PA, says that overall supply of mushrooms has been topping demand, however, different segments of the sector have had different outcomes.

"Organic mushrooms are the only bright spot in the category, with brown and specialty segment dollar sales up 4.5% and 3.3% versus a year ago," he says. "Brands like Caputo & Guest organic mushrooms have been expanding offerings and distribution. Value-added chef's cuts, like our sliced king oyster and lion's mane steak medallions, have been well received by customers and time-starved consumers."

Garsow says many retailers have reduced the space allocation to conventional agaricus white/brown mushrooms. "Random weight mushroom dollar sales, down 9.7% versus a year ago, are one of top decliners. While



Bulk mushrooms still remain relevant to some retailers and consumers in markets in the U.S., but only make up a small percentage of retail sales as the sector continues changing.

they continue to be carried in fresh specialty and natural stores, conventional retailers are finding it difficult to justify the space allocation to bulk."

At Buona Foods, Landenberg, PA, Chris Johansen, sales & account manager, says bulk mushrooms still remain relevant to some retailers and consumers, but make up only a small percentage of retail sales.

Johansen says supply is steady at the moment. "We have increased our growing capacity over the last several years, and we are in the midst of another expansion right now. As we approach the end of the summer, we will see the same seasonal challenges that we usually see on the growing side, followed by the increased demand of the holidays."

The involvement of Chinese companies in the mushroom sector is changing the dynamic, notes Adam Pokornicky, chief executive, Mountain Meadow Mushroom Farm, Escondido, CA, and they are using more automation than companies in the U.S. and Canada.

As such, Mountain Meadow has moved away from more mainstream mushrooms, such as creminis, and developed a new business model. As it develops its specialty business, the



Wegmans is among those food retailers that merchandise mushrooms prominently in its produce sections. At the Wegmans store in Brooklyn, NY, during Thanksgiving, they go through cases and cases of mushrooms, says Alex Secory, produce department manager.

goal is to become a high-tech operation that can compete with anyone in the mushroom business on cost and quality.

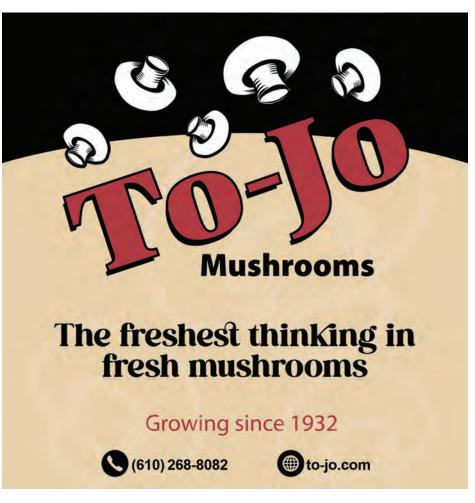
"I think we can be a high-quality, low-cost producer long term," he says. "American grown, regenerative agriculture, organic, doing things the right way."

Bryan Shelton, vice president of sales and marketing, Giorgio Fresh, Temple, PA, says, the outlook for mushrooms is "steady but cautious."

"Different costs like labor, energy and packaging continue to put pressure on pricing," Shelton says. "However, since we are a vertically integrated operation, we are well-positioned to manage these challenges, while maintaining quality and service for our retail and foodservice partners."

Giorgio focuses on white, brown, exotic and organic mushrooms, but its product mix has evolved.

"Today, there's strong demand for value-added products," says Shelton. "Our solution is creating innovations, like stuffed products, grill packs and sauté kits. We are expanding into specialty varieties, launching Vita Sana Sol to branch beyond mushrooms into citrus with products like Persian limes. Our focus has shifted from being just a mushroom supplier to being a flavor-forward, convenience-driven brand."



Reinvigorating the Retail Avocado Category

More supply, sourced from multiple growing regions, can lead to lower prices and higher sales.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

ometimes, one and one is way more than two. Take avocados, for example. In the early 1990s, most of the supply to U.S. supermarkets originated from California, with marketing support from the California Avocado Commission (CAC).

Per capita consumption in 1996 totaled 1.51 pounds, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) data. The following year, Mexico received a green light, following a nearly century-long phytosanitary-driven ban, to export fruit to 19 Northeast and Midwest U.S. states from November through February. By 2007, Mexican avocados were shipped to all 50 states.

Today, supply is primarily sourced from five countries, as well as California in the U.S., with marketing support from the CAC and organizations representing Mexican, Peruvian and Colombian avocados. This resulted in a U.S. per capita consumption of 8.6 pounds in 2024, a 470% increase.

Despite this dynamic three-decade trajectory, the avocado category has remained static over the last five to six years, as volumes sold into the U.S. have been relatively flat, according to Xavier Equihua, president and chief executive officer of the Peruvian Avocado

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It is important that retailers offer avocado variety to drive incremental sales. This includes options across various ripeness levels, sizes, packaging formats (such as bagged or bulk), and both conventional and organic selections. Retailers who invest in effective promotions and eye-catching merchandising strategies are more likely to see stronger sales and increased profitability.

Commission (PAC), headquartered in Washington, D.C.

"Collectively, associations spend around \$80 to \$100 million in marketing," says Equihua. "Yet, what we need is more supply. We have yet to hit the 3 billion mark. The U.S. imported 2.8 billion pounds of fruit in 2022 and 2.9 billion pounds in 2024. We should be at 3.5 billion pounds by now to keep up with demand."

SOURCE A GLOBAL SUPPLY

Equihua says more supply, sourced from multiple growing regions, could lead to lower prices and higher sales. "We view the U.S. market as having the greatest potential for this, driven by the trend of people seeking to eat more healthfully, particularly younger individuals."

Supply diversification, combined with continually creative marketing support, equals the answer to reinvigorating the avocado category.

There is a trend for retailers to diversify their portfolios of avocado-sourcing regions.

"We source our avocados almost exclusively from Mexico and California," says Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager at New Seasons Market, a 21-store chain based in Portland, OR. "We will see Chilean avocados occasionally in late winter if there is a gap between Mexican and Californian crops, but, for the most part, Mexico and California can supply us with all that we need."

"A key part of our diversified sourcing strategy is to be able to source from two or more origins at any given time throughout the year," says Keith Barnard, senior vice president





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of global sourcing for the Oxnard, CA-headquartered Mission Produce. "This enables us to fill in supply gaps and strategically mitigate supply chain challenges."

For the U.S., Mission's primary origins include Mexico, Peru, California and Colombia, but it also sources from Chile, the Dominican Republic, and New Zealand to complement supply sources, Barnard says.

Mexico is the No. 1 avocado supplier to the U.S., with 2.3 billion pounds of fruit exported in 2024. This represents nearly 80% of avocados sold in the U.S., based on data provided by the Hass Avocado Board (HAB), in Mission Viejo, CA.

"In Mexico, more growing regions outside of Michoacan are working toward getting approval on protocols to export their avocados to the U.S.," says Allan Acosta, vice president of global sourcing for Robinson Fresh, in Eden Prairie, MN.

California ranks second, providing 11.8% of the avocados sold in the U.S. in 2024, according to HAB data.

"U.S. avocado volumes will increase over the next five years, and California will play a big part in this," says Peter Shore, vice president of product management for Calavo Growers, in Santa Paula, CA. "New orchards have been planted in Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties."

Peru is expected to export more than 200 million pounds of avocados to the U.S. between May and September 2025, up from 145 million pounds in 2024.

Exports of avocados from Colombia reached 76 million pounds in 2024.

"Several production zones in Colombia continue to be developed to extend year-round availability and close supply gaps in the U.S. market," says Manuel Michel, managing director of the Colombia Avocado Board (CAB), with offices in Orlando, FL. "These regions are expected to commence commercial exports to the U.S. by 2026–2027, pending phytosanitary certification and achieving a sufficient production scale. This expansion is part of Colombia's broader vision to become a reliable, year-round avocado supplier."

The Dominican Republic and Chile each sent some 13 million avocados to the U.S. in 2024.

"The Dominican Republic has newer plantings of Hass avocados, with harvest from March to September, and they are developing their infrastructure," says Ozzie Figueroa, marketing and consumer service director for Henry Avocado Corporation, in Escondido, CA. "This fruit reaches the East Coast in seven to eight days post-harvest."

Guatemala is expected to have access to the U.S. market within the coming year. In April,



In California, shoppers can enjoy specialty varieties, such as Bacon, Fuerte, Pinkerton, Reed and Zutano. Additionally, Hass-like varieties, such as GEM and Lamb, have delivered strong sales performance for retailers.

Mission Produce opened a state-of-the-art packinghouse in the country. "With two crops annually, November to March and a smaller crop from June to July, Guatemala bridges supply gaps during key periods throughout the year," says Barnard.

Ecuador has a work plan negotiated with the USDA and is awaiting final inspections, according to Giovanni Cavaletto, chief executive officer for the U.S. at GLC Cerritos, in Oxnard, CA. "Ecuador's start is further out than Guatemala's, and with fewer acres developed. The goal with Guatemala and Ecuador is to increase volume, which traditional sources have not done in recent years."

YEAR-ROUND MARKETING SUPPORT

Consumer demand for avocados in the U.S. is expected to continue rising. To meet this demand, "avocado suppliers must prioritize delivering excellent quality, since the eating experience is a key factor for shoppers," says Gary Caloroso, regional business development director for the Giumarra Companies, head-quartered in Los Angeles, CA.

"Equally important is offering variety at retail to drive incremental sales. This includes options across various ripeness levels, sizes, packaging formats (such as bagged or bulk), and both conventional and organic selections," adds Caloroso. "Retailers who invest in effective promotions and eye-catching merchandising strategies are more likely to see stronger sales and increased profitability."

Retailers can find promotional assistance from growers and shippers. For example, Mission Produce's in-house marketplace intelligence, AvoIntel, delivers consumer insights to inform of profitable programming opportunities, according to Brooke Becker, senior vice president of sales.

WHAT THEY ARE

U.S. avocado volumes will increase over the next five years, and California will play a big part in this.

Peter Shore, Calavo Growers,
 Santa Paula, CA



Avocado suppliers must prioritize delivering excellent quality, since the eating experience is a key factor for shoppers.

Gary Caloroso, Giumarra
 Companies, Los Angeles, CA

"With AvoIntel, we've been able to help our customers drive double-digit sales growth."

Colombia, California in the U.S., Peru, and Mexico all have country-of-origin marketing organizations.

This spring, the Colombian Avocado Board conducted a multi-week promotion with Weis Markets, a chain of over 200 stores headquartered in Sunbury, PA. The campaign, which ran from March 27 to April 23, included a display contest, point-of-sale tools, and in-store engagement chainwide with the Avocados from Colombia brand. The timing

aligned with key spring holidays, including Easter, Earth Day and Cinco de Mayo, and marked the start of the Traviesa season, one of Colombia's two harvest seasons that support year-round availability.

"Partnering with the Colombia Avocado Board on the recent display contest was a game-changer for us," says Mathew Forbes, Weis Markets' avocado buyer. "The promotional support and striking in-store materials generated incredible engagement, and we saw a significant sales increase during the campaign. We're excited to keep building on this momentum with future collaborations."

The CAB will unveil its new national marketing campaign in October at the IFPA Global Produce and Floral Show.

The CAC, based in Irvine, CA, provides ongoing support to its retail partners by coordinating in-store promotions, providing pointof-sale materials and signage, and conducting digital marketing campaigns to maximize sales and consumer engagement in their stores, according to Terry Splane, the CAC's vice president of marketing. "With the increased size of the 2025 harvest, we are focused on initiatives that leverage consumer demand for California avocados and feature messaging around consumer priorities, such as sustainability, local growing and ethical sourcing."

Avocados From Peru, the national brand of the PAC, opened its 2025 U.S. season in May with a major league splash: a high-impact partnership with the Detroit Tigers that serves as the cornerstone of the brand's national marketing efforts.

"Sports inspire people to stay active and live well, values that Avocados From Peru champions in every campaign," says Equihua. "No other origin does what we do to integrate avocados with cultural, lifestyle and wellness-driven experiences."

The 2025 signature partnership with the Detroit Tigers, in collaboration with Meijer, a 500-plus store chain based in Grand Rapids, MI, and Chevrolet, includes in-stadium promotions, retail displays, digital content, and summer grilling campaigns. The centerpiece is a sweepstakes for an "Avo Tigers" Chevy Silverado pickup truck, with the grand prize winner to be announced Sept. 21 on Fan Appreciation Day at Comerica Park.

Complementing its event series, PAC offers a range of customized retail programs. Initiatives include a national e-coupon and rebate program, social media competitions, in-store activations, display and sales contests, recipe-driven digital content, and a national mesh bag program.

Avocados From Mexico (AFM), based in Irving, TX, will continue to focus its promotions on football, starting with college foot-



contest, point-of-sale tools, and in-store engagement chainwide with the Avocados from Colombia brand.

ball in September and extending through the Super Bowl in February. This time frame aligns with the country's leadership position in avocado supply to the U.S.

"There are some 1,900 football viewing occasions from the start of college football to the Super Bowl," says Stephanie Bazan, AFM's senior vice president, communications strategy and execution. "From October through December 2024, retail equivalized

sales volume was up 10% compared to the year before and was the biggest since the pandemic, up +29% compared to 2022."

Bazan says AFM will again have a robust fall promotional campaign with an omnichannel approach that includes everything from a media presence to in-store elements and a new consumer offer designed to drive traffic to the stores and get more units in the



Build Success in Salad Kits

Salad kits are experiencing continued growth.

BY LISA WHITE

n today's produce departments, packaged salad kits are experiencing momentum and continued growth. Younger consumers, especially Gen Z and Millennial households, are driving this growth in fresher eating habits and semi-prepared meals.

"Consumers today are prioritizing convenience, health, and variety — and salad kits meet all three demands," says Leah Vanwoerkom, vice president, marketing and brand, 80 Acres Farms, which produces salad kits from its vertical farming operation, headquartered in Hamilton, OH. "This growth is further fueled by innovation, primarily in kits, with chopped and lettuce kits growing over the past five years."

Chopped salad kits now have a 28% household penetration, according to David Austin, vice president of marketing and innovation, Dole Fresh Vegetables, Monterey, CA.

"Salad kits are no longer a trend — they're a staple," says Tal Shoshan, founder and chief executive of FiveStar Gourmet Foods Inc., Ontario, CA, which markets under the Simply Fresh brand. "Consumers have made health and convenience non-negotiables, and salad kits sit at the intersection of both."

WHAT'S NEW

New salad kits with innovative flavor profiles are giving this category more leverage.

At the Southeast Produce Council Southern Exposure Show in March, Dole Fresh Vegetables introduced four chopped kits in smashed burger style, apple harvest, cool melon and strawberry poppyseed flavors.

Austin says the new kits are the direct result of expanded research by the brand into the latest taste trends, ranging from fruits, herbs and spices to low-sugar, smoke and char preferences.

"The Dole innovation team is seeing various simultaneous flavor trends ranging from maple bourbon, chipotle and everything seasoning to combinations of fruits like strawberry and melon to more exotic options like dill pickle and spicy cashew," he adds. "Smokehouse and charred flavors are big right now, as well as unexpected combinations, such as strawberry and poppyseed and international influences."

This year, Fresh Del Monte, based in Coral Gables, FL, expanded its portfolio through Mann Packing, which includes four new Newman's



Own Salad flavors: Creamy Caesar, Ranch, Italian Recipe and Parmesan Roasted Garlic.

"Salad kits are evolving beyond traditional offerings, with new and emerging flavors reflecting consumers' growing appetite for bold, global and health-forward options," says Joshua Kusske, director of new product development, Fresh Del Monte.

"We also see brands execute new items with nuanced takes on familiar flavors. It's no longer enough to have just a plain ranch item. Consumers now have a range of options to choose from, such as salsa ranch, pizza ranch, or dill pickle ranch varieties."

Kusske adds there's also been a rise in unexpected ingredient pairings, and the use of nutrient-dense greens, such as microgreens, mustard leaves and kale, replacing traditional lettuces, with crunchy nut, dehydrated fruit or vegetable toppings.

Over the past year, Simply Fresh launched its Global Inspirations line featuring international flavors, including Korean BBQ, Mediterranean Mezze and Mexican Street Corn. It also introduced protein-packed kits and single-serve shaker salads for on-the-go options.

In addition, there's a push for organic components beyond greens, like organic dressings, cheeses and croutons. However, price sensitivity in the organic segment requires careful value-positioning.

Little Leaf Farms expanded its salad kits line last fall with the addition of a dairy-free Sesame Ginger Salad Kit that includes Thai-seasoned wonton strips, sliced almonds, toasted quinoa and sesame ginger dressing served on top of baby crispy green leaf lettuce. In addition, the brand introduced a lettuce blend, Sweet & Crispy, and Little Leaf Farms is also launching Romaine Leaf this summer.

"Like all our lettuce varieties, Romaine Leaf is grown without harmful pesticides, herbicides or fungicides, nurtured in greenhouses that harness sunlight and fresh rainwater and sustainably produced," says Chris Hill, chief revenue officer, Little Leaf Farms, Devens, MA.

Fresh Express' most recent salad kit introductions this year include Creamy Goddess Chopped Kit, Farmhouse and Orange Sesame.

"We're seeing the rise of kits that go beyond traditional Caesar or Garden blends," says Fabian Pereira, vice president of marketing, innovation, international for Fresh Express, based in Salinas, CA. "Today's innovation is driven by a fresh wave of culinary trends — from Latin American heat and umami-packed Asian flavors to elevated comfort classics and wellness-focused blends featuring nutrient-dense ingredients."

Over the past year, 80 Acres Farms expanded its lineup with its Berry Bliss and Eatalian lines.

"Caesar and ranch-based flavors tend to get all the love in salad kits, but we continue to hear from consumers that they are looking for more flavor options," says Vanwoerkom.

Bonduelle Americas, based in Quebec, Canada, has expanded its product line with grilled chicken toppings and a Mediterranean-style salad kit, as well as shelf-stable lunch options with plant-powered ingredients.

"We're seeing an uptick in globally inspired flavors and those that bring layered texture and bold taste, but also variety," says Bobby Chacko, Bonduelle's chief executive. "Korean with sweet and spicy flavors is showing 4.9% growth in the last 12 weeks, as consumers demand more variety."

MERCHANDISING & PRESENTATION

According to Kusske at Fresh Del Monte, retailers have significantly expanded the shelf space dedicated to salad kits over the past five years, reflecting strong and sustained consumer demand.

"While exact figures vary by store size and region, the overall trend is clear: Salad kits now occupy more linear feet in refrigerated produce



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sections than before," says Kusske. "This growth is driven by the increasing popularity of chopped and chef-inspired kits, which offer variety, convenience and elevated flavor profiles."

Retailers are also strategically segmenting their displays by flavor, sizes and global cuisine influences, he adds. "As a result, both vertical and horizontal merchandising space has grown to accommodate this expanding and dynamic category."

FiveStar Gourmet Foods' Shoshan agrees shelf space for salad kits has expanded significantly, often doubling in the past three to five years. What used to be one or two shelves has evolved into dedicated refrigerated sets featuring both kits and stand-alone greens. And retailers now see salad kits as essential for driving the perimeter's performance.

"Retailers are embracing secondary placements, like chilled islands near deli, graband-go coolers or cross-merchandising with beverages or proteins," says Shoshan. "Shaker formats are rising fast in popularity due to their portability and user interaction. Clean, transparent bowls and bold top-labeling also help drive impulse purchases."

Shoshan recommends highlighting variety with clear segmenting, vibrant visual appeal and point-of-sale signage. Frequent rotation and stocking are critical.



strong and sustained consumer demand.

Austin says Dole is focused on in-store

Austin says Dole is focused on in-store vehicles like shelf strips and danglers supported by at-shelf tear pads.

"Additionally, we leverage digital ads, paid SEO and digital coupons accompanied by at-shelf signage to generate awareness for trial and repeat consumers," he says.

Little Leaf Farms' Hill is seeing shopper experience and brand storytelling converge at the point of sale.

"Consumers are increasingly drawn to displays that emphasize local production, sustainability and freshness, which not only capture attention but build trust and transparency, as well," Hill says.

"Retailers are significantly expanding shelf space for salad kits, signaling their evolution from a niche segment to a category mainstay," he adds. "We're seeing retailers segmenting kits into chopped, clamshell and single-serve formats, carving out more real estate to differentiate these options."

He also has seen a strong lift from satellite displays — secondary placements near protein items or in grab-and-go zones.

Over the past decade, Chopped Kits have grown over 17% in share, while Conventional Blends have declined by nearly the same amount (-17%), and Classics have dropped by approximately 11%, Fresh Express' Pereira notes.

Bonduelle's Chacko says successful merchandising depends on consumers' ability to connect to flavor cues.

"Cross-merchandising helps spark discovery and having old school POS material brings people back to basics with floor talkers and signage," Chacko notes. "Retailers need to connect to the shopper's path to solve meal challenges."





Atlanta's Unique Fresh Produce Appeal

'Capital of the South' showcases regional produce and flavors.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

ousing a population over 1.7 million, with a major port, a thriving IT sector, and the logistics center of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport — home to Delta Airlines — Atlanta represents an interesting market for anyone working in the fresh produce industry.

But beyond the statistics, Atlanta is also the natural hub for a vibrant produce industry across wider Georgia, which produces everything from pecans and blueberries to spring onions and watermelons.

Atlanta has become a unique market for fresh fruits and vegetables, given the presence of large numbers of young graduates drawn from rural communities across the state, according to Sarah Cook, director of business development at the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

"A lot of people in Atlanta were originally from other areas in the state. It's a destination for after they graduate from college," she says. "Many have ties to farms, and they want to take what they had growing up — that fresh,

local produce grown right here in Georgia."

"And then our retailers and restaurants are really doing the work to endorse local produce, and prepare things in traditional ways, as well as unique and different ways, creating fusions and offering fresh takes on old recipes."

STRONG WHOLESALE PRESENCE

Another factor that makes Atlanta unique, Cook continues, is the presence of the Atlanta State Farmers Market. "That means we are able to deliver products all over the East Coast from the Atlanta market. It means chefs and foodservice distributors have easy access to fresh produce."

Based at the Atlanta State Farmers Market, Nickey Gregory is a 25-year-old full-line, fresh produce wholesaler, re-packer and processor, which delivers overnight across 10 Southeastern states. With a diverse customer base, the company services foodservice, retail and wholesale customers with just-in-time ordering and delivery.

Nickey Gregory's vice president of business development and marketing, Andrew Scott, describes Atlanta as a "melting pot of locals and transplants from across the world."

"There are 13 Fortune 500 companies based in Atlanta, and with that comes employees — and their eating habits —

moving into this region," he says. "There is a good mix of independent restaurants and retailers here that compete with the chains. Atlanta's population continues to grow as it cements its title as the Capital of the South."

Although headquartered in Pompano Beach, FL, grower, importer, processor and distributor Southern Specialties operates facilities in Arizona, McAllen, TX, and Atlanta, GA. With distribution throughout the U.S., the company's vice president of business development, Charlie Eagle, says Southern Specialties' emphasis is on "areas east of Texas."

One such area is Atlanta, where Southern Specialties supplies a wide variety of fruits and vegetables to restaurant, hotel and retail customers.

"Atlanta is a base for Delta Airlines, which provides direct flights to most cities in the U.S., which makes it an ideal place for anyone looking to visit customers and prospective customers," says Eagle. "The city is also an important landing spot for produce that Southern Specialties brings to market, and we have a strong customer base in Atlanta."

One of the newest arrivals in the Atlanta produce industry is marketer-distributor Anthony Marano, a Chicago, IL-headquartered business that now oversees a growing presence in the Atlanta area.

According to president and chief business officer Damon Marano, Anthony Marano made the decision to invest in Atlanta after identifying a clear opportunity for growth, which at the same time would allow the company to "create better life opportunities" for its employees and their families.

"After 70+ years in Chicago, my brother and I said, 'let's go where there's a market,' and Atlanta called our name," he explains. "Now, with the way the country is booming, we see that Atlanta is the gateway to the Southeast, and we're excited to be part of that.

"Atlanta is definitely a new culture. Understanding the South and how vastly different this country is from one side to the next is important to us. One part I love is how relationship-based they are — people in Atlanta really value relationships."

Anthony Marano now has two facilities in the Atlanta area: a 76,000 square foot distribution center in the Atlanta State Farmers Market in Forest Part, GA, and a 153,000 square foot value-added complex in nearby Conley, GA, which includes banana ripening rooms, and a repacking service.

Marano describes Atlanta as a growth-oriented, logistics-driven market with a huge amount of population diversity and ethnicities from all over the globe. This factor, he says, gives companies like Anthony Marano the opportunity to bring people products that "remind them of back home."

At the same time, he says having a base in Atlanta gives Anthony Marano access to customers in the Florida Panhandle, the Deep South, and eastern coastal regions. "These types of regions don't exist in the Midwest, and there's a lot more to learn from that," Marano adds.

BECOMING A 'ONE-STOP SHOP'

When it comes to succeeding in new markets — whether it be Atlanta or elsewhere — Marano says it's important to get to know your customers, learn what their needs are, and understand what challenges they might need solving.

Anthony Marano's focus, he continues, is on being a "one-stop shop," where they can serve all a company's needs, from banana ripening to produce packaging, and even source more unusual items for the region's growing ethnic populations.

"Our goal is looking at how do we increase the revenue in our customers' produce area," he says. "We find that when our customers win at produce and their customers are excited to shop with them, we win. It's a great method for how we hope to serve the people of Atlanta."

Now in its 33rd year in business, exotic fruits and specialty vegetable supplier Coose-



mans Atlanta continues to adapt to the everchanging environment and business, according to the company's general manager of operations, Bryan Thornton.

"We work with new adaptations to food safety requirements," he says. "Customers wants and needs keep us evolving."

In terms of the key to running a successful produce business in Atlanta, Thornton says it is vital to "know your market" and to continue to adapt as that market evolves.

"Every market has its own diverse population and eating habits continually change," he explains. "We focus on keeping moving forward, never stopping evolving, and remembering we always need solid customer service."

According to Eagle, Southern Specialties sources from 10 countries across the Americas, operating significant programs from Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. itself. Asparagus accounts for Southern Specialties' biggest product by volume, with the company the largest importer of asparagus from Peru, and among the largest from Mexico.

"Our facility offers customers private label packaging programs, as well as custom fresh-cut products," Eagle adds.

Describing wholesalers like Nickey Gregory as the "ambulance service to the produce industry," Scott says suppliers provide customers with short buys, cross-docking, fresh cut/processing, forecasting, merchandising, as well as peace of mind. And, he says "business is good" after a slow start to 2025.

PROMOTING GEORGIA

For Nickey Gregory, Scott says a key differentiator in Atlanta is a focus on "Georgia Grown" products when in season. "We are proud platinum sponsors of the Georgia Grown program and promote locally grown often to our customer base," he explains.

In fact, the "Georgia Grown" brand and label is one of the most recognizable ways the Georgia Department of Agriculture supports local growers at a statewide level, and Cook says this work is increasingly paying dividends at a consumer level.

"We've done a lot of work over the past decade and a half to try to influence consumers to be cognizant of the Georgia Grown brand," she says.

"We're really trying to influence people to look for that Georgia Grown brand when they're shopping, and identify with local by letting them know what's fresh, what's in season, and what's produced locally."

Another factor in the Georgia Grown program's success has been its partnerships with retailers and Atlanta chefs.



Nickey Gregory Company is a full-line fresh produce distributor, repacker, and processor based in Atlanta. We are family-owned and offer overnight deliveries throughout the Southeast.

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Potential



"We have a Georgia Grown chef program where we have chef ambassadors who put forward a concerted effort to source locally and highlight Georgia products in their menus," explains Cook. "They do a great job switching out their menus to highlight what's available in Georgia, so when it's peach season, they feature peaches throughout the menu, not just in the dessert section, but also in dressed salads and entrées."

Cook describes the program as having a "multi-pronged approach," with an ecosystem of supporters and partners, which is helping drive higher demand in the Atlanta region.

Marano agrees that "locally grown" is a key differentiator in Atlanta, and a factor which makes it decidedly different from Chicago. "Local is way bigger in Georgia than it is in Illinois or the Midwest," he says. "Agriculture is their No. 1 industry, and seeing the kind of enthusiasm they have is great."

Having two seasons, Marano continues, is another element that makes Georgia as a whole different. "With two seasons, we can pull product from local farms for the spring and the fall," he says. "That's so exciting to

represent these companies the right way. It's a win-win for all: it gives consumers better value, and then returns the money right back to the farmers so they can produce more in the state. It's nice to be part of that."

COMPETING MARKETS AND THE TARIFF THREAT

For Atlanta produce companies bringing in produce from overseas, one potential challenge could be the threat of the Trump Administration's import tariffs. Although Eagle concedes many of Southern Specialties' products could fall into this category, he also sounds a note of caution. "We're still waiting to see what the effect will be. Right now, we're still in a holding pattern waiting to see how all this will play out."

Scott says Nickey Gregory hasn't encountered too many supply chain challenges when it comes to bringing products from growing regions to customers. "From time to time, we'll have some tight markets, but overall, we haven't faced any issues," he says.

For Cook at the department of agriculture, challenges will always exist in the form of competing markets. "We always have to face

WHAT THEY ARE



There are 13 Fortune 500 companies based in Atlanta, and with that comes employees — and their eating habits — moving into this region. There is a good mix of independent restaurants and retailers here that compete with the chains. Atlanta's population continues to grow as it cements its title as the Capital of the South.

 Andrew Scott, Nickey Gregory, Atlanta, GA

challenges from competing markets. Any time there is a similar growing region in a different area, we are always encouraging our consumers to support local and make sure they reach for locally produced products first."

■ GEORGIA PEACHES EXPORTED TO MEXICO FOR THE FIRST TIME IN NEARLY THREE DECADES

Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Tyler J. Harper announced June 20, in coordination with Genuine Georgia and Atlanta-based Reveam, that Georgia Grown peaches have been exported to Mexico for the first time in 27 years.

Mexico has had strict import restrictions on peaches produced in the southeastern United States due to pest concerns since 1994. Reveam's proprietary, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-approved Electronic Cold-Pasteurization (ECP) technology enabled Genuine Georgia to meet Mexico's strict import requirements and ship 42,000 pounds of Georgia Grown peaches south to Mexico.

This achievement represents an important step forward toward opening more markets for Georgia producers and reducing barriers to international trade.

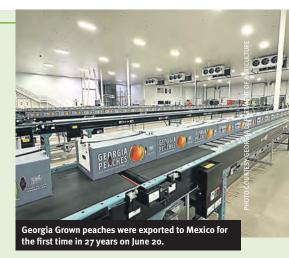
"Expanding access to reliable markets for Georgia producers is absolutely critical to ensure the continued success of our state's No. 1 industry and our farm families," says Harper. "The partnership between Genuine Georgia and Reveam is a win for Georgia farmers and a blueprint for how our industry can use cutting-

edge technology, like Reveam's Electronic Cold-Pasteurization process, to break down barriers to international trade, exceed international food safety standards, and reduce food waste."

"This is about more than just opening market access. It's a transformation of what's possible for Georgia and south-eastern agriculture," says Reveam co-founder and chief regulatory officer, Chip Starns. "Our ECP technology is giving Georgia growers the opportunity to reach new consumers, reduce waste, and meet the most rigorous international standards."

"There are a lot of peach eaters in Mexico, and a lot of them would love to have those Georgia peaches," says Duke Lane, president, Georgia Peach Council. "To give you a perspective of how many potential peach eaters are down there, you've got 22 million people in Mexico City and the surrounding areas. All of a sudden, we're now bringing on another 20-plus million customers."

Georgia last exported peaches to Mexico in 1994, when Mexican officials imposed a ban due to concerns about the potential spread of invasive pests. Since



then, Georgia peach growers have been working in close coordination with the Georgia Department of Agriculture, the USDA, and Mexican agricultural authorities to develop and implement rigorous new protocols to meet Mexico's phytosanitary standards.

A breakthrough in reopening the market came with the implementation of ECP by Reveam. The USDA-approved process uses electron beam technology to eliminate pests and pathogens without chemicals or heat, helping maintain the quality and shelf life of fresh peaches while meeting Mexico's strict import requirements.

Look to Dried Figs for Stable Year-Round Sales

The versatility of dried figs attracts shoppers.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

ried figs can be enjoyed in the creamy icing of a holiday cake, in a lush salad, or on their own as a delicious snack. Fresh figs, while delicious and popular, are typically obtainable only for a few months, with a shelf life even more limited to a few weeks, but dried figs are available year-round — and produce departments should spotlight their unique taste and versatility.

Melissa's World Variety Produce, Vernon, CA, produces both, but for the leading distributor of specialties, "dried figs are more popular for us," reports Director of Public Relations Robert Schueller.

Of their two dried fig offerings, Schueller says the Organic California Mission Figs ranks first. "It's much sweeter overall, but the Organic California Golden Figs have a more visual appearance on a plate."

Some describe Mission figs' flavor as a strawberry, melon and banana mix. Pale yellow golden figs have buttery, caramel flavor notes. The chewy texture of both gives a pleasant crunch due to the tender seeds in the fruit's center.

"As a signature variety only available from California, the Mission fig is the dominant variety — 60% versus 40% for California golden figs," says Karla Stockli, chief executive of the California Fig Advisory Board, Madera, CA. "Preference ranges by individual. Some people love Mission, some love Golden, but most love both."



Consumers love the unique flavor of the fig.

 Karla Stockli, California Fig Advisory Board, Madera, CA



The California Fig Advisory Board, Madera, CA, recommends, when fresh figs are in season, that retailers feature dried figs nearby — a reminder to consumers that they can get their fig fix with dried figs available year-round.

Stockli says the California fig industry has seen an increase in demand for California dried figs in product manufacturing, specifically the baking segment. "The California fig industry produces further processed fig ingredient products, such as diced, extruded-diced, paste, and juice concentrate, that have become very popular for quicker, flavorful and clean ingredient solutions."

NUTRITION AIDS SALES

"Overall, consumer interest in health and wellness continues to increase, so fig nutrition remains a priority message," adds Stockli.

She says dried figs are a good choice for adding fiber naturally to the diet. "One serving (3-5 figs) is a good source of dietary fiber, including both soluble and insoluble fiber, providing 5 grams total dietary fiber per serving, which is equivalent to 18% of daily value. The California dried fig industry absolutely encourages retailers to promote fig nutrition to increase sales."

RETAILERS AND DRIED FIGS

At the Food City store on Memorial Parkway, Huntsville, AL, produce manager Kenneth Besley says they stock the dried figs "where they are easily seen so people can find them quickly."

Food City, Abingdon, VA, has stores in five Southeastern states.

Sun-Maid Dried Mission Figs, noted in Food City's weekly flyer as California, are displayed among dried strawberries, dates, cranberries, and store-brand Food Club sundried raisins. Sunny Fruit Organic Dried Figs, in 5-count bags, are nearby.

Jeremy Dill, produce manager at the Meridian Street, Haggen store in Bellingham, WA, reports, "We sell out in a day or two when we can get fresh figs." He orders black mission, brown and green figs. When obtained, they are kept in the cold case.

Their stock of Sun-Maid Mission Figs, Dalmatia Fig Spread, and Organic Turkish Figs is displayed with raisins. Holidays and specials result in more sales, he adds. "The peak sales for snacks are the little packs."

The regional chain, Haggen Food and Pharmacy, operates 15 stores in Washington.

Stockli says when fresh figs are in season, a successful idea is to feature dried figs nearby. "It's a great reminder to consumers they can get their fig fix with dried figs available year-round."

INDUSTRY ADDS PRODUCTS

Stockli notes the rising trend for figs in product manufacturing. "Fig breads, fig bars, fig dressings, fig jams, fig barbecue sauces, and fig crackers are a few examples of new products in the market."

She also says the trend in packaging is to feature the fresh fig, but it is dried fig ingredients that are being used to make these products. Retailers could ride that wave by providing more ideas for their use. "Consumers love the unique flavor of the fig, and the demand for these new products proves it. When whole figs are purchased at retail, they are typically consumed as a snack or in baking."

Stockli says the California fig industry has partnered with several bakers over the past year to educate and to showcase how easy and fun figs are in baked goods. Kyra Johnson of Kyra's Bake Shop in Lake Oswego, OR, and winner of Food Network's *Cupcake Wars* created fig brownies, fig rice crispy treats and fig crackers.

Melissa's Schueller reminds cooks, "Dried figs can be rehydrated in warm water for recipes calling for fresh figs."

Schueller notes that Melissa's biggest dried fruit sales come in the fourth quarter of the year. The Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's, and Ramadan holidays create dried fig demands.



Debunking Myths About Wholesalers' Role in the Supply Chain

Wholesalers

aren't just

another link in a

chain; we're an

active partner

to both growers

and suppliers.

BY BILL LOUPÉE

here has been a lot of confusion around the role a wholesale distributor plays in the supply chain, especially when it comes to the fresh produce industry. For a long time, people thought of wholesalers as middlemen, creating an additional, perhaps unnecessary, layer between sourcing and supplying, but the truth is that we play an integral role in many ways. Here's how:

WE'RE NOT DISTRIBUTORS, WE'RE PARTNERS

Wholesalers aren't just another link in a chain; we're an active partner to both growers and suppliers. No matter where a grower is located, either domestically or internationally, we are able to connect them with end customers, such as retailers, to get their product. And for those customers, we help them vet and find the highest-quality product, making sure that it's delivered on time and to their standards.

As the agent between these parties, we handle all of the logistics, so orders get from point A to point B quickly and safely, and ultimately maintain the vast network both need to stay in business.

WE'RE SHEPHERDS OF QUALITY & DELIVERY

While wholesale distributors make sure that product gets to where it needs to be when it's expected to be there, we're also managing far more than people realize. We don't just source all of the trucking needed to transport produce, but guarantee that the product is serviced in-transit.

We also conduct quality assurance tests when product arrives, ensuring customers are getting

the commodities at the standard they expect, and sourcing new product if it doesn't. It's a timesaver for customers who need to get fresh produce on shelves or into kitchens without having to worry if they're delivering the best of the best.

WE MAKE SURE PRODUCT IS READY TO SELL

When fresh produce arrives at a warehouse, it isn't just processed for inventory and checked for quality. Wholesalers take the important step of making sure that it's also ready for its final point of purchase.

This can include a number of steps, such as white label packaging, bagging items in specific quantities or mixes and even pre-cutting fruits and vegetables. Wholesalers are key for preparing product so it's ready as-is in whatever form customers need.

WE NAVIGATE SHIPPING COMPLEXITIES

When it comes to sourcing produce from around the world, it helps to have a partner that knows the back-end work needed to get commodities across international borders.

Wholesalers step in as the experts, easily managing the processes necessary when it comes to imports, exports and tariffs, which is becoming increasingly important in today's marketplace as we've seen policy continually shift between the U.S., Canada and Mexico, with rates changing on different items from day to day. This

important step goes beyond paperwork, although it's a critical part of the process, including confirmation of sale documents, safe food licenses and furnishing a bond to appease tariffs, and also means managing site checks if the FDA or USDA wants to hold inspections once product arrives, or if border control requires an inspection before allowing a truck to enter the U.S.

WE'RE READY-TO-GO STORAGE

Unless a retailer or foodservice group is a large, national chain, it's unlikely that they'll have their own warehouse to hold product. Buying additional real estate for storage is expensive, and wholesale distributors eliminate the need for it by having that space to house product for as long as customers need before transporting it to their final destination.

Another benefit? This also allows wholesalers to provide volume discounts to smaller- and mid-sized operators by creating value across the portfolio.

WE CAN FLEX OUR INVENTORY

Given long-standing relationships with growers and the ability to house product safely and on-site, wholesale distributors can also be more agile with their inventory and stock up on specific commodities if the market is tightening or there are tariff increases.

By doing this, we also become an indispensable resource for retailers or foodservice groups who may need to access product with little notice. Wholesalers are key in creating accessibility to customers, making

sure they never run out of the items that drive their sales. In fact, it's something that should be baked into the relationship, and any good account representative should be helping customers stay ahead of market shifts.

WE EMPOWER CUSTOMERS TO FOCUS

By taking on all of the above responsibilities, wholesale distributors offer their greatest value by giving both growers and suppliers the freedom to focus on their core competencies. Growers can put their energy into growing the best fruits and vegetables possible, and suppliers can focus on marketing and sales efforts to meet their business goals.

While wholesale distributors may operate "in the middle," we're by no means a middleman. We're an invaluable layer, acting as a partner that takes care of all transportation, storage, packaging and stocking needs, while making the connections that matter for businesses to thrive.

Without wholesalers, these stakeholders wouldn't be able to do what they do best, and it'd be much more difficult to get the healthy and delicious fruits and vegetables we love from wherever they grow, right to our plates.

pb

Bill Loupée is chief operating officer at Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI.



Fresh Produce Finds Its Snacking Sweet Spot

BY ANANDA ROY

s traditional snack categories mature and consumers demand healthier, more functional options, fresh produce is stepping into the spotlight. New analysis from Circana, *Snack Unwrap: The Insatiable Craving for Growth*, reveals that fruits and vegetables are not only expanding their role in everyday consumption, but becoming pivotal to the future of snacking across Europe's top grocery markets.

At a time when unit sales across the broader snacks category have stalled, fresh produce stands out for its consistent growth, strong emotional appeal, and alignment with wellness-led lifestyles. In short, the future of snacking might look a lot like your fresh produce aisle.

The European snack market reached €234 billion (\$275 billion) in value sales in 2024, up 2.9% year-on-year, despite unit sales holding steady at \$115 billion. According to Circana's analysis, snacks now account for 40% of all edible grocery value sales across Europe.

Based on data from six major markets and 628 snack segments, the analysis offers a comprehensive view of how snacking is evolving across the region.

Circana highlights a fundamental change

in when and why consumers snack. Gone are the days when snacks were confined to midafternoon pick-me-ups. Today, snacking happens around meals, replaces meals, and is used to support emotional well-being and health goals. Fresh fruits and vegetables are now a go-to choice for these expanded occasions. More than half of consumers (53%) report eating fresh produce with a meal, while 52% snack throughout the day.

This shift reflects changes in how people view food. Snacks are no longer just a convenience or indulgence; they're a form of self-care.

Nearly half of European consumers (47%) say regular snacking boosts their sense of well-being, a reminder that snacking is as much an emotional habit as a physical one.

DRIVING GROWTH IN A FLAT MARKET

While total snack unit sales across Europe's top six grocery markets (EU6) have plateaued, fresh and chilled produce continues to grow. In 2024, chilled and fresh fruit posted a 4.4% increase in unit sales. Dried fruit, nuts, and seeds also performed strongly, with 4.9% growth.

Chilled and fresh fruit accounts for 8% of total innovation value across the snacks sector, according to the analysis. That may seem small, but it represents a growing recognition of produce as a viable platform for innovation.

Snackable formats, like portioned melon cups, fruit mixes with added protein, and ready-to-blend smoothie kits, are helping to redefine what a "treat" looks like.

Retailers are leaning in, too, investing in visibility and merchandising of fresh snacks alongside yogurts, dairy drinks and health foods.

Fresh produce needs to be presented, not just as healthy, but as exciting, satisfying and relevant. That may mean new packaging formats, improved chilled fixtures, and stronger storytelling.

THE FUNCTIONAL EDGE

More than half of

consumers report

eating fresh produce

with a meal, while 52%

snack on it throughout

the day.

Fresh produce also aligns strongly with the shift toward functional snacking. With more consumers seeking foods that help them manage weight, boost mood, or enhance energy, fruits and vegetables offer natural benefits.

As weight-loss drugs become more common, appetite suppression is changing consumer behaviors. Smaller, high-quality snacks

that deliver satisfaction without excess are rising in relevance; a space fresh fruit can occupy with credibility.

Retailers and brands are increasingly positioning fruit and veg in the "better for you" snack zone, both in terms of messaging and placement. From prepared fruit packs to on-the-go veg pots, fresh produce is earning its place as a credible snack, not just a meal side.

And there is room to stretch the category further. For example, fortified fruit blends, immune-boosting citrus snacks, and prebiotic

veg mixes could all ride the wave of health and functionality.

NAVIGATING PRICE PRESSURES

While inflation has impacted many food categories, fresh produce has remained competitively positioned. Circana shows that chilled and fresh fruits outpaced most categories in both value and unit sales growth, suggesting consumer willingness to pay for freshness, quality and convenience.

Still, price sensitivity matters. Success in this space depends on delivering value through smart portioning, transparent sourcing, and perceived health benefits.

There is also a renewed opportunity to highlight freshness as a value in itself, not just in terms of shelf life, but in the experience and satisfaction it delivers to health-conscious shoppers.

A GROWTH PLATFORM

The snack aisle of tomorrow won't just be about indulgence; it will be about intention. And fresh produce, with its versatility, natural appeal, and health halo, is perfectly positioned to thrive.

For suppliers, marketers, and retailers working in the produce sector, the message from *Snack Unwrap* is clear: Think beyond the side dish. Snackification is no longer just a trend, it's a growth engine, and fresh produce is firmly in the driver's seat.

pb

Ananda Roy is SVP Thought Leadership and Europe CPG Growth Advisor at Circana. Circana's Snack Unwrap is the most comprehensive analysis of Europe's snack market to date, offering commercially relevant insights essential for growth. Based on POS data from six key European markets (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and the U.K.), it examines 628 snack categories.

produce on the menu



What Gen Z Values: Strategies to Make Produce Appealing to the Digital Generation

Gen Z actively seeks

credible, evidence-based

information. This calls

for the produce industry

to create trusted food.

nutrition and health

content in partnership with

healthcare professionals.

BY NOVFLLA LU

about 90% of the population don't eat enough vegetables, and 80% don't eat enough fruit. While many factors, such as convenience and taste, come into play, technology also influences how people perceive the nutritional and health benefits of produce, particularly among the Generation Z demographic.

Generation Z, or Gen Z, comprises teens and young adults born between 1997 and 2012, who are now 12 to 27 years old. It is an emerging and growing demographic globally. Research shows that 95% of this diverse and digitally connected generation has access to a smartphone, and 97% use the internet daily.

As this tech-savvy generation uses the internet and smartphones to connect with others and receive news and information, creating engaging online content that resonates with this population is essential. In other words, developing strategies that connect

with this digital generation may influence their food choices and purchasing decisions, shaping their consumption behaviors both in the short and long term.

In fall 2024, I attended a Gen Z consumer insights webinar hosted by Half Your Plate, a health education campaign by the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA) that encourages people to fill half their plates with vegetables and fruits to improve their health. Here are the three key takeaways I learned about Gen Z and strategies to align with their values and beliefs:

City University revealed that only 2.1% of the analyzed nutrition content on TikTok was accurate when compared to public health and nutrition guidelines.

The good news, though, is that Gen Zs actively seek credible, evidence-based information from healthcare professionals. This calls for the produce industry to create trusted food, nutrition, and health content in partnership with healthcare professionals, such as registered dietitians, to build trust with this growing demographic and to positively influence their produce consumption behaviors.

GEN Z VALUES CONVENIENCE, TASTE AND PRICE

When making food selections, Gen Z values convenience. This driver could be due to juggling education, work, social life, self-care and other responsibilities.

As mentioned earlier, Gen Z recognizes the importance of

optimal health, which includes eating vegetables and fruits as part of their diet. However, they may also prioritize the taste and culinary experiences, according to a 2024 article published in *Scientific Reports*.

Price could also impact Gen Z's purchasing decisions, especially for those already in the workforce or at the beginning of their career. The same report indicates that this demographic seeks foods that offer the bang for the buck.

Value-added produce, such as pre-sliced and pre-washed options, would appeal to this demographic, as long as it is also

affordable and perceived as convenient and delicious.

Whether you are a producer, a supplier, or a produce brand, be creative with how you connect with this growing demographic. As technology evolves and Gen Z ages, Gen Z's perspective on food and beverages may also change. Only time will tell how this unique group of consumers will shift their purchasing and consumption behaviors.

For now, I encourage you to take advantage of social media — use it as a way to connect with Gen Zs to make your products visible to this group. More importantly, be bold and stand out from the crowd of misinformation by forming partnerships with registered dietitians, who can help you create trusted messaging and engaging content backed by credible evidence, while keeping Gen Z's values — convenience, experiences, flavors, affordability and diversity — in mind.

Novella Lui, RD, MHSc is a registered dietitian and a freelance food, nutrition, and health writer in Canada who combines her interest in food science, evidence-based nutrition, and health education through content creation. She is passionate about seeking new ways to bridge the communication gap between the business and the health side of food. As a foodie, she loves to travel around the globe to learn about how food connects with people's culture and way of life. Connect with Novella at info@livetonourish.com for work samples and collaboration opportunities.

GEN Z VALUES WELLNESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Gen Z is interested in the plant-based way of eating; they are also inclined to learn about the health benefits of functional foods and ways to incorporate them into their diet. Functional foods include vegetables and fruits.

According to Innova Market Insights, almost half of the Gen Z demographic follows food and beverage trends on social media. The Hartman Group, an international food and beverage research firm, also suggests this tech-savvy generation utilizes product reviews to support their purchasing decisions.

Recognizing that Gen Z also makes food and beverage choices and buying decisions based on environmental, sustainability, and inclusivity aspects, developing marketing strategies that align with this growing demographic's values may positively influence their vegetable and fruit consumption.

GEN Z VALUES AUTHENTICITY

Creating online content, particularly for platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, could also resonate with Gen Zs, according to a 2024 survey study published in the Journal of Medical Internet Research.

However, the amount of nutrition and health misinformation is alarming. A 2024 survey conducted by MyFitnessPal and Dublin

NoKota Packers Providing Quality, Integrity, Service For 45 Years

family business since 1979, NoKota Packers, Inc. Buxton, ND, is celebrating its 45th anniversary in 2025. The third-generation packer ships red and yellow potatoes from the Red River Valley.

"Through changes in ownership and through retirements, our service, work ethic and uncompromising commitment to quality and customer satisfaction have never wavered," says Carissa Olsen, president and chief executive. "We look back with satisfaction at our decision to promote Red River Valley red potatoes, and we are excited about continuing our involvement in such a dynamic industry."

During NoKota's first season in 1979, they stored potatoes in an unfinished facility, represented four local farming operations, shipped 220,000 hundredweight of potatoes, and employed 18 employees.

The first addition for NoKota Packers was in 1993, and there have been three

other expansions, in 1994, 1996 and 2011. "Although we have made physical changes to the storage and wash plant, the concept remains the same — our potatoes are stored in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment to maintain quality throughout the season," says Olsen.

Olsen says NoKota has also made many updates to equipment, including the recent replacement of one of the packaging lines, adding a robotic palletizer to two main lines, and replacing the optical sorter. These updates have increased efficiency and helped fill labor positions.

"Today, we have more than doubled in size, work with nine different growing operations, can ship 600,000-plus hundredweights of potatoes, and employ around 32 employees throughout the year," says Olsen.

NoKota has a state-of-the-art facility in the Buxton location and does the majority of sales from there. "We have connections



to brokers out of other locations in the Red River Valley and Central Minnesota, as well as with other partners in the Fresh Solutions Network throughout the country," says Olsen. "We have a reputation for superior quality and service, and are honored to

have the commitment of premier potato

growers in the Red River Valley."

and lifelong friends.

As the company looks forward, Olsen says the main goal is to continue to provide the quality, integrity and service that they have offered for the past 45 years. "We will also continue to look for ways to improve our processes and efficiencies, including new innovations and technologies."

NoKota believes the heart of it all is service — not just meeting expectations, but exceeding them, understanding that the success of the business depends on the satisfaction of those it serves. "By embracing these principles, the mission lives on, growing stronger with time, while respecting the roots that have sustained it for nearly half a century," says Olsen.



During NoKota Packers' first season in 1979, they stored potatoes in an unfinished facility, represented four local farming operations, shipped 220,000 hundredweights of potatoes, and employed 18 employees. The first addition was in 1993, with three other additions, in 1994, 1996 and 2011.

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Shuman Farms, Inc.	19	912-557-4477	shumanfarmsga.com
SL Produce LLC			
Spice World, Inc			
The DiMare Company			
The Foundation for Fresh Produce			
To-Jo Mushrooms, Inc	41	610-268-8082	to-jo.com

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