



PRODUCE BUSINESS

40TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

OCTOBER 2025 | VOL. 41 | NO. 10 | \$9.90

### MARKETING

Organic Peppers | Pecans

### REGIONAL PROFILES

Los Angeles & Southern California

Nogales | Canadian Supply Chain

# 40

## PEOPLE OF PURPOSE LOOK TO THE FUTURE

As we celebrate 40 years of publishing this month, we asked 40 influential produce leaders to identify trends that will shape the industry in the years ahead.

### PROCUREMENT

Florida Fall Produce  
California Citrus  
Blueberry Imports

### FEATURES

Cross-Merchandising  
Consumer Packaging  
Wholesaler Report

### MERCHANDISING REVIEWS

Apples | Root Vegetables







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## COVER STORY

### 19 40 People of Purpose

PRODUCE BUSINESS is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a yearlong editorial series featuring influential voices in the fresh produce industry.



## IN THIS ISSUE

### 6 PB QUIZ

### 12 PRODUCE WATCH

### 14 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The Fresh Produce Industry's Role in Building a Sustainable Future

### 101 INFORMATION SHOWCASE

### 102 BLAST FROM THE PAST

Markon Celebrates 40 Years of Foodservice Innovation

## FEATURES

### 34 FORTY YEARS OF WHOLESALE VALUE

As Produce Business celebrates 40 years, wholesalers around the country share their side of the business.

### 48 CROSS-MERCHANDISING: WHERE MAGIC IS MADE

Retailers use cross-merchandising to boost the bottom line.

### 55 THE WAR ON PLASTIC IS PROTRACTED

The search is on for fresh produce packaging alternatives that spare landfills and oceans.

### 58 TARIFFS SHAKE CANADIAN PRODUCE SUPPLY CHAIN

Industry warns continued disputes could influence fresh produce affordability, access and stability.

## SPECIAL INSERTS

### 51 A DEDICATED LEADER FOR SOUTH CAROLINA AG

South Carolina growers reap decades of support and success from their agriculture commissioner and champion, Hugh E. Weathers.





## DEPARTMENTS

### MERCHANDISING REVIEW

- 64 ROOT VEGGIES ADD VERSATILITY TO PRODUCE AISLE**  
From potatoes to parsnips, root vegetables deliver health and comfort.
- 70 APPLES ATTRACT ATTENTION AND SALES**  
A full season of flavors keeps apples fresh, visible, and in demand.

### PROCUREMENT

- 74 CITRUS BIG BUSINESS IN CALIFORNIA**  
Retailers benefit as producers focus on quality, specialty and merchandising.
- 77 FLORIDA PRODUCE GETS A BOOST**  
Sampling, stories, and promotions on tap in supermarkets this fall.

- 80 FIVE WAYS TO BUY & SELL IMPORTED BLUEBERRIES**  
Imports fuel growth as the year-round demand surges.

### ORGANIC MARKETING

- 83 SIX OPPORTUNITIES TO SELL MORE ORGANIC PEPPERS**  
Make your display as vibrant as your conventional one.

### DRIED FRUIT & NUTS

- 96 PECAN POTENTIAL: DRIVING RETAIL GROWTH**  
Holiday demand is helpful, but pushing pecans year-round is the path to more sales.

## SPECIAL FEATURES

- 9 40TH ANNIVERSARY CONGRATULATIONS**  
**RISING RETAILER**

- 16 AMAZON FRESH DELIVERS CONVENIENCE**  
With an easy-to-navigate layout, this Virginia produce department makes shopping simple.

### REGIONAL MARKET PROFILES

- 86 NOGALES ADAPTS AFTER TOMATO AGREEMENT ENDS**  
Arizona's border city is adjusting to new costs, compliance hurdles and long-term questions.
- 92 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FACING FRESH UNCERTAINTY**  
Immigration raids and labor shortages affect produce wholesalers.

## COMMENTARY

- 8 SPECIAL NOTE FROM KEN WHITACRE**  
Oracles at Delphi
- 10 VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY**  
Cutting Through the Noise: Why Truth Matters in Food Marketing
- 98 EUROPEAN MARKET**  
Innovation Can Deliver Sales Growth
- 99 PRODUCE ON THE MENU**  
Ugly Produce is Not 'Ugly'
- 100 WHOLESALE MARKET**  
Take the Chaos Out of Fresh Produce Distribution





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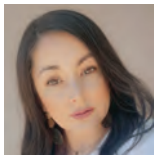


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## THIS MONTH'S WINNER

**MONICA LOVATO**  
Produce Operations Lead  
Topco Associates LLC  
Visalia, CA

Born and raised in Visalia, CA, Monica Lovato says the Central Valley is "truly a special place. We're surrounded by the freshest fruits, with mountains in view every day, and the beach just a few hours away."

Lovato also considers herself lucky in her career. When she began at Topco, she had no produce experience. She started on as a temp for two years, and she says it has led to "a lasting career."

Lovato has been with Topco for 17 years, most of that time assisting the berry desk. More recently, she moved into produce operations. "The skills I built in member/vendor support — problem-solving, and keeping things running smoothly on the berry side

— have carried over well into this new role," she says.

She says the favorite thing about her career is "the growth and changes over the years, from system changes to coworkers, all of it has made this career such a great journey."

When Lovato is not in the office, you can usually find her chasing after her toddler. "She keeps my world spinning and my schedule (and heart, of course) full!"

Lovato also loves Mexican food — "albondigas, pozole, chile rellenos — those are my go-to's. And yes, I'll still enjoy a steaming caldo, even when its 100-plus degrees outside!" She also recommends eating at Westwoods BBQ if you are ever in Fresno, CA.

What she enjoys most about PRODUCE BUSINESS is "the informative content across the board, the innovative ideas and insightful interviews."

As this month's winner, she 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](http://www.producebusiness.com/quiz).** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our December 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!



## QUESTIONS FOR THE OCTOBER ISSUE

- 1) Please fill in the blank space: Root Vegetables Add \_\_\_\_\_ to Produce Aisle.
- 2) "My Favorite Colors Are October" is the headline for which company's ad \_\_\_\_\_?
- 3) Which Canadian company has been a "Leader in importation and distribution since 1918" \_\_\_\_\_?
- 4) "Good Business and Good Fruit" is the headline for which company's ad \_\_\_\_\_?
- 5) What is the main phone number for Produce House \_\_\_\_\_?
- 6) Avocados from Mexico will be at which booth number at IFPA \_\_\_\_\_?

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

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_

Company \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

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

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

Answer and submit your entry online at [www.producebusiness.com/quiz](http://www.producebusiness.com/quiz)

# PB

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# Oracles at Delphi

The magazine you hold in your hands is the culmination of four decades of thought-leadership. Most of the credit goes to the genius of Editor-in-Chief Jim Prevora (1961-2022), who had the ability to extract many years of produce genetics into a modern-day communicator of ideas and industry advice.

Jim was the smartest person I ever met, even going back to our college days. His wealth of knowledge in most subjects was an attraction to nearly all of the leaders in the industry, and it wasn't uncommon for Jim to receive daily phone calls about even the most arcane subjects.



Each monthly PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine was just a small part of the contribution Jim made to the industry, and when he passed away nearly three years ago, there was an immediate void of thought-leadership that had advanced the industry in a positive direction. One might even say that the merger of PMA and United might not have happened

without Jim's earnest persuasion. Even some of today's food safety organizations, innovative retailers, and producers of proprietary produce items owe a hat tip to Jim's wisdom.

When Jim passed away in November 2022, I stepped into many of the roles Jim occupied, not only in the production of this magazine, but in the consulting services Jim established. To this day, our company conducts biannual share group meetings of retailers, wholesalers and fresh-cut processors. We also enjoy working with universities, trade associations and companies outside of the produce arena to focus on specific areas that need improvement.

Last year at IFPA's Global Show, we launched a year-long program to uncover some of the passions that motivate industry leaders, amassing more than 50 testimonials from a diverse group of volunteers. The experience continued at the 2024 New York Produce Show with the theme — "Where Passion Becomes Action."

One of the most remarkable takeaways from our passion project was hearing about many of the significant issues that motivate individuals to champion, not only within their companies but in the industry at large. We couldn't resist keeping the project going down a new and different path.

On the cover of this issue are 40 "People of Purpose" — a hand-selected group who illustrate their passions for where the industry might head in the future. These individuals volunteered their time to write about some of the crucial issues affecting our industry today. Some are still submitting their contributions, and we will be publish-

ing all 40 articles over the course of 2025 and 2026.

What is striking about the topics submitted to date is how trenchant they are to the industry at large:

- Next-Generation Shoppers
- Produce and Public Health
- What Makes a Great Produce Manager?
- Keys to Brand Marketing Success
- Talent Mentorship/Career Development
- Technology at Retail
- Foodservice Macro Trends
- Development of Seeds for Flavor
- Contract Procurement
- Nuances of Foodservice Distribution
- Produce in Schools
- The Organic Consumer
- "Last-Mile" Food Safety Management

We look forward to publishing these articles throughout the year, and we also want to use the thoughts expressed to carry the dialogue even further.

Starting in this issue, we are re-introducing our Letters to the Editor section (see page 9) to invite comments from the rest of the industry. If you are interested in participating with an opinion on any of these articles/topics, please send them to [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com).

During the process of editing the submitted articles, I could not stop thinking of a conversation with Jim years ago about the Oracle of Delphi. Dating back to 1400 BC, the Oracle of Delphi was the most important shrine in all of Greece, where a priestess of Apollo would deliver prophecies. Today, taking the Delphi concept further by using a technique of a series of questions and answers, there are many "Delphi Groups" established to flush out trends and topics to carry companies and industries forward.

In a way, this project, led by the 40 People of Purpose, is the start of a new PB initiative. By incorporating many of the subjects as feature stories into our annual editorial calendar, we will be asking many more people to share their insights on these important industry trends. If you would like to see our latest editorial calendar, please send a note to [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com).

Moving into our fifth decade of service in the industry, our goal is to make PRODUCE BUSINESS a focal point for intellectual enquiry. By opening the pages to the industry as a year-long Delphi Project, we hope there will be further advancements in our original theme, established in 1985: To Initiate Industry Improvement.

**PB**

**Ken Whitacre**  
CEO/Publisher



# Anniversary Congratulations

*Editor's note: The outpouring of kind words and memories from colleagues, friends, and industry peers on our 40th anniversary at PRODUCE BUSINESS has been both humbling and heartwarming. Many of you shared stories with Publisher Ken Whitacre that go back to the very beginning in 1985, while others offered reflections on more recent connections. Each note is a reminder of the community, camaraderie, and thought leadership that have always been at the heart of this magazine. Below are just a few of the comments:*

The mutual respect, passion, and teamwork you and Jim brought to PRODUCE BUSINESS, the New York Produce Show, and countless other ventures during the last four decades is, indeed, rare and something to celebrate. Our industry owes you, and Jim's memory, much gratitude. Congratulations, Ken.

**David Marguleas, executive chair,  
Sun World International**

Congratulations on an illustrious career, Ken. Keep up the good work!

**Paul Boris, supply chain specialist,  
profit acceleration strategist**

Congratulations, Ken. You were a brilliant team. Wishing you so much success and joy in all the years to come.

**Maggie Bezart Hall, Mags International**

Congrats, Ken! You have definitely made an impact and contribution within the industry.

**Ken Gray, Bushwick Potato Company**

Ken, congratulations on your 40th anniversary at PRODUCE BUSINESS! The photo of you with Jim brings back great memories and reflects the long-standing relationship that began when you first came on board. The PB format continues to stand the test of time, and while we all miss Jim, his legacy clearly lives on through your leadership.

**Mark Arney, CEO at NWPB**

Ken, it has been a pleasure to be an associate and friend for the past 35 years with you (and with Jim), and part of the extended PB/Phoenix family in many dif-

ferent ways over my career. You're amazing, intelligent and loyal. Congrats!

**Jodean Robbins-Duarte, owner,  
Solutions Associates International**

Congratulations, Ken, on 40 incredible years. Certainly, an authority in the industry. Filled with passion to help share stories and important news.

**Lynn Kilroy, communications and  
marketing strategist**

Congratulations, Dad! It is so inspiring to see the lasting effect of the hard work you have put in over these 40 years!

**Shea Whitacre, student,  
University of Florida**

You and Jim built an amazing legacy, Ken. Congratulations on the past 40 and best wishes for however many lie ahead.

**Bryan Silberman, retired CEO,  
Produce Marketing Association**

About 40 years ago, I was a young editor at a farm publication in the Midwest. I wrote a note to Jim and asked if we could swap subscriptions. Over the years, everything I know about the produce industry (off the farm), I learned from the pages of PRODUCE BUSINESS. It's been an honor to join its ranks behind the scenes for the past five years. Here's to many more years of insight from PB. Congrats!

**Susan Crowell, journalist, storyteller  
and editorial consultant**

Congratulations, Ken! I know Jim is smiling!

**Matt Middleton, executive leadership**

Cheers, Ken! Many congrats on 40 years. You have been wind beneath my wings over my 20 years in the industry — and I thank you for that!

**Megan Zweig, president, DMA Solutions**

Congratulations, Ken! When I count the people I'm so glad to know in life, you are among them. I appreciate your curiosity, your fearlessness, and your friendship.

**Allison Moore, executive vice president,  
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas**



Outside Elaine's Restaurant in Manhattan during the summer of 1985, Jim Prevora and Ken Whitacre staged the first PRODUCE BUSINESS media kit photo.

I can still remember the table display of PRODUCE BUSINESS at the PMA and all of the great memories at United conventions.

**Ron Orr, executive director,  
Pro Mark Group**

You and Jim took a very open approach to reporting and editorials that is unique in a trade publication. Cheers to the next 40!

**Emanuel Lazopoulos, principal,  
board director, adviser**

You recognized and elevated young talent in the industry. I can still remember how excited I was when you published one of my first-ever press releases back in 1990! Wishing you all another 40 years of success!

**Lisa Cork, fresh produce brand &  
packaging strategist**

Ken, you and Jim have done, and continue to do, the industry well. Jim was always pushing to limits with honesty and passion; you making things happen, connecting people and exploring so many avenues. I look forward to seeing (and supporting) what you do next and making sure the future of this industry is vibrant and growing with each generation.

**Paul Kneeland, building fresh produce  
communities/farmers first/  
soil health advocate**

Send your letters to  
[editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com)



# Cutting Through the Noise: Why Truth Matters in Food Marketing

BY IRENE CARDOZO

When it comes to produce, perception matters almost as much as taste. And in today's digital landscape, misinformation can spread faster than facts, confusing consumers, undermining trust, and ultimately hurting the produce industry. Over the past year, one example stands out: the misinformation firestorm surrounding Apeel, a plant-based coating designed to extend the shelf life of produce.

The recent media mini-storm around Apeel is an important cautionary tale for retailers and marketers in what can happen when a celebrity gets on the misinformation bandwagon — as was the case with Michelle Pfeiffer's Instagram post in June, stating that "organic produce is no longer safe."



The truth? Apeel's organic formulation, Organipeel, hasn't been used in the organic marketplace for over two years. And by law, every material used in organic farming and handling must be reviewed, disclosed, and approved by accredited third-party certifiers. The organic seal remains the most transparent and federally regulated label in the food system.

The retraction of the false post came long after the damage was done — after consumers had shared, worried, and questioned whether they could trust what they saw in the produce aisle.

This is not an isolated incident, as food misinformation has become one of the industry's biggest threats. It thrives because it plays to our emotional connection to food. It triggers fear for our families, skepticism of big business and confusion about science.

## Solutions For The Produce Industry

How do we fight against misinformation? A few solutions stand out:

- 1. Be proactive, not reactive.** Producers and retailers should anticipate hot topics and prepare clear, shareable content ahead of time.
- 2. Meet consumers where they are.** Misinformation thrives on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube because that's where consumers spend time. The produce industry needs to be equally present there.
- 3. Center on trusted sources.** Shoppers are skeptical of companies defending their own products, but they trust third-party verification. That's why the USDA Organic seal is so powerful.
- 4. Tell personal stories.** Data is critical, but anecdotes resonate. Sharing why farmers choose organic practices, or why young parents reach for the organic option, makes the benefits tangible.

PB

As a Millennial, I understand how persuasive these messages can be. I've paused to double-check an ingredient. I've stood in front of strawberries, wondering if the latest online post about pesticides had merit. I've had friends text me screenshots of claims like "organic is just marketing" and ask if it's true.

Even working inside the industry, I've felt that tug of uncertainty.

In grad school on a tight budget, I debated whether to spend the extra dollar on organic spinach — and it wasn't just about price, it was about trust. If I feel that way with insider knowledge, I can only imagine how overwhelming it is for everyday shoppers.

## MISINFORMATION MATTERS

Produce sits at the center of this storm, and the stakes are high — for the sector and for our health, given how important produce is to our nutritional and dietary needs.

Organic is now a \$71+ billion industry, growing at double the pace of conventional food products, according to OTA's *2025 Market Report*. This growth is fueled by younger consumers — Gen Z and Millennials — who demand transparency, care deeply about sustainability, and are willing to pay more for products they trust. But trust can be fragile. One viral post can undo months of thoughtful education and positive momentum.

## THE POWER OF THE ORGANIC SEAL

Trust is exactly why the Organic Trade Association and The Organic Center launched the "Seal Makes It Simple" campaign in September, supported by a USDA Organic Market Development Grant.

The campaign's goal is to cut through the clutter of claims and remind consumers that when they see the federally regulated USDA Organic seal, they don't have to second-guess their purchase. Piloting in six regional markets — Atlanta, GA; Charlotte, NC; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Lubbock, TX; and Tampa, FL — the shopper education program is running through 2026.

The campaign uses fact sheets, videos, and myth-busting graphics to separate rumor from reality.

## A CALL TO ACTION

We cannot let misinformation rob consumers of confidence in organic produce. The stakes are too high for farmers, retailers and public health. As an industry, we must rally around trusted sources, amplify accurate voices, and remind shoppers that the USDA Organic seal is not just a logo, it's a promise — rooted in transparency, backed by law, and designed to protect both people and planet. **PB**

*Irene Cardozo is the director of marketing and communications at the Organic Trade Association, where she leads strategic communications, brand marketing initiatives, and cross-organizational campaigns to advance organic integrity and trust in the USDA Organic seal, and drive industry growth.*



## FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Friends,

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

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



### **Here's how:**

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

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



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

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

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

Ken Whitacre

Publisher/Editorial Director

Kwhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

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



## TRANSITIONS

## Driscoll's

Driscoll's, Watsonville, CA, appointed **Jiunn Shih** as its global chief marketing officer, effective Sept. 15. In this newly created role, Shih will build a global marketing structure and expand investment in brand programs across Driscoll's markets. He will be based in Hong Kong, relocating from Singapore.

Born and raised across multiple continents, Shih brings a unique multicultural perspective, complemented by experience across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. He has more than 20 years of senior leadership experience in FMCG and agribusiness, with roles at Zespri, Unilever, Syngenta and L'Oréal. Most recently, as chief marketing, innovation and sustainability officer at Zespri, Shih spearheaded the company's brand and growth strategy, launched a pioneering sustainability innovation fund, and drove new product innovations across global markets.



Jiunn Shih

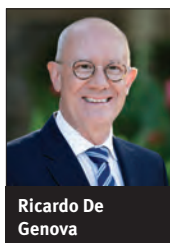
## Sabert Corporation

Sabert Corporation, Sayreville, NJ, appointed **Ricardo De Genova** as senior vice president of innovation, reporting to Paul McCann, chief executive.

In this role, De Genova will oversee Sabert's Global Centers for Innovation, new product development, design, and marketing/product management teams.

De Genova brings more than three decades of experience in innovation and corporate leadership across the packaging, chemicals, and specialty ingredients industries. Most recently, he served as senior vice president of global innovation and new business at Graphic Packaging International, where he was responsible for organic growth strategies through innovation. His previous roles include leadership positions at Solenis LLC, Ashland Inc., Cargill and The Dow Chemical Company.

A native of Brazil, De Genova holds a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from Maua School of Engineering, and he has completed executive studies at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business.



Ricardo De Genova



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Walmart Joins Riveridge Produce Marketing for Tour

Just in time for "International Eat an Apple Day," several local Walmart leaders and store managers joined representatives from Riveridge

Produce Marketing for a farm and facility tour. The event brought together local growers, business stakeholders and policymakers to celebrate the impact of locally sourced food on communities across Michigan.

The event highlighted the contributions of Riveridge Produce Marketing, a vertically integrated apple grower, packer and marketer headquartered in Sparta, MI. The Riveridge label represents apples from nearly 200 family orchards, providing for nearly 60% of Michigan's fresh apple crop. Additionally, fresh-pressed cider can be found under the same label year-round.

## Bland Farms Wins Dual Category Leadership Awards

Bland Farms, Glennville, GA, has earned the 2025 Grocery Insights Category Leadership Award in both onions and sweet potatoes, while Director of Sales Sloan Lott has been appointed chairman of the board for the Southeast Produce Council (SEPC).

With roots in Georgia and expanded operations in Peru and Mexico, Bland Farms continues to lead category growth and ensure year-round availability. From the world-famous Vidalia sweet onions to the celebrated Sand Candy sweet potatoes, Bland Farms delivers fresh flavor, trusted quality, and produce innovation to both the industry and families across the nation.



## SnapDragon Apple Harvest Promises More Monster Crunch

Crunch Time Apple Growers, Newark, NY, a cooperative of more than 160 apple growers, is kicking off the 2025 harvest of SnapDragon apples. Known for their big crunch, sweet and spicy flavor, and red skin, SnapDragon apples — the official apple of the Buffalo Bills — are being picked at peak quality.

"This year's crop of SnapDragon apples is exceptionally crisp, juicy, and absolutely bursting with flavor," says Jessica Wells, executive director of Crunch Time Apple Growers.

A product of the apple breeding program at Cornell University, SnapDragon apples are a cross between Honeycrisp and a variety that was never released.

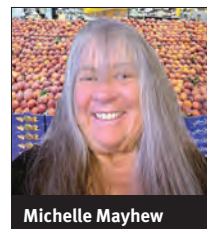
Harvested starting in mid-September, SnapDragon apples retain their crunch and flavor for months. In fact, their sweetness and complexity only deepen as the season goes on, making late winter and early spring some of the best times to enjoy them.

This season, SnapDragon apples will be available in thousands of stores across more than 40 states.

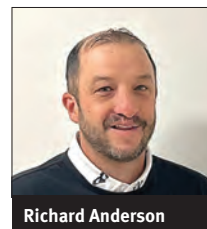


## IFPA Award Winners Revolutionizing Retail

Winners of the International Fresh Produce Association's (IFPA) Retail Merchant Innovation



Michelle Mayhew



Richard Anderson



Scott Bennett

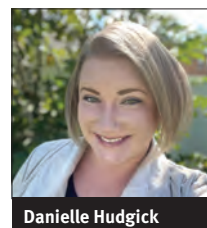


Michael Collins

Award will be recognized at the Retail Awards Reception, Oct. 17 at the Global Produce & Floral Show in Anaheim, CA.

IFPA awarded winners in five store-count categories:

- Michelle Mayhew, Dorothy Lane Market (1-50 stores), director of produce, Dayton, OH.
- Richard Anderson, Smith's (51-150 stores), director of produce, Salt Lake City, UT.
- Scott Bennett, Jewel-Osco (151-200 stores), produce sales manager, Itasca, IL.
- Michael Collins, Harris Teeter (251-399 stores), senior manager of produce operations, Matthews, NC.
- Danielle Hudgick, Sprouts (400+ stores), sr. category manager, Phoenix, AZ.



Danielle Hudgick

## NASCAR Star Ross Chastain Shifts '10 Years Fresh' into High Gear

Racing met retail as about 200 fans steered over to Market 32 in Malta, NY, Sept. 10 to meet NASCAR star Ross Chastain. The meet-and-greet near the neighboring Albany-Saratoga Speedway brought

Cup Series Playoff fever to customers, marking one of the first marquee events in Market 32's 10-week-long "10 Years Fresh" campaign.

Chastain, driver of the No. 1 Chevrolet Camaro for Trackhouse Racing and an eighth-generation watermelon farmer, signed autographs and greeted guests during the one-day appearance. His agricultural roots provided a natural tie-in to Market 32 and Price Chopper's focus on fresh produce. The Malta location and many others carry his family's Melon 1 watermelons.

The "10 Years Fresh" campaign, which kicked off Sept. 7 and runs through mid-November, will feature sampling events, exclusive product offerings, special savings opportunities, and community engagement experiences across Market 32 and Price Chopper stores.



## Green Life Farms of Florida is now Sunswell Greens

Green Life Farms, Lake Worth, FL, grower of hydroponic lettuce, microgreens, and specialty greens, has begun a new chapter as Sunswell Greens.



This rebrand reflects the company's focus on using Florida's natural advantages to grow greens that stay fresh longer, taste better, and support its customers' wellness goals.

Sunswell Greens grows premium-quality microgreens, cut lettuce and head lettuce.

The company will continue operations with the same growing expertise, operational team, and ownership with no disruptions to service or delivery. As a member of Fresh from Florida, Sunswell Greens operates two state-of-the-art hydroponic greenhouses in Lake Worth and Punta Gorda, FL, to grow non-GMO lettuce, microgreens, and specialty greens using OMRI-certified practices.

Sunswell Greens products are available at grocery stores, specialty retailers, and restaurants across Florida, including Publix, Winn-Dixie, The Boys Farmer's Markets and more.

## TIPA Compostable Packaging Launches Home Compostable Label for Fresh Produce

TIPA Compostable Packaging, Nordhorn, Germany, together with Bio4Pack, its European subsidiary, has launched a new certified home compostable label for fresh produce.



Produce stickers are one of the top five most persistent contaminants in compost, prompting a global transition to compostable alternatives driven by both market and regulation trends.

TIPA's home compostable produce label stands out in the marketplace with resistance to moisture, while remaining flexible. Its pressure-sensitive adhesive allows for strong adherence on a variety of produce, ranging from the smooth skin of a banana or mango to the complex, rough skin of an orange or cantaloupe, without leaving a residue on the produce.

## OTA Celebrates 40th Anniversary with New Campaign Launch

As the Organic Trade Association (OTA), Washington, celebrates 40 years, the organization launched the "Seal



**ORGANIC  
TRADE  
ASSOCIATION**

Makes It Simple" campaign, aimed at raising consumer awareness about the benefits of organic for personal well-being and the environment. OTA developed integrated media, digital, and retail campaigns to help eliminate consumer confusion when shopping for food and textiles — amid a myriad of certifications and choices available — with a clear call to action to look for and choose the USDA Organic seal.

Organic is now a \$71 billion industry, growing

at double the pace of conventional food products, according to OTA's 2025 Market Report. Unlike other eco-labels or certifications, only organic is federally regulated, ensuring that food and fiber are produced without pesticides, GMOs, synthetic additives, or antibiotics, while promoting animal welfare, sustainable agriculture and a healthier planet.

The "Seal Makes It Simple" program will run through Dec. 31, 2026, and will debut in six regional markets where organic has strong potential for growth: Atlanta, GA; Charlotte, NC; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Lubbock, TX; and Tampa, FL.

Funding for the campaign is made possible through a \$2.2 million USDA Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG) awarded in 2024 to OTA and The Organic Center, part of the \$300 million Organic Transition Initiative. Together with Organic Voices and support from OTA members, the organization is investing \$4.4 million over three years to expand consumer trust and grow organic markets.

## IBO Launches BlueCareers: A Global Recruitment Platform for the Blueberry Industry

The International Blueberry Organization (IBO) is launching BlueCareers, a new recruitment platform developed specifically for the global blueberry industry. Designed to bring together employers and professionals, BlueCareers serves as a centralized hub for career opportunities, job postings, resume submissions and networking at every level of the value chain.

All employers and professionals within the industry can access the platform at [bluecareers.internationalblueberry.org](http://bluecareers.internationalblueberry.org), where they will be able to post and browse job opportunities, submit resumes, and connect through a growing directory of industry members worldwide. IBO members benefit from preferential access and rates.



**BlueCareers**

## CMI Orchards Creates Sustainability Program

CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA, has launched CMI SOARS: Sustainable Orchards and Regenerative Solutions, designed to advance sustainability and regenerative agriculture across the tree fruit industry.

The CMI SOARS includes a comprehensive greenhouse gas inventory and annual sustainability report, the development and implementation of regenerative products and solutions, and transparent storytelling to empower both retailers and consumers with information about CMI's environmental efforts.

CMI will begin sharing the projects developed under SOARS, highlighting the practical ways regenerative practices are improving orchard health, boosting yields, and delivering nutrient-rich fruit to market, alongside an aggressive action plan with sustainable goals and emission-reduction targets.



For retail partners, SOARS creates direct business value while supporting global sustainability goals. By sourcing regeneratively grown fruit, retailers can strengthen their supply chains through verified carbon credit inset purchases, reduce emissions throughout distribution networks, and engage environmentally conscious consumers with a compelling narrative.

CMI Orchards has launched a dedicated landing page for the SOARS initiative, [www.cmisoars.com](http://www.cmisoars.com).

## Mission Produce Expands Distribution to Miami

Mission Produce Inc., Oxnard, CA, is expanding its operations and distribution to Miami, FL, enabling the company to directly service customers in Florida with its signature World's Finest Avocados and World's Finest Mangos, as well as provide ripening and bagging services.



Miami also serves as a strategic import hub for product sourced from Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and other offshore origins. By entering Florida directly, Mission can streamline logistics, reduce transit times, and move product seamlessly across its U.S. distribution network. With more than 18,000 retail outlets across the Southeast, the location positions Mission to better service this customer base.

## Lidl US CEO Joel Rampoldt to Keynote PLMA's 2025 Trade Show

Joel Rampoldt, chief executive of Lidl US, will deliver the keynote address at PLMA's 2025 Private Label Trade Show, Nov. 16-18 in Chicago.

A business leader with a track record in large-scale retail transformations, Rampoldt has widely recognized expertise in building teams and helping them tackle complex problems in customer offer, marketing, supply chain and financial management.

Lidl, parent of Lidl US, operates more than 12,000 stores in 31 countries, employing more than 350,000 employees globally. It is part of the Schwarz Group, the world's third-largest retailer.

The supermarket chain is well-known for its focus on private label, easy-to-shop layout and curated product selection that emphasizes essentials and popular items, which contribute to budget-friendly, efficient shopping.

Lidl US, established in 2015, is headquartered in Arlington, VA, and operates 190+ stores on the East Coast. About 80% of its award-winning products are private label, all of which undergo taste, quality and sensory testing.

Rampoldt will speak at the 8 a.m. keynote breakfast Nov. 17, at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare, which is adjacent to the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center, site of PLMA's 2025 Private Label Trade Show.

Themed "Store Brands Marketplace," the show will feature more than 35,000 food and nonfood products, 3,100 booths, and 2,000 exhibitors representing 65 countries.



Joel Rampoldt



# The Fresh Produce Industry's Role in Building a Sustainable Future

BY RON LEMAIRE

The Global Coalition of Fresh Produce offers a series of briefing notes titled *Fruits and Vegetables: Global Value Chains Explained*. The notes serve as resources designed to illuminate the complexities and interconnectedness of the fresh produce industry on a global scale.



From production and distribution to consumption and environmental impact, these briefings aim to provide an in-depth understanding and promote informed discussions on the industry's role in achieving global sustainability and food security.

In the *Understanding Costs and Prices in Global Value Chains for Fruits and Vegetables* section of the report, the critical issue of affordability and consumer confidence in a volatile global market is addressed. It highlights that fruits and vegetables consistently offer exceptional value, both nutritionally and economically, remaining highly competitive compared to other food categories even amid inflationary pressures.

Data from the United States, Canada and the European Union demonstrate that, while food prices generally have risen in recent years, the price increases for fresh fruits and vegetables have been comparatively less significant. This relative stability underscores the efficiency and resilience of the fresh produce supply chain.

The report delves into the multifaceted factors influencing consumer prices, which are often poorly understood. These include the perishable nature of produce, seasonal fluctuations, and substantial investments in sustainable land and water management.

Crucially, the note dissects the various cost pressures confronting growers and the broader industry, such as escalating input costs (construction materials, fertilizers, fuel, machinery), rising labor costs, and the increasing burden of compliance with food safety and sustainability standards.

The economic viability of the industry is further challenged by disruptive forces, like extreme weather events, which reduce yields and necessitate significant adaptation investments; geopolitical tensions affecting trade routes and freight rates; and volatile trade policies leading to tariff uncertainties.

The compounding effect of these challenges is severe, with a significant portion of the global fresh produce industry operating at a loss or breaking even, threatening long-term sustainability and prompting many operators to consider exiting the sector.

Complementing this economic analysis, *The Environmental Footprint of Fruits and Vegetables* articulates the fresh produce industry's profound commitment to environmental stewardship. This note emphatically demonstrates the remarkably low environmental footprint of fruits and vegetables when compared to other food categories, particularly meat and dairy.

Drawing on comprehensive meta-analyses, it presents compelling data on significantly lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, land use, and water consumption associated with plant-based foods. For instance, GHG emissions from plant-based foods are 10 to 50 times lower than those from animal products, primarily due to the inefficient energy conversion in animal agriculture and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) emissions.

The report strongly advocates for dietary shifts toward greater consumption of fruits and vegetables as a powerful strategy for mitigating climate change and conserving natural resources.

Beyond minimizing negative impacts, the second briefing note highlights the positive environmental externalities generated by fruit and vegetable production.

Woody perennial crops, such as fruit trees, are identified as effective carbon sinks, actively sequestering atmospheric carbon in their biomass. And fruit orchards foster biodiversity by creating micro-habitats for pollinators, contributing to ecosystem resilience.

The industry's proactive engagement in sustainability is showcased through numerous global examples. Case studies from Canada (e.g., Lufa Farms' hydroponics, Highline Mushrooms' energy optimization), Africa (e.g., Africado Ltd's biodiversity protection, East African Growers' smart irrigation), Latin America (e.g., Mexico's avocado sustainability initiative, Agrícola Famosa's regenerative agriculture), and Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g., Zespri Global's climate adaptation plan, Auckland Council's food waste-to-energy project) exemplify these innovative efforts.

The note also critically examines the concept of "food miles," arguing that transport's contribution to a food's total GHG emissions is often minor compared to production methods, and emphasizes the crucial role of international produce trade in supporting livelihoods in developing countries.

In conclusion, these two briefing notes collectively present a robust argument for the indispensable role of the fresh fruit and vegetable industry in building a sustainable future.

As chair of the Global Coalition of Fresh Produce, I emphasize that understanding both the economic complexities and environmental leadership of our sector is paramount. Continued collaboration, innovation, and supportive policy frameworks are essential to ensure the industry's economic resilience, enhance its environmental contributions, and ultimately secure a healthy and affordable supply of fresh produce for a growing global population.

Learn more at <https://producecoalition.net/publications/>.

Ron Lemaire is president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association and chair of the Global Coalition of Fresh Produce. Its member organizations represent producers, importers, exporters, wholesalers, distributors, retailers and other actors in global supply chains for fresh produce, in Canada, the U.S., Latin America, Europe, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.



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A new retail store in Bailey's Crossroads, VA, showcases Amazon Fresh's efforts to highlight fresh food and convenience in a streamlined, easy-to-shop format, merging traditional supermarket merchandising with tech-driven engagement.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/  
MIKE DUFF PHOTOS

# Amazon Fresh Delivers Convenience

With an easy-to-navigate layout, this Virginia produce department makes shopping simple.

BY MIKE DUFF

**A**mazon Fresh has reinvented itself several times in recent years, and another shift may still be ahead. Its latest approach focuses on aligning more closely with consumer expectations for a supermarket, starting with a stronger emphasis on the produce department.

The Bailey's Crossroads store in Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., showcases that direction. Designed to highlight fresh food and convenience in a streamlined, easy-to-shop format, the concept emerged after Amazon paused growth of the store concept in 2023 to reassess operations and incorporate lessons from earlier models. Since then, growth has picked up again, with the chain surpassing 50 stores last year and now totaling 62 locations.

Amazon says it remains committed to building its food business, which includes Fresh, and Whole Foods Market, which was acquired by Amazon in 2017.

At the Bailey's Crossroads Amazon Fresh, the store offers walk-out technology as well as self-checkouts and Dash Carts. Amazon's Dash Cart features built-in scanners that let shoppers register items as they place them in the cart. A screen totals purchases as you go.

Amazon touts its Fresh store network as a benefit in its Prime membership program. In the company's fourth quarter conference call, Andy Jassy, Amazon president and chief executive, referenced its brick-and-mortar operations as part of the benefit package members get with a monthly subscription. Consumers also can get unlimited grocery delivery and orders over \$35 from Whole Foods Market and Amazon Fresh for \$9.99 a month in a limited version of the membership package.

In the company's first quarter conference call, Jassy pointed out, "Even if you exclude Whole Foods Market and Amazon Fresh,



A scale had instructions under "Weigh Now and Check Out Faster." The 1-2-3 steps included Enter Item Code (PLU), Check Weight and Price, and Print Label and Place on Bag or Container.



A refrigerated floor case showcases packaged berries and grapes, with paper signage above enhancing the electronic display below.





Behind the glass doors at the back of the cold case, salads, fresh-cut items, and vegetables, such as squash and peppers took center stage.

Amazon is one of the largest grocers in the U.S., with over \$100 billion in gross sales last year."

Amazon has been making adjustments to its Fresh stores, as exemplified by the Bailey's Crossroads location, which opened in December of 2024. In Bailey's Crossroads, the Amazon Fresh produce department opens right at the entrance with a floral display up front. Big, conspicuous signage reading "Fruits & Veggies" is positioned above the cold cases on the wall beyond the floor presentation. The layout offers parallel rows of products, mostly on slant tables, but with some secondary and satellite signage on endcaps. Endcaps included items such as bagged lemons and avocados.

An architectural pillar had vertical signage that stated, "Look for Organics on the Shelf." The same kind of green and white signage, both vertical and horizontal, were in front of the various floor displays, calling out organics in the merchandise mix within the various displays.



At the produce department's front open section, displays highlight head lettuce, loose greens, radishes and bagged celery.

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Salads, veggies, and fresh cuts predominated the cold case at the Amazon Fresh store in Bailey's Crossroads, VA. The case housed both bagged and clamshell salads, as well as cut fruit and vegetables.

Citrus reamers sat in a multi-basket display at the end of the apple display, which included both bagged and bulk apples. The store also displayed sweet and white potatoes in bulk and bags, with spaghetti squash alongside.

On the sales floor, a refrigerated case displayed packaged berries and grapes, with paper signage above complementing the built-in digital screens. Additional signs tied the promotion together by

featuring a parfait recipe accessible through a QR code. The mix of physical and digital touchpoints reflects Amazon Fresh's effort to merge traditional supermarket merchandising with tech-driven engagement.

Signage also provided storage tips — for example, advising shoppers to keep blueberries refrigerated and lightly covered.

Next to the floral presentation near the entrance, which included a round floor and on-the-wall fixtures, Amazon Fresh Bailey's Crossroads offered pallet displays of promotional items, including, at the time of the store visit, mandarins, Sumos and Honeycrisp apples.

Behind the glass doors at the back of the cold case, salads, veggies, such as squash and peppers, and fresh cuts predominated. The case housed both bagged and clamshell salads, as well as cut fruit and vegetables. The fresh-cut case element incorporated BOGO promotional signage in and around clamshell fruit, chopped onions and prepped celery.

The Bailey's Crossroads Amazon Fresh isn't the only newly opened store in the D.C. area. After Bailey's Crossroads opened in December, the company debuted an Amazon Fresh store in March in Silver Springs, MD, using the same format.

**PB**



## INSIDE THE STORE

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ICA

# CELEBRATING 40 YEARS: PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

If there's one thing **PRODUCE BUSINESS** has always stood for, it's creating a space where leaders can come together — to exchange ideas, to challenge one another, and to strengthen the industry we all serve. That spirit of thought-leadership and camaraderie has guided us for 40 years, and it's at the heart of this special anniversary series.

During our **PRODUCE BUSINESS** 40th anniversary year, we're curating 40 powerful voices in a special editorial series to help shape the future of the produce industry. Over the next 10 months, we'll be sharing the voices of 40 individuals whose perspectives matter most right now. We bring you 10 leaders' insights in this issue, and then we will share three more trend articles each month of our anniversary year.

These are growers who nurture crops from the ground up, shippers and distributors who keep the supply chain moving, retailers and foodservice operators who connect with consumers every day,



and innovators who are reimagining how fresh produce fits into modern lives. Each brings a unique lens, but all are united by a common goal: ensuring that more people eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, more often.

That goal has never been more important. At a time when consumers are seeking healthier choices, communities are focused on well-being, and businesses are competing for attention in a crowded marketplace, fresh produce has a distinct advantage. Yet turning that advantage into consistent growth requires new ideas, bold leadership, and a willingness to think differently.

We believe the insights shared in this series will do more than inform — they'll inspire. They'll spark conversations in boardrooms, warehouses, fields and stores. And most importantly, they'll remind us all that by working together, we can grow not only an industry, but also healthier families, stronger communities, and a brighter future.





# FIRST DAYS AND BOLD TOMORROWS

BY KEN WHITACRE  
PUBLISHER, PRODUCE BUSINESS

**T**here's something about first days. The first day of school, the first day of a new job, or the first day of a new year. There's palpable excitement, natural trepidation, and an anticipation of new things, new friends, new dreams.

When Jim Prevor and I started *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, the first few days were certainly hectic, but they were also filled with the bravado of youth and our desire to make a difference in the fresh produce world. Jim and I dreamed of making an impact in the industry that his family passed down to him over many generations, and I think it would be an understatement to say that *PRODUCE BUSINESS* hasn't made its mark these past 40 years.

## OUR NEXT 40 YEARS

Of all contributions made by *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, the most important one, in my opinion, is the open forum it creates of thought-leadership and close camaraderie. And it's the thought-leadership that we celebrate in this anniversary issue, and over the next 10 months.

*PRODUCE BUSINESS* will be sharing the insights of 40 key individuals within the fresh produce industry, insights that will challenge long-held opinions, encourage leaders of the next generation and foster

greater industry fellowship. We hope you will read these leaders' words carefully and ponder how to incorporate their wisdom in your own life's work. If you wish to respond to any of the opinions expressed, we invite you to send your comments to our editors: [info@producebusiness.com](mailto:info@producebusiness.com).

Risk-taking, fearless leadership, transformational change — all of these things are part of a company's (or family's) culture. But rather than simply talking about it, we need to live these values if we want our industry to grow.

As we forge the next 40 years of produce innovation together, we hope you pause to look around you, say a few words of thanks, and then ask yourself: How will I be bold today?

Without *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine, I certainly would not be the man I am — intellectually and emotionally — because of the wonderful fellowship of people who contributed to it, not only by reading the magazine, but by commenting on and off the record, inviting me to their homes, enjoying each other's company at an event, or even after hours.

As we march on toward the future, I will continue to open my arms to new acquaintances and give even bigger hugs to the old ones. And I will continue to dream big. It's like our first days all over again.



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# Contract Procurement: Customer-Centric Retail

BY JEFF CADY

In today's fast-paced, ever-evolving fresh produce industry, one thing remains constant: the customer's expectation for quality, consistency and fair pricing. As a retailer, I've learned that meeting these expectations isn't just about stocking shelves — it's about building a supply chain that puts the customer at the center of every decision.

At the heart of this approach lies contract procurement, a practice that has become indispensable for retailers who want to deliver value year-round.

The produce business is inherently volatile. Weather events, shifting demand, and global supply chain disruptions can send prices soaring or plummeting overnight. Yet, from the customer's

perspective, these fluctuations are invisible — and frankly, irrelevant. Shoppers don't want to hear about crop failures in California or hurricanes in Mexico; they want to find their favorite fruits and vegetables at a fair price, every time they visit the store.

That's why we've made contract procurement a cornerstone of our approach. By working closely with suppliers to establish steady, season-long pricing, we can smooth out the highs and lows that

would otherwise be passed on to the consumer. This isn't just about protecting margins; it's about delivering on the promise of consistency that keeps customers coming back.



## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST TRANSACTIONS

Contract procurement is more than a legal agreement — it's a relationship. In many cases, these contracts are sealed with a handshake rather than a signature. What matters most is the mutual commitment: we pledge my business to a supplier for a set period, and, in return, we expect reliability, even when the market gets tight.

This relationship-based approach pays dividends when challenges arise. Recently, for example, a certain market experienced a sharp price increase due to supply constraints. Because we were on contract with a supplier, we had already agreed on a fair price months in advance. When costs started to rise, I picked up the phone and reminded my supplier of our agreement. We discussed the situation openly, and, while I'm always willing to listen if unforeseen circumstances arise, my priority is to ensure that my customers are protected from sudden price spikes.

This kind of open dialogue is only possible when both parties are invested in the long-term relationship, not just the next transaction. It's a philosophy I try to instill in my team, especially those who come from more transactional industries. In fresh produce, success is built on trust, communication, and a shared commitment to the end consumer.

## HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY FOR PREDICTABILITY

While relationships are the foundation, technology is a tool that helps us navigate uncertainty. Forecasting tools, data analytics, and market intelligence platforms allow both retailers and suppliers to anticipate challenges and make informed decisions. We may not be able to predict the weather, but we can use technology to model scenarios, identify trends, and plan for the unexpected.

For example, by analyzing historical data and monitoring global events, we can anticipate tight markets and adjust our procurement strategies accordingly. This not only benefits retailers, but also gives suppliers the confidence to plan their production, reducing stress and uncertainty throughout the supply chain.

## REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

Let me share a couple of real-world examples. As we approached grape season this year, I called my supplier and said, "Instead of selling me grapes at rock-bottom prices in September and October, let's agree on a fair, consistent price now." I'd rather pay a steady price throughout the season than subject my customers to wild swings at the register. The same goes for soft fruit — at the start of the California season, I work with suppliers to avoid inflated prices when demand exceeds supply, ensuring that we can offer consumers a fair deal from day one.

This approach isn't limited to a single category; it's a philosophy I apply across the board. As long as both retailer and supplier honor their commitments, everyone wins: The supplier gets a reliable partner, the retailer gets consistent supply, and the customer gets the value they expect.

## KEEP EYE ON CONSUMER

My advice is simple: Stay in touch with your customers' needs and work backward through the supply chain to meet them where they are at. Don't get distracted by short-term gains or market noise. If you keep your eye on the consumer and use every tool at your disposal — contracts, relationships, technology — you'll be well positioned to succeed.

Looking ahead, the fresh produce industry will only grow more complex, and the challenges we face will continue to evolve. But one thing remains clear: The retailers who thrive will be those who invest in strong supplier partnerships and never lose sight of the customers' needs.

Contract procurement isn't just a tool for managing risk — it's a strategy for building trust, ensuring reliability, and delivering real value to the people who count on us every day. By staying true to these principles, we can navigate whatever comes our way and help shape a produce industry that's resilient, responsive, and ready for the future.

*Jeff Cady is vice president of produce and floral for Northeast Shared Services, headquartered in Schenectady, NY, which supports the retail banners of Price Chopper, Market 32 and Tops Friendly Markets.*

# We Can Give Schoolchildren a Better Life

BY ALEX DINOVO

**W**hen I was 8 years old, my grandmother's pasta and meatballs was my favorite meal. I can still remember the smell of tomato sauce simmering on the stove and the sound of her knife tapping against the cutting board. Dinner at Grandma DiNovo's house wasn't just about food — it was about love, family, and connection. Everyone cleared their schedule to be there, because you could taste the care she poured into every dish.



That early experience taught me something I've carried into my career: Feeding people is more than meeting a physical need. It's an act of service, an expression of care, and a statement about what we value. If this is true in our homes, it should be even more true in our schools. After all, the meals we serve to children

every day send powerful messages about their worth, their health and their future.

## NOURISHING BOTH BODY AND SOUL

For too long, school meals have been reduced to a simple equation of calories and cost. But food is never just fuel. It is culture, community and identity. When we serve children highly processed, low-quality meals, the message is clear: convenience outweighs care. Over time, that message shapes how kids see themselves and the world.

The good news is that we have the chance to change this narrative. By prioritizing fresh fruits and vegetables in school meals, we can nourish not just bodies, but minds, communities and futures. Fresh produce carries a simple but profound message: You matter, your health matters, and we believe in your potential.

We don't need more studies to tell us that fruits and vegetables are essential to lifelong health. They reduce the risk of chronic disease, support healthy brain development, and lay the foundation for better learning outcomes. Yet too many children still go through their school day without consistent access to them.

At a time when one in six children struggles with obesity, and diet-related illnesses are straining our healthcare system, investing in school produce programs is not optional. It is the most cost-effective public health intervention we have. A healthier child today means a healthier adult tomorrow — one less likely to face preventable disease and one more likely to contribute fully to society.

Selling produce to schools isn't just about a single meal; it's about

shaping a lifetime of habits. When a child experiences fresh fruit in school, three things happen. First, they receive immediate nourishment. Second, they influence their family's choices, bringing home new preferences, encouraging parents and siblings to try what they've enjoyed at school. Third, they build positive associations that increase the chance they'll become lifelong produce consumers, increasing per capita consumption over time.

This is why every dollar spent on fresh produce in schools has a compounding return. It pays off in improved health outcomes, stronger communities, and even future economic benefits as healthcare costs decline. Few investments can match that return on investment.

## WE ARE ALL ADVOCATES

As an industry, we cannot be passive. Fresh produce doesn't have the marketing budgets of soda, snacks, or fast food. But what we do have is righteousness of mission. We are providing the food that extends life, sharpens minds, and strengthens communities. That is a story worth telling loudly, consistently, and with one unified voice.

We need policymakers to continue expanding programs like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) and ensuring that all federally subsidized school meals prioritize fresh, not just shelf-stable or processed options. We must resist any backsliding toward convenience foods and push instead for innovation: individually packaged produce,

creative classroom tasting programs, and partnerships that make fruits and vegetables both appealing and accessible.

And we need every stakeholder — from growers to distributors to educators — to see themselves as advocates. Whether your passion is nutrition, equity, or simply doing what's right for children, this is your cause.

When we place fresh fruits and vegetables on a child's tray, we are planting seeds — seeds of health, of hope, of possibility. We teach children, in the universal language of food, that they are worthy of nourishment and care. That lesson will echo far beyond the cafeteria walls, shaping their choices, their families, and their futures.

My grandmother's meals left an imprint on me that shaped my life's work. Imagine the imprint we can make on millions of children by ensuring that their school meals reflect the very best of what our farms, our industry, and our communities can offer.

Food is more than sustenance. It is medicine, it is education, and it is love. If we want to change the trajectory of our children's health, and, by extension, the health of our nation, then fresh produce in schools is not a side dish. It is the main course of a better future.

*Alex DiNovo is president and chief operating officer at DNO Produce, Columbus, OH.*

Selling produce to schools isn't just about a single meal; it's about shaping a lifetime of habits.





**Family grown always here for you**

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## SL Produce: the strength of vertical integration

**H**eadquartered in Los Mochis, Mexico, but with operations in McAllen, TX, and Nogales, AZ, SL Produce is a dynamic producer, exporter, and importer, able to react quickly to last-minute client requests. The key, and the strength, of SL's business model is a vertically-integrated structure that allows for full control all the way up the supply chain.

According to SL Produce's chief executive, Selman Tachna, the fact that SL is a family-owned and run business means that the decision-making process far more agile and able respond quickly to customer orders. "Compared with a company with a corporate structure with lots of different levels, there is a much greater ability to be flexible and provide more attention to clients," he says.

"We always seek long-term relationships with our clients – after all, as a family-run business, these relationships are what keeps our company going and feeds all the people who work for us in our region."

Moreover, as a vertically-integrated company, Tachna says SL is able to provide clearer communications and take decisions in-the-moment. "SL is able to make fast decisions, which is a really important advantage in an industry where the products only last for short periods of time," he explains. "We're able to offer personalized solutions for each customer because of the fact that we are vertically-integrated, which gives us much more flexibility in everything from packaging and pack format to sizes and fruit selection."

### Complete Control

A further advantage of SL's structure is its ability to control all aspects of the business, from deciding what crops and

varieties will be sown in the fields to which workers are best suited for harvesting, and which facilities are best situated for packing.

"With a lot of importers, product quality can vary from week to week," continues Tachna. "We work to make sure we consistently have the same high quality. If there are any changes, we let the client know what's happening on-the-ground and what to expect. It's another advantage of being vertically integrated."

"Another factor is freshness. In other businesses, the product might go from the grower to the importer and from the importer to the distributor, and it can pass through three of four different sites before it reaches the customer. We say: "Where do you want it and what time do you want it?" We take care of the product from the time we sow it, through to harvesting, packing and onward transportation to our clients."

An additional focus for SL is on added value products. The company recently launched a new service providing a range of fresh-cut fruits and vegetables, from mangos though to green beans and bell peppers. "More and more consumers are looking for smaller pack sizes and more ready-to-eat options," says Tachna.

Hand-in-hand with the focus on added value, SL is also investing in not just testing new varieties, but also in exploring innovative – and more sustainable – farming methods. "Sustainability is a topic we take seriously at SL," Tachna adds. "And the fact that we are vertically integrated means we have control from the seeds that are planted in the fields through to packing and shipping to clients; and this control means we are able to focus on growing crops that are more supportable and sustainable."







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# Cultivating Talent in the Produce Industry

BY MARC GOLDMAN

**W**hen I first started working in the produce industry, it wasn't by design. Like many in my generation, I took a part-time job as a kid, never intending to make a career out of it. I was in college, studying business administration, and working as a produce clerk for a little extra money. Back then, I was making about \$10,000 or \$11,000 a year part time, which wasn't bad, especially with double time on Sundays. I remember hearing that produce managers were making \$35,000, and that was

the moment I realized there was a real future here. Less than six months later, I was a manager. That was 46 years ago, and I've never looked back.

Today, the challenge of attracting and retaining talent in the fresh produce industry is more pressing than ever. The work isn't glamorous, and it's certainly not easy. You're unloading trucks, stacking boxes, throwing out garbage — real, physical work. It's not the kind of

job that most young people dream about. In fact, I see fewer and fewer young people interested in getting into this business. There are so many other ways to make money now — social media, side hustles, you name it — and a lot of them don't involve getting your hands dirty.

But here's the thing: For those who do come in, there's real opportunity. In our company, we have 17 stores, and half of our produce managers started as clerks. I make it a point to look for young employees who show a good attitude and a willingness to work. If someone puts in the effort, I do everything I can to let them know they have a future here. I want them to see that they could be a manager one day, making a good living and providing for their families. For me, that's the best part of my job — taking someone from a minimum wage position and helping them build a career.

Promoting from within isn't just good for the employee; it's good for the company. When you give someone a shot and they succeed, you've got a manager who's loyal and understands the business from the ground up. Even if they don't make it, others see that you're willing to invest in your people, and that motivates them to work harder. Every person I've promoted to manager is still with us,

or they've moved on to even better opportunities elsewhere. That's a win in my book.

One of the biggest changes I've seen over the years is the loss of personal relationships in the business. It used to be that deals were made face-to-face, sometimes with a little yelling and a lot of passion. You'd argue, maybe even throw something, but five minutes later, you were friends again. Now, everything's done by email or text. It's efficient, but it's not the same. The produce business has always been about relationships, and I worry that's getting lost.

## IMPORTANT USE OF YOUR TIME

So how do we make this industry more attractive to the next generation? I think it starts with us — managers, supervisors, leaders. We have to engage with our teams, not just rely on corporate initiatives. When I have an idea for a change, I don't just dictate it. I bring in the produce manager, some of the clerks, and ask for their input. Sometimes they come up with ideas I'd never have thought of. Ultimately, I make the decision, but involving people gives them ownership and pride in their work.

If I see someone with potential, I give them more responsibility.

Maybe I'll have them help with orders, or let them run the department when the manager's on vacation. And when someone's doing a great job, I try to get them a raise — sometimes before they even ask. Nobody likes to ask for more money, and when you recognize their work without them having to toot their own horn, it means a lot.

We're a small, family-owned company, so we don't have formal internships or professional development programs. But that doesn't mean we can't develop talent. It just means the responsibility falls on people like me. We have to

spot the young employees who show interest and help them grow.

If I were talking to a high school or college class, I'd tell them this: The produce industry isn't glamorous, but it's honest work. You'll always have a job, you'll always be able to feed your family, and if you work hard, you can build a good life. I'm not a genius — I just had a work ethic and a little bit of confidence. That's what got me here.

The future of our industry depends on our willingness to invest in people, to share our stories, and to make this business something to be proud of. It's not brain surgery. It's about giving people a chance, supporting them, and building relationships that last. That's how we'll keep the produce industry strong for generations to come.

*Marc Goldman is the produce director at New York City-based Morton Williams Supermarkets.*



The future of our industry depends on our willingness to invest in people and to share our stories.

# The Case for Produce Consolidation

BY STEVE GRINSTEAD

**T**he produce industry has experienced some consolidation over the years, but not nearly to the extent of other family business industries. Looking at other industries that were also mostly made up of small family businesses — funeral homes, tractor supply, boat dealerships, etc. — they significantly rolled up in the '80s and '90s. Many factors, mostly revolving around the difficulty of dealing with an extremely perishable product, prevented our industry from the same fate. The produce business is an extremely difficult business and not easy to cookie-cutter, or even replicate at all.



The industry needs to have fewer players in order to be healthy. It is problematic for too few players to be in each market, which the government provides oversight for, but it is also problematic to have too many players in each market. When you have far too many players in each market, it becomes a race to the bottom, with companies

making bad business decisions to gain or retain customers. Those challenges continue to grow with the soaring cost of last-mile distribution.

Additionally, there are many new technologies to employ today to improve food safety, traceability, freshness, efficiencies, etc., but they are expensive. It's difficult for smaller organizations to afford and take advantage of these technologies.

The arguments against consolidation usually revolve around not enough competition to keep pricing in check and competitive, as well as the loss of creativity and innovation. This is a real concern, but the produce industry is light-years from that scenario. I believe we could have half as many players and still remain competitive and innovative.

## MARKET IS DYNAMIC

When you look at other segments of the industry, such as retail, they significantly consolidated decades ago. I remember everyone thinking that there would end up being only three retail grocers in the U.S.

But the free market finds a way to right-size itself. As the retailers grew larger, there were niches that were left unfilled. The small regional players grew larger and have become significant players in the industry. Many independents sprang up from the larger retailers not being able to address every market and niche group. The population dynamics of many markets have changed over the years as well, which continues to evolve local and niche needs.

## IMPROVING GREAT COMPANIES

FreshEdge has been consolidating the produce distribution industry for the past six years. We have aggressively grown via acquisition of great produce companies, with the model of leaving the companies significantly like they were, while still taking advantage of our ever-growing scale.

When we looked at the produce distributors in the United States, there were large companies in the Northeast, Southeast, and out West. The middle of the country was made up of mostly midsize to smaller companies. We first set out to become the large company in the middle of the country and then continue expanding from there.

We developed the model of each company joining the FreshEdge family of Best in Class companies vs. "selling out." The previous owners became partners in the FreshEdge organization, so they still have skin in the game and remain driven to grow and be the best we can be. We only focused on great companies that were market leaders in each market.

FreshEdge was built on being customer-obsessed from the beginning. All our customer programs were tailored to each customer's wants and needs. So, starting with great companies that were already customer-centric was important. Then, we layered on technology and processes to make the companies even better at delivering the appropriate customer experience.

Next, we added numerous perishable product lines to the companies, and FreshEdge has been evolving from a produce company to the premier fresh specialist. This allows us to serve our customers' needs with a wider array of delicious and nutritious foods with the same focus and attention that we do with produce.

The other industry segment that we have been busy consolidating is local fresh-cut produce.

Through startups and acquisitions, we now have six fresh-cut, value-added facilities and one USDA kitchen. These Best in Class fresh-cut operations feed our various Best in Class fresh food distribution facilities. This allows our customers to order value-added products this morning, have them freshly and expertly cut and packaged to their specs this afternoon, and then delivered to their foodservice or retail operation tomorrow morning.

FreshEdge is private equity-backed, and we are proud to have Wind Point Partners as our partner. They have been an incredible resource to us and helped us become a more efficient and well-run company.

I believe our industry will continue to consolidate for the foreseeable future, and I think it will be healthy for all aspects of it. We are proud to be part of this industry consolidation and believe that our customers, suppliers, and associates have all benefited from the process. I love this industry and have made making it better my life's work.

*Steve Grinstead is chief executive of FreshEdge, a family of best-in-class fresh food distribution companies backed by Wind Point Partners.*

I believe we could have half as many players and still remain competitive and innovative.



# Pressures and Promise of Foodservice

BY ANDY HAMILTON

Since America has grown and industrialized, dining out has expanded right alongside the American Dream. Wild Bill Hickok may not have ordered a Caesar salad during the Black Hills Gold Rush, but he and Calamity Jane likely still dined on beans, corn, carrots, cabbage, and potatoes with their whiskey at a rowdy Deadwood saloon.

As waves of immigrants introduced new cuisines, Americans often first experienced

exciting new flavors in restaurants before they became staples in home kitchens. After World War II, the suburban boom fueled the rise of fast food, delivering cheap and convenient meals in innovative formats.

Entering the 21st century, macro trends continued to reshape dining. Delivery apps leveraged a smartphone world, and these apps proliferated

as consumer time demands increased. By 2015, Americans were spending more on food away from home than at home.

## HAMMERED BY INFLATION, PANDEMIC

But the COVID-19 shutdowns changed everything overnight. Restaurants lost the in-house dining and social interaction that make eating out special. Thankfully, many states accelerated recovery, and traffic rebounded — fueled by “revenge travel” and consumers’ overwhelming desire to reclaim life’s simple joys, such as dining out with friends, family and neighbors.

Despite surviving a tumultuous pandemic and post-pandemic world, restaurants today face enormous obstacles to long-term success and profitability. Although some chains are posting record-high sales, the industry has endured three years of food inflation, higher labor costs, and restrictive regulations. After the Federal Reserve belatedly began raising rates in 2022, food-away-from-home inflation outpaced food-at-home inflation, widening the gap beyond pre-COVID norms.

Operators now face a delicate balancing act: raising menu prices enough to offset costs without alienating customers. Many consumers have already resisted continual price hikes. Many operators with the wrong business model or offerings for their market, or inefficient cost structures with rocketing labor costs, had no chance of surviving in such a harsh business environment. The restaurant environment for our friends in Canada has been even more punitive.

Over-stimulative fiscal policy and prolonged near-zero interest rates contributed to the inflation spike of 2021–2023. While tariffs

remain an unwelcome tax, as Milton Friedman famously noted, inflation is “always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon.”

With M2 money supply now below the five-year average, inflation risks are less severe than during the pandemic-era stimulus, even with today’s tariff pressures. However, Fed Chair Jerome Powell, who failed miserably controlling or even recognizing inflation in time during the post-COVID-19 economy, is scared to act for fear of creating another inflation event.

History shows when consumers grow anxious, discretionary spending drops quickly. After vacations filled with meals at airports, resorts, and theme parks, the first place consumers trim is often at these discretionary expensive trips, and then we see residual damage trickling down to local neighborhood restaurants. This cycle spells potential trouble for the foodservice industry.

Yet, there are tailwinds that could help restaurants weather the storm and even thrive:

- Major events: Concerts, football games, and monster-sized events such as the 2026 World Cup drive massive traffic for foodservice.
- Return-to-office trends: More commuting means more meals purchased outside the home. We all eventually run out of leftovers!
- Lower gas prices: Affordable fuel encourages consumers to dine out more freely. My home state of Georgia, for instance, temporarily cut gas taxes to boost consumer spending, which was a boon for foodservice.
- Policy stability: Reducing tariff uncertainty would calm consumer fears. Tariffs, such as 17.1% duties on Mexican tomatoes, do nothing but lift the long-term price levels and diminish demand.
- Less red tape: In extremely high-burden states like California, radically simplifying bureaucracy would ease the cost and risk of starting and maintaining restaurants. Let’s also get rid of the job-killing, astronomically high minimum wage triggers, too.
- Lower interest rates: Moderating borrowing costs would support operators’ investments and stimulate economic activity which always adds to foodservice traffic.

At Markon, we provide fresh produce to our four private, family-owned broadline foodservice distributors/owners. Our name “Markon” stems from “marketing consistency” — a principle every restaurant strives for. As Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney stated in a recent interview, “Success is about being consistently good. Occasionally great gets you fired in this business.” The same principle of consistent performance applies to foodservice.

Given the headwinds operators already face, isn’t it time for policymakers to cut back unnecessary bureaucracy and poor policy choices — and help America’s restaurants succeed?

*Andy Hamilton is chief executive of Markon Cooperative Inc., headquartered in Salinas, CA.*

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# There's No One Way to Shop for Produce

BY RON LEMAIRE

**W**alk into a grocery store in 2025 and you'll find a consumer juggling a dozen silent decisions in the produce aisle.

They're weighing price, of course. But also packaging. And convenience. And whether the produce was grown nearby. They're thinking about what's on sale, what's in season, and, in some cases, what aligns with their values. All of this happens quietly, but it shapes every purchase.

Taste, freshness, texture, color, and size all matter, shaping our traditional ideas of consumer preference.

But in the produce department, preference is a lot more complicated than what someone simply "likes." It's about what people are navigating, economically, socially and emotionally. That's the real shift we're seeing.

## REDEFINING VALUE

We've been watching this unfold through CPMA's Consumer Pulse research. Week after week, the pat-

tern holds: Shoppers remain loyal to fresh produce, even as price sensitivity rises. But affordability alone doesn't explain their behavior. The trade-offs behind each decision, such as what gets chosen, skipped, or substituted, tell a deeper story.

A report from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, developed with the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, shows that Canadians are redefining what value means. Nearly 60% now look for food with less packaging, while more than half say convenience plays a role in what they buy. Almost half also see climate change as the most serious long-term threat to Canada's food system. Together, these shifts point to a consumer who is weighing more than just price — they're thinking about impact, ease, and long-term sustainability every time they shop.

At the same time, the report highlights how consumers are "trading down" and adjusting habits to reduce their total grocery spend. They're switching brands, reducing portion sizes, or cutting back on premium items. In the fresh category, that can mean skipping higher-priced organics or opting for more shelf-stable produce. For the industry, this isn't a sign of disinterest, it's a signal that shoppers are being more deliberate.

There's also a generational dimension. Younger Canadians are

more likely to seek information on sustainability, working conditions, and ethical sourcing. They want to know where their food came from and how it got to them. These are early indicators of what matters to the next wave of long-term consumers.

## PREFERENCES ARE ALWAYS CHANGING

What does all this mean for the produce sector? It means that understanding today's consumer is more complicated than tracking price elasticity or coupon usage.

It's about understanding the context in which decisions are made, and, in many ways, the produce department is where these pressures show up most clearly. Our products are fresh, often unpackaged, and highly visible. There's nowhere to hide, which is both the challenge and the opportunity.

The industry isn't being caught off guard by these shifts in consumer behavior. In fact, our members have been adapting for a while now, making practical changes that meet people where they are.

Retailers are leaning into flexible pack sizes, value-driven promotions, and merchandising strategies that honor cultural and regional food preferences. Others are rethinking how they communicate about sourcing, freshness, and product use to truly connect with what matters to their customers.

At CPMA, we've been working to support this shift with research and outreach that reflect how real people make choices. Through initiatives like Half Your Plate, we aim to meet consumers where they are, offering simple, practical tools to make fresh produce feel more accessible in everyday life. This work helps bridge the gap between what the data tells us and how we can inspire real-world behavior change.

We still have to resist the urge to oversimplify. The consumer isn't a single, fixed profile.

They're not static. What someone wants on a Tuesday evening after work is likely different from what they prioritize on a Saturday morning trip to the farmers market.

What they say matters might not always match up with what they actually buy. That's not a contradiction, it's simply human nature. The key isn't to find a single "right answer," but to stay curious, listen to the data, and accept that preference is always changing.

By picking up on those signals and responding thoughtfully, we can stay relevant. Produce is central to our food culture, and it's our job to make sure it remains a vital part of the conversation about what we eat and why it's so important.

*Ron Lemaire is president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA).*

Understanding today's  
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# Free Trade to Fee Trade: A New Reality

BY ALLISON MOORE

**T**he great disruptors facing the fresh produce industry in 2025 have been the ever-changing implementation tariffs and the anti-dumping duties impacting one very large produce category: tomatoes.

For many decades, the fresh produce industry has evolved under tariff-free conditions that helped U.S. companies build dynamic supply chains that leveraged the strengths of diverse growing regions.



Growing in a climate best suited for a specific commodity during a specific time of year has made the produce industry stronger by reducing supply gaps and increasing quality.

Trade means that U.S. growers and distributors looking to partner with retail and foodservice buyers for longer supply windows are able to do that by working with

growers in regions across our many trading partners.

The result has been an amazing transformation in the produce world. Consumers can now find most fresh produce items throughout the year when they go to the grocery store. Gone are the long, dark winters without a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.

## TARIFF-FREE GROWTH

Trade has also driven innovation in the industry. We see new, exciting varieties of all kinds of fresh produce items — from the multitudines of table grapes to tomatoes of every shape, size and color, a rainbow of bell peppers large and small, mini pickles, a whole host of Asian vegetables, and more.

The evolution in the produce industry has also changed how items are grown. We have seen U.S. companies investing in and creating partnerships with greenhouse growers in much of Mexico, Canada, and pockets in the U.S., leading to consistent supplies, improved quality, and wiser use of resources. We see advancements in drip irrigation, integrated pest management, soil health, and adaptations to address climate change.

This trade activity creates a strong economic impact on the United States. For example, a Texas A&M Study estimates that fresh tomatoes imported into the U.S. from Mexico generate over \$8.3 billion in economic activity and support more than 46,000 U.S. jobs. Imagine the positive impact across all commodities that U.S. companies are importing into the U.S.!

## THE DISRUPTIONS: TARIFFS

With a change in U.S. presidential administrations, however, a

new focus on tariffs or duties to recalibrate trade flows means that many of the efficiencies, strengths and innovation created across supply chains will now be challenged.

Unfortunately, tariffs create supply chain, pricing, and supply pressures that will negatively impact U.S. companies. These challenges are forcing companies to make hard decisions and rethink their supply chains based on an ever-changing tariff landscape. Companies are renegotiating business relationships with suppliers and buyers, and consumers will be picking up the tab for the increases in price resulting from the tariffs.

There is the belief that applying tariffs to imported produce will make supply chains return to the U.S. However, tariffs do not create beneficial climates in the off-season. Tariffs do not create an adequate workforce in the U.S. to work on farms. Tariffs do not magically construct decades worth of greenhouses in the blink of an eye to replace imported produce. Tariffs do not make supply chains more resilient.

Tariffs add cost for businesses and consumers. Tariffs also create cash flow issues. Tariffs undermine trading relationships that have evolved over decades. Tariffs create uncertainty of supply.

Companies are working to find a path forward while continuing to provide fresh produce year-round for consumers.

## BIGGER THREAT

On top of tariffs, we are also facing the industry-crushing implementation of anti-dumping duties on fresh tomatoes from Mexico, the major supplier to the U.S. of vine-ripened round and roma tomatoes,

the wide variety of cherry and grape tomatoes of varying colors, tomatoes on the vine, and a whole lot of new tomato varieties made possible by the greenhouse revolution in North America.

If tariffs are like a traffic jam during rush hour, then anti-dumping duties are like destroying bridges and taking our roads during an evacuation order. Tariffs create uncertainty and increased costs, and anti-dumping duties create major havoc that is meant to disrupt and destroy industries.

## UNCHARTED TERRITORY

For U.S. companies sourcing from Mexico, that is not going to be any different. The anti-dumping duties have taken the industry into uncharted territory. When there are weather impacts like hurricanes in Florida, labor impacts in the U.S., continued land use pressures in the U.S., and other challenges facing domestic agriculture, then the industry and consumers are in a whole new world.

We have not yet seen the full fallout from the varying tariff rates from our different trading partners or the duties on tomatoes being paid by U.S. importers. In the meantime, companies are working to find a path forward for themselves and their employees while continuing to provide fresh produce year-round for consumers.

*Allison Moore is executive vice president of Fresh Produce of the Americas, which is headquartered in Nogales, AZ.*

# Empowering the Next Generation

BY RAINA NELSON

**T**he produce industry is changing — fast. From supply chain innovation to consumer demand for transparency and sustainability, we're facing a transformational moment. But amid all the technological advances and market shifts, one of the most powerful changes we can make has nothing to do with logistics or shelf life. It's about people — specifically, preparing the next generation of leaders to shape the future of produce.

I've spent my career in fresh produce, working across every link of the value chain. Throughout that journey, I've been one of just a few women in the room more times than I can count. But that's changing — and I love it.



Women are stepping into leadership roles at an accelerating pace, bringing fresh perspective, emotional intelligence, and collaborative strength to a traditionally male-dominated

industry. Yet for all our progress, real equity is still a work in progress.

To ensure our industry evolves in a way that reflects the diverse world we serve, we need to be intentional — not only about representation, but about investment in the leadership pipeline.

## MENTORSHIP AS A MULTIPLIER

My passion for mentorship is personal and profound. I've benefited greatly from mentors — men and women — who saw potential in me before I saw it in myself. Now, I feel a responsibility to pay that forward.

That's why I'm so deeply involved with the Southeast Produce Council's Next Generation Leadership Academy, a program designed to elevate emerging leaders with tools, mentorship and a powerful network. This academy gives them a seat at the table and the confidence to use their voice when they get there.

Programs like this are leadership accelerators. They create access, visibility and pathways that didn't always exist before. And in a time when the industry is struggling with labor shortages and succession gaps, nurturing young leaders is not just the right thing to do — it's the smart thing to do.

## FROM COMMITMENT TO ACTION

At Westfalia Fruit, we're committed to building a leadership culture that mirrors our values: inclusive, courageous and future-focused. We're in a transformation phase ourselves. Our ambition is to put stronger structures in place that invest in our people and their leadership path.

We are designing an accredited leadership academy that will focus on leadership development across the globe and I am very excited for that to take life. I encourage my team to pursue and accept leadership opportunities — both within and outside of the company, maximizing opportunities to learn from industry leaders, company leaders and each other.

Leadership isn't about a title or position; it's about the willingness and drive to encourage others to find and use their own power. At Westfalia, we are committed to bringing out the best in each other through a relentless pursuit of and support for individual, company-wide and industry growth.

## LOSING TALENT WE DESPERATELY NEED

Here's the hard truth: If we don't evolve how we develop and promote talent — especially diverse talent — we'll lose it. Next generations entering the workforce are looking for more than a paycheck: They're seeking purpose, balance and a clear growth path. If we don't provide those things, they'll find them in other industries.

The produce business is unlike any other — fast-paced, mission-driven, deeply connected to the land and the health of our communities. It should be a magnet for young, ambitious talent, not a maze. But that means we need to dismantle outdated structures, challenge unconscious biases, and normalize women leading at every level — from farms to boardrooms.

We need to be intentional — not only about representation, but about investment in the leadership pipeline.

## WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Success isn't a single moment or milestone — it's a movement. Imagine an industry where multigenerational teams collaborate seamlessly, blending wisdom and curiosity. Where innovation isn't limited by hierarchy. That's the future I envision.

For the industry to thrive, we need current executive leadership to engage and provide more mentorship, and more companies that see leadership as a crop worth cultivating. It's more women speaking on industry panels, inclusion of the next generation learning how to run operations, negotiate contracts, build brands, and owning their value in spaces where they were once underrepresented. It's more seasoned leaders mentoring with intention. It's companies redesigning leadership pipelines to be more equitable and visible.

To the next generation in produce: You belong here. Your voice matters. Speak up, even when your heart is pounding. Ask for the opportunity. Say yes before you feel fully ready — growth happens outside your comfort zone.

To industry leaders: If you want to future-proof your business, invest in the next generation. Don't wait for talent to prove itself before you support it. Be the mentor who changes someone's trajectory. Elevate their seat at the table and then listen when they speak.

*Raina Nelson is president of Westfalia Fruit USA.*



# Rethink the Role of the Produce Manager

BY MIKE ROBERTS

Walk into nearly any grocery store in America, and the first thing a shopper sees is produce. It's the heartbeat of fresh retail — colorful, dynamic and demanding. Yet, despite its visibility and critical importance, the produce department remains one of the most misunderstood and undervalued areas in grocery operations, especially when it comes to leadership.



Too often, produce is treated as an afterthought. When a staffing issue arises, the default solution is to “just throw someone over there.” The assumption? Anyone can do produce.

This mindset is not only outdated — it's costing us talent, profit, and long-term stability. It's time we start recognizing the produce manager's role for what it truly is: a skilled, strategic,

high-impact position that should be a pipeline to executive leadership.

## REFRAMING PRODUCE AS A SKILLED DISCIPLINE

Produce management isn't just about stacking tomatoes and rotating bananas. It's about managing margin on a knife's edge. It's about making real-time decisions on shrink, handling logistics under pressure, merchandising to drive movement, leading a team, and delivering on customer expectations — all within the tightest, most perishable category in the store.

Put simply, a great produce manager is part merchant, part operator, and part coach.

If more leaders with a background in produce were promoted into higher executive roles, we'd see more thoughtful decision-making around labor models, supply chain realities, assortment strategies, and waste mitigation. These are all areas where traditional corporate silos often overlook the nuance — and the cost — of fresh.

By continuing to undervalue produce managers, we risk:

- Burnout and high turnover from our most capable store leaders.
- Poor departmental performance due to lack of training or respect.
- A talent drain — where high-potential individuals leave because they don't see a future in fresh.

And worst of all? We perpetuate a culture where the most critical department in the store is treated like the least strategic.

## WHAT SUCCESS COULD LOOK LIKE

Imagine a future where produce is no longer seen as a starting point, but as a strategic pillar of retail success. Where produce managers are not just store-level operators, but part of the talent pipeline for district managers, merchandisers, category directors, and even vice presidents.

Success means investing in produce talent: formal training, leadership development, data literacy, and cross-department exposure. It means valuing real-world execution as much as traditional credentials.

If someone can run a high-performing produce department, there's no job in the store they can't handle. Start treating them that way. Give them visibility. Solicit their input. Include them in strategic conversations. Promote from fresh.

Also, stop setting people up to fail. Don't treat produce as a catch-all for underperformers from other departments. This isn't a place for trial-and-error — it's a complex and high-stakes environment.

When we treat it that way, we see results that match.

## THE ROLE OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Senior leaders set the tone. If you value fresh, show it. Recognize talent in produce roles. Offer mentorship and sponsorship. Push back against the idea that produce isn't “strategic.” It is. It always has been.

And if you're making corporate-level decisions without a fresh perspective in the room — you're only seeing half the picture.

If you're making corporate-level decisions without a fresh perspective in the room, you're only seeing half the picture.

## A WORD TO NEXTGEN LEADERS

If you're managing a successful produce department today, hear this: You are already operating at a high level. You juggle pressure, pace, people, and perishables — all while delivering results daily. That's leadership.

Keep sharpening your skills. Learn the financials. Understand the broader retail business. Speak up. You have insights that corporate teams need to hear.

There is no ceiling for produce people — unless we believe there is one. The best operators I know came from the floor, from the trucks, from the wet rack. They know what works because they've lived it. And that's exactly the kind of leader this industry needs more of.

Produce isn't easy — and it's not supposed to be. But when done right, it's the most exciting, high-impact part of the grocery business.

Let's stop treating produce managers like placeholders — and start treating them like the future executives they are.

*Mike Roberts is vice president of produce operations at Arkansas-based Harps Food Stores Inc.*

# Talent and Innovation Will Shape the Future

BY GEORGE SHROPSHIRE

When we first started Love Beets, our goal was simple: introduce Americans to a vegetable they thought they knew. Beets weren't new — but the way we presented them was. From the contemporary packaging to bold flavors and ready-to-eat convenience, Love Beets redefined how consumers could experience this humble root vegetable. What began as a niche idea quickly grew into a movement that transformed produce shelves across the country.



But building a brand is never just about the product — it's about the people behind it.

In many ways, the story of Love Beets is a story about talent and innovation working hand in hand. It was our team's willingness to challenge conventional thinking and their relentless curiosity that helped

us turn a polarizing vegetable into a beloved staple for health-conscious and flavor-seeking consumers alike.

And as our success with Love Beets grew, so did our ambition. Our out-of-the-box thinkers began to think bigger picture — if we could make beets fun and appealing, how else could we make fresh produce more appealing to consumers?

That's what led to the formation of Offshoot Brands — our next chapter. We envisioned a company that could nurture and scale a portfolio of produce-centric, better-for-you food brands, each with its own distinct identity but united by a shared mission: to help more people eat more plant-forward foods, more often. Offshoot Brands became not only a home for Love Beets, but a launchpad for other progressive, category-defining brands.

But no matter how much we evolve, two principles remain foundational to everything we do: people and innovation.

## THE TALENT IMPERATIVE

In the produce industry, we talk a lot about quality, freshness, and logistics — but we need to talk more about talent. As consumer expectations change and competition intensifies, it's not enough to have great products. You need great people — people who think differently, move quickly, and are unafraid to disrupt.

Hiring and developing top talent has been central to our growth. At Offshoot Brands, we invest heavily in our team because we know innovation doesn't happen by accident — it happens because the right people are empowered to lead. From our R&D specialists to our incredible commercial team, brilliant marketers and supply chain experts, every success we've had is rooted in the strength of our people.

Our collaborative approach ensures every team member has a seat at the table. When people feel heard — when their ideas are welcomed and their feedback valued — they become more than

employees. They become invested stewards of the business. Empowered individuals take ownership of their work, push boundaries, and care deeply about the success of the company — because it becomes their success, too.

That mindset is core to everything we do. From the early days to now, we've had passionate team members help shape who we are. They believe in the mission, they've helped shape the brands, and they continue to fuel our growth. They're not just part of the team — they're champions of it. Passionate people with a shared purpose, driving real impact.

## PRODUCT INNOVATION AS A GROWTH ENGINE

Equally vital is our approach to product innovation. We don't just chase trends, we anticipate them. Whether it's functional wellness, global flavors or sustainability, we look for white space where we can introduce something truly different. Innovation in produce isn't just about a new variety or flavor — it's about rethinking form, function and occasion.

Love Beets taught us that even the most traditional categories can be reimaged. That same spirit drives our work across our whole portfolio at Offshoot Brands. We're not just responding to consumer demand — we're helping to shape it.

Our team is a mix of omnivores, vegetarians, flexitarians, gluten-free and dairy-free eaters, and balanced eaters — each with their own lens on health and wellness. That diversity isn't just personal, it's powerful. It

gives us a built-in focus group and a broader perspective on how different people eat, what they care about, and where the market is headed. These varied perspectives help us stay curious, push boundaries, and create products that resonate with real people living real lives.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As we look to the future of fresh produce in the United States, one thing is clear: The most meaningful breakthroughs won't come from products alone — they'll come from people. People who think differently. People who aren't afraid to challenge what's been done before. People who understand that true innovation isn't just about ingredients — it's about ideas.

Consumers are demanding more: more transparency, more functionality, more flavor, and more alignment with their values. Retailers are hungry for differentiation. And the industry is ready for reinvention.

At Offshoot Brands, we're not just rising to meet that moment, we're helping to shape it. By continuing to invest in bold thinkers and cultivating a culture that values curiosity, collaboration, and courage, we're building a team that's equipped to push the boundaries of what's possible in fresh food.

Because the future of produce belongs to those willing to reimagine it — and we believe that future is plant-forward, people-powered, and just getting started.

*George Shropshire is general manager of Off Shoot Brands, Conshohocken, PA.*

**PB**





Dealing with the logistics aspects of the wholesale business has become essential. Many wholesalers have progressed to offering in-house delivery and logistics.

PHOTO COURTESY J.E. RUSSELL PRODUCE

# Forty Years of Wholesale Value

AS PRODUCE BUSINESS celebrates 40 years, wholesalers around the country share their side of the business.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

**D**uring the lifespan of PRODUCE BUSINESS, the wholesale job has evolved significantly.

"The wholesaler role has shifted tremendously," says Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications at D'Arrigo New York, Bronx, NY. "We've been working with PRODUCE BUSINESS since its inception, and the way the industry has changed has been amazing. It's gone from handwritten communications to call cards, faxes and white boards, to now electronic."

As the industry evolves, Katzman Produce, Bronx, NY, also evolves to customer needs, says Mario Andreani, chief operating officer. "We started off with just seven items. We've now expanded our offerings to over 2,500. We've also increased our services and diversified our business, launching into areas including merchandising, foodservice and distribution."

Over time, wholesalers emerged as a crucial supply chain link. "We offer important value-added services, such as repacking, bagging, pre-cutting and private labeling, in addition to assuring the highest quality product," says Jordan Grainger, vice president of sales and business development, Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI. "For growers and farmers, we make their product available to a vast network of buyers they may never be able to access on their own."

Wholesalers show value to customers in more non-traditional areas, too, explains Ryan Dietz, president of Heartland Produce Co. in



Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI, is offering new bagging and repacking services based on customer demand, such as new mesh citrus bags.

PHOTO COURTESY BEN B. SCHWARTZ & SONS

Kenosha, WI. "Being seen as a service provider, as opposed to just a wholesaler, is key to staying relevant in a changing retail landscape."

Just surviving as a produce wholesaler means your role is evolving, notes John Vena, president of John Vena Inc. (JVI) in Philadelphia, PA. "It may be the slow and steady addition of new services, or an unanticipated product request from a potential customer resulting in product lines you never imagined you could manage successfully," he says.

## BECOMING A VALUABLE PARTNER

When Willie and Lynn Itule launched Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ, in 1979, they built relationships through top-quality products and outstanding service. "Fundamentally, that hasn't changed over the past 40 years," says Billy Itule, chief executive. "What has changed are the ways wholesale produce distribution companies build and maintain relationships and deliver product and service."

## Meet the Team Joe Schneider



## Built on Hard Work

For 38 years, Joe Schneider has been dedicated to D'Arrigo New York. He began his career working in maintenance while his father worked for Steve D'Arrigo. After his father's passing, Joe took on greater responsibilities, guided by Steve's mentorship and support. He quickly earned the reputation as the company's "go-to" guy. From personnel to facility work, Joe took it all on. As the company grew, so did Joe. The General Manager position was created for him, recognizing his leadership and commitment to D'Arrigo New York.







The Katzman Produce, Bronx, NY, team poses inside the Katzman Produce berry box. PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

Wholesalers are now true partners, says Kristina Garris, executive director of fresh for Bashas' and Food City, a division of Raley's Companies, in Chandler, AZ, with 113 stores. "More than product is expected. They give retailers additional flexibility and efficiency by providing market insights, quality assurance, assistance with food safety, and in many cases, logistics knowledge. The partnership is now more cooperative and less transactional."

Customers in every sector expect wider variety, which has influenced how Pacific Coast Fresh Company in Portland, OR, operates. "This shift has made us not just a supplier, but also a connector, helping customers access both the familiar and the unique," says Tom Brugato, president.

"In foodservice, we've had to adapt quickly to keep up with evolving dining habits. For retail, we provide retail merchandising support, product and promotional information, sourcing updates, weather reports, pricing analysis, and a host of other services."

Over the past 40 years, wholesalers have shifted to become strategic partners, agrees Mark Coté, produce merchandiser at Redner's Fresh Markets in Reading, PA, with 44 stores.

"They now provide value-added services, such as category management, logistics support, data-driven insights, and quality assurance," he says. "Wholesalers increasingly help retailers streamline supply chains, reduce shrink, and meet evolving consumer demand for freshness and convenience."

Strategic alliances form a new base of services. For example, more than 30 years ago, JVI was asked to source pre-ripened Hass avoca-



John Vena Inc. (JVI), Philadelphia, PA, sales and buying team, helps customers at JVI's market store. PHOTO COURTESY JVI



Customers in every sector expect wider variety, which has influenced how Pacific Coast Fresh Company in Portland, OR, operates. PHOTO COURTESY PACIFIC COAST

dos. "Since that time, and in partnership with West Pak Avocado, our pre-conditioning program has grown to include on-site facilities and everyday processing of avocados, plantains and mangos," says Vena.

"A broadliner's request to help solve a fresh herb problem blossomed into a boutique repack facility to provide packed-to-order items not only to foodservice, but to meal kit providers and retailers," he adds. "These were profound changes in our business and allowed us to continue to grow."

Growers, processors, corporate procurement, executive chefs and restaurant management see their distributors as key partners well-positioned to offer solutions beyond getting produce from point A to B, explains Itule.

"The solutions we offer have evolved as a direct response to how customers and industry partners need us to support their businesses," he says. "These include connecting growers and chefs for seasonal menu planning, supporting regional and national clients with seamless integrations into procurement and restaurant management platforms and building standardized order guides for school districts, so they can meet FFVP and USDA requirements."

However, at its core, the industry remains a people business. "Relationships are what drive this industry forward," says Stefanie Katzman, chief executive of Katzman Produce. "We've grown and adapted with the times, but our foundation is still built on strong partnerships and trust."

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Wholesalers increasingly help retailers streamline supply chains, reduce shrink, and meet evolving consumer demand for freshness and convenience."**

Mark Coté, Redner's Fresh Markets, Reading, PA

- **"Relationships are what drive this industry forward. We've grown and adapted with the times, but our foundation is still built on strong partnerships and trust."**

Stefanie Katzman, Katzman Produce, Bronx, NY



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# Not Your Grandfather's Wholesale System

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Wholesalers are embracing technology to support customers and increase efficiency.

"Improvements include advanced ordering platforms, real-time inventory tracking, and route optimization for faster deliveries," says Mark Coté, produce merchandiser at Redner's Fresh Markets in Reading, PA. "Cold-chain management and data-sharing tools ensure freshness and reduce shrink. These upgrades create greater efficiency, reliability, and stronger partnerships between wholesalers and retailers."

Kristina Garri, executive director of fresh for Bashas' and Food City, a division of the Raley's Companies, in Chandler, AZ, has observed wholesale investments in enhanced order tracking technologies, more effective routing, and better cold chain management.

"Many provide a real-time view into deliveries and inventories, which aids in more precise planning and shrink reduction," she says. "To reduce expenses and enhance freshness, some have even created tools to combine loads or plan cross-docking. This type of innovation is becoming a differentiator in the business."

Decades ago, specialized technology was primarily for very large companies, explains Talia Shandler, director of sales at S.G.S. Produce in Los Angeles, CA, but now it's accessible to everyone. "Most everyone is using tech and digital tools to share orders and for warehouse and inventory management," she says. "We're so much more sophisticated in our truck management and temperature trackers."

## BETTER MANAGEMENT

Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ, has strategically invested in technology to streamline operations and enhance customer experiences. "Our Warehouse Management System is central to day-to-day operations," says Billy Itule, chief executive. "Facilitating API integrations is a standard operating procedure for many clients. Customers expect the same ordering experience they offer patrons, so we built our ordering app on one of the industry-leading platforms, Pepper."

Ben B. Schwartz & Sons in Detroit, MI,

launched its own proprietary platform, Ben B. Access. "We built our own so we can integrate with third-party solutions," says Jordan Grainger, vice president of sales and business development. "Our platform allows us to expedite orders, deliver with greater precision, automate administrative tasks and analyze data to help us better predict future purchasing decisions. We know customer pain points will change over time, and Ben B. Access gives us the agility to change with them."

Riggio Distribution Co. in Detroit, MI, uses custom software for sales, accounting, and operations. "Our customers benefit from the reporting, inventory controls and accuracy, as well as up-to-date information," says Dominic Riggio, president.

## LOGISTICS EFFICIENCY

Heartland Produce in Kenosha, WI, constantly evaluates new technology to increase customer service levels and efficiency in operations. "Online ordering, real-time driver updates, dock management tools, and data analytics are all being used," says Ryan Dietz, president.

D'Arrigo New York, Bronx, NY, has invested in technology for truck tracing and temperature control. "These aspects, as well as our use of technology to optimize routing, are crucial," says Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications. "Up-to-date communication we can relay to the customer or shipper has had a huge impact on our business. Our online ordering process also helps us learn about customer buying habits, which in turn aids our purchasing."

Pacific Coast Fresh Company in Portland, OR, currently uses Aptean's Produce Pro with its Warehouse Management System capabilities, allowing for lot-level tracking of all products in the facility.

"We also use their Mobility Application so drivers can gather digital proof of delivery signatures, which are continuously uploaded to our host system," says Ted Hendryx, chief operating officer. "Aptean's Paragon routing system allows easy comparison of planned versus actual routes. We use Samsara's fleet monitoring software to track GPS information, trailer temperature, and camera systems that record critical events."



An example of the changing wholesaler technology scene, Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI, launched its own proprietary platform, Ben B. Access. The platform allows them to expedite orders, deliver with precision, automate administrative tasks and analyze data.

PHOTO COURTESY BEN B. SCHWARTZ & SONS

## NEXT LEVEL

Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA, connects digitally with more customers and suppliers for efficient transactions. "With some, it is EDI, others use our online ordering platform, and some retailer partners are beginning to implement Empower Fresh, an AI-powered produce management tool built for independent grocers," says Jonathan Steffy, vice president and general manager.

Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY, deploys custom apps to digitize processes, integrating AI for document scanning and automated workflows, optimizing routing for its fleet, and expanding digital learning to up-skill its teams, according to Jimmy Chacko, director of technology and innovation.

"Across the business, we're replacing paper and email-based tasks with real-time dashboards and automated approvals, centralizing data for better analytics, and streamlining processes to reduce inefficiencies and improve service," he says.

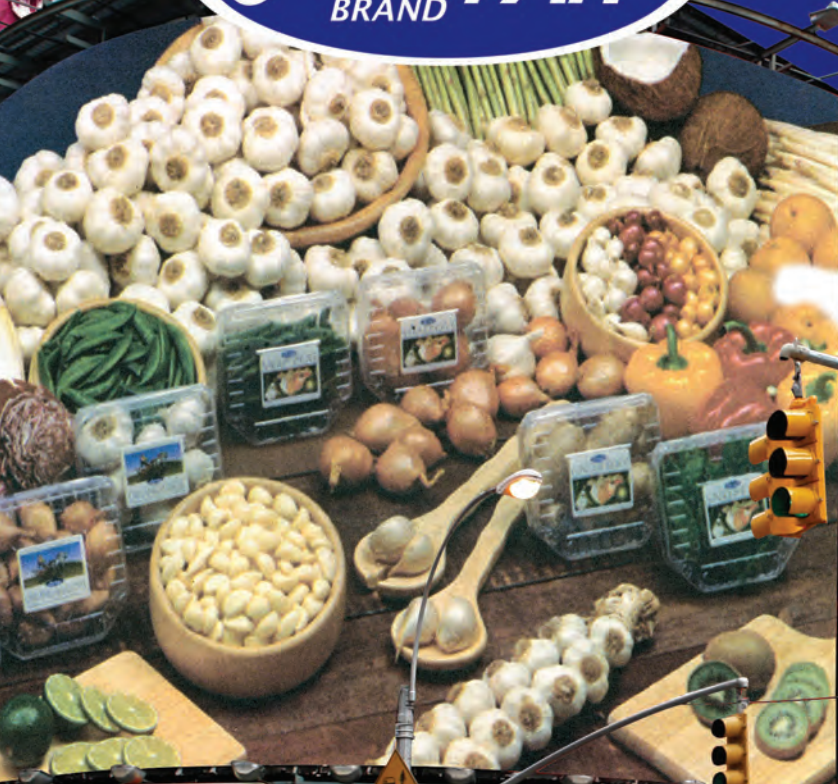
Chelsea Morning Provisions in Ipswich, MA, uses Choco AI to help with orders. "Orders received by voicemail, email, and even fax can include hundreds of items across dozens of pages," says Natasha Carr, director of operations. "In the past, we'd read or listen to each order, transcribe it, and manually log it into a piece of software. Now, each order is automatically turned into a digital order, allowing us to spend only a few minutes reviewing it. The AI also gets smarter over time, so if a regular customer calls and says 'give me what I had last time,' it understands."

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Dominic Riggio, president at Riggio Distribution Co. in Detroit, MI, emphasizes the value of relationships — both supply and sales. “A quality wholesaler is an extension of the customer’s buying team with invaluable knowledge and experience,” he says.

#### MEETING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Expectations for wholesalers evolve as customers look for more of everything.

“Wholesalers are increasingly valued for added services,” says Coté. “Retailers want flexible delivery options and advice on trends, pricing and consumer preferences to stay competitive. Wholesalers who provide training, marketing tools, and innovative product solutions strengthen partnerships, help retailers drive sales, reduce shrink, and meet shopper expectations.”

As customers look to improve opera-

tions, they expect vendors to do the same, explains Dietz of Heartland. “Vendors are expected to stay ahead of industry trends, technological advancements, and consumer preferences to stay relevant.”

Competition among retailers is strong, which puts pricing pressure on produce, as well as a desire to be first-to-market with new products, states Bonnie Fuson, vice president of customer experience at Pacific Coast Fresh.

“Our foodservice customers continue to demand locally sourced, but there’s also growing appreciation for value-priced items as operators navigate economic pressures. Customers are increasingly accustomed to online ordering and want the ability to select the exact produce that meets their needs.”

Customers want a one-stop vendor that can deliver exactly what they need, how they need it, when they need it, explains Grainger. “We have vast grower networks in place to get whatever product they want at the highest quality, and then prepare it for their end use so they don’t have to outsource that layer of work,” he says.

“Customers are also looking for transparency and access, being able to track their deliveries, contract drivers, and submit orders with as little friction as possible.”

Bashas’ and Food City’s Garriss points out that retailers demand effective communication, transparency and strong customer service. “To improve our planning, we want wholesalers to work as an extension of our own teams, exchanging data on crop conditions, pricing patterns, and possible supply issues,” she says. “Additionally, there is a stronger focus on sustainability, traceability and food safety. We easily identify wholesalers who assist us in meeting those standards.”

#### SHARING EXPERTISE

Customers rely on wholesale expertise. “It’s knowledge of price, quality and other information,” says Natasha Carr, director of operations for Chelsea Morning Provisions in Ipswich, MA. “We differentiate our business by fully purchasing from our local wholesale market and looking over what we buy every single day. We are invaluable because we have the relationships for quality, supply and correct information.”

Wholesaler know-how becomes even more important in a tight economy, according to Talia Shandler, director of sales at

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S.G.S. Produce in Los Angeles, CA. "Retailers depend on wholesalers a little more for consolidated loads," she says. "Wholesalers can be nimble and offer what customers want. Issues with climate and changes in growing areas play to wholesale strengths in knowing information and advising the customer."

Wholesalers provide expertise for procuring variety and specialized options. "Customers are asking for very unique varieties or items," says Carr. "We've expanded into items for small plates or charcuterie boards since this is really trending."

Katzman Produce partners with suppliers to provide specific packaging and merchandising options. "Customers increasingly look for higher-quality packaging that not only protects, but also effectively merchandises product at retail," says Andreani. "There's also growing demand for organic options, so we've launched a dedicated organics department."

Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA, is committed to organics and is also connecting producers with retailers and buyers in the emerging regenerative agriculture



Expectations for fresh produce wholesalers evolve as customers look for more of everything — flexible delivery options, advice on trends, pricing and consumer preferences, training and marketing tools. PHOTO COURTESY NICKEY GREGORY

space. "Regeneration is about building up healthy soil that creates resilient farms, prevents erosion, absorbs more water and resists drought, captures carbon, and produces vibrant and nutrient-dense food," explains Jonathan Steffy, vice president and general manager. "We're working with local

regenerative farms as well as others around the country, including buying regenerative and regenerative organics from trial plots at major grower-shippers."

#### CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING

Wholesalers continue to hone their abilities. Over the last 25 years, Nickey Gregory Company in Forest Park, GA, has expanded to include overnight delivery throughout the Southeast; fresh-cut processing for foodservice and retail; banana and avocado ripening; retail support DSD; hands-on in-store merchandising; and crossdocking programs.

"We continue to expand our retail support division, adding retail-specific items, including commodities and fresh-cut processed items," says Andrew Scott, vice president business development and marketing.

Itule points out the strategic advantage of his company's ability to pivot. "This dynamic has positioned us to broaden our portfolio in service to customers. For example, our team has procured Dubai chocolate ingredients to complement the strawberries we sell."

Ben B. Schwartz & Sons is currently expanding its distribution radius to new regions between Toronto and Atlanta, and into Texas. "We're offering new bagging and repacking services based on customer demand, such as our new mesh citrus bags," says Grainger. "We want to keep being a trusted partner to our customers while bringing our reliable distribution and high-quality products to new customers."

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To better serve customers, wholesalers are expanding produce lineups, increasing services and diversifying business to include merchandising, foodservice, distribution and logistics. Pictured, Katzman Produce buyer and salesperson, Bardo Salazar, greets a customer. PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN PRODUCE

Pacific Coast Fresh is steadily expanding its line, enhancing local and regional selections while continuing to bring in unique global items, says Brugato. "We've launched prepared foods and a new line of hummus products. In foodservice, we're focused on supporting chefs and operators with consistent quality and dependable supply."

D'Arrigo New York looks to support customer expansion and grow with its partners. "Our customer base is changing the way they're doing business, so we partner with them on their expansions," says D'Arrigo. "In turn, this increases our productivity and relationships with our suppliers because we bring in more product."

Chelsea Morning Provisions seeks to relocate in the near future. "We're on the hunt for a new warehouse," says Carr. "We want to make operations as streamlined as possible and ensure customers feel very taken care of."

#### EMPHASIZING LOGISTICS

Dealing with the logistics aspects of the business has become essential. "There is always something in the logistics chain that causes some degree of pain," says Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario. "Port issues, freight availability and rates, border regulations — it's never-ending. Our strong team is able to work proactively with partners to find solutions."

D'Arrigo aims to be a logistics expert for the supplier and the customer. "The job of

a wholesaler is to figure it out and have a solution no matter what," she says. "Many shippers don't have their own trucks, so they rely on us to arrange the logistics all the way to the customer. We started delivery in the 1990s and now operate a fleet of over 70 trucks."

Many wholesalers have progressed to offering in-house delivery and logistics. Nickey Gregory has its own logistics team handling all inbound and outbound shipments. "This includes managing our fleet of over 50 trucks," says Scott. "We offer FOB and delivered pricing to customers."

Solving supply chain problems for large national retailers and the grower-shippers serving them in ways Four Seasons Produce couldn't as a wholesaler was the impetus for starting a new sister company, Sunrise Logistics, in 2006, according to Steffy.

Katzman Produce has grown from a single truck to a full fleet. Today, it operates a fleet of refrigerated, technologically advanced trucks and trailers servicing hundreds of customers each week, says Andreani.

Wholesalers continue to find creative solutions to transportation challenges. "To help buffer against volatility and support driver retention, we are moving toward leasing our fleet instead of owning," says Ted Hendryx, chief operating officer at Pacific Coast Fresh. "Along with refined driver productivity incentive programs, these steps will help us manage costs and mitigate labor increases."





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Cross-merchandising with complementary products provides an opportunity to add excitement to the produce section.

PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS PRODUCE

# Cross-Merchandising: Where Magic is Made

Retailers use cross-merchandising to boost the bottom line in produce.

BY JILL NETZEL AND CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Shoppers look for convenience with grab-and-go packaging, quick and easy dinner ideas, healthy meal solutions, and snacking ideas. They may even be persuaded to drop additional products into their basket if a display grabs their attention. That's where cross-merchandising plays a leading role in the produce department.

"The best way to increase the trip ring is through cross-merchandising, with the drawback of course being the additional labor and operational challenges," says Anne-Marie Roerink, president, 210 Analytics, LLC, San Antonio, TX. "But the sales numbers don't lie. Putting bananas by cereal moves the needle. Putting avocados in the chip aisle, fresh lemons in seafood, pineapples near ham, corn and mushrooms near steak, etc., all move the needle."

## CROSS-MERCHANDISING 101

The Fresh Gourmet Company in Westlake Village, CA, a leading supplier of retail food products and custom ingredients to nationally recognized supermarkets, foodservice operators, and manufacturers, uses three critical ingredients for making great displays in produce, including planning, location and promotion.

"For planning, focus on items with high sales volume, such as bananas, berries, apples, potatoes and tomatoes," says Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager. "Display these fresh items with non-perishable items that have a strong tie-in with fresh produce, such as banana bread mix, smoothie mixes, Wrapples, seasoning mixes and salad toppings."

Brian Dey, senior merchandiser and natural store coordinator at Four Seasons Produce in Ephrata, PA, recommends pairing like commodities with each other to bolster produce sales and create impact purchases. "An example would be pairing apple cider with apple displays. Shoppers can buy some apples for fresh eating now, then pick up a gallon of cider to share with their families."

Vic Savanello, vice president of produce merchandising and business development at Katzman Distribution in Burlington, NJ, says cross-merchandising efforts are "great practice because that's where the magic is made."

"One of our successful cross-merchandising efforts was our Super Bowl-inspired guacamole station," says Savanello. "We took fresh avocados as our centerpiece, tied in tomatoes, onions, limes, garlic and jalapeño peppers. We added an assortment of salsas to the display, and the effort went to the next level when we stacked boxes of tortilla chips around the display."

Brian Truax, vice president of sales and marketing at Indianapolis Fruit in Indianapolis, IN, suggests the most effective cross-merchandising strategy involves building around holidays, in-store events, local sports teams, or a specific meal.

"Select items to create a good margin blend — a mix of low margin sale items with high margin items," he adds. For example, he recommends building a guacamole display with avocados, garlic, onions, tomatoes, limes, jalapeños, chips and beer.

Chad Hackenbracht, president of Taste Apple, Inc., a premium caramel and chocolate-covered apple maker in Newcomerstown, OH, agrees and adds, "Cross-merchandise our apples with other holiday items, like pecans for Thanksgiving, and various holiday items around Christmas time when the stores are building the display tables with all the 'staple items.'"

## CROSS-MERCHANDISING OUTSIDE PRODUCE

Effective cross-merchandising simplifies the shopping process by encouraging the natural connections between products to create a seamless shopping experience.

"Make the produce department look neat, seamless and practical," says Andrew Che, produce associate at Global Foods Market in St. Louis, MO. "Have easy-to-follow paths to guide the customer through the store for an expanded cross-merchandising experience."

He recommends considering the order the shopper will encounter when walking through the store. For example, if the shopper

walks to the deli department to grab a sandwich, fresh fruit, such as apples and oranges, should be prominently displayed near the section, along with signage for a beverage. "Make it feel like a seamless and eye-catching tour," he says.

"Work with your peers to tie in some impact or impulse items during everyday selling," explains Truax from Indy Fruit. "Citrus in beer and wine; lemons with seafood; kebab veggies in the meat department; and grab-and-go by the registers."

"Since our products must be refrigerated, we team up with other refrigerated items from across the store, like meat or chicken, and create fun cooler displays touting party ideas like chicken nachos, burger for football and holiday parties," says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations, LLC, the Rhome, TX, manufacturer of avocado, salsa and queso products under its iYo Quiero! brand. "We also utilize signage, when working with center store partners, that leads consumers to the fresh, refrigerated section to find our products."

Lavanya Setia, director of marketing at the National Mango Board (NMB) in Orlando, FL, incorporates mangos into cross-category promotions, such as breakfast or grilling themes, to drive sales. "Mangos pair excellently with products like yogurt, granola, and meats, such as chicken and pork. Creating meal solutions, including mango chutney or mango chicken wraps, helps consumers envision how they can incorporate mangos into various aspects of their diet."

## FRESH AND CREATIVE

Effective signage and recipe ideas are essential for successful cross-merchandising displays. Clear, informative signs can guide shoppers to promotional products and provide usage inspiration for new culinary ideas and menu pairings.

For example, a display featuring fresh herbs might include a sign with recipe ideas or cooking tips, such as how to make a homemade pesto using basil, garlic and olive oil.

"Continued creativity in merchandising, and keeping up with recipes and popular items to stay current with the latest trends across the store and the industry is super important," says Dey.

Truax suggests maintaining a log of past displays, including photos, to identify what was successful and what didn't work, allowing for continual improvements. "Ensure displays are timely and relevant. Make sure all items are clearly priced, fresh and filled, and neat with sharp lines, using a variety of colors for color breaks when possible."

## WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Industry leaders agree that not cross-merchandising items is the biggest mistake. "What doesn't work is not being creative and not doing everything possible to build the basket and drive more sales," says Jose Troya, sales and merchandising specialist, Katzman Produce.

Che, from Global Foods Market, adds, "Have a reason for everything to be together, and make sure it pairs well together. If strawberries are on display, I expect to

see other sweet berries and complementary products, such as dessert cups and whipped cream. Also, place pre-packaged, cut, bright colored fruit together."

While retailers do an amazing job with signage and product promotion in-store, says Fresh Innovations' Murray, "If I could wave a wand and ask for anything, it would be to see more produce mixed in with the RTE (ready-to-eat) section to encourage ease of eat with produce to go along with the easy-to-prepare meals." **PB**

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# A DEDICATED LEADER FOR SOUTH CAROLINA AG

**South Carolina growers reap decades of support and success from their agriculture commissioner and champion, Hugh E. Weathers.**

**S**outh Carolina agriculture has enjoyed a passionate proponent in Hugh E. Weathers, who has served as South Carolina's Commissioner of Agriculture since September 2004. Under his leadership, the South Carolina Department of Agriculture (SCDA) developed a variety of innovative and successful programs. "As agriculture in the state has changed with more fruit and vegetable crops being grown in our state, Commissioner Weathers has led the way in promoting these crops and the infrastructure needed to make them successful," says Jeff Wilson, co-owner of Cotton Hills Farm, LLC, in Chester, SC.

Commissioner Weathers came from a dairy background, but gained a broad view of the industry before taking office through his involvement with Farm Bureau and his work in finance. He was born, and still resides, in Bowman, SC, and is a fourth-generation farmer. He graduated from the University of South Carolina, earning BS Degrees in Accounting and Finance. Upon graduation, he worked as a corporate banking officer with C&S National Bank before returning to Weathers Farms.

His family holds an important place in his life. He has been married for 42 years to Blanche (Gramling) of Spartanburg County, who grew up on her family's peach farm. They have three sons, four granddaughters, and four grandsons. The

Weathers are active members of Orangeburg First Baptist Church. "I've always had great respect for Hugh as a family man," says Susan McAleavey

**Commissioner Hugh E. and Blanche Weathers in Ireland in 2022 as part of an agricultural trade mission.**

Sarlund, executive director of the Eastern Produce Council (EPC) in New Providence, NJ. "He adores his family, and I always enjoy family updates from him."

Living only a few miles from Weathers Farms, Ronnie Summers, president of SC Advocates for Agriculture and former chief executive of the Palmetto AgriBusiness Council (PABC) in Bowman, SC, has observed a man who values family. "He spends quality time with his family while still handling significant responsibilities at SCDA," he says. "He recognizes the need for balance in his life. Part of what makes him a success in this regard is his faith, which he exhibits quite often and leads to the balance he lives out."

Commissioner Weathers' emphasis on developing connections has resulted in strong partnerships over his tenure. "Hugh has always done an excellent job of fostering the relationship between South Carolina ag and the EPC," says McAleavey Sarlund. "Between my father (previous EPC executive director) and myself, there have been 35 years of consistency and mutual support and respect between EPC and SCDA."

## **BUILDING A BRAND**

Weathers is particularly known for his agency's flagship program, Certified South Carolina. The Certified SC program, launched in May 2007, helps consumers easily identify and purchase South Carolina products while increasing market opportunities for farmers.

Lonnice Kelley, customer service and sales at Senn Brothers Produce in Columbia, SC, has been in a buying role for almost all of Commissioner Weathers' term. "I especially got to see the differentiation of various state programs in my role with Food Lion in local produce sourcing working across 10 states," he says. "Commissioner Weathers and Certified SC

**Weathers at a produce stand at the Rural Summit in Anderson, South Carolina in 2009.**



are head and shoulders above other programs in the Southeast."

"This was his vision when he came on as commissioner," says Chalmers Carr, owner of Titan Farms in Ridge Spring, SC. "The goal was to raise awareness for the agricultural goods produced in South Carolina. The program is successful because he's never stopped fighting for South Carolina ag."

Before Weathers took office, several attempts were made at state ag promotion programs, but none truly gained traction. "From the moment he stepped into his role, he committed himself fully to building and sustaining the Certified SC program," says Charles Wingard, vice president of field operations for WP Rawl in Pelion, SC. "Under his leadership, the program has grown into a trusted and recognizable brand."

Weathers took a studied approach before developing the program by contracting some initial market research. The research revealed that 90% of shoppers surveyed would purchase SC-grown products. However, 68% of those surveyed couldn't identify South Carolina products from the competition. These findings gave direction to SCDA's campaign.

Certified SC began with an industry-wide push, driven by SCDA. "Commissioner Weathers went to the state legislature for funding," says Carr. "Not only was he successful in getting it started, but he was able, year after year, to demonstrate success and continue getting funding. He has fought for taxpayer money justifiably spent on promoting an industry that is







the backbone of the state.”

First steps of the program saw a logo reading “Certified SC Grown” appear in grocery stores, at roadside markets and in advertisements.

Cotton Hills Farm is among the many farms that have incorporated the Certified SC Grown logo into its labels. “Produce managers tell us their customers look for that label because they know SC Grown products are the best,” says JEB Wilson, co-owner.

## EXPANDING TOOLS

Over the past 18 years, Certified SC activities have expanded from logo use to now include a wealth of promotional and marketing tools and opportunities. The department promotes Certified SC as a whole through social media, adver-



## Q&A WITH COMMISSIONER WEATHERS

Produce Business had the privilege of speaking with Commissioner Weathers about his very effective career.

**PB: Why did you feel it was important to start the Certified SC program?**

South Carolina farmers are very independent and hardworking in producing food for the rest of us. It can be challenging for them to get off the tractor and be involved in marketing. When I started, we wanted to develop something that would serve as a connection between those farmers and those who consume what the farmers produce.

**PB: What were your goals and expectations at the time you started?**

To make better connec-

tions between farmers and consumers, give the industry more of a face in the programming, and pave the way for more support from the consuming public when there were issues facing agriculture. As an example, not long after we began Certified SC, we had some Right-to-Farm legislation make it through our General Assembly and into law. Now, its passage may not be directly related to our program, but the easier you make it for people to associate with farming, the easier it is for them to sup-

*Thank you*

Commissioner Hugh Weathers, for your leadership and dedication to South Carolina Agriculture!

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tising, events, sponsorships, and more. Retail merchandising resources help retailers carry and promote South Carolina produce at peak ripeness throughout the year. The department also hosts the Certified SC Showcase, an annual trade show to connect buyers and producers

with South Carolina grown products.

Commissioner Weathers has facilitated business by focusing on flavor and buyer linkages. "He has done a great job of promoting the taste of our produce and giving us an advantage," says Jerry Watson, co-owner of Watsonia in Monetta, SC. "He

really supported new business development, especially with chain stores, for our farms and South Carolina products."

The launch of Fresh on the Menu and the South Carolina Chef Ambassador program were major milestones for the program — expanding its reach into

port other issues affecting the farmers.

**PB: Has Certified SC grown beyond what you first thought?**

It's expanded vastly. When we first began and over the years periodically, we've done consumer research to see if it's working — if people recognize the program. Out of the gate, it was marginal. But our more recent research shows over 80% of the consuming public recognize Certified SC Grown as the brand/logo to pick to support local farmers.

**PB: What are other programs are you proud of establishing?**

I'm especially proud of our ACRE program because for someone with a new idea in agriculture, that program may be their only financial support, along with their own savings, to move their idea forward. I'm gratified that it operates in that space for the smaller entrepreneur. I'm looking forward to seeing the innovation in ag that comes from this program.

**PB: What has motivated you**

**over the last 20 years?**

From time to time, I've had farmers and restaurants make a point to tell me personally just how Certified SC has impacted their economic survival. For example, a prominent caterer told me that they made the decision to use as much South Carolina product as possible, and it's made all the difference in seeing their business thrive. To hear those stories and feel like it's making a difference is the motivation to keep going.



In-store branding ties in with statewide TV, digital, and outdoor ad campaigns.

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foodservice. Through Fresh on the Menu, restaurants and chefs partner with Certified SC by sourcing at least 25% of their ingredients from South Carolina.

## PROVEN SUCCESS

The Certified SC program has grown from 60 members when it started to 2,253 as of this year. According to a 2020 study by the University of South Carolina, Certified SC accounts for an additional \$273.5 million in economic activity, 1,615

jobs and \$51.2 million in labor income for South Carolinians annually, reflecting the positive returns of the branding effort.

Increased production acreage in vegetable crops also points to its success. The

U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2022 Census of Agriculture showed vegetable acreage in South Carolina was up 25% over five years earlier. The state now leads the nation in collard green, turnip green, and Southern pea acreage, according to the census.

The Certified SC program has been incredibly valuable to farms. "It has not only helped bring greater awareness to South Carolina agriculture, but it has elevated the industry as a whole," says Wingard of WP Rawl. "We see firsthand the impact of the logo on our packaging. The program has been an important tool in connecting with customers and reinforcing the strength and pride of SC agriculture."

Wingard also credits the program with fueling growth beyond the state's borders. "Much of South Carolina's produce is marketed throughout the eastern U.S. and, over time, both buyers and consumers have come to recognize the Certified SC Grown logo as a trusted symbol of quality," he says.

## CONSISTENT LEADERSHIP

Weathers has provided visionary,


steady leadership, according to EPC's McLeavey Sarlund. "It's been a pleasure to work with him because of the constancy and his continued involvement in the programs."

He is also credited with expert team building at SCDA. "He knows how to pick a team," says Watson. "He's skillful at recruiting good people and has put together an excellent staff over the years."

From the very beginning, Weathers has provided steady guidance, according to Wingard. "By making the program a priority, he ensured it had the structure, resources, and long-term vision to grow," he says. "As a fourth-generation farmer himself, he truly understands the value of our work and the challenges we face."


With his announced retirement, 2026 will serve as his last year in office.

Titan's Carr expresses gratitude to both the Commissioner and his wife Blanche. "They are true role models of partnership," he says. "Blanche has been so involved and supportive of Hugh. We offer a big thank you to both of them and everything they've done to support South Carolina agriculture."



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**Congratulations on your retirement, Commissioner Hugh Weathers, and best wishes for all the wonderful things ahead!**

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Sustainable packaging must compete with plastic in keeping produce items fresh and safe. For some produce, visibility is essential because the package must let consumers see that the products look fresh and disease-free. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

# The War on Plastic is Protracted

The search is on for produce packaging alternatives that spare landfills.

BY BOB JOHNSON

In the ongoing environmental war against plastic, plastic is winning. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), each year, more than 25 million pounds of plastic end up in landfills, where it persists indefinitely.

Alternatives to plastic may reduce trash entering dump sites or oceans, but they don't always work as well with fresh produce, and the cost of reducing, reusing, or recycling enough plastic to make a difference is prohibitive.

"Everybody is in favor of sustainability, but nobody wants to pay for it," says Steve Greenfield, director of sales and marketing at NNZ Packaging, Atlanta, GA.

According to the EPA's latest estimate, released in November 2024, plastic generation increased from 25 million tons at the turn of the century to more than 35 million tons in 2018. And despite concerted efforts to promote recycling, less than 10% of that plastic was recycled in 2018.

Many state governments look to shippers using plastic packages to pay the cost of keeping the material out of the environment.

"Oregon, California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Maine already have extended producer recovery laws, and Washington and Maryland will soon," says Greenfield. "In Oregon, the charge will be \$1.40 a pound for plastic and 4 cents a pound for cardboard. It can cost a grower millions of dollars to ship."

Package producers are faced with the challenge of learning to offer their customers the best alternatives under these new and varied rules, and Greenfield says they've had to hire a consultant to help navigate the regulations. "This all just started in the last two or three months."

## CONSUMERS PUSH CHANGE

Enough consumers have expressed a desire to see less plastic in produce departments to attract the attention of retailers and package makers.

"Packers and distributors are actively piloting more sustainable packaging, especially as pressure from both consumers and regulatory bodies increases," says James Davidson, chief commercial officer at Genera, Houston, TX. "Retailers are using their buying power to push suppliers toward greener packaging, and packers are responding by exploring new materials, like fiber, that align with those goals."

Genera produces Nature-Pack, a line of bio-based compostable packaging.

"Shoppers are willing to pay a little more when they feel their purchase is supporting a greater good, but the value must be obvious and authentic," he notes, adding there are customer segments "that will increase loyalty to brands that are making the effort to reduce their impact."

Century-old global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, New York, NY, surveyed consumer attitudes about sustainable packaging in 2023. The survey revealed many customers are willing to pay a premium for products in sustainable packaging.

Some retailers have heard from customers that they would like to see less plastic in the produce department. "I've had customers say there is too much plastic in the salad mixes," says Steve Mason, produce manager at Grove Market, Pacific Grove, CA. Grove Market is an independent store serving the affluent coastal town of Pacific Grove, which borders Monterey.

Given a choice between the sustainability of bulk produce and the convenience of plastic packages, customers differ in their preferences. "When the beans come in, some customers in their 90s



will pick each one up, examine it, and make a decision, while other customers just like to grab-and-go, so they take the package," says Karim Wahhab, produce manager, Draeger's, Los Altos, CA.

Draeger's is a small independent chain serving suburbs outside San Francisco.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF PLASTIC: IT WORKS

The stage would seem to be set for a quick transition away from plastic packaging in the produce department. Most consumers want to see less plastic, and many are even willing to pay more for alternatives. There have been attempts to find alternatives by package producers, and most retailers are aware that plastic packaging has become a sustainability issue for customers.

What's holding back a packaging revolution? In produce, plastic still works.

"In the produce aisle, packaging is truly more about shelf-life and maintaining quality than it is about convenience," says Helena Beckett, director of sales at BrightFresh Microgreens, San Marcos, CA.

"An important part of sustainability is utilization," she adds. "We harvest our microgreens at the peak of quality and use micro-perforated resealable films to guarantee premium flavor profiles and a long shelf-life."

Beckett notes that consumers expect packaging to protect quality and freshness. "Retailers are also focused on reducing waste and store shrink," she says. "And, of course, the price must stay competitive for most consumers to make the purchase without hesitation."

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"When the sustainability story is clear and compelling, shoppers are willing to pay a little more when they feel their purchase is supporting a greater good, but the value must be obvious and authentic."**

James Davidson, Genera, Houston, TX

- **"The consumer will expect any packaging to maintain quality and shelf life. Retailers are also focused on reducing waste and store shrink."**

Helena Beckett, BrightFresh Microgreens, San Marcos, CA

Sustainable packaging must compete with plastic in keeping produce items fresh and safe. For some produce, visibility is essential because the package must let consumers see that the products look fresh and disease-free.

Plastic packages are particularly useful at preserving the freshness of produce that has been fresh-cut. "Anything we cut, we put in a package, but most of our customers like to pick their own stuff," says Wahhab.

Retailers must navigate a maze of contradictory priorities for packaging. "Consumers want packaging that's better for the planet,

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but they're not going to compromise on ease and function," says Steve Rosse, vice president of marketing, Genera.

At the same time, there is a need for packaging to reflect a brand's values and tell a story, Rosse notes. "That's where materials like ours really shine. We grow and make our packaging from grass here in the U.S., so it's a sustainability story you can trace from seed to shelf."

Compostable materials that break down take recycling to another level. "We focus on designs and raw materials that are both compostable and high-performance," says Rosse.

The alternatives must work well and be economical if they are to be widely used in produce, says Genera's Davidson. "Consumers are resistant to change, that's why it is important for brands, packers and distributors to educate consumers about the changes."

Plastic provides the best protection for the delicate greens produced by BrightFresh. "To date, I have not seen any alternative materials that protect fresh produce, as well as plastic in terms of maintaining quality and shelf-life," says Beckett.

### REDUCE, REUSE OR RECYCLE

There is no single alternative for produce retailers looking to replace plastic containers with alternatives that are just as functional and economical. One option is to offer more produce in bulk, with no consumer packaging at all.

Grove Market offers salad greens in bulk, as well as in the familiar hard plastic containers. Mason recalls one customer, seeing that the bulk clipped spinach was sold out, recoiled at the thought of buying the product packaged in plastic.

"Paperboard might cost twice as much as plastic, but you can make up some of it with less expensive dyes, which stamp the shape of the product," says Greenfield.

Some strawberry shippers use cardboard packages rather than rigid plastic clamshells. For example, Watsonville, CA-based Sambrailo Packaging offers fiber-based cartons for strawberries.

Other shippers of vulnerable salad greens have also shifted to alternative packaging that reduces plastic without eliminating it. "To meet consumer expectations around sustainability, we transitioned to new peel and reseal packaging in 2024, reducing plastic waste by 25%, while still maintaining freshness and durability," says Beckett.

Salinas, CA-based Taylor Farms reduces plastic using a fiber-based carton with a thin, clear plastic film for individually sized salads.



BrightFresh Microgreens, San Marcos, CA, has a new micro-perforated resealable film for 2025 that guarantees flavor and a long shelf-life. PHOTO COURTESY BRIGHTFRESH

### KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

The optimal mix of alternatives depends on what a retailer's customer base wants, and what they are willing to pay for.

"We're seeing strong interest in fiber-based alternatives, such as ours at Genera, especially as both consumers and brands become more aware of the long-term impact of plastic," says Davidson. "Retailers and packers are looking for options that don't just look sustainable, but truly are, from sourcing to end-of-life."

A challenge for retailers is knowing the importance their customers place on reducing plastic pollution.

"In markets where consumers are vocal about plastic concerns and not cost-constrained, we see some packers and retailers testing paper or board-based packaging," says Beckett. "If sustainability is a core value of the retailer and that is how they go to market, then, yes, they can get a premium price for more sustainable packaging." **PB**

## Leaders in Portion Packing, Innovation

While many in the produce supply chain are struggling to balance performance with sustainability, Latitude 36 Foods, Salinas, CA, has built packaging innovation into its DNA.

The company began in 1975 as a family-run business focused on portion-packed croutons for fresh-cut produce companies. "That humble beginning laid the foundation for something much bigger," says Leslie Surber, president. "Today, we're proud to be recognized as a national leader in portion packing, known not just for what we do, but how we do it — with innovation, reliability, and a spirit of collaboration that runs deep."

Over the past seven years, Latitude 36

has leaned hard into packaging innovation, developing solutions from pillow bags and stand-up pouches to ready-to-eat trays. The company partners with private-label snack retailers to conceptualize and launch custom products.

Sustainability is a central priority. Latitude 36 works with partners to test recyclable films that meet emerging standards across North America. Several protein films are already fully recyclable, proving that environmental responsibility and performance can go hand in hand.

"At Latitude 36, we don't just pack — we partner," says Surber. "Every solution is tailored, every relationship valued. That's what makes our work meaningful." **PB**



Latitude 36 Foods, Salinas, CA, offers innovative packaging formats — from portion packs to master packs and custom private-label solutions.

PHOTO COURTESY LATITUDE 36





Ron Lemaire, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, Ottawa, Ontario, says tariffs are straining the North American produce supply chain, disrupting affordability and stability — and underscoring the need for collaborative, tariff-free trade among the U.S., Canada and Mexico. PHOTO COURTESY CPMA

# Tariffs Shake Canadian Produce Supply Chain

Industry warns continued disputes could influence fresh produce affordability, access and stability.

BY MIKE DUFF

**A**lthough other issues affect the Canadian supply chain — fuel, labor and the preparations for the review of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2026 — all other considerations pale in comparison to the recent tariff turmoil, which has caused a rift across the North American supply chain.

More than that, however, a substantial disruption threatens the position of the two countries and Mexico, as a trading bloc that can contend with other international players, says Ron Lemaire, president of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), Ottawa, Ontario.

CPMA decided to hold its board of directors' semi-annual meeting in Austin, TX, Sept. 17-20, and gave members a chance to meet and work with produce sector players involved in the U.S. and Mexico trade.

On July 24, CPMA and the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) issued a letter that urged the leaders of the United States, Mexico and Canada to resolve the ongoing tariff disputes that threaten the affordability, accessibility and stability of fresh fruits and vegetables across North America.

The letter read, in part: "In 2024 alone, Canada imported nearly \$5.5 billion in fresh produce from the United States and \$3 billion from Mexico. Meanwhile, the United States imported over 24 billion pounds of fresh produce from Mexico, valued at \$19.6 billion, and exported more than \$1.7 billion into Mexico."

"The fresh produce supply chain is one of the most deeply inte-

grated in the world, with cross-border trade between our nations ensuring year-round access to healthy fruits and vegetables," notes IFPA Chief Executive Cathy Burns.

"The stability of the North American fresh produce market is paramount," Lemaire adds. "Canada's industry is inextricably linked with our trading partners. Any disruption directly impacts our growers, supply chains, and ultimately, consumer access and affordability."

## POPULAR OPINION

Canadian consumer sentiment has been swaying, Lemaire says, sometimes in opposition to purchasing U.S. products, sometimes settling into a less strident position, but opinions have shifted with trade and political development and declaration.

Hutch Morton, senior vice president, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario, says there's been a shake-up in the marketplace.

"There has been a shift in consumer sentiment since the spring in Canada to 'Buy Canadian,'" says Morton. "However, with fresh produce, that feeling is often aspirational, and consumers generally make a purchase decision based on quality and price."

Lemaire says tariffs are disrupting Canada's supply chain from the U.S. in several ways. When Canada imposed counter-tariffs on certain U.S. produce this spring, consumers faced a 25% surcharge on items like watermelons.

The Canadian counter-tariff on many commodities, including produce, came down Sept. 1, but Lemaire says it's impossible to determine what new developments may develop.

Whatever national sentiment is involved, consumers buy produce primarily based on quality and price, he points out. In that case, whatever disruptions tariffs and trade contentions cause, the realities of procuring and purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables remain.

"It really has been a lose-lose for everybody, the consumer, the shipper, the buyer, everybody."

Tariffs and related trade issues are causing new thinking in the Canadian produce sector, as produce market players consider how



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they will approach the future, says Morton.

"We continue to look at diversifying our supply chain in terms of shippers and regions," he says. "Last summer, I joined CPMA on a trade mission to meet growers in Peru, and we subsequently sold more Peruvian product than any previous year. In September, I will join CPMA again on a mission to Turkey with the same goal."

Lemaire says another danger is that price and emotional factors may lead consumers away from purchasing fresh produce and turn more to frozen and other alternatives. "Substitution is a traditional behavior in a high-tariff environment."

Ultimately, cooperation is required to maintain a sensible, responsible supply chain. "We need to all be working together to drive a common message about the importance of a terror-free environment and a free trade dynamic," says Lemaire.

### GROWING CHANGES

Rachel Boucher, who oversees marketing and communications for Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers in Leamington, Ontario, says tariffs have upended a vital trade flow that typically keeps costs down and products moving — at the very moment consumers are already squeezed by rising prices.

"Unnecessary stressors are being placed on the integrated produce supply chain based on trade negotiations and tariffs being applied," she says. "These stressors continue to create doubt among consumers across North America, which will have significant impacts on healthier eating options, which will ultimately have an

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"There has been growth in some of our Canadian categories this year, and we've added some items, but the overall value in terms of sales dollars is small compared to our imports. In Canada, we have clear limitations around what we produce, and that doesn't meet demand."**

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

- **"Greenhouse vegetables are highly dependent on the U.S. market. There are few alternate markets we can explore due to the perishability of our product and existing competition."**

Rachel Boucher, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, Leamington, Ontario

impact on consumption and demand due to increased costs."

The trade between Ontario greenhouse growers and the U.S. has been a response to demand among American consumers, says Boucher.

"Ontario greenhouse vegetable farms ship more than two-thirds of our production to the U.S.," she says. "The perishability of our product limits our options when seeking alternate export markets."

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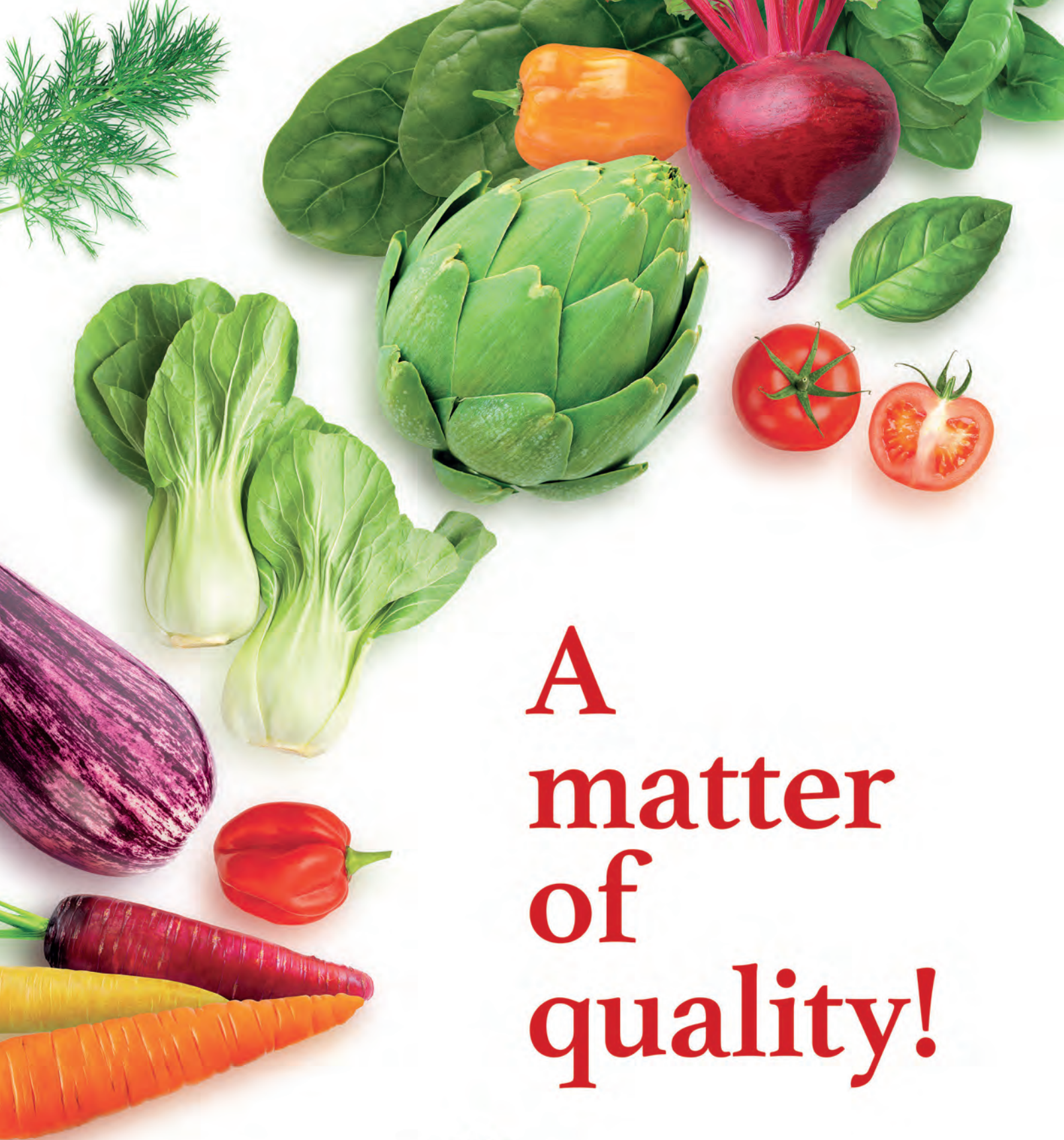
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Ontario greenhouse vegetable farms ship more than two-thirds of their production to the U.S., supplying fresh, perishable produce to a market 10 times the size of Canada, with over half of the U.S. population reachable within a day's drive.

PHOTO COURTESY ONTARIO GREENHOUSE VEGETABLE GROWERS

Our sector continues to increase exports to the U.S., which is approximately 10 times the size of Canada and provides us access to over 58% of the U.S. population within one day's drive."

Morton says the changing tariff environment challenges supply chain connections across North America.

"I see tariffs affecting our supply chain from the U.S., both directly and indirectly," he notes. "When Canada put counter-tariffs on some U.S. produce items, we have been paying a 25% tariff on watermelons and citrus. That negatively affects both volumes and margins, and ultimately makes produce more expensive at retail for Canadians."

### EFFECTS OF DISRUPTION

Sylvain Charlebois, Ph.D., professor, senior director, Agri-Food Analytics Lab, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, says the story on tariffs has changed in substance.

"Canada initially slapped counter-tariffs on a range of U.S. agri-food products back in March, which rattled supply chains. But as of late August, Ottawa rolled back tariffs on food products that were never supposed to be hit under CUSMA (known as the USCA in the U.S.) in the first place. That's taken a lot of pressure off produce flows. Still, the episode underscored how fragile trade arrangements can be. The food industry doesn't need surprises. It needs certainty to plan and invest confidently."

Charlebois points out before tariffs became an issue in the spring, the produce trade "into the U.S. was running smoothly under CUSMA — efficient, predictable and

growing. The brief period with counter-tariffs showed how quickly uncertainty creeps in. With the rollback, we're back closer to 'normal,' but trust has been shaken a bit."

Although tariffs take center stage in any look at the Canadian supply chain, other factors do come into play, some ongoing. Labor is always an issue.

"Labor is our No. 1 cost, closely followed by energy," says Boucher. "Our members have been investing in research, innovation, and adaptation to offset labor and energy costs, but government policies, domestically and globally, have had negative impacts. Policies at the federal level, climate change initiatives aimed to penalize food producers, erode the competitiveness of our members."

Charlebois agrees labor remains a chronic issue — seasonal workers are harder to secure and more expensive. "Consumers are demanding local, sustainable, and affordable produce all at once, which puts pressure on the supply chain."

Innovation remains a driving factor in the Canadian produce sector.

"Greenhouses and vertical farms are expanding fast in Canada, especially in Ontario and Quebec," Charlebois notes. "These allow growers to stretch seasons, reduce import reliance, and even create new export opportunities. Breeding and varietal innovation also matter. Canadians are producing produce varieties that travel better, last longer, and appeal to shifting consumer tastes."

"These innovations add resilience, but without certainty in policy and trade, it's harder for growers to scale them."

PB





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Colorful, well-organized root vegetable displays highlight variety and freshness.

PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

# Root Veggies Add Versatility to Produce Aisle

From potatoes to parsnips, root vegetables deliver health and comfort.

BY K.O. MORGAN

**R**oot vegetables, so named because they grow underground with leafy greens above ground, absorb great amounts of nutrients from the soil, making them some of the healthiest vegetables in the produce section.

Consumers tend to think of potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes as root vegetables, but this produce category also includes carrots, beets, radishes, turnips, parsnips, ginger, garlic, yams, cassava, celery root, rutabaga, jicama and horseradish — giving shoppers a large variety of healthy choices and flavors.

“The root vegetable market is one of the most unique groups of produce out there. You have unique spice with horseradish and parsnips; great color and flavor with carrots, beets, turnips and radishes; and you have great versatility with potatoes and sweet potatoes,” says Matt McMillin, leader of marketing and business development at J.R. Kelly Company in Collinsville, IL. His self-proclaimed “Horseradish Capital of the World” is 15 miles from downtown St. Louis, MO.

## KNOW YOUR MARKET

Regional preferences can play a role in demand for specific root vegetables.

“In the Midwest, we see strong interest in hearty staples, like russet and red potatoes, as well as yellow onions,” says Alexandra Gumz, head of marketing, Gumz Farms LLC, Endeavor, WI. “In southern regions, sweet potatoes tend to lead, while coastal areas often see a demand for specialty and organic varieties. Tailoring assortment and messaging to align with local culinary traditions and demographics can help retailers better serve their customer base.”

Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing, Duda Farm Fresh Foods in Oviedo, FL, agrees. “When it comes to radishes, the West Coast typically sees higher demand for fresh bunches of radishes, as those consumers prefer to touch and see the produce as a whole. But the East Coast prefers the Cello and Ready Radishes that are precut.”

“We even see regional differences with the demand for horseradish,” McMillin says.

Retailers should also be aware of cultural differences and preferences, since these can affect root vegetable sales. For example, during Passover, the demand for horseradish often increases, while during holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, and during the winter, there is a high demand for potatoes, onions, carrots and sweet potatoes.

Highlighting the source of root vegetables is also important. For example, warmer growing regions and higher temperatures tend to produce radishes with a bolder, spicier taste, while cooler climates yield milder varieties.

“This means that flavor trends are closely tied to seasonal and regional conditions — and that’s a story worth telling,” says Towell. “By highlighting these natural differences, retailers can market root vegetables in a way that connects consumers to the growing region and the unique flavor profiles that come with it.”

## KEY TO PUSHING SALES

Year-round marketing campaigns are a great way to push root vegetables, especially the least familiar ones. Retailers can use comfort foods that are popular in fall and winter, such as stews and soups, to display root vegetables, along with roasts, broths and spices.

In summer, displaying root vegetables along with marinades, charcoal and grill tools can tap into warm-weather grilling. “Onions, in particular, pair naturally with a wide range of cooking ingredients — from fresh herbs and peppers to pasta sauces and proteins,” says Gumz.

Signage that advertises the healthy nutrients found in root vegetables can help customers incorporate them into their meals all year. Displays that emphasize the many ways to use root vegetables can also push retail sales.

“I would love to see the health benefits mentioned a little bit more with this group of vegetables, and have retailers positioning items that can be used together nearby on shelves,” says McMillin.

Towell suggests emphasizing the versatility of root vegetables in ways that consumers may not have thought about. “We suggest in-

cluding radishes next to salad kits and offering recipe ideas, such as promoting radishes as a salad topper or as a low-carb dipper when placed next to dips and hummus."

Jeffrey Cady, vice president of produce and floral, Northeast Shared Services, Buffalo, NY, says as the weather turns cooler in upstate New York, they ask produce departments to display root vegetables. "We also take root vegetables out of the produce department and tie them in with the meat department to give shoppers meal ideas."

Gumz says root vegetables are versatile, affordable and nutritious staples that fit into a wide range of diets and cooking styles. "Emphasizing local sourcing and the simplicity of preparation also helps consumers feel more confident incorporating them into meals."

During pickling season, McMillin recommends retailers place horseradish near cucumbers so shoppers don't have to search multiple sections to find different pickling ingredients.

Another area where horseradish can be used more often is in charcuterie. "Freshly shaved horseradish often has a bite to it that isn't overpowering, and it has a great, natural flavor that goes great with cheese, meats and crackers," McMillin says. "Horseradish is also included in fire cider tonics, along with ginger, so placing these two items together is another idea for cross promotion."

Gumz says displays should be clean and well-stocked and incorporate recipes, QR codes with cooking ideas, or signage showcasing the local farm source. "This adds authenticity and helps to build trust."

#### HANDLE WITH CARE

While most root vegetables appear hardy and durable, careful handling is important in order to maintain freshness and appearance.

"Temperature is key," says McMillin. "Keeping the cold chain intact is important when handling cold root vegetables. For instance, horseradish likes it very cold. We keep our roots stored in the 28-30F range, which is much colder than most retailers or wholesalers can, because of the combination of produce. It goes a long way in preserving shelf life and freshness."

Gumz agrees. "Proper storage and handling are essential to preserve freshness and quality. Root vegetables, particularly potatoes and onions, should be stored in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area to avoid sprouting or spoilage."

Cady of Northeast Shared Services says while they have a great shelf life, root vegetables still need TLC. "Handle them with gentle movements and care to avoid bruising, cuts or abrasions. Damage can lead to rot, decreased visual appeal to consumers, and loss of nutrients."

Retailers should also maintain clean, damage-free displays and rotate inventory regularly to minimize shrink and make sure produce employees understand the importance of handling root vegetables with care. "Education on best practices at the store level helps ensure that product quality is maintained from farm to consumer," says Gumz.

#### TRENDS AND OUTLOOKS

Most root vegetables are affordable, which gives them the unique advantage of being a healthy choice for cost-conscious consumers, particularly during uncertain economic times. Their versatility goes beyond stews, soups and sides, which is why displaying recipe cards or QR codes linked to recipes are great ways to boost sales.

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explains Gumz. "At Gumz Farms, we've taken a long-term, sustainable approach to crop planning, which helps ensure reliable supply, even amid market fluctuations. We also work closely with our retail partners to plan ahead and support consistent availability throughout the year, while focusing on quality, consistency and sustainability."

But pricing depends on the balance of supply and demand, as well as increasing costs of labor. There are also regional differences in demand for different commodities within the category. "We have been working hand in hand with growers to try to keep prices down with a focus on efficiency from the farm into packing through shipping," says McMillin.

As consumers increasingly seek transparency, sustainability and locally grown produce, demand for packaging that highlights food origin and eco-friendly farming practices resonates among shoppers.

"At Gumz Farms, we see great value in connecting the customer to the farm — highlighting where and how the produce is grown," says Gumz.

Packaging innovations that keep root vegetables fresh and easy to store, while increasing shelf life, are gaining in popularity.

"We offer the widest range of packaging options out there, with 5-, 10-, and 50-pound bags, as well as individually shrink-wrapped roots. Shrink-wrap is our newest option, with the ability to extend shelf life, as well as promote different brands through private labeling," says McMillin. "We also private-label or promote through individual hang tags without the shrink-wrapper."

Resealable packaging is appealing to consumers seeking the convenience of already cut, diced and seasoned options.

"Duda Farm Fresh Foods is the only fresh produce brand that offers stand-up pouch bags that give consumers three options that are resealable," says Towell. "This allows merchandising at the retail level more opportunities to market the product with brand and product visibility due to the standup packaging."

Other trends in the root vegetables include a growing demand for specialty roots, such as celeriac and Jerusalem artichokes, as well as less common, nutritious vegetables, like turnips and rutabagas, and a growing popularity of using the entire root vegetable.

Displays that show how to incorporate the entire root vegetable into a recipe or meal could be beneficial for shoppers. **PB**



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# Apples Attract Attention and Sales

A full season of flavors keeps apples fresh, visible, and in demand.

BY SARAH LOUISE KLOSE

In the fresh produce aisle, apples are a wholesome, flavorful choice. They can be sweet, crunchy, juicy or crisp. Apples sell fresh from harvest for August through December, and come from controlled atmosphere storage in the other months.

Apples are picked fresh and sold if they don't have enough starch for storage, according to Brianna Shales, marketing director, Stemilt, Wenatchee, WA. "Rave is the first apple off the tree. SweetTango comes right after." Stemilt harvests from August through October/early November.

The New York apple harvest kicks off in mid-August with early varieties (Ginger Gold, Zestar!, etc.), followed by September/October mainstays (Honeycrisp, Fuji, RubyFrost, etc.). Harvest wraps in early November, says Cynthia Haskins, president, New York Apple Association (NYAA), Fishers, NY.

## EXPECTED VOLUME

The total U.S. apple production for 2025-26 will be 278.5 million bushels, according to USApple. Washington is the top producer, with a forecasted crop of 180 million bushels. New York comes in second with 30.5 million bushels.

"Favorable spring conditions — ample rainfall, sunshine, and warm temperatures — have set the stage for a strong crop across western New York, the Hudson Valley and the Lake Champlain region," says Haskins.

Michigan is third at 30 million bushels, a 10% increase versus last year. "As Michigan apple growers continue planting high-density orchards and using new farming methods, the state's apple crop is expected to grow in size," says Diane Smith, executive director, Michigan Apple Committee in Lansing, MI.

## WHAT TRIGGERS SALES?

Retailers can optimize apple sales by stocking different varieties.

"Retailers should have managed varieties elevated from commodity varieties, and communicate to consumers why they need a better apple," says Jennifer Miller, executive director, SweetTango (Next Big Thing), Emmaus, PA. "SweetTango drives people to the store."

Flavor is also important — as is how apples make consumers feel. "Perhaps they connect with the personality we use to describe our apple varieties. First Kiss is sassy, Pazazz is bold and bright," says Kristi Harris, brand manager, Honeybear Marketing, Elgin, MN.

Price and value are important to consumers, and loyalty programs are growing, says Emily Cox, marketing manager, FirstFruits Farms, Prescott, WA. "In the past five years, loyalty programs and personalized offers have gone from being the specialty of a few retailers to a standard across the industry, creating a seamless and highly targeted shopping experience."

Packaging also helps sell more apples. "We have reinvented differ-



Eye-catching apple displays in high-traffic areas — paired with clear signage and colorful variety separation — drive impulse purchases and help retailers highlight both bulk and packaged options during peak harvest and year-round. PHOTO COURTESY SWEETANGO

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"I think demos are really important. Have someone out there cutting apples and talking about the different varieties. Maybe they separate the crispy from the dense apples."**

Jennifer Miller, SweetTango (Next Big Thing), Emmaus, PA

- **"Strategically placing large, well-merchandised bulk displays in high-traffic areas — such as the front of the produce section, endcaps, or co-branded displays in center store — can significantly boost impulse purchases."**

Jen Lessner, T&G Global, Wenatchee, WA

ent packs for different items. I think that is really important to keep things fresh," says Alisha Albinder, marketing and operations manager, Hudson River Fruit Distributors, Milton, NY. "Have a 2-pound bag because maybe the consumer doesn't want to buy a 5-pound bag."

Retailers may look at "miles to market," and consumers often choose apple varieties from their home state.

"Pure Michigan evokes a lot of feelings. Our apples are grown on the west side of Michigan, where there are warm sunny days and cool late summer nights. And that brings out the sugar. The water supplies our flavor," says Trish Taylor, marketing manager, Riveridge Produce Marketing, Sparta, MI.

## HEALTHY EATING

The "Eat More Apples" campaign, created and promoted by an industry-driven nonprofit organization, aims to increase U.S. apple consumption. It touts apples — filled with fiber, vitamin C and antioxidants — as a nutritional powerhouse.



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"Fiber is a growing health trend, and apples are a simple solution to reaching the daily recommendation," says Harris.

"There is really no better food than the apple. It is chock full of vitamins, and you can eat it on the go," adds Taylor. She suggests weekly store giveaways switch from vitamin water to apples.

### DISPLAY TACTICS

Retailers should consider creative display strategies that take advantage of apples' visual appeal. "Apples in all shades look great in low-profile modular displays that are increasing in popularity in retail stores," says FirstFruits' Cox.

Hang signs or banners to describe new apple club varieties. "These apples have stricter brand standards and are more difficult to grow. Yet retailers are equalizing Honeycrisp and Gala with SugarBee and SweetTango. There needs to be a way for consumers to understand the difference," says Miller of SweetTango.

Consider big displays to celebrate apple season. "If you have an impressive display, it

will catch someone's eye. And that is what you want to do. In the fall, we push a lot of totes, they hold five pounds of apples," says Hudson River's Albinder.

NYAA supplies "Apples From New York" totes and display bins, plus custom display shippers and signage.

Stemilt partners with a Chicago retailer (Jewel/Albertsons) on a big apple event every February. "One year was an apples takeover. Once it was Cosmic Crisp. So, there is still a lot of theater when it comes to merchandising," says Shales.

### MARKETING APPLES FOR KIDS

Apples are ideal for school lunches. "Lil Snappers put apples in kids' hands. We've had success with that, so we'll continue," says Shales. The apples are small, yet big on taste, crunch and juice.

"USDA programs have been moving toward more popular varieties in recent years, like Gala, for their school lunch and food bank deliveries. This helps many rediscover apples and hopefully create movement," says Taylor of Riveridge.

"For younger shoppers, CMI recently introduced licensed kid-friendly apple bags, featuring characters like Bluey and Paw Patrol, offering a fun, healthy option for families and supporting back-to-school merchandising," says Kaci Komstadius, marketing manager, CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA. The apples come in organic or conventional.

### PARTNERSHIP MARKETING

Free apple samples at sporting events may lead to retail apple purchases.

"We have a partnership with the Buffalo Bills. Before every home game, we hand out 5,000 sample packs of (New York) apples," says Jessica Wells, executive director, Crunch Time Apple Growers in Newark, NY. The 2-ounce slice packs resemble its pouch bags sold at retail.

In October, Bank of America Chicago Marathon runners (all 53,000) are handed a Michigan apple at the finish line. The 10-year partnership "reflects our commitment to support healthy lifestyles, reach consumers seeking healthy food options,



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and have a strong presence in the Chicago market," says Smith of the Michigan Apple Committee.

Other marketing initiatives raise brand awareness while donating to good causes. For a second season, Honeybear Marketing is partnering with Second Harvest Heartland and a hockey team to Put Hunger on Ice. Last year, Pazazz donated 12,000 pounds of apples to the food bank under the program.

#### **BULK VS. PACKAGED**

By offering a broad range of bulk and packaged apples, retailers can capture incremental sales and ensure apples remain a category driver.

"Bulk fruit builds excitement around freshness and variety, while packaged apples encourage repeat purchases and align with consumer demand for convenience and consistency," says Komstadius.

Bulk apple displays work best with separation between varieties, and signage to explain flavor. "I suggest they break up the bulk apples with apple slicers or caramels. Or at least break out by color, so consumers know they are grabbing the apple they intended to buy," says Wells.

Bagged apples tend to be smaller, and come in paper or poly bags, or pouches. FirstFruits Farms is launching organic apple bags with bold graphics and details like variety, flavor and grower information. Stemilt sells its larger organic apples from Washington in a sustainable four-pack.

#### **PROMOTION AND CROSS-PROMOTION**

Current promotional methods include demos, coupons and influencers.

"We want Snapdragon experienced fresh, so eating is the best experience. We look for influencers to use apples in their natural form: chop them up and put them in salsa, coleslaw, dip," says Wells.

For cross-merchandising, pair apples with cheese, bagged salads, trail mix, pie crust or oats. Tajin spice goes with tart apples, like Granny Smith. Cider and caramels partner with apples, too.

"You see a lot of TikTok trends on caramel apples, so retailers can have caramels and sticks nearby, make it a one-stop," says Taylor of Riveridge.

#### **IN-STORE AND ONLINE SALES**

When putting apples on sale, offer different varieties and flexible pricing. "To keep the apple category fresh and exciting for consumers, retailers should aim to feature

three to five apple varieties on ad at any given time, rotating weekly or bi-weekly based on availability, and promotional goals," says Komstadius.

She recommends a combination of bulk and bagged apples, with at least one organic item and one premium variety. This strategy builds trial and loyalty and ensures strong volume movement.

"Couponing is great for loyal customers, but for those who want to buy spontaneously, you have to have sales in store,"

says Albinder of Hudson River.

T&G Global focuses on personalized digital promotions and retailer-specific loyalty programs for its Envy and Jazz apples, which are grown in Washington state (sold October through June) and imported from New Zealand (sold July through September).

FirstFruits Farms says online grocery will grow five times more than in-store in the next few years, so retailers should shift to shoppable digital content. **PB**



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California's citrus industry continues to thrive with premium offerings and strong demand, even as growers navigate shifting markets, labor challenges and rising costs.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

# Citrus Big Business in California

Retailers benefit as producers focus on quality, specialty and merchandising.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

**C**itrus is big business in California. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service, there are currently an estimated 140,000 acres of oranges under production in the state, as well as 69,000 acres of mandarins and tangerines, and 52,000 acres of lemons. And despite the state enduring some frustrating times, this product category appears to be in good health, with an expansion into premium lines and innovative new varieties.

Based in the heart of citrus country in Orange Cove, CA, Cecelia Packing Corporation grows, packs, ships and markets premium California citrus, most of which is drawn from its own production covering over 2,200 acres surrounding its packing house.

According to the company's Allison Garza, Cecelia experienced a successful past 12 months, with record sales in some items, despite challenges surrounding navels. "The first few weeks of the 2025 navel season were a struggle with the surplus of small navels in the industry," she says.

Harvesting in November through to April-May, and occasionally June, Cecelia's citrus offer includes navels, blood oranges, Cara Caras, grapefruit, Minneola tangelos, mandarins, and then Valencias to round off the season. Specialty offerings are offered using labels including Cara Cara Pink Navels, and Sky Valley Heirloom Navels.

Another California company focusing on the premium end of the market is Bee Sweet Citrus in Fowler, CA. The business, which offers oranges, lemons and mandarins, is welcoming back its premium line for customers featuring pummelos, Golden Gem grapefruit, Royal Red oranges, and Heirloom navel oranges, all specialty varieties.

"While oranges, mandarins, and lemons have always been everyday household purchases for families, we've seen a growing interest

in specialty citrus varieties during the winter and spring," says Bee Sweet's director of communications, Monique Mueller.

## SEASONAL OUTLOOK

Headquartered in Delano, CA, Wonderful Citrus is, of course, best known for its Wonderful Halos Mandarins, but the company is also a leader in seedless lemons — marketed under the Wonderful label — as well as regular lemons, grapefruit, navels and limes.

"This year, we had a very strong winter season, all the way through to the beginning of June, with a nice transition into the counter-seasonal program from the Southern Hemisphere to keep Wonderful Halos on shelf 52 weeks a year," says Wonderful Citrus' senior vice president of sales, Dave Rooke.

Wrapping up the first year of partnership with Ventura Pacific Packing — a lemon grower-packer in Ventura County, CA — Wonderful has now established itself as a leading lemon grower, packer, and shipper, representing more than 25% of total lemon category volume. And sales are showing it, Rooke says, with Wonderful's lemon volume sales almost double compared to year ago.

## INFLUENCING FACTORS

So, what is driving California citrus sales? With the 2025/26 season almost underway, Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing, Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA, expects to see a strong showing from specialty favorites, in particular blood oranges, Cara Cara (of which Sunkist is the largest supplier), and Minneola tangelos from December, following pummelos, navel oranges and grapefruit.

When the market or product availability fluctuates, Sunkist Growers targets its offering to fit the needs of retail partners through larger bag options and customizable merchandising, according to

# 75 YEARS OF KNOWING AND GROWING CITRUS

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Howard. Given the presence of more USDA “choice grade” fruit, Howard says Sunkist can create more value-led deals for customers.

According to Garza at Cecelia, some of the highest recent demand on the specialty side has been on Minneola tangelos. “It’s a cross between a tangerine and a grapefruit, with the tangerine sweet and the tart grapefruit, and I think it’s that mix of flavors that is driving demand,” she says. “We are also excited to be releasing a new and improved grapefruit carton design in 2026.”

Mueller at Bee Sweet says shoppers are on the lookout for high-quality produce that’s fresh and adds value to their day. “While there’s no doubt that citrus fruits add nutritional value to someone’s diet, they also act as a healthy alternative for those looking for delicious, on-the-go snacks.”

Wonderful’s Rooke says there are also positive signs when it comes to consumer demand in the citrus category, with growth being driven by a combination of snackability, convenience and consistent high quality. “Those three attributes are what consumers are looking for: better-for-you snack options.”

“We firmly believe quality matters and quality sells, and when a consumer has a good experience with your brand, and it resonates with them, they’ll come back and buy it again,” says Rooke. “We see the adverse effect of poor quality, poor taste, on the shelves where we really start to see a decline in sales, and it really hurts the category as a whole.”

#### PACKAGING & MARKETING

The key to driving citrus sales is being creative in your approach to marketing, according to Garza. “Creativity and curiosity lead to

increased demand — if you have someone with some type of creative marketing or a phrase that goes on the bag, it’ll spark curiosity, which leads to increased sales for the retailer,” she says.

With limited floor space often being a challenge for many retailers, Howard says Sunkist will be promoting new, space-efficient displays that are engineered to fit into any store layout. The company will also be providing new grower bin headers spotlighting people behind the hard work that goes into growing the citrus.

Howard says health and wellness are top-of-mind for consumers when it comes to citrus purchases, given the category’s positive benefits for everyday health.

#### CHALLENGES

For Garza, robotics presents the best, most practical solution for dealing with the labor shortage at all levels of a citrus operation. “A lot of people are leaning toward robotics, from the field to the packaging,” she says. “Implementing robotics, like drone mapping and spraying machines, and even baggers, is essential. It’s definitely helping costs down for suppliers, which will hopefully bring the cost down to consumers.”

According to Rooke, the citrus category as a whole has been over-saturated and over-supplied in a lot of areas, which puts a lot of pressure on growers and shippers.

“It makes it hard in a highly commoditized space where some of the citrus varieties that we sell could be oversupplied,” says Rooke. “Oftentimes, people are selling them below total farming costs. We have to figure out how to balance the equation.” **PB**



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Publix Super Markets, based in Lakeland, FL, has more than 900 stores in Florida. This fall and winter, Publix will conduct in-store sampling events of "Fresh From Florida" produce.

PHOTO COURTESY PUBLIX

# Florida Produce Gets a Boost

Sampling, stories, and promotions on tap in supermarkets this fall.

BY LOUISE KRAMER

**W**ith consumers concerned about spending amid rising grocery prices and economic uncertainty, retailers plan to spark sales of Florida produce this fall with sampling programs, price promotions and storytelling.

Stew Leonard's, operator of eight fresh-themed grocery stores in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, will kick off its Florida citrus sales with a price promotion for navel oranges, at four for \$5 or five for \$5, says Charles Yeh, director of produce for the Norwalk, CT-based retailer.

"Our produce managers like to start with a good price on a seasonal item like this, especially when the brix is right. Customers will fall in love with the taste and be back to buy them throughout the season," says Yeh.

Florida is famous for its abundant supplies of citrus and fresh vegetables in the fall and early winter, but because it is hurricane season, weather adds uncertainty to the supply chain.

"We watch hurricane season very closely, as large-scale wind and rain events can damage crops in Florida," says Yeh. "We are in constant communication with our growers during this time of year."

For now, Florida growers anticipate a strong fall this year, says Christina Morton, director of communications for the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA) based in Winter Park, FL.

"Growers are committed to providing reliable quality and consistent volumes to their customers. They are optimistic and remain focused on bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to the tables of millions of American consumers without interruption."

Florida is the primary source on the Eastern Seaboard for domes-

tically grown produce from fall through winter. The state's diverse array of fruits and vegetables includes bell peppers, cabbage, celery, cucumber, eggplant, grapefruit, leafy greens, oranges, snap beans, squash, sweet corn, tangerines and other specialty citrus, tomatoes, and watermelon.

## CONSUMERS STILL WANT FRESH

Consumers remain cautious about spending this fall. Nevertheless, the outlook for fresh produce and other essential purchases is steady, compared with fall 2024, according to the international business consulting firm McKinsey & Company, which tracks consumer sentiment each quarter.

While consumers say they will cut back on non-essential items, the New York-based company's August 2025 report revealed two-thirds of survey respondents expect to spend the same amount on fresh produce this year versus 2024, with 24% saying they will spend more.

"It could be the case where people might say they're not going to buy fresh and might buy frozen or canned corn because it's cheaper," says Jonathan Allen, farm manager of RC Hatton Farms based in Pahokee, FL. The family-owned grower supplies sweet corn in tray packs to Lakeland, FL-based Publix Super Markets.

## FRESH FROM FLORIDA BRAND BOOST

Florida produce continues to get a helping hand from a robust state-funded marketing program managed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) based in Tallahassee, FL. The FDACS incentivizes consumers to buy "Fresh From Florida" produce with digital coupons and cash-back promotions, along with advertising across several platforms.

FFVA's Morton calls the "Fresh From Florida" branding program an invaluable partner in providing farmers with resources to market their produce to a national and global audience. "It is a recognizable



brand that makes Florida produce easy to identify in-store."

Sprouts Farmers Market, a retailer based in Phoenix, AZ, works with local farmers in the communities where it operates and participates in the FDACS "Fresh From Florida" program.

With 455 stores across 24 states, including 58 locations in Florida, Sprouts sources Sunshine State produce in the fall from numerous growers. Lauren Frank, manager of public relations for Sprouts, says they include Alderman Farms, Boynton Beach, FL; Noble Citrus, Winter Haven, FL; Southern Valley, Norman Park, GA; Grimes Produce Company, Plant City, FL; and C&B Farms, Clewiston, FL.

"Florida is a key hub for our local and regional sourcing team, where collaboration with growers helps us test new opportunities, broaden our assortment, and excite customers," says Frank.

### CITRUS IN SPOTLIGHT

Florida citrus enjoys star status in produce departments in the fall and winter, and one grower at least expects shoppers to buy more grapefruit this year. Derek Rodgers, director of sales and marketing for Dundee, FL-based Florida Classic Growers, says the company's grapefruit volume continues to grow.

Rodgers is optimistic about this year's citrus crop. "Quality is looking excellent. With our C.U.P.S. (Citrus Under Protective Screen) program, as well as our aggressive outdoor plantings, we are gearing up for a great season," he says.

Florida Classic Growers includes the "Fresh From Florida" logo on its packaging.

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"People are re-remembering the benefits of grapefruit. It's a fantastic source of vitamin C, as well as a great way to boost your cortisol in the mornings."**

Derek Rodgers, Florida Classic Growers, Dundee, FL

- **"We've seen strong growth in our Florida sourcing programs and continue to expand each year — introducing new crops and working closely with growers to bring innovation to the market."**

Lauren Frank, Sprouts Farmers Market, Phoenix, AZ

Stew Leonard's has several sales tactics for citrus in store. "We work with our farmers in Florida year-round, but during the fall and early winter, we have a big focus on citrus from Florida, including oranges, navel oranges, Cara Cara navel oranges, and freshly squeezed juices," says Yeh.

Allen of RC Hatton Farms says telling stories about growers is a good tactic. "We actually have done things like that," he says. "There seems to be a pretty big disconnect between the public and farmers, and that their food comes from farmers and not the warehouse of Publix or Walmart or Kroger," he says.

PB

## Florida Produce Shines With 'Fresh From Florida' Retail Promotions

Florida produce is getting a boost this fall from increased advertising in stores and beyond.

The Sunshine State's two largest supermarket chains, Publix and Winn-Dixie, will start running shopping cart ads in November, two months earlier than in 2024. The ads are part of the multi-pronged state-funded "Fresh From Florida" branding and marketing program to promote Florida commodities run by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) based in Tallahassee, FL.

"Fresh Flavor is Always Grown Local," the shopping cart ads say against a colorful photo of Florida produce.

Shoppers will also see floor decals touting Florida produce in Winn-Dixie stores in the state, says Susie McKinley, director of the FDACS division of marketing and development.

Publix, based in Lakeland, FL, has more than 900 stores in the state. Winn-Dixie, based in Jacksonville, FL, a division of Southeastern Grocers, currently has some 340 stores in the state.

In all, "Fresh From Florida" has more than 100 retail partners in more than 10,000 stores across 23 countries, says McKinley. "Fresh From Florida" is partnering with multiple retailers to promote Florida produce with digital coupons.



The "Fresh From Florida" branding and marketing program promotes Florida commodities run by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Tallahassee, FL. PHOTO COURTESY FDACS

"Retailers can drive sales by sourcing Florida produce and engaging in 'Fresh From Florida' branded promotions," says McKinley.

### SEASONAL SPOTLIGHT

This fall, several "Fresh From Florida" retail partners have special promotions that will highlight the variety of seasonal produce grown in the state. The Fresh Market, based in Greensboro, NC, will showcase Florida tomatoes, sweet corn, green beans, and grapefruit throughout the fall and winter on sponsored livestream events, says McKinley.

Publix will conduct in-store sampling events of "Fresh From Florida" produce, including Florida tangerines.

Consumer-focused digital couponing this fall will include "Fresh From Florida" promotional incentives through the cash-back apps Ibotta and Shopkick. "Consumers see promoted 'Fresh From Florida' products on the apps. When consumers purchase 'Fresh From Florida' produce, they upload their receipt to the app, and once verified, they receive a promotional offer," says McKinley.

These special promotions are in addition to "Fresh From Florida" circular ad promotions.

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# Five Ways To Buy & Sell Imported Blueberries

Imports fuel growth as the year-round demand surges.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**B**lueberries have an incredible, century-old story that spans from local to global. The turn of the 20th century saw a cranberry farmer and a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) botanist put their talents together to develop the first domesticated blueberry in Whitesbog, NJ. By 1916, the duo sold their first commercial highbush blueberry crop, and today, 38 U.S. states grow these little blue dynamos as a business. Washington, Oregon, and Georgia are the top three producers, according to USDA data as shared by the U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC), headquartered in Folsom, CA.

However, that's only half the story. In the early 21st century, the U.S. began to import blueberries in significant quantities. This reflected the growing global supply of cultivated blueberries, plus something much more important: consumer demand.

Shoppers' cravings, plus greater supply, boosted per capita consumption of blueberries from 0.26 pounds in 2000 to 2.54 pounds in 2021 based on USDA ERS 2023 data.

"Consumers want blueberries year-round now," says Marc Goldman, produce director, Morton Williams Supermarkets, a 17-store chain headquartered in the Bronx, NY, and a subsidiary of Wakefern Food Corp.

In 2024, U.S. imports of fresh blueberries hit a record 684 million pounds, up 22% from the previous year, and were valued at \$2.18 billion. According to the USDA Economic Research Service's *Fruit and Tree Nuts Outlook* for March 27, 2025, this made blueberries the fourth most valuable fresh fruit import in the U.S., following avocados, bananas and grapes.

"With the global production of blueberries increasing exponentially each year, it is simply a matter of time until they become the No. 1 harvested, picked, and consumed item in the berry category," says Tom Linaris, berry buyer for Katzman, on the Hunts Point Terminal Market, in Bronx, NY.

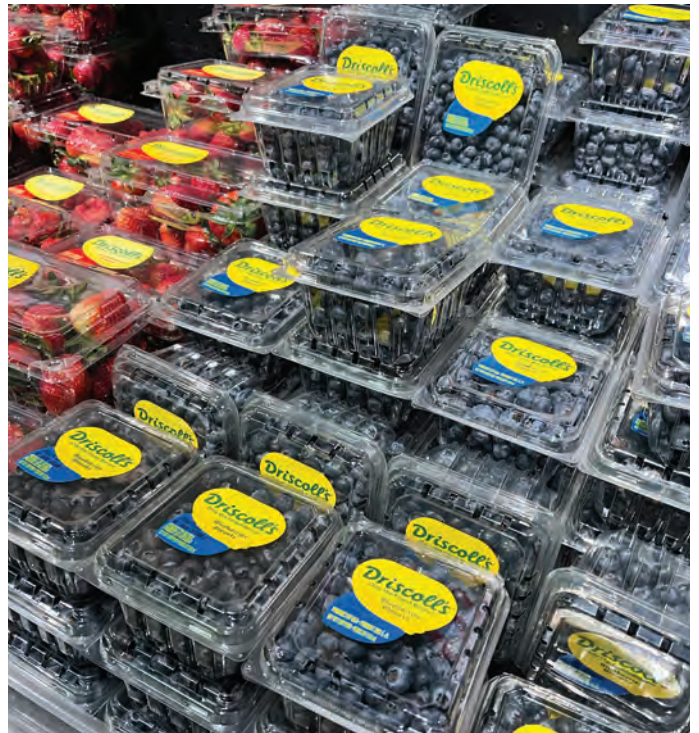
"During the fall, winter, and spring, the imported fruit has proven to be a strong and reliable source for national promotions, with consistency in the supply chain (inbounds), quality, and flavor profile. The introduction of new proprietary varieties through advanced breeding programs is also fueling growth."

Here's how to ensure retail shelves stay stocked and sales sweet with imported blueberries:

## 1. FOLLOW THE COUNTER SEASONS

To meet strong year-round consumer demand, the U.S. relies on imported blueberries from trade partners in Peru, Mexico, Chile and Canada, according to Kasey Cronquist, USHBC president. "These imports complement domestic production, keeping blueberries in front of consumers in the produce department."

Peru, Mexico and Chile supply nearly 90% of imported blueberries to the U.S. by volume, according to USHBC data.



With the global production of blueberries increasing each year, it's just a matter of time until they become the No. 1 harvested, picked, and consumed item in the berry category.

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

Wholesaler Shapiro-Gilman-Shandler Co. (SGS), in Los Angeles, CA, imports from Peru (late August-January), Mexico (September-May), and Chile (December-February), according to Stevie Shandler, berry manager.

"Roughly two-thirds of fresh blueberries sold in the U.S. now come from imports, so these windows are critical for us," she says.

Peru's peak production will arrive between weeks 41 and 51 (Oct. 6 to Dec. 21), with ample promotion opportunities, according to Doug LaCroix, director of sales and marketing for Family Tree Farms, in Reedley, CA. The company exclusively markets premium blueberries with MBO genetics in North America. These are varieties developed in Australia, which feature attractive attributes such as an extra-large size.

"We have yet to keep up with demand, so we are continuing to expand," says LaCroix. "Because Peru can produce such high-quality fruit, over an eight-month harvest window, we plan to expand here."

But tariffs have affected the allocation of the Peruvian crop, LaCroix adds. "The early data shows that the Peruvian industry is sending a disproportionate amount of the crop to Asia and Europe, to mitigate some of the tariff risks/costs associated with the U.S."

Blueberries from Mexico and Canada are currently exempt from tariffs, while blueberries from Peru and Chile are subject to the base-line 10% reciprocal tariff.

Brian Bocock, vice president of product management at Naturipe Farms, headquartered in Salinas, CA, says both Chile and Mexico are "re-inventing themselves through improved genetics that are focused on firmness and flavor."





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Southern Specialties, a Pompano Beach, FL-based grower, processor, and distributor, sources its blueberries from British Columbia, Canada, in August and September.

"Argentina and Uruguay contribute fruit from September through December, while Colombia provides limited volumes in February and March," says Katzman's Linaris. "Other countries are actively testing and developing production with a focus on filling the critical gap between February and April, when import supplies begin to wind down and the domestic season is just starting. Colombia, in particular, shows very good promise, with excellent growing conditions during this window."

## 2. SOURCE A VARIETY OF SKUS

Retail produce buyers can build a bigger blueberry category in the import season by actively sourcing berries of different sizes, assorted packaging choices, and organic, as well as conventionally grown fruit.

"Jumbo-size blueberries jump out on the shelf and have been a game-changer that drives dollars in the category," says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie's Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several retailers in the Pacific Northwest, such as Metropolitan Market, Fred Meyer and Sprouts.

Family Tree Farms pioneered the jumbo 9.8-ounce blueberry SKU over 15 years ago. "There was initial skepticism from retail that blueberries could justify an additional, premium SKU without cannibalizing traditional SKUs," says LaCroix. "The adoption has been so successful over this timeframe that almost all our retail partners are demanding a third, premium SKU. Some even report that this SKU is their highest performing in the department."

Pints remain the best-selling pack size and have essentially become the industry standard, according to Linaris. "Larger sizes, such as 18-ounce and 2-pound packs, are gaining traction, particularly with big-box retailers."

At Morton Williams, the 6-ounce clamshells are most popular during the winter, according to Goldman, although the stores carry larger sizes, too, depending on the season and availability.

Organic blueberries make up around 15% of imports to the U.S., according to the USDA Economic Research Service.

"We handle both conventional and organic blueberries, with organic volumes increasing steadily from Peru and Chile. Organics are also an area of growth, and we'll be collaborating with our partners on promotional ads timed to Mexico and Chile's strongest weeks," says SGS's Shandler.

## 3. BUYERS PREPARE: ASK KEY QUESTIONS

From a procurement standpoint, planning with customers is essential when it comes to imported blueberries, says Gary Caloroso, regional business development director for The Giumarra Companies, Los Angeles, CA. "We work closely with them to identify the optimal timing for transitioning from one origin to the next. With lead time, we can provide stronger support through customized merchandising, as well as tailored sales and marketing programs."

"The biggest question we get asked in other markets that isn't asked enough in North America is 'what varieties am I buying?'" says Family Tree Farms' LaCroix. "The answer to this question will give a buyer more control over the quality, volume, and timing that they are receiving. Other markets seem to be more knowledgeable about

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Many consumers still think of blueberries as a summer fruit, so driving awareness during the fall, winter and spring takes a little extra effort."**

Brian Bocock, Naturipe Farms, Salinas, CA

- **"Peru gives us fall promotional strength, Mexico carries spring ads with shorter transit and better shelf life, and Chile bridges winter gaps with a meaningful organic share."**

Stevie Shandler, Shapiro-Gilman-Shandler Co. (SGS), Los Angeles, CA

the separation in genetics, how they perform in different growing regions, having moved away from commodity buying."

Less commonly asked, but just as critical to a successful blueberry program, are questions about varieties, labeling, sizing, and consistency between buyers, sellers and shippers. "These details can make a real difference," says Katzman's Linaris.

## 4. TURN CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Navigating peak volumes during the Peruvian window is a challenge, notes LaCroix. "We are meeting this challenge by planting new MBO varieties that naturally produce earlier and later in the season, as well as adapting timing with existing varieties that respond to different pruning techniques and/or growing locations in Peru."

From a distributor's perspective, another challenge is the overlap of seasons, which puts pressure on prices and increases the risk of quality loss during long transit periods. "We turn these into opportunities by planning tiered promotions, specifying varieties, handling practices, and building substitution paths across origins to keep ads intact," says Shandler.

An ongoing task for retailers is simply reminding shoppers that fresh blueberries are available year-round. "When retailers position berries at the front of the produce section, customers are reminded to buy," says Naturipe's Bocock.

## 5. KEEP DEMAND UP WITH SUPPLY

Customers at Morton Williams Supermarkets can purchase blueberries in clamshell packs, but that's only one way, says Goldman. "We have a large cut fruit program and will include berries throughout the year in fresh fruit cups, berry bowls, and with fruit like watermelon to add color."

While blueberries' well-known nutritional benefits have long fueled consumption, The Giumarra Companies supports the USHBC's strategy to build on this strong health message, says Caloroso. "This is by adding greater emphasis on taste and ease-of-use through expanded marketing efforts."

Looking ahead, the USHBC will position blueberries as a flavor-forward, exciting choice that competes with other top-tier products, says Cronquist. "That's part of our vision to make blueberries the world's favorite fruit. Some even say we should aim to be the world's favorite snack."



Colorful pepper displays draw shoppers in and boost sales of the everyday staple.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

# Six Opportunities To Sell More Organic Peppers

Organic displays should look as inviting and abundant as conventional ones.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**B**ell peppers and chile peppers are everyday foods that have had a place at mankind's table for centuries. Native to the Americas, Spanish explorers in the 15th century carried these Capsicum family members across the pond, with cultivation eventually spreading worldwide.

Most recently, consumer demand for both types of peppers — sweet bells and heat-packed chiles — has boomed. Last year, Americans ate nearly 11 pounds of bell peppers and 8 pounds of chile peppers, based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data.

Organic bell pepper dollars grew to \$200 million in 2024, ranking these fruits as the 17th top organic fruit and vegetable category, based on the *State of Organic Produce Report 2024*, presented by the Organic Produce Network, in Monterey, CA. These sales represented a 4.4% year-over-year increase. And with price premiums for organic bell peppers remaining steady at 55.2%, it underscores continued consumer demand.

"We continue to see steady growth in demand for organic bell peppers," says Ray Mastronardi, vice president of sales at Del Fresco Pure, a greenhouse grower located in Kingsville, Ontario. "Consumers are increasingly looking for produce that aligns with their health, wellness, and sustainability values, and organics deliver on that."

"For retailers, the opportunity lies in positioning organic bell peppers not just as a premium product, but as an everyday staple that supports a healthy lifestyle."

## 1. SEARCH FOR YEAR-ROUND AVAILABILITY

Late summer and early fall supplies of peppers can be difficult.

"It's a shoulder season for supply and can be challenging in both availability and quality," says Kristina Federico-Luna, sales manager at Wholesum Family Farms Inc., in Amado, AZ. "Bell peppers require

a growing medium and expertise that is not found everywhere, so building a strong supplier base is challenging. Winter supplies have better growing regions and should be strong. That's why redundancy in supply is key to successful program planning."

The greenhouse program at Del Fresco Pure enables the company to offer consistent organic bell peppers throughout the fall and winter, says Mastronardi. That said, he admits organic production can be more sensitive to weather and pest pressures, making it more challenging to maintain volumes at peak demand times.

"While we work hard to minimize gaps, there can be periods where supply is tighter. On the flip side, retailers can take advantage of windows where supply is more abundant, particularly ahead of holiday demand when shoppers are cooking and entertaining more."

Divine Flavor, a Nogales, AZ-headquartered grower-owned distributor of grapes, tomatoes and bell peppers, anticipates closing its June-to-October gap in supply for organic bell peppers by 2026.

"We are working now with grower partners in the central Bajío region of Mexico. Combined with our West Coast production in Jalisco and Sinaloa, we will have consistent year-round options for retailers," says Alan Aguirre, head of the marketing department.

Mexico is the primary source of organic bell pepper imports to the U.S. In 2024, the share of total monthly import value for fresh organic bell peppers ranged between 7% and 11%, according to the *USDA ERS Vegetable and Pulses Outlook: April 2025* report.

## 2. RING MORE BELLS WITH COLOR

Most bell peppers, conventional and organic, sold at retail are green, which Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie's Produce in Seattle, WA, sees playing out in their region. "Green and red bell peppers are our most popular colors in organic."

Charlie's Produce supplies retailers in the Pacific Northwest, such as Metropolitan Market, Fred Meyer and Sprouts.





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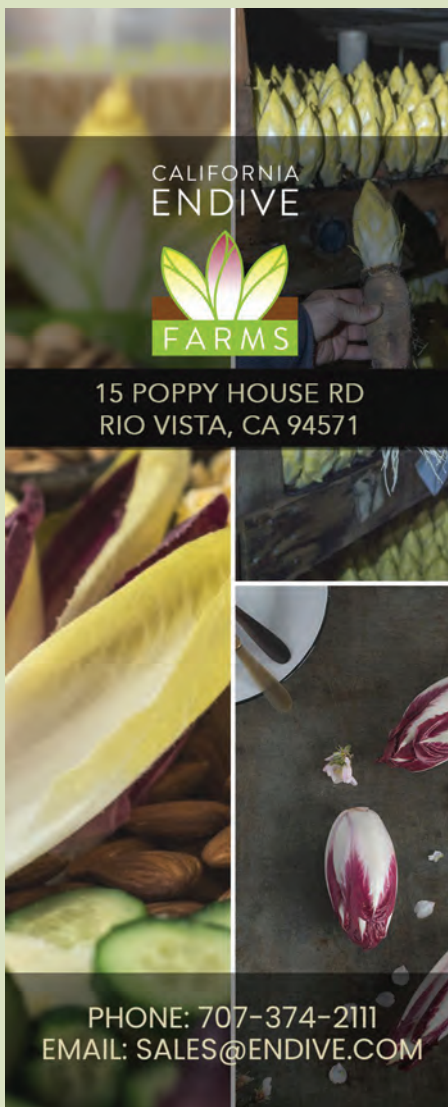
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But consumer demands are increasing for all colors of organic bell peppers, including green, red and yellow, says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's World Variety Produce, Vernon, CA. "We are also starting to see demand for the less popular orange as well. The newer mixed package (red, yellow, and orange) is gaining some momentum over the last few years."

In addition to color, Marc Goldman, produce director, Morton Williams Supermarkets, a 17-store chain headquartered in Bronx, NY, and a subsidiary of the Wakefern Food Corp, offers customers a choice of sizes. "We carry the mini sweet peppers in organic, as well as organic bells."

Mini sweet peppers are a distinct cultivar known for greater sweetness and crispiness than bell peppers, while a baby bell pepper is a miniature version of a traditional bell pepper.

Divine Flavor is currently testing growing organic baby bell peppers.

### 3. DIFFERENTIATE WITH ORGANIC CHILES

The market for organic chile peppers is smaller than that for bells, say growers. One reason is that some customers find it difficult to justify the increased cost for something used in often small amounts. However, there is interest in certain varieties of organic chiles, making these the ones to introduce first at retail. "Organic jalapeños are overall best-sellers," says Kazmirski.

Schueller says two major varieties represent 80% of total organic chile pepper sales. "That is jalapeño for Hispanic, and shishito for Japanese or Asian. We sell both in 8-ounce tote bags. There are not many growers of organic hot peppers."

Demand is different when selling organic jalapeños and organic shishitos, says Courtney Boyer, supply chain manager for Duncan Family Farms, Goodyear, AZ. "As more retailers transition SKUs from conventional to organic, there could be a boost in demand. Shishitos are still relatively new to the retail space, so demand is increasing based on consumers' exposure to the item."

### 4. GET THE RIGHT RING

Bulk outpaces sales of packaged peppers overall. Yet, the best ring-through on organic bells and chile peppers, according to Melissa's Schueller, "will always be packaged. Packaging also offers an easier way to stack a neat display."

"A two-count is the most popular organic green bell pepper pack style," says J.C. Myers, vice president of sales and marketing for SunFed, in Rio Rico, AZ.





PHOTO COURTESY DUNCAN FAMILY FARMS

At Del Fresco Pure, the most popular colored pepper pack style is the multi-count bag, says Mastronardi. "Bulk displays remain important for organics, but packaging helps build shopper trust by ensuring consistent quality and food safety. The opportunity is in offering a mix of both, depending on the retailer and region."

Duncan Family Farms packs its chile peppers in a perforated, resealable bag or clamshell.

## 5. SEE IT TO SELL IT

The biggest challenge is ensuring peppers are displayed in a way that highlights their vibrancy and freshness, says Mastronardi. "Organic peppers need to look just as inviting and abundant as conventional peppers. Opportunities include incorporating color breaks into the display to highlight variety, utilizing signage to highlight organic certification, and cross-promoting with other organic produce to inspire meals. Clean, well-stocked displays make a huge difference in consumer confidence."

Merchandising has a significant impact on consumer choices for chile peppers.

"If you look at a lot of the peppers, they are on a middle or low shelf in the refrigerated section or on an endcap tucked away from the main aisles of produce," says Boyer.

"If they were brought front and center, or staged as part of a recipe with other ingredients needed, folks may be more likely to purchase."

## 6. PROMOTE WAYS TO USE

Bell and chile peppers need to be promoted as ingredients to increase sales, recommends Boyer. This includes call-outs to their flavor profiles and/or nutritional benefits.

In the U.S., the most common uses for bell peppers include adding them raw or cooked to salads and sandwiches, incorporating them into stir-fries and fajitas, using them as pizza toppings, and stuffing them with rice and meat for a main dish. But bells are versatile, and suggesting new uses can encourage customers to buy more.

"A few of the culinary trends now are substituting red bell peppers for tomatoes to make a creamed soup and using bell peppers in cold pasta salads," says Divine Flavor's Aguirre.

Finally, while price promotions can help drive trial, relying solely on price can undervalue the category, says Mastronardi. "The real opportunity is in education and inspiration — showing consumers how versatile peppers are across cuisines and meal occasions."

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Raquel Espinoza of Produce House, Nogales, AZ, says today's Mexican tomatoes, especially popular Romas, reflect decades of innovation and quality improvements.

PHOTO COURTESY MAUI FRESH

# Nogales Adapts After Tomato Agreement Ends

Arizona's border city is adjusting to new costs, compliance hurdles and long-term questions.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

**N**ogales, AZ, the border city that sits a short drive — but a potentially long wait — away from its Mexican cousin Nogales, Sonora, has long been synonymous with the produce business. Located within easy reach of Mexico's northern production regions, and U.S. central and eastern markets, the city handles an estimated 37% of all produce imports shipped from Mexico to the U.S.

But, despite being long-established in the city, there is a palpable unease among Nogales' importers, particularly following the end of the Tomato Suspension Agreement in July 2025. The Trump administration's decision effectively scrapped minimum prices for Mexican tomato imports in favor of imposing a 17.09% anti-dumping duty on all fresh tomatoes imported from Mexico.

"We've been trying to adjust to this new world — there are duties on tomatoes and there might be tariffs on other things if things don't go right," says Lance Jungmeyer, president of the Nogales, AZ-headquartered Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA). "We've seen a drop in overall volumes, so we're definitely feeling the trade crunch."

"Until earlier this year when there were tariffs on everything for three days, no one had dealt with tariffs since the late '90s," he adds. This means there are few people who know the mechanics of dealing with import duties and how they can affect a company's bottom line.

"There are all different economic equations you have to make to figure out how your business adapts to that."

## WHO WILL SURVIVE?

FPAA is working with members on how to get paperwork prepared, so that if they are audited, they'll have everything in order. But "how do you calculate dutiable value?" Jungmeyer adds. "Tomatoes are 16% of what crosses the border, and there are a lot of companies where tomatoes might be 70% of what they do, and they're looking at their businesses and asking if they can afford to pay these duties or if they should get out of tomatoes, and some people are."

Jungmeyer believes the crunch time will come during the next 12 months when it becomes apparent which companies are able to survive, and which ones drop out of tomatoes.

"This isn't really hurting the Mexican growers as much — the importer is the one who has to pay the duty," he says. "It's Southeast U.S. versus Southwest U.S. in a political fight, but the U.S. companies on this side are getting punished. Some other framework would be better, but we think there should be tariff-free trade on entrance."

With United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) negotiations restarting, Jungmeyer says importers will be paying close attention to how the talks "affect what we do at the border," as well as how companies are regulated, and the possible imposition of tariffs.

"We want to know what the Mexican and U.S. governments will do to resolve this issue in a way that's not punitive to the importers."

## CLOUD OF UNCERTAINTY

Established in Nogales in 2014, Produce House has its own growing operations in Sonora, Mexico, encompassing tomatoes, squash, cucumbers and other products. Currently in the process of strengthening its programs and expanding production into Sonora's neighbor Sinaloa, the company recently moved to new facilities, adding cold storage chambers and doubling its floorspace to 100,000 square feet.

But while the outlook appears to be largely positive for Produce House, Director of Sales and Marketing Raquel Espinoza says the tariff situation has created a lot of uncertainty in Nogales' produce

# STRONG FOUNDATIONS: PRODUCE HOUSE AIMS TO BUILD ON RECENT GROWTH

**B**ased in Nogales, AZ, Produce House was founded in 2015 by produce professional Raquel Espinoza: who brings more than 35 years of growing and sales experience. The company imports Mexican products and continues to expand through its own production as well as long-term grower partners in Mexico.

Espinoza recalls the company initially focused on “hard shell” squash such as Butternut, Kabocha, Acorn, and Spaghetti. Yet, given her extensive background in tomatoes, it wasn’t long before Produce House reentered that segment.

In addition to strengthening squash, melon, and cucumber programs, the company is expanding its tomato portfolio. Current offerings include Roma and vine-ripe tomatoes, with plans to add heirloom and grape tomatoes. Produce House has also launched its Organic Citrus Program, with expectations of stronger production to come. This broadens the company’s offerings alongside organic garlic and organic hard shell.

Geographically, Produce House is expanding production from Sonora into neighboring Sinaloa, while also increasing capacity in Nogales. They will move into a new 100,000-square-foot facility — double the size of the previous warehouse — provides expanded cold storage and advanced handling.

“It’s a great step forward,” says Espinoza, “This facility gives us the space and tools to keep pace with demand and better serve our customers.”

## FACING A CHANGING MARKET

As a tomato grower and importer, Espinoza notes that the end of the Tomato Suspension Agreement — which she describes as an “anti-dumping tariff” — has created significant uncertainty across the industry. Additional questions remain about how new tariffs on non-North American produce will affect importers nationwide.

“Importers are concerned about contracting amid uncertainty,” Espinoza explains. “There’s a cloud of long-term uncertainty about how these tariffs are going to play out.”

She emphasizes that today’s imports are very different from decades past. Gone are the days of gas-green tomatoes; instead, importers such as Produce House supply quality varieties like Roma and vine-ripened. Mexico’s production has since become far more sophisticated, with a broader range of varieties and advanced growing practices.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Despite challenges, Espinoza remains confident in the resilience of the industry. She stresses the value of expert guidance and collaboration, highlighting the role of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA) in keeping importers informed.

“This is a dynamic, resilient industry that continues to evolve,” she says. “There is still so much potential — and at Produce House, we’re committed to being part of that future.”



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industry. "Growers are worried about making planning decisions," she says. "There's a cloud of uncertainty about how these tariffs are going to work."

Looking at the end of the Tomato Suspension Agreement, Espinoza believes the industry is "paying the price" for the events of 1996 when the U.S. Department of Commerce agreed to suspend its anti-dumping investigation on Mexican tomato imports.

However, she argues the tomatoes being imported in 2025 can't be compared with those that were available 29 years before. "We're not talking about the same tomatoes anymore," says Espinoza.

"We're looking to professionals within the industry to help us navigate through this new world, so we don't fall into the same pitfalls again, and have an industry that is more resilient."

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"A lot of people have a very gloomy view of the U.S. administration, but we see things in a much more positive way. I can go and sell in Europe or Asia, but at the end of the day, the U.S. is Mexico's biggest market, and Mexico is the U.S.'s biggest market."**

Jaime Chamberlain, Chamberlain Distributing, Nogales, AZ

- **"Roma was in its infancy 30 years ago; it's now one of the preferred tomatoes. The Florida tomato is still the basic 'Gas Green' tomato; it's not the same as the tomatoes produced in Mexico."**

Raquel Espinoza, Produce House, Nogales, AZ

Jaime Chamberlain, former chairman of the Greater Nogales Santa Cruz County Port Authority and current president of Nogales-based importer Chamberlain Distributing, has clear memories of the Suspension Agreement, having worked on its development in 1996. However, he says the family-run business decided to get out of the tomato business because of the terms negotiated in the last iteration of the agreement in 2019.

Chamberlain says Nogales importers are "walking around pretty shocked by what the Department of Commerce has done. Anti-dumping duty is very different from a tariff, and this is a significant change that is going to affect businesses in a negative way."

"The most obvious way is the uncertainty," he adds. "Here, we aren't making investments for the next day, our investments are made with the expectation we will see a return in three to five years."

In the case of Chamberlain, these investments include helping growers in Mexico install new shadehouses and desalination plants. But, he says, the imposition of the duties will cause many importers to ask whether they can afford to pay their growers and the U.S. government at the same time.

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Despite the challenges, Chamberlain, whose company recently celebrated 56 years in business as an importer of fruits and vegetables from Mexico, remains upbeat about the Nogales' produce industry.

"I can go and sell in Europe or Asia, but at the end of the day, the U.S. is Mexico's biggest market, and Mexico is the U.S.'s biggest market."

#### INNOVATION CONTINUES

This is likely why, far from being deterred by the setback of the Suspension Agreement, Nogales' companies are continuing to invest and innovate. In the case of importer SunFed, based in Rio Rico, AZ, these investments have taken the form of the expansion of a pilot program for conventional and organic Roma tomatoes, plus diversification into the carrot space, according to its vice president of sales and marketing, J.C. Myers.

SunFed completed two significant projects — an upgrade of its solar grid in order to offset up to 80% of its energy costs, and a revamp of its value-added packing, enabling it to shrink wrap over different tray sizes.

The company's vice president of finance and legal, Matt Mandel, says that while SunFed's imports are subject to review by any one of over 40 different government agencies, the main entity responsible — Customs and Border Protection (CBP) — efficiently processes cargo, and, for the most part, the border crossing process remains fairly fluid.

"We have a great relationship with our local entity, and they are very receptive to our feedback as to ways we can mutually improve the crossing process," he says. "We applaud the introduction of non-intrusive inspection tactics (X-ray surveillance, among others) and hope they will continue to be implemented, and their use increased to meet both of CBP's mission directives."

In a similar vein, Michael DuPuis, head of public relations and quality assurance at Divine Flavor, also based in Nogales, says the company has sought to differentiate itself in the vegetable space through innovative pack presentations.

Although better known as a top table grape importer, Divine Flavor has been focusing on achieving 12-month vegetable



SunFed, Rio Rico, AZ, credits Customs and Border Protection with keeping the border process efficient and fluid, even as imports face oversight from more than 40 agencies. PHOTO COURTESY SUNFED

availability from Mexico by expanding production from northern Mexico into central states, DuPuis says.

"We have expanded our footprint in Mexico's Bajío region into Guanajuato and Querétaro, adding greenhouse-grown bell and mini peppers, and Roma and beefsteak tomatoes," he says. "We are finding a lot of good growers that fit the Divine Flavor mold, and the technology and innovation are really well set up there. They are dedicated to what Divine Flavor is gearing up to do in terms of sustainability and organics."

David Watson, senior vice president of sales and marketing at Rio Rico, AZ-based Fresh Farms, says business has continued to evolve, with the company adding grape volumes and varieties, and tomatoes as a new division. Additionally, Watson says Fresh Farms has increased its packaged peppers and corn tray production and operations in response to growing demand, opting to pack at source rather than repacking in Nogales.

As far as the trade situation is concerned, Watson believes the imposition of duties will increase costs, from fertilizer to packaging materials, in addition to the uncertainty over how the duties and wider tariffs will affect everyone in the supply chain.

"Retailers are uncertain, as are growers and foodservice distributors, but at some point the higher costs will be passed on the consumers," he predicts.

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Vallarta Supermarkets has 60 outlets across California, serving the vibrant Mexican and Latino community.

PHOTO COURTESY VALLARTA

# Southern California Facing Fresh Uncertainty

Immigration raids and labor shortages affect produce wholesalers.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

With a population of close to 24 million, accounting for 60% of California's total, Southern California encompasses the urban sprawl of Greater Los Angeles and San Diego to vineyards, breathtaking coastlines, and inhospitable deserts. It's also a state with a unique ethnic makeup, which is heavily influenced by its proximity to both the Mexican border and the Pacific Ocean.

According to analyst Statista, Hispanic and Latino residents in California overtook the number of white residents in 2023 and now constitute an estimated 40% of the state's population. Asian Americans, meanwhile, account for close to 16% of California's population, estimated at 7.1 million.

Analyst IBISWorld valued the state's supermarket and grocery store industry at \$118.5 billion in 2025, containing well over 13,700 businesses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this total also includes a thriving grocery sector catering to the state's distinct demographics.

According to online directory Grocery-Stores.org, California is ranked first in the U.S. for ethnic grocery stores, with a total of 426 outlets across the state. Retailers, like Northgate Market (with 41 stores in Southern California) and Vallarta Supermarkets (with 60 outlets across the state), together serve the vibrant Mexican and Latino community. Meanwhile, Asian food specialist 99 Ranch Market

operates 42 stores in California, accounting for 67% of the chain's total store number across the U.S.

## LABOR SHORTAGES

However, over recent weeks, Southern California's diverse ethnic mix has dominated media headlines for all the wrong reasons. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) immigration raids from July 2025 onward have had a profound impact across the region, leading to produce industry employees skipping work or avoiding grocery retail outlets for fear of being picked up.

Based close to the LA Wholesale Produce Market, Shapiro Gilman Shander Produce — better known as SGS Produce — is well-placed to have witnessed the chaos caused by the raids, both for wholesalers and the wider produce industry. As well as a broad range of conventional and organic produce staples, the company imports exotics.

SGS' chief operating officer, Talia Shandler, says it is difficult to assess the state of the local produce business without talking first about the overall immigration situation.

"Our customers are seeing people staying home more often, and that is trickling down overall. I think that, even though it's not isolated, the overall general climate in LA is affecting everybody," she says. "It's affecting growers with labor shortages, it's affecting retailers with clientele, it's affecting the entire chain."

Shandler emphasizes the company's primary duty is to its workers and its clients. "First and foremost, we care about our employees, we care about our customers," she says. "Our first responsibility is to them, making sure everybody is safe and protected. And then, we kind of take it as it comes."

In a similar vein, Francisco Clouthier, general manager of fellow Los Angeles-based wholesaler Maui Fresh International, says Southern



## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Our customers are seeing people staying home more often, and that is trickling down overall. I think that, even though it's not isolated, the overall general climate in LA is affecting everybody."**

Talia Shandler, Shapiro Gilman Shander Produce, Los Angeles, CA

- **"Consumption has decreased by a big percentage in LA. The distributors we work with in the LA Produce Market have lost workers, and the end consumers aren't buying as much."**

Erick Carranza, EV Produce, McAllen, TX

California's produce business has faced challenges over recent months, from tariffs on many imports to the end of the Tomato Suspension Agreement to ICE raids adversely affecting labor availability.

"Some of the problems we are dealing with are the Netherlands and Spain having duties placed on them, and the change in the tomato business," he says. "There's been an uneasy feeling for the last six months."

Although Maui Fresh has recently launched a new, four-color bell pepper pack, and has expanded its packaging range to include smaller bags and boxes to cater for the growing customer demand for convenience, Clouthier says labor availability continues to be a challenge.

"The program we're working on really needs more labor and we're very short of labor in LA for the type of work we do," he admits. "The supply of labor has been very limited. The problem with LA is not everybody wants to start work at 2 a.m. every morning."

### UNIQUE DEMOGRAPHIC MIX

In business since 1984, Melissa's/World Variety Produce operates out of a 330,000 square foot facility in Los Angeles and is currently the largest distributor of specialty produce in the U.S.

According to Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Melissa's Produce, the company continues to see strong sales at retail and foodservice, with a particular emphasis on table grapes, melons, figs and treefruit. Melissa's, he says, has also experi-

enced strong import sales for exotics, namely mango, papaya, pineapples and dragon fruit, among other products.

The strength of Melissa's exotics offer is surely a reflection of demographics-driven demand in the Southern California region, with Latino — and, to a lesser extent, Asian — preferences dominating the market. "There's stronger distribution of Hispanic / Latino produce in the West, Southwest, Southeast and East," says Schueller. "Toward the West and Southwest, it's more Mexican to Central American populations, and in the

Southeast and East, we see more Puerto Ricans and South Americans driving popular growth."

In addition, Schueller says there is significant demand for Asian produce in the West and East of the region, and in particular in metro Los Angeles. At the same time, he says it's clear that more people are willing to move for their careers, leading to the movement and diversification of ethnic populations across the country.

Despite this more recent phenomenon, Southern California's Latino population

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remains significant, a fact recently highlighted by Melissa's during the September 2025 Hispanic Heritage Month. To celebrate, Melissa's launched turnkey Hispanic Heritage Month promotions, complete with POS signage, recipes, and educational content to highlight Latino-inspired produce and ingredients.

The company used the occasion to highlight its extensive array of products aimed at the demographic, including cactus pears,

nopales, mangos, papayas, guavas, and specialty peppers, such as Fresno, Pasilla and Guajillo.

If there are challenges for Melissa's, Schueller says it has come in the form of tariffs on non-domestic sourced produce.

#### IMPACT ON CONSUMPTION

Although based in McAllen, TX, EV Produce operates distribution centers in Los Angeles, CA, and just over the border in

Tijuana, Mexico. According to Vice President Erick Carranza, EV has enjoyed a fruitful 12 months, increasing its export volumes from its own Mexican production sites, and reaching agreements with more North American retailers. "Fortunately, we were able to close deals with the distributor clients we were looking for, thanks to our presence in produce trade events."

In common with many Los Angeles-based produce distributors, Carranza says the increased presence of ICE has caused difficulties for all sections of the produce industry. "Consumption has decreased by a big percentage in LA," he says. "The distributors we work with in the LA Produce Market have lost workers, and the end consumers aren't buying as much. Of all our markets where we operate, we have seen the most impact in LA."

California, and more specifically Los Angeles, is currently EV's principal market for limes due in large part to the large Latino population, Carranza says. "Out of all the states, California — together with Texas — is the one with the largest Latino presence. This is a big factor when it comes to the consumption of our products."

When it comes to reaching this market, Carranza says one of EV's biggest advantages is the company's repacking facility in Tijuana, which allows it to effectively supply the region with limes and other Mexican-grown products.

"We save days in transit time, and we are able to repack the products so they reach retailers and end consumers in a better condition," he adds. "This is a major point of difference, which has helped us establish EV in the California market."

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Southern California's produce industry reflects the region's rich ethnic mix, where Latino and Asian demographics drive demand for specialty items, even as labor shortages, tariffs, and immigration raids create new challenges.

PHOTO COURTESY GELSON'S



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Once a holiday staple, pecans are breaking into snacking with health-focused positioning, new flavors and convenient formats.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

# Pecans Cracking New Opportunities

Holiday demand is helpful, but pushing pecans year-round is the path to more sales.

BY MIKE DUFF

**P**ecans are cracking new opportunities in the retail produce aisle. Traditionally tied to holiday desserts, the nut is now finding traction year-round, driven by health-conscious consumers, innovative flavors, and snackable formats. The category is evolving — and retailers are starting to take notice.

Industry leaders say the shift is driven by both market forces and consumer trends. Tess Mercado, founder and president of Nutridge Farms in Chino, CA, notes that rising pecan prices in the Golden State — partly due to agricultural labor disruptions — haven't slowed demand for her premium, date-sugar-coated pecans, which are vegan and gluten-free.

Tiernan Paine, owner of Tree-Ripe Fruit Co. in Milwaukee, WI, points to strong enthusiasm for flavored and candied varieties, even as overall sales fluctuate with broader economic pressures. Meanwhile, Chris Large, sales manager at Torn & Glasser in Los Angeles, highlights a steady market for shelled pecans, particularly in ethnic and seasonal channels.

Pecans have traditionally had a seasonality aligned with the late-year holidays, Mercado says, so they can benefit from rolling with the right flavor at the right time. "Pumpkin spice season is going to be good."

Tree-Ripe Fruit Co. takes a unique approach to selling produce to consumers,

using multiple trucks to visit scheduled locations and selling to consumers directly from the vehicles. "What I have seen, and we've seen a lot of, is demand and interest in flavored and all the candied pecans," Paine says. "All this is anecdotal, but the enthusiasm for those is still very strong. As a category, we're still very optimistic that there's some growth opportunities there."

Large says it's not that flavored product isn't something the company sells, but demand for basic pecans is still relatively strong. "In-shell pecan is a seasonal thing," he says. "We still sell a lot of in-shell pecans from September to December. We have a huge ethnic population, and in a lot of Latino stores, they want in-shell pecans."

## SELL BEYOND HOLIDAYS

Daniel Zedan, executive vice president, sales and marketing, Pecan Grove Farms, Batavia, IL, says holiday demand is helpful, but pushing everyday sales is the path to growth. "While the fall is traditionally the strongest sales quarter of the year, for the past several years, the industry has been focusing their marketing efforts on year-round uses, both domestically and overseas."

Serena Schaffner, chief marketing officer, American Pecan Council and American Pecan Promotion Board, Irving, TX, agrees opportunities exist in snacking, with critical demographics key to gains.

"Circana retail data tells us that pecans have grown by approximately 3.5% in the

snacking category this year compared to last year, which is exciting and also on trend," she says. "Consumers, particularly Millennials and Boomers, are looking at ways to snack nutritiously and nuts overall are a category that continues to deliver. Pecans don't just taste good, but they're good for you, easy to portion and are convenient to bring to work or pack for school lunches."

## UNEASY MARKET, BUT POTENTIAL

Zedan admits the pecan sector is somewhat mixed today, with any growth versus other nuts being minimal in part because of market conditions. "At the moment, the market is flat. While domestic consumption is up slightly, exports are down."

"Pricing reacts to the economy, and all food prices have seen increases since 2021, including pecans," notes Mary Mikelyn Bruorton, executive director of the Georgia Pecan Growers Association, Tifton, GA. Specific to the pecan sector, input costs have increased and driven prices up.

In Georgia, however, pecans have enjoyed some significant traction, Bruorton says, in part due to aggressive marketing campaigns funded through the Georgia Pecan Growers Association, the Georgia Commodity Commission for Pecans, the American Pecan Council and American Pecan Promotion Board.

Pecans get the most use and recognition in states that produce them in large quantities, such as Georgia, Texas and New Mexico.

"Pecan pie as a Southern dessert staple is probably the most recognized pecan dish in, not only Southern cuisine, but traditional American fare, particularly around U.S. holidays," Bruorton says.

Schaffner agrees that pecan-growing states, particularly in the South, have a higher-than-average consumption. However, she suggests that indicates opportunity exists elsewhere.

"We are beginning to focus more marketing efforts on the Northeast, as we see consumers there tend to reach for healthier snacks, and with our health benefits — good fats, low carbs, high antioxidants — we think we can appeal to those consumers."

Bruorton says boosting recognition of pecans as a snack food lends to greater merchandising opportunities within the produce department. With many produce sections offering more products positioned as healthy snacks, from cut fruit to tub nuts, one result can be a greater pecan presence alongside fruits and vegetables.

#### MATCHING DEMAND FOR FLAVOR

Rachel Ercole, marketing director, Diamond Foods, Stockton, CA, says that flavor innovation can drive pecan success in the market.

"Flavor innovation is driving tremendous growth across all snack categories, especially in the snack nuts category," she says.

Ercole says pecans naturally lend themselves to sweet profiles, and Diamond is seeing strong performance in traditional sweet flavors, like pecan pie/praline,

cinnamon, maple and honey. It recently introduced a Pecan Pie Snack Pecans flavor. "Sweet flavors represent 30% of unit sales and are growing 34.6% year-over-year."

Diamond is also expanding into other flavor territories. "Our introduction of Sea Salt Snack Pecans has exceeded expectations, as salted varieties are up 481.7% versus last year, though still a small 0.4% of unit sales," Ercole says. "There's also growing interest in spicy flavors like Cajun, which are up 194% and represent 1% of sales. We're even seeing fun, innovative flavors like Dill Pickle and Cherry Slurpee appearing in the

broader snack nut category."

Large says that, although value-added isn't huge for Torn & Glasser, the company does do shelled chocolate, barbecue, and sometimes glazed varieties. Their butter toffee pecans are also a mainstay.

Pecans may be the next nut to break out, Large says, as companies turn to flavors, and as processors, including those making nut milks and butters, turn to them as the next opportunity, which is something that could raise the profile of the commodity to the benefit of produce department sales. **PB**

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- "While unflavored pecans still represent about 60% of unit sales, flavored varieties are where the real excitement is, as they're growing at 33.5%."

Rachel Ercole, Diamond Foods, Stockton, CA

- "There has been a lot more interest in pecans from Gen Z and Millennials, who are looking for a healthier snack/diet alternative."

Daniel Zedan, Pecan Grove Farms, Batavia, IL



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# Innovation Can Deliver Sales Growth

BY ANANDA ROY

Smaller consumer packaged goods (CPG) manufacturers are innovating at scale to create “superstar” products, with average sales per innovation higher for small- and medium-sized brands than large ones. Tapping into local and sustainability claims and shoppers’ desire for products that excite, inspire and support their lifestyle, smaller challenger brands are highly effective in driving sales revenue through innovation — proving the old adage that “small is mighty.”

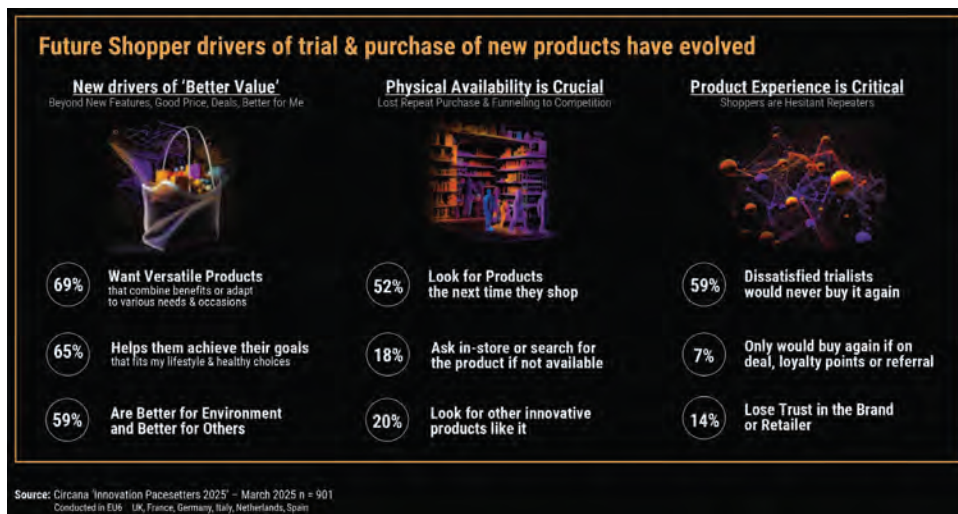
This conclusion is based on the *Europe’s Innovation Pacesetters 2025 Report*, published by Circana — a detailed study of over 75,000 new CPG product launches and renovations in 2024, encompassing food, drink, household, personal care, baby and pet products. The report analyzes point-of-sale data from Circana’s largest European markets, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.K. (EU6), and draws on consumer research to understand purchasing behavior.



Across Europe, ongoing geopolitical and economic uncertainty, coupled with inflation, has led to an overall decline in CPG innovation. The number of innovations fell by 20% compared to 2023, while sales of new products were down 17%. Only 5.2% of all CPG products were

innovations last year, down from 6.2% the previous year; one of the lowest levels ever recorded by Circana.

The U.K. and the Netherlands had the highest inflation rates and suffered the biggest innovation declines in terms of value sales. The U.K. saw sales of innovations in edibles categories decline 28%



Innovation is a proven source of growth and a way of delighting shoppers who are eager for new products at a time of cost-cutting and uncertainty.

between 2023 and 2024, while the Netherlands fell 43% over the same period.

Innovation is the lifeblood of CPG, a proven source of growth and a way of delighting shoppers who are eager for new products at a time of cost-cutting and uncertainty.

Despite New Product Development (NPD) declining year-on-year in all years since the pandemic, as companies focus on optimizing their portfolios and using shrinkflation to boost sales, there are significant pockets of growth among smaller and challenger brands and among some of our best-loved heritage brands reinventing themselves.

Circana’s analysis also reveals that new products perform better in their second year of launch as shoppers try them out, any distribution issues are sorted, and price adjustments are made. **PB**

*Ananda Roy is senior vice president and industry adviser, Consumer Goods, Circana.*

*Circana analysed point of sale data for branded consumer packaged goods from the EU6: France, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands, between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2024. This was compared to trends in the previous full year 2023 and in some case studies to mid-term trends in 2021-2022. The report also draws on Circana’s Pacesetters Survey, undertaken in March 2025 with 1,000 consumers across the EU6, and Circana’s European Innovation Attitudes research, undertaken in April 2023 with 3,500 consumers in the EU6. Circana also uses proprietary analytical models to develop innovation rankings.*

## FRESH CATEGORY UNDER PRESSURE

- Innovation Value Share declined -1.5pp to 4.4% (FY2024 vs FY2023).
- Innovation in fresh, including fresh produce, struggled to maintain value growth.
- Innovation slowdown: Fresh is losing innovation share due to falling value and unit sales, despite being price sensitive.
- Small and niche fresh produce manufacturers are capturing outsized returns per innovation, indicating opportunities for premiumization and specialist positioning.
- Across EU6, demand for health-focused, functional, and convenient fresh formats is sustaining NPD success in selected subcategories like smoothies.

# Ugly Produce is Not ‘Ugly’

BY NOVELLA LUI

**W**hen you come across the term, “ugly produce,” you may associate it with vegetables and fruits that don’t meet the cosmetic standards set by food retailers. While customers tend to shop with their eyes first, there is no reason to suggest that produce’s appearance has any association with its taste, flavor and quality.



As living costs go up, selling less-than-perfect produce can help make fresh vegetables and fruits more affordable and accessible. Some produce businesses have set up a business model where they gather the odd-looking veggies and fruits from farms and retail grocers, and deliver produce boxes with mixed varieties directly to customers’ doors.

So, I can’t help but ponder, why can’t both unattractive and attractive produce coexist in the same retail space? Can we

change retail customers’ perceptions so they see that produce of the same variety is equally good, regardless of differences in appearance?

## GIVE CUSTOMERS MORE OPTIONS

In the grocery store, you can easily spot the day-old produce from its fresh counterparts, because the former is either packaged with a discounted sticker or placed in a separate area designated for discounted items in the produce section.

However, it is nearly impossible to find odd-looking fresh produce, whether it is a carrot, apple, or potato, you name it. So, it is unsurprising that consumers prefer produce that looks perfect and associate this attribute with quality, taste and nutritional value.

To bridge this gap in perception, produce retailers could consider presenting the unattractive varieties right next to the perfect-looking produce as a separate SKU, normalizing and sharing with customers that variations exist as part of the produce’s natural growth.

## THE NAME MATTERS

In addition to giving customers more options, strategizing on the ideal name for these aesthetically imperfect produce is key, according to a 2021 study published in the *Journal of Marketing*. This ties into how marketing and product presentation can impact buying decisions.

In one of the experiments, the researchers labeled the cosmetically flawed produce as “ugly” with displays and advertising, while placing them next to the cosmetically perfect produce. This name caught the eyes of some customers, which might have contributed to the boost in sales for the misshapen produce.

Another 2022 study published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* indicated that when cosmetically flawed produce was paired with messaging that described the environmental and sustainability benefits and debunked the myth that only perfectly looking produce was acceptable, customers were more likely to buy the unconventional produce.

## PRICING ALSO MATTERS

Still, giving these unattractive veggies and fruits a catchy name and educating customers is only one strategy. Most customers want good quality at an affordable price, so figuring out the right price point for odd-looking produce will require some thought and consideration.

The same research study from the *Journal of Marketing* showed that if the price of the aesthetically flawed produce was marked far too low from the conventional, such as offering the former a 60% discount instead of 25%, customers might relate that produce with a 60% discount would be likely to be of lower quality and more inclined to avoid it.

## POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

From an organizational perspective, especially for mid- to large-sized grocers, adding cosmetically flawed produce into the retail landscape may require administrative and policy changes.

Changing the status quo, though, may shift customers’ perception and acceptance of ugly produce, simply because ugly produce is not ugly at all. They should be a conventional commodity just like their industry-acceptable counterparts — they offer the same taste and health attributes. Selling these items helps customers save money and reduces food waste — an ongoing issue that requires multifaceted solutions.

Plus, making these odd-looking produce more readily available to customers may also diversify farmers’ revenue and profits, giving them an additional option to sell their products as they are, aside from the current strategies that involve selling this produce as animal feed and ingredients for added-value products, and donating their unwanted produce to gleaning programs.

The downside to including “ugly” produce in the mainstream market would be posing challenges to produce businesses that are already in this niche market. If retail grocers, such as a neighborhood grocery store, decide to sell ugly produce as an additional SKU as part of their offerings, along with their conventional fresh produce, would this put existing produce businesses in this niche market at risk and drive them out of business? I would love to hear your thoughts on this.

Another consideration for retail grocers may be their company’s mission and vision. While assessing the profit margin is important for some businesses, others may focus on their environmental impact, and some may consider both or more factors. Ultimately, knowing what your customers value and aligning your values with theirs while keeping in mind your business goals is important.

All in all, providing customers with every opportunity to enjoy produce — no matter how it looks — ensures that quality options are always within reach.

**PB**

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



# Take the Chaos Out of Fresh Produce Distribution

BY MARIA DESARBO

Choosing the best ERP software system to run your produce business is one of the most important decisions a company can make. Each platform caters to the subtle nuances of different sectors across the fresh produce industry.

Famous Software has carved out a niche among large retail organizations, offering tools that align with the complexity of high-volume operations. Produce Pro, a tried-and-true option, is a favorite

among terminal markets and distributors who value stability and familiarity. Our software of choice at Carbonella & DeSarbo, GoPure, is an ideal solution for FOB shippers and regional distributors like ourselves.

GoPure allows us to operate efficiently, accurately and confidently across all areas of our business, from sales and inventory to accounting and logistics. Its intuitive interface, affordability, and clean transaction tracking logs made it a

no-brainer for us. But, like every ERP system on the market, it had a gap — business intelligence and analytics.

In today's data-driven world, accurate and effective decision-making requires more than a gut feeling. The ability to make smart choices hinges on hard facts derived from real-time data.

While ERP platforms store vast amounts of transactional data, extracting insights from that data is often a tedious process. We found ourselves cobbling together spreadsheets, exporting PDFs, and manually calculating metrics — losing valuable time and, often, context. Gut instinct, while helpful, can be clouded with emotion.

Our chief executive, Vinnie Caliendo, says that meaningful data should be no more than “three clicks away.” That mantra guided us toward integrating our ERP system with Microsoft Power BI — a platform that has completely transformed how we view our business.

The moment we connected GoPure to Power BI, it was like someone turned the lights on in the room. Suddenly, we had the ability to visualize performance trends, identify inefficiencies, and act quickly on insights that previously took hours or even days to discover. Instead of waiting for month-end reports to spot issues, we now detect them in near real-time.

I still remember the first time Power BI helped us catch a drop-off in ordering from one of our longtime customers. We hadn't noticed it during our normal weekly reviews, but Power BI flagged the change in order pattern. Our sales rep made a quick call, learned the customer was trialing a competitor, and we were able to address

the issue before we lost the business. Without that dashboard, we probably wouldn't have caught it in time.

What makes Power BI so impactful is its flexibility and visual storytelling. With customizable dashboards, we can track KPIs, such as sales by customer, item velocity, margin trends, spoilage, delivery accuracy and purchasing patterns. These dashboards aren't just for executives — they're shared with salespeople, buyers, warehouse leads, and customer service reps so everyone is aligned on what's happening and where we're headed.

There are other platforms on the market that function similarly — Tableau, Qlik Sense, Looker, and IBM Cognos, to name a few. With the help of a capable IT consultant or internal tech lead, these platforms can connect directly to your ERP and render data into interactive visuals. Gone are the days of manually creating Excel reports or making critical decisions based solely on intuition. Now, data is not only accessible — it's actionable.

We've built over 40 unique dashboards across departments, each one tailored to a specific business need. When our sales team wants to know whether a customer has dropped certain SKUs, they don't need to ask accounting or operations to run a report. They simply click into their BI dashboard, filter by customer, and immediately see order trends over time. This empowers our team to be more proactive, responsive and customer-focused.

We've also found that integrating financial metrics with operational data paints a fuller picture of our business health. By layering purchasing and sales data with AP/AR insights, we can track margin compression, price fluctuations, and vendor performance — all within the same dashboard. This 360-degree view helps us manage costs, make smarter procurement decisions, and ensure that we're investing resources in the right places.

At Carbonella & DeSarbo, Power BI has also helped us foster a data-first culture. When everyone — from the owner to the forklift operator — can see the impact of their actions reflected in real-time data, accountability and performance naturally improve. We've become a more agile, transparent and informed organization.

The fresh produce industry isn't just about freshness anymore — it's about foresight. With razor-thin margins, short shelf lives, and constant market volatility, those who can harness the power of their data will outpace those who can't. ERP systems lay the foundation, but tools like Power BI unlock their true potential.

In an era where every decision counts, it's not enough to have data — you need to use it. And when done right, business intelligence isn't just a tool, it's a competitive advantage.

**PB**

*Maria DeSarbo is president of Carbonella & DeSarbo, Branford, CT.*



## WRITE FOR PRODUCE BUSINESS!

We welcome analysis and insight from industry leaders who have expertise to share in retail, wholesale, foodservice, or trends that impact produce across the world. Reach out to us at [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com) to inquire about column submissions.

## INFORMATION SHOWCASE

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Alpine Fresh, Inc.	66-67	305-594-9117	alpinefresh.com	J. R. Kelly Co.	84	618-344-2910	jrkelly.com
Altar Produce, LLC	66-67	760-357-6762	altarproduce.com	JAB Produce, Inc.	44	312-226-7805	jabproducecompany.com
Anthony Marano Company	38-39	773-321-7500	anthonymarano.com	Jacobs Malcolm & Burr (JMB)	66-67	209-367-0990	jmb-produce.com
Avocados from Mexico (AFM)	Cover	714-721-2256	avocadosfrommexico.com	Jackson Farming Co.	69	910-567-2202	jfcmelons.com
Ayco Farms, Inc.	66-67	954-788-6800	aycofarms.com	Jade Produce, LLC	76	956-227-1098	jadeproduce.com
Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Inc.	45	313-841-8300	benbdetroit.com	Jonathan Sprouts	85	508-763-5505	jonathansprouts.com
Brighter Bites	7	773-398-9336	brighterbites.org	Kurt Zuhlke & Assoc, Inc.	56	610-588-7992	producepackaging.com
California Endive Farms	84	707-374-1111	endive.com	Maui Fresh International LLC	93	213-688-0880	maui-fresh.com
Capital City Fruit Co, Inc.	46	515-981-5111	capitalcityfruit.com	Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	85	201-807-9292	auerpak.com
Carb Americas	66-67	954-786-0000	carbamerica.com	Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	66-67	201-807-9292	auerpak.com
Classic Yam, Inc.	68	209-394-8656	ctcproduce.com	Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	41	201-807-9292	auerpak.com
Coast To Coast Produce, LLC	42	203-271-2006	ctcproduce.com	Miedema Produce, Inc.	65	616-669-9420	miedemaproduce.com
Connecting Health Innovations	64	chi-llc.net	ctcproduce.com	MIXTEC Group	18	562-652-2299	mixtec.net
Courchesne Larose Ltee	61	514-525-6381	courchesnelarose.com	Nash Produce	68	252-443-6011	nashproduce.com
Crystal Valley Foods	66-67	305-591-6567	crystalvalleyfoods.com	New Jersey Department of Agriculture	21	609-913-6520	findjerseyfresh.com
Daaks International, Inc.	95	213-612-3225	darrigony.com	New York Apple Association, Inc.	73	585-924-2171	applesfromny.com
D'Arrigo New York	35	718-991-5900	darrigony.com	North American Produce Buyers Ltd.	59	416-255-4436	naproduce.com
Dole Food Company, Inc.	2	704-213-3478	dole.com	Pacific Tomato Growers/Sunripe Certified, LLC	90	941-722-3291	sunripecertified.com
Eagle Export Inc.	62	450-992-0521	eagleexport.ca	Peter Rabbit Farms	85	760-398-0136	peterrabbitfarms.com
EV Produce International, Inc.	94	956-215-8872	evproduce.com	Produce Blue Book	50	630-668-3500	bluebookservices.com
Farm Direct Supply, LLC	66-67	561-910-4341	farmdirectsupply.com	Produce House	87	520-281-8943	produce.house
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.	37	718-893-1640	fiermanproduce.com	S. Katzman Produce, Inc.	43	718-991-4700	katzmanproduce.com
FirstFruits Marketing, LLC	71	509-853-4710	ffm-wa.com	Senn Bros Inc	52	803-799-6210	sennbrothers.com
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	79	850-617-7343	followfreshfromflorida.com	Seven Seas/Tom Lange	66-67	217-786-3300	tomlange.com
Foundation for Fresh Produce	103	202-303-3435	freshproduce.com	SL Produce LLC	24-25	+52 687 897 1971	slproduce.mx
Fresh Innovations, LLC. (Yo Quiero Brands)	49	817-674-9120	freshinnovationsllc.com	South Carolina Dept of Agriculture	51-54	803-422-7256	agriculture.sc.gov
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas	91	520-287-2707	freshfrommexico.com	Southeast Produce Council	54	877-720-7372	seproduceccouncil.com
Fru-Veg Marketing, Inc.	66-67	305-591-7766	fruveg.com	Southern Specialties, Inc.	66-67	954-784-6500	southernspecialties.com
Garber Farms	68	337-824-6328	garberfarm.com	Spice World, Inc.	89	407-851-9432	spiceworldinc.com
Gem-Pack Berries, LLC	81	831-320-8181	gem-packberries.com	Square 1 Farms, LLC	66-67	561-614-2814	sq1farms.com
Goodness Gardens	84	845-355-4757	goodnessgardens.com	Stronach & Sons Inc	63	416-259-5000	stronachandsons.ca
Gourmet Trading Company	66-67	310-350-5404	gourmettrading.net	SweetTango (Next Best Thing Coop)	72	866-716-3428	sweettango.com
Grimmway Farms (Cal-Organic)	69	661-845-5229	grimmway.com	The Perishable Specialist Inc.	66-67	305-477-9906	theperishablespecialist.com
Harvest Sensations, LLC	66-67	305-907-3230	harvestsensations.com	The Wonderful Company	75	661-720-2400	wonderfulcitrus.com
Heartland Produce Co.	46	262-653-1000	heartlandproduce.com	Thermal Technologies, Inc.A37	5	803-691-8000	thermaltechnologies.com
Heritage Flower Company	18	877-359-7626	heritageflower.com	Titan Farms Sales, LLC	52	803-685-5381	titanfarms.com
I Love Produce, LLC	85	610-869-4664	iloveproduce.com	Topshaw Farms Packing	68	662-682-7733	topshaw.com
International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA)	15	302-738-7100	freshproduce.com	Vick Family Farms Partnership	68	252-237-7313	vickfamilyfarms.com
IPR Fresh	88	520-377-5710	iprfresh.com	Walter P. Rawl & Sons, Inc.	53	803-894-1900	rawl.net
				Watsonia Farms	54	803-685-7035	watsoniafarms.com



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Markon's quality control efforts begin in the field. Examining lettuce in 1986 are (standing, L-R) Ronnie Wallace, president, and Bill Sheid, vice president, Ben E. Keith Co.; and Gary Walsh, president, Miller Cascade Inc. In the foreground are Markon Executive Vice President David Eldredge and Paul Gordon, president, Gordon Food Service. PHOTO COURTESY MARKON

# Markon Celebrates 40 Years of Foodservice Innovation

**F**ounded in 1985 in the Salinas Valley, CA, Markon Cooperative Inc. will reach its 40th anniversary milestone in November. From the beginning, Markon set out to provide solutions for foodservice operators. They were the first to create foodservice-specific brands, introduce specialized cuts and packs, provide timely market and product information tools, and initiate food safety metrics.

Since then, they have continued to champion the unique needs of operators across North America. And because Markon's five broadline distributor members span the U.S. and Canada, they deliver quality, consistency and dependability, no matter the location.

"With Markon, you can feel confident that your fruit and vegetable products come from the most dependable growers in the industry, growers that Markon has built strong relationships with over our more than 40 years in business," says Andy Hamilton, chief executive.

The company officially kicked off its year of celebrations at the May board of directors' meeting in Monterey, CA. The three-day event brought together Markon leadership and representatives from all five of their independent foodservice member companies: Ben E. Keith, Gordon Food Service, Gordon Food Service Canada, Nicholas & Company and Shamrock Foods.

"Markon was created to bring value to our member companies by educating growers about the real-life needs of foodservice customers in the areas of packaging, pack sizes, product informa-



Mark Shaw, vice president operations, Markon, leads an industry tour in 2002.

PHOTO COURTESY MARKON

tion, promotions and new products," says Hamilton. "Over the past four decades, we've set many milestones that keep us uniquely positioned to anticipate and respond to the rapidly evolving fresh produce demands of the foodservice industry."

Showing no signs of stopping, Markon has bold plans for the next 40 years, focusing on product innovation, food safety, sustainability, community support and multi-unit account development. **PB**

**The Foundation for Fresh Produce is the solution  
for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.**

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by Cornell University

GLOBAL TRADE SYMPOSIUM

RISING STAR RECEPTION

40 Under Forty Awards  
EPC Leadership Alumni Gathering

OPENING COCKTAIL RECEPTION

## Wednesday, December 3rd

KEYNOTE BREAKFAST

EXPO OPEN

BUYER CONNECT MEETINGS

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS SERIES

## Thursday, December 4th

FOODSERVICE FORUM  
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- Hunts Point
- Philadelphia Market
- Manhattan Retail Tour  
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