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PROCUREMENT Mexican Produce



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Innovative new choices perk up the category.





THIS MONTH'S WINNER

DEYSI HERNANDEZ
Account Receivables
Don Hugo Produce, Inc.
Edinburg, TX

For more than a decade, Deysi Hernandez has been a part of Don Hugo Produce Inc., based in Edinburg, TX. Since joining the company in April 2012, she has witnessed its growth firsthand. Established in 2008, the small operation is now a recognized name in the produce industry.

As an accounts receivable specialist, Hernandez creates customer orders, manages accounts, and ensures details for the company, which specializes in importing and distributing Mexican produce.

"The company has allowed me to experience different positions, from the shipping/receiving department to the accounting

department," she says, "allowing me to understand how each department's duties and accuracy connect with each other to allow the company to flow."

Deysi's advice for those new to the produce world is "don't give up. Do your best to provide the best quality in product and service."

Outside of work, Hernandez enjoys moments that balance her professional life. "I love spending time with my daughters — watching movies, cooking, and enjoying the sunset," she says.

Reading PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine, she says, "I love how the magazine provides so much useful information surrounding produce, and I enjoy reading each page."

For Hernandez, success in the produce industry isn't just about numbers — it's about growing, learning, and taking pride in the journey.

PB

How To Win! To win the PRODUCE BUSINESS Quiz, the first thing you must do is read through the articles and advertisements in the print or digital issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, scan and send your answers to the address listed on the coupon. **If you wish to fill out the questions online, please go to: www.producebusiness.com/quiz.** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our February 2026 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

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



QUESTIONS FOR THE DECEMBER ISSUE

- 1) What is the name of the new brand of fruit packed by DiSilva/Morning Kiss? _____
- 2) How many years has Bushmans' Inc. been "Growing Excellence"? _____
- 3) ProducePackaging.com is the website for which company? _____
- 4) Foodtown of Bushwick is located in which Borough of NYC? _____
- 5) What is web address for Gem-Pack Berries? _____
- 6) In which city is Galera Fresh based? _____

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Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

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

(2) snail mail to: DECEMBER 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



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75 YEARS OF KNOWING AND GROWING CITRUS

After 75 years of being in the citrus business, we've learned a thing or two.

Growing a citrus business takes a lot more than planting and harvesting fruit. It starts with taking care of the people around you and stopping at nothing to make sure those relationships grow and thrive. We've also learned that a vertical approach works best. From growing and packing to marketing, building brands, and beyond, we've reimagined how to grow a healthy and thriving citrus business from the ground up. And we'd like to thank all our partners for continuing to make Wonderful Citrus a lot more wonderful.

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TRANSITIONS

Colombia Avocado Board

The Colombia Avocado Board (CAB), Orlando, FL, held its annual meeting, Oct. 16, bringing together directors and association members to review the year's progress and elect the nine-member board of directors for the 2025/26 term. Four officer positions were filled, including one new director, as CAB builds momentum for another year of growth and stronger retail partnerships in the U.S. market.

Galen Johnson, CAB secretary and importer director from Mission Produce, is newly elected to the board of directors. Members re-elected to new officer roles include: **Kellen Newhouse**, CAB chair and importer director from West Pak Avocado; **Ricardo Uribe**, CAB vice chair and exporter director from Cartama; and **Sergio Plata Ortiz**, CAB treasurer and exporter director from Baika Fruit.

Continuing board members include: **Katheryn Mejia**, CAB director with Corpohass; **Brian Gomez**, CAB importer director with Green Fruit Avocados; **Dustin Hahn**, CAB importer director from Naturipe Avocados; **Ricardo Mejia**, CAB exporter director from Fruty Green; and **Carlos Andres Londoño**, CAB exporter director from Jardin Exotics.



Galen Johnson

NatureSweet

NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX, appointed **Paul Bonvehi** as chief financial officer. A seasoned global finance leader, Bonvehi will play a pivotal role in advancing NatureSweet's long-term strategy and strengthening the company's operational and financial performance.

Bonvehi has more than 25 years of international financial leadership experience within the agriculture and food industries across the United States, Latin America and Europe. Most recently, he served as chief financial officer at Martori Farms.



Paul Bonvehi



ANNOUNCEMENTS

Ark Foods Celebrates the Holiday Season With Squash Program

Ark Foods, Immokalee, FL, is highlighting its domestically grown honeynut squash program this holiday season.

"Honeynut squash perfectly captures what Ark Foods stands for — flavor, simplicity and a genuine love for vegetables," says Noah Robbins, founder and chief executive. "It's grown right here in the U.S., farmed in Upstate New York, and packed with natural sweetness that proves seasonal produce can be both comforting and exciting."

Compact and deeply flavorful, the variety is about half the size of a traditional butternut, but twice as sweet. Its rich orange flesh is high in beta-carotene, a natural antioxidant, and its edible skin makes preparation effortless.

Watermelon Board Unveils Strategies for Category Growth

The National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB), Winter Springs, FL, has released its latest research, *Omnichannel Strategies for Watermelon Category Growth*, revealing that the category has added 7 million new purchasing households since 2021, with watermelon now in 75% of all U.S. households. These new buyers helped generate \$782 million in incremental purchases, pushing total category purchases to \$3.2 billion — a 33% increase over the period.

"Industry partners now have a clear roadmap for growing watermelon sales across retail channels," says Mark Arney, NWPB executive director. "By tailoring strategies to the unique opportunities present in each channel and among evolving shopper demographics, retailers can strengthen loyalty, broaden penetration, and drive incremental trips and dollars."



Watermelon category sees rise in cross-channel purchasing

FPA Honors Pedro Batiz Sr.

The Fresh Produce Association of the Americas, Nogales, AZ, announced that Pedro Francisco Batiz Guillen will receive the Pillar of the Industry Award at FPA's annual meeting in March.

Guillen is a distinguished veteran of the produce industry whose career has been defined by leadership, partnership and mentorship. He began his journey in produce at age 17 and went on to co-found RB Packing and later Divine Flavor, alongside Alán Aguirre Sr. and Carlos Bon Sr.

Beyond his business achievements, Pedro has impacted countless individuals throughout his career. His friend and business partner, Carlos Bon Jr., shares, "I can write a book about Pedro Batiz. He stands for faith and resilience ... Pedro has been able to face issues through his faith and resiliency. He can really bring out the best of everyone in a work group."



California Giant Foundation Donates \$60,000

California Giant, Watsonville, CA, announced its philanthropic distribution of \$60,000 through The California Giant Foundation. This contribution, raised through employee-led fundraising efforts, highlights the company's commitment to its Berries with Purpose ideology: nourishing communities, protecting the planet, and delivering exceptional berries for generations to come.

The funds were generated through a variety of staff-driven initiatives, including the successful annual Skirt Steak Barbecue and various year-round office campaigns.

The 2025 nonprofit beneficiary organizations include: CASA of Santa Cruz County, CASA of



Monterey County, CASA of Santa Barbara County, Jacob's Heart Children's Cancer Support Services, Seneca Central Coast, Monarch Services, Partnership for Children, Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes, Pajaro Valley Shelter Services and Teen Kitchen Project.

Unique Cold Storage Expands

Unique Cold Storage, Pompano Beach, FL, has expanded its menu of services to include custom bagging capabilities. The netted bagging equipment complements the company's offerings of third-party services.

The Unique Cold Storage facility is Primus certified and carries SQF, Organic and SMETA certifications. The company offers a significant menu of services, including cold storage, consolidation, cross-docking, forced air and hydrocooling, ripening services and customized packing services.



ORBIS Corporation Hosts Grand Opening of Manufacturing Facility

ORBIS Corporation recently hosted the grand opening of its renovated state-of-the-art manufacturing facility in Greenville, TX. The facility, in operation since earlier this year, features 420,000 square feet of manufacturing space and 240,000 square feet of warehouse space.

It produces reusable totes and pallets. With sustainability in mind, ORBIS fully repurposed and modernized this existing facility, estimated to create more than 190 new jobs within three years.

Located 50 miles northeast of Dallas, Greenville offers a strategic location.

NEW PRODUCT

¡Yo Quiero! Brings the Heat With Jalapeño Dips Collection

This holiday season, ¡Yo Quiero!, Rhome, TX, is turning up the heat and flavor with the launch of its new Jalapeño Dips Collection.

Featuring Jalapeño Ranch, Jalapeño Dip, Candied Jalapeño Dip and Candied Jalapeños, the new collection features the "sweet + spicy" flavor craze with two of its items.

All products in the Jalapeño Dips Collection are now available for order for retailers nationwide.



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Gap Between Consumers and Industry

BY BEN CAMPBELL

The produce industry is a dynamic, fast-paced, competitive, global family that feeds millions of people around the world.

The industry has transformed over the years from a hand-harvesting/horse and wagon transportation system to an industry that integrates both human labor and technology. The industry has become more environmentally efficient,



reducing food waste at the production and consumer levels, while also being a critical part of communities, both rural and urban.

On the consumer side, a lot is known about demand for produce, whether it is willingness-to-purchase locally and/or organically grown, food safety, or reasons for purchasing. However, little is known about how consumers view issues that have a direct impact on the industry.

Utilizing data from several nationally representative surveys of U.S. consumers, we find that consumers have mixed perceptions about the produce industry.

MIXED CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

Looking at consumer views on the produce industry, around 60% view the industry as heading in the right direction on things such as environmental sustainability, feeding the U.S., food safety, paying appropriate wages, safe working conditions and trade issues.

However, 40% of consumers view the industry as heading in the wrong direction on the same issues, with around 15% indicating the industry as a whole is moving in the extremely wrong direction.

Though most consumers have a positive view, it is concerning that such a large percentage of consumers have negative views of the industry.

The most important issues to consumers tended to be disaster assistance to producers, increasing costs for production, labor issues and import/export issues. The next included the aging of farmers, helping the younger generation move into farming, and selling farmland to developers.

Though all of these issues have important ramifications to the industry, the top issues are most likely top issues for two reasons 1) they relate to issues that could result in short-term price increases at the consumer level; and 2) they are more widely covered in the media and are more likely seen as more important due to consumers being more aware.

TRADE AND LABOR

Taking a closer look at two issues that are having a tremendous impact on the produce industry — import/export and labor — some interesting results emerge.

With respect to trade, consumers view the produce industry as being net neutral on trade, if not leaning to the U.S. exporting more than they import. A quick look at USDA data indicates this could not be further from the truth, as the U.S. is a net importer of produce with the gap expected to widen over the next decade.

Further, consumers view the import/export situation for produce to be similar to that of major meats (beef, chicken, pork), timber, row crops and production inputs. The importance of this finding is immense, as the produce industry in the U.S. is facing exponential growth in imports, with small export growth, while many other agricultural commodities are seeing slowed import growth and increasing export growth.

If policymakers share the same perceptions of the produce industry as their constituents, key policy decisions may not reflect the true nature of the situation.

With respect to labor, there is a large percentage (around 70%) of U.S. consumers who perceive there to be no labor issues in the produce industry, with around 30% of the 70% perceiving there to be a surplus of labor. And if there is a shortage, paying higher wages, increasing worker benefits, and providing better working conditions are the key to solving the shortage.

However, only 40% of the population surveyed indicated they would pay more for produce if worker wages were increased. This number is most likely high, as consumers often indicate they will pay higher prices in surveys and in reality, will not.

Looking at the H2-A program, most consumers surveyed were unfamiliar with the program and were indifferent to the H2-A provisions, though responses were varied on whether H2-A workers were paid a competitive wage in 2025. These results indicate a consumer base that does not understand the labor market in the produce industry.

So, overall, the U.S. population tends to be uninformed on issues that have a direct impact on the produce industry.

On the policy front, policies at the national, state, and local levels have a direct impact on competitiveness in the marketplace. A failure by a population to understand the complexities of issues impacting an industry often leads to policies that do not address issues that need to be addressed.

Ben Campbell is a professor in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at the University of Georgia.

PB

... the U.S. population tends to be uninformed on issues that have a direct impact on the produce industry.



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. 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, which began in October, 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 three 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.

Send your comments on any of these articles/topics to editor@producebusiness.com.



Don't Ignore the CEO Gap

BY JERRY BUTT

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reports the average age of U.S. farm producers was 58.1 years in 2022 and that number continues to climb each time they conduct surveys. At MIXTEC Group, an executive search firm serving fresh produce, we believe the average age of owner-operators in our industry is higher.



In an industry accustomed to leadership continuity, the aging of senior leadership presents a major risk. Family-owned fresh produce enterprises are especially vulnerable: Founders or longtime CEOs are nearing retirement, the next generation may not be ready — or willing — to step in, and few family businesses have formal succession plans or deep benches of leadership talent to draw from. In short, the CEO handoff could be the weak link in tomorrow's produce companies.

Given that family farms account for more than 95% of U.S. farms, CEO transition presents a significant risk for our industry that is not talked about often enough, as it is overshadowed by more urgent issues, including water, labor and tariffs. However, the potential crisis for companies may be coming sooner than they think.

Over the past decade, retirement has driven 75% of the CEO search assignments MIXTEC Group has conducted — not a typo. One only needs to look at our own trade associations, IFPA, Western Growers Association, and the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, among many others — to see the trend firsthand. These high-profile examples are merely the tip of the iceberg; growers/shippers, processors, and distributors make up the bulk of movement beneath the surface.

The CEO handoff
could be the weak
link in tomorrow's
produce companies.

WHY IT MATTERS IN FRESH PRODUCE

Family-owned companies rely on a mix of enterprise-specific know-how — crop planning, seasonality, post-harvest handling and customer relationships — and executive leadership in strategy, supply chain and compliance. When a long-serving CEO exits, the company doesn't just lose a titleholder, it risks losing institutional knowledge that is nuanced and vital. While the industry is becoming more data-driven, certain business decisions still depend on human experience — assets that can walk out the door at retirement.

Here are some of the key challenges I see:

- Many firms remain led by founders or first-generation CEOs, making transitions emotionally and operationally complex.
- Younger family members may pursue careers outside agriculture or feel unprepared for the multifaceted demands.
- Unlike large, publicly traded corporations, produce firms often lack deep benches of non-family executives.
- Thin or informal succession plans can create risks.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE CEO GAP

Produce is unforgiving: Narrow harvest windows, perishable inventory, weather volatility, and buyer demands leave no margin for leadership misalignment. When a CEO exits without planning, the consequences can cascade:

- Stalled growth or strategy paralysis while new leadership finds its footing.
- Culture can be adversely affected.
- Loss of customer or supplier confidence as disruptions ripple through operations.
- Governance erosion, weakening oversight of quality, food safety, labor and compliance.

With consolidation, globalization, labor and climate pressures, leadership gaps threaten both competitiveness and resilience.

CLOSING THE GAP

Family-owned produce businesses should treat CEO succession as a strategic imperative, not just a good idea. Steps include:

1. Start early and document the plan. Identify successors, set timelines, define roles, and delegate responsibilities gradually.
2. Professionalize governance. Engage independent directors or non-family executives, establish performance metrics, and invest capital in leadership development. (If you take nothing else from this article, take this.)
3. Build a talent pipeline. Family successors need structured training in finance, operations, supply chain, and strategic thinking.
4. Communicate and align. Keep family, management, board, key customers, and suppliers informed about succession path, expectations, and timelines to reduce conflict and uncertainty.
5. Plan for the unexpected. Illness, sudden departures, or external crises can derail even the best intentions.

A TIMELY IMPERATIVE

As Baby Boomers retire, the leadership pipeline must be replenished. Fortunately, the industry offers strong apprentice and leadership programs for all levels through national, regional, and commodity-specific trade associations. More than 35 U.S. universities host agricultural leadership programs. Additionally, there are countless programs outside of the industry in leadership, management and specific functional training.

The time to engage these programs is now. In fresh produce, timing, freshness, and relationships always count; leadership continuity should not be optional. With the average producer approaching or in their 60s, and few formal succession plans in place, the window for proactive transition is narrowing fast.

Those who act today to close the CEO gap will define tomorrow's produce industry — stronger, smarter, and built to last.

Jerry Butt is president and chief executive of the Mixtec Group, an executive search firm based in La Crescenta, CA.

In My Nostalgic Era

BY KATIE CALLIGARO

When I was a little girl, I can remember my pap pulling over on the side of the road to pick blackberries and strawberries — we'd eat the sweetness right out of his salty hand. As summers progressed, freshly picked tomatoes and banana peppers with basil from the garden were staples at the Calligaro table, with salads and peaches galore at every annual beach vacation. In winter, we could always count on some



form of charcuterie, celery with cream cheese, and the good old-fashioned veggie tray, which has now been relegated to me, as my go-to “what I bring to the party.” (“You make the mushrooms with love,” they say.)

Produce has always been at the center of my family traditions, but my point in sharing all of this is that the way people eat is not just a choice or a preference, but rather it is

embedded in our culture from the time we are born.

One of the primary barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption is a learned lack of preference. Despite the rainbow of color and variety of taste and texture profiles, fruits and vegetables rank low in consumer choice. Fruits and vegetables do not have the appeal of other food options. Food experiences early in life affect us for life. Exposing children to fruits and vegetables in a way that creates meaningful memories, not only nourishes them, but establishes lifelong healthy eating habits.

Another barrier is mis- and dis-information people are absorbing from social media. With 5.07 billion people (or 62.6% of the world's population) designated as users of various platforms, social media has a direct connection to the foods people eat and don't eat.

We also know that people are leaning into healthy eating trends — they want to do the right thing for their health, mind and bodies. But people know that fruits and vegetables are good for them, yet they still aren't eating enough (based on daily recommendations).

The point is, whether by design, childhood experiences, or social media, food preferences around the world have this in common: fruits and vegetables rank low on the list. We simply aren't drawn to eat fruits and vegetables.

WE CAN CHANGE THE TREND

This puts us in a unique position as an industry. And I feel a personal responsibility given my role as director of marketing and communications at The Foundation for Fresh Produce to change that. We can make a difference in our daily work. And that is what fuels me. My 25-year career working in PR and marketing for food

and beverage companies has propelled me through the supply chain, but my passion has landed in the following purpose-driven approaches to promote produce:

1. Driving demand for fruits and vegetables through culturally relevant content beyond pretty pictures on social media. Let's work with chefs and other professionals to help consumers make them taste good. Let's lean into flavors, texture and cultural variations. We talked at the CIA's Menus of Change Leadership Summit — every culture has a rice dish that probably includes a lean protein and veggies. Using herbs and spices can change an entire flavor profile that might make something more desirable, craveable and acceptable for different communities.

2. Leaning into the emotional connection people have with eating. It is traditions. It is childhood memories. It is gatherings. And that brings joy. It creates an experience. Flavors bring us back. They bring us together. And that's what makes people want to do it again.

Behavioral scientist Dr. Jason Riis says, if you want people to do something different, you have to make it easy. And enjoyable. And with an immediate reward. Aside from biting into a juicy piece of watermelon in the middle of summer that takes you back to the pool when you were 8, what does that look like for everyday eating occasions? And what are people already doing or eating that we can latch onto, like pizza night or taco Tuesday?

3. Activating communities where people are getting information and inspiration. There is a passionate group of food and nutrition professionals among the dietetic community who are connected to consumers at every turn where they are making decisions about food. Let's engage them and arm them with resources so that they can share our messages for us. They are also a trusted source to debunk misinformation on our behalf.

THE TIME IS NOW

Now more than ever, people are connecting their food choices to health. And produce should be at the center.

The time is now. If we want consumers to do something different, we have to do something different too. Let's be bold. Let's shout from the rooftops the health benefits of our products. But let's also make it fun. Let's make it factual. And let's play into feelings that build cultural experiences that turn into lifelong habits.

The time is now to put fruits and vegetables at the center of the plate at every meal, snack, road trip, little league game, school breakfast, or holiday — you get the point.

The time is now to make memories with fruits and veggies at the center. The time is now to make it cool to Have A Plant every time you eat.

Let's do this!

Katie Calligaro is director, marketing and communications, for The Foundation for Fresh Produce.

Food experiences
early in life affect
us for life.

Standing Out in the Produce Aisle: The Power of Brand Marketing

BY GABRIELA D'ARRIGO

As a fourth-generation leader in the fresh produce industry, I've seen firsthand how the landscape has evolved — and how critical brand marketing has become to our success. In a world where quality is expected and competition is fierce, it's not enough to simply grow great products. We have to tell our story, build trust, and create lasting relationships with our customers.



For me, it always comes back to the consumer and the customer. I've learned that people will always return to a brand they resonate with. If you're marketing your brand correctly, you're going to establish yourself and build a loyal following. Some brands even develop a cult following, and that's not by accident.

I've seen how people recognize a brand — they know the quality, they know the story,

and they understand what they're getting. There's no question in their mind. When a customer is looking to buy for their store or restaurant, they don't have to think twice or second-guess their decision. They know what they're buying, and they're confident in their choice. And the same is true for diners or supermarket shoppers.

LESSONS FROM THE INDUSTRY

Take Driscoll's berries, for example. When someone buys Driscoll's, they know they're getting the highest quality and standard. People love it, and there's a real following. In my own company, which developed the Andy Boy brand, I've seen customers specifically ask for our romaine hearts. They won't settle for another brand. We've received letters from consumers saying, "This is the best. The quality stands up. I can buy it, it has a long shelf life. The sizing is good. I'm getting a good bang for my buck. I'm not being shortchanged."

But I also know that even the best product can be overlooked without strong marketing. You can have the best product on the planet — it could cure cancer — but if you don't know how to market it, people won't know about it, and it won't be purchased.

MODERN MARKETING: BEYOND THE NEWSLETTER

The way we market has changed dramatically. With all the technological advancements available, it's easier than ever to provide

analytics and show results — from grower to consumer. Social media has been a game changer. There are so many new avenues to reach consumers and customers who go beyond traditional methods.

But it's not just about posting something and calling it done. There has to be a strategy. It's become more sophisticated, but at its core, it's about understanding your audience — how they communicate, how they receive information, and how you can educate them about your brand. It's about offering different options and making sure your message is clear and consistent.

For those who are hesitant to invest in brand marketing, don't be afraid to learn from the experts. The companies that are doing it right are outsourcing to agencies, learning from them, and then bringing that knowledge in-house. It's like taking a crash course in marketing. You don't have to keep the agency forever, but you do need to understand the basics so you can build on them.

Authenticity is key. Don't just chase the biggest influencer on Instagram. Find someone who's growing, who resonates with people, and build a real partnership. You want them to believe in what

you're selling, because your audience can tell when it's just a paid ad. Real belief and real connection matter.

NOT ROI, BUT 'RETURN ON OBJECTIVE'

Brand marketing isn't just a "nice to have" anymore — it's a necessity. I always say, "It's not a return on investment. It's a return on objective." In a world where consumers are bombarded with choices, the brands that tell their story, build trust, and engage authentically will be the ones that thrive.

One thing I've learned over the years is that change can be uncomfortable, especially in an industry rooted in tradition like fresh

produce. But embracing new marketing strategies doesn't mean abandoning what's always worked — it means building on that foundation.

I've seen firsthand how even small steps, like experimenting with new social media platforms or collaborating with up-and-coming influencers, can yield big results. It's about being open to learning, staying curious, and not being afraid to try something different.

The future of our industry depends on our willingness to adapt, innovate, and keep our brands relevant for the next generation of consumers. In fresh produce, how you tell your story is just as important as the product you're selling.

PB

Gabriela D'Arrigo is vice president of marketing and communications at D'Arrigo New York, a premier produce distributor located at the Hunts Point Terminal Market in New York City.



Mannix Family Markets opened its latest ShopRite supermarket in the Great Kills community of Staten Island, NY, in September. It devotes a great deal of space and priority to fresh produce.

MIKE DUFF PHOTOS

Mannix Family Opens State-of-the-Art ShopRite

Fresh-focused Staten Island store features an expansive produce department.

BY MIKE DUFF

Mannix Family Markets opened its latest ShopRite supermarket in Staten Island, NY, in September. The store features a prominent produce section with a broad range of fresh fruits and vegetables, including a significant presentation of organic and locally grown produce.

Located at 100 Greaves Lane in southcentral Staten Island's Great Kills community, the store became the fourth supermarket operated by the Mannix family in the New York borough. It is an independently owned banner affiliated with Wakefern Food Corp., Keasbey, NJ.

At 62,000 square feet, it's a full-service supermarket that has an emphasis on well-merchandised fresh food and professionally prepared specialty items arranged so consumers can easily plan meals.

Tim Mannix, vice president of Mannix Family Markets, headquartered in Staten Island, says the process that led up to the Great Kills store opening Sept. 14 was a decade in length, but when the company was ready to build, it did so deliberately.

"It's been a long time coming, but we started construction back in February, so, it was a seven-month sprint," he says. "We're very excited. We took the building down to the studs. It's fully state-of-the-art, our latest and greatest. We're anticipating a great cutout from a produce standpoint."

"I really love the way the produce department came out."

The Great Kills store is part of a drive by Mannix ShopRite to develop its physical plant. All the stores range from 60,000 to 70,000 square feet. Mannix says they opened one store in 2016, another in 2020, and fully renovated one in 2023. "Our produce cutouts tend to be in the 12% range, so we tend to devote a significant amount of space to produce."



The new Mannix ShopRite has significant organic produce selections. In fact, organics actually head up the cold case.

Mannix says they tend to merchandise specific to the neighborhood, given demographics. "We're fortunate enough that we encourage a lot of cross-shopping across Staten Island. So, we look for consistency, where customers aren't lost. They have a sense of familiarity when they shop all of our locations."

CREATING PRODUCE THEATER

Among the new store's features is the fog technology on the greens wall. In an example of ShopRite mutual support, Mannix management became familiar with the technology after seeing it in the Cingari ShopRite operation in Connecticut, a fellow Wakefern co-op member, and introduced it in the new store.

The new store also features clear sightlines in the produce department. "We want our customers to see into the back of the department straight through the store," says Frank Kolovich, director of operations for Mannix ShopRite. "So, we went with lower gondolas and refrigerated tables up front."

Seasonal presentations are important in regard to produce merchandising. During the fall opening, the front feature display was mixed apples, pears, and citrus with year-round draws, such as avocados and grapes, with a small berry slot as part of the seasonal transition. Nearby, another floor display offered a mix of various tomatoes, bagged lettuce, broccoli, sweet potatoes, bagged baby carrots and mushroom cartons.

Deeper in the department, the variety of apples was already vast, including bagged and bulk on slant tables. An endcap offered bulk apples in carry-away mini shopping bags.

There is also an extensive presentation of tropical and Latin produce. Plantains ranged among bananas, ripe bananas and cooking bananas. A perpendicular endcap featured pineapples, mangos and other tropicals. Another aisle display included commodities, such as yucca, chayote, malanga coco and aloe vera leaf. Kiwis complemented the rest in an independent display on the shoulder of the main fixture.

Departments surrounding produce and integrating with complementary produce merchandising included bakery, meat, deli, a fish market, frozen seafood and sushi.

With produce as a cornerstone, new and refurbished ShopRite stores feature design elements that foster value — for example, offering prepared and ready-to-eat items. Even shoppers who want to do most of their own cooking can grab a pre-cooked protein, bagged salad, cherry tomatoes and chunk squash to prepare when they get home.

KEEPING IT FRESH

The embrace of fresh and convenient was evident in Great Kills ShopRite, with the rear of the cold case deep in both clamshell and bagged salads, followed to the front by fresh herbs and bagged veggies. The greens section included head and bunched items, as well as various bulk vegetables, including root commodities such as parsnips and beets.

“We believe in prepared foods fresh made, so we’re making everything on site,” says Kolovich. “We don’t have a commissary as a small company, so we produce everything fresh in our kitchens. We try to keep in mind what our customers are looking for in convenience. It’s definitely something we believe in.”



The new store features clear sightlines in the produce department, featuring lower gondolas and refrigerated tables.



The new Mannix ShopRite offers a full breadth of fresh fruits and vegetables, but also helps the busy shopper with extensive fresh-cut offerings, including a dedicated low-profile case of fresh-cut fruit and fruit salads.



At the new Mannix Family Markets ShopRite in Staten Island, NY, staples, like potatoes and onions, are given as much merchandising attention as berries or greens.

That includes fresh cuts. The Great Kills store has a dedicated low-profile case of fresh-cut fruit and fruit salads. At the time of the store opening, it included everything from half strawberries and sliced mango to mixed fruit chunks with grapes and blueberries and half watermelons.

The new Mannix ShopRite also has significant organic and gluten-free selection. In produce, organics actually head up the cold case, and what immediately catches the eye is that products are bagged or in sealed cartons to keep them pristine amid the conventional produce.

At the store opening, about a third of the display was devoted to fruit and the rest to vegetables.

A noteworthy element enhancing the produce department is colorful and extensive signage positioned above the cold case. It runs the length of the display and mounts vivid illustrations of produce with information about individual commodities, each including tips on consumption.

PB



INSIDE THE STORE

ShopRite of Evergreen Plaza
100 Greaves Lane
Staten Island, NY 10308
347-215-2151
www.Shoprite.com



The Wiggles are teaming up with the International Fresh Produce Association Australia-New Zealand to launch the Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign — a nationwide push to help kids eat more fruits and vegetables. Pictured: Lucia Field, Blue Wiggle; John Pearce, Purple Wiggle; Simon Pryce, Red Wiggle; Evie Ferris, Yellow Wiggle; Lachy Gillespie, Purple Wiggle; Dominic Field, Tree of Wisdom; Tsehay Hawkins, Yellow Wiggle; and Anthony Field, OG Blue Wiggle.

PHOTO COURTESY IFPA ANZ

Driving Produce Consumption: Fruit Salad, Yummy Yummy!

The Wiggles team up to get Aussie kids eating fresh produce.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Only 4% of Australians hit the national target of two servings of fruit and five of vegetables a day, says the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among children, 94% miss the daily vegetable mark. And it's not improving. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) projects fresh fruit intake will fall nearly 10% by 2030, while "junk" foods jump 18%.

Unless that changes, the fruit-and-veg gap will keep widening, with long-term health consequences. Australia isn't alone. Many developed nations, including the U.S., share the same problem.

It's not for lack of supply. Australia's farms produce a bounty of fresh food. The nation's agricultural output has grown 34% over the past two decades, from \$61.5 billion in 2004-05 to \$82.4 billion in 2023-24, according to the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences.

Productivity gains, technology adoption, and better management have boosted crop volumes, not counting imports. So, the produce is there, the appetite isn't.

And it's not for lack of trying. Governments, industry, and educators have all pushed produce promotion. Even pop culture got involved: The Wiggles — Australia's most beloved children's band — turned fruit prep into a musical moment with their 1994 hit *Fruit*

Note from the Publisher:

We couldn't be more thrilled to honor the International Fresh Produce Association Australia-New Zealand and The Wiggles with the PRODUCE BUSINESS Global Marketing Innovation Award.

This award honors trailblazing companies and people who brilliantly market and sell produce to increase overall produce consumption.

Our hope is to inspire translatable programs and galvanize industry executives to work together through partnerships to effect meaningful change.



Salad (Yummy Yummy). The song's catchy "chop it up, mix it up" lyrics, calling out apples, grapes, bananas and melons, have racked up more than 94 million YouTube views. The tune still strikes a nostalgic chord for parents and a playful note for kids, making it ripe for a reboot in Australia's latest produce push.

KIDS AS INFLUENCERS

In June, at Hort Connections, the International Fresh Produce Association Australia-New Zealand (IFPA ANZ) announced a partnership with The Wiggles to launch the Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign, an unprecedented push to help children eat more fruits and vegetables.

The announcement was amplified with a media launch on *The Today Show*, broadcast from Family Fresh Farms, a 12-acre glasshouse in New South Wales that grows Qukes brand baby cucumbers for produce distributor, Perfection Fresh. The segment introduced both The Wiggles' Tree of Wisdom tour and the presenting partnership.

The Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign was founded on solid evidence. IFPA's 2024 *Global Intelligence Consumer Tracking Study*, spanning seven countries — Australia, Brazil, China, Germany, South Korea, the U.S. and the U.K. — found that Australian parents are more likely than their global peers to be influenced by their children's preferences when grocery shopping.

Added inspiration for the campaign came from two other behavioral insights of the study. First, 56% of Australian parents take their children grocery shopping most or all the time, and second, 51% of Australian parents allow their children to cook with them by age 8.

"IFPA and The Wiggles saw an opportunity to do something truly different and unprecedented," says Belinda Wilson, managing director of the IFPA ANZ, in Melbourne, Australia. That is, "to unite the fresh produce industry and families alike through a science-based campaign that brings education to life with music, movement, and play in a way that transcends cultures and language."

Behind the scenes, the IFPA ANZ team has been working closely with The Wiggles' creative and production teams to coordinate the campaign's strategy, partnerships, and creative content. The campaign is supported by a network of partners, including Hort Innovation, AUSVEG, Perfection Fresh, Flavorite, Mitolo Family Farms, Mackays Marketing, Premier Fresh and the IFPA global team.

"Making healthy eating fun is part of the magic of The Wiggles," says Brett Fifield, chief executive officer of Hort Innovation, the North Sydney-based, nonprofit grower-owned research and development corporation for Australia's horticulture industry. "Inspiring kids to eat fresh fruit and veggies will have lifelong impacts on their health, on our communities, and on the growers who nourish the nation."

Financially, the campaign is funded through a combination of industry contributions, sponsorships and in-kind support.

But the real power lies in the people.

"At the end of the day, if we can make one more child excited about eating a banana, potatoes, or a cucumber, we've done our job," says Anthony Field, the original Blue Wiggle and one of the songwriters of Fruit Salad.

CAMPAIGN NUTS & BOLTS

The Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign is a multimedia education campaign, blending digital, social and live experiences to connect with children and families wherever they are.

Concerts. From November 2025 through January 2026, The Wiggles, often called the "Taylor Swift for toddlers," take their Tree of Wisdom Big Show Arena Spectacular on tour across Australia.

The Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign is built into the show through songs, visuals, and audience interaction, turning fresh produce into part of the fun. The stage comes alive with fruit and veggie inflatables, bright costumes, and high-energy music. Before the show, kids and parents can sample fresh produce and learn where it comes from.

"We ran a competition this fall to meet The Wiggles Live in Concert in Australia," says Wilson. To enter, families must purchase fresh produce, including Tiny Toms tomatoes, Qukes mini cucumbers, bananas, or fresh potatoes, and answer questions.



The Wiggles' Tree of Wisdom Big Show Arena Spectacular brings the Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign to life on stage, blending music, movement, and colorful produce-themed fun to inspire kids and families across Australia to eat more fruits and vegetables.
PHOTO COURTESY IFPA ANZ

Digital. The campaign's digital home sits proudly on The Wiggles' official website, which, combined with all The Wiggles' digital presences, reaches a global audience of more than 20 million visitors. This partnership gives the campaign unparalleled reach into Australian households and across international markets.

The dedicated Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy hub features games, recipes, educational videos, and downloadable resources that link healthy eating with play, music and learning.

Social Media. Across The Wiggles' industry and IFPA A-NZ's social media platforms, the campaign has sparked a wave of engagement about fresh produce, capitalizing on social media trends, such as the dancing "blue shirt guy."

As of the end of October, four to five social media posts, including Blue Wiggle Field "going bananas" by dancing to celebrate National Banana Day, have reached 1.3 million (1,316,510) users across The Wiggles' main platforms (Meta and TikTok), with post views exceeding 1.1 million, demonstrating significant interaction and excitement.

THE SUPPLY SIDE

Australia's leading produce suppliers are backing Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy to drive lasting change in how families buy, cook, and enjoy fresh produce. For these companies, the campaign's alignment with their core mission — boosting fruit and vegetable consumption — makes it a natural fit.

"The message couldn't be more important," says John Tselekidis, head of sales and marketing for Mitolo Family Farms, located north of Adelaide. It is Australia's largest potato and onion grower and packer, supplying major Australian supermarket chains, like Coles and Woolworths.

"We wanted to be involved in this campaign because of its strong alignment with increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among Australian families, by partnering with Australian family icons, The Wiggles."

The company is contributing through new family-friendly recipes, lunchbox ideas, and on-pack messaging in its upcoming back-to-school promotion, showing how potatoes can play a simple, nutritious role in everyday meals.

AUSVEG, the national industry body representing vegetable, potato and onion growers, based near Melbourne, is also lending its support.

"With The Wiggles onboard, we know they talk directly to kids here and around the world," says Michael Coote, chief executive officer.

AUSVEG and its state associations are helping amplify campaign materials through their channels and grower networks. Coote says that just one extra serving of vegetables per person per day by 2030 could unlock the equivalent of U.S. \$2.8 billion in national benefits,

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including a direct U.S. \$2.1 billion boost to the vegetable supply chain, proof that eating more veggies is good for both health and the economy.

Flavorite, Australia's largest glasshouse producer of tomatoes, cucumbers and bell peppers, located north of Melbourne, is bringing the campaign to life in-store with Wiggles-branded Tiny Toms and cherry truss tomato packs featuring QR codes that link to recipes, videos, and competitions.

"It's about connecting consumers, not just to the food they eat, but to the farms and people who grow it," says Tom Millis, marketing and communications manager.

These grower-shippers' advice for other produce suppliers: Get involved. Partner with IFPA-ANZ or local retailers, integrate family-friendly education into packaging and digital campaigns, and make healthy eating easy and fun.

"The Wiggles platform gives producers access to an audience we could never reach alone," says Tselekidis.

LOOKING AHEAD — FILLING A CUP HALF FULL

The Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign has the potential to reverse Australia's declining intake of fruit and vegetables. In the short term, it will reach millions through The Wiggles' global platforms, including 20 million website visitors, social media, concerts, and national retail activations, helping make produce fun, familiar, and part of daily life. For the industry, that means stronger visibility, brand connection and sales growth.

"The scale and credibility of The Wiggles give this campaign a unique opportunity to influence behavior at a household level," says

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"At the end of the day, if we can make one more child excited about eating a banana, potatoes, or a cucumber, we've done our job."**

Anthony Field, original Blue Wiggle

- **"Making healthy eating fun is part of the magic of The Wiggles. Inspiring kids to eat fresh fruit and veggies will have lifelong impacts on their health, on our communities, and on the growers who nourish the nation."**

Brett Fifield, Hort Innovation, North Sydney, Australia

IFPA ANZ's Wilson. "It's not just awareness; it's about driving real change in what families buy and eat."

Long term, even modest gains in fruit and vegetable intake could improve public health, strengthen grower resilience, and build future demand. Retailers see the same potential.

"If families could reach the recommended intake of fresh fruits and veggies daily, it would mean healthier kids, happier parents, and stronger support for our local growers," says Luke Harris, co-chief executive officer of Harris Farm Markets, a 36-store retailer headquartered in Sydney. "That means being part of something bigger, helping families build lifelong habits around fresh, local, nutritious food."

PB

Retailers Emphasize Produce is Fun, Colorful and Good For You

Retailers are an integral partner in the the Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign, recently kicked off by the International Fresh Produce Association Australia-New Zealand (IFPA ANZ) in partnership with The Wiggles.

Retail activations will launch nationally across Australia from January to February 2026, coinciding with the Australian back-to-school season.

The campaign has received endorsement from all of Australia's leading supermarkets.

"We've always believed that good food brings people together," says Luke Harris, co-chief executive officer of Harris Farm Markets, a 36-store retailer headquartered in Sydney, with locations in New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. "That is an exact quote from dad, David Harris, who started this business in 1971. That starts with inspiring a love of fresh fruit and vegetables early on."

Harris adds the Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign "fits right at the heart of our purpose: For the Greater Goodness. We stand for more than just the good food we sell. We're about championing goodness in every sense — for farmers, the environment, local communities and our customers."

PLENTY OF PROMOTIONS

Planned elements include: a competition with various prizes, including the main prize being an opportunity to meet The Wig-



Harris Farm Markets, a 36-store retailer headquartered in Sydney, is bringing The Wiggles' Fruit & Veggies Yummy Yummy campaign to life in stores with produce displays, interactive photo ops and promotions.

PHOTO COURTESY HARRIS FARM MARKETS

gles at an in-store appearance; life-size cut-outs of The Wiggles placed alongside fresh produce displays; and hanging banners.

There will also be digital marketing and outdoor billboards reinforcing the campaign message in high-traffic areas; catalogue inclusions and retailer-specific digital activations; and on-pack stickers for products linked to the competition.

PB



At McCaffrey's Food Markets, a nine-store chain headquartered in Langhorne, PA, the two biggest items that spike in sales for the Super Bowl are avocados and guacamole.

PHOTO COURTESY MCCAFFEY'S

Fresh Produce Will Score Wins

Three ways retailers can sell more fresh produce for the Super Bowl.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

The statistics are staggering. U.S. retailers sold 64.9 million units of Hass avocados during Super Bowl week, generating \$74.4 million in retail sales, a 25% jump in dollar sales and a 3.8% increase in units compared to 2024.

According to the Hass Avocado Board's (HAB) Avocado Holiday Retail Recap for Q1 2025, this year's results mark the strongest Super Bowl week performance in four years, underscoring how avocados continue to score big with fans as a game-day staple.

"The two biggest items that spike in sales for the Super Bowl are avocados and guacamole," says Tony Mirack, produce director of operations for McCaffrey's Food Markets, a nine-store chain headquartered in Langhorne, PA.

But thinking of the Super Bowl solely as an avocado holiday risks a fumble on even bigger sales. That's because when Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, CA, hosts Super Bowl LX on Feb. 8, 2026, the action on the field will be rivaled only by the food on America's tables.

The Super Bowl isn't just a sporting event; it's one of the biggest eating occasions of the year.

"Football season, particularly the lead-up to the big game, has a meaningful impact on produce sales," says Nicholas Towell, director of marketing at Duda Farm Fresh Foods, in Salinas, CA. "It's second only to the winter holidays for driving demand."

Here are three ways to sell more fresh produce in the run-up to the Super Bowl:

1. GO ALL OUT WITH AVOCADOS

Mexico exported an estimated 242.5 million pounds of avocados to the U.S. in the four weeks leading up to Super Bowl 2025, according to data shared by Avocados From Mexico (AFM) in Irving, TX. This represents approximately 8% of the country's crop, whose peak season is October to May.

For 2026, AFM has enlisted actor and comedian Rob Riggle as "The Guac Guru" to headline its nationwide Super Bowl marketing campaign launching Jan. 19. The initiative promotes avocados as the ultimate game-day ingredient, reinforcing the link between guacamole and football. Shoppers who buy the Super Bowl-themed bag can scan a QR code, upload their receipt, and receive \$1.50 cash back, with 10 winners earning a year's supply of avocados. AFM offers retailers in-store materials and packaging, while supplies last.

"Pair Rob Riggle's larger-than-life energy with our fresh avocados, and you've got a game-winning combo that guarantees avocados will be the real champs at every watch party this season," says Stephanie Bazan, senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution.

While California's peak season typically runs from spring through summer, some early fruit is often available for Super Bowl promotions, especially for retailers in the western U.S., according to Terry Splane, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission (CAC), in Irvine, CA.

"Our retail marketing directors work with avocado handlers and regional partners to identify early availability and co-develop merchandising and promotional opportunities," says Splane.

Multiple displays of bulk avocados, bags, and organic fruit help drive sales, says Peter Shore, director of business development and marketing for Calavo Growers, in Santa Paula, CA.

This year was the first year meaningful volumes of avocados from Colombia were available during the first quarter. Colom-

bia's primary season runs from September to February, with peaks in December and January.

"As a result," says Manuel Michel, managing director of the Colombia Avocado Board (CAB), based in Orlando, FL, "Colombian avocados have primarily played a supporting role in ensuring retailers have a

reliable supply from multiple origins during key promotional windows like the Super Bowl."

2. THINK PRODUCE DEPARTMENT-WIDE

"We tie in other produce items, like tomatoes, limes and cilantro, along with avocados for Super Bowl displays," says Ben Painter, president of SPD Markets, a two-store chain headquartered in Nevada, CA.

Virtually any SKU in the produce department, from fruits and vegetables to nuts and tie-in products, can be promoted for the Super Bowl to increase the ring.

"Whole watermelons are the best value, with over three dozen servings per watermelon feeding a party-size crowd at Super Bowl parties," says Stephanie Barlow, senior director of communications for the National Watermelon Promotion Board, in Orlando, FL, which offers retailers an online library of football party-related recipes, carvings, and usage ideas. "However, in February, fresh-cut watermelon is more readily available and convenient, especially when skewering cubes for party platters."

As for vegetables, Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's/World Variety Produce in Vernon, CA, recommends featuring jalapeño, serrano and shishito peppers, as well as a variety of tomatoes and tomatillos.

"Our premium Peruvian sweet onions are a fan favorite this time of year," says John Shuman, president and chief executive officer of Shuman Farms, in Reidsville, GA. "We've built programs that celebrate flavor and sweet onions and also encourage fans to add more fresh produce to their game-day menus."

Grimmway Farms, in Bakersfield, CA, has its new Carrot Fries Air Fryer Kit line for shoppers' game-day spread this year. "It's the first carrot air fryer product on the market and includes two flavors: Mediterranean Herb and Chipotle Maple," says Katie Streiff, category marketing manager for carrots. "This product should be merchandised with other convenience vegetables to capture shoppers looking for convenience."

Celery sticks and 2-inch Celery Dippers are consistently top-performing items for Duda Farm Fresh Foods during the NFL playoff season, according to Towell.

Kathleen Triou, president and chief executive officer of Fresh Solutions Network LLC, based in Newport Beach, CA,

suggests tapping into the latest trend: potato boards. “The boards are crafted from seasoned mashed potatoes, which serve as a base for other toppings, spread on a cutting board,” she explains. “They are flavorful, enjoyed finger-food style, and a satisfying solution to hungry guests.”

Tajin seasoned kernels have been a football-watching fan favorite, says Joseph Setton, executive vice president of Setton Farms, in Terra Bella, CA. “Our premium Pistachio Pub Mix, featuring our family’s Buffalo Wing Kernels, crunchy ranch corn nuggets, savory sesame chips, and hickory almonds, is also a hit.”

Hampton Farms, in Raleigh, NC, is the official peanut of bowl season, says Eric Boonshaft, director of marketing. “Between the Bowl Season 12-ounce bags and display cases and our 24-ounce Salted In-Shell Peanut football-themed bags and display cases, we’ll be providing our retail customers with all the tools for a successful football-themed campaign.”

One in three Wonderful Pistachios consumers says they enjoy pistachios while watching sports, with football leading the way, according to Diana Salsa, vice president of marketing for The Wonderful Company, in Los Angeles, CA. “Our classic Roasted & Salted variety continues to be the MVP of our lineup during football season.”

“We’re especially excited with the added momentum from our partnership with NFL quarterback Josh Allen, of the Buffalo Bills, who is featured on life-sized standees and point-of-sales displays.”

This year, Litehouse Foods in Sandpoint, ID, is working with retailer partners to offer eye-catching displays and limited-edition football-themed labels on its classic Litehouse Homestyle Ranch and Chunky Blue Cheese products. “This helps us create a connection back to the sporting occasion, which encourages people to grab us off the shelf,” says Kate Ness, senior brand manager.

3. BUILD GAME-DAY DESTINATIONS

Visibility is everything during the Super Bowl build-up, says Boonshaft. “We recommend using display cases and bins in the produce section, along with other areas of the store near beer and salty snacks. Retailers can also create themed zones, such as ‘Game-Day Headquarters’ or ‘Snack Stadium’ with peanuts featured alongside chips and dip, or position our display bins right next to the beer coolers, a move that consistently drives impulse sales.”

Strong merchandising is essential to capitalize on shopper enthusiasm, says the CAC’s Splane. “We’ve seen retailers show

exceptional creativity. Some have built entire football fields out of avocado crates, complete with end zones and team colors. Others have set up ‘guacamole bars’ where shoppers can customize ingredients.”

Create a “Loaded Potato Bar” concept, recommends Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager for the Sugar Foods Corporation, in Villa Rica, GA, which sells dry seasoning packets under its Concord Foods brand.

“Pair bacon pieces with potatoes, shred-

ded cheese, and sour cream. Add inspiration with recipe cards or QR codes to drive impulse buys.”

Finally, another display and promotional idea is to create value-driven “Game-Day Snack Packs” by bundling celery sticks with popular dips like ranch, blue cheese, hummus, or with complementary items, like baby carrots and veggie trays, suggests Duda’s Towell. “These bundles appeal to consumers looking for convenient, ready-to-serve, and healthier snacking options.” **PB**

Retailers, Tap Into Regional Game-Day Produce Preferences

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

The Super Bowl may be a national celebration, but what's served on game day depends heavily on where fans call home.

North and Northeast: Cold weather and comfort foods rule the table. Buffalo chicken dip, chili, and layered taco dips are fan favorites, according to coffee machine review site Coffeeness.

"Bulk celery sticks for wing lovers in the Northeast are a must," says Nichole Towell, director of marketing at Duda Farm Fresh Foods, in Salinas, CA, noting strong demand for traditional party platters.

While guacamole sales are strong nationwide, "our white dips are especially popular in the Northeast," says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations, LLC, in Rhine, TX.

In-shell peanuts, a Southern staple, are seeing faster growth for football watch parties in the Northeast, says Eric Boon-

shaft, director of marketing for Hampton Farms, in Raleigh, NC.

South: "Tailgating and grilling reign supreme," says John Shuman, president and chief executive officer of Shuman Farms, in Reidsville, GA, pointing to sliders, kabobs, and dips made with sweet onions as regional favorites.

The South Atlantic is now the country's fastest-growing avocado market, up 29% in 2023, followed by Texas at 21%, according to data shared by Avocados From Mexico in Irving, TX.

"This growth is fueled by Millennials and Gen Z shoppers discovering fresh, versatile avocado recipes," says Stephanie Bazan, AFM senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution.

Midwest: Heartier comfort foods dominate Midwestern spreads. "Bold flavors, like queso and hearty dips, define the region," says Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager for the Sugar Foods Corporation,

in Villa Rica, GA, which sells dry seasoning packets under its Concord Foods brand.

In colder regions, greenhouse-grown produce can easily make its way onto the table, says Randi Church, marketing manager for Windset Farms, in Delta, British Columbia. "We're excited to add our new Greenhouse Party Tray (Cameo cherry tomatoes, Sweeties mini peppers, and Fresco cucumbers) to the mix this year."

West: With this year's Super Bowl in Santa Clara, CA, the West Coast is showcasing its signature produce-forward flair.

"With this year's game being played near San Francisco, retailers and fans alike can have fun incorporating regional flavor," says Terry Splane, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission, in Irvine, CA. "For instance, our bruschetta with California Avocado and Basil recipe brings together fresh California produce with sourdough to let fans enjoy the foods of the hosting city."

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TOP 1000 The Best Business Register

Promote Potato and Onion Diversity for Top Sales

Innovative new choices perk up the category.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Step into today's produce departments and you'll marvel at the vital potatoes and onions category. Assorted multicolor varieties enlivened by vibrant packaging beckon you with diverse choices.

For decades, both potato and onion offerings, excelling with superior nutrition plus outstanding value, rang up winning purchases in grocery stores. Vintage cookbooks, ethnic websites, social media platforms, and talented food influencers now combine the familiar and new creations to produce a captivating market category to propel sales.

Many consumers seek affordability and value from this staple category, but today, purchases are often driven by convenience. Air frying, microwaving, plus value-added products attract. Also, there are greater choices among varieties, and creative mixes, and smaller sizes in packaging are widespread.

EARLY CROP TRENDS

Regions differ somewhat, but product availability looks good. Mike Carter, chief executive officer of Bushmans' Inc., Rosholt, WI, reports it was a warm, humid season, "but the potato crop is timely, good quality, and a great mix of sizes."

He notes the market has shifted toward convenience and smaller packages, although he fulfills all sizes. "Russets are still king, but there are different varieties of russets."

The company supports retailer sales in the category with quick turns, point-of-sale (POS) materials and recipes.

Marketer for Minnesota and North Dakota potatoes, Kevin Olson, owner, Ben Holmes Potato Co., Becker, MN, says yields are up, and "quality is great, with nice yellows and reds."



Potatoes and onions remain two of the most essential staples in the produce department. With vibrant packaging, new convenience formats, and innovative specialty varieties, the category continues to thrive. PHOTO COURTESY GRIMMWAY

Along with smaller packages, Olson points to small, even tiny, potatoes as gaining momentum. He observes that some exhibitors market them aggressively at shows. "Exposure in the markets, and chefs, have made a difference."

This trend is toward C size (1.5-inch diameter) yellow, red, or both in a steamable tray. It has become so great, Olson says some growers "are using varieties that produce only small yellows and reds."

Eric Beck, director of marketing, Wada Farms, Idaho Falls, ID, reports this year's quality is "top-notch." He adds the company can offer "pretty much anything a retailer or foodservice distributor is looking for."

As the specialty market continues to grow, he says Wada Farms has an array of products to fit the bill. It includes 1.5-pound mesh bags, individually foil-wrapped microwaveable russet potatoes, and tray packs.

"The market share continues to gain as consumers gravitate toward smaller pack sizes," Beck says. "Time-starved consumers want ready-to-go offerings because they are very convenient for meal prep."

He also notes organic demand "continues to see some linear growth as people

continue to be educated on what organic can offer in their diets."

MERCHANDISING STRATEGIES

Jessica Congdon, category marketing manager, Grimmway Produce, Bakersfield, CA, suggests strategies for usage occasions. "Offer a variety of sizes and formats of 1.5 to 3 pounds of bite-sized potatoes from Tasteful Selections for convenience-minded shoppers. Rotate regularly and mix in russet, gold, red, purple potatoes and lean into eye-catching packaging or POS tools to draw interest from 10 feet, 5 feet, and at the shelf. Include organic options to meet health-conscious demand."

Recognizing the seasonal opportunity, Congdon says, "The first quarter is a strong sales period for potatoes and onions — driven by shopper goals, culinary traditions and seasonal celebrations."

Cross-merchandising amplifies the bottom line, and she recommends creating displays that solve problems for shoppers. "Pair potatoes and onions with broth, beans, stew meat for hearty winter meals. Feature with sour cream, cheese, and toppings for 'Potato Lover's Month.' Build a

corned beef and cabbage destination set for St. Patrick's Day, complete with red or gold potatoes and onions."

INDUSTRY SUPPORT

Commodity boards, along with grower-packer-shipper-marketers, work with retailers on sales promotions, current and coming trends, supply availability, and category management.

The Idaho Potato Commission (IPC), Eagle, ID, works to ensure that Idaho potatoes remain a staple on menus and in households for their quality, versatility and health benefits. Vice president of retail and international, Ross Johnson, says they employ promotion directors to communicate the realities of each crop and the opportunities in each market.

"One of the great things about the potato category right now is the innovation in small and microwaveable potatoes."

"We've seen many category managers struggle with understanding the proper way to go about growing the category, while keeping a focus on the products consumers love," Johnson adds. "Now that

Idaho is a one-stop shop for all varieties of potatoes, we are able to take Nielsen data and fully analyze the shifts in the marketplace. Recently, we've had big wins in helping retailers capitalize on shifts within the category by sharing our data."

He adds that the "gourmet category does not cannibalize sales from the staple items. Gourmet potatoes are typically purchased in addition to the staple russet, red, or yellow they had already planned to purchase. We've seen some incredible growth in the category by making a strategic merchandising play"

Mark Phillips, marketing specialist, Prince Edward Island Potato Board, Charlottetown, PEI, says the board represents 175 potato dealers who grow, on average, 2.5 billion pounds of potatoes.

"While it is still a small part of our overall production, creamers, in particular, have been a major growth market for us."

He adds that they continue to adapt to trends. "For years, we relied on traditional varieties like Russet Burbank. While they are still grown, we have been researching and adapting to new varieties, like Mountain

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Create displays that solve problems for shoppers. Pair potatoes and onions with broth, beans, stew meat for hearty winter meals."**

Jessica Congdon, Grimmway Produce, Bakersfield, CA

- **"When the display is well ventilated and turned over regularly, showcasing onions and potatoes together can spark meal ideas and boost overall produce sales."**

René Hardwick, National Onion Association, Eaton, CO

Gem, that better suit our growing season."

The National Onion Association, Eaton, CO, in its role of representing growers in the industry, promotes programs to educate consumers about onions and ultimately increase demand. René Hardwick, director of public and industry relations, says onions have been a staple in people's diets for generations, and consumption has inched up year over year.

"We attribute this to chefs finding creative ways to include onions in their meals, and, of course, a younger generation's increasing interest in cooking nutritious and delicious foods."

Regarding varieties, Hardwick notes that yellows lead. "Yellow onions are the dependable frontrunners — not simply because they show up across global cuisines, but because they are built for endurance. As a storage variety, they tolerate drying and cool storage far better than their higher-moisture cousins."

She adds that white onions carry more moisture and a milder punch, which means they tend to store for a shorter time and are often chosen for fresh applications. "Red onions bring a pop of color and a bold flavor that stands out in salads and salsas, while white onions add a cleaner, sharper taste to fresh dishes. Red onions' crimson hue makes them a favorite in restaurants where visual appeal and flavor impact matter."

She says sweet onions will likely keep their spotlight. "They've carved out a loyal



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One way to invigorate the staple (and stable) potato category is to include organic offerings, which continue to see growth.

PHOTO COURTESY GRIMMWAY PRODUCE

following, especially in regions where people crave their mild, mellow flavor. Vidalia, Walla Walla, and Texas 1015 have brand recognition.”

POTATOES AND ONIONS TOGETHER

Hardwick says potatoes and onions are a natural pair in the kitchen, but she cautions that moisture and gases can compromise freshness unless properly managed. “When the display is well ventilated and turned over regularly, showcasing onions and potatoes together can spark meal ideas and boost overall produce sales.”

Retailers vary in whether these products are sold separately, paired, or simply near each other.

Zack Lowe, produce manager at the Western Avenue, Knoxville, TN, Food City store, reports that he sells potatoes and onions together. Russets are the most popular, but he indicates that reds and yellows in 5-pound bags sell well, too, and their soup medley features red and white potatoes.

The store’s “Short Cuts” feature assortments, and for shoppers’ questions about product uses, the store offers a “cheat sheet.” Lowe says it ties in with sale prices at holiday times.

The department recently advertised jumbo white, cipollinis, fall/winter yellow storage, radiant reds, shallots, Peri & Sons’ Sweetie Sweet, plus Vidalia. They also stock store-made diced fresh-cut onions.

TRENDS POINT TO SPECIALTIES

Earth Fresh, Burlington, Ontario, specializes conventional and organic potatoes. Andrew George, chief sales and procurement officer, says they are launching new variety innovations: Butter Russets, Butter Golds

and Butter Reds. “The word ‘Butter’ evokes comfort, quality, and taste.”

Pointing to the packaging, the 5- and 10-pound light-blocking bags with mesh packs retain freshness and quality, and the high-graphic design elevates shelf appeal. Kwik Lok tags link to recipes. High-graphic bins allow quick setup and display.

“Clear, consistent messaging that educates consumers on potato types and best uses drives repeat purchases,” George says. “Since 2016, yellow-fleshed potato sales have more than doubled at retail, growing from 10% to 16% of total potato sales.”

Kelsey Weingart, brand manager, marketing, Peri & Sons Farms, Firebaugh, CA, says they offer a “comprehensive One n’ Done onion program that includes conventional and USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) organic red, white, and yellow onions, as well as sweet onions and gourmet varieties. Our specialty lines, like Sweetie Sweet and Sweetie Tearless, are designed to cater to different shopper preferences and seasonal opportunities.”

She adds that large, colorful displays featuring complementary products, such as peppers, garlic, avocados, or proteins, can inspire meal ideas and increase basket size.

DEMAND CONSISTENT

The 2024 consumption of potatoes at 117.2 pounds per person, although largely unchanged from last year’s 116.9 pounds, stands at the highest availability since 2018. This USDA data also notes that fresh table stock makes up 29% of the measure.

Per capita onion consumption in 2024 rose to 21.3 pounds, from the previous USDA report of 17.45 pounds.

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PROFILES AND PHOTOS BY MIKE DUFF

If change is the only constant, New York's food scene proves it deliciously true. In this city, food never stands still.

New York thrives on reinvention — its kitchens, markets, and menus in perpetual motion, stirred by the people and ideas that pour in from around the globe.

New York's culinary culture is both rooted and restless: grounded in tradition, yet always hungry for what's next. Ingredients and influences arrive daily, finding their way into restaurant kitchens, neighborhood groceries and corner markets. Yesterday's curiosities — like dragon fruit or jalapeños — are today's staples.

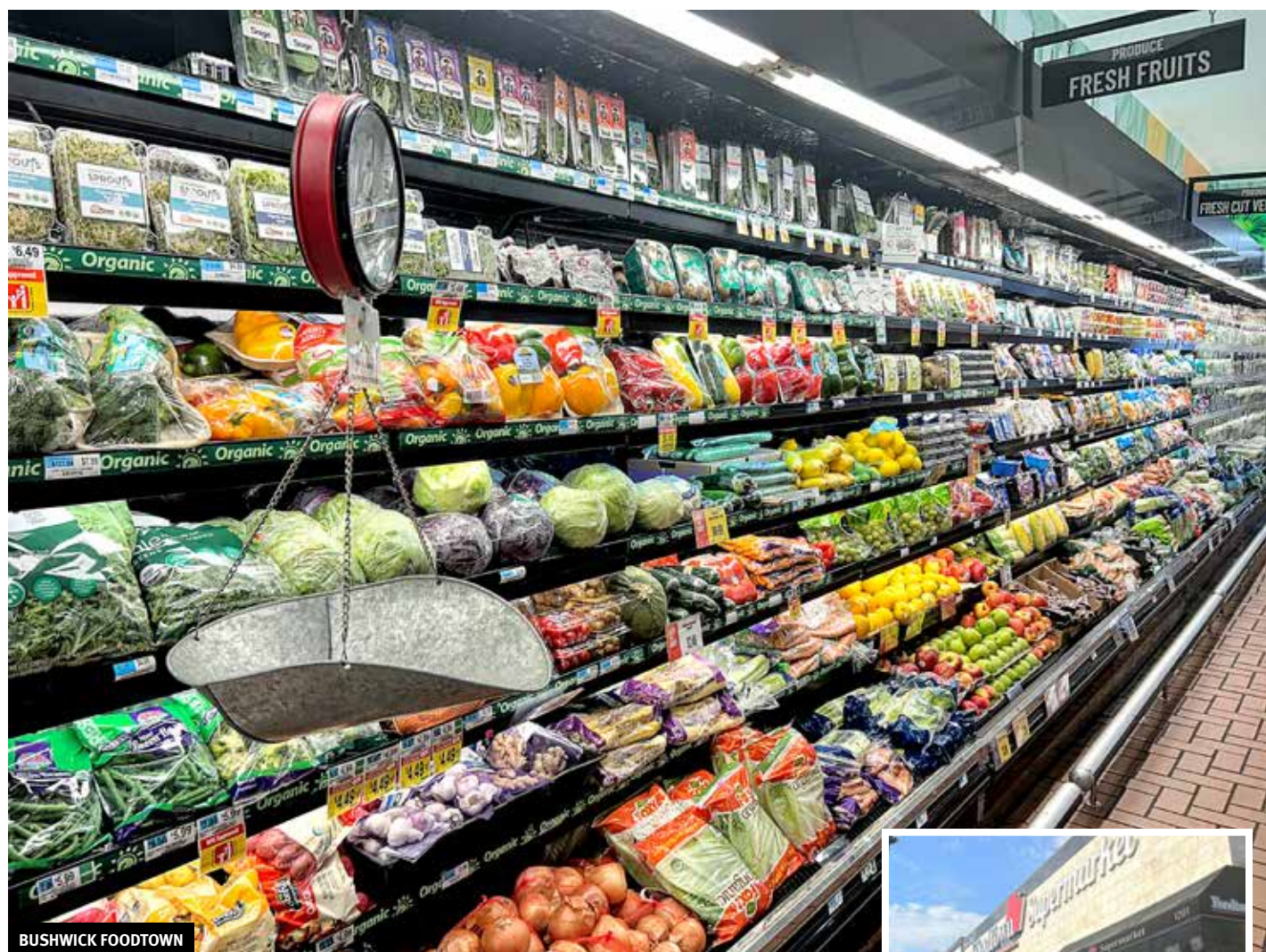
Lately, the city's palate has tilted toward Asia, with hot pot and pho drawing diners of all backgrounds into specialty

markets once considered niche. Mediterranean and Middle Eastern flavors are also taking center stage, expanding beyond Greek and Lebanese to embrace Turkish, Persian, and Syrian inspirations.

And as New Yorkers demand food that reflects their values and lifestyles — organic, vegan, gluten-free, high-protein, local — restaurants and retailers are keeping pace. The farm-to-table and greenmarket movements have become more than trends; they're now essential to the city's definition of freshness and transparency.

In New York, food evolves as fast as the neighborhoods themselves. Every shift in taste, culture, and community brings a chance to discover something new — something distinctly, deliciously New York.





BUSHWICK FOODTOWN

Feeding the Masses in NYC

Bushwick is a community in the throes of a revival. A neighborhood once synonymous with urban decline has turned around, and new residential and commercial properties are rising, and existing infrastructure has seen improvement.

To feed a multifaceted community like Bushwick requires a lot of thought, not only because of shopper requirements, but also because commercial properties tend to be relatively small, so 70,000 square foot supermarkets are not easy to locate. Small, well-run supermarkets are important because many consumers don't own cars and rely on mass transit and shoe leather to get around. Enter the Bushwick Foodtown, which operates directly under an elevated subway line.

Foodtown in Bushwick has operated for six years under its current ownership. Dan Wodzinski, head of operations and merchandising, says the building was purchased in 2019, and the new owners did a major renovation before opening.

The original store had a food court in front, but that didn't suit new ownership. The renovation placed an emphasis on perishables and related departments. The front and back were opened up to create a longer presentation of perishables, service department and grocery.

"The store is about 15,000 square feet in size, with about 10% dedicated to produce," Wodzinski says.

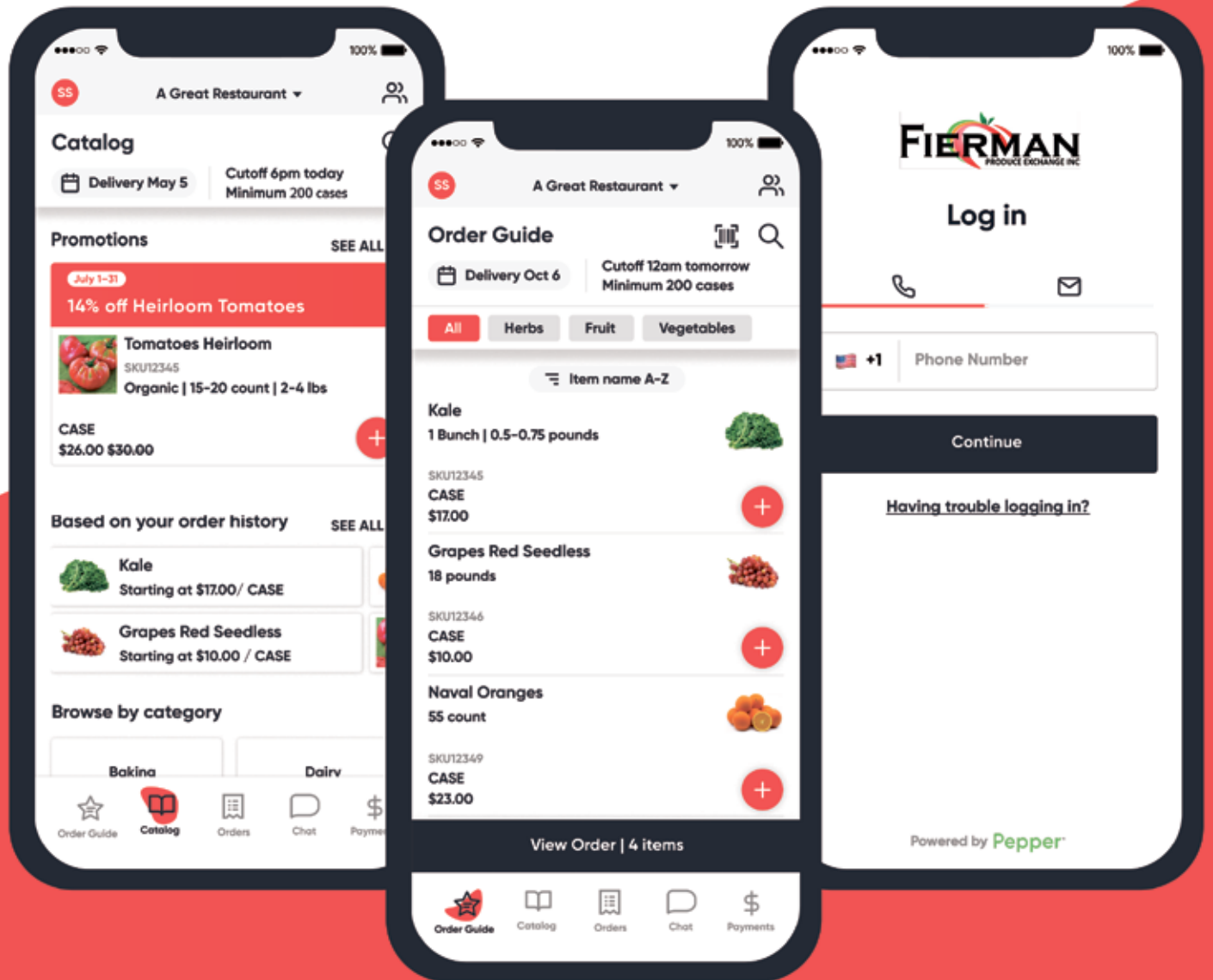
During an October store visit, an upfront combination table and carton display mixed early and late season produce, including decorative ears of corn, plums and peaches as an adjunct to the main display of tomatoes, bulk apples in tote

bags for convenient carry out, avocado and tomatoes. The linear department had rows of floor dry fixtures operating perpendicular to a long cold case down the store wall, which offered bagged and clamshell salads.

Bushwick is home to many large families, so their needs became an important point of demand. Yet the store also had to accommodate young people moving into the neighborhood, many single professionals who favor convenience food.

"We had to challenge ourselves," Wodzinski says, "to serve the traditional family customers and the young single professionals."

The introductory floor display had its complement just behind in another



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presentation of tomatoes and avocados, with bagged and clamshell salads adjacent in the cold case. Multiple varieties of bulk apples and pears occupied the next table display with whole pineapples on the end cap. The store displayed citrus along with mangos and persimmons.

Facing was the main table display of Latino specialties, including plantains and root vegetables. The associated endcap was the main banana display. Next, potatoes, onions and garlic were arrayed next to a variety of squash and a few coconuts. Berries and grapes occupied endcap refrigerated cases.

The cold case featured an extensive selection of organic fruit, vegetables and herbs.

The supermarket also includes a diverse greens assortment with items, such as bunch carrots and asparagus. Other vegetables included heads of cauliflower, corn, broccoli, cabbage, eggplant, squash, pepper and scallions among other commodities.

Fresh-cuts are a critical part of the produce departments in New York, where a lot of the kitchens and refrigerators are small. So, in the midst of the cold case, Foodtown offers overwrapped trays of

fresh-cut broccoli heads, cut cauliflower and sliced zucchini, yellow squash and peppers. Celery and carrot spears were nearby, individually provided and in combination. Overwrapped veggies include asparagus, Brussels sprouts and okra. Then diced veggie combinations include onions and peppers, as well as carrots, onions and celery and mixed peppers. The display also offered chopped white and red onions.

As for fresh-cut fruit, the Bushwick Foodtown stocked everything from cups to trays in an on-the-floor refrigerated case. Mango, pineapple, watermelon, honeydew melon and cantaloupe were chunked, mixed fruit was tubbed and trays accommodated sliced melon and kiwi. The salad lineup includes both bagged and clamshell, positioned near the store entrance in a relatively large display for the convenience of grab-and-go shoppers.

Fact File

Foodtown of Bushwick
1291 Broadway
Brooklyn, NY 11221
718-443-7913
www.foodtown.com/stores/foodtown-of-bushwick

FANDOQ

Serving a Taste of Persia

Cuisines with roots in the Middle East have become increasingly popular in the New York metro region for a variety of reasons; however, a Persian menu is less well known but has its own particular charms.

FandoQ is a Persian restaurant that operates in Garden City, a community that's part of Long Island's Nassau County. It's adjacent to the Roosevelt Field mall and a retail landscape that includes everything from Neiman Marcus to Costco to Whole Foods Market to Orvis to Nordstrom Rack, as well as lots of restaurants.

Although unique, Persian cuisine draws influences from many sources, but the food tradition and the underlying culture center on modern-day Iran.

"Persian cuisine is something between Indian, which is spice-heavy, and Mediterranean, which, while not bland, is less



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spice-heavy,” says Sam Ghafari, FandoQ manager. “We use different spice notes, not as intense or Indian or Pakistani food. Persian food is inspired by all the cultures around Iran, including Afghan, as well.”

Among Persian dishes on the FandoQ menu are Shirazi Salad made with tomatoes, cucumbers and onion, complemented

by a lemon dressing. The menu also offers Ghorme Sabzi, a Persian herb stew with kidney beans and beef cubes. Considered the national dish of Iran, the Persian herb stew traditionally consists of sautéed herbs, such as parsley, cilantro and fenugreek, slow-cooked with meat, often beef or lamb, kidney beans and, the key ingredient, dried

Persian limes, but it has regional variations.

Broadening its menu regionally, FandoQ includes its own take on Greek salad with fresh lettuce, sliced cucumbers, tomatoes, green bell pepper, red onion, olives, feta cheese and vinaigrette dressing, as well as Tabbouleh Salad, with parsley, mint, tomato, bulgur wheat, finely chopped vegetables and dressing.

Items that might be associated with other cuisines also find their way into FandoQ’s bill of fare, including samosas and Grape Leaves Dolmeh.

FandoQ vegetarian fare includes a Falafel Platter served with hummus, tahini sauce and pickles; Sautéed Vegetable Platter with eggplant, zucchini, peppers, onions and mushroom topped off by house-made tomato sauce; and Vegetable Kebab with grilled eggplant, zucchini, peppers and onions, mushrooms and plum tomato. Falafel is also available as an appetizer, as is the chef special Kashk-E-Bademjan, which consists of cooked eggplant with curd, fried mint, garlic, onion and walnuts.

“Rice is very big in Persian cuisine, but so are vegetables,” Ghafari says. “We use a lot of tomatoes, eggplant and green peppers. While not as heavy as Italian cuisine, we do use garlic, which varies in dishes because certain areas use some and other areas don’t use garlic.”

Rice is an important element on the FandoQ menu and served up in an intriguing variety. In addition to brown and white rice, the restaurant offers Albalo Polo, a sour cherry rice; Zereskh Polo; Persian Barberries Rice; and Baghali Polo, rice with dill and fava beans.

Fact File

FandoQ
1610 Old Country Road
Westbury, NY 11590
516-279-4551
www.fandoqny.com

LORING PLACE

Enjoy the Tastes of the Season

When it opened in December 2016, Loring Place had an immediate connection to the neighborhood around its Greenwich Village location because its founder, Chef Dan Kluger, began his restaurant career as a maitre d’ at nearby Union Square Cafe.

That job introduced Kluger to the Union Square Greenmarket, which he has now

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frequented for more than 20 years. The Greenmarket has been an inspiration for Loring Place, operating on West Eighth Street, where the seasonal menu builds on the bounty provided by the Greenmarket growers.

Joe Ramos, Loring Place general manager, says the restaurant is positioned both as a neighborhood gathering place and a destination for New Yorkers who want to enjoy the unique fare and local ambience.

"We have many guests who come regularly for lunch, brunch or dinner," Ramos says. "I think our menu is creative, that changes with each season, but still has elements consistent all year-round. Since opening, we've heavily utilized the Green-

market, local farms and local spirits to keep with our ethos, being local and sustainable when possible."

"We aim to support as many farms as we can at the Greenmarket, many of which chef [Kluger] has had relationships with for a very long time," Ramos says. "We definitely focus on seasonality, with the menu changing with what the seasons bring, but, more importantly, with the produce that's at its peak during that time."

The restaurant also accommodates

diners with allergies, aversions and specific diets.

How Loring Place uses produce in the dishes makes the restaurant unique. Even on the more limited lunch menu, fruit and vegetables are prominent elements in delivering flavor. For example, the snacks and small plates elements of a recent menu included Marinated Olives with citrus and chilies; Butternut Fries in a lemon-parmesan dressing; Baked Ricotta with Kabocha squash, chilies, mint and grilled sourdough;

LORING PLACE



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and Tuna Crudo with citrus, chilies and radishes.

The salads and seasonal vegetables included a Shaved Brussels Sprouts Salad with olives, almonds, green apple vinaigrette and manchego; Roasted Beets Salad with ginger, orange, toasted cashews and crispy sunchokes; and Wood Grilled Broccoli Salad with orange, pistachios and mint. Lunch salads included Chicken Paillard with butternut squash, pickled pears and fennel vinaigrette.

Loring Place defies pizza orthodoxy with a hand-milled, whole wheat Date Pizza that features mozzarella, bacon, chiles and radicchio.

Although many of the same dishes appear on both the dinner and lunch menu, some items are evening-only, recently, including Grilled Acorn Squash with cider glaze and housemade granola; and Celery Root Salad with Asian pear, fennel, candied walnuts and lemon among the snacks and small plates. Among the large plates for dinner were Spice Roasted Cauliflower with fennel, apple and preserved lemon; and Maple Glazed Chicken Breast with carrots, parsnips and cranberries.

The role of fruits and vegetables is central to what makes Loring Place unique, and the connections to the neighborhood and the Greenmarket give the restaurant a particular authenticity. Combine that with a warm, inviting interior tucked into a historic 1848 building, and you have an eatery that courts visitation.

Fact File

Loring Place
21 W. Eighth St.
New York, NY 10011
212-388-1831
www.loringplacenyc.com

99 RANCH

Catering to Asian Shoppers

Its parent company is located on the West Coast, but 99 Ranch made a critical move out East this year by opening a supermarket on Main Street in Flushing, NY, one of the most populous Asian neighborhoods in the United States.

The supermarket is the 64th in a chain operated by Tawa Supermarket, Buena Park, CA, across 11 states, all focusing on Asian foods. The Flushing store, the company's first in New York City, includes signage in



English and Chinese as part of its positioning and commitment to authenticity and shopping ease for all customers.

According to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York, Flushing has the largest concentration of Chinese immigrants in the city. Twice as many Chinese immigrants live in Flushing than in Manhattan's Chinatown. From the broader perspective, Queens, the borough where Flushing 99 Ranch operates, has the largest population of Asian immigrants in New York.

"The Flushing store features a pan-Asian assortment that reflects the diversity and tastes of the local community," Alice Chen, chief executive of 99 Ranch, tells *PRODUCE BUSINESS*. "Our produce department highlights seasonal selections that bring freshness and authenticity to everyday meals.

"This fall, for example, we're featuring sweet and crisp Korean and Chinese pears, along with a rotating variety of Asian greens, melons and fruits. By focusing on quality, seasonality, and cultural relevance, we aim to make 99 Ranch Market a place where the community can experience the best of Asian flavors, year-round."

On entering the store, consumers are immediately introduced to the store's produce assortment in case displays in the

aisle and slant tables adjacent. On the day of a store visit, pineapples were featured in the opening floor case display along with citrus, honeydew melons, mini red pomelos and dragon fruit. Across the sales floor were a range of Asian specialties, such as, for example, White Beech mushrooms. The large bean sprout presentation includes both packaged and bulk product.

Chen says 99 Ranch saw Flushing as a neighborhood where the company could offer shoppers a distinct and inviting shopping experience.

"Flushing has long been one of the most vibrant and culturally rich neighborhoods in New York City," she says, "a true hub of Asian cuisine and community. As we continue to expand our footprint on the East Coast, opening our first store in New York City marks an exciting milestone for 99 Ranch Market. We saw a unique opportunity to serve this dynamic neighborhood with an elevated supermarket experience that brings together authenticity, freshness, and



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cultural connection. The timing felt right to introduce a destination that celebrates Flushing's diversity and offers a taste of Asia that feels both local and inspiring."

Chen says the Flushing store represents an elevated format for 99 Ranch Market, a two-level concept that combines a full-service supermarket on the upper level with a food hall below.

From live seafood and fresh produce to ready-to-eat meals, this location brings together the best of what 99 Ranch Market offers, with a strong focus on quality, convenience and variety.

"Its modern design and urban layout reflect how the brand continues to evolve to meet the lifestyle and expectations of New York City shoppers, while staying true to its roots in authentic Asian food culture," she says.

The two-story, 37,000-square-foot store includes a 22,000-square-foot Market Floor with more than 10,000 hand-selected SKUs across pantry, frozen, and premium meats, in addition to produce and live seafood.

In-store services include complimentary fish frying and live crab/lobster steaming, self-checkout, members-only promotions,

and 1% back in loyalty points via the 99 Ranch Super Rewards program.

The 15,000 square foot EAT UP Food Court occupies an underground space for food vendors offering fare from dim sum and boba tea to Vietnamese pho, Taiwanese street food and sushi.

Fact File

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Portokali Gourmet Market, in Brooklyn's Sheepshead Bay neighborhood, sits on a busy street corner in a section of New York that is among the city's most dynamic.

The community still has significant, long-established Italian and Jewish populations, as well as the large Russian population in adjacent Brighton Beach. However, the neighborhood today includes Latino groups of various backgrounds, as well as large numbers of residents from Ukraine, Georgia and parts of eastern Europe, as well as Asia, with a significant number of residents hailing from the Middle East.



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Portokali serves them all, and it does so 24 hours a day.

"It started as a small store, but kept expanding until it got the entire corner," says staffer Ayten Avci.

The corner is on a busy commercial strip where East 18 Street hits Sheepshead Bay Road, and the first thing a customer or passerby would notice is the abundant display of fruits and vegetables outside the store, lining its exterior walls.

Over the slant table displays were banners identifying each commodity in large, clear lettering, catching consumer attention and prompting shopping. Across the sidewalk from the larger presentation along the store's wall were curbside table displays. Anyone walking down the street was surrounded by fresh produce.

Cut fruit occupied an ice table on the other side of the store entrance, alongside some half-Hami melons, a commodity associated with the Xinjiang region of China.

Although it shares space with other departments, produce was abundant inside Portokali as well. The store set much of the produce assortment to satisfy the widest range of shoppers, so more tomato and pepper displays were mounted inside across from a cold case, including squash, carrots, tray-wrapped corn ears, Brussels sprouts and asparagus, as well as both packaged and bulk mushrooms, ranging from white to oyster.

Next to that case was a large presentation of greens along with items, such as radishes and scallions, with organic items mixed into the display, all neatly merchandised. Indeed, organic items popped up in displays across the produce department.

Several specialty items were offered alongside the more mainstream products, including cubanelle peppers, runner beans, calabaza and cranberry beans, as well as commodities that have become more or less mainstream in New York, such as dragon fruit and chayote.

While Portokali offers a rather wide variety of produce, it does so in a limited space shared with other departments. As such, the operation is labor-intensive, and workers remain busy refreshing displays that are consistently well-maintained.

With some strong merchandising, a lot of core products and accompanying items from various food traditions that are in demand, Portokali serves a neighborhood of varied tastes and preferences, but an ongoing interest in fresh food.

Fact File

Portokali
1509 Sheepshead Bay Road
Brooklyn, NY 11235
718-332-5900
www.facebook.com/PortokaliGourmetMarket/

THE BAY CAFE

Fresh, Kosher and a Surprise

The Bay Cafe bills itself as having the best Italian food in Manhattan Beach, but there is a twist — it's kosher.

And that's not the only twist. Although the cuisine is Italian at its core, the menu incorporates a variety of different influences, such as seasonal food.

A lot of what makes The Bay Cafe unique is based on where it operates. Manhattan Beach is one in a string of Brooklyn sea and bayside communities. It's a neighborhood with a mix of residents and food from Eastern European, Latino and other backgrounds, and Brighton Beach, famous for its Russian eateries. A significant part of the population consists of Jewish residents who hail from different parts of the world and different food traditions.

"We take from Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Russian traditions," says Meyer, Bay Cafe restaurant manager, who didn't offer his last name, referring to Jewish cultures as they evolved in Eastern and Central Europe, Iberia and the eastern Mediterranean, and Russia. The influences on the



SnapDragon Apples Fuel Retail Sales with Hall of Fame Sweepstakes

Crunch Time Apple Growers, the grower-owned company behind SnapDragon® apples, is announcing something special for football fans and apple lovers alike: Snap Your Way to Canton, a sweepstakes presented in partnership with the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The Snap Your Way to Canton Sweepstakes runs through February and offers participants the opportunity to win a once-in-a-lifetime experience at Football's Greatest Weekend in August – the Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2026 enshrinement ceremony and surrounding events, including the Hall of Fame game and an invite-only dinner with inductees. Fans enter by purchasing SnapDragon apples at participating retailers; winners will be announced in early March.

As the official apple of the Buffalo Bills since 2022, SnapDragon has become known among football fans; partnering with the Pro Football Hall of Fame stretches the alignment with pro football beyond Buffalo

and gives fans the chance to score exclusive prizes.

The sweepstakes highlights the brand's continued commitment to its retail partners. Any SnapDragon retailers who sign on to the campaign by December 8 will be included in a consumer-facing press release announcing the program. "It's a win-win," says Jessica Wells, Executive Director of Crunch Time Apple Growers. "Retailers gain visibility, and fans get more chances to find SnapDragon apples in stores."

The promotion is part of Crunch Time's broader effort to celebrate the excellent taste and hard work that goes into every apple they harvest. "Every SnapDragon apple represents the work of more than 160 family growers across the state," says Wells. "From our orchards around the state of New York to grocery stores nationwide, we take pride in delivering consistent quality and an unforgettable eating experience."

Known for its bold sweetness and satisfying crunch, SnapDragon apples continue

to gain fans across the country. Their signature flavor and Monster Crunch – make SnapDragon apples stand out among premium apple varieties. "SnapDragon has that perfect balance of flavor, juiciness and crunch," says Wells. "It's the kind of apple that wins you over from the very first bite."

As the Pro Football Hall of Fame Sweepstakes kicks off, Crunch Time Apple Growers invites fans, retailers, and produce industry partners to join in celebrating the flavor, pride, and community that make SnapDragon apples second to none. Retail partners that sign on will be mentioned in further press materials, and all participating stores will receive themed in-store collateral and social media content to help drive shopper engagement in the sweepstakes. "Whether you're cheering from the stands or from your kitchen, SnapDragon apples are a hall-of-fame level snack," says Wells. "We can't wait to see how fans get involved – and maybe take home a hall-of-fame worthy prize."

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menu are even broader, even including Pao de Queijo, Brazilian cheese bread. A large Orthodox Jewish population in Brazil has a long connection with New York.

The influences don't end there, as the dessert menu includes churros, while the appetizer menu offers tiradito de tuna, a dish with a Peruvian pedigree.

Outside of the Italian dishes, other Mediterranean cuisines influence the Bay Cafe menu. Greek Salad with beefsteak tomatoes, peppers, red onion, and kalamata olives has its place on the menu, as does Crispy Halloumi Salad, with roots in Cyprus, combining mixed greens, cherry tomatoes, cucumber and caramelized onions.

In another example of the Bay Cafe's willingness to incorporate food trends as they've developed in New York, there's an Asian Chopped Salad with roasted red and golden beets, sliced pears, mixed greens, feta cheese and toasted walnuts.

Still, The Bay Cafe's menu is based on Italian cuisine, so a favorite, such as Penne Ala Vodka and Wild Mushroom Risotto, are right at home. Yet, the menu makes room for consumers who are fans of vegetable-based entrees, as is the case with Eggplant Parmesan, and those who are looking for healthier variations on traditional cooking, in the case of Spaghetti Squash Medley, with the requisite spaghetti squash, sautéed vegetables, olives, basil and feta cheese.

Pizza is a house specialty, and variations include Truffle Mushroom Pizza and Olive Za'atar Pizza, using Middle Eastern za'atar spice, which is a blend of thyme, marjoram, oregano, toasted sesame seeds and sumac.

Side dishes are vegetables-heavy at the Bay Cafe and include Sautéed Spinach and Broccoli, Grilled Vegetables and Roasted Baby Potatoes. There are also gluten-free items noted on the menu.

The story of the Bay Cafe begins with fresh flavors, and the restaurant positions itself as the laid-back place that constantly refreshes and revitalizes the menu, bringing in new flavors, items, and dishes that make for a cosmopolitan eating experience.

Fact File

The Bay Cafe
2 Neptune Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11235
347-554-8811
www.thebaycafebkc.com



UNION SQUARE GREENMARKET

Bringing Fresh Produce to the City

The Union Square Greenmarket is a long-established institution that connects urbanites with the growers who raise their food in the New York City region.

The open-air market, with a festival-like setting of little stalls and sprawling display spaces, operates year-round under the auspices of GrowNYC, an environmental nonprofit organization, although not all vendors participate all year. The market operates every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday in the north and west plazas of Manhattan's Union Square Park.

Union Square symbolically marks the changeover from Manhattan to Greenwich Village. South of the park, the neighborhood switches from a commercial geography to a more residential one, although both areas are mixed in their composition. The vicinity has historically had limited access to fresh perishables, although that has changed over time, with more independent supermarkets and local chains, such as Morton Williams, popping up nearby, as well as major chain operators, including Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe's and Wegmans.

Yet, the Greenmarket remains an institution embraced by New Yorkers, and while produce has a dominant place in the operation, it isn't alone. The range of goods



offered by the 140 regional sellers range from pastry to cider to jams to flowers to seafood to woolen goods.

Still, produce is the market's strength. For example, Van Houten Farms of Orangetown, PA, which also operates a Pearl River, NY, garden center, offers a wide range of seasonal and other produce, as well as plants, in one of the larger market spaces. It started at Union Square in 1976, since the institution's founding.

Although it offers items, such as potatoes, that could keep it in operation over the winter, Van Houten Farms is focused on the seasonal aspect of its business at Union Square, says Passang Tenzin, the Greenmarket manager for the farm. The grower remains in the market until Christmas, then shuts down for the season.

The beginning of Van Houten Farms Greenmarket season opens in March with flowers and spring produce, and closes its Union Square year with Christmas trees and related decorative items. In the autumn, the variety of produce was considerable with fresh cauliflower, mixed peppers, cabbage, purple broccoli and beefsteak tomatoes and pumpkins prominent, alongside a range of flowering plants.

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The Greenmarket has been an important part of Shushan Valley Hydro Farms' business, says Erin Murphy, who helps run the market operation for the Shushan Valley, NY, grower. "They've been coming here for 20 plus years."

The operation offers its core tomato product line — beefsteak, vine cluster, cherry — all year long. The grower also cultivates cucumbers, herbs and some greens.

The Union Square Greenmarket is best known for the efforts by GrowNYC to bring fresh regional produce, perishables and artisan products to Big Apple consumers. Today, GrowNYC operates more than 45 greenmarkets throughout New York's five boroughs.

Fact File

Union Square Greenmarket

Union Square Park

*Union Square West and East 17th St.
New York, NY 10003*

212-788-7900

*[www.grownyc.org/greenmarket/
manhattan-union-square-m](http://www.grownyc.org/greenmarket/manhattan-union-square-m)*

URBAN VEGAN ROOTS

Healthy Eating That's Not Boring

Urban Vegan Roots bills itself as a purveyor of globally inspired vegan dishes, with a bold New York attitude in the heart of Astoria, NY, which is fitting.

Astoria is known for its vibrant Greek community, but it has tremendous diversity and a dynamic social environment. For one thing, the community, which borders Long Island City, gets contributions from long-established Black and Latino residents and includes a significant Brazilian presence. Irish, Italian and Middle Eastern residents contribute as well. The community also has a large contingent of young professionals.

And Astoria is a community with food at heart. From the latest trendy eateries to traditional Greek tavernas, Astoria has had a dynamic nightlife for generations, much of it centered on Steinway Street and Broadway, but spilling across the community.

Urban Vegan Roots is part of today's Astoria food scene. The restaurant creates a space where community, creativity and compassion come together over flavorful, house-made fare — from small plates to hearty entrees and all-day brunch. The decor is engaging, featuring art portraits of musicians and celebrities, a spray of graffiti



graphics and a bandstand where players regularly entertain diners.

The restaurant encourages potential diners to consider it for parties and community gathering, but is just as happy with folks who drop by for a cocktail or coffee as they work, study or just take a break.

Menu influences are international and offer a mix of flavors and approaches to preparation. Among small plate items, Mushroom Empanadas include shiitake and cremini mushrooms, Numu plant-based mozzarella, and avocado salsa verde with Parm, a term for non-dairy Parmesan cheese food, while the Good Bunny Roasted Carrots are awash in chile agave glaze, toasted pumpkin seed, tahini, lemon, maple and parsley.

Dishes can be veggie variations on popular cuisine, as in the case of the Buffalo Soldier cauliflower bites with ranch dressing and scallions, or the Coconut Breaded Konjac Shrimp (konjac being made from a Southeast Asian root vegetable), served with arugula, chile aioli, avocado salsa verde and pico.

Under the heading Plates, the menu includes main dishes, such as I Ain't No Chicken avocado ranch salad with kale, romaine, southern fried seitan, avocado, tomato, garlic croutons, Parm and ranch dressing; and Wild Style Zucchini Scallopini featuring lightly breaded zucchini, lemon caper sauce



with mixed mushrooms, mashed potatoes and parsley.

Urban Vegan prides itself on having brunch all day, with The Big Brando Breakfast Burrito stuffed with turmeric rice, black beans, marinated tofu, Numu mozzarella, avocado, pico, flour tortilla and chile aioli; and the Egg McNuthin' consisting of tofu, avocado, hollandaise, shiitake bacon, arugula, onion and kala namak, a black rock salt, along with housemade bread.

Bottom line: Urban Vegan Roots doesn't just emphasize healthy eating, but enjoying it as well.

Fact File

Urban Vegan Roots

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Meet the Team Scott Schepis



Tradition at Work.

Scott Schepis has been a dedicated member of the D'Arrigo New York team for 15 years. He began his career unloading railcars and advanced through the roles of Porter, Warehouse Associate, and Foreman before becoming an Operations Supervisor. Scott's journey reflects the D'Arrigo family tradition of hard work, loyalty, and opportunity. These values that have guided the company for generations. As Scott shared, "knowing you will be recognized for your work drives me to continue learning daily." His story is a testament to how dedication and integrity continue to shape the D'Arrigo New York legacy.

Boston Finds Fresh Momentum

Innovation and heritage shape Beantown's evolving food scene.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Boston's vibrant food scene is undergoing a dynamic transformation, blending deep-rooted New England traditions with a surge of innovation across retail and foodservice. From restaurants redefining "seed-to-fork" dining to retailers catering to increasingly savvy and sustainability-minded shoppers, the marketplace is evolving rapidly.

"Seed to fork dining in restaurants and educated buyers in retail continue to push the bar for operators," says Frank (Francis) Rossetti, president of Banks Square Market, doing business as The Produce Connection, in Wakefield, MA.

Rossetti notes a shift toward experience-driven concepts, where food meets entertainment — from movie nights and board games to the latest craze, pickleball. "Consumers continue to challenge us to offer items beyond basic nutrition," he says. "They look for sustainability, partnerships with local growers, and reducing environmental impact through packaging."

That same pursuit of quality and connection extends into retail. "Our retailers want the best product and will pay more money for it," says Gianna Piazza, lime and avocado sales specialist at Community-Suffolk, located at the New England Produce Center in Chelsea, MA. "We have thriving chain stores as well as a variety of independent retailers of all sizes."

RETAIL ADVANCEMENT

Boston's retail landscape is adapting to changing consumer habits. The growth of Amazon Prime, Instacart, and other delivery platforms has reshaped how shoppers source their groceries. "This may make it easier for the public to gather their groceries while busy at work," says Jared Menzer, vice president of sales for Beacon Fruit and Produce in Chelsea, MA, "but it makes it difficult for retailers to showcase new products to the public."

Rossetti notes large-scale retail operators are embracing AI and data analytics to drive traffic and create automation, while smaller regional or neighborhood retailers "are capitalizing more on personal and detailed approaches through social media communication and in-person store experiences."

Boston's marketplace is constantly evolving, says Mark DeMichaelis, president and chief executive of State Garden in Chelsea, MA. "Today's consumers shop differently than even a decade ago. Local and fresh matter more than ever, giving shoppers confidence they're getting a fresher, higher-quality product. This consumer perception is evidenced by continued demand for organic."

Niche and ethnic stores also continue to thrive. "Our ethnic stores have continued to grow since COVID," says Maurice Crafts, managing partner at Coosemans Boston in Chelsea, MA. "We've seen a pretty good influx of Hispanic business."



Boston's food scene is evolving — expanding beyond the city's downtown core and redefining how consumers experience food. PHOTO COURTESY SID WAINER & SON

BROADENING FOODSERVICE

As Boston's retail scene evolves, so does its dining landscape — expanding beyond the city's downtown core and redefining how consumers experience food. "There is strong growth in the Seaport and surrounding neighborhoods," says Allie Wainer, regional vice president for New England at Sid Wainer & Son and The Chefs' Warehouse in New Bedford, MA. "Restaurants are leaning into smaller plates, global flavors, and relaxed fine dining. The demand for local ingredients and transparency in sourcing plays a major role in both menu development and purchasing decisions."

Growth is evident in chains and restaurant groups. "We see more national restaurant chains coming into Boston," says Patrick Burke, co-owner of Garden Fresh Salad Company in Chelsea, MA. "We're seeing this grow more than individual chefs opening up their own restaurants, though that is still happening."

"Smaller, independently owned restaurants seem to be taking a back seat to restaurant groups," says Natasha Carr, director of operations for Chelsea Morning Provisions in Ipswich, MA. "Additionally, the Michelin Guide made its debut in Boston in May of 2025, which has helped make the city more of a 'foodie destination' than in years past."

The rise in convenience-driven dining is another major force. "People are getting more comfortable ordering meals and groceries through food delivery apps, making takeout in restaurants more of a focus and priority for success," says Menzer.

He adds that bars, breweries, and casual venues are adapting in creative ways. "The bar scene has definitely taken off. Bars are starting to offer appetizers and small plates of food for customers to stay in one location and be served small bites. Some of our food truck customers are hired by bars or breweries to park outside of their location and serve customers there."

PB

Boston Wholesalers: Experience That Delivers

Experience, adaptability, and connection fuel innovation.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Boston produce suppliers are amping up their business savvy to stay ahead in an increasingly complex marketplace. Whether serving restaurants, retailers or foodservice operators, wholesalers balance time-tested expertise with fresh strategies to meet customer demands.

"The Boston food scene is experiencing notable changes across both retail and restaurant sectors, reflecting broader industry trends, and shifting consumer preferences," says Dominic J. Cavallaro III, secretary at John Cerasuolo in Chelsea, MA. "Price increases have been widespread, affecting both retail products and dining establishments. Many vendors may not fully recognize these price adjustments are driven by numerous factors, including rising fuel costs, unpredictable weather patterns, supply chain disruptions, and inflation."

Amid market fluctuations, Boston wholesalers rely on decades of industry experience to keep their customers competitive. "None of what we do is super new," says Gene Fabio, president of J. Bonafede, Chelsea, MA. "The bulk of our job is to help our customers make money. My supplier has to make money, and my customers have to make money. It's our job to see to both."

At Community-Suffolk, in Chelsea, MA, that customer commitment has defined nearly a century of service. "We provide the best in the product lines we service," says Steven Piazza, president. "It's our goal to provide consistent quality and value in what we handle."

COLLABORATION IS KEY

Though the wholesalers compete with each other, collaboration is also crucial to success. "We're all swinging the same bat," says Fabio. "We help each other to ensure we're taking care of customers. There's plenty of room for everybody to make money."

A cornerstone of that collaboration is the New England Produce Center (NEPC) in Chelsea, which anchors Boston's supply chain success. "Without NEPC, we could never have built our business to what it is today," says Frank Rossetti, president of Banks Square Market, doing business as The Produce Connection in Wakefield, MA. "The relationships and support we encountered over the years is immeasurable."

That network advantage extends to buyers, like Beacon Fruit and Produce, whose NEPC location enhances both access and efficiency. "With all the other houses in the market offering an array of products, we can find the exact product we need to fulfill our customers' needs by quite literally going next door or across the street for it," says Jared Menzer, vice president of sales. "This helps our customers receive their specialty items much faster than if they ordered elsewhere and at a more affordable price."



Though Boston wholesalers compete with each other, collaboration is also crucial to success, and a cornerstone of that collaboration is the New England Produce Center in Chelsea, which anchors Boston's supply chain success.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO

With wholesalers, customers get a direct line to those doing the actual buying plus decades of experience in the industry, says Natasha Carr, director of operations for Chelsea Morning Provisions in Ipswich, MA. "I don't know any chef who can text their produce buyer from one of the giant distributors at 11 p.m. with questions, and get an answer. Our customers can."

EVOLVING SUPPLY CHAIN

As the marketplace has evolved, so have Boston wholesalers. "The business is different from decades ago, so we all have to work a little harder," says Fabio. "One evolution is in the area of supply chain logistics. Customers are increasingly looking for delivery. I have two trucks on the road."

Community Suffolk delivers via its off-market location. "We have a tractor-trailer and a 14-pallet truck that are busy 12 hours a day," says Piazza.

The Produce Connection operates a fleet of trucks, making daily deliveries all over New England, according to Rossetti. "We push our teams to create solutions when customers bring us opportunities."

State Garden provides delivery and logistics services from its Chelsea facility, says Mark DeMichaelis, president and chief executive. "We provide reliable, on-time delivery throughout the East Coast, ensuring fresher product by shortening the final leg of the supply chain."

Delivery, specialty sourcing, pre-cut, and latest-in-the-industry ordering times for next-day delivery are all Chelsea Morning services. "Our customers rest easy knowing they have a partner in us that's looking out for them," says Carr. "This allows them to focus on their customers."



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EXPANDING SERVICES

Additional services also include packaging and custom products. On the retail side, for example, State Garden offers multiple formats, including peel and reseal tubs, rigid lids, and bags, says DeMichaelis.

Coosemans Boston in Chelsea, MA, provides repack services, taking a 20-pound case, normally too much for a customer, and repackaging it to a five- or 10-pound unit, says Maurice Crafts, managing partner. "For example, customers don't want a 30-pound bag of turmeric. We'll repack it to a one-, three- or five-pound. This is especially important for the foodservice industry. Smaller restaurants, and even some of the big guys, don't want to take on large packs of certain items."

Garden Fresh Salad Company in Chelsea, MA, offers the benefit of consistent product. "Our product is cut consistently and measures consistently," says Patrick Burke, co-owner. "If we sell 10 pounds, they know they're getting 10 pounds of usable product. We also save our customers on labor cost since we're cutting it."

Garden Fresh also does custom packs



Wholesalers, like Garden Fresh Salad Company in Chelsea, MA, specialize in additional services, such as packaging and custom products. Pictured are Patrick Burke, Adam Feld and Michael Burke. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO*

and blends for customers. "If they want something specific, for example a new mix, we work with them," says Burke. "We help them figure out what they need."

VALUED EXPERTISE

The knowledge wholesalers offer adds immense value. "Buyers love learning," says Gianna Piazza, lime and avocado sales specialist at Community-Suffolk on the NEPC. "For example, there are so many types of mandarins, all with different flavor profiles, seasonality and other characteristics. When I got here six years ago, people would just

come in and say, can I have a clementine? Now they come in knowing specifically what variety they want."

Information about products is crucial, adds Fabio. "A good retailer is talking to me to learn as much as they can about each item they're selling. There's so much to know about every item, and it takes a long time to develop that expertise. People think the produce business is simple but it's not. It's complex with a lot of detail."

The depth of knowledge and experience of the team at Sid Wainer & Son and The Chefs' Warehouse company in New Bedford, MA, helps customers stay ahead of trends, says Allie Wainer, regional vice president for New England. "Our goal is to give our partners access to an education. We have a website that provides solutions for chefs at their fingertips, but we also have a team of professionals our customers can rely on."

Gianna Piazza loves warning customers about a potential issue, such as passing on information about a weather issue. "Or if a product is going up or down in price. I let them know so they can plan accordingly."

PRODUCT INNOVATION

Wholesaler expertise extends to product development and trends. State Garden's R&D and production teams develop proprietary blends, unique formulations, and exclusive items tailored to customer needs and consumer trends. It also collaborates with customers to provide in-store signage, digital content, and promotional programs to highlight freshness, sustainability and local sourcing stories, says DeMichaelis.

Coosemans' Crafts notes current trending items include micro pea tendrils and edible flowers, and continued demand for exotic and tropical items. "Also trending are any items used in healthy juicing, including turmeric, baby carrots, herbs."

A large advertisement for Produce Business magazine. The top left features a large green and white "PB" logo. To its right, the words "PRODUCE BUSINESS" are written in large white capital letters. Below the logo, the text "INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT SINCE 1985" is written in white. In the center, there is a glowing lightbulb with a magazine cover inside it. The magazine cover has the "PB" logo and the text "PRODUCE BUSINESS" and "TOP 10 NEW PRODUCT INNOVATIONS". To the right of the lightbulb, there is a list of topics: "SUPPLEMENT: NEW YORK PRODUCE SHOW SOUTH REVIEW", "PROGRESS: Imported Citrus Florida Tomatoes", "FEATURES: People of Produce: Jose Alvarado, Tom Smith, Rickie Smith", "REGIONAL PROFILE: Detroit", "RISING RETAILER: Florida Farms", and "MERCHANDISING: Bananas Citrus Winter Merchandising Guide". At the bottom left, the text "To get ahead in the produce business, you need to stay ahead of the produce business." is written in white. Below that, it says "For subscription information, please visit www.producebusiness.com or call 561-994-1118".

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PB REGIONAL PROFILE

Mushrooms are in the spotlight for both flavor and sustainability, says Wainer. "Plant-based alternatives or vegetables that can be the start of a plate continue to be the trend," she says. "Consumers are increasingly mindful about what they consume, paying attention to nutrient density and clean protein options at the center of the plate."

Fresh, high-quality ingredients remain essential, but flavor still leads, Wainer adds. "Specialty melons, sweet potatoes, citrus and unique grape varieties are catching attention for color, texture and flavor."

Gianna Piazza advises looking for sweet limes, a hybrid cross between a grapefruit and a lime. "It's an amazing piece of fruit. It looks like a lemon, but it's sweet."

INTO THE FUTURE

Boston wholesalers seek out technology for efficiency and service. "We're using anything to help us better function and serve customers," says Burke of Garden Fresh. "A lot of the technology is pretty standard now. It's important especially to have good tech for the paperwork, reporting standards and traceability."

Chelsea Morning uses Choco AI, which



At Community-Suffolk, in Chelsea, MA, customer commitment has defined nearly a century of service. Pictured are Gianna and Jackie Piazza. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO*

is designed for food distributors, to help customers easily place orders. "We also use it to track trends and understand our own weekly buying data," says Carr.

Beacon uses Choco AI, other ordering sites, and any other way to make things easier for customers, says Menzer.

The Produce Connection offers an online and mobile ordering system for orders to be placed directly into its system. "Our warehouse operates under Voice Picking Technology to help our selectors with accuracy and efficiency," says Rossetti. "We

have a truck routing system to manage the efficiency of our fleet. In the fresh-cut processing department, we utilize technology to scan different vegetable and fruit items, ensuring product is cut with as little waste as possible."

The Chefs' Warehouse continues to invest in its e-commerce platform. "Our online marketplace highlights value-added produce, local partnerships, and trending items through curated seasonal highlights designed to inspire menu creativity," says Wainer. **PB**



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Classic Boston Reimagined at The Banks

Named for famed fishing grounds, The Banks Seafood & Steak updates traditional Boston fare.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

The Banks Seafood & Steak, which opened in 2021, elegantly serves up classic New England dishes with innovative interpretations.

"The restaurant focuses on bold, seasonal dishes, featuring expertly grilled steaks and seafood paired with an award-winning wine list and signature cocktails," says Edson Rojas, executive chef.

The restaurant is owned by Himmel Hospitality Group (HHG), which has been serving Boston for over 40 years, and is a sister restaurant to Grill 23, Bistro du Midi, and Harvest. The two-story space is refined, yet inviting, foretelling the elevated dining experience to come.

The full-service dining experience offers sweeping views of the city and was designed to offer a sophisticated, but approachable atmosphere. "The restaurant's goal is to celebrate and capture the spirit of Boston, past and present, blending the city's rich culinary traditions with contemporary flair and seasonal, flavorful ingredients," says Rojas.

FOCUS ON FLAVOR

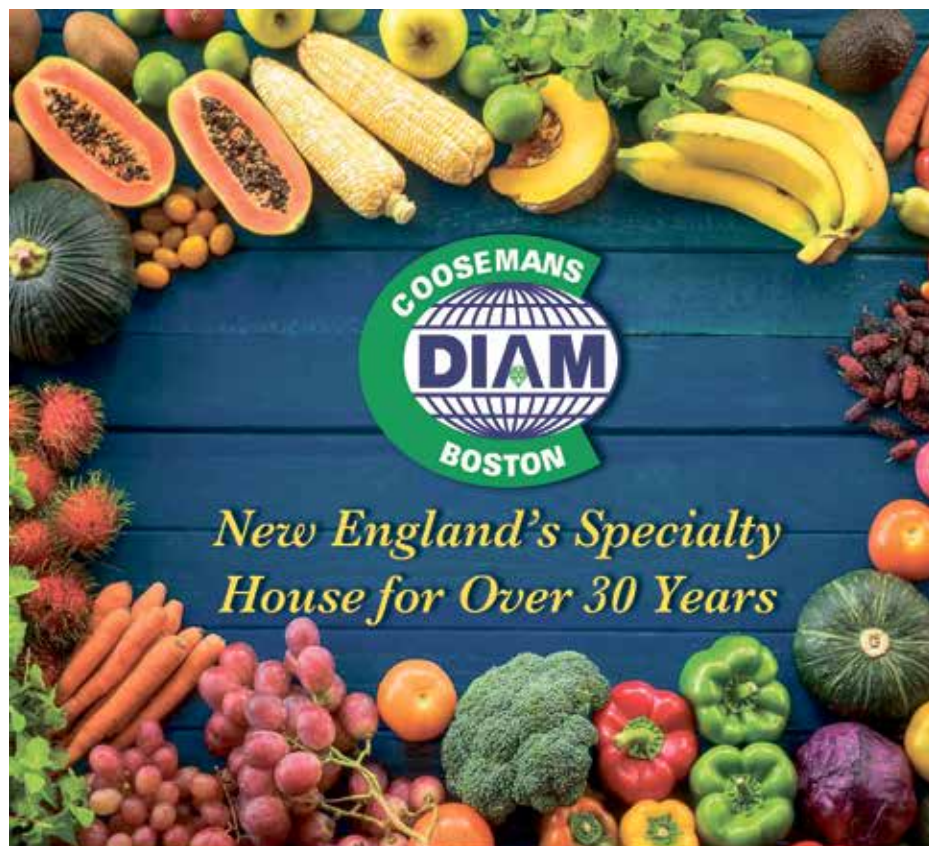
The menu pulls inspiration from New England, but also from all over the world. Growing up in both Peru and Spain,

Rojas brings multicultural influence and a deep-rooted appreciation for culinary tradition to the dishes he creates. Despite a food-focused upbringing, he initially pursued a legal career, eventually trading textbooks for an apron in Greater Boston's top kitchens.

Before joining The Banks team, Rojas

worked at Farmstead Table, Benedetto, and Gustazo Cuban Kitchen & Grill. He now plays an instrumental role in developing The Banks' partnerships with local vendors and its use of diverse, locally sourced seafood.

The restaurant spends approximately \$7,000 each month on produce, and quality is the No. 1 sourcing criteria. "Our seafood,



A full-service dining experience at The Banks Seafood & Steak offers a sophisticated, but approachable atmosphere, and the innovative menu spotlights fresh, seasonal produce.

PHOTO COURTESY MATT KISIDAY PHOTOGRAPHY



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farm and pantry partners help keep our menu fresh in every way," says Rojas. "From the dock to the stockyards, we start every meal with ingredients of unrivaled quality."

INNOVATIVE MENU

Dinner begins with an impossible choice of delectable starters. The Hawaiian Kan-

pachi Crudo combines yellow watermelon, double-aged shoyu, aleppo, and lemon grass-infused extra virgin olive oil. Jumbo Lump Crab Cakes arrive with delicate thin-sliced cucumber rolls, micro greens and an addictive aioli. Beef Tartare highlights quail egg, black garlic, truffle oil, mushroom confit and kataifi.



The menu at The Banks Seafood & Steak pulls inspiration from New England, but also from all over the world.

PHOTO COURTESY THE BANKS SEAFOOD & STEAK


The vibrant, savory sweet Arcadian Greens Salad marries chopped vegetables, sweet nectarines, feta, and sunflower seeds in balsamic vinaigrette. The Banks' take on New England Clam Chowder adds Berkshire pork belly, chives and herb oil.

For entrée, the flavorful and perfectly executed Brandt Prime Bavette includes fresh watercress and a garnish of pickled onion. A luscious Lobster Gnocchi boasts generous chunks of lobster along with Berkshire pork belly and pecorino romano. Seared Tuna adds in avocado, cilantro, succotash, garlic scapes and cherries. Ora King Salmon embraces red currant, Nardello peppers, beets and smoked mussels.

Sides include Foraged Mushrooms, Homemade Mashed Potatoes and Broccolini. Dessert delights spotlight seasonal produce, such as Crème Brûlée with a peach pie filling and streusel, and a fresh Strawberry Shortcake with strawberry ganache, strawberry tuile and strawberry sorbet.

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Florida strawberries bring a burst of summer sweetness to winter produce departments, offering retailers opportunities for local, seasonal promotion and strong sales.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

FL Strawberries ‘Promote Themselves’

The sight, smell and taste of Florida strawberries keep them in shoppers’ carts.

BY MIKE DUFF

Florida strawberries are a taste of summer in the fall and winter, offering produce departments additional sales through a sweet complement to autumnal fruits and vegetables.

Supermarket operators in Florida and nearby states are among the quickest to embrace the opportunities Sunshine State strawberries present.

“We know that perfect freshness starts close to home, and Southeastern Grocers takes great pride in supporting local growers across the Sunshine State,” says Brad Mullinax, vice president, fresh merchandising for Southeastern Grocers, Jacksonville, FL.

“We begin featuring these strawberries as soon as they are ready to ship to neighborhood stores, which is typically by late November,” Mullinax adds. “As the season gains momentum, we expand our offerings to provide customers with a variety of ways to enjoy their favorite local berries.”

Southeastern Grocers identifies and promotes Florida-grown strawberries, often showcasing the Fresh from Florida logo or clear Florida labeling “so customers know they are bringing home fruit grown right here in our home state.”

Mullinax says that recently Southeastern Grocers, which is changing its corporate identity to The Winn-Dixie Co. in early 2026, has expanded its strawberry presentations to offer more variety and value for customers.

“Shoppers can now choose from a wide range of Florida-grown options, including 1-pound and 2-pound packages, organic strawberries and even the unique Pearl white, also known as pineberries, when available.”

Mullinax says Florida growing partners have introduced several new varieties, like Sensation and Brilliance. “Because these berries are grown close to home, they are often picked in the morning and delivered to our distribution centers the same day, allowing neighbors to enjoy farm-fresh strawberries quickly.”



Wish Farms, Plant City, FL, produces premium fruit that's shipped fresh to customers across the U.S. and Canada.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Southeastern Grocers isn't the only Florida food retailer to promote the state's strawberry crop. Publix produced a video focusing on the crop and its Plant City, FL, hub. For three months of the year, the video proclaims, "Strawberries here grow sweeter, juicier than anywhere else. Anywhere. That means the season's best strawberries come from Plant City farms, from our soil, that's perfectly suited for the fruit."

OFF TO GOOD START

After a season marked by the effects of Hurricane Milton, as well as rising input and labor costs, Wish Farms, Plant City, FL, entered the 2025-26, November to April, Florida strawberry season with renewed optimism. "The weather has cooperated well during the planting phase, as the bare roots begin to establish themselves," says Nick Wishnatzki, Wish Farms public relations director. "Sunny days, cool nights and dry winter weather are the ideal growing conditions for strawberries."

This season, Wish Farms is also growing four strawberry varieties developed by the University of Florida: Brilliance, Medallion, Ember and Encore. Wishnatzki says the newer Ember and Encore varieties embody desired size, flavor and enhanced disease resistance. Based on last year's performance, Wishnatzki expects Ember and Encore to provide an overall boost in yield and productivity as the season starts in 2025.

Shawn Pollard, grower and sales manager at Astin Strawberry Exchange, Plant City, FL, agrees developments at the University of Florida have been a boost to growers.

"The University of Florida breeding program has some great leadership," he says. "I've done this for 30 years. I've never had varieties this good. They're that good — the total package, flavor first, color, shelf life, size. They're good, you want to bring them home to your family."

Naturipe Farms, Salinas, CA, sees good prospects for its central Florida strawberry operations, which start harvesting in November.

"Our peak supplies will occur in early 2026," says Jim Roberts, president of Naturipe Farms. "Compared to last year, we have not had any major weather challenges and expect to have a great season ahead."

IN DEMAND

Alyssa Grimes of Grimes Produce Co., Plant City, FL, says Florida strawberries are in demand and Grimes does significant business within the state, but its strawberries find their way across the United States and Canada. "A good portion of our produce goes to Canada. Markets outside of Florida are very important."

Solid consumer response is having a positive effect on Florida strawberry growing. "For the past two years, strawberry acres have grown exponentially in Florida," Grimes says.

Indeed, Susie McKinley, director, Division of Marketing and

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WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Growers are expanding to meet demand in Florida and across the U.S. and Canada.”**

Susie McKinley, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Tallahassee, FL

- **“Because these berries are grown close to home, they are often picked in the morning and delivered to our distribution centers the same day.”**

Brad Mullinax, Southeastern Grocers, Jacksonville, FL

Development, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Tallahassee, FL, says this year, Florida has over 15,000 acres of fresh strawberries in production, an increase of about 2,000 acres compared to last year.

“This growth reflects strong consumer demand, favorable market conditions and ongoing investment in Florida’s strawberry industry,” she says. “Growers are expanding to meet demand in Florida and across the U.S. and Canada.”

Astin Strawberry Exchange is one of those growers expanding, says Pollard, with a new 100,000-square-foot facility. “We have a farm that’s around 800 acres, so we built a cooler on site. This will be our third cooler. It’s exciting. I can hold 150,000 flats in that.”

He adds the Astin operation does cooling for other growers, enhancing the value of the facilities it operates.

Roberts says Naturipe Farms distributes its Florida strawberries primarily on the East Coast. “Florida strawberries are a perfect fit for consumers on the East Coast, as they are close in proximity. We have the newest varieties that optimize quality and flavor that keep customers coming back for more.”

Wish Farms focuses on the eastern United States, too, counting on the quality of its Florida strawberries to maintain markets.

“We ship all over the U.S. and Canada, but Florida strawberries tend to stay east, as there is a heavier supply of Mexican berries in other regions during this time,” Wishnatzki says.

MERCHANDISE THE SENSES

Roberts says that Florida strawberries are a crop that can readily draw shopper attention when they get eyes on it.

“Honestly, Florida strawberries promote themselves,” he says. “They’re a product that retailers have been asking Naturipe’s sales representatives for for some time now, and it means a lot to us that we’re able to meet that demand.”

Mullinax says Southeastern Grocers builds enthusiasm for Florida strawberries among shoppers as the season hits stride.

“As the Florida strawberry season ramps up, our displays grow along with the harvest, featuring larger, more vibrant showcases throughout the winter months,” he says. “As volume and availability increase, we also strive to provide winning pricing and exciting promotions, offering customers great value on the freshest local berries, especially as the season peaks around February.”

“We love celebrating Florida strawberries and the hard-working,



Florida strawberries are so popular with shoppers that growers are expanding to meet demand. Florida has over 15,000 acres of fresh strawberries in production, an increase of about 2,000 acres compared to last year. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

local growers who make them possible,” Mullinax says, adding the grocer promotes strawberries through a multi-channel marketing approach, including weekly ad circulars, digital media and email campaigns.

“Strawberries are merchandised in prominent, high-traffic locations, and display space is expanded depending on ad pricing and seasonal demand,” he says. “To enhance the shopping experience, we also feature tie-in items, such as bakery shortcakes, glazes and fruit dips, to inspire delicious ways to enjoy Florida strawberries.”

Mullinax suggests that food retailers who want to get more out of strawberry opportunities should consider the calendar.

“Certain weeks are particularly special for this fruit. For example, leading up to Valentine’s Day, we lean into strawberries as the perfect romantic treat,” he says.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Both growers and retailers can count on support for Florida strawberries.

“The Florida Strawberry Growers Association helps promote Florida strawberries beginning in October and throughout the entire season,” says Grimes. “FSGA helps us stay in front of changing regulation in the industry and backs the strawberry industry as a whole. Fresh from Florida also helps promote Florida berries.”

Fresh From Florida runs a dynamic advertising campaign across TV, radio, podcasts, digital, social media, online shopping platforms, grocery cart ads, floor talks, and in-store promotions. Through the Retail Incentive Program, participating stores can highlight Florida-grown products using circular ads, digital placements, custom displays, recipes and sampling events.

“With nearly 1.4 million social media followers and 35 years of trusted branding, Fresh From Florida continues to drive produce sales and increase consumer awareness,” says McKinley.

Still, McKinley says the growers association is important to keeping the strawberry sector advancing.

“The Florida Strawberry Growers Association serves as a vital voice for Florida strawberry farmers,” McKinley adds, “advocating for the industry and helping connect growers with buyers and consumers. Together, Fresh From Florida and FSGA ensure consistent branding, extensive market reach and strong support for Florida’s strawberry industry.”



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Mexico's avocado industry keeps U.S. shelves stocked year-round, delivering Hass avocados when California and other regions are out of season.

PHOTO COURTESY PETE'S MARKET

Mexico Strengthens its Role as Produce Powerhouse

Retailers can profit from showcasing Mexican fresh produce.

BY K.O. MORGAN

November to May is the peak import season of fresh produce from Mexico into the U.S.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) website, Mexico is the largest single source for U.S. produce imports, supplying 63% of vegetable imports and 47% of fruits and nuts. For Mexico, the U.S. is the destination for 91% of Mexico's total annual horticultural exports.

"We receive produce all 12 months of the year, but the peak season is November to May," says Andy Martin, president and co-founder of A&A Organic Farms, Watsonville, CA. "Our biggest challenge is to make sure we have the crops customers want to purchase. We are making changes to the spring/summer crop plan in Baja for 2026 to

make sure we are not trying to compete with our customers' locally grown offerings."

KEEPING PACE WITH DEMAND

For Avocados from Mexico, Irving, TX, it's all about meeting the year-round demand in the U.S. for avocados, says Stephanie Bazan, senior vice president, commercial strategy and execution. "Avocados are really a summer fruit, but Mexico is able to provide them to the U.S. from October to March. That's important because during those months, there are no avocados from California, Chile or Peru."

She says while Colombia does produce avocados year-round, it can't at the volume that would meet U.S. demand. "Mexico, on the other hand, has four blooms, so we are able to produce avocados all year, which is the only place in the world where that happens."

Greenhouse technology is helping Mexico keep pace with U.S. demand for produce, says Jose Luis Obregon, president, IPR Fresh, Nogales, AZ. "Greenhouse technology has extended the bell pepper and European cucumbers from the Mexican season to a year-round basis. We expect continued growth in greenhouse-grown vegetables."

Sabrina Fisher, director of marketing and communications at Texas International Produce Association in Mission, TX, agrees. “There has been a shift toward more year-round/shoulder-season coverage via greenhouses/shade houses. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) 2024-25 analysis highlights substantial gains for avocados and raspberries, especially with protected-ag enabling shoulder-season volume. This improves quality and smooths seasonal gaps.”

Obregon expects more focus on sustainability and stronger traceability initiatives throughout the supply chain. “But the biggest opportunity remains Mexico’s reliability — consistent high-quality supply during the U.S. off-season helps retailers stay stocked year-round.”

Martin of A&A Organic Farms agrees. “Our growers in Mexico have proven they can deliver good-tasting, high-quality organic produce all year long.”

TOP PRODUCE FROM MEXICO

Top imports from Mexico include avocados, tomatoes, bell and hot peppers, cucumbers, squash, berries, limes and mangos. “The USDA’s ERS, which tracks the role of food imports into the U.S., shows that avocados and berries, including strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries, have grown the fastest among Mexico-to-U.S. horticultural imports over the past decade, with tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and squash remaining core vegetables being imported,” says Fisher of Texas International Produce Association.

Brooke Becker, senior vice president of sales, Mission Produce, headquartered in Oxnard, CA, says Mexico supplies about 80% of avocados in the U.S. and is also the largest importing country of mangos to the U.S., representing about 67% of mango imports. “The 2025 Mexican season delivered 955 million pounds of mangos — an 18% increase.”



Mexico leads the mango market, supplying about 67% of all mangos imported into the U.S. Mexico shipped 955 million pounds in 2025 — an 18% increase over the previous year. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

Bazan of Avocados from Mexico says avocados are an “iconic export” from Mexico. She says eight out of 10 avocados in the U.S. come from Mexico because Mexico is the largest producer of avocados in the world and the largest exporter of the fruit. “Our avocados are Hass, the most popular avocado, so we’re needed in order to meet U.S. demand.”

Despite the popularity of produce imports from Mexico and the needs they fill in the retail store, the industry isn’t without its challenges, including rising transportation costs, border logistics, variable border wait times, and recent tariff uncertainty. Trade policy shifts can also create pricing volatility and planning difficulties.

“The tomato is our best-selling item, but with the unfortunate addition of a tariff on tomatoes in July 2025, that changed the sales pattern for the Baja tomatoes,” says A&A Organic’s Martin. “We continued to move tomatoes, but the prices were lower than expected. No other crop has a tariff on it so far, and this summer we saw steady movement on Persian cucumbers, green beans, zucchini, basil and mini peppers.”

On the plus side, Mexico’s proximity to the U.S. is a boon for suppliers, buyers and retailers. “The supply train between Mexico and the U.S. is very efficient,” says Bazan. “For example, you can have a fresh avocado in two to five days, from orchard to your table. This has a huge socio-economic impact on both sides of the border — \$7.5 billion in the U.S. and \$6 billion in economic impact in Mexico. Seventy-eight thousand direct and seasonal jobs are created in Mexico, and more than 42,000 jobs in the U.S. This is a boost for the economies of both countries.”

CAPITALIZE ON PRODUCE FROM MEXICO

The many eye-catching colors and the year-round abundance of produce from Mexico make it an easy sale for retailers. Still, there are many ways in which stores can entice shoppers to fill their baskets with Mexico’s fruits and vegetables.



Avocados and berries, including strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries, have grown the fastest among Mexico-to-U.S. horticultural imports over the past decade.

PHOTO COURTESY A&A ORGANIC FARMS



Mexico's proximity to the U.S. is a boon for fresh produce suppliers, buyers and retailers. The reliability and supply during the U.S. off-season helps retailers' produce departments stay stocked year-round. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO*

One way is to lean into key events, such as the Super Bowl, Lent, spring grilling and Cinco de Mayo, when demand for produce such as avocados, tomatoes and limes is high. "With football season in full swing, now is a great time to promote avocados with game day messaging," says Becker. "Come January, retailers can then transition to messaging around healthy New Year's resolutions and the Big Game."

Obregon says large, vibrant displays, bilingual signage, and cross-merchandising with complementary items, like tortillas, meat or cheese help drive movement.

"We encourage retailers to create displays that show the versatility of avocados beyond guacamole," says Bazan. "Avocados are healthy, which is one reason why they're popular, but their creamy texture also works well in a variety of dishes. Our job is to show how Avocados from Mexico can be used as handhelds, such as on tacos, burgers, hot dogs and pizza. Avocados are also a great addition to salads and can enhance any dish."

Displays that use bilingual recipe tie-ins are another way to push Mexican produce sales. Providing "build a meal" suggestions along with ripening and handling tips, and secondary displays near beer, snacks, and in the meat department can also add a ring at the register.

"It's important to create destinations in stores to make it easy for consumers who are looking for particular items, such as avocados for guacamole, for example," says Bazan. "By doing so, shoppers may purchase additional produce items that complement the guacamole recipe. Our studies have found that a lift in the value of the basket can occur when avocados are merchandised in different areas of the store, such as the deli department promoting avocado on sandwiches, the aisle that shelves tortilla or taco shells, and in prepackaged bakery items."

In addition, young people in particular follow trends on food-service and restaurant menus and then go to retail stores and try

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"The biggest opportunity remains Mexico's reliability — consistent high-quality supply during the U.S. off-season helps retailers stay stocked year-round."**

Jose Luis Obregon, IPR Fresh, Nogales, AZ

- **"Our growers in Mexico have proven they can deliver good-tasting, high-quality organic produce all year long."**

Andy Martin, A&A Organic Farms, Watsonville, CA

to replicate and recreate those dishes, which can boost the sales of ingredients listed on those menus. Retailers who are aware of recipe trends can aid shoppers in these efforts.

"Merchandising is key," adds Bazan. "Creating a very attractive space in the store can drive impulse purchases. For example, about 70% of avocado purchases are planned; that is, consumers already have it on their lists. But it's also important to capture incremental purchases through impulse buys. Consumers see avocados advertised in the store on a table or on display, and that results in a 13% lift in sales. But our studies found that when there's a display of a named brand, such as Avocados from Mexico, retail stores could expect a 25% lift."

Retailers can also tap into point-of-sale (POS) materials provided by many sellers and distributors. "Various boards and groups provide materials that help educate consumers about the quality and freshness of Mexican produce," says Obregon. "We often share those tools with our retail partners."

Packaging also plays a role in pushing Mexican produce sales. "Consumers are looking for value-pack opportunities, so we've also developed our Retail Ready Mango bag, which gives consumers the convenience of three or four mangos in one grab-and-go product," says Becker of Mission Produce.

But packaging fruit, such as avocados, can sometimes be a challenge. "With avocados, you have one package and it's a natural package — so there's not a lot of space on that avocado to brand," says Bazan. "But having the brand on merchandise matters, so our brand has a distinctive avo glow color that we've created to make our brand stand out. We've also encouraged packers to use our PLU stickers to reinforce the branding at point of sale."

OUTLOOK FOR PRODUCE

The popularity of Mexican produce with U.S. shoppers is expected to continue to grow. Its longer growing season and wide array of fresh produce choices allow American consumers to purchase favorite fruits and vegetables outside of the U.S. growing period. Tariffs, however, are a concern and might result in higher prices. Whether that affects purchasing numbers remains to be seen and will require creative promotions on the part of retailers.

"The best way for retailers to promote, merchandise and market Mexican produce is to book ad promotions, cross-merchandise with other retail items, and set up contracted prices that allow for price stability in these uncertain times," advises Martin of A&A Organic Farms.



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Chestnuts a Seasonal Favorite

Health-conscious consumers drive demand for this classic holiday nut.

BY LISA WHITE

Although not as common as other nuts, chestnuts are a popular choice for those looking to eat healthier. Chestnuts are dense with calories and rich in vitamin C and antioxidants. The low-fat, high-carb nut variety, which cannot be eaten raw, is typically roasted, but also can be boiled or steamed.

According to Yasmin Pacia, chief marketing officer at Trucco Inc., Vineland, NJ, fresh-roasted chestnuts have a warm, mildly sweet, earthy and nutty taste with a soft, creamy texture. "Ready-to-eat chestnuts offer a tender, slightly caramelized and buttery profile. They are less oily than other nuts and closer to a bread- or yam-like texture."

Community Co-op Market LLC in Tallahassee, FL, offers chestnuts from a local supplier.

"They are offered in bulk and displayed packaged on our shelves," says Hope Galbin, produce manager. "Sales have been steady and pricing has stayed consistent."

However, this nut type is not a staple in all stores. Chestnuts are not offered at Bexley Natural Market, a not-for-profit cooperative grocery store in Bexley, OH. "We don't sell chestnuts, because nobody has asked for them," says Charles Ott, the store's manager.

According to Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Vernon, CA-based Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Melissa's offers three different forms of chestnuts throughout the year; however, it is only the fresh imports from South Korea, China and Italy that are available seasonally between October and December.

"These are highly seasonal; we sell 75% of our chestnuts in the fourth quarter," he says. "South Korean nuts are less pricey than Italian chestnuts."

NEW & BEST SELLING

Because chestnuts are mainly sold raw and in bulk in produce departments, these items don't have the wide range of flavors or varying formats like other nut types. However, 10 years ago, Melissa's introduced steamed chestnuts in grab-and-go packaging called Organic Chestnut Snax.

"These are sold in a pouch and ready to go," says Schueller. "The nuts are soft and moist, but also crunchy, so they can be incorporated into a recipe or eaten alone."

He says bulk chestnuts are the most popular, although stores prefer packaged product.

"East and West coasts and major metro areas in the Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and Southwest are our biggest markets," says Schueller.

Pacia says demand is highest in coastal metro regions with multicultural communities. "In the U.S., the Northeast shows the strongest seasonal interest."

However, appealing to tradition or convenience could also woo buyers, Pacia adds. "Young, health-conscious consumers are drawn



Retailers can spotlight chestnuts in high-traffic seasonal displays, pairing nostalgia with innovation. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

to ready-to-eat presentations due to convenience and clean-label appeal. Fresh chestnuts remain closely associated with cultural and holiday traditions."

Torn & Glasser, headquartered in Los Angeles, CA, offers a wide range of nuts, including fresh Italian chestnuts.

"Each type of nut has unique characteristics, and a successful roast depends on maximizing the individual flavor," says Chris Large, the company's sales manager. "We sell to multiple retailers, and where they decide to place product is up to them. We use merchandisers for one chain we work with and will partner with store teams to strategically place product in high-volume spaces."

MARKETING & MERCHANDISING

Marketing and merchandising chestnuts can be challenging when sold in bulk. Fresh chestnuts usually are not sampled, as these products are difficult to work with.

"Typically, the chestnuts are in the seasonal nuts and dried fruit area and, in most cases, and also, displayed next to other seasonal specialty citrus, pomegranates, persimmons, quince and variety citrus, too," says Schueller.

Large says it has been difficult to increase prices on Torn & Glasser's products. "For the first time in many years, it was a nightmare to get retailers to take price increases," says Large. "However, the supply outlook is fantastic."

He adds that bulk nuts scooped into poly bags have been replaced by colorful packaging preferred by the younger generation.

Pacia says merchandising is most effective when fresh chestnuts are displayed in high-traffic seasonal areas with rustic elements, and ready-to-eat choices are placed near grab-and-go or produce snack sections.

"Side-by-side placement effectively shows the difference between traditional roasting and ready-to-eat convenience," notes Pacia. "For fresh chestnuts, in-store roasting or warming samples draw shoppers with aroma and nostalgia. Ready-to-eat chestnuts sample well by simply opening a pouch and offering small bites near high-traffic displays. Demos work best at season kickoff shopping periods to encourage immediate purchase."

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We Are Strongest When Connected

BY STEPHANIE TRAMUTOLA

The heart of the produce industry has always been its people. Trust and relationships are everything. We are an industry built on legacy and innovation — where long-standing family traditions meet new ideas and fresh perspectives.

Whether your story begins like mine with a grandfather at a terminal market, as a first-generation entrepreneur, or a team that built something new, the common thread is the same: hardworking people who take pride in their craft and keep their communities nourished every day.

That shared commitment is what makes this industry so special,

and what makes investing in the next generation of leaders so essential. As our world evolves, our challenges grow more complex, from sustainability and climate to food safety, waste reduction, labor, and equitable access to fresh food. Meeting those challenges requires more than knowledge; it requires leadership. And few industries invest in future talent with the same level of care, generosity and authenticity as fresh produce.



One shining example of that investment is the International Fresh Produce Association's (IFPA) Leadership Program, sponsored by Corteva Agriscience. Now entering its 30th year, it remains the premier leadership development experience for the global fresh produce and floral industries.

Each year, 12 professionals embark on a year-long journey to strengthen leadership skills, build business relationships, deepen understanding of government and public affairs, and amplify our industry's collective voice.

As a member of the Class 29 cohort, I experienced firsthand our community's dedication to its people. Over the course of a year, we explored every part of the supply chain, from farms and distribution centers to retail operations and government offices.

Industry leaders generously opened their doors to share their stories, challenges and vision for what lies ahead. Alongside these visits, our professional development sessions, hands-on exercises, media training, and reflection challenged us to lead with confidence and purpose. Every experience pushed us in new ways and shaped us both personally and professionally.

Each stop revealed a different aspect of the produce world. On one farm visit, we saw the future in action as a son learned side by side with his mother, preparing to take the reins.

At a distribution facility, technology and innovation were on full display, improving efficiency while preserving quality. We joined roundtable discussions about policy and trade, hearing firsthand how tariffs, regulations, and supply chain shifts impact growers, shippers, and consumers alike.

Those conversations continued on Capitol Hill, meeting with lawmakers to advocate for key issues shaping the future of fresh. Every experience deepened our understanding of this industry's interconnected network.

That sense of unity was mirrored within Class 29 and reaffirmed that we are strongest when we are connected. Learning alongside my classmates was one of the most meaningful parts of the journey. Each person brought a unique background, perspective, and strength to the table, showing how much we gain when we listen and collaborate.

What we built together as a class reflects something much larger — a network that continues to expand long after graduation. The alumni, now spanning nearly three decades, stand as proof of how deeply this industry invests in its future.

Their continued guidance reminds us that people remain at the center of everything we do. None of this would be possible without the commitment of those who champion emerging leaders — from Corteva Agriscience, the program's sponsor, to IFPA's dedicated team, and the many produce professionals who continue to inspire others. Their support ensures that the next generation is prepared to lead the industry forward.

Looking ahead, adaptability will be essential to building on that foundation. With shifting consumer expectations, supply chain pressures, and advances in technology and AI, our landscape is changing rapidly. The next wave of leadership will need to navigate that change, embracing innovation while staying grounded in the principles that define us.

Whether it's adopting sustainable practices, leveraging data, or responding to market shifts, our willingness to adapt will determine our success. The future belongs to those who remain proactive, open-minded, and eager to keep learning.

At its core, the produce industry is about people — where relationships, integrity and shared purpose guide our work. Programs like the IFPA Leadership Program strengthen that legacy by fostering connection and growth across the industry. Through continued learning and collaboration, we can carry forward the values that make this community so extraordinary and ensure our field continues to flourish.

The future of fresh is bright, and it is ours to nourish, ensuring every business, every story, and every brand continues to thrive for generations to come.

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

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Produce Is More Than a Side Dish

BY NOVELLA LUI, RD, MHSC

While there is no standard for the number of ingredients in a dish, there is no reason why produce can't be a star ingredient on any menu.

More consumers now appreciate the benefits of plant-based eating and seek dishes that are flavorful and nourishing. Global flavor trends are also influencing people's food choices, especially with the role of social media. So, produce can be used creatively in foodservice to craft vibrant, appealing and mouthwatering dishes.

Let's explore why produce remains a key ingredient, and how to incorporate new flavors in foodservice.



PRODUCE OFFERS FLAVOR AND VISUAL BEAUTY

Produce offers a wide range of natural flavors — sweet, earthy, tangy, bitter, sour and umami — which come from their unique bioactive compounds. These compounds, along with the produce's texture and aroma, create a distinctive sensory experience.

For example, the sweetness you experience in produce is from the naturally occurring sugars present. The sour

flavor from unripe produce is tied to the levels of malic and citric acids present, determining the produce's pH levels. And, the pungent flavor you experience from eating chile pepper is reflective of its degree of spiciness and heat.

Produce also adds color to the dish through naturally occurring pigments, which absorb certain wavelengths of light, producing what our eyes perceive as the different colors. To name a few, anthocyanins from berries, eggplants, grapes, and cherries give off the red, purple and blue hues, while chlorophyll offers various shades of green, and carotenoids have yellow, orange and red pigments that give the colors to carrots, tomatoes and mangos.

From a visual standpoint, a produce's color and appearance could influence the dish's visual appeal, affecting people's satiation and emotional responses to food. A 2023 study published in the *Journal of Health Communication* examined over 53,000 images from 90 food influencer accounts on Instagram and found that images with colors, such as red, orange, and yellow had more likes, as these colors are associated with brightness and colorfulness.

PLATING INFLUENCES THE DISH'S ATTRACTIVENESS

The same research found that plating food with high contrast and vibrant colors may increase appetite and satisfaction. A study published earlier this year that recruited 176 participants from Wageningen, the Netherlands, had similar findings: Salads plated in a high-stacked style, regardless of plate size, evoked more positive

emotions than a plate with food spread flat, or low to no stacking.

This effect may be due to the brain connecting food stacking with fullness. Interestingly, plate size mattered for perception when viewing images online, but not when viewed in real life.

PRODUCE IS MORE AFFORDABLE

From a cost perspective, produce generally costs less than animal-based proteins. For example, in September 2025, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data showed that 1 pound of 100% ground beef cost \$6.32, while bananas were 67 cents, and iceberg lettuce was \$1.73 per pound.

If a plant-based protein, such as soy, is also a key ingredient alongside produce to make in a salad dish, it can be a nourishing menu item because soy has complete protein and is a good source of iron. For example, shelled edamame, a form of baby soybeans, can be a complementary ingredient to a rainbow-colored salad with leafy greens, diced tomatoes and corn.

If you were to use 1 pound of edamame (currently priced at \$4.16 from Walmart) and 1 pound each of the mentioned produce to make a plant-based salad (\$1.73 per pound of lettuce, \$1.88 per pound of field-grown tomatoes, and \$1.42 per pound of corn), this recipe would give you four pounds worth of food, and cost \$9.19, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

GLOBAL INFLUENCES INTRODUCE NEW FLAVORS

While produce is flavorful on its own, global influences continue to expand culinary variety. Thanks to the advances in agriculture, trade, travel and migration, new ingredients and cooking techniques are being introduced that blend and reshape global cuisines. This results in diverse, innovative and flavorful dishes.

When these dishes are shared on social media, the communication platforms enable people to share visually striking meals, which may spark or fuel food trends.

YouGov US reports that in the third quarter of 2025, potatoes, sweet corn, garlic, romaine lettuce, and broccoli are the top five vegetables among people who have a positive opinion of a vegetable.

Pairing these veggies with global flavors could create new menu items. Some examples include Gamja Bokkeum (Korean sweet soy-glazed potatoes), grilled corn with Caribbean-inspired butter, spaghetti with garlic and olive oil, Chinese-inspired stir-fried lettuce with garlic and oyster sauce and Indian-style broccoli curry.

PB

Novella Lui, RD, MHSC is a registered dietitian and a freelance food, nutrition and health writer in Canada who combines her interest in food science, evidence-based nutrition, and health education through content creation. Connect with Novella at info@livetonnourish.com.

The EU Must Prioritize Fresh Produce

BY PHILIPPE BINARD

Freshfel Europe participated in the 11th annual EU Conference on EAFRD Financial Instruments, held in Milan and organized by fi-compass, the European Commission's DG AGRI, and the European Investment Bank (EIB).

The event, titled "Financing the transition to resilient EU agri-food systems and sustainable farming," brought together policymakers, financial institutions, and agri-food stakeholders to explore innovative financial tools supporting the green and digital transition of European agriculture. It was an opportunity for Freshfel Europe to

call for adjustments to the EU budget and financial instruments in favor of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Representing the European fruits and vegetables (F&V) sector at the Milan conference, Freshfel Europe highlighted the pivotal role of fresh produce in achieving a sustainable, low-carbon, and healthy European food system.

The event was a timely opportunity to remind EU decision-makers to rebalance the shrinking Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) budget and facilitate access

for the fresh produce sector to tailor new financial instruments channeled through the EIB.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are at the cornerstone of a sustainable food system. With their lowest emissions and environmental footprint within agriculture, the sector also has a unique carbon sequestration capacity, contributing directly to the EU's carbon neutrality goals.

Fruits and vegetables also deliver undisputed health benefits, forming the foundation of sustainable diets that can help curb the rise of obesity and non-communicable diseases in Europe. These essential health and environmental assets position the fresh produce sector as the perfect partners to address societal concerns.

The fruits and vegetables sector is a significant driving force in climate-smart production, and yet the sector only receives 3% of CAP funds. A radical budget shift is crucial. Today, 80% of the EU CAP budget is destined to products of animal origin, which contribute heavily (more than 50%) to agricultural carbon emissions.

Those inefficiencies were already flagged by the European Court of Auditors in 2021, but not much has been done since then to effectively reverse this situation.

A shift to a more plant-based diet is part of the response to mitigate high carbon emissions linked to diet, primarily animal-based and ultra-processed food. Today, the consumption of natural, raw,

and fresh fruits and vegetables stands at 350 grams per capita/day, well below all targets. At least half of the plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables.

Could we one day see 50% of the EU's CAP budget dedicated to supporting supply chains that deliver healthy, tasty, and high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables to consumers? This is not a provocative stance, but a necessary reflection based on reality and an uncomfortable truth for many!

The fruits and vegetables sector stands at the core of the solution and needs to be better positioned as the perfect partner for the desired transition to carbon neutrality. Better aligning EU policies and budget with the objectives to shift toward a more plant-based diet is no longer an option, but should be an obligation for policymakers.

Today, there is a huge discrepancy between production levels and the corresponding needs of consumption, according to dietary guidelines. EU policies and budget should be instrumental in reconciling that significant imbalance, which leads ultra-processed food to dominate the diets of Europeans.

The fresh sector has specific business challenges, ranging from generation shift to growing climate hazards, new pests and diseases, geopolitical market, R&I, and adaptation of production methods to fully deliver on the most sustainable production and supply chain.

Budget and financial instruments should be adapted and reflect the specificity of an intricate fresh produce business model. Unlike other concentrated agri-food models in grains, meat or dairy, the fruits and vegetables sector is operating with a vibrant composition of many small holders with a great diversity of products with specific needs influenced by the seasonality, by production with shorter or longer cycle, indoor or outdoor production, tight margins impacting investment, and supply chain collaboration.

The financial instruments need to have clear objectives, be flexible for immediate response, provide confidence in the usage, and secure equal access to prevent distortion of competition among member states. It should also fill the existing gaps, namely regarding insurance for climatic hazards, which will continue to be on the rise.

Freshfel Europe called on the European Commission and EIB to prioritize fruits and vegetables within EU financial instruments and recognize their strategic value in achieving climate neutrality and healthy diet goals. Freshfel Europe will continue its pledge for better support of the fresh produce sector, given its essential role for society, for the planet and for the economy. It is no longer an option; it is an obligation for policymakers. **PB**

Philippe Binard is Freshfel Europe's general delegate. Freshfel Europe is the European Fresh Produce Association, representing the interests of the fresh fruits and vegetables supply chain in Europe and beyond.



Veg-Land Celebrates 50 Years of Freshness, Family and Innovation

Veg-Land Inc., a second-generation, family-owned business, marks its 50th anniversary, celebrating a legacy of delivering farm-fresh produce, fostering friendships, and driving innovation in the organic and conventional produce industry. Founded in 1976 by brothers Jim “Big Jim” Matiasевич and John Matiasевич, Veg-Land has grown from humble beginnings in Watsonville, CA, into a powerhouse, serving retailers and businesses across North America and beyond.

A FAMILY LEGACY

What began as a vision by two brothers to bridge the gap between small family farms and customers’ tables has flourished under the current leadership of Big Jim’s son, Jimmy Matiasевич, alongside his brother Jeff, and the rising third generation, Jimmy Jr.

The Matiasевич family’s commitment to excellence, honesty, and hard work remains the cornerstone of Veg-Land’s success. “Our family’s passion for farming and dedication to quality has shaped everything we do,” says Jimmy Matiasевич. “As we celebrate 50 years, we’re driven to reimagine the produce industry for decades to come.”

Raised in Watsonville, Jim and John Matiasевич understood the vital role of small, independent growers. In 1976, they initially provided warehousing and distribution for a national retail chain. A year later, Veg-Land Sales was established, specializing in grower sales from California’s fertile Salinas and Imperial valleys.

In the 1980s, the family launched JBJ Distributing Inc. to meet the growing demand for organic and specialty produce, cementing their leadership in supplying high-quality organic crops nationwide.

Today, Veg-Land’s three divisions — Veg-Land Inc., JBJ Distributing Inc. and Fresh Cut Inc. — deliver comprehensive solutions, from precision warehousing and seamless sourcing to customer-curated



Brothers Jim “Big Jim” Matiasевич and John Matiasевич founded Veg-Land in 1976 in Watsonville, CA.
PHOTO COURTESY VEG-LAND

fresh-cut processing. These services empower businesses with efficient, cost-effective supply chains and premium, farm-fresh produce.

Veg-Land is more than a supplier — it’s a strategic partner. By minimizing waste, optimizing costs, and streamlining operations, Veg-Land helps businesses of all sizes stay competitive.

“We don’t just deliver produce; we deliver results,” says Jimmy Matiasевич. “Our innovative approach ensures our partners receive the freshest fruits and vegetables, while reducing shrink, labor and costs.”

BRIGHT FUTURE BUILT ON TRADITION

As Veg-Land celebrates its 50th anniversary, the Matiasевич family honors its heritage, while continuing to embrace innovation. From national retailers to local businesses, Veg-Land remains a trusted partner, delivering transformative solutions that elevate brands and enhance customer experiences. With a century of farming tradition and a forward-thinking vision, Veg-Land continues to set the standard for excellence in the produce industry. **PB**

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