

# PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS  
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

## PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

Abbie Gellman  
Amber Gray  
Jin Ju Wilder

JANUARY 2026  
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## FEATURES

Marketing  
Organics

Packaging  
Innovations

Mexican  
Produce

## PRODUCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

# FRESH INCENTIVES

Partnerships are using  
produce prescriptions  
and innovation  
to help improve  
health and  
drive consumption.



## RISING RETAILER

Lambert's

## PROCUREMENT

Specialty Citrus

## DRYED FRUITS

Dates



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Dole Food Company



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Partnerships are using produce prescriptions, incentives, and innovation to improve health and drive consumption.

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### THIS MONTH'S WINNER

**SCOTT BARTH**  
Store Manager  
Thorp SuperValu  
Thorp, WI

Scott Barth began working at Thorp IGA (now Thorp SuperValu) in 1988 as a junior in high school. Now the store manager, he offers this advice: "Keep it fresh."

This advice can be taken a couple of different ways, he explains. "One of the ways is to display product that looks good to the eye. The other way to keep it fresh is to continually change up displays."

Barth says the produce department is important in his store since it is the first department customers see, and it always "looks like it is grand opening ready." He credits the produce manager, Karen, and her assistant, Natasha, who do a "wonderful job."

Barth does a little bit of everything as manager, from online reports and checking emails to shoveling snow in the winter. "Since we are a small-town store, I am also

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

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### QUESTIONS FOR THE JANUARY ISSUE

- 1) Which company says, "We deliver the right products to the right partner, the right way"? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) How many years has Wonderful Citrus been "Knowing and Growing Citrus"? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Which company is advertising its "High-output automated packaging for your products"? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) What is the name of the Modern Wellness initiative recently launched by California Walnuts? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) How many organizations were represented in the Pabellon de Mexico at this year's New York Produce Show? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Fill in the blank: Food As Medicine Starts in \_\_\_\_\_.

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

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Jin Ju Wilder  
Vesta Foodservice



Maria Wieloch  
ICA

# CELEBRATING 40 YEARS: PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

If there's one thing PRODUCE BUSINESS has always stood for, it's creating a space where leaders can come together — to exchange ideas, to challenge one another, and to strengthen the industry. 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.



# Food as Medicine: The Produce Industry's Expanding Role

BY ABBIE GELLMAN, MS, RD, CDN

**A**s a chef and Registered Dietitian at the intersection of nutrition and culinary innovation, my career revolves around food's impact on health. But today, "food as medicine" programs — especially medically tailored meals, farmacy, and produce prescription initiatives — are opening vital new channels for the fresh produce industry, allowing us to nourish communities and grow markets in ways once unimaginable.

Over the past year, I've developed and designed the Medically Tailored Meals (MTM) program at Rethink Food, a New York City-based nonprofit addressing food insecurity. This innovative, no-cost meal delivery service supports eligible Medicaid recipients throughout New York City's five boroughs and Long Island. Although the Medicaid 1115 waiver

is available statewide, the Rethink Food program is specific to the greater NYC area.

Our work demonstrates just how critical high-quality fresh produce is to this emerging sector, and why produce businesses and commodity groups should be paying attention and getting involved.

## MEDICALLY TAILORED MEALS: WHERE PRODUCE IS THE STAR

The heart of any successful food-as-medicine program is produce. In our MTM partnership with a local foodservice business, we've created a 28-day menu cycle focused on real, nutrient-dense ingredients. Each meal is crafted to support individuals with chronic illnesses — think meals rich in leafy greens, seasonal vegetables, hearty pulses, and fruits that freeze and transport well.

For growers, shippers and marketers, this isn't just a feel-good mission. It's a true growth market. Every week, we're supplying frozen meals — breakfast, lunch, dinner — for hundreds of Medicaid recipients, and the demand will continue to climb as more people lose access to SNAP benefits. MTMs give produce suppliers a persistent, reliable customer base, as institutional buyers look for volume, variety and consistency.

But the opportunity goes deeper than sales. We rely on transparent sourcing and often highlight specific farm partners in our communications — think "asparagus from this company," "strawberries from that farm," or "these tomatoes featured in our signature chili." Forward-thinking produce companies can benefit from this storytelling, using nutrition-sensitive programs as a platform to build brand and category awareness.

## PRODUCE PRESCRIPTION & FARMACY PROGRAMS: A NEW SALES CHANNEL

"Farmacy" initiatives are another area primed for partnership. Over the summer and fall of 2025, I led a 12-week program with

SBH Teaching Kitchen and Hospital in the Bronx, NY, where patients — many with limited incomes and chronic health risks — received weekly prescriptions for fresh produce. These bags weren't just filled at random. We worked to ensure variety, freshness, and cultural relevance, delivering a meaningful introduction to new crops and easy ways to prepare them.

For produce marketers, these programs represent a direct touchpoint with families who might otherwise find fresh fruits and vegetables inaccessible — both because of price and supply chain limitations. There's considerable interest among healthcare systems in partnering with local growers and aggregators to source for these programs, and opportunities abound for commodity boards to sponsor, co-brand, or help offset costs to boost health and demand.

## THE TIME IS NOW

Much of this momentum is driven by healthcare policies. In New York, the New York State 1115 Medicaid waiver currently funds six months of medically tailored meals for qualifying patients; other states are exploring similar models. Private health insurers, especially on the West Coast, are testing health-focused food programs with companies like Performance Kitchen, often leaning heavily on frozen fruits and vegetables. If your business serves institutional buyers, now is the time to explore dialogue with hospital systems, nonprofits, and insurers looking for reliable, high-quality supply.

And these programs work. Studies funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, and others are building the evidence that programs that deliver medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions are showing positive, measurable results for patients, such as reduced hospitalizations and ER visits; improved blood pressure and A1C; and lower health care costs — up to \$24 billion annually, according to some estimates.

Of course, these opportunities aren't without their challenges. Logistics remain key: Meals require produce that freezes and ships well; traceability and food safety are paramount. But those in the produce industry know how to meet exacting standards. What's needed now is a nimble, collaborative approach — commodity boards and companies working with chefs, Registered Dietitians, and nonprofits to design offerings that fit the new "food as medicine" model.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Most importantly, these initiatives are profoundly changing how Americans relate to fresh food. We're not just talking about commodity trade anymore — we're talking about being at the forefront of a preventive health revolution.

By joining the food as medicine movement, the produce industry has a chance to support public health, create new sources of demand, and embed fruits and vegetables deeper into the fabric of everyday life.

*Abbie Gellman is a New York City-based Registered Dietitian and chef, consultant and author.*



Our work demonstrates just how critical high-quality fresh produce is to this emerging sector — and why produce businesses and commodity groups should be paying attention and getting involved.

# Fresh Produce is the Original Functional Food – and the Industry's Biggest Untapped Advantage

BY AMBER GRAY

In an era of rising healthcare costs, growing rates of diet-related disease, and online debates about “what’s healthy,” the produce industry holds the most powerful — and most underutilized — story in all of food: fruits and vegetables are the ultimate functional foods.



We’re not riding a passing trend. Health and wellness have shifted from niche claims to cultural imperatives, with consumers seeking foods that help them feel better, think more clearly, age well and prevent illness. Food is medicine, the concept of using what’s on your plate to protect and improve your health, has been around for decades, but recent

momentum has opened a new opportunity: positioning produce as the easiest, most credible path to wellness.

## WHY WELLNESS MATTERS NOW

Produce is naturally nutrient-dense, fiber-rich, phytonutrient-packed and versatile enough to fit any eating pattern or culture. In today’s Make America Healthy Again climate, that’s not just a selling point, it’s a public health lifeline.

But here’s the reality: People don’t overhaul their diets overnight. We need to meet consumers where they are to make small changes that are sustainable over time. It might be teaching someone to roast vegetables at high heat (a game-changer for Brussels sprouts) or showing how blending mushrooms with ground beef can stretch a meal while boosting nutritional value. These approaches honor cultural traditions and economic realities while nudging eating habits in a healthier direction.

For the produce industry, that means moving away from a “just eat more fruits and vegetables” drumbeat and toward messaging that inspires specific actions that can be easily incorporated into everyday life.

## THE EVOLUTION OF HEALTH

Younger generations, especially Gen Z, are more ingredient-savvy than previous generations. They want to know where their food comes from, how it’s grown and how it can benefit them. They’re fluent in the language of functional foods — gut health, anti-inflammation, brain health — and hungry for options that fit their lifestyle.

At the same time, they’re navigating a paradox: Never before have consumers had so much access to food information, and never before has misinformation been so rampant. Social media has replaced traditional nutrition education, leaving consumers to sort fact from fad while influencers with no formal training shape the conversation. This is a prime opportunity for produce brands to step in with science-backed, easy-to-digest education that builds trust.

Nutrition research is key here. Public funding is scarce, so

high-quality, industry-funded studies are often the only way to generate the insights needed to understand the health benefit potential of fruits and vegetables. When conducted with transparency and rigor, this research is a powerful tool for credibility and differentiation.

## THE WELLNESS MINDSET: BEYOND NUTRITION FACTS

Wellness isn’t just a trend, it’s a mindset. And it’s not one-size-fits-all. For a high-end natural grocery shopper, wellness might mean organic certification and superfood ingredients. For someone in a food desert with a tight budget, it could mean affordable frozen produce that delivers essential nutrients without waste.

For the produce industry, wellness marketing means moving beyond “vitamins and minerals” into lifestyle-driven storytelling. How does your product help a young athlete recover faster? Support mental clarity for busy professionals? Offer accessible, nutrient-packed options for families on a budget?

Produce already checks all the functional food boxes. These benefits resonate with younger audiences seeking foods that make them feel good today while protecting their health tomorrow.

The wellness movement is here to stay, and the produce industry is uniquely positioned to lead it.

## GEN Z, POLICY SHIFTS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

As Gen Z consumers enter adulthood and become parents, their preferences will reshape the food landscape. They’ll expect convenience, transparency, excellent taste and better integration of wellness into everyday eating.

But industry effort alone won’t move the needle on public health. We need stronger government support for programs that make healthy foods more affordable and policies that bring produce into more schools, hospitals and community programs.

We must remember that our audiences are diverse with varying needs, interests, desires and financial resources — our positioning and messaging must be audience-specific to have the biggest business and public health impact.

## WHAT THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY CAN DO

The wellness movement is here to stay, and the produce industry is uniquely positioned to lead it. We need to continue to invest in evidence-based research to deepen consumer trust and prove real-world impact. We need to tell richer stories that connect produce to daily life and educate with empathy, offering simple, lifelong solutions. And we need to advocate for access so that wellness isn’t a privilege, it’s a public good.

Fresh produce isn’t just part of a healthy diet; it’s the foundation. In a market flooded with “functional” claims and fortified snacks, fruits and vegetables are the original functional food. It’s time to claim that position, unapologetically, and remind the world: If you want to eat for health, you need to start in the produce aisle.

*Amber Gray is director at Wild Hive, Orlando, FL, a food, agriculture and nutrition integrated marketing agency.*

# The Produce Prescription: Why the Future of Public Health Depends on Us

BY JIN JU WILDER

**D**avid Suzuki, the renowned Canadian environmentalist and longtime host of *The Nature of Things*, recently said what many have quietly feared: "It's too late."

He was talking about climate change — how we've crossed seven of nine planetary boundaries and failed to shift the narrative. That quote has been stuck in my head — not just because of its implications for our environment, but because it made me think about something more personal: health.

In the past year, I've been devouring books like *The Body* by Bill Bryson, *Outlive* by Peter Attia, *Lifespan* by David Sinclair, and *Behave* by Robert Sapolsky. These books paint a clear picture: We don't just want to live longer, we want

to live better. And diet — especially the daily consumption of fruits and vegetables — is one of the most powerful tools we have to prevent chronic disease and improve quality of life.

And yet ... we still treat produce like a side note. A commodity. An optional extra.

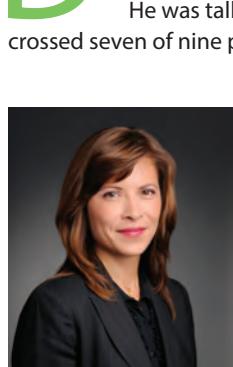
Something that's good for you, sure — if you can afford it, access it, or know what to do with it.

We can't afford that mindset anymore. Not as individuals. Not as a society. And certainly not as an industry.

## WE MUST CLOSE THE HEALTH DIVIDE

Our mission as produce professionals can't just be about growing or distributing food. It must be about growing consumption. About closing the gap between what's grown and what's eaten. About ensuring that children and seniors, students and patients, busy parents and struggling families all have access to fresh, affordable, nourishing produce.

Because if we don't, the health divide in this country — and across much of the world — will continue to grow. And health will increasingly become a marker of privilege.



**Health will increasingly become a marker of privilege if we don't focus on growing produce consumption.**

Last July, the International Fresh Produce Association launched a bold new campaign aimed at U.S. policymakers. With taglines like "Before there were co-pays, there were carrots," and "You can't make America healthy again without fruits and vegetables," the message is loud and clear: Produce is not a luxury — it's a necessity. The campaign urges action on produce prescriptions, school meal reform, and equitable access to real food as part of healthcare and agricultural policy. These aren't abstract ideas. They're tangible, proven solutions.

And yet, as Bishop Desmond Tutu once said: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

This is the moment for us to go upstream.

I've worked in the fresh produce industry for most of my career. I love this business — the people, the innovation, the literal fruits of our labor. But I believe our purpose is shifting. It has to.

This is why I serve on the LA Food Policy Council: to help drive local programs and partnerships that bring food justice to the neighborhoods that need it most. It's also why I accepted the role of chair-elect for the Foundation for Fresh Produce — because this issue requires both grassroots and global solutions. We have to push for change at every level of our food system, from farm to policy to plate.

Suzuki may be right that the systems we've relied on — legal, political, economic — haven't delivered the changes we need. But he also said local communities are where change can still happen. I believe that, too.

And the produce industry? We are the frontline of that local change. We are the growers, the connectors, the educators, the solution-makers.

The next 40 years will look different than the last. Climate change, aging populations, chronic disease, healthcare costs, food insecurity — all of it will intersect in the produce aisle. We need to be ready. Not just with more product, but with more purpose.

The fight for human health isn't over. But it starts here — with what we grow, what we share, and what we choose to stand for. **PB**

*Jin Ju Wilder is vice president of marketing and business development at Vesta Foodservice, Los Angeles, CA. She is also chair-elect for the Foundation for Fresh Produce.*

## TRANSITIONS

**Peruvian Asparagus Importer's Association**

At its annual association meeting in Anaheim, CA, Oct. 16, Peruvian Asparagus Importer's Association (PAIA) membership announced their co-chairmen for 2026-2027. **Carlos Solf** of Southern Specialties serves as the East Coast chair, while **Craig Rolandelli** of Jacobs Malcolm & Burtt serves as the West Coast chair.

Established in 2001, the PAIA Association will commemorate 25 years of service in September 2026. Since its inception, the association has demonstrated leadership within the asparagus trade sector, attributed largely to the dedication of its membership.



Carlos Solf



Craig Rolandelli

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Richard A. Nardella Passes Away**

Philadelphia wholesaler **Richard A. Nardella**, of Woolwich Twp., NJ, passed away on Dec. 10, 2025, at 83. A self-made businessman, he was the former owner of Nardella Wholesale and Fruit Inc. on the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market.

He earned a business degree from St. Joseph's University in food marketing and then launched his wholesale business, creating a legacy for his family's future. During his lifetime, he was recognized by the Korean-American Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association of Philadelphia, and for his charitable work, by Philabundance, Little Sisters of the Poor, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia Eagles Autism Foundation. He also received a U.S. Army medal during his service for his bravery as an army paramedic.

His family was of extreme importance to him, and he was extremely proud of his children's and grandchildren's accomplishments. Husband of the late Judith M. Nardella (nee Decker), he is survived by his daughter, Dana Durante; five grandchildren; four great-grandchildren; and his brother, Anthony Nardella Jr. He was predeceased by his daughter, Judy A. McDonald-Dunn, his grandson, Michael McDonald, and his brother, Francis Nardella.



Richard A. Nardella

**SiCar Farms Transitions to Winter Lime Crop**

SiCar Farms, McAllen, TX, is transitioning into its winter lime crop, complementing its year-round supply and supporting retailer citrus promotions.

As part of its continued growth, SiCar Farms has

expanded operations into Florida, strengthening its ability to serve consumers across the Northeast.

SiCar Farms sources its limes from regions with climates that naturally support strong yields and superior fruit quality, reducing the need for excessive agricultural inputs. This approach reinforces the company's commitment to sustainability while consistently delivering fresh, flavorful limes to market.

**Wish Farms Celebrates Chuck Hollenkamp**

Chuck Hollenkamp, director of strawberry grower relations at Wish Farms, Plant City, FL, received the Florida Strawberry Growers Association's Lifetime Achievement Award at its annual gala. This prestigious recognition celebrates Hollenkamp's four decades of leadership and dedication to the Florida strawberry industry.

Hollenkamp began his career with Wish Farms in 1985 as the vegetable packing house manager in Webster, FL. After four years, he transitioned to Plant City, where he was promoted to sales manager in 1989, a role he held for 25 years. In 2005, he advanced to executive vice president of fresh sales, and in 2016, he assumed his current position as director of strawberry grower relations. Under his guidance, Wish Farms' strawberry acreage grew from 1,100 acres to 2,300 acres, strengthening partnerships with growers and ensuring consistent quality for customers.

Hollenkamp will continue to serve Wish Farms through 2026, maintaining strong relationships with Florida strawberry growers and supporting the company's growth.

**Sun Pacific Cuties Has New Marketing Campaign**

Sun Pacific, Pasadena, CA, recently launched its new "Irresistibly Cute" marketing campaign across digital advertising, social media, influencer marketing, and in-store activations.

Retailers can help shoppers find their favorite Cuties mandarin brand by prominently displaying Cuties in new merchandising "Wow" displays.

To further support retailers, Cuties has a refreshed website supporting the "Irresistibly

Cute" campaign. The site has wellness information, crafts, activities and content along with snacking ideas and recipes to keep shoppers engaged and to encourage new and repeat purchases at retail. Shoppers can join the Cuties Club for coupons and more to continue driving traffic to stores. Retailers are encouraged to contact a Sun Pacific sales rep to develop a custom program tailored to their shoppers.

**AutumnCrisp Launch Breaks Records in Denmark**

Sun World International's partnership with Salling Group sparked a grape craze in Denmark this fall, introducing AutumnCrisp green seedless grapes to Danish shoppers for the first time — and marking a major milestone for branded produce in Europe.

Since hitting shelves across føtex, Bilka, and Netto, AutumnCrisp has driven momentum with a 90% sales increase, contributing to an overall 25% annual growth in the grape category. This growth is a direct result of the robust campaign that not only introduced shoppers to AutumnCrisp, but also positioned Salling Group as the first retailer in the EU to feature branded grape packaging.

The campaign's digital footprint matched its in-store success. A high-impact influencer activation generated more than 1.5 million impressions across Instagram and TikTok. In stores, bright displays featuring branded packaging and targeted digital promotions helped turn AutumnCrisp into a must-try item.

**Taylor Farms Wins Canada's Most Trusted Salad Kit Brand**

Taylor Farms, Salinas, CA, has been named Canada's Most Trusted Salad Kit brand in the 2026 BrandSpark Most Trusted Awards, marking Taylor Farms' second consecutive win in the category. The recognition reinforces Canadian consumers' trust in Taylor Farms and validates its commitment to quality, innovation and food safety.

Each year, BrandSpark International conducts the BrandSpark Canadian Trust Study, one of Canada's most comprehensive consumer research initiatives, surveying over 45,000 Canadians and capturing more than 240,000 brand evaluations.

Since opening its doors, Taylor Farms has invested over \$60 million into the 60,000-square-foot Toronto facility, establishing Taylor Fresh Canada in 2022. Today, the facility operates with over 400 team members who produce over 900,000 pounds of fresh foods for Canadian families each week.



### Florida Strawberry Season Begins

Florida's strawberry season is officially underway, according to the Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FSGA), Plant City, FL.

This season, consumers will see a new wave of FSGA advertising, designed to highlight the taste and quality of Florida-grown berries. The campaign will reach targeted shoppers across digital platforms, including streaming video, streaming audio and social media.

Shoppers are encouraged to look for the iconic Fresh From Florida logo on packages.

### EPC Leadership Class Wraps Up Year at New York Produce Show

The seventh Eastern Produce Council (EPC) Leadership Class topped off its 2025 program with a mix of opportunities at the New York Produce Show and Conference (NYPS) Dec. 2-4.

"The trade show and conference offer a perfect conclusion to our year of networking and education," says Susan McLeavey Sarlund, EPC executive director. "And, the learnings and connections the class has made will continue with them well into their future careers."

In New York, the leadership class took part in the NYPS Cornell University Future-Leaders-In-Produce Foundational Excellence event. The class was also recognized at the Rising Stars and EPC Leadership Reunion Reception prior to the opening cocktail reception. All six prior EPC Leadership Classes were invited to the reception along with this year's class. Each current class participant received the Brené Brown *Dare to Lead* book along with a leadership pin. A pin was also given to all alumni at the reception. Additionally, the class was recognized at the Keynote Breakfast before walking the trade show floor.

The EPC's program provides a dual-medium learning environment and includes various tours and classroom learning activities throughout the year. Nominations for the eighth leadership class open this month.



Connect. Learn. Grow.

### Fyffes: Pineapples Rise in Consumers' Choice Table

A Nielsen consumer survey of favorite fruits commissioned by Fyffes earlier this year ranks pineapples at No. 10 as the fruit most consumed in the last six months. The research confirms that pineapples, once a dessert favorite, have grown in their appeal to become a daily delight.

Among pineapple consumers interviewed, the appeal that it has as a satisfying treat ranked highest, with 31% of respondents claiming "to treat myself" as their top reason to eat pineapple. Other consumer tastes revealed in the survey show that pineapples are mainly eaten with a partner (44%) or family (26%) at home.

Best liked as a dessert (34%), or as a snack between meals (32%), or as an ingredient (21%), other findings of interest to retailers show that 36% of respondents make a spontaneous purchase, attracted by appealing fruit on the shelf or well-presented fruit in a separate aisle as a second point of sale instore.



ucts each year. With six warehouses and 26 merchants on the peninsula just northeast of Manhattan, it supplies around 12% of all food consumed in and around the New York City metropolitan area.

In addition to the preservation of jobs, the new facility will greatly improve the overall climate for those who work in the area, as well as make good on promises outlined in outgoing Mayor Eric Adams's "Hunts Point Forward Plan," "PlaNYC: Getting Sustainability Done," and the "Green Economy Action Plan." Among his 70 missions to improve business and quality of life in the city were creating family-sustaining jobs, enhancing community health and improving access to healthy food.



### NEW PRODUCTS

### Taylor Farms Launches New Double Dip Vegetable Tray

Taylor Farms, Salinas, CA, collaborated with Bitchin' Sauce to launch the Taylor Farms Double Dip Vegetable Tray with Bitchin' Sauce. This innovative tray pairs Taylor Farms' fresh-cut vegetables with two complementary dips, a classic buttermilk ranch and Bitchin' Sauce's signature almond-based dip, which is both vegan and dairy-free.

The Double Dip Vegetable Tray with Bitchin' Sauce is available now nationwide at Sprouts Farmers Market.



### Hunts Point Produce Market Will Get 'Cutting-Edge' Revamp in Late 2026

Hunts Point Produce Market in the Bronx, NY, will undergo a major redevelopment later this year that will make it one of the first "all-electric intermodal food distribution centers" in the U.S.

The multi-million-dollar project will both improve air quality and enhance its appearance by improving the aging facility and increasing the use of upgraded railroad and water. The New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) and the Hunts Point Produce Cooperative, which jointly spearheaded the initiative, have entered into agreements with Aurora Contractors, LLC and Primus Builders, Inc., which will finalize design-and-function details before they begin construction in late 2026.

The City of New York and the State of New York are each putting \$130 million into the project. Another \$145 million in funding will come from federal grants (including the Federal Highway Administration), plus monies raised by NYCEDC from railroad rehabilitation and a loan from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The Hunts Point Market is the pivot point for distribution of more than 2.5 billion pounds of fresh fruits, vegetables and specialty prod-



### Ocean Mist Farms Launches Heartichokes Line

Ocean Mist Farms, Watsonville, CA, unveiled its latest innovation — Heartichokes — at the New York Produce Show in December.

The new value-added line features three items: two varieties with chef-crafted seasoning packets — Lemon Butter and Savory Parm — and one unseasoned option for artichoke fans who prefer their own signature spices. Versatile and convenient, Heartichokes can be roasted, sautéed, added to soups, stews, or stir-fries — and even grilled for an effortless dish.

# Health, Sustainability and the Evolving Produce Shopper

BY MELISSA CONFORTO

**A**mericans are filling their grocery carts with more intention than ever before, and fresh produce continues to be a focal point of this shift. According to Provoke Insights' latest biannual study of 1,500 U.S. consumers, shoppers are prioritizing health and quality in their food choices, but their decisions are also shaped by practicality, trust and price.



As produce remains one of the most tangible reflections of healthy eating and sustainability, these evolving attitudes carry major implications for growers, brands and retailers alike.

## HEALTH AND FUNCTION DRIVE FRESH CHOICES

The pursuit of health is redefining how Americans shop the grocery aisles. Parents, in particular, are steering their families toward products with low sugar (27%) and organic qualities (24%), emphasizing both nourishment and natural sourcing. Millennials also over-index on organic preferences, suggesting a sustained demand for produce positioned as "better-for-you."

While the health movement is strong, there are limits to extremism. Consumers favor moderation over elimination, preferring reduced-sugar over sugar-free claims. This balance-first mindset is an opportunity for produce marketers to position fruits and vegetables as naturally sweet solutions that fit into a healthy lifestyle without compromise.

## THE LABELING TRUST GAP

In an era saturated with on-pack claims, authenticity matters. Nearly one-quarter of shoppers question the credibility of food labels like "no artificial flavors" or "sustainably sourced ingredients." This skepticism is highest among Gen Z, the very demographic most often targeted by wellness marketing. Even health-conscious consumers, while slightly more trusting, express hesitation.

For the produce industry, this signals the need for stronger storytelling and verification. Claims such as "locally grown," "organic," or "pesticide-free" resonate most when backed by transparency.

Growers and retailers can build confidence through clearer sourcing information, certifications and in-store education. In an environment where misinformation spreads quickly, transparency has become a competitive advantage.

## PAYING MORE FOR PRODUCTS THAT DELIVER

While budgets remain tight, most consumers are still willing to pay more for grocery products that align with their values. Eighty-three percent say they would spend extra for high-quality ingredients, and a similar majority express openness toward cleaner eating.

For the produce sector, this suggests a strategic opportunity.

Sustainability should complement, not overshadow, core product value. Leading with freshness, taste and nutrition, while positioning environmental responsibility as an added benefit, aligns best with current shopper sentiment.

## LOCAL AND ORGANIC IN CENTER STAGE

Nearly half of grocery shoppers say locally grown produce most influences what they buy, followed closely by organic offerings. These attributes are particularly important to parents, Boomers and high-income households, reflecting how family health and perceived quality drive decision-making.

Local produce is seen as fresher, safer, and more trustworthy, key themes that directly address broader consumer skepticism toward packaged goods.

However, though consumers say they are willing to pay more for high-quality ingredients, half of shoppers say price remains a primary barrier for purchasing more produce. Short shelf life and seasonal availability are additional reasons consumers limit their produce purchases.

These specific concerns are especially common among affluent consumers, who are otherwise more motivated by freshness and locality. To sustain momentum, the industry can highlight the long-term value of quality produce through freshness guarantees, clearer origin stories, and education about seasonality.

## PACKAGING PREFERENCES

How produce is packaged matters. Gen Z shows a growing preference for recyclable plastic packaging, while older generations still favor buying produce loose. This divide illustrates the balance between sustainability and convenience that retailers must navigate.

Packaging that both protects freshness and communicates environmental care can reinforce trust and appeal across age groups.

## TURNING INSIGHT INTO OPPORTUNITY

The findings are clear: Health, quality and authenticity remain the heart of consumer motivation, and produce sits squarely at that intersection. As shoppers seek balance between indulgence and nutrition, convenience and sustainability, the fresh produce category has a unique chance to lead.

Brands and retailers that communicate honesty, emphasize freshness, and deliver consistent quality will not only gain loyalty, but also reinforce produce as the foundation of a healthier, more hopeful future.

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

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The Lambert's Market in Westwood, MA, 12 miles southwest of Boston, prides itself on its fresh, quality produce, the foundation of the market.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO

## Lambert's Market: Giving Customers The Best

Fresh, quality produce at a good value draws shoppers to this Boston retailer.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

**S**eventy-five years ago, Nino Lambert's father and uncle started selling produce and a few groceries out of the back of a truck. As the business grew, they opened a store, and then expanded as their sons joined the enterprise. Today, Lambert's Market operates two stores, says Lambert, owner of the Lambert's Market Westwood store.

The Lambert's Westwood store is a full-service full-line grocery store, with a deli, meat and fish market, and wine and beer, in addition to produce and groceries, says Lambert. "We just put in a smoothie bar and we're really excited about it. We also have garden centers at each location, with friendly and knowledgeable staff. And, we have the biggest selection of retail Christmas trees from Maine to New York."

Though Lambert's has evolved, some aspects have not changed. "We have consistently maintained our core values of hard work and customer service in our effort to provide the freshest products," says Lambert.



Boston-area Lambert's Market sources produce six days a week from the New England Produce Center, and also buys direct from local growers, giving the supermarket access to a wide breadth of fresh produce.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO

Lambert is excited his son John, the third generation, just began at the store, although Lambert says "he has been working with me since he was about 10 years old."

The store promotes with some circulairs and TV, but is also exploring social media. "My daughter just recently got us on TikTok," says Lambert. "She and my son did a TikTok video for the salad bar that hit 3.5M views. We have a huge social media presence now and it's something we do

every day. That's brought in a lot of younger generation customers."

### PRODUCE IS FOUNDATION

Produce is the soul of the Lambert's stores. "We're known for produce," says Lambert. "We have a very big produce presence because it's what we were born out of. We started and grew up in produce and we've never lost touch with it."

The Westwood store measures close to



Seventy-five years ago, the Lambert brothers started selling produce and a few groceries out of the back of a truck. Today, Lambert's Market operates two full-service supermarkets in the Boston area. PRODUCE BUSINESS/JODEAN ROBBINS PHOTO

10,000 square feet, with produce occupying half of it. "Produce's percent contribution to overall sales in the store is around 25%," says Lambert.

A massive salad bar is at the heart of the store. "Our salad bar is famous," says Lambert. "The salad bar is at the center of the store and there are over 1,000 items on it, including some hot items. Just in the past five years, we have expanded the size of the salad bar three times."

Lambert explains produce is the hardest part of the business, but the store has evolved by adding other produce elements. "The salad bar helps because we can use produce we pull off the display in the salad bar," he says. "I can't imagine running the business without a salad bar right now. It really helps with store shrink and customers love it."

#### SERVICE, QUALITY, VALUE

The store focuses on the three pillars of service, quality and value throughout all aspects of the operation. "My father always said, if you can give customers a little more than they expect, then they'll come back," says Lambert. "I try to give customers a little more than they expect in value and also in service."

Lambert's commitment to produce is evident in its merchandising. Half the entire back wall of the store is a two-tier vegetable rack. That same aisle also features gondolas for potatoes and product that doesn't need refrigeration. The front wall houses fruit, including melons, grapes and kiwis, and opposite the front wall are gondolas housing apples, oranges and pears.

When customers walk in the front door, they're greeted by a table with deals. "My brother buys the produce at NEPC (New England Produce Center) and gets some special deals," says Lambert. "We have about 2,000 customers a day who just come in for lunch, so those deals up front really promote impulse purchases. We see a lot of extra purchases from that."

The layout of the department stays essentially the same throughout the year, but items within the sections change with

the seasons, says Lambert. "We had a big presence of peaches and plums at the end of summer, but then in fall we transition to apples and build bigger displays of that. We try to change up the offering quite a bit to fit the seasons."

#### FRESH SOURCING

The company's roots in produce mean its primary goal is to find and sell the best produce available. "We want only the freshest, highest quality and best price for our customers," says Lambert. "This goal is the foundation of our company."

Lambert's prides itself on offering just about everything to customers. "We have everything from ginger to horseradish to PEI turnips," says Lambert. "Some items we don't make any money on, but we have to have them for our customers. I have a customer from Ireland who comes in once a week for PEI turnip, so I have to have it. Coconuts and figs are another example."

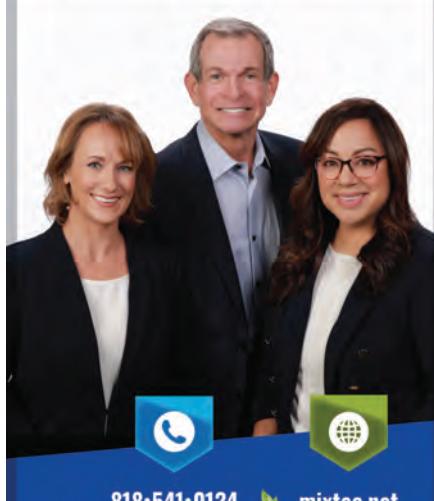
The store sources from the NEPC six days a week. "We've had a presence there for 75 years," says Lambert. "The benefit of sourcing six days a week means we always have fresh product. We can also be flexible and buy what we need each day."

Lambert's also direct buys local product, such as apples. "Bolton Orchards and Broderick Orchards are two of our apple growers," says Lambert. "For pumpkins, we use McCue in Waltham. Bean Farms in Westwood supplies our local corn, tomatoes, summer squash, zucchini and cucumbers. Hanson Farms is another great supplier for us. We buy a lot of local off the NEPC as well. I have access to everything we need between the NEPC and our local farmers."

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## INSIDE THE STORE

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Vouchers for Veggies/Eat SF traces its roots to physician-led innovation in San Francisco, CA, where founder Dr. Hilary Seligman recognized that prescribing medication without addressing food access left a critical care gap. The program typically provides \$40 to \$120 per month in fruit and vegetable benefits over six months.

PHOTO COURTESY CONSTANZA HEVIA

## Produce and Public Health

Partnerships are using produce prescriptions, incentives, and innovation to improve health and drive consumption.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Fresh fruits and vegetables are directly tied to reversing the nation's two leading causes of death, and Americans are not eating nearly enough of them. Heart disease and cancer account for more than 40% of all U.S. deaths, according to the *National Vital Statistics Report* published Sept. 16, 2025.

Yet, produce consumption remains stubbornly low. Only about 12% of adults meet the recommended daily fruit intake of 1.5 to 2 cups, and just 10% reach the 2 to 3 cups of vegetables recommended in the 2020-2025 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, according to CDC reports. The health impact of closing that gap is simple, side-effect-free, and scientifically backed.

"Improving fruit and vegetable consumption is one of the most evidence-based strategies for strengthening public health. This is why so many Food as Medicine programs start with increasing produce consumption," says Mandy Katz, MS, RD, CSP, LDN, healthy living director, Giant Food, 166-store chain headquartered in Landover, MD.

From a retail perspective, Katz adds, "the produce section is more than just a department; it's a public health intervention that greets individuals every time they walk into the grocery store. People visit grocery stores far more often than they see a clinician, giving retailers a unique opportunity to influence daily health behaviors. When we make produce more visible, more affordable, and easier to use, we shift consumer norms toward healthier eating."

Consumers say cost is one of the biggest barriers to eating nutritious foods. More specifically, about seven in 10 Americans say the increased cost of food in recent years has made it more challenging to eat healthfully. A larger share of lower-income adults than upper-income adults express this view (77% vs. 54%), according to findings from a Pew Research Center survey, *Americans on Healthy Food and Eating*, conducted in early 2025, among 5,123 U.S. adults.

### RETAILER FOCUS:

One way to lessen the cost barrier is to produce prescription plans, retail-led initiatives, and federal programs that offer cards or coupons for free fresh fruits and vegetables that participants purchase at retail. Many are based on medical need.

**• Produce Prescription Plans.** Over the last decade, many produce prescription plans have moved from pilot concepts to operational tools that route healthcare dollars directly into produce departments, with retailers serving as the delivery system.

Eat Well, managed by the non-profit Reinvestment Partners in Durham, NC, launched a pilot at Food Lion in 2016. The 1,100-plus store retailer, headquartered in Salisbury, NC, initially loaded fruit and vegetable funds onto its loyalty cards.

As the model expanded, flexibility became essential, leading to a retailer-neutral restricted debit card accepted at major national chains, including Ahold Delhaize banners, Kroger, Albertsons, Walmart and Instacart.

Participants, most often individuals managing diet-related chronic disease, are enrolled through health plans, care managers, dietitians and community health workers. Monthly produce benefits range from \$40 to \$320, depending on program intensity. Funds are limited to fruits and vegetables — fresh, frozen, or canned without added ingredients.

"It's a very smooth process. There are no vouchers, no special trips, and no changes required at checkout," says Neal Curran, director of food programs.

DC Greens' Produce Rx followed a similar evolution, beginning in 2012 as a small farmers market program using paper vouchers before scaling into a regional model spanning grocery stores and markets across Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia. Physicians prescribe fruits and vegetables to Medicaid recipients. Debit cards average about \$100 per month and typically run for one year.

"Access and education go hand in hand," says Eric Angel, executive director, emphasizing that produce dollars are paired with nutrition education to support lasting change.

The Food Trust, Philadelphia, PA, approaches produce incentives through a combined access, affordability, and education framework, operating Food Bucks and Food Bucks Rx programs tied to SNAP transactions and healthcare-issued prescriptions.

"By integrating incentives into existing retail systems, the program encourages repeat visits, while allowing families to select fruits and vegetables that align with culture, taste and cooking habits," says Julia Koprak, associate director.

Vouchers for Veggies/Eat SF traces its roots to physician-led innovation in San Francisco, CA, where founder Dr. Hilary Seligman recognized that prescribing medication without addressing food access left a critical care gap. The program now operates in multiple regions, typically providing \$40 to \$120 per month in fruit and vegetable benefits over six months.

"We really want to get people in the habit of eating fruits and vegetables," says Cissie Bonini, executive director of the program, which is part of the Food Policy, Health, and Hunger Research Program at the University of California, San Francisco.

Across these four programs, health outcomes show consistent patterns. Participants increase their fruit and vegetable intake by about one serving per day, with reported reductions in A1C, blood pressure, BMI, and medication use.

● **Retailer-Led Initiatives.** Giant Food's Healthy Flexible Rewards program, says Katz, is an example of the retailer's success in encouraging and enabling shoppers to buy more produce. A loyalty rewards program that gives more points for healthier purchases can influence behavior change, which helps reduce the cost as a barrier to healthier eating, according to Katz.

"When healthy options earn more rewards, customers don't need to work harder to make healthy choices; the system guides them there," she says.

● **Federal Programs.** Public health programs that align with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, like WIC (USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), have been shown to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and improve health outcomes. Following the fruit and vegetable benefit increase in 2021 from \$9 to \$11 to \$35 per month, WIC shoppers spent \$12.40 more per month on WIC-eligible produce — \$9.30 more than non-WIC shoppers.

Today, children receive \$26 a month, and mothers receive \$48-\$56.

"In 2025, President Trump proposed cutting the fruit and vegetable benefit by 75%, but Congress smartly chose to fund it fully," says Mollie Van Lieu, vice president of nutrition and health for the International Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C. "We will be advocating for its full funding in 2026. Fortunately, the MAHA (Make America Healthy Again) Commission has identified the WIC fruit and vegetable benefit as a proven intervention to support public health, so we will use that momentum going into 2026."

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps) participants are not required to purchase



At Giant Food, a 166-store chain headquartered in Landover, MD, a Produce Prescription In-Store Display program, creates a dedicated destination that highlights fruits and vegetables.

PHOTO COURTESY GIANT FOOD

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

● **"Over time, increased produce consumption can reduce healthcare costs, improve quality of life, and support community wellbeing, making retail an active partner in public health, not just a place to shop."**

Mandy Katz, Giant Food, Landover, MD.

● **"Knowing something is good for you alone doesn't cut it. What matters is connecting people to how a food fits their household."**

Tina McGeough, Stop & Shop, Quincy, MA

healthier foods, Van Lieu adds. "While the evidence is clear on poor health outcomes associated with sugar-sweetened beverages, practically speaking, we have no evidence that banning soda and junk food will drive fruit and vegetable purchases. We will support proven interventions, like SNAP incentives, that show increases in fruit and vegetable consumption."

### GROWER FOCUS:

Another way to overcome the cost barrier to consuming more fresh fruits and vegetables is to provide free boxes of produce. These are programs that can especially benefit growers.

● **Food Box Programs.** Food box programs that started as emergency relief during COVID-19 are now settling into a different role: reimbursable healthcare benefits built around fresh produce.

At SunTerra Produce in Newport Beach, CA, that shift is fully evident in how Project Food Box operates today. The program enrolls Medicaid members with diet-related chronic conditions and begins with a telehealth assessment conducted by dietitians.

Participants receive 20- to 22-pound boxes of fresh produce delivered weekly, supported by recipes and preparation guidance.

"The program captures as much as 30% of produce that falls outside retail cosmetic or sizing standards and moves it through coordinated partnerships with food banks, healthcare providers, and faith-based organizations, creating both an outlet for growers and a consistent source of fresh fruits and vegetables for communities with limited access," says Steve Brazeel, founder and chief executive officer of both SunTerra and Elevated Foods, the latter of which operated Project Food Box.

In Puerto Rico, Caribbean Produce Exchange (CPE), a produce distributor based outside San Juan, is scaling FoodBox programs through Medicare Advantage.

Puerto Rico is a priority market because more than 55% of Medicare recipients are dual-eligible for Medicaid. CPE supports the program with large cold-storage warehouses that can convert full container loads into food boxes, at about 3,000 loads per year. The standard Medicare FoodBox is a quarterly benefit valued at \$100 to \$140, with roughly 70% of its contents as fresh produce.

"There are two magic words: local and fresh," says Angel R. Santiago, president and chief executive officer.

Nationally, Planet Harvest, a for-profit company headquartered in Glencoe, IL, focused on reducing food waste, has organized its Food Farmacy as a framework linking a grower network with healthcare providers, employers, and community organizations.

Programs range from produce boxes to workplace wellness initiatives. Education is embedded through recipes, storage tips, and a new partnership with Thrive Global, a New York, NY-based behavior change technology company.

"When people have affordable access to fruits and vegetables, and they change their behavior to include them regularly, health outcomes can improve," says Melissa Melshenker Ackerman, managing member and chief executive officer.

At the regional level, 4P Foods, a fresh produce distributor based in Warrenton, VA, partnered with Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., on the FliPRx prescription program. Serving food-insecure families with children who are at risk for obesity or diabetes, the program delivers weekly produce bags sourced from more than 100 Mid-Atlantic growers.

"It's a chance for recipients to try something new without risking the use of limited SNAP dollars," says Devon Byrne, 4P's account manager.

Health data is beginning to follow. Project Food Box participants showed a 1-point drop in A1C in a UC Irvine study, while 4P Foods reports significant reductions in BMI among children.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While cost is often cited as the biggest barrier to eating more fresh produce, three other barriers continue to limit consumption. Eighty-three percent of U.S. adults surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2025 said that taste is extremely or very important when deciding what to purchase. Over half (52%) cited the food's healthiness, and 47% cited its convenience.

● **Taste: Raising the Eating Experience.** Flavor remains the first gatekeeper to repeat purchases. The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council (USHBC), in Folsom, CA, points to continued advances in genetics and breeding that improve consistency and eating quality. "Decades of research have built blueberries' health halo, but the eating experience still matters," says Leslie Wada, PhD, RD, senior director of nutrition and health research.

At Stemilt Growers, in Wenatchee, WA, apples, such as Cosmic Crisp, illustrate how flavor-forward varieties can reinvigorate mature categories, says Brianna Shales, marketing director. "The variety rose from zero to No. 7 in the apple category in just six years, driven by high flavor, crispness, and storability."

● **What's Healthy: From Research To Retail Decisions.** Health messaging is most effective when it shows up where decisions are made. The California walnut industry leveraged clinical research on



Planet Harvest, Glencoe, IL, has linked its Food Farmacy grower network with healthcare providers, employers and community organizations. Programs range from condition-specific produce boxes, like the above kidney-friendly box, to workplace wellness initiatives.

PHOTO COURTESY PLANET HARVEST

walnuts and heart health to earn the American Heart Association Heart-Check certification in 2011.

"For the last eight years, we've developed annual retail promotions for American Heart Month to translate health research into point-of-purchase signage, educational displays, recipe content, digital and social-media assets, value-added promotions, and media outreach, designed to make walnuts' heart-health benefits clear and compelling," says Jennifer Olmstead, senior director of U.S. marketing and communications for the California Walnut Board and Commission, in Folsom, CA.

Meanwhile, the National Watermelon Promotion Board, Winter Park, FL, takes a practical approach to turning watermelon research into real retail results.

"The science is translated into simple, consumer-friendly messages that show up in press materials, social media, retail kits and dietitian outreach," says Juliemar Rosado, director of retail and international marketing. "Retail partners then bring these messages to life with POS signage, recipes, sampling tools, and staff training that help produce teams and retail dietitians talk about watermelon's health benefits."

Retail execution indeed brings the science to life. At Giant Food, a Produce Prescription In-Store Display program, developed with dietitian, merchandising, and vendor partners, creates a dedicated destination that highlights fruits and vegetables selected for their health benefits.

"Customers don't need to work harder to make healthy choices," says Katz. "Having a clear 'healthy, try something new' destination reduces overwhelm and encourages shoppers to add one more produce item."

At Stop & Shop, a 365-store retailer based in Quincy, MA, retail dietitians focus on application. "Knowing something is good for you alone doesn't cut it," says Tina McGeough, MPH, RDN, CDCES. "What matters is connecting people to how a food fits their household."

● **Convenience: Removing Friction.** Time remains a persistent barrier to healthy eating, making convenience a priority.

Growers and retailers should understand the barriers and opportunities shoppers face today, says the IFPA's Van Lieu. "At the end of the day, customers make choices based on what they can afford, what looks good, and what they know they or their family will eat within their current eating patterns. We need to deliver on price, but also flavor, convenience, and meeting cultural and nutritional needs." **PB**

# Tap Into Organic Trends Now

Once a niche, organic produce has become a core retail category.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

**T**oday's organic produce category isn't the Birkenstock-clad shoppers' niche it once was. Heading into 2026, the category is firmly commonplace.

Underscoring this mainstream momentum, U.S. organic sales reached \$71.6 billion in 2024, according to the *2025 Organic Market Report* released in April by the Organic Trade Association (OTA), headquartered in Washington, DC.

What's more, produce remained the largest organic category, accounting for 30.1% of total organic sales, or \$21.5 billion.

Organic produce penetration in total U.S. produce grew from 13.1% in 2015 to 15.5% in 2024, and produce remains the entry point for consumers into organics.

"Organic has moved into everyday shopping," says Noelle Neary, produce category manager for The Wakefern Food Corp., in Keasbey, NJ, while speaking on a panel at the New York Produce Show in December. "For 2026, the focus is on how organic is presented — whether through integrated or dedicated sets, clearer pricing and better education — so shoppers can make confident choices."

These eight trends are shaping the growth of organic produce:

## 1. ORGANIC CONTINUES TO OUTPERFORM

Organic produce growth is no longer episodic. It has been steady for three consecutive years. More specifically, according to OTA data, organic sales growth rose 5.2% in 2024, the highest rate since the pandemic spike in 2020, while total store sales fell to 2.5%, the slowest since 2017.

"When I started working in organics in the early 1990s, the industry projected a \$5 billion market," notes Eric Mitchnick, director of the organic and specialty division, D'Arrigo New York, at Hunts Point Market, Bronx. "Today, we're north of \$70 billion, with produce accounting for almost a third of that. That's not a niche anymore."

Demand continues to head north, according to Brian Dey, senior merchandiser and natural stores coordinator at Four Seasons Produce Inc., in Ephrata, PA. "Consumers may be stretching their dollars, but they continue to prioritize health. When it comes to what they feed their families, organic remains a priority. I don't see the organic movement slowing down at all going into 2026."

Performance varies by subcategory, but the leaders are clear. In 2024, organic bananas grew 15.5%; berries, 10.3%; potatoes, 9.8%; citrus, 7%; onions, 6.7%; apples, 6.6%; mushrooms, 5.9%; avocados, 5.5%; and carrots, 5.1%, based on OTA data. Organic packaged salads declined 4.5%, reinforcing that growth can be selective, not automatic.

## 2. ORGANIC DEMAND SPANS MULTIPLE SHOPPER TYPES

Organic purchasing now spans all generations, but not all shoppers engage the category the same way.

In fact, David Bright, vice president of category marketing at



Organic produce remains the largest organic category and a key entry point for shoppers embracing organic foods.  
PHOTO COURTESY NATURAL GROCERS

Grimmway Farms in Bakersfield, CA, and its subsidiary, Cal Organic Farms, sees younger shoppers shaping long-term demand.

"Millennial and Gen Z consumers are prioritizing organic produce as a way to improve lifestyle and health outcomes."

However, channel still matters, according to Jeff Fairchild, buyer at the Organically Grown Company, in Portland, OR. "Co-ops, natural food stores, and specialty retailers attract an older, more established customer with disposable income. I don't see a dramatic shift yet toward younger shoppers in those channels."

Joanna Jaramillo, marketing manager, Wholesum Family Farms, Amado, AZ, identifies three shopper segments shaping demand.

"The first is premium early adopters, who are highly discerning with strong purchasing power, who actively seek new, flavorful, elevated organic varieties. They respond to differentiated SKUs, storytelling, and culinary inspiration. Second, some value-driven shoppers are more flexible in their preference for organic and are more likely to buy when price gaps are narrow or when value is clearly communicated. Third, we're also seeing younger, value-driven shoppers who over-index on preferences for sustainability, taste, and brand transparency."

## 3. WIDER DISTRIBUTION IS FUELING ORGANIC GROWTH

Organic produce growth is being driven by greater availability across more retail formats, according to Fairchild. "I don't think consumers are suddenly eating more produce. A lot of what we call growth is organic, showing up in more places. For example, when a large retailer decides to add an organic SKU — bananas are the classic example — it appears to be category growth, but consumers may just be switching from conventional to organic. The pie isn't always getting bigger; it's being sliced differently."

## 4. YEAR-ROUND EXPECTED

Seasonality gaps in organic produce continue to narrow as expanded import programs, stronger varietal performance, and im-



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proved supply-chain coordination support more year-round availability. Controlled-environment agriculture has also contributed to stability in select categories.

"We offer organic produce 365 days a year across all of our formats, and we are proud that every category has an organic option," says Wakefern's Neary.

Natural Grocers positions organic produce front and center year-round, supported by in-store education and trained staff. "It's the first department you see when you enter our stores — that's how important it is to us," says Katie Macarelli, director of public relations for the 168-store chain headquartered in Lakewood, CO.

On the supply side, companies like Blue Mountain Organics source volume-moving organic vegetables, like broccoli and celery, from both the U.S. and Mexico, selling to retailers, wholesalers, and distributors in the U.S. and Canada.

"We're seeing increased demand for organic cilantro. Next, we'll be expanding beyond wet veg into organic avocados and citrus, with year-round supply from California and Mexico," says Darrell Beyer, founding partner in the Reno, NV-based business.

Viva Tierra Organic imports apples and pears from Peru, Chile and Argentina in the spring. "The USDA's NOP Import Certificate has improved the integrity and traceability of organic produce, establishing brand trust regardless of where it's grown," says Chris Ford, business development and marketing manager for Viva Tierra Organic Inc., Mount Vernon, WA. In 2026, the company will launch a new organic grape program from Peru.

Value-added products, many of which have 12-month availability, are also increasing the continuous organic supply. Grimmway Farms' Cal-Organic introduced a line of value-added vegetables last year, with Organic Stemless Kale as the most popular.

### 5. NARROWER PRICE GAPS

Organic produce still carries a premium — generally 5% to 25% over conventional — but that premium is tightening on everyday staples.

OTA consumer research shows that 67% of shoppers expect organic to cost about 20% more than conventional, while only 6% expect a 60% premium. Importantly, 59% say organic is the food attribute they are most willing to pay more for.

"In some commodities, organic pricing is now at or below conventional," says Four Seasons' Dey.

Natural Grocers' Macarelli says the retailer is seeing more customers seeking ways to eat well on a budget, making organic seasonal produce more relevant than ever.

### 6. PACKAGING

Packaging has become a strategic lever in organic produce, balancing sustainability expectations with retail efficiency.

"Organic shoppers don't want plastic, but retailers need scan-through and identification," says Fairchild. "Paper-based and recyclable materials help bridge that gap."

Wholesum Family Farms expects continued growth in top-seal packs, resealable units, and fiber-based trays in 2026. "The trend isn't less packaging," says Jaramillo. "It's smarter packaging."

### 7. MERCHANTISING STRATEGY

Retailers are still split on whether organic performs best in dedicated sections or integrated displays.

"We see both models working," says Four Seasons' Dey. "Dedicated sections serve loyal organic shoppers. Integration captures incremental sales."

D'Arrigo New York's Mitchnick favors integration in mass-market stores. "You're not selling to the 15% who already buy organic — you're trying to reach the other 85%. Side-by-side comparison invites trade-up."

However, adds Grimmway's Bright, "many retailers are looking for organic destinations where consumers can easily identify and find organic produce in one spot."

### 8. EDUCATION

Education has become the most reliable way to drive conversion. OTA data shows that consumers familiar with more than half of organic certification characteristics are 10 percentage points more likely to justify a price premium. Moving from low awareness to high awareness increases price justification by more than 20 percentage points. In September, the OTA launched a "Seal Makes it Simple," an integrated media, digital and retail campaign to help eliminate consumer confusion when shopping for food and textiles.

"Retailers grow organic when they communicate what it stands for and how to use it," says Jaramillo.

# 15 Years of Celebrating Fresh

New York Produce Show Highlights

DECEMBER 2-4, 2025





# 15 Years of Celebrating Fresh

Spotlighting exhibitors showcasing standout fresh produce and industry leaders delivering educational sessions, the New York Produce Show and Conference (NYPS) took place Dec. 2-4, 2025, in Manhattan under the theme "15 Years of Celebrating Fresh."

Across three days of networking and idea-sharing, thousands of attendees experienced a full slate of high-impact events, including a sold-out opening reception, a keynote exploring generational consumer behavior, and a new off-site Ideation Fresh Foodservice Forum.

"I would never have imagined, in those early days, that we would move to the world-class Javits Center in such a brief time," says Ken Whitacre, chief executive of Phoenix Media Network and publisher of PRODUCE BUSINESS, one of the show's two signature sponsors, along with the Eastern Produce Council (EPC). "Our global expansion is also obvious, as the NYPS attracts peers from around the world, impassioned to connect, share, create and prosper."

## DAY ONE

The Global Trade Symposium kicked off to an overflow crowd Tuesday, Dec. 2, at the Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel. Produce industry global leaders across six panels tackled the challenges of fresh produce imports and exports and a session on seed development.

Those sessions ran concurrently with Cornell University's Future-Leaders-in-Produce Foundational Excellence program. The daylong workshop featured sessions on marketing, a robust panel of young leaders, and signature sessions from Cornell professors on trends in the produce industry, and career development.

At the Rising Star social, PRODUCE BUSINESS honored its 40 Under 40 winners with personalized plaques. The show also hosted guests at the two-hour Opening Cocktail Reception in the Sheraton's expansive Metropolitan Ballroom.

## DAY TWO

Trade show day kicked off at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center with the Opening Keynote Breakfast, capped by David and Jonah Stillman of GenGuru, examining how Baby Boomers through Gen Z

influence today's workforce and consumer behavior.

Also at the breakfast, Whitacre awarded plaques for Merchandiser of the Year to Thomas Cingari Jr., vice president of produce and floral at Cingari Family Markets, and Global Marketing Innovation Award to IFPA Australia-New Zealand's "Fruit and Veggies Yummy Yummy" collaboration with The Wiggles. Whitacre also presented crystal light bulb trophies to PRODUCE BUSINESS' 10 Innovation Awards winners and the Joe Nucci Award for best innovation to Giorgio Fresh for its Grill Packs.

After the breakfast, New York State Agriculture and Markets Commissioner Richard Ball and other dignitaries cut the ribbon that opened the doors to the trade show floor. Thousands poured in to network, to learn about new trends on the Industry Insights stage and get a glimpse of all the produce on display.

Other activities included the invitation-only Consumer Media Lunch and the signature Buyer-Connect program, which puts key decision-makers in touch with vendors in pre-arranged, one-on-one meetings.

When the trade show ended, City Harvest volunteers gathered more than 30 tons of fresh produce donated by exhibitors to be redistributed to food pantries and into the hands of those in need.

## DAY THREE

The final day gave guests the chance to explore two unique options — industry tours around the New York metropolitan area and the Ideation Fresh Foodservice Forum.

The three tours were highlighted by a variety of key retail and wholesale stops:

- **In the Bronx:** Hunts Point Terminal Market
- **In Manhattan:** Trader Joe's, Whole Foods Market, Wegmans and the Oculus.
- **In Philadelphia:** Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market and Sprouts Market

## SAVE THE DATE!

Mark your calendar for next year's New York Produce Show and Conference: Dec. 2-4, 2026.



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## Foundational Excellence Program Speaks to Future Fresh Produce Leaders

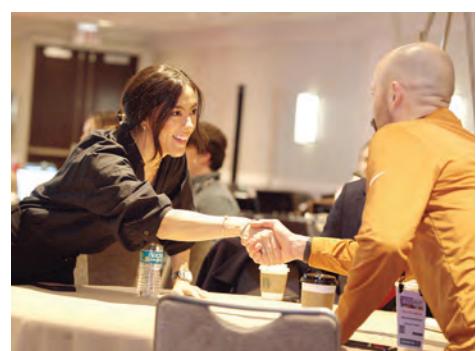
"An MBA in the fresh produce industry in a day," is how Ken Whitacre of Phoenix Media, co-host of the New York Produce Show and Publisher of PRODUCE BUSINESS, described the one-day Foundational Excellence Program led by Cornell University professors.

**Miguel Gómez**, professor, Cornell University, opened with international trade and key sector pressures. Small groups cited rising input and logistics costs, H-2A challenges, weather and water constraints, inflation, and the need to communicate value better.

Discussion also covered flat U.S. per-capita consumption, limited brand differentiation, and uneven effects of private label. Four Star Mushrooms' **Joe Weber** stressed consumer education, while Naturipe Farms' **Ryan Reilly** highlighted expanding AI applications.

In the marketing session, **Brad Rickard**, professor, Cornell University, emphasized the Four Ps and highlighted wins, such as Cuties and Cotton Candy grapes. Breakout groups examined shelf-life improvements, social media outreach, and labor-saving tools that could redirect focus to merchandising. YY Fruits' **Justin Leis** discussed nutrient-fortified GMO varieties, and University of Georgia agribusiness major **Kala Ogletree** noted strong health marketing potential and food waste considerations.

**Aaron Adalja**, professor, Cornell University, described how veg-forward cuisine continues to gain ground, especially with





Gen Z. He noted that 49% of consumers prefer vegetable substitutions and 36% want extra vegetables added instead of plant-based analogs (Mintel 2025) — momentum reflected in bowls, shareable snacks, sauces, beverages and breakfast formats.

A young professionals panel, moderated by **Cynthia Haskins**, New York Apple Association, emphasized relationship-building, networking and AI awareness. Cleveland Kitchen's **Tyler Schneider** summed it up: "People are never going to stop eating."

The page features four large squeeze bottles of garlic paste (blue), ginger paste (orange), mix ginger garlic paste (green), and minced garlic (red). Below them are smaller jars of garlic and ginger products. The text reads: "Enhance your dish with our garlic and ginger squeeze bottles and jars. They will revolutionize your cooking process. These squeeze bottles and jars are not only a time saver but also a space saver, with their compact design perfect for any kitchen. Experience the ease, freshness and exceptional flavor they bring to your cooking." Contact information: 610.869.4664, Sales@ILoveProduce.com, www.ILoveProduce.com. The I Love Produce logo is in the bottom right.

The page has a dark green background with a repeating leaf pattern. The text reads: "Pepper is Built for Produce Distribution. Pepper brings your orders online so you can share new arrivals and sell surplus before it spoils." It features a mobile phone screen showing a catalog of items: Celery (Organic sleeves | 50 ct case), Strawberries (Organic | 8 ct case | 1 lb), Potatoes (Fresh Russet potatoes | 50 lb), and Tomatoes. Each item has a green plus sign button. To the right is a QR code with a green play button icon. The text "LEARN MORE" and the website "www.usepepper.com" are at the bottom.



# Global Trade Symposium Spotlights Tariffs, Logistics Strains and Seed Innovation

**Miguel Gomez**, professor, Cornell University, opened the Global Trade Symposium and spoke on the global trends in international trade of fresh produce, noting the fresh produce industry is the "most exciting and challenging" right now.

## POLITICS AND PRODUCE

In the first session, Politics and Produce, panelists included **Chuck Zeutenhorst**, vice president of sales and marketing, FirstFruits Farms; **Fernando Cruz Morales**, chief executive, Grupo Comercial Terroir del Valle; **Jessie Capote**, chief executive, J&C Tropicals; **John Pandol**, director of special projects, Pandol Bros.; and **Ron Lemaire**, president, Canadian Produce Marketing Association. The discussion was moderated by **Tom Stenzel**, principal of The Stenzel Group.

The panel focused on the impacts of tariffs. Capote notes that at J&C Tropicals, the priority is ensuring tariffs do not interfere with business, emphasizing "the two most important things to us are consumers and growers."

Lemaire urges a broader view of tariff impacts, pointing out that duties on Chinese materials affect multiple parts of the supply chain, including packaging. Morales highlighted Mexico's global position, noting the country holds a 26% surplus. He warned that U.S. prices could rise by 30%, while Mexican production may fall by 12%.

Pandol compared tariffs to any other cost added to the system, while Zeutenhorst raised concerns about labor instability. He explained that in 2023, 99% of returns on Washington apples went to labor and criticized the inconsistency of the H-2A program. "This inconsistency is my concern in the upcoming negotiations."

Capote closed with a strategic perspective: Stronger companies will adapt and rise to the moment, but "my biggest worry is the losers we'll start seeing coming down the pike."

## NAVIGATING TURBULENCE IN TRANSPORTATION & LOGISTICS

Maintaining the cold chain and ensuring timely deliveries of fresh produce has become increasingly difficult. Labor shortages, tariffs, smaller harvests, extreme weather and shifting trade routes are forcing importers to adapt quickly. This session explored the strategies companies are using — and planning — to strengthen supply chain resilience.



Panelists included **Florent Philippot**, ZGroup USA LLC; **Jai Thakrar**, chief executive, Jalaram Fruit; **Mike Laws**, president, Laws Logistics; and **Tony Martinez**, managing member, Primo Trading Services. **Anthony Serafino**, chief executive, EXP Group, moderated the panel.

Martinez emphasized the ongoing challenges at the border, noting, "We need to tackle and address every border issue."

Thakrar pointed to significant congestion at South American ports, explaining that demand is outpacing port capacity: "The ports can't keep up." Serafino added that U.S. port technology lags that of other countries.

Martinez says his company monitors every port closely to understand the shifts in consumer demand, calling McAllen and Pharr, TX, the top-performing U.S. ports at the moment.

"Collaboration is everything, and we are behind as an industry," says Serafino, with Philippot agreeing. "We need to work together to make that happen."

## SEEDS OF CHANGE

In the Seeds of Change session, panelists discussed the creativity, characteristics and new variety development of seeds, from ideation to marketing, and ultimately, positioning in stores.



Panelists included **Amanda Knauff**, vice president of NE sales, Taylor Farms; **Ernst van Eeghen**, vice president of business development, Church Brothers; **Jenny Maloney**, strategic accounts manager, Bayer Crop Science; and **Uri Krieger**, global head of R&D, vegetable seeds and flowers, Syngenta. **Craig Carlson**, chief executive, Carlson Produce Consulting, was the moderator.

Krieger noted the real complexity lies in the food chain itself, with each segment approaching sustainability in its own way. He warned that new pathogens are emerging at unprecedented rates.

Van Eeghen emphasized the industry's focus must remain on yield and quality. "We're not adding acreage," he says. "Disease pressure and environmental stress are rising. Plant diseases are increasing. We need to work with breeders to strengthen genetics as much as possible."

Knauff pointed to labor as a major concern, using iceberg lettuce as an example. Her team asked whether there was a better way to handle it. "You have to think about the future," she says. "We have automation, but in some cases, the process hasn't caught up yet."

Maloney stressed the need for industrywide collaboration, and Knauff agreed, highlighting the value of consumer insights. "We want people to come to fresh first."

## MARKETING OF EXPORTS

In the Marketing of Exports panel discussion, moderated by **Manuel Michel** of the Colombia Avocado Board and including **Kim Breshears** of Potatoes USA, **Anne Warden** of the American Pecan Council, **Jennifer Olmstead** of California Walnuts, **Danielle Coco** of the Southern United States Trade Association, **CarrieAnn Arias** of USA Pears, **Monica Moreno Arellano**, Grupo PM, and **Kevin Hamilton** of the North American Blueberry Commission, commitment became a critical consideration.

Hamilton says two goals are foremost: growing demand and the imperative to "connect buyers and sellers."

Along those lines, Moreno Arellano says, communication is important, but it goes two ways. A key to success is developing a deep familiarity with an export market, and not just in terms of numbers, but a real understanding of both consumers and business partners.

Breshears makes the point that international competition requires constant attention as to where and how to approach exporting. China and India, for example, are producing more potatoes for export. "They're messing things up for us."

Arias says it is important to spend some money maintaining relations in export markets even when the U.S. players can't service them, so that moving product to them when available isn't a matter of starting from scratch.

California walnuts are up against the abundant production in China, and that caused some market share loss when a smaller crop occurred, says Olmstead. Still, California Walnuts keeps pushing, working with those sources for export support available, calling USDA Foreign Agricultural Service support "crucial," but also taking



a position in international markets that emphasizes the quality the Golden State can provide.

## MARKETING OF IMPORTS

In the last session, The Marketing of Imports, **Vic Savanello** of Katzman Distribution hosted a panel that included **Columbia Avocado's Michel**, **John Papp** of Jac Vandenberg, **Kim Chackal** of Equifruit, and **Rodrigo Torres** of Altar Produce.

Savanello noted that a lot goes into gaining traction in the U.S. marketplace, from developing effective packaging, marketing and merchandising support that spotlights authenticity, and the advantages of the products from beyond regions outside of the U.S. Yet, storytelling is a way to connect a product and U.S. consumers.

For Chackal, getting Equifruit's story across means grabbing the attention of consumers in a way that breaks through their usual habits, what she refers to as "disruptive marketing."

Torres says Altar approaches the marketplace a little differently than other companies on the panel, which have been working to make inroads against strong, established competition. "We are the largest grower and marketer of asparagus worldwide," he says, but adds that the company must remain dynamic, avoid complacency, and make sure its message is getting heard where opportunity presents itself.

The Colombia Avocado Board has developed a marketing campaign that's focused on how the fruit it promotes is produced, taking in the country, the landscape, and the growers, as well as the passion and the care involved in bringing the product to the market.

Although Papp says Vandenberg's work with packaging, logos, and concise messaging are critical marketing elements, the company has a broader determination to maintain an identity, which is especially critical in reaching Gen Z and Millennial consumers who "want to find a friend in that brand, something they can relate to, share their values with."



The invitation-only Rising Star Reception, Dec. 2, honored the 2025 class of 40 Under 40 award winners. The reception was sponsored by **MIXTEC Group** and **D'Arrigo New York**.

Held in the Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel, Metropolitan Ballroom, in advance of the opening cocktail reception, the celebration included current award winners, individuals recognized in previous years, as well as family and friends.

To nominate someone for next year's class of 40 Under 40 leaders, email [editor@producebusiness.com](mailto:editor@producebusiness.com).

The New York Produce Show opening cocktail reception at the Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel was the place for old friends, new acquaintances and industry colleagues to connect and celebrate. People from around the globe mingled, and the conversations and networking made it an evening to remember.

The opening cocktail reception was sponsored by **Famous Software**, **Mission Produce** and **Pepper**.







## Keynote Breakfast: Power of Recognition & Insight

A who's who of fresh produce industry leaders attended the NYPS Opening Keynote Breakfast. South Carolina Agriculture Commissioner **Hugh Weathers**, architect of Certified SC Grown, opened by singing the national anthem. Weathers also earned a standing ovation upon receiving the PRODUCE BUSINESS Lifetime Achievement Award.

**Thomas Cingari Jr.**, vice president of produce and floral at Cingari Family Markets, was named PRODUCE BUSINESS 2025 Merchandiser of the Year for store renovations and display strategies that reinforce freshness and drive sales. "Thank you to PRODUCE BUSINESS and the entire Wakefern produce division, who provide us with the resources to put our passion to work," says Cingari.

The 2025 Joe Nucci Award for Product Innovation was presented to Giorgio Fresh for its Grill Packs, while IFPA Australia-New Zealand's "Fruit and Veggies Yummy Yummy" collaboration with The Wiggles received the Global Marketing Innovation Award. David and Jonah Stillman of GenGuru closed the program by examining how Baby Boomers through Gen Z influence today's workforce and consumer behavior.



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PRODUCE BUSINESS / JANUARY 2026 / 31







In its third year at the New York Produce Show, the **Buyer-Connect** program gives retailers and vendors a chance to meet during the trade show, enhance relationships, and plan together for the year ahead.

The two-hour program, held at the end of the trade show, also paired university students with buyers this year. This gave the students a chance to get a first-hand look at the buyer-vendor exchange.

Sponsors of the Buyer-Connect program included Pabellon de Mexico, Altar Produce, Procomer/Essential Costa Rica, Sev-Rend, Avo Fans, California Endive Farms, EV Produce, Fox Packaging & Fox Solutions, Fresh Farms, Kings River Packing, Marengo Foods Company, Mid-State Produce, Nature's Finest Produce, Pro Ecuador, Russo Farms, San Jorge Produce, Topline Farms, United Apple Sales, Vick Family Farms and Villamex Farms.

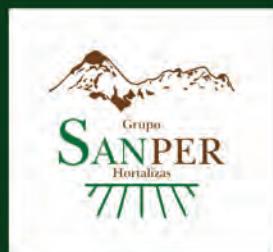




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## PB DAY 2: GRAZING CARTS

New chef-sponsored grazing carts were located in the Central Park section of the trade show floor at the Javits Center, Dec. 3.

New York State Department of Agriculture, California Walnut Commission, CMI Orchards, Gem Pack Berries, Giorgio Fresh, California Endive Farms and F&S Fresh Foods all had chef-sponsored grazing carts.

Surrounded by exhibitors and attendees, the chefs constructed large platters on boards for attendees to sample.



# Pure Elegance, Pure Health: The Culinary Secret of the Endive

## The Radiance of Nutrition

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the endive is a nutritional powerhouse wrapped in delicate leaves. It is a "pure health" champion for three key reasons:

**Digestive Wellness:** High in fiber and containing inulin, it acts as a natural digestive aid.

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**The Ultimate Detox:** With zero fat, it is the perfect ally for those seeking a light yet satisfying culinary experience.

## A Symphony of Flavors

The true magic of the endive lies in its evolution on the palate. While its crisp, raw leaves provide a refreshing, slightly bitter crunch—perfect as a chic edible spoon for appetizers—the application of heat transforms it entirely. When roasted or caramelized, the endive's natural sugars emerge, softening its bite into a buttery, nutty delicacy that pairs beautifully with toasted walnuts, aged cheeses, or a drizzle of balsamic reduction.

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# From Organics to Food Waste: Industry Insights Take Stage

Four educational sessions were spotlighted on the Javits Center trade show floor. Each topic featured a panel of industry leaders, who shared their insights.

Organic produce remains the front door to the category — and it's still pulling in shoppers. Moderator **Adrienne Messe**, with the Organic Trade Association, cited the *2025 Organic Market Report*, which showed 5.2% growth, more than double total store sales, with produce representing 30% of organic sales and often a shopper's first organic purchase.

Panelist **Danelle Huber**, senior marketing manager at CMI Orchards, described how grower-owned investments have expanded organic apples, pears, and cherries despite rising costs. **Eric Mitchens**, director of organic/specialty at D'Arrigo New York, pointed to strong growth in berries and broader grower participation. Wakefern's produce category manager, **Noelle Neary**, emphasized education and collaboration to support pricing and expand organic penetration.

Keeping edible food out of the waste stream depends on how well partners plan and act. Moderated by **Garland Perkins**, founder and principal of Fresh Endeavors Consulting, the session brought together leaders from the food rescue, distribution, and sustainability sectors. Food Bank for New York City's **Bob Silvia** described same-day recovery supplying 780 agencies, while City Harvest's **Carlos Rodriguez** cited nutrition education and a 400-partner network.

Sharing Excess founder **Evan Ehlers** highlighted technology, tax credits, and granular tracking; CPMA's **Dan Duguay** pointed to research, policy, and directing food to its highest possible use; and **Stevie Shandler** of Shapiro-Gilman-Shandler emphasized tightening SOPs to prevent last-mile rejections.

During the session "Going For Brokers: Why Having a Knowledgeable Partner Is Key To Success," **Paul Kneeland** of Elevated Foods hosted a panel including **Brian Maguire**, executive vice president of produce at JOH, Billerica, MA; **Chris Hill**, chief revenue officer, Little Leaf Farms, Devens, MA; and **Christina Stipe**, director of produce at Northeast Shared Services/Price Chopper/Market 32, Schenectady, NY.



The panel acknowledged that the market is challenging when it comes to everything from staffing to consumer demand to dealing with environmental considerations, but that open and supportive relationships can help keep things moving positively.

Hill commented that brokers can help suppliers and retailers stay connected, saying, "It starts, in my opinion and our team's opinion, with the consumer. We really strive on finding a partner who can be an extension of our company."

Maguire said that, as the business of the brokerage has evolved, JOH has increasingly gotten into analytics. "We're built on relationships, but I think it's so important to have the tools in your toolbox to be successful in all aspects of the business."

In the panel, "Beyond the Pile: How Category Management Drives Produce Growth," **Tom Barnes**, **Julie DeWolf** and **Cara Ammon** of Category Partners pointed to ways companies can distill research and experience using category management principles as a way to effectively optimize operations.

DeWolf, senior vice president of business development, said she has seen research and marketing done in the category management context to enhance optimization. "Through category management, you can do comparisons and understand the competitive landscape to see how your competition is priced, if you're at a fair price, and how you might want to make adjustments."

# Targeting NextGen at NYPS Media Lunch

A select group of 50 consumer media and influencers explored trends and opportunities presented by NextGen, particularly Gen Z and Alpha, at a private luncheon, Dec. 3. Attending the event were top journalists and dietitians from lifestyle magazines, social media, radio, news services and TV.

**Stefanie Katzman** of wholesaler S. Katzman Produce welcomed the group, setting the stage for the NextGen topic. **Belinda Wilson**, managing director of IFPA Australia-New Zealand, made a brief appearance with Dorothy the Dinosaur to discuss their consumption promotion campaign with The Wiggles.

Generational experts **David and Jonah Stillman** provided a foundation of facts related to the generations and led a thought-provoking Q&A with attendees. **Katie Calligaro**, director of marketing and communications at The Foundation for Fresh Produce in Newark, DE, discussed key research and actionable steps for reaching NextGen.

Sponsoring companies included Dole Fresh Fruit, Fresh Gourmet Company, SnapDragon and RubyFrost Apples (Crunch Time Apple Growers), California Walnuts and Katzman Produce.

**Jessica Wells** from Crunch Time Apple Growers shared how they are connecting with NextGen and brought the SnapDragon mascot for an appearance. **Jennifer Olmstead** of California Walnuts conveyed the new perception of walnuts and how the product is growing in usage applications. Culinary expert **Jill Overdorf** of The Produce Ambassador walked attendees through a guided four-bite Winter Tasting Experience, showcasing sponsors' products.



DAY 2: STUDENT PROGRAM **PB**

# Student Program Inspires Future Leaders in Produce

The annual student program was also held during the trade show, Dec. 3. The hour-long program brought together more than 45 students and professors from Cornell University, University of Georgia, Rutgers University and St. Joseph's University. Panelists included **Rick Feighery** of Procacci Brothers, Philadelphia, PA; **Renata Vargas Alvarez** of Walmart, Mexico City, Mexico; and **Leslie Simmons** of Fair Trade USA, Oakland, CA.

Each panelist spoke about their backgrounds, which illustrate a variety of paths into the fresh produce industry. Simmons says when she first started working at her family's

business, she never imagined she would leave. "Never burn a bridge because you never know when you will be working with them."

Vargas Alvarez, now a produce director at Walmart, encouraged the students to ask questions. "You can ask, and get something really good. Have courage."

Feighery advised students to advocate for themselves. "When you find the right company, take any job you can there, and keep busy, keep moving."

All three panelists emphasized the importance of mentorship and relationship-building in the produce industry.





# Inside the Ideation Fresh Foodservice Forum

The 2025 NYPS Ideation Fresh Foodservice Forum debuted an immersive format that moved beyond ballroom presentations to hands-on, culinary-centered learning.

More than 40 industry participants traveled to two New York City landmarks: De Gustibus Cooking School at Macy's and the James Beard House in Greenwich Village. Conceived and hosted by **Jill Overdorf** of The Produce Ambassador, the forum centered on how produce performs in real foodservice environments.

The morning at De Gustibus paired trend analysis with insights on digital influence, led by Menu Matters president, **Maeve Webster**, and vice president, **Mike Kostyo**. Sessions highlighted produce as a practical entry point for global flavors, menu differentiation, and consumer comfort, while also addressing how predictive AI on social platforms increasingly shapes menu visibility and purchasing behavior. The discussion underscored the importance of balancing technology with culinary judgment and human creativity.

A chef-led tasting from Roland Foods showed how shelf-stable global ingredients can work alongside fresh produce to support consistent, labor-efficient execution. The day concluded at the James Beard House with a plant-forward vegan menu prepared by **Chef Shenarri Freeman**, reinforcing the forum's core takeaway: Produce education is most effective when experienced firsthand.







# Three Fresh Produce Industry Tours Visit Philadelphia, Manhattan and Hunts Point

During the last day of the NYPS, Dec. 4, participants could select one of three Fresh Produce Industry Tours when registering for the show and conference. All bus tours departed from the Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel.

## PHILADELPHIA WHOLESALE AND RETAIL TOUR

Attendees of the NYPS enjoyed a tour of the fully enclosed and refrigerated Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market (PWPM). Tour participants included grower/shippers, association representatives and wholesalers.

**Christine Hofmann**, PWPM marketing coordinator, welcomed the group to the state-of-the-art facility. After sharing the main characteristics of the innovative facility, Hoffman led the group on a walking tour of the wholesale concourse of the fully refrigerated, 700,000 square-foot facility.

The group visited the front sales showrooms, as well as the coolers of various PWPM merchants. They also had the opportunity to view a ripening room and hear about the ripening process with **Mark Levin** of M. Levin & Co.

After the wholesale market, the participants visited a Sprouts Market in Philadelphia before returning to New York City.

## MANHATTAN RETAIL TOUR

More than 40 tour participants took part in the Manhattan retail tour. Stops included



three supermarket retailers: the Chelsea neighborhood Trader Joe's, 675 Sixth Ave.; the Union Square Whole Foods Market, 4 Union Square East; and Astor Place Wegmans, 770 Broadway.

The tour also gave participants a chance to walk around the 9/11 Memorial Plaza and The Oculus. Attendees had lunch in The Oculus at one of several eateries that put fresh produce on the menu — including Eataly, Sweetgreen, Pret a Manger, Gansevoort Liberty Market and Devon & Blakely.

## HUNTS POINT TOUR

The Hunts Point Produce Market tour in the Bronx, NY, offered a behind-the-scenes look at New York City's produce wholesalers. Hunts Point is the New York City area's hub for fresh produce, with a history going back more than 200 years. The market today spans over 1 million square feet. Hunts Point is the largest market in the U.S., with more than 30 firms calling it home.

The lunch at the end of the tour provided time for a Q&A.



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# Specialty Citrus Invites Shoppers to Explore

Familiar flavors, new varieties, and strategic merchandising make specialty citrus an exciting category.

BY MIKE DUFF

**W**hether going out to eat or visiting the supermarket, consumers are ready for new eating experiences, something specialty citrus can satisfy.

Although consumers are wary about trying foods that are unfamiliar, specialty citrus has advantages because it's a familiar class of fruits, with a range of flavors. Specialty citrus can prompt consumers to think about trying new items, too. So, the combination of nutrition, new flavor experience, and convenience can make a Satsuma orange the first step toward making bolder choices.

Introducing specialty citrus as the key season approaches in late fall can signal to customers that more is on the way, says Vince Mastrommauro, director of produce operations at Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL. He begins with Halos, then Cara Caras and heirloom navels.

"The next question is always, 'When will the Sumos come?'"

Texas grapefruits and stem-and-leaf mandarins follow, with the mandarins receiving a bit of special attention. "We bag them up in a clear tote bag," says Mastrommauro, "and we put it out on display. It really pops. We're able to promote that and not do anything with the price."

## SPARK SHOPPERS' INTEREST

Mastrommauro says introducing new items to consumers in the specialty citrus category can yield immediate sales, as well as foster an openness to trying new things.

He also points out that the shoulder period — when winter merchandising stretches into spring, but before stone fruit and berries are fully available — can be a challenging time to create excitement in the produce department. However, featuring specialty items that fall outside core citrus or everyday produce can help spark interest and add a welcome sense of discovery for shoppers.

Information is important, he cautions. Unfamiliar items need promotional support that attracts and educates.

Mastrommauro says a new favorite is the Kishu mandarin out of Georgia. "There was a buzz for a few weeks when they had it," he says, also pointing to "the new seedless lemons from Wonderful. That's been a new way of adding value to the citrus category."

Aside from the occasional greenhouse-grown lemon, Argus Farm Stop in Ann Arbor, MI, doesn't stock citrus, as it's completely focused on locally grown fruits and vegetables. However, during summer, Argus rolls out pawpaws, a locally grown fruit with a tropical flavor.

Dani Cavagnaro, manager of produce at Argus Farm Stop, says



Sumo citrus draws shoppers into the specialty citrus category, pairing sweetness and easy-to-peel convenience with the familiarity of citrus. PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

pawpaws appeal to consumers who are expanding their fruit palate and want a tangy fruit that has an exotic flavor. "People love them," she says. "We have a high customer demand for them. We have to start waitlisting people when we get them in."

## THE SPECIALTY LINEUP

The specialty citrus category has a big range. According to Jim Cutsinger, of International Citrus and Produce, Burlingame, CA, specialty citrus "generally includes Murcott tangerines, Orri tangerines, Satsumas, Cara Cara navels, blood oranges, specialty grapefruits, key lime varieties, Meyer lemons to a degree, Minneolas, kumquats, finger limes and newer branded tangerines, such as Autumn Honey and Juicy Crunch."

"Consumers are continually looking for new ways to add variety to their fruit choices," adds Sarah Deaton, director of marketing, Sun Pacific, Pasadena, CA. "Being able to provide new flavor experiences within the citrus category is key to keeping the category fresh and getting consumers to buy more citrus."

Rodrigo Lazo, sourcing and grower liaison, Seald Sweet, Vero Beach, FL, points out that innovation remains a key to specialty citrus. "Our company is currently working with Leanri, a variety we commercialized," he says. "In terms of maturity, Leanri sits between early-season clementines and late-season mandarins, yet maintains the desirable characteristics of a true mandarin. It is considered an



Specialty citrus brings color, flavor and discovery to the produce department, offering shoppers familiar fruits with new taste experiences.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

'easy peeler,' and like Tango and Orri, it is seedless, attributes that continue to drive consumer trial and repeat purchases."

Although Leanri mandarins are still in a development phase, early performance is promising, says Lazo, with strong internal quality, good Brix levels, and "a flavor profile that positions it as a differentiated option within the easy-peeler category. We believe it has the potential to carve out its own identity."

Cutsinger says the major drivers of specialty citrus growth, and qualities that are important to feature in merchandising and promotion, include flavor and sweetness, health benefits, convenience and snacking, and ease of consumption.

Curiosity drives many specialty citrus purchases. At Frieda's, Los Alamitos, CA, specialty citrus and related categories are positioned and, at times, repositioned to intrigue consumers. Such was the case with finger limes, which it rebranded as Citrus Caviar. In working with specialty produce, Frieda's keeps in mind that playing to consumer inquisitiveness is important, especially in combination with other critical attractors, such as healthfulness and convenience, all of which address lifestyle considerations.

#### ON-RAMP TO MORE RINGS

Specialty citrus matches trending consumer demand for healthier snacks and better-for-you convenience foods. "The rise of mandarins was the on-ramp," says Alex Jackson, vice president of sales and marketing for Frieda's. "Once shoppers got used to citrus in snacking formats, they were primed to explore popjoys, limequats, mandarinquats, and other fun, bite-sized varieties."

Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing at Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA, says retailers can radiate beyond citrus basics that are traditionally popular to draw more eyes to the larger category, particularly among younger consumers.

"Our core winter commodities include navel oranges, lemons, California mandarins and grapefruit," says Howard. "These mainstays are available in both conventional and organic options and remain strong sellers across age groups. At the same time, younger shop-

#### WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Being able to provide new flavor experiences within the citrus category is key to keeping the category fresh and getting consumers to buy more citrus."**

Sarah Deaton, Sun Pacific, Pasadena, CA

- **"Our latest consumer insights show that Sunkist Cali Mandarins are no longer just a kid-focused fruit. More Millennial and Gen Z shoppers are turning to mandarins as a fresh, snackable solution that fits their busy lifestyles, proving that this variety delivers broad household appeal well beyond the lunchbox."**

Cassie Howard, Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA

pers are gravitating toward varieties that offer more flavor, function and story, like Cara Caras and blood oranges, both of which saw double-digit year-over-year volume growth this past season."

Cutsinger agrees certain products have propelled the specialty citrus category.

"Murcott tangerines in particular have fueled category growth," he says. "We have seen they've introduced many consumers to higher-flavor citrus and helped drive interest in other specialties. As shoppers get used to segmented citrus sets and branded flavor profiles, they're more willing to try varieties outside the traditional orange and grapefruit offerings."

Right now, Cutsinger characterizes Murcott tangerines, including W. Murcott and Honey Murcotts, as niche, but rising into greater prominence. Other fast-growing specialty citrus items, in addition to Orri tangerines and Autumn Honey tangerines, include Crunch tangerines, among the newer premium Florida varieties. He added that Cara Cara navels are enjoying steady mainstream growth and that

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blood oranges are getting a lift from culinary use and social-media spotlighting. In addition, Texas/Rio grapefruits have lately been stepping up as strong winter performers.

Cutsinger says such items appeal broadly, but especially to certain shoppers. "The top specialty citrus shopper is engaged in produce overall, willing to pay for flavor and

quality, and often health-focused," he says. "Families drive a lot of tangerine volume. Demand is strongest on the West Coast, Southwest, and major Northeast metros where retailers promote the category aggressively."

Deaton says Sun Pacific is also high on Orri oranges. "Known for their golden-orange hue and smooth, easy-to-peel skin,

Orris are grown in ideal Mediterranean-like climates where warm days and cool nights help concentrate their natural sweetness. We're gaining some great traction with this variety with consumers who are loving its unique flavor underpinned by its exceptional balance of sweetness and acidity."

#### BUILD SALES

As specialty citrus varieties win broader popularity among consumers, opportunities to build sales grow.

"When we look at more exotic specialties, Sumo-type citrus has gained attention," says Lazo. "Also, pomelo is showing steady growth as consumers become more familiar with its flavor and versatility. These trends illustrate how dynamic the specialty citrus segment has become."

"Success today depends on consistent eating quality, clear differentiation and a strategic supply window. As consumers grow more comfortable exploring beyond traditional citrus, varieties that offer convenience, flavor and reliability are well-positioned to lead the next stage of growth."

Specialty citrus is broad enough to offer something for just about everyone.

Deaton says some shoppers "will be looking for something their family will love, while providing key health benefits; others want something new and exciting to keep them on their journey of health and wellness, and some are just your early adopters/foodies that must try everything that comes out new first. Lucky for us, specialty citrus like Orri mandarin meets a lot of these needs that shoppers are looking for: easy to peel for kids, high in vitamin C and a unique, delicious flavor."

Jackson says Frieda's provides retailers with resources they can use to engage consumers across a range of use occasions. For example, consumers can take Frieda's Citrus Caviar, cut and squeeze the lime to free the tangy bubbles for consumption or use to flavor food or even cocktails.

Addressing cocktail connoisseurs is an opportunity specialty citrus offers, and how many mixologists might look at a flavorful froth as the point of departure for a unique specialty margarita.

"Specialty citrus is where flavor, creativity, and curiosity meet," Jackson says. "It's one of the rare categories where the product practically markets itself. All retailers need is the right assortment and the right storytelling. That's what Frieda's was built for."

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## FROM THE FIELDS TO YOUR TABLE



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Splendid by Porvenir, Nogales, AZ, the U.S. import arm of Grupo Splendid, continues to build momentum in mangos, navigating trade uncertainty, while benefiting from growing global demand and stronger retail partnerships.

PHOTO COURTESY SPLENDID BY PORVENIR

# Optimism and Caution in Nogales

Trade shifts, tariffs, and innovation shape the future of Mexican produce imports.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

As the single largest source of imported fruits and vegetables, Mexico's produce industry is vital to the U.S. supply chain. Nogales, AZ, has long accounted for an outsize share of this import trade — the official City of Nogales site puts the figure at over 37% of annual trade — but lately the region's close-knit produce community has faced some challenges, not the least of which has been the termination of the long-standing Tomato Suspension Agreement in July 2025.

Lance Jungmeyer, president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA), a group that lobbies on behalf of importers and is headquartered in Nogales, says the end of the Suspension Agreement and the imposition of anti-dumping duties have had major consequences for many companies in the region.

Some importers, Jungmeyer says, have had to put business plans on pause with any extra money needed to pay the duties, a process that has required a lot of readjustment. "Most business is based on predictability, but it's been unpredictable, so it's been a tough year," he admits.

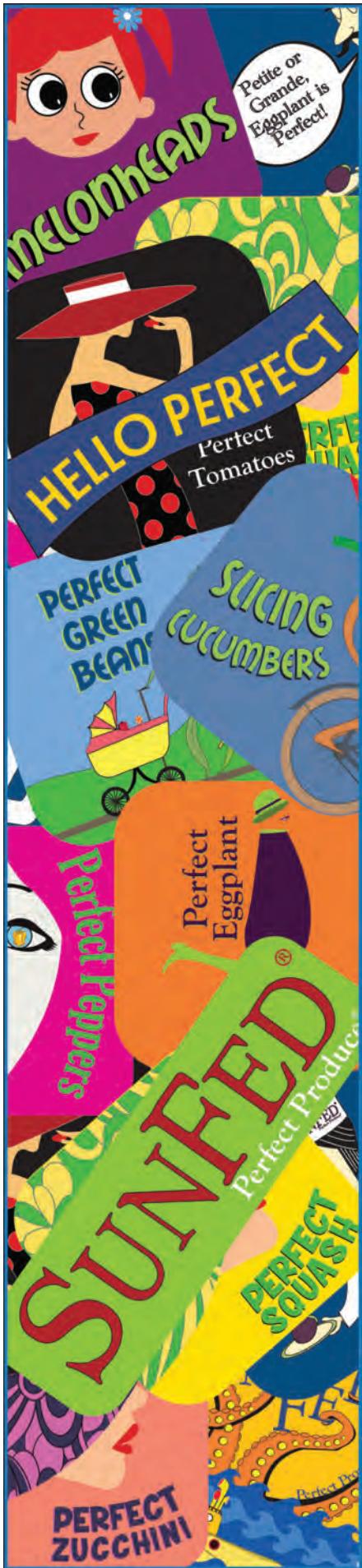
"Whether you are an importer, a distributor, or a retailer, you might have planned for a certain amount of tomatoes this season, but that all changed in July when the duties were put in place. It's really causing some companies to think about getting out of the tomato business and moving into other commodities."

"It has caused everybody to press pause on every aspect of business development. If you are in the tomato business, you have to be retaining monies to pay the duties, which is a whole different calculation for people."

At the same time, Jungmeyer says the current precarious state of the economy has led to less demand in grocery stores and less economic activity, as shoppers prioritize the essential over what might be considered non-essential purchases. The result, he continues, has been a 5% to 10% reduction in demand, which has caused "huge problems" for many in the industry.

"In stores in the U.S., whether it's meat or dairy, a lot of prices have gone up and people's wages haven't kept pace with that, so they are making tough choices," says Jungmeyer. "We see less demand in grocery stores and less economic activity. Companies had planned for a regular season, and that's not what we're seeing. It's making them a lot more cautious."

Despite this, Jungmeyer says demand for products, like vine-ripe tomatoes, continues to grow, and he says the FPAA remains optimistic about the negotiation of a new deal between the Mexican and U.S. governments.



Fresh Farms, Rio Rico, AZ, highlights its expanding Mexican grape program, featuring premium Bloom Fresh and Sun World varieties.

PHOTO COURTESY FRESH FARMS

#### THE NEW REALITY

Produce House, a Nogales-based company specializing in tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, citrus and other products, experienced the disruption caused by the abolition of the Suspension Agreement firsthand.

Produce House's director of sales and marketing, Raquel Espinoza, says the business had to undergo restructuring as a result of the change, with a view of accommodating new regulations, some of which are yet to be determined.

"It's a new world for us and a new challenge that we're going to be stepping into as we step into our tomato business," she says. "There's no way around it, prices are going to rise, because the moment we need to pay anti-dumping duty against that product, not only will we probably see less production coming in, but the duties will impact pricing. The Anti-Dumping Duty is a quota we need to pay. It's not just a one-time tariff; it's a quota that will determine a future outcome for the tomato industry."

At a consumer level, Espinoza agrees with Jungmeyer that shoppers are buying what they need rather than what they want. "They are just buying the basic, staple items that they need, and not as open to buying other items because of the cost of inflation, and all the ripple effects down the supply chain that makes those prices rise so high."

As a business, Produce House's range of

products runs from slicing cucumbers to different varieties of hardshell, melons and watermelons. The company has also recently introduced a citrus program, encompassing grapefruit and oranges. "Produce House is already diversified, meeting the needs of our buyers. It's also been our policy to be diverse. Not because of what's happening in tomatoes; it's just good business to be able to have different offerings."

Still in its infancy, Produce House's citrus program is expected to grow, and Espinoza anticipates it will become a staple item, drawing on the company's own orchards in Hermosillo, Sonora. "We're still not ready. We're building those programs for the future, probably within the next two years."

Another Nogales-based business with strong ties to Mexico is IPR Fresh, which specializes exclusively in bell peppers and European cucumbers imported year-round through strong partnerships with Mexican growers.

According to IPR President José Luis Obregon, demand has remained solid, but tariff uncertainty has become a major factor. "Even though tariffs were only applied for three days in March 2025, the risk of sudden implementation affects planning and pricing," he says. "Weather shifts also impacted early supplies, and we've focused on strengthening grower relationships to maintain consistency."

Likewise, based in Nogales, Splendid by Porvenir is the U.S. import arm of major Mexican grower Grupo Splendid, focusing

on mangos and sweet corn, among other products.

Splendid by Porvenir's Cindy Schwing says the temporary imposition of tariffs made produce trading "more tenuous and harder to plan long-term." Despite their subsequent removal, she believes the 2026 negotiation of bilateral agreements between Mexico and the U.S. will be "very telling" for future business.

Although headquartered further along the border in McAllen, TX, GR Fresh is similarly a major importer of a range of Mexican-grown products, including bell peppers, eggplant, cucumber, zucchini, yellow squash and tomatoes. GR's vice president of sales and marketing, Tony Incaviglia, says their tomato season is now in full swing with a good rhythm of production from Sonora and Sinaloa, which is expected to increase into the spring.

Saying that, he believes duties "and other restraints" on tomatoes are likely to have an impact, citing projections which forecast a decrease in plantings by as much as 35-38% during 2026. Another contributing factor, Incaviglia continues, is the expected rise in growing costs on top of the new tomato import duties.

## THE EVOLUTION OF IMPORTS

In such trade conditions, Alan Aguirre, chief marketing officer for Divine Flavor, argues the first people to lose are the consumers, followed by growers, and then the retailers. However, he says Divine Flavor's retail clients are doing a good job to help the company and others like it to endure until the situation stabilizes.

Divine Flavor has focused on weathering the uncertain times by strengthening its production resources and grower base. As well as drawing on volumes from Jalisco between March and May, followed by Sonora from May to July, the company works with growers in Peru (November-January), Chile (January-March), and California (August-October/November).

The effect, says Aguirre, is that Divine Flavor can guarantee 12-month supplies of red, green and black grapes, which include premium varieties such as Candy Hearts, Candy Snaps and Candy Dreams.

The company is also expanding its central Mexican production — in the states of Querétaro and Guanajuato — to increase its supplies of hothouse cocktail tomatoes and snacking cucumbers during the summer.

Over at Splendid, Schwing says overall business has been steady and growing as the company gains new ground in different markets. "I believe the Splendid brand has

strengthened as we've increased our supply base and had consistent deliveries," she says. "Splendid has had more traction with the chains in promotions as well."

Schwung says Splendid has benefited from "unprecedented growth" in the global mango industry, with new markets opening up. "We've seen an increase in consumer demand, expanded e-commerce channels and an explosion of the processed mango product market."

"The consumer expects to have just about every item in the produce department year-round, which keeps all of us in the industry jumping to be able to provide it," she adds. "With every year, positive changes are implemented and streamlining/improving margins become more and more important."

To this end, Schwung says Splendid is continuing to grow its organic mango plantings, viewing mangos as a lucrative segment that is worth pursuing. "Organically certified mangoes continue to show growth as they command premium prices in the U.S. and Europe."

## MAXIMIZING MEXICAN PRODUCE SALES

To make the most out of sales opportunities for Mexican produce, Schwung recommends "regular, consistent communication" to make sure growers and suppliers time the arrival of volumes to coincide with potential gaps in U.S. production.

## WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"The advances in Mexico have been tremendous, so true partnerships are being sought after to make business transactions more equitable."**

Cindy Schwung, Splendid by Porvenir, Nogales, AZ

- **"People are looking for new ways to bring avocados and guacamole into the market. We are going to see a lot of companies playing around with these innovations, and I think we will continue to see avocados in different places around the store, like delis and desserts."**

Patrick McGinnis, La Bonanza Avocados, Mission, TX

"When importing Mexican produce, buyers must become accustomed to growers who are becoming more and more sophisticated and professional about doing business," she advises. "The advances in Mexico have been tremendous, so true partnerships are being sought after to make business transactions more equitable."



Bell peppers remain a staple of Mexican import programs, with consistent year-round supply and improved quality.  
PHOTO COURTESY DIVINE FLAVOR

Based in Mission, TX, La Bonanza Avocados is the U.S. branch of Aguacates La Bonanza, a company headquartered in Mexico's avocado heartland of Michoacán. Now in its third generation under the management of the Villaseñor family, La Bonanza has been directly exporting avocados to the U.S. for over 25 years, according to director of retail sales Patrick McGinnis.

Although previously focused largely on retail, McGinnis says the company has developed its foodservice business over the last six years to leading restaurant chains, including Chipotle and Taco Bell. "You've probably had our product without even knowing it."

During the past 12 months, La Bonanza has also moved into what McGinnis describes as the "front-facing retail side," working directly with some of the country's biggest grocers. Part of this business includes a range of snacking guacamole-based dips — including Avocado Hummus and Avocado Jalapeño Dip — which has taken the La Bonanza brand onto supermarket shelves.

"Avocados and guacamole have been around a long time, but our biggest opportunity comes from innovation," he says. "We pride ourselves on being diverse and pushing the envelope. It gets buyers excited because these are innovations they haven't seen before."

McGinnis believes that innovation is the most effective way of maximizing the potential of Mexican produce in the U.S. "People are looking for new ways to bring avocados and guacamole into the market," he says. "We are going to see a lot of companies playing around with these innovations, and I think we will continue to see avocados in different places around the store, like delis and desserts."

Located in Rio Rico, AZ, Fresh Farms is the U.S. arm of its Hermosillo, Mexico, parent company of the same name. The business produces, distributes and markets a wide range of products, including table grapes, vegetables and tomatoes. Grapes, in particular, are a well-known item for the company, according to marketing coordinator Ana Romero, who says Fresh Farms is continuing to increase supplies out of Jalisco and Sonora, including new varieties.

Producing Bloom Fresh and Sun World varieties, the company recently introduced a line of frozen grapes, including premium Cotton Candy and Candy Hearts. It will also be offering Mexican-grown tomatoes on a year-round basis.

"Retailers are well-versed in sourcing these items, and we see opportunities only getting better," predicts Romero. "Retailers should consider advertising the winter vegetable items as often as they can during the season, as there is ample supply available most weeks. The quality and condition of the winter vegetable items is excellent and provides a great way to set the departments apart from retailers who don't focus on it."

## RISING COSTS

According to Schwing, drought and water scarcity continue to be factors when sourcing from Mexico, meaning it is highly affected by the weather, market price fluctuations and availability.

While IPR's Obregon acknowledges that tariff unpredictability, rising labor and freight costs, and weather-driven supply changes all form significant challenges, he believes these are tempered by growing opportunities from Mexico's expanding protected agriculture, which is improving on quality, uniformity and season length.

"Growth in greenhouse production has led to more consistent supply, smoother seasonal transitions, and improved shelf life



Headquartered near Nogales, AZ, SunFed delivers fruits and vegetables, pairing innovation with quality and flavor.  
PHOTO COURTESY SUNFED

and appearance for both peppers and European cucumbers," says Obregon.

Obregon expects modest price increases are likely over the next 12-24 months as a result of high labor and transportation costs, although he believes careful planning can help manage the impact.

As a company that receives imports daily from Mexico, Incaviglia says GR Fresh has to deal with a number of ongoing challenges, from exchange rates, which can impact pricing and availability, to the migration of skilled labor to other industries.

New regulations and changes in product standards are also a concern, as is the imposition of tomato import duties and rising production costs.

Despite this, Incaviglia says GR and other importers are benefiting from increasing demand for year-round availability and improved skill levels when it comes to growing technologies. "Mexican growth has increased consumption in the tomato category in this country overall due to those innovative technologies and consumer preferences."

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Viewed as a whole, Nogales' importers benefit from being part of a vibrant business where there is a real interest in the produce arriving from Mexico, says Jungmeyer.

He says the FPAA is also excited about the possibilities offered by the review of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). "We went to a public hearing where our chief executive spoke," he says. "There are some groups in the U.S. who want to put in place protectionist measures, but we point out the great opportunities to be gained through more cooperation between the U.S., Mexico and Canada."

Daniel Ibarra, president of Splendid, predicts continued growth of specific commodities and companies, along with additional mergers and acquisitions.

He believes AI will be at the forefront, driving many of the changes, as well as increasingly common forward contracts and contract production with a view to locking in prices and securing stable revenue.

Obregon predicts continued expansion of protected agriculture in Mexico, given stronger demand for program-driven sourcing, and steady consumption of peppers and European cucumbers. At the same time, he says tariff uncertainty is likely to remain a key variable for the industry.

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# Produce Packaging Innovations Abound

Packaging focuses on sustainability, shelf life and retaining quality.

BY LISA WHITE

The fresh produce industry continues to benefit from new packaging developments. From newer sustainable materials to innovations in preserving shelf life and product quality, manufacturers are unveiling improved options. Consumers reap the rewards of this packaging with added convenience, and retailers are seeing less waste and expanded marketability.

## AUTOMATING PACKING

Europe tends to be one step ahead of the U.S. when it comes to environmentally friendly packaging, but 4HM Solutions, a produce packaging equipment and materials company based in Yakima, WA, seeks to level the playing field. "One of our big things is finding global solutions that haven't made it to the U.S. yet, especially on the automation front," says Brant Carman, West Coast sales manager.

In January 2025, the company brought over the first machine from Italy's Frutmac, which automates produce packaging into sustainable cardboard. Cardboard trays are pulled, stacked and lidded, then glued onto the side of a tray. The technology can package 54 packs of a four-pack of apples in a minute, compared to pouch bags that run 10 or less per minute.

"We're focusing on apples, being from Washington, but looking to expand to citrus, avocados and stone fruit," Carman says.

The company also recently introduced Blue Pearl, a blueberry sorting machine that runs on AI to reduce labor.

For years, Collinsville, IL-based Sev-Rend imported clipping wire cassettes from Europe. But current economic conditions and import tariffs "made it imperative that we invest in the necessary equipment to bring the manufacture of these cassettes in-house," says Rob Williams, president and chief executive.

The recent addition of hot needle and macro perforating equipment has expanded the company's product lines to include microwave steamable FFS films and anti-fog, ventilated lidding films for tomatoes, berries, mushrooms and other high moisture content products.

"We are seeing more companies move toward automation to reduce labor costs, especially with stand-up pouches," says Williams.

Sev-Rend also has modified its stand-up pouch machines to be capable of manufacturing "pouches on a roll" for those that are looking for a domestic source for this style of pouch.

Also new in Q4 2025 was the addition of extruded mesh equipment, says Williams. "We now have the ability to produce high quality mesh in-house."

## EYE TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

With a focus on making clamshell packaging more sustainable, Multisteps, an Australian food packaging company with plants in Fresno and Visalia, CA, developed a technology that allows printing directly onto the packaging, with no separate label required. With



Fox Packaging's signature Fresh Mesh bags provide durable, high-visibility packaging that boosts airflow, protects quality and enhances branding at retail. The McAllen, TX-based company continues to expand flexible film options. PHOTO COURTESY FOX PACKAGING

this process, the surface of the clamshell can be entirely utilized.

"We realized that this brings more sustainability to a clamshell," says Monica Steinberg, director of business development and growth at Multisteps Industries. "We use food-approved inks that are 100% recyclable, which facilitates the recyclability process of clamshells."

Multisteps partnered with Oxnard, CA-based Gem-Pack Berries, which will be the first company launching the new clamshells for its berries in the first quarter of 2026.

"This also eliminates another material in the packaging stream," says Madu Etchandy, senior vice president of operations at Gem-Pack Berries. "And if a brand or label regulation changes, we don't have to worry about excess inventory of outdated labels."

Sinclair, a U.K.- and California-based global provider of automated fresh produce labeling solutions, first launched a certified industrial compostable PLU fruit sticker in 2019 and then its first home compostable PLU fruit sticker in 2021. In October, the company marked the anniversary of its second-generation home compostable fruit label.

"We now have 400+ customers using compostable PLU fruit stickers," says Duncan Jones, Sinclair's senior marketing manager.

The T55 home/industrial compostable fruit sticker is certified to break down and decompose within 365 days. The non-toxic label also meets food safety compliance requirements.

MULTIVAC Group, based in Kansas City, MO, a global supplier of packaging and processing solutions, also recently unveiled several technologies, including the W 500 Flowpacker, a flow-packing system designed for fruits and vegetables.

"It creates neat pillow packs using minimal material and works perfectly with sustainable films and paper-based options," says Rachael Novak, marketing director.

The company also introduced PixelHEAT and PixelSEAL Systems, advanced heating and sealing technologies that help cut film usage by up to 50%, boost energy efficiency and support recyclable mono-materials. Another product, MultiSeal, is a resealable system for thermoforming and flow-pack applications.

"It's great for keeping produce fresh and adding convenience for consumers," Novak notes, "especially ideal for smaller to mid-size production runs."



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MULTIVAC also recently introduced TopWRAP and TopCLOSE Label Closure, which offers plastic-free or reduced-plastic packaging for items like apples and mushrooms. Its sustainable mono-material films and recyclable film solutions are designed for easier recycling (mono-materials) and fiber-based/low-plastic tray alternatives.

### QUALITY AND SHELF-LIFE RETENTION

In addition to sustainability, packaging technology has been developed that retains fresh produce quality and lengthens shelf life.

In 2023, Easypak, a Leominster, MA-based provider of thermo-formed packaging solutions, began exploring long-term, sustainable solutions to a persistent challenge in the fresh-cut fruit category: excess purge that affects product appearance, texture and shelf life. It developed Elevate Freshness, a patent-pending packaging innovation designed to reduce or eliminate the need for soaker pads in fresh fruit clamshells and sealed containers.

"Elevate Freshness works by elevating the product above where the juice collects, improving both presentation and shelf life," explains Troy Hill, director of product development & innovation.

The design features a hexagonal grid base engineered to capture excess moisture, paired with raised islands that hold fruit securely above the liquid. This separation helps maintain color, texture and overall product quality across the full shelf life — performance backed by research conducted in collaboration with Michigan State University.

"This innovation reflects what retailers are looking for: longer-lasting fruit, better presentation, and less material waste," says Brian Smith, Easypak's vice president of sales and marketing.

Fox Packaging, a family-owned flexible packaging manufacturer based in McAllen, TX, specializes in produce packaging that protects product quality, says Aaron Fox, vice president.

One of its newest offerings for the produce category is Fox VertiFilm, a laminated film designed for vertical form-fill-seal applications.

This material is not proprietary and is designed to run on most existing bagging equipment. Gauges and substrates are tailored to specific line and commodity needs, helping optimize both product protection and operational performance. The films support bold graphics while still letting shoppers see the product.

The company offers trial rolls so packers can test Fox VertiFilm on their equipment. It is ideal for apples, avocados, grapefruit, lemons, limes, mandarins, onions, navel and sweet potatoes.

Fox Packaging has also introduced flexible structures with up to 30% post-consumer recycled (PCR) content in select poly, combo and stand-up pouch formats.

Although MAP (Modified Atmosphere Packaging) is not a new technology, it recently has been implemented for use with premixed produce and precut fruit. MAP is a packaging method that uses a controlled atmosphere of gases to extend the shelf life of food products.

"We've seen big success with MAP packaging use in fresh-cut produce, which offers a longer shelf life and higher quality," says Maxwell Remington Krieger, chief operating officer at Dark Side Equipment, headquartered in Denver, CO.

StePac PPC, an Israeli company that's part of Buffalo Grove, IL-based PPC Flexible Packaging, recently introduced the PAZ Stand-up Pouch, the first MAP resealable pouch that controls excess moisture.

According to the company, this patent-pending solution offers a three-in-one approach in a resealable stand-up pouch: modified atmosphere, modified humidity and condensation control.



4HM Solutions, Yakima, WA, has a first-in-the-U.S. machine from Italy's Frutmac, which automates produce packaging into sustainable cardboard. The technology can package 54 packs of a four-pack of apples in a minute.

PHOTO COURTESY 4HM SOLUTIONS

### WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"The goal is for fresh produce packaging to be 100% compostable, recyclable or reusable."**

Duncan Jones, Sinclair, U.K.

- **"We are seeing more companies move toward automation to reduce labor costs."**

Rob Williams, Sev-Rend, Collinsville, IL

At PPC Flexible Packaging, shelf-life extension has always been the focus. "We do a good job in controlling the packaging atmosphere, including the CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> rates to accommodate specific respiration rates," says Joe Bradford, vice president sales, produce.

### PRICING, SUPPLY & MARKETING

"Retailers and consumers are finding ways to minimize waste and expenditures," says Bradford. "We also have to reduce the cost of packaging spend, so we do everything we can to be as efficient and innovative as possible to compete."

Williams at Sev-Rend expects tariffs to continue to impact supply and cost of imported packaging materials.

"As a company, we have focused on bringing previously imported products in-house to help mitigate this," he says. "Pending any unforeseen circumstances, we don't expect any large swings in pricing and availability of domestically produced goods for the foreseeable future."

According to Fox at Fox Packaging, pricing and supply for flexible packaging continue to be influenced by global resin markets, freight and overall demand. "While there is still some movement in costs, our priority is to provide as much stability and predictability as possible for fresh produce packers."

# Momentum Builds for Dates

Demand, snacking and strategic merchandising are positioning dates as year-round opportunity.

BY MIKE DUFF

**D**ates are getting more recognition than ever, with Cognitive Market Research anticipating a 3.7% annual growth rate in North America for the next several years.

Marc Goldman, produce director, Morton Williams Supermarket, Bronx, NY, says consumers are looking for more from produce departments, and, although traditional fruits and vegetables are important, more shoppers are seeking items that they feel are better for them, including dried fruit and nuts, particularly as an alternative to snacks they perceive as unhealthy.

Dates, as merchandised in the produce section, can get a boost from that interest.

Goldman, operating most of his produce departments in Manhattan, has an ethnically diverse customer base that includes a lot of shoppers who normally consume dates, but also supports customers who are interested in healthy eating, as well as new flavor sensations. He says the date merchandising at Morton Williams remains "pretty much the same all year."

Robert Schueller, director of public relations, Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Los Angeles, CA, says the company sees its greatest date sales in the Southeast, West Coast, Southwest and East Coast locations. Food retailers typically merchandise dates "next to other popular dried fruits, including prunes, figs, cranberries, raisins, among other fruits, like mango, banana, papaya, pineapple, and all nut products, shelled and unshelled," he adds.

## SEASONAL AND YEAR-ROUND

"There is high demand for nuts and dried fruit, like dates for cooking, especially from Thanksgiving to Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's," says Schueller. "So, retailers do merchandise special seasonal merchandising bins with an assortment of nuts and dried fruits that are highly popular in the fourth quarter season."

Melissa's sees the majority of date orders falling in the October to December timeframe, as well as in February around Valentine's Day, and in the April/May timeframe for Passover, Easter and Mother's Day. At such times, enhancing the date presentation can address the additional demand and the opportunity that comes along with it.

David Baxter, vice president of sales and marketing, Natural Delights, Yuma, AZ, emphasizes that visibility is the most critical factor in both high- and low-demand markets. "In areas with strong demand, merchandising supports and reinforces existing purchasing behavior. In lower-demand markets, lack of visibility is often the main barrier, so placing dates in more prominent locations creates opportunities for discovery and trial!"

As noted, he says, date sales are strongest during the November



Dates are gaining visibility in produce departments as retailers expand merchandising, seasonal displays and snacking formats. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

and December holiday season, as well as through Ramadan, with both periods continuing to grow year over year.

"Islamic populations view dates as staple ingredients," Scheueller points out, "but it's a multi-cultural item that is attracted by Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and European consumers."

## SNACKING OPPORTUNITY

Amanda Sains-Harris, vice president of marketing, Joolies Dates, Coachella Valley, CA, points out that snacking is an important means to get a wider range of consumers interested in dates.

"We have our Date Pops, little date and walnut bites. The cinnamon bun and lemon pops just launched in Whole Foods nationwide. The distribution on these has increased."

As the company expands into market supermarket chains in the United States, Sains-Harris characterizes Joolies' growth as "our excitement, bringing more dates to the snacking category."

She adds that demand is up significantly right now, so it's time to bring excitement to the category.

## PACKAGING & DISPLAYING

Snack-size packages can have advantages in establishing additional, conspicuous sales points, including at checkout. They can prompt consideration from consumers who might not be traditional date purchasers but who might try a new flavor sensation or something healthier to eat on the go.

"Using more disruptive merchandising, such as spot or satellite displays outside the traditional dried fruit and nut aisle, is particularly effective for capturing attention and introducing the category to new shoppers," says Natural Delights' Baxter. "Ideally, retailers should use a combination of approaches: maintaining consistent placement within the dried fruit set while also incorporating secondary displays to maximize visibility, trial, and overall category growth."

# Sustainability as Leadership in Produce

BY ALEX FRANTZ

I'm calling it now: Food waste reduction, responsible sourcing, and data-driven transparency will define the next era of wholesale produce.

If your immediate reaction is skeptical, I get it. Sustainability has been promised, diluted, rebranded and sidelined. In a tight-margin industry where price often dictates decisions, sustainability is frequently treated as "nice to have." Clients want it, but demand fluctuates. One year, sustainability is a strategic priority; the next year, cost reduction trumps everything else.

But expectations are rising. Clients are asking harder questions about environmental and social performance. New regulations are shaping market access in areas like packaging, EPR, human rights and emissions reporting. Climate change is creating real supply-chain volatility.

Today's pressures are reinforcing the business case for sustainability. That urgency shaped the 2025 IFPA Global Show announcement of a Global Sustainability Framework, a unified blueprint for practical, scalable action across five sustainability pillars: Food Loss/Waste, Sustainable Packaging, Regenerative Agriculture, Social Responsibility and Climate Change.

At Midwest Foods, sustainability is a strategic priority because it reflects who we are and how we operate. As a women-, family-, and locally owned company, our business was built on the belief that relationships, not transactions, come first. Innovative solutions, chef-driven products, and operational excellence are how we honor those relationships. Clients increasingly want to know not just what we deliver, but how we deliver it.

Our sustainability strategy blends what we can operationalize efficiently and profitably with what will drive the greatest long-term impact. Roughly one-third of food grown for human consumption in the United States never reaches a plate. Once in landfill, decomposing food produces methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide.

Wholesalers sit at a critical point in the supply chain where loss prevention and landfill diversion can be leveraged. Following the EPA's Wasted Food Scale, we focus first on preventing waste through inventory precision, handling improvements, forecasting and operational discipline.

When surplus does occur, we prioritize feeding people. Partners like the Chicago Food Sovereignty Coalition ensure donations reach community members across Chicago. In 2024, we diverted 71% of the waste generated at our warehouses through recycling, composting, donations and anaerobic digestion, keeping 3,569 tons of waste out of the landfill.

Our Kenosha food-waste system illustrates how sustainability and efficiency reinforce each other. Creating a dedicated waste stream for scraps from pre-cut production reduced cost, improved worker



safety, and diverted unavoidable waste from landfill. Our Edible Cuts pre-cut program helps chef partners reduce prep waste, increase yield, and manage time and labor more efficiently, especially in operations without composting infrastructure.

Sustainable packaging innovation has been another opportunity for meaningful client impact. We transitioned the majority of break items to biodegradable mesh that decomposes in six months under landfill conditions. Edible Cuts grab-and-go packaging trials expanded across sandwiches, salads, wraps and parfaits, balancing product preservation with plastic reduction and cost considerations.

This year, Midwest Foods became only the second distributor in the nation to join the U.S. Food Waste Pact — aligning our internal systems with client goals and contributing to sector-wide solutions. Through Pact working groups, we collaborate on data standardization and pilot opportunities that strengthen our own systems and support client objectives.

Responsible sourcing is fundamental. We focus on supply-chain development and product availability, building grower relationships, curating seasonal variety, and simplifying procurement, so busy chefs can engage with local, organic, and regenerative options without added complexity.

Local purchasing strengthens regional food economies, shortens transportation distances, and supports supply-chain resilience. Organic and regenerative practices support healthier soils, protect waterways, and reduce synthetic inputs, improving long-term ecosystem health.

For growers, these markets can provide stable demand and better margins. For clients in education, healthcare, and hospitality, they offer differentiated value where quality, transparency, and values-driven purchasing increasingly influence decisions.

Sustainability is becoming part of the baseline for doing business. Requirements now appear in RFPs as routinely as food safety standards. Nearly every major client publishes an annual sustainability report and expects suppliers to provide credible data on Scope 3 emissions, waste reduction, packaging and responsible sourcing. We are seeing a clear uptick in requests for third-party social responsibility assessments, like EcoVadis and Sedex, an indicator that clients want verifiable insights into labor practices, human rights protections, and ethical sourcing, not just environmental metrics.

Sustainability in produce now spans the full spectrum of environmental and social performance, and the market is increasingly demanding proof, not promises.

Sustainability supports supply-chain resilience, reduces long-term risk, and prepares our industry for the regulatory and environmental realities already reshaping global markets. **PB**

*Alex Frantz leads Midwest Foods' local sourcing and sustainability programs, connecting farms with chefs and institutions to build a values-driven food system. She oversees supply chain development, waste reduction, and responsible sourcing initiatives, and serves in leadership roles with Green City Market and multiple regional and national sustainability councils.*

## Sustainability is becoming part of the baseline for doing business.

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# Savoring Foundation Over Trends

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

**A** new year. The board is scrubbed, the knives are sharp, the walk-in is reorganized (at least in our minds), and we get one of the rarest gifts in foodservice: a moment to choose what we will build before the next rush hits.

The builders — growers, suppliers, distributors, operators, culinary teams — are the ones who fortified the foundation when nobody was watching. The ones who understand that produce in foodservice isn't just ingredients. It's a connective chain of timing, temperature, ripeness, labor, yield, trim, shelf-life, menu performance, and whether the line can execute it on a Friday night with a new cook on sauté.



As we step into 2026, I'm heralding four foundational values: connection, consideration, consistency and craveability — with one additional non-negotiable word written across every spec sheet and menu meeting: flavor.

## CONNECTION

In produce, connection is everything: grower to shipper, shipper to distributor, distributor to operator, operator to guest. When those links are strong, produce performs. When they're weak, the product gets blamed for what was likely a communication problem.

Chefs don't fall in love with an item because someone emailed a price list. They fall in love because it tasted like something — because someone explained the variety, the seasonality, the handling, the usage, the shelf-life and the menu placement. Because they were treated like a partner, not a purchase order.

Connection is field walks and tasting tables. It's real conversations about what's working and what isn't.

And internally? Connection is culture. A team that feels seen, trained, and valued performs differently. A staff who understands the product's story and sells it with conviction.

If 2026 is about growth, connection can't be accidental. It must be a conscious decision — like a menu, like a system, like a relationship you plan to keep.

## CONSIDERATION

Consideration and convenience are design principles. They are demonstrations of respect.

It's acknowledging that foodservice is operating inside tighter labor, tighter margins, tighter timelines, and higher expectations than ever. Consideration is produce that shows up in the right spec and the right condition, with predictable yield and clear culinary intent. It's packaging that actually works. It's product that can flex across dayparts without the team doing gymnastics.

When produce is inconvenient, kitchens compensate. They over-trim. They over-season to mask inconsistency. They swap items midservice. They cut items from the menu entirely. When produce delivery is done with consideration, chefs can be chefs again.

## CONSISTENCY

Consistency doesn't get applause, but it earns loyalty. And loyalty is what keeps foodservice alive.

Guests return because the salad they loved tastes like itself again. Because the citrus still pops. Because the greens still have snap. Because the tomato tastes like summer, not like wet cardboard. Because the bowl they crave doesn't fluctuate in texture or flavor from one week to the next.

Consistency is product standards, but it's also honoring systems. It's forecasting that's honest. It's QA that's empowered. It's substitution policies that protect the kitchen and thus, the guest experience. It's a cold chain that doesn't get treated like a suggestion. It's communication that happens to avert a crisis, not after one occurs.

And consistency is culinary discipline: the same cut size, the same hold time, the same dressing ratio, the same finishing salt, the same acid. It's training that becomes muscle memory.

If your produce program is "great when it's great," you don't have a program — you have a lucky streak. Consistency turns luck into leadership.

## CRAVEABILITY

Guests order desire. They order crunch. They order char. They order sweet heat. They order bright acid that makes your mouth water. They order herbs that hit the nose before the fork even lands. They order contrast — hot and cold, creamy and crisp, juicy and smoky.

Craveability is what makes produce win the menu battle — not because it's "good for you," but because it's good. If we want produce to lead in foodservice, then we have to talk about flavor like it's the main event. Because it is.

Flavor is ripeness, variety selection, and time. It's knowing the difference between "available" and "ready." It's respecting seasonality and helping to build menus that flow with it. It's teaching teams how to treat produce like a protein: with technique.

A carrot becomes a headline when it's roasted hard, kissed with chili oil, finished with yogurt and herbs, and served like it deserves the spotlight. A tomato becomes a memory when it's peak-season, salted properly, paired with something creamy and something crunchy, and left alone enough to be itself. Craveability is not complicated. It's intentional.

If you want a better year, stop asking, "What should we add?" and start asking, "What should we strengthen?" Strong systems create consistent execution. Consistent execution creates confidence. Confidence creates repeat business. Repeat business creates stability. Stability gives you the freedom to innovate.

So, here's my challenge to you for the new year: Forget the trends and the predictions. In 2026, let us start with foundational basics: connection, consideration, consistency and craveability. Let's lead with what makes produce unstoppable: flavor that's alive, specific and unforgettable. Let's herald the new year — one delicious decision at a time.

*M. Jill Overdorf is founder and president of The Produce Ambassador, which provides strategic insight, brand development, and innovative solutions for the foodservice, produce, hospitality and culinary sectors.*

# UK Economic Outlook Pessimistic

BY JAMES WALTON

The latest Economic Viewpoint report, "What to Plan For in 2026," from IGD (The Institute of Grocery Distribution, Watford, England) warns food and drink businesses will face another make-or-break year in 2026. Retail food inflation is forecast to remain persistent, only easing slightly.

At the same time, fragile shopper confidence, rising household taxes and geopolitical risks all threaten economic recovery. Businesses must prepare for a volatile environment where affordability and selective indulgence will define consumer behavior.

Here are some of our predictions for what to expect for the economy, consumers and government policy in 2026, through the lens of the food system, including possible implications for businesses.



## KEY INSIGHTS

- Inflation Outlook:** Retail food inflation is expected to decline gradually (4.3% in 2025, 3.8% in 2026 and 3.3% by 2027), but geopolitical shocks could trigger fresh price spikes. Economic growth forecast is downgraded to 1.4% for 2026, with productivity at 0.7%.

However, comparing IGD forecasts food inflation with the U.K.'s Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts for general inflation, it is likely that food and drink will become more expensive in 2026, relatively speaking.

This means that food and drink businesses will come under more scrutiny in the future by the government, media and influencers. Businesses must be ready to explain why prices continue to rise and be seen to be acting to protect consumer interests.

- Consumer Pressure:** 33% of shoppers plan to cut back on grocery spend in 2026, up from 28% in December 2024. For Away From Home (AFH), 45% of consumers plan to cut back spend in the next few months, versus 46% in December 2024. Economic pressures are expected to continue limiting volume demand for food in both retail and AFH for many years. Food businesses will become more vulnerable to any change in fixed costs, such as labor.

- Tax Burden:** Household taxation will rise further in 2026, limiting disposable income and reinforcing value-driven shopping.

- Opportunities:** Despite caution, consumers will selectively trade up, especially during seasonal events like Christmas, creating growth pockets for businesses balancing value and premium. There may be some room to develop more premium retail sales as shoppers avoid eating out.

Rather than frequently changing product ranges or chasing small, short-lived opportunities, focus on operational efficiency, cost control, and protecting core business. Investments should be targeted and justified by clear, sustained demand, not by hopes of a rapid rebound.

## NAVIGATING SUPPLY CHAINS

Supply chain risks from climate change and geopolitical tensions will persist in 2026. The U.K. food system — like the whole economy — remains highly exposed to external shock events. In another recent IGD report, "Supply Chain Trends 2026," we identified four clear themes to take forward into action over the next few years:

- Sustainability will remain an investment priority.** Delivering a sustainable, robust operation remains a key trend for the supply chain; there will be an ongoing need to reduce emissions.

- Secure supply chains will be foundational for future strategies.** Supply chain security is becoming a critical concern, and logistics sectors that face heightened exposure to fuel and energy volatility. The risk of disruption must be embedded into strategic planning to safeguard continuity and resilience.

- Technology will enable cost pressures to be mitigated.** Companies are expected to put continued downward pressure on costs, which will have to be set against rising customer expectations. Automation and digitalization will be key enablers to delivering better metrics at lower costs.

- Speed and flexibility become increasingly important in the last mile.** Sustainability, security, and technological innovation

remain essential, but they won't satisfy evolving customer expectations alone. Success will depend on balancing these themes with greater flexibility, faster delivery, and personalized experiences that align with how customers choose to shop.

Taking prompt action to harden the U.K. food system against change will be expensive, but this cost would be dwarfed by doing nothing or even by delaying action.

By the end of 2026, the U.K. will be halfway through the current Parliament, President Donald Trump will be halfway through his second term, and devolved governments could look very different. Expect the government to accelerate policies and regulatory changes shaping food policy, which are forces businesses cannot ignore. Next year is likely to bring a push to implement key measures before the next general election, with food policy influenced by both government priorities and external pressures.

2026 will be a critical year for the food and drink industry. Businesses must stay relevant to value-conscious consumers while unlocking growth from resilient segments. Those able to deliver affordability alongside moments of indulgence will be best placed to succeed.

*James Walton is the chief economist at IGD, and equips businesses to anticipate and deal with strategic change. For a deep dive into what 2026 will bring, across the economy, consumer sentiment and government policy, read the full IGD Viewpoint report at [www.igd.com/social-impact/economics/reports/viewpoint-what-to-plan-for-in-2026/72126](http://www.igd.com/social-impact/economics/reports/viewpoint-what-to-plan-for-in-2026/72126).*

# Winn-Dixie Celebrates Century of Service

Winn-Dixie, headquartered in Jacksonville, FL, celebrated its centennial in 2025. For 100 years, the grocer has been more than just a store — it's been a cornerstone of Southeast communities, serving communities in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi.

"Reaching 100 years is an extraordinary milestone that belongs to everyone who has been part of Winn-Dixie's journey — our associates, our customers and the communities we call home," says Anthony Hucker, chairman and chief executive for Southeastern Grocers (SEG), Winn-Dixie's parent company. "For generations, we've been a trusted part of family dinners, holiday gatherings and everyday moments that matter most."

Hucker says that trust is their greatest measure of success. "As we celebrate our centennial, we honor our lasting legacy of serving our neighbors with quality and value and look ahead with a renewed commitment to empowering people to feed and enrich our commu-



This Winn-Dixie store from the 1960s showcases the brand's presence in the Southeast.

PHOTO COURTESY WINN-DIXIE

nities as we carry Winn-Dixie into the next century."

Through partnerships with local food banks, disaster relief efforts and community giving programs, Winn-Dixie has shown that being a good neighbor is about more than just providing quality groceries; it also means investing in the well-being of communities that have supported the grocer for 100 years.

As Winn-Dixie enters its second century, it remains focused on its founding principles of quality, value and community connection, while embracing innovation to serve evolving customer needs. From traditional in-store shopping to modern online delivery options, the grocer continues to offer fresh, new options to best serve families across the Southeast.

In early 2026, SEG will step into a new era as The Winn-Dixie Company, uniting under one brand with a renewed focus on its home state of Florida.

"For a century, Winn-Dixie has proudly called Florida home," says Hucker. "Our story is built on the resilience and spirit of its people, and that foundation will guide our future. As we enter our next century as The Winn-Dixie Company — a brand-new, 100-year-old company — we are accelerating growth where our roots run deepest."

PB



The classic Kwik Chek logo, seen on this storefront, was introduced in the 1950s. The logo became the foundation for the checkmark that still appears in today's Winn-Dixie branding.

PHOTO COURTESY WINN-DIXIE

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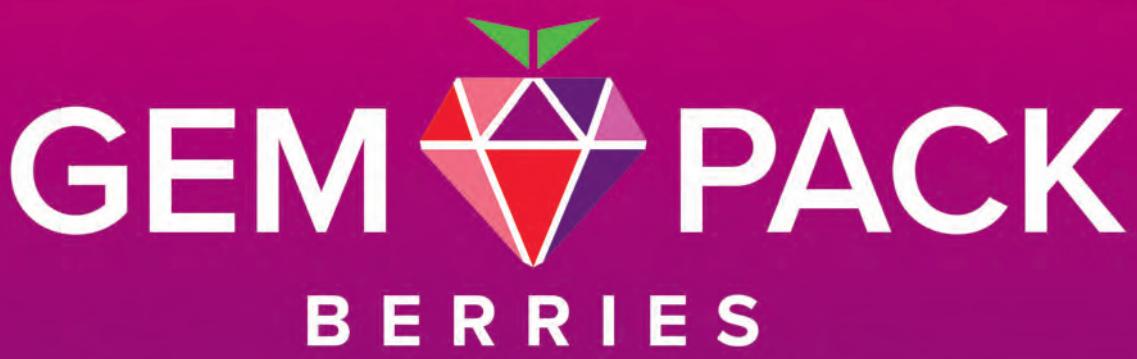
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