

PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

Matt Landi
Helen Pappas
Maria Wieloch

PROCUREMENT

Mexican Mangos, Sweet Potatoes

FEBRUARY 2026
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FEATURES

Spring Merchandising Guide

2026 BEST INDEPENDENT
RETAILER AWARD

UNCLE GIUSEPPE'S MARKETPLACE

The powerhouse chain delivers the best in old-world charm and fresh produce for shoppers.

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THIS MONTH'S WINNER

OLIVIA HART
Finance and
Admin. Manager
Urban Food Hub
Birmingham, AL

The Urban Food Hub is a Birmingham, AL-based initiative designed to address the challenges faced by residents living in food deserts, where access to fresh produce is limited. Led by REV Birmingham, the hub focuses on improving food access by partnering with neighborhood corner stores. Through these partnerships, participating stores are stocked with fresh, affordable produce tailored to the needs and preferences of their customers.

Behind the scenes of the organization is Finance and Admin. Manager Olivia Hart, who pays vendors, bills customers, and "generally, keeps things running," she says.

Hart was previously executive director of a small nonprofit. "While this wasn't produce-related, it honed my organizational skills to bring to a larger organization," she says.

So, although relatively new to the fresh produce industry, she has learned quickly about the industry. "My experience of the produce industry is that you have to be flexible and sometimes pivot quickly, but that can be very rewarding when you discover something new."

Many Birmingham residents lack the option of a full-service grocery store, so they often rely on convenience stores and fast-food outlets instead. Hart says, "Working for a nonprofit that is dedicated to building communities and enhancing people's lives is very rewarding."

Hart says when she isn't working, you can find her riding her bike. "I'm a bike commuter, but I also ride with friends whenever I can. It's a very social activity, great for exploring my city and surroundings."

She says she's learned a lot from reading PRODUCE BUSINESS. "It's important to know where our food comes from."

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



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for 40 Years

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QUESTIONS FOR THE FEBRUARY ISSUE

- 1) How many ways are there "to Sell More Value-Added Veggies"? _____
- 2) "The boring choice in produce" is the slogan for which company? _____
- 3) Which company is offering Red Bananas as "love at first bite"? _____
- 4) What is the brand name of Bushman's Microwave Potato? _____
- 5) Which company offers the Tarpless SX ripening system? _____
- 6) Fill in the blank from the advertisement: "Shoppers are more likely to purchase products labeled _____"

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Organic Continues to Blossom

BY MATT LANDI

When I started buying organic products more than two decades ago, I first turned to the independent markets and co-ops that had a steady source of organic options available. Fast forward to 2026, and it only takes a

visit to a larger format store or national chain to see how deeply organic foods have entered the so-called mainstream. In most cases, organic is no longer relegated to a tiny corner of large produce departments, as the USDA-certified organic logo is showing up across a number of familiar products, from berries and bananas to varieties of lettuce and beyond.



This proliferation of certified organic products in the produce aisle has been largely driven by consumer demand, slowly building over multiple decades,

with a smaller movement pre-dating the existence of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 altogether.

In fact, this market started building back in the 1970s, driven by passionate eaters and wellness advocates, many of whom were influenced by even earlier adopters such as J.I. Rodale, Rudolph Steiner and Rachel Carson with her 1962 book, *A Silent Spring*.

While organic continues to proliferate today with elements of that social activism intact, it has evolved into a powerhouse industry within the global food marketplace, with organic now available in an estimated 190 countries.

BY THE NUMBERS

Today, the U.S. holds the largest share of the overall organic market, with an estimated 74% of U.S. consumers now recognizing the USDA Organic seal. Organically produced food accounted for \$71 billion in gross sales in 2024, with fresh produce making up over \$21 billion as the leading category. This goes along with 5.2% year-over-year growth, more than double the conventional marketplace, which helps paint an optimistic picture of consumer interest and continued motivation to source organic foods.

While I got my introduction to organic food as a college student stocking shelves at a small independent food store in Burlington, VT, over two decades ago, it's the younger generations, many of whom grew up with organic food from an early age, who are driving today's organic market expansion to new heights.

According to OTA's *2024 Consumer Perception Report*, Gen Z con-

sumers (those born between 1997-2012) are the core organic shopper base, over-indexing at all income levels, with 53% rating USDA Organic as important criteria when making a grocery purchase. This younger generation, along with Millennials before them, represent the first generations to come of age with organic more widely adopted and available in the larger marketplace.

Gen Z spending power is also expected to overtake Baby Boomers by 2029, and 90% of them in our study report being either aspirational or already committed to the health benefits of organic and importantly, are willing to pay more for it.

EXPECT CONTINUED GROWTH

Given this bright future, we're not only proud to celebrate our 40th anniversary as the Organic Trade Association (OTA), but we are also excited about the potential for continued industry growth and evolution.

While OTA's initial focus was on developing unified, regulated organic standards and an endorsement program for certification programs, we've evolved to be the leading organization promoting and protecting the organic trade. Like the early adopters, we know

that much of the work is not only in building awareness for organic, but in creating access to simple educational information to help grocery shoppers assess a myriad of options.

At OTA, we have made significant progress and are more committed to our mission than ever — and, we still have considerable work to do to help educate consumers about the benefits of organic. We also need retail partners to support this goal.

With product shelves becoming increasingly cluttered and competing messaging coming at us at a frantic pace — from value pack deals and discounts, to varying health claims and certifications — grocery stores, and produce aisles specifically, have become ripe for consumer confusion.

This is why, in September 2025, OTA launched "The Seal Makes It Simple," a multi-faceted integrated media, digital, and regional in-store campaign highlighting the benefits of organic.

With a strong member base of companies, including retailers, many of whom sell both organic and conventional products, we know that one size does not fit all and that there is room for options that suit consumers' lifestyles, values and wallets. Our goal at OTA is to be a trusted source of clarity and to cut through the clutter — mainly to help facilitate a positive grocery shopping experience for consumers where making informed choices is as simple as choosing the USDA Organic seal.

Matt Landi is vice president of industry relations with the Organic Trade Association, which is headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Organic has evolved
into a powerhouse
industry within
the global food
marketplace.

Innovation, Consumer Demand Redefining Sustainable Packaging

BY HELEN PAPPAS, CSR

Sustainability in fresh produce is driven by three forces: product developers, retailers and consumers. Each plays a role in shaping what you see in the produce aisle, how it's packaged and what's purchased. My goal in sustainable product development is finding the balance between offering products that work for our company, and helping retailers meet their product and packaging goals in the produce aisle, while giving consumers what they like and ultimately want to buy.



SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING AS A WHOLE

Taking accountability in sustainable product design means taking a “whole”istic approach that addresses the whole packaging lifecycle. At Pete Pappas and Sons, our generational family grower/shipper/distributor business, this approach includes addressing post-con-

sumption disposal of product packaging to minimize long-term packaging effects on landfills. As a supplier, we must consider the limitations of our own machinery, protective quality and breathability of alternative packaging types, any certifications on those products, and the economic impacts of changing to a new packaging type.

By focusing on the entire packaging lifecycle, my goal is to boost consumer purchases of sustainably packaged fresh produce while reducing post-consumption waste. To achieve this, we're committed to offering only packaging with higher Post-Consumer Recycled (PCR) content and materials that are either certified recyclable or certified compostable.

RETAILER GOALS + PURCHASING

Retailer sustainability goals often address plastic usage in stores, which informs our packaging development trends. Their goals may include both making plastic “better” in the short term, or eliminating plastic and incorporating alternatives for the longer term.

Making plastic “better” can involve increasing PCR content of products on shelf, or ensuring the plastic used is recyclable. One way to ensure recyclability is by using wash-away labels on plastic packaged products. This allows separation of the label from the packaging during the recycling bath and ensures that packaging can continue through the recycling process without any lingering label, adhesive or ink effects. Also, including labelling directives that

make it apparent to customers how to recycle plastic packaging, is another way to make it “better.”

Plastic reduction or elimination on the shelf includes replacing Styrofoam or non-recyclable plastics with recyclable or compostable ones, including paper, fiber or other alternatives. These goals shape both what consumers have access to purchase, and what we as suppliers should align with and innovate further.

CHANGING CONSUMER PREFERENCES

In the media reporting on consumer preferences and even individual consumer social media posts, we see trends featuring products that are better for you and better for the environment. These ideals play a role in what consumers purchase and retailers sell. Product transparency plays a key role here, and technological advances in apps that scan barcodes to grade food and beverage products on their health and sustainability qualities have become new purchase drivers. These preferences also align with food quality, organics, American-grown and local product, natural-based packaging, and even preferring products with shorter ingredient lists.

Through this lens of consumer behavior changes and purchase preferences, there is a rising opportunity for sustainability in new product innovation.

VISIBILITY + PACKAGING TRANSITIONS

One key consumer preference is product visibility in packaging. Unfortunately, visibility is rarely outweighed by sustainability benefits. While completely recyclable and compostable paper-based packaging are widely available, I've heard many times, “If customers can't see it, they won't buy it,” and those types of packaging are simply not see-through.

But, there is an opportunity to give products both visibility and buyability while still allowing for compostable or biodegradable features. Even if the entire package cannot become paper or fiber-compostable, a solid first step is transitioning at least part of the packaging away from Styrofoam or plastic.

One key example is our organic line, Pete's Garden Organics, which offers tray-packaged products. These align consumer preferences of organic produce with the added

sustainability benefit of being on a certified compostable fiber tray. These fiber trays are an alternative to the use of Styrofoam or plastic for that component, which since 2021, has avoided over 7 million pieces of Styrofoam or plastic from entering the retail market and ultimately landfills after product use. By transitioning part of the packaging to an alternative material, we have made a huge impact.

Finding balance in sustainability for me means developing new products that meet consumers' needs while aligning with retailer goals and benchmarks in sustainability — all while making the best packaging choices for our company, our products and the environment.

Where there is opportunity, there is always room for innovation.

Helen Pappas is the director of marketing and sustainability and fourth generation at Pete Pappas and Sons, a family-owned wholesale grower, shipper and distributor in Jessup, MD. She is a certified sustainability reporting manager (CSR), with a passion for packaging, organics and zero-waste.

Finding balance in sustainability means developing new products that meet consumers' needs while aligning with retailer goals and benchmarks in sustainability.

Shifting the Fresh Produce Consumption Paradigm

BY MARIA WIELOCH

As someone deeply passionate about the fresh produce industry, I have long believed that increasing consumption is where everything starts. Yet, across the globe, we are witnessing a worrying trend: declining consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, especially among children. This is not just a business concern — it is a societal and health issue that demands urgent attention and collective action.



For years, our industry has operated with a “push” mentality. We have focused on producing and distributing our products, hoping that consumers will follow. But the world has changed. Today, we must embrace a “pull” strategy — one that starts with the consumer and works backward. We need to understand what the end consumer wants, what they don’t want, and, crucially, why they are not consuming more fresh produce.

The stakes are high. The habits we set at a young age tend to continue with us throughout our lives. If we fail to instill healthy eating habits in children now, it will be exponentially harder to change behaviors later. The consequences are already visible: rising rates of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes.

BREAKING BARRIERS

How do we address this challenge? At ICA, we have made a commitment to be part of the solution. Only one out of 10 Swedish children eat the recommended 500 grams of fruits and vegetables per day. That means 90% are falling short. So, we realized we needed to dig deeper and understand the real barriers to consumption.

Through research interviews, studies, and direct engagement with children and parents, we identified four main barriers: attitude, knowledge, availability and price.

First, attitude. We need to shift the perception of fruits and vegetables from something children “should” eat to something they “want” to eat. This requires creative marketing and engagement, making produce appealing and fun.

At ICA, we have launched a new campaign, borrowing tactics from other foods and snacks that appeal to children — limited editions, vibrant packaging, influencer partnerships, and a presence in settings where children spend their time, such as gaming and sports.

Second, knowledge. It’s not just about telling children and parents that fruits and vegetables are healthy; it’s about making the information engaging and accessible. Fun facts, interactive programs, and school-based education can make a real difference. We are working with schools and our shop owners to bring this knowledge directly to families.

Third, availability. If fresh produce isn’t present where children are — at sports events, in schools, at the checkout counter in supermarkets — then the healthy choice simply isn’t an option.

Finally, price. While the actual cost of produce is often comparable to less healthy options, the perception persists that it is more expensive. We must address both the reality and the perception, advocating for lower taxes on fruits and vegetables and running pricing campaigns that make healthy choices more affordable.

Our approach is not a one-off campaign, but a long-term initiative. We have committed to at least two years of sustained activities, constantly evaluating and adapting our strategies.

The results so far are promising. Our campaign has been recognized as one of the top 10 global initiatives for promoting children’s health by the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD). But we know there is much more to do. This is not a challenge that any one company can solve alone. It requires joint responsibility and opportunity across the industry, from growers to retailers, from policymakers to educators.

If we succeed, the rewards will be immense: a healthier population, a stronger industry, and a future where fresh produce is at the center of every meal.

Maria Wieloch is head of category management fruit, vegetables and flowers at ICA, Sweden’s leading retailer, as well as a board member of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA).

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There's Science Behind Mango Health Claims

BY LAVANYA SETIA

Mango has long been a favorite for their sweet flavor, but there's even sweeter news for its health benefits. A new 2025 literature review of nearly a decade-worth of mango nutrition science, published in *Food & Function Journal*, uncovered the role this vibrant fruit plays in supporting satiety, weight maintenance and blood sugar balance, as well as other areas, like brain, gut and skin health.



This comprehensive literature review, conducted by the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), evaluated published research about mango nutritional benefits between 2016 and 2025 to understand the role mango can play in overall health and wellness. The study found that, across the body of research, mango demonstrated promising benefits across a number of important health needs.

MANGO AND WEIGHT MAINTENANCE

Within the body of research studied, data showed that mango may support weight maintenance by helping people feel fuller for longer. In one particular study, for example, adult participants who snacked on fresh mango reported feeling more satisfied after two hours than when they ate a low-fat cookie with the same number of calories (100 kcal). After 12 weeks, the mango snackers maintained their weight, while the cookie group gained weight.

The findings on weight maintenance are further substantiated by a separate, recently published study from Florida State University, which found that participants who ate mango daily saw a decrease in waist-to-hip ratio, while the control group's increased. They finished with less body fat and more lean mass than the control group.

MANGO AND BLOOD GLUCOSE CONTROL

In the literature review, researchers found that mango consumption consistently showed benefits for blood sugar across multiple studies. Compared to common snack alternatives, eating mangos was linked to improved insulin activity and lower blood sugar.

Notably, mango intake increased levels of adiponectin, a natural protein associated with reduced inflammation and enhanced insulin

sensitivity, suggesting a potential mechanism behind mangos' positive effects on insulin-related markers.

These findings suggest that regular mango consumption may improve insulin sensitivity, highlighting the potential for mango to help the body use insulin more efficiently and support long-term metabolic health.

"The growing body of research identifies mango's promising role in supporting metabolic health," says Britt Burton-Freeman, Ph.D., MS, director of the Center for Nutrition Research, Illinois Institute of Technology.

"Findings suggest that mango can be a valuable addition to a balanced diet, helping to regulate blood glucose and support weight management — benefits that many people may not always associate with fruit. As we continue to explore mango's unique nutrient and phytonutrient profile, we're uncovering even more ways it can contribute to overall well-being."

MANGO INTAKE AND EMERGING RESEARCH AREAS

Early research is also uncovering potentially promising associations between mango intake and brain health, gut microbiome support and even skin appearance. While more studies are needed, bioactives in mango, like mangiferin and gallotannins, are showing potential in areas like cognitive performance and skin protection.

Naturally invigorating from the inside out, mango delivers over 20 vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and feel-good nutrients. **PB**

Lavanya Setia is the director of marketing at the National Mango Board.

This literature review was supported through an unrestricted grant from the National Mango Board (NMB). NMB had no influence over the studies or their findings. The literature review examined 29 in vitro and in vivo research studies between 2016 and July 2025 on the health benefits of consuming mango (flesh), with a focus on obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. It also explored emerging evidence of potential benefits related to brain, gut and skin health.

The National Mango Board is an agricultural research and promotion program funded by the mango industry, and an instrumentality of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The board's vision is "for mango to be an ongoing part of every American's diet based on versatility, taste, and nutritional benefits, enabling mango to move toward being a top 10 valued whole fruit in the U.S. market by 2030."

Mango may support weight maintenance by helping people feel fuller for longer.

TRANSITIONS

IPR Fresh

IPR Fresh, Nogales, AZ, took a step forward in its marketing and business development strategy with the addition of industry veteran **Mark Munger** as the company's first vice president of marketing and business development.

Munger brings nearly 40 years of experience in the fresh produce sector. Most recently, he served as senior director of marketing at Ocean Mist Farms, where he played a key role in executing a significant brand refresh and launching an innovative new product line. His extensive career also includes senior roles at industry-leading organizations, including 4Earth Farms, Andrew Williamson Fresh Produce, Driscoll's and the Produce Marketing Association.



Mark Munger

The Giumarra Companies

The Giumarra Companies, Los Angeles, CA, appointed produce industry veteran and nonprofit executive **Rich Dachman** as the company's independent chairman of the board of directors.

Dachman will continue to serve as chief executive officer of Brighter Bites, an organization he joined in 2019 following his retirement as vice president of produce for Sysco. He has spent more than 40 years in the industry, including 28 years in various leadership roles at Sysco and FreshPoint. Dachman served as chairman of the Produce Marketing Association (PMA), now the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), in 2012. His industry honors include PMA's Center for Growing Talent (CGT) inaugural Jay Pack Cultivating Our Future Award (2018) and PMA's Robert L. Carey Leadership Award (2019).



Rich Dachman

Village Fresh Greenhouse Grown

Richie Keirouz has been named vice president of sales at Village Fresh Greenhouse Grown. In his new role, he will lead Village Fresh's sales strategy, oversee key account relationships, and support the company's continued expansion.

Keirouz brings more than 25 years of sales leadership experience in the fresh produce and greenhouse-grown sector. Prior to joining Village Fresh, he served as vice president of business development at Westmoreland Sales. He previously held the role of senior director of sales at Mastronardi Produce. Earlier in his career, Keirouz held sales and marketing roles with Mucci Farms and Nature Fresh Farms.

In addition to his produce industry experience, Keirouz is an award-winning motivational speaker.



Richie Keirouz

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Honeybear Brands Pear Imports Freshen Retailer Fruit Supply

Honeybear Brands, Elgin, MN, announces its fresh-picked crop of Bartlett and



Bosc pears will hit retailer shelves in early March through June 1, courtesy of its Southern Hemisphere orchards. Bartlett pears deliver March 1, with Bosc starting April 1.

With its array of orchards in Washington and the Midwest, plus its import production in South America, Honeybear Brands provides a turnkey pear and apple program for retailers year-round, executing 100% supply assurance and ensuring the lowest landed cost program.



Southern Specialties White Asparagus Available

Southern Specialties, Pompano Beach, FL, announces availability of premium white asparagus in anticipation of the 2026 spring holidays. Southern Specialties is positioned to meet high demand across both retail and foodservice sectors.

White asparagus offers a unique culinary profile that distinguishes it from its green counterpart. The spears maintain a striking pearlescent color and a delicate, nutty flavor with a tender texture.

BDA/Dorot Fresh and Sweet Carrots Arrive in the Northeast Region

BDA/Dorot Farm has launched its new export season of fresh and sweet carrots for the North American market.

The new crop features BDA/Dorot Farm's premium fresh and sweet jumbo carrots and cello carrots, now shipping to retail chains, foodservice distributors, and fresh-cut processors across the United States and Canada.

In addition to exporting jumbo carrots, BDA/Dorot Farm also grows California baby carrots year-round to meet customer demand across multiple segments, including retail and foodservice. This combination strengthens BDA/Dorot Farm's position as a year-round carrot supplier, offering a fully integrated program with consistency, quality and service.

BDA/Dorot Farm supplies premium fresh and sweet carrots in a wide range of packing formats, including 1-, 2-, 3-, and 5-pound cello bags, as well as jumbo bulk 25- and 50-pound bags for foodservice and processing.



Matty Matheson Brings Big Flavor to Mushroom Council Campaign

Chef, entrepreneur, Emmy Award-winning executive producer and TV personality Matty Matheson will be the lead spokesperson for the Mushroom Council's 2026 consumer campaign, "It's Not Magic. It's Mushrooms."

Known for his boisterous style and practical approach to cooking, Matheson brings credibility with Gen Z and Millennial audiences that want food that's easy to make, tastes great and delivers more in every bite.



The campaign serves up high-impact ads, recipes, and influencer storytelling to inspire more frequent mushroom cooking, from quick breakfasts and snacks to flavor-packed dinners that elevate everyday staples. Anchored by Matheson's bold, approachable style, the effort meets younger consumers where they discover food today.

Naturipe Farms Among First to Earn Pro-Forest Certification for Deforestation-Free Avocados

Naturipe Farms, Salinas, CA, earned Pro-Forest certification for its avocados, meeting a voluntary, third-party standard that verifies deforestation-free production practices in Mexico.



The Pro-Forest program was developed in response to growing retailer and consumer expectations around responsible sourcing and forest protection. It is increasingly requested by U.S. retailers, like Costco, as part of sustainability commitments.

Through its Baika Mexico operations, Naturipe Farms was an early adopter of the Pro-Forest program, becoming one of the first avocado packing houses in Mexico to earn the certification. The Pro-Forest system uses satellite mapping to monitor land and fire activity dating back to 2018, helping ensure avocados are sourced from land free of deforestation. The certification complements Naturipe's broader sustainability efforts, including the introduction of compostable Price Look-Up (PLU) stickers.

With U.S. avocado volumes expected to remain strong through 2026, Naturipe continues to invest in practices that support both environmental responsibility and a reliable, high-quality supply for retailers.

Top Employer Index Certification Recognizes Grocery Retailer



Ahold Delhaize USA, Salisbury, NC, has been recognized as a top employer in the United States by the Top Employers Institute, earning the certification for the second consecutive year.

Ahold Delhaize USA, a division of international food retailer Ahold Delhaize, is part of the U.S. family of brands, which also includes five leading omnichannel grocery brands: Food Lion, The GIANT Company, Giant Food, Hannaford and Stop & Shop.

The Top Employers Institute certification is based on a comprehensive HR Best Practices Survey, which evaluates organizations across six domains and 20 topics, including people strategy, work environment, talent acquisition, learning, well-being and organizational purpose.

Mercado González Northgate Market: An American Dream that Keeps Growing

Independent chain's growth mirrors SoCal Hispanics.

BY BOB JOHNSON

The sprawling 37,000-square-foot Mercado Northgate Gonzalez supermarket in Costa Mesa, CA, is a breathtaking celebration of Mexican culinary traditions.

In the produce department, the Hispanic customers find items that might not be available in a Safeway or Kroger store. "We have cactus pears, and we also have a variety of green tomatoes," says Justino Tiseda, produce manager at the store. "We have more varieties of fruits and vegetables."

Beyond a selection of produce items used in Hispanic cooking, Mercado is a destination with features not often found in a supermarket.

CULINARY ADVENTURE

Even before you see the produce department, you can smell the culinary treats offered at more than 20 puestos or food stands scattered throughout the store. These puestos, a common feature in Mexico City supermarkets, offer seven types of hot chocolate, sweet churros, tacos and other dishes prepared on-site.

"Each puesto offers unique culinary adventures, including sweet churros and seven types of hot chocolate from renowned Mexico City churreria El Moro, carnitas at Carnitas Don Miguel, a Chiva Torta by Familia Albarran, and Tacos Los Guichos from Familia Zenteno," according to a company description of the Costa Mesa store.

The spacious Mercado Gonzalez also includes a white tablecloth restaurant run by well-known Los Angeles restaurateurs. "Jorge Salim and Javier Hernandez Pons, part of the team behind famed Los Angeles restaurants LA Cha Cha Chá and Loreto, are opening a new in-store fine-dining restaurant in Mercado, Maizano, serving such dishes, such as mole, sopa de lima, and a variety of memelas and tetelas," according to a company description.



Mercado González in Costa Mesa, CA, blends an expansive produce department with foodservice, local entrepreneurship and in-store experiences. PHOTO COURTESY MERCADO GONZÁLEZ

The Mercado goes the extra mile to evoke thoughts of Mexico, as this store is decorated with murals and features live music performed on a stage in front of a water fountain.

The goal is to offer, in addition to food, an experience. This market also offers opportunities to cooks from the community.

Mercado González supports local entrepreneurs by providing them with a platform to show off their culinary talents. The community kitchens guide entrepreneurs toward food safety certificates, teach them how to cost out the inventory, and support their overall growth and success.

Outside the sprawling market is a 6,000-square-foot bar decorated with tropical vegetation. Visitors will find a wide variety of drinks, from micheladas to an extensive selection of mezcal, tequila and Mexican beers.

Mercado Gonzalez is the 44th store in the independent Northgate Gonzalez chain, and the crown jewel of the system Miguel González Sr. and his wife, Teresa, started in Anaheim in 1980.

Not that long ago, Orange County was known as the home of Disneyland, Knotts Berry Farm and Southern California's highest concentration of Republicans. But the community has changed. "Ninety-five percent of our customers are Latino or Hispanic," says Javier Bautista, director of

produce and floral at Northgate Gonzalez Markets.

HISTORY OF THE MARKET

The story of Northgate Gonzalez Markets begins in Mexico in the middle of the 20th century.

Don Miguel Gonzalez was a shoemaker in his native town of Jalostitla in Jalisco until a fire destroyed his shop in 1952. After more than a decade of struggling to get by, Gonzalez immigrated to California to pursue a better life for his family.

In 1980, he and his wife Teresa opened their first market in Anaheim in an abandoned liquor store. That store has grown into an independent chain owned by more than a dozen of Don Miguel's descendants.

When Northgate Gonzalez Market started in a former liquor store, it proved to be the right idea at the right time, as the store, serving Hispanic residents, steadily grew to 44 outlets in four Southern California counties.

PB



INSIDE THE STORE

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 Hours: 6 a.m.-10 p.m., daily
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www.northgatemarket.com



At NY-based Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace, an Italian-themed alfresco atmosphere is everywhere, from the Roman columns to ceilings painted to resemble the sky, with puffy white clouds overhead, especially in the produce department.
 PHOTO COURTESY UNCLE GIUSEPPE'S MARKETPLACE



BEST INDEPENDENT RETAILER AWARD 2026

Rooted in Produce: Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace

An old-world market experience where produce sets the tone.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

When shoppers step into an Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace, or Uncle G's for short, the experience is immediate and unmistakable. The aroma of signature, made-from-scratch garlic focaccia, baked fresh daily, draws customers straight into the prepared foods department, intentionally positioned at the front of the 12-store, Melville, NY-based chain for maximum sensory impact.

There are also scents of warm house-made mozzarella, crafted daily behind glass-enclosed rooms where customers can watch the process; classic Italian entrées like chicken Parmesan and sausage and peppers; and a subtle sweetness from freshly piped cannoli and hand-dipped chocolates. Add the in-store crooners who sing classics from artists like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, and the tone is set, echoing the hospitality of the old-world Italian markets once prevalent on Long Island.

From there, the experience naturally leads to produce, reflecting the DelPrete family's roots as produce wholesalers for more than four decades and the launchpad for its retail business.

This immersive, end-to-end fresh-food strategy is a central reason Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace earned the PRODUCE BUSINESS Best Independent Retailer Award for 2026. From scratch-made foods and in-store theater to a produce department shaped by decades of wholesale expertise, the chain exemplifies how strong merchandising and product knowledge drive fresh produce sales and usage.

The industry-nominated award honors independent retailers

that excel at buying, presenting and selling fruits and vegetables to elevate customer experience and encourage greater consumption.

ROOTS IN PRODUCE

"Produce has always been central to what we do," says Carl DelPrete, chief executive officer and co-founder of Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace. "My brother and I have been in the produce import and distribution business since the early 1980s, operating RBest Produce on the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx until our move to Port Washington, NY, in 2012. It's a full-line produce distributor that supplies independent supermarkets from Philadelphia to Rhode Island, including our own retail stores."

Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace, named after one of the brothers' uncles, started in 1998 as a small neighborhood produce market. It was initially opened by Carl and his brother, Philip (who passed away in October 2025), under the name East Meadow Farms, in Nassau County's community of East Meadow, NY.

The idea was simple: sell great quality, fresh produce to local customers. As the store grew, the DelPretes realized customers were looking for more than produce. They wanted fresh foods, including deli items, breads and prepared meals. In 2001, fellow produce wholesaler Tom Barresi joined the brothers as an operating partner, and the trio rebranded the business to Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace. Their first store, a 7,800-square-foot store in East Meadow, NY, opened that November.

"The vision became creating a market that felt like the places we grew up shopping as kids, where you knew the butcher, the deli made things fresh, bread was baked in-house, and fresh, great produce was always the foundation," says DelPrete.

Today, the chain's dozen markets are located across Long Island, Westchester County, and in New Jersey. The most recent is a 40,000-square-foot facility, opened in Bohemia, NY, last November.

A 56,000-square-foot Uncle G's is scheduled to open in Greenvale, NY, early this year in a space vacated by a Stop & Shop, followed by a Levittown, PA, location formerly a King Kullen, later this year.

BEST-IN-CLASS SOURCING & SELECTION

Fresh product in Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace averages 8% to 10% of the store's total square footage. Here, there are 1,000-plus produce SKUs, with 12% of fruits and vegetables organic. Local is based on seasonality and availability, while imports are primarily about ensuring consistent quality and availability. When there's something unique that makes sense, the retailer will bring it in. But they aren't focused on chasing specialty items or trends for their own sake. As DelPrete says, "the basics always come first."

The primary source of produce supply is the family's company, RBest Produce Inc.

"We work closely with national brands, such as Driscoll's, Del Monte and Dole, and these are long-standing partnerships," says DelPrete. "At the same time, we're always open to working with local growers when the season allows. When local products are available and meet quality standards, we buy local. We pride ourselves on our partner relationships with growers and products, large and small."

Uncle G's has a dedicated produce leadership team that manages procurement.

"Today's customers are looking for quality, variety, and confidence. They want to know that when they buy produce, it will last at home and taste as it should," says DelPrete.

They've seen growth in organic produce, and DelPrete notes there's also been growth in items once considered specialty, such as dragon fruit, star fruit, ginger and turmeric.

"Those items have become everyday purchases for many of our customers," he adds. "We always keep an eye out for new and interesting items, whether that's new varieties or different colors, like purple potatoes."

Convenience is also essential, which is why Uncle G's value-added produce program is strong. Dedicated teams of staff members cut fruit and vegetables in-store multiple times per day. Offerings include zoodles, cauliflower rice, stir-fry mixes, and cut fruit, as well as value-added and packaged salad programs that are constantly evolving.

"What makes our produce departments different? It's really the standards we hold ourselves to," says DelPrete. "We're not trying to be a specialty-only store or chase unusual items. What we focus on is quality."

An example of that is sugar testing, he adds. "When melons arrive, they're tested, and we won't send anything to stores unless they reach a minimum Brix of 12, and usually 14. If it doesn't meet that, it doesn't go out."

That's important, "because there's nothing worse than buying a melon, taking it home, and it tastes like a cucumber. We work very hard to avoid that."

That same standard carries through to cut fruit. "Everything in our cut fruit program comes from fruit that meets those same quality standards, so customers know that when they buy cut fruit, it's going to be sweet and it's going to be good."

"In the end, it comes down to trust," says DelPrete. "Customers trust that when they buy produce from us, it's been checked, tested, and held to a higher standard than they might find elsewhere."



The dozen Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplaces are located across Long Island, Westchester County, NY, and in New Jersey. Another Uncle G's will open in Greenvale, NY, early this year, followed by a Levittown, PA, location later this year.

PHOTO COURTESY UNCLE GIUSEPPE'S MARKETPLACE



"Produce has always been central to what we do," says Carl DelPrete, chief executive officer and co-founder of Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace.

PHOTO COURTESY UNCLE GIUSEPPE'S MARKETPLACE

THE ART OF SERVICE & SELLING

The keys to Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace's register-ringing displays and merchandising tactics are to build theater around seasonality and abundance, then layer in education.

Examples include color-blocked vegetable walls that make selection intuitive and appealing in photos and in person; organic, imported and conventional sets merchandised side by side so customers can compare appearance and price quickly; marketplace storytelling at peak times, such as citrus mountains in January, corn and tomato stages in summer, and apple orchards in the fall; and signage that calls out taste cues, "sweet," "crisp," "buttery," and storage tips that protect guest value at home.

"The produce department has a warm personality, and it really comes from our people. Our produce managers and team members live and breathe what they work. They know the product, they care about it, and they enjoy talking to customers about it," says DelPrete.

"A good example of that happened recently. I witnessed a customer ask our manager about the difference between SugarBee and Honeycrisp apples. Instead of just explaining it, the produce manager said, 'One second,' went back, grabbed a knife, cut the apples, and let the customer taste them. That's a good example of how we operate. We don't just point and tell people what to buy. We take the time to show them, let them try things, and help them understand what they're getting."

Ultimately, he adds, "we're selling produce, but we're also providing service."

The produce departments at Uncle G's offer several other services. There's daily cut fruit and vegetable prep for grab-and-go, with rotating seasonal combinations; chef-driven demos and sam-

Meet the Team
Scott Schepis



Tradition at Work.

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

pling that teach simple techniques; made-to-order fruit platters, crudité trays, holiday centerpieces, and custom gifts with cheese or charcuterie add-ons; and cross-department meal ideas that pair produce with seafood, butcher, bakery or cheese.

Produce promotion is multifaceted. One way is sending out millions of circulars every week, and produce is always a big part of that.

“Featured are items customers are already looking for, and the aim is to be highly competitive on them,” says DelPrete.

It’s not just about price, though, he adds, pointing to regular tastings, demos, value-added promotions, and, in some cases, chefs or team members speaking with customers about how to use specific items.

“The idea is that produce shouldn’t just be something you grab and go. We want customers to feel confident in what they’re buying, understand what they’re getting, and feel good about bringing it home,” says DelPrete. “That’s really the focus of how we promote produce.”



The DelPrete family’s roots as New York City-area produce wholesalers for more than four decades were the launchpad for its retail business, Uncle Giuseppe’s Marketplace. Pictured are founders (L-R) Tom Barresi, Philip DelPrete and Carl DelPrete.
PHOTO COURTESY UNCLE GIUSEPPE’S MARKETPLACE

BEYOND PRODUCE

The sights and attention to detail in every department make a trip to Uncle Giuseppe’s Marketplace more of an experience than a store visit. The Italian-themed alfresco atmosphere is everywhere, from the Roman columns to ceilings painted to resemble the sky, with puffy white clouds overhead, especially in the produce department, and murals that transport customers into an old-country Italian street scene.

Strategic theater-style lighting makes food displays pop, adding to the high-en-

ergy, part-market, part-show atmosphere. Despite the old-world aesthetic, newer locations feature modern amenities, such as 55-foot cooking hoods, temperature-controlled rooms for cheese, and high-density, energy-efficient LED lighting.

Like produce, each department — especially perishables — offers a distinctive delight. Shoppers listen for the sound of the bakery’s bell. It’s rung about every half hour as from-scratch loaves come out of the oven. The in-store butcher makes Italian sausage daily to stock the meat department, while live lobsters swim nearby in seafood. In addition to the cafe coffee bar, serving espresso as well as cappuccino, there’s also a gelato station next to the candy station, and often, chocolate fountains ripe for dipping fresh fruit.

Plus, produce doesn’t live just in the produce department at Uncle G’s, it’s used throughout the store. The full-service deli and prepared foods department, with its ready-to-eat meals, soups, salads, side dishes, and pizzas, relies heavily on fresh fruits and vegetables sourced directly from the sales floor. The same goes for the retailer’s in-store chopped salad programs. The bakery features fruit pies and desserts made with produce department ingredients. Nothing is ordered pre-made; it’s all made daily on-premises using ingredients Uncle G’s already sells.

“One of the benefits of having kitchens and bakeries in every store is that produce is culled multiple times a day,” says DelPrete. “Items that are pulled from the floor don’t go to waste; they’re used immediately in prepared foods or bakery production. That helps us maintain quality on the sales floor and ensures we use product responsibly.”

“Produce is part of what ties the entire store together and helps us maintain freshness and consistency across everything we sell.”

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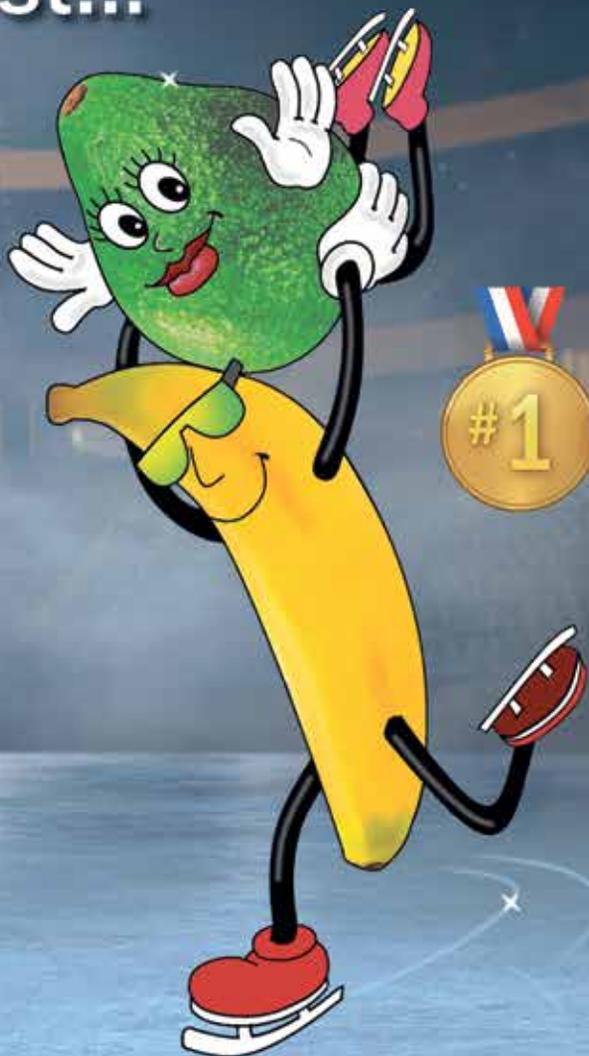
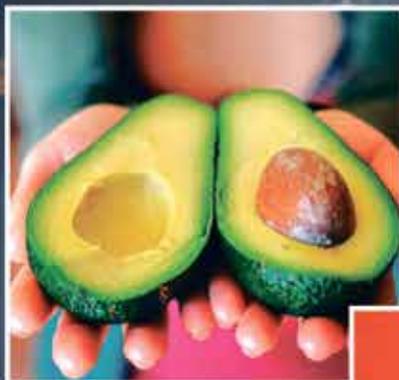
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Spring occasions provide a great opportunity for retailers to make a splash with items, and fresh asparagus bunches are a prime example. Making a point of spring seasonal fruits and vegetables as they come into form can be the basis of buzz in the department.

PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

Spring Emerges in the Produce Department

Retailers balance timing, weather and consumer expectations to merchandise spring produce.

BY MIKE DUFF

Merchandising spring produce can be tricky. That's because the season begins at different times depending on where in the U.S. you live, so unlike the more definitive post-Labor Day shift from summer to fall, the warming weather shift is more of a gradual process that requires careful management.

Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations, Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, says the transition to spring has to be carefully considered, as key winter commodities, such as citrus and apples, continue playing a role.

Given Sunset's location in Chicagoland, consumers aren't necessarily looking for spring produce as early as they might be in warmer parts of the country. Although the shift has already begun at Sunset Foods, "the transition is basically April to June."

BLENDED TRANSITION

The Northeast, where Northeast Shared Services operates, also has a gradual transition from winter to the warmer weather that prompts consumers to crave spring produce.

Jeff Cady, vice president of produce and floral, Northeast Shared

Services, Schenectady, NY, which serves Price Chopper/Market 32 Supermarkets and Topps Markets as part of Northeast Grocery Inc. operations, says variability is part of the merchandising equation.

"Spring resets typically begin early to mid-March and are done gradually over several weeks, with winter items eased out as spring quality and supply stabilize," Cady says. "The transition can vary year to year based on availability of supply, along with the weather trends in the areas where we are doing business. Just like everything in the produce business, nothing is really black and white, only shades of gray."

Stores typically begin promoting spring items as soon as they appear on the sales floor, using limited "first of the season" messaging, rather than waiting for a full spring set.

As the slate of spring holidays arrives, the opportunity to turn up seasonal efforts and encourage consumers to get excited about seasonal fruits and vegetables becomes more actionable.

For Cady, spring merchandising combines established products with newer variations. "We focus on the proven key versions of the items to drive the bulk of the business and then tactically work in new items or new versions of existing items to see if they add incrementality to the category," he says. "We win some, and we lose some."

Retailers aren't on their own, of course, and there are plenty of resources that helps spring produce grab more attention.

"Support routinely comes from commodity boards, state agriculture programs and key growers, providing seasonal POS, promotional funding, and crop-timing insights that are especially valuable," says Cady. "It is a team effort in the produce industry, and as the

years go by, I see this building into one big partnership. Everyone has a role to play, and they get better every year.”

GLOWING UP

Produce departments are one of the places consumers can experience the season unfolding, even where, maybe, the weather hasn't come around to the pleasant temperatures the calendar promises. Making a point of spring seasonal fruits and vegetables as they come into form can be the basis of buzz in the department.

Watsonville, CA-based Driscoll's has developed branded "Only the Finest Berries" packaging to enhance store-level merchandising presentations. Its berry patch look, enhanced by its brand labeling, can be a way for retailers to make a point that fresh spring produce is available for purchase.

"This season, we're elevating the experience for shoppers and retailers alike with offerings that make every display pop, and every bite unforgettable," says Garland Reiter Jr., Driscoll's chief commercial officer.

The spring season is a big occasion for Irvine, CA-based Gem-Pack. "Gem-Pack is nothing but optimistic about spring berry sales," says Michelle Deleissegues, senior vice president of marketing. "Berries are an everyday consumption produce item and we continue to see category growth at retail throughout an uncertain economy. We look forward to planning spring promotions with our retailers around key berry holidays and throughout the spring and summer seasons to keep product moving throughout peak harvest and to inspire consumer loyalty and consistent purchasing behavior."

On the vegetable side of the business, grower-owned J.R. Kelly Co., Collinsville, IL, works with Midwestern growers as a commodity marketing organization to promote horseradish. "Spring holidays are our biggest movers in the world of horseradish. Easter, and especially Passover, combine to consistently make March and April our most important months of the year. Horseradish is often used as the maror or bitter herb on the traditional Passover Seder," says Matt McMillin, business development specialist for J.R. Kelly Company. "It varies by region, but we definitely see a jump in demand for the holidays."

Ivan Brown, senior director of marketing at Del Monte Fresh Produce North America, Coral Gables, FL, says spring occasions provide a great opportunity for retailers to make a splash with items, such as avocado. Brown suggests retailers who maintain a significant avocado profile have an opportunity to build toward a Cinco de Mayo holiday.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Successful promotions are a collaborative process."**
Michelle Deleissegues, Gem-Pack, Irvine, CA
- **"Easter, Passover, Mother's Day and Cinco de Mayo are key anchors that accelerate spring sets and promotions."**
Jeff Cady, Northeast Shared Services, Schenectady, NY
- **"During Passover, it would be great to see items that are commonly purchased for the Passover Seder to be marketed or positioned nearby. It could be easily promoted as a one-stop shop or a holiday/special occasion center to allow for quicker, more targeted shopping."**
Matt McMillin, J.R. Kelly Co., Collinsville, IL



"Retailers can promote products during the holidays by running both print and digital advertisements before and after the season, along with creating exciting in-store promotions and highlighting them on social media," he says. "Themed displays can also encourage consumers to make holiday-specific purchases."

Brown recommends offering both ready-to-eat and ready-to-ripen fruits to cater to consumer needs, and cross-merchandising with other produce that are complementary for recipes.

Driscoll's Reiter says spring holidays,

from Valentine's to Memorial Day and even into June, are "merchandising moments" when seasonal produce items, such as berries, have a receptive audience. Retailers can leverage those occasions by featuring seasonal packaging, secondary displays and cross promotions.

This spring, the Del Monte MAGnificent Melon will arrive on store shelves as a proprietary variety, Brown says, adding it will meet consumers' No. 1 demand for a melon that is consistently sweet. "The high flesh-to-seed ratio results in an overall more intense flavor."

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PLANNING AND COLLABORATION

Retail success depends on having an integrated plan that maximizes the sales of the range of products that come into season.

"It's important retailers stay in close contact with their berry sales representatives so they can work together to plan promotions around key weather events and volume surges and declines," says Gem-Pack's Deleissegues. "Cross promotions can be momentum builders, especially right before or after peak berry promotions."

McMillin says cross-merchandising is a

way to make things convenient for sometimes harried holiday shoppers. "I'm a big fan of positioning items that might be used together for holidays and special occasions nearby on the shelves."

"I think convenience is becoming key as people's schedules are busier than ever before. It's not just quality of produce, but also time is also very valuable to the consumer, and it could be a driving factor in how much a consumer buys at the store," McMillin adds.

Although holidays are key in the swing

into spring, Del Monte's Brown says it's important to keep in mind how the shopping public is changing.

"Millennial and Gen-Z consumers are starting to gravitate toward whole nutrient foods that support a healthier lifestyle, which places emphasis on treating food as medicine," he says. "Social media continues to be a driving factor in how younger generations discover healthier options and recipe ideas; these options often emphasize brain, gut, and immune health as a benefit of eating fresh."

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More Than a Gateway: South Florida is a Market Worth Watching

The region is unique and diverse.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Covering the Miami metropolitan area, the Everglades, and south to the Keys, South Florida, with its population well over 6 million, is a region famed for its Latin flavor, and proximity to Central America and the Caribbean as an import hub.

But while South Florida's Latino population totals around 2.5 million, according to the UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, it should be emphasized that it is far from homogenous. Of the estimated total population, only around 1.1 million are Cuban Americans; the rest of the region's Hispanics have roots in Central and South America, and the Caribbean, covering a range of different countries.

According to Susie McKinley, director of marketing and development at the Tallahassee-based Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, South Florida's sizable Hispanic population influences retailer produce departments across the state.

"There tends to be a wider variety of produce items, primarily tropical produce, that is common in many Hispanic cultures," she says. "Many growers in the area provide tropical produce to the region, primarily in the summer."

Going by sheer numbers of locations, Publix, Winn-Dixie, and Aldi are the largest grocery retailers, not just in Southern Florida, but across the state as a whole, although Texan grocer Tom Thumb, budget operator Save A Lot, and Key Food all have substantial presences.

At the same time, successive waves of Hispanic immigration to the region have driven the growth of Hispanic-focused grocery retail chains, from Fresco y Más (a subsidiary of Southeastern Grocers) to Presidente Supermarkets, Sedano's, and Bravo, among many others.

"South Florida is a unique and diverse region for produce," says Denise Gomez, marketing manager for Doral, FL-based packer, importer and marketer JC Tropicals. "Our great weather allows for year-round cultivation of a wide range of fruits and vegetables."

On the homegrown side, JC partners with local producers in the Homestead area (south of Miami) to source a variety of fruits that can be cultivated in South Florida's tropical climate, including dragon fruit, passion fruit, mamey sapote, avocados, mangos and more.

"South Florida is home to a diverse population, including large communities from Latin America and the Caribbean from countries like Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Colombia," continues Gomez. "This cultural diversity influences the types of produce that are in demand, particularly tropical fruits, root vegetables, and fresh herbs, which are staples in many Latin American dishes."



South Florida, with its population well over 6 million, is a region famed for its Latin flavor, and proximity to Central America and the Caribbean as an import hub. South Florida's sizable Hispanic population influences retailer produce departments across the state.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

THE LATIN CONNECTION

Although South Florida is a significant producer of tropical fruits, the region — and particularly the Miami metropolitan area — is famed as a gateway into the U.S. for Central and South American produce through Port Everglades and the Port of Miami.

And this seaborne trade is substantial. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Observatory for Economic Complexity, fruit and vegetable imports to the Miami Customs District totaled \$2.91 billion in 2023, an 8.98% increase from the year before.

Guatemala topped the list of source countries in 2023 — with imports valued at \$515 million — followed by Peru (\$494 million), and Ecuador (\$235 million). Melons headed up the products table, with imports estimated at \$228 million, followed by bananas at \$190 million during the year.

Among the companies specializing in this trade is Miami-based importer-distributor Total Green Tropicals, which brings in a range of exotic fruits and vegetables, regularly delivered from nine countries, according to general manager Jorge Herrera.

Receiving an estimated 40 container loads per week, Total Green caters to Hispanic populations, not just in Florida, but across Texas, Arizona, California, New York, as well as Chicago, Philadelphia and Atlanta. It has also recently added North Carolina to the list with the November 2024 acquisition of Asheboro-headquartered El Niño Produce.

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WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Our great weather allows for year-round cultivation of a wide range of fruits and vegetables.”**

Denise Gomez, JC Tropicals, Doral, FL

- **“There tends to be a wider variety of produce items, primarily tropical produce, that is common in many Hispanic cultures. Many growers in the area provide tropical produce to the region, primarily in the summer.”**

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

Given the business’ Hispanic focus, Total Green’s top imports lean heavily toward in-demand products from Latino consumers, from plantain (sourced from Ecuador and Guatemala) to specialties, such as yuca, malanga and chayote squash.

“Ethnic products are the basis of our business, and we have grown a lot in recent years,” says Herrera.

With locations across the U.S., as well as offices in Belgium, Peru and Guatemala, Coosemans has been a leading name in the specialty produce business for over 40 years. With a focus on products from Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean, Europe and Asia, Coosemans Miami imports a wide range of specialties that the company’s Alex Unger describes as “off-the-wall, not-so-well-known items. If it’s available, we’ll find it and sell it.”

These include products from rambutan, tamarillo, and kumquat to heirloom tomatoes and Red Fresno chiles, although the company does handle a full range of more conventional fruits and vegetables.

Coosemans has seen significant recent growth in edible micro-flowers, which chefs use for decorative purposes. “This is a big, new item that has grown over the last five years by 1,000% easily,” says Unger, adding that the micro-greens segment has also seen substantial sales growth.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

While unusual specialties undoubtedly help many importers stand out from the crowd, one factor that has united the industry has been the lingering difficulties since the COVID-19 pandemic.

One such challenge, according to Herrera at Total Green, has been high freight rates, which rose in the wake of the pandemic and have yet to decrease. As a result, he says companies like Total Green have to pass the extra costs on to customers in order to remain in business.

Gomez at JC Tropicals agrees that pandemic-era disruption continues to affect the South Florida produce industry. “The pandemic had a significant impact on a lot of us, leading to port delays, labor shortages, price fluctuations, and shifts in consumer behavior.”

“While some of these challenges persist, we’ve had to adapt by diversifying our sourcing strategies and increasing flexibility to meet market demands.”

“Costs are higher — in some cases, substantially higher than pre-pandemic, which leads to higher prices on the commodities



South Florida is home to a diverse population, so the cultural diversity influences the types of produce that are in demand, particularly tropical fruits, root vegetables, and fresh herbs, which are staples in many Latin American dishes.

PHOTO COURTESY JC TROPICALS

coming in and higher prices for the end user unfortunately,” admits Unger at Coosemans.

“But you do what you can to cut costs as much as possible. For example, bringing products into Tampa and shipping them down is one way we can cut that cost, so there’s things we can do to keep us more competitive and keep the product more affordable for the end user.”

Another challenge affecting retailers in South Florida is fluctuation in prices due to seasonality, supply chain disruptions and weather events, according to Gomez.

She says the demand for variety and freshness can also be challenging, especially given the region’s diverse cultural preferences. “Retailers need to stock both mainstream items and exotic products, which can complicate inventory management and freshness.”

“For us as distributors, we have the same challenges. With products from 18 different countries, we must navigate logistical hurdles such as weather, crop delays, transportation issues and strikes.”

Given the challenges, Gomez says distributors are central to the produce market in South Florida, ensuring fresh produce reaches retailers and consumers in a timely manner with consistent quality.

However, looking ahead, Unger sees further consolidation on the horizon for Southern Florida’s produce industry. “I think we’re going to see a lot more consolidation with companies being bought up,” he says. “It’s a big trend, with venture capitalists coming in and buying a lot of the smaller companies, and squeezing out your traditional jobber and small produce guy.”

Welcome to 'The Center of Growth'

2026 New York Produce Show & Conference

The size and shape of our trade-show floor at the Javits Center provides unencumbered access to attendees for 7 hours. And the educational and culinary activities throughout the show floor encourage non-stop engagement. Last year's attendance of key buying executives created opportunities for producers and marketers to engage with a full range of customers and prospects. It is the kind of show where you can discover new customers while reinforcing existing relationships.

We are the industry's Largest Fixed-Site Show

Since 2010, attendees across the globe have gathered here annually at the 12th Largest Population Center in the World and at the hub of produce for importing and exporting. The largest concentration of retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operators/distributors are already here for you to connect with at your booth at the Javits Center.



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Our Show attracts buyers and decision-makers from North America and abroad. Our hosted "Buyer-Connect" program and buyer-oriented educational components before and after the one-day trade show on Dec. 3 attract highly engaged leaders who are capable of purchasing large volumes of produce.

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You will reach the largest buying concentration of retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operators/distributors in North America.



Round out your year with memorable networking, intimate meetings with buyers, educational enhancement and fantastic experiences in one of the best places to be during the holiday season.

THE BUYERS ARE HERE ...

Percentage of buying companies attending The New York Produce Show and Conference each year.

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Retailers

27%

Wholesalers/
Distributors

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Foodservice

More than 45% of our attendees come from the buying sector.



The regional, national and global buying community – in both retail and foodservice – is enthusiastically committed to the event, often registering not just one or two top executives, but using this opportunity to go deep in the ranks of leadership.

This gives you an opportunity to reach a range of influencers never before present at one venue. It also includes middle-tier staffers who represent the up-and-coming leadership in these important buying organizations. Plus, our unique Buyer-Connect Program gives you an up-close-and-personal perspective on buyer needs.

What they're saying about the New York Produce Show?

"As a foodservice distributor, the Show is a fantastic opportunity to discover new products and connect with both longtime partners and new suppliers – all in one place. The show encourages real, collaborative conversations and helps us discover innovative items and partnerships we are excited to share with our customers and teams. It is an energizing, relationship-driven event I genuinely look forward to each year."

David Prid, Director of Marketing, Keweenaw Produce

"First time at this show, and it was a great experience. The location is excellent, and there is a great atmosphere. Met multiple customers and vendors at this show. Networking at this type of event is crucial, and the show allows you to create great connections. The tours at the terminal markets are a great experience for all the attendees that decide to make the tour. Looking forward to next year's event."

Alejandro Diaz, VP of Growth, Kingston Companies

"We had a great time in New York. We saw a bunch of brands and came away with some new product ideas. One supplier already sent us samples for our customers the next day. The Natalie's juice stand was great and offered a lot of new varieties. We really enjoyed the Philadelphia Market tour."

**Kenny Meert, Chief Operating Officer,
Keggs Produce**

"Sold show, well worth the investment."

David Lawrence, CEO, Rotterdam Produce

"The Show is like no other. Retail, foodservice, and wholesale outlets are all represented well. The Northeast is a huge population center. There is no better way to understand the opportunities and logistical challenges that bring here and seeing first-hand how 8 million people get their fruits and vegetables day-in and day-out."

Giuseppe Casaleto, CEO USA, SICO Certified

"As we launched our new service in Gloucester, NJ, we decided to participate this year in the show. The experience was excellent – well-attended by current customers and new prospects shipping into that market. Show staff was extremely attentive, ensuring that every detail was professionally managed. Due to the positive experience and strong business opportunities ahead, we are planning to participate again next year."

**Aniel Raines, Sr. Director of Business Development,
Crosley, Inc.**

"Congratulations to the organizers of the Show for delivering an outstanding event. From the quality of exhibitors to the organization and networking opportunities, everything was first-class. It was a truly valuable experience for the produce industry."

Marie Ponce, Dir. of Corporate Relations, AvoWorld

"We started attending the Show in 2010 and have been an exhibitor every year since. The 2025 show was exceptional! It was very well-attended, and we had a wonderful time seeing old and new friends!"

Tim Davanaugh, Sr. Account Manager, FirstFruit

What they're saying about the New York Produce Show?

"The New York Produce Show was a tremendous success for us. It gave us the opportunity to reconnect with many longtime friends in the business and, just as importantly, to build new relationships. What truly stands out about the show is the family atmosphere it provides—it reflects the heart of the produce industry and the people who make it so special. We are incredibly thankful to the organizers, exhibitors, and attendees for making it such a meaningful and well-run event, and we are already looking forward to coming back next year and making many more new friends along the way."

Byron Masury, President, Sunnyside Farms

"The New York Produce Show is an incredibly impactful show that brings together the top decision-makers and thought leaders in the Produce Industry. The show's intimate environment provides the perfect setting for productive discussions that can materially scale your business. The educational seminars, networking events and trade show are all thoughtfully designed to facilitate meaningful interactions with industry decision-makers and leaders in the greatest city in the world!"

Juliet Moran, Senior Director of Sales Prod. Supp. Life

"The NYPS provided an intimate setting for Zespri to engage with key retailers in this important market. It was an excellent opportunity to showcase our new RubyRed kiwifruit variety and initiate discussions for the 2026 New Zealand season."

Theresa Maack, Regional Account Manager, New Zealand Kiwi Holdings, Inc.

"The Show continues to be one of the most valuable events on my calendar, and it delivered once again this year. The Buyer-Connect program created meaningful, efficient conversations, and the manageable size of the show made it easy to navigate while allowing for more personal, productive interactions. It is a well-run event that truly supports relationship-building, which we all know makes the produce industry so special."

Jeff Cady, VP of Produce & Floral, Northeast Show Services (Market 32, Price Checker, Total)

"Ocean Network Express displayed a booth for our first time at the Show this year, and we are sure to be back in 2026! We typically exhibit at major shows in the US and globally. We experienced significant foot traffic at the show, securing many good sales leads and meeting potential new customers for our global ocean services. The Javits Center was a great venue for the show, and we look forward to attending again in the future!"

Mark Kendall, Sr. Director, NA Sales, Ocean Network Express (North America) Inc.

"The Show continues to be a high-energy event that brings together industry leaders, innovation, and meaningful networking opportunities. It is a great environment to reconnect, collaborate and build on both existing and new partnerships."

Karolina Sokolicka, Regional Sales Manager (Northeast), Hampton Farms

What they're saying about the New York Produce Show?

"For me being in NYC, this is the most important show of the year. I started with the first show at the Hilton, and it gets better every year. It's great to see all the people you do business with all year and all the new companies trying to get your business. Even the old companies are trying to do business again."

Marc Goldman, Produce Director, Morton Williams

"The New York Produce Show was a magnificent event with strong attendance, a wide range of high-quality vendors, and plenty of valuable conversations and new connections. The energy of being in New York City during the Christmas season made it even better and helped make the trip especially memorable."

Mike Roberts, VP of Produce Operations,
Harjo Food Stores, Inc.

"The Show plays a meaningful role in paving the way for young professionals in our industry. The thoughtful programming, access to industry leaders, and intentional networking create real opportunities for growth and connection. Each year, I leave feeling inspired, supported, and excited about the future of produce."

Stephanie Tramatola, Director of Marketing and Administration, A&P Produce

"The Show was well-organized, well-attended, and full of meaningful conversations. I came away with solid contacts and real follow-up opportunities. Looking forward to coming back in 2026."

Brian Basore, TMM Farms

"I am not surprised that it has been all positive feedback. It was a great show overall, and it truly felt bigger and more impactful than previous years. The energy, attendance, and quality of conversations were all noticeably elevated, making it a very productive experience. It also felt like a strong indicator of the show's continued growth and relevance as we look ahead to 2026."

Tom Ross, Director of Contract Sourcing,
Fresh Alliance

"The Show was a great opportunity to connect with everyone one last time before the holidays. Having not attended for many years, I was impressed with the size and scale of the event. It was nice to see such a good turnout, which provided our team with many opportunities for conversation with the buying side."

Brian Artie, Executive VP of Sales,
Tanjuma & Artie

"The New York Produce Show always delivers with a terrific venue in the Jacob K. Javits Center, and top decision-makers from throughout the industry and especially in the New York area."

Andy Hamilton, CEO, Marbon

"As usual, it was a great and exciting show! Many connections were made and plenty of networking opportunities during the show! NYC and the show are always a fantastic way to end the year!"

Michael Fernandez, Director of Sales, John Deere
Logistics and Greene Transport Companies



Wegmans, headquartered in Rochester, NY, merchandises carrots and celery together in the produce department, pairing packaged with bulk. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

Creative Promotions and Merchandising Reframe Carrots

This vegetable is a year-round staple in the produce department.

BY MIKE DUFF

Carrots can be fun, just ask Walmart. The Bentonville, AR-based retailer used a holiday promotion featuring carrots to emphasize its connection to the growing community that supplies its fresh produce. Walmart promoted its connection to Hungenberg Produce, a fourth-generation family farm in Greeley, CO, as it encouraged consumers to bring their kids to the store and pick out carrots to lay out for Santa's reindeer, right beside the milk and cookies for St. Nick.

Jordan Hungenberg, chief executive of Hungenberg Produce, notes the operation has grown through its relationship with Walmart that began more than two decades ago. "At the time, there was only one major carrot supplier in the country. Walmart took a chance on us over 22 years ago, a small, local producer."

In its promotion, Walmart emphasized Hungenberg Produce harvests, washes and packs carrots, and has them at one of its distribution centers within less than 48 hours. From there, they move on, reaching store shelves in 72 to 96 hours of harvest. The reindeer connection is Walmart's way of reinforcing its relationships with families, both helping them to celebrate the holidays and partnering with them to supply fresh fruit and vegetables.

"The piece was intended as an engaging way to highlight how Walmart works closely with growers and suppliers to deliver quality and freshness to customers," says company spokesperson Haley

Maxwell. "It reflects Walmart's ongoing work to provide high-quality, fresh items for customers across produce, including carrots, and our collaboration with growers."

ADAPTABLE PRESENTATION

As flexible as carrots are in use, they are equally adaptable in presentation. Wegmans, Rochester, NY, for example, mounts designated carrot and celery presentation in stores consisting of packaged product, but also includes bulk carrots in cooking vegetable merchandising.

Carrots are also part of Wegmans' brand prepared and ready-to-heat offerings, such as its dill-roasted carrots.

Today, consideration of promoting and merchandising carrots has to include convenience. Mike Servello, chief executive, Bargain Grocery, Utica, NY, says while he does carry some bulk product, it's important to offer bagged prominently, as that's the way consumers have moved. "They prefer one- or two- or five-pounders."

PROLIFERATION OF CHOICE

Sean Balog, director of sales and marketing, Hillside Gardens Ltd., Bradford, Ontario, says retailers can best address the carrot category "as a core destination within the produce department by merchandising all formats together so shoppers can easily choose based on value, convenience or use occasion. Clear signposting that distinguishes between cooking, snacking and specialty options helps simplify the shopping experience."

Balog emphasizes that maintaining freshness through disciplined rotation and clean, full displays is critical, as strong visual quality reinforces carrots' value perception across all formats.

Karen White, vice president of marketing, Bolthouse Fresh Foods, Bakersfield, CA, says merchandising can help consumers get a better sense of all the ways they can use carrots. “Merchandising continues to play an important role in supporting category growth by helping shoppers more easily navigate the carrot set and understand how carrots fit into their routines.”

White says carrots lend themselves naturally to cross-merchandising because of their versatility. “Within the produce department, opportunities alongside fresh dips, hummus, packaged salads, soup ingredients, and entertaining trays help reinforce both snack and meal occasions. In other areas of the store, carrots can also complement proteins, such as beef, for soups and stews, particularly during colder seasons. While execution can vary based on store layout, these adjacencies create inspiration and help shoppers connect carrots to complete meal solutions.”

Since carrots today come in a range of colorful varieties, Matt Hiltner, marketing manager, Babé Farms, Santa Maria, CA,

suggests retailers can use hue to improve the display.

“Babé Farms’ colorful bunched carrots are best displayed together, with each variety arranged to create striking color contrasts,” he says. “Creating a captivating display in the produce department is key to capturing consumer interest and boosting sales.”

However, he adds that making sure the basics are addressed is critical to merchandising, including keeping carrots well misted and properly rotated, trimming carrot tops as needed, clearly differentiating formats as to bulk, baby bunched, hand-peeled and snack sizes.

It’s helpful to “group products in a way that makes usage intuitive,” he adds. “Signage and recipe cards help. When shoppers can quickly understand what each type of carrot is best used for, conversion improves.”

At Grimmway Produce Group, Bakersfield, CA, David Bright, vice president of category management, says putting together merchandising displays that clearly



A wide range of carrot varieties and formats, from bulk to baby, shredded, sticks and organic options, gives shoppers the flexibility to choose based on occasion, convenience and value. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

differentiate products, including organics, can make it simpler for consumers to see what the product category offers.

“Carrots are relatively easy products to merchandise for retailers,” says Bright. “While a wide band of orange in the produce department is a clear signal to shoppers of where to find carrots, retailers can assist shoppers in finding the carrot product they seek and potentially inspire a purchase of a different carrot product by ensuring clearly visible facings of each product. This is especially important to differentiate conventional from organic.”

EMPHASIZING VIRTUES

Carrots combine health and affordability at a time when both wellness and price motivate shoppers.

“To drive volume, retailers should lean into carrots’ role as a nutritious, affordable staple, particularly when consumers are focused on managing total basket spend,” says Hillside Gardens’ Balog. “Secondary displays and seasonal messaging tied to soups, roasting, holidays, and healthy resets can generate incremental sales, while consistent everyday merchandising reinforces carrots as a dependable, year-round essential.

“Balancing strong value messaging with limited, well-placed specialty offerings allows retailers to support both volume and trade-up opportunities without diluting the core category.”

Effective merchandising can make the case for the versatility and applicability of

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WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **To drive volume, retailers should lean into carrots' role as a nutritious, affordable staple, particularly when consumers are focused on managing total basket spend."**

Sean Balog, Hillside Gardens Ltd., Bradford, Ontario

- **"As one of the most versatile vegetables in the produce department, carrots are expanding beyond traditional uses and showing up across more eating occasions throughout the day:"**

Karen White, Bolthouse Fresh Foods, Bakersfield, CA



carrots. "By organizing the set around clear occasions and purposes, retailers can make carrots easier to shop, easier to use, and more relevant across multiple moments throughout the day," says White.

Given their many uses, carrots can be an ideal candidate for cross-merchandising.

"While great on their own, carrots pair well with many items in the produce department and grocery store in general," says Bright. "Shredded carrots are an excellent complement to salads, made at home or purchased in a bag, for additional color and flavor. Baby carrots, sticks and chips are perfectly paired with dips, including ranch, nut butters, hummus and others. This makes for easy snacks or quick entertaining platters."

Past Grimmway research showed higher purchase correlation between carrots and Greek yogurt, indicating an excellent prospect for cross promotion, he adds.

The nature of the commodity gives the carrot particular cross-merchandising advantages. "Carrots lend themselves well to cross-merchandising because they fit into both value-driven meal solutions and healthy snacking occasions," Balog says.

"Within produce, they pair naturally with onions, potatoes and other cooking staples to reinforce economical home-cooked meals, as well as with celery, cucumbers, peppers and dips for snack-tray solutions. Snack carrots also complement packaged salads as an easy add-on for lunches and quick dinners. Outside of produce, carrots can support wellness-oriented displays alongside juicing and smoothie ingredients, such as apples, ginger, and beets."

"Growth in the category is being driven by a combination of usage occasions and pre-cut forms that support convenience and home cooking," says White. "Purpose-driven new items, such as Bolthouse Fresh's Soup n' Stewin' carrots, are designed specifical-



Bulk carrots remain a staple in the produce department, offering an easy option for shoppers seeking freshness and flexibility.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

ly for fall and winter soups and stews, to help reduce prep time and make cooking more approachable. These formats make it easier for shoppers to incorporate carrots into meals by simplifying preparation and supporting everyday cooking."

From a demographic standpoint, Hiltner says, "younger consumers and food-inspired shoppers are driving interest in carrots when paired with sauces and trending ingredients like hot honey, chili crisp, and za'atar spice. At the same time, carrots will always have broad appeal due to their familiarity, value and versatility." **PB**



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Convenience-driven innovation is reshaping the vegetable aisle, as value-added offerings deliver time savings without sacrificing freshness, flavor or nutrition.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Five Ways to Sell More Value-Added Veggies

Fresh-cut and full flavor — convenience is powering sales.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Convenience without compromise is reshaping the produce department's vegetable offerings. Value-added and fresh-cut vegetable products ranging from shopping list staples, such as salad kits, celery sticks, and snipped green beans, to newer offerings, like kits, sauté- and roastable-ready Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and cauliflower florets with restaurant-quality seasonings, are gaining momentum. That's because time-pressed consumers are looking for ways to cook at home without sacrificing freshness, nutrition or flavor.

For some retailers, the strategy is hardly new. Morton Williams Supermarkets, a 17-store chain headquartered in the Bronx, NY, and a subsidiary of Wakefern Food Corp, was selling in-house-cut broccoli and cauliflower florets, pepper rings and zucchini noodles years before national brands scaled the category.

"The advantage is the freshness, the ability to put together different combinations like an eye-catching container of layered white, orange, and purple cauliflower florets, and the margin," says Marc Goldman, produce director. "Even today, in-store prep remains core to the business, but you've got to put the labor into it."

That in-house model now coexists with a rapidly expanded branded landscape.

Retailers increasingly source washed, trimmed and ready-to-use vegetables from grower-shippers and wholesalers with dedicated production facilities. As a result, value-added vegetables accounted for \$11.8 billion in market sales, or nearly three-fourths (72.4%) of value-added produce sales for the 42 weeks ending Nov. 2, 2025,

based on Circana Integrated Fresh data shared by 210 Analytics in San Antonio, TX.

Yet, during this same time, a 0.3% dollar increase came with 0.7% unit and 0.4% volume declines.

"The value-added vegetable category has been flat, not because of lack of interest, but due to price sensitivity, inflation and tighter household budgets," says Christine Jackson, director of sales and marketing for Walter P. Rawl and Sons, in Pelion, SC.

"Shoppers still value convenience, but they're being more selective about how often they buy it."

Here are five ways to maximize sales in this category by giving shoppers what they want.

1. FOCUS ON DEMAND

Demand for fresh-cut and value-added vegetables reflects how well products fit modern households, with shoppers adjusting purchasing habits rather than changing what they eat.

"Our goal is to address access to healthy eating by creating a portfolio of products that cater to all consumers' needs for taste, convenience and price," says Charis Neves, vice president of product and innovation for Taylor Farms, Salinas, CA.

That shift is evident in potatoes, where shippers are investing in value-added potato programs to bring innovation and choice into a traditional staple.

"Microwave-ready potatoes steamed in bags or trays offer consumers a quick solution that can be seasoned to their own preferences," says Christine Lindner, marketing manager for Alsum Farms & Produce, Friesland, WI.

When a seasoning component is included, says Jessica Congdon, category marketing manager for potatoes, Grimmway Produce Group, which represents RPE and Tasteful Selections brands, "consumers are willing to pay more for value-added potato products because it turns potatoes from a simple ingredient into a complete side-dish solution."

Performance data spins a twist on this trend. Fresh-cut organic vegetables posted stronger dollar and unit growth than conventional fresh-cut items, with organic kale, broccoli and potatoes showing gains, according to Nielsen data for the 52 weeks ending Dec. 20, 2025, shared by the Grimmway Produce Group, in Bakersfield, CA.

Value-added veggie meal kits further reflect shifting demand, says Chris Drew, president and chief executive, Ocean Mist Farms, Castroville, CA. "Demand centers on Millennials, 29-44, and Gen X, 45-60, in dual-income households, with growing interest from older Gen Z and smaller households seeking portion control, less waste and weeknight meals."

2. STOCK BEST-SELLERS

Best-selling products tend to share a clear formula: familiar commodities, minimal prep, and versatility across meals and eating occasions.

At Duda Farm Fresh Foods, fresh-cut celery continues to lead the pack. "Our value-added fresh-cut celery is our number one," says Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing and innovation for the Oviedo, FL-headquartered company. "These are followed closely by Ready Radishes, available in pre-washed, pre-cut coins, mini-sticks, and whole formats."

French beans remain a major volume driver for Born Farms by Unispice, in Houston, TX, supported by strong momentum in sugar snap peas, snow peas, baby carrots and Brussels sprouts. "One of our fastest-growing stars is baby corn," says Alexia Safieh, head of communications, citing its visual appeal and popularity in global cuisines.

While Fresh Express plays selectively in the segment, its top performers point to the power of simple formats, such as broccoli and cauliflower florets, sugar snap peas, carrot shreds and stir-fry kits. These items succeed, says Fabian Pereira, vice president of marketing and innovation for the Windermere, FL-headquartered company, "because they reduce prep time, while fitting naturally into multiple eating occasions."

Southern greens anchor sales at WP Rawl, where value-added collards and kale are top sellers, while Taylor Farms continues to see steady demand for chopped and mini chopped salad kits, with flavor-forward options, like Caesar, Sweet Kale, Avocado Ranch, and Mexican Street Corn, leading sales.

Flavor differentiation is also driving growth for Ocean Mist Farms. Within its Roastables Ready-to-Cook Kit line, Lemon Caesar Brussels sprouts, Zesty Herb broc-

coli florets, and Parmesan & Black Pepper cauliflower florets resonate most. "Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, each item features a seasoning crafted specifically for that vegetable," says Lori Bigras, communications manager.

3. TRY WHAT'S NEW

Snackability, speed and flavor define the latest offerings across the value-added and fresh-cut vegetable category.

For example, bite-sized snacking is driving demand for Duda's Dandy-brand Snack-

ing In A Snap! These 2-inch celery dippers are available in 8-ounce and 1.25-pound resealable bags and are designed for dips, charcuterie boards or bento boxes.

Organic convenience is fueling sales at Grimmway Farms' Cal-Organic Farms brand, says David Bright, vice president of category marketing for the Grimmway Produce Group. "Our newer Organic Stemless Kale is gaining interest by removing the central vein, which greatly speeds up prep time, while reducing food waste in the kitchen."

Flavor-forward innovation is front and



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WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Fresh-cut veggies continue to play a key role in keeping vegetables in the shopping cart — especially for busy households — rather than simply replacing whole vegetables one-for-one.”**

Christine Jackson, Walter P. Rawl and Sons, Pelion, SC

- **“Demand centers on Millennials, 29-44, and Gen X, 45-60, in dual-income households, with growing interest from older Gen Z and smaller households seeking portion control, less waste, and weeknight meals.”**

Chris Drew, Ocean Mist Farms, Castroville, CA

center, and a good example is Ippolito International’s new Brussels Bites kits, sold under its Queen Victoria brand. Pre-washed, bite-sized Brussels sprouts come in 13- to 14-ounce bags in Barbecue Cheddar, Garlic Bacon, and Ginger and Sweet Chili.

“We have heard from parents who were happy to have a good tasting, vegetable-based solution for dinner time,” says Lara Grossman, marketing director for the Salinas, CA-headquartered company. “The American consumer palate is growing. Unique, more adventurous flavors are being combined with vegetables.”

F&S Fresh Foods seeks to satisfy shoppers’ global tastes with its fresh-cut veggies combined with chef-style compound butters, sold under the Vineland, NY-based company’s Garden Pure label. These include Green Beans with Soy Ginger Butter, Vegetable Medley with Roasted Garlic Parsley Butter, Sweet Potato with Maple Cinnamon Butter, and Sweet Baby Broccoli with Lemon Shallot Butter, all with 3 to 4 servings per package.

In salads, Fresh Express continues to see best-seller momentum from chopped salad kits inspired by global cuisines. New flavors introduced in 2025 include Orange Sesame and Mediterranean Herb.

Value-added artichokes are expanding usage occasions, says Ocean Mist Farms’ Bigras, pointing to ready-to-cook formats that align with roasting, sautéing, and air-frying trends. “Our first-to-market Heartichokes, tender baby artichoke quarters, transform artichokes from special occasion to special everyday. The three items feature a plain variety, plus products with Lemon Butter and Savory Parm seasoning packs.”

Similarly, Bushman’s Inc. sells small potatoes and seasonings in a No. 5 paper bag under its Country Boy Label. The line includes white B-sized potatoes with salt for recipe-ready New York Salt potatoes, red B-sized potatoes for a crawfish boil, and B-sized yellow potatoes with spicy Cajun seasoning.

“We would love to find a retailer willing to partner with us on this product line,” says Mike Carter, chief executive.

4. SELL MORE

Selling more fresh-cut and value-added vegetables comes down to disciplined execution in merchandising, product handling and promotion.

Color and vertical presentation remain powerful traffic drivers at Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL, where, for example, sliced red peppers, diced onions, and celery are vertically merchandised to maximize visual impact, according to Vince



Time-pressed consumers are looking for ways to cook at home without sacrificing freshness, nutrition or flavor, and “ready-to-cook” or “ready-to-eat” messaging helps value-added vegetables stand out in the produce department.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Mastromauro, director of produce operations. “When merchandised vertically, the colors really pop. Half of selling fresh produce is it being fresh, but it’s also how it’s merchandised.”

Digital engagement now plays a larger role before shoppers even reach the store, says Bright of Grimmway. “Store apps and digital media help drive traffic to specific SKUs through promotions, recipes and product education. In-store signage and pre-bundled meal solutions then reinforce those choices at the shelf.”

Fresh Express’s Pereira stresses strict cold-chain management, frequent rotation and strong placement near bagged salads to reduce shrink and support repeat purchase. “Clear signage highlighting convenience and meal solutions helps convert interest into sales.”

Cross-merchandising and themed promotions further increase basket size. For example, “clear claims, such as ‘ready-to-cook’ and placement near proteins, help shoppers quickly understand value,” says Ocean Mist Farms’ Bigras.

Pair baby corn with baby carrots, suggests Born Farms by Unispice’s Safieh, “or create themed promotions such as a ‘Wok Week,’ featuring sugar snap peas, baby corn, baby carrots, and snow peas together as a ready-to-cook solution.”

5. KEEP AN EYE ON INNOVATION

Innovation is increasingly defined by tighter execution and smarter systems, rather than dramatic reinvention. The focus is on improving reliability, usability and shelf life, while meeting the needs of how consumers shop and cook.

“Innovation is moving toward simple, smart ideas that add value — products that save time, reduce waste, and feel worth the price,” says Walter P. Rawl and Sons’ Jackson. “We’ll see more versatile, craft flavor options, and packaging that keeps products fresh longer while being more sustainable.”

Packaging remains central to that progress.

“Our proprietary breathable films, like Keep-Crisp packaging, allow the optimal balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to circulate, helping greens stay fresh and crisp — without the use of preservatives,” says Fresh Express’ Pereira.

Flavor and preparation are also evolving, with new ways of preparing fresh vegetables in fun ways, according to Ippolito International’s Grossman. “Suppliers are energized to create new flavors using core commodities that are familiar and available.”

Looking ahead, Ocean Mist’s Drew says data-driven development will be essential. “Transforming premium commodities into convenient meal solutions, while maintaining balance, will be key.” **PB**



Organic sweet potatoes have been getting a lot of attention from retailers and consumers because consumers want to eat healthier.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Retailers: Boost Your Sweet Potato Profile

Today's sweet potato buyer is health-conscious and looking for year-round versatility.

BY MIKE DUFF

Sweet potatoes have gained popularity as consumers seek healthy products, so it might be time for produce managers and executives to reexamine the opportunities the commodity offers.

Phil Penta, managing partner, Three Guys from Brooklyn, Brooklyn, NY, says his store combines visibility and bulk displays that let shoppers know the store always has plenty of volume, along with signage that clearly identifies all varieties of root crops he offers in a store with a multi-ethnic clientele.

"At Three Guys from Brooklyn, we stick to our game plan: straightforward, high-volume merchandising that focuses on value, freshness and visibility," says Penta. "We typically offer sweet potatoes in bulk, rather than packaged, since our customers like to select their own, and it helps us keep prices competitive."

"We usually carry the traditional, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes, but when cost and availability allow, we also bring in Japanese

sweet potatoes," Penta adds. "They've really grown in popularity with customers looking for a sweeter, nuttier option, and they shine when roasted. We sometimes carry purple varieties, too, though those are more niche and, again, depend on sourcing and pricing."

Dani Cavagnaro, produce manager for Argus Farm Stop, Ann Arbor, MI, says because the operation, with three outlets, carries only local produce, its sweet potato season is November to February or March, depending on availability. Still, Argus customers not only look forward to sweet potato time, but they are also fond of multiple varieties.

"We have traditional, but we also do purple and Garnet sweet potatoes," she says.

Cavagnaro adds that purple has a particular following for its sweeter, "kickier" flavor and fluffier consistency when cooked.

Argus does bulk merchandising for sweet potatoes and designates varieties of root crops to ensure shoppers have an easy reference. Argus also has an advantage when it comes to helping customers find what they want, Cavagnaro says. "We have a good staff that is very knowledgeable. We can give individual attention to customers."

SALES ARE SWEET

The numbers suggest that putting a little extra effort into sweet potatoes makes sense. According to Circana, total U.S. sweet potato/



The sweet potato customer today includes the traditional and the trend-forward, so be sure your merchandising and promotion is targeting both sets. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

yam sales results from grocery, drug, mass market, military and select club, dollar, beauty and online retailers totaled \$813.6 million, up 8.8% for the 52 weeks ending May 18. The Circana category of red/orangey red flesh sweet potatoes/yams led in sales at \$524.5 million, up 9.7% year over year, with white fresh sweet potatoes/yams following at \$158.9 million, up 10.1% and golden fresh sweet potatoes/yams coming in at \$95.6 million, up 3.1%.

Sand Candy, Rocky Mount, NC, a collaboration between Bland Farms and Battleboro Produce, says the sweet potato customer today includes the traditional and the trend-forward.

"The sweet potato customer has traditionally been a seasonal shopper," says Troy Bland, chief executive of Bland Farms, Glennville, GA, "someone who reaches for this vibrant root vegetable during the holidays, especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas. But that's changing. Today's sweet potato buyer is increasingly health-conscious, diverse in age, and looking for year-round versatility."

Attitudes toward sweet potatoes are influenced by restaurants that have been putting them on the menu more as options for, among others, vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free patrons. As such, Marc Turner, general manager, Bushwick Potato Commission, Farmingdale, NY, says retail, and even foodservice operators, can look to innovative restaurants for ideas about how to boost sweet potato sales.

Bushwick does a significant foodservice business and has seen the impact of items, such as sweet potato fries, acting as a starting point to other dishes.

"I feel that the biggest growth is coming through foodservice," Turner says. "Restaurants that are increasingly using sweet potatoes in their dishes are making the bigger impact."

Susan Noritake, vice president of sales and marketing at Bako Sweet, Bakersfield, CA, says the target audience for sweet potatoes is evolving.

"Sweet potatoes have an opportunity for success with Millennials who are health-conscious and convenience-focused, making

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Retailers having the most success utilize prominent displays for impulse buys in the non-traditional time periods, and there is a real momentum starting in category growth."**

Susan Noritake, Bako Sweet, Bakersfield, CA

- **"The best retailers have placed sweet potatoes in front of the store and have invested in a mix of in-store and digital strategies."**

Michelle Grainger, North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, Benson, NC

packaged products ideal basket builders," she says. "Leaning into the health-conscious mindset across generations, sweet potatoes are a nutritional standout, including supporting healthy aging, meaning there is something for everyone. Retailers having the most success utilize prominent displays for impulse buys in the non-traditional time periods, and there is a real momentum starting in category growth."

Josh Kingdon, founder and chief operating officer of Sweetpotato Awesome, Las Vegas, NV, which freeze-dries fresh products into better-for-you snacks, notes that the range of items using the tuber, from treats to fries, is based on, but also underscores, nutritional value. "Most consumers recognize that they are healthy," he says.

TAP INTO CONVENIENCE FACTOR

David Bradley, director of business development, Nash Produce, Nashville, NC, notes that consumers are interested in health and in flavor, but they're also interested in convenience, so the company offers boxed, individual and 1.5-pound Steamable Sweets mini sweet potatoes in ready-to-microwave packs, as well as four-count trays and 2-, 3- and 5-pound mesh bags.

He emphasizes that offering an attractive product is important to success, but convenience is important to consumers today and can drive growth among those shoppers who prefer grab-and-go items.

"First and foremost now, is convenience," says Bradley. "You want to gear your packaging to where it is consumer convenience-focused, so they don't have to sit there and select through a bunch of sweet potatoes to find the right one."

When it comes to merchandising considerations, Christy Griggs, sales/logistics at Topshaw Farms, Vardaman, MS, says varieties are important in certain cultural and ethnic circumstances. At the same time, younger consumers in general are looking for new, healthy foods, and food retailers can engage their consumer curiosity. Griggs says that will work best when displays are enticing.

"A nice, clean display with added color helps draw attention."

Bland recommends a hybrid approach: "Position sweet potatoes near the regular potato set, but give them distinct signage and space so they don't get visually lost."

He adds that including organic and conventional SKUs side by side can be a smart move, offering shoppers choice, but so is offering items that satisfy different prep preferences, including microwavable, individual, steamable and bagged.

"The most effective retailers treat sweet potatoes not just as a

commodity but as a feature-worthy, versatile staple," says Bland.

Norman Brown, director of sweet potato sales at Wada Farms, headquartered in Idaho Falls, ID, says both conventional and organic sweet potatoes have been coming on, with organic getting a lot of attention from retailers and consumers. He says it relates to consumers wanting to eat healthier, and sweet potatoes are a way to do that.

Brown says sweet potatoes are not only bigger on restaurant menus, but on prepared dishes and meals. In his vicinity, many health-oriented food retailers offer prepared grab-and-go meals these days, "and almost everyone has a sweet potato."

DIVERSIFY YOUR PRODUCT LINE

Where it can be done, says Commissioner Mike Strain, DVM, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF), Baton Rouge, LA, local can be a sweet potato mover, something LDAF heavily supports. And Louisiana growers are innovators who respond to trends, including Garber Farms, Iota, LA.

"What you've seen with Garber Farms, they will individually wrap sweet potatoes," says Strain. "And you can grab as many as you want. They're labeled, they're wrapped, you can cook them. You just grab and go."

When it comes to merchandising, food retailers can employ a range of approaches based on customer base and preferences, says Michelle Grainger, executive director, North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, Benson, NC.

"The best retailers have placed sweet potatoes in front of the store and have invested in a mix of in-store and digital strategies," she says. "They have identified price, nutrition and education around how to cook, store, and prepare the product in an effort to better unlock stronger sales performance. Stores have invested in the spring/summer seasons by having bins and educational materials to increase impulse purchasing. They have used eye-catching bags featuring nutrition information. Cross-merchandising with ingredients commonly used in recipes, such as nuts, herbs, specialty seasonings and cheeses, has proven successful." **PB**

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Retailers can maximize mango sales by creating large displays and placing mangos at the front of the store or endcaps in produce aisles.

PHOTO COURTESY CONTINENTAL FRESH

Mexican Mangos Delight Consumers

Demand drives variety, volume and growth in the United States market.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Producing multiple sizes, varieties, and presentations, Mexico accounts for the largest share of mangos available in U.S. stores, shipping more than 55 million cartons from key production regions in Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán and Sinaloa.

Kent mangos (at 52%), followed by Tommy Atkins (29%), dominate, according to the National Mango Board (NMB), but recent seasons have seen Ataulfo — known in some sections of the industry as Honey — stake an increasing claim (at 16%) in the U.S. market.

Nissa Pierson, who represents Mexican mango grower-exporter Crespo Organic from her base in Healdsburg, CA, and also writes the *Under the Mango Tree* industry blog, says there are good reasons for Ataulfo's growing popularity, citing both the variety's inherent qualities, and its abilities to adapt to a changing climate.

"Ataulfo has been around for a long time — it's a super authentic Mexican mango that has all the flavor that customers are looking for, as well as the ability to combat climate change," she explains. "It has been one of the most successful mangos out of Mexico, although we have a long way to go in making Ataulfo more mainstream."

Although consumer demand for mangos is growing — for the

moment, at least — supply from Mexico's production regions is so abundant that it is overcoming any concerns about the impact of climate change.

"Mexico has a long mango season, from Nayarit in the south to Sinaloa in the north," Pierson says. "Nayarit and Sinaloa overlap when they are at their peak, and volumes are so high that for the moment, climate change doesn't matter. However, southern regions of Mexico, where there is much less infrastructure, are facing a lot of climate change."

SEASONAL AVAILABILITY

Brooke Becker, senior vice president of sales at Oxnard, CA-headquartered Mission Produce, describes Mexico as a cornerstone of Mission's global mango program, offering extended seasonal coverage and a broad mix of varieties that meet diverse market needs.

The company sources Mexican mangos through most of the year, following the harvest from the southern state of Chiapas in February to northern Sinaloa through September. This extended season, Becker says, allows Mission to provide a consistent lineup that includes Kent, Keitt, Tommy Atkins, Ataulfo and Palmer varieties.

"Each variety plays a distinct role in the category," she explains, "from the rich flavor profile and strong shopper recognition of Honey (Ataulfo) mangos early in the season, to the reliable perfor-

mance and versatility of round varieties like Tommy Atkins, Kent, and Keitt as the season progresses.”

According to Becker, the category has seen steady growth, with mangos now ranking as the ninth most-sold fruit in U.S. grocery stores. “Mexican mangos have played a significant role in that evolution, thanks to their long season, consistent quality, and alignment with key cultural and seasonal consumption moments.”

At Rio Rico, AZ-based importer-marketer Ciruli Brothers, the company’s director of marketing and strategic planning, Sandra Aguilar, says domestic sales have evolved from mangos being considered an exotic fruit to becoming a mainstream staple that consumers purchase repeatedly.

According to Aguilar, per capita consumption of mangos in the U.S. has tripled over the past 20 years, although in volume terms, the figure hovers closer to 4 pounds per capita per year. And, she says, there is plenty of opportunity to keep growing demand and driving consumption of this fruit.

Ciruli’s best-selling mango is premium Ataulfo, which it markets under the Champagne brand, followed by a split between Kent, Ataulfo, Tommy Atkins, Keitt and Haden. “Ataulfos are a superb variety, and we handle them with care to ensure retailers and consumers receive the best quality time and again.”

“During the fourth quarter of 2025, there was significant rainfall in the growing regions, so we expect a plentiful volume to kick off our season in February,” she adds. “With production across several states, we can offer multiple promotional opportunities for customers, especially with Champagne mangos, in 2026.”

Making up the largest share of the available mango supply in the U.S., Mexican mangos allow retailers to carry different SKUs at various price points for their customers, thanks to a long March-September season, and the availability of multiple varieties and sizes.

“Mexico offers superior-quality mangos and a sweeter experience for consumers,” Aguilar says. “Because of Mexico’s close proximity to the U.S., mangos can be picked riper and travel a shorter distance from tree to table, resulting in better flavor and more repeat purchases.”

Jonathan Valladares, category manager at Dora, FL-located JC Tropicals, notes Mexico supplies roughly 60-65% of total U.S. mango imports. “Today, the U.S. imports over \$1 billion worth of mangos annually, with Mexico accounting for the majority of that volume and value.”

A key factor in the growth has been an extended seasonality across multiple growing regions in Mexico, providing nearly nine months of supply. He also cites changing demographics and tastes, with increased demand for tropical flavors.

Although JC carries all standard mango varieties, Valladares says a newer variety, Mallika, is gaining attention. “It’s a premium, fiberless mango with excellent sweetness and aroma, and it addresses some of the eating-quality concerns of more tradi-

tional varieties,” he explains. “While volumes are still limited, it’s starting to appear as a specialty option.”

PRICING PLAYS KEY ROLE

Another major player in the market is Coral Gables, FL-based Continental Fresh, a company that imports varieties like Tommy, Kent, Keitt, and Ataulfo between February and September every year, starting from Chiapas in the far south and ending with Sinaloa in the northwest.



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WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“When mangos are featured at prices near \$1 each, sales volumes jump markedly. However, mangos are becoming a staple item, so demand is constant.”**

Robert Cabili, Continental Fresh, Coral Gables, FL

- **“Mexican mangos benefit from strong familiarity among shoppers and consistent eating quality, which supports repeat purchases across retail and foodservice channels.”**

Brooke Becker, Mission Produce, Oxnard, CA



According to Continental’s vice president of sales and development, Robert Cabili, pricing plays a key role in driving mango sales, as competitive pricing and promotions help spike demand. “When mangos are featured at prices near \$1 each, sales volumes jump markedly.”

“However, mangos are becoming a staple item, so demand is constant,” he adds. “Retailers now plan big mango promotions year-round and through key holidays.”

Rather than focusing on price alone, Becker says Mission views performance as being closely tied to quality, ripeness and promotion timing. “Mexican mangos benefit from strong familiarity among shoppers and consistent eating quality, which supports repeat purchases across retail and foodservice channels.”

MERCHANDISING FRONT AND CENTER

According to Becker, ripeness-led merchandising continues to be one of the most effective ways to grow mango sales, with an estimated 67% of mango shoppers eating their fruit within two days of purchase. This factor, she says, makes ripe mangos — particularly stages 3 and 4 — ideal for front-of-store displays and secondary placements.

“Ripeness is also the top factor shoppers consider when selecting a quality mango, and peak ripeness delivers peak flavor, which is the No. 1 purchase driver for the category,” Becker says. Mission supports ripe merchandising with customer-specific ripe mango programs, using state-of-the-art ripening technology.

Another important area for Mission in driving the mango category forward is packaging innovation. To meet demand for value-pack opportunities, the company has developed its Honey Mango Clamshell and Retail Ready Mango Bag, which Becker says are lifting volume and dollar sales without cannibalizing bulk purchases.

At Ciruli, Aguilar identifies a direct correlation between display size and sales. For example, she says a 4-by-4-foot display will attract less attention than a larger 8- or 10-foot display in the produce section. “We have always advocated for increased shelf space to drive sales.

“Although there are various promotional periods during the season, May through August are excellent months for promotions because multiple varieties are available at the same time, and volume is plentiful.”

Cabili at Continental suggests retailers can maximize mango



Mexico supplies the majority of U.S. mangos each year, shipping more than 55 million cartons across multiple regions and varieties, with Kent and Tommy Atkins leading volume, and Ataulfo steadily gaining market share. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

sales by creating large displays and placing mangos in store-front or endcaps in produce aisles. He says placement with complementary items, like avocados, pineapples, citrus and other tropical fruits has also shown to be impactful. Cabili also recommends adding clear variety info and ripening tips, as well as cutting instructions and recipe cards, to educate shoppers on selecting and using mangos.

Highlighting sustainability projects, like Continental’s own Fresh Water For All mango program — an initiative which supports clean water and sanitation in Latin American communities — is another effective way of both inspiring consumers and driving mango sales, Cabili adds.

PERFECT COMBINATIONS

As a highly versatile product, mangos pair naturally with a wide range of fresh and center-store items, according to Becker, who cites popular cross-merchandising opportunities, such as avocados, limes, onions, peppers, and cilantro for fresh salsas, as well as berries and tropical fruits for smoothies and fruit bowls.

Seasonal events, like Cinco de Mayo, which Mission sees as the biggest mango consumption event of the year, open the door for strategic cross-promotions to help reinforce mangos as both a flavorful and functional ingredient, encouraging shoppers to buy with a recipe or occasion in mind, Becker adds.

However, while promotions are undoubtedly effective, Valladares at JC believes the real game changer for Mexican mangos has been the existence of a long window. It has allowed mangos to move from a seasonal item to a staple found in homes across the country.

“Mexican mangos sell extremely well in the U.S.,” Valladares adds. “One major advantage is proximity — shorter transit times mean lower freight costs and fresher fruit. Because the fruit doesn’t have to travel as far, it can be harvested closer to optimal ripeness, which improves eating quality. Pricing always matters, but freshness and consistency give Mexican mangos a strong edge.”

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Fueled by versatility, smart merchandising, and value for today's health- and budget-conscious consumers, peanuts are shining in the produce department. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

Peanuts Step Into the Spotlight

Peanuts are evolving into a protein-powered destination category.

BY CHUCK GREEN

Peanuts are much more than a mere bag of shells. A year-round part of the diet in the U.S., a large portion of peanuts are eaten as snacks and in peanut butter, according to the American Peanut Shellers Association. They're also consistently included in the menus of the foodservice industry.

The fact that peanuts are versatile in various cuisines and their incorporation into on-trend dishes that click with diverse consumer preferences plays a key part of the consumption trend.

"Peanuts are no longer a seasonal or secondary item in produce;

they're becoming a true destination category," says Eric Boonshaft, director of marketing at Hampton Farms in Raleigh, NC. "The most effective marketing strategies lean into experience and nostalgia, while keeping a modern, clean look. In-shell peanuts especially benefit from storytelling around sports, family gatherings and everyday snacking."

Roxana Ehsani, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN, Registered Dietitian nutritionist and board-certified sports dietitian, recommends people buy peanuts because they contain a mixture of healthy fats, fiber and plant protein. "They make for a nutritious snack over a processed food, such as chips, and provide you a trio of nutrients to support overall health."

Eating peanuts as a snack, continues Ehsani, located in Miami, "can help support healthy blood sugar levels thanks to their combo of nutrients, (such as) fat, fiber and protein." They also contain micro-nutrients like biotin, vitamin E, and B vitamins.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Peanuts remain one of the most accessible and affordable protein sources in the produce department.”**
Eric Boonshaft, Hampton Farms, Raleigh, NC
- **“Gen Z has a growing interest in protein and low sugar foods, which aligns perfectly with the 7 grams of plant-based protein and 0 grams of sugar that peanuts deliver.”**
Dena Malsom, National Peanut Board, Marietta, GA

UPDATE YOUR MARKETING

Even with the most insatiable appetite for them, one way to help keep peanuts front and center among consumers is spot-on marketing. Tailoring marketing strategies to address consumers' evolving needs — those of Millennials and Gen Z, in particular, both of whom increasingly opt for peanuts as a protein-rich snack — is paramount.

“Gen Z has a growing interest in protein and low sugar foods, which aligns perfectly with the 7 grams of plant-based protein and 0 grams of sugar that peanuts deliver,” says Dena Malsom, vice president of marketing and communications at the National Peanut Board in Marietta, GA.

MERCHANDISING ANOTHER KEY

Merchandising is another key driver of peanut sales. Josh Christensen, vice president of marketing at Genius Gourmet, Coeur d'Alene, ID, says secondary placements, endcaps, produce-adjacent snack zones and front-of-store features, “appear to create incremental lift versus static shelf placement.”

He says seasonal storytelling, such as back-to-school, new year wellness, summer travel and sports moments, “can refresh the set without changing core SKUs.”

“The most successful merchandising strategies focus on visibility and simplicity,” says Hampton Farms' Boonshaft. Large-format dump bins in produce, cross-merchandising near beer and beverages, and secondary placements near front-end or seasonal displays all drive impulse purchases.

Boonshaft notes retailers are finding success with themed displays: “Game Day Snacks,” “Backyard BBQ Essentials,” or “Healthy Everyday Snacking.”

“Clear signage highlighting protein content, freshness and simple ingredients helps reposition peanuts as a produce item, rather than just a packaged snack,” he says.

Peanuts are showing rising repeat purchases and loyalty, according to 2025 Nielsen Consumer NIQ data, creating opportunities for peanut-centric brands to unlock growth using merchandising strategies that focus on driving both penetration and buy rate, reports the American Peanut Board.

Appealing to specific lifestyles can also increase impact and success, especially when integrating across marketing tactics from digital in-store, brand pages, display ads, social, recipes, influencers and other paid media.

Meantime, the palate's never far from any conversation involving peanuts — or any food, for that matter.

“Younger consumers and families are also experimenting more



A strong in-store presentation highlights the versatility of peanuts in the produce department. PHOTO COURTESY HAMPTON FARMS

— they're looking for bold flavors, but still want recognizable, clean ingredients,” explains Boonshaft. “Offering a mix of traditional and adventurous flavors allows retailers to appeal to multiple demographics within the same display.”

WHO'S BUYING

Various demographics, with wide variations seen among different racial and ethnic groups, influence which peanuts are consumed in the U.S., reports Expana, which provides commodity price data, forecasts and intelligence.

The rates of the consumption of peanuts varied by race and ethnicity, according to a study presented at the 2025 American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology/World Allergy Organization Joint Congress. Non-Hispanic white participants report 50% to 100% higher consumption than non-Hispanic Black or Mexican American participants.

RELIABLE VALUE

On another front, you're likely all too aware that inflation and broader economic pressures are touching nearly everything — peanuts included.

“From both supplier and retailer perspectives, peanuts have become a reliable value item during inflationary periods,” says Boonshaft. Compared to many center-store snacks, peanuts offer a strong price-per-serving and nutritional value, which resonates with cost-conscious consumers.

“Shoppers might cut back on dining out, but they're still entertaining at home — and peanuts fit perfectly into that shift,” he adds.

For retailers, peanuts offer strong margins, long shelf life, and minimal shrink, making them a smart category to expand even during economic uncertainty.

And let's not overlook peanut butter. Mari Fassett, founder and chief executive, MARIMIX Crunch-Baked Snackmix, explains, “Peanut butter is one of the smartest value ingredients in snackmix — it delivers big flavor and staying power without a premium price. Even in an inflationary environment, we've seen peanut butter pricing essentially flat year-over-year with supply remaining steady and demand very resilient.”

PB

Investor Expectations Are Changing Produce Operations

BY MARIA DESARBO

Not long ago, outside investment in produce businesses followed a familiar pattern. Investors focused on growth potential, customer relationships, and whether the numbers penciled out. Operational details mattered, but they were often secondary to volume, margins and market opportunity.

Today, that equation has changed. As more private equity and institutional capital enters the produce sector, investor expectations have expanded beyond financial performance.

Increasingly, they want to understand how a business truly operates, especially when it comes to data, traceability and governance. For operators, recognizing these expectations early can make future partnerships far more productive.

A decade ago, many investors viewed food

safety, compliance, and systems as boxes to check. If audits were passed and issues were rare, that was often enough. Now, those same areas are evaluated as indicators of operational maturity and risk management. Investors are less interested in whether a company looks good on paper and more interested in whether it can perform consistently under real-world pressure.

SHOW ME THE DATA

One of the most noticeable shifts is the emphasis on data. Produce businesses have always been information-heavy, but much of that knowledge has historically resided in people, rather than in systems. That approach can work, until it doesn't.

Investors today expect timely, accurate visibility into inventory, quality and performance across facilities and seasons. This is not about having the most sophisticated technology, but about having data that is reliable, repeatable and accessible when decisions need to be made.

Traceability has followed a similar path. What was once viewed primarily as a regulatory obligation is now widely seen as a core operating capability. Investors understand that recalls, quality issues and supply disruptions are not hypothetical risks in produce, they are well-known and ongoing realities.

They want confidence that traceability systems are embedded into daily operations, not assembled only when an audit or emer-

gency occurs. Strong traceability demonstrates discipline, coordination and readiness — qualities that matter far beyond compliance.

WHO MAKES DECISIONS

Governance is another area where expectations have quietly, but significantly, evolved. Clear ownership structures, defined decision-making authority, and documented processes are no longer seen as “corporate” formalities. They are viewed as safeguards.

In produce businesses that grew quickly, or were founder-led, governance often developed informally. Investors today recognize this pattern, but they also expect progress toward clearer accountability as companies scale.

From an operator's perspective, these expectations can feel daunting at first. Many produce businesses have been built through hard work, relationships and problem-solving, rather than formal systems. But experience shows that addressing these areas proactively often improves the business, regardless of investment outcomes.

Better documentation reduces confusion. Clear roles speed decisions. Strong systems free teams to focus on customers and products instead of constant firefighting.

FROM FIELD TO FUND

For companies considering outside capital, the most valuable preparation often happens before any formal discussions begin.

Taking an honest look at operational blind spots, strengthening food safety and traceability practices, and ensuring the business does not rely too heavily on a handful of individuals, can make a meaningful difference. These steps signal readiness, but they also build resilience in an industry where conditions change quickly.

The relationship between produce operators and investors has matured. Capital today is more engaged, more informed, and more attuned to operational risk than in the past. That shift brings higher expectations, but it also creates opportunities for stronger partnerships.

When operators understand what investors are looking for, and investors respect the realities of produce operations, the result is not just growth, but more durable, well-run businesses from field to fund.

PB

Maria DeSarbo is president of Carbonella & DeSarbo, Inc. in Branford, CT.

Investors are less interested in whether a company looks good on paper and more interested in whether it can perform consistently under real-world pressure.



The Foundation for Fresh Produce is the solution for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.

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Bananas Hold ‘Top-Of-The-Fruits’ Position

BY ADRIANO DI DIA

Fyffes has released recent European-wide consumer research that confirms the popularity of bananas as the consumer’s No. 1 favorite fruit.

The research, undertaken by NielsenIQ with more than 7,000 consumers across Europe, shows that bananas continue to be the public’s favorite fruit, with a massive 89% of consumers confirming that they have eaten bananas within the previous four weeks.

Second favorite at 75% are apples, followed in third place by oranges at 56%, and in fourth place, grapes at 44%.

We are thrilled that bananas are the favorite fruit of consumers with the highest household penetration across Europe. It is a testament to a fruit that is tasty, nutritious, convenient and sustainable. The research not only confirms banana popularity, but also gives us very valuable insights that guide us in the development of marketing strategies and



market expansion plans. We’re delighted to share it with the sector and our retail partners.

Another measure in which bananas outranked all other fruits surveyed was under the heading of “Consumption Frequency.” In this, bananas returned the highest position, out-placing all others under every heading with an “at least” weekly (72%), monthly (95%) and quarterly (98%) consumption figure.

Viewed from a different perspective, this shows that three out of four consumers profess to eating bananas weekly (at least), with nine out of 10 doing so monthly.

Another feature revealed in the survey shows that a significant 59% of consumers admitted to “not remembering” the price they had paid for their most recent banana purchase, reducing to 27% who “roughly remembered” and 14% who recalled the “exact price” they had paid.

In all, 13 fruits were surveyed, ranked in descending order of consumer choice for consumption in the past six months as follows: banana (95%), apple (89%), oranges (74%), grapes (74%), berries (71%), pear (64%), melon (60%), lemon (60%), avocado (58%), pineapple (57%), peach (45%), mango (43%), and papaya (10%).

Asked why they consume bananas, survey respondents ranked “to satisfy my appetite” highest at 34%, followed by “to have a convenient and quick snack” at 27%, and “to support my healthy diet” in third place at 24%.

Other points of interest revealed in the survey show that, for the majority of consumers, bananas are a “planned in advance” purchase at 65% upward.

While a majority of those surveyed prefer to eat their banana when fully “ripe yellow” skinned, a significant number (22%)



Of 13 fruits surveyed, the top five ranked in descending order of consumer choice for consumption in the past six months are: banana (95%), apple (89%), oranges (74%), grapes (74%), and berries (71%).

preferred bananas that are “more green than yellow” at the time of purchase. **PB**

Adriano Di Dia is chief marketing officer with Fyffes. Conducted in March 2025, this survey is part of Fyffes’ ongoing market research program. Recent marketing initiatives from Fyffes include their ongoing “Eat’em, Like’em, Love’em” marketing campaign, launched in Ireland in September 2025 and due to launch soon in the U.K. Trudi’s, the “banana brand that gives back” of the Fyffes group, launched in Norway in June 2025 with its new campaign “Little Voices” in out of home and social media, showcasing the impact of bananas in the communities where the fruit is grown.

Food Trends to Watch in 2026

BY NOVELLA LUI

As we enter 2026, the foodservice landscape continues to evolve, shaped by wellness priorities, the pursuit of global flavors, and technological advancements. I've identified five key trends shaping the food scene this year.



FIBERMAXXING YOUR MENU

Fibermaxxing, or loading up on fiber-rich foods, is one of the biggest nutrition priorities this year because of growing interest in gut health. Including fiber-rich foods, such as produce, to meals and snacks can help with regularity and feeling full, and may lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease and colon cancer.

While one out of 20 Americans meets the minimum daily recommended fiber intake, many want nutritious options that still taste good. Using produce strategically in menus is one of the most effective and consumer-friendly ways for the foodservice industry to boost people's dietary fiber intake.

Consider evaluating the sensory and textural attributes of existing dishes and reformulating them with hidden or blended produce — adding mushrooms, carrots or onions to ground meat for meatballs, tacos and burger patties — and adding vegetable purees to curries, gravies and pasta sauces, to name a few.

BOOST BRAIN HEALTH

Studies show that eating lots of plant-based foods, like vegetables and fruits, may support brain health. For instance, leafy greens and berries have antioxidants that may protect brain cells from damage and inflammation.

Broccoli, kale and spinach provide nutrients, like vitamin K, folate and lutein, which may help with memory. Citrus fruits and berries have flavonoids and polyphenols that may improve focus and support long-term brain health.

You can make wellness part of your customers' meals by offering dishes that support brain health. Try adding spinach or kale to wraps, pasta and omelets, serving roasted broccoli as a side, or using sweet potato or pumpkin puree in baked goods.

If you are looking to develop a brain-friendly, nutritious drink, consider using colorful produce with vibrant colors, such as beets, blood oranges and red berries, since many consumers are interested in their health benefits. For example, you could make refreshing and visually striking smoothies with beets and berries, or with blueberries and spinach.

PRIORITIZE PLANT-BASED INGREDIENTS

Most people know that plant-based foods are nutritious, but many now prefer natural foods over products that use plant-based ingredients as substitutes. They want foods that are naturally and minimally processed, according to Innova Market Insights' *Top Food and Beverage Trends 2026*.

This could be an opportunity to create new menu items, like mixing fresh cauliflower and peas with pasta to improve its nutrient density.

GLOBAL FLAVORS CONTINUE TO INSPIRE

Global flavors are shaping modern dining by updating menu items without needing to change foodservice operations completely. Adding global flavors keeps menus interesting and lets you offer new tastes, textures, and cooking techniques that meet customer expectations.

In particular, more people want dishes that show real cultural roots and authenticity. When you prepare menu items with respect for cultural traditions, you help customers discover and connect with other cultures, which also builds trust in your business.

Many world cuisines have long featured vegetables as main dishes, like Korean kimchi and West African okra stew. These food items are emerging as popular dishes as those cuisines become available in the country.

At the same time, globalization, travel and social media influence fusion flavors. According to Innova Market Insights, 60% of consumers are willing to try traditional flavors with a modern twist. Some examples of vegetable-focused dishes that combine global flavors with conventional vegetables are gochujang-glazed Brussels sprouts, harissa-roasted carrots, turmeric-roasted cauliflower, and tamarind-glazed eggplants.

When adding global flavors to your menu, remember to understand, respect and credit the cultures you draw from.

INTEGRATE AI INTO FOODSERVICE OPERATIONS

Finally, artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming a part of everyday life and business. According to Datassential, quick service and fast-casual food businesses are the leaders in implementing AI in their operations, such as automating ordering, to streamline kitchen and front-of-house processes, improving efficiency and reducing costs.

Adopting AI in foodservice operations may also improve food safety, food quality, production, and more. When you incorporate this emerging and rapidly evolving technology as part of your operations and management, you can analyze what your customers like, come up with new recipe ideas, and suggest ways to add vegetables and fruits without increasing costs.

It becomes your collaborator and brainstorm partner, recommending ways to boost the nutritional value of your dish, tracking produce use to manage inventory, and helping you identify ingredients before they spoil that you could use to create one-off, special menu items. **PB**

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

Duda Farm Fresh Foods Celebrates Century of Fresh Thinking

Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL, a grower and processor of fresh vegetables, celebrates its centennial anniversary in 2026, marking a century of leadership in celery innovation, family farming, industry leadership and sustainable growth.

It all started in 1926 when Andrew Duda purchased 40 acres of farmland, and his sights were set on the American dream. The company has spanned six family generations, with five generations actively shaping their approach to growing, harvesting, and delivering high-quality fresh produce.

In 1953, Duda officially launched the Dandy brand, and in 1979, Duda expanded fields beyond Florida and began to offer celery, citrus, radishes, sweet corn, lettuce and more.

From its early adoption of advanced farming practices to the development of fresh-cut solutions and waterjet cutting technology,



In 1926, Andrew Duda took his first cart of celery to market, the start of what was to become Duda Farm Fresh Foods. Pictured is Andy Duda Sr. PHOTOS COURTESY DUDA



This photo was on the cover of the Orlando Sentinel Star: Florida Magazine (Oct. 25, 1981). Ferdinand Duda was walking in the fields of the Duda family's Zellwood, FL, farm, holding the hand of his grandson, Stephen Hrncir. The article within that publication was titled, "The Duda Dynasty."

Duda has maintained a steady focus on improving flavor, efficiency and consumer satisfaction.

"Reaching 100 years is a milestone we owe to our dedicated team, strong industry partnerships, and commitment to innovation, all rooted in the Duda family's unwavering dedication to quality, sustainability, and feeding families for generations," says Mark Bassetti, president of Duda Farm Fresh Foods. "As we honor our 100-year legacy, we remain focused on growing the future through innovation, sustainability and family values."

The company says its valued partners, the produce industry, and its dedicated team of employees, are the driving force behind its success.

The year-long celebration will feature advertising, retailer mailouts this spring, print and digital communications, new packaging rollout this summer, and a grand finale celebration at the IFPA Global Produce & Floral Show in October.

"Partnering with Duda means more than premium produce, it's a partnership built on an entire century of trust, reliability, and fresh thinking," notes Bassetti. "We are excited to celebrate this incredible milestone and the next 100 years." **PB**

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