

PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

Sonya Constable
Stefanie Katzman

MAY 2026
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2026 RETAIL SUSTAINABILITY AWARD

FIVE STARS FOR NATURAL GROCERS

Colorado store shines for its commitment to its five pillars and an organic-first retail experience.



PROCUREMENT
Sweet Corn

MERCHANDISING
Guacamole
Stone Fruit

RISING RETAILER
Fresh Grocer of Upper Darby

REGIONAL PROFILE
Chicago



 Dole Food Company

Learn
More!



Fresh Mangoes

From Mexico, Central & South America



Dole's seamless sourcing ensures a steady supply of high-quality mangoes: consistent in size and improved sweetness.



COVER STORY

16 ROOTED IN SUSTAINABILITY

As 2026's Retail Sustainability Award recipient, Natural Grocers committed to organic-first retail experience.

IN THIS ISSUE

- 4 PB QUIZ
- 10 PRODUCE WATCH
- 11 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE
Six Strategies for Boosting Produce Consumption
- 58 INFORMATION SHOWCASE
- 58 BLAST FROM THE PAST
Richter and Company: A Century of Growing

FEATURES

- 20 THE STATE OF CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENTAL AGRICULTURE
There are many opportunities for retail and foodservice in CEA.
- 24 STATE AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS DRIVE PRODUCE SALES
State-backed branding is transforming local produce.
- 29 GUIDE TO PRODUCE INDUSTRY CAREER DEVELOPMENT
Leadership programs cultivate new talent and shape industry survival.
- 33 THE MIDWEST PRODUCE NETWORK
Produce from Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin keeps retail competitive.
- 43 SIX WAYS TO PUT AN OLÉ IN RETAIL GUACAMOLE SALES
This modern favorite is fueling demand through convenience and flavor innovation.



DEPARTMENTS

MERCHANDISING REVIEW

48 STONE FRUIT: WINNER ACROSS DEMOGRAPHICS

The U.S. delivers a steady stream of high-quality peaches, plums, apricots and nectarines.

PROCUREMENT

52 ROCKY START TO SWEET CORN SEASON

Weather disruptions tighten early supplies and drive record pricing.



SPECIAL FEATURES

- 6 CELEBRATING 40 YEARS: PEOPLE OF PURPOSE
- 38 CHICAGO: 'MY KIND' OF PRODUCE TOWN
The city's food scene fuels strong demand for fresh produce.

RISING RETAILER

13 AT THE FRESH GROCER, PRODUCE IS KEY

Diversity helps PA independent move a large volume of produce.



COMMENTARY

- 12 VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY
From Commodity to Culture
- 54 WHOLESALE MARKET
Prevent Losses in the Produce Supply Chain
- 56 PRODUCE ON THE MENU
Produce Has Sex Appeal — It's Time to Stop Looking Away
- 57 EUROPEAN MARKET
Half of Groceries Sold in Europe are Private Label



THIS MONTH'S WINNER

MILLY MCDUGAL
Buyers Assistant
Bozzuto's
North Haven, CT

Milly McDougal may not have started her career in produce, but today, as a buyers assistant at Bozzuto's in North Haven, CT, she's immersed in the fresh produce industry.

Her typical day includes manually entering purchase orders across a wide range of vendors, while assisting buyers in day-to-day procurement on dozens of items. At the same time, she keeps a close eye on fluctuating market prices across multiple commodities.

For those new to the industry, McDougal offers this advice: "Do not blink, and keep your head on a swivel. With the summer season approaching, the produce industry gets busy. Every day is different. Be prepared for changes and adapt quickly."

As warmer weather approaches, she sees strong momentum in organic products, along with continued consumer interest

in fresh, convenient, grab-and-go options. "Consumers are also looking for fresh products and, simply, to-go items."

Over time, McDougal has gained knowledge by staying engaged with market trends and learning on the job. One of the aspects she values most is the opportunity to work alongside seasoned industry professionals. Their experience and insight, she says, have been instrumental in her development.

Outside of work, McDougal likes going on vacations, going on hikes, working out, and confesses, "I enjoy my quiet time."

She also turns to PRODUCE BUSINESS as a source of inspiration. "The magazine is loaded with fresh, innovative ideas with every month's issue," she says. "I always enjoy seeing the outstanding merchandising in the magazine. I also enjoy reading the history of where and when the growers started and how they have grown and expanded since their beginning."

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

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

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QUESTIONS FOR THE MAY ISSUE

- 1) What is the email address to obtain information about Dole's Fresh Mangoes? _____
- 2) Who is the Secretary of Agriculture for the New Jersey Department of Agriculture? _____
- 3) Which company is advertising its Produce Packaging High-Output Automated Solutions? _____
- 4) Which Detroit-based company has provided Fresh Produce for Over a Century? _____
- 5) How many ways are there "to Put an Ole in Retail Guacamole Sales"? _____
- 6) What is the sales office phone number for Galera Fresh? _____

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Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

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Answer and submit your entry online at www.producebusiness.com/quiz



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As a health-allied foundation that is an extension of the world's largest produce trade association, The International Fresh Produce Association, **The Foundation for Fresh Produce can make connections and unify efforts that no one else can.**

Together, we can increase fruit and vegetable consumption and change the trajectory of human health.



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Rethinking Retail Talent Acquisition and Leadership

BY SONYA CONSTABLE

In the ever-evolving landscape of fresh produce retail, talent acquisition and leadership are experiencing significant change. Over the past two decades, the industry has broadened its view — moving beyond a sole focus on deep category expertise to appreciating the value that diverse backgrounds and strong business acumen contribute. Having entered the produce world

from a nontraditional path, I've seen how openness to new perspectives benefits our teams, strategies and overall success.



A NEW ERA

Historically, produce departments were led by individuals who developed their expertise over long careers in the field. Product knowledge, a grasp of seasonality, and experience with the challenges of perishables were seen as leadership essentials. These skills are still

incredibly valuable, but retail is increasingly open to leaders with different backgrounds — those who bring business experience, curiosity, and a focus on customers.

At Sprouts, we've found adding team members who have proven track records of success as business leaders helps us round out our overall team's skillset. They are curious, adaptable and eager to dig into the complexities of a new industry. This shift doesn't diminish the value of produce veterans — in fact, it highlights the importance of blending their expertise with fresh perspectives. The result is a team that is not only knowledgeable, but also agile, innovative and deeply attuned to the needs of our customers.

One of the most rewarding aspects of leading a produce team today is the opportunity to build a group that draws on a wide range of experiences. On my own team, I've seen the power of combining produce veterans with individuals who have strong process skills or business backgrounds. The veterans provide invaluable industry knowledge, while those from other sectors challenge us to think differently and apply new strategies. This makes us all better at what we do.

This cross-pollination of ideas is essential for staying competitive in a dynamic market. It encourages continuous learning and helps us avoid the pitfalls of routine thinking. By fostering an environment where everyone can teach and learn from one another, we create a culture of growth that benefits both our team members and our customers.

DEVELOPING LEADERS

Leadership in today's produce retail environment is about more than managing operations — it's about developing people. At Sprouts, we invest in our team's growth by leveraging industry training programs and encouraging movement across departments. Whether it's transitioning from analytics to merchandising or from frozen foods to produce, these opportunities help our employees build a broad skillset and prepare for future leadership roles.

While we don't have a formal internal leadership development program specific to produce, we make use of excellent resources available through industry organizations. These programs not only provide technical training, but also foster connections with peers across the sector, enriching our collective knowledge and strengthening our leadership pipeline.

One of the challenges we face as an industry is attracting young talent. Many people simply aren't aware of the exciting opportunities that exist in fresh produce retail. Outreach — whether through college campus visits, internships, or community engagement — is critical to building awareness and interest. We need to help the next generation see that this is a vibrant, dynamic field where they can make a real impact on customers' lives.

ADVICE FOR INDUSTRY LEADERS

For those in a position to influence hiring and team development, my advice is simple: Be open-minded. Don't let traditional expectations limit your search for talent. Give people with diverse backgrounds a chance — they may surprise you in the best possible way. Take the time to get to know your team members and invest in their growth at every level, not just among your direct reports.

Encourage your employees, especially those new to the industry, to pull up a seat at the table. Confidence and initiative are key to success, and it's our job as leaders to create an environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute.

The fresh produce retail industry is at a crossroads, and the choices we make about talent acquisition and leadership will shape our future. By embracing diversity, fostering continuous learning, and remaining open to new ideas, we can build teams that are not only prepared for today's challenges, but also poised to lead the industry forward.

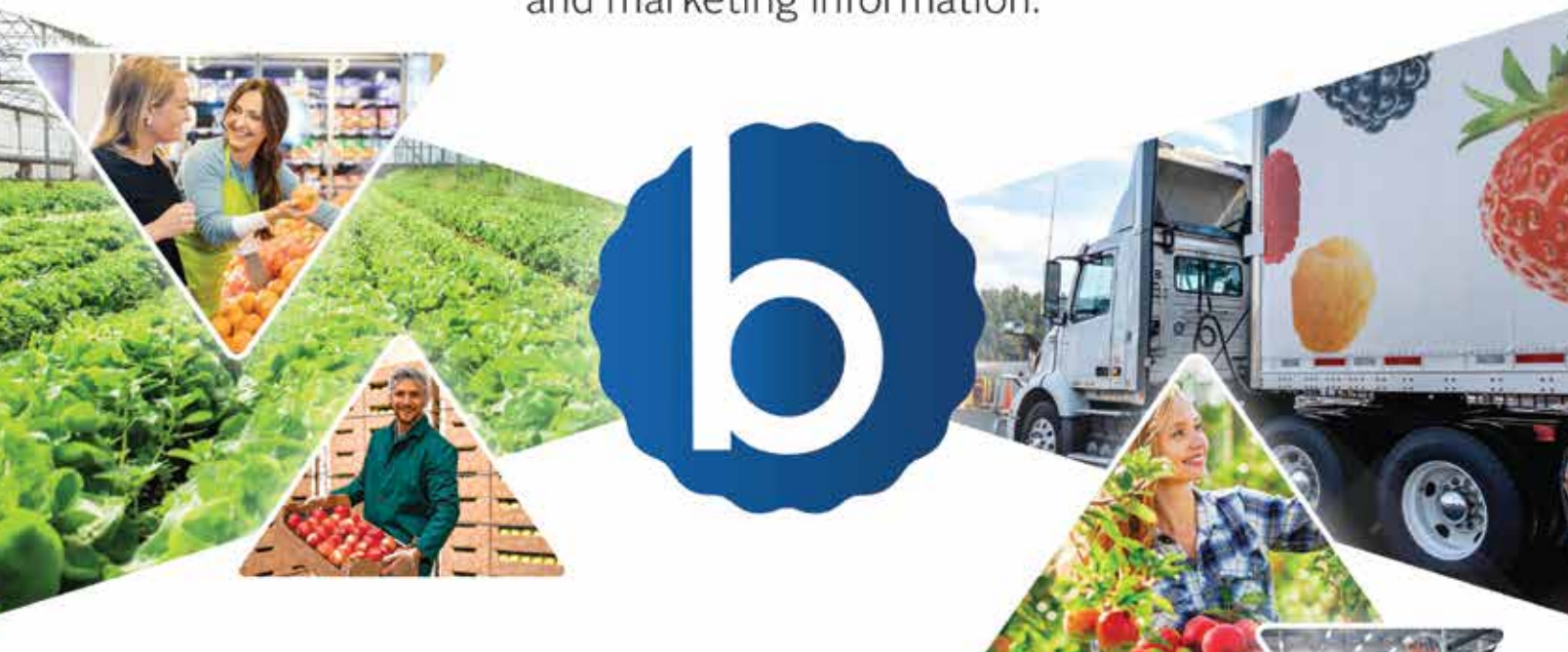
As we continue to evolve, let's remember that our greatest strength lies in our people — their unique backgrounds, their willingness to learn, and their shared commitment to serving our customers. That's the recipe for lasting success in fresh produce retail.

Sonya Constable is vice president of produce for Sprouts Farmers Market Inc., a supermarket chain headquartered in Phoenix, AZ, with stores in 23 states nationwide.

Retail is increasingly open to leaders with different backgrounds — those who bring business experience, curiosity, and a focus on customers.

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Five Tips for Building a Career in the Produce Industry

BY STEFANIE KATZMAN

Starting out in any industry, especially one as dynamic and fast-paced as the produce business, can be a whirlwind. Today, I am the chief executive of Katzman's family of companies, leading teams of approximately 500 people across multiple companies spanning the produce supply chain. Yet, I can still remember my earliest days when I joined Katzman Produce 24 years ago: trying to get my hands dirty, absorb everything, make a good impression, and prove myself.



Looking back, there are a few key things I did that set me up for success. Here are my top five tips for building a career in the produce industry.

1. ACTIVELY LISTEN AND TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE "WHY"

When beginning your career, listening is your superpower — specifically active listening: paying attention not only to what is said, but why it's said. Our industry has so many seasoned produce experts with knowledge and experience to share, and these people are the best resources. Listen to your managers, watch how decisions get made, and ask thoughtful follow-up questions.

Understanding your company's — and the greater industry's — ecosystem helps you become more capable and confident, and provides a strong foundation for the rest of your career.

Understanding your company's — and the greater industry's — ecosystem helps you become more capable and confident, and provides a strong foundation for the rest of your career.

2. CHASE EXPERIENCE, NOT TITLES

The most valuable way to start your career is by gaining as much experience as possible. I recommend learning everything you can in your current role, and also being open to making lateral moves to other roles and departments within your company, where you can broaden your perspective, understand different parts of the business, and gain insight into how everything works together to run the operation.

This cross-functional foundation is so helpful in developing as a leader, elevating the way you're able to think about the business and interact with people throughout the organization. During these earlier years, in some cases, a lateral move could even be more beneficial than a higher title, heightening your potential due to the increased experience.

3. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, THE EARLIER THE BETTER!

Relationships are everything in our business. Building connections and a positive reputation takes time, so start early. Be open, curious, and outgoing. Show up to events, network with people at your company and throughout the produce industry (those you do — and even those you don't — do business with) and help others whenever you can.

As you build your network, you'll have more contacts and re-

sources to brainstorm ideas, navigate challenges, identify solutions, and open doors for you and your company for years to come.

4. PROACTIVELY COMMUNICATE

The produce industry is fast-paced, especially with the perishable nature of our products. There are so many factors outside of our control — whether it's Mother Nature at the farming level, traffic or storms when transporting product, or a number of other unexpected elements that could occur throughout the supply chain. Things will go wrong and not according to plan, and what matters most is how you handle these situations.

When faced with a problem, if you've quickly exhausted possible resources and solutions to no avail, be upfront and communicate early with your team or customers to give everyone time to adjust and find other solutions, potentially outside of you and your business.

By showing partners that you're focused on their goals and helping them solve problems, you build trust, long-term relationships and mutual success.

5. GET INVOLVED WITH ASSOCIATIONS

Reaching our full potential as the produce industry requires all of us working together to make an impact. That's where industry associations come in. They connect individuals and companies to the bigger picture and greater goals of the industry, offering valuable insights into trends, policy, innovation, and more.

They can help introduce you to industry peers who are equally passionate about moving the industry forward. And many associations offer leadership development, training and platforms to share knowledge, skills and solutions with dedicated resources and expertise.

Whether through regional, national or international associations, there are opportunities for everyone to join and contribute. If you're not sure where to start, talk to colleagues, attend a local event, or simply ask someone in your network with shared interests. It's an investment in your growth and in the future of our industry.

Relationships are everything in our business. Building connections and a positive reputation takes time, so start early.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As part of the produce business, we get to work with great people and great products that improve lives. If you're new to produce, welcome to the best industry in the world! Be curious, make connections, and never stop learning. Get involved, give back, and surround yourself with people and experiences that can help you grow.

I'm so grateful for all of the people and experiences that have taught me. And 24 years in, I'm still learning something new every day.

Stefanie Katzman is chief executive and fourth generation at Katzman, a family of companies with 100+ years in the produce business, which supplies approximately 450 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables annually. She also serves on the U.S. Council of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), and serves on the board at DREAM, a public charter school and youth development organization, and the New York Advisory Board for Sharing Excess.



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TRANSITIONS

Equifruit

Equifruit, Montreal, Quebec, announces that **Owain Hoefle** has joined the company as sales manager, Western North America. Based in British Columbia, Hoefle will be responsible for developing key retail relationships across Canada and the United States.

Hoefle brings experience in produce, floral and grocery to the role. During his 17 years at Pattison Food Group, he rose through the ranks from store-level operations to director of produce, floral and bulk, a role in which he developed deep expertise in category management and retail produce programs. He most recently served as key account manager at Rainbow Greenhouses.



Owain Hoefle

Pro Citrus Network & Foremost Fresh Direct

Pro Citrus Network (PCN), Visalia, CA, and Foremost Fresh Direct (FFD), Baytown, TX, announce two leadership transitions designed to support the companies' continued growth and long-term success.

Jacquie Ediger, current executive vice president and managing partner, has been appointed president of both PCN and FFD. **Allan Dodge**, founder and current president of both organizations, will transition into the role of chairman of the boards.

PCN and FFD have added the role of vice president of business operations. This position is being filled by industry veteran **Jen Doxey**.



Jacquie Ediger



Allan Dodge



Jen Doxey

Ippolito International

Ippolito International, Salinas, CA, has added **Neftaly Vargas**, account manager, to its sales team. Vargas joins the team from Braga Fresh, where she focused on value-added programs and supported customer relations and account growth.

Prior to that, her work experience included tenure at Tanimura & Antle, initially in the finance area, then moving into foodservice and retail sales roles.



Neftaly Vargas

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Peruvian Avocado Commission Honors Barnard and Lucy

The Peruvian Avocado Commission (PAC), through its flagship brand Avocados from Peru, honored Stephen J. Barnard and Bob Lucy with the Global Leadership Award in recognition of their extraordinary contributions to the avocado industry.

The awards were presented April 8, during a dinner at The Lodge at Torrey Pines, CA, in honor of the recipients, the evening prior to the PAC 2026 annual membership meeting.

Barnard, co-founder and chief executive officer,



Pictured (L-R): Peruvian Avocado Commission Chairman Jose Antonio Castro, Bob Lucy, Stephen J. Barnard and Xavier Equihua.

Mission Produce, was recognized as a pioneer who helped transform avocados into a global staple through innovation in ripening, global sourcing and category development. Over more than four decades, he built Mission Produce into a vertically integrated, billion-dollar business spanning more than 25 countries.

His early and visionary investment in Peru helped establish the country as a leading global supplier, including founding the largest avocado packing operation in the world in Peru and becoming one of the largest avocado growers in the country.

Lucy, co-founder of Del Rey Avocado Company, was honored for his nearly five decades of leadership and service to the avocado industry. A respected pioneer, Lucy played a key role in shaping the U.S. avocado market and expanding the global presence of the category.

He served for many years as chairman of the Peruvian Avocado Commission's Marketing Committee and as a member of its board of directors.

CMI Orchards Expands American Dream Program

As America gears up for its 250th anniversary, CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA, is bringing the celebration to retail with a special edition American Dream program featuring limited-edition packaging and point-of-sale (POS) materials.

To celebrate America's 250th anniversary, CMI Orchards is updating American Dream packaging and POS designed to create bold and impactful retail displays, including:

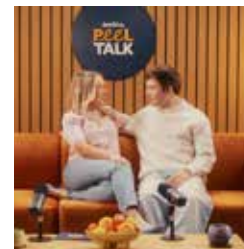
- Commemorative 250-themed pouch bags and clamshells for cherries;
- Coordinated cherry master cartons that align with packaging graphics to support high-visibility displays;
- New American Dream apple pouch bags designed for extended seasonal use, with strong merchandising opportunities tied to key patriotic holidays.

From June 18 through July 16, CMI Orchards will team up with Healthy Family Project to drive a national fundraising campaign benefiting military families. Through the American Dream program, proceeds will benefit Our Military Kids, which funds extracurricular activity scholarships for children of deployed National Guard, deployed reserve, or veterans receiving care for combat-related injuries or illnesses.



Sunkist Introduces 'Peel Talk'

Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA, has launched *Peel Talk*, a new digital content series designed to deepen consumer engagement and reinforce citrus's role in everyday wellness, snacking and shared moments.



Peel Talk introduces original storytelling, culinary inspiration and interactive content that connects consumers more directly to citrus and the farmers behind it — while supporting engagement during peak California citrus season.

The series includes four episodes, all available across Sunkist's digital platforms, including Instagram and TikTok (@SunkistCitrus).

In addition to episodic content, *Peel Talk* features approachable recipes.

Fresh Pro Gives Honey Watermelons Brand Refresh

Fresh Pro, Longwood, FL, has refreshed its Honey Watermelons brand. Designed to support shopper marketing and increase consumer engagement, the updated brand introduces an integrated marketing platform that helps simplify watermelon selection and drive demand at the shelf.



The refresh includes a new consumer landing page, original video content, point-of-sale materials, and an enhanced PLU system.

At the center of the brand refresh is Buzzy, a new character mascot that brings the "Honey" in Honey Watermelons to life as a friendly, farm-inspired bee. Recognizing that shoppers often hesitate when choosing a watermelon, Buzzy was created to support that final decision moment, offering simple, practical tips that make selection easy and approachable.

The brand's new website serves as a central hub for discovery, education and engagement.

SugarBee Apple Named Official Healthy Snack of the Seattle Mariners

SugarBee Apples, Wenatchee, WA, have teamed with the Seattle Mariners as the club's Official Healthy Snack in a new partnership designed to bring bold flavor and better-for-you snacking to fans at T-Mobile Park and beyond.



The excitement kicked off during Mariners Fan Fest Jan. 31 and Feb. 1, and will continue throughout the season with special appearances, sampling and interactive experiences. Keep an eye out for The Hive, SugarBee's buzzing home inside T-Mobile Park during select games, where fans can stop by for a taste, snap a photo, and join in the fun.

Six Strategies for Boosting Produce Consumption

BY RICK STEIN

Fresh produce is a big differentiator for food retailers, but lately its allure has been tempered by consumer financial challenges. Households under financial strain have been less likely to perceive the value of buying and consuming produce, according to *The Power of Produce 2026* report from FMI — The Food Industry Association.

Consider the following consumption data points from the research:



- Fresh produce inclusion has declined across meal occasions, with cost cited as the primary barrier, especially among those facing financial challenges.
- Daily consumption of fresh produce, at 31%, is at its second-lowest point in nine years. More consumers have shifted to four to five days a week, which has reached its highest share since 2017.

- The share of consumers incorporating fruit in meals declined in the past year. The steepest drops were in morning and afternoon snack occasions, followed by dinner and dessert.

Fresh produce remains a critical growth driver for food retail, with \$97 billion in sales. However, even though fresh produce has experienced below-average inflation, three-quarters of consumers believe that fruits and vegetables have become more expensive, a perception that impacts purchases.

While produce generated dollar, unit, and volume sales overall in 2025, 95% of that growth came from fruit, while vegetable sales were flat, according to Circana data in the FMI report.

Boosting fresh produce consumption is an important goal of food retailers and requires a multi-pronged approach, because consumers vary widely in their behaviors. Here are six strategies I believe to be essential for increasing consumption, based on information in the report.

1. Communicate Freshness and Taste: Retailers can underscore how quickly produce is delivered to their stores. They can highlight daily replenishment, rapid farm-to-store delivery, and produce associate quality checks that assure peak freshness. Retailers can lean in by using messaging such as, “from the field to our shelves in about three days.”

2. Emphasize Health Benefits: Health and nutrition are the leading drivers for increasing fresh fruit and vegetable consumption, according to the research. The food industry can leverage nutrition as an essential reason for shoppers to prioritize produce when money is tight — a messaging approach that can work across omnichannel shopping. The key is to elevate education to reinforce value perceptions and support produce’s role as an affordable investment in long-term health.

3. Relay Cost-Comparisons: Retailers have opportunities to con-



trust their prices to those of restaurants — to underscore the savings at retail. This type of approach works especially well for value-added, convenient produce solutions. These items are typically pricier than non-value-added items, but they become more appealing when food retailers relay price comparisons to similar items at restaurants.

4. Promote Under-Utilized Occasions: Not all meal occasions are created equal in terms of shopper consumption patterns, a point underscored in the research. Retailers can expand produce offerings,

ideation, and recipes aimed at under-utilized meal occasions, such as dinner and snacking for vegetables and lunch and dinner for fruits. Speaking of occasions, produce departments have opportunities to increase their emphasis on special occasions like holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries to enhance consumption year-round.

5. Spotlight Locally Grown: Locally grown items outperform other products in getting consumers to spend a little more, the research

found. Produce retailers already showcase local, but they can do even more to explain the origins of produce items, including information about growers.

6. Support Waste Reduction: Consumers want to reduce at-home food waste, especially during these challenging financial times. Providing storage, portion and usage guidance can help achieve this goal, a result that can boost produce value perceptions. The approach showcases retailers as educators who help support shoppers.

Food retailers need to interpret the consumer insights and ideas outlined here based on their own unique businesses. They have big opportunities to collaborate with suppliers to advance success. Suppliers can help communicate to consumers about taste, freshness, health benefits, occasions and other produce topics.

Driving consumption isn’t always easy, but success is more likely when partners work together to achieve progress.

Rick Stein is vice president of Fresh Foods, FMI — The Food Industry Association.

PB

Daily consumption of fresh produce, at 31%, is at its second-lowest point in nine years.

From Commodity to Culture

BY DARYN MAYER

Walk through almost any retail food store, and one thing becomes immediately clear: the produce department is often the most vibrant and visually appealing section of the store. Bright colors, fresh aromas, and an abundance of fruits and vegetables — in a remarkable variety of shapes, sizes and textures — create an experience few other departments can match.

Yet, despite this natural advantage, many produce companies remain largely invisible to consumers. While other food categories have successfully built strong consumer brands, much of produce is still marketed as a commodity — competing primarily on price, availability, or basic nutrition messaging.



In today's increasingly cluttered marketplace, that approach limits the industry's ability to capture attention, build loyalty and drive sales.

The next opportunity for the produce industry is to shift from commodity marketing to cultural relevance — positioning fresh fruits and vegetables as part of modern lifestyle and food culture.

One of the most effective ways to make that shift is through experiential marketing and strategic media storytelling. Across consumer categories, brand marketers have learned that consumers do not simply want to hear about products — they want to experience them.

Events, tastings, and lifestyle-driven integrations allow consumers to interact with products in ways traditional marketing cannot replicate. When paired with thoughtful content capture and distribution, these experiences help transform fresh produce from a simple ingredient into something more meaningful: a product consumers recognize, trust, and choose again.

Across the industry, companies investing in experience-led marketing are beginning to separate themselves in both visibility and velocity.

Fresh produce is particularly well-suited for experiential marketing because it naturally engages the senses and invites interaction. Fruits and vegetables can be prepared, shared, and tasted in memorable and unexpected ways, creating an immediate connection between product and consumer.

Increasingly, companies interested in engaging with consumers directly are moving beyond traditional food outlets and integrating produce into broader cultural moments — from major sporting events and marathons to entertainment gatherings, music festivals, and creator-driven experiences. These settings introduce products in dynamic ways, helping companies connect with audiences where culture, lifestyle, and conversation intersect.

Equally important is how these moments are captured and extended.

When fruits and vegetables are experienced within the moments and media that shape consumer behavior, they become more than items on a shopping list — they become part of lifestyle, discovery, and everyday rituals, helping strengthen brand recognition, drive product trial, and support long-term sales growth.

Experiential environments create powerful storytelling opportunities that live far beyond the event itself. Through video, photography, and digital media, marketers can document real moments of discovery, interaction and enjoyment. When shared across social and digital channels, this content becomes an ongoing narrative that introduces products to new audiences and reinforces brand recognition over time.

These environments also create space for authentic endorsement. When celebrities, athletes, artists, creators, chefs, or media personalities encounter a product in an immersive setting, their reactions often carry more influence than traditional advertising because they feel real, unscripted, and relatable.

Together, experiential marketing and media storytelling play a powerful role in driving product trial — one of the most direct ways to influence purchasing behavior. By presenting fruits and vegetables in creative and culturally relevant ways, companies can reshape how consumers perceive fresh produce. What begins as a moment of discovery can quickly translate into trial, stronger recognition, and repeat purchase.

For the produce industry, the opportunity is significant. By embracing experiential marketing, strategic storytelling, and cultural integration, companies can move beyond the commodity conversation and into modern consumer relevance.

When fruits and vegetables are experienced within the moments and media that shape consumer behavior, they become more than items on a shopping list — they become part of lifestyle, discovery, and everyday rituals, helping strengthen brand recognition, drive product trial, and support long-term sales growth.

Daryn Mayer is the founder of AEFECT Communications and You Fortified, a modern, healthy living branded media, content, and event company. She specializes in helping produce and better-for-you brands move from commodity to culture through experiential activations, strategic partnerships, and media-driven storytelling that strengthen brand recognition, drive product trial, and support sales growth. **PB**



The Fresh Grocer of Upper Darby in Upper Darby, PA, is a full-service independent supermarket, owned and operated by the Burns family since 2016. The family currently operates seven supermarkets across the Philadelphia, PA, region under both The Fresh Grocer and ShopRite banners. PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS DUARTE

At The Fresh Grocer, Produce is Key

Diversity helps PA independent move a large volume of produce.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

In the heart of an extremely diverse community, The Fresh Grocer of Upper Darby in Upper Darby, PA, serves customers from many cultural traditions and meets demand for produce, extending far beyond traditional grocery assortments.

The township's slogan describes Upper Darby as "The World In One Place," a fitting phrase, says Tim Brown, chief operating officer for the store.

"The area represents more than 100 different ethnic backgrounds," Brown explains. "That diversity drives us to carry a wide range of global fruits, vegetables, herbs, and specialty items to allow customers to prepare the foods that connect them to their culture and family traditions."

The full-service independent supermarket has been owned and operated by the Burns family since 2016. The family currently operates seven supermarkets across the Philadelphia region under both The Fresh Grocer and ShopRite banners.

"As a family-owned business deeply rooted in the community, our focus is on delivering quality fresh foods, strong perishables programs, and personalized service that reflects the needs of the neighborhoods we serve," says Brown.

In the summer of 2020, the store was renovated to modernize the shopping experience and further emphasize fresh departments, including produce. "The redesign focused on creating a brighter, more open produce department with flexible merchandising fixtures and improved refrigeration," says Brown. "This allows the team to better highlight seasonal items, promotional displays, and the diverse assortment customers expect."

SERVING WITH PRODUCE

Brown explains the company takes great pride in its perishable

programs and believes strong fresh programs are what truly differentiate a supermarket.

"We empower store management teams to merchandise their departments based on the needs of their specific community, rather than forcing every location into the same model," he says. "That flexibility allows us to respond quickly to customer preferences, introduce new items, and expand categories that resonate locally."

The Upper Darby Fresh Grocer listens closely to customers and makes sure its assortment, pricing and promotions align with their needs, says Brown. "In produce, specifically, we focus on delivering the highest quality products, maintaining strong everyday value, and creating an aggressive promotional program that keeps fresh fruits and vegetables accessible to everyone."

Produce plays a critical role in shaping the store's overall image. "Freshness is key," says Brown. "Customers associate freshness and quality with the produce department, so maintaining strong standards in quality, variety, and pricing helps reinforce our reputation. When customers see vibrant displays, fresh product, and competitive pricing in produce, it builds confidence in the entire store."

Many of the store's team members have grown within the organization and have worked at this location for years. "That experience gives them a strong understanding of the community and its preferences," says Brown. "We regularly share insights across our stores to identify trends, successful promotions, and opportunities to expand product offerings."

VARIETY AND VALUE-DRIVEN

The store is approximately 54,000 square feet and boasts about 2,500 square feet dedicated to produce. The department is positioned at the front of the store.

"We believe that leading with fresh produce sets the tone for the entire shopping trip and reinforces our commitment to freshness, quality and value," says Brown. "This store's produce department

contributes about 10% of total store sales.”

The store’s variety is vast, and Brown explains that their flexibility and responsiveness set them apart from the competition. “Because we aren’t locked into rigid planograms, our team has the ability to quickly introduce new items, respond to customer requests and adjust shelf space based on demand,” he says. “That agility allows us to maintain an assortment that truly reflects the community we serve.”

The department carries more than 850 SKUs, including fresh fruits and vegetables, juices, salads, dips, dressings and vegetarian options. “We’ve continued to expand our assortment to reflect the tastes of our community,” says Brown. “In particular, we’ve seen significant growth in tropical and exotic produce categories, which performed exceptionally well in 2025. Items that might be considered specialty products in other markets are everyday staples for many of our customers.”

Produce is heavily featured in weekly circular promotions, which highlight seasonal items and value-driven pricing.

VISUAL AND MOBILE STRATEGY

The store’s merchandising strategy focuses on large, fresh bulk displays of key promotional items. “We believe strong visual merchandising communicates freshness and value,” says Brown. “Displays are built around weekly promotional programs, seasonal opportunities and customer demand.”

Entering the department, shoppers are greeted with a horizontal line of farm-style wooden bins showcasing the weekly deals. The right side of the department is flanked by two 20-foot refrigerated cases —

one stocked with cut fruit and vegetables and the other with juices. The left side of the department is lined by a 34-foot fresh wall and a wet rack, along with 24 feet of glass door refrigerated merchandisers.

The interior of the department is all mobile, and moved around seasonally. “We utilize JSI for our interior department, Hillphoenix cases for our refrigeration, and Airflow products to help properly display merchandise,” says Brown.

The department features a unique 9-foot circular banana display that holds 11 to 12 cases of bananas at a time. For quality considerations, each banana hand sits on a shelf and is not stacked. The circular display allows easy access for shoppers from all sides. The store sells 24 cases of bananas each day.

All produce is sourced via the store’s co-op, Wakefern. “We’ve found it to be the most efficient for consistent quality and sizing,” says Brown. “We move approximately 2,000 cases per week in fresh produce.”

Brown points to tropicals as an example of the store’s responsiveness to sales and procurement. “As demand increased, our team focused on ensuring strong in-stock conditions during peak shopping times and expanding our assortment of tropical fruits and vegetables.”

PB



INSIDE THE STORE

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Natural Grocers, headquartered in Lakewood, CO, has been named *PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year*. The retailer is committed to 100% organic produce, regenerative agriculture initiatives and sustainability practices. *PHOTOS COURTESY NATURAL GROCERS*

ROOTED IN SUSTAINABILITY

Natural Grocers committed to organic-first retail experience.

BY MIKE DUFF

Even before sustainability was in vogue, Natural Grocers pioneered an approach to food retailing that focused on healthy eating and prepared the company for eco-friendly operations.

Evolving sustainability practices, including a strong commitment to regenerative agriculture, made Lakewood, CO-based Natural Grocers a clear choice for the 2026 *PRODUCE BUSINESS Sustainability Retailer of the Year*.

Natural Grocers' efforts in regenerative food production include working with other companies to help establish a basic definition and standards that can inform certification criteria. Not only that, but Natural Grocers is working with the Pennsylvania-based Rodale Institute to spur programs, including the Ladybug Love campaign developed to expand understanding and appreciation for insects that make positive contributions to food production.

Everything Natural Grocers does emerges from the five principles created at the company's foundation in 1955: Quality, Always Affordable Prices, Nutrition Education, Community and Crew.

"Quality" encompasses organic foods, including 100% organic produce; supplements that support healthy living; natural body care items; and wholesome own-brand products. "Community" emphasizes neighborhood support, such as coaching sessions, donations and carrying local products, and "Crew" means the company not only provides employee access to nutrition education and healthy products, but also good pay and substantial benefits.

ROOTED IN SUSTAINABILITY

At Natural Grocers, everything has its roots in the five founding principles, says Matt Fowler, category manager, produce. "We pride ourselves on being the go-to retailer for sustainability and higher product standards in the industry."

While sustainability was not explicitly outlined in the company's founding principles in the 1950s, its core philosophy naturally aligned with the movement as environmental awareness



- Purpose-driven foundation:** Natural Grocers' founding principles, especially its commitment to 100% organic produce, continue to guide operations.
- Sustainability in action:** From regenerative agriculture partnerships to compostable bags and plastic-free checkouts, sustainability is embedded in strategy.
- Educated, loyal customer base:** Health- and eco-conscious shoppers trust the retailer for transparency and quality, driving repeat visits and interest among younger generations.



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gained prominence in the 1960s. What begins as a focus on individual health has since evolved into a broader understanding of wellness — one that encompasses not only personal wellbeing, but also the health of communities and the integrity of the environment.

Katie Macarelli, Natural Grocers' director of public relations, says the company is intensely focused on sustainability and the environment. "I never worked at a company that is so mission focused in this realm," she says. "It's in every conversation. It underlies every conversation."

The company visibly demonstrates its commitment to sustainability in the produce department, and in more ways than one.

"It's so ingrained in everything we do," says Macarelli. "For instance, the compostable produce bags. There's something that blew my mind when I started with Natural Grocers. That was really ahead of its time."

Natural Grocers eliminated plastic bags at checkout in 2009.

Sustainability is also a big deal in construction, remodeling and the relocation of Natural Grocers stores. For example, Macarelli says Natural Grocers recently completed a relocation project in Abilene, TX, with sustainable building materials and fixtures among the environmental components that went into developing the new site.

Employee training in critical subjects like sustainability is ongoing, with everyone from executives to checkout staff learning about developments, in part so everyone can acquaint customers with the latest Natural Grocers' eco-actions.

"A lot of energy and education go toward sustainability that has truly nothing to do with sales," says Macarelli. "It is just who we are."

Community outreach and support is important to Natural Grocers, which sponsors local community events that touch on wellness and the environment. The occasions feature nutritional health coaches who conduct classes about food and health, as well as the connection of food to sustainability.

The company has built its "good4u" brand, with good4u in its logo, marketing, and the company even refers to its employees as its "good4u crew."

REGENERATIVE AG

Consumers who are drawn to Natural Grocers are attracted to its assortment of supplements and organic produce, but they also are enticed by the company's position on sustainability, says Macarelli.

In March, as part of its annual Earth Month program, Natural Grocers worked with the Rodale Institute to celebrate the company's Ladybug Love campaign, one example of its longstanding commitment to organic integrity, regenerative agriculture and environmental stewardship. The campaign encourages communities to protect beneficial insects, while supporting regenerative organic agriculture.

Macarelli explains Natural Grocers has also developed what it calls a Regenivore Meal Wheel designed to help consumers who want nutritional density in their diets as part of healthier eating practices. It details organics consumption with an emphasis on foods that grow through methods that curb greenhouse gas emissions, preserve vital ecosystems and build soil health.

WORRY FREE

The customers who shop Natural Grocers are food- and sustainability-conscious, and they have high expectations, including the 100% organic produce assortment. As such, Natural Grocers is kept on its toes while ensuring their satisfaction.



From regenerative agriculture partnerships to compostable packaging and plastic-free checkouts, Natural Grocers embeds sustainability into every level of its operations.

"Our core shoppers are very conscious of where their food comes from and health," Fowler says. "They want to make sure that their dollars spent at our stores are going toward sustainable practices and clean and high-quality products. Our customers know that they can come to Natural Grocers and do not have to worry about reading small signs or having to seek out organic produce in our produce departments."

Fowler says every produce department at Natural Grocers is a certified organic handler. "We proudly take the extra steps to make sure that only the best organic produce is coming in and out of our doors. And we provide comprehensive training to our crews to give them the in-depth knowledge behind every piece of produce we offer, from apples to zucchinis.

"We really just take the worry out for our shoppers, and they know that when they step into a Natural Grocers, that they're getting the organic product that they come to expect."

Even if shoppers have different motivations, organic production, sustainability and affordability are important to all shoppers.

"Some shoppers come to us specifically for produce because they trust that we carry 100% organic produce, so there's no second-guessing labels or standards," says Fowler. "And for many, that means making regular bi-weekly trips just for fruit and vegetables."

Fowler says they have historically served a strong 50-plus audience, but they are seeing growing engagement from Millennials and Gen Z shoppers who are invested in where their food comes from and how it impacts human health, communities and the planet.

"The families with young children are another core group," he says. "Parents appreciate being able to shop confidently, knowing every product choice meets the same high bar for their children.

"We support this diverse mix by pairing uncompromised standards with everyday value in education. Because when organic avocados are 99 cents, it's easy for the shoppers to make produce the heart of their baskets."

Fowler says sustainability evolved from the chain's core principles into measurable actions across all stores.

Natural Grocers Prioritizes Regenerative Agriculture

BY MIKE DUFF

In its latest annual sustainability report, Natural Grocers, headquartered in Lakewood, CO, details the sustainability initiatives developed over the years as a natural extension of its founding principles. For instance, Natural Grocers carries plant-based, household compostable plastic produce bags, and 100% recycled, recyclable, and compostable paper bags, after eliminating plastic grocery totes in 2009.

In stores, it has tackled food waste and applied technology to streamline temperature tracking in store coolers, while using 48% recycled-content corrugated cardboard, incorporating energy-efficient LED lighting, and adding CO2 refrigerant systems in a pilot program.

Now, Natural Grocers is prioritizing regenerative agricultural practices that

support soil, water and air quality, and biodiversity.

Natural Grocers partners with The Rodale Institute, Kutztown, PA, which conducts research and provides farmer and veteran education on regenerative and related farming practices.

Christie Pettys, product standards manager, food, Natural Grocers, who makes sure products maintain criteria set by the company, is working to help better define regenerative agriculture. More specifically, she is working internally and with other organizations to fix a minimal standard for what constitutes regenerative agriculture.

At Expo West in March 2026, Natural Grocers helped organize a discussion on regenerative standards, inviting diverse players in the food business to sit down and talk about what might be required to put together effective criteria.

“There is no cohesive regenerative standard,” says Pettys. “There are a bunch of certifiers with different standards.”

It’s not that certifiers lack good intentions, she explains, but each tends to emphasize different approaches and factors, often reflecting specific areas within agriculture.

Pettys says to advance regenerative agriculture, it’s important to establish a broad consensus on the minimum standards that define regenerative practices across the wider agricultural spectrum.

Even if many companies exceed any established baseline, says Pettys, reaching consensus is essential to create a clear, shared understanding of what qualifies as regenerative agriculture and animal husbandry — and what makes a claim credible. In turn, this helps consumers make more informed choices.

“In produce, that starts with a long-standing commitment, only selling 100% USDA certified organic fruits and vegetables, and actively supporting farming practices that build soil health, protect biodiversity and strengthen long-term food systems,” he says.

Fowler says this helps grow the next generation of organic producers, while educating customers and crew.

“Inside our stores, sustainable operation choices, from energy efficient LED lighting to plastic bag-free checkouts, which we were one of the first retail chains to ever do that, reinforces those values and creates a shopping environment that aligns with what our produce customers care about.”

DEDICATED SHOPPERS

Consumers are increasingly educating themselves about the depth and impact of organic agriculture and, as Fowler explains, that growing awareness is helping people see “how much it impacts Mother Earth” and why it is “the right way of growing produce.” He adds that as shoppers become more informed, they also recognize how closely organic practices align with caring for the planet — an understanding he believes will “continue to propel the organic industry.”

Fowler points to packaging as a central focus in the company’s sustainability efforts. He emphasizes a strong commitment to materials that are biodegradable and earth-friendly, particularly given that “not everybody has access to recycling.”

With produce moving through a wide range of packaging formats, he notes that “something that breaks down naturally is the best choice,” and says this approach is a priority in ongoing collaboration with growers and vendors.



The attention that Natural Grocers gives to wellness across the range of perspectives, from health to sustainability, and, particularly with its 100% certified organic produce, helps to define the company.

PHOTO COURTESY NATURAL GROCERS

The attention that Natural Grocers gives to wellness across the range of perspectives, from health to sustainability, and, particularly with its 100% certified organic produce, helps to define the company. Customers enter Natural Grocers stores understanding that they are shopping a retailer that shares their priorities. **PB**

The State Of Controlled Environmental Agriculture

There are many opportunities for retail and foodservice in CEA.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Weather can always disrupt fresh produce cultivation and supply chains. This is especially true in much of the United States, where snow, ice, and cold mean no local field harvests half the year and the potential for trucking delays. However, at Lees Market in Westport, MA, a family-owned and operated supermarket that includes three Clements' Marketplaces in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, customers can buy fresh salad, veggies and herbs year-round.

How fresh? The distance from farm to shelf is measured in feet, not miles.

In 2023, the retailer invested in creating its own onsite hydroponic farm, Vertigreens. The 2.5-acre equivalent controlled environment agriculture (CEA) hydroponic farm is housed in a revamped, state-of-the-art, 40-foot shipping container.

"Our customers have always had a tremendous interest in locally grown produce," says Matthew Ponte, marketing and communications for Lees Market and Clements' Marketplaces. "We have partnered with many local farms for decades to meet their needs. Our Vertigreens farm allowed us to take it one step further and offer fantastic, hyper-local produce all year."

The seeds for Vertigreens were planted when Lees Market produce manager, J.D. Squires, experimented with home hydroponic grow cases inside the store that went over well with customers.

The team started discussing how to scale the concept and discovered Freight Farms, a Boston, MA-based manufacturer of vertical farming systems. Packaging was also an unforeseen challenge, as the retailer wanted to avoid contributing to harmful plastic waste. The solution is eco-friendly packaging made from bamboo fiber.

"Our core lineup is a salad mix (five types of lettuce plus arugula) and a romaine blend (red and green romaine)," says Ponte. "These have been a massive hit."

TODAY'S CEA LANDSCAPE

CEA, also called "protected agriculture," encompasses greenhouses, vertical agriculture, hydroponics, aquaponics, and other controlled production methods. From 2009 to 2019, the number of CEA operations in the U.S. increased by more than 100%, from 1,476 in 2009 to 2,994 in 2019, according to the report *Trends, Insights, and Future Prospects for Production in Controlled Environment Agriculture and Agrivoltaics Systems*, released January 2024, by the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS).

Production volumes increased by 56% during the same time, from 502 million pounds to 786 million pounds. Mexico and Canada also continue to expand their CEA-grown production and vegetable



In 2023, Lees Market, Westport, MA, invested in creating its own onsite hydroponic farm, Vertigreens. The retailer's core lineup is a salad mix (five types of lettuce plus arugula) and a romaine blend (red and green romaine), which it sells in-store.

PHOTO COURTESY LEES MARKET

exports to the U.S., according to the report. Mexico accounted for 81% of total greenhouse-grown U.S. vegetable imports, excluding potatoes, from 2018 to 2020.

Canada's CEA farmgate value doubled between 2013 and 2023 to \$2.5 billion in 2023, with the U.S. reaping 99.5% of the industry's exports, based on Statistics Canada (CATSNET) data as of August 2024.

Windset Farms is a good example of this growth. "What started as a 4-acre bell pepper greenhouse in 1996 has since expanded to grow and market 2,500 acres of greenhouse vegetable production in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico," says Ryan Cherry, director of sales for the Delta, British Columbia-headquartered greenhouse grower.

In the last few years, some companies in the CEA industry have experienced profitability struggles, consolidation, and notable bankruptcy filings.

However, "those organizations that are vertically integrated and scaling up their operations, like us, continue to see a growth trajectory. Smaller startups tend to focus on niche crops and premium markets," says Chris Veillon, vice president of marketing for Topline Farms/Westmoreland Sales, in Leamington, Ontario, which grows, as

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Basil is the top crop at Beats Per Minute (BPM), a Kansas City, MO-based veteran-owned vertical farming company. BPM supplies its basil to 51 supermarkets in the Kansas City area, custom packaged in a bouquet wrap plastic. BPM also provides display stands for its retail customers for prominence and ease of merchandising.

PHOTO COURTESY BEATS PER MINUTE

well as delivers its produce with a 150-truck fleet.

“Advances in technology — such as automation, AI, and efficient hydroponic systems — have improved yields and resource efficiency.”

The growth in CEA in the U.S., North America, and globally, says Martin Ruebelt, vice president and chief scientific officer for Nature-Sweet, the San Antonio, TX-headquartered largest vertically integrated CEA company in North America, “is driven by rising consumer demand for high-quality, sustainable, year-round produce.”

There is a lot of room for CEA production to grow. Consider that the volume of specialty crop production with CEA systems is small, estimated at less than 2%, compared to outdoor field production, according to the USDA ERS January 2024 report.

A GROWING VARIETY

Tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers have been grown in greenhouses for over 50 years. According to the USDA ERS report, this trio represented 60 to 70% of CEA-grown crops from 2009 to 2019, with major grocery chains, like Walmart, Costco, and Target, partnering with CEA producers to supply these three.

Today, says Tom Stenzel, executive director of the Alexandria, VA-headquartered Controlled Environment Agriculture Alliance (CEAA), “indoor-grown tomatoes have taken over the retail marketplace.”

Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations for Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL, has experienced this CEA revolution in the tomato category. “Sometimes now we don’t carry any field-grown. TOVs, beefsteak, cherry on the vine, grape tomatoes, and snacking tomatoes have blown up this category positively.”

Unique varieties are increasing in demand, adds Windset’s Cherry. “You no longer have just a grape or tomato on the vine, but a whole array of varieties to suit your culinary needs and preferences.”

The grower has introduced several new tomato products including its Shake & Snack Tomatoes, in an 8-ounce sustainably inspired ladybug-shaped clamshell with a pop-open lid; Amore-brand sweet tomatoes on the vine; and Yum Yum brand cherry tomatoes.

“People will eat more produce if it’s interesting, and we’re doing our part with different colors and flavor profiles,” says Jim DiMenna, president of Red Sun Farms, in Kingsville, Ontario, which recently introduced its 1.5-pound resealable container of Sweetpops tomatoes, and its 1-pound pouch bag of Tatayoyo mini sweet peppers. Both are for snacking.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“People will eat more produce if it’s interesting, and we’re doing our part with different colors and flavor profiles.”**

— Jim DiMenna, Red Sun Farms, Kingsville, Ontario

- **“Consumers have demonstrated a willingness to pay a premium for CEA-grown produce, recognizing the value of being clean and fresh and adding value by being customizable and available year-round.”**

— Rick Vanzura, Freight Farms, Boston, MA

CEA-grown leafy greens are on the rise in the marketplace, according to Stenzel. “Indoor-grown salads are now up to 5% nationally and exceeding 15% of the retail market in the Northeast.”

Little Leaf Farms, headquartered in Devens, MA, has seven facilities and 40 acres to supply its baby leaf lettuce to the over 7,000 grocery stores throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. Little Leaf’s four main varieties are Baby Crispy Green Leaf, Baby Red & Green Leaf, Baby Spring Mix, Sweet Baby Butter Leaf and Sweet and Crispy.

“We’re seeing growth in CEA-grown single lettuce SKUs and salad kits featuring CEA-grown lettuce,” says Paul Sellev, founder and chief executive officer.

Gotham Greens, headquartered in Brooklyn, NY, with 40 acres of hydroponic greenhouses across 13 locations in nine states, primarily grows leafy greens and herbs, including popular varieties like butter, romaine, spring mix and basil.

“While we certainly see the overall market share of indoor/CEA grown leafy greens growing, we don’t expect indoor-grown leafy greens to take over the majority of the category anytime soon, but rather serve as a complement to conventional field-grown salad,” says Viraj Puri, co-founder and chief executive officer.

Basil is the chief crop at Beats Per Minute (BPM), a Kansas City, MO-based veteran-owned vertical farming company. Like Lees Market, owners purchased a high-tech 40-foot container farm from Freight Farms that can produce the equivalent of 3.5 acres. The compact space makes it accessible to work for disabled staff, says owner and sales manager, David Payne.

“Balls Food Stores was the first retailer to visit our farm,” says Payne. “They wanted a living herb program rooted in basil, and that’s what we delivered.”

Today, BPM supplies its basil to 51 supermarkets in the Kansas City area, including all Balls’ banners like Price Chopper, Hen House, Payless Foods and Sun Fresh, as well as to Cosentino’s Markets. The herb is custom packaged in a bouquet-wrap plastic. BPM also provides display stands for its retail customers for prominence and ease of merchandising.

City Roots Farm, in Columbia, SC, grows 11 varieties of microgreens in its 2023-constructed carbon-neutral facility, which includes a nearly 2-acre greenhouse, 2 acres of solar panels, geothermal heating systems, and a distribution facility. Varieties include cilantro, radish, arugula, kale, mustard and sunflower. The grower’s location puts them within a drive of Florida to the south or New York to the north. The microgreens have a 14-day shelf life.

CEA Thrives on the Menu

Hydroponic greenhouse-grown vine-ripened tomatoes were first served on salads, hamburgers, and chicken sandwiches at Wendy's in 2018.

A year later, according to a news release from the Dublin, OH-headquartered quick-serve restaurant (QSR) chain, with nearly 6,000 U.S. locations and over 400 in Canada, every tomato served was grown in a North American hydroponic greenhouse.

Dependable twice-a-week 52-week-a-year delivery, consistency in size, look, and taste every time, and the producer's strict food safety standards by growing in a controlled environment, were the main reasons the chain switched sourcing from outdoor to indoor-grown tomatoes.

The company has worked to do the same with lettuce in the U.S. and Canada for the past few years.

"Foodservice operators, from fast-casual restaurants like Just Salad to high-end, white tablecloth restaurants, are increasingly turning to indoor-grown produce for similar reasons as retailers, i.e., high quality and consistency year-round," says Viraj Puri, co-founder and chief executive officer of Gotham Greens, a hydroponic greenhouse grower headquartered in Brooklyn, NY. "Salads continue to be popular menu items, but our leafy greens are regularly featured in burgers, sandwiches, wraps, pizzas and more."

Just Salad, a 90-plus-unit fast-casual chain headquartered in New York, NY,

sources its salad greens from Gotham Greens, including butterhead, crispy green leaf and gourmet spring mix.

Last year, Sweetgreen, a fast-casual 926-unit restaurant chain based in Los Angeles, CA, partnered with Little Leaf Farms, a Devens, MA-based greenhouse grower of baby leaf lettuce, to test the grower's lettuce in the chain's popular salads in select markets.

"With a shared commitment to supply real food to local communities," says Paul Sellew, Little Leaf founder and chief executive, "we saw this as an excellent opportunity to feature our fresh, crispy greens in Sweetgreen's tasty menu items to appeal to mutual fans and new Little Leaf Farms consumers alike."

"Microgreens are a high-dollar, high-profit item that works well in our facility," says Eric McClam, co-founder and chief executive officer. "Whole Foods and Sprouts were some of our first retail buyers. Most retailers take three to five SKUs, with more during the holidays, and line price them."

Fruit, including strawberries and melons, is now available via CEA production.

Jeff Cady, vice president of produce and floral for Schenectady, NY-headquartered Northeast Shared Services, which represents 152 Tops Friendly Markets and 132 Price Chopper/Market 32 stores, worked with an Ohio-based grower to bring in organic greenhouse-grown strawberries during the winter.

"It was a win for us. Good flavor, local in the winter, and organically grown," says Cady.

MARKETING & MERCHANDISING

Retailers are increasingly adding and expanding their CEA offerings, according to Sonia Klinger, marketing manager for Del Fresco Pure, a Kingsville, Ontario-headquartered greenhouse pioneer. "Retailers often highlight their CEA produce through labeling or promotional displays to distinguish these products."

At Lees Market and Clements Marketplace, there are designated Vertigreens display cases with light-up logo signage that mirrors the sign on the actual farm, says Ponte. "All products also have unique labeling and informative signage to describe the program to customers. We also shot some videos of the inside of the farm and production process that we have looping on a TV near the display, so customers can see how it all works."

This educational component is essential to selling CEA products at retail.

The "hyper-local" message is a big part of that, according to Rick Vanzura, chief executive officer of Freight Farms, which has farmer-customers in all 50 states and 41 countries collectively growing over 500 crops, with over 60 commercially viable. "But being



Tom Stenzel, executive director of the Alexandria, VA-headquartered Controlled Environment Agriculture Alliance, says that indoor-grown tomatoes have taken over the retail marketplace. PHOTO COURTESY WINDSET FARMS

hyper-clean, hyper-precise, and always available are also important value propositions."

"The premium amount varies by channel, with premiums being higher direct-to-customer than, for instance, through grocery. The trick is communicating all that value in a compelling, concise way," Vanzura adds.

LOOKING AHEAD

With climate change and supply issues only growing, indoor agriculture will play a critical role in the industry, according to the CEA's Stenzel. "One trend to look for is traditional field growers adding an indoor segment to their production. This is not an 'us-against-them' fight between indoors and outdoors. Rather, we're first produce companies, seeking to deliver the highest quality produce through whatever production methods work best."

PB



State-backed “buy local” branding programs help retailers turn regional produce into a sales driver, boosting visibility, strengthening shopper trust, and connecting consumers with the farmers behind the food. PHOTO COURTESY NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

State Agriculture Programs Drive Produce Sales

State-backed branding is transforming local produce.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

State department of agriculture produce branding programs, often termed “state-branded,” “locally grown,” or “buy local” initiatives, can measurably drive demand and sales of fresh fruits and vegetables at retail.

At the same time, local purchasing tied to these campaigns generates a retail multiplier effect of \$1.32 to \$1.90 for every dollar spent, according to the August 2023 report *Local Food Systems: Clarifying Current Research* by the North Carolina State Extension Service, based in Raleigh, NC.

“The demand for local remains incredibly strong for all food categories,” says Brian Baldrige, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA), in Reynoldsburg, OH, which runs Ohio Proud. This initiative promotes products that are at least 50% grown, raised, or processed in the state, through its marketing department.

“We see this at every level, from retailers looking for local produce and other products, to more schools adopting farm-to-school projects, and restaurants and chefs working with us to identify growers in their area,” Baldrige says. “We’ve heard anecdotally from grocers that when they bring out local growers and processors to sample during events, their overall sales increase anywhere from 2-4% during that event.”

Starting with Jersey Fresh, the nation’s first state-run agricultural branding and quality-grading program founded by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture in 1984, demand for locally grown foods has kick-started similar projects nationwide. The big benefits lie in the strength of branding, the ability to link growers and sellers, and suc-

cessful marketing and promotion programs that span from in-store to virtual.

THE HEAVY LIFTING POWER OF STATE BRANDS

State branding programs, while trailing major national brands with much higher budgets, do enjoy widespread logo recognition.

For example, Fresh From Florida, the marketing and branding program developed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), boasts a 91% logo awareness among Florida consumers surveyed. Recognition of the sunny logo is also strong across key markets outside of Florida, too — 81% in Atlanta, 73% in New York, and 77% in Montreal.

The Fresh From Florida Logo Incentive Program reimburses growers for 50% of printing costs (up to \$5,000) when they add the Fresh From Florida logo to product packaging.

“Though results vary by retailer, strong logo recognition and prominent in-store identification reliably influence buying decisions,” says Susie McKinley, director, Division of Marketing and Development for the Tallahassee, FL-based FDACS. “Integrating the logo into weekly ads, online shopping platforms, and in-store displays reinforces quality, freshness, and consumer confidence.”

As of 2024, 79% of South Carolinians are aware of the Certified SC Grown (CSCG) program, a branding and marketing initiative started in 2006 by the South Carolina Department of Agriculture (SCDA).

“Well over 80% of South Carolinians between the ages of 18 and 44 are aware of CSCG,” says Chris Whitmire, director of the Columbia, SC-based SCDA’s marketing department. “Further, 88% say they would be more likely to buy an item labeled Certified SC Grown over one that was not labeled CSCG.”

Regardless of whether shoppers know of the Colorado Proud brand, the presence of the label significantly increased “intent to buy,” according to Danielle Trotta, senior marketing specialist and



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New Jersey

Leveraging Local to Drive Loyalty

At Inserra Supermarkets Inc., a 23-store chain headquartered in Mahwah, NJ, stocking and spotlighting Jersey Fresh produce is more than merchandising — it's a strategy to build shopper trust and repeat sales.

The chain, a member of the Wakefern retailers' cooperative doing business as ShopRite and PriceRite, has worked with Abma's Farm since 2008. The fourth-generation family-run farm, with locations in Hillsborough and Wyckoff, is well known for its sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, squash and berries.

Inserra has developed a consistent in-store program that puts the grower's local produce front and center in season.

"Highlighting Jersey Fresh produce is a major priority, and we take a very intentional approach in-store," says Thomas Minardi, produce supervisor.

One of the retailers' most effective strategies is creating a dedicated "Local Abma's Farm" display, supported by clear signage, such as "Local" and "Fresh," Abma's branding, and digital content on its streaming boards.

"This program allows us to tell a story, connecting customers to the farm, the people behind the product, and the journey from field to shelf. That storytelling creates a more meaningful shopping experience and reinforces the value of buying local," says Minardi.

This narration aligns with broader consumer trends, contributing to Jersey Fresh's success. Launched in 1984 by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), Jersey Fresh



By prioritizing Jersey Fresh, retailers, like Inserra Supermarkets Inc., a 23-store chain headquartered in Mahwah, NJ, are driving engagement with dedicated local displays using clear signage to connect shoppers with nearby growers.

PHOTO COURTESY INSERRA

is a quality grading and marketing program that promotes locally grown produce. An October 2025 survey by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture found that more than half of consumers associate the Jersey Fresh brand with locally grown produce, as well as freshness and quality.

"Our annual consumer awareness survey indicates that people recognize the quality of Jersey Fresh and are willing to pay a premium," says Joe Atchison III, New Jersey secretary of agriculture.

program manager for Colorado Proud, a free marketing program run by the Colorado Department of Agriculture, Broomfield, CO.

"Even for those seeing the logo for the first time, over 60% say it would make them choose that product more frequently."

Even more impressive, 96% of New York residents surveyed said they favored food bearing the New York State Grown & Certified label, versus food without this designation. Founded in 2015 by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, this label signifies that agricultural products are state-grown and meet standards for food safety and environmental stewardship.

"Seventy-four percent said they would buy more, and 49% said they'd pay more for New York produce with this label," says Richard A. Ball, commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Albany, NY.

MAKING CONNECTIONS: WHAT'S IN SEASON, FROM WHERE & WHEN

Retailers most often ask about seasonal availability, sourcing contacts, and optimal ways to promote Florida-grown commodities, according to the FDACS' McKinley, so the program provides seasonal availability calendars and introductions to Florida shippers and distributors. It also offers guidance on using the Fresh

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"The demand for local remains incredibly strong for all food categories. We see this at every level, from retailers looking for local produce and other products, to more schools adopting farm-to-school projects, and restaurants and chefs working with us to identify growers in their area."**

Brian Baldrige, Ohio Department of Agriculture, Reynoldsburg, OH

From Florida logo in signage, circulars, digital ads, and recipe content to boost product visibility.

Ohio Proud regularly works with retailers to identify new products and farms offering fresh, local produce, adds Baldrige. "We hold a food show twice a year and invite retailers, chefs and foodservice directors from around the state to come, meet our members, and sample their products."

Midwest retailers also look to Indiana Grown, a branding and

marketing initiative administered by the Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) in Indianapolis.

"We serve as a one-stop connector, matching buyers with Indiana Grown businesses that fit their needs," says Caroline Patrick, program director. "We also host an annual showcase to connect retail and wholesale buyers with participating producers. It's an effort that resulted in more than 20 new Indiana businesses landing on one retailer's shelves following the 2025 event."

PROMOTIONAL PARTNER

The FDACS partners with more than 100 domestic and international retailers across 33 states and Washington, D.C. to promote Florida produce in circular ads, digital and social media ads, sampling events, in-store displays, and more, says McKinley. "Fresh From Florida also utilizes grocery cart advertising, floor talk, coupon apps, shoppable digital ads, and online shopping platforms to drive sales of Florida produce."

Sprouts, Walmart, and Publix are among the retailers where C&B Farms sells, with its produce packaging carrying the Fresh From Florida logo. "Publix alone carries 18 conventional and 18 organic items and does a great job of letting customers know the product was grown in Florida," says Chuck Obern, owner of C&B Farms, in Clewiston, FL, which grows 94 crops, including vegetables, leafy greens and herbs.

Noble Citrus has partnered with Sprouts on large displays of the grower's craft-cultivated Juicy Crunch and Autumn Honey tangerines, with Fresh From Florida logos prominently displayed on the point-of-sale materials.

Currently, the four-generation Winter Haven, FL-based citrus grower is working with the Fresh From Florida program and retailers to promote demand for its tangerines and oranges via its Noble Citrus Fresh Juicing Program. This is a specialized retail partnership where Noble provides premium, fresh-picked fruit to grocery stores for on-site squeezing.

"Florida has long been known for the great flavor, brix and yield of citrus," says Quentin Roe, president at Wm. G. Roe & Sons, Inc., with its Noble Citrus brand. "This program is designed to deliver just-picked, fresh-squeezed flavor with all its nutrients and no preservatives or added sugars. There is great value in having the Fresh From Florida logo on in-store marketing materials."

Retail merchandising materials are a

major component of the CSCG program.

"We visit approximately 500 retail locations each year to ensure all grocers have our standard point-of-purchase signage and materials," says Whitmire. "We also work to further engage retailers on collaborative, store-specific efforts, for example, cobranding with Certified SC. Our goal is to work with the grocer to make our brand fit within what they are trying to accomplish with their local produce efforts."

This summer, Ohio Proud is working with Kroger on a series to feature Ohio Proud member companies and have them sample in-store.

"The Ohio Proud program experienced funding cuts in 2025, which have limited our ability to run in-store promotions," says Baldrige. "However, we're using this as an opportunity to retool the program and look for grant funding that will allow us to do more with retailers to promote fruits and vegetables." **PB**

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Building the next generation of produce leaders requires a strategic, industry commitment to talent development, mentorship, and early-career engagement.

ADOBE STOCK PHOTO

Produce Industry Career Development Guide

Leadership programs cultivate new talent and shape industry survival.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Pressed by aging leadership and a scarcity of workers willing to take on labor-intensive jobs, the produce industry is looking for ways to encourage new talent to perform the work necessary to grow, market and distribute products in today's complex food system.

"Leadership development is no longer a future priority, it's a current-day business imperative," says Raina Nelson, president and chief executive officer of Westfalia Fruit USA. "The produce industry has an incredible story to tell, and it's our responsibility to develop and inspire the next generation to lead it. If we don't invest in developing talent now, we risk losing future leaders and institutional knowledge that built this great industry."

The workforce shortages created by fewer young professionals entering the sector, combined with a lack of succession planning, should prompt companies to rethink how they attract, develop and retain talent.

"We are also experiencing a major shift in capabilities and the need for new skills in highly technical positions tied to automation, sustainability, AI, food safety, logistics, and more," says Leslie Simmons, senior director of business development, fresh goods, for Fair Trade USA, Oakland, CA.

"The days are gone when someone enters the produce industry and stays in the same role for the next 30 years."

Here are six ways to build the next generation of produce leaders:

1. CULTIVATE TALENT THROUGH INDUSTRY EFFORTS

Because workforce challenges are not isolated to individual companies and affect the entire fresh produce and floral supply chain, industrywide collaboration on talent development is critical.

"Gen Z and Millennial professionals expect clear career progression, strong leadership, meaningful work, and ongoing opportunities to learn and grow," says Nikki Wootten, program and education manager for the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), Washington, D.C. "They also value transparency, mentorship, purpose-driven work, and flexibility. Companies that offer structured development and visible career pathways are far more successful in attracting and retaining younger talent."

After experiencing challenges recruiting the next generation of leaders to fill seats on Hass Avocado Board's (HAB) board of directors, the Mission Viejo, CA, organization created the Hass Avocado Industry Board Leadership Development (BOLD) program, partnering with University of California, Davis, faculty. Coursework on marketing, finance, regulatory, and governance gives participants skills to direct and evaluate HAB programs.

"Through the immersive, yearlong curriculum, participants gain the insights, tools, and confidence necessary to actively contribute as the next generation of board members, bringing their expertise, energy, and commitment to serve the broader avocado community," explains Emiliano Escobedo, HAB's executive director.

Since its first class in 2018, the Eastern Produce Council's (EPC) Leadership Program helps place and advance industry professionals through field and classroom experience. Class members have also partnered with the New York Produce Show, attending the show's Cornell Foundational Excellence Program to interact

with industry members and participate in breakout discussions, providing camaraderie, relationships and mentorship.

“Everybody wants to build up their LinkedIn page or their resume, which is understandable, but the goal is to have people go through the program and stay involved with the EPC and support us and then pass their experience on to other people in their companies,” says Susan McAleavey Sarlund, executive director of the New Providence, NJ, organization.

“There’s a snowball effect in people wanting to be a part of it (the industry) and take it back to their companies, to junior or new people in their organizations, and get them to participate since they’ve had such a good experience as part of the program,” says McAleavey Sarlund.

2. BUILD INTERNAL STAFF THROUGH CROSS-TRAINING

Rotational programs, internships, and management training initiatives are a growing area of focus. Emerging leaders are increasingly identified based on perfor-

mance, leadership potential and engagement rather than only on tenure.

Cross-training and mentoring help Procacci Brothers Sales Corp., a Philadelphia, PA, wholesaler that has also worked with universities and co-op learning, attract and retain employees. New employees are required to learn every aspect of the business, including being cross-trained in warehouse, shipping, receiving and quality control, before they can advance into other positions.

“The cross-training and the shadowing are probably the two most important things we do in that on-the-job learning,” says Rick Feighery, president. “They’re all capable of stepping in and helping in any one of those positions, even though it’s really separate departments overall.”

Along with onboarding and training, Katzman Produce’s professional development division provides ongoing development through helping team members build skills and grow in their roles. The New York City Terminal Market wholesaler focuses on developing future leaders

by creating clear career paths, supporting internal mobility across departments and throughout its family of companies, and by promoting from within when possible, says Andrew Roy, chief people officer.

“We are intentional about investing in our people as a core part of our growth strategy,” he says. “Through leadership coaching and mentorship initiatives, we are building a strong pipeline of talent equipped to lead the organization forward.”

3. ASSOCIATIONS CAN SOW SEEDS OF NEW WORKERS

Since 2010, the Millen, GA, Southeast Produce Council (SEPC) works to train upcoming retail and foodservice professionals through its Southeast Training Education Program for Upcoming Professionals, nicknamed STEP-UPP. SEPC also trains emerging leaders through the Next Generation Leadership Academy (NGLA).

STEP-UPP was designed to train 12 high-potential retail and foodservice professionals with emphasis on the development of strategic business orientation, personal leadership and hands-on field experience.

STEP-UPP blends learning with classroom education through a learning portal, virtual sessions and hands-on field experience. The program is considered a premier leadership development/educational program in the produce industry because it combines multiple high-impact elements, says Gary Baker, senior director of fresh for MDI/Merchants Distributors LLC, Hickory, NC.

“Students are able to build strong connections across retailers, suppliers, and industry leaders,” he says. “Through holistic industry understanding, participants gain a full view of the supply chain — from farm to retail/foodservice and experience training.”

Like many companies, Westfalia Fruit participates in industry leadership programs, including those at HAB and SEPC.

“Building a strong pipeline requires deliberate investment, cross-functional exposure, hands-on experience, and leadership opportunities,” says Nelson. “We strive to entrust and challenge our people early. We find this accelerates their growth and the business’s growth as well. We’re proving when you invest early and intentionally in talent, you don’t just build leaders, you secure the future.”

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Some of the members of the seventh Eastern Produce Council Leadership Class cap their 2025 program by participating in a panel at the New York Produce Show's Foundational Excellence event in December. They gained valuable industry insights, connections, and career-building experience alongside produce leaders. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

4. SPONSOR INTERNSHIPS AND UTILIZE LOCAL COLLEGES

Exposing individuals to industry opportunities, internships, and working through local colleges help companies recruit early talent.

Initially, to secure more workers, Western Growers promoted ag tech in community college curricula, followed by statewide workforce development meetings. Filling technical middle skill jobs from ag majors majoring in crop, soil and plant sciences, ones willing to work in ag, the effort supplies ag employers with more local employees from community colleges.

To encourage companies to use more students in paid internship opportunities, the Irvine, CA, organization gave employers \$3,000 internship reimbursements, says Carrie Peterson, Western Growers' grant manager for workforce development initiatives and Next Generation program manager.

"They're looking to Western Growers in this program to help identify highly qualified candidates for internships," says Peterson, which could lead to full-time employment after graduation.

"By developing these relationships and assisting in convening these meetings and connections, more than ever, we're able to get the producers and the Western Growers members connected with a very talented pipeline of students," says Peterson.

Industry efforts to interest young people in produce careers work well, with *PRODUCE BUSINESS* bringing more than 50 students from five universities to the New York Produce Show and Conference to meet with exhibitors and retailers. IFPA's suite of programs and education aims to connect to high school and university students, and offer early internship opportunities, notes Fair Trade's Simmons.

"It is difficult to identify significant, clear, and specific data around the success of individual programs," she says. "The clearest metrics have been cited within the (IFPA) Pack Family Career Pathways program, where approximately half of participating college graduates took jobs or internships in the produce industry, and retention among those young professionals was reported at 73%."

5. MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS PRODUCE RESULTS

Mentorship pairs emerging leaders with experienced professionals. Through hands-on methods closely tied to real business outcomes, IFPA's Emerging Leaders Program helps participants build practical leadership skills while learning how business decisions are made across the supply chain. Participants return to their organi-

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Mentorship builds not just knowledge, but confidence and perspective."**

Renata Vargas Alvarez, Walmart, Mexico City, Mexico

- **"If we don't invest in developing talent now, we risk losing future leaders and institutional knowledge that built this great industry."**

Raina Nelson, Westfalia Fruit USA, Oxnard, CA

- **"We are intentional about investing in our people as a core part of our growth strategy."**

Andrew Roy, Katzman Produce, Bronx, NY



zations more engaged, more confident and more invested in their long-term career growth within the industry.

"Mentorship is particularly important as the industry undergoes a generational transition, while also becoming more complex and interconnected," says IFPA's Wootten. "Mentorship helps transfer decades of institutional and relationship-based knowledge while accelerating leadership development for emerging professionals. It also strengthens industry networks, fostering collaboration, shared learning, and long-term business growth across the supply chain."

Believing everyone in the industry must work to attract more talent, the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA), Maitland, FL, develops future talent through programs, including partnering with a leading state ag university.

"From an association perspective, one of our fundamental responsibilities is to actively mentor and develop the next generation of leaders," says Christina Morton, director of communications. "This is not solely the role of associations or companies; it is also essential for every individual within the industry to proactively identify rising talent and play a role in nurturing their growth."

Successful mentorship programs are structured, yet flexible, and include clear objectives, defined timelines, and regular check-ins while focusing on practical outcomes, such as career clarity, leadership readiness, and stronger industry connections — not only informal conversations, Wootten says.

"Mentorship strengthens retention by helping employees feel supported and invested in — both within their organizations and across the industry," says Wootten. "Cross-industry mentorship is especially valuable because it gives emerging leaders broader exposure to supply chain challenges and opportunities beyond their individual roles."

Executive or senior-level sponsorship can be pivotal in worker development and retention.

"Mentorship and sponsorship are both essential, especially with younger employees who want to feel seen, heard, and have a clearer, achievable growth path," says Fair Trade's Simmons.

"Generational shifts mean a workforce that wants something different from the older, more tenured generation. They are looking for money, but also for meaning in their work, as well as learning and development," Simmons adds. "A combination of emotional intelligence and technical skills is going to be incredibly important."

"Companies are using programs like STEP-UPP to strategically place their high-potential employees, to expose them to the pro-

duce industry and their leadership potential,” SEPC’s Baker explains. “STEP UPP has assigned mentors for each student who is part of the class, and this bolsters retention and engagement because employees feel more supported, engaged, and confident by having this mentor in place to help guide them.”

Mentoring brings many benefits. “What truly makes a difference is real exposure and mentorship,” says Renata Vargas Alvarez, assistant purchasing director of fruits and imports for Walmart, Mexico City, Mexico, who spoke at a New York Produce Show panel discussion in December.

“Mentorship builds not just knowledge, but confidence and perspective. In the end, it’s about access to leaders, challenges and growth. And in this industry, we’re always learning — every day brings something new that pushes us to grow.”

6. BLENDED EFFORTS AID WORKER RETENTION

Many companies are adopting a blended approach. Structured programs build foundational skills, peer mentoring fosters collaboration and support networks, while executive sponsorship provides exposure to senior leadership and strategic decision-making, says Wootten.

“These investments help companies build stronger internal talent pipelines, reduce turnover among high-potential employees, and prepare the next generation of leaders more efficiently,” she says.

Companies are also encouraging more strategic and innovative thinking earlier in employees’ careers, often identifying high-po-

tential employees earlier and supporting them with structured development plans, Wootten adds.

Mentorship plays a critical role in driving retention, developing future leaders and fostering innovation, explains Katzman’s Roy.

“We are actively working to capture the expertise of our deeply knowledgeable tenured team members who have helped drive our success, and translating it into structured learning opportunities for the newer and younger generations of our workforce,” he says. “This trains and empowers rising talent, and ensures that the core principles of our business are preserved and strengthened over time.”

Since the early 2010s, FFVA’s Emerging Leader Development Program has helped shape future talent, graduating nearly 170 participants, with 10 serving on FFVA’s board of directors. The organization’s Women in Ag Leadership series promotes women pursuing ag careers. Representing Florida’s specialty crop industry, FFVA invests in the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences’ Wedgworth Leadership Institute leadership development program.

“Not only are companies focusing on developing emerging leaders, but associations are increasingly taking on this responsibility to cultivate talent with an eye toward long-term industry impacts,” explains Morton.

“Member companies often tell us that graduates experience tangible benefits, including enhanced leadership capacity and increased confidence, which positively influence their contributions within their organizations.”

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As a key growing region, the Midwest offers logistical advantages along with a wide range of staple items central to everyday shopping. From May through September, much of the produce featured by Midwest retailers is sourced locally, including cherries.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVERIDGE

The Midwest Produce Network

Produce from Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin keeps retail competitive.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Sourcing fresh produce from the Midwest can help keep retail supermarkets competitive. The major Midwestern states, which include Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin, provide retail buyers with fresh products in the late spring and summer when other deals are winding down or ramping up.

As a major growing region, the Midwest's logistical advantages offer a large catalog of staple items. From May through September, a large portion of what retailers across the Midwest offer originates from the region, including cucumbers, all varieties of peppers, sweet corn, and a full lineup of squash — items customers seek weekly.

"Midwestern produce is extremely important to retail operations, especially for businesses like ours that prioritize freshness, value,

and strong relationships with growers," says Sarah Urbani, director of marketing and advertising for Joe Randazzo's Fruit and Vegetable Market, a Detroit, MI, chain. "During the peak growing season, it becomes the backbone of our produce department."

"Sourcing from the Midwest — particularly states like Michigan and Indiana — allows us to bring in product that is fresher, travels a shorter distance, and can be offered at a better price point. That combination is critical in retail, where quality and value directly impact customer trust and repeat business."

The Midwest's organic muck soil is known for growing tasty and beautiful produce, and its reliable access to fresh water makes the Midwest a uniquely strong production region.

"The Midwest's climate, topography, and natural resources — such as Great Lakes access and varying soil types — make it possible to grow a wide range of commodities," says Jordan Grainger, vice



Wisconsin potatoes are a seasonal favorite for consistent quality and well-known Midwest-grown flavor.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

president of sales and business development for Ben B. Schwartz & Sons Inc., a Detroit, MI, wholesaler.

“Geographically, it’s centrally located, so it’s an easy place to distribute produce from, given it’s also connected via major highways and waterways, and international borders for easy transport,” adds Grainger. “Lastly, there is a rich agricultural community across the Midwest, so there is a lot of support from local programs all the way up to state and federal governments.”

Midwest produce plays a vital role for retailers of all sizes, including the family-owned Big Apple Finer Foods store in Chicago’s Lincoln Park community.

“Midwest produce is vital in summer profitability because retailers can purchase key produce items locally, instead of sourcing at either of the coasts or even internationally,” says Sean Lodarek, produce. “This, especially nowadays with rising gas prices, saves a ton on transportation costs, along with the produce itself saving on transportation times, which means fresher produce that may even last a few days longer since it saves on being on a truck across the country before ending up on shelves.”

DIVERSE PORTFOLIO

One drawing card for the Midwest is Michigan, one of most agriculturally diverse states, second only to California. The Wolverine State grows more than 300 commodities.

“We are an overnight reach to much of our region and a two-day trip to the farther regular reaches,” says Jordan Vande Guchte, vice president of sales for Superior Sales, Hudsonville, MI, which grows a variety of vegetables, including asparagus, bell peppers, broccoli, green beans, cabbage, carrots, celery and summer and hard squash.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Whether it’s Michigan asparagus, Wisconsin potatoes, or Indiana sweet corn, our retailers and the consumer get excited for these items every year. The reputation of the taste and quality of these products is well known throughout the Midwest.”**
Ryan Dietz, Heartland Produce Co., Kenosha, WI
- **“In times of high fuel costs, the Midwest becomes even more critical for retail, thanks to our central location and efficient access to markets across the country, but primarily the Midwest for our summer offerings.”**
Trish Taylor, Riveridge Produce Marketing Inc., Sparta, MI

“We are overnight delivery to so many people, population-wise, in the United States,” says Chadd Buurma, president of Buurma Farms Inc., Willard, OH, which grows and ships up to 40 vegetables, including a variety of leafy greens, herbs, radishes, green onions, sweet corn, cucumbers and fall hard squash.

“If consumers are shopping in Ohio or Pennsylvania or wherever it may be and see products grown here somewhat locally, as opposed to Canada, Mexico, California, I certainly think that they’re going to grab that when it’s available.”

Indiana promotes its local bounties. The Indiana State Depart-



The Midwest's rich, organic soils help produce flavorful, high-quality fruits and vegetables, giving the region a natural advantage in growing standout produce. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

ment of Agriculture's (ISDA) Indiana Grown program works with Hoosier State farms and food businesses, providing marketing support through farm-to-table dinner events, media opportunities and agritourism development.

"Indiana agriculture is diverse and strong, with more than 53,000 farms," says Chad Nixon, the Indianapolis, IN-based ISDA's director of public affairs. "We continue to rank nationally in specialty crops that matter to produce departments — No. 3 in pumpkins and No. 5 in watermelons — aligning with what shoppers look for in summer and fall. We've seen growers add acreage, tunnels, and packing capacity to meet seasonal spikes, while institutions increase purchases of specialty crops through farm-to-institution procurement initiatives."

The other Midwest states also play big roles in growing fresh produce.

"Whether it's Michigan asparagus, Wisconsin potatoes, or Indiana sweet corn, our retailers and the consumer get excited for these items every year," says Ryan Dietz, president of Heartland Produce Co., a Kenosha, WI, distributor. "The reputation of the taste and quality of these products is well known throughout the Midwest."

The soil and climate help the region produce a large shopping cart of produce, from apples to zucchini squash.

"The Great Lakes create ideal growing conditions, with fertile soil, unique microclimates that support crop diversity, and long summers that extend into the fall — allowing for optimal harvest timing, consistent rainfall, and exceptional flavor," explains Trish Taylor, marketing manager of Sparta, MI's, Riveridge Produce Marketing Inc., which grows and ships apples, cherries, plums and asparagus.

"The Midwest has a strong reputation for experienced growers, with many farms now in their sixth and seventh generations. These families have preserved the traditions that make our region uniquely Midwest-grown, while continuing to adapt and invest in new innovations to deliver high-quality produce."

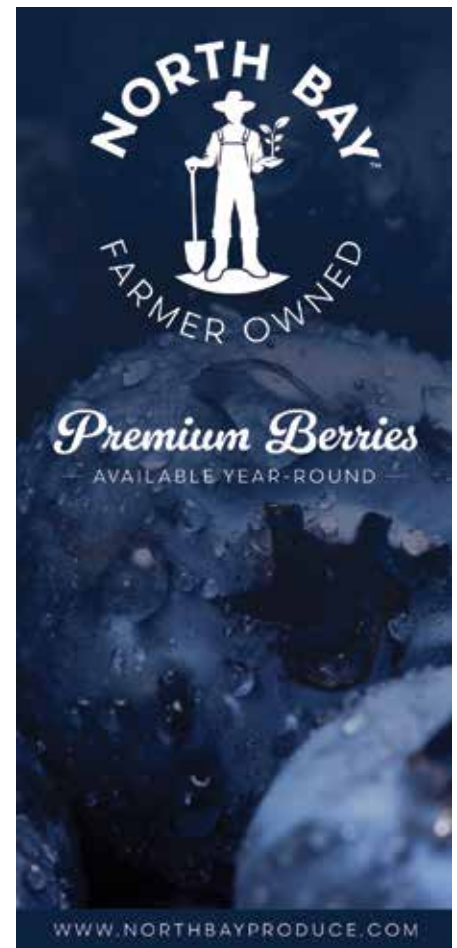
UNDERRATED REGION

The Midwest is a vital production region due to its favorable location and climate, diversity of crops, access to water, and distance to populous markets, agrees Kathy Michael Sponheim, co-owner of Michael Family Farms, Urbana, OH, which grows a variety of potatoes.

"Midwest produce has a great reputation for quality and freshness. The Midwest is unique in the fact that, in addition to a temperate climate and adequate rainfall, it is also home to the Great Lakes and several major rivers," she says. "The region is also blessed with rich fertile soil, providing a canvas for a variety of fruits and vegetables that often don't get recognized in a region known for corn and soybeans."

The Midwest's logistical advantages remain a big benefit to keeping retail produce departments efficient.

"During peak seasons, retailers rely heavily on Midwest-grown fruits and vegetables to keep shelves stocked with fresh, high-quality product at competitive prices," says Joe Randazzo's Urbani. "This consistent supply not only supports strong sales, but also helps retailers reduce dependence on imports. Shorter transit times mean fresher product, lower transportation costs, and the ability to respond quickly to changes in demand — factors that directly impact retail performance and profitability."



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Midwestern growers/shippers leverage overnight and two-day distribution to deliver a wide range of vegetables with peak freshness, giving retailers a competitive edge. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

The large variety of produce grown in the Midwest benefits supermarket produce departments.

“Given the variety of produce grown in the Midwest, retailers can bundle orders across a large product mix, streamline sourcing, and guarantee freshness and minimize costs through shorter transit times,” notes Ben B. Schwartz’s Grainger. “On the sales end, they can do seasonal promotions or create cross-merchandising opportunities, such as grouping items for convenience, like a grilling kit that includes a medley of vegetables.”

The logistical advantages are obvious, says Taylor. “In times of high fuel costs, the Midwest becomes even more critical for retail, thanks to our central location and efficient access to markets across the country, but primarily the Midwest for our summer offerings.”

“While the Midwest may not produce the same volumes as some regions, our focus is on growing for local markets,” she notes. “This provides clear advantages, helping retailers manage freight costs while delivering fresher product to consumers, with less time spent in transit and better flavor as a result.”

STRONG SEASONAL PRESENCE

In some ways, the overall Midwest season can be as filling as other regions.

“The length of a season from late May and June all the way through October or November, depending on the crop, that’s almost six months,” says Buurma. “That’s like Florida. Obviously, when

you ramp up, you’re starting with only maybe two, three, four, five commodities, but you get the full season for three, four months, and then as the weather changes in the fall, you might lose some of those more tender items, and you kind of ramp down. But, in general, it’s a five- to six-month shipping season with different commodities coming and going throughout that season, like Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri.”

Seasonality is key. “Many small, family-owned farms are still offering product throughout the Midwest,” says Heartland Produce’s Dietz. “The seasonality of the product grown here keeps the demand for these items high when they are available.”

The Midwest’s geographic advantages help keep retail produce departments competitive, even with the East Coast and Southeast regions. “Anytime we can reduce miles on product, we can bring a fresher and better tasting product to the consumer while reducing cost and carbon footprint,” says Dietz.

“Retailers can access several types of produce items in a geographic area to save on logistics costs and keep inventory fresh by bringing in mixer loads,” says Michael Family Farms’ Sponheim. “When a truck can get produce from field to shelf in 24 hours, consumers can taste the difference and fall in love with the flavor, creating greater demand for the local produce item. Beyond saved costs in freight and freshness of produce, retailers can also count on growers to be able to ship on short notice to prevent empty shelves. They can get an additional truck there the next day.”

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Chicago represents a diverse retail landscape in which stores do an excellent job of catering to their ethnic neighborhoods. For example, Farmer's Best Market, a two-store grocery retailer in Chicago, IL, offers a variety of produce from all over the world. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO*

Chicago: 'My Kind' of Produce Town

The city's food scene fuels strong demand for fresh produce.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

From the classic deep-dish, by way of long-established pizza and Italian food outlets, to Mexican and Latin influences and the more recent growth in French cuisine, Chicago's dining industry has it all. Taken as a whole, the Windy City boasts close to 12,000 restaurants, according to Dataessential, with produce playing a key role across the industry.

Rated one of the top food cities in the U.S, Chicago, IL, residents spend more than \$1,000 each month on dining out — putting it in fourth place in the country as a whole — with most willing to pay premium prices for quality, Current Backyard's 2025 City Food Culture Study found.

Serving much of this demand is the 33-acre Chicago International Produce Market (CIPM), a state-of-the-art produce market home to more than 22 independent produce merchants and one of the few facilities of its kind left in the country.

Based at the CIPM, La Galera Produce, also known as Galera Fresh, opened for business in 2004, when its primary focus was on importing Mexican produce. The company evolved to focus on the U.S. market, adding Western vegetables, including potatoes and onions.

According to Galera's chief communications officer, Francine Cossyleon, one of the key factors that most characterizes Chicago as a market for produce is its dynamism, "with competition at every corner."

As such, she says it's critical for businesses like Galera to stay competitive and humble. "We must make it easy for grocery stores to work with us," she explains. "Sometimes, that means flexibility on payment terms or accepting unjustified returns."

Over the past two years, Galera has further extended its range with U.S.-grown fruits and, most recently, Asian produce. "We've come a long way, and recognize that, given the changing markets and demographics in Chicago, our best bet is to provide for the masses," says Cossyleon.

"The changing demographics and consumer trends keep us on our feet."

A UNIQUE PRODUCE TOWN

Basciani Foods has grown mushrooms in Pennsylvania for 101 years and distributed them in Chicago for over 40 years from its own dedicated facility. Chief Executive Michael Basciani embraces the appeal of the city. "I love Chicago. I love the Midwestern people, I love this town. You go to Chicago, it's some of the best food ever."

One of the first companies to do daily deliveries from Pennsylvania to Chicago, and redistribution across the city, Basciani Foods



The JAB Produce, Inc. team includes (L-R): Mike Smetana, Steve Argires, Tony Ragusa, Mark "Sparky" Poremba, Jacob Serck and Mike Ruffolo. JAB is a wholesaler and distributor of fresh produce on the Chicago International Produce Market. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

has achieved success by tailoring its mushroom offer to the needs of chefs and foodservice operators in the metropolis.

"Other mushroom companies are retail-oriented; I went strong into foodservice and almost did it like kitchen prep — how can I help your restaurant or office building or school, so there's less laboring in kitchens to have more tables in your restaurants," Basciani explains.

More recently, Basciani has focused on providing sliced mushrooms with a longer shelf life via freezable, 5-pound bags, as well as marinated mushrooms. Over the years, Basciani has also carefully added complementary items, such as shallots and onions.

Since its beginning 30 years ago, Midwest Foods, with locations in Chicago and Kenosha, WI, has focused on supplying specialty and seasonal produce to chefs, institutions and culinary professionals across Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana. The company has grown into a full-service partner across the supply chain, with a strong emphasis on value-added solutions, according to Midwest President Erin Fitzgerald. More recently, it has added premium spices and signature blends following the acquisition of a spice company.

Another major area of growth has been in-house production, including the Edible Cuts line of pre-cut fruits and vegetables and grab-and-go offerings, designed to help operators address labor challenges, improve consistency, and increase efficiency.

Fitzgerald describes Chicago as being "one of the most demanding produce markets in the country," driven by both its diversity and the level of expectation from operators.

"The dining scene spans Michelin-starred restaurants to high-volume neighborhood concepts, but that same expectation for quality and consistency extends across sectors including healthcare, education, and large-scale foodservice environments," she says.

"Ultimately, our role is to help customers navigate a market that moves quickly and leaves little room for error," Fitzgerald says. "We are built to match the pace and expectations of Chicago's food scene."

Headquartered in Chicago, but with additional distribution centers in Maryland, California and Texas, Sun Belle markets and ships fresh berries — blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and golden berries — nationwide and to Mexico, Canada, Europe and Asia. The company recently launched Craveabelles, a new, premium blackberry brand.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Local produce grown in the Midwest in season is some of the best product available anywhere."**
Ryan Dietz, Heartland Produce, Kenosha, WI
- **"Across the board, there is very little tolerance for inconsistency. Operators expect reliability, quality, and access to unique or specialty items as a baseline, not a differentiator."**
Erin Fitzgerald, Midwest Foods, Chicago, IL
- **"Chicago is the eating town. You've got deep-dish, and there are some great small restaurants out there. You go to Chicago, it's some of the best food ever."**
Michael Basciani, Basciani Foods, Avondale, PA

According to Taylor Hazelwood, Sun Belle's vice president of sales, Chicago's appeal as a produce market lies in its central location and iconic city architecture, "layered with vibrant culture and cuisine" from all over the world.

With an estimated 69 million people in the Midwest, making up around 20% of the U.S. population, Hazelwood says Chicago is also significant as a produce hub by sheer population density.

"With that, there is high demand for fresh produce for an array of needs," she says.

To the north of the Chicago urban center, Heartland Produce Company works to serve retailers and foodservice providers throughout the upper Midwest from its base in Kenosha, principally through its Organic Indeed- and Fresh Indeed-branded packaged fresh produce.

According to Heartland president Ryan Dietz, the company's focus on locally sourced, in-season organic produce has been key to helping retailers and other partners drive sales, while supporting local growers.

Dietz says Chicago represents a diverse retail landscape in which

stores do an excellent job of catering to the ethnic neighborhoods in which they reside. "Heartland works to make sure the right balance of quality and value of product is offered to these stores, allowing value to be passed along to the consumer."

A CENTRAL HUB

According to Fitzgerald, Chicago is one of the most strategic markets in the country for produce distribution, primarily because of its central location and infrastructure.

"It serves as a major transportation hub, with access to national trucking lanes and air freight, which allows for efficient inbound and outbound movement of product," she says. "That positioning gives us the ability to source from multiple growing regions and maintain consistent supply across seasons."

Another advantage is the diversity of the market, Fitzgerald adds, with Chicago able to support a wide range of customers, from chef-driven restaurants to large institutional operators.

However, that complexity is also a challenge. "It is an extremely competitive market with tight margins and high expectations around quality, consistency, and service," Fitzgerald explains. "Customers are sophisticated and price-aware, and there is very little room for error."

A produce marketer/shipper, Sun Belle uses its Chicago hub as a central gateway for both domestic and imported berries. It's a streamlined model that enables the company to ensure a consistent supply of berries, while maintaining rigorous quality control



The 33-acre Chicago International Produce Market is a state-of-the-art produce market that is home to more than 22 independent produce merchants and is one of the few facilities of its kind left in the country. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

standards, says Mike Dixon, Sun Belle's senior sales account manager and a Chicago native.

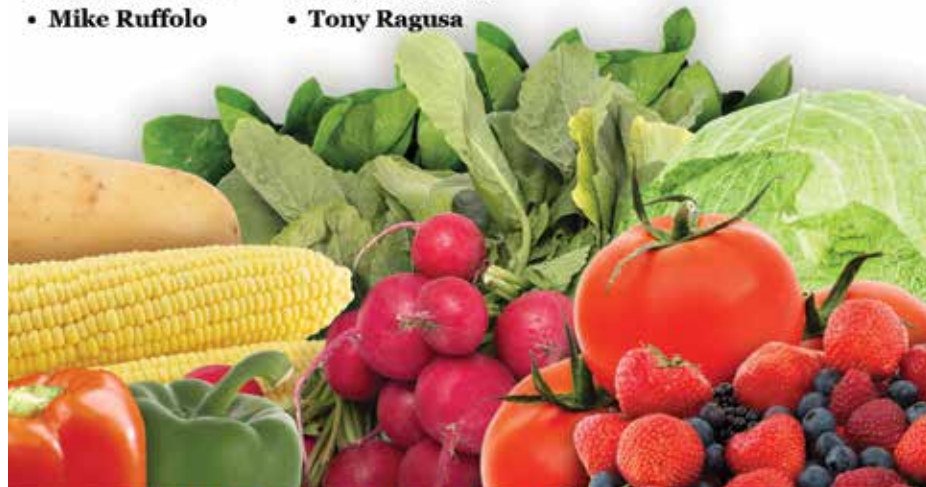
"Chicago has long been a central hub of the nation," adds fellow Chicagoan and senior sales account manager, Troy Elliott. "From the early days of railroad and shipping to modern times of trucking and air, many items come through Chicago before their final destination. Chicago was built on transportation. This allows us to have more flexibility when procuring produce."

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At the Chicago International Produce Market, La Galera Produce, also known as Galera Fresh, first opened for business in 2004, when its primary focus was on importing Mexican produce. The company later evolved to focus on the U.S. market, adding Western vegetables, including potatoes and onions. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

A GROWING NETWORK

“Being centrally located in the Midwest gives us the flexibility to leverage all growing areas and ports of entry in the USA,” says Dietz at Heartland. “This allows us a tremendous amount of flexibility to take advantage of opportunities as they arise and pass them along to our partners.”

Fitzgerald says the company’s proximity to key growing regions is a core advantage in how it sources and moves product. “Being based in Chicago and Wisconsin puts us within immediate reach of strong regional supply, including Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin, while also positioning us as a central hub for national distribution.”

As an urban center, Fitzgerald says Chicago benefits from a unique geographic advantage with a proximity to Michigan — the second most agriculturally diverse state in the U.S. — as well as other Midwest producers that support seasonal and regional sourcing.

That proximity, Fitzgerald continues, enables Midwest’s buyers to maintain direct relationships with growers and stay closely connected to what is happening in the field. “Because we are integrated across the supply chain, from grower relationships through distribution, we have greater visibility into crop conditions, tighter quality control, and the ability to make faster, more informed sourcing decisions as markets shift.”

From a logistics standpoint, Fitzgerald describes Chicago as one of the most efficient distribution points in the country, with major trucking lanes running through the region and access to air freight via O’Hare International Airport. Thanks to this infrastructure, she says Midwest is able to source from multiple regions simultaneously and pivot quickly in response to weather events, seasonality, or supply disruptions.

AN IDEAL PLATFORM

But in this age of retail consolidation, the question surely has

to be asked: How are wholesale markets managing to survive and thrive? And what part do independent retailers play?

For Dietz, wholesale markets and wholesalers in general do an excellent job of helping smooth out the swings in supply and demand. “They work extremely hard to market product in excess supply situations, partnering with retailers that are able to push product in volume at a huge value to the consumer.”

Galera’s Cossyleon says it’s clear consumers are holding all grocery stores to a higher standard. “Grocery stores need to draw customers with both prices and good quality, so that’s where we come in.

“We partner with great farms to ensure we provide the best products; even with slight price fluctuations, our grocery store partners stick with us. I think our farm and grocery partnerships really help us see through the rough patches, and vice versa. Galera Fresh supports them with their weekly ads when possible to help draw in our customers.”

Sun Belle’s Hazelwood argues the key to continuing to thrive in today’s dynamic marketplace is a combination of exceptional customer service, superior quality and freshness, expert product handling, and continuous innovation.

“Amid ongoing market consolidation, the produce and berry sector continues to evolve and thrive by moving beyond its traditional role as a commodity supplier,” she says, adding Sun Belle is leaning into advanced technology, sustainability initiatives, and the specialized needs of retailers and consumers.

Dixon views independent retailers as playing a vital role as strategic partners, providing an ideal platform to test new products and varieties. “These partnerships deliver immediate, real-world feedback on shopper preferences, allowing Sun Belle to refine offerings and stay ahead of market trends,” he says. “Independent retailers provide a critical, community-focused, and highly adaptable sales channel that keeps the market vibrant and responsive.”



Once a simple staple, guacamole has grown into a high-impact, value-added category, driven by convenience, flavor innovation and consumer demand.

PHOTO COURTESY WHOLLY GUACAMOLE

Six Ways to Put an Olé in Retail Guacamole Sales

This modern favorite is fueling demand through convenience and flavor innovation.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Americans eat an estimated 8 million pounds of guacamole — and that's just on Super Bowl Sunday. This modern favorite, made of mashed ripe avocado with seasonings, traces its roots back nearly half a millennium.

Avocados were a staple of the Aztec diet, an empire centered in what is now Mexico, as early as the 14th century. The fruit was mashed with tomatoes, chiles and salt into *ahuacamolli*, a precursor to today's guacamole. Following the Spanish arrival in 1519, ingredients, such as onion, lime and cilantro, were introduced, shaping the flavor profile now familiar to consumers.

Today, the availability of Hass avocados, shifting U.S. demographics, and persuasive health-focused marketing have transformed guacamole into a high-velocity, value-added category with wide-ranging flavor variations, flexible packing options, and year-round merchandising potential.

"Pre-made guacamole continues to show strong growth as shoppers look for fresh, convenient options without compromising quality," says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations for

Harp's Food Stores, a 178-store chain based in Springdale, AR.

The global guacamole market was valued at \$1.47 billion in 2025, and is projected to reach \$2.63 billion by 2034, with a CAGR of 6.5% of 6.5% during the forecast period from 2026-2034, according to the March 2026-released report, *Guacamole Market Size, Share, Trends and Forecast by Form, End Use, Packaging, Distribution Channel and Region, 2026-2034*, by the IMARC Group, with U.S. offices in Brooklyn, NY.

North America currently dominates the market, with a 40.3% market share in 2025.

1. CAPITALIZE ON CREATIVITY, CONVENIENCE AND CLEAN EATING

Guacamole is now a staple in so many households, says Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager for Sugar Foods Corporation in Villa Rica, GA, which owns the Concord Foods brand of dry guacamole mixes. "It's not just for parties anymore. People use it as a topping, a spread, or a side, and it fits into all kinds of meals. That everyday versatility is a big reason demand stays strong. Plus, guacamole feels like a simple way to make any meal or gathering a little more special."

The company recently introduced its Organic Guacamole Mix, a natural fit for people already buying organic avocados.

Convenience is also a driver of pre-made guacamole sales.

"For shoppers, it eliminates the guesswork and prep. There's no need to find ripe avocados or buy multiple ingredients. They can simply grab a package, pick up some chips, and go for immediate

consumption,” says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist for Charlie’s Produce, Seattle, WA, which supplies independent retailers as well as chains, including Fred Meyer and Sprouts.

“For retailers, it’s especially valuable for those without the labor for in-store prep. It also helps meet demand during high-vol-

ume events like the Super Bowl and Cinco de Mayo, while serving as a value-added extension of avocado sales.”

In addition to convenience, adds Chris Monahan, senior brand manager for refrigerated dips at Hormel Foods subsidiary MegaMex Foods, in Orange, CA, makers of the Wholly Guacamole brand, “the typical

shopper for guacamole products wants to feel great about the refrigerated dip they are buying, often looking for ingredients they can pronounce. A secondary, but growing, shopper segment includes those seeking dairy-free alternatives to snackable dips.”

There’s a strong overlap between avocado shoppers and guacamole purchasers, but it’s not purely a substitute. “Most consumers buy both: whole avocados for planned meals and guacamole for snacking,” says Elena Iturbide, account executive for GoVerden USA, a Plano, TX-based company that sources its avocados from Michoacán, Mexico, and focuses on clean-label guacamole products.

2. FOCUS ON CORE, THEN EXPAND

Increased demand for variety, chunkier textures, spicier profiles and more traditional recipes, as well as strong performance from grab-and-go formats, is where Harps’ Roberts sees demand trending. “Single-serve cups, in particular, are resonating with customers who want quick, healthy snack solutions.”

Overall, Roberts adds, the category is evolving toward more premium, fresh-focused offerings.

“Our best-seller continues to be our Chunky Guacamole varieties, driven by their fresh flavor, simple ingredients, and versatility across occasions,” says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations, Rhombus, TX, makers of the ¡Yo Quiero! Brand. “These core products serve as category anchors and are essential for any retailer looking to build a strong guacamole set.”

For retailers looking to expand the category, Murray recommends adding: grab-and-go 4-ounce options for convenience-focused shoppers; spicy or flavor-forward varieties to drive incremental purchases; and larger party sizes for entertaining occasions.

“The strongest approach is to start with those high-velocity items, then layer in differentiated flavors or formats that add variety without overcomplicating the set,” emphasizes Ivan Brown, senior director of marketing for Fresh Del Monte North America, in Coral Gables, FL.

Fresh Del Monte manufactures premium homemade tasting guacamole with an eight-day shelf life, different from HPP (high pressure processing) alternatives, which

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can alter the texture and mute the flavors of fresh ingredients.

There are regional preference differences.

“Markets like Texas and the Southwest tend to over-index on spicier flavors, while simpler, classic profiles perform consistently across the country,” says GoVerden’s Iturbide, whose company’s best seller is its Perfectly Ripe Avocados, made with avocado, lime, salt and pepper, and available in 2-ounce single-serve cups, sold in a bulk pack of 16 cups for warehouse-style retail chains.

“That said, clean-label, simple products and convenient formats are must-haves everywhere.”

3. STOCK NEW GUACS

One of the newest areas of focus for Fresh Innovations’ ¡Yo Quiero! brand is its Authentic Mexican line of guacamole. Available in both original and spicy varieties, made with serrano peppers, the products are packed in 8-ounce cups and 10- and 15-ounce tubs.

“This line resonates with consumers seeking cultural authenticity,



In November 2024, Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA, introduced its 2-pound family-size Party Guacamole in original and spicy flavors. Each container packs the equivalent of 12 Hass avocados. PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA’S

elevated flavor profiles, and fresh options that feel homemade,” says Murray.

The latest innovation for MegaMex Foods’ Wholly brand is a line of avocado dips available in three dairy-free varieties: Roasted Red Bell Pepper & Spinach, Spinach Artichoke, and Tomato & Basil. These

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products are currently available in select Midwest locations, with the goal of nationwide expansion.

“The innovation was driven by several market trends, including the increasing consumer demand for dairy-free alternatives for those who have difficulty digesting lactose, the growth of the refrigerated dips category, and the popularity of avocados for their wellness benefits,” says Monahan.

On the packaging front, Calavo Growers has introduced 14-ounce squeeze pouches for its AvoFresco premium brand of prepared guacamole and avocado products. The three-item line includes Authentic Guacamole, Only Avocados & Sea Salt, and AvoCrema, a mix of avocado and sour cream.

“The package utilizes airtight, or fresh-lock, technology to retain the guacamole’s vibrant green color for up to two weeks once opened,” says Ron Araiza, executive vice president for fresh foods.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Single-serve cups, in particular, are resonating with customers who want quick, healthy snack solutions.”**

Mike Roberts, Harps Food Stores, Springdale, AR



- **“Positioning guacamole as a meal enhancer, rather than just a dip, helps expand usage occasions and increase basket size.”**

Tara Murray, Fresh Innovations, Rhome, TX



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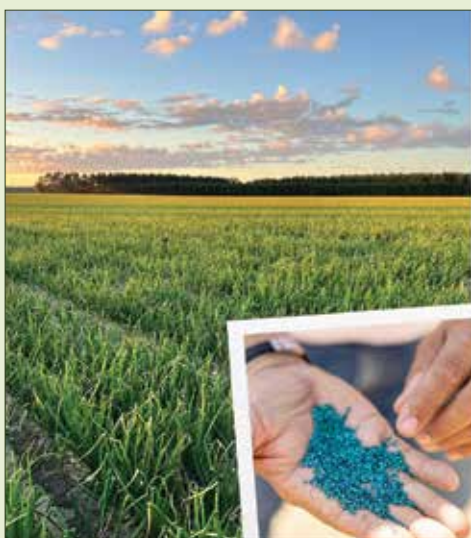


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4. BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL COME

Guacamole is positioned as a destination category at Harps Food Stores. "In many stores, we dedicate an entire refrigerated door or 4-foot set to dips and salsas, with guacamole as the anchor," says Roberts.

In produce, it's important to highlight freshness and taste. Hence, merchandising requires a combination of visual appeal and strategic placement to attract customers and boost sales, according to Fresh Del Monte's Brown.

"Rotating stock to ensure only the freshest produce is displayed, drawing attention and encouraging purchase with proper signage and visuals, and prioritizing

optimal placement of displays like eye level and/or near high traffic areas is important for a successful display."

Occasion-based displays are another big opportunity, according to GoVerden's Iturbide. "This is especially true around events, such as sports, holidays, or summer grilling, where guacamole naturally fits."

While destination displays are highly effective because guacamole shoppers often seek the product intentionally, secondary displays help capture incremental purchases, says Fresh Innovations' Murray.

"Tried-and-true merchandising tips include placing guacamole near avocados and fresh vegetables for natural pairing. Creative merchandising ideas include game-day snacking stations, taco-night meal solution displays, and fresh snack

stations featuring cut vegetables and dips. These types of displays help position guacamole as more than a dip, but as a versatile, everyday fresh solution."

5. GROW GUACAMOLE SALES FOR SNACKS & MEALS

Prepared items in the produce department continue to grow as consumers seek convenience without sacrificing freshness. Value-added produce, which represented 16.1% of total produce sales for the 52 weeks ending March 22, 2026, according to Circana Integrated Fresh Market Advantage data, is becoming a significant contributor to fresh department growth.

Retailers can target shoppers by positioning pre-made guacamole as both a snack solution and a meal enhancer. Cross-merchandising is one of the most effective ways to do this, according to Murray. She recommends retailers drive incremental purchases by placing guacamole alongside: fresh vegetables such as peppers, carrots, and cucumbers; tortilla chips and fresh tortilla sections; prepared meals and deli items; grilling proteins like chicken or steak; taco night ingredients like tortillas, pico, and shredded cheese; and salad kits and grain bowls.

"Positioning guacamole as a meal enhancer, rather than just a dip, helps expand usage occasions and increase basket size."

6. PROMOTE YEAR-ROUND IN PEAKS & PLATEAUS

Peak promotional activities usually occur during key holidays and events that drive high demand, says Brown. "Some examples are Cinco de Mayo, Easter, Mother's and Father's Day, and summer holidays. Leveraging major holidays where shoppers are hosting lots of people and staying on top of consumer trends are key to keeping sales moving year-round."

With big global sports events coming up, such as World Cup matches, Sugar Foods' McCaul expects guacamole to continue playing a role. "Anytime people gather to watch sports, good food tends to be part of it."

Slower sales periods may occur during post-holiday months when entertaining dips slightly. However, retailers can maintain momentum by promoting everyday use occasions such as lunch solutions, healthy snacking, and meal enhancements, says Murray.

"As consumers continue to prioritize fresh, convenient foods, pre-made guacamole remains a strong year-round performer with opportunities for continued growth."

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It is recommended to place stone fruit in front-of-store or other high-traffic areas, using large, abundant displays arranged by variety and color to highlight freshness and seasonality. PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

Stone Fruit: Winner Across Demographics

The U.S. delivers a steady stream of high-quality peaches, plums, apricots and nectarines.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Concentrated in California, with smaller volumes from Washington State, Oregon and Georgia, the U.S. stone fruit industry offers high-quality peaches, plums, apricots, and other items. The season extends from April to November, providing a compelling product during the peak summer months.

With the 2026 crop running about 10 days ahead of 2025 due to warmer weather, grocery retailers need to begin planning now. That includes developing strategies to drive impulse and complementary sales among an increasingly broad base of stone fruit consumers.

Michael Thurlow, national sales specialist at Reedley, CA-headquartered Mountain View Fruit Sales, says the California season is shaping up to be promising, with a strong fruit set and sizing, healthy orchards, and favorable weather conditions.

“We’re taking a hands-on, proactive approach to thinning and crop management to ensure excellent size, shape, and eating quality right out of the gate,” he says. “We’re seeing excellent orchard health and strong early indicators, giving us confidence in a high-quality, promotable season.”

Mountain View offers a full range of California-grown stone fruit, including yellow and white peaches and nectarines, apricots and plums, with timing driven by variety and growing region.

Based in Porterville, CA, Homegrown Organic Farms offers a strong organic stone fruit lineup, including California-grown peaches, nectarines, plums, pluots and apricots, available primarily from May through September.

According to deciduous category director, Stephen Paul, peak promotable volumes occur from late June through early August, and demand is thriving, aided by increasing consumer interest in understanding how food is grown. He says Homegrown’s own stone fruit program continues to grow, with consistent volume increases.

To the north, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Oppy maintains its position as the leading importer of Southern Hemisphere stone fruit during the winter, according to the company’s executive director of grapes and stone fruit, Bill Poulos.

Some 90% of the company’s imported fruit is sourced from Chile and South Africa, although Poulos stresses growth opportunities into the U.S. weren’t limited by the 30% tariff South Africa faced during most of the season. Oppy has Chilean peaches, plums, nectarines, and pluots between December and May, plums and pluots from South Africa from January to May, and Oregon prune plums in August and September.

On a much smaller scale, Sparta, MI-located Riveridge Produce Marketing markets a growing volume of peaches and prune plums at a regional level each year, all of which are sourced from Michigan producers.

Marketing Manager Trish Taylor says volume depends on Michigan weather, although turnaround from the orchard to packing to bulk and pouch bags in store is pretty quick, given the local nature of the business. Additionally, she says Riveridge's packing facility "does an amazing job with quality," utilizing AI to detect defects.

"It's a great opportunity for those in the Midwest to enjoy these summer fruits grown locally — no need to get them from Georgia," Taylor adds. "Michigan peaches are all their own with flavor and juiciness."

EFFECTIVE DISPLAYS

According to Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Los Angeles, CA-based Melissa's Produce, the industry is readying for a robust California stone fruit season for 2026, following a weather-affected 2025.

Melissa's offers apricots, peaches, nectarines, plums, plumcots and other specialties between May and September from California, as well as counter-seasonal fruit during December to early March from New Zealand and Chile.

Schueller recommends using endcaps to display peak season together as a late-spring, early-fall category, focusing on apricots during May-June, alongside nectarines and peaches from May-early September, as well as plums and plumcots from late May-early September.

He also suggests placing stone fruit close to other summer fruits, such as grapes, cherries and melons, to maximize sales.

Audrey Desnoyers, director of business development and key account management at Oppy, says keeping imported peaches, plums and nectarines near imported grapes for impulse purchases is important during the winter, when stone fruit is not as top of mind.

Approaching summer, she says the focus should switch to creating excitement and visibility with large, abundant displays that signal freshness and local seasons.

Mountain View's Thurlow recommends front-of-store or high-traffic placements with large, abundant displays — organized by variety and color to create visual appeal — that signal freshness and seasonality. He also suggests leading promotions with seasonal messaging, such as "California Grown," as well as emphasizing eating quality and readiness.

Bianca Kaprielian from Reedley, CA-based Creekside Organics — a company formed following the recent merger of Kaprielian's business Fruit World with Creekside — says 2025 was a strong year, thanks to a focus on keeping programs consistent while bringing excitement through new varieties, such as Ume plums.

"We're always looking at ways to keep the category fresh," says Kaprielian. "We're focused on strong varieties that deliver high flavor and great texture."

The company starts with Ume plums and early organic cherries and apricots, an early window which Kaprielian says brings great energy and sets the tone for the season ahead. From there, Creekside moves into organic peaches and nectarines as the season builds into summer.

To get the most from stone fruit, Kaprielian recommends "big, full, colorful displays," which help the category "feel like summer" the second shoppers walk up to it. "Mixing varieties, leaning into the color range, and building volume all help," she adds. "Sampling can make a huge difference, too. Once someone tastes a great peach or apricot, they're in. When the fruit is great, shoppers notice — and they come back for it."

According to Paul at Homegrown, stone fruit performs best when merchandised with an emphasis on abundance, vibrant color, and clear ripeness cues. "Sampling, secondary displays, and

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Sampling can make a huge difference. Once someone tastes a great peach or apricot, they're in. When the fruit is great, shoppers notice — and they come back for it."**

Bianca Kaprielian, Creekside Organics, Reedley, CA

- **"Proper handling is essential to maintaining quality. Gentle handling, regular rotation, and avoiding over-stacking help minimize damage and preserve fruit integrity."**

Stephen Paul, Homegrown Organic Farms, Porterville, CA

storytelling around flavor and farming practices are all effective in driving sales."

Paul says there is also a strong opportunity to tie promotions to seasonal moments, such as summer holidays, family gatherings, and outdoor events like Fourth of July celebrations. "These occasions naturally align with stone fruit and help position it as a centerpiece for summer enjoyment."

Another Reedley, CA grower, Moonlight Companies, produces peaches, nectarines, plums and apricots April through November, following the natural progression of the season from the Coachella Valley through California's Central Valley and into Washington State. "This allows us to extend the domestic season while maintaining consistent quality from orchard to shelf," says Chief Marketing Officer Ben Vived.

Rather than importing during the off-season, Moonlight — which supplies both conventional and organic — prefers to stay within its own growing regions to "maintain full control over quality, flavor, and consistency," Vived says.

"Stone fruit is a seasonal event; retailers should treat it that way," he continues. "We see the greatest opportunity for incremental growth in the core summer months. That's where retailers can win by staying aggressive — maintaining display space and expanding how the category is merchandised."

PERFECT COMBINATIONS

Paul suggests pairing stone fruit with items that enhance convenience or inspire usage, such as yogurt, granola, baking ingredients or cheeses. He also sees strong opportunities alongside berries, grapes and citrus to create a full seasonal fruit display that encourages larger basket sizes.

Kaprielian says stone fruit naturally bridges sweet and savory, creating easy cross-merchandising opportunities. "Think specialty cheese with apricots and nectarines, peaches alongside proteins for grilling, and beverage pairings — stone fruit for iced tea, sangria, and summer cocktails or mocktails."

Similarly, Thurlow says extra sales are available by situating stone fruit beside berries and cherries for seasonal fruit sets, shortcake and whipped cream for desserts, yogurt and granola for breakfast and snacking, as well as near grilling items as a grilling complement. Impulse purchases can also be found by placing stone fruit near bakery or deli, he adds.

During the import stone fruit season, Oppy's Desnoyers advocates running promotions pairing peaches, plums and nectarines with green, red and black grapes from the Southern Hemisphere.

Tapping into the potential for white flesh peaches, nectarines and



Stone fruit has a broad consumer appeal, giving retailers a prime opportunity to drive summer sales through strong merchandising, strategic pricing and cross-category promotions. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

sweet-tart plums to complement charcuterie boards, she suggests placement should be considered close to favorite protein sources, such as pork, chicken and tofu.

Bearing in mind stone fruit's sweet appeal to children, Desnoyers also recommends keeping small-sized, specialty offerings, like donut peaches, pluots, cherry plums and sugar plums, on hand for lunches and snacks.

PRICING CORRECTLY

When it comes to pricing, Kaprielian recommends leaning into promotable windows. "When volume is there, and fruit is eating well, that's the time to go big," she says. "Sharp pricing helps bring shoppers. Consistency matters too. Keeping pricing approachable during the season helps build momentum week over week."

Thurlow at Mountain View advocates aggressive early-season promotions to help build momentum, followed by maintaining price and value in alignment with quality — "especially early when fruit is at a premium."

He also suggests using multi-buy offers, such as two-for-one or bulk pricing, to drive volume, while ensuring pricing supports display size and turnover, keeping fruit fresh.

Although organic stone fruit can command a premium, Home-grown's Paul says strategic and competitive pricing, especially during peak volume periods, is key to driving trial and repeat purchases. "Clear communication around quality, flavor, and farming practices helps justify price points, while also educating consumers on the value of organic and the commitment behind it from growers."

GETTING STORAGE RIGHT

A notoriously fragile product, stone fruits of all types are prone to bruising and spoilage due to mishandling and poor storage practices at the store level. To counter this, Melissa's Schueller recommends

avoiding storing stone fruit in refrigerated cases, and making sure they are kept clear of misters. He also advises against high stacking to avoid damage.

Instead, he suggests grab-and-go packages — typically bags around 1-2 pounds in weight — as an ideal option for maintaining fruit in optimum conditions. "Grab-and-go totes packages are ideal as fruit stays better, especially for proper ring through," Schueller adds.

"Proper handling is essential to maintaining quality," says Paul. "Gentle handling, regular rotation, and avoiding over-stacking help minimize damage and preserve fruit integrity. Education is also critical, as helping both retail teams and consumers understand ripening stages can significantly improve the overall eating experience."

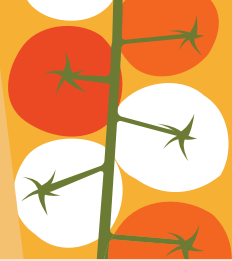
Thurlow advises against excessive cold storage, given the sensitivity of stone fruit to chilling injury. At the same time, he recommends displaying fruit at room temperature to encourage ripening and enhance aroma, alongside frequent rotation to maintain freshness and visual appeal.

When handled correctly, he believes there is strong potential to expand the stone fruit market, especially by offering early and late season varieties to maximize the growing period so fruit is available to consumers longer.

Thurlow's confidence is based on the broad appeal of stone fruit, which spreads across demographics, from families and kids who "gravitate toward sweet, easy-to-eat fruit with good size and minimal acidity" to adults who are "increasingly focused on flavor, texture, and premium eating experience."

Like Thurlow, Paul believes the category's cross-generational appeal can continue to drive growth. "Families with children are often drawn to its sweetness and snackability; older consumers typically value consistency, quality, and price, making a dependable eating experience especially important," he says.

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A February freeze in Florida disrupted early sweet corn harvests, creating short supplies and shifting demand to other growing regions before recovery began. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

Rocky Start to Sweet Corn Season

Weather disruptions tighten early supplies and drive record pricing.

BY MIKE DUFF

Sweet corn is likely to have an interesting year, as extreme weather conditions in Florida led to short supplies in early spring, with heat in the West also proving disruptive. But the outlook as the year progresses suggests improving availability and prices.

In 2024, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. sweet corn plantings fell to 343,000 acres from 384,000 acres in 2023. The top five states in acres planted were Minnesota, Washington, Wisconsin, Florida and California. In terms of utilization, Florida was top for the fresh market, followed by California, Georgia, Wisconsin and New York.

Fresh sweet corn production slipped only slightly from 2022 to

2024. The decline in processed utilization was much steeper than it was for fresh, which suggests that demand for fresh sweet corn has remained relatively strong.

WEATHER ISSUES

The 2026 season started out rough, as a February freeze badly hurt the early crop in much of Florida.

Five Crowns Marketing, a Brawley, CA-based grower and shipper with operations from northern California to Mexico, saw early demand for sweet corn swing West, given the lack of Florida product. As March ended, Five Crowns was selling open market corn at \$46 to \$48.95 a box, according to Daren Van Dyke, director of marketing.

"That is unheard of," he says. "Before that, the highest I've ever personally sold corn for was \$32.95 during COVID."

While the East Coast supply dried up, Mexico had heat issues that cut sweet corn production. Then, weather forced an early season in California. So, even as the high spring temperatures hit Mexican sweet corn, Brawley was two weeks early, and much of what Five Crowns grew up to April went to the company's extensive processing business.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Memorial Day is a big spring holiday in which we promote our Tray Pack Sweet Corn, perfect for grilling. Cross-promoting in-store with butter, seasonings and other grilling/barbecue essentials can encourage sales.”**

Nichole Towell, Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL

- **“After heavy snowfall in many parts of the country this winter, we are anticipating the consumer being very excited and eager to begin to cook outdoors and grill corn and other summer vegetable items.”**

Bill Nardelli Jr., Nardelli Bros.-Lake View Farms, Cedarville, NJ

“It’s really thrown a monkey wrench into this whole thing,” says Van Dyke. “What is Memorial Day going to look like, since our planting schedules have all moved up? Northern California is going to move up; everybody is going to move up. But that changes your complete structure for your season, because, obviously, you plant for triple for the Memorial Day pull. You plant because everybody goes on ad, then nobody goes on ad.”

Bill Nardelli Jr., vice president of sales, Nardelli Bros.-Lake View Farms, Cedarville, NJ, says despite the small early harvest in Florida, things began to look up as mid-April approached, with good volume in view, and improvement extending into promotable volumes into May.

“From late May through the end of June, harvest will transition into Georgia,” says Nardelli. “In late June, early July, we will begin corn harvest in New Jersey and continue through October.”

He says supply availability grew through April, in part due to sweet corn replanted after the frosts in Florida. “We’re going to be in Florida all the way through Memorial Day,” Nardelli explains. “There will be a little overlap between Georgia and Florida, since Georgia corn will start in late May, and the Georgia harvest on corn will run all the way through the end of June. Then we’ll transition into New Jersey right around the end of June, early part of July.”

Chris Rawl, co-owner of Clayton Rawl Farms, Lexington, SC, says prospects for sweet corn are still good, which should keep prices reasonable. Although the Florida freeze tightened the market, prices were moderating as the warmer days arrived.

“My guess is if farmers continue to have good weather, then there is going to be plenty of volume until the Fourth of July, until Georgia winds down, so prices will stay low to normal,” he says. “Weather has been dry for the most part, so getting in the field to plant and tend corn hasn’t been a problem from South Florida to South Carolina and Georgia.”

Rawl notes, however, increasing input costs will hit grower profits. “The biggest cost challenge this year is the increase in fertilizer cost due to Hormuz Strait being shut down because of the war,” he says, noting fertilizer prices have increased as much as 50%. Additional fuel costs add to the pinch.

LINGERING EFFECTS

Five Crowns’ Van Dyke says West Coast growers are facing another weather-related challenge: worm pressure. “It’s all the heat units,” he explains. “First of all, there was no killing freeze in the winter, so those bugs survived out in the desert.”



Consumer demand for convenience has resulted in more tray-pack corn in produce departments.

PHOTO COURTESY NARDELLI

In a normal season, Five Crowns wouldn’t be fighting worm pressure until May. This year, the fight started in March.

“Once it starts, it doesn’t stop. Of course, in the state of California, they’ve removed so many of our good pesticides that we can’t use any more. It’s a nightmare. We’re limited in what we can apply,” he says. “So, bottom line is, there is going to be an issue. You’re just going to see it.”

GETTING INTO SPRING

Although it promotes core products year-round, with prime season coming on, Duda Farm Fresh Foods, Oviedo, FL, has its particular approach to spring and sweet corn.

Although Memorial Day is a focus, occasions throughout spring represent good chances to move commodities such as sweet corn.

“Spring holidays and events such as Easter, Mother’s Day, and graduations play a critical role in driving both demand and promotional activity for spring products,” says Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing and innovation at Duda. “These occasions create natural spikes in consumer interest.”

As spring gives way to summer, retailers can transition messaging and merchandising from holiday-centric presentations to themes, such as summer snacking, healthy eating and outdoor gatherings.

“Highlight produce as essential for picnics, barbecues and everyday meals,” says Towell.

Consumer demand for convenience may have resulted in more tray-pack corn appearing in many produce departments, Nardelli says, but demand for bulk corn in parts of the northern U.S. where sweet corn traditionally grows is likely to keep demand for bulk, unhusked product strong.

“Through the summer months, demand trends toward bulk corn,” he says.

CONSIDERING THE CONSUMER

Retailers should be ready to create conspicuous displays of sweet corn, both in bulk for traditionalists and tray wrapped for the convenience shopper.

“As we begin warmer spring temperatures around the country, particularly the Northeast and Midwest consumers begin to shift their focus to spending more time outdoors,” Nardelli says. “With this, we see an increase in corn demand, especially in areas of the country that have had harsh winters.”

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Prevent Losses in the Produce Supply Chain

BY JEREMY GALLI

Loss in the supply chain is one of the biggest challenges produce businesses face. Fruits and vegetables are highly perishable, and even small delays in sourcing, distribution, or inventory management can lead to spoilage and waste.

At Joe Randazzo's Fruit & Vegetable Inc., preventing those losses has always been a priority. As a family-run business that has been serving the community for decades, we've built our operation around a few core principles that help us maintain freshness, reduce waste, and deliver the highest quality produce at the lowest prices to our customers.



ATTENTION TO DETAIL

One of the most important ways we prevent loss is by paying close attention to our inventory. In the produce business, attention to detail is everything.

Because fruits and vegetables change quickly, we constantly monitor what is coming into our stores, inspect it, know what is selling, and how fast items are moving through our system.

Our team carefully inspects incoming shipments and regularly checks the quality of produce, both on the sales floor and in the warehouse. This helps ensure everything meets our standards before it reaches our customers.

Managing inventory properly also means being proactive. Wholesalers should watch sales trends closely and adjust purchasing decisions based on seasonality, demand, and product availability.

By staying organized, wholesalers know exactly what they have on hand to prevent over-ordering and reduce the risk of produce sitting too long. It's a system built on attention to detail and experience, and it plays a major role in limiting waste.

SOURCING PRODUCE

Another major factor that helps us prevent supply chain losses is how produce is sourced. Many produce stores rely heavily on wholesale markets or distribution hubs, which can add extra time between when a product is harvested and when it reaches the store shelf.

We take a different approach — buying directly from farmers and growers, building relationships with these farmers and growers for decades.

Buying direct allows us to cut out several steps in the supply chain. Instead of products being harvested, shipped to a large market, handled multiple times, and then resold to retailers, we work directly with growers to bring produce straight to our stores. This reduces travel time, minimizes handling, and allows fruits and vegetables to arrive fresher.

Working directly with farmers also builds strong relationships with the people who grow our food. These relationships give us better insight into harvest schedules, crop quality and seasonal availability. As a result, we're able to plan purchases more accurately and receive produce closer to peak freshness. That direct connection is a key reason why we're able to maintain such high quality while also preventing unnecessary waste.

INVENTORY SPEED

One of the biggest advantages we have in preventing loss is the speed at which our inventory moves. Our business operates four retail store locations, and in addition to that, we run a large wholesale department that delivers produce to more than 300 restaurants, markets, and businesses throughout the Metro Detroit, MI, area.

In most cases, produce that comes through our system cycles out within four to five days at most. That fast turnover is critical in the produce industry. When inventory moves quickly, it means items are being sold while they are still fresh, rather than sitting in storage for long periods of time. The faster product moves, the lower the chance of waste.

This high volume also allows us to bring in fresh shipments frequently instead of storing large amounts of product for extended periods. Rather than overstocking and hoping it lasts, we continuously bring in fresh loads and move them out just as quickly. It's a system that keeps our displays stocked with vibrant, high-quality produce, while minimizing the risk of loss.

Wholesale customers rely on us to provide fresh ingredients that meet their standards, and rapid inventory turnover helps do exactly that.

Preventing supply chain loss ultimately comes down to three key principles: attention to detail, direct relationships with growers, and fast inventory movement. By carefully managing inventory, sourcing directly from farmers whenever possible, and moving product quickly, we're able to maintain freshness, while reducing waste.

In an industry where freshness matters every single day, those practices make all the difference.

Jeremy Galli is delivery manager at Joe Randazzo's Fruit & Vegetable Inc., Detroit, MI.

Preventing loss ultimately comes down to attention to detail, direct relationships with growers, and fast inventory movement.

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Produce Has Sex Appeal — It's Time to Stop Looking Away

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

Somewhere along the way, the peach and eggplant became icons of cultural flirtation, and the produce world looked the other way and kept talking as if fruits and vegetables were merely earnest, wholesome, and good for you.

That gap is worth paying attention to — wholesome and sexy are not mutually exclusive.



Produce has never lacked personality. It has color, fragrance, texture, beauty, seasonality, pleasure, and an almost unmatched ability to signal freshness and vitality. It can be comforting or adventurous, elegant or messy, familiar or surprising. It can be luxurious, playful, dramatic, and deeply satisfying.

As a chef, I have spent more than 30 years working in what we now call farm-to-table, the space between the field, the kitchen and the consumer. I believe one

of the greatest opportunities in produce today is not simply to grow, ship, or display it well. It is to translate it better and elevate the sex appeal — that space where CPG excels.

Most consumers are not experts in seasonality, varieties, ripeness, handling or flavor development. They are in a grocery store deciding quickly, or looking at a menu for a few seconds, or scrolling past content that must earn attention immediately.

That is why our broad language, like “fresh,” “healthy,” and “good for you,” while still true, is no longer enough. It may establish virtue, but it does not necessarily create desire. And desire is what moves people toward action.

People do not choose food only because it is responsible. They choose it because it sounds delicious, looks beautiful, feels relevant, and fits into their lives. They want confidence. They want usefulness. They want flavor. They want to know what something is going to do for dinner tonight, for lunch tomorrow, or for the small, but meaningful, pleasure of eating well.

On menus, too often, fruits and vegetables are described as an afterthought or a healthy obligation, rather than highlights. They appear as the lighter option, the side dish, the garnish, the substitute, or the healthy part of the plate.

But when produce is described with real culinary intention, it becomes something else entirely. It becomes the reason to order. A charred spring onion with citrus and herbs. A chilled melon with lime and chipotle. A ripe tomato layered with texture and salt. The difference is not only in the ingredient. It is in the language.

At retail? Produce departments are visually rich, but visual abundance is not the same thing as consumer confidence. Shoppers need more than display. They need cues, suggestions, information.

What does it taste like? What is the texture? How do I use it? Is it ready now or later? What should I pair it with? Why this one over that one? Better signage, better packaging copy, and more useful merchandising can turn uncertainty into enthusiasm — and purchases.

And when writing about produce or speaking on sales calls, the opportunity may be even greater. Produce is often discussed in generic terms that flatten its appeal. But fruits and vegetables are inherently sensory. A peach is not simply healthy; it is perfumed, fleeting, and best when eaten over the sink. A fig is lush. A mango is messy in the best possible way. Chiles bring heat and thrill. Strawberries can feel romantic. Tomatoes at peak season are almost unreasonable in their beauty. Pomegranates are dramatic.

The sex appeal of produce is not manufactured; it is inherent. It lives in ripeness, perfume, color, texture, anticipation, and the fleeting perfection of something at its peak. The perfect bite can be similar to the perfect sip of wine — it will never happen again with the same circumstances, and this is what makes it all the more memorable. The power of produce is not only nutritional. It is emotional, visual, textural and experiential.

That is why the peach and eggplant emojis matter, culturally and strategically. They remind us that produce already has social currency. It already carries symbolism, humor and recognition. The point is not to make produce marketing gimmicky. It is to recognize that fruits and vegetables are not bland objects in need of virtue-based rescue. They are already vivid. Our job is to speak about them with more accuracy and imagination.

This matters even more with younger consumers. A new generation of eaters is visually literate, globally curious, and highly attuned to tone. They respond to authenticity, but they also respond to clarity, usefulness and style. They want food to feel engaging and relevant, not instructional or distant. That makes produce translation not a nice extra, but a real commercial opportunity.

The good news is that produce does not need reinvention. It needs a new interpretation.

It needs menu language that makes it craveable. Retail storytelling that makes it approachable. Writing that makes it memorable. It needs the same intentionality other categories have long used to build desire, loyalty and excitement.

The produce industry already has an extraordinary product. Fruits and vegetables bring color, vitality, versatility, and built-in sensory appeal. But in a crowded marketplace, those qualities do not always speak for themselves. They need to be translated into terms that consumers can feel, picture, crave, and act on.

The opportunity is right in front of us: to leave behind the stodgy old language of produce, and start talking about it as it truly is — vibrant, beautiful, sexy, desirable, and absolutely worth choosing.

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

Half of Groceries Sold in Europe are Private Label

BY ANANDA ROY

Private label has reached a 50% unit share across France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom for the first time, as European households feeling cost-of-living pressures buy more supermarket brand products.



The share of private label units sold has increased every year since 2021, according to Circana's latest analysis of Europe's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market, rising by more than three percentage points over the period, and with further growth expected this year.

Store brand products already make up more than half of consumer packaged goods (CPG) and FMCG units sold in some countries, led by Spain at 59%

and the Netherlands at 56% where discount supermarkets are more established. Private label unit share has also risen to 52% in the U.K. and Germany, and stands at 46% in France and 36% in Italy.

Tracking sales of millions of SKUs over more than 230 FMCG categories, Circana's analysis found that supermarkets have been keeping prices low and quality high by tapping into health and lifestyle trends and offering more premium own-label offers and innovative new product launches than national brands.

Retailers' targeting of social media content toward younger, less brand-loyal shoppers is also playing a key role in driving demand.

While national brands have been winning shoppers back and slowing the growth of private label, higher food inflation following the conflict in the Middle East could lead to another rise in the number of retailers' own brand products in shopping baskets by the end of the year.

Online and AI-driven shopping, which typically prioritize cheaper products that meet the same needs, are also expected to give supermarkets another boost this year as shoppers order more groceries online.

Supermarket private label brands have spent the last decade becoming powerful brands in their own right. Given that a normal shopping basket today costs the same as a premium basket did last year, price-conscious consumers are making hard decisions about which products to buy.

Retailers' product ranges include cheap basics, premium treats, healthy and high-protein foods, and trendy lifestyle items that are proving a trusted and attractive alternative to national brands and changing how people shop all over the world.

Retailers are also targeting younger generations who are less loyal to big brands with TikTok shops and viral moments; discounters are opening more stores; and AI makes it easier than ever before to compare products on price and function alone.

National brands will need to rely on more than just the reputation of their brand name or heavy discounts to tempt shoppers.

The cost-of-living crisis is expected to intensify in the second half of the year as the war in Iran increases the prices of fertilizers, transport, distribution and ingredients. This is likely to give retailers another boost, with private labels growing quickly again as households look for ways to save money.

Circana also found that on-shelf promotions, loyalty pricing, and price-match strategies have intensified as part of a price war across the sector, but branded products are being discounted far

more heavily than private labels. Thirty-four percent of branded unit sales were on promotion, compared with 14% for private label, across Europe's six biggest grocery markets.

With margins already squeezed, national brands will need to take a deep dive into shopper and loyalty data, as well as pricing and promotion strategies if they are to compete and survive. Saturating the market with promotions is not a long-term survival tactic.

Private labels also now account for 42% of sales across Europe's six biggest grocery markets, putting their value at €324bn (\$381 billion). Private label value share stands at 31% in Italy, 36% in France, 44% in Germany and the U.K., 52% in Spain and 55% in the Netherlands.

Circana also found:

- Food and beverage categories were the main driver of private label growth, particularly in areas such as ready-to-eat meals, snacking, beverages and dairy.
- Private labels have also grown significantly in water drinks with competitive pricing, deep promotions, limited editions and consumer targeting.
- Non-food CPG categories continue to feel the most pressure from national brands.

The latest Circana analysis is based on one year of data ending December 2025, across France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.K.

Ananda Roy is senior vice president of strategic growth at Circana. **PB**

Circana predicts further acceleration of private label growth during 2026.



In 1926, Moses Richter (left) journeyed to New York City to secure fair prices for Southern peach growers, sparking the founding of Richter and Company, Charlotte, NC. PHOTO COURTESY RICHTER AND COMPANY

Richter and Company: A Century of Growing

In 1926, Moses Richter boarded a train for New York City to help Southern peach farmers get a fair market price for their crops. That journey marked the beginning of Richter and Company, headquartered in North Carolina.

Founder, Russian-born Moses, came to America as a teenager. Early years in the U.S. were spent with his sister and brother-in-law in North Carolina, where Moses quickly found work peddling produce. That job fit him perfectly, and it wasn't long before he opened Richter Department Store, which offered a variety of items, from jewelry to brogans, and its customers included peach farmers.

Moses listened to their complaints about not getting fair prices for their products, which motivated his trip to New York City. Soon, he began selling Southern peaches at the Washington Street Produce Market, the epicenter of the New York produce industry.

Richter and Company's reputation grew quickly, and Moses soon sold Southern peaches throughout the U.S. and Canada. During that time, he respectfully earned the nickname "Peach King."

After World War II, Moses' son, Bernard, joined his father in business when his stint in the Navy ended. Father and son continued to expand the company, working together until Moses died in September 1969.

Bernard led Richter and Co. into the 1980s before turning it over to his sons, Benjie and Lloyd, who remain top executives.

For more than 10 decades, Richter and Company has established deep partnerships with a handful of Southeastern growers Richter markets as its "Family of Farms."

In the 2000s, Richter and Company opened its Texas office under the leadership of Kevin Rogers, executive director. Benjie Richter, company president, and Lloyd Richter, vice president, are stationed at company headquarters in Charlotte, NC. Jarrod Snider manages a year-round onion program, which features Vidalia and Peruvian onions.

A fourth generation of Richters, Ben and Brittany, also have joined the team.

Not surprisingly, peaches remain the company's largest crop, followed by onions, strawberries and blueberries.

Richter and Company works with farmers in three Carolina growing regions, which allows peach sales from literally the first picking day of the season to the last. "We are one of the largest Southeastern peach distributors in the world," says Rogers.

Richter and Company has partnered for more than 50 years with Stanley Farms, of Collins, GA, to sell its Vidalia onions, which are shipped throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Equally special are Richter's strawberries and blackberries, grown by McLeod Farms in McBee, SC. They are highly sought-after and "fly off the shelves," says Rogers. "One hundred percent of the berries are sold to major retailers in the Carolinas."

"When quality counts, retailers count on us," says Benjie Richter.

The same rang true a century ago, when Benjie's grandfather, Moses, started and perfected one of the East Coast's largest produce sales firms.

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The final winner will be announced at this year's **New York Produce Show and Conference** and will be featured in our January 2027 issue of **PRODUCE BUSINESS.**



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