

PRODUCE BUSINESS
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

2026 40-UNDER-FORTY AWARDS

RISING STARS

PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

Dwight Ferguson
Jill Overdorf

PROCUREMENT

Michigan
Ohio
New Jersey

MERCHANDISING

Grapes
Organics

NUTS

Walnuts

RISING RETAILER

H Mart

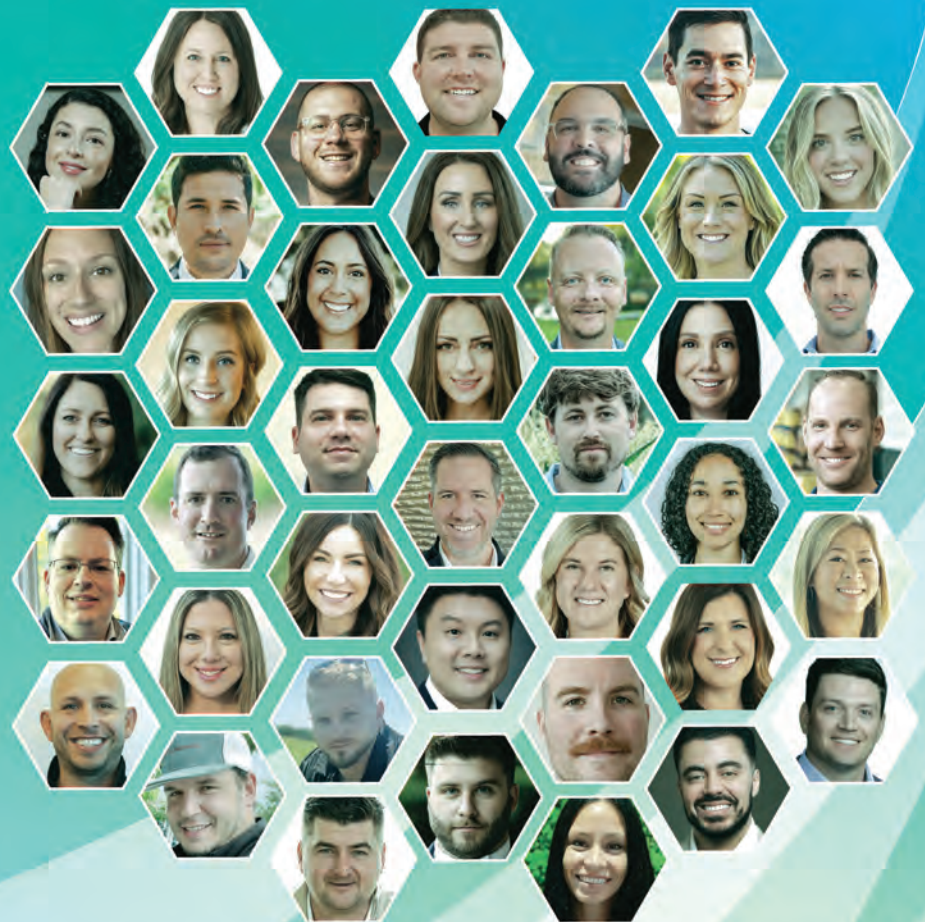
BLAST FROM THE PAST

Allen Lund Company

WHOLESALE MARKET

Distribution Consolidation:
Threat or Opportunity?

The next generation of leaders has arrived, bringing fresh ideas that will redefine the industry's future.



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OIKAWA | PENUNURI | QU | QUIRING | RIPPBERGER | RODRIGUEZ | RUVALCABA | SARIC | SIMAS
VARGAS ALVAREZ | VENABLES | WILLIAMS | XAYAVONG-ESCOBAR

**PROFILES ON
THE WINNERS**

PAGE 23

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THIS MONTH'S WINNER

CYNTHIA ROLEN
Citrus Category
Product Manager
Cvista
Valrico, FL

As citrus category product manager at Cvista in Valrico, FL, Cynthia Rolan works in produce, food science and flavor innovation, connecting citrus ingredients to products consumers use every day.

"We supply the flavor and fragrance industry with citrus oils and specialty citrus fractions," explains Rolan. "These products eventually will be in anything from finished flavors, beverages, fine fragrance, and even industrial chemical uses."

She says working with citrus means closely monitoring crop conditions, sourcing challenges and shifting market dynamics.

"Citrus can be finicky, as we can see through the depletion of the citrus crop in Florida over the last 30 years," says Rolan. "We have to find new sources of raw material, but also find a way to standardize those

products to our current customers."

Rolan says those entering the industry should prepare for unpredictability.

"My advice for anyone getting into the produce or produce byproduct industry is to expect the unexpected at times," she says. "We cannot control Mother Nature at times, which can make it tricky in our industry. But on the positive side, we are always conducting new research to develop new ways of helping our industry."

One of the aspects she enjoys most about her career is the opportunity to expand her knowledge.

"My favorite thing about my career thus far is constantly learning something new," she says.

Outside of work, Rolan enjoys going to theme parks and spending time at the Florida beaches with her family.

As a reader of PRODUCE BUSINESS, Rolan says she enjoys reading the regional articles.

As this month's winner, Rolan 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 August 2026 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

WIN A \$200 AMAZON GIFT CARD

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



QUESTIONS FOR THE JUNE ISSUE

- 1) Which brand of vegetables is offered by Centre Maraicher Eugene Guinois Jr. Inc.? _____
- 2) What is the website address for Pandol? _____
- 3) What is the 888-number for Buurma Farms? _____
- 4) Which company offers "Flexible Packaging Built Around YOUR Products"? _____
- 5) Cello radishes and Michigan vegetables are main items offered by which company? _____
- 6) In the Dried Fruits & Nuts article, how many ways are there to sell more walnuts? _____

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

Name _____ Position _____
 Company _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
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Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

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

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

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



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MARKETING
EXCELLENCE
AWARDS



2026

TURN YOUR MARKETING INTO AN AWARD-WINNING EXPERIENCE



Right now, and through June 19, 2026, we're taking entries for the 38th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards Program, presented by PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine. The awards recognize excellence in marketing in each of six categories: retail, foodservice, wholesale, shipping, commodity organizations and allied service/product providers. Promotion in print, broadcast and digital media are eligible to win.

2025 MARKETING EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

Avocados from Mexico, Bolthouse Fresh, California Avocado Commission, Gotham Greens, Hass Avocado Board, Healthy Family Project, Highline Mushrooms, Honeybear Brands, Natural Delights, North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, Northwest Cherries, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, Shuman Farms, Stemilt Growers, Sun World and Texas International Produce Association

To participate, send us the following for each entry:

1. Your name, company, address and phone.
2. Type of business.
3. Names and dates of promotion (must have taken place between June 1, 2025 and July 1, 2026).
4. Promotion objectives. Description of promotion.
5. Promotion results (sales or traffic increases, media attention). What made this program a success?
6. All support materials used in the promotion – such as POP, ads, posters, Social Media Links, TV commercials.

High-resolution images to illustrate the promotion are required. (Please do not send any produce)

**Fill Out The Form on [Producebusiness.com](https://www.producebusiness.com) or Send Entries To:
PRODUCE BUSINESS MARKETING EXCELLENCE AWARDS
551 NW 77th Street, Suite 101, Boca Raton, FL 33487**

Deadline for entries is June 19, 2026

For additional information, call: 561-994-1118, Ext. 109

TRANSITIONS

¡Yo Quiero!

¡Yo Quiero!, Rhome, TX, announces **Codie Hair** as its new director of sales. In this role, Hair will support national accounts alongside Jay Alley, vice president of sales, helping drive continued growth for the brand and its expanding portfolio of guacamole, salsa, queso, bean dips, and other refrigerated dip solutions across produce and deli departments.

Hair brings more than 30 years of experience in retail grocery and sales, with the majority of his career rooted in the produce department. He spent 28 years with United Supermarkets, where he held roles ranging from produce manager to store management and produce business manager, overseeing all categories within produce.

Most recently, Hair worked in the brokerage business, including Schraad Sales and Marketing and Texas Fresh Food Brokers.



Codie Hair

Wish Farms

Plant City, FL-based Wish Farms has promoted **James Peterson** to chief executive officer, and **Gary Wishnatzki** will transition to chairman of the board.

Peterson joined Wish Farms in 2011. After serving as vice president of sales and marketing, he was named chief operating officer in 2024, overseeing daily operations, implementing a Strategic Initiatives Program, and playing a key role in guiding the company through challenges while driving its continued growth.

Wishnatzki will remain actively involved as chairman of the board, focusing on governance, and key external relationships, including the company's investments in proprietary genetics. He will also continue to serve as an adviser to the executive team.



James Peterson



Gary Wishnatzki



ANNOUNCEMENTS

NJDA Hosts Annual BBQ at Demarest Farm

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture hosted its 16th annual barbecue for the Eastern Produce Council at Demarest Farm in Hillsdale, NJ, May 19.

EPC President and Executive VP Produce & Floral JOH, Theresa Lowden, welcomed the audience and covered EPC business before turning things over to Ed Wengryn, New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture; Tom Beaver, Sunny Valley's director of sales and marketing; Brandon Raso of Variety Farms Inc.; and Zach Heiken of ZRH Farms, all of whom provided updates on New Jersey crops and the impact of the weather.

Edwin Steep, brother of Theresa Nolan,

announced this year's EPC/Nolan Family Foundation Scholarship winner, Michael Larson. Larson is the son of EPC Member Rob Larson of Alpha1Marketing/Krasdale. He will be a sophomore at Rowan University in the fall.

Avocados From Mexico Launches Guacamolé Summer Shopper Program

Avocados From Mexico is giving soccer fans a new reason to cheer with its "Kickoff a Guacamolé Summer" campaign.

Starting now through July 17, every purchase of a themed bag gives shoppers a \$1.50 cashback offer through Venmo or PayPal. To redeem, consumers simply scan the QR code on the bag and snap a photo of their receipt.

Avocados From Mexico is also spotlighting a companion sweepstakes featured across digital media and in-store bins. From now through June 30, fans can visit kickoffwithguac.com to enter for the opportunity to win a top-of-the-line 2026 Nissan Kicks. Every entrant is assigned a unique number, and once the car's winner is drawn, if their number matches the grand prize number, they'll also drive away with an additional \$500,000.

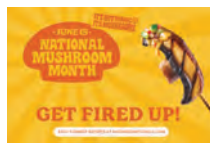


National Mushroom Month Moves to June

Beginning this year, National Mushroom Month is moving to June to align with peak grilling season and remind shoppers that mushrooms are a versatile, year-round staple.

The Mushroom Council recommends five actions to help retailers boost mushroom sales this season, supported by turnkey merchandising materials and promotional resources.

1. Add Seasonal Signage and Digital Assets
2. Spotlight Value-Added Convenience
3. Educate Through Variety
4. Inspire with Meal Solutions
5. Prioritize Shelf Quality.



Melon 1 Launches Watermelon Season with Strong Early Harvests

Melon 1, Punta Gorda, FL, launched its 2026 domestic watermelon season with strong early harvests in Florida and an expanded growing program that will continue moving up the East Coast and into key Midwest regions throughout the summer.

This season, Melon 1 is growing a diverse mix of watermelon varieties, including seedless, seeded, yellow watermelons and specialty Black Jacks. Harvesting began in Florida in May and will continue through June, with Georgia harvests expected to begin in early June and run through the end of July.



Additional regional production will then follow along the East Coast throughout the summer season across South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky and Indiana, supporting consistent summer supply and ongoing distribution.

Melon 1 is continuing to expand its AI-supported consumer marketing initiatives in partnership with Blackmon Media Group for a second consecutive year. The strategy is designed to support retail partners by reaching highly relevant shoppers who have demonstrated interest in watermelon and related produce categories through advanced digital targeting and consumer engagement campaigns.

Zespri Launches New Global Brand Platform 'Grown For Good'

Zespri has launched a refreshed global brand platform, Grown for Good, reinforcing its commitment to natural nutrition and creating value across the kiwifruit industry.

Grown for Good sharpens Zespri's focus on helping close everyday nutrition gaps with great-tasting, nutrient-dense kiwifruit, backed by science and delivered through strong partnerships from orchard to store.

Building on the success of Zespri's previous platform, Make Your Healthy Irresistible, Grown for Good reflects Zespri's purpose in action — going beyond advertising to champion nutrition in-market, support customers and shoppers with clearer nutrition leadership, enable growers to continue lifting quality and sustainability, and unite teams behind long-term, purposeful growth.

Grown for Good, will launch across Zespri's core markets globally with the 2026 New Zealand kiwifruit season.



NEW PRODUCT

Divine Flavor Highlights the Potential of ARRA Honey Pop

As the Mexican table grape season begins to ramp up, early Sonoran harvests are already making their way to market. For grower-importer Divine Flavor and its parent company Grupo Alta, Nogales, AZ, the 2026 season marks a milestone in early-season innovation with the first harvests of ARRA Honey Pop.

ARRA Honey Pop was developed to overcome a long-standing industry challenge: achieving full flavor, texture, and appearance in grapes harvested at the very start of the season.

Beyond eating quality, the variety offers strong advantages in the field. With high fertility, uniform ripening, and minimal intervention required, ARRA Honey Pop delivers consistent fruit quality from vine to market.

Unlike many early varieties that require multiple harvest passes, ARRA Honey Pop can often be picked in a single pass, ensuring uniform maturity and quality. This consistency translates directly to the consumer experience — delivering reliable sweetness, texture, and visual appeal in every box. **PB**





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Fresh Produce is Driving Grocery Loyalty

BY CARLY FINK

Fresh produce is no longer just another department in the grocery store. Produce is increasingly driving purchasing decisions beyond the produce aisle. And perhaps no group is fueling that shift more than parents, who are significantly more likely to value produce branding.

According to Provoke Insights' 12th wave of nationwide consumer trends research, one in five Americans says they choose their primary grocery store because of its fresh produce selection. This is especially important among urban consumers, parents and Gen Z shoppers. The research comes from Provoke Insights' biannual study that surveys 1,500 Americans between 21 and 65 and provides a clear lens into how evolving consumer expectations and shopping behaviors are reshaping the grocery landscape, particularly within fresh produce.



At the same time, produce branding itself is beginning to break out of its commodity roots.

Twenty-six percent of Americans say they regularly purchase the same produce brands repeatedly. Consumers most often state better quality (36%), worth the price (30%), and better taste (27%) as the key reasons they stay loyal. In a category traditionally dominated by interchangeable products and price-driven decisions, that represents a major shift.

The strongest opportunity may lie with parents. Overall, 26% of Americans say the produce brand or grower name is important when purchasing fresh produce. However, that number jumps to 37% among parents. Frequent grocery shoppers (35%), Gen Z consumers (35%), Millennials (34%), urban shoppers (34%), and Hispanic consumers (34%) are also significantly more likely to say produce branding influences their purchasing decisions.

The contrast becomes even sharper among shoppers without children. Half of consumers without kids, 50%, say produce branding is unimportant. The findings suggest parents are far more likely to use recognizable produce brands and grower names as a shortcut for trust, quality, and reassurance when shopping for their families and children.

That behavior is already influencing what shoppers notice in-store. While only 21% of Americans say they often or always notice produce brand or grower names, the consumers who do are highly engaged. Parents (32%), urban shoppers (31%), Hispanic consumers (29%), and Millennials (28%) are significantly more likely to notice produce brands while shopping.

Produce brands represent more than simple recognition. Many consumers associate produce brands with higher quality (30%), while female consumers are especially likely to connect produce branding with trust and food safety (22%).

Age also impacts brand perception, with Millennials more likely to say name recognition means better taste and Baby Boomers indicating it means more consistent freshness. The findings suggest produce branding is evolving from simple identification into a signal of quality, consistency and shopper confidence.



The study also reveals which produce brands are currently winning the awareness battle.

Dole continues to dominate unaided produce brand recall at 24%, significantly ahead of all competitors. Chiquita follows at 5%. Meanwhile, Driscoll's appears to be gaining real momentum with consumers, climbing to 4% unaided recall, up from just 1% when the question was last asked in 2022. The increase suggests consumers are becoming increasingly receptive to produce brands that establish stronger emotional and quality-driven connections.

Importantly, this growing emphasis on produce branding is happening at a time when consumers are becoming more intentional with spending. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72%) say inflation is still impacting grocery store prices. Consumers are increasingly financially strained, with 13% of Americans saying they are going further into debt, up from 9% in 2025. Additionally, 31% of Americans say they feel financially unstable about the future.

As shoppers look more carefully at where they spend their money, recognizable brands may provide an added layer of reassurance around quality and value. This may be especially true for parents, who appear far more likely to prioritize trusted produce brands when purchasing food for their households.

For growers, retailers, and produce marketers, the implications are significant. The research suggests produce branding does not need universal awareness to drive impact. Even with relatively low overall recognition today, the consumers who engage with produce brands are allowing those brands to shape both purchasing decisions and grocery store loyalty.

The opportunity for growers extends well beyond logo recognition. Branding, packaging, visibility, storytelling, and consumer research are becoming critical tools for driving trust, strengthening loyalty, and increasing brand conversion in an increasingly competitive grocery environment.

Provoke Insights conducted a 15-minute online survey among 1,500 Americans between 21 and 65 in March 2026. A random stratified sample methodology was used to ensure a high degree of representation of the U.S. population. The Summer 2026 Brand Equity research page can be found at <https://provokeinsights.com/2026-summer-trends-research>.

Carly Fink is Provoke Insights' president and head of strategy and research.

Produce's Bright Leadership Future

BY DWIGHT FERGUSON

Leadership has always driven change and progress in the global produce industry. From family farms to multinational distributors, from seed innovators to retailers, effective leadership determines not just how the industry performs today — but how it will thrive tomorrow.

As the world now faces the significant challenges of climate change, technology disruption, and workforce evolution, produce stands out for something very special and rare: optimism. Why? Because its future is being shaped by leaders who combine experience with empathy, vision with action, and an understanding that leading is actually serving.



Leadership and management are often used interchangeably, but they're far from the same. Management keeps operations efficient — organizing, planning, and executing to maintain consistency and reliability. Leadership,

by contrast, is about inspiration. It's about rallying people around a shared vision, sparking innovation, enabling their employees to perform at their best and fostering cultures that welcome change and growth.

The best leaders in produce balance both — they maintain operational excellence while daring their teams to imagine what's next.

FIFTY YEARS OF TRANSFORMATION

Few industries have evolved as dramatically — or as successfully — as produce. Half a century ago, most fruits and vegetables were local, seasonal, and required little technology. Today, the industry is a sophisticated, data-driven, global network delivering freshness, flavor, and nutrition 365 days a year. This remarkable transformation has been fueled by six major forces:

- **Globalization and Supply Chain Expansion:** Advanced logistics and cold chain systems now allow consumers to enjoy a wider range of products from all over the world, regardless of season.
- **Technological Innovation:** Precision agriculture, drones, and AI forecasting have redefined how crops are planted, harvested and distributed.
- **Food Safety and Traceability:** Modern tracking tools give consumers confidence in what they buy — from farm to fork.
- **Sustainability:** Water conservation, soil health, and waste reduction have moved from optional goals to business imperatives.
- **Consumer Awareness:** Shoppers now demand transparency, ethical sourcing, and the health benefits only produce can provide.
- **Workforce Development and Diversity:** A broader range of voices — across gender, culture and age — is fueling creativity and resilience.

Every one of these shifts required courageous leadership: individuals willing to take risks, champion new ideas, and collaborate across borders.

In the produce world, leadership isn't confined to corner offices.

LEADERSHIP ACROSS THE SUPPLY CHAIN

In the produce world, leadership isn't confined to corner offices. It's found in the hands of people who make things grow — literally and figuratively.

Growers demonstrate it every day, experimenting with regenerative farming and data-driven techniques that boost yields while protecting the planet.

Packers, shippers and logistics experts redefine efficiency with systems that keep produce moving swiftly, safely, and sustainably.

Marketers and retailers lead by connecting the dots between farms and consumers — teaching people not just where their food comes from, but why it matters for their health and for the planet.

Researchers, trade associations, commodity boards and leadership programs nurture the next generation of talent, ensuring the skills and mindsets needed to navigate an ever-changing industry landscape.

And at the foundation are field workers and small producers whose hands-on leadership — often unheralded, but essential — keeps the entire system thriving.

Together, they form an industry culture built on progress, collaboration, and respect for both people and nature.

NOURISHING HEALTH AS WELL AS BUSINESS

Beyond innovation and continued growth, the produce industry holds an even greater calling: improving human health. Fruits and vegetables are the foundation of wellness — proven to reduce chronic disease, boost immunity, and enhance both mental and physical performance.

As consumers worldwide grow more health-conscious, the industry's mission has expanded. Today's produce leaders aren't just selling food; they're championing global nutrition, access to fresh produce, and alliances to help ensure a healthier future for all. This dual focus — feeding people and healing the planet — gives the industry a moral clarity that few others can match.

A BRIGHT, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The future of produce depends on its people. Across the world, industry groups, universities, and companies alike are investing in leadership training, mentorship networks, and cross-border collaboration. Younger professionals bring fresh energy, fluent in technology and sustainability. When paired with the hard-earned wisdom of long-time growers and operators, the result is a dynamic, resilient workforce — one that doesn't just adapt to change, but anticipates it.

The last 50 years proved what this industry can achieve through courage and creativity. The next 50 promise even more — smarter farming, more efficient supply chains, and stronger communities nourished by the power of fresh produce.

Because, ultimately, leadership in produce isn't just about growing fruits and vegetables. It's about growing health, opportunity, and the future itself.

Dwight Ferguson is a former president and chief executive of the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation and the immediate past chair of the Foundation for Fresh Produce.

Planting the Future: A Call to the Next Generation

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

To the rising voices, innovative thinkers, and ambitious doers in the next generation of the produce industry: The fresh produce sector has always been rooted in cycles — cycles of growth, harvest and renewal. Now, it is your season to grow. The responsibility of stewarding our industry through the next generation of challenges and opportunities falls to you. I offer a roadmap — drawn from decades of field visits, kitchen collaborations, supply chain problem-solving, and conversations across every link in the chain.



CULTIVATE TALENT LIKE WE CULTIVATE CROPS

Talent must be nurtured like the crops we grow. We have long invested in soil science and varietal research, but too often we overlook our investment in

people. All team members — from field crews to warehouse workers; marketing coordinators to corporate chefs — deserve mentorship, opportunity, purpose, and equitable pay.

Developing future leaders from within requires intention and vision. Hire for values, train for excellence, and create advancement pathways. Listen deeply, share knowledge, and build workplaces that reflect the diversity of the communities we serve. As a recipient of the Jay Pack Cultivating Our Future Award, I know that investing in people is how we ensure that the mission of our industry continues long after we have left the field, warehouse or boardroom.

BUILD A SEED-TO-SERVICE SUPPLY CHAIN

The future supply chain must be seed to service — integrating knowledge from genetics lab to consumer's plate. Innovation thrives when agronomists, procurement teams, and chefs work in harmony, driven by data, sustainability, and shared goals.

Efficiency should be a shared responsibility. Smarter logistics, better packaging, and open communication mean fewer lost loads, fresher product and happier eaters.

INSPIRE NEXT GENERATION TO EAT FRESH

We all know the statistics: Fruit and vegetable consumption in America is flatlining or declining, especially among younger generations. But here's the opportunity: We don't need another clever marketing campaign. We need a movement. Fresh produce should be as exciting as street food, as culturally relevant as global fusion, and as craveable as the latest food trend going viral.

That starts with access, education, and storytelling. Show kids where food comes from. Normalize kohlrabi, mango and jicama. Support programs like FFVP and Pilot Light. Foodservice in schools, stadiums, hospitals, and campuses shapes lifelong habits — let's



PHOTO COURTESY BABE FARMS

You inherit not just a business, but a mission to nourish, to innovate, to sustain.

make the fresh choice the easy and delicious one.

And never underestimate the influence of foodservice. Schools, colleges, stadiums, hospitals, and tech campuses — these are the places where lifelong habits are formed. Our role is to support institutions in making the fresh choice the easy choice — and the desirable and delicious one, too.

CHEF INNOVATION WILL LEAD THE WAY

Chefs are our frontline ambassadors, translating agriculture into appetite. Collaborate early — before the menu stage. When a chef understands seasonality, varietal characteristics, and postharvest life, they become storytellers, educators and champions of fresh.

But chef innovation must also be accessible. How do we support scalable, operationally feasible ways to showcase produce in institutional and fast-casual environments, not just white-tablecloth dining? How do we help the next generation of culinarians see produce as the center of the plate, not the garnish?

Invite chefs to the field, host ideation sessions, and pilot new cuts or applications together. Make innovation scalable for fast-casual and institutional dining, not just fine dining.

A FUTURE ROOTED IN POSSIBILITY

I challenge you to: cultivate talent, build seamless supply chains, inspire fresh consumption, and champion chef-led innovation. Create a delicious legacy.

The future of produce isn't just in the ground — it's in your hands and in your minds. The future of fresh is yours to lead.

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.

SEISMIC CHANGE STARTS HERE



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.



**Join the mission:
freshproduce.com/foundation**



At the newly renovated H Mart store in Cherry Hill, NJ, displays include mounds of bagged garlic and onions adjacent to mandarins, bananas and kiwifruit.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

H Mart Expands Produce in Renovated Cherry Hill, NJ, Store

Asian specialties are designed to enhance the shopping experience.

BY MIKE DUFF

When H Mart reopened its renovated Cherry Hill, NJ, store in late April, shoppers were introduced to an upgraded and expanded downstairs perishables department with an enhanced produce section.

Cherry Hill is an affluent community east of Philadelphia, PA. Although the U.S. Census Bureau identifies two-thirds of the population as white, 13% of the population is of Asian descent.

The renovated store gives H Mart the chance to “bring our passion for Asian food culture to the community,” says the company’s president, Brian Kwon. “We will continue to provide the same shopping experience our customers already love, with the same high-quality food and service. We look forward to welcoming everyone back and sharing our appreciation of Asian food culture with the Cherry Hill community.”

By design, says Hailey Pi, marketing associate, it expanded the

Cherry Hill store with its houseware section and placed the customer service desk on the upper floor, so it could also provide more room for perishables and produce below.

H Mart closed the Cherry Hill location temporarily, June 29, 2025, to undertake work on the store, which proceeded to the spring store reopening. “The store previously had a downstairs section, but as part of the remodel, the upper level was expanded,” says Pi. “As a result, a new food hall was added upstairs, and the housewares section, along with the customer service center, were relocated to the upper level.”

With the renovation, the Cherry Hill store can stock a wider variety of Asian foods and lifestyle products, while still competing with other food retailers on products that are as familiar as strawberries.

“Downstairs, you’ll find produce, meat, seafood, and grocery items, and checkout is also available on that level,” says Pi. “In terms of perishable items, the store carefully



INSIDE THE STORE

H Mart
1720 NJ-70
Cherry Hill, NJ 08003
856-489-4611
www.hmart.com



Behind a papaya display, there are mixed Asian and tropical fruits, ranging from mangos to dragon fruit, with melons and pineapples mixed into the bottom of the display. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO*

monitors product quality and expiration dates to ensure freshness and safety for customers.”

However, unlike many split-level supermarkets with main perishables and grocery food sections downstairs, H Mart Cherry Hill opens on grocery, although a small number of perishables mix in, including on a refrigerated endcap.

Shoppers have to proceed into the grocery section and turn to the far side of the building to find a relatively airy produce section, even if on the lower level. One advantage the arrangement offers is that many refrigerated items are positioned at the end of a typical shopping trip and, so, stay cold.

At the produce section entrance, the store mounts displays of products familiar to any shopper, including mounds of bagged garlic and onions adjacent to mandarins, tropicals, including bananas, and loose oranges and kiwifruit.

The flip side of the fixture, behind the papaya side of the endcap display, is mixed Asian and tropical fruits, ranging from mangos to dragon fruit, with melons and pineapples mixed into the bottom of the display. As the sales floor continues, cases include fruit, with a strong apple endcap awaiting shoppers as they approach, and a mix

From One Store to More Than 100: H Mart’s Rise

H Mart characterizes itself as the largest Asian supermarket chain in the U.S. and a pioneer of Asian food in America.



Launched in 1982 with a single store in Woodside, Queens, NY, H Mart has grown to encompass more than 100 stores across 18 different states, as well as five modern warehouse centers and processing facilities.

H Mart is also known for the food halls it has developed.

of bagged and loose fruit, dominated by citrus in late spring.

As they move through the section, shoppers find more Asian produce, such as Chinese spinach and Shanghai choy tip, but it is mixed in with vegetables, with everything from greens to radishes to turnips.

The cold case includes a high proportion of fresh-cut vegetables, convenient clamshell salads, packaged fruits and vegetables, berries and prepared fruit. Signage there and elsewhere uses both Latin and Chinese characters.

The produce section ends with the clamshell salads, then packaged tomatoes, grapes and fresh-cut fruit in the cold case, and, on the floor, bagged and loose fruit, including pomegranate, and giftable boxed fruit.

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“They have a unique talent for making fresh produce feel exciting by tying it to modern lifestyle moments with engaging media and hands-on events that spark consumer interest and encourage people to try the products.”

Helene Dembroski
New York Apple Association
Board of Director

Packaging Solutions for Produce

Labels and bags step into bigger produce merchandising roles.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Packaging and labels are more critical than ever in retail fresh produce merchandising and sales.

To capture sales, growers and retail buyers should understand how today's packaging must transcend branding by attracting shoppers and clearly communicating information, including topics such as sustainability.

"Graphics are doing more work today than they used to," says Victoria Lopez, marketing and business development manager for Fox Packaging, McAllen, TX. "Shelf impact still matters, but packages also need to communicate nutrition, origin, and recycling instructions in a way that is clean and accurate. Consumers pay more attention to that information than they used to."

The latest developments in produce labeling are centered on sustainability and shopper engagement. Labels and bags increasingly communicate product origin, details, nutrition, recycling instructions, traceability data and other information in a simple manner that can stand out in produce aisles, displays and shelves.

"Packaging is our 'silent salesperson,' working 24/7 at shelf to answer questions, build confidence and make trying something new feel easy," says Alex Jackson, vice president of sales and marketing for Frieda's Branded Produce, Los Alamitos, CA. "Of course, we meet all regulatory requirements, but we also see every pack as a chance to inspire and that's where the magic happens."

INFORMATION, PLEASE

The increase in demand for data transferring is changing how bags and secondary packaging, including trays, are labeled, says Tamara Muruetagoiena, vice president of sustainability for the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), Washington, D.C.

"There are higher demands than ever, from a data standpoint, from the late part of the supply chain, and that data needs to be transmitted from the supplier," says Muruetagoiena. "There's an evolution of more data needed to be cramped into that space, evolutions from barcodes and QR codes."

Marketing through packaging is also vital, and "branding has never been more important," says Alysha Lowe, marketing specialist with Sev-Rend, Collinsville, IL.

"As consumers become more selective and values-driven, brands must clearly communicate their story, quality and differentiation," Lowe emphasizes. "Effective branding on produce packaging builds recognition, conveys trust and communicates key selling points instantly."

The global food packaging market size was estimated at \$422 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach \$599 billion by 2033, growing at a 4.3% Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) from 2026 to 2033, according to Grand View Research.

RETAILER EXPECTATIONS

Harps Food Stores Inc., a Springdale, AR-based chain that oper-



A fresh produce bag is the one direct touchpoint between a brand and the consumer at the point of sale, and shouldn't be treated as an afterthought.

PHOTO COURTESY FOX PACKAGING

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Effective branding on produce packaging is everything. It helps a product shine in a sea of apples and bananas."**
Alex Jackson, Frieda's Branded Produce, Los Alamitos, CA
- **"It's critical that suppliers, growers or packers understand the importance of labeling and bags, and fitting their information in that space."**
Tamara Muruetagoiena, International Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C.
- **"Packaging is often the first — and sometimes only — brand touchpoint in-store."**
Alysha Lowe, Sev-Rend, Collinsville, IL

ates more than 140 stores in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Louisiana and Mississippi, evaluates packaging and labeling on sell-through, shrink control and ease of execution at store level, says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations.

"At Harps, labeling is important when it adds clarity and helps drive the sale," he says. "Simple, easy-to-read information like variety, usage or key attributes is what resonates most with our customers. If it becomes too complicated or cluttered, it tends to lose effectiveness."

Packaging can directly affect shelf life, product integrity and retail arrival. For example, films blocking most visible and UV light reduces greening and extends potato shelf life, while mesh provides



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breathability that keeps product, including onions and citrus, fresher longer through the supply chain, says Fox Packaging's Lopez.

EARLY PLANNING ADVISED

"Matching the right bag to the right product is not just a packaging decision, it is a quality decision that pays off from the packhouse to the consumer," says Lopez. "The bag is the one direct touchpoint

between a brand and the consumer at the point of sale, and it gets treated as an afterthought more often than it should."

Produce marketers shouldn't consider labeling an afterthought, Lopez adds. "The operations that do it well decide early what the package needs to communicate and build around that, rather than adding elements one at a time until the space runs out."

Limited label space is one of the most common practical problems that arises, particularly on mesh bags.

"Produce labeling should be treated as part of the overall packaging strategy, not just a required component," says Destiny Buccieri, marketing manager of New Kensington, PA-based Yerecic Label. "A well-designed label supports shelf presence, shopper communication, and broader brand and sustainability goals."

Labeling technology is becoming more connected to traceability, compliance, and supply chain visibility.

At the same time, labels and printed bags are increasingly expected to carry lot numbers, barcodes, QR codes and other traceability information that supports downstream requirements. This means packaging specifications need to be built correctly from the start so the design, print method and required data all work together, explains Lopez.

"Packaging design in produce has been shifting toward a cleaner, more straightforward presentation," she says. "The right information can build trust, but unclear or unsupported language can create risk."

Consumers want to find information quickly, and a cluttered bag makes that harder, she stresses. "A well-executed bag still drives shelf impact, it just does it with more discipline than it used to. Because packaging programs take time to develop, these conversations should happen early, not right before a regulation or retailer requirement takes effect."

COLLABORATION REQUIRED

For effective produce merchandising, suppliers should work closely with their retail customers, collaborating on designing packaging systems that allow for co-branding, ensuring their individuality works with the supermarkets' produce merchandising.

"Collaboration is key," says Sev-Rend's Lowe. "Suppliers can design packaging systems that allow for co-branding — balancing their own identity with the retailer's brand guidelines. Flexible print technologies make it easier to adapt designs while maintaining consistency across different retail environments."

Effective labeling and bagging is an opportunity for retailers and suppliers to make packaging feel helpful and human.

"When a brand is clear and consistent, it doesn't compete with a retailer's identity,

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it complements it and adds value to the shelf," says Frieda's Jackson.

Branding is increasingly important in produce, especially as more items shift into packaged and value-added formats.

"On shelf, the label is often the first and main opportunity to communicate quality, create differentiation, and influence purchase decisions," says Yerecic Label's Buccieri.

SALES TOOLS

Branding can build trust and help the product stand out. However, it works best when it stays clean and complementary to the overall department presentation, she says.

Harps' Roberts agrees. "Packaging and bag printing can be effective sales tools — particularly for commodity items — but they support the bigger picture rather than lead it. The suppliers who perform best for us are those who can differentiate their product while still fitting into a straightforward, value-driven store environment. Clear messaging and simple design go a long way without overpowering the shelf."

Food safety and preservation requirements also continue to drive technological advancements in packaging.

Currently, the FSMA is targeted at only a few produce categories, but includes processed perishable food supply chains, says Sean Watson, president and founder of Pro Label International Inc., Santa Barbara, CA.

"The perishable food supply chain will be impacted by the coming of FSMA, but also waste reduction and freshness initiatives for brand building," Watson cautions. "All these initiatives imply more data required to enhance item level visibility using a newer, Serialized Global Trade Item Number (SGTIN) standard for item-level identification."

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUS

The industry is seeing major retailers move away from narrowly defined packaging sustainability targets and more toward broader compliance initiatives, says Sev-Rend's Lowe.

"Differing EPR laws from state to state are requiring retailers to shift their focus and make their packaging defensible and state compliant in order to ensure market share in these states," she says.

Though the information transmitted through Price Look Up (PLU) stickers can replace packaging, the stickers can contaminate compostables and waste streams, prompting a global effort to ban PLU stickers.

"That is one of the biggest efforts in our

entire industry on things that go beyond plastic and beyond current materials is on PLU stickers," says Muruetagoiena. "There's that tug of war between policymakers not understanding our industry and our industry moving forward."

IFPA efforts are focused on the development of compostable PLU stickers as a solution, "as so many countries are threatening banning them."

Companies are leveraging QR codes to deliver extended product information, including sourcing details, grower stories, nutritional data, and sustainability

initiatives. Increasingly, QR codes are being integrated into broader data strategies, supporting inventory management, quality control and recall readiness. QR codes are also being used for traceability, allowing consumers and retailers to track products back through the supply chain.

"QR codes remain highly relevant and are evolving in their application," says Lowe. "As consumers seek more transparency and information, QR codes provide a scalable way to bridge the gap between limited on-pack space and the demand for deeper engagement." **PB**

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Technology Shapes the Future of Produce Ripening

Retailers are relying on advanced technology and improved supply chain handling to maintain quality.

BY MIKE DUFF

Ripening has become more precise due to technology, which can help retailers refine their fruit programs, but it still comes down to working with suppliers and store employees to satisfy the needs of communities and even individual stores.

With different approaches to ripening, success is still measured in purchases. When retailers identify how they need to handle commodities, such as bananas, avocados, mangos and pears, opportunities arise, both in terms of working with suppliers and how they handle fruit in the store. In effect, handling is ripening at the store level.

Take bananas, for example. Gary Campisi, president, Campisi Produce Consulting, Rogers, AR, and former senior director of Quality Control at Walmart, says that demand for color continues to vary among food retailers in commodities such as bananas. Still, many of the biggest, including Walmart, want one color of banana every day.

For other retailers, he says, taking bananas that still have some green on delivery can be a solution when a portion rolls over into the next day and becomes yellow. Consumers who want fruit that will last a bit longer are satisfied. Those who want to eat immediately are too, and the retailer can manage effectively at the store level.

Technology has helped in getting products through the supply chain with more consistency, Campisi says, and artificial intelligence is entering the market.

"It used to be more of an art than a science," he points out.

More attention to ripening can have its advantages, though. Campisi says Walmart instituted a pear ripening initiative some years ago to good effect, with a demo program seeing a 66% jolt in sales. Later, a ripening program with avocados drove similar sales gains, while a mango initiative made it into the vicinity as well.

Although preconditioned pears were once a rarity, they've become an advantage for varieties, such as Anjou and Bartlett, as the main season for the fruit opens up, says Campisi.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Bil Goldfield, director of corporate communications, Dole Food Co., Charlotte, NC, says the general rule has always been that consumer ripening preferences vary and are frequently dictated by geography. "Urban shoppers have tended to prefer ripe, ready-to-eat fruit to enjoy immediately, while their counterparts in rural areas prefer fruit with an extended shelf life since they are in stores less often. While this is still mostly true, this assumption was challenged, at least for bananas, by a national survey conducted by Dole."

Of the consumers participating in the survey, 29% say they



Advances in ripening technology allow companies like Calavo, Santa Paula, CA, to remotely monitor and adjust ripening rooms, helping ensure avocados reach optimal quality and freshness more efficiently. PHOTO COURTESY CALAVO

enjoyed eating bananas "that were at least partially green, including 6% that prefer the fruit mostly green," says Goldfield. "One-half of banana lovers want perfectly yellow fruit with no green or brown spots, which is still significant, but less than the overwhelming dominance of ripe-only fruit that most in the industry assume."

Goldfield says retailers and produce managers who take a two-color banana merchandising approach, benefit from a larger customer pool and better sales.

Tracie Levin, controller, at wholesaler M. Levin and Co., Philadelphia, PA, says consumer preference around fruit ripeness has been shifting, but not in a single direction. "Shoppers want choice, not a one-size-fits-all ripeness level. Because shoppers want choice, retailers need to figure out a good balance. A smart choice for a retailer would be to have a variety of ripeness stages available."

Offering both ripe and unripe fruit gives consumers more choice and flexibility, says Peter Shore, vice president of product management at Calavo, Santa Paula, CA. "Promoting ripe now and ripe later signage is key to additional ring ups. Consumers are often shopping for the week, looking for an avocado today and one later."

Ken Melban, president of the California Avocado Commission, Irvine, CA, says that customer preference has been turning to fruit that's ready to eat, "driven by convenience and the expectation of a great eating experience. At the same time, retailers absolutely need both ready-to-eat and firmer fruit. Consumers shop with different usage timelines in mind. The right balance really comes down to store-level data."

Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president, D'Arrigo New York, Bronx, NY, says retailers are aware of how customers want a product, such as bananas, so the question of how ripe products should be is some-

thing that is established on a case-by-case basis.

“The guys who like unripened still want unripened because of their clientele, or because they have a set up in the store,” she says. “And the guys who want to have it on turn, they want to have their two or three days on the shelf.”

In foodservice, as in retail, the preference for not quite ripe produce can vary based on the particular operation, says Tyler Domingo, assistant ripening manager for John Vena Inc., Philadelphia, PA, but adds, “Most restaurants look for guac-ready avocados, while retailers look for fruit with shelf-life.”

TECHNOLOGY APPLIED

Retailers, meanwhile, should recognize the role technology plays in ripening and supply chain handling, especially as consumers now purchase and receive produce through a variety of channels.

“The new ripening rooms are a must if you want to be competitive in the future of home delivery,” says Dennis Kihlstadius, chief executive at Produce Technical Services, Bemidji, MN.

Modern technology is moving more of the science into ripening.

“It is starting to make the system more efficient and taking some of the old tribal knowledge out of the equation,” says Kihlstadius. “The newer ripening rooms can heat on one side and cool on the other, making the investment into new ripening rooms pay off in less than two years.”

Technological advances “have definitely increased efficiency and retailers’ control of the ripening process, with the ultimate goal being to empower retailers to give their shoppers more of the fruit they want,” Goldfield says. “The move to forced-air ripening rooms has resulted in greater consistency and precision in setting humidity and temperature, which for many retailers, has led to noticeable energy savings. Predictive AI is also finding its way more into produce ripening in the form of ripeners leveraging algorithms to help better manage timing, temperature set points and outturn color.”

Ivan Brown, senior director of marketing at Fresh Del Monte North America, Coral Gables, FL, says the ripening process has to be approached carefully.

“We utilize pressurized ripening rooms to ripen avocados and bananas, which are energy efficient and can ripen anywhere from 20-42 pallets of fruit at once,” he says,

“equating to thousands of individual pieces of fruit and roughly 38,400 pounds of bananas. We also manually trigger ripening for avocados and bananas to ensure a visible uniformity of ripening stages.”

In practice, the systems used at D’Arrigo allow the company to ripen without having to devote the same number of manhours to monitoring and adjusting systems, as the technology “is more accurate. You’re measuring the actual levels and status of a product in real time,” says D’Arrigo.

Levin says technology today “is evolving faster than ever. Ripening used to be more of a trial-based approach, where you could turn up or down temperature to see how long the fruit will take to ripen. Now the technology is data-driven, and it can more or less map out the ideal ripening schedule as needed for you.”

Critical factors in getting the product from the ripening room into the shopper’s cart include keeping product fresh in store, with rotation key.

“Technology has emerged and is continually improving,” says Calavo’s Shore. “Ripening rooms can be controlled from your phone, providing more flexibility with changes on the fly if needed. Dry matter, a key maturity index, and time of season and country of origin requires longer or shorter durations in the ripening room, as well as duration of ethylene conditioning. Late-season fruit will only take 1-3 days to fully ripen.”

According to Alberto Lizondro, director of quality assurance and regulatory affairs at Fyffes North America, Coral Gables, FL, “There is new AI-driven software, such as Stella, being introduced for use in ripening rooms to assist or potentially automate parts of the ripening process. In my opinion, this technology can serve as a valuable tool to support ripeners, but it should not replace the human element. Critical tasks, such as taking multiple pulp temperatures, assessing the internal condition of fruit samples, and determining color stage ranges, still require human judgment and expertise.”

Although he says ripening hasn’t changed dramatically since the advent of advanced pressurized rooms, Joe Menei, ripening manager at John Vena, says, “We are able to better monitor ethylene and CO2 levels, while also being able to ripen more fruit at a time.”

Florent Philippot, chief executive of

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ZGroup USA, Miami, FL, says the ripening units his company has developed, which are built into 20- and 40-foot mobile containers, offer flexibility so that companies that want to get into ripening or expand existing operations can do so with a relatively small investment.

As such, ZGroup allows companies to begin ripening “without risking too much,” he says.

PEAR, MANGO NECESSITIES

With pears, education about ripening is important, and it helps if store personnel can share an understanding of how the process works with shoppers.

CarrieAnn Arias, president and chief executive, USA Pears, Milwaukie, OR, observes that many people don’t know that pears are one of the few fruits that don’t ripen on the tree, so shoppers need an idea of how to continue the process themselves

“One thing we like to reiterate with consumers is there is no right level of ripeness,” Arias says. “It’s all a matter of personal taste, preference and use.”

At Crespo Organics, Rio Rico, AZ, Nissa Pierson says that, with mangos, there is no perfect ripening moment due to taste and varietal considerations. As such, mangos also require consumer ripening education to ensure satisfaction.

“Real education: what variety they have, what the growing regions are like, what stage it’s in, and how it will operate as time moves,” she says, “and what you can do with it at all stages of ripeness.”

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

• **“Just look at the store pickers for home pickup or delivery. Do you think they have been trained to know what is ripe and what is good? No. They are just filling an order, and if you do not have the right degree of ripeness to give that customer a good eating experience, you have lost that battle.”**

Dennis Kihlstadius, Produce Technical Services, Bemidji, MN

• **“One thing we like to reiterate with consumers is there is no right level of ripeness. It’s all a matter of personal taste, preference and use.”**

CarrieAnn Arias, USA Pears, Milwaukie, OR

She advises retailers to differentiate when it comes to mangos. “Retailers tend to handle all mangos the same, and they are not the same fruit,” she says. “A Keitt is ripe when it’s still green. An Ataulfo has a narrow ripening window that requires entirely different handling than a Tommy Atkins, which is far more cold-chain resilient and holds longer at each stage.”

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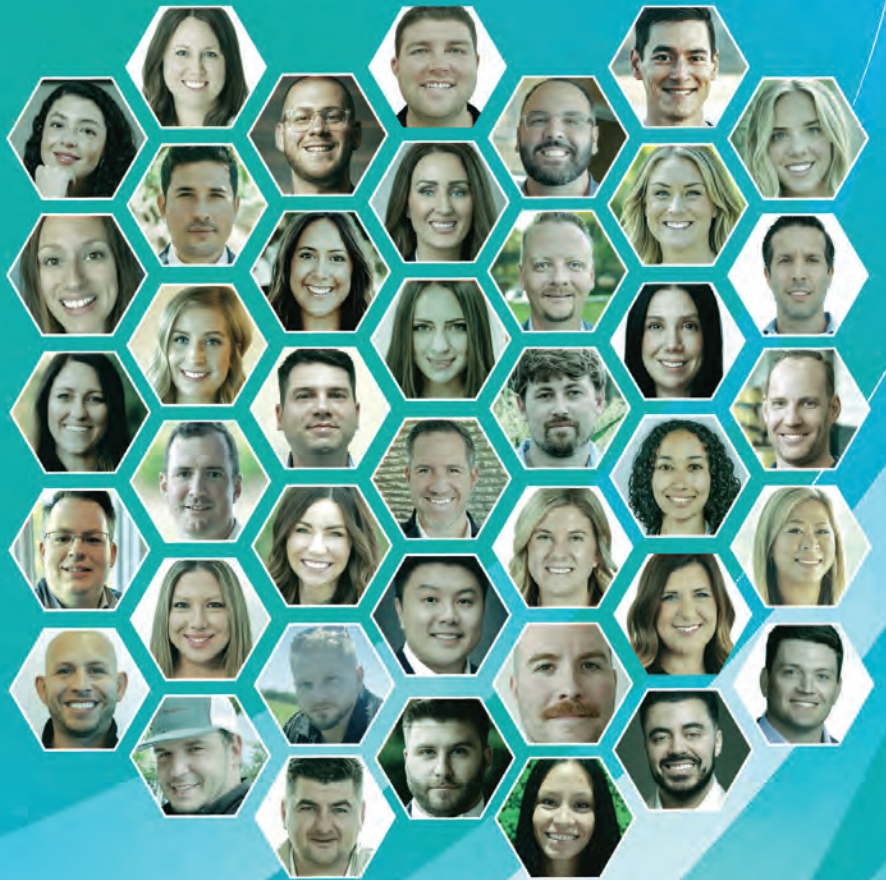
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40 Under Forty: Meet the Industry's Rising Leaders

This year's honorees are shaping the future of fresh produce.

Congratulations to this year's winners of the annual **PRODUCE BUSINESS 40 Under Forty** awards!

This year's 40 Under Forty class celebrates the next generation of entrepreneurs and leaders who are redefining what it means to succeed in the fresh produce industry.

These standout individuals are strengthening the industry through the power of connection — they're intentional about finding the right people, actively expanding their networks, showing up at key events, offering support, and building trust.

Each honoree brings a unique blend of drive, vision, potential, and determination — qualities that will continue to shape and elevate the industry for years to come.

Individual candidates were contacted to discuss their key company, industry, community, and personal accomplishments, sharing meaningful examples of their roles, as well as goals and aspirations. We are so proud of all the winners!

NOTE: If you were not chosen this year, or if you nominated someone who was not selected, please understand that the process is highly selective, and we encourage you to resubmit updated information in 2027. We welcome suggestions of well-deserving candidates throughout the year. Simply email us at editor@producebusiness.com. We look forward to honoring outstanding 40 Under Forty leaders again in 2027. Congratulations to all the winners!

Alán Aguirre Camou, 38
Chief Marketing Officer
Divine Flavor
Nogales, AZ



Hometown: Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico
Hobbies: Smoking/Grilling, Hiking, Fútbol (Soccer), Surfing, Scuba-diving, Skiing
Family/Community: Married, 1 daughter, Patronato de La Costa Hermosillo, Construyendo
Motto in life: Keep It Fun.

Aguirre's contributions have been instrumental in shaping Divine Flavor into a recognizable brand within the industry.

He grew up working at the family

grape farm in Sonora, then got his first job at a Carl's Jr México when in high school. After graduating from university, he went to work at marketing agency Clicker 360 in Mexico City.

At the beginning of 2014, he started officially working at Divine Flavor. He began at the warehouse level, managing all freight deliveries, then moved to a sales executive position and, at the same time, began building the company brand and its marketing department from scratch. His notable accomplishments, in conjunction with his marketing team, have been the Grower Summits and the Better Grower Program.

He is a recent graduate from the IFPA Food Industry Management Program with Cornell University. He is also starting his dual MBA and data science master's at IE University in Madrid.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

This is all people-driven; no one can grow by their own individual efforts. Even competitors, despite being rivals,

are friends who experience the same industry issues, not enemies.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Being at the farm and befriending people from multiple cultures.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

Previous generations had more uncertainty, and it was tougher to cope through seasons because there were fewer tools and communication. Today it is still relationship-driven, but with more transparency and long-term commitment from growers and retailers.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

First, year-round consistency in quality. It is difficult, but possible to achieve if there is a strong partnership with retailers, growers, and daily monitoring of the supply chain. Being able to maintain quality when product volume grows significantly helps solidify our relationship with our customers and

increases the consumer's loyalty.

Second, not relaxing on specialty product innovation — always venturing to produce items that are unique in flavor, convenient and eye-catching for North American and global markets.

Third, soil regeneration practices at our farms will assure products with more nutrients, like decades ago, when just one orange was enough to suffice our daily vitamin-C intake.

Q: What do you think consumers will desire in the future?

More transparency in sourcing, always the best flavor, but with flavor comes the need for nutrients. We need more collaboration from governments on protecting farmlands across the globe, besides giving jobs to communities. As an example, previous generations needed just one orange on average for their daily vitamin C intake because the soil was richer in nutrients. Today, because of excessive pesticide use and pollution of the land, it is harder to get those nutrients. We need about four to five oranges to meet our daily vitamin C needs to stay healthy.

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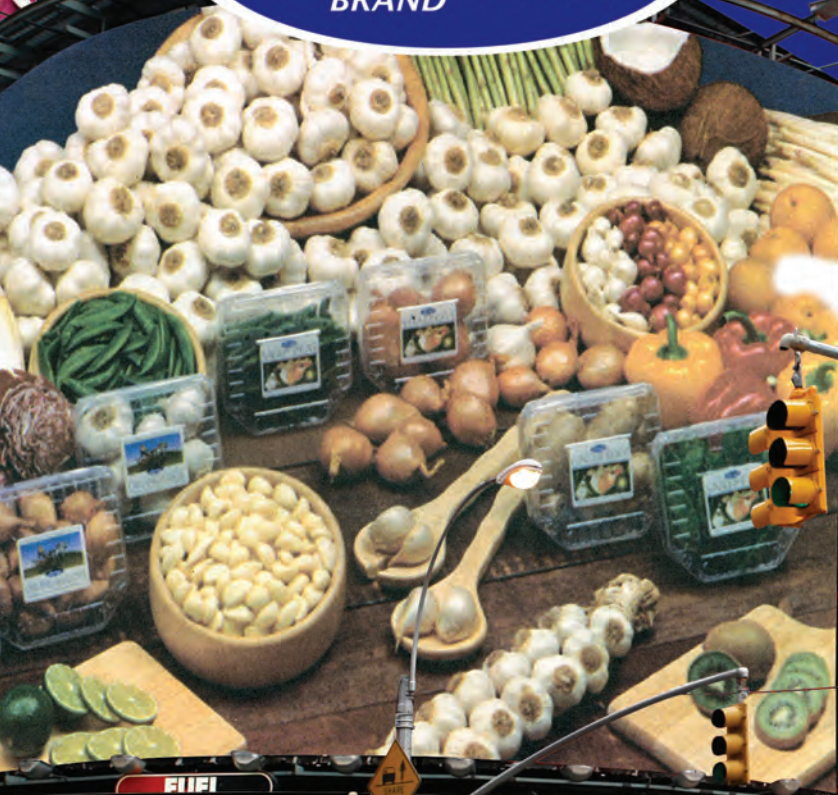
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Michelle Alo, 38
Vice President of Marketing
Kings River Packing, LP
Sanger, CA



Hometown: Reedley, CA/Kingsburg, CA
Hobbies: Reading, Running, Watching kids' sports
Family/Community: Married, 3 children
Motto in life: Choose purpose, then move boldly.

Alo brings nearly two decades of experience in agribusiness and food marketing, with a career deeply rooted in operations and family farming. She began her career in 2005 as a summer office assistant at Royal Valley. Other summer work in 2007 included work as an operations intern at Sun Maid Growers of California.

After completing her degree in 2008 at Cornell University, she began her full-time career at Sun Maid as a production planner. In 2011, she progressed to buyer and analyst, and in 2017, she became production planning manager. In 2018, she transitioned into marketing at Sun Maid as associate brand manager, growth initiatives. In 2019, she became brand manager of Sour Raisin Snacks.

She then served as brand manager at Plum Organics in 2021 before joining Kings River Packing as director of marketing in 2022. She was promoted to her current position in 2024.

She has been part of the leadership team helping grow Kings River Packing into a top five citrus brand in the U.S. Her work has included launching the "Grown to Share" brand platform and Feeding America partnership, leading key digital initiatives.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I grew up in a multigenerational farming family, knowing early on that I wanted to find my place in the industry. I began my career as an office assistant in the packing house where my grandfa-

ther, uncles, and father delivered fruit, learning the business from the ground up and developing a deep respect for the work behind every harvest.

Over the years, that foundation has come full circle — attending industry events alongside my aunt and uncle, and now meeting people who share stories about their relationships with my family. To me, produce isn't just an industry — it's family.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

What I'm most passionate about in the produce industry is strengthening the connection between people, farms, and the food they eat.

I care deeply about honoring multi-generational farming traditions, while helping ensure family farms can thrive long into the future. That passion shows up in my focus on flavor and convenience — because when produce tastes great and fits into modern lifestyles, people choose it more often. For me, produce is more than a product or a transaction; it's about people, legacy, and building meaningful, lasting relationships that make fresh food relevant, accessible, and worth choosing every day.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I was honored to be a part of IFPA Leadership Class 29, but I am most proud of building a team that continues to do meaningful, impactful work.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Retailer and brand collaboration drives the most growth in the produce industry because it unites shopper insight with product expertise to create clearer, more compelling experiences for consumers. Retailers contribute real-time data, access, and trust at the point of purchase, while brands bring innovation, storytelling, and consumer understanding.

When aligned, they deliver consistent messaging at shelf, inspire new usage occasions, accelerate adoption of innovation, and reduce friction in the buying process. This partnership shifts produce from a commodity purchase to a relevant, crave-worthy choice — boosting frequency, basket size, and long-term category health for the entire industry.

Aimee Bach, 31
Business Development
Manager
FirstFruits
Yakima, WA



Hometown: Puyallup, WA
Hobbies: Rodeos, Country concerts, Skiing, Finding a good brewery
Family/Community: Central Washington University Marketing Mentor, DECA Judge
Motto in life: You've only got one life to live.

Bach has demonstrated ability to drive business growth, while making an impact on the produce industry and her community. She exhibits strong leadership through strategic market expansion, industry engagement and mentorship.

Her career started as a marketing and events coordinator at the Iron Horse Brewery after her college graduation from Central Washington University. She built a loyalty program, traveled around the state sharing products, and planned headline-making events that attracted 1,000+ people. From there, she moved into finance and accounting recruitment.

Her entry into the produce industry came in 2021, when she took a position as business development manager at FirstFruits. In this role, she has played a key role in expanding the company's footprint by developing and strengthening strategic partnerships with major retail customers. She has led initiatives that drive category growth, enhance customer engagement, and increase brand visibility across the region.

She has completed the USApple Next Gen Fellowship and the FPFC Apprenticeship. Her commitment to service, especially her leadership of the "Take a Bite Out of Hunger" program, which has helped donate over 3.2 million pounds of apples, highlights her dedication to addressing food insecurity.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I understood earlier that no one is going to hand you a roadmap for success, especially in produce. Every season, customer, market, and operational challenge is different, which means curiosity and adaptability matter more than having all the answers immediately. Immerse yourself in networking events, meaningful mentorships, and resources like produce news publications to gain deeper understanding of the industry.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

One of the things I'm most passionate about is the growing "food is medicine" movement. At the end of the day, we're not just selling apples or produce; we're selling a lifestyle to help provide nutrition, wellness, and nourishment to communities. There's something incredibly rewarding about being part of an industry that directly impacts people's health and everyday lives.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

The trust and relationships I've built throughout my career. Produce is a relationship business in the truest sense, and people remember how you communicate during difficult situations far more than they remember an easy season.

Coming into agriculture without a traditional produce background forced me to learn quickly and earn credibility through consistency, adaptability, and follow-through. I've never been the most transactional person in the room, and I think that's actually become one of my strengths.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Stay curious, build relationships early, and learn how every part of the supply chain connects together. Produce is one of the few industries where you can discuss consumer psychology, weather patterns, labor challenges, logistics, packaging, and retail strategy all within the same meeting. If you can stay adaptable, communicate well under pressure, and genuinely care about people, the industry will usually give that energy back to you over time.

Brooke Becker, 37
Senior Vice President of
Sales and Marketing
Mission Produce
Oxnard, CA



Hometown: Clovis, CA

Hobbies: Family, Faith, Staying active

Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters, Reality Ventura Church

Motto in life: Stay steady in the chaos, take care of people, and lead with passion and drive.

Becker entered the produce industry through a buying and selling internship at Kroger, where she gained cross-commodity experience in grapes, melons and vegetables. She joined Mission Produce as a sales intern after being recruited at a

campus career fair and has spent the past 15 years advancing.

During her tenure, she has been a driving force behind Mission Produce's transformation from a small, privately held company into a global leader in the worldwide fresh produce business.

Today, she directly oversees approximately \$1.4 billion in annual sales. Under her leadership, Mission Produce has earned several prestigious industry awards, including Walmart's Supplier of the Year (2025), UNFI's Circle of Excellence Supplier of the Year (2024), and Grocery Outlet's Supplier of the Year (2026).

She has led key initiatives, including the successful launch of Mission's retail-ready mango bag program, and contributes to enterprise-level strategy around market development, geographic expansion, and new commodity growth. She serves as a director on the Peruvian Avocado Board and has been an active member of Ventura County Young Farmers & Ranchers for 15 years.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Produce teaches you quickly that it's a marathon, not a sprint. Markets fluctuate, supply changes, and not every decision will go your way. The key is staying calm in the chaos, learning quickly, and focusing on long-term relationships rather than short-term wins.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

The people. This industry is built on relationships, trust, and consistency and honestly, it's the people that make even the most chaotic days worth it.

What I'm most passionate about is building and maintaining strong, long-term relationships, both within my team and across the supply chain. In produce, markets change faster than most of us can respond to our inboxes, but strong relationships are what keep everything grounded.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Growth is driven by consistency and trust. When retailers and consumers can rely on a product experience, whether it be quality, availability, or value, they lean in and expand consumption.

In produce, growth doesn't come from a single lever. It comes from aligning the entire supply chain, from field to fork,

to consistently deliver a reliable and enjoyable experience that drives repeat purchase behavior over time.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

The most meaningful growth happens at the intersection of all three, but it is only unlocked when operations and sales are fully aligned. Sales and marketing can identify the best opportunities and shape demand, but without operational discipline, consistent supply, quality control, and execution, you can't sustain growth.

The companies that win in the long term are the ones that can translate strategy into reliable execution every day. Say what you mean, and deliver what you say.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be curious, stay humble, and have fun. The produce industry is small, and your reputation matters. If you operate with integrity, follow through on your commitments, and treat people with respect, those relationships will carry you through every stage of your career.

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Jake Billmeyer, 38
Co-Owner & National Sales
Ben B. Schwartz
Detroit, MI



Hometown: Birmingham, MI
Hobbies: Basketball, Coaching youth sports, Golf
Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Make a Wish, American Cancer Society
Motto in life: Work hard and good things will come!

Billmeyer represents the fourth generation of a family business. Over the course of his 18-year career in produce, he has taken Ben B. Schwartz from being just a company on the Detroit Terminal Market to being considered the largest and highest velocity house in Detroit. He is responsible for merchandising the most fragile commodities carried by Ben B. and has learned to read markets better than anyone. Simultaneously, he handles relationships with several of the company's largest national retail accounts.

Billmeyer joined Ben B. Schwartz in 2008 after graduating from the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Starting in a sales role, he embodied many of the same attributes that made his father successful, including relationship building, anticipating market shifts, and a strong work ethic. Eventually, he transitioned from a sales role serving walk-in traffic at the terminal to handling the majority of the company's largest national retail accounts.

With the addition of his brother, Drew, to Ben B. Schwartz in 2013, he was tasked to take on a more strategic role. Along with his leadership team, he worked toward an objective to expand the company's geographic service area and scope of services offered.

He helped build the team by hiring several key employees into leadership roles, investing in technology, leveraging processes to improve the customer

experience, and marketing the business through a targeted approach. Billmeyer has also been a major supporter of Ben B. Schwartz's philanthropy, donating 3.3 million pounds of fresh produce to food banks and pantries throughout metro Detroit over the last year and a half.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I am part of the fourth generation of our family to be a steward of Ben B. Schwartz. My parents met at the Detroit Produce Terminal, and it has been a major part of our family's makeup long before I was born. I knew eventually that I wanted to put my mark on our family's life work as well.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

This is a relationship business. Quality produce can get you in the door, but relationships are the differentiator.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

Pushing boundaries. Whether it be new products, technology innovation, or making things happen that others can't, it's exciting to be on the leading edge of what's possible in the produce industry. More importantly, to idea share within our team on the way there and to celebrate each other's successes along the way.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

The growth of our company, new service areas we're now serving, and an improved customer experience that we continue to refine every day.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

A combination of sales/marketing and operations. The two must work hand in hand and support each other in achieving the big goals.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Think about successful processes, products, companies, and people OUTSIDE of our industry. Why are these things or people successful? How can we apply that to the produce industry to continue reaching new heights?

Zach Cohen, 34
Sales
Cohen Produce Marketing
Camp Hill, PA



Hometown: Harrisburg, PA
Hobbies: Running, Traveling, Cooking, Reading, Hiking
Motto in life: The best ability is availability.

Cohen was unexpectedly thrust into a leading role at Cohen Produce Marketing, becoming co-owner and taking charge only a few years after joining the family business. In a short time, he has earned the respect of those in the industry for stepping out and taking on challenges in the changing apple industry.

After graduating from Temple University in 2014, Cohen began his professional career at Total Quality Logistics, where he spent two years as a logistics account executive.

In 2016, he joined Giant Eagle, where he spent seven years in various roles. During his time at Giant Eagle he handled store planning, product assortment, category performance, and in-store execution before he transitioned to the digital and omnichannel marketing team for three years. In this role, he helped support Giant Eagle's e-commerce operations, omnichannel marketing programming, and digital coupon engagement and execution across all store categories.

In October 2022, he joined Cohen Produce Marketing, a fourth-generation family-owned produce brokerage and exporter. In his current role, he works closely with growers to source and market high-quality produce.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Growing up with my dad and uncle working for the family produce business, I always knew I wanted to join them. The jobs I had prior to joining Cohen Produce Marketing were stepping stones that I felt

prepared me to join the family business.

More so, I was excited about the opportunity to work with my dad, with hopes of running the business with him for the next several years. My dad unexpectedly died in March 2024 — only 18 months into my tenure. Since my dad's death, the "why" of working in the produce industry is even more important now — it's carrying on a legacy and continuing to provide the best service to our growers and customers that has led to Cohen Produce's success.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

It's a marathon, not a sprint. I am always so eager to see instant results, but now, almost 12 years in my professional career, it's important to understand that seeing success — whether it's a small task or a big project — takes time and patience.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about the growers we work with every day. Without their efforts and contributions to the produce industry, everyday consumers around the world wouldn't eat the highest quality produce that we help supply year-round. I believe the importance of building relationships with our growers is immeasurable to our success.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Being selected as a fellow in the U.S. Apple Association's 2025 NextGen Leadership Program. This program is great for upcoming leaders within the apple industry. It provides professional development, insight on legislative/regulatory activism for the industry, and networking and mentorship opportunities with others in the apple industry. Along with six other fellows, we partook in a 12-month leadership program with trips to Capitol Hill, industry conferences, and orchard visits to get more hands-on experience.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

When I first started, my dad always emphasized the importance of building strong relationships. We may be in the business of selling apples, but the trust and relationship we build with growers and customers is what truly drives long-term success.

Eric Cowles, 36
Director, National Accounts
TheogCompanies
Salinas, CA



Hometown: Bowling Green, KY

Hobbies: Golf, Hunting, Travel

Family/Community: Married,
2 daughters

Motto in life: Build something that matters.

Cowles began his career in the produce industry in 2012 as a retail business analyst with Caito Foods, supporting the Dollar General produce business. Working closely with the merchandising team, he built a strong foundation in wholesale operations while gaining hands on experience with large scale retail execution.

Partnering with the director of produce, he supported the development of the distribution network, alignment of store operations, and execution of assortment strategy. These efforts directly supported Dollar General's expansion of its produce footprint from 73 to more than 4,000 store locations.

In 2021, Cowles accepted the role of regional sales manager with Dole Fresh Vegetables, supporting Mid Atlantic and Southeast accounts within the value-added packaged salad division.

Dole Fresh Vegetables transitioned to TheogCompanies following its acquisition by Arable Capital Partners. TheogCompanies family of brands includes Bud Fresh Vegetables, Dole Fresh Vegetables, josie's organics and organicgirl.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I got started in the produce industry shortly after graduating from Western Kentucky University with a degree in finance. Like many new graduates, I applied to a wide range of roles through the university's career portal. Through a combination of timing and opportunity, I accepted a position with Caito Foods, supporting the Dollar General account. That role became a truly impactful introduction to the industry, as it allowed me to be part of Dollar General's

broader effort to help fight food insecurity in rural communities with limited access to fresh produce.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

The people. This industry was built and will continue to stand on its relationships. The legacy, hard work, and dedication shown by the people within this industry is truly incredible.

Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of in your career?

In 2024, I had the opportunity to participate in the Saint Joseph's University Future Food Industry Leadership program. Being a part of this program helped me gain different perspectives from others in the food industry.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

That's a tough one. Every function within this industry must continually evolve and adapt to meet changing consumer needs and preferences. If I had to choose one, I would highlight product innovation. Consumers are always seeking the next best thing, greater value, and more convenient options. While maintaining a strong connection with the core customer is essential, it's equally important to keep product offerings fresh, relevant and engaging.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Convenience, nutrition, quality, and value remain central to today's consumer priorities. Shoppers are increasingly seeking products that feel relevant and deliver a strong value proposition. While price certainly matters, it is the overall value of a product that resonates most, especially in the current economic climate. Trends continue to shift toward higher-protein, lower-sugar options. Balancing these factors is no small task, but it is essential to delivering a strong and satisfying consumer experience.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Take every opportunity to learn and grow. Be willing to lean in as a teammate and learn all facets of the business when possible. Always lead with integrity and stay focused on building your personal brand.

Richard "RJ" Durante, 38
Co-Owner
Nardella, Inc.
Philadelphia, PA



Hometown: Haddonfield, NJ

Hobbies: Golfing, Baking, Writing

Family/Community: Married, 1 son, Eagles Autism Foundation, Philadelphia Flyers Charities, Sharing Excess, Philabundance, Little Sisters of the Poor, LiveUp Programs (Adults with Down Syndrome) and PALS (Children with Down Syndrome)

Motto in life: Let your quiet kindness be your loudest legacy.

Durante began his produce career in 2015 when he joined his family's business, Nardella Inc., after stepping back from pediatric nursing at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Following the same path as his father, he started as a porter/selector, learning the business from the ground up. Determined to understand every facet of the operation, he advanced to warehouse supervisor in 2017, while also cross-training in cashiering, ticketing and order reconciliation.

In 2018, he moved into an assistant sales role and, drawing on his background as a registered nurse with a minor in microbiology, became the company's director of food safety. In 2019, Durante became a full salesman while continuing to lead food safety and support weekend operations as a warehouse supervisor. In 2023, he added payroll administration and Teamsters liaison responsibilities, and in 2024, he was invited to join the company's ownership group. In 2025, he received vendor recognition for sales performance. In 2026, he became vice president of the Philadelphia Produce Credit Bureau and was selected to serve on the Philadelphia Produce Market's Union Negotiation Board.

Today, he continues to maintain responsibilities across sales, food safety, payroll, labor relations, operations and ownership, while still working Sundays

hands-on in the warehouse unloading trucks and pulling orders.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Just how much the produce industry depends on adaptability. No two days are the same, and the challenges constantly fluctuate. Markets change, weather changes, product quality changes, trucks are delayed, and customers require immediate attention. All these problems must be solved in real time.

Coming from healthcare, I understood responsibility and urgency, but produce taught me a different kind of resilience. I learned that success in this industry is not only about knowing the product, but more importantly, showing up consistently, building trust, communicating clearly, and being willing to do whatever job needs to be done that day.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

The thing I am most passionate about is reliability. In produce, people depend on you, and your word is a bond forged in trust. Customers depend on you to deliver quality product, employees depend on you to provide leadership and stability, and vendors depend on you to represent their product honestly and professionally.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Earning my place in the business from the ground up. I did not enter the company directly into a leadership role. Becoming part of the ownership group in 2024 was a major milestone, but I am equally proud that I still maintain a hands-on role in the business.

I can still be found unloading trucks, pulling orders, helping in the warehouse, and stepping into whatever role is needed. That means a great deal to me because I believe leadership in a family business is earned through consistency, humility and hard work.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

My advice would be to stay humble, work hard, and learn every part of the business you can. Do not be afraid of physical work or unglamorous jobs. The produce industry rewards people who show up, pay attention, and take responsibility.

Joseph Eisinger, 36
Organic Buyer
Katzman Produce
Bronx, NY



Hometown: Albertson, NY
Hobbies: Golf, Tennis, Numismatics (the study and collection of coins and currency)
Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters
Motto in life: Self reflect every day.

Eisinger represents the next generation of produce leadership by combining operational knowledge, commercial instincts, and a forward-looking vision for organics.

He began his career in the produce industry at a young age, working on the receiving side of the business in the summer at E. Armata, gaining hands-on experience in warehouse operations and learning about products, quality control and logistics.

After college, he was drawn to the industry's stability and fast-paced environment and chose to pursue produce full time. He began working at Nathel and Nathel, and advanced from warehouse roles into a foreman position, and then transitioned into retail sales. In this role, he built on his product knowledge and developed stronger relationships.

Recognizing increasing demand for organics, he moved into buying at Katzman in 2024, playing a key role in developing Katzman's Organic Department, including a dedicated USDA-compliant organic warehouse. He has helped expand the program from 20 SKUs to 200 plus in two years.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I was introduced to the produce industry by my father. He actually had a route and brought me to see the Hunts Point Produce Market when I was 13. At 16, I was working on the receiving side during the summer, and that early expo-

sure gave me a strong appreciation for how the business operates.

After college, I was looking for a stable career path and went into produce full time. I already had experience in the industry and genuinely enjoyed the fast-paced, hands-on environment, so it felt like a natural decision to build my career here.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Mistakes are part of the learning process. Early on, there's pressure to get everything right, but over time, you realize that mistakes are valuable if you learn from them. In my role, the key is to analyze what went wrong, adjust, and be transparent with customers. That mindset helps you grow and build stronger, more honest relationships with coworkers and customers.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about providing customers with high-quality organic products that I personally believe in. There's a strong connection when you're selling something you would buy and consume yourself. It goes beyond just moving product. It's about standing behind what you offer and delivering value to customers in a meaningful way.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Growth is driven most at the operational level. You can generate demand through sales and marketing, but if your operations can't support growth, whether it's inventory, logistics, or execution, you ultimately limit your ability to scale. Strong operations create the foundation that allows every other part of the business to grow sustainably.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

One of the biggest trends is the growing connection between food and health. Consumers are becoming more aware of how fresh produce supports overall wellness, and that shift is driving increased demand. As the industry continues to educate consumers on the benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables, it reinforces the idea that produce is not just food, but an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

Loubna El Wacham, 32
Digital Marketing Specialist
Equifruit
Montréal, Quebec



Hometown: Montreal
Hobbies: Dance (salsa), Traveling, Biking, Running
Family/Community: Projets Autochtones du Québec (PAQ), Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, Association Québécoise du Commerce Équitable

Motto: It always seems impossible until it's done.

El Wacham represents the next generation of leadership in the produce industry, bringing creativity, strategy, and purpose to how fresh produce is communicated to consumers. Five years ago, she started at Equifruit as marketing coordinator and has since worked her way up.

As digital marketing specialist at Equifruit, she develops campaigns and collaborations that help audiences understand the people and stories behind their fruit. In 2025, she led more than 20 digital collaborations, generating over 6.8 million impressions and 26,000 website visits, significantly expanding awareness of Equifruit Fair-trade bananas.

She also developed a Fairtrade Month toolkit for retail partners, equipping them with social media templates and educational content to better communicate the value of fair trade bananas in-store, and led a 2025 International Women's Day campaign with Les Filles Fattoush, highlighting women-led food brands. Beyond Equifruit, she is actively engaged in the produce and fair trade community, volunteering for the past five years with AQDFL (Association Québécoise De La Distribution De Fruits Et Légumes / Quebec Association of Fruit and Vegetable Distribution) and AQCE (Association Québécoise Du Commerce Équitable / Quebec Fair Trade Association).

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My first role in the produce industry was with Equifruit. I was looking for a company aligned with my values — one that creates real impact for people and the planet — and Equifruit checked every box. From day one, I became a Banana Badass, ready to help disrupt the banana industry and make it fairer for farmers.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

What excites me most is how a simple banana can change everything. Before Equifruit, I didn't know the full story about the banana trade. Now, I'm passionate about helping people understand why bananas shouldn't be so cheap and why fair trade matters for a sustainable future.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of having the courage to leave my previous role at a web agency and finding Equifruit. It was exactly the alignment I was looking for, using my digital marketing skills to support a meaningful purpose: disrupting the banana industry to make it fairer for farmers.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Growth comes from aligning produce with the realities of today's world. When environmental and ethical standards are built into supply chains, it meets what consumers are already looking for, and that's what drives demand.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Certifications such as Fairtrade, women-owned, and B Corp help signal that a brand is doing things differently. More and more, consumers want to support products that reflect their values, not just their budgets, and understand how their food is produced and who it supports.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Connect with others, stay curious and ask lots of questions. That's how you build your network, grow your career, and keep learning.

Austin Todd Hamilton, 36
Director of Ag
Hamilton Growers/Southern
Valley Fruit and Vegetable
Norman Park, GA



Hometown: Norman Park GA
Hobbies: Flying Airplanes, Playing Drums, Riding dirt bikes with his kids
Family/Community: Married, 4 children, Heritage Church leadership team
Motto in life: To work hard, love others and bring glory to my savior Jesus Christ!

Hamilton is a third-generation farmer, forward thinker, and advocate for agriculture's future. As director of agriculture at Southern Valley Fruit and Vegetable, he oversees production in South Georgia, Tennessee and Yucatan, Mexico, with a focus on sustainability and innovation.

Before joining the family farm, he spent two years working at Southern Tractor and Outdoors, learning to sell tractors and manage the shop.

In 2012, he started working with Hamilton Growers/Southern Valley. Working with his father, Kent Hamilton, he began growing cotton and squash. In 2015, he took over growing all the produce in Georgia for the company. He was promoted to his current position in 2018 and given the responsibility to make Mexico, Tennessee, and Georgia productions successful. As part of his job, he creates the year-long planting schedules for each location based on sales needs, oversees research trials and various sustainable practices for over 6,000 acres of produce, and manages the H2A labor.

Under his leadership, the company has successfully stopped fumigating in all its locations and is using biology to control nematodes and diseases. He has also spearheaded Southern Valley's expansion into South Florida.

In 2025, Hamilton assumed the role of president of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, further demonstrating his leadership and commitment to the industry. He is

known for his dedication to advancing safer, more efficient farming practices and having a vision for strengthening the food supply chain.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I grew up in this business. I used to ride in the tractors with my dad when I was a little boy. I couldn't help but enjoy it. As a boy, I couldn't wait to grow up and help Daddy farm; my little dream turned into reality, thanks to God.

Q: What do you know now you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Failure is a part of making great things happen. My dad told me I would fail, but I didn't realize how that would feel until I made some failures of my own, and so for that I'm thankful.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

We used to grow tons of acres of produce, and now we are growing less and focusing more on growing for a profit. We couldn't stay in business without focusing on our costs and our sales prices. Also, there are more and more regulations, and that makes things harder for us.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Some challenges are to have enough farmers who are willing to farm. Farming isn't easy, our whole industry isn't easy, we have to make things more fun and exciting to attract new people.

As far as opportunities, the sky is the limit; this is such a challenging business that not everyone can do it the right way. We have to continue to stay relevant in the industry, and I see tons of opportunities to do that. If you work hard and do what you say you will do, you will be successful.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Farming and growing produce in two countries and three states. It takes a lot of planning in a lot of areas to make that happen — and we do it 365 days a year. To me, it's extremely impressive that we are able to do that. I always say "we" because it's not about me, it's about our team, and without them I wouldn't be successful.

Riley Hicks, 30
Category Manager — Produce
Save A Lot
Saint Ann, MO



Hometown: Escondido, CA
Hobbies: Traveling, Hiking, Reading
Family/Community: Volleyball coach, Community volunteer
Motto in life: Go big or go home.

Hicks began his produce career in 2018 in sales and marketing at Suntreat Packing & Shipping after graduating from California State University, Fresno. For almost three years, he supported sales initiatives, led marketing efforts, and managed accounts payable and receivable.

In 2020, he joined Topco Associates as a category coordinator, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the grape and stone fruit desk, while supporting sourcing strategies for member retailers. In 2021, he expanded his operational and commercial expertise by joining Fruit World Company as a field operations representative. In that position, he coordinated harvest and packing across multiple facilities, managed logistics and inventory transfers, purchased fruit to fulfill customer orders, and strengthened client relationships through sales and marketing.

In 2023, he returned to Topco Associates and rapidly progressed from category analyst to senior category analyst, leading sourcing strategy for berries, grapes and citrus, conducting market supply analysis, and setting weekly and promotional pricing. In October 2024, he was promoted to associate category manager — citrus, where he negotiated season-long contracts, led RFPs, delivered strategic category reviews, and built strong partnerships.

In December 2025, he joined the Save A Lot team as a produce category manager, where he now negotiates contracts, delivers on the strategic vision of the produce team, and builds partnerships with independent retailers and vendors.

Throughout his career, he has consistently exceeded sales goals, strengthened supply chain execution, and driven category growth through strategic sourcing and data-informed market insight. He has served as a mentor for the last few years for the IFPA Management Fundamentals Program and the SEPC STARS program.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish that I knew it was OK to fail. What really matters is how you move on and how you correct the situation. I have found out in recent years that it is OK to fail if there is sound reasoning behind what you are trying to accomplish. And if you fail, you correct the situation and grow from it. This is where my life motto of "go big or go home" comes into play; I would rather fail trying than not try at all.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I am passionate about delivering top-quality products to consumers at price points that make produce a more affordable option for all consumers.

Many consumers view some produce items as a luxury that they cannot necessarily afford on each trip to the grocery store. I aim to make produce as affordable as possible, while still delivering top quality. Consumers should not have to choose between items that will feed and sustain their families and produce. I hope to see the industry come to a point where the consumer can afford to put a 5-pound bag of potatoes and a 3-pound bag of mandarins into their cart rather than one or the other.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

There are several trends in the world right now, but consumers' health and wellness priorities are driving produce purchases the most. As more and more consumers are prioritizing their health, we see more produce being purchased to support these goals.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Say yes. Say yes to all the new experiences and opportunities. I have met some of the best people in my life in this industry.

Megan Jacobsen, 39
Vice President, Sales
and Marketing
Gills Onions
Oxnard, CA



Hometown: Fresno, CA

Hobbies: Sourdough bread maker, Health & wellness, Gardener

Family/Community: Lanna Foundation President/Chairman of the Board, The Well Community Church, Missionary work in Thailand, Fresno State Alumni Association
Motto in life: Lead with grit, but listen with grace.

As a fourth-generation fresh grape farmer from Fresno County, Jacobsen is a proven leader. In her current role at Gills Onions, she leads national sales across the U.S. and Canada.

She began her professional path in public relations and community advocacy with The Big Fresno Fair and the Fresno Chamber of Commerce. In 2011, she took a position as director of membership for the California Fresh Fruit Association. In 2015, she transitioned into the private sector, taking a national marketing manager position at Solutions 4Earth, where she focused on soil health and innovative crop nutrition.

This role led to a pivotal role for Gills Onions for more than eight years now. She has built and strengthened partnerships with top foodservice distributors, secured major national accounts, and implemented systems that improve efficiency and decision-making. Her background in policy, communications, and agriculture gives her an edge.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

As a fourth-generation grape farmer, I grew up with the rhythm of the harvest and a deep respect for the land. Farming is in my DNA, and while my family made the difficult decision to sell our operation in 2015, my commitment to the agricultural community only deepened.

I stayed in produce because I believe this industry is the most resilient and essential in the world. I don't just work in produce to sell a product; I work here to honor my heritage and ensure the next generation of California agriculture has a seat at the table.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

When I first started my career, I wish I had known that resilience is a more valuable asset than perfection. In the beginning, I focused on mastering the technical data and the regulations. While that knowledge is essential, I now know that the ability to build trust, listen to the needs of a customer, and lead with empathy is what moves the needle.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

My greatest passion in this industry is the intersection of holistic wellness and agricultural integrity. We often get caught up in the logistics of the supply chain; however, when you strip all of that away, we are in the business of human health.

We have the privilege of providing the most nutrient-dense, life-giving foods on the planet. As someone who advocates for intuitive movement and holistic health, I find it amazing that our daily work ends up in the hands of mothers and fathers who are just trying to do the best for their children.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

The accomplishment I am most proud of is leading our organization through a complex recall process. In the produce industry, a crisis is the ultimate test of a leader's integrity and transparency. During this period, I served as the primary liaison between our company, federal agencies, and the public. It required a level of "all-in" commitment.

I had to balance the technical demands of food safety protocols with the need for clear, honest communication with our customers and consumers. What makes me proudest isn't just that we navigated the crisis, but how we emerged from it.

It was a master class in resilience and a reminder that, in produce, your reputation is truly built on how you handle the hard days, not just the successful harvests.

Joanna Jaramillo, 37
Marketing Manager
Wholesum Family Farms, Inc.
Amado, AZ



Hometown: Tucson, AZ

Hobbies: Weight training, Dance expression, Crafts

Family/Community: Tucson Meet Yourself, Local arts festivals

Motto in life: Make it happen, speak what you want into existence.

Jaramillo is a strategic marketing leader who has played a pivotal role in elevating Wholesum's brand and market presence. She has led brand and cross-functional initiatives spanning brand management, PR, retail marketing, packaging, events, social media, data analysis and product development.

She gained early exposure to the industry through her family's Colombian restaurant. After college, she spent several years in nonproduce positions.

In 2018, she joined Wholesum as marketing coordinator, and in 2019, she moved to marketing specialist. In her first year with Wholesum, she led the execution of the company's rebrand from Wholesum Harvest to Wholesum.

In 2019, she helped bring the fair trade message to partners by supporting the company's Healthy Start volunteer initiative, where they built a kitchen in a community kindergarten.

In 2021, she was promoted to marketing manager. She led the introduction of the company's first cardboard sustainable packaging for organic tomatoes on the vine in 2021, which has since scaled nationwide and expanded into additional commodities, significantly reducing clamshell usage.

In 2022, she created "Semillitas," the company's first festival celebrating 10 years of fair trade impact in Sonora, Mexico, alongside a customer appreciation campaign. More recently, she has contributed to product development, bringing data, research, and strategic positioning into cross-functional work.

In 2025, she played a key role in the launch of Lil' Ones, organic snacking tomatoes, paired with campaign that surpassed 1 million views.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

What brought me into the industry as a professional was a job posting for a marketing coordinator role at Wholesum that genuinely spoke to my soul.

I grew up in Rio Rico, AZ, surrounded by produce companies and families. Even though my parents weren't in the industry, it was just always part of everyday life. My background is in media arts and communications, and I also spent several years working in my mom's restaurant, so art, food and hospitality have always been very close to me in a hands-on way.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

What I'm most passionate about in produce is its ability to connect people. It's a universal building block, grown from the earth, yet experienced differently across cultures and kitchens.

What makes it especially meaningful to me is the emotional layer that can be brought forward through storytelling, packaging and brand experience.

Produce isn't just what's harvested but what happens before and after. It's how it's shared at the table, how it becomes part of traditions, and how it supports our health along the way.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

I find it to be a system, not a single lever, but growth usually starts with innovation. You need something new or better to spark demand. Marketing then builds connection and identity around it, and sales and operations are what make that growth real and scalable. When one of those is missing, growth is stunted.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Produce is living and breathing, and a little theatrical. It is from nature, and that comes with its beauty and challenges, so volatility is a part of the deal. My advice is to build your adaptability early, learn to pivot and navigate uncertainty and surprises. Just as important, stay curious.

Kevin Kaeser, 38
Category Manager
The Winn-Dixie Company
Jacksonville, FL



Hometown: Bricktown, NJ
Hobbies: Fishing, Golfing, Grilling
Family/Community: Married, 2 sons, Coaching little league teams
Motto in life: Carpe Diem

Kaeser has built a distinguished career spanning more than 20 years with The Winn-Dixie Company. He started in 2003 as a front-end associate and has advanced over the past 23 years through store-level roles to his current position as category manager. With experience across the grocer's stores and business operations, he has a commitment to continuous improvement and collaboration.

A graduate of the Southeast Produce Council's STEP-UPP program, he is known for connecting strategy with execution and building strong partnerships that support long-term success. At Winn-Dixie, his diverse operational background has provided him with a comprehensive understanding of store execution, merchandising, and strategic category management, enabling him to consistently deliver results that enhance both customer experience and business performance.

Kaeser is recognized for his ability to connect data-driven insights with practical execution, driving disciplined improvements through cross-functional collaboration. Among his most notable accomplishments, he led a high-impact, cross-functional initiative to revitalize the value-added produce category.

By leveraging sales and shrink analytics, he identified opportunities to realign assortments, labor focus, and in-store processes toward higher-growth segments. Through close partnership with store operations and support teams, he simplified workflows and empowered associates to prioritize high-value tasks, resulting in a 16% year-over-year

increase in category sales, while simultaneously reducing shrink.

A committed people leader, he is equally passionate about talent development, maintaining a strong record of mentoring and coaching that has led to numerous internal promotions, and reinforcing his belief that sustained success is built through investing in people and capability.

He actively contributes to the produce industry through his involvement with the SEPC Retail Committee, where he shares retailer perspectives.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

The value of the relationship between retailers and suppliers is paramount, with the volatility every category experiences throughout the year.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

Delivering the highest quality produce to my customers throughout Florida.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Seeing people with whom I was able to spend time in my career go on to become successful and build their own careers within the organization.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Enhancing the customer experience while meeting their everyday needs and delivering on this daily.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Operations, this is where we have face time with our customers and the opportunity to develop relationships with the communities we serve.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Functional foods that customers already know are better for you, but learning the why and what the specific nutrients can do for the body. Educating the customers while in our stores is key.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Have fun. Produce is fueled by passionate people who love what they do, and relationships are key to success.

Chris Keany, 38
Chief of Staff
Keany Produce & Gourmet
Landover, MD



Hometown: Alexandria, VA
Hobbies: Exercising, Weight training, Cardio, Coaching youth sports
Family/Community: Married, 2 children and expecting another, Former Volunteer EMS/Firefighter
Motto in life: Fight in the shade.

As the second generation of a produce business, Keany grew up in the produce industry, working overnight shifts on the docks alongside his father and uncles, rolling hand trucks and learning the business from the ground up. That early exposure provided him with the opportunity to work in just about every department. He officially joined the company full-time 14 years ago as a day shift shipping supervisor, where he strengthened his operational foundation and completed the Keany Executive Leadership Development Program.

In 2015, he became general manager of Emerald Isle, and had the opportunity to lead the opening of the company's Richmond facility — its first expansion beyond its core market. In that experience, he helped pilot and establish the operational framework that has since served as the standard for the company's now nine-warehouse network, shaping how it scales and operates today.

In 2019, he moved into sales as an account executive in the DMV market and then into an emerging accounts manager role, where he was honored to be selected for Produce Alliance's Next Generation of Produce Executives and serve on the Wholesale Distributor Board for United Fresh (now IFPA). Since 2022, he has served as chief of staff for the Keany Family of Companies, including Keany Produce

& Gourmet, Limehouse Produce, and Ward's Produce, where he has played a key role in aligning strategy and operations across the organization.

In 2026, he is stepping into the role of president, where he will bring both legacy knowledge and fresh leadership to the company.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I fully appreciated how important those early, hands-on roles would be. At the time, it's tough work, but it gives you a foundation you can't replicate any other way. Understanding every part of the business and respecting each role makes you a better leader down the line.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Opening the Richmond facility. It was our first step into a new market and required everything we had — long hours, problem-solving, and a lot of teamwork. It was a defining moment for both the company and my career.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

I think it starts with foodservice. As chefs and operators continue to raise expectations, it pushes all of us to improve — whether that's through better products, stronger service, or more efficient processes.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Sales, marketing, and technology all play a big role. Sales is about never getting comfortable and continuing to build relationships. Marketing helps tell your story and build your brand, especially in new markets. And technology gives you an edge in an industry that hasn't always been quick to adopt it.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Buckle up — it's a fast-paced, ever-changing environment. You're dealing with perishable products and constant customer interaction, so no two days are the same. My biggest advice is to start at the ground level and build your foundation. You can't skip those steps if you want to be successful long-term.

Anna Kirsch, 37
Director of Business
Development
Calavo Growers
Santa Paula, CA



Hometown: Paramus, NJ

Hobbies: Staying active, Travel, Petting all the dogs

Family/Community: Director on co-op board for 9 years, NY Cares volunteer, NYC Marathon volunteer, NYU's Pediatric Rehab volunteer.

Motto: Show up as your best, every day!

Kirsch entered the produce industry in 2012, when her career pivoted to a position at FreshDirect as associate marketing manager. In this role, she focused on new customer acquisition and activating trade partnership programs. The passion from the produce team was inspiring, so a year later, she moved to New Star/organicgirl to work on premium salad greens, juices and dressings. Here, Kirsch built a foundation in sales, merchandising, customer service, and consistency in quality in her role as marketing and merchandising manager.

After three years, Kirsch moved to Avocados From Mexico as regional director of trade marketing. She led the design and execution of programs that drove consumer engagement and category growth across retail, foodservice, and e-commerce channels throughout the Northeast and Central regions.

In 2022, she joined Westfalia Fruit as an account manager, gaining valuable experience operating within a competitive market and selling across both retail and foodservice channels.

In 2024, she moved to director of business development at Calavo Growers. In this role, she is focused on driving excitement and sustainable growth within the avocado category by designing customized programs for both new and existing customers.

In addition to cultivating new business, she partners closely with existing customers to support their growth through category management, assortment optimization, effective merchandising strategies, impactful promotions, and tailored solutions to meet specific business challenges. Kirsch is a recipient of the 2020 SEPC Next Generation Leader Award.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began working in the produce industry when I saw the passion my coworkers had for what they did. I was on the marketing and customer acquisition side of the FreshDirect business, and produce was always excited about something new. Their enthusiasm was contagious!

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

It is OK to fall in love with what you do.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

People. Food brings people together around a table and brings us together as an industry. The people make it work, and the love and passion keep it going.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I have mentored young people who are starting out, and I am extremely proud of their wins and personal growth. Although I will be a footnote in their success stories, I am extremely proud to have played a part in that success.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Innovation is an idea or a possibility coming to life. Often, this is only possible with collaboration across several departments.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

The people in this industry are passionate and eager to share their knowledge with you. Ask as many questions as you can!

Crissa Kudroch, 37
Manager, Account and
Sales Administration
Mastronardi Produce
Kingsville, Ontario



Hometown: Leamington, Ontario

Hobbies: Running, Biking, Yoga/Pilates, Golf, Camping

Family/Community: Married, 1 daughter.

Motto in life: You don't know, until you know! Growth comes from stepping into situations you don't fully have figured out yet.

Kudroch began her career in the produce industry shortly after graduating with a business/human resources degree, and soon transitioned into sales. A close friend introduced her to an entry-level sales administration role with a local greenhouse in 2010. After two years of developing foundational skills in sales operations, she advanced to a sales administration position with Mastronardi Produce.

In this fast-paced and highly competitive environment, she refined expertise in order management, customer relations and cross-functional coordination.

In 2020, she was promoted to account manager. In this role, she managed day-to-day ordering systems and pricing strategies, introduced new product lines to clients, negotiated contracts, and coordinated complex fulfillment processes to ensure timely and accurate delivery tailored to customer requirements.

In 2023, she was promoted to manager, account and sales administration, where she currently leads a team of 13 administrative professionals. In this role, she oversees workflow optimization, adapts team processes to meet the rapidly evolving demands of the produce industry, and ensures effective workload distribution to maintain high levels of performance and service. She is a graduate of the Cornell Executive Leadership Development Program (2023).

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Growing up in Leamington, the Tomato Capital of Canada, with the largest concentration of greenhouses, it appeared to be an obvious decision. A close friend introduced me to my first admin role at a local greenhouse, and two years later, when the opportunity arose to join the leader in the industry, I jumped at it.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I'd worry less about making the "perfect" choice. A decent decision you act on beats a perfect one you overthink.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

Staying engaged and dependable for our teams, customers, and partners from start to finish. To know I made a difference.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of my proudest accomplishments in my career has been stepping into a dual role as sales account and admin manager and successfully leading a team of 13 administrative staff in a fast-paced produce environment.

When I took on the role, one of the key challenges was ensuring accuracy and speed in order processing while also supporting the sales team's responsiveness to customers, given how time-sensitive the produce industry is. I focused on streamlining communication between sales and admin, standardizing order entry processes, and improving workload distribution across the team. I also introduced clearer accountability and daily prioritization routines to reduce errors and delays.

As a result, we significantly improved order accuracy and turnaround time, which helped strengthen customer satisfaction and reduced friction between departments.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Social media — turning produce into more of an "experience" category instead of just a staple. Also, convenience without compromise. People want to eat better, but time is still the biggest barrier. That's pushing growth in ready-to-eat, pre-cut, pre-washed, and snackable produce that makes healthy eating easier in real life.

Karley Lange, 39
Director, North American
Promotions
Northwest Cherries/
Washington State
Fruit Commission
Yakima, WA



Hometown: Yakima, WA

Hobbies: Riding side-by-sides in the mountains, Gardening, Cooking, Ag networking activities

Family/Community: Married, 1 child

Motto: When things get tough, persevere and push forward — great things come to those who work for it.

As the director of North American Promotions for Northwest Cherries, Lange helps lead promotions representing growers in five states, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and Montana.

She heads up U.S. and Canadian promotional programs for Northwest fresh sweet cherries. In this role, she strengthens retailer partnerships and drives category growth across multiple channels. She designs and executes integrated marketing campaigns informed by consumer research and market insights, oversees digital platforms and retail advertising programs, and expands brand visibility and audience reach.

Her career with Northwest Cherries began in 2015 and reflects progressive growth through increasingly responsible roles, beginning as a domestic marketing assistant, advancing to marketing specialist, and ultimately leading to her current leadership position. Along this path, she has led the development and execution of national marketing and promotional programs across the U.S. and Canada. She has overseen website management, social media strategy, subcontractor coordination, and program analytics to improve performance and ROI across initiatives.

She takes pride in being part of a

team delivering measurable impact for growers through creativity, strategic execution, and data-driven decision-making.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Previously, I was in the medical field and was ready for a change. After graduating from college, I saw an opportunity to start fresh. Agriculture is such a huge part of the Yakima Valley, and I thought it would be a fun and interesting field to be part of.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Anything is possible. When I started at Northwest Cherries, I learned that an agricultural career can come with its share of challenges, and that growth opportunities don't happen every day. However, I've been fortunate to spend 11 years here growing, learning, and advancing. That experience taught me not to limit myself or my potential and that with hard work and dedication, I am helping the Northwest Cherries team and our growers and industry partners to continue to reach new goals.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

While it was a difficult and unexpected situation, I'm most proud of stepping up during a critical time for our organization. Our president fell ill and went on medical leave right at the start of cherry season, and I was asked to take on his responsibilities in addition to my own.

It was a whirlwind and came with a lot of pressure, especially during such a pivotal time for the industry. Despite the challenge and the big shoes to fill, I was able to step in along with many members of the team, keep things moving forward, and successfully manage everything that came our way. I was also quite appreciative of the support I received from the industry.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Growth happens when all areas work together, but sales and marketing play a critical role in connecting the product to the consumer. Without that connection and clear messaging, even the best product can go unnoticed.

Jessica Levac, 38
Director of Sales —
Fresh Division
Bellemont Powell Ltd.
Boucherville, Québec



Hometown: Marieville, Québec

Hobbies: Discovering new restaurants, Volunteering with animals, Unwinding in nature

Family/Community: 1 daughter

Motto in life: Lead with integrity, work hard, and always stand up for the people around you.

Levac began her career in the produce industry in 2012, handling the order desk and acting as a sales assistant for produce broker, Bellemont Powell, where she gained hands-on experience in sales and logistics. During her 12 years there, she moved into roles with increasing responsibility in retail strategy and account management, helping develop programs, support product launches, and strengthen partnerships between suppliers and major Canadian retailers.

In 2022, she became director of sales. In this role, she leads strategic retail partnerships and business development. She focuses on developing innovative programs, aligning supplier capabilities with retailer strategies, and building long-term partnerships that drive sustainable category growth.

She was selected as the 2022 winner of the Quebec Produce Marketing Association (QPMA) Next Generation Program, serving as the Next Generation Intern, while assuming interim board member responsibilities, supporting government relations and advocacy initiatives, and actively contributing to all association committees.

She has served as a member of the CPMA Education Committee and PFP Alumni Sub-Committee since 2022, and has been chair of the CPMA Women in

Produce Working Group since 2023. She served as chair of the QPMA Next Generation / Emerging Talent Committee in 2023-2024, co-organizer of the Inaugural CPMA Women in Produce Summit in April 2025, and co-chair of CPMA Convention Retail Tours (100th Convention and Tradeshow in Montreal) in 2025. She was a part of CPMA's Passion for Produce Alumni Class of 2022, was named CPMA's Young Professional of the Year in 2024, and was most recently selected as a 2026 Outstanding Women in Produce nominee.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had understood earlier just how relationship-driven the produce industry is. Technical knowledge and operational skills are important, but long-term success in this business really comes down to trust. Over time, I learned that transparency, reliability, and strong communication are what build lasting partnerships. When challenges happen, and they always do in produce, those relationships allow everyone to work through them together.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I'm passionate about making fresh produce more accessible and convenient for consumers. As lifestyles become busier, the industry has a real opportunity to innovate in ways that make it easier for people to incorporate fresh foods into their daily routines.

Produce plays an important role in both health and the overall shopping experience in stores, and finding ways to keep the category exciting, approachable, and relevant is something I care deeply about.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One accomplishment I'm especially proud of is serving as chair of the Women in Produce Working Group within the Canadian Produce Marketing Association. Supporting mentorship and helping elevate other professionals in our industry is something I care deeply about, and I'm grateful to contribute to initiatives that encourage the next generation of leaders in produce.

Greg Lukasik, 34
Sales
Bartolotta LLC
Archbald, PA



Hometown: Dunmore, PA

Hobbies: Baseball, Golf, Darts,
Working out

Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Abington Heights Volunteer Assistant Varsity High School Baseball Coach, Saint Anthony's Church, Volunteer at Saint Francis Soup Kitchen

Motto in life: The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.

Lukasik has been with Bartolotta for more than a decade, consistently delivering results, while strengthening long-term customer relationships. He combines industry knowledge with a sharp instinct for market timing and expanding key accounts.

He started in the produce industry in July 2014 with William Rosenstein & Sons, handling procurements for institutions. Shortly after, he transitioned into sales, while still maintaining the procurement business. In 2017, he moved to sales manager until the company was sold in 2019. In September 2019, he joined Bartolotta's sales team to specialize in California veg and citrus. He also works with Bartolotta's sister company, Atlantic Fresh Trading, and its watermelon growing facility in Sycamore, GA.

In 2025, he reached over \$10 million in sales. Beyond the numbers, he mentors the younger team members and greatly contributes to the office growth, work ethic and integrity.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Ironically, I didn't have produce on my radar. I saw an ad on Craigslist and didn't even apply when I saw two years of produce experience needed. A couple of weeks later, I met Jay Rosenstein, and I told him I was looking for jobs, and he mentioned the ad which I did not apply

for due to my lack of experience. He hired me and explained being new was good, as I came in with no bad habits, and I could learn hands-on at the wholesale experience. I am thankful he took a chance on me 12 years ago.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Never be afraid to put yourself out there. This industry is built on relationships. And relationships don't develop through emails. This industry is as rewarding as the effort you want to put into it. Never be afraid to say "I don't know." Get the right answer and be truthful about the information you are giving instead of guessing.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

My customers and the relationships that come with them. It's hard to call people your "customers" when you aren't just discussing produce. You are discussing family, sports, and just life in general. I consider myself one of the luckiest people to be able to call my customers my friends.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Demand will always be the driving force in the produce industry. And the cornerstone of this industry is the farmer. Reliability, trust, and innovation are also major driving factors. A combination of all these factors leads to this industry continuing to be successful on a large scale.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Consistency, from both a quality and price standpoint, are the biggest driving factors. If pricing stays consistent and the quality is there, then people are more open with the trust you built.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Learn what you are selling. Take the trip to the farm. Go to the shows. The relationships you build are everything. Put your face out there. Be adaptable. Nothing is ever predictable with produce, and it's your job to be able to learn to roll with it and come up with a plan that works.

Jorge Martinez, 36
Director of Varietal
Operations, Lemons
Sunkist Growers
Valencia, CA



Hometown: Valencia, CA

Hobbies: Spending time with family,
Watching and playing sports

Family/Community: Married, 2 children, California Lutheran University, Nature Conservancy, Center for Biological Diversity, Youth soccer coach

Motto in life: Work hard, be humble, and most importantly, be kind.

Martinez began his produce career with Sunkist Growers in January 2016 as an account manager, taking on some of the most challenging accounts in the Sunkist portfolio. Tasked with reversing declines, he quickly demonstrated his ability to identify customers with the potential to grow, developing relationships and driving weekly sales gains.

He successfully elevated performances across wholesale, foodservice, retail and brokerage accounts. His exceptional performance resulted in him being awarded the honor of Sunkist Sales Leader for both domestic and global sales in 2021.

The following year, he was promoted to a key account manager. In this role, Martinez focused on key retail accounts.

His continued sales success set the stage for his transition to the Sunkist varietal team, moving into operations as director of varietal operations in 2023. In this leadership role, he oversees the activities of the largest lemon shipper in the world, including Sunkist Growers' global lemon program. The program manages the marketing and movement of over 20 million cartons of lemons per year.

He completed the IFPA Emerging Leaders Program in March 2020.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry?

I entered the produce industry somewhat by accident and, honestly, had no

idea what to expect. My wife found the job listing and encouraged me to apply, believing I would be a great fit due to my two degrees in communications and Spanish.

Despite having no previous produce experience, the opportunity to work with a company that helps provide nutritious food to families around the world felt meaningful and too important to overlook. What started as a leap into the unknown, quickly became a career I'm truly passionate about.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had recognized earlier the importance of remaining open to change and embracing adaptability within this industry. No two seasons are the same, and Mother Nature always keeps us on our toes.

Understanding early on that flexibility isn't just helpful, but essential, would have made my first few years a little smoother. I have learned to anticipate change, pivot quickly, and remain steady through uncertainty, which is one of the most valuable lessons I have learned throughout my career and something I have instilled in my team as they have progressed.

Q: What is the one thing in your business you are most passionate about?

I am most passionate about and love that we provide a healthy and delicious product that is appealing to all ages. I take great pride in representing Sunkist Growers because the organization truly prioritizes healthy living and is committed to providing the highest-quality citrus to consumers.

Beyond the fruit itself, I love that we provide healthy recipes and tips to consumers using our fruit and strive to make it accessible to everyone. Knowing that our work contributes to healthier lifestyles is what motivates me.

Q: What would you like consumers to know about the industry?

That the citrus industry plays a vital part in the agricultural sector, contributing to both local economies and global food supply chains. Citrus is not only delicious and nutritious, but also offers numerous health benefits. Our industry is deeply committed to supporting sustainable and responsible citrus farming practices.

Matthew Mattia, 37
Research Geneticist
USDA-ARS
Fort Pierce, FL



Hometown: Freehold, NJ

Hobbies: Surfing, Fishing, Traveling

Family/Community: Married

Motto in life: Work hard, stay curious, and leave a legacy.

Dr. Mattia is a research manager and citrus geneticist with experience in plant science, breeding, market development and laboratory oversight.

His work in citrus variety evaluation, such as identifying the HLB-tolerant Donaldson tree, has potential for revitalizing early-season orange production in the Florida citrus industry and is now the ninth most propagated scion in the state. He has bridged gaps to solve some of the citrus industry's most difficult issues and has released two new HLB tolerant citrus varieties: US SunGlo and US Brixy.

His leadership in this domain underscores his expertise and vision in addressing critical challenges. His leadership in establishing international breeding programs for various crops demonstrates his vision and capacity to drive innovation on a global scale.

Mattia's career began in agronomy, but a pivot during his master's studies sparked a fascination with the produce industry and its intersection of science, innovation and market demand. He transitioned to fruit crop research at the University of Florida, where he made significant contributions to tomato and citrus breeding.

In 2018, he took a leadership role at TerViva where he developed breeding pipelines and novel product portfolios for tropical crops. In 2020, he joined Agmerica as vice president of global research and market development, where he led international R&D initiatives in organic and regenerative agriculture, developed product lines, and secured

partnerships across the U.S., West Africa and the Caribbean.

He moved to a position with USDA-ARS in 2021, where he currently serves as a citrus research geneticist leading high-impact citrus variety development programs, including collaborations with The Coca-Cola Company. He has managed multimillion-dollar research portfolios, developed citrus varieties, and established public-private partnerships that bridge science and industry to create meaningful agricultural advancements.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began working in the produce industry during my master's degree, shifting from agronomic crops to fruit research. While studying in New Zealand, I became fascinated by the complexity of evaluating and testing new varieties. This interest led me to pursue a path focused on high-value horticultural crops and eventually citrus.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Surround yourself with good people who are willing to support you and help you grow. Listen to the advice of others and consider diverse opinions before drawing conclusions. Most importantly, find a good mentor, someone who challenges you and helps you navigate the complexities of the industry.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The spread and severity of HLB has intensified across Florida, and the industry is facing a low Brix crisis. However, we now have more tools than ever — new technologies, genetic resources and strategic collaborations — to tackle these problems. I'm excited about the next wave of citrus varieties reaching consumers.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Helping farmers by delivering citrus varieties that improve their profitability and success. This includes the release of new varieties that are already transforming groves and have the potential to make a lasting impact throughout the citrus supply chain.

Krystal McCusker, 39
Sales Representative
Oppy
Coquitlam, British Columbia



Hometown: Wilmington, DE

Hobbies: Traveling, Eating, Reading the newest book series, Motorcycle Riding

Family/Community: Married, 2 children

Motto in life: Don't be afraid to make mistakes — that's the best way to learn and grow!

McCusker joined the produce industry in 2006 as an administrative specialist for Dole Fresh Fruit Deciduous, while she was still attending college. Over the course of several years, she worked her way to grower service supervisor, where she was responsible for volume projections, grower accounting, and financial reporting, gaining an understanding of imported produce and the relationships between all networks. During this time, she collaborated with and built strong relationships with Chilean Growers.

In 2019, she moved into sales with Del Monte Fresh Produce NA, continuing with deciduous commodities, where she worked with different markets within the U.S., along with being exposed to the fresh-cut sector of the business. She was responsible for sales, along with customer programs and category management, fresh-cut replenishment and grower reporting.

In December 2021, she moved to Oppy (The Oppenheimer Group) in her current position. She is currently responsible for servicing multiple retail and wholesale accounts with sales revenues over \$29 million among 10-plus categories. She is also a key account manager of one of the top retail accounts. In 2022, she participated as a member of the Eastern Produce Council's Leadership Program.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

To be fair, I never dreamed of working

in the produce industry. I never even thought of how all this produce manages to get on the shelves in the grocery stores. However, I was given an opportunity while still in school and never looked back!

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

No two seasons are the same! Ha, no two days are the same!

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

The diversification of produce. There are so many options that are extremely beneficial for healthy living in a world full of "convenient" fast food options. The right food is better than medicine.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am extremely proud that I worked and paid my way through college. I am the first and only person in my family to attend and graduate with a college degree.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Knowledge! Consumers will walk past the next best item if they are unaware of what it is and the benefits it provides.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Marketing can impact growth tremendously. Understanding the trends and being ahead of the curve can make or break a product.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Social media has a great impact on consumer purchasing. It is impressive, and also a little scary, the impact an influencer has.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

To listen! Listen to those around you, others in the industry. Everyone has a different perspective or way of doing something. You can learn something new every single day. Understand that you will never know it all, continue to ask questions, and that no question is a stupid question.

Hana Mohsin, 33
National Sales Manager
Misionero
Gonzales, CA



Hometown: Salinas, CA

Hobbies: Traveling, Pickleball, Her dogs, Reading

Family/Community: Make-A-Wish volunteer

Motto in life: Better to be red in the face once than to blush a hundred times.

Mohsin is known for being passionate about sustainability and pushing for sustainable practices within her organizations and industry associations. Her roots in the produce industry run deep; she grew up in the Salinas Valley, where the view from her family home was a patchwork of endless produce fields, and spent formative years in her family's strawberry fields in Castroville, CA.

While earning a marketing degree at Fort Lewis College, she interned with Taylor Farms' marketing department, gaining early exposure to brand strategy and consumer engagement in the fresh produce space. After graduating in 2015, she relocated to Columbia, SC, joining Fresh Express/Chiquita as a retail specialist. There, she managed the Charlotte division of Publix stores, building lasting retail relationships across the region and honing skills in account management, in-store merchandising and retail sales execution.

She returned to California in 2017 to join Markon as product coordinator. In 2020, she advanced to senior multi-units associate where she played a key role in annual contract management, multi-unit sales strategy, and sustainability initiatives, co-managing the Markon Sustainability Task Force.

In 2020, she brought her blend of sales, marketing, and sustainability expertise to Misionero as a marketing coordinator, spearheading the Produce and Reduce Zero Waste Initiative before being promoted to national sales

manager, where she oversees key accounts and drives revenue growth. She is a graduate of SEPC Next Generation Leadership Academy and served as a CPMA Sustainability Committee member from 2019 to 2020.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Looking back, I wish I had known that it's OK not to have all the answers at the beginning of your career. Early on, I put a lot of pressure on myself to figure everything out quickly and to always make the right decisions. With experience, I've learned that growth comes from asking questions, seeking guidance, and being open to learning from mistakes.

I also wish I had realized sooner the importance of patience, building a career and developing expertise takes time, and each step along the way is valuable. Today, I appreciate that progress is a journey, and I'm grateful for the lessons learned along the way.

Q: What is the one thing in produce you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about the people. From those working tirelessly in the fields and packing plants to the teams behind the scenes, it's their dedication that makes everything possible.

My favorite part of my job is taking others on field tours — seeing their reactions when they truly understand the effort and care behind every clamshell of strawberries or bag of romaine is incredibly rewarding. Witnessing that moment of realization and appreciation is inspiring and reminds me why I love being part of this industry.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of my proudest accomplishments is relocating to Charlotte, NC, to advance my career. Moving across the country to the East Coast — without knowing anyone — was both a personal and professional leap of faith. This experience pushed me out of my comfort zone and challenged me to adapt, build new relationships, and truly integrate into a new community.

Taking this step not only expanded my professional network within the produce industry, but also enriched my personal life by allowing me to form lasting friendships and connections.

Megan Nash, 40
Vice President Member
Engagement & Business
Development
International Fresh Produce
Association (IFPA)
Washington, D.C.



Hometown: Kennett Square, PA

Hobbies: Running, Reading, Cheering for Philadelphia sports, Enjoying live music

Family/Community: St. Patrick Catholic Church, Eagles Autism Foundation, Breast Cancer Research

Motto in life: Keep growing, stay grounded, and never lose sight of what matters most.

With more than 15 years of experience in the produce and floral industry, Nash's career has been rooted in people.

She began her career in 2008 at Country Fresh Mushroom Co. Inc. In 2013, she joined The PMA Foundation for Industry Talent as a program manager, leading career pathway programs and expanding industry outreach, before advancing to program director.

In 2022, she was promoted to director of education and talent at IFPA, where she led cross-functional teams to deliver programming and elevate the association's position as a thought leader. She also contributed to the organization's strategic planning efforts. Her work has focused on building scalable, high-impact initiatives, including expanding student programs and partnerships, creating a leadership development pathway, and growing the Women's Fresh Perspectives portfolio.

In her current role, she oversees member engagement and business development, continuing to focus on delivering value, driving growth, and helping shape a more connected and future-ready industry.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

Growing up in Kennett Square, PA,

I was surrounded by the mushroom industry, but I never expected to build a career in it. After graduating college, I started in newspaper advertising sales and quickly realized it wasn't the right fit. I leaned into my network, landed at a local mushroom company, and was immediately drawn to the pace, complexity, and, most importantly, the people.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had been more intentional about learning in the moment. Early in your career, it's easy to focus on what's next instead of embracing where you are. Some of the most valuable growth comes from being present, listening, observing, asking questions, and learning from everyone around you. Titles come and go, but how you build your foundation stays with you.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the growth, evolution, and impact of the Women's Fresh Perspectives portfolio. It has evolved to meet the changing needs of the industry, and seeing the impact it has on individuals' careers has been rewarding. I'm equally proud of the people I've worked with and supported along the way. Seeing others grow and succeed is one of the most meaningful parts of leadership.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

It is hard to say growth happens the most in one area. It happens through the connection of all parts of the supply chain. When what's happening in the field aligns with what's happening at retail, in marketing, and with the consumer, that's when you see momentum.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be curious and take advantage of every opportunity to learn! This industry is filled with amazing people who reward curiosity, relationships, and those willing to step into new spaces. Ask questions, build relationships, and don't be afraid to explore different areas.

Katie O'Connor-Zeno, 36
Senior Director of Marketing
Garrett Brands
Chicago, IL



Hometown: Valparaiso, IN
Hobbies: Cooking, Gardening
Family/Community: Married, 2 stepchildren

Motto in life: Build boldly, move with intention, and leave everything better than you found it.

O'Connor-Zeno began her career in the produce industry at Produce Alliance in 2016 as a marketing and design coordinator. Over the next eight-plus years, she advanced into leadership roles as marketing manager and eventually marketing director.

During her tenure, she led initiatives that strengthened the company's digital presence, increased social engagement year-over-year, and elevated brand visibility.

She collaborated closely with growers, distributors, and internal teams to align marketing with business goals, while also developing press releases, educational content, and video storytelling to highlight the value and versatility of fresh produce. In 2025, she became vice president of marketing and product development for Planet Harvest, where she led product development, brand strategy, and cross-functional marketing efforts.

In 2026, she moved to her current position, where she continues to innovate in the food space and contribute to the growth and evolution of the food industry.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I almost went to culinary school right after high school, but quickly realized that cooking was more of a labor of love and personal passion than a professional

path. I spent some time in digital media and radio, but eventually felt the pull to do something with food, funny enough, while I was a vegetarian at the time.

One serendipitous scroll led me to the Produce Alliance website, and the rest is history. Since then, I've fallen head over heels for produce, this industry, and the people who are in it. I live it, breathe it, cook with it, and talk about it constantly (just ask my husband).

What started as a curiosity quickly grew into a full-blown passion, and I've never once looked back. This industry is vibrant, nourishing, and truly feels like home.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The produce industry has evolved in some big and fascinating ways since I first started. Technology has played a major role, everything from traceability and logistics to data-driven forecasting has become more sophisticated, and that's brought a whole new level of efficiency and transparency to how we operate.

Consumer behavior and how they see fresh food has shifted, too. People are more curious and conscious about where their food comes from, how it's grown, and what it means for their health and the planet. That's pushed the industry to be more innovative, more sustainable, and more storytelling-focused, which, as a marketer, I love.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

I believe sustainability is, hands down, one of our greatest challenges and most exciting opportunities. From water scarcity and packaging waste, we're being pushed to rethink how we grow, move, and market produce in smarter, more responsible ways.

The good news is that innovation is on our side, with advancements in regenerative farming, supply chain efficiency, and compostable packaging that are opening doors for real, lasting impact. If we lean into collaboration and stay committed to progress, we have the power to lead the food industry toward a more sustainable future.

Alex Oikawa, 37
Director of Business
Intelligence
Taylor Farms
Salinas, CA



Hometown: Salinas, CA
Hobbies: Golf, Fitness, Coaching son's baseball
Family/Community: Married, 2 children
Motto in life: Learn as much as you can and have fun doing it.

Oikawa began his career in the produce industry at Colorful Harvest while attending college, where he started in an administrative role and quickly took on additional responsibilities. He later transitioned into a sales role, where he expanded business with key customers, including bringing Costco back as an active account prior to graduation.

His time at Colorful Harvest laid the groundwork for a career defined by curiosity, adaptability, and a customer first mindset. In 2014, he joined Robinson Fresh, where he supported and later managed major accounts. He advanced into an account management role, overseeing citrus purchasing on the West Coast and growing a new customer lead into a top 10 account by profitability within his office.

In 2018, he joined Taylor Farms, beginning as a distribution representative and helping launch a new team, while building processes and operational standards. He later moved into sales and account leadership roles, including customer account champion, where he strengthened and grew key customer partnerships.

In 2025, he moved into his current role for the foodservice segment at Taylor Farms.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I kind of fell into produce. In college, I was looking for a part-time job and

ended up getting connected with a small strawberry grower/shipper. I started at the front desk answering phones, mailing invoices, manually sorting, and filing sales orders for accounting. Over time, I kept asking for more responsibilities and grew into roles touching marketing, operations and accounting.

The more I learned about the business and the industry, the more I knew I wanted to build a career in produce. Going into my senior year, I had an opportunity to move into a full-time sales role, something I couldn't pass up. I shifted to night classes to finish college while working full time during the day. I'm forever grateful I was given a chance and supported in my growth while I juggled a new role and school. Those early experiences still shape how I approach my career today.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I've been fortunate to have incredible mentors throughout my produce career, and it's something I value to this day.

One thing I was told early on that has stuck with me forever: no one is a mind reader. Don't expect your peers or superiors to understand how you feel or what your goals are. Be intentional and transparent about what you want to achieve in your career. I appreciate those who have taken the time to mentor me, and it's something I try to pay forward.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

My greatest accomplishment is the range of experiences I've had. I've touched different aspects of the business, like accounting, transportation, operations, and sales, and every role has given me a different perspective on how this industry works.

Time in front of the customer is where I've learned the most, and it's shaped how I think about the business today. I'm proud of the knowledge I've built, and I'm excited to bring those insights to the table.

Right now, I'm involved in several projects aimed at creating significant, scalable efficiencies and driving impactful change within my organization. Likely, the accomplishment I'm most proud of hasn't happened yet.

Ruben Penunuri, 39
Senior Sales Representative
Del Campo Supreme, Inc.
Nogales, AZ



Hometown: Nogales, AZ

Hobbies: Golf, Soccer, Reading, Running

Family/Community: Married, 2 children, Casa Hogar de Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Cristo Rey I.A.P.

Motto in life: I strive to lead by example, demonstrate resilience in every aspect of my work, and remain consistently goal-oriented.

Penunuri brings 15 years of experience in the fresh produce industry, with the past four years spent at Del Campo Supreme.

In his current role, he manages and supports some of the industry's most demanding retail accounts. These programs require precision execution, strategic pricing, and constant coordination between growers, operations and retail partners. He excels in this environment and has become a trusted point of contact for both customers and growers. He is frequently relied upon in high-pressure situations where supply is tight, markets are unpredictable, and customer expectations remain high.

After graduating from the University of Arizona in 2010, he began his career at EuroFresh Farms as a pack house lead, where he managed labor teams and focused on improving pack house efficiency and productivity. In 2012, he transitioned into the quality and compliance department, where he was part of the team responsible for implementing SQF certification.

Following EuroFresh Farms' acquisition by NatureSweet, he remained with the quality team and played a key role in ensuring a smooth operational transition, while implementing NatureSweet's quality standards.

In 2014, he moved into sales, accepting a sales representative role with Farmer's Best International, where he built a strong foundation in customer relationships, account growth, and market development over seven years. In 2021, he was recruited to join Del Campo Supreme as a senior sales representative.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had understood earlier how critical communication and relationships are in this industry. Success isn't just about doing your job well — it's about earning trust, being consistent, and understanding the challenges faced by growers, retailers, and customers alike.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of my sustained performance and recognition as Salesman of the Year for four consecutive years at Del Campo Supreme. This achievement reflects not only sales results, but also consistency, leadership, and the trust built with customers and internal teams over time.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Growth is driven by reliability and execution. Retailers want partners who can consistently deliver quality product, strong service, and solutions — not just competitive pricing.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Consumers are increasingly focused on health, convenience, and transparency. Value-added packaging, consistent quality, and trust in the brand all play a major role in driving repeat purchases.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Learn every side of the business, stay humble, and be willing to work hard. The produce industry rewards those who put the work in, remain resilient, and build relationships based on trust and performance.

Kevin Qu, 36
Import & Export Manager
Fresh Direct Produce Ltd
Vancouver, British Columbia



Hometown: Vancouver, British Columbia

Hobbies: Swimming, Jet-ski, Table tennis, Dessert making.

Family/Community: Married

Motto in life: Where there's a will, there's a way.

Kevin Qu immigrated to Canada from China in 2005 and began his career at Fresh Direct Produce while still in high school. Over the past 18 years, he has advanced through a wide range of roles — from packer and receiver to finance, and ultimately into import operations.

After earning his bachelor's degree in economics, he was appointed import coordinator in 2015, and then promoted to import buyer in 2018. In 2023, he began a role as assistant import manager, and most recently, in January 2026, he was promoted to import and export manager.

One of his significant achievements was transforming the papaya category from a small offering into a key sales driver for the company. This success earned him the 2019 Outstanding Buying and Sales Performance Award, and contributed to Fresh Direct Produce receiving a Best Supplier Award from one of its major customers that same year.

Driven by a deep passion for the produce industry, he has consistently exceeded procurement targets and supported strategic initiatives across the company. He was entrusted with managing high-impact categories and key strategic customer accounts, contributing to FDP's recognition as a Platinum Best Managed Company. In 2021, he was honored to complete the Canadian Produce Marketing Association's Passion for Produce program. He is incredibly proud to have played a role in Fresh Direct Produce's growth from a single location in Vancouver to four operations across Western Canada.

Q: What is the one thing in your business that you are most passionate about?

Canada is a proudly multicultural country, and this diversity is one of its greatest strengths — something I deeply connect with. I take great pride whenever our team successfully brings in products from overseas. It's more than just moving goods; it's about sharing cultures and connecting people through food.

Our company offers Canadians the chance to explore global flavors, while also allowing our diverse communities to reconnect with the familiar tastes of their home countries. That sense of connection is powerful. Seeing the satisfaction on our clients' faces — whether it's joy, nostalgia, or curiosity — fuels my passion.

Q: How has the industry changed during your tenure?

The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, Trump-era tariffs, and the impact of global warming have continually challenged my Import and Export Department, reshaping how and when we source products globally.

Over my 17 years in the industry, I've witnessed significant shifts in consumer behavior. There have been times when shoppers balanced premium quality with deals, followed by periods of strong purchasing power, driving demand for exotic produce.

More recently, inflation and transportation costs have driven produce prices so high that they rival or even surpass the cost of meat. As a result, consumers have become more budget-conscious, carefully selecting which fruits and vegetables to buy. Navigating these changes has strengthened my resilience and strategic thinking in this ever-evolving global trade environment.

Q: What challenges and opportunities do you see for the future of the industry?

Climate change, logistics, and supply chain disruptions, and the continued reliance on physical labor are major challenges for global agriculture.

On the consumer side, inflation and rising living costs are making shoppers more discerning, demanding greater transparency in how produce prices are set. Despite these challenges, technology and automation present significant opportunities for the produce industry.

Matt Quiring, 37
Senior Vice President, Brand,
Product and Marketing
Nature Fresh Farms
Leamington, Ontario



Hometown: Leamington, Ontario
Hobbies: Golfing, Watching sports
Family/Community: Married, 3 children, Executive Sponsor to Nature Fresh Farms Philanthropic Committee
Motto in life: Go big, or go home.

A second generation in produce, Quiring has built his career at Nature Fresh Farms through a progressive, hands-on path that began on the picking line and moved through quality assurance before transitioning into commercial leadership.

After gaining early operational experience, he joined the Nature Fresh Farms Sales team when it was established in 2010. He soon advanced from sales/category manager into retail account leadership. In those roles, he helped build retail accounts from the ground up, developed partnerships with major retailers and customers, and became a key contributor to the company's growing commercial platform.

He was promoted to director of sales in 2020, overseeing the development of retail accounts and helping lead the expanding sales team. He later advanced to senior vice president of sales and marketing, and in 2025, moved into his current role.

Across these roles, he has contributed to the company's growth in sales strategy, category development, product innovation, retail partnerships, and brand-building. His leadership has also supported team accomplishments in packaging and brand innovation, including Nature Fresh Farms earning multiple PAC Global Awards over the past three years, with recognition for initiatives such as Taste Good, Feel Good, Snack Happy, HallowYoom, and Organic Little Obsession Strawberries.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My dad started a business when I was a child. I always watched his hard work ethic and the passion he had for creating excellence, so I always knew I wanted to be part of that.

As soon as I was done with high school, I opted for my advanced education to be on the job — learning, developing, and growing from the strong people we had in our business and were partnered with.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Be more curious. Being curious uncovers things that you never would have thought about as an individual. Gathering other perspectives is so important because everyone has ideas, and without asking the right questions, some of those ideas may go unsaid.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

The people. We have some of the most intense, passionate, and good-willed individuals.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

Given I was the first employee hired at our sales organization, being part of the growth from \$40,000,000 to \$1 billion in revenue is something I couldn't have ever fathomed.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Having curiosity and craving more — whether that be learning, success, relationships or personal development.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

A true, clear, and convicted view on who your target customer is. Get to know them well and focus on the things that drive them to buy more. Then focus on what you can do to help that. Be their choice, every time, and don't get caught up in the noise around you.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Nutritional benefits, taste, and convenience all seem to be things that are rapidly evolving as expectations for shoppers.

Adriane Rippberger, 38
Director of Marketing
Mushroom Council
Lee's Summit, MO



Hometown: Lake Mills, WI
Hobbies: Camping, Hiking, Biking, Reading
Family/Community: Married, 2 daughters, School reading and lunchroom volunteer, Neighborhood community cleanup group
Motto in life: Leave things better than you found them.

Rippberger is a passionate food marketer and strategist dedicated to supporting U.S. agriculture and the growers behind it. Over the course of her career, she has helped lead national marketing campaigns across the produce industry, connecting consumers with fresh foods while supporting demand for American farmers.

Her work has been recognized with multiple industry honors, including awards from the National Agri-Marketing Association and the American Advertising Federation for national consumer marketing campaigns.

Rippberger began her career at Harvest PR, where she discovered the unique world of commodity marketing and quickly developed a passion for the produce industry. She helped lead marketing efforts for organizations, including the National Watermelon Promotion Board and the U.S. Apple Association, and played a key role in securing the Mushroom Council business in 2015.

Following Harvest PR's merger to become Curious Plot, she spent the next seven years helping shape marketing strategy for major commodity boards, including California Avocados, Midwest Dairy and the Mushroom Council. After 13 years in agency leadership, Rippberger joined the Mushroom Council in 2025 as director of marketing and

working from Minneapolis, where she now helps lead national consumer, retail, foodservice, and nutrition programs designed to increase demand for fresh mushrooms across the U.S.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My career in produce started somewhat unexpectedly. Early in my career, I joined Harvest PR. I honestly had no idea this world existed. But the more I learned, the more I realized how unique the industry is.

In marketing, you don't always get the opportunity to promote something that genuinely benefits people. In produce, you do. You're helping connect consumers with real food and supporting the people who produce it. Once you spend time with growers and see the passion behind what they do, it's hard not to feel invested in their success. That combination of purpose and storytelling is what has kept me in this industry.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

You are your own best advocate. Early in your career, it's easy to believe that good work will naturally get noticed. The most successful people learn to speak up, raise their hands for opportunities, and advocate for the impact they want to make.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

Without question — the growers. When you spend time with farmers and hear about the challenges and risks they face, it gives real perspective on the importance of the work we do in marketing. Supporting the people who grow our food is incredibly motivating.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the long-term commitment I've made to the produce industry, and the commodity organizations I've served over the years. For nearly 15 years, I've had the opportunity to work alongside growers, boards and industry partners to build marketing programs that evolve and grow over time. That continuity has allowed me to develop meaningful relationships and a deep understanding of many different commodities.

Fraymil F. Rodriguez, 37
Chief Operating Officer
Exp. Group LLC
North Bergen, NJ



Hometown: Jersey City and Bayonne
Hobbies: Sports, HIIT training, JiuJitsu
Family/Community: Married, 2 sons
Motto in life: Mamba Mentality, Outwork Everyone, Hustle, Grind, Execute.

Rodriguez is a senior executive and growth-focused operator in the food distribution industry, currently serving as chief operating officer of Exp. Group. He began his professional journey in September 2007 after graduating from high school in Santiago, Dominican Republic, entering the industry with a hands-on approach that built a strong foundation in both operations and sales.

By 2011, his performance and leadership earned him a management role, where he quickly distinguished himself through his ability to drive growth, streamline operations, and build high-performing teams. From there, he advanced through executive leadership, serving as vice president and later senior vice president, before being appointed chief operating officer in 2025.

Throughout his career, Rodriguez has been instrumental in scaling Exp. Group into a multi-state operation, expanding its distribution network across New Jersey, New York, and Texas, while strengthening direct sourcing relationships throughout Latin America. He has led key initiatives to enhance operational efficiency across a fleet of over 80 trucks and multiple distribution centers, while also playing a central role in building strategic partnerships and positioning the company for continued expansion.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began my journey in September 2007, right after graduating high school in Santiago, Dominican Republic. My father was in the industry since 1998, and I was drawn to it after high school.

Like many in our industry, I started from the ground up, learning every aspect of business hands-on.

What drew me in and ultimately kept me here was the pace, the people, and the global nature of produce. It's an industry where effort translates directly into results, and where relationships and trust truly matter. That combination made it more than just a job; it became a long-term career.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I'm most proud of the journey itself, growing from an entry-level role in 2007 to chief operating officer. That progression represents years of discipline, resilience, and continuous learning.

Beyond titles, I take the most pride in helping scale Exp into a multi-state operation and building teams that continue to grow and succeed together. Seeing others develop and win within the organization is just as meaningful as any personal achievement.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Growth in this industry is driven by a combination of reliability, relationships and execution. Customers need consistency in supply, quality and service. Companies that can build strong partnerships, both on the sourcing side and with customers, while executing at a high level operationally, are the ones that grow the fastest.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

All areas matter, but operations are the foundation. Without strong operational execution, growth in sales or marketing isn't sustainable. Once that foundation is solid, sales and strategic partnerships accelerate growth significantly.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Start by learning the business from the ground up, and don't rush the process. This is an industry where experience matters, and every role teaches you something valuable. Focus on building relationships, being reliable, and staying consistent in your work. If you combine that with a strong work ethic and a willingness to learn, there is a lot of opportunity to grow and succeed.

Kiah Ruvalcaba, 37
Vice President, Marketing & Business Development
Fowler Packing Company
Fresno, CA



Hometown: Clovis, CA
Hobbies: Travel, Pilates, Non-fiction books, Podcasts
Family/Community: Married, 2 children
Motto in life: What you aren't changing, you're accepting.

As vice president of marketing and business development at Fowler Packing Company, Ruvalcaba has been instrumental in scaling the Peelz and Samsons brands into nationally recognized, retail-driven success.

She began her career in agriculture in 2015 as an account manager at Meras Engineering, working directly with growers on precision irrigation and ag chemical solutions. In 2016, she moved to a marketing position at JP Marketing, where she led the agency's Farm to Shelf initiative and developed brand and go-to-market strategies for produce companies across California's Central Valley. In 2018, she was recruited as a marketing manager by Family Tree Farms.

She joined Fowler Packing Company in 2019 as director of marketing, where she led the development and launch of the Peelz citrus brand. Since its introduction, Peelz has grown from concept to become the fastest-growing citrus brand and the second largest in the category. In 2025, she was promoted to her current position where she leads brand strategy, market expansion, and growth initiatives, and serves as the company's only female executive.

She served as secretary for Central California's Women for Agriculture from 2015 to 2017, supporting industry advocacy and leadership initiatives. She participated in Leadership Fresno's Class 34 in 2018, and completed the Execu-

tive Leadership Development Program at Cornell University in 2024.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry?

My path into the produce industry started unexpectedly when a peer recruited me into a sales role. That early exposure gave me a deep appreciation for the agricultural supply chain and later positioned me to lead the Farm to Shelf initiative at the marketing agency where I worked. Living in California's Central Valley, I quickly recognized that some of the most dynamic and creative opportunities were rooted in the produce industry.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Early in my career, I wish I had understood that action absorbs anxiety. It's easy to overthink decisions, wait for perfect clarity, or feel intimidated by new challenges. What I've learned is that progress comes from taking thoughtful action, even when you don't have every answer. Momentum builds confidence, and many of the opportunities that shaped my career came from stepping forward before I felt completely ready.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about redefining how produce is marketed, moving beyond price and into brand, experience, and the emotional connection.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of becoming the first female vice president and executive in the company's history. This represents not only a personal milestone in my career growth, but also a meaningful step forward in paving the way for future female leaders within the organization.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

As a marketer, I live, breathe and study these trends. Consumers today are increasingly driven by health and wellness, convenience, quality and value.

They're also looking for products that feel niche, whether through unique varieties, strong branding or a compelling story.

Edin Saric, 40
President and CEO
Midwest Best Produce
St Louis, MO



Hometown: Saint Louis, MO

Hobbies: Sports, Cars, Traveling

Motto in life: Always strive to be your best in everything that you do.

Saric grew a company from a small local distributor into a nationwide grower and shipper. What began as a hands-on operation serving nearby farms and retailers evolved through his persistence, long hours, and deep industry knowledge. Midwest Best Produce has now expanded into a major supply partner for large-scale retail and foodservice customers across the country.

Saric began his career in 2002 as a bagger/produce associate at Sappington Farmers Market, where he unloaded daily produce delivery trucks and stocked produce coolers, took daily inventories, and helped place product orders.

In 2005, he became assistant warehouse manager at Midwest Best Produce, where his duties included overseeing a repacking crew, receiving/shipping inbound and outbound trucks, and inventory and product quality control. In 2008, he moved to operations manager, directing day-to-day operations for warehouse and office facilities, coordinating farm operations, and supervising sales and transportation.

He was promoted to vice president in 2021, where he provided executive leadership across multiple departments, strategic planning, operational efficiency, and revenue growth.

In 2024, he became president and chief executive. In his current position, he collaborates with growers to expand acreage, plan for upcoming seasons, and invests time and resources into strengthening both farming and import operations while also driving sales growth

and building strong relationships with trading partners.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

At 16, I began working as a bagger and produce associate at a local farmers market grocery store, where I developed a strong interest in the produce industry. That interest quickly led me to take on a role in the produce department. As I became more engaged in all aspects of the business, I was inspired to pursue further opportunities and eventually applied to Midwest Best Produce.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

I am most passionate about the relationships I've built over the years with colleagues, customers, growers and suppliers.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of my proudest accomplishments is becoming the first Bosnian-American business owner in the industry.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Growth wouldn't be possible without the dedication of everyone involved in daily operations, from the team picking the produce to those loading the trucks, and everyone in between, ensuring that the product makes it from the field to the consumers' table.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

A growing focus on health and wellness, demand for locally sourced produce, and awareness of sustainability and environmentally friendly farming practices.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Take the time to learn every aspect of the business, from the fields to the customers. Build strong relationships and stay curious about each part of the process that impacts the final product. Every day is a new lesson. Hard work and patience are key and will be very rewarding in the end.

Kenneth Simas, 39
Director of Produce
Procurement, East Coast
Chef's Warehouse
Ridgefield, CT



Hometown: Providence, RI

Hobbies: Coaching flag football

Family/Community: Married, 2 children

Motto in life: Do Not Be the Reason.

Simas is known as a wealth of knowledge who goes above and beyond to keep customers and coworkers aware of changes in quality or selection. Throughout his tenure, he has demonstrated excellence in procurement, resulting in great selection and pricing for his company.

He started in the business 22 years ago at 16, working at Stop & Shop as a "cart coraller." Within six months, he moved to cashier, and then into the produce department. He spent two years working in produce and finishing high school before he was promoted to full-time produce clerk. Soon after that promotion, he became assistant produce manager. He was then promoted to produce manager and held that position for about two years.

In 2013, he was recruited by Sid Wainer and Son to work as a produce buyer. Over the last 10 years at Sid Wainer/Chef's Warehouse, he has been promoted three times in 2017, in 2019, and again in 2025.

In 2025, he moved into his current position, where he is responsible for all day-to-day produce purchasing activities on the East Coast, vendor partnerships, and overall profitability in the category. Additionally, seven buyers report to him. He currently helps support the sales team at Chef's Warehouse, helping to expand the company's produce across five warehouses in the East.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I knew all the produce lingo. We use such interesting terms in this

business: spuds, pots, TOV, grass. It has been fun learning it all.

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

Relationships and treating people like people. This is a relationship business, and we have come a long way as an industry and as buyers in not yelling and berating one another on the phone for OOS or late trucks. Lots of work still to do, but we are getting there.

Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of in your career?

My team. I am very proud of my team and the development and accomplishments we have been through over the years. Being able to have the longevity that we have had together has been awesome.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Curiosity and healthy eating.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

At all levels. I know it sounds cliché, but in this business, we all have to be in sync, or it just does not work. OPS needs to make sure we deliver on time with a great product, procurement needs to make sure we purchase it correctly and turn it in a timely fashion, sales needs to have the customer base to move the product and keep customers happy and coming back, and marketing needs to put the icing on the cake and make it all come together.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Social media trends have been a huge piece of being able to capture different generations for buying produce. All the different videos about the industry keep things interesting. Also, produce is a relationship business, and the longer these produce companies are around and continue to provide a great service, the customer base will follow that reputation and service.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Keep learning and never think you know it all. This business continues to surprise me every day and is never boring.

Renata Vargas Alvarez, 34
Produce Director
Walmart México
Mexico City, Mexico



Hometown: Mexico City
Hobbies: Indoor cycling/barre, Movies and TV series, Food, Travel
Family/Community: Married
Motto in life: Live with purpose, stay present, and truly enjoy the life you are building.

Vargas began her career in 2015 as an intern at Walmart de México y Centroamérica. What started as a temporary role quickly became a long-term path in the produce industry.

Within a few months, she earned a place on the merchandising team, setting the foundation for a career defined by growth, impact, and ownership. She advanced through roles, including merchandising assistant, buying assistant, and buyer, where she led high-volume categories end-to-end, owning sales, margin, shrink, and supply chain execution. During this time, she delivered strong commercial results, scaling programs from five to over 30 trucks, and was recognized as best category buyer.

She was later promoted to senior buyer, leading some of the top-performing categories in the business, including apples, grapes and pears. Today, she serves as director of fruit and imports, leading one of the most critical fresh categories and working with global partners to deliver high-quality products to millions of families every day.

In 2025, her team was recognized as Perishables Squad of the Year at Walmart, reflecting their ability to deliver results through collaboration and execution. She is a member of the Women's Fresh Perspectives Committee and has represented the industry on international stages, including the New York Produce Show and Conference, as well as at a conference with Aneberries in Guadalajara.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I didn't start with a dream of working in produce — I started with curiosity and ambition. I joined Walmart as an intern while I was still in school and, instead of waiting for opportunities, I went after them. I asked to be part of the buying team, and within two months, I earned that opportunity. Even though I didn't choose produce at the beginning, the moment I stepped into it, I didn't want to leave.

What made me stay was the impact. Visiting the fields and understanding the people behind every product made me realize that what we do is not just about selling — it's about feeding millions of families and connecting an entire value chain. Produce is not just a category, it's purpose; and that's what has driven my career ever since.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That growth comes from being bold, not from being perfect. Early in my career, I focused on proving myself. Over time, I learned that real impact comes from taking ownership, making decisions, and learning fast. If I could go back, I would tell myself: raise your hand more, trust your instincts, and don't wait to feel ready because you never fully are.

Q: What trends do you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Consumers are driven by convenience and trust. They want products that are easy to consume, but they also expect consistency in freshness and quality. That expectation is built through execution. Trust is not created at the shelf, it is built throughout the entire supply chain. The ability to protect the product from harvest to store is what ultimately drives repeat purchase. When we deliver both convenience and consistent quality, we create sustainable growth.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Be curious, take ownership, and stay close to the product. This is a highly dynamic and people-driven industry, where understanding the field and building strong relationships makes a difference. But most importantly, focus on execution.

John Venables, 37
Vice President, Finance & Administration
Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc.
Secaucus, NJ



Hometown: Chicago, IL
Hobbies: Cooking, Collecting and listening to records, Exploring bourbon and rye, Chicago Cubs and Bears
Family/Community: Married, 2 children.

Motto in life: Do Simple Better. (Keeps the phrase on a signed baseball from Joe Maddon on his desk as a daily reminder.)

Venables has been with Maurice A. Auerbach since late 2020, jump-starting his produce career in the middle of a very challenging time. He brings a unique perspective, having worked in both the for-profit and nonprofit (university) sectors, for large companies and small.

Since joining the company, he has led initiatives focused on improving operational workflows, strengthening financial processes, and implementing more effective reporting and technology systems across the organization.

Prior to joining Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc., Venables built a diverse professional background spanning operations, finance, technology, marketing and retail leadership. While working full-time, Venables earned his bachelor's degree in communication studies from Northwestern University and later received his MBA from DePaul University.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

My family relocated from Chicago to New Jersey during COVID, while my wife Amanda was pregnant with our son, and at the same time her family's produce business was looking for additional leadership support. I came into the industry with a background in operations, finance, and process improvement, but very little direct produce experience.

What initially began as an opportunity to help the family business, quickly turned into a genuine appreciation for the pace, complexity, and people within the produce industry.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

That the qualities that make people successful in one industry are usually the same qualities that lead to success in any industry. Work ethic, communication, problem solving and adaptability matter far more over the long term than being an expert in any one specific area.

Technical knowledge can always be learned, but the ability to work well with people, stay resilient, and continue adapting to new challenges is what truly drives growth.

Q: Where do you think growth happens the most?

Operations are the backbone of sustainable growth in the produce industry. Sales and marketing efforts can create opportunities, but long-term growth is only possible if it is fully supported operationally.

At the end of the day, the industry depends on the people who are receiving product, moving boxes, managing logistics, maintaining quality, and making sure customers consistently receive what they expect. Strong operations are what allow companies to grow consistently over time.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

Go easy on yourself when you first enter the produce industry. It is unlike anything else I've experienced professionally.

Produce is highly dynamic, and while people try to model and predict everything, there are limits to how much can truly be controlled. My advice would be to spend time learning from and respecting the warehouse, transportation, and operations teams.

Those employees are the backbone of the industry and understanding how product moves through the supply chain is invaluable.

Don't come in assuming you already know a better way to do things. In produce, if something is being done differently or unconventionally, there is usually a good reason behind it.

Ross Williams, 35
President
Titan Farms
Ridge Spring, SC



Hometown: Edgefield, SC

Hobbies: Hunting, Outdoor activities, Ongoing education opportunities

Family/Community: Married, 1 daughter, Harmony Methodist Church, Ridge Agricultural Club Member, South Carolina Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers — Saluda County

Motto in life: Do the common things uncommonly well.

Williams is president of Titan Farms, the largest peach grower on the East Coast. Since joining the company in 2014, he has distinguished himself by advancing through nearly every aspect of the operation, beginning as receiving supervisor and subsequently excelling as packhouse manager, director of packing operations, vice president of fresh packing and business development, chief operating officer, and ultimately president.

He brings strong experience in post-harvest operations, food safety, packing, and supply chain management.

He spearheaded the adoption of post-harvest technology, enhancing fruit quality, extending shelf life, and improving the consumer experience at scale. He played a leadership role in a strategic partnership to launch certified organic peaches, expanding Titan Farms' portfolio and aligning with evolving consumer demand.

Outside of Titan Farms, he is active in the broader produce industry. He serves on the Southeast Produce Council Board of Directors as chairman of the Grower/Shipper Advisory and is also involved with the International Fresh Produce U.S. Policy Council and several other influential agricultural advisory groups. His industry engagement and leadership

have earned him recognition through several leadership programs, including selection as a Southeast Produce Council Next Generation Award recipient. He holds a B.S. from Clemson University and has completed executive training at Cornell University and North Carolina State University.

Q: How did you begin working in the produce industry and why?

I began my career in produce at Titan Farms as a summer forklift driver throughout high school and college. What started as a summer job, quickly became something much more meaningful. I was drawn in by the people, culture, and sense of family that define Titan Farms and the produce industry. Over time, that connection grew into a deeper passion for the industry. The people in the produce industry are special and inspire greater dedication to the industry.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

Early in my career, I depended on my own expertise and sheer will. While those qualities are important, I have learned that growing a business is ultimately about the people, the team aspect.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

It is difficult for me to point to one single accomplishment as my proudest moment. The moments that stand out most are the times when our team has achieved something meaningful together. Every time our team reaches a goal, solves a difficult problem, improves a process, or delivers for our customers and growers, I feel an incredible sense of pride. Those collective wins are what matter most to me. I am proud of what we have accomplished, but I also believe our greatest accomplishments are still ahead of us.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

True collaboration across every sector of the produce industry is what drives the most growth. When growers, shippers, distributors, retailers, and service providers work together toward shared goals, the entire industry becomes stronger.

Meyree Xayavong-Escobar, 39
Account Manager Supervisor
PRO*ACT, LLC
Monterey, CA



Hometown: Merced, CA

Hobbies: Hiking, Being outdoors, Volunteering, Traveling

Family/Community: Married, 2 children, US Committee, Salvation Army

Motto in life: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Matthew 6:33.

With more than 13 years of experience in retail and customer service, Escobar has built a career centered on service excellence and cultivating strong, lasting relationships. Since joining PRO*ACT in 2017, she has progressed from account assistant to account manager supervisor, consistently demonstrating growth, initiative, and leadership. In recent years, she has played a pivotal role in transforming PRO*ACT's account management team, overseeing operations that support more than 150 distributors nationwide. Under her leadership, distributors have reported high levels of satisfaction in vendor relationships, contract management, and day-to-day support.

Escobar has further strengthened her leadership capabilities through several professional development programs, including PRO*ACT's Emerging Leaders Program and the IFPA Emerging Leaders Program at the University of Arizona. She is also currently participating in SEPC's Next Generation Leadership Academy (Class 4), continuing her commitment to growth and industry leadership.

Q: What do you wish you knew when you first started your career?

I wish I had known early on the

importance of truly understanding the business and being proactive. It's not just about completing daily tasks, it's about knowing your customers, understanding your suppliers, and seeing the bigger picture. That's what allows you to lead effectively, build strong relationships, and create long-term success

Q: What is the one thing in produce that you are most passionate about?

What I'm most passionate about is the relationships. The produce industry is built on trust and connection, and having the opportunity to build meaningful partnerships with both customers and suppliers is what drives me every day.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

One of the accomplishments I'm most proud of is leading a team and helping develop them into high-performing account managers. Seeing their growth, confidence, and success is incredibly rewarding.

Q: What do you think drives growth the most in the industry?

Growth is driven most by relationships and adaptability. When you truly understand your customers and build strong partnerships with your suppliers, you create a foundation for success. From there, staying aligned with consumer trends like health, convenience, and sustainability allows you to continue growing and evolving with the industry.

Q: What are some trends you think fuel consumers to purchase more produce?

Health is the biggest driver; people want to eat better and see produce as part of that. But convenience is huge too. If it's easy and ready to use, people are more likely to buy it. On top of that, trends, like local sourcing, sustainability, and even social media recipes, are really influencing what ends up in their carts.

Q: What advice would you give someone new to the produce industry?

My advice would be to stay curious and committed to learning. Be a sponge, take in as much knowledge as possible, ask questions, and continuously look for ways to grow.

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Eye-catching grape displays that showcase a mix of colors, premium varieties and branded offerings can drive impulse purchases and encourage repeat sales. PHOTO COURTESY MOLLY POP

Four Ways to Score California Grape Sales

Retailers can boost sales by focusing on flavor and variety.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

The old saying, “they buy with their eyes, but repeat on the way it eats” certainly rings true for fresh grapes. Flavor, crunch, size, and quality are key consumer drivers, according to Mitch Wetzel, vice president of sales at Sunview Marketing International, in Delano, CA. “Retailers are increasingly focused on fruit that creates repeat purchases as the industry shifts away from simply supplying grapes 365 days a year. It’s got to taste good. It’s got to bring that person back.”

Fresh grapes accounted for 5.3% of total produce dollar sales during the 52 weeks ending March 28, 2026, generating \$5.1 billion in dollars out of \$96.8 billion in total produce sales, according to NielsenIQ Retail Measurement data from NielsenIQ.

“Grapes are a major driver of produce sales for us, typically representing 6% to 8% of total department sales depending on the time of year and availability,” says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations for Harps Food Stores, a 178-store chain headquartered in Springdale, AR. “It’s a staple item that’s consistently on the customer’s shopping list, and it commands a significant amount of space in our department — both in our fruit sets and as a feature display. It’s one of those core categories that you can always count on to generate volume.”

As the California grape season kicks off, it’s a great time to look at how availability, both volume and varieties, is shaping up and the best ways to sell more of this sweet, crunchy fruit at retail.

1. CAPITALIZE ON AN EARLY START

California’s Coachella Valley table grape harvest began in late April 2026, about 20 days ahead of its traditional May start. “California saw the earliest table grape bloom on record in 2026,” says James Benson, vice president of sales and marketing for Bari Produce, in Fresno, CA. “We should see grapes harvesting in the Central Valley

by mid- to late-June. Even if cooler weather slows us down a bit, we will still be well ahead of normal.”

This early forecast means that retailers can bring California grapes in earlier, for early summer, and include them in July 4 promotions, according to Ian LeMay, president of the California Table Grape Commission, in Fresno, CA. LeMay also cited a *U.S. Attitude & Usage Study* conducted in December 2025, that found 79% of primary shoppers bought grapes in the past three months. “Most grape purchasers buy a few times per month (37%) or weekly (27%), so retailers should build a consistent weekly California grape rhythm for more repeat purchases.”

Retailers have the biggest opportunity from late July through October. That’s when supply is more consistent, quality is at its peak, and the full range of offerings is available, says Elena Hernandez, director of global marketing insights for Sun World International, in Bakersfield, CA. “From a strategy standpoint, this is also when retailers can move beyond transactional promotions and lean into building repeat. When the product is performing at its best, it’s the ideal time to reinforce the experience and give shoppers a reason to come back, not just trade in.”

2. COLOR SELLS & SO DO VARIETAL NAMES AND BRANDS

“Color is still the primary way most customers shop the category — green, red or black,” says Harps Food Stores’ Roberts.

Green/white grapes account for 55.5% of total grape dollar sales and are also the strongest growing segment at +5.8% year over year (YoY), according to NielsenIQ Retail Measurement data. Red grapes represent 35% of grape sales, but are declining -6.6% YoY. Black/blue grapes contribute 4.1% (-0.8-point share) of total grape dollars and are the weakest performing major type, with sales down -16.7% YoY. Remaining grapes account for 3% of grape sales, with relatively flat performance.

“It used to be Thompsons until Thanksgiving, then Autumn King. Now, for green grapes, Autumn Crisp has started to replace the Thompsons,” says Nick Dulcich, co-owner and president of Pretty Lady Vineyards, in Delano, CA. “There are some good red varieties like Ruby Rush in the early season and Scarlotta in the late season. Many stores

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are dropping black grapes. Adora is difficult to grow and color, and has a lower demand. Autumn Royal is still around, but dwindling.”

However, Adora black grapes have performed well in the Pacific Northwest, according to Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist at Charlie’s Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies independent retailers and larger chains.

“The large Adora grapes generated strong excitement once shoppers saw them. We went from having a couple of hundred cases on hand to nothing the next day. I think it’s all about visual merchandising and the impact of oversized fruit. The same is true of jumbo green grapes.”

There’s a growing shopper awareness around specialty varieties and branded grapes, says Roberts. “Varieties like Cotton Candy continue to grow in popularity, and newer items like Moon Drops and Candy Hearts are gaining traction, as well. As customers try these products, they tend to come back looking for them again.”

Varieties like Autumncrisp, Sweet Globe, Sweet Celebration, Candy Snaps, Candy Hearts, and Cotton Candy continue to drive excitement thanks to their flavor, crunch, and consistency, says John Cymbal, co-founder and chief marketing officer of Molly’s Grape & Citrus Company, headquartered in Midland, MI, with operations in Bakersfield, CA, which sells under the Molly Pop brand.

“In the San Joaquin Valley, we are introducing Bebop red seedless grapes, a vibrant midseason variety featuring large berries, lively fruit flavor, and outstanding crispness.”

Branding is taking on a larger role in the grape category.

“A brand, when a consistent eating experience backs it, gives retailers a way to promote with more confidence. It shifts the message from ‘grapes are on sale’ to ‘this is what you can expect,’” says Sun World’s Hernandez. “We’ve seen this play out in retail environments. In one recent example, a premium branded grape program drove a 90% increase in sales and lifted the total grape category by 25% during the launch window.”

Branding will continue to grow in the grape category, says Sarah Deaton, director of marketing for Sun Pacific, in Pasadena, CA. “Grapes are evolving from a commodity into a branded, experience-driven category, and that is why we are launching our own brand — Famous Vineyards.”

Private-label grapes are a trend that’s been rolling for a while.

“Both store brands, like Albertson’s, use Signature label, or private brand owners like the Welch’s program, which has been around for about 30 years, are used,” says John Pandol, director of special projects for Pandol Bros Inc., in Delano, CA, which is one of the country’s top 10 grape producers. “Some use a private label with a regular spec, some as a premium offer, some as a value offer. Sometimes the brand is no brand at all, with a clear bag showcasing the beauty of the natural grapes instead of some graphic design.”

What’s notable, Hernandez adds, “is that demand for higher-quality, more differentiated grapes is growing across all regions, not just traditionally premium markets. That tells us this isn’t a niche shift. It’s a broader reset in how shoppers think about the category.”

3. GROW SALES WITH ORGANIC

Over the past five years, organic grape volume has grown by 18%, easily outpacing its conventional counterpart, says Piers Hanbury, executive director of category development for Oppy in Coquitlam, British Columbia. “Notably, while over the past two years organic grapes enjoyed a 21% surge, year-over-year organics are down 2.3%



Retailers who highlight flavor, crunch, and unique varieties help transform grapes from a commodity item into a destination category. PHOTO COURTESY FRESH FARMS

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Grapes are a major driver of produce sales for us, typically representing 6% to 8% of total department sales depending on the time of year and availability.”**

Mike Roberts, Harps Food Stores, Springdale, AR

in volume, highlighting a potential ceiling for this category. This downward trend over the past 12 months is regionally diverse, with New England declining more than other regions.”

From a seasonal standpoint, organic grape availability is strongest during the California season, summer through fall, with peak promotable volumes typically landing in late summer, says Deaton.

4. SELL MORE

“Grapes are a high-impact category from a merchandising standpoint. They take up a large section in our set, and we also feature them as a primary display item throughout the department,” says Harps Food Stores’ Roberts.

There’s no one-size-fits-all in assortment. “Assortment is all over the board, with programs based on 3 to 5 SKUs and others with 10 to 20 SKUs,” says Roberts. “For example, some retailers have 3 colors of a premium grape, 3 of a value grape, 3 colors of an organic, 3 colors of a 2 or 3 pound clamshell, and between 0 and 6 specialty grape offerings at different times.”

Pandol adds, “Consider the 52-week order guide versus the LTO approach. No law says a store can’t have 2 SKUs in May, 8 in July, and 14 in September. And, never merchandise a bigger set than the stores can merchandise. That is setting your stores up for failure. Incremental grape sales are highly impulse-driven. Do not ‘set it and forget it.’”

Point-of-sale marketing can be effective at drawing consumer attention to specific varieties, flavor profiles, and recipes, says Megan Gorgisheli, vice president, marketing administration and brand for The Giumarra Companies, Los Angeles, CA. “Where appropriate, sampling is a great way to introduce shoppers to new varieties.”

Elevate grapes as a snack solution by creating visually engaging “snack pairing” destinations that combine grapes with cheese, nuts and deli items, according to David Watson, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms, in Rio Rico, AZ. “This way, retailers can drive incremental sales and increase basket size.” **PB**



New Jersey's strong local agriculture identity, diverse growing regions and proximity to major East Coast markets continue to drive demand for Jersey-grown produce at both retail and wholesale levels.

PHOTO COURTESY MCCAFFREY'S MARKETS

New Jersey Produce Thrives on Diversity and Location

With several microclimates, the Garden State's produce industry is extensive.

BY LISA WHITE

Known as the Garden State, New Jersey has built one of the nation's most diverse produce industries. The state grows more than 100 varieties of fruits and vegetables and supplies fresh produce to markets across the East Coast and beyond.

As of 2022 statistics reports, New Jersey ranks eighth nationally in blueberry production, 13th in sweet corn production, and seventh in tomato production, according to Joe Atchison, assistant secretary of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), Trenton, NJ. "However, the Garden State also ranks in the top 10 in production of squashes, eggplants, peppers, cranberries, peaches and more."

Growers ship throughout the East Coast, into Eastern Canada and west to the Mississippi River and beyond, he adds.

"Because of New Jersey's location within hours of nearly 50 million people, it was bound to become an integral part of the distribution of goods," says Atchison. "We have shipping ports in the northeast and southwest parts of the state, some of the busiest highways in the country, as well as rail lines and warehouses — re-frigerated, frozen and standard — throughout the state."

CONSUMERS CONNECT TO LOCAL

At Murphy's Fresh Markets, which has locations in Medford, Tabernacle and Beach Haven, NJ, consistent volume leaders are bananas, strawberries, apples, tomatoes and bagged salads.

"Those have held the top spots for years, and I don't expect that

to change," says Ronald Murphy, owner. "What has shifted is the growth we've seen in the organic set. Organic baby spinach, organic apples and organic grape tomatoes, in particular, have all moved up in the rankings meaningfully over the past two or three years."

He adds that Murphy's stores have adjusted floor space and ordering accordingly.

Murphy emphasizes local and Jersey-grown is a real differentiator for the store. "Customers here have a genuine connection to supporting local business and agriculture, and we lean into that hard during the summer season," he says.

As a link between growers and markets, FarmLind Produce, River Vale, NJ, works with 75 farms, with three growers for every commodity, running a total of 30 trucks to its customers. Its primary products are tomatoes, sweet corn, blueberries, squash and eggplant.

"Blueberries and tomatoes are our biggest movers, along with fall squash, and Jersey peaches are huge," says owner Matthew Lind. "We work with 250 different produce items."

Three years ago, FarmLind entered the foodservice arena and now services 150 restaurants.

"The difference between us and another wholesaler is we're a middleman, but we don't hold any inventory," Lind explains. "We're selling to stores before we buy it, so we're picking up corn at 5 a.m. on Monday, and less than 24 hours later, it's in the store. Our specialty is logistics and connecting growers with retailers."

Paterson, NJ-based Brothers Produce Inc. imports product from

around the world, as well as from U.S. growers. Dates is one of its largest commodities, says Mustafa “Steve” Gaber, president.

“Watermelon also is a monster item, along with eggplant, peppers and corn.”

Founded in 1931 and operated by New Jersey growers, The Vineland Cooperative Produce Auction Association Inc., Vineland, NJ, is open to all New Jersey farmers. Through this organization, the farmers can sell through the daily auction or via direct sales. Growers pick and pack the produce the same day as the auction to ensure freshness.

“We offer our growers and buyers support services such as ice, cooling and packaging supplies,” says Carol DeFoor, manager. “You can purchase via the auction, either on-site or using our remote auction application. We have buyers from various areas in New Jersey, as well as a few from out of the state.”

Auctions are Monday through Saturday and begin at 10:45 a.m. Since it deals with New Jersey produce, the auction starts in late April to the beginning of May, depending on whether conditions are favorable to crop growth.

“The growers have diversified their production to meet the demands of the market, as the markets have changed,” says DeFoor. “At one time, eggplant was one of the largest sellers; now some of the growers have diversified their crops to include napa, bok choy, methi, poblanos, etc. to meet the changing market needs.”

KEY LOCATION AND LOGISTICS

New Jersey’s location is unique, as it is within three hours of major markets, including New York, Philadelphia and the Maryland/D.C. area. However, this doesn’t make the state immune to economic challenges.

“Our customers are navigating elevated grocery bills across the whole store, and produce is no exception, especially on items where supply is limited because of poor spring growing conditions,” says Murphy. “From the retail perspective, between supply chain volatility, fuel and freight cost increases, and weather-related crop impacts, our cost of goods in the produce department has been unpredictable.”

As a result, Murphy’s Markets has tried to be strategic about pricing and passing on costs to customers.

“We’ve also gotten more disciplined about ordering and shrink management, so we’re not eating margin losses on the back end,” he notes.

Regarding the logistics of shipping crops, NJDA’s Atchison says many larger farms have their own trucking fleets to deliver products to wholesalers and retailers throughout the market region.

“Others belong to cooperatives who serve as one-stop shops for retailers, restaurants and foodservice professionals,” he says. “Some sell to brokers and wholesalers who arrange shipping, while others sell directly to consumers at one of the state’s 140 community farmers markets or on their own farm market or farm stand.”

Bruce Klein, director of marketing at Maurice Auerbach Inc., Secaucus, NJ, a supplier/packer of garlic and specialty produce, says logistics are challenging.

“Ships coming in and getting product off the pier in a timely manner is the toughest thing we’re challenged with,” he says. “Also, trucking has become harder, and gas prices are a part of it, along with fewer workers at the port.”

New Jersey has several microclimates, which allow growers to

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“When we can merchandise product with a Jersey origin, it sells faster and at a better margin.”**

Ronald Murphy, Murphy’s Fresh Markets, Medford, NJ

- **“The black dirt region is mineral-rich, with dried-up lakes great for growing greens, like lettuce and onions. We can grow everything in any region in Jersey, but some areas are preferable for certain items.”**

Matthew Lind, FarmLind Produce, River Vale, NJ

produce a variety of fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products.

“For example, our sandy, acidic soil provides excellent drainage for tomatoes, resulting in richer flavor and fruit that isn’t water-logged,” notes Atchison.

MARKETING & PROMOTIONS

In 1984, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture established the Jersey Fresh marketing and quality grading program. This pairs marketing with defined quality standards.

“Over the years, the department’s Division of Marketing and Development has promoted the brand and agricultural products from New Jersey each growing and harvesting season,” Atchison explains. “Tactics have been reviewed each year and modified as needed for the following season.”

Currently, the department runs a digital billboard campaign that rotates products weekly to highlight what’s in season. It also sponsors traffic and weather updates on Jersey Shore radio stations throughout summer weekends.

“Additionally, we have an active social media team, and we host giveaway days featuring blueberries, tomatoes and peaches, as well as Jersey Fresh prizes,” says Atchison. “On the B2B side, we attend regional, national and international trade shows throughout the year, promoting Jersey Fresh produce to retail and wholesale buyers.”

Murphy’s Markets’ “Jersey Fresh” summer produce program has been one of its strongest recurring promotions.

“We partner with local farms and run features on Jersey corn, tomatoes, peaches and blueberries with strong in-store signage and social media support,” says Murphy. “We’re continuing to invest in how we tell the produce story in-store — better merchandising, cleaner signage and more education around what’s in season and why it matters.”

Looking ahead, Lind at FarmLind Produce predicts there will be fewer farms and more large growers. “Farmers can make more money developing their property than growing on it.

“But the closer you are to the farmer and understanding growing practices, the better.”

Labor and input cost increases and climate impacts will continue to put pressure on growers, says Atchison. “But New Jersey’s farmers have always been innovators, and we expect them to continue to adapt and succeed to meet consumer needs while balancing the business end of their operations.”



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Ohio Provides Local, Fresh and Value-Added Produce

Retailers, growers and wholesalers are navigating labor shortages, rising costs and changing demand.

BY MIKE DUFF

The Ohio produce sector is adapting to meet the demands of today's market and the desire in the Buckeye State for local fruits and vegetables.

Local is important to Ohio consumers, says Jeff Tomassetti, produce/floral director at Buehler's Fresh Foods, Wooster, OH, which operates stores in northeast Ohio. "Ohioans love our Buckeye State, and we love supporting our local farmers. We see many new products being produced or grown in Ohio each year."

"We are very lucky here in Ohio to have so many amazing, locally grown products, and we partner with some of the best growers and have been partners with many for over 50 years now," he says. "We also support a local Amish produce auction, which we attend two days per week from June through October, sometimes filling a full semi twice per week."

In addition to the Amish auction, Buehler's sources local fruits and vegetables whenever possible, says Tomassetti. "We believe that local is a great way to offer healthier options at a more affordable price, especially right now with the cost of freight on everything we import and move across the country."

Buehler's No. 1 SKU in the bag or packaged salad category, is a local greenhouse-grown variety of lettuce called Buckeye Blend from Buckeye Fresh in Medina, OH. "We carry locally grown micro-greens also from an indoor greenhouse facility, which is something we hardly heard of a few years ago."

It's all in response to evolving consumer demand, he says. "We offer a vast variety of pre-cut or convenient items and always strive to continue to create new offerings each year."

One of Buehler's most successful programs is its fresh fruit and yogurt parfaits — low-fat vanilla, Greek or strawberry yogurt with an array of fresh fruits. "We sell over 3,000 per week, and we make them fresh at our stores each day."

He says they also started making acai bowls with fresh fruit and granola a few years ago and are currently selling about 300 per week.

Although Buehler's has seen gains, Tomassetti says challenges remain.

"The biggest impact on operating a retail store in Ohio is probably no different than anyplace," he says. "It is labor, finding people with a passion for serving people and taking pride in quality and service. Packaging supply cost, tariffs and fuel surcharges are other obstacles we face each and every day in operating a grocery store."

Ethan Stuckey, with the market at The Pickwick Place, sees



Buehler's Fresh Foods, Wooster, OH, strengthens its local produce program by partnering with Ohio growers, supporting Amish produce auctions and expanding convenient fresh offerings, including parfaits, acai bowls and locally grown greenhouse products.

PHOTO COURTESY BUEHLER'S

demand for Ohio produce growing. From his perspective at the Bucyrus, OH, farmers market and cafe, which has its roots in his family farming history, the crop mix has stayed steady.

"The biggest changes were post-COVID: a high uptick in local produce sales with a leveling off to slight retraction. Recently, things have remained steady," says Stuckey. "Berries of all types always seem to be much higher in demand than what we can grow in Ohio."

KEEPING PACE

Even if the market isn't changing radically, gradual shifts prompted some changes in the produce sector. Chadd Buurma, president of Buurma Farms, Willard, OH, says he is open to considering the planting of new crops if customers approach him, and a market is opening up. For example, Buurma added bok choy and napa in a new product initiative a couple of years ago.

"It's taken off well for us," he says. "But with most of our crops, we just look at history. We watch our history and what trends there are, and certainly crops, like cilantro, dill and bok choy, those are the three that have really taken off."

Prospects for Ohio produce looks good, says Buurma. "The weather didn't stop us from planting a regular rotation of crops."

Alex Buck, president of growers cooperative Fresh Forward, Newcomerstown, OH, formerly the Fruit Growers Marketing Association, says circumstances were positive as winter transitioned into spring. "We had a normal winter that was ideal for the tree fruit. Early spring had some warmer days that brought on apples and peaches two to three weeks ahead of schedule."

Pickwick Place's Stuckey notes the change of season was a bit rough on some perennials in his region, with peaches getting rouged up a bit.

Buck says the economy is having more of an impact on consumer demand, with local remaining important, but shoppers concerned about finding the best prices.

Still, Buurma says that local, which he defines as a 400-mile radius around the company's Willard, OH, and Gregory, MI, farms, continues to get a lot of support at retail, including from the region's chain operators.

"We've got great partnerships with many retailers, and they support homegrown. They promote homegrown," he says. "When you walk into a store in the summertime, and you see pictures of my family, they're trying to relate to consumers that this is grown right here locally."

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Buurma says growers get research support from Ohio State University, where seed, plant, and disease trials are ongoing.

"That support is huge," he says. "If we see a problem in a crop that we maybe haven't seen before, we can bring that to Ohio State, and they can get on it. They can start researching it, and they can start to pinpoint what the problem might be. With that, they can help us take on that problem so we can solve it, continue to have a new crop, and move forward."

However, another source of support for growers and retailers — the Ohio Proud program — has been shelved, at least for now, says Ashley McDonald, marketing specialist, Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA), Reynoldsburg, OH.

The Ohio Proud program was ODA's signature marketing initia-

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Locally grown and farm-to-table may have peaked as the main emphasis has been on affordability for the consumer. Retailers and restaurants still have a strong partnership with local farms, but it still must be competitive with the current market pricing."**
Alex Buck, Fresh Forward, Newcomerstown, OH
- **"If you're shopping in Cleveland and you see something that's grown two counties away from you, you know it's fresher."**
Chadd Buurma, Buurma Farms, Willard, OH

tive, promoting food and agricultural products that are 50% raised, grown or processed in Ohio.

"Unfortunately, Ohio Proud's funding was eliminated from the state budget last year. However, we are applying for a specialty crop block grant this year to increase consumer promotions and product placement for produce in small- to medium-sized specialty grocery stores and restaurants for 2027 and 2028."

ODA did make an early contribution to promoting Ohio agriculture this year. "We did do a large event for Ohio Agriculture Month in March with Kroger called the Supermarket Showdown, where several local celebrities, including ODA Director Brian Baldrige, raced through the store to shop for local products. All items collected were donated to a local food bank in Perrysburg, OH, by Kroger." **PB**

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Michigan Produce Fulfills the Seasons

Growers deliver a diverse lineup of fresh produce, from asparagus and berries to apples and parsnips.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Michigan's climate and geographic location help drive its diverse agricultural production. The Great Lakes play a major role by moderating temperatures and providing moisture, while the state's central Midwest location impacts freight costs and shipping efficiency.

EARLY ASPARAGUS

The crown jewel of Michigan produce — asparagus — typically begins the prolific vegetable season.

Jamie Clover Adams, executive director, Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board (MAAB), reports in mid-May, "The 2026 Michigan asparagus season is beginning to take shape, with harvest underway across the state and pacing influenced by recent weather conditions."

"New recipes and videos will highlight the versatility, flavor, and freshness of Michigan asparagus, showcasing how it can elevate everything, from quick snacks to complete meals, as a complement to everyday dining."

Retailers are encouraged to access the MAAB, DeWitt, MI, for point-of-sale materials to support in-store promotions.

Adams suggests placing asparagus in weekly ads and holding store tastings. "If people try eating it, they like it, and will buy it."

Trish Taylor, marketing manager, Riveridge Produce Marketing, Sparta, MI, says, "We are currently in full swing with asparagus season and will soon transition into sweet cherries."

NEW BERRIES

MBG Marketing, Grand Junction, MI, is the world's largest marketer of fresh and value-added blueberries.

"MGB represents generations of growers, families, and friends who share a common passion for growing the best blueberries in the world," says Brian Bocoock, chief executive officer. "The crop this year is strong compared to last year. We expect it to be great when Mother Nature cooperates with the supply and great quality."

In testing new varieties, he reports, "We're really excited with the quality and volume of Envoy, and we'll see how it performs in the marketplace."

Consumers, he notes, look for color, flavor, firmness and size. "They buy blueberries with their eyes."

APPLES

Gretchen Mensing, director of communications and marketing, Michigan Apple Committee, Lansing, MI, says Michigan apples are grown on approximately 850 family-run farms, many in their fourth and fifth generations.

In 2025, 30 million bushels were produced. "This year, growers are



Michigan's agricultural profile covers a wide range of products. Only California ranks higher. Ranking first in asparagus production, Michigan growers raise about 50% of the United State's asparagus. The state also produces about 30% of cucumbers, and 25% of the squash.

PHOTO COURTESY MICHIGAN ASPARAGUS ADVISORY BOARD

reporting positively from their orchards, and are thankful for a mostly mild spring," says Mensing. "While there have been some frosts during bloom, it's difficult to tell yet what, if any, damage has taken place. By August, we will have a better idea of what is expected for the 2026 crop."

Honeycrisp, Gala, Fuji, and Red Delicious are the most popular varieties, with Gala being the most produced. EverCrisp and Ambrosia continue to gain popularity.

Regarding sales, she notes, "Mainly Michigan apples are sold in Michigan, the surrounding Great Lakes region, and south to Florida."

Riveridge's Taylor says apples thrive in Michigan's climate. "Warm summer days followed by cool, early fall nights help develop the sugars that create firm, sweet, high-quality fruit. We are proud to provide fresh apples year-round, along with fresh-pressed cider."

She adds, "To ensure consistent quality, we utilize the latest packing and sorting technology, including AI-driven systems that accurately size and identify defects in apples and cherries. This allows consumers to simply grab-and-go and get on with their day and have nutritious food on hand."

MYRIAD CHOICES

Michigan's agricultural profile covers a wide range of products. Only California ranks higher.

The Michigan State University Extension's availability guide lists 16 fruits and 28 vegetables. Ranking first, Michigan produces about 50% of the country's asparagus, about 30% of cucumbers, and 25% of the squash. As the second largest producer of dry beans, it is also a major producer of potatoes, snap beans, bell peppers, cabbage, pumpkins and more.

The varying types of Michigan soil — particularly muck and sandy — allow Michigan farmers to flourish an array of crops.

Michigan pioneered the celery industry in the Kalamazoo area in the 1850s. Today, the state is the second-largest producer.

"The fresh market ready-to-eat celery did well early this year with floating row covers," says Justin Lutke, general manager of the Michigan Celery Promotion Cooperative, Inc., Hudsonville, MI.

Since the early '70s, Miedema Produce, Inc., Hudsonville, MI, has been growing, packing, and shipping radishes. From this beginning crop, Miedema now grows over 50 vegetables and ships all over the U.S. and Canada. Their Arizona facility, from November to May, augments their June to November Michigan season for all-year availability.

Specializing in root crops, they provide customized packs and cuts, such as trimmed radishes, parsnips, chips, and more, to reach the highest standards.

"We have worked hard over the past decades to position ourselves as a 'one-stop shop' for many of our buyers," says Todd Miedema, principal.

They provide private labeling, contract packing, and marketing services on specific data to boost sales. "When it comes to produce,

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Sweet cherries are expected to become an even larger commodity for Michigan in the coming years, driven in part by our strategic central location and efficient distribution capabilities."**

Trish Taylor, Riveridge Produce Marketing, Sparta, MI

- **"The demand for all produce will continue to increase, including Michigan produce. Produce is essentially vitamins through food, and there is a movement to eat healthy. As with other growing areas' challenges, all Michigan produce will help fill the rising demand."**

Dominic P. Riggio, Riggio Distribution Co., Detroit, MI

freshness is the name of the game," he says.

Rice Lake Farms, Grant, MI, specializes in non-GMO vegetables, including over half a dozen squash varieties. Rick Sible, development and food safety general manager, says parsnips are their No. 1 crop. "The quality is outstanding because of its milky-white color," he says.

Sible suggests retailers show their attractive vegetables in an open-air vegetable display with sales by the pound. "Let customers pick out their choices — many want to personally select which to purchase."

Grower, packer, shipper, Tom Greiner Farms, Hart, MI, supports and promotes Michigan agriculture to create year-round category opportunities that help growers thrive in an ever-evolving market.

Its crops include asparagus, sweet cherries, zucchini, sweet corn,

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PB PROCUREMENT

apples, pumpkins, hard squash and evergreens. Co-owner Sarah Greiner describes their marketing features that innovate techniques to preserve freshness and flavor.

“Maintaining a cold chain for sweet corn is essential for freshness and sweetness,” says Greiner.

Michigan enterprises support and promote the agriculture industry with product delivery, assisting in maintaining freshness, and evaluating the market.

Ken Korson, apple category manager of grower-shipper, North Bay Produce, Traverse City, MI, explains, “North Bay has made significant investments in packing sheds, packing lines, and controlled atmosphere (CA) storage technology. These improvements allow us to maintain exceptional quality, extend freshness, and deliver a premium product to customers year-round.”

He adds that apples are the primary year-round focus in Michigan due to consistent consumer demand and the ability to maintain a quality supply throughout the year.

According to Korson, North Bay represents Gala, Honeycrisp, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Pink Lady, McIntosh, Jonathan, Jonagold, Paul Red, Ginger Gold, Ambrosia, EverCrisp and Ida Red.

Also, he indicates that new varieties are important in today’s marketplace. “Varieties, such as Pink Lady, Ambrosia, and EverCrisp, provide eating quality and help diversify our offerings, giving retail customers a stronger and more competitive product mix.”

He adds, “We work closely with buyers to develop programs that help drive sales and meet consumer demand. Examples include tote bag promotions, bulk apple bin displays, and customized strategies to increase visibility and movement at retail.”

FUTURE DEMAND

Dominic P. Riggio, president, Riggio Distribution Co., Detroit, MI, forecasts, “The demand for all produce will continue to increase, including Michigan produce.”

Korson predicts that Michigan’s apple industry is expected to continue growing, as many orchards are just now reaching full production maturity.

“Michigan has always produced high-quality fruits and vegetables, and is entering its peak season, so we expect demand to grow in the coming months,” says Bill Loupée, chief operating officer, Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Detroit, MI. **PB**

Organic Produce Sales Drive Growth

Rising organic tide lifts other boats in the produce aisle.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Organic produce sales are booming, outpacing conventional produce and helping retail produce departments thrive. Though many retailers are investing in organic programs, opportunity remains to improve execution. Stronger merchandising, clearer communication, and better integration into the overall produce set can help fully capture the category's growth potential.

"At this point in business, it (organics) is a necessity," says Myles Chasser, fruit buyer with Four Seasons Produce Co., an Ephrata, PA, wholesaler. "Sales continue to be strong and growing, showing younger consumers who want more organics. On many items throughout the year, demand exceeds supply.

"It is no longer called a fad, as it was for decades. You must have organics to capture all the produce dollars."

RECORD ORGANIC SALES

In 2025, U.S. organic produce sales jumped to \$10.6 billion, growing five times faster than conventional, according to the Organic Produce Network's (OPN) *State of Organic Produce 2025* report. The sales experienced a 5.9% year-over-year growth — \$1.1 billion in added sales compared to 2024, and higher than conventional's 1.3% growth rate, according to the Monterey, CA, organization.

"Organic produce represents a meaningful and growing share of retail produce sales, with continued opportunity for expansion as consumer demand increases," says Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing, Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA.

"Organic produce remains an important and growing segment in retail, driven by rising consumer interest in health, transparency, and sustainability. It plays a key role in attracting younger shoppers and supporting trade-up opportunities within the produce department."

Howard notes nearly 70% of U.S. organic shoppers cite health as their top reason for purchase, and younger consumers are driving continued growth.

Organic produce sales are booming at Vashon Thriftway in Vashon, WA. The store on Vashon Island in Puget Sound sells 12 cases of organic bananas a day versus two conventional. Organic winter squash and organic yams sell throughout the year, and the supermarket's other organic produce is also moving well, says Henry Porter, produce manager.

"It's probably the most important part of our department," he says. "It's grown from just a little side area to over 50% of our sales. Once the local stuff happens, it really explodes."

Organic produce remains the standout category, accounting for nearly 30% of total organic sales, with a penetration rate of 16% into the overall produce market, according to the Washington, D.C., Organic Trade Association's *2026 Organic Market Report*.



Clear signage, dedicated organic sets, and product visibility help shoppers quickly identify organic produce and better understand its value, nutrition and growing practices, driving sales at retail. PHOTO COURTESY SPROUTS

ORGANICS' STARRING ROLE

According to a Circana report, the organic consumer consistently delivers larger basket rings than the conventional shopper, driving approximately \$100 per trip, compared to \$73 when purchasing conventional vegetables.

Organic shoppers contribute to higher overall department value and shopper loyalty, notes Katie Diesl, president of the organic vegetable category at Grimmway Farms, Bakersfield, CA.

"Organic is no longer a niche segment. It is a core component of the produce department, supported by consumers who prioritize transparency, quality, environmental stewardship, and trust."

Organic demand is increasingly being shaped by younger consumers, particularly Gen Z and Millennial households, many of whom were introduced to organics at an early age, Diesl adds. "These shoppers have adopted organics as a lifestyle choice rather than a passing trend and continue to support the perceived value fresh organic fruits and vegetables bring to their health and families."

Food co-ops lead organic product sales, with St. Paul, MN's National Co-op Grocers (NCG) reporting that 38% of food co-ops' combined annual \$2.8 billion sales come from Certified Organic products, compared with 25% of sales at other natural grocery retailers, and just 3% at conventional grocers (2025 SPINS data), reports Josh Crone, NCG's retail programming senior manager of produce.



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PB MERCHANDISING REVIEW

“Our co-op shoppers, whether ‘core’ co-op supporters, or others who make their co-op one of several fresh food shops during the week, absolutely expect to see a great degree of organics within the produce department,” says Crone. “Nearly every co-op produce department nationally has a large organic footprint. Some members sell exclusively organic produce, while others adopt more of a hybrid approach. Organic produce, taken as a whole, is absolutely intrinsic to our values and how we go to market in produce.”

BIGGEST ORGANIC MOVERS

As the leading organic produce category, berry sales surged 10.5% to \$4.4 billion. Citrus sales climbed 18%, while bananas also experienced double-digit growth at 12.6% to reach the \$1 billion mark, according to the Organic Trade Association.

Other big organic movers, in order, are packaged salads, apples, bananas, carrots, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, citrus and grapes. In terms of movement, bananas, berries, apples, carrots, potatoes, packaged salads, citrus, onions, grapes and lettuce led OPN’s list.

“The organic berry category is currently a ‘hero’ of the produce aisle,” says Kyla Oberman, director of marketing for Watsonville, CA’s California Giant Berry Farms. “The sector is characterized by robust growth that outpaces the broader food market, driven by a surge in superfood health consciousness and improved year-round availability.

“As we look at the 2026 landscape, berries aren’t just a seasonal favorite; they are a primary driver of overall retail growth, consistently outpacing conventional produce in both dollar sales and consumer velocity.”

SEPARATE VS. INTEGRATION

Retailers employ a mix of strategies, including dedicated organic sets and integrated displays alongside conventional items.

“Co-merchandising organic and conventional items together can be highly effective, as it allows shoppers to compare options and encourages trade-up,” says Sunkist’s Howard. “It also helps normalize organics as part of everyday shopping rather than a separate niche category. Separate organic sections can be beneficial for destination shoppers who actively seek out organic products. However, integrating organics into the main produce set

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Clarity is critical. Dedicated organic sets help differentiate products from conventional offerings, while clear labeling and strong product visibility allow shoppers to quickly find and choose organic items.”**

Katie Diesl, Grimmway Farms, Bakersfield, CA

- **“For consumers, the decision to buy organic is not a trend — it’s a deliberate prioritization of health and transparency.”**

Kyla Oberman, California Giant Berry Farms, Watsonville, CA

often drives greater overall movement by increasing visibility and making it easier for shoppers to choose organic options.”

Big, planned displays can help movement.

“The most important thing is to clearly identify and market organics with clear shelf tags and signage,” says Four Seasons Produce’s Chasser. “You need to make it easy for the customer to decipher.”

Separate organic sections can be beneficial for destination shoppers who actively seek organic products.

“If you segregate the organics, you are basically marketing to the organic consumer, while if you integrate it and the price isn’t too far apart, you may gain some sales from crossover and even conventional consumers who say, ‘oh, for 30 cents, I will buy the ‘healthier’ option,’” says Chasser.

WET WALL INFLUENCE

Because of its color, freshness and abundance can create visual impact, wet walls remain effective merchandising tools and should serve as the focal point of the produce department, says Grimmway’s Diesl.

“Organic should be merchandised in a way that is easy to identify and clearly communicates its value,” she says. “The most effective way to drive organic sales is to focus on conversion and help shoppers move from interest to purchase.”

PB

Five Ways to Sell More Walnuts

Sales grow as health, convenience, and snacking trends drive demand.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Health and wellness, interest in minimally processed foods, and demand for convenient snacking are helping drive walnut sales. As consumers look for foods that deliver nutrition along with everyday benefits, walnuts stand apart as the only nut that is a significant source of plant-based omega-3 ALA, while also providing protein, fiber, and healthy fats, according to the California Walnut Board & Commission (CWB&C), in Folsom, CA.

“Promoting walnuts in the produce department is good for many reasons, such as being a very healthy item, and you can cross merchandise them with many items, like dates, berries, apples, salads, etc.,” says Ryan Sanchez, sales manager for produce at the Albertsons Companies, in Boise, ID.

Here are five ways to boost walnut sales:

1. STOCK BEST SELLERS

In-shell walnuts are the best-selling produce department product, according to Rachel Ercole, marketing director, Diamond Foods, Stockton, CA, which sells its walnuts under the Diamond of California brand. “Retailers are seeing growing demand for larger bag sizes, such as the 2-pound bag, a signal that consumers are incorporating walnuts into a wider variety of uses and occasions.”

Shelled walnuts are also a top register-ringer for the Mariani Nut Co., in Winters, CA, according to Kristen Holden, director of marketing. “We pioneered walnuts in produce 15 years ago, back when retail buyers were still calling it a ‘baking nut.’ It makes sense to have them in produce.”

From a packer/distributor perspective, “our largest sales for consumption are the pure walnuts,” says Stephanie Blackwell, founder and chief executive officer of Aurora Products in Orange, CT. “However, we purchase 10 times as many walnut halves and pieces as we do chopped walnuts. For us, it’s a 50-50 split between all-natural and organic walnuts.”

Walnut halves and pieces are the top-selling forms of walnuts in produce, accounting for the bulk of Truly Good Foods’ sales in Charlotte, NC. “We are a complete snack program provider, so our walnuts are usually displayed as part of a wide assortment of nuts, trail mixes, dried fruits, and other snacks, basically a one-stop shop for baking and snacking needs,” says Mike DeCramer, national account executive for retail.

2. TRY WHAT’S NEW

Flavored walnuts are currently the biggest focus for product innovation.

“For bulk and prepack options, we are developing a variety of flavored walnut options to increase their appeal as a snacking nut and not just for meal prep or baking,” says DeCramer.

The newest addition to the Fruit & Nut line for the Sugar Foods Corporation, in New York, NY, is its Fresh Gourmet-brand Walnut



Strategic cross-merchandising, larger displays and nutrition-focused signage can help retailers position walnuts as a versatile, healthy snack option throughout the produce department. PHOTO COURTESY DIAMOND FOODS

Apple topping. “It combines honey-roasted walnut pieces with dried apple pieces and is ideal for topping salads,” says Samantha McCaul, senior marketing manager.

In terms of flavor, emerging profiles, such as hot honey, tikka masala, blood orange, marion berry, and fig, demonstrate walnuts’ versatility across sweet and savory products, according to Robert Verloop, the CWB&C’s executive director and chief executive officer.

3. BOOST VISIBILITY, BOOST SALES

Bulk displays of nuts, such as walnuts, to purchase by the pound were once the norm, says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist at Charlie’s Produce, in Seattle, WA. “Now, most of our retailers have a square block of display space on top of the tables with all packaged products. The nuts are more visible this way.”

The CWB&C offers retailers display tools, such as header cards, shelf signs, and recipe cards, that feature the American Heart Association’s Heart-Check.

4. CREATE MEAL & SNACK CONNECTIONS

Featuring walnuts with fresh produce can boost basket size, increase engagement, and inspire consumers to seek out California walnuts as part of their regular produce purchases, says Verloop. “In fact, research shows that 76% of shoppers are more likely to purchase walnuts when displayed alongside fresh fruits and vegetables.”

For seasonal cross-merchandising, Diamond’s Ercole adds, “Q2 and Q3 are strong for salad- and grain-bowl focused displays pairing shelled walnuts with lettuce, arugula, and grain bowl ingredients. Q4 lends itself to in-shell nuts and harvest-inspired pairings.”

5. PROMOTE YEAR-ROUND

There has been greater emphasis on encouraging retailers to feature walnuts year round, including outside traditional holiday periods. “Peak promotional windows, such as summer snacking, back to school, and during Heart Month in February, are supported with campaign ideas, creative assets, and messaging that keep walnuts relevant throughout the year,” says Verloop.

New UK-EU Accord Aims to Reduce Trade Barriers and Food Costs

BY URSULA F. OTT
THE CONVERSATION

It is now almost a decade since the U.K. voted for Brexit and since the tariffs of President Donald Trump's first term increased global trade frictions. Brexit removed the U.K. from the European single market for goods and services. Now, though, the country is pro-

posing a pivot back toward alignment with EU regulations.

What could not have been widely predicted back in 2016 was the COVID pandemic, nor a war on European soil. The U.K. has been exposed to these shocks without the EU support system. So, what may once have been impossible to imagine is now on the cards — adopting EU single market rules under new U.K. legislation.



In May 2025, the U.K. and EU reached a new trade agreement, paving the way for both sides to move closer on their economies and business. Unpredictable U.S. trade tariffs and a weakening of the U.S.-U.K.-EU relationship hastened this. In addition, it has been estimated in a comprehensive study that Brexit has reduced the size of the U.K. economy by 6-8%.

Politically, the approach announced by the U.K. prime minister, Keir Starmer, is a courageous step. U.K. legislation would allow the country to adopt new EU laws without the need for parliament to vote each time. But any plan is certain to provoke strong opposition from the Conservatives and Reform U.K.

However, it is a signal of the seriousness of the U.K.'s intentions to move closer to the EU by adapting to its regulations and giving up independence from EU law. That is a costly move for the U.K. in terms of its credibility, but the U-turn should reinforce its commitment to the EU.

BENEFITS TO U.K.

But beyond this, there are three clear benefits to the U.K.

1. The EU is built on rules and regulations that guide the bloc's labor market, trade and security systems. Alignment would clearly help U.K. businesses, consumers, and individual workers to maneuver within these systems.
2. By breaking from the single market, the U.K. chose a costlier approach to trading and investing across the EU border. Aligning regulations would reduce cross-border bureaucracy.
3. The EU is looking for new trading partners after supply chain

disruptions from COVID and the Ukraine war — not to mention the current impact on oil and gas supplies. The EU does not need to rely on the U.K., but a new direction in the relationship could reduce the threat of supply chain disruption in the future.

BETTER DEAL FOR CONSUMERS?

So, what could this mean for U.K. businesses and consumers? Food producers trading within the U.K.-EU zone would have a quicker turnaround of their fresh produce. This would reach shop shelves in the U.K. and EU more quickly, giving shoppers better-quality fresh foods.

Reducing the amount of complex paperwork and export health certificates at borders would allow a free flow of fresh food even between Great Britain and Northern Ireland (which remained part of the single market). This trade has been disrupted since Brexit and affects both trade between food producers due to paperwork and border delays, and food security.

Border checks, paperwork and adapting to legal requirements are expensive and increase food prices (and with that, inflation). Bringing trade between the EU and the U.K. closer could reduce these costs and should also allow producers to benefit more from global value chains.

Going forward, it will be resilience, rather than trade efficiency, that will be important for both businesses and nations. Both will want to be able to reconfigure networks at speed.

If inflation rises due to product shortages, governments have limited fiscal space to offer direct support to citizens (which would mean increased levels of spending) or to cut taxes.

Another benefit could come in the form of foreign direct investment into the U.K. from overseas. In 2025, this began shifting from low-cost developing countries toward capital-intensive and technologically-driven investments in developed countries — and especially in the EU (Germany, Italy and France).

Alignment with EU regulation could give investors more confidence to commit to the U.K. Foreign direct investment in renewable energy and AI products, for example, would benefit both the U.K.'s workers and its consumers.

This is a time of new geopolitical alliances and cooperation. Trading and investment options could help secure economic, political, and societal stability in a volatile world. So far, this is a relatively small step by the U.K., but starting to align to EU regulations could ease a complex relationship.

Professor Ursula F. Ott is the head of the International Business, Strategy and Decision-Making Research Centre at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, England.

Eight Tips for Adding Bowls to the Menu

By Novella Lui

The bowl trend isn't another food fad — it's a strategic opportunity for foodservice professionals to showcase produce in ways that encourage consumers to eat more produce, while keeping business in mind. Bowls are an excellent way to accommodate diverse dietary preferences, allowing customers to customize their dishes based on available options.

The bowl itself provides an ideal environment for arranging food compared to flat plates. According to a 2024 study in the *Journal of Food Engineering*, the sides of a bowl act as a supportive foundation, allowing ingredients to stack without toppling. The bowl's physical structure allows layers to be distinctly defined, with foundational ingredients, like grains, forming the dense base, while lighter, delicate ingredients, such as garnishes, rest on top.



Because of the bowl's shape and size, it impacts the plating style, influencing how much food eaters expect to consume. A 2025 study published in *Food Quality and Preference* indicates that higher-stacked foods, such as bowls, visually suggest a larger portion.

While a larger portion may not mean people will necessarily eat more, the depth of the bowl allows for visually appealing cross-sections where customers can see the ingredients stacked atop one another, rather than blended together on a flat plate. This visual presentation may influence one's initial desire to eat.

Bowls that are produce-forward allow operators to create dishes where plant-based ingredients are the stars. Whether you are a fast-casual or a corporate foodservice operator, here are eight things to consider when incorporating bowls into your menu offerings.

1. OFFER A VARIETY OF FLAVORS

Treat produce like you'd treat protein — season boldly, use classic cooking techniques, and give it center stage. Produce can anchor a bowl just as satisfyingly as animal-based proteins.

The same vegetables can also work across multiple bowl combinations. Flavor-wise, consider offering a variety of flavors, such as sweet roasted beets, savory grilled veggies, and tangy fruits and pickled vegetables.

2. BUILD IN COLOR AND CONTRAST

Bowls create a visually appealing food product. "Aim for a rainbow" effect with your ingredient offerings — fresh beets, orange sauces, yellow corn, bright greens and more. Textures from produce offer crispness and crunch, creating endless textural combinations when combined with grains and proteins, keeping every bite enticing.

3. USE SEASONAL AND LOCAL PRODUCE

According to a 2024 research article published by *Scientific Reports*, Millennials and Gen Z prefer local food. If your customer base is from these generations, build your bowl program around seasonal

produce availability to enable streamlined marketing, keep your menu fresh, and potentially control costs. For example, feature pea shoots and asparagus in spring, give way to tomatoes and corn in summer, and transition to squash in autumn.

4. OFFER CUSTOMIZATION WHEN POSSIBLE

Bowls are so appealing because customers can customize the ingredients to their liking. When possible, let your customers build their own bowl by choosing their base and sauce. Examples of bases are grains, rice, riced cauliflower, leafy greens and noodles.

When planning your bowl menu, consider the number of options and the audience that you want to target. Diversifying your menu options that also align with certain lifestyle choices, such as vegan, high-protein, and plant-forward, may attract a larger customer base.

5. CONSIDER TEXTURE AND FINISH

Offering a variety of produce textures in your bowl lets customers experience different textures. Consider mixing crisp raw veggies with roasted, pickled and fresh varieties.

The finishing touch also matters — topping the bowl with nuts and seeds, croutons, fried wonton strips and more, elevates it. Fresh herbs, microgreens, and edible flowers, like cilantro, mint, and basil, along with a drizzle of dressing or sauce, make the presentation social media-worthy.

6. CONSIDER YOUR BUSINESS STRUCTURE

The bowl assembly is inherently faster than traditional plating because most components can be prepared in advance, enabling customization during service. This efficiency allows for shorter wait times and higher table turns.

Still, this build-your-own-bowl concept may work well for corporate and higher education cafeterias and food stalls, but it may not align with fine dining.

7. ASSESS YOUR KITCHEN INFRASTRUCTURE

While bowls can be a profitable business, there are operational considerations to keep in mind. For example, while many bowl components can be prepared in advance, do you have enough staff to prepare ingredients during peak hours when certain ingredients run low? Do you also have the kitchen infrastructure and the ability to maintain and support the safe storage and preparation of a variety of hot, cold, and room-temperature food ingredients?

8. CONSIDER STAFF TRAINING

Bowl assembly may look simple, but assembling bowls requires standardization, where portion control becomes essential. Ensuring staff are trained to deliver a consistent, high-quality product will be important to keep customers happy and coming back for more.

While customers are free to choose what they include in their bowls, your staff will also need to be knowledgeable about flavor and texture combinations.

Novella Lui, RD, MHSc is a registered dietitian and a freelance food, nutrition, and health writer in Canada. Connect with Novella at info@livetounish.com for work samples and collaboration opportunities.

Produce Distribution Consolidation: Threat or Opportunity for Growth?

BY MARIA DESARBO

If you've spent any time in the foodservice produce world lately, you've probably noticed the shift. Companies are getting acquired. Regional distributors are merging. Larger players are expanding their footprint at a steady pace. Consolidation is no longer a future conversation — it's happening in real time.



And depending on who you ask, it's either a problem or a solution.

There's no question this industry has always been built on independence. Local distributors, family businesses, and relationship-driven sales have defined produce for decades. That model isn't disappearing overnight — but it is being tested. Rising costs, increasing complex-

ity, and changing customer expectations are forcing everyone to take a hard look at how they operate.

In that environment, consolidation starts to make sense.

Let's start with the reality: The cost to run a produce distribution business has gone up — significantly. Labor is tighter and more expensive. Transportation costs are unpredictable. Fuel, insurance, compliance — none of it is getting cheaper. At the same time, customers expect more: better fill rates, broader product lines, tighter delivery windows and faster communication. That's a tough combination to manage without scale.

Larger, more consolidated operations have a clear advantage. They can move more volume through their system, run more efficient routes, and leverage stronger purchasing power. Those efficiencies don't just improve margins, they create a more consistent operation. And in produce, consistency is everything.

We see it clearly in logistics. The fewer times a product is handled, the better it performs. Consolidated networks allow for faster turns, more direct routing, and less unnecessary movement. That means fresher product, reduced shrink, and fewer issues at the customer level. It's not complicated, but it does require infrastructure that smaller operations often struggle to build on their own.

Another major shift is happening on the customer side. Foodservice operators are under pressure, too. Labor shortages haven't gone away, and neither has the need to streamline operations. Many buyers are actively looking to reduce their number of vendors. They want fewer touchpoints, fewer invoices, and fewer problems to manage. That's driving demand for broader, more integrated distributors.

A consolidated distributor can offer a wider range of products across categories, while maintaining availability and service levels. That "one-stop shop" approach isn't just convenient, it's becoming a competitive advantage. And for distributors who can execute it well, it opens the door to deeper customer relationships and increased share of wallet.

Technology is another area where consolidation is accelerating

change. Running a produce business today requires more than just good instincts and strong relationships. It requires visibility — into inventory, margins, customer behavior and operational performance. Having access to real-time, actionable data can completely change how you manage your business.

The challenge is building that kind of visibility isn't easy. ERP systems, reporting tools, and analytics platforms require both capital and expertise. Larger organizations are better positioned to make those investments and, just as importantly, to integrate them into daily operations. The result is faster decision-making, better forecasting and fewer surprises.

There's also a resilience factor that doesn't get enough attention. The past few years have shown us how fragile parts of the supply chain can be. Whether it was sudden demand shifts, product shortages, or labor disruptions, the companies that weathered those challenges best were the ones with flexibility. Scale helps with that. It doesn't eliminate risk, but it does create options.

Of course, consolidation isn't without its concerns. There's a legitimate fear that as companies get bigger, they lose what made them successful in the first place. In produce, that usually comes down to relationships. This is still a people business. Customers don't just buy product — they buy trust, responsiveness and accountability.

If consolidation leads to a loss of that connection, it's a problem. But it doesn't have to.

The most successful models we're seeing are the ones that balance scale with local autonomy. They invest in infrastructure, technology and procurement at a higher level, but keep sales and customer relationships close to the market. They empower their teams to make decisions, solve problems, and maintain the level of service customers expect.

That's not easy to do, but when it works, it's powerful.

It's also worth noting that consolidation doesn't eliminate competition. In many regions, there are still more distributors than the market can sustainably support. That kind of fragmentation often leads to pricing pressure and margin compression that hurts everyone. A more rational competitive landscape can actually benefit the industry, allowing companies to compete on service, reliability, and expertise instead of just price.

So where does that leave the independent distributor? In my view, still very much in the game, but with a different set of expectations. The bar is higher. Efficiency matters more. Visibility matters more. And the ability to adapt matters more than ever.

Some will choose to grow, some will choose to partner, and others will double down on what they do best. There's no single right answer. But ignoring the shift isn't one of the options.

Consolidation isn't just about getting bigger. It's about building businesses that can handle the realities of today's market. The companies that recognize that won't just survive this shift, they'll lead it.

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



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The Allen Lund Company, founded 50 years ago, reached a sales milestone in 1998 of \$100 million.

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Allen Lund Marks 50 Years in Logistics

The Allen Lund Company, La Cañada Flintridge, CA, is celebrating its 50th anniversary as a transportation broker in the logistics industry. Since its founding in 1976, Allen Lund has grown from a single-office operation to a global company with more than 40 branches moving freight worldwide.

With \$1,000 in his pocket, Allen Lund made the decision to start his own transportation brokerage company, and in 1976, the Allen Lund Company formally opened the first office in Los Angeles, CA, adjacent to the produce market. Lund and his wife, Kathie, began what he referred to as “living the American dream.”

“Allen Lund Company was started so that our mom and dad could feed their kids,” says Eddie Lund, president. “Fifty years later, it is a billion-dollar company that still has that family feel. It’s a great accomplishment, and we are so proud of our people who have taken Mom and Dad’s dream and made it a reality.”

Specializing as a national third-party transportation broker with offices across North America, and with over 800 employees, the Allen Lund Company works with shippers and carriers nationwide to arrange dry, refrigerated (specializing in produce), and flatbed freight. It manages 640,000 loads a year.

“We are so blessed to be celebrating our 50th anniversary, and we are grateful to the city of La Cañada (our home for 47 of the 50



Pictured are Allen Lund and his wife Kathie. The Allen Lund Company began in 1976, and as years went on, the company continued to grow, opening offices across the country. In 2017, it became a 500M company — one of Allen’s dreams.

years), Los Angeles County, and all of the vendors and friends we have in the area who have offered their support,” says Eddie Lund.

The company also celebrated the memory of its founder, Allen Lund, with custom-made cowboy hats and commemorative pins, gifted to employees of the company.

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to your table since 1978*

ROMAINE, ROMAINE HEARTS, BOSTON, GREEN LEAF, RED LEAF, ICEBERG, CELERY,
GREEN ONIONS, CARROT, LOBOK, NAPA, PARSLEY, CILANTRO, FLAT CABBAGE

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