

PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS

INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

JULY 2026
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REGIONAL PROFILE
NEW YORK

PEOPLE OF PURPOSE

Ami Ben-Dror
Theresa Lowden
Megan McKenna

FEATURES

Summer
Salads

Produce
in Higher
Education

RISING RETAILER

The Fresh
Grocer of
Brooklyn

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

South Carolina
Peaches

MERCHANDISING

Garlic

PROCUREMENT

Peaches

ANNUAL FOODSERVICE ISSUE

PRODUCE POWER PLAY

Fresh fruits and vegetables are no longer complementary items on foodservice plates and menus. They are the stars.

INSIDE: MUSHROOMS | OVERDORF: 5 REASONS TO LEAN TO PRODUCE



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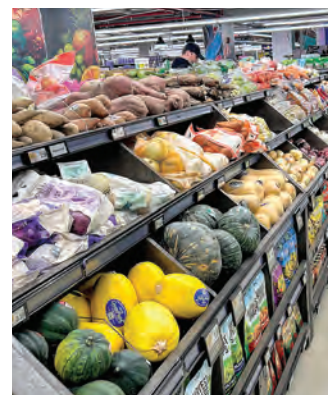


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THIS MONTH'S WINNER

BOON YEE SIEW
Operations Improvement
Analyst
Highline Mushrooms
Essex, Ontario

For Boon Yee Siew, accuracy and consistency are essential to keeping operations running smoothly at Highline Mushrooms. As an operations improvement analyst at Highline Mushrooms, Siew says she spends much of the day "creating and maintaining material master records, ensuring data is accurate, duplicate-free, and properly configured for business use."

After nearly 17 years in the mushroom industry, Siew still finds the work rewarding. "My favorite part of my current career is that it helps keep the company's information accurate and consistent," says Siew.

For those entering the produce industry, Siew says it's important to understand seasonality and prioritize freshness. "Learn the season and focus on quality," she says. "Nowadays, I think most customers are after freshness, as well as the value in produce. In my opinion, that means the pressure as a business would be to keep the products looking uniform, reducing waste, and the efficiency in responding to the change of the customer's expectation."

Outside of work, Siew enjoys exploring Bazi, also known as Chinese metaphysics.

A regular reader of *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, Siew says the magazine helps her understand the market trends of the business.

As this month's winner, Siew 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 September 2026 issue of *PRODUCE BUSINESS*.

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QUESTIONS FOR THE JULY ISSUE

- 1) "Berries so good, they speak for themselves" is the slogan for which companies berries? _____
- 2) In which three states does Exp. Group have its strategically located hubs? _____
- 3) What is the email address for FresCo New York? _____
- 4) What is the telephone number for Fierman Produce Exchange? _____
- 5) Karina Roman works for which Hunts Point produce company? _____
- 6) Which Southern US State offers The Tastier Peach? _____

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

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Company _____

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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: JULY 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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for 40 Years

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TRANSITIONS

Naturipe Farms

Naturipe Farms, Salinas, CA, has named **Jennifer Pulcifer** vice president of compliance.

Pulcifer brings more than 13 years of executive experience in food safety, sustainability, and global supply chain compliance within the fresh produce industry. She holds a master's degree in food safety and a bachelor's in agribusiness management from Michigan State University, and has been involved in industry leadership through multiple committees and organizations focused on advancing food safety and sustainability standards.

Pulcifer will also help advance Naturipe's broader strategic objectives, including strengthening the company's customer-focused approach, accelerating innovation and deepening its commitment to food safety, sustainability and social responsibility.



Jennifer Pulcifer

New York Apple Association

The New York Apple Association (NYAA), Fishers, NY, named **Susan Chekow Lusignan** chief executive officer.

As NYAA's next leader, Lusignan will focus on strengthening internal operations, expanding consumer marketing initiatives, and identifying new funding opportunities that supports the industry's long-term health. She is committed to building strong relationships with NYAA's grower members and the broader network of industry partners essential to New York apple production.



Susan Chekow Lusignan

California Giant Berry Farms

California Giant Berry Farms, Watsonville, CA, announces the return of industry veteran **Tom Smith** as vice president of sales and marketing.

As a member of the senior leadership team, Smith will oversee global business and trade market strategies and the overall commercialization of California Giant's product platform.

Alongside Smith's appointment, the company has expanded its sales organization, announcing internal promotions alongside four new seasoned hires to accelerate growth, sharpen operational execution, and deliver enhanced value to growers and retail partners.



Tom Smith

JOH

JOH, Billerica, MA has hired **Brendan Burns** as senior vice president, Produce, Metro. His extensive background includes leadership roles with industry-leading organizations such as Red Bull North America, Vita Coco, Bai Brands, Watermelon

Water, Bolthouse Farms/Generous Brands, and, most recently, Gutsy Inc. (Culture Pop Soda), where he served as senior vice president of sales.

Burns has earned a reputation for driving growth, building strong customer relationships, developing talented teams, and successfully scaling both emerging and established brands.

Originally from New Rochelle, NY, he lives in Fairfield, CT.



Brendan Burns

Local Express

Local Express, a Glendale, CA-based SaaS vertical platform that powers unified, omnichannel e-commerce for grocery and food retailers, announced **Ryan Webb** has joined the company as vice president of marketing.

Webb brings more than 15 years of experience in growth and product marketing for SaaS companies, including leading teams through multiple IPOs and building scalable go to market engines in complex software categories. He will help Local Express sharpen its category narrative in grocery ecommerce and position its Native AI unified commerce platform for independent and regional food retailers.



Ryan Webb

ANNOUNCEMENTS



EPC Leadership Class Tours Farm and Philadelphia Port

The eighth Eastern Produce Council (EPC) Leadership Class gained firsthand knowledge of production practices and logistics while touring farms and facilities in southern New Jersey and Philadelphia. The trip was held June 2, and began at the farm of Frank Donio, Inc. in Hammonton, NJ.

Annie Pape, special projects and brand manager and fourth generation at Donio, welcomed the group and provided a brief history of the company. Led by Josh Minton, Donio sales and procurement and an EPC Leadership Class alumnus, the group toured organic blueberry production, as well as organic vegetable production, and heard about the challenges of the spring weather. The class was also able to view several pre-cooling aspects in the warehouse, ripening rooms, and logistics aspects of the operation.

The class then traveled to Holt Logistics Corp. at the Port of Philadelphia, where they were joined

by Derek Haines, Jared Stevens and Todd Brown of Holt. The group received an exclusive tour of port operations and viewed the unloading of a container ship. They were also able to visit the on-dock USDA inspection warehouse.

Participants selected for the 2026 program include: Alec Arena, Frank Donio Inc.; Stacy Conway, C.A. Ferolie; Timothy Dunn, Katzman Distribution; Judy Fierman, Fierman Produce Exchange Inc.; Michael Hearn, Four Seasons Produce; Ryan Kelly, Baldor Specialty Foods; Dylan Lang, Fowler Farms; Joycelyn Muise, F&S Fresh Foods; Veritza Ortiz, Four Seasons Produce; Paul Pascal, Sunny Valley Intl.; Meetkumar Patel, Wakefern Food Corp.; Natasha Phan, Mastro-nardi Produce; Dante Savanello, JOH; Meghan Szymansky, Crispy Green; Scott Tepper, Fierman Produce Exchange Inc.; Jake Walters, John Vena Inc.; Ben Weir, Local Bounty; and Chris Zuhlke, ProducePackaging.com.

Fox Solutions Partners With JASA

Fox Solutions, McAllen, TX, has entered into a partnership with JASA, a Netherlands-based leader in weighing and packaging automation, to bring fully integrated packaging and automation solutions to the U.S. market.

As one of only two authorized U.S. distributors for JASA, Fox Solutions will provide sales, service and parts support for JASA equipment, giving domestic growers and packers direct access to JASA's technology.

Through the partnership, Fox Solutions can now support full packing lines for expanded markets, including leafy greens, fresh cut fruits, tomatoes, meat and poultry, seafood, and tapas — categories that demand equipment built for speed, frequent changeovers, and strict hygiene standards.



IMG Citrus and the Mixon Family Join Forces

IMG Citrus and the Mixon Family have announced a partnership focused on advancing premium Florida grapefruit through the combination of protected agriculture, and an integrated go-to-market platform designed to serve consumers around the world.

The partnership combines the Mixon Family's long-term investment in Citrus Under Protective Screen (CUPS) production with IMG Citrus' nearly 50 years of experience marketing grapefruit to leading retail and foodservice customers across North America, Europe and Asia.

Together, the families will represent one of the most significant fresh Florida grapefruit platforms in the industry, with more than 850 acres of CUPS production and a combined program expected to represent more than 1.4 million cases. The partnership is expected to account for more than half of Florida's fresh grapefruit market, giving retailers confidence that this is not a niche effort, but a meaningful, scalable platform for the future of the category.



Call for Innovative Product Entries

ENTRY IS FREE of Charge.
Just send us your product
by September 14th and give
us the reason why you think
it is innovative.

High-volume buyers of produce and floral are constantly in search of items that will differentiate their stores and restaurants from the competition. But what is truly innovative and what will disrupt consumer buying behavior?

We invite all produce and floral suppliers to send us their most innovative products of 2026. Let us know why you think this product is innovative in less than 500 words.

Our editorial team will select the Top 10 items for recognition in our **November 2026 Cover of PRODUCE BUSINESS.**

Once the Top 10 items are announced, the produce industry at large will decide which item is the **MOST INNOVATIVE PRODUCE ITEM OF 2026.**

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



Contact for more information:
KWhitacre@ProduceBusiness.com
Phone: 561-994-1118, ext 101

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Amazon and Bashas' Launch Grocery Delivery and Pickup in Arizona

Amazon and Bashas', a subsidiary of The Raley's Companies, announced the launch of grocery delivery and pickup at four Bashas' store locations in Phoenix, Tempe, Tucson, and Scottsdale, AZ.

Customers can now shop approximately 15,000 Bashas' grocery items on Amazon.com and the Amazon shopping app with same-day delivery to their doorstep or pickup at a Bashas' store.

This launch marks Amazon's first third-party grocery collaboration in Arizona. Bashas' joins a growing network of regional and local grocery retailers available on Amazon for grocery delivery across the U.S., complementing Amazon's existing grocery offerings from Amazon.com, Amazon Fresh, and Whole Foods Market.

**Fresh Del Monte Enters Multi-Year Partnership With Pittsburgh Pirates**

Del Monte Foods Inc., a division of Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc., announced a new multi-year partnership with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

The Del Monte brand made its official debut at PNC Park June 9 during the Pirates' game against the Los Angeles Dodgers. Del Monte signage is featured prominently on the left field wall, alongside sponsorship of the Pirates grounds crew and in-game activations throughout the season.

The announcement follows Del Monte's recent reaffirmation of Pittsburgh as the operational hub for its foods division, where key functions including supply chain, finance, commercial operations and research and development are anchored.

Del Monte Foods' history in Pittsburgh dates to 2002, when the company acquired several iconic brands, including StarKist, 9Lives and Nature's Goodness, from Heinz.

**Fyffes Launches Summer Pineapple Campaign in Europe, UK**

Fyffes is launching a "Brighten Up Your BBQ" shopper campaign across 61 Globus stores in Germany, putting pineapples at the heart of summer grilling season. Running for four weeks, the in-store activation will feature displays, social media support across Instagram and Facebook, and promotional activity through leaflets.

Shoppers will also be invited to take part in an online competition by scanning a QR code and



answering a simple question for the chance to win one of 10 grills.

Fyffes also plans to roll out summer pineapple shopper campaigns in the U.K. and Ireland.

OVGV Supports National Food Security Strategy

The Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OVGV), Leamington, Ontario, is expressing strong support for More Choice. More Control. More

Canada: Canada's first-ever National Food Security Strategy, unveiled June 11 by Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Backed by more than \$3.2 billion in investments over 10 years, the strategy represents a transformative commitment to strengthening Canada's domestic food system.

"This is a significant and forward-looking investment that will directly benefit greenhouse growers across Ontario and Canada," says Richard Lee, executive director, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers.

The National Food Security Strategy's four pillars: enhancing competition in grocery retail, increasing domestic processing capacity, expanding year-round production, and reducing regulatory barriers, align closely with OGVG's priorities.

OVGV is particularly encouraged by the federal commitment of \$750 million for controlled environment agriculture, which will support the expansion of year-round fruit and vegetable production across the country.

**Mission Produce To Market Organic California Keitt Mangos**

Mission Produce Inc., Oxnard, CA, has entered into a marketing and distribution agreement with Anthony Vineyards, the leader in fresh table grapes, dates and mangos in the Coachella Valley, to market organic Keitt mangos.

This year's California Keitt mango season is expected to start in July and last through early September. Grown domestically and harvested close to market, the fruit does not require hot-water treatment and is delivered at peak maturity, resulting in strong color, rich flavor, and consistent quality.

In 2025, retail sales of organic mangos reached nearly 70 million pounds, with volume increasing 154% compared to 2020. Organic mangos now account for 16% of total mango volume.

**Skylar Rae Cherry Season Returns**

Skylar Rae cherries, celebrated for unmatched sweetness and crunch, have officially returned. Known for their golden-red blush, Skylar Rae cherries have brix levels higher than any other cherry variety, ranging from 23 to 27 at harvest.

"The heartfelt backstory of the discovery of the

variety also adds to the charm and uniqueness of Skylar Rae," says Rochelle Bohm, vice president of marketing at CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA.

The Toftness family had been farming cherries in Wenatchee, WA, for more than a decade when they suffered the loss of their infant daughter, Skylar Rae. Around this time, while working in the family orchard, Skylar Rae's grandpa looked up to the sky and saw a rainbow come down over the hill. Weaving through the orchard, he followed the rainbow to its end, where he stumbled upon a cherry tree that was different from any other tree in his orchard, leading to the discovery of a new cherry variety the family named in honor of Skylar Rae.

Harvest continues through the end of July.



NEW PRODUCTS

NatureSweet Celebrates America's 250th with Limited-Edition Cherry Tomato

NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX, is honoring America's 250th anniversary with the launch of its limited-time NatureSweet America's 250 pack, a festive cherry tomato on the vine grown in the U.S.

Available only for a limited time, this special-edition pack features premium cherry tomatoes on the vine cultivated in greenhouses in Willcox, AZ.

The NatureSweet America's 250th pack will be available at select retailers nationwide for a limited time during the anniversary celebration season.

**New Kit From The Little Potato Company**

The Little Potato Company, Edmonton, Alberta, added a new staple to its Microwave Ready Kit lineup: A Little Homestyle Ranch, now available at major retailers in the U.S. and Canada.

"Ranch is the No. 1 dressing flavor in the country, and potatoes are the No. 1 side dish — it's the perfect pairing," says Angela Santiago, chief executive and co-founder of The Little Potato Company.

Like every kit in the lineup, each steamable tray comes with one pound of pre-washed Little Potatoes and a classic ranch seasoning pack. Microwave for five minutes, toss with the seasoning, and dinner's ready.

A Little Homestyle Ranch Microwave Ready Kits have an SRP of \$3.99 per tray.



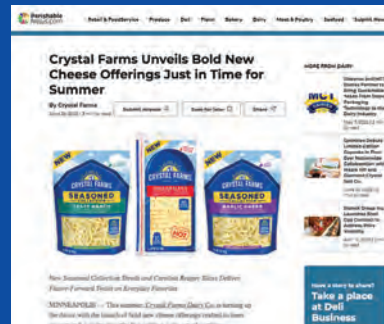


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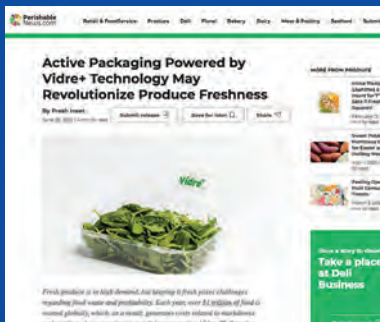
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Watermelon Tops 3.5 Billion Pounds at Retail

BY MEGAN MCKENNA

The watermelon category surpassed 3.5 billion pounds at retail in 2025, and new research from the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB) delivers a clear roadmap for sustained growth. The NWPB has released its *2025 State of the Category Marketing Guide*, equipping retailers, marketers, and category managers with fact-based insights to drive year-round watermelon sales.



The new research highlights how whole and cut watermelon play distinct, but complementary, roles throughout the year.

The findings point to three clear opportunities for the industry to maximize retail sales:

- Capitalize on the strong promotional performance of whole watermelon during spring and summer, even beyond traditional holiday windows. It consistently outperforms other melon varieties, delivering a stronger promotional lift with a smaller average discount.
- Leverage cut watermelon strategically in fall and winter, when it drives retail sales and growth as whole watermelon availability tightens.
- Utilize the regional insights in the guide to adapt pricing, distribution and merchandising strategies by region to unlock growth in both developed and emerging markets.

On an annual basis, whole watermelon remains the primary driver of retail volume, accounting for 79% of total pounds sold and contributing more than 41 million incremental pounds year over year.

Meanwhile, cut watermelon drives annual dollar sales, representing 49% of total sales and adding more than \$117 million in incremental growth. While both forms are essential to category health, their impact varies significantly by season and availability.

During the spring and summer seasons, whole watermelon stands as the clear category driver, accounting for 77% of annual retail volume and reaching an 86% share in June and July. On promotion, it outpaced both cantaloupe and honeydew, delivering +75% volume lift and +50% dollar lift on smaller discounts than either variety.

The data makes a compelling case for extending whole watermelon promotional support beyond traditional holiday windows, where significant incremental sales opportunities remain untapped.

As the calendar shifts to fall and winter, so does the opportunity. Cut watermelon becomes the category's primary dollar driver when whole-fruit availability declines, accounting for 49% of annual dollar sales and reaching a 70% share in December. With 30% of cut volume sold on promotion during the fall/winter season, it generates efficient lift and sustained dollar momentum at a time when overall category promotion softens, reinforcing its role as a critical driver for



**WATER
MELON
BOARD**

**2026 Marketing
Guide Preview**

available at watermelon.org

The National Watermelon Promotion Board's *State of the Category Marketing Guide* is a new tool for the watermelon industry, equipping retailers, marketers, and category managers with fact-based insights to drive watermelon sales year-round.

GRAPHIC COURTESY NWPB

maintaining sales outside peak summer months.

Regionally, the data makes one thing clear: Opportunity exists across the U.S.

The Plains led national performance with a +17% increase in volume versus 2021, demonstrating how well-developed regions can continue to expand.

In addition, wide pricing variation further underscores regional opportunities. For example, in the Great Lakes, cut watermelon is priced up to 835% higher than whole fruit, highlighting differences in value perception and merchandising strategies across markets.

Whether a region is developed or still emerging, the guide delivers insights to help retailers refine pricing, optimize distribution, and tailor promotional strategies to accelerate watermelon growth nationwide.

"Watermelon is a produce category performer, and we see significant opportunity for continued growth," says Mark Arney, executive director for the NWPB. "From extending whole watermelon promotions beyond the summer holidays to aligning promotional strategy and merchandising, the guide gives the industry the tools to drive year-round growth. We're excited to get it into their hands." **PB**

Megan McKenna is senior director of marketing and foodservice for NWPB. The NWPB invites all industry professionals, retailers, and stakeholders to leverage insights and actionable recommendations in the *State of the Category* report and *Marketing Guide*. For more information on accessing these resources or about the NWPB's initiatives, visit www.watermelon.org/audiences/industry/research/retail-research/.

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Carrots Taught Me the Power of Building a Brand

BY AMI BEN-DROR

I grew up in the fields. My childhood was spent on our farm, Dorot, harvesting whatever was in season — potatoes, garlic, wheat, watermelon and carrots. I come from a third generation of farmers. Working the land wasn't something I chose. It's in my bones.



But what I didn't understand back then was this: Growing a great product and building a great business are not the same thing.

For decades, the produce industry has operated as a commodity business. We grow. We pack. We ship. We compete on price. And for a long time, that model worked.

But when I came back to produce after studying business and marketing, I saw something

that didn't sit right. We were putting incredible effort into growing high-quality product, yet it was still being treated as interchangeable.

A carrot was a carrot.

That was the moment an idea started to form. What if it wasn't? What if a carrot could stand for something? What if it could have identity, consistency, and meaning beyond price? What is the added value that I could bring?

That thinking became the foundation of Dorot Farm.

When I first started exporting jumbo carrots from Israel to North America, most people focused on the operational challenges — logistics, shelf life, demand. They weren't wrong. But I was focused on something else.

I wasn't trying to move product. I was trying to build something people would recognize and trust.

A brand is not packaging. It is not a logo. A brand is a promise. For Dorot Farm, that promise is simple: fresh and sweet. But once you define that, everything has to align behind it.

Product has to deliver on that promise every time. That meant investing in how we grow, harvest, handle, and ship — not just for efficiency, but for consistency. Because if one container fails, the brand fails.

Customers are not just buyers. They are part of the brand. If they don't believe in it or can't sell it, it doesn't exist at the shelf. So, we worked with them on positioning, merchandising and movement — not just supply.

Over time, something changed. Customers stopped asking for

carrots and started asking for Dorot Farm.

A few years after I launched Dorot Farm in North America, customers in Europe started asking for the Dorot Farm brand and not just for carrots. It was then that I knew it had become a global brand, and we were on the right track. That's when you know you're no longer operating as a commodity supplier.

Vision is what allows you to stay on that path.

There were many moments where it would have been easier to go back — to chase volume, react to price, follow the market. But building a brand requires patience. Carrots sit in the ground for months. Decisions you make today show up much later. You can't think short-term and build something long-term at the same time.

That same vision is what led us to expand into rainbow carrots, yellow carrots, and baby carrots grown in California — not as random additions, but as extensions of the brand.

This is the shift I see happening across the industry. Consumers are looking for something they recognize and trust. Retailers want partners who can help drive sales, not just fill shelves.

That creates a divide: There will be companies that continue to operate on price and volume. And there will be companies that build brands. The ones that build brands will have stronger relationships, better positioning, and more control over their future.

But it's not easy. Building a brand requires consistency, discipline, and long-term thinking in an industry that often rewards short-term decisions. If you don't deliver, the brand breaks quickly.

If you ignore this shift, you become interchangeable. And when that happens, the only lever left is

price.

If you embrace it, the opportunity is significant. You can create differentiation, build loyalty, and move from being a supplier to something much more valuable.

For the next generation in this industry, my advice is simple. Start with a vision. Don't just think about what you grow. Think about what it stands for. Spend time in the fields, but also in the stores. Watch how people buy. Pay attention to what they recognize and trust.

Because that's where brands are built.

In the end, this business is not just about growing produce. It's about building something people ask for by name.

Customers are looking for our brand because they trust our quality, freshness and taste.

Ami Ben-Dror is founder and chief executive of BDA/Dorot Farm, with U.S. headquarters in Melville, NY.

A brand is not
packaging. It
is not a logo.
A brand is a
promise.

Leadership: How It's Evolving, and Why It Matters

BY THERESA LOWDEN

Leadership matters! It is the foundation that supports companies and organizations and builds the future. It's not just about authority or decision-making; it's about influence, vision, and the ability to fuel others toward a shared goal. Effective leadership fosters trust, nurtures development, and drives change.



Leading isn't just about managing; it's about mentoring. It's not about directing; it's about empowering. In our industry of constant change, leadership is what helps teams stay steady and keep moving forward. It matters because people matter.

Leadership touches people's lives every day. It's how we come together to build, to grow, and to move forward.

As our world becomes more connected — and more unpredictable — the need for leadership that is thoughtful, courageous, and compassionate will only grow stronger.

HOW LEADERSHIP IS EVOLVING

Leadership today is completely different than it was a generation ago. I've seen a gradual shift from traditional leadership to approaches that focus on collaboration, empathy and adaptability. When I started my career, leadership often meant "ruling with an iron fist" — a top-down approach where the leader had to be strong and stringent. Today, I roll up my sleeves alongside my team, regardless of my title.

In my own experience, leadership is also about being present for your team — leaning in when they're overwhelmed, and making sure no one feels left behind. In our fast-paced business, I often remind my team, "If you need help, I don't think you're not doing your job. We're in this together." It's not about handing off responsibility, but about building accountability and resilience, and creating an environment where empathy exists and everyone feels recognized, heard and appreciated.

Strong leadership now brings out the best in the team by delegating, trusting and creating a space for individualism. Mentorship is key, where a leader guides and supports rather than directing every move. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and then tariff uncertainties, our team faced relentless price increases and unpredictability. My role was to keep the team calm, encourage positive thinking, and remind them that challenges can be worked through together.

In the past, leaders were expected to have all the answers. Today, people want leaders who are real — willing to be open, admit

challenges, and connect on a human level. Qualities like transparency, vulnerability and emotional intelligence matter just as much as strategy or expertise.

Leadership used to mean overseeing every detail. But the best leaders now focus on lifting others up. I mentor younger team members, helping them manage stress and find work-life balance. Micromanagement is on its way out, and mentorship is what people value most.

Leadership is also being reshaped by the digital age. With remote work, AI, and teams spread across time zones, leaders need new skills like digital fluency and the ability to communicate effectively from anywhere. Our CEO, for example, has challenged us to embrace AI, and I encourage my team to use it to streamline tasks, freeing time to focus on growing our business and building relationships.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, leadership will be less about giving orders and more about building connections. Leaders of the future won't just make decisions, they'll bring people together, care about the bigger picture, and stand up for fairness and diversity.

People want to follow leaders who stand for something. Making a positive difference — whether in communities, the environment, or simply doing the right thing — will be at the heart of leadership. Outside of work, I'm involved with a nonprofit that helps families with children who have medical needs. Many of my industry peers are similarly engaged in their communities. Business is relationship-driven, and the passion we bring to our work often extends to making a difference beyond the office.

Change is constant, so leaders will need to stay curious, keep learning, and bounce back when things get tough. What matters most won't be titles or charisma, but humility and resilience. I encourage my team to embrace change, to never be afraid to try something new, and to see challenges as opportunities for growth.

Ultimately, leadership isn't about having every answer, it's about asking the questions that bring out the best ideas. It's about drawing on the wisdom of the group, rather than trying to carry everything alone. And it means shifting from leading with ego to leading with empathy — from trying to be the hero, to choosing to be the guide who helps others succeed.

The future will belong to those who can lead with vision and humility — leaders who know how to listen as well as speak, and who can turn challenges into opportunities that can be tackled together. Because leadership isn't just a title or a position, it's a responsibility. And it's one we all share.

Theresa Lowden is executive vice president, produce and floral at Mid Atlantic, for JOH, a regional food broker with offices throughout the Northeast and North Central U.S.

Foodservice Drives Fresh Produce Demand

BY MEGAN MCKENNA

Long before influencers inspired what we eat, foodservice was shaping the way we experience food. Restaurants, chefs and operators were the original influencers, making familiar items fresh, introducing new ingredients, and showing consumers what is possible on the plate. For fresh produce, this relationship drives demand from the plate back to the farm.

The roots of modern foodservice lie in communal dining, but it was the rise of restaurants in the 18th century that began to position chefs as trendsetters. Fast forward to today, and that influence has only accelerated. With restaurant industry sales projected to top \$1.5 trillion, according to the National Restaurant Association, foodservice remains one of the most powerful platforms for shaping consumer behavior. In fact, USDA data shows that nearly 59% of total U.S. food spending happens away from home,



reinforcing just how essential foodservice is to the way Americans eat.

So what does that mean? It means foodservice is a live test kitchen for produce. Chefs take what farmers grow and translate it into something craveable that's worth repeating at home. There is a shared passion that is hard to replicate. Spend five minutes with a grower talking about their crop, then step into a kitchen where a chef is building a dish around that same ingredient, and you see it immediately. Both are obsessed with flavor, appearance and what their final product says to the world.

More than 80% of operators say fresh produce is essential to their menus, according to insights from the International Fresh Produce Association. Produce in foodservice is projected to grow at a rate that slightly outpaces the overall industry. Foodservice has tight margins and constant change, so that kind of balanced growth signals real opportunity.

The produce industry has seen this foodservice-driven demand take hold. Think about the rise of avocados, once a niche item in many parts of the country, they became a staple thanks in part to menu penetration through guacamole and avocado toast. Mushrooms have followed a similar path, evolving from a side compo-

nent to a center-of-the-plate feature in plant-forward menus. Even mangos have followed a similar path, gaining traction as chefs introduced global flavors and applications.

And yes, watermelon has had its moments, too. From fresh juice bars to savory applications like salads, and even rind pickles or compressed flesh preparations, foodservice has helped expand how people think about using the whole fruit. It is always fun to see that lightbulb moment when someone realizes watermelon is more than a delicious summer slice.

Foodservice also plays a critical role in educating consumers about seasonality, as limited-time offers create excitement around peak flavors. The strong sense of season has traditionally been a defining strength of produce and foodservice. But is the conversation evolving? Today's consumer expects access to fresh produce year-round. Retail has set that expectation. Foodservice operators are increasingly building menus that feature produce across seasons, supported by a global supply chain.

This is not about abandoning seasonality, it is expanding the role of produce so it can deliver both consistency and an aha moment. A guest might fall in love with a dish in July, but they want to order a watermelon dish that's seasonally inspired in January. Foodservice has the ability to make that happen while still celebrating peaks along the way.

Produce-forward dishes continue to align with trends around freshness, health and global flavors, all while offering operators flavor diversity. For the produce industry, foodservice delivers scale, visibility and influence over how products are used. A new flavor pairing or technique from a chef creates a ripple effect. Consumers bring the experience home from retail, turning trial into habit.

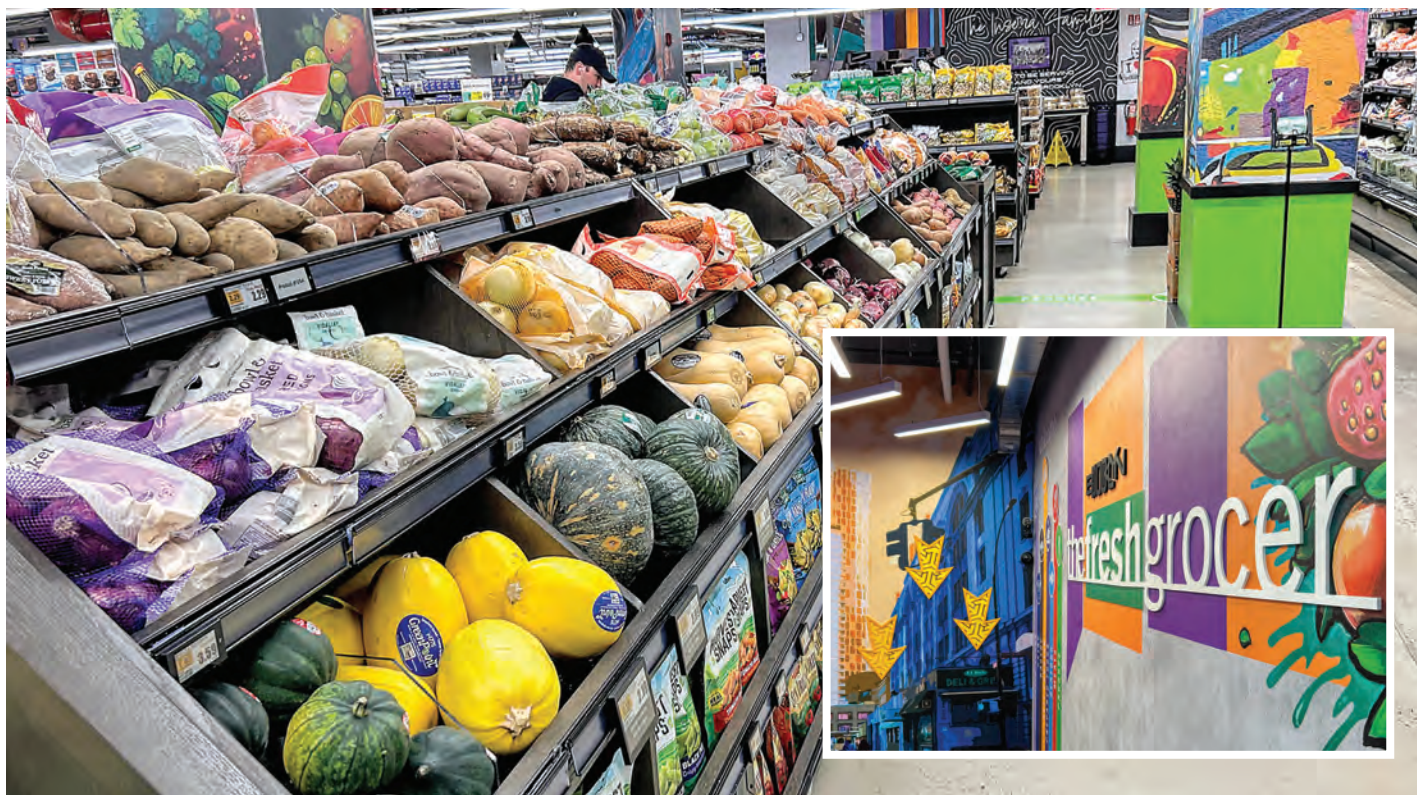
This is why continued collaboration between the produce industry and foodservice operators is so important. It is not just about selling more product. It is about growing consumption. The opportunity in front of us is significant. By leaning into foodservice, the produce industry connects with consumers through innovation in a way that feels authentic.

After all, trends may start online, but they truly come to life on the plate. Retail is part of where purchase happens, but foodservice is where the ideas begin. Sometimes, the next big idea starts with something as simple as reimagining a slice of watermelon.

Megan McKenna is senior director of marketing and foodservice for the National Watermelon Promotion Board, Winter Springs, FL.

PB

Retail is part of where purchase happens, but foodservice is where the ideas begin.



The Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn is an 18,000-square-foot store located near the commercial hub of the Fulton Street Mall. It has a produce-forward presentation that is designed to be welcoming and colorful.
 PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

The Fresh Grocer Debuts in New York City

Wakefern banner's fresh format is designed for busy shoppers.

BY MIKE DUFF

The Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn opened Feb. 13, marking the banner's New York City debut and bringing premium produce, prepared foods, a full-service butcher, bakery, seafood and floral departments to a populated urban landscape.

The 18,000-square-foot store, located near the bustling commercial hub of the Fulton Street Mall in Kings County, NY, has a produce-forward presentation designed to be as welcoming and colorful as the path to it. The store design is such that busy urbanites can quickly get what they need, whether it's to-go food or a full week's groceries.

The Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn is part of Inserra Supermarkets, Mahwah, NJ, a Wakefern Cooperative member established in 1954. The company operates 24 ShopRite supermarkets in New Jersey and New York, as well as a pair of Price Rite Marketplace stores and a Fresh Grocer, all three located in the Garden State. The Fresh Grocer banner is proprietary to Wakefern.

Lawrence Inserra III, president of Price Rite and Fresh Grocer at Inserra Supermarkets, says fitting into the Brooklyn neighborhood is

consistent with how the company plans its locations.

"As a family-owned company, we have always looked for neighborhoods where we can truly become part of the community, and downtown Brooklyn felt like a natural fit," he says. "Being right across from the Fulton Mall, this location is at the heart of a vibrant, high-traffic area where people live, work and shop every day."

"The Fresh Grocer format works especially well here because it's built for busy urban customers," Inserra adds. "We're able to bring our deep experience as grocers to the neighborhood and offer fresh, high-quality foods, prepared meals and everyday essentials all in one place, making it easy for shoppers to get what they need quickly without sacrificing quality."

SHOPPERS ON THE MOVE

In locating Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn, the ability to use a flexible format to service local consumers properly was key.

"We're serving a really diverse Brooklyn community, from families to young professionals to commuters and workers passing through

INSIDE THE STORE

the **fresh** grocer

The Fresh Grocer of Fulton St.
 523 Fulton St.,
 Brooklyn, NY 11201
 Hours: 7 a.m.-10 p.m., daily
www.thefreshgrocer.com



A single cold case section on the back wall features bagged salads with fresh-cut vegetables, along with packaged veggies, including those under Wakefern's Bowl & Basket private label. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO*

the area, and that's something we are very intentional about," says Inserra. "The store was designed to reflect those different needs and tastes, with everything from fresh produce and a full-service butcher to ready-made meals and grab-and-go options for customers on the move. We've also included a wide selection of international products and locally sourced items, so the store feels relevant and welcoming to the community it serves."

"Bringing this store to life has been a thoughtful process," Inserra adds, "and the team is proud to now welcome Brooklyn shoppers through the doors."

As they approach Fresh Grocer Brooklyn, customers encounter a colorfully decorated entryway, including a mural at the entrance celebrating the Inserra family legacy in the supermarket business.

In addition to the entryway graphics, the butcher shop department features unique artwork, which itself was inspired by the original New Jersey butcher shop owned by the Inserra family.

Throughout the produce section, vibrant fruit graphics decorate supporting columns, enhancing the department's visual engagement. On the floor, color-coded and labeled strips in green, red, blue and purple lead shoppers to produce, meats, seafood and prepared foods, respectively.

"Customers will find premium produce, a full-service butcher, a from-scratch bakery and a strong assortment of prepared foods, alongside national brands and Wakefern's award-winning private label products," says Inserra. "It's about giving shoppers plenty of choices."

The floor's green stripe turns into the produce section, leading



As shoppers enter The Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn's produce department, they encounter tub nuts, dried fruit and other potential grab-and-go edibles. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO*

through the floor displays to the wall-mounted cold case, where peppers, cucumbers and associated vegetables lead to a presentation of greens.

As shoppers enter the produce department, they encounter a small, but conspicuous, floral presentation, which fronts a run of tub nuts, dried fruit and other potential grab-and-go edibles.

A crate-style double fixture mounts stone fruit and avocados on an endcap during a midspring visit to Fresh Grocer. The floor fixtures continue down the aisle with multi-shelf displays of citrus, melons and tropicals.

Floor displays include herbs, vegetables, peppers, and tomatoes along the aisle. On the other side of the display, the store racks up a presentation of melons that share space with potatoes and onions.

A single cold case section on the back wall features bagged salads with some fresh-cut vegetables, along with packaged veggies, including those under Wakefern's Bowl & Basket private label.

FITTING IN

The Fresh Grocer produce section and store conception overall, as executed in Brooklyn, position the operation as a place where local shoppers who want a better, but reasonably priced, class of edibles can find satisfaction.

"What really sets The Fresh Grocer apart is that balance of quality, value and convenience," says Inserra.

"At its core, the store is about serving the community, something the Inserra family has been committed to for more than 70 years in the places where we operate grocery stores," says Inserra. "The Fresh Grocer of Brooklyn brings approximately 140 new jobs to the area and helps expand access to fresh, high-quality foods in a convenient location."

He says the team is focused on creating a welcoming, neighborhood feel, with in-store events, sampling and opportunities for customers to engage with the store.



Fresh produce is taking a larger role in foodservice, driven by consumer demand for healthier meals, global flavors, convenience, and plant-forward menu innovation.

PHOTO COURTESY NATURIFE

Produce Powers Foodservice

The top 10 foodservice trends and how fresh produce fits in.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Moo-ve over meat. Fresh fruits and vegetables are no longer relegated to garnish, add-ins, or supporting roles on restaurant plates. That became clear when *PRODUCE BUSINESS* reached out to nearly two dozen movers and shakers across the produce sector, from grower-shippers and marketers to distributors, wholesalers, commodity boards, industry experts and chefs.

We asked a simple question: What are the biggest macro trends shaping dining away from home today, and where does fresh produce fit in? Some answers were expected. Others were surprising. Together, they paint a revealing picture of produce's growing importance on the plate and the trend-driven opportunities ahead.

Here are the top 10 responses, ranked by how often each was mentioned.

1. HEALTH, WELLNESS & GLP-1s SHAPE MENUS

The single most powerful macro force driving fresh produce in foodservice is the consumer shift toward health-forward eating, according to Huy Do, market researcher and trendologist at Datassential, a Chicago, IL-headquartered food and beverage industry market research platform.

"Nearly 40% of consumers say they are more likely to purchase from foodservice venues offering healthy, better-for-you prepared meals — a figure that rises to 43% among Gen Z and 42% among Millennials, according to a November 2025 Datassential study. Fresh produce sits at the center of that conversation."

BY THE NUMBERS

- 55% of GLP-1 users are purchasing more fresh produce.



- Nearly 40% of consumers are more likely to purchase from foodservice venues offering healthy, better-for-you meals, with that rising to 43% among Gen Z and 42% among Millennials.

- Prepped produce formats are growing 8% year over year, as operators increasingly turn to fresh-cut, washed and value-added products to reduce labor and improve efficiency.

Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, sweet potatoes, broccoli, and carrots are having a moment in foodservice.

PHOTO COURTESY
TAYLOR FARMS



Healthful eating priorities are also accelerating as more people use GLP-1s, and Gen Alpha places a higher priority on healthy living than the previous generation, adds Amy Myrdal Miller, MS, RDN, FAND, founder and president of Farmer's Daughter Consulting, in Carmichael, CA, and the nutrition and foodservice director for CA GROWN.

"Restaurants are using certain foods, like kale, berries, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, and avocados, to attract diners looking for better-for-me options," says Myrdal Miller. "These produce items all have strong health halos regardless of what they are paired with on menus."

An estimated 10 to 30 million Americans are currently taking GLP-1 medications, such as Ozempic, Wegovy, or Zepbound, for weight loss and type 2 diabetes, according to an August 2025 report from the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, Hyattsville, MD. This represents between 7% to 12% of the U.S. adult population, with projections that this number will reach 25 to 30 million Americans by 2030.

Fifty-five percent of GLP-1 users are purchasing more produce, according to the April 14, 2026, report, *Halo Effect of GLP-1s Signals New Consumer Lifestyle and Health and Wellness Trends*, by the Acosta Group, a global sales and marketing agency in Jacksonville, FL.

"These treatments shift consumers' focus toward smaller portions, maximum nutrient density, and flawless quality and flavor," says Tom Smith, vice president of sales and marketing for California Giant Berry Farms, in Watsonville, CA. "This means operators will increasingly rely on year-round availability of berries to keep these high-margin,

health-driven options consistently on the menu."

Interestingly, GLP-1 medications may change how foods taste. A March 2025 study from the University of Pennsylvania found that these drugs can dull the intensity of the five basic tastes. For vegetables, like cabbage, that may mean less bitterness, making it easier for some people to enjoy.

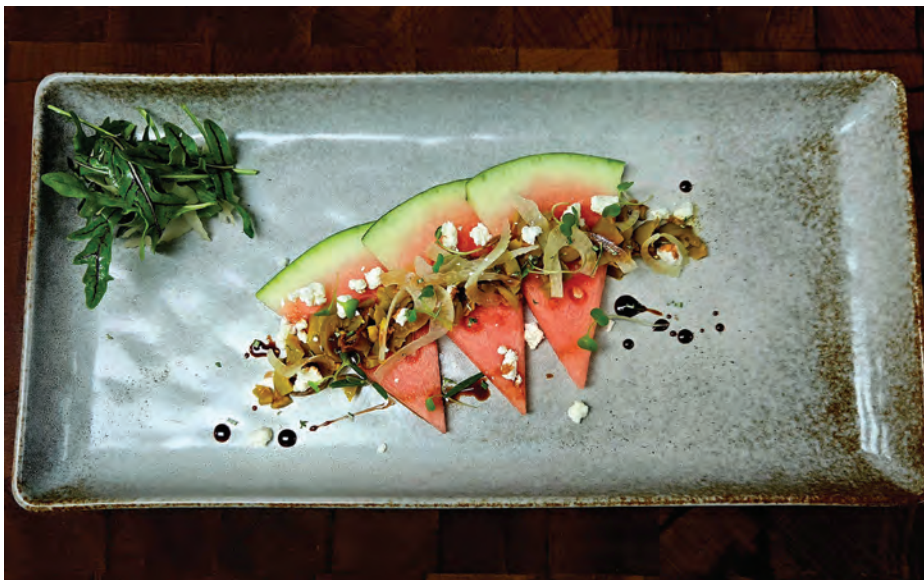
"Broadliners are struggling to keep sales high and costs low, so they are shifting to more produce to bring down the price," says Jeff Church, chief operations officer of Church Brothers, Salinas, CA, which acquired Mann Packing and its key assets late last year.

Some casual restaurant chains offer a great example. "Instead of serving plain iceberg lettuce, of which we've seen iceberg fatigue, they're adding other affordable vegetables like red cabbage to create a more colorful, eye-catching mix," adds Loree Dowse, vice president of marketing and communications.

Dowse adds Little Gem Lettuce, a cross between romaine and butter lettuce, is seeing adoption at high-end restaurants.

While diners want healthier options, they are not willing to sacrifice.

"Consumers expect healthy foods to taste great, and operators will continue looking for produce with stronger flavor, better texture, and a more premium eating experience," says Ashley Finster, vice president of marketing for Naturipe Farms, in Salinas, CA. "Through breeding and genetics work, we're focused on delivering berries with exceptional taste, texture and consistency. This creates opportunities for fresh berries to play an even bigger role across menus, beverages, snacking and culinary innovation."



Chef Christopher Delissio created this Watermelon with Tangerine Chili Olives. In 2025, Delissio was one of 12 winners in the Kitchen Collaborative culinary menu ideation competition with another entry, Togarashi-Crusted Watermelon with Spicy Hoisin-Honey Chili Crunch Sauce and Pickled Watermelon Rind. The National Watermelon Promotion Board sponsored him in the competition.
PHOTO COURTESY CHRISTOPHER DELISSIO

2. APPETITES GROW FOR FUNCTIONAL FOODS

Chef Jill Overdorf, founder and president of The Produce Ambassador, a consulting firm based in Torrance, CA, notes the allure of fresh produce goes beyond being “healthy.”

“Fresh fruits and vegetables as functional, feel-good foods are rooted in the idea of produce doing a job: fiber, freshness, hydration, satiety and recovery, with flavoring still carrying the sale.”

Functional greens associated with specific wellness benefits include spinach, arugula, romaine, green kale and multi-leaf varieties. On the fiber-forward side, says Lisa Hearne, senior vice president of foodservice sales and marketing for Taylor Farms, in Salinas, CA, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, sweet potatoes, broccoli, and carrots “are having a moment.”

“Side vegetable options are always top of mind for us; it’s where we bring value-added solutions that make easy work for chefs while driving menu differentiation for customers.”

Produce as functional fuel also puts produce at the center of the plate, adds Jin Ju Wilder, chief executive officer of Vesta Foodservice, in Santa Fe Springs, CA, dba L.A. Specialty Produce Co.

“For sourcing, this means more organic where it matters to the guest, specialty and heirloom varieties, and a real spotlight on mushrooms, where provenance and freshness become part of the story,” she notes. “Prep examples include mushroom-forward mains, bean-and-grain bowls, blended

mushroom-and-beef burgers, and vegetable-centric small plates.”

Functional fuel is most visible in chef-driven and fast-casual restaurants, plus wellness-oriented hospitality and health-care, adds Wilder.

“Value cuts across every channel, but bites hardest where budgets are fixed, like colleges and universities, K-12 and health-care. What follows is that healthcare and education tend to adopt what restaurants prove out, so functional, plant-forward menus will deepen there as patient- and student-experience expectations rise.”

3. LABOR-SAVING SOLUTIONS

This third macro trend is less sexy, but maybe most important. That is, the nitty-gritty problems of running a foodservice operation remain key for operators, says Mike Kostyo, vice president of Menu Matters, a food and beverage industry consulting firm in Arlington, VT.

“When you talk to them about fresh produce, you hear the same concerns repeatedly. They are afraid of waste, of extra labor having to break down fresh produce, of produce going bad when prices are so high, and of getting bad or inconsistent quality.”

This leads operators to debate the pros and cons of buying fresh produce, adds Wade Hanson, senior principal, advisory practice, at Technomic, a Chicago, IL-headquartered food and foodservice consulting and market research firm. “Fresh produce requires employee prep, or buying labor-saving produce typically is a higher-cost product. These are debates that are



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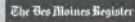


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Produce brings texture, color, flavor and flexibility to the menu, like these fingerling potato street tacos.

PHOTO COURTESY GRIMMWAY PRODUCE GROUP

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happening among foodservice decision makers daily.”

On top of this, diners still expect meals that feel fresh, scratch-made, and elevated, even as operators streamline back-of-house operations, according to Lisa McNeece, senior vice president of foodservice and ingredient sales at the Grimmway Produce Group in Bakersfield, CA.

“That is driving strong demand for value-added produce solutions, like fresh-cut vegetables, prepared salad blends, convenience potatoes, and grab-and-go offerings, that help improve efficiency while still delivering flavor and appearance.”

Fast-casual, QSRs, hospitals, and education are all ordering more pre-cut and washed produce because these operations are driven by the need for speed, consistency, and reduced labor, says Deena Ensworth, senior content manager for the Markon Cooperative in Salinas, CA.

“We introduce new products year-round to keep our offerings fresh and on trend. This summer and fall, we plan to debut several more thoughtful products that meet chefs’ needs and customers’ cravings.”

A new value-added innovation initiative is kicking off this year for watermelon: compressed watermelon.

“The vacuum process not only enhances



Fast-casual, QSRs, hospitals, and education are all ordering more pre-cut and washed produce because operations are driven by the need for speed, consistency, and reduced labor.

PHOTO COURTESY MARKON

flavor, but should improve shelf life and reduce labor prep time,” says Megan McKenna, senior director of foodservice and marketing for the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB), in Winter Springs, FL.

“There is a strong domestic opportunity, with prepped formats growing 8% year over year and appearing more frequently on menus globally. As part of the board’s broader foodservice strategy, innovations, like compressed watermelon, can help operators rethink how watermelon can deliver across menus and months.”

4. SUPPLY CHAIN STABILITY & AI ADOPTION DRIVE SOURCING

Supply chain turbulence is one of the realities stakeholders across the fresh produce industry must contend with, according to Jordan Grainger, vice president of sales and business development at Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, in Detroit, MI.

“Tariffs, labor shortages, and rising fuel costs are issues causing

costs to rise, making it more difficult to compete on price. We work with our foodservice customers to absorb the strain. This may mean combining deliveries and optimizing our routes, or bulk ordering to keep costs down.”

Operators also want suppliers who communicate well, understand their business, and can provide dependable supply when conditions become challenging, says Grimmway’s McNeece.

“That has increased the focus on diversified growing regions, strong coordination across the supply chain, and long-term partnerships built around consistency and trust. In today’s environment, reliability has become just as important as product quality itself.”

From a preparation and menu planning standpoint, reliability directly impacts an operator’s ability to execute consistently across locations and seasonal promotions, McNeece adds. “Operators need confidence that products will be available and support menu consistency over time.”

AI is becoming a tool that separates good vendors from great



Foodservice operators are leaning into freshness, seasonality and flavor in a bigger way, and that opens more doors to fresh produce. And today's diners are looking for unique, visually striking menu experiences.

PHOTO COURTESY GRIMMWAY PRODUCE GROUP

ones, and there's a race to develop solutions that automate processes and alleviate operational pain points, says Grainger. "Companies are looking to AI to create a strategic advantage, such as predictive analysis for ordering, to help them get ahead, especially in the current environment."

5. PRODUCE POWERS GLOBAL FLAVORS

Produce is a great ingredient, but there must be a tie to the menu, adds the NWPB's McKenna. "Global flavors allow produce to tell origin stories, as well as inspire with interesting flavors. Watermelon is a great fit because it pairs well with sweet, savory, spicy, salty, and acidic flavors."

One such standout is Chef Christopher Delissio's Togarashi-Crusted Watermelon with Spicy Hoisin-Honey Chili Crunch Sauce and Pickled Watermelon Rind, one of 12 winners in the 2025 Kitchen Collaborative culinary menu ideation competition.

Delissio, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, serves as corporate executive chef for Intermountain Health, headquartered in Salt Lake City, UT, which operates 38 hospital cafes and bistros. The NWPB sponsored him in the competition.

"Grilling fruit is something we've seen for 10 to 20 years, but crusting the fruit first is new," he says, adding that the bite-sized, cube-shaped cut of watermelon featured at the center of the plate in his recipe resembles seared tuna. "We purchase whole watermelons so that we can pickle the rind. Other creative ways we prepare watermelon are with fennel in a salad, and watermelon pizza with olives and feta."

Mangos are another good example. "Global flavor trends are expanding how mangos are used, pushing them beyond traditional fruit applications into savory and cross-cultural dishes, such as curries, salsas, sauces, marinades, bowls, beverages, and handhelds across all dayparts," says Lavanya Setia, director of marketing for the National Mango Board, in Orlando, FL.

6. PLANT-FORWARD IS EVOLVING ALONGSIDE PROTEIN-FORWARD MENUS

Protein may be driving menu conversations right now, but produce is evolving alongside it, rather than competing against it, according to Grimmway's McNeece.

"Produce brings texture, color, flavor, and flexibility to protein-forward menus across multiple menu applications while helping operators create meals that feel balanced without losing craveability."

Plant-forward dining is no longer a niche, but it's expanding into mainstream urban markets and diverse culinary scenes, says Nicholas Gonring, consulting chef and center of the plate specialist for the Great Lakes West Division of Gordon Food Service, in Wyoming, MI.

"Vegetables on menus are now found next to preparatory methods like smoking, curing, sous vide, confit, fermenting, fireroasting, yakitori grilling, spit roasting (roisserie) and more."

Gonring explains one factor for this approach's success is that diners cannot replicate these elaborate techniques at home. "Unprecedented menus drive new opportunities to deliver exclusive customer experiences. Additionally, during a period when our economic climate is characterized by inflation and rising energy



Restaurants are using certain foods, like berries in this Chia Breakfast Pudding, to attract diners looking for better-for-me options. PHOTO COURTESY MARKON

costs, dining out for the average person has become less affordable. Their spend must bring more to the table than just a meal; it has to be memorable, more experiential."

7. REAL FOOD REIGNS

One of the clearest trends from diners is the continued demand for "real" food, according to Menu Matters' Kostyo.

"When we asked them what claims or messages they wanted from food brands, the No. 1 option they wanted was that foods were 'made with real ingredients.' This is a real opportunity for fresh produce. Foodservice operators should display fresh produce whenever possible. Display it if you have an open kitchen. Menu lots of options that showcase produce in its whole state."

8. LOCAL, SEASONAL & SOCIAL: THE NEW MENU FORMULA

There are more requests for domestic and local sourcing, as customers want to know where their produce comes from and support community growers, says Grainger of Ben B. Schwartz.

"Given rising transportation costs, domestic sourcing is having a big moment," Grainger says. "Locally grown produce helps eliminate unnecessary transportation costs, which appeals to all channels. However, we're seeing greater interest for these types of commodities from the restaurant and hospitality audiences who build menus around specific ingredients, seasonality, or local tie-ins."

From a marketing standpoint, Naturipe's Finster adds, operators are leaning into freshness, seasonality, and flavor in a bigger way.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Chefs are also thoughtfully re-imagining ways to transform fresh produce through unorthodox techniques, swapping the places where most would expect meat to receive such treatments."**

Nicholas Gonring, Great Lakes West Division of Gordon Food Service, Wyoming, MI

- **"Restaurants are using certain foods, like kale, berries, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, and avocados, to attract diners looking for better-for-me options. These produce items all have strong health halos regardless of what they are paired with on menus."**

Amy Myrdal Miller, Farmer's Daughter Consulting, Carmichael, CA

"We're seeing more limited-time menu items, seasonal promotions, and holiday tie-ins like spring berry cocktails, summer smoothie campaigns, or strawberry-inspired desserts during peak season."

On the social side, today's diners are looking for unique, visually striking menu experiences, says California Giant's Smith. "The specific visual trends and social media platforms driving this trend will change rapidly, making individual presentation fads relatively short-lived. However, the underlying consumer desire for unique, vibrant, and flavor-forward dining experiences is permanent."

9. PRODUCE MOVES VALUE BEYOND PRICE

Consumers are becoming more intentional about foodservice spending, making value about more than just price, says Ken Melban, president of the California Avocado Commission, in Irvine, CA. "California avocados fit well within this trend because they help operators deliver a more premium experience while supporting demand for fresh, locally grown, wholesome ingredients."

Part of this trend are products, like produce, with a purpose to enhance the customer experience, adds Gordon Food Service's Gonring. "Operators are battling commodity pressure on key produce items and rising costs by leveraging value-added produce. Where that labor has been saved, it has been directed toward menu innovation that directly impacts the customer experience."

Gonring offers finger limes as an example.

"They are the only citrus that's not consumed in its liquid form. Each small pearl bursts in your mouth, offering an unparalleled sensory experience, while several varieties produce unique pearl colors that make upping your garnish game a breeze."

10. SNACKING HITS THE MENU

Snacking remains one of the fastest-growing foodservice segments, especially among Gen Z consumers, says NMB's Setia.

"Snacking trends are driving more portable, single-serve, and handheld mango applications, including snack cups, smoothies, wraps, parfaits, salsas, and frozen or blended items. Mango's natural sweetness, color, and texture make it a strong fit for on-the-go and all-day snacking menus, especially in fast-paced dining and campus environments."

In the end, says Grimmway's McNeece, while trends may shift over time, "fresh produce consistently remains relevant because it brings freshness, flavor, color, versatility, and authenticity to the menu, and those qualities continue to matter across every segment of foodservice." **PB**



Fresh, colorful and packed with seasonal flavor, summer salads showcase the best of the produce department, while offering consumers a light, healthy meal option.

PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

Sell Summer Salads That Sparkle

Novel ingredients can ignite sales.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

As spring moves into summer, and the temperatures heat up, the produce industry shifts into summer salad season — a time of the year that is growing in importance. However, there is much more to summer salads than simple leafy greens. With the right kind of inspiration, shoppers are open to embracing specialty vegetables, as well as fruits, as the perfect ingredients to give a summer salad extra color, flavor and zip.

Based in Le Grand, CA, J. Marchini Farms is best known for growing three radicchio varieties — radicchio, Treviso and Castelfranco, which it supplies year-round. New for 2026, J. Marchini is expanding its Tuscan kale crop, a leaf also known as Lacinato kale or Dino kale.

According to Marissa Marchini, Tuscan kale, with its sturdy leaves and earthy flavor, pairs well with the bitterness of radicchio in a salad. “Tuscan kale does well in the summer heat, considering its sturdy leaves don’t wilt like other types of lettuces,” she says. “It’s the perfect addition to any summer salad.”

Away from leafy vegetables, J. Marchini also has summer figs available between June and August.

Marchini believes both products fit neatly into a market-wide trend for loading salads with non-traditional ingredients, from in-season fruits and vegetables to chickpeas and global flavors, all of which are transforming the summer salad into a complete meal.

Summer naturally drives increased demand for leafy greens as consumers shift toward lighter meals, outdoor dining, grilling, and healthier eating habits, says Loree Dowse, vice president of marketing and communications, Church Brothers Farms, Salinas, CA.

According to Alex Jackson, vice president of sales and marketing

at Los Alamitos, CA-based Frieda’s Branded Produce, consumers are moving away from boring, predictable salads.

“They’re using whatever ingredients they have available, rather than following strict recipes,” she says. “It’s more about the experience of making something and balancing the flavor elements: sweet, savory, crunchy and acidic. Specialty produce can complement familiar ingredients in the fridge and make them feel new.”

Jackson argues the produce department should be viewed as a place of discovery, not a checklist that looks identical year after year. To achieve this effect, she advocates stocking items that give shoppers “something to figure out and a clear payoff when they do.”

For B&W Quality Growers in Fellsmere, FL, flavor and nutrition are a central focus for summer salads, with the company benefiting from the ability of its top performers — watercress and baby arugula — to fit into today’s wellness trends.

“During the summer, consumers naturally shift toward lighter meals, fresh salads, and simple seasonal recipes,” says B&W’s marketing manager, Anna Klawitter. “Watercress fits well into that trend because it adds fresh flavor and exceptional nutritional value, while baby arugula remains popular for its versatility and distinctive taste.”

SUMMER MERCHANDISING

When it comes to effective merchandising of summer salads, Dowse at Church Brothers says retailers achieve the most consistent results when they promote salads as part of a complete meal solution, rather than treating them as a stand-alone category. “Cross-merchandising helps shoppers envision complete meals and encourages larger basket sizes.”

Dowse also recommends showcasing different greens and usage occasions to drive incremental sales and category engagement, given that consumers often purchase the same salad items repeatedly.



Berries can make salads more fulfilling, says Jerry Moran, vice president of sales at Salinas, CA-headquartered Naturipe Farms. "That matters because consumers are looking for meals that are both health-forward and filling." PHOTO COURTESY NATURIFE

Klawitter advocates making it easy for shoppers by offering both healthy foods and inspiration for quick meal ideas.

"We see the best results when retailers pair products with simple recipes, nutritional messaging, and complementary items," she says.

Based in Santa Maria, CA, Babé Farms has introduced several specialty lettuce items, which, according to Marketing Manager Matt Hiltner, are aimed at elevating fresh salads beyond standard bagged options.

In Hiltner's opinion, retailers can create stronger displays by cross-merchandising specialty salad greens with seasonal and complementary items, such as stone fruit, berries, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, carrots, herbs, dressings, cheeses and nuts.

"Because leafy greens are especially sensitive during the warmer months, hydration and rotation are key," Hiltner advises. "Regular misting, proper refrigeration, and attentive display maintenance help preserve freshness and shelf appeal."

"Retail teams should routinely inspect displays, remove any bruised, wilted, or decaying leaves, and keep the product looking clean, full and inviting."

Hiltner also recommends merchandising specialty items "in a way that feels approachable" by employing clear signage, usage suggestions, and simple recipe ideas. "When consumers can visualize the finished dish, they are much more likely to try something new."

Marchini recommends focusing on ways salads can be included in group settings — such as a family barbecue — given that summer is traditionally a social time of the year.

INSPIRE SHOPPERS

Jackson, at Freida's, believes nearly any produce items can become a salad ingredient. "Retailers can inspire shoppers by showing them how unique fruits and vegetables fit into today's creative salad trends, rather than treating them as stand-alone ingredients."

To achieve this, Jackson argues signage should answer "what can I do with this?" not just "what is this?"

Growing year-round in climate-controlled greenhouses in cities across the country, Brooklyn, NY-headquartered Gotham Greens recently launched single-serve "Grab & Go Salads," which feature greenhouse-grown lettuce with toppings and dressings.

Jodi Genshaft, the company's vice president of marketing, recommends combining produce with prepared foods, such as placing fresh basil near tomatoes for summer caprese salads.

Located in Los Angeles, CA, Robert Schueller at Melissa's Produce advises using endcaps of tomato varieties during the peak of the June-September domestic season, as well as signage that suggests new salad combinations.

WHAT'S NEXT: THREE TRENDS SHAPING SALADS

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Loree Dowse, vice president of marketing and communications, Church Brothers Farms, Salinas, CA, predicts three key trends will continue to shape the salad category.

- Products offering unique textures, flavors, and restaurant-inspired appeal.
- Retailers who offer both conventional and organic options are better positioned to meet a wider range of consumer preferences.
- Versatility is becoming increasingly important.

"Consumers want products that can be used across multiple occasions," says Dowse. "Whole-leaf products that deliver flexibility are particularly well-positioned for summer."

THINK BEYOND THE WET RACK

Of course, salads aren't just about leafy greens. Headquartered in Wenatchee, WA, Stemilt Growers offers apples, pears and cherries, which can make a great addition to a packaged or homemade salad, according to Marketing Director Brianna Shales.

"Apples and pears offer a great fiber boost with natural sweetness to salads, while cherries are a seasonal favorite in the summer for fruit salads or even paired with leafy greens, goat cheese and walnuts."

To make the most of the seasonal potential, particularly for cherries, Shales recommends a prominent position with ample shelf space to help drive impulse sales.

"Salads are no longer just a meal complement; they are now a main component of dinner that people utilize for convenience, nutrition and often add proteins, too," says Shales.

Another complementary product category approaching peak season is California berries. Chris Christian, vice president, market insights, at the California Strawberry Commission in Watsonville, CA, says retailers can make the most of the season by maintaining large primary displays of strawberries, supported by in-store price reductions and loyalty card savings.

Also based in Watsonville, California Giant Berry Farms offers conventional and organic strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries for summer salads.

For effective merchandising, California Giant's director of marketing, Kyla Oberman, advocates building a clearly designated, high-traffic area in the produce section that acts as a one-stop summer salad station, using a prominent endcap or themed display table. "Keep the visual inspiration front and center with highly visible signage or recipe cards featuring innovative berry-forward salad ideas."

Cross-merchandising is also crucial, according to Oberman, who recommends placing mini-displays of fresh berries directly adjacent to packaged salad kits, or merchandising whole-head lettuce and artisanal greens alongside clamshells to capture impulse purchases.

"Berries can help make salads more fulfilling and heartier," says Jerry Moran, vice president of sales at Salinas, CA-headquartered Naturipe Farms. "That matters because consumers are looking for meals that are both health-forward and filling."

To take advantage of this trend, Moran recommends ensuring a strong visual presentation with colorful displays that signal freshness and peak-season quality. "Retailers tend to see success when they keep berry displays full and located in multiple areas throughout the store during key summer moments, like holidays, cookouts and back-to-school season."

SALAD SUCCESSES

Klawitter says B&W has experienced success with retailers who go beyond simply stocking the product, and instead help tell its story. Such examples she cites include recipes, nutrition messaging, social media support, retail dietitian involvement, and in-store sampling, all of which perform well because they help consumers feel more confident trying something new.

Hiltner makes special mention of Taylor's Market in Sacramento, CA, which he says has done a great job merchandising Babé's specialty lettuces and Blonde Frisée. "They pack the product into clamshells and label it at store level, which helps make the item easier for consumers to identify, protects the product, and can help improve shelf life."

Jackson says Freida's has achieved strong results with retailers when the visual appeal of its products is supplemented with customer education. "Watermelon radish, for example, is beautiful when it's cut, so show shoppers the interior with signage or samples," she explains.

Similarly, Melissa's Schueller says his company has achieved effective results with customized signage and point-of-sale material designed to educate and inspire shoppers to add creative salad components.

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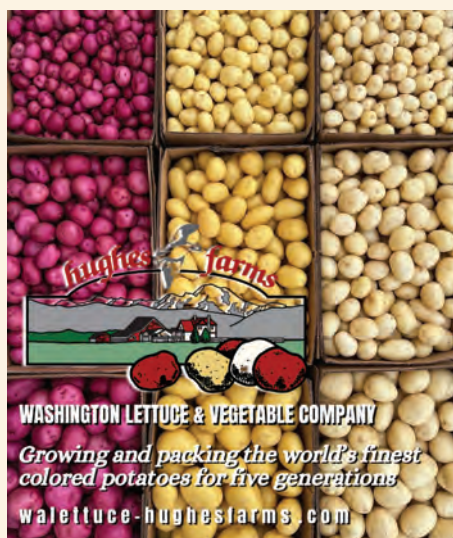
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Chefs nationwide are reimagining the iconic burger with a blended burger version, featuring finely chopped mushrooms with meat for more delicious, nutritious and sustainable burgers. PHOTO COURTESY MUSHROOM COUNCIL

Mushrooms Bring Magic To Menus

Mushrooms check several boxes at once: flavor, versatility, nutrition, value and efficiency.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Few ingredients offer chefs as much creative freedom as mushrooms.

In fact, Chef Spike Mendelsohn, a Washington, D.C.-based restaurateur and charismatic fan favorite on Bravo's *Top Chef*, calls mushrooms "one of the most interesting ingredients in the world."

Mendelsohn is known for his plant-based, fast-casual empire, PLNT Burger, a 13-location chain across six states with locations that range from kiosks inside Whole Foods Markets to stand-alone eateries in New York City and Boston.

"They have so many different textures," Mendelsohn says, "and can be enjoyed in a variety of preparations, from dried, roasted, pickled and raw, and readily absorb marinades and seasonings, making them adaptable across cuisines and cooking techniques."

The chef's menus feature everything from oyster and maitake mushrooms to lion's mane, which he says is "having their moment right now." At PLNT, he uses the root of yellow oyster mushrooms, something typically thrown away but entirely edible, nutritious, and delicious, prepared akin to fried chicken and served as the chain's "Chik'n Funguy" sandwich.

Mushrooms, thanks to their popularity and versatility, are ubiquitous on today's foodservice menus. More than 70% of U.S. restaurant menus feature mushrooms, spanning all formats ranging from QSR to fine dining, according to 2025 data supplied by the Mushroom Council, based in Lee's Summit, MO.

WHY MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms on the menu are a plus, for diners and foodservice operators alike, because they check several boxes at once: flavor, versatility, nutrition, value and operational efficiency.

"For consumers, mushrooms deliver rich umami, a satisfying texture, and a real food alternative to highly processed meat substitutes," says Sean Steller, director of business development at Phillips Mushroom Farms, in Kennett Square, PA.

"The broader trend has shifted from strictly vegan positioning toward flexitarian, plant-forward, and protein-optimized eating," he adds. "Mushrooms fit that very well because they can complement meat, stretch proteins, or stand alone as the center of the plate."

He cites National Restaurant Association's 2026 forecast which highlights comfort, health, value, and bold flavor as major menu drivers, all of which align closely with mushrooms.

On the operator side, the biggest trends are menu versatility, labor savings, consistency and value creation, says Jim Garsow, chief marketing officer for Caputo & Guest, in Kennett Square, PA.

"Mushrooms offer a very high culinary return for the cost because they add flavor, texture, visual appeal, nutrition, and menu flexibility," he stresses. "One case can support multiple menu items, such as breakfast, bowls, burgers, pizzas, pastas, soups, sides, appetizers,



Mushrooms + creativity = menu hits with diners. Based in Kennett Square, PA, grower-distributor Caputo & Guest created a recipe for lion's mane crab cakes, an elevated, plant-based alternative to seafood.

PHOTO COURTESY CAPUTO & GUEST

and plant-forward entrées, all while providing the consistent supply, sizing, yield, shelf life, food safety confidence, and simplified kitchen execution operators need in today's labor-challenged foodservice environment."

Mushrooms can be cost savers, adds Leslie Harden, national retail sales director for Monterey Mushrooms, in Watsonville, CA. This is especially true "when compared to current escalating meat costs."

Michael Basciani Sr., chief executive officer and president of Basciani Foods, a fourth-generation mushroom grower in Avondale, PA, agrees. "Take a 10-pound box of sliced white mushrooms. There are about 2,000 slices on average. Operators who put 20 to 25 slices on each pie (pizza) have enough for about 95. Said another way, a 10-pound box of small button mushrooms has 350-400 mushrooms. Using 8 to 9 on a side dish, that's 40 to 50 portions. And a 5-pound box of portobello caps has about 100-150 caps. For a 4-cap appetizer, that's 25 to 35 servings. The value is incredible."

Mushroom varieties most often appearing on foodservice menus include white button, crimini (aka baby bella), portobello, and shiitake, with oyster, king trumpet, maitake, beech, and lion's mane, according to Cristie Mather, vice president of marketing for the Mushroom Council.

"Consumer interest in global cuisines and novelty on the menu has inspired chefs' innovation with mushrooms and mushroom varieties."

FROM TOPPING TO TOP BILLING

Pizza reigns supreme when it comes to mushroom applications, making up more than 20% of mushroom menu mentions, according to 2025 data from the Mushroom Council.

On pizza menus specifically, mushrooms are being positioned as a central flavor system rather than a simple topping. An example from a September 2025 Datassential report highlights a cauliflower crust pizza built around house-made mushroom bisque, roasted garlic, crimini and shiitake mushrooms, mozzarella, and truffle oil, according to Huy Do, market researcher and trendologist at Datassential, Chicago, IL.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Mushrooms offer a very high culinary return for the cost because they add flavor, texture, visual appeal, nutrition and menu flexibility."**

Jim Garsow, Caputo & Guest, Kennett Square, PA

- **"Consumer interest in global cuisines and novelty on the menu has inspired chefs' innovation with mushrooms and mushroom varieties."**

Cristie Mather, Mushroom Council, Lee's Summit, MO

"This build treats mushrooms as the architectural core of the dish. Truffle oil and black truffle more broadly remain prominent premium cues on specialty pizza menus, reinforcing that mushroom-adjacent luxury flavors continue to drive menu innovation in that segment."

Beyond pizza, mushrooms serve as an elevated topping for flatbreads, burgers, sandwiches, omelets, steakhouse sides and loaded appetizers.

"Operators are moving beyond basic sliced mushrooms into named specialty varieties and chef's blends," says Caputo & Guests' Garsow. "Shiitake is one of the strongest foodservice varieties because it has broad menu versatility, strong umami, a familiar culinary profile, and excellent performance in both cooked and value-added applications."

Mushrooms' versatility also extends to blended meat applications and center-of-the-plate dishes.

"Mushrooms work very well in blended burgers, meatballs, tacos, dumplings, meat sauces, and breakfast sausage-style applications because they improve moisture, texture and flavor, while helping operators manage food cost," says Garsow.

Chefs are featuring innovative mushroom mains on menus,



Today's operators are looking for ingredients that are easy to prepare, reduce labor, and perform consistently without sacrificing flavor. Mushrooms fit the bill. Bacon-wrapped trumpet peppers, anyone? PHOTO COURTESY CAPUTO & GUEST

giving more attention to specialty varieties, adds Phillips' Steller. "A few examples include oyster mushrooms fried or roasted for a meaty bite; shiitakes bringing deep umami to ramen, stir-fries, and sauces; maitake roasted or seared; royal trumpet sliced into 'scallops' or grilled; and lion's mane cutlets."

Mushrooms are equally at home in Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Mediterranean, and modern American cuisine. "We see chefs using shiitake in ramen and dumplings, oyster mushrooms in tacos and bao, king oyster in Japanese-inspired seared dishes, and maitake in tempura or steakhouse-style preparations," Garsow adds.

SAMPLES BY SEGMENT

Today's operators are looking for ingredients that are easy to prepare, reduce labor, and perform consistently without sacrificing flavor, says Lisa Will, commercial director at South Mill Champs in Kennett Square, PA.

"Fresh-cut mushrooms, including sliced and diced formats, help streamline kitchen operations while maintaining quality," she adds.

For prepared mushrooms, Will sees excitement growing around blends and flavor profiles that deliver with simple execution. "Examples include a blend of white, crimini, shiitake enrobed in oil with salt, pepper and garlic, a roasted white and shiitake mushrooms with onions, peppers and an Asian seasoning, used as is or to layer additional flavors."

• **QSR & FAST CASUAL.** In this foodservice segment, mushrooms are often used to add flavor and perceived quality to familiar items, such as mushroom Swiss burgers, breakfast sandwiches, pizzas, tacos, bowls and burger applications.

"By far, the biggest volume play in foodservice is either 10-pound sliced white mushrooms, or two 5-pound sliced white tubs for use

in pizzerias and sub shops," says Mark Kreiner, outside sales coordinator for Mother Earth, in Landenberg, PA. "However, Jersey Mike's featured a Portobello Sub last year originally as an LTO, but it gained traction and was carried on the menu for months afterward."

Many chain-level examples show how mushrooms have morphed into featured menu ingredients. For example, there's the BBQ Shroom Bowl with Fable Food's BBQ Shiitake at Just Salad, a 100-plus-unit chain headquartered in New York City.

Sweetgreen, based in Los Angeles, CA, with over 900 outlets, offers its Shroomami, a kale, portobello, and wild rice bowl. 'Shroom Burgers and seasonal specials, such as the Black Truffle Shroom, are popular at Shake Shack, a 500-plus global chain rooted in New York City.

"We have seen strong opportunities for mushrooms in limited-time offers (LTOs) and new menu development, especially where operators are looking to add fresh, flavorful, and plant-forward items," says Barry Sullivan, director of culinary innovation and commercialization at Giorgio Fresh, in West Lawn, PA.

He points to recent concepts, such as portobello mushroom cheesesteaks, mushroom salads with arugula and fresh mozzarella, and miso button mushroom bowls with sticky rice. "These promotions help increase mushroom usage by positioning mushrooms as a key ingredient that adds flavor, texture, and value to the dish."

There are other examples of new menu items and LTO's featuring mushrooms. For example, late last year for the holiday season, the Scottsdale, AZ-headquartered P.F. Chang's nearly 300 restaurants introduced its "Black Pepper Filet." This sliced beef filet comes with shiitake mushrooms, onions, shishito peppers, black pepper sauce, and Togarashi spice.

The Mushroom Council is engaged with the Culinary Institute

of America's "Healthy Menus Collaborative," which includes participants, such as Panda Express, Panera Bread, Chick-fil-A, Taco Bell and Subway.

"Through this unique program, the Mushroom Council can provide one-on-one education to menu decision-makers about how mushrooms meet diner needs related to versatility, flavor, nutrition, and sustainability, while also addressing operator needs like labor-saving forms, handling best practices, and timely menu innovation," says Mather.

Recent topics have included GLP-1 menu solutions, kids' menus and the new dietary guidelines.

• **CASUAL & FINE DINING.** White-tablecloth chefs want premium whole mushrooms and specialty varieties that deliver plate drama and a clear menu story, says Caputo & Guest's Garsow.

An example he offers is the steak enhancer Garlic Butter Mushroom Medley, a combination of shiitake, portobello and button mushrooms, on the menu at Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar, a 60-plus-unit upscale fine-dining chain based in Tampa, FL.

"In chef-driven restaurants and upscale foodservice, we are seeing growing interest in lion's mane, king oyster, oyster, maitake, and specialty blends because they offer stronger texture, better plate presence, and a more differentiated menu story," Garsow adds.

There are excellent high-profile restaurant menu examples. For one, the Lion's Mane Mushroom Bourguignon and Grilled Lion's Mane Steak with truffle potatoes and mushroom bordelaise at celebrity chef Tal Ronnen's Crossroads Kitchen, with locations in West Hollywood, CA, and Las Vegas, NV.

The Mark Restaurant by Jean-Georges in New York City serves Butternut Squash Soup garnished with black trumpet mushrooms



Mushrooms elevate burgers with umami flavor, meaty texture, and menu versatility.

PHOTO COURTESY PHILLIPS MUSHROOMS

as a starter, a Wild Mushroom and Kale Frittata as an entrée, and side dish of sautéed maitake mushrooms seasoned with sesame and lime. Also in New York City, Michelin 3-star restaurant Eleven Madison Park, Chef Daniel Humm's fully plant-based fine-dining restaurant, offers a vegan take on Oysters Rockefeller, using gold or blue oyster mushrooms.

"The future of mushrooms in foodservice is not just more mushrooms — it is better mushrooms, better formats, and better menu storytelling," says Garsow. "Organic lion's mane, king oyster, shiitake, oyster, and maitake give chefs the flavor, texture, and visual appeal to create dishes consumers remember and operators can profitably repeat."

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Student Engagement Drives Higher Education Foodservice

Fresh produce moves to the head of the class in university dining.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Students at Pitzer College, a private liberal arts school in Claremont, CA, find produce plentiful at every meal. Across 17 dining halls and eateries, fruits and vegetables anchor a dining program, operated by Bon Appétit Management Company, that is focused on wellness, customization and flavor.

As a sample, the menus of Executive Chef Marcos Rios, who sources much of his produce through Vesta Foodservice, in Santa Fe Springs, CA, offer build-your-own salad bars with mixed greens, seasonal vegetables, grains and cheese; watermelon-and-tomato “poke” bowls with or without tuna, the latter swapping in plant-based ingredients in place of fish; and composed salads including a cherry tomato and watermelon salad, a roasted-vegetable quinoa salad, and a beet-and-greens salad with orange segments.

That’s not all. There’s also a plant-based taqueria for vegan and vegetarian students and guests, with selections, such as cauliflower al pastor, soyrito-and-potato tacos, and portobello fajitas, with black and pinto beans, cilantro rice, and toppings like cabbage-and-pico slaw, guacamole, cilantro and onion, and salsa verde and roja.

And Pitzer College is far from alone. Fresh produce is becoming an increasingly visible part of many dining strategies in higher education.

“When we look at collegiate dining today, there are multiple priorities, and produce helps address each of them,” says Robert Nelson, chief executive officer of the National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS), in East Lansing, MI.

“With produce, you can focus on your wellness message, on sustainability, and it is being used as part of innovation efforts in designing and developing new products and menu items,” Nelson explains. “It’s certainly part of student engagement because it’s all about telling the story.”

CAMPUS PRODUCE OPPORTUNITY

Fresh produce has become a cornerstone of college and university (C&U) dining.

“It’s not a trend in this segment so much as a foundation,” says Huy Do, market researcher and trendologist at Datassential, a Chicago, IL-headquartered food and beverage industry market research platform.

“Salad appears on 95% of C&U menus, broccoli on 90.6%, corn on 86.8%, and vegetable sandwiches on 89.9%, reflecting how central produce is to the everyday dining experience on campus.”

Student demand is pushing this forward, Do adds. “Thirty-seven percent of college students say they carefully watch what they eat



Students are paying closer attention to where their food comes from and want transparency around sourcing and sustainability. PHOTO COURTESY COMMON MARKET

or follow a strict diet, and 35% follow diets that limit animal products, creating strong institutional pressure to build menus around fresh, plant-forward ingredients.”

Most operators are responding with a hybrid approach, Do says, as 79% say they offer a consistent core of daily staples alongside rotating options, “meaning produce is showing up both as a reliable everyday offering and as a vehicle for seasonal and trend-driven menu variety.”

Opportunities for the produce industry in C&U dining score an A-plus.

“My organization spends \$5 million a year with our produce company. That’s a lot of produce,” says Steve Giardini, senior director at Michigan Dining at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, which feeds some 15,000 students, representing all 50 states and over 60 countries, on meal plans daily.

“Overall, the two highest demand items our students consistently say they want are more berries and avocados. These are on our menus pretty much all the time.”

THE BIG THREE DRIVERS: PLANT FORWARD, LOCAL & GLOBAL

Plant-forward wellness, local sourcing, and globally inspired flavors are the three leading trends driving increased consumption of fresh produce in college and university dining.

“What’s driving all of it pushes the same way,” says Jin Ju Wilder, chief executive officer of Vesta Foodservice, dba L.A. Specialty Produce Co. That is, “Gen Z health and climate values, more diverse

Engaging University Students Beyond The Plate

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Fresh produce goes beyond the plate in college and university dining.

"We use a variety of methods to promote produce, such as Harvest of the Month, where we highlight an in-season fruit or vegetable that we're featuring in menu items in our dining centers that month," says Kerry Paterson, director of campus dining and catering, for University Housing & Dining Services, at Oregon State University, in Corvallis.

"We also utilize a lot of food photography on the digital screens in our dining locations and social media to showcase the variety of fresh and tasty menu items we're offering."

The Wonderful Company recently participated in a 'Wonderful Night' event at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

"Students used our Wonderful products as part of a non-alcoholic mixology competition," says Nancy Johnson, senior director of foodservice business development and sales for the Wonderful Company, in Los Angeles, CA.

"The top three finalist drinks included 'Mint to Me,' featuring lime juice and POM Wonderful 100% Pomegranate Juice; 'Sunset Spritz,' made with orange juice, lime juice, and POM Pomegranate Arils; and 'The Sweetart Grapefruit,' featuring grapefruit, Wonderful Seedless Lemons, and POM Pomegranate Arils."

ON-CAMPUS COLLABORATIONS

There's also promotion in the back of the house.

"We've partnered with groups like the U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council to come in and work with our chefs.



Higher education foodservice work goes beyond giving diners three square meals. Many institutions also offer cooking classes to arm students with lifelong healthy eating skills.

PHOTO COURTESY ARAMARK COLLEGIATE HOSPITALITY

They'll do an event at one of our dining halls where every dish, both savory and sweet, will feature blueberries one night at dinner," says Steve Giardini, senior director at Michigan Dining at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

"Using fresh blueberries to enhance the barbecue sauce's flavor was eye-opening for our students. It spurred the notion of creativity and discovery in them."

Earlier this year, the California Avocado Commission hosted a culinary training at Oregon State University, says Paterson. "Avocado continues to be a top favorite when it comes to add-ons. The training taught our chefs new techniques for using avocados, including in desserts, breakfast dishes, and various global cuisines. We are looking forward to incorporating what we learned into our menus."

Finally, produce is serving as a valuable training ground for life skills in higher education. For example, Chartwells Higher Education, a division of Compass Group North America that

operates contract dining services on 320-plus C&U campuses nationwide, hosts monthly cooking classes called Teaching Kitchens.

"This allows students to learn life skills, try new recipes, and create community on campus," says Sarah Bodner, vice president of creative and innovation, in Charlotte, NC.

One of the C&U dining department's responsibilities is not just to make sure there's food to eat for today, says Robert Nelson, chief executive officer of the National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS), in East Lansing, MI, "but to teach students the skills they need and give them the knowledge they need so they can eat well for the rest of their lives."

Jeff Weissinger, assistant director of operations for Vanderbilt University Campus Dining, Nashville, TN, agrees. "We want students to walk through a produce section when they're 27 years old and go, 'Oh, that looks familiar. I remember when I had that. Let me try that.'"

campuses, chronic labor constraints, budget pressures, and fresh produce, prepared efficiently and merchandised so it's craveable."

Menus in the dining halls at the University of Michigan are more than 50% plant based, with produce in side dishes as well as center-of-the-plate items, says Giardini. "For the last two and a half years, all our burgers have been a blend of ground beef and mushrooms. You get a nice juicy burger, and it's gone over really well."

Vanderbilt University Campus Dining, Nashville, TN, offers its

"Power Plant" dining concept inside one of its dining halls. Offerings include custom-built bowls featuring whole grains, leafy greens, roasted veggies, and plant-based proteins; vegetarian burgers garnished with avocado, bean sprouts and red cabbage; globally inspired sides such as Moroccan chickpea and carrot salad; and cold-pressed, fruit- and vegetable-based juices made in-house from scratch daily.

"When we rolled out this concept two years ago, we saw a 70%



How fresh do you want it? The sign on this microgreen unit at Vanderbilt University says "Now Growing Tomorrow's Lunch." Having locally grown, sustainable options ticks the boxes for many college and university diners. PHOTO COURTESY VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

increase in students going to that dining hall and a 30% reduction per student in animal protein consumption. That tells us our students want plant-based," says Brian Cochrane, Vanderbilt's director of culinary operations.

GO LOCAL

Students are paying closer attention to where their food comes from and are seeking transparency around sourcing and sustainability, according to Michael Gilligan, senior director, brand management for Aramark Collegiate Hospitality, a division of Philadelphia, PA-headquartered Aramark, which manages dining halls, cafes, catering, and retail operations in over 275 C&U nationwide.

"At Towson University, approximately 60% of produce utilized across dining operations is sourced from our local partners and regional suppliers, including seasonal vegetables like squash, peppers, lettuces, potatoes, and carrots, as well as rotating fruit selections such as multiple apple varieties offered daily."

The Common Market, a Philadelphia, PA-headquartered nonprofit regional food distributor that serves over 120 C&U's, has been at the heart of this strategy, Gilligan adds.

"The most consistent trend we see across all four of our regions (Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Great Lakes, and Texas) is a focus on seasonal and local sourcing, and the willingness of campus dining chefs to let that influence their menus rather than fighting national procurement calendars year-round," says Caitlin Honan, communications and marketing director.

The nonprofit also provides campus dining operators with ready-to-use print and digital profiles that spotlight local farms and producers across cafeterias, menu boards, and social media.

"Grape tomatoes grown in the Southeast are our top-selling fresh produce item with our university accounts," Honan says. "Romaine lettuce is also an anchor item across both the Southeast and the Mid-Atlantic. Hydroponic greens, sweet potatoes, apple varieties, and sliced mushrooms also make up the bulk of top fresh produce sales across our regions, representing more staple, cold-weather options."

On the West Coast, local sourcing is a preference at the University of California (UC), with campuses in Berkeley, San Diego, Davis, Los Angeles, Merced, and Santa Cruz.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"When we look at collegiate dining today, there are multiple priorities, and produce helps address each of them."**
Robert Nelson, National Association of College & University Food Services, East Lansing, MI
- **"My organization spends \$5 million a year with our produce company. That's a lot of produce."**
Steve Giardini, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- **"The most consistent trend we see across all four of our regions is a focus on seasonal and local sourcing, and the willingness of campus dining chefs to let that influence their menus."**
Caitlin Honan, Common Market, Philadelphia, PA

"We're working with farmers and trying to identify where UC can commit to buying an entire crop," says Marilyn Biscotti, the Oakland, CA-based senior category manager, Hospitality & Food, and co-project director of the Global Climate Leadership Council.

"We do help some farmers get into distribution. A lot of times, they don't have the trucks, insurance, or logistics to get onto campus. We help them navigate that."

Top trending produce on UC campus menus includes leafy greens like kale, spinach, and arugula for salad bars and grain bowls; Asian veggies such as baby bok choy, daikon, and gai lan; tropical fruits including mango, Asian pear, and Fuyu persimmon; and cruciferous veggies such as broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts with global spice blends.

TASTE THE DIVERSITY

Operators are increasingly using globally inspired and flavor-forward preparations to enhance vegetables, salads, and produce-based accompaniments, says Datassential's Do.

"Among the fastest-growing produce-related preparations in C&U are marinated artichoke (+26% four-year growth), pickled vegetables (+24%), elote (+23%), jackfruit (+26%), and charred preparations (+20%)."

"Students want bold flavors and authenticity, which global cuisines naturally provide through inherently vegetable-forward dishes," says Deena Ensworth, senior content manager for Markon, in Salinas, CA.

"A few popular college meals we've noticed growing in popularity are global breakfasts like banh mi with pickled vegetables, shakshuka, and chilaquiles; street corn- and Korean kimchi-inspired bowls; Middle Eastern mezze plates; and mushroom birria tacos."

The dining services at the University of Minnesota, in Duluth, MN, work with students to create multicultural dinners. "Not only do we help support these events, but we also take some of those menu pieces and bring them into the dining hall," says director Betsy Helgesen, whose department feeds over 7,000 meal-plan students daily.

"One of the dishes that does really well for us is a butternut squash curry. It's very popular with our students and with our guests, and by its nature, but not by its design, it is vegan."

A large, close-up image of a human hand, palm up, holding numerous glowing, stylized human figures of various sizes. The background is dark blue with many small, out-of-focus light points, creating a sense of depth and connection.

NEW YORK REGIONAL PROFILE
SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

The Customer Connection

New York-area produce companies are deepening customer relationships by helping retailers and foodservice operators succeed.



INSIDE

ON THE TERMINAL MARKET.....37
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Adapting to a New Era at Hunts Point

The Hunts Point Produce Market, Bronx, NY, has served as one of the most important distribution hubs in the U.S., supplying retailers, wholesalers, foodservice operators and independent grocers throughout the Northeast.

While its mission remains unchanged, moving fresh fruits and vegetables quickly and efficiently from growers to customers, the way that mission is accomplished continues to evolve.

Today's produce buyers expect more than competitive pricing. They rely on wholesalers for dependable delivery, product expertise, merchandising guidance, and technology-driven solutions that help them navigate a complex marketplace.

At the same time, wholesalers face mounting pressures of their own, from rising freight costs and labor shortages to traffic congestion, changing consumer preferences, and uncertainty surrounding tariffs and global supply chains.

Those challenges are reshaping the role of the modern produce wholesaler.

New York-area companies are investing beyond the loading dock. New warehouse technologies, sophisticated inventory management systems, artificial intelligence, expanded import programs and enhanced transportation capabilities are helping wholesalers operate more efficiently.

Customer relationships have become more strategic, with wholesalers advising buyers on merchandising strategies, product substitutions, assortment planning and consumer trends as much as they do on daily market conditions.

SERVICE IS ESSENTIAL

Service has become a defining competitive advantage.

"Today, the right price, service, top-tier quality, everything has to be perfect," says Michael Armata, buyer and salesman at E. Armata.

His comments reflect the reality facing companies throughout the Hunts Point Produce Market. As delivery becomes increasingly important for retailers operating with lean staffing and tighter inventories, wholesalers are navigating some of the country's most congested roadways while using GPS tracking, fleet monitoring and

other technologies to ensure products arrive when promised.

The emphasis on customer partnerships extends beyond transportation.

Companies are investing in merchandising support, category management, direct importing, organics, value-added products and customized programs designed to help retailers differentiate themselves in competitive markets.

HUNTS POINT MARKET TRANSFORMATION

At the same time, the market itself continues to transform.

As discussions continue regarding the future redevelopment of Hunts Point, many companies are choosing to invest heavily in their current facilities, expanding refrigerated storage, modernizing operations and implementing technologies that improve traceability, inventory accuracy and operational efficiency. Others are broadening their businesses through new import programs, expanded distribution networks and specialized divisions focused on organics, foodservice and global sourcing.

Innovation is occurring across almost every aspect of the business.

Artificial intelligence is beginning to influence warehouse operations, transportation management and customer communications. Data analytics are improving forecasting and inventory control. Advanced logistics systems provide real-time visibility into deliveries, while global sourcing programs help wholesalers anticipate supply challenges months in advance.

Yet despite these technological advances, the foundation of the business remains unchanged: relationships, trust and responsiveness.

The stories that follow in this *PRODUCE BUSINESS* special supplement illustrate how New York-area wholesalers continue to adapt, while maintaining their essential role in the fresh produce supply chain.

As the industry continues to change, wholesalers are proving that their greatest strength isn't simply the product they move — it's the partnerships they build and the solutions they provide every day. **PB**



Transformation Shaping Future at Hunts Point Market

Wholesalers are investing in the tools customers need to thrive.

BY MIKE DUFF

The Hunts Point Produce Market has long been the beating heart of fresh produce distribution in the Northeast. Today, however, the iconic Bronx facility finds itself at a crossroads. As wholesalers navigate changing customer demands, rising costs and aging infrastructure, momentum is building around plans to modernize and reposition the market for the future.

A lease extension has provided breathing room, but the larger conversation centers on redevelopment and what comes next. While consensus remains a work in progress, wholesalers increasingly agree that investing in facilities, technology and strategic partnerships will be essential to maintaining Hunts Point's vital role in the produce supply chain.

Many wholesalers express doubt about building a replacement market, especially because Hunts Point will have to remain in operation during a major construction program. Many wholesalers have invested to upgrade their existing facilities, which makes a teardown even more difficult to recommend. And getting capital organized for such a project is an immense task.

So, ideas about redevelopment in and around the existing structure are getting more attention. Still, the daunting task will require careful organization and consensus, complicated by the change in

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"So, if you roll on the same playing field, how do you differentiate? It's customer service, quality and brand recognition. That's the only way, in this market, to differentiate yourself. We all sell the same product."**
Carey Rubin, Rubin Bros
- **"This year is already looking like a much better year on the import side than last year was. There was just so much uncertainty last year."**
Justin Leis, CJ Brothers

the New York political landscape every four years.

The market gained an eight-year lease extension to 2039, but while that affords more time, it does nothing to change the physical and operating realities.

Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce Exchange, has maintained that a complete market reconstruction is impractical, arguing that securing the necessary funding would be difficult and that resources could be more effectively invested in modernizing the existing facility.

He says a new market just doesn't fit the reality of Hunts Point



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operations. "Basically, it's not going to happen."

Matthew D'Arrigo, owner of D'Arrigo New York, says the market continues negotiations with the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the parties are exploring designs Hunts Point will accept as a cooperative enterprise.

Accommodations for transportation and delivery are critical to a market remake. D'Arrigo says market wholesalers have been doing more business further afield, as well as more deliveries.

"I think there's actually more customers that are shopping the market or calling up the market and looking to get deliveries," he says.

NOT STANDING STILL

Wholesalers are evolving amid the overall future market uncertainty, says D'Arrigo. Take technology for example. Scanning tech has gained acceptance, and today helps wholesalers with issues around efficiency and traceability.

"Our inventory control is much tighter than it used to be," D'Arrigo says. "Is it revolutionary? No. It's evolutionary."

Artificial intelligence has been advancing at CJ Brothers, says Justin Leis, director of business development. The company is coding and building proprietary software, including integrations to improve performance across functions, including, for instance, transport.

"We've integrated our trucking management system with a dial-

Keeping Produce Moving Through Congested Roadways

BY MIKE DUFF

Michael Armata, buyer and salesman at E. Armata, says that the daily grind continues for wholesalers on the Hunts Point market, but that's a key to their ability to serve customers.

Earlier this year, when some key commodities were suffering price spikes, Armata could help customers maintain volume by looking for alternative products at better prices, which is a valuable service that market wholesalers offer.

An issue that hasn't abated is freight, which is squeezing everybody across the supply chain. "Freight has been so high," says Armata. "It's a big factor."

However, it's not only long-haul freight that is an issue, as more Hunts Point customers look for delivery in a metropolitan area that's only becoming more congested.

"It's very difficult," says Armata. "It's very congested. Delivery times are tough to make. Today, the right price, service, top-tier quality, everything

has to be perfect. We have to find the windows and times to get in there and deliver, drop off, and go. If customers have any issues, we'll work with them."

To deal with delivery issues, Armata has been using technology that includes navigation, which helps get products to the right place on time, and the company can monitor where trucks are going, how fast they are going, and what is going on with them via mounted cameras.

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ing and texting application,” he says. “So, we have all the loads being pulled into this new platform from the TMS, which has the carrier info, the pickup info, the drop-off info, the tracking on the truck, and then we’ve got the calling and texting service automatically checking in with the drivers.”

When drivers respond via phone or text, the system automatically takes the information and combines it with GPS input to create a real-time ETA.

A&J Produce Corp. has launched a tropicals department, beginning direct import operations, starting small, but with an eye to building out the business more effectively.

“We’re going to start with plantains as the first direct item,” says Stephanie Tramutola, director of marketing and administration, “and then from there, we’ll expand. We’re excited about that.”

A&J is also making a push on the customer front, according to John Thomas Bonomolo, director of operations and administration, who explains the company has moved to ensure that the breadth of product it offers meets the city’s needs, whatever the local preferences.

“We hired a gentleman to go out on the road, go get new customers, go get old customers that we lost contact with,” says Bonomolo. “He’s been bringing them in.”

A&J has also expanded cold storage with additional electric refrigerated trailers that contribute to efficiency and sustainability,





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and is staying current on emerging AI tools, including Nash AI and Pepper AI.

"We're making sure we're staying up to date on what's happening industrywide," says Tramutola, pointing to engagement with the Eastern Produce Council and International Fresh Produce Association.

Recently, A&J welcomed family member James Bonomolo to the team, where he will take on vegetable sales, and, in 2027, the company will celebrate 50 years in business.

MULTIFACETED APPROACH

Market wholesalers are also expanding off-market. For example, the Katzman operations includes its wholesale business, Katzman Produce, on the Hunts Point Produce Market, but also now has multiple companies outside of the market.

"Katzman's business has evolved a lot over the past few years," says Robert Katzman, business development and food safety coordinator. "We've honored our 100-plus years of family and history, and we hold our same heart values as the foundation of everything we do. At the same time, we've diligently focused on sustained growth and succession planning."

He says it launched a distribution business, Katzman Distribution, and has officially expanded to a family of companies, with capabilities throughout the supply chain. "This evolution has enabled us to provide even better service to our customers throughout New York City, the tri-state area and the Northeast, propelling all of us forward as we grow together."

Several years ago, Katzman launched an organics program. Joe Eisinger, the company's organics buyer, says creating a distinct operation within the larger company is supported by the many con-

sumers who retain a strong affinity for organics, especially younger, health-conscious consumers.

"There's still a very good demand here on the East Coast for organic produce," he says.

Today, the Katzman U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified organics program now offers more than 200 SKUs, and has a dedicated sales team and organics warehouse on the Hunts Point market to support continued growth. The company works with existing suppliers, but has developed new relationships across the U.S., and even internationally.

"That all reflects us listening to our customers and asking them what they are looking for," says Eisinger.

Katzman has also created a talent development department, led by Alissa Marcus, reflecting the company's determination that investing in its people could have a great payoff. Katzman had instituted a successful leadership development project in 2019, and that became the starting point for the talent development department launch, Marcus says.

"We saw so much traction," she says. "We asked how do we scale this to the entire company?"

"We're going to be affording opportunities for real, honest communication, and opportunities to empower our staff to succeed in their current roles and potentially other roles."

Katzman's family of companies also includes Global Harvest, an importer with service-disabled veteran ownership, says Paul Jaffa, president.

In 2019, Jaffa launched Global Harvest as a distinct operation within Katzman to give the import business a specific identity. Now, he says, Global Harvest is recognized as a "direct importer of



our own products. We go overseas. We source our products from our growers. That way, when we go to our direct retail customers, we're selling our product from our growers. We've gone out, done research. We've evaluated their products. We know it's a high-quality product. We know they're quality growers."

Global Harvest puts "boots on the ground in-country," he says, to ensure it is knowledgeable about each region and each grower that the operation engages.

KEEPING IT GOING

Whether it's extending an extra week's credit or doing business at a dollar less, the core of Hunts Point market operations is balancing the needs of the wholesaler and the customer.

According to Carey Rubin of Rubin Bros., maintaining strong operations requires a disciplined focus on key priorities, careful attention to detail, and ongoing efforts to improve efficiency through technology and other operational advancements.

"It's really just a day-to-day grind in terms of trying to maintain costs," he says. "At the end of the day, there are certain variables that are uncontrollable: What you're going to pay for the product, because we don't buy it on contract, and how much it costs to get it here. You only hope that you're paying comparable rate prices with what your competitors are paying."

Delivery continues to be a critical issue, as more market customers want, and even need, wholesalers to get goods to them. Yet, that drops more expense on wholesalers.

"We run trucks, and it costs a lot of money," Rubin says. "Obviously, fuel is a big issue now, but you also have to maintain that truck, have the labor to run the truck, the insurance.

"That's a no-brainer, wanting delivery. But that also kind of ties you into one house. If I'm going to deliver to a customer, they have to order enough from me to warrant a delivery."

Rubin says those customers who still come down to the market in their own trucks, or who send a truck to the market, have an

Meet the Team
Karina Roman



Unwavering Determination.

As an immigrant from Ecuador, Karina is proud of the career she built through hard work, perseverance, and a commitment to continuous learning. Twenty-four years ago she joined D'Arrigo New York as a clerk and today she runs the Accounts Receivable Department. Along the way, she found not only an employer but also a mentor in Kevin D'Arrigo. "Kevin opened the door for me. He trusted me to learn and grow every day. He gave me the courage and confidence that I had lost over the years."

D'ARRIGO
NEW YORK



opportunity to shop and work with multiple wholesalers, and make the final decision on what's the best produce available for their customers. "There is an advantage for people to come to the market."

MAKING STRIDES

Trucco has been engaged in a multi-year business expansion, in part by innovating and running with the momentum generated by successful programs, according to Yasmin Pacia, chief marketing officer.

"Our company has had tremendous growth after COVID," she says.

One example of that growth is in cherries. "We started importing from Chile a couple years ago," says salesman John Magna. "That program is growing continuously every year."

As for Trucco's formidable kiwi program, Magna says they're bringing a new variety out of New Zealand, RubyRed kiwi, a Zespri item. "We brought in a good amount and moved it to a lot of the main retailers on the East Coast."

"We saw incredible responses," says Magna.

Pacia notes the company continues to do well with its branded green kiwi, KiwiStar, available in conventional and organic.

Magna says most of Trucco's imported product lands in the company's Vineland, NJ, distribution center. The company has expanded the facility, which now totals 180,000 square feet. Still, Hunts Point remains Trucco's wholesale distribution hub for New York City and immediate environs.

At CJ Brothers, the company's import program has been expand-



ing, and Leis says that being an importer has been "very interesting" over the past year with tariffs imposed, struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court and then subject to refunds as imposed by the U.S. Court of International Trade.

Leis says that despite the challenges last year, CJ made the import business work, with better prospects, experience and capabilities cause for optimism. "This year is already looking like a much better year on the import side than last year was. A lot of the volatility in the domestic market has created some opportunities."

Leis notes that, as always, outside influences can have a profound effect on the Hunts Point market, and it's not only weather. Freight prices are up with the increase in fuel costs, which has compressed margins especially on less expensive commodities.

FOODSERVICE FOCUS

Over the past few years, Coosemans New York has been rolling with the development of the marketplace, navigating tariff issues, and working with foodservice operations.

Charlie Badalamenti, operations manager, says the company has to be ready to help as the foodservice sector deals with dynamics arising out of social media, for example.

"Every restaurant's diversifying," he says, "because everyone wants to be the new TikTok-famous restaurant."

"You have the new generation coming in," says Peter Faraci, Coosemans sales manager, says, "and everything's on the phone. They know that, and they know social media sells."

PB

Global Sourcing Keeps Fresh Produce Flowing

BY MIKE DUFF

The Katzman Global Harvest operation started with a single item, then added a citrus assortment and has continued growing so that, today, it can provide product 52 weeks a year. When required, it also can step in if a domestically grown commodity is short.

Global Harvest has a unique per-

spective in that it keys on maintaining and building relationships, including in new growing areas, across the international marketplace, says Paul Jaffa, the operation's president.

It also deals with the calendar differently, as it plans months in advance and not based on immediate demand and sales spikes as they occur annually.

"We're in tune with what's happening globally," says Jaffa, "why things are starting to happen and how they're going to shape, and how we think that's going to start to affect the overall market in the U.S. We're doing a lot more forecasting, a little predictive analysis of where we think this market is going to be in three months, four months, five months."

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Coosemans New York, Inc.	242-244, 249.....	718-328-3060
D'Arrigo New York... ..	301-320, 323-330, 332-336.....	718-991-5900
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.....	247-248, 250-257	718-893-1640
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FresCo LLC.....	153-157, 462-463	718-589-5000
Georgallas Tomato & Produce	447-449	718-842-6317
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Mendez Int'l. Tropical Foods	152,158-162.....	718-893-0100
Henry Haas, Inc.	424.....	718-378-2550
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National Farm Wholesale Corp.	437.....	718-617-6229
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Hunts Point Produce Market

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Undetected and unexpected, Sudden Cardiac Arrest (SCA) is claiming our youth. Cardiovascular disease is the second leading medical cause of death in children and adolescents in the United States. Data estimates that 1 in 50 high schools have a SCA in a student on school grounds each year. Affected youth usually appear healthy and normal... until they have an arrest. The good news is that early detection is possible, heart conditions are treatable and young lives can be saved. Knowledge of the observations and actions that can make the difference between life and death are key to a successful outcome.

Early detection is crucial. The Louis J. Acompora Memorial Foundation promotes the early detection of heart conditions in youth through heart screenings. Frequently, the warning signs and symptoms of a heart condition in youth go undetected.

Most occurrences of SCA in youth occur in public places. The increased availability of publicly accessible automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in schools and school-sponsored athletic events will dramatically increase the probability that youth and adults alike will survive a sudden cardiac arrest. Knowing and properly executing the critically time-urgent links of the Cardiac Chain-of-Survival can help save the life of someone in SCA.

In June of 2002, Governor George Pataki of New York signed Louis' Law, which requires AEDs in all New York public schools. To date 139 lives have been saved as a direct result of this law in New York public schools. Each time a vibrant, seemingly healthy child suffers a Sudden Cardiac Arrest (SCA), the Louis J. Acompora Memorial Foundation mission of protecting youth from SCA and preventable Sudden Cardiac Death (SCD) becomes even more critical. We know it happens and we need to collectively assure others realize it by sharing our Mission and Vision.

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Through partnerships with fresh-cut suppliers and specialty produce providers, Katzman Distribution, Burlington, NJ, helps retailers expand their offerings with convenient, high-quality products, while simplifying sourcing and replenishment. PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

Five Ways New York-Area Companies Cater to Customers

In the competitive NYC marketplace, produce wholesalers, distributors and importers focus on customers.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Cesar Ritz, founder of The Ritz Hotel, once said, "Never say no when a client asks for something, even if it is the moon." New York area produce companies may not be providing the moon, but they are taking extra steps to ensure customers feel supported and valued.

"Our job is to become the partner that our customers can't do without," explains Victor Savanello, vice president merchandising and business development at Katzman Distribution in Burlington, NJ. "We create this relationship by delivering everything they need to accomplish their goals and succeed."

Customers increasingly seek personalization. "The new generation of clients wants a special boutique style of service," says Anthony Serafino, president of Exp Group in North Bergen, NJ. "Customers want accessibility, efficiency, variety and peace of mind. We understand the new age of consumers."

The amount of competition in the marketplace requires companies to differentiate themselves, adds Bruce Klein, marketing man-

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Dorot Farm, Melville, NY, partners with retailers to drive produce sales with innovative merchandising, promotional displays and dependable farm-to-store quality.

PHOTO COURTESY DOROT FARM

ager for Maurice A. Auerbach in Secaucus, NJ. “We do that for our customers by not only offering excellent pricing but also superior quality and unmatched customer service.”

One way of serving customers is knowing the end consumer, says Ami Ben-Dror, founder and chief executive of BDA/Dorot Farm in Melville, NY. “We make sure they have the right product to meet their consumer needs. We sell more, and our customers sell more. We focus on quality, freshness and sweetness in our products.”

Customer satisfaction is rooted in communication. “Communication is key because, in the end, you must have great communication for consistency,” says Ben-Dror.

New York-area wholesalers, importers and distributors highlight five crucial areas for building successful customer relationships.

1. EFFICIENT LOGISTICS

Effectively managing the supply chain provides the foundation for serving customers well. “The path to success is to understand how to move product more efficiently and provide a consistent supply,” says Ben-Dror. “To do that, we need to control all the steps from farm to customer.”

“It’s really important to understand all the elements, especially today,” he adds. “There is a lot you need to pay attention to and handle the right way to ensure product maintains quality and consistency.”

Delivery is a crucial part of the wholesale distribution equation, yet it must be adaptable. Maurice A. Auerbach has planned days for delivery to all its customers, but offers flexibility. “If a customer needs a special delivery on not their normal day, we make arrangements for that to work,” says Klein.



Anthony Serafino, president of Exp Group in North Bergen, NJ, says customers increasingly seek personalization. “The new generation of clients wants a special boutique style of service. Customers want accessibility, efficiency, variety and peace of mind. We understand the new age of consumers.”

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO



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Katzman Distribution is focused on all categories related to fresh and beyond, says Victor Savanello, vice president merchandising and business development. "That is what our customers want and expect."

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

Investment in the logistics arena sets up reliability today and success tomorrow. Exp Group purchased over \$2.5 million of new equipment this past spring to increase its capability. "With inflation and the cost of oil, the cost of goods has been more expensive than ever. As a result, logistics are more expensive," says Serafino. "We continue to focus on logistics because it differentiates us from other suppliers. Our clients want things done as logistically efficiently as possible."

Direct importing is another increasingly valuable aspect of controlling logistics. "Exp started as an importer," says Serafino. "We love directly importing because we can provide the most direct and centralized line of merchandise for our clientele. Importing has been a key strategy because it allows us not only to control the source but the whole supply chain."

Maurice A. Auerbach is a direct importer of many of the items it markets. "Controlling the product from when it comes off the flight or when the container reaches our dock helps us give our customers the freshest and best product available," Klein says.

2. MERCHANDISING SUPPORT

With current labor constraints, retailers and other customers look to wholesalers and distributors for help in the store and with information. Merchandising services are one of the key pillars of Katzman's service to customers. "We provide guidance, training and support to our customers because merchandising effectively is vital to their success," says Savanello. "We want to provide everything they need to be the best solution in their neighborhood for their consumer base."

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Innovation is always changing, pushing forward, and we have to move even more quickly than others."**

Anthony Serafino, Exp Group, North Bergen, NJ



- **"We want to provide everything they need to be the best solution in their neighborhood for their consumer base."**

Victor Savanello, Katzman Distribution, Burlington, NJ

Merchandising services are a new and growing piece for Exp Group. "A lot of our retail clients value our help with store resets, understanding the consumer, or in helping choose and understand variety," says Serafino. "We're also offering ways to communicate and how they can penetrate the new age of consumer. Retailers are very conscious of the differences between the generations and who they're serving. How they set the produce department, given the consumer age, is essential and we can help."

Ben-Dror says Dorot Farm seeks creative ways to help customers increase sales in-store. "For example, during holidays we bring carrots in a bin to create excitement and POS focus," he says. "The store increases sales because they're selling in a bin. It's a partnership be-

tween the buyers and us to increase sales."

3. PROVIDING ALTERNATIVES

As customers look to satisfy a variety of consumer tastes, wholesalers and distributors assist by providing advice, as well as a selection of items. "Our job is to have the best product available for our customers," says Savanello. "We inform our customers of our recommendations, the opportunities, and availability of assortment, guiding them to the best solution for their business and their consumers. We work together with our customers, listening to what they want, and do our best to get them exactly that."

Advising on product is all about relationships. "You want great communication with the teams of buyers to ensure consistent supply," says Ben-Dror. "For example, if they have a product shortage, we work with them to help them find it from a different area."

The team at Maurice A. Auerbach works to help customers understand constraints in the marketplace. "We sometimes have to substitute an item because of a late truck or a container not getting off the port on time," says Klein. "However, we always discuss and clear it with the customer in advance."

New York-area wholesalers continue to diversify into cultural tastes, trend-influenced items and value-added products. "We're selling tofu here," says Serafino. "I never thought we'd sell tofu."

Yet, Serafino also explains the need for handling more traditional items, too. "The need for an A-to-Z supplier is greater than ever," he says. "We started our business with a niche in tropicals, but now we're selling stone fruit, apples and vegetables. We sell 15 different hot peppers, but we can also sell a beautiful kiwi from New Zealand."

Katzman is focused on all categories related to fresh and beyond, says Savanello. "That is what our customers want and expect."

4. PARTNERING TOGETHER

Partnerships and strategic alliances serve to bolster the business in sourcing all the way through to marketing. "It's very important to have a proper sourcing pipeline," says Exp's Serafino. "It's more capital intensive than ever and it's very difficult for smaller companies to have it. We're spending a lot of money to ensure we have the correct pipeline for our clientele. I travel a lot to ensure we're talking to our sources to understand what's going on at the farm level. Adequate communication both up and

down the chain is extremely important."

Savanello notes Katzman is always seeking strong partners and adding to its industry-leading partnership network. "Our recent addition of the Prima brand California stone fruit to our network of partners is an example what our customers and the consumer identifies as a preferred brand," he says. "We're proud that we get to offer Prima exclusively in our region."

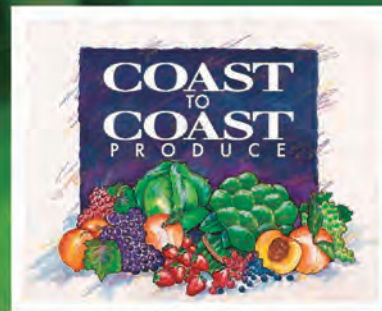
Katzman also partners with a leading fresh-cut company to deliver timely, high-quality fresh-cuts for retailers who

struggle doing it themselves. "We come in and help our customers set up fresh cuts on the stand, in their systems, and we get them into the fresh cut business, which is so important in today's produce department," he says.

"Our partnership with Melissa's is another value we bring to our customers. We make it seamless to get these items on a regular basis, and can order today for tomorrow."

Dorot Farm is always open to new partnerships, according to Ben-Dror. "People

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Direct importing gives distributors, like Exp Group in North Bergen, NJ, greater control over sourcing, logistics and product quality, helping ensure a consistent supply chain while delivering fresh produce efficiently to customers. PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

look to our brand and operation and want to see how they can plug into it," he says. "It's a lot of work to ensure the right product gets to the customer and you need the right partners for that as well."

Wholesalers utilize new alliances to fill gaps in their offering for customers. "We at Maurice A. Auerbach are always looking to source new vendors to complement existing partnerships," says Klein. "Our executive team travels to overseas shows and conventions to build new alliances."

5. EMPLOYING INNOVATION

Forward progress driven by technology is a decisive advantage for successful wholesaling and distributing. "We pride ourselves on being an innovative workplace, especially in harnessing technology," Exp's Serafino says. "If we know how the customer likes things, we can cater to them better and use our technology to serve them better. For example, we can employ AI in automating certain aspects of our business to better service our clients. Just when you think you have the next level, there is always a new level. Innovation is always changing, pushing forward, and we have to move even more quickly than others."

Innovation and technology are critical to success, agrees Savanello. "All our sales and movement data is made available to us through Microsoft Power BI, which allows us to use all of our captured data to work for us and our customers," he says. "We employ state-of-the-art live telematics through the Samsara system to provide real-time visibility into the Katzman delivery fleet."

Katzman also has capabilities to practice enhanced Customer Relationship Management (CRM) through a leading customer relationship management technology in the industry, Salesforce. "Our custom ordering application on Salesforce provides a user-friendly platform to place orders accurately and efficiently," says Savanello. "And, although invisible to our customers, our modern Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Warehouse Management SAGE X3 system ensures efficient inventory flow that drives the optimum quality and reduces shrink."

Dorot Farm uses technology in various aspects of its operation, particularly in post-harvest, says Ben-Dror. "This allows us to perform better sorting for more optimal consistency. It also yields a higher food safety result because there are no human hands involved in the process. It's a lot of investment in innovation, but it is better for the product."

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SOUTH CAROLINA PEACHES

THE TASTIER *Peach*

South Carolina's deep-rooted peach industry continues to offer a superior eating fruit

BY JODEAN ROBBINS



PHOTO COURTESY OF TITAN FARMS

South Carolina produces the most peaches east of the Mississippi River, grosses approximately \$80 million annually to the state, and employs over a thousand people according to the SC Peach Council in Columbia, SC. South Carolina typically produces around 78 tons per season shares Jeff Hopkins, Musser fruit research center farm manager at the College of Agriculture, Clemson University in Clemson, SC.

South Carolina peaches are a staple and grown in every region, explains Beth Black White, co-owner at Black's Peaches in York, SC. "The South Carolina Department of Agriculture has done a fantastic job with the SC Certified program," she says.

Peach season typically runs from May to September. "Weather permitting, we see clingstone peaches in early May and sometimes late April," says Gary Prince, co-owner of Senn Brothers in West Columbia, SC. "The freestone comes in around mid-June or early July. The season starts winding down in September."

South Carolina's commercial production is concentrated in three main zones: the Piedmont/Upstate, The Ridge, and the Coastal Plains. "The diversity of growing regions allows our state to grow a wide variety and provides us an abundant cross-section of product to offer buyers," says Spencer McLeod, owner-operator of McLeod Farms in McBee, SC.

"To have consistent product from May to September, it takes 50 varieties to fill gaps."

South Carolina offers a superior peach due to a variety of factors, including climate, proximity to market, and hands-on family businesses. "Our conditions are conducive for a flavorful peach and product is from farm to store in a short time frame," says Chris Yonce, co-owner of J.W. Yonce & Sons Farms/Big Smile Peaches in Johnston, SC.



SOUTH CAROLINA PEACHES



Spencer McLeod, owner-operator of McLeod Farms



Black's Peaches owners Arthur Q. Black, Beth Black White and Christopher Black



Tommy Chappell, owner of Chappell Farms standing next to bags and buckets of fresh peaches.

PERFECT PROPORTION

Industry and consumers alike can count on South Carolina peaches for a superior sweet eating quality. "Our peaches are sweeter and juicier because we have the perfect weather and soil for peaches," says White. "The trees get the perfect amount of cold weather and correct acidity in the soil to be scrumptious."

According to McLeod, South Carolina has a unique terroir – how a specific region's climate, soil, and terrain give a product its unique character. "Our location, climate, soils and other factors all play a part in our ability to produce outstanding peaches for customers," he says.

Hopkins notes typical Brix for South Carolina peaches is higher versus California and Georgia. "What makes South Carolina good for peach growing is overall climate, high humidity and acidity within the soil," he says.

Ross Williams, president of Titan Farms in Ridge Spring, SC, and vice president of the South Carolina Peach Council, stresses the importance of the Brix-to-acid ratio in flavor. "This is where South Carolina peaches really shine because our climate results in a perfect ratio yielding a flavorful, juicy peach," he says.

Benjie Richter, president and co-owner of Richter and Company, headquartered in Charlotte, NC, explains South Carolina, in particular, has perfect humidity, good sunlight and the right temperature for peaches. "Due to the combination of humidity and soil type we have, we grow a peach with an excellent acid-to-sugar ratio," he says. "The result is the flavor everyone remembers from childhood."

Hot summer days and humid nights also affect flavor conveys Williams. "The humidity at night helps prevent moisture loss in the fruit and makes

sure the fruit maintains the juiciness," he says.

Because South Carolina peaches are a great eating quality peach, they make an enticing retail display, states Richter. "When a retail store has a big display of South Carolina peaches, and shoppers walk by, they can smell the aroma," he says.

The perfect environment for growing sweet peaches means no need for artificial ripening rooms relates Jim Forrest, founder of Dixie Belle Peaches in Ridge Spring, SC. "Consumers taste the difference," he says.

REALLY RIPE

Growers carefully monitor maturity to pick as close to ripe as possible. "South Carolina product is for all practical purposes tree-ripe," says Prince. "The closer you get to a true tree-ripe peach, there's nothing better."

Peaches picked close to peak ripeness have better color and flavor, explains Justin Ness, owner of Sunny Slope Farms in Cherokee County, SC. "What we pick that day, we want to get to the consumer or at least to the retailer within 24 hours," he says.

Farms then ensure harvested maturity via the cold chain. "We hydro-cool our peaches immediately after harvest and work to get them to our customers as quickly as possible," says Tommy Chappell, partner at Chappell Farms in Kline, SC. "The less time between the tree and the consumer, the better the eating experience."

Quality control for freshness at the farm level is crucial. "We take pride at Titan Farms to ensure all product leaves our facility within four days off the tree and mostly sooner," says Williams. "It's absolutely critical for the consumer to have

as consistent of an eating experience as possible."

EXPERT HANDLING

South Carolina growers actively invest and manage inputs to ensure the highest quality of their orchards. "The soil just seems made for peaches here but we do add extra phosphorus, potassium and nitrogen to the soil for the tree's health," says Arthur Q. Black, co-owner at Black's Peaches in York SC. "The peach trees thrive better in a manicured orchard, so we try to keep the grass cut as much as possible around the trees."

Quality control is twofold for peach growers: field operations and pack house operations. "Growing peaches in South Carolina, we must be diligent in our harvest," says McLeod of McLeod Farms. "Due to variability in weather, we may need to pick more frequently to stay ahead of the variety and get a peach that is shippable but still with the maturity we want."

Growers also harness technology. "We use the machine sorter to help sort out the big, obvious quality issues," says McLeod. "Then our hand graders will fine-tune grade. The machine sorter helps allow our people to finish the box and focus on the minuscule details of the pack."

Chappell Farms' quality-control process is built around consistency and accountability, relates Chappell. "Every shipment is carefully inspected to ensure it meets our standards for freshness, appearance and food safety," he says.

At J.W. Yonce & Sons, the family has a hand at every juncture from planning and growing to harvesting and shipping. "Every aspect of the farm is handled by a family member to ensure the highest quality and accountability," says Yonce.



SOUTH CAROLINA PEACHES

CLOSE TO MARKET

Proximity to market has multiple advantages for South Carolina. Closer to home means riper fruit from the tree and more sustainable benefits. "Location provides a logistical advantage for both wholesale distribution and direct-to-consumer sales," says Chappell. "With transportation costs continuing to rise, it's a real benefit. We're within reach of major population centers from Canada to Florida, allowing us to deliver fresh peaches efficiently and cost-effectively."

Close to 65 percent of the population in the U.S. can be reached within a two-day trip from our farm to the retailer's distribution center, explains Williams. "A piece of fruit can be from tree to shelf within four to five days depending on how long the retailer takes to put it through their system after it's deliv-

ered," he says.

Location is a significant advantage, agrees Richter of Richter and Company. "We have a tremendous time and freight advantage," he says. "South Carolina peaches are often at a competitive price point because we are closer to final market."

Though much of South Carolina's traditional market is the heavy population of the East Coast, distribution is expanding. "Some of the newer markets we're beginning to see heavier volume in include the Deep South, mainly Texas, and as far west as Oklahoma," says Williams. "Titan Farms is also exporting into Mexico, including Monterrey and Guadalajara."

ALWAYS ADVANCING

New presentations offer opportunity for sales. "Dixie

Belle packs in trays, clamshells, pouch bags, handle baskets and volume-fill boxes," says Forrest.

Titan looks to premium packaging as a sales driver. "One of the most beneficial presentations has been a three-pound consumer pack as a purveyor of premium fruit," says Williams. "This tray is perfect for consumers who want premium fruit but in a convenient package. Retail should offer both bulk and packaged. We have seen that packaged fruit doesn't cannibalize bulk it actually adds purchases."

Packaging on the farm has also seen changes. Sunny Slope has moved over the years from wooden baskets and crates to corrugated boxes and plastic baskets that are more recyclable. "The plastic is easier to reuse and also to clean," says Ness. "This helps us with food safety considerations as well." **PB**



BEHIND THE *Peaches*



A product is only as good as the hands that produce it. "Growers in South Carolina are family businesses, into multiple generations, and have developed an outstanding degree of consistent farming practices and experience throughout many years," says Jeff Hopkins, Musser fruit research center farm manager at the College of Agriculture, Clemson University.

Meet some of the hands behind these amazing peaches.

Blacks Peaches

Blacks Peaches has been growing since 1923 and currently has the fourth generation involved. "My great-grandfather, Arthur L. Black, planted the first trees in 1921, and in 1923, we had our first peaches," says Beth Black White, co-owner. "The farm currently manages 50 acres and has diversified over the last 50 years, incorporating strawberries, tomatoes, veggies, pumpkins and more in addition to peaches."

Black's Peaches business model differs from some of the other growers

because it only direct-retails its peaches. The farm still grows some of the "old school" varieties, including Red Haven, Monroe, Loring, Jefferson, Contender and Winblo. "Some of the newer varieties we grow include Caroking, Bounty, Victoria and Flame Prince," says Black White. "These are giving the old ones a run for their money in texture and sweetness."

Chappell Farms

Chappell Farms, with 800 acres of peaches, is a family-owned and operated farm. While deeply rooted in agricultural tradition, the farm continues to evolve to meet the needs of today's customers. "We're proud of our history, but we're equally focused on the future," says Tommy Chappell, partner. "In 1927, my great-grandfather began farming in North Carolina, and in the 1950s, my grandfather established operations in South Carolina with my father and uncle. The logo on our peach boxes is Pat's Pride, named after my father, Pat Chappell. We also market peaches under the Phyllis'

Finest label, named after my mother."

As the southernmost commercial peach grower in South Carolina, the farm benefits from an earlier harvest window than many growers across the state. "That gives us a unique opportunity to provide customers with fresh, locally grown peaches at the beginning of the season," says Chappell. "And, our traditional roadside stand continues to bring families back year after year, and our two U-pick fields now welcome visitors from all over who want to experience the farm firsthand."

Dixie Belle

Dixie Belle is a fourth-generation peach farm stretching over the South Carolina counties of Edgefield, Saluda and Orangeburg. "Our family has been growing peaches on The Ridge of South Carolina for four generations," says Jim Forrest, founder. "Our knowledge comes from many years of growing experience and is accompanied by a passion to provide farm-fresh produce. We take pride in our family farm, and the

generations we've dedicated to providing quality, homegrown peaches."

Dixie Belle grows 3,000 acres of sweet, high-quality peaches. Alongside the farm's signature peach crop, it has also expanded its strawberry acreage and grows other fruits and vegetables in season.

J.W. Yonce & Sons, Inc.

Generation after generation, J.W. Yonce & Sons has grown from a small peach orchard to a thriving commercial organization with more than 4,300 acres. Currently owned and managed by fourth-generation Chris Yonce and his cousin Josh Yonce, the farm has continued to maintain core values over the past 80-plus years.

Chris Yonce explains they consider the farm a true family farm because family members are involved in all operations.

SOUTH CAROLINA PEACHES

"From planting the trees to growing a quality peach to harvesting to selling them, we have family overseeing and involved in every aspect," he says. "Consistent quality is a family tradition. Our standards are high, and we continually make sure the bar is raised. Our retail customers have come to rely on our dedication to detail and consistent quality, which is why we have formed retail partnerships that have lasted for over 25 years."

McLeod Farms

Family-owned and operated since 1916, McLeod Farms has proudly grown fresh produce for over a century. The McLeods operate one of the largest peach orchards in the area, and at the helm are father and son, Kemp and Spencer McLeod, the fourth and fifth generation on the 7500-acre farm. The

company sells under the Mac's Pride brand. "We grow over 50 varieties of peaches on the sandy, loam soils of the Pee Dee area," says Spencer McLeod. "We are continuing our family's legacy by incorporating new technologies emphasizing precision ag techniques."

The farm's diversity includes peaches, strawberries, blackberries, year-round vegetables, and row crops. The McLeods have also expanded their local roadside market to include not just their homegrown produce, but to bakery, ice cream shop, and event space. "Our roadside market gives us direct insight into what consumers think and want," says McLeod. "That helps us in all aspects of our business."

Richter and Company

Richter and Company is a family-owned

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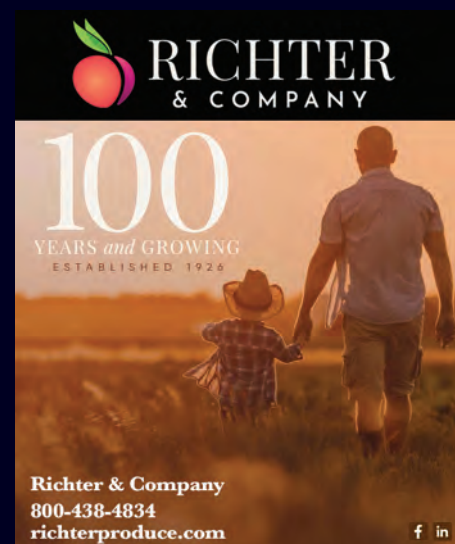
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and family-grown business offering the finest labels in the South. "Our operation is known as a Family of Farms - a trademark that developed through close, personal relationships with grower partners," says Benjie Richter, president and co-owner. "We are one of the world's largest distributors of fresh Southern peaches. My grandfather started business in 1926. I'm third generation, and we have fourth generation working here now too."

Richter and Company partners with three growers to represent their product as an exclusive sales team. "We specialize in selling and distribution," says Richter. "We are very hands which is important. Peaches are our main commodity, though we do sell other products, including Vidalia onions, strawberries and other berries. We currently represent around 4,600 acres of South Carolina peaches between the three farms."

Senn Brothers

Senn Brothers is a family-owned business operating since 1944. It is the largest wholesale distributor of fresh fruits and vegetables in South Carolina. "We take great pride in sourcing the finest quality products from growers across the nation, around the globe, and within our local community," says Gary Prince, co-owner. "We have specialized expertise in local product, school programs and fruit sales."

With a rich history spanning three generations and founded by E.D. "Jake" Senn, the company has established a strong reputation for excellence in every aspect of its service, but has a particular affinity with its local grower community. "We do all we can to support our local farmers when they have product," says Prince. "Our goal for the local farmers is to be an on-ramp

into the food chain. We help them get into many places they can't sell direct. For many of our customers and growers, it's easier for us to do the last mile than for them to do it."

Strawberry Hill USA

In 1946, Perry Cooley offered land from his cotton farm to his son, Frank Eugene "Gene" Cooley, to farm peaches. Since Gene had just returned from World War II, Perry agreed to furnish the land and purchase the trees if Gene would dig the 2,000 holes in the fertile South Carolina soil. "In the mid-1950s, Gene's brother, Ansel, joined him in the peach business and built a packing shed," says James Cooley, owner and third generation. "The nearly 400 American flags that fly in the summer wind on our building are a tribute to Gene and Ansel Cooley to commemorate their service in

SOUTH CAROLINA PEACHES SHOWCASE



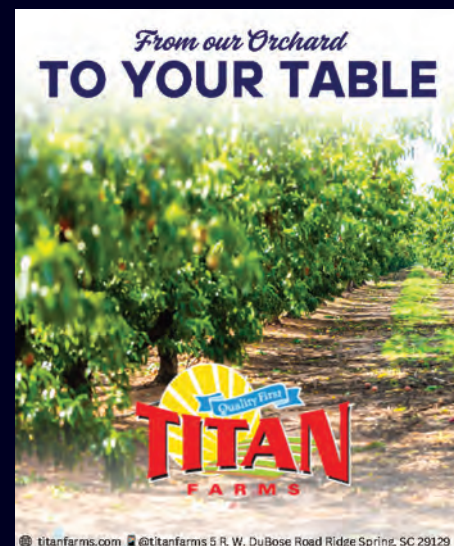
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World War II."

Over the decades, the farm diversified into strawberries as well as peaches. "In 2001, we added a restaurant and ice cream parlor, and in 2007, we put in 36 acres of blackberries," says Cooley. "A second roadside market was established in Gaffney, SC, in 2008. As of 2021, Strawberry Hill U.S.A. is now the largest strawberry farm in South Carolina with 115 acres. Peaches are still our primary crop with close to 1,000 acres in production."

Sunny Slope Farms

Multi-generational, family-owned Sunny Slope Farms was founded in 1944 by a New Jersey grower who moved to South Carolina. "It was my grandfather's farm," says Justin Ness, owner. "I'm the fourth generation. The farm grows around 60 acres of traditional southern peaches. Our smaller size allows a hyper-personalized attention to product and customers."

The farm also prides itself on a classic focus. "Some growers are changing varieties but we're sticking with the traditional ones," says Ness. "We know they work well here and they're what our customers expect."

We've been able to build a good relationship with our customers. In an increasingly competitive environment, our family works hard to keep the farm operational despite difficult seasons. People say the reason I do it is because I have peach fuzz in my blood."

Titan Farms

Titan Farms is the largest peach grower and shipper on the East Coast. As a first-generation family farming operation, the company manages every step of its vertically integrated supply chain, from growing and harvesting to packing and processing. "We have been growing peaches for the last 27 years," says Ross Williams, president. "The farm was established by Chalmers and Lori Anne Carr. They were first-generation farmers and have grown the business from just shy of 1,000 acres to 6,500 in peaches and another 1,000 in vegetables."

Over the years the business has grown with family members and long-term employees creating a family atmosphere at the farm. "We look at our business as a family farm," says Williams. "We are not all family, but we treat each other as family, and that is a high value for us."

Watsonia Farms

The Watson family passion for farming began over 100 years ago. Today, the third and fourth generations of Watsons own and operate Watsonia Farms, specializing in organic produce. In 1918, Joseph H. Watson Sr. planted the first asparagus in South Carolina. In 1925, Watson and four other growers planted peach orchards, becoming a genesis of commercial peach production in The Ridge growing area of the state. In 1981, the farm began diversifying into other products, and in 2005, became USDA organically certified. "We pride ourselves on local farming since 1918," shares Jerry Watson Jr. "But we also must be progressive and stay with the times to remain successful in this ever-changing industry. One new development is that we are now working with Titan Farms' sales team for sale of our organic peaches."

Land stewardship is a guiding principle at Watsonia. "We continue to give back to the land through procedures such as crop rotation, cover crops, soil amendments and erosion control," says Joe Watson, co-owner. "Our daddy would always say 'you need to leave the land better than you found it.'" **PB**

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Large, colorful peach displays help create a sense of seasonal excitement, drawing shoppers into the produce department and encouraging impulse purchases during peak summer selling periods.

PHOTO COURTESY TITAN FARMS

Grow Peach Sales During Peak Season

Aroma and large displays help boost sales of this summer fruit category favorite.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Peaches are one of the key drivers of summer produce sales. The fragrant and vibrant-colored fruit attracts impulse purchases and helps retailers create excitement in produce departments during peak season.

Now a nearly year-round category, retailers are finding success merchandising peaches. The availability of Southern, California, Chilean and Mexican fruit leaves only a limited number of weeks when peaches aren't available in large supplies.

"Peaches are extremely important to the produce department," says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations for Harps Food Stores Inc., based in Springdale, AR. "They are a true showstopper. A good peach display can set the tone for the customer's entire shopping trip."

The category builds momentum during the summer when the South and California produce high volumes of fruit.

SIGNATURE CATEGORY

"Peaches are one of the signature categories of summer produce and play an important role in driving seasonal excitement through-

out the department," says Krista Beckstead, director of marketing for Mountain View Fruit Sales, Reedley, CA.

"When quality and flavor are strong, peaches create impulse purchases, increase basket size, and encourage repeat visits. They also help retailers reinforce a fresh, premium image during peak summer shopping periods."

Peaches are a critical summer item for Market Basket's 90 retail stores in the Boston, MA, area.

"Peaches are a big draw for our customers every summer," says Tim Shea, buyer/merchandise for the Tewksbury, MA-based chain. "Once Eastern peaches and California peaches hit the shelves, there's some excitement in the area. Summer's coming. It's just a big part of our summer program."

Georgia and South Carolina peach production typically begins in May and can harvest through August and early September. Responsible for approximately 70% of U.S. peach production, California peaches ship late April through October. Other regions, including New Jersey and Pennsylvania, usually begin in early July and ship through late September.

Chilean fruit ships to the U.S. from November through March, with Florida peaches harvested from March through mid-May.

"People associate peaches with summertime, kids out of school, vacation and time to grill," says Will McGehee, a partner with Genuine Georgia Group LLC, Fort Valley, GA. "We get a lot of our flavor from where we're growing them. We have a wonderful soil and climate for sweet peaches. We get searing heat during the day, which develops sugar pretty quickly."

SUMMER TREAT

For many consumers, the California stone fruit harvest season — which also includes apricots, nectarines and plums — signals the start of the summer, when the produce aisle is filled with fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables, says Courtney Razor, director of member services and communications for the California Fresh Fruit Association (CFFA), Fresno, CA.

“California peaches are a versatile product known for their freshness, sweetness and flavor,” she says. “They are a true summer staple, and can be enjoyed on their own as the perfect seasonal snack or incorporated into signature summer dishes, such as cobblers, ice cream, jams and spreads. Throughout the season, shoppers will have access to a wide range of peach varieties, including both yellow- and white-flesh peaches, as well as unique offerings like flat or donut peaches.”

An item that shoppers naturally associate with summer, peaches are a highly anticipated seasonal item that encourages impulse purchases. Strong peach programs help retailers create fresh, colorful and abundant produce departments that attract shoppers.

“Peaches are a major summer sales driver for retailers, as they bring strong seasonal excitement to the produce department,” says Ross Williams, president of Titan Farms, Ridge Spring, SC. “Peaches bring energy and excitement to the produce department during the summer season. Their vibrant color and seasonal appeal naturally draw shoppers in. Promotional activity drives sales growth.”

In the past, retailers sold either Southern or California peaches. Today, they sell both.

“Southern peaches have tremendous flavor,” says Benjie Richter, partner with Charlotte, NC’s Richter & Co. “They have humidity, and they have a very good acid-to-sugar ratio that gives you that delicious peach flavor when you get them from Georgia and South Carolina. They sell themselves. Once somebody picks one up, the flavor and the smell brings them back for repeat sales. It’s kind of a sexy fruit. Everyone likes peaches.”

TRAFFIC BOOSTER

Whether from the South or California, peaches are a popular produce item.

“Peaches help drive overall produce sales by increasing traffic and creating larger seasonal displays that encourage shoppers to purchase multiple summer fruits together,” says Angela Hernandez, vice president of marketing for Trinity Fruit Co., Inc., Fresno, CA. “Peaches are an important seasonal category because they create energy and excitement in the produce department while offering strong movement during the summer months.

“Their strong aroma, vibrant color, and flavor make them an easy grab-and-go item for shoppers looking for healthy summer snacks.”

From large, loose bulk displays to tote bags and pouch bags, a variety of merchandising approaches works well with peaches, depending on the fruit’s sizing and supply region, according to suppliers and retailers.

“When horizontal space is restricted, building vertically can be just as impactful. Stacked displays create height, draw the eye, and help communicate volume and freshness even within a smaller footprint,” says Williams of Titan Farms.

Ideally, peaches should be given ample space during peak season to showcase their abundance and visual appeal.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Peaches create excitement, build impulse sales, and make the department feel alive. They are one of those items customers look forward to every year, especially during the Southern peach season.”**

Mike Roberts, Harps Food Stores Inc., Springdale, AR

- **“Being one of the most recognizable summer fruits, peaches help create eye-catching displays, encourage impulse purchases, and give shoppers a reason to engage with fresh produce.”**

Ross Williams, Titan Farms, Ridge Spring, SC

DISPLAY VARIATIONS

Peaches can be displayed in many produce aisle locations. “The retailers call them front page, back page, side cap, endcap, those different words that I’ve heard used,” says Genuine Georgia’s McGehee. “And so, they always have them on display in some form or fashion. Certain weeks are big up front, but even when those large displays are shrunk back down, they’re still sizable and findable.”

At Harps, tote bag displays drive volume for Southern peaches, while loose bulk displays remain best for larger-sized California peaches.

“Retailers should treat peaches like a seasonal destination, not just another item on the rack,” advises Roberts. “Build displays that are full, seasonal, fresh, placed in a high-traffic area, and easy to shop. Make sure the fruit is ripe enough to create aroma and excitement. Carry multiple varieties when possible, including yellow flesh, white flesh, and Saturn or donut peaches.

“The best displays are big, full, seasonal, and placed in a high-traffic area. Peaches should be treated as a feature item when they are at their peak.”

Market Basket’s summer fruit display includes Eastern peaches on one side, California peaches on the other side with white peaches in the middle, and they build extra endcap displays.

“We promote as often as possible, several times every season, be it Eastern peaches, California peaches,” says Shea. “I would say peaches are a staple for the summer and very important for us to have them and have different varieties of peaches for our customers. We’re in the peach business for sure.”

Richter says stores do well when they merchandise peaches in large, waterfall-like displays where retailers erect displays from shipper boxes.

AROMA POWER

“When you go into a store and you see a big display of Southern peaches, you can smell them and they look good,” says Richter. “The fruit comes out and is a volume-fill abundance, where shoppers can go in there and get a bag and pick as they wish. Those displays yell and speak to you that it’s regional, a Southern peach that didn’t have to travel that far from the farm. We get tremendous resale.”

Peaches are associated with summer eating occasions, grilling, entertaining and healthy snacking, says Mountain View’s Beckstead.

“High visibility locations near department entrances or alongside

other summer fruit categories perform especially well," she says. "Their vibrant color, aroma and flavor naturally attract shoppers and create a strong visual impact in-store. Large peach displays can increase overall traffic to the produce department and help drive complementary purchases across berries, cherries, melons and other seasonal fruit categories."

"Displaying peaches front and center with strong signage and summer-themed messaging helps capture shopper attention," says Trinity Fruit's Hernandez. "Color blocking peaches alongside complementary summer fruit creates visual impact and helps shoppers easily shop the category. Secondary displays near high-traffic areas, sampling during peak flavor windows, and messaging around 'snacking the sweet side of healthy' are all great ways to increase shopper engagement."

OTHER STORE PLACEMENTS

Cross-merchandising is a key piece of successful merchandising of peaches. Peaches work well with fresh cherries and other dessert items. If retailers can involve ice cream, the dessert can significantly boost sales, although that can be challenging operationally depending on the store layout, explains Harps' Roberts.

"Peaches are important because they drive both planned and impulse purchases," he says. "Customers come in looking for them during peak season, but a great display can also stop shoppers in their tracks. Once a customer buys peaches, it can lead to additional purchases across the store — shortcakes, pie shells, cobbler mix, ice cream, whipped topping, or other dessert items. That is what makes peaches so powerful."

Titan Farms' Williams recommends retailers consider displaying peaches in other store locations.



Retailers may do well when they merchandise peaches in large waterfall-like displays made from shipper boxes. PHOTO COURTESY TITAN FARMS

"Think beyond a standard produce display," he advises. "Secondary displays, front-of-store placement, seasonal bins, and cross-merchandising with bakery, dairy, breakfast, salad, and grilling items can help peaches stand out and encourage larger basket rings."

As with most tree fruit categories, weather continues to play a major role in crop sizing, timing and overall supply, says Beckstead.

"The industry remains optimistic about consumer demand for peaches, particularly when quality and flavor align," she says. "Retailers should stay closely connected with suppliers throughout the season to manage promotional planning and transitions effectively. As these are a seasonal fruit, they are highly sought after during the peak summer season since consumers can't get them year-round."

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Cross-merchandising garlic with complementary produce items can inspire meal ideas, increase shopper engagement, and drive additional sales throughout the produce department.

PHOTO COURTESY SPICE WORLD

Showcase Garlic's Flavor

A growing assortment of fresh, organic, and ready-to-use products is driving growth.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Just a whiff of garlic's aroma evokes an array of flavorful meals. Then, the range of convenient garlic products draws consumers to a retailer's produce department.

With today's products, food preparers of any ability or training can master the potential of garlic's flavor. The expansion of convenience products prompts the proliferation of concoctions to spotlight the nuances of garlic flavors.

GROWING MARKETS

Christopher Ranch Garlic, Gilroy, CA, provides U.S.-grown garlic to all 50 states. Their heirloom garlic's high levels of Brix and allicin account for their famous texture, bite and aroma. Fresh and processed offerings include plentiful examples.

"The garlic industry is a very exciting place to be," says Executive Vice President Ken Christopher. "As garlic has moved from a relatively exotic ingredient to being the center plate of any dish from Latin America, southern Europe, eastern Europe, South Asia and East Asia, it is increasingly becoming the consequential staple for so many dishes' flavor profile."

Fresh garlic sales have experienced positive year-over-year changes in both dollar and volume sales across multiple recent four-week periods, according to Samantha Snyder, director of marketing, sustainability and innovation, I Love Produce, West Grove, PA. "This pattern of growth is observed in several consecutive periods, indicating robust and sustained consumer demand."

"Fresh garlic demand in the U.S. retail market has shown consistent growth, and the latest available data suggests this upward trend is likely to continue into the near future."

Snyder points out that growth is not limited to a single season or short-term spike. "Over the past year, nearly every four-week period has shown positive or stable growth in both dollar and volume sales, suggesting that garlic is maintaining its popularity as a staple ingredient in U.S. households."

I Love Produce ships fresh, bulk, and packaged shelf-stable and “squeezy” minced and garlic paste-mixed convenient jars, plus black and elephant garlic. Snyder predicts packaged products will grow in importance for consumers due to ease of use.

“Many consumers prefer to purchase already peeled or chopped products that are ready to use in their favorite dishes without the effort.”

Bruce Klein, director of marketing, Maurice Auerbach Inc., Secaucus, NJ, counters that “most retail consumers look for bulk garlic. Garlic is absolutely, definitely growing.”

But he distinguishes foodservice. “They enjoy the peeled products. Here, the convenience aspect leads.”

Auerbach markets to retail chains, foodservice, and wholesale customers, specializing in both bulk and bagged products of a range of sizes and featured containers.

Robert Schueller, director of public relations, Melissa’s Produce, Los Angeles, CA, agrees that garlic markets are expanding. “I anticipate continued growth overall.”

Melissa’s extensive line varies, with their year-round organic garlic at 7%, peeled at 5%, roasted, chopped and minced jarred items 4%, black garlic 3%, and the seasonal elephant garlic 6%, and spring garlic 2%.

Mike Smith, senior vice president of sales and marketing, Spice World, Orlando, FL, also predicts growth.

“Fresh garlic is expected to increase in 2026 due to consumer interest in eating fresh and in functional foods tied to immunity and wellness,” he says. “We expect to see all garlic segments growing between 4% and 8% moving forward, driven by the convenience for consumers as they continue to seek more flavor in their cooking.”

Spice World features convenient, ready-to-use jar products, squeezable options, minced, sliced, chopped, crushed, and fresh garlic, as well. They ship to all U.S. states.

ORGANIC RISING

Christopher says demand for organic garlic has steadily increased year-over-year, and “we are proud to be the nation’s largest supplier

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Fresh garlic is expected to increase in 2026 due to consumer interest in eating fresh and functional foods tied to immunity and wellness.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

of organic garlic, offering over 200 million bulbs to select customers that value the freshest and healthiest offers."

Smith also says organic garlic continues to grow in popularity, with both consumers and retailers. "Major grocery retailers continue to dedicate more shelf space to organic produce as organic produce consumers typically show store loyalty and repeat purchasing patterns. We are seeing Gen Z and Millennials select organic products as their first choice."

Spice World offers organic products in both fresh and ready-to-use formats.

Melissa's Schueller says while organic products can cost a little more, there is no difference in taste — "the consumer buys into the lifestyle."

Klein says organic products from Maurice Auerbach are NOP-certified organic, which means there are rigorous steps taken from farm to table to ensure their organic status and quality.

Snyder, of I Love Produce, offers incentives to effectively expand organic sales. She suggests temporary price reductions or loyalty discounts.

"Introducing more organic SKUs, especially in under-represented categories, increases shopper engagement and basket size," she says. "Clear labeling, signage, and digital content highlighting organic benefits drive trial and repeat purchases."

CROSS-MERCHANDISING BOLSTERS SALES

When it comes to cross-merchandising, Christopher Ranch finds success over the Thanksgiving/Christmas season, as well as the weeks leading up to the Super Bowl.

Snyder notes that pairing organic produce with complementary organic products (e.g., organic dips, snacks) encourages trial and increases overall organic category sales.

"I would recommend garlic promotions with avocados, tomatoes and other ingredients for guacamole and other dips, especially in the summer," she says. "Garlic is a staple ingredient in so many recipes — it adds so much flavor and can enhance any dish."

Smith recommends retailers surround Spice World products with fresh produce that easily works with garlic.

"Cross-merchandising with other compatible produce items

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- "We expect to see all garlic segments growing between 4% and 8% moving forward, driven by the convenience for consumers as they continue to seek more flavor in their cooking."

Mike Smith, Spice World, Orlando, FL

- "Fresh garlic is always going to be the gold standard. While peeled and minced options offer great convenience, you just can't beat the incredible flavor you get from fresh cloves. A kitchen without garlic is like love without a heart."

Charles Yeh, Stew Leonard's, Norwalk, CT

creates an opportunity to bring in general merchandise to produce displays," he says. "Lime juicers and guacamole serving dishes are good examples."

Schueller says, typically, the shelf-stable garlic products are found next to the onions section. "Dried tomatoes, pine nuts, lime and lime juices play well, even with other value-added products."

EXPLORE PRODUCTS

Garlic producers continuously work with their products, creating different mixtures plus offering ways to enjoy garlic. Examples are Melissa's new Toun and the marketing of elephant and black garlic.

"There is a demand for clean-label, multi-use condiments that elevate flavor without necessary additives," says Schueller. "Toun garlic delivers pure, velvety garlic flavor with a citrusy lift. Toun Guajillo Garlic Dip adds a mild smoky kick from guajillo peppers, offering a warm, complex twist."

I Love Garlic lists elephant garlic, which is a member of the leek family, plus black garlic. "Black garlic is naturally fermented over time," says Snyder, "creating a deep, sweet and tangy umami flavor. It produces a mild, caramelized taste with no harsh garlic aftertaste; rich in antioxidants ideal for sauces, dressings, marinades, gourmet foods, functional foods, and seasonings."

Garlic fans express fascination with scapes that occasionally appear at farmers markets. Prior to harvest, the long, green, slightly curly, tubular purple-like flowers bundle at the tops of the long green garlic plants. Scapes can be simply trimmed and used raw or quickly cooked for their very mild sweetness.

Foodservice operators and retail produce directors are proficient at garlic exploration.

"Fresh garlic is always going to be the gold standard," says Charles Yeh, director of produce at Stew Leonard's, Norwalk, CT, which owns and operates eight supermarkets in New England. "While peeled and minced options offer great convenience, you just can't beat the incredible flavor you get from fresh cloves. A kitchen without garlic is like love without a heart."

He adds that both jarred and fresh garlic are stocked at Stew Leonard's. "Our customers are truly passionate about it, too — in fact, Stew Leonard's No. 1 selling salad dressing is Garlic Expressions, simply because people love seeing these big, whole garlic cloves right in the bottle."

Tropical Produce a Growing Opportunity

BY STEPHANIE TRAMUTOLA

For many consumers, tropical produce is not a specialty item, it is an everyday essential, deeply tied to tradition, culture and nutrition. As demand continues to increase in this category, wholesalers have an opportunity to better support their customers while expanding their business.

At A&J Produce, this growth prompted us to launch a new tropical department. While the decision was driven by consumer interest, it also reflects broader shifts taking place across the produce industry. As consumer preferences evolve and communities become increasingly diverse, wholesalers are expanding their offerings to better reflect the markets they serve.



Entering the tropical category is not simply about adding new products. It is about strengthening our role as a full-service partner while positioning

ourselves more strategically within the supply chain.

Operating out of the Hunts Point Produce Terminal Market, one of the largest wholesale produce markets in the world, gives us a unique advantage. Our location allows us to efficiently supply a wide range of ethnic populations throughout the Northeast while providing access to the freshest, highest-quality produce.

That assortment includes tropical items, such as plantains, yuca, malanga, batata, calabaza, papaya and bananas, with offerings adjusted seasonally based on availability and demand. These commodities play a vital role for independent retailers, bodegas, neighborhood grocers, foodservice operators, and produce buyers throughout the region.

As we expand into this category, I spoke with our new tropical buyer, Ralph Tejeda, whose experience and industry insight have been instrumental in establishing the department. According to Tejeda, understanding the customer base is critical to building a successful tropical program.

"We serve a broad customer base, including Latino, Asian and Caribbean communities," says Tejeda. "However, these groups should not be treated as a single market, because each community has distinct preferences and traditions. For example, El Salvadorian cuisine differs from Mexican cuisine, just as Dominican cuisine differs from Jamaican cuisine. Recognizing these differences allows us to better support the diverse population of New York."

Mainstream consumers are also increasingly seeking new and interesting products, broadening the category's reach beyond traditional ethnic markets.

With greater demand comes increased responsibility throughout the supply chain. For A&J, direct importing and compliance with our Foreign Supplier Verification Program (FSVP) have been central to

developing a credible and competitive department.

"It is important to source products as close to their origin as possible," explains Tejeda. "Buying direct can improve profit margins as well as securing consistent supply."

Direct sourcing also creates operational advantages that extend beyond pricing.

"Working closely with the source allows us to be among the first receivers of product, which is critical for freshness," he says. "It also gives us information that helps us plan ahead and respond more effectively to potential supply interruptions."

Like many sectors of the produce industry, tropical sourcing comes with significant operational challenges, including weather disruptions, supply chain delays, and rising fuel costs. Because of these variables, food safety and compliance remain essential.

Tejeda notes A&J's established compliance department and adherence to food safety protocols provide a layer of reassurance as imported produce accounts for a growing portion of the market.

INVEST IN TRAINING

Beyond sourcing, tropical produce also requires a deeper level of product knowledge and handling expertise. Many commodities travel long distances before reaching distribution facilities and retail shelves, which can affect shelf life, explains Tejeda. "Many tropical items may also be unfamiliar to handlers, creating a need for training on proper storage, ripening, rotation and merchandising."

Investing in education and operational training is as crucial as sourcing the right product. A strong tropical program requires coordination between procurement teams, warehouse staff, transportation providers, and buyers to ensure quality is maintained from origin to delivery.

At A&J, we view this department as more than just a category expansion. It represents an investment in the future of our business and in the communities we serve.

Wholesalers who diversify their offerings and remain connected to shifting consumer trends will be better positioned for long-term growth. For A&J, this represents an opportunity to maintain and strengthen our relationships, from growers and import partners to retailers and end consumers, while connecting cultures, products, and communities through produce.

As the produce industry evolves, wholesalers must adapt to the changing demographics and preferences shaping the marketplace. For A&J, the tropical department represents both a strategic investment and a cultural one, strengthening our sourcing capabilities, broadening our customer reach, and reinforcing our commitment to delivering quality, consistency and care.

PB

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

Growing Threat From AI Food Fraud

BY ANNABEL KYLE AND ALASDAIR DEAN

Businesses are facing a new wave of fraud driven by artificial intelligence, with customers increasingly using AI-generated images and legally framed complaints to secure refunds and compensation.

Here at Food Alert, we're seeing live cases across the United Kingdom involving manipulated food images designed to depict mold,



undercooked meat and foreign objects that were never present in the original meal, creating growing financial and reputational risks for operators already under pressure from rising costs.

AI-generated content is increasingly widespread online. With more than 34 million AI-generated images now reportedly produced every day and 71% of social media content estimated to be AI-generated, food businesses are becoming vulnerable to a new form of "AI food fraud."



The issue is exacerbated by how many third-party delivery platforms handle complaints, with refunds often processed automatically before costs

are passed directly onto retailers.

The problem is becoming a day-to-day challenge for retailers.

There have been instances where we've seen AI manipulation of images relating to foreign bodies or undercooked food complaints. We do think this is likely to increase, and we are aware that third-party aggregators reportedly receive a lot of suspicious complaints of this nature.

We've identified two key emerging threats facing operators: fabricated photographic evidence and AI-written intimidation tactics.

Customers are increasingly using AI tools to generate convincing complaint emails that include legal terminology and references to enforcement authorities, in an attempt to pressure businesses into issuing refunds.

A bigger trend we see is the use of AI to intimidate our food business clients in relation to food complaints.

For example, if a guest disagrees with the outcome of their complaint, we will often receive an email that is clearly written with AI, quoting legislation and stating they will be reporting the matter to enforcement authorities, government agencies, legal representatives, and so on.

Fraudulent complaints escalated to local authority Environmental Health Officer (EHO) departments, whether through AI-generated images or intimidatory written correspondence, can trigger inspections. Even where the original complaint is fabricated, an inspection may uncover unrelated issues, creating real regulatory exposure. Repeated complaints on record can also, over time, affect a business's food hygiene rating.

Our own research found that 84% of local councils across England, Wales and Northern Ireland charge businesses for a food hygiene re-rating, with the average cost totaling £219.95 (\$295).

Identifying fake complaints is becoming increasingly difficult as AI technology advances rapidly.

At the moment, email and written complaints are relatively easy to identify, as AI language is currently fairly easy to distinguish. However, this is likely to change over time. Images are harder to spot and, while there are clues to look for, they are trickier to see. Again, these will become harder and harder to identify over time, and relatively rapidly.

Current U.K. legislation does not cover AI-generated food complaint fraud, leaving businesses exposed while regulation struggles to keep pace with the technology. In the U.K., there is currently

nothing that governs the generation of images outside the intentional generation of sexually explicit images. This also means other people might see and hear of this type of fraud and the lack of legislation around it, and carry it out for themselves.

We urge businesses to strengthen complaint investigation procedures, maintain robust food safety documentation and work closely with delivery platforms to challenge suspicious refund claims more effectively.

Businesses should continue treating every complaint seriously to avoid overlooking genuine food safety risks while remaining alert to signs of AI manipulation. **PB**

Identifying fake complaints is becoming increasingly difficult as AI technology advances.

Food Alert is a leading food safety, health & safety and compliance consultancy supporting businesses across the hospitality, foodservice, leisure, retail and manufacturing sectors. The company provides expert technical advice, auditing, training and compliance solutions. The full report can be found at www.foodalert.com/blogs-resources/ai-food-fraud.

Annabel Kyle is a food safety and compliance expert with over 20 years of experience, focusing on compliance, interpreting legislation and guidance, updating and creating policies and procedures for clients, supporting clients with EHO appeals and serving as the technical voice of Food Alert. Alasdair Dean is Food Alert's AI lead and a food and health and safety professional, running Food Alert's food complaints program.

Making Produce the Easy Choice

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

If you are in the produce industry, one of the most enduring goals is to increase consumption. We grow, ship, sell, market, merchandise, cook and advocate for fruits and vegetables because we believe they belong more consistently on the plate.

But not everyone living in America has the same access to fresh produce, and that directly affects their ability to eat the recommended five portions a day.



That is why the opportunity can't sit in retail alone. Grocery stores matter, but habits are also formed in restaurants, schools, hospitals, universities, workplace dining, hotels, fast casual concepts, prepared foods, convenience channels and community feeding programs.

Foodservice has enormous influence. It introduces people to flavors. It normalizes ingredients. It teaches preparation by example. It turns vegetables from obligation into experience.

If we want produce to become a daily habit, we have to make it easier to choose, easier to trust, easier to prepare, easier to crave, and easier to repeat.

CONVENIENCE

Fresh produce competes in a food environment designed around speed, portability and predictability. Packaged snacks, fast food, prepared meals, and center-of-the-plate proteins are often easier to understand, order, and consume than fruits and vegetables. Produce can compete, but it must be designed into real eating occasions.

At retail, that may mean washed, trimmed, snackable, microwaveable, pre-cut, pre-portioned, and meal-ready formats.

In foodservice, produce can move beyond the passive side dish and become part of the architecture of the menu.

Think about what makes other foods easy to want: crunch, salt, heat, sweetness, creaminess, acidity, aroma, contrast, and a clear reason to take another bite. Produce can deliver all of that when it is handled with culinary intention.

COST

Affordability matters. But value is not only about price. Value is also about yield, versatility, labor, shelf life, menu application, and whether the customer will eat it.

For consumers, the question is often: Will my family use this before it spoils? For operators, the question is similar: Will this product perform consistently, cross-utilize well, support food cost, and deliver enough customer appeal to earn its place on the menu?

The produce industry can help by telling a stronger value story. Cabbage can be slaw, taco garnish, roasted entrée component, soup base, sandwich crunch, dumpling filling or fermented condiment. Apples can be breakfast, snack, salad, sauce or dessert.

CONSISTENCY

Fresh produce will always have natural variation. That is part of its

beauty. But too much variation creates risk. A great peach creates loyalty. A mealy peach creates hesitation. Crisp greens build trust. Tired greens undermine it. A flavorful melon brings someone back. A bland one quietly damages the category.

Foodservice operators are especially sensitive to this. They need products that perform under pressure. Quality control, cold chain management, ripeness and seasonality education, handling guidance, packaging, forecasting, and distributor communication all influence whether produce succeeds once it leaves the field.

This is where suppliers and distributors can become better partners. Do not just sell the case. Help the kitchen understand the product.

Fresh produce does not have to be identical every day, but it does have to be dependable enough to trust. Trust builds repeat purchase.

CONFIDENCE

Nutrition may justify produce, but flavor sells it.

For too long, the industry has leaned on health messaging, while underplaying the culinary power of fruits and vegetables. Health matters, of course. But people do not return to a dish because it met a dietary recommendation. They return because it tasted good, satisfied a craving, and gave them a reason to want it again.

Produce is competing with chips, fries, burgers, pizza, sweet drinks, and packaged snacks designed for craveability. If fruits and vegetables are going to win more often, we have to treat flavor, texture, aroma, seasoning, temperature, contrast, and satisfaction as essential parts of the consumption strategy.

This is where foodservice may be the strongest lever we have. Chefs and menu developers can make produce aspirational.

ACCESS

Access is not only a retail issue. It is a food-system issue. Many Americans eat meals prepared by others.

If produce is absent, poorly prepared, under-seasoned, over-priced, or treated as an afterthought in those places, we miss an enormous opportunity.

But access without appeal is not enough. Availability without quality is not enough. Produce has to be present, practical and pleasurable.

THE PATH FORWARD

If we want Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables, we must support the people who put produce on the menu. Retail may drive the shopping cart, but foodservice helps shape appetite.

Make produce easier to buy. Easier to store. Easier to prep. Easier to menu. Easier to cross-utilize. Easier to crave. Easier to trust. If we want produce consumption to grow, we have to make fruits and vegetables feel less like an assignment and more like the best part of the plate.

PB

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.

After 40 years, Babé Farms Still Believes Anything is Possible

This year, Babé Farms, Santa Maria, CA, is celebrating its 40th anniversary, marking four decades as a pioneer and driving force in the specialty produce category.

From humble beginnings in 1986 to becoming one of the most recognized labels in baby vegetables and gourmet greens across the U.S. and Canada, Babé Farms' story is rooted in curiosity, family, and commitment to quality.

Founder Wilbur Souza, a third-generation farmer from a pioneer farming family in California's Santa Maria Valley, was inspired by his travels throughout Europe, where delicate mesclun mixes and baby vegetables were staples of refined cuisine. Seeing opportunity where few others did, Souza returned home determined to introduce these European-style vegetables to the U.S. market at a time when iceberg and romaine dominated grocery shelves.

The company grew out of Souza & Boster Farms, which supported Babé Farms in its earliest years. Early on, neighboring farmers questioned the idea of growing "baby" vegetables, but Babé Farms' willingness to push boundaries quickly set it apart. What began as a small, family-run venture soon became one of the first companies to introduce packaged spring mix, specialty greens, and colorful baby vegetables to North America.

"Forty years ago, specialty vegetables were a niche concept without a lot of exposure," says Jeff Lundberg, president and chief executive, Babé Farms. "Today, while still unique, they're more prevalent across the produce industry. We're proud to have helped shape that evolution."

People have always been at the heart of Babé Farms. Alongside Souza, founding partners, Greg and Cherrie Pedigo and Frank and Judy Lundberg, shaped the company's culture and direction. Many long-tenured employees, often spanning multiple generations of the same families, have also played a critical role in building, not just the operation, but the spirit of the company itself.

Today, Babé Farms grows and harvests more than 70 varieties of specialty vegetables, ranging from baby carrots, radishes, beets, and lettuces to specialty greens, organic kales, and spring mix, and offers nearly 600 customized pack options for chefs and retailers.



Babé Farms' Founder Wilbur Souza was inspired by his travels throughout Europe, where delicate mesclun mixes and baby vegetables were staples of refined cuisine. Seeing opportunity where few others did, he returned to California determined to introduce these European-style vegetables to the U.S. market. PHOTO COURTESY BABÉ FARMS

Still family-owned and operated, Babé Farms is led by Jeff Lundberg, son of founding partner Judy Lundberg-Wafer, who now serves as chairman of the board.

"When we started, the goal wasn't to build a national brand; it was to grow something meaningful and take care of our employees," says Lundberg-Wafer. "The growth followed because of the trust we built with our team and our customers. Seeing the next generation take an interest in the company makes this milestone even more special."

"What we're most proud of is our people," says Lundberg. "Babé Farms exists because of their skill, loyalty and heart. From day one, food safety and quality have gone hand in hand. Everything else follows."

After 40 years, the philosophy remains simple: Don't limit expectations — anything is possible. **PB**

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