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MARKETING MAGIC

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RIISING RETAILER

Whole Foods Market

MERCHANDISING

Onions
Peruvian Asparagus

PROCUREMENT

Eastern Apples
Specialty Mushrooms

MARKETING

The Organic Consumer

FEATURES

Tailgating

REGIONAL PROFILE

Atlanta





A Pineapple For Every Occassion

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COVER STORY

- 14 38th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards:**
14 Campaigns Prove Best Marketing
Thinks Outside the Box

IN THIS ISSUE

- 4 PB QUIZ**
- 6 PRODUCE WATCH**
- 10 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE**
Small Dietary Shifts, Big Opportunity
- 59 INFORMATION SHOWCASE**
- 59 BLAST FROM THE PAST**
ALDI Celebrates 50 Years in the US

FEATURES

- 24 FIRE UP FALL MERCHANDISING**
From back-to-school through Thanksgiving, discover merchandising ideas and seasonal marketing strategies.
- 28 PROMOTING TAILGATING FAVORITES IN PRODUCE**
Guerrilla merchandising inside and outside the department lifts game-day sales.



DEPARTMENTS

MERCHANDISING REVIEW

- 32 ABCs OF MERCHANDISING PERUVIAN ASPARAGUS**

Attending to a few fundamentals will benefit fall and winter asparagus sales.

- 34 HELP SHOPPERS ADD ONIONS TO MEALTIME**

Convenience and providing mealtime solutions are key to onion set evolution.

PROCUREMENT

- 39 BEYOND WHITE BUTTONS: SIX WAYS TO SELL MORE SPECIALTY MUSHROOMS**

Make mushrooms a destination, and then help shoppers decide what to buy.

- 43 EASTERN APPLE INDUSTRY ADAPTS TO DEMAND**

Retailers and growers are building apple sales through local sourcing.

ORGANIC MARKETING

- 48 UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIC SHOPPER**

Insight into today's consumer helps build organic produce sales.



SPECIAL FEATURES

- 12 WHOLE FOODS MARKET EXPANDS IN LONDON**
New Whole Foods locations in the U.K. spotlight premium produce, exclusive seasonal offerings and cross-merchandising strategies.
- 52 ATLANTA: PRODUCE TERMINAL OF THE SOUTH**
Booming population helps Atlanta wholesalers distribute produce.

COMMENTARY

- 56 WHOLESALE MARKET**
Community is Infrastructure, Not Networking
- 57 EUROPEAN MARKET**
Failure in High-Volume Retail Marketing
- 58 PRODUCE ON THE MENU**
Six Ways to Encourage Students to Enjoy Fresh Produce



THIS MONTH'S WINNER

JOE WAPO
Sysco Chicago
Produce QC Manager
Chicago, IL

Transitioning into the produce industry wasn't originally part of Joe Wapo's plan, but it has become a rewarding career.

Currently transitioning from a quality control inspector to quality control manager at one of Sysco's Fresh Point facilities in Chicago, IL, Wapo plays a vital role in ensuring product quality.

His position requires a hands-on approach and attention to detail.

"I am constantly checking for potential problems in our inbound product, as well as products in our cooler to mitigate shrink and maximize customer satisfaction," says Wapo. "I use all five of my senses daily and consistently, so anyone entering this industry in the capacity of a quality control should expect to do the same."

With a background in inventory manage-

ment, he was approached about joining Sysco's produce department, despite having little knowledge of fresh produce.

"I was very hesitant to make the transition," he says. "My supervisor at the time convinced me otherwise. Four years later, I feel very much at home in this field."

One of the greatest rewards, they say, is that no two days are ever alike. "I learn something new every day, and no day is exactly the same."

Wapo says outside of work, there's not much downtime. "Spare time? What's that? Currently, my coworkers and I enjoy submitting entries in your monthly quiz so that, in the off-chance one of us wins, we can continue our cascading banana-phone profile picture."

He also credits **PRODUCE BUSINESS** with helping him grow professionally.

"The magazine provides a unique perspective of the produce industry," he says. "This was a useful tool when I was starting out in this field."

PB

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QUESTIONS FOR THE AUGUST ISSUE

- 1) The Nickey Gregory Company is a "Proud member of" which Family? _____
- 2) Which company has the slogan, "The branches are heavy. The wait is over!"? _____
- 3) Which company says, "Meals Taste Better With Flavor You Can Trust"? _____
- 4) Phillips Mushroom Farms is focused on which type of Mushrooms? _____
- 5) What is the website URL for Shuman Farms? _____
- 6) How many ways are there To Sell More Specialty Mushrooms? _____

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

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

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TRANSITIONS

Allen Lund Company

The Allen Lund Company (ALC), La Cañada Flintridge, CA, announced that **Alex Rice** has been promoted to assistant general manager of the Cincinnati, OH, office.

Rice attended Sinclair Community College and built a career focused on sales and logistics. He joined ALC Cincinnati in 2019. Before his promotion, he held various roles including transportation broker, business development specialist and national sales manager.



Alex Rice

Moonlight Companies

Moonlight Companies, Reedley, CA, has added **Courtney Hernandez** to its sales team, bringing an experienced retail sales leader to support the company's stone fruit and winter citrus programs while strengthening retail customer relationships.

In her new role, Hernandez will help guide retail sales strategy and will work closely with Moonlight's farming, packing and operations teams to help customers make the most of the company's seven-month stone fruit program, which includes peaches, nectarines, plums, pluots and apricots grown across key West Coast regions.



Courtney Hernandez



ANNOUNCEMENTS

CMI Orchards Makes Back-to-School Snacking Simple

As back-to-school season approaches, CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA, is ready to make healthy snacking fun with a lineup of kid-friendly apple programs. Featuring its popular Crunchie Munchies, Hero, and Daisy Girl Organics brands, CMI delivers bite-sized grab-and-go apples, perfect for busy school days.

Two-pound and 5-pound Hero packaging delivers snack-sized apples for small hands, including Gala and Pink Lady.

CMI's Crunchie Munchies 3-pound organic program offers snack-sized apples in playful, dragon-themed packaging. Other organic options include apples and pears from CMI's flagship organic program, Daisy Girl Organics, delivering a range of core and branded varieties in a 2-pound format.

In addition to CMI-branded programs, CMI can offer licensed character bags to boost shelf appeal and tie into broader grocery store products and marketing. Retailers are encouraged to contact their CMI sales representative to learn more.

Back-to-school also presents a key opportunity for retailers to engage young shoppers through CMI's Apple Crush program — an interactive platform delivering a personalized apple match with fun facts and flavor profiles.

**California Prune Board Tackles Misconceptions**

The California Prune Board is seeking to dispel common misconceptions about prunes, as it ramps up global efforts to spotlight their role as a nutritious, everyday snack.

High in fiber, prunes have long been perceived as a remedy for digestive issues. For some, this "medicinal" image consigns prunes to the store cupboard for occasional use only. For others, prunes are, albeit wrongly, associated with added sugars or high-calorie content and are seen as a much less nutritious alternative to fresh varieties.

- Truth No. 1: Prunes do not contain added sugars
- Truth No. 2: Prunes are fat-free and saturated fat-free
- Truth No. 3: Nutrient-dense prunes have natural health benefits
- Truth No. 4: Prunes are delicious as a snack and an ingredient
- Truth No. 5: Prunes are trending with younger consumers

Berry Fresh Bringing Blueberry Genetics to the US and Canada

Berry Fresh is bringing blueberry genetics from Mountain Blue Orchards (MBO) to the U.S. and Canada through its farms in Peru and Mexico, beginning in fall 2027.

The agreement strengthens Berry Fresh's blueberry offering, with plantings commencing in 2026 and fruit arriving to customers for the 2027 season.

"It's undeniable that growth in the category is being driven by elevating the eating experience for consumers. More than ever, they are buying



specialty varieties promising memorable flavor," notes Jyoti Bhogal, managing director of Berry Fresh. "These new varieties will delight even more shoppers and increase loyalty and repeat purchase within the blueberry category."

Field Fresh Farms Unifies Operations

Field Fresh Farms, Watsonville, CA, has consolidated the production, packing and shipping of The Salad Farm and Lily's Organic Farm products under its experienced team, providing customers with an even stronger, more streamlined source for premium leafy greens.

Since its inception, The Salad Farm has operated as a joint venture between Field Fresh Farms and Muzzi Family Farms. For nearly 20 years, Field Fresh Farms has grown and processed the leafy greens sold under both The Salad Farm and Lily's Organic Farm brands.

Field Fresh Farms has now assumed full responsibility for the production, packing and shipping of these products, ensuring customers continue receiving the same high-quality leafy greens they know and trust with uninterrupted service.

Customers may continue purchasing products under The Salad Farm and Lily's Organic Farm labels or choose to transition to the Field Fresh Farms or Beach Road Organics brands.

The consolidation also provides customers with convenient pickup locations in Hollister and Watsonville, creating a one-stop pickup solution across an expanded portfolio of conventional and organic vegetables. In addition to leafy greens, customers now have access to Field Fresh Farms' complete lineup of romaine, head lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, specialty vegetables, and value-added products.

Catalytic Generators Supports Ready-to-Eat Trend

Consumer demand for ready-to-eat avocados has transformed the way the fresh produce industry approaches ripening. What was once considered a specialist service has become an essential part of the supply chain, helping growers, importers, ripeners and retailers deliver fruit with consistent quality, predictable ripeness and reduced waste.

Commercial ripening programs are becoming increasingly sophisticated, combining a deeper understanding of fruit physiology with reliable ethylene application and modern ripening technologies.

Catalytic Generators' Easy-Ripe systems are designed to provide continuous, reliable ethylene production for commercial ripening operations.

Catalytic Generators, Norfolk, VA, recently obtained approval for avocado ripening in Italy and continues to expand its regulatory footprint internationally. These approvals provide customers with the confidence that they are using a legally authorized solution while supporting the continued growth of commercial ripening programs in new markets.





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Honeybear Brands Makes Strides on Sustainability Goals

Honeybear Brands, Elgin, MN, has released its 2025 Sustainability Report, marking five years of measurable progress toward its environmental goals.

In collaboration with Sustainable Food Group, Honeybear established science-based sustainability goals in 2019 across four key pillars: pollinator health, packaging, food loss and waste, and climate and energy. The company committed to transparent, third-party measurement and annual reporting, with 5- and 10-year targets guiding its long-term strategy.

Highlights of the 2025 report include progress in each key area: pollinator habitat protection, plastic-free packaging, zero landfill food loss and sourced renewable energy.

Through its Adopt an Acre program, Honeybear partners with retailers to establish, fund, and maintain pollinator habitats on the orchards supplying their stores. Retailers participating in the program benefit from custom signage, consumer education materials, and co-branded messaging — backed by measurable environmental impact.

A & A Organic Farms Expands Sustainable Packaging

A & A Organic Farms, Watsonville, CA, is expanding its Sustainable Packaging Collection with the introduction of compostable retail packaging for its organic onion program.

The new retail-ready program features compostable mesh bags paired with compostable header cards, providing retailers with an environmentally responsible merchandising solution that reduces traditional plastic while maintaining product presentation and shelf appeal.

The new organic onion program offers a variety of retail and bulk pack styles, giving retailers, wholesalers, and foodservice operators the flexibility to select packaging formats that best fit their merchandising needs.

- The Sustainable Packaging Collection includes:
- Compostable open pint containers for organic snacking tomatoes and organic strawberries
 - Biodegradable retail packaging for organic lemons
 - Additional retail-ready sustainable packaging programs currently in development.



Muzzi Family Farms Expands Salad Farm

After nearly 20 years of producing and packing leafy greens and fresh-cut vegetables through its ownership in The Salad Farm, Muzzi Family Farms, Moss Landing, CA, is bringing those products directly to market under its own brands.



The expansion gives foodservice and retail customers a broader selection of organic and conventional products.

New products, all domestically sourced, include conventional romaine hearts, iceberg lettuce, romaine lettuce, green leaf lettuce, and bunched spinach, as well as processed, value-added items, such as clamshell packs, chopped romaine, shredded lettuce, coleslaw and broccoli florets.

These organic and conventional products are being sold under three Muzzi brands: Muzzi Family Farms, Dominic's and Lisa Mia.



Ken Toong Receives College & University Food Services' Highest Honor

Ken Toong, assistant vice chancellor of auxiliary enterprises at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has received the highest honor awarded by the National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS), the Theodore W. Minah Distinguished Service Award. The recognition was presented during a special reception at the NACUFS 2026 National Conference in New Orleans, LA.

Toong was recognized for nearly three decades of visionary leadership at UMass Amherst and across the campus dining sector. Under his leadership, UMass Dining has earned nine consecutive No. 1 rankings for Best Campus Food from *The Princeton Review* and has become one of the nation's most recognized collegiate dining programs.

Throughout his career, Toong has championed healthy, sustainable, delicious and experiential dining through his "Food for the Common Good" philosophy. He is the founder of the Tastes of the World Chef Culinary Conference, now in its 32nd year, and has helped shape collegiate dining nationally through decades of innovation, collaboration and mentorship.

A past chair of the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association (IFMA), Toong was a 2013 recipient of the IFMA Silver Plate Award, was named a White House Campus Champion of Change, and most recently received the inaugural Excellence in College Dining Award from the Mediterranean Diet Roundtable. He holds an MBA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and

a Bachelor of Business Administration from Acadia University in Canada.



NEW PRODUCTS

Olivia's Organics Debuts Greenhouse Salad Program

Olivia's Organics, Chelsea, MA, announces its new Organic Greenhouse Salad Program and Organic Crunch Program.

The Organic Greenhouse Salad Program features 100% greenhouse-grown organic baby leaf salads available in both 4- and 8-ounce packages, including Organic Green Leaf Crunch and Organic Green & Red Leaf Crunch. Grown entirely in State Garden's certified organic greenhouse, the program delivers freshness, consistency, and year-round availability.

The Organic Crunch Program includes: Peppery Crunch, Buttery Crunch, Crimson Crunch and Power Crunch.

Earthbound Farm Introduces Regenerative Organic Certified Salad Greens

Earthbound Farm, Salinas, CA, has launched its first Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC) Spring Mix, which will be available for a limited time nationwide through October 2026.

Earthbound Farm's ROC program builds on its existing organic standards with additional farming practices intended to improve soil health, promote carbon sequestration, and enhance biodiversity: increased soil coverage, conservation tillage, biodiversity enhancement and ecosystem stewardship.



Bolthouse and Tajín Team Up on New Carrot Shakers Flavor

Consumers continue searching for healthier, more convenient snacks that deliver bold flavor and satisfying crunch. Bolthouse Fresh Foods, Bakersfield, CA, is answering that demand with a new collaboration with Tajín seasonings, bringing together Bolthouse Fresh's Carrot Shakers and Tajín's iconic chile-lime flavor in a new better-for-you snack experience.

The new Bolthouse Fresh Carrot Shakers package will feature Tajín Clásico Seasoning Reduced Sodium paired with fresh baby carrots in an easy grab-and-go format. The interactive package allows consumers to release the seasoning directly into the bag and shake.

The new Tajín Carrot Shakers will be available in both retail and foodservice channels, including K-12 schools.





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Small Dietary Shifts, Big Opportunity

BY AMANDA IZQUIERDO, MPH, RD, LDN

Health and nutrition remain key drivers of fresh produce purchases, with consumers increasingly looking for simple, sustainable ways to support their well-being. This aligns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which encourage prioritizing whole, minimally processed foods and making small dietary shifts to build healthier eating patterns.



Fresh avocados fit naturally into that approach. As a whole food that provides healthy fats and fiber, avocados offer retailers an opportunity to connect nutrition science with practical, everyday meal solutions. New research also highlights how the nutrient profile of avocado supports blood sugar management

and overall cardiometabolic health.

A recent secondary analysis of the Habitual Diet and Avocado Trial (HAT), the most extensive clinical trial of its kind, found adults who consumed one large avocado daily for six months experienced a significantly greater reduction in dietary glycemic load compared with those who maintained their usual diets with no more than two avocados per month. The study included close to 1,000 adults with elevated waist circumference, a risk factor for Type 2 diabetes.

Dietary glycemic load reflects how the quantity and quality of carbohydrates in the overall diet influence blood sugar response, and it's an important factor in the prevention and management of several chronic diseases, including Type 2 diabetes. What makes these findings notable is that participants were not asked to follow a prescribed diet or eliminate foods. Instead, they simply added one avocado to their daily routine.

The findings reinforce an important nutrition principle: Small, repeatable habits can contribute to healthier eating patterns over time and meaningful improvements in health.

Avocados are naturally sugar-free and considered a low-glycemic food. One serving, which is one-third of a medium avocado, also provides 6 grams of unsaturated fat and 3 grams of fiber (a good source). Healthy fats and fiber slow digestion, which may help maintain healthy blood glucose levels.

A GROWING BODY OF AVOCADO RESEARCH

The latest findings add a new dimension to an expanding body of avocado research. Previous studies have explored avocado consumption in relation to diet quality, nutrient intake, gut health, heart health and weight management. This research builds on that foundation by examining dietary glycemic load, providing additional insight into how avocado consumption may influence the overall nutritional quality of the diet.

Viewed collectively, the research helps create a more complete picture of how avocados fit within healthy eating patterns. Rather than focusing on a single nutrient or health outcome, scientists continue to explore the role whole foods, such as avocados, can play in supporting long-term dietary habits and overall health.

BRINGING SCIENCE TO PRODUCE DEPARTMENT

For retailers, these findings provide a timely opportunity to connect nutrition benefits with meal inspiration.

Simple merchandising strategies can help shoppers see how avocados fit into everyday eating occasions. Pairing avocados with whole grains, vegetables, other fruits, and lean proteins can provide easy meal and snack solutions while reinforcing the role produce plays in healthy eating patterns at every meal — whether it's breakfast, lunch or dinner.

For example, retailers can highlight simple, nutrient-dense

recipes, such as an Avocado, Blueberry and Pineapple Cloud Smoothie, which combines avocado with fruit, soy milk, and almond butter to deliver fiber, healthy fats, and satisfying flavor in a convenient breakfast or snack option. Easy Avocado Snack Halves topped with balsamic vinegar, seasonings, or other flavorful toppings offer another quick, customizable snack idea that provides fiber and healthy fats to help keep consumers feeling satisfied.

Cross-merchandising, recipe displays, and educational signage can further support consumer decision-making by helping shoppers translate nutrition science into practical food choices.

Importantly, no single food determines overall diet quality and health outcomes. While more research is needed to understand how these findings apply to other populations, the latest findings from the Habitual Diet and Avocado Trial add to a growing body of evidence supporting the role avocados can play within healthy eating patterns and blood sugar management.

For produce retailers, the takeaway is straightforward: Consumers are often looking for realistic ways to eat better, and simple additions can help support healthier eating habits over time. Fresh avocados, with their combination of naturally good fats, fiber, and versatility, provide a compelling example of how nutrition science can be translated into practical, everyday choices.

PB

For retailers, these findings provide a timely opportunity to connect nutrition benefits with meal inspiration.

Amanda Izquierdo, MPH, RD, LDN, is public relations and advertising manager for the Hass Avocado Board (HAB) and a spokesperson for Avocados — Love One Today, the board's nutrition marketing program. The study discussed was funded by the Hass Avocado Board, which had no role in data collection, data analysis, interpretation or writing the manuscript. While the findings from a single study cannot be generalized to all populations, the research contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting the role of avocados in healthy eating patterns.



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Whole Foods Market in Angel, Islington, London, continues to spotlight produce as a centerpiece of its retail strategy, emphasizing seasonal assortments, premium organic offerings and unique varieties that help differentiate the shopping experience for U.K. consumers. PHOTOS COURTESY WHOLE FOODS

Whole Foods Market Expands in London

New Whole Foods locations in the U.K. spotlight premium produce, exclusive seasonal offerings and cross-merchandising strategies.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

U.S. retailer Whole Foods Market has continued its expansion across the pond with the opening of its newest London, U.K., store in the affluent residential area of Angel, Islington in April 2026, the first in a series of new London locations as the brand continues to expand its U.K. footprint.

Designed as a convenient, neighborhood-focused format, the 3,600-foot store offers customers high-quality natural and organic products alongside fresh, everyday essentials. Whole Foods celebrated the store inauguration by giving away free packs of Driscoll's berries, coffees, and limited-edition tote bags.

Produce plays an integral part in Whole Foods' offerings on both sides of the Atlantic, and it is here that the role of Suzanne Webb, the company's U.K.-wide head of perishable buying and supply chain, assumes central importance.

Although the store is new, Webb is no newcomer to produce

retailing. She brings years of industry experience, including roles with U.K. grocer Tesco, and as lead buyer for the salad and vegetable team at Marks & Spencer. Since 2019, Webb has led the Whole Foods Market produce team, initially as head produce and floral buyer, before taking charge of perishable buying as a whole.

"Fresh produce has always been a particularly exciting area to work in because it's so seasonal, fast-moving and closely connected to customer behavior," says Webb. "There's always something new to learn, whether that's changing growing conditions, emerging varieties or evolving customer preferences."

STANDOUT PRODUCTS

Webb views the breadth of Whole Foods' organic assortment as a key point of difference for the retailer, as well as its merchandising, particularly in its largest stores. She says the grocer also benefits from being able to offer customers unique seasonal products, including Amarillo peaches in August, Sumo citrus in January, and Champagne (Ataulfo) mangos in spring.

"Our customers particularly love our organic fruit and vegetables, especially when produce is at its seasonal peak, and we can offer the very best flavor and quality," Webb continues. "Our extensive assortment of loose greens and specialty vegetables is another real differentiator, particularly in our larger format stores."

By working closely with trusted grower partners to source exclusive seasonal products, she says Whole Foods is able to provide shoppers with products they can't find anywhere else. A standout example she highlights is the retailer's partnership with Rio Rico, AZ-based Ciruli Brothers, which grows yellow mangos in Mexico for Whole Foods' U.S. and U.K. stores, and the mangos quickly became a top-selling item upon arrival.

Another example, highlighted by Webb, is Sumo citrus from Suntreat in Dinuba, CA, which has "developed a strong following thanks to its sweetness, easy peel ability and premium eating quality."

FOCUS ON SEASONALITY

To get the most out of a produce department, Webb believes buying in season is key. "While we offer many produce lines year-round, we always expand our assortments when products are at their peak, allowing us to offer the best quality and flavor possible," she says.

"We also invest heavily in training and communication across the entire supply chain. My teams work closely with our quality control specialists and vendors every day to maintain consistently high standards of freshness and quality."

Building knowledge within store teams is equally important, according to Webb. Every Whole Foods produce team member is trained to identify quality issues and ensure anything not in optimal condition is removed before reaching shoppers.

She says collaboration with growers and suppliers is another major focus. "Produce can be a challenging industry, particularly with the impact weather and seasonality can have on supply, so we place enormous value on strong long-term partnerships," Webb explains.

At a store level, she recommends understanding sales demand, and merchandising according to customers' needs, while always considering the perishability of each item. "It's important to remove any poor-quality products before refilling displays, rotate stock regularly and handle produce with care, never over-stacking items that could be damaged," Webb continues.

She also advocates ensuring the presence of clear, well-placed signage to make sure shoppers have the information they need to purchase confidently.



INSIDE THE STORE



Whole Foods Market
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Angel, Islington, London
8 a.m.-10 p.m., Monday to Saturday
and 8 a.m.-9 p.m., Sunday
www.wholefoodsmarket.co.uk

PERFECT COMBINATIONS

Cross-merchandising is another useful tool that Webb says can help complete the customer mission, and she focuses on combinations that naturally complement how customers shop and eat.

"For example, we often place yogurts alongside berries, cheese or salad dressings with salad sets and olive oil and basil near our tomatoes," she says. "These are tried-and-tested combinations that help inspire meal ideas, make shopping more convenient, and ultimately drive stronger sales across categories."

Webb believes opportunities to cater to different customer segments can be found by offering a range of solutions across departments, such as ready-to-eat products, like cut fruit, dips and fresh juice for shoppers looking for convenience or grab-and-go options.

At the same time, she says Whole Foods provides loose and packaged options across most categories, giving customers flexibility in how they shop. "While we lead with organic and seasonal produce, we also offer year-round choices across a range of price points to suit different budgets and shopping habits."

UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES

"We're seeing strong momentum behind blackberries, which is especially exciting as we approach the U.K.'s blackberry season," she says. "More broadly, premium berries continue to grow in popularity, with customers increasingly looking for high-quality, clean snacking options."

In vegetables, Webb predicts bitter leaves will become a bigger trend, highlighting the ample assortment of radicchio varieties that Whole Foods stocks during peak season, offering "great color, texture and depth of flavor" to winter salads and seasonal dishes.

Looking at what else is planned for Whole Foods Angel during 2026, Webb says the store will focus on introducing its Islington customers to "some of the fantastic Spanish and Italian stone fruit" available in the summer.

"One of my personal favorites is the Natoora Amarillo peach, a late-season variety that delivers a real taste of sunshine in August and September," she adds. "We're always excited to showcase products with exceptional flavor and seasonality, and stone fruit is a great example of that." **PB**



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14 Campaigns Prove Best Marketing Thinks Outside the Box

38th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards

The freshest ideas don't always come in a box. The 14 winning entries in the PRODUCE BUSINESS 38th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards demonstrate how today's produce marketers are thinking outside the box — breaking away from traditional marketing playbooks to capture attention, build stronger consumer connections, and drive measurable sales.

Whether through social media campaigns, retailer partnerships, influencer collaborations, creative displays or innovative digital strategies, this year's winners transformed fresh produce into memorable brand experiences. They told stories, sparked conversations and inspired consumers to see fruits and vegetables in new ways.

This year's PRODUCE BUSINESS 38th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards program celebrates organizations that pushed creative boundaries through breakthrough innovation, digital transformation and meaningful community engagement.

Special thanks go to all the entrants for taking the time to submit and share the required material and results for judging. The number of imaginative and compelling entrants made the judges' task especially challenging, and we encourage those companies that did not win to apply next year. In celebration — and for inspiration and learning — the top 14 campaigns awarded with Marketing Excellence are presented on the following pages.

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



Avocados From Mexico

PROMOTION

Avocados From Mexico and QDOBA Mexican Eats

STRATEGY

As pricing pressure began to peak around Tax Day, with Americans scrutinizing every receipt, QDOBA Mexican Eats saw a moment to reinforce a core value: fresh, handcrafted guac made with Avocados From Mexico should be celebrated, not surcharged. Unlike its competitors, QDOBA includes guac at no extra cost on any Create Your Own entrée — and Tax Day Guac Relief pushed that offering further. QDOBA Rewards Members were invited to “file” a short survey in exchange for a \$5 reward, sharing how often they paid for guac and how it made them feel.

RESULTS

The campaign generated 6.8B+ earned impressions across 300+ placements. The campaign also drove meaningful consumer engagement, with 14,540 guests filing for Guac Relief to claim their free side of freshly prepared guac made with Avocados From Mexico.



Chiquita

PROMOTION

National Chiquita Day

STRATEGY

To celebrate National Banana Day, April 15, 2026, Chiquita transformed the occasion into National Chiquita Day, turning a traditional food holiday into a branded cultural celebration. Building on its “Pop by Nature” platform, the campaign centered around an AI-powered hero video featuring Miss Chiquita that reimagined Times Square as a vibrant Chiquita takeover.

To drive participation, the brand introduced a tropical-inspired jingle and social dance challenge, inviting consumers to learn, share and remix a signature Chiquita dance move across social media. Creator collaborations helped amplify the campaign and encourage engagement, while paid media across TikTok and Meta extended reach and interaction. The promotion was further supported by an Instagram giveaway.

RESULTS

The campaign generated 12 earned media placements totaling more than 524,000 earned impressions, supported by 1,858 paid editorial placements through press release syndication, a MAT feature and ANR/ audio distribution, resulting in more than 221 million impressions.





Equifruit

PROMOTION

5 Freaking Dollars

STRATEGY

Five Freaking Dollars was an integrated annual marketing campaign designed to challenge one of the banana industry's biggest contradictions. Decades of intense price pressure have helped make bananas one of the cheapest items in the grocery store, but that low price often comes at a cost. Equifruit built the campaign around a simple question: If consumers regularly spend \$5 on coffee, socks, wellness products, and impulse purchases without hesitation, why does paying banana farmers fairly feel expensive?

Each activation brought the same message to life through a different creative lens, supported by experiential marketing, email campaigns, LinkedIn content, media relations, digital advertising, guerrilla marketing and branded microsites.

RESULTS

Email campaigns reached more than 1,600 produce industry contacts, achieving open rates as high as 47% and click-through rates as high as 22%. The campaign earned coverage across 12 trade media outlets, generating 27 media placements and an estimated industry audience exceeding 500,000. On LinkedIn, campaign content generated more than 16,600 impressions, 2,359 reactions, and 169 comments.

01.

**WE BOUGHT THE LATTE,
SO THEY COULD BUY THE BANANA**

MARCH 2025

Café Banana Badass invited SEPC attendees to grab a coffee while confronting the campaign's central truth: switching to Equifruit Farmade bananas costs shoppers less than their morning latte habit.

The activation made the \$5 difference feel tangible, familiar and easy to repeat. Buyers came for caffeine, but left with the point: Farmade bananas are not expensive. The industry has just made utterly cheap bananas feel normal.

Tactics

Experiential Trade Show Booth
LinkedIn Campaigns
Email Surveys, Release
Press and Media,
Print Ads
Email Campaigns
Email Campaigns



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Gotham Greens

PROMOTION

Dip into Bold Flavor

STRATEGY

Gotham Greens launched a multi-channel campaign following the launch of its new line of plant-based dips. Made with a creamy cashew base and fresh greens and herbs, the dips are available in five flavors: Spinach Artichoke, Green Goddess, Tzatziki, Buffalo, and Queso. The campaign repositioned Gotham Greens Dips beyond snacking as a versatile, everyday ingredient for cooking and entertaining.

Social content introduced the new flavors and showed unexpected ways to use the dips, from using them as sauces and marinades to pairing them with unconventional dipping vessels. The campaign also tapped into cultural moments with a Father's Day "Dips for Dads" giveaway. Influencers were gifted the full dips lineup ahead of the Super Bowl and encouraged to share their favorite flavors and ways to use them for game day entertaining. Email newsletters reinforced the content with simple recipes. A paid media push supported key moments across the campaign.

RESULTS

- Dips mailer reached a total of almost 5 million total followers;
- Over 100,000 impressions, 2.2% engagement rate across 40 dips social media posts;
- 9% open rate across newsletters.



Idaho Potato Commission

PROMOTION

It All Starts With Idaho Potatoes

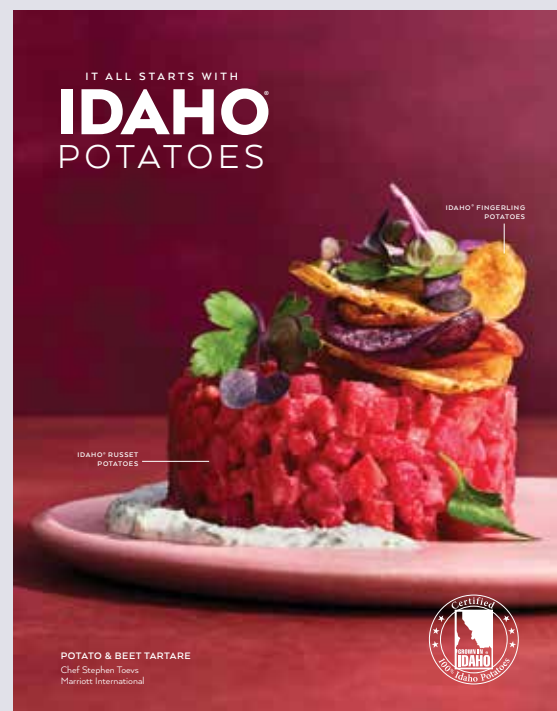
STRATEGY

This campaign reinforces that great dishes begin with high-quality ingredients. Unlike typical category creative, it uses vibrant, high-impact color inspired by fresh ingredients and plating to capture attention, with Idaho potatoes as the clear hero. At the center are real, chef-created recipes, making the work both credible and inspiring.

As an annual platform, chef interest in participating in the campaign continues to grow, with inventive recipe submissions this year ranging from Italian potato pastries to globally inspired Potato Sushi, and elevated versions of classic dishes like tartare, gnocchi and meatloaf. The ads are featured across print and digital foodservice publications. Full recipes are hosted on the Idaho Potato website.

RESULTS

Digitally, the ads were seen over 2.2 million times, driving broad visibility among key foodservice decision-makers, garnering over 32,000 clicks to idahopotato.com where the audience could learn more about recipes and usage. The campaign also resulted in 300 leads, helping grow a qualified audience of chefs and operators for ongoing outreach and communication.





Mastronardi Produce

PROMOTION

Flavor That Lasts: Celebrating 30 Years of SUNSET Campari Brand Tomatoes

STRATEGY

In 2025, Mastronardi Produce celebrated 30 years of its SUNSET Campari brand cocktail tomatoes. The multi-channel Flavor That Lasts campaign kicked off in September with increased retail presence. Every Campari brand tomato package featured a vibrant, limited-edition 30th anniversary label, serving as both a visual cue and a signal of brand longevity, quality and trust. Along with custom in-store POS displays and shipper bins, SUNSET Campari brand tomatoes were reinforced as a staple on store shelves. At the center of this campaign was a trio of emotionally driven 30-second digital commercials, which debuted online to kick off National Tomato Month in October.

RESULTS

The commercials generated over 3.8 million impressions, 3.5 million completed views, and reached over 2.2 million people. The results speak for themselves: With an average VCR of 92%, these videos had a strong contextual alignment with consumers. A national morning-show tour featuring Sherri French of Mom Hint generated more than 235 million earned-media impressions across four major U.S. markets. Surpassing 3.5 million views on YouTube and with a 92% completion rate, the three-part digital video series resonated with audiences. Campari brand tomatoes realized a +10% increase in dollar sales and consumption in 2025.



Medrano Produce

PROMOTION

Repositioning a Family Business into a Modern Category Leader

STRATEGY

A comprehensive rebranding strategy elevated Medrano Produce into a premium, story-driven produce brand, while establishing the company as an emerging thought leader in the lime category. At the center of the rebrand was a new packaging system designed to command attention in the produce department. Each citrus variety received a distinctive visual identity, while maintaining a cohesive family of packaging across the product line.

Equally important was uncovering and communicating the Medrano family story. The new brand positioned Medrano around family values, generational stewardship, and a commitment to doing business the right way. A new trade show strategy and materials, a new website, refreshed brand messaging, photography, and digital content created a consistent brand experience across every customer touchpoint.

RESULTS

The result is a cohesive identity that celebrates the company's heritage, while equipping the next generation of leadership with a platform for continued growth, stronger retail partnerships and long-term brand equity.





Mushroom Council Research and Promotion Board

PROMOTION

It's Not Magic. It's Mushrooms.

STRATEGY

In 2026, the Mushroom Council launched a new marketing platform and tagline, "It's Not Magic. It's Mushrooms.," aimed at attracting the next generation of mushroom shoppers and driving long-term category growth. Developed with direct input from a marketing task force of mushroom industry leaders, the platform addresses a new target audience of emerging consumers: current light and medium mushroom shoppers whose profiles skew younger to Millennial and Gen Z. The goal is to move these consumers up the purchase-frequency ladder toward heavy mushroom shoppers. The Mushroom Council deployed more consumer ad dollars than ever before across digital, social, and streaming channels to drive trial, repeat purchase, and long-term category growth.

RESULTS

Between Jan. 1 and May 31, 2026: 66 million total campaign impressions across streaming TV, streaming audio, social media, creator/influencer content, podcast ads, digital advertising, and search engine advertising; 1.24 million engagements; 1.1 million website visits to MushroomCouncil.com; 16.1% increase in average spend on mushrooms in stores with signage featuring Matty Matheson; and 11% lift in favorability of mushrooms among Millennial and Gen Z shoppers exposed to ads.



National Watermelon Promotion Board

PROMOTION

Elevating Watermelon's Visibility Through GroceryTV

STRATEGY

New in 2025, NWPB partnered with GroceryTV to deliver digital video content directly into grocery stores. Thirty-second, no-sound videos ran in high-traffic areas, such as front-end, entrances, or pharmacy sections of grocery stores, putting watermelon in front of household decision-makers. The campaign featured NWPB's watermelon limeade recipe and videos in August and September across Hy-Vee, ShopRite and Cardenas grocery stores in 11 states.

RESULTS

In total, the campaign received a total of over 82 million impressions, and exposure to the in-store campaign drove a 12% increase in overall sales of watermelon within stores.





NC Sweetpotato Commission

PROMOTION

Impossible to Ignore: NC Sweetpotatoes Take Over New York City

STRATEGY

To promote fresh produce consumption beyond the holiday season, the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission launched an integrated New York City campaign that repositioned fresh sweetpotatoes as a nutritious, craveable, everyday ingredient. The campaign combined two of the most recognizable media environments in the country: Times Square and the New York City subway system. The first phase launched in February during National Sweetpotato Month with a digital billboard activation in Times Square. The second phase extended the campaign into New York City's subway system during the busy summer months.

RESULTS

The Manhattan subway campaign generated an estimated 1.9 million impressions and delivered 881,632 digital plays against a contracted goal of 302,400 plays, exceeding the target by more than 291%. Most importantly, the campaign helped advance the commission's mission of increasing year-round consumption of fresh North Carolina sweetpotatoes.



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

Helene Dembroski

New York Apple Association
Board of Director



Northwest Cherries

PROMOTION

**Savor A Sweet
Cherry Moment**

STRATEGY

The 2025 campaign was a fully integrated marketing initiative designed to elevate awareness of Northwest sweet cherries as a healthy, versatile superfruit. The campaign ran throughout the 2025 cherry season and beyond, spanning media relations, social media activations, influencer partnerships, newsletter marketing and live event sponsorships.

RESULTS

- 2.8 billion+ total audience reached (domestically) — a 577% increase over 2024;
- 6.5 million social media accounts reached through integrated social media activations;
- 24% increase in website traffic to the Northwest Cherries website compared to 2024;
- 2.8 million daily riders on the fully wrapped Northwest Cherries train in Bangkok.



Pear Bureau Northwest/Crisp.Global

PROMOTION

**USA Pears in Israel: Growing Demand
During a Record Crop Year**

STRATEGY

During the 2025–26 season, Northwest pear growers launched an integrated omnichannel campaign in Israel to support export sales during a record pear crop. The initiative was designed to increase consumer awareness of USA pears, strengthen their premium positioning, and drive retail purchases. Pear Bureau Northwest, in partnership with Crisp.Global agency, connected in-store execution with targeted digital activations. USA Pears returned to in-store activations after more than 15 years. More than 120 point-of-sale placements and in-store demos were implemented across major Israeli retail chains. Digital marketing support included geo-targeted advertising around stores where POS materials were placed, as well as collaborations with leading Israeli influencers and food bloggers.

RESULTS

The program generated 9 million consumer impressions online and delivered nationwide visibility through retail activations across chains representing more than 30% of Israel's food retail sales. End-of-season consumer research also confirmed the impact of the campaign: 23% of surveyed consumers who tried or purchased USA pears said the main reason was noticing them in-store through POS materials or strong shelf visibility.





Shuman Farms

PROMOTION

From Farm to Table with Courtney Cook and Shuman Farms

STRATEGY

To promote the 2026 Vidalia onion season and drive awareness of the RealSweet brand, Shuman Farms partnered with nationally recognized food creator Courtney Cook whose viral onion cup recipes had already captured the attention of millions online. Identifying the strong alignment between Cook's content and their product, Shuman Farms invited her to visit the farm to experience the Vidalia onion story firsthand. She then shared the experience with her audience through Instagram and TikTok, highlighting both the one-of-a-kind flavor of Vidalia onions and their journey from farm to table.

RESULTS

Shuman Farms generated more than 6.4 million views across Instagram and TikTok, demonstrating the ability of trusted digital creators to connect with consumers at a scale traditionally requiring significant advertising investment.

Highlights across Instagram and TikTok include:

- 6.4M+ views
- 563K+ likes
- 35.5K+ engagements (comments, shares, saves and reposts)

As a result of the campaign, Shuman Farms social media accounts, as well as the related RealSweet brand account, saw major gains in followers:

- Shuman Farms Instagram — 65% increase
- RealSweet Instagram — 27% increase
- Shuman TikTok — 17%



Sun World/AUTUMNCRISP Grapes

PROMOTION

The AUTUMNCRISP Effect

STRATEGY

Sun World International partnered with Denmark's largest retailer, Salling Group, to launch a program featuring AUTUMNCRISP Brand Grapes. The program spanned Salling Group's leading retail banners, including Bilka, fØtex and Netto, and combined multiple consumer touchpoints and a digital-first strategy to create a seamless path from discovery to purchase, including: premium branded packaging; social media influencer partnerships; leveraged influencer content to show what to look for in store; geo-targeted paid social media advertising; retail displays and in-store promotions; and public relations outreach.

RESULTS

- AUTUMNCRISP sales increased 90%
- The overall grape category increased 25%
- Total grape sales across participating retailers increased more than 35% year over year, with projections approaching 100% growth by year-end
- Influencer content generated more than 1.5 million social media impressions
- Paid social media across Meta and TikTok received 8+ million impressions and 554,000 engagements
- Paid search earned: 53,881 impressions and 2,894 clicks.





Freaky Fruit is a Halloween-themed promotion by Melissa's/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA, supported by point-of-sale materials. Aloe vera, pomegranate, quince, goldenberries, cherimoya, starfruit, pinkglow pineapple, blood orange, strawberry papaya, finger limes, and passion fruit are some of the fruits featured. PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA'S

Fire Up Fall Merchandising

From back-to-school through Thanksgiving, discover fall merchandising ideas and seasonal marketing strategies.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Fall isn't simply another season for produce retailers — it's another selling strategy. As summer fruit gives way to new-crop apples, pears, pumpkins, potatoes and winter squash, shoppers shift from back-to-school routines and Labor Day gatherings to home cooking, Halloween and holiday entertaining.

Case in point, U.S. supermarkets sold \$7 billion in fresh fruits and vegetables during the four weeks ending Nov. 30, 2025, as Thanksgiving demand and increased promotional activity helped lift produce volume 1.1%, according to the *U.S. Produce Retail Point of Sales Results* for November 2025, published by the International Fresh Produce Association with data from 210 Analytics.

"The transition into fall is arguably the most exciting and critical time of the year," says Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager for New Seasons Market, a 22-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR. "It represents a unique intersection of changing consumer behavior, rich storytelling, and an unparalleled local harvest."

BACK-TO-SCHOOL

August-September

Pairing bananas with school supplies, like backpacks and lunch boxes in late August and early September, strengthens the fruit's image as a quick, healthy breakfast and lunch option, not just for kids, but for the entire household, says Bil Goldfield, director of corporate communications for the Dole Fresh Fruit Co., in Charlotte, NC.

"One trend we've noticed is that the back-to-school season that was routinely reserved for kids has become a whole-family reset."

Back-to-school is one of the most important apple merchandising opportunities of the year, says Aimee Bach, business development manager at FirstFruits Marketing LLC, in Yakima, WA. "Opal apples offer a unique advantage because they are naturally non-browning when sliced, making them ideal for meal prep and school lunches."

Three-pound pouch bags of Lil Snapper-brand kid-sized apples and pears are a popular promotional vehicle for Gala apples and Bartlett and Starkrimson pears and will be supported by new display bins and point-of-sale (POS) signage this fall, according to Brianna Shales, marketing director at Stemilt Growers LLC, in Wenatchee, WA.

This season, the Healthy Family Project, a Reidsville, GA-based cause-marketing organization promoting healthy family eating through retail partnerships, will roll out its new Little Snackers bins in all Harps Food Stores. The bins, which encourage families to let children enjoy a free piece of fruit, are part of the organization's fall Produce for Kids campaign, which benefits local Feeding America member food banks.

"The messaging on the bins is very direct and family-focused: 'Free Fruit. Healthy Kids. Stronger Community,'" says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations for the 178-store chain headquartered in Springdale, AR. "The shippers will be filled with easy-to-eat, kid-friendly fruit, such as bananas, clementines, apples, and other snack-size produce. We expect stores to have these in place during the back-to-school season and continue using them into the fall."

The Healthy Family Project will also launch its campaign in Albertson's Mid-Atlantic stores from Sept. 4-Oct. 15. This campaign is a new addition for Produce for Kids and will feature easy, family-friendly recipes in stores featuring partner products. There will also be in-store radio and other in-store support.

The focal charity is Nourishing Neighbors, a program of Albertsons Companies Foundation, with a goal of enabling 1.5 billion meals by 2030 and \$10 million annually to end the cycle of hunger, says Aimee Smith, director of partnerships and account development.

"On average, our promotions bring in eight to 25 produce brand partners across categories, everything from apples, citrus, cucumbers, tomatoes, veg, grapes to packaged salads, berries and value-added items, so shoppers see the campaign across the entire department rather than in a single aisle," says Smith, who adds 4,000-some grocery retail stores, both regional and national banners, participate.

LABOR DAY

Sept. 7

Labor Day is like a light switch from summer to fall in terms of merchandising, notes Brian Dey, retail and merchandising innovation manager for Four Seasons Produce, in Ephrata, PA. "Many



National Apple Month in October gives retailers an opportunity to create eye-catching displays, promote new-crop varieties and drive produce department sales.

PHOTO COURTESY FOUR SEASONS

retailers will have flash sales for grilling items well into September and October, depending on the weather. However, this is the time to use produce to set the tone before customers even enter the door, with outside displays of pumpkins, ornamental gourds and winter squash."

A local grower supplies pumpkin, squash and mini ornaments to Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL, according to Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations. "It makes a fun transition, and customers get excited for what they find inside, like new crop apples, pears, potatoes and sweet potatoes."




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Painted and ornamental pumpkins are available throughout September and October from Bay Baby Produce Inc., in Mount Vernon, WA, with many varieties continuing through Thanksgiving to extend the fall decorating season.

Peak promotional opportunities begin in early September as consumers decorate for fall, says Lindsey Lance, director of marketing and sales.

"By offering products that transition seamlessly from early fall décor to holiday entertaining, retailers can maximize sales throughout the entire season," Lance says. "New this season, we're introducing officially licensed 8-count MLB Pie Pumpkins for sports fans."

The start of college football and the American Labor Day theme make it an excellent time to promote new-crop California garlic, says Ken Christopher, executive vice president of Christopher Ranch in Gilroy, CA. "Guacamole and salsa are now staples for game-watching, and garlic is a key ingredient in both. Sleeve garlic is especially gaining in popularity."

ROSH HASHANAH

Sept. 11-13

Retailers should pay attention to cultural and demographic opportunities, says FirstFruits Marketing's Bach. "For example, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, traditionally includes apples dipped in honey as a symbol of a 'sweet year' ahead."

Specialty produce ideal for featuring include fruits, such as figs, Fuji apples, quinces, and pomegranates, and vegetables, like baby potatoes, celery root, horseradish, winter squash, and beets, according to Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA.

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

Sept. 15-Oct. 15

Retailers in areas of the country with a strong Hispanic population are a natural fit to celebrate this month, but not the only ones, according to Four Seasons Produce's Dey.

"By creating a section of the department with tropical fruits, vegetables and roots, putting a flag out or signage that says, 'Celebrate Here' makes it easy for Hispanic shoppers to find these essentials and for non-Hispanic shoppers to be introduced to and try these items."

Melissa's offers retailers Hispanic Heritage Month-themed POS, including a taco-themed Iron Man poster with a QR code that directs shoppers to 10 taco recipes. Three-by-5-inch cards provide information on individual ingredients, such as canela (cinnamon) and Anaheim peppers.

"We're seeing new demand in plantains, and are supporting this growth with dedicated plantain programs, some of which are themed to fall for the first time," says Dole's Goldfield.

"Plantains lead the exotics category in sales growth and increased 8% in 2025 alone, the result of Latin-inspired flavors continuing to move into the mainstream of North American eating habits," he notes. "There's interest in other exotics, too, such as red bananas, baby bananas and manzanos."

NATIONAL APPLE MONTH

October

Fall, and particularly October, is the time for big apple displays and promotions.



Garlic's folklore as a vampire repellent is the inspiration for Christopher Ranch's themed display boxes for Halloween. Retailers often host in-store display competitions, add other decorations, and cross-merchandise additional products in the display to build excitement.

PHOTO COURTESY CHRISTOPHER RANCH

On the East Coast, Hudson River Fruit will have a strong supply of New York-harvested apples, says Alisha Albinder, vice president of sales and marketing, in Milton, NY. "Honeycrisp continues to be the flagship promotional variety, but we also see excellent movement on McIntosh in the Northeast, Gala for value promotions, Ambrosia for premium sweet flavor, and specialty varieties like SnapDragon and RubyFrost that help retailers differentiate their assortment."

On the West Coast, proprietary varieties, like Opal, return in the fall, allowing retailers to differentiate their assortment beyond classic offerings, according to FirstFruits Marketing's Bach. "New is the introduction of Opal Smiles, an innovative consumer engagement program that encourages consumers to collect Opal apple PLU stickers and track their progress using an Opal Smiles tracker sheet. As shoppers reach collection milestones, they unlock rewards and prizes, creating an incentive to purchase Opal apples repeatedly throughout the season."

The best way to display apples, especially in the fall, is to create a destination for them at the front of the produce department, says Stemilt's Shales. "Whether you have a large space or limited space, using signage or bins to call attention to the apple section is key. Education, simple and bold, can help shoppers understand why they should choose one variety over another."

HALLOWEEN

Oct. 31

Produce feels like an afterthought with the Halloween focus on sweets, but it's a big part of Frieda's Branded Produce's identity. "We have a growing lineup of 'spooky' produce like rambutan, Buddha's hand, Kiwano horned melon and dragon fruit," says Alex Jackson,

vice president of sales and marketing for the Los Alamitos, CA-based company. "Their unique appearance, flavors and colors are at peak availability right around Halloween."

"Retailers are engaging more with spooky foods promotions than ever," Jackson adds. "Thanks to Pinterest, TikTok and Instagram influencers driving creative content into feeds with fresh produce, it's easier than ever to bring spooky foods into produce and inspire shoppers at point-of-sale and digitally."

Freaky Fruit is a Halloween-themed promotion by Melissa's, supported by POS materials, such as banners, bin signs, Iron Man posters, and 3-by-5 product cards. Aloe vera, pomegranate, quince, goldenberries, cherimoya, starfruit, pinkglow pineapple, blood orange, strawberry papaya, finger limes, and passion fruit are some of the fruits featured.

Mid-October is a great time for a Halloween sales push for caramel apples, says Chad Hackenbracht, president of Tastee Apple Inc., in Newcomerstown, OH, whose latest creation is a two-pack Mini Caramel Apples.

"For our gourmet apples, we have created an Ultimate Candy Bar Crunch Apple, which tastes exactly like your favorite candy bar. Front-of-department displays paired with ads or coupons have increased sales by 50% to 120%."

The peak promotional window for persimmons is mid-October through November.

"Halloween serves as a natural launchpad for high-impact promotions. The vibrant orange color of Fuyu persimmons fits seamlessly into autumn-themed displays, and our branded packaging features bold black-and-orange graphics that complement the fruit," says Megan Gorgisheli, vice president of marketing administration and brand for The Giumarra Companies, in Los Angeles, CA.

"Placing our high-graphic 2-pound branded pouch bags adjacent to loose bulk displays gives shoppers multiple purchase options and, according to our internal data, can increase category sales. We also offer branded Do You Fuyu display bins to retail partners."

Garlic's folklore as a vampire repellent is the inspiration for Christopher Ranch's themed display boxes for Halloween. "We see retailers host in-store display competitions, add other decorations, like skeletons and witches on brooms, and cross-merchandise additional garlic products in the display to build excitement," says Christopher.

Bay Baby Produce's new 18-count Jack Pack displays, available in both orange and white for Halloween decorating, feature a custom mix of pumpkins.

"Rather than purchasing a single pumpkin, customers often envision decorating an entire porch, office, classroom, or dining table, leading to larger basket sizes and increased overall sales," says Lance.

NATIONAL POMEGRANATE MONTH

November

California's fresh pomegranate season begins in October, when POM Wonderful launches its whole-fruit and arils program.

"Because fresh pomegranates are only available for a limited time, the shorter window to purchase helps drive interest and demand, creating a 'get it before it's gone' mindset," says Jennifer Hirano, vice president of marketing for the Los Angeles, CA-headquartered company.

Since pomegranates are often purchased on impulse, the company works with retailers nationwide to incorporate eye-catching brand packaging and high-graphic in-store POS displays, including bin bases, posters, and balloons. All include QR codes to educate and inspire shoppers with everything from recipes to how-to-open videos.

Hirano says the company is launching a consumer education

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"I encourage retailers to allocate a slot or space year-round to try new sweet potato SKU's and generate curiosity and interest to build on the sweet potato category as a whole."**

Jeremy Fookes, A.V. Thomas Produce, Inc.,
Livingston, CA

- **"The transition into fall is arguably the most exciting and critical time of the year. It represents a unique intersection of changing consumer behavior, rich storytelling, and an unparalleled local harvest."**

Jeff Salchenberg, New Seasons Market, Portland, OR

campaign this fall, focused on answering two common questions: How to select a ripe pomegranate and how to open a pomegranate easily. "The campaign will be supported through both in-store merchandising and social media initiatives to help shoppers feel more confident when purchasing and enjoying pomegranates."

THANKSGIVING

Nov. 26

This largest food-centric holiday in the U.S. dovetails with a prime supply of fresh cranberries, according to Kevin Tritz, in sales and operations at the Twin Lake Cranberry Co. LLC, in Vesper, WI.

"Retailers increase displays two weeks before Thanksgiving and continue into December. The benefit of our red mesh packaging, over plastic bags, is controlling moisture on the berries and maintaining good shelf life."

Thanksgiving is the top promotional period for sweet potatoes, too, with high volume and traditional recipe placement, according to Jeremy Fookes, director of sales for A.V. Thomas Produce Inc., in Livingston, CA, which offers red, orange, white and Japanese sweet potatoes, as well as Okinawa, Ben Yagi Purple and Stokes Purple varieties.

"I encourage retailers to allocate a slot or space year-round to try new sweet potato SKU's and generate curiosity and interest to build on the sweet potato category as a whole."

Research conducted internally at Frieda's Branded Produce reveals that 56% of shoppers say they want to use produce that's more special than what they typically buy when cooking for the holidays, says Jackson.

"Stokes Purple sweet potatoes answer the enthusiasm for something unique," she says. "They also fit traditional sweet potato sets, with pecans, maple syrup, and fresh herbs to help holiday shoppers visualize a complete side dish. National volume growth in the sweet potato category has been phenomenal. One national retailer we work with experienced a 50% volume increase in sweet potatoes last season."

Retailers have a tremendous opportunity to keep sweet potato merchandising fresh throughout the fall by moving beyond Thanksgiving and connecting the category to everyday meal occasions, says Michelle Grainger, executive director of the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, in Benson, NC.

"Our 'Sweet Happens' campaign embraces the reality of busy lifestyles with a lighthearted approach, reminding shoppers that sweet potatoes fit seamlessly into their everyday routines — not just special occasions."

PB



While tailgating is traditionally centered on chips, wings, burgers and alcohol, retailers can capitalize on the seasonal occasion by placing fresh produce in a starring role. Avocados are naturals for such displays, but other produce, including pistachios, remain essential game-day items. PHOTO COURTESY WONDERFUL CO.

Promoting Tailgating Favorites in Produce

Guerrilla merchandising inside and outside the department lifts game-day sales.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Tailgating remains a key sales driver for fall and winter produce sales. Effective merchandising techniques, including proper display planning and cross-department promotions, can encourage shoppers to place more produce items in their baskets.

"Tailgating has become a beloved seasonal tradition, and its food-centric nature creates many promotional opportunities for the produce industry," says Susie McKinley, director of the Division of Marketing and Development, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Tallahassee, FL.

While tailgating has traditionally centered on heavy foods, including chips, wings, burgers and alcohol, retailers can capitalize on the mammoth seasonal occasion by placing fresh produce in a starring role. Avocados and party trays are naturals for such displays, but other produce, including sweet onions, watermelon and pistachios, remain essential game-day items.

FOOTBALL FRENZY

As Harps Food Stores operates in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee and Kentucky, tailgating promotions are important to its more than 100 stores that are in the middle of football country.

"Tailgating items are very important to produce sales because produce fits naturally into football food," says Mike Roberts, director of produce operations for the Springdale, AR-based chain. "Fall football brings families, friends and communities together, and food is a big part of that. For supermarkets, it creates strong weekly opportunities around snacks, grilling, dips, trays and easy meal solutions."

Avocados are one of the biggest opportunities for Harps, especially when tied in with guacamole ingredients and dips. Tomatoes, onions, jalapeños, peppers, potatoes, corn, celery, baby carrots, veggie trays, salsa, dips and cut fruit all play a role.

"Tailgating is no longer just about the traditional chip-and-dip mindset; it's an evolution toward healthier eating habits," says Joe Nava, vice president of sales and business development for West Pak Avocado, Murrieta, CA. "Avocados are at the heart of this shift, offering consumers the fresh, heart-healthy ingredients they crave to elevate their tailgating experience."

Tailgating offers a massive opportunity for the produce department to pivot from traditional summer merchandising into a highly lucrative tailgating season, says Stephanie Barlow, senior director of communications for the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB), Orlando, FL.

"Shoppers increasingly want flexibility," she says. "They still enjoy traditional game-day foods, but they're looking for lighter options that don't sacrifice flavor. Fresh produce helps balance heavier

SEASONAL SHINE

"Tailgating is an important seasonal opportunity for the produce industry because it gives retailers a reason to make fresh products

part of a high-traffic, high-energy shopping occasion,” says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for ¡Yo Quiero!, a Rhine, TX-based dip maker.

“For produce departments, that creates a strong opportunity to drive sales through fresh dips like guacamole and salsa, fresh-cut vegetables and fruit trays,” she adds. “When retailers merchandise these items together as a complete tailgating solution, they make it easier for shoppers to build the party in one stop and increase the opportunity for impulse and incremental purchases.”

Sports and food bring people together, says Diana Salsa, vice president of marketing for The Wonderful Co., Delano, CA, which experiences sales lifts in its pistachios during tailgating season.

“Retailers can promote tailgating items by leaning into the excitement and energy of the football season,” says Salsa.

“Consumers are already shopping with game-day occasions in mind, so incorporating seasonal signage, themed displays, and dedicated football promotions can help capture attention and inspire purchases.”

With heightened consumer interest in health, fresh produce items in tailgating events make sense.

“Produce has the potential to be a strong sale due to health concerns, salads, fruit and veggie platter — they make for a family-friendly environment,” says Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA.

CONSIDER OTHER ITEMS

While sweet onions might not be the first produce item that comes to mind when shoppers think of tailgating, game-day occasions provide a prime showcase to highlight their versatility. From homemade guacamole, salsa, and onion dip, to iconic sides, like onion rings and fresh toppings for burgers and brats, sweet onions work well in many dishes, says John Shuman, president and chief executive officer, Shuman Farms, Reidsville, GA.

“Tailgating provides great opportunities for fresh-forward merchandising and cross-promotions throughout the fall and winter months,” he says. “It’s no secret that tailgating items are major sales drivers during the fall and winter months.”

Retailers must carefully consider their displays, and to truly capitalize on the tailgating season, “retailers should move beyond basic fruit placement and instead create an avocado destination,” says West Pak Avocado’s Nava.

“By prioritizing grab-and-go convenience and offering a variety of bag sizes and fruit ripeness, coupled with catchy, high-traffic displays, retailers can meet consumers exactly where they are. Success isn’t just about stocking the shelf; it’s about strategizing supply, offering ready-to-eat ripeness, and cross-merchandising with other guacamole and grilling ingredients to simplify the shopping journey ahead of any game-day event.”

The most effective displays are large, eye-catching, and ideally at the front and center of the department, says Shuman.

“We suggest that our retail partners utilize onions to anchor tailgating displays, given their versatility and position as a key ingredient in a variety of different appetizers and sides,” he says. “Merchandising sweet onions alongside high affinity items and tailgating favorites builds baskets.”

BOLD FLAVORS DESIRED

The most popular tailgating items are those that are easy to dip, top, share, and add to a larger spread. Guacamole continues to be a game-day staple, along with salsa, queso, bean dips and vegetable trays, says Murray.

“We’re seeing strong interest in bold, layered flavors that still feel approachable,” she says. “Shoppers want familiar formats, but they

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Tailgating has become a beloved seasonal tradition, and its food-centric nature creates many promotional opportunities for the produce industry. Each week, football fans search for fresh inspiration for what to bring to their next tailgate.”**

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

- **“Tailgating and football season are important occasions for the produce industry because it brings consumers together through snacking, sports, and entertainment.”**

Diana Salsa, The Wonderful Co., Delano, CA

also want something that feels new. That makes items like jalapeño dips, roasted salsas, Hatch chile flavors, candied jalapeños and authentic Mexican-inspired recipes especially relevant.”

Retailers are increasingly creating one-stop tailgating destinations by merchandising around the tailgating theme, rather than individual categories, says Salsa.

“Displays that tap into the excitement of football season and make game-day shopping easy tend to perform best,” she says.

“Dynamic displays and eye-catching point-of-sale (POS) materials can help drive visibility and impulse purchases as consumers stock up for tailgates and watch parties. Consumers are shopping with a specific event in mind, so displays should clearly communicate game-day relevance and inspire consumers to stock up for tailgates and watch parties.”

BOOSTING OTHER STORE ITEMS

Cross-promotions in the produce department and beyond serve as great tools for driving sales by increasing basket size. They create valuable meal solutions for busy consumers and often inspire trial-ing of items that shoppers might not typically purchase.

“The best approach is to merchandise by occasion, not just by item,” recommends Harp’s Roberts. “Customers are shopping for burgers, guacamole, snack trays, dips, and grilling items, so we need to make those connections easy.”

Placing a secondary bin of whole watermelons in the beverage aisle next to beverages and mixers with a sign for “Watermelon Kegs” encourages shoppers to hollow out the watermelon as a natural drink dispenser. Similarly, spot-merchandising whole melons in the meat department near charcoal and ribs highlights watermelon’s smoky compatibility for grilling or as a refreshing side dish, advises NWPB’s Barlow.

“Cross-merchandising by occasion rather than department makes shopping easier,” she says.

FDACS works closely with retailers to promote Florida-grown produce. To meet demand for Fresh From Florida produce, which ships during the fall and winter, FDACS shares seasonal, tailgate-friendly recipes throughout the tailgating season with its more than 1.5 million social media followers.

“Cross-promotions are a great way to promote Florida produce through building the elements of a full dish, like crisp Florida vegetable garden wraps made with Florida peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, lemon, arugula, cream cheese and sandwich wraps, setting the customer up for success in gathering all the ingredients,” says McKinley. **PB**

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2026 Agenda

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* Indicates invitation only events



DAY 1: WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 2

START	ENDS	EVENT	SITE
7 am	8 pm	Registration & Badge Pick-Up	Sheraton lobby desk
7:30 am	3 pm	Global Trade Symposium (Separate Fee Required) 	Sheraton NY Times Square Room TBA
8:30 am	3:30 pm	Foundational Excellence (Separate Fee Required) 	Sheraton NY Times Square Room TBA
9:30 am	5:30 pm	Shuttle to/from Javits Center	Sheraton lobby (53 rd St.)
10 am	5 pm	Exhibitor Badge Pick-Up	Jacobs Javits Center
10 am	5 pm	Exhibitor Booth Setup	Jacob Javits Center
5 pm	6 pm	Rising Star Reception*	Sheraton: Metropolitan Ballroom
6 pm	8 pm	Opening Cocktail Reception	Sheraton: Metropolitan Ballroom

DAY 2: THURSDAY DECEMBER 3

START	ENDS	EVENT	SITE
5:45 am	5:30 pm	Shuttle Bus to/from Javits Center	Sheraton lobby (53 rd St.)
7 am	5 pm	Registration & Badge Pickup	Javits Center: Concourse 1C
7 am	10 am	Exhibitor Booth Set-Up	Javits Center
8 am	9:50 am	Opening Keynote Breakfast	Javits Center: Special Events 1D
9:50 am	10 am	Ribbon Cutting/Trade Show Opens	Javits: Concourse: 1C
10 am	5 pm	Buyer-Connect Program	Javits: Hall 1C, back left
11 am	1 pm	Consumer Media Lunch*	Javits: Hall 1C, Room TBA
11 am	5 pm	Chef Demonstrations	Javits: Floor, Central Park
11 am	4 pm	Industry Insights Stage	Sheraton: Metropolitan Ballroom

DAY 3: FRIDAY DECEMBER 4

START	ENDS	EVENT	SITE
8 am	5:30 pm	Ideation Fresh Foodservice Forum* (Separate Fee Required) 	Sheraton lobby Bus leaves promptly at 8 am
8 am	5 pm	Industry Tours: Hunts Point Market Philadelphia Produce Market Manhattan Retail Tour (Stops TBA) (Separate Fee Required)	Sheraton lobby Bus leaves promptly at 8 am





Eye-catching asparagus displays in high-traffic areas, paired with complementary meal ingredients and clear signage, can help increase sales.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

ABCs of Merchandising Peruvian Asparagus

Attending to a few fundamentals will benefit fall, winter asparagus sales.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Fresh asparagus offers significant sales potential through the fall and winter, a time of year when Peru is a major player.

"Peruvian asparagus offers retailers plenty of opportunity for quality, fresh product," says Priscilla Lleras, executive director of the Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association (PAIA). "Peru provides a stable supply of asparagus with particular attention on peak season from October to December."

PAIA's *2025/2026 Fresh Asparagus Statistics, Category Trends and Demographics Report* notes that Peru accounts for over 30% of fresh market asparagus imports to the U.S.

From September through December, Peruvian asparagus helps retailers maintain a consistent supply when domestic production declines, explains Mark Coté, regional produce supervisor for Redner's Markets in Reading, PA, with 45 stores.

"Its premium quality, versatility, and strong consumer demand drive sales and margins," he says. "Featuring asparagus in seasonal promotions, meal solutions and holiday displays boosts profitability, while offering shoppers a fresh, healthy vegetable throughout the fall months."

Stores should plan months ahead, manage quality, and merchandise asparagus as a premium seasonal vegetable, says Jeff Friedman, president of CarbAmericas in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. "November and December are a unique period for asparagus because consumer demand rises with holiday meals."

A few elemental ABCs will yield positive results. "The consistent,

reliable quality of Peruvian product sets retailers up for dynamic merchandising prospects in fall and winter," says Carlos Solf, vice president procurement for Southern Specialties in Pompano Beach, FL, and co-chair of PAIA.

"Focusing on a few strategic areas will enhance sales and elevate the produce department's image with shoppers."

A = ATTENTION-GETTING DISPLAYS

Produce must be visible to end up in the shopping cart. "We focus on building a robust display," says Josh Alsberg, owner of RubINETTE Produce Market, a unique gourmet independent retailer in Portland, OR.

Asparagus isn't typically on the shopping list, so consumers need to see it, explains Lleras. "Displays should be prominent. Even stores with limited space can build an attractive display."

Coté shares three keys to effective displays include visibility, freshness and cross-merchandising. "Place displays in high-traffic areas, keep them fully stocked with premium quality product, and pair complementary items to inspire meal ideas," he says. "Clear signage and attractive presentation encourage impulse purchases and increase overall sales and profitability."

Katiana Valdes, marketing director for Crystal Valley Foods in Miami, FL, emphasizes asparagus should be placed in a prominent location within produce, especially near high-traffic areas. "Secondary displays during promotions can significantly increase impulse purchases."

Shani Nir, management at Ayco Farms in Pompano Beach, FL, urges retailers to highlight asparagus to entice sales. "Endcap displays or additional refrigerated display fixtures placed in high-traffic areas offer best results," she says.

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of PAIA this year, the association is sponsoring a Retail Display Contest Challenge in October.

B = BASICS OF HANDLING

A great asparagus display starts with excellent product. "First, ensure you are purchasing fresh product from a reliable and consistent supplier," says Craig Rolandelli, president and chief executive at Jacobs Malcolm & Burt (JMB) in San Ramon, CA, and PAIA co-chair.

"Then, be sure to handle it correctly, from the back room all the way through floor display. Asparagus displays should be well maintained to ensure the best product is in front of shoppers."

Lleras recommends asparagus be kept cold (34-36 degrees F) in the backroom and moist (damp room). "Fresh asparagus is not ethylene-sensitive, but it is susceptible to absorbing very strong odors," she says. "So, stores should be thoughtful of what they are storing next to it."

CarbAmericas' Friedman recommends displaying asparagus standing up in refrigeration. "Be sure to create a full display, but not overcrowded."

At Rubinette, quality is imperative for purchase. "When people are shopping for asparagus, they want nice tight heads and firm stalks; otherwise they walk away from it," says Alsberg.

Fresh, well-stocked displays are essential, agrees Valdes. "Fresh-looking product drives sales, while sparse or dehydrated displays quickly discourage purchases."

Also, she stresses retailers should plan early. "Holidays increase demand significantly, so working with suppliers well in advance helps secure product and promotional volume."

Stores can promote throughout fall and into the winter holidays. "Peruvian product provides a long window for sales," says Rolandelli. "Stores can begin planning in September, build into peak volume in mid-October, and promote heavily for the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons."

C = CONSUMER EDUCATION

Reaching out to consumers is another essential component of positive sales. "Stores should support fresh asparagus with weekly ads, digital promotions, recipe cards, point-of-sale signage and social media content," says Cotê.

Although asparagus is a pretty straightforward vegetable, PAIA's Lleras emphasizes the importance of reaching shoppers with messages on ease of preparation to encourage purchases from new consumers wanting variety and nutrition. "Provide ideas on usage with signage, demos, or in-store communications."

Consumers often need inspiration, agrees CarbAmerica's Friedman. "To increase impulse buys, use QR codes or recipe cards."

Stores can educate shoppers on meal and usage ideas through cross-merchandising. "Giving shoppers meal ideas encourages larger basket sizes," says Crystal Valley's Valdes. "Display asparagus alongside proteins, such as steak, salmon, chicken or lamb, as well as potatoes, mushrooms, lemons and seasonings."

Rubinette uses a variety of cross-merchandising opportunities. "We're always thinking in terms of culinary use," says Alsberg. "Asparagus goes well with capers, anchovies and Parmesan cheese. Or pair it with nice pastas or heirloom grains you want to feature."

Alsberg also notes shoppers love pickled asparagus. "Fall is a great opportunity, since many consumers are into canning. Merchandise with a canning set including pickling jars, garlic and dill."

Providing nutritional information will also drive sales, according to Lleras. "Shoppers are increasingly health-conscious. Asparagus contains amazing health benefits including: low in calories; naturally fat-and cholesterol-free; good source of potassium, vitamin A and vitamin C; and rich in rutin and folacin."

Friedman recommends focusing on the benefits of asparagus rather than price. "Communicate ideas such as a healthy holiday

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Endcap displays or additional refrigerated display fixtures placed in high-traffic areas offer best results. This provides a destination, thereby driving incremental sales and attracting new customers."**

Shani Nir, Ayco Farms, Pompano Beach, FL

- **"Value-added asparagus is an increasingly important part of the category. Retailers can merchandise these products adjacent to conventional, naked bunches, allowing shoppers to choose between traditional and convenience options."**

Katiana Valdes, Crystal Valley Foods, Miami, FL

dish, tastes great air-fried with oil and Romano cheese, or full of healthy antioxidants," he says. "A 'Get to Know the Grower' sign will also get the consumer involved and educated."

Social media is the best way to go direct to the customer, says Ayco Farms' Nir. "Understand your target audience and how they best communicate with your store. Putting recipes on your website is a great option for shoppers, or using a QR code on products to increase traffic to your website."

D = DIFFERENT OPTIONS

Increase ring by offering size, color or packaging options. "Having multiple sizes is important because there are different uses for each," says Alsberg. "The thin asparagus is a quick poach or light sauté. But if you want to grill, you want the thicker. If you want to catch all your shoppers, you must have multiple sizes available."

Standard asparagus is ideal for everyday cooking, sautéing, stir-fries, and recipes where asparagus is cut into pieces, explains Valdes.

"It appeals to value-conscious shoppers and those looking for versatility," she says. "Large asparagus offers a premium appearance with excellent eating quality and works well for grilling, roasting, and sheet-pan meals."

Valdes suggests stores can merchandise multiple sizes together with clear signage highlighting the best use for each size.

Offering multiple product sizes meets different needs. "This includes needs of different households, budgets, and meal occasions, and increases shopper satisfaction and sales," says Redner's Cotê.

Packaging options, such as bags, trays, and varying styles and weights, are continually evolving, adds Nir. "Ayco does year-round in-house packaging for multiple options, including tray packs, flow pack and stand-up gusseted bags to offer for retailers," she says. "Flow pack and gusseted style bags are the most popular currently."

According to Cotê, some value-added options include microwave-ready packs, trimmed spears, and seasoned meal kits. "Merchandise these products alongside fresh asparagus with clear convenience messaging, meal ideas, and cross-promotions featuring proteins, sauces, and side dishes to drive incremental sales."

Value-added products provide benefits for shoppers, as well as store personnel, adds Solf of Southern Specialties.

"Trends indicate continued interest for quick meal solutions and value-added is easy for shoppers to pick up," he says. "It is also easier for retail staff to handle. Peruvian importers and distributors now offer a variety of fresh asparagus value-added options."

PB



Given onions' broad use by consumers, displays and cross-merchandising can be a key driver for onion sales.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

Help Shoppers Add Onions to Mealtime

Convenience and providing mealtime solutions are key to onion set evolution.

BY MIKE DUFF

Retailers are finding new ways to grow onion sales without abandoning the category's traditional strengths. Bulk onions merchandised alongside potatoes remain the backbone of the business, but expanded secondary displays, cross-merchandising programs, and an increasing assortment of bagged and fresh-cut products are helping retailers capture additional sales across multiple consumer needs and purchasing occasions.

Terry Fiorica, produce category merchant at Wegmans Food Markets, Rochester, NY, notes the company has a range of private label bagged product to complement bulk onions, including yellow onions, organic yellow onions, sweet onions, organic sweet onions, red onions and organic red onions.

Fiorica notes online customers are more likely to buy chopped onions vs. bagged or bulk. Year to date, almost a third of chopped onion sales have been digital, a proportion twice that in bagged or bulk.

At The Giant Company, Carlisle, PA, Chris Bush, a regional director, says onion sales also vary with occasion and location. He explains the more meat and potatoes in local diets, the more onions a store is

likely to sell. Even a smaller rural supermarket, as one in Everett, PA, recently conferred to the Giant banner, needs fairly large, conspicuous onion displays in association with potatoes.

"This is definitely a meat and potatoes store," he says.

In an interesting turn, the Everett Giant includes tomatoes in its main display of potatoes and onions, suggesting more variation in onion use, such as guacamole and fajitas.

IN THE BAG

Sloan Lott, director of sales at Bland Farms, Glennville, GA, says bagged onions create new merchandising opportunities.

"Beyond convenience, they give us a chance to tell a much bigger story than you can with bulk product alone," he said. "With bags, we can highlight recipes, share cooking tips through QR codes, promote seasonal programs and give shoppers more information about what makes sweet onions different. It's another way to engage consumers right at the shelf and inspire them to put sweet onions in their cart."

"Bulk onions will always have an important place in the department, but bagged onions allow us to build a stronger brand experience and create more impactful merchandising."

John Shuman, president and chief executive of Shuman Farms, Reidsville, GA, says a "strong balance between bags and bulk simplifies merchandising for retailers. The clear, bold messaging on the front of our bags helps distinguish the product and eliminate confusion in the onion set."

"The key is merchandising bags and bulk together, leading to

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ONION EVOLUTION

Although often the same weekly purchase it has been for consumers over the years, the onion category is evolving as retailers place greater emphasis on convenience, meal solutions and product differentiation, says Steven Shuman, general manager, vice president of sales, G&R Farms, Glennville, GA.

"While yellow, red and white onions remain staples, sweet onions continue to gain momentum because of their mild flavor, versatility and strong seasonal appeal. Consumers are also looking for authenticity, whether that's regional origin, family farming or a product with a story behind it."

Jessica Congdon, category marketing manager, potatoes, at Grimmway Farms, Bakersfield, CA, says the onion category is morphing from "a basic commodity presentation toward a more usage-based approach, with retailers increasingly thinking



Bulk onions will always have an important place in produce, but bagged onions are gaining ground. Smart retailers figure out the best mix of both.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

Add Organic Onions to Retail Mix

BY MIKE DUFF

Organic sweet onions have been making gains as shoppers are thinking more about ways to protect their health.

"We've continued to see steady growth in organic sweet onions, and it's very much in line with what we're seeing across the broader organic produce category," notes Sloan Lott, director of sales at Bland Farms, Glennville, GA.

"From a pricing standpoint, the category has remained relatively consistent," he adds. "Like any produce item, there are factors that can influence pricing, but overall, we've seen stable demand and a healthy market for organic sweet onions."

About 5% of Bland Farms' total crop is organic, with approximately 120 acres dedicated to organic Vidalia sweet onions.

"We expect organic sweet onions to earn even more shelf space and become a more consistent part of

year-round programs," Lott says. "With our 52-week supply from Georgia, Peru, Mexico and other U.S. growing regions, we're well positioned to help retailers meet that demand throughout the year."

Dante Galeazzi, marketing order manager, South Texas Onion Committee, Mission, TX, says the organization has detected a growing interest in organic sweet onions in the past few years, including increased adoption by retailers that have incorporated organic TX1015 sweet onions into their onion programs.

"As consumers continue to prioritize health, wellness and organic options, demand appears to be trending upward among a dedicated segment of shoppers," Galeazzi says. "While pricing can fluctuate based on supply, availability and market conditions, organic sweet onions generally continue to command a premium compared to conventional offerings."

about onions by meal occasion, household size, convenience and value.”

Core yellow, white and red onions remain the foundation of the category, Congdon says, “but retailers can create stronger sets by clearly differentiating use cases: yellow for everyday cooking, red for fresh applications and grilling, and white for sharper flavor profiles and Hispanic-inspired meals.”

Bulk onions remain important for shoppers who want to choose individual pieces and buy only what they need, while bagged onions appeal to shoppers looking for value, pantry stocking and convenience.

“A balanced merchandising strategy is usually best,” adds Congdon. “Maintain a strong bulk destination for variety and quality perception, while supporting bagged options for value-driven and stock-up purchases.”

TAG TEAM FOR MORE SALES

Given onions’ broad use, cross-merchandising can drive sales.

“Onions go with almost everything, making cross-merchandising one of the most underused opportunities in produce,” says Kelsey Weingart, brand manager, marketing, Peri & Sons, Yerington, NV.

“Meal-oriented displays are a natural fit. For taco night setups, guacamole stations and soup season builds, pairing onions with peppers, tomatoes, or broth products gives shoppers a complete meal idea and increases basket size. QR codes linking to recipes at these displays close the loop between inspiration and purchase.”

She notes the traditional potato and onion set remains a solid foundation for core products in both categories and habitual shoppers who are clear on what they want.

“But it shouldn’t be the ceiling,” says Weingart. “The category has room for more dynamic setups, specialty sections, seasonal displays and impulse-oriented placements near high-traffic areas.

“Signage that leads with flavor, rather than just price, turns a commodity display into a category destination.”

Steven Shuman agrees traditional potato and onion displays are a keystone and shouldn’t be the only merchandising strategy. “Seasonal secondary displays, meal-solution merchandising and promotions help generate impulse purchases while showcasing the unique flavor and versatility of sweet onions. Retailers that highlight the limited availability and premium quality of Vidalia onions can create excitement that benefits the entire onion category.”

Spice World has its own way of helping retailers build sales via its minced and chopped packaged onion products.

“We include QR codes on our Easy Onion shippers that take consumers quickly to our website to explore all types of delicious recipes with onions,” says Mike Smith, the company’s senior vice president of sales and marketing. “They can create a shopping list starting right in the produce department.”

To cross-merchandise Spice World Easy Onion products, whether squeezable bottles or resealable jars, Smith recommends retailers surround them with fresh produce that work well with onions, such as tomatoes, tomatillos, peppers and avocados. Cross-mer-

chandising with other compatible produce items creates an opportunity to bring in general merchandise, such as lime juicers and avocado storage holders, to produce displays, he adds.

Dante Galeazzi, marketing order manager, South Texas Onion Committee, Mission, TX, emphasizes onions can benefit from virtual promotion and purchasing. “The growth of online grocery shopping has also created new opportunities through digital recipe recommendations, meal bundles and suggested add-on purchases.”

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GEORGIA GROWN

f i X in y p d

"As retailers continue to focus on convenience and meal inspiration, cross-merchandising has evolved from simply grouping similar products to helping consumers envision complete meals and occasions."

THE SWEET LIFE

John Shuman contends that smart merchandising is essential in driving onion category sales. "Retailers should use shelf tags and signage to identify sweet onions as a premium offering and clearly differentiate them from standard yellow onions. Sweet onions provide a bigger ring, and baskets with sweet onions are more likely to contain high-affinity items like peppers, tomatoes, potatoes and squash."

As the Texas sweet onion season began winding down with summer's arrival, retailers were still finding creative ways to feature sweet onions, especially in and around the growing region, Galeazzi says.

"This season, display contests featured dedicated bins, Texas-themed displays, cross-merchandising with complementary products and promotional pricing," he

says, "reminding Texans that the state's own growers offer sweet onions in the spring."

He also is a believer in cross-merchandising as a superior way to prompt onion purchases, sweets included.

"Sweet onions are most effective when cross-merchandised with complementary products that encourage meal planning and increase basket size," Galeazzi says. "Opportunities have expanded in recent years as retailers have embraced more meal-oriented merchandising. Today, sweet onions are commonly featured with ingredients for grilling, burgers, fajitas, kabobs, salads and other recipe solutions."

John Shuman maintains sweet onions are the onion category driver for retailers throughout North America. "Consumption is highest in the northeastern part of the country, where sweet onion sales can account for nearly one-third of total category sales."

To maximize the opportunity in store, Shuman says sweet onions should be merchandised beside traditional onions

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Bulk onions will always have an important place in the department, but bagged onions allow us to build a stronger brand experience and create more impactful merchandising."**

Sloan Lott, Bland Farms, Glennville, GA

- **"Signage that leads with flavor, rather than just price, turns a commodity display into a category destination."**

Kelsey Weingart, Peri & Sons, Yerington, NV

so shoppers can easily compare varieties, but dedicated displays help reinforce their premium positioning and seasonal appeal.

"For Vidalia onions in particular, dedicated displays reinforce their unique identity and create excitement throughout the season."

MAKE IT EASY

Along with sweet, retailers should consider how prepped product can play a role in driving sales.

"Fresh cut onions are critically important to maximizing sales in the onion category," says Spice World's Smith. "Cut onions like Spice World's Easy Onion grew out of the same consumer insight that has guided much of the company's innovation: People love the flavor of fresh ingredients, but they increasingly want convenience and time savings."

After the success of Spice World's ready-to-use garlic products, Smith says their team recognized a similar pain point with onions, prep time, mess and inconvenience. "Easy Onion delivers authentic onion flavor in a format that removes those barriers, making it easier for home cooks of all skill levels to elevate their meals."

"The key for retailers is to see fresh-cut and whole onions as two parts of the same category serving the same consumer at different moments in their week," says Peri & Sons' Weingart. "A well-merchandised whole onion set still anchors everything."

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There is a greater availability of specialty mushrooms than ever before, and because of their higher price per pound, specialty mushrooms represent 7% of total fresh mushroom sales.

PHOTO COURTESY THE MUSHROOM COUNCIL

Beyond White Buttons: Six Ways To Sell More Specialty Mushrooms

Make specialty mushrooms a destination, and then help shoppers decide what to buy.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Specialty mushrooms are having a moment, and it's not just on the tasting menu. Once the domain of fine dining and farmers markets, varieties like shiitake, oyster, lion's mane and trumpet are now showing up in mainstream produce aisles, credited to a mix of foodservice inspiration and consumer curiosity. Add in health-and-wellness buzz, plant-forward eating, and

year-round availability, and it's no wonder shoppers are reaching beyond white buttons and browns for something a little more exotic.

McCaffrey's Food Markets, a nine-store chain headquartered in Langhorne, PA, carries white, brown, specialty and dried mushrooms. Stores are within an hour or less drive of Kennett Square, PA, nicknamed the Mushroom Capital of the World, and where most of the nation's mushrooms are grown.

"Our customers know their mushrooms," says Tony Mirack, produce director of operations. "As for specialties, we carry shiitakes, oysters, hen of the woods (maitake), royal trumpets, and blends containing three or four specialty varieties, each with different textures and flavors. Mushrooms are a destination category for us."

While white, cremini, and portobello mushrooms account for the bulk (93%) of fresh mushroom sales, specialty mushroom varieties



Specialty varieties are visually spectacular, and that's an essential opportunity for impulse retail sales. PHOTO COURTESY GOURMET MUSHROOMS

have been an area of increased focus among consumers, retailers and chefs alike. Of note, specialty mushrooms sell more than \$90 million through traditional food channels, according to data shared by the Mushroom Council, headquartered in Lee's Summit, MO.

"Mushrooms make up about 3% to 4% of total vegetable sales and 1% to 2% of total produce sales," says Anne-Marie Roerink, president of 210 Analytics in San Antonio, TX, and retail analyst for the Mushroom Council. "Because of their higher price per pound, specialty mushrooms represent 7% of total fresh mushroom sales and about 2% to 3% of volume sales."

Here are six ways to sell more specialty mushrooms at retail:

1. FEATURE BEST SELLERS & UP-AND-COMERS

There is a greater availability of exotic mushrooms than ever before, as both legacy farms and upstart micro mushroom producers are growing more, according to Mark Kreiner, outside sales coordinator for Mother Earth LLC, in Landenberg, PA.

Shiitake, oyster, and maitake (hen of the woods) remain the strongest specialty mushroom movers for Phillips Mushroom Farms, in Kennett Square, PA. "Their versatility, savory umami, and mainstream recognition make them staples," says Sean Steller, director of business development.

Phillips Mushroom Farms has expanded considerably through advancements in climate-controlled growing and infrastructure investment to supply a broader range of specialty varieties year-round in consistent volumes.

Shiitake mushrooms are the most extensive variety within specialty mushrooms, according to Roerink. "They also have the widest distribution, and have gained in distribution and sales, generating \$66 million over the past year."

What's more, shiitake are the only specialty mushrooms to rank among the top 20 selling mushroom SKUs by dollars, with 5-ounce sliced conventional and organic ranking at 18 and 19, respectively,

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Mushrooms are a destination category for us."**
Tony Mirack, McCaffrey's Food Markets, Langhorne, PA.
- **"Consumers shopping in the organic produce section often seek premium, nutrient-dense items, and mushrooms fit seamlessly into that basket."**
Sean Steller, Phillips Mushroom Farms, Kennett Square, PA

according to the June 2025-published report, *Top Sellers by Pack Size and Format*, by the Mushroom Council. By unit sales, these two SKUs rank 19th and 20th.

Fast up-and-comers are oyster, lion's mane, and trumpet varieties. Oyster mushrooms, for example, have grown 26% since 2020 to \$8 million in annual sales, Roerink says. "With their range of colors, they are a foodie favorite to add a pop of color to dishes."

Justin McLean, sales manager at Farmers Fresh/Premier Mushrooms, in Abbotsford, BC, says they've seen a rise in popularity in lion's mane, "with its links to the nootropics and brain health trends."

In addition to shiitakes, "maitakes (hen of the woods) are another specialty mushroom variety we carry. Both do well," says Ben Painter, president of SPD Markets, with two stores located in Grass City and Nevada City, CA.

2. OFFER ORGANICS

Organic has a far greater presence in mushrooms (23%) than in total fresh produce (12%) or total vegetables (15%), according to Roerink, on behalf of the Mushroom Council. "Organic mushrooms are a growth area, with younger consumers leaning into organic production. Organic mushroom dollar sales reached \$338 million over the past year, with increases in dollars, units, and volume."

Demand for organic specialty mushrooms is outpacing conventional growth, according to Phillips' Steller. "Consumers shopping in the organic produce section often seek premium, nutrient-dense items, and mushrooms fit seamlessly into that basket."

Mother Earth is looking to launch retail packs of Organic Mini King Trumpets, Organic Chestnut Mushrooms, and Organic Golden Enoki soon, says Kreiner. "We launched our four SKU line of organic dried mushroom pieces earlier this year, with lion's mane, oyster, shiitake, and portobello."

3. TRY NEW SKUS

There are new varieties, new blends, and new value-added products for retail. For example, Steller says Phillips is expanding production of wood ear, chestnut and pioppino (also known as black poplar) mushrooms.

Blends, or grouping multiple varieties into one pack, are a huge trend, according to Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's/World Variety Produce in Vernon, CA. "We've introduced two blends, in 6-ounce packages each. Protein Blend, with maitake, shiitake, and king oyster mushrooms, perfect for plant-based dishes, and a Grilling Blend, with shiitake, king oyster, and portobello, ideal for cooking on a grill."

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BUYING & HANDLING SPECIALTY MUSHROOMS

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Buying specialty mushrooms begins with planning and consistent coordination with suppliers.

"Retail buyers should plan ahead and maintain strong supplier relationships to ensure consistent availability of specialty varieties throughout the year," says Bryan Shelton, vice president of sales and marketing for Giorgio Fresh Co., in Blandon, PA.

Accurate forecasting is key, agrees Sean Steller, director of business development for Phillips Mushroom Farms, in Kennett Square, PA. "Specialty mushrooms require careful planning to ensure steady year-round volumes, due to the short shelf life and inconsistent demand cycles."

Attention to product care is just as significant to sales as sourcing.

"Good handling practices throughout the supply chain pay off into better consumer engagement," says Anne-Marie Roerink, president of 210 Analytics, and retail analyst for the Lee's Summit, MO-headquartered Mushroom Council.

"When mushrooms look optimal, not only do planned (list) purchases come to fruition, but consumers are also more likely to upsize to a 16- or 24-ounce package because they know the mushrooms will last for a few days."

Specialty mushrooms can be more delicate than white or brown mushrooms, and retailers should immediately place mushrooms into the cooler upon receipt at the store level.

"Proper cold chain standards of 34-38°F should be maintained throughout the supply chain," advises Mark Kreiner, outside sales coordinator for Mother Earth, LLC, in Landenberg, PA.

"Never display mushrooms out of refrigeration and ensure vents in the refrigerated display cases are working properly and are not blocked," adds Cristie Mather, vice president of marketing for the Mushroom Council. "Don't place mushrooms near wet rack items or items that produce ethylene gas, and don't stack mushrooms on display more than two high, as they can bruise. Rotate the stock frequently, and follow FIFO (first in, first out) best practices and restock new products in the back of the display."

The Giorgio Fresh Co., in Blandon, PA, recently expanded its value-added offerings with Sliced Mushroom Grill Packs. The three flavors are Smokey Honey Habanero with cremini, king oyster, and lion's mane mushrooms; Steak Seasoning with cremini mushrooms; and Brown Sugar Bourbon with cremini and shiitake mushrooms. Each is 8 ounces.

"Each pack has a foil tray that can be placed directly on a grill," says Bryan Shelton, vice president of sales and marketing.

4. CREATE A DESTINATION DISPLAY

Retailers can successfully introduce specialty mushrooms by starting with one facing per item, keeping products fresh, and maintaining tight turns while learning store-specific demand, says Lawrence Tuck, vice president of retail category management at Monterey Mushrooms in Watsonville, CA. "This approach helps build velocity and ensures the right mix as consumer interest grows."

Specialty varieties are visually spectacular, and that's an essential opportunity for impulse sales.

"The colors and shapes lead to a natural curiosity to know more about the flavor and texture profile and what to do with them," says Roerink. "In retail, dwelling is selling, and a display showing a variety of specialty mushrooms, along with consumer education, can be a great way to boost mushroom sales."

The Mushroom Council has developed point-of-sale signage that educates consumers about each mushroom variety and provides recipe inspiration.

"These free resources help make the mushroom display a destination while also promoting impulse purchases," says Cristie Mather, vice president of marketing for the council. "For time-strapped shoppers looking for inspiration, the signage has recipe QR codes that make recipe planning and shopping a no-brainer."

5. CREATE MEAL SOLUTIONS

Cross-merchandising is key, says Giorgio's Shelton. "We recommend displaying specialty mushrooms alongside complementary items like sauces, dips, and proteins to inspire meal ideas and highlight versatility. This approach highlights mushrooms as part of a broader culinary experience rather than a direct substitute for white buttons, helping boost total category sales."

Specialty mushrooms are a significant component in foodie displays, according to Roerink. "High-end retailers have taken the opportunity to cross-promote foodie options such as grass-fed beef with specialty mushrooms. We're also starting to see integrated displays where retailers are testing mushroom supplements alongside their fresh counterparts."

For other ideas, Phillips' Steller suggests, "Pair oyster or lion's mane with tofu, tempeh, and other plant-based proteins. Place shiitake near ramen kits or Asian sauces, and bundle maitake with risotto kits or specialty cheeses."

6. TARGETED PROMOTION

Specialty mushroom performance is strong, says Roerink. "We see these items deliver true incremental growth to the exotic subcategory rather than replacing existing sales. Early results show more than a 20% lift, supported by targeted digital coupon programs that continue to drive trial and repeat."

Use ad pricing to draw customers into the mushroom category of varieties, recommends Melissa's/World Variety Produce's Schueller. "Do this especially in the weeks leading up to major cooking holiday promotions, such as Christmas and New Year's."

In-store taste demos let customers experience the flavor differences of specialty mushrooms firsthand.

"We, as a company, offer samples to retailers," says Justin Reyes, national sales and marketing director for Gourmet Mushrooms, in Sebastopol, CA.

Eastern Apples Fill Sweet Spot

Retailers and growers are building apple sales through local sourcing.

BY MIKE DUFF

Apples are a core agricultural crop through much of the East Coast, with a consumer that supports local traditions — and growers.

The East Coast region, ranging from the Carolinas to Maine, looks forward to fall and the abundance of their native fruit.

Mathew Blair, produce category business manager, Northeast Shared Services, Schenectady, NY, which supports operations at Tops, Price Chopper and Market 32 stores, says the company begins ramping up eastern apples as summer peaks.

"We typically start to expand our displays around mid- to late August, depending on the new crop starting dates," he says. "Our seasonal display changeover typically happens right after Labor Day. At that time, everyone is looking for fall items like apples and apple cider."

LOCAL CONNECTION

During the eastern apple growing season, local is a powerful selling force, but it has to be wielded carefully, as definitions can differ depending on where you are.

"Let's take Vermont, for example," explains Blair. "The state of Vermont regulates how the words 'local produce' is used in promoting fresh produce. To them, local means within the state of Vermont. New York, on the other hand, does not regulate how local produce is advertised. This is where the gray area is."

"For us, each state that we operate in has a different set of merchandising point-of-sale (POS) that calls out our local program, and that is largely within those stores' state lines."

Blair says Northeast Shared Services supports its own local suppliers and even distributes directly from growers operating near the stores it serves.

Local apples and the connection to local producers appeal to consumers, with the rise of agritourism, including u-pick, cementing the bond.

The truth of that is evident in central New York.

"In season, we move a lot of apples," says Mike Servello, chief executive, Bargain Grocery, Utica, NY. "When they're in season, we put bins of apples out, and the customers love it. They fly."

Although much of his clientele is price-oriented, given that the store operates in what once was a food desert, the enthusiasm for the traditional harvest season and its bounty of apples affects everyone, with the bonus that people understand they are participating in and supporting an agricultural tradition.

IT TAKES ALL KINDS

Grower Carrie Wafler, of Wafler Farms, Wolcott, NY, and member of the New York Apple Association board of directors, sees the variety landscape changing, but in a deliberate way.

"Growers are responding to that intelligently," she says. "Retailers



Eye-catching displays of eastern apples help retailers capture shoppers' attention during the fall, while encouraging larger basket sizes. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO*

want consistency, the same high-performing varieties on the shelf year-round, and New York growers are planting and managing to meet that demand. That means varieties like Honeycrisp are where growers are putting their investment."

Wafler says the pace of new variety plantings has slowed, and it's a rational response to the current environment. "Cost of production has increased significantly, and growers need confidence in both the agronomic performance and the retail demand before committing to a new planting. The era of chasing every new variety has given way to a more deliberate, profitability-focused approach. Traditional eastern varieties still have a strong and loyal home in fall harvest, farm markets and local retail."

Jessica Wells, executive director of Crunch Time Apple Growers, Newark, NY, says she's optimistic about the Northeast. "Weather conditions this spring created some variability, but, in general, fruit set, sizing and quality look strong. In New York



From early fall harvest through summer, thanks to modern varieties and storage capabilities, the Eastern apple season lets retailers highlight variety, freshness and local sourcing.

PHOTO COURTESY NYAA



Offering menu ideas triggers apple sales beyond the snacking end use. More shoppers are looking for a premium eating experience, even from the traditional apple.

PHOTO COURTESY NYAA

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Apples shouldn't be viewed as strictly seasonal. With proper storage, we can support a much longer selling window."**
Jessica Wells, Crunch Time Apple Growers, Newark, NY
- **"The Northeast continues to be a reliable and important apple-producing region for the county."**
Alisha Albinder, Hudson River Fruit, Milton, NY

specifically, we're expecting solid quality, with potential for slightly tighter supply compared to some recent large crops."

For Crunch Time, volumes continue to grow as more SnapDragon and RubyFrost acreage reaches maturity, with SnapDragon emerging as one of the fastest-growing premium apple varieties in the East.

The SnapDragon harvest starts in mid-September, and the selling season continues through the winter into spring. RubyFrost harvests mid-October, typically hitting stores in November. "It is a strong storage apple, often marketed through the summer months," says Wells.

"One of our key messages to retailers is that apples, especially these varieties, shouldn't be viewed as strictly seasonal. With proper storage, we can support a much longer selling window."

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Weather remains one of the biggest variables in apple production, influencing crop size, fruit quality and the timing of harvest each season.

PHOTO COURTESY NY DEPT. OF AG

Consumer demand for fresh apples continues to be strong, particularly for premium varieties and locally grown programs, says Alisha Albinder, vice president, Hudson River Fruit, Milton, NY.

"In New York and the Hudson Valley, growers have invested heavily in modern orchard systems, allowing for improved fruit quality, consistency and efficiency."

Hudson River Fruit anticipates a fairly typical marketing season. "Early-season timing can shift depending on weather and maturity, but apples remain one of the few produce categories capable of delivering high-quality supply nearly year-round through modern storage technologies," says Albinder. "Retailers continue to benefit from strong promotional opportunities beginning at harvest and extending throughout the year."

Hudson River Fruit supports customers with POS materials, display bins, signage

and digital assets, as well as variety- and retailer-specific promotions.

Kaari Stannard, president and owner of Yes! Apples, Glenmont, NY, says the 2026 northeast apple season continued solidly into early summer after a good start.

"We are finishing the season off strongly with a 12-month program on Gala, Pink Lady, Fuji and Red Delicious," she says. "Due to the drought in New York for the 2025 growing season, we are short on Honeycrisp."

It is too early to tell how early or late this next season will be, she says. "Our expectation is that we will have the volume to market in 12 months, as we have done for many years now. Unfortunately, due to the freeze in the lower Hudson Valley, where many of our Pink Ladies are grown, we will not be able to take 12 months."

Stannard says Gala and Honeycrisp are



A rustic, farm bin display connects shoppers to the orchard and the traditional harvest season, and helps move apples.
PHOTO COURTESY BARGAIN GROCERY

strong varieties over the season, but that Snapdragon and Sweetango are getting more attention.

COLD COMFORT

At United Apple Sales, Lyndonville, NY, James Williams says the company had to weather an early chill. "Much of the East Coast experienced a frost event April 20 and 21," he explains. "More northern latitudes were not as far into floral development and therefore much better protected. New York growing districts along Lake Ontario and further north fared better, and a nearly full crop is estimated in those regions, including here at United Apple Sales. Overall, eastern apple supplies will certainly be down this season."

In North Carolina, Linda Pryor, a grower with Hilltop Farms, Hendersonville, NC, and a board member of the Blue Ridge Apple Growers Association and North Carolina Apple Growers Association, says North Carolina had "prematurely warm weather in March that brought the trees out of dormancy early. The freeze impacts were not as damaging and widespread as they were in more northern states."

She says the North Carolina apple crop remains "relatively strong for 2026, becoming more of a seller's market, which is

unusual, due to decreased volume in other growing areas."

But, she cautions, "There are no certainties until harvest is complete."

Still, the apple business moves forward. "The desire for the fresh market nationwide is crisp, juicy, high-flavor apples," says Pryor. "New varieties are continually being released; the popularity of agritourism is a driver for the newest varieties to be grown for those venues, while more staple and proven varieties are still grown for commercial purposes."

She says the strongest variety for Hilltop Farms has been Rome and will likely continue to be.

Development of the apple sector in the East has taken on more of a branded aspect, says Hudson River's Albinder.

"The East has seen significant growth in managed and branded varieties over the last decade," she observes. "Varieties, such as SnapDragon, EverCrisp, RubyFrost and Ambrosia, continue to gain traction as consumers look for unique flavor profiles and premium eating experiences."

Albinder says Snapdragon and RubyFrost have seen positive growth trends in the premium category. "We're proud of the variety of taste profiles and retail support to keep these programs going."

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The top 10 organic produce categories are berries, packaged salads, apples, bananas, carrots, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, citrus and grapes, according to the Organic Produce Network's 2025 State of Organic Produce report. PHOTO COURTESY CREEKSIDE ORGANICS

Know Your Organic Shopper

Insight into today's consumer helps build organic produce department sales.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Organic produce remains the largest category in the organic industry, topping \$22.7 billion in U.S. sales in 2025. It accounts for nearly 30% of all organic food sales, with a penetration rate of 16% into the overall produce market, according to the *Organic Market Report 2026*, released in March by the Washington, D.C.-headquartered Organic Trade Association (OTA).

Yet the consumer driving that growth looks far different than decades ago.

"Today's organic shopper isn't just a niche health-food enthusiast. They are mainstream, highly informed, and value-driven," says Jeff Salchenberg, produce program and category manager for New Seasons Market, a 22-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR.

Understanding who today's organic shopper is, what motivates purchasing decisions, and what they buy and why offers retailers valuable insight into where the category is headed and how to capture its next phase of growth.

TODAY'S ORGANIC CONSUMER

Today's organic consumer can't be summarized into a single persona, says Joanna Jaramillo, marketing manager for Wholesum Family Farms Inc., Amada, AZ, which introduced its Lil' Ones Organic Baby Cucumbers for snacking in July.

"People are at different points in their organic journey," she explains. "Some purchase only organic and have a strong commitment, willing to pay any premium, while others prioritize organic only for certain products based on health, quality, taste, price, or availability."

Retailers need to build on this idea of the organic journey, Jaramillo adds. "Each generation enters that journey from a different place, and with different motivations and life experiences."

"Younger consumers, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, continue

to lead organic adoption," says Bob Borda, senior vice president of sales at Cal-Organic Farms, a division of Grimmway Farms and the Grimmway Produce Group, Bakersfield, CA.

Last year, the Cal-Organic innovation pipeline launched Veggie Crunch and Coleslaw Cabbage Blends, BIMBI Baby Broccoli to more retailers, and specialty vegetables like Cal-Organic purple and orange cauliflower that add variety and visual appeal to the organic category.

"They actively seek products that support wellness, sustainability, and food transparency, and they are more willing to explore new vegetables, flavors, and meal solutions," Borda adds. "They also look to social media and digital platforms for recipes, cooking inspiration, and product discovery before they ever enter the store."

Millennials are the engine of organic right now, adds Peppe Bonfiglio, vice president of sales for Mastronardi Produce Ltd., in Kingsville, ON.

They are raising families, and they pay attention to ingredients, he explains. They want to feel good about what they are feeding their families, and they are willing to spend more on produce they trust, even while watching the overall basket price.

In July, the company introduced its Sunset-brand organic Sprinkles, sweet red and yellow micro-grape tomatoes in kid-friendly packaging for snacking, salads and lunchboxes.

"Gen X (ages 46-61) shoppers tend to take a more practical approach," says Ron Selders, president of fresh for United Natural Foods Inc. (UNFI), in Providence, RI, which this year expanded its availability of organic specialty produce, such as cherimoya, dragon fruit and jumbo avocados.

"They value quality and consistency, while also paying close attention to price, which can make them more selective in how and when they purchase organic items."

Boomers' purchasing decisions are often driven by a desire to

preserve long-term health, according to Wholesum's Jaramillo. "They may not purchase every product organically, but they're often willing to invest in categories they believe have the greatest impact, and fresh produce is among those areas."

While each generation approaches organic a little differently and their motivations differ, says Cal-Organic's Borda, "they are all helping drive category growth and every generation is looking for products that deliver value beyond price alone."

Since everyone is an organic shopper, organic produce isn't a silo category anymore, adds Chris Ford, business development and marketing manager for Viva Tierra Organic Inc., Mount Vernon, WA, an importer of primarily organic apples, pears and citrus.

"Every retailer, from the local independents to the nationwide chains and club stores, is an organic retailer today."

THE PRODUCE BUYING PERSPECTIVE

The organic produce category maintained steady 5.3% growth for the year, with the \$4.4 billion berry segment still the category leader, growing at a rate of 10.5%, based on data in the OTA's *Organic Market Report 2026*.

"Berries combine indulgence and health in one package, which is exactly what today's shopper wants," says Mastronardi's Bonfiglio. "Our organic Sunset WOW Dreamberry strawberries are grown in high-tech organic greenhouses, and deliver quality, consistency and, most importantly, the flavor consumers are looking for."

Lettuce and other greens grew to \$1.7 billion, an increase of 1.5%, based on the OTA's 2026 report.

"Lettuce, spinach, kale, the superfood sector, is definitely a strong one in organics," agrees Michael Boskovich, organic sales at Boskov-

ORGANIC IS A 'GENERATIONAL THING'

Shoppers who view organic claims as at least somewhat important:

- Gen Z (ages 14-29), 77%
- Millennial (30-45), 77%
- Gen X (46-61), 55%
- Boomers (62-80), 55%

The willingness-to-pay gap is wider. Only 7% of Boomers will spend more on organic.

Source: 2024 Consumer Perception of USDA Organic Report

ich Farms Inc., Oxnard, CA. The company is seeing club-store-size organic spinach sell strong, as well as organic red, green and black kale still widely used in bagged salads.

The top 10 organic produce categories are berries, packaged salads, apples, bananas, carrots, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, citrus and grapes, according to the *State of Organic Produce 2025* report, by the Organic Produce Network, Monterey, CA.

"We see growth across berries, citrus, bananas, avocados, and snackable vegetables," says UNFI's Selders. "These categories tend to resonate because they offer health value, frequent consumption, and a manageable price premium. They're also items shoppers purchase regularly, use across multiple occasions, and can easily incorporate into everyday routines."

Produce continues to serve as the gateway into organic for many



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Every retailer has its own philosophy on whether organic should be next to the conventional offering, in its own set, or the only offering. Regardless, organic produce should be as easy to find as conventional fruits and vegetables. PHOTO COURTESY CAL-ORGANIC FARMS

shoppers, says Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing at Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA. Sunkist will soon introduce new packaging for its organic Sunkist Cali mandarins that creates a greater shelf presence and reinforces the fruit as a convenient healthful snack.

"Categories that deliver convenience, versatility, and strong eating experiences are particularly well-positioned for growth," Howard notes.

Organic specialty produce are currently strong in sales for Melissa's/World Variety Produce, in Vernon, CA, which carries over 250 organic items. "My opinion is that they are comfort foods in challenging times in the world," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations.

In terms of display and merchandising, organic produce should be as easy to find as conventional fruits and vegetables, says Alex Jackson, vice president, sales and marketing, for Frieda's Branded Produce, in Los Alamitos, CA.

"Every retailer has a different philosophy on whether it should be next to the conventional offering, in its own set, or the only offering if the price is comparable to conventional," Jackson says. "Regardless, you want the decision to be something you can execute with purpose and can communicate to store staff."

Frieda's popular organic items include turmeric, Mahana ginger, Stokes purple sweet potatoes, pink lemons and kumquats.

At Sunset Foods, a five-store chain based in Highland Park, IL, Director of Produce Vince Mastromauro says they merchandise organics in dedicated sets with clear green signage and headboards, so shoppers can easily distinguish them from conventional.

"We carry both organic and conventional in key categories like bananas, broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes, apples, bagged salads and leafy greens, while some items, such as collards, mustard greens and kale, are now organic-only," Mastromauro adds. "Our organic assortment stays in the same location year-round, making it easy for customers to find what they're looking for."

Beyond placement, says Mastronardi's Bonfiglio, "two things move the needle: sampling, because flavor is still the most persuasive sales tool we have, and storytelling, through clean signage and packaging that explains the why."

Storytelling does make a meaningful difference, agrees Nicole Mason, director of marketing and community engagement for Creekside Organics Inc., in Bakersfield, CA, which launched its seasonal California grape program with Thomcord and Kyoho grapes in

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Younger consumers, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, continue to lead organic adoption."**
Bob Borda, Cal-Organic Farms, Bakersfield, CA
- **"[Gen X (ages 46-61) shoppers] value quality and consistency, while also paying close attention to price, which can make them more selective in how and when they purchase organic items."**
Ron Selders, United Natural Foods Inc., Providence, RI
- **"Every retailer, from the local independents to the nationwide chains and club stores, is an organic retailer today."**
Chris Ford, Viva Tierra Organic Inc., Mount Vernon, WA

June. "Highlighting family farms, grower-owned businesses, regional production, or unique company attributes helps create a stronger connection with shoppers."

"For example, we're a certified Woman-Owned Business Enterprise (WBENC), we grow many of our own products, and we partner with like-minded organic growers who share our commitment to quality, relationships, and the future of organic agriculture," Mason adds. "Those stories help differentiate our products in a crowded marketplace."

Technology — social media, digital content, QR codes — gives the produce industry new ways to tell the story behind organic food, says Mason. "Even simple tools can make a difference. Fruit World's Thomcord Tales invites consumers to text the brand with questions or feedback about their Thomcord grapes, creating a direct line of communication that builds engagement and trust."

ORGANIC PRODUCE OUTLOOK

Younger shoppers are aging into peak spending years, and organic is expanding into discount retail channels, says Frieda's Jackson. "Those are important structural drivers that will push the U.S. organic sector to OTA's prediction of crossing the \$100 billion threshold by 2030."

Over the next five years, the greatest opportunity for organic growth will come from creating a connected consumer journey, rather than thinking about the produce department as a standalone shopping experience, adds Cal-Organic's Borda.

"Consumers increasingly discover products through recipes, social media, retailer websites, and digital content before they ever enter the store," he explains. "Retailers that seamlessly connect those digital touchpoints with destination merchandising, seasonal storytelling, and differentiated assortments will be best positioned to drive category growth."

"We also have an opportunity to rethink how seasonality comes to life in the produce department," Borda says. "Harvest windows have traditionally driven seasonal merchandising, but today retailers can create excitement throughout the year through meal occasions, limited-time features, specialty vegetables, and fresh culinary inspiration that keeps shoppers engaged and coming back to the category."



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A Showcase for All Seasons



One of Atlanta's major advantages is the Atlanta State Farmers Market, which provides produce infrastructure many other regions do not have. Several of the wholesale distributors service the entire Eastern Seaboard daily.

PHOTO COURTESY ATLANTA STATE FARMERS MARKET

Atlanta: Produce Terminal of the South

Booming population helps Atlanta wholesalers distribute produce.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Spurred by steady population increases, Atlanta has emerged from its beginning as a railroad terminus to one of the nation's largest, most dynamic regions and a major global player.

As the hub of the South, Atlanta is home to 18 Fortune 500 companies, and the headquarters of another 19 rated in the Fortune 1000 list in industries including aviation, retail, food, packaging and finance. The metropolitan area also plays a critical role in fresh produce distribution throughout the Southeast.

"Atlanta has become the hub and the Capital of the South," says Charlie Eagle, vice president of business development for Pompano Beach, FL-based Southern Specialties Inc., who works in Atlanta. "We have an ever-increasing population. We have a sophisticated consumer. We have international trade. It all comes together. It's a true international city."

POPULATION EXPLOSION

As the sixth largest U.S. metropolitan area, the population of the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA, Metro Area is 6.5 million, up

362,000 from the start of the decade, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Driven by robust job growth, the region adds approximately 60,000 to 65,000 new residents annually.

"Every year, the population is increasing," says Andrew Scott, vice president of sales and business development for Nickey Gregory Co., a wholesaler based on the Atlanta State Farmers Market in Forest Park, GA. "With the interstate system, you can send a lot of produce overnight to most areas of the South. There are definitely areas of growth and a lot of distribution centers being built here. I have seen a lot of growth since I moved here in 1994. It's a big, thriving, growing city."

Atlanta is also the third leading U.S. metro area by numeric growth from 2024 to 2025, trailing only Houston and Dallas, TX, but ahead of Phoenix and Charlotte, NC, according to Census Bureau. Each of metro Atlanta's 11 counties saw population increases from 2024-2025, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission.

"Atlanta's population is large, fast-growing, diverse and increasingly food-conscious," says Matthew Kulinski, director of marketing for the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA) in Atlanta. "Population growth is increasing both the volume and complexity of produce demand. More people means more demand, but Atlanta's growth also brings new cuisines, new retail formats, and higher expectations for freshness, convenience, and specialty products."

The commission forecasts the 21-county Atlanta region will potentially add 1.8 million people by 2050, bringing the region's total

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Nickey Gregory Company is a trusted partner for businesses across the greater metro Atlanta area, delivering fresh fruits and vegetables with dependable service. Located at the Atlanta State Farmers Market, through broadline and independent distributors, the company supplies foodservice, retail and wholesale companies across the Southeast with more than 500 fresh produce items sourced from local growers and suppliers worldwide. Supported by an efficient distribution network and a strong commitment to food safety and quality, Nickey Gregory Company helps customers keep their shelves stocked and kitchens running smoothly.



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Driven by robust job growth, the Atlanta region adds approximately 60,000 to 65,000 new residents annually. The Atlanta market includes consumers looking for traditional Southern staples, local seasonal produce, international ingredients, health-focused options and premium branded products. *PHOTO COURTESY WHAT CHEFS WANT*

population to 8 million. “To put that growth in perspective, it’s as if all of metropolitan Indianapolis will move to the Atlanta region over the next 30 years,” the commission stated.

“Atlanta’s one of the most dynamic markets in the country right now,” says Lauren Kellum, director of marketing for What Chefs Want, Louisville, KY. “You’ve got real population growth, a deep mix of cultures, and chefs who aren’t playing it safe. That shows up in demand. One day it’s Southern staples, the next it’s hyper-specific global ingredients. If you can’t keep up, you get left behind.”

THRIVING INDEPENDENT RETAIL SCENE

While the large grocery chains dominate mass grocery sales, the Atlanta region is home to numerous smaller local and regional chains and stores, including City Farmers Market, an international supermarket chain with six Atlanta area locations; NDM (Nam Dae Mun), with eight locations throughout the Greater Atlanta area; and Talpa Supermarkets (Supermercado Talpa), a Hispanic-oriented retailer with more than a dozen locations in the Atlanta region, including a store in Dalton, GA, which opened in the fall of 2025.

“We are seeing the increase in the people,” says Jenna Kennedy, produce manager of Sevananda Natural Foods Market, a natural foods cooperative located in the trendy Little Five Points district, considered one of Atlanta’s hippest neighborhoods, northeast of Atlanta’s downtown.

“I think it’s just going to keep growing. We just keep needing to buy more and more (produce). Nobody wants to shop at the regular grocery stores anymore. Atlanta’s getting to be a hip town.”

Scott says Nickey Gregory is starting to experience fewer pickup or dock customers, with customers preferring delivery. The wholesaler continues to focus on foodservice distribution center sales and has increased its retail and fresh-cut processing business, expanding the number of specialty items it carries to serve the city’s broadening ethnic population.

“With all the new concepts popping up here, we try to help on both the retail and foodservice sectors because you have a lot of people coming to this market,” he says. “A lot of the grocery retailers have distribution centers here. Foodservice is still a big percentage of our business, but we’re selling more independent grocery retail-

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“Atlanta’s growth also brings new cuisines, new retail formats, and higher expectations for freshness, convenience, and specialty products.”**
Matthew Kulinski, Georgia Department of Agriculture, Atlanta
- **“Atlanta is a high-growth, high-expectation market. There’s a lot of opportunity, but it doesn’t reward average.”**
Lauren Kellum, What Chefs Want, Louisville, KY

ers, probably just over a hundred stores that we’re servicing. This city has a lot of different retail formats, a lot of independents and small store chains.”

COMPETITIVE MARKET

That mass of food business keeps distributors busy.

“The Atlanta produce market is very competitive,” says GDA’s Kulinski. “Established wholesalers, regional distributors, national firms, local farms, and new companies are all working to serve a sophisticated customer base. That competition is good for consumers and creates opportunities for strong Georgia Grown products to stand out.”

“There has been this explosive growth and advances in the number of restaurants, the style of restaurants, and, of course, the number of hotels,” says Southern Specialties’ Eagle. “This area’s so close to everything in the Southeast. Being an overnight ride by truck from our Pompano Beach (Florida) headquarters, it’s only natural that the Atlanta region is a very important consumer of our products — both foodservice, retail, and club store-wide.”

“Produce is important here because it’s so hot here,” says Sevananda’s Kennedy. “There are lots of people here and it’s always busy. The population here affects it. It’s definitely been booming. This is a



Last September, the City of Atlanta, in partnership with Invest Atlanta and Savi Provisions, opened Azalea Fresh Market, a first-of-its-kind municipal grocery store located in downtown Atlanta. Azalea Fresh Market is the result of a collaborative effort between the City of Atlanta, Invest Atlanta, Savi Provisions, the Independent Grocers Alliance and community members who identified a pressing need for more affordable, fresh and healthy food options in Atlanta. PHOTO COURTESY AZALEA FRESH MARKET

busy city. We need to keep refilling and doubling-up when we need. We've definitely been having good business. There's never a quiet moment."

FAST-MOVING DINING SCENE

Diners and the produce companies that serve the restaurants benefit from the ever-changing dining trends.

"Atlanta's restaurant scene moves fast because it's chef-led," says What Chefs Want's Kellum which distributes to foodservice operators in 15 states. "You've got high-end kitchens, strong independents, and a lot of creative fast-casual concepts all pushing each other. That competition raises the bar across the board. It's the mix of diversity, growth, and a strong culinary scene. Trends show up here early, and they move fast."

The market includes consumers looking for traditional Southern staples, local seasonal produce, international ingredients, health-focused options and premium branded products.

"That diversity creates strong demand for a wider range of produce than many surrounding markets," says GDA's Kulinski. "Atlantans are adventurous eaters. The region supports traditional Southern cooking, international cuisine, chef-driven restaurants, farmers markets, health-conscious shoppers, and upscale grocery formats. That means produce demand is not one-size-fits-all. Consumers want quality, variety, freshness, and authenticity."

The region's ethnic diversity helps drive restaurant sales.

"There's so much to choose from with all the nationalities in town," says Nickey Gregory's Scott. "There are all these different cuisines. There's a good mix of restaurants here, and it is really a great restaurant scene."

KEY PRODUCE TERMINAL

An important supplier of fresh produce to the growing region is the Atlanta State Farmers Market, located just south of the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, which handles around 110 million passengers a year.

"One of Atlanta's major advantages is the Atlanta State Farmers Market, which provides produce infrastructure that many other regions do not have," says GDA's Kulinski. "Combined with Atlanta's scale, diversity, and strong demand, the market gives wholesalers access to a large and varied customer base.

"The challenge is that Atlanta buyers expect variety, quality,



Wholesalers in the Atlanta region are also diversifying with value-added products to satisfy customers' needs. PHOTO COURTESY NICKEY GREGORY

consistency, and fast service. Produce is perishable, margins can be tight, and customer expectations are high, so wholesalers have to be efficient, responsive, and able to adapt quickly"

Produce growers and distributors considering servicing the giant metro area must do their homework.

"Atlanta is a high-growth, high-expectation market," says What Chefs Want's Kellum. "There's a lot of opportunity, but it doesn't reward average. The companies that win here are the ones that execute every day. Strong service, consistent product, and real relationships. That's what separates everyone else from the ones that actually stick."

What Chefs Want is seeing more demand for items that used to be considered niche, including specialty peppers, herbs and tropical products. "The kind of produce that's hard to source consistently is now expected to just be available," says Kellum. "And local! Local sourcing is a huge driver. Menus change fast, especially when you're working around what's local and in season. That's why we invest so much in tools like our weekly local sourcing updates, newsletters, and menu-planning guides. It gives chefs something practical to build from, not just a list of products."

PB

Community is Infrastructure, Not Networking

BY CARISSA REMITZ

More than four years ago, I co-founded Together Hospitality Chicago, a restaurant resource group that's grown to be a true community of hospitality leaders. Of everything I've done in my 25-plus-year career, it's what I'm most proud of — building a space for people to share, to learn, and to be vulnerable. Use the word “networking” to describe it, and you couldn't be more wrong.



Networking is what happens at trade shows, and it ends when the trade show does. Infrastructure is different. It is built deliberately, maintained continuously, and paid for long before it pays back. Most companies in our industry do the first and call it the second.

Too often, relationship building gets filed under “soft skills.” Really, it's the most durable marketing strategy we have for turning customers into long-term partners.

TRUST FORMS BEFORE TRANSACTIONS

Everyone in produce says relationships come first. A sales call can open the door, and in my experience, the trust that turns a customer into a partner is built elsewhere — in a room where nobody is selling anything.

That's what our Together Hospitality roundtables look like — chefs, operators, and hospitality leaders talking honestly about the things that keep them up at night. Leadership. Burnout. Turnover. Growth.

On paper, none of that is a produce distributor's problem to solve. In practice, it's the foundation of everything: Our customers' industry surviving its hardest problems is the precondition for our business existing. So, month over month, year over year, I invest in the room where those problems get worked on, with no sales pitch attached.

Here's what more than four years of leading this group has taught me: When trust forms off the clock, it survives on the clock. Those relationships don't evaporate the moment someone shows up with a lower price. You can't buy that, and you can't build it the week you need it, which is exactly what makes it infrastructure.

PEOPLE BUY FROM PEOPLE THEY LEARN FROM

The second thing communities do is share knowledge, and knowledge is what customers are actually buying. Our local and sustainability team translates between two vocabularies: the grower's language of volume, timing, and what's coming out of the ground this week, and the chef's language of seasonality, story and menu. That translation is the product.

We built a service out of it. Our Midwest markets bring a farmers market experience directly into our customers' spaces — a curated selection of local and seasonal products, staff to run it, and farm profiles that tell the stories behind the food.

Farmers get valuable time back. Our customers get an experience their guests remember. It's connection, delivered.

Our farm tours run the same logic in the other direction. For years we've brought chefs and clients to the field, to stand in the rows with the growers who supply them. A chef who has walked Garwood Orchards with the folks who've worked that land for decades understands something no spec sheet can teach.

RESILIENT SYSTEMS ARE THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The third thing communities create is resilience, and right now that matters most. Our industry is consolidating fast. Purchasing is centralizing. Distribution networks are “optimizing.” Farms are disappearing.

When pressure hits, isolated companies have one lever left: price. We stay price competitive without giving up our values, because local is what our customers want to see, even as consolidation pulls the industry away from it.

Living those values means building direct relationships with local growers. We connect harvests to institutional buyers: schools, hospitals, universities. Growing at that scale is one challenge; delivering at it is another, and that is the problem distribution exists to solve.

The same is true farm by farm. Take Scheeringa Farms in Highland, IN, where Jenny Scheeringa and her sisters run the third generation of a farm their grandfather started.

Scheeringa will tell you plainly that theirs is the last farm left in town. They've built a business on several channels: greenhouses, a beloved farm stand, seasonal events that draw families from across the region and wholesale.

We're proud to be a part of that last one, carrying their harvest into commercial kitchens. This is what real resilience looks like — not one relationship doing everything, but a community of relationships each doing their part. That's why the last farm in town is still the last farm in town, instead of the one that used to be there.

JOIN SOMETHING

Most of the infrastructure our industry needs already exists, and it's looking for people willing to show up. Serve on the board of your local farmers market or another food-related nonprofit. Join sector-wide efforts like the U.S. Food Waste Pact, where we collaborate on problems none of us can solve alone. Those are some of the most valuable rooms in this industry, and every one of them has an empty chair.

After 25 years, in and alongside this industry, here's what I know to be true: Marketing's job is not just generating leads. It's also building places where relationships can grow.

A lead list starts depreciating the second you finalize it. Infrastructure compounds. At a moment when so much of our industry is consolidating, community is the one competitive advantage that can't be acquired.

Carissa Remitz is the director of public relations and marketing at Midwest Foods, a women-, family-, and locally owned produce distributor serving the Midwest, and co-founder and chapter director of Together Hospitality Chicago. She has spent more than 25 years in hospitality marketing and communications.

Failure in High-Volume Retail Marketing

BY KEVIN GOEMINNE

Grocery retail marketing has hit a structural tipping point, according to the latest industry research released by CHILI publish. Campaign production now operates at manufacturing scale, but without the systems, controls, or reliability that underpin industrial production. The result is a growing gap between output and execution, and this is increasingly putting revenue at risk.



This is not simply a question of volume. It is a systems problem. Retailers are attempting to run industrial-scale content production on fragmented workflows, manual approvals and disconnected tools. At this level of complexity, failure is becoming systemic.

Across grocery retailers in the U.K., U.S., France, Germany and the Netherlands, marketing teams are producing hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of campaign assets every month to meet the demands of always-on, multi-channel retail media ecosystems. Marketing output now mirrors manufacturing scale.

The CHILI publish *Brandwidth 2026* research report, based on 256 grocery retail marketing leaders, reveals the sheer volume of production now required to compete in modern retail:

- 57% of campaigns generate between 50-200 variants, while 21% produce up to 500 variants per campaign;
- Over half (54%) of teams run 3-10 campaigns per month, with a further 4% exceeding 10 campaigns monthly;
- Nearly half of campaigns cover 500+ store locations, reflecting the scale of execution required.

At these volumes, even mid-sized retail media teams are managing hundreds to thousands of assets per month across formats, markets and channels.

This isn't campaign marketing as we've traditionally known it. It's continuous production at industrial scale. Retail marketing teams are now operating like content factories.

This explosion in output is driven by the convergence of key industry trends:

- Retail media growth, turning promotions into paid, measurable inventory;
- Multichannel ecosystems, spanning digital ads, in-store displays, apps and email;
- Personalized and localized marketing, requiring multiple versions per audience, region, and store.

The data shows that over 80% of campaigns now span both digital and in-store channels, making multichannel execution

the norm, rather than the exception. Meanwhile, 34% of retailers run campaigns across multiple countries simultaneously, adding complexity through localization, language, pricing and regulatory requirements.

Despite this manufacturing-level output, most organizations are still operating with structures designed for lower volume. Over half (55%) rely on parallel production tracks across teams and vendors, while only 42% describe their production as mostly automated.

This means that the majority are still operating systems that are partially manual, requiring multiple sign-off processes that slow down the time to delivery.

This mismatch between scale and capability is creating systemic strain and, in the worst cases, see campaigns bypassing official processes to speed up approvals. Fifty-five percent of marketing leaders say that they frequently see the inconsistent application of brand guidelines, as local teams take approvals into their own hands.

The consequences of this are no longer just operational. Sixty percent of respondents say failures directly hit revenue through missed promotional windows. In real financial terms, most incidents cost between €10,000 and €50,000 (\$11,400-\$57,000), with some running significantly higher.

The knock-on effect of missed windows can be a damaged brand partnership. These relationships are a critical component of retail media monetization, and therefore anything that puts these at risk is endangering future promotional opportunities.

Automation is emerging as the only viable path forward. At manufacturing scale, retail promotions require the same level of reliability as financial or supply chain systems. That means deterministic, governed, and repeatable processes with zero tolerance for error.

The good news is that nearly three-quarters of our respondents have already explored AI-driven content generation and two-thirds have piloted workflow automation.

However, automation is not about speed or efficiency alone. It is about ensuring that every promotion is executed accurately, consistently and on time, across every channel and market. Doing this takes a reliable solution where there is no "silent workaround" to ensure 100% on-time, accurate delivery. **PB**

*Kevin Goeminne is a Belgian SaaS entrepreneur and chief executive, best known as co-founder and chief executive of CHILI publish. For more insights into the state of creative operations in grocery retail, access the *Brandwidth 2026* research report at www.chili-publish.com/research/brandwidth-grocery-retail/insights. CHILI publish's *Brandwidth 2026* report surveyed 256 grocery retail leaders across brand, marketing, operations and procurement directly involved in promotional production across organizations in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and the Netherlands.*

This isn't campaign marketing as we've traditionally known it. It's continuous production at industrial scale.

Six Ways to Encourage Students to Enjoy Fresh Produce

BY NOVELLA LUI

With a new school year beginning, now is an ideal time to plan school food menus. School foodservice professionals play an essential role in shaping what children eat, what they are willing to try, and how they develop their attitudes toward food.



Since school-aged children receive school meals, featuring vegetables and fruits in school meals could help increase students' produce consumption, improve their overall diet quality, and support their readiness to learn.

School meals also create meaningful opportunities for students to build positive relationships with food and develop healthy eating habits that can last well

beyond the school years.

Here are six practical strategies to encourage students to enjoy more vegetables and fruits.

1. BUILD PRODUCE INTO FOODS STUDENTS ALREADY ENJOY

While offering vegetables and fruits as side options is one way to encourage intake, incorporating them into familiar, well-liked menu items can also be effective. Students may be more willing to try and enjoy vegetables and fruits when they are included in foods they already recognize and enjoy, such as tacos, pasta, sandwiches, pizza, wraps, rice bowls, soups, smoothies and breakfast parfaits.

For example, schools could offer chicken fajita bowls with lettuce, salsa, corn, bell peppers and fruit; turkey burgers topped with tomato, cucumber slices and lettuce; whole grain pasta with marinara sauce and roasted vegetables; bean and vegetable burritos with shredded lettuce and tomato salsa; or yogurt parfaits with mixed berries and diced peaches.

For additional inspiration, consider exploring the wide range of kid-friendly, standardized recipes available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Team Nutrition website.

2. CONSIDER COLOR AND VARIETY DURING MENU PLANNING

Food presentation, which involves color, texture and variety, plays an important role in menu planning. These elements make meals more visually appealing, support nutrient diversity, and increase food acceptance among students.

When planning the cycle menu, aim to include a variety of colorful vegetables and fruits throughout the week, including dark green, orange and yellow, red, purple, and blue, and white and brown produce. This approach helps create meals that are nutritious, visually inviting, and compliant with federal nutrition standards.

For individual menu items or daily meals, avoid repetition within the same color group when possible. For example, offering white potatoes, cauliflower and pears in the same meal may make the plate appear pale-looking, unless the dish also includes brighter-colored ingredients. Adding color contrast to dishes, such as leafy greens, carrots, tomatoes, berries, or peppers, to complement

lighter colored food items, could make the meal more attractive and encourage students to try and enjoy a wider variety of foods.

3. MAKE PRODUCE AN EASY CHOICE

Consider working with school administrators and staff to create a healthy school food environment where nutritious food and beverage options are visible, appealing and easy for students to choose.

For example, place grab-and-go fruits, colorful vegetable cups, and pre-portioned salads near the front of the serving line to help make these options more accessible and inviting. If buffet-style service is available, consider having a build-your-own salad bar available to give students choice and autonomy while encouraging them to explore a variety of vegetables and fruits.

4. RESPECT CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES

When planning the school food menu, it is important to offer items that reflect the cultural and religious values, and dietary preferences of the school community. Providing foods that are familiar, meaningful and inclusive may improve food acceptability and increase the likelihood that students will choose and enjoy the meals offered. Offering culturally and religiously preferred food options also demonstrates the school's commitment to creating a respectful and inclusive environment for all students.

5. INVOLVE STUDENTS WITH MENU PLANNING

Involving students in menu planning may also help make school meals more appealing, acceptable, and enjoyable. When students have opportunities to share their preferences and feedback, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over the menu and be open to trying new foods.

For instance, before adding a new food item to the menu, consider partnering with the school's administrative team to engage students through taste-testing events.

Offering new foods in a low-pressure, welcoming environment can encourage students to try items they might not otherwise choose, while also providing valuable and candid feedback.

If reducing food waste is also a goal, students can be invited to vote on new menu items, suggest recipe names, and participate in food waste audits. Their input can help identify which foods are most acceptable, guide future menu planning, and support efforts to reduce waste.

6. CONNECT MENUS WITH NUTRITION-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Lastly, supporting students in becoming more familiar with and accepting of vegetables and fruits can extend beyond the cafeteria.

If your school has access to outdoor space for building a school garden, the infrastructure to support cooking activities, or both, consider partnering with school administrators and staff to offer hands-on opportunities for students to grow, harvest, prepare and cook produce.

Research suggests that these experiences may help build students' food literacy, confidence, and curiosity about trying new produce, thereby increasing their produce consumption over time. **PB**

Novella Lui, RD, MHS is a registered dietitian and a freelance food, nutrition, and health writer in Canada. Connect with Novella at info@livetounish.com for work samples and collaboration opportunities.



The first ALDI U.S. print ad from 1976. The ad ran in the Iowa City Press-Citizen newspaper.

Pictured is an ALDI store grand opening from 1984. Today, ALDI has transformed from more than just a grocery store into a movement, with customers lining up hours before grand openings. *PHOTOS COURTESY ALDI*

ALDI Celebrates 50 Years in the US

As ALDI USA celebrates its 50th year in the U.S., the retailer is doubling down on its nationwide expansion, announcing plans to open more than 180 stores by the end of 2026.

In 1961, the Albrecht Family founded the world's first discount grocery store in Germany. Fifteen years later in 1976, the first U.S. ALDI store opened in Iowa. Today, with the ALDI headquarters in Batavia, IL, it has grown to more than 2,800 stores, pushing it closer to its goal of 3,200 stores by the end of 2028.

"Fifty years ago, ALDI USA opened its doors with one mission: to provide customers with access to affordable food and groceries without compromising our high-quality standards," says Atty McGrath, chief executive officer. "Many things have changed in 50 years, but I can assure you that promise still guides every decision we make."

McGrath says when she began as a district manager over 23 years ago, she could not have imagined ALDI today — "from being named a Time 100 Most Influential company to the loyal and enthusiastic fan base that brings lines wrapping around the block for new store grand openings."

She credits the success to ALDI teams nationwide. "To every ALDI

employee, past and present, thank you for everything you've done to get us to this point. We couldn't have done it without you, and I can't wait to see what the next 50 years have in store for us."

The loyalty built in the first 50 years in the U.S. has helped transform ALDI into more than just a grocery store and instead into a movement. Customers line up hours before grand openings, fans proudly wear head-to-toe ALDI gear, and loyal shoppers share product recommendations in dedicated Facebook groups, some with more than 3.8 million members.

ALDI is also sharing a deeper outlook into its growth plans over the next five years, including entering Colorado for the first time, continued growth in Southeast and West markets, and plans to open three new distribution centers across the country.

"These strategic investments are all about making sure customers can continue to count on us for the quality, affordable groceries and enjoyable shopping experience they love," adds McGrath. "As we look ahead to our next 50 years in the U.S., we'll continue to earn shopper loyalty by staying true to what's made ALDI successful: keeping things simple and delivering real value."

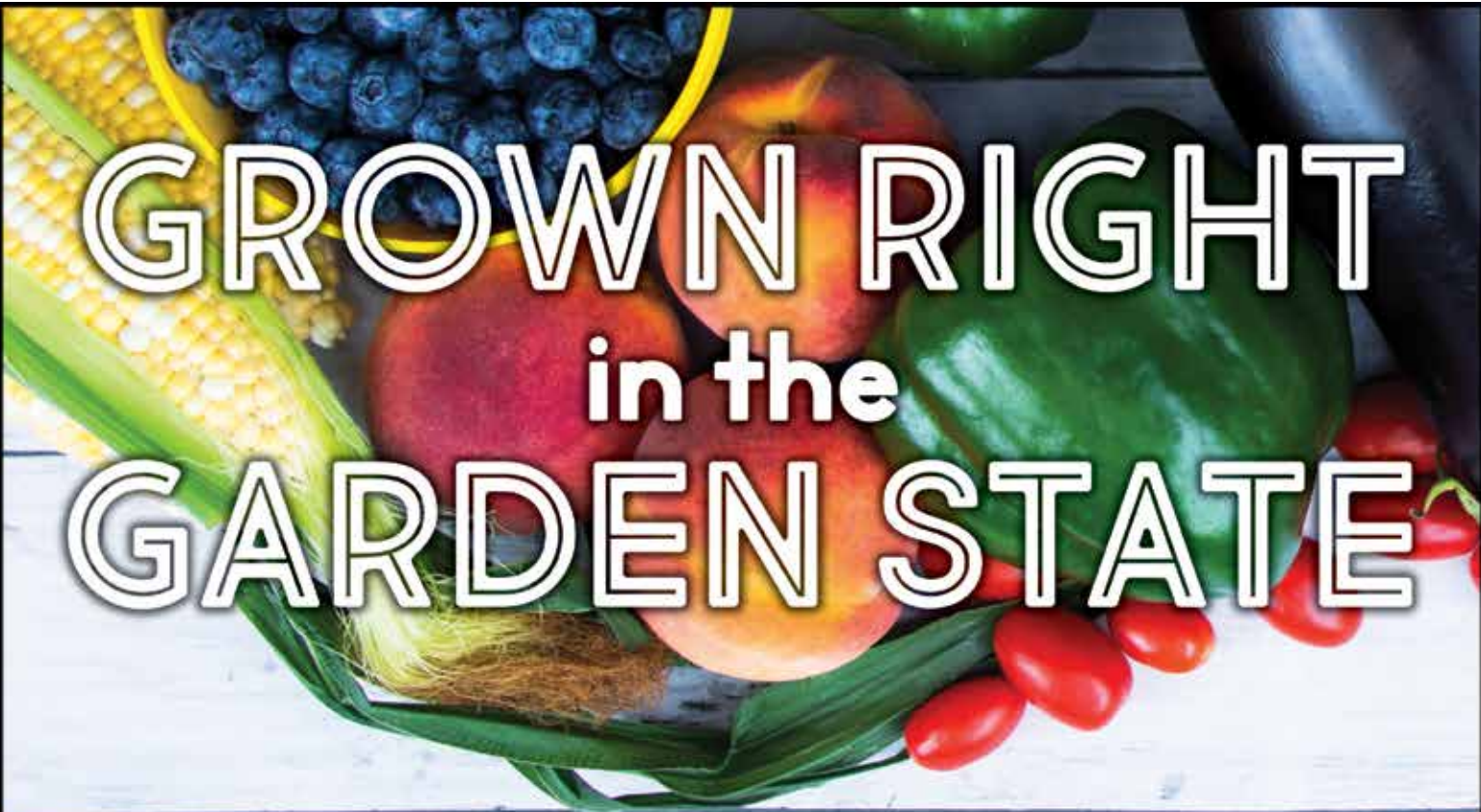
PB

INFORMATION SHOWCASE

AUGUST 2026

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COMPANY	PAGE #	PHONE	WEBSITE	COMPANY	PAGE #	PHONE	WEBSITE
Capital City Fruit Co., Inc.	13	515-981-5111	capitalcityfruit.com	New York Produce Show and Conference	30-31	212-426-2218	NYProduceShow.com
Crunch Time Apple Growers	45	716-300-8522	crunchtimeapplegrowers.com	Niagara Fresh Fruit Co.	46	716-778-7631	niagarafreshfruit.com
Dole Food Company, Inc.	2	704-213-3478	dole.com	Nickey Gregory Company, Inc.	53	404-366-7410	nickeygregory.com
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.	17	718-893-1640	fiermanproduce.com	Pacific Tomato Growers/Sunripe Certified, LLC	38	941-722-3291	sunripecertified.com
Fowler Farms	47	315-594-8068	fowlerfarms.com	PerishableNews	7	561-994-1118	perishablenews.com
Fresh Produce and Floral Council	51	714-739-0177	fpfc.org/about-us	Phillips Mushroom Farms LP	41	610-925-0520	phillipsmushroomfarms.com
Grimmway Produce Group	36	661-845-5229	grimmway.com	Produce Blue Book	5	630-668-3500	bluebookservices.com
Gumz Muck Farms, LLC	25	608-981-2488	gumzfarmswi.com	Produce Business Innovation Awards	15	561-994-1118	ProduceBusinss.com
Heartland Produce Co.	49	262-653-1000	heartlandproduce.com	Shuman Farms, Inc.	37	912-557-4477	shumanfarmsga.com
International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA)	9	302-738-7100	freshproduce.com	Spice World, Inc.	35	407-851-9432	spiceworldinc.com
MIXTEC Group	13	562-652-2299	mixtec.net	The Foundation for Fresh Produce	11	202-303-3435	freshproduce.com
New Jersey Dept of Agriculture	60	609-913-6520	findjerseyfresh.com	You Fortified Lifestyle	21	917-783-1737	youfortifiedlifestyle.com



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