

FEATURES: WHOLESALE REPORT | CANADIAN SUPPLY CHAIN | NOGALES | PACKAGING

PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

OCTOBER 2026
VOL. 42 | NO. 10 | \$9.90

**REGIONAL
PROFILE**

Los Angeles

MERCHANDISING

Apples

Root Vegetables

PROCUREMENT

California Citrus

Florida Fall Produce

Red River / San Luis Valley Potatoes

RISING RETAILER

Seabra

COVER STORY EXCLUSIVE

**WHERE DO
WE GO
FROM HERE?**

Charting a smarter path forward for food safety



Learn
More!



Think Mangoes, Think Dole!



Ask about our Mango display bins.



Contact us at DFFSales@dole.com

 Dole Food Company

® TM & © 2026 DOLE



COVER STORY

19 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A Smarter Path Forward for Produce Safety

The future of food safety lies in predicting risk before outbreaks occur.

IN THIS ISSUE

4 PB QUIZ

6 SPECIAL NOTE

Moving the Needle ... Together

8 PRODUCE WATCH

11 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Fresh Opportunities for Retailers

Potatoes USA analysis shows how potatoes can drive cross-purchase, meal solutions and snacking.

97 INFORMATION SHOWCASE

98 BLAST FROM THE PAST

Goody by Blue Banner: CA Citrus Enters A New Era

SPECIAL FEATURES

13 SEABRA FOODS: CAPTURING CUSTOMERS WITH CULTURAL FLAVORS

With three Orlando-area stores, this retailer showcases produce, engages the community, and promotes food diversity.

63 PRODUCE IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

Los Angeles' diverse demographic and long-standing businesses make for a thriving produce scene.



FEATURES

35 WHOLESALERS UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Customer expectations continue to grow, and wholesalers continue to meet them.

46 CANADA'S PRODUCE INDUSTRY AT A CROSSROADS

Trade uncertainty, inflation, and supply chain pressures are prompting a focus on collaboration.

54 SUSTAINABILITY AND CONVENIENCE: CAN PRODUCE PACKAGING SATISFY BOTH?

Consumer demand, retailer sustainability goals, and new regulations are driving innovations.

57 NOGALES: THE CROSS-BORDER PRODUCE SUCCESS STORY

The Southwest region retains its leading import status.

DEPARTMENTS

MERCHANDISING REVIEW

67 ROOT VEGETABLES FINDING NEW GROWTH

Retailers are expanding the role of root veggies beyond traditional staples.

73 SIX WAYS TO SELL MORE APPLES

Promote apples throughout the year, not just when leaves start changing.

PROCUREMENT

76 THREE WAYS TO BUILD STRONG CALIFORNIA CITRUS SALES THIS WINTER

California leads the U.S. in fresh citrus, allowing retailers to build excitement.

81 FALL PRODUCE BOUNTY IN FLORIDA

The Sunshine State's fall produce keeps supermarket produce shelves stocked during fall and winter.

85 RED RIVER VALLEY POTATOES: A STORY WORTH TELLING

From fertile soils to ideal weather, the region provides the perfect recipe for growing potatoes.

88 COLORADO'S SAN LUIS VALLEY: PREMIER POTATO POWERHOUSE

The valley has become one of the nation's top potato-producing regions.

DRIED FRUIT & NUTS

92 PECANS OFFER SEASONAL PROMOTIONAL POWER

This snackable, versatile nut keeps the category afloat

COMMENTARY

22 VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY

The Industry That Cares Enough to Get It Right

94 EUROPEAN MARKET

Fresh Produce Priority for German Consumers

95 PRODUCE ON THE MENU

Six Fall Vegetables for Your Menu

96 WHOLESALE MARKET

Old-School Relationships, New-School Expectations



THIS MONTH'S WINNER

EMILY STULLER
Al Peake and Sons, Daughter
Too, Food Service Co.
Sales and Office Manager
Toledo, OH

Emily Stuller helps connect the sales team at Al Peake and Sons Food Service and customers with the products and information they need.

"Whether we help a restaurant find the right product for a menu item or give a sales rep information they can put to use right away, it's rewarding to be part of that connection," she says. "I also enjoy that there's always something new to learn."

Stuller says her typical day can include reviewing product availability and market updates, creating sales flyers, and supporting the sales reps. "My advice to someone new to the industry is to stay curious, ask questions and build relationships. The foodservice industry changes quickly, and you learn a lot by listening to growers, suppliers, coworkers and customers."

She says foodservice customers are looking for fresh ingredients that add flavor and color to their menus while helping them manage costs and kitchen labor. "Seasonal produce and convenient, ready-to-use options are especially useful in those conversations."

She also says communication matters. "I focus on sharing timely market information and helping our sales team offer customers practical options when conditions shift."

A graduate of the University of Toledo with a bachelor's degree in marketing, Stuller enjoys game nights with friends and family, hanging out in her pool, going to Michigan football games, and hands-on projects around the house.

She says she appreciates how **PRODUCE BUSINESS** brings together perspectives from across the industry. "Its coverage of distribution, foodservice, and market trends helps me see the bigger picture and think about how those changes affect our customers and sales team."

PB

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

WIN A COMPLETE SET OF TOP FLITE 2026 XL GOLF CLUBS!

The full 13-piece package includes a strategic mix of clubs built for distance, high launch, and maximum forgiveness. See you on the links!



QUESTIONS FOR THE OCTOBER ISSUE

- 1) What is the telephone number for Stronach & Sons 2020? _____
- 2) Which variety of orange is "The Most Iconic Orange in Produce"? _____
- 3) Which brand is "A Symbol of New York"? _____
- 4) The Center of Growth is the theme of which trade show and conference held on December 2-4 this year? _____
- 5) What is the website URL for Wonderful Citrus? _____
- 6) What is the headline for Cathy Burns' "Voice of the Industry" column in this month's cover story? _____

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

Name _____ Position _____

Company _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Photocopies or scans of this form are acceptable.

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

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

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

PB

PRODUCE BUSINESS

INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT
for 40 Years

OCTOBER 2026 • VOL. 42 • NO. 10 • \$9.90

P.O. Box 810425 • Boca Raton • FL 33481-0425
Phone: 561-994-1118 • Fax: 561-994-1610
info@producebusiness.com

CHIEF EXECUTIVE/PUBLISHER

Ken Whitacre
KWhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Aimee Tenzek
ATenzek@phoenixmedianet.com

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Chris Burt
CBurt@phoenixmedianet.com

EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATOR

Lori Schlossberg
LSchlossberg@phoenixmedianet.com

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT

Jim Bartelson
JBartelson@phoenixmedianet.com

VICE PRESIDENT OF DIGITAL STRATEGY

James Elmer
JElmer@phoenixmedianet.com

PRODUCTION LEADER

Jackie Tucker
JTucker@phoenixmedianet.com

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Carol M. Bareuther, Susan Crowell, Mike Duff,
Bob Johnson, Dorothy Noble, Sarah Klose, K. O. Morgan,
Jodean Robbins, Steven Maxwell,
Lisa White, Doug Ohlemeier

ADVERTISING SALES STAFF

Debbie Miller
dmiller@phoenixmedianet.com

Angelica Gayon
AGayon@phoenixmedianet.com

Steve Jacobs
SJacobs@phoenixmedianet.com

Leslie Levy
LLevy@phoenixmedianet.com

Joelle Stephens
jstephens@phoenixmedianet.com

NEW YORK PRODUCE SHOW MANAGEMENT

John Toner
JToner@phoenixmedianet.com

Send insertion orders, payments, press releases,
photos, letters to the editor, etc., to
PRODUCE BUSINESS, P.O. Box 810425
Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425
PH: 561.994.1118 FAX: 561.994.1610
PRODUCE BUSINESS is published by
Phoenix Media Network, Inc
Ken Whitacre/CEO
P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425.

Entire contents © Copyright 2026
Phoenix Media Network, Inc. All rights reserved.
Printed in the U.S.A.
Publication Agreement No. 40047928

american
business
media
The Association of Business Information Companies



GROWN RIGHT in the GARDEN STATE

Jersey Fresh farmers deliver the exceptional quality and flavor that your discerning customers demand. And they are capable of delivering just-picked produce often within hours not days of harvest, guaranteeing it's the freshest product possible. The Jersey Fresh logo represents not only the finest fruits and vegetables, but some of the hardest working people in the Garden State. By promoting Jersey Fresh in store and on ad, you're supporting our essential workers and providing your customers with the very best.



The Jersey Fresh Team | 1.609.913.6515 | FindJerseyFresh.com |



Jersey Fresh is a program of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture | Mikie Sherrill, Governor | Edward D. Wengryn, Secretary of Agriculture



Moving the Needle ... Together

Forty-one years ago, a small team of us dropped copies of the very first *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine under hotel room doors in San Francisco. We were young, a little reckless, and sure that the produce industry had something very important to contribute to the broader food trade.

Four decades later, I'm more convinced of that than ever.

When Jim Prevor and I launched this magazine in 1985, we gave it a simple mission: "Initiate Industry Improvement." Of all the improvements we've chased since then (better marketing and merchandising, product innovation, safer food, smarter supply chains), one goal sits above the rest: collaborate closely with the industry to entice people to eat more fruits and vegetables.



It is also the goal that has been hardest to reach. The CDC reports that only about one in ten American adults eats the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. Categories grow, new items come to market, and promotions come and go. Yet, as Jim often reminded us, selling more of one item does not always mean people are eating more produce overall. A win for blueberries can be a loss for apples. The real prize is changing what goes on the plate throughout the course of each day.

That is a big challenge, and no single company, association or magazine can solve it alone. So for our 41st anniversary, I'm asking for your contribution in two ways.

First, write to us. What is working to increase consumption, and what isn't? Is it retail merchandising/promotions, foodservice menus, school programs, packaging innovation, flavor-driven breeding, or something nobody has tried yet? What should the industry stop doing? We want the ideas you debate at the bar after a trade show, not just the ones in press releases. Please send your ideas and comments to editor@producebusiness.com. We will publish a selection in our Letters to the Editor section throughout the year, and the best ideas will help shape our editorial calendar.

Second, help us recognize those people and companies

already making a difference. Across the supply chain, there are people and companies quietly moving the needle: a retailer whose produce department turns shoppers into regular customers; a chef or restaurant introducing a new way to present a fruit or vegetable as a center-of-the plate item on its menu; a commodity board or regional organization developing a new playbook for promotion; a grower-shipper whose marketing gets kids asking for vegetables.

We want to find them, celebrate their accomplishments and share their insights.

Please go to **ProduceBusiness.com** and nominate the people and companies you think do the best job of increasing produce consumption. Look for the icons on the side of our website for these awards:

- **Best Independent Store**
- **Merchandiser of the Year**
- **40 under Forty**
- **Most Innovative Dining Outlet**
- **Marketing Excellence Award**
- **New Product Innovation Award**
- **Best Global Marketing Initiative**
- **Retail Sustainability Award**

Our editors will review every nomination, and we will feature the most exemplary in our pages throughout the coming year, so the rest of the industry can learn from their examples.

Jim believed that the best ideas in this industry come from the people who live it every day. For 41 years, YOU have given us the stories, the insights and occasionally the arguments that fill these pages. As we move deeper into our fifth decade, I can't think of a better way to celebrate than by opening those pages even wider.

Let's work together to raise the bar on produce consumption. I look forward to hearing from you.

PB

Ken Whitacre
Publisher/CEO

P.S. If you'd like to chat about ways your organization can help increase consumption, or to share an idea directly, please call me at 561-994-1118, ext. 101, or email me at KWhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

For Fruit That's **ALWAYS BEST**



THE GLOBAL
**PRODUCE
& FLORAL**
SHOW
BOOTH 2025



Go TarpLess®!

With the World's #1 Commercial Ripening Room System

TarpLess® ripening rooms give you *total control* over the ripening process - delivering beautiful, high-quality fruit uniformly ripened to the exact stage you need, when you need it. Fruit that looks better, lasts longer and weighs more for an unbeatable sales advantage.

With the most advanced technology, proven reliability and a ROI of 2 years or less, it's the ripening room trusted by more Top 20 retailers, wholesalers and growers than any other system! All backed by Thermal Tech's legendary training, service and support.

For Fruit that's ALWAYS BEST - Go TarpLess®!

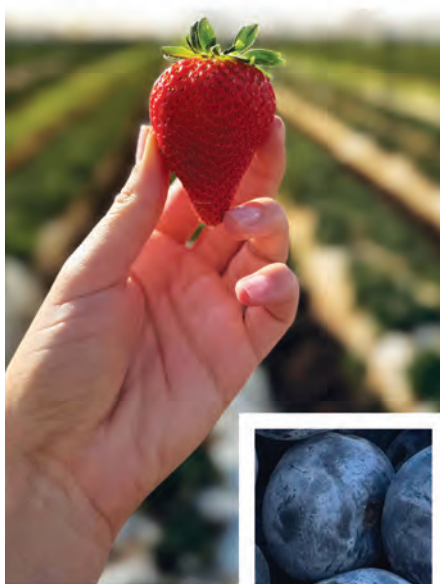
Designed, Installed and
Available Exclusively From:

THERMAL TECHnologies

The Global Leader in Commercial Ripening
Room Design & Construction

www.ThermalTechnologies.com





**A 100% MEXICAN
COMPANY**

www.rcgfruits.mx



TRANSITIONS

Bloom Fresh

Bloom Fresh, London, England, recently announced two leadership appointments to meet growing global demand for its branded fruit varieties. Effective immediately, **Fiachra Moloney** assumes the newly created role of director of growth and market development, while fresh produce industry veteran **Jennifer Sanchez**, DBA, joins as chief marketing officer.

During his tenure as chief marketing officer, Moloney helped elevate Bloom Fresh's global market presence across the fresh produce value chain. In his new role, Moloney will focus on driving growth across key markets, including Europe, China, India and Southeast Asia.

Sanchez joins Bloom Fresh with more than two decades of fresh produce industry experience spanning brand marketing, customer engagement, market intelligence and commercial strategy. She is recognized for helping build and grow leading produce brands through leadership roles with Driscoll's, Green Giant Fresh and Sun World International. She will be based in the U.S.



Fiachra Moloney



Jennifer Sanchez

Phoenix Media Network

Phoenix Media Network Inc., Boca Raton, FL, hired **Debbie Miller** as regional account manager on the West Coast for its flagship digital and print publication, *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine, and The New York Produce Show and Conference.

Miller has more than 20 years of experience in sales and business development, including a four-year stint as West Coast regional sales manager at The Produce News. She will be servicing accounts in northern and central California and the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington and Idaho), along with other key national accounts.



Debbie Miller

Gem-Pack Berries

Gem-Pack Berries, Santa Monica, CA, promoted **Marcia Marble** to assistant vice president of retail sales. In her new role, Marble will provide expanded leadership across the company's retail sales efforts while continuing to oversee key customer relationships.

Marble joined Gem-Pack Berries in March 2023 as senior director of sales.



Marcia Marble

PLMA

The Private Label Manufacturers Association (PLMA), New York, NY, appointed **Jennifer Linke** as vice president, association relations, a newly created executive leadership position. In this role, Linke will lead PLMA's member and retailer engagement, marketing and communications, and programs and events.

Linke brings more than 25 years of private brand and retail experience to PLMA.



Jennifer Linke

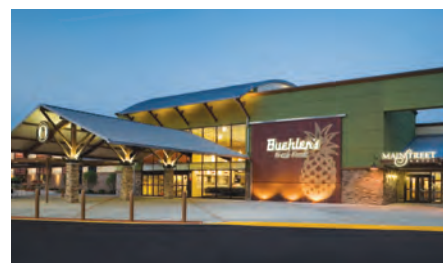
ANNOUNCEMENTS

IPC Focus: Moving More Idaho Potatoes

The 98th annual Idaho Grower Shippers Association Convention brought growers, shippers, processors, marketers and industry partners together in Sun Valley, ID, ahead of the upcoming harvest.

Discussions addressed water availability, agricultural economics, and the industry's future, while leadership transitions at the Idaho Potato Commission (IPC) included Brian Jones becoming chairman and Brian Lundquist becoming vice chairman.

At the convention, IPC President And Chief Executive Jamey Higham focused on the demand side of the business: How the commission can build on Idaho's strong consumer recognition and help move more potatoes through retail and foodservice channels.



Flashfood Launches With Buehler's Fresh Foods

Flashfood announced a partnership expansion with Buehler's Fresh Foods, Cleveland, OH, bringing Flashfood to all 14 Buehler's locations in northeast Ohio. Through the Flashfood app, shoppers can now find fresh produce, meat, dairy, bakery items, prepared foods, and more at significant discounts.

Through its partnership with Flashfood, Buehler's will offer surplus food from its stores at a discount through the Flashfood app, creating more opportunities for shoppers to save on groceries.



BID FOR BRIGHTER FUTURES

A Virtual Silent Auction

Brighter Bites is driving demand for fresh produce in communities nationwide. We help children and families discover, prepare, and enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables through repeated exposure both at school and at home.

Join our silent auction this November 30 - December 4 where every bid helps provide fresh produce and nutrition education to students, empowering healthier habits and brighter futures.



“

We don't just deliver produce; we help families build lifelong habits. We are raising the next generation of produce consumers.

-RICH DACHMAN
CEO, BRIGHTER BITES

**SUPPORT OUR MISSION.
HELP US REACH MORE FAMILIES.**

BROWSE OUR ITEMS & REGISTER TO BID



From spa packages to jewelry to sport suites, don't miss your chance to take home something special while making a difference!

Ad space generously donated by Produce Business.
Thank you for your continued support!

USDA Mushroom Standards Changing

HIGHLINE
EAT A MUSHROOM. BE SUPER.

Following the USDA's recently announced revisions to the U.S. Standards for Grades of Mushrooms, Highline Mushrooms, Leamington, Ontario, is reaffirming its commitment to the quality expectations it has established with its retail and foodservice customers.

The revised federal standards, which took effect Sept. 24, modernize mushroom grading requirements for the first time in nearly 60 years, including changes to defect tolerances, sizing, terminology, and the treatment of open veils.

At Highline, USDA grade standards represent an industry benchmark. Customer specifications, however, remain central to how Highline grows, packs and supplies mushrooms. Highline will continue to work directly with its customers to maintain agreed-upon product specifications.

Joolies Date Sours Go Mainstream

Joolies Date Sours are heading into fall with its biggest retail expansion yet. The sour, chewy whole-fruit snack is rolling out across major retailers including Target, Costco, H-E-B, Meijer, Hy-Vee and ShopRite and other Wakefern banners. The expansion also includes specialty and independent retailers nationwide, including Erewhon, Laurel Supply and Lunds & Byerlys.



The expansion follows the launch of Date Sours

at Sprouts Farmers Market earlier this year, where Joolies, Los Angeles, CA, introduced a new way to experience the date.

Made from organic dates and five ingredients, Joolies Date Sours deliver a soft, gummy-like chew with a sour flavor — with no added sugar, sugar alcohols or artificial ingredients. The line comes in four candy-inspired flavors: Watermelon, Cherry Cola, Peach and Blue Raspberry.

GEM Pear Volume Grows

This season, CMI Orchards, Wenatchee, WA, has increased availability of its GEM pears, a variety known for flavor, versatility, and consumer appeal.

Primarily grown by Diamond Fruit in Oregon's Hood River Valley, GEM pears remain a signature offering that is largely unique to CMI Orchards. Featuring light green skin and red blush, GEM pears offer consumers the best characteristics of Bartlett, Seckel and Comice, but with a unique eating experience. Consumers can enjoy them straight from the tree as a crisp, sweet snack, or allow them to soften for a juicy, buttery texture. Their slow-browning qualities make them an ideal choice for snacking, lunchboxes and entertaining.

Available now through January, GEM pears can be merchandised in bulk or 2-pound pouch bags. CMI also offers branded GEM pear display bins that create secondary displays and attract shopper attention throughout the produce department.



Chief commercial officer, Gerardo Lugo (left); Board Chairman David Marguleas (center); and President and Chief Executive Bernardo Calvo gather at the closing of Sun World's 2026 Symposium.

Sun World Celebrates 50 Years and Honors Marguleas

Sun World International, Bakersfield, CA, celebrated its 50th anniversary during its 2026 Symposium and Field Days, marking five decades of innovation that have helped shape the fresh produce industry.

The company also honored board chairman, David Marguleas, for his 40 years of leadership and contributions to Sun World, establishing the David Marguleas Endowed Research Fund in support of UC Davis Viticulture & Enology and dedicating the David Marguleas Tasting Room at the Sun World Center for Innovation.

More than 450 growers, licensees, marketers, retailers, researchers and industry leaders gathered for the company's Symposium and Field Days, where attendees explored the next generation of Sun World innovation and the future of fresh produce.

Crawford Packaging Opens Facility in Central Florida

Crawford Packaging recently opened its new U.S. facility in Auburndale, FL, strengthening the company's ability to serve customers across North America.

Customers will benefit from local inventory, faster access to consumables and equipment, local technical support — including service and spare parts — and improved speed to market, making it easier to access packaging solutions and expertise.

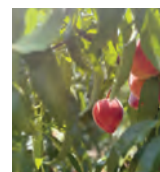


Titan Farms Achieves SQF Quality Certification

Titan Farms, Ridge Spring, SC, has achieved SQF Quality certification, demonstrating the company's commitment to maintaining rigorous quality control and assurance practices throughout its operations.

The certification follows the successful completion of an independent audit conducted on July 16. The audit evaluated Titan Farms' quality management systems, including the processes used to monitor product quality, manage potential risks, and support consistency across its operations.

Achieving certification represents the final step in formally validating the standards, procedures and quality management practices the company has maintained across its farming and packing operations.



Pink
by jadeproduce.com

Pink Organics
by jadeproduce.com

Fresh Produce.
Quality Decisions.
Reliable Supply.



Grower. Packer. Shipper.

Fresh Opportunities for Retailers

Potatoes USA analysis shows how potatoes can drive cross-purchase, meal solutions and snacking.

BY NICK BARTELME

Consumers' search behavior around potatoes online is revealing new opportunities for retailers in-store — from cross-purchase and merchandising to meal solutions and at-home snacking. New analysis from Potatoes USA shows



how sustained search interest in potato recipes, preparation ideas and entertaining formats is translating into clear opportunities retailers can activate.

Potatoes are already America's favorite vegetable, with shoppers purchasing more than 15.3 billion pounds annually. By examining where consumer interest in potatoes leads online, Potatoes USA identified several emerging search trends that point to how

shoppers are planning meals, entertaining, and preparing snacks at home — and how retailers can meet that demand.

Among the findings and insights for retailers:

STARBUCKS-INSPIRED DISH CREATES CROSS-PURCHASE OPPORTUNITIES

Retailer insight: Google search data shows shoppers are looking to recreate an iconic Starbucks snack bite at home, creating opportunities for retailers to drive cross-purchase and inspire meal solutions.

According to Google Trends, searches for "Starbucks Potato Chive Bake recipe" are up 1,100% over the past two years, following the item's introduction to Starbucks' menu.

Retailers can lean into this interest with in-store recipe cards (available online at Potatoes USA), online click-to-cart bundles, or cross-merchandising potatoes with complementary items such as eggs, cottage cheese, herbs and greens. The concept can also be adapted for prepared foods or grab-and-go sections with a house-made take on the popular dish.

CAPITALIZING ON CHATGPT'S PREFERRED CHIPS RECIPE

Retailer insight: Understanding how ChatGPT responds to common potato chip queries can help retailers anticipate the products and tools shoppers may seek when making chips at home.

ChatGPT has become a destination not only for recipe inspiration, but also for conversational guidance around cooking techniques that shoppers may not find in a traditional recipe. According to SEMrush data, "how to make potato chips recipe" is among the most likely trending queries. When prompted, ChatGPT's most common

56% of consumers engage in pre-shop activities before shopping. Of those who do, the most impactful ways to drive fresh potato volume and dollar sales are:

- **RECIPES:** 13% of consumers looked up, saw, or were given a recipe that influenced them to add potatoes to their list. Also, Gen Z is more likely to use recipes (88%) and prioritize foods that are "something you'd get excited about eating."
- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** 8% of consumers saw a recipe or dish that caught their eye on social media.
- **SMARTPHONE:** 8% of consumers bought potatoes because of some other smartphone engagement.

response outlines a consistent preparation method — thinly-sliced russet potatoes fried in vegetable oil in a deep pot or Dutch oven, seasoned with kosher salt and aided with a deep-fry thermometer.

For retailers, ChatGPT's "preferred" recipe flow reveals a clear opportunity to merchandise a complete chips-at-home solution. Pairing russet potatoes with cooking oil, kosher salt, peelers and thermometers — supported by shoppable recipes, click-to-cart bundles or in-store signage — can help retailers capture incremental sales, particularly around snack-forward moments like game day.

Potatoes USA also offers its own potato chip recipe on its website.

BAKED POTATO BARS EMERGE AS A VALUE-FORWARD DINING OCCASION

Retailer insight: Growing search interest in baked potato bars present retailers with a customizable, budget-friendly hosting solution that can be merchandised as a complete meal kit for gatherings and celebrations.

Google Trends also points to baked potato bars as an emerging trend, signaling shopper interest in meals that are affordable, easy to prepare, visually appealing and adaptable to different tastes and dietary preferences.

In tailgating or the holiday season, retailers can take advantage of this growing interest by merchandising baked potato bar kits that bring together potatoes with toppings, proteins and sides into one cohesive in-store or online display.

When shoppers purchase potatoes, they open the door to countless ways to prepare and enjoy them at home. By examining where potato curiosity leads online, we identified clear opportunities for retailers to tap into that interest and, in some cases, turn one potato purchase into two.

PB

Nick Bartelme is the global retail development manager at Potatoes USA, the marketing and research organization for the U.S. potato industry. Based in Denver, CO, he manages the global retail development program, retail sales category dashboards, and merchandising strategies to help retailers optimize long-term potato volume. He can be reached at retail@potatoesusa.com.



THE GLOBAL
**PRODUCE
& FLORAL**
SHOW

OCT. 14–16
ORLANDO, FL, USA

YOUR NEXT OPERATIONAL ADVANTAGE COULD BE WAITING *in Orlando!*

See the technologies, ideas, and industry expertise helping fresh produce and floral businesses solve today's most pressing operational challenges.

Join 20,000 industry professionals, thousands of global buyers, and more than 1,000 exhibitors at the largest produce and floral expo in the world.



 **REGISTER NOW**



At Seabra Foods in Ocoee, FL, produce is featured at the store's entrance on wooden display tables that are convenient to shop and easy to stock.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/E. SHAUNN ALDERMAN PHOTOS

Seabra Foods: Capturing Customers with Cultural Flavors

With three Orlando-area stores, this retailer showcases produce, engages the community, and promotes food diversity.

BY E. SHAUNN ALDERMAN

Fruits and vegetables in the United States have a way of revealing all-American stories involving hopes and dreams, family and flavors. This is the case for Seabra Foods, which started in 1967 as a small grocery store in Newark, NJ.

The narrative from that first family store to present-day Seabra Foods involves numerous chapters and challenges. Today, with 19 stores in four states, the story clearly has become a page-turner.

Portuguese immigrants, Américo and Maria Seabra, along with support from their six children, built Seabra Foods into a company

now serving flavor-seeking customers in Florida, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Jersey. A store opening is scheduled soon for a Tampa, FL, location.

HONORING CULTURAL ROOTS

Located about 12 miles southwest of Orlando, Seabra Foods in Ocoee, FL, offers a fusion of American food and grocery supplies, with an assortment of foods favoring the neighboring Latin and Hispanic communities.

Produce is featured at the store's entrance on wooden display tables that are convenient to shop and easy to stock.

Complementing the in-store fruit and vegetable offerings is an extensive salad bar. The hot food buffet with ethnic dishes is ideal for take-home meals or for customers dining in the store's popular café.

Cesar Simas, general manager, Seabra Foods South, indicates the prepared food offerings are popular with customers working locally and those who typically enjoy Latin-style foods.

Made On the Spot: Juices and Smoothies

BY E. SHAUNN ALDERMAN

When fresh fruits and vegetables are a major customer draw, there is an opportunity to double down with extra service for wellness-minded shoppers. The fresh fruit and smoothie bar at Seabra Foods in Ocoee, FL, offers fresh juices prepared on the spot and specialty juices blended for smoothies.

"Two out of the three Orlando stores have a smoothie bar," says Cesar Simas, general manager, Seabra Foods South.

Customers can order juices from a

variety of fruits squeezed on-site, such as orange, tangerine, passion fruit, pineapple or a combination. Private label, ready-to-go bottled juices are merchandised on ice on wooden display tables in the produce department a few feet from the juice bar.

The Specialty Juice menu offers 10 healthy concoctions, including Morning Magic for \$7.99, which is made from celery, cucumber, apple, lime, avocado and spirulina.

"We created the smoothie bar as another avenue of providing fresh daily, store-made juices to our health-conscious customers," says Simas.



Seabra Foods in Ocoee, FL, offers fresh juices prepared on the spot and specialty juices blended for smoothies.

"We have local workers and everyday customers come in, select our fresh prepped food from the buffet, and eat right here in the store. They know our food is fresh and they find familiar flavors."

Since opening in May 2024, this Seabra Foods location has a reputation for supporting community events and cultural celebrations.

WELCOMING ENTRANCE

Fresh floral bouquets greet customers as they enter the Ocoee Seabra Foods, which was formerly a Toys R Us retail location. This store is 30,000 square feet and carries 150 different produce items in 3,500 square feet. Simas says about 10% of total store sales can be attributed to produce sales.

The wood and iron produce tables are in-house creations.

PRODUCT MIX

From papayas, pineapples and pears to pomegranates, plums, and peaches, the expansive spread of display tables presents a generous, dry produce offering of loose units. For shopping convenience, citrus products are grouped, as well as other unpackaged items, such as the combination of avocados, tomatoes and onions.

About 10% of the produce display is organic, according to Simas, who says organic is not a big category for the store's customer base.

Related to food safety, Simas says Seabra Foods has a staff person who collaborates with its suppliers, monitoring the food safety program.

Shopping in this store is an exploratory experience if you are not familiar with the products commonly referred to in the U.S. as ethnic produce. When searching for cooking items, typical customers easily reach for Malanga Lila, celery root, yuca and cocoa bean pods.

Customer feedback often mentions appreciation for Seabra Foods not going overboard with plastic wrap on every item.

Another offering shoppers value is discounted bags of blemished produce, which are displayed on the lower level of the wooden tables. "Our customers seem to really appreciate the option of purchasing discounted, but still very consumable, product," says Simas.

Automatic misters are directed toward the top row of produce



The Ocoee, FL, Seabra Foods carries about 150 different produce items. The wood and iron produce tables are in-house creations.

items in the 25-foot, chilled wall case. Bulk carrots, lettuce varieties, peppers, and eggplants are merchandised here.

The abundant display includes an assortment of fresh herbs sold by the bunch. Jiló, a Brazilian specialty vegetable, was an interesting discovery because it is not commonly found in Florida ethnic produce departments. Home cooks prepare jiló similar to eggplant — salting it first to reduce possible bitterness.

PROCUREMENT PROCESS

"The main source of our produce comes directly from the Tampa Wholesale Produce Market," explains Simas. Located about 85 miles southwest of Ocoee, the Tampa produce source is visited three times a week by Antonio Oliveira, regional manager, who buys for



Seabra Foods, which started in 1967 as a small grocery store in New Jersey, has grown into a company with 19 stores in Florida, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Jersey.



Seabra Foods in Ocoee, FL, features specialty items, providing an ethnic customer base with the products they are looking for.

the Seabra's three Central Florida stores.

As produce buyer in the field, Oliveira manages the strategy for the day-to-day replenishment plan.

Additionally, Simas is quick to credit the importance of each store's produce manager and their roles in purchasing. "Their input is critical."

Since Seabra Foods features ethnic and specialty items, Simas suggests the buying process involves a perceptive eye. "For Seabra Foods, there is a big emphasis on providing our ethnic customer base with the products they are looking for."

The company has a warehouse in Orlando where purchased products are delivered. Distribution to the three Orlando area stores happens from this warehouse. **PB**



INSIDE THE STORE

Seabra Foods

Seabra Foods
9489 W. Colonial Drive
Ocoee, FL 34761
Sunday-Thursday, 7 a.m.-9 p.m.;
Friday and Saturday, 7 a.m.-10 p.m.
<https://seabrafoods.com>
407-455-6987



The salad bar and hot food buffet include ethnic dishes. Many customers dine in the store's popular café area.

VISIT US AT
**IFPA
BOOTH 1705**
TO TASTE OUR
LATEST DIPS

**IYO
QUIERO!**

THIS IS WHAT WINNING TASTES LIKE

AWARD-WINNING VARIETY IN YOUR FRESH CASE

Voted **BEST GUAC** and **BEST BEAN DIP** by top-rated lifestyle magazine.

Won **CHEESE PRODUCT OF THE YEAR** at the Mindful Awards.

Food & Beverage voted chunky guacamole **EDITOR'S TOP PICK**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT SALES@YOQUIEROBRANDS.COM



Peruvian Asparagus

PAIA ^{Celebrating 25 Years}

Importer's Association

• ALPINE FRESH • ALTAR PRODUCE • AYCO • CARB AMERICAS • CRYSTAL VALLEY • FARM DIRECT SUPPLY • FRU- VEG MARKETING •

FRESH ASPARAGUS
GROWN YEAR-ROUND

VISIT ALPINEFRESH.COM | +1.305.594.9117

FRESH. RELIABLE. YEAR-ROUND.
TRUSTED ASPARAGUS EXPERTISE SINCE 1998
SERVING RETAILERS AND FOODSERVICE PARTNERS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA
sales@altarproduce.com

scan to explore more

FRESH ASPARAGUS
YEAR ROUND

sales@aycofarms.com | (954) 788-6800

PASSION PERFORMANCE INTEGRITY
NEW JERSEY 732.655.4223
FLORIDA (HQ) 954.786.0000
YOUR OFFSHORE PRODUCE SOURCE
www.carbamericas.com

ONE SOURCE TO GROW THE CATEGORY

East Coast: 305.591.6567
West Coast: 213.627.2383
crystalvalleyfoods.com

FDS
FARM DIRECT SUPPLY

+1 561-910-4341
www.farmdirectsupply.com
Sales@farmdirectsupply.com

GROWERS & IMPORTERS OF FRESH PRODUCE

305.591.7766
fruveg.com

FRESH ASPARAGUS

310.216.7575
gourmettrading.net

HARVEST A Better EXPERIENCE

MIAMI, FL 305.591.8173
LOS ANGELES, CA 213.895.6968
WWW.HARVESTSENSATIONS.COM
@HARVESTSENSATIONS

• ALPINE FRESH • ALTAR PRODUCE • AYCO • CARB AMERICAS • CRYSTAL VALLEY • FARM DIRECT SUPPLY • FRU- VEG MARKETING •

For a copy of the 2026 Fresh Asparagus Statistics,
Category Trends and Demographics Report
visit our website at:
Peruvianasparagusimportsassociation.com

Peruvian Asparagus

PAIA ^{Celebrating 25 Years}
Importer's Association



• GOURMET TRADING COMPANY • HARVEST SENSATIONS • JMB PRODUCE • LANGE-COMPANIES • MAURICE A AUERBACH INC •



**Fresh from our farm
to your table**

SINCE  1888

415-285-0400
www.jmb-produce.com



lange

seven seas
ASPARAGUS ASPERGES

Year Round Availability
772.410.0790 or lange-companies.com

ASPARAGUS
Importer and Distributor of
Peruvian asparagus

Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc.



AuerPAK
BRAND

201.807.9292
Secaucus, NJ
www.auerpak.com
PAUL, JOSH, IAN, BRUCE, JOHN, KELVIA, LISA

• PRIME TIME SALES, LLC • ROBINSON FRESH • SOUTHERN SPECIALTIES • SQUARE 1 FARMS • ADVANCE CUSTOM BROKERS • THE PERISHABLE SPECIALIST INC •

*Year-Round
Availability*



**PRIME
TIME**

*Vertically
Integrated*

 **robinson
FRESH**

Fresh
Asparagus
Delivered



robinsonfresh.com
1.800.323.7587



**SOUTHERN
SPECIALTIES**

954.784.6500
SouthernSpecialties.com



YEAR-ROUND VALUE ADDED ORGANICS



**SQUARE 1
FARMS**

*Service & Quality
Begin Here*

Year Round Availability
sales@sq1farms.com 561.614.2814
www.sq1farms.com
Contact Our Team Today!

**Your
Trusted
Partner**



 **advancecustoms**
BROKERS INTERNATIONAL, LLC™

786-476-0700
www.advancecustomsbrowsers.com



**The
Perishable
Specialist
Inc.**



Frank A. Ramos

T 305.477.9906
F 305.477.9975
C 305.986.1969
E frank.amos@albawheelsup.com

9831 NW 58 Street Unit 131,
Miami, Florida 33178

CUSTOMS BROKER
theperishablespecialist.com

POWERED BY 



• GOURMET TRADING COMPANY • HARVEST SENSATIONS • JMB PRODUCE • LANGE-COMPANIES • MAURICE A AUERBACH INC •

PB PRODUCE BUSINESS



**PLEASE LOOK FOR LINKS ON OUR WEBSITE
TO ACCESS THE NOMINATION FORMS FOR
THE FOLLOWING AWARDS:**

40 UNDER FORTY
AWARDS



RETAIL
SUSTAINABILITY
AWARD



BEST INDEPENDENT
RETAILER
AWARD



GLOBAL MARKETING
INITIATIVES
AWARDS



NEW PRODUCT
INNOVATION
AWARDS



MARKETING
EXCELLENCE
AWARDS



MERCHANDISER
OF THE YEAR
AWARD



MOST INNOVATIVE
DINING OUTLET
AWARD



PRODUCEBUSINESS.COM



PRODUCE BUSINESS
INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Charting a smarter path forward for food safety

- 20 SPECIAL NOTE FROM KEN WHITACRE**
Familiar Crossroads, New Pathway
- 22 VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY COLUMN FROM CATHY BURNS**
The Industry That Cares Enough To Get It Right
- 23 THE FUTURE OF FOOD SAFETY**
- 26 BREEDING FOOD SAFETY INTO LETTUCE**
- 29 PUTTING DOLLARS WHERE IT COUNTS**
- 30 PUTTING OUTBREAK RESPONSE ON FAST-FORWARD**
- 31 OPINION COLUMN BY JILL OVERDORF**
Science Must Move Faster Than Social Media
- 32-33 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**
Closing Food Safety Gaps

Familiar Crossroads, New Pathway

Five lessons to carry forward as this crisis unfolds.

Once again, our industry finds itself at familiar crossroads. All along the supply chain, growers, shippers, importers, wholesalers, retailers and foodservice operators across North America are on edge, as no one can predict the next recall and fallout from the headlines and questions from anxious consumers.

The arduous work ahead is to collaborate as an industry to keep recalls from happening again.

This is not unfamiliar territory for PRODUCE BUSINESS. Twenty years ago, our founder, Jim Prevor — known industry-wide as the Perishable Pundit — thoroughly analyzed the 2006 spinach E. coli outbreak, which killed three people and sickened more than 200 in 26 states, not as a single news cycle but as a warning he refused to let the industry forget.

Jim returned to it again and again over the following decade, insisting that the industry's real vulnerability wasn't any one pathogen — it was memory: "As the spinach crisis recedes in time, it may recede in memory," he wrote in 2007, "but, unfortunately, humans tend to be motivated by threats they perceive as imminent."

Twelve years later, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* during the 2018 romaine crisis, he made the companion point: that protecting consumers and rebuilding trust depends on precision and proportion — targeted, evidence-based response rather than broad alarm that has the potential to destroy blameless growers.

Jim passed away in 2022, but the questions he raised have only grown more urgent — and this issue is our answer to them.

The cover story that follows, "*Where Do We Go From Here? A Smarter Path Forward for Produce Safety*," gathers voices from across the supply chain — growers, retailers, scientists, trade associations — who are already building the system Jim once



The cover story that follows, gathers voices from across the supply chain — growers, retailers, scientists, trade associations — who are already building toward the system Jim once could only imagine: one that catches risk before it becomes an outbreak, not after.

could only imagine — one that catches risk before it becomes an outbreak, not after.

Five lessons worth carrying forward as this crisis unfolds:

1) Don't let urgency fade with the headlines. Every outbreak generates a burst of attention and investment that tends to erode. The industry's job now is to convert this moment into durable change, not a memory.

2) Invest in traceability precise enough to protect the innocent. A system that can pinpoint the exact field, lot, crew and all touchpoints along the supply chain protects consumers faster — and spares blameless growers the kind of industry-wide fallout Jim wrote about in both 2007 and 2018.

3) Move from reactive testing to predictive risk management. As several experts in this issue describe, combining environmental, microbial and operational data can flag rising risk before contamination reaches a harvest.

4) Reward transparency instead of punishing it. Companies that proactively share risk data should never be penalized with that same data. A safe harbor for good-faith disclosure will uncover problems sooner than fear of liability ever will.

5) Communicate risk with precision, not panic. Swift protective action and proportionate, accurate public

communication are not in conflict — both are necessary to rebuild trust.

PRODUCE BUSINESS has spent more than four decades initiating industry improvement. We intend to keep doing exactly that, starting with this issue. In the following issues and going forward, we welcome your input on new pathways toward minimizing food safety risk. If you wish to have your comments published in PRODUCE BUSINESS, feel free to send your thoughts and opinions to editor@producebusiness.com.

PB

Ken Whitacre

Publisher, PRODUCE BUSINESS

MEALS TASTE BETTER WITH **Flavor You Can Trust**



QUALITY SINCE 1949

Families have trusted Spice World to bring bold, fresh flavors to their tables for over 75 years. Our dedication to quality starts with long-standing grower relationships built upon an unwavering commitment to quality that you can count on—in fact, all Spice World products are tested by independent laboratories to ensure the highest standards of food safety.

Visit us at SpiceWorldInc.com to learn more.



**BRINGING
HIGH QUALITY
PRODUCTS TO
YOUR PRODUCE
AISLE SINCE 1949**

The Industry That Cares Enough to Get It Right

BY CATHY BURNS

There's no use pretending this was an easy year for fresh produce. An outbreak shook consumer confidence in the very products we know to be the healthiest on the planet, and the effects rippled far beyond the source.

The data tells the story plainly. A CBS News poll in late July found 40 percent of Americans said they were buying or eating less produce because of it, with even sharper drops among women and older consumers. Trust was shaken, and I won't wave that away.

But I want to challenge a conclusion that gets drawn too easily in moments like this. It is the idea that when something goes wrong, something must be fundamentally wrong with us. That when confidence breaks, it proves the industry is careless, or cutting corners, or in need of an outside fix.

Look at what the record actually shows, and you'll see a very different industry.

You'll see the Center for Produce Safety, whose work began two decades ago after an earlier outbreak, bringing industry, government and academia together so produce safety solutions are grounded in science and ready for the field, not the theoretical.

You'll see IFPA and WGA scientists partnering with the FDA, federal and academic scientists for two years of meticulous work to define research gaps that still need to be filled for the industry and public health authorities to deal with cyclospora.

You'll see an industry that, in the wake of this summer, deepened its collaboration with the FDA and the CDC, convened a panel of leaders focused on joint prevention, and engaged Codex and the European Food Safety Authority to advance standards that protect public health and keep trade moving.

You'll see tools most consumers will never hear about, including monitoring that draws on the same genomic data federal agencies use for outbreak surveillance, so that when a signal appears, we can act on behalf of members before it becomes a headline.

And you'll see an industry willing to put real numbers behind transparency.

When our own work found that more than two-thirds of participants named a lack of traceability as a defining industry challenge, we didn't shrug. A volunteer-led group engineered a



solution estimated to save 8 million labor hours and \$250 million a year in traceability compliance costs. That is not the behavior of an industry that doesn't care. That is the behavior of an industry that cares enough to invest in getting it right, at scale, and on its own initiative.

So let me be direct, in the way I know this community appreciates.

The problem this year was never our commitment. Confidence and trust are the real currency of this business. When it holds, borders open, markets function, and consumers choose fresh. When it cracks, the disruption doesn't stop at one commodity, one country, or one company.

Our challenge is not that we've done too little. It is that the immense, daily, science-driven work of keeping food safe has too often been the quietest story we tell. And in the absence of that story, others get told in its place.

Yes, we will always learn and do better. Every outbreak reinforces that responsibility, and we carry it seriously. But learning and doing better is not the same as conceding the industry itself is the thing that needs repair. We are the people closest to the crop, closest to the cold chain, and closest to the consumer. No group is better positioned to drive the changes food safety demands, because no group has more at stake or more expertise to bring to the table.

That is why the long wait on traceability has to end. Not because Congress, a regulator, or other trade groups say so, but because this industry is ready, consumer trust is on the line, and traceability is part of how confidence gets rebuilt. Leadership here belongs to us, and we should claim it plainly.

If there is one thing I want people outside our world to understand, it is this: The strength of fresh produce was never in pretending nothing goes wrong. It is in how completely, and how quietly, this community works to make sure it goes right. That commitment is real. It deserves to be seen, and an industry this capable should never let anyone else define it.

The future of food safety will not be handed to fresh produce. It will be led by it. That is the industry I know, and it is the one worth fighting for.

PB

Cathy Burns is chief executive of the International Fresh Produce Association, representing the global fresh produce and floral supply chain. A former grocery executive, including president of Food Lion, she brings extensive leadership experience, industry insight and recognized expertise in consumer trends, marketing and retail strategy.



The Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement brings growers, food safety experts, and researchers together to develop practical, science-based standards that help identify and reduce risks before they become food safety problems. PHOTO COURTESY CALIFORNIA LGMA

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A Smarter Path Forward for Produce Safety

The future of food safety lies in predicting risk before outbreaks occur.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

The fresh produce industry has spent decades getting better at preventing food safety problems. Yet outbreaks still happen. The next step is getting better at seeing them coming.

New science, technology and data make it possible to spot potential problems sooner, target preventive measures more precisely and make better use of information already collected from field to fork. The opportunity isn't simply to collect more data or conduct more tests. It is to use the tools the industry already uses to recognize when risk is changing, and act before an outbreak starts.

PRODUCE BUSINESS asked industry experts across the supply chain to look beyond established food safety practices and consider what

could make a difference. Their answers point not to one new test, technology or regulation, but to knowing where to look harder, intervening earlier, and ultimately building a system that can better anticipate risk.

MANAGING A MOVING TARGET

"Fresh produce is grown in an open, dynamic environment," says Laura Strawn, Ph.D., professor and extension specialist in the Department of Food Science and Technology at Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, VA. "Weather, water, wildlife, adjacent land use, workers and production practices all interact, and risk can change quickly."

The challenge is recognizing when those conditions have changed enough to warrant a closer look.

For example, agricultural water is a known risk that is influenced by many factors beyond the grower, says Joelle Mosso, associate vice president, science programs for Western Growers Association (WGA), in Irvine, CA. "Trying to understand [the contaminants in] hundreds of thousands of gallons of water [sampled] in 100 milliliters or less than half of a cup of water is unlikely to be productive."

And people add another variable.



The Food Safety Modernization Act's revised agricultural water requirements encourage growers to proactively assess potential risks throughout their production systems.

PHOTO COURTESY FOOD SAFETY STRATEGY

"Human behavior can be more difficult to control than equipment or infrastructure, making worker health, hygiene and sanitation programs essential," says Lloyd Gabay, director of food safety and quality assurance at Wish Farms, in Plant City, FL.

"Effective food safety depends on continuous training, education, and reinforcement so employees understand how their actions directly impact product safety."

Controls extend throughout the operation. Brendan Niemi, Ph.D., chief science and technology officer, Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), Chicago, IL, names supplier GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) compliance, sanitation of facilities and equipment, cross-contamination controls and a documented cold chain as part of an overall traceability program.

The number of control points to manage increases as produce moves through the supply chain.

"Today, compared to 30 or 40 years ago, more fresh fruits and vegetables are coming into the U.S. from more and more places in the world," says Jeff Hall, senior director of food safety and inno-

vation at the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), in Ottawa, Ontario.

"Every time you add another node to the supply chain, you add another spot where an issue can occur."

Unlike foods that undergo pasteurization or another final pathogen-elimination treatment, most fresh produce reaches consumers without a kill step.

"Fresh produce is valued for being fresh," says Gabay of Wish Farms. "That means the industry must manage food safety risks throughout the growing, harvesting and packing process rather than relying on a final intervention."

The job, then, is to recognize when risk changes and act early enough to keep hazards from reaching consumers.

GET AHEAD OF THE RISK

Some of this shift is already underway. The FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) Produce Safety Rule's revised agricultural water provisions, for example, emphasize comprehensive agricultural

water assessments and inspections, says Gretchen Wall, M.S., senior director of food safety for Food Safety Strategy LLC, in Frederick, MD.

"This requires growers to understand and think critically about what hazards and risks might be present within their production system, rather than responding reactively to positive test results."

Risk-based models take that further, letting growers run "what-if" scenarios to gauge different controls. Advanced sensors can continuously monitor water quality, environmental conditions and sanitation.

"By leveraging data-driven decision-making, growers can move beyond periodic testing toward continuous risk management," says Richard Lee, executive director of the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OGVG), in Leamington, Ontario.

Virginia Tech's Strawn sees potential in putting even more information together. "I think one of the most exciting directions is predictive produce safety, combining environmental, microbial and operational data to identify when conditions associated with increased risk are occurring."

That includes the "tails" of data, meaning rare occurrences that can disappear in averages, but offer clues to problems.

"The goal isn't necessarily to label a field 'safe' or 'unsafe,'" says Strawn. "It is to recognize when conditions have changed enough that we should look harder, verify, or intervene."

Shared infrastructure among government, universities, extension agents, commodity groups, laboratories and industry could make that approach scalable. Artificial intelligence could also help find patterns within the information.

"I think using artificial intelligence to begin to analyze and identify patterns that maybe aren't obvious to humans, or that we don't

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- "Today, compared to 30 or 40 years ago, more fresh fruits and vegetables are coming into the U.S. from more and more places in the world. Every time you add another node to the supply chain, you add another spot where an issue can occur."

Jeff Hall, Canadian Produce Marketing Association, Ottawa, Ontario

- "It's important for everyone, at store level and across the entire supply chain, to understand our role in food safety and make sure we do all the checks and balances and execute them consistently."

Jeff Cady, Northeast Shared Services, Inc., Schenectady, NY



have the bandwidth for, could be a valuable tool," says Mark Munger, vice president of marketing and business development at IPR Fresh, in Nogales, AZ. "We have to move away from reactive science and get more into predictive science."

One example is already taking shape. Western Growers' GreenLink data-sharing and AI platform brings growers together to contribute time and data, build shared learnings, and develop predictive

ready✓safe
EXTEND SHELF LIFE | SUPERIOR FOOD SAFETY

**PROTECT
FRESH-CUT PRODUCE FROM CYCLOSPORA
BEFORE IT BECOMES A HEADLINE.**

The smart solution for safer food and longer-lasting freshness.



**CYCLOSPORA
IS MAKING HEADLINES AGAIN**



- ✗ Causes foodborne illness lasting weeks
- ✗ Difficult to remove with conventional washing
- ✗ Outbreaks damage consumer trust
- ✗ Can result in recalls and significant financial loss

**ready✓safe HELPS
PROTECT YOUR PRODUCE**

- ✓ 99.9% pathogen elimination including E. Coli, Listeria, Salmonella and Cyclospora
- ✓ Maintains product quality, color, texture and taste
- ✓ Clean-label technology
- ✓ No chemicals



**EXTENDS
SHELF LIFE**
Up to 32 days
of freshness



**ENHANCES
FOOD SAFETY**
Eliminates
pathogens including
Cyclospora



**CLEAN LABEL
SOLUTION**
No harsh chemicals
or additives

SAFER FOOD. LONGER SHELF LIFE.

SCAN TO LEARN MORE



maglio
COMPANIES



maglioproduce.com



414.906.8800



marketing@maglioproduce.com



Beyond prevention, better detection, traceability and traceback can help the industry learn from what pathogens do get through.

ADOBE STOCK PHOTO

models and proactive tools to better understand and manage risk. It offers a glimpse of how information generated across multiple operations could become more valuable when analyzed collectively.

However, technology doesn't replace consistent execution of the food safety practices already in place.

"It is important for everyone, at store level and across the entire supply chain, to understand our role in food safety and make sure we do all the checks and balances and execute them consistently," says Jeff Cady, vice president of produce and floral at Northeast

Shared Services Inc., the Schenectady, NY-headquartered parent company of Market 32, Price Chopper, and Tops Friendly Markets.

REMOVING RISK

Prevention also means designing platforms and technologies to reduce risk in the production system.

"One of the promising shifts in produce food safety is moving away from relying solely on testing and instead designing risk out of the production system wherever possible," says Wish Farms' Gabay.

Breeding Food Safety Into Lettuce

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Growers choose lettuce varieties for traits such as disease resistance and quality. In the future, food safety could be part of that seed decision, too.

Research by Maeli Melotto, Ph.D., professor and vice chair of plant sciences at the University of California, Davis, has shown lettuce varieties don't all respond the same way to *E. coli* and salmonella. Those with stronger immune responses tend to harbor lower pathogen populations. On lettuce with weaker responses, the bacteria can multiply.

Melotto is using CRISPR-Cas gene editing to target susceptibility genes and make lettuce less conducive to

bacterial growth. The approach is faster and more precise than traditional breeding, she says, and her method does not produce GMO plants. Quality and nutrition remain unchanged.

Proof-of-concept work on two cultivars is complete. Melotto has iceberg ready and is working with romaine and leaf lettuce. She's now looking for industry buy-in to move the research toward application.

Melotto works with seed companies, which could eventually add reduced susceptibility to human pathogens to the trait package growers already consider when selecting varieties.

"I cannot promise 100% immunity," says Melotto. "What I can promise is reduced risk."

Knowing Where to Look

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Food safety risk can shift with the field, season, weather, and pathogen. Laura Strawn, Ph.D., professor and extension specialist in the Department of Food Science and Technology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA, sees an opportunity to use those changes to get ahead of problems through what she calls predictive produce safety.

A 2023 study co-authored by Strawn shows how different those risk patterns can be. Researchers collected 920 samples from 10 Virginia produce farms across all four seasons. Overall, 5.3 percent tested positive for salmonella and 2.3 percent for listeria monocytogenes.

A deeper dig unearths striking differences. Salmonella was about 18 times more likely to be detected on Virginia's Eastern Shore than on the mainland. Of 21 listeria monocytogenes-positive samples, 17, or 81 percent, were collected in winter. Irrigation water stood out, too: 21.7 percent of samples were positive for salmonella, compared with 4 percent of field drag swabs and 1.8 percent of soil samples.

Strawn says averages are useful, but the "tails" of the data, i.e., the rare occurrences, can reveal when problems may be developing.

Predictive produce safety would combine microbial findings with factors, such as weather, rainfall, flooding,



Laura Strawn (pictured), professor and extension specialist in the Department of Food Science and Technology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA, advocates for predictive produce safety — using data on weather, environmental conditions, and pathogen behavior to anticipate food safety risks and intervene before contamination leads to an outbreak.

PHOTO COURTESY FOOD SAFETY STRATEGY

hydrology, agricultural water quality, adjacent land use and historical data.

The idea isn't to label a field "safe" or "unsafe," she says. It's to recognize when conditions have changed enough to warrant more sampling, verification or controls.

"Instead of testing everything all the time, we should use data to know when and where we need to look harder," says Strawn.

Drip irrigation, for example, can reduce contact with the edible portion of a crop. Gabay also points to protective structures around irrigation ponds and reservoirs in Mexico and Guatemala to reduce animal intrusion, while robotic harvesting platforms can reduce human handling.

IFT's Niemira highlights emerging post-harvest interventions ranging from ozone and cold plasma to electrolyzed water, high-pressure processing and ultraviolet and pulsed light. "The challenge is making them work at commercial volumes and acceptable costs without compromising quality."

Matthew Taylor, Ph.D., head of the Department of Food Science and Technology in Virginia Tech's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, sees potential in plant extracts, particularly essential-oil components applied to produce surfaces.

"In many cases, the plant extracts work as well, if not better than, those more conventional treatments," says Taylor. "If cost was not the problem, I think we'd see more."

Maglio Companies is adding an intervention after packaging with ReadySafe, its electronic cold pasteurization technology for fresh-cut produce.

"Food safety is not a one-time achievement; it's an ongoing commitment," says Jim Rieck, director of sales and marketing for the Glendale, WI-headquartered company, which also operates a repack and fresh-cut facility in McAllen, TX.

"Every additional validated intervention strengthens the food safety system. ReadySafe can achieve up to a 99.999 percent reduction in pathogens such as E. coli, listeria, and salmonella, with published research demonstrating complete cyclospora inactivation under validated conditions. It can also extend shelf life up to 32 days

without harsh chemicals or altering taste, texture or aroma."

Beyond prevention, better detection, traceability and traceback can help the industry learn from what does get through.

CPMA's Hall cites whole genome sequencing, which can genetically connect illnesses and potential sources. "Over time, those findings can help show whether the same strain has appeared before and reveal geographic or seasonal patterns."

TRACING THE RISK

Traceability adds another piece, says Gabay. "The goal is to achieve true field-to-fork visibility, allowing growers and marketers to quickly identify the specific harvest crew, field block and production lot associated with a product."

Wish Farms has piloted an internal traceability system using unique 16-digit QR codes, starting with machine-packed blueberries and exploring its use with field-packed strawberries, raspberries and blackberries.

The International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) is looking further down the supply chain, particularly after produce passes through the first distribution center and may be repacked, transformed or combined with other ingredients.

"When FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) was written a decade and a half ago, and 70 percent of Americans were still using flip phones, we didn't have access to the portable technologies that we have today," says Max Teplitski, chief science officer of the Washington, D.C.-headquartered international trade association.

"The Warehouse Management System (WMS) approach that we are advocating for fully leverages modern technology and algorithms to get the entire supply chain to compliance, end-to-end,

REAL-TIME ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING
Sensors track water quality, air conditions, and growing environment to identify risks early.

AUTOMATION & PRECISION TECHNOLOGY
Reducing human contact and enhancing consistency in handling and hygiene.

AI-POWERED PRODUCE SCANNER
Every piece. Every time.

INDIVIDUAL PRODUCE SCANNING
Advanced non-destructive technology scans every piece of produce for harmful pathogens before it leaves the farm and throughout the supply chain.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING & HYGIENE
A strong food safety culture ensures every team member plays a role in protecting consumers.

DIGITAL TRACEABILITY
End-to-end visibility allows for faster response and greater transparency across the supply chain.

CONSUMER TRANSPARENCY
Consumers can easily access the journey and safety verification of their produce for total confidence.

RESEARCH, INNOVATION & SUSTAINABILITY
Ongoing investment in science and technology drives continuous improvement in food safety, sustainability, and resilience.

Richard Lee, executive director, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, Leamington, Ontario, envisions high-speed, non-destructive pathogen scanning using imaging, spectroscopy, molecular detection, and AI to analyze individual pieces of produce as shown in the graphic above. GRAPHIC COURTESY OGVG

and to minimize labor costs and maximize accuracy of traceability records. When it works the way it should, a recall that used to take days can be executed in hours, which means contaminated product comes off the shelf faster and fewer people get sick."

This approach is designed to scale, Teplitski adds. "By anchoring it in the digital infrastructure that warehouses and distribution centers already rely on, and by making it interoperable across the supply chain, we can extend the same level of traceability to operations of every size, here in the U.S. and in the growing regions we depend on around the world."

Faster traceback is only part of the payoff.

"The greatest value of traceability is not simply responding faster to an outbreak," says Aimee McDonald, director of food safety for the Markon Cooperative, in Salinas, CA. "Its greatest value is helping us learn from what happened so we can prevent similar events in the future."

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Every outbreak investigation provides lessons that can be applied more broadly, adds Adriana Alfaro, manager, food safety and technical services at FMI — The Food Industry Association, Arlington, VA.

"Applying those lessons across commodities, regions, and supply chain partners is one of the most effective ways to strengthen prevention efforts."

The Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA) is putting that

learning into practice by bringing together growers and food safety professionals in the field, along with academic researchers equipped with science-based data.

"Bringing those perspectives together allows us to develop better-targeted standards based on risk, evidence and effectiveness," says Tim York, chief executive officer of the Salinas, CA-based organization. "It also helps ensure that standards are scientifically sound while remaining practical and implementable in real-world agricultural operations."

SEE IT COMING

Consider a grower getting ready to harvest. Information collected over time and across the growing area comes together. The pattern changes, signaling it is time to look closer.

"If I had unlimited resources, I would redesign produce food safety around prediction rather than reaction," says John Paap, supply chain security specialist at Jac Vandenberg, in Tarrytown, NY.

"I'd build a shared, real-time surveillance system that combines environmental testing with data on irrigation water, weather, flooding, wildlife, nearby livestock operations, and pathogen genomics. I would pair that with truly end-to-end digital traceability. We should be able to identify affected product quickly and precisely, rather than implicating an entire commodity or growing region."

Wish Farms' Gabay sees similar potential in a microbial risk map.



Adriana Alfaro, manager of food safety and technical services at FMI – The Food Industry Association, says every outbreak investigation provides lessons that can strengthen food safety practices across the fresh produce supply chain. PHOTO COURTESY FMI

“A grower could enter a field location and receive a real-time risk score identifying potential food safety concerns before planting, harvesting, or making management decisions,” he says.

In effect, Virginia Tech’s Strawn adds, “We should use data to know when and where we need to look harder, instead of testing everything all the time.”

Much of the information needed is already being collected. The problem is that it often resides in different places.

“If I had unlimited resources, I would connect us better because I think we’re stronger when we are connected,” says IPR Fresh’s Mung-er. “If we were sharing all that, then we would have much stronger

ability to identify patterns that signal emerging risks.”

But greater sharing raises a critical question: What happens to companies that voluntarily generate and share information identifying potential risk?

WGA’s Mosso says microbial test results, indicators and other data collected proactively to characterize risk need some form of safe harbor. “We cannot expect the food industry to build the information we need to manage risk efficiently if we use that same information as evidence that they are ‘risky’ when something goes wrong.”

Food Safety Strategy’s Wall similarly envisions “a network that

Putting Dollars Where it Counts

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Growers have no shortage of ways to spend money on food safety. Research by Martin Wiedmann, Ph.D., Gellert Family Professor in Food Safety in the Department of Food Science at Cornell University, in Ithaca, NY, is helping show where those dollars could make the biggest difference.

Specifically, Wiedmann’s 2025 Cornell-led study modeled E. coli O157 risk from field to fork in fresh-cut romaine. Untreated surface water applied by overhead spray accounted for 52 percent of predicted illnesses. Treating that water cut predicted illnesses by 90.5 percent with chlorine, 91.1 percent with UV, and 96.8 percent with peracetic acid.

Switching overhead-irrigated acreage to furrow irrigation reduced predicted illnesses by 96.3 percent, and moving overhead and furrow irrigation to drip performed better than chlorine or UV treatment.

The model also tested the California and Arizona LGMA’s (Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement) tighter 2023 standard for surface water used in overhead irrigation, 235 versus 576 MPN (most probable number) generic E. coli per 100 mL, and predicted a 31.1 percent reduction in illness risk.

Wiedmann sees the next step as putting this type of analysis directly in growers’ hands. Within about three years, he envisions interactive, AI-powered tools that could factor in a field’s characteristics, water source, and other conditions to help rank potential interventions.

“If I have an extra \$10, \$100, or \$1,000, where do I invest it to get the biggest return on my investment, the biggest reduction of foodborne risk?” he says.

“Growers are willing to put money into food safety, but they want to make sure they put it in the right place, in the right practices. Those are the types of decisions we’re trying to help growers make.”

Putting Outbreak Response on Fast-Forward

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Speed matters when fresh produce is involved in a food safety investigation.

Xiangyu Deng, Ph.D., professor at the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety in Griffin, GA, says many of the tools needed to find answers faster already exist. The challenge is putting them to work.

Whole-genome sequencing (WGS) has transformed public health surveillance, yet industry adoption remains "strikingly low," says Deng. Liability concerns and technical barriers help explain why. Another is the lack of models showing companies how WGS can reduce risk or deliver value.

Traceability presents a similar gap, he adds. FDA has deferred enforcement of enhanced FSMA food traceability requirements until July 2028. Until then, companies

aren't required to provide the standardized, lot-level, supply-chain data envisioned under the rule, information that could speed traceback and help narrow recalls to affected lots.

Deng would take that further with a live national traceability system capturing food transactions in near real time. Each lot could be linked digitally from farm to processor, distributor, retailer and restaurant. Pair those records with genomics, and investigators could follow both the product and pathogen toward the source.

AI could add another layer, but only with good data behind it.

"As for AI, I believe garbage in, garbage out," says Deng. "If we still lack high-quality datasets to train or feed the models, the practical applications of AI in food safety will remain limited, despite all the hype."

allows transparent sharing of data with no punitive actions."

The information could identify trends, direct research dollars toward real-world problems and help regulators focus on the most critical needs. More unified food safety standards could also help producers direct resources toward their greatest risks rather than meeting multiple buyer and regulatory requirements.

"Most importantly, I'd create a system where discovering and reporting a food safety risk is rewarded, not punished," says Paap. "Technology can give us better sensors and better data, but prevention only works if growers, workers and companies have every incentive to surface problems early."

The economics must work, too.

"We need to find mechanisms to ensure that those who invest in food safety and manage risk are not overlooked if their price is higher due to more rigorous programs and/or infrastructure updates that are capital-intensive," says Mosso.

That puts buyers squarely in the equation. Water treatment, monitoring, automation and traceability cost money. If purchasing decisions recognize those investments, buyers can help make stronger preventive systems economically sustainable rather than treating food safety improvements solely as another cost growers must absorb.

Responsibility also extends beyond the farm. WGA calls for operations that can affect produce risk, including animal operations, landfills and compost facilities, to share responsibility.

Research could open other possibilities. Virginia Tech's Taylor suggests winged insects moving between livestock operations and nearby row crops could potentially be used to monitor pathogen movement.

Whatever develops has to work for growers. Predictive models, AI, pathogen scanning and connected traceability only move food safety forward if operations can practically and affordably use the information to make decisions.

"We have to continue to do the science, communicate, and then we have to figure out a way to make it practical, efficient and cost-efficient for the producers," says CPMA's Hall.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **The Warehouse Management System approach fully leverages modern technology and algorithms to get the entire supply chain to compliance, end-to-end, and to minimize labor costs and maximize accuracy of traceability records. When it works the way it should, a recall that used to take days can be executed in hours, which means contaminated product comes off the shelf faster and fewer people get sick.**



Max Teplitski, International Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C.

- **"If I had unlimited resources, I would redesign produce food safety around prediction rather than reaction."**

John Paap, Jac Vandenberg, Tarrytown, NY

OGVG's Lee envisions high-speed, non-destructive pathogen scanning using imaging, spectroscopy, molecular detection and AI to analyze individual pieces of produce. Couple that with a national digital traceability platform connecting growers, packers, retailers, regulators, laboratories and public health agencies with potential risks could be tracked across the supply chain.

FMI's Alfaro sees the long-term goal as "a farm-to-fork food safety system powered by real-time data, predictive science and unprecedented collaboration."

Jac Vandenberg's Paap takes it one step further.

"The goal shouldn't just be getting better at solving outbreaks or ensuring zero pathogens; that is practically impossible," he says. "It should be building a system capable of seeing them coming." **PB**

Science Must Move Faster Than Social Media

Editor's Note: This column is reprinted from the September 2026 issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS.

BY M. JILL OVERDORF

I have spent my career weaving my work and passion between the field and the kitchen. I have bought produce, cooked it, sold it, specified it, promoted it, walked fields with growers, stood in packing houses, worked with distributors and watched chefs turn

raw ingredients into something people want to eat.

So, when a foodborne illness outbreak is linked to lettuce, berries, herbs, onions, peppers or another fresh fruit or vegetable, I pay attention.

I also brace myself. Not because the information should not be reported. It absolutely should. Not because the produce industry should be protected from scrutiny. It should not. I brace myself because a

highly specific public-health investigation can become a sweeping public conclusion in a matter of hours: Lettuce is unsafe. Berries are dangerous. Jalapeños or cilantro will make you unwell.

From all of this, a blanket decree emerges — “Don’t eat produce.” And that is where the problem begins.

The American food system is not perfect. No food system can be. Agriculture is biological, food is perishable, people are human, and zero risk does not exist. But the U.S. produce supply is supported by an extraordinarily sophisticated food safety system, and the fresh produce industry has invested heavily in making that system stronger.

Most consumers never see what sits behind the apple in a lunchbox or the bag of spinach in a refrigerator. They do not see growers monitoring agricultural water, packing houses maintaining sanitation programs, laboratories conducting tests, distributors tracking lots, retailers setting supplier requirements or food safety professionals spending entire careers studying risks most of us would rather never have to think about.

That infrastructure matters. So does the public infrastructure around it.

Food safety is not the responsibility of any one company, grower or agency. It is a chain of responsibility that includes farms, processors, distributors, retailers, restaurants, laboratories, universities, local and state health departments and federal agencies. When that system works, illnesses are detected, patterns emerge, investigators compare data, products are traced and, when necessary, recalls are issued.

A recall is alarming when it becomes a headline. Particularly when it is a poorly uninformed headline. But a recall can also mean the system worked.

We should always ask how contamination happened and how we prevent it from happening again. Accountability matters. Prevention matters even more.

But identifying a pathogen, narrowing it to a product or production window and removing that product from commerce is not evidence that the entire food supply has failed. It is evidence that

surveillance and traceback are doing what they were designed to do.

The bigger challenge today is that science is methodical while social media is immediate. Epidemiology requires evidence. Social media requires content.

An outbreak investigation may involve patient interviews, laboratory analysis, purchase histories, distribution records, genomic sequencing and traceback across multiple companies or states. Early theories can change as evidence develops. Sometimes the initial assumption turns out to be wrong. That is how science works.

It is also exactly the kind of nuance that disappears online.

When social media becomes the primary source of information, a preliminary finding becomes a definitive accusation. By the time accurate information catches up, the damage may already be done.

And that damage extends well beyond perception. When consumers lose confidence in a commodity, growers and companies with no connection to an outbreak can lose sales, markets and crops. Restaurants remove ingredients. Retailers react. Buyers become cautious. Consumers change habits.

The economic impact can move through the supply chain faster than the pathogen itself.

That is why strong, credible government food safety agencies are not the adversary of agriculture. They are part of what protects it.

The produce industry should be among the strongest voices calling for well-staffed, adequately funded and scientifically credible agencies that can identify outbreaks quickly, manage traceback efficiently and communicate clearly about what is known, what is not yet known and what consumers should actually do.

That is not an argument for bureaucracy. It is an argument for capacity. We need experienced epidemiologists. We need laboratories. We need inspectors and investigators. We need coordinated data systems. We need state and federal agencies that can work together quickly and accurately without agenda. And increasingly, we need public communicators who can translate complicated investigations into information consumers can understand and trust.

Because if those systems weaken, information does not stop. The vacuum simply gets filled by someone else. Today that may be TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube or whatever headline travels fastest.

An algorithm cannot conduct traceback. A viral post cannot determine whether correlation is causation. An influencer cannot establish whether several illnesses in different states share a common source. We need institutions whose job is to do exactly that.

Whether you are a farmer, chef, distributor, retailer, parent or simply someone standing in a grocery store deciding what to put in your cart, you want the same thing: competent people following the evidence and telling you the truth as quickly and accurately as possible.

The next rumor certainly will not wait for the science. If we want consumers to trust the food on their tables, then accurate information must be treated as part of food safety itself.

Science may never move as fast as social media. But science has to be given every chance to catch up and tell the true story. **PB**

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



Closing Food Safety Gaps

Editor's Note: We asked our readers this question — If you could reimagine how the industry prevents foodborne illness outbreaks involving fresh produce, with unlimited resources, technology and government support, what would that look like? Here are some of the responses we received to our online query.

Can we be honest? By the time infectious diseases figures out where the outbreak came from, it is six weeks after the fact. The product from that particular field has already been consumed and exited out of our systems. We are dealing with perishables that do not have a six-week shelf life.

**Tony Aresco, owner,
Matarazzo Brothers Co.**

Promote consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables that are treated and washed. Educate consumers on safe handling of fresh fruits and vegetables at all levels.

**Victor Camacho, sales manager,
Antunez & Son Produce**

The responsibility starts in the fields with the grower. Fields, packing, transportation, receiving product at the borders, distribution, wholesalers, supermarkets — all of this has to have a strict and reliable certification company that will ensure and check the product at each stage. It is very important that the grower be aware of the problem immediately. Traceability is very important.

**Ines Crisantes, vice president of
sales, Ultimate Trading Co.**

My suggestions would be for more better monitoring of equipment, employees and testing. Also, better and more frequent federal, state and county inspections. Those inspections

should be available to the consumer. Overall, I think that the growers and processors should be held more accountable.

**James Wolf, manager,
Evolve Foods, LLC**

We can better educate the public on where the produce comes from. That it is not, in fact, all of the items on the market, which producers are not connected to the recall, alongside who is. We need to better educate the public during these recalls, not just scare them silly.

**Erin Wright, director of food sourcing,
Ohio Association of Foodbanks**

The industry has spent decades strengthening prevention, sanitation, testing and traceability; and those measures remain essential. We believe the next evolution is adding another question: If contamination still occurs, what intervention do we have in place to stop it before that product reaches the consumer?

**Jessica Argust, senior marketing
specialist, Maglio Companies**

If I had unlimited resources, I would redesign produce food safety around prediction rather than reaction. Today, we're relatively good at investigating what happened after people become sick. The next evolution should be identifying the conditions that make an outbreak more likely before it happens.

I'd build a shared, real-time surveillance system that combines environmental testing with data on

irrigation water, weather, flooding, wildlife, nearby livestock operations and pathogen genomics. With enough data and the right technology, we should eventually be able to identify when a particular field, watershed or growing region is experiencing elevated microbial risk and intervene before contaminated product enters the supply chain.

I'd pair that with truly end-to-end digital traceability. When something does go wrong, it shouldn't take days or weeks to reconstruct the supply chain. We should be able to identify affected product quickly and precisely rather than implicating an entire commodity or growing region.

We've made real progress here as an industry, but we can do better. Most importantly, I'd create a system where discovering and reporting a food-safety risk is rewarded, not punished. Technology can give us better sensors and better data, but prevention only works if growers, workers and companies have every incentive to surface problems early.

The goal shouldn't just be getting better at solving outbreaks or ensuring zero pathogens —that is practically impossible. It should be building a system capable of seeing them coming.

**John Paap, manager,
Jac Vandenberg, Inc.**

It is summertime in the USA. Why are the big grower-shippers in this country sourcing product from Mexico when we are growing more than enough in this country? We need to support the American farmer.

**Ira Nathel, president,
Nathel & Nathel**

We welcome your input on new pathways toward minimizing food safety risk. If you wish to have your comments published in *PRODUCE BUSINESS*, feel free to send your thoughts and opinions to editor@producebusiness.com.

Rethinking Agricultural Water Safety

Let's start with the basics. Poop is the origin of many microbial hazards that contribute to the risk of foodborne illness involving fresh produce.

In the case of recent cyclosporiasis outbreaks, it is even more specific: human poop. Today's produce food safety system remains largely reactive. An outbreak leads to identification of the food vehicle, traceback to the source, sampling for greater clarity, recalls when necessary, and corrective actions intended to reduce future risk. But what if we could prevent contact of fecal contamination with produce before an outbreak occurs?

Prevention efforts have traditionally centered on the growing farm. That makes sense for factors growers can control, including worker hygiene, sanitation, management of waste generated on the farm, and agricultural practices. It is far less effective for agricultural inputs when quality is affected miles upstream, by events outside the grower's control.

The next major paradigm shift in produce safety should be recognizing that the future unit of prevention is collaborative, across the ecological system. It cannot be limited to the individual farm.

Agricultural water is an ideal case for this shift in thinking, in that water quality management must shift to being done at the level of the water resource that supplies the farm.

A grower cannot prevent contamination that is already present when water reaches the farm. Yet responsibility for understanding and protecting these systems is fragmented among many organizations that frequently operate independently.

The federal alphabet soup of EPA, FDA, USDA, USGS, and NOAA all generate information relevant to water quality, hydrology, environmental conditions, agriculture or public health. States, water districts, municipalities, wastewater utilities, growers, industry and universities add still more information.

Management of water resources cannot be limited by continuing to operate within independent datasets and institutional silos.

Instead, we envision a National Agricultural Water Protection Network, or NAWPN, in which these participants contribute information to a shared agricultural water intelligence system.

Meteorological forecasting provides a useful precedent. Nobody owns the weather. No single organization produces a weather forecast. Forecasts emerge from integrating observations, models, technology, and expertise from many independent contributors.

Everyone contributes information, and everyone benefits from better forecasting and better decisions. Agricultural water resource protection should function in much the same way.

Today, we investigate outbreaks after contamination has occurred. The future should allow us to anticipate contamination, identify the conditions driving that risk, and support preventive or mitigating decisions that prevent contaminated water from ever reaching the crop.

Technology did not allow this vision to be achievable until relatively recently. We lacked both scientific understanding and many of the technologies necessary to build it. Today, we have a much clearer understanding of contamination pathways and of the importance of agricultural water as a pathway for microbial hazards to reach fresh produce.

Every agricultural region could now develop a continuously updated digital representation of its water resources, including basic hydrogeological characteristics, land use, wastewater sources, irrigation infrastructure, and potential contamination pathways.

Dynamic weather, hydrological, environmental, microbial, infrastructure, and observational data could then be layered onto that foundation. The vision is no longer limited primarily by technology. The challenge is whether we are willing and able to integrate information across sectors and translate data into useful decisions.

Implementing NAWPN would require three strategic objectives. First, prevent or reduce contamination entering the water resource through prevention at the source, watershed stewardship, resilient infrastructure, and shared responsibility among those who influence water quality.

Second, understand the system and its contamination pathways through One Health collaboration, the agricultural water assessment process, irrigation system

inspections, microbial and environmental surveillance, hydrological information, land-use characterization, and other relevant observations.

Third, transform this information into actionable intelligence through predictive analytics and risk-based decision-making. NAWPN would serve as the integrator and analytical framework connecting these three objectives. Regional water resource information would feed the network; models would evaluate changing conditions and contamination pathways, and the resulting information would be returned to growers as a region-specific Agricultural Water Risk Index, or AWRI.

The AWRI could function much like a weather forecast.

The most difficult question then becomes: What should the grower do with that information? The science is not yet sufficient to prescribe universal action for every AWRI level, commodity, region, or irrigation system.

Over time, research linking specific combinations of water resource conditions, contamination events, agricultural practices, and crop outcomes could allow these general considerations to evolve into validated, region-specific response playbooks.

It remains essential to investigate outbreaks, maintain effective regulatory expectations, and continually improve practices within the grower's control. NAWPN would not replace those responsibilities. It would make them more realistic by recognizing that growers cannot manage contamination sources that originate far outside their farms without information about the larger system supplying their water.

The future of produce food safety should move from a pathway that is often viewed primarily as field to farm, toward one that recognizes the complete continuum of region, water resource, NAWPN, grower, and field.

The future of produce food safety should not be defined by faster outbreak response. It must be defined by our ability to anticipate, reduce, and prevent outbreaks by stopping contamination before it reaches the field.

**Don Stoeckel, Ph.D., professor,
Cornell University**

PB PRODUCE BUSINESS

INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT



VISIT US
AT BOOTH
#3336

To get ahead in the produce business,
you need to stay ahead of the produce business

For subscription information, please go to
www.producebusiness.com
or contact us today at
info@producebusiness.com • 561-994-1118



Customers today expect more information, speed, flexibility, transparency, and proactive communication from wholesale partners.

PHOTO COURTESY CANADAWIDE

Wholesalers Rise to the Challenge

Customer expectations continue to grow, and wholesalers continue to meet them.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Wholesalers have long served as a crucial link between suppliers and customers, but here's the reality: They must adapt to changing customer expectations.

Customers today expect more speed, flexibility, transparency, and proactive communication from wholesale partners, says Tom Brugato, president of Pacific Coast Fresh Company (PCFCo) in Portland, OR. "It's no longer enough to simply have the right product at the right price; they want reliable execution, timely information, and solutions when the market or supply chain doesn't go according to plan."

Consumers are more sophisticated, and consequently retailers are more demanding, explains Bruce Klein, marketing manager

for Maurice A. Auerbach in Secaucus, NJ. "Our customers demand good quality product, delivered on time, and accurate to what they ordered."

Customers expect reliable service, consistent quality and efficient operations, adds Anthony Andreani, director of walk sales at Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY. "They don't want to worry about logistics or deal with off-quality product, so it's increasingly important for wholesalers to make the process as seamless and dependable as possible."

TAXING TIMES

To best serve customers, wholesalers must meet a host of challenges. "The produce industry is full of challenges, from supply-side availability and seasonal varieties to logistics and labor to weather conditions," says Dominic Riggio, president of Riggio Distribution Co. in Detroit, MI. "We go to work every day expecting challenges and working through them for our suppliers and customers."

Challenges facing distributors include logistics, food safety, labor, customer retention and weather volatility, notes Ted Hendryx, PCF-Co's chief operating officer. "Instability and inflation in the economy



Bill Loupée, chief operating officer at Ben B. Schwartz & Sons in Detroit, MI, says customers want a more end-to-end experience with distributors, which goes beyond simply delivering great produce.

PHOTO COURTESY BEN B. SCHWARTZ

also causes many consumers to make different choices with their food dollars, which directly impacts our customers and supply demands."

Billy Itule, chief executive at Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ, says labor is an evergreen challenge. "We view this as a three-prong issue: staffing our warehouse and hiring drivers; finding the next generation of produce buyers and food safety professionals; and keeping our eyes on implementing new technology in our business (AI) with the human talent necessary to maintain an outstanding hands-on customer experience."

Tighter margins due to rising farming, transportation and labor costs are mentioned by Rick Feighery, president of Procacci Brothers Sales Corp. in Philadelphia, PA. "We continue to provide incredible service and value items, but it's increasingly difficult with the strains in those areas. Our suppliers feel it, and our retail partners feel it."

Feighery also notes the uncertainty of fluctuating trade policy affects the produce business both directly and indirectly.

Challenges facing Nickey Gregory Company in Forest Park, GA, include labor, customer buyouts and consolidation, product recalls, and high freight rates, according to Andrew Scott, vice president of sales and business development.

At the same time, challenges present opportunity. "They make a strong wholesaler more valuable, not less," says PCFCo's Brugato. "Our role is increasingly about being a trusted supply-chain partner who understands the customer's business, anticipates needs, communicates early, and finds solutions."

INDISPENSABLE EXPERTISE

With the fast change of pace, knowledge is more important than ever, and wholesalers' grower and supplier relationships gives them valuable details to pass along to customers. "We have insight into changing conditions at the source and stay ahead of those changes to deliver consistency for our customers," says Andy Smith, Katzman Produce director of procurement. "Our experience, strong relationships, and ability to react quickly give us the flexibility to navigate challenges as they arise."

Chris Sarantis, senior vice president at Canadawide in Montréal, Quebec, sees customers expanding the timeline in terms of when they want information. "It used to be two to three weeks out, but now they're asking us three months in advance about the grape programs we'll start," he says. "The technological information about weather patterns and El Niño is making retailers that much more in-

Meet the Team

Juan Luciano



The Business of Bananas

Juan Luciano runs the D'Arrigo New York bananas operation—from buying to logistics to sales and daily management. Every day brings new challenges. He's tasked with managing the ripening process for fruit arriving from different countries of origin, each with its own characteristics and textures. Managing that complexity demands experience and unwavering attention to detail. Juan is committed to getting it right, seven days a week.



Anthony Andreani, director of walk sales at Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY, says today's customers expect dependable service, consistent quality, and smooth operations, making reliability and seamless logistics essential to wholesale success.

PHOTO COURTESY KATZMAN

formed, so they're trying to get programs locked in well in advance."

Maintaining connection remains key. "We continue to see a shift away from face-to-face sales," says Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario. "This means we need to be connected to our customers in a myriad of digital touchpoints. We need to have a staff who can meet every customer where they are."

Joel Fierman, president of Fierman Produce in Bronx, NY, relates that their customer philosophy hasn't changed over decades. "We provide excellent service and quality at a great price," he says. "You can't make everybody happy all the time, but we try our best."

Fierman adds they share information through quality control protocols, and have increased observation of produce on arrival to better serve shippers and customers. "We do our own QC checks and use digital photography to communicate with the shipper. This also reduces the amount of money expended for USDA."

A growth area for wholesale support includes consistent communication and education regarding food safety, suggests Mark Cote, produce merchandiser for Redner's Warehouse Markets in Reading, PA, with 45 stores. "We would like to see wholesalers share more information about product handling, temperature controls, traceability, recalls, and potential quality concerns," he says. "Providing updated food safety guidelines and alerts when issues arise would help our teams respond faster and more effectively."

LEVERAGING LOGISTICS

Customers also expect more service in logistics. "Logistics is one of the costliest pieces of what we do," says Procacci's Feighery. "We're

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"We continue to see a shift away from face-to-face sales. This means we need to be connected to our customers in a myriad of digital touchpoints. We need to have a staff who can meet every customer where they are."**
Hutch Morton, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario
- **"Retailers are working longer hours without personnel to run their own trucks. They need us to fill that gap. It's on us to provide the transportation and extra refrigeration and storage space for customers. It's a huge piece I only see growing."**
Gabriela D'Arrigo, D'Arrigo New York, Bronx, NY

always looking at what more we can do to reduce cost and be more efficient while still serving the customer."

Customers want a more end-to-end experience with distributors, which goes beyond simply delivering great produce, asserts Bill Loupée, chief operating officer at Ben B. Schwartz & Sons in Detroit, MI.

"They're looking to consolidate layers of work they would have to source otherwise, which includes value-add services such as

FRESH PRODUCE FOR OVER A CENTURY.

Ben B. is the trusted partner for businesses that demand the freshest produce, delivered with consistency and care.

- 24/7 Support
- 300+ Grower Network
- Any Commodity. Any Time.
- Custom Ordering & Delivery Tracking Platform
- Wide Distribution Radius



BEN B. SCHWARTZ & SONS

Tel: (313) 841-8300 • www.benbdetroit.com

Freshness. Reliability. Since 1906.



At Heartland Produce Company, we are proud to be a trusted produce wholesaler, providing the Midwest with the finest fruits and vegetables — from our family to yours. Guided by our core values, we are dedicated to selflessly serving our customers, delivering consistent results, and sharing our passion for produce every day. With a commitment to excellence and a promise to always keep it real, Heartland Produce is more than just a supplier — we're your partner in fresh.




WE DON'T JUST MEASURE YOUR SUCCESS. WE GUARANTEE IT.



Capital City Fruit measures our performance in quality, consistency, safety, and service. Ask what our Measured Success Guarantee can mean for your business!

For More Information:

Call: 515-981-5111

Fax: 515-981-4564

Email: ccfsales@capitalcityfruit.com



PB FEATURE

bagging, white-labelling, repacking, and pre-cut commodities," he says. "We've been expanding our services to meet these needs to stay competitive."

Wholesalers focus on improving logistics through better communication and more reliable order fulfillment. "With changing customer demands and tighter inventory controls, we expect wholesalers to provide accurate deliveries, consistent quality, and dependable delivery schedules," says Cote. "Technology is becoming more important, including real-time order tracking, inventory visibility, and better forecasting. These improvements help us reduce out-of-stocks, control shrink, and keep our produce departments fresh."

Logistics on the import side present additional hurdles. "We have flights coming in and boats docking and sometimes just getting the product off the pier is the most difficult part of the supply chain," says Josh Auerbach, sales and procurement for Maurice A. Auerbach. "Coordination is crucial to be sure we get product in a timely way."

Fluctuation and uncertainty in trade policies, tariffs and fuel prices wreak havoc on wholesalers.

"There are certain programs we may not be able to continue due to the increased logistics costs and cost burden of tariffs," says John Vena, president of John Vena Inc. in Philadelphia, PA. "Just as important is the weakness of the dollar against the currencies in the countries from which we import many items. Right now, that represents a cost increase of 15% compared to previous seasons."

DEPENDABLE DELIVERY

More and faster delivery is another customer expectation, and Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications at D'Arrigo New York in Bronx, NY, says requests for delivery from customers "have grown exponentially."

"Retailers are working longer hours without personnel to run their own trucks. They need us to fill that gap," she explains. "It's on us to provide the transportation and extra refrigeration and storage space for customers. It's a huge piece I only see growing."

For four-store retailer/wholesaler Joe Randazzo's Fruit and Vegetable Market in Detroit, MI, offering free delivery has been huge for customers.

"With gas surcharges and delivery fees rising industry-wide, we want to give our



Challenges facing distributors include logistics, food safety, labor, customer retention and weather volatility.

PHOTO COURTESY PACIFIC COAST

customers peace of mind that they will not be hit with those extra fees," says Sammy Randazzo, senior produce buyer. "Orders can be placed until midnight the day before expected delivery. We take orders in any way our customers feel comfortable, including email, text, phone call, or on our new wholesale app."

Like others in produce, PCFCo faces challenges related to transportation capacity, refrigerated carrier availability, fuel costs, and service reliability, according to Kenny Ngo, senior director of operations.

"On the inbound side, higher fuel prices continue to increase freight costs, while securing reliable, refrigerated carriers has become more difficult," he says. "On the outbound side, customer expectations continue to evolve with smaller drop sizes, tighter delivery windows, changing operating hours, and increased demand for flexibility. To meet these challenges, we have renewed our focus on route optimization, delivery density, and truck utilization."

Late deliveries, long loading times waiting for product, and driver turnover, as well as

Auerpak Brand...



a Symbol of New York



Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc.

Call **888 AUERPAK**

Paul Auerbach • Josh Auerbach • John Venables • Ian Zimmerman • Bruce Klein • Kevia Payero • Lisa Montagna

Food Safety Expectations

Wholesaler food safety protocols strengthen customer programs.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

This summer's cyclospora outbreak reemphasized food safety through the entire fresh produce supply chain.

"Every highly publicized outbreak reinforces expectations for transparency, supplier oversight and rapid response," says Dave Doble, senior director of quality and food safety at Pacific Coast Fresh Company (PCFCo) in Portland, OR. "While food safety has always been a core requirement, today's environment demands more robust verification, documentation and traceability than ever before."

Wholesalers play an important role in supporting customer food safety goals. "They provide products that meet established safety standards and regulatory requirements," says Mark Cote, produce merchandiser at Redner's Warehouse Markets in Reading, PA, with 45 stores. "They help build confidence by maintaining strong food safety programs, proper handling procedures, temperature controls, and traceability throughout the supply chain. Their communication and documentation also help us verify that products are being handled correctly before they reach our stores."

Gabriela D'Arrigo, vice president of marketing and communications at D'Arrigo New York in Bronx, NY, explains the unique food safety aspects of wholesale distribution. "We want to keep as many hands off as possible, but also need to manage the product," she says. "It's like a giant game of Tetris. We must expertly manage timing and shelf life."

DOWN THE CHAIN

Wholesalers ensure food safety protocols on the supply side. "We work with growers and shippers with best-in-class food safety programs," says Hutch Morton, senior vice president at J.E. Russell Produce in Toronto, Ontario. "The work starts well before we ever receive a product in our warehouses, with site and field visits. Clear lines of communication with external partners and internal teams go a very long way in managing a food safety program."

The expectation at Joe Randazzo's Fruit and Vegetable Market in Detroit, MI, with four stores, is transparency from vendors. "Making sure we, as a retailer, know which growing region our product is coming from, and making sure quality control at the grower level isn't overlooked, have been the main focus of our buying strategy," says Sammy Randazzo, senior produce buyer.

As a grower, Procacci Brothers in Philadelphia, PA, has food safety ingrained in its thought process. "In our wholesale business, we rely on our growers' due diligence," says Rick Feighery, president. "We have clear and accurate traceability, which we've had for a very long time. Everything we buy is from pre-approved vendors, and it's all transparent to the customers."

ADDRESSING OBSTACLES

The nature of the supply chain presents difficulties. "Speed is a major issue in food safety," says Chris Sarantis, senior vice president



Ben B. Schwartz & Sons in Detroit, MI, has detailed processes in place to guarantee food safety. They log traceability data, separate produce that can cause cross-contamination or spoilage, and conduct proactive audits and drills to make sure our systems are working before they need to in the event of a traceback. PHOTO COURTESY BEN B. SCHWARTZ

at Canadawide in Montréal, Quebec. "When a problem is identified, it can take a long time to address the situation as it evolves and changes. We must get the information quickly, react to it as quickly as possible, and give the most accurate information."

Data is at the core of food safety, explains Bill Loupée, chief operating officer at Ben B. Schwartz & Sons in Detroit, MI. "If an outbreak occurs, stakeholders need access to records that capture everything from the end customer through distribution, including the grower, harvest information, and specific growing regions or lots," he says. "Our ERP helps us capture, organize, and analyze this data so we can act quickly if or when we need to."

At Willie Itule Produce in Phoenix, AZ, warehouse operations are fully traceable — inbound and outbound, according to Billy Itule, chief executive. "We also have redundancies built in to ensure that, should an issue arise, the fresh produce and goods we're moving are protected and maintain the rigorous standards of the cold supply chain."

LOOKING FORWARD

Dan Acosta, director of operations at Katzman Produce in Bronx, NY, says they work hard to stay ahead of changes and make sure teams are prepared before new requirements take effect.

John Vena Inc. in Philadelphia, PA, trains employees in food safety starting their first day, regardless of their position. The company also holds additional training in quarters three and four to ensure staff is up-to-date on food safety procedures, says Nora Olson, food safety and quality assurance manager. "We complete environmental monitoring year-round to ensure our processes are working."



We deliver the **right** products to the **right** partner, the **right** way!



Expertise with in-store merchandising support and resets



State-of-the-art distribution facility in Burlington, NJ with separate temperature zones and full truck and railroad receiving capabilities



Complete line of conventional and organic produce, and back-of-the-book supporting items

Partner with us to transform your business via the produce department!

vsavanello@katzman.com | jgranata@katzman.com

+1 609-300-2599

2041 US-130, Burlington, NJ 08016

driver retention, are a few obstacles in the logistics space, agrees Nicky Gregory's Scott. "We deliver most of our orders on our own fleet of trucks, ensuring that the cold chain stays intact."

Complex logistics is an area where technology improves efficiency, says Itule, explaining they use software to help optimize routes. "With customer expectations tightening and fuel costs perpetually on the rise, being especially effective at planning stops helps us time deliveries to customer needs and design fuel-efficient routes to mitigate costs."

Procacci also uses logistical routing software for greater efficiency with deliveries, according to Feighery. "Everybody wants quick, cost-effective delivery," he says. "Our delivery radius continues to expand, as does our company-owned fleet from Philadelphia. This gives us increased control over both delivery times and cost."

TACKING ON TECHNOLOGY

Technology provides wholesalers with solutions. "Technology is integral to every one of our departments," says Bonnie Fuson, vice president customer experience and foodservice sales at PCFCo. "Through integration of software, leverage of AI, and good adoption of our CRM, we continue to give more time back to our teams and provide them with better data to service customers and grow sales."

Scan guns, tracking, inventory management and routing programs are becoming standard, while AI promises new efficiencies. "As the dust settles around AI offerings, we are reviewing existing

data and scrutinizing it more closely to unearth better solutions to serve customers and lower costs," says PCFCo's Hendryx.

J.E. Russell uses AI tools in its reporting, which supports its business intelligence and planning, explains Morton. "We leverage more advanced tools in our fleet tracking and building out our ERP with enhanced capabilities. We are evaluating QC and e-commerce platforms too."

JVI recently implemented an analytics tool to provide more insight into sales, buying and operations. The tool works as an add-on to its current ERP, so it has been a low-impact way to upgrade IT, says Dan Vena, JVI director of sales. "We also added a system to track and store product receiving data for each load. This gives our team insight into information, such as product condition on arrival, that will help us better serve our customers."

Wholesalers look to customization to improve operations, and Auerbach has integrated software specifically for monitoring and tracking food safety tasks. "Using tablets for a digital trail helps ensure things are done properly according to SOPs and also recorded properly," says Josh Auerbach. "And we're using real-time temperature trackers to maintain cold chain and food safety."

Ben B. Schwartz & Sons has a custom ERP platform, Ben B. Access. "We felt off-the-shelf products were limiting, and wanted an agile system that could grow with us and quickly adapt to customer needs," says Loupée. "It helps us capture and analyze data so we can continually adjust inventory, optimize routes, track product and more."

PB



Selling a full line of top quality fruits and vegetables from growing regions across the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Sales:
 Steve Argires • Tony Baba
 Sam Gaglione • Jose Montoya
 Mark Poremba • Tony Ragusa
 Mike Ruffolo • Jacob Serck
 Mike Smietana

312-226-7805
 312-226-5154

J.A.B PRODUCE COMPANY
 2404 S Wolcott Ave • Units 22-23-24-25
 Chicago, IL 60608



MIXTEC GROUP
 40TH ANNIVERSARY

**#1 EXECUTIVE SEARCH FIRM
 IN PRODUCE**

818-541-0124 mixtec.net



Sales 773-446-6161 Fax: 773-446-6165

Email: office@galerafresh.com Web: www.LaGaleraProduce.com

Location: 2404 S. Wolcott Ave, Units 26-31, Chicago, IL 60608

Freshness Guaranteed!





Hutch Morton, senior vice president of J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario, says tariff uncertainty and shifting consumer sentiment are creating challenges for produce importers navigating a complex marketplace.

PHOTO COURTESY J.E. RUSSELL PRODUCE

Canadian Produce at a Crossroads

Trade uncertainty, inflation, and supply chain pressures are prompting a focus on collaboration.

BY MIKE DUFF

Tariffs and inflation are having a profound effect on the North American produce supply chain. While fruits and vegetables continue to move across borders with relatively little disruption from duties, rising costs and added complexities are putting pressure on the system.

As the situation changes, the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), Ottawa, Ontario, is doing what it can to ensure that fresh, affordable produce can reach consumers throughout North America and beyond.

"We're supportive of an open free trade model between all of our trading partners, not only the U.S. and Mexico," says Ron Lemaire, president. "We're recognizing the unfortunate position Canada has been in, to have to put in a retaliatory tariff model."

Lemaire says CPMA lobbies the government of Canada, the Minister of Agriculture's office and others, "to make sure they recognize

food should be excluded from any tariff regime, because the end result is to impact Canadian consumers and the cost of food, which already is an issue relative to food inflation."

In the long run, anything that disrupts the fresh food supply chain is a detriment to all parties.

"The industry is still looking for the most effective way to get product to market," says Lemaire. "In North America, it's proximity. We need each other in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico based on the diversity of product we have and how we move that product quickly to market."

"Not that we can't work with Turkey and South Africa and Australia, but when you have a market right next to you, and you can easily import product, and it's what the consumer is asking for, it's the best business decision to try and move product in through our partnership with the U.S. and Mexico."

The North American fresh produce industry, including retailers, faces intense margin pressure as inflation has driven every link in the supply chain to find efficiencies.

Lemaire says by the end of 2026 and into 2027, the market may reach the limits of compression, which translates into more costs being passed on to increasingly price-sensitive consumers, and they are unlikely to surrender more money for the same products without complaint or response.



At Canadawide Fruits, everything we do comes down to three things: variety, freshness, and service. We work with growers around the world and close to home to offer our partners a wide and consistent selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, chosen for quality and value. Behind that selection is careful attention to storage, inventory, and timing, so that what reaches our partners is always fresh and delivered when it's needed. In an industry where conditions can change quickly, our role is to make that reliability feel simple for the people who depend on it.

That same commitment to consistency and care extends beyond our warehouses, it's what drives us to stay connected with our partners and to build new relationships across the world. This fall, part of the Canadawide Fruits team will be attending two of the industry's most important international gatherings.



We will be at Fruit Attraction in Madrid, October 6-8, where we look forward to meeting with our current partners to strengthen the relationships that make our supply chain strong, while also connecting with new potential suppliers and partners from around the globe.

Shortly after, we will once again be present at IFPA in Orlando, October 14-16, a show we have attended for decades. Our continued presence there reflects the value we place on face-to-face relationships in an industry built on trust.

These kinds of events bring together international partners in a competitive and dynamic global environment, and they remain essential opportunities for us to grow, to learn, and to take our business, and that of our partners, to the next level.





EAGLEXPORT

Always
Abundant
Variety

Always
Fresh
Quality

Always
Exceptional
Service

EAGLEXPORT

1.450.992.0521
info@eaglexport.ca



Most fresh produce moving between Canada and the United States has remained tariff-free when CUSMA (Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement)-compliant. However, repeated tariff threats have complicated contracting, investment and sourcing decisions.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

TARIFFS TRIGGER ANTI-US SENTIMENT

The CPMA has continued advocating for the elimination of tariffs, and, along with other organizations, including the International Fresh Produce Association, it was a signatory on a letter to the chief executives of the United States, Canada, and Mexico in support of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

The letter points out that, as members of North America's fresh produce sector, the organizations strongly support a full 16-year renewal of the agreement.

"Our countries rely on cross-border trade to meet year-round consumer demand and ensure food security," the letter states. "This complementary, seamless exchange supports growers in all three countries and has historically allowed for efficient and affordable access to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables for the benefit of consumers across North America."

The current market environment has prompted the Canadian produce industry to expand its focus internationally, seeking new export opportunities and outlets for growers' products. Although the USMCA remains intact at this point and new duties haven't impacted covered produce categories, relying on anything in the uncertain trade environment is a substantive risk.

As an importer of fresh produce, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario, has to deal with the direct and indirect costs and challenges arising from the tariff situation, says Hutch Morton, senior vice president.

"The indirect costs of the latest round of tariffs is quite simply the negative consumer sentiment toward anything from the USA," he says. "Given the outsized share that USA imports of fresh fruits and veg are in the Canadian market, it's a difficult time.

"Currently, there are no tariffs on any commodities that we are importing from the U.S., but it's such a volatile time that the instability makes every day a challenge. With the affordability challenges that families in both countries face, nobody wins."

PRODUCE IS VULNERABLE

Richard Lee, executive director, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OGVG), Leamington, Ontario, says the direct effect of tariffs has been limited because most fresh fruits and vegetables that comply with USMCA rules of origin continue to cross borders tariff-free.

However, that does not mean the industry can afford to become complacent, says Lee. "The produce sector relies on certainty, predictability and efficient cross-border trade. While the current framework continues to support the movement of fresh fruits and vegetables, ongoing trade discussions and the potential for future tariff actions create uncertainty for growers, retailers and consumers alike."

From a Canadian supply chain perspective, Lee says the greatest concern is not necessarily the impact experienced today, but the risk of future policies that could increase costs or disrupt the flow of food across North America.



Providing our customers with the freshest produce.

We are a family-run organization characterized by generosity and a deep passion for high-quality produce.

As one of the largest importers of Chilean and Peruvian produce in Canada, our commitment is second to none; our reward is the loyalty of our trading partners and an abundant supply of deliciously perfect fruit.

Frank Spagnuolo-President, Steven Moffat-VP Finance, Gord Love-VP Business Development
Sam Kanellopoulos-VP Sales and Procurement, Jeremy Smith-Buyer
Stephan Schmekel-EVP Sales and Marketing, N.A.

Office: 416-255-4436 🍷 Buying/Sales: 416-255-5544 🍷 Office Fax: 416-255-0243

336 Ontario Food Terminal
165 The Queensway, Toronto ON M8Y 1H8

Email: naproduce@naproduce.com
Web: www.naproduce.com

"Fresh produce is highly perishable, and any barriers that increase transportation costs, reduce efficiency or complicate market access can have consequences throughout the supply chain."

Lee says OGVG will continue advocating "for policies that avoid unnecessary harm to the food system. The industry supports a rules-based trading environment that allows produce to move efficiently across borders, encourages investment and protects consumers from additional cost pressures during a time when food affordability remains a significant public concern."

As things stand, tariffs have created more uncertainty than actual shortages of fruits and vegetables, says Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, professor, senior director, Agri-Food Analytics Lab, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

"Most fresh produce moving between Canada and the United States has remained tariff-free when CUSMA (Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement)-compliant," he says.

He adds, however, repeated tariff threats have complicated contracting, investment and sourcing decisions. "Produce is especially vulnerable because companies cannot stockpile perishable products. Even when fruits and vegetables are not directly targeted, tariffs on packaging, equipment, fertilizer or transportation inputs can raise costs throughout the chain."

The continued health of the North American supply chain is especially important when food affordability is considered

"Any tariffs applied to food products, directly or indirectly, ultimately add costs somewhere in the supply chain," says Lee. "Those

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Currently, there are no tariffs on any commodities that we are importing from the U.S., but it's such a volatile time that the instability makes every day a challenge. With the affordability challenges that families in both countries face, nobody wins."**

Hutch Morton, J.E. Russell Produce, Toronto, Ontario

- **"Fresh produce is highly perishable, and any barriers that increase transportation costs, reduce efficiency or complicate market access can have consequences throughout the supply chain."**

Richard Lee, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, Leamington, Ontario

costs are difficult to absorb indefinitely and can eventually contribute to higher prices at retail."

He expects the North American produce sector will remain highly integrated because consumers continue to demand year-round access to fresh fruits and vegetables. "Canada, the United States and Mexico each play important and complementary roles in meeting that demand."

When you put integrity into everything you do, it shows.



At J.E. Russell Produce, we've built our reputation on good old-fashioned values and a commitment to doing things right. Whether we're working with the finest growers and shippers of fruits and vegetables throughout the world, or building strong relationships with every produce customer, we are dedicated to providing the very best in quality and service.

RUSSELL
J.E. RUSSELL PRODUCE LTD.

JERUSSELL.CA • ONTARIO FOOD TERMINAL • TORONTO, ONTARIO

© 2024 J.E. Russell Produce Ltd. All trademarks and logos belong to their respective owners.





Driscoll's®
Only the Finest Berries™



Italian Produce

COMPANY LIMITED
SINCE 1969

Ontario Food Terminal
165 The Queensway
Toronto, ON (M8Y 1H8)
416-259-7641
info@italianproduce.ca



D'ARRIGO
CALIFORNIA

#1561  **DRC**



BBID #115718



CPMA
CANADIAN PRODUCE
MARKETING ASSOCIATION



ASSOCIATION QUÉBÉCOISE
DE LA DISTRIBUTION
DE FRUITS ET LÉGUMES
QUÉBEC PRODUCE MARKETING ASSOCIATION

THE BIG PICTURE

Although tariffs get a lot of attention, Charlebois notes much of what Canadian produce growers face is what producers face everywhere across North America.

"Weather and the Canadian dollar remain more important short-term price drivers than tariffs," he says. "Canada imports substantial volumes of fruits and vegetables, particularly during winter, so a weaker dollar is quickly reflected in wholesale costs."

Charlebois says labor is another major constraint, along with fuel, fertilizer, refrigeration, insurance and trucking costs. "Growers face higher wages, housing costs and continued dependence on seasonal foreign workers."

Lemaire explains CPMA works to ensure agricultural inputs are not negatively affected by tariffs or regulations that increase production challenges and costs, which can ultimately lead to higher food prices.

"Underneath one of the Canadian tariffs on the U.S. is a tariff on packaging," he says.

"There now is an exclusion relative to packaging for food products. That's part of our work to make sure food doesn't get caught in having added costs."

Lee says the greenhouse sector, as it operates in Ontario, faces a host of challenges, including rising operating costs in labor, energy, packaging, fertilizer, financing, insurance and transportation costs, placing considerable pressure on business margins.

"At the same time, the sector operates within a highly integrated North American supply chain, making efficient cross-border transportation essential to its success."

Although transportation isn't tariffed, duties can affect produce operations.

"For many growers, transportation has become both more expensive and less predictable than it was prior to the pandemic," says Lee. "Rising freight rates, driver shortages, supply chain disruption and regulatory changes have added costs and complexity to moving products throughout North America. These pressures come on top of the broader inflationary environment

that growers have been managing over the last several years."

J.E. Russell's Morton says the cost of freight for its imports has increased, specifically the cost of fuel since the war in Iran started. "It hurts because it's not possible to pass that increase along to our customers entirely, so margins get hurt, as does overall volume, when prices are just too high."

Tariffs and other pressures create complications, Lee says, but the U.S. remains a critical market for Canadian growers, so continued access, including reliable transportation webs, is critical to maintaining a competitive market environment.

"Ontario growers have built strong customer relationships and integrated supply chains across North America, but their success depends on the efficient movement of goods across the border," Lee says.

RETAIL DEVELOPMENTS

On the retail end, supermarkets and other food sellers across Canada have been active in responding to inflation and other developments in the marketplace, says Charlebois, using more promotions, loyalty offers, private-label products and flexible sourcing.

He notes consumers are also trading down, buying more discounted produce and switching between fresh, frozen and canned products.

"Retailers are pressing suppliers for efficiencies, but they cannot absorb every increase indefinitely. When costs persist, consumers eventually see higher prices, smaller packages or reduced variety. Competition among retailers can delay an increase, but it cannot eliminate the underlying cost."

Retailer Loblaw, Brampton, Ontario, has placed some emphasis on its hard-discount No Frills supermarket chain, and in June, Loblaw opened a No Frills location in Brockville, its 200th store in Ontario.

Loblaw also opened multiple Maxi stores in 2026, a deep-discount supermarket operating mainly in Quebec.

In a second-quarter conference call, Richard Dufresne, chief financial officer, Loblaw Companies, said the company's hard discount banners continued to perform well in the quarter, with comparable sales close to 4%. "Maxi and No Frills remain well-positioned for customers focused on value, supported by strong execution in both existing and new stores."

PB

Hillside Gardens

The boring choice in produce.

Ontario, Canada | Georgia, USA

Reliable, routine, and refreshingly uneventful.

Vertically integrated grower & packer shipping 52 week supply

THE GLOBAL PRODUCE & FLORAL SHOW

BOOTH # 802

GEORGIA, USA | ONTARIO, CANADA | HILLSIDEGARDENS.CA



STRONACH & SONS 2020

Over 50 years strong in the Ontario Food Terminal

**We carry the quality products you expect
and the savings your customers deserve...**

Apples, Cherries, Pears

Asparagus, Beets, Broccoli, Brussel Sprouts, Bunched Greens, Bunched Herbs, Cabbage
Cauliflower, Celery, Cucumber, Eggplant, Garlic, Leeks, Lettuce, Onions, Peas
Peppers, Root Vegetables, Squash, Zucchini



CPMA
CANADIAN PRODUCE
MARKETING ASSOCIATION



Stronach & Sons (2020) Inc.
Ontario Food Terminal
165 The Queensway, Suite 316
Toronto, ON, M8Y 1H8

Website: www.stronachandsons.ca
Tel: 416-259-5000
General Inquiries: stronson@stronachandsons.ca

Sustainability and Convenience: Can Produce Packaging Satisfy Both?

Consumer demand, retailer sustainability goals, and new regulations are driving innovations.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Convenience has long been the primary focus for produce packaging, but recent years have seen the emergence of what some might see as a competing concern — sustainability. Driven by consumer concern, and by new legal regulations, sustainable packaging is now a priority for many grocery retailers, but can the two co-exist?

Kelsey Weingart, brand manager, marketing at Peri & Sons Farms in Yerington, NV, says sustainability and recycling are currently top of mind across the industry, especially with California's new SB-343 law pushing the conversation even further.

"Packaging can't just claim to be recyclable anymore. It actually has to be accepted by recycling programs, and that's raising the bar for everyone," she says.

"With a change like this comes real cost, and it's not as simple as swapping out a logo or a material. Companies have to rework designs, replace printing plates, and place entirely new packaging orders. What looks like a small label change from the outside actually takes real time and substantial investment behind the scenes. We see it as part of doing business the right way, but it's worth being upfront that these transitions aren't instant or free."

Specializing in whole onions, Peri & Sons is currently in the process of moving its full line of organic products to plastic-free packaging, one of the first steps being the introduction of its 100% plastic-free, compostable and recyclable "Earthbag."

According to Brian Pincus, vice president, innovation at Atlanta, GA-headquartered Smurfit Westrock, sustainability is no longer a side conversation; rather, it is central to how retailers, growers, and consumers evaluate packaging.

"Sustainability now plays a central role in the produce industry, with retailers, growers, and consumers increasingly looking for packaging that reduces plastic while maintaining product protection, shelf life, and supply chain performance," he says.

DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

In the opinion of Victoria Lopez, marketing and business development manager at McAllen, TX-based Fox Packaging, the industry is witnessing a shift from sustainability messaging to sustainability proof. This, she says, has brought a movement in the conversation from broad claims to extended producer responsibility, standardized recycling language, and greater transparency around the claims a package makes.

"Buyers and consumers are asking more questions, and pack-



Sustainability plays a central role in the produce industry, with retailers, growers, and consumers looking for packaging that reduces plastic while maintaining product protection, shelf life and supply chain performance. PHOTO COURTESY SMURFIT WESTROCK

aging has to do more than sound sustainable. It has to protect the product, run efficiently on the line, and fit into real recycling systems before it can credibly support a sustainability claim," Lopez argues.

A second important trend, Lopez continues, is the growing role of the package as a communication tool.

"Shelf impact still matters, but packaging needs to clearly communicate nutrition, origin, product details, and recycling instructions within limited space," says Lopez.

Pincus, meanwhile, says the focus for Smurfit Westrock is very much on practical paper-based packaging innovations that help produce brands reduce plastic, citing the company's paper-based EverGlow primary packaging for produce, and its moisture-resistant WetTech for cold-chain and high-humidity environments.

"The key advantage of paper-based packaging is that it helps brands reduce reliance on plastic and advance sustainability goals without compromising performance," he says.

Although he emphasizes that the best fit depends on the commodity and supply chain requirements, Pincus says paper-based packaging performs particularly well for products, such as berries, grapes, snacking tomatoes, avocados, citrus, and many tree fruits.

SUSTAINABILITY A PRIORITY

Headquartered in Wenatchee, WA, Stemilt Growers has long focused on sustainable packaging through its own Responsible Choice program, and the launch of paper four-packs to give an alternative to plastic.

But while legislation, such as Extender Producer Responsibility, or EPR, is starting to be enacted by states — where suppliers are required to pay fees based on the package type — Stemilt's Marketing Director Brianna Shales says plastic bags and pouches remain

Produce Packaging

High-Output Automated Solutions



MULTIVAC's range of traysealing and thermoforming packaging equipment provides the ideal solution for your fresh produce production. Our full line solutions increase output and simplify processes within your existing floor space by integrating printing, labeling, and inspection.

Contact our team to learn about our range of equipment and technology.



 **MULTIVAC**
GROUP

important to retailers. Instead of complete elimination, she says Stemilt will focus on making improvements.

Lopez at Fox says sustainability is a priority across the industry, and increasingly is an important part of Fox's own product development conversations, with the company seeking to make flexible packaging more efficient, more recyclable, and better aligned with the realities of today's recovery systems. To this end, Fox is continuing to expand recycled content across its portfolio, and now includes 30% post-consumer recycled content in much of its materials.

"Our focus is not simply on eliminating packaging, but on designing packaging that is right sized for the commodity, uses material responsibly, supports recyclability where possible, and helps reduce unnecessary waste throughout the supply chain," Lopez adds.

Aptar Active Material Science, a packaging manufacturer specialized in solutions for the fresh-cut segment, recently launched Halopack, a 90% paperboard packaging system that can hold liquid and MAP items for over 21 days, while featuring sidewall windows.

According to Christa Biggs, manager of business development at the Auburn, AL-based company, Halopack is the only true paperboard item in the market that can act as a direct replacement for plastic, "delivering equivalent shelf life, barrier properties, operations, and supply chain robustness."

FINDING A BALANCE

Convenience has been a key element of produce packaging for much of the past decade, but aligning this demand with sustainability obligations is likely to take center stage in the coming years.

Finding the balance between sustainability and convenience remains a challenge, Shales admits. "New packaging, whether sustainable or not, takes time to become efficient to reduce costs."

For Lopez, the balance is found at the commodity level, advocating the need to match the right structure to the right product. "A film structure may be the right fit for a commodity that needs light protection, mesh may be the best option for products that require airflow, and a resealable pouch may make sense for snacking or value-added produce that consumers use over multiple occasions," she says.

Biggs at Aptar believes the "sweet spot" between convenience and sustainability lies in avoiding either extreme — all-plastic convenience or all sustainability — and instead focusing on reducing total system waste while remaining affordable and easy to use.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"Shoppers want to feel good about the brands they're buying from, from the brand's story down to its packaging."**

Christa Biggs, Aptar Active Material Science, Auburn, AL

- **"We believe the future lies in packaging solutions that use less material, improve recyclability, reduce food waste, and remain cost-effective."**

Magdalena Becker, Crawford Packaging, London, Ontario

"The best sustainable solutions are those that maintain freshness and reduce shrink while using less material."

Headquartered in London, Ontario, Crawford Packaging is a manufacturer that supplies paper trays, as well as linerless labels, and recyclable PE stretch films. It offers a variety of grab-and-go packaging solutions in both single-serve and multipack formats.

Director of Marketing Magdalena Becker says Crawford is seeing strong interest in solutions that reduce environmental impact. At the same time, she admits there is still a challenge: Many sustainable packaging options come at a higher cost.

"The industry continues to work toward solutions that are both environmentally responsible and economically viable," says Becker.

While sustainability has become a priority throughout the produce supply chain, its success depends on balancing environmental goals with the realities of protecting highly perishable food, says Mark Medovitch, content manager at Inline Plastics Corp, Shelton, CT.

"Fresh produce has a limited shelf life, so packaging has an important job to do — if it helps prevent damage, extends freshness, and reduces food waste, it's contributing to sustainability in a meaningful way," he argues.

"When packaging performs well, retailers can reduce shrink, processors can improve efficiency, and consumers receive fresher products," he says.

PB

Slice & wedge cutter FS-3600

- Cuts (half) slices, (cored) wedges, sticks and cubes
- Various conveyor and belt options
- Easy to use touchscreen with recipe management
- Smart tray filling with counting function

Live at
Pack Expo
Stand: LU-7537



sormac

Nogales: The Cross-Border Produce Success Story

The Southwest region retains its leading import status.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

The history of fresh fruit and vegetable imports in Nogales, AZ, can be traced to 1905 when the first shipment from Mexico crossed the border. Now, the largest port of entry for Mexican produce to the U.S., handling around 37% of total imports, Nogales has consolidated its status in the industry, but challenges remain.

For Nogales' importers, overcoming challenges from rising diesel prices to border delays are going to be top of the priority list for the 12 months ahead, as well as seizing emerging opportunities offered by value-added and ever more convenient options.

One such importer is IPR Fresh, a company that built its business around greenhouse-grown colored bell peppers and cucumbers imported through Nogales. It also handles green bell, mini and hot peppers, plus squash and other items on a seasonal basis. The company covers both organic and conventional.

"Our real strength is in greenhouse-grown colored peppers and cucumbers, where we've developed longstanding relationships with growers in Mexico," emphasizes Vice President Of Marketing And Business Development Mark Munger.

"While our product mix continues to evolve based on customer demand, our focus is on products where we can provide consistent quality, reliable supply and strong year-round programs," he adds.

Another Nogales-located business, Divine Flavor, focuses on hothouse vegetables, including colored bell and mini peppers, Roma and grape tomatoes, long English, Persian and slicer cucumbers, and squash — all offered as organic or conventional.

During the Sonora grape season, typically from May through July, the company also imports table grapes through Nogales.

"Nogales is a 365-day loading location for us, which gives us the flexibility to utilize the region throughout the year," says Quality Assurance and Public Relations Manager Michael DuPuis. "We tend to see more customers transition to loading out of Nogales during the winter and spring months, particularly when our grape programs are active."

Similar to other Nogales companies, Farmer's Best International imports tomatoes and cucumbers, followed by round tomatoes, green and red bell peppers, eggplant, summer squash, and hard-shell squash during the fall and winter seasons.

Director of Sales Steve Spence says Nogales' key advantage lies in its proximity to Sonora, Mexico, one of the most important agricultural regions in North America.

"Sonora plays a critical role in Mexico's export economy, producing a diverse range of fresh fruits and vegetables, including squash, cucumbers, bell peppers, Roma tomatoes, melons, table grapes, and many other commodities," he says.



Nogales, AZ, is the largest port of entry for Mexican produce to the U.S., handling around 37% of total imports, such as bell peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, grapes and other commodities.

PHOTO COURTESY IPR FRESH

"This strong agricultural base, combined with Nogales' established infrastructure and expertise in handling fresh produce, positions the region as a vital gateway for delivering high-quality fruits and vegetables to U.S. consumers year-round."

PROCUREMENT OPPORTUNITIES

IPR's recently changed the direction of the business, with a greater emphasis on building year-round supply programs and expanding relationships with growers to achieve consistent availability across the seasons, according to Munger.

The business is also focusing on developing direct relationships



BEYOND THE SHELF:

SL Produce invites retailers to go straight to the source

The summer months of 2026 were a tumultuous period for the produce industry, and undoubtedly signaled the importance of transparency throughout the supply chain. Bell pepper, green bean and cucumber specialist SL Produce goes even further – enabling retail customers to connect directly with the grower, and allowing full transparency of its operations from the field to final delivery.

Headquartered in Los Mochis, Mexico, but with facilities in Nogales, AZ and McAllen, TX, the vertically-integrated company makes a point of controlling absolutely everything in its supply chain, from growing and harvesting through to packing and distribution, explains SL's PR & marketing manager Ivonne Lugo.

"We don't have to rely on third parties to tell us what's happening with our products. We know firsthand, and that allows us to give our retail partners direct answers, complete transparency, and greater confidence with every shipment," she says.

Now in its fourth generation, the family-run business may have its origins in Sinaloa's Los Mochis region, but its production today spreads across Mexico – covering Sinaloa and Sonora in the north to the more centrally-located Jalisco – with the company able

to offer high quality bell peppers, cucumbers, sweetcorn, zucchini and green beans year round. For 2026, SL has further expanded production to Baja California North and South, with the first volumes having been harvested during the summer months. SL also offers added-value products, such as fresh-cut mango.

Full transparency and the ability to go straight to the source rather than through an intermediary is a key element of SL's entire product offering, Lugo continues. "Sometimes you have to deal with five different people if something goes wrong; we pride ourselves on being the only accountable party our customers require in the supply chain," she explains. "You can call us directly and we can identify any problems right away, you don't have to go through anyone else.

"We offer the highest level of transparency in the supply chain: if a problem arises, we can go direct to the root immediately, solve it, and ensure it doesn't happen in the future."

Lugo says SL's commitment to transparency means customers are welcome to visit the company's facilities and fields anytime they like, citing the example of the entire sourcing time of one major retailer recently taking advantage of the offer to view the Jalisco site



TENDERLAND REBRAND

At the same time as publicizing its unwavering commitment to transparency, SL has announced a rebranding of its Tenderland label, replacing the previous dark green colors with a bright, vibrant design that reflects the products' freshness.

"We want to develop the partnership we have with retailers by offering improved branding for Tenderland with a more attention-grabbing design featuring fresher, brighter colors," Lugo says. "We're also very flexible in terms of pack sizes – we can provide customers with the sizes and presentations that their shoppers prefer."

SL PRODUCE will be exhibiting at the IFPA Fresh Summit 2026 in **Booth 2851** from **October 14-16 2026** in the **Orange County Convention Center** in **Orlando, FL**



BRINGING THE FRESHEST PRODUCE TO YOU!

Growers and experts, therefore
the best retailers partners.
No middle men needed!



Contact us for
year round supply



(215) 798 45 94



info@slproduce.mx



slproduce.mx

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“This strong agricultural base, combined with Nogales’ established infrastructure and expertise in handling fresh produce, positions the region as a vital gateway for delivering high-quality fruits and vegetables to U.S. consumers year-round.”**

Steve Spence, Farmer’s Best International, Nogales, AZ

- **“For IPR Fresh, the opportunity isn’t simply to move more product through Nogales. It’s to use Nogales as the foundation for building a larger, more integrated, year-round supply business.”**

Mark Munger, IPR Fresh, Nogales, AZ

with retail and foodservice customers. “Historically, Nogales has been an important hub for our business, but we’re increasingly thinking beyond the traditional Nogales model and looking at how we can build a broader North American supply business,” he says.

An example of this has been the opening of a new distribution point in McAllen, TX, which gives IPR another strategic location to better connect Mexican growing programs with markets further east.

“Nogales remains central to our business, but we’re investing in infrastructure, supply and customer relationships that allow IPR Fresh to reach well beyond Nogales,” adds Munger.

At SunFed, which principally imports squash, cucumbers, eggplant, bell peppers, and tomatoes, Vice President Of Sales And Marketing J.C. Myers views consolidation as the biggest opportunity for business growth.

“This is a penny profit business,” he says. “Economies of scale, a greater market share, cross-selling, stronger pricing power, more investment capacity, reduced competitive pressure are the key to growing in the industry, especially with imports via Nogales.”

A slightly different example is GR Fresh. Although headquartered in McAllen, TX, the company imports through Nogales from November through May to cover its western Mexican production, which includes items such as Roma, round, grape, and on-the-vine tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, yellow squash, and zucchini, among other items.

Over the past year, says GR’s Vice President Of Sales And Marketing Tony Incaviglia, the business has continued to strengthen around its core commodities while expanding value-added offerings.

As part of this process, the company has introduced and expanded several controlled environment and retail-ready programs, including greenhouse-grown four-count beef tomatoes, plus medley, cherry and grape tomatoes, along with other custom pack offerings.

These programs, says Incaviglia, complement GR’s traditional Roma tomato, pepper, cucumber, eggplant, and yellow and zucchini squash business, while giving customers more options and additional ways to drive sales.

According to DuPuis, Divine Flavor is continuing to see growth across its core commodities, which he views as a positive reflection of both consumer demand and retail partnerships.

In addition to working on the launch of more visually appealing



GR Fresh, headquartered in McAllen, TX, imports through Nogales from November through May to cover its western Mexican production, which includes items such as Roma, round, grape, and on-the-vine tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, yellow squash, and zucchini.

PHOTO COURTESY GR FRESH

packaging in 2027, the company is working on new grab-and-go formats for seedless mini peppers.

“Consistency remains one of the biggest challenges with this emerging commodity, and we’re seeing some very encouraging results from growers currently participating in our trials,” adds DuPuis.

DuPuis says Divine Flavor is also working with new high-flavor tomato varieties that it believes could be true game-changers, some of which are exclusive to specific growing regions. “We’re excited about the opportunity to be among the first to introduce them to the U.S. market.”

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Like any major produce corridor, Nogales faced challenges around logistics, transportation, labor, border efficiency, and maintaining consistent quality throughout the supply chain.

However, DuPuis sees the challenges as opportunities for Divine Flavor to differentiate itself.

“For us, the key is having strong relationships with growers and supply chain partners, planning ahead, and maintaining a consistent focus on quality and execution. The companies that can provide reliability and solutions when challenges arise will ultimately be the ones that continue to succeed.”

According to Spence at Farmer’s Best, logistics remain one of the most significant challenges for distribution through Nogales, with competing gateways — such as McAllen — offering geographic advantages due to their proximity to many large population centers.

“With a substantial portion of the U.S. population located east of Texas, transportation efficiency and freight costs are critical considerations when serving key markets,” he says. “Despite these challenges, Nogales continues to play a vital role as a premier gateway for produce imports. Its established infrastructure, experienced workforce, and longstanding industry relationships provide significant value to importers, growers and customers.”

SunFed’s Myers says stress has come from rising diesel prices —



Three Days of Nonstop Networking with Those
You Know and Those You Should Know!!



January 13-15, 2027
JW Marriott Starr Pass
Tucson, AZ

Register Today at www.SWIPEexpo.com

“double last year due to geopolitical conflicts” — combined with reduced refining capacity and limited reserves. The pressures are forcing customers east of the Mississippi to look at alternate crossing points to keep down costs.

Incaviglia at GR Fresh points to rising costs associated with transportation, labor, packaging, customs, and compliance as principal challenges. “With fresh produce timing is critical, border crossing delays can quickly impact quality, availability and cost,” he explains. “We are also dealing with changing trade policies and duties, particularly on tomatoes, which add another layer of cost to an already challenging business environment.”

Munger at IPR says Nogales companies have to deal with the traditional challenges that come with operating through a major international crossing point, such as border efficiency, transportation, labor, and the ongoing complexity of moving perishable products across an international border.

“Those issues can have an outsized impact on fresh produce because we’re dealing with a highly perishable product and very tight delivery windows,” he says.

At the same time, Munger believes one of the challenges — and an opportunity — for companies in Nogales is making sure they are not “overly dependent” on a single point in the supply chain.

“That’s part of the thinking behind our broader strategy,” he explains. “We’re continuing to invest in our grower relationships, our logistics capabilities and additional distribution infrastructure so we have more flexibility in how we serve customers.”

THE ROLE OF THE FPAA

The Nogales-headquartered Fresh Produce Association of the Americas (FPAA) is a key supporter of the city’s importers, and one whose importance to produce businesses can’t be understated.

SunFed Chief Executive Matt Mandel describes the FPAA as “an association of like-minded businesses, often competitors, who feel being a part of something bigger allows [them] to accomplish tasks that are too big for any single company.”

“Whether it be our close-working relationship with relevant federal agencies or the incredible relationships we’ve fostered at the state and federal level, the FPAA is able to better advocate for the greater good of our industry and, by extension, we reap those benefits. A rising tide lifts all ships,” he adds.

It’s a view echoed by DuPuis. “The FPAA has always been a great resource for Divine Flavor,” he says. “They are involved in virtually every aspect of the produce industry and provide tremendous support and advocacy for the Nogales produce community. Their involvement, advocacy, and industry knowledge provide significant value to companies doing business through the region.”

The FPAA brings together the companies and people who make the Nogales produce industry work. For a company like IPR Fresh, Munger says this network is valuable not only from a business standpoint, but also because it gives them a voice on issues that affect the entire supply chain.

“Nogales is a unique produce community because of the depth of expertise and relationships that have developed on both sides of the border,” he adds. “I think the FPAA plays an important role in helping protect and strengthen that ecosystem.”

WHAT’S NEXT

Nogales offers “tremendous expertise and infrastructure,” which



Mark Munger, vice president of marketing and business development at IPR Fresh, Nogales, AZ, says the company’s strength is in greenhouse-grown colored peppers and cucumbers, where they have developed longstanding relationships with growers in Mexico.

PHOTO COURTESY IPR FRESH

IPR combines with strong relationships with growers in Mexico. The opportunity ahead, Munger says, lies in leveraging those assets to serve customers more consistently throughout the year.

“We’re particularly focused on expanding our grower base and strengthening production during periods when supply can be more challenging, including the summer months,” says Munger. “That allows us to offer customers a more complete program rather than simply being a supplier during a particular growing season.”

At the same time, Munger sees an opportunity to take what IPR has built in Nogales and connect it with customers across a much broader geography, especially in terms of fostering direct relationships with retail and foodservice customers.

“For IPR Fresh, the opportunity isn’t simply to move more product through Nogales,” he adds. “It’s to use Nogales as the foundation for building a larger, more integrated, year-round supply business.”

Incaviglia sees further opportunities for future growth through expanding year-round imports of core vegetables. “Nogales remains a major gateway for Sonora and Sinaloa production, and there is additional opportunity in extending the season to help support western domestic business opportunities.”

DuPuis agrees. “Nogales is an important gateway for produce, and its ability to operate as a 365-day loading location makes it an important part of our overall supply chain,” he says. “We see particularly strong opportunities during the winter and spring months, when more customers transition their loading programs through Nogales and our grape programs are active.”

DuPuis also sees growth potential in bringing differentiated products into the market, such as new varieties, specialty items, innovative packaging or programs designed around specific retail needs.

“Ultimately, our goal is to continue being a resource and solution for our customers while focusing on products and programs that we know we can consistently deliver.”



Los Angeles County has the most grocery stores in California, with more than 6,700. And Los Angeles' huge Hispanic population, approximately 47%, affects the produce department's lineup. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

Produce in the City of Angels

Los Angeles' diverse demographic and long-standing businesses make for a thriving produce scene.

BY LISA WHITE

California grows more than half of U.S. fruits and vegetables, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, so it's no wonder that the Golden State's biggest city, Los Angeles, is a produce hub.

With the U.S. Census Bureau reporting its population at more than 3.8 million as of July 2025, Los Angeles' big Hispanic population, approximately 47%, has influenced both retail and foodservice offerings.

Long-standing supermarket chains dot the landscape, including Ralph's, now part of Kroger; Smart & Final; Vons; and Trader Joe's. Hispanic grocers include Vallarta Supermarkets, Northgate Market and El Super. According to a report by XMap, Los Angeles County not only has the most grocery stores in the state, with more than 6,700, it also ranks highest in foot traffic.

The city's massive immigrant and expat population finds no shortage of ethnic goods at the numerous specialty grocers selling foods sourced from across the globe.

Foodservice is just as robust. According to LAist, 758 new restaurants opened in 2025, surpassing the previous record of 729 set in 2024. Limited-service restaurants now account for nearly a third of all newly opened establishments, while 539 full-service eateries opened last year.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"One of the strongest trends in the market is the continued growth of organic."**
Rod Kramer, Third Party Logistic Services, at Giumarra, Los Angeles, CA
- **"Consumers are increasingly looking for foods that deliver meaningful nutritional benefits while also fitting seamlessly into busy lifestyles."**
Zak Laffite, Wonderful Citrus, Delano, CA

Ethnic fare has made its mark in this arena, too. The counter inside Mercado La Paloma is the only Mexican restaurant in Los Angeles boasting a prestigious Michelin star. El Cholo is the oldest Mexican restaurant, opening in 1923, and its waitress Carmen Rocha is said to be the creator of nachos in 1959. This city is also well-known for Asian fare in Korea Town, Thai Town and China Town.

DIVERSITY AND HISTORY

As with its supermarkets and restaurants, there is history in Los Angeles' wholesale produce sector. Giumarra Bros. Fruit Co. was founded in 1922, beginning operations on the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market, commonly referred to as the LA Terminal Market or LA Market. The company continues connecting growers

across California, Mexico and international import regions directly with Western retail and foodservice buyers.

"Southern California serves a large and diverse customer base, creating demand for a wide range of produce varieties and pack sizes to suit ethnically focused retailers, specialty produce suppliers and broad-line distributors, all serving distinct

customer needs," says Kristina Lorusso, vice president, retail partner services, for The Giumarra Cos.

"Each of these consumer groups has distinct needs for specialized produce staples, from chile peppers and tropical fruit to fresh greens and root vegetables. A world of options can all be found on the LA Market."

The Wonderful Co. is a large grower and seller of citrus and tree nuts, including Wonderful Pistachios, Wonderful Halos, Wonderful Seedless Lemons and POM Wonderful.

"The LA/Southern California market is home to a large, diverse population of health-conscious, active consumers who prioritize nutritious, convenient foods that fit their lifestyles," says Jennifer Hirano, the company's vice president of marketing. "We're also seeing a growing interest in functional foods and beverages in Southern California, as consumers increasingly look for products that offer benefits beyond basic nutrition."

Located in South Los Angeles, about 4 miles from the LA Produce Market, Melissa's/World Variety Produce Inc. launches 20 to 40 new items annually.

"SoCal is one of the most diverse demographics in the USA," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations, adding that there's not a produce type the company doesn't offer in its multicultural lineup.

Francisco Clouthier, owner of Maui-Fresh International, Inc., agrees Los Angeles is diverse in terms of its demographic. The wholesaler specializes in cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, melon and Hawaiian papaya, among other items.

THE POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

There are a number of advantages — and challenges — to doing business in the City of Angels.

"The Los Angeles market allows wholesalers to serve both major retailers and independent businesses through flexible volume options and centralized access to a broad range of commodities," says Rod Kramer, vice president, Third Party Logistic Services, at Giumarra. "Proximity to growing regions and major ports further strengthens our location on the LA Terminal Market. It supports efficient sourcing, faster replenishment, and reliable distribution to key markets."

The major growing regions include the Central Valley, Oxnard, Santa Maria and the Imperial Valley.

As a vertically integrated grower, packer and marketer, Wonderful benefits from growing where it sells.

"Our integrated model gives us greater visibility across the supply chain from the orchard, packing houses and to the customer," says Zak Laffite, president of

Maui Fresh

INTERNATIONAL



Bringing Consistency to an Inconsistent Industry

As a grower, wholesaler, and distributor of fresh produce for local and national customers, we recognize the importance of being a good steward to the land, our team and our customers. Our mission is to provide consistency in an environment that can be unpredictable.

Maui Fresh is *your partner* in the fresh produce market. We provide exceptional service, produce that meets the highest standards for quality and freshness, and offer customized services to meet your needs.



Wholesale/
Distributor



Packaging and
Custom Packing



Consolidation



Cross Docking



Direct to
Store Delivery

Main Office

1601 E. Olympic Blvd, #509/510, Los Angeles, CA, 90021 (213) 688-0880

Shipping Warehouse

2652 Long Beach Ave., Los Angeles, CA, 90058 (213) 788-7800



www.Maui-Fresh.com

Wonderful Citrus. "Being close to where our products are grown allows us to have a strong understanding of the crop, respond quickly to market needs, and maintain greater control over the product as it moves from the orchard through packing and ultimately to our customers."

In addition to providing more than 1,500 produce items, Melissa's benefits from cost savings due to bulk purchasing, as well as reduced delivery costs with fewer trips and the city's cross-dock system. Cross-docking involves taking products straight from inbound trucks to outbound vehicles with minimal to no storage time in between.

"We have access to Mexican borders, like Baja, in just a few hours by truck," Clouthier says. "We also deal with Western Canadian greenhouse products that can be here in less than two days."

The biggest disadvantages of doing business in Los Angeles are the issues of many big cities: traffic, high taxes and labor shortages.

"The cost of living here is very high, so it's not cheap or easy to attract talent to the area," Clouthier explains.

TRENDS & CHALLENGES

Those with businesses in Los Angeles are noting predominant trends in packaging sizes and produce commodities.

"Giumarra was one of the first USDA Certified Organic providers on the LA Market, and we continue to offer a variety of seasonal domestic and imported organic fruit and vegetable offerings," says Kramer at Giumarra. "One of the strongest trends in the market is the continued growth of organic. Customer demand for organic options has increased steadily."

The focus on wellness also has resulted in other market changes.

"Today's shoppers expect more from the citrus category, seeking flavorful, functional foods that support their wellness goals while offering convenience and consistent quality," says Laffite. "Packaged citrus continues to gain momentum as busy households look for easy, grab-and-go options that simplify everyday routines."

Wonderful Halos are available in a variety of pack sizes, including 2-, 3- and 5-pound bags, as well as boxes, with organic Wonderful Halos offered in 2-pound bags at select retailers.

"We're also seeing continued growth in online grocery shopping," Laffite notes. "We're investing across our brands to reach consumers wherever they shop, supported by a dedicated team of e-commerce ex-



Maui-Fresh International, located at the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market and with a 90,000-square-foot, solar-powered warehouse nearby, has access to Mexican borders, like Baja, in just a few hours by truck.

PHOTO COURTESY
MAUI-FRESH INTERNATIONAL

An advertisement for FrutaSi Limes. The background is a solid green color. In the center, three lime slices are stacked vertically. The top slice is a wedge, the middle one is a half, and the bottom one is a half. They are all glistening with water droplets. In the top right corner, there is a logo for 'ev PRODUCE INTERNATIONAL' featuring a stylized green leaf. In the bottom left corner, the 'FrutaSi Limes' logo is displayed, with 'FrutaSi' in a large, white, script font and 'Limes' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it. In the bottom right corner, the website 'www.evproduce.com' and email 'sales@evproduce.com' are listed in white text.

**WE GROW
WE PACK
WE CARE**

FrutaSi
Limes

www.evproduce.com
sales@evproduce.com

perts focused on strengthening our digital presence and connecting with online shoppers.”

Schueller notes the biggest trends are in value-added products, grab-and-go packaging, snack items and multi-cultural foods. Emerging are organic produce, along with a focus on products offering increased protein and fiber.

The Los Angeles region is not immune to challenges facing the industry as a whole, says Kramer at Giumarra. “The two greatest challenges I see are rising operational costs and changing weather patterns impacting production.”

Wonderful Citrus’ Laffite notes citrus greening, also known as HLB, continues to be an ongoing concern for the industry.

This bacteria attacks citrus trees, impacting the fruit viability.

“We’re actively working with other growers to share best practices, advance solutions and mitigate the impact of HLB,” he says. “Additionally, labor availability and rising input costs, including shipping, continue to put pressure on the industry.”

The recent publicity about parasites, specifically cyclospora, has also raised concerns.

“Although Melissa’s is not part of the recall, it affects all produce companies in the industry,” says Schueller.

Clouthier says 2026 has been a difficult year that started with a short supply of vegetables coming from Mexico due to the weather.

“Then, mid-June to August was the complete opposite, with lower demands and higher volumes,” he says. “The cyclospora and jalapeño salmonella has impacted our business, with restaurants switching from fresh to canned salsa due to safety concerns.”

He adds that a higher rate of testing by the FDA has put some products on hold at the Mexican border for as much as a week.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite the challenges, Los Angeles-based wholesalers and produce suppliers predict the future will be bright.

“I expect the wholesale produce market to remain relevant because it provides businesses of all sizes with flexible, reliable access to a wide variety of commodities,” says Kramer at Giumarra.

Laffite at Wonderful Citrus believes the focus on health and better-for-you foods will continue shaping the category in the year ahead. “Consumers are increasingly looking for foods that deliver meaningful nutritional benefits while also fitting seamlessly into busy lifestyles.”

“We anticipate continued demand for fresh produce and nutritious snacks, as well as convenient formats that make it easier for consumers to incorporate healthy choices into their everyday routines.”

He also expects versatility to remain an important trend, with consumers looking for ingredients that can work across meals, snacks, beverages and recipes.

“By combining strong in-store visibility with products that align with consumer preferences, we see an opportunity for further engagement and growth.”

PB



DAAKS
INTERNATIONAL
Rooted in Specialty Produce

The Green Jewel.

LUXURY THAT GROWS.

PREMIUM OKRA
PROUDLY GROWN
IN CALIFORNIA.

HAND SELECTED FOR QUALITY | PRECISION GROWN | HARVESTED AT PEAK FRESHNESS

RESERVED FOR
Those Who Know Quality.

CONTACT
SAM: 917-691-5577 | SUNNY: 909-851-2781

SOURCED FROM NICARAGUA, HONDURAS & MEXICO FOR 365 DAYS AVAILABILITY.

XXX B Primus Labs



Once considered a niche vegetable, beets are finding new fans as consumers embrace their flavor, nutrition, and versatility across a wide range of meal occasions.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Root Vegetables Finding New Growth

Retailers are expanding the role of root veggies beyond staples.

BY MIKE DUFF

For generations, potatoes, carrots and onions have been the dependable backbone of the produce department. Now, retailers are asking a different question: What else can root vegetables do?

From sweet potato bowls and colorful beets to parsnips, daikon and other globally inspired varieties, the category is finding new life as shoppers look for more flavor, nutrition, convenience and inspiration. The opportunity isn't necessarily to replace the staples that built the category, but to expand the occasions in which consumers see roots as an essential part of the meal.

At Giant Carlisle, Chris Bush, regional director of the Everett, PA, store, says that some locations lend themselves to a more traditional root vegetables presentation. "The more rural you are, you'll find the meat and potatoes are bigger."

The Everett store has a major potato and onion presentation up front facing the rest of the produce section, which continues behind.

In contrast, Food Bazaar, headquartered in Long Island City, NY, focuses on variety when it comes to root vegetables. Its clientele is a mix of ethnicities, so the company's stores need to not only offer diversity in mainstream root vegetables, but also those consistent with Asian, Caribbean and Latin cuisine.

Food Bazaar includes a wide variety of root vegetables in its promotions. On a recent day, deals included jicama, white turnip, radishes, organic beets at 25% off, with box radishes at 34% off, parsley root at 40% off, and daikon at 44% off.

Argus Farm Stop, Ann Arbor, MI, is hyper-focused on local pro-

duce, which means that in the colder months, its vegetable assortment leans heavily toward root vegetables.

Dani Cavagnaro, Argus produce manager, says the store holds a unique position. Although it is Michigan-centric, Argus operates in a college town that has a population drawn from across the world. "We're not your typical Midwestern city," she says. "We have so many people from so many culinary backgrounds."

Similar to retail shoppers' preferences, foodservice operators seek new flavor profiles and ingredients in an atmosphere where the fresh and novel are welcomed.

"We provide produce for several local restaurants in the downtown area, and they have done a great deal with introducing new vegetables that might otherwise be passed by or be intimidating to people," says Cavagnaro. "Small restaurants help with that."

Staple root vegetables remain foundational in a state where potatoes and carrots are not only central to the regional fare, but are key crops grown there.

THE ROOT CAUSE

Anne-Marie Roerink, president of 210 Analytics, San Antonio, TX, says root vegetables are having something of a renaissance and have been a bright spot within an overall challenging produce environment.

"Potatoes continue to anchor the category, while sweet potatoes, yams and beets are bringing new relevance through nutrition, fiber, bold color and highly shareable meal formats," she says.

Even with more root vegetables getting attention, Roerink points out potatoes accounted for about 72% of dollar sales in the category over a recently concluded 52-week period.

"Deflation is pulling potato dollars down 1.3% year over year, unit and volume sales are essentially stable, and volume is up 5.5% versus three years ago," she says. "That stability, combined with the rapid growth of sweet potatoes/yams and beets, suggests the

POTATOES FOR EVERY OCCASION

Fresh thinking that brings
new occasions & new growth
to the potato category.

**Plan your potato
program with us!**



RPE

Brands. Insights. Solutions.

A Grimmway Produce Group™ Company

Sales: 800-678-2789



Brand recognition is becoming increasingly important in root categories as shoppers seek consistency and quality.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

opportunity is less about replacing the traditional potato and more about expanding the role of root vegetables across more meal occasions."

Roerink says the numbers demonstrate consumers continue to look for ways to add root vegetables to meal occasions even while other produce categories face pressure.

"In the latest 52 weeks, fresh root vegetables generated \$5.9 billion in sales, up 2.6%, with unit sales up 2.7% and volume up 2.2%," she says. "Within the category, sweet potatoes/yams are the standout in terms of year-over-year growth, reaching \$1 billion in sales, up 21.3% in dollars, 15.6% in units and 18.6% in volume.

"The latest four weeks are even more striking: Dollar sales are up 31.3%, units 25.1%, and volume 30.3%."

Once confined to the role of a seasonal side dish, the sweet potato/yam segment has evolved.

"The popularity of the sweet potato hot honey bowl and similar bowl builds has helped turn the sweet potato into a highly versatile, everyday ingredient, while also benefiting complementary ingredients such as grains, proteins and other vegetables," says Roerink. "Sweet potatoes check several boxes consumers are seeking right now: fiber, nutrients, natural sweetness, color and versatility, while also fitting into the broader trend toward simple, customizable bowls and meals."

SUCCESS WITH BEETS

Another success story, beets make the case that consumers are more willing to experiment with nutrient-dense vegetables.

Todd Miedema, vice president, Miede-

ma Produce, Hudsonville, MI, says many consumers see beets as having a lot of health benefits, and are buying beets themselves, beet juice and beet powders. "That consumption is up, and we do notice that, too. Beets are moving better at the retail level."

Fresh beet sales are up 22.1% in dollars, 18.2% in units and 16.2% in volume over the latest 52 weeks, says Roerink. Over three years, the category has grown more than 50% in dollars.

"Like sweet potatoes, beets benefit from their nutrient and fiber credentials, but they also bring strong visual appeal and versatility to salads, bowls, roasting and other meal occasions."

THE FLEX

Root vegetables work in a variety of dishes and can be mutually substituted, as in the case of consumers switching to and from carrots and parsnips and white and sweet potatoes. They can be prepared as a main entree, a side dish, or an element in anything from a skillet meal to soup.

"Root vegetables have tremendous versatility, giving retailers an opportunity to think about them across more occasions than the traditional produce set might suggest," says Karen White, vice president of marketing operations, Grimmway Produce Group, Bakersfield, CA.

"Carrots and potatoes each have distinct purchase patterns, but both can move easily across snacking, quick sides, weeknight cooking, family meals and entertaining."

Retailers can also partner with vendors developing products that align with evolving consumer trends, offering everything

from fresh bulk vegetables to packaged and value-added options that make preparing root vegetables more convenient.

"We see the opportunity in helping consumers unlock more of that versatility through the right formats, pack sizes, preparation cues and inspiration," says White. "As we move through the remainder of 2026 and into 2027, those occasions naturally evolve from back-to-school and summer grilling into fall harvest flavors, roasting and soups, and, ultimately, holiday meals and entertaining. The product may be familiar, but the occasion, format, and inspiration can continually feel new."

Market research indicates consumers are eating at home more, but they continue to have tastes shaped by restaurant experiences.

"Consumers are looking for new flavors and experiences, but they also want solutions that fit easily into everyday life," says White. "That creates an opportunity to bring innovation to vegetables they already know and trust through new formats, flavors and usage occasions."



Argus Farm Stop, Ann Arbor, MI, tailors its root vegetable assortment to Michigan-grown products while offering a diverse selection that reflects the global culinary traditions of its customer base. PHOTO COURTESY ARGUS FARM STOP

Always Fresh. Always Available.

Add variety to your radish offering. For You® Radishes, Radish MatchStixx, and Radish Chips are always available from Miedema: the only year round grower of cello radishes in the country. **Call today!**



616.669.9420

www.miedemaproduce.com



BRAND STATEMENTS

As is the case with other produce categories, branding can boost buys. Ami Ben-Dror, manager, Dorot Farm, Melville, NY, says the carrots he offers are premium products that appeal to those consumers who are inclined to purchase higher-end produce. For him, the key points that have to be addressed in moving product are consistency and branding.

Branded products have become more important in a number of commodities, demonstrating that the premium product shopper may gravitate to a brand in a root category, such as carrots. As long as the brand is there, that shopper will come in "time and again to buy. These people are looking to buy the same brand, same quality," says Ben-Dror.

Core products, such as potatoes, are foundational and need an in-store profile to draw consumer attention to the root vegetable

category. But providing options and variety are critical, local considerations.

"There is an opportunity to merchandise around occasions and meal solutions and give consumers more inspiration for how to use the product," says White. "Seasonality is a big part of that opportunity. Back-to-school can emphasize snacking and convenient week-night solutions. As we move into fall, the story transitions toward harvest flavors, roasting, soups and comfort meals, followed by family meals and entertaining during the holidays."

IN SEASON

Retailers recognize seasonality plays into root vegetable sales, and promotional plans often kick into high gear as the year grows colder.

"When things turn cooler, we do see consumption of those items

showcase NATIONAL SWEET POTATOES



The Freshest Carolina Gold Sweet Potatoes
and Best Customer Service Offered

NOW SHIPPING NEW CROP CURED
SEPC BOOTH #317

11124 Christian Road, Wilson, NC 27896
(252) 237-7313
vickfamilyfarms.com

For Sales Contact: Charlotte Vick
(252) 885-0051
charlotte@vickfamilyfarms.com



Packing & Shipping Varieties of
SWEETPOTATOES

**Quality, Service &
Year-round Supply**

Custom Package Sizes
are available

For information contact
our sales team

252.443.6011
Fax 252.443.6746

SEPC BOOTH #1958

www.nashproduce.com

go up," Miedema says. "When people are making a nice hearty stew, and they want something new in there. For example, a parsnip is a great substitute if you want to give something a little pizzazz."

For younger consumers, retailers might suggest new uses for root vegetables based on consumption and restaurant trends, providing information about how to prepare them along with notes on how they support wellness.

"I do believe that a lot more of the younger generation is willing to do that, and to get friends over to cook, to make food at home, and there is the experimenting," says Miedema.

And when consumers find new recipes and ways to prepare food, they often share them with friends and relatives, he adds.

None of it needs to be complex — rutabaga, parsnip and turnip fries all can be "fantastic," Miedema points out.

Retailers who provide new ideas for consumers will be at a new level of engagement and, perhaps, gratitude. "I think it would drive produce sales, and it would generate some loyalty for that retailer," he says.

PB

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- "The sweet potato bowl leans into the popularity of cottage cheese and was among the fastest-rising Google searches over the past year. This build-the-bowl trend uses yams as the anchor while consumers layer on proteins, cottage cheese, hot honey and sometimes other veggies"

Anne-Marie Roerink, 210 Analytics, San Antonio, TX

- "Root vegetables have tremendous versatility, giving retailers an opportunity to think about them across more occasions than the traditional produce set might suggest."

Karen White, Grimmway Produce Group, Bakersfield, CA

showcase NATIONAL SWEET POTATOES

TOPASHAW FARMS

Premium Quality Sweet Potatoes

At Topashaw Farms, we know sweet potatoes. Our family's been growing 'em for over 30 years!

With numerous acres of rotating crop land, cutting edge technology, and an experienced, dedicated staff... Topashaw has the right team to meet high customer demands.

662-682-7733

Fax: 662-682-7736

topashaw.com

PB PRODUCE
BUSINESS



**INITIATING
INDUSTRY
IMPROVEMENT
FOR 40 YEARS**

*To get ahead in the
produce business, you
need to stay ahead of
the produce business.*

**For subscription
information, please visit
www.producebusiness.com
or call 561-994-1118**



Jackson Farming Company

*In the south we love
our tea sweet - and our
potatoes the same way*



**Delivering the best
products from our family
farm to your family's table**

Jackson Farming Company

Autryville, NC | 910-567-2202 | www.jfcmelons.com

Sweet Potatoes
Eastern Cantaloupes
Watermelons
Honeydew Melons
Specialty Melons
Broccoli
Pumpkins



Grow Your Retail & Foodservice Business

Connect with retail and foodservice companies serving the fresh produce supply chain with Blue Book's credit rating and marketing information.



Grow Sales

Connect with thousands of businesses throughout the produce supply chain with our searchable online database.

Manage Business Risk

Know a company's Blue Book rating, predictive score, and pay practices before making the sale.

Resolve Challenging Transactions

Use Trading Assistance to resolve a business dispute or collect a past due payment.

Grow Your Business—Contact Us Today!



This vibrant apple display plays off the freshness and color of apples, and draws shoppers to the produce department.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBÉRT FRESH MARKETS

Six Ways To Sell More Apples

Promote apples throughout the year, not just when leaves start changing.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

There's more than one way to sell an apple. This season, retailers may need all of them.

Apples are a major contributor to produce department sales. In 2025, the category ranked as the third most popular fruit behind berries and grapes.

Still, dollar sales were down 2.4%, according to the *U.S. Produce Retail Point of Sales Results*, published by the Washington, D.C.-headquartered International Fresh Produce Association in January 2026.

The opportunity ahead for retailers is to promote and merchandise strategically, kicking off with the new crop.

"We'll do our new crop apple extravaganza in mid-October," says Terry Esteve, produce and floral director at six Robért Fresh Markets and a Lakeview Grocery, headquartered in New Orleans, LA.

"Sales jump because we have apples customers may not have tried before on display and at an attractive price."

1. PROMOTE THE CROP

The crop will dictate what makes the most sense for retailers to push. U.S. growers are forecast to harvest 263 million bushels of apples in the 2026-27 season, down 7% from last year and 3% below the five-year average, according to the Falls Church, VA-headquartered U.S. Apple Association's *2026 Industry Outlook Report*, released Aug. 21.

"The story this season really varies by region," according to Chris Gerlach, USAApple vice president and author of the report.

West Coast availability is shaping up well, with Washington, the nation's top producer, forecast at 176 million bushels, down overall only 2% in volume.

"We anticipate our volume to increase by approximately 10%, driven by continued growth across our apple program," says Rose Vejvoda, sustainability and communications manager at CMI Orchards, in Wenatchee, WA. "This means supplies are expected to remain ample to support retail promotions."

Brianna Shales, marketing director at Stemilt Growers, also in Wenatchee, notes there will be varieties, like Cosmic Crisp and Honeycrisp, with larger supply than last year that will need promotions. "The good news for retailers is that these two apples have strong momentum, and they will be category boosters."

Michigan's apple crop is nearly equal to last year's, at around 25 million bushels, ranking the state No. 3 in production.

"One of the biggest differences season over season is fruit size, with apples sizing larger this year," says Trish Taylor, marketing manager for Riveridge Produce Marketing Inc., in Sparta, MI.

A good example is larger tray-pack Honeycrisp apples that look more promotable than limiting programs to 72s, 80s and 88s, where demand is already strong, according to Chuck Yow, business development and sales at North Bay Produce, in Traverse City, MI.

On the East Coast, New York, the nation's No. 2 apple producer at 32 million bushels, will have 10% less volume, while Pennsylvania and Virginia collectively are usually less than 7 million, are down 58% and 48%, respectively.

"A drought left 10% to 15% of last year's fruit undersized for market. This year, apples are running two to three sizes larger," says Austin Fowler, chief executive officer and co-owner of Fowler Farms, in Wolcott, NY.

Pivoting with the crop, says Shales, "is where opportunities translate to dollars in produce."

2. CURATE A DISPLAY

Apples have long been a pile-it-high category. Going big can be good. However, more apple varieties, higher costs, and shrink make deciding what gets the space increasingly important.

"When shrink is a big deal for a retailer, displays don't become big deals," says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist at Charlie's Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers such as Metropolitan Market and larger chains such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts.

During Rob  rt Market's fall event, they'll put 14 to 18 varieties on sale, says Esteve. "Then we'll take the biggest movers like Honey-crisp, which is our No. 1 seller, Pink Lady, second, and Cosmic Crisp, third, and build additional displays of these varieties, plus tie in apple cider."

Build displays on best-practice merchandising.

"Apples should look abundant, fresh and colorful," says Kristi Harris, brand manager for Honeybear Marketing LLC, Eden Prairie, MN.

Display bins in secondary, high-traffic locations remain an effective way to merchandise apples, according to Shales. "We've seen a bit of a resurgence around these, especially for calling out specialty items."

Retailers have reported double-digit sales lifts when apples are cross-merchandised with caramel dips during seasonal promotions, according to the IFPA Consumer Tracker 2026, cited in the IFPA Global Intelligence Engine.

"Secondary display areas, such as the deli and cheese, have also generated 15-20% increases in apple sales during promotional periods," says Julieta Castillo, marketing coordinator for Superfresh Growers, in Yakima, WA. "These results reinforce the value of taking apples beyond the traditional produce display and merchandising them around how consumers actually eat and shop."

3. PACK IT RIGHT

This season's larger fruit in some growing regions opens opportunities for bigger packs.

"One is promoting 5-pound bags instead of 3-pound bags for certain varieties that are sizing larger, such as Fuji, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious and Jonagold," says North Bay Produce's Yow.

At the same time, smaller bags can make the price of entry easier for shoppers.

"A lot of retailers are selling the 2-pound bag and seeing success with it because consumers go through it a little faster and come back again to purchase more," says Charlie's Produce's Kazmirski. "But three pounds is still in the same ballpark."

Overall, bagged apples continue to gain momentum, with dollar sales up 13% and volume sales up 7%, while bulk apples are trending down 2% in dollars and 3.5% in volume, according to Circana data for the 52 weeks ending Aug. 9, 2026, as shared by Superfresh Growers.

"That doesn't mean bulk is going away. The strongest apple programs balance both, using bulk to showcase varieties and give consumers choice," says Castillo. "At the same time, packaged options provide convenience, value, and an easy grab-and-go solution."

4. HELP SHOPPERS CHOOSE

As apple varieties with different flavors and textures have multiplied, telling them apart by sight hasn't gotten any easier, especially among red-skinned varieties.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"I love in-and-outs, meaning those fun apple varieties that show up for a short time and then they're gone. It adds another layer of excitement to the category."**

Max Maddaus, Kowalski's Markets, Woodbury, MN

- **"Secondary display areas have generated 15-20% increases in apple sales during promotional periods."**

Julieta Castillo, Superfresh Growers, Yakima, WA

- **"A strong display with clear variety differentiation can sell more fruit than simply putting additional varieties into the case."**

Kristi Harris, Honeybear Marketing LLC, Eden Prairie, MN

"Put five different apples in a bag and ask the average consumer to identify each one, and I don't know that they could," says Kazmirski.

Kowalski's Market, Woodbury, MN, uses signage to tell customers what each variety is best for — whether it's baking, snacking or pies, and to give them a sense of the apple's flavor profile, says Max Maddaus, director of perishable operations and produce director at Kowalski's, an 11-store chain.

"It's important to have those educational pieces there so customers know what they're getting."

Many growers offer programs that can help retailers deliver this consumer education.

For example, CMI Orchards Flavogram uses color-coded bin cards, posters, and digital assets to compare varieties by flavor, aroma, and texture, helping shoppers match unfamiliar apples to ones they already know.

Apple Crush takes a dating-app approach, connecting colorful in-store bins, POS signage, and displays via QR codes to a digital experience where shoppers answer questions about taste, texture, and use to find their "perfect apple match."

"The Flavogram remains a useful tool for simplifying the shopping experience by helping consumers identify apples that match their preferred flavor profile," says CMI's Vejvoda. "Apple Crush continues to deliver strong results by helping younger consumers discover apples in a fun, interactive way."

5. KEEP IT FRESH

Keeping the apple department fresh doesn't necessarily mean carrying more varieties. Sometimes it means taking one out, bringing another in, and giving a short-season apple its moment in the spotlight.

"We get rid of what's not working," says Maddaus. "There are some old-school apple varieties, like Red Delicious and Golden Delicious, that we don't carry anymore because there just aren't enough consumers looking for them. At the end of the day, there are so many significantly better-eating apples available to customers."

Gala remains the largest-volume U.S. apple at 16% of production, according to the *USApple 2026 Industry Outlook Report*, followed by

Red Delicious (12%), Granny Smith (11%), Honeycrisp (10%), other varieties (9%), and Fuji (9%). Over the past five years, Granny Smith, Honeycrisp, Cosmic Crisp and Pink Lady/Cripps Pink have increased production, while Gala, Red Delicious and Fuji have declined.

"We already have customers asking when the Ambrosias will be back in," says Robért Market's Esteve.

One example of what's new is Fowler Farms' Sweet Maia, an early-season, crunchy, flavorful apple timed to sell through before later varieties arrive. Ludacrisp follows in November, bringing a sweet-tart flavor and a distinctive name that plays off rapper Ludacris and is designed to catch younger consumers' attention. The Midwest Apple Improvement Association in Oberlin, OH, developed both varieties, along with others such as EverCrisp.

"We sold out of both last year," says Fowler.

6. SELL THE OCCASION

Apples can drive sales of fruit and other basket items year-round.

"In the fall, we do a lot of cross-merchandising with our bakery department, putting apple pies, apple butter, apple bread and apple crisp into our produce displays. We even have a Honeycrisp apple pie that always goes into our Honeycrisp display. It works really well and captures incremental sales," says Maddaus.

Unique seasonal merchandising is another effective way to drive dollars. For example, CMI is tapping into America 250 celebrations, including Veterans Day initiatives that align with new-crop availability and harvest completion, says Vejvoda. "Our American Dream program was created to honor our active military, veterans, and their families. We'll be celebrating this milestone year in an even bigger way through retail promotions and consumer engagement opportunities."

Healthy snacking, holiday baking, charcuterie and entertaining,



A curated blend of bulk, bagged and related apple items make a display that encourages multiple purchases.
PHOTO COURTESY RIVERIDGE PRODUCE

and wellness goals are all occasions ripe to promote apples.

"Apples have a great story to tell, with so many consumers thinking about GLP-1s, fiber, and reducing the amount of processed food in their diets. They're naturally sweet, hydrating, and a good source of fiber, all in a convenient grab-and-go package," says Riveridge's Taylor.

Spring also provides opportunities to refresh the category with seasonal messaging. FirstFruits, for example, has a Taste of Luck, a seasonal program built around Granny Smith and Opal, with St. Patrick's Day recipes and merchandising.

"The bigger takeaway," says Chuck Zeutenhorst, president of sales and marketing for the Prescott, WA-based company, "is that apples should have a reason to be promoted throughout the year, not just when leaves start changing."

PB

SweetTango®
APPLES

**Sweet, Fresh,
and Crisp.**

**Pick the best for
your store.**





There is little imported organic citrus, which means California plays an especially important role in supplying the organic category nationwide.

PHOTO COURTESY CREEKSIDE ORGANICS

Three Ways to Build Stronger California Citrus Sales This Winter

California leads the United States in fresh citrus, allowing retailers to build excitement.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

The California citrus season's peak volume and variety begins this month, giving retailers plenty of fruit and even more ways to sell it.

The state's 2026/27 forecast calls for 84 million cartons of navels, including blood oranges and Cara Caras, up 5% from last year's initial estimate, according to the *California Navel Orange Objective Measurement Report*, released Sept. 11 by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) in cooperation with USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The companion *California Mandarin Objective Measurement Report* projects 38 million 40-pound cartons of Tango and W. Murcott mandarins, up 15%.

Add specialty citrus, lemons and grapefruit, and California gives produce departments ample to work with this season. Turning that volume into sales comes down to knowing what to buy, where to go

big, and how to merchandise and promote both the whole crop and each variety when it's at its best.

"California citrus season is when citrus is most important to our customers, so we've got to get after it right away," says Max Madaus, director of perishable operations and produce director at Kowalski's Markets, an 11-store chain headquartered in Woodbury, MN. "There's no limping into it. As soon as the fruit is available, we've got to get big displays up, build waterfalls, and support it with great marketing and point-of-sale material."

1. KNOW THE STATE SNAPSHOT & SEASONAL OUTLOOK

Imports have become a bigger part of the U.S. fresh citrus supply, rising from about 20% of domestic availability two decades ago to more than 40% in 2024/25, according to the USDA Economic Research Service's *Fruit and Tree Nuts Outlook* report, released March 27, 2025. Even so, domestically grown fruit still accounts for the majority of fresh citrus available to U.S. consumers, and California dominates that supply.

"Consumers are looking for three things from citrus: great eating quality, convenience, and value," says Sarah Deaton, director of marketing for Sun Pacific, Pasadena, CA.

"California is particularly well positioned because we can offer

Real-time collaboration:

The key to Sunkist Growers' success at retail

Consumers continue to prioritize health and wellness, and citrus remains a natural fit because it delivers great taste, versatility, and nutritional benefits.

According to insights gathered through Sunkist's category management program, Cassie Howard, senior director of category management and marketing at Sunkist Growers, says shoppers are also seeking more convenient snacking options and premium produce experiences that bring excitement to the department.

At the same time, Howard says younger consumers are increasingly willing to explore new varieties and flavors, creating opportunities for customers to build engagement through seasonal storytelling, merchandising, and showcasing the full category.

"Whether it's everyday favorites or specialty offerings, citrus continues to resonate with consumers looking for fresh, flavorful choices," she adds.

As a company, Howard says Sunkist's approach is grounded in real-time collaboration, working with customers on category insights, shopper trends, merchandising, and marketing support to help drive results.

TAILORED PROGRAMS

So how does Sunkist help customers navigate seasonality while maintaining a strong program throughout the year? Jeff Gaston, Sunkist's vice president, varietal operations, says the company's year-round supply strategy combines Sunkist's cooperative grower network (from California and Arizona) with complimentary import programs. Although imports supplement supply during seasonal transitions, Sunkist also maintains California citrus availability during the summer months.

Overseas producers, Gaston explains, are held to the same commitment to quality and integrity that defines the Sunkist brand, adding that the company keeps retail partners informed about supply transitions well in advance, so citrus can stay a dependable, profitable category on the shelf year-round, not just during the winter peak.

"Sunkist's ability to leverage its network of growers and supply sources helps customers maintain a strong citrus program year-round," he says.

Given that every customer's customer base and shelf space is different, Sunkist develops

customized packaging formats and merchandising solutions tailored to customer needs. "That flexibility gives customers room to create

seasonal interest, encourage discovery, and show shoppers the real diversity of what our growers produce," Gaston adds.



**THE MOST
ICONIC
ORANGE
IN PRODUCE**

**SUNKIST®
NAVELS**

As America's oldest farmer-owned citrus cooperative, Sunkist® has become a beloved household name for generations of shoppers. Make Sunkist Navels the centerpiece of your citrus lineup and learn how the power of our 130+ year old legacy can help you capture market share and drive loyalty.

Sunkist is a registered trademark of Sunkist Growers, LLC.
©2026. Produce of U.S.A. All Rights Reserved.

Sunkist
FARMER OWNED SINCE 1893

consumers a broad range of citrus varieties throughout the year, from familiar everyday favorites to specialty varieties that create excitement.”

The Golden State’s role is even greater in organic citrus, says Bianca Kaprielian, co-chief executive officer of Creekside Organics, Bakersfield, CA, which packs its citrus under the Fruit World brand.

“On the East Coast, shoppers see a significant amount of imported conventional citrus, especially mandarins. Organic is a different story. There is little imported organic citrus, which means California plays an especially important role in supplying the organic category nationwide.”

California produces more than 90% of the nation’s fresh citrus and leads the U.S. in fresh-market oranges, lemons and mandarins, according to California Citrus Mutual, Exeter, CA. The state’s acreage reflects that mix. Based on the *CDFA/NASS 2026 California Citrus Acreage Report*, oranges, including navels, account for nearly half (45.6%) of California’s citrus acreage.

The lineup keeps California fruit in the produce department for an extended selling window. Early navels start around Oct. 1 and run through June 15, while tangerines and mandarins run from Oct. 1 to May 1. Grapefruit, including pomelos, and lemons are available year-round, with new crops starting around Nov. 1 and Aug. 1.

For retailers, California citrus can fill supply gaps when regional crops come up short. After bad weather wiped out the local satsuma crop a few years ago, Terry Esteve, produce and floral director at Rob  rt Fresh Markets and Lakeview Grocery, a six-store chain headquartered in New Orleans, LA, looked farther afield to keep citrus in the department.

“We partner with Matrana’s Produce here, and they’re a Sunkist house, so they have a good variety of California citrus,” says Esteve of the family-owned wholesaler serving Louisiana and Mississippi.

Looking to the 2026-2027 California citrus season forecast, early projections indicate increased volumes across most citrus varieties this season, says Randy Stucky, director of harvesting and grower relations for Bee Sweet Citrus, in Fowler, CA. “While overall size structure is slightly smaller than last year, we expect a strong showing of medium to large fruit sizes, providing a diverse and desirable mix for our customers.”

Growers say a robust El Ni  o pattern could bring above-average rainfall to California’s Central Valley this winter. If prolonged rains keep crews out of the groves, harvest could slow, and supplies temporarily tighten. For retailers, that could mean lighter orders and the need to adjust ad volumes or promotion timing until picking resumes.

2. GO BIG & BROAD WITH SELECTION

Biggest sellers are usually bagged mandarins, oranges, bulk lemons and grapefruit, says Jason Sadoian, sales representative with Bee Sweet Citrus.

“The biggest shift we’re seeing is that consumers aren’t necessarily choosing between ‘commodity’ and ‘specialty’ citrus. They’re shopping across the category based on the occasion,” adds Sun Pacific’s Deaton. “They may buy a bag of Cuties for the family while also picking up a specialty variety like Cara Caras, because it looks interesting or offers a different flavor experience.”

ORANGES. Navels remain a core seller, according to John Carter, vice president of sales at Sunkist Growers. “Volume was up 7% season-to-date as of August, despite a larger size profile that required

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **“The biggest shift we’re seeing is that consumers aren’t necessarily choosing between ‘commodity’ and ‘specialty’ citrus. They’re shopping across the category based on the occasion.”**

Sarah Deaton, Sun Pacific, Pasadena, CA

- **“Opportunities for retailers include leaning into limited-window specialty varieties with dedicated displays and cross-promotions.”**

Cassie Howard, Sunkist Growers, Valencia, CA

- **“When the Sumos are in, they take the stage. If you’re going to promote Sumos, you’re not promoting navels or tangerines with them. You’re going to want to grab that high retail.”**

Jason Kazmirski, Charlie’s Produce, Seattle, WA

active marketing coordination with packinghouses and customers.”

Heirloom navels are a best-seller for Charlie’s Produce, in Seattle, WA, which supplies several independent retailers such as Metropolitan Market and larger chains such as Fred Meyer and Sprouts. “Heirlooms have grown in popularity here in the Northwest,” says Jason Kazmirski, retail specialist. “They tend to have more juice inside; that’s the reason.”

In the Southeast, Cara Caras have picked up over the last three or four years, says Rob  rt Fresh Markets’ Esteve. “They’re selling almost as well as the navel oranges.”

Cara Cara oranges were the top growth item this season, adds Sunkist’s Carter. “This is especially true of the 3-pound bag, up 27% versus last year, as more consumers become aware of the fruit’s unique flavor and added health benefits.”

Sunkist Cara Cara oranges continue to benefit from the cooperative’s *Power with the Pink Orange* partnership with the National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF), which helps keep the variety top of mind for shoppers throughout the season.

“Opportunities for retailers include leaning into limited-window specialty varieties with dedicated displays and cross-promotions, particularly as Sunkist’s new Organic 3-pound Cara Cara Giro bag featuring our NBCF collab rolls out for the new season,” says Cassie Howard, senior director, category management and marketing.

MANDARINS. California has done a great job with its mandarins, says Kazmirski. “We roll through the mandarin crop from late November to March when we get to the Gold Nugget. Shoppers can tell the difference among these mandarins because they vary in size and flavor.”

Convenience is a major driver of consumer interest in mandarins.

“Their small size, easy-peel characteristics, seedless options, and portability make them naturally aligned with today’s lifestyles,” says Sun Pacific’s Deaton, who adds that the grower’s Cuties brand was the No. 1 selling mandarin, boasting the highest velocity by a wide margin along with unparalleled repeat rates (57% vs 40% of competitors’ buyers).

“We are excited to launch our ‘Don’t get caught without Cuties’

fruitsandveggies.org

The Ultimate Fruit & Veggie Hub

Fruitsandveggies.org is working hard for the produce industry. It boosts the appeal of fruits and veggies with the inspiration and information people need to make them deliciously easy.



have a
plant®

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



**THE
FOUNDATION**
FOR FRESH PRODUCE



campaign. When the cuteness is irresistible and the cravings inevitable, we'll remind people that the best defense against growling stomachs and teary tantrums is a solid supply of Cuties."

The California season for Wonderful Citrus' mandarin brand, Halos, is forecast to start earlier than usual, says Zak Laffite, president of the Delano, CA grower. "Harvest will likely start mid-October with fruit hitting store shelves by Halloween."

Laffite adds that Wonderful Halos are available in a variety of pack sizes, including 2-, 3-, and 5-pound bags, as well as boxes, with organic Wonderful Halos offered in 2-pound bags at select retailers.

Large mandarins, or dekopons, are booming.

"We forged a new partnership with Family Tree Farms out of California last year with their Sno-Mandarins, and it was outstanding. Customers love it, especially since the product's great," says Kowalski's Markets' Maddaus.

Sumo Citrus, the trademarked dekopon from AC Foods, parent of AC Brands/Suntreat in Fresno, CA, takes center stage when it's available, according to Kazmirski, with its higher retail price making it a fruit to feature on its own.

"When the Sumos are in, they take the stage," says Kazmirski. "If you're going to promote Sumos, you're not promoting navels or tangerines with them. You're going to want to grab that high retail."

SPECIALTY. Specialty citrus gives retailers another way to keep the category fresh throughout winter, says Creekside Organics' Kaprielian. "We've increased acreage for our organic quat program, including Mandarinquats, Centennial Kumquats, and Meiwa Kumquats, as we've seen growing interest in these unique varieties. We also offer other specialty citrus throughout the season, including sweet limes and Buddha's hand."

For retailers, education and visibility are key, Kaprielian adds. "Simple messaging around flavor, how to eat or use each variety, and their limited seasonal windows can make specialty citrus more approachable and encourage shoppers to try something new."

LEMONS & GRAPEFRUIT. Wonderful Seedless lemons kicked off its seventh season with California-grown fruit starting harvest in July, and nationwide placement in large retailers such as Whole Foods, Walmart, Trader Joe's and Kroger, says Laffite.

"Available in 1-, 2-, 3-, and 5-pound bags, our seedless lemons remain the leader in the bagged lemon category, having driven nearly 100% of the category's growth over the past four years. By eliminating seeds, they make everyday tasks like slicing, squeezing, and cooking more convenient."

Sunkist Grower's California-grown cocktail grapefruit, Oro Blancos, Melo Golds, and pomelos are available during windows between mid-October and mid-May.

3. PROMOTE EVERY DAY & HOLIDAYS

Winter weather can drive promotions, and at Rob rt Fresh Markets, colder temperatures signal it's time to build big displays of 40-count California navels, says Esteve.

"As soon as it gets cold here, everybody gets sick. That's when the big displays go up because everybody's looking to supplement their vitamin C. We'll sell a bin of those big Sunkist navels every other day in every store."

Tried-and-true, high-graphic, point-of-sale displays remain a great way to merchandise and help retailers drive impulse citrus purchases, says Wonderful Citrus' Laffite.

"We encourage retailers to display POS (point-of-sale) in sec-



California offers consumers a broad range of citrus varieties throughout the year, from familiar everyday favorites to specialty varieties that create excitement.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

ondary locations beyond the produce aisle, including at checkout and lobby entrances, to maximize visibility and capture shoppers' attention throughout the store."

Another way to go big is with a seasonal citrus event.

Many Northwest retailers served by Charlie's Produce do just that in November and December — merchandising lemons, limes, navels, grapefruit and mandarins together, but being selective about what goes on ad.

"You don't have five different mandarins on the same ad. You run one or two, whatever's available," says Kazmirski. "They're not all available at their peak season at the same time."

Different retails across the citrus mix give retailers additional promotional price points while protecting margin, he adds.

For the holidays, navel oranges and mandarins are a consistent hit with consumers during Thanksgiving and Christmas, as their sweet flavors pair perfectly with holiday dishes and desserts, according to Monique Mueller, director of communications for Bee Sweet Citrus.

"Heirloom navels and other varieties appeal to those pursuing healthy goals as the new year begins, while lemons add a bright, fresh touch to classic Super Bowl recipes. For the Lunar New Year, families often choose pomelos as a symbol of prosperity, while Cara Cara and Royal Red oranges, with their vibrant pink and red hues, take center stage in Valentine's Day promotions."

Whatever the day or event, California offers a diverse range of citrus varieties to suit every occasion from fall to spring.



Florida provides retailers with a dependable supply of fresh fruits and vegetables during the fall and winter, supporting promotions and keeping produce departments well stocked.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Fall Produce Bounty in Florida

The Sunshine State's fall produce keeps supermarket produce shelves stocked during fall and winter.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

Growing produce during the contra season, Florida is known as a reliable supplier that keeps retail produce aisles stocked with fruits and vegetables when other states and growing regions cannot.

The Sunshine State supplies product sufficient for promotions during the fall and winter that keep produce sales moving during otherwise bleak weather times.

"Florida is the primary source for domestically grown produce from fall through winter, making it one of the most important production regions during this period," says Susie McKinley, director of the Division of Marketing and Development for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Tallahassee, FL.

"As temperatures cool across the country, Florida's fall harvest offers a wide selection of produce including bell peppers, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, snap beans, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, sweet corn and leafy greens."

Florida's produce remains a consumer draw for retailers up and down the East Coast, the Southeast and Midwest.

"Florida produce is a great opportunity to offer some seasonal

options that customers love," says Bucky Slagle, vice president of produce/foodservice/floral/Starbucks for K-VA-T Food Stores Inc., DBA Food City, Abingdon, VA.

PORTFOLIO VARIETY

In Florida, agriculture is the state's second-largest industry, producing more than 300 commodities. Favorable winter temperatures aid berry growth.

"Florida plays a critical role in the domestic produce supply chain," says Nick Wishnatzki, public relations director of Wish Farms, Plant City, FL. "Our state's subtropical climate allows growers to supply fresh strawberries during the winter months, providing retailers with a dependable source of domestically grown produce when consumer demand remains strong."

Florida's location enables fast delivery to Eastern markets, giving consumers peak flavor and nutritional value. Additionally, Florida's diverse crop offerings allow retailers to meet a wide range of consumer preferences, says Christina Morton, director of communications for the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA), in Maitland, FL.

"The variety of fruits and vegetables grown here, combined with the timing of our growing season, means consumers can enjoy U.S.-grown produce when the rest of the country is in the midst of or emerging from the long winter months," she says.

"Often, Florida is one of just a few domestic suppliers in the marketplace, and sometimes the only domestic supplier, for a variety of

CUPS ups Florida's citrus game.

Citrus Under Protective Screens is boosting the quality of Florida Grapefruit.



Learn more at Retail.FloridaCitrus.org

PB PRODUCE BUSINESS



INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT *Since 1985*

To get ahead in the produce business, you need to stay ahead of the produce business.

For subscription information, please visit www.producebusiness.com or call 561-994-1118

PB PROCUREMENT



Florida produce has earned a reputation for quality, freshness, and dependable supply, and is sometimes the only domestic supplier for strawberries, fresh market tomatoes, bell peppers, sweet corn and radishes. PHOTO COURTESY FDACS

crops, including strawberries, fresh market tomatoes, bell peppers, sweet corn, radishes and more."

That variety helps with important occasions.

"Florida's fall crops align with some of the year's most important produce selling periods," says Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing and innovation for Duda Farm Fresh Foods Inc., Oviedo, FL, which grows and ships celery, sweet corn, leafy greens and other crops.

"From back-to-school meal preparation and football season to holiday entertaining and family gatherings, fresh vegetables play a central role in seasonal shopping patterns. Products such as celery support a variety of consumer needs, including cooking, snacking, meal preparation, and holiday recipes, helping retailers drive traffic and increase basket size."

CITRUS ADVANTAGE

Known as The Citrus State, Florida's favorable climate helps it produce quality oranges, grapefruit and tangerines.

"Florida's abundant sunshine and warmth, coupled with its bountiful rainy season, provides ideal conditions for growing the sweetest and juiciest citrus that consumers are known to love," says Marisa

Zansler, Ph.D., director of economic and market research for the Florida Department of Citrus (FDOC), Bartow, FL.

"Florida's growing environment helps set our fruit apart from other regions of the world," she says. "The warm temperatures, sunshine, rain, and unique sandy soil create the perfect recipe for growing citrus, and the latest varieties show highly favorable traits, producing premium quality fruit and greater yield. Our oranges are globally recognized as being exceptionally sweet and juicy. Our growers are known for their commitment to producing superior fruit."

Florida is a great place to grow tomatoes and other vegetables during the fall, winter and spring, says Elyse Lipman, chief executive officer of Lipman Family Farms, Immokalee, FL.

"We're based in the Sunshine State, and as the cooler weather sets in, we're focused on Florida as the primary domestic source of fresh tomatoes," she says.

"Tomatoes belong to every season, and we take pride in being a part of whatever's simmering for fall meals and holiday spreads," Lipman adds. "The same goes for our peppers, cucumbers and squash. Each one delivers flavor that evolves to meet the season."



TRUST IS GROWN HERE



Scan
to learn more!
←



**Fresh
from
Florida.**

Celebrating America 250

FreshFromFlorida.com/Retail • Email: RetailMKT@FDACS.gov

SEASONAL BENEFIT

Florida produce helps retailers maintain seasonal advantages. "Florida produce is known for its great flavor and its unique seasonal availability, providing produce first in season domestically," says FDACS' McKinley.

"By harvesting produce during the fall and winter months, Florida growers provide a reliable and diverse supply of fresh fruits and vegetables to retailers. Within a matter of days, Florida produce is picked, shipped, and on store shelves all along the East Coast."

Retailers should take advantage of that seasonality.

"Florida produce performs best when retailers tell a story around seasonality, freshness and local agriculture," says Wishnatzki.

"Consumers connect with products that have a sense of place, and Florida's reputation for premium winter produce gives retailers a strong merchandising advantage."

SEASONAL OPTIMISM

The outlook for the state's fall-to-winter season looks good, says FDOC's Zansler. "The state has committed significant support for the industry to continue its new planting efforts, and demand for Florida citrus continues to be strong among our consumer audience. With new plantings from the most recent four to five years coming into production, the industry is conservatively hopeful for a 5% increase in production from last year.

"We are excited to say that every tree we are adding to Florida is helping us build the next chapter."

Florida produce has earned a reputation for quality, freshness and dependable supply. Retailers value Florida's ability to deliver consistent products throughout key seasonal transitions, says Duda's Towell.

"The outlook remains positive as consumers are planning for seasonal events, entertaining occasions, and holiday gatherings, creating significant opportunities for produce sales throughout the fall and winter months," she says. "Florida growers are positioned to support these trends with a dependable supply of fresh vegetables and strong customer partnerships."

K-VA-T/Food City's Slagle likes promoting Florida's citrus heritage.

"Florida tangerines and pummelos are both great for fall and winter," he says. "It brings back some of the nostalgia of the olden days when Florida citrus dominated. Customers love going in and finding fresh Florida tangerines and navels. Many shippers are experimenting with some great varieties that I think will help bring Florida citrus back closer to what it once was."

FRESH FROM FLORIDA PROMOTIONS

With 1.6 million social media followers, the Fresh From Florida logo drives sales and increases consumer awareness.

And retailers receive extensive marketing support through the "Fresh From Florida" advertising campaign, which includes a mix of TV, radio, print, digital display, and social media advertising, as well as promotions on online shopping platforms, cashback and coupon apps, and in-store advertising including retail floor graphics and shopping cart advertising.

FDACS partners with retailers to promote Florida commodities by using the Fresh From Florida brand through a retail incentive program that includes participating retailers that include Publix, Sam's Club, The Winn-Dixie Co., Walmart, ALDI, The Fresh Market and Sprouts.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING:

- **"Florida's abundant sunshine and warmth, coupled with its bountiful rainy season, provides ideal conditions for growing the sweetest and juiciest citrus that consumers are known to love."**

Marisa Zansler, Florida Department of Citrus, Bartow, FL

- **"By harvesting produce during the fall and winter months, Florida growers provide a reliable and diverse supply of fresh fruits and vegetables to retailers. Within a matter of days, Florida produce is picked, shipped, and on store shelves all along the East Coast."**

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

"These tools give retailers a clear advantage by pairing strong brand visibility with products that meet seasonal demand, creating compelling profit opportunities," says McKinley. "Shoppers look for the 'Fresh From Florida' logo on packaging and labels, and that recognition translates into real buying power. To increase sales, we encourage retailers to identify Florida produce in their print and digital weekly advertisements by featuring the 'Fresh From Florida' logo alongside product images."

The retail support aids suppliers and supermarkets.

"Each year, the state of Florida funds the Fresh From Florida program, an invaluable partner in providing farmers with resources to market their products to a national and global audience," says FFVA's Morton. "It is a recognizable brand that makes Florida produce easy to identify in store. Not only does it signify a customer is getting the highest quality, freshest produce, but it also provides marketing support to growers, keeping American consumers buying locally grown Florida produce."

In-store sampling events have also proven successful by giving consumers the chance to sample fresh Florida produce. Retailers also utilize in-store signage displays to promote Florida produce, says McKinley. "These promotions bring greater awareness to Florida fruit and vegetables, increasing demand and sales."

POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Despite yearly weather challenges including hurricanes, tropical storms and freezes, the outlook for Florida produce for the 2026-27 season remains positive.

"Florida growers anticipate a strong season ahead and are committed to providing reliable quality and consistent volumes to their customers," says Morton.

The simple act of placing a priority on buying Florida produce is a win for growers and consumers, she adds.

"For consumers, they know they are supporting Florida growers and getting produce that is of the freshest, highest quality. And for growers, it means having demand for their product that will in turn positively impact the people and communities behind this important industry in the state."



Red potatoes remain the Red River Valley's signature crop, but growing consumer demand has prompted many growers to expand yellow potato production.

PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO

Red River Valley Potatoes: A Story Worth Telling

From fertile soils to ideal weather, the region provides the perfect recipe for growing potatoes.

BY BOB JOHNSON

The Red River Valley is noted for more than the iconic 1925 cowboy love song that bears its name. The land straddling the border between Minnesota and North Dakota is blessed with a combination of geologic and climate advantages that make it particularly suitable for growing flavorful and nutrient-dense potatoes.

"The Red River Valley has a combination of soil, climate, and generations of growing experience that is difficult to replicate," says Carissa Olsen, president of NoKota Packers, Buxton, ND. "Our rich, black soil is some of the most fertile farmland in the world, and it produces potatoes with the color, texture and flavor the region has become known for."

NoKota Packers is a third-generation packer-shipper of potatoes grown by Red River Valley farmers. The company is part of the Fresh Solutions Network and, in addition to retail shipments, fills small orders for walk-up customers.

UNIQUE CLIMATE

The Red River Valley is one of the few areas of the country where potatoes are grown with rainfall and no irrigation.

"We grow our red potatoes on dry land — it gives the potato

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"The combination of great growing conditions, experience and long-standing relationships gives the Red River Valley a unique identity in the potato industry."**

Carissa Olsen, NoKota Packers, Buxton, ND

- **"We are so blessed with the soils and climate that we can give the consumers a choice between red and yellow potatoes."**

Gary Shields, Northern Plains Potato Growers, Grand Forks, MN

good flavor," says Gary Shields, executive director of Northern Plains Potato Growers, Grand Forks, MN. "Our processed potatoes are grown on irrigated land, while the fresh are grown on dry land."

The Northern Plains Potato Growers represents 200 family farmers on both sides of the Red River.

In addition to the soil and climate, Red River Valley potatoes benefit from growers who have worked the land for generations.

"The people are just as important as the land," says Olsen. "We work with experienced growers who understand this crop and this region extremely well. Many of the relationships between growers, packers and customers have been built over decades. That combina-



**CRYSTAL CHAMP
POTATOES**

**O.C. SCHULZ &
SONS, INC.**

Growers and Shippers of
Quality **Red River**
Valley Potatoes

Fresh **Reds** and **Yellows** in all Sizes

Crystal, North Dakota
Phone (701) 657-2152
e-mail: andy@ocschulz.com
or Jeff @ 701-741-8850
www.ocschulz.com




The Red River Valley's fertile black soil, favorable climate, and generations of farming expertise combine to produce the color, texture, and flavor that have made the region's potatoes renowned. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*



**REAL POTATOES.
REAL PEOPLE.
REAL COMMITMENT.**

FRESH RED AND YELLOW POTATOES
FROM THE RED RIVER VALLEY.



QUALITY
YOU CAN TRUST



GROWER
PARTNERSHIPS



PACKED
TO ORDER



SHIPPING
NATIONWIDE



Rooted in the Valley. Committed to Quality.

SALES Mike Rerick | Steve Johnson
miker@nokotapackers.com | stevej@nokotapackers.com
701-847-2200 | www.nokotapackers.com
Buxton, North Dakota

tion of great growing conditions, experience and long-standing relationships gives the Red River Valley a unique identity in the potato industry."

Nature gives the Red River Valley rich glacial soils and enough rainfall to support a potato crop. But what nature gives, nature can take away, as there are no guarantees the rain will fall at the right time to produce a good harvest.

"Weather will always be one of our biggest variables," says Olsen. "The Red River Valley has experienced everything from drought conditions to excessive moisture over the last several growing seasons. Because much of our crop is grown without irrigation, Mother Nature plays a significant role in both yield and quality."

At different times during the 2026 season, growers experienced both too much and too little rain.

"This year's crop is a mixed bag," says Shields. "We've had some challenges with lack of rain in some areas, and it has impacted yields."

In some areas, there was too much rain early in the season.

"We had some challenging early season rain and lost acreage, and we haven't had enough rain late," says Dave Moquist, owner

of O.C. Schulz & Sons, Crystal, ND. "Our potatoes are naturally irrigated, and we grow on glacial bed soils, so they are more nutrient-dense. Our volume is trending down from last year, but it's about average. The volume has been trending up because new varieties and better management practices have given us better yields."

O.C. Schulz & Sons is a family-owned company that grows potatoes, sugar beets, wheat and soybeans in the Red River Valley.

CONSUMER PREFERENCES

While red potatoes are the region's flagship crop, many growers have diversified in recent years to offer more yellow potatoes.

"Yellow potatoes continue to be the biggest growth story for us," says Olsen. "Historically, NoKota was almost exclusively a red potato operation. We introduced yellows several years ago and have continued increasing that portion of our business based on customer demand. Reds remain our foundation and still make up the majority of what we grow, pack and ship, but yellows have become an important part of our mix"

Other growers have also increased their production of yellow potatoes.

"The majority of the fresh market pota-



While many people in the produce business are aware of the quality of Red River Valley potatoes, there may be opportunities for retailers to tell this story to consumers. *PRODUCE BUSINESS PHOTO*

atoes are red or yellow. The yellows are now around 30%," says Moquist.

Shields believes this versatility is a sign of the region's strength. "Just like with any commodity, trends come in," he says. "Yellow potatoes have also trended upward over the last few years. We are so blessed with the soils and climate that we can give the consumers a choice between red and yellow potatoes."

Olsen has noticed other changes in consumer product mix preferences, including interest in smaller potatoes and smaller package sizes. "Consumers like convenience and flexibility, so products that fit different household sizes and different ways of preparing potatoes continue to create opportunities."

Red River Valley potatoes are harvested in late summer, but improved storage facilities let some packers ship nearly year-round.

"Our potatoes get shipped all over the country," says Shields. "We harvest in September, and because storage has improved over the years, some packers can ship through July."

SMALL, BUT MIGHTY

Flavor and nutrient density have earned the region's red potatoes a solid reputation, says Olsen. "The Red River Valley name

certainly has its strongest recognition throughout the Midwest and central part of the country, where customers have been buying Red River Valley potatoes for generations. But the reputation extends well beyond our immediate region."

Promotion of Red River Valley potatoes is limited because the area is a secondary producer, compared to Idaho and Eastern Washington.

"We are a fairly small area, so we don't have the promotion budget of Idaho, but we have been known since the 1950s," says Moquist.

Minnesota and North Dakota combined harvest a little more than 4 billion pounds of potatoes a year, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, while Idaho harvests nearly 14 billion pounds a year.

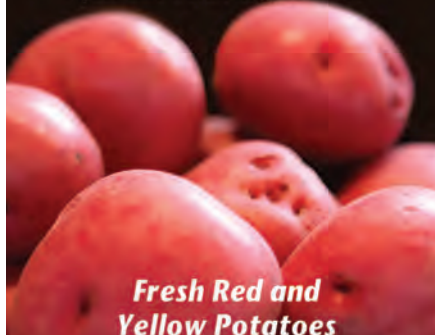
While many people in the produce business are aware of the quality of Red River Valley potatoes, there may be opportunities for retailers to tell this story to consumers.

"We continue to find that customers who know the Red River Valley associate it with high-quality red potatoes in particular," says Olsen. "Red River Valley' means something within the produce industry, but there is still room to build that recognition with the end consumer. Consumers increasingly care about where and how their food is grown, and we have a great story to tell." **PB**



**We've grown and shipped
our own potatoes since
1950**

Sales:
 TJ Hall - (701) 894-6112
 tjhall@polarcomm.com
 Jackson Hall - (701) 894-6112
 jackson@hallsnd.com
 Jeff Lazur - (701) 741-8850
 jeff@hsmarketingllc.com



**Fresh Red and
Yellow Potatoes**



**Midwest Grown
Table-Stock Reds
Yellows, Whites and Russets**



**Bulk Totes
Paper
Cartons
Consumer Poly Available**

**Kevin Olson:
320-241-4119**

www.benholmespotato.com



Consumer demand continues to shift toward smaller potato packs, with 3-, 4-, and 5-pound bags gaining popularity as shoppers move away from traditional 10- and 15-pound sizes.

PHOTO COURTESY POTATOES USA

Colorado's San Luis Valley: Premier Potato Powerhouse

The valley has become one of the top potato-producing regions.

BY BOB JOHNSON

Tucked snugly among Colorado's mountain ranges is one of the country's major potato-growing regions. The San Luis Valley's unique combination of fertile soils, favorable climate, and long growing season allows farmers to produce high-quality potatoes across a wide range of varieties, while its central location supports distribution to markets nationwide.

"At more than 7,600 feet above sea level, the San Luis Valley is one of the premier potato-growing regions in North America," says Les Alderete, executive director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, Monte Vista, CO, and general manager of Skyline Potato Company, in Center, CO, a division of JV Smith Cos., in Yuma, AZ.

"Our warm days, cool nights, and nutrient-rich soils set our region up perfectly to grow amazing potatoes."

The 85-year-old Colorado Potato Administrative Committee

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING:

- "We get calls all the time asking how they can get a Colorado potato. That leads me to believe retailers may be missing an opportunity to promote what they already have on their shelves."

Tara Artho, Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, Monte Vista, CO

- "We are the second-largest fresh potato-growing area in the United States and are home to around 100 multigenerational farming families dedicated to producing high-quality potatoes for both domestic and export markets."

Les Alderete, Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, Monte Vista, CO, and Skyline Potato Company, Center, CO



The Colorado Potato Administrative Committee is emphasizing nutrition through a marketing agreement with the Colorado Rapids soccer team and its mascot, Rapids Man. PHOTO COURTESY COLORADO POTATO ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE

serves San Luis Valley growers and shippers. The committee advises emphasizing the nutritional benefits of potatoes.

"Nutrition is top of mind for most consumers these days," says Tara Artho, executive director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, adding a medium potato is naturally fat-, cholesterol-, and gluten-free, while providing complex carbohydrates, vitamin C, fiber, and more potassium than a banana. "Studies have shown how good potatoes are for athletes, and those with a regular workout routine."

Currently, the potato committee is emphasizing nutrition through a marketing agreement with the Colorado Rapids soccer team and its mascot, Rapids Man.

HARVEST, DIVERSITY

Their long season allows Colorado growers to harvest 2.3 billion pounds of potatoes a year, which places the state among the leaders clustered behind Idaho and adjacent Eastern Washington.

Potato harvest in the San Luis Valley mirrors the varieties grown nationally, with russets followed by yellow potatoes, then also reds and fingerlings.

"The San Luis Valley offers a lot of prod-

uct diversity in those 2 billion pounds," says Alderete. "Russets are still king in this area, but growers produce more than 70 potato varieties, including russets, reds, yellows, fingerlings and specialty potatoes."

Additionally, the state's internationally recognized potato breeding program at Colorado State University works to introduce new varieties that address changing market demands.

In recent years, there has been a shift in the size of bags most demanded by consumers. "Over the last five years consumers have demanded smaller packs — 3-, 4-, and 5-pound packs are in high demand," says Alderete. "They are replacing the 10- and 15-pound bags from past years."

Letting consumers know where the potatoes were grown may also help in merchandising.

"Being able to say, 'Locally Grown' is a huge advantage these days," says Artho. "That is what shoppers look for. It makes them feel good to know their dollars are staying within their community. I would love to work with a retailer that wanted signage to draw attention to what the consumers already want."

"We get calls all the time asking how



Produce for a healthier tomorrow.™

**Growing & Shipping:
Conventional: Russets**

Packs Available:

**All consumer packs,
cartons and bulk.**

YEAR ROUND AVAILABILITY

**For inquiries, please
contact our sales team**

719.754.3484

Fax 719.754.2200

**les.alderete@skylinepotato.com
jvsmithcompanies.com**

***Fresh from our
Family to Yours***

**GROWER, PACKER
AND SHIPPER**

Our packing facilities are
designed to bring the potatoes
we grow directly to you.
We pack conventional russets,
and yellows.

Aspen Produce llc



Colorado's San Luis Valley produces about 2.3 billion pounds of potatoes annually, with a long growing season supporting a diverse crop led by russets, followed by yellow, red, and fingerling varieties.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

they can get a Colorado potato. That leads me to believe retailers may be missing an opportunity to promote what they already have on their shelves."

GROWN FOR FRESH MARKET

The Colorado harvest is shipped almost entirely to the fresh market. "We are the second-largest fresh potato-growing area in the United States and are home to around 100 multigenerational farming families dedicated to producing high-quality potatoes for both domestic and export markets," says Alderete.

Around 95% of the crop is shipped to the fresh market, and 20% of that is bound for Mexico.

Location benefits San Luis Valley potato

growers, as they are closer to cities in the East and Midwest than Idaho and Washington, and closer than the Red River Valley to markets on the West Coast.

"Geography is another competitive advantage we have here in Colorado," says Alderete. "Shipping a Colorado potato often means shorter transit times and lower freight costs."

San Luis Valley potatoes have developed strong loyalty among Colorado consumers, and the industry rewards that loyalty.

"Each year, we hold a Potato Festival with craft and food vendors, farm tours, a professional chef competition featuring multiple Colorado-native chefs, numerous free games for kids, and free baked potatoes," says Artho. "We are celebrating our 20th anniversary."

PB

showcase GARLIC, HERBS & SPECIALTIES

JONATHAN
SPROUTS™
Makes everything better

50 years of Unsurpassed
Quality Service and Dependability

Organic

Alfalfa

Broccoli

Radish

Wassabi

Mung Bean Sprouts

Pea Shoots

and more!



Also Available:

Organic Heirloom Cranberries
grown in SE Massachusetts



508.763.2577

- www.jonathansprouts.com -

AuerPAK
BRAND

For over 60 years

Specializing in Garlic
and Other Specialties

Maurice A. Auerbach, Inc.

Brand New State-of-the-Art Distribution Center

Paul Auerbach • Josh Auerbach
Bruce Klein • Ian Zimmerman • John Venables
Lisa Montagna • Kevlia Payero

201.807.9292

Fax: 201.807.9596

www.auerpak.com

117 Seaview Drive, Secaucus, NJ 07094

showcase GARLIC, HERBS & SPECIALTIES



**J.R.
KELLY**

— COMPANY —

The Horseradish House

HORSERADISH ROOT

Bold Flavor.
Real Quality.
Naturally.



PREMIUM
QUALITY
ROOTS



SUSTAINABLY
GROWN



IDEAL FOR
RETAIL & FOOD
SERVICE



www.jrkelly.com
618-344-2910



BLACK
GARLIC

SHALLOTS



We deliver reliable supply and premium quality across a wide variety of products, sourced from the best, quality-checked, and brought straight to your table.



GARLIC



GINGER



www.iloveproduce.com



610.869.4664



sales@iloveproduce.com



PB PRODUCE
BUSINESS

INITIATING INDUSTRY IMPROVEMENT

Since 1985

To get ahead in the
produce business,
you need to stay ahead of
the Produce Business.

For advertising opportunities and subscription information, please go to
www.producebusiness.com or call **561-994-1118**

Pecans Offer Seasonal Promotional Power

This snackable, versatile nut keeps the category afloat.

BY DOUG OHLEMEIER

A staple at holiday tables across the U.S., pecans remain an important product for retailers. But supermarkets can improve pecan sales by beefing up marketing and merchandising year-round.

"Pecans offer high dollar rings," says Bucky Slagle, vice president of produce/foodservice/floral/Starbucks, K-VA-T Food Stores Inc., DBA Food City, Abingdon, VA. "They're a strong item for holiday business, a good margin opportunity and impulse purchases."

"They also offer seasonal promotional power," Slagle adds. "It's very important to make sure you take advantage of promoting them September through December."

Pecans, however, are gaining serious traction outside of the holidays, as consumers discover their snackability characteristics.

According to Circana retail data pulled from October 2025 to May 2026, the pecan industry saw volume increase 0.7%. That amount may seem small, but it's significant when considering the entire nut category, where volume for all nuts declined by 5.3% that period.

"We're optimistic about the growth of pecan consumption, both here and across the globe," says Serena Schaffner, chief marketing officer of the Irving, TX-based American Pecan Promotion Board (APPB).

"The Circana statistic shows that's proof that consumers are not just looking at pecans as an ingredient for pies, but also as an important ingredient for their everyday health."

RIISING STAR

Pecans are a bright spot in a declining category.

"They are the No. 1 selling gourmet specialty, and pecans are driving the whole category," says Sam McDaniel, chief executive officer of Madison, WI's Fortune Favors. "Pecans are a really big deal that kind of fly under the radar."

"The snacking and our gourmet products are growing very quickly. The nuts category last year was flat, but pecans were up almost 17%. So, what pecans did was hold the line for the rest of the nuts category."

According to Nielsen, in the 52 weeks ending June 27, 2026, pecans were the fastest-growing nut type (+11%) in a slightly declining \$6 billion nut and trail mix category.

"The growth comes from the fact that pecans serve multiple consumer occasions — they have a strong heritage in baking and holiday entertaining, but increasingly are also being purchased as an everyday snack and ingredient," says Will McGehee, partner with Genuine Georgia Group, based in Fort Valley, GA.

"That creates an opportunity for retailers to generate sales across multiple areas of the store, rather than treating pecans strictly as a seasonal baking item. The category also continues to show resilience. Recent industry data shows pecan retail dollar sales growing year over year, including continued growth within snacking."



Cross-merchandising, secondary displays, sampling, and a mix of package sizes can help retailers position pecans as both a versatile cooking ingredient and a nutritious snack for multiple shopping occasions. *PRODUCE BUSINESS/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO*

PROPER PLACEMENT

Successful merchandising is a matter of placing pecans in front of shoppers in displays with transparent window packaging, says Jeff Worn, president and chief executive officer of South Georgia Pecan Co., Inc., Valdosta, GA.

"In the produce area, where things can get crowded, it's more challenging, but making the presentation and stating the facts around the health benefits is probably the most important," he says. "The product speaks for itself a lot of the time with pecans and how they're displayed, but you must have a great product in there. You should have good imagery, attractive packaging, and a display that grabs attention."

Relatively new to produce aisle promotions, the APPB has been working with stores to merchandise pecans through shippers — easily assembled, display-ready containers requiring minimal floor space that can be situated in areas including the ends of aisles. In its first year, shippers have seen 50% unit and 43% sales lifts.

Fortune Favors' McDaniel recommends retailers embrace different use situations and understand where pecan growth resides, including merchandising pecans next to salad kits.

"This is something that has legs, and if you can put it next to the things that people really understand, it's such an easy pickup," he says. "If you want to place them in places that are a bit higher-level demographic areas, the entertaining component, the building charcuterie boards, the presenting with the correct fruit and cheese, especially cheese and pecans in that fruit table, you're talking about adding to your basket."

Cheese at \$7-\$8 and pecans at \$9 can add almost \$20 to shoppers' baskets.

"You're bringing them back, and there's such great quality, and those pairings make all of it better," says McDaniel. "It's really a way for those produce departments to drive repeat business, basket size,

and loyalty because you're providing customers with an idea, which is what everybody wants: ease of use."

CHANGING THINGS UP

Retailers can sell more pecans by changing the message throughout the year. Instead of promoting only recipes and baking, show consumers how pecans fit into snacking, lunches, salads, breakfast, entertaining and other everyday occasions, says McGehee.

"Give consumers more reasons to notice and use pecans," he says. "That starts with consistent shelf presence, but secondary displays, cross-merchandising, sampling and digital support can make a significant difference."

Retailers should also consider merchandising different package sizes and formats based on the occasion, he adds. A larger bag may appeal to the household or baking consumer, while smaller resealable or single-serve packages are ideal for snacking and convenience. "We encourage retailers to think about pecans as both an ingredient and a snack, rather than forcing the category into just one usage occasion."

TIE TO OTHER USES

Good pecan displays require effort to attract shoppers.

"They need to be displays that connect them to something that they already buy," says K-VA-T/Food City's Slagle. "Tie them in with apples, sweet potatoes, pears, cranberries and salads. Keep a permanent home for these in the produce department. Build a secondary display in the fall months. Have creative signage on displays like, for example, 'Pecan pie starts here, all you need.'"

Simple, highly visible displays communicating occasions tend to work best, says Genuine Georgia's McGehee.

WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING

- **"We encourage retailers to think about pecans as both an ingredient and a snack, rather than forcing the category into just one usage occasion."**

Will McGehee, Genuine Georgia Group, Fort Valley, GA

"A display doesn't necessarily have to be huge," he says. "A well-positioned secondary display with several strong items and a clear message, such as snacking, entertaining, or baking can be extremely effective. For snack-oriented pecans, portable displays and smaller footprints can also allow retailers to place the product in higher-traffic areas where shoppers aren't necessarily expecting to find pecans."

APPB has experienced success in placing pecans in other areas of the store, particularly with yogurt, which saw 114% unit and 112% sales lifts.

"The challenge with any commodity is that it's not top of mind," says APPB's Schaffner. "If customers aren't thinking about our product, they're not putting them into the cart. Our strategy is interruption: showing up where shoppers aren't looking for us."

The advent of the APPB is helping the industry unite to better promote pecans.

"It's still kind of young, but it's found its place from a data and analytics, marketing and awareness and an overall industry representation standpoint," says South Georgia Pecan's Worn.

PB



**Perishable
News.com**

The online source for fresh news and ideas
for success in the Produce Department...
and beyond!

Subscribe now for instant, daily or weekly e-mail updates. **It's FREE!**

www.perishablenews.com

Fresh Produce Priority for German Consumers

The International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) surveyed 752 German consumers in 2026 to better understand how shoppers are navigating grocery decisions, fresh produce consumption, and broader economic pressures.

The findings show a German produce consumer who is financially cautious but still highly protective of fresh fruits and vegetables. Even as many shoppers report purchasing fewer items or giving up certain products entirely, fresh produce remains one of the least likely categories to be cut when grocery prices rise.

Economic pressure continues to shape grocery behavior in Germany. According to the 2026 data, 31% of consumers report purchasing fewer items overall due to budget constraints, while another 31% say they have given things up or stopped buying certain items entirely.

However, fresh produce remains comparatively resilient against these cutbacks. When asked what items they are most willing to give up if grocery prices increase, only 6% of consumers said they would cut fresh fruit or fresh vegetables.

To put this in perspective, consumers are vastly more likely to sacrifice other categories before touching their produce budget. If prices rise, 51% would cut fresh flowers, 33% would cut snack items, 28% would cut seafood, and 24% would cut canned fruit.

PRODUCE DRIVES STORE SELECTION

Understanding why a consumer chooses one grocery store over another is critical for retail partnerships. The 2026 data shows that produce quality and value remain central to store choice in Germany.

Notably, these core produce attributes outrank many other store-choice factors. Special offers, discounts, or promotions are influential for 64% of consumers, but the physical freshness, value, quality, and selection of produce remain the leading drivers.

This emphasis on quality sits alongside a broader health orientation. Sixty-five percent agree that “health is one of the most important factors in deciding which foods I eat,” while 52% say they try to eat organic foods whenever possible.

Key Takeaways

- **Unrivaled Category Protection:** Only 6% of German consumers would sacrifice fresh fruit or fresh vegetables if grocery prices rise — compared to 51% who would cut fresh flowers and 33% who would cut snack items.

- **Freshness and Value Lead Store Choice:** Freshness of produce (78%) and value for money (76%) are the top deciding factors for retail selection, outranking special offers and promotions (64%).

- **Organic and Health Focus:** Health remains a primary driver for 65% of shoppers, while 52% actively try to eat organic foods whenever possible, creating clear category differentiation opportunities.

- **Navigating Broader Anxiety:** Industry favorability softened modestly from 59% (2024) to 54% (2026) against widespread consumer concern over political upheaval (54%), health (52%) and family safety.

While the produce industry remains more positive than negative in Germany, favorability has softened. Overall top-two-box favorability for the produce industry declined from 59% in 2024 to 54% in 2026.

It is vital to view this metric against the backdrop of the consumer's current mental state. Positive descriptors, such as “satisfied,” “confident,” and “grateful,” remain common, but 24% of consumers report feeling stressed and 21% report feeling anxious.

Furthermore, primary concerns for self and family have risen across multiple areas, including political upheaval, mental/physical health, war and overall safety of family.

PB

Category Most Willing to Give Up When Grocery Prices Rise

% of German Consumers (2026)

Fresh Flowers	51%
Snack Items	33%
Seafood	28%
Canned Fruit	24%
Fresh Fruit & Vegetables	6%

*Source: IFPA 2026 Germany Consumer Survey, n=752

Top Influences When Choosing a Grocery Store

% Extremely/Very Influenced — German Consumers (2026)

Freshness of Produce	78%
Provide Good Value for Money	76%
Quality of Produce	73%
Has a Wide Selection of Produce	68%
Special Offers/Discounts/Promotions	64%

Six Fall Vegetables for Your Menu

BY NOVELLA LUI

October brings autumn to farmers markets and grocery stores, as root vegetables, colorful squash and hearty greens take center stage. Cooler weather also brings an appetite for warm, comforting meals, making fall an ideal time for foodservice operators to feature seasonal vegetables.



In addition to bringing vibrant color, flavor and texture to the plate, fall vegetables provide valuable nutrients and can support the development of fiber-rich menu options. This article highlights six versatile and high-yielding fall vegetables that foodservice professionals can use to create nutritious, appealing and comforting autumn dishes.

CARROTS AND PARSNIPS

Carrots are widely accepted and used in a variety of menu formats. In a mixed dish, their familiarity makes less familiar root vegetables more approachable and appealing.

In particular, carrots pair well with parsnips, a pale-colored taproot vegetable that is in the Apiaceae family, except that it is earthier, sweeter and nuttier than carrots. Roasting both vegetables brings out their natural sweetness and creates caramelized flavors, making this pairing suitable for grain bowls, side dishes and soups. Classic favorites include carrot and parsnip soups and glazed root vegetables.

Together, carrots and parsnips become a nutrient powerhouse while offering visual appeal, flavor, and texture more than either vegetable alone.

As a nutrient-dense pairing, carrots are high in beta-carotene, which the body converts to vitamin A that supports the immune system, growth and development and vision. Parsnips offer vitamin C, which supports immune function and collagen formation; folate, which contributes to normal cell growth, and potassium, which supports nerve and muscle function.

TURNIPS AND RUTABAGAS

If you are looking for less familiar vegetables to incorporate and encourage people to eat, consider turnips and rutabagas. Both add variety to the menu, and consumers will recognize them as seasonal items.

Turnips are lighter in flavor, but offer a mild peppery taste, while rutabagas are sweeter, earthier and denser. Together, they complement each other in root vegetable soups, gratins, hashes, stews, grain bowls and more. From a nutrition perspective, both vegetables provide vitamin C and dietary fiber, which supports digestive health.

WINTER SQUASH

Since winter squash is harvested in autumn and has the colors,

flavors and textures customers often associate with the season, this group of squashes is an ideal item to feature on the fall menu. Their varying shades of orange and yellow create visual appeal on the plate without relying on garnishes.

Winter squash is excellent for many cooking methods, such as roasting, baking, pureeing, steaming and mashing. Personally, I prefer seeing butternut, acorn, and spaghetti squash on the menu.

Butternut squash brings a deep orange color to soups, risotto, pasta sauces and grain bowls; acorn squash, when served as individual half portions, offers attractive visual appeal; and spaghetti squash's strand-like texture adds a mouthfeel and visual appeal to casseroles and veggie bowls.

Operationally, larger winter squashes, like butternut and pumpkin, can be used in more than one way, such as adding cooked, diced pieces to salads, blending into soups, and roasting wedges for a side dish.

Additionally, winter squash's mild and slightly sweet flavor pairs well with mild-tasting proteins. Because of its mild flavor, winter squash also adapts to many flavor profiles, from cumin and curry spices to miso, sage, rosemary, thyme and garlic, making plant-based entrees with tofu, lentils and beans delicious.

CABBAGE

The arrival of heartier autumn vegetables does not mean leafy vegetables need to disappear from the menu. Cabbage is a practical, versatile option available year-round that fits well in fall and winter dishes. This cruciferous vegetable provides a high usable yield, and its attributes change depending on how you use it.

Raw cabbage is crisp and mild, lending well with slaws, salads, tacos, wraps and sandwich toppings. When cooked, it softens and sweetens, absorbing flavors from broths, sauces, herbs and spices.

Cabbage varieties also go beyond the typical green cabbage — there are also red, Savoy, and napa, each with distinct flavor and texture depending on how you use them.

For instance, shredded red cabbage stands out in a veggie slaw because of its vibrant color; Savoy cabbage's crinkly appearance adds mouthfeel to a stuffed cabbage roll; and napa cabbage leaves complement dumplings well because they absorb the flavors from the fillings.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The six featured fall vegetables can be standalone items prepared in different ways, or accompany other ingredients, adding nutritional value, color, flavor, and texture attributes to dishes. Their versatility and high usable yield also make them ideal choices for foodservice operations to consider incorporating into their menus. **PB**

Novella Lui, RD, MHS is a registered dietitian and a freelance food, nutrition, and health writer in Canada who combines her interest in food science, evidence-based nutrition, and health education through content creation. Connect with Novella at info@livetonnourish.com for work samples and collaboration opportunities.

Old-School Relationships, New-School Expectations

BY RICHARD "R.J." DURANTE

There is a particular rhythm to the wholesale produce business that is difficult to explain to someone who has never experienced it. The day starts early, too early for most, but is typically remedied by our first, or second, cup of coffee.

Before the sun comes up, orders have been placed, product has been checked, problems have surfaced, and you are searching for your next cup of coffee, while juggling a dozen conversations.



These conversations happen face-to-face, by phone, or whatever form of communication gets the quickest response. The goal is always the same: Find a solution as quickly as possible. Somewhere amid all of that, I find myself moving between two very different generations.

On one side are owners, employers, customers and industry veterans in their 60s and 70s, who have spent decades building relationships throughout the wholesale produce business. On the other side are buyers, salespeople and employees in their 20s and 30s, who bring an entirely different set of expectations into the workplace. As an "elder Millennial," I often feel like I am standing somewhere in between.

Growing up, I learned from a generation that placed enormous value on relationships. In the wholesale business, trust was not something established through a contract, an app or a customer portal. It was earned over years of doing what you said you were going to do. These were people whose judgment was often shaped by the firmness of a handshake, the eye contact maintained during a conversation and, most importantly, whether your word could be trusted.

The older generation understood that the relationship itself was the business. A customer might buy from you because you had taken care of them for 20 years, or because they had worked with your father, and possibly even your grandfather. A supplier might make an extra effort to find product because they knew that when you gave your word, it meant something. Problems were solved through a conversation rather than emails or a string of rambling texts.

There is also an incredible amount of knowledge wrapped up in that generation. They remember markets, growing regions, seasons, customers and situations that no computer system could ever fully capture. Much of what they know comes from experience, often learned from hard mistakes made along the way. That is something worth protecting.

At the same time, the younger generation entering the industry has grown up in a completely different world. They expect information quickly. They want pricing, availability and specifications to be accessible. They are comfortable communicating through text messages, shared documents, photographs, software platforms and real-time updates. They are also more likely to ask why something is done a certain way instead of simply

accepting that it has always been done that way. And that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Customers have changed, too. A buyer may prefer one concise email over countless phone calls. They may expect pictures of product within seconds. They may want order confirmations, traceability information or updated pricing immediately. Younger employees often understand those expectations instinctively because that is how they communicate in every other part of their lives.

The challenge comes when either generation assumes their way is the only way. Technology can make us faster, but also less personal. An email may communicate a price efficiently, but it cannot always replace a five-minute conversation that strengthens a relationship. A spreadsheet can provide a tremendous amount of information, but it cannot replicate the instinct of someone who has watched a particular commodity move through dozens of market cycles over 40 years.

On the other hand, experience can sometimes turn into resistance to change. "We have always done it this way" can be valuable when a method has survived decades for a good reason. But, it can also prevent a business from recognizing when a better tool, process or approach has become available.

Communication styles can create similar misunderstandings. Texts can be viewed as efficient or impersonal. A younger employee may want to understand the reasoning behind a decision, while an older manager may interpret the questioning as resistance.

Yet underneath these differences, I believe there is far more common ground than we sometimes recognize.

Both generations value trust. The way that trust is built may look slightly different today. It could mean combining the instincts of someone who has seen dozens of market cycles with the technology of someone who can analyze information faster than ever before. That combination may be one of the greatest opportunities facing wholesale markets today.

We do not have to choose between the old school and the new school. The relationships, work ethic and personal accountability that built this industry should never disappear. They are too important. But, preserving those values does not mean preserving every method exactly as it existed decades ago.

Likewise, embracing technology, transparency, flexibility, and faster communication does not require abandoning the personal relationships that made wholesale markets successful in the first place. The future belongs somewhere in the middle.

Every generation that enters this industry will leave its own mark. Our responsibility is to carry forward the things that deserve to last, while remaining open to the things that can make us better.

The wholesale business will continue to change, but some things never really go out of style: Work hard, know your product, take care of your customers, and do what you say you are going to do. Change begins with listening. Progress begins with doing. **PB**

Richard Durante grew up in the produce business and has spent years working alongside his family at Nardella Inc., Philadelphia, PA. His experience spans buying, selling, operations, and customer relationships, all rooted in the values of hard work, trust and family tradition. He lives in Haddonfield, NJ, with his wife, Ashley, and his son, Bennett.

Receive supplier information fast by using the **PRODUCE BUSINESS** Information Showcase.
Here's how: Contact the advertiser directly via the website, email, or phone listed in the ad.

COMPANY	PAGE #	PHONE	WEBSITE
Advance Custom Brokers & Consultants	16-17	786-470-0400	advancecustombrokers.com
Alpine Fresh, Inc.	16-17	305-594-9117	alpinefresh.com
Altar Produce, LLC	16-17	760-357-6762	altarproduce.com
Aspen Produce, LLC	89	719-754-3464	aspenllc.com
Avocados from Mexico (AFM)	Inside Cover	714-721-2256	avocadosfrommexico.com
Ayco Farms, Inc.	16-17	954-788-6800	aycofarms.com
Ben B. Schwartz & Sons, Inc.	39	313-841-8300	benbdetroit.com
Ben Holmes Potato, Inc.	87	763-261-0990	benholmespotato.com
Canadawide Fruit Wholesalers Inc.	47	514-38-3232	canadawidefruits.com
Capital City Fruit Co., Inc.	40	515-981-5111	capitalcityfruit.com
Carb Americas	16-17	954-786-0000	carbamericas.com
Crystal Valley Foods	16-17	305-591-6567	crystalvalleyfoods.com
Daaks International, Inc.	66	213-612-3225	daaksinc.com
D'Arrigo New York	37	718-991-5900	darrigony.com
Dole Food Company, Inc.	2	704-213-3478	dole.com
Eagle Export Inc.	48	450-992-0521	eagleexport.ca
EV Produce International, Inc.	65	956-215-8872	evproduce.com
Farm Direct Supply, LLC	16-17	561-910-4341	farmdirectsupply.com
Fierman Produce Exchange, Inc.	16-17	718-893-1640	fiermanproduce.com
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	83	850-617-7343	followfreshfromflorida.com
Florida Department of Citrus	82	863-537-3999	floridacitrus.org
Fresh Innovations, LLC. (Yo Quiero Brands)	15	817-674-9120	freshinnovationsllc.com
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas	61	520-287-2707	freshfrommexico.com
Fru-Veg Marketing, Inc.	16-17	305-591-7766	fruveg.com
Gourmet Trading Company	16-17	310-350-5404	gourmettrading.net
Grimmway Produce Group	68	661-845-5229	grimmway.com
Halls G4, LLP	87	701-846-6112	harvestsensations.com
Harvest Sensations, LLC	16-17	305-907-3230	harvestsensations.com
Heartland Produce Co.	40	262-653-1000	heartlandproduce.com
Hillside Gardens Ltd.	52	905-775-3356	hillsidegardens.ca
I Love Produce, LLC	90	610-869-4664	iloveproduce.com
International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA)	12	302-738-7100	freshproduce.com
Italian Produce Co. Limited	51	416-259-7641	jerussell.ca
J. E. Russell Produce Limited	50	416-252-7838	jrussell.ca
J. R. Kelly Co.	91	618-344-2910	jrkelly.com
JAB Produce, Inc.	44	312-226-7805	jabproducecompany.com
Jackson Farming Company	71	910-567-2202	jfcmelons.com
Jacobs Malcolm & Burt (JMB)	16-17	209-367-0990	jmb-produce.com
Jade Produce, LLC	10	956-227-1098	jadeproduce.com
Jonathan Sprouts	91	508-763-5505	jonathansprouts.com
La Galera Produce, LLC	45	773-446-6161	lagaleraproduce.com
Lange Companies	16-17	217-786-3300	tomlange.com
Maglio Companies	25	888-477-6382	maglioproduce.com
Maui Fresh International, LLC	64	213-688-0880	maui-fresh.com
Maurice A. Auerbach Inc.	41, 90	201-807-9292	auerpak.com
Miedema Produce, Inc.	69	616-669-9420	miedemaproduce.com
MIXTEC Group	44	562-652-2299	mixtec.net
Multivac	55	816-891-0555	multivac.com/us
Nash Produce, LLC	70	252-443-6011	nashproduce.com
New Jersey Department of Agriculture	5	609-913-6520	findjerseyfresh.com
NoKota Packers, Inc.	86	701-847-2200	nokotapackers.com
North American Produce Buyers Ltd.	49	416-255-4436	naproduce.com
O. C. Schulz & Sons, Inc.	86	701-657-2152	ocschulz.com
Prime Time Sales, LLC	16-17	760-399-4166	primetimeproduce.com
Produce Blue Book	72	630-668-3500	bluebookservices.com
RCG Fruits	8		rcgfruits.mx
Robinson Fresh	16-17	952-683-2800	robinsonfresh.com
S. Katzman Produce, Inc.	43	718-991-4700	katzmanproduce.com
Skyline Potato Co.	89	719-754-2681	jvsmithcompanies.com
SL Produce LLC	58-59	+52 687 897 1971	slproduce.mx
SORMAC INC.	56	567-200-8420	sormac.com
Southern Specialties, Inc.	16-17	954-784-6500	southernspecialties.com
Spice World, Inc.	21	407-851-9432	spiceworldinc.com
Square 1 Farms, LLC	16-17	561-614-2814	sq1farms.com
Stronach & Sons (2020) Inc.	53	416-259-5000	stronachandsons.ca
Sunkist Growers, Inc.	77	661-290-8900	sunkist.com
SweetTango (Next Best Thing Coop)	75	866-716-3428	sweettango.com
The Foundation for Fresh Produce	79	202-303-3435	freshproduce.com
The Perishable Specialist Inc.	16-17	305-477-9906	theperishablespecialist.com
The Wonderful Company	100	661-720-2400	wonderfulcitrus.com
Thermal Technologies, Inc.	7	803-691-8000	thermaltechnologies.com
Topashaw Farms Packing	71	662-682-7733	topashaw.com



Blue Banner Company was founded by W.J. Mazzetti in 1950 and remains family-owned and -operated.

PHOTO COURTESY BLUE BANNER

Goody by Blue Banner: CA CITRUS ENTERS A NEW ERA

For more than 75 years, Blue Banner Company has built its reputation on quality, service, and trusted relationships within the citrus industry.

Founded in 1950 by W.J. Mazzetti in Riverside, CA, the family-owned and -operated company began its journey as a citrus packing operation and became a licensed packer with Sunkist Growers in 1951.

Today, under the leadership of President Tom Mazzetti and his son Vince Mazzetti, the fourth generation of the family to carry on the legacy, Blue Banner is recognized as one of the premier citrus packers and shippers, specializing in grapefruit.

In 2025, Blue Banner introduced Goody, a new brand reflecting the company's commitment to delivering high-quality citrus products.

Tom Mazzetti recalls one of the earliest lessons he learned in the business: "When someone asks you to do something, you do it immediately. A sense of urgency is paramount to success in our business."

For Vince Mazzetti, the foundation remains simple: keeping your word. "Honesty and your word are really all you have. If your growers, customers, friends, family, and colleagues can't trust you, then you are on a path to failure. This literally applied to my educational experiences in ALL aspects of our business, from irrigating fields, driving trucks, and building relationships in the packing house and with customers."

As Goody moves forward, Tom Mazzetti says, "In the next 10-50 years, we want to grow our business, successes and customer relationships and continue to be a trusted name in the industry."

PB



Blue Banner Company started its journey with Krinard Packing Company in Riverside, CA, and has been in its current location since 1965.

PHOTO COURTESY BLUE BANNER

GREAT SPONSORSHIPS,
BOOTHS AVAILABLE AT
SALES@NYPRODUCESHOW.COM

NETWORKING | EDUCATION | TRADE SHOW
INDUSTRY TOURS | BUYER-CONNECT PROGRAM

COME BE A PART OF IT!

Join us for the produce industry's most dynamic show.

- Enjoy a new floorplan, with ultra-wide 'Grand Central' main aisle and better traffic flow on our end aisles.
- Meet one of the largest contingents of produce buyers at any show in the produce industry.
- Learn about the latest trends and innovations at three co-located education conferences.
- Experience boundless networking opportunities at our world-class Cocktail Reception and Keynote Breakfast and on our free shuttle buses.
- Take in the sites, lights and amazing food options in Times Square in December!



INTERESTED IN ATTENDING THE 2026 SHOW?
SEND AN EMAIL TO INFO@NYPRODUCESHOW.COM



NO ONE KNOWS AND GROWS CITRUS LIKE US.

When you call yourself Wonderful, you do things differently.
Wonderful means setting your own standard, then raising your own bar.
It means never compromising on quality and always choosing the right way,
especially when it's the hard way. Wonderful means putting your best
into every step of the way, from seed to store. That's what we do.
And that's why no one does citrus like us.

Wonderful citrus™



(661) 720-2500 | wonderfulcitrus.com