

Little Taste Bud

William Ian Prevor has been to the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association Convention, the Produce Marketing Association Convention, even a PMA Board of Director's meeting — quite a resume considering he is not yet 18 months old. Indeed he must have been paying attention because he is a stern critic of tasteless produce.

Carrots, peas, corn, plums, nectarines, pineapple, bananas, citrus, apples, pears — William is a forthright aficionado, and he will gladly spit out substandard produce. And it *IS* often substandard. When I try the same batch, I inevitably find he is right. Today's blueberries are tart, the melon just isn't ripe, the papaya has an off taste, and the apple is mealy.

William is also quite demanding about the timing of his food. He wants what he wants and he wants it now. Yet it is not easy to find fresh fruits and vegetables.

His parents are always on the run and so William eats out frequently. The local Italian restaurant has great pizza, which always meets with William's approval. At dessert time, however, there is cheesecake and tartufo, cannoli and spumoni, but no fruit to be found. Same thing goes at William's favorite Chinese haunt — canned lychee nuts are the only fruit on the menu.

Following William around for a few days points out that the industry, as a collective, needs something beyond *5 a Day* as a tool to increase produce consumption:

First, PMA should consider organizing a Produce Access Task Force. The purpose of this group would be to bring the weight of the best and brightest in the produce world to the task of expanding sales venues.

They sell a lot of cookies, chips and even ice cream novelties at gas station mini marts. What specialized products, packaging and distribution system needs to be developed to get produce into this market? What would it take to replace canned pineapple and canned lychee nuts with fresh product in Chinese restaurants across America? How hard is it to replace canned mushrooms on pizza with fresh product?

Second, the industry should consider trade-marking some kind of seal for fresh product, promoting it to consumers, and then making the seal available to restaurants that pledge to only use fresh ingredients. The biggest competition for fresh broccoli is clearly frozen. And *5 a Day* represents both. But a new "Fresh for Flavor" program might distinguish those foodservice operators who are committed to offering consumers fresh product.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, we need to set minimum taste standards for every fresh produce item. We have condition standards, appearance standards, even size standards — but relatively few efforts at assuring consistent good taste. In Florida, grapefruit cannot be shipped until it meets a minimum brix level. This way, in the race by shippers to grab high prices for early fruit and by retailers to be first in the market, nobody will pack substandard fruit, which might, literally, sour the consumer on the fruit.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of official regulation, especially at the start of the seasons, but it is doubtful that government regulation will be tough enough to exclude from market the volume of tasteless product out there.

The effort will have to be spearheaded by private industry. Wal-Mart is actually ideally situated to take the actions that will help Wal-Mart's customers and, coincidentally, the whole produce industry.

If you want to sell Wal-Mart some T-shirts, don't think that price is all that will matter. Before Wal-Mart carries a T-shirt, it is going to test them extensively and evaluate your ability as a supplier to maintain the appropriate quality levels.

This is not an easy task. Think of how many products Wal-Mart sells, how many vendors it works with. Standards had to be developed for T-shirts, boxer shorts, baseball caps and on and on. Wal-Mart could use its immense resources to develop standards for sugar content and other flavor markers for every produce item it carries. Then it could work with its vendors to have every batch of product tested before it is shipped to Wal-Mart.



BY JIM PREVOR

Sometimes it takes a child to teach adults a little about taste.

Simultaneously, Wal-Mart would communicate this new flavor commitment to its customers and assure them that if the cantaloupe isn't sweet, it is not going to be sold in Wal-Mart this week. It is a different vision of serving the consumer. Instead of thinking we are doing right by the consumer by committing to always carry everything, good or not, it is saying that we commit to the consumer by ensuring that everything we carry is delicious.

This will enable consumers to buy with confidence. In time doubtless other chains would adopt similar programs and the very economic structure of the growing/shipping segment, especially in fruit, will change. Because now growers will not be paid on how much they ship, but, rather, on how much *tasty* fruit they produce.

It is not going to be an easy transition. But these three proposals — to push produce into venues where it is scarce, to promote fresh produce over frozen and canned, and to give consumers confidence that the produce they buy is tasty — would transform the industry.

We need to act. After all, William Ian Prevor, scourge of tasteless produce producers and vendors, might start favoring Chicken McNuggets if he can't find consistently tasty produce in convenient locations. It would be our fault, not his.