

RETROSPECTIVE

SEASONED RETAILER **DON HARRIS** TALKS ABOUT 40-PLUS-YEAR PRODUCE CAREER

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

Supply and demand meant trading crops with neighbors when Don Harris grew up on a farm in Idaho. His father and grandfather put produce in Harris' blood from birth. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Business Marketing from the University of Idaho, he traded the field for retail by holding a series of leadership positions with Safeway, where he worked his way to director of corporate produce merchandising and marketing.

This followed a career with natural and organic retailer, Wild Oats, where Harris served as vice president of produce and floral, creating a buying team that supplied more than 100 stores nationwide with organic produce. Then, after five years working on the supply side as director of category development for Estero, FL-based Naturipe Farms, Harris started his own business, Harris Consulting Solutions.

In May of this year, he embarked on another interesting facet in an illustrious produce career by becoming director of produce supply for Feeding America, the Chicago, IL-headquartered nonprofit organization that operates a nationwide network of foodbanks. Over the years, Harris served two terms on the Produce Marketing Association's Board of Directors. He currently writes a monthly column in *PRODUCE BUSINESS* magazine.

Where were you in 1985?

I had just moved into Safeway's corporate offices in Pleasanton, CA, in March of 1985.

What was the produce department like in 1985?

The big deal in the 1980s was the awaking of the importance of produce. It was a time when we at Safeway said, "let's differentiate ourselves by making produce a star." We saw concepts like Loblaws in Canada that really focused on fresh, and we took inspiration



Don Harris

from what we saw in other concepts across the country from both regionals and smaller independents.

This meant purposeful layouts designed to entice the shopper rather than patchwork displays of produce. In addition, we reset the department with fixtures; for example, orchards and field bins under canopies with track lighting. Imports from South America and convenience products like bagged salads were getting their start at the same time. I remember stapling labels onto the first bags of lettuce. New stores were being built to carry 300 to 400 and even 500 produce SKUs.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

It was competitive for us. In Northern California, there was Raley's and Fred Meyer; in Southern California, Vons and Ralphs; Giant in Maryland; Ukrops in Virginia; King Soopers in Denver; Fry's Food Stores in Phoenix; and Tom Thumb, H-E-B and Randalls in Texas. Safeway was not in the New York and Chicago

markets at the time. No one pushed produce as much as we did. We wanted to be on the front of the wave.

When did the industry start to change, and what were the drivers of change?

FMI Trends surveys in the 1980s showed that while customers didn't generally like supermarket shopping, they did enjoy the produce department. In fact, the quality of the produce was the primary criteria they used for selecting where to shop. That's one of the reasons produce was moved to the front of stores. We had floral at our entrances. Sales-wise, floral wasn't that big a part of department sales, but our boss at the time thought that walking through floral put customers in a good mood to shop. We took this concept from some of the budget shops in San Francisco.

How would you describe the produce department today?

You have some of the best cutting-edge retailers out there and others not worth a darn. Unfortunately, we've seen a plateau, a repeat of the same old thing and even sacrificing in presentation and flair due to economic pressures on labor. The creativity we do see is coming from the smaller regional retailers, such as Wegmans that don't have to answer to Wall Street. Some retailers today forget the rules that the old-timers in the industry taught us. For example: "You can't save yourself into a profit"; "You don't take a percentage to the bank, you take dollars."

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry during the past 30 years?

The explosion of variety is certainly one of them. But it became hard to keep all the prices in your head, and it took too long to keep checking a list for prices. PLU codes

