

## RETROSPECTIVE

### JEFF SHILLING, VICE PRESIDENT PROCUREMENT FOR FRESHPRO FOOD DISTRIBUTORS, REMINISCES ABOUT HIS EARLY DAYS IN PRODUCE AND SHARES ADVICE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

**W**ith 42 years in produce, Shilling encountered significant shifts in the industry during his career. He started as a part-time clerk in Kings Food Markets in 1973 at the age of 16 during high school and remained in retail, holding positions such as produce manager, night manager and assistant store manager. After 10 years, he moved into the warehouse (owned by Kings at the time) as an assistant produce buyer, then produce buyer, head produce buyer, sales manager, and director of produce procurement. He is currently vice president procurement for FreshPro and responsible for overseeing all purchasing in all departments.

#### Where were you in 1985?

I was working in the warehouse as produce buyer and assisting as sales manager for Kings. My responsibilities included produce purchasing and store merchandising, in addition to managing retail pricing and advertising programs for the stores.

#### What was the produce department like in 1985?

We had about 250 regular SKUs in the produce department — almost all of which were fresh. I remember a few years later, we remodeled a store, and in effort to show our variety, we brought in around 450 items, which was unheard of at that time!

In the mid 1980s, just about everything still had a season. When the season was over, we went to the next item. Imported produce was beginning to become popular around then, with products like colored peppers from Holland and Jet Fresh peaches and nectarines from Chile. There was no marketing of organic produce in our supermarkets until the Alar scare of the late 80s. Whatever fresh-cut products were in the department were cut in the store. Strawberries were still sold in



Jeff Shilling

loose pints. There were no packaged salads to speak of; in fact, if something was packaged, it usually meant it was being reduced for quick sale. Loose bulk displays of product were synonymous with freshness. We had our own product identification numbers for the cashiers to identify product with at the front end. PLU numbers and UPC numbers were just being introduced in produce.

#### How was the overall retail environment?

This was probably the most exciting time in the produce business. Fresh produce was in and we could do no wrong. Just pile it high and watch it fly! Tonnage was constantly increasing and new items were arriving all the time. Farmers were starting to pay attention to flavor, rather than how long the product would hold in a cooler. Improvements in trucking and refrigeration helped get product to the destination faster and in better condition. The increase in popularity of air containers meant more imported produce from overseas could be introduced to the mix.

#### When did things start to change, and what were the drivers?

In my opinion, the single event with the greatest impact on produce was the introduction of the Jane Fonda workout videos in 1982. Suddenly, women (and eventually men) had a new interest in exercise and eating healthy. This caused an explosion in the produce industry, as everyone wanted to add fresh fruits and vegetables to their diet. Produce department cut-out percents [the percentage of produce sales compared to total store sales] went from the low teens to the high teens — even low 20s in some stores.

#### What were some of the biggest innovations in the industry during the past 30 years?

Starting in the early 80s, we saw the introduction of salad bars, juice machines, pineapple corers, and we even had pea shuckers and sprout growers in some departments. Educating the consumer on how to prepare fresh produce and the nutritional value of fresh produce was starting to become popular. We had produce “Tip Tapes” in the departments. They were a looped VHS tape — put out by United Fresh Produce Association — to help educate consumers on specific products. Recipe cards were marketed by several companies and point-of-sale signs were becoming more informative.

As we entered the 90s, organics became a hot button for us. While few supermarket chains carried organic produce in the early 90s, just about everyone had some organic presentation by the end of the decade. Packaged produce began to become more popular with packaged salads increasingly replacing fresh salad sales. Produce variety went wild in the 90s with new items constantly introduced. Companies like Frieda’s helped retailers sell these new products to the consumer with informative and attractive packaging. Flavor

