

RETROSPECTIVE

FROM AUSTRALIA TO BRITISH COLUMBIA,
 RETAILER **MICHAEL MOCKLER** SHARES
 INSIGHTS FROM 45 YEARS IN PRODUCE

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

Mom-and-pop shops, corner stores stocked with staples and green grocers who knew each customer by name. These were the retailers, a then 5-year-old, Michael Mockler remembers as the customers who purchased the 100-pound burlap bags of potatoes and onions his father bought each week on the terminal market outside of Sydney, Australia.

Mockler's produce career started more than a decade later as manager of a local fruit barn. In 1989, he moved to the Canadian province of British Columbia where he became produce specialist at Thrifty Foods. Since 1995, he has held the title of director of produce operations for this Victoria, BC-headquartered 26-store chain that's now a banner of Sobeys Inc. Mockler served the industry as Exhibit Committee Chair for the 2010 and Co-chair of Sponsorship Committee for the 2013 Canadian Produce Marketing Association Annual Convention & Trade Show, both held in Vancouver.

Where were you in 1985?

I was the buyer/merchandiser/operator of the Fruit Barn in Kempsey, a town located about 250 miles north of Sydney. Fruit Barns are like large retail produce departments located on the side of the road.

What was the produce department like in 1985 compared to now?

There were no computer or PLU systems. You had to memorize the price for 100 items and the prices changed twice a week. I didn't see PLUs until I was at Thrifty. PLUs led to categories and category management. Today, we have 400 to 500 PLU items in our departments — not counting private label and UPC products.

Speaking of UPCs, I remember seeing the first bagged coleslaw and thinking "that's crazy,



Michael Mockler

who would buy this?" Back then, cabbage was 3-pounds for 30-cents. A package of coleslaw was one-quarter of this weight and sold for 50-cents.

Organics were practically non-existent. My wife and I flew to Los Angeles shortly after arriving to British Columbia, and I remember driving 12 miles to find a supermarket that sold organic produce. There was no certification. It was a personal guarantee from the farmer. Poor quality was the norm: gnarly potatoes or apples with worm holes. It was in the 1990s when we started with organics at Thrifty. We had to make a concerted effort to understand this customer. That meant focus groups. Back then, organics were two to three times the cost of conventional.

In general, it was all about selling customers what you wanted to move. Now, it's all about giving customers what they want to buy.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

In Australia, there were plenty of corner fruit shops. These were 30-foot storefronts with a house attached on a neighborhood block. Shoppers could buy staples like onions, potatoes and bananas in a flash. Knowing shoppers' names was part of the customer service and a competitive advantage. Then, the big chains and the 40,000 square-foot fruit barns came in. Consolidation of the supermarket chains happened next, which were driven by the consumer's desire for one-stop shopping.

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

The 1990s is when we took a hard look at what direction we wanted to take. We realized that while everyone wanted to drive an SUV, not everyone wanted the same SUV. With apples, for example, we could sell 10-pound boxes cheap or assorted varieties of extra fancy at a higher price. We went with the latter option and partnered with growers across Canada that had the same philosophy. Since then, I travelled to California, Hawaii, Mexico, Chile and Japan, to name a few places, to identify growers that can provide us with the quality and variety our customers want.

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

It's the expansion of varieties beyond our wildest dreams. We're selling whole categories now instead of single products. This has given us incremental sales, which were not available 30 years ago. Ten years ago, I had the opportunity to buy square-shaped Japanese watermelon. I loved it! My boss asked me how much I could sell, and I said probably one at \$100 apiece. So he asked why I wanted to spend \$20,000 on air freight to

