

RETROSPECTIVE

TOM MURRAY GIVES PERSPECTIVE ON NEW ENGLAND'S RETAIL SCENE

BY CAROL BAREUTHER, RD

The ability to constantly seek and embrace change has served Tom Murray well during his 41-year retail produce career. Murray, who got his start as a clerk with Roche Bros. Supermarkets in 1974, continues to work for the 21-store chain headquartered in Wellesley, MA. He has held a number of progressive leadership titles from produce manager, produce merchandiser and produce director to store operations director, vice president of store operations, and since 2007, vice president of produce and floral. Roche Bros. has earned the Boston Globe's "Top Places to Work" award for seven years running (2008 to 2014), and stands out for the longevity of its employees such as Murray. Murray also serves as first vice president of the New England Produce Council.

Where were you in 1985?

I was the produce manager at our Sudbury, MA, store. This was our first store to feature a bulk produce department immediately at the entrance. Perishables were featured prominently around the perimeter with a strong fresh concept throughout the shopping pattern.

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

We first expanded the produce department around 1985. In 1974, when I started, produce was considered a "tunnel aisle" — in the center of the store — and pretty sterile. There wasn't much bulk produce. I remember we would trim and wrap our own iceberg lettuce, weigh it, and write the price on each bunch of bananas with a magic marker.

Today, there are so many more SKUs compared to

the 1980s. Most categories are available 52 weeks per year. Instead of novelty being driven by seasonality, we now offer more local, convenient, and exotic items that are new to the customer. For example, we now sell more dragonfruit in one-week than we previously did in an entire season.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

New England in 1985 was a fairly competitive retail environment, with more independents and fewer chains. Star Market, Shaws, Stop & Shop, and Market Basket were the large operators. Today, you also have Whole Foods Market, Wegmans, Target, Big Y, Hannaford, BJ's Wholesale Club, Trader Joe's, Price Chopper and Wal-Mart to add to the list of competitors in the region — all with little

growth in population. Today, New England also has a strong local farmstand business with growing interest in CSAs.

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

In the late 1990s, customers started to purchase more healthfully, which drove demand for more fresh produce offerings. Organics also emerged in the 1990s, became more prevalent by the 2000s, and move at a strong pace today.

Customer interest in novelty and variety also created change. Today, the Food Network, Rachel Ray and Dr. Oz are such powerful influencers of demand that you must stock what they are featuring, because that's what shoppers want to buy.

Convenience is another driving force, but not at the expense of freshness or health. Fresh-cut fruit and vegetable sections continue to have strong growth. Consumers are looking for easy alternatives that fit their busy lifestyles.

As a member of the Chandler Copps' share group of independent retailers, I learned about new merchandising ideas, products and technologies. This was a great way to stay on the cutting edge, especially since I was from a small New England company. After our group visited Randalls in Texas, we changed our merchandising to Euro tables, which gave us a great farmstand look.

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

Produce traceability and its contribution to food safety has been a game changer. Imagine what traceability would have



Tom Murray

