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APRIL 2025

MERCHANDISER OF THE YEAR

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MARKETING • MERCHANDISING • MANAGEMENT • PROCUREMENT

40
YEARS
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INDUSTRY
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Thomas Cingari Jr.,
Cingari Family Markets:
Merchandiser of the Year



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cover story

15 MASTER CLASS IN MERCHANDISING

Thomas Cingari Jr. awarded 2025 Produce Business Merchandiser of the Year.



in this issue

4 PB QUIZ

8 PRODUCE WATCH

10 RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

No-Hunger Games: How Medication Adoption is Changing Consumer Food Demand

50 INFORMATION SHOWCASE

50 BLAST FROM THE PAST

Wonderful Citrus Celebrates 75 Years as a World Leader in Fresh Citrus

departments

PROCUREMENT

18 NOGALES REMAINS THE PRODUCE GO-TO IN SPRING DESPITE THE CHALLENGES

This major port of entry enables easy access to fresh produce.

22 KEY WAYS TO BUY AND SELL MORE SPRING GRAPES

The grape category is the 10th fastest-growing fresh category in the supermarket.

25 RETAILERS CAN ADD CRUNCH TO CARROT SALES

Check out three ways to buy and sell more fresh carrots.



ORGANIC MARKETING

28 CALIFORNIA ORGANIC STRAWBERRIES: STILL GOING STRONG

Berries are the top organic item in produce.

MERCHANDISING REVIEW

30 SWEETEN SALES WITH SWEET ONIONS

A variety of sweet onion types herald the season.

33 TODAY'S TOMATOES MORE COMPLEX TO MERCHANDISE

To shoppers, it's a snack, it's a salad, it's an ingredient — and it's indispensable.



FRESH-CUT MARKETING

36 INNOVATIONS IN FRESH-CUT PRODUCE PACKAGING AND TECHNOLOGY

Technological advancements are shaping the fresh-cut produce market.

DRIED FRUIT & NUTS

40 SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ON ALMONDS

Retailers can capitalize on the health benefits and versatility of almonds.



special features

6 WHERE PASSION BECOMES ACTION

Everyone in the produce industry has a story to tell — a story of beginnings, or detours, or family, or growth.

12 SUPER FOODTOWN: SERVING THE BRONX

Bruckner Boulevard store undergoes significant reconstruction.



commentary

42 VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY

Building Communities: How Buyers and Sellers Can Differentiate

44 PRODUCE ON THE MENU

Meet Ube: A Tuber in Rising Popularity

46 EUROPEAN MARKET

Unanimous Vote in Favor of Approved Operator Scheme — But Will the Government Listen?

48 WHOLESALE MARKET

The Upside of Selling Your Produce Business



THIS MONTH'S WINNER

DAVID RADTKE
General Manager
Veg-Land, Inc.
Fullerton, CA

Before David Radtke's more than two decades in produce, he worked for the county probation department. "We like to joke that my years there prepped me for the fast-moving, ever-changing, chaotic work that produce can be," he says.

A typical day for Radtke starts with walking the Veg-Land facility, where he is general manager, greeting team members, and getting a view of any issues or concerns. He spends the rest of his day looking for anything that is out of place or that needs attention; checking emails; reviewing daily receiving, loadings, production orders; and any other administrative work.

Radtke says the things he appreciates most about his career are the people he works with, the customers and relationships he has built, and the unpredictability of the industry. "I am energized by the opportunity to solve complex problems

for our customers, and ultimately, the consumers who purchase these products. I find great satisfaction in building successful cohesive teams that allow for team members to be successful and grow professionally," he says.

Radtke says during his produce career, "I have been blessed to work with a lot of great people and be a part of great teams, each one giving me another set of tools to be successful today."

When he isn't working at Veg-Land, you may find him in the kitchen. "My favorite thing to do for the people in my life is to cook. I find great comfort and satisfaction in preparing food for the people I love."

He also has an active volunteer life with Lions Clubs International and enjoys traveling.

He values **PRODUCE BUSINESS**, because "the articles and stories are current, informative and relevant. I enjoy seeing the new trends and innovations in the produce industry. I always find stories that are interesting and informative for me and my career."

As this month's winner, Radtke will receive a \$200 Amazon gift card. **pb**

How To Win! To win the **PRODUCE BUSINESS** Quiz, the first thing you must do is read through the articles and advertisements in the print or digital issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, scan and send your answers to the address listed on the coupon. **If you wish to fill out the questions online, please go to: www.producebusiness.com/quiz.** The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our June 2025 issue of **PRODUCE BUSINESS**.

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QUESTIONS FOR THE APRIL ISSUE

- 1) According to **Avocados from Mexico**, what percentage increase in sales do stores garner by merchandising avocados in branded AFM displays _____?
- 2) Which company offers the **Tarpless® SX** -- "most widely used commercial ripening room system on the planet" _____?
- 3) What is the telephone number for **EV Produce International** _____?
- 4) What is the website address for **Kurt Zuhlke & Associates, Inc.** _____?
- 5) **Ferrari Farms** is based in which city and state _____?
- 6) Who is this year's **PRODUCE BUSINESS** Merchandiser of the Year _____?

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Answer and submit your entry online at www.producebusiness.com/quiz



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The Freshness, the Colors Just Spoke to Me

Paul Kneeland
Vice President of Sales
Elevated Foods
Long Beach, CA

(Editor's note: Paul Kneeland has a rich resume within the produce industry, from Roche Bros. Supermarkets, Kings Super Markets, Ahold-Delhaize USA, and, most recently, as senior vice president of sales for Gelson's Markets. In January, he joined Elevated Foods. He spoke about his passion story during the New York Produce Show in December.)

I fell in love with the produce business many years ago. When I walked into a supermarket, I saw all the colors, I saw all the freshness, the fruits and vegetables. They just spoke to me, and they said to me, 'you've got to be in this business.' And that was many years ago.

I'm still in the business, still love the business, and it's been a great career for me. I've met so many people — all the relationships that I've had in this business have been great.

The people are the absolute best part of the industry.



I Want People to Fall in Love With Produce

Joanna Jaramillo
Marketing Manager
Wholesum Family Farms
Amado, AZ

My produce industry passion is finding the ways to make people fall in love with produce. There's so much potential — whether it's flavor, whether it's the experience, or colors — for produce to be even bigger and better in people's lives. And as a marketer, that is my passion.

I grew up in southern Arizona, always surrounded by produce, but I had no idea back then that this would become a part of my life. In 2018, I began working at Wholesum, and since then, I have found my place. It was my first experience actually working in produce, and I have been in love ever since.

It is an industry with so much to work for and work toward, and it's always fun and challenging. There are so many creative ways to be a marketer, which is my career goal as well. I love produce, and I love all the creative challenges it brings to me and it's a wonderful industry to work in.



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TRANSITIONS

Mushroom Council

The Mushroom Council, Lee's Summit, MO, is expanding its marketing team with the addition of two produce marketing leaders. **Cristie Mather** steps in as vice president of marketing, and **Adriane Rippberger** joins as director of marketing.

Collectively in their careers, Mather and Rippberger have helped shape marketing strategies for dozens of food and beverage organizations, both at agencies and in-house, including commodity boards, brands and associations representing apples, avocados, berries, dairy, grapes, pears, watermelon, potatoes and nuts.



Cristie Mather



Adriane Rippberger

Natural Delights

Natural Delights, Yuma, AZ, promoted **Natalia Dentoni** to senior brand manager, alongside expanded roles for **Shayna Telesmanic**, **Mauro Santelli** and **Bridgette Weber**.

Dentoni joined Natural Delights in 2021 as digital marketing manager. In her new role, Dentoni will oversee a broad range of consumer-facing content, including email campaigns, social media, and the company's website. She will also continue to manage retail and shopper marketing on platforms, such as Amazon and Instacart, focusing on increasing customer engagement and driving sales.

Weber, who began her career with Natural Delights as trade marketing manager, will transition into a full-time business development manager role. In her new position, she will focus on supporting retail partners and driving growth in the Southeast region.

Telesmanic, director of international sales, will expand her focus to lead West Coast sales, including the Costco global account.

Santelli, who has been with Natural Delights for four years leading growth in Canada and the North American foodservice channel, will now oversee the Middle East market.



Natalia Dentoni



Shayna Telesmanic



Mauro Santelli



Bridgette Weber

Stemilt

Stemilt, Wenatchee, WA, selected **Jana Fischback** as its new sustainability coordinator in the food safety and compliance department. Fischback comes to Stemilt following over seven years of experience as co-founder of the educational nonprofit Sustainable NCW in Wenatchee. In this newly created role, Fischback will work to enhance Stemilt's environmental commitment and sustainability efforts.

Fischback will collaborate with teams to develop greenhouse gas reduction initiatives, lead life cycle assessments, analyze data for insights, and engage with stakeholders to promote sustainability efforts. She will also work with Stemilt's research and development department to identify targets, roadmaps, trends, and insights to inform decision-making.

Fischback has a master's degree in environmental studies from The Evergreen State College and a bachelor's degree in communication with an emphasis in public relations from Washington State University.



Jana Fischback



ANNOUNCEMENTS

EPC Leadership Class Tours Philly Port and Wholesale Market

Members of the 2025 Eastern Produce Council (EPC) Leadership Class viewed the complexity of the supply chain first-hand during a March 18 tour of the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market (PWPM) and Holt Logistics.

The day began at the Philly wholesale market with a presentation by PWPM's Marketing Coordinator Christine Hofmann on the market's development and role in the produce business.

The second stop of the day was a visit to Holt Logistics Corp. at the Gloucester Marine Terminal in Gloucester City, NJ, where Sam Ecker, business development, presented a comprehensive summary of the various facilities of the Philadelphia area ports.

After lunch, the group toured the Gloucester Marine Terminal to learn about the processes for imported products and inspections.

Participants selected for the 2025 program include: Marcus Albinder of Hudson River Fruit Distributors; Susie Alvarez of Dayka + Hackett; Christine Consales of Dole Fresh Fruit; Geoffrey Gero of House Foods; Drew Hennemuth of Four Seasons Produce; Garrett Josephson of Farm-Wey Produce; Drew Koepfel of Katzman Distribution; Nathan Kreiser of Four Seasons Produce; Justin Leis of CJ Brothers Inc.; Michael Lovera Jr. of JOH; Emily Naples of JOH; Tyler Schneider of Cleveland Kitchen; Taylor Sears of LGS; Aleksander Skarzynski of Wakefern Food Corp.; Casey Spencer of John Vena, Inc.; Paul Williamson of Highline Mushrooms; and Matt Zapczynski of Idaho Potato Commission.

Also participating in the tour were: Theresa Lowden of JOH, current EPC president; Vic Savanello of S. Katzman Produce Distributors, EPC Leadership committee chair and past EPC president; and Al Murray, EPC board member.

Fyffes Recognized for Environmental Sustainability Contribution

Irish fruit importer Fyffes has been commended for its contribution to environmental sustainability at the PwC Business Post Sustainable Business Awards gala ceremony held recently in Dublin,

Ireland. Ciaran Sweeney, managing director at Fyffes Ireland, accepted the award on behalf of the company.

The global tropical produce distributor was honored with the Sustainable Project of the Year: Agri food 2025 award, based on what judges termed the "exceptional efforts" made by the organization in successfully implementing sustainable farming practices across its operations, resulting in significant environmental benefits.

Chief among them is the introduction of crownless pineapples to reduce food waste; moving to 100% recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging before 2026; and the implementation of regenerative agriculture on its farms to improve biodiversity, soil health and reduce GHG emissions.



Ciaran Sweeney

Melissa's Produce Kicks Off Ojai Pixie Tangerine Harvest

The Ojai Pixie Tangerine season is officially underway, and Melissa's Produce, Los Angeles, CA, is supporting the co-op of family-run citrus growers in the Ojai Valley. This year, the Pixie harvest is looking especially promising, with a strong harvest of smaller fruit that is already bringing up to 18.

With year-over-year growth of +33% in both 2023 and 2024, Melissa's has experienced its two highest years ever for Pixies. This is a clear indicator that Ojai Pixies continues to be a sought-after product, with increasing consumer demand.

Retailers who join the program benefit from a complete suite of marketing support, including signage, social media assets, promotional videos, photography and recipe ideas.



California Giant Berry Farms Announces Strong Domestic Blueberry Crop

California Giant Berry Farms, Watsonville, CA, shares a blueberry crop update forecasting increased volumes of organic and conventionally grown blueberries. The promising start to the domestic blueberry season has come with early season harvests underway.

Conventional blueberry production is ramping up, with the Central Valley harvests expected to begin in early May, ensuring a consistent supply of fresh, conventional blueberries.

On the organic front, Oxnard is currently experiencing peak production, yielding high-quality fruit.

California Giant is also highlighting the availability of its premium Giant Blueberries. These large (20mm+) and exceptionally flavorful berries are now available in a new label design, selected by California Giant's consumer audience.



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No-Hunger Games: How Medication Adoption is Changing Consumer Food Demand

By Sylvia Hristakeva

The widespread adoption of GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) receptor agonist medications, such as Ozempic and Wegovy, is reshaping consumer food demand in ways that are likely to have significant implications for the food industry.

In our study, co-authored with Júlia Liaukonyt (at Cornell) and Leo Feler (at Numerator), we analyze transaction data from a nationally representative household panel linked to survey responses on medication adoption provided by Numerator. The findings reveal a substantial decline in total grocery spending and spending on food away from home following GLP-1 adoption, shedding light on how these medications influence consumer purchasing behavior.

As of July 2024, an estimated 8.3% of the U.S. population had adopted GLP-1 medications, with nearly half using them primarily for weight loss, rather than diabetes management. Weight-loss adopters tend to be younger and come from higher-income households, compared to those using the medications for diabetes, suggesting potential meaningful differences in their food consumption patterns.

One of our key findings is that households with a GLP-1 user reduce total grocery spending by approximately 6% within six months of adoption. This effect is even larger among higher-income households, where spending declines by 8.6%. These reductions are primarily driven by decreased purchases of ultra-processed foods, including a significant 11% decline in snack foods and sweets.

Despite widespread declines in food spending, fresh produce purchases remain largely unaffected, with some evidence of an increase among weight-loss users. This pattern suggests that, while GLP-1 medications suppress appetite, they do not lead to across-the-board reductions in food spending, but rather a shift in dietary composition, favoring healthier options.

For the produce industry, this stability offers reassurance that demand for fresh fruits and



The produce industry is well-positioned to benefit from the changing consumption patterns associated with GLP-1 adoption.

vegetables is resilient, even amid broader reductions in food expenditures.

Beyond grocery store purchases, food-away-from-home expenditures decline significantly, with an 8.6% reduction in spending at fast-food chains, coffee shops and limited-service restaurants.

Lower-income households experience the sharpest cutbacks in dining out, reducing their spending at these establishments by 14%. This shift indicates that GLP-1 users are not only purchasing fewer high-calorie processed foods at grocery stores, but are also making fewer food purchases outside the home.

An important aspect of the study is its

examination of whether these dietary changes persist over time. While the magnitude of grocery spending reductions attenuates after six months, it remains negative and statistically significant.

Among weight-loss users, spending returns to pre-adoption levels within a year, whereas diabetes users exhibit sustained reductions. Notably, for households that discontinue GLP-1 use, grocery spending rebounds, suggesting that the observed reductions in food purchases are directly linked to medication use, rather than long-term behavioral changes.

From a business perspective, these findings underscore the need for food producers and retailers to adapt to evolving consumer preferences.

The declining demand for high-calorie processed foods poses challenges for manufacturers in those categories, but presents opportunities for companies that focus on fresh, nutrient-dense products. Given that fresh produce spending remains stable, even as other food categories see declines, the produce industry is well-positioned to benefit from the changing consumption patterns associated with GLP-1 adoption.

Looking ahead, future research could explore how the food industry can further engage with this growing consumer segment. Potential avenues include tailored marketing efforts, educational campaigns on the benefits of fresh produce, and innovative product offerings that align with the dietary patterns of GLP-1 users.

Given the stability of produce demand in the face of overall grocery spending declines, there is a strong case for continued investment in strategies that highlight the value of fresh fruits and vegetables in a health-conscious diet.

pb



The full study can be found at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=507392. Sylvia Hristakeva is an assistant professor at Cornell SC Johnson College of Business. Hristakeva's research fields include quantitative marketing and empirical industrial organization.

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Right now, and through June 1, 2025, we're taking entries for the 37th Annual Marketing Excellence Awards Program, presented by PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine. The awards recognize excellence in marketing in each of six categories: retail, foodservice, wholesale, shipping, commodity organizations and allied service/product providers. Promotion in print, broadcast and digital media are eligible to win.

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To participate, send us the following for each entry:

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 2. Type of business.
 3. Names and dates of promotion (must have taken place between May 31, 2024 and June 1, 2025).
 4. Promotion objectives. Description of promotion.
 5. Promotion results (sales or traffic increases, media attention). What made this program a success?
 6. All support materials used in the promotion – such as POP, ads, posters, Social Media Links, TV commercials.
- High-resolution images to illustrate the promotion are required. (Please do not send any produce)**

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Deadline for entries is June 1, 2025
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Super Foodtown: Serving the Bronx

BRUCKNER BOULEVARD STORE UNDERGOES SIGNIFICANT RECONSTRUCTION.

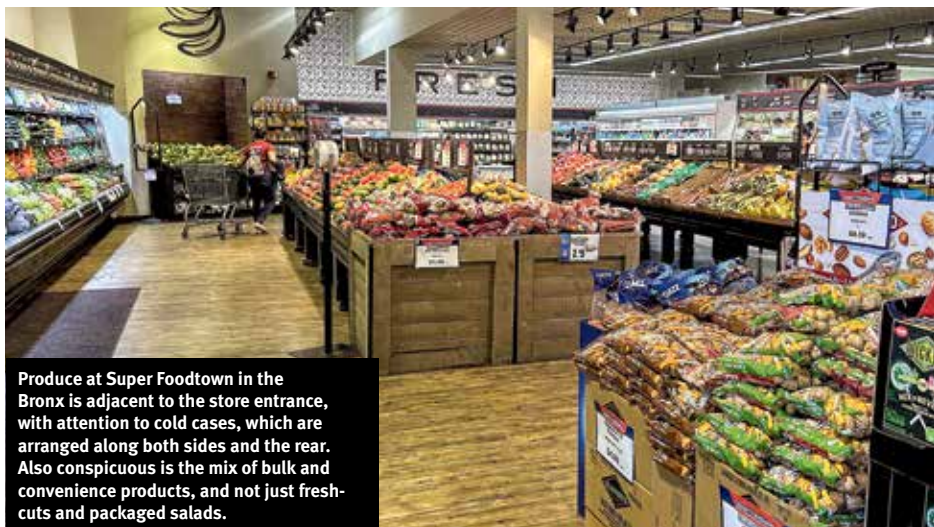
BY MIKE DUFF

Change is the one certainty in the world and, in New York City's borough of the Bronx, Super Foodtown has evolved to continue serving a middle-class community that has become more diverse over time, and still values quality fresh food.

Managing partner Harry Celentano says the resident population has shifted over time, but the mixed community still includes a significant proportion of demographics that arrived early in the neighborhood, particularly Italian, Latino, Black and Asian populations.

To serve the community, the operation on Bruckner Boulevard has undergone significant change over the 21 years it has been in operation. However, the biggest change happened just before it adopted the Super Foodtown banner. Before that, the store was a 10,000-square-foot A&P.

Super Foodtown arrived as a partnership that saw potential for the site, but also shortcomings that had to be addressed, Celentano says. To that end, the partners initially closed the store and invested in reconstruction for more than two years, resulting in a higher-profile, airier space, as opposed to the low-slung A&P store environment.



Produce at Super Foodtown in the Bronx is adjacent to the store entrance, with attention to cold cases, which are arranged along both sides and the rear. Also conspicuous is the mix of bulk and convenience products, and not just fresh-cuts and packaged salads.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

Although a few visible structural remnants remain, such as a lower ceiling in part of the store, Celentano says the reconstruction basically “knocked it down to the ground and added on.”

MAKING IT EASY TO SHOP

Although ethnicity is often an issue in New York food retailing, Celentano says certain trends have an almost universal effect. One is convenience.

Celentano says the store has experienced increased demand for fresh cuts and other convenience items. Once a rarity, now they have a conspicuous space in the store, supported by employees who have a work-

space where they cut fruits and vegetables on an ongoing basis, and the fresh-cut assortment ranges broadly from broccoli to watermelon.

Celentano says that whatever cut fruits and vegetables customers want, the store is willing to provide wherever it can.

Fresh-cuts and convenience items designed for quick and easy preparation can be more expensive by the ounce than raw products, but, for a lot of busy consumers, there is no real trade-off.

“Pineapple, we have it chopped up because that’s the way the consumer is heading,” says Celentano. “Years ago, there was none of this.”

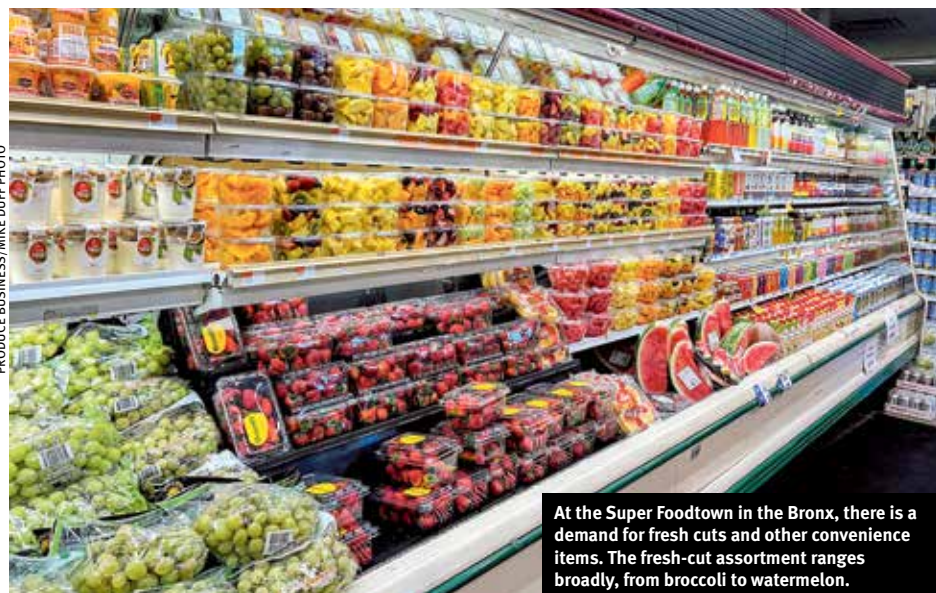
Cut fruit, even though it might be a more expensive purchase — making it better for store finances — can be economical for the shopper. “If you’re not eating an entire cantaloupe, the other half goes into the garbage,” he says.

Those consumer trends are what led Super Foodtown to devote time and effort to processing their own cut fruits and vegetables, says Celentano. “You have to change with the times.”

As customer preferences have changed, Super Foodtown has also integrated vegetarian and vegan grocery products into the produce section to make them more prominent to consumers who typically spend a higher-than-average proportion of their in-store time in the produce section.

“We brought in all these organic and vegan products,” says Celentano. “We integrated it into the produce.”

In doing so, the store has created a dedi-



At the Super Foodtown in the Bronx, there is a demand for fresh cuts and other convenience items. The fresh-cut assortment ranges broadly, from broccoli to watermelon.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO



PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

The floor displays in the produce department of Super Foodtown in the Bronx lead with packages of potatoes and tote-bag apples and pears identified as produced in New York.

cated presentation that, for vegan and organic shoppers, is a convenient destination for what they need in their own neighborhood.

THE LOOK

Produce is adjacent to the store entrance, and conspicuous in the department is the space devoted to cold cases, which are arranged along both sides and the rear. Also conspicuous is the mix of bulk and convenience products, and not just fresh-cuts and packaged salads.

The floor displays lead with packages of potatoes and tote-bag apples and pears identified as produced in New York. Bananas and Latin specialties follow on one side of the display, with citrus and melons following on the other.

It's noteworthy that one high-profile floor display near the rear of the store is devoted exclusively to bananas, with special signage above, suggesting just how popular the fruit is with Super Foodtown customers.

Another floor display, headed up with 5-pound bags of red and russet potatoes, continues on the one side with bagged, bulk and onions. The other side proceeds with avocados, mangos, and tomatoes in various forms, including slicing bulk and clamshell cherry, finally ending with another convenience-oriented product, bagged mini potatoes.

The range of store-cut and wrapped tray vegetables has a high-profile place in a cold case on the back wall of the produce department, intermingled with bagged whole apples and near packaged greens. The case also includes jars of gourmet pickles that require refrigeration, bagged sauerkraut, mushrooms, bagged celery and packaged fruit.

A cold case against the exterior wall opens with greens and gives way to fresh vegetables, much in bulk but some bagged, including whole and baby carrots. The colorful display includes bulk eggplant, yellow and green squash and bell peppers. Next, clamshell vegetables and kale, with Latin specialties, including tomatillos, habanero, and poblano peppers, are on the shelf just below.

Cut fruit in tubs is in a cold case that lines the far side of the department. Nearby are clamshell salads, salad dressings, bagged and loose apples, pear, and bagged grapes, as well as branded single-serve fresh fruit cups. The store also merchandises berries in the immediate vicinity.

A final section of the case houses an array of beverages, pacing the trend seen in other produce sections — placement of juices and other drinks that have health associations.

Among its produce suppliers, Super Foodtown buys from C&S, D'Arrigo, and other local wholesalers, including a specialist in Latin items, says Celentano. The ability to use multiple suppliers, which may be easier in the Bronx given the proximity of the Hunts Point Market, allows Super Foodtown to focus on quality and price.

pb

FACT FILE

SUPER FOODTOWN OF THROGG'S NECK, BRONX

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FROM THE PUBLISHER

You Can Help Showcase Produce Industry's Best



THOMAS CINGARI JR.
Vice president of produce and floral,
Cingari Family Markets, Stamford, CT

As PRODUCE BUSINESS nears its 40th anniversary, we're reminded of the remarkable people whose paths crossed ours along the way — people who bring their passion to produce every day. Pickers in warehouses, reps in sales, executives in the C-suite. It doesn't matter what their role in the industry, the people with passion we've met are all moving the industry forward.

Every day in the produce industry is unique because of the very perishable nature of the products we sell. That dynamic alone creates a unique breed of people willing to take risks and live in the moment. And it is the people making it all happen that attracts me the most.

At PRODUCE BUSINESS, we want to highlight the success of these individuals, like this year's Merchandiser of the Year, Thomas Cingari Jr., vice president of produce and floral at Cingari Family Markets, based in Stamford, CT.

"Our shining star, when you walk in every single one of our stores, is the produce department," says Cingari. "We put it — produce and floral — front and center."

"It's a real color explosion when you walk in." (*You can read the complete profile on page 15.*)

In addition to the Merchandiser of the Year award, we also salute others during the year, showcasing the winning companies and individuals at Independent Stores (February), Most Innovative Dining Outlets (July) and through Global Marketing Innovations (December). These industry standouts are all using creativity — and passion — to unleash new ways to engage with consumers, whether in-store, online or via social media, and move the needle on fresh produce consumption.

NOMINATE SOMEONE TODAY

Each of these awards stems from industry nominations that single out those companies and executives exemplary in selling and marketing fruits and vegetables to consumers. You can fill out any of these nomination forms on our website, ProduceBusiness.com, by looking for any of the icons seen below.



BY KEN WHITACRE
PUBLISHER,
PRODUCE BUSINESS



Master Class in Merchandising

Thomas Cingari Jr.: 2025 PRODUCE BUSINESS Merchandiser of the Year

BY SUSAN CROWELL

There's a saying in produce Thomas Cingari Jr. holds dear: If you put out five apples, you may sell three. But if you put out 200 apples, you may sell 180.

"I believe that growing overall produce consumption is all in merchandising," says Cingari, vice president of produce and floral at Cingari Family Markets, based in Stamford, CT. "Customers buy with their eyes, so hand-stacking, putting out large quantities of items, will always positively impact sales. It just gives the customers a real sense of freshness."

It's that basic produce principle that earned Cingari the PRODUCE BUSINESS 2025 Merchandiser of the Year award.

"Thomas Cingari Jr. has redefined produce merchandising at Cingari Family Markets, bringing creativity, expertise and an unwavering commitment to excellence to every aspect of the department," writes his nominator.

Cingari is quick to credit the work of his team. "I believe we have the best produce managers in the country, and these guys are absolutely unbelievable. I cannot do this myself," he emphasizes. "I believe most of this award should go to them, because they're the ones doing it every day."

Family-owned and operated for over 90 years, Cingari Family Markets owns 10 ShopRites and two Cingari Family Markets (Grade A Markets) in southern Connecticut. It is part of the retailer-owned cooperative, Wakefern Food Corp.

GREW UP IN MARKETS

It was inevitable Cingari Jr. would gravitate toward the family business: At 5 or 6, on the weekends, he was helping package chopped lunch meat in his father's meat department. As he grew, he worked every department from the ground up — bagger, cashier, dairy, stocker, you name it. His first produce job? Trimming and crisping greens.

The retail education surrounded him even when he didn't want it: He played travel hockey, and everywhere his team competed, the weekend included a stop at the local supermarket. "As a young kid, I was upset about this," he confesses, "but in the long run, it opened my eyes to both good and bad things



of how to run certain parts of the store."

After graduating with a business degree from Bryant University in Smithfield, RI, he started a rotation with every store department, and over two years, learned the boots-on-the-ground roles.

"Basically, I got to learn what the workday looked like, and what it took for everybody to get their job done," says Cingari. "It was invaluable time."

He landed in produce full time because that's where the company needed him, "but I really fell in love with produce."

"I just loved that there was constant movement, the colors, and the relationship between us and the growers," he explains. "Produce was just super dynamic, and I was just drawn to it, and developed a real passion for it right off the bat."

FORGING THE FUTURE

Cingari has played a pivotal role in the company's overhaul of all of its 12 locations, both conceptually and strategically. Renovation has been completed at seven stores and three store renovations are currently underway. And produce has been the focus of each makeover.

"Our shining star, when you walk in every single one of our stores, is the produce department," says Cingari.

"The science behind merchandising is we want to lead with fresh," he explains. "So, when a customer walks in our door, we're going to hit them with a ton of color, freshness

and texture. It's a real color explosion when you walk in."

Right away, that subliminally triggers the idea that if this store has the freshest produce, the quality in the rest of the store is similar, says Cingari.

"We work really, really hard to make sure that every time you walk in, it looks a certain way."

The reputation of the stores' produce was solid pre-reno, he adds, "but we enhanced what we were previously doing with newer displays and a completely different color scheme."

The new produce departments keep all the displays low, so when shoppers enter the store, they have clear sightlines straight to the back, with a profusion of color everywhere — showcasing all of the product.

The remodels also moved the value-added section, the cut fruit and vegetable program, to the front of the store (an idea that came from an employee), so shoppers also pass it by first thing. "The sales are extremely positive, and we've really grown that category in a big way."

Cingari spends a lot of time in the stores, both pre- and post-renovation, watching customer body language and shopping patterns, and getting verbal feedback from both employees and shoppers. "I'm talking to the customers, and my guys are talking to the customers, and our store managers are talking to customers."

The result? He makes real-time adjustments based on that feedback, because "what

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looked great on paper didn't necessarily translate into 3D."

"At the end of the day, we might make a decision that looked great, but it didn't make sense for our customers," he explains. "I literally keep a running list for a couple weeks of customer suggestions, and positive and negative feedback, and we use that."

Each successive remodel builds on that customer feedback, Cingari adds, "and we've gotten better and better and better at what we do, not only from a merchandising standpoint, but also from an overall flow or how we set up that department for traffic patterns."

Above all, each remodel focused on the needs of the community it serves.

MERCHANDISING FOCUS

The newly renovated stores showcase produce freshness through mass displays, often hand-stacked for visual appeal. Color and



Cingari Family Markets is remodeling all its 12 locations, both conceptually and strategically. Renovation has been completed at seven stores, including this ShopRite in Shelton, CT, and three store renovations are currently underway. And produce has been the focus of each makeover.

PHOTO COURTESY CINGARI FAMILY MARKETS/BRODEN DESIGN GROUP

texture are key to spotlighting the produce.

Cingari points to his favorite produce, all things citrus, as an example. "Sometimes you have a category like pears where all the colors kind of bleed into each other. And some of the citrus categories allow you to use color and texture breaks to really make

those other categories pop, so I like to use citrus almost like a paintbrush in the department, to highlight some of the other different categories."

It's also cross-merchandising within the department, such as placing new varieties of items next to an everyday, familiar item

■ KEYS TO MERCHANDISING SUCCESS

Along the way, Thomas Cingari Jr. has gathered experience and knowledge that is building the markets' presence, reputation and sales. And his tips are a master class in merchandising:

1. Never take shortcuts in produce.

Longtime Cingari Family Markets employee, the late Al Salemme, took Cingari under his wing, and one of the things he emphasized to the young man? Never take shortcuts.

"He taught me that any decision you make — whether it's buying or whatever — is for the long-term benefit of the customer," recalls Cingari. And he puts that in practice by focusing on consistent quality and maintaining high standards, and "making sure our stores look like it's a grand opening every single day."

"You can walk into any one of my stores on a Monday afternoon, and it's going to look the same as it does on a Saturday afternoon," Cingari emphasizes. "Making sure the customer gets the same experience any time they walk into our stores is the key."

2. Empower your team. Cingari gives his produce managers creative freedom, trusting them to make merchandising decisions while maintaining overall quality standards.

"I have members of my team that have been with us for over 40 years, so they've been teaching me throughout my entire career, and I still lean on them," says Cingari.

Cingari absorbs a great deal of

information through a variety of channels: He's vice chair of the produce committee at Wakefern; he attends the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) show annually; he meets with the co-op's growers; and he sifts through the mountains of company data, and weather updates from growing regions.

"All of that information, I pass down to my team, so they have the same level of information that I do."

3. Be adaptable and listen to customers. Cingari Family Markets tailors every store to its specific neighborhood, constantly gathering and implementing customer feedback. Even in Stamford, where the company has four stores, each one is different, based on customer demographics.

"We make sure we bring in the products that our customers are asking for," says Cingari. "We're constantly listening to them, taking their feedback, and doing what they ask."

And it's that communication and flexibility that drives the banner. "What makes us successful is being able to be nimble and really give our customers exactly what they want."

4. Focus on the fundamentals. Cingari emphasizes that getting staple items right is crucial — things like potatoes, onions, and basic apples must be consistently excellent before introducing more exotic varieties.

It's not grandiose, he explains, "but

you have to nail your staples. You have to have consistency in your highest-moving items, otherwise, you're not going to get a full basket.

"Some of the less sexy items are your most important items — everything from a Gala apple to a loose Idaho potato to having the right onion. All of those little nuts and bolts items have to be right," says Cingari. "And then once those are right, you can branch out, and bring in those fresh, different things."

The hardest part of running a produce business, he adds, "is keeping that consistency 365 days, 52 weeks a year."

And an early lesson is still one of utmost importance: "Make sure you're in the right variety of fruit and vegetable at the right time from the right growing region."

5. Transparency and learning from mistakes. "When I first started, a family member told me, 'If you make a mistake, don't try to cover it up,'" Cingari recalls. And that advice — be open about errors, fix them quickly, and use them as learning opportunities — continues to guide him and his team.

"It's always 'what happened, and why did it happen,' and 'how are we going to learn from it and not make that mistake a second time?'" he says. "It's always from a culture of learning and a culture of coaching. We all play for the same team, and we all want each other to get better, because we're all rowing the boat in the same direction."

“When a customer walks in, we’re going to hit them with a ton of color, freshness and texture. It’s a real color explosion when you walk in.”



— Thomas Cingari Jr., Cingari Family Markets, Stamford, CT
PRODUCE BUSINESS 2025
Merchandise of the Year

— think blood orange next to a Gala apple. “They buy it because it looked so great, right?”

The remodel upgrades include expanded sections that integrate locally sourced and seasonal produce items. Enhanced displays include recipes, meal ideas and cooking tips, or signage that explains the uses of different apple varieties or the Scoville hot pepper rating.

While location and merchandising of sale items and other key staples are going to be consistent, Cingari says individual store produce managers have the creativity and take ownership of how they display their produce, based on the company’s standards.

The introduction and growth of Cingari Family Markets’ private label offerings have also distinguished Cingari as a leader in produce merchandising. By incorporating locally sourced ingredients into private-label products, he has created an array of offerings that celebrate the region.

Regardless of merchandising, though, Cingari emphasizes staff training as the linchpin to their produce department success, and he invites growers and others into the stores to give seminars to employees on all aspects and varieties of produce.

“It really comes down to the knowledge of the associates that are in the departments,” he says, “so that when a customer asks a question, they can answer it honestly, and really talk to the customers.”

DOING LITTLE THINGS RIGHT

Cingari stresses they never take the competition for granted, and often visit rival supermarkets to stay abreast of the market.

“We try to stay at the top of our game, and we try to constantly innovate in what we’re doing,” he says. “Our customers clearly have reacted in a positive way.”

Other Wakefern members often visit to glean tips to the Cingari success. “There’s nothing groundbreaking,” Cingari admits. “It all comes down to my team being unbelievable and setting that high standard, and making sure it’s upheld every single day.” **pb**

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PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Spring and summer are key months for major commodities imported through Nogales, AZ — bell peppers, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, melons and grapes.

Nogales Remains the Produce Go-To in Spring Despite the Challenges

This major port of entry enables easy access to fresh produce.

BY STEVEN MAXWELL

Nogales, AZ, located on the U.S.-Mexico border across the Rio Grande from its Mexican neighbor of the same name, has long been famed as a major produce port of entry, enabling easy access to wide swathes of the U.S. However, during the spring, Nogales comes into its own.

According to John Davidson, director of sales at Nogales-based Malena Produce, Nogales fills a window when Canadian- and U.S.-grown product is just starting to

be harvested. “Nogales and Mexico product ensures consumers can have fresh produce on a year-round basis as has come to be expected by retailers and U.S. consumers,” he says. “Nogales late season volume is very promotable, especially for Roma and round tomatoes.”

The company is currently promoting green beans, grape and medley tomatoes, and colored bell peppers under its new Allday label in a variety of pack styles. It also markets Roma and round tomatoes, slicer cucumbers, squash and eggplant during the spring and through to the summer.

Starting from mid-late March, fellow Nogales importer Divine Flavor is focused on its West Mexico vegetable program, with Sinaloa and Sonora, the two key regions for the company’s hothouse-grown conventional and organic bell peppers and mini peppers, plus beefsteak, Roma and grape tomatoes. Divine Flavor also markets an assortment of European, slicer, and snacking Persian cucumbers, as well as yellow squash and Italian zucchini.

From there, the company moves to its melon program from mid-April to early May,

EV PRODUCE INTERNATIONAL introduces new lime packaging for enhanced retail flexibility

EV PRODUCE INTERNATIONAL, a McAllen, TX-based importer specializing in Mexican-grown limes and chayote, has announced the launch of new packaging solutions designed to optimize retail presentation and distribution across the United States and Canada. In addition to the existing 40 lb box, the company is now offering open tray-style boxes in 35 lb (for bagged or netted limes) and 38 lb (for bulk limes).



According to Erick Carranza, Vice President of EV Produce, the new packaging format addresses the specific needs of club store and retail clients seeking display-ready solutions. "This new presentation is strategically introduced to provide greater flexibility and efficiency for our customers, enabling direct-to-shelf merchandising without the need for repacking," stated Carranza.

Further expanding its product offering, EV Produce will launch a new citrus brand, "Chuby's Limes," later this year, featuring 10 lb and 40 lb box configurations.

"The introduction of 'Chuby's Limes' will diversify our brand portfolio, allowing clients to select from a range of packaging and brand options," Carranza explained. This new brand will complement EV Produce's established "Frutasi Limes," "Paty Limes," and "Rika's Limes" brands.

"Chuby's Limes" will also feature a new brand mascot, which will be incorporated into the packaging design and prominently displayed at upcoming industry events. "This brand expansion provides clients with a wider selection of lime brands, each with distinct color schemes and design aesthetics," Carranza added.

Addressing Market Challenges

EV Produce International, like many importers of Mexican produce, has navigated recent market fluctuations resulting from evolving U.S. policy considerations. "The recent period has presented logis-

tical and market challenges, particularly concerning lime consumption on the West Coast," Carranza acknowledged. "However, our commitment to market responsiveness and diversification remains paramount."

In line with this strategy, EV Produce has expanded its product portfolio to include Mexican-grown Jalapeño, Serrano, and Habanero chiles, as well as tomatillos.

As a family-owned enterprise with integrated production and export operations, EV Produce International maintains production and packing facilities in Mexico, alongside import and distribution centers in McAllen, TX, and Los Angeles, CA. This vertically integrated structure ensures efficient product flow and quality control throughout the supply chain.



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offering cantaloupe, honeydew, Hami (a new, sweeter, cantaloupe-style melon), plus regular seedless and mini seedless watermelons. Until late July, it is also focused on its Mexican table grape program, before switching to California.

"Spring and summer are key months for all our major commodities, such as bell peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and grapes, and volume-wise, these are the heaviest months at Divine Flavor," says Divine Flavor's Chief Marketing Officer Alan Aguirre Camou.

In a similar vein, for Rico Rico, AZ-headquartered SunFed, spring is marked by the start of the new summer squash, cucumber, and bell pepper imports, as well as a 52-week carrot program. New for 2025, the company also has an expanded Roma tomato program, plus cucumbers from Baja California.

All the products — alongside grape tomatoes — count as staples for SunFed, dominating through to summer when the focus switches to Central Mexico and shipping through Otay Mesa, CA, and Pharr, TX.

THE TARIFF THREAT

But while the spring season is in full swing, there remains one issue dominating

the thoughts of many importers: the on-again, off-again question of tariffs.

"With the new administration keeping all of us guessing who's on first, it seems as if every day is a clean slate," says SunFed's vice president of sales and marketing, J.C. Myers. "Thankfully, Nogales is made up of numerous multi-generation folks who have weathered just about every type of season imaginable, and we have an excellent association, the FPA (Fresh Produce Association of the Americas), representing our best interests."

Davidson at Malena Produce believes the threat of tariffs could stay with Nogales' importers and Mexican producers for the foreseeable future with the current administration.

"Malena Produce continues to follow the situation closely," says Davidson. "It is not impacting our Canadian sales since the tariff does not apply to product going to Canada. We saw an influx of product cross before the tariffs in early March. With the situation being so fluid, we have not been able to determine the long-range impact."

"For the short term, the main challenge will be what looks to be month to month on the tariffs, and the impact on supply and demand," he adds. "Fortunately, in February tariffs were lifted before they began and March only lasted three days."

Aguirre at Divine Flavor describes the situation as an ongoing process, which has a lot of produce companies — not just in Nogales, but across the industry — preparing for all outcomes.

"We're grateful that an impasse was reached regarding this situation as this has given us time to prepare in case the tariffs go through," he admits. "We're keeping a close eye on the situation and reviewing internally, while collecting guidance from around the industry so there is a clear path of communicating the formula we would use and how the legal deductions would apply to lower the tax before being passed along to the customer."

PROCUREMENT OUTLOOK

Saying that, tariffs are not the only challenge on the horizon for Nogales' importers. According to Davidson, a lack of water in Mexico during the spring is likely to impact crop selection and yields.

Similarly, Aguirre says that 40% of the table grape crop was lost for Divine Flavor — and parent company Grupo Alta — in Sinaloa due to a combination of Hurricane Otis, cooler weather and water scarcity.

In 2025 to date, Aguirre says many of the company's grower partners have regained previous production levels, resulting in more volume so far this season. "So far, the outlook

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

"Nogales and Mexico product ensures consumers can have fresh produce on a year-round basis as has come to be expected by retailers and U.S. consumers."

John Davidson, Malena Produce, Nogales, AZ

for table grapes looks promising, but we'll know in the coming weeks the forecast for table grapes coming from Sonora, which is generally around the 22-24 million box range," he adds.

Aguirre says Central Mexico is becoming an opportunity for Divine Flavor, thanks to an abundance of resources, infrastructure and climates to grow in, not to mention the growers already based in the region and the time of the year they produce.

"As a producer-supplier, it is important for us to expand our growing operations where needed so we can service our clients top-quality produce year-round, and central Mexico, alongside Baja Sur, are key growing regions with potential outside the West Mexico areas," he says.

"The reality of the situation is that new growing territories are emerging where water is abundant."

YEAR-ROUND OBJECTIVE

Although weather, labor, and costs are often mentioned as challenges for importers, Aguirre says a more recent obstacle has been achieving procurement on a 365-day basis.

Despite this, he says Divine Flavor has taken strides toward overcoming gaps in production and securing procurement from alternative areas of Mexico, which has helped the company transition from one production area to another.

"Mexico used to be at one period of the year, but we firmly believe that gone are the days of seasonal produce in Mexico," adds Aguirre.

Divine Flavor and Grupo Alta are supporting these efforts through The Better Grower Program, an initiative created to help find "similar-minded suppliers" who believe in



Nogales and Mexican produce fills a window in the spring when U.S.-grown product is just starting to be harvested.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMEE TENZEK PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY DIVINE FLAVOR

Starting from mid-late March, Nogales, AZ, importer Divine Flavor is heavily focused on its West Mexico vegetable program, with Sinaloa and Sonora, the two key regions for the company's hothouse-grown conventional and organic bell peppers and mini peppers.

the core values of being a reliable source of produce.

The objective, says Aguirre, is to find growers dedicated to delivering great-quality produce, who at the same time comply with stringent food safety practices, and operate ethically on a social and environmental level.

"These are the growers who will stay around in the industry and the alliances we seek for our procurement," he adds. "The Better Grower Program is the pinnacle of our procurement."

With shippers often asked to supply products when their own crops are not in season, Davidson at Malena says companies are increasingly focusing on procuring and partnering with other growers to fulfill contracts.

It has, he says, created a unique situation. "Florida cannot supply the needs of the U.S. and Canada, so having Mexico is necessary to be able to fill the gaps," Davidson argues. "Canada will be looking to Mexico to supply product over the U.S. for the short term."

HOW NOGALES KEEPS RETAILERS COMPETITIVE

One key area where Nogales continues to play a major role is in keeping U.S. retailers competitive during the spring, and, according to Aguirre, the city is transforming into an ever larger and more important port of entry for supplying North American retailers.

"It's hard to speak on behalf of all of

Nogales, but for Divine Flavor, what we work diligently on are a variety of factors," he says. "One: focus on supplying premium quality produce. And two: working from the market backward."

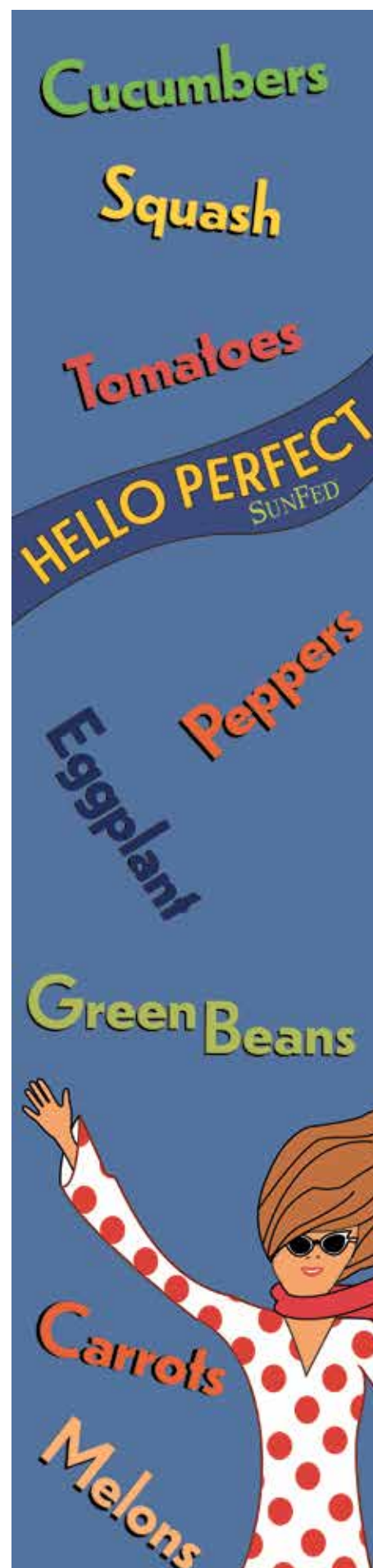
For the latter, Aguirre says Divine Flavor works closely with retail partners to plan programs with an emphasis on not "over-producing," so each commodity provides a purpose.

"We are vertically integrated with each of our grower partners, so this gives us an opportunity to plan strategically in all facets of our operation and the supply chain," he says. "We believe this approach provides balance to the market, which benefits both the retailers and the growers."

Aguirre adds quality and flavor are two important components to maintaining a competitive edge.

For J.C. Myers at SunFed, keeping competitive is about working with growers who challenge themselves to bring a better product to the U.S. market at the absolute best cost. "Combined with industry-leading packaging tech from StePac and Verdant, retailers can rely upon consistent quality supply through the spring months."

With the commitment of Nogales' importers unwavering, it is clear that — in spite of the ongoing threat of tariffs — the city's position as the leading source for Mexican produce during the spring will remain unchallenged and is only likely to grow. **pb**



Key Ways to Buy and Sell More Spring Grapes

The grape category is the 10th fastest-growing fresh category in the supermarket.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Getting caught without grapes on the produce department's shelves doesn't pay. When compared to 2019, the grape category ranks as the 10th fastest-growing fresh category in the supermarket, at +20.8% and valued at \$1.7 billion, according to the report, *Produce & Floral: 2024 Year in Review & 2025 Outlook*, Dec. 12, 2024, using Circana Integrated Fresh data.

What's more, grape customers are great shoppers. The average basket size with grapes is worth nearly \$99.47 to a retailer, based on Circana data from the Global Grape Convention, held in August 2024.

Yet, springtime, when fruit supply transitions from growing regions across three major areas — South America, Mexico and Southern California — can be the trickiest time of the year for retail buyers to ensure stores are well stocked with high-quality fruit.

"We source fresh grapes from a mix of regions to ensure availability and diversity, as well as ripeness and sustainability," says Chris Harris, category director of produce and floral at New Seasons Market, a 22-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR. "In spring, Mexico offers early-season grapes, while Southern California provides locally sourced options as the season progresses, ensuring we have a consistent supply for our customers."

SOURCES & FORECASTS

The biggest challenges in sourcing spring grapes from South America, Mexico and Southern California include rising production costs, labor expenses, transportation challenges, and supply chain logistics, according to David Watson, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms, in Rio Rico, AZ, with additional offices in Mexico and California.

However, Watson adds, "these challenges can be turned into opportunities by building stronger partnerships between U.S. retail buyers, merchandisers, and growers, ensuring



a more reliable and consistent supply chain."

He says retailers that establish long-term programs with growers benefit from better planning and fewer disruptions than those purchasing weekly. "With proactive planning, these obstacles can be managed effectively, ensuring a smooth and steady supply of high-quality grapes."

SOUTH AMERICA

The South American table grape export deal to the U.S. typically starts in northern Peru in October or November and runs through March or April, with Chilean fruit beginning in December and finishing in May.

"This year, we have had an overlap from Peru to Chile and are expecting another overlap from Chile to Mexico in May, followed by an overlap from Mexico to California," says Fernando Soberanes, the Long Beach, CA-based vice president of sales for the Los Angeles, CA-headquartered Giumarra Companies.

That said, Soberanes says Giumarra will have heavier volumes of green seedless grapes arriving from Chile right before the marketing order on April 10, and red seedless in-bound volumes are expected to stay consistent

through early May, weather permitting.

The USDA marketing order requires that imported seedless grapes arriving in the U.S. on April 10 or later meet a U.S. No. 1 minimum grade, size and maturity requirements.

Peru offers a niche crop of organic grapes, says Mike Asdoorian, part owner and in buying and sales for DLJ Produce, in Long Beach, CA, which sells its grapes under the premium Razzle Dazzle and Eat Well brands.

Before entering the U.S., Chile must fumigate its grapes with methyl bromide, so this fruit can't be sold as organic, he explains. "However, there's a systems approach underway in Chile as an alternative to fumigation, and we may see non-fumigated fruit from this country in the next three to five years."

Newer growing regions in South America are helping fill supply gaps during this spring period.

"Brazil's tropical regions begin their first harvest around April with new varieties like the Ruby Rush, a grower-friendly alternative to traditional early-season reds," says Dane Joubert, senior marketing manager for Bakersfield, CA-headquartered Sun World International LLC. "In Northern Peru, growers have optimized a second Scarlotta Seedless crop

PHOTO COURTESY FRESH FARMS

harvested in March/April, achieving success. However, volumes remain limited.”

Joubert says Sun World’s Autumncrisp brand of green seedless grapes are harvested in South Africa until March, while Chile extends its season into early April, depending on weather conditions.

The Southern Hemisphere table grape season transitions to the Northern Hemisphere from April through June, although this changeover can swing up to three weeks, depending on the year and growing conditions. It’s also common for retail buyers to simultaneously source late-season red grapes from Chile and early-season green grapes from Mexico.

“The fruit, its quality, tells us what to do,” says William Kopke, managing director of William H. Kopke Jr. Inc., in Port Washington, NY.

MEXICO

According to Louie Galvan, principal at Fruit Royale, in Delano, CA, Mexican grapes are the key supply connector between Southern and Northern Hemisphere supplies. “Mexico is vital to our year-round supply of fresh table grapes.”

In the last seven to eight years, grape production in the southern Mexico state of Jalisco has kick-started imports to the U.S. by, on average, two weeks earlier than usual. This fruit arrives in late March and early April, with the significant benefit of offering fresher green grapes. Grapes grown in this region tend toward proprietary and specialty varieties. Production in both Jalisco and Sonora to the north will increase this year, with a focus on premium varieties, according to growers.

“Sonora will start in the first days of May but not have volume until the last week of May or June. Peak weeks are always the first three weeks of June,” says John Pandol, director of special projects for Pandol Bros., in Delano, CA.

Promotable volumes of Mexican grapes are expected in time for Memorial Day, says Giumarra’s Soberanes. “The availability of Mexican grapes is projected to continue through mid-July, with promotable volumes for the Fourth of July as well.”

The best-selling grape varieties during the spring season continue to evolve, with green varieties leading the charge in popularity among producers, retailers and consumers, says Fresh Farms’ Watson.

“Varietal development has been rapidly changing, with a clear focus on meeting market demand for fresh, high-quality grapes,” he says. “Green grapes, in particular, have seen significant acceptance, while newer red varieties are now emerging and showing promise,



Green grape varieties lead in popularity among producers, retailers and consumers during the spring season.

aiming to compete with the greens for market share. However, reds present challenges, requiring proper coloring, brix, and flavor development before harvest.”

Galvan says the best-selling grape varieties for Fruit Royale out of Sonoma are Sweet Globe green and Sweet Celebration red. “Both varieties are big, crunchy and sweet, which tends to be the trifecta when ringing the bell of what consumers are after in grapes.”

This year will mark the second season of red Berry Snaps from Grapeco Farms Inc., in Delano, CA. “The fruit has an elongated shape and a hint of strawberry flavor,” says Jared Lane, chief executive officer.

The introduction of Ruby Rush brand red seedless grapes grown in Sonora, Mexico, and Coachella, CA, has strengthened the early-season red grape segment, says Sun World’s Joubert. “New early-season proprietary varieties, such as Ruby Rush, continue to enhance early supply with improved quality, coloring, and harvest timing compared to older red seedless varieties. Peak volumes are expected in May.”

Divine Flavor LLC, in Nogales, AZ, is one of the world’s largest companies growing high-flavor grapes, specializing in more than 20 commercial varieties. Among these are Green Cotton Candy, red Gummyberries and Candy Hearts, and black Jellyberries grown in Mexico.

“Thanks to having better late-season varieties out of Sonora, we can grow and sell our premium grapes just as California starts with their early-season varieties,” says Alan Aguirre Jr., chief marketing officer.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

As Mexican and the first California grapes out of the desert of the Coachella Valley enter the market, supply stabilizes, and pricing usually remains competitive.

“Our transition to desert grapes occurs between May 15 and 31,” says Pandol. “Some years, when Memorial Day falls later, desert grapes can be in the stores in ad volume, but

usually, the first weekend in June is the start of the ad season. Depending on Central California’s crop timing, six to seven weeks of desert grapes usually dominate the grape scene. The halfway mark of the Sonora harvest falls between June 10 and 15.”

Sun World’s Joubert says promotable volumes of Ruby Rush and Midnight Beauty black seedless grapes from the Coachella Valley are available in late May and early June.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

The challenge is finding different ways to promote grapes and keep consumers engaged in repeat grape purchases weekly to keep product moving and fresh during these supply-exceeds-demand years.

Fernando Soberanes, vice president of sales, Giumarra Companies, Los Angeles, CA

The opportunity for retailers lies in leveraging branded programs to elevate the grape category and drive premium sales. Higher perceived value enables better pricing and margins compared to unbranded offerings.

Dane Joubert, senior marketing manager, Sun World International, LLC, Bakersfield, CA

procurement ► Spring Grapes

"We are committed to collaborating closely with our customers to effectively plan grape supplies each week throughout spring and early summer. Our goal is to support our retail partners in ensuring smooth transitions between grape varieties and sourcing regions. In the grape category, there should not be gaps in supply from different countries of origin, weather permitting," says Giumarra's Soberanes.

SELL BUNCHES

Impulse-grabbing, buy-with-your-eyes displays and regular promotions are two key ways to sell more grapes in the spring.

"We increase our grape displays to a 12-foot refrigerated table and feature a greater selection of high flavor varieties with the transition to domestic grapes in the spring," says

Max Maddaus, produce director at Kowalski's Markets, an 11-store chain based in Woodbury, MN.

Harris at New Seasons Market displays grapes in numerous ways. "Our goal is to let the fruit speak for itself. So, we often display our grapes with the edges of the bags folded over, showcasing their natural beauty and premium quality and enticing customers to grab their perfect bunch.

"For those on the go, we also package them in small paper bags with handles, which are ideal for taking on a spring or summer picnic. Additionally, we sell grapes in bulk, allowing customers to choose the exact quantity and quality that best suits their needs."

One of the best methods to have robust grape sales is to have them on the shelf when grapes are fresh and abundant, says Pandol.

"The perennial challenge is getting retailers to use this year's forecasts, not last season's supply curve."

Pandol speculates some grocers are beginning to use AI predictive software, but he warns there are two problems with that. "Firstly, these are first-generation software. Secondly, it's an open secret that poor data quality is the Achilles' heel of AI. The forecast for this season does not reliably exist three months out and certainly is not on the internet. Systems that depend on last year's data? Use at your own risk."

Price is the primary way retailers promote commodity grapes.

"Branded grapes differentiate themselves through superior eating quality, post-harvest longevity, and a more refined consumer experience," says Sun World's Joubert. **pb**



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PHOTO COURTESY NEW SEASONS MARKET

Since shoppers buy with their eyes, retailers should create a great presentation on the shelf with fresh carrots.

Retailers Can Add Crunch to Carrot Sales

Check out three ways to buy and sell more fresh carrots.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

There was once a time when having a 3-pound bag of cello carrots on the shelf represented the entirety of the produce department's carrot category. Sure, in some places, there might be a 2- or 5-pound bag in addition or, more likely, instead. But everyday SKUs didn't reach a standard two until the advent of baby carrots in the late 1980s and widespread stockkeeping in the early 1990s.

Baby carrots — generally regular-size whole carrots that are cut, peeled and polished — opened the door to value-added innovation. Enter products like fresh-cut carrot sticks, shreds, chips and coins, creating enough SKUs for a sizable section of eye-catching orange.

These fresh-cut technologies have boosted carrot consumption, increasing from a per capita intake of 2.2 pounds in 1919 to 8.8 pounds in 2022, according to a report published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

Organic carrots also give retailers another item to promote, as organic produce accounts for over 15% of U.S. fruit and vegetable sales. Top sellers include carrots, behind avocados, berries and apples, and ahead of packaged salad and bananas, according to the 2024 Organic Industry Survey, released last May by the Washington, DC-headquartered Organic Trade Association.

Last year, the carrot category ranked

seventh among the top 10 vegetable categories in sales at \$1.7 billion, with a 52%-dollar share of vegetable build, according to Circana Integrated Fresh, Total US MULO+, latest 52 weeks ending Oct. 6, 2024.

Growers are also tapping into the ever-changing ways consumers want to buy, cook with, and consume carrots with the innovation of new products. This spring, for example, Grimmway Farms, the Bakersfield, CA-based world's largest grower, producer and shipper of carrots, introduced its Carrot Fries Air Fryer Kit. Consider that two-thirds of U.S. households had an air fryer, according to a 2023 study by market insights and analytics company, Circana, up from 11% in 2017.

Retailers can add crunch to their carrot category sales by offering a consistent, high-quality supply, a SKU for every customer, and eye-catching displays with year-round promotions.

1. ENSURE A STEADY SUPPLY

California produces over 85% of carrots grown in the U.S., according to the 2021-published report, *Carrots*, by the U.S. Agricultural Marketing Resource Center in Ames, IA. Four main production regions offer retail buyers year-round supply.

"The weather during planting was much better this year than last year," says Rob Giragosian, sales manager at Kern Ridge Growers LLC., in Arvin, CA. "This has resulted in better yields, and the trend should continue for the coming months. All sampling indicates that the carrot crop should keep up with demand until at least late June."

Grimmway Farms also supplies customers from its production area in Georgia, "reducing the number of miles and amount of time required to bring fresh carrots to customers in the eastern half of the U.S.," says David Bright, vice president of marketing.

Michigan and Texas are also major carrot-growing states.

The U.S. also imports carrots, with some of the most significant volume from Mexico, Canada and Israel, according to the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

"Much of what we grow is based on demand from retail contracts," says Ami Ben-Dror, the Melville, NY-based founder and chief executive of BDA/Dorot Farm, an exporter of fresh carrots from Israel, which also produces baby carrots in California. "This enables us to provide a consistent supply of carrots that are high quality and food-safe."

Since carrots are a shopping list staple, a steady, high-quality supply is essential.

"We take a strategic approach to regional farming to ensure consistent availability across all carrot varieties, both organic and conventional," says Karen White, vice president of marketing for Bakersfield, CA-based Bolt-house Fresh Foods Inc., in Bakersfield, CA.

"By leveraging multiple growing regions, we can adapt to seasonal changes and maintain a steady supply. This approach supports long-term retail partnerships and spot-buy opportunities, allowing retailers to plan ahead or quickly adjust to consumer demand."

2. BUILD YOUR CATEGORY

Each carrot offering at the retail level will



appeal to different end users, says Kern Ridge Growers' Giragosian. "This is why having a diversified carrot offering at the store level is crucial to pushing movement. In my opinion, most retailers have a good handle on what their customers' preferences are and what they need to satisfy their demand."

According to White, whole carrots continue to appeal to budget-conscious consumers who prioritize meal prep and home cooking. "Their cost-effectiveness and versatility make them a reliable choice for consumers looking to incorporate fresh, nutritious vegetables into their meals."

Bolthouse offers whole carrots in conventional and organic bunches with tops on; in 1-, 2-, 3-, and 5-pound conventional bags; in 1-, 2-, and 5-pound organic bags; and 2-pound organic rainbow carrots.

Rainbow carrots continued to outpace category sales in the latest data published by Circana, according to Grimmway's Bright. "We offer organic rainbow carrots in baby, whole, and several value-added cuts. Rainbow products have a unique visual appeal that brighten up any dish or snack."

For retail, Babé Farms focuses solely on whole baby bunched carrots grown in six varieties, including French (Orange), Yellow, Purple, Pink, White and Round (Thumbelina).

"Our most popular items at retail are the Baby French Carrots for their petite size and classic look, as well as our Baby Mixed Carrots, which include a variety of colors (three-plus) to allow retailers to create a rainbow in their produce display," says Matt

Hiltner, marketing manager for the Santa Maria, CA-headquartered company.

"We anticipate good supplies of all varieties of our colorful carrots in the spring," Hiltner adds. "While we dealt with a few minor challenges presented by recent rainy weather, the impact was minimal, and we expect to be on track for our peak carrot season (April-October)."

Baby carrots drive sales in the carrot category, says Bright, and comprise more than 40% of retail sales, followed by whole carrots packed in bags.

Grimmway offers conventional and organic baby carrots in 1-, 2-, 3-, and 5-pound bags under its Grimmway, Bunny-Luv, Bunny-Luv Organic and Cal-Organic brands.

Snacking remains a key driver of carrot consumption, particularly with the increasing demand for convenient, grab-and-go, and portion-controlled options.

"Baby carrots' ready-to-eat format makes

them a go-to choice for lunchboxes, meal prep, and entertaining. Additionally, as more consumers seek portion-controlled and health-conscious snacking options, baby carrots align with low-calorie, high-fiber eating habits," says Bolthouse Fresh Foods' White.

The company offers its Fresh Carrot Shakers, single-serve packs of baby carrots with three flavors: Dill Pickle, Chili Lime and Ranch. There's also a 5-count multipack.

Conventional carrot demand has always been higher than organic in the carrot category, says Kern Ridge Growers' Giragosian, typically due to price points to consumers.

However, adds Grimmway's Bright, "organic carrot sales remained resilient in the last 52 weeks, as shoppers made difficult financial decisions to stretch their grocery budget. Both dollar and volume sales for organic carrots were slightly higher than total carrot category sales, demonstrating



Carrots are some of the top-selling organic fresh produce, behind avocados, berries and apples, according to the 2024 Organic Industry Survey, released last May by the Organic Trade Association.

shoppers' commitment to the organic carrots."

While snacking remains strong, growers see a notable shift in consumer behavior toward cooking applications.

The demand for value-added carrots is rising, explains White. "Pre-cut, prepped ingredients, such as crinkle-cut, matchstick, and shredded carrots cater to time-saving meal prep needs. Ready-to-cook formats, including products like Side Dish Sizzlers, align with consumers who seek convenience without sacrificing freshness."

Side Dish Sizzlers is a three-item line of 10-ounce bags of crinkle-cut carrots with a sauce pack included. Sauce flavors are Garlic Herb, Sweet Honey Heat and Herb Vinaigrette.

"Ready-to-roast fresh-cut vegetables are popular with our shoppers," says Max Maddaus, produce director at Kowalski's Markets, an 11-store chain based in Woodbury, MN. "One of our offerings, created with our recipe, is rainbow carrots with olive oil and herbs."

Grimmway's Carrot Fries Air Fryer Kit is available in Mediterranean Herb and Chipotle Maple, tapping into consumers' desire for bold flavors.

3. BOOST SALES THROUGH DISPLAYS & PROMOTIONS

Shoppers buy with their eyes, and BDA/Dorot Farms' Ben-Dror recommends retailers create "a great presentation on the shelf," and reminds that carrots need to be refrigerated on display.

Chris Harris, category director of produce and floral at New Seasons Market, a 22-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR, says few things are more photogenic than fresh carrots.

"We love to have fun with the colorful nature of the vegetable, including both the root and the stem. Our goal is to ensure they're highly visible and featured alongside complementary ingredients that bring out the carrots' natural sweetness, vibrant color and density, including fresh leafy greens and brassicas (like broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts)."

Grimmway Farms recommends merchandising carrots as a "big wall of orange," as the carrot category is a destination for shoppers.

"The 'big wall of orange' is a beacon for shoppers to find the usual products, typically baby or whole carrots, to add to their cart. This also exposes the shopper to other value-added carrot cuts and allows the retailer to upsell the shopper to an organic carrot product," says Bright.

According to White, since carrots are a versatile, all-day vegetable that fits into multiple meal occasions, retailers can maximize sales and category performance by

expanding carrot placement beyond the produce aisle to drive impulse purchases and increase basket size.

"In the deli and fresh snack sections, baby carrots can be displayed near hummus, guacamole, and other dips to encourage healthy snacking and entertaining purchases. Whole and crinkle-cut carrots can be cross-merchandised with poultry, beef, and seafood to inspire easy sheet pan dinners in the meat and seafood sections," she says. "Grab-and-go areas also provide an excellent opportunity to showcase single-serve baby carrots alongside pre-packed cheese, protein snacks, and yogurt, catering to busy shoppers looking for healthy, convenient options."

Promotions are key to sustaining and growing carrot category sales.

"It is important to understand the product and the demand seasonality to develop effective promotion strategies," says Bright. "Some holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, are seasonal consumption peaks that require little to no promotional discounts to drive additional sales, while holidays earlier in the year from April to September, like Easter, Mother's Day, Memorial, and through Labor Day, can benefit from additional promotional support."

pb

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

As meal solutions become a larger focus in grocery shopping, value-added carrots are crucial in expanding the category's performance.

Karen White, vice president of marketing, Bolthouse Fresh Foods, Inc., Bakersfield, CA

Spring and Easter are hot times of year for our varieties of colorful carrots.

Matt Hiltner, marketing manager, Babé' Farms, Inc., Santa Maria, CA

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California Organic Strawberries: Still Going Strong

Berries are the top organic item in produce.

BY BOB JOHNSON

Berries surpassed packaged salad mixes as the most important organic item in produce departments two years ago and show no signs of looking back.

Supermarket consumers purchased \$473 million of organic berries in the third quarter of 2024, according to analysis by Category Partners. Third quarter data showed organic berries were up 2.7% over a year ago and widened their lead over salad mixes, which were down 5.2%. Category Partners uses Nielsen data to do statistical analysis for the Organic Produce Network.

Although the organic berries category includes blackberries and raspberries, most of the volume is strawberries.

Most organic strawberries come from California, which produces a large majority of all the strawberries grown in the country.

“More organic strawberries are grown in California than anywhere else in the world, and 90% of U.S. grown strawberries are from California,” says Chris Christian, vice president for market insights at the California Strawberry Commission, Watsonville, CA. “They are shipped throughout North America and exported to more than 30 countries. Organic production is about 13% of the acreage and 10% of production volume.”

PEAK SEASON

Although organic strawberries are grown and shipped out of California year-round, the peak season is from March to early July, when production reaches the coastal zone 100 miles south of San Francisco.

During this long season, a few holidays stand out as excellent opportunities to promote California organic strawberries. “Demand is extremely high in holiday seasons: Valentine’s Day, Easter, Passover, Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day,” says Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Melissa’s World Produce, Vernon, CA.

Although the company sources produce globally, Melissa’s has had success with a premium line of berries from California. “We currently get organic Harry’s Berries from Ventura, CA, as the organic season started much earlier than usual,” says Schueller.



Expanded refrigerated displays in the produce department will drive strong incremental sales and encourage consumers to buy multiples.

He says price is stable due to demand and consistent weather that is ideal for strawberries. “In 2024 compared to 2023, we saw an increase of 12% in organic strawberries. In 2024 compared to 2023, we saw an increase of 19% in organic Harry’s Berries.”

Some retailers report increased consumer interest when California organic berries replace the winter product from Mexico and Florida. “There is definitely interest in the California strawberries, especially the organic ones,” says Karim Wahhab, produce director at Draeger’s Market, Los Altos, CA, operating four markets in Los Altos, San Mateo, Menlo Park, and Danville, all affluent neighborhoods in the Bay Area.

Naturipe Berry Growers, Watsonville, CA, grows conventional and organic strawberries 12 months a year in California. “This year-round growth and availability mean that shoppers can purchase all year,” says Jerry Moran, vice president of sales. “Naturipe strawberries are available all year long, with the seasonal peaks in the spring and summer.”

Naturipe ships strawberries for more than 150 growers from throughout California’s coastal region.

Organic strawberries are available year-round in California, but the volume reaches its peak when the harvest hits Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, which combine for more than 40% of the state’s harvest.

“California produces strawberries on a year-round basis in the Oxnard and Santa Maria growing areas,” says Kelley Sablan, communications manager for California Giant Berry Farms, Watsonville, CA. “The Watsonville/Salinas region spans from March to November, typically, barring any major weather events. Organic strawberries are available from California Giant from a variety of regions, including Santa Maria, Mexico and Watsonville/Salinas. The Santa Maria region produces organic fruit year-round.”

California Giant ships more than 40 million trays of berries every year.

Volume and opportunities for promotion are greatest from March until late summer. Early indications are that the 2025 crop of organic California strawberries will be robust.

“So far, this year’s crop is looking excellent,” says Moran. “We’ve bounced back exceptionally well from the rain and flooding that much of California experienced a few seasons ago, and the result is healthy plants and bountiful volumes. Between our fields in California and supplemental volumes coming from Florida and Mexico, it’s shaping up to be a great year for strawberries.”

PREMIUM VARIETIES

While most strawberries are not labeled by variety in the store, two major shippers are enjoying success with premium varieties.

Melissa's features premium strawberries from Harry's Berries, grown organically on the coast north of Los Angeles. Harry's Berries, grown using University of California varieties Gaviota and Seascape, enjoyed nearly 20% growth last year.

Naturipe has invested in the development of its own proprietary premium strawberry variety.

"Mighty Reds, Naturipe's biggest, sweetest, juiciest strawberries, are coming from California and will be available, for a limited time only, from March through May," says Brian Vertrees, director of business development at Naturipe. "Jaw-droppingly huge, Mighty Reds are a must try for strawberry lovers."

Some shippers provide packaging that helps build an eye-catching display. "Our organic clamshells are labeled with a bright green logo — they market themselves," says Vertrees.

SHOWCASE THE BERRIES

A colorful refrigerated combination of strawberries with other berries can create an optimal display.

"Now's the perfect time to create an inviting berry display that brings a little springtime energy into the store," says Vertrees. "Shoppers love seeing fresh, colorful berries front and center — it lifts moods and gets people thinking about warmer days."

Spring is the time for a berry party in the produce department refrigerators. "In the retail environment, effective merchandising starts with a prime location in the produce section, eye-catching displays, and consistently full stock," says Sablan. "Clear signage highlighting berries and any promotions can entice customers. Cross-merchandising with complementary items, like yogurt or baking ingredients, boosts impulse buys. Where appropriate, showcase health benefits of berries as part of a well-balanced diet."

Strawberries announce that spring has come, and warmer days are ahead.

"Expanded refrigerated displays as we come into the spring months will drive strong incremental sales lifts and encourage consumers to buy multiples and mix and match offers will get more berries in the basket," agrees Vorhees. "In May (National Strawberry Month), consumers should enjoy strawberries in every form — and that includes organics. We encourage retailers to market conventional and organic strawberries all month, offering new ways to use strawberries and sharing information about their unique health benefits. It's a great time for shoppers who usually buy conventional to give organic a try."

Most important to remember in merchan-

dising is to maintain the cold chain from the field to the produce department shelf.

"No matter what aspect of the distribution chain your business is in — foodservice, retail, or wholesale — operating with fast cycle times and maintaining cold chain integrity is crucial for optimal berry quality and shelf life," advises Schueller. "Training produce team staff on proper handling and regular quality checks, including stock rotation, ensures customers receive the best quality berries possible."

The quality of berries on display should be monitored regularly. "Maintaining the cold chain all the way to the shelf, monitoring displays for quality and freshness are critical," advises Christian.

Vertrees says demand for California organic strawberries is consistent. "Consumers choose organic for a number of reasons, including preference for increased sustainability in the growing process or a focus on more natural fertilization techniques. Recently, we've also seen a trend toward eating well and having an understanding of what you're consuming."

PRODUCTION COSTS RISING

Christian says California farmers are facing increasing costs to produce organic strawberries. "Production costs are rising for California strawberry farmers much faster than inflation

or returns from the marketplace. Strawberries are a top revenue category in supermarkets, and it is important that higher prices paid by consumers also improve farm revenue."

Buoyed by recent strength in the market for California organic strawberries, major shippers believe demand will be strong enough to absorb rising costs.

"Even when berries slightly rise in price, shoppers know that the Naturipe name means they'll be getting fresh, top-of-the-line product every time — and they're willing to pay for it," says Naturipe's Moran. **pb**

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

More organic strawberries are grown in California than anywhere else in the world.

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The sweet onion category benefits from year-round availability, thanks to regional domestic production shifts throughout the seasons, as well as imported sweets.

Sweeten Sales with Sweet Onions

A variety of sweet onion types herald the season.

BY DOROTHY NOBLE

Imagine food preparation without sweet onions. Whether raw or cooked, milder, sweet onions are indispensable in today's kitchens.

"I believe the demand for sweet onions will continue to rise. Over the past five years, we've seen our own demand grow exponentially," says Ryan Conlon, sales manager for year-round grower, packer-shipper Progressive Produce, Los Angeles, CA. "As more consumers discover and prefer the unique flavor profile of sweet onions, interest naturally increases. Many retailers have found it beneficial to offer both bulk options and consumer bags to meet this growing demand."

Jeff Brechler, sales representative, Little Bear Produce, Edinburg, TX, agrees the market growth is steady. "Customers enjoy mild onions. They like the low acidity, and look for mildness for raw, sautéed, and baking. Chefs prefer sweetness to caramelize."

Simply put, "more people realize the great taste and value of a sweet onion," says Kim Brunson, manager, Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee, Kennewick, WA.

In recent years, the Vidalia onion category has dominated consumer interest in the sweet onion category, says John Shuman, president and chief executive of Shuman Farms, Reids-

ville, GA. "Vidalia onions are the heart and soul of our business."

"We're committed to ensuring that Vidalia onions continue to be a household staple and a high-performing category for retailers."

YEAR-ROUND AVAILABILITY EXPANDS SALES

The sweet onion category benefits from year-round availability, thanks to regional production shifts throughout the seasons, according to Conlon, who adds Progressive

Produce has a "traveling fresh sweet onion program."

The calendar starts with Mexican Mayan Sweets, which it packs and distributes January through most of April. Midway through April, they start the Vidalia program, even though not all their partners transition with them. Then, in May, Progressive Produce ships California flat onions through June into July.

"Walla Walla Sweets start becoming available just in time for the Fourth of July and run through August. Then we start packing



PRODUCE BUSINESS/SUSAN CROWELL PHOTO

When shopping for sweet onions, customers often look for quality, freshness, price and size. Retailers should offer varying packaging, from onions in bulk to bagged options.

and distributing our Peruvian Mayan Sweets through the end of the year,” says Conlon.

This season, Little Bear Produce produced some harvests as early as February, and Brechler predicts the harvest will continue with good quality. Their yellow, sweet, mild Honey Sweet commands accolades, and they also grow Honey Suckle red onions.

TX 1015 Sweet Onions, administered by the South Texas Onion Committee, are available from March until mid-July. According to marketing order manager Dante Galeazzi, the Rio Grande Valley supplies the market during March through early/mid-June, and the Winter Garden Region supplies the market around late April through July.

“This year, Uvalde is starting earlier — around April 10 — two weeks ahead of schedule,” Galeazzi says.

This year, Vidalia onions were available beginning April 15, the official pack date set by the Georgia Department of Agriculture and the Vidalia Onion Committee (VOC). Usually, they run until Labor Day.

Afterward, the onion companies transition to Mexican and Peruvian onions to continue the premium sweet onions.

Sloan Lott, director of sales, Bland Farms, Glennville, GA, forecasts a slightly smaller crop this year, due to colder, wetter conditions during the growing season.

“It was unexpected that our crop would endure a tropical storm, a hurricane, floods, and even 6 inches of snow — but that is exactly what happened,” says VOC Executive Director Shane Curry when announcing the pack date. “Despite these unpredictable conditions, our crop has managed to withstand the challenges with only minor damage. We are eager to provide our consumers with the high-quality Vidalia onions they look forward to each year.”

In its rich, sandy loam in California, JJB Family Farms, Stockton, CA, produces white, yellow and red onions, as well as sweet onions and organic onions. They ship spring and fall for their locally grown onions, principally for California retailers.

Manager Derrell Kelso acknowledges demographic preferences — Hispanics generally prefer whites, while South Asian, Indian and Pakistani cooks use more red onions. European culture, Kelso reports, demands more yellow onions. Sweet onions lead some of their branded bags.

PACKAGING CATERS TO MARKET

Conlon says, over the years, packaging has changed a lot, from retail partners just carrying onions in bulk to bagged options available now in 2- to 8-pound bags.

“More retailers are shifting toward bagged

Vidalia sweet onions over bulk,” Lott notes. “Over the past five years, our bag business has nearly doubled — what started with four baggers under the grader is now eight, running full throttle.”

At Locati Farms, Walla Walla, WA, grower Michael Locati has more than 23 different pack sizes, styles and specifications. “We do whatever the customers ask.”

Kelso notes that the sleeves on JJB’s packages turn onion displays from a pile to a stack. Plus, he says, “Striking packaging spurs impulse purchases.”

PROPER HANDLING MAINTAINS FRESHNESS

Galeazzi says the beauty of the TX 1015 Sweet Onion is its long shelf life. With their higher water content and less pyruvic acid, they average jumbo sizes, suitable for storage, “with the proper handling and care.”

Progressive Produce’s Conlon recommends storing whole onions in a cool, dry and dark area. “Moisture can lead to issues with mold, and too much light can cause onions to start sprouting. For foodservice partners dealing with cut onions, these should be refrigerated.”

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ONION NUTRITION AIDS CONSUMERS

The National Onion Association, Eaton, CO, concentrates on the nutritional benefits of onions in the diet. “Onions are so naturally full of flavor, it’s hard to imagine not having them in your pantry,” says René Hardwick, director of public and industry relations. “But when you learn that a diet rich in onions can help build your immunity, fight disease, and lower your risk for heart problems, it’s a no-brainer.”

Hardwick says the focus at the National Onion Association is to highlight onions as a nutritional powerhouse. “From enhancing flavors in culinary delights to their rich antioxidant properties, onions are not just a kitchen staple, but a vital component of a healthy diet. We’re excited to showcase their diverse benefits and encourage everyone to savor the goodness of onions in every meal.”

START WITH PROMOTING

Bland Farms plans family-focused recipes and activities for its summer campaign this season, and its sales managers will help retailers customize and maximize store engagement, says Lott.

Conlon says Progressive Produce teams up with retail partners to help them with social media campaigns for various growing regions. The company also offers bins that can be used in retail stores.

Locati recommends placing the Walla Walla sweet onions in front of the produce section, where it’s easy for consumers to find them.

Little Bear’s Brechler reminds marketers holidays are key times for traditional onion sales. “Summer has Father’s Day, July Fourth, and opportunities for tailgating at sports events,” he notes. “Lots of things for onion ingredients, such as salads and dips, attract consumers.”

At JJB Family Farms, Kelso adds, “Cross-merchandising is easy with onions. They go with anything. In recipes, they can be used for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Shuman recommends retailers create eye-catching Vidalia onion displays through clear signage and cross-promoting with complementary items, like grilling products, salad ingredients and fresh meal solutions.

“Positioning Vidalia onions in multiple locations throughout the store — such as near the meat department during grilling season — can also help drive incremental sales.”

“We also encourage retailers to train their produce teams to confidently talk about Vidalia onions with shoppers. That’s why we’ve developed Shuman Farms University, which provides educational resources to help retail teams better understand and sell Vidalia onions,” adds Shuman.

Galeazzi says retailers have different ways of promoting the TX 1015 Sweet Onion. He says one retailer, with 2-, 3-, or 5-pound bags, has “Texas Roots” branding with packaging, highlighting county and grower suppliers. Others use private labels with the bag stating “TX 1015 Sweet Onions” and positioned as a limited-time premium product. Others use digital coupons paired with complementary items, such as tomatoes, and others use in-store coupons.

STOCK NUMEROUS ONIONS

Throughout the nation, grocery stores offer significant choices for consumers. Many supermarkets display specialty onions alongside the well-known varieties and the recognized brands. Of note, observes JBB Family Farms’ manager Kelso, “West Coast retailers stock more organic products on the shelves. The East Coast is different.”

Homeland Stores, Oklahoma City, OK, is the largest locally owned Oklahoma grocery chain, with 31 stores statewide. Using not only a weekly ad but also a monthly shoppers’ guide, onions make up more than 15 categories.

Jennifer Thomas, produce manager at the Oklahoma City Boulevard store, says holidays and sports events are the store’s busiest. Promotions, such as the date the Vidalia onions appear, also drive more customers to the store. “Customers look for quality, and what looks nice.”

Uncle Giuseppe’s Marketplace, with 11 stores in New York and New Jersey, is noted for old-fashioned Italian specialties. At the Ramsey, NJ, store, Produce Manager Eliseo Valderabano says customers look for freshness and price, “and the largest onions,” especially



PRODUCE BUSINESS/AMIEE TENZKE PHOTO

the jumbo size. Their customers do not particularly shop in events. “People buy onions all the time.”

The store displays onions on racks, adjacent to salads, tomatoes and packaged mushrooms. The stock is inspected constantly, with frequent rotations. They offer bulk and typically 2-pound size yellow onions, plus red and white loose onions, and scallions, shallots and pearl onions. “At the beginning of the season, Vidalia onions are especially demanded.” **pb**

WHAT THEY ARE
Saying

Sweet onions, like most items, sell more with the proper promotion. Signage with recipes helps consumers utilize sweet onions in ways they may not have thought of.

Ryan Conlon, sales manager,
Progressive Produce,
Los Angeles, CA

Shoppers love Vidalia onions, but they need to know when they’re in season and how to use them.

John Shuman, president and
chief executive officer, Shuman
Farms, Reidsville, GA

■ SWEET ONION AVAILABILITY SHOULD CONTINUE

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2025 Vegetable Report shows the per-person availability for onions in a recent decade has grown. It recorded 18.37 pounds in 2014, and 21.27 pounds in 2023.

Onions rank among the top-produced commodities in the U.S. Domestic onion production in 2024 increased 5% over 2023. Plus, last year’s crop value was 13% over the previous year. About

three-fourths was for the fresh market.

The National Onion Association reports that popular onions can be available year-round in the U.S. Over 20 states grow onions — Washington leads, then California and Oregon. However, 20.8% are imported.

With production increases and forecasted demand, sweet onions should be available in continued promotable volume.



PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

The appearance of more tomato varieties — as well as more ways to purchase them, from little cups of cherry tomatoes to bulk beefsteaks — requires food retailers to pinpoint their specific consumer demands, whether for cooking, meal prep or snacking.

Today's Tomatoes More Complex to Merchandise

To shoppers, it's a snack, it's a salad, it's an ingredient — and it's indispensable.

BY MIKE DUFF

The tomato business is going through significant change at the retail, wholesale and grower levels, as the popular category is affected by a variety of consumer trends. And today, rather than four, five or six tomato SKUs, many stores offer a dozen or more.

The tomato's diversity is driven by food-service demands, consumer wellness motivation, and gourmet and ethnic food trends. To get the most of the tomato category requires innovation built around these changes and local consumer preference.

Overall, the tomato is the second most commonly consumed vegetable in the U.S., fresh and processed. Fresh tomato consumption in the U.S. started out the century at about 19 pounds per person and peaked at

21 pounds in 2011, according to Statista. The consumption number hovered above 20 pounds until dropping to 17.9 pounds during the COVID-19 pandemic, then began trending up again to reach 19.2 pounds in 2023.

KNOW YOUR SHOPPERS

At Saker ShopRite, Holmdel, NJ, demographics and the popularity of ethnic cuisine drives what the company offers. At the opening of a new store in South Plainfield, NJ, Richard Saker, the company's president, recently observed his shoppers have strong preferences for tomato products by variety and in terms of form. Saker ShopRite customers today buy fewer fresh tomatoes because they increasingly want convenience, and are often willing to trade money for time. Saker says he

runs four commissaries to turn basic commodities, including tomatoes, into what's increasingly sought by consumers.

"They want to buy fresh salsa," he says, adding, "This is part of this prepared food generation. They're buying convenience and services."

Yet the company doesn't forsake other tomato forms. The South Plainfield store, on opening, had a special endcap display featuring bulk tomatoes and bagged avocados. To put a trendier spin on the display, the tomatoes were heirloom varieties.

Vince Mastromauro, director of produce operations, Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL, says devising tomato merchandising programs today is a matter of using space wisely for staples, then building in more to attract more shoppers. So, he's thinking about the shopping

list sale, the add-on sale and the impulse sale at the same time

"It's getting your bulk stuff, tying it with your tonnage item of an avocado, and your package stuff should be either behind it or on the flip side," he says. "You're not going to leave the department without buying a tomato of some sort."

He looks for deals that will appeal to a customer base that's affluent and thoughtful about food purchasing, so, when he gets a price on something such as brown tomatoes, he will get it out on a deal.

BEYOND SLICING

NatureSweet has adapted to the change in the tomato business, says Jenny Halpin, the San Antonio, TX-based company's senior manager, external communications. Its mission, she explains, is to provide premium produce at a time when consumers are more focused on fruit and vegetable origins, quality, healthfulness and flavor.

"Our commitment to quality has driven our growth, leading to an expansion of product offerings beyond our classic snacking tomatoes like Cherubs," she says. NatureSweet has introduced new varieties, such as Glorys, ideal for grilling, sautéing, roasting and baking, and Constellation, which delivers a burst of color and flavor. D'Vines is an on-the-vine tomato for snacking, salads, and charcuterie boards, and the company's specialty varieties include Adora, an award-winning heirloom tomato known for its unique flavor and texture.

"Additionally, advances in controlled environment agriculture and sustainability practices have allowed us to remain at the forefront of the sector, providing fresh, high-quality tomatoes year-round," says Halpin.

NatureSweet has gone to lengths in improving tomato eating experiences in the company's area of focus.

"When it comes to different segments, our grape tomatoes remain a market leader, while cherry tomatoes are experiencing growing demand," she says, adding even beefsteak tomatoes "have evolved to appeal to consumers seeking meaty, versatile varieties for cooking, with a strong preference for heirloom and premium options."



Fresh tomato consumption in the U.S. peaked at 21 pounds in 2011, according to Statista, and was roughly 19.2 pounds in 2023.

Tomatoes' nutritional characteristics are consistent with consumers' desire to eat healthier, Halpin adds.

"The increasing shift toward healthier eating and the growing preference for convenient, ready-to-eat options have prompted retailers to prioritize premium and snackable tomato varieties, like Cherubs and Glorys, which align with these trends," says Halpin. "This has led to more prominent shelf space in stores, making it easier for consumers to access these high-quality tomato options."

CONSUMERS WANT CONSISTENCY

Danny Murphy, sales merchandising manager, Pure Flavor Farms, Leamington, Ontario, acts as a point person working directly with stores to enhance their tomato sales. He says some retailers, particularly larger chains, are trending toward uniformity of product and product presentation.

A number of those want store-to-store consistency — in both merchandising and quality — for operational and banner reasons. Other chains lean on seasonality, purchasing the best quality that still satisfies value expectations and providing tomatoes from local growers that their customers want to support.

Murphy works with retailers to build sales of all Pure Flavor labels, including MightyVine tomatoes. He says an advantage of

branded produce is that growers and packers are involved in ensuring the quality, and consumers recognize that good brands maintain standards. Not long ago at a Midwestern chain, Murphy brought in 500 branded bins for display in the front of the produce section to emphasize the MightyVine label.

He also works with the Pure Flavor Group to help them develop local tomato programs. "People still care and want to know where their produce is coming from," he says.

Part of the job is not only helping retailers understand how a branded product can boost their produce department but also helping maintain the availability of the goods. "It's all about going into stores and relaying the consumer feedback to my buyer so she can build a better rapport with the retail team," says Murphy.

KEEP AN EYE ON PRICE

Murphy adds that price still counts, and getting a good balance of quality and price for consumers at the store level is important.

Daniel Blumb, senior category growth manager, sales, at NatureSweet, says consumer affordability is an issue, so understanding how a consumer base weighs its options is important, whether for mealtime or snacking.

"Consumers continue to incorporate these products into their households, increas-

■ BE NIMBLE ENOUGH TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MARKET

A tomato glut this winter was the latest twist in the tomato tale.

Michael Armata, buyer and salesman at E. Armata, Bronx, NY, says food retailers had an opportunity this winter to do major tomato price promotions to generate sales. "There has been an overabundance. With the oversupply, people could stir up business."

Food retailers had a chance to make a statement with deals on tomatoes. On most shopping lists, consumers are generally familiar with tomato pricing, so they won't miss and are likely to appreciate a bargain provided.

"Everything is so expensive right now with inflation, any savings is welcome. You want to be able to retail any items you can at reasonable prices," says Armata.

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

You're not going to leave the department without buying a tomato of some sort.

Vince Mastromauro, Sunset Foods, Highland Park, IL

The increasing shift toward healthier eating and the growing preference for convenient, ready-to-eat options have prompted retailers to prioritize premium and snackable tomato varieties.

Jenny Halpin, NatureSweet, San Antonio, TX

ingly opting for more affordable choices, like Romas, slicing rounds and private label options," he says. "However, many are unwilling to compromise on flavor, leading to sustained demand for premium snacking tomatoes."

Blumb cites numbers, from the last 13 weeks compared to the previous year, that show the number of buyers for premium snacking tomatoes, like Cherubs, grew by 12%, adding 3.3 million households for a total of 31 million.

BOTTOM LINE

The appearance of more tomato varieties in a greater number of stores — as well as more ways to purchase them, from little cups of cherry tomatoes to bulk beefsteaks — requires food retailers to pinpoint specific consumer demands, whether for cooking, meal prep or snacking, to be able to refine presentations. However, that same development can create a challenge: Retailers still need volume drivers to ensure they remain connected to their core tomato customers, the most consistent and the biggest tomato purchasers.

Michael Armata, buyer and salesman at E. Armata, Bronx, NY, suggests that produce departments, even on a store basis, should each identify and promote the SKUs that are most heavily purchased, and then expand around those to entice additional purchasers and those customers whose preferences are more unique.



The increasing shift toward healthier eating and the growing preference for convenient, ready-to-eat options have prompted retailers to prioritize premium and snackable tomato varieties.

PRODUCE BUSINESS/MIKE DUFF PHOTO

"With so many different varieties, it's a little more difficult to get the volume on one item," he says, adding he uses the company's market knowledge to help customers monitor what's working best for them.

The multitude of tomato products demands more attention, Armata emphasizes. Unless handling at stores is given careful consideration, product quality will diminish, along with shopper satisfaction, and shrink will

creep higher. Consumers storing tomatoes in a 35-degree home refrigerator may be a bad thing, but maintaining proper cool temperatures through the supply chain and to the shopper is going to mean greater customer satisfaction.

"You need to store the product with the right refrigeration," he said. "Then, you have to think about how the rotation is with the stock in the store."

pb



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Innovations in Fresh-Cut Produce Packaging and Technology

Technological advancements are shaping the fresh-cut produce market.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Try this test at work: Swap the morning doughnuts for a basket of whole apples or oranges, along with pre-cut slices of the same fruits. Which is eaten fastest? That's right, it's the easy-to-eat, fresh-cut form.

"There is no question that fresh-cut produce meets our customers' demand for convenience when it comes to healthy eating, providing quick meal solutions without compromising on nutrition," says Chris Harris, category director of produce and floral at New Seasons Market, a 22-store chain headquartered in Portland, OR.

Value-added fruits and vegetables in the supermarket produce department represented a dollar sales share of 15.4% and a pound sales share of 8.2%, compared to non-value-added produce for the 52 weeks ending Feb. 23, 2025, according to the report, *A New Year & New Opportunities in Produce & Floral*, released March 6 by Circana and the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA).

"Retailers prioritize fresh-cut produce with high consumer demand, convenience, and good shelf life, such as lettuce, salad greens, carrots and celery," says Joe Bradford, vice



In Sormac's PepperCorer Robotic (PCR), a robotic arm picks up each pepper, places it in the machine, cores it, and cuts it into the desired shape — rings, wedges or cubes. The PepperCorer Robotic has a capacity of up to 2,500 pieces per hour.

PHOTO COURTESY SORMAC

president of sales, produce, at PPC Flexible Packaging, in Payson, UT.

"Certain fresh-cut items are experiencing rising demand due to health trends, snacking habits, meal prep convenience, and packaging advancements," Bradford adds. "These include pineapple chunks, mango cubes, sweet potato cubes, and halved or shredded Brussels sprouts."

Melons, mixed fruit, pineapple, berries, apples, mangos, grapes, mandarins, papayas, and avocados were the 10 top-selling value-added fruits for the year, ending Feb. 23, 2025, according to data in the Circana and IFPA report. Salad kits, broccoli, lettuce, garden salads, carrots, mushrooms, celery, salad blends, slaw salads, and beans ranked as the top 10 selling value-added vegetables.

The key to the continued growth and success of fresh-cut fruit and vegetable products is innovation in cutting and packaging.

CUTTING-EDGE ADVANCEMENTS

Peeled, cored and spear-shaped cut pineapples are a customer favorite at Kowalski's Markets, an 11-store chain based in Woodbury, MN. "We don't sell many whole pineap-

ples anymore, except for the new pink-fleshed variety, and even those we're starting to offer in fresh-cut form now," says Max Maddaus, produce director.

The KA-750 Pineapplator, a counter-top size pineapple peeler ideal for retailers' use back-of-the-house, in a central commissary, or by fresh-cut processors, is one of the best-selling pieces of equipment sold by Denver, CO-based Dark Side Equipment, a licensed distributor for Astra Inc. Astra is a company headquartered in Fukushima, Japan, that produces a wide range of automated peeling equipment.

"This vertical peeling system also works on papaya, mangos, melons and gourds, and offers product yields 15-20% higher than traditional hand peeling," says Maxwell Krieger, U.S. sales manager.

The company has recently released a retail floor version called Pineomatic. This enables customers to choose a whole pineapple from the produce display, ideally co-located adjacent to the cutter, then employ a quick three-step self-serve process to peel, core, cut into rings, and place into a container ready to go. The unit also has a self-cleaning function.



PHOTO COURTESY DARK SIDE EQUIPMENT

Denver, CO-based Dark Side Equipment recently released the Pineomatic. Customers can choose a whole pineapple from the produce display, and the Pineomatic's quick three-step self-serve process peels, cores, cuts into rings, and places into a container ready to go. The unit also has a self-cleaning function.

“The marketing plus to the Pineomatic is an interactive action station for the customer and in-store theater for other shoppers,” says Krieger.

“The driving factor today is fresh cuts to meet consumer demand, rather than fresh cutting to help reduce shrink and hope it sells,” he adds.

In February, Dark Side Equipment introduced its Astra Inc./Fruit Peeling Machine, which peels citrus, like lemons, limes, oranges, grapefruits and pomelos one at a time.

According to Mira Arts, head of marketing for Sormac B.V., headquartered in Venlo, The Netherlands, there is increased attention to hygiene in fresh-cut produce. “This is not only essential to food safety, but it is also ultimately beneficial to shelf life and maintaining freshness.”

For example, she says, damaged leaves in a salad pack lead to cell fluid leaking within the pack, stimulating the growth of bacteria and ultimately shortening shelf life. “We design equipment on the principles of easy cleanability, which leads to effective disinfection, resulting in microbiologically safe machinery, and eventually, improved food safety.”

Sormac is also exploring ways to automate repetitive cleaning tasks. One example is the built-in flush-in-place functionality in vegetable washing machines.

In February, Sormac unveiled several innovations in fresh produce processing technology. The PepperCorer Robotic (PCR) and a three-dimensional Dice Cutter (CD-145) are two. In the first, bell peppers are fed in bulk and then automatically delivered one by one to the machine, which uses vision technology to determine their orientation.

A robotic arm then picks up each pepper, places it in the machine, cores it, and cuts it into the desired shape — rings, wedges or cubes. The PepperCorer Robotic has a capacity of up to 2,500 pieces per hour.

The new Dice Cutter features a 15.7-inch drum diameter, the largest in its class. It has an easy-to-use touchscreen HMI (human-machine interface), which operators use to digitally set up the slice, dice, and/or stick thickness without needing mechanical adjustment. The cutter, suitable for potatoes, carrots, onions and fruit, has a capacity of over 13,000 pounds per hour, depending on the application.

The growth of automation and AI is another trend in fresh-cut processing.

“This includes using robotics, imaging technology, and AI-powered product recognition to help detect defects and mistakes and ensure faster troubleshooting at the production floor in case issues occur,” says

WHAT THEY ARE *Saying*

The future of produce slicing equipment will be focused on automation, precision, waste reduction and food safety. We also expect developments in more sustainable and energy-efficient models that reduce power and water consumption to enhance eco-friendly operations.

Mira Arts, head of marketing,
Sormac B.V., Venlo, The
Netherlands

Arts. “The PepperCorer Robotic is one example, and so is our OptiPro. The OptiPro visual automation system is a solution that uses deep learning software for product recognition at the processing line. In case of a discrepancy versus the recipe, a signal will be sent to the line controls to trigger corrective actions.”

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PACKAGING DEVELOPMENTS

One of the first factors Maddaus, at Kowalski's Markets, looks for in fresh-cut packaging is sustainability. "It should be environmentally friendly, recyclable or biodegradable."

The fresh-cut produce industry is driving sustainability by incorporating post-consumer content, compostable and biodegradable packaging, according to Carrie Cline, senior brand manager for Inline Plastics Corp., in Shelton, CT.

"Consumers are increasingly pushing for higher post-consumer recycled content in food packaging, and larger companies are progressively setting sustainability targets to increase this percentage," Cline says. "These industry advancements reflect a strong commitment to reducing plastic waste, while maintaining high product quality and sustainability standards."

Currently, every PET product in Inline Plastics' portfolio contains 10% post-consumer recycled content. The company is also a member of the How2Recycle labeling program, which has introduced label guidelines to give consumers clearer instructions on how to recycle packaging.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), which holds producers accountable for their products, from design to disposal, is also driving sustainable and lightweight packaging.

"This may spur possible transitions from rigid packaging to flexible packaging," says Jeff Travis, senior manager of innovation and sustainability for American Packaging Corp., in Columbus, WI. "Packaging manufacturers like ourselves are responding with various sustainable packaging options, including Design for Recycle, Design for Compost, Certified Circular Content, PCR Content, Renewable (or Bio-Based) Content and Source Reduction."

PPC Flexible Packaging's R&D efforts primarily focus on developing sustainable films for modified atmosphere packaging and qualifying them for various applications. It has introduced a fully recyclable, multilayer film designed for fresh-cut applications.

"This film runs smoothly on automated machinery and is cost-effective compared to other environmentally responsible alternatives. With its low OTR (oxygen transmission rate), we can easily regulate permeability through laser perforations, ensuring optimal performance," says Bradford.

New Seasons Market has a circular recycling program that supports its fresh-cut produce.

"In partnership with D6 (a Sulphur Springs, TX-based recycler), all our fresh-cut packaging carries special labeling to communicate some key points: each container is crafted



PHOTO COURTESY INLINE PLASTICS

The newest innovation from Inline Plastics, Shelton, CT, is the "Flip and Mix," designed for the 7 by 7-inch Safe-T-Fresh Squares line. This three-compartment insert sits atop the main dish, featuring two equal-sized compartments and a larger showcase section, ideal for keeping ingredients separate until consumption.

specifically for us utilizing post-consumer recycled No. 1 PET flake," says Harris.

Customers are encouraged to return the packaging to recycling centers across all 22 stores. "Once returned, the packaging will be repurposed into new containers, supporting a cycle of reuse that aligns with our commitment to sustainability and environmental responsibility."

Maintaining the quality of the product inside is another essential factor Kowalski's Markets' Maddaus looks for in cut produce packaging. "Shelf life, breathability, and how the product presents to the consumer are all things we consider in our holistic approach to packaging," says Harris.

Inline Plastics' newest innovation is the "Flip and Mix," designed for the 7-by-7-inch Safe-T-Fresh Squares line. This three-compartment insert sits atop the main dish, featuring two equal-sized compartments and a larger showcase section, keeping ingredients separate until consumption. This design preserves the texture and freshness of components, like croutons, vegetables or toppings, enhancing the consumer's dining experience.

PPC Flexible Packaging's Bradford recommends retailers prioritize packaging that extends shelf life, as well as highlights its important environmental benefits. "Food waste accounts for 8% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, contributing to global warming. In my opinion, when developing packaging for fresh produce, functionality should take priority over recyclability or compostability to minimize waste and its environmental impact."

Consumers want to be assured their produce is safe and high quality. Intelligent packaging can be used to communicate this.

"Intelligent packaging simplifies retailer stock rotation and reduces consumer-gen-



PHOTO COURTESY PPC FLEXIBLE PACKAGING

PPC Flexible Packaging, Payson, UT, focuses on developing sustainable films for modified atmosphere packaging and qualifying them for various applications.

erated food waste by monitoring product freshness after opening the package," says Claire Sand, owner of Packaging Technology and Research LLC, in Stillwater, MN, and a member of the Food Packaging Division at the Chicago, IL-headquartered Institute of Food Technologists.

"This is important in food waste prevention since much of the food waste is consumer- and retailer-derived, and fresh-cut produce has a short shelf life," she says. Higher food prices; laws against food waste, like those in Vermont; the 40% surge in listeria, salmonella, and E. coli cases in 2024; and the dissolution of the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF) and other governmental bodies responsible for food safety "point to the need to implement intelligent packaging to communicate food safety and quality effectively."

Connecting intelligent and active packaging is the next step for packaging innovation, adds Sand. "This integration would use intelligent packaging to detect spoilage, and then active packaging would be triggered to mitigate the spoilage. For example, if microbial growth is sensed in fresh-cut produce, antimicrobials can be released to inhibit further growth. This would allow preservatives to be released only when needed and extend the shelf life."

The future of fresh-cut produce packaging continues to shift to convenience, portion control, and grab-and-go formats to align with consumers' increasingly busy lifestyles, says Inline Plastics' Cline. "Single-serve and resealable packaging is in high demand, allowing for better portion management and on-the-go consumption, while variety packs and customized packaging solutions are growing in popularity among retailers looking to offer more flexible options for consumers."

pb

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Shining the Spotlight on Almonds

Retailers can capitalize on the health benefits and versatility of almonds.

BY K.O. MORGAN

Almonds play an important role in overall health, with research showing that this nut supports heart health, gut health, weight management, skin health and exercise recovery.

In fact, research from top scientists indicates that almonds can be considered the most nutrient-dense food on the planet, thanks to their high levels of melatonin, vitamin E, protein, fiber, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, riboflavin, iron and magnesium.

“Our role is to build demand in the U.S. and globally and to conduct research into the vast range of nutritional benefits of almonds,” says Rick Kushman, manager, media relations, global communications and a spokesperson at Almond Board of California, Modesto, CA. “We want people to know that two decades of research and more than 200 peer-reviewed publications attest to this nutritious profile of almonds. It is the nut with the highest levels of nutrients.”

“Almonds are extremely versatile, and their health benefits make it great for snacking,

adding to trail mixes, using in baking and smoothies, and as toppings for salads, yogurt parfaits and oatmeal,” adds Katharine Hawkins, director of marketing and e-comm, Good Sense Foods, New Hope, MN. “Because of its many uses, almonds can be promoted in retail stores all year long.”

Almonds in the U.S. are all grown in California, which is home to more than 7,000 growers and processors. They are harvested in late summer to early fall.

“However, unlike highly perishable produce items, almonds have a longer, more stable shelf life, which enables year-round consumption that makes it easy to incorporate into healthy eating plans,” says Brett Libke, senior vice president of sales for North America and East Coast General at Oppy’s, headquartered in Coquitlam, British Columbia.

Carmen Bourgaize, chief commercial officer at Blue Diamond Growers in Sacramento, CA, agrees. “We know consumers are looking for healthy, fresh foods when they shop in the produce section. Retailers can capture incremental purchases by merchandising snackable fruits and veggies alongside protein-powered almonds, making it easy for customers to create a well-rounded mini meal or healthy snack.”

RAMPING UP THE TASTE BUDS

Almonds on their own are a tasty nut, one of many reasons they’re so popular. New taste profiles are also gaining in popularity among consumers looking for healthy snacking varieties.

“Offering different flavors from trusted almond brands will help ensure you reach as many people as possible. Our consumer-tested assortment includes Oven Roasted Honey, Lightly Salted, Sea Salt & Black Pepper, Whole Natural Almonds, Toasted Almonds & Cherries, and Sea Salt Almonds & Blueberries,” says Bourgaize of Blue Diamond Growers.

“This new line had the perimeter shopper top of mind from the get-go. It features premium varieties with no added oils or artificial flavors,” adds Libke of Oppy’s. “These blends were developed specifically for the produce department with an ingredient list you wouldn’t otherwise find in the snack section.”

Lakeland, FL-based Publix carries a full lineup of almonds — Marcona, raw, roasted, roasted salted, milk chocolate, dark chocolate, lemon crème, cinnamon toasted, seasonal pastels and seasonal candy cane, says Lindsey Willis, media relations manager.

Other unique flavor profiles currently being

sold at retail stores include spicy and sweet combos, such as hot honey and sweet sriracha, chile lime, dill pickle, Wasabi soy, matcha, coconut, and Mexican hot chocolate. “Today’s consumers seek more than just the basics,” says Bourgaize.

Tying almonds with other foods is another way to activate shoppers’ taste buds. “Place almonds on displays next to smoothie mixes, along with fresh berries and bananas, or create a display of almonds with premade salads or salad ingredients, which can give customers ideas on how to include almonds, especially the new almond flavors, into their healthy eating plans,” suggests Hawkins of Good Sense Foods.

SPOTLIGHTING ALMONDS

Almonds are a high-impulse purchase, so displays should be eye-catching and placed strategically. “The produce section is a perfect fit for attention-grabbing displays and shipper units to encourage grab-and-go,” explains Libke of Oppy’s.

“Placement is key — almonds are prominent when placed at eye level, such as across the top of produce displays and endcaps, or near complementary items. And almonds should be well stocked and looking their best.”

Produce departments can also use marketing techniques that include seasonal and health-focused promotions, such as April Heart Month or Healthy January, or healthy snacking for kids in summer or when they go back to school in August or September.

In addition, using QR codes on almond displays or packaging can link to recipes that include almonds as one of the ingredients, as well as their nutritional benefits.

“Promoting healthy attributes of almonds can increase sales,” says Hawkins. “For example, many consumers don’t know that the best time to eat almonds is before bedtime. The high melatonin in almonds helps in regulating circadian rhythms, and the rich calcium and magnesium levels in almonds help in relaxing muscles, making for a more restful sleep. Also, eating almonds on an empty stomach allows your body to absorb their nutrients more effectively.”

Libke recommends pairing almonds with complementary products, such as apples or salads. “Cross-merchandising almonds with these items in the produce department helps reinforce their versatility.”

Highlighting the many new almond flavors via shippers or dump bins, and pushing almonds as a healthy snack item can also create shopper excitement.

“There are a wide variety of seasonings available that can be used to produce unique



The produce department is a good fit for almond displays and shipper units to encourage grab-and-go. Sales are strongest when almonds are placed at eye level, such as across the top of produce displays and endcaps, or near complementary items.

flavored almonds,” says Hawkins. “Displaying these new flavorings can be done in the produce department, but also in the snack aisle and at endcaps by registers. In addition, almonds can be displayed in the cereal aisle by the oatmeal, perhaps on a clip strip.”

Willis says Publix customers can find almonds near fresh produce displays, and at times they will be displayed near a packaged salad case with sliced almonds for a salad topper. “We always try to carry a wide range of different options for our customers: whole, sliced, slivered, blanched, dusted, toasted and chocolate-dipped.”

PROMOTIONS AND MARKETING

“Oppy is in a unique position to bring our produce partners together to deliver more robust marketing programs for our retailers,” says Libke. “For example, we have extensive marketing support available to retailers from the Blue Diamond and Oppy teams, including in-store merchandising services and materials, customized ads and promotions, social media content, in-store demos, national media campaigns and more.”

Packaging can also help promote almonds in stores. “Consumers are always seeking transparency these days, and they want to know what they’re purchasing. Clear packaging or having a window in resealable pouches or clear tubs seem to work best,” says Hawkins of Good Sense Foods.

“They also want to know how to recycle the packaging. Tubs and lids should be clearly numbered in the triangle, and bags should be clearly labeled if they can or cannot be recycled,” she adds.

Signage in the produce department that highlights the high protein, no sugar added, and heart-healthy benefits of almonds can also push sales. “We look for creative ways to educate customers on the health benefits, healthy fats, nutritional profile, and versatile use of almonds,” says Willis.

WHAT THEY ARE Saying

Many consumers don’t know that the best time to eat almonds is before bedtime. The high melatonin in almonds helps in regulating circadian rhythms, and the rich calcium and magnesium levels in almonds help in relaxing muscles, making for a more restful sleep.

Katharine Hawkins, Good Sense Foods, New Hope, MN

Information about the sustainable farming practices used in growing almonds is another way to shine the spotlight on almonds, since almond crops are considered climate-smart farming because almond trees capture and store carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, in their wood and roots. The accumulation of this storage reduces emissions and environmental impact.

California is one of only five Mediterranean climates on earth essential to growing almonds.

“Our role is to help the public understand that California almonds come from sustainable and innovative family farms. Ninety percent of California almond orchards are family farms, and the environmental stewardship story is very strong because California is one of the most regulated growing environments globally with strict laws that protect the environment,” says Kushman of the Almond Board of California.

“That is a strong selling point for today’s environmentally and sustainably aware consumer.”

pb



Building Communities: How Buyers and Sellers Can Differentiate

BY PAUL KNEELAND

The differentiation in retail space problem has been evasive for some time now. It has been discussed among produce industry experts for many years, and the fix seems so simple. But if the solution is simple, then why does the challenge still exist? To be sure, market penetration is difficult for any new item, and that is where we usually attribute the problem. However, we see generations of small family farmers struggle to achieve that sacred spot in that valuable space in the produce section.

There are many reasons for this conundrum, and solutions are sometimes denied for a whole set of different reasons. From the mundane — “We do not have the time needed to fill out the paperwork” or “We are too busy to spend the extra time needed to build this business” — to more complex excuses around certifications and food safety and traceability.

Doing what we always have done has supported small family farmers for generations, and some do not see a need to change. So why are we seeing such a decline in small growers over the years?

On the buy side, purchasing from the same purveyors of fresh fruits and vegetables for many years is a safe and sound way for the buy side to get exactly what they have always received. This mindset remains to this day, even though the game has changed dramatically. With flat- and negative-inflation sales in retail, innovation and change will set competition apart.

Results are the scorecard to all organizations, and not many will succeed with negative trends and losing money for too long. Risks exist when taking a chance, but so do rewards. Winners of this game will be able to figure out the keys to each of the plays. Finding methods that have not been used in your operation could be the ticket that advances your trajectory.

Differentiation in the retail space is fleeting. Traditional supermarkets are struggling to create excitement for consumers. Retailers who made bets that consumers would absolutely want to pick out their own fresh produce and continue to shop brick-and-mortars are finding out that many have turned to online purchases, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

While enjoying the convenience of e-commerce, consumers have a love affair with farmers markets. Direct connection to the source of their food is something that spans generations,

from the Gen Zs to the Boomers. Freshness is something that everyone savors. Who can argue that fresh fruits and vegetables taste better and last longer when the supply chain is shortened?

Despite the consumers’ strong desire for freshness, common understanding of the buy side and the sell side is aloof. Both point to each other as the problem. Buy side cannot understand why small family farmers cannot fill out paperwork necessary and get them all the certifications, just like all their larger growers. Small family farmers cannot understand why they need to get endless certifications and fill out continuous paperwork.

Yet small family farmers and buy-side executives both really want to do business together.

What’s the solution to bridging the gap? Here are a few thoughts:

1. Review your core beliefs — just about every retailer that is deeply rooted in the community is successful. They become part of the community and are there to support in good times and in bad times. The stores

become meeting places, and the store staff become friends. Local family farms connect with the community in the same way.

2. Develop deep personal connections with local growers. Visit their farms, meet their families. Go into the fields and experience their amazing work. Visit often. Growers are part of your community, too. Find more ways to tell the farmer’s story through in-store events and merchandising, social media, videos, and other media promotions, like local news stations and radio.

3. Help each other out. Understanding how products get to market is key. Look at ways to streamline tedious processes, such as certification, vendor setups, traceability, food safety and other administrative work necessary to get product on shelf.

Solving the core problem has been elusive. Solutions exist. Now is the time to unite small family farmers and buyers. The outcome ultimately gets fresher fruits and vegetables to its closest output, shortening the supply chain and giving consumers the experience that they want: great tasting, locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables that support the community.

Paul Kneeland is vice president of Elevated Foods, focused on connecting small family farms who are dedicated to improving soil health to retail and institutional buyers, based in Costa Mesa, CA.

Finding methods that have not been used in your operation could be the ticket that advances your trajectory.

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BY NOVELLA LUI

Meet Ube: A Tuber in Rising Popularity

Ube (pronounced ooh-beh) is a substantial part of the Filipino food culture. From street foods to fine dining, this purple vegetable is making its way into the mainstream food scene in the U.S.

Ube's growing popularity in North American cuisine appears to be fueled by the rise of Filipino cuisine, social media engagement, and consumer interest in naturally vibrant ingredients.

So, what exactly is an ube? Ube, in Tagalog, stands for tuber. It is a type of purple yam, with a similar texture to conventional yams.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Data Central, every 3.5-ounce serving of ube has 27 grams of carbohydrates, 4 grams of fiber, and 0.1 grams of fat. It is also a source of vitamin C, and notable for its rich content of anthocyanins, a group of antioxidants that give the tuber its vibrant purple hue.

UBE, TARO, PURPLE SWEET POTATO: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Ube is often mistaken as a taro and a purple sweet potato, but each has its own distinct texture, flavor profiles and culinary uses, explains Brian Chau, food scientist and founder of Chau Time, and Christine Farkas, RSE, CRC, founder, food innovation adviser, and certified research chef at iHeartFood Consulting.

Ube has a creamy, off-white skin that is thicker than the skin of purple sweet potatoes. Raw ube also has light purple flesh, which becomes a deep purple when cooked. It is mildly sweet and moist, with a slightly sticky texture and a nutty, vanilla-like aroma. Its vanilla notes are also more pronounced than taro and sweet potato.

Purple sweet potatoes, in contrast, are broader in size, drier, denser and starchier, with a more pronounced earthy sweetness ideal for baking and roasting.

Taro is a corm from the taro plant with brown skin, white flesh, and specks of purple embedded in it. While taro has a more savory profile and a mild and nutty flavor, it can also be used in sweet dishes.

USING UBE

In Filipino cuisine, ube is boiled and then mashed with condensed milk, integrated into desserts and baked goods to create sweet, creamy and smooth flavor and texture while providing color, depth and thickness. Its vibrant purple hue elevates the visual appeal of dishes, making it both striking and memorable.

Beyond its traditional roots, Chau and Farkas share creative ways to use ube:

- Pastries and breads: Croissants, laminated pastries and Japanese-style milk bread;
- Breakfast and brunch items: Pancakes, waffles and mochi doughnuts;
- Desserts: Cheesecake, flan, soufflé, cookies, ice cream and panna cotta;
- Beverages: Lattes, bubble teas, milkshakes, cocktails and mocktails.

Ube can replace sweet potatoes and taro, but adjustments may be necessary due to its higher moisture content and distinct flavor profile.

Chau explains, "Ube can replace sweet potatoes in desserts so long as the sweetness is monitored, because this purple tuber tends to be sweeter than sweet potatoes. The same can be said with taro in beverages so long as the consumer does not mind a more purple beverage. Depending on the recipe, the ratio of vanilla may also need adjustment."

Ube is a versatile ingredient in savory dishes, adding viscosity and depth of flavor. "Boil, steam, bake and puree ube, and use as a base for sauces, soups and stew," says Chau. "Ube has been used in various Southeast Asian cuisines, including Vietnam, where it is pureed and integrated as a base in a soup with pork and many herbs."

As a direct substitute to other starchy root vegetables like sweet potatoes, ube in stews adds some sweetness to balance out the savory of meats.

Farkas suggests using ube in bao buns and steamed buns to add a subtle sweetness, while balancing the savory flavors for pork belly or crispy tofu fillings. You can also get creative with ube by incorporating it in risotto, croquettes, tamales, dumplings, savory pancakes, and roast and toss it into a warm salad for a unique depth of flavor.

For recipes that rely on the firmness or drier texture of sweet potatoes or taro, Farkas recommends using additional thickening agents, ingredients, or modified cooking techniques to achieve the desired consistency.

Beyond flavor, ube is a dynamic and visually appealing ingredient in a range of culinary applications. Its natural color can also change based on the cooking method used and pH levels of the ingredients it is combined with.

Farkas explains, "In neutral to slightly alkaline environments, ube maintains its deep purple hue, while higher acidity levels, such as in citrus-based dishes, can cause the root vegetable to take on a reddish or pinkish tint. This color variability allows chefs to experiment with both flavor and presentation."

WHERE TO FIND UBE

Ube can be grown in the U.S. in climates similar to the Philippines, such as parts of California, Florida, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam and Hawaii.

Chau says getting the whole ube in bulk may be difficult, as it is grown more as a specialty crop in the country. "The best way to buy this purple vegetable in bulk is through import brokers or foodservice distributors that service Filipino restaurants," he suggests.

pb

Novella Lui, RD, MHS, is a registered dietitian, and a freelance food, nutrition and health writer in Canada who combines her interest in food science, evidence-based nutrition, and health education through content creation. She is passionate about seeking new ways to bridge the communication gap between the business and the health side of food. Connect with Novella at info@livenourish.com.

Beyond flavor, ube is a dynamic and visually appealing ingredient in a range of culinary applications.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Friends,

For nearly four decades under the leadership of Jim Prevor, PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine has been a leading industry influencer in the effort to increase overall produce consumption, whether by one commodity at a time or through educating the entire produce buying sector about ways to sell more fruits and vegetables.

PRODUCE BUSINESS renews this commitment, and we invite you to help us continue our mission! In addition to devoting even more editorial pages to assist the industry in moving the needle on consumption, we invite you to nominate key players we can highlight in our pages for the industry to learn by their examples.



Here's how:

Throughout the year, we will be selecting companies and people exemplary in selling and marketing fruits and vegetables to consumers. Introduced through 4 cover stories that are based on industry nominations, we will showcase award-winning examples of companies and individuals doing superb jobs in consumer engagement.

PLEASE LOOK FOR LINKS ON OUR WEBSITE TO ACCESS THE NOMINATION FORMS FOR THE FOLLOWING AWARDS:



Our team of award-winning editors will select the top recipients based on your nominations and descriptions of each company's contribution to increase produce consumption.

We urge you to participate in our recognition awards as often as possible so we all contribute to the success of this program to raise the bar on produce consumption.

If you would like to reach me, my telephone number is 561-994-1118, extension 101. Again, thank you for your support.

Ken Whitacre
Publisher/Editorial Director
Kwhitacre@phoenixmedianet.com

P.S. As we enter the next phase the PRODUCE BUSINESS mission to "initiate industry improvement," we encourage your input and hope you will contact us to discuss ways to increase produce consumption.



Unanimous Vote in Favor of Approved Operator Scheme — But Will the Government Listen?

BY MIKE PARR

On March 6, I attended a meeting set up by the Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC) for industry members to discuss their thoughts on the proposed changes to plant health fees with Defra (U.K.'s Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs). Specifically, the meeting was designed to enable members to put forward their concerns regarding the impact these changes are likely to have on their business.

Defra's argument for the increase in fees is that it has been five years (2019) since the fees were last refreshed, and this would enable full cost recovery — the fee increase would cover all the costs associated with the rollout of the scheme, including a portion of overhead costs.

The suggested increase is 27%, which represents a significant hike in costs at a time when the industry is already reeling from so many other post-Brexit changes, not least the Common User Charge and monies spent to adapt systems and train staff to manage the required new protocols.

The FPC estimates the plans to increase the charges associated with plants and plant material imports could represent a rise in annual import fees from £6.5 million (\$7 million) to at least £16 million (\$17.3 million), if the proposals get the green light, with as much as 95% of the additional costs allocated to the U.K. fruit, vegetable and plant sectors.

While delegates naturally raised the question of Defra efficiencies to make this increase more palatable, the government line at this point was that limited data is currently available, but information would be released in the near future. That would be fine were it not for the fact that the consultation period ends in two weeks' time, so how is it possible to make an informed response if the data is not forthcoming ahead of the consultation deadline?

This effectively means we are commenting on a matter blindly, without the critical facts in hand. Is this really the government's idea of "working with industry stakeholders?"

In the context of this discussion, a primary point for debate

was also an update on the physical and I.D. inspection fees, for European and Rest of World imported goods, and how these would be handled.

In a room that was largely filled with importers, it was gratifying to see a unanimous vote in favor of the Approved Operator Scheme (AOS) as the most viable solution to the new required border control checks, which allows eligible trained traders to carry out their own physical and identify checks.

Given the fact PML Seafrigo invested in this training as far back as 2023, this would be welcome news. The pilot for this initiative

was due to run from June to December 2024, with post-pilot evaluation scheduled between December 2024 and February 2025. Yet during this time, PML Seafrigo has been unable to provide the service associated with Approved Operator status.

Early adopters of the scheme, such as PML Seafrigo, will have waited for over two years post training for the scheme to be rolled out, which seems an excessively long period, given the evaluation of the pilot is only allocated three months?

While the room voted a resounding yes to the AOS, the final decision will, of course, be with the ministerial team.

Before the closure of the consultation period, the FPC joined forces with the Horticultural Trades Association and The British Potato Trade Association to send a joint letter to Baroness Hayman of Ullock, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) with responsibility for biosecurity and borders, and Huw Irranca-Davies MS, Welsh Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, which included a stark warning of the devastating impact the proposed fee increases would have on U.K. businesses.

Let's just hope this time around, they do actually listen to those working at the coalface, and that this is not yet another example of the government simply paying lip service.

Mike Parr is chief executive, U.K. and Ireland, of PML Seafrigo.

Is this really the government's idea of "working with industry stakeholders?"



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The Upside of Selling Your Produce Business

BY MARIA DESARBO

Grow, grow, grow is the far-reaching goal of this industry, whether in your fields, in your warehouse, or on your shelves. There is no faster or better way to grow than through mergers and acquisitions.

We sold our company in July 2022, and have benefited tremendously from taking this step. Becoming part of a larger family of companies will not only offer rock-solid security to your business, but will also create opportunities for your employees and customers that didn't exist.

Many things are changing in this industry right now, and one thing that we all will always benefit from is volume. Strategically related entities, without adding a single customer, become instantly more valuable once linked, creating a one plus one equals three, or sometimes more, scenario.

Mutual buying power leads to greater negotiating leverage, and any existing customer concentration diminishes within a larger portfolio. There are countless privately owned companies, as well as private equity firms looking to expand in the fresh produce industry, who may be interested buyers of your business.

The chief executive of Native Maine Produce (backed by RLJ Private Equity firm) Vinnie Caliendo says, "We prefer for the top leadership to remain, but also look for companies that have a bench of competent management that can run the business on a daily basis without top management calling all the shots. We look for the senior folks who understand accrual accounting is part of their future, whether they are doing it themselves or not. Joining a larger organization affords many benefits to the sellers, cashing in on wealth creation, or having other like-minded folks that appreciate the combination is stronger than the individual parts."

This team will have the opportunity to work on more challenging and fulfilling work.

The most exciting part of joining a portfolio of companies is watching employees upskill and identify paths toward growth that otherwise wouldn't exist. Opportunities arise to synergize intercompany growth, develop a deeper and broader org chart to solidify the foundation you will build upon, enhance your financial insights and outputs, as well as to create new positions that the company previously did not need.

Jimmy Davolio, president of Native Maine, shares his experience on watching his team grow from being a stand-alone entity to a multi-location company: "Being able to capitalize on the mutual strengths of a portfolio company is not only profitable with revenue opportunities, but also with people. We saw better

pricing due to the combined buying power and more consistent quality. We also saw the benefits of people with long and varied experience working together to optimize results. Lifetime employees have really embraced the growth opportunity in front of them, and the growth of both our people and profits proved to be a perfect outcome."

Positions, once filled with a revolving door of personnel, suddenly stabilize with folks who want both you and the company to succeed. The challenges faced will shift from how to maintain the day-to-day infrastructure, to looking weeks, months, and years ahead, committing to what you ultimately want the company to look like, and strategically working toward that big picture vision.

Our company has certainly become a more attractive and exciting place for talented workers, with genuine upside potential. The change in company culture has been the single greatest improvement we have experienced.

The process of approaching a sale can be an emotional one, as well as quite time-consuming. However, by working with the right team, you will save yourself a lot of wasted time. Even if you are not quite ready yet, it is always good to get your ducks in a row and operate your business as if you are going to sell.

If self-representation feels overwhelming, there are advisers out there who can prepare you to make your process a smooth one. These advisers know the ins and outs of the process to maximize efficiency and organization, as well as your valuation.

We ask countless questions when buying a box of lettuce — imagine the number of questions you will be asked by those buying your entire company.

Andy Buchholtz, president, A. Buchholtz & Co., in New York, says, "Entrepreneurs often think that they don't need help when selling their business. No matter who you are, the value of preparing high-quality, professional, descriptive materials, presenting the financials of your business in the best light, and reaching out to what may amount to hundreds of buyers on a confidential and anonymous basis by an experienced third-party, should not be underestimated."

Selling our business has offered incredible opportunity and security. As an industry peer, I am happy to serve as a resource if you are contemplating taking this professional step. There is a high likelihood it will strengthen the future of your organization in ways you haven't even thought of yet.

pb

Maria DeSarbo is president of Carbonella & DeSarbo Inc., a regional wholesaler based in Branford, CT.

Many things are changing in this industry right now, and one thing that we all will always benefit from is volume.



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Wonderful Citrus Celebrates 75 Years as a World Leader in Fresh Citrus

Wonderful Citrus, Los Angeles, CA, a pioneer in the produce industry, is celebrating 75 years in 2025. With hundreds of growing partners around the world, imports from seven countries, and nearly 7,500 employees, Wonderful Citrus still believes in investing in its people and partners.

It now operates 10 packing house locations in various regions across the United States, including its main operations in California, Texas, New Jersey and Mexico.

As pioneers in produce marketing, Wonderful Citrus' team of more than 200 in-store merchandisers work closely with retailers.

Originally founded in 1950 as Paramount Citrus Association, the company marketed and sold citrus for independent California citrus growers who were underserved by packing consolidators and brokers.

In 1981, Lynda and Stewart Resnick acquired Paramount Citrus, bringing their marketing prowess and financial acumen to the citrus industry. The acquisition paved the way for what is now one of the largest agricultural portfolios in the world, with The Wonderful Company establishing itself



In 1966, foundations were laid for the new Paramount Citrus Association plant, McFarland, CA, which, at the time, was the largest, most modern packing plant in California.

as the leader in branding and marketing of pistachios, almonds, pomegranates, mandarins and seedless lemons.

"We are proud to celebrate a legacy built on deep expertise, boundless passion, and an unwavering commitment to putting our people and partners first," says Zak Laffite, president, Wonderful Citrus. "As we celebrate 75 years, Wonderful Citrus is excited to continue leading the citrus category forward through innovation, quality, marketing and sustainability — because no one knows and grows citrus like us."

In celebration of this anniversary milestone,

Wonderful Citrus is bringing back its original namesake brand, Paramount Citrus, as a primary label within its portfolio, representing its heritage as a citrus grower. Consumers can find the new Paramount Citrus label, including both packaged and stickered loose fruit, in produce departments across the country.

As Wonderful Citrus looks ahead, Laffite says they will focus on long-term growth and expansion, along with supply chain diversification. Wonderful Citrus is also investing in farming and cultivation activities to introduce and enhance the availability of high-demand varieties throughout the year. **pb**



The McFarland Press, Kern County, CA, dedicated its Oct. 21, 1966, edition to Paramount Citrus Association. Paramount held grand opening ceremonies, Oct. 28, 1966, for its new packing plant. The plant was the most innovative in California at the time, handling 15,000 boxes of fruit each day.

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Sources: 1. Numerator Shopper Metrics, 06/19/23 to 06/16/24. 2. GameChanger Merchandising Test.



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