

DESPITE POSITIVE PRODUCE AFFILIATION WITH CHEFS, COLLABORATION IS STILL NEEDED

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Cracking the “Chef Code” is essential if the produce industry is to achieve its consumption goals and if the nation is to achieve its public health goals. We now know that simple admonition to consumers to eat more produce won’t boost consumption, so we have to focus on creating produce-rich meals that are so delicious people choose to eat more produce by accident.

It is popular in the industry now to note that the trade went astray, focusing on breeding to increase yield and ease of transport, while neglecting taste and flavor. There is something to this, and today many breeding programs are focused on flavor. However, focusing on practicalities does keep costs down, and that is important to increase consumption as well. In any case, boosting consumption through better tasting produce achieved through breeding programs is a very long-term proposition. It is not uncommon for a quarter century to pass between the initiation of a breeding program and commercial quantities of a more flavorful produce item.

Much more likely to have an impact in the short term is culinary technique and culinary focus. If we can get chefs to focus on the produce, rather than the protein, meals will change and consumption will increase.

However this is no small task. On the positive side, what the industry has going for it is that chefs really like produce. They like the variety, the flavor, the color, the textures, the culinary options . . . In a world where chefs get beaten up by health messages — use less salt, butter, fat, etc. — the produce message is positive: Use more produce!

There is quite a lot on the negative side. First, although chefs like produce, they are not quite as fond of the produce industry. They like foraging through farmer’s markets and chatting with farmers they know. There are exceptions, of course, but many chefs are not at all focused on the kinds of institutional safeguards on things such as food safety that the produce industry brings to the table.

Second, chefs are seen as authorities on food, but culinary education programs often do not educate much on supply chain issues. Many chefs have idiosyncratic views on everything from pesticides to

farm labor. Third, most chefs are focused on developing recipes that meet the expectations of their clientele, not changing those expectations. This means it is difficult to overcome deep cultural expectations such as the primacy of protein in meal planning.

Making the problem worse, the produce industry is not the best at interfacing with foodservice operators. The industry is fine at selling off-the-shelf products and even does OK at customizing pack sizes. However, what is really required to work with chain foodservice is a collaborative approach at menu and product development. Few produce companies have the capacity to do this, mainly because

they don’t have the R&D chefs necessary to interact with foodservice operators.

More than this, the economic structure of a commodity-based industry has made growers and shippers hesitant to invest in this approach. After all, a broccoli shipper that somehow persuades McDonald’s to sell a broccoli-rich dish is not guaranteed a path to fame and fortune. McDonald’s might just buy it

from another vendor for a nickel less. In fact, McDonald’s may buy frozen broccoli instead.

In addition, many shippers are interested in developing their own brands and getting premiums for their products. Yet products typically lose their brand identity when served at foodservice establishments. So foodservice doesn’t mesh well with the strategic direction of many produce companies.

Yet change is afoot in produce, and it may come through those very breeding programs that, at first glance, didn’t seem like the path to increased consumption. Proprietary product — such as those Driscoll’s sells or the various “club” apple varieties or Sun World’s licensed programs — limit the amount of acreage devoted to particular varieties. This means that increases in demand for the varieties can result in higher prices, and because the varietal characteristics are distinctive, other varieties can’t be easily substituted.

Put another way, these proprietary varieties can allow the margin that will enable investment in collaborative menu development and foodservice programs. The old-fashioned profit motive, played with a new age genetic twist, just might be the code necessary to incent the industry to maximize the opportunities in the foodservice channel.

That would be good for operators, for the produce industry and the health of the American people.

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