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Food Safety Tug Of War: Balancing Ideal Versus Reality

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INSIDE:

THE PUNDIT LOOKS AT MARKETING LOCALLY GROWN
CONVENIENCE STORES • SPRING MERCHANDISING • PROTECTED AGRICULTURE
MEXICAN MANGOS • VALUE-ADDED POTATOES
ONIONS ON THE MENU • CARROTS • PACKAGED NUTS



Dole leads the way in nutritional education, helping consumers to achieve a healthy lifestyle.

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THIS MONTH'S WINNER



Guy Savio
Produce Coordinator
King Kullen Supermarkets
Long Island, NY

Guy Savio has been working at the “first super-market in America” for almost 35 years. King Kullen Supermarkets, a family owned, 46-chain store, headquartered in Long Island, NY, has been around since 1930 and according to Savio, “It was the first supermarket that had everything under one roof.”

That “everything” included produce. Today, Savio is King Kullen’s produce coordinator. As second in command in the produce department, Savio oversees all produce managers,

buys merchandise for the stores, and is responsible for the set up of new stores, including buying the machines and equipment.

Savio’s father introduced him into the produce industry with his first job at 16 working in a supermarket. Through the years, including time in the service and college, the produce industry kept calling Savio back. “I never left,” he says.

Savio has been reading PRODUCE BUSINESS for the past 20 years. “I enjoy reading about the up-and-coming trends and it also keeps me up to date with what other people are doing in the country,” he says.

How To Win! To win the PRODUCE BUSINESS Quiz, the first thing you have to do is enter. The rules are simple: Read through the articles and advertisements in this issue to find the answers. Fill in the blanks corresponding to the questions below, and either cut along the dotted line or photocopy the page, and send your answers along with a business card or company letterhead to the address listed on the coupon. The winner will be chosen by drawing from the responses received before the publication of our April issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS. The winner must agree to submit a color photo to be published in that issue.

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- 2) What is the contact number for Paramount Citrus? _____
- 3) Who is the General Session speaker at PBH’s annual conference? _____
- 4) Name three companies that use the Certified Greenhouse seal on their products. _____
- 5) Name the three companies that form The Vision Companies _____
- 6) When is the America Trades Produce Conference? _____

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THE FOOD SAFETY MODERNIZATION ACT AND THE TESTER AMENDMENT: THE ROAD AHEAD

By Robert Guenther,
United Fresh Senior Vice President of Public Policy



As the fresh produce industry prepares to respond to the recently proposed rules of the Food Safety Modernization Act, a clearer picture of how FSMA will be implemented is coming to light, and there may be a dangerous challenge ahead if the Tester Amendment remains in the final rule.

The Tester Amendment creates an exemption for producers who sold an average of less than \$500,000 worth of food to all buyers (calculated in the three years preceding the applicable year), and qualify as selling mostly to local customers. United Fresh opposed that exemption when the law was passed, and the organization continues to be seriously concerned about that exemption. It's a big flaw in the law: it's been proven true time and time again that regardless of farm size, pathogens can compromise the product. Until it is fixed, United believes that retail and foodservice buyers have a special role to play in enforcing the rules, with their responsibility to ensure that their produce suppliers, large or small, are in full compliance with these food safety standards. It is in all of our best interests to promote a consistent food safety standard with no exceptions.

Once in final form, the rules will set an important roadmap for enforcement, which we expect will come with the FDA working with the USDA, state departments of agriculture and private sector organizations to ensure that all producers are meeting the standards. We fully expect the industry to stringently follow the final rules, and to encourage colleagues to comply. How we collectively drive awareness and the need for compliance throughout the industry will shape enforcement of this landmark food safety initiative.

Another industry concern regarding

UNITED BELIEVES THAT RETAIL AND FOODSERVICE BUYERS HAVE A SPECIAL ROLE TO PLAY IN ENFORCING THE RULES, WITH THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO ENSURE THAT THEIR PRODUCE SUPPLIERS, LARGE OR SMALL, ARE IN FULL COMPLIANCE WITH THESE FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS. IT IS IN ALL OF OUR BEST INTERESTS TO PROMOTE A CONSISTENT FOOD SAFETY STANDARD WITH NO EXCEPTIONS.

implementation is the cost, and it is a number that will be extremely difficult to predict. United Fresh members already make significant investments in food safety processes and good agricultural practices that address the specific risks identified in the FDA proposal, which are essential costs of delivering safe, healthy products. United has a long history of supporting robust funding for the FDA to handle the associated administrative costs of FSMA.

However, in an initial review of the Produce Safety rule, United Fresh found the proposal to be mostly harmonious with priorities the industry has identified and communicated to lawmakers over the past few years. Throughout the development of FSMA, we have always held that the proposed rules must be: 1) commodity-specific, based on best available science; 2) risk-based; 3) consistent no matter where produce is grown or packaged, in the U.S. or imported, large or small operations; and 4) flexible to allow for advances in science and production technology. United has been among the most vocal supporters of comprehensive modernization of the food safety system in the United States, working with members of Congress

and the Bush and Obama Administrations, and testifying before House and Senate committees more than 10 times to advance improved food safety for fresh produce.

There is plenty of work to be done to refine the proposals to final rule form. United has organized two working groups, one for each rule, which have begun a deliberative process to review the more than 1,000 pages total for both proposals. The working groups are comprised of United's volunteer leaders, representing a broad spectrum and expertise of the produce industry. Each of these panels will conduct a thorough analysis of the proposed FDA rules over a series of meetings, webinars and other events. Comments generated by the working groups and the broader membership will be compiled and approved by United's Board of Directors before being submitted to FDA prior to the May 16 deadline on the 120-day comment period set by FDA for both proposed rules.

United Fresh will continue to advocate on behalf of the industry with comments on the long-awaited proposed Produce Safety and Preventive Controls for Human Foods rules and serve as a resource throughout the process and beyond.



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CELEBRATING
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A 'PUBLIC CHOICE' PERSPECTIVE ON FOOD SAFETY

By James Prevor
President & Editor-in-Chief



Nobody is opposed to improving food safety. Indeed there is unanimity in both the supply chain and the public policy community that food safety is not only desirable but imperative. Yet, despite this being so, and having been so for many years, there are an estimated 48 million cases of foodborne illness in the United States each year.

On the supply chain side, the problem is obvious. Producers have to produce food that buyers will buy. Even though there is great emphasis on it, food safety is simply one of many elements — including good prices — that buyers demand. Since food safety is a continuum — we can test the water monthly, weekly, daily, hourly or every five minutes — lines have to be drawn. So though every buying organization has standards, no organization says it will always buy the safest product human ingenuity can produce and totally disregard flavor, price, etc.

On the public policy front, we are now confronted by rules proposed to implement the Food Safety Modernization Act. Yet, oddly, even by the standards of the advocates of this law, the impact on food safety will be negligible. The FDA estimates that the law could prevent nearly two million illnesses annually. That is a big number, but in the context of the incidence of foodborne illness, it is in the area of 4 percent, and that is assuming the Act is fully funded, a far-from-certain proposition in these times of budget strain.

The truth is that the whole law represents a kind of triumph of assertion over evidence. The heart of the law is a requirement that all “high-risk domestic facilities must be inspected within five years of enactment and no less than every three years, thereafter.” Now being that inspectors are very expensive and the FDA estimates it needs 2,000 new ones to fulfill this task, and that inspections are very distracting and expensive for businesses and thus add costs that consumers must ultimately pay, one would think we had lots of evidence that inspections of this type enhance food safety. One would suppose there had been conducted a series of large scale pilot projects done over many years in which one group of facilities was inspected on this schedule and a control group was not inspected and that the results showed inspected facilities had significantly lower rates of food safety problems.

Indeed, not only would one think we carefully determined that these inspections help but, more, that this schedule — five years followed by three years — is the “sweet spot,” the carefully calibrated moment to maximize the reduction in foodborne illnesses or at least to most efficiently reduce foodborne illnesses.

Unfortunately, none of this is true. We have no evidence that this helps at all, certainly not that we have somehow identified an optimal strategy. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary. The allegation is that over the George W. Bush administration, the FDA was gutted and underfunded. Indeed advocacy groups such as The Center for Science in the Public Interest point out that FDA food safety inspections tumbled by almost 50 percent between 2003 and 2006 alone.

If federal inspections were the key to food safety, one would have expected problems to boom, but The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that, despite media-riled public perception to the contrary, the trend has shown a reduction of incidence of food safety problems: “For individual pathogens, the incidence of infection was significantly lower in 2011 compared with 1996-1998 for *Shigella* (65% decrease), *Yersinia* (52% decrease), *E. coli* O157 (42% decrease), *Listeria* (35% decrease) and *Campylobacter* (22% decrease) but was higher for *Vibrio* (76% increase). It did not change significantly for *Salmonella* or *Cryptosporidium*.”

So why do we wind up with public policies so unlikely to be optimal? James Buchanan died early this year at the age of 93. He was a Nobel Laureate in

economics and won that prize for his contributions to Public Choice theory. This theory rejects an older model that viewed government officials as somehow outside the realm of economics, always acting in the public interest. If you want to know why things happen in government, Public Choice theory teaches that one should look to the incentives of individual players.

A Libertarian might argue — and may even be correct — that the public policy most likely to enhance food safety would be to close the FDA! Right now, people assume all the food is safe because politicians and bureaucrats promise that. As a result, it is very hard to get a return on investment when a producer spends money to enhance food safety. If the government was to announce a policy of “caveat emptor” — let the buyer beware — then individuals would likely be more concerned about food safety. They would be more brand loyal and only purchase from producers they trust, or they may evaluate supermarkets based on their trust that the supermarkets vet suppliers for food safety. Investments in food safety would garner an ROI.

Yet such a policy, viewed through a Public Choice lens, has zero chance of enactment. Why? Well, it would reduce the power and influence of all the decision-makers. In this sense, the 2,000 additional inspectors make the bureaucrats at the FDA more important and the politicians in the government more important, which is exactly the outcome that Public Choice theorists would predict. It is not necessarily the outcome optimal for food safety.

pb

If you want to know why things happen in government, Public Choice theory teaches that one should look to the incentives of individual players.

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TRANSITIONS

SUNSWEEET GROWERS, INC. YUBA CITY, CA

Sunsweet Growers, Inc. has announced the promotion of **Jeff McLemore** to the role of vice president of North American marketing. In his new role, McLemore will oversee Sunsweet marketing efforts in North America, including prunes, juices, and specialty fruits. Jeff's new role reflects his 8-year dedication to the growth and development of Sunsweet's dried fruit business.



PRO*ACT MONTEREY, CA

PRO*ACT, has promoted **Brian Kane** to chief operating officer. Kane joined PRO*ACT in 2008 as vice president of client services, leading the team's development and management of perishable sourcing and distribution programs for multi-unit foodservice companies. Kane assumes broad leadership responsibility for PRO*ACT's day-to-day operations, overseeing procurement, client services, marketing, business development, retail sales and food safety.



ANNOUNCEMENTS

RENE PRODUCE'S ROMAS CERTIFIED ORGANIC

Primus Labs has recently awarded the Roma tomatoes grown by Rene Produce, a market-leading producer of the Rene Reserve Roma tomato during the Winter Mexican tomato deal, with a certified-organic label. The Roma category extends the company's entrance into organics, where Rene started with Long English Cucumbers in 2011. The first lots of organic Romas are being packed in 25-lb. bulk boxes, and each tomato will have a PLU sticker. The company also will be packing 1-lb. clamshells as well. The bulk boxes are now available from both the McAllen, TX, and Nogales, AZ, distribution facilities.



ALPINE FRESH TEAMS UP WITH FLORIDA BLUEBERRY GROWER

Alpine Fresh, Inc., Miami, FL, has announced a joint venture with Five Star Family Growers of Auburndale, FL. Beginning next month, the two companies will begin packing Florida-grown blueberries in their brand new, state-of-the-art packing facility. This new blueberry packing shed marks the beginning of a partnership with domestic growers of blueberries.

DOLE PARTNERS WITH EATINGWELL MAGAZINE

The partnership between DOLE® Salads and *EatingWell Magazine* represents the first time the company has teamed up with a major media brand. The year-long alliance of print and online properties includes a host of initiatives designed to demonstrate just how easy and delicious a balanced diet rich in leafy greens and fresh produce can be.



HEIRLOOM BEEFSTEAK TOMATOES AVAILABLE TO SPECIALTY RETAILERS

Farmhouse Tomatoes, Inc., Lake Worth, FL, established in 1996, is one of the "original" hydroponic greenhouse growers of Heirloom beefsteak tomatoes. The company focuses on what it considers to be the "three best beefsteak varieties ever": The Red Brandywine, the Cherokee Purple, and The Gold Medal. Its greenhouse-grown heirloom tomatoes can be found from November 1st through June 30th at local gourmet produce markets.



NEW PRODUCT

NEW LIL SNAPPERS CITRUS LINE FROM SUNKIST PROVIDES BIG OPPORTUNITY

Through a joint venture with Wenatchee, WA-based Stemilt Growers, Lil Snappers™ citrus line of kid-sized fruit is now available as the newest member of the Sherman Oaks, CA-based Sunkist® family. The convenient grab-'n-go 3-lb. citrus bags join Stemilt's apple and pear lineup. Both companies will maintain sales of their own products under the Lil Snappers brand. The two companies will collaborate on cross-category consumer and trade promotions.



NEW PRODUCT

MANN PACKING CREATES NEW VEGGIE MAC-N-CHEESE PRODUCTS

Mann Packing Company, Salinas, CA, is bringing another new concept to the produce department with the first ever Veggie Mac-n-Cheese kid-friendly meal solution. The product line includes four flavor profiles using market-leader Sargento® cheese including Classic Cheddar, Bacon & Cheddar, Fiesta Cheddar and White Cheddar. Each cheese sauce is coupled with fresh vegetables and a ready-to-heat pasta packet.

Produce & Floral Watch is a regular feature of PRODUCE BUSINESS. Please send information on new products, personnel changes, industry, corporate and personal milestones and available literature, along with a color photo, slide or transparency to: Managing Editor, PRODUCE BUSINESS, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail us at info@producebusiness.com

Join Us For This Exciting Industry Event!

Produce for Better Health Foundation's 2013 *Consumer Connection* Conference will be held at the W San Francisco Hotel from March 13-15. The agenda for this year's conference is better than ever, offering cutting-edge research, dynamic and engaging speakers, and just enough time to network with the elite of the fruit and veggie industry.



Effective Marketing of All Forms of Fruits & Vegetables March 13-15, 2013

GENERAL SESSION SPEAKER



Laurie Demeritt,
President of the Hartman Group
Reimagining Health & Wellness &
the Role of Fruits and Vegetables

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION



Ross Shafer



Scott Klososky



Cam Martson

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salston@PBHFoundation.org or 302-235-2329, ext. 332.



Boomers Grow Up Eating Their Fruits And Vegetables

BY DARREN SEIFER, FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY ANALYST, THE NPD GROUP

What does a tomato or a banana mean to a retailer's customers? Actually, it can mean quite a bit in terms of driving retail traffic. The NPD Group's food market research, which continually tracks what individuals eat and drink, shows that 60 percent of primary shoppers say liking a store's produce is one of the reasons they regularly shop at a particular store. Having consistently fresh produce and a wide selection is of great importance to getting these consumers to walk through the doors. Understanding and meeting the needs of the different types of produce consumers is another key to driving traffic in the produce area. Let's take Baby Boomers as an example of a produce consumer base.

As we move into the next 10 to 20 years, a major consideration for producers, manufacturers, and retailers alike will be the aging Boomer population. Comprising roughly 25 percent of the U.S. population, this generation will see kids leaving the home and parents entering retirement years (or at least planning to retire). We have seen this with other generations before, but this time it's happening on a much grander scale.

Fruit and vegetable consumption tends to increase as consumers age, tied to increasing health concerns. Also consider that older Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1955, already have begun to increase their consumption of store-fresh fruits and vegetables. National Eating Trends reports the average older Boomer consumed fruit 182 times in 2012, up from only 118 times in 1999. The story is similar for vegetables: now older Boomers consume vegetables about 174 times per year, but in 1999 the average was 149 times.

This research also reveals some channels are doing much better than others at attracting these consumers. For instance, a greater percentage of shoppers more loyal to conventional supermarkets/grocery stores say they like the produce at those stores more than shoppers of natural/gourmet stores that specialize in organic produce. At first it seems counter-

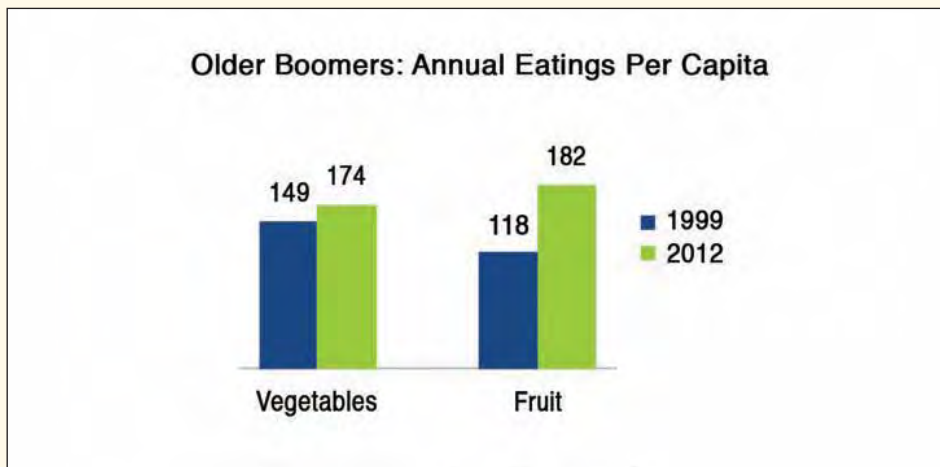


CHART COURTESY OF THE NPD GROUP/NATIONAL EATING TRENDS®, YEARS ENDING FEBRUARY

intuitive, but peeling back the onion's layers shows the natural channel is best at attracting people who are looking for unique items as well as organic foods and beverages. This channel pulls in produce-minded consumers who are loyal to other channels, but who are willing to shop around for their produce. This emphasizes the importance of produce to the natural channel, but it also highlights opportunities for other channels to increase their basket sizes with stronger produce offerings.

Since vegetables are often served as a side dish, particularly at dinner, it's important to look at produce in the full context of eating. Marketers and retailers should consider either cross-marketing or placement strategies that more closely align with consumers' dinner plates. For example, when looking at all dinners containing a vegetable side dish, chicken, beef, and pork are the top center-of-plate dishes served in those instances. Sandwiches and burgers are also top main dishes at dinner, however, they are less likely to be consumed with vegetables, NPD's National Eating Trends data shows.

There has also been much concern

recently surrounding children's eating habits and that they may be contributing to obesity. A study conducted by the University of North Carolina showed kids are snacking on about 586 calories per day from snacking occasions alone, which is up from 418 in 1977. While it is true that kids often snack on sweets and savory items, the silver lining is that parents seem to be taking charge of their children's snacking habits. Over the past 10 years, fruit has grown to become the top snack food for kids, particularly those ages six to 12. This hints at opportunities for retailers to adjust their fruit sections to accommodate snack-minded consumers, and shows retailers' commitment to the health of customers and their families.

NPD's food market research shows that the quality and freshness of produce is a driver of store traffic and builds retailer loyalty. Boomers grew up hearing that it was important to eat their fruits and vegetables and it's a lesson they increasingly practice as they age. Understanding the life stages of consumers and their mindset about produce will help increase store traffic, loyalty and dollars.



The NPD Group is the leading provider of reliable and comprehensive consumer and retail information for a wide range of industries. Today, more than 2,000 manufacturers, retailers, and service companies rely on NPD to help them drive critical business decisions at the global, national, and local market levels. NPD helps our clients to identify new business opportunities and guide product development, marketing, sales, merchandising, and other functions.

An Opportunity Not To Be Missed

BY JIM PREVOR, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PRODUCE BUSINESS

Certain behaviors are closely correlated to age. Want to be a Public Policy genius? Find a cohort of children much larger than the current generation of teenagers and young adults and declare that violent crime will increase over the next 20 years. Want to be a genius twice? As this large generation hits 40, confirm that the generation behind is much smaller, then announce that violent crime will decline over the next 20 years.

So the produce industry may well get in trouble as it looks over the next few decades and sees rising per-capita consumption, which is actually caused not by increased popularity of fresh produce, but by the age curve of consumers. We may declare ourselves geniuses for our marketing acumen and be totally shocked when consumption starts to drop as the high-consuming age cohort begins to be superseded by much smaller numbers.

Whatever people consume, it is not hard to come up with reasons why produce quality, variety and price would compel shopper visits. Grocery items are interchangeable, so it is difficult to drive traffic with your spiffy display of Tide. Yet it is also true that one shouldn't overplay the meaning of surveys such as this. Things that tend to win the acclaim of large numbers of shoppers also tend to quickly be focused on by most chains. So they become not so much a winning strategy as the ante necessary to play in the game. There are, of course, differences between banners in their emphasis on fresh produce, and thus, on the quality and variety available and even on the price, but if you compare, well, apples to apples, say two upscale chain stores of around the same square footage serving similar demographics in the same neighborhood, typically, one finds pretty similar produce departments.

So the consumer winds up getting attracted by offerings that seemingly are of low importance on surveys. In other words, if cleanliness is important to 98 per-

cent of shoppers, and as a result all the stores focus on cleanliness, then it might be the selling of Kosher food or organic food, though important to only a tiny percentage of consumers, which actually drives store choice.

The role of produce in attracting shoppers from one store to another is interesting. In urban areas, there has been an explosion of ethnic retailers. These retailers succeed in no small part because of their razor sharp focus on a particular consumer, specifically consumers of a particular nationality or ethnicity. This focus tends to edit grocery assortment severely, so most shoppers won't be satisfied by these stores — they don't carry the brand of pasta sauce or soup the mainstream consumer seeks.

However, although some of these stores add some produce items, say carrying more chilis or peppers, they typically offer a robust produce selection. In fact, because these ethnic stores are quick on the dime and opportunistic buyers, they often can offer very good produce for truly bargain prices. So the produce selection serves as an independent draw for mainstream consumers.

Marketing and merchandising, as Churchill said of Russia in another context, is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. So if one must choose, it is not completely clear whether it is wiser to merchandise with the main-plate protein because side dishes are customary there, or to merchandise with the sandwich and burger fixings to push the idea that produce can enhance these items. Of course, the real winner is when one can introduce consumers to meal alternatives where produce takes center stage — say a stir-fry, where the protein is more an accent and the produce is the star.

There are, indeed, lots of opportunities to sell snack fruit to children. A not insignificant part of the boom in Mandarins is that they are such a perfect fruit for children. Being small, the Mandarins

fit in the hands of a child; they are seedless, sweet, easy-to-peel, really a perfect storm of snack fruit for a child. Add in the role of fresh-cuts, where things such as watermelon spears and cubes have transformed a relative rare summertime specialty into an everyday dish in refrigerators across the country.

Of course, if we really want to train children to eat healthy, we have to condition their taste buds to appreciate more bitter vegetables. That is a tough sell, but the good news is that with all the Baby Boomers around, all suddenly mindful of their mortality, displays and information supporting the health benefits of vegetables of all types have an appreciative constituency ready and waiting. That is an opportunity to boost sales, please customers and help the health of American consuming public — in other words, an opportunity not to be missed.

Displays and information supporting the health benefits of vegetables of all types have an appreciative constituency ready and waiting.



The Disconnect Between Marketing Of Local And Sales Of Local And The Necessity For Promoting What We Actually Sell

FROM JIM PREVOR'S PERISHABLE PUNDIT 01.22.2013

An attendee at the recent New York Produce Show and Conference sent us this note regarding a discussion we had on stage with a baker's dozen of industry "thought-leaders":

PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine and the Eastern Produce Council are to be congratulated for the success of the 3rd Annual New York Produce Show and Conference.

I want to strongly disagree, however, with your lengthy, discussion and conclusions during the Perishable Pundit's "Thought Leaders" Opening Breakfast Symposium about the growing trend of "locally grown" items in the produce department. This is simply incorrect.

Despite rhetoric and publicity to the contrary, consumers are most interested in choice in their produce department. This has resulted in year-round availability of fresh produce from around the globe. During the winter, sugar snap peas and melons from Central America; asparagus and sweet onions from Peru; blueberries, grapes and pomegranates from Chile, to name just a few, are among the most important factors in the increased sales and consumption of fresh produce.

Does the "local" aspect of a particular fresh produce item impact a customer's choice in selecting a particular fruit or vegetable — I suspect very little. Local produce — which for now let us define as fruits and vegetables grown within 150 miles of where it is consumed — has become less, not more, important as a total percentage of produce sales. Ten years from now, this trend will be even more so — not less. PRODUCE BUSINESS should examine this theory with actual sales data from supermarkets to quantify, confirm or contradict it.

The international nature of fresh produce (and everything else) is a fact of life. Whether our smart phones, music videos, automobiles or peaches are produced in South Korea or South Carolina is interesting, but not the key factor in our purchasing decisions. Goods and services are manufactured where they are most efficient and productive at fulfilling a particular consumer need or want — around the globe. The increasing availability on retail store shelves in the USA of Argentine organic apples and pears in February adds options for consumers and takes away nothing. Ask Washington state apple and California citrus growers if the global nature of fresh produce is increasing or decreasing.

On Wednesday at The New York Produce Show, I was speaking with a grower of domestic sweet onions in Georgia who also has international grower partners in Peru. His observation is that consumers care more about the "locale" nature of their produce than whether or not it is grown near where they live. They want to know about the farm and the general milieu of the fresh produce they consume. How was it grown? What is the farm like? What are the sanitary standards? How are the workers treated?

The overwhelming majority of consumers want choice, value, quality and convenience. We, as produce industry professionals, need to continue to embrace THAT reality and



increase sales of ALL healthy fresh produce, not romanticized notions of a trend that does not exist.

— Craig Padover, account and category manager, Jac. Vandenberg Inc., Yonkers, NY

Craig is astute in noting that actual produce sales have not in any way tracked the hype related to "local." In fact, how could they? Unless consumers were to decide to forgo bananas, winter fruit, citrus, avocados, etc., they could not, in much of the country, possibly become true locavores.

Indeed, many of the proclamations made by retailers as to their local sales are questionable. We joked here previously that Wal-Mart, which defines local as "in state," could increase its local sales simply by opening more stores in California.

One very progressive retailer told us that many get confused between marketing and sales. His chain is promoting local very aggressively, but sales are not significantly higher than they had been before these marketing efforts.

Indeed this may be the crux of the issue regarding Craig's concern. We may need to distinguish between procurement or sales trends and marketing trends.

That retailers are focused on local as a marketing tool is not really subject to dispute. Even all this attention to rooftop

greenhouses, etc., are mostly undertaken with the idea of positioning a store as hyper-local.

On the foodservice end, white tablecloth chefs also like to promote local, the idea being that the chef has some special connection with the local farmer and has added value by vetting his produce.

We wouldn't say that the "Thought Leader" panel reached any conclusions on local. It was more a matter of sharing ideas on how retailers could capitalize on the marketing craze surrounding local.

Certainly, overall, The New York Produce Show and Conference was committed to the entire supply chain. In fact, the day before that breakfast panel, the event featured The Global Trade

available. So local simply can't account for a very high percentage of Harvard's usage of fresh produce.

So the question Greg posed was whether or not Harvard dining was as proud of the vast majority of its purchases, which are not locally grown, as it is of its local program.

This is a fair question for all retailers. There is now a lot of research that indicates that the meaning of "locally grown" varies quite a bit from a straight geographical interpretation. For example, in many cases, the interpretation may be political — one's own state or country. Craig also points to the "locale" vs. "local" argument, and there is a lot of indication that consumers want to know substantive things about where their food

If we don't promote what we are actually selling, we will one day be accused of being disingenuous. So retailers need to focus on being as proud of all their produce as they are of their locally grown programs, and then they need to start thinking about how to educate their consumers as to the fine quality of this product as well.

Symposium. This annual event is dedicated to the proposition that this is a global industry. Looking at the agenda for both the 2012 and 2011 programs, you will see that we spent a full day exploring the intricacies of global trade.

This being said, we do think that Craig is posing a key question: Are retailers doing enough to communicate how proud they are of their non-local produce?

Greg Drescher, vice president of strategic initiatives and industry leadership at the Culinary Institute of America, is fond of telling a story: Harvard's dining program came out with a brochure lauding its operation. The vast majority of the brochure was focused on Harvard's very aggressive locally grown program. Of course, no matter how aggressive a program, there just isn't that much produce grown locally to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, as a school, the population drops during the summer when a lot of that local product is

comes from — not just where the food is grown but how and by whom.

There are a lot of retailers who will hang photos of local farmers and descriptive information about the family and the farm. There is little reason to believe that consumers won't value similar information about family farmers, properly tending their land, from all over the world.

Promoting local is fine, but what Craig is really asking is what about promoting the vast majority of produce that is actually in the stores? In the end, if we don't promote what we are actually selling, we will one day be accused of being disingenuous. So retailers need to focus on being as proud of all their produce as they are of their locally grown programs, and then they need to start thinking about how to educate their consumers as to the fine quality of this product as well.

Many thanks to Craig for weighing in on this important issue.

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Food Safety Tug Of War: Balancing Ideal Versus Reality

Behind the rhetoric of the food safety discussion are a few disparities between what the industry ideally wants and what current reality dictates.

BY JODEAN ROBBINS



As the produce industry looks to move forward, it faces balancing food safety considerations with business realities. “The produce industry’s goal is always to increase consumption, and one of the tenets of increasing consumption is to make sure the product is safe,” says Bob Whitaker, chief science and technology officer for the Produce Marketing Association, based in Newark, DE.

“The real issue is how we get a balanced message out on the risk of eating produce versus not eating produce,” says Jim Brennan, president of Salinas, CA-based SmartWash Solutions LLC. “If we get people to eat more produce, the life expectancy of 300 million Americans goes up. The real health risk is when people move away from produce.”

However, guarantees in agriculture are hard to come by. “The nature of the food industry challenges uniformity,” states Wil Sumner, director of testing services for SCS Global Services, located in Emeryville, CA. “Food safety audits and certifications attempt to enforce a certain amount of uniformity and streamline the process to meet expectations.”

“We face a continuing challenge of finding ways to enhance the safety of fresh produce,” adds Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral merchandising for Wegmans Food Markets in Rochester, NY, with 82 stores. “We need to continue to do research and find ways of getting the information uncovered by putting research into the hands of those who can apply it to production, harvesting and distribution.”

Progress often means change. “We’ve learned more about food safety in produce in the past decade than we have in the past 100 years,” claims Whitaker. “As we learn more, we have to accept that the business paradigm is changing. This is a key decision we make with no compromise. We must adapt the way we do business to ensure the product is safe.”

“The unpredictable nature of the business can make things complicated, but we need to remain committed to food safety and not make decisions that go against your food safety policies,” emphasizes Corsi.

As the produce industry advances in food safety, it will continue playing the tug-of-war between achieving the ideal and dealing with present-day reality.

Certified Suppliers Vs. Last-Minute Need For Product

In a perfect world, everyone in the entire supply chain would have excellent food safety programs all the time. Present day reality leaves us with a system where sometimes, in certain market situations, food safety falls through the cracks. “Often, problems occur when a load is bought because the market was short or it was at the end of season,” states Whitaker.

“You’re only as strong as your weakest link,” says Tommy Wilkins, produce procurement director for United Supermarkets, a 51-unit chain in Lubbock, TX. “If you don’t chase that safe product all the way through then you’re doing your customers a disservice.”

Disconnect between buying and food safety departments can also lead to oversights. “Often, produce buyers are disconnected from the quality/food safety group and each has separate, sometimes conflicting, objectives and priorities,” states David E. Gombas, senior vice president, food safety and technology, for United Fresh, based in Washington, D.C. “Quality/food safety is trying to make sure consumers get safe produce and protect the

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WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THE FSMA?

The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) was signed into law on January 4, 2011. A year later, the industry is still waiting to see what the law will mean in practical terms. "FSMA directs the FDA to complete some 90 specific deliverables over the several years following enactment, including a host of regulations, guidance documents for industry, notices, studies, reports to Congress, and pilot projects," says Carla Daniels, spokesperson for the Office of Public Affairs at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in Silver Springs, MD. "While FDA lacks the resources to do everything at once, we have worked hard to prioritize our efforts and to deliver on both immediate and longer term FSMA mandates."

According to the FDA, the following actions affecting the produce industry have been accomplished in the implementation of the Food Safety and Modernization Act:

- Issued interim final rules on criteria for administrative detention and used this authority three times; issued interim final rules on prior notice of imported food.
- Established the Produce Safety Alliance and the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance.
- FDA met the FSMA mandate for foreign food safety inspections, and is well on its way to meeting the 5-year inspection frequency mandate for high-risk domestic food facilities.

- Used a new tool for enforcement given to FDA under FSMA, that of the ability of FDA to suspend the facility registration of a food facility in certain circumstances when the food manufactured, processed, packed, received, or held by a registered food facility has a reasonable probability of causing serious adverse health consequences. FDA suspended the registration of the company at the center of the foodborne illness outbreak traced back to peanut butter produced by a New Mexico company.

- Implemented biennial registration renewal for food facilities during the period beginning on October 1 and ending on December 31 of each even-numbered year.

- The interim final rule on Establishment and Maintenance of Records issued in February 2012 and is in effect.

"Though many in the private sector are already implementing modern preventive measures, implementing the FSMA will require varying degrees of change in practices as well as a real transformation in how FDA does its job," says Daniels. "FDA knows its rules and oversight practices must take full account of the diversity of operations covered by FSMA. These rules and practices must be risk-based and flexible, address small business concerns, and be backed up by guidance developed with the help of industry, by technical assistance, educational outreach, and other collaborative efforts with our stakeholders." **pb**

company. Buyers are trying to ensure an ample supply in the pipeline of whatever produce for which they are responsible."

To better assure food safety, concerned buyers are implementing several steps. "Historic and forecasted usage and open communication can eliminate last-minute needs," states Rick Antle, president and CEO of Tanimura & Antle, in Salinas, CA. "Additionally, few buyers are single-supplier-sourced. So, if the buyer has pre-certified suppliers, the buyer's need to source from non-certified suppliers is eliminated. There may be inconveniences and a price element that the buyer dislikes, but last minute needs can be sourced from pre-certified suppliers."

"We have eliminated all of our brokers," reports United's Wilkins. "We coordinate with partner/growers as closely as possible and have specific amounts grown so we tighten the supply and don't have brokerage moving product around. Developing relationships with

wholesalers who share your same philosophy also helps fill in product with confidence."

Produce procurement team at Lakeland, FL-based Publix Super Markets, Inc. has required food safety management systems of suppliers since the FDA published the *Guidance for Industry: Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables* in the late 1990s. Many of its suppliers have moved beyond these initial requirements, implementing either food safety certification in concert with the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) or the industry-driven Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Harmonization effort.

"Because we have over 13 years of metrics with suppliers that have demonstrated food safety management systems through GAPs and other programs, our produce procurement team has flexibility to quickly identify another source of supply should a business disruption occur," says Maria Brous, director of media and community relations for Publix. "Our produce procurement

team works very closely with our suppliers of fresh fruits and vegetables to maintain appropriate volumes to fulfill our supply chain demands."

At Earthbound Farm, all suppliers must comply with extensive food safety and organic integrity programs. "It does make it extremely difficult for us to make spot buys," reports Will Daniels, senior vice president of operations and organic integrity for Earthbound Farm, in San Juan Bautista, CA. "We really count on the many growers in our network who have already made it through our compliance framework."

Making the decision not to carry an item can be a tough call. "We have to draw the line not to deviate from our plan," says United's Wilkins. "We have made the decision to not carry something because we don't have an approved supplier. In this age, if you're not certain where and how the product's been grown, then there must be some tough decisions. Long term, you make the decision that is best for consumers; if there is uncertainty you have to say no."

"Your primary suppliers need to understand your food safety requirements and make sure any last minute fill-ins are up to those standards," concurs Wegmans' Corsi. "If they aren't, the product shouldn't be sent."

Knowledge, preparation and commitment lay the foundation. "We know this marketplace is variable," states PMA's Whitaker. "As long as our products are subject to weather, then the buying community must have multiple sources of product. Plan ahead and have a list of approved suppliers before the crisis happens. Know these suppliers and their food safety programs, and they'll be just as reliable as your primary ones."

SCS's Sumner adds, "Buyers need to set the requirements by which certified suppliers operate. The buyer can make a big difference by clearly stating and maintaining a line of defense with suppliers that requires consistent evidence of certification, recertification, and testing in regular documented steps."

Demand For Local Vs. Availability Of Certified Supply

The growing demand for local produce mixed with the difficulty of small grower certification has led to the myth of small grower exemption. Dr. Gurmail Mudahar, vice president of food safety research and development for Tanimura & Antle, relates, "Small, local growers may hold the belief that due to their smaller size, food safety is not a big issue as their produce will reach a smaller distribution. Cost can also be a factor. Ideally, irrespective of grower size or distribution, food safety should be equally important."



The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement is one example of a commodity-specific food safety program that has been very successful in its mission to keep consumers safe.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LGMA

“Food safety is a universal requirement, regardless of the grower size or whether the product is organic or conventionally grown,” emphasizes Corsi. “Local is great for freshness and community support and is highly recognized by customers, but it still has to be safe. Food safety issues such as water quality, soil amendments and personal hygiene don’t differ by farm size.”

“Pathogens don’t know the difference between size or location,” concurs Whitaker. “They are equal-opportunity beasts. From an industry perspective, we want as many participants as we can get (regional, local, national) but they have to be safe. The marketplace has opened up the opportunity for local suppliers, but we must require a good food safety program for all suppliers.”

Progressive retailers proactively ensure all growers are food-safe. “We ask all our local growers to be at a minimum of GAP-certified or moving toward it,” says Wilkins. “We visit them to know what food safety they’re practicing.”

“At Publix, our requirements for food safety are applicable for all suppliers, regardless of whether it’s a local farm or from outside our operating area,” states Brous. “Food safety is a shared responsibility, and our food safety

experts at Publix actively engage with the Florida Food Safety and Food Defense Advisory Council. This group developed reasonable and easy-to-understand food safety recommendations that ultimately led to the Cottage Foods Legislation signed into law in Florida.” Effective July, 2011, the Cottage Foods Legislation allows individuals to manufacture, sell and store certain types of “cottage food” products in an unlicensed home kitchen, such as bread, cakes, cookies, jams, etc.

Food safety programs can be tailored to fit a smaller operation; there is no one-size-fits-all. “A food safety program should be appropriate to the risks associated with a specific operation and to the end use of the product it’s producing,” states Earthbound’s Daniels. “For example, our rigorous multi-hurdle food safety program with raw product and finished goods test-and-hold is appropriate for production of ready-to-eat salads with nationwide distribution. But if a small grower is growing something not marketed as ready-to-eat and distributed locally, it would probably have a very different food safety program.”

“Nothing prevents local producers from conforming to Best Management Practices as established by the buyer,” says T&A’s Antle.

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“Buyers often use auditors to verify compliance, which is a validation that on the day of the audit, the producer was compliant with the buyer’s Best Management Practices.”

“Buyers need to be consistent in their food safety expectations,” advises United Fresh’s Gombas. “While those requirements can be size-appropriate — for example, large operations certified to a GFSI-benchmarked standard versus small operations audited to a lower cost, buyer-accepted standard — the mandatory aspects must be identified and consistently applied. The operation’s management needs appropriate knowledge and understanding of what is required, and to ensure priority is given to safety and adequate resources are available.”

Small growers often express concern about not having food safety resources like big companies. “Food safety practices are scalable,” says Gombas. “Small growers can implement a fully effective food safety plan if they do it wisely, focusing on what works in their operation rather than just copying what others have done. This responsibility extends to auditors, who must understand there’s more than one way to achieve food safety objectives.”

Wegmans has been working with land-grant universities, the USDA, local departments of agriculture and local growers since 2005 sponsoring GAPs education and making reference materials available. “It’s critical to communicate your requirements and then help growers meet those requirements,” says Wegmans’ Corsi. “And you may need to have a conversation with some about what it takes to keep your business.”

Corsi continues, “We’ve provided training materials, meeting sites, technical support, meals, and brought in academia and government agencies to share information. We’ve reimbursed growers to help them cover the cost of their audits. The national trade associations also have food safety and GAPs training materials. Nationally, the Center for Produce Safety is working on applied research that can be used on all different sized farms.”

PMA has been involved for over two years in helping train local suppliers in food safety. “We partner with a retailer or food safety expert who discusses their philosophy on food safety and their specific programs,” reports Whitaker. “This helps local growers see their role in a much bigger picture.”

Earthbound has worked with Family Farmed, an organization based in Oak Park, IL, to help create a simple online tool where small and mid-sized farmers can create a risk-based food safety program. “Others in the industry also contributing to the development of this tool include the FDA, USDA,

Chipotle, small farmers, The Wild Farm Alliance, The Wallace Foundation, CAFF and UC Davis,” reports Daniels.

FDA funded the Produce Safety Alliance specifically to develop food safety training for small operations. “All the industry-developed Commodity Specific Food Safety Guidelines have been written with the small grower in mind,” relates United’s Gombas. “The Harmonized Standards, developed by the Produce GAPs Harmonization Initiative, was specifically piloted on small operations to ensure the standards were scalable and practical. All of these activities are ongoing and freely available for operations to use.”

More Testing Vs. Problems With Testing

As buyers and government implement testing criteria, the industry faces myriad issues related to the true value of testing, starting with the basic question of purpose. “Testing for the purpose of ‘let’s see what we find’ is a waste of resources,” says Gombas. “Likewise is the ‘I want to make sure it’s safe’ reason because a company can’t do enough testing to assure safety. I’ve also heard ‘to reduce my liability’, but I’ve never seen how testing reduces the liability of a company being sued.”

“You cannot test your way to food safety,” emphasizes Whitaker. “The frequency of contamination is very low; the level of contamination is very low, and you can’t prove a negative. The science just doesn’t support proving what you tested means the product you didn’t test is safe.”

“If testing is targeted toward contamination caused by uncontrollable factors, current sampling plans used for collecting the samples in the field are statistically invalid and do not provide accurate information,” explains T&A’s Mudahar. “Testing is utilized to make buyers feel secure. However, we have not seen a reduction in recalls for those companies with a regular produce testing program.”

Wegmans’ Corsi adds, “Test-and-hold cannot guarantee the safety of the product. There’s the potential to get a false sense of security with test-and-hold. You can’t test your way to safety. It all points out just how important it is to do as much as we can to prevent contamination in the first place.”

Yet, testing serves a purpose, and Gombas suggests some defensible intentions, explaining, “Some of the valid reasons include establishing a baseline to measure whether future actions make a change, verification that food safety activities are working or investigation because you think there may be a problem.”

“Test-and-hold programs have some validity as a way to check systems and processes and take some degree of comfort that they’re

THE IMPORT CHALLENGE

Evolving food safety regulations are changing the landscape for importers. "There's no question that the whole food safety push impacts imported produce," says John McClung, president of the Mission-based Texas International Produce Association. "In the FSMA you've got several provisions which have yet to be fully fleshed out by the FDA, like the voluntary exporters program, the food facility registrations and with that the contentious issue about the U.S. agent."

In the past, U.S. importers may have been registered as representatives of overseas suppliers, but were not held accountable. "A big change is that the importer is now responsible and liable for the safety of the product," says Bob Whitaker, chief science and technology officer for the Produce Marketing Association in Newark, DE. "If you bring it in, you must ensure it's been produced in a food safe manner."

Such responsibility can have a significant price tag. "For example, if a Mexican shipper gets in trouble with food safety issues and FDA decides it needs to be re-inspected before further shipping to the United States, it can run about \$10,000 a pop," explains McClung. "Every exporter must have a single U.S. agent and that agent will bear the responsibility of paying FDA for inspections or recall expenses. Previously under the bioterrorism act, the U.S. agent was the point of contact, but there was no financial liability or exposure. Under the new law, this changes."

This legal and financial exposure may lead to changes in how importers do business. "As a practical matter, some brokers or importers may represent a couple of thousand shipping operations in Mexico as the U.S. agent," says McClung. "So they're in a real tough spot of financial exposure. That has to be resolved under the new regulations. It's before FDA now but we don't know what they're going to do about it."

The FSMA includes a foreign supplier verification requirement. "Program importers must ensure foreign suppliers are getting third-party certified and implementing standards," explains McClung. "However, FDA has no capability to look at every operation so the industry will be held responsible for that."

pb

working as designed," adds Corsi.

Publix has instituted such test-and-hold requirements of suppliers, including fresh fruits and vegetables, for many years. "Microbiological testing of food can serve as an integral part of a food safety management system," explains Brous. "Our requirements are based on the 2005 *Industry Best Practices for Holding Tested Products* facilitated by the International HACCP Alliance. While such microbiological testing could pose difficulty and added expense years ago, improvements with laboratory testing processes have resulted in the ability to

implement such programs without adding additional refrigerated warehousing expense."

"Test-and-hold is a valid food safety mechanism," states Earthbound's Daniels. "But, it's important to be clear that test-and-hold is not, in and of itself, a food safety program. It is a hurdle in a multi-hurdle food safety program and verifies that your upstream food safety protocols are working or might need adjustment. The goal of test-and-hold is to identify gross contamination so we can eliminate it from the product stream."

SmartWash's Brennan details three primary



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places to test. "Three main areas include before harvesting, receiving after harvest, and at finished product," he says. "We prefer to term them 'surveillance programs.' We don't believe testing is a good way of denoting a good lot versus a bad lot, but we do view it as a good way to survey and verify. Field testing is important to make sure inputs are good so they don't adulterate the outputs."

Heena Patel, technical director, Food Safety Audit Services for SCS, says, "If product distributes through a packing house, a company may try to minimize testing by instituting a preventative monitoring program using environmental

swabs on a regular basis and implementing effective Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) and control points in the manufacturing process."

Testing's role must be appropriate. PMA's Whitaker states, "In this day and age, we want to know that what we're doing is really having an effect. Testing is important and has a place in our industry but it's not a 'be-all-end-all'"

"If the industry moves to a standard of testing, this must start with valid sampling methods, valid frequency of testing for that environment, an understanding of the test results, and taking appropriate actions based on the test results," adds Patel.

ZERO RISK VS. REALISTIC RISK

Perhaps one of the greatest inconsistencies with respect to produce food safety is the pursuit of zero risk within the scheme of producing in an environment where risk is always a factor. "The Supreme Court has long held that there must be a relationship between substances present in our food and the harm they allegedly cause in humans," says Wesley Van Kamp, vice president of legal and general counsel for Salinas, CA-based Tanimura & Antle. "The mere presence of substances such as nitrites, mercury and aflatoxins is not sufficient to render the food illegal. The fresh produce industry should be held to the highest standards in food safety, but produce is grown outside in soil, not in a sterile environment. While we can use the best farming and harvesting practices to minimize the risk of contamination, we cannot eradicate that risk."

"From a regulatory standpoint, we have a zero tolerance policy based on an Act made in 1938," reports Bob Whitaker, chief science and technology officer for the Produce Marketing Association, based in Newark, DE. "Since then, we've learned more about these pathogens and we've developed tools where we can find them. There seems to be a disconnect between the amount we find and the risk it represents."

Advancements in detection and reporting add to the conundrum. "The ability to detect seems to be getting better and better and the information sharing capability among the regulatory folks is tremendous," says Dave Corsi, vice president of produce and floral merchandising for Wegmans Food Markets in Rochester, NY, with 82 stores. "The real challenge is understanding the severity and reality of the threat."

"We need to determine whether

pathogens can be entirely avoided by good agricultural practices," states Van Camp. "If they cannot, then FDA needs to set tolerance levels as required by the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act for unavoidable poisonous substances. Presently, the European Union, Canada and Australia all have adopted tolerance levels in fresh produce for *Listeria Monocytogene*."

Despite the reasonableness of the 'limited risk' argument, the industry is hard-pressed to gamble with public health. Corsi says, "In terms of 'better safe than sorry,' I would much rather not have product on our shelves and feel comfortable that we don't have a problem than be in the position of wondering if we might have a problem. We haven't figured out how to tell our customers, 'Don't worry, it's just a little bit of salmonella.'"

"I couldn't stand before any of my customers and say we have a zero risk in what we do," relates Tommy Wilkins, produce procurement director for United Supermarkets, a 51-unit chain in Lubbock, TX. "When you grow product and Mother Nature is involved, there is always a possibility of something happening. We just have to get better at what we're doing and how to lower the risk."

Consumers also factor into the risk equation. "There is a multitude of things the consumer can do to hurt or affect food safety even if we've done everything right," says Wilkins. "Consumer education should be a big part of food safety in the future."

"Government agencies, retailers and the produce industry must educate consumers to make sure produce is thoroughly washed before use," adds Dr. Gurmail Mudahar, vice president of food safety research and development for Tanimura & Antle. "This is an easy and effective method to ensure produce safety."

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Local Effectiveness Vs. National Programs

Some of the most highly touted successes in food safety come from regional programs. The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA) is one example of a commodity-specific food safety program, now in its sixth year. Scott Horsfall, CEO of the LGMA, in Sacramento, CA, reports, "Several produce industry groups have made food safety their No. 1 priority, including not just the LGMA, but also the Arizona Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, the California Cantaloupe Advisory Board, the California Tomato Farmers, the Florida Tomato Exchange and the Rocky Ford Growers Association."

"Commodity-specific food safety programs for lettuce and leafy greens, netted melons, green onions, tomatoes, and mushrooms have been successful," states Wegmans' Corsi. "The guidance programs that were initially developed by industry with regulatory and academia participation brought people together and started the process for enhancing produce safety."

"Industry-initiated food safety programs like the LGMA and California Cantaloupe Advisory Board have created guidelines and standards minimizing food safety risks when these items are properly handled," adds T&A's Antle.

Yet despite the recognized success, widespread adoption of these programs has been elusive. "A National Leafy Greens Standard has yet to progress beyond hearings because of regional opposition," reports Antle. "The past two years demonstrate that regional programs are likely to have higher health risks. Historically, this has meant smaller and more contained outbreaks. However, as regional growers outgrow their local market area and begin shipping nationally, these health risks also grow, as we saw with the 2012 Indiana cantaloupe outbreak."

"Resistance is the same as always ...you're trying to tell someone what they should do in their business and no one likes to be told what to do," explains SmartWash's Brennan. "It's an initial reaction, but over time they'll work through it. When the program is shown not to be onerous and growers see how many of the requirements they're already doing, then it becomes easier and more manageable."

Any successful program must begin with personal ownership. "Those operating under local, regional or national programs must own it," says PMA's Whitaker. "It's not someone forcing them to do something. They have to engage in the process, consider it their own and become committed to what they're doing down the road. This is what has made the LGMA the success it is."

"These programs are not about the cheapest price," explains Horsfall. "They are not about a score. They're about frequent inspection and re-

inspection to ensure the right thing is being done 100 percent of the time. They're about mandatory government oversight and corrective actions. They're about Best Practices based on sound science with real penalties for those who don't comply. They're about establishing a culture of food safety on the farm to protect public health."

Whether national or local, programs must be customized. "Food safety principles may be universal but implementation begins at home," advises United's Gombas. "Commodity-specific guidances are not written to be plug-and-play. Individual growers must understand what parts

affect them and why, have help in developing operation-specific food safety plans, and receive training on how to implement the plans. Otherwise, some aspects won't make sense, some won't be implemented, and some will be implemented in the wrong way."

"Guidance is just what it sounds like," says Whitaker. "It's not a food safety program. To have a good food safety program means you must personalize it to your operation. Ten growers from ten different areas will not all be doing everything the same, therefore their food safety program must be different as well." **pb**



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NACS offers convenience store operators programs to learn the ins-and-outs of a fresh-food provider.

Convenience Stores Prepare For Fresh-Food Future

To stimulate business growth, a growing number of convenience store operators are learning new skills to become effective fresh-food retailers. **BY OSCAR KATOV**

The lure is a fresh foodservice education program developed by the Alexandria, VA-based National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS), serving as the format for individual retail action plans, which can deliver \$200,000 or more a year in sales to an average store. “Our surveys show that convenience stores are increasingly becoming destinations for on-the-go meals and refreshments,” reports Jeff Lenard, vice president of communications. “We’re witnessing a striking evolution in our industry, focused on fresh-food offerings to millions of our daily on-the-go customers.”

This strategy of aiming for a new level of consumer attention was evident at the recent NACS annual convention, which took place in Las Vegas, NV. Standing-room-only workshops offering instruction in fresh meal preparation, along with hundreds of exhibits, ranging from ovens and fresh meal menus to displays by national restaurant chains pitching franchise opportunities, were just a few of the highlights of the convention.

Simply put, fresh is in. The demand for fresh foods beyond the supermarket — at a convenience store or a drug store — reflects growing consumer awareness of nutrition

values and recognition of obesity’s harm to health. And, in a significant signal of change, tastes are moving beyond fast food offerings of a burger, fries, and a shake.

The national and powerful impact of the industry’s new direction is evident in the decision by the 7-Eleven stores to double offerings of fresh foods in its U.S. and Canadian stores. In an interview published in *The New York Times* in December of last year, Joseph De Pinto, the company’s CEO, said, “We’re aspiring to be more of a food and beverage company, and that aligns with what the consumer now wants, which is more tasty, healthful, fresh food choices.” Based in Dallas, TX, 7-Eleven is the world’s biggest convenience store chain with about 7,550 stores in the United States, according to the company’s website.

Evolution Of NCAS CAFE

“While there are convenience store operators who are already very successful in offering a fresh food program, there remains a huge learning curve for many others,” recognizes Ieva Grimm, senior director for education services and executive director of the NACS CAFE (Center for Achieving Foodservice Excellence). “The need for NACS CAFE was

driven by store operators who recognized that running a foodservice operation, regardless of size, is not the same as adding a few new brands of snacks on store shelves.”

“In all of this, the convenience store industry continues to evolve, and the business climate and consumer also continue to change,” explains Grimm. “Offering fresh prepared food is a growth opportunity many convenience store operators have identified as critical in responding to desires of their on-the-go customers.”

At the heart of this education and training initiative are a series of online computer-based training modules and a three-day program onsite at Atlanta-based Georgia State University’s School of Hospitality, which leads to certifications for foodservice managers, supervisors and corporate directors. “There’s a difference in magnitude between the execution skills necessary to sell a candy bar and to sell quality, freshly prepared foods and a quality cup of hot, fresh coffee,” points out NACS chairman Tom Robison, president of Robinson Oil Company, in Santa Clara, CA. “NACS shows you how to do it right.”

John Bennett, retail operations manager at Robinson Oil, a graduate of the NACS CAFE program as a certified convenience foodser-

vice manager, shares, “We’re just in our infancy in developing our fresh program. We have 34 Robinson fuel locations. Eighteen of them have convenience stores, and of those, 10 have food offerings.”

According to Bennett, three popular offerings at Robinson are Grab-and-Go, Roller Grill, and Food Warmers, all of which are fresh items that can be prepared quickly. He adds, “Our customers want to get in and out of the store as fast as possible, so we pride ourselves on speed of service as well as consistency in the quality of our offerings. This past year, we had a 47 percent increase in sales of our grill items, so we must be doing something right! The key factor lies in the freshness of our products.”

Bennett adds, “To say that the competition for California drive-in traffic is fierce would be an understatement. Keep in mind there’s a Subway or a Pizza Hut on most corners. Co-branding our stores would not be an advantage. Our best advantage is our own identity, with fresh food offerings and great service.”

Pat Kelly, director of purchasing for High’s of Baltimore, LLC, an operator of 51 convenience stores based in Baltimore, MD, remarks, “All of our stores offer a fresh food menu, such as fresh-made deli subs and fresh break-

fast sandwiches. Of the 51 stores, we promote 16 as ‘On the Move,’ a proprietary brand, which offers fresh-made salads, grape cups, and a large array of Grab-N-Go products such as parfaits, yogurts, and fruit cups, as well as fresh fruit.”

Kelly is also a certified consumer food service manager, thanks to NACS CAFÉ, and is sensitive to maintaining the highest standard of freshness in her offerings. “For our subs, sandwiches, wraps and paninis, we make sure that we have fresh lettuce, tomatoes and onions. We can ruin an offering if the produce is not fresh and not appealing visually.”

Kelly traces back the growing popularity of the program to five years ago, when consumer interest in nutrition and general health issues began to become prominent. “We developed a fresh food program on our own, also catering to local demographics by location,” she recollects. “We operate in 51 different communities and a good number of our day-to-day customers are neighbors, so we have developed good relationships with them and understand what they need.”

Looking Ahead

So, where is the convenience store industry

headed in the retail food business?

One look at facts provided by NACS, and the path is clear.

With more than 148,000 locations, convenience stores are everywhere, accounting for \$681 billion in sales. This contrasts with supermarkets, numbering 32,924 stores reaching \$584 billion, and drug stores, with 38,526 stores and \$222 billion in sales, not including prescriptions.

Consumers are embracing convenience stores like never before. For example, an average store selling fuel has around 1,140 customers per day, or more than 400,000 per year. Cumulatively, the convenience store industry serves 140 million customers per day.

Convenience stores sell time — an invaluable commodity — offering speed of service to consumers who want to get in and out of the store quickly. These shoppers recognize this channel of trade for its convenient locations, one-stop shopping, grab-and-go foodservice, variety of merchandise, extended hours of operation, and fast transactions.

Certainly, the numbers of prospective customers are evident. A fellow NACS convention member standing in line for a workshop put it this way: “Our retail DNA is in quality fresh foods.” **pb**

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Banacol guarantees the excellence of our products and the satisfaction of our clients due to our vertical integration. We count on our own farms to produce the fruit, obtain plastics and cartons from our own plant, and utilize our own logistical operation. This productive model permits us to generate greater efficiency and to control the flow of our processes from planting to the final delivery.

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• PLANTAIN:

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• TROPICALS:

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associated company that allows Banacol to expand its portfolio to include service to transport fruit from Colombia and Costa Rica to the Northeast Coast of the United States, while reserving space for third parties.

Our logistics operations originate in Uraba, Colombia and in Moín, Costa Rica. Our installations and services are CTPAT Level 3, BASC (Business Alliance for Secure Commerce), and ISPS (International Ship and Port Facility Security) certified.

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- Ground transportation of general cargo.
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- Operation in container terminals.
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BANACOL SOCIAL FOUNDATION

An important part of Banacol's Cultivating Wellbeing philosophy is its commitment to the social development of the communities where it has plantations. Through its social foundation, Corbanacol, it contributes directly to the sustainable development of these



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- 6,212 housing improvements (Construction of new housing and improvements to existing housing) delivered by Corbanacol
- 42,000 people received drinkable water thanks to the construction of 5 rural aqueducts in the region of Urabá, in alliance with other public and private organizations
- 4,700 children who benefit from Initiation and Formation Centers for sports, art and culture in Colombia and Costa Rica
- 976 children who benefit from nutrition programs where, in addition to medical check-ups and growth and development assessments, they receive a nutritional supplement of banana flour processed by Banacol in its Center for Research and Development. We deliver weekly 450

kilos to the families.

- 3,800 recipient families of the program Healthy Housing developed under the methodology of the World Health Organization and adapted to the conditions of the region of Urabá, with the objective of improving sanitary and hygiene conditions in the homes of company employees
- 2,000 small plantain producers benefitted in 2011 from cooperative business programs including technical assistance, improvements to housing and infrastructure, and sports and cultural programs
- 60 parks and sports complexes, and 110 school classrooms that were improved or built in Colombia and Costa Rica to enhance education and recreational conditions in the communities
- 21,588 employees have benefitted from education and preparation programs that the company has advanced in the last 7 years.
- More than 7,000 jobs directly generated in 2012 in Colombia, Costa Rica and the U.S.
- 18,8 million kilos of organic compost are processed annually, taken from banana and pineapple waste, and utilized as fertilizer in the company's plantations
- 783,7 tons of plastic residue are recycled annually, to later be used as principal material for income-generating projects for mother-headed households
- 20 water recirculation plants in the company's banana packing facilities in Colombia that decrease water use by 60%

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Whether it's an Earth Day celebration or a spring Produce For Kids promotion, there are countless ways to invigorate the produce department during the spring season.

Try Something New For Spring Merchandising

Holidays abound during the spring months, making it a perfect time for thorough and thoughtful merchandising. **BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD**

March marks the start of spring, and with it comes a big change in the produce department. Winter citrus gives way to tree fruit and a variety of domestic melons by May, while fresh asparagus, artichokes and leafy greens play a bigger role than root vegetables.

One of the best ways to call out this changing palate of flavors is to merchandise around both new and tried-and-true holiday themes. A five-week stretch between Easter and *Cinco de Mayo* this year leaves a five-week holiday void in April ripe for celebrating something different like Earth Day and Love Your Produce Manager promotions.

Dan Sleep, development representative supervisor, division of marketing, for the Tallahassee-based Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), confirms the importance of the holidays at the retail level. "Holidays play a pivotal role in assisting in the expansion of sales opportunities of our commodities that find their way to shoppers from Sarasota to Singapore. We're working with our retail partners to examine ways to enhance sales throughout the United States and some 25 countries in 2013."

ST. PATRICK'S DAY: March 17

According to Maureen Torrey Marshall, vice president of Elba, NY-based Torrey Farms, St. Patrick's Day is the biggest holiday of the year for storage cabbage. "Some retailers will sell cabbage in bins for a one- or two-week period as a loss leader," she says. "Others will price-promote cabbage, carrots and potatoes together for a New England boiled dinner. We've started to see a few retailers with in-house fresh-cut operations bundle wedge-cut cabbage, potatoes and carrots in one ready-to-cook package."

Robert Schueller, director of public relations for Melissa's/World Variety Produce Inc., in Los Angeles, CA, suggests a green theme for this traditional Irish holiday. "Promote items like fresh herbs, sugar snap peas, leeks, green Kohlrabi, cherimoyas, squash and more."

PASSOVER: March 25

Fresh horseradish sales skyrocket for Passover, says Dennis Diekemper, general manager of the Collinsville, IL-based JR Kelly Co. "We shrink-wrap the roots, which are about a pound each, so they don't dry out, and each comes with a booklet and website for recipes," he details.

Diekemper suggests fresh horseradish be displayed with other roots such as ginger.

"Other popular Passover ingredients are beets, celery root, parsnips, potatoes and carrots," says Schueller.

EASTER: March 31

"Think Thanksgiving in the spring with ham in place of turkey, and you've got Easter," says Schueller. "It's a big family meal occasion. Produce ads tend to focus around the trimmings such as variety onions and potatoes, radishes, leafy greens and asparagus."

Cherie Watte Angulo, executive director of the El Centro-based California Asparagus Commission (CAC), says, "An early Easter is a challenge, but this is the primary holiday for asparagus. We have new crop asparagus at this time, which means it's fresher than Peruvian imports, and a new crop also means more tender stalks." The CAC can work with retail customers to develop an exclusive recipe for Easter and other spring promotions.

Angulo recommends offering customers a choice: medium, large, extra-large and jumbo. "People serve asparagus in a number of ways, such as in a salad, side dish or appetizer platter," she points out, so your best bet is to provide an

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Frieda's Inc. assists retailers with demos and sampling via its Produce University.

option for all types of dishes.

An early Easter should be no problem for California strawberry promotions. Chris Christian, vice president of marketing for the Watsonville-based California Strawberry Commission (CSC), reports, "Acreage in the state is up 6.5 percent; this increase means excellent availability. This is especially the case since much of this increase is in southern California. If weather is favorable, we should be ramped up in production by the second week of March or earlier and have great promotional volumes into June."

Jim Grabowski, merchandising manager for

Well-Pict Berries, in Watsonville, CA, says, "The 1-pounder is the work horse of the industry. It's often promoted as 2-for-3 for a certain price or BOGO for Easter, although it might be hard to have a really barn-burner price on ad this early in the season."

"Promote strawberries for one week before, the week of and the week after Easter," recommends Christian. "Our research shows that promoting for three weeks around a holiday can lead to a 6.5 percent increase in pounds and 11 percent in dollars over not advertising for the full three weeks."

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NATIONAL 'LOVE YOUR PRODUCE MANAGER' DAY: April 2

This fun month-long produce promotion was invented by Frieda's, a Los Alamitos, CA-based specialty produce wholesaler, and first test-marketed last April at Schnucks Markets, a 99-store chain based in St. Louis, MO. Karen Caplan, Frieda's president, explains, "The event served as an opportunity to get produce managers excited about engaging with shoppers and for shoppers to vote for their favorite produce manager — American Idol-style."

AVOCADOS STAR AT NORTHGATE GONZALEZ MARKETS FOR CINCO DE MAYO

Side Note

Hass avocados are a best-selling item in the produce departments at Northgate González Markets, a 35-store chain based in Anaheim, CA. This is true both throughout the year and for Cinco de Mayo. Alfonso Cano, assistant produce director, explains, "We carry two sizes: a medium or small 70-count and a larger 40- to 48-count avocado. We also offer a third SKU, an 84-count with four fruit in a bag."

Avocados will be featured either in-store or in the chain's weekly ad circular. Small fruit will be promoted at 3- or 4-for-99-cents, while large fruit will sell for 89 cents to \$1.29 each, depending on the market. "The idea is to upsell customers to a greater quantity of fruit," Cano explains.

Two other features make the chain's Cinco de Mayo promotion successful. First, only ripe, ready-to-eat fruit is sold. "We don't worry about what we lose in shrink, but rather what we'd lose in sales if we sold unripe avocados," Cano says. "We have our own ripening rooms, which allow us to get more aggressive. We also have seven-day-a-week delivery to our stores. That allows our stores to not get inundated with excess stock."

Secondly, Northgate's produce staff will cross-merchandise avocados with other popular ingredients for Cinco de Mayo favorites such as salsa and guacamole. This includes garlic, tomatoes and onions. "We'll also display avocados in the chip aisle and limes next to the beer," Cano says. "Cinco de Mayo is a good excuse to promote not only avocados, but also a variety of produce."

pb

Customers who took part by using a text message poll were automatically entered into a drawing to win \$500 in Schnucks gift cards. The promotion was so successful that Frieda's will expand it this year into an official national Love Your Produce Manager Day.

Caplan points out, "It's a chance to shine the spotlight on produce managers with exemplary customer service and to increase consumption by featuring a variety of specialty fruits and vegetables. We suggest produce managers promote different categories around one-week themes. For example, it could be Healthy Eating since spring break and summer are coming up, or spring fruits and vegetables, or an artichoke festival with different varieties, or vegetarian products and push salad ingredients such as radicchio, dried tomatoes and pine nuts," she details.

EARTH DAY: April 22

Natural foods retailers have customarily been the ones to capitalize on this celebration of the natural environment. Conventional retailers have jumped in, too in recent years and used this commemoration to promote organically grown fruits and vegetables and vegetarian foods, including soy products.

Organic produce is a natural fit with Earth Day. According to the Organic and Natural 2012 report by the Bellevue, WA-based Hartman Group, 49 percent of consumers surveyed chose organics because of environmental concerns, up from 41 percent in 2010.

There is a variety of both imported and domestic fruits and vegetables available in April. Addie Pobst, sustainability and integrity import coordinator for CF Fresh, in Sedro Woolley, WA, remarks, "We have a full line of new crop apples and pears out of South America. Variety-wise in apples, it mimics what you see in the domestic season in September and October, with category mainstays like Gala and Fuji being the most dominant. In pears, the Bartletts will typically wrap up by April and the D'Anjous and Bosc will come in late in the month. We also offer variety pears out of Argentina such as the Abate Fetel."

On the domestic front, organic acreage of California strawberries increased from 4.7 in 2012 to 6.3 percent in 2013 — a 43 percent jump. The CSC's Christian reveals, "We plan to do media outreach on our environmental stewardship programs this spring. These programs include use of drip irrigation by our farmers to conserve water, IPM (integrated pest management) and our partnership with the California Department of Pesticide Regulation to decrease the use of fumigant pesticides and find alternatives."

Organic salad greens, including the new Zen

Blend and Butter Lettuce Leaves, are top products for Earth Day promotions from Earthbound Farm, in San Juan Bautista, CA. In addition, the company will continue with its Take an Organic Step Forward program. Customers sign up for this program, which is announced on-pack and via in-store POS materials, receive a daily e-newsletter with organic tips, fun facts and recipes, as well as a weekly downloadable coupon.

Samantha Cabaluna, Earthbound Farm's director of communications, says, "We started

last April and hoped for an enrollment of 70,000 by the end of the year. We actually reached 113,000 participants by mid-December. The coupon is the incentive for customers to join, and once they do, they find they like all the information that we deliver in small bites."

April is also National Soyfoods Month. Melissa's Schueller points out, "It's a great tie-in with Earth Day and a good time to promote soy foods such as different types of tofu, meat alternatives like soy taco and soyriso, and edamame."



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SPRING ARTICHOKEs FEATURED IN WINNING DISPLAY AT RALEY'S SUPERMARKETS

Customers shopping at the Pittsburg, CA-location of Raley's Supermarkets, a 133-store chain in West Sacramento, CA, were treated to an eye-catching sight last year. From April 25 to May 1, produce manager, Mike Russo, had a 16x12-ft. display of more than 100 cases of artichokes, which he built using two Euro tables, additional racks, cases of 12-ct artichokes. This massive presentation enticed customers to buy and earned Russo the grand prize in the spring display contest sponsored by Ocean Mist Farms.

The display took Russo two hours to build in the front lobby of the supermarket. He cut the top of the boxes so that artichokes spilled over attractively. In addition, he cross-merchandised items such as garlic, ranch dressing, mayonnaise, lemon, olive oil, parmesan cheese and bread crumbs. "We discovered many shoppers had never



PHOTO COURTESY OF OCEAN MIST FARMS

tried artichokes; this was the first time, so we also offered easy-to-prepare recipes."

Artichokes were priced at 99 cents each during the one-week promotion, a significant savings over the regular retail at the time of \$2.99. As a result, Russo's year-over-year sales were up 71.8 percent, compared to a chain average of 8.7, and Russo's artichoke sales as a percent of total department sales were 5.89 percent compared to the chain average of 4.32 percent. **pb**

CINCO DE MAYO: May 5

Spotlight Latin ingredients on this Mexican national holiday that has become Americanized

and celebrated throughout the United States. Key items for promotion include fresh chilis, vegetables like chayote, jicama and tomatillos

and fruits such as Key limes, details Schueller. "We offer a promotional kit that contains shelf strips and danglers that read 'Happy *Cinco de Mayo*,' as well as recipe tear pads," he says. "This year, the recipes will be a Chayote Salad, a Jicama Salad with mango and tomatillos and a Simple Chile Salsa with tomatoes."

May is the peak shipment time for Florida tomatoes. The Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee (FTC), offers 4x5-inch full-color recipe tear pads for Florida Tomato & Avocado Salsa perfect for *Cinco de Mayo* promotions. Samantha Winters, the FTC's director of education and promotions, suggests, "The tear pads have two sturdy adhesive strips that make it easy to post right by the Florida tomato display. The recipe boosts sales in the entire produce department, as it calls for red onion, bell pepper, cilantro and fresh lime juice, in addition to two large tomatoes and one large avocado."

And tomatoes are just the tip of the iceberg. Florida produce is coming in strong all through the spring season. Sleep of the FDACS reports, "Florida comes into full production with a wide assortment of fresh commodities beginning as early as December and expanding greatly from March through May. Fresh fruits and vegetables include snap beans, blueberries,

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sweet corn, cucumbers, eggplant, lettuces, grapefruit, peppers, oranges, potatoes, strawberries, squash, Tangerines, tomatoes and watermelon, to name a few. Combined, more than one billion dollars of cash receipts flow from the state in this time period, supporting tens of thousands of jobs statewide.”

Sweet corn is another popular ingredient for Cinco de Mayo, says Jason Stemm, spokesperson for the Fresh Sunshine Sweet Corn Council, in Maitland, FL. “Fresh corn is perfect for Mexican-style corn on the cobb with mayonnaise, cheese, lime and ground red pepper.” Stemm recommends, “Build attractive displays that include corn in the husk and in tray packs, or with a couple of husks peeled back to showcase the bright, colorful kernels. Provide recipes and usage ideas to add items to customers’ baskets that are not on their list. As customers have a greater interest in fresh produce, it is good to remind them how easy it is to cut kernels from the ear to use in recipes that call for canned or frozen kernels.”

Florida ships a little over 1 million crates of sweet corn per week during the peak late-April to May time period.

MOTHER’S DAY: May 12

In early May, flower and gift sales rise dramatically, as do ingredients for Mom’s breakfast-in-bed. Omelettes with fresh herbs and veggies are always a winner as are berry-filled crepes.

Well-Pict’s Grabowski says, “Chocolate-dipped long-stem strawberries are popular too, as well as other types of berry desserts. Depending on the weather, we’ll have raspberries available as well as strawberries.”

MEMORIAL DAY: May 27

Memorial Day marks the unofficial start of summer and the grilling season. Spring vegetables from south Florida to south Georgia experience high demand during this time, says Lee Ann Oxford, marketing director for Raleigh, NC-headquartered L&M Companies. “These include bell pepper, cucumber, squash, cabbage, broccoli, beans and corn.”

According to John Shuman, president and director of sales for Shuman Produce, in Reidsville, GA, Vidalia sweet onions have a place in many spring and summer holidays such as Memorial Day. “The world’s most famous sweet onion can add the perfect complement or act as the centerpiece to a wide variety of warm-weather dishes including salads, dips, sides, grilled favorites and much more.”

Displays drive sales, Shuman adds. “Stock both bagged and bulk Vidalias on a large



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MEIJER'S NUTRITIONISTS PROMOTE PRODUCE FOR KIDS

Last spring, Meijer, a 200-plus-store chain headquartered in Walker, MI, ran Produce for Kids (PFK) Ideal Meals demos in all its stores. Samples of the meal, which featured Beany Pitas made with the fruits and vegetables of companies participating in the campaign, were given out to store patrons during a retailer-wide demo day. Meijer was also able to tie the demos into store-specific healthy eating initiatives and Sprout TV character

in-store appearances.

Shari Steinbach, MS RD, the lead dietitian and Healthy Living Advisor for Meijer, explains, "We had a grand opening in Bath, MI, and Sprout character, Sportacus, visited. We had visitors come from a few hours away just for this event. We handed out goodie bags to the kids with PFK coloring pages and activity sheets and made smoothies for taste-sampling."

display in the center of the produce aisle and use signage to identify the product and its inherently sweet and mild flavor along with its

seasonality," he advises. "Use of secondary displays to account for an increase in volume during the weeks leading up to spring holidays

In addition, Steinbach and the other four regional RDs employed by Meijer incorporated the PFK theme into the 80 to 100 TV spots they record each quarter. "Produce for Kids is a perfect fit for us because the recipes are easy, affordable and healthy," says Steinbach. "Many shoppers want to eat healthfully, but think it's too expensive and time-consuming. As RDs, we use the PFK recipes to help drive sales in the produce department." **pb.**

is also highly recommended."

The Vidalia Onion Committee (VOC), in Vidalia, GA, will offer its new Taste of Summer

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promotion, which will run from May 1 through August 31. Wendy Brannen, the VOC's executive director explains, "Our new, annual promotion will feature summer-centric promotional partners such as Johnsonville Sausage and involve elements ranging from a consumer contest for best recipes and outdoor entertaining ideas, national public relations outreach, and in-store events, point of sale, and packaging. As consumers heat up the grill and get cooking outside more and more each summer season, the promotional organization for Georgia's famous sweets feels the ongoing and unique summer-themed campaign will be a tasty way for them and their new partners to reach consumers at retail."

Produce partners for the Taste of Summer promotion include Wholly Guacamole, the

National Mango Board and the National Watermelon Board.

Vidalia sweet onions and a number of other seasonal fruits and vegetables also are featured as sponsored products in the annual Produce for Kids spring promotion. Amanda Keefer, manager of public relations and social media for Orlando, FL-based Produce For Kids (PFK), reveals, "We will be moving to a more digitally focused campaign this year. We have found that shoppers use their mobile devices frequently while in the store to look up recipes and product information, so we are redesigning our website to be more user-friendly and mobile-optimized."

A new, simplified in-store POS unit will direct shoppers to the PFK website for recipes, the new

Parents on Produce blog offering tips from real parents, more information on the campaign, and the ability to enter the campaign sweepstakes. Keefer explains, "Shoppers will have the opportunity to scan a QR code on the POS unit to go directly to our website or they can enter the web address directly into their phone. The new tear pads on the unit will contain a shopping list of sponsored products, making it easier for shoppers to add these items to their carts."

Last year's spring PFK campaign ran in 17 banners and in more than 3,000 stores across the country. With the help of more than 40 fresh produce suppliers, PFK was able to raise more than \$350,000 for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals and other children's hospitals in participating retailers' markets. **pb**

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The battle continues over whether national greenhouse-grown regulations are necessary.

Open-And-Closed Case: What Defines Greenhouse-Grown And Do Consumers Care?

Drive toward greenhouse standard riles controversy as Mexico's protected agriculture industry further penetrates retail shelves. **BY MIRA SLOTT**

Mexico's protected agriculture industry continues to grab marketshare and coveted shelf space in crowded produce departments, where "greenhouse-grown" has become omnipresent. What defines greenhouse-grown has sparked contentious debate as competition heats up amid fears of a saturated, commoditized category. A cutthroat market is being fueled by a spectrum of protected agriculture processes and technological advances spurring so-called greenhouse hybrids. These systems are geared to adapt to varying climates and growing environments and are strategically engineered to maximize product value in quality, taste, efficiencies, yields, and price, according to Eric Viramontes, CEO, of the Mexican Association of Protected Horticulture (AMHPAC) headquartered in Nogales, AZ.

To the chagrin of executives invested in costly, traditional, fully enclosed greenhouse operations, the term "greenhouse-grown"

has turned indiscriminately commonplace, watered down and distorted in its meaning. "Products labeled as greenhouse-grown when they are not create confusion in the marketplace and trick consumers into buying something different than they intended," says Doug Kling, senior vice president and chief sales and marketing officer at Village Farms, headquartered in Eatontown, NJ, and one of the largest greenhouse operations in North America.

Bellevue, WA-based Certified Greenhouse Farmers, which represents major greenhouse growers in North America, such as Village Farms and Delta, BC, Canada-based Windset Farms, among others, is emboldening efforts to enact a single, uniform standard and definition for what constitutes and can be labeled greenhouse-grown, enforced by federally regulated guidelines. The action is critical, says Ed Beckman, president of Certified Greenhouse Farmers, not only to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the greenhouse

process and the benefits accrued from it, but to arrest product misrepresentation in the marketplace, and protect unknowing consumers from getting duped by greenhouse imposters.

Economics dig at the root of the issue. "The basic reason people are pushing for a greenhouse-grown standard is that a traditional greenhouse with climate control and a CO₂-enriched atmosphere is a more expensive process — no doubt about it," says Gerry Odell, chief farming officer at Immokalee, FL-based Lipman Farming, which is embarking on an evolving hybrid greenhouse strategy that uses retractable roofs to prolong the growing season and create optimum product value. "We're looking for the best techniques to get the highest quality and maximum yields and a better return per unit." That approach involves flexibility hinging on numerous factors, not the least of which is the perceived value in the marketplace, he emphasizes. "Will consumers pay more?"

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Lipman Farming is working on a hybrid greenhouse strategy that uses retractable roofs to prolong the growing season.

“The argument that a greenhouse-grown label on protected agriculture product is misleading has some merit,” Odell acknowledges, but at the end of the day, greenhouse-grown and protected agriculture

products have been commoditized. “People aren’t realizing premiums for these products because they have to compete with everything else out there for shelf space. At retail or foodservice,

the focus is on maintaining margins,” he explains, adding, “Product grown in an active climate-controlled greenhouse may be a conceptual value for some people, but I don’t think most consumers would pay a premium for it.”

Taking Sides

Certified Greenhouse Farmers’ position is that a harmonized greenhouse standard will safeguard the integrity of the process to ensure safer, higher quality, and more consistent product, and production techniques that are better for the environment. “We believe on these grounds there is merit for a standard and expectations for compliance from a government standpoint, as well as for the trade and the consumer,” Kling says, noting the importance at retail of consistent quality in alleviating shrink.

“The greenhouse standard equates to a *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval or a *Consumer Reports* rating. If you make a claim, stand behind it. Protected agriculture products undercut the premiums that are needed to grow greenhouse products, involving expensive structures, high input investments and production costs. To have a piece of plastic over wood and grow with trench irrigation in the ground and then call it ‘greenhouse’ deceives consumers. It’s fraudulent.”

Those are fighting words for Viramontes of AMHPAC. He argues that the move to create a single greenhouse-grown standard and definition with stringent and restrictive guidelines is intended to manipulate an unfair economic and marketing advantage. Viramontes claims the action is predicated on an inability to compete with the palpable entry of Mexican product grown within the protected agriculture umbrella to generate quality and value.

Such a standard, Viramontes argues, artificially justifies charging a premium by implying that such product is safer, of superior quality and more environmentally sound than protected-agriculture-grown product. He emphasizes that these greenhouse-grown standards include requirements that are unnecessary and less desirable for certain protected agriculture growing environments, and only increase costs, which will be passed on to the consumer.

Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Exchange, doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to his perspective on the issue: “Because there is so much misidentified product hoisted out into the market as ‘greenhouse-grown,’ it has eroded the

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“Product grown in an active climate-controlled greenhouse may be a conceptual value for some people, but I don’t think most consumers would pay a premium for it.”

— Gerry Odell, Lipman Farming

total margin for the category. That pollution has caused the virtual collapse of true greenhouse production,” says Brown. “The consumer has been lulled into accepting whatever the product has been labeled. If I produce a bike and can sell it as a car, do you think that’s fair?”

Whether you can ever get greenhouse product valued for its true worth in an environment that doesn’t define it is very questionable, according to Brown, who views the problem in the context of a broader fight. “We are part of the domestic tomato industry coalition vying to resolve the trade dilemmas that exist between the United States and Mexican tomato community and this is an issue in that arena,” he explains.

However, for John McClung, president of the Mission-based Texas International Produce Association, the view is vastly different. “A greenhouse-grown standard is simply nothing this organization would support,” he asserts. “Texas has very little commercial tomato production as it was pretty much taken over by Florida and California and imports. Our perspective is the one that importers take because we import a lot of tomatoes. For an importer, the issue is what is the quality of the product I can provide and at what price can I provide it? That is the crux of the greenhouse standard argument and what is also behind the tomato suspension dispute.”

At the end of the day, the consumer is faced with buying some kind of tomatoes, and quality, taste and price are what should drive production, McClung argues, adding, “I would certainly dispute greenhouse is any safer. Tomatoes in the supermarket are either safe or not. This is an argument we went through for years — that technical inputs control safety — but you can have perfectly

safe field-grown tomatoes.

“We’re saying, I don’t care how it’s grown; I care about the quality and safety and price. The equation is simple: You cannot produce greenhouse tomatoes by the definition that Certified Greenhouse Farmers is talking about and compete with Mexican tomatoes. It’s comparable to the old organic versus conventional argument; it’s fine if a consumer wants to eat organic. We present organic, but it’s spurious to say it’s more wholesome, safer or better for the environment,” says McClung.

Retailers are trying to put the most attractive cost-controlled product in front of the consumers, McClung continues. “If consumers want polka-dotted tomatoes, retailers will try to get them. Retailers want what consumers want — tasty, quality and safe and affordable product. I have to tell you they don’t care very much if it comes from the United States, Mexico or Antarctica.”

Consumers want as wide array of product as they can get. “Coming up with a marketing strategy to compete is all fine and good,” says

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Over the past two decades, advances in Mexico's protected horticulture industry have resulted in the significant expansion of tomato and vegetable categories in the United States. While once U.S. consumers had limited seasonal availability and variety in items such as tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers, the investment and commitment in protected agriculture in Mexico now puts an affordable abundance of quality produce on consumers tables.

The protected agriculture industry in Mexico is made up of growers using covered crop technologies that vary from passive to semi-active and active greenhouse technologies. "Our growers employ some of the most advanced technologies and production practices available to provide safe, high quality and sustainable products to the marketplace," says Eric Viramontes Board Member of AMHPAC The Mexican Association of Protected Horticulture.

Viramontes continues, "These production technologies promote a contamination-free environment during the production cycle, allowing for higher food safety and security standards. Additionally, all resources are used in a more efficient manner so high quality items can be produced with the use of less land and water, making it an environmentally friendly industry."

The main products from the Mexican protected horticulture industry are tomatoes, bell peppers, hot peppers, lettuce and cucumbers. "Other products include eggplants, melons, and some specialties," reports Viramontes. "With the great diversity of climates Mexico has, there is no product that can't be grown. Our growers are open to exploring any niche or exotic product that our customers may require."

DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION

Mexico's protected ag industry is represented by an active and successful association, AMHPAC, comprised

of more than 250 growers. Founded in 2008, this young association represents an elite group of pioneering and committed growers focused on values such as productivity, competitiveness, sustainability, quality, safety, responsibility, and organization.

"These are second and third generation greenmarket farmers that manage agricultural operations using world-class technology," says Viramontes. "They are committed to executing the best agricultural, safety, and sustainability practices not only in their own farming fields but throughout the entire process of harvest, packaging and distribution."

It is quickly becoming the leading and most dynamic association of protected horticulture in North America today. "AMHPAC offers advice and assistance to members through a number of programs such as helping to facilitate grant applications for federal and private funds," explains Viramontes. "We also provide leading educational services to our members through seminars on topics like food safety and traceability."

"AMHPAC provides organization and leadership to a multi-faceted industry and offers a united voice," says Dan Nagel, owner of Commodity Distribution Service in Los Angeles, CA. "It offers preeminent representation of the protected ag industry in Mexico."

SETTING THE BAR

Mexico is now able to harvest 12 months out of the year with remarkable results in productivity under high quality standards and successfully compete in international markets. AMHPAC is the standard-bearer for the Protected Agriculture sector in the world.

"Mexico and AMHPAC have revolutionized the industry because they're the front runners in so many of these technologies," says Nagel. "They're on the cutting-edge because of their commitment. As importers they are

challenged to bring unique things and value to the marketplace and they have done that, especially in tomatoes."

AMHPAC's mission is to unite and consolidate the Mexican protected agriculture industry in one solid and recognized guild that facilitates the representation and defense of its members' interests. "We do this by providing useful services and tools that allow for the advancement of productivity and competitiveness of our members in the global marketplace," says Viramontes. "Our members, employees, and even our individual suppliers must be committed and trained to practice our fundamental values, thus becoming synonymous with the highest quality and safety standards within the industry."

The leaders and members of AMHPAC recognize the challenges of this industry and remain steadfast in their commitment to the marketplace. "At AMHPAC, we know that opportunities to improve and solidify ourselves as growers come with great challenges," says Cesar Campaña, former AMHPAC Chairman of the Board. "We are more united and prepared than ever before, we share a unique vision and a unique commitment to jointly strengthen our presence and leadership in the market. This is what the Board of Directors and I envisioned says Campaña. What Eric Viramontes accomplished during his service as CEO is remarkable; I thank him for his service and the enormous strides he made in moving our organization to a very high level. I wish him the greatest success in his new projects."

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Mexican Protected Agriculture industry:

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ADVANCES IN TOMATO CATEGORY TO BE DESTROYED BY PROTECTIONIST MEASURE

Despite widespread success and growth of the tomato category at retail over the past decade, a handful of Florida tomato producers may succeed in destroying an offering that currently brings variety and availability to millions of U.S. consumers. The current move to negate the 16-year old Tomato Suspension Agreement in order to file a new trade case and reignite a trade dispute benefits neither industry nor consumers.

"The notion to suspend this agreement that has been working for this length of time seems irresponsible not only to the entire Mexican and U.S. industry but ultimately to the U.S. consumer," says Dan Nagel, owner of Commodity Distribution Service in Los Angeles, CA.

For years, U.S. and Mexican producers along with retailers have worked to build and expand the tomato category for U.S. consumers. "Collaboration builds stable and successful markets," says Cesar. The success of the tomato category is proof. Today we have a prominent category with many different varieties. Consumers have affordable, quality options."

"The objective has always been to have stable but competitive pricing and promote the growth of the tomato industry and the benefits of tomato consumption" says Nagel.

The United States Department of Commerce has repeatedly confirmed the Tomato Suspension Agreement to be in the public interest because it brings stability to the marketplace. The Agreement has been renewed two times and no violation of unfair pricing has ever been found. Even so, the Mexican industry is willing to improve the agreement.

"We believe that the agreement is a strong working

platform that promotes good and fair trade in the tomato industry," says Carlos Espinoza, President of AMHPAC's Tomato Defense Committee. "We have actively participated for more than 11 months in The Mexican Tomato Defense group where AMHPAC is working along with other industry members from CAADES and the Baja Growers Association to develop a strong and honest proposal to enhance the current agreement."

LOSE-LOSE PROPOSITION

Restrictions on Mexican imports would result in less choice and availability for U.S. consumers. "The market would see a reduced consumer selection of tomatoes and therefore fewer tomatoes being bought," says Campana. "The demand for tomatoes is so great that U.S. production couldn't possibly meet the needs. Reinstating duties on Mexican tomatoes will only lead to inefficiency in the supply chain and lack of reasonably priced product for consumers."

"It's pretty obvious that this would affect the two most critical things to be concerned about with any commodity--price and quality," states Nagel. "The result of restrictions on Mexican imports will be higher prices and poorer quality."

Restriction of Mexican tomatoes would affect the economy and the distribution chain in the United States. "Trade restriction on tomatoes would create the inevitable domino effect as supplies dwindle and prices go up," explains Nagel. "We receive all types of products from Mexico including tomatoes but the decrease in volume would affect us and result in less business, a poorer economy and ultimately layoffs. It will have a potentially dramatic affect on the marketplace."

More than 1,000 U.S. companies are dedicated to distributing Mexican produce. Allied U.S. businesses

also include transportation, suppliers, retailers, and companies that make pallets, as well as cartons, fertilizers and seeds coming from the U.S. Estimates show the jobs generated by the Mexican tomato industry in both countries as exceeding 400,000 people.

A NEED FOR COLLABORATION

Mexican growers have invested in technology and variety that makes them more efficient and competitive as well as offering excellent products to consumers. "Mexico has a global vision of the tomato industry," says Nagel. "By that I mean selecting and networking with seed companies around the world to produce a great variety of products. Mexico needs to be commended and not punished for their contribution to this industry."

From a retail, foodservice and buyer perspective, tomatoes from Mexico represent a significant profit category. They are the number one food export item to the U.S. and consumers have driven the demand for the category. Prominent retail displays or plate-use of the wide variety of tomatoes now available would become extinct if trade restrictions are instated.

"Instead of throwing out an agreement that has worked for 16 years, the focus should be on tweaking it and then growing consumption," says Cesar. "If the growing regions work together, we can create a stable market with greater variety. More consumers will eat more tomatoes and the category will grow even more. Working together, our two countries can not only improve market conditions but the well-being of our populations and industries."

"Florida and Mexican growers need to work together collectively to create a stable, vibrant category," agrees Nagel. "This will benefit both parties and, in the end, U.S. consumers."



Carlos Cueto – Chairman of the Board of AMHPAC





McClung, “but the contention that a narrowly defined definition is the only kind of greenhouse...that’s nonsense.”

A National Standard

Right now, there is no national, unified

standard or requirements, although there are particular states that have defined their own standards and requirements, including California. Certified Greenhouse Farmers’ Beckman says that these requirements do not go far enough. Certified Greenhouse Farmers’

standards are more stringent with extended parameters, paralleling those in Canada.

The goal would be to have this greenhouse-grown standard and certification regulated and enforced by the

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“We’re definitely interested in the progress of getting a greenhouse standard and definition embedded in the United States. We have ‘buy in’ from all the provinces’ growing areas and are working on having the definition embraced by regulators in Canada.”

— Linda Delli Santi,
BC Vegetable Market Commission

government, and Beckman says that talks are currently underway and progressing at the federal and state levels as well as with Canada and other interested parties to move the process forward.

“We’re definitely interested in the progress of getting a greenhouse standard and definition embedded in the United States,” says Linda Delli Santi, executive director at BC Vegetable Market Commission, headquartered in Surrey, BC, Canada, noting, “We have ‘buy in’ from all the provinces’ growing areas and are working on having the definition embraced by regulators in Canada.”

The standard definition is not lengthy. “It’s nothing that all commercial greenhouse growers are not doing already,” contends Delli Santi, herself a greenhouse grower for 30 years. “I definitely support Ed Beckman’s organization and what it is aiming to accomplish. We’re trying to harmonize, and it would be nice to have a North American definition.”

Such talk infuriates AMHPAC’s Viramontes, he says, raising the prospect that a certified greenhouse-grown label could propagate and play to consumer prejudices that Mexican product is less safe and lower quality, something Mexico’s produce industry has been battling hard to alleviate. “We’re turning into the bad guys when we are using optimal technologies to grow magnificent vegetables in the most effi-

cient ways. I just see dishonesty with those proposals, and would challenge that presumption that an active technology greenhouse is better than passive greenhouse technology in quality, shelf-life, safety or the environment,” he continues. “If you want to tell the consumer about the technology, let’s talk about labor and input costs, and how much fossil fuel an active greenhouse is producing; let’s measure carbon footprints in parts of the world where it’s snowing, etc.”

Viramontes says that greenhouse-grown product could actually be less sustainable if one does a comprehensive cost/benefit analysis. For instance, one must balance water savings with increased use of other inputs, costs of the structure and operation. Also, it is important to include the three legs of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. How will this impact the jobs of hundreds of thousands of people within the supply chain in Mexico and the United States, for example?

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Will this increase the cost of product and lead to a reduction in produce consumption? And the bottom line: If a company can't afford to do business, isn't it ultimately unsustainable? "In the end, if it's a question about quality and price, the retailers and consumers are choosing, and those promoting the movement toward a single greenhouse standard have lost that fight," says Viramontes.

Many years ago, Dutch product was demanding a premium, and Canadian greenhouse growers were garnering high prices, but that was short lived, according to Lipman's Odell. Mexico entered the market and other North American companies eyeing their profitable neighbors, jumped on the greenhouse bandwagon producing a tremendous amount

of product.

The only question to consider: What is the size of the U.S. market and what level of consumption will be sustainable for all these products? "The more proficient these companies get, the higher the yields and the more they have to sell, and everyone is doing the same," he explains. "It's the nature of the beast. Our goal is to be a reliable supplier of tomatoes in North America 52 weeks a year. That's our mission."

In framing actions moving forward, "I think the days are gone of being able to demand a premium price for greenhouse product," says Odell. "There is a lot of competition and a limited amount of shelf space; you succeed with quality, flavor and price. That's where the consumer sees the value." **pb**



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Demoing mangos with recipes and ripeness information boosts sell-through of this sometimes hard-to-figure-out fruit.

Five Challenges And Opportunities To Market More Mexican Mangos

With a little education and smart display tactics, consumers are poised to enjoy Mexican mangos through the winter. **CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD**

Mexico has a hand-in-hand relationship with the United States when it comes to mangos. The United States is Mexico's largest export market for this tropical fruit. In 2012, the country shipped a total of nearly 58 million boxes; Mexico is the United States' primary supplier of mangos, with volumes accounting for approximately 65 percent of the fruit Americans consume annually.

According to Alfonso Cano, assistant produce director at Northgate González Markets, a 35-store chain based in Anaheim, CA, "This volume and availability makes Mexican mangos a staple in our stores."

1. Growing Volumes At A Highly Competitive Time Of Year

The Mexican mango season is strongest from March through August. However, this is a time when U.S. produce departments are

bursting with domestic tree fruit, grapes, melons and more. What's more, mango volumes out of Mexico are expected to continue to increase 10 to 15 percent annually due to an increase in acreage and production per acre, all driven by demand. This provides a register-ringing opportunity to make Mexican mango displays more visible and better priced for promotion.

The potential is already apparent. The mango category's contribution to department sales peaked at 0.6 percent in Q2 last year, according to the Nielsen Perishables Group, a West Dundee, IL-based fresh food consulting firm, followed by 0.42 percent in Q3 of the same year.

Mangos are an impulse item and price-sensitive. Cano remarks, "If the price is \$2 each, nobody is going to buy. In the peak of the Mexican deal, we display mangos on free-standing units or end-caps. Then, we will promote them either in-store or on the back

page of our ad circular in multiples. This might be two 10-count mangos for 99-cents or four 15-count for 99-cents."

The Mexican mango industry is made up of thousands of growers. Some are large, but many are small producers. "Because mangos thrive in a tropical climate, they will be found in the states that border the Pacific Coast, such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Jalisco, Nayarit and Sinaloa," details Mario Cardenas, a sales associate who leads the mango program at the newly opened Edinburg, TX, location of Farmer's Best International.

"There are many peaks in the Mexican season, all of which are, of course, subject to weather," says Larry Nienkerk, partner and general manager at Burlingame, CA-based Splendid Products. "The earliest fruit will come in a small way out of Chiapas with Ataulfos at the end of January. Volume starts to pick up in February. Then, later in February, red fruit like Tommy Atkins will

“Every year it seems like the offshore mango program is starting earlier and ending later. Mexico has an advantage with having the United States in its backyard in that it is able to let the fruit mature on the trees so that way it reaches consumers with its optimal Brix levels.”

— Mario Cardenas, *Farmer's Best International*

start out of Oaxaca. The real volume deal is from April until mid-August,” he details. “Mexico will go until mid-September, when the season finishes up in central and northern Sinaloa.”

Cardenas adds, “We communicate on a daily basis with our production team to strategize the peak volume pulls so that we may pass that information on to the retailers and plan out our promotions. I really believe that price is half of the equation, and educating consumers on how to select a mango at the store is the other half of the equation. If consumers know how to choose the right piece of fruit, they will always be back for more.”

2. More Variety Means More Education

A mango is just a mango to some customers. Northgate's Cano notes, “Whatever is available — be it a Tommy or Kent — consumers won't pay attention if they just want a mango. But the Ataulfo is different.”

Flavor, a fiberless flesh and eye-catching yellow skin set the Ataulfo apart from other mango varieties. At first, the Ataulfo was considered a specialty targeted to ethnic shoppers. Freska's Hall acknowledges, “We've seen a general increase in the number of retailers that have started to carry this variety. As a result, we're seeing better volumes out of Mexico. For example, where there used to be a 75-to-20 percent ratio of green-skinned to yellow, today that ratio is more like 60 percent green and 40 percent yellow. Improved availability has led to better pricing, and as a result, an increase in popularity and acceptance.”

Ronald Cohen, vice president of sales of River Edge, NJ-based Vision Import Group LLC, agrees, adding, “Years ago, the Ataulfo was spotty in Mexico. Now, there's widespread planting of this variety in all major growing areas. In addition, availability out of Brazil, Ecuador and Peru means virtually year-round availability of Ataulfos, which is helping the variety to grow.”

In addition to Ataulfo mangos, which Nogales, AZ-headquartered Ciruli Brothers

imports and markets from March through July under its trademark Champagne mango, marketing manager, Sandra Aguilar, notes, “We also handle other varieties, including Kent and Keitt, which are available from June through August.”

Jim Weber, produce director at Econo Foods, a 6-store chain headquartered in Brillion, WI, says, “We carry Haden, Keitt, Kent or Tommy Atkins.”

According to Cardenas of Farmer's Best, “The Tommy Atkins variety is the best-seller for its long shelf-life and dark red blush. The Tommy Atkins, Hadens and the Kents start in March and end in August.”

“On the new varietal front, there have been some small plantings of the Thailand native, Nam Doc Mai, in the Nayarit area, as well as proprietary breeding throughout Mexico,” reports Splendid's Nienkerk.

Shoppers have become more aware of the different varieties of mango and that color isn't as important as flavor, but there is still educational work to be done. “As customers get more familiar with mangos, they start to request varieties such as Ataulfos and Kents due to their excellent eating quality,” says Aguilar.

3. Location: Proximity Matters

Peru, followed by Ecuador, Brazil, Guatemala and Haiti, also supply the United States with mangos. Mexico's advantage over all of these countries is shipping distance. Instead of a two-week trip by boat from South America, mangos arrive in three or four days at most out of Chiapas in the early spring to only eight to 12 hours by truck from northern districts like Sinaloa. Approximately 32 percent of Mexican mangos cross into the U.S. border through Arizona and 67 percent through Texas, according to the Orlando, FL-based National Mango Board's (NMB) *Mango Crop Report Application*.

Ciruli Brothers' Aguilar says, “Mexico's close proximity allows for more expedient handling at the ports of entry. Closer proximity also means that mangos arrive fresher



PHOTO COURTESY OF CIRULI BROS.

at store shelves and have a longer shelf life.”

Neighboring distance also gives Mexico a completion advantage over offshore mangos, adds Farmer's Best's Cardenas. “Every year it seems like the offshore mango program is starting earlier and ending later. Mexico has an advantage with having the United States in its backyard in that it is able to let the fruit mature on the trees so that way it reaches consumers with its optimal Brix levels,” he explains. “The offshore mango works in a different process by cutting the fruit at an early stage. This strips the mango of its Brix content and also opens the door to many condition defects. They need to do this so that the mangos can endure a ship ride of two weeks.”

4. Recall Stigma

An excellent food safety record spanning many years came to an abrupt end for the Mexican mango industry on September 13, 2012, when the Food & Drug Administration placed Agricola Daniella, in Sinaloa, on Import Alert. A total of 127 people in 15 U.S. states were reportedly infected from Daniella-brand mangos contaminated with a strain of Salmonella. Nearly one million mangos were recalled as a result. Retail sales were on track for a 15 percent volume increase in July and the first part of August, but dropped when import volume fell 35 percent when the recall was initiated in September, according to the NMB's *Mango Performance Q3 2012 Retail Scanner Data Update* and *Q3 2012 Ad Tracking Trends Update*.

“What is curious about mangos,” says Splendid's Nienkerk, who was intimately involved with the extensive and expensive recall, “is that they are a hard-skin tree fruit. Food safety outbreaks usually involve ground fruits and vegetables. We're not sure, but the contamination could have occurred somewhere along the supply chain through tainted

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water or equipment. To prevent this in the future, it's all a matter of improved infrastructure and traceability."

This outbreak caught importers of Mexican mangos by surprise. Vision Import's Cohen remarks, "It opened up the industry's eyes. As a result, we, as an industry, have taken the lead in analyzing and improving food safety. We want to offer the safest fruit possible."

The National Mango Board is currently conducting a risk assessment throughout the mango industry so we can identify opportunities for improvement. The NMB's director of marketing, Megan McKenna, adds, "We will also host a Mango Food Safety Conference on March 6, in McAllen, TX, which will focus on food safety guidelines and standards for the mango industry."

Will the outbreak affect the marketing of Mexican mangos this season? According to Northgate Market's Cano, it will not. "Only about 2 percent of our customers picked up on the outbreak," he says. "In addition, we only buy from Mexican suppliers that have been third-party audited."

However, Freska's Hall adds, "I believe we may see greater focus on Mexican mangos as

we begin the new season. There will likely be more retailer attention given to having all the certificates, Global GAP and Primus in order. But I don't anticipate any significant issues."

Farmer's Best's Cardenas agrees. "The outbreak issues will even out the playing field and eliminate the shippers that don't implement a food safety program."

Interestingly, irradiation, which some in the industry have researched as an alternative to the hot water treatment of imported mangos to prevent fruit fly infestation, is also effective in killing the bacteria responsible for many food safety outbreaks such as Salmonella.

5. Merchandising Mexican Mangos

The challenge in merchandising Mexican mangos is that most consumers don't know where the fruit comes from, says Econo Food's Weber. "We do carry Mexican mangos, but since our customers consider mangos tropical, it doesn't matter if they are from Mexico, Peru, Ecuador or other countries," he explains.

Importers of Mexican mangos offer a wealth of merchandising resources. For

example, Ciruli Brothers works with retail customers to customize their mango programs. Aguilar explains. "We do this by offering various packaging styles, sizes and varieties. For promotional support, we also have print-ready POS material that our customers can use, which include ripening guides, cutting charts and recipes with product photography."

Similarly, Hall says, "We go to key customers and assist them with any type of marketing. This can include ad dollars, display contests and demos. Demos have a good effect on pull."

The NMB promotes all mangos sold in the United States. "Although we don't have specific Mexican mango promotions," says McKenna, "we do have very strong promotions taking place between the months of March and September, when Mexican mangos are in the marketplace. These include direct-to-consumer outreach as well as national and local media, social media, nutrition outreach, mom and kid programs, retail promotions, the Small Retailer Display Contest, retailer tools and resources, including POS, category development, images and messages." **pb**

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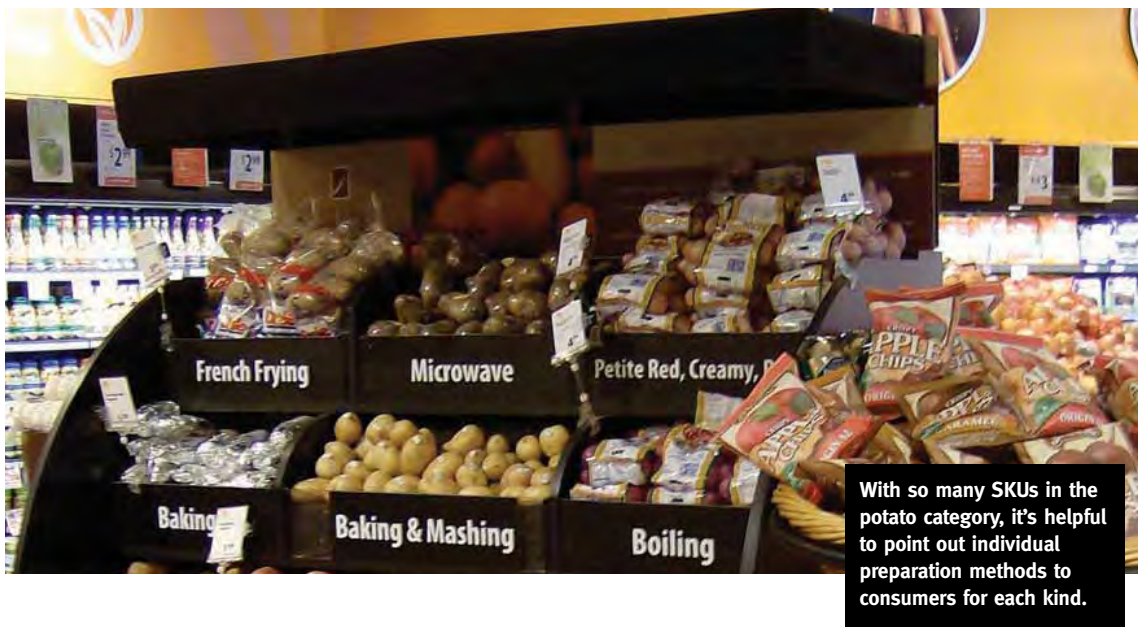
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Value-added Potatoes: More Variety Steals The Show

The demand for convenient but interesting meal choices continues to earn value-added potato products a new and growing role in the produce department. **BY BOB JOHNSON**



“Value-added potato items have carved out a niche in the retail supermarkets,” says Ken Gray, vice president of sales and marketing at Bushwick Potato Commission, based in Farmingdale, NY. Bushwick is part of a six-plus decades old family firm that offers its Guarantee-brand potatoes.

Microwaveable and steerable potatoes are familiar products that, frankly, did not originally catch on among many groups of consumers. David Lukens, produce manager at West Point Market, based in Akron, OH, admits, “I tried microwaveable potatoes about 10 years ago, and my customers said, ‘I don’t want to pay twice as much for a wrapped potato.’ It might work for some people, but not for us.”

Producers heard the message, and are adding new and interesting items that should keep value-added potatoes a growing category. “I think the category is growing,” says Dick Thomas, vice president for sales at Potandon Produce, located in Idaho Falls, ID. “The category has broadened over the past couple of years, thanks to the advent of new items.” Potandon is the exclusive supplier of Green Giant Fresh potatoes and onions.

Smaller potatoes and more interesting flavors are driving the increase in value-added potato products. “Small size, quick cook times, and unique flavors continue to drive consumer trials,” details Randy Shell, vice president of marketing and new business development at Russet Potato Exchange (RPE), in Bancroft, WI. “Expanded SKUs and small package sizes are the fastest growing segment of the potato category.”

Make It Easy And Interesting

Value-added potatoes began with products ready to be steamed or microwaved, but the category is growing with the addition of new and interesting flavors. “Almost all retailers are selling some form of value-added potato,” recognizes Ed Romanelli, vice president for sales and marketing at Agrow Fresh Produce Inc., located in Chicago, IL. “There has been steady growth, especially with items that allow consumers to add their own flavors. We put a separate steam bag in our petite potato bag this year, which lets customers wash, cut and — if they like — flavor the potatoes to their own individual taste. This package allows customization prior to cooking, which infuses more flavor into the potatoes,” he explains.

Agrow is a grower, packer and shipper of potatoes and onions, with an emphasis on red and Yukon gold potatoes. The firm has had success with its new product. “Most of the customers that try them usually buy them again,” says Romanelli. “We get calls from customers that use our petite potatoes with the steam bag adding flavors telling us how great they turned out and how much time they saved. Many different varieties of steerable 24-oz. bags of potatoes have come out in the past year. Some are potatoes with flavorings already added; some are also packaged in microwaveable trays,” he adds.

Potandon is another producer that has added a variety of flavor choices to its ready-to-steam or ready-to-microwave potato products. “We have a microwaveable potato in four different flavors — Four Cheese, Roasted Garlic, Mesquite Bacon And Three Chile,” details Thomas. “We introduced them three years ago and they are available across the country.” The company’s Klondike steamers are microwaved in the package and ready to eat in 4½ minutes.

“About two years ago, we introduced shelf-stable Klondike rose, with red skin and yellow flesh, and Klondike Gold Dust, with yellow

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skin and yellow flesh; the response has been very good," continues Thomas. These two products, under the Klondike Express line, come in 1-lb. microwaveable packages that are ready to eat in six minutes.

Another line, Klondike Gourmet Petite Potatoes, comes in 1½-lb. packages of red skinned-yellow flesh, yellow skinned-yellow flesh, purple skinned-purple-flesh, red skinned-white flesh and a medley of colors.

Reser's Fine Foods of Beaverton, OR, has recently introduced a line of pre-baked potatoes in three dishes — Scalloped, Hash Brown Casserole and Zesty Au Gratin.

"I think they are starting to gain good response among many of the consumers who are trying them," says Kevin Stanger, senior vice president of sales and marketing at Wada Farms Marketing Group, in Idaho Falls, ID. "Those consumers who generally don't have a lot of time to prepare potato dishes have enjoyed the value-added convenience that they offer."

"I think any product that has the quick-cook convenience is included in value-added," says Stanger. "The new baby/mini-sized potatoes as well as fingerlings, etc., are on that list. Many 'new' varieties are sometimes included, but I'm holding the definition to a truly value-

added product/packaged product."

Even producers with only peripheral involvement in value-added potatoes are experiencing this convenience movement in the produce department. "Our packers do little if any value-added packaging in-house although we do source red potatoes to outside the Valley to be made into potato salad, frozen entrees, soups, and fresh stew packs, just to name a few," says Ted Kreis, marketing and communications director at the Northern Plains Potato Growers Association, located in East Grand Forks, MN. "The only item that would show up in produce departments would be baby reds in steamer bags. Our reds are sent to Wisconsin and Idaho to be included in these packs." The Northern Plains Potato Growers Association does research and marketing for its more than 250 farmer members in the Red river Valley.

A Growing Category

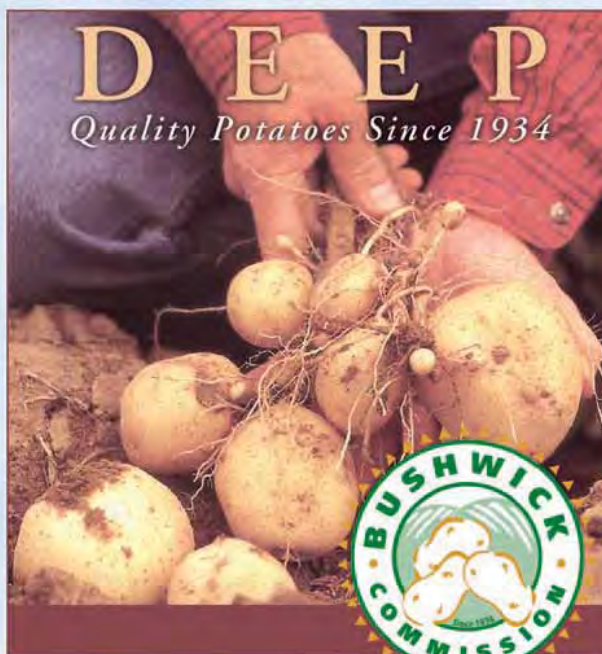
According to Jim Richter, executive vice president for sales and marketing at Rexburg, ID-based Wilcox Marketing Group, "With the advent of new items, the value-added potato category has been trending up for the past two to three years."

"I would imagine they are up," agrees Jim

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“There has been steady growth, especially with items that allow consumers to add their own flavors. We put a separate steam bag in our petite potato bag this year, which lets customers wash, cut and — if they like — flavor the potatoes to their own individual taste. This package allows customization prior to cooking, which infuses more flavor into the potatoes.”

— Ed Romanelli, Agrow Fresh Produce, Inc.

Ehrlich, executive director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee (CPAC), in Monte Vista, CO. “Anything that’s new and interesting is attracting consumers’ interest, especially items that are convenient.” The Colorado Potato Committee represents more than 175 potato growers and shippers in Colorado.

“We haven’t done any steamable ourselves, but some of our customers have,” says Dave Moquist, owner and sales manager at O.C. Schulz & Sons, based in Crystal, ND. “Companies keep coming out with steamable potatoes. I don’t know if it’s just a question of keeping up with the Joneses, but it looks popular. There’s

all sorts of different levels in value-added — just putting them in a 5-lb. bag is adding value.”

The interest in value-added potato products is not universal, however, and may depend on demographics. Mark Luchak, vice president for produce and floral at Rice Epicurean Markets, a five-store independent retailer based in Houston, TX, is not seeing more interest in value-added potatoes. “At this time, we are not even carrying them,” he says. “We’ve carried some in the past. We had microwavable potatoes in a bag, processed potatoes in a bag, and cubed and peeled sweet potatoes in a bag, but we didn’t have enough movement to

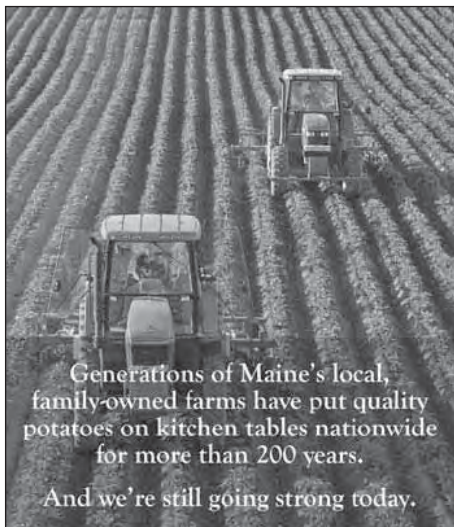
continue carrying them.” As such, the experiment in value-added potatoes at Rice Epicurean ended in 2012.

Variety Is The Spice Of The Category

Many of the new value-added products are new varieties in shrink-wrapped, steamable or microwavable packaging. “In the fresh potatoes, we’re seeing shrink-wrapped potatoes, and new varieties that are shrink-wrapped,” reports CPAC’s Ehrlich. “Probably the best thing retailers can do is offer recipes and ideas about how to use them, and display potatoes in ways that give consumers ideas about how they can use them, like boiling or baking.”

Merchandising must bring the consumer awareness that these new products are available. Potandon’s Thomas knows, “The key to merchandising value-added potatoes is consumer awareness of the products and varieties that are out there. Cooking tips and recipes help, too.”

Recipes and ideas for consumers can help and so, too, can the patience to try the new products to see which catch on. “Getting buyers interested in trying something new — and something that is not going to be high volume to start off — is a challenge,”



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Romanelli of Agrow says.

Other producers agree that willingness to try new products is a key to success with this category. “Testing new items is always critical to their success,” Gray says.

As the category continues to grow, look for innovations in value-added potato packaging. “There are many packaging options in the market now, including poly, poly/mesh, mesh, microwaveable bags and trays and a few others,” says RPE’s Shell. “Most have now been

in the market for at least a year, but innovation will continue to be a big part of specialty potato growth moving forward.”

Locations, Locations, Locations

Value-added potatoes have already earned a niche, and appear poised to continue growing. “They seem to be in all the retail areas, with most of the major retailers carrying one item or

another,” says Stanger of Wada Farms.

But this is a fairly new category, and it takes commitment at the store level to optimize sales. “The biggest challenge is getting the produce department to display and market them correctly,” Stanger adds. “You can have some of the best products out there, but without the support at the store level, consumers may miss what the new product really has to offer them.”

The space challenge is unavoidable because of the proliferation of new and interesting products in produce. According to RPE’s Shell, “The biggest challenge is space and the expanded SKU offerings in the category. We are going to see increased SKUs, and retailers will struggle finding the right shelf space for unique items. Expanding SKUs of specialty potato items will be critical for future growth within the potato category,” he continues. “Similar to what’s already happening in the apple category, consumers will continue to demand more of these items. There will be a shift in consumer buying habits to smaller, unique items that cook quickly.”

Part of the learning curve with value-added potatoes is learning which of the many possible areas in the store work best. “Get them into the value-added section in produce, because that’s where people are looking for them,” Wilcox’s Richter suggests. He adds there are opportunities for promotion in numerous other areas of the store. “We have a shipper that retailers can set up by the meat department, or in the deli by the rotisserie chicken. Those are two good places to cross-merchandise,” he says.

The refrigerated section is another area of the store that can be used to merchandise some of these value-added products. “We’ve seen refrigerated, non-mashed potatoes growing significantly the past year or so,” reports John McCarthy, category manager at Reser’s Fine Foods. “Most of our products are in the deli, but we’re going more to the meat department, too. We had a line that was in produce and some retailers choose to put us there.”

One way to bridge the gap between the refrigerated section and the produce department is to use an end-cap refrigerator unit within the produce department to cross-merchandise numerous meal components. “We’re working with retailers to do cross promotions with the cut salads,” continues McCarthy.

“The category takes work to learn which products will move, and how to merchandise them, but this is a growth area. Depending on the geographic and demographic area, these products are creating more excitement and sales,” says Bushwick’s Gray. **pb**

Size Matters: Smaller Is Better

There is a trend among value-added potatoes toward products featuring smaller potatoes. “Most of the growth in the value-added category has been C-sized potatoes,” notes Jim Richter, executive vice president for sales and marketing at Rexburg, ID-based Wilcox Marketing Group. “C-sized has been leading the way as more people want to have the restaurant experience at home. We’ve reformulated the Potato Jazz line we introduced a few years ago, moving from B- to C-size. And we have four flavors — Chipotle, Zesty Italian, Savory Herb, and Garlic and Parsley,” he details.

B-sized potatoes are 1½ to 2¼ inches in diameter, while C-sized potatoes are less than 1½ inches in diameter.

“We recently introduced two new microwaveable packs to our Tasteful Selections baby potatoes product line in two different varieties: our signature flavor Honey Gold and Ruby Sensation,” says Randy Shell, vice president of marketing and new business development at Bancroft, WI-based Russet Potato Exchange (RPE). “The 16-oz. packs cook in six minutes and are perfect for a quick side dish.”

The trend toward smaller potatoes extends all the way to fingerlings in steamable bags. “Organic Fingerlings in a steamable bag are the latest value-added items that are generating sales,” reports Ken Gray, vice president of sales and marketing at Bushwick Potato Commission, based in Farmingdale, NY.

Smaller potatoes and smaller packages are the trend in the entire potato category, whether value-added or not. “Compared to 20 years ago, the potatoes are getting smaller, and the packs are getting smaller, too,” points out Dave Moquist, owner and sales manager at O.C. Schulz & Sons, based in Crystal, ND. “There are more 3-lb. bags, five-pounders instead of 10, and hardly any 20 pounders.”

With new flavors and sizes, the value-added category is on the rise while the mature commodity potato category seems stable. Paul Dolan, manager at Associated Potato Growers, a grower-owned cooperative, based in Grand Forks, ND, shares, “We don’t do much value-added, but they may be increasing a little bit. The value-added products tend to be specialty items. We wash and pack them, so we sell 3-lb. tote bags all the way up to a 2,000-lb. tote bag for the repackers. I would say the demand is about level for the commodity.” **pb**

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Onions Offer Versatility For Foodservice

Not only are onions a staple in the foodservice arena, they provide nutrition, color, taste and texture to a wide variety of dishes. **BY JENNIFER KRAMER**



PHOTO COURTESY OF USA ONIONS

Michelle Dudash's Oven-Fried Onion Bloom recipe is a healthy take on the popular foodservice dish of a deep-fried onion bloom.

Chef Michelle Dudash, RD, knows a thing or two about onions and is excited to share her knowledge with those around her. As the video spokesperson for USA Onions, the marketing arm of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee, she regularly discusses the nutritional importance and versatility of onions, helping encourage both retail consumers and foodservice clients use them in new and inventive ways. To that end, she recently filmed a segment for the Parma, ID-based commodity board demonstrating how to dice an onion, make it “bloom,” and even how to reduce tear-causing onion vapors. “It was really fun to shoot and it will offer some great tips for foodservice providers on how to better use onions in their operations,” says Dudash. The video premiered February 5 at the annual Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Growers’ Meeting, and is now accessible online via Facebook, YouTube and at USA Onions website.

In addition to her work with USA Onions, Dudash stays busy with a regular blog on www.michelledudash.com, and frequently contributes to a wide variety of health and

fitness magazines such as *Self*, *Women’s Health*, *Natural Health* and *Whole Living* just to name a few.

Dudash recognizes the significance of onions in creating a plethora of dishes, especially in the foodservice arena, where flavors need to be saturated in order to be stretched. “While I don’t currently work in a restaurant, I used to cook at

the late, five-star Mary Elaine’s at The Phoenician [a luxury desert resort in Scottsdale, AZ]. There, I learned how onions played an important role in building a good flavor foundation in soups, stocks and braises,” she says.

Onions Add Color, Texture And Nutrition

One great way to use onions is as a base in



PHOTO COURTESY OF USA ONIONS

puréed soups. “They are a foundation to so many of my dishes,” says Dudash. “In my cookbook, *Clean Eating for Busy Families*, I use onions as a base in my Hearty Broccoli Cheddar & Yukon Gold Potato Soup, and Creamy Butternut Squash & Apple Soup with Pepitas. I sweat them in olive oil and in the end, they are puréed, adding a bit of sweetness to balance out the dish, as well as a silky smooth mouth feel,” she details.

But more than just a starting point, Dudash says onions are, by far, one of the most used ingredients in her recipes, and are a great way for foodservice operations to extend dishes. “I use onions as a healthy and helpful way to extend protein-based dishes, like my Braised Pork Buns with Quick Pickled Cucumbers & Bean Sprouts. The onions practically melt in with the meat and are so delicious,” she says. “Also, in my Hoisin Beef & Edamame Lettuce Wraps in a Hurry, onions add natural sweetness, allowing for less reliance on added sugars.”

They are also colorful, and Dudash knows exactly which onions to use when the dishes she is creating call for a punch of color. “I opt for diced or sliced red onions when I’m

“I use onions as a healthy and helpful way to extend protein-based dishes, like my Braised Pork Buns with Quick Pickled Cucumbers & Bean Sprouts.”

— Chef Michelle Dudash

searching for ways to brighten up the color of a dish, like in my Halibut & Summer Squash Paper Pouches, and Angel Hair Pasta with Shrimp, Summer Vegetables and Goat Cheese,” she shares.

“I love using red onions as center-of-the-plate items for vegetarian dishes, especially, like in my Olive Oil-Cured Summer Vegetable Sandwiches,” she continues, “where the

onions are cooked low and slow in the oven with olive oil, concentrating the flavors and providing a crunchy texture.”

For children and picky eaters, onions are an easy way to “sneak in vegetables,” says Dudash, who uses them in her meatloaf and meatball recipes, which also contribute to their juiciness.

Many foodservice establishments serve onion rings, but there is a way to keep customers both happy and healthy with Dudash’s Oven-Fried Onion Bloom recipe. “I use a large brown Spanish sweet onion and dredge it in egg, whole-wheat Panko breadcrumbs and spices. It’s a healthy answer to onion rings and definitely satisfies my craving for the deep-fried version.”

Beyond entrees and side dishes, “Onions are wonderful in dips, like in my Crowd-Pleasing Fresh Spinach and Artichoke Red Bell Pepper & Artichoke Dip, and Creamy Avocado, Tomato & Black Bean Dip, where I sauté them and then add them to the dip mixture,” Dudash says. “I also like to purée onions and use in it marinades, like in my Jamaican Jerk Chicken & Sweet Potato Planks recipe.”

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In All Its Forms, Carrots Continue To Be A Produce Staple

While the variety of value-added SKUs are taking charge, carrots of all kinds can continue to bring profits to produce when smart and savvy merchandising techniques are put to use.

BY MICHAEL FEMIA



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOLTHOUSE FARMS

Create a carrot destination to bring attention to the wide variety of SKUs. When customers see all the options they have, they are likely to buy more.

Many years after the introduction of baby carrots, the carrot category continues to expand, with today's suppliers offering a rich assortment of SKUs, many of which are value-added, suitable for practically any occasion. Emphasizing the significance of value-added carrot items, Bob Borda, vice president of marketing for Bakersfield, CA-based Grimmway Farms, reports, "Carrots are the second highest revenue-producing fixed weight vegetable, next to potatoes, in the produce department. This statistic does not include bagged salads. Value-added carrot production has revolutionized the carrot category. Today, value-added carrots, which include baby, petites, matchsticks, chips, individual baby carrot snacks, and carrot dippers, account for 56 percent of all carrots sold at retail."

Paying mind to a handful of key merchandising strategies recommended by the nation's leading carrot suppliers can dually help improve the shopping experience and boost category sales.

Create Multiple Displays

Among top suppliers, the consensus is that

the category should be split between two primary displays: one including all value-added items, and another with bulk, bagged, and bunch carrots. "Retailers sell more value-added carrots when they separate the cooking carrots from the value-added carrots," asserts Borda. "When you display them together, consumers will shop price, and buy the 1-lb. cellos because they're less expensive than the value-added items. Sometimes customers plan to go home and peel them and cut them up, but don't do it. Ultimately, in these cases, they don't eat as many carrots," he explains.

Borda advises giving the value-added set a 6-ft. section of a cooler toward the front of the department. Housing all value-added items, including baby carrots, matchsticks, carrot chips, petites, and carrot dippers complete this value-added set. He adds, "This is the grab-and-go part of the produce cooler, offering ready-to-eat selections, while also allowing for strong cross-promotional ties with dressings, dips, and bagged salads."

Borda continues, "The second carrot display should be adjacent to other cooking vegetables, and include the remaining carrot lines: cello, table carrots, and bunch carrots with tops.

These items need further preparation, and typically complement the other cooking vegetables on the wet racks."

Brandon Bayman, Midwest/Mid-Atlantic regional director of merchandising for Bakersfield, CA-headquartered Bolthouse Farms, affirms this strategy, revealing that using two major carrot sets have been known to boost category sales. "Every retailer does things differently, but this is what carrot experts recommend," he says. "We have data showing a 3 percent increase in store carrot sales when the category is merchandised with two separate displays, versus jamming all of the SKUs together in one set. It makes the shopping experience easier."

Highlight Key Snacking Occasions

Outside of these two primary displays, there are plenty of good opportunities to include carrots in seasonal and permanent theme-displays. There are a number of popular carrot snacking occasions throughout the winter months, when overall category sales are typically at their highest. As Borda points out, "Early November marks the major shift when both baby carrots and cello carrots index over 100. As the weather turns cold and consumers

revert back to cooking carrots, the overall consumption of carrots increases. This increase in consumption remains above the annual baseline through the end of April. The major holidays and big events, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, Super Bowl, and Easter, also positively influence the consumption of carrots as they are a healthful snacking alternative during these celebrations.”

Emphasizing the importance of promoting carrots as a snacking item, Borda quotes the NPD Group’s 2012 *Snacking in America* report, (which was included in PRODUCE BUSINESS’ November, 2012, issue as a *Research Perspective* column) which estimates 20 percent of eating occasions are snacks. Bayman also acknowledges the importance of the fresh snacking category and anticipates that it will continue to grow in the coming years. “Snacking with carrots, apples, grapes, dried fruits, etc., is going to be a booming category in the years ahead, especially when you think about how these items are already being put into lunchboxes, and even introduced via vending machines in schools,” contends Bayman. With that in mind, he reminds retailers that, “smart secondary display opportunities include shelving value-added items in the salad and snacking cases.”

Especially during the holidays and other key occasions for entertaining, Jeff Cady, produce and floral category manager at Tops, a 133-unit chain in Williamsville, NY, creates snacking destinations that highlight baby carrots and other popular bite-size items. “We use dipping displays anchored with carrots, along with other dipping vegetables,” he details. “We pull that out for holidays and any season that inspires entertaining. That has given us good success.”

“Back-to-school marks an increase in baby carrot sales,” reminds Mishalin Modena, senior marketing manager for Green Giant Fresh, in Salinas, CA.

At Tops, Cady ensures that these items are prominently merchandised along with other produce items that can be easily included in a child’s lunchbox. “We create a lunchbox destinations and promote aggressively during the back-to-school season,” he says. “For carrots, we include some packages that include dips, along with snack-size portioned bags. In those displays, we also include sliced apples, celery, raisins, and some other dried items.”

With a number of seasonal and year-round uses for carrots, there is plenty of opportunity for creative secondary displays. Beyond that, however, Modena cautions against shelving carrots haphazardly as color breaks throughout the department. “This makes shopping harder, as customers have

to search across the whole produce department to find the carrots they need,” she says. “They also might miss some new product types.”

Maximize Shelf-Life

“When baby carrots leave our plant, there’s a certain amount of water in the bag so the carrots stay fresh and moist,” explains Bayman. “We always merchandise them laying the bag flat to keep the water level even throughout the bag. When you place them vertically, all the water goes to the bottom and the carrots at the top dry out quicker.”

“Blush — that chalky white look — is actually from lack of water in the bag,” adds Bayman. “When a carrot bag gets close to being out of date, you won’t see any water in the bag and that’s when the carrots will start to blush up and become white, indicating a lack of water.”

“You also want to make sure carrots are kept below 45 degrees, not at room temperature,” reminds Bayman. “Cellos, especially, sometimes get tossed onto a middle section in the department, where they aren’t staying cold,” a mistake he cited as a leading source of customer dissatisfaction. “Of the complaints we’ve received over the years, we often hear from consumers that the carrots were in the middle of the

produce department, unrefrigerated.”

Harry Sheaffer, sales associate at Marker 29 Produce, in Lake Park, GA, also points out that unrefrigerated carrot displays set a bad example for consumers, who might, in turn, assume that it’s best to store them at room temperature at home.

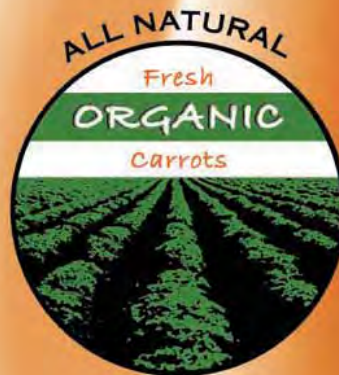
Integrate Organic And Conventional

“We generally recommend shelving organic carrots in the organic set,” says Bolthouse’s Bayman. “Otherwise, if you jumble organic and conventional SKUs together, it becomes harder to make a decision.”

Joe Connolly, produce director for West Bridgewater, MA-based Shaw’s Supermarkets, with 170 units, agrees, adding, “It depends on the season, but as a general rule, organic carrots are best merchandised with the organic category, rather than intermingled with the regular carrots. During the winter months — the heaviest buying period for carrots — we merchandise organic and conventional carrots together, which helps build the organic category as a whole.”

Connolly continues, “If you stock two of everything, you end up with a lot of SKUs. You can limit that by alternating sizes between conventional and organic. If you carry 1- and 3-

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“If you stock two of everything, you end up with a lot of SKUs. You can limit that by alternating sizes between conventional and organic.”

— Joe Connolly, Shaws Markets

lb. conventional bags, offer a 2-lb. bag of organic, which offers consumers a cheaper price point than the 3-lb. conventional,” he suggests. “You don’t want to duplicate every bag size.”

Don’t Forget Bulk, Bagged, And Bunched

Value-added carrot sales might constitute the majority of category sales, but cellos are far from irrelevant. “The full-size carrot program is sometimes taken for granted as baby carrots are often seen as the sexier item in the category,” stresses Matt Curry, president of Brooks, OR-based Curry & Co. “Don’t forget to give attention to full-size carrots. They can find a place in so many different recipes, from salads and desserts to entrees. Their flavor profile fits so many different items”

“There are certainly opportunities for seasonal promotions,” adds Curry. “In the past, we’ve promoted stews and soups over the winter, and salads during spring and summer. We promote Vidalia carrots while they’re in season from February to June, and highlight local brands whenever possible.”

Cady reports trying something along the same lines at Tops. He reveals the chain’s next Meal Deal promotion will feature a stand-alone display anchored with a roast outside the produce department, tying in carrots, onions, and potatoes.

Sheaffer also mentions that health-conscious consumers have latched on to home-juicing, offering a boost to cello sales. “Juicing is becoming very popular, and it’s bringing some life back to cellos,” he says. “Sometimes we hear from people who are juicing on a regular basis. They might be able to use 10 or 25 pounds of carrots in a week!”

Some consumers may opt for cellos particularly after comparing prices with value-added items, contends Sheaffer. “Due to the tight economy, people are starting to take a look at how much money they’re spending on the ready-to-go products,” he points out. “Whereas baby carrots are ready to roll, you get more for what you pay with cellos. You’re definitely saving money if you take the time to wash, peel and cut them up. You can still find a good sweet carrot in a cello package.”

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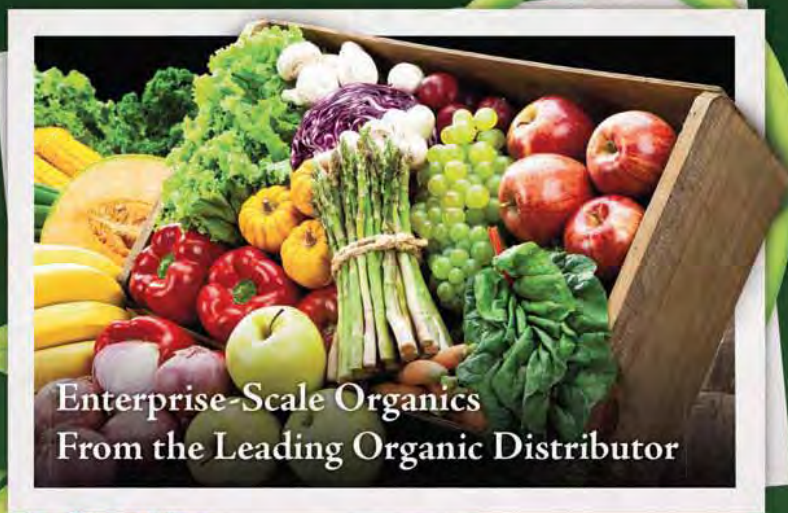
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Packaged Nuts Take Center-Stage

New flavors and exciting partnerships keep packaged nuts top of mind for consumers looking for healthy snacks or recipe ingredients. **COMPILED BY MADELINE MESA**



Aurora Launches New Assortment Of Flavored Nuts

Stratford, CT-based Aurora Products, Inc., has a new line of flavored nuts that provide consumers with a healthy and nutritional snack choice that contains only all-natural ingredients. Nuts are known for their high fiber content and nutritional value. All of the flavors in Aurora's new line of "good-for-you" are made with preservative-free seasonings.

The Aurora Natural Seasoned Nut line includes the following favorites:

- **Cinnamon Vanilla Almonds:** Rich in fiber and protein, Aurora's almonds are freshly roasted and lightly coated with cinnamon and vanilla flavoring; the almonds have a sweet, yet robust flavor.
- **Honey Roasted Almonds and Cashews:** A crisp outer covering to the nut adds an extra crunch to these sweet nuts.
- **Barbeque Almonds:** This tangy flavor is just right for picnics, or with your favorite beer.
- **Onion Garlic Almonds:** A distinctively unique flavor gives the almonds that added enhancement.
- **Smokehouse Almonds:** They taste like the almonds were roasted right over a camp fire.
- **Tomato Salsa:** Offer a healthy, tomato taste with just the right zing.
- **Wasabi Almonds:** For those consumers who prefer something a little spicy.
- **Butter Toasted Peanuts:** Sweet and crunchy

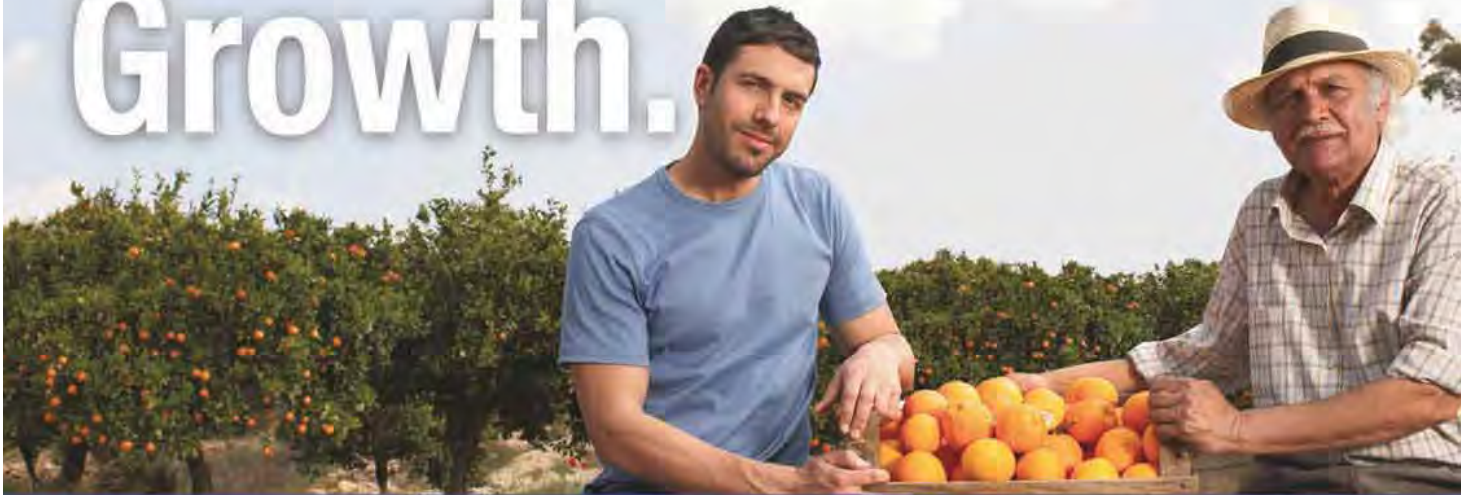


Tropical Foods Adds New Flavors To Buffalo Nuts Snack Line

Tropical Foods, a food manufacturer headquartered in Charlotte, NC, that specializes in raw and roasted nuts, dried fruit and snack mixes, has introduced new flavors to its top-selling Buffalo Nuts line — peanuts with a kick of buffalo wing flavor. The bold new flavor additions include Buffalo Nuts with Ranch, Honey Roasted Buffalo Nuts, and Buffalo Nuts with Blue Cheese. Chad Hartman, marketing director at Tropical Foods, said, "Our new additions allow people to choose from a variety of spicy flavors, and add to the industry trend of bold snacking options." Each 5-oz. bag of nuts has a suggested retail price of \$1.99 to \$2.49.



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Fisher Nuts Partners with Chef Alex Guarnaschelli

Elgin, IL-based John B. Sanfilippo & Son, Inc., whose products can be found under the Fisher Nuts, Orchard Valley Harvest and Sunshine Country brand names, has partnered with Chef Alex Guarnaschelli, a nationally recognized and award-winning chef who is a regular judge on *Chopped* and recently won *The Next Iron Chef: Redemption*, has been named Fisher Nut's first official spokesperson.

In this role, Chef Guarnaschelli developed a series of exclusive recipes such as Almond Heart

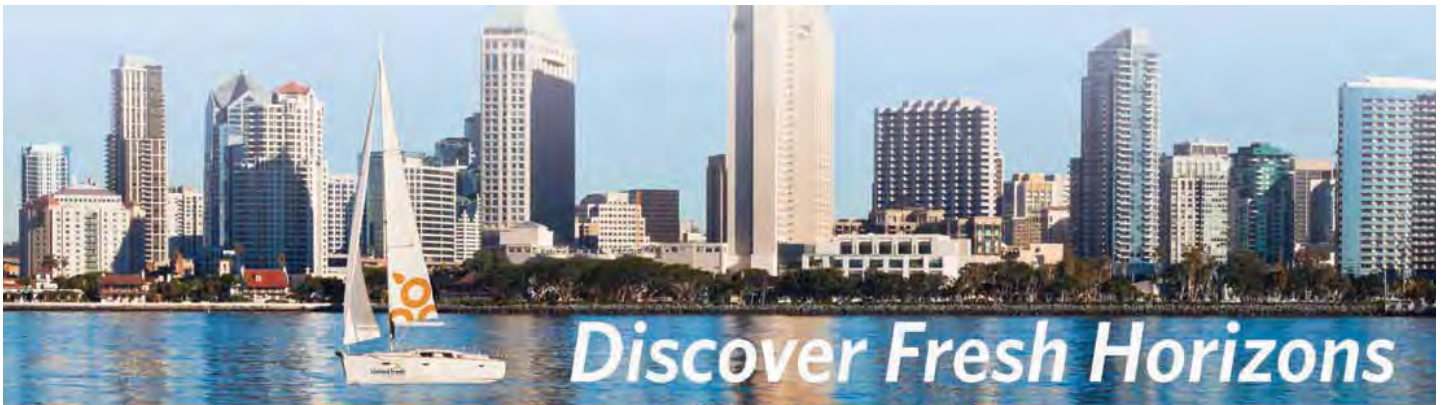
Cookies, Stuffed White Mushrooms with Pecans and Baked Clams with Walnuts, that will be accessible on the Fisher Nut website. She also shares tips on how at-home cooks can add simple ingredients such as Fisher almonds, walnuts or pecans to meals to easily create a restaurant-worthy dish. Chef Guarnaschelli points out that Fisher's Freshness Seal Bag, "...preserves the flavor of the nuts after the bag has been opened," she says. "This way, your Fisher nuts will always be ready for the next recipe."



Setton Farms Debuts Burlap Bag

Terra Bella, CA-based Setton Farms, grower/shippers of 100 percent naturally tree-opened, premium California pistachios, regularly dry-roasts its extra large 18/20 pistachios to perfection with a touch of sea salt. The environmentally conscious company makes a habit of reusing the eco-friendly 100-percent cotton burlap bag that features a clear, inner-sealed film bag.

The burlap bag is a perfect gift solution, and is packed with 19 ounces of great-tasting, nutritious California pistachios. The burlap sack conforms to today's consumers who want that straight-from-the-farm look and feel with an upscale appeal. Setton Farms also offers its cashews in an 18-oz. version of the burlap bag.



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The three-day conference will feature a tour of the Pharr-Reynosa Port of Entry and Quanta Labs, National Mango Board outreach meeting, networking events and dynamic interactive sessions with influential speakers. Attendees will include Mexican growers and distributors, U.S. buyers, importers and distributors, custom brokers and government officials from Mexico and the U.S. including SAGARPA, FDA, DOC, USDA, CBP and more.



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THE TRUE DEFINITION OF BUYING POWER



From time to time, during weekly merchandising and buying meetings, management asks the produce operation if they are buying at the best cost. They want to know if their buying power is being utilized effectively. They often ask for concrete examples of instances where product was purchased substantially lower than the market and competition. We all recognize how difficult it is to obtain such

facts to prove that the produce operation is buying better than the competition. Management seems unable to grasp the concept that proving that one buys better than someone else is not an easy thing to accomplish. Once again, “They just don’t get it!” They simply assume that because they are retailers and they control the orders, they should be the ones to dictate the cost.

In our world of produce, there are different definitions of what “buying power” means. To some, it means that their sheer volume should be adequate to allow them to obtain the lowest possible cost. Guaranteed. To others, it is the ability to use their volume to effectively negotiate a price that is equitable to both parties. In my experience, the use of the sheer volume of orders to pound suppliers into submission and to simply use volume effectively to negotiate a price both have their drawbacks. It took a lot of trial and error to finally come up with an effective and productive program to best utilize buying power. Not surprisingly, the solution was developed by combining the two principles. Buying power is used most effectively when large or strategic volumes of a commodity are used to negotiate a cost based on the supply and desires of the vendor. This solution goes against the conventional thought that volume in negotiation and the position of power of the retailer (orders) should have the upper hand. This is the exact stance that management maintains, and why they don’t understand the inability to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they buy at the best cost.

This collaborative approach to the buying process has proven to be very successful in my experience as well as in many leading retailers

today. It is a classic win-win proposal that allows both parties to gain from the transaction, each in their own way. Retailers get the good cost that they are looking for, and the suppliers sell what they need to at a price that is a good return for them. Strategically, this accomplishes both the retailers’ goals in terms of cost and the suppliers’ desire to produce and sell product profitably. The process also pays dividends in another way by improving the relationship between buyer and seller. When both parties use their strengths collaboratively, to reach common ground, the perception of each other improves. This is how strong relationships develop and fair dealing images are enhanced. These types of dealings build upon each other and develop a strong bond of trust between the parties. These relationships are very strong and always stand the test of time.

This process was more prevalent in the industry in the past but has fallen out of favor with the emphasis — that borders on an obsession — on cost control and the relative lack of experience and exposure to the workings of the produce marketplace by the new buyers in the industry. They have been conditioned to always drive for the lowest price and they are measured on their success in driving costs down. While cost control is not necessarily a bad thing, overemphasis — and the use of it as the primary measuring stick to gauge the success and growth of a buyer — is unwise and counterproductive. It is up to us, as leaders in the retail industry, to foster and promote this tried-and-true approach with the new and younger generation of buyers.

I am sure that these overtures will be well received by the supplier community as it allows them to be a more active participant in the process, rather than simply the source of supply. By engaging in this activity, one can gather the benefits as discussed above, in every transaction. The bonus would be the success of the process in delivering beneficial cost of the operation and providing a viable answer to management queries. In this manner, the definition of buying power would be one of cooperation and collaboration between both sides of the equation with the intent to help grow the industry. In our world of cost control and antagonistic relationships between buyers and sellers, this looks to be the best solution to ending the conflict between the two sides of the equation, thus moving the total industry forward. **pb**

When both parties use their strengths, collaboratively, to reach common ground, the perception of each other improves. This is how strong relationships develop and fair dealing images are enhanced. These types of dealings build upon each other and develop a strong bond of trust between the parties.

By Don Harris

Don Harris is a 38-year veteran of the produce industry, with most of that time spent in retail. He has worked in every aspect of the industry, from “field-to-fork” in both the conventional and organic arenas. Harris is presently consulting on all subjects of retail, category development and sales strategies, among others. Comments can be directed to editor@producebusiness.com

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—Jim Richter



A FRESH UPDATE: INSIGHTS INTO THE PRODUCE TRADE BETWEEN THE U.S. AND E.U.



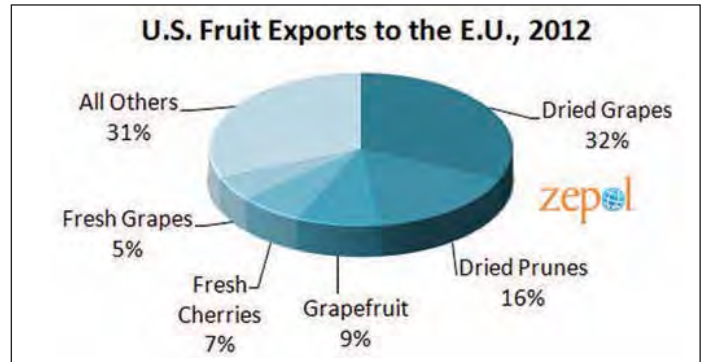
Perhaps one of the most seasonal and susceptible industries is the fresh produce business. Highly dependent on Mother Nature's cooperation, companies in the produce industry must be ready to make quick decisions at any time. In addition, the short shelf-life of produce means that the supply chain must deliver without delay, or the company pays. To complicate the process even further, growing seasons

vary from region to region, causing distributors to vet several suppliers in order to ensure year-round deliciousness.

Last year was an interesting year for the fresh produce trade. From January through November of 2012, the U.S. exported more than \$10 billion worth of fruits and veggies, 6 percent of which were consumed by the European Union. On the import side, the United States imported nearly \$15 billion worth of fresh produce, and of that, 2 percent came from the European Union. Using Zepol's trade intelligence tools, we have detailed produce trade trends between the United States and the European Union.

Fresh Fruit Trends

The fruit trade between the United States and the European Union has seen some positive growth and some rotten growth in the past year. From January through November of 2012, U.S. exports of fruit to the E.U. decreased 10 percent from the previous year. Conversely, U.S. imports of fruit from the E.U. increased a whopping 55 percent in the same period. The drought in the United States during the peak growing season explains the drop in exports and the rise in imports. U.S. exports of dried grapes, grapefruit, and strawberries all saw significant decreases

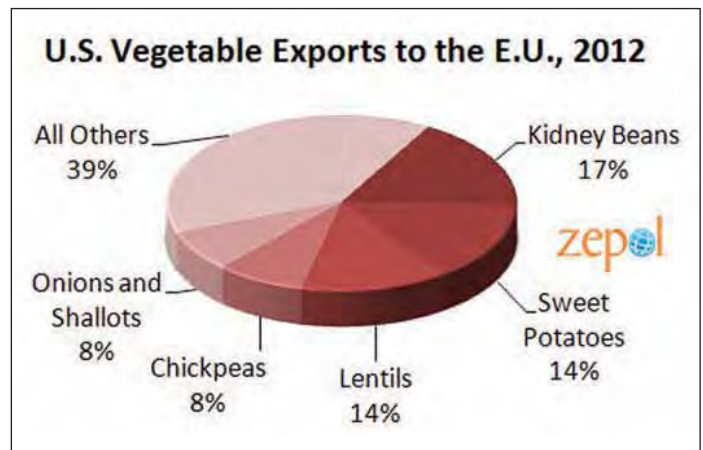
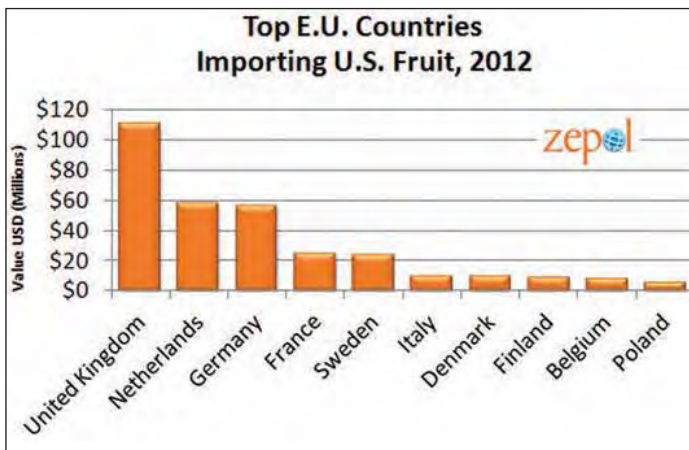


to Europe during that time. Fruit headed to France, Denmark, and Belgium saw drops of nearly 30 percent in 2012. Fruit from the U.S. destined for Finland increased by 30 percent in 2012, due to higher demand for dried grapes, dried prunes, and fresh apples.

Veggie Varieties

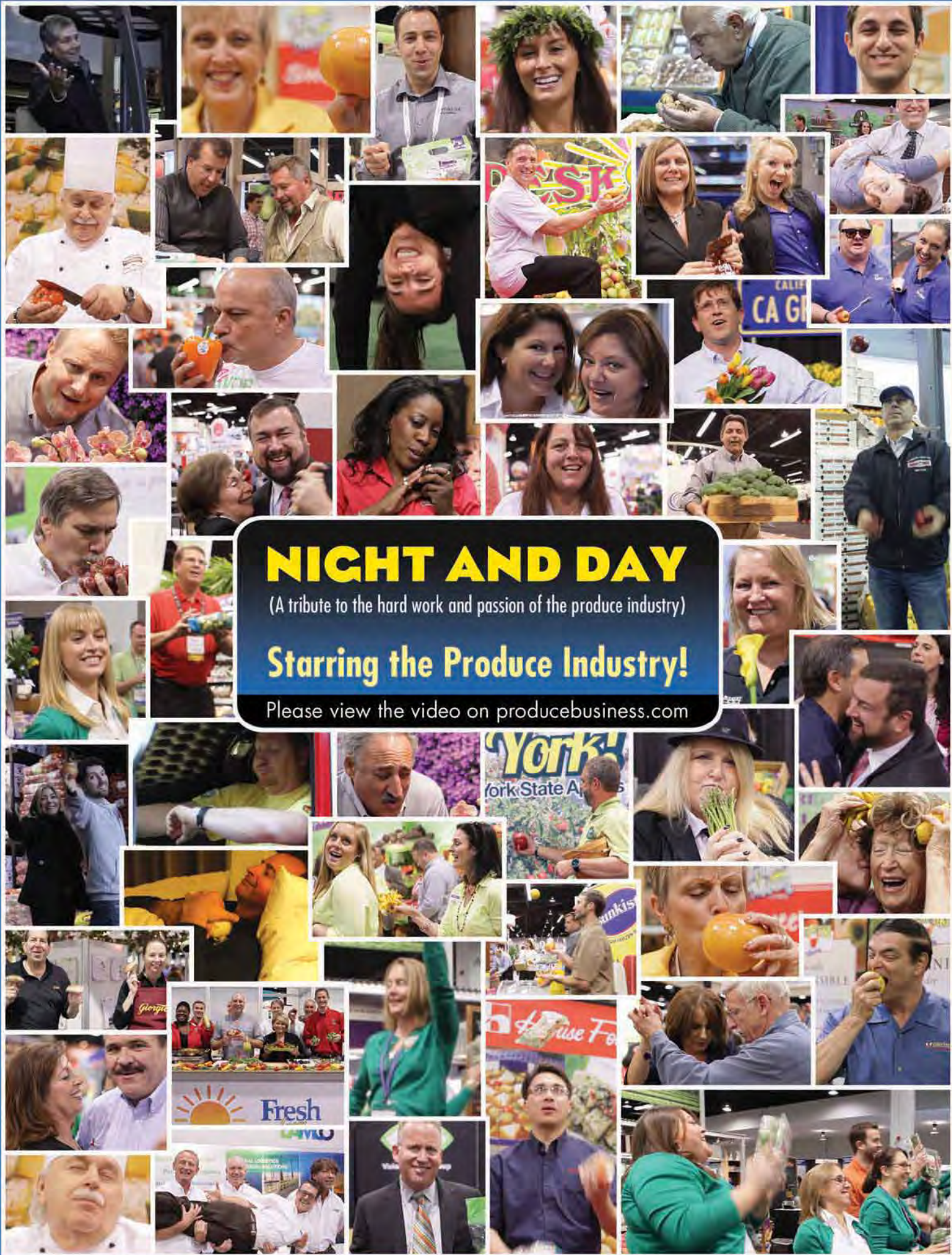
Vegetable exports from the United States were not affected as much by the drought in 2012. In fact, from January through November, U.S. vegetable exports to the E.U. actually increased by 7 percent. On the other hand, U.S. imports of veggies from the E.U. dropped by 1.6 percent. The United States exported more sweet potatoes, chickpeas, and onions, to name a few. The United Kingdom, the top country of destination in the E.U. for both U.S. fruits and vegetables, increased consumption of veggies by nearly 30 percent in 2012.

Future predictions for the produce trade are complex. Rising food prices will likely continue to be a forefront issue in the industry, as well as supply chain efficiencies. Beyond that, Mother Nature has an inescapable amount of control over the supply and demand.



By Chelsea Craven

Chelsea Craven is the marketing coordinator for Zepol Corp., in Minneapolis, MN.



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MAKING FRUIT MOVE

Today, the Hunts Point Terminal Market in the Bronx, NY, is the largest wholesale market in the country, generating \$2.2 billion in annual sales and handling 210 million packages of fruit and vegetables each year. Even before the 1967 move to Hunts Point, its predecessor, the Washington Street Market, also held the title of the largest wholesale market in the United States.

Joe Pellicone, in sales at Bronx, NY-based D'Arrigo Bros. Co. of New York, Inc., recalls the fresh produce auctions that took place on the piers of the New York Harbor. "Produce would come across the Hudson River on barges to be sold at auction right there on the pier," says Pellicone. "This photo at Pier 27 was taken in 1953 to celebrate the arrival of Florida Tangerines."

According to Pellicone, Steinhart & Kelly was one of the bigger companies in the wholesale market, "and had its hands in a lot of different categories." He continues, "Ludwig Levy worked for Steinhart & Kelly and was an organizer of some sort. Based on the way he was dressed, he was clearly a principal in the company. He looked the part," says Pellicone. "Harry Prevor [on the left], owner of J. Prevor, Inc., [and grandfather of PRODUCE BUSINESS Editor-in-Chief, Jim Prevor] was an independent auction buyer and wholesaler on the Washington Street market in Manhattan, and would come down to the pier to look over the items that had just arrived off the barges."

While sales and procurement in the produce industry have drastically changed since the years of the auctions, much in the business remains the same, such as the significance of family. "Back in the day, my dad used to drive trucks for Steinhart & Kelly. I remember when I was young rushing to the market from school so I could help unload the trucks he worked on. It was definitely a family environment." Even today, there remain a handful of companies in the produce business that are fourth- and fifth-generation companies. Sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles all continue working together, many of whom were raised on the market, and are now raising their children the same way.

The *Blast from the Past* is a regular feature of PRODUCE BUSINESS. We welcome submissions of your old photos, labels or advertisements along with suggested captions. Please send materials to: Editor, PRODUCE BUSINESS, P.O. Box 810425, Boca Raton, FL 33481-0425, or e-mail info@producebusiness.com



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