

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the

SNACK

ISSUE 104 JUNE 2026



A Legacy OF Heart

*Julie pg 58
Olivarria*



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WHEN I RECENTLY SPOKE WITH THE OWNER OF OUR NEIGHBORHOOD PIZZA SHOP, HE SHARED SOMETHING THAT STAYED WITH ME. If we call the shop directly and place our order with them rather than a delivery app, he said, we'll get a much better value for our family.

The reason is simple: We would most likely get a chance to speak with the owner himself, a man who loves his community and employs people who feel similarly. While delivery services are lovely, there are the added fees, the layers, the distance between the customer and the kitchen. It's an amazing solution for efficiency and ease—but it removes the connection. Something is lost the further we get from one another.

Then he said something that felt bigger than pizza: Life didn't get expensive—you and I just got further separated.

There's a kind of inherited wisdom in that statement—something people in our industry have known for generations. This business has never just been about product moving from Point A to Point B. It's been about people. About the relationships that close the gap between uncertainty and trust.

I have to walk a fine line with this analogy, because this isn't about dismissing convenience or efficiency. It's about recognizing a growing disconnect, one that's showing up in the fresh produce industry in very real ways. More and more, we're losing the instinct—and sometimes the ability—to simply pick up the phone and call each other when times get tough.

We hear about a storm on the East Coast and assume there will be a produce shortage. Or we assume that shortage won't reach a specific retailer. So instead of a buyer who, in wiser days, might have called the strawberry desk in California to ask whether the truckload will make it, decisions get made in isolation. The buyer just decides not to buy.

That's the current tension: We are more connected than ever, yet operating further apart.



Over time, that distance creates space for more cost, not less. Efficiencies once maintained through constant contact and conversation have been replaced by systems—spreadsheets, forecasts, and analytics. And while those tools are powerful, they don't carry the compassion, intuition, or lived experience of someone who understands both sides of the desk.

That's not to say more efficient channels aren't a boon, because they absolutely are. Just ask me. As a mother of a three-year-old and a one-and-a-half-year-old, convenience matters. Technology matters. Systems matter.

But, something is lost the further we get from one another.

And that's the part we have to be intentional about passing on, especially to the next generation coming into this industry. Not just how to read the data, but when to reach for the phone, to do what the data can't: Lean on relationships, trust, and honesty to find solutions that are good for everyone, built in moments like these. Not just how to manage risk, but how to share it. Not just how to transact, but how to trust.

So yes, let technology make our lives easier. Let it make our businesses more efficient.

But let's not lose the ability to pick up the phone.

Let's not lose the relationships that have always made this industry work.

Because in the moments when things get uncertain—and they always do—that connection is still our greatest advantage. 🍋

Jordan Okumura-Wright
Editor in Chief
AndNowUKnow, *Deli Market News*,
and *The Snack Magazine*

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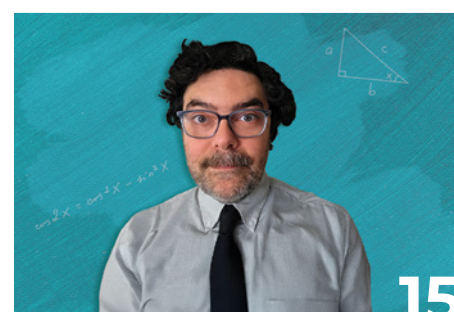
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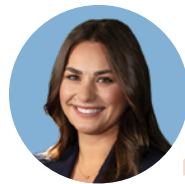
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» The IF List «

Vincent Balistrieri

Senior Produce Buyer, Redner's Markets

With Jordan Okumura-Wright



Nowhere in the history of the *IF List* have we had a part 1 and part 2. But, if you know Vincent Balistrieri, Senior Produce Buyer, Redner's Markets, you know this retail decision-maker is an artist first, in practice and in soul, filled to the brim with creative inspiration—something he brings to his role, the table, and his conversations. And now, to the *IF List*. As we embark on part 1 of Vince's *IF List*, you can't help but go down a rabbit hole of content that's candid, meaningful, stirring, and simply...Vince...

» IF you had to choose one personal artifact to leave behind after you are gone, what would it be?
I hope my drawings and paintings entertain people after I'm gone!

» IF you had to be roasted by one comedian, who would it be?
Fozzie Bear.

» IF you were to find yourself in a zombie apocalypse, what would be one talent you have that would help you survive?
I'm hoping zombies do not prefer eating hairy people.

» IF you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?
Pythagoras...and a translator.

» IF you could see one movie or read one book for the first time again, what would it be?
Movie: *Singing in the Rain*, Book: *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

» IF you had to distill your personal definition of success into one sentence, what would it be?
Having enough agency and means to provide assistance to anyone who truly needs it.

» IF you could have been born in another century or decade, which would it be and why?
During the rise of Dada and Surrealism in real time—I'm tempted to say 1890—but honestly, I wouldn't want to have missed the last thirty years of evolution, so I'm happy to be exactly who, when, and where I am.

» IF you could be a character in any book, who would you be?
Oscar Lester in *Me and Mr. Cigar* by Gibby Haynes.

» IF you had to choose now, what would your last meal consist of?
Lion's Mane Mushrooms from La Semilla in Atlanta, Rich Landau's Langos, Oil-Cured Olives, Dickel's, really cold and unlawfully carbonated water, and my wife Molly's crème brûlée.

» IF you had to move to a different city, what three restaurants would you take with you?
V-Street (Philly, PA), Ella's Deli and Ice Cream Parlor (Madison, WI), Bob and Timmy's (Providence, RI)—all sadly no longer with us.

» IF you could switch places with anyone for one day, who would you choose and why?
A museum guard at the Prado in Madrid. Imagine spending all day with Las Meninas, Garden of Earthly Delights, or Fra Angelico's Annunciation. I'm dizzy just thinking about it!

» IF you could have any actor play you in a movie, who would you want?
Bruno Schlenstein. 🍷





LEARNING by DOING

By Peggy Packer

From left to right: Tracy Carranza, Megan Chedwick, Tom Bramers, Zach Bramers, Jeff Church, Steve Church, Brian Church, Loree Dowse, Chuck Church, and Genesis Ibarra

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Some lessons can only be learned through experience.

There is only so much research, forecasting, and strategic planning that can be done before we must surrender our control to Mother Nature, fast-changing consumer demands, and other unforeseeable challenges that inevitably lie on the horizon. This means a vital part of learning the ins and outs of the industry is done actively on the job, through problem-solving conversations, collaboration, and signed purchase orders.

Church Brothers Farms thrives in such an environment, tackling each new launch and expansion with not only the decades of expertise that have made the company what it is today, but the willingness to learn, evolve, and push each category it enters to the next level.

“My dad and uncle have been in the business since the late ’60s, working for other companies before founding Church Brothers Farms together in 1999,” Jeff Church tells me as the team and I discuss the next crucial period of growth. “When I think about why they were successful, it’s because they cared about their customers. The key to our business has always been about giving customers what they want and being hyper-focused on taking care of them.”

This company-wide commitment is evident in Church Brothers’ 27 years of continued growth and industry excellence. Since 1999, the grower has rapidly fortified its portfolio, operations, and executive leadership team to deliver on its promise to be a reliable

being fully vertically integrated was slow. My dad and uncle started this company with just five people sitting around a desk selling produce,” Brian says, thinking back to the earliest days of Church Brothers Farms. “My father was very innovative and customer-oriented, and he had a vision for the future that still carries us forward today. With all of the moving parts of this business, what we’ve been able to accomplish is incredible. Today, you could be a great grower, but if you don’t get it right after that, it won’t mean anything. You’ve really got to coordinate the whole operation and get in sync to make the business work; and the crops don’t stop growing on the weekends—you’ve got to be thinking about it every single day.”

By following this dedicated path to vertical integration, Church Brothers Farms has elevated its standing as both a retail and foodservice partner, guaranteeing two of the most integral qualities for the buy-side: convenience and reliability.

“There’s a lot that goes into being a strong partner,” Brian explains. “I think one of the things that really sets us apart is our value proposition as

one-stop shop. Jeff, Chief Operating Officer, and his brother Brian, Chief Executive Officer, share a moment of honest reflection as they remember what it took to reach this goal.

“The road to

being fully vertically integrated was slow. My dad and uncle started this company with just five people sitting around a desk selling produce,” Brian says, thinking back to the earliest days of Church Brothers Farms. “My father was very innovative and customer-oriented, and he had a vision for the future that still carries us forward today. With all of the moving parts of this business, what we’ve been able to accomplish is incredible. Today, you could be a great grower, but if you don’t get it right after that, it won’t mean anything.

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“The key to our business has always been about giving customers what they want and being hyper-focused on taking care of them.”

Jeff Church,
Chief Operating Officer, Church Brothers Farms

a one-stop shop. Being fast, efficient, and competitively priced is quite an advantage to have. With Church Brothers Farms, retailers and foodservice operators can get everything they need in one stop, with the guarantee of great quality, price, and service.”

As part of its commitment to being a full-service operation, Church Brothers has strategically evolved into a vertically integrated grower-packer-shipper, honing its expertise in farming, harvesting, processing, and more to deliver the utmost quality to its partners.

“By having all of our growing operations under our umbrella, we are able to ensure the best quality for our customers, without sacrificing that quality for cost or speed. Making money is not the key to every decision we make,” Jeff adds. “We want to be efficient while also doing the job right for our customers.”

Brian and Jeff agree that this vertical integration blueprint wasn’t a masterpiece from its inception, but rather a constantly evolving strategy.

“When you start doing more things on your own as a company, it doesn’t mean you are good at it on day one. Sometimes it’s a multi-year process,” Brian notes. “The learning component of doing it ourselves was quite beneficial to us, because it allowed us to discover the best ways to make a vertically integrated business work. We’ve worked to become experts in every category we’ve taken on. It’s been a 25-year process, but



Left: Brian Church and Jeff Church lead Church Brothers Farms with the same values their dad and uncle started the company with in 1999

Below: Loree Dowse and Tracy Carranza are spearheading an ambitious new vision for how the Church Brothers Farms brand shows up at retail



you learn through the challenges and achievements. There are a million different layers to produce, and you can't go to college to learn it."

Over the past several years, Church Brothers Farms has strategically extended the boundaries of its geographical footprint, adding multiple new facilities and processing plants to the fold through a variety of tactical acquisitions.

Among these strategic moves was the company's acquisition of key assets and operations of Mann Packing, which finalized in December 2025 and helped solidify Church Brothers' leadership position in value-added vegetables. Accelerating the supplier's long-term growth strategy, the acquisition immediately expanded Church Brothers' annual volume with capacity to grow through the newly integrated Gonzales, California, facility—a 200,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art, fresh-cut plant touting 160,000 square feet of production and cold storage space, 40,000 square feet of offices, and 7.5 acres primed for future expansion.

As Tracy Carranza and Loree Dowse explain to me, this deliberate move positions Church Brothers Farms as one of the only suppliers with the scale and capability to deliver a full retail fresh-vegetable offering, from value-added cut vegetables and packaged salads to specialty items and a wide assortment of field-packed offerings.

"We want to become the leaders in innovation," Tracy, Vice President of Retail Sales, chimes in, noting how the supplier's portfolio is charting a new course for retailers. "We're not setting out to follow everybody else; we want to set a new standard. Little Gems Salad Kits were our first venture into the salad kit space, but we have some incredibly unique products in the pipeline that are going to revolutionize a few categories. We want to be on-trend and resonate with the younger generation of consumers who are looking for something different."

Recognizing salad kits as one of the biggest growth engines in produce,

Church Brothers took the opportunity to expand its beloved Little Gems offering—a staple in foodservice operations—to retail shelves. After recently securing placement at multiple retailers throughout the country and ramping up its social media and influencer marketing strategies, the company is setting the stage for more success for the iconic line.

"Produce is the original wellness space, so why not take our products in a direction that meets consumers where they are right now in the wellness arena?" adds Loree, Vice President of Marketing and Communications. "Our Little Gems Salad Kits were a jumping point for that, and a great example of how we are intentionally separating our products from everything you see on the shelves right now."

Tracy agrees, explaining how Church Brothers is leaning into iconography to more clearly communicate the positive attributes of fresh produce.

In doing so, the producer is taking a unique approach to brand visibility and department differentiation. Leaning into the aesthetically pleasing neutral colors currently dominating industries like fashion, home decor, luggage, and more, the company is putting a distinctive twist on the bright colors that have come to be associated with produce and its packaging.

"If you look at social media, people today are using the kitchen as a place to brag," Loree laughs. "They want to show off what's on their countertop and in their refrigerators. When it comes to what's on the shelves in the department today, traditional produce packaging is very loud, with vibrant, bright colors. We took a very intentional and strategic approach,

switching it up to align with the modern consumers' lifestyle."


Guided by this thoughtful packaging and merchandising blueprint, Church Brothers Farms is looking forward to revitalizing the sector with even more product innovations.

"We're taking some categories that have gone a little stale or haven't seen new innovation in a while, and finding ways to breathe new life into them," Tracy says before teasing a few ideas. "Some of these categories haven't been elevated in decades. Nobody's questioned: Is this the right flavor? Is this the best packaging? We're excited to rethink every category and shake it up with products that make sense to today's shopper."

category expertise to introduce a fresh new experience for shoppers.

Charting its course ahead, the grower will further bolster its retail operations, supported by its entry into more niche categories through the acquisition of Mann Packing. As it has been for the past 27 years, Church Brothers Farms remains focused on expanding its value proposition and delivering on its promise to be a reliable one-stop shop.

"More than anything, you have to be nimble," Brian explains as the conversation winds down. "If you're nimble and you take care of your customers, opportunities will come along. We didn't anticipate many of the milestones we've reached along the way, but because we stayed adaptable and took advantage of every opportunity we could, we've grown into a powerful one-stop shop."

Through it all, one thing remains certain: Church Brothers Farms will continue growing, innovating, and expanding in the years to come—but most importantly, the nearly three-decades-old operation and the team that makes it successful are upholding their commitment to never stop learning. 

"The learning component of doing it ourselves was quite beneficial to us, because it allowed us to discover the best ways to make a vertically integrated business work."

Brian Church,
Chief Executive Officer, Church Brothers Farms

To achieve this, the company participates in dedicated innovation sessions with its buy-side partners, helping identify stagnant categories and using its multi-



A Closer Look at Giorgio Fresh Mushroom Grill Kits


By Ryann Howard

There's a certain confidence that comes with grilling. It's a style of cooking that invites bolder flavors and food that's meant to be enjoyed as it is, right off the heat. That confidence carries through Giorgio Fresh's Mushroom Grill Kits, which position mushrooms as a natural part of the grilling occasion.

Before you even read the flavor names, the Mushroom Grill Kits tell you exactly what they're meant for. Bold blocks of color cut across the tray—burnt orange, deep blue—signaling smoke and heat. The mushrooms themselves are front and center, sliced and visible.

Pre-cut, ready to use, and with spice packets in each package, the mushrooms remove prep from the equation. The flavor profiles lean into familiar grilling cues of Steakhouse Seasoning, Brown Sugar Bourbon, and Smoky Honey Habanero.

Mushrooms become something to share. They work just as easily as a side as they do folded into burgers, tacos, or grain bowls, fitting naturally into mixed plates and mixed preferences. For shoppers, the kits make the decision simple; for retailers, they offer a clearer use case tied to a specific moment.

In framing mushrooms as a grilling essential, the Grill Kits quietly expand the role mushrooms can play during the outdoor cooking season. It's about meeting the grill with products designed to belong there. 

UP
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GIORGIO



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{ what the fork }



4EARTH FARMS™ ORGANIC BROCCOLI SALAD WITH FETA

INGREDIENTS

- 5 cups 4Earth Farms™ Organic Broccoli Florets
- 2 4Earth Farms Persian Cucumbers, sliced
- 1 cup chopped 4Earth Farms Organic Red Bell Peppers
- ¼ cup lemon juice (1 large lemon)
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large clove garlic, minced
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- ¼ tsp ground pepper, plus some for garnish
- ¼ tsp salt
- ¾ cup sliced red onion
- ¼ cup crumbled feta cheese

Prep Time: 15 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Whisk lemon juice, olive oil, garlic, oregano, pepper, and salt together in a medium bowl until well combined.
- 2 Add broccoli, bell peppers, onions, and sliced cucumbers; toss until evenly coated.
- 3 Top with the feta cheese.
- 4 Garnish with additional pepper, serve, and enjoy!



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▶ MENTORS IN THE MAKING ◀

STEFANIE PANDOL

MARKETING AND SUSTAINABILITY SPECIALIST, PANDOL BROTHERS

BY CHANDLER JAMES

There are some who fight to find their place in the agriculture industry—those who may have taken a roundabout route to their dream role, and still others who stepped away from the produce sphere only to learn that it is where they belonged the whole time.

Then, there are those like Stefanie Pandol, whose fresh produce path was paved from the time she took her first breath.

“I didn’t just find the produce industry—having grown up in it, I sometimes feel like it found me,” Stefanie, the Marketing and Sustainability Specialist at Pandol Brothers, began telling me. “As part of a fourth-generation family business, grapes were always a constant in my life, and from a young age, I saw firsthand the impact and importance of the work we do. While there was never an expectation for me to follow that



path, it was something I chose because of the connection I felt to both the product and the people behind it.”

Early on, Stefanie was exposed to the business through dinners, industry

events, and even by attending her first Produce Marketing Association (now International Fresh Produce Association) event while in college. Those experiences gave her a deeper understanding of the relationships and dedication that drive this industry.

During college, Stefanie explored almonds and pistachios through internships in production and product development. While valuable, those experiences clarified her true passion: fresh produce and grapes. Guided by mentors, Utah State professors, and industry connections, she pursued a master’s degree in sustainable agriculture and food systems.

“That experience helped prepare me for the evolving challenges of the industry and ultimately led me back to where it all began—now with a deeper perspective and a stronger appreciation

for the business I’m proud to be part of today,” she relayed.

One of the first mentors who made their mark on Stefanie was Cheri Diebel, the former Chief Executive Officer of Pandol Brothers.

“Cheri has been part of my life for as long as I can remember, having started with our family business in 1981 and eventually serving as CEO. When I began working in different areas of the company in 2012, she became a steady and trusted guide during a pivotal time in my life,” Stefanie said. “From decisions about college to navigating early career choices, Cheri consistently offered thoughtful, experience-driven advice.”

Stefanie added that what stands out most is Cheri’s leadership style and resilience.

“She built strong relationships across the globe—often as the only woman in the room—earning respect through her knowledge, integrity, and presence. From her, I learned the importance of confidence, preparation, and leading with both strength and humility. She helped shape not just how I approach business, but how I carry myself within the industry,” Stefanie continued.

In high school, Stefanie met Ian LeMay at California Fresh Fruit Association

(CFFA) and California Table Grape Commission (CTGC) meetings. The now-President of the CTGC has come full circle as a mentor.

“Through those early introductions and continued interactions over the years, Ian became someone I could consistently turn to for advice,” Stefanie stated. “One of the biggest lessons I’ve taken from Ian is his ability to lead and communicate effectively. He has a presence that commands attention without being overpowering—something that’s incredibly valuable in an industry built on relationships. From him, I’ve learned how to engage with others thoughtfully, speak with purpose, and lead with confidence while remaining approachable.”

Stefanie’s college years were also essential stepping stones in her fresh produce journey. When attending Utah State University (USU), she crossed paths with faculty member Robert Lee.

“I met Rob during my sophomore year at USU, where he served as a professor and advisor to the Agribusiness Club. Early on, he played an important role in helping shape my academic direction and better define my interests within agriculture,” Stefanie told me. “Through his mentorship, I built a strong foundation in critical thinking, decision-making, and reading the business

landscape—guidance that ultimately influenced my decision to pursue a master’s degree focused on sustainable agriculture and food systems.”

Reflective of this pivotal experience, Stefanie’s biggest advice for those just getting started in the produce industry is to stay curious and be willing to learn every side of the business.

“This industry is built on relationships, hard work, and adaptability, so don’t be afraid to step outside your comfort zone and gain experience wherever you can. Take the time to build genuine connections with people who have been in the industry longer than you. Mentorship is invaluable, and the lessons you learn from others can shape your path in ways you may not expect,” Stefanie said on a final note. “Above all, be patient with your growth. Agriculture is constantly evolving, and there’s no single path to success. Stay passionate about what you do, remain open to change, and be willing to put in the work—over time, it will pay off.”

Aside from the life-changing mentorship she received, Stefanie has herself to thank for her successful journey in the fresh produce industry. She followed her intuition with every step on her path, ultimately leading to a career she can’t live without. 🍇



IAN LEMAY,
President and Chief
Executive Officer, California
Table Grape Commission

“California’s table grape industry has always been a story of families who came to this state seeking opportunity, put down roots in our soil, and built something enduring not just for themselves, but for generations to follow. The Pandol family is part of that rich legacy. In Stefanie, we see the very best of what that legacy produces and the promise of our future. She carries a deep respect for those who came before her, paired with a clear understanding that leadership today means adapting, innovating, and thinking globally while staying grounded in community and stewardship. She models how to honor tradition while confidently stepping forward to meet new challenges. Leaders like Stefanie help ensure California table grapes remain not only competitive, but inspirational for an industry defined by people who invest in others, share knowledge freely, and lead with purpose. She represents the next chapter of a multigenerational story that continues to move our industry forward.”



ROBERT LEE,
Instructor, Applied
Economics Department,
Utah State University

“I first met Stefanie when she took my Farm Management class. She did exceptionally well in all my courses, and I was impressed with her commitment to learn and improve herself. Stefanie is hardworking, honest, and friendly. Those traits create a ripple effect of productivity and goodwill that transforms any classroom or work environment. She invests herself in her work with a level of integrity that ensures every outcome is reliable. Stefanie built trust effortlessly, allowing her classmates and friends to feel secure, safe, and accepted. This sincerity makes Stefanie naturally adept at working with and for others. I could always count on her to bring a smile, a completed assignment, and a great attitude. This was not a result of a life without challenges, but a choice to meet the world with optimism. In a world that often rewards individual achievement above all else, Stefanie combines diligence with a kind and happy heart.”



CHERI DIEBEL,
Former Chief Executive
Officer, Pandol Brothers

“Stefanie is a pleasure to work with. She possesses the rare combination of youthful energy, tenacity, and idealism with an old soul’s wit, wisdom, and patience. No project is too big or small, and her dedication to getting the job done ahead of schedule while exceeding expectations is amazing. Stefanie is a proponent of keeping communication channels open and clear information flowing between stakeholders. She seeks input from all interested parties and providers. She compiles and articulates goals and benchmarks and makes sure they are understandable and supportable. I do not believe I have ever seen Stefanie back away from a challenge or refuse an assignment, saying, ‘That’s not my job.’ Stefanie’s work ethic and the upbeat energy she projects is infectious and motivating for all she interacts with. She is an excellent example of what it takes to build a successful, strategic corporate culture and success story, and is an effective and inspirational example for those she mentors.”

“I DIDN’T JUST FIND THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY—HAVING GROWN UP IN IT, I SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE IT FOUND ME.”

STEFANIE PANDOL,
Marketing and Sustainability
Specialist, Pandol Brothers



CONSISTENCY *is Key*

A Q&A With Andrew George, Chief Sales and Procurement Officer, and Jessica Anderson, Vice President of Marketing and Innovation, EarthFresh

By Chandler James

When perusing the fresh produce aisle, consumers shouldn't have to question their choices. They may have tried a particular product in the past—the first time it was excellent, the second time, not so much. Will they try the product one last time? Or try something new?

That is how quickly one could lose a customer. In other words, consistency is absolutely crucial in securing shopper loyalty. The latest potato program from EarthFresh ensures consumers have a consistent eating experience every single time they purchase its products.

With EarthFresh's new Butter Potato program, consistency becomes the driver of such loyalty; prioritizing on-pack clarity to give shoppers peace of mind that the potatoes in the package are the same ones they've reached for in the past.

Launched in the fall of 2025, the Butter Potato program is a boon for garnering consumer loyalty. Driving market share and category leadership, Andrew George, Chief Sales and Procurement Officer, and Jessica Anderson, Vice President of Marketing and Innovation, divulged all of the juicy details.



Chandler James: I am thrilled to see the Butter Potato program hitting retail shelves this month. Can the two of you pull back the curtain on this exciting launch?

Andrew George, Chief Sales and Procurement Officer, EarthFresh: The Butter Potato program from EarthFresh is a premium, flavor-led platform built around potato varieties selected specifically for superior taste, texture, and consistency. The program features three carefully curated, yellow-fleshed varieties—Butter Russet, Butter Red, and Butter Gold—each chosen to deliver a rich, creamy, naturally buttery eating experience across a range of cooking methods, from baking and roasting to mashing and frying.

At its core, the program is centered on variety-driven flavor and reliability. Unlike most potatoes on the market, which are often packed as a mix of changing varieties, EarthFresh ensures that each bag contains a consistent, named variety. This guarantees that consumers can expect the same cooking performance and taste experience every time they purchase.

Jessica Anderson, Vice President of Marketing and Innovation, EarthFresh: To support this, the program is backed by clear, intuitive branding and educational on-pack features that help shoppers easily identify a premium offering. Each package includes a Kwik Lok QR code that connects to an interactive digital platform, where consumers can explore the unique attributes of each variety, learn where their potatoes are grown, and discover detailed tasting and texture notes.

To further validate quality, the varieties were evaluated through third-party sensory analysis to ensure they meet the program's high standards. By highlighting the distinct characteristics of each potato, the program also unlocks new opportunities for recipe development, giving consumers a deeper, more engaging way to connect with what they're cooking.



CJ: Andrew, it is clear that the Butter Potato program prioritizes consistency and the consumer's eating experience. What sets these products apart from others on the market?

AG: What truly differentiates the Butter Potato program is its commitment to variety clarity and eating consistency.

In today's market, most potatoes are sold as commodities, often blending multiple varieties that can shift from week to week. This lack of transparency can lead to inconsistent cooking results and unpredictable eating experiences.

EarthFresh Butter Potatoes eliminate that uncertainty. Each variety is purpose-selected through extensive research and consumer testing, consistently outperforming standard offerings in flavor, texture, and overall preference. By delivering a dependable, high-quality experience every time, the program builds consumer trust, encourages repeat purchases, and elevates potatoes beyond a commodity-driven category.



“At its core, the program is centered on variety-driven flavor and reliability.”

Andrew George,
Chief Sales and Procurement Officer,
EarthFresh





**“EarthFresh
saw an
opportunity
to bring
true variety
recognition
to the potato
aisle...”**

Jessica Anderson,
Vice President of Marketing
and Innovation, EarthFresh




CJ: I’d imagine a program as forward-thinking as this was the result of many hours of product development. Jessica, can you tell me more about the inspiration behind launching this program?

JA: The inspiration for the Butter Potato program came from a simple but powerful consumer insight: People care deeply about flavor and consistency, but often don’t realize how much potato variety influences their experience.

Recognizing this gap, EarthFresh saw an opportunity to bring true variety recognition to the potato aisle—much like what consumers already expect in categories such as apples. By clearly defining, branding, and educating shoppers on specific potato varieties, the program introduces a new level of transparency and confidence at the point of purchase.

By pairing exceptional, butter-forward varieties with intuitive branding and accessible education, EarthFresh has created a program that simplifies decision-making, delivers reliable flavor, and brings meaningful innovation to a category that has historically seen little differentiation.

I’m imagining a future in which consumers go in search of a specific potato variety to meet their needs and preferences. Once they become better acquainted with the different varieties available to them, their ability to factor potatoes into their weekly menus will grow exponentially. And when they may feel a bit unsure about a choice, they can always rely on the Butter Potato program from EarthFresh to deliver consistent quality every single time. 



— From Transaction to — TRUST Partnership-Led Growth

A Q&A with **Josianne Légaré**, Senior Vice President
of North American Sales and Strategic Growth,
Nature Fresh Farms™

By Anne Allen

The industry stands at a precipice, and companies like Nature Fresh Farms™ are strategizing how best to respond to the myriad of challenges modern produce companies face. When Josianne Légaré joined the greenhouse grower in July of 2025, she began an operational alignment that continues to pay dividends. Showcasing how the powerful combination of consumer-first thinking and operational discipline has translated into

commercial growth, the company emphasizes the importance of long-term, insight-led partnerships that foreground relationships, not simply transactional selling.



Josianne Légaré,
Senior Vice President of
North American Sales
and Strategic Growth

What does that look like in practice? For Josianne, Senior Vice President of North American Sales and Strategic Growth, it means turning strategy into something tangible and building partnerships that deliver on both sides of the aisle.



Anne Allen: Josianne, can you offer us a brief outline of your journey to Nature Fresh Farms? What led you to the role, and what lessons have you gleaned so far?

Josianne Légaré, Senior Vice President of North American Sales and Strategic Growth, Nature Fresh Farms™: I'm approaching my first year at Nature Fresh Farms as Senior Vice President, North American Sales and Strategic Growth, and it's been a rewarding one. I've spent over two decades in sales and commercial strategy across Canada and the United States, and it's given me a deep appreciation for what genuine partnership looks like in practice.

A fun fact about me: my career has taken me across the continent. I've lived in the East, the Midwest, the West, and on both sides of the border. Wherever I landed, I made it a priority to build relationships and understand the local culture quickly. In Vancouver, that meant immersing myself in the running community and completing a half-marathon in each city I called home. That competitive, team-oriented mindset carries into the office too. Whether we're on a go-kart track or working through a complex retail challenge, I'm always looking for ways to bring people together around a common goal.

"If you focus on doing great work in partnership and delivering real results, excellence becomes the natural outcome."

Joining Nature Fresh Farms has allowed me to build on an already deeply entrepreneurial culture within a company known for its collaborative approach and commitment to retail partners, consumers, and our teams. I am excited to help launch our first internal Women's Committee, creating space for mentorship, growth, and the kinds of conversations that advance women across the fresh produce industry. Building a stronger future starts with investing in one another.

AA: Since you've joined Nature Fresh Farms, how has your time at the company impacted its growth?

JL: My focus has been on reinforcing Nature Fresh Farms's foundation of trust, performance, and excellence. Genuine, long-term relationships with our retail partners are the cornerstone of success.

By aligning sales strategy with our teams and retail partners, we've already identified opportunities to deliver meaningful innovation and sustainable growth. Our key areas of impact are better alignment, stronger retail

execution, a clearer voice of the customer, and a culture that celebrates success.

AA: What are the ways Nature Fresh Farms supports its retail partners? How has this evolved under your leadership?

JL: Nature Fresh Farms has always brought quality products, reliable service, and a personalized approach to its retail relationships. What we've built on over the past year is the depth of collaboration behind those commitments: working side by side on category planning, sharing consumer-backed insights, and developing tailored programs designed to grow the category, not just our share of it.

I'm proud of the investment we're making in our sales team's capabilities. With the right tools and insights, our team is positioned to support our mission of leading the transformation of large-scale indoor farming across North America through a consumer-first strategy built on strong, aligned partnerships.

AA: Why is Nature Fresh Farms making the strategic shift from transactional selling to insight-led partnerships?

JL: Transactional selling has a ceiling, and our retail partners know it as well as we do. Retailers today are navigating real complexity: shifting shopper behavior, tighter margins, and growing pressure to

"With the right tools and insights, our team is positioned to *SUPPORT* our mission of leading the transformation of *LARGE-SCALE* indoor farming across North America through a *CONSUMER-FIRST* strategy built on strong, aligned *PARTNERSHIPS*."

— Josianne Légaré, Senior Vice President of North American Sales and Strategic Growth, Nature Fresh Farms™



JOSIANNE'S MINTY GREEK SALAD

Inspired by Josianne's French-Canadian roots and love of seasonal cooking, this salad brings together fresh ingredients that complement each other perfectly. A modern take on a classic Greek salad, a touch of mint adds brightness and balance, showing how different flavors, like different people, can come together to create something better.



Scan for recipe!

deliver category performance. What they need from a supplier is more than reliable supply. They need a partner who understands the category, brings informed perspective, and helps them make better decisions.

At Nature Fresh Farms, that's what we bring. Our greenhouse expertise, combined with consumer insights and the category knowledge our partners bring to the table, creates a genuine basis for collaboration. The goal is better outcomes for shoppers, and that is a goal we can build a long-term relationship around.

AA: What are some examples that highlight this approach?

JL: It looks different depending on the partner and the opportunity. With some retailers, it means bringing data-informed recommendations to support assortment

decisions or promotional planning. With others, it means collaborating on new product introductions or developing in-store initiatives that strengthen the shopper experience. It also means being agile when the unexpected happens, stepping in to bridge supply and demand gaps and ensuring continuity when our partners need it most. We are also engaging with retailers on longer-horizon opportunities, including merchandising strategy and category expansion. These are conversations grounded in shared goals, and they are the kind that build lasting commercial relationships.



Josianne Légaré said it best: "The goal is better outcomes for shoppers, and that is a goal we can build a long-term relationship around." 🍅

WTF DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Nature's Partner®
Blueberries

?



BLUEBERRY FLAX HOTCAKES WITH DATE SYRUP

INGREDIENTS

HOT CAKES

- ½ **cup** fresh Nature's Partner® Blueberries, rinsed and dried, plus more to serve
- 2 **large** eggs
- ¾ **cup** unsweetened nut milk of choice (flax milk recommended)
- 1 **tsp** vanilla extract
- 3 **tbsp** coconut sugar
- 1½ **cups** all-purpose flour
- ¼ **cup** flaxseed meal
- 1¾ **tsp** baking powder
- Non-stick cooking spray, preferably coconut oil for best flavor
- Granola, optional to garnish

DATE SYRUP

- 1 **cup** Medjool dates, pitted
- 2 **cups** water

Prep Time: 10 mins

Cook Time: 15 mins

Servings: 2-4

DIRECTIONS

- To make the hotcake batter, whisk together the eggs, nut milk, vanilla extract, and coconut sugar until foamy. Fold in the flour, flaxseed meal, and baking powder until just combined. Lastly, gently fold in the blueberries for about 10 seconds, being careful not to overmix the batter.
- Heat a non-stick pan over medium heat and spray lightly with non-stick cooking spray. Using a large ice cream scoop, scoop an even amount of batter per hotcake. Fry each hotcake for 1-2 minutes per side. The hotcakes are meant to be smaller and thicker than regular pancakes.
- Meanwhile, to make the date syrup, blend together the dates and water until they form a syrupy paste.
- To assemble the hotcakes, sprinkle more fresh blueberries on top with granola (optional) and date syrup to taste. Enjoy!



Giumarra



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LIVING BY DESIGN

By Chandler James



MARY HESLEP, senior vice president of strategy and business development, Ten Acre Marketing



Mary Heslep's journey to fresh produce is colored by passion. Stemming from a burgeoning interest in graphic arts that took root in high school, the initial stepping stones of Mary's path were paved long before she made her way to Ten Acre Marketing.

What stood out most about this journey? Mary always follows her intuition.

A self-proclaimed suburbanite from Boston, Massachusetts, Mary started her career as a graphic designer-turned-produce marketer, later making an indelible mark on the produce industry as Senior Vice President of Strategy and Business Development at Ten Acre. Early on, she participated in an extensive art department at her high school and excelled in graphic arts. Mary followed that passion like her North Star.

"After completing my MFA in Graphic Design from Savannah

College of Art and Design (SCAD), I freelanced for a few years, supporting small businesses and trying to run one of my own. In 2008, all those clients were losing their business, and therefore so was I. I decided I needed more stability in my career, and moved to Washington, DC, where the unemployment rate was the lowest in the nation at the time. I took a job as a graphic designer for a pharmaceutical distribution trade association," Mary begins.

While at that association, she had the opportunity to cut her teeth. Mary developed the role of Senior Director of Marketing and Creative Services, delivering all the marketing and design needs for the association. This was her foray into marketing.

"After seven years there, I discovered the role of Senior Director of Marketing Communications at United Fresh Produce Association. I was seeking an industry that better aligned with my values, and I could not argue with the values of the fresh produce industry," Mary tells me. "I spent seven years at United Fresh

before the merger that created the International Fresh Produce Association. Leah Halverson, one of my Produce Marketing & Merchandising Council (PMMC) members and an industry colleague, presented me with the opportunity to join her in building Ten Acre Marketing. The rest is history."

Mary says she often reflects on how she got into the produce industry and the many life experiences that led her into agriculture. While she did not grow up on a farm, she did grow up gardening. It laid the foundation for her understanding of where food comes from and what it takes to produce it.

"I also grew up in a community where we studied and celebrated the Revolutionary War. We often dug up old apothecary bottles in our garden, as our property and town were once a rural farm. Today, my father volunteers his time in the community garden that he built for the town and on the historic commission at Grand View Farms, the most storied farm in the small town of Burlington, Massachusetts.

"I was seeking an industry that better aligned with my values, and I could not argue with the values of the fresh produce industry."

- **MARY HESLEP**, senior vice president of strategy and business development, Ten Acre Marketing

Agriculture has always been all around us," Mary relays.

In addition to her foundational understanding of agriculture, Mary attributes her marketing career to her ability as a visual communicator.

"Graphic Design taught me a new language that allowed me to approach communications with a breadth of varied solutions. Through over a decade of honing my creative skills, I learned design methodology, practicing the many ways of articulating a concept or message through visual narrative," Mary states. "These storytelling skills are the foundation of the marketing strategies I develop. I can envision the end result while I'm still working on the initial concept. And I have the experience to know how different audiences see and interpret concepts differently."

Of course, in fresh produce, Mary has a rainbow of inspiration to draw from. She divulges that when she was interviewing at United Fresh, Miriam Wolk appealed to Mary's creative nature by sharing, "We are the most colorful industry in the world!"

"The colors, textures, and flavors of fresh produce spoke to my soul. Every campaign I approached was through all five senses, envisioning how consumers could experience produce through sight, touch, taste, smell, and sound," Mary explains. "Since joining Ten Acre Marketing, this approach of the senses has only expanded as I've had the opportunity to be in more fields, packing sheds, and

across borders. And now, what I enjoy most about working in this industry is celebrating the hard-working men and women across the global supply chain. I'm in a position to empower small businesses and large corporations to tell their stories in meaningful ways, and with an experience that ensures those stories resonate with key audiences. Ours is an industry where all of my lived experiences come together in unison."

As we tend to do in this industry, Mary is now infusing her work with the desire to pass these experiences and lessons on to those who are just beginning to forge their path in produce.

"This industry is like no other. Working in agriculture is a career filled with lifelong learning. There are always new varieties, innovative technologies, challenging seasons, regulatory hurdles, and changing consumer behaviors, all of which can impact your direct role in this industry. On the other side of that coin is the reality that there's always going to be another season, another harvest, and the sun will rise again tomorrow. It's that eternal optimism that makes agriculture unique, special, and something to be treasured. I'm proud to be part of this industry," Mary concludes.

The path to a meaningful and fulfilled life is not always clear-cut. Unforeseen circumstances may blow us off course, but when one's internal compass is as strong as Mary's, true north points in the direction of their intuition. 🌱

WTF DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }



RED PEPPER MUSSELS

INGREDIENTS

ROASTED RED PEPPER PUREE

2 Red Sun Farms® Red Sweet Bell Peppers
2 **tb**sp butter
Salt & pepper, to taste
½ **cup** heavy cream

MUSSELS AND TOASTED BAGUETTE

1 **lb** PEI fresh mussels
1 **tb**sp white pepper
Juice of 1 lemon
2 **tb**sp garlic, minced
1 Thai chili, finely chopped
1 **cup** white dry wine
Baguette
3–4 **tb**sp butter
6 basil leaves, finely chopped

Prep Time: 30 mins

Cook Time: 30 mins

Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to broil on high.
- 2 Cut bell peppers in half and remove seeds. Place on a cooling rack on a baking tray and add to the oven on the top rack. Cook for 30 minutes, let cool. Set aside a few slices of peppers for garnish (optional).
- 3 Place roasted peppers into a food processor with ½ cup heavy cream, 2 **tb**sp butter, and salt and pepper to taste. Blend until smooth.
- 4 Prep the mussels by cleaning, scrubbing, and de-bearding them under cold water. Toss any mussels that do not close when tapped.
- 5 In a large bowl, add the mussels, garlic, wine, Thai chili, lemon juice, and white pepper.
- 6 Cut the baguette into ½" slices on an angle. Brush with butter and place on a baking sheet. Bake at 400° F until lightly toasted.
- 7 Add the mussels from the bowl to a large saucepan on medium-high heat. Carefully add the red pepper purée to the mussels and place the lid on top to steam the mussels. Cook for approximately 5–7 minutes (until all or most of the mussels are open). Discard any mussels that remain closed or cracked.
- 8 Place the mussels into a bowl and pour all the remaining sauce over the mussels. Garnish with chopped basil and sliced peppers. Serve with the toasted butter baguette and enjoy!

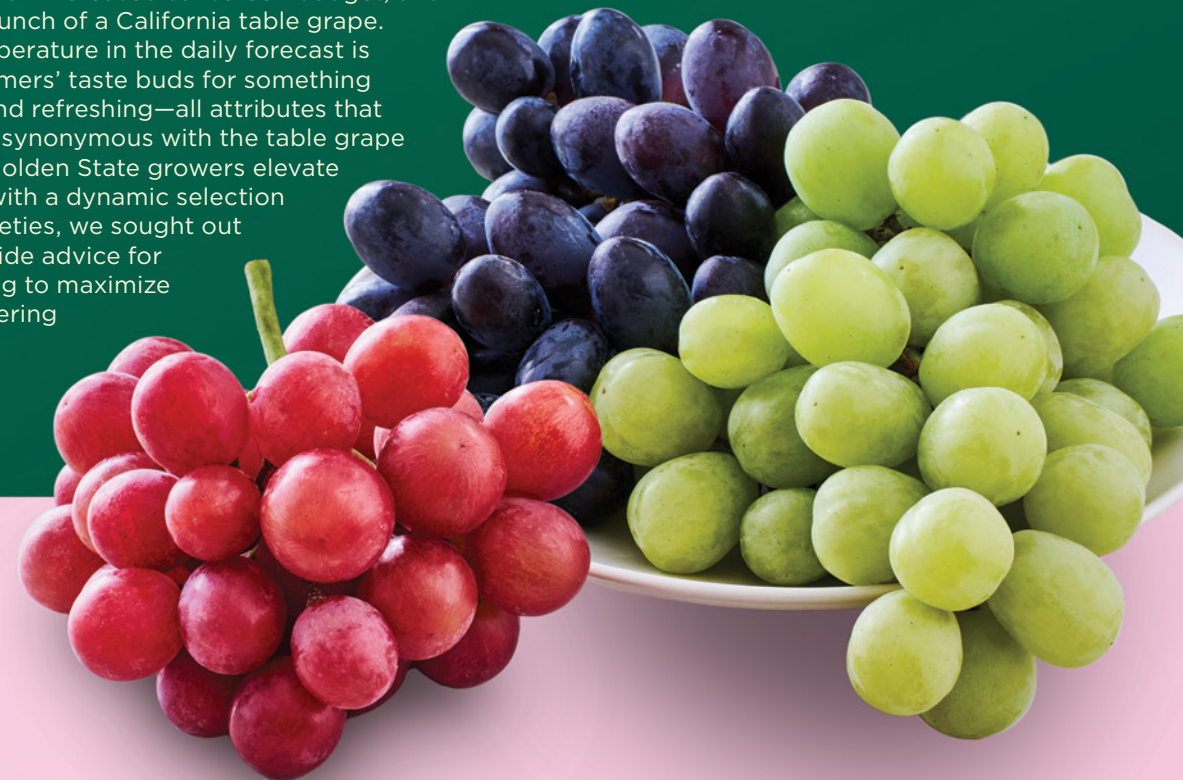
To learn more about Red Sun Farms®, visit www.redsunfarms.com



California Table Grapes

SnackChat *By* Peggy Packer

Summers here in *The Snack's* hometown, Sacramento, California, signal a few different things: an uptick in outdoor activities, an increased sunscreen budget, and the coveted crunch of a California table grape. The rising temperature in the daily forecast is priming consumers' taste buds for something sweet, crisp, and refreshing—all attributes that are practically synonymous with the table grape category. As Golden State growers elevate departments with a dynamic selection of top-tier varieties, we sought out some supply-side advice for retailers looking to maximize this mouthwatering moment...



Ian LeMay,

PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA TABLE GRAPE COMMISSION

"Promoting Grapes from California results in repeat sales from motivated and excited shoppers. California grapes enjoy a long season, being harvested May through December, with promotable volume into January, so there are plenty of opportunities for retailers to promote California grapes. Promoting Grapes from California brings the advantages of brand recognition and domestic preference. According to an Attitude and Usage Study conducted in December 2025, 82 percent of grape purchasers had heard of Grapes from California, and 72 percent of grape purchasers said they would prefer to buy fresh grapes from the United States instead of grapes imported from another country if they had a choice. Further, putting California grapes on promotion results in increased sales; 62 percent of grape purchasers are motivated by a sale at a store, and 68 percent of grape purchasers are motivated by coupons. The California Table Grape Commission is excited to partner with retailers to promote Grapes from California with a number of activities, such as contests, digital promotions, point-of-purchase materials, sampling, and the retail RD program."

Photo credit: California Table Grape Commission



Randy Ciumarra,
**VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES,
GIUMARRA VINEYARDS**

“With steady proliferation of spectacular new varieties driving record sales across North America, California table grapes are a rare differentiator in the produce department. Due to an early season, retailers have significant upside potential for another huge win in the grape category in 2026. It’s looking like grape fans will enjoy at least two extra weeks of California fruit, starting in late June and going through the end of December. Globally, people are craving healthier diets, more active lifestyles, and upscale experiences. Consumer purchasing behavior continues to validate this premiumization trend. Shoppers are consistently choosing better-eating varieties with superior flavor and texture, and are willing to pay for a higher-quality snacking experience. California table grapes—recently deemed a “superfood”—have become a favorite for social media influencers to promote as a versatile, convenient, and nutrient-dense option for consumers of all ages. All good reasons for retailers to feature California grapes on the regular and leverage the momentum of this high-engagement fruit.”



Rob Spinelli,
SALES, ANTHONY VINEYARDS

“Front-and-center is best when it comes to merchandising grapes during California’s peak season, from July through September. Over the past few years, Anthony Vineyards has added new vineyards in Coachella Valley with varieties like Sweet Globe, Honey Pop, Sugra53 - Ruby Rush®, Sugra35 - AUTUMNCRISP®, and Cotton Candy™. We are also adding more new varieties in Bakersfield, which will support both our conventional and organic programs.

Highlighting organic grapes can be an effective way to grab the consumer’s attention in the organic arena, and retailers who really put a focus on organics have seen great results. Anthony Vineyards is one of the largest organic grape growers, offering product from May to November.”



Laura Berryessa,
SALES MANAGER, CASTLE ROCK VINEYARDS

“When Castle Rock was established, our philosophy was to grow and export the best quality grapes that we could ship anywhere in the country. That philosophy still holds true today. To be able to achieve this, you have to be willing to make strategic investments while also having the conviction not to cut any corners. As part of our commitment, Castle Rock is currently in the process of expanding our main cooler, increasing our loading, shipping, and storing capabilities as we continue to build for the future.

From the beginning of the season to the end, we grow each variety with the same intent: to have the best product, day in and day out. Our Coachella Valley operations offer fresh, quality fruit for those retailers who want to be among the first to carry California table grapes. By consistently promoting our grapes, the shopper becomes familiar with our label and knows that it will deliver on quality and flavor time and time again.”



Mitch Weitzel,
**VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES AND MARKETING,
SUNVIEW MARKETING INTERNATIONAL**

“Today’s grape category performs best when it is built with intention, where success is driven by more than great fruit and supported by a clear, structured plan. At Sunview, we take a Single Source® approach to category planning, combining seasonal reviews with a portfolio of Sunview Owned varieties to help retailers build a consistent, full-season program with confidence. We work closely with our partners to align promotions, display strategy, and packaging so everything in store supports one cohesive plan. Through our First Class™ standard, we focus on execution that is consistent, organized, and built to perform week after week. When the category is supported by structure, ownership, and alignment, retailers see stronger shopper engagement and more predictable growth throughout the California season.”



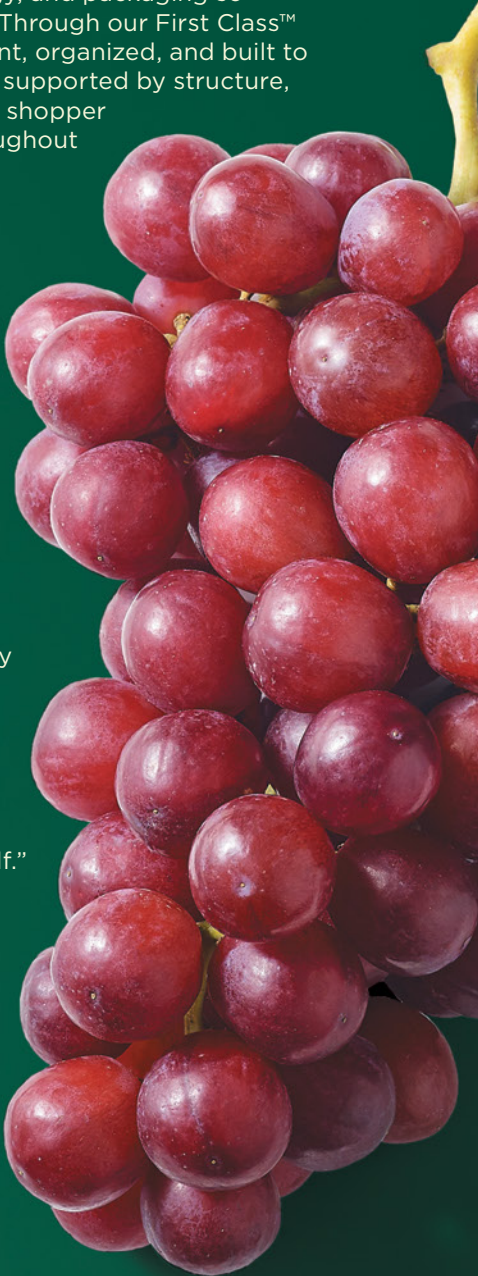
Shelby Overt,
**MARKETING MANAGER, PACIFIC
TRELLIS FRUIT**

“The grape category really comes alive in the spring as we transition to our Mexico and California grape programs, keeping promotable volumes strong and quality consistent. At Pacific Trellis Fruit, we work hard to make that handoff seamless so retailers can plan with confidence and keep displays full of great-tasting fruit all summer long. This is the perfect time to spotlight premium varieties like AUTUMNCRISP®, Applause™, and Epic Crisp®, as well as specialty candy varieties like Candy Snaps, Candy Dreams, and Candy Hearts—all of which are known for their incredible crunch, balanced sweetness, and standout flavor. These are the grapes that turn first-time buyers into repeat customers! With the Dulcinea brand surpassing 100 million consumer impressions in 2025, there’s real brand loyalty behind the label. Bringing that recognition into your grape set helps elevate the category and build trust right at the shelf.”



Rudy Placencia,
**VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES,
FOWLER PACKING COMPANY**

“Grapes remain one of the most popular summer produce items, and we’ve seen strong, sustained growth in consumption, particularly in green varieties like Samsons Sorbet®. We’re also excited about the momentum building around several new red varieties entering production in the coming seasons. As an industry, we have a real opportunity to re-energize the red category and deliver fresh excitement to the grape aisle. Maintaining quality starts long before the consumer takes their first bite. Cold chain consistency and proper merchandising are essential to delivering the best possible eating experience. Refrigerated displays continue to deliver the strongest quality outcomes at retail. Whether grapes are elevating a summer charcuterie board, adding a refreshing crisp to a seasonal salad, or enjoyed as a go-to snack, we’re proud to begin shipping this year’s crop and look forward to a strong season ahead.”





Angelic Meza,
**MARKETING ENGAGEMENT MANAGER,
SUN WORLD INTERNATIONAL**

“June is a pivotal month for table grapes as summer snacking kicks into high gear. Today’s shoppers are intentional—they want to feel confident they are getting the most out of every purchase. That is where branded grapes shine. Brands like AUTUMNCRISP® and RUBY RUSH signal a consistent eating experience built around flavor and crunch, not just color. Consumers are gravitating toward crunchy snacks, so crunch-forward grapes like AUTUMNCRISP® deliver that satisfying bite while also fitting seamlessly into a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Retailers can capitalize on June momentum by clearly identifying brands at shelf and building vibrant displays that reinforce grapes as a reliable, craveable snack choice. We know that when retailers spotlight differentiated brands and tell the flavor story, they move the table grape category beyond a commodity and into a destination snack.”



Chelsea McClarty Nielsen,
MARKETING, HMC FARMS

“This summer, we are starting our California season off with something exciting. It is a new variety called Belcanto™, and everyone who’s tasted it has been asking all winter when it will be available again. This small, seedless green grape is sweet, juicy, and flavorful. It is the perfect way to jump-start our domestic season and get people excited about the start of California table grapes. The grapes will be available in a variety-specific clamshell that can be easily stacked and displayed at the front of the store or next to any grape display.”



Antonio Escobar,
GRAPE CATEGORY MANAGER, DIVINE FLAVOR

“June is the heart of Mexico’s grape season, when peak volumes of premium white and red varieties are available, offering ample opportunities for promotion. It’s also when we begin harvesting our specialty, proprietary varieties such as Jellyberries™, Gummyberries™, and Cotton Candy™. In addition, June marks the late-season availability of AUTUMNCRISP® from Jalisco, expected to carry through mid-month. This variety continues to drive growth in the grape category, with strong consumer demand due to its outstanding taste, size, and texture. Backed by our experience, expertise, and state-of-the-art central packing facility, Divine Flavor can support any pack style or presentation. As a flavor-first company, we’re excited to deliver another exceptional grape season from Mexico this June.”

Photo credit: California Table Grape Commission

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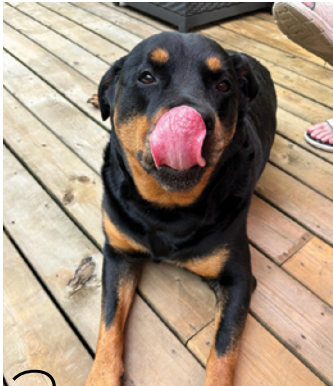
With Peggy Packer

“E very problem has a solution if you just dive in.” Just a few lines into a recent email from Stephanie Myles of Mastronardi Produce®, I am already inspired. An explorer in every sense of the word, Stephanie’s affinity for traveling, painting, mentoring, and a perfectly curated vibe is practically contagious as the Events Coordinator invites us to discover her most favorite things...



1 MY HUSBAND

He is my favorite person to do life with. Life with him is basically laughter, mischief, and vibes only.



2 INGA

Our dog runs my entire life, and she knows it.



3 TRAVELING

Drop me in a new city with good food, good views, and a little chaos, and I’m in my happy place.



4 FAMILY AND FRIENDS

They’re my support system, my hype squad, and the reason half my life feels like a comedy show.



5 EVENT PLANNING

I love shaping the vibe, setting the flow, and quietly watching everyone enjoy a moment I orchestrated.



6 PAINTING

There’s something about a blank canvas that brings out my best ideas and reminds me that every problem has a solution if you just dive in.



7 THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY

After 13 years, the pace and the people feel like home to me.



8 MENTORING

Watching someone step into their strengths and knowing I helped nudge them there is one of my favorite things.



World Famous **CHERRIES**

Capture the Summer Moments!



Kyle's Pick® Ultra Premium cherries target the flavor-focused customer!



Extend the season with an explosion of aromatics, sugars, and juiciness with A Half Mile Closer to the Moon® cherries!





By Melissa De Leon Chavez

What haven't I said about cherries? After more than a decade writing for the fresh industry, I've waxed poetic, I've punned, I've celebrated this delightful fruit in words more than I can count—and I am not alone. New and staple varieties continue to shine as summer gems that inspire impulse purchases and premium rings at the register. So instead I asked a few experts:

WHAT UNIQUE SPOT WOULD YOU LIKE TO FIND FRESH CHERRIES IN THE STORE?



Brianna Shales,
MARKETING DIRECTOR, STEMILT

"Summer can be busy, especially for shoppers who are running, working out, or spending time outdoors. Cottage cheese has become a trending, high-protein snack for active consumers, and pairing it with a cup of fresh sliced cherries, naturally rich in antioxidants that support the body after exercise, creates a balanced pre- or post-workout option. Merchandising the two together gives shoppers an easy, refreshing way to get in protein while introducing a new usage occasion for cherries, one that drives incremental sales and positions cherries as part of a functional snack routine."



Tyler Johnson,
SALES, RAINIER FRUIT COMPANY

"The reality is that cherries sell themselves and don't need to be paired with anything to shine. However, pairing cherries with other charcuterie board items could be a win-win. With summer being a prime season to host friends and family, cherries earn their spot on the board—often paired with cheese, crackers, and dips, but just as often standing out on their own. Placing cherries near these items can help consumers make that connection quickly, while still reinforcing that cherries are a strong choice on their own."



Lorinda Oscarson,
MARKETING MANAGER,
CHELAN FRESH

"If I could see Pacific Northwest cherries cross-merchandised in a non-traditional area in-store, I would love to see them paired with specialty cheese or charcuterie boards in the deli section. Cherries add a burst of color and a sweet-tart flavor that complements cheeses and cured meats perfectly. Featuring them together would inspire shoppers to think beyond just snacking and consider cherries as a sophisticated addition to appetizer platters or entertaining spreads, ultimately driving incremental sales in both categories."



Catherine Gipe-Stewart,
DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
SUPERFRESH GROWERS®

"Mocktails, now known as the more trendy 'zero-proof cocktail,' are no longer just juice and soda. Bars are crafting them with the same creativity, presentation, and pricing as traditional cocktails, complete with fresh ingredients and eye-catching garnishes. Many feature seasonal flavors, making fresh fruit a natural fit. What better way to elevate a zero-proof drink than with Northwest cherries? Some examples include a Northwest Cherry Spritz, Cherry Ginger Fizz, and a Cherry Lemon Cooler. Merchandising cherries near the mixer section with simple signage and recipe inspiration can spark ideas and drive impulse purchases."



Rochelle Bohm,
VICE PRESIDENT OF
MARKETING, CMI ORCHARDS

"Pacific Northwest cherries naturally shine in the cheese section, where shoppers are in a summer entertaining mindset, hunting for pairings and snack-able treats. Sweet, fresh cherries alongside aged goudas, bries, and salty cured meats drive incremental sales from a customer who's ready to spend."



Troy Le Cheminant,
CATEGORY MANAGER,
CHERRIES, WESTLAKE PRODUCE

"I'd love to see PNW cherries cross-merchandised in the dairy section, since cherries naturally pair well with creamy, rich textures. Whether on top of vanilla ice cream, layered in a Greek yogurt parfait, or featured alongside a brie or goat cheese on a charcuterie board, cherries elevate dishes with their perfect balance of sweetness, acidity, and nuanced flavor."



Emily Cox,
MARKETING MANAGER,
FIRSTFRUITS FARMS

"If I could see our cherries cross-merchandised anywhere unexpected in-store, it would be in an on-trend 'Cherries & the Spirit of Summer' display. Imagine cherries at the center surrounded by coordinating beach towels, colorful bowls and cups, cherry and lime gut-healthy sodas, popsicle and ice cube molds, even cherry-shaped pool floaties. Cherries aren't just another fruit in the produce department; they're one of the true stars of summertime. Creating a display that celebrates the full spirit of summer helps shoppers connect cherries with the fun, seasonal moments they look forward to all year. When retailers merchandise cherries this way, it turns a simple produce purchase into a celebration of the season."





By Editorial Contributor Julie Marcik, President, Joe Produce SearchSM

When interviewing for a new role, the focus is often on proving you are the right fit for the opportunity, as it should be. At a certain point, especially for professionals considering a move from a role where they are already successful, the question also becomes whether the opportunity is the right fit for them.

The strongest candidates understand an interview is not just about being chosen; it is also about choosing wisely. Not from a place of entitlement, but rather from a sincere interest in understanding whether the leader, culture, team, and expectations truly align with how they work best and where they will thrive.

Selective Is Not the Same as Entitled

Thoughtful candidates understand the difference between discernment and demands.

Evaluating an opportunity is not about expecting every role to meet a personal wish list. Compensation, title, and perks matter. Focusing only on those elements can cause candidates to overlook what ultimately drives success and fulfillment. It's okay to be selective; a new role is not just a title, compensation package, or job description. It is a choice of leadership, team, culture, and environment. Those factors shape your day-to-day experience and long-term success.

Questions That Show Interest, Not Entitlement

The best questions feel natural. They reflect curiosity about how a leader operates and how the team functions—not a checklist of demands.

A few strong examples:

- What does a really good working relationship with you look like?
- What do you think makes this team work well together?
- What kinds of people tend to do especially well on this team?
- If I joined your team and hit a roadblock early on, how would you want me to handle it?
- When people have different approaches to something, what is usually the best way to work through that?
- These questions help round out the conversation in a natural way.



There is still a lingering belief that candidates should simply be grateful for an opportunity. That mindset is outdated and often leads to poor long-term outcomes. Handled well, these conversations do not raise red flags. They signal maturity, curiosity, and strong judgment.

Tone and Timing Matter

- Sell yourself first
- Then vet the opportunity
- Ask from a place of interest, not expectation
- Focus on fit, not just benefits

Go Deeper Than Job Description

Most interviews stay surface-level. Strong candidates go further. They focus on what it actually feels like to work in the role, not just how it is described. Pay attention to leadership style, expectations, values, and if they align with yours, track record, and team stability.

- Leadership style: Direct or indirect, hands-on or delegative, transparent or guarded
- Expectations: Pace, priorities, availability, and boundaries
- Values alignment: What matters most to the leader and organization
- Track record: Whether people grow, are promoted, and stay
- Team stability: High turnover can be a red flag, while long-standing roles may signal limited growth

Look For Real Signals

Anyone can give a polished answer. What matters more is how a leader talks about the team, the company, and the challenges ahead.

Listen for whether they speak positively about colleagues, acknowledge challenges honestly, offer a realistic view of the role, and show genuine interest in getting to know you. Strong leaders are candid and self-aware. The tone often tells you more than the words.

The Process Tells a Story

- How long does the process take?
- Is communication clear and organized?
- Do leaders invite questions?
- Do conversations feel rushed, too long, or just right?

Life Outside of Work Still Matters

Even at senior levels, life outside of work plays a role. Leaders who understand real-world responsibilities often create more sustainable environments. Whether it is supporting family commitments or respecting time outside of work, that perspective can make a meaningful difference in long-term success and satisfaction.

Before You Say Yes, Consider:



The Bottom Line

The goal is not perfection. It is alignment. The best career decisions are not made by saying yes to every opportunity; they are made by asking the right questions, paying attention to the right signals, and being willing to walk away when something does not feel right.

The best hiring partners understand that a successful placement is about fit on both sides. It is not enough to identify a qualified candidate or an attractive opportunity. Employers need to be clear about what they want and what they offer, and candidates need a full, honest picture of where they are going and why the role may be right for them. That kind of mutual clarity is what leads to stronger, longer-lasting matches.



Julie Marcik, President,



Julie Marcik is President of Joe Produce. With more than 20 years of executive search experience, she leads the Joe Produce team and oversees the company's strategy, growth, and service to the produce industry and adjacent sectors. Julie brings deep expertise in talent, leadership, and long-term organizational fit. Joe Produce is the go-to job platform and trusted recruiting partner for the produce industry and adjacent sectors.

WTF DO I DO WITH California Giant Berries ?

{ what the fork }



SUMMER BERRY PASTA SALAD

INGREDIENTS

SALAD

- 1 cup sliced California Giant Strawberries
- 6 oz California Giant Blueberries
- 6 oz California Giant Blackberries
- 8 oz short pasta
- 2 cups packed fresh arugula
- 1 cup mozzarella pearls
- ¼ medium red onion, thinly sliced

DRESSING

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 tbsp balsamic vinegar
- 2 tsp granulated sugar
- ½ tsp dried basil
- ½ tsp fine sea salt
- ¼ tsp black pepper

Prep Time: 30 mins

Cook Time: 10 mins

Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Cook pasta according to package instructions. Set aside to cool completely.
- 2 In a glass jar, combine all dressing ingredients. Close tightly with lid and shake well until combined.
- 3 Add pasta to a large serving bowl. Add strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, arugula, mozzarella pearls, and red onion.
- 4 Drizzle the dressing evenly over the salad and use tongs to toss gently until ingredients are lightly coated.
- 5 Garnish with freshly cracked pepper before serving, if desired. Enjoy!



To learn more about California Giant Berry Farms, visit www.calgiant.com

IFCO

Modern farms deserve modern Packaging

www.IFCO.com





CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS

SNAPSHOT

By Chandler James

We are now in the heart of the California avocado season, and consumers are flocking to the produce aisle to get their fix. Anticipation builds in the off-season, making for a consistent category boost in the spring and summer months. With this coveted crop continuing to drive demand, we thought we would do a quick category check-in...

AFFINITY FOR AVOCADOS IS VERY STRONG**



The California avocado crop estimate this year is

330 million pounds

RETAIL: THE AVOCADO CATEGORY CONTINUES TO GROW***

\$3 billion

in total avocado dollar sales for 2025, up \$100 million

FOODSERVICE: AVOCADOS ADD VALUE**

Restaurant dishes with avocados command a consistent

\$2 premium

over dishes without them



CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS BRANDED BAGS DRIVE SALES GROWTH

In 2025, bagged avocado sales reached nearly

1 billion avocados

in total U.S. retail volume, increasing nearly 8% compared to prior year†



California Avocados branded avocado bags outperformed the competitive market by

8.1 points ↑

in bagged avocados unit growth compared to non-branded bags in an in-market test in 2025†

JUNE IS CALIFORNIA AVOCADO MONTH!

Peak availability this season is expected to be April through August



DID YOU KNOW?

The Mother Hass Tree was planted as a seed in La Habra Heights, California, in the late 1920s by postman Rudolph Hass. All Hass avocados in the world can trace their heritage to this one tree that lived for 76 years.



*Photo credit: California Avocado Commission

**Source: Dataessential

***Sources: Circana and the Hass Avocado Board Path to Purchase study 9/2025

†Source: Circana

‡Source: 2025 California Avocado Tracking Study

CALM THROUGH THE INFO-STORM

A Q&A with Gary Clevenger,
Managing Partner, Freska Produce International

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

In a world where many are trying to be everyone's cup of tea, Gary Clevenger is content to be a shot of tequila. Sure, you could smooth things out with margarita mix, but in fresh produce, where every second counts, clarity is best taken with no more than a dash of salt.

There is no area in which this is more critical, Gary recently pointed out to me, than market intelligence and fresh product resources. Ready to serve insights straight up, the Managing Partner for Freska Produce International dove into the crucial yields from aligning with Bobalu, what he's sure the next few years in the industry look like, and what he means when he says "real market intelligence."

Pull up a stool, and let's dive in.



Q1
Melissa De Leon Chavez:
Gary, can you expand more on how Freska ensures logistics coverage and how this goes hand in hand with what I've heard you call "real market intelligence?"

Gary Clevenger, Managing Partner, Freska Produce International:

At Freska, logistics isn't an afterthought—it's the backbone of our market intelligence. We operate distribution points in Nogales, Arizona; McAllen, Texas; Oxnard, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and beyond, allowing us to observe product movement, quality, and buyer behavior in real time.

Because we control our warehouse operations—especially in Nogales—we QC (quality control) every load, tracking sizing trends, pressure levels, and condition daily. That information feeds directly into our sales strategy. When you're touching the fruit, not just trading it on paper, you understand supply shifts before the reports hit.

Logistics coverage also protects our customers. Weather disruptions, port delays, and cross-border bottlenecks aren't surprises to us. They're variables we actively manage. The result is consistency of supply paired with early market signals. That's the difference between reacting to the market and staying ahead of it.

Q2
MDC: Diving deeper, how would you define "real market intelligence" in the industry, among so much information and as many channels to access it?

GC: Real market intelligence is verified, boots-on-the-ground information combined with context to separate noise from truth. It's knowing not just that prices moved, but why they moved; is it a sizing curve shift? Is Mexico peaking early? Is Peru heavy in 48s and 60s? Are retailers committed to a promotional window? We analyze industry stats and reports closely—shipment data, arrival volumes, regional movement patterns, and historical seasonal trends—for mangos and within the avocado category, tracking harvest projections, offshore supply curves, and retail promotional cycles. But numbers alone don't tell the full story. They have to be interpreted against what we're physically seeing loaded in the fields, crossing the border, and moving through distribution. We talk to growers daily. We monitor harvest projections. We review USDA and industry reporting, but we validate it against real-time quality, maturity, and sizing conditions.

In both mangos and avocados, the market rewards those who act early, not those who react late. Real market intelligence helps buyers make decisions before the market makes them for you.

“WEATHER DISRUPTIONS, PORT DELAYS, AND CROSS-BORDER BOTTLENECKS AREN'T SURPRISES TO US. THEY'RE VARIABLES WE ACTIVELY MANAGE. THE RESULT IS CONSISTENCY OF SUPPLY PAIRED WITH EARLY MARKET SIGNALS.”

- Gary Clevenger, Managing Partner, Freska Produce International

Q3

MDC: Speaking of expansions and access, Freska and Bobalu have now been partnered for over a year. Can you tell me how this process evolved to complement and grow both brands?

GC: The Freska-Bobalu partnership has been about alignment, not just expansion.

Freska brings global sourcing, year-round avocado and mango programs, and cross-border logistics expertise. Bobalu brings one of the strongest branded strawberry programs in North America with deep retail relationships and best-in-class field execution.

Over the past year, we've integrated sales channels, strengthened logistics coordination, and shared market intelligence across categories. What started as complementary strengths has evolved into a more cohesive platform. We're able to provide customers with broader category solutions rather than single-item transactions.

It's about scale, but it's also about specialization. Each brand maintains its identity and expertise, while benefiting from shared infrastructure and insight.

Q4

MDC: A year in and settled, what should the buy-side know about this partnership and how it further differentiates Freska and Bobalu in such dynamic categories?

GC: Buyers today don't just need product, but reliability, transparency, and strategic guidance. Our partnership creates supply depth across multiple high-velocity categories: avocados, mangos, strawberries, and specialty tropicals. That diversification matters in volatile markets and strengthens forecasting. When you're seeing movement across categories, you understand promotional pressure and shelf competition differently. That perspective allows us to advise buyers on timing, sizing, and promotional windows with more confidence.

Most importantly, we are operators. We are in the fields, the packing houses, and the warehouses. That operational proximity reduces risk for the buy-side. In dynamic categories where weather, labor, and global trade can shift quickly, experience and infrastructure matter.

Q5

MDC: With the boots-to-the-ground knowledge you've gathered over the years, what do you see playing out for the industry from now to 2030?

GC: The fresh produce industry will continue to consolidate—not just structurally, but strategically. Retailers and foodservice operators are demanding fewer supply gaps, greater forecasting accuracy, and partners who can manage volatility across multiple origins and seasons.

At Freska, our focus between now and 2030 is disciplined growth—strengthening global grower partnerships, expanding value-added and organic programs, investing in logistics infrastructure, and deepening the integration between categories like avocados, mangos, and strawberries.

The future belongs to companies that combine operational control, financial discipline, and real-time market intelligence. We intend to be one of them.

Albertsons Companies' Jay Schneider recently referred to the amount of data available as an informational blizzard—and with everything from expanding insights companies to artificial intelligence inundating our industry, that gale is about to become more obscure before it eases. Partners like Freska Produce International offer more than a little comfort through the storm; they offer a way to see through it. [S](#)

“OUR PARTNERSHIP CREATES SUPPLY DEPTH ACROSS MULTIPLE HIGH-VELOCITY CATEGORIES: AVOCADOS, MANGOS, STRAWBERRIES, AND SPECIALTY TROPICALS.”

PRIME
TIME

An Immeasurable Impact

A Q&A with



and



Desirae Perez,
Senior Marketing
Manager, Prime Time
Produce

Nicole Bryon,
Sustainability Social
Responsibility
Coordinator, Prime
Time Produce

By Peggy Packer

In the fresh produce industry, I believe we all inherently share a common end goal: to make an impact.

There are countless ways a company can wield the strength of its operations to make a difference. From the most integral task of meeting consumers' nutritional needs with fresh, high-quality produce, to the sustainability and philanthropic efforts introduced along the way, the reach of a recognized produce business can be powerful and expansive.

One company harnessing its operational prowess to do good beyond its fields and facilities is Prime Time Produce. Offering a robust portfolio spanning multiple categories—including bell peppers, mini peppers, asparagus, tomatoes, and corn—the supplier has continued to expand its growing regions, customer relationships, and partnerships, establishing itself as a trusted and recognized name in fresh produce.

This thoughtful and strategic growth has not only allowed the company to ensure the consistent

delivery of fresh, flavorful, and nutritious produce. It has also allowed Prime Time to make an immeasurable impact in the communities it serves.

Desirae Perez, Senior Marketing Manager, and Nicole Bryon, Sustainability and Social Responsibility Coordinator, take us to the heart of these meaningful initiatives: the company's Growing Greater Together philosophy.



Peggy Packer: Through a variety of unique strategies, Prime Time Produce's impact on consumers extends far beyond the shelf. In addition to being a trusted and reliable produce supplier, can you tell us a bit more about what "Growing Greater Together" looks like beyond the field?

Desirae Perez, Senior Marketing Manager, Prime Time Produce: Growing Greater Together is reflected in every aspect of our operations. Across our practices, our people, and our produce, we believe we achieve more when we work together. This mindset extends beyond our organization to our partners, industry peers, and customers. The relationships we've built with these groups continue to strengthen, evolving from a solid foundation into something even more impactful. It's a testament to what can be accomplished when people align around a shared purpose.

PP: What initiatives has Prime Time been focusing on to expand the Growing Greater Together mentality beyond its day-to-day farming operations?

DP: Prime Time is involved in a variety of community outreach initiatives, including a long-standing partnership with the Boys & Girls Club of Coachella Valley. In March 2026, Mike Way (Chief Executive Officer), Jeff Taylor (Chief Operating Officer), and their wives were named the 2026 Champions of Youth in recognition of their continued support. They have been involved since 1995, carrying forward a legacy of support that has remained a consistent part of the company's identity. The recognition reflects not only their leadership, but also the broader impact Prime Time continues to make both within the industry and in its local community.

Showing up to help our communities grow is something that Prime Time will always strive to continue. This partnership remains a cornerstone of our outreach efforts, demonstrating that investing in people and community is just as important as delivering quality product.

PP: What an incredible impact on the next generation! How else is Prime Time helping build awareness or understanding of the produce industry among the youth?

Nicole Bryon, Sustainability and Social Responsibility Coordinator, Prime Time Produce: Prime Time recently launched its Seed-to-School program, where we've visited elementary schools to read our books that walk students through the seed-to-store journey of bell peppers and asparagus. Seeing their curiosity and excitement as they begin to understand where their food comes from has been incredibly rewarding.

We've also spent time with high school students, sharing real-world insights into the agriculture industry, including diverse career paths, educational opportunities, and personal experiences. Being able to connect with students at that stage, answer their questions, and hopefully inspire a few to consider a future in agriculture is something that can have a lasting influence.

PP: How is Prime Time taking a more intentional and measurable approach to sustainability and social responsibility across the business?

NB: Over the past year, we've been focused on bringing more structure and intention to how we approach sustainability and social responsibility as a company. That's led us to formalize our efforts into what we call the Prime Time Pledge, which will be published in summer 2026. It's about making sure everything we do, from how we operate in the field and packhouse to how we support our employees and engage with our communities, is aligned, measurable, and transparent. We are taking the time to build a strong foundation first so that when we share more publicly, it is grounded in real data and real progress. For us, it is not about rushing to set targets; it is about building something thoughtful, credible, and built to last.

"Across our practices, our people, and our produce, we believe we achieve more when we work together. This mindset extends beyond our organization to our partners, industry peers, and customers."

- Desirae Perez, Senior Marketing Manager, Prime Time Produce



"Over the past year, we've been focused on bringing more structure and intention to how we approach sustainability and social responsibility as a company."

- Nicole Bryon, Sustainability Social Responsibility Coordinator, Prime Time Produce



What initially began with three friends and a shared passion for growing premium produce has since evolved into a respected fresh operation with an impact that extends far beyond its geographical footprint.

At the end of the day, that impact is our industry's most important goal.

WTF DO I DO WITH Calavo Avocados ?

{ what the fork }



MEXICAN CHIPOTLE CHORIZO FLATBREAD

INGREDIENTS

1 large firm, but ripe Calavo Avocado, sliced
2 pieces good quality naan bread
4 oz fresh mozzarella cheese
1 cup finely shredded Mexican blend cheese
18 thin slices fully cooked Mexican style chorizo
1/3 cup slivered red onion
 Fresh cilantro sprigs

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 10–12 mins
Servings: 8

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 450° F and line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.
- 2 Tear mozzarella cheese into 1/2" pieces and place equal amounts on each flatbread. Sprinkle with Mexican blend cheese and top with chorizo and red onion.
- 3 Bake for 10–12 minutes or until cheese is melted and golden on the edges.
- 4 Place avocado slices over the top and garnish with cilantro. Enjoy!

To learn more about Calavo, visit calavo.com

Calavo



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A LEGACY OF *HEART.*

A LIFE OF *LEADERSHIP*

BY JORDAN OKUMURA-WRIGHT

JULIE OLIVARRIA'S IMPACT ON THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY GOES FAR BEYOND HER IMPRESSIVE CAREER-IT LIVES ON IN THE RELATIONSHIPS SHE BUILT, THE PEOPLE SHE MENTORED, AND THE STANDARD SHE SET EVERY DAY. AS SHE STEPS INTO A WELL-EARNED RETIREMENT, HER PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE WILL CONTINUE TO BE FELT ACROSS THE INDUSTRY SHE HELPED SHAPE...





Rannel Santiago, Julie Olivarria, Tracy Stephenson, and Jon Greco in Salinas, California

Agrounded constant, carrying light, compassion, and an unwavering sense of purpose, Julie Olivarria stands as a beacon in the industry. And like a beacon, she carries with her a wisdom of guidance, knowledge, and service that is a hallmark of her presence, her contributions, and her fortitude.

Growing up in California’s Salinas Valley, surrounded by agriculture, Julie saw firsthand the gamble, the soul, and the heart that went into each seed—every square foot of dirt, drip of water, full day of sun. Playing in the fields as a child cultivated a deep respect for each hand in the process. She understood what it meant to have your livelihood tied to the earth. And it was in these early experiences that the profound influence of relationships and community took root.

As a mother, a grandmother, a friend, a colleague, and a mentor to so many, it is hard to imagine an industry not guided by this foodservice force. And yet, even as I write that, I can see her

gently stepping back from such a spotlight. To her team, to those who have depended on her will, aptitude, and deep sense of responsibility, Julie is very much a leader who leads by example, a source of inspiration and deep roots, and, without a doubt, one of the warmest people I have ever met. And it is that presence that makes this moment of transition all the more meaningful.

With Julie’s retirement on May 29, 2026, fresh in all of our hearts and minds, it feels clear that sometimes moving away from one thing is not simply that, but a movement toward something else. A calling, in its own way. After decades of leadership as Vice President of Produce at Sysco, Julie stepped over this new threshold with the same intention that defined her career. And for Julie, that looks like growth in new forms, a life at a different pace, a heart full of love for her grandchildren, and friendships that will continue to carry her forward.

In reflecting on that journey, in every conversation I have with Julie, I leave with a strong sense not just of the

“*THOSE RELATIONSHIPS, THOSE SHARED CHALLENGES, THOSE MOMENTS WHEN THE WHOLE TEAM PULLED TOGETHER TO MAKE THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPEN—THOSE ARE WHAT I’LL CARRY WITH ME.*”

**JULIE OLIVARRIA,
RETIRED VICE PRESIDENT OF
PRODUCE, SYSCO**

work itself, but the example she sets is what truly defines her, in all that she does and all those she brings to the table with her. That kind of leadership can be quiet, but it holds a consistency that can shape generations. The way we show up for others is, in the end, what endures. Julie’s leadership is not the kind that demands attention, but the kind people instinctively follow.

“The produce industry is unlike any other. There’s a passion that exists within it—people genuinely believe in what they’re selling and who they’re selling it for. We know that increased produce consumption can change lives, and we’re proud to be part of the original health food movement,” Julie shares with me. “At Sysco, I’ve made lifelong friends and learned from some of the very best. I’ve had the privilege of working with incredibly talented people who care deeply about doing things the right way. Those relationships, those shared challenges, those moments when the whole team pulled together to make the impossible happen—those are what I’ll carry with me. This chapter has been meaningful because of the people. They’re what made the work worth doing every single day.”

It’s that sense of connection, of people first, that Julie returns to again and again. And from there, her perspective widens, grounding that passion in the deeper understanding of how every hand, every step, shapes the whole.

“One of the biggest lessons is that while we all have our individual roles, every single person along the way is

vital to our success. It starts with the ground, the seed, the fertilizer, the grower, the harvesting crews, the cooler teams, the loaders, the drivers, so many touch points before a product ever reaches a customer,” Julie begins as I ask her about the clarity that has formed over decades of experience in both the grind and the glory of it all. “It takes every one of those steps being executed perfectly for beautiful produce to end up on someone’s plate, usually within a week at most. Professionally, that taught me humility and respect. Personally, it taught me gratitude. This industry is a chain of people who care deeply about what they do, and that’s something I’ve never taken for granted.”

That same awareness of every hand in the process extends beyond operations and into relationships. Many of Julie’s colleagues describe her as not only a strong business partner, but also a trusted friend and mentor. Such a relationship can be fragile in the best of times for many, a constant act of balancing, a fierce focus on the livelihood of all parties. But with Julie, it’s as if the nature of such acts is a ritual, a tradition she holds close to her heart. This high standing she holds relationships in within fresh produce is something that Julie holds dear, and something she hopes remains in the foundation of who we are.

For her, that foundation has always come back to one thing: relationships.

“This has always been a relationship business, and I hope it always is. I’ve been described as tough but fair,

WORDS FROM JULIE’S COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS



**RICH DAGHMAN,
BOARD CHAIRMAN, GIUMARRA
COMPANIES AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER, BRIGHTER BITES**

“Julie’s retirement marks the closure of a highly impactful chapter, not just for Sysco, but for the produce industry. Having had the privilege to work with her I have a personal perspective on her journey and the legacy she leaves behind. She always demonstrated a rare combination of strategic clarity, emotional intelligence, and an unwavering commitment to doing things the right way. Under her leadership, Sysco strengthened grower relationships, expanded sourcing capabilities, and enhanced consistency and quality. She pushed the organization to think differently about how produce could drive value and differentiation. Her superpower was clearly her focus on people. She understood that strong teams are the foundation of sustained success, and she made that happen!”



**LISA MCNEEGE,
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,
FOODSERVICE AND
INGREDIENT SALES, GRIMMWAY
PRODUCE GROUP**

“Julie and I have essentially grown up together in this industry over the past 25 years. We both started out on the sales desk and somehow figured it out along the way, she at Sysco and me supplying her and team with their carrot needs. We have worked through our share of challenges, had a lot of conversations that only made our partnership stronger, and shared more than a few bottles of wine over the years. I still laugh thinking about her saying that we should retire at the same time; she clearly had the better plan. I could not be more excited for Julie as she settles into this next chapter, enjoying peaceful days, more time with family, and making memories with her precious grandbabies. Best wishes, Jules!”



MIKE WAY,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
PRIME TIME PRODUCE

"I have had the privilege of selling produce to Julie Olivarria since 1992, in a time when business relationships were built on handshakes and trust. Julie has always been a customer I am proud to work with—she embodies integrity and has consistently proven herself in this challenging industry. Through hard work and dedication, she has achieved remarkable success and ascended to the top at Sysco, serving as an example for others at every stage of her career. Julie is not only a valued customer but also a friend, and Prime Time is proud of our years of doing business together. All of us at Prime Time wish Julie the very best in her next chapter and sincerely thank her for being such a trusted partner."



DANIEL LORD,
DIRECTOR OF BROADLINE
SALES - FOODSERVICE,
TAYLOR FARMS

"Julie Olivarria's retirement really feels like the end of an era for me. She's one of those rare people who can step into a complicated situation and quickly get to what truly matters. Her breadth of experience across the industry and her ability to cut through the noise have always set her apart. From her humble beginnings in grower/shipper sales to her rise to Vice President at a Fortune 500 company, Julie has had an incredibly impressive journey. I've genuinely appreciated the opportunity to work with Julie over the years, and I'm grateful to also call her a friend."



RICK RUSSO,
GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY
STRATEGIST, CHURCH
BROTHERS FARMS

"I first met Julie 30 years ago when she was a sales coordinator at NewStar Fresh Foods. She definitely wasn't a wallflower, and it wasn't unheard of for her to drop a one-liner on you that would leave you speechless. Her fearless spirit and work ethic quickly earned her a larger role, and then led to what became a fantastic career with Sysco. To one of my closest friends in the business, congratulations on a great career and for setting such a strong example for the women following you."

and I take a lot of pride in that. For me, the balance comes from being consistent—showing up the same way whether we're negotiating a contract or sharing a meal," Julie tells me. "People want to work with people they trust. They want to know you'll tell them the truth, that you'll stand by your word, and that you'll be there when things get hard. I've always believed that strong relationships make strong business, not the other way around."

For Julie, those relationships were never abstract. They were lived, built over time, and in many ways, took hold early, in that first moment she saw herself in this industry

"In my early 20s, I applied for a role at a produce company, and while I waited to be interviewed, I could see and hear the sales office in action. I guess you could say it was love at first sight, because from that moment, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I've always loved the fast pace, the fact that no two days or challenges are ever the same, and most of all, the people. That combination hooked me early and kept me here for more than 30 years," Julie reflects.

Such a meaningful journey has been made more beautiful by mentors and lessons, successes and failures. None that Julie could imagine growing without.

"There have been so many impactful people in my career. From early mentors who taught me the fundamentals of the business, to growers who showed me what true passion for the land looks like, to colleagues at Sysco who pushed me, challenged me, and believed in me," Julie expresses. "I've been fortunate to work with leaders who gave me opportunities before I believed I was ready, and partners who treated me like family. Their influence shaped not just my career, but the kind of leader I tried to become, one who listens, one who learns, and one who lifts others up the way I was lifted."

This dynamic, loving, and also accountable form of leadership, learned and given, is something that Julie hopes she has encouraged and supported in her team and in those who are just coming into their commitment to fresh produce.

"I learned early on to say what you mean and mean what you say. This industry is built on long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships, not transactional ones. When we grow together, we accomplish more," Julie remembers. I can feel the richness of her legacy surfacing in her mind as she makes space to share her wisdom with me. "Trust is earned through consistency, showing up the same way in good times and bad. Be transparent, be accountable, and remember that every decision you make affects someone else in the chain. When leaders model that mindset, it creates a culture where people feel valued and connected."



“ ”

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COREY GRISWOLD,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER, PROSOURCE

"The working relationship I have enjoyed with Julie has been one of the great privileges of my career.

What began as a valued customer relationship became a lasting friendship—one built on trust, mutual respect, and shared experience. Julie has always brought integrity, vision, toughness, and a much-needed sense of humor to every crazy situation the produce industry has thrown our way! I hope Julie can enjoy unlimited time with her family (especially her grandchildren) in her retirement!! Thank you for all the years of partnership and friendship!!"



**RANNEL
SANTIAGO,**
DIRECTOR OF PRODUCE,
SYSKO

"Julie is the kind of leader who brings out the very best in people. By recognizing individual strengths and thoughtfully coaching areas of growth, she built confident, high-performing teams and lasting relationships. A true role model for our industry and the next generation of leaders, she will be deeply missed. I'm so excited for her next chapter with her family and incredibly grateful for her lasting impact."



JAMIE KITZ,
DIRECTOR OF
INDUSTRY RELATIONS,
INTERNATIONAL FRESH
PRODUCE ASSOCIATION

"I just love Julie's approach to work and to life. I have known her to describe herself as a 'more the merrier' kind of gal. This reflects in her leadership and building impactful teams—she truly delights in people and sees their strengths. Her sense of community and lifting others up also has been inspiring. I'll never forget her calling me and saying, 'Jamie, what are we going to do to keep young women professionals in our area engaged in produce?' What a nudge! That sparked immediate action on our part. Her career is defined by dedication, heart, and a core approach I have heard her share with many: If there is an opportunity you are pursuing, never take 'no' as the final answer. I wish my good friend Julie and her family all the best in her next journey. The future is bright."



**VINCE
BALLESTEROS,
RIVER FRESH FARMS**

"Congratulations, Julie, on an amazing career and what is sure to be a wonderful bit of rest. From a grower-shipper perspective, Julie has always stood out for her strong understanding of both the shipper and the buyer. She brings a practical, balanced approach and a genuine respect for the people behind the product. As she retires, it's clear her impact on the industry and the relationships she's built will be lasting. Julie has been a trusted voice and partner, and she will certainly be missed."



**TOM FERGUSON,
OWNER, CLASSIC FRUIT**

"Julie and I were speaking last fall, and it sounded like she still had many years left in the tank, so it was very surprising to hear the news of her upcoming retirement. Being the same age and both of us having young grandchildren, I could not be happier for Julie as she moves into this next chapter of her life—one where she can fully enjoy time with her family. Having spent over 35 years in the produce industry, I have met many great people along the way, and Julie is definitely one of the very best. I have been fortunate to work with Julie during her years of leadership at Sysco, and she has always been a consummate professional. The positive personality she exudes is contagious to everyone around her, and that could not be more evident than in the loyalty and respect of those who were part of her team. We have been fortunate to share many meals and plenty of laughs together, and I am confident those moments will continue even as she enjoys retirement with her husband, Paul. Congratulations Julie, on all that you have accomplished throughout your career, and thank you for the friendship you have brought to Ellie and I."

“ ”


SAY YES.

*SO MANY DOORS OPENED FOR ME
BECAUSE I RAISED MY HAND AND
TOOK ON CHALLENGES OUTSIDE
OF MY ROLE. I NEVER LOOKED
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I LOOKED AT IT AS LEARNING,
GROWING, AND BECOMING MORE
VALUABLE TO THE TEAM.*



For newcomers entering the fresh produce industry today, building a meaningful and lasting career is not for the faint of heart. But it will be a worthy challenge and an unending gift.

"Say YES. So many doors opened for me because I raised my hand and took on challenges outside of my role. I never looked at it as doing extra work; I looked at it as learning, growing, and becoming more valuable to the team," Julie describes. "This industry rewards curiosity, resilience, and heart. If you show up willing to work hard, willing to learn, and willing to build relationships, you'll find a career that gives back far more than you put in."

And so, while we celebrate Julie Olivarria and all she has given to this industry, it is not with a sense of finality, but of gratitude and continuation. Congratulations, Julie, on a remarkable career. The door you helped shape in fresh produce remains open, and your presence and example will continue to guide those who follow. 

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HIGHLINE
EAT A MUSHROOM. BE SUPER.

Where MUSHROOMS Meet MOMENTUM



By Anne Allen

Some companies evolve because of external forces compelling them to do so; others evolve because they see a roadmap to the future, one in which they are shaping the guideposts for potential innovations. When Highline Mushrooms rebranded in 2025, the company saw an opportunity to redefine how mushrooms appear on the shelf. Since then, the rebrand's vibrant, bold, and color-forward palette has driven momentum for the company and its retail partners.

Now, Highline Mushrooms is focused on scaling the category through supply, innovation, and accessibility.



“The rebrand has made mushrooms easier to shop for and to understand, which is helping drive more confident purchasing decisions both in-store and online,” shares Sabrina Pokomandy, Director of Business Development and Marketing, as we dive into talking about how the company is driving this current mushroom boom. “From a consumer standpoint, we’ve seen a clear increase in interaction across our digital platforms, with more shoppers engaging with our content, recipes, and product offerings.”

On the retailer side, the response has been just as impactful.

“Retailers have bought into the rebrand and are leaning in proactively, whether that’s through stronger merchandising, expanded assortment, or supporting programs that encourage trial,” Sabrina says. “There’s a shared understanding that growing the mushroom category means making it more visible, more relevant, and easier for shoppers to engage with—and the rebrand is helping unlock that.”

Another reason for Highline’s success could be the ethos behind the rebrand itself. Intended to bring more consumers into the mushroom fold, it delivers a bold, color-forward palette across every touchpoint to build long-term loyalty with the shoppers who will define its future.

“The rebrand moved quickly from concept to execution—and is already

delivering impact across the business,” Sabrina adds. “We’ve successfully rolled it out across North America with full alignment across packaging, digital, in-store merchandising, and customer programs. It’s also been recognized at the industry level, including winning Best Rebrand at the 2025 Besties Awards, which reinforced that the new identity is resonating not just creatively, but commercially.”

More importantly, it’s opened the door to better conversations with retailers.

“We’re seeing stronger alignment on planogram strategy, shelf organization, and how to introduce more value-added solutions into the set. The rebrand has given us a clearer platform to support category growth—not just refresh how it looks,” she says.

In addition to the rebrand momentum, Highline is leveraging partnerships to expand its operations and strengthen brand recognition.

“The upcoming launch of our Farm of the Future in Leamington is a major step forward,” Sabrina shares. “It will allow us to improve consistency, strengthen forecasting, and support long-term growth—especially as demand continues to evolve across both conventional and organic segments.”

“THERE’S A SHARED UNDERSTANDING THAT GROWING THE MUSHROOM CATEGORY MEANS MAKING IT MORE VISIBLE, MORE RELEVANT, AND EASIER FOR SHOPPERS TO ENGAGE WITH—AND THE REBRAND IS HELPING UNLOCK THAT.”

Sabrina Pokomandy, Director of Business Development and Marketing, Highline Mushrooms



BEFORE



Focused on making it easier to shop for and use mushrooms, Highline Mushrooms has also expanded its product offerings under the new Fresh Gourmet Series, which includes the Grill Mate Kit, Cream of Mushroom Soup Kit, and Stuffed Mushrooms.

“These products were developed with a clear focus: helping retailers bring more meal solutions into the category and helping consumers find easier ways to use mushrooms,” Sabrina explains. “We’re seeing a shift where shoppers are looking for convenience, but still want fresh, high-quality ingredients. So instead of adding more of the same, we focused on meal assembly solutions—products that simplify cooking and create new usage occasions.”

The partnership with Instacart is key to this strategy.

“Partnering with Instacart allows us to extend our presence beyond the physical shelf—showing up in search, driving discovery, and converting shoppers in real time,” she says. “It’s about meeting consumers wherever they shop and removing friction from the purchase decision.”

Every item in the Fresh Gourmet Series is designed to reduce prep, inspire meal ideas, and make mushrooms more central to the plate—whether that’s a quick weeknight dinner, a side for grilling, or something ready to entertain with.



AFTER

“THROUGH EXPANDED DIGITAL ACTIVATION AND PARTNERSHIPS LIKE INSTACART, WE’RE REACHING SHOPPERS WHEREVER THEY ARE AND INTRODUCING THE HIGHLINE [MUSHROOMS] BRAND IN HIGH-INTENT MOMENTS...”


“For retailers, this creates clear differentiation and trade-up opportunities within the set,” Sabrina adds. “For consumers, it answers the question of how to use mushrooms, which is one of the biggest unlocks for category growth.”

Throughout this flurry of expansion, accessibility has remained top of mind for Highline.

“Through expanded digital activation and partnerships like Instacart, we’re reaching shoppers wherever they are and introducing the Highline brand in high-intent moments—whether that’s on the digital shelf or in-store,” Sabrina

emphasizes. “It’s helping us bring new consumers into the category.”

Highline Mushrooms always operates with the future in mind. It does something remarkable in its long-term strategies: planning not for tomorrow’s challenges, but for those ten years from now.

So, I know the company will make good on its promise of bringing new customers to the category. In fact, the latest innovation to come from Highline Mushrooms is probably already in the works. 



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PRODUCE PULSE

Fresh Takes Flight

By Peggy Packer

When the ever-so-popular “beer flight” concept made its debut in the world of food, I knew exciting things were in store for fresh produce. From delicious mashed potato spreads elevated by an array of toppings to fresh Jalapeños stuffed with everything from cream cheese to hot Cheddar, consumers have been eager to welcome this creative take to the culinary scene, with fresh produce leading the charge.

Sparked in early 2025 and only continuing to swell, shoppers’ growing interest in food flights is creating opportunities in the produce department, as the fun food trend is a premium source of inspiration for cross-merchandising strategies and themed displays. A creative display introducing shoppers to the potato flight could drive multi-category growth by cross-merchandising with peppers, onions, tomatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, and other toppings.

Even spotlighting sweet recipes like a waffle or ice cream flight can boost produce traffic by promoting fresh fruit like berries, bananas, peaches, and mangos as toppings.

The ideas for a fresh-forward food flight are virtually limitless—which means so are the cross-merchandising opportunities.

Enticing in-store displays are increasingly crucial for capturing the attention of today’s shopper. According to the International Fresh Produce Association, “in-store displays and promotions sway produce purchases more effectively than print ads, online banners, or social media,” emphasizing that elevating produce’s visibility with strategic merchandising is a must*. In addition to influencing department displays, the food flight trend can be harnessed as a vehicle for in-store sampling demos, which is another effective strategy for driving impulse buys.

Beyond the physical produce department, retailers can reach consumers digitally with food flight recipes that place produce front and center. Recipe inspiration significantly motivates purchases when engaged with both pre-trip and in-store, according to consumer insights from Potatoes USA**. Digital grocery lists, shoppable recipes, and effective cross-merchandising displays can help bridge the gap between digital recipe inspiration and purchase.

Merchandising inspiration is all around us, and the emergence of the popular food flight brings produce into the spotlight in an exciting new way. Don’t believe me? Do a quick social media search yourself and witness the abundance of fresh!

So, what are you waiting for? Have fun, get creative, and watch produce take flight! 🍴

HERE ARE SOME CATEGORIES ALREADY PRIMED FOR TAKEOFF...

- Potatoes
- Peppers
- Sweet potatoes
- Heirloom tomatoes
- Sweet corn
- Onions
- Plantains
- Avocados
- Mushrooms
- Cucumbers
- Apples
- Peaches
- Pineapples
- Dates
- Carrots

*“The fun food trend is a premium source of inspiration for **CROSS-MERCHANDISING STRATEGIES** and themed displays.”*

- Peggy Packer



WHERE VOICES POWER PROGRESS

BY CHANDLER JAMES

In a world that often rewards us for falling in line, Superfresh Growers® empowers its employees to speak up.

It's been said time and time again that fresh produce is an industry that thrives on collaborative thinking, and Superfresh is one supply-side pro truly putting those words into action. The company takes collaboration a step further than multi-company promotions—it invites everyone, from the field to the packinghouse to the corporate office, to bring their voice to the table.

A perfect example of this company-wide mindset is Superfresh's continued investment in Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) certification. As Derek Tweedy, Vice President of Operations, tells me, Superfresh was actually one of the first grower-shippers to work with EFI. Robert Kershaw, Chief Executive

Officer of Superfresh, began speaking with Kevin Doyle, former Chief Executive Officer at EFI, in the 2010s, brainstorming how the program would work for Washington State and the treefruit industry as a whole.

"Supporting our teams and running good operations has always been a priority for us, and EFI gives us more structure and accountability around that work," Derek says. "It helps us identify issues earlier, involve employees in solutions, and make changes that improve safety, communication, and efficiency across our operations."



DEREK TWEEDY,
VICE PRESIDENT
OF OPERATIONS,
SUPERFRESH
GROWERS®

Superfresh has been EFI-certified since 2021, continuing to move toward 100 percent EFI-certified farms for corporate orchards. In 2026, the supplier has significantly expanded EFI certification, now with the majority of cherry acreage certified, in addition to already significant EFI-certified apple and pear acreage.

Derek divulges that more EFI-certified acreage will be added for apples in 2026, with blueberries to follow in 2027. The long-term goal is to make EFI the operating standard across Superfresh farms and facilities.

"EFI has helped us put structure around something we've always cared about: supporting our teams and running strong operations. It's improved communication, strengthened leadership teams, and helped us make faster, better decisions. Most importantly, it's given employees a bigger voice in improving how we work," Derek relays.

I had the opportunity to hear from various members of the Superfresh team about how the expanded EFI certifications are impacting their day-to-day work life. A common theme experienced across every testimonial is that team members feel empowered to use their voice.

"One of the biggest changes we've seen with EFI is a shift in ownership," Derek points out. "Employees are no longer just following a process—they're helping improve it. They're speaking up, identifying challenges, and being part of the solution. That engagement is what makes the program successful."

It is rare, in this life, to work for a company that honors the voice of the individual as much as it prioritizes the big-picture vision. We here at *The Snack* are proud to bring a handful of those integral voices to these pages:

FRANCISCO GARCIA,

PACKING SUPERVISOR

"Since the EFI program started at Superfresh, things feel better inside the packing facility. People have more confidence to talk with supervisors and share ideas. Leadership feels more even, and communication is better. We are solving more problems and fixing small issues before they become big ones. We also made changes to be more efficient, such as reducing the number of steps workers take when carrying apple boxes between work areas. People feel more comfortable speaking with the EFI team and finding solutions together. Employees feel heard, respected, and more comfortable working in roles where they are more effective."

JACKIE SALCEDO,

FOOD SAFETY AND GLOBAL
G.A.P. MANAGER

"EFI has helped bring our teams closer together. Employees feel more comfortable coming to leadership, voicing concerns, and sharing ideas. When concerns are raised, we take action, implement suggestions, and fix issues. That has built trust, and it continues to generate new ideas and improvements across our operations."

Training has been a big part of EFI, especially around harassment prevention and workplace expectations. All crew leaders are trained, and we continue to revisit these topics through monthly education. We've seen a real change in comfort level—employees are more willing to speak up and have conversations they might not have had before.

One of the most important parts of EFI is showing employees that leadership is listening and cares about their day-to-day work. Recently, orchard employees requested a new clipping tool to make stem clipping easier and more ergonomic, and we implemented it. We also upgraded picking bags with more padding to protect both the apples and the employees' backs. These changes help reduce injuries and create healthier, happier teams."



MICHELE MAGANA,
SAFETY AND TRAINING
COORDINATOR

“EFI has helped bring employees and supervisors together. Employees feel heard, they have more confidence, and they are speaking up more to share their opinions and ideas.

EFI has also helped improve our food safety culture. It’s not just something we have to do; it’s part of our culture now. People understand why food safety matters, and they take pride in doing things the right way.

With EFI, communication is better between employees and supervisors. People feel more comfortable talking, sharing ideas, and working together to solve problems.”

**“SUPPORTING OUR
TEAMS AND RUNNING
GOOD OPERATIONS
HAS ALWAYS BEEN
A PRIORITY FOR US,
BUT EFI GIVES US
MORE STRUCTURE
AND ACCOUNTABILITY
AROUND THAT WORK.”**

- DEREK TWEEDY, VICE PRESIDENT OF
OPERATIONS, SUPERFRESH GROWERS®

YANET SANCHEZ,
SENIOR HUMAN RESOURCES
MANAGER

“EFI has strengthened communication across our teams in many ways. For example, we now send safety newsletters by text so employees can stay informed and connected more regularly. It has helped us keep communication consistent and accessible for everyone.

One of the biggest impacts of EFI has been exposure and understanding. Employees are learning not just their job, but how their work connects to the full process, from the orchard to the production line. When people understand the bigger picture and why fruit quality matters at every step, they take even more pride in their work.

We have been focused on bringing more exposure to our teammates. We’ve also created more cross-training opportunities. Pickers are touring the production lines and seeing what happens after harvest. That exposure helps employees understand how important their role is and how every step affects the next team.

We’ve been very intentional about building leadership through EFI. Team members were nominated and selected to represent different groups of employees. The goal is to grow leadership within our own teams and make sure every group has a voice.

One recent improvement that came from EFI was around material resupply. Now, more employees are empowered to restock materials as needed instead of waiting for a manager. It’s a small change, but it makes a big difference in efficiency and shows trust in our employees.

One of the most meaningful moments for me was when our team nominated Carlos Mariscal for EFI Farmworker of the Year. Leadership took the time to interview him and hear his story, which showed him how much he is valued. He told us he felt proud just to be nominated and that he could share that moment with his children. That is the kind of culture we are trying to build, where people feel seen, valued, and proud of their work.”



EDELMIRA GODOY,
PLU MANAGER

“I asked for plates to be added in the PLU bank to make the work easier and more organized, and maintenance installed them right away. It made the area more efficient, clean, and tidy, and it made me feel heard. I also worked with the EFI team to add barcode holders in more areas, which made packing easier for employees. EFI helps us bring ideas forward and turn them into real improvements.”

**JOSE MARTIN DE
LO REYES,**
FORKLIFT DRIVER

“Since EFI started, there has been more communication. In the shipping area, things that were needed are getting done, and the work is more efficient. We have also made improvements to forklift safety to ensure employees are safe. That is very important to all of us.”

Looking back at those early EFI conversations in the 2010s, I wonder whether Robert and Kevin knew that their vision for a safer and more equitable work environment would one day extend to every corner of the Superfresh Growers organization. With momentum continuing to build across operations, I have no doubt that vision will be realized sooner than we may think. 🍎

Libations

For All Occasions

PEAR AND FENNEL FIZZ



By Jordan Okumura-Wright

Photography by Reid Monsma

I love a libation that lingers, changes as it moves across the palate. Call it an adventure in the senses, but when an experience arises at the intersection of flavor, smell, texture, temperature, and sight, it truly is one to remember.

At first sip, the Pear and Fennel Fizz is familiar—soft pear, a touch of citrus—but then something unexpected lingers. Fennel, often reserved for the plate, finds its way into the glass, bringing a gentle anise note that feels both refreshing and refined. The Pear and Fennel Fizz is a reminder that fresh produce doesn't have to stay in its lane. It can surprise, elevate, and even anchor the occasion. Balanced with

lemon and honey and lifted with a splash of sparkle, this drink feels as comfortable at a dinner party as it does in a quiet moment at home—proof that complexity can come straight from the field.

Imagine pears, fennel, and honey merchandised within a Topo Chico display. The vibrant yellows and greens are perfect for spring and for drawing the eye and the crowds. The opportunities for cross-product promotion are endless.

I've grown past having the hot burn of a little gin in my drink, but please consider it if you want a little piney bliss for your palate as the sun sets on this recipe. [S](#)



Here's how to make it... Prep Time: 10 mins Servings: 1

INGREDIENTS

- 3 oz** pear nectar or fresh pear juice
- 2 oz** chilled fennel tea (or **1–2 tbsp** lightly muddled fresh fennel bulb)
- ½ oz** fresh lemon juice
- ½ oz** honey (or honey simple syrup)
- Sliced fennel (as much as you like)
- Sparkling water
- Ice

DIRECTIONS

1. If using fennel tea, steep sliced fennel in hot water, then chill completely.
2. In a shaker or mixing glass, combine pear juice, fennel tea (or muddled fennel), lemon juice, and honey. Stir or shake gently until well mixed.
3. Strain into a glass filled with ice.
4. Top with sparkling water and give a light stir.
5. Garnish and serve immediately.

Optional garnish: thin pear slice, fennel frond, or lemon twist



WTF DO I DO WITH Del Rey Avocados ?

{ what the fork }



SUMMER AVOCADO ROLLS

INGREDIENTS

2 ripe Del Rey Avocados, sliced
8 rice paper wrappers
1 cup shredded carrots
1 cup cucumber, julienned
1 cup purple cabbage, shredded
½ cup fresh mint leaves
½ cup fresh cilantro
½ cup cooked rice noodles, optional
 Butter lettuce or Romaine leaves

PEANUT DIPPING SAUCE

¼ cup creamy peanut butter
1 tbsp soy sauce
1 tbsp lime juice
1 tsp honey or maple syrup
1 tsp sriracha, optional
2–3 tbsp warm water, to thin

Prep Time: 30 mins
Servings: 8 rolls

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Slice avocado and prep all vegetables so everything is ready to assemble.
- 2 Dip one rice paper wrapper into warm water for about 5–10 seconds until soft but still slightly firm.
- 3 Lay the wrapper flat and add lettuce, rice noodles (if using), avocado slices, carrots, cucumber, cabbage, and herbs.
- 4 Fold the bottom over the filling, fold in the sides, and roll tightly.
- 5 Repeat the process with remaining wrappers.
- 6 Whisk peanut butter, soy sauce, lime juice, honey, and sriracha. Add warm water until smooth and dip-ready. Enjoy!

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WTF DO I DO WITH { what the fork } Natural Delights® Medjool Dates ?



MEDJOOL DATE AND PERSIMMON FRUIT CAKE

Recipe by Shweta Garg

INGREDIENTS

FRUIT BASE

2 Natural Delights® Medjool Dates, pitted
1 Fuyu persimmon, finely diced
1 **tbsp** candied orange peel, finely diced
1 **tbsp** all-purpose flour (for coating fruit)

½ **tsp** ground cinnamon
¼ **tsp** ground cardamom
¼ **tsp** ground nutmeg
¼ **tsp** salt

Prep Time: 60 mins
Cook Time: 60 mins
Servings: 8

DRY INGREDIENTS

1 **cup** all-purpose flour
¼ **cup** whole milk powder
½ **tsp** baking powder
¼ **tsp** baking soda
1 **tsp** orange zest

WET INGREDIENTS

½ **cup** unsalted butter, softened
⅓ **cup** granulated sugar
2 **large** eggs, room temperature
1 **tsp** vanilla extract
½ **cup** whole milk
1 **tbsp** orange juice

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DIRECTIONS

- 1 Finely dice the Medjool dates and persimmon. Toss with 1 **tbsp** flour to lightly coat and prevent sinking. Set aside.
- 2 Candy the orange peel (if making from scratch): Remove the white pith from orange peels and finely dice. Simmer peels in 1 **cup** sugar and 1 **cup** water for 45 minutes, until translucent. Drain, cool, and toss in additional granulated sugar before using.
- 3 In a large bowl, cream the butter and granulated sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in eggs one at a time, then mix in vanilla extract, milk, and orange juice until fully combined.
- 4 Sift together all dry ingredients. Fold gently into the wet ingredients until just incorporated. Gently fold in the prepared fruit mixture until evenly distributed.
- 5 Transfer batter to a parchment-lined loaf pan. Bake at 350° F (175° C) for 45–55 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean or with moist crumbs.
- 6 Allow the cake to cool completely before slicing. Serve with tea and enjoy!

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