

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the

# SNACK

ISSUE 107 SEPT 2026

## Both Sides of the Table

**JAY SCHNEIDER**

ACME/SAFEWAY

*pg 36*

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**I** HAVE HEARD THAT MINE IS THE FIRST GENERATION OF PARENTING AND REPARING AT ONCE—SHAPING THE FUTURES THAT RELY ON US WHILE DISCOVERING WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE VALUE, AND WHERE WE'RE WILLING TO TRANSFORM. It has changed the way I watch the world and feels so appropriate for our industry at this moment as well.

Everywhere I look these days, I find evidence of that same precarious balance: two opposing ways of being pulled taut against each other, a pendulum swinging wide, searching for a stillness that keeps slipping out of reach. I find it in the books I read, the shows I watch, in the stories from companies striving for longevity in a time when family generations, succession planning, and a far horizon are questions instead of expectations.

As a person in my 40s, I stand at this bridge as well. Trying to decide what to learn and what to unlearn. There are traditions in fresh produce that made us who we are—the relationship building, the resilience that coalesces when we come together—and they were built to carry wisdom forward, not to sit as relics on a shelf.

But our industry is moving along separate roads these days, with new generations coming in carrying different experiences, different backgrounds, different studies, different ways of prioritizing connection in relationships—some who haven't cut their teeth in the produce department, who haven't yet felt the weight today's suppliers carry. And still, we are tugged in multiple directions, between transactions and connection, between efficiency and the time-honored art of long conversation.

These things are not opposites; they are not fighting against each other, but I do believe we live in a time of change when we need to ask ourselves, in the same moment: What is worth preserving, and what is worth reinventing?



How do we find the bridge between stewardship and progress, between the handshake and the email, between the laughter around a table and the machines that help us thrive, understand, and manage our world better? Maybe by simply carrying the question forward, we can find a way to hold the paradoxes of our times.

Where do our values hold true, where must they evolve? What is our responsibility to our industry and to each other?

I often forget about the power of looking into someone else's eyes while they tell me their story. How I grow when listening to how they grew, how we can see something new together we could not have seen without the crisis, without the conversation, without the connection.

I always forget, as I talk myself into one thing and out of another, that two opposing ideas can be true at the same time.

I cannot find the step ahead without knowing where our industry has come from, and I cannot understand the treasures of the past without seeing the challenges and the changes in our future.

What we choose to protect and what we choose to transform, brick by brick and stone by stone, is the foundation those who follow will rely on for its steadiness, and its ability to carry them forward. 🌱

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

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DEPARTMENTS

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FRESH FOLK

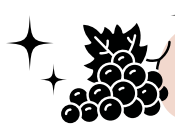
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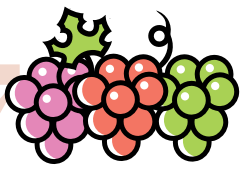
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**¼ tsp** salt  
**¼ tsp** pepper  
**½ cup** panko breadcrumbs  
**¼ cup** grated Parmesan cheese  
**1 tsp** Italian seasoning

**Prep Time:** 5 mins  
**Cook Time:** 15 mins  
**Servings:** 1

## DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 400° F.
- 2 Cut the shallots lengthwise and remove papery outer layer. Peel the layers apart, carefully, keeping them as intact as possible. Cut any larger pieces so they are 1½–2" long and ½" wide.
- 3 Place the shallots in a large bowl and toss with the olive oil, paprika, salt, and pepper.
- 4 Combine the breadcrumbs, Parmesan, and Italian seasoning in a bowl. Add the breadcrumb mixture to the shallots and toss to combine.
- 5 Place the shallots in a single layer on a large baking sheet.
- 6 Bake for 12–15 minutes until desired crispiness is reached. Serve with your favorite dip and enjoy!



To learn more about Peri & Sons Farms®, visit [www.periandsons.com](http://www.periandsons.com)

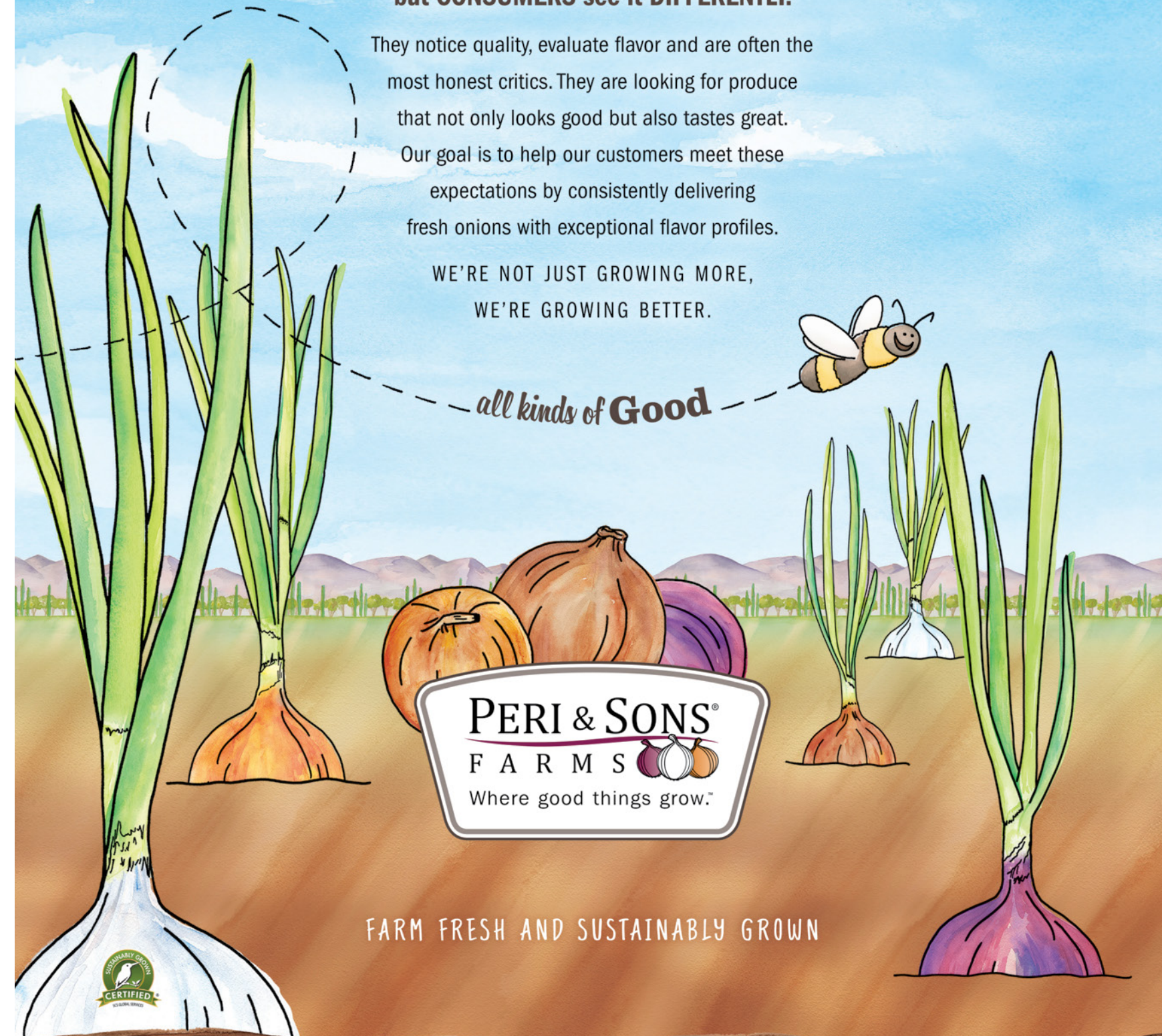
# FOCUSED on FLAVOR

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John Newell and  
Steven Newell,  
Co-Founders,  
WINDSET FARMS®

# 30 YEARS

*in the Greenhouse*

By PEGGY PACKER





What would life around you look like if you ventured three decades back in time?

For Steven Newell and John Newell, Co-Founders of WINDSET FARMS®, a jump back to 1996 uncovers the catalyst of a life-changing endeavor. The beginning of an ambitious and soon-to-be-accomplished dream.

“We grew up on our parents’ poultry farm, so agriculture was always part of our lives,” Steven, President and Chief Executive Officer, says, taking me to the very beginning of it all. “When we decided we wanted to go into business together, we started looking at things we were both genuinely interested in: technology, farming, anything on the leading edge.”

With their respective backgrounds in hand—Steven through the Quantum Shift Entrepreneurship program at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario, and John with a Bachelor of Science in Microbiology from the University of British Columbia—the two brothers tactically explored several directions before landing on hydroponic greenhouse vegetables.

In 1996, Steven and John ignited the Windset Farms legacy with a four-acre bell pepper greenhouse on their parents’ property in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

“There was a learning curve in the early years,” John, Chief Operating Officer, recalls. “Controlled Environment Agriculture is highly technical, and on top of that, we wanted to brand it, market it, and

sell it—something that wasn’t very common on the West Coast at the time. What helped most was getting out and talking to people. We met with experts and growers from across the globe. You have to be willing to ask questions and continue learning, which is something we still embrace today.”

Perseverance may be the single biggest lesson from those early years, both industry vets agree, along with mastering the art of taking risks.

“Early advice from family and friends to take risks while you’re young really stuck with us. Growing up with entrepreneurial parents, we understood taking risks is part of the journey—but doing the hard work and research to make informed decisions always helped steer us in the right direction,” Steven adds. “We also learned not to bite off more than you can chew: Stay focused

“THE INDUSTRY KEEPS EVOLVING, AND YOU HAVE TO EVOLVE WITH IT.”

*John Newell,*  
Chief Operating Officer,  
WINDSET FARMS®



Jeff Madu, Steven Newell, and John Newell - Windset Delta, British Columbia, facility (2011)



“AT THE END OF THE DAY, FLAVOR IS WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE BACK.”

*John Newell*



and keep improving one step at a time. That mindset has shaped the foundation of everything we do—a commitment to consistent excellence, growth, and innovation. It’s what has driven the company forward over the past 30 years, and it’s just as relevant today as it was when we started.”

Alongside this foundational commitment, location has also been a vital advantage for Windset Farms and its customers. The grower’s owned facilities, located close to major markets across Canada and the United States, allow it to harvest, pack, and ship product within 24 to 48 hours. Reinforced by an extensive partner-grower network in British Columbia and Mexico that enables flexible regional balancing and continuity of supply, this proximity supports freshness, shelf performance, and reliable retail execution.

“A lot of our competitive advantage comes down to decisions we made about where and how to operate—climate, location, access to resources, and labor. These things have given us a real foundation to build on,” John tells me. “When we moved our headquarters to Delta, BC, one of the key factors in

selecting that location was the amount of sunlight the region receives, which is more than anywhere else in the area. We applied the same thinking when we expanded to Santa Maria, California, where a favorable climate supports year-round production without supplemental lighting. That facility is now the largest single-site vegetable greenhouse in the United States.”

From there, it’s all about staying on top of technology, sustainability, and flavor, John says.

“The industry keeps evolving, and you have to evolve with it. Our goal has always been to grow with the least possible impact, using the best available tools to do more while using less,” he explains. “Windset recently received the Power Smart Champion Award from BC Hydro for its commitment to energy conservation and innovation at our Delta facility. That recognition followed a significant investment in advanced

LED technology, which transformed Delta into Western North America’s largest LED-lit greenhouse facility, with significant expansion plans in the very near term. It’s a good example of what consistent excellence and innovation look like in practice.”

Windset Farms’ approach to innovation also extends to flavor. From identifying emerging preferences to trialing new varieties with trusted partners, the team continues to search for produce that delivers the right balance of flavor, quality, consistency, and performance. Whether developing new snacking concepts or refining existing favorites, every product decision begins with the goal of growing produce people genuinely enjoy eating.

“Innovation has always been about more than technology,” John assures. “It’s about finding better ways to serve the customer. That means working closely with our partners to evaluate new





Top: John Newell and Steven Newell breaking ground at Windset's first Abbotsford, British Columbia, greenhouse in 1996  
Bottom: John Newell (2002)



varieties, testing performance in our growing environments, and selecting products that deliver exceptional taste along with strong quality and yield. At the end of the day, flavor is what brings people back.”

Through three decades of growth, expansion, and incredible achievements, Windset Farms’ values remain unchanged and continue to influence the company’s leadership and team culture.

“Your people are your greatest asset. We believed that from the start, and it’s only become more true over time. Being welcoming—to our people, our partners, and new ideas—has always been central to how we operate,” Steven shares. “It shapes how we hire, how we lead, and how we think about growing the business. If you don’t have the right people around you, none of the rest of it works.”

Windset Farms also holds Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) certification and partners with Fair Trade-certified farms, reflecting its commitment to grow well, use resources responsibly, and treat people with respect. In addition, the grower’s desire to care for people extends beyond its employees, partners, and consumers, made evident by Windset’s various community impact initiatives.

“Community has always mattered to us. We make weekly donations to local food banks year-round, support local sports teams, and participate in community events focused on health and wellness,” John explains. “It’s important to us not only to grow healthy, nutritious produce, but to do what we can in our community to share the long-term benefits of eating well.

When I ask where the company plans to grow from here, Steven and John map out a long-term vision for Windset Farms.

“The direction is doing more with less. Future-proofing the business means future-proofing production costs and reducing our footprint at the same time, and you do that by using every resource as efficiently as possible,” Steven says. “Renewable energy is a big part of that picture, and so is continued local expansion. That’s what consistent excellence, growth, and innovation look like over the long-term. It’s an operating principle that keeps pushing us forward.”



**“YOUR PEOPLE ARE YOUR GREATEST ASSET. WE BELIEVED THAT FROM THE START, AND IT’S ONLY BECOME MORE TRUE OVER TIME.”**

*Steven Newell,*  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
WINDSET FARMS®

John agrees, explaining that the future of sustainable agriculture will live at the intersection of modern technology and working with what nature gives us.

“The farms that figure out how to bring those two things together, build strong enough teams to execute on it, and consistently deliver on taste, are the ones that are going to lead,” he emphasizes. “Our vision has always been to grow sustainably for our planet, and the next 30 years will be about living up to that in bigger and more meaningful ways. That’s where we want to be, and we believe we’re building the right foundation to get there.”

With three decades of success in their rearview—and many more ahead—the industry duo shares some words

of advice for fresh produce’s next generation of leaders.

“Stay true to yourself and what you’re good at. Don’t chase everything; figure out where your strengths are and build from there,” John says. “Think long-term. This industry rewards patience and consistency far more than shortcuts. And never stop seeking knowledge; the people who keep learning are the ones who keep improving.”

“Meaningful partnerships take time to develop, but they’re worth every bit of the effort,” adds Steven. “That commitment to growth, innovation, and genuine connection isn’t just good business advice—it’s a way of operating that compounds over time in ways you can’t fully anticipate when you’re starting

out. Those principles have served us well for 30 years, and we don’t see that changing. At the end of the day, we started this business to grow delicious, high-quality produce. The company has grown, products have been added, branding and varieties have evolved, but flavor has always remained the top priority. That part hasn’t changed, and it never will.”

If we were to travel 30 years back in time to that four-acre bell pepper greenhouse in Abbotsford, British Columbia, you wouldn’t see the decades-strong, multinational produce operation you see today.

What you would see, however, is the grit, dedication, and passion that made it all possible. 





**SEPTEMBER MVP**



**HIGHLIGHTS**

# Frank Camera

Director of Operations and Growth Strategies, Fresh Connect Produce

Time at Company: 8 Months

With Peggy Packer

**S**trong, hardworking, patient, and dependable. It's easy to see why Frank Camera likens the fast-paced produce sales industry to the powerful ox. With a 35-year career and a wealth of knowledge in what it takes to bring fresh produce to shelves, the industry vet has brought the buying and selling experience he gained throughout his journey to an exciting new role. Who is Fresh Connect Produce's newest Director of Operations and Growth Strategies, both at the desk and beyond? Read on to find out...

» What is a metaphor for your day-to-day work life?

"In sales, I would say it's like navigating a ship, especially over the past several years, with the new ways buyers are operating. Salespeople need to show they can adapt and take new routes. In my current role, it's like cultivating a garden, as we are a start-up and are currently laying the seeds for growth."

» Did you come to your role by accident or design? How so?

"I got my start in this industry 35 years ago in high school, growing up in farm country in Pennsylvania. While looking for my first job, I landed a position in the produce department of a small family retail chain. I worked there throughout high school and college. I went to school to be a teacher, but stayed in the industry after college, and caught the fever by accident. My journey has shown me many different sides of the business as I worked at the stores, in merchandising, managing retail, writing ads for independent retailers, buying, and selling—eventually holding positions like Vice President of Sales and Vice President of Operations."

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» What is one talent, interest, or skillset people might not know you have?

"For most people that I interact with, I don't think there are many surprises, as I am an open book. But for those reading this and just getting a glimpse of me, I have coached high school baseball for over 25 years and love building the team and creating a winning culture. However, I have a 4-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter, so I have now stepped back and am coaching tee-ball and coach-pitch softball."

» If sales were an animal, what would it be?

"An ox, as you need both stamina and reliability."

» What is the best advice you've received about your job/career?

"I was told early on to trust my gut and take calculated risks based on the information I had—that not everything would come out as planned, but the wins would be memorable, and the failures would be educational."

» Fill in the blank: "The next generation of produce professionals should \_\_\_\_."

"Never dismiss the need for real relationships. Don't just rely on technology for the answers. Talk to people, and let them get to know you while you learn about them. Find good mentors and consume all they have to give."

while you learn about them. Find good mentors and consume all they have to give."



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# Canadian THANKSGIVING SNACKCHAT

By Anne Allen

Spend any amount of time in this industry, and you'll immediately know the importance of giving thanks. Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand across the fresh produce sector. As our Northern neighbors celebrate Canadian Thanksgiving, we reached out to several industry friends to learn what this holiday means to them...



*Amanda Orr*

Communications Manager, Mastronardi Produce®

"When I'm entertaining for the holidays, I love putting out a board with different SUNSET® Bombs® tomatoes. Watching guests discover the diverse flavors of tomatoes is always a rewarding experience for those in the produce industry. People are genuinely surprised at the difference between Flavor Bombs®, Sugar Bombs®, Honey Bombs®, and Lolli Bombs®. With October being National Tomato Month, it's the perfect time to share the whole Bombs® lineup with shoppers and invite them to try the different flavors for themselves. After all, nothing brings family and friends together like good company and flavorful food. Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow Canadians."

*Randi Church*

Marketing Manager, WINDSET FARMS®

"This Thanksgiving, I'm especially grateful for the people behind every piece of produce we bring to the table. From our customers to our suppliers, our food bank partners, and everyone across the supply chain. It's not always visible, but every day I'm reminded of the care, effort, and dedication it takes as an industry to deliver fresh, healthy food to our communities. And that's something truly worth being thankful for."



*Carlos Visconti*

Chief Executive Officer, Red Sun Farms™

"Thanksgiving is a moment to slow down and reflect on the connections that sustain us, from the greenhouses where our food is grown to the tables where it's shared with family and friends. We're deeply thankful for the dedication of our teams across Canada, the U.S., and Mexico, and for the growers, partners, and communities who make it all possible. It's because of them that we can continue delivering fresh, flavorful produce to families, not just on Thanksgiving, but every day."

*Matt Quiring*

Senior Vice President, Brand, Products and Marketing, Nature Fresh Farms

"Thanksgiving for me is a reminder of how food brings people and communities together. Whether it's contributing to local initiatives, supporting our partners, or simply sitting around the table enjoying a great meal with family and friends, those moments of connection matter. At Nature Fresh Farms, we're thankful for the opportunity to grow fresh produce that helps create meaningful experiences and supports communities throughout the season and beyond."







## Kelsey Coon

Sales and Marketing Manager,  
Highline Mushrooms

"Thanksgiving is all about bringing people together, and mushrooms help make that happen. As more Canadians look for simple, versatile ingredients, mushrooms deliver across every part of the meal. From stuffing to sides to plant-forward mains, they add rich flavor, stretch ingredients, and make prep easier. We're proud to be part of holiday tables with ingredients that work across multiple dishes, without compromising on taste, quality, or tradition."

## Alexa Hambly-Galbraith,

Vice President of Business Optimization,  
Gwillimdale Farms

"As we celebrate Thanksgiving, we're reminded that farming is rooted in community, tradition, and care. We're grateful for our team, our partners, our customers, and the communities we nourish across Canada and beyond. Growing healthy root vegetables for families is a privilege, and this season invites us to slow down and savor the fresh flavors we work hard to provide."



## Steve Young

Director of Sales, Oppy

"Thanksgiving is a time to slow down and appreciate the people and blessings in my life. It reminds me to be grateful for family, friends, good health, and the opportunities I have. At Oppy, that same spirit is reflected in the people we work with, the growers who trust us, and the customers we serve. To me, Thanksgiving is about gratitude and recognizing the teamwork that helps bring fresh produce to families across Canada."



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# WTF DO I DO WITH Church Brothers Farms Organic Spring Mix ?

{ what the fork }



MEDITERRANEAN CHICKPEA SALAD

## INGREDIENTS

**5 oz** Church Brothers Farms Organic Spring Mix  
**2–15 oz can** chickpeas (garbanzo beans); drained and rinsed  
**1 cup** cherry tomatoes; cut in half  
**1** English cucumber; diced  
**1** green or red bell pepper; diced  
**1** red onion; diced  
**½ cup** Kalamata olives  
**¾ cup** crumbled feta cheese

## HOMEMADE MEDITERRANEAN DRESSING

**¼ cup** olive oil  
**2 tbsp** fresh lemon juice  
**Zest of 1** lemon  
**2 tbsp** white wine vinegar  
**1** garlic clove, minced  
**1 tsp** dried oregano  
**½ tsp** salt  
**¼ tsp** black pepper  
**2 tbsp** fresh parsley, finely chopped  
**2 tbsp** fresh dill, finely chopped

**Prep Time:** 10 mins  
**Servings:** 6



To learn more about Church Brothers Farms, visit [www.churchbrothers.com](http://www.churchbrothers.com)

## DIRECTIONS

- 1 To make the dressing, whisk all of the ingredients together and set aside.
- 2 In a medium bowl, combine chickpeas, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, bell pepper, red onion, olives, and feta cheese. Drizzle dressing all over the chickpea mixture and toss to evenly coat.
- 3 On a large platter add spring mix and top with chickpea salad. Enjoy!

## A Closer Look at Bolthouse Fresh Foods™ Tajín® Carrot Shakers®

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Shaking a snack brings back so many childhood memories, but today's kids are getting a much healthier alternative to the dry ramen noodles that we were crunching on when I was in elementary and middle school thanks to Bolthouse Fresh Foods™.

If you had told me carrots would be the next cool item to shake at the schoolyard, I don't know if I would have believed you. But then I got to try the convenient yet well-named

“zesty” Zesty Ranch offering of the Carrot Shakers® initial rollout. Then there was the fun and delicious Dill Pickle. Now, the company is adding a popular twist with Tajín® Carrot Shakers.

The sweet crunch of carrot combined with Tajin's tangy flavor profile, which has already made its mark in the fruit sector, makes for an amazing potential uplift to the veg category while broadening the perception of carrots for kids and adults alike.

Embracing its role of balancing health and fun, the brightly colored packaging complemented by Bolthouse's bold branding easily engages the eye before it leaves its mark on the palate.

And with availability for both retail and foodservice channels, including K-12 schools, these snacks will certainly be shaking up fresh demand across all sectors. [S](#)

UP  
CLOSE



**BOLTHOUSE FRESH**



# BOTH SIDES *of the* TABLE

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

Four decades in produce have taught Jay Schneider one thing: The industry's greatest advantage isn't technology—it's *knowing how to balance it with people...*





**B**alance, in this industry, is never a destination. It's the work itself. The goal is not a fixed point but an action.

The verb, not the state. We live this daily on the larger continuum. Between art and science, between wisdom and curiosity, technology and human connection, the fresh produce industry thrives. Jay Schneider understands this deeply, wrapping his years of experience around an ever-growing desire to adapt to the needs of today. Jay and those like him are themselves bridges, balancing the tried-and-true ways with a present and future accelerating at a pace the industry has never seen before.

Jay has experienced this industry from so many angles—store-level, merchandising, supplier side, and now back at retail after rejoining Albertsons as Produce Sales Manager, Acme/Safeway Mid-Atlantic Region, in December 2025. Jay has seen much of the landscape change, but one thing

Bill Wells, Jay Schneider, Sean McGee, and Chris Leathern collaborate on keeping fresh produce inviting, innovative, and a standard-setting department in the store

remains the same: Hands-on experience shapes the best decision-making methods today, especially when combined with an environment increasingly driven by data and technology.

“Technology, nowadays, most certainly helps in many different ways. Retail, for the most part, is still such a face-to-face business, though. Working on the supplier and merchandising side in retail gives that very specific experience that connects the dots behind product supply chain, negotiations, and, more importantly, category strategy,” Jay begins. “My store experience reminds me that execution really depends on people. We are in a people business where store teams work hard to bring our programs to life. So I do use the data to guide my decisions, but at the same time keep things realistic for them to execute so that our customers get a great experience shopping in our produce department.”

Jay's path in produce is rich and varied. It began on the night crew at ACME Markets in the mid-1980s, where a part-time job quickly became a lifelong calling. He rose through roles including Produce Manager, Field Buying Inspector, Produce and Floral Operations Specialist, and Assistant Sales Director before serving as Produce Director and later Director of Merchandising for Albertsons. Jay took a new path in 2021, expanding his leadership across the industry, heading buying

at Gorillas, leading East Coast sales at Pacific Trellis Fruit, and serving in executive sales roles at F&S Fresh Foods and Consalo Family Farms, before returning to Albertsons in December 2025, bringing four decades of fresh perspective full circle.

Reflecting on the strong belief that fresh produce is built on handshakes and personal conversations, balancing that human-to-human connection with the growing role of digital tools and automation in retail, Jay shares that the relationship is actually a complementary one.

“That foundation of handshakes and personal conversations still matters to me—and honestly, it matters even more now that digital tools and technology are at the forefront of the business. The way I see it, technology should enhance human connections, not replace it,” Jay describes. “For me, the value of tech is in how it enriches the conversations we're having. When I'm talking with a partner about a product trend, the data points help us close the loop on opportunity gaps faster and with more confidence. When I'm working with my team, the insights we get from our tools help us make smarter decisions about how we go to market.”

**“My store experience reminds me that *execution really depends on people*. We are in a people business where store teams work hard to bring our programs to life.”**

*Jay Schneider, Produce Sales Manager, Acme/Safeway Mid-Atlantic Region*

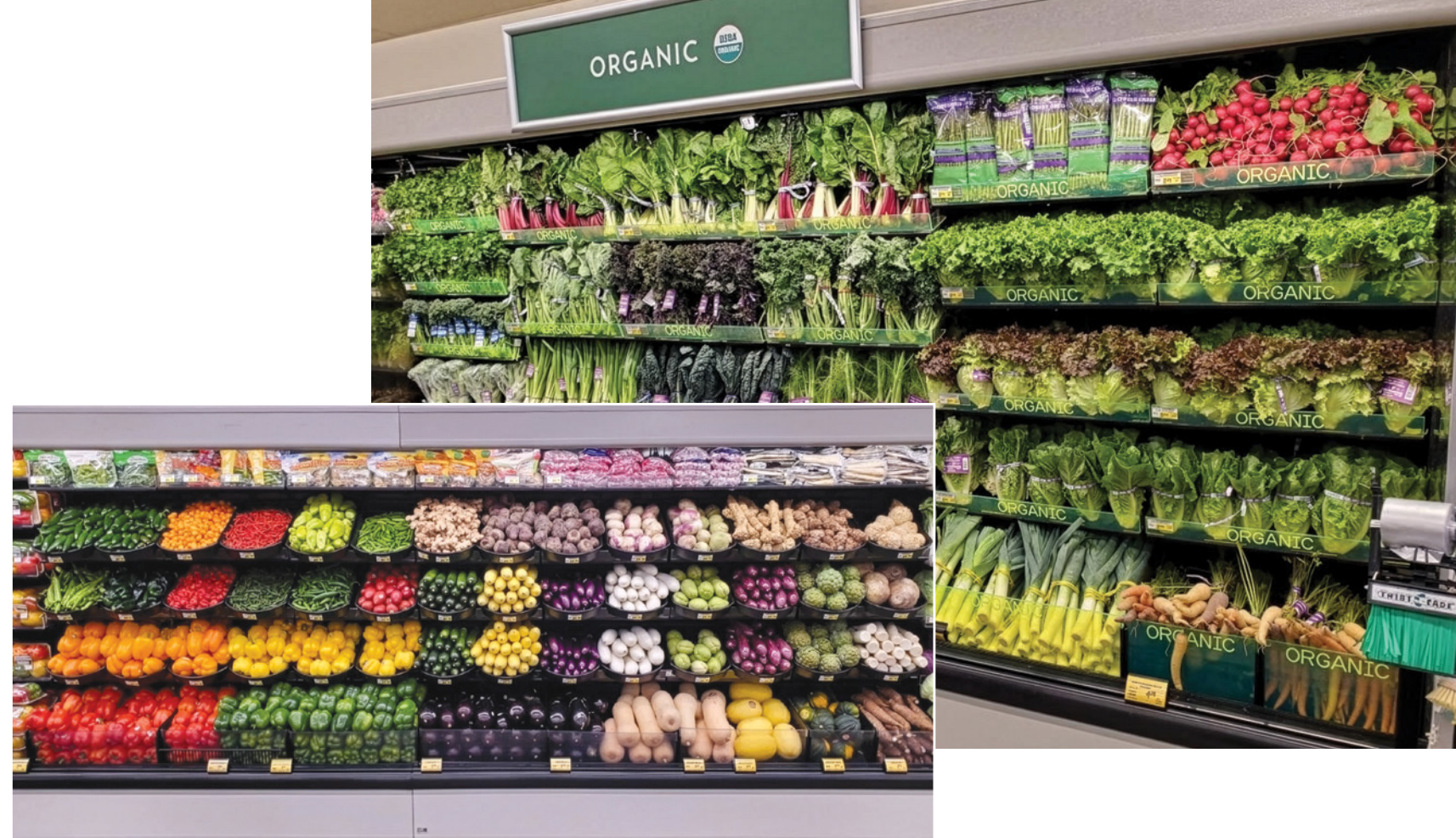
Produce department designs are intentional, fueled by years of wisdom, experience, and insight

Then he says something that reframes the whole thing.

“The real alignment still happens in the conversations around that data,” Jay observes. “And sometimes, the best ‘technology’ is still just picking up the phone. I'll catch myself typing a long text or email trying to explain something, and then I stop, delete it, and make the call. The clarity and connection you get from a real conversation are still unmatched.”

Jay paints a picture for me.

“In my office, I keep old photos of produce departments from the 1950s, '80s, and '90s. I look at those pictures, and they remind me how simple things were at times—but also







“If you can stay curious, stay humble, and keep things real, you won’t just build a career—you’ll build a reputation. And in this industry, that’s everything.”

how people back then were probably thinking: I wish I had a report that could tell me \_\_\_,” he laughs. “It’s a good reminder that the tools evolve, but the heart of the business doesn’t. It’s always been about people working together to solve problems and serve customers. So for me, the balancing is simple: use technology to make the human moments stronger, not fewer.”

From Jay’s perspective, a good retailer is one who executes well in individual areas—running clean stores that enhance the shopping experience, building strong vendor relationships based on trust, and continuing to invest in technology. Those are important, he notes, but they’re not enough on their own.

“What separates a good retailer from a great retailer is the ability to blend execution, relationships, and technology into one unified operation,” Jay says. “This is something that Albertsons does well. It’s about everyone rowing in the same direction, using data not just as information but as a source of empowerment. When our teams can interpret insights and make the right decisions for our customers and the business, that’s when the organization becomes truly great. Great retail isn’t one pillar—it’s the integration of all three. Technology gives us clarity, relationships give us alignment, and execution brings it to life for the customer.”

Having sat on both sides of the table—retailer and supplier—Jay understands the pressures of both roles: negotiating, cost impacts, and achieving what is good for the business. But more often than not, what he has taken away from it all is the beauty of true partnership, beyond the simply transactional.

“On the supplier side, I learned how much smoother things run when retailers bring you into the conversation early—on planning, on innovation, and on forecasting,” he lays out. “On the retail side, I’ve seen how much value suppliers bring when they proactively share insights, trends, and solutions. True partnership is working for a solution...and not being reactive.”

Looking back on his career and the many paths that it has led him down,

Jay Schneider calls the Snyder Ave, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, store his primary base and home away from home

Jay again gives much credence and gratitude to not just the opportunities that crossed his path, but the people who influenced the way he leads today.

“I’ve been very fortunate in my career to have some great mentors, and a few of their lessons still stick with me today. One of the first things I learned—something I still smile about—was ‘never assume,’” Jay remembers. “And I’ll be honest, I learned that one the hard way. But it shaped how I communicate and how I lead.”

These mentors also taught Jay that leadership starts with doing the small things well.

“Walk the floor, know your team, understand the work, and never ask someone to do something you wouldn’t do yourself. It is really important not just for the leader but for those they lead. These early lessons still guide me every day,” Jay insists. “The bigger lesson, though, was about how you treat people in this business. Everyone has a job to do, and everyone deserves respect for the role they play. When I was on the retail side, I always remembered that vendors had one job: to sell their items. That’s their responsibility, their livelihood. So I made it a point to always respond—yes or no—never leaving someone hanging. That respect goes a long way, and it builds trust that lasts.”

Jay turns to his team.

“I tell my team the same thing today. It’s not just about the decision you make—it’s about how you show up, how you communicate, and how you treat people along the way. That’s the kind of leadership that sticks with you. And it is wonderful to be a part of such a culture,” he says.

For those coming up in the industry—and maybe even for his younger self—Jay reflects on what it means to build a career that lasts, evolves, and stays grounded in what really matters.

“I believe that you need to be willing to learn, evolve, and adapt,” Jay expresses. “This industry changes fast—every few years, it looks different—and that’s not a bad thing. Stay curious. Ask questions. Don’t assume you know everything, because the moment you do, the business will remind you otherwise. I learned that early.”

He emphasizes the importance of staying grounded in who you are.

“Titles change. Companies change. Strategies change. But your character—how you show up, how you communicate, how you treat people—is what builds a career that lasts. That’s what people remember,” Jay reiterates. “If you can stay curious, stay humble, and keep things real, you won’t just build a career—you’ll build a reputation. And in this industry, that’s everything.”

When we speak of the bridge, building an understanding between the past, the present, and the future, it is not just a metaphor. It is people. It is Jay Schneider and those who carry that torch. 🔥



# WTF DO I DO WITH Moonlight Peaches ?

{ what the fork }



PEACH BOURBON SMASH

## INGREDIENTS

**½ ripe** Moonlight Peach, divided  
**2 oz** bourbon  
**¾ oz** fresh lemon juice  
**½ oz** simple syrup, or to taste  
**4 fresh** mint leaves, plus a sprig for garnish  
Crushed ice  
Splash of club soda, optional

**Prep Time:** 5 mins  
**Servings:** 1



## DIRECTIONS

- 1 Cut ¼ of the peach into small chunks for muddling and slice the remaining ¼ for garnish.
- 2 Add peach chunks and simple syrup to a double old fashioned glass. Muddle until peaches release their juices. Add mint leaves and gently press them once or twice to release their aroma.
- 3 Pour in bourbon and fresh lemon juice. Stir to combine.
- 4 Fill glass with crushed ice and stir until well chilled.
- 5 Top with a splash of club soda, if desired.
- 6 Garnish with the fresh peach slices and a sprig of mint. Serve immediately and enjoy!

*Tip: Use ripe peaches for the sweetest flavor and easiest muddling. Adjust the simple syrup depending on how sweet your peaches are.*

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Shoot for the Moon



# WTF DO I DO WITH 4Earth Farms™ Organic Asparagus ?

{ what the fork }



ORGANIC CAPRESE ROASTED ASPARAGUS

## INGREDIENTS

**1 lb** 4Earth Farms™ Organic Asparagus  
**2 tbsp** olive oil  
 Kosher salt and pepper, to taste  
**2 cups** shredded mozzarella cheese  
**2 cups** cherry tomatoes, halved  
 Fresh chopped basil  
 Balsamic glaze

**Prep Time:** 10 mins  
**Cook Time:** 20 mins  
**Servings:** 4

## DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 400° F. Line a baking sheet with foil and spray with non-stick cooking spray, or use a silicone liner.
- 2 Place the asparagus on one side of the baking sheet and the tomatoes on the other side.
- 3 Drizzle the asparagus with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Repeat with the tomatoes.
- 4 Bake for 5 minutes. Remove from the oven and top the asparagus with mozzarella cheese. Return to the oven and cook for another 5–10 minutes, until the cheese is melted and golden.
- 5 Remove from the oven and transfer the asparagus to a serving plate. Top with the tomatoes and fresh basil. Drizzle with balsamic glaze and serve. Enjoy!

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# California TABLE GRAPE | SNAPSHOT |

By Anne Allen

**G**reat produce departments are built around products that shoppers love, and California grapes deliver on every front with their exceptional taste, quality, and proven health benefits. With an astounding array of varieties, Grapes from California are one of the produce department's most powerful drivers. To help retailers make the most of the season, the California Table Grape Commission invests in tools to deliver shopper satisfaction and repeat purchases. Read on for shopper insights, category trends, merchandising inspiration, and more...

## Sell What Matters at the Shelf

### Keep Firmness and Freshness On Point



Shoppers care deeply about grape firmness, freshness and cleanliness, so prioritize culling, rotation, and cold chain operations for higher conversion and repeat sales!

### Move More California Grapes By Selling the Eating Experience

Grape purchasers rank taste No. 1 and color No. 2, so post shelf signage that sells the eating experience: lead with flavor profiles supported by all colors!





## California by the Numbers



**Over 99%** of commercially grown U.S. grapes are grown in California



California is home to over **80 table grape varieties**



California table grape season runs from **May - January**

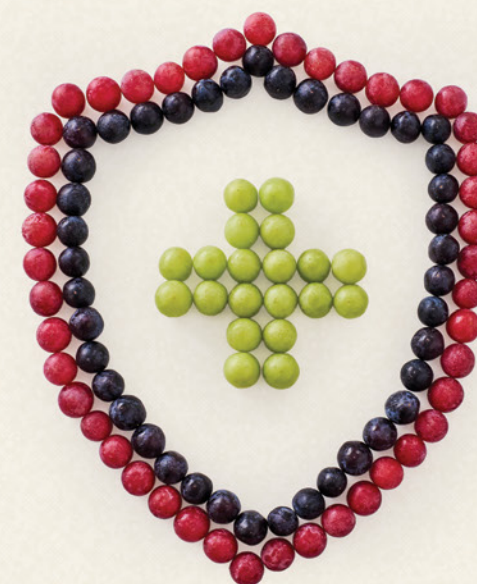


## Turn Shopper Insights into Sales

- **Tap into Popularity by Featuring California Grapes More:** 79% of primary shoppers bought fresh grapes in the past 3 months
- **Build a Consistent “Weekly California Grapes” Rhythm for More Repeat:** Most grape purchasers buy a few times per month (37%) or weekly (27%)
- **Don’t Overlook Digital:** 81% of online grape purchasers buy via retailer-owned platforms, so add California grapes to Buy Again, Add to Cart prompts, and smart substitutions
- **Boost Sales with Secondary Displays & Front-of-Produce Placement:** 92% of fresh grape purchases are in a physical store, and 20% are online

*Data source: 2025 Opinium U.S. Attitude & Usage Study.  
Study conducted: December 2025.*

## Benefits by the Bunch



**93%** 93% of grape purchasers are more likely to buy grapes knowing they are a heart-healthy food (58% much more likely).

**94%** 94% of grape purchasers are more likely to buy grapes knowing they may help protect against metabolic decline in the brain associated with natural aging (62% much more likely).

**92%** 92% of grape purchasers are more likely to buy grapes knowing they may support a healthy immune system (58% much more likely).

**93%** 93% are more likely to buy grapes with colon-health knowledge, and 91% with UV skin-protection knowledge.

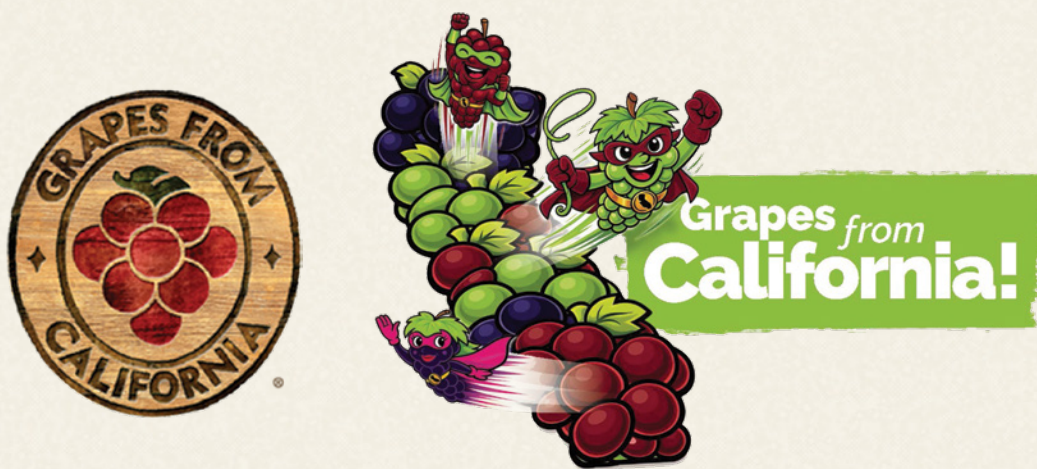






## Make 'California' a Reason to Buy

- **Teach your customers: California grown = US origin:** 72% of grape purchasers prefer U.S. origin when given a choice, while <5% prefer imported. Since 99% of US grapes are grown in California, make it prominent!
- **Keep California at the forefront at the point-of-choice:** Consumers can't choose California if they can't see California. So build consistent origin visibility at the top three points-of-choice: in-store, signage, e-commerce product titles, and features ads/app banners!
- **Tap into the familiarity of "Grapes from California":** 82% of grape purchasers know the Grapes from California brand, so include this logo in circulars, apps, and co-branded promotions!



SOURCE: California Table Grape Commission



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# FORGED, *never* FINISHED

*By Jordan Okumura-Wright*

Rannel Santiago's leadership has been forged through challenge, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to people, proving that the strongest leaders are shaped by adversity rather than easy seasons.

**T**here is a certain kind of leader that burgeons in an industry like ours. Born from pressure, uneven strata, unknown paths, and hard-won outcomes, these leaders are made of a precious metal that finds the light in the smallest of cracks and innovation where others may find only denouement and steep walls not worth the climb.

Rannel Santiago knows differently. She knows that every uphill battle and downhill fall becomes a living, breathing part of our stories. And they are the stuff that leaders are made of.

"I've learned over the years that I thrive in high-pressure environments. When things are fast, messy,

and a little chaotic, that's where I find my rhythm. Those moments pull the best out of me," Rannel, Director of Merchandising, Sysco, shares with me. "I love jumping in, untangling the chaos, and figuring out how to move products, people, and processes from point A to point B as quickly and effectively as possible. New projects? Count me in. Learning how something works? Even better."

That balance—malleable but strong under the pressures of an industry like this one—is where Rannel's perspective and leadership have been honed. Not without her trials and hurdles, of course, but Rannel assures me that the experiences that shaped her the most weren't the easy wins.



**Rannel Santiago,**  
Director  
of Produce,  
Sysco



“““

I love jumping in, untangling the chaos, and figuring out how to move products, people, and processes from point A to point B as *QUICKLY AND EFFECTIVELY* as possible.

- **Rannel Santiago**, Director of Produce, Sysco

“They were the moments of uncertainty, the times when things didn’t go as planned. Being pushed outside my comfort zone taught me how to navigate the unknown with confidence and humility. I’ve tried things that didn’t work. I’ve taken risks that didn’t pan out. And every time, I’ve learned to own my part, find the lesson, and lead my team toward a better solution,” Rannel reflects. “Bouncing back became one of my strongest muscles—and it made me a better leader. Today, I lead with transparency, curiosity, and the belief that failure isn’t the end of the story, it’s often the beginning of our most innovative ideas. Those challenges didn’t just shape my career; they shaped the leader I am today.”

Growing up in the Salinas Valley, Rannel could not help but be

surrounded by agriculture—the kind of proximity that shapes the leaders our industry produces. Agriculture has a way of getting into your bones, and fresh produce is part of the fabric of everyday life.

“My stepdad worked as a produce broker, so I was exposed early on to the world of procurement and the fast-paced nature of the industry. Initially, I thought I would follow in my mom’s footsteps and pursue a career in real estate. After graduating, I started down that path, but it did not take long for me to realize it was not where I belonged,” Rannel shares as she maps out a path of intention, but also discovery.

In 2006, Rannel joined a local foodservice buying office as a coordinator, and that’s when

everything clicked. She immediately fell in love with the produce industry, the people, the seasonality, the challenges, and the impact it has on so many facets of the food supply chain.

From that point forward, she knew that fresh produce was where she wanted to build a life—where she could become the best version of herself.

As Rannel climbed those first hills and hurdles, she didn’t yet have the full picture of where she was headed. What she had was a hunger to grow—and that hunger, more than any five- or ten-year plan, guided her decisions along the way.

“Early on, I did not have a perfectly defined vision of where my career would lead—but I knew I wanted

to grow. Once I entered the produce industry, that curiosity and drive took over. I raised my hand for every opportunity I could find. In those first few years, I touched everything from coordinating and pricing management to customer support and even began assisting a buyer in citrus and berry procurement,” Rannel remembers, recalling how she knew that there was something more that she needed to really strengthen her understanding of what it meant to live and breathe fresh produce.

So, she took a leap of faith.

“I realized that to understand the industry, I needed experience on the grower-shipper side. That led me to a role with a potted floral and herb grower that had just undergone a major merger. Because the organization was still integrating, I had a unique opportunity to jump into process enhancement, partner with tech leaders to help shape a new ERP system, and support innovation from production all the way through shipping,” Rannel says. “Being on the front lines—working with production crews, marketing teams, and customer relations for major retail chains—was incredibly eye-opening. As I settled into the role, I also invested in myself by attending career-development training courses and large industry conferences.”

Everything shifted for Rannel in a seismic way when she began managing the company’s Salinas sales office. Moving into a role that occupied both student and teacher unlocked something for her. Leadership revealed a new set of skills Rannel didn’t even realize she had, and it brought her a tremendous amount of joy and fulfillment.

So, when a manager position opened at Sysco, she was ready.

“I stepped in as Merchandising Manager, and after a few years, moved into the Director of Merchandising role,” Rannel says. “In this position, I’ve been able to leverage every skill I picked up along the way—working cross-functionally, driving process improvements, and partnering strategically with our leadership team to support both our office and the broader industry.”



Top: Rannel Santiago, Julie Olivarria, and Jordan Okumura-Wright catch up at an IFPA Foodservice; Middle: Rannel and her family are a close-knit group and an important part of Rannel’s professional compass; Bottom: Julie and Rannel do their part to advocate for ag across the industry



Sysco Produce team members Jon Greco, Nick Hansen, Henry Fovargue, Michael Brown, Rannel Santiago, John Kaler, Troy Thomas, and Cliff Woods bring the breadth and depth of produce wisdom to customers, suppliers, and more



“““

Those challenges didn’t just shape my career; they shaped the *LEADER* I am today.

As part of Rannel’s leadership philosophy, she admits that her understanding of what it means to guide—and be guided by—her colleagues keeps shifting, sharpened by new lessons and hard-won experience.

This layer of growth for Rannel has been the most exciting part of her leadership journey so far: mentorship. The impact she can have on the next generation of produce professionals is something she does not take lightly, but holds deeply. Mentorship does not move in one direction; it is a continuum shared with those who enter into the experience with you.

“My leadership style has evolved from being the one who wanted to take on everything myself to becoming a more intentional, people-focused leader. Mentorship is a major part of that shift. I’ve been fortunate to have strong mentors throughout my career—and still do today—who have shaped the way I show up for

others. Their impact is exactly what inspires me to pay it forward,” Rannel tells me. “Now, I prioritize being accessible, supportive, and helping people build confidence in their own abilities. Whether it’s coaching someone through a challenge or encouraging them to take on something new, I want to create space for others to grow, learn, and shine. When I think about the next generation, my goal is to help them discover their strengths, understand the value of both innovation and relationships, and navigate this industry with confidence. If I can have even a fraction of the impact on them that my mentors had on me, then I know I’m leading in the right way.”

In so many ways, Rannel is standing in that perfect moment where the industry needs a bridge, a harbinger, a guide as it moves from past into future, as it moves from traditional processes to more technologically informed ones, as it holds tight to its relationship-driven foundation while adapting to the pace of progress made today.

The produce industry is becoming increasingly driven by technology and data, yet it remains deeply rooted in relationships. The incoming generation, as Rannel explains, can find the right balance between embracing innovation and preserving the human connection that has always been central to this business.

“Technology is moving faster than any of us can keep up with, and innovation is reshaping the produce industry in real time. But even with all the new tools, platforms, and data at our fingertips, one thing hasn’t changed: this business still runs on relationships,” Rannel describes. “The next generation needs to understand that innovation doesn’t replace connection—it elevates it. When we have strong relationships across the industry, we’re able to openly share ideas, learn what others are using AI and technology for, and build solutions that make the entire supply chain better. One company’s innovation can spark another’s breakthrough, but only if people are talking to each other.”

That is why human connection has to be the guide. The heart—not the contract—has to be the focal point, and wisdom has to be the throughline of an industry held together by family, friends, and colleagues. It is rough water we cross together, and a horizon we reach because we crossed it side by side.

“That’s why it’s so important to mentor and guide the incoming generation. They need to know that having solid industry contacts, nurturing partnerships, and showing up for people matter just as much as understanding the latest tech. When you combine both—tech-forward thinking and genuine human connection—you become agile, informed, and ready for whatever comes next in this fast-moving industry,” Rannel says. “In the end, the balance isn’t about choosing between innovation and relationships—it’s about using both to push the industry forward together.”

And that, in the end, is the metal Rannel is made of: forged, never finished. 



A team that laughs together thrives together

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# WTF DO I DO WITH LIV Produce Organic Red Potatoes ?

{ what the fork }



MEDITERRANEAN RED POTATO SALAD WITH FRESH HERBS AND TOMATOES

## INGREDIENTS

**1 lb** LIV Produce Organic Red Potatoes  
**1 lb** cherry tomatoes  
**¼ cup** chopped fresh parsley  
**3 tbsp** chopped basil  
**1 tbsp** chopped fresh mint  
**1 tbsp** chopped fresh oregano  
**1 tbsp** dry oregano  
**2-3 tbsp** extra virgin olive oil  
 Coarse sea salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

**Prep Time:** 5 mins  
**Cook Time:** 20 mins  
**Servings:** 4

## DIRECTIONS

- 1 Wash and cut LIV Produce Organic Red Potatoes into bite-size pieces.
- 2 Boil the potatoes until they are tender. Do not overcook, about 15 minutes. Drain and set aside.
- 3 While the potatoes are boiling, prepare the herbs. Finely chop and mix them all together in a bowl and set aside. Slice cherry tomatoes in half.
- 4 Assemble the salad. In a large bowl, add the potatoes, tomatoes, and olive oil and toss gently. Sprinkle over the herbs and gently toss again.
- 5 Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve. Enjoy!

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► MY FAVORITE THINGS ◀

DARRIN CARPENTER

SENIOR CATEGORY MANAGER, CHELAN FRESH

With Chandler James

What do fruit, football, and family have in common? Yes—they all start with F—but they are also a handful of the things that keep Darrin Carpenter full of life. The Senior Category Manager at Chelan Fresh appreciates everything life has to offer, from small moments of reflecting on a favorite song to big memories like a trip to the beach. No matter what favorite thing he points to, we are all ears...



1 GRANDKIDS

Ranging from newborn to nine years old, they help keep things in perspective and keep me young.



2 MUSIC

Mostly classic rock with a mix of country. It helps me reflect on different seasons of my life.



3 FRUIT

Of course, apples, pears, and cherries are my favorite!



4 FOOTBALL

I finished my 30<sup>th</sup> season as a high school football official earlier this year, which makes the sport pretty special.



5 HAWAII

Island life is a fantastic way to recharge. The sand, waves, smells, and slow pace of the islands call me back.



6 CHURCH

Faith and a church family are great at keeping me grounded and reminding me what is important.



7 THE FALL

The reflection of the end of summer, along with the sights and smells of the cooler weather, makes this the best season.



8 JOHN SANDFORD

I love his writing style, and yes, I still prefer the physical book in my hand.



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# Libations

## For All Occasions

### GREEN GRAPE MOSCATO SLUSH



**By** Peggy Packer  
**Photography by** Reid Monsma

**T**his September, I am fully embracing simplicity. Simplicity, with a delicious side of frozen table grapes.

While some may reserve slushies and smoothies for an iconic summer experience, I am not one to restrict myself to seasonal bounds. So, even as the scent of fall fills the air and the October chill nears, I can always find myself reaching for a fruit-centric frozen delight.

In this Green Grape Moscato Slush, green seedless table grapes—or red, there really are no limits here—combine with a sweet, effervescent Moscato to create a simple but refreshing sip. As table grapes take their place on seasonal charcuterie

boards and in creative fall recipes, a unique take on fall indulgence like the Green Grape Moscato Slush can inspire shoppers to think outside the box and enjoy the fruit in ways they haven't yet considered.

Not to mention, this libation greets shoppers with coveted fall flavors while satisfying those who are already reminiscing on the warmer days of summer. And the cherry on top? All it takes is two ingredients and a blender to bring to life!

Whether they're excitedly settling into autumn or eagerly counting down the days until next summer, this slush is sure to satisfy any shopper's taste buds. 🍷



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

#### INGREDIENTS

**1½ cups** seedless table grapes, plus extra for garnish  
**1 cup** Moscato of your choice  
Ice (optional)  
Sugar (optional, for garnish)



#### DIRECTIONS

1. Rinse table grapes and store them in the freezer overnight.
2. Add frozen table grapes and Moscato to a blender and blend until the slush reaches the desired consistency. Adjust by blending in ice, more grapes, or Moscato, as needed.
3. To create a garnish, add three grapes to a skewer. Wet the grapes with Moscato, then roll them in sugar to coat.
4. Pour the blended mixture into a glass of your choice and top with the garnish, if desired. Enjoy!





# WTF DO I DO WITH Del Rey Avocados ?

{ what the fork }



AVOCADO PANZANELLA SALAD

## INGREDIENTS

### SALAD

- 2 ripe** Del Rey Avocados, diced
- 3 cups** cherry tomatoes, halved, or heirloom tomatoes, chopped
- 1** English cucumber, sliced or chopped
- ½ small** red onion, thinly sliced
- 4 cups** rustic bread, cubed
- ⅓ cup** fresh basil, torn
- 2 tbsp** fresh parsley, chopped
- ½ cup** mozzarella pearls or crumbled feta, optional

### VINAIGRETTE

- ¼ cup** olive oil
- 2 tbsp** red wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp** lemon juice
- 1 tsp** Dijon mustard
- 1 small** garlic clove, grated or minced
- ½ tsp** honey
- Salt and black pepper, to taste

**Prep Time:** 10–15 mins

**Cook Time:** 10–12 mins

**Servings:** 4–6

## DIRECTIONS

- 1** Toast the bread: Preheat oven to 375°F. Place bread cubes on a baking sheet, drizzle lightly with olive oil, and season with salt and pepper. Bake for 10–12 minutes, tossing halfway, until golden and crisp.
- 2** Make the vinaigrette: In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, red wine vinegar, lemon juice, Dijon, garlic, honey, salt, and pepper.
- 3** Build the salad: In a large bowl, combine tomatoes, cucumber, red onion, basil, parsley, and toasted bread.
- 4** Dress and rest: Pour the vinaigrette over the salad and toss gently. Let sit for 10–15 minutes so the bread can soak up the tomato juices and dressing while still keeping some texture.
- 5** Add avocado last: Gently fold in the diced Del Rey Avocados right before serving so they stay fresh and intact. Enjoy!

To learn more about Del Rey Avocado, visit [www.delreyavocado.com](http://www.delreyavocado.com)



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dirt

# SWEETENING the SEASON

By Chandler James

The summer of 2026 is coming to a close. *The Snack* writers here in California have made it through another three-month stretch of high temperatures ranging from 90 to 100-plus degrees, and the promise of cooler weather offers a welcome reprieve.

With the changing of the seasons comes another transformation—

**Taylor Meadows**  
Marketing Manager,  
Happy Dirt

**Laura Cloak**  
Sales Manager,  
Happy Dirt





**Randall Watkins**  
Farmer-Owner,  
Watkins Farm



the one that happens in the consumer kitchen. Bright summer salad recipes are stowed away as shoppers in the Northern Hemisphere begin pulling out warm and comforting meals to carry them through the fall and winter.

While sweet potatoes serve as a staple in my kitchen year-round, the transition from late summer to early fall ushers in supplies from North Carolina, touting rich flavors and unmatched eating qualities. Happy Dirt, I have come to understand, is one provider whose North Carolina sweet potato supply is well-positioned to bolster retail programs into the cooler months.

“Our programs offer retailers on the East Coast and beyond the ability to bring in one of the best regional programs in the Southeast,” Taylor Meadows, Marketing Manager, began telling me when I asked how Happy Dirt supports its retail partners heading into the fall. “We have consistent branding on all of our items and can also support customers with customized in-store marketing, whether that is signage or various marketing partnerships involving social media, farmer profiles, and more.”

As we all know, there are many steps involved in the journey from field to shelf. How do we ensure the carefully grown product

reaches its full potential in the hands of consumers? This is where collaboration between growers and retailers is essential. Partners of Happy Dirt can count on the fact that North Carolina sweet potatoes will be backed by category insights.

“With decades of experience, our team can help coach and guide customers on everything from item selection to merchandising to supporting in-store displays and signage. We have a close relationship with all of our organic sweet potato farmer-partners, so the guidance we give to retailers comes directly from the guidance that farmers have given to us about their product,” Taylor continued.

Supply chain reliability is crucial in the fresh produce industry. With so many shoppers looking to diversify their carts as the seasons change, Happy Dirt is a steadfast partner with the consistency needed to build trust.

“We pride ourselves on great customer service when it comes to keeping our customers up to date,” Laura Cloak, Happy Dirt’s Sales Manager, explained. “Produce, especially on the East Coast, can have its challenges, and we know the importance of reducing surprises and delivering the highest quality items for our customers.”

Of course, that reliability and trust are sown long before Happy Dirt’s products make their way to the grocery store. Consistency starts in the field, and Happy Dirt bolsters its programs through the deep relationships built with its growers.

“Our programs are very diversified. We have multiple farmer-owners and partners in North Carolina that help extend our season from April



**“We pride ourselves on great customer service when it comes to keeping our customers up to date.”**

- Laura Cloak, Sales Manager, Happy Dirt



into December on many items. Our overall organic acreage in North Carolina is now over 2,000 acres,” Laura pointed out. “In addition to North Carolina, we have a number of other key farm partners in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. We offer organic Covington sweet potatoes as well as purples, Murasakis, Garnets, and Bonitas in bulk, and all of these except Bonitas are also available in 3 lb bags.”

As a shining example of these formidable bonds with Happy Dirt’s grower partners, Laura points to Randall Watkins.

“Randall is our youngest farmer-owner, and he also sits on our Board

of Directors. Making his mark in the category, he was the first farmer in North Carolina and the first organic sweet potato farmer in the United States to become Fair Food Certified. He grows all of his organic sweet potatoes for Happy Dirt,” Laura relayed.

While it is true that Happy Dirt maintains a formidable network of partners to keep its North Carolina sweet potato program running smoothly, the supplier is never one to stand still. On a final note, Taylor teased what Happy Dirt is looking forward to in the coming months.

“We’re excited to start introducing more prepackaged items to build

out our portfolio. We’re currently developing a prepackaged program for summer squash, cucumbers, peppers, and eggplant, which we hope to launch in fall 2026. We’ll be following that up with a tray-packed organic bicolor sweet corn program beginning in the 2027 season,” Taylor concluded.

As the sun sets on summer and we move toward the fall and winter seasons, the produce industry keeps churning. Retailers are beginning to shift their programs and merchandising strategies to meet increasing demand for colder-weather eating occasions. And along with that transition, Happy Dirt will be ready to offer its support. 



# SWEET POTATO -SnackChat-

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

**G**rowth. Partnership. Performance. Sweet potatoes are proving they have staying power, fueled by evolving consumer demand and strengthened by partnerships across the supply chain. From the field to the produce aisle, success depends on shared strategy, disciplined execution, and delivering consistent value. Retail buyers and supply-side leaders weigh in on what's driving the category today, and what's positioning it for even greater growth tomorrow...



**Carmel Stout-Kornegay,**  
Sourcing Manager, Fresh Potatoes and  
Sweetpotatoes, Walmart

"One of the things I love about sweetpotatoes is that they work for every meal of the day—and all the snack occasions in between. They're no longer just a holiday favorite, and consumers are showing us they want more. Whether it's breakfast hash, a quick snack, an air-fryer lunch made in the office, or even dessert, people continue to discover new uses for sweetpotatoes. Their nutritional value is an added bonus to their versatility, making them an easy choice for consumers looking for foods that are both delicious and wholesome. Fresh recipes and meal ideas keep sweetpotatoes exciting, inspire creativity in the kitchen, and give consumers a reason to come back and try something new."



**Susan Noritake,**  
Vice President of Sales and Marketing,  
Bako Sweet®

"Bako Sweet® is excited to be planning with our retail partners. Our goal is to grow the category, inspiring consumers to utilize sweet potatoes in new ways. September kicks off our *Game Day* campaign with eye-catching displays and recipes inspired to include sweet potatoes for tailgating fare, with a fun twist on favorites like sliders, tater tots, and chili. November starts our holiday program with festive POS to increase shelf space, helping our partners increase sales and bring people together. The best results come when we work with our retailer partners, helping them reach their goals and building executable programs."



**Chris Keetch,**  
Director of Produce and Floral,  
The GIANT Company

"Demand for sweet potatoes continues to grow as more shoppers incorporate them into everyday meals for their flavor, flexibility, and health benefits. From a buying perspective, strong supplier partnerships are essential to keeping quality high, maintaining dependable supply, and promoting at the right times throughout the year. Those relationships help us navigate both opportunities and predictable challenges, while ensuring customers receive the best product at an everyday value. Social media trends, like cheese-stuffed sweet potatoes, have also introduced the category to new, long-term consumers."



**Mike Roberts,**  
Vice President of Produce Operations,  
Harps Food Stores

"We continue to see positive momentum in the sweet potato category. Sweet potatoes fit well with what many customers are looking for today—healthy, flavorful, versatile, and affordable items that can be used in a lot of different ways. They have always had a strong seasonal presence, but social media has helped make them more of an everyday item. Recipes on TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms have introduced customers to new ways to use sweet potatoes beyond the traditional baked or holiday preparation. Looking ahead, I think there is still good opportunity for growth in the sweet potato category, especially in bagged sweet potatoes, more petite sizes, purple sweet potatoes, and white-flesh varieties. Customers are looking for healthy, flavorful, and convenient options, but they also like discovering something a little different. For retailers, the key is making the category easy to shop and giving customers ideas. Strong displays, clear variety callouts, recipe inspiration, and consistent quality are all important. For suppliers, the opportunity is in helping retailers tell the story around flavor, nutrition, convenience, and usage. Sweet potatoes have a lot of room to grow when we present them as an everyday meal solution, not just a holiday item."



**Anthony Innocenti,**  
Managing Partner, LIV Produce

"The strongest sweet potato programs are built through innovation, differentiation, and the resilience that comes from close supplier partnerships. As consumer interest continues to grow, we're focused on expanding our varietal offerings—from purple sweet potatoes and Japanese Murasakis to red and traditional orange varieties—to help retailers deliver a complete category experience. Value-added options further broaden the category's appeal across demographics, household sizes, and lifestyles. Combined with their nutrition, flavor, and versatility, sweet potatoes continue to prove they're a true triple threat."



**Helen Rosen,**  
Wholesale Coordinator, Happy Dirt

"At Happy Dirt, sweet potato planning for the holidays starts months ahead. This year, we worked with our farmer-owners to secure higher volumes on specialty varieties like Murasaki, purple, and garnet sweets, turning demand into real growth for their farms. Covingtons remain the rockstar of our lineup, the variety Happy Dirt was built on, and sweet potatoes keep earning space on the plate: packed with nutrition, at home in casseroles and bowls, and there when shoppers need them. Grower partnerships across North Carolina let our team plan ahead so retail partners never see a gap on the shelf."





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# FRESH FUEL

AN ACTIVE APPROACH TO BRAND VISIBILITY



A Q&A WITH JESSICA WELLS,  
Executive Director, Crunch Time Apple Growers  
By Peggy Packer

For Crunch Time Apple Growers and its iconic SnapDragon® brand, Monster Crunch® has evolved far beyond a tagline.

A clear reminder of what people love most about the variety, this creative positioning has transformed SnapDragon's standout texture into an iconic brand moment, capturing the hearts of fans across the United States.

Thanks to its incredibly loyal fan base and expanding brand presence, SnapDragon has grown from a regional favorite to a coveted variety with a strong national following—and with increased volume ahead, this momentum is only expected to continue.

Jessica Wells, Executive Director, details the strategy behind the brand's exponential growth and what opportunities it is creating for retail.







**PEGGY PACKER: HOW IS CRUNCH TIME RESHAPING ITS MARKETING APPROACH WITH SNAPDRAGON? WHAT OPPORTUNITIES IS THIS SPARKING FOR RETAILERS?**

**JESSICA WELLS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CRUNCH TIME APPLE GROWERS:** Crunch Time is taking a fresh approach to variety marketing by showing up in the real, active moments where people naturally reach for something energizing and convenient. With SnapDragon, we're focusing on being present in the places where people are moving, like community races, outdoor events, fitness-driven gatherings, and other adventure-oriented activities where a crisp, portable snack fits seamlessly into the day.

The Monster Crunch®, balanced sweetness, and hint of vanilla that define SnapDragon apples make them an easy go-to for people who want something refreshing and satisfying on the move. You don't need to peel them, refrigerate them, or deal with sticky hands. They're the kind of snack you can toss into a gym bag, pack for a long day outdoors, or enjoy after a workout. By putting SnapDragon apples directly into these environments, we're helping consumers associate apples with convenience, flavor, and natural energy in ways that align with their lifestyles.

"SnapDragon® is intentionally positioned as a brand with personality, not a commodity defined only by specs. **Instead of focusing solely on sweetness or crunch, we highlight what the apple represents and how it fits into the rhythm of active, on-the-go lives.**"

**JESSICA WELLS,**

Executive Director, Crunch Time Apple Growers

**PP: CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT HOW CRUNCH TIME POSITIONS SNAPDRAGON AS A BRAND RATHER THAN A COMMODITY?**

**JW:** SnapDragon is intentionally positioned as a brand with personality, not a commodity defined only by specs. Instead of focusing solely on sweetness or crunch, we highlight what the apple represents and how it fits into the rhythm of active, on-the-go lives.

The SnapDragon brand is built around energy, creativity, adventure, and camaraderie. We bring that to life by connecting with people where they are already spending time. These are the places where people make daily decisions about the snacks that fuel their routines. We think about occasions first: Where are people recharging, refueling, or looking for something fresh and convenient? We want SnapDragon to feel like a natural part of those everyday moments.

This approach helps consumers associate the brand with something easy, flavorful, and enjoyable. Over time, that familiarity builds trust and increases the likelihood that they'll reach for SnapDragon again.



**PP: WHAT SETS SNAPDRAGON APART FROM OTHER APPLE VARIETIES?**

**JW:** SnapDragon stands out because it delivers a specific, reliable eating experience every time. Consumers know they're getting a crisp, crunchy bite with balanced sweetness and a subtle hint of vanilla. Monster Crunch® isn't just a tagline; it's something people feel the moment they take a bite. That consistency builds trust, and once people discover it, they tend to come back.

The variety also raises expectations for what an apple can be. SnapDragon feels fun and a little different—from the name to the light, energetic branding—while still delivering on the texture and flavor that apple lovers care about most. Crunch is one of the biggest drivers of apple preference, and SnapDragon leans into that in a big way. It's a healthier snack that still feels satisfying and a bit indulgent, which resonates with people looking for something both convenient and enjoyable.

SnapDragon gives retailers an edge by naturally standing out on the shelf. The packaging and displays highlight its signature Monster Crunch®, and the name itself sparks curiosity. It's the kind of apple shoppers notice—and want to try. Once they do, the eating experience does the rest. The memorable crunch and flavor turn first-time buyers into repeat shoppers, helping retailers build a dependable base of returning customers.



**PP: HOW IS THE BRAND LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR FUTURE GROWTH?**

**JW:** Crunch Time is building on the momentum that made SnapDragon resonate from the start. The brand has gained strong traction in New York State, especially through its connection to the Buffalo Bills and the energy of Bills Mafia. SnapDragon has become more than an apple—it has become part of the community.

As the brand expands, we're scaling that same mindset. The next phase focuses on celebrating the individual communities where SnapDragon is now widely available. Think of it as a "regional champs" approach: showing up in ways that feel local, authentic, and connected to the active lifestyles of each area. We're also emphasizing moments that matter to active adults and families, from fitness-oriented events to outdoor activities to busy weekends filled with movement. These are natural opportunities to build connections with current shoppers and introduce the brand to new ones.

In stores, we're continuing to invest in visibility through recognizable packaging, thoughtful displays, and strategic sampling. When people taste SnapDragon, that's when it clicks. All of this works together to keep growing the category by making apples feel more relevant, more fun, and more worth choosing.

**N**ext season, SnapDragon will be available nationwide during key windows, giving even more consumers the chance to discover it and become lifelong fans.

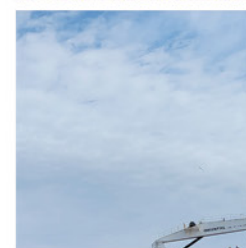
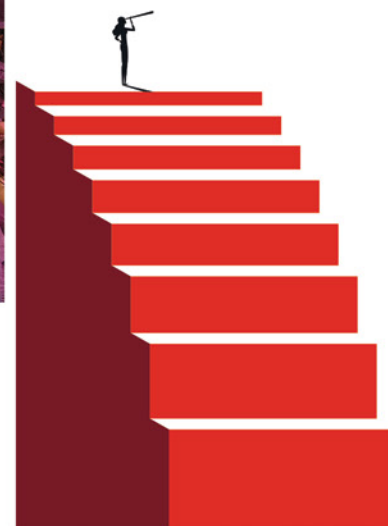
By meeting consumers exactly where they seek to refuel, Crunch Time Apple Growers is forging a permanent place in active lifestyles for SnapDragon apples. One thing is certain: The next time they are on the go, consumers will reach for that Monster Crunch. 





# STEP-UPP 2026: STEPPING INTO LEADERSHIP

By Melissa De Leon Chavez



Connection and curiosity are a powerhouse combination for the rising leaders of our industry. It is also a superpower gained by those who carve out the time in an already chaotic schedule to participate and graduate from Southeast Produce Council's Southeast Training Education Program for Upcoming Produce Professionals (STEP-UPP) program.

As of September 2026, 24 more buy-side individuals join the ranks of those committed to strengthening the links in the supply chain and pass the baton to the 2027 roster. Congratulations to these graduating professionals...



**David Sherrod,**  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
Southeast Produce Council

"The SEPC STEP-UPP program is built around three important initiatives: Strategic Orientation, Personal Leadership, and Field Experience. Through Strategic Orientation, participants learn that business growth occurs through thoughtful planning and strong partnerships. These relationships influence our decisions and remind us that progress happens when we work together across the entire supply chain. Personal Leadership creates valuable face-to-face networking opportunities that build greater trust, understanding, and respect between growers of fresh produce and buyers of fresh produce. Finally, Field Experience gives participants the opportunity to kick the dirt together and stand in one another's shoes. When we better understand each other's challenges, responsibilities, and contributions, we strengthen not only our relationships, but the entire produce industry."

When growers, sellers, and buyers plan together, build relationships face-to-face, and share real-world experiences in the field, we develop greater respect and appreciation for each other's goals. The SEPC is so proud of the fruit this program has produced over the years and how the participants are making such an impact on our industry."

**Mike Roberts,**  
Board Ambassador, Southeast Produce Council;  
Retail Committee Co-Chair, STEP-UPP; Vice President  
of Produce Operations, Harps Food Stores



"One of the greatest strengths of the STEP-UPP program is the opportunity to watch future leaders in our industry grow right in front of you. Each class brings new energy, curiosity, and passion for produce, and I am proud to see another group take full advantage of everything this program offers."

STEP-UPP is much more than a tour. These participants receive a full education on the produce industry through in-person tours, virtual education days, QA training, and sessions covering every aspect of the business—from H-2A labor and logistics to food safety, leadership, growing practices, packing, shipping, and retail execution. It gives them a true farm-to-store perspective and helps them understand the challenges, opportunities, and people behind the fresh produce supply chain.

I also appreciate the SEPC for continuing to invest in programs like STEP-UPP. They do a tremendous job giving back to their retail partners and helping develop the next generation of produce leaders. That kind of commitment strengthens the entire industry.

Seeing the way this class asked questions, engaged with growers and suppliers, and represented their companies gives me a lot of confidence in where we are headed. The future of the produce industry is bright with people like this coming up through it."



# STEP-UPP Class of 2026

## Retail Class



**Tamra Barnes,**  
Produce Manager,  
Harps Food Stores



**Logan Bohannon,**  
Produce  
Supervisor,  
Town & Country  
Supermarkets



**Carl Brown,**  
Produce  
Merchandiser,  
W. Lee Flowers



**Kat Ciriello Clark,**  
Sr. Manager, FDC  
Quality, Target



**Daniel Corbeira,**  
Senior Sourcing  
Analyst, Walmart



**Sabrina Gordon,**  
Produce Buyer,  
Associated  
Wholesale  
Grocers



**Autumn Marrale,**  
Produce Buyer,  
Ingles



**Jordan Pregi,**  
Produce Buyer,  
MDI



**Kyle Pruitt,**  
Produce  
Supervisor,  
K-Va-T Food  
Stores



**Brent Slack,**  
Produce Manager,  
United  
Supermarkets



**Tyler Sluss,**  
Produce Buyer,  
Schnuck Markets



**Jasmine  
Weatherly,**  
Category Manager,  
Southeastern  
Grocers

## Foodservice Class



**Gabriel Bonilla,**  
Buyer,  
Royal Fresh Cuts



**Max Braun,**  
Senior Distribution  
Lead,  
Chick-fil-A Inc.



**Hannah Kim,**  
Procurement Sales  
Coordinator,  
Fresh Alliance



**Rocio Lopez,**  
Buyer,  
What Chefs Want



**Hunter Marshall,**  
Manager, Category  
Development,  
NPC Powered by  
Foodbuy



**Tomasz Nazaruk,**  
Associate  
Category  
Manager,  
US Foods



**Melissa  
Rodriguez,**  
National Accounts  
Coordinator,  
Brothers Food  
Service



**Ellie Rothstein,**  
Produce Category  
Manager,  
Baldor Specialty  
Foods



**Jacob Silva,**  
Produce Category  
Manager,  
Ben E. Keith



**Daman Singh,**  
Buyer,  
FreshPoint



**Carsen Solf,**  
Marketing  
Associate,  
Kings River  
Packing



**Matthew  
Williams,**  
Manager of  
Quality Control,  
Texas Roadhouse



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supporting  
children and  
families



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# WTF DO I DO WITH Superfresh Growers® Organic Autumn Glory Apples ?

{ what the fork }



ORGANIC AUTUMN GLORY CLOUD TOAST

## INGREDIENTS

2 Superfresh Growers® Organic Autumn Glory® Apples, diced  
Sourdough bread  
1 cup ricotta cheese  
Zest of 1 lemon  
3 tsp honey  
1/3 cup brown sugar  
Pistachios, crushed  
Maple syrup  
Cinnamon  
Pinch of salt

**Prep Time:** 10 mins

**Cook Time:** 10 mins

**Servings:** 1



## DIRECTIONS

- 1 Add the ricotta cheese to a blender with lemon zest, 2 tbsp of honey, and salt. Blend until the consistency becomes light and fluffy. Transfer the ricotta cheese into a piping bag and set aside in the fridge.
- 2 In a medium pan, add the maple syrup and brown sugar, let it thicken, then add the diced apples and sprinkle cinnamon. Cook for about 3 minutes until the apples are well coated. Set aside.
- 3 Toast 2 slices of sourdough bread to the desired crunch.
- 4 To assemble, spread a thin layer of whipped ricotta over the bread. Pipe more ricotta around the edges to create a fluffy, cloud-like shape, leaving a well in the center. Then spoon a generous portion of the apple mixture into the middle.
- 5 Sprinkle the crushed pistachios all over the toast and drizzle a little bit more of honey.
- 6 Serve and enjoy!

To learn more about Superfresh Growers®, visit [superfreshgrowers.com](https://superfreshgrowers.com)

# aptean GROWING PAINS Into → GAINS

A Q&A with Sheldon Peacock,  
Product Director in Agent  
Engineering, Aptean

BY MELISSA DE LEON CHAVEZ

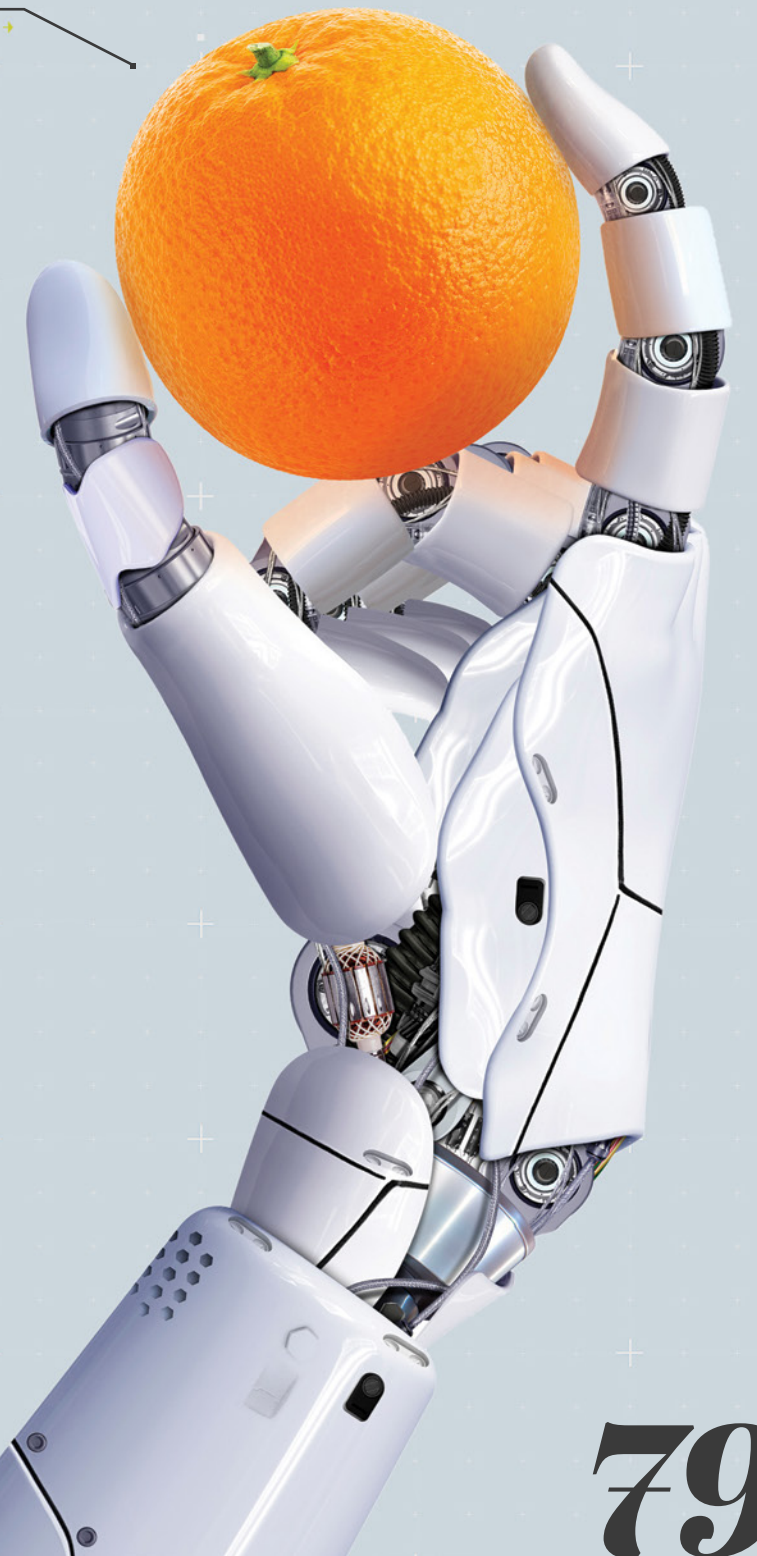
Technology and agriculture. To assume no two worlds are further apart is one of the greatest misconceptions of our industry.

True, one is often abstracted and futuristic to the other's boots-on-the-ground, grit-and-grind image, but the Silicon and Salinas Valleys are close neighbors. At just 60 miles apart, each calls the same region of California home, a geographic tie that makes it seem as though any ambivalence between the two may be more a sibling rivalry, brought closer together when they see their differences are what make them a stronger pair.

If there is a meeting point between the figurative sides of the two valleys, Sheldon Peacock is it.

Sheldon, a Product Director in Agent Engineering at Aptean, focuses on the practical application of AI agents in enterprise software. He has more than a decade's worth of experience working with global fresh produce and food businesses under his belt, and two decades of experience in Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central development. A background spanning software engineering, product leadership, change management, process optimization, and industry-specific ERP design, combined with previous roles at Produce World and LINKFRESH, gives Sheldon deep insight into the operational challenges faced by modern fresh organizations.

But the first thing he tells me is that he grew up on a farm.







**Melissa De Leon Chavez:** Sheldon, you bring a unique perspective to a market that is increasingly vying for fresh attention. Can you tell me about what you are doing to help serve supply partners?

**Sheldon Peacock, Product Director in Agent Engineering, Aptean:**

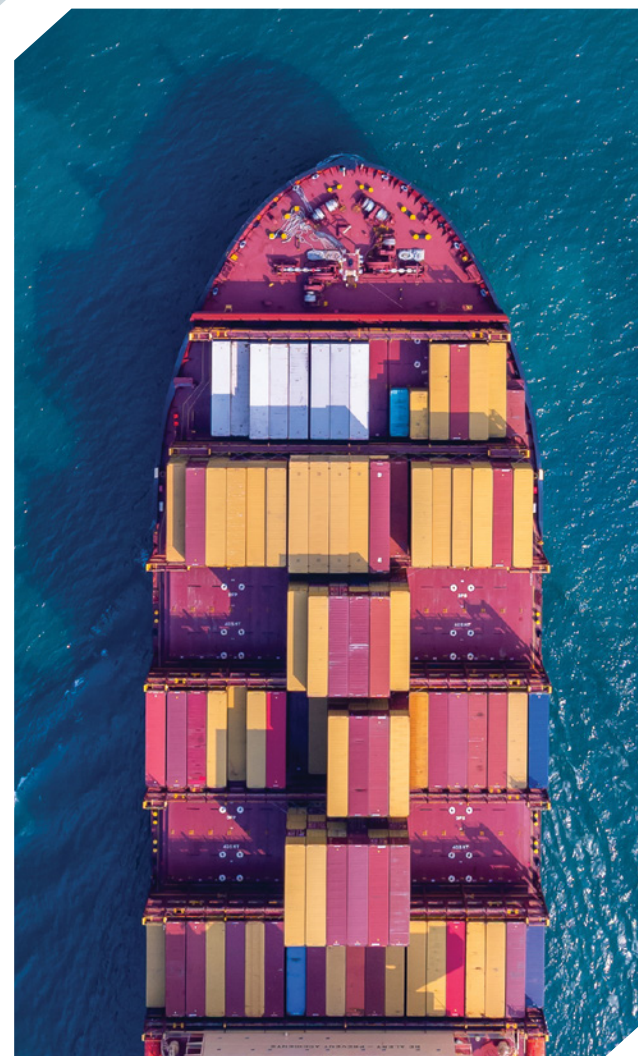
I grew up in the fresh industry, and now I can experience my two passions—farming and computers—in the same place, which is, quite frankly, bonkers. I can't believe I'm this lucky. And it helps demonstrate our approach, because while Aptean is a large company covering many industries, we are also focused on serving those industries well. For produce, we are building agents around the recurring problems we consistently see across the industry, so customers can realize value quickly and extend from there. Then we can custom-build on top of that.



**MDC:** As someone who understands the fresh industry, how do you introduce new technology without disrupting what's already working in what is inherently an unforgiving space?

**SP:** Upgrading ERPs is significantly harder than providing a tool that helps suppliers solve problems, especially a tool that understands their industry. That's the key to a pre-built agent in our space: It's constructed for not only their product, but their industry and role. So it knows what a procurement officer does, it knows the importance of quality and timeliness in a fresh industry, and it knows how that impacts further down the line.

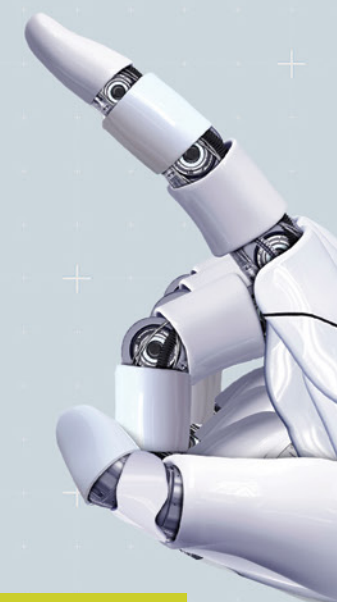
I know what it's like to deal with a short shelf-life product that you've got stocked and you're wanting to push out of your warehouse. Having an agent that knows the importance of not sitting on stock that expires can identify likely customers and prepare recommendations for the salesperson. Or maybe you have a customer who allows you to over-send by five percent, so give them a push. If we automate this, we give the human back time so they can go work on a problem an agent can't apply to. That's where the value is: It's not the job it takes, it's the job you're allowed to do in its place.



"IT'S NOT THE  
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IT'S THE  
JOB YOU'RE  
ALLOWED TO  
DO IN ITS  
PLACE."

- Sheldon Peacock, Product Director in Agent Engineering, Aptean



**MDC:** You have emphasized the importance of giving time back to the grower, and how even the buy-side is seeing changes fueled by technology. What is the untold story or avenue you see technology taking the industry that is not getting shared?

**SP:** It's the automation of the frustrations—that's the biggest value gain. I see it as perhaps what my parents would have seen when computers entered their workplace, going from typewriters and logbooks to these computers with spreadsheets on them. The job didn't change; the way you worked changed. You started to be able to do more, better, and easier, with less frustration. AI is moving us significantly further forward, but only in certain places. Like any good tool, it has a perfect place for a perfect job. There are things it does okay, and there are things it should not be allowed to do because it's just not good at it.

**MDC:** As you say that, the first thing I think of is the personal nature of our business and the fear that technology is widening rather than closing the gap. Specifically, around losing the grower-to-buyer relationships that have been built over years. Can you speak to how this can be avoided?

**SP:** It depends on what you are trying to achieve. It goes back to the automation of the frustration. If a relationship is a frustration within your business, then automate it and give it to an agent. But if handling a relationship is important to you, then keep that and automate what will allow you to focus on your relationship. That way, you get the best of both worlds—you shouldn't have to compromise, quite frankly. The conversations can be richer because you are able to spend more time on them and less time on the data analysis. And we're eliminating mistakes along the way; the number of human errors we used to see with data processing is reducing because the agent can identify data trends that are going out.

I don't see it as depersonalization if you're focusing on removing frustration to enable the human. I don't believe that it has to be impersonal if you're using the information to drive a better conversation.

From complex supply chains and compliance demands to quality, traceability, and margin pressure, Sheldon knows firsthand that ours is an industry that must navigate an incredible amount of terrain to find its footing. Yet the Startup Nation and the Salad Bowl call the same region of California home, a symmetry that brings tangibility to the strengthening bridge between both.

And the possibility of merging the two worlds many view as so far apart is, for him, a dream come true. 



# WTF DO I DO WITH { what the fork } Sweet Onions from Shuman Farms ?



MARINATED AND ROASTED SWEET ONIONS

## INGREDIENTS

**4** Shuman Farms Sweet Onions, halved

### MARINADE

**1 cup** water  
**1 cup** apple cider vinegar  
**2 tbsp** brown sugar  
**2 tsp** fresh rosemary, chopped  
**½ tsp** kosher salt  
**¼ tsp** black pepper  
**1 pinch** red pepper flakes, optional

### ROASTING

**4 tbsp** butter, cut into 8 slices  
**1 tsp** fresh rosemary

**Prep Time:** 15 mins

**Marinade Time:** Overnight

**Cook Time:** 1 hr

**Servings:** 8

## DIRECTIONS

- 1 In a small bowl, mix the marinade ingredients. Pour into a baking dish large enough to hold all eight onion halves (a 9" × 13" baking dish is recommended).
- 2 Trim the tops and roots from each onion, then cut in half horizontally, leaving the skin on. Place the onions cut side down in the marinade. Cover and refrigerate overnight.
- 3 Preheat the oven to 400° F. Flip the onions over in the marinade.
- 4 Top each onion half with ½ tbsp of butter and sprinkle with the remaining rosemary.
- 5 Roast uncovered for 1 hour, or until golden brown and tender.
- 6 Remove from the oven, spoon the sauce over the onions, and sprinkle with fresh herbs, if desired.
- 7 Remove the outer skins from the onions. Enjoy!

To learn more about Shuman Farms, visit [www.shumanfarmsga.com](http://www.shumanfarmsga.com)



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**112 Years, Zero Pivots**



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[sales@sunsetgrown.com](mailto:sales@sunsetgrown.com)

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