

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the SNACK

ISSUE 108 OCT 2026



An Enduring Legacy

❖ D U D A pg 64

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**MAKE ROOM
FOR
MUSHROOMS**

A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH INDUSTRY VETERAN DICK SPEZZANO HAS STAYED WITH ME. Produce has always been both art and science. The science will keep evolving. But the art—the inherited wisdom, the relationships, the trust, the conversation, the spirit—that's where this industry has always drawn its strength.

During my conversation with Dick, he raised an idea that is simple to explain but harder to grasp in practice. We talked about something that is becoming more challenging to pass down: that education and innovation of the produce trade—the knowledge gained through apprenticeship and mentorship, through seasons won and lost, and through knowing what struggles came before you.

Dick sees a widening gap, a break in the chain of wisdom that was once easily handed down. Veterans teaching buyers, relationships forming before transactions. People who knew the categories, the families, the seasons, and the simple act of following the sun.

A change is happening in the industry, on both sides of the desk—the buying and the supply-side. What a produce career is built on is changing, and so are the routes people take to get here. Especially on the purchasing desk.

Some retailers are doing an excellent job of keeping this wisdom available and essential to the roles they are building. They are led by people who understand that the nature of this business is about more than what is on the P&L. They create opportunities for their teams to experience the field, the orchard, the farm and the retail floor—to get their hands dirty, see a crop where it is grown, or stand in a store and watch firsthand how customers respond to it. Even when budgets don't allow for a trip to the San Joaquin Valley or Florida's row crop regions, there are farms and orchards closer to home with local seasons and growers willing to open their doors.

These experiences offer something that can't always be taught from behind a desk. They lead to a deeper



understanding of the art and science of fresh produce, but also of what maintains its beating heart: relationships.

As Dick better puts it, the beauty of progress is that today's generation has the opportunity to benefit from the fruits of its predecessors, but you can only truly do that by knowing the history, the trials and tribulations, and the hurdles that came before you.

Progress doesn't happen in a vacuum. Having lived through an El Niño season or a devastating crop loss; having watched a category decline as farmers are pushed out by input costs and supply chain challenges; having sat across the table with buyer and vendor partners to find a solution that solidifies a relationship instead of breaking it—these experiences become the wisdom of our industry. When that wisdom is passed down, yesterday's hard-earned lessons become part of how we make better decisions today.

Even in my own 15 years in produce, I've watched that shift accelerate. Growers and suppliers find themselves reintroducing, reinventing, and re-messaging just to explain who they are. Too often, the buyer on the other side doesn't know the legacy, the growing region, or the nuances that can make or break a season. And when that context is missing, resilience starts to thin.

Strong partnerships create room for understanding long before the tough seasons arrive. They are built by people who reach across the desk and make a connection before making a transaction.

Maybe the responsibility of progress, then, is not choosing between the art and the science, but making sure we carry the wisdom of one forward as we advance the other. 

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

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FEATURES

SUNKIST GROWERS THE FACES BEHIND THE FRUIT

The cooperative's steadfast commitment to supporting its growers drives a series of investments in innovation, operational excellence, and so much more. Jim Phillips, Christian Harris, and Cassie Howard take us behind the curtain...



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GLOBAL FOOTPRINT,
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THROUGH DECEMBER!



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THE FACES *Behind* THE FRUIT

By PEGGY PACKER

Jim Phillips, Cassie Howard, and Christian Harris, the faces behind the fruit (Orange Harvest mural - Exeter, California)

Since 1893, Sunkist Growers has been proving that staying power comes from never standing still. With new investments, fresh ideas, and growers leading the way, the citrus icon is planting the seeds for its next era of growth...



Sunkist Annual Grower Meeting



Historic packinghouse (circa 1930)



1910

For more than 48,910 days, Sunkist Growers has been building a reputation for quality, consistency, and longevity. One hundred and thirty-four years lie in the cooperative's rearview mirror, with each turn or speed bump informing its next route.

Since then, the company has forged one of the most recognizable brands in fresh produce, bringing a full citrus portfolio to market with the help of a talented network of family farmers. Today, Sunkist Growers includes more than 1,100 grower members supported by employees, packinghouse teams, sales and marketing professionals, and business leaders working together to bring citrus from grove to consumer. While many consumers know Sunkist as a citrus brand, the cooperative's business extends far beyond marketing fruit. From packing, logistics, and sales to technology investments, licensing, and business operations, each part of the organization plays a role in supporting the growers behind the Sunkist name.

"Our mission says it best: Everything we do is for our growers. That is not simply a statement; it serves as the lens through which we evaluate every investment we make," says Jim Phillips, President and Chief Executive Officer.

As production costs continue to rise and consumer expectations evolve, Sunkist has focused on strengthening the capabilities needed to compete in an increasingly complex marketplace. Over the past several years, Sunkist has made targeted investments across technology, quality systems, logistics, customer partnerships, and supply planning.

This period of growth includes the evolution of Sunkist's organizational structure, the return of Limoneira to the cooperative, a strategic investment in Sienz to accelerate innovation and technology development, and the opening of a new Consolidation Center to improve speed, streamline logistics, and create a better experience for customers. Together, these initiatives have improved operational agility, streamlined decision-making, enhanced customer service, and strengthened Sunkist's ability to meet changing market demands.

"BY CONTINUING TO INVEST IN OUR PEOPLE, OUR CUSTOMERS, OUR BRAND, AND OUR COOPERATIVE, WE ARE POSITIONING SUNKIST [GROWERS] TO REMAIN A TRUSTED LEADER IN CITRUS FOR GENERATIONS TO COME."

Jim Phillips

President and Chief Executive Officer,
Sunkist Growers



"BY INTRODUCING CONSUMERS TO THE MULTI-GENERATIONAL FARMING FAMILIES BEHIND THE SUNKIST [GROWERS] NAME, WE ARE CREATING A STRONGER EMOTIONAL CONNECTION TO THE BRAND WHILE REINFORCING THE QUALITY, HERITAGE, AND VALUES THAT HAVE DEFINED OUR COOPERATIVE FOR OVER 130 YEARS."

Cassie Howard

Senior Director of Category Management and Marketing,
Sunkist Growers

The impact of those efforts is already visible across the business. Through technologies such as Clairifresh®, Sunkist can evaluate fruit quality more consistently, provide feedback across teams, and strengthen collaboration with customers. Additional investments in production and grower data help the organization better understand varietal mix, orchard age, and future supply opportunities, enabling more informed planning across its network. Improved visibility and decision-making tools are also helping Sunkist move fruit more efficiently while maintaining the quality standards customers expect.

Sunkist's growth strategy is not simply about expanding volume. The organization remains selective about the fruit it brings into its system, focusing on the right growers, the right quality standards, and the right varieties to meet evolving customer and consumer needs. That disciplined approach helps protect the integrity of the Sunkist brand while ensuring customers have access to the quality, consistency, and varieties they need.

"Success doesn't happen through a single investment or initiative," says Christian Harris, Chief Operating Officer. "It's the result of continually looking for ways to improve how we operate, how we serve customers, and how we position the organization for the future. That's the approach driving many of the decisions we're making today."

With a stronger operational foundation in place, Sunkist has also accelerated investments in its brand, customer marketing programs, and consumer engagement efforts. Through integrated marketing campaigns, customer partnerships, retail and foodservice programs, and strategic brand initiatives across more than a dozen international markets, the organization has continued expanding its reach while reinforcing the quality and heritage associated with the Sunkist name.

Those efforts have translated into measurable brand momentum. According to its latest brand tracking research, Sunkist delivered one of the strongest year-over-year gains in unaided awareness among tracked citrus brands. While key citrus competitors remained largely flat, Sunkist also increased top-of-mind awareness, demonstrating that more consumers are not only recognizing the brand but actively thinking of Sunkist first when purchasing citrus. The research also found that Sunkist remains the most widely



Packing Ladies mural - Exeter, CA

recognized citrus brand, reinforcing its leadership position within the category.

In June 2026, the citrus cooperative expanded consumer engagement through its reimagined Sunkist.com experience, introducing the "Welcome to the Co-op" platform alongside new storytelling features such as Segments and Peel Talk. The refreshed digital experience invites consumers to connect more directly with the growers, the fruit they grow, and the everyday moments that define Sunkist.

For consumers, that connection can begin with something as simple as peeling a citrus fruit at the kitchen counter, packing oranges into a lunchbox, or reaching for lemons while preparing a family meal. The refreshed digital experience gives those everyday moments a deeper story by helping shoppers better understand the people, places, and cooperative values behind the fruit they bring home.

"Welcome to the Co-op reflects our belief that the best way to build the Sunkist brand is by putting the people behind the fruit at the center of the story," says Cassie Howard, Senior Director of Category Management and Marketing. "By introducing consumers to the multi-generational farming families behind the Sunkist name, we are creating a stronger emotional connection to the brand while reinforcing

the quality, heritage, and values that have defined our cooperative for over 130 years."

Supporting grower members also means investing in the people who help bring that mission to life every day. Across 87,000 acres, 10 office locations across four countries, 24 packinghouses, four growing districts, and grower partners around the world, Sunkist relies on teams working across operations, quality, logistics, sales, marketing, and customer service to keep the business moving forward. Through initiatives such as Grove University, an online learning platform focused on employee growth and development, enhanced internal communications platforms keeping teams connected, leadership development programs, volunteer engagement opportunities, and employee well-being initiatives, Sunkist continues building a culture centered on learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement. These efforts help employees stay connected, continue developing their skills, and support the evolving needs of the business.

"Those investments strengthen our organization, support employee engagement and retention, and ultimately enable us to better serve our grower members and customers," adds Harris.

"Our goal is not simply to preserve Sunkist's legacy; it is to build on it," concludes Phillips. "By continuing to invest in our people, our customers, our brand, and our cooperative, we are positioning Sunkist to remain a trusted leader in citrus for generations to come."

As Sunkist looks ahead, its focus remains on the growers, employees, and customers who will help shape the next chapter of the organization's story. 

Snapshot Citrus

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Zesty, spritz, zing...Words to describe citrus on the eyes, tongue, even nose are ones that wake us up and capture us. It is one of the most vivid and vibrant categories, offering just as many opportunities for visual engagement and color break in the produce department as it does in the home and on the plate. And with a citrus offering for every occasion, there is truly an option for every consumer, the health-seeking to the aesthetically and flavor driven. Lets dive in to the opportunities, from palette to palate...



Blood Orange

Attributes	Deep maroon interior with very few seeds and orange-red blushed exterior; easy to peel
Aroma	Mildly floral with an earthy, papaya-like fragrance
Flavor	Rich, plum-like flavor with hints of tart cherry and raspberry undertones



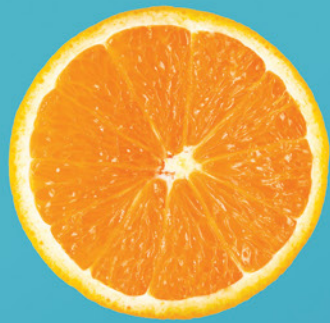
Cara Cara Orange

Attributes	Rich pink pulp with orange exterior; seedless
Aroma	Pleasingly tropical
Flavor	Extremely sweet with a kiss of cranberry and cherry undertones



Navel Orange

Attributes	Small navel formation on the blossom end; easy to peel and seedless
Aroma	Sweet, floral
Flavor	Refreshingly sweet with rich vanilla finish and cherry undertones



Valencia Orange

- Attributes** Differentiated from other orange varieties by a thin, slightly pebbly rind and occasional seeds
- Aroma** Orange blossom
- Flavor** Perfect balance of sweet and tart flavors; high juice content



Ojai Pixie Tangerine

- Attributes** Small with a pebbly, light orange skin; seedless, easy to peel, and grown only in the lush Ojai region of Southern California
- Aroma** Sweet citrus aroma with floral undertones
- Flavor** Candy-like sweetness



Clementine, W. Murcott, and Tango

- Attributes** Uniquely rounded middle, flat top and bottom, medium-sized fruit with deep orange, smooth, glossy skin; seedless and easy to peel
- Aroma** Sweet, wildflower, pomegranate-like
- Flavor** Crisp, apricot-like or candied nectar flavor with a rich aftertaste



Eureka and Lisbon Lemon

- Attributes** Two different types that are virtually indistinguishable from each other; bright yellow with medium to slightly pebbly skin; popular citrus fruit used in cooking today
- Aroma** Crisp, floral smell
- Flavor** Distinct tangy flavor that complements both sweet and savory foods



Meyer Lemon

- Attributes** Cross between a regular lemon and a Mandarin orange; bright yellow or rich orange-yellow color
- Aroma** Rich lemon blossom; floral, sweet lime, lemon, and Mandarin scents
- Flavor** Zesty sweet citrus flavor



Pink Variegated Lemon

- Attributes** Pink on the inside with a yellow-and-green-striped rind
- Aroma** Bright, crisp
- Flavor** Slightly less acidic than conventional lemons



Satsuma Mandarin

- Attributes** Varying in shape from flat to necked; easy to peel and segment; seedless
- Aroma** Sweet honeysuckle aroma
- Flavor** Refreshing with warm, tropical hints



Page Mandarin

- Attributes** Prominent circle on blossom end
- Aroma** Crisp citrus scent
- Flavor** Rich flavor



Gold Nugget Mandarin

- Attributes** Bright and slightly bumpy rind; seedless, sweet, and easy to peel
- Aroma** Candy citrus
- Flavor** Rich and sweet, juicy flavor



Minneola Tangelo

- Attributes** Cross between a grapefruit and tangerine; a deep orange with a knob-like formation at the stem end and few, if any, seeds; peels easily
- Aroma** Robust, tart-orange aroma
- Flavor** Bold, tangy flavor and bursting with juice



Grapefruit

- Attributes** Yellow skin with a pink blush, flesh varies from light pink to deep red
- Aroma** Subtly sweet, sour cherry
- Flavor** Perfect balance of sweet and tart flavors, occasionally super sweet; extremely juicy



Texas Rio Red Grapefruit

- Attributes** Overall blush on the exterior peel with a deep red interior color
- Aroma** Bright and floral
- Flavor** Surprisingly sweet with a hint of zing



Persian Lime

Attributes Typically sold while still dark green in color, gradually turns light green as it ripens; virtually seedless

Aroma Spicy, floral

Flavor Distinctive lime flavor

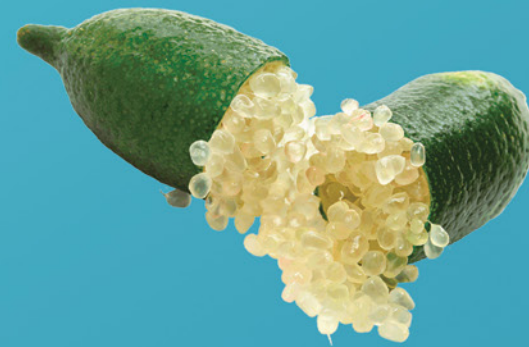


Key Lime (Mexican or West Indian Lime)

Attributes Generally round with straw yellow flesh and a thin, leathery skin; ranging from light green to yellow

Aroma Highly crisp aromatic attributes

Flavor Fresh, tangy taste



Finger Lime

Attributes Not related to a lemon or a lime; considered a micro-citrus with tiny fruit pearls in a wide range of colors

Aroma Unique, refreshing lime

Flavor Similar to a lemon-lime-grapefruit combination



Oro Blanco and Melo

Attributes Oro: Slightly larger than grapefruit with a thick green-yellow rind

Melo: Larger than Oro with a thinner rind

Aroma Sweet

Flavor Oro: Juicy and sweet with bitter membranes

Melo: Sweet, but less sweet than a Pummelo



Pummelo

Attributes Largest of all citrus fruit; thick, dark green peel that fades to yellow as season progresses

Aroma Zesty; slightly tropical with a hint of jasmine and lime

Flavor Sweet with a candied aftertaste

SOURCE: The Snack and AndNowUKnow
Citrus Grower Contributors

WTF DO I DO WITH { what the fork }

Bee Sweet Citrus Mandarins ?



HALLOWEEN CHARCUTERIE BOARD



INGREDIENTS

Bee Sweet Citrus Mandarins, peeled
Blackberries
Brie cheese, cut into shapes of ghosts
Celery sticks with leaves
Cheddar cheese, sliced into pumpkin shapes
Chocolate-covered pretzels
Crackers of your choosing
Dried apricots
Googly eyes
Green apples, sliced
Mini chocolate chips
Nutter Butter Cookies, or peanut butter cookies of your choice
Oreos, or chocolate cookies of your choice
Pretzel sticks
Red peppers
Reese's Pieces Peanut Butter Cups
Salami
String cheese
Vanilla yogurt
White frosting

Prep Time: 2–3 hrs

Servings: 2*

*Amounts will vary based on the needs of guests

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Assemble Ghost Cookies: Dip Nutter Butter Cookies in vanilla yogurt, then place two mini chocolate chips as eyes. Arrange on a cookie sheet and freeze for 2–3 hours.
- 2 Prepare Zombie Peppers: Wash all produce. Use frosting to adhere googly eyes and chocolate chips to peppers. Set aside.
- 3 Make Chocolate Bats: Cut Oreos, or cookies of your choosing, in half. Use frosting to attach two halves as wings to each Reese's Piece. Add googly eyes, and set aside.
- 4 Shape the Cheeses: Use pumpkin and ghost cookie cutters to make Brie cheese ghosts and Cheddar cheese pumpkins.
- 5 Create Mandarin Pumpkins: Peel mandarins. Cut celery stems to resemble pumpkin stems and insert them into mandarins. Set aside.
- 6 Make Cheese Brooms: Cut string cheese in half. Finely slice one end of each to create a broom-bristle effect. Insert a pretzel stick into the uncut end as the broom handle.
- 7 Slice apples as desired.
- 8 Assemble the tray: On a large tray, arrange all produce, salami, pretzels, and cookies. Add the Cookie Ghosts just before serving. Enjoy!

Optional: Decorate the spread with plastic skulls, spiders, and mini pumpkins for a festive touch.

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ELIZABETH VOTH

ACCOUNT MANAGER,
FULLTILT MARKETING

With Peggy Packer

Elizabeth Voth has a passion for meaningful moments in the great outdoors. From fly fishing to paddleboarding, camping, and traveling, the Account Manager for FullTilt Marketing is most at home when the wonders of Mother Nature are at her fingertips, and the promise of a new experience is just around the corner. Perhaps this is why she fits so perfectly into the magnificent world of produce. When she isn't busy promoting fruits and veggies, there are a few other ways Elizabeth likes to spend her time...



1 MY HUSBAND

My neighborhood best friend, whom I married in 2024.



2 BEING AN AUNT

Spending time with them and watching them grow is precious to me!



3 CAMPING

It refuels my tank and deepens my appreciation for nature.



4 PLANTS

Life is better with more green in it!



5 PADDLEBOARDING

It's how I spend all my free time in the summer.



6 FLY FISHING

A fun way to enjoy quality time with my husband and family.



7 SNOWBOARDING

My favorite way to beat the Washington winter blues!



8 HEALTHY EATS

I love promoting good foods!

WTF DO I DO WITH Bimi® Baby Broccoli ?

{ what the fork }



BIMI® BABY BROCCOLI HARVEST SALAD

INGREDIENTS

10 oz Bimi® Baby Broccoli, chopped
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 shallot, thinly sliced
3 tbsp apple cider vinegar
1/2 tbsp spicy brown mustard
1 tbsp pure maple syrup
Salt and pepper, to taste
2 cups cooked and cooled faro
1 granny smith apple, diced
1/2 cup dried cranberries
4 oz feta, crumbled

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

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Add the chopped Bimi® Baby Broccoli to a hot steamer pot and steam for 4–5 minutes or until tender. Remove from the pan and let cool completely.
- 2 Add the olive oil to a small saucepan and place over medium-low heat. Add the sliced shallot and cook, stirring frequently for about 2–3 minutes or until the oil just begins to simmer. Remove from the heat and whisk in the vinegar mustard, maple, and a pinch of salt and pepper to taste until everything is combined.
- 3 In a large bowl add the cooked and cooled Bimi® baby broccoli, cooked faro, apple, cranberries, feta, and the warm shallot dressing.
- 4 Toss until everything is well combined. Serve immediately or refrigerate to cool completely if desired. Enjoy!

To learn more about Bimi® Baby Broccoli, visit www.bimibaby.com



THE SUPERIOR STEM

As the original baby broccoli, I've been compared to plenty of other varieties. But when it comes to flavor, tenderness, and year-round consistency, I don't just measure up—I rise above. Bimi® brings unbeatable quality to every plate, making me the superior stem for retailers and foodservice partners alike.

Taste for Yourself at IFPA Booth #1253

.....

Come by the Bimi® booth at IFPA! James Beard-nominated Chef Thai Dang of HaiSous Kitchen will be serving up *stemsational* dishes. One taste, and you'll know why Bimi® is Broccoli, But Better.



bimibaby.com



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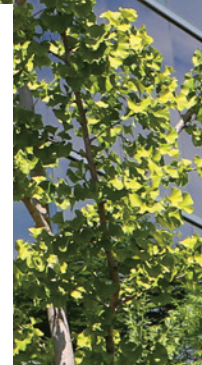
By Jordan Okumura-Wright

Fric tion. It both creates and is created by challenges, pain points, uncertainty, and even lack of clarity. But friction is also the stuff of creation. Look through the lens of physics for a moment: friction converts kinetic energy into thermal energy, and when harnessed, it can drive transformation.

So much of what our fresh produce industry does is find opportunity where many may only see scarcity or an absence of direction, but this is the arena where Famous Software thrives. The team sees solutions and possibilities where others may not, creating a runway primed for growth and change for their clients and their customers.

What gets solved for one operation rarely stays there. It travels to the next grower, the next shipper, the next buyer working the same problem on a tighter clock. An impact felt by the industry at large, because how could it not?

Artificial intelligence sits somewhere between tool and threat right now, depending on who you ask. Heather Hammack, President of Famous Software, stepped into that conversation and did what the best harbingers of change tend to do. She listened first.



Jordan Okumura-Wright:
The volume is truly up on AI conversations right now. You've talked about starting with listening before you build anything, and I'd love to hear what you were hearing. What did the industry tell you was actually worth building, and was there anything you decided to set aside along the way?

Heather Hammack, President, Famous Software[®]: There's certainly a lot of noise around AI right now, which is exactly why we took a step back and started by listening rather than developing for the sake of developing. Customer centricity has always been a core tenet at Famous Software, and our approach to innovation has consistently been guided by one principle: to create solutions that deliver meaningful value for our customers.



What we heard from the industry was interesting. Most customers weren't coming to us with a list

of specific AI features they wanted. In many cases, they didn't yet know what AI could or should do for their business. What they did know was where they were experiencing friction. They wanted to save time, eliminate repetitive tasks, reduce manual effort, and create opportunities for greater efficiency across their operations.

That insight shaped our roadmap. Rather than chasing emerging AI trends, we focused on identifying areas where intelligent automation and AI-driven workflows could solve real problems and help customers make better operational decisions.

We realized our customers weren't asking us to build AI for the sake of AI. They were asking us to help them make better operational decisions. For decades, Famous Software has been building the data foundation that makes AI in fresh produce possible. What AI allows us to do is connect that data, surface it at the right moment, and reduce the cognitive load on the people running produce operations. That's why we say we're not adding AI to Famous—we're making explicit what Famous has always been: the intelligence layer of the fresh produce supply chain.



“Rather than chasing emerging AI trends, we focused on identifying areas where intelligent automation and AI-driven workflows could solve real problems and help customers make better operational decisions.”

- Heather Hammack, President, Famous Software[®]



JOW: When a grower or shipper asks what this really does for their bottom line, how do you like to answer? I'm curious about the specifics—the hours it gives back, the decisions it changes, where it actually shows up in dollars.

HH: When customers ask about the bottom-line impact, I think it's important to acknowledge that we're still in the early stages of understanding the full potential of AI in our industry.

The real value isn't that AI makes people work faster. It helps them make better operational decisions with greater confidence. Every day, produce teams are doing an incredible amount of mental math—matching customer specifications, quality standards, shelf-life, transit times, inventory availability, and historical buying patterns. That's not where their expertise creates value. Their expertise is deciding what to do with that information. AI handles the math so people can focus on the judgment.

The data to make those decisions has existed inside the ERP for years. AI simply allows us to connect that information and surface it before someone has to stop what they're doing and calculate it manually.

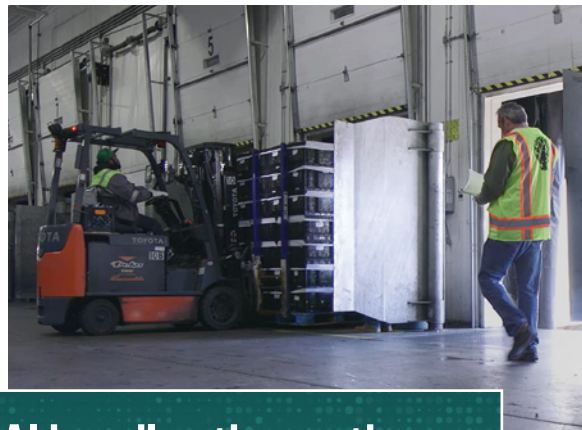
JOW: You talk about taking repetitive work off people's plates and helping teams move faster. In a business that runs on relationships and hard-won instinct, how do you think about what AI should handle, and what's better left in human hands?

HH: In this industry, you can't put a price on true human interaction, meaningful relationships, or the kind of gut instinct that only comes from years of experience. Those are not things we are trying to replace with AI.

At Famous Software, that belief is very personal. Many of our leaders have risen through the ranks of the organization after decades of hard work and firsthand industry experience. I started my career as a sales representative, traveling to trade shows, visiting customer sites, and meeting with people every day to understand how this industry really works and where the pain points are. That hasn't changed—I still spend a significant amount of time at industry events and with customers, listening to their challenges and learning how their businesses are evolving. That's the kind of industry knowledge and judgment that AI can support, but never replace.

The way we think about it is simple: AI should handle the cognitive load of repetitive analysis, not strategic judgment. AI can process the information, but people still make the decisions that depend on relationships, experience, instinct, and context.

We are using AI to reduce friction so our customers can spend more time where their team's ingenuity, expertise, and judgment create the greatest value.



“ AI handles the math so people can focus on the judgment. ”



JOW: If you look out three to five years and you've built this the way you hope, what does a day inside a produce company feel like that it doesn't today? And honestly, what's the part of this work that still keeps you up at night?

HH: If we've done this right, five years from now the most experienced person in the building won't be the only person who knows how to make the right decision. Their knowledge won't disappear when they retire or move on. It will have been captured, made available to everyone in the operation, and strengthened by data over time.

That's what excites me most about AI. It's not replacing experience—it's preserving it. It's taking decades of institutional knowledge and making it accessible to the next generation of produce leaders.

Ultimately, that's how produce companies become more resilient. They spend less time relying on manual calculations and tribal knowledge, and more time making confident decisions that keep high-quality produce moving efficiently through the supply chain. When that happens, everyone benefits—from the grower and shipper to the families who expect fresh produce on store shelves every day.

Ultimately, AI isn't changing what makes this industry successful. It's helping preserve the expertise, relationships, and judgment that have always made it successful—while giving the next generation of produce leaders better tools to build on that foundation.

JOW: Trust in the scope of AI is a big talking point with many people, especially when a single call on a load of perishables carries real weight. How do you earn an operator's trust in what the tool is telling them?

HH: Ultimately, trust isn't earned through a feature set—it's earned through consistent performance over time. Our customers aren't trusting AI. They're trusting the decades of produce expertise, operational knowledge, and customer insight that have always been at the heart of Famous Software—and now power our AI.

Trust has always been the foundation of our business. In an industry where a single decision can impact product quality, customer relationships, and profitability, people don't adopt technology simply because it's new—they adopt it because they trust the company behind it.

For more than 50 years, Famous Software has built that trust by consistently delivering solutions that help our customers succeed. We operate from a place of integrity, and our reputation is everything to us. That's how we've earned our customers' trust for more than half a century, and it's the standard we bring to every innovation we deliver—including AI.

Preservation, as Heather frames it, holds two things at once: values and the acceptance of change. It is not about fossilizing everything you can into a business model, but homing in on what deserves to be carried. Famous Software has the heart and the hands to build tools like these. And what we know does not have to leave with us. 



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WTF DO I DO WITH { what the fork } Crystal Valley Foods Gourmet Baby Carrots ?



GLAZED BABY CARROTS

INGREDIENTS

2 lbs Crystal Valley Foods Gourmet Baby Carrots
4 tbsp maple syrup, divided
2 tbsp whole grain mustard, divided
1 tbsp olive oil
4 tbsp Dijon mustard, divided
 2 garlic cloves, minced
½ tsp dried thyme (plus fresh thyme sprigs for serving)
¼ tsp salt
 Black pepper
 Pine nuts
 Goat cheese, crumbled

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 25–30 mins
Servings: 4



DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 425° F
- 2 Rinse and dry your carrots and slice them lengthwise in half. Add the carrots to a large bowl.
- 3 In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, 2 tbsp of maple syrup, 1 tbsp of whole grain mustard, and 2 tsp of Dijon mustard. Pour the glaze over the carrots.
- 4 Add garlic, thyme, salt and pepper to the bowl and toss the carrots until well coated.
- 5 Prepare your baking pan by lining it with parchment paper or greasing it with non-stick cooking spray. Using tongs or a slotted spoon, transfer the carrots to the pan. Make sure the carrots are all on one even layer. Place the pan in the oven and roast for 25–30 minutes or until the carrots are tender.
- 6 While the carrots are cooking, toast your pine nuts in a small, dry skillet for about 5 minutes. Stir frequently until golden brown and fragrant. You won't need to add any oil as pine nuts release their own oil when heated.
- 7 Once the carrots are done roasting, whisk the remaining 2 tbsp of maple syrup, 1 tbsp of whole grain mustard, and 2 tsp of Dijon mustard together and drizzle over the carrots. Toss and top with crumbled goat cheese and toasted pine nuts. Enjoy!

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WTF

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Del Fresco Pure®
G.R.EAT! Grab. Rinse. Eat!®
Grape Tomatoes



MARINATED GRAPE TOMATO MEDLEY

Come visit us at Global Produce and Floral Show! Booth #1889

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pint each** Del Fresco Pure® Red, Orange, and Yellow G.R.EAT! Grab.
Rinse. Eat!® Grape Tomatoes
- 8–10 oz** mozzarella pearls
- 1 cup** Greek-style marinated olives
- 2–3 tbsp** prepared pesto sauce
- ½ cup** fresh lemon juice
- 1 cup** extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves** garlic, minced
- ¼ cup** fresh basil, chopped
- 2 tbsp** fresh parsley, chopped
- 1 tsp** crushed red pepper, optional
- ½ tsp** sea salt

Prep Time: 15 mins
Marinate Time: 1 hr
Servings: 8–10



DIRECTIONS

- 1 In a 32 oz jar, combine the minced garlic, pesto, fresh lemon juice, extra-virgin olive oil, sea salt, and crushed red pepper. Seal and shake vigorously until emulsified.
- 2 Rinse the G.R.EAT! Grab. Rinse. Eat![®] tomatoes. Add the tomatoes, mozzarella pearls, Greek-style olives, fresh basil, and parsley into the jar with the dressing.
- 3 Seal the jar tightly and gently shake until all ingredients are evenly coated.
- 4 Refrigerate for at least 1 hour before serving. This allows the flavors to meld and the tomatoes to absorb the bright lemon-pesto marinade.
- 5 Serve directly from the jar for a rustic presentation or transfer to a serving bowl. Pairs perfectly with crusty bread for scooping. Enjoy!

Tip: Store in the refrigerator for up to 3–5 days. Flavors will continue to deepen the longer the salad sits.

To learn more about Del Fresco Pure[®], visit delfrescopure.com



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A Closer Look at Atlas Produce Sunnies Energy Bites

By Chandler James

A trio of new products has made its way to retail shelves, putting fresh produce in the snacking spotlight. Launched in 2022, Atlas Produce's Sunnies brand has been diversifying eating occasions for consumers of all ages—now in three new and exciting flavors.

The new Sunnies Energy Bites include Strawberry, Apple Cinnamon, and Blueberry flavors. I knew straight

away that the Apple Cinnamon variety would find its way to my shopping cart as soon as possible. Easily identifiable by their pink, green, and blue pouch bags, these Medjool date bites are eye-catching additions to the produce aisle.

Sunnies Energy Bites have no hidden ingredients, preservatives, or added sugars, and Atlas Produce uses non-GMO ingredients. With these guarantees, discerning

**UP
CLOSE**

consumers can feel good about what they purchase.

Atlas Produce has always championed California Medjool dates and healthy snacking. Each serving has 5 g of protein, 3 g of fiber, and is full of potassium and vitamin D. With tremendous flavor and healthy benefits rolled into one bite, it will be hard to pass up on this easy ball of nutrition. 



Learn More 



FRESH ENERGY
SUNNIES

WTF DO I DO WITH { what the fork } Highline Cream of Mushroom Soup Kit ?



HIGHLINE FRESH GOURMET SERIES CREAM OF MUSHROOM SOUP KIT

INGREDIENTS

1 package Highline Fresh Gourmet Series Cream of Mushroom Soup Kit
3¼ cups 2% milk (or liquid of choice)

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

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To learn more about Highline Mushrooms, visit www.highlinemushrooms.com

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Rinse the mushrooms.
- 2 In a large pot over medium heat, sauté the mushrooms for about 10 minutes, or until tender.
- 3 In a small bowl, whisk the soup mix with ¼ cup of the milk until smooth.
- 4 Stir the soup mixture into the mushrooms.
- 5 Add the remaining 3 cups of milk and bring to a gentle boil, stirring frequently, about 5 minutes.
- 6 Reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes.
- 7 Serve warm and enjoy with family and friends!

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WTF DO I DO WITH Juicy Gems® Pomegranate Arils ?

{ what the fork }



WHIPPED GOAT CHEESE WITH JUICY GEMS® POMEGRANATE ARILS

INGREDIENTS

Juicy Gems® Pomegranate Arils,
as desired
10 oz plain goat cheese, softened
1 (5.3 oz) package Boursin Shallot &
Chive Cheese, softened
2-3 tbsp heavy cream
Honey (hot honey is a delicious option),
for drizzling
Roasted pistachios, chopped, as desired
Fresh thyme leaves
Flaky sea salt
Crostini or artisan crackers, for serving

Prep Time: 15 mins
Chill Time: 30 mins
Servings: 8

juicygems®

DIRECTIONS

- 1 In a food processor, combine the goat cheese, Boursin, and heavy cream. Blend until smooth and fluffy.
- 2 Spread the cheese mixture onto a serving platter, creating soft swirls with the back of a spoon. Cover and refrigerate until chilled or ready to serve.
- 3 Just before serving, drizzle with honey. Top with Juicy Gems® Pomegranate Arils, chopped pistachios, fresh thyme leaves, and a light sprinkle of flaky sea salt.
- 4 Serve with crostini or artisan crackers and enjoy!

Tip: The whipped cheese mixture can be prepared up to 2 days in advance and refrigerated. Just before serving, drizzle with honey and add the Juicy Gems® Pomegranate Arils, chopped pistachios, fresh thyme, and flaky sea salt for the freshest flavor and presentation.

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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Giorgio Shiitake Mushrooms ?



10-MINUTE RAMEN WITH CHILI CRISP MUSHROOMS

INGREDIENTS

4 oz Giorgio Shiitake Mushrooms, cleaned, stems removed, sliced
2 large eggs
2½ tsp chili crisp, plus more for drizzling
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 cups (2.25 oz) instant ramen noodles, such as soy, chicken, beef or shrimp flavored, prepared according to package directions
Fresh cilantro, roughly chopped, for garnish
1 lime, cut into wedges, for serving

Prep Time: 5 mins
Cook Time: 10 mins
Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

- 1 In a small pot over medium-high heat, bring 2 quarts of water to a boil. Gently drop eggs into water. Cover and remove from heat. Allow eggs to cook for 6 minutes, until soft-boiled. Drain and rinse eggs with cold water, or place in an ice bath. Set aside.
- 2 Meanwhile, heat chili crisp in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until light golden-brown, about 4 minutes. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.
- 3 Peel eggs and slice in half lengthwise just before serving. Top ramen with mushrooms and soft-boiled egg. Garnish with cilantro and drizzle with additional chili crisp.
- 4 Serve with lime wedges and enjoy!

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Left: Amy Duda
Kinder, Sammy Duda,
and Tracy Duda
Chapman

Right: Andrew Duda

AN ENDURING

LEGACY

BY JORDAN
OKUMURA-
WRIGHT

“Curiosity is in our DNA, the belief that there’s always a better way, that we can do better.”

Sammy Duda tells me this as he sits contemplative in the afternoon light, sharing his family’s story with me. I can tell from the cast of his eyes that he has already weighed a lifetime of decisions before we even began our conversation this morning. The heat in Oviedo, Florida, is a subtle 92 degrees with a light 94 percent humidity. But Sammy, as always, seems acclimated to the environment, as comfortable in the heat as he is in a boardroom. With four generations of the Duda

family work ethic coursing through his veins, you might expect a man like Sammy to have all the answers—which he just may—but today, as he has been for most of his career, he leads with curiosity, as do the rest of the fourth and fifth generations of Duda family members working for the company.

To endure for 100 years takes effort, awareness, and adaptability. To endure in fresh produce and thrive for that long takes something more. A hunger for a better life, and an unwillingness to value the fear of failure over the possibility of success. All characteristics Sammy attributes to an immigrant work ethic that seeded a dream transformed into a century-long legacy.

As DUDA and its legacy agriculture business, operated under wholly owned subsidiary Duda Farm Fresh Foods, celebrate their 100th anniversary in 2026, coinciding with America's 250th, the story of a family who moved across an ocean to create a home lands succinctly. It is a milestone the family treats less



The Three Seniors John Duda, Andrew Duda, Jr., and Ferdinand Duda

“

Andrew left his life because he knew he wanted something else for his family...They never gave up on the dream they wanted, and they were going to do whatever it took to get it.

Amy Duda Kinder,
Corporate Vice President, Safety and Operational Effectiveness, DUDA

like a finish line and more like a starting point—proof of what's been built, and reason enough to keep building.

Roots of a Dream

It all started with a man named Andrew Duda, fresh from Austria-Hungary—present-day Slovakia—with 40 acres

of farmland, and sights set on the American Dream.

“The Duda legacy started in a way only an immigrant could love: with very little and everything to gain. Most people looked at the first generations of Dudas here in Florida like they were nuts: the land they bought, some of the things they did. Our Founders' mindset and drive came from having nothing. So they appreciated every opportunity that arose

in front of them—whether or not they took it,” Sammy says.

That kind of gratitude has a way of ripening into something warmer across a hundred years of retelling. It is less about the risk that was taken, and more about who it was taken for. Ask any Duda family members why that first opportunity mattered, and the answer stops sounding like strategy and starts sounding like love.

As Amy Duda Kinder describes, Andrew didn't leave his life because he thought it was going to be easier. Far from it.

“Andrew left his life because he knew he wanted something else for his family,” Amy, Corporate Vice President, Safety and Operational Effectiveness, tells me, leaning on the realism that has always

been a stabilizing virtue, balancing and empowering the dreamer in each member of the Duda family. “They never gave up on the dream they wanted, and they were going to do whatever it took to get it.”

Some could say it was grit. Another name you could call it is grace.

“They had an enduring faith in the Lord, and that he would bless them, whatever happened; he was going to be there for them,” Tracy Duda Chapman, Chief Legal and Administrative Officer, shares. “It's a story as close to the American Dream as one can get.”

When I ask Amy and Tracy separately how it all began,

neither one starts with strategy. Instead, both start with a man alone on a boat, and the family he left waiting.

Andrew arrived seeking land he could own and a place where he could practice his faith freely. His early farming attempts in central Florida failed outright, forcing the family back to Ohio meatpacking work to save enough to keep paying on their land.

“My great-grandfather came over here by himself, and three years later, his wife and children followed him. It was the

need to build something they believed in that ushered them forward, something that matched their values, and their sense of what a purposeful life should be,” Amy began.

What comes next isn't history so much as inheritance; family lore, unprovable and undimmed for it.

“As it goes,” Tracy begins, “our great-grandmother, tired of waiting for her husband to send for her, loaded up her children and arrived in America through Ellis Island, not speaking English. The cart carrying her family to the home near Oviedo also carried the letter announcing she was coming—arriving before the letter did, so that Andrew had no warning, but by the family's telling, he was overwhelmed with joy.”

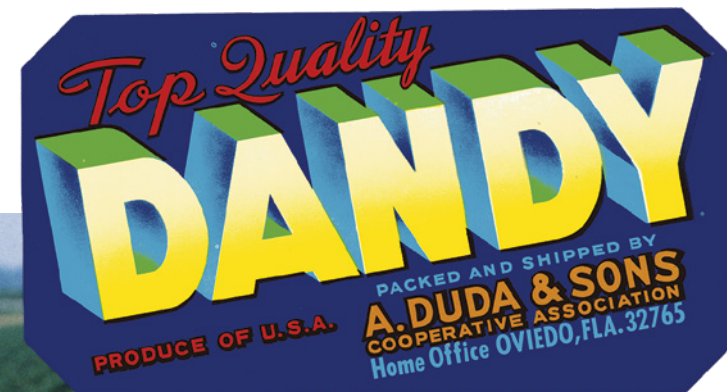
Between Sammy, Tracy, and Amy, each remembers specific details, and when I sit individually with each, I hear the same hundred-year story told three beautiful ways. That's the beauty of a tale told by many. Love has a way of shaping a story over time, as each teller layers in their own recollections, their own favorite moments, until what's left behind isn't a transcript at all—it's a design particular to storytelling itself. A language of love, for a labor of love. A story of persistence and determination against all odds.

Growing Beyond the Stalk

In 1926, that persistence produced the company's first successful cash crop: a cart of celery to market, grown on the family's original 40 acres near Oviedo. It was the first season profitable enough to fund the next. Curiosity and the drive to stay relevant kept the Dudas putting one foot, and then one cart, in front of another.

From there, the curiosity became a track record.

Once committed, the family engineered around every limitation. When a sales agent pointed out that celery grown in muck soil had better quality than celery



“”

The Duda legacy started in a way only an immigrant could love: with very little and every thing to gain.

Sammy Duda,
Chief Executive Officer, DUDA

grown in sand, the family went looking for muck, which is how they ended up farming in south Florida. And when the celery itself needed harvesting equipment that didn't exist yet, they built it.

“In the '50s,” Tracy says, “John, the oldest, patented what was at the time called the mule train—an implement attached to a tractor that would go through the field. This is just the way the family worked. Find a problem, solve it.”

Then solve it better.

Andrew's three sons—John, Andrew Jr., and Ferdinand, warmly known within the family as the Three Seniors—built the diversified company on top of that first crop. This first set of family boots planted firmly in fresh soil also planted a beautiful ideal, one that generations since have grown and cultivated. Each specialized: one in farming, one in mechanical innovation (patenting harvesting equipment), one in business and finance. Under their leadership, the company launched the Dandy brand in 1953, moved into muck-soil celery farming and citrus by 1960, and expanded into cattle and land holdings, including in Australia.

That same instinct to diversify applied to geography as much as it did to category.

“We diversified within agriculture—cattle, leaf crops, sod, citrus—and then across the country,” Sammy explains, noting that it wasn't a straight line. “We had to recognize that some of the business ventures we tried didn't work. The onion business would be one, and Western citrus ended up being

another. The industry changes quickly, and breaking into some categories is not always easy, if ever. I would say the most important thing the family learned, more so than whether to go into a certain business, was knowing when to get out.”

The third generation pushed the company beyond Florida entirely, into Texas, Arizona, and California, against internal skepticism that the company should stay put.



All of these pivotal moments stand out to Sammy, Amy, and Tracy, and they come together less as a distinct chronology of growth and more like moments of momentum adding to a steadily growing legacy.

“I don't know that I really thought about our history and those pivotal decisions, many of which were made over so many years,” Sammy says. “I reflect back on what the family did in

the face of criticism: You shouldn't go to California. You shouldn't get into value-added. You shouldn't even go to South Florida. You're good right here; you don't need to expand beyond that. You don't need to buy that ranch in what is now Viera. It's a wet ranch; you would be crazy for buying that thing. Don't get into home building; you guys don't know what you're doing. And yet, if we'd have hit the stop sign on all those decisions over the years, I don't think we would be here. You don't know if they're all

going to work out. It has taken collective courage, not just mine, but the organization's, to make decisions where you don't know the future. But that is how we got here.”

That same generation built commercial real estate into a second core business alongside food and agriculture: starting in the 1980s with the new town of Viera—a name the family says is Slovak for “faith,” tying the development back to the same religious freedom that brought Andrew to Florida in the first place.

“Originally, they went to Valencia, California—one of those places that was developed as a new-town concept,” Tracy says. “They came back and said, ‘That's what we want to do: build a new town.’”

And they did. A generation later, another leap of faith and determination brought them up against the luck (or lack thereof) in timing.

“Right before the Great Recession, we launched our home building business,” Tracy says. “We decided the real margin was in home building, not just selling lots.”



“”

It has taken collective courage, not just mine, but the organization's, to make decisions where you don't know the future. But that is how we got here.

Sammy Duda

But the leap has since withstood the test of time and paid off.

The entry into real estate then expanded into a broader commercial property portfolio as the company diversified out of its sugar business and certain East Coast citrus landholdings. A fresh-cut processing facility opened in Oxnard, California, in 2008, alongside a deepening investment in proprietary celery genetics and value-added products.

By the time that facility opened, a new generation of Dudas was already at the table.

The fourth generation—Amy, Tracy, and Sammy among them—joined in the early 1990s through the company's family rotation program, then rose into today's leadership: Sammy as Chief Executive Officer, Tracy overseeing legal

and government affairs, Amy leading food safety and sustainability.

In 2026, DUDA marks its centennial with company-wide celebrations, employee recognition, and philanthropy tied to its founding tradition of tithing.

Bred for What's Next

Ask any of them what a hundred years actually requires, though, and nostalgia isn't the answer you get.

“Any company that lasts 100 years, you've had to adapt, be willing to change, to recognize that what you're doing isn't working and you've got to find a different way to do

things,” Tracy reflects.

Sammy adds that they are a company that cherishes its past, but does not live in it.

“We do not need to wake up one day in the wilderness and wonder what happened to us,” he expresses.

I've sat in a lot of these conversations, and it's rare that a CEO says the quiet part—that standing still is itself a decision, and usually the wrong one—without being asked twice. Ask Sammy for the boldest thing the company's done lately, though, and he doesn't reach backward at all.

One of the most recognizable moves for DUDA was its entry into more celery and crop genetics; a longtime dream of the DUDA company, with recent developments solidifying that in the company's diversified business model. In February 2026, A. Duda & Sons and G's Group announced a joint venture acquisition of Tozer Seeds Ltd, a United Kingdom seed company founded in 1944. The deal, spanning the U.K., Spain, Netherlands, and U.S. operations, builds on a decade-long partnership between DUDA and G's that pairs Tozer's breeding portfolio with DUDA's celery genetics.

"The whole move into genetics with celery—going after not just horticultural characteristics but flavor and consumer traits—was a big one," Sammy says, and the value-added push that followed was deliberate insurance against volatility.

Convenience, By the Bunch

With its growing family of companies and diversification, the move puts them in a global seed genetics position in the market. Genetics, though, is only half the edge.

"The move to value-added was also a stabilizer for consumer trends. We haven't abandoned the commodity side, but we're looking for those opportunities in value-added, because that's where the consumers are going," Sammy remarks. "We also just got the *Good Housekeeping* seal for our eight-ounce celery sticks. They don't just hand those out to anybody; it's got to have taste, nutrition, quality, convenience, and innovation."

For DUDA, serving the modern customer has never just meant keeping shelves stocked. It's meant to lighten the load for the people buying celery by the truckload, and reshape how the vegetable itself is viewed, used, sourced, and cherished.

"If you think about the larger national retailers, they've got 600 items, and

they're supposed to keep track of every single one, and they can't. So they look for people like us. You should know your category better than they do," Sammy says. "If you're not relevant to the customer, your days are numbered."

Amy pivots the conversation and meets me where I am as a consumer.

"You're a mom, I'm a mother too. I was a lunchbox mom," she says. "Moms want something that's easy to pack in a lunchbox, and you don't want to use carrots all the time; you don't want to always use apples. So, we cut the celery into four-inch sticks, and we bundle them so you can take them apart and have four little sticks in a bag."

I've packed enough lunches to know she's right, and to know exactly where the four-inch sticks would live in my fridge.

The same instinct shows up in newer formats.

"We have celery dippers, which are two inches—almost bite-able," Amy says, of the format introduced last year at the International Fresh Produce Association Global Produce & Floral Show. "And, again, really leaning into 'How do we add some type of complementary ingredient?'"

This move to convenience and new items is important to Sammy and the team.

"Certainly when it comes to convenience through value-added expansion," Sammy says. "But I also think about unique items from genetic traits, ones with the nutrition and convenience that make it easier for people to consume our product. The genetic piece and the IP, having items that are unique and very difficult to compete with, would be our way of innovating and supplying going forward."

“”
Any company that lasts 100 years, you've had to adapt, be willing to change, to recognize that what you're doing isn't working and you've got to find a different way to do things.

Tracy Duda Chapman,
Chief Legal and Administrative Officer, DUDA



Tray-pack corn is another big area of differentiation that consumers are clamoring for. Being able to use nearly all the corn in a tray coincides with an ever-growing movement around reducing food waste and packaging.

"To that end, and to ensure we are bringing the most value to our customers, when we make big changes to a product or packaging, none of it happens without the retailer as a partner, not just a customer," Amy says. "Retailers have the most connection to the consumer. More than we do. It's all about working with them on what they want, too—that's how this industry works."

Down to the Dirt

Knowing an industry that well hasn't spared the Dudas from getting some of it wrong.

"We've made many poor decisions, and we have made great ones," Tracy says, smiling at the gamble of it all, but also the faith. "But I guess we've made more

good decisions than not—we're still here today, and hopefully we'll be here for another hundred years."

Ask any of them why the good decisions have outnumbered the bad, and the answer keeps landing in the same place.

"These aren't glamorous businesses," Sammy says. "It's down to the dirt—whether you're building a house from the dirt or operating at the dirt level, it really starts there. There's no job beneath me. All of those are very integral. If you really want to be successful at the end, you've got to understand the beginning."

It's the kind of line that would sound rehearsed from almost anyone else. From Sammy, sitting in that leadership seat, it doesn't.

Sammy hesitates for a moment, hoping to find the right words.

"I want to believe it's authenticity. There's a real obligation to authenticity that is so lacking in today's environment. We're a nation of skeptics and cynics. We want some authenticity, and I'm not saying we're perfect, by any means, but that

believability is also part of our culture," he expresses.

It's a claim I found myself believing well before he made it.

"It's just the way we are," he says.

That same lack of pretension shows up in how the family shares control, strategy, and growth. Today, the company keeps its pool of wisdom strong and plentiful with a Board of Directors, including outside independent directors, to advise the company. Leadership is both family and non-family, or rather chosen family as the Dudas see it.

At 100 years in, this way of approaching business, scalable growth, building something that lasts, and faith is a legacy DUDA desires to continue passing on to future generations. Just like the Three Seniors did.

And the compass pointing toward all of it is the same one that's guided the company for a century.

"That curiosity of staying abreast of what's going on in the marketplace will guide our decisions," Sammy says. "As long as we do that, I think we'll remain relevant."

Endurance, faith, and the DNA of curiosity. In the bones of it, this is a story about enduring in the face of hardship and challenge. In the heart of it, it is the story about a dream and a family, and the hands that carry an immigrant's dream into the soul of today.

Ask Sammy what comes after that, and the curiosity answers before he does.

"We'll just have to make the moves that, historically, we've been successful with," he says. "Recognizing those and implementing those, I think, is the key to success for the next 100 years."

A hundred years of curiosity hasn't made the Dudas certain of what comes next. It's only made them unafraid of not knowing. 🍷

THE INDUSTRY JUST GOT

BIG-GER

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We want to talk about your avocado program at IFPA Global.
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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Sweet Onions from
Shuman Farms ?



SLOW COOKER CHILI WITH SHUMAN FARMS SWEET ONIONS

INGREDIENTS

- 1 medium** Shuman Farms Sweet Onion, diced
- 2 lbs** ground beef
- 1** green bell pepper, diced
- 2 cloves** fresh garlic, minced
- 1 can (28 oz)** crushed tomatoes
- 1 can (16 oz)** light red kidney beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 can (16 oz)** dark red kidney beans, rinsed and drained
- 2 tbsp** chili powder
- 2 tsp** paprika
- 1 tsp** ground cumin
- 1 tsp** salt, or to taste
- 1 tsp** black pepper, or to taste
- 1-2** Jalapeño peppers, seeded and chopped, optional

Prep Time: 15 mins

Cook Time: 3-4 hrs

Servings: 8

DIRECTIONS

- 1** In a large skillet, cook ground beef, onion, bell pepper, and garlic over medium-high heat. Stir until the ground beef crumbles and is no longer pink.
- 2** Once beef is fully cooked and the vegetables are browned, drain the mixture and dispose of any grease.
- 3** Pour cooked mixture into a full-size slow cooker. Stir in crushed tomatoes, both cans of kidney beans, Jalapeño peppers (optional), and all seasonings. Cook on high for 3-4 hours, or on low for 5-6 hours.
- 4** Enjoy!

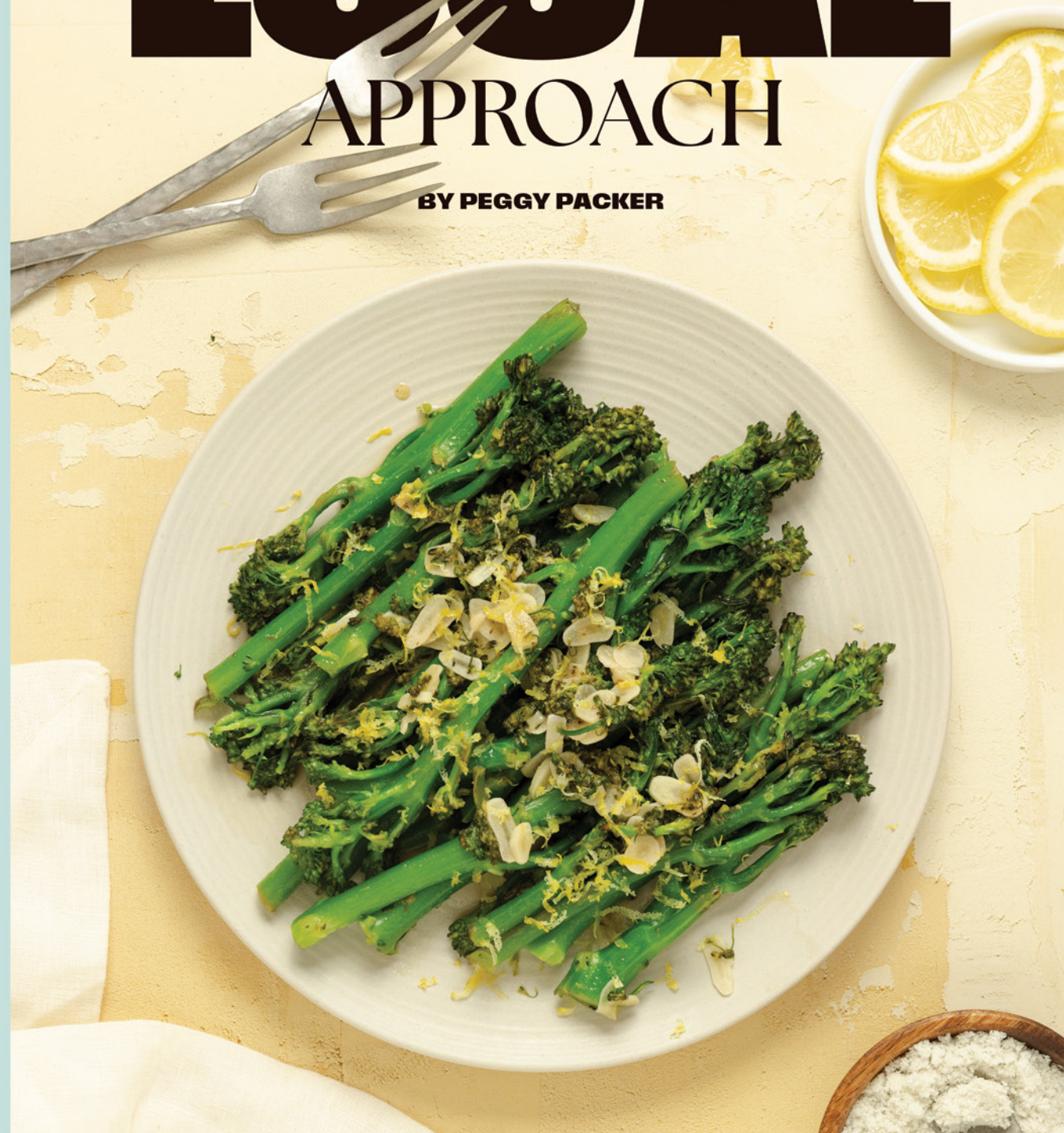
Tip: For a tailgate twist, swap the bowl for an onion cup! Fill it with chili, pile on your favorite toppings, and enjoy the ultimate handheld game-day bite.

To learn more about Shuman Farms,
visit www.shumanfarmsga.com



GLOBAL FOOTPRINT, LOCAL APPROACH

BY PEGGY PACKER



How can you maintain a wildly successful global operation while still delivering the service and reliability of a family-run business? When it comes to upholding this dynamic balance in the vegetable genetics space, Sakata Seed America could teach a masterclass.

A longstanding name in the world of fresh vegetable innovation, Sakata has been breeding vegetables since the late 1930s and is recognized for its cutting-edge research programs and genetics that span the globe.

Despite its massive geographical footprint, Sakata's continuous growth is fueled by a localized, bespoke approach to vegetable breeding. One hundred years of history does not equate to a faceless multinational corporation, but a deeply experienced organization that operates with the culture and agility of a local family business.

In the most practical sense, this philosophy shows up in Sakata's efforts to breed strategically for specific regions and niche markets, rather than pushing one national catalog.



Tracy Lee Zogby,
Senior Manager of
Sales Operations and
Development, explores



the many advantages this blueprint has carved out for Sakata and its vast network of partners.

"We run trials and regional adaptation out of our Florida research station for Eastern growers who face hot, humid, unpredictable conditions that a one-size-fits-all variety just can't handle. It shows up in our Home Grown division, which serves local growers, farm stands, and home gardeners, and in region-specific grower-support tools like our new Eastern Broccoli Bulletin," Tracy explains. "And it shows up in relationships—our team knows growers by name and stays with them from seed to shelf, and beyond."

This personalized approach is one of the key factors setting Sakata apart in the fresh vegetable sector. Emphasizing the importance of its customers' individual needs, the company possesses the

“Competitors tend to optimize for the biggest, safest volume; we’re willing to develop the distinctive variety that gives a grower a premium crop and gives a retailer a genuine point of difference.”

Tracy Lee Zogby,
Senior Manager of Sales Operations and Development,
Sakata Seed America

incredibly impressive ability to uphold the R&D scale of a global breeder while promising the responsiveness of a local partner.

“We pair long-term investment in breeding with a close understanding of the regional conditions our growers face,” Tracy notes. “That’s also why we sometimes invest in creative, niche varieties—items that may not fit a mass-market spreadsheet but that our grower and retail relationships tell us matter. Competitors tend to optimize for the biggest, safest volume; we’re willing to develop the distinctive variety that gives a grower a premium crop and gives a retailer a genuine point of difference.”



“These varieties expand what a category can be—on color, flavor, and shelf appeal—which gets more people eating vegetables and gives our partners something new to sell.”

Alicia Suits,
Senior Marketing Manager, Sakata Seed America



With its focus trained on the specific needs of its grower and retail partners, Sakata continues to develop vegetable varieties that bring something meaningful to the market, whether through flavor, functionality, or a unique eating experience.

“It’s in our DNA. We literally created a category,” Alicia Suits, Senior Marketing Manager, chimes in. “Baby broccoli, which we market as Bimi®, began in our

breeding program in Japan as a hand-pollinated cross of broccoli and Chinese kale, bred for milder flavor and better heat tolerance. We’ve kept that spirit going: Purple Magic, our All-America Selections-winning broccoli, is the first purple-stemmed, purple-headed broccoli in the world, and it’s naturally high in anthocyanins. Our beet program’s experimental future possibilities span the full color spectrum—from taking our golden Touchstone Gold to the next level to completely reimagining the pink-and-white candy-stripe rings of Chioggia Guardsmark.”

Sparkling advancements in categories from A to Z, the vegetable breeding powerhouse continues to introduce

new varieties that sharpen the produce department’s competitive edge. These innovative new varieties are backed by expert support teams and materials strategically designed to help region-specific growers get the most out of them.

This blueprint—and the team that ensures it keeps running smoothly—has paved the way for the ongoing success of distinctive Sakata varieties such as Miz America, Kallard™ Sweet Kita, Thriller, and Purple Magic.

“These varieties expand what a category can be—on color, flavor, and shelf appeal—which gets more people eating vegetables and gives our partners something new to sell,” Alicia continues.



“We’ll keep leaning into the specialty and niche work, because that’s where we can help our partners stand out.”

Tracy Lee Zogby

More growth lies on the horizon for this legendary breeding operation. As it lays the foundation for further developments in vegetable quality, yield, and flavor, Sakata Seed America will continue to invest in R&D, breeding for specific regions and conditions, and building out its pipeline. The company is also enhancing its support side, from regional trials and agronomic guidance to grower resources and offerings for controlled-environment growers.

“We’ll keep leaning into the specialty and niche work, because that’s where we can help our partners stand out,” Tracy concludes. “The goal is simple: stay big enough to keep innovating, and local enough to keep it personal.”

In our industry, companies are constantly asked to balance growth and tradition. Legacy and innovation. Efficiency and personal connection. What’s most impressive is how fresh produce achieves this balancing act, paying respect to both our industry’s future and the vital building blocks of its past.

Sakata Seed America does not sacrifice connection, service, or quality for the sake of innovation. Quite the contrary, actually.

Sakata Seed America’s consistent portfolio innovation is driven by that

connection. While its research programs may span the entire globe, the breeder’s partners know the support they need—and the next game-changing variety—are just a phone call away. 🍅

Regardless of which cutting-edge new offering Sakata is bringing to its retail and grower partners, the goal remains the same, Tracy and Alicia tell me. As it has been throughout its 100-year history, Sakata is committed to breeding varieties that provide retailers with a true point of difference and give growers a premium, higher-margin crop.



Cracking the Monolith

By Melissa De Leon Chavez



A Q&A with Anthony Innocenti, Managing Partner, LIV Produce

Purple, red, orange, Murasaki...Beneath a surface of educating consumers about the difference between yams and sweet potatoes lies an undiscovered world of varieties. Each one is an opportunity to break open the possibilities of the category by maximizing each one's purpose.

Taking a hammer to the monolithic concept of sweet potatoes, Anthony Innocenti is ready to see the tuber shining through consistent availability, differentiated offerings, and a trusting, transparent program. Take up your seat, and your fork, as we dive in...



Melissa De Leon Chavez: Sweet potatoes are clearly having a moment for LIV Produce right now—new varieties, new pack sizes, a bigger presence. Was there a specific point where this category shifted for you from a solid performer to something worth building a whole story around?

Anthony Innocenti, Managing Partner, LIV Produce: It has really been the realization of something we grew over time. This program didn't happen overnight; it's been years of work, and as we built a culture of growing some of the highest-quality sweet potatoes on the West Coast, buyers and retailers began to notice. Now we are excited for what we believe will be our best year ever; a long-term yield of the last few years of concentrated investment and relationship-building.



MDC: You've expanded into varieties like purple sweet potatoes and Japanese Murasakis. What's exciting to you about giving retailers and their shoppers more variety in this category?

AI: There is so much opportunity for variety recognition in the category. Changing the monolithic perception of sweet potatoes can be the next frontier for sweet potatoes through recognition of varieties and applications for specific occasions or dishes.

MDC: You've called sweet potatoes a hot topic right now. What's driving that from an industry standpoint—more retail shelf space, stronger category performance, something else at play?

AI: Along with the potential for more variety awareness, the biggest push for growth is through consistency of quality and volume with no gaps. As we all know, the holidays are coming up and that is when the category really shines, but it's been pushing far beyond that part of the calendar. Now, we are primed for really successful holiday SKUs to tee up a year-round, 100 percent California-grown sweet potato crop to further support and drive more demand. We offer a full array of value-added SKUs year-round as well, including trays and bags.



“Changing the monolithic perception of sweet potatoes can be the next frontier for sweet potatoes through recognition of varieties and applications for specific occasions or dishes.”
Anthony Innocenti,
Managing Partner, LIV Produce



“We are primed for really successful holiday SKUs to tee up a year-round, 100 percent California-grown sweet potato crop to further support and drive more demand.”



MDC: You’ve also been scaling up acreage, which I don’t doubt takes trust with growers. What does that partnership look like on the ground as you’ve expanded, and what have you had to figure out together that you didn’t expect going in?

AI: We are very fortunate to have a good cooperative of growers we support and have helped grow along with us. Through our steady increase of grower partners, we have managed to maintain a really strong network and we take pride in both sides being open and transparent with each other. I often point to this as one of our strongest aspects because it helps us mitigate as many surprises as possible.

MDC: If you had to give LIV’s sweet potato program a one-line pitch to retail buyers, what would it be?

AI: Offering a 100 percent California-grown crop is a unique strength that helps close the gaps that have challenged sweet potatoes in the past. We further that success with our ability to navigate and execute national distribution, helping us to deliver anywhere in the country. Finally, despite that amount of reach, we remain a nimble team that is always reachable and listening to customers about what they might be looking for from the grower. From there, we ensure we meet, then exceed their expectations.

As we enter the season that makes sweet potatoes famous, I can’t help but linger on the latter half of Anthony’s statement: that this window only tees up even more opportunities for the category to continue shining.

The infrastructure is already there. Retailers know how to merchandise sweet potatoes at scale, consumers already reach for them without hesitation, and the supply chain is ready to prove it can meet a surge in demand without missing a beat. What’s left is imagination—the work of showing shoppers that a vegetable they associate with one meal, one holiday, one side dish, belongs on their plate in January and July as easily as it does in November and December. Rather than a heavy lift, it is a shift in framing, backed by a category that has already earned its place at the table.

One that is ready to let the momentum of the holidays carry into the quiet months that follow, until “in season” stops meaning a handful of weeks and starts meaning any time at all.

Here is to making the holiday season not the peak of sweet potato demand, but the catalyst. 

ORCHESTRATING



THE SEASONS

A Q&A with
Rich Thompson, vice president, Escondido
and **Gary Caloroso**, Regional Business
Development Director

Giumarra 

By **Jordan Okumura-Wright**

A year-round avocado program is far more than a series of shipments timed correctly. It is a musical score.

Arranging one is as complex as composing for an orchestra. And in avocados, the audience is the consumer. With the right supplier partners, the execution sounds seamless: the strings and the woodwinds blending so cleanly you never hear the seam between them, and the listener takes in all the pleasure of the performance without ever knowing the tuning that came before it, the dissonance, the last-minute revisions, or the section that entered late.

In partnership with the retailer, the consumer never feels the hiccup in the crop transition, the gaps in supply, the storm that brought the gentle hum of a well-tuned season to a roar, or the shrink that lived or died on a sourcing decision made weeks upstream.

Conducting such seamless programs are The Giumarra Companies’ Rich Thompson, Vice President, Escondido and Gary Caloroso, Regional Business Development Director, who share how this score comes together and the execution that turns produce into green gold.



Q1

Jordan Okumura-Wright: What does being a service-driven avocado partner look like in practice, week to week, for a retailer working with Giumarra?

Rich Thompson, vice president, Escondido, The Giumarra Companies:

Every day, we work hard to provide the highest level of customized service to our valued customers. We stay closely connected to the market and proactively keep our customers informed with timely, relevant updates that affect their avocado business. From the moment an order is placed through final delivery, we carefully manage every purchase order (PO) with effective communication, attention to detail, and consistent execution at the center of everything we do.

Our customers can count on us to deliver consistency, reliability, and accountability. We value their partnership in return. We make the customer our priority, tailoring our approach to meet their unique needs and expectations.



Q2

Jow: Avocados ask a lot of a category: ripeness, timing, shrink, and shelf presence. What does your team bring to those conversations that a buyer wouldn't get from a supplier who is simply moving volume?

Gary Caloroso, Regional Business Development Director, The Giumarra Companies: When it comes to ripeness, timing, shrink, and shelf presence, we help our customers source the best possible avocados from the right origins at the right time. We carefully plan and manage crop transitions with a focus on optimal sizing opportunities, fruit maturity, and consistent quality.

Our team works closely with customers to review specifications, shelf performance, and overall appearance to ensure the fruit meets their expectations. Giumarra's avocado sales team is actively discussing program planning with our retail partners. We recommend solutions, but they are involved every step of the way to ensure they are fully integrated in the process.

We develop customized avocado sourcing programs for each valued customer, applying the supply chain expertise and best practices our team has refined over decades of experience.

Q3

Jow: How do the relationships you've built across the supply chain, from grower to shipper to retailer, make the avocado category stronger for everyone in it?

RT: Since entering the avocado business in 1982, we have built and maintained long-standing relationships with trusted growers and packers. Together, we have developed a multi-faceted avocado program designed to deliver reliable supply, consistent quality, and flexibility to meet our customers' specific needs.

We take pride in our daily communication and collaboration with our partners, sharing insights on sizing, quality, market conditions, and promotional planning. These strong, relationship-based partnerships provide us with greater security of supply and the ability to respond quickly to changing market conditions.

That commitment is especially valuable when supplies are tight. Our deep partnerships and decades of experience help us secure the right fruit and continue serving our customers with confidence—even when the market is short.

While our brand is Nature's Partner, we take it one step further—we are truly produce partners.



Q4

Jow: Merchandising and best practices help retailers make the avocado category a destination. How does Giumarra support in this area?

GC: Avocados are a star of the produce department—versatile, great-tasting, and backed by a powerful nutritional story. They are also a special invitation to bring family and friends together around the table.

As part of our commitment to our customers, we provide customized marketing and merchandising support designed to drive avocado sales, increase consumer engagement, and maximize profitability. We fully support customer-driven promotions and corporate initiatives, tailoring our programs to align with each retailer's unique goals.

We also collaborate closely with our retail partners on bag designs and provide private-label support to help strengthen their avocado programs and brands. Our close relationships with avocado promotional boards and industry associations help us provide trade marketing and merchandising support that builds the category and creates greater opportunities for our customers.

RT: Our commitment is simple: Every customer matters. Every order matters. Every avocado line is a priority.

In addition, we work closely with avocado promotional boards and industry associations to provide trade marketing and merchandising support that helps build the category and create greater opportunities for our customers.

Q5

Jow: What do you want the buying community to understand about Giumarra's avocado program that they might not already know?

RT: At Giumarra, when we say we are going to do something, we do it. It's ingrained in our culture. We make a full commitment to our customers and stand behind our promises. In an increasingly volatile market, our customers need peace of mind, confidence, and results—and that is what we strive to deliver every day.

We are one of the largest avocado suppliers in the United States, supported by two strategically located avocado packinghouses in California. Our Escondido facility serves the Southern California region, while our Ventura facility supports the growing volume of avocados available from the North.

Our size gives us strength, but our approach remains personal. We serve every customer with best-in-class communication and a boutique mindset, tailoring our service to their individual needs.

Behind it all is a strong team and robust infrastructure that provide enhanced sourcing capabilities both domestically and internationally. This combination of scale, relationships, expertise, and personalized service allows us to deliver the supply, quality, and reliability our customers can count on.

“In an increasingly volatile market, our customers need peace of mind, confidence, and results—and that is what we strive to deliver every day.”

Rich Thompson, Vice President, Escondido, The Giumarra Companies



When the program is right, even the imperfections of such a score become the beautiful markers of challenges overcome by partnerships, and an industry with more passion and dedication than any score can truly encapsulate. 



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Berries ?



PEACH AND BERRY SALAD

INGREDIENTS

2 cups California Giant
Strawberries, quartered or halved
6 oz California Giant Blackberries
1 cup California Giant Blueberries
2 ripe yellow peaches, sliced
1 tbsp orange juice
½ tbsp lime juice
½ tbsp honey
6 basil leaves, torn

Prep Time: 10 mins
Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Add all fruit to a large bowl or serving dish.
- 2 In a small bowl, whisk together orange juice, lime juice, and honey until well combined. Drizzle over fruit and toss gently to combine.
- 3 Garnish fruit with torn basil leaves and serve. Enjoy!

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



A Conscious COLLECTIVE

**A Q&A with *Elton Evans*, Founder, Executive
Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer, TruSource**

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

The power of intention cannot be overstated. In an industry where so much happens in the blink of an eye, often at the whim of natural forces outside our control, intention is a guiding light. It helps leaders stay the course, even when the road ahead is not the one they mapped. For TruSource Founder and Chief Executive Officer Elton Evans, that intention has shaped every step in building a stronger, more connected produce distribution system.





Melissa De Leon Chavez: Elton, TruSource describes itself as a collective. What does that mean in practice?

Elton Evans, Founder, Executive Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer, TruSource: We chose

'collective' deliberately because it reflects how we intend to operate. In practice, it means each operating company keeps its name, local leadership, and the customer relationships it has built over the years, while we invest together in the things that make all of us better: food safety systems, added capacity, procurement, and the ability to serve customers across a broader footprint.

We are not trying to replace local expertise with a centralized model. We are building enterprise capability around local expertise, giving customers the responsiveness and accountability of a trusted regional operator with the resources of a larger platform behind it. It's local roots with collective strength.



MDC: You stepped away from full-time operating leadership. What brought you back to build TruSource?

EE: Throughout my career, including at Sysco and Dean Foods, I saw how much food distribution depends on reliable supply chains and strong local execution. For me, the work has always come back to one thing: feeding people. Retirement gave me the space to consider which industry challenges I still felt compelled to solve. I kept returning to one question: How do we get fresh food to more people, more reliably?

The produce industry is full of exceptional regional businesses with trusted customer relationships. As customers grow and supply chains become more complex, those businesses often need greater capacity, technology, infrastructure, and reach. Consolidation can provide those advantages, but it can also move decisions farther away from customers.

I believed there was room for a different model, one that equips regional operators to grow while preserving the local knowledge and relationships that make them successful. That conviction became TruSource. Our vision is fresh food on every plate. We help advance it by strengthening the regional companies and capabilities that keep fresh food moving.

"Our vision is fresh food on every plate. We help advance it by strengthening the regional companies and capabilities that keep fresh food moving."

- Elton Evans, Founder, Executive Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer, TruSource



MDC: Consolidation is reshaping produce distribution. How is TruSource differentiating its approach?

EE: Every company that has joined TruSource—Freshway Foods, Forestwood, and Nickey Gregory—was already a strong business with an established reputation in its market. Our role is to use the collective's scale to invest in food safety, capacity, technology, supply-chain performance, and talent, so those companies can serve customers more reliably and build lasting businesses. Scale is valuable only when it strengthens the regional operators the system depends on.

MDC: You know firsthand that trust is a critical currency in our industry. Can you tell me a bit about how TruSource is protecting and strengthening that trust as the company grows?

EE: Trust and performance both follow clarity. I like to say leaders don't eliminate uncertainty; they maintain clarity despite it.

Our mission makes our commitment clear: to deliver fresh produce with the reliability, service and care our customers count on. That is the standard customers should experience from every company in the TruSource collective.

We are deliberate about what changes and what does not. Local leaders remain close to their customers and accountable for their businesses. TruSource adds resources, standards and shared capabilities that help them deliver on that promise more consistently. Our growth is designed to strengthen the confidence of our customers, not disrupt it.

MDC: Speaking of that model, what does it look like in action and what does your approach mean for those TruSource serves?

EE: One early example is Nickey Gregory's investment in value-added processing capacity, which Forestwood can draw on to expand its offerings without duplicating infrastructure. This extends the value of Nickey Gregory's investment while giving Forestwood more ways to serve local customers.

For customers, the model preserves the local relationships and responsiveness they count on while adding broader capabilities and more consistent execution. We are not asking customers to trade local service for scale. TruSource is designed to deliver both.

MDC: I get the sense that this is just the beginning, but with so much intention in how you have moved forward so far, what do you see on the horizon for TruSource and its customers?

EE: I see TruSource building a lasting future for its operating companies and the people who have spent their careers building them, while becoming an even more capable and reliable partner to customers.

When we do this right, TruSource will demonstrate that regional companies can grow together without giving up what made them trusted in the first place. That is how we strengthen the system that moves fresh food and bring our vision of fresh food on every plate closer to reality.

Intention gives TruSource its direction, but its strength comes from the perspectives it brings together; regional operators, customers, partners, and a leader whose career has spanned food distribution and other complex industries. With willingness to evolve and the steadfast of its purpose, TruSource is carving its own path toward a vision of a more united fresh industry with one result: consistent reliability from the field to the plate. 🍓



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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Superfresh Growers®
Autumn Glory Apples ?



AGUACHILES WITH AUTUMN GLORY APPLES

INGREDIENTS

4 Superfresh Growers® Autumn Glory® Apples
1 lb raw shrimp, butterflied
1½ cucumber
¼ red onion
2 Serrano peppers
1 cup fresh lemon juice
Handful cilantro
Salt and pepper

Prep Time: 20 mins
Marinate Time: 45 mins
Servings: 4



DIRECTIONS

- 1 Rinse, peel, and butterfly the shrimp, then pat dry. Arrange in a single layer in a shallow dish and season lightly with salt and pepper.
- 2 Pour the lemon juice over the shrimp, ensuring they are fully covered. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes, allowing the shrimp to marinate and gently cure.
- 3 Once cured, transfer the lemon juice from the shrimp into a blender. Add the Serrano peppers, cilantro, and 2 peeled and cored Autumn Glory apples, then blend until smooth.
- 4 Pour the blended sauce back over the shrimp and return to the refrigerator for an additional 15 minutes.
- 5 While the shrimp marinates, thinly slice the remaining 2 Autumn Glory apples. Peel the cucumber, cut it in half lengthwise, remove the seeds, and slice. Thinly slice the red onion.
- 6 Remove the shrimp from the refrigerator and add the apples, cucumber, and red onion to the dish. Toss gently until everything is evenly coated.
- 7 Serve immediately with chips and enjoy!

To learn more about Superfresh Growers®, visit superfreshgrowers.com



A BRANCH BETWEEN WORLDS



A Q&A With Michelle Alo,
Vice President of Marketing

By Chandler James

Connection is one of the greatest aspects of the human experience. A handshake, an inside joke, a shared meal—these are experiences that bring people together. In a time when divides seem greater than ever before, cultivating such experiences has become a hallmark of the food industry.

Fresh produce, in particular, has the power to inspire connection. The branches of a citrus tree, for example, serve as the connection

between the Earth and the consumer kitchen. It gives us industry operators a unique position in the world; it is a responsibility Kings River Packing does not take lightly.

Enter the grower's Poppies Mandarin brand. With nature's help in creating perfectly shareable segments, these Mandarins serve as a symbol of human connection. Walk with me as I hear Michelle Alo, Vice President of Marketing, explain a mission that goes far beyond the brand.

Q1



Chandler James: Michelle, can you tell me more about Kings River Packing's Poppies program? What is the brand's origin story?

Michelle Alo,
Vice President of
Marketing, Kings River Packing:

Poppies began as a Mandarin label, built on a foundation of high-quality California citrus and generations of growing expertise. For many years, it primarily served as a product identifier in the marketplace. As the Mandarin category matured and consumer expectations evolved, we saw an opportunity to transform Poppies from just a label to a brand that could communicate not just what we grow, but who we are.

Around the same time, we were formalizing a broader company philosophy called Grown to Share. The platform emerged from our mission to honor God by positively impacting the lives of our employees, growers, customers, and community, and from the values that have shaped our company over decades. We wanted a way to articulate how we think about business, relationships, and the role agriculture can play in creating positive impact.

Poppies became the natural first expression of this. Mandarins are inherently shareable: easy to peel, naturally segmented, and often enjoyed together by families and friends. The fruit itself enables the simple acts of generosity and connection that Grown to Share celebrates. Today, Poppies serves as the most visible example of Grown to Share in action through storytelling, retail partnerships, community programs, and consumer engagement initiatives that encourage people to share a little more goodness with one another.



Q2

CJ: Can you tell me more about the Grown to Share initiative? How did it come to be?

MA: The idea didn't start with a marketing campaign. It started with the values that have guided our company for decades. Throughout our history, we've tried to operate in a way that prioritizes relationships, stewardship, service, and creating value for others, not just for ourselves.

As we began thinking about the future of our brands, we realized an opportunity to put language around something that was already true about our culture. The phrase 'Grown to Share' captures the belief that the best things we grow aren't just citrus. They're opportunities to serve, connect, support others, and create positive impact.

At the same time, we saw a broader cultural truth emerging. People still crave connection and community, but modern life often makes those moments harder to create. We believed there was an opportunity to celebrate and amplify produce's role in human connection.

Grown to Share became the intersection of those two ideas: who Kings River Packing has always aspired to be and what consumers are increasingly looking for in the brands they support. It provides a unifying platform for how we think about products, partnerships, retail activations, community engagement, and giving back.

Poppies is the first brand bringing that vision to life in a highly visible way, but the platform itself is bigger than any one campaign or commodity.

"In a category where products can look very similar on the shelf, creating emotional relevance becomes increasingly important."

Michelle Alo, Vice President of Marketing, Kings River Packing

Q3

CJ: How does the platform better position Kings River in the competitive Mandarin sector?

MA: The Mandarin category is filled with strong products that often compete on similar attributes such as sweetness, convenience, easy peeling, and family appeal. Grown to Share helps us move the conversation beyond product features to purpose and meaning.

For Poppies specifically, the platform provides a differentiated position rooted in sharing and connection, giving retailers and consumers a reason to engage with the brand that goes beyond price or promotion. It also demonstrates our commitment to investing in brands, retailer partnerships, and community-focused programs that help grow the category in new ways.

In a category where products can look very similar on the shelf, creating emotional relevance becomes increasingly important. Grown to Share gives Kings River and Poppies an ownable space centered on connection, generosity, and community impact while creating tangible value for retailers through shopper engagement, merchandising opportunities, and local activation programs.

Q4

CJ: You mentioned partnerships with Hy-Vee and Brookshire's that are helping to get the word out about Grown to Share. I'd love to hear more.

MA: The Hy-Vee and Brookshire's activations represent the next evolution of Grown to Share. By bringing the program to life in these retailer partners and their markets during the back-to-school season, we are aligning with a period when families are re-establishing routines, packing lunches, and seeking convenient, healthy snacks.

The retailers are featuring specially marked 3 lb Poppies bags and display bins supporting the You Scan. We Give. program. The campaign combines in-store merchandising, digital media, local outreach, and community impact initiatives. In Brookshire's markets, the program also includes a volunteer event with the East Texas Food Bank focused on assembling student backpack donations.



Q5

CJ: Can you speak more to the importance of connection for Kings River and the industry at large?

MA: Connection is really at the heart of what agriculture has always done. Food brings people together around dinner tables, lunchboxes, celebrations, and everyday moments. As growers, we're several steps removed from those moments, but they're ultimately why we do what we do. The fruit we grow becomes part of people's lives, relationships, and traditions.

We believe citrus has an opportunity to be more than a transaction. It can create moments of generosity, belonging, and connection. That's the thinking behind Grown to Share. It's not simply about encouraging someone to buy a bag of Mandarins; it's about recognizing that something as simple as sharing a piece of fruit can be the start of a conversation, an act of kindness, or a moment of community.

Consumers today are increasingly looking for brands that reflect their values and help them feel connected to something larger than themselves. Produce has always had that potential because it naturally participates in life's shared moments. Our goal is to celebrate and amplify that role through the brands and programs we create.



“Connection is really at the heart of what agriculture has always done. [...] The fruit we grow becomes part of people's lives, relationships, and traditions.”



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BREEDING BALANCE

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Size does not always indicate impact. In our industry, the largest variable is the smallest physical offering. Because nothing grows without a seed.

“Our breeders stay closely connected to customers and the wider food value chain, ensuring that every breeding decision is guided by real needs in the market. While developing a new variety takes years, the motivation comes from knowing that we are creating solutions that help growers, traders, retailers, and consumers succeed. The strongest

confirmation that we are on the right track is when our customers and their customers see value in the varieties and concepts we bring to market,” Jean-François Thomin, Global Manager Marketing Projects for Enza Zaden, shares.

In fact, listening to some of the voices behind the seed breeder and provider, I’m struck by how few need to know every aspect of the industry like those who produce those seeds. As Justin Lanier, Sales Manager of the United States, points out to me, the balance

between consumer demands and grower needs, then what is necessary at retail, is a tenuous balance.

“We can’t lose sight of the end consumer, because they’re the ones who are going to drive the market,” Justin agrees. “If the consumer doesn’t buy it, the grower doesn’t have anything to grow. That’s why we have a portfolio—you can’t please everyone with the same product. The idea is to have enough to cover as much of the market as possible. At the end of the day, we have to keep all the members of the chain in mind when developing a product—because if it doesn’t work for one part of the chain, it won’t work for any of it.”

Far from having eyes only on the finish line, Justin tells me how the foundation of Enza Zaden’s goal is to create products that reduce risk throughout the rest of the chain.

“You want to make a product stable agronomically; take the risk out of production factors. From the shipping standpoint, making them firm, making them hold—we look at rind thickness, all these different traits that go into whether a product can ship and hold in a retail store. And then at the consumer level, the consistency of the experience,” he says.

Yes, this existence of providing fresh food is a risky one, and sacrifices are often needed at nearly every step to make miracles happen in the way of successfully completing the supply chain

“THE STRONGEST CONFIRMATION THAT WE ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK IS WHEN OUR CUSTOMERS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS SEE VALUE IN THE VARIETIES AND CONCEPTS WE BRING TO MARKET.”

Jean-François Thomin,
Global Manager Marketing Projects, Enza Zaden

across a multitude of categories. But Justin’s own philosophy is one that makes it feel more like an adventure: “That’s the fun of produce—you never know everything. If you know everything, it gets boring!”

And when you get it right, it’s exhilarating.

When developing a concept like Lunara Seedless Watermelons or Tribelli® Seedless Snack Peppers, there are so many traits pulling in different directions—taste, appearance, shelf-life,

agronomics. And Jean-François tells me that there is rarely a single trait that wins.

“Success comes from finding the right balance between what growers need to produce a reliable crop, what retailers need to market and distribute it effectively, and what consumers are looking for in terms of eating experience,” he says. “For Tribelli Seedless, the consumer experience was a key driver. By combining the sweet taste and convenience of a snack pepper with the seedless eating experience consumers increasingly value, we created a product that delivers value across the chain. Every breeding decision is guided by that balance, ensuring that

ENZA ZADEN





“WITH LUNARA SEEDLESS, WE SET OUT TO CREATE SOMETHING TRULY DISTINCTIVE THAT WOULD ELEVATE THE WATERMELON CATEGORY.”

Eli Collins,
Marketing Generalist for the United States and Canada, Enza Zaden

one improvement does not come at the expense of another.”

Diving deeper into that process, Justin shares that there are so many hands and voices behind bringing one seed to market.

“We have global teams that develop strategy for regional, and regional goes down to local. From the breeding perspective, breeders, breeding support teams, and many others contribute throughout the process. There’s a lot that goes into just identifying one product,” he points out.

Because so much is invested across so

many steps, it’s understandable that success in any market piques interest in the other. The vision in bringing that to execution, however, is another aspect entirely.

Enza Zaden’s Tribelli Seedless already had a life in Europe before making its North American debut.

“Tribelli Seedless gained traction in Europe because it delivers clear value throughout the supply chain,” Jean-François explains. “Consumers appreciate the sweet taste, vibrant colors, and the convenience of a seedless eating experience, which fits perfectly with the growing demand for healthy

snacks. Retailers see an opportunity to differentiate their assortment with a product that offers genuine added value, responds to solid consumer trends, such as convenience and healthy eating, while growers can benefit from a solid agronomical proposition.”

On the other hand, Lunara’s is a more recent debut, launched through retail channels across the United States.

“With Lunara Seedless, we set out to create something truly distinctive that would elevate the watermelon category,” says Eli Collins, Marketing Generalist for the United States and Canada. “Its unique spotted rind creates strong



“IT’S IMPORTANT TO FIND THE RIGHT PARTNERS THAT ARE WILLING TO PUSH THE ENVELOPE A LITTLE BIT. FROM THERE, YOU CAN BUILD MOMENTUM IN THE MARKET.”

Eli Collins

visual appeal at retail and immediately captures consumers’ attention, while its consistently excellent flavor and quality deliver an experience that keeps them coming back. The result is a watermelon that stands out on the shelf and offers real differentiation for consumers.

Too often we hear about differentiation and the power of standing out, but Eli’s words strike strongly on the two sides of being identifiable. When you are distinctly memorable, you want to be sure it’s for the best reasons.

“If you take a regular-looking watermelon and put it in a store, a consumer could be buying one of twenty different varieties,

and the consistency of the experience can vary—they may go in one time and like what they get, and go back for another one that isn’t as good. What we’re trying to do is have something that’s identifiable, and allow for a more consistent experience,” Justin explains.

And because something new comes with inherent risk and questions of where it might fit, Eli points out that finding the partner who is willing to go first is as much of a factor as the product itself.

“It’s important to find the right partners that are willing to push the envelope

a little bit. From there, you can build momentum in the market as more people across the industry begin to recognize the opportunity,” he says. “The journey from concept to commercialization has been years in the making. From identifying promising genetics and refining the concept through breeding, testing, and consumer validation, to finding the right retail partners, each step has contributed to transforming an innovative idea into a reality for consumers.”

A connection of minds and hands, all brought down to the significance and strength of a single seed. 🍉

WTF DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

EarthFresh Butter Red Potatoes ?



BUTTER RED WARM HERBED POTATO SALAD

INGREDIENTS

2 lbs EarthFresh Butter Red Potatoes, quartered
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 tbsp apple cider vinegar (or white wine vinegar)
1 small red onion, thinly sliced
2 tbsp fresh parsley, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 15–20 mins
Servings: 4–6

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Place potatoes in a large pot and cover with cold, salted water. Bring to a boil and cook until just tender, about 12–15 minutes. Drain well and let them rest for a few minutes so excess moisture evaporates.
- 2 In a small bowl, whisk together the olive oil and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper.
- 3 While the potatoes are still warm, place them in a large bowl. Add the sliced red onion and pour the dressing over top. Gently toss to coat, being careful not to mash the potatoes.
- 4 Sprinkle with parsley, toss lightly again, and adjust seasoning if needed. Serve warm or at room temperature and enjoy!

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HALLOWEEN

Snack Chat



By Ryann Howard

Halloween is creeping closer, and if you ask me, there's no reason the candy aisle should have all the fun. From spooky snacks and party spreads to festive displays, fresh produce has plenty of ways to cast a spell on shoppers. Creative merchandising, clever cross-promotions, and seasonal inspiration can transform the department into a Halloween destination. So, what tricks can retailers pull from their sleeves to scare up fresh sales? We called on our industry friends for some frighteningly good ideas...



Auna Lundberg,
Senior Marketing Manager, Stemilt

"Honeycrisp apples continue to be a standout item for the fall holiday season because they resonate with shoppers across so many occasions, from everyday snacking to entertaining and seasonal recipes. Their broad appeal is reflected in sales, with Honeycrisp accounting for two of every 10 apples sold. A strong Honeycrisp program can help retailers build excitement throughout the department, especially when used as the foundation for multi-variety apple promotions and displays. As a recognizable flavor anchor, Honeycrisp can encourage shoppers to explore other varieties while driving category engagement and larger baskets. Programs like Lil Snappers® extend that opportunity by offering a family-friendly option that appeals to busy households looking for convenient, healthy snacks during the holiday season. Pairing displays with simple recipe ideas and holiday entertaining inspiration can further connect shoppers to fresh produce and support seasonal sales."

Peppe Bonfiglio,
Vice President of Sales, Mastronardi Produce®

"When most people think about Halloween, they think about candy, but there's a big opportunity around entertaining. Families and people of all ages are hosting and attending themed events throughout the month—parties, movie nights, and get-togethers. That's where SUNSET® Bombs® come in. They're the easiest and freshest thing to add to a snack spread. No prep, no knife, just a bright pop of color and flavor people keep reaching for. My advice is to merchandise them into the entertaining set in the weeks leading up to Halloween, near the trays, dips, and cheese, not back in the tomato aisle. A bowl or board with Flavor Bombs®, Honey Bombs®, or Lolli Bombs® does a lot of work for very little effort, making them an ideal staple for entertaining."



Monique Mueller,
Director of Communications,
Bee Sweet Citrus

"With the holiday season quickly approaching, there's no better time to enjoy Bee Sweet's diverse variety line than now! Our wide selection of citrus items appeals to every shopper, making it easy to add vibrant, nutrient-rich produce to any meal. As food takes center stage at holiday and seasonal gatherings, our Navel oranges, Mandarins, and specialty items offer fresh, flavorful ingredients for our customers' favorite entrees, desserts, and more."



Kyla Oberman,
Director of Marketing, California
Giant Berry Farms

"Halloween isn't always a holiday that naturally leads shoppers to the produce department, which creates a unique opportunity for retailers. Through in-store signage, merchandising, recipe inspiration, and digital communications, retailers can help consumers see how berries fit into Halloween celebrations, from festive fruit boards and spooky desserts to seasonal baking and family activities. California Giant offers a variety of seasonal recipes, photography, and usage ideas that retail partners can leverage in their own shopper communications to help bring these concepts to life. As shoppers look for creative ways to celebrate, a little inspiration can go a long way in showing how fresh produce can play a fun and flavorful role in the season."



Gary Clevenger,
Managing Partner, Freska
Produce International

"Not every Halloween treat needs a wrapper. Some of the sweetest ones come with a peel. Fresh mangos add bright color and natural sweetness to any Halloween party. They're great for fun fruit trays, spooky snacks, or a fresh break from the candy bowl. Mangos prove that a healthy treat can still be fun, festive, and delicious."



Stronger Together:

A Q&A WITH **Stephen Fink,**
PRESIDENT OF TABLE GRAPES AND AVOCADOS, DAYKA & HACKETT

By CHANDLER JAMES

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This time-tested nugget of wisdom crosses my mind as I am enlightened about Dayka & Hackett's vertical integration with Frutura. Through a diverse network of growers and resources, Frutura's scope and scale have allowed Dayka & Hackett to strengthen the supply chain for avocados, table grapes, citrus, and cherries—a competitive edge that carries weight at retail.

In our recent conversation, Dayka & Hackett shares the story of one of the fruit industry's biggest players, and Stephen Fink, President of Table Grapes and Avocados, tells it best.



Chandler James: Dayka & Hackett's vertical integration with Frutura is a clear differentiator in the fresh fruit segment. Can you tell me more about the dynamics of this relationship?

Stephen Fink, President of Table Grapes and Avocados, Dayka & Hackett: Dayka & Hackett is part of the Frutura family of companies, providing access to a vertically integrated produce platform spanning farming, packing, logistics, ripening, marketing, and distribution. Rather than relying solely on third-party suppliers, Dayka & Hackett is able to leverage fruit grown and packed within Frutura's global network across multiple countries and growing regions.

As a platform, Frutura's business units work closely together to align on strategy, including retailer partnerships, varietal selection, farming practices, and operational best practices. This collaboration allows Dayka & Hackett to bring customers a more coordinated, reliable, and quality-focused supply chain from orchard to retailer.

Under Frutura, Dayka & Hackett works with fellow business units around the world, including Agricola Don Ricardo in Peru, Subsole in Chile, Frutura Uruguay, Cerasus in Chile, and Montana Fruits in Colombia.



CJ: There are clearly a ton of advantages that come with vertical integration. What specifically does Frutura provide to Dayka & Hackett?

SF: We are able to maintain greater control over fruit quality and consistency, improve traceability and food safety oversight, and ensure a more reliable year-round supply. This is supported by better forecasting and inventory management that aid in reducing supply chain disruptions.



Our vertical integration with Frutura also allows for a faster response to market changes. We boast increased transparency from farm to customer and a stronger ability to invest in innovation, sustainability, and consumer programs.

For our retailers and foodservice customers, vertical integration creates confidence that supply and quality standards can be maintained even during challenging market conditions.

CJ: Dayka & Hackett's avocado, table grape, citrus, and cherry programs set the company apart from its competitors. How does vertical integration support this?

SF: For table grapes, the company's integrated network allows it to combine domestic and international sourcing while supporting investments in premium varieties, vineyard development, and packing infrastructure. Vertical integration also provides direct access to avocado production in key growing regions, helping ensure consistent supply and quality. It also supports ripening operations that deliver ready-to-sell fruit to customers.

Control across the supply chain helps Dayka & Hackett maintain quality standards and year-round availability while supporting branded and value-added citrus programs. In terms of the cherry program, the company's global sourcing relationships and operational expertise help maximize seasonal opportunities and provide customers with premium fruit backed by strong quality oversight.

The company provides premium cherries from its own farms, supported by strong quality oversight and deep operational expertise. By working directly with the farming team, Dayka & Hackett is able to develop tailored retail programs that align with each customer's needs, maximize seasonal opportunities, and help retailers drive sales.





“Dayka & Hackett is able to leverage fruit grown and packed within Frutura’s global network across multiple countries and growing regions.”

Stephen Fink,
President of Table Grapes and Avocados, Dayka & Hackett

CJ: What are some other unique aspects of Dayka & Hackett’s avocado, table grape, citrus, and cherry programs?

SF: Dayka & Hackett utilizes year-round sourcing from multiple countries for our avocado program. Dedicated ripening capabilities, strong grower relationships, and production access allow us to focus on consistent quality and supply continuity.

We set ourselves apart in the table grape segment through premium and proprietary varieties and well-known consumer brands. We also work closely with our growers and breeding companies on new and up-and-coming varieties. Innovative packaging and merchandising programs boost the year-round availability we maintain through global sourcing.

Our citrus program is differentiated by a broad portfolio, including Mandarins, Clementines, oranges, lemons, and limes. Consumer-focused branding initiatives, strong retail merchandising support, and an emphasis on flavor and eating quality enable us to provide the best possible supply.

Like our other fruit programs, we focus on premium varieties and quality standards for our cherries. Strategic seasonal sourcing and integration with broader fruit category programs provide the ability to support promotional opportunities during peak seasons.

CJ: On a final note, can you share some of the lesser-known benefits of Dayka & Hackett’s relationship with Frutura?

SF: Through Frutura’s platform, Dayka & Hackett benefits from access to a global network of farms, packing facilities, and distribution assets, giving it scale while maintaining category expertise. The company has built programs designed to provide consistent availability across multiple fruit categories, helping retailers simplify sourcing and category management.

As part of Frutura, Dayka & Hackett participates in sustainability efforts focused on responsible farming, water stewardship, resource efficiency, and long-term agricultural resilience. On the consumer-facing side, the company continues to invest in proprietary varieties, branded programs, ripening technology, packaging innovation, and merchandising solutions that help retailers differentiate themselves and drive sales.

Perhaps the strongest overarching message is that Dayka & Hackett’s relationship with Frutura allows us to participate throughout the supply chain—from production through delivery—creating greater accountability, consistency, and value for customers.

In a vast sea of fresh produce offerings, Dayka & Hackett is finding ways to set itself apart from the rest. The message is clear: We are stronger together. 

WTF DO I DO WITH Moonlight Peaches ?

{ what the fork }



PEACH BOURBON SMASH

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 **ripe** Moonlight Peach, divided
- 2 **oz** bourbon
- 3/4 **oz** fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 **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 1/4 of the peach into small chunks for muddling and slice the remaining 1/4 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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WHAT THE VINE HOLDS

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

Our industry is about learning and unlearning. Simultaneously. Learning what changes are coming down the path and what solutions have potential. Unlearning the traditions or habits that no longer serve an organization; the ones that have become antiquated, artifacts of time. There is knowing your past in order to take the best next step into the future, and then there are roots that don't grow. It is a delicate balance. Tip too far in one direction and you're stagnate. Tip too far in the other and you find yourself scaling without roots: growing so fast the ground beneath you disappears.

Krysten DeGiglio finds herself in such a balance these days.

Krysten DeGiglio with her children, Luca and Gianna





Left: Krysten DeGiglio and her father, Mike De Giglio, both found their passion for produce through the Village Fresh journey; Above: Krysten with her Aunt Rose making her early greenhouse memories

As she steps into her role as Chief Revenue Officer of Village Fresh, she reflects on a business that has transformed; rooted in identity, but built to grow, enhanced by this next era of opportunity. Village Fresh, founded by her father, Mike DeGiglio, has been shaped over decades by the dedication of its people, its leadership, and the partners who have played a role in its journey. Now, as the company enters its next chapter, Krysten joins the leadership team of Village Fresh. Her story is one of discovery and differentiation as she paved her own road to Village Fresh.

For Krysten, carrying that name into the CRO seat isn't a symbol of succession. It's a choice she made: slowly, deliberately, across a decade of showing up.

"Watching my dad, Mike, dedicate his life to Village Fresh, formerly Village Farms, has given me such deep appreciation for his work ethic, his sacrifice, his entrepreneurial spirit, and most importantly, his passion. Without that, I know we would not be where we are today. The culture he fostered and the values he instilled are something truly special, and they are what I hope continue to live on. This company, to me, stands the test of time, and that's a testament to his vision, perseverance, and unwavering commitment," Krysten shares.

In this newly created executive role, Krysten will lead the company's commercial strategy, revenue growth initiatives, and customer partnerships across North America. This period of strategic growth is not a new

one for Village Fresh, as the company has continued to expand and transform since its inception. Now, under the Verdexa Holdings platform, the company has the tools and the resources to truly map out the near and far horizon.

The blueprint for such growth has come from years and years of sweat equity, wisdom, and innovation cultivated by Mike and his team and now ushered into the future by Krysten and the Village Fresh leadership.

But it all started with a young Krysten visiting the greenhouse with her family, traveling down rows and rows of vines, plants growing towards the sun, protected under glass. As a child in a world of green, she could almost believe she heard the plants growing, the water dripping rhythmically, the footsteps softly stirring the quiet hum of the greenhouse. And, as childhood does, it makes remarkable memories, instilled with wonder, fascination, and passion. All qualities still present in Krysten today, though her road was a curved one with a destination that led her onto different paths before returning her to Village Fresh.

"I remember taking a tomato off the vine and biting into it. Now, when I look at my kids, I picture myself as a child in the greenhouse, having that same experience. Seeing my kids enjoy the products that our team has worked so hard to bring to market makes that connection even more personal," Krysten says. "When I look at a tomato, of course, I see the



"When I look at a tomato, of course, I see the greenhouse. I see the care, the attention, the people, the innovation, the sustainable practices..."

*- Krysten DeGiglio,
Chief Revenue Officer, Village Farms*

greenhouse. I see the care, the attention, the people, the innovation, the sustainable practices, all of which made it possible for them to enjoy that tomato."

Her route back wasn't predetermined.

"My father and I both agreed that I would start my career somewhere else, not even really with the end goal of working here, but it was important that I pursued my own career path before even considering coming to the company," she remembers.

Krysten has spent over a decade finding her footing inside this company; learning it, earning it. When she looks back at that path, it was not just one moment that sealed her love for the industry, it was a series of stories and experiences that shaped her love for fresh. Today, Krysten's appointment to this newly created role at Village Fresh reflects the confidence Verdexa's leadership has in her.

Krysten joined Village Fresh in 2015 after beginning her career with Ernst & Young and Daiichi Sankyo. The busy and dynamic now mother of two little ones earned her Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration from Fairfield University. She progressed through increasingly senior sales leadership roles, including Regional Corporate Sales Representative, Regional Corporate Sales Manager, and most recently Director of Regional Corporate Sales. With a trifecta of financial, strategic, and commercial expertise to fuel her thoughtfulness and

curiosity, Krysten is hungry for what is next, but also excited to celebrate the roots that have remained strong and expansive over the course of Village Fresh's tenure.

That hunger didn't arrive with the title. It was there long before.

The decade she spent moving through regional and corporate sales roles wasn't title-climbing. It was relationship-building: retail, club, and foodservice accounts across North America, earned by showing up, following through, and putting the customer first.

"Success is not just about selling. It's about understanding all the facets that impact what we care about most: execution for the customer. Krysten expresses. "Relationships come before transactions. Sales is the outcome of trust that's been built over time. You can look at the numbers, and it tells a story, but the relationship is the intangible variable that sets the stage for success. We hope to build on our long-term partnerships while developing new relationships with customers who respect the value of the supply chain. We truly care about the health of the industry and also the companies that we work with, and when we share that mindset, everyone has the opportunity to grow."

The Village Fresh team has earned its reputation by investing in their word and doing what they say they are going to do. Simply put, as Krysten clarifies, treat others the way you want to be treated.

"Be transparent. Keep consistent execution top of mind. That foundation we've built our company on is not going to change. We just have an opportunity now to build upon those strengths and to continue evolving," she notes, adding that while the team's strategy and long-term plans are fortified with vision, even a good plan has limitations. "You can't control every variable, but you can control how you respond. Our commercial strategy will focus on understanding what our customers need to be successful. We are going to listen, and listen well. Most importantly, we will prioritize our initiatives around how Village Fresh and our customers can create value together to be mutually successful. Our success is key to their success, too."

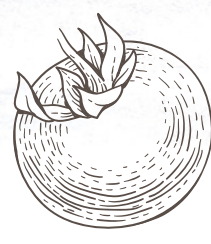
The company didn't change alone. The world around it did. Enter Verdexa in 2025, previously Vanguard Food before recently rebranding in 2026.

Village Fresh didn't arrive in 2025 as a company in need of rescue. It arrived as one of the most enduring names in controlled environment agriculture, 35-plus years deep, supplying retail, club, and foodservice customers across the United States and Canada with greenhouse-grown tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers. What changed wasn't the company. It was the context around it.

When Verdexa Holdings formed in 2025 through a partnership between Village Farms International, Sweat Equities, and Kennedy Lewis Investment Management, Village Fresh became its flagship operating company.



“Sales is the outcome of trust that’s been built over time. You can look at the numbers, and it tells a story, but the relationship is the intangible variable that sets the stage for success.”



“Verdexa will provide additional resources, capabilities, expansion opportunities, and production capacity to our portfolio. This will enhance what we’re capable of, but it doesn’t change the core of who we are and what we stand for,” Krysten says.

The platform is designed to grow: Adding additional operating companies over time, building shared services, and providing the kind of capital and infrastructure a 37-year-old greenhouse grower can use to do more of what it already does well. More acreage. More product lines. More innovation capacity. The identity stays; the ceiling moves.

“Being the flagship of something new and larger is its own kind of responsibility,” Krysten says. “Luckily for us, growth doesn’t have to come at the expense of identity. The growth phase and the changes we’re going through will enhance the customer experience. We’ve spent over 35 years building our reputation and our values remain constant, even as we evolve.”

There’s a particular kind of weight that comes with a story like this one. I ask Krysten how she holds everything that’s been built and still gives herself room to lead it somewhere new.

“I feel a responsibility to honor everything that has been built over the past 37 years while helping prepare Village for the next 37. Our goal is to continue expanding this company so that we can add more chapters to the story for years to come,” Krysten

reflects. “It’s about finding the right balance between executing today and building for tomorrow. That’s where I think this role holds so much weight for me. The pressure is not to reinvent who we are, but to help us evolve by capitalizing on the strength of our resources, our team, enhancing our brand, enhancing our reputation.”

If you ask Krysten or Mike about where these strongholds of success come from, both will humbly and graciously gesture to the people who have not just laid the groundwork, but sustained its growth.

“The greatest strengths of Village Fresh are based on the experience, the dedication, and the loyalty of our team. And that has shaped us—it’s been instrumental in making us who we are. We’ve been fortunate to have very little employee turnover and team members with long tenure, which has given us an incredible depth of knowledge and expertise,” Krysten shares. “As we look to the future, it’s important that we cultivate the next generation of talent to carry on the legacy and culture. Our industry, at large, is in the midst of a new generational transition. It is an exciting time.”

“Every day matters,” Krysten says. “Every day contributes to the success of our future.”

The vine holds. And she tends it. 🍅



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Taking the Fright Out of Executive Search

How Partnership Unmasks the Best Hires



By Editorial Contributor Julie Marcik, President, Joe Produce SearchSM

A successful search is a partnership, and both sides own the outcome. Deciding to work with an executive search firm is a big decision, especially when retaining a firm for the first time. It is a substantial investment where mutual trust is essential. Keep in mind that the investment is on both sides.

During the initial conversations, pay attention to what the executive search consultant is asking. Are they trying to understand the company, the need, the challenges, and the role? Or are they primarily focused on pitching their services?

That evaluation should go both ways. A search firm commits significant time, resources, relationships, and credibility to every search it accepts. At Joe Produce Search, we will not take on a search unless we are confident that we understand the need and can deliver results.

Vetting the firm matters, but choosing one is only the beginning—hiring a search firm is not a handoff. Companies hire executive search firms for their expertise, industry relationships, objectivity, and ability to reach candidates they may not find on their own. The firm should lead the process, evaluate talent, and keep the search moving. Even an excellent firm cannot operate in a vacuum.

The employer does not need to manage the search—that is why it hired the firm. But it must provide clarity, access, alignment and timely feedback.

The search firm knows how to navigate the talent market. The employer knows the organization. The firm should carry the process, and the employer must remain close enough to provide direction, context, and decisions.

Clarity Comes Before Candidate Activity

A search firm can help sharpen the position, challenge assumptions, and translate the company’s needs into a candidate profile. What it cannot do is manufacture organizational clarity where none exists. Keep the core hiring team small and make sure everyone agrees on how candidates will be evaluated. Although others may provide input, one person should own the final decision and remain actively involved.

Ideally, that person is also the leader to whom the executive will report. Hiring for a position when the direct leader is not in place and active in the search creates significant risk for everyone involved.

Scheduling and logistics can be delegated. Conversations about the direction of the role, candidate fit and changing priorities should not be.

Trust the Firm or Do Not Hire Them

The firm must earn trust through preparation, transparency, sound judgment and follow through. Once the search begins, let the firm lead. Be receptive to guidance, market feedback and difficult conversations. A successful partnership allows for disagreement. What it cannot withstand is guarded communication or withheld concerns.



EMPLOYER ← → SEARCH PARTNER

If either side feels the search is moving in the wrong direction, stop and regroup. A thoughtful reset can save a search. Quietly moving the target usually undermines it.

Take the Skeletons Out of the Closet

A good search consultant will carefully vet a candidate's background, reputation and potential concerns. The employer should approach the process with the same openness.



Every company has challenges. Perhaps the position has experienced high turnover, the leadership team has not always been aligned or the organization is navigating significant change. There may also be perceptions in the marketplace that are accurate, outdated, or somewhere in between.

This is especially important in the close-knit produce industry. The best executives will do their homework, ask questions, and pay attention to word on the street.

The search firm should not learn about company challenges from a candidate. Surprises can damage the credibility of both the firm and the employer. Sharing the skeletons does not mean airing every piece of company business. It means trusting the consultant with the information needed to anticipate difficult questions and represent the opportunity honestly.

Transparency does not weaken the company’s story. Handled well, it makes that story more credible. Your search partner represents you, and is often a candidate’s first introduction to the company and the opportunity. The best executives are going to ask a lot of questions.

When the consultant cannot answer reasonable questions, or the consultant and employer provide conflicting answers, it reflects poorly on both. If you want your search partner to tell your company’s story well, make sure they understand the whole story, not just the job description.

Shared Ownership, Different Responsibilities: Both sides own the outcome, but they have different responsibilities.

THE EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTES	THE SEARCH FIRM CONTRIBUTES
Organizational context and a clear business need	A disciplined search strategy
An honest picture of the opportunity and its challenges	Accurate and compelling representation in the market
Access to the decision maker	Respect for the decision maker’s time
An aligned and focused hiring team	Consistent process leadership
Timely, specific candidate feedback	Thoughtfully evaluated candidates
Openness to guidance and market feedback	Candid recommendations backed by sound judgment
Immediate communication when priorities change	Flexibility and a clear plan to recalibrate
Trust in the search partner	Conduct that continually earns that trust

The Best Searches Are Partnerships

Executive search does not have to be scary. The real risk is entering a search without clarity, trust, access and shared ownership. When these elements are in place, both sides are positioned for success, and the employer is far more likely to realize the full return on their investment. 

Julie Marcik is President of Joe Produce, the go-to job platform for the produce industry, connecting employers and professionals across the food chain, from seed to store. With more than 20 years of executive search experience, Julie understands that produce is more than a job it’s a lifestyle. Joe Produce combines powerful technology with real human expertise to help companies find the right talent and professionals discover new opportunities. Through Joe Produce Search, Julie and her team also provide executive search services for key leadership and management roles across North America.



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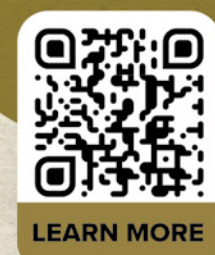


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Libations For All Occasions

B.O.B. WHISKEY SOUR



By Chandler James

Photography by Reid Monsma

As I peered into my kitchen at the end of a long week, I craved a craft cocktail to carry me through the weekend. Seeing that I desperately needed to take a trip to the grocery store, my mind began running through the possibilities for dinner. Some leftover naan, cottage cheese, and veggies came together for my take on a meatless pizza—but what to drink?

Then I spotted them. The half-full clamshell of blueberries in my fridge and a few Blood oranges on my counter. And thus, the Blood Orange Blueberry (B.O.B.) Whiskey Sour was born.

This bright and tangy beverage awakens the senses with a flavor

combination that may not seem obvious at first, but creates a perfect pairing nonetheless. For my friends who prefer to keep their libations alcohol free, I would bet my bottom dollar that the Blood orange and blueberry purée could be swapped into myriad other beverages. Even added to my sparkling water, I'd say this recipe is a winner!

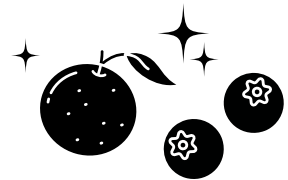
Such a dynamic flavor combination is merchandising gold in the produce department. I would suggest placing blueberries and Blood oranges near each other somewhere in the store, and maybe round out the display with some Bulleit Bourbon or other beverage accompaniments. You can thank me later.



Here's how to make it... Prep Time: 15 mins Servings: 4

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup fresh-squeezed Blood orange juice
- ½ cup fresh blueberries
- 8 oz whiskey (I recommend Bulleit Bourbon)
- 4 fresh Blood orange wedges, for garnish



Inspired by Heather Christo

DIRECTIONS

1. Add the fresh Blood orange juice and blueberries to a saucepan over medium heat. Bring the mixture to a simmer and cook for a few minutes or until the blueberries become soft.
2. Remove from heat and let the mixture cool for at least five minutes. Add to a blender and purée on high until smooth, then let the purée cool completely.
3. Add ½ cup of the purée and 4 oz of whiskey to a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake until combined.
4. Pour the cocktail into glasses filled with ice and add fresh Blood orange wedges as garnish. Repeat steps 3 and 4 with the remaining purée and whiskey, and enjoy!





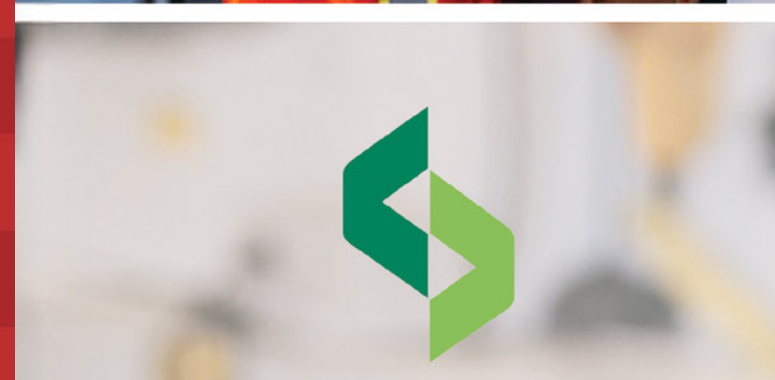
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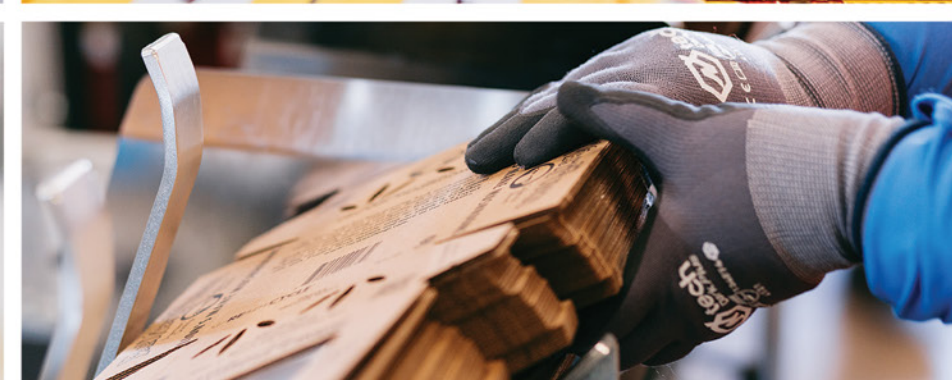


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