Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the SNACK

ISSUE 109 NOV 2026



MIKE ROBERTS

Harps Food Stores, pg 60

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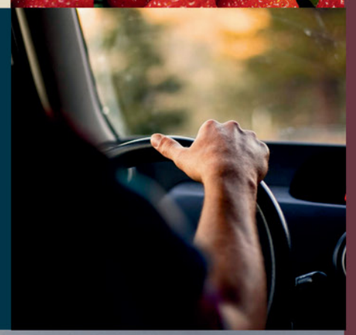
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I NEED NOT TELL THIS INDUSTRY ABOUT GRATITUDE. If anything, it has taught me the meaning of the word.

From professional relationships to friendships, and the conversations that cut through the heart of both, I am thankful for every moment I have been given. Moments that could have gone elsewhere. Every bit of advice that has come across an email, a phone call, a late-night conversation over dinner, or even a drink back in the day.



This industry has been a guiding light through love and loss, through challenge and celebration, and, always, through growth. I came in as a simple writer, scripting videos. I write this now having become a parent, a wife, a mother, a partner, and someone who helps our leadership team address the livelihoods of today's fresh produce industry and the people who carry it.

While November begins a formal season of gratitude, this industry has taught me that gratitude does not have a season. It has taught me that to be a true contributor, we must become a runway for other people's growth. It has taught me that good writing is writing that listens.

And you have given me so much to listen to.

We are at an interesting confluence right now, between technology and tribal wisdom, one slowly making room for the other. Companies needing to transform just to exist, let alone thrive. And our small company of artists, curiosity-seekers, and advocates is so thankful for you. For those who pick up the phone when we call. Who answer an email in the early hours. Who share the conversations with us that don't always make it into the story. More often than not, they do not. But they build our understanding of you.

And in that, they build our understanding of ourselves. A small media company only knows what it is by what it is trusted with. Every story you have let us tell, and every one you have chosen to keep close instead, has shaped the shape of us. We did not arrive here already knowing who we were. We arrived curious, and you handed us the raw material of an identity: your candor, your patience with our questions, your willingness to let us sit at your table before we had earned it. We have spent years learning this industry, but the truer thing is that this industry has spent years teaching us who we could become inside it.

And they build your understanding of us.

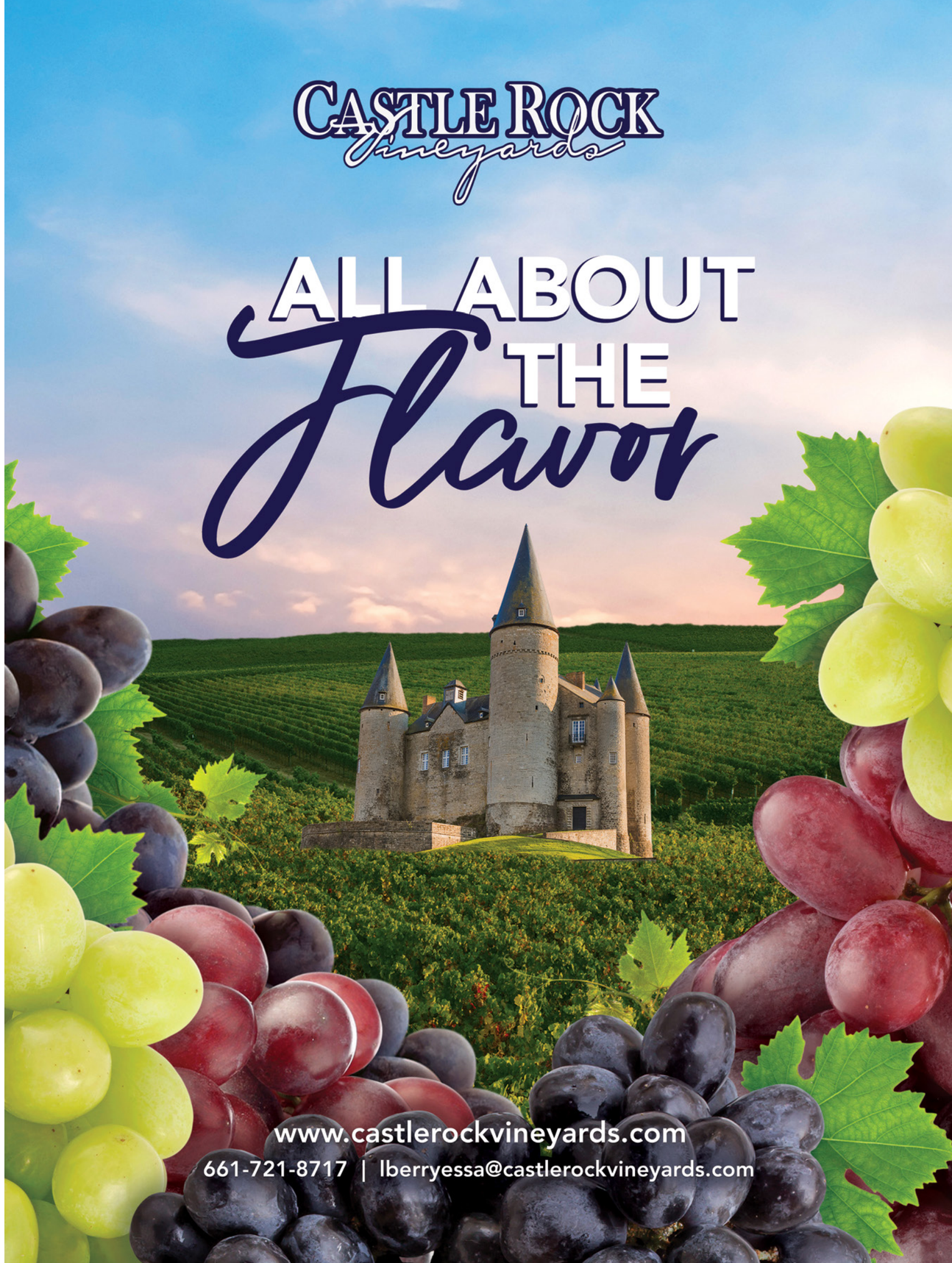


Jordan Okumura-Wright
Editor in Chief
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FEATURES



BEE SWEET CITRUS
A THRIVING ECOSYSTEM
Monique Mueller and Jasmine Reynozo share how social sustainability remains a guiding principle, shaping every aspect of the citrus operation…



SPROUTS FARMERS MARKET
THE ORBIT OF FRESH
He was a loyal customer before he was a team member. Fifteen years later, Adam Snuggs is merchandising the department he used to shop. The new VP discusses great produce teams, changing consumers, and what the industry still gets wrong…



RSM
THE MARGIN OF ERROR
Margin doesn't usually disappear. It erodes, through shrink, freight, costs nobody sees until the order is long gone. Kevin Head speaks on what a connected platform catches…



SAM'S CLUB
THE IF LIST
Ask what Shanan Cox would go back and redo, and the answer is nothing, because even the hard moments taught her something she needed later. This Senior Director of Merchandising takes on the *IF List*…



GEORGIA-PACIFIC
THE TOTAL PACKAGE
Turning refuse into profits is no small accomplishment. It's a next great step in sustainability. Blake Gordon shares the strategy, implementation, and benefits of the GP Recycling program…



GWILLIMDALE FARMS
MY FAVORITE THINGS
Kshama Joshi finds inspiration in everything. From humble root vegetables and big family celebrations to Bollywood movies and plenty of good food in the mix, this Marketing and Brand Manager rarely sees a dull moment…



PURE FLAVOR®
MENTORS IN THE MAKING
A resume on a windshield got him in the door; listening got him everywhere else. Director of Sales Michael Glass shares the mentors who shaped him, and the father who gave him three principles he still works by…

DEPARTMENTS

NOVEMBER 2026
ISSUE 109

FRESH FOLK



MVP HIGHLIGHTS
DAN SEBETIC

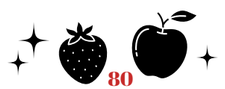


THE IF LIST
MIKE ROBERTS

TRUE TO TASTE

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JOE PRODUCE
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MONIQUE MUELLER,
Director of Communications, Bee Sweet Citrus

JASMINE REYNOZO,
Director of Human Resources, Bee Sweet Citrus



A THRIVING ECOSYSTEM

BY PEGGY PACKER

THE BEE IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS IN OUR ECOSYSTEM.

The fuzzy little pollinators contribute directly to humans' food security, with roughly a third of the world's food production dependent on them. Their pollination efforts are crucial to the success of some of Earth's most vital ecosystems and grasslands. They provide delicacies like honey, pollen, and royal jelly. Even the beekeeping industry, formed in response to the insect's mere existence, now serves as a crucial source of income for many rural neighborhoods.

All around us, the bee is pursuing a steadfast, ceaseless, and often silent mission—and the result is a world that thrives in the balance of nature it helps create.

Like the creature that anchors its brand, Bee Sweet Citrus understands that a thriving ecosystem depends on every player doing its part. The company's social sustainability blueprint puts that principle into practice, cultivating an environment where each team member is supported, valued, and equipped to contribute to something larger. Social sustainability is a guiding principle that shapes every aspect of the citrus operation, creating a supportive environment that helps each team member play their part in the company's mission of keeping fresh fruit in consumers' hands.

This commitment is most evident in Bee Sweet's employee-focused initiatives, such as the company's Wellness Program. Launched in 2017 and led by Director of Human Resources Jasmine Reynozo, the Wellness Program is a collaborative

effort with United Health Centers designed to reach employees living in the rural communities surrounding Bee Sweet Citrus.

"By partnering with one of the Central Valley's premier clinics, we can ensure our team has direct access to vital health services," Jasmine says, sharing the goal behind this impactful initiative. "United Health Centers operates 40 locations serving over 50 communities across California's Fresno, Kings, and Tulare counties. This extensive network allows our employees and their dependents to conveniently access medical, dental, chiropractic, and mental health services for a nominal co-pay. Our Wellness Program does not replace medical and dental insurance at Bee Sweet Citrus; it's offered as an employee perk."

The company's annual on-site Wellness Fair is another cornerstone of its employee support efforts.

"By inviting a diverse range of Central Valley vendors, including those in healthcare, real estate, entertainment, child care, and mental health, we can provide employees with valuable resources and connections," Jasmine explains. "Through this event, we reinforce that our commitment to their well-being extends beyond the workplace. In addition, we regularly host on-site eye exams, mammograms, flu clinics, and other health services, ensuring our employees have comprehensive support year-round."

An ecosystem cannot prosper without its many moving parts. Bee Sweet Citrus has established a strong reputation for growing, packing, and shipping premium citrus varieties, none of which would be possible without the company's dedicated workforce.

"From the packing house to the fields, our employees are the true driving force behind our brand. They are the reason we can grow, pack, and ship fresh numerous citrus varieties throughout the year, and they are the reason why Bee Sweet Citrus has achieved the success we enjoy today," Monique Mueller, Director of Communications, says. "That's why a big portion of our marketing efforts are dedicated to showcasing our employees. Their stories, personalities, and the responsibilities they carry have helped shape our brand, and we believe it's just as important to highlight the people who make everything possible as well as the product itself."

This is another way Bee Sweet Citrus expresses appreciation for its workforce while also creating a stronger bridge for consumer connection.

> "From the packing house to the fields, our employees are the true driving force behind our brand. They are the reason we can grow, pack, and ship fresh numerous citrus varieties throughout the year, and they are the reason why Bee Sweet Citrus has achieved the success we enjoy today."
>
> Monique Mueller, Director of Communications, Bee Sweet Citrus









"Whether we're featuring long-term employees in recruitment commercials or highlighting our interns on our social media accounts, we've noticed that employee-driven content helps our workforce feel a sense of pride," Monique continues. "It also gives our audience a chance to connect with our workforce on a personal level and recognize that it's our team who makes year-round citrus possible for our customers."

Connecting shoppers to the people who grow their favorite fruit completes the natural cycle Bee Sweet has created. The company backs its employees with unwavering support and appreciation. Those employees' hard work brings an expansive and delicious citrus portfolio to market. Consumers get to enjoy fresh, high-quality fruit with a deepened understanding of the human effort it took to get that orange, lemon, lime, or grapefruit into their palm.

And doing so, as we in the industry know well, is no small feat.

"Production agriculture comes with unique challenges: unpredictable seasons, long hours, and demanding work in both the packing house and the fields. We recognize these realities and strive to prioritize our employees' well-being by supporting work-life balance and offering resources that help them and their families stay healthy," Jasmine notes. "By fostering this supportive environment, we aim to cultivate a workplace where employees feel valued, motivated, and inspired to build long-term careers with Bee Sweet Citrus. Above all, we want every team member to know they are essential to our continued success."

One of the biggest results of the social sustainability efforts at The Hive is employee retention. The culture Bee Sweet Citrus actively works to create is a valuable foundation for long-term commitment and passion for the work employees do each day.

"When employees feel appreciated and know they work for a company that values their happiness inside and outside the walls of work, it's easy to want to stay and continue building their career at one place," says Jasmine. "Since we opened our doors in 1987, we've seen a lot of people get hired at Bee Sweet Citrus right out of college or high school and stay all the way until their retirement. It's a trend we aim to continue for generations to come."

Just as the beloved bumblebee approaches each spring refreshed in its search for pollen and nectar, Bee Sweet Citrus seeks new opportunities each year to expand its social sustainability efforts. The company continuously incorporates feedback to inform how it supports its employees.

"Every year, we try to incorporate something new," Jasmine tells me. "For example, our employees had previously expressed interest in mental and behavioral health for themselves and their families. We went back to the drawing board and worked with UHC to provide behavioral health services under our wellness program effective 2026. Every year, we hope to expand our social sustainability program and continue to provide services to our employees."

As with the buzzing bee and the freshly bloomed flowers it pollinates, the actions one takes to achieve a single, seemingly simple mission can sometimes open the door to a world of wonder and growth.

By setting an unyielding focus on making its employees feel valued and supported, Bee Sweet Citrus has not only strengthened its workforce but also laid an unshakable foundation for the company's long-term success.

The citrus titan is a powerful example of what can be achieved when we uplift the most vital elements of our ecosystem.

CITRUS

SnackChat

By Peggy Packer

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of ways to utilize fresh citrus? For everyone who lands on this page, the answer to that question may be completely different; that is the beauty of the citrus category. With some of the year's most food-centric holidays upon us, citrus is ready to fulfill every role from star to supporting actor. Hear from a few supply-side experts on how to keep citrus in the spotlight this season...



Cassie Howard,

Senior Director of Category Management and Marketing, Sunkist Growers

"This season, Sunkist® is bringing the *Welcome to the Co-Op* story to life like never before with our reimagined Sunkist.com experience—connecting shoppers directly to the growers behind the fruit. That momentum is showing up in the numbers too: Citrus continues to outpace the broader fruit category, and Sunkist remains the most recognized name in citrus. It's a great moment for the buy-side to lean into a brand with real momentum and a story consumers are responding to."



Anthony Innocenti,

Managing Partner, LIV Produce

"Navel oranges are really the driving citrus SKU for this time of year, as people look to transition out of summer fruit and into premium organic sweet Navel oranges. This season's citrus opportunities also include new crop grapefruit and lemons, including Meyer sweet lemons. For retailers looking to maximize sales, we recommend building displays that show commitment to the product—build it high and let it fly."



Sarah Deaton,

Director of Marketing, Sun Pacific

"We are excited this citrus season to launch our *Don't Get Caught Without Cuties* campaign. When the cuteness is irresistible and the cravings inevitable, we'll remind people that the best defense against growling stomachs and teary tantrums is a solid supply of Cuties. Cuties is the No. 1 Mandarin in sales and velocity leader by a wide margin, and we can't wait to work with retailers to help drive their category sales."



Adam Bravinder,

Director of Sales, Citrus, Fowler Packing Company

"November is the California citrus season kickoff. Harvest is just getting underway in our orchards, and the early Navels and Clementines are showing strong brix and good eating quality—the fruit shoppers wait all year for. This season, we're building on *Nothing Peelz Better* with our biggest Peelz program yet: pop-ups, our largest social media partnerships to date, and bold displays in-store and online designed to stop shoppers in their tracks. Behind it all is the same commitment to quality and consistency Fowler Packing is known for. We're not just getting shoppers excited about citrus—we're investing in helping our retail partners drive sales and make the most of the season."



Monique Mueller,

Director of Communications, Bee Sweet Citrus

"The Bee Sweet Citrus team is proud to offer our customers an exceptional selection of flavor-packed citrus varieties! Our easy-peel Mandarins and Navel oranges are perfect for busy families managing packed school and work calendars, providing convenience without sacrificing taste. Meanwhile, our specialty selections are sure to bring vibrant flavor and a touch of elegance to any holiday dish. All of our varieties are available for convenient pickup at our facility in Fowler, California. With our sales team working closely with our farming, production, and shipping teams, customers can trust they're receiving fresh, high-quality fruit with every order."



Shannon Shepp,

Executive Director, Florida Department of Citrus

"The brand equity and consumer trust that Florida Citrus maintains brings value to the produce section that is hard to compare. Our multi-generational growers are committed to producing premium grapefruit, oranges, and tangerines that are known worldwide for their juiciness and diverse use in the kitchen. Their skin might have minor imperfections (due to Florida's subtropical growing conditions), but consumers know what's inside, thanks to decades of producing premium-quality fruit and our commitment to tell the story. It's the fruit consumers turn to, whether it's needed to segment, slice, juice, sauté or marinate. The Florida Citrus harvest season aligns perfectly with cold and flu season, the holidays, and well into spring, which is why our consumer-targeted programs around immunity, wellness, performance, and culinary moments enhance those purchase occasions at retail."



Craig Morris,

Citrus and Grape Category Director, Homegrown Organic Farms

"November marks the start of an exciting season, as shoppers look for fresh flavors, convenient snacks, and versatile ingredients for holiday meals and gatherings. Homegrown Organic Farms is proud to support that demand with the country's most comprehensive organic citrus program, backed by year-round supply and a vertically integrated network of growers and packing operations throughout California. Retailers can build excitement by featuring Navels, Mandarins, lemons, grapefruit, and specialty citrus alongside recipe inspiration and seasonal displays. Looking ahead, we are developing Regenerative Organic Certified® citrus acreage, expanding our EFI-certified program, and exploring new specialty varieties. Together, these efforts help retailers tell a citrus story centered on flavor, farming legacy, and responsible stewardship."



Kevin Steiner,

Director of Business Development, Mountain View Fruit Sales

"We're looking forward to another strong citrus season here in the Reedley area, with a great lineup of California-grown varieties including our Rascals Mandarins, Ruby Red grapefruit, Cara Cara oranges, and Meyer lemons. Our focus as always will be on delivering consistent quality, excellent flavor, and the trusted MV Partnership our retail partners depend on throughout the season. For retailers, we encourage building impactful displays featuring our Brilliant and Rascals branded retail bins, maintaining strong in-stock positions, and merchandising multiple varieties together to give shoppers plenty of choices. We're excited about the upcoming season and look forward to helping our retail customers make the most of it."



Michelle Alo,

Vice President of Marketing, Kings River Packing

"At Kings River Packing, we see the start of California citrus season as something worth celebrating. There's a special excitement that comes with the arrival of first-of-season California Navels and Poppies Mandarins, signaling the beginning of the holiday season and the gatherings that bring people together. As shoppers prepare for Thanksgiving, citrus adds freshness, flavor, and color to family meals and everyday snacking occasions. Retailers can build excitement with destination displays featuring Navels and Poppies alongside lemons, grapefruit, pummelos, and organics. Kings River Packing offers the tools, resources, and flexibility to create customized programs that help retailers make the most of the citrus season."





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UP CLOSE

A Closer Look at Medrano Produce New Organic Lime Packaging

By Ryann Howard

A fresh look can go a long way in the produce department, and Medrano Produce is giving its organic lime packaging a redesign to squeeze more value out of every retail impression.

The company's new aesthetic features its promise, "Quality That Honors Family," placing the values behind the business front and center. Guided by the same family commitment that has shaped Medrano since 1979, the updated design offers buyers a visual representation of the quality, innovation, and long-standing relationships supporting the program.

Packaging is more than a vessel for getting fruit from supplier to shelf. Strong branding can help communicate product value, reinforce confidence in a trusted grower-shipper, and provide a cohesive story that resonates throughout the supply chain. Medrano's refreshed boxes accomplish this while supporting the reliability, consistency, and service its retail and wholesale partners have come to expect.

I appreciate packaging updates that do more than simply change the graphics. By connecting its organic lime offering to the company's family legacy, Medrano is giving customers another reason to remember the name behind the fruit.

The new boxes give the organic lime category some added zest.



Learn More

Medrano PRODUCE

WTF DO I DO WITH SUNSET® Tomato Branch™ ?

{ what the fork }



CRISPY RICE SQUARES WITH SUNSET® TOMATO BRANCH™ POKE

INGREDIENTS

TOMATO POKE
- **2 cups** SUNSET® Tomato Branch™ Tomatoes, halved
- **2 tbsp** soy sauce
- **1 tbsp** rice vinegar
- **1 tsp** toasted sesame oil
- **1 tsp** white miso paste
- **1 tsp** maple syrup or honey
- **1 tsp** grated fresh ginger
- **1 tsp** chili crisp
- **1** green onion, thinly sliced
- **1 tsp** toasted sesame seeds

CRISPY RICE
- **3 cups** cooked sushi rice, slightly warm
- **2 tbsp** seasoned rice vinegar
- **1 tsp** sugar
- **½ tsp** salt
- **2–3 tbsp** neutral oil (canola, grapeseed, or sunflower), for frying

SPICY MAYO
- **¼ cup** mayonnaise
- **1–2 tsp** sriracha
- **1 tsp** lime juice

GARNISH
- Seaweed squares
- Cilantro leaves
- Sesame seeds

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 20 mins
Servings: 16 squares (4–6 people)

To learn more about Mastronardi Produce®/SUNSET®, visit *www.sunsetgrown.com*

DIRECTIONS

1. While the rice is still warm, gently fold in the seasoned rice vinegar, sugar, and salt. Press the rice firmly into a parchment-lined 8" square pan, about ¾" thick. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours, or overnight, until firm.
2. Lift the chilled rice from the pan and cut into 16 equal squares using a damp knife.
3. Heat a thin layer of oil in a large non-stick or cast iron skillet over medium heat. Fry the rice squares for 3–4 minutes per side until deep golden brown and crispy. Transfer to a paper towel or wire rack to drain.
4. To make the tomato poke, whisk together the soy sauce, rice vinegar, sesame oil, miso, maple syrup, ginger, and chili crisp.
5. Gently toss the Tomato Branch™ tomatoes with the dressing, green onion, and sesame seeds. Let marinate for 15–20 minutes.
6. Make the spicy mayo by whisking together the mayonnaise, sriracha, and lime juice.
7. Assemble each crispy rice square with: a drizzle of spicy mayo, a square of seaweed, a spoonful of Tomato Branch™ poke, cilantro leaves, and sesame seeds.
8. Serve immediately while the rice is warm and crispy. Enjoy!

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The Margin of Error:

Why a Single Source of Truth Protects the Bottom Line

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

Kevin Head, Director of Food and Beverage, RSM

Every dollar of margin in the produce business matters. Every data point received is a tool, a moment to pivot or push forward. The produce industry lives by these small moments and measurements because each one is not singular. They tell a story and define the narrative yet to come.

Most produce companies are not short on systems. They have one for accounting, one for inventory, one for the grower, one for the truck, with a spreadsheet or dashboard collecting the knowledge; but they are not always turning that information into clear truths about the balance of a company.

Somewhere in that gap between, margin goes missing before anyone even knows to look for it.

Kevin Head, Director of Food and Beverage, RSM, spends his days closing that gap, building the Microsoft platform that follows a product from a grower's field to a customer's invoice and keeps the numbers honest along the way. Below, Kevin walks through what that gap actually costs a produce company, and how the right platform closes it.

Jordan Okumura-Wright: Kevin, when you look at produce companies today, what is the most common technology problem you see holding them back from growing?

Kevin Head, Director of Food and Beverage, RSM: The biggest issue I see is not necessarily that produce companies lack technology. It is that they have accumulated too many disconnected systems over time.

They may have one system for accounting, another for inventory, separate tools for grower accounting, warehouse operations, transportation, quality, food safety, and customer management, with Excel filling in the gaps between them. Each individual system may do its job reasonably well, but the overall environment makes it difficult to see and manage the business as one operation.

That fragmentation becomes a real constraint on growth. Employees spend too much time reconciling information, rekeying data, and trying to determine which number is correct. Management decisions are often based on yesterday's information, or on reports that had to be manually assembled. When the company adds a location, expands into a new region, acquires another business, or takes on a major customer, those manual processes become increasingly difficult to scale.

In my view, the real problem is not simply outdated software. It is the lack of a connected operational foundation that allows the business to grow without adding the same amount of administrative complexity.

JOW: RSM works across a lot of industries. What makes your work with produce and fresh food companies distinct, and why does that expertise matter?

KH: Produce is different because the product, its value, and its available shelf-life can change very quickly. You are dealing with seasonality, perishability, variable quality, changing market prices, grower relationships, food safety, and extremely tight fulfillment windows. A process that works well in a traditional manufacturing or distribution company may not work in produce.

That is why industry experience matters. You have to understand how product moves from the field or grower through receiving, grading, packing, repacking, cooling, storage, transportation, and ultimately to the customer. You also have to understand grower contracts and settlements, packouts, yields, lot attributes, quality holds, catch weight, commissions, claims, deductions, and changing product value. Those are not edge cases in produce. They are part of the core business.

RSM combines that industry understanding with Microsoft technology expertise. We work with companies across the grower, packer, shipper, processor, importer, distributor, and fresh-food value chain. We are also active in the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), serve on industry subcommittees, and have participated in traceability working groups associated with IFPA and GS1.

That experience changes the conversation. We are not starting by asking a produce company to explain why its business does not operate like a conventional manufacturer. We can begin with an understanding of the industry and focus the discussion on where that company is unique.

JOW: When RSM talks about the full Microsoft stack for produce companies, what does that actually mean in practice? Can you walk us through how the pieces fit together?

KH: When we say the full Microsoft stack, we are talking about an integrated business platform, not simply an ERP implementation.

Dynamics 365 is generally the operational backbone. Depending on the size and complexity of the company, that may be Dynamics 365 Finance and Supply Chain Management or Business Central. It connects areas such as finance, purchasing, sales, inventory, production, warehousing, quality, logistics, and asset management.

We then extend that foundation with produce-specific capabilities. RSM has solutions built on Dynamics 365 for areas such as grower accounting, lot traceability and food safety, trade promotions, and label integration. For example, grower accounting can support contracts, receipts, deductions, premiums, advances, and settlement processes within the broader ERP environment.

Power Platform helps address the processes around the ERP. Power Apps can support mobile or role-specific applications, Power Automate can manage approvals and workflow, and Power Pages can provide external experiences for growers, vendors, customers, or other business partners.

Microsoft Fabric and Power BI create the data and analytics layer. They bring together operational and external data so leaders can see margins, inventory, quality, production, service levels, and other performance measures without relying on manually assembled reports.

Azure provides the integration, data, application, and security services needed to connect outside systems such as field applications, equipment, EDI networks, transportation systems, retailers, and trading partners. Microsoft 365, Teams, SharePoint, Copilot, and Copilot Studio then connect the platform to how employees communicate and work every day.

> "Employees spend too much time reconciling information, rekeying data, and trying to determine which number is correct. Management decisions are often based on yesterday's information, or on reports that had to be manually assembled."
>
> Kevin Head,
> Director of Food and Beverage,
> RSM

The value comes from how these pieces work together. Instead of buying a series of isolated applications, the company is creating a common platform for transactions, data, analytics, workflow, collaboration, and eventually AI.

JOW: Real-time visibility comes up a lot in this industry. How does the Microsoft platform actually deliver that from field to invoice?

KH: Real-time visibility begins with capturing information as part of the transaction, at the point where the work is taking place.

That could start with a grower contract, harvest estimate, purchase commitment, or inbound receipt. As product arrives, the company captures the grower, field or source, lot, quantity, weight, quality attributes, grade, pack date, and other relevant information. That same lot identity then follows the product through cooling, storage, repacking, transformation, sales allocation, shipping, and invoicing.

Because those transactions are connected, teams are not waiting for information to move from one department to another through spreadsheets or end-of-day uploads. Sales can see what is available and what is committed. Operations can see what needs to be packed or shipped. Quality can see holds and test results. Finance can see the economic impact of operational activity.

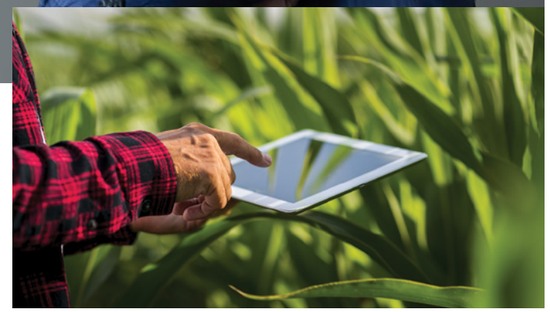
Power BI and Fabric then organize that data into role-based views. An operations leader may be monitoring inventory age, yield, throughput, and order status. A sales leader may be looking at availability, customer commitments, and margin. Finance may be looking at accrued costs, grower obligations, landed cost, and profitability.

The important distinction is that real-time visibility is not just a dashboard. It is the result of having the underlying transactions connected from field to invoice and making that information available in the context where decisions are being made.



> "You also have to understand grower contracts and settlements, packouts, yields, lot attributes, quality holds, catch weight, commissions, claims, deductions, and changing product value. Those are not edge cases in produce. They are part of the core business."





JOW: Traceability and FSMA 204 compliance are top of mind for a lot of produce companies right now. How does a connected Microsoft platform change how companies handle that?

KH: A connected platform allows traceability information to be captured as part of normal operations rather than reconstructed after the fact.

FSMA 204 focuses on maintaining Key Data Elements associated with specific Critical Tracking Events for foods on the Food Traceability List. The FDA also requires covered organizations to be able to provide the relevant information within 24 hours, or another reasonable time agreed to by the agency. The current federal enforcement date is July 20, 2028, but companies should not interpret the additional time as a reason to postpone readiness, particularly when customers and retailers may have their own requirements.

In a fragmented environment, the information needed for a trace may be spread across receiving documents, warehouse systems, production records, shipping data, emails, and spreadsheets. The organization may technically have the information, but locating, validating, and assembling it in the required format can be extremely difficult.

With a connected Microsoft platform, lot identity and the required data can move with the product through receiving, transformation, repacking, inventory movements, and shipping. Microsoft's traceability capabilities support chain-of-custody information, batch and serial identifiers, product genealogy, and forward and backward searches across the product value chain.

RSM also has a Lot Trace and Safety solution that provides forward and backward transaction tracing and supports recall analysis through a guided process.

The broader benefit is risk reduction. If there is an issue, the company can identify the affected product and customers more precisely instead of treating a much larger amount of inventory as potentially impacted. That supports a faster, more controlled response and helps protect both consumers and the company's brand.

JOW: Produce margins are tight and product value changes fast. How does having a single source of truth impact the bottom line?

KH: In produce, small errors repeated across a large transaction volume can materially affect profitability.

A company may look profitable when the order ships, but that margin can change once freight, commissions, regrades, repack costs, shrink, quality claims, customer deductions, and final grower settlements are included. If those costs live in different systems, management may not understand actual profitability until well after the commercial and operational decisions have been made.

A single source of truth connects the physical movement of the product with the financial outcome. Inventory, quality, sales, purchasing, warehousing, transportation, and finance are working from the same underlying transactions.

That helps the business answer practical questions much earlier: What inventory should we sell first? Which product should be repacked? Are we fulfilling an order with a profitable lot? Is a customer, commodity, region, or channel performing as expected? Are we losing margin through shrink, freight, substitutions, claims, or pricing decisions?

You do not improve margin simply by installing an ERP. You improve margin by giving people accurate information early enough to take action. In an industry where product condition and value can change by the hour, the timing of that information matters almost as much as the information itself.



JOW: What does growth look like for a produce company that has made this transition? What becomes possible that was not possible before?

KH: The biggest change is that growth becomes more repeatable. Before the transition, adding a new facility, customer, product line, or acquired company may also mean adding more spreadsheets, interfaces, manual reconciliations, and people whose primary responsibility is moving information between systems. The company can still grow, but every stage of growth adds operational friction.

With a connected platform, the company can standardize core processes while still allowing for legitimate differences across commodities, locations, and business units. It becomes easier to bring a new facility onto the platform, integrate an acquisition, manage higher transaction volumes, and provide consistent reporting across the organization.

The company can also become more sophisticated in how it uses data. It can move from explaining what happened to anticipating what is likely to happen. That may include better demand planning, inventory allocation, yield analysis, margin management, and identification of quality or service issues.

Most importantly, the management team gains confidence that the operating model can support the company's strategy. Technology stops being something the business has to work around and becomes part of how the company scales.

JOW: A lot of leaders are nervous about the disruption of a technology transformation. What does RSM's approach look like and how do you minimize that risk?

KH: That concern is completely reasonable. An ERP transformation touches almost every critical process in the company, and in produce, the business cannot stop receiving, packing, shipping, or invoicing while a new system is being implemented.

Our approach starts with understanding how the business actually operates. We spend time with the people doing the work, not just the executive team or the IT organization. We identify what should be standardized, what is genuinely unique, where the current processes create risk, and which capabilities are most important to the business case.

From there, we use a structured, gated delivery approach. RSM's Velocity methodology brings industry-specific configurations, project tools, testing assets, governance, and reusable implementation content into the project rather than starting with a blank page. Our practice materials describe five gated work segments and more than 500 prebuilt test scenarios.

We also take phasing seriously. In some companies, a single go-live makes sense. In others, it is better to sequence finance, operations, facilities, business units, or capabilities. The right answer depends on the company's operational calendar, harvest or seasonal cycles, internal capacity, and risk tolerance.

Finally, we focus heavily on data, integrations, testing, change management, cutover, and post-go-live support. Technology is only one part of the transformation. The organization has to be ready to operate differently on day one. Our objective is not simply to get the software live. It is to help the client adopt the platform without losing control of the business.

JOW: For a produce company leader reading this who knows their technology is holding them back, what is the best first step they can take right now?

KH: The best first step is not immediately selecting a new ERP. It is developing a clear, fact-based understanding of where the current environment is limiting the business.

I would start by bringing together leaders from finance, sales, operations, supply chain, quality and food safety, and IT. Identify where information is being manually reentered, where teams are maintaining important processes in spreadsheets, where reporting requires significant reconciliation, and where the business cannot answer an important question quickly or confidently. Then connect those issues to business outcomes. Are they causing excess inventory, shrink, missed sales, margin leakage, delayed close, customer service issues, traceability risk, or difficulty integrating acquisitions? That creates a much stronger foundation than starting with a list of software features.

From there, a company can develop a practical technology and data roadmap. That may lead to an ERP transformation, but it may also identify integration, analytics, process, or master-data improvements that should happen first.

The key is to begin with the business problem, not with the product. A successful transformation starts when leadership agrees on what the company needs to do better and why that improvement matters.

Data no longer speaks for itself, if it ever did. With leaders like RSM working the data with surgical precision, maybe today's farmers, packers, and shippers can get a little more shut-eye and a lot of clarity.

WTF DO I DO WITH Pure Flavor® Cherry Picked™ ?

{ what the fork }



TOMATO MEDLEY TART

Learn about this product

INGREDIENTS

12 oz Pure Flavor® Cherry Picked™, halved
1½ cups ricotta, goat cheese, or cottage cheese
¼ cup everything bagel seasoning
1 prepared pie shell
Olive oil
1 egg
Splash of water
Sea salt (optional)
Fresh basil, chopped (optional)

Prep Time: 10 mins
Cook Time: 25 mins
Servings: 6

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 425° F.
2. Mix cheese with everything bagel seasoning.
3. Spread filling into pie shell.
4. Layer halved tomatoes on top, skin side down. Drizzle with olive oil.
5. Whisk egg with water and brush crust.
6. Bake 25 minutes until golden and tomatoes burst.
7. Top with sea salt and fresh basil if desired. Enjoy!



To learn more about Pure Flavor®, visit *www.pure-flavor.com*

Pure Flavor®

» The IF List «



Shanan Cox

Senior Director of Merchandising, Sam's Club Produce

With Jordan Okumura-Wright

Shanan Cox has the wisdom of the long game in her back pocket. Having worked on the supply-side of the industry and now Sam's Club as Senior Director of Merchandising, she understands where the produce starts and where it meets the hands of the consumer. Her time at Market Fresh Produce and Hillshire Brands gave her that view of the supply chain's beginning, and a different vantage on the consumer than the one she holds now. As you can imagine, I have many questions for Shanan, but today she graciously gave me her time and put her pen to our *IF List* questions...

» IF you could see one movie or read one book for the first time again, what would it be?
The Shawshank Redemption. There's nothing quite like experiencing that ending for the first time.

» IF you could have been born in another century or decade, which would it be and why?
The Gilded Age. I'm fascinated by the era's ambition: extraordinary businesses being built, industries transformed, and families creating legacies still visible today.

» IF you had to choose one personal artifact to leave behind after you are gone, what would it be?
Handwritten notes. They capture what mattered to me at different points in life.

» IF you had to be roasted by one comedian, who would it be?
Conan O'Brien. I appreciate sharp humor, and I'm always willing to laugh at myself.

» IF you were another species in the animal kingdom, what would you be?
An elephant: loyal, determined, and I never forget.

» IF you had to choose one word to describe yourself, what would it be?
Driven.

» IF you could redo one moment or event in your life, which one would you choose and why?
None. Even the hard ones taught me something I needed later.

» IF you wrote an autobiography, what would be the title?
Still Becoming.

» IF you had a superpower, what would you want it to be?
The ability to pause time.

» IF you could invent anything, what would you invent?
A way to add a few hours to every day.

» IF your younger self could see you now, what would surprise them most?
That I built a career in produce and love it.

» IF your phone could only have three apps, which would you keep?
Messages, Photos, and Maps.



MENTORS IN THE MAKING

MICHAEL GLASS

DIRECTOR OF SALES, PURE FLAVOR®

BY JORDAN OKUMURA-WRIGHT



Some of us stumble into the fresh produce industry, drawn by a guiding light that illuminates our path. Others of us fight to get here, take the roundabout way, even tape our resume to the windshield of a prominent marketer. The latter takes grit, an extra sense of dedication that turns desire into determination. These are not just qualities of a work ethic, but a sense of self carried through all that we do. Every time our lives shift, we cross a threshold. Some of us tread lightly, and others, like Pure Flavor's Michael Glass, seize the moment.

"I started in the greenhouse industry in 2002. I was working construction at the time, looking for something steadier. I'd been dating my girlfriend for a couple of years and knew I wanted to propose, so I needed a real career. I was drawn to the greenhouse industry because of the growth happening around me, these large farm expansions I kept seeing. But I couldn't get an interview to save my life. So I found out where one of the greenhouse owners lived and taped my resume to his windshield," Michael, Director of Sales, Pure Flavor, tells me. "I got the call the next day, was hired into sales support, and worked my way into an Account Manager role within the first year."

A resume on a windshield is a small act of bravery, and bravery, once practiced, tends to repeat itself. Michael's passion for the greenhouse industry grew, bringing him under the guidance and leadership of some of today's most notable and innovative companies in glass. In the fall of 2023, Michael joined Pure Flavor, enriching the team's stellar sales and business strategies with a mindset for driving profitability, sales growth and development, customer service, and sales performance. Understanding the buying community's needs and anticipating where the market is headed has allowed Michael and the Pure Flavor team to thrive in an ever-changing greenhouse industry.

Over the course of his journey, Michael met many mentors who became lasting and influential landmarks in his career and his personal life. People whose mark still holds strong with Michael today, steering the course of his growth in moments of indecision, challenge, but also celebration.

Jay Colasanti, now-Owner of Lakeshore Veggies, is one of those people. When someone takes a chance on you, you never forget them. And never forget how valuable it is to pay it forward as well.

"Jay was the one who hired me. He's an amazing marketer and idea guy. He took a chance on me when I was just a kid who taped a resume to a windshield," Michael shares.

Cliff Robinson, a member of that early ecosystem with Jay, also led by example and taught Michael that while action was important, listening was the balance of such leadership.

"Cliff was Jay's business partner, and one of the best salesmen I've ever been around," Michael reflects. "I spent my first five years in produce sitting between Cliff and Al Pollard, and that's where I got my education. I learned by listening." Al brought that glue that all teams need. He understood that the connective tissue needed to be maintained and promoted, that managing was not just about ensuring people did their jobs, but about making sure they were supported.

"He was my first sales manager. Al was an expert at keeping the team together and making sure all departments worked toward the common goal," Michael remembers.

Al is gone now. What he held together is not.

Lifelong mentors are hard to come by, but for Michael, his father filled that role, guiding him not only in childhood but into adulthood and his professional life. David Glass understood the anatomy of effort and values, and he instilled them in Michael.

"My dad began his career as a real-estate and insurance broker. When I was young, he transitioned to focus fully on insurance sales," Michael begins. "He taught me three foundational principles that still guide me: honesty—always be honest, because relationships and trust are built through honesty; listening—you can't correct course, find solutions to a problem, or present an opportunity if you're not truly listening to what the other person is saying; and the value of hard work—learn from everyone around you, then outwork them, put in the time and effort. He is still someone I can turn to for advice or simply to talk things through."

Mentorship holds a special place in Michael's heart, and he knows that everything he has learned becomes even more powerful when he himself gets to pass it on.

"After 25 years in produce and three with Pure Flavor, the best advice I have is pretty simple: Don't overcomplicate it," he expresses. "Build real relationships, be someone people want to pick up the phone for, and follow through on what you say. Most importantly, listen to your customers. Listening to what they need is one of the most important things you can do when communicating."

My favorite bit of advice hits home.

"You can't help them grow if you're not listening to what they need—so, stop talking," he smiles and says. "Showing up with a good attitude, treating people right, listening to what matters to them, and doing what you say you're going to do has taken me further than anything else. The rest tends to figure itself out."

Set the course, find people to help you cultivate it, and don't forget to listen.



JAY COLASANTI,
Owner, Lakeshore Veggies

"I am happy to see that Michael Glass is being recognized in *The Snack Magazine*. I introduced Michael to our then-company, Red Zoo Marketing, about 25 years ago when he was an intern in the produce business. Michael had a presence that suggested he was eager to learn and possessed a welcoming, trusting attitude with which I was comfortable.

Mike is a self-driven person who quickly understood Michael knowledge of his customers' needs and requirements was essential for bringing value to them and building a beneficial relationship.

Michael is that kind of person—you could present him with a challenge, and he would soon be back with the goal accomplished."

"I WAS DRAWN TO THE GREENHOUSE INDUSTRY BECAUSE **OF THE GROWTH HAPPENING AROUND ME,** THESE LARGE FARM EXPANSIONS I KEPT SEEING."

MICHAEL GLASS,
Director of Sales, Pure Flavor®



DAVID GLASS,
Michael's Father, Retired Real Estate, Insurance Broker, Insurance Sales

"When I look at Michael today, as his father, I swell up with pride to see how he has grown over the years into a respected individual in both his business and his personal life. He has been able to navigate his way through many challenges that at times, I must admit, had me on the edge of my seat, shaking my head. Michael has always shown the ability to courageously move forward and work harder when a challenge is placed in front of him. Several times over the years, I found myself saying to his new employers and managers, 'Just don't let him get bored!' He thrives on being challenged.

His mother and I tried to instill in him the importance of integrity, hard work, being equally respectful to everyone, being honest, following the Biblical truths, laughing (even at yourself), having fun, being humble, and not taking yourself too seriously!

Once again, he's met the challenge!"

"THE BEST ADVICE I HAVE IS PRETTY SIMPLE: **DON'T OVERCOMPLICATE IT.**"

MICHAEL GLASS

The ORBIT of FRESH

SPROUTS™
FARMERS MARKET

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

This is a home for the senses. An inviting architecture and floor design that trains movement into an orbit of the fresh. Seasoned with rustic bins, farm stand signage, and trusted brands with aligning values, commitments, and vision. And this is just the surface of the story Sprouts Farmers Market writes continuously. No detail is left unreviewed. Not the freshness of the apple display, not the crispness of each head of broccoli, only slightly dusted with dew. Shopping should be invigorating, and that is what a trip to Sprouts does for its loyal clientele, first-time visitors, and everyone who has had a hand in getting it there.

Today's retailers require an extra layer of value, one built between buy-side operators and vendors and the retailer and its shoppers. Knowing what the consumer wants from their experience and executing it requires a foot in both lanes. Adam Snuggs, the company's new Vice President of Merchandising, Produce, understands that perspective and what it takes to make a good fresh produce department into a great one.



Jordan Okumura-Wright: Adam, you've spent about 15 years with Sprouts Farmers Market and have seen the business from a lot of different angles. What originally brought you to the company, and what has kept you there?

Adam Snuggs, Vice President of Merchandising, Produce, Sprouts Farmers Market: Fifteen years ago, I joined Sprouts because I genuinely believed in what the company stood for. I've always been passionate about health and wellness, and as a loyal customer, I admired the Sprouts brand long before I became a team member. When the opportunity came to join an organization I respected, I was excited to be part of it.

What has kept me here is the strong alignment between my personal values and Sprouts' purpose and culture. Helping people live and eat better is incredibly meaningful work, and I truly believe the impact we make extends far beyond our stores. Whether it's providing healthier food choices for our communities, building strong partnerships with our growers and suppliers, or advancing sustainability efforts, the work we do positively affects the lives of our customers and the people who help bring our products to market.

After 15 years, that sense of purpose still motivates me every day. I'm proud to be part of a company that is committed to making a difference for our customers, our communities, and the future of food.

JOW: You've worked your way from the store level into training, operations, retail initiatives, district leadership, and now this role. When you look back, what were some of the experiences that really prepared you for where you are today?

AS: When I look back on my career at Sprouts, every role has taught me something different and helped shape who I am as a leader. I've been fortunate to learn from a variety of great leaders, work through periods of change, and gain exposure to many different parts of the business. Each experience has given me a new perspective and helped me grow both professionally and personally.

One of the things I've appreciated most is the opportunity to see Sprouts from so many different angles. From the store level to training, operations, retail initiatives, district leadership, and now merchandising, I've seen firsthand how connected our teams are and how much we accomplish when we work toward a shared goal. Along the way, I've learned the importance of staying curious, maintaining a growth mindset, investing in people, and being adaptable when challenges and opportunities arise.

As I step into this new role, I'm excited about what's ahead. While there is always more to learn, I feel incredibly grateful for the experiences I've had and the people I've worked alongside throughout my career. They've given me a strong foundation, a broad understanding of the business, and a deep appreciation for what makes Sprouts special. I'm looking forward to building on that experience and continuing to contribute in new ways.



"In my experience, *great produce departments* start with *great people.* You can have the best assortment, the best merchandising strategy, and the best tools, but none of it comes to life without a team that *genuinely cares* about serving customers and takes pride in what they do."

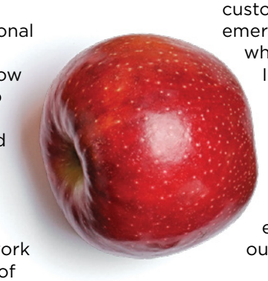
Adam Snuggs,
Vice President of Merchandising, Produce,
Sprouts Farmers Market

JOW: Having spent so much time close to the store, the teams, and the day-to-day realities of retail, what have you learned about what sets apart a good produce department from a great one?

AS: In my experience, great produce departments start with great people. You can have the best assortment, the best merchandising strategy, and the best tools, but none of it comes to life without a team that genuinely cares about serving customers and takes pride in what they do. The teams that stand out are the ones who are passionate about their community, eager to learn, and committed to continuously growing their skills.

Over the years, I've also learned that when it comes to building strong teams, mindset often matters just as much as experience. Produce knowledge is important, but I place a lot of value on qualities like curiosity, critical thinking, adaptability, and a desire to grow. Those traits often become the foundation for long-term success.

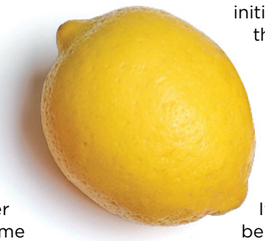
From an operational perspective, I've seen firsthand how important it is to make processes simple, clear, and easy to execute. When we create merchandising and operational programs that work across a variety of stores and markets, we give our teams the ability to focus less on complexity and more on delivering a great customer experience.



At the end of the day, the best produce departments find the right balance between consistent execution and local relevance. When you combine great people, simple processes, and a strong connection to the needs of the community, that's when you create an exceptional produce department.

JOW: The consumer is changing pretty quickly right now, from how they shop and what they value to what they're willing to spend. What changes are you paying the closest attention to?

AS: The produce customer has evolved significantly over the course of my career, and I think the pace of change is only accelerating. When I first started in the business more than 20 years ago, e-commerce was virtually nonexistent, organic produce was far less prevalent, and customers generally had fewer choices when it came to how and where they shopped. Today, customers have more information, more options, and higher expectations than ever before.



Because of that, I believe it's critical that we continually listen to our customers, stay connected to emerging trends, and meet them where they are. A few areas I'm paying particularly close attention to are the continued growth of e-Commerce, the impact of GLP-1 medications on food purchasing habits, and the increasing role of AI in shaping both the customer experience and how we operate our business.

What excites me most is that each of these trends represents an opportunity to better serve our customers. Whether that's making healthy eating more convenient, adapting our assortment to evolving wellness needs, or using technology to improve the shopping experience, our goal remains the same: understanding what matters most to our customers and delivering value in ways that are relevant.

JOW: When you look at where produce is headed over the next five or 10 years, what do you think we as an industry need to be better—and what happens if we don't?

AS: When I think about the future of produce, I'm incredibly optimistic. Innovation is happening across every part of the industry, from seed and variety development to farming practices, sustainability initiatives, and technologies that improve freshness and reduce waste. Together, these advancements are helping make produce more appealing, accessible, and relevant for today's consumers.

If there's one area where I believe our industry needs to continue improving, it's how we understand, communicate with, and educate consumers. Today's customer wants to know more about where their food comes from, how it's grown, how it supports their health, and the impact it has on the environment. As an industry, we have an opportunity to make produce more approachable, more transparent, and easier to incorporate into everyday life.



The organizations that succeed in the future will be the ones that stay closely aligned with the evolving needs of their customers while continuing to innovate responsibly. If we fail to listen, adapt, and educate, we risk creating a disconnect between the incredible work happening throughout the supply chain and the consumers we're trying to serve.

At the end of the day, our industry's success depends on maintaining that connection and making decisions that are good for our customers, good for our growers and partners, and good for the planet.



Good for the customer, good for the grower, good for the planet. This is where Adam and his colleagues find themselves measuring success. With a foot in both lanes, and a curiosity driving the change and the tradition at Sprouts, the story keeps writing itself forward.





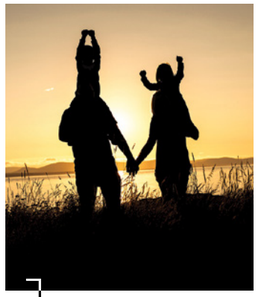
MY FAVORITE THINGS

KSHAMA JOSHI

MARKETING AND BRAND MANAGER, GWILLIMDALE FARMS

With Ryann Howard

Family, food, creativity, and a little Bollywood magic: Kshama Joshi's favorite things are rooted in the people, places, and traditions that bring joy to her life. From celebrating Christmas and Diwali to exploring different cuisines and finding inspiration in the humble root vegetable, Kshama gives us a colorful glimpse into what makes her happiest as she shares her favorite things…



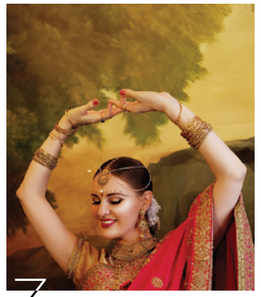
1 MY FAMILY

My favorite people—simply being together, making memories, laughing, and enjoying the everyday moments.



2 MY WORK

I love Gwillimdale Farms and being creative, bringing ideas to life, and doing work that actually feels meaningful; turning ideas into stories that connect with people.



3 BOLLYWOOD MOVIES

The music, the drama, the emotions. I can't say no to a good Bollywood movie.



4 FOOD AND DIFFERENT CUISINES

I love trying new foods and discovering different flavors from around the world.



5 BEING A MOM

My most rewarding role and one that has taught me more about love, patience, and life than anything else.



6 ROOT VEGETABLES

I love how humble, colorful, and versatile they are; turning something simple from the earth into something amazing.



7 CHRISTMAS AND DIWALI

I love the magic, togetherness, traditions, food, and excitement that come with both celebrations.



8 MY HOME

My safe space, my cozy little corner of the world, and the place where I feel happiest.

Georgia-Pacific

THE TOTAL PACKAGE



A Q&A with Blake Gordon, General Manager of Digital Trading, Georgia-Pacific

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

One's trash, processed correctly, can become a treasure.

Identifying a multi-sided opportunity for growers, distributors, and those valuing transparency in sustainability commitments, Georgia-Pacific Recycling collects and pays for the same cardboard boxes growers and distributors usually pay a waste hauling company to pick up.

It is an alchemical approach that has helped GP Recycling forge a new recycling philosophy for the packaging sector, rescuing not just refuse from the landfill, but revenue as well. With cost as one of the highest priorities across our industry, every financial facet counts. Blake Gordon, General Manager of Digital Trading, took time to share with me how packaging can give back to the bottom line with the right partner to light the way.

49

Q1



Melissa De Leon Chavez: The produce industry watches costs closely, but turning a recycling line item into a revenue stream is a completely different kind of thinking. How did GP Recycling land on this model?

Blake Gordon, General Manager of Digital Trading, Georgia-Pacific: The model grew out of a simple observation: Many organizations still view recyclable materials primarily as something they need to get rid of. At the same time, mills and manufacturers are looking for quality recycled materials to support their operations.

We saw an opportunity to connect those two needs. Rather than treating recycling solely as a sustainability initiative or disposal expense, we believe companies should evaluate recyclables the same way they evaluate any other commodity produced by their business. When businesses understand the value of their materials and have access to reliable end markets, recycling can become both an environmental and economic win.

Q2

MDC: And that win, from what I was told, was no small victory. You made a six-figure difference in one produce company's bottom line. Without giving away anything proprietary, could you share what that partnership looks like?

BG: The strongest partnerships typically start with a company taking a fresh look at materials that have been overlooked or undervalued. In many cases, we find opportunities to improve how recyclable materials are collected, marketed, and moved to end users. The result isn't necessarily one big change. It's often a series of improvements that help capture value previously lost.

One example is a fourth-generation family-owned company that sells produce throughout the U.S. and Canada. Before working with GP Recycling through our hubbIT platform, the company was paying more than $1,000 per month per distribution center to have recyclable materials hauled away. Not only were we able to save them that $1,000 cost, but we were able to pay them $2,000 for the material. They were then able to expand this to three of their locations. While every operation is different, our goal is always the same: Help suppliers turn a cost center into a business asset while keeping the process simple for their teams.

Q3

MDC: Growers and distributors run fast operations. How do you help them understand this program is worth stopping to evaluate?

BG: For produce growers and distributors, recycling isn't the business they're in. They focus on running safe, efficient operations. We start by helping them understand that the cardboard, metals, and plastics generated by their operation may have value. Many companies view these materials as a cost center when they could be an asset. The waste evaluation process doesn't have to be disruptive. GP Recycling representatives can often provide a preliminary assessment based on the types and volumes of materials being generated.





"WHEN BUSINESSES UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF THEIR MATERIALS AND HAVE ACCESS TO RELIABLE END MARKETS, RECYCLING CAN BECOME BOTH AN ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC WIN."

- Blake Gordon,

General Manager of Digital Trading,
Georgia-Pacific

Q4

MDC: Walk me through what the relationship looks like for a grower who works with GP Recycling—from that first conversation to the moment they get a check instead of an invoice, what does that look like as those reps help guide them?

BG: For many suppliers, the biggest surprise is realizing that what they've long considered waste can contribute to the bottom line. Every supplier relationship is different, but we typically start by understanding their operation, the recyclable materials they generate, and how those materials are currently handled. Once we understand the volume and type of materials being generated, how they are collected and stored, and the facility's operating constraints, we can identify opportunities to help suppliers capture more value from those materials.

We then develop a collection and logistics approach that fits their operation while minimizing complexity for their team. Once materials begin moving through the program, suppliers gain access to a transparent process and a reliable outlet for those materials. Instead of paying to dispose of materials that may have value, they can often generate revenue from those same materials.

Q5

MDC: Sustainability reporting is increasingly a retail expectation throughout the supply chain as well. How does the transparency GP Recycling provides fit into that picture?

BG: More companies are being asked by customers, retailers, and stakeholders to demonstrate progress on sustainability commitments. That starts with having visibility into what materials are being diverted from landfill and where those materials are going. Transparency helps companies better understand the outcomes of their recycling programs and supports conversations around landfill diversion, circularity, and resource stewardship. Sustainability efforts are most effective when they're backed by reliable data, and organizations increasingly want visibility into what happens to materials after they leave their facility. When you become a supplier of GP Recycling, you gain access to our proprietary online self-service platform called GPR365 Connect. With this platform, we help provide that visibility through documentation such as certified weights, settlement records, and chain-of-custody confirmation.

Q6

MDC: A statement that stood out starkly to me was that GP Recycling never landfills collected materials. What does the chain look like after the cardboard leaves the dock?

BG: The cardboard enters the recycling supply chain, where it is prepared for use as a feedstock in new products. Depending on the material, those recyclables may be directed to paper mills or other manufacturers that can put the material back to productive use. For example, GP Recycling serves as the sole supplier of recycled fiber to Georgia-Pacific's mill system, which uses more than two million tons of recovered paper each year to manufacture products people use every day. Materials may be directed to GP mills or to a network of manufacturers that use recovered paper, plastics, and metals to make new products.

Our role is to help ensure recyclable materials move back into the economy as raw material rather than being discarded. That supports both resource efficiency and the broader circular economy.

Q7

MDC: Who is the grower or distributor who benefits most from this program, and what would you say to those who haven't yet considered that their recycling could be working for them?

BG: The best fit is typically an organization generating significant volumes of recyclable materials, particularly corrugated cardboard and other fiber-based packaging, as well as scrap metals and plastics, but that hasn't recently evaluated the market value of those materials. Distribution centers, produce growers, food processors, and manufacturers often have more opportunity than they realize.

My advice: Don't assume the way you've always handled recycling is the best option available today. Recycling markets, technology, and transparency have evolved. Taking a fresh look at your recyclable materials could reveal opportunities to reduce costs, generate revenue, and support sustainability goals at the same time.









When Blake first told me that GP Recycling turns what is typically a cost drain into a revenue stream, it sounded like transforming lead into gold. But while the measure of a miracle or magic trick is typically in its ambiguity, this one is made better by the concrete steps taken to identify and repair a financial leak.

With transparency, mutual benefits, and technology coming together, this is not simply an asset—it is a newer, stronger map for the recycling triangle that has become so valuable across all industries.



Dan Sebetic

East Coast Sales Director, Oppy

Time at Oppy: 8 years

With Chandler James

At the intersection of fresh produce and music sits Dan Sebetic. The East Coast Sales Director at Oppy infuses his life with passion—from the sales desk to the DJ booth. With roots leading back to the buy-side, Dan's industry expertise runs deep. A self-proclaimed member of the "boomerang club," he found his way back to Oppy in 2022. The rest, as they say, is history...

» How would you describe your day-to-day work life?

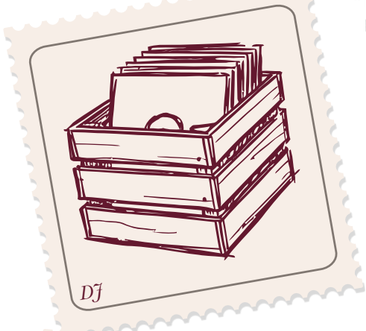
"When I'm not on the road, the day-to-day is pretty fast-paced. While in years past there was seasonal downtime, these days we have year-round deals and are always getting prepared for the next season. It's a fast-moving business, and that's what makes it so exciting; there's always another season to prepare for, another opportunity to pursue, and something new on the horizon."

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

"Kind of by accident, but my career began in a grocery store. I always knew I'd end up in the food industry at some point. Over the years, I worked my way up from bagger to eventually getting an opportunity to open a new store as a Produce Manager."

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

"I've always been a fan of all types of music and used to DJ at clubs, bars, car shows, friends' weddings, etc. There's no person in the produce business with a larger collection of music than me. I have to stay up to date with all the latest, and I belong to a few record pools."





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

"A chameleon—it's all about how you blend in with your surroundings!"

» What is the best advice you have received about your job or career?

"The 3 P's: Be patient, polite, and persistent. If you continue to stay in front of people, have a positive attitude, and work hard, you can eventually achieve the things you want to."

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

"Spend some time in the stores and learn the art of merchandising, placement, seasonality, etc. It'll make you understand your potential accounts better later down the road and give you the ability to 'speak their language.'"

» Who are a couple of mentors who have had a huge influence on your life?

"I have many here at Oppy, but early on I had some really good ones I met in the stores. One of them was the Produce Manager I had the opportunity to be trained with. He really had a passion for the business and taught me how to sell produce in volume. During my training, I started reading books about produce so I could understand more about why things ripened, looked a certain way, etc. If I was going to be a Produce Manager, I needed to learn about it all. I did this by visiting growers, meeting with wholesalers, stopping at stores in different markets, etc."

WTF DO I DO WITH North Bay Blueberries ?

{ what the fork }



Learn about this product

BLUEBERRY POMEGRANATE CRUNCH SALAD

INGREDIENTS

SALAD
- **½ cup** fresh North Bay blueberries
- **4 cups** arugula/spinach mix
- **¼ cup** goat cheese crumbles
- **¼ cup** dried cherries
- **1** avocado, sliced
- **¼ cup** cooked and seasoned farro or wheatberries
- **⅓ cup** roasted chickpeas*

***ROASTED CHICKPEAS**
- **1 can** low or no-sodium chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- **½ tsp** garlic powder
- **½ tsp** onion powder
- **¼ tsp** Italian seasoning
- **1 tsp** salt
- **¼ tsp** pepper

POMEGRANATE MAPLE VINAIGRETTE
- **¼ cup** olive oil
- **1½ tsp** Dijon mustard
- **2 tbsp** minced shallot
- **1 clove** garlic, minced
- **3 tbsp** maple syrup
- **2 tbsp** lemon juice
- **⅓ cup** fresh or bottled pomegranate juice
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 30–35 mins
Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

1. Prepare oven to 400° F. Add a piece of parchment paper to a baking tray. Add chickpeas and spices and mix well. Bake for 30–35 minutes or until toasted and crisp.
2. Add all pomegranate maple vinaigrette ingredients to a jar and blend until smooth using an immersion blender.
3. Assemble the salad. Add the greens to a bowl. Top with blueberries, dried cherries, pistachios, roasted chickpeas, and cheese; finish with sliced avocado, then drizzle with the vinaigrette and enjoy!

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• BERRIES SNACKCHAT • BLUEBERRY BLISS • BERRIES SNACKCHAT • RAZZLE RASPB

BERRY GOOD • BERRIES SNACKCHAT

By Chandler James

Who says consumers' affinity for berries will end at the close of summer? With year-round supplies keeping the retail shelf stocked, shoppers are returning to the produce aisle for an eating experience they know will be consistent. Whether it be blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, or strawberries, there are plenty of ways to make this category shine long into the winter months. We tapped our industry friends to bring their insights to these pages...



Kyla Oberman,

Director of Marketing, California Giant Berry Farms

"During the winter months, shoppers are often looking for ways to bring freshness, color, and a sense of balance to their meals. Berries naturally fit that need, whether they're being used for holiday entertaining, seasonal baking, breakfast, desserts, or everyday snacking. While many shoppers associate berries with summer, they're a year-round staple. Creating opportunities to inspire consumers with new usage routines, berries bring freshness, color, and versatility to the produce department and remain a staple well beyond the summer months."



James Archer,

Vice President of Berries, Mastronardi Produce®

"Berries have become one of the most in-demand items in the produce aisle, moving from seasonal treat to year-round staple. This means consumers now expect the same great berry experience all year. That's a real opportunity for retailers, but it's also a challenge, as inconsistency can send shoppers away from the category. That's where greenhouse-grown WOW® Dreamberry strawberries stand out. They offer premium flavor and consistent quality throughout the winter months, a win-win for retailers and consumers. Feature them where shoppers see them first, connect them to holiday gathering, and use them to signal that your berry set delivers all winter long. That reliability is what builds trial into repeat trips."



Marcia Marble,

Assistant Vice President of Retail Sales, Gem-Pack Berries

"As we head into the winter months, berries are an easy snack, great for breakfast and a fun way to add some color to the table around the holidays. For retailers, it's about keeping berries easy to see and giving shoppers a reason to grab them. Have fun with displays and remind shoppers how easy berries are to enjoy every day. I love berries all year, and I think shoppers do too!"



Ryan Lockman,

Vice President of Sales and Procurement, North Bay Produce

"Berries will be plentiful as we look toward the winter season, which means promotions will be available. Imported blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, and strawberries from Florida all look to be set for great seasons. Berries have become staples for holiday gatherings and should be featured weekly in all produce displays. The berry category continues to drive the department, 52 weeks a year."



Jim Roberts,

President, Naturipe Farms

"Today's shoppers expect fresh berries year-round, and they're looking for healthy, convenient options that fit everything from weekday breakfasts to holiday gatherings. Retailers who keep berries front and center with additional displays, cross-merchandising, and simple meal ideas can keep the category performing well long after summer. Sometimes all it takes is a reminder that berries are just as relevant in November as they are in June. Winter is also a great time to introduce premium varieties that give shoppers a reason to come back. When consumers know they'll find consistently great flavor and quality, berries become a regular part of the shopping list."

BERRY SWEET • BERRIES SNACKCHAT • STRAWB

BERRIES SNACKCHAT • BLACKBERRY BOOGIE • BERRIES SNACKCHAT

BERRIES SNACKCHAT • UNBERRY-LIEVABL



Brent Scattini,

Executive Vice President, Lange Farms

"Winter brings plenty of opportunities for retailers to keep berries at the forefront. The holidays are an especially good time to show shoppers just how versatile berries can be, whether they're used for brunch, baking, desserts, entertaining, or simply snacking. Seasonal displays can help inspire shoppers and show how easily berries fit into their holiday plans. Through Lange's year-round berry program, Seven Seas strawberries help retailers keep the category moving and give shoppers plenty of reasons to reach for fresh berries all winter long."



Josianne Légaré,

Senior Vice President, North American Sales and Strategic Growth, Nature Fresh Farms

"As the first greenhouse producer in North America to commercially grow and market organic greenhouse strawberries, Nature Fresh Farms has seen firsthand how shoppers continue looking for fresh berries well beyond the summer season. Winter gives retailers a great opportunity to inspire new purchase occasions by merchandising strawberries with ingredients for holiday entertaining, weekend brunches, charcuterie boards, winter salads, or even seasonal cocktails and mocktails. When strawberries are displayed as part of a meal or occasion rather than on their own, it helps shoppers discover new ideas, adds value to the produce department, and can increase basket size. It's a simple way to keep berries relevant all winter long."



Hailey Clark,

Director of Marketing, Sun Belle

"As we head into the winter months, the holidays bring a renewed sense of togetherness, with families and friends gathering around the table, hosting celebrations, and creating memories. Berries are a natural fit for those occasions—they're universally enjoyed, naturally sweet, and bring vibrant color and freshness to an array of dishes, both savory and sweet. Retailers have endless opportunities to help shoppers envision berries in those moments through seasonal displays, recipe inspiration, and creative cross-merchandising. I certainly know I'm not the only one who loves bringing a unique charcuterie spread to a holiday gathering. Retailers can tap into the increased focus on entertaining by merchandising charcuterie items and other entertaining essentials alongside fresh berries. By highlighting their versatility, retailers can keep berries top of mind and show consumers they have a place at the table all winter long."



Laudan Chaffin,

Marketing Director, Berry Fresh

"As we head into the winter months, blueberries are a great example of how retailers can keep berries relevant well beyond traditional summer occasions. With the holidays approaching, berries can bring freshness, color, and flavor to everything from breakfast and snacking to entertaining and holiday meals. They're an easy addition—or even a simple substitute—to make familiar dishes feel more vibrant, fresh, and wholesome without sacrificing taste. Retailers can help inspire those occasions through strong displays, recipe ideas, and cross-merchandising with complementary items. The opportunity is to show shoppers that berries, especially the delicious blueberries during this time of year, can play a versatile role throughout the holiday season and all winter long."



Don Hobson,

Vice President, Bobalu

"As we head into the winter months, strawberries offer retailers a fresh, colorful, and versatile way to inspire shoppers throughout the holiday season and beyond. From holiday gatherings, where strawberries beautifully complement cheesecakes, dessert platters, and sweet treats, to healthy after-school or game-day snacks served on skewers or layered into parfaits, the possibilities are endless. Strawberries also add a festive touch to seasonal beverages, pairing beautifully with ciders, champagne, and specialty cocktails. Their bright color, fresh flavor, and year-round versatility make strawberries an easy choice for entertaining, everyday snacking, and holiday celebrations—giving retailers countless opportunities to inspire consumers and drive purchases."



Nick Wishnatzki,

Public Relations Director, Wish Farms

"As retailers look to drive berry sales through the winter months, one of the biggest opportunities is to lean into the proven benefits berries provide. Consumers are constantly being flooded with advice from influencers and self-proclaimed wellness gurus, but berries have something much more powerful behind them: science! Registered dietitians and nutritionists can help tell that story, highlighting the role berries play in supporting heart health, brain function, immune support, and overall well-being. The message is especially timely as consumers set New Year's resolutions and look for simple ways to eat healthier. Berries check all the boxes: They're flavorful, convenient, and packed with nutrients, making them an easy addition to a healthy lifestyle."

» The IF List «



Mike Roberts

Vice President of Produce Operations, Harps Food Stores

With Jordan Okumura-Wright

Work hard, have fun, people matter, and give back. These are the beliefs that inspire Mike Roberts every day, and that drive the teams around him. In an industry full of challenges and hurdles but also flush with deep connections, passionate spirits, and people willing to hand down what they were given—leaders like Mike are standard-setters. Ask Mike to define success, and he does it in four words: Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Ask him to describe himself, and he says "dependable." These are the spaces where the work happens for Mike and his team. With a presence like this, I knew a few of our *IFs* wouldn't throw him off track, and if anything, they just make us love him more...

» IF you had to choose one song to be the soundtrack of your year, what would it be?
"We Are the Champions" by Queen.

» IF you wrote an autobiography, what would be the title?
I Probably Shouldn't Have Said That.

» IF you could see one movie or read one book for the first time again, what would it be?
The Hobbit.

» IF you could imagine yourself in a different industry, what would it be?
Culinary chef.

» IF you had to choose one personal artifact to leave behind after you are gone, what would it be?
My single-shot .22 rifle that my great-granddad gave me when I was 5; it's over 100 years old.

» IF you were another species in the animal kingdom, what would you be?
Wolf.

» IF you had to eat the same thing every day for the rest of your days, what would you eat?
Pizza.

» IF you could join a musician, dead or alive, on stage to sing along or play an instrument with, who would you choose and why?
Johnny Cash—he was a rebel!

» IF you could re-experience an awesome day in your life, what day would you choose and why?
Camping with my dad; I learned, I had fun, and it was awesome!

» IF you had $10 million to donate to someone or something else, who would you choose and why?
No Kid Hungry, Healthy Family Project—feeding children healthy and nutritious foods is important for our future, and seeing kids healthy and happy makes me happy.

» IF you could rename one fruit or vegetable, what would it be called?
Artichoke. Make it Asparchoke—there are only a few people that I know who will get this!

» IF you were to find yourself in a zombie apocalypse, what would be one talent you have that would help you survive?
Tenacity.

» IF you had to choose one word to describe yourself, what would it be?
Dependable.



WTF DO I DO WITH Giorgio® Baby Bella (Cremini) Mushrooms?

{ what the fork }



MUSHROOM AND TRUFFLE RISOTTO

Learn about this product

INGREDIENTS

1 oz Giorgio® Dried Porcini Mushrooms
2 (8 oz) packages Giorgio Baby Bella (Cremini) mushrooms, cleaned with stems trimmed
- **1 package (8 oz)**, roughly chopped
- **1 package (8 oz)**, thinly sliced

4 tbsp unsalted butter
4 shallots, very finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
1 small handful fresh thyme sprigs (about **6–8 sprigs**)
1½ cups Arborio rice
½ cup dry white wine
2 cups hot chicken or vegetable broth
⅓ cup Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
1 tbsp truffle pesto (optional)
Truffle oil, for drizzling
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Prep Time: 20 mins
Cook Time: 30–35 mins
Servings: 4

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Real Food, Served Fresh

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DIRECTIONS

1. Place the dried porcini mushrooms in a heatproof measuring cup or bowl and pour 1¼ cups boiling water over them. Let soak for 30 minutes, or until softened.
2. Meanwhile, melt 2 tbsp of the butter in a large sauté pan or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the chopped shallots and cook for 3–4 minutes, until softened.
3. In a food processor, pulse the 8 oz of roughly chopped Baby Bella (Cremini) mushrooms with the garlic until very finely chopped. Add the mushroom mixture and the whole thyme sprigs to the shallots. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until most of the moisture has evaporated.
4. Stir in the Arborio rice and cook for 2 minutes, stirring frequently to coat the grains with the butter.
5. Pour in the white wine and cook until it has almost completely evaporated.
6. Strain the soaked porcini mushrooms over a saucepan, reserving the soaking liquid. Add the chicken or vegetable broth to the mushroom soaking liquid and keep it warm over low heat.
7. Add the warm broth mixture to the risotto one ladleful at a time, stirring frequently. Wait until most of the liquid has been absorbed before adding the next ladleful. Continue until the rice is tender but still slightly firm in the center, about 20 minutes.
8. Roughly chop the soaked porcini mushrooms and stir them into the risotto during the last few minutes of cooking.
9. While the risotto cooks, melt the remaining 2 tbsp butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the remaining 8 oz of sliced Baby Bella mushrooms, season lightly with salt and pepper, and cook for 6–7 minutes, stirring occasionally, until golden brown and lightly crisp around the edges. Set aside.
10. Remove the thyme sprigs from the risotto. Stir in the grated Parmesan and the truffle pesto, if using. Taste and season with salt and pepper. If needed, add a splash of warm broth or water to loosen the risotto to your desired consistency.
11. Divide the risotto among serving bowls. Top with the sautéed mushrooms, drizzle with a little truffle oil (too much can be overpowering), and finish with extra grated Parmesan before serving. Enjoy!

WTF DO I DO WITH Homegrown Organic Farms Meyer Lemons ?

{ what the fork }



MEYER LEMON CURD

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp Homegrown Organic Farms Meyer Lemon zest
1 cup freshly squeezed Homegrown Organic Farms Meyer Lemon juice
2 cups granulated sugar
½ cup salted butter, softened
4 large eggs
2 large egg yolks

Prep Time: 10 mins
Cook Time: 10–14 mins
Chill Time: 4 hrs

DIRECTIONS

1. Beat butter and sugar with an electric mixer on medium speed until blended, about 45 seconds. Add eggs and egg yolks, one at a time, beating just until blended after each addition.
2. Gradually add lemon juice to butter mixture, beating at low speed just until blended. Stir in zest. (Mixture will look curdled.)
3. Transfer mixture to a heavy 4 qt saucepan and cook, whisking constantly, over medium-low until mixture thickens and coats the back of a spoon, 10–14 minutes.
4. Transfer curd to a bowl, and place plastic wrap directly on warm curd (to prevent a film from forming). Chill until firm, about 4 hours. Refrigerate in an airtight container up to 2 weeks. Serve with biscuits or scones. Enjoy!

Tip: This bright and zesty Meyer Lemon curd makes the perfect addition to scones, cookies, biscuits, or toast!

To learn more about Homegrown Organic Farms, visit *www.hgofarms.com*

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ORGANIC FRUIT IS OUR PASSION

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Homegrown Organic Farms was created nearly a decade after our founders transitioned their family farm to organic practices in 1989. They were early pioneers among California's citrus growers as they embraced organic methods, driven by their commitment to care for the land and people. Today, we carry forward the same passion representing more than 100 organic growers covering over 8,000 acres of organic fresh fruit.

Scan QR code or visit www.hgofarms.com to learn more.

Apples SNACKCHAT

BY MELISSA DE LEON CHAVEZ

Whole or sliced, baked, grilled, raw, or juiced—there are few staple fruits that have gained notoriety in as many forms as the apple category has. From the well-known way to keep the doctor at bay, to autumnal apple juice or steaming pies, it is a category that has morphed into so many forms that anyone can choose a favorite.

In a realm so versatile and exploding with variety, how do you ensure each category in the department stands on its own and maximizes investment? Dig in with industry experts...



Rochelle Bohm,

VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING, OMI ORCHARDS

"Deal-by-deal buying gets you a truckload and a transaction. Season-after-season partnership gets you a program: merchandising built around your store's traffic patterns, cross-promotions that tie apples to other pairings, and displays designed and positioned to capture impulse traffic and keep selling beyond the promotional window. That's what separates a retailer's apple program from everyone else's, and it only gets built when a buyer and grower commit to more than one season together."



Auna Lundberg,

SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER, STEMILT

"To stand out in the apple category, focus on creating destination displays that feature multiple varieties, seasonal themes, and cross-promotions that inspire meal and snacking occasions. The strongest programs are built through long-term supplier partnerships, where a deeper understanding of the category and consumer behavior creates opportunities for innovation, stronger execution, and sustainable growth. At Stemilt, we believe our role is to help retailers win at the point of sale. That means delivering quality fruit, category expertise, merchandising support, and innovative programs that help create differentiation, build shopper loyalty, and ultimately sell more fruit."



Jason Bushong,

VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES, WENATCHEE, THE GIUMARRA COMPANIES

"Opportunities continue to abound in the apple category, which remains one of the top three fruit items for shoppers. Our recent consumer research found that taste is the primary driver of apple purchases, with shoppers willing to pay a premium for apples that deliver a superior eating experience. Consumer perceptions of yellow apple varieties also skewed positive, suggesting additional opportunities for assortment growth at retail. This presents a compelling opportunity for The Giumarra Companies' exclusive yellow variety, Lemonade™. Its unique sweet-tart flavor profile aligns closely with current consumer preferences. As our organic and conventional Lemonade volumes continue to expand, we look forward to partnering with retailers to build awareness, drive trial, and bring added excitement to produce department."



Mac Riggan,

VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, CHELAN FRESH

"The apple category grows when retailers think beyond a display and build a destination. The best programs combine strong merchandising, cross-promotions, and a curated variety mix that gives shoppers a reason to explore. Whether it's the everyday elevated appeal of SugarBee®, the snackable convenience of Rockit™, or the eye-catching excitement of Lucy™, differentiation matters. When buyers and suppliers invest in each other season after season, not deal by deal, they build trust, innovation, and a category shoppers want to return to again and again."



Susan Chekow Lusignan,

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NEW YORK APPLE ASSOCIATION

"Retailers sell more apples when they have a good variety of apples for bulk and bagged, sell high-quality fruit, and offer competitive prices. Consumers should be able to easily identify different apple varieties and their recommended use (snacking, baking, specialty drinks and recipes), flavor profiles (from sweet to tart), and nutritional benefits. Prominent, creative displays and special promotions help drive sales. Orchard/farm-themed displays are always popular with consumers and remind them of where their fruit originates. Many retailers suggest recipes that use apples, and pairings of popular Fall Harvest items together such as apples, caramel, and cider."



Emily Cox,
MARKETING MANAGER, FIRSTFRUITS

"A strong apple program starts with the right mix, but it's built through long-term collaboration. Pair proven category drivers like Honeycrisp and Cosmic Crisp with emerging varieties that give shoppers something new to discover. Then make the assortment easier to navigate through flavor-based merchandising, educational signage, sampling, and targeted promotions. At FirstFruits, our Washington and Michigan supply allows us to tailor programs to each retailer, while our programs like 'Smart. Simple. Delicious.' and 'Opal Smiles' create meaningful shopper engagement that goes beyond a single promotion and builds repeat purchases."



Kristi Harris,
BRAND MANAGER, HONEYBEAR BRANDS

"Merchandising gives retailers an opportunity to turn apples from a familiar staple into a relevant solution for today's shoppers. Honeybear Brands' latest campaigns do just that by connecting apples to two powerful consumer motivations: wellness and family. Fiber Is the Superhero of Nutrients highlights apples as a naturally fiber-rich choice for health-conscious shoppers, while Mama Bear Approved celebrates moms and their role in choosing wholesome foods for the people they love. With engaging messaging and eye-catching POS, these campaigns give retailers new reasons to stop shoppers, spark interest and ultimately drive incremental apple purchases."



Julieta Castillo,
MARKETING COORDINATOR, SUPERFRESH GROWERS®

"Consumers are prioritizing health, value, convenience, and quality, and apples naturally deliver across all four. Apples' portability, shelf-life, and fiber content align with growing interest in functional nutrition and foods that fit busy routines. Retailers can stand apart by bringing those benefits forward through clear messaging, easy-to-shop displays, and the right mix of varieties and package formats. When buyers and suppliers share data and plan together season after season, they can respond to changing habits, keep the category relevant, and build sustainable growth beyond any single promotion."



Danelle Huber,
MARKETING DIRECTOR, CRUNCH PAK

"I'd advise retailers to start with the shopper and build from there. Families are looking for fresh, wholesome options that make healthy choices a little easier, whether that's a whole apple, sliced apples in a lunchbox, or a convenient snack on the go. At Crunch Pak, we're fortunate to be part of those everyday moments, and we've seen firsthand that the strongest apple programs are built through long-term partnerships. When retailers and suppliers share ideas, plan together, and stay focused on quality and consistency, everyone benefits, especially the shopper standing in front of the display looking for something fresh and healthy for their family."

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UP CLOSE

A Closer Look at Enza Zaden New Lunara Brand

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

In the realm of merchandising and marketing, imagery and word choice paint the canvas of consumer understanding. A move from Enza Zaden on a unique melon showcases this by bringing starlight to the produce aisle, illuminating speckles on the rind and creating inspiration for a cosmic experience.

With light flecks on the newly branded seedless watermelon, Lunara, the name, logo, and merchandising assets of this sweet fruit lift it out of the soil and into the mesosphere.

At retail, Lunara's natural variation stands out, drawing consumers to put it in their baskets, while consistent internal quality brings them back for more.

That consistency is by design. A regular-looking watermelon on the shelf could be any one of many varieties, so how good it tastes can change from one purchase to the next. Lunara's spotted rind makes it instantly identifiable, giving shoppers a reliable way to find the same quality again.

According to Enza Zaden, Lunara has delivered consistently strong results over years of trial evaluations and two successful seasons of commercial production across multiple growing regions in the U.S., combining reliable field performance and fruit quality with an eating experience that has been validated through consumer testing and preference research. Now launched through retail channels across the United States, Lunara is the result of years of work, from identifying promising genetics and breeding superior varieties to extensive testing, consumer validation, and collaboration with retail partners.

Each fruit is unique, carrying its own variation of markings, a feature that highlights how natural and individual each melon is while consumers continue to lean into all forms of individuality.

Here is to a melon that celebrates what makes it different from the rest, with external and internal attributes worthy of the stars.



Learn More

LUNARA

ENZA ZADEN

The Hottest Show in the Desert returns January 13-15, 2027 with three days of nonstop networking activities scheduled.

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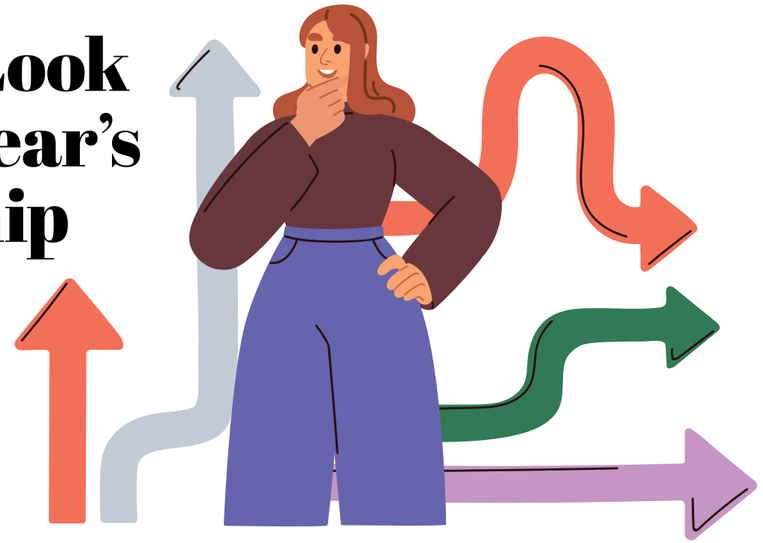
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A Fresh Look at Next Year's Leadership

Who will lead your growth next year?



By Editorial Contributor Julie Marcik, President, Joe Produce Search℠

We are entering one of the busiest times of the year in fresh produce. As our industry works to put fruits and vegetables on holiday tables, companies are managing transitions, increased demand, customer needs, year-end goals, and packed schedules. It may feel difficult to look beyond the immediate hustle, but planning for the year ahead cannot wait.

Year-end planning should involve more than budgets, sales goals, and operating plans. Companies must also ask whether they have the leadership talent needed to execute those plans.

What is coming in the new year? Perhaps your organization has lofty goals, anticipated challenges, or plans to introduce new products. Maybe a retirement is approaching, a leader is ready for a promotion, or growth has created new responsibilities.

Every major goal needs a capable leader behind it. Who will move each priority forward? Does that person have the experience, authority, resources, and capacity to succeed? If the answer is unclear, now is the time to complete the people side of your business plan.

Who Will Turn Your Plans Into Progress?

Start by taking an honest look at your leadership team and organizational structure.

Are important initiatives moving slowly because no one clearly owns them? Is an executive covering too many areas? Are key decisions dependent on one person? Is there a capability missing that will be essential next year?

An organizational gap does not always require an outside hire. The solution may be developing an existing team member, promoting someone who is ready, or restructuring responsibilities. Identifying the need early gives you time to consider all of your options.

Talk with your leaders about their personal and professional goals. Someone may be ready for more responsibility, considering retirement, or looking for a clearer path to growth. These conversations can reveal opportunities within your team and help you anticipate change.

Employers should not assume they know what their executives want next, just as executives should not assume leadership knows their ambitions.

Plan Early for a Strong Hire

Hiring before the need becomes urgent often leads to a stronger hire.

When a critical position must be filled immediately, the focus can shift from finding the right person to finding an available person. The company may rush to define the role or compromise on qualities that once seemed essential.



Planning ahead creates room to be thoughtful. The company can define what it needs, align decision-makers, consider internal talent, and evaluate external candidates without the pressure of an empty seat. Executives also have time to evaluate the opportunity and make a responsible transition.

The date you need someone in the seat is not the date you should begin the search. It is the date you must work backward from. If you anticipate needing an executive during the first quarter, the clock is already ticking.

Plant the Seeds Before January

Hiring often moves more slowly during the holidays. Calendars fill up, travel increases, and interviews become harder to coordinate. That does not mean companies should wait until January to begin.

If you plan to work with an executive search firm, now is the time to retain one, clarify the role, and launch the search. The firm can begin identifying and engaging potential candidates while your team manages year-end demands.

December can also create a valuable recruiting opportunity. As professionals reflect on the past year and establish goals for the next, thoughts about their careers often come into play. At Joe Produce, we find that people make time for these conversations in December and early January.



They may not be actively applying, but they are considering what they want next.

Starting the search now gives employers an opportunity to connect with strong executives who may never enter the active candidate pool and build momentum before January arrives.

Preparing Your Organization for Growth

- Set organizational goals for the coming year
- Create a clear vision for what your leadership team must accomplish
- Assess your organizational chart for gaps in leadership, capacity, and capabilities
- Talk with team members about their goals and readiness for future opportunities
- Decide whether each gap calls for development, promotion, restructuring, or an outside hire
- Align decision makers before launching a search
- If you plan to use an executive search firm, engage it early

Start the New Year With Momentum

Year-end is more than a hiring slowdown. It can be a valuable window for reflection, planning, and productive conversations.

Companies that assess their leadership needs now will enter the new year with more options and a clearer path forward. Whether the right solution is developing current talent, promoting from within, restructuring responsibilities, or beginning an external search, early planning creates the time and space to make a thoughtful decision.

The new year may bring ambitious goals, new products, expected challenges, and exciting growth. Don't wait until January to start building the team that will make it happen. Begin recruiting now, while there is time to be thoughtful, selective, and ready to move when the right leader comes along.

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.



Julie Marcik,
President
JOE Produce Search℠

WTF DO I DO WITH Dayka & Hackett Cherries ?

{ what the fork }



Learn about this product

CARAMELIZED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH CHERRY SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

½ cup pitted Dayka & Hackett Dark Cherries, quartered
1 lb Brussels sprouts
2 tbsp butter, melted
¼ tsp coarse sea salt
⅛ tsp ground black pepper
1 tbsp water
1 tsp good-quality balsamic vinegar
1 tsp soy sauce
⅛ tsp ground cardamom

Prep Time: 10 mins
Cook Time: 25 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 400° F. Trim the ends off the Brussels sprouts and remove any discolored or damaged outer leaves. Cut them in half lengthwise, or in quarters if they are very large.
2. Place the Brussels sprouts on a large baking sheet. Drizzle the melted butter on top and sprinkle on the salt and pepper; toss to combine.
3. Roast the Brussels sprouts until golden and crisp outside and tender inside, about 20–30 minutes, flipping once halfway through.
4. While the Brussels sprouts roast, make the cherry sauce. Add the cherries, water, balsamic, soy sauce, and cardamom to a small saucepan over medium heat. Cook until the cherries are softened but not mushy, and the sauce is thickened, about 4–5 minutes, swirling the pan occasionally.
5. Pour the Brussels sprouts into a serving dish and top with the cherry sauce; serve immediately. Enjoy!

To learn more about Dayka & Hackett, visit *www.daykahackett.com*

WTF DO I DO WITH Crystal Valley Foods Blueberries and Baby Heirloom Tomatoes ?

{ what the fork }



Learn about this product

RED, WHITE, AND BLUE CAPRESE SALAD WITH BLUEBERRIES

INGREDIENTS

6 oz Crystal Valley Foods Fresh Blueberries
2 pints Crystal Valley Foods Baby Heirloom Tomatoes, halved
Fresh basil, chopped
Fresh mozzarella, cut into ½" slices
Balsamic vinegar
Olive oil
Salt and pepper

Prep Time: 10 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

1. Toss the blueberries, tomatoes, and basil in a bowl.
2. Use the star cookie cutter to cut stars out of the sliced mozzarella. If you don't have a cookie cutter, you can use a knife to shape and cut stars. Add the cheese stars to the salad.
3. Drizzle with balsamic vinegar and olive oil.
4. Season with salt and pepper. Enjoy!

To learn more about Crystal Valley Foods, visit *www.crystalvalleyfoods.com*

HOMEGROWN
ORGANIC FARMS

CERTIFIED STEWARDSHIP

A Q&A With Scott Mabs, Chief Executive Officer, Homegrown Organic Farms

By Peggy Packer

Look where a company invests its time, energy, and money, and you will see its vision for the future. For Homegrown Organic Farms (HGO), that vision is a bountiful one.

The company's various industry certifications—from Regenerative Organic Certified® to Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) and Bee Better Certified®—reflect its commitment to caring for the land and its people in the process of bringing fresh fruit to market.

At HGO, stewardship goes beyond any single certification, farming practice, or sustainability initiative. As Chief Executive Officer Scott Mabs tells me, it is about how all of those efforts work together to create a stronger future for agriculture.

Eager to learn more about the company's goal of becoming the world's most caring and trusted produce ecosystem? So are we.



"As we look to the future, our focus is on building a produce ecosystem that creates value at every level."

Scott Mabs,
Chief Executive Officer, Homegrown Organic Farms



Peggy Packer: How do stewardship and sustainability shape HGO's company initiatives and growth strategies?

Scott Mabs, Chief Executive Officer, Homegrown Organic Farms: Our roots in organic agriculture go back to 1989, when our founders decided to transition their family citrus farm to organic. It was a forward-looking choice that helped shape who we are today. Organic remains the foundation of what we do, and our responsibility as stewards of the land and people has continued to grow alongside the company. Stewardship is closely connected to who we are as a company and the purpose behind how we operate: Create generational opportunity and inspire others to live this life for a greater purpose. That perspective influences everything from the farming practices we support to the way we invest in our employees, farmworkers, and communities.

As we look to the future, our focus is on building a produce ecosystem that creates value at every level. That means supporting healthy farms, strengthening relationships with partners and customers, investing in our people, and making decisions with long-term impact in mind.

PP: Homegrown Organic Farms has several coveted certifications under its belt. How do these strengthen the company's operations?

SM: Organic is where our story begins and remains the foundation of our business today. Our roots in organic agriculture go back more than three decades, and today we offer year-round organic programs across citrus, berries, stonefruit, fall fruit, and grapes. More than a certification label, organic reflects the way we have always approached farming: with care for the land and a long-term commitment to doing things the right way.

Regenerative Organic Certified builds on our organic foundation with an even greater focus on soil health, biodiversity, land stewardship, and social responsibility. In 2022, Homegrown Organic Farms became the first in the industry to achieve Regenerative Organic Certified status for stonefruit, marking an important milestone in our long-standing commitment to stewardship. Since then, we have expanded the program to include fall fruit and blueberries, with additional commodities on the horizon.

In addition, our Oregon blueberry farms are Bee Better Certified, reflecting a commitment to protecting pollinator habitats, promoting biodiversity, and supporting responsible pest-management practices.

PP: Social responsibility is another key focus for HGO. How does this show up across the company?

SM: As a 100 percent employee-owned company, our employees have the opportunity to share in the value they help create and contribute directly to our long-term success. Employee ownership is closely tied to our purpose of creating generational opportunity, reinforcing accountability, collaboration, and a shared sense of responsibility while helping build a stronger organization for our people, growers, customers, and partners.

The Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) program brings another essential part of stewardship into focus: the people who make agriculture possible. Across our EFI-certified programs, EFI supports social responsibility, worker engagement, food safety culture, and continuous improvement by strengthening communication and collaboration throughout the operation. One of the most meaningful elements of the program is the EFI premium associated with certified products, which provides a direct benefit to farmworkers. It creates a tangible connection between responsible sourcing and the people behind each harvest, while giving our customers and retail partners an opportunity to support positive impact at the farm level. For us, EFI reinforces the idea that a strong food system depends on both healthy farms and the people who make each harvest possible.

"More than a certification label, organic reflects the way we have always approached farming: with care for the land and a long-term commitment to doing things the right way."





PP: Beyond these certifications, what other milestones are markers of HGO's stewardship?

SM: We have continued to expand the scope of stewardship throughout the supply chain. That includes investments in solar energy at our facilities and offices, more responsible packaging options, and programs designed to reduce agricultural waste. Our Harvest Rescue program is a strong example. By creating markets for organic fruit that may fall outside traditional cosmetic standards but is still fresh and flavorful, we are able to reduce food waste, create additional value for growers, and make more of each harvest count.

Our commitment also extends beyond the farm, through employee-led Homegrown Cares efforts, in partnership with our sister company, AgriCare. Together, we support programs such as Thanksgiving meal donations, holiday giving initiatives, educational scholarships, and other local outreach efforts. These programs reflect a broader view of stewardship, one that includes not only the land and resources we depend on, but also the people and communities that help agriculture thrive.

"As a 100 percent employee-owned company, our employees have the opportunity to share in the value they help create and contribute directly to our long-term success."





PP: How does the company plan to further enhance its stewardship and sustainability practices?

SM: Looking ahead, we plan to continue growing our organic programs and expanding Regenerative Organic Certified offerings across more commodities, while supporting practices that strengthen soil health, protect natural resources, reduce waste, and build more resilient farms. Just as importantly, our responsibility as stewards extends to people. We will continue investing in our employees, farmworkers, growers, and communities, creating opportunities that support people and contribute to the long-term health of the agricultural communities we depend on.

As we work toward becoming the most caring and trusted produce ecosystem in the world, we remain focused on both sides of that responsibility: caring for the land that sustains us and the people who make every harvest possible.

Strong relationships, engaged farmworkers, investments in employees and communities—all of these play a critical role in strengthening the food system. Through its sustainability and social responsibility efforts, Homegrown Organic Farms showcases exactly what it means when it says it is Growing for Generations.

For HGO, each season is a new opportunity to care for the land, support the people behind its food, and leave its farms, communities, and company stronger for the generations that follow.

UP CLOSE

A Closer Look at Red Sun Farms Chef's Collection™

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Go Ahead! Try Me!

The tagline dares consumers to dive into Red Sun Farms Chef's Collection™ mixed medley tomato line—one of several callouts, each coming with its own personality.

Five vividly illustrated tomatoes, each with its own personality, have been brought to life in the company's relaunch of the line. And far from just some cute characters on a pack, each comes with its own background story to inspire and embody the tomatoes they represent. Team members wrote individual biographies for each tomato variety, paving the way for strong potential to educate and engage consumers.

In addition to "Go Ahead! Try Me!," taglines like "Turn Up the Tasty!," "Taste the Sunshine!," "I Don't Do Ordinary!," and "Next Stop: Delicious" all draw in curious customers.

Beneath the dynamic surface of these characters and their callouts is Red Sun's innovative streak—always seeking the next way to stand out not just creatively but technically.

Each pack image holds as much variety as the medley inside, thanks to digital printing technology that let the supplier develop multiple character images that run in rotating sequence across Top Seal, labels, and bags. No one character gets to shine; all are stars, and with varying combinations, there is an extra bit of excitement to each case. Innovation meets creativity in a combo that came together through internal teamwork and retail partnership, research, and whimsy. Several images, five personalities, one dare for consumers: Try to stop at just one.



Learn More

RED SUN FARMS

WTF DO I DO WITH Sweet Onions from Shuman Farms ?

{ what the fork }

Learn about this product

SWEET ONION MAC & CHEESE

INGREDIENTS

4 large Shuman Farms Sweet Onions, sliced
3 tbsp olive oil
Pinch of salt
Pinch of pepper
1 lb cavatappi pasta, cooked
3 tbsp unsalted butter
¼ cup all-purpose flour
2 ½ cups milk
10 oz Gruyère cheese, freshly grated
4 oz Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
¼ cup of breadcrumbs
Fresh thyme, for serving

Prep Time: 30 mins
Cook Time: 1.5–2 hrs
Servings: 8–10

SHUMAN FARMS

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

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat olive oil in a large, oven-safe Dutch oven or skillet over medium heat. Add the onions with a big pinch of salt and pepper.
2. Stir often until the onions soften, then decrease the heat to low. Continue to cook the onions, stirring often, for about 60–90 minutes, until golden.
3. Preheat the oven to 375° F. Boil the pasta according to the package directions.
4. Transfer caramelized onions to a plate.
5. Add the butter to the Dutch oven. Once melted, add in the flour, whisking to create a roux.
6. Cook for 1–2 minutes, until the roux becomes golden in color.
7. Slowly pour in the milk while stirring constantly. The mixture will begin to thicken.
8. Reserve some of the cheese for topping, and stir in the remaining cheese until melted.
9. Add in ¾ of the caramelized onions. Stir in the cooked pasta until combined.
10. Top with the remaining cheese and remaining caramelized onions. Sprinkle with the breadcrumbs.
11. Bake for 25–30 minutes, until golden and bubbly.
12. Remove from the oven, and sprinkle with fresh thyme. Enjoy!

Libations
For All Occasions

BERRY APPLEY SANGRIA

By Ryann Howard
Photography by Reid Monsma

Hosting family for the holidays means accepting that your home will not actually belong to you for several hours.

In my case, my son will inevitably come looking for juice approximately 45 seconds after I've started doing something that requires both hands. My aunts will need something to sip while they set up camp in the kitchen and yap their way through dinner prep. And my mom? She needs a drink in hand for her endless trips through the back door, where she'll somehow manage to talk to every person she passes, check on the kids outside, come back in to see what everyone in the kitchen is doing, and then repeat the entire process five minutes later.

That's exactly why I—and many consumers like me—love having something like one easy pitcher ready to go. This month's libation, Berry Appley Sangria, is a bubbly, fruit-packed sip made with crisp apples, juicy strawberries, fresh lime, sparkling white grape juice, and seltzer. Better yet, it's alcohol-free, so one pitcher can make the rounds with just about everyone at the gathering.

I can put it together before everyone arrives, set it on the counter, and, most importantly, stop thinking about it. From the kids clamoring for juice to the adults hovering around the kitchen, everyone can pour themselves a glass while I focus on everything else that comes with hosting.

Here's how to make it...

Prep Time: 10 mins
Chill Time: 1 hr
Servings: 5

INGREDIENTS

- **1 bottle (750 ml)** sparkling white grape juice
- **1 large** red apple, thinly sliced
- **1 heaping cup** strawberries, halved
- **1** lime, thinly sliced
- **1½ cups** seltzer water
- Edible flowers for garnish, optional

DIRECTIONS

1. Add the sliced apples, strawberries, and lime to a large pitcher. Pour in the sparkling white grape juice and gently stir to combine.
2. Refrigerate for at least one hour to give the fresh fruit time to mingle with the juice.
3. Just before serving, add the seltzer water and give everything a gentle stir.
4. Pour over ice, making sure each glass gets plenty of apples, strawberries, and lime. Garnish with additional fresh fruit if desired. Enjoy!



UP CLOSE

A Closer Look at Highline Mushrooms Fresh Cream of Mushroom Soup Kit

By Ryann Howard

Soup season is about to get a fresh upgrade, and Highline Mushrooms is giving retailers a new way to bring this comforting meal straight into the produce department.

I love an innovation that answers the shopper's inevitable "What's for dinner?" question without over-complicating the solution. The new Fresh Cream of Mushroom Soup Kit, part of Highline's Fresh Gourmet Series, does exactly that by pairing fresh sliced Mini Bella mushrooms with a pre-portioned dry soup mix.

With a quick sauté followed by the addition of seasoning and milk, shoppers can prepare a fresh soup serving four in approximately 25 minutes. That convenience makes the kit a natural fit for busy households seeking simple meal inspiration without sacrificing the freshness they expect from the produce aisle.

For retailers, this launch gives consumers another reason to add mushrooms to their carts while creating new opportunities to increase category sales. The recognizable recipe can help remove preparation guesswork, encourage incremental purchases, and broaden the role mushrooms play in weekly meal planning.

By turning a versatile vegetable into a clear, convenient meal solution, Highline is serving up the kind of value-added innovation that could keep mushroom category growth simmering.



Learn More

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