

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the SNACK

ISSUE 101 FEB 2026



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W

E ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF A BREATH.

As we approached the last winter solstice, accompanied by a chilling inverted weather pattern that stretched

cold, damp weeks longer than they should have lasted, I sat in a yoga class as the instructor named the moment we were in. She called it the bottom of a breath. For anyone who has ever dabbled in breathwork, or been caught without the pull of air in your lungs, you know that the bottom of a breath can feel both terrifying and clarifying.

Your lungs are empty. There is no surplus. You are suspended in the pause, wondering where the next breath will come from, and whether it will be enough.

For some, that moment carries exhilaration; empty space ready to be filled, the promise of renewal, the belief that abundance follows restraint. For others, it feels like scarcity made physical, a reminder of how long you have already been holding on. Much like a new year.

In the produce industry, that pause is not theoretical. It is lived. Farmers are shouldering rising costs of production while being asked to deliver food for less, and then less again. Margins are compressed. Risk is amplified. The work is essential, but too often the reward feels disconnected from the effort required to sustain it.

We move through this moment the same way we move through the bottom of a breath. Not balanced, but balancing. Between innovation and exhaustion. Between



stewardship and survival. Between the pride of feeding people and the very real math of whether it can continue to pencil out.

Hope, here, is not a slogan or a promise of ease. It is practical. It is measured. It shows up in the decisions growers make to keep planting, in the partnerships that hold when conditions tighten, in the willingness to adapt without losing sight of why this work matters in the first place. Hope looks less like abundance and more like commitment.

This 101st issue, the first of 2026, is about meeting the industry where it is.

Not glossing over the pressure, but naming it, understanding it, and sharing the tools, perspectives, and conversations that help us move forward with clarity. The next breath does not come from pretending things are lighter than they are. It comes from facing the weight honestly and choosing how to carry it.

We are still here. The pause is real. And the breath, when it comes, will be shaped by what we do now.

Jordan Okumura-Wright

Editor in Chief
AndNowUKnow, Deli Market News,
and The Snack Magazine

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Greens in every color



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A GOLDEN AGE

Fueled by customer feedback, employee loyalty, and a unique backstory, the company is marking much more than a milestone. Heather Hammack dives into differentiation in the produce tech space...



GWILLIMDALE FARMS

ART OF THE EARTH

The company's latest launch is more than a product, it's the latest brick in a bridge to the realization of a new brand. Kshama Joshi and Quinton Woods discuss the importance of a united vision in bringing a flurry of color to the veg world...



UNITED SUPERMARKETS

LESSONS IN FRESH

As he enters his 33rd year in grocery, Joseph Bunting emphasizes the importance of embracing innovation and staying agile in the retail arena. The United Supermarkets Produce Business Director shares some helpful advice in this insightful Q&A...



BLAND FARMS®

REGIONAL ROCKSTARS

To ensure Southeast Georgia's operational foothold in produce, the sweet onion steward invests in a strategically located facility. Troy Bland delivers insights on how this helps Bland Farms stand out from the pack...



SPROUTS FARMERS MARKET

THE IF LIST

Helping to shape a national produce strategy, championing community coaching, and still sneaking time to reveal his ultimate *Snack IF List*, is just a few of the things that make Daniel Spivey tick...



RED SUN FARMS

MVP HIGHLIGHTS

With 27 total years in greenhouse sales and a decade in produce retailing before that, there is not much this industry maven has not navigated. Learn from Harold Paivarinta's wisdom with our unique prompts...



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AN IMPACTFUL CRAFT

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SHOWING SOME LOVE FOR PRODUCE: ATTRACTING FRESH TALENT

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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Peelz® Citrus

?



Learn about this product



PEELZ CARA CARA CAPRESE SALAD

INGREDIENTS

2 Peelz® Cara Cara Oranges
1 (8 oz) log or ball of fresh mozzarella cheese, sliced
Fresh basil leaves
3 tbsp balsamic vinegar
1 tbsp honey
2 tbsp olive oil
Sea salt
Cracked black pepper

Prep Time: 10 mins

Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Peel the Cara Cara Oranges and slice horizontally.
- 2 Layer the orange slices, mozzarella cheese slices, and basil leaves on a serving platter, alternating ingredients between each layer. Sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper.
- 3 In a small bowl, whisk together balsamic vinegar, honey, olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Serve with the dressing on the side or drizzled on top of salad. Enjoy!

To learn more about Peelz® Citrus, visit peelzcitrus.com



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» The IF List «

Nick Hansen

**GSC Director,
Category Management - Produce, Sysco**

With Anne Allen

Life is full of surprises, especially for those who live and breathe fresh produce. But life is also about choosing how you respond to these surprises, and that philosophy has kept Nick Hansen afloat no matter how hectic his schedule gets. With a background in business development and supply chain management, Nick brings a confidence to his role that makes him an ideal candidate for our latest *IF List*...

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

Driven.

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

Chris Pratt.

» IF you had to choose one personal artifact to leave behind after you are gone, what would it be?

I'd leave behind a journal filled with stories, photos, and reflections from all the places I've both lived and traveled. Not just destinations, but the people I met, the lessons I learned, and moments that made me feel most alive. Life is about experiences.

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

Sports management.

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

Kevin James.

» IF you were stranded on a desert island, what three items would you bring?

A desalination kit, a Kindle loaded with every book ever, and a lifetime supply of sunscreen.



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

A lion.

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

A Life of Adventure.

» IF you could make everyone watch a movie of your choosing, which movie would you want them to see?

The Pursuit of Happyness. That movie provides a great perspective on perseverance and hope.

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

Tacos.

» IF you could rename one fruit or vegetable, what would it be called?

The banana. Now, nature's boomerang.

» IF your younger self could see you now, what would surprise them most?

I know more about fruits and vegetables than I ever imagined. \$



Kshama Joshi,
Marketing and
Brand Manager

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

WE CAME, WE SAW, WE COLOURED EVERYTHING.

From an external overhaul to an internal vibrancy in vision, this statement refracts and reflects the journey Gwillimdale Farms' team and brand have undertaken over the past two years. Arcing from a refreshed identity to the recent launch of the company's Arterra™ rainbow carrots, Kshama Joshi and Quinton Woods paint a multidimensional picture that splashes colour on every aspect of the business.

"Our rebrand really served as a catalyst for how we think about innovation. It gave us a stronger, clearer sense of who we are and what we want to bring to market. Since then, every new idea, from packaging design to product development, has been guided by that same brand purpose: delivering quality, freshness, and trust in ways that feel both modern and meaningful," Kshama, Marketing and Brand Manager, outlines.

Quinton, Senior Sales and Plant Operations Manager, fills things in further by sharing

how the rebrand also encouraged more collaboration across departments.

"Our teams are aligned on what the Gwillimdale brand stands for, which means innovation now feels more intentional and more consumer-driven. We're not just launching products; we're launching experiences that reflect our values and respond to what customers care about most—quality, transparency, and convenience," he says.

Thus the canvas was set and the creatives poised for a launch that would perfectly reflect this deep change: Arterra™ rainbow carrots.

"Art," the all-encompassing word for creative expression, combined with the Latin "terra" for "earth." Art of the earth, as Kshama points out, ties beautifully back into Gwillimdale's rebrand and what it stands for: creativity, authenticity, and a deep respect for nature.

"Each carrot colour brings its own unique taste, nutritional profile, and visual personality, turning something simple

into a living canvas of flavour and freshness," she shares. "We partnered with growers and suppliers who share our high standards of quality to ensure consistency in every bag. The end result is something we're incredibly proud of, a true expression of our brand brought to life through colour."

The rainbow carrots make tangible the brightness Gwillimdale has woven throughout its culture and offerings, from its packaging and products to its story as a whole. Each hue, Kshama and Quinton point out, represents something unique: a distinct flavour, nutritional value, even a reflection of Gwillimdale's brand diversity and depth.

And it drives home a broader truth: that fresh is so much more than the browns and greens that have been assigned to the "earthy" colour palette. Brilliant reds, wild yellows, shimmering purples,

and so much more are yielded from the soil and sky around us.

After all, what is more natural than a rainbow?

"Last year, we redefined how people perceive staple vegetables like potatoes and carrots; this year, we're elevating that idea by turning produce into a celebration of colour, taste, and meaning," Kshama says. "It's about showing that even the simplest vegetables can be extraordinary when you grow them with care, creativity, and purpose."

Her statement brings into alignment the benefits



"Last year, we **REDEFINED how people perceive staple vegetables like potatoes and carrots; this year, we're **ELEVATING** that idea by turning produce into a **CELEBRATION** of colour, taste, and meaning."**

- Kshama Joshi

Marketing and Brand Manager, Gwillimdale Farms

of both a sales and marketing perspective, which prompts me to ask about how the project—and the reframe of Gwillimdale's overall strategy as a whole—forged such a partnership.

"The synergy between sales and marketing has truly been the driving force behind our success. Quinton brings an incredible depth of knowledge about the retail landscape and a real understanding of what resonates with customers at the store level. He has this amazing ability to translate brand vision into commercial reality, bridging the gap between creativity and the customer experience," Kshama shares. "Quinton's perspective often pushes me to think about the why behind every creative choice—how a design, a word, or even a colour will connect with the person buying it. And, in turn, marketing brings that emotional storytelling layer that supports sales conversations and builds long-term loyalty."



Quinton further elaborates on the dynamic partnership and how it wove into each point of the new product offering.

"When we developed Arterra™, that collaboration became even more meaningful. From day one, Kshama and I worked hand in hand to ensure every detail—the name, the colour palette, the packaging design—told a cohesive story that would both stand out on shelves and stay true to our brand values. My insight into how shoppers engage with products met with her perspective of our story and brand, and it helped guide everything from display strategy to how we highlight product benefits on the pack," he tells me. "It's been a truly collaborative process between our sales, marketing, and production teams. The idea started from our shared belief that vegetables should be as fun and inspiring as they are nutritious. From there, we worked closely with our retail partners to ensure that everything from the pack design to the in-store presentation reflected our colourful, premium positioning."

If there is anything I have learned of the art of nature, it is that its

beauty often cannot be captured fully on the page, the canvas, or the photograph—some mediums save the moment, but all pale in comparison to the details and textures of witnessing it in person. A moment that will arrive for the first time at the Canadian Produce Marketing Association's (CPMA) Convention and Trade Show.

"CPMA is always an exciting time for us. It's where we get to share our story directly with the industry and showcase how our innovations are shaping what's next in fresh produce. This year feels particularly special because it's the first time we'll be bringing a lot of our new packaging designs and our Arterra™ rainbow carrots to the show floor. Our booth will be a true reflection of the Gwillimdale brand evolution—fresh and full of colour, mirroring the creativity and care that define everything we do," Kshama shares.

Gwillimdale will be highlighting how its refreshed look and product line work hand in hand to communicate quality and authenticity, while also emphasizing convenience and consistency for both consumers and retail partners.

"Beyond Arterra™, we're continuing to invest in product diversification and new initiatives that enhance our offerings and strengthen our position in the market," Quinton elaborates. "We're also exploring new ways to deepen community engagement and food education, helping people, especially kids, understand where it comes from, how it's grown, and why it matters to make healthy, informed choices. Ultimately, our vision remains the same: to keep growing better—for our consumers, our partners, and our brand. This year at CPMA, that vision will be brighter, bolder, and more colourful than ever before."

I cannot think of a better produce exclamation point to this statement than a carrot of a different colour—one which has brought a multitude of facets into one bright execution, with Quinton and Kshama leading in orchestral succinctness.

"With Arterra™, we both wanted to create something that wasn't just a product, but an experience—vibrant, meaningful, and proudly Gwillimdale. It's a great example of how collaboration between sales and marketing, rooted in trust and shared vision, can turn a creative concept into measurable success," Kshama muses, leaving me with a final, integral thought. "It's where our refreshed identity meets innovation in the most colourful way. Strategically, Arterra™ builds on our goal to showcase freshness, quality, and variety in everyday vegetables, while creatively, it allows us to express our brand's vibrancy more boldly than ever."

The point where quality and creativity meet—the story and the idea, inspired by the product—is the spark that catalyzes consumer intrigue. Likewise, Arterra™, from vision to vegetable, has physically realized the intangible changes Gwillimdale began with its rebranding approach.

Modernization with meaning should not be sterile; it should reflect the human experience.

We came, we saw, we coloured everything. 

Libations For All Occasions

ICED BLUEBERRY MATCHA LATTE



By Peggy Packer
Photography by Reid Monsma

I'll be the first to admit I hopped on the matcha bandwagon far too late. After months of seeing the inviting green tea all over social media and on the tables of my local coffee shop, I finally decided to dive in and see what the hype was about.

It only took one sip to know this would be a new go-to order for me, and only two to begin imagining how the already fan-favorite drink could be further elevated with fresh fruit. Deciding which avenue to take was its own adventure, as a simple matcha latte begs for the addition of anything from fresh strawberries to mangos. In fact, a quick Google search resulted in various recipes featuring citrus, bananas, pears, and even figs. All that goes to say,

the current matcha craze may be the next major traffic driver in the produce department.

With February upon us and blueberry season in full swing, this month's libation blends the sweet superfood with the delicious earthiness of matcha in the form of a mouthwateringly sweet latte. While blueberries are the star of this creation, I can see a very similar recipe being applied to a variety of different produce categories.

Consumer trends create momentum at the retail level, and the matcha craze continues to gain steam. If the cards are played right, fresh produce can catch a ride along with it. \$

Here's how to make it...

Prep Time: 5 mins
Cook Time: 10 mins

Servings: 1

INGREDIENTS

BLUEBERRY SYRUP
2 cups fresh blueberries
1/4 cup honey (or more, depending on desired sweetness)

1 tbsp vanilla extract
1/2 lemon, juiced (optional)
1 cup water

MATCHA LATTE
1 package Matcha green tea powder (unsweetened)

1/2 cup milk of choice (oat milk recommended)

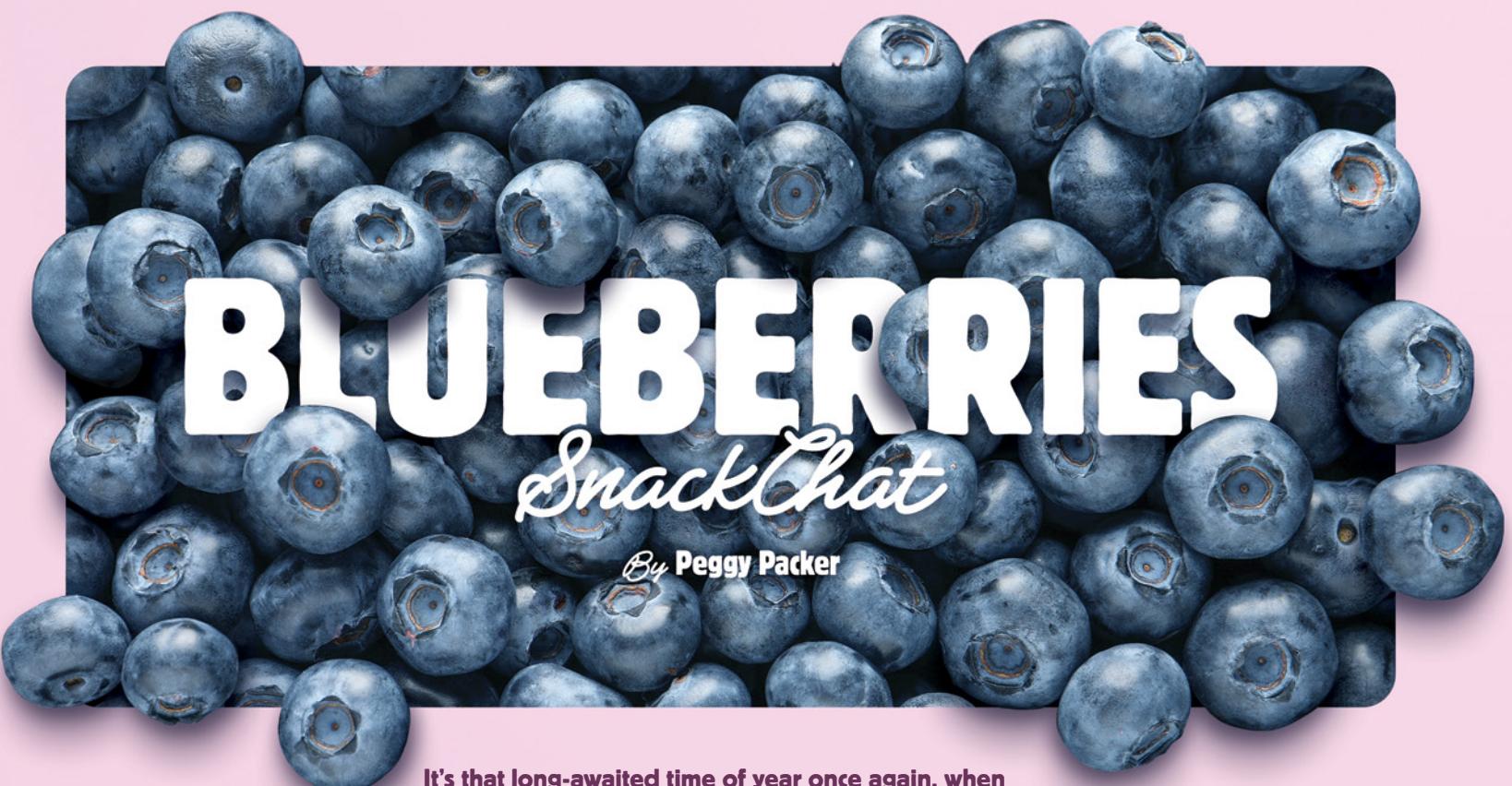
1-3 tbsp homemade blueberry syrup
Cinnamon (optional, for garnish)

DIRECTIONS

- To make the blueberry syrup, add blueberries, honey, and water to a pot and simmer on medium-low heat for 10 minutes.
- Muddle blueberries in the pan. Add lemon juice and vanilla extract before stirring and further crushing the berries.
- Strain the liquid into a sealable bottle or jar and store in the fridge. Allow the syrup to cool for at least 30 minutes. If you prefer your drink with some added texture, you can skip the straining and place the muddled mixture into the fridge to cool. (Syrup can be stored in the fridge for up to one week.)
- Prepare one serving of matcha according to the directions on the package. Set aside.
- Add ice to a tall glass or mason jar. Add 1-3 tbsp of blueberry syrup, depending on your sweetness preference, followed by milk of your choice and the prepared matcha.
- Sprinkle some cinnamon on top, if desired, and enjoy!

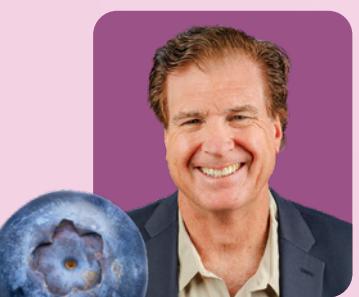
Note: If you're still relishing those final days of winter, make this a cozy indulgence by skipping the ice and preparing your matcha with hot water.





It's that long-awaited time of year once again, when consumers flock to their local produce departments to be met with a vivid sea of fresh blueberries. Deliciously sweet and jam-packed with nutrients, the small superfruit is constantly stirring up waves of demand, and these first few months of 2026 are no different. Calling out to simple snackers and adventurous culinary explorers alike, the category is charting the course for increased berry consumption. Looking to climb aboard and ride the wave? Take some advice from these aficionados and go full steam ahead...

TIM YOUNANS,
Vice President of Sales, California Giant Berry Farms



Blueberries have cemented their status as the ultimate snack, and their increased year-round supply is one factor driving growth. Consumers are drawn to convenience, consistently improved eating quality, and the powerful health benefits this superfruit delivers. This success isn't accidental; it's fueled by dedicated industry-wide investment. At California Giant Berry Farms, we are making significant, strategic moves to enhance the category. This includes heavy investment in improved genetics for better flavor, as well as cutting-edge sorting and packing technology to ensure the highest quality reaches the consumer. This focus on excellence is translating into exciting market trends, like the surging popularity and market share of jumbo and other super-premium packs. These technological investments secure the quality our customers and consumers expect and the profitability needed for sustained growth, keeping the blueberry category dynamic for the long term."



PAUL DRISCOLL,
Director of Business Development, North Bay Produce

"Blueberry innovation is moving faster than ever, delivering a superior eating experience, and driving demand for premium quality. Consumers are becoming more discerning, and expectations are rising. North Bay is ready to meet the challenge. Through diverse global planting initiatives, including the SEKOYA program, we're setting new standards for flavor, yield, and shelf-life—creating wins across the entire supply chain. As a cooperative, our strength lies in diversity and a commitment to sharing knowledge. This collaboration accelerates the development of new varieties to their full potential, faster and with greater consistency. Because consistency in quality isn't just a goal, it's the key to sustaining global growth and keeping blueberries at the center of consumer demand."

MICHELLE DELEISSEGUES,
Senior Vice President of Marketing, Gem-Pak Berries



"Due to their small size and package configurations, blueberries can be easy to overlook in the produce department compared to the larger, brighter fruits—especially during the holidays when creating visual impact is at its peak. Build display height and volume by checkerboarding blueberry displays with other berries. Add incremental sales by placing blueberries in other refrigerated department cases. For example, merchandise blueberries with bagged salads to add flavor and boost nutrition, in the deli department with cheeses for appetizers and cheese boards, and in the bakery for topping cakes and other desserts."



RYAN FRONKE,
Category Manager - Blueberries, Homegrown Organic Farms

"Blueberries continue to shine as a must-have staple in the berry category, driven by year-round availability and exceptional health benefits. Homegrown Organic Farms is positioned to build on this momentum with new plantings and fresh varietals from our domestic crop in 2026 and beyond. We're especially eager to expand our California coastal programs to kick off the domestic season earlier, along with a steady supply of our jumbo blueberries, Mammoth Blues™, from May through August. As an industry, we continue to raise the bar for quality and consistency in every clamshell, ensuring that consumers enjoy the very best, week after week. Coupled with strong retail support highlighting the convenience, snackability, and health benefits of blueberries, we expect to see continued growth in overall consumption."



JIM ROBERTS,
President, Naturipe Farms



"Don't let the February chill fool you—it's still a great time to promote blueberries! Consider advertising the great health benefits of blueberries and the variety they can add to your shoppers' routines. February can bring a winter slump, so blueberries—with their antioxidants, bright color, and naturally sweet flavor—can be a great natural remedy."

The Naturipe Farms team will be heavily promoting Mighty Blues, our jumbo-sized blueberries, ahead of the Super Bowl with our *Go Big!* campaign. These are a great option for retailers who want to offer their customers something a little over-the-top; they can be enjoyed like typically-sized blueberries, with a wow factor you just won't find anywhere else. Shoppers in February will also enjoy exceptionally high-quality berries from Chile, thanks to updated supply chain logistics as well as new blueberry varieties that are bred to deliver improved taste and flavor."





GARLAND REITER, JR.,
Chief Commercial Officer, Driscoll's

"Blueberries continue to be one of the most dynamic categories in fresh produce, and we see tremendous opportunity to elevate the experience. At Driscoll's, our mission is simple: Delight consumers through flavor and quality. That starts with genetics—developing proprietary varieties that deliver exceptional taste—and extends through the entire value chain. Premium offerings like our Sweetest Batch™ blueberries have gained strong traction because shoppers are willing to pay for an elevated product. Great-tasting berries are typically consumed fresh right out of the clamshell; that's why the job of the first clamshell is to sell the next clamshell. It is essential for retailers to create a 'berry destination' in refrigerated cases, cross-merchandising blueberries with the remaining berry patch of strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries. By aligning with retailers on shelf placement and differentiation, we can grow category value together while keeping the consumer at the center."



RYAN HOWARD,
Sales Manager, Family Tree Farms

"Blueberries remain one of the strongest-performing categories in produce, and Family Tree Farms is committed to elevating the experience through flavor-first breeding and premium offerings. Consumer demand remains strong for blueberries that deliver exceptional flavor, firmness, and visual appeal. Our proprietary Jumboz™ program has successfully elevated the eating experience with larger-sized berries that offer a consistently sweet bite and crisp crunch, driving shopper excitement and repeat purchases."



Retailers who position blueberries as a premium snacking item—supported by prominent placement and clear messaging around flavor and quality—are capturing greater shopper engagement and strengthening category performance. In 2026, our commitment remains focused on flavor-first breeding, reliable global supply, and collaborative strategies that support retail partners in building a destination blueberry program. When consumers experience a noticeably better blueberry, they don't view it as a routine purchase—they make it a must-have item in their basket every time they shop."



YASMIN PACIA,
Chief Marketing Officer, Trucco

"A Harvard-affiliated study found that regular blueberry consumption helped slow memory decline in older adults, supporting the idea that this small berry plays a fundamental role in long-term brain health. As brain wellness becomes a bigger part of everyday nutrition choices, shoppers are looking for foods that support cognition, and blueberries fit that space naturally."

For retailers, this creates an easy value story to share: no new routine, no education challenge, just a familiar fruit with a great health benefit. Blueberries already show up in breakfasts, lunch boxes, and quick snacking, which makes the brain health message simple to add in. It's a natural way to speak to wellness-minded shoppers and encourage them to come back for more."



FINDING *Operational* RHYTHM

A Q&A With Chuck Zeutenhorst, FirstFruits Farms

By Chandler James



Bringing together two companies does not have a one-size-fits-all solution."

I am told this by Chuck Zeutenhorst, FirstFruits Farms, as we dive into a conversation exploring the two years of growth since the supplier acquired Applewood Orchards and Applewood Fresh Growers in December of 2023.

He explains how combining companies can be incredibly nuanced at times. I quickly understand that success does not come from a one-track mindset, and the FirstFruits-Applewood team has now found a unique rhythm.



*Chuck Zeutenhorst,
FirstFruits Farms*

1

Chandler James: In the time since the Applewood Fresh acquisition, what have been some of the most significant learning opportunities for FirstFruits Farms?



Chuck Zeutenhorst, FirstFruits Farms: Becoming a multi-regional supplier means learning to see the world through two very different lenses. One of the biggest learning opportunities has come from really understanding the differences, which are truly the strengths, of farming in two distinct regions. Growing in Washington and Michigan differs in climate, timing, pests, and even operational rhythms. This has pushed us to rethink how we plan, forecast, and communicate across teams. We've learned a lot from Applewood's experience in a more variable, four-season climate, and their team has learned from our scale and systems here in Washington. The opportunities come when we use this knowledge to better serve our customers year-round.

We've also learned that integrating two companies is as much about people and culture as it is about orchards and packing lines. Blending decades of traditions, leadership styles, and ways of working doesn't happen overnight. It takes being intentional through listening and respecting what each team does well, finding shared values that can guide the future.

2

CJ: I would imagine it is a pretty formidable team with the combined strength of both companies. What has your multi-regional reach allowed FirstFruits to do in the past two years?

CZ: This opened doors that simply weren't possible before. The combined power of Washington and Michigan has allowed us to serve national accounts in a more strategic way, promoting regional strengths through one unified voice. We can ship like a local supplier while still operating at a national scale. That means smarter freight decisions, cross-dock opportunities, and tailored delivery approaches that lower costs, reduce miles, and ultimately create a better experience for retailers and their customers.

Being multi-regional has also strengthened our varietal strategy. Instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, we can match the right varieties to the right markets based on regional preferences, demographics, and retailer demand. It's helped us expand our offerings through managed variety programs, supported by stronger marketing and a deeper understanding of what consumers in each region want.

Different bloom and harvest windows also help us extend our availability and keep fruit on the shelf longer. When one region faces weather or crop challenges, the other can fill demand without disruption. And there's still so much room to grow and innovate. We learn from every opportunity and every situation that arises as the seasons go on, and it only makes us more confident in the strength of our multi-regional model and the value it brings to our customers.



66 We're incredibly proud of the teams in both Washington and Michigan who make this multi-regional model not just possible, but successful.

3

CJ: As the two companies have grown together, what has surprised you?

CZ: We did our homework, but it would've been naïve to expect zero surprises, especially when you're two companies nearly 2,000 miles apart and rooted in different growing worlds. One of the biggest surprises has been how different the growing and operational cultures are between the two regions. In Michigan, the small independent grower still plays a huge role in the industry, and that perspective influences everything from how farms are managed to how fruit moves through the system. In Washington, the cost of growing has pushed the industry toward larger-scale operations out of necessity. Seeing those differences up close has been eye-opening and it's pushed us to appreciate and learn from two distinct ways of thinking about the same crop.

We have also been noticing where regional loyalties show up in the market. There are customers and consumers who have deep pride in Michigan apples, and others who look specifically for Washington fruit. Being a multi-regional supplier has allowed us to tap into those loyalties instead of competing against them.

The timing of the seasons, the strengths in different varieties, and even the way each team approaches storage or quality all ended up fitting together better than we could have predicted. It's allowed us to offer more consistency and flexibility for our customers than we expected.

4

CJ: As you look toward year three of your combined strength, what do you want the industry to know about this alliance?

CZ: FirstFruits Farms and Applewood Fresh are united under one umbrella: FirstFruits. You'll still see FirstFruits Farms. You'll still see Applewood Fresh. But increasingly, you'll also see FirstFruits used as the collective identity that ties everything together. FirstFruits is the enterprise brand, and FirstFruits Farms and Applewood Fresh are the regional engines that power it. Together, they represent one coordinated team, strategy, and future, expressed in ways that honor the identity of each region.

Above all, it's the people behind these names who make the whole thing work. We're incredibly proud of the teams in both Washington and Michigan who make this multi-regional model not just possible, but successful. It's a group of hardworking, deeply dedicated people who show up every day with the same commitment to quality and service.

...integrating two companies is as much about people and culture as it is about orchards and packing lines.

*Chuck Zeutenhorst,
FirstFruits Farms*



A
Q&A
With

Joseph Bunting

Produce Business Director,
United Supermarkets

32

Lessons in FRESH

BY *Peggy Packer*

Control is something many covet but never fully grasp.

In a world as dynamic as ours—where the moon's gravitational pull governs the tides, in turn influencing the Earth's rotation and determining the cycle of day and night—there are far too many moving pieces beyond our reach.

This is one lesson produce teaches you well. Navigating the push and pull of Mother Nature, the ebb and flow of consumer demand, and the many other challenges unique to this industry is an ongoing lesson in adaptability.

Now in his 33rd year in the grocery industry, Joseph Bunting has certainly mastered this skill.

Decades of expertise, the confidence to embrace new strategies, and a commitment to offering the best shopper experience make the United Supermarkets Produce Business Director one to watch in the retail space.

Strap in for 33 years' worth of industry lessons revealed in one insightful Q&A.

PP: Can you tell us a bit more about your journey? I'd love to know what sparked your interest in fresh produce and what kept you invested.



JB: Produce Business Director, United Supermarkets: I started sacking groceries at United Supermarkets when I was 16 years old, never thinking it would turn into a career.

Eventually, I earned the opportunity to move over to the produce department. Maybe it was the seasonality or the ever-changing aspect, but there was just something about it that drew me in. When I graduated from college with a degree in Ag Business and a degree in Marketing, United was looking for someone they could train to be a Buyer. I was fortunate enough to be selected and moved to Lubbock, Texas. I was a Buyer for 10 years before moving to the Business Manager Role. I was the first Produce Business Manager for the company before transitioning to the Director Role about 11 years ago.

What kept me around all these years were the people and the challenge this job presents. Our business can be very challenging at times due to Mother Nature and so many other factors. To me, that is what makes it fun.



Cooper, Gage, Kaytlyn, and Aimee are incredible sources of support and inspiration for Joseph Bunting

PP: Tell me more about your role as Produce Business Director. What are some of your strategies when it comes to driving department growth?

JB: My role as a Business Director is obviously to hit our financial goals, but also to keep us on trend in the produce department. There have been numerous changes over the years, along with evolutions in the way we do business. There are many times I have to ask myself, "Why are we doing this?" or "What changes should we be making?"

I am not a fan of doing things the same way just because we have always done them that way in the past. Sometimes you have to take risks and try new things. My focus is always on offering the guests what they want, when they want it. If you take care of the guests' needs, the financials will usually take care of themselves.

PP: What are some key attributes you look for in a produce partner? What makes for a strong buyer-supplier relationship?

JB: This business is a relationship business. It is not "if" but "when" you have a problem. When you run into issues, having a great partner makes all the difference. To be a good partner, you have to work together. It can't just be a one-sided equation, because both parties have to make money to stay in business and support each other next year. We treat partners the way we want to be treated and expect the same from them.

PP: What lessons has produce taught you? What are some values you will continue to carry throughout your life?

JB: You are not in control as much as you would like to be. You can have great plans in place, but they can be turned upside down in a hurry with a weather event, trucking issue, packaging problem—you name it. When those things happen, you have to go to plan B. I will say, you get really good at pivoting on the fly.

In addition, I have been fortunate in my career to have worked with many great leaders who have consistently preached the importance of doing the right thing. Honor your word and do what you say you are going to do. It helps build trust and a great partnership.

PP: If you could give the next generation of industry leaders a word of advice, what would you say?

JB: Embrace change and take advantage of the new technologies available to you. Have fun and get involved. It's one of the best industries out there.

Learn to adapt, embrace change, and have fun. These are the lessons we can all take away from a decades-long career like Joseph's.

Cheers to the fresh produce industry for always being our humble teacher. 

WTF

DO I DO WITH
{ what the fork }



SHRIMP AND PEPPER STIR-FRY

INGREDIENTS

3 Topline Farms® Bell Peppers (1 red, 1 yellow, 1 orange), sliced
 1 lb shrimp, peeled and deveined
 2 tbsps olive oil
 1 small onion, sliced
 3 cloves garlic, minced
 1 tbsps fresh ginger, grated
 2 tbsps soy sauce
 1 tbsps oyster sauce
 1/2 tbsps red pepper flakes, optional, for heat
 Salt and pepper, to taste
 Parsley and sesame seeds, for garnish

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 10 mins
Servings: 2-4

DIRECTIONS

- In a large skillet or wok, heat 1 tbsp of olive oil over medium-high heat.
- Add the shrimp and season with a pinch of salt and pepper. Sauté for 2-3 minutes until pink and opaque. Remove from the pan and set aside.
- Add the remaining 1 tbsp of olive oil to the pan. Toss in the bell peppers and onion, stirring frequently for 3-4 minutes until slightly softened but still crisp.
- Stir in the garlic and ginger, cooking for 30 seconds until fragrant.
- In a small bowl, whisk together soy sauce, oyster sauce, and red pepper flakes.
- Return the cooked shrimp to the pan and pour in the sauce. Toss everything together and cook for 2 more minutes, allowing the flavors to blend. Adjust seasoning if needed.
- Finish it off with a sprinkle of chopped parsley and sesame seeds. Enjoy!

Tip: Perfect over jasmine rice, stir-fried noodles, or even in lettuce wraps for a lighter option!

To learn more about Topline Farms®, visit www.toplinefarms.com

Topline Farms®
Bell Peppers

?



▶ MY FAVORITE THINGS ▲

LAUREN WHITE

MARKETING MANAGER,
FOWLER PACKING COMPANY

With Jordan Okumura-Wright

Lauren White has expanded her career at some of the most foundational companies in California's premier agricultural regions—where the roots of fresh produce run deep. To love this industry, and truly thrive in it, is to be grounded, resilient, and deeply connected to the land and the people who grow our food. Lauren embodies all of that and more. Join us as we take a closer look at this dedicated, adventurous individual—and the favorite things that help her thrive...



1 CHARCUTERIE WITH PEELZ® CITRUS AND SAMSONS GRAPES

Better than any sweet treat, and is my version of girl dinner.



2 LAKE TAHOE

Grew up going to Tahoe for the Fourth of July. The fireworks are the best!



3 DOGS

I have two dogs: Ace (German Shepherd) and Miley (Golden Retriever).



4 WAKE SURFING

Great way to escape Fresno's summer heat by enjoying an afternoon on the lake.



5 SALINAS RODEO

My grandfather was President in the 1970s, so attending has been a family tradition for a long time.



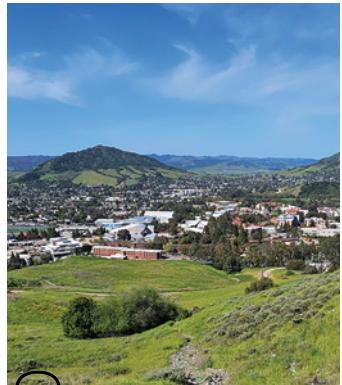
6 FAMILY

My husband Landan and my daughter Bonnie.



7 THE TOAST PODCAST

Daily dose of swirly pop culture for my commute to work.



8 ALMA MATER CAL POLY, SLO

I'm a 3rd generation Mustang, and how could you not love San Luis Obispo, California?

A Golden Age

A Q&A with Heather Hammack, President, Famous Software

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

In an industry eternally rooted at the crossing between antiquated and innovative, I was nothing short of shocked to hear that Famous Software just celebrated 50 years in business. A tech-fueled company forged with fresh produce's needs in mind, proudly boasting a purpose-built ERP platform with over 1,500 installation sites and 20,000 users, feels by definition too modern to be at such a milestone.

But that is its own testament to the Famous brand's consistent relevance. To its commitment and its ability to go beyond current needs into future probabilities. With a level of expertise uncommon in the world of produce-specific software, company President Heather Hammack took some time to walk me through the components that have crafted such an integral industry ally.



Q1

Melissa De Leon Chavez: How do you continue to deepen your understanding of the produce industry and sustain your reputation for quality over five decades?

Heather Hammack, President, Famous Software: Our reputation for reliability and integrity is paramount to our success. There's a culture of service at Famous Software that is unique. Our Founders knew the importance of learning from and listening directly to our customers and industry partners, and while we know a lot about this industry, it takes a level of humility and a growth mindset to continuously evolve to meet its needs.

We've focused on the unique aspects of the produce sector, and that wealth of knowledge, coupled with an unbridled commitment to our customers' success, is how we continue to find our own success while deepening our understanding of the industry. One of the tenets of our reputation is reliability. Not only is the data within our ERP reliable across modules, but our people and promises can be relied upon. We don't make promises we can't deliver. Our customers know that and trust us to help take their businesses to the next level.

1. Stephanie Ramirez, Support Supervisor and 2025 Employee of the Year, with April Macias, Senior Consultant
2. Wayne Holm at a trade show (1995)
3. Kirk Parrish's 25th anniversary
4. John Dietz, Kirk Parrish, Wayne Holm, and Harvey Kuffner at Wayne's retirement party (2002)
5. Famous Software support staff (1997)
6. Famous Software staff (2010)

Q2

MDC: Can you tell me about the unique foundational cross between Founder Wayne Holm's being a 'country kid with a dream and an entrepreneurial spirit?' His background must have had an interesting impact on the company's overall approach.

HH: Wayne's legacy lives on in our daily operations and absolutely drives our company's culture and long-term vision. He was an incredibly unique person who leaned on his agricultural roots and his interest and talents in accounting, alongside the skills he learned in the U.S. Army to create what is today Famous Software. That intersection of service, expertise, and a love of agriculture certainly had and continues to have an impact on what Famous is today.

John Dietz and Harvey Kuffner, who joined the organization shortly after it was founded, also had a profound impact on the trajectory and success of Famous Software. The ambition and humility of these three industry greats created a dynamic that not only had a deep understanding of and empathy for the challenges of the fresh produce industry, but also an intense desire to be of service to their customers with reliable technology that could help foster growth. Today, as we work to serve our customers, that same spirit is present. We also look for those values in new candidates we hire. We recruit from leading ag universities like Cal Poly and Fresno State to bring in graduates with ties to agriculture, fresh produce, accounting, and technology. By attracting top-tier talent, we continue to expand on the legacy of our founding fathers and grow our expertise in the unique areas we serve, combining fresh insights with the historic roots that drive our success.

1. Famous Software exhibiting at Global Fresh Produce & Floral Show (GPFS) 2024
2. Heather Hammack and Carolyn Craft (Director of Support) attending the 2025 Famous Software Annual Holiday Luncheon
3. Famous Holiday Luncheon, 2025—all doing a cheers to 50 years



Q4

MDC: I imagine that contributes to how closely the company ties customer feedback into innovation. Can you tell me more about how that is accomplished?

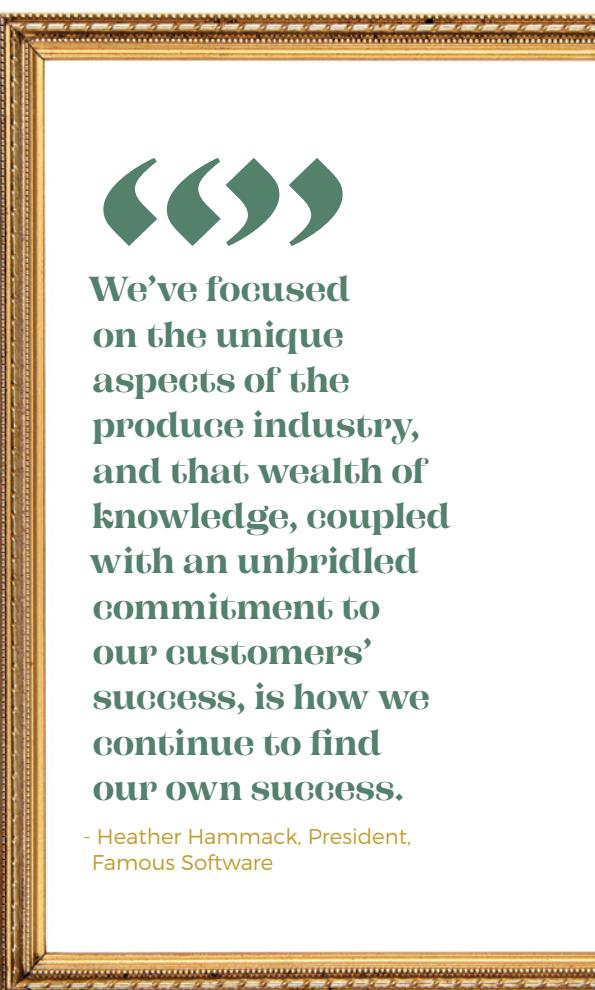
HH: Whether it's through our legendary support team, account maintenance with our sales staff, software update support with our Network Services team, or custom projects with our staff of developers, at every opportunity, we listen to the unique needs of our customers. We then use that information to tailor our new features and enhancements, driving innovation by providing what the industry needs. For example, as we were seeing the enhanced traceability needs coming through legislation and retailer requirements, we initiated a FSMA 204 steering committee with some of our largest customers—Ocean Mist® Farms, Church Brothers Farms, Mucci Farms, Lipman Family Farms, Veg Fresh Farms, and Robinson Fresh. We started meeting with these and other key stakeholders regularly to understand the legislation at a deeper level. We wanted to hear directly from our customers what they were being asked to do by retailers and foodservice operators. Then, we made sure to prioritize those needs in our development roadmaps and quarterly releases to ensure our customers were poised for success.

Q5

MDC: Looking ahead, what key priorities will guide Famous Software into its next 50 years?

HH: At Famous Software, we will always be dedicated to the values our Founders started this company with: reliability, humility, commitment to the industry, customer centricity, and integrity. By staying true to those principles, especially our customer centricity, we will continue to evolve to meet the needs of our customers and the larger industry. Our vision is to be the premier provider of software and services to the produce industry. We will continue to accomplish that vision by leveraging our expertise and dedication to our customers' success.

Whether it's navigating the opportunities of AI, an enhanced regulatory environment, or managing through potential tariffs, Famous Software will always stay true to the foundations of our success—delivering reliable, consistent, and meaningful value to our customers.



Famous' conclusion of its 50th year is not just a golden anniversary, it is a golden opportunity for all ready to lay the bricks that will bridge today's dreams with tomorrow's realizations.

Technological solutions, now more necessary than ever before, must go beyond trends into anticipations. With a product development roadmap so intertwined with its customers, and full of enhancements and features that will continue to provide a competitive advantage, it is clear Famous Software is not just the solution of today—it is the partner of a lifetime. \$





Regional Rockstars

A Q+A With Troy Bland, Chief Executive Officer, Bland Farms®

By Anne Allen

Inothing stirs the blood quite like racing against a clock. Those in fresh produce have adapted to running at a breakneck speed, and it hones a mind ready to turn challenges into solutions.

One such mind is none other than Bland Farms® Troy Bland. The supplier's Chief Executive Officer knew that the recent purchase of a Vidalia® onion facility spelled opportunity, and he and the team immediately went to work so the facility could deliver on a long-anticipated goal of Troy's: a shorter harvest season.

40



AA: First off, walk me through the importance of shrinking the harvest season. How does that differentiate you?

Troy Bland, Chief Executive Officer, Bland

Farms®: Bland Farms' philosophy—and by extension, my philosophy as CEO—is that I trust Mother Nature. Still, I want to take as many variables out of the equation as I can. Getting onions out of the field as soon as possible is the easiest way to do that. That puts us in the driver's seat.

My goal is to control when we harvest. Mother Nature can hold onions a little longer, but not too long. You want to be at the peak of that curve, not on the downward side.

Competitors have worked against us by trying to prolong the season and make later-season varieties a priority. To me, early-season varieties are best because they eliminate the weather factor. April is historically drier than May in southeast Georgia, so the sooner I can get onions out of the ground, the better pack-out I can get, and a better pack-out means a more shelf-stable onion for my retailers.

AA: How does the purchase of this facility tie into this goal?

TB: The Vidalia facility, which we've leased for a number of years, is part of the 1.4 million boxes of onions we store yearly. It will be the largest storage facility in the industry—even bigger than our home site, with the capacity to store over 400,000 bushels. That will bring us to a total of 1.5 million boxes in storage a year.

This increased capacity allows us to be much more efficient in getting our onions out of the field, into a dryer, into a cold room, and into their final resting spot. We're trying to take out the long 'fresh season' of Vidalias—getting them harvested and in storage as soon as possible so we're not dealing with onions that stayed in the fresh season too long.

AA: What technologies or tools do you employ in this facility?

TB: Today, Bland Farms still has more traditional drying rooms than anybody else in the industry, and we have hybrid rooms—which can dry and cool in the same room without moving the onions. Less movement means less jostling.

We're going to use the same technology we've been using at our main farm in Glennville, Georgia, since 2020, which is a secondary cooling system with glycol for a hot loop and a cold loop. We'll be running glycol at



temperatures of 120° F and 28° F. That allows us great temperature variation. It also allows us to control humidity—something we learned from the cannabis industry. We took that knowledge and applied it to onions.

What used to take us almost a month to get onions to temperature now takes about 14 days from plowing to harvest. What used to take four weeks now takes 7–10 days, so we've doubled drying capacity. It is a much more efficient system. Instead of having to use 55 million BTUs of natural gas per hour to dry 120,000 bushels of onions, the new rooms use 3 million BTUs per hour to dry 300,000 bushels.

“Bland Farms® philosophy—and by extension, my philosophy as CEO—is that I trust Mother Nature. Still, I want to take as many variables out of the equation as I can.”

Troy Bland,
Chief Executive Officer, Bland Farms®



AA: Bland Farms also recently replaced its refrigeration system to better increase operational efficiency. Talk to me a little about this move and what it means for the company.

TB: We’re very safe and very knowledgeable about how to use ammonia refrigeration. Ammonia is 30 percent more efficient than a Freon system of the same size.

It’s a smart practice, and it’s more sustainable. At the farm, we took out 77 compressors and replaced them with three. At the Vidalia facility, we’re replacing 30 compressors with four smaller ones, and that’ll be ready for the season. We’ll be up and running in March.



With the purchase of this new facility, Bland Farms® strides toward its goal of shrinking the Vidalia® harvest season

AA: How does the purchase of this facility tie into Bland Farms’ approach to doing business?

TB: Our packing shed is on the cutting edge. The industry tried to automate everything at one point, then realized you need people. I knew enough about our process not to bring in full automation—we didn’t have the checkbook for that anyway. We automated the lowest-hanging fruit using AI to make the packing house what it is today. There is still no other packing house in the U.S. that packs and bags directly off the sizers the way we do.

I would prefer to sell 100 loads of Vidalia onions than 100 loads of Mexican onions because it helps my community. When we sell Vidalias, we’re investing back into the people who make Bland Farms what it is and who put southeast Georgia on the map for sweet onions.

Backed by generational expertise and driven by a desire to perform well in the market, Troy Bland brings a solid strategy to the regional staple that is Bland Farms. \$

» The IF List « Daniel Spivey

**Produce Merchandising Director—Fruit,
Sprouts Farmers Market**

With Jordan Okumura-Wright



For more than a decade, Daniel Spivey’s strategic mind has been integral to Sprouts Farmers Market’s growth, evolution, and refinement of its fresh produce program. As Produce Merchandising Director—Fruit, he now drives operational blueprints that strengthen national purchasing, enhance vendor partnerships, and advance sourcing, merchandising, sales, and retail solutions. Beyond the produce aisle, Daniel brings a philanthropic spirit, with over 15 years dedicated to coaching sports in under-served communities. Where he finds time for a *Snack IF List* remains a mystery—but we’re certainly glad he did...

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

Driven. I’m always looking for ways to better myself, my family, my company, my team, and my peers.

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

Human Biologist/Biohacker. I am fascinated by how the human body works, specifically how diet and deficiencies affect other parts of the body, such as the mind.

» IF you had to choose one personal artifact to leave behind after you are gone, what would it be?

My Bible that my mother gave me when I was five.

» IF you were stranded on a desert island, what three items would you bring?

My wife, a fishing pole, and a satellite phone to call for a pickup when we start missing our kids and grandkids.

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

A bear. Few natural predators, highly intelligent, eat whatever they want, and take long naps.



» IF you could make everyone watch a movie of your choosing, which movie would you want them to see?

The Pursuit of Happyness. A great story about a father not giving up, despite many hardships, to create a better life for himself and his son.

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

Steak, roasted Brussels sprouts and potatoes, and a sweet, juicy white nectarine for dessert.

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

Faith, Family, and Continuous Improvement.

» IF you could rename one fruit or vegetable, what would it be called?

Pineapple, because the name never made sense to me. I would rename it Crownsweet: “Crowned by nature, sweet for all.”

» IF your younger self could see you now, what would surprise them most?

I would have a large and amazing family by the time I was 44. My wife and I are blessed to have four adult children, their spouses, and six grandchildren. Sixteen of us now, with hopes to have 20 within a few more years! \$



Diving consumption lies at the heart of everything we do in fresh produce. It inspires us to invest in the latest technologies, to dig deep into consumer research, and to chase after the coveted dream that one day American shoppers will turn to fruits and vegetables for their mealtime solutions rather than CPG alternatives.

At the center of this fight is Country Sweet Produce and its Bako Sweet® brand.

For several years now, the supplier has utilized the power of its brand to inspire consumers during the month of February, which represents not only National Sweet Potato Month, but National Heart Health Month.



Susan Noritake
DIRECTOR OF SALES, BAKO SWEET®

“Historically, this hasn’t been the time of year that sweet potatoes are on shopping lists,” Susan Noritake, Director of Sales, explains as we dive into how promoting sweet potatoes during February boosts the category. “Building eye-catching displays that inspire and educate shoppers is a winning strategy to inspire increased consumption.”

In order to produce year-round demand, the Bako Sweet brand leans into sweet potatoes as a heart-healthy powerhouse. Packed with fiber to reduce cholesterol, potassium to regulate blood pressure, and antioxidants to combat inflammation and oxidative stress, they’re an ideal substitute for rice, pasta, or white potatoes.

Certified by the American Heart Association’s (AHA) Heart-Check Food Certification Program, Bako Sweet uses the organization’s logo on its packaging to entice and educate consumers.

“The logo resonates with consumers and gives them the confidence to make healthy choices,” Susan adds, also noting that Bako

Sweet helps retailers communicate to shoppers just how heart-healthy its sweet potatoes are through point-of-sale (POS) materials and eye-catching packaging.

Never doubt the value of a household name and a recognizable logo!

To make sweet potatoes a retail destination, Susan encourages buyers to bring enough product to achieve a decent display size and catch shoppers’ attention.

“Pulse in promotions that offer temporary price reductions (TPR) to encourage trial,” she suggests. “We think the display bins are a great way to create more space and catch shoppers’ attention. Be sure to keep displays full for maximum sales opportunity.”



BUILDING EYE-CATCHING DISPLAYS THAT INSPIRE AND EDUCATE SHOPPERS IS A WINNING STRATEGY TO INSPIRE INCREASED CONSUMPTION.

Susan Noritake
DIRECTOR OF SALES, BAKO SWEET®

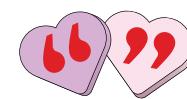


To keep the category even more top of mind during the promotional window of February, Susan tells me value-added solutions are key.

Retailers can further capitalize on this boost by spotlighting the category’s other attributes, like being a good source of potassium and fiber, as well as vitamins A and C. The Bako Sweet website features a recently developed Sweet Potato Facts page, which dives into each of these advantages and more.

“Bako Sweet continues to lead with convenience packs that help shoppers navigate hectic schedules,” she says. “We also partner with recipe creators to find ways to seamlessly incorporate sweet potatoes into everyday meals. Not only are they a super food, but their versatility is amazing. You can use them in everything from savory fare to sweet, and even include them for healthier dessert options.”

Bako Sweet has long used February as a month-long opportunity to educate consumers on the goodness of sweet potatoes, not only because they’re nutritionally



NOT ONLY ARE THEY A SUPER FOOD, BUT THEIR VERSATILITY IS AMAZING. YOU CAN USE THEM IN EVERYTHING FROM SAVORY FARE TO SWEET, AND EVEN INCLUDE THEM FOR HEALTHIER DESSERT OPTIONS.

BAKO SWEET
Organic Orange SWEET POTATOES
Celebrating AMERICAN HEART HEALTH MONTH THIS FEBRUARY
NET WT. 3lb (1.36kg)

CERTIFIED HEART HEALTHY **RICH WITH VITAMIN A** **GOOD SOURCE OF POTASSIUM** **GOOD SOURCE OF VITAMIN C** **CAN LOWER RISK OF HEART DISEASE**

amazing, but because they're versatile. In today's world, where shoppers are looking to make every dollar count, advertising the versatility of the mighty sweet potato is a no-brainer.

Currently, Bako Sweet has a full line of convenient packages, from microwavable singles to microwavable family bags. It also offers 3 lb bags, perfect for families, or 4-count trays for larger and more portion-controlled sizes.

Having run this promotion for a few years now, I ask Susan what trends have driven the popularity of the category—and what she expects to see in 2026.

"Sweet potatoes are on trend to outpace the growth of total produce and potatoes*," Susan emphasizes. "It's very exciting to see younger shoppers making them a pantry staple. Historically, sweet potatoes were enjoyed by the boomer generation. They still are, certainly, but we are now seeing greater purchasing power from millennials and Gen Z. Not only do they love the traditional orange varieties, but we are seeing exploration into red, purple, and white varieties. Each has a unique flavor which lends itself to culinary exploration."

With plans for increased engagement at the store level, Bako Sweet hopes that



Harold Paivarinta

Vice President of Sales and Business Development, Red Sun Farms

Time at Red Sun Farms: 15 years

With Melissa De Leon Chavez

His current role is a significant chapter in the already-dynamic story of Harold Paivarinta's career. With 27 total years in greenhouse sales and a decade in produce retailing before that, there is not much that this industry maven has not encountered from both sides of the proverbial aisle. Yet every time I see him, he has one of the more calming energies in the room—whether that's a small gathering or a trade show floor spanning thousands of people. As such, Harold's perspective is one I will carry with me far beyond this page...

» **How has working in sales influenced or informed the way you live your everyday life?**

"My produce-buying role prepared me for a career in sales because I was exposed to a wide array of folks who sold to me. It was easy to figure out which ones were straight shooters and which ones blew smoke and hot air. The ones that took the time to understand my business and collaborated with me to create sales plans to support my organization's goals were the ones I chose to partner with."

Partnership is a word thrown about far too often. Partnership takes work. For a partnership to be truly successful, all parties must benefit. Give everything you have every day, and you'll enjoy a long and successful career. Live every day like it's audit day, and conduct yourself as though your mother is watching you, and you will quickly build your personal brand."

» **What is one hobby, passion, or talent that the industry may not know about you?**

"Food and travel are tremendous passions of mine. Everywhere I've been, food has played an integral part in the culture. From food carts to fine dining, food connects people. The people you dine with are just as important as what you are eating. Some of the strongest connections I've made in my life were made while enjoying very memorable meals."

» **Who are the important mentors who have guided you or had an influence over you?**

"The Owners and leaders of Red Sun Farms: Jamie Mastronardi, Jim DiMenna, and Carlos Visconti. Carlos, because of his vision and strategic approach to business; Jim and his amazing ability to converse with someone and put them at ease almost instantly; and Jamie, because of his huge heart, work ethic, and ability to get sh!t done. All three gentlemen have been very influential."

Mr. David Sherrod is another individual I admire greatly, as he gave up a successful career in sales to take on the challenge of Chief Executive Officer and President of the Southeast Produce Council (SEPC). His involvement since the formation of SEPC and its explosive growth over the past 11 years is unmatched. He has carefully curated a collection of the best people in the industry to support him as he's led the council to its premier status in our industry. Even more impressive, he's accomplished this feat while staying true to his roots and grounded by his faith. He's remained humble through all the success and deflects praise to others, always."

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

"Make real connections with the best people in our industry. Technology and devices are tremendous tools, but there's no substitute for forging lasting relationships based on trust. Begin building those relationships on day one."

WTF

DO I DO WITH
{ what the fork }

CARA CARA HOT HONEY GOAT CHEESE BITES

INGREDIENTS

2 Sunkist® Cara Cara Oranges, segmented and diced with excess juice strained
 1 puff pastry sheet, thawed
 8 oz goat cheese
 1 strip fresh rosemary, finely chopped
 1 strip fresh thyme, finely chopped
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Drizzle of red chile infused honey

Prep Time: 25 mins
Cook Time: 15 mins
Servings: 24 bites

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 425° F. Cut the puff pastry sheet into 12 equal squares (slice puff pastry into 3 equal-size vertical strips and then 4 rows across). Place each square into a muffin tin with corners up.
- In a bowl, mix the goat cheese, rosemary, thyme, salt, and pepper.
- Place 1 heaping tbsp of goat cheese mixture in the center of each muffin tin. Top with 1 heaping tbsp of Cara Cara, being sure not to add any extra juice. Drizzle the top of the Cara Caras with hot honey.
- Bake for 15 minutes or until golden brown. Let them cool for at least 5 minutes before removing from the pan.
- Garnish with a few thyme leaves. Serve with more hot honey and enjoy!

To learn more about Sunkist Growers, visit www.sunkist.com

Sunkist® Cara Cara
Oranges

?

A Closer Look at Ocean Mist® Farms Rebranded Roastables Line

By Anne Allen

With each passing year, the value-added sector becomes more competitive. Delivering products that satisfy the busy lives of American shoppers is no easy task, but suppliers like Ocean Mist® Farms readily rise to the challenge. Its rebranded Roastables line brings premium, field-fresh vegetables in a convenient, value-added package, all in a packaging format that stands out on-shelf.

The result of strategic investments in marketing initiatives and consumer research, the new Roastables line was developed for time-starved consumers looking for quick and wholesome meal solutions. Now seven items strong, the award-winning line consists of flavor options ranging from zesty herb to sweet sesame.

In the precious few seconds that consumers scan displays, catching their eye with visually enticing packaging is key. Divided in half vertically, the product peeks through beneath words of inspiration—‘Cut the prep, keep the credit,’ reads one; another says ‘Ready when you are.’ With the quick cook time prominently posted on the front, and effortless 4-step directions on the back, anyone picking up the package knows precisely what’s between them and a hearty meal.

The best part? With virtually no prep required, consumers can have a nutritious addition to their meal in just 15-20 minutes. Safe to say that competing at the value-added level has become par for the course for Ocean Mist Farms. 



WTF

DO I DO WITH
{ what the fork }North Carolina
Sweetpotatoes

?



SAVORY SWEETPOTATO RICOTTA BREAKFAST BOWLS

INGREDIENTS

SWEETPOTATOES

2 large North Carolina Sweetpotatoes, chopped into $\frac{1}{2}$ " pieces

1 tbsp olive oil

1/4 tsp garlic powder

1/4 tsp smoked paprika

1/4 tsp salt

1/4 tsp pepper

CHICKEN AND SPINACH MIXTURE

1 tbsp olive oil

1 lb ground chicken

1/4 tsp garlic powder

1/4 tsp smoked paprika

1/4 tsp salt

1/4 tsp pepper

6 oz fresh spinach

BOWLS

1 1/2 cups part-skim ricotta cheese

1 avocado, peeled, pitted, and chopped

4 tsp hot honey (or more to taste)

Prep Time: 15 mins

Cook Time: 30–35 mins

Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 400° F.
- Toss the sweetpotatoes with the olive oil, garlic powder, smoked paprika, salt, and pepper and spread onto a baking sheet. Bake at 400° F for 20–25 minutes, stirring once halfway through, until sweetpotatoes are tender.
- As sweetpotatoes cook, heat olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat and add ground chicken, cooking for 5–10 minutes, stirring until the meat is browned.
- Add the garlic powder, paprika, salt, and pepper to the chicken. Cook for another minute, stirring often.
- Add the spinach to the skillet. Cook for another few minutes, stirring often, until the spinach is wilted and the chicken is fully browned.
- Divide the ricotta, avocado, sweetpotatoes, and chicken/spinach mixture evenly between four bowls.
- Drizzle with hot honey and enjoy!

Learn about this product

Recipe credited to the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission



To learn more about the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission, visit nctsweetpotatoes.com

CALIFORNIA AVOCADO

Snack Chat

By Chandler James

Shoppers will know they have struck green gold once they come across a California avocado display. Beloved for their rich flavor and consistent quality, California avocados are one category that keeps consumers returning to the produce aisle more frequently while they are in season. Experts from the supply-side are armed with insights for retailers to maximize their California avocado sales in 2026. Hear from a few of them in these pages...



JOE NAVA,

Vice President of Sales and Business Development, West Pak Avocado

"We're always excited about California avocado season, as it provides a unique opportunity to offer premium fruit that's locally grown. Retailers can showcase these high-quality avocados—especially popular varieties like Hass, Gems, and Lamb Hass—through the peak months of April, May, and June. West Pak's Farm to Table program is the perfect way to solidify the local aspect for bulk avocados. It starts with customized PLUs that highlight CA and connect consumers with the local grower where the goodness originates. It's no secret that CA produces a beautiful piece of premium fruit, especially during peak months when everything has sized up nicely. We recommend showcasing CA bags—which are gaining popularity year-over-year—and collaborating with California Avocado Commission for the perfect recipe for a successful season. With consumer interest rising across regions, retailers should promote their CA avocado programs now to capitalize on this high-demand season."



CHRISTINA WARD,

Director of Marketing, Westfalia Fruit

"California remains a critical pillar of the United States avocado market, supporting domestic supply with an eating experience shoppers continue to seek out. As the California avocado season gains momentum, we're delivering a strong Good-Better-Best program designed to meet shopper needs across value, quality, and premium tiers. Our approach strengthens supply reliability, elevates ripening standards, and advances quality insights and innovation, ensuring a consistent quality throughout the season. To maximize full-crop utilization and meet growing demand across multiple channels, Westfalia Fruit is further expanding its portfolio with premium avocado oil and other total-crop solutions, giving consumers more versatile, nutrition-forward ways to enjoy the benefits of avocados beyond the fresh category."

KELLEN STAILEY MARTIN,

Vice President of Marketing, Index Fresh

"Index Fresh is ready for a standout California avocado season, with promotable volumes across all sizes and a GEM crop that's roughly 1.5 times larger for our California Crema GEM avocado program. Our extensive California Grower network ensures consistent supply and premium quality, backed by innovative programs to help retailers capture seasonal sales peaks. Our expanding bagged avocado line provides shoppers with the convenience and quality they trust, meeting the rising demand for versatile options. Looking ahead, Index Fresh will continue to grow our California Crema GEM program and introduce new products designed for ease and versatility."



GARY CLEVINGER,

Managing Member, Freska Produce International

"It's always good when California avocados are in season—they bring a freshness and quality that's hard to match. This year's crop has had its ups and downs, but our growers have stayed committed to delivering top-tier fruit. As we wind down the season, we encourage retailers to keep promoting California avocados. Consumers still connect with the local story and appreciate knowing their fruit comes from nearby groves. The flavor, texture, and consistency are all there—now's the time to highlight California and finish the season strong."



GALEN JOHNSON,

Senior Director of Sales, Mission Produce

"California avocado season is always special—the quality of fruit grown right in our backyard is hard to beat. We work with dedicated growers up and down the coast to provide the consistency retailers need, and with our state-of-the-art facility in Oxnard, we can pack and ripen locally so fresher fruit hits shelves faster. For retailers, this is the time to lean into the local story. Shoppers respond to knowing where their food comes from, and California avocados deliver on that authenticity. To make the most of the season, retailers can merchandise different sizes and ripeness stages to help shoppers find exactly what their household needs. For families, our value pack bags are especially popular—I know my four-year-old can't get enough California avocados!"



GARY CALOROSO,

Regional Business Development Director, Giumarra Companies

"We anticipate higher California avocado volumes this season, and our company is well prepared to handle the additional production with our two California packinghouses in Escondido and Ventura. We encourage retail, wholesale, and foodservice partners nationwide—not just those in the West—to actively feature California avocados. Our team supports customers with tailored programs and merchandising solutions. We believe compelling storytelling is essential to building an emotional connection with consumers, and at Giumarra, we're ready to help create that spark so our customers can drive stronger California avocado sales."

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An Impactful Craft

*By Melissa
De Leon Chavez*



Tomorrow is inevitable; whether it is full of promise or not depends on the actions you take today. Rather than a cautionary tale, let me instead share a promise: You can make an incredible difference through incremental steps.

“Effective social responsibility efforts require a continuous improvement journey, and it’s one Stemilt has been on since our founding in 1964,” **West Mathison, President, Stemilt**, assured. “We are further along in that journey in a way that I never would have even thought possible.”



One of the strongest strides Stemilt has made in this formative commitment is also one of the most recent in its five-generation-strong, family-owned and operated history. It started when West first shook hands with the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) in 2016 followed by an alignment of ideas and eventually a pilot in 2019. Some exploration showed an infinite range of potential, and in 2020, the company upheld its legacy as a pioneer in certifying its first ranch in Quincy, Washington. All its owned fields and facilities in Washington followed soon after in 2021, and the pair have only looked forward to endless changemaking.

"We have reduced workplace injuries by 15 percent and have seen some months with zero injuries—that's with 3,000 people coming to work in ag every day," West reflected. "I believe it's a testament to how we have engaged every single one of our Stemilters to manage risk and to develop teamwork and strong communications."

EFI has directly trained more than 100 Stemilters on the Responsibly Grown, Farmworker Assured standards, and worked with Stemilt to certify five internal trainers who lead ongoing training for its workforce. Overall, Stemilt invests 8,000 hours annually toward EFI and continuous improvement.

"Since first earning the Responsibly Grown, Farmworker Assured certification EFI program five years ago, Stemilt and its incredible team have remained



committed to training, development, and process improvement. Over time, I've watched them engage workers and empower them to act in the moments that matter most to safety and quality,"

LeAnne Ruzzamenti, Director, Marketing and Communications for EFI, shared. "They have also been deeply committed to responsible recruitment, working with partners like

Cierto on the ground to ensure workers are treated fairly and properly. It has been a wonder to watch this company rise to meet its mission and produce high-quality team culture and the fruit such a commitment yields."

She went on to explain how many safety improvement initiatives have come directly from workers through the Stemilt/EFI worker-manager collaborative team, including ensuring water was more accessible in the fields; improved transportation safety; packing house improvements, and more.

Each step was an internal observation—a seedling idea that often took a small amount of nurturing to sprout into an impactful move the company can now celebrate and continue to improve upon.

Stemilter engagement rate improved 10 percent from 2022 to 2024, based on annual engagement surveys, with the partnership demonstrating EFI's strength as a worker engagement tool that drives business performance.



"Stemilt isn't just where we come to work; it's where we learn, take risks, drive change, and collaborate with each other. Because so much of our time is spent at work, making that environment supportive and empowering benefits not only our careers but our lives outside the office, field, or packing line as well. EFI helps ensure everyone has the tools and experience to succeed, because a great 9-to-5 leads to the best 5-to-9," West states. "We see our partnership with EFI as a mechanism to bring out the brilliance in our people who are out in the fields and in our processing facilities. The people who are doing the work know what needs to be done, and they often have great ideas for making it better. EFI helps us connect that knowledge and talent with the resources to bring the ideas to life."

With the average tenure of Stemilters employed year-round being 9.3 years, West's reflection on how professional quality of life directly impacts personal quality of life hits home on a mathematical level. Stemilt brings 1,600 workers through the H2A program and has a 96 percent return rate, while local seasonal workers are reported at an 80 percent return rate.



Kevin Boyle, Director of Workforce and Organizational Development for EFI, shared that, in his experience, the rate at which organizations learn in

general is quickly becoming the key sustainable source of competitive advantage. And it is one he feels Stemilt is on the leading edge of, embracing the "leaders teach" adage across all levels of its staff.

"Every person that I have worked with at Stemilt, from the orchards to the headquarters, values relationships. There is a shared core belief that people are the key to high performance, that they are the problem solvers and should be valued," Kevin observed, pointing out that more than \$800,000 has been paid to Stemilt workers as a bonus through the EFI certification program.

But while each individual is a crucial component of greater impact, there is a grander vision at large that West is quick to name.

"Ending poverty through agriculture is my personal mission. Through programs

“ ”

I believe it's a testament to how we have engaged every single one of our Stemilters to manage risk and to develop teamwork and strong communications.

West Mathison, President, Stemilt

like EFI, we're able to bring education and opportunity into the workplace, helping Stemilters grow their skills, shape their own futures, and thrive both on the job and at home," he stated.

EFI's training and Responsibly Grown, Farmworker Assured certification program helps strengthen workers' skills around communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. It also creates a worker-manager collaborative team as a definitive space where ideas can be brought and issues solved—adding an unquantifiable skillset that, much like the work-life balance West observed earlier, cannot help but be taken beyond the workplace into everyday life.

"Stemilt has shown incredible commitment to high standards, not just with its consistently high rate of compliance to EFI's rigorous certification, but with its commitment to the whole human. The team's dedication goes beyond any audit, embracing a truly unique and refreshing approach in agriculture to help workers show up and be their best selves," LeAnne observed.

So, as today winds down, what change does tomorrow hold for you? For Stemilters, it is a dawn of promise entirely of their own making. ☀

Testimonials



Brianna Shales, Director of Marketing, Stemilt

"Bringing EFI into our operations has been essential in training our workforce, especially around soft skills like collaborating to find solutions for problems and holding up ideas for doing things better. The changes might be small in nature, but they add up to build engagement, trust, and overall growth of our company and the growth of our people."



Maggie Torres, Manager of Talent Management, Stemilt

"Through EFI we have embraced a deep culture of continuous improvement. As the season comes to a close, I am focused on how we can do it better next year, and during the season, I am focused on listening to employees to find ways to improve and get better at everything we do."



Bernardo Reyes, Ranch Manager, Stemilt

"When Stemilt started working with EFI, we saw opportunities for workers to express themselves and look for solutions to the problems we couldn't see. Since working with EFI, workers are happier because they are listened to, are free to express their opinions, and help us build a safer workplace."

WTF

DO I DO WITH
{ what the fork }

Bee Sweet Citrus
Royal Red® Oranges ?



ROYAL RED® MARGARITA

INGREDIENTS

2 oz Bee Sweet Citrus Royal Red
Oranges, freshly squeezed

1 oz fresh lime juice

1 oz Cointreau

1 oz simple syrup

1 oz silver tequila

Kosher salt or margarita salt for
the rim of your glass

3 to 5 ice cubes

Optional: Sparkling water,
for topping

Prep Time: 10 mins

Servings: 2

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Place all ingredients in a cocktail shaker and fill with ice. Shake until cold.
- 2 Run the lime around the rim of a glass. Dip the edge of the rim into a plate of salt (or for a festive look, use margarita salt).
- 3 Strain the margarita mix into the glass with the salted rim. Fill the glass with ice, top it with sparkling water (optional), and serve. Enjoy!



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FULL DREAM AHEAD

By Melissa De Leon Chavez



An anniversary is often draped in nostalgia and reflections rather than galvanic nebulas. Yet reaching its 70th year in greenhouse growing has sparked a cataclysmic energy in Del Fresco Pure®, which views the trail behind as motivation to blaze ahead.

“Our heritage isn’t just history—it’s our compass. It reminds us why we started and why quality, care, and integrity matter. But heritage never stops us from looking forward. Seventy years is a milestone that makes you pause and dream,” **Carl Mastronardi, President**, shares. “For us, it goes beyond a celebration of how far we’ve come and becomes a catalyst for imagining what’s next.”

Innovation has become an umbrella term for intentional change—taking control of what is inevitable, shaping it to our will, and building something incredible. For Del Fresco Pure, it is recognizing that time moves onward, and so must the pillars that have held it for seven decades. Ringing out over this all-consuming idea are Carl’s words, “Innovation is also a people story.”

When asking what is next, the answer rarely lies with the result. Whether that is successful sustainability initiatives, stunning new products and packaging, or even a winning strategy, all originate with the people whose ideas planted the seeds.

“Every decision we make is guided by a simple question: How do we grow better—not just produce, but impact, partnerships, and community? Training the next generation of growers and visionaries who will carry our business forward, and working alongside retailers, technology innovators, and industry leaders allows us to grow, adapt, and surprise consumers in ways we couldn’t achieve on our own,” Carl assures me.

Being open to external perspectives is more than just a point of pride for the grower; it is a necessity by which it sees itself able to step outside of the box and beyond expectations.



“Partnerships aren’t just part of what we do—they’re at the heart of everything we do. We thrive on exploring new ways to connect with consumers. Partnerships are a big part of that mindset, allowing us to experiment, innovate, and bring fresh ideas to life,” **Sonia Klinger, Marketing Manager**, explains.



► Fedela Mastronardi, matriarch of Del Fresco Pure®, continues to inspire recipes and product



Reflecting on this impact, one partnership she says truly stands out is with Logan Moffitt, “the Cucumber Guy” who all but single-handedly created a cucumber shortage from the demand by his viewers.

“As our brand ambassador over the past year, Logan has turned the humble cucumber into a viral sensation—and we’re thrilled to continue working with him this year. What makes Logan truly special is the way he connects with people, engaging consumers of all ages. Collaborating with Logan isn’t just about growing better cucumbers—it’s about storytelling, creating experiences, and inspiring the next generation of produce lovers. Partnerships like this fuel innovation, expand our reach, and build meaningful, lasting connections with consumers everywhere,” Sonia says.

“

Seventy years is a milestone that makes you pause and dream.

Carl Mastronardi,
President, Del Fresco Pure®

Just when the story begins to sound like a Hollywood blockbuster-level production, Sonia takes us back to the humble strength of heritage. Specifically, understanding the importance of what is sliced, simmered, baked, and served in the household's heart—the kitchen.

"It all starts with Fedela Mastronardi, our matriarch, who believed that the heart of the home was the kitchen table. She would gather her family together, turning simple ingredients into joyful, memorable meals. Every dish she made carried love, laughter, and the warmth of togetherness," **Jamie D'Alimonte, Chief Executive Officer, comments.**



"We've dedicated ourselves



► Del Fresco Pure® is celebrating 70 years of greenhouse growing thanks to growers, innovators, and influencers



Mastronardi, Vice President of Sales, sums up.

Looking back over 70 years, Del Fresco's journey has been shaped by both bold innovation and a commitment to people from its earliest days. Moments like expanding its greenhouse technology, introducing new varieties, and building lasting retail partnerships have all defined its company culture and brand identity. But what truly stands out, Ray shares, are the small, human moments.

"The growers innovating on the greenhouse floor, our team problem-solving in real time, and the shared excitement when a new idea takes root...those moments continue to define us today. Embracing controlled environment

to more than growing produce—we've nurtured flavor, nutrition, and innovation, always putting people first."

Carrying Fedela's spirit forward, Sonia tells me it is the matriarch's recipes that inspire Del Fresco Pure's gourmet greenhouse-grown produce to this day. Her values—family, care, and a passion for fresh, wholesome food—guide everything the company does.

"Every cucumber, tomato, pepper, and specialty item reflects her legacy and our promise: to deliver quality, passion, and fresh taste in every bite," Jamie says.

Yes, Del Fresco Pure is thinking big about current demands like sustainability, from renewable energy and smarter water management to reducing its carbon footprint across operations, and it is exploring new technology, refining growing methods, and continuously reimagining what fresh produce can offer consumers. But it is doing so without ever losing sight of the principles that built the company.

"We balance the two by staying curious, experimenting boldly, and trusting our people to innovate. Quality. Passion. Fresh taste. Always, from our family to yours. It is our North Star," **Ray**



Mastronardi, Vice President of Sales, sums up.



agriculture was a leap into the unknown, but it allowed us to deliver fresh, high-quality produce year-round—a promise we've kept ever since," he observes.

Over the last four of the company's seven decades, Jamie and Carl have guided Del Fresco Pure with vision and heart. They expanded greenhouses, scaled operations across North America, and preserved the family values that have always defined the company: quality, passion, and freshness in every bite.

"Today, every tomato, cucumber, and specialty item reflects more than innovation—it reflects a legacy. A legacy of family, of love for the land, and of devotion to the people who bring our produce to life on their tables," Carl comments. "We grow with purpose, and we grow with passion."

A journey that began in 1956 with a humble quarter-acre farm and greenhouse has evolved from traditional growing in greenhouses and outdoors into the realization of a dream.

"Every seed we planted carried a simple promise: to bring fresh, wholesome food to our community. In 1984, we embraced hydroponic growing, a bold step that allowed us to protect every harvest, maintain the cold chain, and deliver the freshest, most flavourful produce possible. It was innovation rooted in care—care for the plants, care for the people who eat them, and care for the future of our farm," Jamie states, closing with a promise. "While it may look different as we evolve, that is still what we do every day. We always have something up our sleeves—so keep an eye out for what's coming next!"

“

Every cucumber, tomato, pepper, and specialty item reflects [Fedela Mastronardi's] legacy and our promise: to deliver quality, passion, and fresh taste in every bite.

Jamie D'Alimonte,
Chief Executive Officer, Del Fresco Pure®

Growers, innovators, influencers. All are critical pieces that guide a brand toward its evolving destiny. Their

dedication, creativity, and passion are what have assured Del Fresco Pure has thrived for 70 years, lighting a path for others to follow.

The destination? The future of fresh produce.

A Closer Look At Church Brothers Farms Little Gems Salad Kits

By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Food somehow tastes better when made by someone else. This little idiom's tallest tower is the restaurant table, where you trust someone behind the kitchen door to know far more than you about maximizing the potential of each ingredient.

Pack that image up to go, put it on a grocery shelf, and you have Church Brothers Farms Little Gems salad kits.

Standing in its strongly established foodservice footprint, the grower is bringing what it has learned from restaurant demand to retail offerings with the wisdom that food trends often begin on a menu. While there is a healthy mix of tradition found in available flavors like Caesar, there are also exciting new spins like Creamy Chipotle, Champagne, and—my kind of flavor profile—Miso Ginger.

Each kit features whole-leaf Little Gem lettuce, dressings made with avocado oil, and smaller proportioned 8.5 oz bags to reduce food waste. On the back of the pack is a “Boost Your Plate” protein call-out spreading further inspiration.

And Church is expanding the salad category's reach not just in the ingredients, but the structure and presentation of its kits. Looking to tap both the consumers already ordering Gem-based salads as well as those looking to shake up their salad experience, the kits stand out on the shelf by bringing a beige bag that offers contrast to the value-added section.

For shoppers who want restaurant expertise packed and prepped for them to bring home, this new line is one ready to pick up the check. 

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GOOD *by* DESIGN

By Peggy Packer

Allow me to take you back to 1976...

Surrounded by the daily hustle and bustle of the Los Angeles Produce Market and the surrounding city, an ambitious team of five occupies a small office, each busily taking phone calls or sifting through the paperwork of their latest deal. The faintest sound of a pinball machine can be heard as one employee decompresses from a busy afternoon in the break room next door. At one desk sits Allen Lund, Founder of the Allen Lund Company (ALC), contemplatively mapping out the newly founded transportation broker's next growth play. Just a few feet away, Co-Founder Kathie Lund methodically sorts through a massive stack of papers, overseeing all of the company's finance and accounting operations. Neither are aware that they sit at the beginning of a 50-year legacy, with each hour of hard work laying another brick in the foundation of an operation that would

one day see over \$1 billion in annual revenue.

“Starting a business on your own is dangerous, but it’s also exciting,” Kathie Lund shares, remembering the early days of the business when she served as a one-woman finance, marketing, HR, and accounting department. “I never doubted Allen’s expertise in taking care of customers and getting things done. He had a gift for it, and he realized how important it is to help people and teach them how to do the right thing.”

Upon his passing in 2018, Allen left behind a financially strong and well-organized operation.

Today, the ALC network spans over 40 offices across the United States, Canada, and India, significantly elevating the company’s ability to support its partners

with premium transportation and logistics services. Allen’s sons—David, Kenny, and Eddie—now serve in executive leadership positions, each having worked on the brokerage desk and developed a deep understanding of the business, inside and out. Additionally, the Co-Founders’ son-in-law, Steve Doerfler, has also risen through the ranks from broker to company Chief Financial Officer.

While the operation has evolved rapidly alongside the produce industry, Allen Lund Company’s success today is a testament to the values instilled by Allen Lund himself, upheld by the generation of leaders who oversee its offices today.

“Going from one office to more than 40 sales offices, things have certainly changed,” reflects Eddie Lund, President. “But really, the main cornerstones of

“Starting a business on your own is dangerous, but it’s also exciting. I never doubted Allen’s expertise in taking care of customers and getting things done. He had a gift for it, and he realized how important it is to help people and teach them how to do the right thing.”

Kathie Lund, Co-Founder, Allen Lund Company

the company—doing business with integrity, honoring your word, having a great benefits package—have been upheld through all these years. When you’re a service business, you don’t have a tangible product you can rely on. It’s your people providing the service that is your product. Our commitment to taking care of our employees is something that hasn’t changed in the past 50 years.”

Applied to both its employees and its partners, this focus on building trust and fostering strong relationships has been a cornerstone of the company’s approach since its founding in 1976.

“Dad’s intention at the beginning was, ‘My name is on the building, the invoice, and the check, so we’re going to do things the right way.’ We call that the Lund way,” Eddie recounts. “Those are the values we uphold every day: trust, integrity, and doing the right thing every single time. Those are the things we’ve learned from Mom and Dad and that we aim to keep instilling in people today.”

In addition to its commitment to being a transportation broker its partners can trust, ALC extends its people-first mindset to the many employees who help fuel its day-to-day success. From annual celebrations to encouragement through life milestones and even dinners at Kathie’s house, the organization is dedicated to creating a welcoming company culture.

“Every office has a fun little place where you can go and throw a dart, play ping pong, or enjoy some kind of stress reliever,” Kathie explains, highlighting another way the company prioritizes the happiness and success of

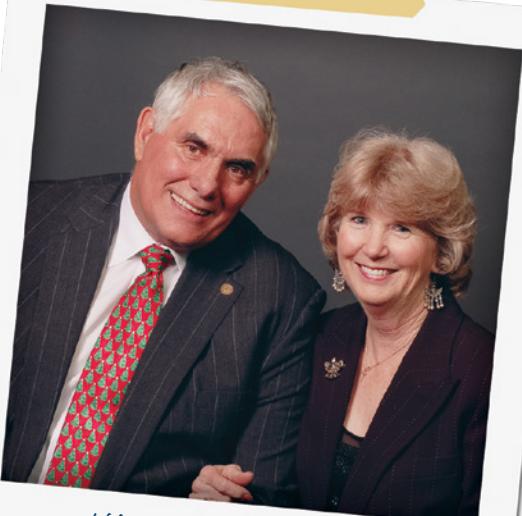
its employees. “Back in the first office, we had a couple of pinball machines. Sometimes, you just need a break from the daily phone calls and a breath of fresh air.”

From its culture to its business operations, the Allen Lund Company succeeds by upholding the values that have cemented it as a mainstay in the transportation and logistics arena.

“I don’t think a lot has changed regarding how we do business. The modes of communication may have changed, but the nuts and bolts of the business are very similar,” Eddie explains. “Technology has always been a useful tool to help that communication, but the relationship, in the end, is the most important. Multiple technological platforms have emerged—from the .com era to the latest developments in AI—and the established brokerages are still here. I think that’s because people want to do business with those they like and trust, and that’s what we aim to prove every day.”

Further elevating the Allen Lund Company as an industry leader is its constant innovation in the transportation and logistics landscape. Supported by its in-house IT department, the company continues to secure technological advantages, increasing its capabilities and bolstering its position as an industry leader. One prime example of this is AlchemyTMS, ALC’s proprietary transportation management system.

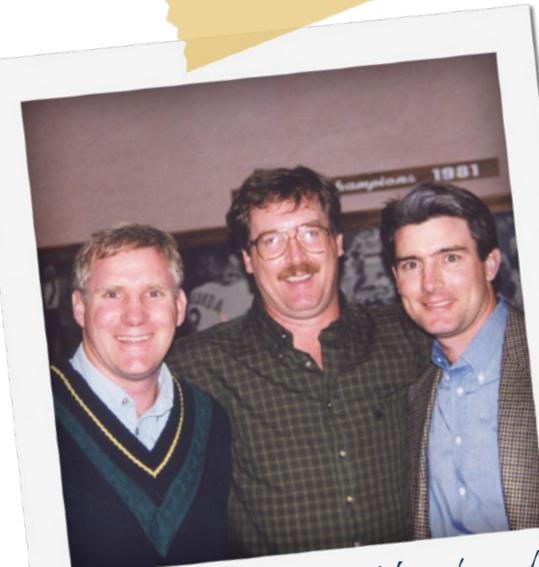
“You’ve got to be on the leading edge with technology,” Eddie notes, looking back over five decades of industry evolution. “You have to be able to communicate with carriers and shippers in the way that they want to communicate. Dad was actually quite a geek, and he stayed on top of the latest technology, even beta-testing several industry developments. He always put a lot of pressure on the group to stay in front. At the same time, what we’re doing isn’t rocket science, so our competitive edge stems from those same values. If you’re honest, pay a fair rate, and communicate well, people are going to want to do business with you.”



Allen and Kathie Lund



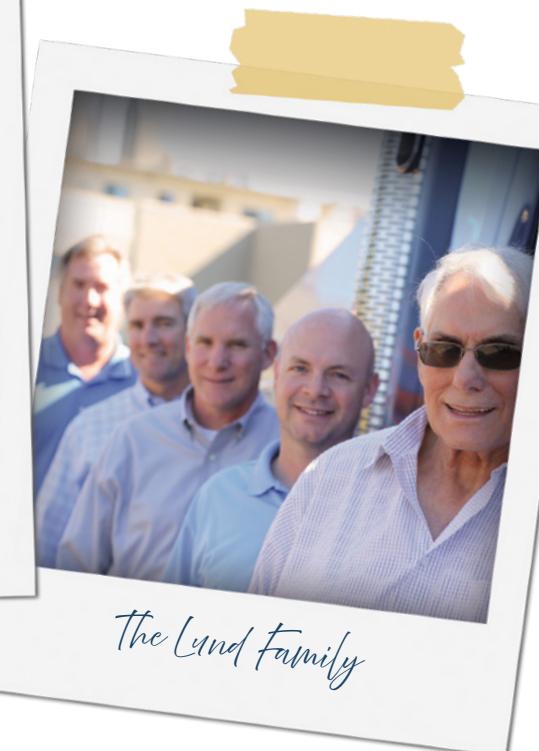
Allen Lund



Kenny Lund, David Lund, and Eddie Lund



The Lund Family



The Lund Family

Supported by these central pillars, ALC has continued to extend its geographical footprint, establishing offices in key regions to accelerate its growth. As it lays out its blueprint for 2026 and beyond, the company plans to further build on this deliberate approach.

“From a growth standpoint, we’re very conservative,” Eddie adds. “We were taught that if you can’t pay cash for something, you can’t afford it. Looking ahead, our growth will be thoughtful and strategic. We’re going to grow steadily, and we’re going to do it in a smart way that won’t jeopardize what we’ve built in the past. We’re also going to find more great people to join our organization and make it even better.”

It is these successful growth strategies that have paved the way for the ALC of today, resulting in an established operation upheld by five decades of industry expertise.

“Fifty years is an incredible milestone,” Eddie continues. “I think it is a testament to the business model we’ve built and the culture we have created. What was built back in the 1970s was truly special, and for Dad to have had the intuition to create something that would withstand the test of time is pretty remarkable. We plan to keep pushing that forward for the next 50 years, emphasizing our role as a dependable partner that you can always count on.”

“What was built back in the 1970s was truly special, and for Dad to have had the intuition to create something that would withstand the test of time is pretty remarkable. We plan to keep pushing that forward for the next 50 years, emphasizing our role as a dependable partner that you can always count on.”

Eddie Lund, President, Allen Lund Company

But before the company officially sets out on its next 50-year run, there are celebrations to be had. Allen Lund Company has several exciting plans in place for its 50th anniversary, ensuring employees across the provider’s 25-state network can participate in the festivities.

Marking another exciting milestone, ALC also recently announced the release of *Be Good: The Allen Lund Story*, a book that tells the story of Allen Lund, his family, and how he built the Allen Lund Company into a thriving business.

“When you start a company on your own, do you ever expect to see decades of growth or \$1 billion in revenue?” Kathie asks as we close out this trip down memory lane. “I always knew Allen would do a good job, and we’d make a living. Neither one of us imagined it

would get as big as it is now. We’ve learned a great deal along the way, and although we now have many more employees, it remains a family business. We’re still focused on doing a good job, picking the right people to work at ALC, and being a company our partners can trust.”

Fifty years and over \$1 billion later, the Allen Lund Company remains, in many ways, the same as it was when it was founded in the ’70s. Treating its employees like family and serving as a reliable partner during even the most unpredictable times has cemented the company’s legacy.

A legacy that began with only one office, a few employees, and an unshakable vow to always work hard and be good. ☺



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WTF

DO I DO WITH Sweettreats® Peppers ? { what the fork }



HEART-SHAPED GREEK PIZZA

INGREDIENTS

6 Del Fresco Pure® Sweettreats® Peppers, seeded and sliced into rounds
½ lb (225 g) lean ground beef
1 onion, thinly sliced
1 tbsps chili powder
½ tsp ground cumin
1 tbsps (15 ml) olive oil
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
¼ tsp red pepper flakes
4 thick or Greek-style pitas or naan bread
1 cup (250 ml) plain Greek yogurt
1 lemon, zest finely grated
1 tbsps (15 ml) lemon juice
2 tbsps flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped

Prep Time: 15 mins
Cook Time: 15 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- With the rack in the middle position, preheat the oven to 400° F (200° C).
- In a large skillet over medium-high heat, cook the meat in oil for 4 minutes, breaking it up with a wooden spoon, until starting to brown. Add the sliced Sweettreats®, onions, chili powder, and ground cumin. Continue to cook for 5 minutes or until the vegetables are tender, stirring a few times. Season with salt and pepper. Keep warm.
- Cut pitas or flatbread in heart shapes using a cookie cutter. In a small bowl, combine the oil, garlic, and red pepper flakes. Lay the pitas out on a non-stick or parchment paper-lined baking sheet. Using a pastry brush, cover the pitas with the oil mixture. Bake for 6 minutes.
- Meanwhile, in the same bowl used to make the oil mixture, combine the yogurt, lemon zest, and juice. Season with salt and pepper.
- Spread the yogurt mixture over the pitas. Top with the beef mixture and garnish with the parsley. Enjoy!

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CMI orchards



Eating Happy

Produce Pulse

By Chandler James

As society continues to evolve, conversations surrounding mental health have gained a greater platform. Recent statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health Disorders state that an estimated 26 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year*.

In an industry that produces some of the healthiest food in the world, we would be remiss not to consider consumers' mental well-being when fueling their bodies. We all know the health benefits of fruits and vegetables, but while many call out heart-health, immunity, gut-health, and more, I've noticed a lack of language used to describe the mind-boosting power of produce. How can we improve that?

The first thing to understand is what your fresh offerings can do to power the brain and promote mental wellness. Piedmont outlines how essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants can be found in many fresh produce items**.

Folate, for example, makes leafy greens a powerful ingredient to boost brain function by supporting neurotransmitter production. Vitamin C—which we know is abundant in items like citrus and bell peppers—can help to combat stress and reduce cortisol levels. Another essential brain booster, magnesium, promotes relaxation and improved sleep and can be found in produce aisle staples like spinach and bananas.

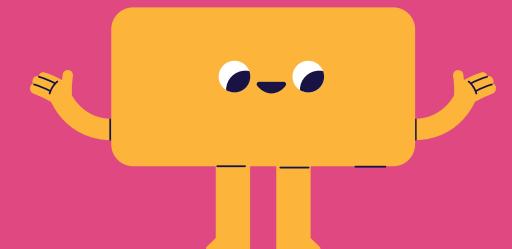
Piedmont also states that anti-inflammatory foods such as berries and ginger can promote mental health**. The source notes that chronic inflammation has been linked to depression and other mental health disorders, making these ingredients essential in fighting such illnesses.

A helpful tool in communicating these health benefits to consumers is to remind them that the more (natural) colors they eat, the more nutrients their bodies—and brains—will receive. In Jordan Okumura-Wright's 2023 piece, *A Place for Health and Play*, she writes how this strategy gives shoppers a sense of whimsy when adding produce to their cart.

To all our supply- and buy-side friends, I challenge you to put mental health benefits front and center in your consumer messaging. Utilize colorful, engaging marketing materials and in-store signage that highlight how spinach can promote a sense of zen, or how citrus can help them maintain a level head amid increasingly busy schedules. Trust me, your shoppers will thank you. \$

"In an industry that produces some of the healthiest food in the world, we would be remiss not to consider consumers' mental well-being when fueling their bodies."

- Chandler James

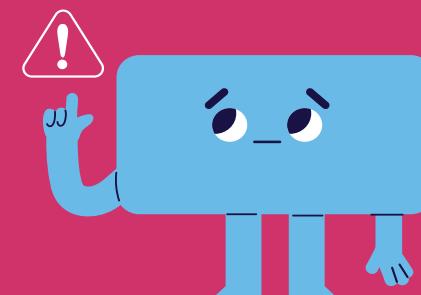


Plant-Based: YES!**

Folates:
Leafy greens, legumes

Vitamin C:
Citrus, bell peppers

Magnesium:
Nuts and seeds



Artificial: NO!**

Processed Foods:
Chips, frozen meals

Sugary drinks:
Sodas, sweetened juices

Saturated Fats:
Red meats, processed meats

SHOWING SOME LOVE FOR PRODUCE: Attracting Fresh Talent

By Editorial Contributor Julie Marcik, President, Joe Produce SearchSM

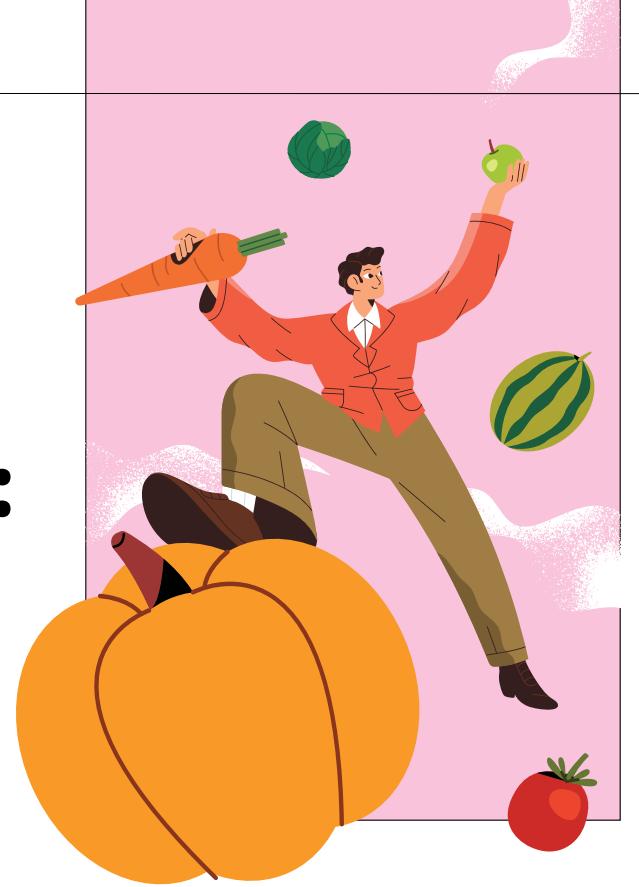
We talk a lot within our industry about how much we love produce—the growers, the brands, the products, the people. Part of “showing the love” now is making sure we share that enthusiasm with the next generation and invite them into the story. The produce industry is at an important crossroads, with many experienced professionals nearing retirement and a growing need to develop the next generation of leaders. Our client companies deeply value the strength, wisdom, and stability of their more seasoned team members, while also recognizing the importance of bringing in fresh talent and perspectives.

There's a strong focus on attracting young people entering the workforce and offering the purpose, flexibility, growth, and culture they're looking for. Companies are rethinking how they present career paths, work environments, and development opportunities to better align with what younger professionals value. As a whole, our industry has a lot to be proud of, and we should be ready—and eager—to clearly share why a young person should consider building a long-term, rewarding career in produce.

Here are seven key points to highlight when engaging the next generation of talent:

1. A Meaningful Impact

You're helping feed people healthy, fresh food, and you can literally see the results in stores, restaurants, and communities. At the same time, you're on the front line of big sustainability issues—soil health, water use, food waste, and carbon footprints—so it's a way to make a real difference for the planet.



2. Exciting, Future-Focused Careers

The produce industry offers a wide range of career paths—farming, food safety, logistics, sales, marketing, data, and more. There's a place for almost any interest or skill set, with plenty of room to move up quickly. It's also increasingly tech-forward, using tools like drones, sensors, data dashboards, and e-commerce for fresh foods, making it a great fit for digital-native young people.

3. Global Connections and Community

The produce industry is both deeply global and tightly knit. You work across borders—imports, exports, and seasonal sourcing around the world—with chances to travel and collaborate with people from many cultures and markets. It's ideal for those who enjoy languages, international business, and cultural exchange. It's a very relationship-driven industry where you can build long-term networks, feel part of a strong local or regional community, and benefit from mentors who are genuinely invested in the next generation.



4. Never a Dull Moment

This life is fast-paced and never boring. Because produce is perishable, things move quickly. There are tight deadlines, last-minute changes, along with a constant need for problem-solving—perfect for people who hate monotony and enjoy a high-energy, always-changing work environment.



5. Enjoyable Lifestyle with Skills for Life

You can build a lifestyle you actually enjoy—whether that's working outdoors in farms and growing regions or staying closer to the food side, engaging with cooking, nutrition, and products you're proud to see in supermarkets and restaurants. Along the way, you build powerful, transferable skills: negotiation, customer service, supply chain and project management, data literacy, forecasting, teamwork, and leadership in fast-paced environments.

Julie Marcik leads the JOE Produce SearchSM team, leveraging more than 20 years of experience in executive search. Produce is not a job, it's a lifestyle. Once you “check the boxes” on skills and experience, the real job becomes matching the people with the culture of the business and leadership. This takes time, expertise, and a robust process Julie and the JOE Produce SearchSM team know well. JOE Produce SearchSM is composed of experienced search consultants and produce professionals. Placements range from middle management to C-level positions throughout North America, covering a wide range of produce and produce-related businesses.

6. Rooted in Tradition and Growing Together

Many produce companies have deep roots, rich traditions, and great origin stories. They're often multi-generational businesses where older leaders have a lot of wisdom to share, with many opportunities for them to learn from younger people's fresh ideas, tech skills, and new perspectives. It's a space where generations learn from each other and grow together.

7. Recession-Resilient Work

People need to eat no matter what the economy is doing, which means demand for fresh produce never really goes away. Individual companies or segments can feel ups and downs, but the industry as a whole is more stable than many “nice-to-have” sectors because fruits and vegetables are essentials, not luxuries. For young people, that can mean better job security, steady opportunities, and a career in a field that's likely to be around—and hiring—for the long-term.

Fresh produce isn't just a category on the shelf—it's an essential, vibrant, and constantly evolving part of people's lives. For young people who want purpose, growth, stability, and a chance to make a real difference, our industry has an incredible story to tell.

As companies, we need to keep telling that story clearly and often—in job descriptions, on our websites, at career fairs, on social media, and in conversations with schools and communities. When we highlight the impact, innovation, people, and opportunities that define the produce world, we're not just filling jobs—we're showing love for the industry that feeds us and inviting the next generation to love it too.

The talent is out there. The opportunity is here. Let's keep showing love for produce and make sure the next wave of leaders knows just how rewarding it can be to grow their future in our industry. \$



Julie Marcik,
President

JOE Produce SearchSM

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