

Bite-Sized Info for the Produce Industry

the **SNACK**

ISSUE 102 APR 2026

FORWARD
with **PURPOSE**

David and Deborah Lake,
4Earth Farms™ PG 60

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LATELY, I'VE BEEN SITTING WITH THE CONCEPT OF SURVIVAL—WHERE IT SHOWS UP IN OUR INDUSTRY, HOW OFTEN IT'S INVOKED, AND WHAT IT REALLY ASKS OF US.

The idea came from a story I was reading that posed a simple question: Does the survival of one require the defeat of another? It's a question that feels especially relevant in fresh produce, though I suspect it applies to many industries navigating pressure from all sides.

When margins tighten, and stakes rise, it's easy for the dynamic between product and shelf, retailer and supplier, to slip into something more adversarial than collaborative. Everyone is fighting to survive—but that framing assumes survival is a zero-sum game.

What if it isn't? What if survival, in this industry, is actually most sustainable when it's shared? The companies that are thriving already know this.

What I'm really talking about here is the relationship between what are often perceived as opposing sides of the supply chain. Growers, shippers, and suppliers on one end. Retailers and foodservice buyers on the other. The tension is real, and it's not imagined—but neither is the opportunity. These sides are not meant to cancel each other out. They are meant to rely on one another. When partnership replaces posture, the wins start to be about how the entire system holds.



The drive for collaboration in our industry is strong. I hear it constantly—in conversations, in panels, in quiet admissions behind closed doors. Companies are choosing to come together instead of going it alone. Sharing ideas, risk, and responsibility in an effort to strengthen fresh produce in a sea of food competitors, all vying for attention, space, and dollars.

The endgame is bigger than any single company, category, or contract.

If survival is the goal—and it is—then perhaps the better question is how do we survive. The only way we move this conversation forward is by having it at all. By acknowledging the tension without letting it define us. By choosing a partnership where competition once felt like the default.

Because survival doesn't have to mean someone else's defeat. It can mean mutual resilience—and a stronger future for fresh produce as a whole. 🍎

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

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FEATURES

KINGS RIVER PACKING BUILT TO LAST

This Q&A with Vice President of Marketing Michelle Alo ventures back to the beginning of the company's history in the mid-1800s, while providing a closer look at the values driving its growth today...



SOBEYS THE IF LIST

When Yan Branco isn't pushing for innovation in the controlled environment agriculture (CEA) space, the Director channels his energy into change-making...



TOPLINE FARMS® CALCULATED SUCCESS

Dino DiLaudo and Justine Taylor map out the goals of the company's deliberate growth strategy, showcasing all of the qualities that make the greenhouse grower a well-rounded supply-side partner...



H-E-B THE IF LIST

Colin Ager, Business Development Manager for Produce Procurement, offers insight into his role, lifestyle, and more in this exclusive...



OCEAN MIST® FARMS CONVENIENCE WITHOUT COMPROMISE

A game-changing rebrand elevates this first-to-market line of time-saving products. Chris Drew explains how the strategic move targets value-added success and increased visibility at the retail level...



WEST PAK AVOCADO LEADING THE PAK

In order to capture the ever-growing market demand for organic avocados, the supplier wields a series of strategic moves. Chief Executive Officer Mario Pacheco details what this means for the company's success in 2026 and beyond...



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A LITTLE CITRUS FOR YOU TO PULL APART
SO YOU DON'T FALL APART

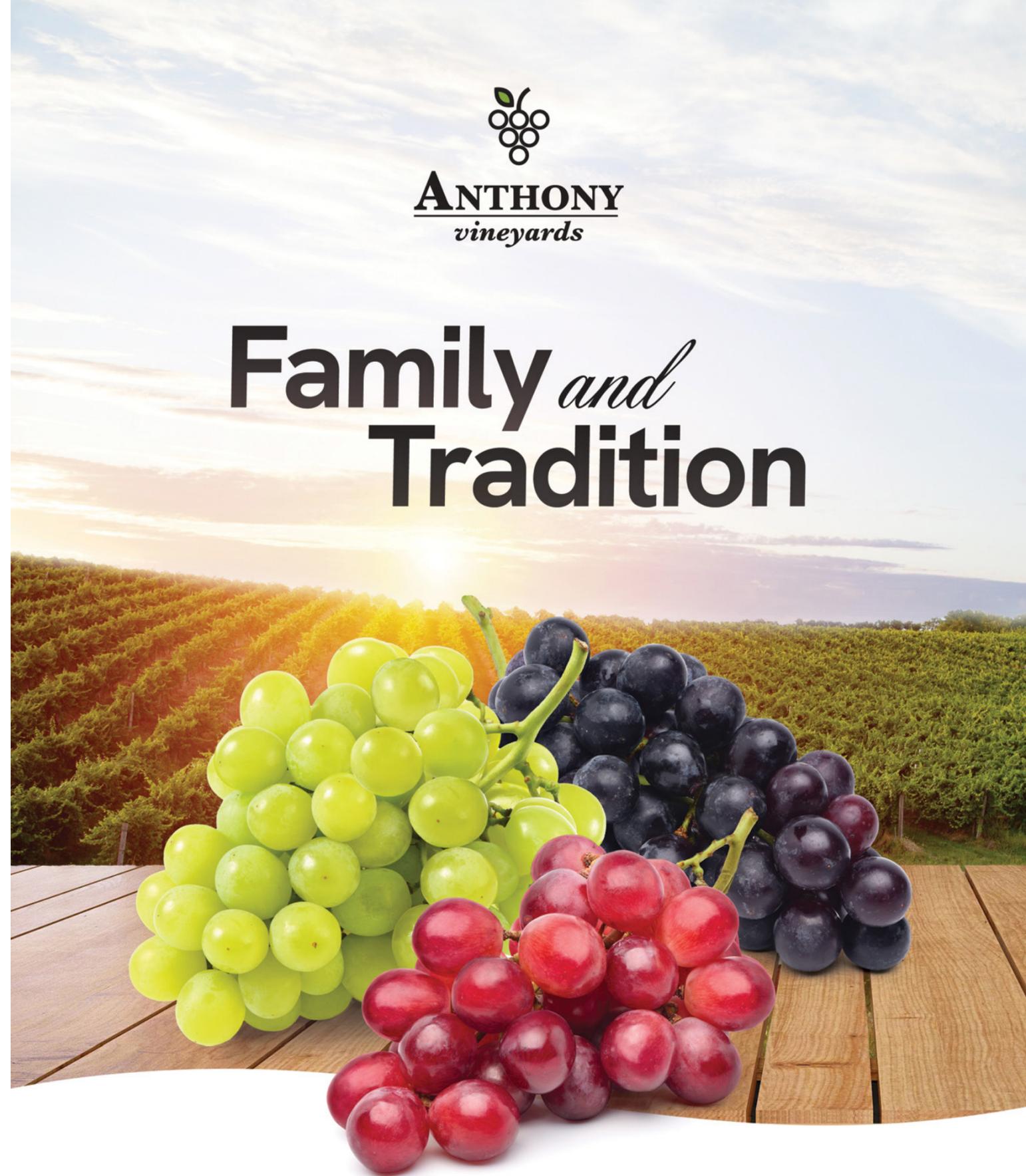
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Here at *The Snack Magazine*, people are our thing. Check out this short list of some of the names we've featured, from the produce industry and beyond...

		
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» The **IF** List «

Yan Branco

Director, Produce Sourcing Innovation and CEA Development, Sobeys

With Melissa De Leon Chavez

In an industry as fast-moving and high-energy as fresh produce, especially on the retail side, it's important to know when to slow down and enjoy the view—and perhaps a beverage, too. When Yan Branco is not digging into the latest in controlled environment agriculture for Sobeys or sourcing high-quality fresh items, I have a feeling he is the first one to turn up the music and the vibes. Find out why when you explore this fun list of “What IFs”...

» **IF you could be a character in any book or movie, who would you be?**

Indiana Jones. Saving the world with a smile!

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

Producing concerts or events and bringing joy to people's lives.

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

A stereo, a long chair, and a pitcher of margaritas. Not here for a long time, but a good one!

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

Forrest Gump.

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

Passion for Produce: An Unexpected Journey.

» **IF you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?**

Fulfillment comes not from material possessions but from meaningful experiences.

» **IF you had to choose now, what would your last meal consist of?**

My grandmother's spaghetti.

» **IF you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?**

My great-great-grandfather, so I could learn more about my family's history.

» **IF you had a superpower, what would you want it to be?**

The power to heal people.

» **IF you were to have a produce tattoo, what would you have?**

I'm not sure, but it's not going to involve an eggplant.

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

A cat—particularly ours. This little guy is living the life!

» **IF you could wake up anywhere in the world tomorrow, where would you be?**

On the North Shore of O'ahu island. So beautiful! 🍷



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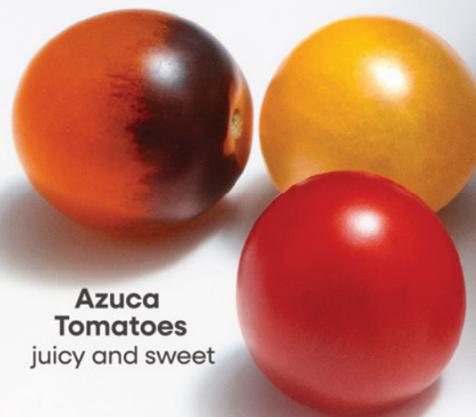
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Strawberry Snapshot

By Anne Allen

It's hard to imagine strawberries as anything other than the category-driving superstars they are. Available all year 'round, the mighty strawberry inspires foodservice operators and home chefs alike to experiment. To keep pace with the category's rapid growth, we turned to our friends at the California Strawberry Commission. Let's dive into the numbers behind this fruit...



\$5.4B
Total Strawberry Dollar Sales (2025)

Dollar Sales Soar

Category dollars grew +10%, adding nearly \$500 million in incremental sales.

\$491M
Strawberry Category Sales Increase vs. 2024

Strawberries

Total Berries

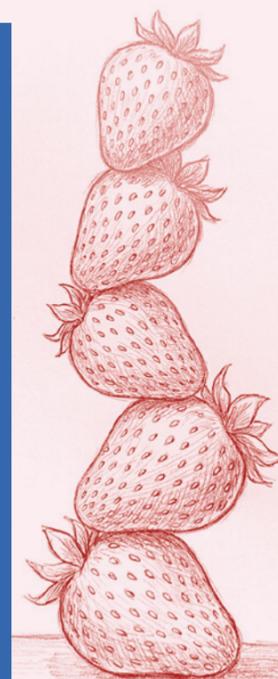
+8.5%

+9.9%

Strawberries Lead Berry Growth

Volume rose +8% year over year, representing 60% of total berry category volume and driving 61% of incremental growth (+123 million lbs)

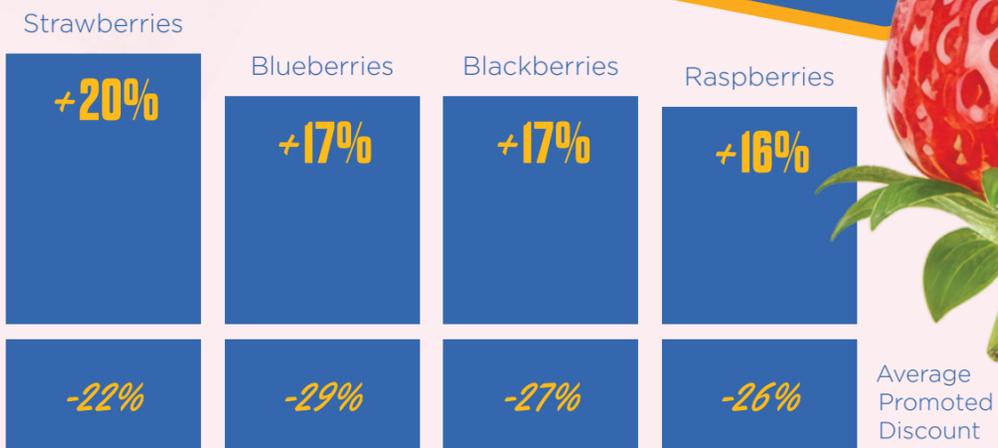
Strawberry dollar sales growth outpaced the total berry category in the past year



Dollar Growth Rate vs. Prior Year

Strong Promotion Impact

During the 52-week period, about 52% of strawberry volume was sold on promotion, generating a +36% volume lift on an average discount of -22%.



Strawberry promotions consistently deliver a stronger promotional lift on a smaller discount, outperforming other berry varieties
 Fresh Berry Promoted Dollar Sales Lift with Average Promoted Discount



Dollar Growth Rate vs. Prior Year by Package Size

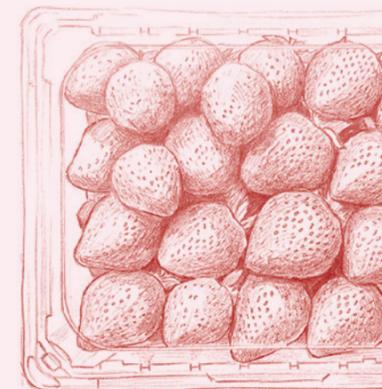
32 oz. Pack Drives Category Expansion

The 32 oz package accounted for 68% of incremental sales and delivered +20% dollar growth, adding \$332 million in revenue.



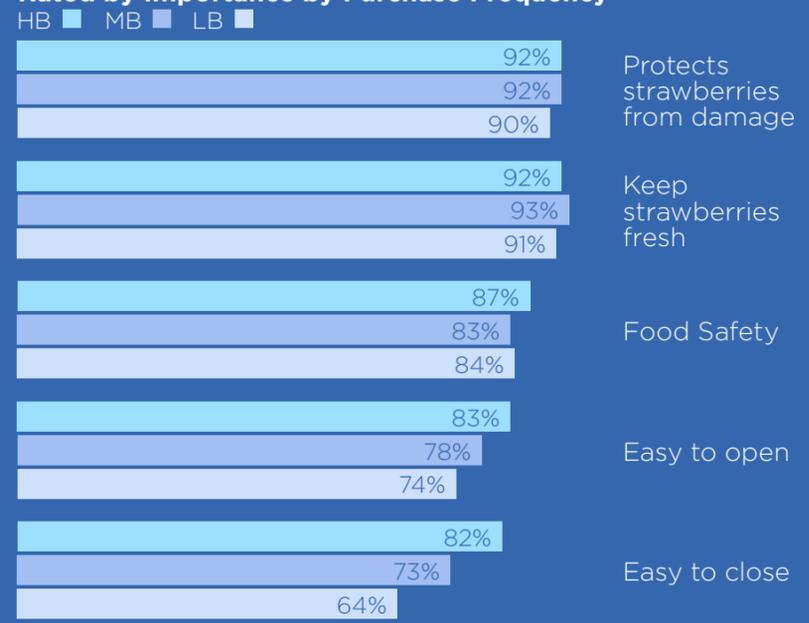
Over the past year the strawberry category increased by +491 million, driven by 32 oz packages

Incremental Dollar Sales by Package Size Share



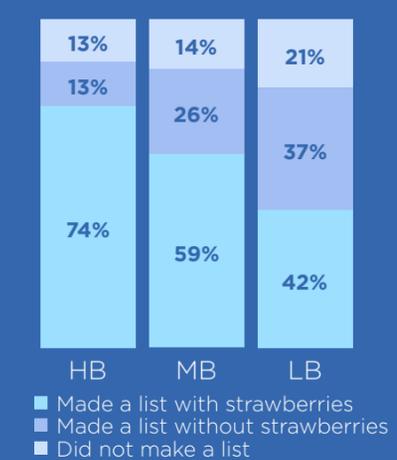
Heavy Buyers (HB) Purchase once per week
Medium Buyers (MB) Purchase several times per month
Light Buyers (LB) Purchase once per month or less

Strawberry Packaging Purchase Factor Rated by Importance by Purchase Frequency



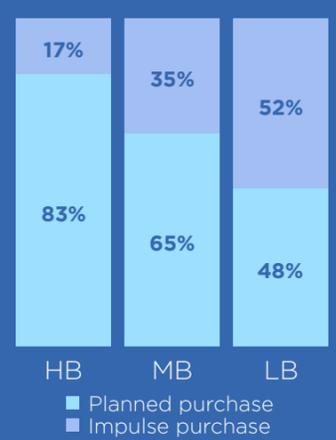
Shoppers Prefer Packaging That Preserves Quality, Freshness, and Offers Convenience

Did Shoppers Prepare a List That Included Fresh Strawberries? By Purchase Frequency



74% of heavy buyers added strawberries to their grocery list compared to 42% of light buyers

Planned vs. Impulse Purchase by Purchase Frequency



83% of heavy buyers to purchase fresh strawberries compared to 48% of light buyers

Planned Purchase Decision Influencers

Which, if any, of the following played a role in the decision to purchase fresh strawberries while in the store?

Influencer	HB	MB	LB
The strawberries looked fresh	62%	65%	58%
Strawberries are a regular/staple in my household	42%	35%	18%
The strawberries smelled fresh	40%	38%	31%
Strawberries were in season	38%	40%	43%
The strawberries were the right price	35%	44%	37%

Even when shoppers plan to purchase strawberries, freshness is the primary decision factor ahead of other considerations such as price and seasonality

SOURCE: California Strawberry Commission. CSC State of the Category, Total U.S., 52 Weeks Ending 7-13-2025 Study Development: Fusion

Libations

For All Occasions

STRAWBERRY SOJU COCKTAIL

By Anne Allen

Photography by Reid Monsma

There's nothing quite like biting into a strawberry. Feeling the juices trickle down your chin as you hastily try to catch them with the back of your hand, a broad smile on your face, like a little kid... There's nothing like it! I wanted a drink that encapsulated this experience of overflowing sweetness, and my social media feed came to the rescue by introducing me to the Strawberry Soju Cocktail.

It looks like the Starbucks Pink Drink, but don't let its cute appearance deceive you. Strawberry soju is a popular Korean spirit that imparts an

irresistible fruity profile, making it nearly impossible to just have one.

The drink begins with muddling strawberries until their juices are released, then adding your ice and strawberry soju. The key to making this drink extra delicious is topping it with Sprite and Calpico Strawberry, a Japanese non-carbonated soft drink. If you want a lighter option, swap the Sprite for sparkling water!

Key opportunities to promote this drink occur during springtime holidays like Easter and Mother's Day, when strawberries are already on most consumers' must-have shopping lists! 🍓

Here's how to make it... Prep Time: 5 mins Servings: 1

INGREDIENTS

- 3 strawberries, stems removed and diced
- 3 oz strawberry soju
- 3 oz Sprite or sparkling water
- 4 oz Calpico Strawberry



DIRECTIONS

1. Add diced strawberries to a glass. Muddle thoroughly to release their juices. You want as much strawberry juice running through this cocktail as possible!
2. Fill your preferred glass with ice. I like to use a highball glass.
3. Add in the strawberry soju, Sprite—or sparkling water, if you prefer—and the Calpico Strawberry.
4. Stir together and enjoy!

Tip: Easily quadruple this recipe and add to a pitcher. It's the perfect drink to make and share with friends!





SMALL BITES,



BIG MOMENTUM:

A Q&A with Veg Fresh Farms

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

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Our industry is amazing at many feats, but one thing I know for sure is that fresh produce growers know how to take a small format—like a fruit or vegetable—and dial in the eating experience so precisely that it creates big flavor, memorable moments, and lasting impressions for the consumer. These programs are layered like strata, systems built ever so distinctly to support something meaningful. Between R&D, marketing, labor, sustainability, efficiency, growing, packing, and shipping, a piece of produce is shaped in remarkable ways—from taste and texture to name and aesthetics.

It is the gift our growers give to the world. Not without its challenges and complexities, but better because of them. Just ask the team at Veg Fresh Farms.

As the company turned the page into the new year through now, its momentum has picked up—carrying a sensory experience through to buyers and consumers alike in new and pleasurable ways. Debuting several expansions to its already expansive portfolio, Veg Fresh has been under the steady guidance of leaders like Chris Jacoby, Sales Director, and Dino Cancellieri, General Partner, as they visualized what lay on the horizon—and then executed it.



Jordan Okumura-Wright: Veg Fresh Farms has always been a humble but powerful operation, in my opinion. Your team's decisions are thoughtful, and your plans are carefully laid. As we head further into 2026, what market signals or customer

needs drove the decision to invest in your key commodity expansions?

Chris Jacoby, Sales Director, Veg Fresh Farms: Recently, we have made strategic moves with our Bitty Bites baby cucumbers, and extended PreCut Solutions.



For Bitty Bites, the cucumber category continues to evolve as consumers increasingly seek convenient, healthy snack options on the go. Building on the strong success of our Persian cucumber programs, we saw an opportunity to further expand our cucumber portfolio with baby cucumbers—a new variety that aligns well with both retail and foodservice needs and what today's consumers are seeking.

We are continually exploring new varieties and product offerings that respond to consumer demand, and we believe Bitty Bites represents the next evolution in the snacking cucumber category.



Dino Cancellieri, General Partner, Veg Fresh Farms: The value-added space is generating increasing demand, and our PreCut Solutions program—launched just over three years ago—has grown rapidly. It has expanded beyond diced and sliced items to include whole peeled onions and customized blends.

Our team works closely with customers to tailor products to their exact needs—whether that's adjusting heat levels in a pico de gallo or delivering a fajita mix cut to precise specifications. The addition of whole peeled yellow, white, and red onions further supports labor and time savings, helping kitchens and deli operations improve efficiency without compromising quality.

It has been an exciting first half of the year for us, and we do not anticipate that momentum slowing.

Jordan Okumura-Wright: What an incredible evolution of your program. Convenience and efficiency feel like strong indicators of successful investments these days. Let's start with Bitty Bites. Chris, can you tell me more about this new launch? How does this new baby cucumber line perform in terms of flavor profile, pack formats, and versatility—and where are you seeing the strongest opportunities in retail versus foodservice?

CJ: Bitty Bites baby cucumbers deliver a convenient, grab-and-go snacking solution designed for today's busy, health-conscious consumers and families. With a crisp, refreshing crunch and consistent quality, Bitty Bites prove that being teeny tiny can deliver big flavor.

These baby cucumbers are ideal as a fresh standalone snack or sliced into salads, bowls, and meal prep applications. Bitty Bites are available in three 9 oz packaging options



for retail: a bright, full-color pouch bag; a clamshell with an eye-catching sticker; and an overwrap tray designed to stand out on the shelf and drive trial. In retail, Bitty Bites add excitement to the cucumber set and support impulse purchases, in-store snacking programs, and party trays.

In truth, Bitty Bites offer versatility for both retail and foodservice, making them well-suited for on-the-go consumption, kids' meal components, and portion-controlled applications that reduce waste. For foodservice, Bitty Bites provide a consistent, ready-to-use cucumber option that supports labor efficiency and menu flexibility, while retail benefits from multiple merchandising formats that encourage trial, leading to repeat purchases and category growth.

Jordan Okumura-Wright: While you are increasingly focused on flavor, convenience, and more versatile eating experiences, I know your eye is also trained on creating a more efficient operation for your customers. Dino, as you note, PreCut Solutions remains a major growth area across the industry and for Veg Fresh. Can you expand on how the company has reinvested in PreCut Solutions, and what operational or labor challenges these offerings help retailers and operators solve?

DC: As I mentioned earlier, the expansion of our PreCut Solutions program to include whole peeled onions has been driven by growing demand from restaurants and delis seeking solutions to ongoing labor and efficiency challenges. By transitioning to peeled onions, operators can reduce prep



“”

...Bitty Bites offer versatility for both retail and foodservice, making them well-suited for on-the-go consumption, kids' meal components, and portion-controlled applications that reduce waste.

Chris Jacoby,
Sales Director, Veg Fresh Farms

time and labor costs while increasing efficiency, allowing them to serve food faster without compromising freshness or flavor.

Our sliced and diced offerings further support restaurant chains by lowering labor requirements and streamlining kitchen operations. In addition, we've partnered with Aptar for our trays to help extend shelf-life, reducing shrink and keeping products like our pico de gallo fresher for longer without compromising taste.

PreCut Solutions goes beyond foodservice, delivering strong results in deli operations where our customized cuts and blends streamline prep time, and our ready-to-eat grape and cherry tomatoes add convenience and value.

Jordan Okumura-Wright: You constantly touch on a recurring theme in our conversations with the Veg Fresh team: partnership. Across these expansions, how is Veg Fresh thinking about partnership—whether that's custom specs, packaging, or program development—to help customers differentiate in a crowded produce set?

U: At Veg Fresh, strong partnerships are at the core of what we do. On the retail side, Bitty Bites baby cucumbers are offered in a variety of packaging formats—including clamshells, trays, and bags—with flexible specifications and portion sizes that can be tailored to meet each retailer's needs.

From seed selection to shelf placement, our programs are designed with purpose. Partnering with growers allows us to secure top-performing varieties, while working directly with retailers ensures our packaging and portion sizes meet the needs of today's shopper.

DC: Through PreCut Solutions, we partner directly with operators to create customized products that help maximize kitchen efficiency while enhancing flavor profiles. From fajita mixes with customized bell pepper combinations—red, yellow, and orange or just red and yellow—to adjustable slice thicknesses (3/8" or 1/4"), we design solutions that fit each operation. Our ginger offerings also provide flexibility, with customizable pack sizes available in both shredded and peeled options.

Jordan Okumura-Wright: Looking ahead through 2026 and beyond, what does success look like for Veg Fresh Farms—and what should retailers and foodservice operators know about how you plan to support their growth in the year ahead?

DC: We remain focused on continuing to evolve our PreCut program, recognizing that labor efficiency, cost control, and consistency are key drivers of demand. Applications for diced, sliced, and ready-to-eat items extend well beyond traditional foodservice, creating opportunities across multiple channels.

We also look for synergies by developing new varieties that generate excitement and drive demand for our retail partners, while seamlessly supporting our PreCut program.

Veg Fresh is unique in our true Farm to Fork approach leveraging our farm operations and supply-side control to deliver consistent value and quality to our retail and foodservice partners year-round.

There are many opportunities on the road ahead; you just need the right team, the right perspective, and the right plan.

From bite-sized innovation to operational precision, Veg Fresh Farms is proving that momentum is built through intention. By aligning flavor, efficiency, and partnership, the company continues to turn small, thoughtful decisions into growth—both meaningful and valuable. 🍓



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Meet Kyle





Whether you are making breakfast for mom, becoming a new mom, or looking back on fond memories, Mother's Day provides an opportunity to honor some of the most impactful people in our lives. Consumers are looking for ways to make their mother feel special this time of year, and what better way to do so than by offering her a nutritious and comforting meal packed with fresh produce?

Discover how these supply-side experts utilize reds, pinks, and much more to draw foot traffic...



Emily Zirkle,

**BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT,
RAINIER FRUIT COMPANY**

"Let's hear it for Mom! In my family, any holiday brunch means breakfast casserole, mimosas, and tons of sliced fruit. I love treating my mom to some buttery, ripe pears and crispy apple slices. Now is a great time to promote sweet and nutritious treats like apples and pears. Their versatility makes them the perfect Mother's Day produce to highlight—a charcuterie staple, baked good filling, and simply a great addition to a breakfast spread. Don't forget the health factor, too; apples and pears are both a great way to slip some fiber between the donuts and chocolate!"

Rachael Jozwiak,

**KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER,
SUNKIST GROWERS**

"I love how citrus can be both simple and special—it's something you pick up on the way home and instantly adds life to the table. For retailers, that means merchandising citrus not just for nutrition but for the joy it brings to occasions like Mother's Day."



Kyla Oberman,

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
CALIFORNIA GIANT BERRY FARMS**

"Mother's Day continues to be a meaningful driver for the berry category, with the 2025 holiday window generating a 7 percent year-over-year increase in dollar sales. The lift reflects consistent consumer demand, as fresh berries remain a staple in holiday-focused eating occasions. At California Giant Berry Farms, we are in a harvest period with strong promotional volumes of high-quality strawberries well aligned with Mother's Day. We encourage retailers to prioritize high-visibility merchandising and well-placed secondary displays during this time frame. Pairing peak-season berries with floral and brunch-focused items can help support incremental movement. For Mother's Day shoppers, berries strike the right balance—fresh, beautiful, and at the peak of the California season. They deliver great taste and everyday nutrition, making them both a treat and a staple worthy of the occasion."

Brittani Cherry,

**EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATOR/
HUMAN RESOURCES, BOBALU**



"Mother's Day is one of our favorite holidays to celebrate here at Bobalu—after all, moms hold a very special place in our hearts! Each year, we feature our beautiful long-stem strawberries, perfect for dipping, gifting, and creating delicious homemade treats. For retailers, our top merchandising tip is to showcase long-stem strawberries with a clear top view so shoppers can see their size and quality. Pair the display with complementary items like dipping chocolate, whipped cream, sprinkles, and other treat-making essentials to inspire easy, irresistible Mother's Day creations."



Krista Beckstead,

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
MOUNTAIN VIEW FRUIT SALES**

"I've accomplished a lot of big 'wins' in my professional career, but nothing compares to wins during motherhood. My biggest accomplishments in life are my boys. Hearing from coaches, teachers and other adults that they are 'caring, respectful, and natural leaders' far outweighs a new product launch, packaging redesign, or marketing award any day. Growing/selling stonefruit is very similar to motherhood; it doesn't happen overnight. There is a lot of love, time, and patience that goes into it. As summer and stonefruit season approaches, we can't wait to share our great-tasting fruit that is truly worth the wait!"

Emily Murracas,

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
MUCCI FARMS**



"Nothing says 'thank you, Mom' like fresh Mucci Farms Smuccies™ Sweet Strawberries. They're bursting with sweetness and always in season. Whether folded into fluffy pancakes, layered in a strawberry parfait, or served simply with whipped cream, they turn brunch into the sweetest part of the day. On Mother's Day weekend, gather around the table and treat Mom to one of our strawberry brunch recipes from the Mucci Farms kitchen or social pages. Because the best way to show love is always through something homemade."



WTF DO I DO WITH Sunkist® Grapefruit ?

{ what the fork }



GRAPEFRUIT BREAKFAST BOATS

INGREDIENTS

- 2 Sunkist® Grapefruits, halved
- 2 **tb**sp honey
- ½ **cup** granola
- 2 **tb**sp nuts, chopped
- 1 **cup** Greek yogurt

Prep Time: 10 mins

Servings: 2



DIRECTIONS

- 1 Carefully loosen the Sunkist® Grapefruit segments with a knife for easy scooping.
- 2 Drizzle honey over each Sunkist Grapefruit half.
- 3 Sprinkle granola and chopped nuts evenly on top.
- 4 Add a dollop of Greek yogurt over the granola and nuts.
- 5 Serve immediately and enjoy your refreshing, citrusy breakfast!

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



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COX FARMS

coxfarms.com

A Closer Look at Peri & Sons Farms® Healthy Value+® Onions

UP
CLOSE

By Chandler James

Shoppers' wallets are being stretched thinner these days, and many of them are looking for budget-conscious options in the produce department that do not compromise on flavor. These consumers will have their demands met and then some with Healthy Value+® onions from Peri & Sons Farms®.

Healthy Value+ onion packages provide a value-priced option to some of retailers' more price-sensitive shoppers. Intrigued?

I haven't even told you the best part yet. These onions do not compromise on flavor, making them an attractive addition to retailers' onion merchandising strategies.

Like all of Peri & Sons Farms' products, the Healthy Value+ onions are safely and sustainably grown before being carefully packed and shipped directly from the family farm. Offered in red, white, and yellow varieties, these grab-and-go onion packages provide shoppers with the peace of

mind that comes from knowing what they are putting on the table will be delicious and healthy.

The Healthy Value+ onion packaging also provides helpful information consumers need to make a purchase with confidence, as well as access to Peri & Sons Farms' extensive online library of free recipes. The cheery, earthy colors and designs on-pack will be the first thing to grab shoppers' attention. The value of this unique onion program will keep them coming back. 



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» The **IF** List «

Colin Ager

Business Development Manager, Produce Procurement, H-E-B

With Melissa De Leon Chavez

Charm and candidness do not often keep the same company, unless you've had a chance to meet Colin Ager. The Business Development Manager for Produce Procurement at H-E-B is a master in the art of conversation and a fun companion in philosophy—someone you can count on to be straightforward in an industry where clarity is its own kindness. We couldn't wait to see what he'd do with a handful of "What *IFs*" and he did not disappoint. Enjoy...

» **IF you could have been born in another century or decade, which would it be and why?**

First-century Rome.

» **IF you had to choose now, what would your last meal consist of?**

Pasta with lemon and oil, chicken, peppers, olives, and squash. Mom's recipe.

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

A musician.

» **IF you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?**

Paul McCartney.

» **IF you could redo or relive one moment or event in your life, which one would you choose and why?**

Not making an effort at NYU (New York University) should be reconsidered.

» **IF you had to wear the same thing every day, what items of clothing would you pick?**

Japanese denim, a fitted white V-neck tee, and Birkenstocks.

» **IF you could make everyone read a book of your choosing, which book would you want them to read?**

The Power Broker by Robert Caro.

» **IF you could bring a mythical creature to life, which would you choose?**

The produce salesperson with a long-term outlook.

» **IF you could enhance one aspect of your intelligence, what part would you want to improve?**

Emotional. Definitely.

» **IF you could teleport anywhere tomorrow, where would you go?**

The rooftop cocktail bar I was once at in Monopoli, Italy, with a view of the Adriatic Sea, good weather, and good friends.

» **IF you were getting a produce-inspired tattoo, what would you choose?**

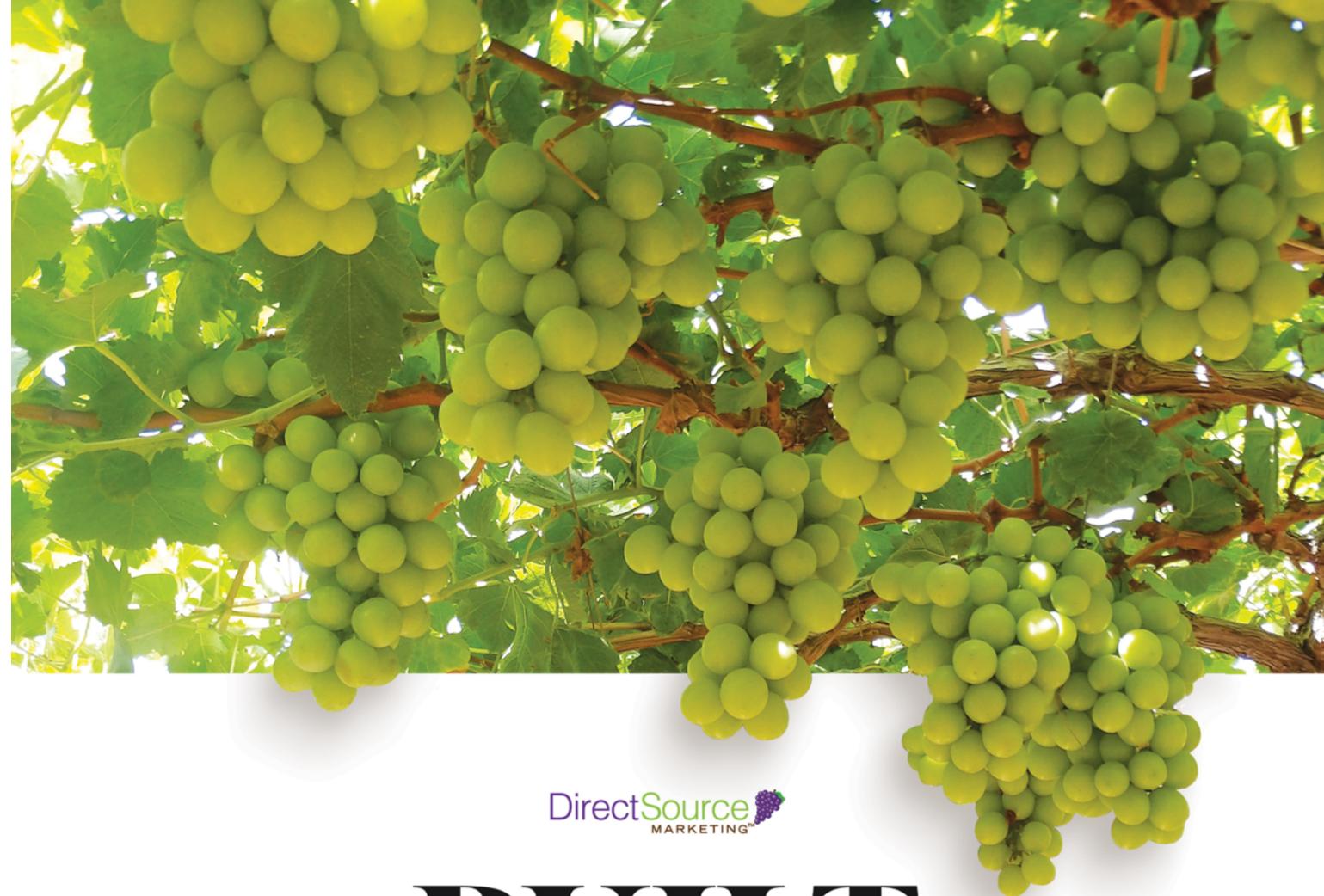
"We're vertically integrated."

» **IF you could join a musician, dead or alive, on stage to sing along or play an instrument with, who would you choose and why?**

I have some experience in this: One's job on stage is to increase the value of the patrons' evening. The purpose is not in establishing one's own sense of self or validating your level of "cool." I was confused about this in my 20s. I'd rather enjoy great musicians as a patron, or work to faithfully represent great work to others. The intersection of those desires isn't present for me.

» **IF you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?**

Look reality in the face and stay interested. 🍷



DirectSource
MARKETING

BUILT *From the* SOURCE UP

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

A grape is just a grape until you understand the story behind it—the company that nurtures it and the values that set apart its quality, flavor, and journey to market. In an increasingly transactional marketplace, Ira Greenstein reaches across the table, the distance, and the divide, and becomes what today's retail customers crave most: a partner. Call me a biased advocate for fresh produce, but this means something more and more these days.



“No two days are ever the same. Every day, there are new challenges that bring either a sense of accomplishment or the drive to come back and do better tomorrow.”

Ira Greenstein,
President and Founder, Direct Source Marketing™

“At its core, this is a farming business—but it runs on relationships. Direct Source Marketing™ was founded on direct communication with customers, honesty, and follow-through,” Ira, President and Founder of Direct Source Marketing, shares with me when I ask him to touch on the heart of the company. “By staying true to those principles, we’ve built strong partnerships with our growers, logistics teams, and retail customers, and we work together to make programs successful. We believe good relationships are where real value is created.”

In today’s produce landscape, execution, consistency, and accountability matter more than ever. Direct Source Marketing has built its business around those principles—connecting retailers, wholesalers, and foodservice buyers directly to high-quality fruit through a vertically integrated, relationship-driven model.

Ira, who found his way into the industry early in his career with the help of his grandfather, who worked at C.H. Robinson, was drawn in by the pace of fresh produce, the dynamic people who occupied it, and the stories that reflected a deep desire to bring exceptional fresh food to people. Now, with more than 35 years of produce industry experience behind him, Ira brings that same early love to everything he does.

As Ira puts it, “No two days are ever the same. Every day, there are new challenges that bring either a sense of accomplishment or the drive to come back and do better tomorrow.”

That unyielding dynamic has informed all that Ira does. Founded on the idea that sourcing should be proactive rather than reactive, Direct Source Marketing operates as both a grower and importer, giving customers greater confidence in quality, supply continuity, and execution. With ownership in grape vineyards in Peru and strawberry fields in California, the company maintains hands-on involvement from the field through final delivery.

Every part of the source-to-supply-chain network remains a vital and integral

component of Direct Source Marketing’s accountability and oversight. This expression of care and commitment is in direct relationship to the values that hold the company to a high standard.

“What sets Direct Source Marketing apart is not just what we sell, but how we operate,” Ira expands. “Our team emphasizes close communication, real-time logistics coordination, and rigorous quality inspections at every step. From harvest planning to cold-chain management, the focus is on honoring our commitments.”

As retailers look for partners who can deliver more than just product, Direct Source Marketing continues to stand out as a supplier built from the source up—combining owned production, trusted

grower relationships, and hands-on execution to deliver fruit buyers can rely on, season after season.

“Our customers come first, every day. They have plenty of options, and the fact that they choose to work with us matters. We honor that by doing business with integrity and treating every interaction as personal,” Ira reflects.

Turning to the cornerstones of Direct Source Marketing, Ira opens up about the company’s grape portfolio. The vertically integrated operation sources and grows premium table grapes across multiple countries, allowing it to serve customers with consistency throughout the year. In addition, Peruvian grape vineyards give the team direct control over farming practices, varietal selection,

and harvest timing—ensuring fruit that meets exacting standards for flavor, size, and shelf-life.

To further strengthen an already high-value offering, Direct Source Marketing also imports cherries, expanding its lineup with high-demand seasonal items that complement its core programs. Long-standing grower relationships, paired with in-house quality oversight, allow the company to deliver fruit that performs at retail and meets buyer expectations, arrival after arrival.

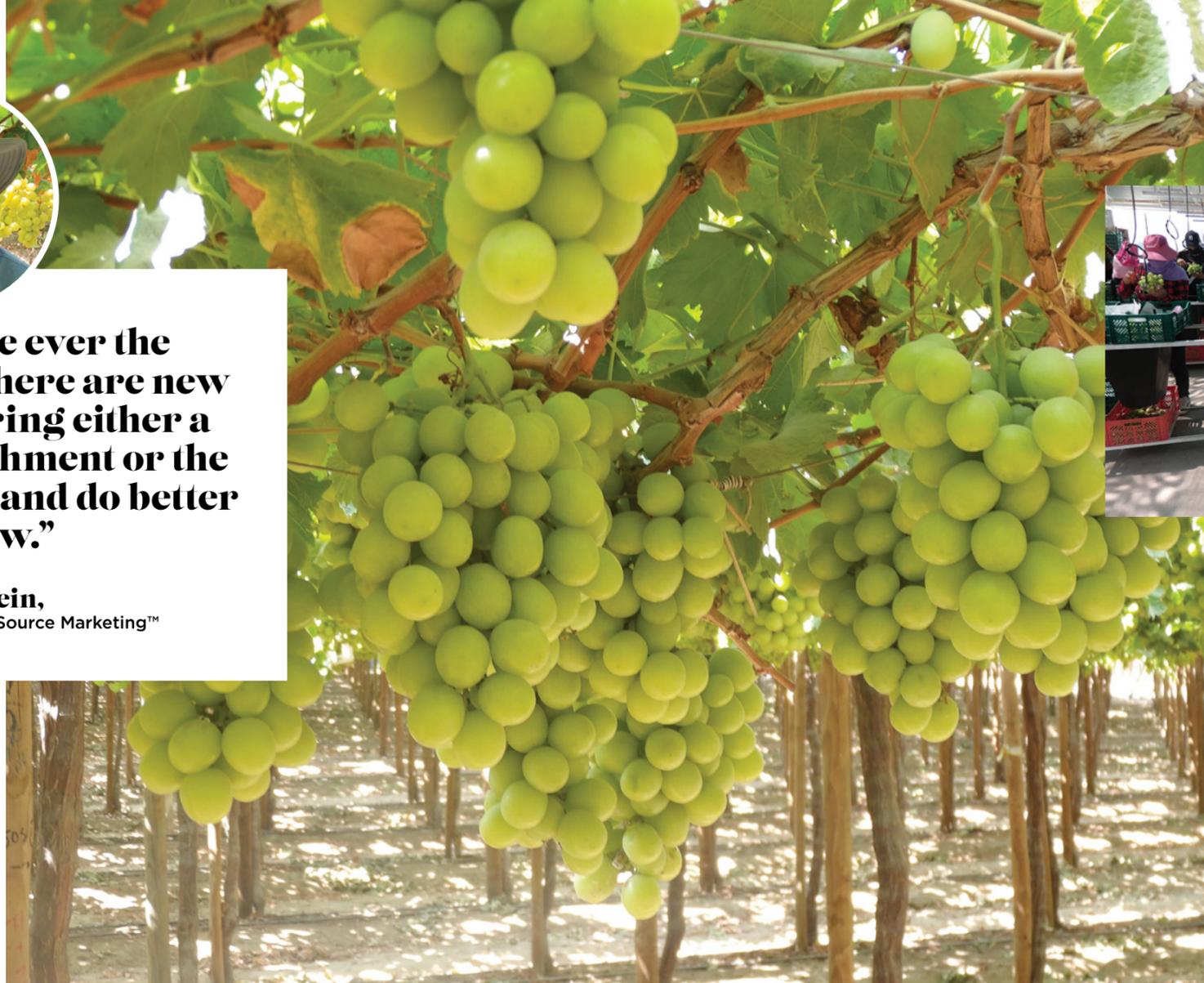
“Strong partnerships with our growers and shippers are the backbone of our business and have helped secure our place among the leading distributors on the East Coast. Many of the growers we work with are family operations that have devoted generations to farming, taking real pride in both their work and the fruit they produce,” Ira describes.

On the domestic side, Direct Source Marketing’s California strawberry ranches further strengthen its vertically

integrated approach. By growing select crops in the U.S. and managing imported programs abroad, the company balances domestic reliability with global sourcing flexibility—an advantage in an increasingly complex supply chain.

“As things change across the industry, we believe the real opportunity is in sticking to our core principles—quality farming, strong partnerships with customers, opening new West Coast markets, and reliable follow-through,” Ira explains. “No matter the fruit we’re shipping, Direct Source Marketing stays focused on what matters most: communication, problem-solving, and execution.”

The look of a handshake has changed over the course of Ira’s time in the industry, but its strength, supportive hold, and consistent presence remain hallmarks of its enduring value—felt at every turn in the vineyard and beyond. 



WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Bee Sweet Citrus
Lemons

?



Learn about this product

LEMON GUACAMOLE

INGREDIENTS

- 2 tbsp** Bee Sweet Citrus Lemon juice
- 3** avocados, ripe
- 1/3 cup** white onion, finely minced
- 1** Serrano or Jalapeño, diced, seeds removed
- 1/4 cup** fresh cilantro, finely chopped
- 1-2** Roma tomatoes, seeded and diced small
- Pinch** of cumin, optional
- 1 tsp** kosher salt, plus more, to taste
- Freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
- Chili powder, paprika, or chives, for garnish

Prep Time: 10 mins
Servings: 2-3

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Add avocado and Bee Sweet Citrus Lemon juice to a bowl and mash to desired texture.
- 2 Add onion, diced Serrano or Jalapeños, cilantro, tomato, and seasonings and mix well.
- 3 Taste and adjust seasonings.
- 4 Serve with tortilla chips. Enjoy!

To learn more about Bee Sweet Citrus, visit www.beesweetcitrus.com



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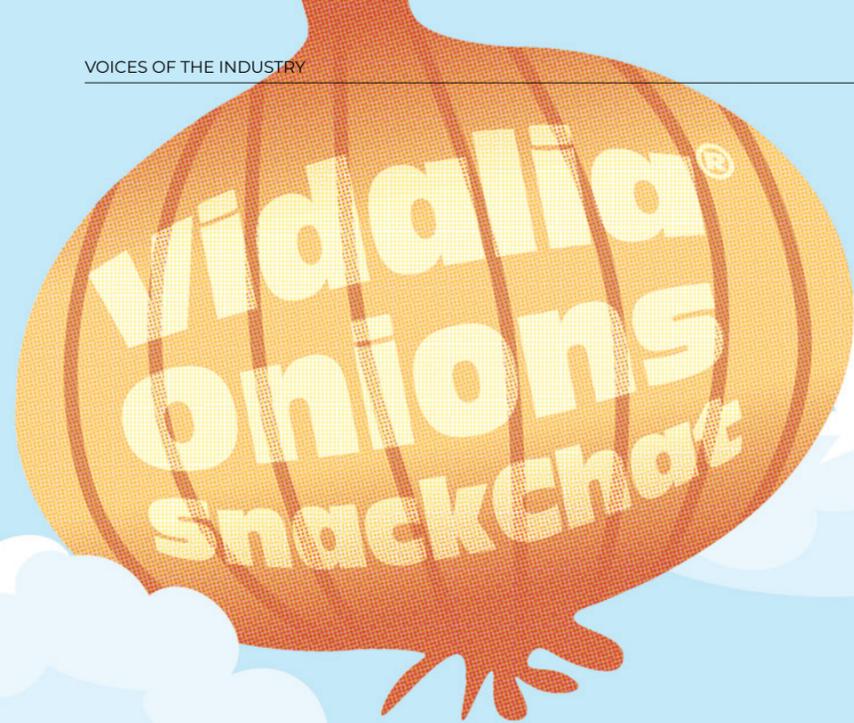


Promotions With a Purpose



Your Vidalia Partner

YEAR-ROUND SWEET ONION LEADER



By Melissa De Leon Chavez

Does the famous Vidalia® onion meet the hype, and how does experience inform those who bring this valuable offering to market? This is exactly the question we brought to a handful of experts as we prepare for the highly anticipated Vidalia onion season...

Question

What is an assumption you had about this variety early on that experience has proven different? How did that change your approach to Vidalia® onions, and how can this help better lift the category at retail?



Mike Tipton,
Vice President of Produce and Floral, Schnuck Markets

“Vidalia® onions’ limited-time availability coupled with their premium status are, in fact, their greatest selling points. It’s suggested that retailers should move from simply stocking Vidalia onions to treating the season as a high-profile, must-shop event. At Schnucks, we commit to massive, eye-catching displays from the official pack date. This insight can help produce retailers better lift the category by leveraging consumer anticipation. Retailers should embrace high-impact, bulk merchandising and strategically cross-promote Vidalias with complementary items like tomatoes, grilling meats, and burger fixings to drive significant incremental purchases throughout the store, positioning the onion as the centerpiece of seasonal cooking.”



John Shuman,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Shuman Farms

“Growing up the son of a Vidalia® onion farmer in southeast Georgia, I was under the impression that a Vidalia onion was just an onion. It wasn’t until I began traveling the country to market Vidalias that I realized just how special they really are to consumers far and wide. I take great pride in witnessing the excitement over Vidalias’ return each spring: No other onion warrants the same response and consumer loyalty. From their unparalleled sweet and mild flavor profile to the designated growing region and official season start date, Vidalia onions are truly one of a kind. Our focus is helping our retailer partners share the Vidalia story in new and exciting ways so that no one—especially younger generations coming into the fold—makes the mistake of confusing a Vidalia sweet onion for ‘just an onion.’”



Troy Bland
Chief Executive Officer, Bland Farms®

“Early on, one assumption was that success with Vidalia® onions was primarily driven by maximizing yield per acre. Like many growers, we focused heavily on agronomic practices that supported volume and consistency, assuming strong yields would naturally deliver the best outcomes. Over time, experience and consumer feedback reinforced that while yield is important, it’s secondary to flavor, texture, and overall eating quality. That insight helped us reassess our approach. Rather than pushing for incremental volume, we began prioritizing practices that protect quality, flavor, and pack out, even when that required more discipline in production decisions. The result has been a more consistent eating experience that builds consumer trust and drives repeat purchases. For retailers, this matters. Vidalias succeed as a flavor-driven category, not a commodity. When the eating experience delivers, the category turns faster, promotions perform better, and shoppers return—lifting not only Vidalias, but the entire onion set.”



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

“I initially assumed the impact Vidalia® onions had in the late 1980s would always carry the category on its own. Back then, before sweet onions were available year-round, customer anticipation was phenomenal—Vidalias sold themselves. Experience has shown that assumption no longer holds true. While Vidalia sweet onions are still a big deal today, the excitement isn’t quite what it once was due to the constant availability of imported sweet onions. That shift changed our approach; instead of relying on anticipation alone, we focus on education—training our staff and using clear seasonal signage to highlight the difference between Vidalia sweet onions and imported sweet onions. That clarity helps shoppers understand value and drives better decisions. Partnering with growers like Shuman Farms, one of the best in the industry for both Vidalia and imported sweet onions, strengthens that message and helps retailers lift the entire onion category through consistency, quality, and trust.”



Cliff Riner,
Vice President of Ag Production and Grower Relations, G&R Farms

“When I started, I thought Vidalia® onions were more of a seasonal novelty—something consumers enjoyed briefly and mainly used raw due to their sweetness. Experience has shown that view was far too narrow. Over time, we’ve seen how versatile Vidalias truly are and how easily they fit into everyday cooking. Their natural sweetness enhances everything from grilling and roasting to caramelizing and slow-cooked dishes, without overpowering other flavors. That realization shifted how Vidalias are approached, from treating them as a specialty item to recognizing them as a seasonal staple that can replace other onions across a wide range of meals. For produce retailers, this insight is powerful. When Vidalias are promoted with broader usage ideas, larger displays, and meal-based inspiration, shoppers buy them more often and in greater quantities. Positioning Vidalias as an everyday solution during their season helps drive repeat purchases, larger baskets, and stronger overall onion category performance.”

WTF DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }



LEMON CAESAR BRUSSELS SPROUTS

INGREDIENTS

1 bag Ocean Mist® Farms Roastables
Lemon Caesar Brussels Sprouts

Prep Time: 5 mins
Cook Time: 15–20 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 425° F.
- 2 In a bowl, mix halved Brussels sprouts with 3 tbsp of preferred cooking oil.
- 3 Once evenly coated, add seasoning packet and toss until all pieces are coated.
- 4 Spread evenly on baking sheet and pop in oven for 15–20 minutes, until golden and tender.
- 5 Top with crispy Parmesan panko garnish (included). Enjoy!

Featured Recipe: Lemon Caesar Brussels Sprouts with Grilled Shrimp Skewers and Israeli Couscous

Other pairing options: Roasted citrus salmon, spiced Mediterranean chicken, or rosemary Dijon pork chops



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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Mountain View Fruit Sales Apricots ?



MOUNTAIN VIEW APRICOT POP TARTS® WITH APRICOT GLAZE

INGREDIENTS

10-MINUTE APRICOT JELLY

- 10 Mountain View Apricots, rinsed, pitted, and quartered
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tbsp fresh Mountain View Lemon juice

POP TARTS®

- 2 packages refrigerated pie crust
- 1 egg, whisked
- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 2 tbsp fresh Mountain View Lemon juice
- 2 tbsp milk
- 3 tbsp 10-Minute Mountain View Apricot Jelly
- 1/2 tsp vanilla extract

Prep Time: 20 mins

Cook Time: 12-15 mins

Servings: 8

DIRECTIONS

- 1 To make the jelly, add apricots, sugar, and lemon juice to a large Dutch oven or large shallow pan. Cook on high and stir until apricots begin to break down and sugar dissolves. Continue to cook apricots for 10 minutes, stirring constantly to allow moisture to evaporate. Use your spoon to break up large pieces of apricot.
- 2 Once the mixture has become thick and apricots have broken down, transfer apricot jelly to a clean jar and refrigerate until ready to use.
- 3 Preheat the oven to 400° F.
- 4 Unroll pie crust according to package instructions and cut into 3" x 5" rectangles. *Tip: Use a ruler or 3" x 5" index card as your guide. If desired, combine the scrap dough and roll it out to create more dough—just be certain the dough is a similar thickness.*
- 5 Add cut pieces of dough to baking sheets lined with parchment paper.
- 6 Add a heaping tbsp of apricot jelly to the center of each piece of dough. Brush egg wash along the outside edges of each pop tart and top with another piece of dough. Use your fingers to press and seal the edges then use a fork to crimp the edges together. Use a fork to poke holes in the top of each pastry 3-4 times, then brush pop tarts with more egg wash. Continue this same process with all pastries.
- 7 Bake in the oven for 12-15 minutes or until the pastries are golden brown. Transfer to a cooling rack to cool completely.
- 8 While the pastries cool, whisk together the powdered sugar, milk, apricot jelly, and vanilla extract to create the apricot glaze. The apricot glaze should be thick and easy to spread. Top each cooled pastry with the apricot glaze and allow the glaze to harden at room temperature.
- 9 Serve and enjoy!

Tip: Instead of a toaster, place the pastries in the oven or microwave to reheat and enjoy warm.



To learn more about Mountain View Fruit Sales, visit www.mvfruit.com

WEST PAKTM
AVOCADO, INC.

LEADING THE PAK

By Anne Allen

Great leadership, like farming itself, is an act of cultivation—requiring foresight, passion, and courage. It begins with intention and care, a willingness to cultivate conditions in which growth can happen naturally and sustainably. Consider the avocado. Once a humble fruit, now it's a global symbol of healthy eating, and the potential of its growth has only just been scratched.

As I speak to Mario Pacheco, Chief Executive Officer of West Pak Avocado, this potential becomes acute. Demand for organic produce continues to climb, and

organic avocados have emerged as a critical driver. While organic avocados currently account for 6-10 percent of total sales volume in the United States, the category is growing, with projections suggesting it could soon surpass 20 percent of the total avocado market*.

This exciting opportunity for growth means suppliers looking to capture this moment must be nimble, innovative, and committed to the organic supply chain—all traits West Pak Avocado has enmeshed in its business model.



“The organic avocado market is defined by a powerful blend of increasing consumer demand and an industry-wide commitment to greater integrity and oversight,” Mario begins. “Evolving standards serve to elevate the entire category and reinforce the value of truly robust programs. For a quality-focused supplier like West Pak Avocado, this shift is a clear advantage.”

For years, West Pak Avocado has worked to secure its position in the organic avocado category through a foundation of reliable sourcing, rigorous quality control, and continuous innovation. Sourcing premium organic fruit year-round from California, Mexico, and Peru, the company’s strategic vertical integration is especially beneficial for managing supply fluctuations and meeting year-round demand for organic avocados, and its commitment to traceability offers transparency and integrity that organic shoppers demand.

But who is this demographic, and what does capturing their attention mean for West Pak Avocado’s success?

Mario is all too happy to clue me in.

“Organic shoppers are truly driving growth in the avocado category,” Mario explains. “This is a sophisticated, high-value consumer segment that prioritizes healthy eating and wants complete transparency about how their food is grown and handled. The organic avocado purchaser spends significantly more on avocados—both organic and conventional—annually, visits grocery stores more frequently, and drives a higher overall market basket value.”

Due to this shopping frequency, the organic avocado shopper is a highly valuable segment for retailers. These shoppers tend to spend nearly twice as much on avocados annually, in comparison to those who buy conventional avocados.

“For every retailer focused on maximizing category performance, a robust organic avocado program is essential to strategically capturing this significant growth opportunity,” Mario emphasizes. “Establishing an organic program is a key strategy for superior category returns and for fulfilling the clear, continuous desire for healthy, premium fruit.”

Recognizing this premium customer is essential for developing successful retail strategies that foreground health, quality, and origin.

As Mario tells me, today’s sophisticated buyers demand full clarity on their food’s origin and handling, a trend he maintains is here to stay.

“West Pak anticipates the continued focus on healthy options in 2026 and beyond. Consumers, especially younger generations and households with children, are actively seeking out nutrient-dense foods grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers,” Mario adds. “We are intensifying our marketing to clearly communicate the nutritional benefits—avocados are rich in vitamins K, C, E, and B—and highlighting the environmentally friendly, regenerative agriculture practices used by our organic growers.”

In addition, the company’s fully certified National Organic Program (NOP) packing houses and rigorous



“Evolving standards serve to elevate the entire category and reinforce the value of truly robust programs. For a quality-focused supplier like West Pak Avocado, this shift is a clear advantage.”

MARIO PACHECO
Chief Executive Officer,
West Pak Avocado



certification process guarantee the highest quality and responsible farming practices.

“We have made critical updates in recent years, primarily in response to the USDA’s Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) final rule, which took full effect in March 2024,” Mario states. “Our core program updates have focused on enhancing compliance and protecting the organic label, which is paramount to consumer trust. We have reinforced our supply chain to comply with the stricter certification requirements and to ensure we meet the highest standards for traceability and enforcement mandated by the rule.”

Providing packaging and point-of-sale marketing that appeal to health-conscious consumers who prioritize healthy options is another element of West Pak Avocado’s strategy. Plus, its ongoing AVO360 program helps to bring organics full circle for shoppers through smart branding and targeted marketing.

“We are launching new branded bags and distinct PLU stickers for our organic fruit to boost visibility and recognition at the point of sale. We are also aligning our efforts with key cultural moments, such as Earth Month in April and National Organics Month in September, to celebrate the goodness of organic avocados,” Mario says.

By combining a year-round supply chain with cutting-edge traceability technology and a focused strategy for the health-conscious consumer, West Pak is well-positioned to capitalize on the market’s explosive growth.

“Our goal is to always stay ahead of the curve and ensure our avocados and the West Pak name remain a gold standard for organic integrity,” Mario concludes.

As consumers continue to seek food that aligns with their values, organic avocado leaders have a unique opportunity to shape the future of the industry. With West Pak Avocado’s current strategy in place, the supplier is prepared to bring continued leadership to the forefront of the “Pak” for years to come. 



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Why the Complaints You Dread May Be Your Best Customers

By Editorial Contributor Leslie Lawrence, Customer Experience Specialist, Joe Produce SearchSM

I had a customer call the other day who was unhappy. Fortunately, I was able to help her, and everything worked out.

After the call, I'll admit I was rattled—she was blunt, and at moments, downright rude. But once the emotion passed and I replayed the conversation in my head, I realized something important:

This was good.

Customers who take the time to call or email when they're disappointed are still invested in the relationship. They haven't quietly walked away. They're giving us a chance to make it right—and insight that can help us improve as a company.

In fact, research consistently shows that customers who voice concerns are often more likely to do business with you again than customers who never complain. When handled well, a complaint can strengthen loyalty, reinforce trust, and deepen the partnership.

At our company, we tell clients: Once your job is live on our website, please let us know if you're unhappy—or if you're not getting the results you expected. That feedback is invaluable. It helps us improve our service and correct problems we might not otherwise see.

And, of course, we love the calls and emails that share the good news too: The job is now closed, and they found the right person through our website. Happy customers return. But so do unhappy customers—especially the ones who feel heard, respected, and supported.

Unhappy customers who share their issues give us a wonderful opportunity to listen, learn, and improve (oh, and write stories about the subject).

Which brings me to this: That small "opportunity" pushed me to do some research on handling complaints. I thought I'd share what I found—so maybe you'll value your next complaining customer too. (Not that there are any complaints in the produce business.)

"Customers who don't complain...walk."
-Bill Gates

Nine Helpful Tips for Handling Customer Complaints

1. LISTEN WITHOUT INTERRUPTING

➤ Let the customer fully explain the issue before responding. Feeling heard goes a long way toward diffusing frustration.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEM IMMEDIATELY

➤ Even if the issue is still under review, recognizing the concern shows respect and professionalism.

3. ASK CLEAR, SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

➤ Gather the details you need—what happened, when, and what "success" looks like to them. Clarity helps uncover the root cause.

4. RESPOND PROMPTLY

➤ Speed matters in produce. The product is perishable, windows are short, and delays can turn a minor problem into a costly one.

5. STAY CALM AND PROFESSIONAL

➤ Avoid defensiveness. A composed response builds confidence and keeps the conversation productive, even when the tone is not.

6. OFFER A FAIR SOLUTION

➤ Whether it's a credit, replacement, adjustment, or another remedy, solutions should align with company policy and the situation—and feel fair to the customer.

7. DOCUMENT EVERY COMPLAINT

➤ Track issues consistently. Documentation helps identify patterns, reduces repeat problems, and strengthens internal accountability.

8. CLOSE THE LOOP

➤ Follow up after the resolution to confirm satisfaction and reinforce the relationship. "We wanted to make sure this is truly resolved" goes a long way.

9. APOLOGIZE

➤ Acknowledge the inconvenience and take responsibility where appropriate. A genuine apology helps rebuild trust and shows customers their concerns matter.



The Mindset That Makes This Work

Your perspective in these situations is everything. Stay calm, stay pleasant, and be grateful they took the time to complain—rather than quietly disappear.

Once the customer's issue is resolved, the internal team should work together to identify and correct the root cause. After the fix is implemented, contact the customer to confirm the issue has been fully resolved and to thank them for bringing it to your attention.

That's how a complaint becomes improvement—and how improvement becomes loyalty. 🍎

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Leslie Lawrence
Customer Experience Specialist

WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Del Fresco Pure®
The Original Cherry
Tomatoes on the Vine® ?



THE ORIGINAL CHERRY TOMATOES ON THE VINE® BUTTERMILK SALAD

INGREDIENTS

- 6 cups** Del Fresco Pure® The Original Cherry Tomatoes on the Vine®, halved
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2/3 cup** buttermilk
- 1/4 cup** sour cream
- 3 tbsp** fresh basil leaves, thinly sliced
- 1** spring onion, sliced
- 2 cloves** garlic, minced

Prep Time: 5 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- Put the cherry tomatoes in a large serving bowl. Season with salt and pepper and toss.
- In another bowl, whisk the buttermilk, sour cream, basil, green onion, and garlic. Season with pepper. Drizzle the dressing over the tomatoes and toss. Enjoy!

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FORWARD *With* PURPOSE

How 4Earth Farms™ Integrates Food Recovery Into Its Supply Chain Strategy

By Jordan Okumura-Wright

In a fresh produce marketplace defined by tight margins, retailer consolidation, and rising sustainability expectations, 4Earth Farms™ has built its growth strategy around three priorities: operational excellence, responsible sourcing, and supply chain efficiency.

As a grower-shipper and distributor serving retail and foodservice customers across North America, 4Earth Farms operates at the intersection of farming, logistics, and market demand. Success depends not only on product quality and consistency but also on shrink management, inventory flow, and waste reduction. Increasingly, it also depends on alignment with customer expectations

around reliability, responsiveness, and environmental stewardship.

For 4Earth Farms, these elements are integrated into daily operations. The company operates a national cold chain distribution program, sourcing from diverse growing regions to ensure consistent, high-quality product year-round.

Sustainability is embedded throughout operations, from reducing waste in the supply chain to recent investments in renewable energy. A solar project producing a megawatt of clean energy is one example of how the company continues to integrate environmental stewardship alongside operational performance.



Deborah Lake, Chairman, and David Lake, President, of 4Earth Farms™

Managing Surplus as a Supply Chain Variable

In fresh produce, surplus is inevitable. Weather variability, retail specifications, and promotional shifts routinely generate product that remains edible but may not fit primary commercial channels.

4Earth Farms has positioned food recovery not as an afterthought, but as an operational outlet. A key partner is

Food Forward, a Southern California-based nonprofit specializing in large-scale fresh produce recovery and redistribution. David Lake, President of 4Earth Farms, officially joined Food Forward's Board of Trustees in 2025, contributing operational insight and strategic perspective to guide the organization's growth and impact.

"Food isn't abstract," 4Earth Farms Chairman Deborah Lake explains. "It's health, it's dignity, and it's how families take care of each other. Surplus product isn't waste—it's an opportunity to extend

the supply chain's impact beyond the business, and it has to be managed with the same operational rigor as everything else we do."

Food Forward's logistics model—handling pickup for the majority of donations—reduces friction for suppliers, allowing 4Earth Farms to redirect surplus efficiently while maintaining focus on core distribution activities. Many companies across the produce industry participate, creating a collaborative ecosystem that extends reach and impact.



“Food isn’t abstract. It’s health, it’s dignity, it’s how families take care of each other.”

Deborah Lake, Chairman, 4Earth Farms™



Scale, Infrastructure, and Measurable Impact

Food Forward has surpassed 500 million pounds of fresh produce recovered and redistributed since its founding and is on track to distribute well over 100 million pounds for the second year and growing. Its expanding warehouse footprint and logistics systems support responsiveness at scale, while diverting produce from landfill reduces methane emissions and contributes to sustainability metrics increasingly tracked by retail buyers.

Large distributors require recovery partners capable of absorbing truckload quantities with cold chain integrity. Surplus is uneven across commodities and weeks, and Food Forward trains recipient agencies to work within this variability. The result is operational efficiency for suppliers, measurable environmental impact, and improved community access to fresh produce.

The Financial Dimension of Recovery

While produce donations support hunger relief, there are operational costs associated with managing recovery at scale. Food Forward encourages suppliers to reinvest a portion of avoided hauling or disposal costs as financial contributions, which support labor, transportation, and infrastructure expansion—enabling the organization to

increase distribution capacity and serve more communities.

“The next level is proving we can manage surplus efficiently. Reducing waste, supporting communities, and improving sustainability metrics strengthen long-term partnerships,” David emphasizes.

Deborah adds, “Integrating responsible practices into sourcing, distribution, and community engagement ensures lasting results. Recovery isn’t a side initiative—it’s part of our operational strategy.”

Retail Expectations and Market Alignment

Retailers and foodservice operators increasingly expect measurable sustainability performance from suppliers. Waste diversion, community engagement, and documented environmental outcomes are now standard evaluation criteria.

For companies like 4Earth Farms, partnering with Food Forward demonstrates action rather than intention. Industry collaboration ensures surplus produce reaches high-need communities efficiently while allowing suppliers to maintain operational focus. Food recovery also highlights operational flexibility and resilience, showing a company can deliver on product, purpose, and performance simultaneously.

Integrating People, Produce, and Planet

At 4Earth Farms, leadership emphasizes people, produce, and planet. In practice, that means reducing waste across the value chain, strengthening grower and retailer relationships, and participating in collaborative initiatives aligned with the company’s core competency: moving fresh food efficiently.

“This framework guides every operational decision—from ensuring year-round supply to supporting programs like Food Forward. Leadership is about making choices that create tangible impact,” Deborah notes.

David Lake adds, “Execution matters. Infrastructure, cold chain programs, and sustainable energy solutions back up our commitments. Strategy without follow-through doesn’t deliver results.”

The partnership with Food Forward illustrates how operational capability can intersect with social need. Surplus



“Execution matters. Infrastructure, cold chain programs, and sustainable energy solutions back up our commitments. Strategy without follow-through doesn’t deliver results.”

David Lake, President, 4Earth Farms™

product becomes input for hunger relief networks rather than landfill waste. Logistics expertise supports nonprofit scalability. Financial reinvestment strengthens the broader recovery infrastructure, enabling Food Forward to expand distribution and serve more communities.

For the produce trade, the takeaway is clear: food recovery is no longer peripheral—it is embedded in how companies manage risk, reputation, and resource efficiency.

“Success isn’t just measured in cases shipped or pounds delivered. It’s in how

we move produce responsibly, support communities, and deliver on promises to our customers,” Deborah concludes. “Integrating recovery into our supply chain is not a side initiative—it’s a business strategy. That’s how we grow, how we lead, and how we make a lasting impact.”

As Food Forward continues building on its 500 million-pound milestone, and as 4Earth Farms expands national cold chain programs and market reach, their collaboration reflects a broader industry evolution: aligning commercial performance with measurable environmental and social outcomes. 



Scott Reade

Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Pandol Brothers

Time at Company: 14 years

With Peggy Packer

Scott Reade is no stranger to navigating the waves. With 14 years under his belt at the company, Pandol Brothers' Vice President of Sales and Marketing has perfectly adapted his surfer mindset to the world of fresh produce, tackling the challenges of our industry with an admirable balance of expertise, creativity, and concentrated positivity. Find out more about this produce vet's career and the lessons he has learned along the way in this MVP spotlight...

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

"I have to make a concerted effort to be positive. It is easy to be critical in our business with so many supply factors out of your control, and I remind myself that the industry is in the same boat."

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

"A little of both. I was working in the carrot business when Bolthouse Farms transitioned from family ownership to private equity ownership. At that time, my family was in the grape-growing business, so it was an easy transition to sell grapes for the Pandol family."

» Is there a lesson in sales you've seen help in life?

"As I've gotten older, it's become easier to tell someone something directly, rather than 'dance' around an issue. Some might appreciate a little sugar-coating, but either way, it is best to be direct."

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

"I like to surf and used to live at the beach for several years."



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

"A cheetah—the fastest animal I can think of. In sales, you always want to think ahead, as much as anyone can, to anticipate the needs of your customers and growers."

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

"Quality sells regardless of how many grapes are in the market. Flavor keeps the shopper coming back."

» What values drive you?

- Creativity
- Growth
- Balance
- Achievement

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

"Focus on building relationships."

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

- Andre Radandt, *Former Chief Executive Officer, Bolthouse Farms*
- Tim McCorkle, *Former Vice President of Sales, Bolthouse Farms*
- Ron Dresher, *Former Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Muranaka Farms*

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BUILT TO LAST:

How Kings River Packing Grows Citrus—and Trust

By Peggy Packer



What do you get when you combine humility, integrity, and excellence with over a century of experience in agriculture?

A formidable fruit operation that promises reliability, quality, and a committed approach to partnership.

A formidable fruit operation like Kings River Packing, that is.

With a historic legacy dating back to the mid-1800s, Kings River Packing has managed to strategically grow its brand and footprint while never losing sight of one fact: Citrus is a natural product grown in an environment nobody can fully control. While each season sparks its own new challenges, the generational citrus grower's most central commitment—delivering the highest quality fruit in as uninterrupted a supply as possible—remains the same.

As the company puts another successful year in the books, Michelle Alo, Vice President of Marketing, sat down with *The Snack* to give us a glimpse of not only Kings River Packing's accomplished history, but its promising future.



Peggy Packer: Over a century and a half of success in agriculture is no small feat! How has Kings River Packing evolved throughout its 173-year history? What industry challenges fueled this evolution?

Michelle Alo, Vice President of Marketing, Kings River Packing: The Hazelton family settled near California's Kings River in 1853 to raise cattle, laying the groundwork for a business shaped by hard work and perseverance. After a cattle drive in 1866, our founders planted the first orange trees in Fresno County, marking a shift that would define generations to come. From the beginning, Kings River has been guided by patience, resilience, and a commitment to building for the long-term.



For many generations, we were growers first. In 1977, we made the pivotal decision to build our own packing house so we could take greater ownership of quality and how our fruit reached the market. That shift allowed us not only to better serve our own groves, but to support other local grower families who needed a dependable partner they could build their future around.

The industry has changed significantly since then—year-round demand, evolving consumer expectations, tighter supply chains—but our response has always been intentional. We've grown carefully, building flexibility into our operation so we can adapt to change without losing the fundamentals that have sustained us for eight generations and counting.

PP: What values has the company upheld since its founding, and how have these values guided Kings River Packing's continued success?

MA: Our core values—humility, integrity, and excellence—guide us as we work with a natural product grown in an environment we can't fully control. Humility keeps us grounded, knowing nature ultimately sets the pace. Integrity ensures we do everything within our control transparently and responsibly, from farming practices to packing and logistics. Excellence drives us to invest in technology, processes, and partnerships that help us overcome obstacles and consistently meet our customers' expectations. These values allow us to navigate uncertainty while building trust across the entire supply chain.

Those values come to life in how we show up for our partners. We believe what we grow carries responsibility—to our growers, our customers, and the families who bring our fruit home. Recently, we welcomed a longtime retail partner to walk our original Heirloom Navel orchard, still producing some of the best Navels over 150 years later, and tour our packing facilities, sharing the full journey from harvest to shipment. Inviting partners into that story builds trust and underscores that today's quality is rooted in more than 150 years of care and stewardship.



PP: What strategic advancements have recently paved the way for the company's growth?

MA: Our growth strategy starts with a simple belief that growth should come from service instead of ambition.

That philosophy guides how we invest. We've expanded capacity, modernized our facilities, and implemented advanced sorting and grading technology to drive consistency and reduce variability. But technology alone isn't what differentiates us.

What sets us apart is how intentionally everything works together—our growers, packing houses, logistics, and retail partnerships. When customers walk through our facilities, they see a deliberately integrated operation, designed to deliver dependable quality, season after season. That level of integration allows us to respond faster, plan further ahead, and support our partners in ways that go well beyond moving fruit.



““””

From the beginning, Kings River has been guided by patience, resilience, and a commitment to building for the long-term.

Michelle Alo,

Vice President of Marketing, Kings River Packing

PP: What growth milestones is Kings River Packing targeting in 2026 and beyond? Why are these primary areas of importance for the company?

MA: Our focus moving forward is helping our retail partners succeed where it matters most—on the shelf.

We're investing more heavily in marketing support because we know the end-consumer ultimately drives purchase decisions. Helping retailers engage shoppers more effectively keeps trips up and builds long-term category growth. At the same time, we're doubling down on quality and supply planning, getting far enough ahead to adjust before challenges can ever become disruptions.

In an industry where so much is unpredictable, we work hard to control what we can. That consistency gives our partners confidence—not just in our fruit, but in the relationships behind it.

At the end of the day, our goal is simple: to make buying citrus easier, more dependable, and more rewarding for everyone involved.

In an industry defined by constant change, Kings River Packing stays grounded in what has always mattered—making thoughtful investments where it has the greatest impact. Rather than trying to manage every uncertainty, the company focuses on strengthening the areas that allow it to better serve its growers, partners, and end consumers alike. By investing in the right technology, facilities, and processes, Kings River creates consistency where it counts, supports long-term sustainability, and remains prepared to adapt as the future unfolds.

Michelle puts it simply: Success in citrus is built on trust—staying grounded and investing with purpose so the work we do today can be shared for generations. 



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A Closer Look at WINDSET FARMS® ARIA™ Tomatoes Sweet Brilliance

UP CLOSE

By Ryann Howard

The first thing that struck me about WINDSET FARMS® ARIA™ Sweet Brilliance was the uniform glow of the tomatoes themselves. Even before reading the name, the pack communicates a sense of polish—smooth, evenly colored fruit arranged with a natural symmetry. It's the kind of presentation that doesn't shout for attention, but earns it anyway.

The name ARIA immediately clicked. In music, an aria is all about clarity: a single melodic line that rises above the accompaniment. These tomatoes embody that same idea. Their smooth finish, luminous color, and balanced size feel

intentional, almost as if they were composed. The branding leans into this theme, with packaging that is clean and refined, offering shoppers an immediate glimpse at the sweet tomatoes inside.

Growing conditions play a starring role here as well. Produced year-round in Windset Farms' controlled greenhouse environment, ARIA benefits from steady care and precise varietal selection. The result is a tomato that stays true to its promise: reliable sweetness and a consistency that retailers can build into an everyday or seasonal tomato strategy.

ARIA Tomatoes' flavor and branding have already earned international recognition, winning a 2026 Superior Taste Award from the International Taste Institute.

As a whole, ARIA Sweet Brilliance offers an experience that blends artistry with dependability. From snacking sets to elevated displays, it supports a range of retail approaches while staying rooted in Windset Farms' belief that growing food is a performance; one where color, texture, and flavor harmonize before the curtain rises. 🍅



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WTF DO I DO WITH Peelz® Citrus ?

{ what the fork }



PEELZ® CITRUS SUGAR SCRUB

INGREDIENTS

Zest from **2** Peelz® Mandarins
 Juice from **2** Peelz Mandarins
2 cups granulated sugar or
 coconut sugar
¼ cup coconut oil

Prep Time: 10 mins
Makes: 1¾ cups

DIRECTIONS

- 1 In a medium bowl, mix together sugar, coconut oil, Mandarin zest, Mandarin juice, and lemon juice until combined.
- 2 Put scrub into a mason jar or seal tight container for use near the sink or in the shower. Enjoy as a refreshing body scrub!

Note: To change the consistency of the scrub, simply add more or less sugar.

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

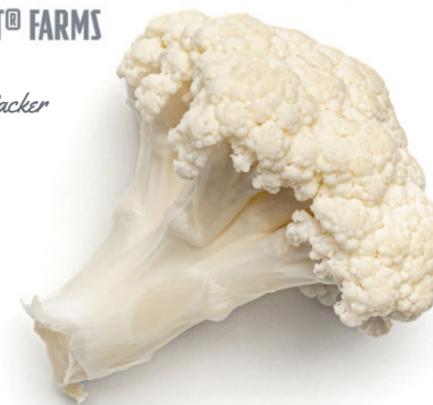


CONVENIENCE WITH *out* COMPROMISE

A Q&A WITH CHRIS DREW,
 PRESIDENT *and* CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
 OCEAN MIST® FARMS



By Peggy Packer



73



A historic legacy and an innovative vision for the future often come together to create something great.

Such is the case for Ocean Mist® Farms and its already popular Roastables line. Tackling portfolio growth with a renewed focus on product development and value-added innovation, the powerful family-farming operation, with its highly recognized brand, is building on a legacy of premium fresh vegetables while actively adapting to evolving consumer needs.

Ocean Mist's innovative new Roastables line made its official debut at the 2024 Global Produce & Floral Show and has only gained momentum since. A lineup that first consisted of only three SKUs—featuring washed and halved Brussels sprouts paired with the chef-crafted flavors of Lemon Caesar, Sweet Sesame, and Sun-Dried Tomato—now includes seven items spanning three different vegetable options, each with uniquely distinct flavors.

While bolstered by new additions like the Zesty Herb, Sweet Teriyaki, Spicy Buffalo, and Parmesan & Black Pepper Ready-to-Roast kits, Ocean Mist Farms' Roastables lineup recently gained another competitive advantage in the form of a strategic rebrand in October 2025. With this newly revamped collection, the fresh powerhouse aims to further strengthen its position as a category innovator and trusted partner in fresh, value-added vegetables.

Taking us behind the scenes of this recent rebrand and the line's initial launch, President and Chief Executive Officer Chris Drew reveals how the supplier is staying ahead of the latest trends and consumer demands.



Q1



PEGGY PACKER: THE ROASTABLES LINE HAS SEEN SOME EXCITING UPDATES LATELY! WHAT CONSUMER INSIGHTS INSPIRED THE INITIAL LAUNCH OF OCEAN MIST® FARMS' ROASTABLES KITS?

CHRIS DREW, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, OCEAN MIST® FARMS: We've invested significant time and resources into understanding evolving consumer needs. Those insights fuel our product development process and ensure we're delivering on-trend, solution-driven innovations that excite our consumers while expanding the category and driving sales growth for our retail partners.



We know today's consumers are stretched for time, yet still want to prepare nutritious, great-tasting fresh vegetables for their families. They're looking for convenience without compromising on quality. We also know that getting kids to eat their vegetables can be a feat for parents. Each of our Roastables items includes a unique chef-crafted seasoning packet, so there is a variety of flavor options sure to appeal to every palate at the table. Our goal is to create convenient, time-saving meal solutions that never sacrifice flavor or quality.



Q2

PP: CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE ROASTABLES REBRAND? WHAT SPARKED THIS MOVE, AND HOW DOES IT INCREASE THE LINEUP'S APPEAL AT RETAIL?

CD: Recognizing consumers are seeking meal solutions that are both nutritious and delicious, we knew the key to connecting with them starts with visibility at the retail level. We knew we had to break out of the 'sea of sameness' in the value-added category.

In October 2025, our Roastables line underwent a full rebrand, launching under the bold new *No Shame in a Shortcut* campaign. The new packaging delivers standout designs with bold colors, high-impact graphics, and witty, fun slogans that give each item its own personality.

Q3

PP: AS THIS GAME-CHANGING REBRAND SHAKES UP THE CATEGORY, ARE THERE ANY OTHER PORTFOLIO INNOVATIONS YOU'D LIKE TO GIVE US A CLOSER LOOK AT?

CD: Ocean Mist Farms unveiled our first-to-market Heartichokes in December to tremendous anticipation. Inspired by our Roastables line, these tender baby artichoke quarters are ready to cook right out of the package and are sure to elevate any meal. The line features three items: two varieties with chef-crafted seasoning packets—Lemon Butter and Savory Parm—and one unseasoned option for artichoke fans who prefer their own signature spices. Versatile and delicious, each package contains the equivalent of roughly five trimmed artichokes, delivering on the promise of virtually no prep, no mess, and no cleanup.

As the largest grower-shipper of artichokes in North America, we are, after all, known for these coveted thistles. Being able to evolve our flagship item into a first-to-market line of distinctive, time-saving products that we believe consumers will truly enjoy is very gratifying for our team.



“ RECOGNIZING CONSUMERS ARE SEEKING MEAL SOLUTIONS THAT ARE BOTH NUTRITIOUS AND DELICIOUS, WE KNEW THE KEY TO CONNECTING WITH THEM STARTS WITH VISIBILITY AT THE RETAIL LEVEL. WE KNEW WE HAD TO BREAK OUT OF THE 'SEA OF SAMENESS' IN THE VALUE-ADDED CATEGORY. ”

**- Chris Drew,
President and
Chief Executive Officer,
Ocean Mist® Farms**



Q4

PP: WHAT ARE SOME OF OCEAN MIST FARMS' KEY FOCUSES WHEN IT COMES TO PORTFOLIO GROWTH AND BRAND VISIBILITY?

CD: We recognize the bulk commodity category is gradually shrinking; however, it remains a very important part of our business. Throughout our 100-plus-year history, we've consistently adapted and evolved to meet changing consumer needs and marketplace trends. Understanding how to transform traditional commodities into innovative, value-added meal solutions—while maintaining the right balance between the two—is essential.

By pairing deep agricultural expertise with data-driven insights, we are expanding thoughtfully into new formats, flavors, and meal solution concepts that make fresh vegetables easier and more convenient for today's consumers. This approach allows Ocean Mist to honor its century-old heritage in commodities while introducing products that drive category growth and strengthen partnerships at the retail level.

Charting the course for value-added product development, Ocean Mist Farms wields its historic legacy and creative adaptability to take fresh produce to new heights year after year. When more fresh demands arise at retail—as they always do—the supplier will be more than ready to meet consumers' needs with yet another highly anticipated innovation. **S**

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SUN-DRIED TOMATO

— NO HASSLE —

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MINUTES
TO IMPRESS

*

SKIP-THE-PREP KIT

CUT

WASHED

SEASONED

WTF DO I DO WITH Highline Mushrooms GRILLMATE Sauté Kit ?

{ what the fork }



HIGHLINE MUSHROOMS GRILLMATE SAUTÉ KIT

INGREDIENTS

1 package (24 oz) Highline Mushrooms GRILLMATE Sauté Kit

2 tbsp olive oil or butter
Protein of choice, for serving

Prep Time: 5 mins

Cook Time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Heat olive oil or butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat.
- 2 Rinse and add the sliced mushrooms from the GRILLMATE Sauté Kit.
- 3 As the mushrooms begin to soften and release moisture, sprinkle in the grill seasoning packet.
- 4 Continue to sauté until the liquid has fully evaporated and the mushrooms are tender and golden brown.
- 5 Remove from heat and serve as a topping or side for grilled chicken breast, steak, or your favorite plant-based protein. Enjoy!

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WTF DO I DO WITH Del Rey Avocados ?

{ what the fork }



AVOCADO CHICKEN SALAD

INGREDIENTS

- 2 ripe** Del Rey California Avocados, divided
- 1½ lb** cooked chicken breast or thigh, diced or shredded
- ¼ cup** mayonnaise
- 2 tbsp** Greek yogurt, optional
- Zest of 1** lemon
- 2 tsp** fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup** celery, finely diced
- ¼ cup** red onion or shallot, very finely minced
- 2 tbsp** fresh parsley, chopped
- 1 tsp** fresh dill or chives, chopped
- ¾ tsp** kosher salt, or to taste
- ½ tsp** freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ tsp** garlic powder
- Pinch** cayenne or Aleppo pepper, optional

Prep Time: 25 mins
Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1** In a large bowl, gently mash 1 avocado with the mayonnaise, Greek yogurt (if using), lemon zest, and lemon juice. Mix until creamy but still slightly textured.
- 2** Add the cooked chicken to the bowl and gently fold until evenly coated with the avocado dressing.
- 3** Fold in the celery, red onion or shallot, parsley, and dill or chives until well combined.
- 4** Dice the remaining avocado and gently fold it into the salad, keeping the pieces intact.
- 5** Season with salt, black pepper, garlic powder, and optional cayenne or Aleppo pepper.
- 6** Cover and refrigerate for 10–15 minutes to allow flavors to meld.
- 7** Enjoy in lettuce cups, sandwiches, or over mixed greens!

To learn more about Del Rey Avocado, visit www.delreyavocado.com



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CALCULATED Success

By Peggy Packer

- ☑ Transparency? Check.
- ☑ Reliability? Check.
- ☑ Sustainability? Check.

When it comes to the most essential qualities one seeks in a supply-side partner, Topline Farms® prides itself on checking all the boxes. The company's proven ability to consistently deliver high-quality produce rests on over 75 years of combined expertise in growing, harvesting, and distributing fresh produce, allowing the greenhouse grower to meet demand reliably while continuing to diversify and scale its already impressive portfolio.



“Topline Farms was founded on a simple set of principles that still define who we are today: putting people first, growing responsibly, and delivering on our commitments,” **Dino DiLaudo, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing**, reflects. “For more

than 75 years, these values have shaped how we operate and how we build connections across our business. In an industry where success is based heavily on trust, our business depends on strong relationships. We have learned that trust is earned through transparency, clear communication, and our reliability to follow through. This approach continues today as we work closely with our growers, logistics teams, and supply chain partners.”

Leading with transparency and dependability in mind has enabled Topline Farms to stay coordinated with its partners, address challenges quickly, and support its collaborative goals. Alongside these prominent values, sustainability is another key focus determining the company's latest growth strategies.

“This has become one of our most important guiding principles. Whether it's investing in resource-efficient greenhouse design, reducing waste, or strengthening our traceability systems, we're focused on growing in a way that protects our environment and supports the long-term resilience of our growing operations,” adds **Justine Taylor, Topline's Chief Sustainability Officer**.

“Our decades of greenhouse experience and the operational systems we've built around it allow us to deliver consistently, but it's our values that continue to guide how we evolve.”



Together, these values guide the company's decisions, strengthen its partnerships, and ensure its products continue to reflect the standards the greenhouse operation has upheld for generations.

Over the past several years, Topline Farms has experienced rapid growth, expanding its greenhouse acreage, product

portfolio, and operational capabilities. This includes expanded capacity in multiple key categories and continued investment in the company's own transportation fleet, which offers direct oversight of how its products move from its facilities to customers. The greenhouse grower's company-owned fleet consists of 85 highway trucks, enhancing distribution capacity and driving efficiency.

“Our approach to growth has been deliberate,” Dino continues. “We invest in infrastructure that strengthens reliability and scale in a way that allows us to maintain the quality and service standards we're known for.”

“ ”

Topline Farms® was founded on a simple set of principles that still define who we are today: putting people first, growing responsibly, and delivering on our commitments.

Dino DiLaudo,
Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Topline Farms®

With this tactical blueprint for growth, Topline Farms secures strategic advantages that keep it in line with the evolving demands of a fast-changing industry.

“The produce sector has evolved significantly over the past decade, shaped by rising consumer expectations and increasing complexity across the supply chain. Today’s consumers want to know where their food comes from, that it is fresh, sustainably grown, and safe to eat,” Dino says. “At the same time, retailers and distributors expect enhanced food-safety standards, tighter traceability, and consistent quality and volume year-round. The rapid growth of controlled-environment agriculture, coupled with advances in automation, data analytics, and climate management, has fundamentally changed how fresh produce is grown and delivered.”

Maintaining this competitive edge requires disciplined, long-term investment across the company’s already advanced operations, further strengthening its fully integrated model.

“We continue to expand our controlled-environment-growing capabilities, integrate precision agriculture technologies, and strengthen our data-driven approach to decision-making,” Justine shares. “Our vertically integrated model allows us to maintain oversight from seed selection through harvest, packing, and distribution, giving us greater control over quality, safety, and consistency.”

With an experienced team and long-tenured leadership, the grower delivers dependable quality and service season after season.

By combining decades of growing expertise with modern production and logistics systems, Topline Farms offers an expansive portfolio of fresh, flavorful, and sustainable produce, while giving its retail and foodservice partners the reliability, transparency, and operational insight needed to meet their quality and supply commitments.

“What sets Topline Farms apart is the way we show up for our partners,” Dino emphasizes. “We don’t see ourselves as just a supplier. We support our partners with insight, flexibility, and a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in today’s produce market. We’re proud to be known for being responsive and easy to work with.”

From packaging and merchandising to product planning, promotions, recyclable packaging requirements, and private label programs, Topline Farms supports a wide range of industry needs. And as the industry’s needs continue to evolve, so too will Topline Farms’ operations.

“Looking ahead, our growth will focus on expanding our greenhouse footprint, strengthening our logistics network, and advancing our sustainability commitments,” Justine tells me. “These investments allow us to scale responsibly while

“”

Our decades of greenhouse experience and the operational systems we’ve built around it allow us to deliver consistently, but it’s our values that continue to guide how we evolve.

Justine Taylor,
Chief Sustainability Officer, Topline Farms®



maintaining the quality, consistency, flavor, and reliability our partners expect.”

Further elevating its industry prowess, the company’s effective growth blueprint includes ongoing investments in next-generation greenhouse technology to supply more produce with fewer resources, improve efficiency, and reduce environmental impact.

“We’re also focused on greater transparency across the supply chain and on educating consumers about where their food comes from and how it’s grown,” Justine adds. “As interest in responsibly grown and traceable produce continues to rise, we see a clear opportunity to lead through measured growth, accountability, and long-term commitment to sustainability.”

Throughout 2026, Topline Farms plans to further expand its greenhouse operations, with more than 175 acres planned for LED-lit production. This expansion includes 42 new acres of LED-lit Roma tomatoes—one of the fastest-growing segments in the category—bringing the company’s total Roma acreage to 70.

While increasing its operational capacity, Topline Farms is also advancing environmental stewardship and ethical sourcing across its operations. In 2025, the company committed to onboarding the majority of its grower supply chain onto the Ethical Charter Implementation Program (ECIP), embedding consistent, practical social compliance expectations at the farm level. This marked a shift from individual compliance efforts to a coordinated, systems-based approach across its controlled-environment agriculture network, earning the grower a place in the 2026 ECIP Leadership Circle.

“This supply-chain focus is reinforced by our own internal commitments to social accountability, as well as new

efforts aimed at better understanding and managing environmental impacts across our broader value chain, from inputs to distribution,” Justine explains. “Together, these initiatives reflect a transparent, end-to-end approach to ethical and responsible practices, where leadership, operational discipline, and continuous improvement are embedded across both grower and internal operations.”



Dino concludes, saying, “We’re proud of how far we’ve come and even more excited for what lies ahead, building on the strong foundation of relationships, expertise, and values that have shaped Topline Farms.”

Our industry is constantly accelerating into the future—at what can often seem like an intimidating pace. As new consumer demands arise, retail needs evolve, and technological capabilities advance, more boxes will be added to the list of desired qualities in a supply-side partner. With one eye already trained on the expectations of tomorrow, Topline Farms will be there to swiftly check off each one. 5

PRODUCE PULSE

VEGETABLES: A GLOW UP ERA

BY ANNE ALLEN

The fresh produce department is evolving, and vegetables stand at the center. After Circana* released its Future of Produce report in January, I began to wonder if we're entering a new era of opportunity, especially after seeing that fresh fruit was set to outpace the department average. Fresh vegetables, on the other hand, were facing a tougher road.

Fresh fruit gained the advantage due to new snacking options and an uptick in consumer interest in tropical varieties. Why then, I wondered, couldn't fresh vegetables do the same? After all, consumers in 2026 are primed to try new things. Datassential**, a market research firm, noted that 64 percent of consumers are looking forward to trying new food or beverage trends this year.

Speaking both as a millennial and as someone who's read the statistics, we love trying new products; it's just a matter of presenting one that captures the cultural zeitgeist.



Innovation is already taking place. For example, Ocean Mist® Farms recently introduced its Roastables line to answer shopper demand for convenient vegetable options, and Church Brothers Farms seized the chance to shake up the salad kit category with the launch of its Little Gems Salad Kits.

But it isn't all about presenting something new.

Outside of packaged convenience, humble vegetables like cabbage are due for a moment in the spotlight. Pinterest Predicts 2026*** listed "Cabbage Crush" on its trend predictions for the year, noting that cabbage is a versatile and budget-friendly ingredient. According to the social media site, searches for cabbage dumplings alone were up 110 percent.

Data can only tell us so much of the story, and predicting buying behavior only goes so far in the ever-changing marketplace of fresh produce. But I believe the pieces for a vegetable comeback are in play.



▶ MY FAVORITE THINGS ◀

THOMAS MATIER

DIRECTOR OF SALES,
NATURE FRESH FARMS

With Chandler James

For Thomas Matier, life is all about surrounding yourself with the people and experiences that bring you joy. Crossing off bucket-list items worldwide is a top priority, but equally important are Thomas' family pizza nights spent at home. Our team at *The Snack* found this list of favorite things to be highly relatable, and we think you will too...



1 MY FAMILY

Being with my wife and daughter is my favorite place to be. They bring me endless amounts of joy.



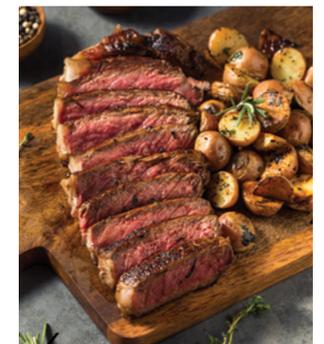
2 MY PETS

Katherine (Kat) and Willow follow me to the door each morning and are the first ones at the door to greet me home each evening.



3 BASEBALL

Every summer, I play on a men's league fastball team. It's awesome to be able to goof around and be competitive with great friends.



4 STEAK DINNER

My absolute favorite meal is a medium-rare steak with potatoes. Simple, yet always delicious.



5 TRAVELING

I've been to many places, but the farthest was Thailand. This spring, I'm heading to Ireland and Scotland with my wife.



6 FRIENDS

Every weekend, I look forward to spending time with my friends. Getting all the kids together, relaxing with great company, and maybe a couple OV Lagers.



7 TV

At the end of a long day, I love to kick back and relax while watching some of my favorite TV series. *Peaky Blinders* is one of my all-time top picks.



8 HOMEMADE PIZZA

Getting in the kitchen and making our own pizza dinners is fun and delicious, especially with Sauci™ tomatoes on top.

WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

Farm2You®
Nectarines

?



NECTARINE CAPRESE CROISSANT SANDWICH

INGREDIENTS

- 3 Farm2You® Nectarines, sliced
- 3 croissants, sliced in half
- 6 slices mozzarella cheese
- 2 medium size tomatoes, sliced
- Fresh basil leaves
- Balsamic glaze

Prep Time: 10 mins
Cook Time: 1-2 mins
Servings: 3

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Broil sliced croissants until the insides are lightly browned, about 1-2 minutes. Watch closely to prevent croissants from burning.
- 2 Layer sandwiches in this order: bottom of croissant, basil, mozzarella cheese, tomato slices, nectarine slices, a drizzle of balsamic glaze, and then the top of the croissant. Enjoy!

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WTF

DO I DO WITH

{ what the fork }

North Carolina Sweetpotatoes ?



HAWAIIAN SWEETPOTATO POKE BOWLS



Recipe credited to the North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission

INGREDIENTS

- 2 large** North Carolina Sweetpotatoes, skin on
- 3 tbsp** sesame oil, divided
- 2½ tbsp** light soy sauce, divided
- 1 lb** sushi-grade ahi tuna
- ¼ cup** rice vinegar
- 3 cups** cooked brown rice
- 2** Persian cucumbers, chopped (or **1** English cucumber)
- 1 cup** shredded carrots
- 2** small avocados, cut into chunks
- 1 cup** shelled edamame
- 3** green onions, finely chopped
- Spicy mayo and sesame seeds, for optional garnish

Prep Time: 30 mins

Cook Time: 20 mins

Servings: 4

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Preheat oven to 400° F and line a baking sheet with aluminum foil.
- 2 Cut sweetpotatoes into cubes and transfer to the prepared baking sheet. Drizzle with 2 tbsp sesame oil and 1½ tbsp soy sauce. Bake for 18–20 minutes, or until soft when pierced with a fork.
- 3 Cut tuna into cubes and place in a medium bowl. Add rice vinegar, remaining 1 tbsp sesame oil, and 1 tbsp soy sauce, and toss to coat.
- 4 To assemble the bowls, evenly divide brown rice, marinated tuna, roasted sweetpotatoes, edamame, carrots, avocados, and green onions among four bowls.
- 5 Drizzle with spicy mayo and sesame seeds, if desired. Enjoy!

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



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