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Has vertical farming finally turned the corner?



"Operators need to focus on being operators and scale accordingly, and tech vendors should focus on being tech vendors and not blur the line to become a grower," says Nick Genty, CEO of Ageye, a Raleigh, N.C.-based provider of turnkey vertical farming solutions, artificial intelligence-powered farm management and crop intelligence software. Photo courtesy of Ageye

From 'massive failures' to the path to profitability, industry insiders weigh in

By Jennifer Straley

March saw the tale of two vertical farming industries play out once again.

Plenty Unlimited announced it had filed for voluntary Chapter 11 bankruptcy on March 23, and a day later, Oishii announced it had acquired robotics company Tortuga AgTech, a move the company says will accelerate growth and cut its Koyo

strawberry harvesting costs by 50%.

Plenty is the latest in a slew of bankruptcies that have plagued the vertical farming industry in recent months, while companies like Oishii, 80 Acres Farms, Eden Green and others have continued to grow and expand.

What do these differing stories say about the current state of vertical farming?

"It shows us that we're making progress," says Nick Genty, CEO of Ageye, a Raleigh, N.C.-based provider of turnkey

vertical farming solutions, artificial intelligence-powered farm management and crop intelligence software.

Tom Stenzel, executive director of the CEA Alliance, agrees.

"The way I would characterize Plenty is, sure it's a bankruptcy, but it's really a reorganization," he said. "They're not going out of business. The reorganization gives them

FARMING page 6

Newly formed Global Grape Group launches campaign to drive demand

By Jennifer Straley

PALOS VERDES, Calif. — For the first time, table grape producers around the world are uniting to drive consumption and raise awareness of the fruit's nutritional benefits, flavor profiles and versatility, with an aim to collectively position grapes as the go-to healthful snack in the U.S. and around the globe.

The newly founded Global Grape Group, currently composed of representatives from Chile, Mexico and Peru, chose FEMME 2025, a multicultural Women's History Month event that organizers say convenes leaders, champions, trailblazers, visionaries, disrupters, trendsetters and change-makers for two days of inspiration and illumination, to launch its "Have a Grape Day" campaign in the U.S.

The global alliance and the consumer campaign comes at a critical time. Global table grape supplies continue to outpace consumption — a situation that Ignacio Caballero, Chile board member of the Global Grape Group and director of marketing for Frutas de Chile, has described as "unsustainable."

"The grape industry is at a turning point right now," Caballero told The Packer in an exclusive interview at FEMME 2025. "Supply has grown 80% in the last 20 years, while demand is only growing at 13%."

Currently, Chile, Peru and Mexico

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Set for the season

Melon shippers ready to roll for spring and summer sales.

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View from the valley

California's Santa Maria region enters prime growing season.

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Citrus spotlight

Seedless lemons and limes continue upward trend.

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Contributors: Tom Burfield, Brian Dey
Graphic Designer: Tasha Fabela-Jonas

SALES

Tal Leiderman, sales@thepacker.com
Caleb Peterson, sales@thepacker.com
Joelle Stephens, sales@thepacker.com
Denise Sundvold, sales@thepacker.com
Kristopher Bolz, sales@thepacker.com
Leslie Germain, sales@thepacker.com
Marina Smith, sales@thepacker.com

ADVERTISING PRODUCTION

Production Manager: Michelle Bauer
Advertising Services Coordinator: Carlo Ignoffo

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PEOPLE

Red Sun Farms makes business development hire



Paul J. Mastronardi has joined greenhouse grower Red Sun Farms as a business development manager, bringing a background in the greenhouse industry and experience in sales, strategic growth and customer relationship management. The company said Mastronardi will focus on strengthening relationships with existing customers, identifying new business opportunities

Paul J. Mastronardi has joined greenhouse grower Red Sun Farms as a business development manager, bringing a background in the greenhouse industry and experience in sales, strategic growth and customer relationship management. The company said Mastronardi will focus on strengthening relationships with existing customers, identifying new business opportunities

and ensuring the company continues to adapt to evolving market demands.

Natural Delights expands team member roles



Natalia Dentoni



Shayna Telesmanic

Natalia Dentoni has been promoted to senior brand manager for Natural



Mauro Santelli



Bridgette Weber

Delights, with Shayna Telesmanic, Mauro Santelli and Bridgette Weber taking on expanded roles. Dentoni will oversee a broad range of consumer-facing content, including email campaigns, social media and the company's website, and she will also continue to manage retail and shopper marketing on platforms such as Amazon and Instacart. Weber has transitioned into a full-time business development manager role in which she will focus on supporting retail partners and driving growth in the Southeast region. Telesmanic, director of international sales, is expanding her focus to lead West Coast sales, including the Costco global account. Her understanding of global markets and cultural preferences around dates will be instrumental as she strengthens the company's presence on the West Coast and with Costco's international operations, the company said. Santelli, who has been leading growth in Canada and the North American foodservice channel, will now oversee the Middle East market, where the company said his experience will be key its expansion into the region.

J&C Tropicals adds to business development team



Ray Mason has joined J&C Tropicals' business development team. Mason has more than 25 years of experience in the produce industry, with a background in greenhouse-grown products, sales, procurement and logistics. In his new role, Mason will identify and develop key business relationships to grow J&C Tropicals' presence in the marketplace.



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ISZOZL

The Packer to launch East Coast Produce Expo

By The Packer Staff

The Packer, Produce Market Guide and Farm Journal have rebranded GOPEX as the East Coast Produce Expo, set to debut Jan. 12-13, 2026, at the JW Marriott Turnberry Resort in Aventura, Fla.

ECPE will serve as the first major fresh produce event of the year, offering a premier venue for industry leaders to establish strategies, form partnerships and engage with innovations shaping the fresh produce market. While maintaining the intimate environment valued by past GOPEX attendees, ECPE will help foster meaningful connections and provide actionable solutions backed by industry-leading data and insights.

“In the heart of every fresh produce professional lies the power to transform our world — one harvest, one connection,



East Coast Produce Expo will serve as the first major fresh produce event of the year, offering a premier venue for industry leaders to establish strategies, form partnerships and engage with innovations shaping the fresh produce market. File photo: Wayne Hardy

one innovative idea at a time,” said Lance Burditt, senior vice president of food and agricultural sustainability at Farm Journal. “The East Coast Produce Expo will serve

as a launching point for produce professionals at the onset of each new year. The vision is to create a strategic platform where industry decision-makers don’t

just exchange data but cultivate valuable partnerships and leverage the latest consumer and industry data to drive business success.”

- ECPE will offer attendees:
- Real connections — ECPE’s BizMatch program, trade show and networking events inspire collaboration, ensuring buyers and suppliers leave with tangible business opportunities.
 - Set the strategy — Attendees will gain exclusive insights from The Packer and Farm Journal’s most comprehensive Fresh Trends Consumer Report to date, featuring in-depth analysis of how attendees can leverage the data to drive growth in the coming year.
 - Regional focus, national relevance — ECPE brings together decision-makers from across the East Coast’s sourcing,

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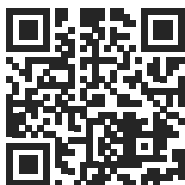
distribution, retail and foodservice sectors, while also attracting national buyers to expand market reach.

- Solutions-driven agenda — ECPE will deliver actionable insights, essential tools and key relationships that drive success in the fresh produce industry.

ECPE exhibitors and sponsors will have the opportunity to gain premier exposure to top-tier

buyers and decision-makers, securing prime positioning in the competitive fresh produce market. Sponsorships and booths are now available, though space is limited. **P**

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Frutura acquires Colombian avocado packer-shipper

By Jennifer Straley

Frutura, a Reedley, Calif.-based global sales and marketing platform for premium fruit, has acquired Colombia-headquartered Montana Fruits, a packer-shipper-marketer of avocados sourced from growers throughout Colombia, according to a news release. Frutura's Dayka & Hackett will manage the newly acquired company.

The family-run Montana Fruits already sources fruit for Frutura companies, the release said. Frutura says the acquisition not only solidifies strong existing relationships, it also strengthens its Latin America footprint — a vital component to the company's international strategy.

"We have a proven formula when we make an acquisition," said Frutura CEO David Krause. "We work with in-country management to add value and optimize

their enterprise. Then we drive growth by facilitating collaboration between the companies in our platform. And lastly, which is the case with the Montana deal, we see what needs to be added to Frutura supply so a priority crop such as avocados can become a 365-day-a-year asset to our customers.

"We're actually ahead of plan with table grapes, citrus and berries," Krause continued. "Avocados are our next big push."

Frutura says its "bench strength in avocados" is built on the avocado acreage of U.S.-based Dayka & Hackett, Agrícola don Ricardo in Peru and Subsole in Chile.

Frutura says it "signaled its bullish intent around avocados" in 2022 by hiring Stephen Fink to drive the effort.

"The Montana investment is that last puzzle piece we needed to be where I want us to be, which is truly vertically integrated in avocados," said Fink, Dayka & Hack-

ett's vice president of sales and marketing. "Montana already has a strong customer base in Europe and Chile. The opening of the U.S. to Colombian avocados became a huge advantage to our domestic customers and that's something Dayka & Hackett can powerfully explore with Montana now part of the Frutura family. Adding Montana's capabilities will allow us to continue to aggressively ramp up and scale as our growing avocado operation necessitates."

Colombia has "exploded" as a globally significant avocado growing region in recent years and Montana has enjoyed year-over-year growth, the release said. Fink says he intends to further magnify that progress by increasing volume.

Frutura says its international platform was designed to facilitate pivots should issues arise around weather, distribution, civil unrest or government action, which includes tariffs. **P**

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time to sort debts and their financial situation while they look for new investors to help get them over the hurdle. I think there's a path forward for them, and I remain optimistic about [the future of] vertical farming."

Plenty, which in December announced the closing of its leafy greens facility in Compton, Calif., is also pivoting away from the highly competitive leafy greens arena to focus solely on its vertical strawberry farm in Richmond, Va.

"There's no question that leafy greens are so competitive, and indoor growers are still competing with outdoor growers with much lower costs," said Stenzel. "I do think the strawberry category is going to be very different. It's another reason why I'm optimistic of Plenty being able to get through this."

Missteps and miscalculations

Both Genty and Stenzel attended February's Indoor Ag-Con in Las Vegas, where much of the vertical farming conversation centered on what went wrong and the lessons learned in the last decade that will position vertical farmers for success in the next 10 years, including:

- Taking "easy money" and too much of it.
- Trying to be both a tech company and a farmer.
- Scaling too quickly with a lack of focus on doing one thing consistently well.
- Skewed valuations.
- Protecting intellectual property above all else, which led to a lack of communication and learning exchange among the vertical farming community.

Not-so-easy money

"In the early years there was so much money spent, and it was easy money to spend," said Stenzel. It led some companies to get off track, he said.

"If you look across the board at all the verticals, the ones who have been more successful were very careful in their spending, whether it's [the self-funded] 80 Acre Farms, Eden Green or others, they've just been extremely cautious and not spending more than they had to actually put up the farm and grow," he said. "The ones who have struggled more are the ones who had the most private equity and operated more like a tech startup instead of a farm."

Genty agrees.

"It was very cheap and inexpensive capital that went into these operators," he said. "And that allowed a lot of money to be put in crazy valuations, and ultimately, some pretty massive failures." It was also the "wrong type of capital," Genty added.



Tom Stenzel, executive director of the CEA Alliance, says there is reason for optimism about the future of vertical farming, as the challenges that led companies to start indoor farming remain. That includes a need to grow produce more efficiently, using fewer resources and in closer proximity to the consumer to improve access to fresh fruit and vegetables. Photo: pressmaster, Adobe Stock

"You had West Coast, Silicon Valley money — VC money — coming in to fund these operations at massive valuations. You're pulling in hundreds of millions of dollars in outside institutional capital with valuations — some in excess of a billion dollars — with the idea that you could scale a food company the same way you could scale a technology company, but it just doesn't work that way.

"So, a lot of capital got put into these companies that forced them to blur the line on whether they were actual operators or technology developers," Genty continued. "You saw a lot of internal development of software, of robotics — all the systems needed to create and run these operations were being developed in-house."

It got very expensive, very fast, he says.

"Imagine an outdoor row crop farmer in the Midwest. You would never see them take VC money to scale their operations, right? It's the wrong type of capital, first and foremost, and secondly, you would never see a large row crop farmer try to build their own tractor or combine to compete with John Deere," said Genty. "I mean, it's just laughable to think about, but that's exactly what was happening. You had these large companies that were raising money as an operator — as a farmer — that then shifted to become a technology developer, and they ended up not doing either very well."

While Genty says many industries face the question of whether there's a competitive advantage to build versus buy, with indoor farming it's not only a capital-intensive proposition, it's also about the reality of how much a head of lettuce can fetch.

"At the end of the day, the base economic

unit of that farm is still a head of lettuce or a basil plant, right? So, the base economic metrics didn't line up with the capital that they were investing into building out that infrastructure," he said. "It was just a clear mismatch."

Ageye thinks vertical farmers are better poised for success by focusing on farming and leaving technology to the tech experts.

"Operators need to focus on being operators and scale accordingly, and tech vendors should focus on being tech vendors and not blur the line to become a grower," Genty said. "And if you look at the successful operations like Vertical Harvest, they use external vendors for their technology, they've had a very good run and they're expanding to a second facility.

"I think it's a good testament to the way this industry is going to succeed, by having strong technology vendors that support strong operators," he added.

Smart scaling

Scaling "methodically" and not until you have a customer are other best practices that are key to success, say Genty and Stenzel.

"The biggest piece is making sure that there's off-take agreements, or there's some type of buyer in place when you build these facilities," said Genty. "Because even if you get everything else right costwise, equipmentwise, if you don't have a buyer lined up for the majority of your output, it's going to be a failed experiment.

Genty recommends having off-take agreements in place for at least 50% of the operation before scaling from there.

"Unfortunately, it's been a little bit of the inverse, where facilities have been specked

out based on output or square footage alone and not necessarily taken into account who's going to buy it, when they're going to buy it and how it's going to scale. As hard as it is, we encourage growers to find your buyer first and then focus on building your facility."

Information exchange

During a panel discussion at Indoor Ag-Con, Tisha Livingston — a co-founder of 80 Acres Farms and the CEO of its wholly owned technology subsidiary, Infinite Acres — discussed how a pervasive lack of information sharing in vertical farming has also hindered the industry from advancing and reaching profitability as quickly as it might have.

"The thing that has disappointed me most in the industry is that after 10 years in now, finally, we're starting to open up visiting one another," she said. "We're all struggling with the same things, and we've been struggling with the same things for the past 10 years.

"If we had been more open and less afraid of sharing our IP, think about what we could have done as an industry," she continued.

"From my perspective, the best way to advance the industry and really think about standardization is benchmarking — looking at best practices and sharing those across the industry."

Path to profitability

On the path to profitability, Genty says being lean and mean matters.

"Early on, there was a big push to have these mega ultra-farms, and some of the ones that have ended up failing were that model. Those 100,000-square-foot facilities are very expensive to operate," he said. "The ones that have done well are smaller, say sub 25,000 square feet or less. Those operations get profitable quicker.

"If you look at where we are now, I think that across the board, the operators are focused on very lean operations and a very clear path to profitability, either already profitable, or a short path to get profitable in the near term," Genty continued. "I think that's the common theme amongst operators that we talk to."

Both Genty and Stenzel remain optimistic about the future of vertical farming.

"All of the challenges that led people to start indoor farming are still there," said Stenzel. "Climate change, droughts, floods, food insecurity, disruption of supply chains and now add the possibility of tariffs to all of that. I believe that indoor agriculture is part of the solution to those challenges.

"To me, the story of vertical farming has had its ups and downs, but in the end, it's still a success story," Stenzel said. **P**

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New Roastables Kits by Ocean Mist Farms are a Hit

Ocean Mist Farms commemorated its 100th anniversary in 2024, kicking off a new era of innovation while continuing its legacy of delivering its Gold Standard artichokes and a full line of premium fresh vegetables.

Last October, the company introduced the exciting new Roastables “Ready-to-Roast Kits” line at the IFPA Global Produce & Floral Show in Atlanta. Just two months later, Roastables earned the prestigious Joe Nucci Innovation Award at the New York Produce Show and Conference in December 2024—an honor celebrating the “best product innovation in service of expanding fresh fruit and vegetable consumption.” For Ocean Mist Farms, the award affirmed both the successful launch of Roastables and the kits’ alignment with current consumer preferences for nutritious, on-trend meal solutions.

Developed in response to rising demand for convenient, wholesome meal options, Roastables’ first phase features washed and halved Brussels sprouts in three chef-crafted flavors: Sweet Sesame, Lemon Caesar and Sun-Dried Tomato. These kits were designed for busy, health-focused shoppers seeking quick, flavorful meal solutions that the whole family would enjoy.

“Nutrition and flavor don’t have to be mutually exclusive,” said Mark Munger, senior director of marketing. “We collaborated closely with a culinary team in San Francisco to develop the unique chef inspired flavor profiles for our new Roastables. One of our key objectives was to create distinctive dishes that capture the indulgent flavors of fine dining while remaining quick and easy for families to prepare at home.”



With their craveable flavors and quick cook time—just 15-20 minutes—these kits make it simple to create a nutritious, flavor-packed side dish or easily elevate them into a main course by adding a favorite protein. Just heat, toss, roast and enjoy!

“We understand that today’s consumers are busier than ever, with many households balancing two working parents,” said Ocean Mist Farms President & CEO, Chris Drew. “Our goal with these roasting kits is to give families back some of their precious time, without having to sacrifice nutrition or taste.” Building on its initial success, Ocean Mist Farms unveiled the second phase of Roastables in March at the SEPC Southern Exposure Show in Orlando.

This launch introduced premium washed and trimmed cauliflower and broccoli florets in four new flavors. With just 35-40 calories per serving, no artificial additives and zero grams of saturated fat, these kits cater to time-starved parents, busy professionals and health-conscious consumers alike.

Looking ahead, the company plans to expand the Roastables line once again in Fall 2025 with the latest phase—featuring another Ocean Mist vegetable product—already in development. With its legacy of excellence and commitment to innovation, Ocean Mist Farms continues to shape the future of fresh, convenient and nutritious meal solutions.



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together export approximately 100 million boxes of grapes to the U.S., or over \$2 billion in grapes each year, and that amount is growing by 15% to 20% each year.

The main market for grapes from Chile, Peru and Mexico is the U.S. It's overstocked in supply, says Caballero, "and no one is investing real money in growing demand."

"We need a joint effort to help with the most important target for us — to grow consumption of grapes in the world, and we will start with the U.S. market," he added.

Dream team of grapes

While the founding Global Grape Group members include Chile, Peru and Mexico, the group says it will soon expand to include grape importers from around the world.

"As a huge basketball fan, I learned from Michael Jordan that talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships," Sergio Lugo, Mexico Board Member for the Global Grape Group and director general for Mexico Table Grapes, told The Packer. "As a team, we're not competitors. We are the producers of grapes around the world. Right now, we are Chile, Peru and Mexico, but we're going to have South Africa, California — and all the countries and regions that grow grapes. This strong teamwork is going to win championships."

The group says its mission is to forge retail alliances and consumer marketing efforts to increase grape consumption and elevate the perception of grapes in the U.S. as a strong player in the healthy snack market, ensuring higher demand, market growth and a sustainable and stable climate for grape producers worldwide.

"'Have a Grape Day' is an uplifting, feel-good campaign that reinforces the convenience, taste, versatility and health benefits of grapes," Caballero said. "We don't want grapes to be just another snack. We want them to be a gateway for a healthy and happy lifestyle."

Global Grape Group says the campaign, which begins with a soft launch in March, will reach millions of consumers nationally through digital media, retail partners, out-of-home placements and point-of-purchase marketing displays.

Caballero says Global Grape Group aims to scale the program next season, beginning in November through August of 2026, but that the timing of the "Have a Grape Day" campaign's March launch couldn't be better. "Just this week, we're



Ignacio Caballero of Frutas de Chile, Yetli Camacho of Trade Commission of Peru and Sergio Lugo of Mexico Table Grapes announce launch of the "Have a Grape Day" campaign at FEMME 2025. Photo: Jennifer Strailley



On behalf of event sponsors Global Grape Group, Ignacio Caballero invited FEMME 2025 attendees to follow #HaveAGrapeDay. Photo: Jennifer Strailley

"We don't want grapes to be just another snack. We want them to be a gateway for a healthy and happy lifestyle."

— Ignacio Caballero, Global Grape Group and Frutas de Chile

seeing more demand than supply," he said.

With the campaign in full swing next season, he expects an elevated grape experience for all, including trade members, growers, importers, supermarkets and consumers.

"The faster the logistical value chain moves, the better quality, the better supply and the better the experience the consumer will have," he said.

Inspired by other fruit

With the "Have a Grape Day" campaign, the Global Grape Group seeks to take a page from the highly successful Avocados

From Mexico and Chilean cherries in China playbooks.

"Twenty-five years ago, per capita consumption in the U.S. of avocados was only 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) and grapes were 3.5 kilograms (7.7 pounds), so grape consumption was more than three times the [annual] consumption of avocados," said Caballero. "Now, 25 years later, grapes are at 3.9 kilograms (8.6 pounds) per capita and avocados are at 4.5 kilograms (nearly 10 pounds)."

"In 25 years — with a huge investment in marketing that peaked at \$80 million and is growing every day — Mexico has been

able to increase demand and consumption," he said.

Meanwhile, grapes "haven't invested any real money" in marketing, he says. "That's why sales are flat."

Caballero says the potential for grape growth is "huge."

"Grapes are the perfect fruit — sweet, but a nice type of sweetness," he said. "So, you can have the indulgence the consumer wants without feeling guilt about eating something that is not good for your health."

Why FEMME 2025?

"FEMME 2025, as a wellness event, is a perfect match for us, and we're dedicated to empowering women leaders who drive new trends that build a healthier world," said Caballero, who also sees women driving produce sales.

"We wanted to launch at an event that makes sense for our target audience and that makes sense for what we want to build in the next years," he continued. "Coincidentally, this event came at the perfect moment in the grape season."

The "Have a Grape Day" campaign will also have an educational component.

"There's a lot of myth about grapes — about the sugar, said Caballero. "It's a very healthy sugar. Just for a comparison, the amount of sugar in grapes is less than a banana. So, there's a lot of things that people don't know about grapes. Why? Because no one has invested money in educating consumers about the benefits in grapes."

Consumers also don't know that there are many different types of grapes with different flavor profiles, sweetness, acidity, etc., he said.

"There is a grape for every consumer in the market," he said. "We can help you find the right grape for you, for the right occasion."

"Education is huge, and that's why a very on-trend event like FEMME will help us to amplify the message," he said.

Addressing FEMME 2025 attendees at the March 19 kickoff brunch, for which Global Grape Group was a sponsor, Caballero said: "I'm very proud today to present you the newly created Global Grape Group — GGG — and our campaign: 'Have a Grape Day.' Our vision is to position grapes as the ultimate healthy, tasty, convenient choice for individuals of all ages."

"We are dedicated to empowering individuals ... like the beautiful women here leading healthier and fulfilling lives," he continued. "We invite you to join us using #HaveAGrapeDay, because together, we can make it a grape day." **P**

UnitedAg Celebrates its 45th Anniversary

Celebrating 45 years of dedication, UnitedAg has been a steadfast champion of the agricultural community, cultivating a legacy of innovation, care, and advocacy. Since its founding, the organization has flourished alongside its members, pioneering healthcare solutions, fostering education, and amplifying the voices of those who feed the nation.



This milestone is more than just a celebration of longevity—it's a tribute to UnitedAg's unwavering commitment to shaping a healthier, stronger future for agriculture.

UnitedAg continues to break new ground in healthcare and member support, expanding its services to meet the evolving needs of the agricultural community. Recent accomplishments include the launch of comprehensive mental health services and the Livongo Diabetes Management program, equipping members with essential tools to effectively manage their health. In addition, UnitedAg has opened six wellness centers across California, providing a broad range of services with zero co-pays for most visits.

"These centers are designed to improve access to healthcare and ensure agricultural workers and their families receive the care they need without financial barriers," says Maribel Ochoa, Director of Communications.

Further strengthening its commitment to member well-being, UnitedAg's health plan, the United Agricultural Benefit Trust (UABT), surpassed an



impressive quarter-billion dollars in annual contributions, a testament to the trust and support of its 1,200+ agricultural member entities. The organization has also expanded its reach internationally, partnering with SAIN to offer a robust healthcare network in the Baja region of Mexico, ensuring seasonal workers have access to continuous medical coverage.

Events Help Showcase 45-Year Achievement

To commemorate this milestone anniversary, UnitedAg is hosting a series of events designed to foster meaningful connections with its members, service representatives, legislators, and vendor partners. The celebration includes interactive town



halls, virtual coffee chats, member meetups, and specialized forums tackling key agricultural challenges. Additionally, conferences will feature educational sessions, while advocacy events will provide opportunities to engage directly with policymakers.

Expanding its outreach, UnitedAg will also spotlight key members through its monthly This Is Ag! podcast series, featuring in-depth conversations with industry leaders across agriculture, healthcare, and policy.

A Long History of Representing Agriculture Needs

For over four decades, UnitedAg has been a trusted partner to the agricultural industry, providing

comprehensive healthcare solutions, education, and leadership development to support its workforce. Through member-exclusive health plans, wellness centers offering zero co-pay services, and mental health support, UnitedAg is helping to ensure that agriculture's most valuable asset—its people—have the care they need.

On the political front, UnitedAg collaborates with policymakers to advocate for legislation and regulations that reflect the needs of the agricultural community. The organization's Agribusiness Education Foundation has surpassed \$2 million in scholarships, and its WomenAg Leadership Academy continues to empower women in agriculture. In

addition, UnitedAg strengthens industry connections through a variety of community engagement events.

UnitedAg addresses critical issues facing agricultural businesses and their workforce, such as affordable healthcare, regulatory compliance, workforce development, and industry advocacy. "By tackling these challenges head-on, UnitedAg equips its members with the tools, resources, and advocacy they need to build a healthier, more sustainable, and resilient agricultural industry," says Maribel Ochoa, Director of Communications.

Building on its success in California and Arizona, UnitedAg has announced its expansion into Oregon and Colorado. "This growth aligns with our mission to provide innovative, member-focused healthcare solutions to the agricultural workforce across the country," Ochoa adds. "Our goal is to be the healthcare plan of choice for the agricultural sector and set a new standard in the industry, ensuring our members and their families have access to the best healthcare solutions possible."



Road to recovery: Can global food production bounce back from record honeybee losses?

By Jennifer Straley

One of the most concerning aspects of the nation's catastrophic 1.1 million honeybee colony loss — representing as much as 70% of U.S. hives and an estimated \$634.7 million in economic impact — is that no one saw it coming, says Omer Davidi, CEO and co-founder of BeeHero.

A global data-driven precision pollination company, BeeHero manufactures low-cost sensors that monitor data from inside the beehive and then translates that data into actionable insights for the beekeeper.

With an estimated hive shortage of 300,000 to 500,000 this year, the ripple effects not only endanger this year's crop yields, but also future seasons, with wide-reaching impacts for the beekeeping, agriculture and food industries, says Davidi.

He says while recent annual bee mortality rates were already a concern at 40% to 45%, this year's 60% to 70% loss is especially troublesome.

How will these losses impact the global food supply?

"Looking at global food production, we definitely expect to see a drop in productivity," Davidi says. "And when we talk about bees and pollination, which is an essential component for roughly 70% or 75% of agricultural crops ... we expect [to see a] drop in production of almonds and avocados and berries — and pretty much everything you can think of — apples and cherries and so on.

"Putting aside the beekeepers that will run out of business because of it, the ability to overcome the high mortality rates in one year is highly likely impossible, and that will probably affect us for the coming two or three years," Davidi continued. "Now the bigger question is: What's going to happen next year? Or what's going to happen two years from now?"

And restoring colonies takes time — and more bees.

"First of all, we lose some beekeepers that are keeping bees to support global food production. That's one aspect," Davidi says of this year's hive losses. "The second thing is the fact that in order to revive the colonies, you need to split hives. You



While recent annual bee mortality rates were already a concern at 40% to 45%, this year's 60% to 70% loss is especially troublesome, says Omer Davidi, CEO and co-founder of BeeHero. Photo: Mediteraneo, Adobe Stock

cannot just buy hives or buy bees out of nowhere. You need to split hives. You need to get your existing hives to expand to a point that you can make two hives out of one hive and then keep pushing it."

Why were beekeepers caught off guard by catastrophic losses?

"Something we need to understand as we look at the industry is that most beekeepers during the wintertime don't necessarily know what's happening inside their hives. You don't open hives during wintertime," says Davidi, as beekeepers don't want to disturb the bees during hibernation.

That's where BeeHero's technology can help, he says. Using a simple sensor placed inside the hive, BeeHero monitors the temperature, humidity, acoustics, light and vibration inside the hive — collecting some 25 million data points a day on some 300,000 hives around the world. The data points are used to create an algorithm that can detect problems and changes inside the hive, such as evidence of queen failure.

"We need to have more visibility [into the hive], so we don't wake up one day realizing 70% of bee colonies died," says

Davidi. "We need to do it early on so we can strategize how to deal with it. We can leverage the fact that there's Southern Hemisphere and Northern Hemisphere, and we might be able to send bees from different places in the world to support the pollination needs."

Davidi says when beekeepers, like those who use BeeHero's sensors, have visibility into what's happening inside the hives, they can address problems early on, which helps stabilize mortality.

Founded in 2017, BeeHero says it has lowered bee mortality by nearly half and increased efficiency by more than 30% in hives using its Pollination Insight Platform. While beekeepers that use BeeHero technology don't see zero mortality, Davidi says they typically see a mortality rate between 20% to 25%.

Though this year saw record honeybee colony losses in the U.S., Davidi says it's not only a problem here.

"It's a global problem," he says, pointing to a region in France that suffered an 80% mortality rate two years ago.

Governmental support

Davidi says BeeHero has been approached by governments and research facilities seeking to learn how agriculture can leverage the company's technology and knowledge to help address this global problem.

"We need to be able to establish plans to support beekeepers to overcome high mortality rates — whether it's from subsidies or financing solutions — we need to help them overcome cash flow and other things, so they don't run out of business," he says. "But all those things cannot be — especially if it's at the governmental level — cannot be done immediately. It takes a lot of time, and that's where early on visibility is critical."

Davidi says BeeHero's goal is to get more sensors into more hives, whether it's using its own technology or someone else's.

"We need eyes in those hives, and those eyes need support at the government level to help address [pollinator health] in a more strategic way," he says. "I don't

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FDA to delay FSMA 204 compliance date by 30 months

By The Packer Staff

The Food and Drug Administration says it will delay the compliance date for the Food Traceability Rule, known as FSMA 204, by 30 months. The agency said it will use appropriate procedures at a later time to extend this compliance date and will publish a proposed rule in the Federal Register.

The FDA says it is committed to a successful implementation of the full requirements of this rule, which will allow for faster identification and removal of potentially contaminated food from the market.

“The compliance date extension does not amend, nor do we intend to amend, the requirements of the final rule, which will improve food safety and protect public health,” the agency said in a news release.

The extension gives covered entities — which includes cucumbers, fresh-cut leafy greens, fresh leafy greens, tomatoes, tropical tree fruits, fresh-cut fruits and vegetables, ready-to-eat salads and more — more time to ensure complete coordination across the supply chain.

FSMA 204 establishes additional traceability record-keeping requirements for entities that grow, process, pack or hold foods on this list. The FDA says this requires a higher degree of coordination between members of the fresh produce and food industry.

To achieve the full public health benefits of the final rule, all covered entities must be in compliance, the agency says.

“Even those few entities who are well positioned to meet the final rule’s requirements by January 2026 have expressed concern about the timeline, in part because of their reliance on receiving accurate data

from their supply chain partners, who are not similarly situated,” the FDA said in the release. “Therefore, FDA intends to allow industry additional time, across all regulated sectors, to fully implement the final rule’s requirements.”

The agency said it will continue to work with stakeholders to identify solutions to implementation challenges during this 30-month delay. **P**

“The compliance date extension does not amend, nor do we intend to amend, the requirements of the final rule, which will improve food safety and protect public health.”

— Food and Drug Administration

A promotional graphic for Avocado Queen. It features a pair of hands holding a halved avocado. Above the hands is a logo of a crowned avocado with the text "LONG LIVE THE AVOCADO" in a circular arrangement. The text "HOLD'EM" is prominently displayed in the center. At the bottom, the brand name "AVOCADO Queen" is shown, with "Queen" in a script font. Below the brand name, the text "VISIT: BOOTH #416" and "AVOCADOQUEEN.US" are displayed.

HOLD'EM

AVOCADO
Queen

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expect to see a full extinction of bees — we don’t want to be overly dramatic — but I do think that we need to establish more sustainable programs for pollination and beekeeping.

“We have the technology available, and we are thinking of ways to bring people that care about what’s happening — not just from a food production perspective, but also from environmental perspective — and basically walk together with the governmental organizations, with the scientific efforts, to overcome this challenge,” he says. **P**



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CINCO DE MAYO

Fresh fiesta: Making celebration essentials the stars of holiday retail promotions

By Jill Dutton

Cinco de Mayo provides a prime sales opportunity for fresh produce as the holiday celebrating Mexican heritage and culture sparks a surge in demand for items such as avocados, limes, tomatoes and hot peppers as consumers plan festive gatherings.

Retailers can maximize sales through eye-catching displays, themed promotions and cross-merchandising strategies.

Peak produce items

A Cinco de Mayo celebration wouldn't feel complete without avocados taking the lead. Avocados From Mexico suggests multiple recipes for consumers to get creative with avocados, not only as guacamole but also as a layered fiesta taco dip, in deviled eggs, as a skewer with mozzarella and tomatoes or even a dessert of lime meringue with avocado mascarpone cream.

"Avocados play a big role in the lead up to Cinco de Mayo," says Stephanie Bazan, senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution for Avocados From Mexico. "Per Numerator, the week during Cinco, fresh avocados are ranked No. 3 in total units after bananas and citrus fruits. When comparing the percent lift from the week prior to Cinco to the week of Cinco, fresh avocados are the top growing in absolute units and experience the highest percent change week over week."

Meeting the increased demand is imperative, and this year looks to have an outstanding season. Naturipe Farms says this year's avocado season is shaping up to be one of the best yet, with a strong supply driven by the growing impact of maturing avocado trees in Colombia.

With Mexico providing year-round supply and Colombia complementing the seasonal transitions, hass avocados from both these points of origin result in a harmonious blend, according to the company. By using multiple growing regions, Naturipe says it can provide an abundant supply of avocados, meeting retailer demand for Cinco de Mayo and beyond.

When it comes to Cinco de Mayo pro-



Retailers can use creative displays of Cinco de Mayo essentials to entice shoppers planning for festivities. Cross-merchandising and themed promotions also can help drive related sales. Photo courtesy of Melissa's Produce

motions, consumers want avocados that are creamy, flavorful and perfectly ripe, whether it's a party-sized bowl of guacamole or fresh avocado slices topping a taco, says Andy Bruno, president of Naturipe Avocado Farms Division.

"Cinco de Mayo is all about bold flavors and fresh ingredients, and avocados are at the heart of that," he says. "We're seeing more people experiment beyond guacamole — adding avocados to margaritas, grilling them for smoky flavor or even

incorporating them into desserts. It's great to see this versatile fruit take center stage for the holiday."

Bruno says Naturipe always sees a surge in sales leading up to the holiday.

Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations LLC and Yo Quiero brands, says its guacamole, salsa and queso items are in the highest demand leading up to Cinco de Mayo.

"Consumers love this food-forward holiday, and they are looking for great-tasting products that are easy to open and serve," she says. "Our line of dips are delicious, convenient and offer consumers a variety of flavors, sizes and heat levels."

Robert Schueller, director of public re-



Cross-promotions and themed displays that inspire avocado and mango recipes, such as mango guacamole and avocado mango salsa, can help retailers maximize sales, says Galen Johnson, senior director of sales for Mission Produce. Photo courtesy of Mission Produce

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lations for Melissa's Produce, says recipes are an effective driver during promotions.

"We find that Cinco de Mayo recipes have been an effective educational tool we offer to retailers next to displayed items," he says. "We have been celebrating this Cinco de Mayo program for over 30 years, as it's always been a driver in getting more Mexican Hispanic items around the peak of promotion time periods — like Lent,

Easter, Cinco, Hispanic Heritage month, Mexican Independence Day — and, of course, the holidays from Thanksgiving to Christmas and New Year's.

"Retailers from last year say the signage and POS materials are driving their Hispanic category — up 20% to 30% — from the four weeks of promotion and display leading up to Cinco de Mayo, in which many are non-Hispanics and celebrating Hispanic food heritage at home," he adds.

In addition to avocados, Schueller

mentions that Melissa's Produce sees a huge jump during this time in limes, key limes and avocado and in value-added items such as guacamole dip, salsa kits and tamale kits.

Schueller says, after avocados, other top produce items include jalapeño, serrano, Anaheim, poblano, red Fresno, habanero and yellow chili peppers, as well as popular vegetables such as jicama, tomatillos, chayote squash, cilantro, yuca root and aloe. For fruits, mango, papaya, cactus pears, plantains and more do well during this period.

At Mission Produce, Cinco de Mayo is one of the top opportunities of the year to drive consumption of its avocados and mangoes, says Galen Johnson, senior director of sales.

"Consumers can go green and gold for Cinco with avocados and mangoes, the perfect pairing for a fiesta," he says. "Cinco is the time to be festive with flavor, so adding mango is a great way to elevate a classic dish."

Johnson highlights data from Circana showing 32.4 million pounds of avocados and 12.4 million pounds of mangoes were sold last year, generating a combined \$99 million in sales for Cinco de Mayo. He says Numerator projects even more people plan to celebrate.

"At Mission, we're looking at double-digit lifts in volume sales for both avocados and mangoes for Cinco de Mayo," he says. "According to Circana, last year avocados saw an 18% volume lift and mangoes saw a 25% volume lift compared to the prior week. So, running promotions for the week leading up to Cinco de Mayo is key to driving more avocado and mango purchasing."

With Cinco de Mayo on a Monday this year, Mission Produce is looking at large orders for the full week leading up to the holiday, and many promotions are starting the Wednesday before, Johnson says.

"The industry expects avocado demand to be strong, especially on small sizes because of the attractive price point," he says. "California season is ramping up just in time for the holiday, so we're expecting

a great supply of locally grown, high-quality avocados to support strong national demand. Several other origins will also be on the market, including Peru, Colombia and Mexico."

Johnson says Mission Produce is building custom ripe programs for its customers to meet the anticipated holiday demand with avocados and mangoes that are ripe and ready to eat.

"Over half of Cinco celebrators plan to dine out or order takeout this Cinco, according to Numerator, so we're supporting our foodservice customers with an ample supply of avocados and mangoes that are ripe and ready to slice, dice and mash," he says. "Promoting dishes that feature avocados and mangoes is a great way to get Cinco started."

Retail strategies

Eye-catching displays, cross-merchandising and themed promotions can help retailers can entice shoppers as they plan for festivities.

"We have hundreds of retailers who participate in Melissa's Cinco de Mayo program, which entails signage around the theme of the celebration and the many essentials for their produce departments," Schueller says.

Johnson

says retailers can maximize sales with cross-promotions and themed displays to inspire avocado and mango recipes, such as mango guacamole and avocado mango salsa.

Avocados From Mexico creates custom store displays as well.

"Avocados From Mexico will be at the center of every good celebration as Guac Makes the Fiesta," Bazan says. "We have in-store displays and 360[-degree] support including social and digital efforts including a digital toolkit with Cinco-themed assets that retailers can leverage or utilize in their retail circular ads, social media, e-commerce and more. This year, Avocados From Mexico is also offering a Cinco thematic branded bag with a \$1.50 cash-back rebate to encourage shoppers to buy



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Consumers preparing for Cinco de Mayo gatherings look for flavorful products that are convenient to serve, such as guacamole, salsa and queso items, says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Fresh Innovations LLC and Yo Quiero brands. Photo courtesy of Fresh Innovations LLC and Yo Quiero

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Sources: 1. Numerator Shopper Metrics, 06/19/23 to 06/16/24, 2. GameChanger Merchandising Test.

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“multiples to prepare guacamole for their Cinco fiestas.”

Leading up to Cinco de Mayo, avocado shoppers spend 1.9-times more on groceries with avocados in the basket than without, she adds.

“We recommend retailers create a fiesta-themed destination complete with eye-catching displays, such as our molcajete-inspired display that can be utilized

as a focal point to display avocados with complementary fresh items such as tomatoes, onions and limes, so shoppers can prepare for their at-home Cinco celebrations,” Bazan says.

An Avocados From Mexico proprietary study indicates there is a 25% increase in unit sales when more avocados are merchandised in a branded Avocados From Mexico display on the produce floor, she says. “Leveraging the Avocados From Mexico branded merchandising displays can give every basket a boost during the second most important consumption period for avocados.”

Murray says Yo Quiero’s marketing strategy focuses on variety with its Ultimate Dip Destination offerings.

“We provide recipe and party ideas that allow consumers to create fun and festive Cinco de Mayo spreads. We really want consumers to enjoy their Cinco celebrations, not spend hours shopping and prepping for them,” she says. “The Yo Quiero line of products ranges from guacamole to salsa to elote to bean dip and now to our new Creamy Jalapeño and Smokehouse Onion.”

Murray says retailers also do well in creating displays that cross-merchandise items like fajita meat, dips, chips, beverages and more to provide convenience for Cinco de Mayo shopping.

“These festive displays increase sales, create excitement and give consumers a one-stop shop for all their party needs,” she says. **P**

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Along with supporting retails with in-store displays and digital assets for promotions, Avocados From Mexico is offering a Cinco de Mayo thematic branded bag with a \$1.50 cash-back rebate to encourage shoppers to buy multiples bags for their gatherings, says Stephanie Bazan, senior vice president of commercial strategy and execution. Photo courtesy of Avocados From Mexico



Photos courtesy of Brian Dey

Recipe for a top-notch guac display

By Brian Dey

A great Cinco de Mayo celebration begins with guacamole. Building a display that's a one-stop guac shop for your customers makes it convenient for them to grab all their needs at one display.

It all starts with the avocado, so be sure to always have ripe fruit on display and be ready to stock from your backrooms.

Tie-ins such as tomatoes, mangoes, limes, cilantro, red

onions, jalapeño peppers and garlic add convenience, build the basket size and set the stage for a celebration to remember. And don't forget the tortilla chips and taco shells.

Printing out a favorite guac recipe and placing it at the POS might give your shoppers a new idea that they might not have thought of before.

A Cinco de Mayo display should appeal visually to the consumer. Remember, the size of the display really does not matter; it simply needs to be impactful enough to draw the attention of your customers. Clean



Brian Dey

uniform boxes, bins and baskets and the use of color breaks within the display will help achieve Cinco de Mayo success.

These holiday displays bring an added level of celebration into the produce department and are a fun way to help create a festive atmosphere for shopping and put produce theater into your store and department. **P**

Brian Dey is the senior merchandiser and natural stores coordinator for Four Seasons Produce.



‘Cinco de Mango’ campaign kicks off with peak mango season

By The Packer Staff

The National Mango Board says its “Cinco de Mango” campaign, launched with the kickoff of peak mango season, uses the holiday’s significant consumer engagement to promote the consumption of fresh mangoes during Cinco de Mayo and beyond.

The board says 93% of consumers plan to make a purchase related to Cinco de Mayo, according to Numerator’s 2025 U.S. Annual Holiday Preview, highlighting the holiday’s impact on consumer spending and the opportunity to promote mangoes as an essential ingredient for an at-home party or gathering.

“Our ‘Cinco de Mango’ campaign showcases how seamlessly mangoes fit

into Cinco de Mayo celebrations,” Ramón Ojeda, executive director for the National Mango Board, said in a news release. “But it goes far beyond Cinco de Mayo. As peak mango season begins, we want everyone to experience the joy of incorporating this delicious fruit into their favorite dishes, from refreshing beverages to savory salsas, fresh mangoes bring a burst of sunshine to any party.”

The multifaceted campaign, which runs through May 5, includes a blend of targeted paid media, in-store promotions, social media content, website resources and strategic public relations. At its heart is a curated collection of easy-to-prepare fresh mango recipes designed to inspire culinary creativity and elevate gatherings, the board says.

The “Cinco de Mango” creative cap-



Photo: volff, Adobe Stock

tures the “vibrant essence” of mangoes and transforming ordinary dishes into culinary experiences, according to the release.

Capitalizing on the popularity of Cinco de Mayo staples like tacos, dips and

margaritas, the campaign will highlight similar National Mango Board recipes, but with a twist: Baja fish tacos with mango salsa, which combines the sweetness of mangoes with the savory flavors of fish tacos; mango salsa, a dip that can be served with an appetizer spread; mango-nada, blending fresh mango with lime and agave, then garnishing the chili-rimmed glass with chamoy or Tajín; and a mango margarita, a tropical take on the classic margarita.

Adding to the campaign’s food-forward focus, a recent National Mango Board study focusing on the fruit’s naturally invigorating properties says they have shown positive effects on insulin regulation, reinforcing mango as a heart-healthy and flavorful addition, the release said. **P**



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MELON MARKETING

How shippers are gearing up for the season

By Tom Burfield

Spring is here, and summer's not far behind. That means it's melon season, and some major shippers have a packed agenda for the spring/summer selling period.

Pacific Trellis Fruit/Dulcinea Farms is introducing a line of high-flavor, high-quality melons, while Dixondale Farms Inc. is preparing to relaunch its popular Navigator cantaloupe program, and MAS Melons & Grapes is ready to enter its biggest promotional time of the year despite the threat of a hefty tariff.

Los Angeles-based Pacific Trellis Fruit/Dulcinea Farms will kick off its brand-new Dulcinea Pure Perfection melons program with three offerings, said Howard Nager, director of marketing and business development.

Pure Sweetness is an extra-sweet variety known for its "incredibly juicy, soft, melt-in-your-mouth flavor," he said. Pure Sunshine is firm, juicy and sweet with a refreshing, smooth taste. Pure Crunch is an oblong Chinese hami melon characterized by a crisp texture and a refreshing flesh with hints of honey and pear.

The company also is the innovator of the mini seedless watermelon, which it calls PureHearts, Nager said. The firm grows organic and conventional full-size seedless watermelons called Sugar Daddy.

"We have a great-tasting Tuscan Style extra-sweet cantaloupe and a great-tasting yellow mini seedless watermelon called SunnyGold," he added.

Dixondale Farms in Carrizo Springs, Texas, may be known for growing onions, but consumers turn out from early June until mid-July to take home its Navigator cantaloupe — sometimes by the case — said Bruce Frasier, president, adding that Dixondale Farms is the only company that grows the Navigator variety.

"The large production areas in Arizona and California have gone to the extended-shelf-life varieties," he said. "We're fortunate that we have the support of Texas retailers."

The Navigator is a full-slip variety with a straw color, heavy netting and "unbelievable aroma," Frasier said. The company has offered the melon, which it calls Carrizo, for almost 30 years.



Workers harvest melons for Los Angeles-based Pacific Trellis Fruit/Dulcinea Farms. The company is preparing to launch its Dulcinea Pure Perfection melon program with three new great-tasting offerings, says Howard Nager, director of marketing and business development. Photo courtesy of Pacific Trellis Fruit/Dulcinea Farms

Some retailers say they sell more cantaloupes during the 45 days Carrizo is available than they do the rest of year, Frasier said.

In Rio Rico, Ariz., MAS Melons & Grapes has been shipping honeydews and watermelons under the Desert Pride label since the company was started 28 years ago, said Miguel Suarez, managing partner.

The company transitions its melon program from the states of Colima and Nayarit in central Mexico to Sonora in the north in early April.

"We're going to have plenty of fruit," Suarez said. But he's not sure what impact the tariffs that may be levied by the Trump administration will have on sales.

When a 25% tariff was imposed from March 4-6, the company had to raise its

price for honeydew melons from \$12 a box to \$16.25. The market remained active at first.

"The customers bought the fruit even with 25% added to the prices," he said. But sales quickly slowed.

"The consumers cannot afford these prices," Suarez said.

Mexico melon acreage likely will be down industrywide compared to last year, he said. But MAS Melons & Grapes isn't slowing down.

"We have big acreage for the spring season," he said.

The tariff was scheduled to go back into effect April 4.

The company has been selling melons to Japan since 2001 and sells the fruit to Canada as well as U.S. buyers. **P**



MAS Melons & Grapes, Rio Rico, Ariz., has been shipping honeydews and watermelons under the Desert Pride label since the company was started 28 years ago, says Miguel Suarez, managing partner. Photo courtesy of MAS Melons & Grapes

Board offers help to boost watermelon sales

By Tom Burfield

There's no denying the popularity of watermelons. U.S. per capita consumption of the fruit was nearly 17 pounds in 2023, the latest year for which figures are available.

The Winter Springs, Fla.-based National Watermelon Promotion Board says opportunities to showcase watermelons are growing as consumer preferences and food trends are evolving — and it is available to help foodservice operators and retailers that feature the versatile melons.

On the foodservice side, the board offers educational and inspirational support to help operators use watermelons to build their menus, said Megan McKenna, senior director of foodservice and marketing. Research indicates that 62% of consumers are highly interested in trying fresh watermelon in innovative dishes, she said.

“Education starts with knowledge around watermelon types and formats in the marketplace, as well as how to handle and cut watermelon for optimal yield,” she said.

The board provides tips on cooking techniques and flavor pairings by region in addition to rind and beverage usage ideas. These tools and resources are shared with foodservice decision makers through foodservice media and events, she said.

For retail, keeping watermelons front and center all year long is key to driving sales, said Juliemar Rosado, the board's director of retail and international marketing.

“A strong merchandising strategy highlights [watermelons'] incredible value, health benefits and versatility,” she said.

Engaging shoppers at touch points — online or in-store — has a big impact.

“Digital platforms are a great way to share mouthwatering recipes, fun facts and quick videos that draw customers in,” she said.

And in-store experiences like cross-merchandising, sampling and promotions “help turn curiosity into purchases.”

The board's annual retail merchandising contest that runs June through August is a good way to supercharge watermelon sales, Rosado added.

“This high-energy summer program aligns with peak demand, National Watermelon Month (July) and National Watermelon Day (Aug. 3),” she said. “It's a win-win for retailers and shoppers alike.”

Besides attracting shoppers, creative displays can educate customers with selection tips and health benefits, leading to bigger baskets and repeat purchases, Rosado said.

The board has a full suite of marketing tools, educational resources and POS materials, and the retailer section of watermelon.org offers everything from retail kits to engaging videos and merchandising inspiration, she said. **P**



Keeping watermelons front and center all year long is key to retail sales, says Juliemar Rosado, director of retail and international marketing for the Winter Springs, Fla.-based National Watermelon Promotion Board. “A strong merchandising strategy highlights [watermelons'] incredible value, health benefits, and versatility,” she says. Photo courtesy of National Watermelon Promotion Board

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SANTA MARIA PRODUCE

Growers anticipate good quality this season

By Tom Burfield

When shopping for fresh produce this spring or summer, there's a good chance buyers will find it in California's Santa Maria growing area.

Growers in the Santa Maria Valley produce a wide variety of produce commodities on about 50,000 acres of rich, fertile soil in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, according to Claire Wineman, president of the Santa Maria-based Grower Shipper Association of Santa Barbara & San Luis Obispo Counties.

April through September is the region's prime growing season.

"The Santa Maria growing region offers a variety of exceptional fresh produce and is an important supplier of fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the United States and beyond," Wineman said.

Strawberries, wine grapes, broccoli, cauliflower and lettuce are the top five items produced there. As the spring season gets underway, grower-shippers are ramping up production of their bestselling fruits and vegetables.

Babé Farms in Santa Maria is featuring its Pink Rhone Little Gem lettuce, characterized by "a sweet crunch, mild buttery flavor and glossy texture," said Matt Hiltner, marketing manager. Pink Rhone was launched last summer and "interest exceeded all expectations," he said.

The company also added a new sales representative, Sarah Grizzle, a recent graduate of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Grizzle will serve as a liaison between the sales team and customers.

This spring and summer, Babé Farms is shipping a vibrant mix of specialty vegetables, including colorful root veggies, baby head lettuces, its signature Blonde Frisée, romanesco cauliflower, fennel, celery root and more, Hiltner said.

"With the wide variety of packs, sizes and colors we offer, Babé Farms typically grows and ships over 60 unique items at any given time," he said.

The company is pleased with the quality and sizing of its specialty vegetables so far this season.



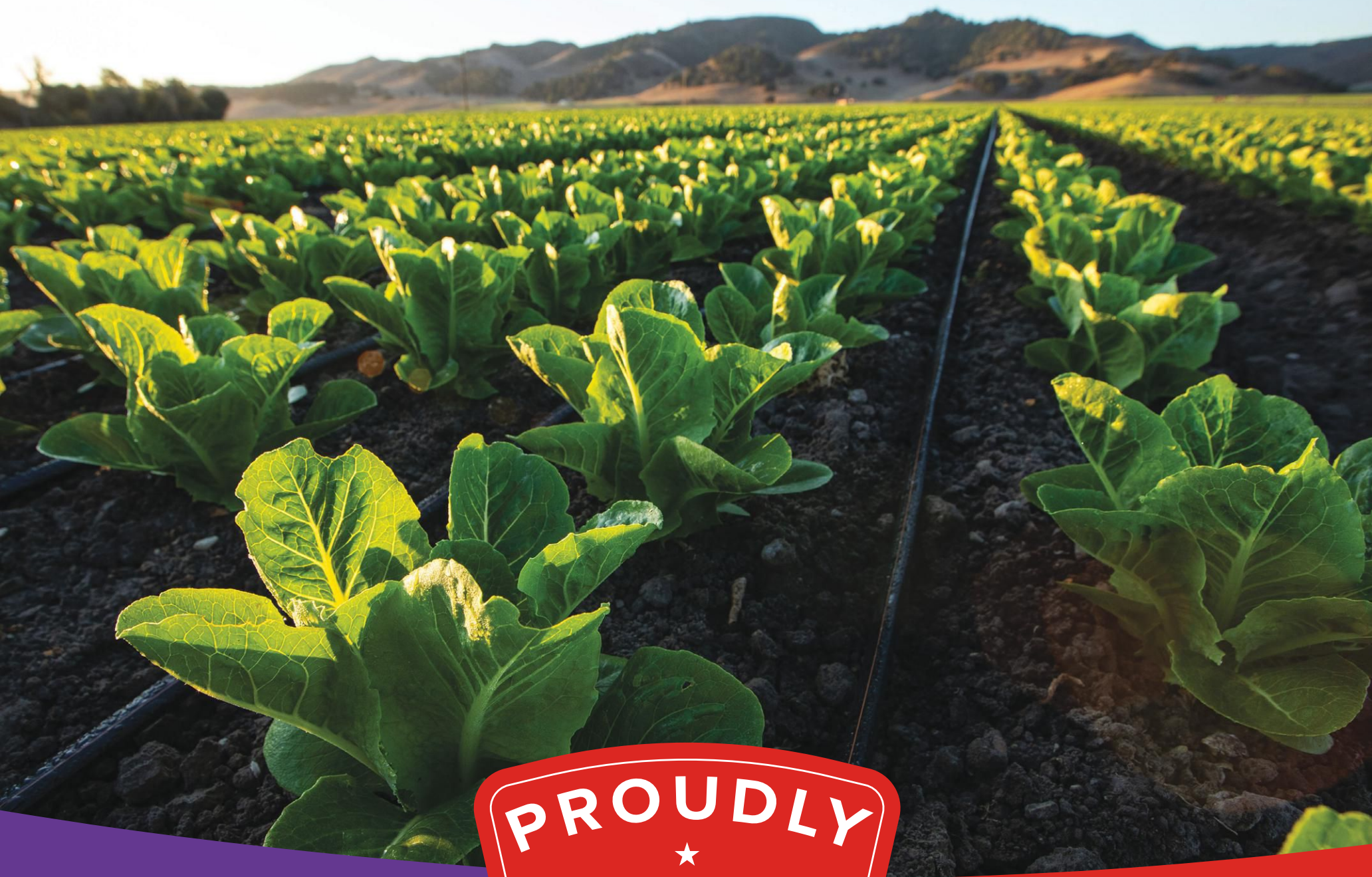
Sarah Grizzle, a recent graduate of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, has joined the sales team at Babé Farms, Santa Maria, Calif., and is pictured showing off Easter egg radishes. The company grows and ships more than 60 unique items and is pleased with the quality and sizing of its specialty vegetables so far this season, says Matt Hiltner, marketing manager. Photo courtesy of Babé farms

The Valentine's salad featuring Pink Rhone lettuce, which exhibits many of the qualities of Little Gem lettuce, was well received by consumers, says Matt Hiltner, marketing manager for Babé Farms in Santa Maria, Calif. "We anticipate similar enthusiasm leading into Easter and Mother's Day as chefs look to 'think pink,'" he says. Photo courtesy of Babé Farms



Santa Maria, Calif.-based Pacific Coast Produce will kick off its chili pepper program in mid-June, says Derrick Doud, vice president. Peppers will be available through December. Photo courtesy of Pacific Coast Produce

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Strawberry production up slightly



Main Street Produce in Santa Maria is “building a broader berry business” by expanding into more growing regions and is adding to its berry offerings, says CEO Mark Murai. Besides Santa Maria, the company now sources strawberries from Florida and Watsonville, Calif., and is working to add Oxnard, Calif., Baja California and central Mexico to its sourcing locations. Photo courtesy of Main Street Produce

By Tom Burfield

Strawberries continue to be the top-valued produce commodity in California’s Santa Maria growing area, according to the Santa Maria-based Grower Shipper Association of Santa Barbara & San Luis Obispo Counties.

As of late March, strawberry production out of the Santa Maria growing area was slightly ahead of last year at the same time — 3.4 million trays compared to 3.2 million in 2024 — according to the Watsonville-based California Strawberry Commission. Total Santa Maria production last year was 88.6 million trays, an increase from 82.8 million in 2023.

The region has 11,432 acres of strawberries this year, up slightly from 2024’s 11,385 acres.

Area growers seem to be prospering along with their strawberry sales.

Mark Murai, who signed on as CEO at Main Street Produce in Santa Maria last July, said the company has been “building a broader berry business.”

Previously a Santa Maria-centric strawberry grower, the company has expanded into other regions and is adding to its

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“The consistency has been excellent, and with warmer weather on the horizon, we expect continued improvement across the board,” Hiltner said.

Babé Farms, which ships year-round, expects to have an increase in volume this year as the company focuses on deepening relationships with customers through more in-person visits, sales training and a stronger presence at trade shows, he said.

Santa Maria-based Pacific Coast Produce will have good volume of conventional and organic soft squash, including green Italian, yellow straightneck and Mexican gray squash from May through November, said Derrick Doud, vice president. In mid-June, the company will kick off its chili pepper program, which will run through December.

Pacific Coast Produce ships broccoli, celery and cauliflower year-round.

“Quality from here on out should be excellent across the board,” Doud said in



Santa Maria, Calif.-based Pacific Coast Produce will have good volume of conventional and organic zucchini and other kinds of soft squash from May through November, says Derrick Doud, vice president. Photo courtesy of Pacific Coast Produce

late March. “We had very good growing conditions.”

Gold Coast Packing Inc. in Santa Maria

will continue to ship its cornerstone items such as broccoli florets, cauliflower florets, spinach, cilantro, Brussels sprouts and

other value-added vegetables, said Monica Cordero, director of sales.

“The growing conditions have been optimal to set us up for a great transition back to Santa Maria,” she said. “Quality is expected to be great.”

The company’s Santa Maria harvest is now underway and will continue until the deal returns to the desert.

Besides conventional produce, many Santa Maria growers offer a selection of organically grown items. Pacific Coast Produce offers organic versions of its soft squash, Doud said.

The majority of Babé Farm’s crops are conventionally grown, Hiltner said, but the company also offers organic bunched green and lacinato kale.

Gold Coast Packing offers organic broccoli florets, cauliflower florets and spinach, Cordero said.

“Organic sales have been steady with slightly more interest in organic,” she said. **P**

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berry offerings. Besides Santa Maria, the company now sources strawberries from Florida and Watsonville, Calif., and is working to add Oxnard, Calif., Baja California and central Mexico to its sourcing locations.

The company now ships raspberries and a few blackberries, as well as strawberries. “We’re building up piece by piece,” Murai said.

Organics is another area Main Street Produce will focus on, Murai said.

The company now offers organic strawberries from April until the end of the year and blueberries from the first of the year through May. Murai said it will eventually cover more weeks.

“Growing in substrate and growing organic has enabled us to fill a certain time period that is sought after and is a good tool for us to broaden our portfolio,” he said.

The company also is looking at various growing systems that will ensure sustainability.

Murai was president of the California Strawberry Commission for seven years and served with a number of other produce companies before taking his current position.

Pacific Coast Produce in Santa Maria started shipping conventional and organic strawberries the first week of March, right on schedule, and will continue through December, said Derrick Doud, vice president.

“Quality has been outstanding,” he said.

Strawberry supplies for Easter and Mother’s Day should be good, rain permitting. Long-stem strawberries should be good sellers for both occasions, he added.

The company offers stem strawberries and 1- and 2-pound clamshells and an 8.8-ounce clamshell.

Although based in Oxnard, Calif., Boba-

Pac Coast Produce in Santa Maria, Calif., started shipping conventional and organic strawberries the first week of March, says Derrick Doud, vice president. “Quality has been outstanding,” he says. Photo courtesy of Pacific Coast Produce

lu Berries grows strawberries on 450 acres in Santa Maria, said Anthony Gallino, vice president of sales.

Bobalu grows on the west side of Santa Maria, which mimics the climate of the Salinas/Watsonville growing area, he said. That means volume won’t pick up until late May or June.

The area has been experiencing warm days and cold nights that strawberries like, he said. “We’ve had perfect conditions so far.” P



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LEMON AND LIME MARKETING



Spring and summer include many opportunities to showcase lemons and limes in displays throughout the store due to their versatility. Photo: Lightfield Studios, Adobe Stock

Citrus cross-promotions can build retail demand during peak time

By Christina Herrick

Citrus marketers say spring is a perfect time for retailers to capitalize on lemon and lime promotions.

With Easter, Mother's Day, Cinco de Mayo and graduation celebrations on the horizon, lemons make a great addition to displays. Cassie Howard, senior director of Category management and marketing for Sunkist Growers Inc., says lemons pair well with many items across the store.

"Lemons are a consumer favorite due to their multiple uses, ranging from drinks and dishes to DIY projects, and they are always in season," Howard said.

All-around addition

Given that versatility, retailers have ample opportunities to showcase lemons and limes with many different displays.

"Placing limes alongside complementary products — such as fresh seafood, cocktail mixers, herbs, and grilling essentials — encourages impulse purchases by reinforcing their role in popular spring and summer recipes," said Zak Laffite, president of

Wonderful Citrus. "Creating visually appealing displays near produce sections, liquor aisles and checkout areas can further drive sales."

Howard encouraged retailers to think of other cross-promotional opportunities such as flavored water.

"Sunkist research has shown that nearly two-thirds of lemon shoppers use lemons to flavor water at home, helping to keep themselves refreshed and hydrated," she said. "With the upcoming summer season, this becomes even more top of mind for consumers. Cross-promotion in the water aisle is a great way to increase impulse purchases."

Laffite said eye-catching POS displays in secondary locations, such as seafood and liquor departments, will also help capitalize on impulse purchases.

"Retailers should place lemons and limes beyond the produce aisle, cross-promoting them in key departments such as seafood, alcohol, bakery and even household cleaning," he said. "Positioning citrus near fresh

CITRUS page 30



Seafood is but one department prime for cross-promoting lemons. Photo courtesy of Sunkist Growers Inc.



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“Retailers should place lemons and limes beyond the produce aisle, cross-promoting them in key departments such as seafood, alcohol, bakery and even household cleaning.”

— Zak Laffite, Wonderful Citrus

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seafood and meats highlight their use in marinades and grilling, while placing them in the alcohol section inspires cocktail creations like margaritas and mojitos.”

With Memorial Day, Cinco de Mayo and other summer holidays as peak lime consumption, Laffite encourages retailers to cross-promote limes with other popular items.

“Bundling limes with avocados, fresh tortillas, salsas and tequila or margarita mixes enhances convenience for shoppers,” he said.

Current availability

The latest USDA crop forecast estimated lemon production for the 2024-25 crop to be about 1.1 million tons, with California expected to produce about 1 million tons, which is up about 6% from the 2023-24 season. Arizona lemon production is slightly down about 5% this season at 36,000 tons.

The USDA estimates fresh lemon imports are up about 8% through January but will settle at lower levels similar to last year’s import of 423 million pounds due to increased domestic production.

The availability and quality of lemons and limes have been good, marketers say, which builds toward consumers’ higher demand in spring and summer. Howard said Sunkist’s lemon crop size is up 10% this season. She said conventional lemons continue to drive the majority of sales, with bulk and bag volume up this year.

“We are noticing an increased demand for both seedless and organic lemons,” Howard said. “Our organic lemon crop size is up by over 30% this year, helping to meet demand.”

Laffite said Wonderful Citrus has also expanded its production to capitalize on the demand during peak season.

“Wonderful Citrus has prioritized operations in Mexico and has made major developments throughout the region in terms of both Wonderful Seedless Lemons and conventional limes,” he said. “These new developments will fill in gaps during peak seasonal transitions with complements from our California supply.”

What’s trending

Seedless limes continue to experience exponential growth, with Wonderful Seedless Lemons noting 300% volume growth since 2021 and bagged seedless lemons accounting for significant growth for three consecutive years. Laffite said consumption and household penetration grew by 40% in the past year, limited only by supply constraints.

Laffite said Wonderful Seedless Lemons launched a significant marketing campaign, “Lemons With Seeds Are Annoying,” to capitalize on that growth. The campaign highlights the small frustrations caused by lemons with seeds and touts the benefits of seedless lemons.

Howard said Sunkist offers recipe cards and header cards to help consumers maximize the use of seedless lemons.

“Retailers can promote seedless lemons

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as a convenience to save time in the kitchen,” she said.

With the continued growth in organic lemon and lime demand, retailers should use signage and displays to help drive more sales, Howard said.

“Featuring a prominent display area with clear signage indicating organic produce is beneficial to shoppers,” she said. “It is also essential to educate consumers about the benefits of organic products using in-store materials, along with special promotions or discounts, to encourage purchasing.”

David Villaseñor, president of Villamex Farms, said he’s seen continual interest in organic limes.

“Organic limes are becoming more and more in demand, especially in big cities where the consumption of organic products has grown in its majority,” he said.

Another trend Laffite said has been a focus for Wonderful Seedless Lemons is online shopping, which continues to grow.

“Since consumers are not able to interact with produce items when online shopping and instead must rely on product images and their perceptions of the brand, it is important to have branded images on grocery e-commerce sites,” he said. “Branded produce outsells private label online by double-digits. It’s truly an opportunity for brands to shine.”

Laffite said Wonderful has seen strong growth among all citrus subcategories thanks to consumers’ continued focus on health.

“Healthier lifestyles continue to be top of mind post-pandemic, and citrus offers the functional benefits and convenience consumers are seeking,” he said. “Lemons can be easily integrated into everyday meals to add color and flavor, with no fat, cholesterol or sodium. Like many citrus, lemons add a healthy burst of bright flavor to meals and drinks, making it a great swap for added sugar or salt.”

And Howard said research by a master chef at Johnson and Wales University shows that lemons can reduce salt in recipes by up to 75%.

Villaseñor encourages retailers to work closely with suppliers to best capitalize on lemons and limes building into spring and summer.

“Sales strategies can be done in collaboration with your suppliers and depending on the different markets and cities to maximize and promote more sales of limes,” he said. “The best way to promote limes is to have a closer relationship with the supplier and take the time to plan together a supplier-to-retailer sales strategy, which is very rare nowadays.”

Laffite said visibility is critical as even smaller footprint displays have been shown to drive more than 24% velocity lifts compared to stores without POS displays.

“To maximize their impact, retailers can feature our lemonade stand POS display that will bring nostalgia to the grocery store aisles,” he said, “Additionally, they can utilize our versatile hexagon bins with culinary-themed header cards, which are a perfect option for merchandising in the produce department or secondary

locations, such as the seafood and alcohol sections. The rotatable header cards show case usages from seafood and cocktails to salads, hot tea and even lemon water — which is one of the top uses for lemon purchases.”

Sunkist, too, offers interactive POS materials tailored to store goals and designed to engage consumers as well as cross-merchandising display bins to help lemons stand out.

“Our interactive point-of-sale materials are available for every variety within

Sunkist’s robust portfolio, along with data-driven pack sizes, limited-edition cartons, and interchangeable bin header and header cards that illustrate innovative ways for retailers to integrate citrus during key promotional periods,” Howard said. “The variety-specific lineup features interchangeable messaging that promotes flexibility and in-store education, allowing retailers to utilize limited floor space effectively.” **P**

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CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRIES

Later Easter a bonus for growers

By Tom Burfield

Easter's relatively late date this year — April 20 — is welcome news for California strawberry grower-shippers. That day is only three weeks before another festive strawberry occasion: Mother's Day.

That means momentum built up by Easter promotions may well carry through to the next strawberry-eating occasion.

"Easter and Mother's Day are definitely big strawberry holidays," said Tim Youmans, vice president of sales for Watsonville, Calif.-based California Giant Berry Farms. "During these spring celebrations, we see a significant increase in demand for strawberries, as they are a popular choice for desserts, brunches and gifts."

Stem berries are particularly popular for chocolate-covered arrangements, fruit platters and decorative additions to holiday meals, he said.

Michelle Deleissegues, senior director of marketing for Santa Monica, Calif.-based Gem-Pack Berries, said that Easter and Mother's Day rank with Valentine's Day as top strawberry holidays. All of those occasions have strong stem availability and demand, she said, because it's easier to find the extra-large berries in early spring.

Anthony Gallino, vice president of sales for Bobalu Berries, Oxnard, Calif., said he was happy with this year's Easter and Mother's Day timing.

"It keeps the flow moving because you've got back-to-back holidays," he said. "It keeps everybody on promotion when Easter is later."

Bakersfield, Calif.-based Western Veg-Produce Inc. expects to increase its strawberry production by 40% for Easter and Mother's Day, said Grayson Ollivier, sales manager.

"Weather permitting, we'll have some of our best quality in California for Easter and Mother's Day," he said.

Shippers got an early start on strawberry season because of mild weather in the Oxnard growing area, Gallino said. Oxnard was entering its peak picking season the last week of March.

Bobalu Berries expects to have a big crop this season, and Gallino said there was potential for 2025 volume to surpass last year's.

The company also will expand its



"Easter and Mother's Day are definitely big strawberry holidays," says Tim Youmans, vice president of sales for Watsonville, Calif.-based California Giant Berry Farms. "During these spring celebrations, we see a significant increase in demand for strawberries, as they are a popular choice for desserts, brunches and gifts," he says. Photo courtesy of California Giant Berry Farms

AgriFrost LLC IQF — individually quick frozen — operation when it opens a facility in Salinas, Calif., in mid-May, said Michael Cleugh, president.

AgriFrost will provide frozen strawberries in a variety of industrial packs and foodservice packs from the 38,000-square-foot facility. The company opened a similar plant in Oxnard in 2018.

California Giant Berry Farms will source its California strawberries from the Watsonville/Salinas and Santa Maria growing regions from early-April through the summer months, Youmans said.

The company is pleased with the Santa Maria harvest, despite an early-season rain delay.

"The quality has been good, with the fruit exhibiting uniform shape and a vibrant, natural sheen," he said. "More importantly, the flavor has been outstanding."

California Giant Berry Farms offers a range of strawberry pack sizes during the spring and summer, ranging from 1-pound packs up to 4-pounders, Youmans said.

"While larger pack sizes are gaining in popularity, 1-pound and 2-pound packs still prevail," he said.

Gem-Pack will continue its winter harvest out of Oxnard and Baja California and start its new spring crops in Santa Maria and Watsonville/Salinas, Deleissegues said.

Weather in Oxnard has been "variable," she said. "We've had off-and-on rain for the last month, and we recently saw temps

soar into the 80s for a couple of days, then cool back down to 60s."

Except for a few wet spells, quality has been consistently strong, though, she said. "The size has been holding nicely for medium-large berries, even in the regions where the season is winding down," Deleissegues said.

Gem-Pack cultivates Fronteras, Monterey, Belvedere, Victor, Adelanto and San Andreas varieties as well as proprietary strawberries, she said. Belvedere and some proprietary varieties are the most recent additions to Gem-Pack's program.

Western Veg-Produce will be shipping strawberries out of Santa Maria and Oxnard in early April as it finishes up its Baja California deal, Ollivier said.

"Santa Maria will have the larger fruit at that time, but Oxnard quality will be steady as well," he said.

The company grows its proprietary BG variety as well as Monterey and Fronteras varieties in Oxnard and Santa Maria.

"BG varieties are showing strong promise in production and flavor," Ollivier said.

The company has had an organic strawberry program for two years and expects to have a 200% increase in organic production this year, Ollivier said.

Western Veg-Produce markets Short N Sweet brand strawberries in 1-, 2- and 4-pound clamshells as well as an 8.8-ounce package. **P**

Prime time for promotions

By Tom Burfield

California strawberry season is ramping up, and the Watsonville-based California Strawberry Commission says promoting the millions of boxes of strawberries that will be reaching produce aisles over the coming months can pay off in a big way.

"California strawberry production will increase rapidly in early April, with excellent quality and strong supplies projected to support Easter and Mother's Day ads, as well as promotions from April through June," said Chris Christian, the commission's senior vice president of market insights.

"Easter and Mother's Day are two key benchmark time frames for gauging California strawberry production, and weekly shipments from mid-April on are expected to be above the three-year average," Christian said.

In 2024, strawberry promotions generated a greater sales lift on a smaller discount than all other berries, Christian said, with 43% volume lift on average 26% promoted discount.

Market research from the commission's "State of the Strawberry Category Report," released at the end of 2024, shows:

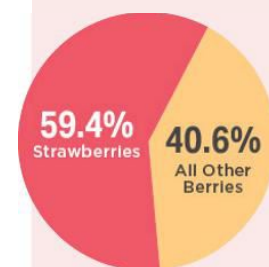
- Strawberries accounted for more than half (59.4%) of the fresh berry category's volume sales.
- Strawberries outpaced all other berries in year-over-year volume growth at 10.9%.

• Across the U.S., the fresh berry category sold more than 2.6 billion pounds of fruit, generating \$11.6 billion dollars in retail sales for the 52 weeks ending July 14.

• During the 52-week period, strawberries outperformed all other berry varieties, with volume growth of

11% over the prior year.

- Strawberries held a 60% share of category volume and contributed 153.6 million pounds in incremental sales. **P**



Fresh Berry Category
Volume (lbs.)
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Ahern is Expanding its Business to Better Serve Farmers

For the past 43 years, Ahern has helped meet the needs of the produce industry with a core business of providing high quality vegetable seeds. Ahern has grown into one of the largest seed distributors in North America by connecting growers with superior seed varieties that transform their productivity.

Over the past year, Ahern has been actively engaged in transforming its operations to incorporate value-added businesses that will address a wide array of agricultural issues. For example, farmers today face diverse challenges like financing, seed technology, yield efficiency, labor management and water efficiency. Ahern aims to work hand in hand with growers in their journey to better support their farm operation needs.

One business entity initiated by the company is Ahern Biosolutions, a venture that helps farmers with crop pollination. "With Ahern BioSolutions, we're focused on enhancing production practices so farmers can operate as efficiently as possible," says Ahern CEO,

Jose Luis Vidales. "On the financial end, another essential branch, yet to be named, is financing. We can help farmers with risk management to better set them up for success."

We Grow with You to Empower Your Growth

Ahern's newly launched position is: We grow with you to Empower your growth. Not content to be only a seed distributor, Ahern is now enhancing its business to support farmers in other areas. "In many cases, there are 40 to 50 people who deal with farmers. Those farmers have a strong appetite to reduce the number of stakeholders they have to work with," explains Jose Luis. "We want to be part of that solution, collaborating closely with customers, leveraging technology to supply them with solutions that will ultimately help them grow their business." From its technology center in Culiacán, Mexico, Ahern is actively evaluating all types of technologies--sensors, predictive analytics, drones and apps that focus on farm management, labor and nutrition. Utilizing these technologies, the company will identify methods to improve the assistance it provides to farmers throughout North America.

Ahern is following a strategic plan for growth, evolving



Jose Luis Vidales

from seed distributor to value-added partner. "Our goal is to grow rapidly with better presence in the U.S. Our intent is to have more empathy for the natural dynamics of the farming business. We'll be spending more time in the field figuring out how to turn a challenge into an opportunity," says Jose Luis. Ahern sets itself apart from the competition with more boots on the ground. The company has the largest team visiting the fields who have

upwards of 15 to 20 years of industry experience. "It's crucial to have great team members with technical expertise working closely with our customers," adds Jose Luis.

Another differentiator is Ahern's speed to market. Partnering with more than 20 suppliers, Ahern offers a much quicker response to farmers' seed requirements. "We are diligent in our speed to market," says Jose Luis. "With our new value-added businesses, we'll look to enhance that expertise utilizing different technologies."

Empower Your Growth represents Ahern's commitment to growers' development and success.

Empower Your Growth



At **Ahern**, we believe in Agriculture as the mother of industries, and in its evolution as a key pillar to face the challenges of food security in a sustainable way.

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Empower Your Growth represents **Ahern's** commitment to grower's development and success.



Oishii acquires robotics company Tortuga AgTech, extends harvesting capabilities

By Jennifer Straley

Oishii, a Jersey City, N.J.-based vertical strawberry farmer, has acquired Tortuga AgTech's intellectual property, assets and members of the Tortuga engineering team. The company says the deal will "turbocharge" the output and efficiency of Oishii's robotic harvesting capabilities.

"The acquisition of Tortuga AgTech's team, intellectual property and assets represents a strategic opportunity for Oishii to further enhance its technological capabilities in robotic harvesting," Oishii co-founder and Chief Operating Officer Brendan Somerville told *The Packer*. "In an industry faced with the very real and incredibly timely challenges of climate uncertainty and labor shortages, Oishii has established an identity of stability and continued growth.

"We're focused on solving these issues with even greater efficiency and precision," Somerville continued. "In terms of timing, this acquisition aligns with our growth trajectory and the market's readiness for scalable, innovation-driven agricultural solutions for the future of indoor farming and beyond."

He added the acquisition will "bolster [Oishii's] operation without compromising [its] financial stability."

Through the deal, Oishii acquires Tortuga AgTech's advanced robotics technologies, including AI-driven models, frontier robotics software and custom hardware. Oishii says it will integrate these technologies with its proprietary robotic systems and ongoing strategic partnership with Yaskawa Robotics, creating the potential to make the company's harvesting capability fully autonomous.

Harvesting solutions

The vertical strawberry smart farm is currently home to 50 robots that Oishii says have revolutionized the harvesting of strawberries and grapes, two of the most delicate and labor-intensive crops to pick.

"To put this in context, by the end of the year we expect robots to surpass human performance with 98% harvesting accuracy 24/7, 365 [days a year]," Somerville said. "In terms of varieties, by the end of the year robots will pick more of our premium Koyo strawberries than humans and reduce har-



Oishii says Tortuga AgTech's advanced automated harvesting and autonomous robot technology — designed for both indoor and outdoor farming — allows for improvements in harvesting and forecasting to assist farms in becoming more resilient, sustainable and successful. Photo courtesy of Tortuga AgTech

vesting expenses by 50%. Our robots already pick over 40,000-man hours per month, and this number will continue to grow."

Oishii says Tortuga AgTech's advanced automated harvesting and autonomous robot technology — designed for both indoor and outdoor farming — allows for improvements in harvesting and forecasting to assist farms in becoming more resilient, sustainable and successful.

A different kind of vertical farm

In recent years, vertical farming has seen continued consolidation and a slew of bankruptcies. How has Oishii succeeded in an industry where others have struggled?

"The first major key to Oishii's success in the space is our differentiation — namely, the fact that we grow and harvest berries, while leafy greens have been the universal industry standard product since the inception of vertical farming," Somerville said. "Of course, this differentiation is only made possible thanks to our implementation of premier technology and AI — implementation that we are excited to super charge through this acquisition."

Oishii's Omakase berry was inspired by strawberries that grow in the foothills of the Japanese Alps, where fruit only grows

for a short period of the year. Oishii says it recreated this specific climate year-round in its indoor vertical strawberry farm.

Another point of differentiation, at least initially, was the price point of Oishii's Omakase berries, which made headlines as "the most expensive strawberries in the world." Somerville says technology like that which Tortuga AgTech brings to the equation will help drive more accessible price points.

"Pricing for our berries is anywhere between \$10 to \$15 a tray," said Somerville. "We're proud to have scaled back the cost of our Omakase Berry from \$50 per tray when we first launched, to \$12 to \$15 a tray today, making them an easily attainable luxury for consumers who wish to experience Japanese quality and flavor. Our second product was the Koyo Berry, which we launched at \$14.99 and is now \$9.99. From here, our plan is to continue to launch new varieties of berries at both higher and lower price points, so there's something delicious at any budget.

"Ultimately, scale, new farms and new technology are what allow us to continue to bring these prices down," Somerville added.

The company's newest product, the Nikko Berry, currently in a beta launch

phase available through Fresh Direct at a price point of \$7.99, is poised to be its most affordable berry yet.

"The incredible early success of this beta launch certainly did lead us to consider how we might go about accelerating our robotics agenda," Somerville said.

Growing pains in agtech

Oishii says Tortuga AgTech has raised \$55 million since its founding in 2016 to advance its automated harvesting and autonomous robots. But the agtech sector has struggled of late; most recently, FarmWise announced it was restructuring.

"There has been no shortage of failure in agritech over the past 10 years, but what remains true is that agriculture needs significant advances in the face of global challenges like climate change, labor shortages, and many other risk and margin pressures," Somerville said. "The fundamental vision and mission of Tortuga and Oishii are the same, and we share this vision with many pioneers, past and present.

"Despite the odds, both Oishii and Tortuga have become leaders in fields where many others have failed, and the melding of our teams gives our broader, shared vision the best possible chance of success," he said. **P**

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