

Fresh Digest

A Publication of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council

Summer 2021



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AMBER ROSSI:
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EDITOR'S VIEW

By Tim Linden



Plant-forward is an Achievable Aspiration

Elsewhere in this issue, there is a story on the “plant-based” food movement that also talks about the two-year Produce for Better Health Foundation’s “Have a Plant” effort.

During PBH’s 30+ year history, it has launched several memorable programs with catchy signature phrases such as “5-a-Day” and “More Matters”. Both of those programs were focused on a quantitative approach cajoling consumers to literally eat more fruits and vegetables. Those programs deserve no blame, but per capita fruit and vegetable consumption has not shown huge gains in the past 30 years.

Wendy Reinhardt Kapsak, who is current president and CEO of PBH, explains the “Have a Plant” campaign is using an emotional appeal to tap into how people feel about eating fruits and vegetables. All you have to do is watch a Nike, Coca Cola or any car commercial to note that using an emotional appeal is the advertising avenue of choice by the world’s top products.

I like the PBH approach and wish it well. Personally, I love its attempt to relabel “plant-based” diets as “plant-forward” efforts. Wendy explained to me that this is a way to include every consumer into the program. She said it is great

that consumers of the plant-based “Impossible Burger” want to cut down on meat and add more plants to their diet. That niche group of consumers is a great target for the Have a Plant campaign. But so are the 80 percent of shoppers who want a ground beef burger. “Why would we exclude them,” she rhetorically asks.

PBH and the produce industry want everyone to embrace the plant-forward concept. Make sure plant-centric foods have a prominent place on your plate.

I love the “plant-forward” concept as it defines my aspirational diet better than any other descriptor. I’m not a vegan nor a vegetarian. I love an occasional burger, a bacon, lettuce and avocado sandwich and barbecued chicken from time to time. But I also make a conscious effort to have a plant-forward diet.

I use cauliflower to make pizza dough and there is nothing better than a roasted Brussels sprouts salad. But that pizza sometimes has sausage on it and it is the bacon that adds crunch to my B.S. salad. A chicken Caesar salad is more satisfying than its non-chicken counterpart if you make it the meal.

In late June, I am attending a weekend reunion with a number of my college roommates and their

spouses. It will be the first time that we will all be sharing a meal together in several decades. The host couple, who insist on making the two dinners for this get together, recently asked the group for its diet restrictions, including our meat preference. I have often asked this same question myself and have inadequately answered it many times before. I am not opposed to meat so I don’t like to be restrictive and say I’d prefer vegetarian. I typically say, “We’ll eat just about anything and love to experiment so be creative if you want.”

But this time, I had a better answer that the host truly appreciated. “We are not vegetarian or vegan but we prefer a plant-forward diet,” I said via email.

The couple loved the response, which led to a swap of our favorite plant-forward recipes. I shared my eggplant meatball recipe and my roasted pesto cauliflower, while she told me about her go-to veggie lasagna, which knocks out both pasta and meat sauce. I was assured there will be plant-forward options for the reunion weekend.

Plant-forward is an achievable way to eat. It fits well with the healthy aspirations of the aging Baby Boomer generation as well as the baked-in nutritional leanings of Millennials and Gen Z’s. 🌱

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EXECUTIVE NOTES

By Don Gann



Moving Forward

It has clearly been a challenging 15 months, but the Fresh Produce & Floral Council has found solid footing and we are moving ahead. We have scheduled a handful of in-person events for 2021, and we are also fast at work developing our plans for a full slate of networking opportunities in 2022.

Our first live event for this year will be the Southern California Golf Tournament to be held at Tustin Golf Course on July 27. In 2020, we were able to hold golf tournaments in both Southern and Northern California, and we will do the same this year. The Northern California event will be held at the Wente Winery Golf Course in Livermore on Friday, October 15. Meeting on the golf course is a time-honored ritual for the produce industry and those two 2020 FPFC tourneys helped bring at least a tad of normalcy to our altered routine.

Our first in-person, potentially outdoor, Southern California luncheon featuring Kevin Coupe of the retail-centric Morning-NewsBeat.com will be held on Wednesday, August 18. We are still working on the venue and finalizing the program, but it is sure to be a

memorable activity that mirrors what has been a mainstay of the FPFC for the past 55 years. We will be respectful of all safety protocols, but we will be able to meet and greet face-to-face with our fellow industry colleagues.

As summer wanes, we are planning a “Welcome Back Luau” on Saturday, September 11. This will be another outdoor activity designed to mimic the spirit of the annual Dinner Dance that had to be cancelled earlier this year. We invite all in the industry to enjoy a night under the stars. Details will be forthcoming.

The always-popular Day at the Races is on the schedule for Saturday, October 2 at Santa Anita Racetrack. This is naturally an outdoor event, so it is consistent with our safety-first theme of 2021. Again, please join your colleagues for a day of fun, relaxation and re-connecting.

We are planning to end our calendar year of events with the annual Charity Auction luncheon on December 8. We are anticipating that life will be back to normal and we can once again meet indoors to continue the FPFC and produce industry tradition of giving to those

less fortunate than we are.

These events all have a familiarity to them that will be a welcome sight as we leave the recent experiences behind and head into a new future. We do love these activities and expect to continue many of them into 2022. But rest assured that we are hard at work reimagining the Fresh Produce & Floral Council and developing programs and activities that fit the needs of our membership. Now is the perfect time to re-examine what we do and how we can best serve you.

I am excited about my permanent position with the Council as President and the opportunity to serve our membership. Please reach out and let me hear your thoughts. Where do you want the Fresh Produce & Floral Council to go?

We are moving ahead and see a very bright future in front of us. 🌱



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Source: 2020 California Avocado Tracking Study QC1. Price and ripeness are sometimes important factors in purchasing avocados. How important are each of the following when purchasing avocados? (Grown by California farmers.)
Answers: extremely/very/somewhat important.

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Amber Rossi:

Global Buyer, Whole Foods

Buy Side Fits Her Skill Set

Though Amber Rossi grew up in a farm community with immediate family members in the fresh produce industry and was in the Cal Poly San Luis Obispo agricultural business program, she didn't always envision a career in the industry.

Her father, Scott Rossi, has had a long career as a sales executive for several table grape shippers and her two older brothers (Doug and Justin) have followed her father into that business, but Amber and her twin sister, Erika, attended Cal Poly without a clear direction. "My sister wanted to go to Cal State Fullerton, but I had my heart set on Cal Poly. We knew we wanted to stick together though, so ultimately I won that battle, with a little help from my parents who vouched that it was an amazing school and also made a lot of sense financially. We could share a car and be roommates, and that's what we did."

Amber said she and her twin were very close growing up in Bakersfield. In high school, they often took the same classes, sat next to each other and were

hard to tell apart. In college, it was the same. "I'd see friends on campus and we'd talk for awhile and then when we were leaving, they'd say 'Bye, Erika!' When I got back to the room, I'd tell my sister who she talked to and what the conversation was about."

Though a common dramatic theme in books, television shows and movies revolves around identical twins trading places, Amber claims she and her sister did not pull any pranks on their friends and family while growing up. "My sister did go to one class for me in college because I was going out of town for the weekend. She sat in on the class and nobody knew the difference."

Post college, the twins have altered their looks a bit with hair color to create some visual separation. "I've gone darker and Erika is now a platinum blonde. People can more easily tell us apart and often think we're sisters but not identical twins."

Even as she was taking ag business classes, Amber thought of the industry as male dominated and wasn't overly interested in pursuing that career op-





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tion. “But I did become more fond of agriculture during my time in college.”

Actually, a pivotal experience was when the twins went to Australia for a study abroad program during the winter quarter of their sophomore year. It was a wine and viticulture course in Adelaide, which is that country’s wine capital. Though she was not a drinker at the time – and not even 21 when she arrived Down Under – Amber loved the experience, acquired a taste for wine and expanded her thoughts about what an ag career could encompass.

She reasoned that the industry was changing, there were more women getting involved and maybe there was a place for her.

Her first job out of college in 2013 was with Bengard Marketing, a family-owned distributor of both imported and domestic fruits, headquartered in the Long Beach, CA area. Amber called it an “awesome opportunity.” As a relatively small company, she was able to get involved in many different aspects of a produce sales outfit, including accounting, sales and inventory.

During three years with Bengard, Amber and her husband, Zach Teske, loved their Long Beach experience. But Zach, a fellow Cal Poly graduate and a

civil engineer by training, received a job offer from UC Santa Cruz and the couple moved about 350 miles north, though still hugging the coast. Amber explains it was a bittersweet decision to leave the Bengard family. She was grateful for the experience but also excited for the next chapter...to explore more facets of the industry and find her niche.

In Santa Cruz, she did secure a job on the buy side with Whole Foods Market, working out of their California buying office in 2016. She started as an associate buyer handling both organic and conventional pomegranates, persimmons and packaged vegetables. In 2019, she was promoted to global buyer, her current role, and handles a broader portfolio including both organic and conventional peppers, cucumbers, summer squash, eggplant and tomatoes. “I love the buying side; there’s just so much that goes on at the retail level that’s super compelling to me. Plus, I get to work with my customers, which are the D.C.’s, and I also get to work directly with my suppliers. I have the best of both worlds!”

She explained that Whole Foods has 10 distribution centers around the country. Those D.C.’s supply the various Whole Foods divisions. Each division has local buyers who buy from their own region and they also place orders through the California and Texas buying offices as well. For her commodities, Amber sources from all over the country and internationally too. “The job requires very strong organizational skills and a lot of multi-tasking. It is very complex and fast-paced but that’s the thrill of it – keeps ya on your toes!”

She admits this has been a challenging year overall, given COVID-19 and working remotely since March of 2020. “I’m excited for the other side of the pandemic and to be able to travel and visit suppliers again.”

In the past, Amber has been to the company’s D.C. in Richmond, CA, and was planning a trip to the Denver operation before her company’s travel ban was implemented last year. She is hopeful she can make that trip sometime soon.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. “Later this summer, we are going to start slowly phasing in going back to the office.”

This year of avoiding people plays well into Amber’s favorite physical pursuit. “We love Santa Cruz; it is an awesome hub of outdoor activity. Personally, I love to hike.”

Several years ago, she noted that Zach started



training for a Mt. Whitney hike with some of his college buddies. They started hiking together more seriously in anticipation of that trip and Amber has gotten very much into it. Santa Cruz, with its ample coastline and mountain trails, offers many, many opportunities for hikes and she takes advantage quite often.

Recently, Amber Rossi was featured on an FPFC webinar discussing the challenges specifically facing produce women during this year of Covid isolation. She very much enjoyed the event and looks forward to participating in some of the networking opportunities that the FPFC will offer when normalcy returns. 🍏



By Tim Linden

The Fresh Produce & Floral Council hosted a webinar on April 14 featuring four female members of the group discussing the future of women in the industry and exploring their own paths to success.

FPFC Board member Kristen Reid of MIXTEC Group was the moderator of the event that featured Kyla Oberman of California Giant Berry Farms, Amber Rossi of Whole Foods, Sheryl Salazar of Albertsons and Shonna Williams of Cardenas Markets. The four panelists discussed lessons learned from the past year, the ability to work remotely, permanent changes brought about by the year of COVID, and the value of teamwork. And they ended the hour-long webinar giving nuggets of advice that their fellow female colleagues might consider as they gain traction in this industry.

Williams noted that working from home was a challenge at first as she struggled to find a good work/life balance. Initially, she was working all the time, spending 60 hours a week working and devoting scant hours to motherhood. As time went by, she learned how to separate the two and started very much enjoying the time at home.

Rossi reported the same initial devotion to work at the expense of her home life. She and her husband do not have children so there was nothing distracting her from devoting all her time to work. She was in a new role at Whole Foods and had difficulty separating work from home life. “My balance was non-existent.”

Rossi started to force herself to take breaks and regain her free time. She also noted that a lesson learned was to treat people with more compassion, which included having a heightened awareness of some of the difficulties others were dealing with in this pandemic-influenced year. She took a “kinder approach” and actively tried “to give people a break.”

Salazar had just been promoted to her current position of director of fresh for her Albertsons division and had to navigate a steep learning curve as she also traversed the pandemic. “I learned I can’t teach third and fifth grade,” she quipped.

Over time, she did adjust to the new workload and the new teaching task at home by adopting a better time management system. But she added that a big positive from the last year was the extra time she got to spend with her family.

Oberman had a little different experience as her working-at-home husband, nanny and two children occupied the four corners of the house, so she went to the office as one of the few employees that did not work remotely. But like the others, most of her colleagues were out of the office and Oberman needed to establish new lines of communication to accomplish the same tasks that usually took place at the proverbial water cooler. She established personal check-ins with colleagues and proactively searched for more connectivity.

Oberman credited the culture at Cal Giant with making the year doable and enjoyable. She said the family-run company always has had a philosophy that employees need to take the time to take care of family and personal matters. As long as you get the job done, you are free to “do what you need to do.”

To promote connectivity and re-enforce camaraderie, the company held regular virtual townhalls, including theme events like a cocktail hour.

Salazar noted that Albertsons used the Microsoft Teams platform to communicate with store teams and it worked very well. They also had large company Zoom calls that were fun and brought everyone together in a way that can’t be done in person. She believes that effort will survive the pandemic. She said they were able to bring team members together from El Centro to Morro Bay and got loads of positive feedback.

Rossi took away some big lessons from the past year that she is bringing into the future, including take full advantage of technology, keep your networking door open, tap into the virtual world and broaden your audience, and make room for people who can’t always be involved.

Williams said this year should teach employers that they can trust their employees and let them work from home when the occasion calls for it. She said if you can’t trust an employee to work from home, he or she shouldn’t be working for you.

The Cardenas Markets executive started her new job recently and is very excited about the potential in front of her for the next two years. The chain is focused on the Hispanic community and Williams loves the family orientation of that population. She said there are “tons of growth opportunity.”

Salazar piggybacked on that concept, noting the steep learning curve she is still climbing. She came up

through produce and has an affinity for that “fresh” section but is now in charge of several others, including deli and meat. Looking forward she wants to be an “employer of choice” supporting associates as they travel their own personal paths, including dealing with issues such as inadequate childcare.

She indicated that both employees and customers are strapped for time and in her new position she wants to focus on solutions that make it easier for shoppers such as convenience, e-commerce and meal solutions. “What can we do to set ourselves apart from the competition?” Try new things is her answer.

Oberman said there are great takeaways from the virtual world we’ve lived in the past year. In the first place, she said virtual meetings allow for more inclusivity. For example, on an in-person sales call only a few people can attend. But when it is held on-line more team members can participate, which is good for the presentation and a good learning opportunity for the lower-level team members.

In wrapping up the event, each of the panelists, taking their cue from moderator Reid, imparted some

advice to other industry women focusing on a quote that defined their philosophy. “Bloom where you are planted,” said Rossi, advising women “to be intentional” about making the most of their opportunities.

“Find your passion and go for it,” she said.

Williams said she lives by the mantra that if “you start with a no, you’ll end with a no” and literally gain nothing in the process. She said women should apply themselves and indicated that you have to embrace opportunities.

“If it doesn’t challenge you, it won’t change you,” is the credo that informs Salazar’s view of opportunities. She added that everyone should be proud of this past year. She noted that if you got through this last year, you can get through anything. “Don’t be intimidated by what you don’t know.”

Oberman’s admitted to two catch phrases that keep her going. “Give yourself grace” and “it’s why they call it work.” The concepts are related in that they call for a don’t give up philosophy. “Plow forward,” she said, and volunteer. “Try it. I’ve gotten to where I am today by raising my hand.” 🙌

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FPFC MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council is to connect members to the information, education and professional network they need to increase knowledge, grow their businesses and collectively advance the industry.

UPCOMING FPFC EVENTS

July

Tuesday, July 27th

Southern California Golf Tournament

Tustin Golf Course

August

Wednesday, August 18th

Southern California Luncheon

September

Saturday, September 11th

Welcome Back Luau

October

Saturday, October 2nd

Day at the Races

Santa Anita Racetrack

Friday, October 15th

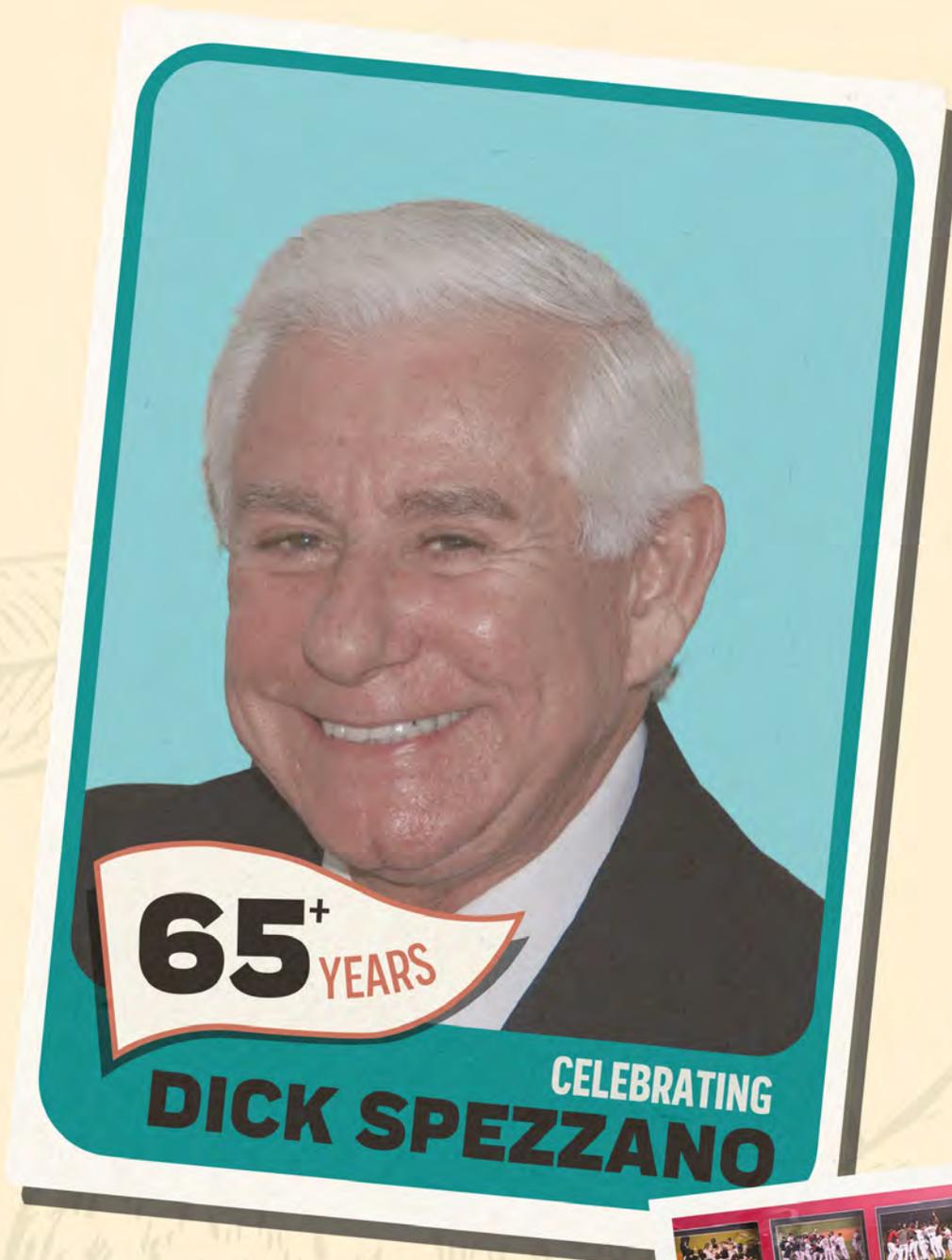
Northern California Golf Tournament

Wente Winery Golf Course

December

Wednesday, December 8th

Charity Luncheon



A TRIBUTE TO A LEGEND

The former Red Sox's superstar, Mookie Betts once said; "All I have to do is get on base. The guys behind me make my job look easier." Those same words sum up Dick Spezzano's leadership in the fresh produce industry. As a leader Dick recognized the value and importance of people. We may be buying and selling produce, but we are in the relationship business. No one is better at relationships than Dick Spezzano!



THIS WAY TO RETIREMENT

STARRING

DICK SPEZZANO

By Tim Linden

Long ago produce retailer Dick Spezzano reached icon status but it was not without risk taking, hard work, great collaborations, some marketing savvy and taking advantage of the opportunities that came his way.

Dick grew up west of Boston in the Thompsonville village of Newton. He came from a large Italian family as his father was one of eight siblings. “We all grew up together and our friends were our cousins,” he recalls, with relatives living all over his neighborhood.

Every Sunday, the entire clan would meet at the grandparents’ farm for dinner. “During the summertime that meant spending three hours on the farm working before we could eat,” said Dick, remembering this was his earliest connection to agriculture and the fresh produce industry.

He would continue the association as he attended community college, earned an associate’s degree and got a part-time job at the local Star Market. After getting that degree, he joined the retailer on a full-time basis and officially started his career as a produce clerk. More importantly, he met his wife, Carole, who also worked for Star Markets.

Over the next few years, their relationship flourished, they got married and Carole became an X-ray technician. It was early 1963 when the couple decided to pack their bags and move across the country to California. Dick had an aunt and uncle living in Ventura County touting the good life that California offered. He also had a colleague at Star Markets with a connection to the Los Angeles area Vons Markets. Dick and Carole made it to California in early June 1963. Within a week, Dick secured a job at a Ventura County Vons as a produce clerk. Carole landed a spot in a local hospital as an X-ray technician and soon they bought a house in Camarillo. Their California adventure had begun...and is still going strong almost 60 years later.



The next 15 years were a blur of constant work, transferring from one store to another, taking on new work responsibilities and starting a family. After about three years, Dick got his first assignment as a produce manager in a Vons’ store in Simi Valley. By 10 years into his Vons career, he had been involved in a couple of management training programs and was the third key carrier at a nearby store. That slot is basically one position below the assistant store manager. While Dick’s career was moving forward at this point and he seemingly was being groomed for bigger things, he was still miles away, both literally and figuratively, from the significant produce role he would eventually play for one of Southern California’s top retailers. At this point, he was working six days a week and wearing many hats. As third

key holder, he had management duties when the store manager and assistant manager were both gone. But he also worked with the night crew stocking the store. "Sometimes, I'd work to 11 at night, come home and have to be up at 3 a.m. to start all over."

It was in 1974 that Dick's produce career moved into high gear and he was truly on the fast track. That year he became field produce supervisor in charge of 22 stores from Goleta in Santa Barbara County to Bakersfield in the San Joaquin Valley. He was in that position for a couple of years and learned a lot. In 1977, he was given the chance to be a temporary buyer in the head office. It would be an arduous job as it would require long hours, including a long commute from Camarillo to the Los Angeles produce market six days a week. At the time, he was also on track to be a district manager, which would have been less grueling. He distinctly remembers being at a store opening in Agoura Hills when a more senior manager told him that if he was going to continue to rise within the company, he had to get into the headquarters office. He did take that temporary slot, was eventually promoted to buyer and moved to the head office in El Monte. "It was a great opportunity to see management on a daily basis and for management to see me," he quipped.

But it was also a difficult task that required lots of



Dick with the PMA leadership team early in his career.

driving. "We were still living in Camarillo and had two young girls. I worked six days a week and used to get up at midnight to drive to the produce market," he said, noting that the market still provided a healthy percentage of his daily buys. I would do my early morning buying and make sure it would be delivered to our Produce DC in El Monte within 1-3 hours so that it could go onto the store delivery trucks and arrive in the stores by 11:00 am-same day. The last thing I would do is to go to Frieda's to look at her items and to get her insight on my responsibilities and then to Giumarra's for coffee.

Soon he moved to Monrovia, where he still lives today, to be closer to the office in nearby El Monte.

He was promoted within the department and became the top produce division merchandiser under Gary Lee, the vice president of the produce division. In 1980, Lee's career took a turn as he joined a Southern California distributor and moved to the supply side of the equation.

A couple of days later, Dick Spezzano was offered Lee's job, but not the vice president's title. "You had to prove yourself as a division manager first. In 1983, I was given the vice president title." At this time Roger Schroeder was the Produce DC manager and I promoted him to my spot as Division Merchandiser. That started a great relationship that endures even to this day.

When he took over that top slot, Vons had about 130 stores. In 1988, Safeway sold all its stores to Vons for a stake in the operation. That instantly more than doubled the size of Vons. At its height, Dick recalls that there were 350 produce departments under his purview. He had opportunities over the years to move higher into store management and take on more departments, but he liked the produce division. “I was happy as a clam in produce and was happy to stay there as vice president of produce and floral.”

In 1997, Safeway acquired all the Vons stock, and the retailer became a subsidiary of Safeway. That effectively ended Dick’s 34-year run with Vons, as he soon took the severance package that was offered and launched a consulting business.

Looking back on his storied career with Vons, during which time he became a well-known and respected U.S. produce retailer, Spezzano points to a number of decisions with a great deal of pride. Early on, he remembers promoting a young Roger Schroeder to the head office. Dick had first met Roger during one long weekend of work while a labor dispute was going on. Dick was a field supervisor and Roger was a produce manager and they had to work a produce department that was short-staffed. When Dick became a buyer, Roger ran the produce warehouse, and Dick was impressed. “When I got Gary Lee’s job, I promoted Roger to my spot.”

At this point Dick was only a handful of years removed from being a produce manager and Roger had no produce office experiences. “We were just two relative rookies, but we ended up kicking ass. We were a great team. We complemented each other perfectly. We had different skills.”



Their friendship grew and they have remained close for the past 40 years.

As head of the Produce Division for 14 years, Spezzano has several indelible memories of that time. He was on the Vons teams that launched both its high-end Pavilions brand in 1985 as well as its ahead-of-its-time Hispanic banner, Tianguis, at the end of the 1980s. In both instances, the Vons development teams did their homework, created the concept after hours of discussions during late night pizza parties, and brought that vision to action. In the case of Pavilions, Dick said the research included a week in

Europe visiting scores of stores in seven countries, observing and analyzing produce presentations.

The produce industry considers itself a relationship business and Spezzano credits many long-time relationships with suppliers for helping the Vons team be an innovator in products and merchandising.

“We worked with Dennis Gertmenian and Ready Pac to launch packaged salads,” he said. “He developed eight salads and said to pick the best four. We decided to try them all and let the customers decide. I always thought that was the best way to go.”

He recalls being a testing ground for the many innovative products coming from Sun World, including its seedless watermelon and its Le Rouge Royal red peppers, as well as its specialty yellow and green peppers. “We were known as early adopters, and suppliers would bring us new items and new packaging,” he said, recalling working with Don Corsaro at Giumarra’s on hand picked and packed summer fruits in RPCs (returnable plastic containers).

Congratulations on your retirement!

Wishing you good luck, happiness and the best for the future.

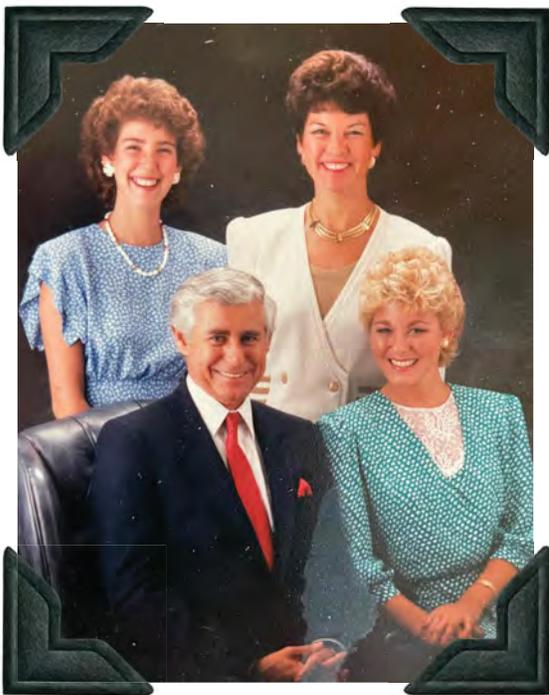
Patty & Roger

Congratulations Dick!



Thank you for all that you've
done for us and the industry.
Have fun seeing the world!





Dick and Carole Spezzano with daughters Sheryl and Sharon

He also noted working to introduce Brentwood Corn from Northern California and specialty mixed melons from Don Smith's Turlock Fruit Company in the San Joaquin Valley. Spezzano also recalls being the first to try baby carrots, which he

remembers were introduced by Mike Yurosek of Yurosek Farms, before Grimmway Farms developed the category and took it nationwide. Selling ripe avocados was another item Vons pioneered with the California Avocado Commission, and the chain under Spezzano was an early adopter of organic produce. The chain also sold fresh orange juice squeezed in the store. "That was a big profit center," he said.

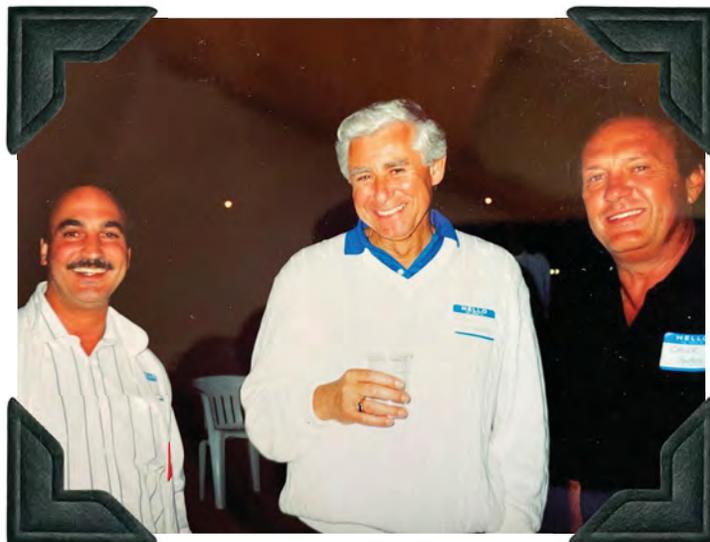
When Vons was going to launch a new produce item, Spezzano made sure that his produce managers and other key personnel took it home and tried it so they could sell it on the floor the next day to shoppers.

"I was also very proud of our floral program. We were

one of the first to put it in the front of the store. Pavilions did a great job with floral sales. Most floral departments add less than 1% (in sales); at Vons we were always at 2% or more."

Transportation was another area in which Vons, under Spezzano, was an innovator. He created a profit center by having the Vons delivery trucks that were servicing Vons stores in the outer limits of the company's geographic reach, handle produce backhauls to the distribution center.

It was in 1997, when, in his mid-50s, Spezzano's career took a turn. As mentioned, Vons was bought by Safeway with the deal becoming final in the spring. By August, it was clear that the chain was taking a new direction and the previous management was given the opportunity to get in line or exercise their severance packages. "I decided to leave and I will say that Safeway was very good to me."





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our mentor, great client, sparring partner,
challenger, inspirer...we thank you
from the bottom of our hearts.



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Spezzano decided to start a consulting business while he waited for his next retail gig. That year, the Produce Marketing Association convention was in Anaheim. Spezzano printed up some business cards and worked the floor. Within a few months, he had four consulting retainers that topped his previous salary. He has remained a retail produce consultant ever since, never having to hunt down clients. He employed a simple philosophy, which included keeping his name out there by talking to the press and being available when speakers or panelists were needed. His stature has grown over the years and while he admits to slowing down a bit, he is not calling it retirement. "I like to stay in the middle of things...stay active," he said. "I had a small project in January and I'll work on projects when they come up."

Over the years, Dick has been very active in industry organizations including a 40-year relationship with the Fresh Produce & Floral Council, which continues to this day. He has served on the board many years, been involved in more committees than one can remember, served as chairman of the board and was a mainstay at FPFC events for all those decades. He was also active at PMA for many years and was instrumental in the adoption of UPC and PLU numbers for the produce industry. Dick called that a "game-changer" which has greatly benefited all facets of the produce supply chain.

His post-work life remains very active as he and Carole have tried to take a couple of overseas trips annually for many years now. He admits catching the foreign travel



The Packer's Bill O'Neill presents the Marketer of the Year Award to Spezzano with his wife, Carole, in attendance.

bug when he was in Europe with Vons in the mid- '80s researching for the eventual opening of Pavilions. Covid-19 postponed a couple of trips in 2020, but the couple plan to travel the Silk Road in Asia this fall and India is also on their to-go list. But Dick said traveling within the United States is their plan for future years.

Their youngest daughter, Sheryl is getting married this summer, and their oldest, Sharon, did bless them with one grandchild, who is in his mid-20s and a chemical engineer developing organic cosmetics. "One grandchild is better than none," Dick quipped. 🍷

WJL Distributors, INC. wants to Thank Dick Spezzano for his professionalism, mentorship, leadership and more importantly his friendship! Enjoy retirement, you've worked your butt off and you deserve the best that life has to offer you!!

**Bill Laliberte,
President**



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MEET THE 2021 FPFC APPRENTICES

Though the initial sessions for the 2021 Apprentice Class of the Fresh Produce & Floral Council have been held virtually, expectations are that this group will get to experience in-person connections before they graduate. Nonetheless, the class of 12 has been busy getting further immersed into the world of specialty crops and learning more about this great industry of ours.

To introduce the FPFC membership to these potential future leaders, *Fresh Digest* asked each apprentice to answer a few questions about themselves and their personal journey to this place on their path.

Pebbles Johnson

Associate Buyer

Grocery Outlet Inc.

Emeryville, CA

Background – I was born in California but raised in the city with bright lights, Las Vegas! I went to a vocational high school and was hired to work at the Luxor Hotel and Casino the day after I graduated. I have spent many years in the casino industry in purchasing and managing in food and beverage working for Station Casinos. On a whim, a headhunter reached out to me and convinced me to explore an opportunity at an Indian gaming casino in Northern California. Being the explorer, I took it and moved to Sacramento. After spending 10 years as the beverage manager at that property, I decided to return to college. For the pursuit of normalcy and balance, I traded my casino life for an opportunity with Coca Cola. I worked full-time, mom of two (13 and 5 now), and was a full-time student and never thought about quitting any of it. If all that was not enough, during my last semester in college, I decided to sell my home and move to the Bay Area wanting to live closer to my Dad. Relocating to the Bay Area I remained with Coke as a business development manager working with new restaurants. My hard work paid off and I graduated from Chico State with a Business Management degree. The most rewarding moment in life was walking across the stage with my boys and family cheering me on! Life changed with COVID and I was laid off and forced to make a very necessary change. Always having a love for purchasing, I pursued an opportunity with Grocery Outlet. Exhausted from interviewing for four months with various companies, I received four offers simultaneously. There was never a question what opportunity I should select. Produce was a natural fit and I love every day. It's humbling to learn a new industry but I would not trade it for anything. Vegas was a desert so when I came to California, I fell in love with anything green and alive! I enjoy taking my boys camping in our travel trailer and spending as much time with them as possible. What has got me through and kept me grounded has been my relationship with God!

FPFC Connection – After I joined GOI, within the first few months my senior buyer informed me about FPFC. He raved about the program and how it would help me further my industry knowledge, open opportunities to connect with other people, and further my career. I have a thirst for knowledge, so I immediately said sign me up! I had fingers and toes crossed that I would be selected, and I take nothing for granted. So far, my mentors, my fellow participants, and training sessions have been amazing. Due to COVID, I have not had the opportunity to attend any events but I am looking forward to them.

Fun Fact: I previously danced for a hip-hop group that was sponsored by Nike. I have performed with several artists and at many mainstream events. I also taught hip-hop classes at various gyms and dance studios throughout Las Vegas. I still got it and can dance my butt off! I graciously traded in my dancing shoes long ago and simply enjoy working out.



Anjali Bonfante

Director of Sales- West Coast

Bolthouse Farms

Bakersfield, CA



Background: I am a first-generation Indian. My parents came to the U.S. from India to pursue higher education and start a family. I grew up in Anaheim Hills, CA. I hold a BA in Psychology from CSULB and an MBA from UCI. I began my career in the apparel industry in my family business selling to national retailers. I also worked in corporate America with Aramark- Uniform Division as their product manager. I then took some time off to have my older daughter (now 17) and began consulting for apparel companies from Italy. In 2010, I went to work for a chocolate company and transitioned to the food business. Since then, I have sold a variety of categories including high-end chocolate, beans and rice, coffee, snacks, and now carrots, beverages, and dressings. My last role led me to the produce industry and connected me with many of the current buyers I work with today. I love produce as every consumer utilizes produce and must walk through produce on their shopping trips, so it's a great place to be and it has much less required slotting to get into vs. grocery. I have three daughters -- identical 12-year-old twins and a 17-year-old, and I have been married for 25 years.

FPFC Connection: I was first introduced to the FPFC through my manager, Bolthouse Farms Vice President David Schoonmaker. He invited me to the holiday luncheon, and I had a wonderful time and experienced the opportunity to chat a little with some of my buyers. I saw the ad for the Apprentices Program and talked with David about it. I was concerned since I have many years of work experience, I might not be a great fit. However, since I am newer to the produce industry, I was accepted.

Fun Fact: I am very active in my daughters' schools and the community through volunteering. My older daughter and I have been engaged with the National Charity League for the past five years; we make and bake meals for the homeless. I also help with fundraising efforts for various groups. To get myself going, I start my day with a workout every morning. I prioritize doing the most dreaded task of the day to get that out of the way. Being organized is key for me as both my husband and I work full-time and have three kids, so having checklists and staying on target helps drive me to achieve my goals.

Cassidy Davis

Organic and Fairtrade Sales Assistant

Calavo Growers

Santa Paula, CA



Background: I was born and raised on the beaches of Ventura, CA. I received my B.A in Communication Studies and Minor in Business from the University of San Francisco in May 2018. After graduating from college, I moved back to my hometown and started at Calavo in June 2018.

FPFC Connection: I first heard about the FPFC Apprentices Program from my coworker, Megan Stallings, who was an apprentice a few years prior. I was immediately excited about the program and was able to attend an FPFC Luncheon. I applied twice and am so excited to be a part of the 2021 class. I am looking forward to learning more about the industry, networking, and creating connections with my fellow apprentices.

Fun Fact: When I'm not selling avocados, I love staying active and being outdoors. I am always looking to try new activities and push myself out of my comfort zone. A fun fact about me is I was in the half time show of Super Bowl 50!

Heather Riebe

Business Development Manager

Renaissance Food Group

Rancho Cordova, Ca



Background: I was born in Escondido, CA and grew up in Temecula, CA. Immediately after high school, I moved up to the Central Valley where I currently reside in Modesto, CA. In 2010, I began my career with Renaissance Food Group and was introduced to the produce industry. At the time, my father (Don Ochoa) and brother (Todd Ochoa) were also in the produce industry. Renaissance was a close family, and this was what drew me to stay with the industry for so long!

FPFC Connection: I was asked to apply to the FPFC program by my boss. Renaissance made all applicants that were interested in the program go through an internal screening process in which only one person was permitted to apply (this was me). I was very interested in the program because I realized I did not know much about the industry. I have been behind the scenes for a long time. After attending several trade shows, I felt a little lost. Everyone knew each other! I did not know hardly anyone. I see the FPFC Apprenticeship Program as a chance to network and gain some knowledge of other parts of the supply chain.

Fun Fact: Outside of work I am running my household. I have two daughters: Leah who is 8 and Cameron who is 5. I am very busy taking care of their wellbeing and assisting with Leah's distance learning (while keeping a full-time job). I enjoy being outdoors and working in the garden when I have time. For the past couple of years, I have enjoyed taking Barre Classes and Cross Fit. This is something I do to keep myself motivated and clear headed! I enjoy cooking and baking. Every week, I plan out our meals and cook every day except Friday!

Elsa Salazar

Marketing Coordinator

Bard Valley Date Growers Association

City Yuma, AZ



Background: Born in Los Angeles but raised in Baja, Mexico, I graduated from CETYS University with an International Business bachelor's degree. My career started while studying business when I did my internship in the Industrial Development Commission of Mexicali. After college, I was the strategic projects coordinator in the National Chamber of the Transformation Industry (CANACINTRA) for almost two years. After that, I discovered the education sector by teaching high school and college students how to develop a business idea. In 2017, I joined the produce industry by working as an export account representative for Bard Valley. After about four years, I joined the marketing team and am learning more about the produce industry, making connections and working with marketing and produce experts.

FPFC Connection: Bard Valley Date Growers is an FPFC member. I learned more about the Council by reviewing the Expos and shows we wanted to attend. Then, the company encouraged me to apply for the program and as soon as I read about it, I felt I needed to be part of it to learn more about the produce industry and be a greater asset for the company.

Fun Fact: I really enjoy learning about human and personal development. I truly believe that by getting to know myself, I can have a balanced personal and professional life. I like to work on my mental, physical, and spiritual well-being by hiking, doing yoga, rappel, paddleboard, road tripping, traveling, photographing and never stop studying the topics I like.

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Sean Quintero
Sales Logistics Coordinator
California Endive Farms
Rio Vista, CA



Background: I was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. I worked as a server for five years in fine dining restaurants in San Francisco before going to college. I graduated from University of California Merced with a BA in Economics. I began my career in finance. I sold equipment financing loans to small to medium size businesses. I never felt satisfied with the job so when COVID happened it presented me with the opportunity to work with California Endive Farms. With zero background in agriculture, I never would of imagined that I would fit in perfectly and enjoy my work. I found that my education and background in serving helped me excel in coordinating and organizing production workers at the plant. I enjoy the daily challenges I am presented with and feel a sense of pride when I can increase sales and worker moral. I know that working in the agriculture industry is where I want to stay as I see a future with great opportunity.

FPFC Connection: I first heard about the FPFC from my boss, David Moen. I have a curious mind and want to always knows how things work. I found myself asking a lot of questions from all different kind of departments. Eventually David wanted to make sure that I got the best information available as well as give me an opportunity to increase my education in agriculture. Once I heard about the FPFC Apprentice Program I knew that I wanted to be part of this great community where passionate professional individual share ideas and lessons they have learned throughout their career. I want to make sure I learn everything I possible can. The public speaking class and lectures we've taken on PACA has already helped me a lot more than I had hoped for.

Fun Fact: I love to take long hikes with my girlfriend and 8-year-old German Shepard name Karma. I have made it to level 65 on COD BO2 Zombie Tranzit.



CONGRATULATIONS

Tawne Haynish

**Wishing you much
success in the 2021
FPFC Apprentice
Program!**

INDEX FRESH

Bobby Hunt

Logistics Manager – Sales Coordinator

Great West Produce

Chino Hills, CA

Background – I grew up in Chino Hills and graduated from Cal State Fullerton. After college, I began my career in staffing and worked in IT Staffing and services for 13 years. I found my way into produce through my brother-in-law Ben Heck and friend Dave Lizzarago who had been working at Great West. Since making the career change 18 months ago, I've seen great improvements in work life balance and have truly been enjoying my career change.

FPFC Connection – I learned about the group early on in my career when starting at Great West Produce. Ken Ewalt participated in the group and Cheyne Long had been through the Apprentice Program. I have not attended any events since starting with Great West in October of 2019. I heard about the Apprentice Program from my manager, Sean Villa. I applied for the program because I would like to jump start my produce career. This is my second career and I feel like I have a lot of catching up to do to keep up with my peers.

Fun Fact: I founded the Chino Hills Gardening Club and have nearly 300 members. I personally specialize in container gardening and square foot gardening at home. Since COVID, I've planned my wedding three times and am looking forward to finally getting married later this year.



Tawne Haynish

Sales Assistant

Index Fresh

Huntington Beach, CA

Background: I grew up in Hollister Ca and currently work remote from Huntington Beach. In high school, I participated in FFA and competed in the rodeo while also playing basketball and running track for all four years. After high school, I wanted to continue my basketball career, so I attended Gavilan Junior College and began studying criminal justice. A couple years in, I still wanted to push myself to play basketball at the next level. So, I did just that by transferring to Whit-tier College on an academic scholarship to play at an NAIA division school. But after a couple years of playing, I wanted to change my focus from basketball to my education. I knew I had to regroup and look for a more specific major...a major that would better fit me. Thankfully, I was accepted to Cal Poly Pomona and graduated with a degree in Agriculture Business Management. Growing up in a small town, I have always appreciated agriculture and all the hard work that goes into cultivating one commodity. I remember driving by the fields in Salinas Valley and being so intrigued by the day-to-day processes. After graduating I wanted to apply everything I learned into the real world. I was so excited when I got hired on at Index Fresh as a sales assistant. Working with avocados has really been a dream come true. I have been with Index for almost two years now. I know this is for sure the industry I want to work in long term. I am excited to see where my growth and new opportunities take me.

FPFC Connection: I learned about the FPFC program when I reached out to my coworker Debbie Williams, asking if there was anything I could do to strengthen my knowledge within the industry. As one of the youngest employees in the company and being one of the newer people to the industry, I wanted to be able to contribute more. After researching the FPFC online and talking to my other coworker, Susie Rea, who serves on some of the FPFC committees, I knew the FPFC would be a great opportunity for me and help me grow, be more comfortable, and network within the produce industry.

Fun Fact: When I am not working, I enjoy being very active. After work you can often find me in the gym and playing sports. I am a part of many adult leagues that consist of kickball, turf/beach flag football and beach volleyball. I grew up riding horses and competing in Barrel Racing events, and although I do not have any horses right now, I plan to get back into it someday as it has and always will be a passion of mine. During the summer, I like to paddle board, hike, and go to the beach. During the winter I love to go snowboarding.



Gisel Arenas
Sales Assistant
Westlake Produce
Downey, CA



Background: I was born and raised in Riverside, CA. I moved to Montebello five years ago. Being a daughter of immigrant parents, I was exposed to produce by being in the fields at a young age with my parents, who worked with fresh Asian produce, from planting to packaging. And my father made greenhouses from the ground up. However, it was in when I graduated high school that I started to get more hands on in produce. I started off in restaurants placing orders and being trained to know what I was buying. Who knew there were so many different types of apples, squashes and lettuces? Once I moved to Montebello, I began my first produce job. I was doing customer service. I then joined Westlake and am currently a sales assistance. I manage my team's appointments, follow up on transportation and input data into the system. And I keep everyone up to speed with all the information I receive. I soon came to realize that I have an amazing team here at Westlake, full of such genuine kind-hearted people.

FPFC Connection: Westlake has been involved with the FPFC for years. I was introduced to the organization by former FPFC Chairman Andrew Bivens, who is COO at Westlake. I have been fortunate enough to work alongside Andrew. Getting to know him on a professional level and outside of office, I have nothing but amazing things to say. I just hope I can continue to progress in this company, and make a difference here at Westlake. I know because of COVID everything is still delicate. Whether its Zoom or in person. I hope to make the best of this year's Apprentice Program.

Fun Fact: Outside of the office on my free time I love spending time with my three dogs and partner. I also love riding horses when I go see my parents. It is so therapeutic being in fields. If I was a millionaire, I'd probably retire early, buy a huge house for so many horses and my dogs...near the mountains just to the watch the sunrise early in the morning with that amazing view. I also secretly have a love for makeup. I feel in my past life I was a makeup artist.

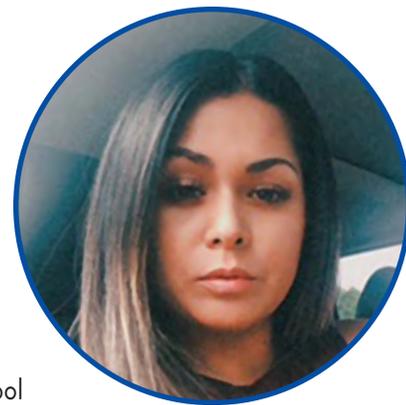
Fresh Produce
& Floral Council

Apprentice Program

Westlake
PRODUCE COMPANY

CONGRATES GISEL
class of 2021

Veleyin Contreras
Sales Assistant
Progressive Produce
Quincy, WA



Background: I was raised in a very small town called Mattawa, WA. My dad was a foreman in the apple orchards. My summers were spent working for my dad. He was always a very hard worker and he taught me about being a reliable employee. My parents couldn't afford for me to go to college so I decided to join the U.S Air Force. But fate had different plans for me. My dad had an accident at work two weeks before I graduated high school. My mom worked, but it wasn't enough to pay the bills. Being the oldest child, I started working in cosmetology. I would go to school during the day and work graveyard to help my parents. After I got my cosmetology license, I worked as a cosmetologist but I didn't like it. I started working at an onion shed as a sorter. Four years later, I was their quality control and food safety manager. Because of this company, I was able to go to college, take classes and earn certifications. I met a lot of great people there and joined another company as their production, field and QC manager. One of my colleagues from that company joined Progressive Produce and asked me to be his assistant. I'm where I am because of him. Now I am very familiar with organic and conventional onions, potatoes, asparagus, hard squash and garlic. I've been with Progressive Produce for two years and I'm learning how to be the director of procurement for organic onions for our company.

FPFC Connection: I heard about FPFC from my coworkers who were apprentices. They talked about the different places and warehouses they had the opportunity to go, and told me that it's like going back to school. I applied for this program because I'm always willing and wanting to be learning more and be a better version of myself.

Fun Fact: I have a 7-year-old son that I enjoy playing video games with. I'm divorced and have been working on myself. I have always been a very active person and I started working out again, which has helped me both physically and mentally. My son and I enjoy taking our dog, Oakley, on walks and to the river. But my true passion I would have to say is shopping for a house for me and my son.

Alexandra Rae Molumby
Marketing Manager
Country Sweet Produce, Inc.
San Diego, CA



Background: I grew up in a small farming town on the Central Coast and then studied Agriculture Business at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. I focused on marketing within my major and even had the privilege of taking Tonya Antle's class. As a result, I chose to pursue a lifelong career in the fresh produce industry. I worked for Grimmway Farms out of college as their Southern California sales and merchandiser. As I gained experience in the produce industry, I saw a need for marketing the importance of agriculture to consumers and started Harvest Joy! Harvest Joy works with companies in the fresh produce industry to educate consumers on how food gets from harvest to table using photography and social media. Harvest Joy built a growing audience of followers who want to know the story behind each farm and the food they grow.

I work full time for Country Sweet Produce as their marketing manager. At Country Sweet, I am able to use the skills I have gained to create brand awareness for our Bako Sweet products. I plan and manage all design strategies as related to brand development with regards to communications, advertising, packaging, trade show management, website, social media and outreach to consumers.

FPFC Connection: I learned about the FPFC when I worked for Grimmway as they had me attend the luncheons and the Dinner Dance as their representative. I felt so welcomed because everyone was so friendly and personal. The first time I heard about the Apprentice Program was when my friend Blair Butterworth graduated from it. I kept seeing LinkedIn posts and then my boss, Chris Carroll, tagged me in one, encouraging me to apply for this class. So I applied for the program because I want to learn as much as I can about the industry and meet others who make it so great!

Fun Fact: Outside of work, I horseback ride a few times a week. I rescued my Quarter Horse from the Premarin Mare Urine industry in Canada when she was 6 months old. She was wild, so I tamed and trained her when I was 12 years old. It was tough but I kept her through high school and college, then moved her with me to San Diego. She is so special to me and horseback riding is so refreshing.

Brent Purvis

Senior Transportation Broker

Allen Lund Company

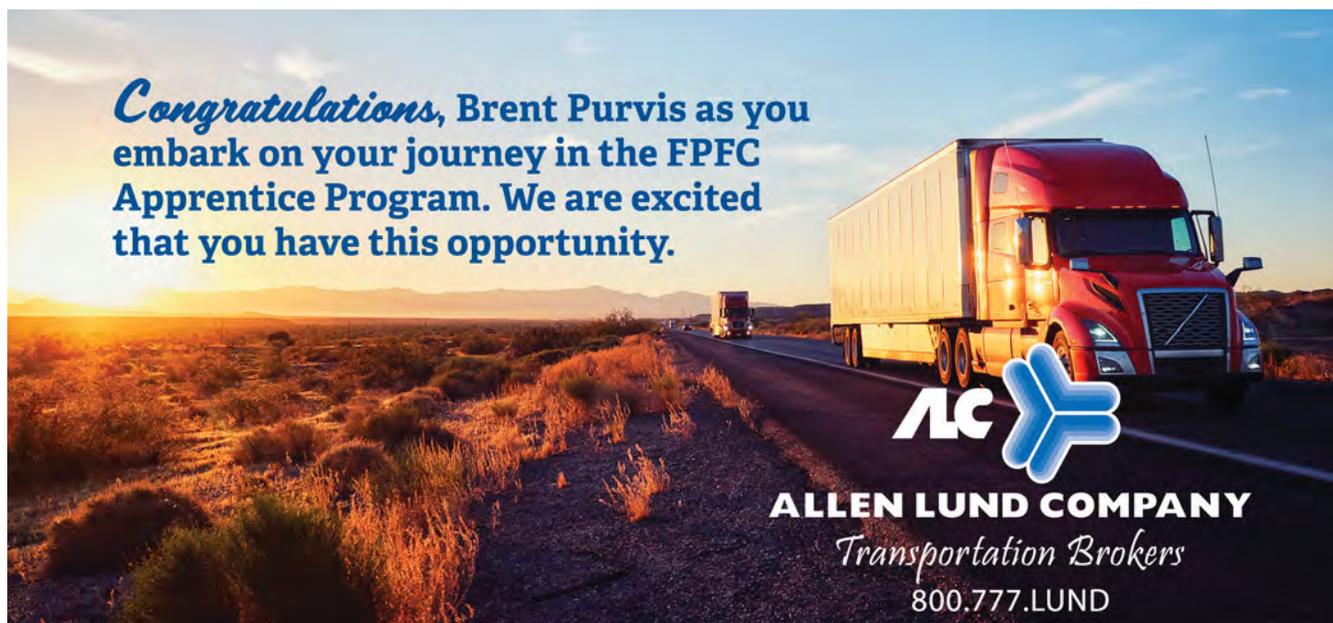
La Canada, CA



Background: I grew up on the eastside of Michigan in the small city of Lapeer and then moved to Grand Rapids, MI, to attend Grand Valley State University. I majored in both Business Economics and Marketing with an emphasis in Logistics. I also played four years of club volleyball while attending college. I got my start in the logistics industry by working at UPS and then moved over to the Allen Lund Company. After about a year with ALC, I moved out to California as a transportation broker in training, working primarily with produce. Shortly after that I moved up to transportation broker, then senior transportation broker. I have been in California for nearly seven years and it has been a blast. There is never a boring day working in the produce transportation industry and I don't see that changing anytime soon. It can be a challenging business at times, but it keeps me engaged and learning something new almost every day.

FPFC Connection: The Allen Lund Company has been a continuing supporter of FPFC and I first learned about FPFC when a co-worker, at the time, was involved in the Apprentice Program. A couple other co-workers were also attending the luncheons just before everything was shut down last year. I really noticed the growth and connections that my team had built by being in the Apprentice Program and attending the events. When the program opened up for applications this year, my manager recommended that I apply. He thought it would be a great opportunity to grow as an individual as well as grow in my career.

Fun Fact: Outside of work I like to stay active as best I can in all areas, whether it be staying active physically or staying active in learning and trying new things. In the past few years, I have tried my hand in real estate and online advertising to help keep me busy in my spare time.



By Tim Linden

The Plant Based Foods Association has revealed that the category grew a whopping 27 percent in 2020, doubling the very impressive growth number of the year before. In fact, U.S. retail sales of plant-based foods have grown 43 percent in the past two years, which is nine times faster than total food sales. The category reached \$7 billion retail sales last year.

And there is no sign of a letup, though it is clear that the pandemic boosted retail sales, largely because the foodservice community experienced a significant downturn due to opening restrictions. Nonetheless, scan data reveals that 57 percent of all U.S. households, which represents more than 71 million units, purchased plant-based foods in 2020, a penetration increase of 4 percent of the nation's households.

For the fresh produce industry, the plant-based food craze is somewhat of a double-edge sword. The industry loves the concept as there is no sector that embodies the movement more fully than whole fruit, vegetable and nut producers. On the other hand, plant-based product discussion typically focuses on processed products and meat alternatives. Whole and packaged raw produce often are not part of the conversation.

The Produce for Better Health Foundation (PBH), an industry organization dedicated to increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, has taken a different approach to the plant-based trend. Wendy Reinhardt Kapsak, president and CEO of the organization, explains that it is an inclusive view, embracing all styles of eating that prioritize plants — vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes and whole grains — without excluding other food groups.

PBH has adopted the term plant-forward, and published a guide designed solely to put more plants on the plate. “You don’t have to create anything new,” she said. “You can be compliant by simply adding more fruits and vegetables to your plate.”

She said a plant-forward diet is not about excluding or limiting food groups. It is simply about being more mindful of how to add and enjoy more plants on the plate. “Flavorful fruits and vibrant vegetables, satisfying whole grains and a variety of wholesome, nutrient-packed foods such as legumes, nuts and seeds, edamame and tofu are the mainstays,” says the PBH guide. “Low-fat milk and dairy products, seafood, lean meat, poultry and eggs are also

parts of this balanced diet and complement plant foods deliciously and nutritiously.”

PBH defines “plant-based” products more narrowly, preferring that the phrase be used to identify food product made with 100 percent plants, such as chickpea-based chicken nuggets or pea-protein burgers made entirely of plants...or nut milks and soy products. It also includes produce in any form, including fresh, canned or frozen.

Kapsak believes the “plant-forward” message is inclusive as it is not as restrictive as a vegetarian or vegan diet and allows more people to achieve success in adopting a healthier lifestyle without too many rules. She said the produce industry loves the increase in people adopting vegetarian and vegan diets, but a “plant-forward” diet can also be an important element of a meat eater, which defines the vast majority of Americans. PBH has launched its “Have a Plant” movement to tap into the emotional connection consumers have to the fruit and vegetable eating experience while inspiring long-term, sustainable behavioral change.

Kapsak said the movement capitalizes on the tailwind that is the plant-forward trend driven largely by inhabitants of Generation Z and Millennials, who are committed to eating healthier. She believes the movement has legs.

PBH has a blueprint to help retailers launch plant-forward promotions and increase consumption of the category. “We’d love to see more retailers partner with PBH to have a plant-forward section that promotes fresh produce in an inclusive way that includes the whole store.”

She added that the plant-forward movement is a great opportunity for fresh produce companies to capitalize on the “large tailwind in our sails” and move the consumption needle forward.

For far too long, Reinhardt said the consumption of fruits and vegetables has been stagnant. “We are trying to lead the change.”

Many companies are capitalizing on the trend by growing their product lines and expanding their reach. The industry has many new players as well as established marketers taking advantage of the collective consumer’s desire to eat healthier and cut down on meat. Meat alternatives or products being marketed that way are leading the category.

One company established more than 30 years ago has seen a huge uptick in sales over the past five years. Jasmine Byrne noted that her mother,



Kimberly Chamberland, started Big Mountain Foods in Vancouver, B.C., in 1987 as an ode to her vegetarian lifestyle. Jasmine revealed that her mother was the first to introduce a veggie burger to the Vancouver market. She largely worked in that region for 25 years but the company, with mother and daughter leading the charge together, has recently expanded into a 70,000 square foot facility and are selling a number of products, led by its Cauli Crumble Veggie Grounds. It also has items that are broccoli and mushroom centric and a line of veggie sausage links. The company boasts that all its items contain a minimum of 40 percent fresh vegetables.

In January 2022, Bryne said the company will introduce an “innovative product that will put us on the map”, though she wouldn’t say anymore.

Bryne believes the plant-based trend will continue as it is being driven by a generation of Millennial consumers who are committed to living a healthier lifestyle and eating a diet that is more plant based. “I think there is no limit to the category,” she said. “There is so much room for innovation and getting creative. The sky is the limit for meat alternatives.”

Bryne said it is the company’s preference that its products be marketed in the fresh produce department along with other value-added produce. She considers Cauli Crumble, Broccoli Boost Veggie Ground and Mighty Mushroom Bites to be akin to fresh cut vegetables and packaged salads. But she does say that the competition is the meat alternative category not whole cauliflower and other fresh produce.

Catherine Viera is head of sales and marketing for Curry Fresh, a plant-based offering of packaged Indian sauces and foods that have also been designed to be sold in the produce department next to tofu, fresh salsas and guacamole. The sauces utilize tofu, jackfruit and chickpeas as well as ginger, turmeric, garlic, cloves and other fresh spices.

The company was founded by India native Priya R

Dass, who graduated from the University of Michigan with an MBA. Initially, he wanted to open a chain of Indian cuisine restaurants to bring his native culinary tastes to U.S. consumers. Eventually, however, he decided to accomplish the same goal through fresh Indian sauces and dishes to be sold in the supermarket in the produce department. Viera said some of the traditional Indian recipes were altered a bit to better fit the plant-based environment. For example, coconut milk is being used instead of dairy-based liquids or chicken broth, and jack fruit and chickpeas are utilized instead of chicken and other meat.

The company initially launched in Michigan but is now selling its offerings in Florida as well, and has started working with a California food broker to introduce its product to Golden State retailers and shoppers. Viera expects the line, which is currently eight products strong, to launch in California by the fall.

She also believes that the plant-based movement is a lasting trend not a fad. She said it represents a change in the way Millennials and others want to eat, which includes reducing their meat consumption.

Another company that pre-dated the trend but is catching its wave is Wildbrine. The company grew out of a project in Ceres, CA in the San Joaquin Valley to restore locally-grown organic produce to its proper place as the foundation of health for people, communities and the planet. The project used cabbage to create naturally fermented kraut products for cancer patients. Eventually, partners Rick Goldberg and Chris Glab created the commercial product marketed under wildbrine and have since added a dairy alternative wildCREAMERY.

The main wildbrine products are sauerkraut, salsa, sriracha and kimchi while the wildCREAMERY products are mainly a substitute for sour cream and butter. Goldberg said the company started commercial production about a decade ago before the plant-based trend had momentum, but their initial goal was always to provide healthy products utilizing plants. “I don’t think we were visionaries,” he said. “But we are passionate about what we do, and it is a philosophy. We live and walk the talk. We are plant forward.”

The company is committed to utilizing fresh products in its process such as whole ginger and Goldberg said they processed 10 million pounds of cabbage last year. “I think the plant-based market is just beginning. People are more aware of eating healthy. Our product is good for the gut and people who are concerned about gut health are our customers. Our product is taking off through gorilla marketing and becoming more and more popular.” 🌱

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