



# Plant Forward: BEYOND THIS

←  
What's  
Possible  
With Produce

*Fresh produce is perfectly poised as the ultimate, holistic plant-based food to champion the burgeoning movement.*

BY MIRA SLOTT

**S**eemingly taken for granted in the overall plant-forward conversation, the fresh produce industry is missing its calling to re-capture the dialogue and remind consumers that fruits, vegetables and nuts are the “original” plants, naturally endowed to drive plant-based diet trends and shifting lifestyles.

Despite the natural association of produce as premier players, marketing dollars behind hamburger chains, venture capital food start-ups and media hype have recently propelled processed *faux* meats as the darlings of the movement.

In fact, engineered meat has entered the mainstream lexicon as evidenced by its arrival as fodder for Late Night television. Even Stephen Colbert of *The Late Show* recognizes fresh produce is getting upstaged. “Right now the biggest food trend in America is

plant-based burger alternatives, which used to be known as salad.”

Plant-based alternatives that replicate meat in taste and texture, such as the Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat, are now going beyond fast food chains and are penetrating shelves at national mainstream retailers. Processed plant proteins containing soy, whole grains, dry beans, pea extract powders and other non-fresh ingredients are finding new space in grocery aisles, meat and dairy, frozen food sections and other refrigerated areas.

“If you think about it, the produce section is the original plant-based source, and yet it is still not getting enough credit or being considered, as attention shifts to processed plant-based alternatives,” says Jason Osborn, director of marketing at The Wonderful Company, Los Angeles, CA.

Seizing this opportunity to supplant meat alternatives with

produce as the main “plant” player may result in getting the industry closer to its long-established goal of increasing consumption to five servings a day.

### PRODUCE IS THE HOLY GRAIL

“With all the things happening with the Impossible Burger and Beyond Meat, it’s important we don’t lose our identity, and we maintain our stronghold on our half of the plate... and we don’t become complacent,” says Lauren Scott, chief marketing officer, Produce Marketing Association, Newark, DE.

“We should never walk away from our competitive advantage of health, but we can’t just rely on that. We can’t just say, ‘we’re part of the plant-forward wave,’ and go sit in our lawn chair and relax. We have to play our own game, built on the industry’s underlying foundation, rather than ride the coattails of the plant-based diet trend,” she says.

If retailers want to harness the plant-forward movement’s core, the produce department is the Holy Grail, according to Marianne Santo, category manager produce and floral at Wakefern Food Corp., the nation’s largest retailer-owned cooperative, merchandising and distribution arm for ShopRite stores, headquartered in Keasbey, NJ. At Wakefern/ShopRite, the movement’s path, imbued in educating and steering consumers to healthier eating choices, inevitably leads to fresh fruits and vegetables, she says.

Santo’s colleague at Wakefern, Terry Murphy, group vice president of fresh, sees the plant-forward movement as an opportunity to break down walls between perishables departments. “This is really a shift in the lifestyle and life-stage needs of consumers looking to eat better, feed their family better and consume a more balanced, nutritious meal, when and where they want it,” he says, warning the industry against boxing people into categories of either vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian.

“I’m responsible for all perishables, and we’re seeing this movement in all departments, not just produce,” says Murphy. “We strive to deliver plant-forward solutions in a differentiated way.” He cites Wakefern’s multi-faceted, chain-wide ShopRite dietitian program as “the true pathway to health between us and our customers.

“We consider our 150 registered dietitians in ShopRite stores our produce prophets,” he says. “Our dietitians are really our secret agents.”

That pathway links the plant-forward



Wakefern utilizes 150 registered dietitians in ShopRite stores to link the plant-forward movement to the produce department.

movement to the produce department, with cross-merchandised fresh fruit and vegetable choices in other perishable departments. “We help consumers to eat better and make better decisions, based on their individual dietary needs,” says Desiree Olivero, manager of health and wellness at Wakefern.

### PERCEPTION PROBLEMS

“Obviously, a plant-based diet should start with fruits and vegetables. But when consumers think plant-based diet, I don’t think they necessarily think about the produce department,” says Kerry Clifford, registered dietitian at Fresh Thyme Farmers Market, which is based in Downers Grove, IL and has 75 stores.

“We are targeting people on their health journey, whether they just got back from their doctor and learned they are pre-diabetic or have been on a plant-based diet for 30 years,” says Clifford. “What’s needed in this expanded plant-based movement is education. People see plant-based and think healthier, even if it’s 200 calories more and processed into something we don’t recognize,” she says. “Let’s go back to fresh fruits and vegetables.”

Ashley Kibutha, registered dietitian manager at Coborn’s, a 120-plus store chain, based in St. Cloud MN, agrees: “We can’t just assume because Kraft macaroni and cheese is now made with cauliflower, it’s also lower in sodium and has all those other factors that go along with a fruit or vegetable,” she says. “We can eat all foods in moderation, but looking at the whole meal, we should have produce be the focus and emphasis.”

Kibutha points out that some super trendy plant-based foods, such as cauliflower

pizza crust and cauliflower crackers, sound good, but they may not be very nutritious.

“Produce must be careful not to be displaced by plant-based products that craft better attribute claims, the way plant-based beverages have cut into organic milk sales,” says John Pandol, director of special projects, Pandol Bros., Delano, CA. “Processed items seek to be placed in the produce section to co-opt the health halo of produce. There is marketing research consumers perceive an item as healthier if it’s located among the fresh produce, which essentially it seeks to mimic. If you want a plant-based diet, eat plants.”

Trying to maintain the purity of produce in the department, Kibutha cites the decision by Emily Coborn, vice president of operations, to take a team approach in sharing the chain’s plant-forward strategies in fresh produce. “Emily’s passion for healthy living gives us the visibility across the company that has truly been the foundation for what we do,” says Kibutha.

“Partnerships between the Coborn’s dietitians, fresh produce directors and merchandising teams are instrumental in coming up with plant-forward product endorsements and the integrated campaigns around them to align with quarterly goals,” adds Kibutha. When dietitians promote and push a product in-store, online and through social media, product sales and related ingredients can skyrocket and generate a significant uptick in produce department traffic, she says.

### PLANT-FORWARD DICHOTOMY

Arguably one of the most important allies in the industry’s involvement of the plant-forward movement is the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), St. Helena, CA. The CIA

has been a leader in framing and accelerating the plant-forward movement, often collaborating with industry players to develop new concepts for menu development. This involves a comprehensive roadmap, combining scientific research, innovation and multi-faceted range of partnerships to address global health and sustainability imperatives.

"We're on the precipice of a transformative new food world, where more sustainable plant-based proteins, meaty produce alternatives, vegetables, legumes, fruits and nuts

penetrate North American eating patterns and palates, reinventing menus at mainstream restaurants and product options at conventional supermarket chains," says Greg Drescher, vice president, strategic initiatives and industry leadership.

"The concept of plant-forward is getting out in the consumer market, mixed in with plant-based, plant-rich terminology, so there is a narrative there, but language is a funny thing. What I'd say is fruits and vegetables are at the center of plant-forward conversa-

## **"Plant-forward does a better job of keeping plants in the discussion, versus plant-based as an ingredient, and how do I replace the meat on my plate?"**

— Lauren Scott, Produce Marketing Association



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tions, but less at the center of meat-analog conversations, but that's just a subset of plant-forward," says Drescher.

Terminologies make a difference. PMA's Scott agrees: "Plant-forward does a better job of keeping plants in the discussion, versus plant-based as an ingredient, and how do I replace the meat on my plate? You could argue that's how people make the connection to the Impossible Burger. The scariest thing would be if people think, 'I had my Impossible Burger, so now I don't have to eat my half-plate of fruits and vegetables'."

Drescher calls it an unintended consequence. "The produce industry has to actively engage to leverage this opportunity," says Drescher. "This involves tremendous technical education and training to conquer the challenges of preparing fresh produce well. Unfortunately, to a certain extent, cooking hamburger or making a pizza is more forgiving," says Drescher.

The other area to look at is blends, or the 'protein flip' — as CIA has coined the concept of making meat a smaller portion of the plate. "Plant-based typically is equated with vegan and vegetarian trends and related to ingredients in a dish. We think the bigger opportunity is around a bigger tent, or flexitarian option, putting fruits and vegetables and other healthy plant-based ingredients at the center of the plate and diet, and animal-based proteins in a supporting role," he explains.

There's a dichotomy between the plant-forward trends and the hard facts. People aren't eating enough produce. According to a study published by the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), just one in ten adults meet the federal nutrition guidelines for daily produce consumption. The challenge as an industry is how to plug the hole. Ironically, more than half of U.S. consumers say they're trying to

eat more plant-based foods and beverages.

Taste remains a main obstacle to doing so, according to PMA research, explains Scott.

“We’ve undersold our flavor profile. The false notion that you make broccoli taste better by putting cheese on it creates and reinforces the underlying belief broccoli doesn’t taste good,” says Scott. “That’s what we’re fighting and fighting through.”

The *Have A Plant* campaign, introduced

earlier this year by the Brentwood, MO-based Produce for Better Health Foundation, targets Millennials and Gen Z consumers to engage in the plant-forward movement through produce. “We know consumers make decisions based first on emotion,” says Wendy Reinhardt Kapsak, president and CEO. “Behavioral research played a much more significant role in the creation of Have A Plant, integrating digital and social content and programming to reinforce the behavioral framework. *Have A Plant* moves away from

**“I see the Impossible Burger as a nicotine patch for people trying to quit meat. We need to pull out all the stops and use our imaginations.”**

— Walter Willett, Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health

finger-wagging and ‘should’ language that has been ineffective in encouraging produce consumption.”

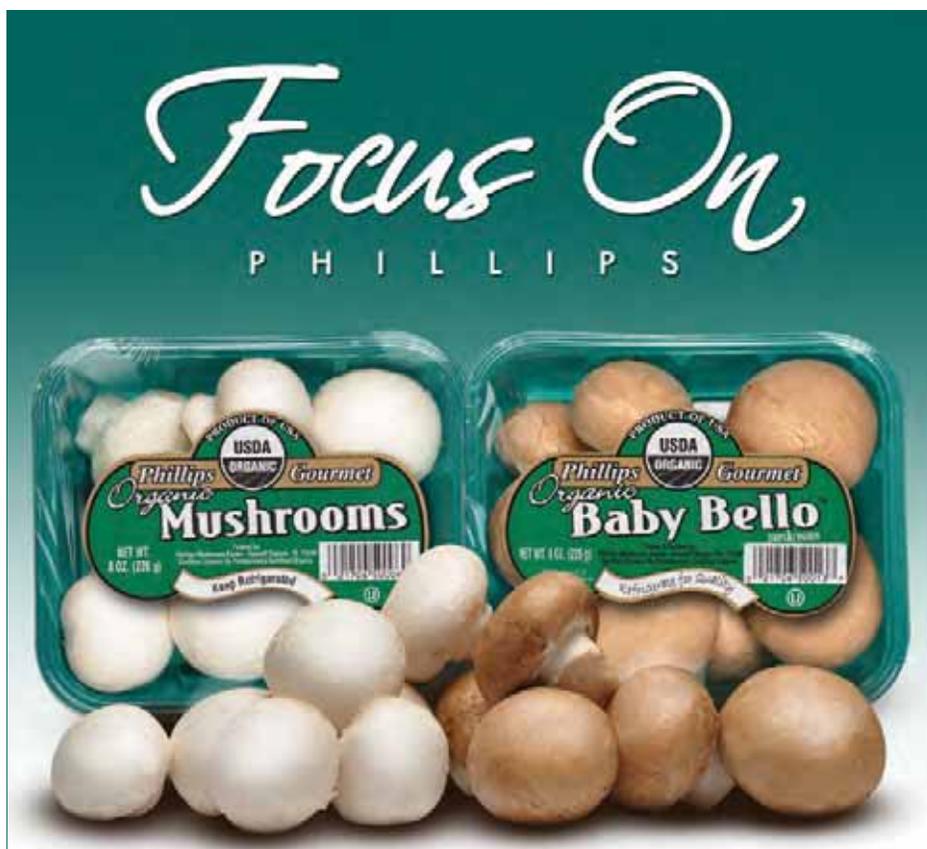
The *Have a Plant* campaign is very different from the traditional, *More Matters* and *Five-A-Day* campaigns as well as the dietary guidance *Half Your Plate* message, which are more prescriptive, says Kapsak.

Nearly 40 percent of U.S. adults are obese, according to the CDC, reflected in an alarming new U.S. Department of Defense study of rising obesity rates even in the military, epitomized in the Navy, where 22 percent of sailors qualify as obese, the *New York Times* reports. The Department of Defense is instituting plant-based, produce-centric dining options to tackle the problem.

Walter Willett, professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, bemoans an unfortunate reality that obesity numbers, which appeared to be trending downward, are on the rise again. “We’re off the path. We can’t sell a deprivation diet. It takes a reorientation, not to just have vegetarian options, but creative, delicious ones,” he says.

“I see the Impossible Burger as a nicotine patch for people trying to quit meat. We need to pull out all the stops and use our imaginations.” Healthy, sustainable food objectives must also weigh costs and benefits, according to Willett. “We don’t want to widen the accessibility gap. We want everyone to benefit and not alienate people from the plant-forward movement. It’s not just for the privileged,” he says.

“The consumers already know produce is healthy. What they don’t know is what to buy, how to store it, how to make it delicious and that it has protein,” says Amy Myrdal Miller, Farmer’s Daughter Consulting, Sacramento, CA. “What consumers want across the board is healthy, easy and affordable. That’s the challenge and opportunity for retailers.”



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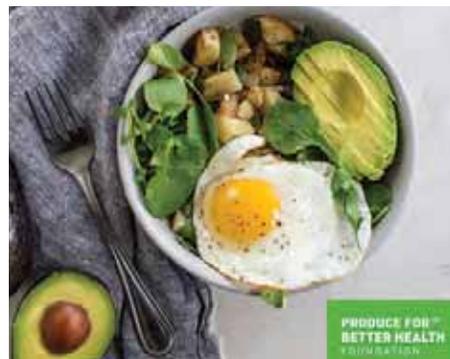
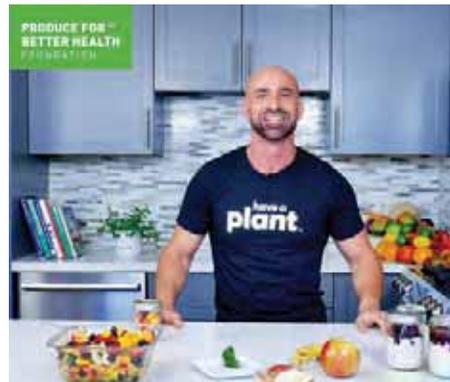
## RECLAIMING RETAIL

Produce for Better Health sees retailers as valuable partners in extending the *Have A Plant* message. It is teaming with supermarket chains through in-store promotions, utilization of the *Have A Plant* logo on private-label packaging and produce bags, leveraging of retail registered dietitian content and ongoing produce training for retail registered dietitians.

"We have several new *Have A Plant* retail projects in the works including in-store

signage and training for store produce staff. In 2019, we partnered with Fresh Thyme and Coborn's on in-store promotions. In 2020, we have new projects planned with Kroger, Hy-Vee, Wakefern, Schnuck Markets, Weis Markets and others," says PBH's Kapsak.

"We are the original plant," says Roger Pepperl, marketing director at Stemilt Growers, Wenatchee, WA. "By putting this simple, contemporary message on our produce, we don't have to turn it into something plant-based."



The "Have A Plant" campaign targets Millennials and Gen Z consumers to engage in the plant-forward movement through produce.

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As an 18-year member of PBH, Pepperl was actively involved in redirecting messaging to *Have A Plant*, he says. "Since we do fruit, we received some initial concerns from industry traditionalists that *Have A Plant* was associated with vegetables and not inclusive enough, but younger generations instantly grab on to what we're trying to say."

Stemilt is rolling out new retail packaging and display bins with the *Have A Plant* logo in 800-1,000 stores nationally. "I think you'll see quite a bit of *Have A Plant* merchandising going forward," says Pepperl.

## HEADWINDS AND TAILWINDS

"In order to maximize the plant-forward movement, it is important retailers maintain focus on the promotion of produce and healthy snacking," says Wonderful's Osborn, who is also on the board of PBH. "Retailers are uniquely positioned to be the ultimate authority on what is offered to consumers; to educate and impact consumers' choices through signage, selection, engagement and merchandising.

The produce industry always faces challenges with Mother Nature and the supply chain. "We don't always have a tailwind like the processed players in the plant-forward movement," says Osborn.

One way to capture that tailwind is

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEL MONTE

through in-store POS signage with large, integrated-product displays, emphasizing the plant-based connection of its healthy brands portfolio, says Osborn. "We work closely with retailers to place our POS in strategic secondary locations of the store including checkout, lobby, deli, pharmacy and other areas where consumers can conveniently find healthy snack alternatives."

According to Kapsak at PBH, "Retail is just catching up to the fact that they can have a bigger win, looking at integrated



Del Monte's Better Break line offers a "healthy and flavorful plant-based or vegetarian snack or meal in just minutes."

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shopper-based solutions, pairing commonly eaten foods, rather than isolated commodity thinking."

"Our industry needs to come together to shift perception of how consumers relate to produce as a whole," adds Osborn. "Our goal is for produce to be as relatable to individuals interested in adopting a plant-based diet and lifestyle, as it is for the everyday consumer, but we need to widen the conversation to address how consumers eat today in general."

According to the Nielsen *Total Food View* Report (June 2018), shoppers don't shop departments anymore; they shop needs. "The ability to realize product synergies across departments leaves room for innovation and cross-promotional opportunities," explains Osborn.

"The way in which the store presents itself is going to need to change. It's not just item and price," says Wakefern's Olivero.

#### PPING THE PR D CE ANTE

"For us, it's always been in our wheelhouse with branding and marketing to encourage plant-based eating," says Bill Goldfield, director corporate communications at Westlake Village, CA-based Dole Food Company, and a vegan himself. "One-third of Americans consider themselves flexitarians, and the produce industry can take advantage of that for people who want less processed meal options, without the chemicals, binders and other agents. We're providing flexitarians with that fresh plant-based solution," says Goldfield.

"As plant-based diets become more prominent in households across the country, produce suppliers and retailers can focus their efforts on making produce the center of the meal or snack as opposed to just a side," says Dennis Christou, vice president marketing at Del Monte Fresh Produce, Coral Gables, FL. "After seeing so many Millennials citing busy schedules as a reason

## A CLOSER LOOK AT COBORN'S PLANT-FORWARD STRATEGIES

"In our markets, we're in small town Minnesota for the most part, so it takes awhile for trends to get here," says Ashley Kibutha, supermarket registered dietitian manager at Coborn's, an employee-owned, 120-plus store chain, headquartered in St. Cloud, MN. "We tend to see more interest in plant-based diets in our metro areas, averaging around 80,000 people. But across our markets, we're seeing a lot of curiosity about plant-based," she says.

"Maybe it's not exactly that people are doing things plant-based yet, but they're interested and asking questions. At the end of the day, it means eating more fruits and vegetables so people are in a better mood and healthier and all those things [PBH's *Have A Plant* slogan] stands for," she says.

"We try to meet people where they are in the spectrum of plant-based eating," she says. "We want people to eat more than just meat and potatoes ... it's fine to have your potato, but why not add a nice fruit salsa on top of that pork chop."

Kibutha says Coborn's helps consumers take baby steps to get more produce in their diets because "we're a grocery store, where we can explain why produce is so important."

### IN RETAILERS WE TRUST

U.S. consumers, in general, are looking to their supermarket to be a partner in their wellness journey, according to data from FMI, Hartman Group and other studies, notes Kibutha. "And as dietitians, we want to be that destination," says Kibutha.

"We need to emphasize the produce department is plant-forward," says Kibutha. "I did a video recipe with cauliflower steak. The next step is merchandising cauliflower in steak form in the produce department," she says.

"Another cool way we can drive people to the produce department is to have signs, 'Hey, I'm Plant-Based Too,' over with the apples, kale and mushrooms." In addition, Coborn's has Chop Shop stations in many of its locations, where consumers can bring their produce to get sliced, minced, and diced the way they'd like it. **pb**

they were not able to get more plant-based options into their diet, our team came up with the Better Break convenience line. It offers a healthy and flavorful plant-based or vegetarian snack or meal in just minutes," he says.

The line is marketed for "ultimate plant-forward snacking," with four grams of protein per serving. With the plant-based movement gaining traction, the opportunities for fresh produce are endless, Christou says, noting continued development of

convenient plant-based options as a solution for its core consumers.

"Our dressings are a catalyst in the plant-forward movement to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables," says Matt Middleton, vice president of sales at Ventura Foods/Marie's Dressings, based in Brea, CA. "We're working with retailers on cross merchandising our dressings to enhance the flavors of produce," he says, referencing new Market Reserve products that have a silk tofu base and are dairy-free.

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## BEEFY STATS

The produce industry may be smart to embrace omnivore lovers. Nielsen data shows sales of meat hit \$95 billion last year, compared to meat alternatives just shy of \$1 billion, and 98 percent of meat alternative buyers also purchase meat.

"The plant-based movement has become anti-meat," according to Wendy Reinhardt Kapsak, president and chief executive at the Produce For Better Health Foundation. "There's a significant opportunity for the produce industry to take the lead in the plant-forward movement and secure its rightful place on the plate," she says. "If the industry doesn't embrace *Have A Plant*, someone else will take a hold of that campaign. This is a do-or-die moment," she contends.

In a 2018 Gallop poll, less than five percent of Americans say they're vegetarian, and less than three percent say they are vegan. What you see is meat is still on the plate, even with plant-forward trends. According to Annette Maggi, retail account manager, PBH, in 2018, PBH kicked off Powerful Produce Pairings as a retail

PHOTO COURTESY OF FRESH THYME



Fresh Thyme cross-merchandises proteins with produce to offer a meal solution as well as bonus sales.

promotion, and in the omni-channel digital space. For example, Jewel Osco, based in the Chicago area, did a promotion with California walnuts and Stemilt apples that featured sliced apples with Greek yogurt walnut dip. It included a cross-merchandising display of all ingredients, tearpads with copies of the recipe, a cooking class and in-store demo. PBH provided web content for a blog. Jewel Osco did a video on how to prepare the recipe, promoted through PBH social media and Jewel Osco. It resulted in a dramatic sales lift over the prior year, same-week period (Stemilt apples notched a 106 percent increase in sales, while California walnuts soared 160

percent), says Maggi. Fresh Thyme ran its first Produce Pairing program in May, in partnership with PBH. "We came up with the concept of using vegetables as vessels, using a potato, pepper or zucchini, etc., as your vessel and then building the meal from that," says Kerry Clifford. A large sign showed a stuffed potato as the vessel. One recipe was a walnut chorizo, using black beans as a way to have a plant-based chorizo for a very tasty meal. Another was a meat recipe with pork. Customers could pick up Fresh Thyme's free magazine with the recipes that coincided with the in-store displays carrying the necessary ingredients.

"We had about 87 million impressions through TV, email, web and in-store. It was really an integrated marketing approach," Clifford says.

Consumers don't eat most foods in isolation. "The fresh produce industry's biggest competition is not other forms of produce, it's the low-nutrient, dense foods out there stealing market share from fresh produce, that's the competition," says Kapsak. **pb**



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Dole's Bountiful Kits contain salad greens, dressing and fresh packs that include plant sources of protein and whole grains, such as quinoa, edamame and black beans.

less options and offers demos of meatless-option meal ideas with recipe cards, signage and ad pricing opportunities, says Schueller.

#### WHAT IS LD IS NEW AGAIN

"Well, actually in the produce department, we've had tofu forever. We've had plant-based products that are made to be sausage-like or ground-beef like or hot dog like or bacon-like," says Wakefern's Murphy. "We are now in the process of changing

people's minds from an educational perspective. An old traditional produce merchant did not necessarily think about these products. There's a new consumer out there looking for this product, so we have to expand our efforts to educate suppliers as well."

"Vegetarians have been buying these plant-based products for a long time now," says Marc Goldman, produce director at Morton Williams, a New York supermarket chain. "We have the soy products with the produce, including tofu shitake noodles,

"Plant-forward is not just about plant-based proteins. Plant-forward is the recognition that plants, *aka* fruits and vegetables, are the best prescription for health," he says.

Introducing tie-in items like dressings that help sell fruits and vegetables is not a new idea, but marketing items such as jackfruit products, for instance, that mimic meat's taste and texture, puts the produce department directly into the conversation with Beyond Meat or the Impossible Burger, explains Myrdal Miller of Farmer's Daughter Consulting.

"Our four most popular meatless items, all merchandised in the produce department, are steamed lentils, jackfruit, edamame and soyrizo," says Robert Schueller, director of public relations at Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Los Angeles. "People have been wild about Jackfruit for the past couple of years. The flavor is incredible, but the work required to break down the entire fruit can be daunting."

Melissa's Jackfruit Pods take the prep work out, without having to commit to the whole jackfruit. The company supplies customized signage to retailers for its meat-

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Jackfruit is known for its ability to mimic meat's taste and texture.

meatless crumbles, savory chicken replacement strips, veggie cheeseburgers and portabella burgers. I have portobello meatballs, beet and kale burgers and Tofurky. This is not new. In some stores these items work well; in others they don't sell," he says.

"We might be different because of space requirements in Manhattan, and maybe in suburban supermarkets, you'll see more. All you need is a neighborhood with customers interested in these products," he says. "What I see is companies re-branding to draw attention to the trend, but it's not something new," he says.

Fresh Thyme's Clifford has a similar view. "Refrigerated space is competitive, and every store is different. We definitely have jackfruit barbeque products near our vegan cheeses in refrigerated coolers just past dairy. In our produce section, we do have a cooler with fresh cauliflower steaks. We put our private label Fresh Thyme, Fresh Veggies sticker on them, as well as spiralized vegetables and other fresh convenience items."

## IN PRODUCE WHERE IT BELONGS

Some retailers are conflicted on where to merchandise newer plant-based, hybrid-type produce snack items. South Mill Mushrooms, 80-year-old mushroom growers, based in Kennett Square, PA, recently launched Shrooms, a variety of plant-based snacks made from their mushroom farms in Pennsylvania and British Columbia. Its Shrooms Splits are a hybrid of mushrooms and meat; Shrooms Bars are crispy mushrooms in different flavor profiles; and Shrooms Shiitake is a mushroom jerky.

At one Morton Williams store in Manhattan, new Shrooms snacks hang high

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Shaw's merchandises South Mill Mushrooms' Shrooms, a variety of plant-based snacks, above the fresh mushrooms in the produce department.

on clip strips alongside packs of nuts, above the onions, garlic and potatoes, adjacent to the organic produce section.

Shaw's is also doing some dedicated racks with Shrooms snack varieties above the mushroom set in the produce department. "We do display shippers and independent off-shelf displays, which can be placed in the produce department, says David Eberwein, director of innovation and product development at South Mill. "At Big Y and Lowes, some displays include a power wing on the side of an endcap with dried fruits and nuts."

Changing retail-buyer mindsets on where to merchandise new plant-forward items can sometimes be a challenge. "One produce buyer thought we were a little early with this concept by assessing snack data," says Eberwein. "Sometimes plant-based products aren't part of the snack data, but we want to target the produce consumer. When you have so many mushroom-loving consumers shopping that department, it seems like it fits instead of trying to compete in the snack aisle."

Eberwein says he is seeing movement of meat-free proteins trend away from scientifically created clones that replicate the redness of meat; a transitioning from products developed in the laboratory to fresh produce products. "We stumbled into something at the right time for consumers looking for real foods, less processed plant-based items," says Eberwein.

"As a fresh industry, we tend to isolate ourselves a bit," says CarrieAnn Arias, vice president of marketing at Naturipe Farms, based in Estero, FL. "It's tough with the perishability, especially if you grow a product that can't be easily or completely processed into another form, or it has to be developed

and there's costly R&D behind it," says Arias.

"We as an industry have to push the envelope, being more exploratory and innovative in product development. Creating usage ideas is really the next stage of the plant-forward movement to bring more produce into consumers' lives," she says.

"The idea of *Have A Plant* is less about giving authoritarian doctrines on x number of servings, but being open to using fresh produce in fun, creative ways," says Arias. For example, in-store blueberry merchandising display contests encourage un-

expected recipes such as blueberry barbeque sauce. "We have to win on flavor and make it convenient and relevant for new generations. Consumers are now looking for more balance."

## T R E C R S E C R R E C T I N S

"Clearly, we need a course correction," says the CIA's Drescher. In 2050, we'll have 10 billion people on the planet to feed, and the status quo is unsustainable. A main

## EMERGING MARKET FOR PRODUCE SUPPLY

A new market for supply may be emerging for produce companies to provide fresh produce to meat-alternative companies and form new partnerships. These products could ultimately be sold and merchandised in the produce department.

“Our research analysis shows U.S. retail sales of plant-based foods have grown 11 percent in the past year, bringing the total plant-based market value to \$4.5 billion,” says Sabina Vyas, director, strategic partnerships at the San Francisco-based Plant Based Foods Association (PBFA).

The plant-based meat category alone is worth more than \$800 million, according to PBFA and the Washington, DC-based Good Food Industry. The leading drivers of plant-based sales continue to be plant-based milks, plant-based dairy, such as cheese, yogurt and ice cream, and plant-based meats.

“We are currently identifying pilot sites for our The Power Plant station concept — mobile units with pre-made plant-based meals and snacks to go, healthy alternatives to counterparts that could include salad bowls, wraps and items like mushroom jerky,” says Vyas.

“We’re just getting our bearings for expansion and riding the plant-forward wave,” says Michael Pan, founder of the Oregon-based namesake company that produces mushroom jerky. “We wanted to



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAN'S MUSHROOM JERKY

solve a problem of finding healthy snacks that taste delicious and keep it simple with clean ingredients. If we can't pronounce it, we don't want it,” he says of Pan's Mushroom Jerky, a 30-year-old family recipe.

“We'd like our store placement to be with fresh mushrooms in the produce department, but we're not there yet. We're trying to find mushroom-growing partners that can deliver on quality and price,” he says.

“Our Power Plant stations are focused on institutions such as colleges and universities, and eventually the goal is to expand into hospitals, airports, and retail,” says Vyas. “It would be great to see our members' foods merchandised with fresh fruits and vegetables in the produce section, and exploring this strategy is one of our goals for the near future. These opportunities may include signage, limited time offers, shopper marketing campaigns and recipes showcasing plant-based alternatives paired with fresh produce.”

Vyas says there are many opportunities for new partnerships between plant-based processors/manufacturers and the fresh produce industry. “The market is ripe for innovation of new products and branding that is inclusive *versus* tailoring messaging to only vegans and vegetarians,” says Vyas.”

pb

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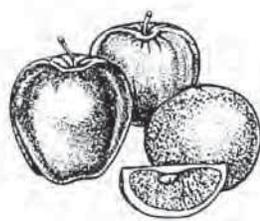


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tenet of the plant-forward approach, says Drescher, is it extends beyond vegetarians and vegans to flexitarians or plant-rich omnivores to encourage broad adoption. He calls it “the protein-shift imperative. This is where there’s traction, where we need to redouble efforts,” asserts Drescher.

Gerry Ludwig, corporate consulting chef, Gordon Food Service, Grand Rapids, MI, urges suppliers to view proteins as their partners. Ludwig, who tracks nationwide restaurant trends via extensive, on-the-ground research, identifies a wave of produce-centric dishes infused with minimal animal proteins to enhance flavors. Innovative chefs are whipping up plant-based dishes meaty in both taste and texture, with or without meat, such as beet falafel or jackfruit barbecue.

Translating that plant-based innovation into K-12 schools is the next push to increase the availability and acceptance of healthy foods, according to Cathy Powers, owner of Akron, OH-based Culinary Nutrition Associates, and chair of the CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative, a national initiative to advance culinary-driven, healthy, flavorful foods for kids.

“K-12 students are much more inter-

## “It’s time for fresh produce companies to take the reins of the plant-based movement and own it.”

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ested in plant-forward cuisines than the adults that serve them would believe,” says Powers. “The foodservice industry needs to be better trained to prepare, season and serve produce. When things are done properly, students are adventurous,” she says.

At the same time, the explosion of meat-alternative menu choices at fast casual and fast food chains are grabbing headlines, signaling an opening to reach a broader, mass-market customer base. Steering produce to the center of the plate in foodservice continues to gain momentum.

Supermarkets elevating the produce department is tried-and-true, but the plant-forward movement creates a new twist. A retailer driving the plant-forward movement to the produce department is the

next step to take full advantage of this fast-growing phenomenon.

Jan England, managing director of England Marketing, based in Cambridgeshire, UK, conducted exclusive research on rapidly shifting dietary habits, the rise of “reducitarianism” “flexitarianism” and plant-based eating and its impacts for the fresh produce industry. She implores retailers, foodservice operators and produce suppliers to capitalize on the myriad untapped opportunities.

“I don’t think the fresh produce industry has completely stepped up to the plate. What we’re seeing is a lot of companies like Beyond Meat penetrate the space with imitation-beef protein alternatives. Soy, wheat, and bean substitutes are well and good,” she says, “but it’s time for fresh produce companies to take the reins of the plant-based movement and own it.

“Most of the time, the major produce companies are competing quite hard with each other for market share and their bite of the cherry at each retailer. It would be good if people could come together and take advantage of the bigger [industry] picture,” says England. **pb**

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