

Plating Produce Front & Center



Bacon & Butter's Avocado-Mushroom Sandwich. The Sacramento, CA-based restaurant serves breakfast, brunch and lunch.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BILLY ZOELLIN AND PROVIDED BY CALIFORNIA AVOCADO COMMISSION

The industry's most influential chefs and visionaries discuss new and versatile menuing options. **BY ELLEN KOTEFF**

With consumers moving the needle toward more healthful eating, innovative chefs are flexing their creative muscles to bring all the colorful splendor of produce front and center — signaling a sea of change in restaurant menus.

Converging factors are the primary impetus for produce items to gain ground with chefs across a wide spectrum of food-service operations, such as independent restaurants, colleges and universities, casual-dining establishments and quick-service chains.

A host of game-changing circumstances, which include versatility, flexibility, range of options, availability, diet trends, preferences for local products and ethnic cuisines, as well as the rising cost of proteins are helping to categorize produce as the hottest items on menus today.

“We are really undergoing a revolution when it comes to the use of produce on menus,” says foodservice trends expert Nancy Kruse, president of Atlanta, GA-based The Kruse Co. “There is a confluence of factors, not the least of which is the influence of chefs and their ability to use produce creatively.”

More often than not, a chef's inventiveness is fully realized when developing recipes and techniques for menu items



Joshua Murray, executive sous chef at JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa, created this rib dish with blueberry sauce exclusively for an event sponsored by the US Highbush Blueberry Council.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF US Highbush BLUEBERRY COUNCIL



Chef Joshua Murray also developed blueberry salt, which he uses as part of the hotel's artisan margarita bar — where a blueberry margarita sells for \$16.

featuring produce.

“In traditional culinary operations, the person working with the animal proteins makes the most money,” says Amy Myrdal Miller, senior director of programs and culinary nutrition, strategic initiatives for the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). “But it takes a lot more skill to bring out the best possible flavors when working with produce.”

Myrdal Miller says one of the most elegant forms of menu improvement is to

build on the simple presentation of a sandwich, which is ubiquitous on American menus. “We worked with one of our committee members who explained how he and his team looked at their sandwiches with an eye toward reducing the sodium.

“They were using a ciabatta bread and the chef said, ‘What if we pulled out some of the bread and filled it with fresh veggies?’ This was a very elegant innovation to building a sandwich, which was really quite simple.”

WE EAT WITH OUR EYES

As Kruse points out, American consumers learn their eating habits away from home as menu items are introduced in restaurants and later adapted for use in home kitchens.

“Clearly, there is a wonderful visual impact when produce is used in restaurants,” she says. “We eat with our eyes, and produce features such fresh and bright colors. As consumers we make an assumption that these dishes are fresher.”

California Pizza Kitchen's
Caramelized Peach Salad



PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN

Maeve Webster, senior director at Datassential, a menu-tracking consultancy, says the freshness factor equates to healthy in the minds of many, including chefs and restaurant owners.

"I see a push by operators to offer a much wider array of produce offerings because there is movement afoot, both internal and external, concerning the healthfulness of what we eat," says Webster.

In the past, fickle consumers said they

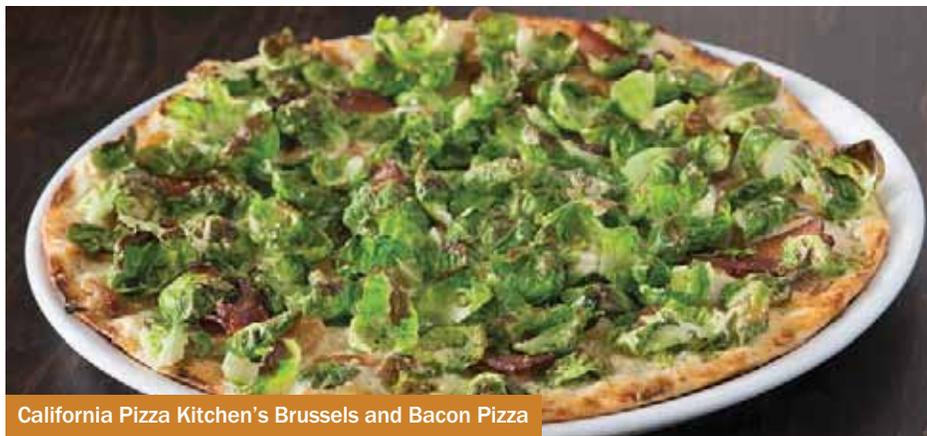
wanted to eat healthier but didn't back it up with their wallets — causing several restaurant chains to dial back their healthy eating initiatives.

"Things are changing with consumers today, and as a result, produce is really coming into its own," says Webster. "On top of that, restaurant operators understand how much texture, color and visual appeal produce adds to any dish — not to mention flavor."

Joy Dubost, director of nutrition at the National Restaurant Association (NRA), says data shows roughly 80 percent of Americans say it is important for restaurants to feature more produce because of its link to health and wellness.

"This interest in health and wellness cuts across all segments of the industry. One of the first things to make a dish more healthful is to add fruits and veggies," says Dubost.

Industry watchdog groups, as well as conscientious chefs, are currently trying to make restaurant menus even more healthful. Dubost points out that locally



California Pizza Kitchen's Brussels and Bacon Pizza

PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN

Red Lobster's Tilapia with Roasted Vegetables



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RED LOBSTER

grown produce ranks second on a trends list in the NRA's 2014 Culinary Forecast, right behind locally sourced meats and seafood.

New York-based chef, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, who recently retained his four-star rating from *The New York Times* for his namesake restaurant, says balance is key and he would like to see produce comprise 50 percent of every meal. "That's the way I used to eat when I was growing up in France," he says. "And with the variability produce offers, that is entirely possible. All you have to do is smell the fresh produce for inspiration."

Vongerichten, like his culinary brethren from coast to coast, is experimenting with fruit and vegetables like never before. Often, the creative juices start to flow following a visit to a farmers market or local farm.

"I love to create new combinations using the produce I find in the local markets and through my travels around the world," says Vongerichten. "In season, there are about 30 or more vegetables and

"I love to create new combinations using the produce I find in the local markets and through my travels around the world."

— Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Chef

herbs locally, and everything is completely different in Asia and Africa."

INNOVATION IN SOURCING

Indeed, sourcing through local farms has caught on with chefs, clearing the path for consumers to experiment at home and prompting retailers to carry more varieties.

"There is definitely innovation when it comes to sourcing," says the CIA's Miller. "A number of our members developed direct relationships with the growers. For

example, if a chef decides that he or she wants to put a squash soup on the menu in the fall, he or she will go directly to the grower or farmer."

Rhona Kamar, chef and owner of Ramsi's Café on the World in Louisville, KY, took local one step further by starting a farm with her husband.

"Four years ago we decided to build a fully functioning farm and now we are the only locally organic farm in Louisville," she says. The farm — Raising Hope Organic Farm — grows varieties previously not sold in the area.

"Last year was our very first growing season, and we grew three different kinds of kale that we put directly in front of our customers. Now that we are both farming and running a restaurant, we have a direct relationship with what we can grow and bring to our customers."

James Corwell, executive chef at the Pacific Union Club in San Francisco, CA, says innovation is being stoked as a result of the ongoing collaborations between farmers and chefs, especially in trend-

(L-R Clockwise) Mediterranean Grilled Potato Salad with seafood menued at Glen Cove Hospital in Glen Cove, NY; J&B Hash with Braised Beef Shortribs at District Commons, Washington, D.C.; Rustic Tuscan Potato and Crab Hash from Washington University.



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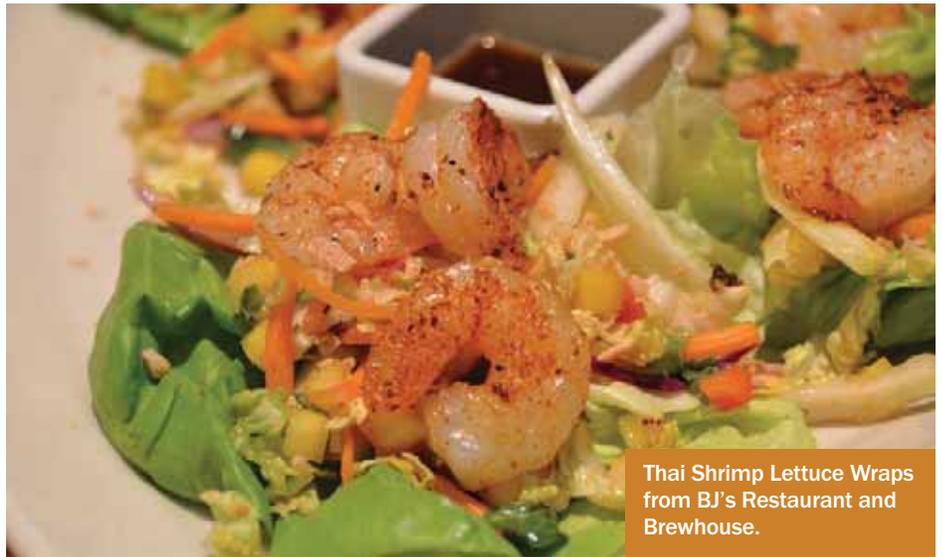
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Thai Shrimp Lettuce Wraps
from BJ's Restaurant and
Brewhouse.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA

“People are realizing the importance of being seasonal. In order for consumers to have a strawberry or a blueberry 365 days a year, the fruits had to be modified, but now our guests are getting away from wanting that.”

— Chef Joshua Murray,
JW Marriott Desert Springs
Resort & Spa

setting California. “I am seeing a lot more small, one-off crops that are not very common.”

Corwell, who is a certified master chef, also sees several varieties of kale and fava beans, and he notes there is also plenty of originality when it comes to preparation techniques.

“Chefs will take the ingredients and go the Alice Waters route and keep it simple. For instance, they’ll take carrots that were roasted in ash or hay and glaze them with a finish of fresh carrot juice.”

Corwell also notes that foraging has taken off in his neck of the woods. “The whole foraging concept has gone across the entire garden. I have a guy who goes

around to all the local farmers and gets me whatever he can every week.”

At Passion Food Hospitality DC, a Washington, DC-based restaurant group under the direction of chef and co-owner Jeff Tunks, it’s back to basics. Juices and sugar cane are fresh squeezed, cherries preserved, vegetables pickled and purees are made fresh daily. “Our guests really appreciate the artisanal approach,” says Tunks.

He points to his ongoing battle with rising beef prices, due in part to the droughts that have crippled California. “These record prices have made us examine how we are doing things, and produce has become an even more important part of our menu as a result.”

A CHANGE OF SEASONS

With a heightened emphasis on seasonality, chefs and home cooks alike are learning produce-based dishes taste best when enjoyed at peak ripeness.

“People are realizing the importance of being seasonal,” says Joshua Murray, executive sous chef at the JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa in Palm Desert, CA. “In order for consumers to have a strawberry or a blueberry 365 days a year, the fruits had to be modified, but now our guests are getting away from wanting that.”

Murray, who worked under a vegan chef for five years, is doing groundbreaking produce dishes and even beverages using a variety of methods requiring a great deal of craftsmanship — including the development of a blueberry salt, which he uses as part of the hotel’s



Watermelon Sunflower Sprout Salad served at Ramsi's Cafe on the World in Louisville, KY.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RAMSI'S CAFE ON THE WORLD

“Fresh is a driver of menu research and development. Lots of chefs at chains these days think in terms of seasonality. They want to give people an excuse to get into the restaurant at the present moment.”

— Nancy Kruse,
The Kruse Co.

artisan margarita bar, where a blueberry margarita sells for \$16.

“There is a nice flavor from the blueberry in the salt, and we have also used it to finish off ice creams and proteins.”

Clearly, as Kruse of The Kruse Co. is quick to note, “Fresh is a driver of menu research and development. Lots of chefs

at chains these days think in terms of seasonality. They want to give people an excuse to get into the restaurant at the present moment.”

One such chain, which is gaining national attention and cleverly inserts the word “Fresh” in its name, is Atlanta-based Fresh To Order, a fast-casual concept with

the tagline: fine. food. fast.

Under the direction of Jesse Gideon, who is corporate chef, the 12-unit chain emphasizes local, seasonal and of course, produce. “We pay a lot of attention to visual cues, flavor and texture,” says Gideon. “You can find produce that is salty, crunchy, sweet, bitter, spicy and soft — so

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why wouldn't we love working with it? Produce is unique in that it is more exciting to deal with than a traditional center-of-the-plate protein.

We use produce in everything we do."

For the chain's black bean burger, the beans are ground in the restaurant and served with a roasted corn relish made from fresh corn, onions, jalapeño and avocados.

Gideon says it takes very little work to make produce taste great, and as evidence he points out you never see someone pluck an apple from a tree and sprinkle it with vinegar or sugar. "Produce can help you learn subtle flavors in a way that you can't get from traditional seasonings or center-of-the-plate items because they are

all or nothing.

"You should be able to taste how much water or sun a strawberry received," says Gideon. "You can never get sick of eating an orange because even though they all taste sort of the same, they all taste a little different as well."

CREATE THE 'HALO OF FRESHNESS'

Kruse says there are several things a restaurant or chain can do with a dish to create the halo of freshness. "How the produce is treated in the kitchen is very important. The product doesn't need to be fresh if it is freshly prepared.

"Examples would be Red Lobster's Tilapia with Roasted Vegetables and Cali-

fornia Pizza Kitchen's Caramelized Peach Salad. What matters are the culinary techniques applied to the fruit and vegetables. When consumers see the steam coming off the dish or feel the warmth on the plate, it elevates the whole meal."

In the category of fast food restaurants, produce is also playing to a growing fan base. "Produce is making a big impact in quick service with all the salad chains that have sprung up in the last few years," says Sam Oches, editor of *QSR* magazine (the Durham, NC-based Journalistic Inc. publication, which is dedicated to quick service restaurants).

Oches points to chains such as Sweetgreen, Saladworks, Tossed and Chop't, which are located primarily on the East

Q&A

Baldor's president, Michael Muzyk, Talks Shop

By Paul Frumkin

Michael Muzyk, the president of Baldor Specialty Foods, Inc., in New York, is a longtime observer of the food and foodservice industries. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY, Muzyk has cooked in a number of restaurants around the country, including the celebrated La Côte Basque in New York City. He also spent time in Belgium working as a consulting chef for a quick-service company.

After spending more than a decade working in the back of the house, Muzyk decided to change careers and moved to the sales side of the foodservice business. In 1995, he joined Baldor as a sales representative, where he moved up through the ranks until being named president. During Muzyk's tenure with the Bronx-based importer and distributor, the company expanded from its produce roots to feature a wide range of food items, including dairy products and cheese; meat, poultry and game products; caviar and smoked seafood; and beverages.

During that time, the company also expanded its reach by opening facilities in Boston and Washington, D.C. One of Muzyk's goals, he says, is to double the size of the company.

Q: How's business?

A: The economy, to some degree, is

rebounding. Not everybody might agree, but in New York City — where finance drives the foodservice business — restaurants are starting to recover from the downturn.

A: How have things changed for Baldor over the past 15 years?

Q: When I joined, we had 50 items that we sold and a couple of trucks. Now we have 200 trucks in New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. Our footprint extends from southern Maine to Virginia, and we operate six days a week. We've continued to add more products than just fruits and vegetables. Today, we carry chocolate, duck breast, lamb, flavored sea salt. We're stocking 3,000 SKUs. It's crazy.

Q: What are some of the big trends in produce that you see right now?

A: Local sourcing is here to stay. And not only with local, fresh produce but with manufactured products, too — be it Jersey tomatoes or locally made honey. Chefs are all turning toward local ingredients. We've been getting many inquiries from consumers as well as chefs who want to know what's available locally, particularly during the [May through October] season. And we're seeing more suppliers extend the season through processing — for example, making Jersey tomato sauce for the entire year.

Q: Do you think this will lead to more branding on menus?

A: Yeah, to some degree, people are interested in the farm name, which you find increasingly listed on menus. But not everybody is doing that. Eric Ripert [chef-owner of Le Bernardin in New York] said he's seen some crazy items on menus. But he said he's not interested in promoting suppliers. Others feel differently, though.

Q: What other trends do you see out there?

A: Social media is not really a food trend, but it's definitely exploding. Young kids are all into it. Blogging and social media has an immediate impact with people and can instantly affect a restaurant's business. It didn't exist 10 years ago, but it's become part of running a restaurant and driving business. I guess it's both a positive and negative trend.

Q: What are the major challenges currently facing the foodservice industry?

A: Supply chain management will always be a hurdle. In New York City, we're often far away from the source. And when you're dealing with a perishable commodity, there will always be challenges inherent in the supply chain. For example, there's a lot of congestion in New York; you always will

Coast and California. “I think Sweetgreen is going to be the winner in this whole thing. The concept is following in the mold of Chipotle but doing it with salad.” Oches says it isn’t just cucumbers and tomatoes anymore. “You see everything now — cilantro, green and red peppers, basil, sprouts, avocado, arugula, kale, Swiss chard and a lot of different vegetables.”

As these salad chains grow and gain momentum, Oches predicts more exotic produce items will start trickling down to the traditional quick-service restaurants.

Judging from the NRA’s “hot” trends as ranked by America’s chefs, exotic produce items are already widely embraced in full-service operations. More than 56 percent of the chefs surveyed said exotic fruits

Blackberry Pulled Pork Salad from Shari’s Cafe & Pies in Beaverton, OR.

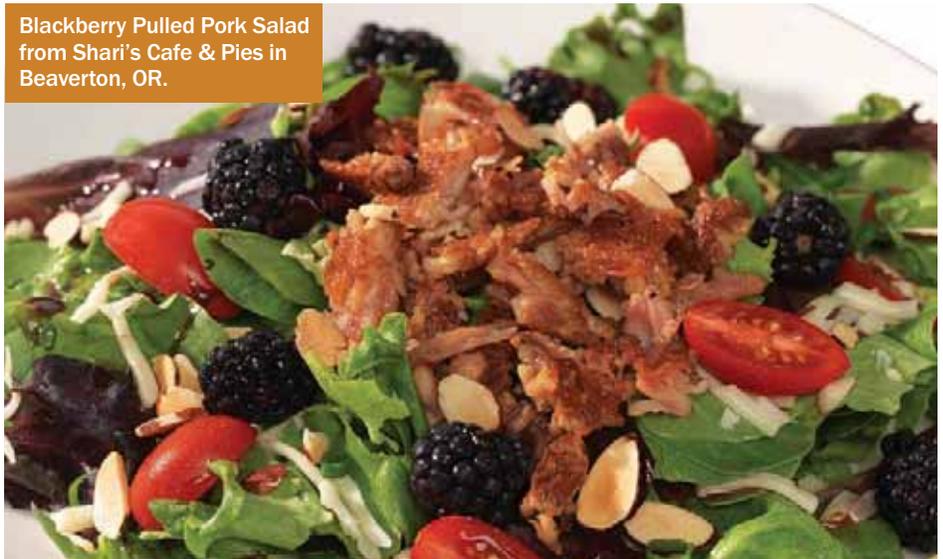


PHOTO COURTESY OF SHARI’S CAFE & PIES

have to deal with that.

In business you don’t stand still. You go forward or backward. We have three locations and coordination between the three to ensure buying power and freshness is a daily challenge. We’re dealing with a commodity that’s either green and growing or brown and dying. We have to be diligent in our efforts. There’s a term used for fish called “dayboat fresh.” You can’t be fresher than that when it comes to fish. We use that term in the produce business. We want to give the customer the freshest product everyday.

Q: Any other challenges that stand out?

A: Food safety. There are food safety initiatives in the pipeline, but I think the costs will be huge. When you go to California or Texas, you see that food safety is costing millions of dollars. At the same time, we have to be diligent as local farming continues to grow. We have to make sure they have systems in place that ensure the safety of their food. They just don’t have the same budget in place [as bigger farmers]. We can’t underestimate the importance of food safety.

Q: What about traceability?

A: I think we’ll see more about traceability of products [through the supply pipeline] in the future. People started

talking about the produce traceability initiative 10 years ago. But I don’t think all of the kinks have been worked out yet. Supermarkets are starting to look at it. Also, [the sandwich chain] Subway is starting to show interest in it, too. They want to know where [ingredients] come from.

Q: Do you see any particular segment driving the trends?

A: All of the segments have their own inherent challenges, so you can’t point at one and say the trends are coming from there. If you look at Restaurant Associates, Sodexo and Compass Group — they operate across business segments, and the competition makes them constantly reinvent what they do.

Fine-dining operators all tend to focus on the quality of the ingredients, and that will never be compromised. The best restaurants will always order the best ingredients. It’s all “price, price, and price.” You get what you pay for.

Retailers, on the other hand, are driving the sales of organic produce. Eighty percent of the organic business is from retailers. And that factor helped drive another trend. It used to be that produce would be delivered to the warehouse and then shifted to the individual stores. Now that trend is reversing. Organic produce doesn’t have the shelf life, so if it goes to the warehouse

first, how much [shelf life] is left? So now we’re going back to the old-school method of delivering to individual stores or direct store delivery.

Q: How do you stay abreast of trends?

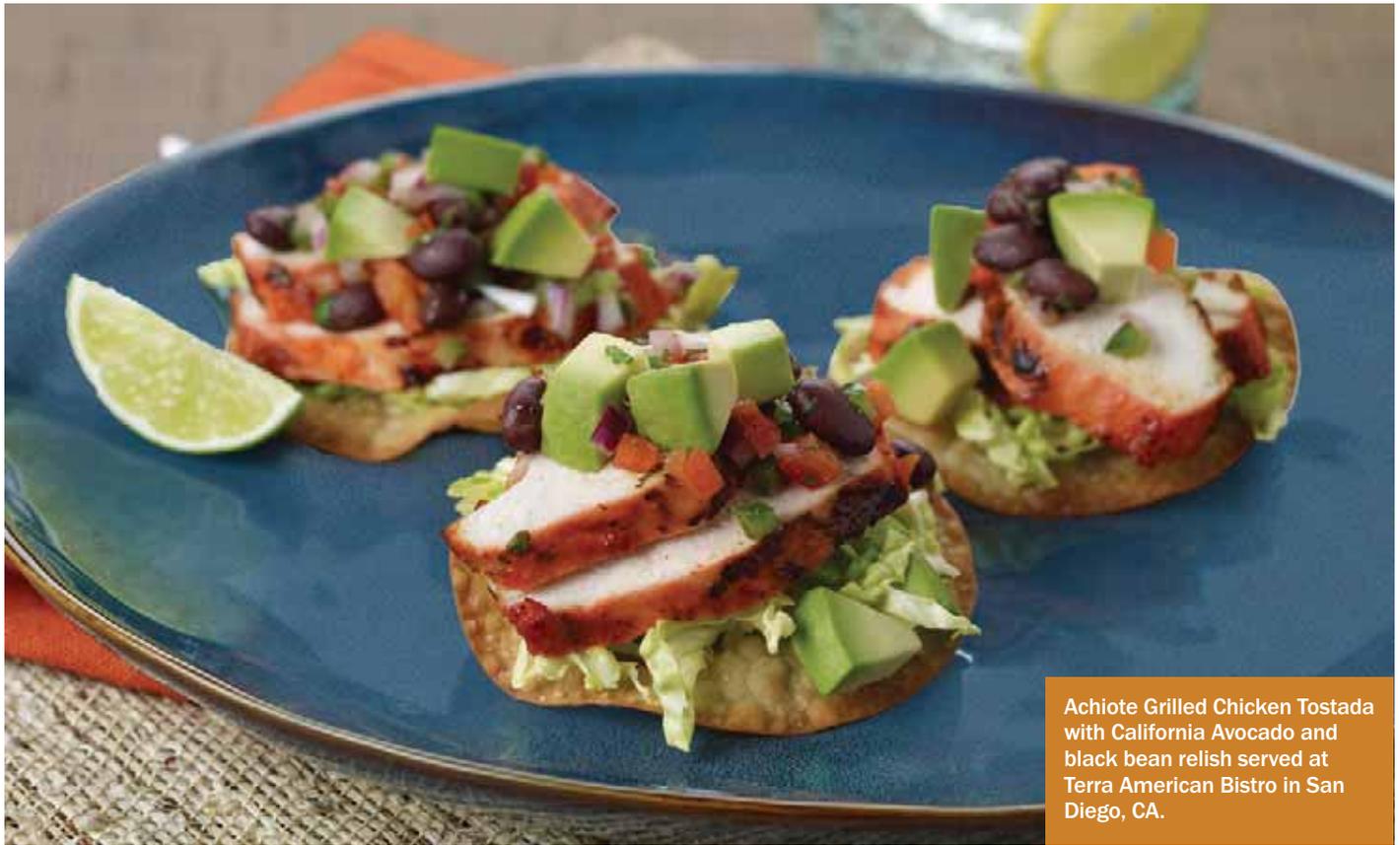
A: I listen to customers. I listen to growers. I’ll speak to shippers or chefs, or they come to us and tell us what they want to do. Many trends start because the growers-shippers want to sell, say, a new heirloom tomato and they come to us to team up. So sometimes we help to create a trend. For instance, we were the first company with ramps [or wild leeks]. Now the supply has opened up. Sometimes we just respond to a customer’s needs.

We’ve also done things like hosting a local farm day. It helps us find out what farmers are doing or what they would like to see.

Q: What would you tell somebody entering the produce business today?

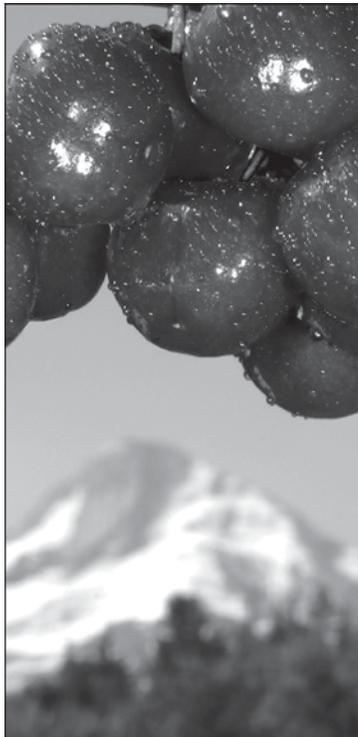
A: Know what your strength is. Are you good with numbers? Should you be on the analytical side of things? Do you have a logistical background? Can you source products? Are you a salesperson? Can you talk to restaurateurs? Are you a driver? Do you work best on the frontline? Those positions are all hard work, but they all offer opportunities.

pb



Achiote Grilled Chicken Tostada with California Avocado and black bean relish served at Terra American Bistro in San Diego, CA.

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such as rambutan, dragon fruit, pawpaw and guava were a hot trend, which was followed by hybrid fruits and vegetables with a 52 percent rating.

Other produce items that scored high on the list of chefs' lists include unusual and uncommon herbs, such as chervil, lemon balm (64 percent), dark greens like kale, mustard greens and collards (61 percent), superfruits such as acai, goji berry and mangosteen (56 percent), heirloom apples (60 percent), organic produce (61 percent) and locally grown produce (79 percent).

Kruse predicts there are other trends looming that will feature produce in a starring role. "I think produce for breakfast has a terrific upside potential. It's the fastest-growing daypart, and produce is underrepresented," she says. She thinks root vegetables, such as turnips, rutabagas, carrots and beets, will gain in popularity and also predicts side dishes will become the new frontier, which bodes well for produce.

"The days where chefs simply throw some French fries on a plate are over," says Kruse. "Opening up the side dish category is nothing but good news for produce processors." **pb**