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# New Varieties Encourage Increased Melon Sales

A recovering economy, projected good season and strong demand bode well for producers and retailers. **BY MEREDITH AUERBACH**



PHOTO COURTESY OF DULCINEA FARMS LLC

On a per-pound or per-serving cost, watermelon is one of the most inexpensive items in the produce department.

**T**he arrival of warm weather still signals to consumers that melon season is about to start. It's not that they don't see, buy and enjoy melon at other times of the year, but warm weather dramatically increases sales volume.

The February freeze in Mexico caused concern, but it appears most of the extreme weather has passed. Wes Leifer, CEO of Scottsdale, AZ-based Pura Vida Farms LLC, comments, "Over the past several years, there seem to be more extremes in the weather patterns. This year, our crop is looking good. Cantaloupes are not yet mature, but they are bigger than normal for this time of year."

Brent Harrison, president of Al Harrison Co. Distributors, a full service grower/shipper located in Nogales, AZ, concurs, and reports, "We don't see any impact on our planned production. We grow under plastic tunnels, which helps insulate the plants from cold and helps control pests and diseases. We just need the good, long, hot and sunny days to bring the melons on. Melons love 100° F"

Producers and retailers alike expect melon demand to increase as the economy continues to improve. There may be upward pressure on pricing that often accompanies more demand.

Agricultural inputs from fuel to fertilizer, employee benefits and use of land are likely to also boost costs. Steve Martori, managing member of Martori Farms, located in Scottsdale, AZ, points out, "Melons are an annual crop and not necessarily an easy one to grow. With rising prices on commodities such as cotton and soy, there might be decreased acreage producing melons. True melon guys will stay in the business; others might not."

## Variety Mix

The standard category mix has not changed much over the past several years. As Joe Burnett, director of floral and produce for the member-owned distributor, Baton Rouge, LA-based Associated Grocers Inc., says, "Watermelon and cantaloupe drive the wagon." Along with honeydew, these melons are the foundation of the category year-round. Traditional large watermelon, mini watermelons, cantaloupe and honeydew can be sourced from either domestic producers in spring through fall and imported during the winter.

The domestic crop starts in South Florida in April and gradually moves north and west as the weather warms into summer. Ken Kodish, melon sales manager at Ayco Farms

Inc., headquartered in Pompano Beach, FL, offers a reminder, "The best time to sell any melon is at the peak of season, which can be in the middle of winter or the middle of summer. The key is a good working relationship between retailer and shipper to identify what is the right timing for the store's customers."

Beyond the basics, newer varieties bring interest to the category and satisfaction to customers. Few consumers can name individual varieties of popular melons such as watermelon and cantaloupe, but growers keep working to identify varieties with specific characteristics for flavor sweetness, or Brix, and texture, even size and weight. Many are niche varieties, still small in volume but growing.

"We're in our fifth year of production with our branded Tuscan melon," reports John McGuigan, vice president sales and marketing for Dulcinea Farms LLC, in Ladera Ranch, CA. "Taking into account all domestic production, availability runs May through November, with a high-quality, consistent melon. We also brand our Pureheart personalized-sized watermelon and the large Ruby Bliss seedless watermelon. With the graphic stickers and boxes, outdoor advertising, coupons and radio tie-ins, consumers are coming to know the brand and depend on

**“Cut melons allow customers to see what the fruit looks like inside and encourages trial of less familiar melons in an easy convenient way.**

**Department personal need constant awareness that cut product like sliced cantaloupe may only have three to four hours of shelf-life, even when displayed in refrigerated multi-deck cases.**

— Dean Holmquist, Foodtown.

the consistent quality and flavor,” he says.

“Think of a lemon drop cocktail, and you get a sense of our new white-fleshed melon we call Lemon Drop,” describes Martori. “It’s sweet and juicy with plenty of citrus overtones. We did trials on it last year and are moving ahead with production. It looks like a honeydew with light netting. We also are seeing increased popularity for Tuscan-type cantaloupes. They will be more available this year.”

Lou Kertesz sings praises for the Harper variety of cantaloupe. The vice president of Fresh Quest Inc., a vertically integrated producer of cantaloupe, honeydew, seedless watermelon and other fruits and vegetables located in Plantation, FL, says, “Great tasting

fruit is what leads to increased consumer demand. The Harper has excellent flavor and consistent appearance with excellent shelf-life. It has higher Brix than most cantaloupe and works well for fresh-cut processors.”


Another rather unique cantaloupe is the Athena, grown by Rosemont Farms, in Boca Raton, FL. Daniel Whittles, director of marketing and product development, comments, “With Athena melons, retailers are typically able to feature a larger sized melon and hit a nice price point for the consumer and the store. Such high Brix melons, along with the non-desert like conditions of the western growing areas, have been limited to mostly regional distribution.”

**Effective Melon Programs**

“There are so many components that make up an effective melon program at retail,” contends Dean Holmquist, director of produce for the 66 stores that make up the co-op Foodtown, based in Avenel, NJ. “You need to determine the balance between cut and whole at different times of year; have consistently high standards at store level to be sure all product is safe; the right equipment; knowledge of your customers and their needs, which can be different from store to store.

“Cut melons allow customers to see what the fruit looks like inside and encourages trial of less familiar melons in an easy convenient way,” continues Holmquist. “Department personal need constant awareness that cut product like sliced cantaloupe may only have three to four hours of shelf-life, even when displayed in refrigerated multi-deck cases. We don’t use ice at all. We also insist that displays get set up early, because in most of our stores, customers are stopping by on the way to work or school to pick up lunch or snacks. For us, these approaches have made a big difference in results.”

The choices available in melons, forms and sizes give retailers ample opportunities for differentiation, especially when melons become a des-



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## There's An App For That!

With a final nod to technology, there's an iPhone app that sounds warning to all producers and retailers of melons. Gordon Hunt, director of marketing for the Orlando, FL-based National Watermelon Board, reveals, "We're in contact with a group in Israel who have developed an app called Iwatermelon to judge the ripeness of a watermelon. It has to do with sound waves and involves placing an iPhone on the melon and knocking the melon several times. We've checked it out and it works!" **pb**

Continuation in the produce department. Pura Vida's Wes Leifer recommends adding new or different melons to the display as they become available, but cautions that sugar and flavor are critical issues. "We monitor sugar levels daily before picking," he reveals. "Variety melons such as orange-fleshed honeydew, Casaba and Crenshaw can make every display custom for the area."

Fresh Quest's Kertesz agrees and says, "Each melon has a niche. Getting it right requires flexibility on everybody's part, especially sizing and best pricing to keep demand high. Regular promotion generates consumer excitement."

### Promotion Is Key

The Orlando, FL-based National Water-

melon Promotion Board focuses exclusively on watermelon, but there can't help but be spillover to other melons as well. Gordon Hunt, director of marketing, points to new programs designed to keep the watermelon message fresh and compelling. "We're kicking off a new Web site this spring and now have the experience and dedicated staff to make more effective use of social media to appeal to a younger demographic. Additionally, as research points to a stronger wellness impact, especially in areas of cardiac and hypertension control, we will communicate the value of watermelon with a heart-shaped watermelon logo for heart health. We will also continue work with Weight Watchers."

Dulcinea's McGuigan shares, "Our approach is to work closely with retailers on

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flavor and consistency and let the promotion board tell the nutrition story.”

Watermelon Board sales tracking data shows serious sales opportunities in mini watermelons and fresh-cut melon, despite relatively flat sales the past two years. The strongest growth areas are in the Great Lakes, Northeast, South Central and Southeast. Whole seedless watermelon is still the biggest segment with more than 60 percent of retail sales in 2010; cut sales follow with about 24 percent of sales, while minis trail with almost 12 percent.

Mike Tipton, director of produce and floral for K-VA-T, reports, “Our chunk sales go up in winter, and for the first time this year we did a successful, full-bin, whole melon promotion. But generally speaking, the hotter the better for

melon sales. We are developing a new distribution center and a fresh-cut area will be part of it. Summer is the ideal time for strong promotion at retail: hot weather, a primed consumer, best supply and cost.”

Hunt reminds both retailers and consumers, “On a per-pound or per-serving cost, watermelon is about the lowest cost fruit in the department.”

Nonetheless, pricing is a point of contention in different geographic areas. How do you price melon? In the East, pricing tends to be on a per-pound basis, while the West leans toward unit or whole melon pricing. Burnett of Associated Grocers comments, “We price by the pound and promotion is very important, but quality is the seller. Make it visible — say 4x4

feet or five shelves — in summer and it sells.”

The Watermelon Board believes that promotionally, holidays take care of themselves; many shippers look at the summer holidays of Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day as ideal promotions to drive bigger volume. Harrison of Al Harrison thinks \$5 is a magic number for whole melons most times of the year, while Kertesz of Fresh Quest and McGuigan of Dulcinea find peak season promotions of 2-for-\$5 a bigger volume driver.

Melon size can make a difference in the calculation for promotion. Club stores often prefer larger sizes; Canadian store often want smaller sizes. Harrison knows, “As a grower, we can work closely with retail customers to be sure we sell what they want.” **pb**

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