

Asparagus Becoming Four Seasons Favorite

Increasing supplies and quality make asparagus a year-round buy for shoppers.

BY MIKE DUFF



North Shore Farms aggressively merchandises asparagus at the start of the produce section.

PHOTO COURTESY NORTH SHORE FARMS

Although it still has seasonal associations, the asparagus business has changed significantly, which may bring additional opportunity to the produce department.

Consumption was up in 2020 in the most recently published numbers, but U.S. acreage decreased as imports gained. Still, asparagus imports help assure a consistent year-round supply, which means consumers can more readily add it to their weekly shopping lists.

Asparagus has long been a popular spring item, and retailers of all sizes conspicuously promoted asparagus this year as spring approached. Even by mid-March of this year, a couple of weeks before the main season launched, asparagus promotions were cropping up all over.

In suburban Long Island, NY, upscale North Shore Farms, an avid promoter of asparagus, had a \$1.99 a bunch deal in its circular. The supermarket chain also is an aggressive asparagus merchandiser, often staging it at the start of the produce section immediately adjacent to the front door and even as part of the under-awning produce display the company operates just outside its front doors.

Across the United States, at Raley's in California, asparagus was on special at \$3.49 for a one-pound bunch, a savings of \$1.40, on the company's website. Organic asparagus was \$5.14 a pound.

At the same time, Walmart promoted fresh asparagus for delivery on its website for \$1.98 a pound/bunch. Walmart also offered its own Marketside bagged asparagus at \$3.98 for a 10-ounce bag.

Asparagus and other seasonal promotions fall underneath a larger tiered promotional strategy that Walmart developed for its supercenter and Neighborhood Market stores.

"Walmart does have national programs, but will have strategies by market depending on the seasonality of the crop," says spokesperson Tricia Moriarty.

At Bargain Grocery in Utica, NY, where the idea is to provide low-cost healthy food to shoppers in what had been a food desert, asparagus isn't a big item yet. Although the store maintains a core produce department, it often brings in fruits and vegetables opportunistically. As such, customers know they'll find asparagus from time to time, and appreciate it because the price is right.

"When we get it, we'll push it out, but never for more than a dollar a bunch," says Mike Servello, chief executive of Bargain Grocery and its parent, Compassion Coalition. "We'll go through a pallet or two."

There are significant opportunities to grow

profitable asparagus sales, as it continues transitioning from a seasonal foodservice and specialty retail product to one that consumers are using more frequently throughout the year.

Jeff Friedman, president of CarbAmericas, Fort Lauderdale, FL, says suppliers and retailers should put their heads together to make the most of the opportunity.

"As a team, we have to ask how do we make it more of a mainstay item," he says.

AVAILABLE YEAR-ROUND

Changes in sourcing have affected availability, retail sales and consumption.

"The vast majority of fresh asparagus

consumed in the U.S. today comes from Peru and Mexico," says Charlie Eagle, vice president business development at Southern Specialties, Pompano Beach, FL. "Land costs, labor considerations and availability of water have greatly impacted domestic production. Domestic asparagus from California, Washington, Michigan and New Jersey are available for a short window of time each spring and early summer."

Priscilla Lleras-Bush of the Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association, Waxahachie, TX, says imports of asparagus from Peru have helped build the position of asparagus as a 12-month vegetable choice.



PHOTO COURTESY AycO FARMS

Imports of asparagus from Peru and Mexico have helped build the year-round category.



PHOTO: COURTESY SOUTHERN SPECIALTIES

Southern Specialties notes that the greatest demand is for medium, or standard, sizes of asparagus.

“Since Peruvian asparagus is a year-round product, there are months of the year that we experience an increase/peak in volume,” says Lleras-Bush. “For example, Peru’s exports increase just in time for the summer festivities and into the fall/holiday season.”

She cites USDA stats that report, year-over-year, Peruvian asparagus imports increased 9% from 2020 to 2021. “We have experienced an increase in volume and consistently great quality.”

Crystal Valley Foods, Miami, FL, imports asparagus from Peru and from Mexico, although it occasionally has domestic product available, according to Katiana Valdes, marketing director. “Peru is a reliable source for asparagus 52 weeks a year. It is because of this consistency that we make sure we always have Peruvian asparagus to supplement our other sourcing regions throughout the year. It helps to ensure that our customers are always covered in case of a weather-related or other unforeseen issue.”

ALL EYES ON ASPARAGUS

Merchandising is especially important to asparagus sales if they are to become more mainstream. Fortunately, retailers can merchandise asparagus in a number of different ways. Of course, one-pound bundles of green asparagus are a standard presentation in and around the cold case, and sometimes still merchandised in icy water, and are the

main promotional vehicle. However, produce sections have a variety of presentation options that can boost attention — and sales.

“Merchandising methods vary and stretch across the United States,” says Lleras-Bush. “Many retailers have seen increased profit and sales by offering various SKUs of sizes and package options. Other retailers provide cross-merchandising: Peruvian asparagus with a protein or sauce or other vegetable products that create vibrant displays. Retailers definitely understand the sales benefits of creating and building big asparagus displays to attract consumers.”

In what might be considered a promising sign of retailer expansion and consumer embrace of the commodity, Eagle says, “At one time, the only asparagus found on retail shelves was a banded bunch of green asparagus. Today, you can find a wide selection of fresh asparagus in a variety of colors and presentations.”

“As an example, by displaying green asparagus next to white and purple asparagus, you are creating a visual destination point and exposing consumers to slightly different flavor profiles,” Eagle adds.

Purple may still be a bit scarce, but can present an opportunity for special or peak season promotions.

“We have also found that value-added packaged asparagus can be complementary to the bulk offerings,” he says.

Retailers should consider when and where they feature asparagus, says Valdes.

“Displaying asparagus on end caps will always attract attention, and it is important to always keep these displays full and rotated,” she adds. “Some upscale retailers use displays with bunches sitting in crushed ice; it gives an impression of freshness.”

Southern Specialties offers several promotional opportunities to retail customers, and Eagle says retailers have told them end cap and island displays in conjunction with discount pricing “is a great way to increase sales.”

Cross-merchandising can be a critical technique to drive asparagus sales and those of related food products, says Valdes.

“Asparagus is popular prepared with lemons, meats [especially] steak, and bacon, so those products would be good to pair with the vegetable,” she says. “It is also a favorite for spring and summer cookouts, parties, family gatherings and it is quickly becoming a holiday staple, so retailers should cross-merchandise asparagus with meats and other grilling and holiday essentials. It’s also becoming a popular brunch item and can be added to quiches, frittatas and other egg dishes. Finally, it can also be enjoyed in a crudité platter, so it is beneficial to cross merchandise asparagus with ranch and yogurt dips.”

She recommends retailers educate

consumers about asparagus through traditional POS as well as by sharing recipes and information on websites and social platforms. “In-store demos are also a great vehicle for increasing retail movement of both white and green asparagus and offer customers a chance to try the product.”

PROMOTION, EDUCATION KEY

Promotions remain important to boosting sales if they are scheduled through the year as consumers shift cooking patterns, CarbAmericas’ Friedman says. Retailers that prompt attention every few weeks have a shot at making more consumers regular purchasers even at nonpromotional prices, particularly if they offer alternative sizes that cost less per full-price purchase than one-pound bunches do.

Eagle says the greatest demand is for medium, or standard, sizes. “The best value for consumers is often found in the smaller sizes,” he adds. “Some folks think the jumbo asparagus are tougher than smaller sizes, but that is not usually the case. Steakhouse offerings have made the jumbo asparagus more popular with a segment of customers.”

From her perspective, Valdes sees a size range running up. “The most common or popular size for retailers is standard/large. A few upscale retailers will offer XL and jumbo

sizes to consumers who want to grill asparagus,” she says.

Even if consumption has been steadily increasing, Valdes says there is “great potential for us as an industry to help grow the asparagus category and increase demand. We need to remind current asparagus consumers about its great health benefits and introduce new and innovative usages, and we also need to reach out to those consumers who may not know about this amazing vegetable yet.”

CarbAmericas’ Friedman says that informing consumers about the nutritional qualities of asparagus and preparation ideas can help generate interest and sales. “We need to educate the consumer with point-of-sales information on how to cook it and how to prepare it. My family has started to prepare asparagus in the air fryer.”

A lot of people don’t realize asparagus is easy to prepare, Lleras-Bush says, and it doesn’t take much to direct consumers to all kinds of cooking and serving ideas.

“Vast information online is available for preparation and usage ideas for asparagus,” she says. “Many retailers offer recipe ideas as well at the store level. Grilling asparagus is a home run for U.S. consumers and those looking for a delicious and nutritious vegetable that is easy to prepare.”

BY THE NUMBERS

- U.S. per capita consumption of asparagus increased from 1.76 pounds per person in 2018 and 2019 to 1.83 pounds per person in 2020.

- Approximately 19,200 acres of asparagus were harvested in the United States in 2020, only about one-third of what it was 15 years ago due to growing imports from Central and South America.

- Almost all of the U.S. commercial asparagus production occurs in Michigan, California, Washington and New Jersey. In 2019, total U.S. asparagus production was 74.37 million pounds.

- About 502.4 million pounds of fresh asparagus came into the United States in 2017, mostly from Mexico, Peru and Chile.

Source: Agricultural Marketing Resources Center, Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association

The Peruvian Asparagus Importers Association website provides additional sourcing insights and ideas for marketing asparagus, Lleras-Bush notes. **pb**