



The Cotton Candy grape varieties are almost a category by themselves. Consumers don't know many grape varieties by name, but they do recognize the different taste of the Cotton Candy varieties.

GRAPES LURE SHOPPERS TO PRODUCE AISLES

Grape industry offers a plethora of merchandising opportunities.

BY TAD THOMPSON

Within the art of modern-day produce merchandising, table grapes present complex challenges, which, well-managed, are also great opportunities.

From his headquarters office in Rio Rico, AZ, David Watson, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms LLC, notes the grape category is changing — not only in varieties, but also in the breadth of the flavor profile.

“We’re at the early stages of getting these grapes,” Watson says. “They’re colliding with each other at the stores, and nobody really understands yet what will have to be done on the marketing side of the business — the marketing of these grapes and the education of the consumers toward these grapes.”

Tom “TW” Wilson, sales manager for The Giumarra Cos., based in Long Beach, CA, stresses, “You can’t just be complacent all the time. Innovation drives the marketplace, certainly for grapes.”

THE VARIETY CHESS GAME

The industry has moved from a world where all growers had the same varieties, says John Pandol, director of special projects for Pandol Bros. Inc., in Delano, CA, “to a world where different marketing programs have different varieties or genetics programs.”

“Retailers need to be careful they don’t paint themselves into a corner, because a ‘must have’ variety in a small window dictates what they do the rest of the time,” Pandol cautions. “A retailer told us a number of years ago if Thompson and Crimson were available 52 weeks a year, that would be golden. That retailer no longer buys either.”

“The reality is retailers buy by variety, but sell by commodity,” Pandol continues. “So how do they determine the best red or white for any given week? Based on prior experience with no adjustments for seasonal variation.”

“Retailers have no idea how much lateral trading and co-packing goes on,” he adds. “How do retailers differentiate suppliers? Once, it might have been by label or supply or quality, but now it’s by variety.”

Watson says many new varieties are not prolific yet and haven’t taken over the old varieties. Still, “it’s the new varieties in the red, green and black category that people want to buy,” he adds. “Those are better than the

old varieties, but they have all these different names that are confusing for consumers. They’re not paying attention to those names, but they’re enjoying eating those new grapes.”

Older varieties include Thompsons and Flames, and others that have been replaced with preferred grapes. Coming in are Sweet Celebration, Sweet Globe, Allison, Timco, Timpson, AutumnCrisp and more.

“But these names will never really be known by the consumer because it’s too confusing,” says Watson. “I shouldn’t say never. But at the moment, they’re not known by the consumer. It’s just another red grape or green grape. But when the consumer eats it, they go, ‘Wow. Wow, man! That’s not the same green grape I had last year! It’s bigger, crunchier and better.’ And so, they don’t know the difference. But of course, we do, and the growers do.”

TREAT CANDY GRAPES SEPARATELY

But Watson quickly adds the candy grape varieties are a separate category.

“That’s a whole other thing that can add a lot of value and a lot of revenue to retailers, if we can educate the consumers and get it out there,” he says. “There are two segments here. The old traditional grapes are going away. The new traditional grapes are coming in, with the new specialty candy varieties.”

merchandising ▶ Grapes

Watson said the candy varieties, among a couple others, are Cotton Candy, Candy Hearts, Candy Dreams and Candy Snaps. “That grape is not the same as the green Thompson or a green Sweet Globe. It’s a Cotton Candy, completely different.”

GRAPES BOOST TRAFFIC

Carlos Bon, vice president of sales for Divine Flavor, Inc., based in Nogales, AZ, says grapes are “a great traffic promoter for our customers.”

“A lot of retailers do a fantastic job merchandising them,” Bon adds. “Social media has had a huge impact lately, as this has grown on the retail side exponentially and how retailers communicate to their customers. When it comes to displaying them, you hear and see multiple strategies, and I don’t think any of them are wrong.”

Wilson says Giumarra’s marketing team offers a variety of grape merchandising options to retailers, while serving the individual needs of those retailers. Promotion efforts are often bundled with retailers’ merchandising plans to save them time and money in producing their own materials. This can include bins, point-of-sale materials, information cards and social media that backs up the promotions.

PACKAGING: TALK AND ACTION IN OPPOSITION

Some retailers like to market grapes in clear bags, so the product is the highlight of what you see, Bon says. Others want more graphics or bands to go around the clamshell. Others include lots of color to grab the attention of consumers. “You see a mix of everything, so I’m not sure if there’s one definitive answer” for the best way to merchandise table grapes.

As to packaging, Giumarra’s Wilson adds there is an industry push toward sustainability, which brings a different type of bag. But there is a counter-current, because the industry has not yet created a bag that is compostable and



Grapes are a traffic (and sales) booster for the fresh produce department.

very clear. Currently, compostable bags are cloudy.

“We want to take care of the planet, but consumers buy with their eyes,” and want to clearly see the grapes, Wilson notes. He stressed that grapes “pop” when displayed in clear bags, with or without graphics.

“Over the last five years, there’s been a lot about reducing the carbon footprint and getting out of plastic,” agrees Bon. “When our competitors and we try to convert out of plastic, retailers try it, but then it doesn’t perform as well as expected. There is consciousness among the consumer world to shop more sustainable when it comes to produce, but, at the end of the day, they want to be able to see their produce. Right now, there really isn’t a sustainable material that is as clear or transparent as plastic is.”

He says Divine Flavor is focusing on plastics that are recyclable or compostable. “Additionally, we are lowering the percentage of plastic when we try to do top-seal presentations or

trying to work with cardboard clamshells. They will still have plastic films, but ultimately, it will have a lot less plastic than it used to.”

When it comes to packaging and labeling, Wilson says PLUs are important to retail stores, and there are a plethora of variety-specific grape PLUs, generated through the PMA, which is now the International Fresh Produce Association. For retailers, the downside of so many PLUs is the computer memory space for their retail systems to be up to date.

Nonetheless, Wilson says most retailers want PLUs on bags and bar codes so their associates can scan at the retail register or customers ring up themselves at self-checkouts. “Retailers are concerned that the cashier doesn’t sell \$4.99 grapes for \$2.99.”

GIVE THEM ORGANIC GRAPES

Bon said there is a huge retail demand for organic table grapes, which is Divine Flavor’s forte.

“By the time we get to Sonora, the hunger

■ IFG FAMILY OF FLAVORS CLARIFIES GRAPE VARIETIES

BY TAD THOMPSON

Jennifer Maguire, international commercial manager for table at Bakersfield, CA-based International Fruit Genetics, or IFG, tells PRODUCE BUSINESS that IFG alone has 48 patented table grape varieties and acknowledges that for retailers and consumers, “it can be a lot to take in.”

Maguire notes the grape trade traditionally categorizes fruit in a nine-box grid, with one axis of red seedless, green seedless, black seedless grapes. These are charted with the other axis of early season, mid-season and late season availability.

But IFG sees such a presentation as limiting because its varieties have more novel attributes than just color and seasonality, including unique shapes, flavors and crunchy or juicy textures.

“True to IFG’s spirit, we are an innovator. We flipped the

nine-box on its head and distilled it down to five distinct flavor groups.”

This is called IFG’s Family of Flavors. Maguire explains, “Let’s face it, grapes are for eating and taste matters. So, we’re focusing on the eating experience rather than other attributes, and that is where we wanted to pivot the messaging.”

The Family of Flavor categories, with examples of related IFG trademarked varieties, include:

- Tropical and Fruity (Candy Snaps)
- Floral and Muscat (Candy Hearts)
- Spicy (Julep)
- Toffee (Cotton Candy)
- Sweet Neutral (Sweet Globe)

pb

for organics is really high, because you're coming from an import season where there is very few organics and the pricing is quite high," Bon says. "So, by the time we start in Mexico, we feel the pricing is reasonable and very attractive to the consumer. It's a great deal for them, and it provides a lot of excitement."

Although, because of the current economic condition in the country and in the world, Bon says some say organics are being a little stagnant, but that hasn't been true for Divine Flavor.

"We have more commitments to grow more organics, even when we need to sell it as conventional. But we are focused and committed to growing more organics, and we are hoping in the near future we can fully commit 100% to growing completely organic." **pb**

■ DO WE NEED A UNIVERSAL GRAPE PROMOTION?

Is broad, industrywide consumer promotion needed to increase grape consumption?

Promotion is currently done by companies independently, competing for their share of market. David Watson, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Fresh Farms LLC, Rio Rico, AZ, believes the option to work together is an idea whose time has come, and would "greatly promote and expand consumption as the avocado industry has so effectively done."

Tom "TW" Wilson, sales manager for The Giumarra Cos., based in Long Beach, CA, shares the opinion. "I have always been a part of the group that thought all grape producers and marketers (should) drive sales as a whole, but the industry tends to be close to the vest," Wilson says. "I always thought it would be better served if everybody worked together to sell more grapes."

U.S. table grape consumption has been at more or less 8 pounds per capita for 20 years. "The last real growth we had in grape sales in the USA were in the '90s, when the last gaps without seedless grapes were filled in," says John Pandol, director of special projects for Pandol Bros. Inc., in Delano, CA.

"For all the great varieties that have been introduced in the last 10-15 years, including the interspecific specialty grapes, consumption has been flat," he adds. **pb**

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