

Score Super Bowl Shoppers With Healthy Produce Twists

An occasion when families and friends come together to watch one of America's favorite pastimes, Super Bowl Sunday ranks second only to Thanksgiving as the biggest eating day of the year in the United States.

Although Buffalo wings, pizza and potato chips top the favorites, both retailers and produce suppliers agree overwhelmingly that vast opportunities remain nationwide to drive sales of fresh fruits and vegetables.

NUTRITION — IN THE GAME

With healthy eating and plant-based foods on the rise, more consumers in hot and cold climates will want nutritious alternatives of classic football fare, as well as healthful options on the side.

"There seems to be more customers every year looking for a Super Bowl snack that they consider healthy," says Ryan Ellison, produce category manager for K-Va-T Food Stores, based in Abingdon, VA. "We are very fortunate to have a huge event like the Super Bowl in February. Without it, the month would be a difficult one in which to grow sales."

Regardless of its location (this year's game will be played in Miami), the Super Bowl's timing also helps to drive produce purchases, according to Nichole Towell, senior director of marketing, at Duda, based in Oviedo, FL. "Super Bowl is always at the same time of year, and we still see the sales surge that week," notes Towell. "In the new year people are looking for healthful beginnings. There's also the trend to substitute with healthy food."

Likewise, Jessica Brown, director of marketing at Curation Foods in Santa Maria, CA, recognizes growing interest in serving produce twists. "You can skip the mayo and spread guacamole on the burger bun, which offers a creamy texture and the added health benefits of avocado," she demonstrates.

Super Bowl 2020 provides "countless opportunities" to snack on-trend, notes Kellen Stailey, vice president of marketing for Grimmway Farms in Bakersfield, CA. Some 17% of U.S. consumers and 23% of Canadian consumers consider themselves plant-forward, which extends to entertaining and celebrations," she explains. "We see consumers

Consumption trends bode well for fresh fruits and veggies as alternative football fare.

BY GILL MCSHANE



PHOTO COURTESY OF AVOCADOS FROM MEXICO

choosing to purchase more vegetables and salads to accommodate evolving eating habits that are leaning more plant-forward."

Adam Cooper, senior vice president of marketing for Los Angeles-based Wonderful Pistachios, concurs, drawing attention to pistachios' plant-based protein and fiber content. "We think consumers are trying to be more mindful about their choices at all times, in particular when catering to a large crowd," he explains. "Plant-based foods are more popular today than ever before."

PRODUCE CHAMPIONS

As plant-based eating becomes more mainstream, the options for entertaining and the availability to try unfamiliar produce have become much broader, asserts Nicole Krauss, media & community relations manager for the Southeast Region of Publix Super Markets, headquartered in Lakeland, FL. "The big game is a great opportunity for foodies to show off their craft, so we make sure our customers have a variety of fresh, flavorful ingredients on hand for their culinary creations," she explains.

In particular, the color, nutrition and versa-

tility of produce provide the greatest advantage for increased sales. Even for avocados, for which the Super Bowl represents that biggest consumption period of the year, there are plentiful opportunities beyond guacamole.

"The fruit is versatile and can be served in a variety of ways on Game Day," says Stephanie Bazan, vice president of market development for Avocados From Mexico in Irving, TX. "Any recipe can be updated with a healthy twist, or a new dish introduced — that's why you're seeing fresh Avocados From Mexico pop up in everything from burgers to tacos to Margaritas."

While Buffalo wings represent one of the highest-consumed dishes, Towell at Duda points out celery is the most popular pairing item. "In the United States, celery sticks show the largest sales during the week of Super Bowl; they outsell during that week compared to Thanksgiving and Christmas," she says.

Moreover, Duda sees opportunities for innovation in the salad category. "Instead of just offering typical salad bowls, consumers could make wraps out of Romaine or leaf lettuce," suggests Towell. "People could also substitute chips for celery, radish, cauliflower

or broccoli to use with dips and sauces.”

Stailey says the carrot category will see a lift, especially across value-added cuts, such as Buffalo wings paired with carrots. “More recently, we’ve seen our carrot chips served with guacamole, and our shredded carrots garnished over homemade chili,” she says. “Other versatile veggies, like rainbow radishes, broccoli, cauliflower and fennel, all contribute to colorful crudité platters.”

■ DRAWING CROWDS

With merchandising critical to supercharging produce sales around the Big Game, highly visible, football-themed displays and signage with clear messaging will be essential.

“We suggest retailers use large, prominent displays to grab their customers’ interest, and to make Super Bowl items easier to find in one compact area,” notes Sarah Deaton, marketing manager, North America, for Zespri International in Newport Beach, CA. “Multiple display locations also help to increase sales.”

Ryan Ellison, produce category manager for K-Va-T Food stores, Abingdon, VA, stresses all shoppers should recognize it is Super Bowl weekend. “You can do this through point-of-sale materials, or by making your party platters, guacamole ingredients, and snack nuts a focal point in your department,” he explains. “Have pistachio and peanut displays loaded ready. Put limes anywhere there is beer. We intend to promote all the ingredients for guacamole together.”

Super Bowl consumers will be looking for food that is convenient to prepare for a large crowd, says Adam Cooper, senior vice president of marketing for Los Angeles-based Wonderful Pistachios. “If possible, have displays out of the produce section to capture consumers who might have missed the section all together,” he recommends. “And remember to stock up. Most producers will run promotions or have coupons available, and you don’t want to miss a sale by not having product.”

Retailers can drive sales by incorporating unique, convenient items into the merchandising set, says Jessica Brown from Curation Foods, San Diego. “Consumers want to entertain with items

K-Va-T’s Ellison agrees: “We sell a lot of in-store-made party trays during Super Bowl weekend, but any produce item that can be cut into a fruit or veggie platter is a great seller. I think as the health revolution continues, you will see more traditional items join the ‘party spread.’”

Fresh fruit and veggie trays are customer favorites at Publix too. “We offer many convenience items, like platters and fruit bowls,”

that stand out and impress their Super Bowl guests,” she notes. “Combining traditional Super Bowl items with new/creative offerings makes it easier for them to get creative with in-home entertaining.”

Given the importance of guacamole, Stephanie Bazan, vice president of market development for Avocados from Mexico, advises retailers to increase the dimension of their avocado displays during this peak consumption period, and offer additional sizing for versatility. “Retailers should look at creating Big Game destinations in their stores with staple items, such as avocados in bulk and bag offerings outside of produce, to facilitate game-time meal solutions for shoppers, and to capture increased sales,” she suggests.

“Feature eye-catching displays with avocados, tomatoes, onions, jalapeños and other complementary ingredients or toppings to provide shoppers with a one-stop solution to create guacamole at home.”

Kellen Stailey, vice president of marketing for Grimmway Farms in Bakersfield, CA, agrees that impactful displays in produce and complementary departments, like delis, increase purchasing potential and provide opportunities to cross-promote, such as pairing carrot cuts with dips.

“Merchandising displays should present better-for-you alternatives to typical football fare, and make party planning easier,” she says. “Clever, sports-related messaging that encourages shoppers to ‘Intercept Empty Calories’ and ‘Stay Lean & Mean’ will remind them to stay the course on their New Year’s resolutions and make healthy choices for themselves and guests.” **pb**

says Krauss. “For those who wish to make their own platters, we offer ready-to-eat vegetables that are as easy as open-and-serve.”

Of course, Super Bowl 2020 presents a chance for retailers to tailor their produce offer to their specific customer base. Publix stores in and around Miami, for instance, plan to feature products, platters and specialty foods unique to the area, like croquette platters, flower arrangements and local desserts.

Meanwhile, one innovative addition to Super Bowl menus is SunGold kiwifruit, which works well across various dishes, says Sarah Deaton, marketing manager, North America, for Zespri International in Newport Beach, CA. “We recommend an avocado with SunGold kiwifruit salsa by itself, or on pulled pork or grilled chicken tacos,” she says. “A frozen SunGold Kiwifruit Margarita with Grenadine is perfect for this occasion also.”

CROSS-MARKETING WINS

“Get the lemons, limes, peanuts and pistachios in the beer aisle,” urges Ellison. “Do not miss this opportunity; it’s the easiest tie-in of the year. We also bring our deli’s in-house-made chips to produce to display with our fresh guacamole and salsa.”

Towell agrees, referring to the benefit of secondary displays. “Play up the celery near the dips, or bring the dips to the produce aisle; the same goes for radishes,” she says. “Show consumers that substituting chips can be healthy and still fun.”

Zespri’s Deaton says there are plentiful opportunities to cross-merchandise SunGold and green kiwifruit too, alongside recipe cards and other POS materials. “Our salsa recipe works great with chips, tacos or pulled pork. A retailer can feature any of these products with a recipe card and signage,” she notes.

Above all, Brown from Curation Foods urges retailers to get creative. “Consumers are longing to be inspired through creative offerings in cross-merchandising sets,” she says. For example, she claims the firm’s new ‘Yucatan Guacamole Squeeze!’ pouch is ideal because it “pairs excellently” with all vegetables for healthy snacking.”

PROMOTIONS & PRICING

Also Super Bowl promotions and pricing are important tactics to maximize sales.

“When it comes to fruit and veggie trays, I like to price in multiples of two,” says Ellison. “Typically, you get the customer to pick up one fruit and one veggie tray, instead of deciding between the two. The same approach applies to guacamole and salsa. Price them in

multiples of two, or even three. This gets the customer to mix or match. You want to get them to change from a 'little get together' to having a party all their friends are attending."

Towell suggests celery price promotions could further boost transactions. "During Super Bowl, the average pricing is the same, and celery is still selling," she points out. "Maybe there's an opportunity to do some promotions to see an even higher increase in sales. Certainly, for a cross-promotion, you could offer a 'buy one, get one free,' so 'buy celery, get a dollar off the dressing,' or 'buy dressing, and get the celery for free.'"

Since Super Bowl 2020 takes place in Miami, Towell says retailers should promote in-season Florida oranges and grapefruit for

use in not only fruit salads or punches, but for on-trend 'mocktails' or craft cocktails too.

MARKETING KNOCK-OUTS

Finally, marketing across various mediums – from in-print newsletters to online and couponing – will ensure produce remains top of mind among Super Bowl party shoppers.

"Marketing typically has our weekly circular decorated up with a football theme," says Ellison at K-Va-T. "You may see a few palm trees included as the game is in Miami."

To make newspaper promotions more powerful, Curation Foods advises using the brand's online presence to drive awareness among social media followers. "The combination of print and social media support created

one of the most successful promotions we have had to date," says Brown.

Indeed, social media is key. "Content that demonstrates different uses, like guacamole as a condiment on hot dogs, or serving your dips with vegetables versus chips, helps consumers approach their shopping differently. We are also offering a coupon for our Yucatan Guacamole Squeeze! via social media in certain test markets."

As for messaging, Duda's Towell reminds retail executives not to focus on what shoppers already know; that produce is good for you. "Focus on what produce brings in terms of great flavor, or a new way to be successful in the kitchen," she says. "Focus on the positives, and the health factor will follow." **pb**