

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## Produce: New Priorities and Preferences

A late 2017 report from the Centers for Disease Control notes that only one in 10 adults eats enough fruit or vegetables, but nonetheless, produce remains among the most consumed foods. According to the NPD Group's 2017 *National Eating Trends Report*, fruits/fruit salads rank fifth among the foods most frequently eaten at home, vegetables/legumes were seventh, and fruit/vegetable juices were tenth; potatoes (excluding chips) ranked third among foods most consumed away from home.

Fruit is America's most frequently eaten snack. After energy/sports/nutrition/protein bars, fruit is also the fastest-growing snack, followed by fruit/applesauce cups, granola bars, and dried fruit, per NPD.

Potatoes overtook tomatoes as the most purchased fresh vegetable in 2017, followed by onions, carrots, lettuce, broccoli, salad mix, bell peppers, celery, and cucumbers. Lettuce purchases grew 8% and potatoes 6% versus the previous year, per *The Packer's 2017 Fresh Trends Survey*.

Bananas, followed by apples, grapes, strawberries, oranges, watermelon, lemons, blueberries, peaches, and cantaloupe, were the most purchased fresh fruits. Nectarines made the top 20 list, while mangos fell out. Sales of some traditional favorites declined: apple purchases dropped 10%, and bananas were down by 7%.

According to the Food Marketing Institute's 2017 *Power of Produce* report, volume sales of organic fruits rose 16.5% and organic vegetable sales were up 7.9% for the year ended (Y/E) March 19, 2017. Potatoes, fresh beans, squash, beets, peppers, cucumbers, and mushrooms were the fastest-growing organic vegetables; limes, cherries, avocados, peaches, and berries were the fastest-growing organic fruits.

Sales of value-added/fresh-cut fruit grew 8.3%, fresh-cut vegetable sales grew 8.7%, and packaged salad sales climbed 4.7%, per

IRI. Complete salad kits accounted for one-quarter of packaged salad sales. Microwavable steam-in-the-bag and sauté-ready vegetable mixes, stir-fry kits, and branded produce are other top fresh produce trends.

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Uncommon herbs, hybrid/heirloom produce, exotic fruit, and superfruits are the top produce culinary trends for 2018, per the National Restaurant Assoc.'s 2017 *What's Hot?* survey of chefs. In 2017, Datassential reported that dragon fruit, persimmons, blood oranges, prickly pears, and passion fruit were the biggest gainers in fruit menu mentions.

More than half (56%) of consumers are trying to increase their fruit/vegetable consumption via snacking, according to FMI. Fresh melon, berry mixes, and carrot/celery sticks were the most purchased fresh produce snacks. One in five consumers bought single-serve fresh salads, per *The Packer*.

According to Packaged Facts' 2016 *Healthy-Ingredient Snacks in the U.S.* report, 27 million adults buy packaged fruit snacks. No-/low-sugar fruit snacks, smoothies, and appetizer rolls/snacks were the biggest snack dollar gainers for Y/E Feb. 26, 2017, per IRI's 2017 *State-of-the-Snack Food Industry* report.

Real vegetable pastas, riced veggies, veggie-based pizza crusts, and other culinary innovations are moving produce to the center of the plate. Vegetable carb substitutes (e.g., cauliflower rice) are the seventh hot culinary trend overall for 2018; veggie-centric cuisines (e.g., Middle Eastern) are the No. 2 main dish trend, per the National Restaurant Assoc.

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vegetables with grains, pasta, lentils, and other ingredients, up 43% in dollar sales for the 12 weeks ending Aug. 13, 2017, per IRI. Frozen ethnic vegetable side dishes are also enjoying brisk sales.

With fruit the most popular dessert,

according to Technomic's 2017 *Dessert Consumer Trend Report*, and fresh fruit the most popular after-dinner snack after ice cream and candy, ethnic and other innovative fruit-based desserts will find a welcome market.

With one-quarter of consumers identifying themselves as flexitarian and 5.8% of Millennial women and 3.6% of Millennial men calling themselves vegetarians, produce-based foods will get increased attention, per Packaged Facts' 2017 *Dairy and Non-Dairy Alternative Beverage Trends* report.

While sales of traditional juices are flat, sales of superpremium juices rose 11% and natural and organic juices were up 7% and 23%, respectively, for Y/E May 4, 2017, per IRI. Apple and orange juice are now tied as the most preferred juice flavor, followed by pineapple, strawberry, grape, cranberry, mango, and peach, per Technomic's 2017 *Flavor Consumer Trend Report*.

Argo's exotic tea bags contain real pieces of dried fruit. Latin American paletas and agua fresca and cheeses with fruit-infused flavors (e.g., coconut) are other hot trends. Watch for single-serve grab-and-go frozen fruits to go mainstream. **FT**



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