Year of the Horse focuses on families and food, providing good opportunities for produce

BY LORA ASCARIAN

January will be a time of celebration as people anticipate Chinese New Year and the coming of the Year of the Horse. People born in horse years are said to be skillful with money, perceptive, cheerful and full of wit. The celebration will begin Jan. 31 and continue for 15 days.

Festivities connected with the holiday are ancient, dating back some 4,000 years to the Shang Dynasty. Today, Chinese New Year is also known as Spring Festival, and it remains China's most important social and economic holiday. Families focus on their reunion and hopes for the future. As in ancient times, food plays a pivotal role in today's celebrations.

In May 2010, the Crop Diversification & Biofuel Research Education Center of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service published its report, Marketing Asian Produce. The report quantified emerging trends regarding consumption of Asian produce, showing that commodities have crossed cultural lines and are being increasingly incorporated into at-home meal planning by Asian and non-Asian populations in the United States.

"The increasingly diverse appetites of Caucasian consumers, combined with a larger ethnic Asian population, fueled an explosion in the popularity of ethnic Asian cuisine during the 1990s and into this century," the report stated. "In the 2000s, American consumers already familiar with Chinese cuisine began exploring Thai, Japanese, Indian and Korean fare, especially when dining out."

It is not surprising that ethnic restaurants offering quick casual and fusion cuisine became increasingly popular.

During 2002, the Food Institute named Asian cuisine as "the next hot concept for the restaurant industry."

According to the report, the fusion of Asian and Latin cuisine was deemed one of the top 20 food trends in 2010 by Restaurants & Institutions magazine.

While the report stated that Caucasian consumers tend to prefer value-added and processed vegetables, "there are some growing market niches for fresh Asian vegetables."

The Produce News spoke with four companies that market Asian produce to get their comments and insights about these trends.

Based in Orlando, FL, Spice World is a leading producer of garlic, as well as herbs and spices. Louis Hymel, the company's director of purchasing and marketing, said Spice World supplies both conventional and organic garlic to retail supermarket chains as well as customers in the foodservice and industrial sectors.

"Garlic fits all international cuisines and in itself can be caroling to cook and eat," Hymel told The Produce News. "Spice World is completely vertically integrated from field to plate, making us a leader in the garlic industry. We know our customers and their customers. Therefore, we offer garlic in every variety imaginable and convenient to use."

An array of packaging options, including bulk, fresh in cello or mesh bags, peeled and ready-to-use jarred garlic are available for both conventional and organic garlic.

One of its very popular items, squeeze garlic, was introduced in 2010. The line eventually included both 20-ounce and 9.5-ounce containers for conventional garlic. In 2012, the program was expanded, offering the same ease and convenience for consumers purchasing organic garlic.

"Our value-added garlic items are so much a main ingredient for Asian cooking, especially our squeeze garlic in extra virgin olive oil, which was introduced less than a year ago," Hymel said.

Hymel added that some of...
Combined efforts in Chile yield PMA Fruittrade Latin America

The Produce Marketing Association, Fedefruta, Chile’s Fruit Growers Federation and Yentzen Group announced a partnership to create a fresh produce supply chain at the inaugural PMA Latin America, an international convention and exposition to be held Nov. 12-13, 2014 in Santiago, Chile.

The first-of-its-kind event for South America will replace both Fedefruta’s and PMA’s long-standing individual conventions in the region. Uniting PMA’s community of global buyers with the expertise and support in export sectors that Yentzen Group’s global outreach will bring unique value to attendees and exhibitors, according to a Jan. 8 PMA press release.

PMA’s strength in the retail segment is expected to bring a strong supermarket presence to the show, including Cosco Wholesale Canada and Tesco Stores Ltd.

Oleem Smethurst of Cosco Wholesale Canada is enthusiastic about the new event, saying in the press release, “I expect to make new connections and gain the insight I need on key markets.”

An expected 90-plus exhibitors and more than 2,250 attendees will populate the show floor, accompanied by education, programming focused on PMA’s expertise in global trends and market knowledge, combined with Fedefruta’s technical expertise to round out the event.

“This new collaboration is part of PMA’s strategy to help the industry make connections by linking members to the people, markets and insights needed to grow business and increase consumption,” Nancy Yuiller, PMA’s vice president of global business development, said in the press release. “This event is designed to help industry members build connections — to experts, ideas, trends and talent — so produce and floral companies can focus on building consumer demand for the products they grow, ship and sell.”

“Merging the biggest event of the fruit and vegetables industry in Chile, Fruittrade, with the global outreach of PMA will offer exhibitors for the whole region,” Fedefruta Chairman Cristian Allendes added in the press release. “Fedefruta, together with PMA, Yentzen Group and support from ProChile — the Export Promotion Bureau from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile, will turn Fruittrade into the main business meeting point for the produce industry in Latin America.”

Guilermo Yentzen, president and founder of Yentzen Group agreed, adding in the press release, “This alliance creates a unique opportunity for the Chilean and Latin American industry — the power to bring together the entire marketing chain of fruit and vegetables from Latin America in one place.”

Year of the Horse provides good opportunity for produce

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Spice World’s retail partners offered special promotions around Chinese New Year, which increase overall garlic sales.

I Love Produce, located in the last week of January, Brazil is finished, and Central America is winding down.”

Currently, Hawaii is the only shipping area coming into ginger production. "The prices are in the $42 to $45 per-box range," Provost said. "The market is going to be very strong for the next month.""Maurice A. Auerbach, head-quartered in Blauvelt, NY, moves all major Asian produce items. The company’s history dates back to World War II when it began moving garlic. "We cater to what our customers want," said Bruce Klein, director of marketing. "We procure based on this." Consumer interest in Asian produce continues to grow. "These items are almost mainstream," Klein said.

According to Klein, consumers enjoy dishes they taste in restaurants and are learning how to make them at home. Consumers are becoming more experimental with items that were previously unfamiliar to them. To illustrate, he said, "Baby bok choy is really showing good movement."

Christopher Ranch LLC, based in Gilroy, CA, began moving bulk garlic a half-century ago. Today, it grows, packs and ships 70 million pounds of garlic annually. Its product line includes chopped and crushed garlic, whole peeled garlic cloves, elephant garlic, roasted garlic, shallots, pearl onions, bomber onions, cipolline onions, roasted chopped ginger, pesto and sun-dried toma-tos.

Marketing Director Patsy Ross said the company is currently transitioning from fresh Brazilian ginger to Hawaiian ginger. "Hawaiian ginger shipments began about one month sooner than normal," she told The Produce News. "Last season, we experienced crop and weather issues, but we are optimistic that volume will be up this year."

Ross said Christopher Ranch will work with its retail partners to determine "what kind of product mix makes sense for them" as they prepare for Chinese New Year.

Christopher Ranch LLC markets a variety of value-added products such as chopped ginger to service its customer base. This season’s shipment of Hawaiian ginger began a month earlier than last year, and the company is expecting increased volume this season.

Keton, PA, is making a big push with its Asian pear program from China. "There are only three packers from Shandong Province, China, allowed to ship Siberi pears to the United States," said John Probasco, an owner of the company. "One of these shippers has formed an exclusive distribution agreement with I Love Produce for our team to market their pears in the United States." Provost said a new protocol has been established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to facilitate the import of two pear varieties. "One is the Siberi pear, which is a traditional Korean style pear," he said. "It is round in shape, brown-skinned, crunchy and juicy." According to Provost, the Siberi pear is exactly the same size as the one grown in Korea. "Korean farmers brought the trees from Korea to propagate the variety in China," he added. "The taste is very good and sweet, with Brix averaging 14."

The other pear is known as a Golden Pear, and Provost said it is generally favored by Chinese consumers. I Love Produce just introduced its new three-pack clamshell for Asian pears. "It has three large pears per package, and will retail in the $5.99 to $6.99 range," Provost said.

In addition to its Asian pears, I Love Produce sells Japanese sweet potatoes, garlic and ginger. "January is going to be one of the tightest markets on record for Chinese ginger," he added. "So featuring ginger on ad for Chinese New Year will be tough. China is gapping between old and new crop, with new crop arriving around March, but the old crop is going to be tight." Provost continued.

Three Sun Coast entities to become one as Sun Coast Farms

Sun Coast Farming, Sun Coast Sales and Sun Coast Texas will start the year with a new name: Sun Coast Farms LLC.

According to Sonny Smith, owner of the company, the change is designed to take advantage of the synergies of the three entities, and the new logo and additional brands are planned as well.

"As we expand our product base and increase the number of products we sell, we felt that a new logo that exemplifies our core competencies was in order," Steve Poindeaster, chief executive officer, added. "And as we continue to grow our retail business segment, we wanted to present a fresh look so the consumer could relate to during their shopping experience so we’ve created our ‘True Grow’ brand."

With Sun Coast Farms’ continued growth in the vegetable category, the growing coast, it is expanding into the Nogales, AZ, vegetable program and also looking at various fruit items that would complement its overall programs.

While its Texas fresh-cut program has been mainly a vegetable operation, company officials plan to respond to increased demand for fresh-cut fruit.

"Our Texas fresh-cut operation is really a service business and we need to listen to the wants and needs of our customers then service that market," Poindeaster added.

With the addition of state-of-the-art equipment by Foodpack machinery that was installed last month, the company will be able to increase production by 50 percent, allowing for the addition of fresh-cut fruit items.

"Our goal is to get the consumer to identify with our ‘True Grow’ brand and to be confident that it will meet all of their expectations in both flavor profiles and food safety," Poindeaster added.

Maurice A. Auerbach procures a wide variety of Asian produce for its customers. Baby bok choy has been a strong seller for the company.

Jim Provost, owner of I Love Produce, said the company will step up its Asian pear imports this season with the introduction of Siberi pears and Golden pears. Import of these two varieties from China has been facilitated by a new protocol established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.