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MASTERS OF MERCHANDISING

Global Food Trends Influence the Produce Department

By Sharon Olson

As consumer tastes evolve and become more adventurous, supermarket produce departments have an unprecedented opportunity to lead the charge in bringing global flavors to everyday shoppers. While many grocery stores have long offered imported center-store items from international regions, the produce department stands uniquely positioned to provide fresh, versatile ingredients that let consumers recreate global dishes in their own kitchens.

Culinary Visions recently conducted “Visioning Panels” with leading authorities on global food trends for Les Dames d’Escoffier International (LDEI). These panels, combined with insights from Culinary Visions surveys, reveal that international flavor exploration is more popular than ever. A remarkable 98% of LDEI survey participants agreed that interest in global flavors has grown, underscoring a powerful trend that is reshaping shopping and dining habits alike.

A CULINARY ADVENTURE THROUGH PRODUCE

According to Culinary Visions research, 83% of consumers expressed a strong desire to explore new cultures through food. The produce department plays a vital role in satisfying this curiosity by offering fresh, culturally significant ingredients that serve as the foundation for international dishes.

Consumers crave not just the flavors, but also the stories behind the food. Seventy-three percent of Culinary Visions respondents indicated they appreciate learning the story behind sampled items when trying something new. This creates an opportunity for produce departments to engage shoppers through tastings and storytelling, highlighting the origins and traditional uses of specific fruits, vegetables and herbs.

Beyond sampling fresh produce, prepared items using a few key international ingredients can also capture consumer interest. Imagine a simple tasting station featuring mangos and limes alongside a jar of salty, chile lime seasoning or quick recipes showcasing Asian greens with an easy sauce from another aisle. These offerings encourage shoppers to experiment and build their culinary confidence.

EXPLORING REGIONAL AND MICRO-REGIONAL FLAVORS

While interest in global cuisine is nothing new,

Research points to the produce department as a cultural gateway.

the focus has shifted toward deeper exploration of regions and micro-regions. Among LDEI experts surveyed, Mediterranean (99%), Asian (97%), and Latin American (96%) flavors ranked as the most popular global culinary influences.

Emerging regions are also gaining momentum, with 82% of experts noting a growing interest in foods from African countries and 64% acknowledging rising enthusiasm for Native American-inspired dishes.

Produce departments can meet this interest by curating ingredient collections that are culturally significant to these regions. For example, Mediterranean fare might feature artichokes, eggplants and citrus fruits, while Latin American-inspired selections could highlight tomatillos, yucca and tropical fruits like papaya.

THE RISE OF THIRD CULTURE CUISINE

A fascinating offshoot of global flavor exploration is the rise of third-culture cuisine, a culinary style that intentionally blends elements from disparate food traditions. This trend is driven by chefs who creatively combine ingredients and techniques from different cultures to craft entirely new dining experiences.

An astounding 98% of LDEI experts agreed that this type of creative fusion is growing in popularity. Many of these inventive dishes are plant-based, which aligns with the increasing consumer preference for sustainable, healthy eating. The produce department is the perfect space to support this trend by showcasing versatile vegetables and herbs that are integral to modern fusion cooking.

CULINARY TOURISM AND ITS INFLUENCE

International travel has regained popularity post-pandemic, with culinary tourism emerging as a key motivator for many travelers. Food and culture exploration remains at the heart of these trips, with 96% of LDEI survey respondents confirming that culinary tourism is thriving.

Travelers return home inspired to recreate

the flavors they experienced abroad, turning to local supermarkets for authentic ingredients. This provides an opportunity for produce departments to capitalize on demand by featuring global staples like Asian greens, Latin root vegetables and exotic fruits.

THE ROLE OF CULINARY DIPLOMACY

Culinary diplomacy, the practice of promoting a country’s culture through its food, continues to gain traction. LDEI survey results indicate that 91% of respondents see countries actively exporting their culinary heritage to foster greater understanding and interest in their cultures.

The produce department has a pivotal role to play in this form of diplomacy. Many of the key ingredients for healthful, globally inspired meals are already found in these departments. By featuring specialty items, promoting seasonal offerings, and collaborating with cultural organizations, retailers can elevate the produce section as a gateway to international cuisine.

Global food trends are reshaping consumer expectations, and the produce department is uniquely suited to lead the way in providing fresh ingredients for diverse international dishes. By tapping into the desire for culinary exploration, storytelling, and authentic flavor experiences, retailers can turn their produce sections into vibrant hubs for cultural connection.

As Culinary Visions research and insights from LDEI experts reveal, the future of food is global, adventurous and fresh. By embracing these trends, supermarkets can cultivate loyal customers who see the produce department not just as a place to buy fruits and vegetables, but as a destination for culinary inspiration. **pb**



Sharon Olson is executive director of Culinary Visions, a division of Olson Communications Inc. based in Chicago, IL. Culinary Visions is a food-focused insight and trend-forecasting firm that provides original consumer and culinary professional research for companies in the food industry. She is an active member of Les Dames d’Escoffier International and has worked on the LDEI trend report since its inception in 2018.