



THE PACKER

Category grows beyond bagged lettuce

By Jim Offner
Special to The Packer

The time when the fresh-cut vegetable category could be summarized simply as bagged lettuce and baby carrots is long gone.

Today, there's an A-to-Z list of vegetables that are available in one or another cut, peeled and packaged format.

"We're seeing an evolution in veg," said Jonna Parker, senior account manager for the Perishables Group, a West Dundee, Ill.-based research firm. "The category is taking on the aspect of variety and ease of use that you saw happen in the frozen category. Now you're seeing it in fresh product, which we weren't seeing five or 10 years back. It's bringing folks back to fresh product."

The Eden Prairie, Minn.-based Sholl Group II, which markets fresh-cut products under the Green Giant label, is finding success in the category with its Freshables microwaveable vegetable category, said Jason Landry, sales director.

"It was something consumers have been looking for, and the retailers have been looking for something innovative," he said.

The company has five processing plants across the U.S.:

- ▶ Curran Co., Saco, Maine, which distributes product in the Northeast;
- ▶ Field Fresh Foods Inc., Los Angeles, a West Coast distributor;
- ▶ Loffredo Fresh Produce Inc., Des Moines, Iowa, middle to lower Midwest;
- ▶ Pearson Foods Corp., Grand Rapids, Mich., upper Midwest; and
- ▶ Walter P. Rawl & Sons, Pelion, S.C., which covers the Southeast.

The company is not likely to stop with that line of nine items, Landry said.

"We do have an R&D department that's working on some items," he said.

Vertically integrated

At Oxnard, Calif.-based Boskovich Farms, the key is overseeing product from the field through processing to the distribution channels, said Mike O'Leary, vice president of fresh-cut.

"Right now, it's about 25% of our business, and it continues to grow," O'Leary said of the company's fresh-cut sales.

Boskovich focuses primarily on green onions, spinach, cilantro and salad items, O'Leary said.

"We focus on things we grow, so we are vertically integrated," he said. "The control we have in the field and the plant are attractive to our customers. We are the grower

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Idea factory

For Monterey Mushrooms Inc., which won an award for packaging at the Produce Marketing Association's 2007 Fresh Summit, a key to success in the fresh-cut category is trying ideas ahead of the competition, said Joe Caldwell, vice president of the Watsonville, Calif.-based grower-shipper.

"Retailers are asking for two things: They're asking for ideas and innovations," he said. "They're also asking us as a supplier to reach the consumer."

His company's brand is very recognizable, Caldwell said, and consumers are comfortable with it — even ones who may not know of all the uses for mushrooms.

"Retailers want us to help them reach the consumer and try to do it

on packs. That's one of the things we've looked at in terms of sustainability options. We're trying to reach the consumers with as much information as possible," he said.

Quickly growing

Supreme Cuts LLC, Mahwah, N.J., was launched exclusively as a fresh-cut company five years ago.

Innovation has enabled the company to grow quickly, said Merle Axelrod, president.

"We're always coming out with new products," she said. "Markets are getting away from bulk, based on shrink as well as sanitary purposes."

Axelrod said her company was the first to offer trimmed brussels sprouts.

"Imitation is a sign of compliment to you," she said. "We're always looking at the next thing, because that's where the market is going."