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## - Advertisement -

# 'Ugly produce' may be on its way to U.S. market

August 28, 2014

Is the European trend of 'ugly produce' on its way to the United States?

While the average produce shopper may think that the beauty of their fruits and vegetables is skin deep (rind deep? peel deep?) and many produce purveyors cater to that view, the elements of taste are the true predictors of a repeat customer.

Word is beginning to reach our shores from Europe (France, specifically), through websites like [grist.com](http://grist.com) and [ecowatch.com](http://ecowatch.com), about a new trend in produce marketing — so-called “inglorious” fruits and vegetables.

If you've ever walked through a farm field, you've probably seen the tomato with a few too many lumps in the wrong places. Or the oddly shaped carrot that even Bugs Bunny might not nibble. Or the eggplant that looks like the head of a “Star Trek” villain.

With the largest producers involved in a system of contract growing for retail sales, farmers often will leave those odd-looking produce items in the field, knowing that buyers will not even consider them for purchase. An old saw in the business says the consumer “buys with their eyes.”

But that reality contributes to as much as 40 percent of America's food being wasted, according to a recent report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. In this country, we know that hunger is a growing problem.

Additionally, the burgeoning incidence of childhood obesity suggests that more fruits and vegetables are needed in our diets.

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In Europe, the numbers are even worse, according to the UN report, with close to 50 percent of fruits and vegetables making their way to the trash heap. But there are signs, at least in France, that attempts are being made to rectify this situation.

According to recent news coverage, French retailer Intermarche is turning the tables on the Brigitte Bardots of the produce world by hyping their more Phyllis Diller-ish counterparts. A catchy ad campaign for “inglorious produce,” combined with discounts of up to 30 percent for such misshapen fare, reportedly have these items flying off the shelves.

However, if the thought of biting into a piece of produce that looks like it came from a circus sideshow isn’t appealing to you (even at a huge discount), Intermarche has a solution. They’re having these freakish fruits and tortuously twisted vegetables turned into juices and soups, where their flavor and nutrition count and their appearance is long forgotten.

According to an Intermarche YouTube video about the campaign, stores sold an average of 1.2 tons of their “inglorious” produce per day during the first two days of the promotion. Additionally, stores saw a 24-percent increase in overall traffic during that time.

So, can we expect to see this approach reproduced in the United States? Certainly, the success of the European experiment would suggest that it is worth American retailers trying this marketing concept themselves.

An effort like this would encourage more healthy eating by people on a limited budget. The 30-percent-off approach could make fresh fruits and vegetables more enticing much in the same way that “dollar menu” items draw cash-strapped consumers to fast-food outlets.

A wider acceptance of less-than-perfect produce also could mean less of it is left in the field and more made available to both retailers and community feeding organizations. Currently, one in six Americans depend, to some degree, upon community feeding programs. This is an all-time high, according to the Food Waste Reduction Alliance, an industry group dedicated to both reducing food waste and increasing the amount of foods donated to food banks.

As one of the few state agriculture departments in the United States that oversee both community feeding organizations and school nutrition programs, NJDA is always interested in finding ways to bring more fresh fruits and vegetables into those programs. A wider consumer acceptance of “inglorious” produce could remove the stigma that is sometimes attached to less-than-grade-A items being donated to food banks. This is something that already has been somewhat overcome through gleaning programs, where excess produce is collected from the farm field and donated to feeding organizations.

It’s estimated that a 15 percent reduction in food waste could mean 25 million fewer Americans living in hunger. That alone is worth retailers taking a look at how this European campaign might be translated into the American marketplace. Who will be among the first retailers to give it a try?

Douglas H. Fisher is the New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture.

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