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Rice Fruit Co. readies premium apple varieties for winter

By

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Rice Fruit Co. is a family-owned business with a rich heritage built upon a passion for growing apples and caring for our community. They honor their heritage by embracing innovation, technology, science, sustainability, all while delivering an excellent eating experience to customers.

For Rice Fruit Co., preparation and clear lines of communication have been the keys to successfully integrating the changes brought by the coronavirus.

“Last March, as cases continued to climb and it became clear that we were headed toward a regional shutdown, we created an internal COVID-19 taskforce to address these critical planning issues,” said Brenda Briggs, vice president of sales and marketing for the Gardners, PA-based company. “We ensured that office employees could work remotely, the packing line was socially distanced, and that preventative safety measures were implemented throughout the facility.”

Additionally, the company followed the CDC guidelines from the start to guide its decision-making and has been able to react quickly and nimbly as necessary to stay operational through the many variables thrown its way.

“The buzz for 2020 has been focused on adaptation and change, and to be ready for anything,” Briggs said. “At first, we saw a dramatic surge in sales as the world ran to the grocery stores to stock up on home necessities, and then sales became quiet as we all went into a general lockdown. Over the summer, as restrictions eased, we saw a dramatic shift into bagged product, and we reacted quickly to have proper packaging materials available for retailers to add newly created bagged items on the shelf.”

Rice Fruit Co. is currently experiencing a very strong holiday push and expects that trend to continue through the end of the year as families continue to spend more time at home.

“We have also been supplying a steady stream of 3-pound apple bags into the USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box program since its creation in April,” Briggs said. “We have been proud to support this effort and ensure that families in need will have access to fresh, quality produce.”

The company has witnessed consumer interest in three key areas during the pandemic: keeping dollars local, purchasing bagged items, and opting for on-line, pick-up, or self-checkout shopping preferences to limit engagement with others.

“To meet the increased grab-and-go demand, we have expanded our options in poly, pouch and totes to remain nimble to our customer needs,” Briggs said. “The Honeycrisp variety continues to drive demand, followed by Gala, Fuji, Granny Smith, and Pink Lady. We also have seen an uptick in sales for Golden Delicious, as they are a familiar favorite variety to have on the shelf to break up the wide-array of red apples.”

Its winter program will feature premium varieties including KIKU, Ambrosia, and EverCrisp.

“Coupled with our current lineup of Honeycrisp, Gala, and Fuji, we have an awesome opportunity to feature local apples through the holidays and into the New Year,” Briggs said. “We are also gearing up to transition into our Ocean Crisp Honeycrisp program in January. Grown in the maritime coastal region of Nova Scotia, we are the exclusive marketer for Ocean Crisp Honeycrisp in the United States. Together, we are able to offer premium, Eastern-grown Honeycrisp from August through April.”

In the midst of the curveballs thrown by the pandemic, Rice Fruit Co. maintained its focus on sustainable packaging.

“Over the summer, we joined the How2Recycle Program and are currently adding the How2Recycle

label to select packaging,” Briggs said. “We are proud to work in partnership with How2Recycle to empower consumers to make sustainable choices when disposing of waste. We hope by adding a consumer-friendly recycling label to our packaging, we will support the effort to increase the rate of recycled materials.”

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