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United Apple's club variety volumes hold strong

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The 2020 apple season was a mixed bag of experiences as the domestic production in Washington state was down approximately 15 percent from the previous year, which prompted pricing on mainline varieties to move up with the shorter crop. Regionally, club varieties had a strong season in both volume and quality. With the price compression on domestic varieties, regional club varieties were competitively priced yet offered more desirable eating experiences compared to standard varieties.



Ward Dobbins, president of United Apple Sales based in western New York, is a fourth-generation grower who began with a small orchard and has since expanded to include multi-regional operations and an import program. "Our family has a 115-year history in the apple business and we have learned that each year is unique," said Dobbins. "You have to be prepared to manage your domestic and import programs to build a sustainable supply base for your retail partners.

"This year's situation in Washington gave us great opportunities to push our regional varieties — both from a pricing perspective and overall volume. Our regional favorites — EverCrisp, Ruby Frost, and SnapDragon — all had near record years in production and the quality has been excellent. These varieties all have great flavor coming out of cold storage, which enables us to extend the season and give retailers great local apples well into the Spring," said Dobbins.

A key component of the success enjoyed by the three varieties has been the appeal of locally grown produce. United Apple created a program — BECAUSE LOCAL MATTERS — to draw attention to its relationships with local orchards and businesses that support agricultural communities. An icon was created to draw attention to the locally produced fruit and has been included in packaging updates on poly bags, pouches and totes.

“Our retail partners have used EverCrisp, Ruby Frost, and SnapDragon to satisfy a strong consumer following for local fruit. With the great flavors and attractive pricing, we have been able to help drive repeat purchases, and enable retailers to show support for locally grown produce,” said Brett Baker, United Apple Corporate vice president.

The packaging options of clam shell, pouch, poly bags and totes give retailers maximum flexibility in developing promotional programs to hit a variety of price points for consumers seeking pre-packaged options to reduce time in the store or facilitate online orders and curbside pick-up service.

Import Season Preparation

United Apple is entering its 12th season as a full-line importer of fruit from Chile and New Zealand, including apple, pears and cherries. Given the lower volume of domestic apples this year, there will be greater opportunities for imported fruit to offer an additional supply of mainline varieties, including Gala, Granny Smith and Pink Lady.

“We have established our demand schedule for conventional and organic varieties and shared it with our seven import partners. Based on these conversations, we are expecting the first shipments to arrive on the East Coast beginning in late March,” said Baker.

Within the overall apple category, organic varieties continue to show consistent upward trends with consumers. United Apple has planned for the additional interest in organic varieties by obtaining required certification as a handler of organic fruit. United’s certification is coming through the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, which complies with the National Organic Program from the USDA that sets requirements for all organic products sold and imported to the United States.

“We have completed the initial certification that qualifies us to receive and store import organic fruit. The next phase we are undertaking is for certification to pack and repack fruit in our facility. This is a significant commitment but one that will enable us to broaden our role as a full supplier of organic product for import and domestic fruit,” said Baker.

He added that since organic product is not typically grown on the east coast, very few packers invest in the process. “The response from retailers has been excellent as we are working to offer a year-round supply of organic fruit. This sustainable supply gives our partners a definite market advantage in planning and supporting increasing organic sales and popularity with consumers,” said Baker.

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