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**Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market upbeat about**

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# business

By

J. McHenry

May 10, 2021

The 700,000-square-foot Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market houses 19 different produce merchants who worked diligently this past year to provide the region with reliable supply amidst a volatile market. As the Northeast moves into spring, merchants look forward to a more even keel.

“Merchants and customers are optimistic about the future,” said Mark Smith, PWPM general manager. “As things continue to open up, we are excited to provide the region with healthy produce.”

Business has been upbeat according to Filindo Colace, vice president of operations for Ryeco in Philadelphia. “Overall, business is pretty close to being back to normal,” he said. “Most of our customers have a positive outlook that with the vaccinations we’ll soon have restaurants at 100-percent capacity.”

The past year overall was a good year for produce in Philly, affirmed Rick Milavsky, president of B.R.S. Produce in Philadelphia. “Business seems to be flowing more normally and we expect a more typical spring,” he said. “Consumers are going out and shopping more.”

During the past year, the knowledge provided by market merchants became even more useful. “People have come to appreciate the value of healthy eating during the past year and our merchants are happy to share their expertise in fresh produce,” said Smith.

Mike Maxwell, president of Philadelphia-based Procacci Bros. highlighted the value of having a finger on the pulse of the marketplace. “We’re being as proactive as we can to promote crops and make sure our retail friends put out aggressive circulars to their customers,” he said. “But also you have to react to the items that maybe you didn’t put in the circular that all of a sudden came on because of good weather somewhere. That’s the business and what we do.”

The marketplace served by PWPM merchants continues to evolve. “We’ve been in Philadelphia for 115 years and have seen many changes,” stated Mark Levin, CEO of M. Levin and Co., a fourth-generation wholesaler and the oldest company on the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market. “Just over the past 10 years we have seen an increase in the number of customers who come in daily to shop for their corner stores and bodegas. There is a huge population of Hispanic, Islander, Indian, Asian and Russian immigrants living and doing business in our region.”

Because of this, according to Levin, merchants experience large growth with ethnic and tropical products. “Brian Kriebel, who heads up our tropical division has expanded our product line and

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because of his efforts we see tremendous growth,” he said. “As more and more immigrants move into the Philadelphia area, we envision our tropicals continuing to expand.”

Todd Penza, salesman with Pinto Bros. in Philadelphia, sees business as currently very competitive. “This year there is more emphasis on getting the right price to make both customers and growers happy,” he said. “Even though it’s not a new challenge, it seems to be greater this year. There are a lot of other different factors out there making business more complex, including cost of delivery, cost of inbound freight and finding labor.”

The market’s physical attributes continue to benefit customers. “We are always focused on the customer experience,” said Smith. “We’re fortunate to be one of the only fully-enclosed, fully-refrigerated wholesale produce markets in the country. We give our customers a safe, comfortable, and convenient destination. We also make it easy for drivers to navigate seamless pick-up and drop-off.”

The market’s refrigerated aspects are crucial for holding produce. “The fact that you’re in a refrigerated building and not breaking the cold chain remains a big plus,” said Milavsky. “Our customers don’t get frozen or overheated product. We maintain a good-quality product for the customer.”

The PWPM market is the most food-safe market in the country, according to Colace. “And, since it’s completely indoor and refrigerated, we provide better shelf life,” he said.

Penza also pointed out the benefit of the market’s central location in the Northeast. “We serve a broad region,” he said. “The market has grown just in how much product is available.”

The location serves to facilitate both customer and grower access. “Philadelphia is centrally located to all major highways and ports making getting product to and from our business very convenient,” said Levin. “Philadelphia is also centrally located to a plethora of areas well-known for local produce such as New Jersey, Lancaster County, Maryland and Delaware.”

Innovating for future sustainability, PWPM has partnered with Natural Upcycling, a food waste collection company that recycles food waste into a renewable resource. “Food that can’t be sold or donated either goes toward animal feed or goes through a process of anaerobic digestion,” explained Smith. “When rotting food creates methane gas, Natural Upcycling can harvest electricity from that gas and use it to generate power. It’s not only the right thing to do for the environment, but it benefits us financially.”

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