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Wada in full swing with potatoes, onions

By

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Noting that “everything’s going” with Wada Farm’s major commodities, company President Kevin Stanger said in mid-October that in addition to its hallmark products of potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes, the Idaho Falls, ID-based company is also moving watermelons and other items from the Southeast.

The full lineup, Stanger said, was to be showcased at 2021’s PMA Fresh Summit in New Orleans. The well-known potato program includes multiple varieties of reds, Russets and yellows as well as organics and specialties such as minis, fingerlings and chippers, and a large selection of value-added products.

The primary varieties of the year-round shipper are its Russets, reds, yellows and chippers, with organics in Russets, reds and yellows. Wada organics are available from late August to April-May.

“We have 20 to 30 varieties of potatoes that are different Russets, reds and yellows,” he said.

The round, white chippers are available year-round and are packed for both retail and foodservice.

Its other specialty potato products include a range of fingerling options and microwaveable items. Among the most popular microwaveable products are the 1.5-pound bags of bite-sized potatoes that are ready to eat in six or seven minutes and the Easy Bakers, triple-washed spuds that are wrapped in a cryovac plastic and ready for the microwave.

Easy Grillers are another convenience item in the portfolio and are perfect for football season cookouts and tailgating. They consist of triple washed, foil-wrapped potatoes that are ready for the grill and are available in tray packs of two, three or four.

Artisan minis are available in red and gold and average one inch in diameter. They come in a microwaveable bag and cook in about five minutes, making them a great option for any meal.

The fingerlings are available in a variety of colors, with sizing ranging from two to four inches in length. The oblong or finger-shaped spuds have red, orange, purple or white skin and red-orange, purple, yellow or white flesh. They’re available for retail and foodservice in paper, poly, mesh or burlap bags.

There are also fresh U.S. No.1 B size Russet, red and yellow potatoes available in one-pound microwaveable bags.

The onion program provides all three colors in a range of pack options, and the sweet potatoes are available in a variety of colors as well as range of packages.

“Everything is shipping now,” Stanger said. “We just finished harvest, and the crop is good, although short.” Wada has potato-growing operations in “all the major growing areas,” he said, and the

company is currently pulling from them all.

Additionally, Wada ships watermelons in a year-round program, and its Raleigh, NC, office also handles pumpkins, butternut squash and sweet potatoes out of North Carolina. Stanger said the Eastern product, while key to the lineup, represents a smaller percentage of volume.

“Our office in Raleigh has two new people this year,” Stanger said. “Fran and Susi Torigian are a great asset and work with Norman Brown. We’ve had the office there for eight to 10 years, and it’s grown considerably in the last year.” Stanger said the Raleigh office represents several sweet potato growers as well as numerous growers of the other crops.

Promotions are an important component of the Wada sales effort, and earlier this year Wada Director of Marketing Eric Beck had described a campaign centered around varietal, organic and chipper programs and the Wada commitment to quality produce.

Stanger said in October that promotions are proceeding as planned, adding, “We try to tailor our promotions to each customer.” He noted that customizing promos is essential.

“Over the years we’ve tried to do different promotions, and we’ve adopted the policy of working with each individual customer to work up their specific promotion,” Stanger explained. He said Wada, which is a provider for Dole, also looks at cross-promotion options in its promotions.

This year, he said, Wada did not introduce any new packaging, but he said the company continues to “look at different things, and we’re always working on improving recyclability.”

He noted, “We don’t have new value-added products this year. Our microwaveable bag was rolled out in 2019.”

Wada’s customer base is a good balance between foodservice and retail, Stanger said, adding, “Obviously COVID-19 shook things up, but it has evened out for the most part. Our business now is split between the two, but during COVID-19 it went heavily to retail.”

Commenting on several industry issues that are affecting the nation now, Stanger said from his position “transportation is a bear, but a grower might say it’s labor.” He continued, “I’m faced day-to-day with the transportation situation, and it’s becoming a bigger concern.”

The shortage of labor has prompted Wada and other companies to turn to automation in many areas, and Stanger said, “We’ve been adding on new technology for sorting this past year, and we’ll continue to add on automation because of labor. We’re working with a university in Idaho on AI for sorting — it’s a mechanical process to remove potatoes that don’t make grade.”

The full lineup of Wada products and services was going to be featured at the New Orleans Fresh Summit, and Stanger said in addition to its well-known programs, “We were hoping to highlight our Southern items as well.” However, he was quick to add, the absence of a 2021 PMA Fresh Summit is a disappointment to the industry, but Wada Farms agrees the decision to cancel was undoubtedly a prudent move by the organization.

“I’ve been to PMA for 35 years, and of course we see the positive results of networking there. It’s the single biggest place to go and interact, and the benefits of showcasing new innovations are huge. The seminars are also very beneficial. But the No. 1 benefit is the opportunity it gives us to get with

our customers.”

Stanger was also very positive about the merger of PMA and United Fresh, saying, “It’s a great move. United is a great presence in government relations and gives the grower/shipper a voice in the industry. Together the organizations can be very powerful.”

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