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**HLB riding the wave of tropical fruit popularity**

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By

John Groh, publisher

October 27, 2022

Tropical fruit has never been more popular, thanks in part to the Covid pandemic that altered the consumption behaviors of consumers across the United States and around the world. And while the pandemic is largely in the rearview mirror, the popularity of exotic fruits remains strong, which is welcome news to [HLB Specialties](#).

Melissa Hartmann de Barros, director of communications for the Fort Lauderdale, FL-based company, said HLB is excited to showcase its line of specialty and tropical fruits at the IFPA Global Produce & Floral Show in Orlando, where it is looking forward to reconnecting with existing customers and meeting new ones following a two-year hiatus from the event.



Melissa Hartmann de Barros

“The pandemic years brought an unexpected increase in the demand for tropical fruits, which is what we specialize in,” said Hartmann de Barros. “We launched several new items since attending our last produce show, which was PMA in 2019. In addition to existing items such as large, Golden, Samba papaya varieties and rambutan, we now have national programs on mangosteen, yellow and white dragon fruit, lychee and organic ginger, as well as other exotic items.”

Hartmann de Barros explained that demand for tropicals increased when consumers were forced to

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stay home due to the pandemic. Not only did they prepare their own meals, but they also sought out nutritious foods to maintain their health and well-being. As a result, retailers stocked their shelves with new and interesting produce items to meet consumer demand for such products.

“Our retail programs have definitely overtaken our foodservice segment during the last two years,” she said. “This is also in large part due to the bold choices of our retail clients, who had the vision to offer their clients new and exciting items such as mangosteen. Who would have thought you would start seeing this unusual and mysterious fruit outside of ethnic retailers or small stands in Chinatown? Mangosteen is one of my personal favorites, and I am excited that more people have the chance to try it now.”

Hartmann de Barros also said stay-at-home requirements resulted in people spending more time online, and tropicals became a star on social media.

“Social media has given our items tremendous visibility, with Tik Tok and Instagram at the forefront,” she said. “Our rambutan, for example, has always enjoyed a large presence on social media, being featured by influencers who have millions of views since we first launched it in 2013.”

But while the pandemic helped boost the profile of tropical fruits, it also presented challenges in the form of supply chain disruptions and a spike in the cost of production.

“The produce business is already hard enough as it is,” she said, “but adding the supply chain delays and exorbitant shipping costs that we’ve experienced over the last two years has been very disheartening.”

For example, she said the cost for an ocean container before the pandemic was below \$5,000. Today, it is over \$9,000. Also, packaging material has experienced a large increase. “We had hoped that the costs for plastics would eventually stabilize, but we’ve been told that packaging material will keep going up in price,” she lamented.

This adds costs to items that already carry a higher price than mainstream fruits, and while some of the costs can be passed along, there is a limit to what consumers will accept.

“There is only so much consumers are willing to pay for an unknown fruit such as mangosteen or yellow dragon fruit, which already have a higher price tag due to the very labor-intensive production involved with them,” she said. “Consumers were willing to pay the premium prices in 2020 when they were looking for an escape from their quarantine or isolation. While we are happy to see that our programs remain steady and consumers are still enjoying the tropical fruits we have to offer, we are not entirely surprised at a slowdown in purchasing power. It’s still part of their diet, just not on a weekly basis.”

Hartmann de Barros said the location of the IFPA convention in Orlando is especially welcome for the HLB team, since it is relatively close to their home office.

“We are just three hours south of the Orange County Convention Center, so it gives our entire group, not only the sales and procurement department, a chance to experience a trade show,” she said. “It also means that the HLB Specialties Florida team will be spending more time together. Several of our team members were hired during the pandemic and have been mostly working remotely. This will be a great chance to be together, walk the show, go for dinner and experience some team-building activities.”

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Hartmann de Barros said this will be the 22nd year that HLB has attended or exhibited at the convention. As for goals for the trade show, in addition to promoting the HLB line of products to the retailers and buyers in attendance, she will be touting HLB's new website, [www.HLBinfo.com](http://www.HLBinfo.com), which branches into two separate sites, one for the North American side of the business ([www.HLBspecialties.com](http://www.HLBspecialties.com)) and one for its European sister company HLB Tropical Food GmbH ([www.hlb-tropical.com](http://www.hlb-tropical.com)).

"The goal of our new website is to offer consumer education with nutritional information and vibrant videos on how to consume the exotic fruits such as mangosteen, dragon fruit, rambutan, and more," she said.

HLB also will be on the hunt for sustainable packaging solutions at the show.

"Sustainability has become such an important part of the business, and we want to do our part," she said. "After all, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and realize that we are contributing to the problem. I have two young daughters, and they remind me every day about the need to do more for the environment."

[John Groh](#)

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## About John Groh |

John Groh graduated from the University of San Diego in 1989 with a bachelors of arts degree in English. Following a brief stint as a sportswriter covering the New York Giants football team, he joined The Produce News in 1995 as an assistant editor and worked his way up the ranks, becoming publisher in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Anne, live in northern New Jersey in the suburbs of New York City.

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