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D'Arrigo New York is diversifying to meet customer needs

By

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Much has changed at D'Arrigo New York over its 75-year history of serving the New York City area's produce needs.

Back at its founding, the company could get by offering a basic assortment of fruits and vegetables to fulfill the needs of its customers. Today, D'Arrigo New York, a privately-held company that operates out of the Hunts Point Market in The Bronx, needs to focus on the demands of more than 1,500 retail and foodservice customers and dozens and dozens of different ethnic groups in order to stay ahead of the curve in the diverse and vibrant metro New York marketplace.

"We are a one-stop shop offering a large variety and wide scale of fruits and vegetables for this region," said Gabriela D'Arrigo, the company's vice president of marketing and communications and a fourth-generation family member. "With all the cultures and ethnics groups that make up the New York City area, and the fact that this is truly a cultural melting pot, we are constantly looking to make sure that we have the items our customers need to fulfill their shoppers' demands."

It is a tricky business. The 23 million-strong New York metropolitan area is home to one of the nation's most diverse consumer bases, with large ethnic groups ranging from the Caribbean and Latin America, to eastern European and Russian to Middle Eastern and even the growing Kosher and Halal markets. "We pay a lot of attention to the individual needs of our customers," said D'Arrigo. "Communication is extremely important, and we listen to what they tell us they need based on their own observations. Our customers communicate those needs to us and it is our responsibility to go out and find those products."

As organic produce becomes a larger player in all of this as well, D'Arrigo said the job becomes a bit tougher. She noted that interest in organic products started to swell about a decade ago and continues to grow at strong rates now with no end in sight. "We see the trends and are bringing in more buyers and salespeople to deal with this growing segment of our business," she said.

D'Arrigo got its start in 1911 when Gabriela's great grandfather, recently arrived from Sicily, opened up a produce stand in Boston. Just a few years later, some family members moved to California, where a sister company grew and shipped produce back east and started the company's Andy Boy branded line.

Finally, in 1948, Gabriela's grandfather, Stephen D'Arrigo, was sent from Boston to New York by his father and told to start a produce business in the country's largest marketplace.

"He started a business at the Washington Street Market in Tribeca," she said. "We eventually outgrew the space and in 1967 moved to The Bronx and the Hunts Point market with four stalls. Today, we have about 300 employees in New York and operate 36 stalls at the market and two other

stalls at facilities outside of the Hunts Point market.”

As a full-line wholesaler, D'Arrigo offers more than 10,000 different SKUs in the seasonal, imported and domestic categories. The company works with 800 domestic and international shippers.

“We are the American dream,” she said. “My great grandparents came to this country and wanted to build something for their family and future generations. Now, we are four generations in and we have done a pretty good job of building a great company here in New York and with our sister companies in Boston and California.”

In fact, she added that the company has recently expanded from the Tri-State area into Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland.

“This is an exciting business that keeps changing,” she said. “The nuts and bolts are the small independents and mom and pop retailers that are extremely diligent on what they are spending their money on. They want the best products on the market at a good price.”

Plus, as with everyone associated with the produce industry, the weather and Mother Nature play a huge role in the running of the business. “There are always bumps in the road and we are at the mercy of Mother Nature,” she said. “We are obsessed with the weather, because whether it is droughts or floods, or snow or rain, we know that they dictate the quality of the product and its price.

“As wholesalers it is our job to provide stability in an unstable environment, which, in a nutshell, is what the produce industry is all about,” she continued. “We are always thinking how ‘can we do a better job to provide that stability and consistency?’ It is a tough task, but we are up to the challenge.”

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