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Exp. Group offers extensive line of specialties as niche items grow in popularity

By

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[Exp. Group](#) supplies a full line of mainstream fresh produce items — such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, bananas and watermelons — but Anthony Serafino, president of the North Bergen, NJ-based company, said the foundation is an A-to-Z offering of specialties.

“We started our organization on tropicals, and it’s something that is principled in our business,” Serafino said. “When we think of specialties, we think of tropical merchandise.”



Citrus, papayas, mangos and

Cavendish bananas are common tropicals in a produce department, but Exp. Group's roster goes deep in the specialties category. For example, its banana category includes manzana (apple), baby and Rulo bananas. The company also distributes several types of plantains.

The company also offers cactus pears and napes, which are cactus paddles, along with a full line of tubers, including yuca, yellow yams, boniato and malanga coca (aka taro).

Although consumers expanding their culinary knowledge is a driver of some specialty purchases, Serafino said changing demographics and immigrant populations ensure interest in the category.

"I think there's a demographic change in our country that allows this," he said. "You know, a lot of people are concerned about immigration policies, but we've had such an immigration into our country of different cultures, making it the melting pot that this country is.

"Generations have changed, and the eating habits of Americans have changed over the

generations,” Serafino continued. “We’re seeing some American families consume items that they’re just seeing for the first time, like yuca.”

Some tropical specialties, such as papayas and a range of mango varieties, are now mainstays in produce departments.

“You know, papaya’s in the mainstream. It’s not just oranges and other citrus,” he said. “I think all of these things are driving the growth of specialties, which is a great thing.”

Even retailers in rural areas are stocking an expanding number of specialty items, he said.

“We’re also seeing big box retailers taking advantage of the success they can bring to their stores,” Serafino said.

Exp. Group has seen year-on-year sales growth trends in the category, spurred in part by healthy eating trends.

“I think there is such a push, not just in specialties, but there’s such a push in all produce items, where things are consumed and how they’re being consumed,” he said. “I think the snacking companies, the Mars and the Frito-Lays, those are the people that have to worry about it because these consumers are looking for healthier options and produce is one place to go for those snacking options.”

As an importer — including of garlic and ginger from China — Exp. Group is concerned about the administration’s tariff policies, Serafino said.

“It’s been a very, very complicated April, but we’re hoping that we’re through the volatile markets and we can just get some steady pushes from here,” he said.

Port traffic on both coasts, as well as air cargo arrivals, has dropped.

“We’re looking at air freight volume from China dropping 30 percent. We’re looking at maritime volume from China dropping 25 percent,” Serafino said in late April. “We’re looking at Los Angeles port arrivals that were up 56 percent year-on-year, but that’s a sign that importers have just been front-loading deliveries (before tariffs rose).”