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Wish Farms has become a major player in Florida blueberry deal

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Wish Farms President Gary Wishnatzki has been a leader in establishing the Florida blueberry industry, and he sees it continuing to mature and grow.

Mr. Wishnatzki is the third-generation leader of a family business that was around as Florida's strawberry business began to boom and mature in the 1930s. He believes blueberries are following that same curve.

"The [Florida] blueberry industry is continuing to grow, following a similar path as strawberries did," he said. "Same as the strawberry industry matured, blueberries are following the same path. It's going to come down to larger farms that are going to be able to make the most of efficiency. Economies of scale are going to dictate that some of the small guys in it now may have to get bigger, though we still actively market for the small grower."



J.C. Clinard, Amber Kosinsky and Teddy Koukoulis of

Wish Farms at the Southeast Fruit & Vegetable Conference in Savannah, GA. (Photo by Chip Carter) While increasing production may hinder smaller operations, “By the same token you get chainstores to feature and plan promotions properly and get the right prices at the right time. You can create demand and stabilize a market,” Mr. Wishnatzki said.

Last year Wish Farms moved about 2.5 million pounds of Florida blueberries, roughly half from its operations in Umatilla, FL, north of Orlando, and the other half from Plant City, FL, according to Director of Blueberry Operations Teddy Koukoulis.

Wish Farms offers its blues in a wide array of sizes: 4.4-ounce, six-ounce, pints and custom packs for 18 ounces up to two-pounders, Mr. Koukoulis said.

Wish Farms blues are PTI-compliant at case level “and then we go a step further and we’re going to implement our patented ‘Fresh QC’ process on every label. Using a smartphone, the consumer will be able to see a video of the grower talking about his farm and get information about berries as well, the nutritional side, recipes, the whole nine yards,” Mr. Koukoulis said. “We think it’s going to be nice and it helps identify our brand.”

Wish Farms’ blueberry deal continues to grow each year and “the company has worked hard to do that. I don’t want to speak for the industry as much, but we at Wish Farms expect a successful season with growth within our category, significant growth, and we want to and will continue to grow,” Mr. Koukoulis said.

Mr. Koukoulis pointed to his father as a perfect example of a hardcore blueberry consumer.

“My father likes blueberries in his cereal, and for him, if they’re \$1.99 or \$4.99 it doesn’t matter, he wants his blueberries in his cereal,” Mr. Koukoulis said. “I think demand will continually grow but I don’t know that it’s going to grow at a pace that would match the growth of the industry. As the economy suffers, if a guy that’s middle class loses his job for whatever reason, then milk and bread become more important than blueberries. But my father would buy blueberries whatever the price.”

Future consumer growth is most likely to come from the demographic that is currently 12-20 years old.

“These are the new customers you’re trying to reach through schools, or they go to McDonald’s and get a blueberry smoothie and like the experience. That’s the customer base that’s going to grow,” Mr. Koukoulis said.

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