As San Francisco added high-tech, biotechnology and medical research to an economic base that already included finance and a robust tourist industry, the city morphed into an upscale community with a median household income greater than $75,000, according to the U.S. Census.

This region of relative affluence with an alternative cultural history led to a distinctive regional produce profile. A number of wholesalers built much, or all, of their business around supplying interesting and high-quality seasonal fruits and vegetables to the restaurants and retailers.

“In the restaurant business, people are very particular,” says Paul Weismann, president of Healthy Avocado, Inc., a Berkeley, CA-based wholesaler specializing in Mexican avocados. “Eating out is a big deal here. There is a lot of money, and people want fancy stuff. There are also specialty wholesalers here like Veritable Vegetable.”

Veritable Vegetable is a San Francisco wholesaler that follows a mission to be environmentally, socially and economically impactful in every aspect of its business. From rooftop solar panels, to diverting 99 percent of the company’s waste, to hybrid trucks and tractor-trailers.

According to stats from Golden Gate Restaurant Association combined with the U.S. Census, there is more than one restaurant for every 250 residents in San Francisco — the highest concentration in the country — and the industry developed rich relationships with nearby farmers.

“San Francisco has nearly 4,000 restaurants, the most restaurants per capita of any U.S. city,” says Gwyneth Borden, executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, San Francisco. “In addition to great produce, San Francisco has great local seafood and meat. Sourcing locally and sustainably is often even of greater importance.”

The emergence of high tech also led to some of the highest housing costs in the nation, as the California Association of Realtors estimates it takes an annual income of $268,000 to buy a median-priced home in San Francisco.

Even in Alameda County, on the traditionally working-class side of the bay, it takes an income of $161,000 to qualify for the average home, which is 30 percent more expensive than in the nearby upscale Napa County Wine Country, and more than three times the national average.

This fast-paced gentrification remade San Francisco’s demographics as the city’s African-American population plummeted from more than 13 percent to less than 6 percent since 1970, according to the U.S. Census.

But the greater San Francisco Bay Area still has tremendous ethnic diversity with large Hispanic and Asian populations making up nearly half the residents of the two counties.

“We sell to Caucasians, a lot to Hispanic companies, and to Chinese customers because we get papaya, rambutan and longan [which is similar to lychee] from Hawaii,” says Weismann of Healthy Avocado. “We sell a lot to Chinese customers. In California, there are many Chinese people. They buy longan from China when it is available. They are even crazier about fruit than we are. We sell longan to wholesalers and one retailer mostly on the West Coast.”

Healthy Avocado ships and wholesales avocados as well as tropical fruits out of Michoacan, Mexico, from its spot at the Oakland Produce Market across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco.

HIGH-QUALITY WHOLESALING

Whether the produce is organic, ethnic, seasonal or all three, the San Francisco Bay Area is packed with consumers looking for interesting and flavorful fruits and vegetables.

“People are looking for new varieties,” says Paul Schumacher, president of Earthquake Produce Inc., located on the Golden Gate Produce Market. “They are definitely looking for high quality. They’re looking for flavor over appearance.”
Earthquake Produce displays photos of beautiful fresh limequats, kumquats, citrons and Melogolds on its Facebook page, but the feature entry is an article from one of the most liberal newspapers, San Francisco Bay Guardian, on a new law enacted by the French Assemblee Nationale requiring supermarkets to give away unsold food.

“In San Francisco,” says Schumacher, “we’re a little more progressive.”

The area is definitely at the head of the pack when it comes to embracing diets high in fresh fruits and vegetables and lower in animal fats. “Customers are less reliant on animal products, and they want the alternatives to taste good, not just look good,” says Schumacher.

Cultivating A Network

Earl’s Organic Produce moved to a larger facility at the Market to handle business that keeps growing in the double digits.

“The San Francisco Bay area is kind of the capital of organic produce,” says Earl Herrick, owner of Earl’s Organic Produce, San Francisco. “The organic consumer is well traveled, well educated, and has a little more money. They are interested in healthy food, and willing to pay a little more for it.”

Herrick got his start in 1975 selling fruits and vegetables out of a converted beverage truck at the Fulton and 10th Street entrance to Golden Gate Park, and the business has enjoyed steady growth to occupy 33,000 square-feet as the only 100 percent organic produce wholesaler at the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market.

“Two years ago, we expanded from one side of the building to a larger area on the other side,” says Herrick. “We went from 20,000 square feet to 33,000. It gave us extra square footage for both warehouses and offices. We added a banana room.”

The company’s website bears witness to the strong presence of foodsies with recipes for hot ginger Satsuma tea, persimmon and pomegranate fruit salad, as well as Satsuma cranberry sauce.

“We’re continuing to grow,” says Herrick. “We opened in 1988, and every year we’ve been here we’ve grown. We used to deliver to Sacramento, and now we go as far as Reno, NV. We used to go to Santa Cruz, and now we go down to Carmel. We have 10 trucks, and we mostly service retailers and some restaurants that are within a day of us. We’ve grown around 10 percent every year.”

Earl’s Organic Produce cultivated a network of more than 50 organic farmers in California — most of them are two hours or less from the San Francisco Market, and nearly that many in Mexico. But the organic sector was not always that ubiquitous.

“When I walked the market in the 1980s, organic was a joke,” says Herrick. “Now everybody has something organic. If you don’t have something on your shelves or menu that is organic, you are behind the times.”

Even before Herrick started peddling organic produce on a San Francisco street corner, Veritable Vegetable started a thriving business as a pioneer wholesaler sourcing produce for the natural food stores where organics first gained a foothold.

“Typical growth for us the past four or five years is 4 or 5 percent, but if you go back farther, it was double digits,” says Karen Salinger, sales director and co-owner of Veritable Vegetable. “It’s leveled out.”

Veritable Vegetable sources organic produce, half of it from nearby Northern California farms, and distributes it to natural-food markets throughout most of the West and Hawaii.

“All the retailers we sell to are co-ops or independent natural food stores, like Bi-Rite Market and Rainbow Grocery Cooperative, Inc.,” says Salinger. “Organic has become so ubiquitous, you can buy it at Safeway, Walmart, Costco, Target or Trader Joe’s.”

The San Francisco Bay area has not been entirely taken over by new-age foodies craving exotic fruits and vegetables grown locally, according to the USDA organic manual.

“We don’t get much demand for organic,” says Robert Bulawsky, owner of Banner Fruit Company, Golden Gate Produce Market. “We’re doing a lot of berries out of California and Mexico, melons out of Mexico, citrus out of California, and a lot of apples out of the

The Price Was Right for Market Expansion

The importance of fresh fruits and vegetables in San Francisco culture is evidenced by the city’s willingness — as the booming high-tech and finance industries take real estate values to the stratosphere — to offer a discount on more land to the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market.

“We began a new 60-year lease with the City of San Francisco in 2013,” says Michael Janis, general manager at the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, located in the city. “It was a real significant year for the San Francisco Produce Market. It’s extraordinary that San Francisco continued its commitment to this sort of business. With real estate off the charts, they even added 3 acres of adjacent property. We’re pushing 25 acres now. The city did a fabulous job of understanding the need to do this in an affordable way.”

An expanded market will allow for greater diversity in the businesses and services available to the public. “The new San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market will allow for more space and a complete foodservice hub that can offer farmers-market-type merchants to service retail-type consumers,” says Calvin Leong, vice president at San Francisco-based wholesaler, VegiWorks, Inc.

The first phase of the Market’s refurbishing and expanding was a new building constructed to strict environmental standards. “In 2015, we opened our 82,000 square-foot LEED gold building,” says Janis. “A LEED gold building for produce distribution is unique. It’s everything from using material that had been on the site, building a very efficient HV system, and a number of other things. We’re going to be doing a phase at a time over the years — rerouting roads around the facility, and refurbishing or redoing existing buildings.”

This new building, which opened at the San Francisco Market last year, is testimony to the demand for produce that is sourced locally, organic, or both.

“Our goal is to continue to make improvements to the market, so our businesses can grow, and new businesses can be added,” says Janis. “Our new building is 100 percent full, and our existing market continues to be full. We’re seeing strong growth in organics, and strong growth in local.

“One of our new businesses is Good Eggs. They bill themselves as a farmers market. It’s eggs, flour or meat in addition to produce. You make out your list online, and they deliver to the Bay Area. Earl’s Organic Produce also expanded significantly on the market.”

Good Eggs, which is a regional online grocery platform, makes home or office deliveries of local organic produce, as well as dairy, meats, deli and bakery items, to upscale locations across the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County, down the Peninsula toward Silicon Valley, and across the Bay Bridge to Berkeley and Walnut Creek.
Banner Fruit was among the original businesses when the Golden Gate Produce Market opened in South San Francisco more than 50 years ago.

“The South San Francisco area is the strongest wholesale market in the Bay area,” says Bulawsky. “It is viable and ethnically diverse. We’re a third generation family business. We were one of the founders when this market [Golden Gate] opened in 1963.”

There is some produce export activity coming out of the San Francisco Bay Area markets, but it is limited. “We do them all — grocery stores, restaurants and exports,” says Bulawsky. “Only about 15 percent leaves the state.”

**EXPANDED REACH**

Export activity is limited in comparison to Los Angeles, which has location advantages and one of the largest modern ports in the world.

“Los Angeles is a hub,” says Weismann of Healthy Avocado. “They ship easily to Las Vegas and Denver, and they’re closer to Mexico. We ship to wherever we can find customers. A lot of it is to the East Coast, and some to the West Coast. We export avocados to Japan, and we’re working on going to China.”

Weismann’s core business has steadily grown along with the increase in shipments to the U.S. of Mexican avocados, which have grown over the past decade from 76 million to 1.3 billion pounds.

“We’re selling avocados in more parts of the country than we were when I started in 2002,” says Weismann. “Now everybody buys them. There’s a big increase in the number of wholesalers who buy avocados. More than twice as many people are buying [avocados], because you have to have them. We have had good support in Mexico since 2002.”

Wholesalers at the terminal markets have seen increased demand for fresh produce, even among people who are not part of the organic movement.

“The doctors are all saying you must eat fresh fruits and vegetables,” says Peter Carcione, president of Carcione Fresh Produce Co., Golden Gate Produce Market.

Carcione is also the president of the Golden Gate Terminal Market, and son of the late Joe Carcione, who became well known extolling the virtues of fresh produce on local television and radio stations as the “Green Grocer.”

Peter Carcione witnessed a change in the produce market brought on by incredible improvements in the technology that keep fruits and vegetables fresh.

“When I first came here 45 years ago, this was a commission market, and a terminal market,” he says. “Most inventory came in on consignment. It came in hot, and you had to sell it the same day it arrived. Hydro cooling and vacuum cooling changed everything. We can ship around the world. Lettuce lasts a week; before it was a day.”

What has not changed is how buyers shop the market and the product available for purchase. “If you walk the market, you can look at the produce, touch it and smell it,” says Carcione. “Now we have fruit coming in from Chile, such as peaches, cherries and nectarines.”

**NATIONAL CHAINS TAKE A BACK SEAT**

One of the customers who comes to look, touch and smell the produce in the middle of the night is Gus Vardakastanis, who walks through the offerings at both the San Francisco Wholesale Market and the Golden Gate Produce Market in South San Francisco to source fresh fruits and vegetables for his fami-
ly’s three neighborhood markets.

Although the family sources some of its produce directly from a few nearby farmers, most of it comes from walks Vardakastanis takes at the wholesale markets since the 1980s.

“My dad goes to the produce markets in San Francisco and South San Francisco every morning,” says Bobby Vardakastanis, who serves as general manager alongside his brother Dimitri of the stores their parents Gus and Georgia started after they immigrated from Greece in the 1980s.

“The owners of the facilities used to come down here to look at the produce and do the purchasing,” says Bob Andrighetto, president of Market Produce Sales, South San Francisco. “Now I think for the big chains it’s more corporate, and they’re concerned more about the percentage than the quality.”

Relatively small local market chains have come to predominate among customers at the wholesale markets.

“You had a lot of people who would come every day to buy produce,” recalls Carcione. “Now the big retailers have their own warehouses. They don’t come to the market. Now it’s the smaller chains with a handful of stores or buyers for restaurants. They all sell to everybody. You don’t just see Chinese vegetables in a Chinese market. He’s going to sell to everybody.”

There is a decidedly upscale trend in the major produce retailers in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

According to the 2015 Chain Store Guide’s market share report, Whole Foods Market has more than a 7 percent market share in the region and increasing; Costco has more than 16 percent; and Trader Joe’s is at nearly 9 percent. When Whole Foods Market opened its fifth store in San Francisco — a city that is less than 50 square miles — the location was just four blocks from the Vardakastanis’ store on Haight Street.

“The competition makes everybody a better businessperson,” says Bobby Vardakastanis.

The family had already been offering organic produce at its stores since the 1990s, so the family responded to the new competition by expanding to include a coffee bar, deli and full-service meat counter, and soon after opened its third store on Harrison in the Mission.

“We sell organic at all three of the markets,” says Vardakastanis. “Our new store in the Mission has a lot of younger people — many of them are newly married and starting families. Our store on Noriega has more larger families, and there are more single people at the Haight.”

With the national chains taking a backseat, and usually sourcing through their own distribution centers, the small chains and ethnic retailers have become an indispensable part of the business for wholesalers at the San Francisco area markets.

AN ETHNIC MIX

“Compared to 25 years ago, there are far more Asians and Latinos,” says Schumacher of Earthquake Produce. “They are some of the biggest shoppers at the market. We would call their specialty markets small by appearance, but they do a lot of volume in a small area.”

Numerous wholesale businesses with core clientele among ethnic retailers and restaurants have grown at the wholesale market.

“At the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, we have many ethnic produce companies, mostly Asian produce,” says Calvin Leong, vice president at San Francisco-based wholesaler, VegiWorks, Inc. “Some are working side-by-side, and some are scattered throughout the...
market. Every company usually has a certain product that they are strong in that separates them.

Many wholesalers catering to ethnic markets carry products in addition to fresh fruits and vegetables. “More merchants are carrying a lot more other products than just fresh fruits and vegetables,” says Leong. “Many customers are looking for ‘one-stop’ shopping. So, it’s consumer driven. VegiWorks for example, carries a full line of dairy including eggs, egg white, and cheeses, and a full line of frozen products including purees, frozen ready-to-use fruits and vegetables, breads, noodles, etc. We also carry dried fruits, nuts, chilis, fresh and dried herbs, and a full line of Asian specialty products used by Japanese restaurants and catering companies.”

Wal-Mart has less than a 2 percent market share in San Francisco and Alameda counties, and is trending downward; while Target and Winco have just a 3 percent market share combined.

Safeway (Pleasanton, CA) still enjoys better than 27 percent market share but is not a factor at the three wholesale markets in the Bay Area, according to the Chain Store Guide report.

Many of the produce trends showing up nationwide came to markets in San Francisco a little earlier and are a little stronger. “Kale has been big the past few years — not so much 10 years ago,” says Vardakastanis. “We also have more packaged, value-added produce than we used to.”

The Vardakastanis find plenty of variety for their diverse customer base at the wholesale markets and a few nearby farms. “We sell the same produce at all three stores,” says Vardakastanis. “At the new store on Harrison, we sell more of the newer specialty items like gem lettuce or different types of mushrooms.”

The family also follows a common practice among San Francisco producer retailers, buying fruits and vegetables directly from a small number of nearby small farms. “We use some local family farms, like Knoll Farms and some other small farms,” says Bobby Vardakastanis. “The quality might be better, and you’re helping out a family farmer.”

Knoll Farms is a 10-acre patch in nearby Contra Costa County where fruits and vegetables are produced using a biodynamic system that emphasizes, not just the absence of synthetic chemicals, but also the interaction between plants and the soil.
Unique seasonal produce from nearby farms is the foundation on which Hayes Street Grill builds much of its menu.

“A lot of our produce is very particular to the farmers who grow it, and a lot of these items are simply not available any place else — like fresh, sweet green peas, young favas, green garlic, Cara Cara oranges and kumquats,” says Patty Unterman, chef and owner of the Hayes Street Grill. “Yes, we are always looking for special produce from our farmers.”

Buying local is popular everywhere, but in this San Francisco Bay Area restaurant, cuisine is uniquely wedded to the diverse harvest from Sacramento, Salinas and Pajaro Valley farms that are two hours or less from the cities.

“Our customers seem to enjoy the purity and simplicity of our local ingredient-driven food,” says Unterman. “We celebrate Sacramento Delta asparagus when it comes in late February, and we stop serving it when the harvest ends in May. So people wait all year to get this exceptionally sweet and juicy local asparagus. The same process happens with local apricots, chicories, tomatoes and artichokes. When they come in, we make dishes based on those items, and people are hungry for them because they haven’t tasted them.”

The demand for specialty produce locally sourced is so strong that Cooks Company Produce builds a wholesale business exclusively on serving relatively high-end restaurants in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

“We serve restaurants,” says Rick Tombari, co-owner at Cooks Company Produce, San Francisco. “We define our customer base as restaurants that want produce that tastes good. Everybody wants produce that tastes good, and they want it from family farms.”

Tombari understands what the restaurants want because Cooks was born out of the frustration from not getting high-quality produce for a restaurant business.

“We started in the restaurant business and couldn’t get good produce,” says Tombari. “Our restaurant closed in 1987, and we’ve been doing this [wholesale business] for 31 years. We have 200 to 300 farmers who come to us with their best seasonal produce, and we sell to about 500 to 600 restaurants a day, six days a week.”

All of those 500-plus restaurants are within a fairly small area as the Cooks’ trucks only go as far east as Walnut Creek, as far south as Los Altos (both well under an hour away) and north to Calistoga in nearby Napa County.

“We have six coolers, and two of them are exclusively organic,” says Tombari. “This is the Bay Area, and people feel organic is better. This time of year, people have a love affair with chicories. We sell Savoy baby spinach, a curly leaf variety that we sell organically. We sell Page Mandarins and Mandarinquats. We sell [lots of] exotic varieties.”

Some restaurants, however, do not need delivery because they are so close to a uniquely San Francisco produce institution.

The Ferry Plaza Farmers Market is home to more than 100 area farmers and artisan cheese makers, bakers, olive oil pressers, and other high-end food producers. The Market, which is open three days a week, is run by the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture as part of a campaign to connect city residents with nearby family, mostly organic, farmers.

“Our whole menu is based on what I personally buy directly from farmers two times a week at our Ferry Plaza Farmers market supplemented by direct delivery two times a week from [Watsonville, CA-based] Mariquita Farm,” says Unterman. “They email us a produce list, and we order two days in advance. We also buy from Pomponio farm. They also deliver.”

A very large majority of the produce that forms the backbone of the menu at the Hayes Street Grill comes from this familiar group of nearby farmers.

“I’d say 80 percent of all our produce comes
directly from the farmers I mentioned,” says Unterman. “The rest comes from Greenleaf Produce in San Francisco, a company that started at about the same time that we opened Hayes Street Grill, 37 years ago.”

Unterman was among the people who envisioned and created the unique Ferry Plaza Market that connects San Francisco restaurants and nearby farmers.

“It was post 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and the city was dead,” recalls Unterman. “Because of the earthquake, a double-decker freeway that ran along the Embarcadero had to be demolished, freeing up a big space in the middle of the Embarcadero in front of the Ferry Building. A group of us headed by Sibella Kraus [president of Berkeley, CA-based Sustainable Agriculture Education] thought we should put a farmers market there with the idea of linking urban restaurants directly with local farmers and regular buyers as well. But the success of the Market was the urban-rural linkage with San Francisco chefs.”

KINDRED SPIRITS

This intimate relationship with the most productive and diverse fruit and vegetable region in the country goes a long way toward defining San Francisco Bay Area cuisine.

“San Francisco built much of its culinary reputation from having amazing access to local produce,” says Borden from the Golden Gate Restaurant Association. “The success of our Ferry Plaza’s Farmers Market is in large part because restaurants source their products from those participating local farmers. Most chefs prefer to source locally and have relationships directly with local farmers.”

The relationship is often very direct, with restaurateurs discussing the menu with farmers before they plant.

“Restaurateurs generally work directly with farmers to ensure they have the supply of specialty crops they need,” says Borden. “There are so many items of greater or new popularity: various types of micro greens, heirloom beans and tomatoes, exotic mushrooms, Meyer lemons, Shishito peppers, sunchoke, French breakfast radishes, rainbow carrots and potatoes, persimmons and kumquats, delicata squash, Asian spices (like ginger), turmeric and lemongrass. Local farmers expanded their offerings, changed their crops of focus, and/or new specialty farms have emerged.”

The menu at many San Francisco restaurants varies with the produce that is in season locally. “San Francisco’s restaurant scene is very seasonally driven, so many restaurant menus only feature what’s in season,” says Borden. “Restaurants here believe good food comes from quality ingredients, which means working with produce when it’s in its prime, rather than serving tomatoes just because people like tomatoes.”

Change is the only constant when it comes to the produce in vogue at San Francisco restaurants.

“Many restaurants are looking for different products than a decade ago,” says Leong. “The food industry is very trendy, especially here in San Francisco. Chefs are always looking to do something different to compete with other restaurants.”

Hayes Street built a regular clientele of patrons of the extensive local arts scene who want to enjoy meals built around produce harvested from nearby farms.

“I’d say 80 percent of our customers are local regulars who come to Hayes Street Grill before performances at the opera house, Davies Symphony Hall, SFJazz Center — and a number of other theaters in our neighborhood,” says Unterman. “We also get locals who live nearby and all sorts of people who work in the Civic Center.”

Unterman advises calling early before dining at one of the many generally small restaurants in the area.

“Go to our fantastic local restaurants of which we have so many that are truly brilliant and use tons of fresh produce,” she says. “But, you should reserve ahead, because so many are small and very busy.”
Bucking trends to make its own way

By Carol M. Bareuther, RD

No planogram, no PLUs and no promotions. Plus, daily changing prices, variety specific signs handwritten each morning, and a willingness — actually a sense of public service by staff — to let customers know when a fruit or vegetable isn’t yet at its peak. This seems like a list of what not to do if you want to be a successful produce retailer. Instead, these are some of the key qualities that set the Berkeley Bowl Marketplace apart from its competitors, and how the retailer earned not only a loyal following for the past 39 years, but a place on the map as a destination for produce shopping in the San Francisco Bay area.

Husband and wife, Glenn and Diane Yasuda, started the Berkeley Bowl as a small farmers market-style store in 1977. The focus was and is on produce, a passion of Glenn’s, although meat, seafood, dairy and bulk foods have always been part of the mix. With Glenn’s predominant passion for produce, you might think the word bowl in the store’s name comes from the idea of a fruit or salad bowl. In reality, the first location at 2777 Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley opened in a converted bowling alley. Today, this store is housed in a renovated Safeway at Oregon Street, a move made in 1999. A second location, Berkeley Bowl West, opened in 2009 less than 2 miles to the west at the intersection of 9th and Heinz streets.

“We’ve always been focused on the trends and what people are buying,” says Nicholas Christopher, a member of the store’s produce buying team who worked for The Bowl for 17 years and was trained by Glenn. “One of the things that has made us so successful is that we listen to the customer. We have the ability to bring in an array of exotic and everyday fruits and vegetables. There’s not the constraints here that the big chains have. We are able to adjust daily and seasonally.”

There’s a fascinating behind-the-scenes sequence of events that ultimately brings customers an incredible selection of conventional and organic produce daily. On the conventional side, it starts when the store’s produce purchasing team writes pre-orders in the afternoon and evening based on what’s selling and customers’ requests.

Then, a three- to four-member team of the Bowl’s buyers make the rounds to a trio of wholesale produce markets — the Golden Gate Produce Terminal, the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market and the Oakland Wholesale Produce Market at Jack London Square — arriving at the first location at 3 a.m. Here, buyers make the day’s purchases based on both pre-orders and opportunistic spot buys as well as glean information about quality, seasonal forecasts and future availability.

The Bowl owns four trucks that follow the buyers and load the produce immediately after it’s purchased for a trip back to stores. The best-selling items bought primarily at these wholesale markets are bananas, tropical fruits and vegetables, rambutan, kiwano melon and breadfruit as well as more mainstream items in the winter.

On the organic side, the Bowl’s buyers purchase direct from a number of nearby small family farms. Selections include kumquats, rainbow carrots and Buddha’s Hand citrus. The retailer arranges delivery by working directly with brokers to set up third party trucks that
transport the fruits and vegetables from farm to store.

“I couldn't imagine just faxing my order to a wholesaler. It’s a huge disconnect. I’d feel like my hands were tied. It’s hard to imagine no direct communication with our wholesalers and our local farmers,” says Christopher.

The result of this aggressive sourcing method is an average SKU count of about 950 conventional and 350 to 360 organic fruits and vegetables. There’s everything from more than three dozen types of tomatoes, two-dozen-plus apples, nearly a dozen mango varieties and a half-dozen kinds of garlic. This selection generates anywhere from 10 percent of a store’s total sales in the winter to more than 20 percent in the summer.

“Customers rely on us to know when to buy something. We do the work for them. We understand seasonality, and if we decide to bring something in early, the workers on the floor will be honest and let customers know the item isn’t at its peak yet. That’s why we like to hire people with no experience. That way, they don’t bring bad habits from the bigger chains we need to break. We are unique in the way we run and our customers appreciate it,” says Christopher.

Produce is the main draw that pulls shoppers into the Berkeley Bowl. As such, fruits and vegetables get primary placement in prominent ever-changing displays in a sizeable section of the Bowl’s average 7,000-square foot of retail space. These produce displays showcase what’s new, what’s just in and what’s freshest.

“Customers know there’s a new show every day. As a result, they come in more often to see what’s available. That creates more impulse buys. We don’t advertise either in print circulars or on social media. Glenn has always believed it’s better to use money that would be spent on advertising to give customers the best prices. We’ve sold cases of mangos or navel oranges for $5.50. There’s no song and dance. Customers come first. We handwrite signs daily and prices change daily,” explains Christopher.

Handwritten signage gives customers more than just pricing information. There are tips for usage as well as a varietal name for each fruit and vegetable. For example, you won’t find “red grape.” Instead, signs read Flame, Crimson or Red Globe. Christopher says the Bowl’s philosophy is to give customers as much information about produce as possible so shoppers can make informed buying decisions.

“You can’t put out one variety one day and another the next that may taste different and not expect customers to get confused and angry. You can’t fool consumers today,” says Christopher.

The emphasis on specific varieties and several of them mean that standard PLUs don’t work at Berkeley Bowl. Instead, the retailer created its own system that relies on specific checker codes. Newly hired checkers spend their first few days on the job reading and memorizing these codes. Codes, for example, may be a red or blue marking on a piece of fruit, a notch in the bottom on a pineapple, or a small slice on a zucchini. These marks are made by produce staff to assure checkers assign the right ring at the check-out.

“It’s a cumbersome system, but it allows us to seek out a number of unique varieties and pass savings along to customers,” he says. The Bowl has a large value-added produce program. There’s a salad bar located in the deli department, a pineapple corer in produce as well as large offerings of fresh-cut fruits and vegetables. The juice machine is a huge hit. Christopher says the stores sell more oranges as juice squeezed in-store than whole fruit. A signature item is fresh pressed pomegranate juice, made similarly to the way apples are pressed into cider.

“We are aware of our competitors (like Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe’s and Sprouts here in the Bay area) and know what they are doing. But we really don’t get concerned with number and let it overtake our main goal of doing our best for customers. That means outsourcing the best produce at the best quality and best price,” says Christopher.