

John Vena adjusting to COVID-19 world

BY KEITH LORIA

John Vena Inc., a specialty produce wholesaler, distributor and importer located at the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market, was quick to implement changes once the coronavirus pandemic began, though it's been a learning curve. While the company

maintains SQF Level II in its facilities, launching so many new policies at once was a challenge.

The company now requires masks be worn by everyone in the facilities at all times, temperature checks are the new normal, and no more than one person can sit at a breakroom table at once.

"We're lucky to have a team that understands the importance of food safety — it's allowed us to keep people as isolated as possible," said John Vena, president of the company. "That being said, labor has definitely been the biggest challenge. Many of our staff have been impacted by quarantines or school closures, and we've had to operate with a reduced workforce."

In regards to sales, John Vena has been able to maintain relatively steady business. Business was on track to do very well in 2020 and even with COVID-19 concerns, Vena is confident that it can continue to serve customers at full volume.

"Our customers are well distributed in a range of industries, so while we've seen huge declines in some, we've seen growth in others — primarily retail and meal kitting," said Dan Vena, director of sales and buying. "Our processing business has also maintained a strong presence."

Additionally, he added the company has been focused on supporting its foodservice distributors as their customers make the switch to take-away and delivery where possible.

"Demand went stone cold for a couple of weeks, but foodservice customers are slowly coming back," Dan Vena said. "Volume is radically reduced, but we have maintained some foodservice business for our growers. There are still restaurants and institutions out there supporting their communities and they need product as much as any retailer."

One of the things it's experimenting with in the wake of COVID-19 is mix produce boxes in order to support some of its smaller retail customers.

"We have been packing a limited line of mixed cases of produce intended for consumers," Dan Vena said. "We're



John Vena has been able to maintain relatively steady business through the coronavirus crisis.

working with a couple of local retail customers rather than trying to market them directly. It's a small program for now, but we are committed to helping our retailers expand their offerings and facilitate contact-less shopping."

John Vena added that the company has always prided itself on being a "Partner in Quality" for its customers.

"But for us, partnership doesn't just mean delivering — it means going the extra mile every day to help our customers, and our suppliers, be successful today and into the future," he said. "And that means providing the products, the services, the support, and the information they need to innovate. I think we've been willing to make those investments, which can seem risky, to grow with our partners. Overall, it has paid off for us, and for them."

The company has been working with a network of local growers to create a more robust local program for the 2020 season than it has ever had in the past.

"We're focusing on niche

varieties and local favorites — both organic and conventional — that our customers ask for regularly, but are only available sporadically during the local season," John Vena said. "We know this season will be difficult for some of our local and regional growers that usually rely on foodservice sales, so we're happy to be able to help them access additional markets."

Even in a challenging market like today, the company continues to be strong. After all, while markets and transportation have been volatile, product is still coming out of the ground.

"In response to COVID-19, we've seen a huge spike in demand for products with some kind of documented or traditional medicinal use," Dan Vena said. "Garlic, lemongrass, turmeric, and aloe vera have been in huge demand. Staple items have also been seeing a big boost — including bananas, pineapples, potatoes, berries, etc. I think we'll continue to see those trends continue through the end of the year."



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John Vena (left) and Dan Vena (right) stand in the main concourse of the PWPW outside of John Vena Inc.'s market store.