

RETAIL

## These consumers want these kinds of peppers



Specialty peppers are purchased by 17% of shoppers, according to the latest Fresh Trends consumer survey.  
(File Photo)

By **AMY SOWDER** May 21, 2021



The U.S. palate may be more sophisticated and worldly than ever, but sweet bell peppers are still the mainstay over the hotter varieties for many of the nation's consumers.

Bell peppers consistently rank in the top 10 most popular vegetables in The Packer's Fresh Trends surveys.

Fresh Trends 2021 revealed that 44% of U.S. customers purchased bell peppers within the past 12 months, while 17% of customers purchased specialty peppers.

Traditionally a Hispanic favorite, specialty peppers like cayenne, poblano, jalapeño, Anaheim and habanero bring flavor for various groups of shoppers, particularly Westerners, affluent consumers and Hispanic and "other" ethnicities, according to Fresh Trends 2021.

"The demand is not as much for specialty peppers compared to bell peppers — that's what the world eats. But we grow them on the side," said Yancey Houston, sales manager at Grower Network, the exclusive marketer of peppers from Lake Park, Ga.-based Corbett Bros. Farms.

Corbett Bros. grows primarily green bell peppers, but some red and yellow bells too, plus cubanelle, Hungarian, jalapeño, long hot, poblano and serrano.

One of the biggest challenges to marketing up-and-coming specialty chili peppers is volume, said Emily Kohlhas, director of marketing at John Vena Inc., Philadelphia.

John Vena Inc. handles greenhouse bell peppers year-round, but also chili peppers of many kinds when the supply and demand are there.

"The chili varieties that are used within particular ethnic communities that really cook and cook often — those varieties can support strong wholesale volumes and commercial production, like jalapeño, serrano, poblano, habanero, green finger hot and Thai hot," Kohlhas said.

"But some niche or heirloom varieties are facing inconsistencies from both the demand and supply side."

On the supply side, growers may experiment with a new variety getting more attention, but they may put in only one planting and end up with a glut when it ripens all at once and is available for a short period of time — “and then nothing,” she said.

On the demand side, there are inconsistencies that affect whether a commercial grower can take on the product, like when certain varieties are used for occasional hot sauce or pickling projects rather than as a centerpiece in dishes.

Even some of their specialty peppers in high demand, including red fresnos and cherry hots, are for small or inconsistent volumes, Kohlhas said. Super-hot ghost peppers and Carolina reapers are also in this category.

“Because even foodservice power-users really only need a few peppers at a time, they are difficult even for us as a wholesaler to maintain enough volume on – and certainly challenging for our growers to justify producing, packing and shipping when you might only have pull for less than a pallet a week total,” she said.

Shishito peppers defy these odds with a winning combination of trendiness in foodservice, served whole and in the center of the plate, and their ability to be commercially produced without too much hassle, Kohlhas said.

“Now they’re becoming an almost year-round sight at retail and an in-demand item for foodservice,” she said.

Affluent shoppers are more apt to buy any kind of peppers than those earning less, according to Fresh Trends, a trend that’s continued for four to five years.

Most consumers chose conventionally grown bell and specialty peppers, but interest in organics has grown and is higher for consumers who buy specialties.

Last year, 21% of pepper buyers said they selected organic bells at least some of the time; in 2021, that number jumped to 27%. Nine percent of shoppers said they always bought organic peppers.

For specialty peppers, 31% of buyers said they selected organic product at least some of the time. Twelve percent said they bought organic specialty peppers exclusively.



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