



## The Grand Finale and Awards Presentation

Date: August 27th, 2025

Time: Noon to 2 pm

Who: Dustin Kennedy, Whole Foods  
Becky Yehia, Broker  
Brantley Hattrich, B&B Pecan Processors  
Karla Ward, D’Vine Foods

### Summary:

Dustin Kennedy from Whole Foods Market outlined the process for local and emerging brands to get their products on store shelves, emphasizing the importance of quality standards, brand identity, and understanding the target customer. He encouraged brands to be retail-ready with proper packaging and ingredient information before making submissions. The Whole Foods portal was highlighted as a valuable resource for inquiries and submissions, and Dustin addressed questions regarding distribution options, reinforcing the collaborative nature of onboarding.

Becky Yehia, a broker, explained the role of brokers in helping vendors place products in retail environments, noting that they operate on a commission-only basis. She pointed out that smaller companies often start by selling directly but may need broker assistance as they grow. An example was provided of a North Carolina company that expanded its reach with a broker's help. The decision to engage a broker was framed as dependent on the vendor's product range and their ability to manage sales independently.

Brantley Hattrich discussed the distribution of local products to grocery chains in North Carolina, detailing the annual category review process that evaluates local items. He emphasized the need for products to be ready for retail, including proper labeling and UPC codes, and highlighted the importance of collaboration between distributors and vendors.

Karla introduced Divine Foods, a co-packing and private labeling company, explaining their offerings and minimum order requirements while emphasizing their commitment to supporting clients transitioning to larger production scales.

The session concluded with the announcement of various food category winners, including notable recognition in baked goods, barbecue sauces, and beverages. Sheri Castle provided insights into the judging process, which involved blind tastings and independent assessments. Acknowledgments were made for the organizational efforts behind the competition, and the

atmosphere was one of appreciation for the talent and creativity displayed by all participants. Plans were made to edit and share the recorded content for future access.

## Chapters & Topics:

### Best Practices for Emerging Brands at Whole Foods

Dustin Kennedy shared insights on how Whole Foods Market works with local and emerging brands, focusing on the need for quality standards and innovation. He advised brands to establish a strong identity and understand their target customers before initiating contact. Additionally, he mentioned the importance of using the Whole Foods portal for submissions and inquiries.

- \* The process of judging and awarding the Best in Taste Awards for specialty food products.
- \* Co-packing services and requirements for brands looking to scale their production.
- \* Whole Foods Market's criteria for onboarding new brands and products.
- \* Distribution options available for brands working with Whole Foods Market and local distributors.

### Understanding the Role of a Broker

Becky Yehia shared insights on the functions of a broker, detailing her journey from working with a distributor to establishing her own brokerage. She highlighted that brokers work on a commission basis, typically ranging from 10 to 15 percent, and are essential for vendors looking to expand their sales beyond direct customer interactions. Becky noted that smaller companies often start selling directly but may seek a broker when they grow overwhelmed or need to reach new markets.

- \* The role and importance of brokers in the distribution process for specialty food brands.

### Discussion on Distributor Pricing and Trade Shows

Becky explained that the 5% commission for distributors is calculated from the price they pay, not the wholesale price. They also discussed the Atlanta gift show, noting its importance for vendors to showcase products and for buyers to discover new brands. Becky mentioned that many vendors from the North Carolina Specialty Food Association participate in the show.

### Distributor Insights from Brantley Hattrich

Brantley Hattrich from B&B Pecan Processors provided insights into the distribution of local products in North Carolina. He explained that grocery chains conduct annual reviews to determine which local items to stock, and highlighted the need for products to be manufactured within the state to qualify. Brantley also discussed the importance of collaboration between distributors and vendors to ensure product availability on store shelves.

### Overview of Divine Foods' Services

Karla detailed the services offered by Divine Foods, emphasizing their focus on small-batch, locally sourced products. They provide custom private labeling and assist with product development, including recipe tasting and packaging. Karla also clarified that they do not store or market proprietary products after they leave their facility.

## Label Creation and FDA Compliance Support

Karla addressed questions regarding the label creation process, stating that their design department provides free support to clients, including creating logos if needed. They highlighted that each product requires an individual label design to meet FDA standards, and they assist in ensuring that labels are shelf-ready and compliant. Karla noted the importance of this support based on recent discussions at a packaging and labeling conference.

## Co-Packing Insights and Best Practices

Karla explained that their co-packing services focus on hot field products, avoiding baked goods and dairy. She highlighted the significance of using glass containers and the challenges of sourcing unique packaging, especially in light of supply chain issues post-COVID. Karla also mentioned that they support clients in understanding the realities of production and packaging.

## Prize Draw and Guest Introduction

Karla highlighted the value of open communication, even when the answers may not be what people want to hear. Karla invited questions from the audience before moving on to the prize draw segment. Sherry Castle was introduced as the guest who would assist in drawing door prizes and announcing the winners of the 2025 Best in Taste Awards.

## Judging Process Overview

Sheri Castle described the structured approach taken during the judging process, where a group convened on Sundays to assess entries in various categories. Judges used assessment sheets to score products from one to ten on five criteria, maintaining a blind tasting format. The judges shared thoughts but did not compare scores, focusing solely on the quality of each individual product.

## Award Winners Announcement

The meeting highlighted the winners of several food categories, starting with Baked Goods where Sweaterbox Confections took first place. Kitcheneeze won first place in Barbecue Sauces, while Tryon Mountain Farms and Sweet Elderberry Shrub tied for first in Beverages. The grand champion was Big Spoon Roasters for their Carrot Cake Almond and Walnut Butter.

## Acknowledgments and Reflections on the Summer of Innovation

Sherry Barefoot received commendations for her outstanding organization and dedication in running the competition, which showcased more than 150 entries. Sheri Castle highlighted the impressive quality of the products, while NC Specialty Foods acknowledged the contributions of all participants, stating that everyone who entered is a winner. The session concluded with gratitude towards the panelists and a note on the availability of the recorded content.

- \* Acknowledgment of Sherry Barefoot's organizational skills
- \* Celebration of the contest entries and participants
- \* Contributions of panelists during the conference
- \* Plans for editing and sharing the conference recording