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## 2007 preview: Green grows

Environmental concerns will be center of the plate in the year to come.

Environmental concerns will exert a bigger force in food processing and packaging as players in the supply chain strive to become more energy-efficient and eco-friendly.

Labeling food products, equipment and serving ware as “green” not only gives producers and manufacturers a competitive edge in the foodservice market, it can help their bottom line.

The new products that reflect this trend are not necessarily organic and are described by several terms besides green: sustainable, all-natural, fair trade, clean and antibiotic-, hormone- and pesticide-free are just some of the labels or specs you’ll see.

A chicken product that is both green and value-added has been hard to come by. Just this month, FreeBird Chicken, antibiotic-free, all-natural poultry that is dedicated to sustainable family farming, has debuted eight new items for foodservice. Included in the lineup are breaded chicken breast nuggets, three varieties of chicken wings, dinosaur-shaped chicken bites, breaded chicken breast patties and two types of chicken breast strips—breaded and grilled. All are fully cooked and frozen, eliminating what the company claims is the operator’s dilemma of having to choose between convenience and “clean.”

Grass-fed beef is another socially conscious protein that is growing in production but difficult to find. Although more U.S. ranchers are raising cattle on grass, there are currently no strict regulations governing the use of the label in this country. Cattle can start off on grass and be finished in a feedlot and still be called “grass-fed.”

A group of restaurateurs founded Estancia Beef—a wholesale business that imports grass-fed beef from Uruguay where it’s raised sustainably. Products from Estancia Beef are sourced from animals that graze on grass throughout their lives; avoiding the feedlot means no fossil fuels are needed to raise the cattle and no antibiotics or hormones used to fatten them up. Currently, tenderloin, ribeye, flank and striploin steaks are available. The company is expanding its sourcing to include U.S. ranchers who are committed to 100 percent grass-fed cattle.

Starbucks continues to be a frontrunner in the green movement. Recently launched is the brand’s Certified and Conservation Coffee Program, which is marketing Café Estima Blend for foodservice operators. Included in this all-purpose blend of Fair Trade certified coffees are Latin American and East African coffees that vary in flavor and intensity. The goal of this program is to purchase only those coffee beans that are grown in a way that protects the environment and promotes economic stability for the farmers.

Over in Wisconsin, farmers have banded together to produce an eco-friendly potato, known as the Wisconsin Healthy Grown potato. The product, which uses integrated pest management technology (IPM), is certified by Protected Harvest, a nonprofit that identifies farmers who follow stringent environmental growing standards.

Over 7 million pounds of Healthy Grown fresh potatoes were produced last year—all branded with a distinctive eco-label—and Healthy Grown processed potatoes are on the drawing board. The program plans to expand to include snap beans, sweet corn, apples, tomatoes and sweet potatoes—all of which will be called “green” even though they’re not necessarily organic.

On the canned fruit and vegetable side, Truitt Bros. has earned certification from Food Alliance, a Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit that supports sustainable, socially responsible practices. Truitt is reintroducing two of its signature products—Blue Lake green beans and juice-packed Bartlett pears—with a new label that shares the company’s story of commitment to protect the environment.

Companies that sell disposables are jumping on the green bandwagon, too. EATware is a new line of environmentally friendly takeout boxes, bowls, plates and trays made of an all-natural material that is 100 percent bio-degradable and recyclable. A non-chemical additive in the products holds the pulp tableware together with crystallization technology, resulting in a sturdy, water- and oil-resistant disposable. EATware plans to introduce several new SKUs in 2007, including a compartmentalized 10-inch plate and smaller trays.