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## Eli & Ali's on cutting edge of food safety, organics, packaging, quality

By CHRISTINA DiMARTINO

"We are currently undergoing a major change in our business," said Peter Kroner, director of corporate development and purchasing for Eli & Ali's Love Tomatoes in Brooklyn, NY. "We are in the process of becoming third-party accredited with PrimusLabs, which will give us the opportunity to have a controlled HACCP program."

Eli & Ali's is a premium packer, distributor, importer and contract grower of conventional, specialty and organic produce. Its line includes specialty packages of organic tomato varieties, hydroponic produce, peppers and fruits. It carries a full line of organic items, which it flies into New York every day from the West Coast and Europe. It also sources local produce whenever available.

Mr. Kroner said that the company is also currently making some major facility improvements.

"We have added stainless tableware to our packing operation," he said. "We employed a consultant to appraise the facility and set up the packing lines. They create a notable efficiency factor. We also equipped our employee areas with lockers, lavatories and cafeterias, so their necessities are separated from our processing areas. Our projections are to have our HACCP certification process completed by the end of the year."

Eli & Ali's is a certified handler of organically grown produce, and Mr. Kroner said that the company is taking it to another level.

"We buy our organic product in master containers, and we are certified to repack the produce," he said. "Our organic certificate, which we have had for over two years, is through [Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York and NOFA-NY Certified Organic LLC], certificate number 200551. It allows us to repack various commodities, and the certification must be upgraded every year through an auditing process."

Mr. Kroner also studies and stays abreast of organic produce information. He noted an article in the Aug. 20 edition of *Time* magazine, headlined "Re-

thinking Organics," by Sanjay Gupta.

"The article stated that researchers at the University of California-Davis have recently added to our understanding of organic food," said Mr. Kroner. "A 10-year study by Allison Mitchell and her team compared levels of antioxidants in tomatoes. They found that those tomatoes grown in organic fields yielded significant levels of two antioxidants, which they believe reduce the risk of chronic health conditions such as heart disease and dementia."

Mr. Kroner said that the article also stated that the research is definite in its nature, although it was a controlled study. The team also found that the higher soil quality becomes, due to planting frequency, the higher the level of flavonoids.

Eli & Ali's major push in its organic line of tomatoes includes Beefsteaks, a counterpart to the conventional version, which is the second-strongest driver for the company; grape tomatoes; cluster tomatoes on-the-vine; and a mixed-medley variety pack of various cherry- and grape-sized tomatoes.

The company's mixed organic heirloom tomato packs, which like all its products carry the "Eli & Ali's" brand, contain a mix in which Mr. Kroner said the company strives to include a minimum of five varieties. The heirlooms are from Northern California, and, also like all other Eli & Ali's organic products, are shipped by air only.

"We also do a strong business with organic peppers," said Mr. Kroner. "Our two-pack assortment is branded 'Eli & Ali's Sweetheart Peppers.' The overprint reads 'Certified Organic.' These are available in packs of reds; red and yellow combined; red and green; and green-green combinations. They look beautiful in the packs, and the trays are biodegradable."

All of Eli & Ali's labels are consistent in schematic and color scheme, and all are proprietary to the company.

"We are changing to entirely biodegradable packaging," said Mr. Kroner. "The process is now underway, and it will include biodegradable overwrap. The entire organic line is now packaged under this criteria, and we will ultimately use it on our entire produce line."



An Eli & Ali's red and yellow organic sweetheart pepper pack.



An Eli & Ali's red and green organic sweetheart pepper pack.



Eli & Ali's organic heirloom tomatoes.