

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

June 14, 2016

Broccoli Rabe Is Trying to be the Next Kale

Inside the marketing machine to make an 'it' vegetable; how growers hired public relations and marketing help to create a superfood



Roasted broccoli rabe and pesto flatbread, a recipe for an appetizer developed by Kate Taylor, of the food blog *Cookie and Kate*, features spicy basil-almond pesto, roasted broccoli rabe and salty feta. PHOTO: ANDY BOY

Broccoli rabe—leafy, pungent and beloved by fans of old-school Italian-American cuisine—is emerging as a star of food blogs, Instagram feeds and the daytime television circuit, thanks to a concerted campaign to position the vegetable as the next nutritional powerhouse.

“I love broccoli rabe,” television talk show host Wendy Williams declared during a recent segment, just before sinking her teeth into a bite of broccoli rabe and quinoa salad. “Very bold.”



Broccoli rabe mellows out when combined with pineapple juice in a Tropical Power smoothie, developed by Shelley West of food blog Vegetarian Ventures. PHOTO: ANDY BOY

The stalky green's makeover from old-school side dish to superfood hopeful hasn't exactly been organic. Like more produce these days, broccoli rabe has its own publicity team.

"So many other cruciferous vegetables are popular," says Claudia Pizarro-Villalobos, marketing and culinary manager for D'Arrigo Bros. Co., the Salinas, Calif.,-based fruit and vegetable grower behind the campaign. Cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and other members of the brassica family have found the culinary limelight, she notes. "Why can't ours be more popular, too?"



Broccoli Rabe is wrapped up in rice paper along with other vegetables in summer rolls, served with a creamy almond hoisin sauce, in a recipe developed by Stephanie Le, of the recipe blog I am a Food Blog. PHOTO: ANDY BOY

The new marketing drill has affected few parts of the supermarket more than the produce aisle, where marketing spending is scarce compared with big packaged-food brands. Food producers are enlisting celebrity chefs, social-media mavens and other digital influencers to help create the groundswell of buzz that propels an ingredient on its viral way. Low barriers of entry in social-media marketing, plus paths blazed by kale and other produce sensations, have spurred more trend-building efforts on behalf of fruits and vegetables.

The idea is to stir in consumers “that need to adopt that ingredient as a badge of honor—to be in on what’s hot,” says Rachel Kay, whose San Diego public relations firm has created campaigns for turmeric-based products, powdered greens and other health foods.

Broccoli rabe has marketing challenges. Its bitterness is an acquired taste, it isn’t commonly found in salads, and its name often causes it to be confused with broccoli.

Turmeric, by contrast, the knobby, orange root that is a staple in Indian and other Asian cuisines, has been steadily gaining attention after research indicated it has inflammation-fighting powers and other benefits. Digital buzz around turmeric surged in 2015, according to Google Trends, around the same time Rachel Kay Public Relations was launching publicity offensives for Temple Turmeric beverages and a turmeric-powder line from supplement maker Gaia Herbs.



Braised broccoli rabe blends with sharp cheddar cheese and buttered, grilled bread to create a sandwich, in a recipe developed by Ashley Rodriguez, of the food blog Not Without Salt. PHOTO: ANDY BOY

In one publicity initiative, a select group of healthy-lifestyle bloggers posted about the merits of the turmeric powder, many with their own recipes, and urged followers to enter a giveaway by writing posts with the Gaia hashtag #livelifebrighter. The effort reached an audience of more than a million, according to Ms. Kay’s firm. “We give them speaking points, but we’re not controlling the message,” Ms. Kay says. “We want them to give recommendations they truly believe in.”

The trick with marketing a new superfood is to reinvent a known ingredient that has a humdrum or ethnic reputation—a challenge, some publicists acknowledge, is ripe for parody. In a 2014 episode of TV’s hipster-parody “Portlandia,” a celery marketer feels pressure to make the vegetable as cool as heirloom tomatoes or Brussels sprouts, and takes desperate steps to make it happen.

In reality, D’Arrigo Bros., whose Andy Boy brand supplies more than 80% of North America’s broccoli rabe, made the robust-tasting vegetable, also known by its Italian name, rapini, its flagship product in the 1940s after patenting its own particular seed, then later dubbing it “broccoli rabe.” Until recently, Ms. Pizarro-Villalobos was the sole member of Andy Boy’s marketing team.



Candice Kumai, celebrity chef and cookbook author, was one of the first digital influencers Andy Boy produce worked with to promote broccoli rabe’s healthful profile. She prepared broccoli rabe on pizza on “The Wendy Williams Show.” PHOTO: JACK JEFFRIES

In recent years, Andy Boy spotted a worrisome trend: Many of its consumers were older people who had grown up eating broccoli rabe as a traditional side dish or [in pasta in Italian-American households](#). “If we want to stay successful,” Ms. Pizarro-Villalobos says, “we need to target millennials.”

To reach young, food-conscious consumers, the family-owned grower signed on with a boutique New York ad agency, Jugular, and a PR firm, LaForce, with clients mostly in fashion, lifestyle brands and spirits. It also partnered with Candice Kumai, a celebrity chef, healthy-eating cookbook author and digital influencer with a fit image, to develop recipes and talk up broccoli rabe on social media and in TV appearances.

Now, Ms. Kumai and stylized images of broccoli rabe are the stars of a video ad created by Jugular, which ran on Hulu and YouTube and is still circulating on social media. Titled “Girl

Boss,” it shows Ms. Kumai kickboxing and cycling to a fast beat. “Green means fierce,” a caption reads before she downs a post-workout broccoli rabe smoothie.



Television talk-show host Wendy Williams tasted a broccoli rabe and quinoa salad and said it was 'bold.' PHOTO: BROOK CHRISTOPHER/GETTY IMAGES

Last fall, a combined 3.3 million-plus viewers of “The Wendy Williams Show” watched Ms. Kumai prepare broccoli rabe on pizza and in other dishes. The same day, LaForce brought some 70 food and fashion writers, recipe bloggers and other digital influencers to a broccoli rabe bash at the New York City apartment of the PR firm’s head, James LaForce.

While Ms. Kumai cooked, waiters in tight T-shirts emblazoned with “Eat Broccoli Rabe” served up dishes like summer rolls and deep-fried arancini, which used the “it” greens as an ingredient. Guests, such as Gina Homolka of the healthy-recipe blog Skinnytaste, posted pictures for hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers with the campaign hashtag #eatbroccolirabe.



Claudia Fizarro-Villalobos, marketing and culinary manager of D'Arrigo Bros.Co., whose Andy Boy brand is trying to position broccoli rabe as a superfood. PHOTO: D'ARRIGO BROS. CO., OF CA

The event has set off a cascade of posts. The website *Eat This, Not That!* posted an article titled “The #1 Weight-Loss Superfood to Eat Now” featuring photos of broccoli rabe dishes and recipes from Andy Boy. The Daily Meal food blog and celebrity and pop-culture site Popsugar also have written about broccoli rabe. LaForce says the campaign doesn’t pay for that kind of press, although it does pay bloggers such as Ms. Homolka to develop recipes. Fees start at a few hundred dollars.

Food marketers also rely on old-fashioned grass roots techniques. Many have been targeting yoga and music festivals. A few years ago, as the avocado industry was pushing avocados beyond salads, sandwiches and guacamole, promoters for a group now called Avocados From Mexico toured college campuses and spotted students smearing

mashed avocado on bread.

Industry officials saw the avocado toast’s photogenic potential, says Emiliano Escobedo, then the group’s marketing chief and now executive director of the Hass Avocado Board.



Olita Mills, senior vice president at public relations company LaForce, which hosted a bash at the apartment of the company founder for 70 food writers and digital influencers to get the word out about broccoli rabe. PHOTO: LAFORCE

can hopefully do a lot," she says.

With a recipe concocted in the test kitchen of the avocado group's PR agency, PadillaCRT, the marketers took toast samples on the road with the Wanderlust yoga festival, now a key marketing event for health-food products. They brought along tote bags illustrated with avocado toast and directions for making the dish.

It was all part of a concerted multiyear effort to push [avocados for breakfast](#). With avocado toast photos going viral on Instagram and Pinterest, timing was everything. Avocado toast "was already happening," Mr. Escobedo says, "just no one was talking about it before."

Broccoli rabe is still looking for its avocado toast moment. A next step, Ms. Pizarro-Villalobos says, will be to get restaurant and supermarket chefs to develop recipes and catapult the ingredient onto more menus. "If we have one or two chefs on board who are part of a bigger chain—the Paneras of the world—we