

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## Broccoli Rabe's Breakout

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OPINION | A12

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HOME & DIGITAL

# PERSONAL JOURNAL.

## Broccoli Rabe Dreams Big

Inside the marketing of an 'it' vegetable; how growers enlisted food influencers to praise the bitter greens

By VANESSA FUHRMANS

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."

The stalky green's makeover from old-school side dish to super-food 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?"

In the produce aisle, marketing has been relatively scarce compared with big packaged-food brands, but it has become ripe for promotional attention. Food producers are enlisting celebrity chefs, social-media mavens and other digital influencers to help create the buzz that propels an ingredient on its viral way. The goal is to repeat the successes of previous produce sensations, from avocados to kale to blueberries.

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 common 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

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GROWER



Claudia Pizarro-Villalobos, marketing and culinary manager at Andy Boy, says the grower wondered, with cauliflower and Brussels sprouts in the limelight, Why can't broccoli rabe be more popular?

ADVERTISING



Erin Lackey, creative director at ad agency Jugular, helped create online video connecting broccoli rabe to kickboxing and cycling.

PUBLIC RELATIONS



Olita Mills, senior vice president at PR firm LaForce, helped organize a bash for food writers and digital influencers to get the word out about broccoli rabe.

CELEBRITY CHEF



Candice Kumai, celebrity chef and cookbook author, was one of the first influencers that Andy Boy worked with to promote broccoli rabe's healthful profile.

TELEVISION PERSONALITY



Wendy Williams, the daytime TV talk show host, helped bring broccoli rabe before millions of viewers when she sampled it in a salad with quinoa on the air. "Very bold," was her verdict.

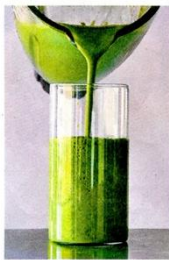
# VEGGIE

Continued from the prior page 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.

In one publicity initiative, Ms. Kay's firm worked with a select group of healthy-lifestyle bloggers, who posted about the merits of the turmeric powder and urged followers to enter a giveaway by writing posts with the Gaia hashtag #Live-LifeBrighter. 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



A broccoli rabe and pineapple juice smoothie, left, from food blog Vegetarian Ventures; an appetizer of roasted broccoli rabe and pesto flatbread, from food blog Cookie and Kate

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.

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 small New York ad agency, Jaguar, and a PR firm, LaForce, with clients mostly in fashion, lifestyle brands and spirits. It also partnered with Can-

dice 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 Jaguar, which ran on Hih 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.

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 #eat-broccolirabe.

The event has set off a cascade of posts. One result was an article on the website Eat This, Not That! titled "The #1 Weight-Loss Superfood to Eat Now." Andy Boy furnished photos and recipes of bro-

coli rabe dishes. 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.

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.

With a recipe concocted in the test kitchen of the avocado group's PR agency, PadillaGRT, the marketers took toast samples on the road with the Wanderlust yoga festival, now a key marketing event for health-food products.

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.

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 menu.

"If we have one or two chefs on board who are part of a bigger chain—the Paneras of the world—we can hopefully do a lot," she says.