Broccolini®
What’s in a Name?

THE GUY HUNG ONTO MY ARM with an urgency that signaled intense enthusiasm or terminal desperation.

“I swear to God, it’s a cross between broccoli and asparagus. I mean we had about five cartons of it. Asparagus. Broccoli. Crossed.”

His accent came through, New York. Maybe his tone was just New York edgy. I shook my head, “Never heard of such a thing,” I repeated.

“But you’re the foodservice guy from Mann Packing, right?”

“Right,” I answered.

“They just you guys are behind the curve. Because this exists. I seen it with my own eyes. And I can’t find it anywhere. The distributor can’t get it no more.”

I shook my head again, bewildered. It was July 1997. We were in Monterey, California, at the Produce Marketing Association’s Foodservice Conference & Exhibition. Mann Packing Company was the world’s largest grower and shipper of fresh broccoli. We’d written the marketing book on fresh broccoli. And I didn’t know what this guy was talking about.
“Listen,” he said, fumbling for his business card. “You gotta find this for me. The chefs went nuts for it. It flew off the shelf. We could sell it all day long. And, like I said, the distributor can’t get any more.”

I glanced at his card. He represented one of the better specialty produce companies in New York City.

“I’ll get on it,” I said, keeping my reservations to myself. A broccoli-asparagus hybrid? It sounded like genetic engineering—a marketing nightmare.

Joe Nucci, Mann Packing’s CEO, was young and bright, and he knew marketing. His father, Don, was co-owner of the company. Joe had grown up in the business. Joe shook his head when I told him we had to get some samples of the asparagus-broccoli hybrid.

“Tom, you can’t cross broccoli and asparagus. Get a grip,” he said.

“Maybe not,” I answered, “But there’s something out there because this guy was going bonkers.”

“I’ll look into it,” Joe murmured, rolling his eyes. He changed the subject. I figured my search had ended before it began.

But two weeks later, Joe called me into his office.

“I’ve found your asparagus-broccoli,” he said. “Except it’s not a cross of broccoli and asparagus. It’s a cross of broccoli and gai lan, also known as Chinese kale or Chinese broccoli.”

“Where did you find it?”

“I called Sakata Seed. We’re one of their biggest broccoli-seed customers. They knew right away what I was talking about.”

Sakata Seed, Inc., founded in Japan in 1913, is one of the world’s major seed companies. It is also one of the world’s leading suppliers of broccoli seed. In the 1980s, wanting to expand its broccoli market, Sakata began searching for ways to produce a variety of broccoli that would grow in hot climates year round, a characteristic that broccoli, like lettuce and strawberries, does not have.

Sakata’s solution: develop a new vegetable that would be both heat tolerant and keep broccoli’s deep green color and beaded buds. They chose to breed traditional broccoli with Chinese kale, also of the Brassica genus of the mustard family. Brassica includes cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and broccoli. More heat resistant than broccoli, Chinese kale offered the advantage of sweet-tasting tender stalks, a quality definitely absent in broccoli. Sakata also chose to develop the hybrid through hand pollination instead of genetic engineering. It took them almost seven years to come up with a product that met their specifications.

Sakata named its new product “Asparation,” implying a connection with asparagus that the vegetable’s slim, edible stem would support visually and would allow growers to demand a price closer to asparagus than broccoli. This need for a higher price was not motivated by greed. Asparation, as it turned out, entailed higher labor costs than broccoli. In the trip from the laboratory to the fields the product turned out not to be heat resistant, as Sakata had hoped. It was very sensitive to abrupt weather changes. Harvesting it required returning to the field several times, since the stalks grew at random rates of speed. And the fact that Asparation stayed in the field longer than broccoli meant greater irrigation costs.

A small grower in El Centro, California, a town located in the southeastern corner of the state close to Mexicali, Mexico, had run other trials for Sakata. This grower was now running trials of Asparation, many of them in Mexico. He had sent samples to some distributors and restaurants, which is how the specialty-produce distributor in New York had come across it.

When Sakata sent us some samples, I understood why the guy from New York had been so excited. With a slender, edible stem, tender, miniature florets, and a taste sweeter than broccoli, Asparation was a truly elegant vegetable. But “Asparation”? The name was a stumbling block. It sounded like a terminal lung disease. And we didn’t like the idea of implying it was an asparagus hybrid when it wasn’t. Furthermore, we knew that the name of a new produce item would be a critical element in marketing it. Everyone in the produce industry knew the story of the legendary Frieda Caplan, who parlayed a small stand in the Los Angeles produce market into a national specialty-produce company by renaming the Chinese gooseberry “Kiwifruit” and bringing it to America. What’s in a name? Often, the difference between success and failure.

Before we worried about a name, however, we had to get the product—not only get the product but get some form of exclusivity if we were going to throw our resources into marketing it. We knew we were looking at some sensitive negotiations with Sakata Seed, because Sakata had a close relationship with the El Centro grower. Sakata was not the kind of company that would jettison a client who had spent time and money running trials.

But the facts were clear. The Southern California grower was too small to grow enough Asparation to market it nationally, and Mann Packing Company had an enviable track record in introducing new broccoli products, including the first precut broccoli florets for the foodservice market and Mann’s Broccoli Cole Slaw, a packaged salad that had achieved a cult-like status among its admirers.

Even though we were the world’s largest shipper of fresh broccoli, we didn’t come close to having enough money
for consumer advertising. So we had to develop a strategy that would employ a one-step-at-a-time process of educating consumers that there was an exciting new vegetable on the market, a vegetable that contained the super vitamin content of broccoli yet was elegant and subtler in taste—the difference between a fullback and a ballerina.

We would begin with the foodservice market—chefs in white-tablecloth restaurants who could afford the product and would create imaginative recipes showcasing Asparation’s versatility in numerous cuisines: Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Italian, Caribbean, and American. Such a strategy would involve a three-pronged approach: demonstrations in food shows, visits with distributors who had the appropriate clientele, and PR in foodservice magazines.

Once the thrust into the foodservice market was underway, we would launch consumer PR with a press tour of the New York media, including the food editors of newspapers, women’s magazines, and food magazines. If you were an editor who printed recipes in your publication, we wanted to see you.

We presented our plan to Sakata, and they were enthusiastic. But exclusivity was a larger stumbling block than we had expected—the Southern California grower had to be allowed to continue marketing Asparation, even if only on a small scale. Additionally, Sakata was not overjoyed by our refusal to market Aspiration under its current name. Eventually, we compromised. Sakata’s Southern California client could continue to grow and market Aspiration, but he had to grow the product in Mexico, which meant there would be a slight difference in our growing seasons, and its acreage would be limited. We would be allowed to market Aspiration under a different name.

Since our initial market was to be chefs, our first step was to get some chefs to help us name the product. And who better than the chefs at the Culinary Institute of America? We encouraged people at Mann Packing Company to submit a new name for Aspiration, and I took this list of twenty-some names to the CIA. The format of the meeting was what the CIA called an “ideation session.” None of the chefs present—as I recall there were six or seven—knew what the product was. Once we were seated, the Asparation came from the kitchen, steamed to slightly crunchy perfection with just a touch of butter.

The chefs looked at the green stalks on the white plate, and I could see they were not only fascinated but also immensely curious as to what kind of hybrid they were about to taste. Each chef tasted it with the same concentration and thoughtfulness you see on the faces of wine judges at a wine competition. The example is apt, because it was Steven Kolpan, professor of wine studies at the CIA, who murmured, “Yes, I believe I detect a touch of kale.”

I knew I had come to the right place.

Once the chefs had agreed that this was indeed a viable product with a future in foodservice, albeit upscale foodservice, and retail, we began discussing what to name the product. When I explained why the current name was Aspiration, I was met by stares of disbelief and groans of displeasure. I moved quickly on to the list we had put together, encouraging the chefs to come up with their own ideas for a name if they had a good one.

Joe Nucci’s wife, Debbie, came up with “Broccolini,” which, as we discussed the merits and faults of each name on our list, came close to being a unanimous choice. I returned to Mann Packing with the news that we had a winner. We immediately applied to register “Broccolini” as a trademark of Mann Packing Company.

When you talk about resources in a fresh-produce company, you’re not talking about a P&G model. You’re talking about five people who had to split up the responsibilities of introducing Broccolini®. We had a foodservice director, a media and trade relations director, a retail sales director, a foodservice manager who could pitch in to help the media relations effort, and an in-house designer, who could turn out media kits, fact sheets, and brochures for less cost than an ad agency.

Joe Nucci’s sisters, Lorri Koster and Gina Nucci, were charged with the press tour, and while I set out to visit foodservice distributors who had upscale white-tablecloth restaurants among their clients, Lorri and Gina began putting together the press kits and making appointments with editors at magazines like Gourmet, Bon Appétit, Good Housekeeping, Better Homes and Gardens, Family Circle, and Ladies Home Journal, and at newspapers including the New York Times and USA Today.

At the foodservice distributors we selected, my job was to fly into town and make a Broccolini® presentation at one of their weekly sales meetings. I showed the distributors what Broccolini® looked like, described the various ways of cooking it and the various cuisines in which it could star as a new and unique produce item. Often I would stay over until the next day and then travel with one of the salespeople as he or she met with the chefs the distributor had pinpointed as potential Broccolini® customers.

The same week we sold our first pallet of Broccolini®—to our Houston distributor, Third Coast Produce, one of whose owners had been a white-tablecloth chef—Lorri Koster and Gina Nucci were having an incredibly successful press tour in New York, including product placement showcasing
Broccolini® on Good Morning America. It seemed that a new produce item was so rare that it was newsworthy. And when USA Today published a photo article titled “Lean Green on Scene: Broccoli, the Next Generation,” the opening sentence of which read, “Oh, it’s an itsy-beany, teeny-weeny, slender greeny Broccolini®!”, sales started to rumble.

Yes, the sun was shining on Mann Packing Company and Broccolini®. Unfortunately, the sun was shining a bit too brightly. To paraphrase Thomas à Kempis, “Man proposes, but Mother Nature disposes.”

“Bad news from the fields,” Joe Nucci said, coming into my office. “No one thought about how this heat wave might affect the Broccolini®.”

“And?”

“The Broccolini® went crazy in the heat. The stalks in the fields we were to harvest this week are over a foot long. They’re tough as bamboo, and the buds have turned into bright yellow flowers. It’s going to be two or three weeks before we’ll have any Broccolini® to sell.”

Because we had never grown Broccolini® for a full season, we didn’t know its idiosyncrasies. We didn’t know that in a heat wave, you have to harvest every day if you want to reap the small slender stalks.

I reached for my Rolodex.

“I guess this deserves a phone call. An e-mail might not persuade all those customers expecting their next Broccolini® shipment that we’re as devastated as they are.”

“Lori and I are calling the retail customers. Gina will help you with foodservice.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll need all the help I can get.”

I can’t say I learned any new cuss words during those phone calls, but I sure heard a lot of familiar ones repeated.

But the inability to control Mother Nature is part of the drill in the produce business, and although our customers weren’t happy, they went on about their business, knowing it was only a matter of time until another grower and shipper lost a battle to Mother Nature and some other produce item suddenly was in short supply. She was an adversary who never lost.

Over the next year we learned a lot about growing Broccolini®, and soon we were able to contain some of the costs and, equally important, to ensure a consistent supply. Chefs are able to deal with seasonal disappearances and reappearances of popular menu items, but weekly or even daily disappearances and reappearances usually ensure that a produce item won’t find a place on the menus of any but the whitest of white-tablecloth restaurants. Most customers prefer consistency to novelty, and nothing irks a customer more than to bring a guest to a favorite restaurant and find one of the restaurant’s signature items unavailable.

With consistent supply no longer an issue, we began working with chefs to explore Broccolini®’s versatility as a menu item. Because of its gai lan connection, the initial chef-developed recipes tended to focus on Asian ingredients. Szechwan Broccolini®, for which the vegetable was sautéed with hoisin sauce, a teriyaki glaze, rice-wine vinegar, chili paste, honey, and sugar, became a popular appetizer as well as a side dish. The name Broccolini® also attracted chefs working in Italian restaurants, and soon we had recipes for Linguine Broccolini®, Broccolini® Frittata, and Balsamic Broccolini®.

Today, Broccolini® is a staple in upscale venues like Whole Foods Markets and in specialty markets like Trader Joe’s, where it is sold under the name of Baby Broccoli. Obviously its success has much to do with its elegant appearance, culinary versatility, and unique flavor. But perhaps one of the most important reasons for its success is its name. In the world of produce Mann Packing Company stood for the best in broccoli, so it made sense that Broccolini® from Mann would be a quality product.

And in the world of the consumer? Well, who in that world could refuse to buy an itsy-beany, teeny-weeny, slender greeny Broccolini®?