

Communication

# The 'Pick-Your-Own' Model of Production and Marketing of Ethnic Crops in Central New Jersey, USA

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**Abstract:** Specca Farms Pick Your Own (SFPYO) operates a 125-acre (50 ha) farm in Bordentown, Central New Jersey, USA, which attends to customers from many different ethnic regions such as Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Mediterranean region, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean. The company produces more than 100 ethnic crops that require unique agronomic and management practices tailored to central New Jersey's ecosystem and the unique quality of produce demanded by various ethnic nationalities. This paper reviews the ethnic crop classifications at the farm, the agronomic and crop protection practices applied to different crop groups, and the factors that guide produce marketing to meet the unique quality demanded by different ethnic nationalities.

**Keywords:** brassicas; central New Jersey; cucurbits; ethnic crops; ethnic nationalities; legume crops; Pick-Your-Own; solanaceous crops; umbels; U-Pick; USA



**Citation:** Specca, D.; Specca, S.; Ayeni, A.O. The 'Pick-Your-Own' Model of Production and Marketing of Ethnic Crops in Central New Jersey, USA. *Agronomy* **2022**, *12*, 751. <https://doi.org/10.3390/agronomy12030751>

Academic Editor: Magdalena Sobocińska

Received: 9 December 2021

Accepted: 16 March 2022

Published: 21 March 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic crops, defined as non-mainstream crops brought to and cultivated in the United States (US) by ethnic nationalities from different parts of the world, have been part of the US agriculture and food systems for centuries [1]. In recent times, many of these crops are being introduced into Pick-Your-Own (PYO) farming enterprises and are contributing significantly to the breadbasket and food security of different communities in the United States [1]. The PYO concept refers to a practice by which the farm owner opens the farm to the public during the harvesting season for the purpose of harvesting produce for family use and/or other purposes. There is limited information on PYO agriculture and food culture, even though its contribution to the US agricultural economy has been increasing steadily, driven mainly by the expanding ethnic populations in the country [1].

Advantages of the PYO type of direct crop marketing include: (a) reduced labor for harvesting, (b) opportunity to sell additional products when customers come to the farm, (c) the farm can become a community gathering space, (d) farmers have an opportunity to know their customers and educate them about produce varieties and growing methods, (e) post-harvest handling tasks including sorting, storage, packing, and shipping are eliminated, (f) there is reduced packaging costs when customers bring their own containers, (g) no need for distributors, (h) it is >90% "cash and carry", and (i) there is greater market recognition [2,3]. Disadvantages include: (a) exposure of customers to risks such as food safety and accidents, (b) long hours during the peak of harvesting, (c) advertising costs may be high in order to attract customers to the farm, (d) yield losses may occur because of customers' limited harvesting skills, (e) unpredictable markets, e.g., COVID-19 has been a major distraction since 2020, which impacted customer volumes [4], (f) uncooperative customers may cause problems for the farmer, (g) unpredictable weather—customers will stay away on bad weather days, which might lead to significant crop losses (a back-up plan must be made to accommodate such situations), and (h) there is need for staff to handle

post-PYO clean up to pick up spoiled crops to minimize disease and increase customer satisfaction, etc. [2,3].

Specca Farms, LLC, which is listed among the larger PYO farms in Burlington County, New Jersey [5], is a fourth-generation family farm. Having started with a farm in Philadelphia, PA, by Italian immigrants Romeo and Theresa Specca, the business relocated to central New Jersey in 1957. Initially, the farm was strictly wholesale vegetables. Over time, demand for ethnic crops by immigrants from different nationalities in the region, who wanted to pick their produce directly from the farm, prompted the consideration of a Pick-Your-Own enterprise. These nationalities, which include people from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Hispaniola, and the Mediterranean region, wanted to continue the Pick-Your-Own tradition that was common in their homeland. Today, 90% of Specca Farms, LLC's income is from Pick-Your-Own. The crops grown at SFPYO are shown in Table 1. The objective of this article is to present the SFPYO business as an example of an ethnic-crop-intensive PYO, highlighting the operations and the role it plays in advancing the integration of ethnic crops into the lives of immigrant populations in Central New Jersey and beyond.

**Table 1.** Crop Classification and Associated Ethnic Nationalities at Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own, Bordentown, New Jersey, USA.

Crop Group	Crop's Common Name	Botanical Name	Associated Ethnic Nationalities
Brassicas	Collard Green	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>acephala</i>	Turkish, Southern US, African, Portuguese
	Kale	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>acephala</i>	American, Northern European
	Turnip tops and bottoms	<i>Brassica rapa</i> , var. <i>rapa</i>	Indian, Southern US
	Mustard greens	<i>Sinapis alba</i>	Indian, Southern US, African
	Rape greens	<i>Brassica napus</i> , var. <i>napus</i>	Indian, Southern US, African
	Arugula	<i>Eruca sativa</i>	American, Turkish, Italian
	Broccoli raab	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>italica</i>	Italian, Indian, American
	Cabbage	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>capitata</i>	Eastern European, German, Polish, Turkish
	Cauliflower	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>botrytis</i>	Indian, Italian, Turkish
	Broccoli	<i>Brassica oleracea</i>	Italian, Northern and Eastern Europe, American
	Brussel Sprouts	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , var. <i>gemmifera</i>	American, Turkish, Northern European
	Daikon radish	<i>Raphanus sativus</i> var. <i>longipinnatus</i>	Indian
	Salad radishes	<i>Raphanus sativus</i>	American, Northern European
	Rutabaga	<i>Brassica napus</i> , var. <i>napobrassica</i>	German, English
	Kohlrabi	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> <i>Gongylodes</i>	German, English, American
Solanaceous Crops	Tomatoes	<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i>	All ethnic groups
	Peppers	<i>Capsicum</i> spp.	All ethnic groups
	Eggplant	<i>Solanum</i> spp.	All ethnic groups
	Potatoes	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	Turkish, Northern European
Legumes	Fava beans	<i>Vicia faba</i>	Italians, Greek, English, Egyptian, Jordanian
	Peas (including Field peas)	<i>Pisum sativum</i>	Turkish, English, German
	String beans	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>	Northern European, American
	Lima beans	<i>Phaseolus lunatus</i>	Southern US, English

Table 1. Cont.

Crop Group	Crop's Common Name	Botanical Name	Associated Ethnic Nationalities
	Italian broad beans	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>	Turkish, Italian, Eastern European
	Cranberry beans	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris Cranberry</i>	Italian, Turkish, Caribbean, African
	Fenugreek	<i>Trigonella foenum-graecum</i>	Indian
Cucurbits	Cucumbers	<i>Cucumis sativus</i>	Turkish, Italian, Eastern European
	Cantaloupe	<i>Cucumis melo var. cantalupensis</i>	All ethnic groups
	Watermelon	<i>Citrullus lanatus</i>	All ethnic groups
	Bitter melons	<i>Momordica charantia</i>	Indian
Umbels	Carrots	<i>Daucus carota subsp. sativus</i>	All ethnic groups
	Parsnips	<i>Pastinaca sativa</i>	English, German
	Parsley	<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	All ethnic groups
	Cilantro	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	Indian, Caribbean, Turkish
	Dill	<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	Turkish, Indian, Eastern Europe
	Fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	Italian, Greek
	Celeriac	<i>Apium graveolens var. rapaceum</i>	English, German
Others	Spinach	<i>Spinacia oleracea</i>	All ethnic groups
	Beets	<i>Beta vulgaris subsp. vulgaris</i>	All ethnic groups
	Swiss chard	<i>Beta vulgaris subsp. vulgaris</i>	Turkish, Italian, American
	Okra	<i>Abelmoschus esculentus</i>	Indian, Turkish, Caribbean, African
	Jute leaf	<i>Corchorus sp.</i>	African, Caribbean
	Red amaranth	<i>Amaranthus spp</i>	Indian, African, Caribbean
	Lettuce	<i>Lactuca sativa</i>	All ethnic groups
	Strawberry	<i>Fragaria × ananassa</i>	All ethnic groups

## 2. Procedure

In March 2021, the Ethnic Crops Research Group (ECRG) at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey (RU), met to deliberate on the MDPI-Agronomy Special Issue on Ethnic Crops in the United States of America (ECUSA). Among the topics selected to highlight in ECUSA was a subject that describes in detail the PYO (also known as U-Pick farms) direct marketing enterprise in New Jersey using a case study that captures the status and trends. The role of ethnic crops in PYO, the agronomy, and the socioeconomic dimensions were to be reflected in the article. The ECUSA's guest editor reached out to Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own in Bordentown, New Jersey, to develop an article on this subject. SFPYO is a family business and is one of the larger PYOs in Burlington County, New Jersey, attending to several ethnic nationalities in New Jersey and the surrounding states. SFPYO's owners agreed to collaborate with the ECUSA's guest editor and together the team gathered information from the past records of SFPYO and added literature on PYO in the United States and New Jersey to develop this article.

## 3. History of PYO in the United States and New Jersey

Depending on the source of information, the Pick-Your-Own (or U-Pick) concept has existed in the United States since the 1800s with the pioneer farmers inviting urban dwellers to fruit and vegetable farms in the southern and western United States as a form of picnic for family relaxation [6]. It was first recorded in California around 1907 when urban dwellers were invited to orange orchards around Los Angeles to "pick their own" [7]. It thus started as an agritourism exercise for urban dwellers. PYO started out

of necessity in the mid-western United States in the 1930s as the produce market became unfavorable for the farmer and prices dropped below the cost of production [7]. Rather than allow the fruits to go to waste, cherry farmers in Wisconsin who could not make money from harvesting and taking their produce to the market decided to invite people in the community and travelers to stop by their farms to pick cherries for a low price. The pioneer farmers who attempted this approach were surprised at how much money they made using the Pick-Your-Own option [7]. In the state of New York in northeastern United States, the PYO was first reported in the 1960s when apple farmers in western New York attempted this option [8] as a way to increase profit. Since those years, the Pick-Your-Own concept has spread throughout the United States. Today PYO is a thriving enterprise in every state of the Union [9–13] and farmers have adapted the concept to fulfill significant needs in their communities ranging from cultural or traditional values to culinary and nutritional preferences [14]. PYO direct marketing is primarily applied to fruits, vegetables, Christmas/ornamental trees/plants, flowers, etc. [9]. Closely associated with PYO operations are entertainment activities such as hayrides, corn mazes, petting zoos, picnic areas, etc. [15,16]. Essentially, PYO has become an environment for promoting the agritourism business in the United States, which grossed a total income of USD 3.7 billion in 2017 [17] and is growing. In 2017, 130,056 farms in the US sold food directly to customers while 28,575 provided agritourism and entertainment services [17]. It is anticipated that more farms are likely to add PYOs and agritourism to their operations in the future to enhance business profitability.

In New Jersey, with more than 100 PYO farms, several PYO websites exist where crops available for picking are listed regularly [15,16,18]. A non-exhaustive list of the central New Jersey area shows there are more than 34 PYO farms in that region [9]. Farms that thrive as a PYO operation tend to be larger and grow crops for which the harvesting requires little skill, but the harvesting cost would be high if the farm had to hire the labor [9].

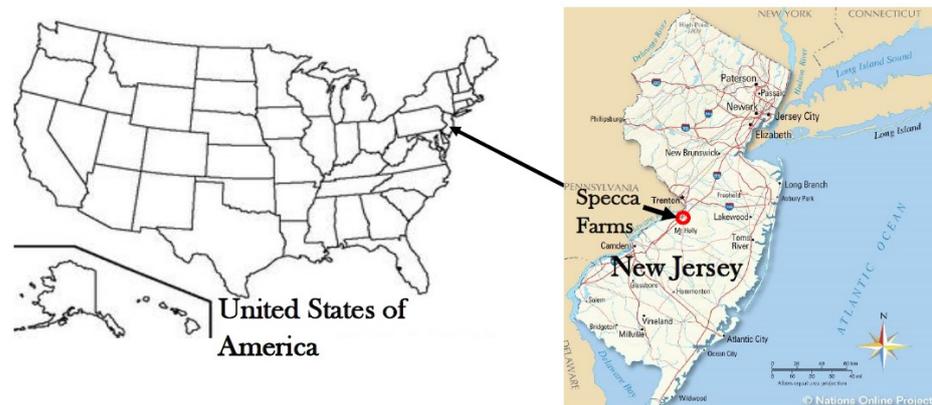
#### **4. Case Study: Specca Farm Pick-Your-Own**

##### *4.1. Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own (SFPYO) Vision*

SFPYO strives to provide a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables to customers from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. The company benefits from the cultural diversity of its customer base and provides the opportunity for a reminder of the homeland with the produce their families grew up loving. SFPYO does not consider itself to be an agricultural entertainment farm; rather, it is a working farm that allows customers to pick produce the way they like to eat them, with minimal waste in post-harvest handling and preparation.

##### *4.2. Farm Description and Ethnic Patronage*

The land that SFPYO farms was preserved by the state of New Jersey for permanent agriculture in 1998 and is a total of 125 acres (~50 ha). It is located in Burlington County, New Jersey (Figure 1) and the soils are mostly a fine sandy loam. Demographically, 66.6% of the population in Burlington County is white Caucasian, 18.3% Black or African-American, 5.4% Asian, 8.5% Hispanic, and 3% two or more races [19]. Surveys of ethnic nationalities that patronize SFPYO indicate that (Asian) Indian, Middle Eastern, Italian, and African cultures are predominant. Ethnic groups from Central and South America, from European Union countries including Austria, the Baltic region, Germany, Poland, Greece, and Portugal, and from Asian countries including China, South Korea, and Japan are common. People from the United Kingdom, France, and Ukraine also patronize SFPYO but not in as significant a number. Most of the customers come from the neighboring towns along the Delaware River but they routinely have customers coming from as far as 80 miles away, from the states of Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Delaware, and Maryland. Social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and their own website, have been used intensively to communicate regularly with their customers about which crops are in season and what updates they need to know about before coming to the farm.



**Figure 1.** Location of Specca Farm Pick-Your-Own in New Jersey, United States (Map Source: [https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/USA/new\\_jersey\\_map.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/USA/new_jersey_map.htm) (accessed on 15 March 2022)).

#### 4.3. Ethnic Crop Groups

In recent years, SFPYO has annually cultivated 100 or more different crops and varieties made up of approximately 30% legumes, 25% brassicas, 25% solanaceous crops, 10% cucurbits, 5% beets/Swiss chard/spinach, and 5% umbels. Table 1 highlights the crop classifications for the popular ethnic crops that are regularly purchased by ethnic nationalities in the region. The most popular crops at SFPYO are the fruiting vegetables including legumes, eggplants, peppers, tomatoes (from Turkey and other parts of the Middle East), leafy greens (especially collards, kale, spinach, and broccoli rabe), followed by okra, Indian jute, etc. Stem, flower, and root/tuber forms of ethnic vegetables are new crop opportunities that are being explored at SFPYO. Figures 2 and 3 show examples of common leafy and leguminous ethnic vegetables at SFPYO, respectively. These crops represent those that are the most popular with ethnic nationalities from across several regions of the world. The cross-cultural patronage has increased significantly in the past 10 years. While the leafy greens (Figure 2), dandelion, lambsquarter, and purslane (verdolaga), had been exclusively patronized by Italian, Turkish, and Hispanic populations in the past, other ethnic nationalities have started to adopt these crops and the spectrum of ethnic interest has increased steadily. The leguminous ethnic crops (Figure 3), which were purchased more by Europeans in the past, are now purchased by all customers. This dynamic cross-cultural patronage presents a bright future for the ethnic crop industry and its role in the agricultural economy of the United States. First, populations across all ethnic nationalities increasingly have access to a wider spectrum of crops that present several beneficial nutritional and health values, and second, the prospects for growth of the ethnic crop industry in New Jersey is promising.



**Figure 2.** Some ethnic leafy greens cultivated at Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own, Bordentown, New Jersey. These crops are common weeds in the United States but eaten by many ethnic nationalities.



**Figure 3.** Some ethnic legumes cultivated at Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own, Bordentown, New Jersey. These crops are cross-cultural in significance.

*4.4. Crop Production*

The types of crops grown at SFPYO are diverse (Table 1). Some crops are planted in the fall and overwinter for a spring harvest. These include broccoli rabe, spinach, and strawberries. In recent years, Brussel sprouts have also overwintered for a spring harvest. Planting of direct-seeded crops begins as early as possible in the late winter and early spring. Crops like fava beans, peas, onions, and brassicas are sown or transplanted into black plastic mulched beds used for other crops the year before. As soon as the soil is dry enough to till, the spring plantings in the soil beds begin. These crops include spinach, beets, Swiss chard, cilantro, radishes, potatoes, various leafy greens, and brassicas (Table 2).

On the production side of the business, attention is shifted to laying plastic mulch beds in May in preparation for the solanaceous crops that have been growing in the greenhouse. Planting is delayed for many warm-season crops so their harvest begins in early August. This is done because experience has shown that people do not want to pick their own produce in July when it is hot and humid. For this reason, the PYO stand is closed in July. Most crops are timed for an August start for the fall season. Many crops, including beans, leafy greens, and some tomatoes, have a short harvest window from 1 to 4 weeks. In order to maintain a continuous supply, successive plantings are made based on their harvest windows. This can be challenging because of rainy spells and excessive heat.

**Table 2.** Farm Operational Protocol at Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own, Bordentown, NJ, USA.

Season	Major Operations		
	Production	Harvesting	Marketing
Spring (March–June)	Broccoli rabe, spinach, strawberries., Brussel sprouts Fava beans, peas, onions, brassicas	Broccoli rabe, spinach, strawberries., Brussel sprouts, Fava beans, peas, onions, brassicas	Broccoli rabe, spinach, strawberries., Brussel sprouts, Fava beans, peas, onions, brassicas
Summer (July–September)	Solanaceous crops, beans, leafy greens, tomatoes	Solanaceous crops, beans, leafy greens, tomatoes	Solanaceous crops, beans, leafy greens, tomatoes
Fall (September to November)	Spinach, beets, Swiss chard, cilantro, radishes, potatoes, various leafy greens, brassicas.	Spinach, beets, Swiss chard, cilantro, radishes, potatoes, various leafy greens, brassicas.	Spinach, beets, Swiss chard, cilantro, radishes, potatoes, various leafy greens, brassicas.

Below are some operational guidelines developed at SFPYO for crop production activities:

- A. Some cultural tips:
- Most brassica and leafy greens have small seeds;
  - For plants that are spaced greater than 6" apart, use transplants;
  - Prepare a fine soil bed that is firm, when you step on it you should sink about an inch into it;
  - For plants less than 6" apart, direct seed 0.25 to 0.5" deep;
  - Good seed to soil contact is important, press soil lightly after planting;
  - A light layer of mulch (0.5") to keep soil moist is helpful for germination;
  - Keep irrigation handy in case it gets hot and dry or to help with germination after a hard rain;
  - Plant on raised beds if your soil is heavy or tends to stay wet;
  - Plant in rows to aid in weed control and harvest;
  - The summer season is the most difficult time to get a good stand for direct seeded.
- B. Fertilizer application and irrigation:
- Leafy vegetables use a lot of water, have drip or overhead irrigation available for May through October;
  - Overhead irrigation will help to cool a crop during the summer but avoid using it on mature greens;
  - Leafy Greens are heavy feeders for crop nutrients;
  - Organic sources of fertilizer also provide good root zone environments and should be used when possible;
  - Chemical-based fertilizers provide a quick response and are useful after high rainfall;
  - Avoid putting all the fertilizer on at the beginning of the crop; several side dresses are best.
- C. Insect and disease control:
- Everyone loves leafy greens—including insects, animals, fungi, and bacteria;
  - Crop rotation is a first line of defense;
  - Floating row covers help keep insects and animals out;
  - Good aeration around the plants will help keep leaf diseases in check;
  - There are some safe organic sprays that are available for home gardens;
  - Beneficial insects can help with some insect control, as can removal by hand.

#### 4.5. Marketing

The fall season is the biggest sales period. Both the cool-season and warm-season crops are planted for harvesting during this period. The later plantings of cold-sensitive crops like solanaceous crops, beans, cucurbits, and okra need to be planned for the expected frost dates. Cool-season crops, including brassica and umbel crops, are planted as late in the year as possible to allow harvesting well into December. Some hardy (cold-tolerant) crops, such as collard greens, kale, Brussel sprouts, Romanesco cauliflower, and spinach are grown and are often harvested into January, as weather allows. SFPYO has an honor system for late season sales because it is not worth having a cashier on duty for the small amount of revenue generated. An honor system is one where there are no employees involved in the transaction; rather, the customer pays a price per bag and deposits the money in a cash box on the way out. The honor system works at SFPYO because of the traditional trust that exists between the farmer and the customer. This might not work in other places where such cordial farmer/customer relationships may not exist. Customers appreciate the early winter PYO produce, and the customer feedback is that it is often some of the best tasting produce they buy from the farm.

An aspect of the marketing strategy that facilitates the PYO operation is the plot/crop identification. Since the farm attends to a wide variety of customers from different cultural backgrounds, the signage/field monitor person creatively designs plot/crop signs that explain in different languages and symbols what vegetable or herb is in the plot and how

it may be harvested. They will interact with the customers to find out what the crop is called in the country they are from and how to properly spell it for the signage. This person is also in charge of patrolling the fields to assist with harvesting instructions, help with locating the correct fields, and keeping customers out of fields that are not open. The signage/field monitor person can communicate in some of the more popular languages spoken by our customers. The clerks can also count in several languages, which is often a pleasant surprise for the customers. Figure 4 shows examples of plot signs at SFPYO. This approach is very helpful in communicating to our customers how to proceed with the PYO operation.



**Figure 4.** Examples of plot identification at Specca Farm Pick-Your-Own for effective communication of plot content to a diverse pool of Pick-Your-Own customers.

After picking the desired produce, the customer proceeds to the farm stand to pay for what has been picked. Figure 5 shows the farm stand attending to PYO customers, as well as to customers who opted to buy freshly harvested produce on display at the farm stand. The PYO produce is mostly sold by weight or unit (e.g., by the head, each single item, or by the count), while most of the produce purchased from the produce display shed may be sold by weight, by the bunch, or by other prepacked units. The farm stand is fully equipped with weighing scales to determine the price for the customer's produce. Honey and eggs that are not from the SFPYO farm but are produced by other people are also sold at the farm stand. On average, during the busy harvesting season the farm stand attends to >150 customers per day.



**Figure 5.** The Farm stand at Specca Farm Pick-Your-Own, Bordentown, New Jersey. To the left is the produce shed where customers may purchase some vegetables; to the right is the scalehouse where the customer's PYO and farm market produce are processed for payment.

SFPYO does not offer wagon/hayrides, a petting zoo, corn maze, or other types of agritourism. Children are encouraged to come to the farm, but must stay with their parents. A picnic area under shade trees is available for families and friends who want to enjoy a meal on the farm and being in the countryside.

The farm employs two family members year-round, as well as one sign maker/field monitor, three clerks, and three field workers seasonally. Part of the reason for the low number of staff is that the customers provide most of the harvesting labor. Because the farm does not offer agritourism activities, this also reduces the number of staff required. However, the work hours can be very long during the August–October harvesting window but all staff are given at least one day off per week to reduce their stress. SFPYO will continue to evaluate whether there is some form of agritourism that is a good fit, but it does not appear to be a high priority for the ethnic customer base.

The post-harvest handling of produce is limited to the crops that are picked ahead for customers who do not want to pick their own produce. There are several retirement communities in our area and the senior citizens are often unable to go into the field to pick. We harvest and refrigerate produce for our farm market sales usually one day in advance.

Customers often comment on the long shelf-life of the produce they have purchased from the farm. This is not too surprising given the freshness and number of days the produce avoids in the supply chain by going directly from the farm to the consumer's home. We have observed that refrigeration is good for extending shelf life and for preserving freshness, but fresh produce from the field, at room temperature, provides the maximum flavor.

Since expanding the farm in 2011, SFPYO has increased to attending to over 4000 customers annually across different ethnic nationalities. Each ethnic group has its own cultural way of harvesting the crops they love in their preferred manner. SFPYO makes efforts to accommodate the unique preferences of each ethnic nationality in the PYO enterprise. Perhaps one of the more challenging issues is that some ethnic dishes use “baby-sized” vegetables such as eggplant, cucumbers, and okra. Harvesting the vegetable at such a small stage greatly reduces the yield per acre and we must charge more accordingly. It is difficult to educate the customer about what size determines a baby product and what determines a mature one. This is one of the areas where cultural differences must be given due consideration when relating to customers. It is a learning opportunity for the farmer and the customer and, once the two sides agree, sociocultural interactions become enhanced and the business opportunity is also enhanced.

## 5. Discussion

The Pick-Your-Own business model is not for every farmer. It involves allowing many people onto your property, interacting with the public, and dealing with the issues that can arise from people not obeying the rules you have set for their conduct while on your farm. This includes littering, picking crops that are not open for picking, driving where they are not allowed, discarding produce they have picked in the field because they decided they don't want it, and theft. The farm staff needs to be diligent in watching the customers when they are in the fields and be firm, but not rude or condescending, when correcting a customer who is out of line. It is the farm's policy to charge customers for what they have picked, even if it is more than they wanted. In some special cases, the farm will accept the excess produce the customer does not want and resell it at the farm stand. SFPYO procures adequate general liability insurance to cover the risk of injury and/or accidents to our customers on the farm.

Keeping track of planting dates, fertilizer application, spraying schedules, varieties, and the amounts of each variety to be grown can be a daunting task and one that we will never do perfectly. We need to be satisfied with getting close to our ideal plan and not be distracted by the minor errors that will inevitably occur.

The major benefits of the Pick-Your-Own business model are that the farmer eliminates the costs for harvesting, packaging, cooling, trucking, and commissions on produce. Together, these costs are often more than the cost to grow the crop. The customer benefits from fresh produce that is cheaper than grocery store prices, is very fresh, and is picked the way the consumer wants, avoiding waste from trimming stems and leaves they cannot eat. The PYO also provides educational and recreational opportunities for the community,

especially for school children and students who are anxious to learn about plant science and agronomy. The farm hosts several school tours through the harvesting season and coordinates with a non-profit farm-gleaning organization, called Farmers Against Hunger, to harvest and distribute excess produce to needy families. These activities provide an opportunity to educate children and adults about commercial agriculture.

Social media, including Facebook and Tik Tok, have changed our marketing strategy drastically. SFPYO was strictly word-of-mouth marketing before these marketing tools became widely used. The signage/marketing employee is responsible for updating the farm's social media accounts, which are dedicated to the farm and not for personal use. By posting information daily, news about the farm is going to our customers frequently and keeping them informed and engaged. Recipes and cooking tips are sometimes included to entice customers to try different ethnic crops. Information on new fields opening, delayed openings caused by bad weather, field conditions, and price discounts are communicated instantly via this type of social media. Many ethnic groups that we serve use these technologies frequently to communicate back to friends and family in their native countries, so it is a media format they are comfortable with. Please feel free to go to the Facebook page, <http://facebook.com/speccafarmspickyourown>, accessed on 15 March 2022 to obtain more information.

## 6. Summary and Conclusions

Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own, LLC., operates a 125-acre PYO farm at Bordentown in Burlington County, New Jersey, USA. Since 2011, the farm has witnessed a dramatic increase in patronage because of increased production and the rapid influx of ethnic nationalities from different parts of the world. Annually, more than 100 different crops are grown to meet the expectation of customers. SFPYO has been successful in recent years because we pay attention to the needs of our customers and value their views. We reach out to the growing ethnic populations in our region, and they provide guidance on what crops to grow and how to refine the production schedule to meet their needs. Our survey of demographic dynamics and produce demand for each year guides our production operations for the next year. In spite of the challenges of meeting the needs of several ethnic nationalities and the logistics for controlling public access on the farm, SFPYO believes the PYO model is a winning approach to assuring and enhancing profitability in an agricultural enterprise established to serve the community far into the future. It is an enterprise that promotes human health and vitality through a culture that provides access to fresh produce.

The United States is a nation of immigrants who desire to eat "comfort food" that has been shared around dinner tables for generations. Careful analysis of the customer base that is available, and what they like to pick, is critical to getting started. Phasing into a PYO business is probably the best strategy versus jumping into it 100%. Customers rarely pick all the harvestable produce off the farm and there is always excess produce to dispose of during the harvesting season. For this reason, PYO farms often have extra produce to take to farm markets. The PYO and direct marketing strategies are synergistic and should be considered together.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization A.O.A. and D.S.; methodology, A.O.A. and D.S.; investigation, D.S., S.S. and A.O.A.; writing—original draft preparation, D.S.; writing—review and editing, A.O.A. and D.S.; funding, D.S., S.S. and A.O.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** No external funding was obtained for this project. Funding for the article's publishing cost (APC) was provided by Specca Farms Pick-Your-Own (SFPYO) and the Entrepreneurial Agriculture (EA) program Account #202848, task 202 from the Department of Plant Biology, Rutgers' School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.

**Data Availability Statement:** This paper did not report any data external to the study.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank Wendy Byer for the produce signs and photos and thank our skilled and friendly staff for making our customer's experience enjoyable so they want to come

back. We want to especially thank Albert Ayeni for his help with identifying new ethnic crops and collaborative crop trials.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethics:** Information provided was voluntarily released by SFPYO based on several years of operating the PYO at Bordentown, New Jersey, USA.

### Abbreviations

SFPYO—Specca Farm Pick-Your-Own; PYO—Pick-Your-Own; NJ—New Jersey; USA—United States of America

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