

# FRUITS OF HIS LABOR

CHARLIE'S PRODUCE  
GROWN FROM THE GROUND UP

*By John Kinmonth*



No matter the state of the economy, Charlie Billow is always in a growing industry. As owner of Charlie's Produce, the largest independently owned produce company in the Northwest, his growth has as much to do with good soil and weather conditions as it does with balance sheets.

Working with growers, restaurants and retailers, Charlie's company provides the crucial link between farm and plate for much of the Northwest. And the numbers are astounding. Charlie's Produce delivers approximately 937 million pounds of produce annually to places as varied as Dutch Harbor in Alaska's remote Aleutian Islands to Seattle's hottest restaurants. His Seattle warehouse alone has more than 2,000 varieties of fruits, vegetables and flowers. Each day, his buyers are on the phone with growers all over the world, from Chelan to Chile.

But it wasn't always so. Charlie grew up in North Seattle and worked for several years on the docks unloading produce as a "lumper" before he landed a job as a truck driver for a wholesale produce distributor.

"Back then, there were a lot of one-truck shows," Charlie says. "They were called peddlers and they would buy and deliver small amounts."

After driving delivery trucks for several years, one of the more popular local peddlers was looking to retire and offered Charlie the opportunity to buy his truck.

"Slim was a character who everybody liked, and he offered me his truck for \$3,500," he says.

Feeling like he had exhausted his opportunities as an employee, he took over Slim's truck at the age of 28.

"I think that first year I made \$9,000," he says.

Despite the humble beginnings, Charlie saw potential and quickly bought another truck. He forged his niche by quickly developing a deft hand for finding the best quality produce, and by doing things for customers that his competitors typically avoided, such as delivering on Saturdays.

"It's simple, the restaurants and stores don't have big enough store-rooms to get through the weekend," he says.

Besides flexibility with deliveries, several key produce innovations contributed to the company's growth, such as supplying fresh basil and Haas avocados year-round—items taken for granted nowadays.

"We had restaurants that wanted to serve fresh pesto, so we needed to find sources for basil year-round," he says. Charlie also worked with farmers to make sure they were only giving him the ripest, blemish-free fruit. Back then, farmers would often pick everything and put it in one box.

"I met with a grower in California and had him pick only red, ripe strawberries, and that kind became our calling card with customers," he says.

Over the years, Charlie's passion for the business, and focus on taking care of his customers and employees have paid off with steady growth every year.

Nowadays, with more than 900 employees and facilities in Seattle, Spokane, Portland, Anchorage and Dutch Harbor, Charlie's Produce has come a long way from its humble origins.

"I thought we were big in the '90s," he says, laughing. Still, Charlie can walk around the huge warehouse and list off the inventory without the aid of notes.

"It's one of my knacks," he says.

One benefit of being in a business dictated by seasons is that it always left time in the winter for skiing with his family. Although his company is now busy all year, Charlie takes time each winter to chase storms.



Charlie donning a winter coat to visit the temperature-controlled warehouse.

**“SLIM WAS A CHARACTER WHO EVERYBODY LIKED, AND HE OFFERED ME HIS TRUCK FOR \$3,500.”**

## 5 REFLECTIONS

### **Favorite book:**

"Shogun" by James Clavell

### **Favorite food:**

Eggs

### **Favorite movie:**

"The Big Lebowski"

### **Best Advice:**

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."—My Dad

### **Favorite vacation destination:**

Anywhere with 24 inches of fresh powder.

### **Favorite Bellevue Club**

**Activity:**  
Basketball