

Prologue

The sun is just coming up as I drive across the George Washington Bridge and head into the WNBC-TV studios in New York City (pre-pandemic). It's a drive that I've made every Saturday morning for the last 30 years in order to do my weekly 'Produce Pete' segment on WNBC 4 New York's *Weekend Today in New York* morning show and one that I've come to know well – though at the same time an incredible opportunity that I could never have imagined would be a reality when I was growing up in North Jersey as the oldest son of an immigrant produce peddler.

My routine, at least for the last several years up until the pandemic, has gone like this. On the Tuesday or Wednesday before each Saturday morning's broadcast, I e-mail our show's producer to confirm the exact fruit or vegetable I'm going to cover on that Saturday's show. I like to wait until the last minute to do that to ensure the quality and availability of the item – two musts for me – because I don't want to talk about something that viewers can't find in their local store; for that reason, you'll never see me covering something like cherries in January. I then send the

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producer an outline of the information I'm going to share in my segment so that the team can prepare highlights to include on the ticker or 'crawl line' running on the bottom of the TV screen during the segment.

On the Wednesday before the Saturday show, I usually buy several cases of the product I'm going to be talking about. Though I'm sure a number of providers would be happy to supply me with free produce for use on the show in exchange for a mention, I've never taken products for free from anyone for the segment and have always bought my own products outright to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest and that I'm able to share my opinions on produce free and clear each week – another must for me. On Thursday, the producer gets back to me with the approximate time that my segment will be airing that Saturday and who will be on the crew.

When Saturday morning rolls around, I get up at around 3 a.m. (my usual wake-up hour after a lifetime in the produce business), get ready to go, and post a note to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram by 5 a.m. about what I'll be discussing on the show that morning and which anchors will be joining me, and then leave my house in Passaic County, NJ by around 6:15 or 6:30 a.m. At the point where I cross the George Washington Bridge, I phone the WNBC crew to say that I'll be at the studios in 15 minutes.

Once I arrive at the WNBC studios on 48th Street in Manhattan, a crew member waits for me to carry in the products I've brought and brings them upstairs while I go park. Parking

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regulations got much tighter at the building after 9/11 and I now use a parking lot across the street. At the WNBC building, security members scan my pass and I get to our studio on the third floor by around 7:30 or 7:45 a.m.

With 60 or 90 minutes to go before my segment, which currently runs at around 9:15 a.m., I go in the back and set up my display. I try to set up my table the same way it would look if I were selling products in my store, showing entire cases of grapefruits or avocados, for example, not just two or three pieces. Depending on the time of year, we may also have props to work into the display as well, such as a Super Bowl tablecloth, heart balloons for Valentine's Day, and/or prepared dishes, like guacamole with chips or chocolate-covered strawberries, which my wife Bette makes the night before.

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Discussing the joys of chocolate-covered strawberries with “Weekend Today in New York” news anchor Pat Battle (above) and the features of navel oranges with NBC 4 New York’s Jen Maxfield (left) during recent segments of NBC 4 New York’s “Weekend Today in New York”

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After *Weekend Today in New York's* Raphael Miranda covers the weather forecast, the crew wheels my table out and I do a quick 15-second teaser about what I'll be covering right after the commercial break and why viewers shouldn't miss it. Two minutes later, I'm back on for my segment, which usually runs about 3-5 minutes long and often involves our news anchors, Pat Battle or Gus Rosendale, and/or floor supervisor and ever-ready taste-tester, Tere Mele.



With the “Weekend Today in New York” crew, including (left to right) meteorologist Raphael Miranda and news anchors Pat Battle and Gus Rosendale

When my segment is over at 9:30 a.m., we send all of the produce to the WNBC control room upstairs for distribution to crew members and other colleagues. While the anchors stay on to prepare *Weekend Today in New York* segments that will be aired later in taxis, I get back in my car with any serving pieces I've

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brought and arrive home by around 11:30. The segment goes up on WNBC's website shortly after – I have my own Produce Pete page (www.nbcnewyork.com/tag/produce-pete/) – and I also post it to my own website (www.producepete.com) as well as to my Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts that afternoon.

I feel honored and privileged to be on WNBC 4 New York every weekend sharing my knowledge from over 70 years of experience in the produce business as “Produce Pete,” the version of Pete Napolitano that I've been since my mid-40s. For something I never expected or even wanted to do when I was first offered the chance to be on TV three decades ago, it's totally changed my life and I hope to keep doing the show for another 30 years. I've worked hard to bring viewers the best of my expertise every single week and it's more fun than ever now thanks to the great people I work with and the incredible response I get from our millions of viewers throughout New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut as well as from fans all over the country and the world who have their own WNBC affiliate or who pick up the New York feed.

Among the questions I hear most often, people always want to know how I've lasted this long on TV, a medium well-known for being fast-paced, fickle, and ever-changing. “What's your secret?” they ask. Honestly, I think it's a combination of things. Though I never had any formal training in TV, I was taught to look people in the eye by an Italian immigrant father who came to America knowing no English and having to read facial expressions and non-verbal cues to survive and succeed. I've never been nervous around TV cameras and have considered them like looking into someone's eye.

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I also attribute my longevity to honesty, sincerity, consistency, and hard work, all values I learned from both my and Bette's working-class parents and other people I would come to admire and respect throughout my life – people who came from humble beginnings, worked tirelessly to build a better life, and never took an opportunity for granted.

And then there's the food, and the stories. Whether you're the president of the United States, the Queen of England, or a working-class citizen like most of us, everybody eats – and food has an undeniable way of triggering memories. Growing up in a large family with a colorful cast of characters and unforgettable experiences – from incredibly difficult ones to wonderful and special ones – that made an indelible impact on me, I've found that sharing these personal stories during my segments reminds people of simpler times, perhaps similar experiences from their own childhood, and touches viewers in an intangible way that simple hard-and-fast rules on selecting, storing, and preparing produce never could. Though I'm sharing information on produce and recipes, it's the stories and the nostalgia that people love to hear. Maybe that's the real secret to my longevity on TV.

The truth is, how many times has the taste of something brought back all sorts of memories (good or bad)? I can't tell you how often different foods remind me of experiences I've had and people I've known throughout my life. It's all about food and memories, I always say. I hope that the memories and recipes I'm about to share give you a flavor for my story and for the experiences and tastes that have served as the culinary soundtrack of my life.