

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Rotten Produce On Shelves At St. Croix Cost-U-Less, Asst. Manager Says He Was Unaware Of Issue, Calls It 'Embarrassing' (Pt. 2)

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VI Consortium received a tip early in March about spoiled and rotting produce being sold at the St. Croix location of Cost-U-Less, a multinational wholesale retailer with two locations in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The company's website, [which serves as the web portal for all of its stores](#), has as its motto: "Always find freshest produce at Cost-U-Less."

However, that was not what *VI Consortium* found when conducting an on-site investigation at the wholesaler.

On March 11, *VI Consortium* reporters visited the St. Croix store, located in Sion Farm, first to look at the produce section and then to talk to the manager about pictures the *Consortium* received showing rotten avocados and other produce. It did not take long -- in fact, only within minutes of being in the store -- before reporters found countless spoiled items in the produce section, seemingly having been left on the shelves for days of nearby workers.



Cost-U-Less employee hauls

away rotten avocados

VI Consortium found spoiled and rotting eggplants, lettuce, parsley, green peppers and apples. The eggplants were soft, bruised and moldy. The apples were heavily bruised and sponge-like. The avocados were so rotten that an employee who came to inspect them after being informed of their condition, hurriedly carried away more than a dozen after the items began to crumble and ooze as they were being inspected. The parsley were slimy and browning, and the decay in the lettuce could be seen in a specific area that had turned black.

Asked to speak with the manager, an employee told *VI Consortium* he was unavailable because he was in a meeting. However, as *VI Consortium* continued to walk through the section inspecting the various produce, the assistant store manager, John Allison, showed up.

Allison said the produce were inspected and rotated everyday by shift employees whose job was to ensure spoiled goods were discarded and the shelves restocked with fresh items. In order to do this, Allison said, an employee was assigned a shift from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., and another would come in early in the morning, before the store opened to the public, to inspect and restock the produce.

VI Consortium visited the store at about 10:30 a.m. on March 11. Reporters questioned Allison about his assertion that produce was inspected every day, both the night before and prior to the store opening each morning, yet multiple rotten items had remained on the shelves well into the day's business hours.



Rotten and moldy eggplant found on Cost-U-Less'

produce shelf

Allison said he was not aware that the rotten items were on the store's shelves and he learned of the matter for the first time while speaking with reporters. *VI Consortium* informed Allison that reporters had received a tip about the condition of the store's produce section three days prior to the visit, but it appeared that the produce section had remained untouched.

As reporters pressed Allison further, he admitted that changes needed to be made and said he would rectify the situation.

"That's unacceptable," he began. "It's embarrassing. I'll make sure I get a hold [of the employees] and say to them, 'Hey, I've got customers coming in here, and they're not happy with what they're seeing. Because I shop there [and] I'm not happy with that.'"

"So, I will come down on my employees and they will correct this here believe me or not, they will correct this," Allison went on. "We don't have room for that. We're not here to steal [customers] money or anything like that; I can honestly tell you that I have the best customer service on the island."

VI Consortium wanted to know by what metric did Allison measure his claims that the St. Croix Cost-U-Less branch had the best customer service on the island. The assistant store manager gave an example of one customer who had purchased a fan and returned it, pointing out that it was evident the fan had been in use for some time because of its condition. However, he said the return was processed and the customer was given a refund.

"This is an island," Allison said. "This ain't like Chicago; this is an island. I need her to come back next week and I need you to come back happy next week," he added. "I don't make money by ripping people off."

Allison did not offer the results of surveys conducted in order to qualify his claim.

As Allison, just one year and three months into his job, continued to insist he could not have a sit-down interview with *VI Consortium* reporters to provide more details of his store's inspection schedule and other pertinent matters, he suggested that a meeting be arranged between him and the company's CEO, who is based in Canada.

Allison told reporters he would provide the CEO's direct number; however, he changed his mind and instead offered reporters the number of the company's human resource manager, Gabrielle M. Wilkerson, based in Bellevue, Wash.

"I don't want to give you all my boss' cellphone number, I mean that's just fair," Allison said.

Allison said he could not show reporters company files, including the last time the store was inspected by the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA) or the date the last inspection was made with his boss. However, he told reporters he would return to the store on March 13 to discuss the matter in more detail.



Rotten lettuce with black decay found at Cost-U-Less

VI Consortium has reached out multiple times to both Allison and the company's corporate offices and have left messages requesting a meeting; however, calls have not been returned at the time of this story.

Immediately following the store visit to Cost-U-Less on the morning of March 11, *VI Consortium* visited Plaza Extra East, located just west of Cost-U-Less, to investigate the condition of that supermarket's produce section.

Upon arrival, an employee was seen inspecting the produce, searching for items that are no longer fresh, removing them, then rotating and restocking the shelves.

The man said the inspection was conducted twice per day.

When asked if Plaza receives complaints from customers, the employee said it was inevitable.

"Customers will always complain," he said. "Even if it's good they will complain. You know how customers behave."

While *VI Consortium* inspected and found the items on Plaza Extra East's produce shelves to be fresh that Wednesday, there have been complaints from customers who say they have had to return items to the store because they were spoiled.

Yusuf Yusuf, Plaza Extra East's owner, told *VI Consortium* in a recent interview that he had a mechanism in place, with a staff of nine employees, including a manager and supervisor, that ensure quality is delivered in the store's produce section.



... is making sure that we have fresh product. Making sure
... in, they feel like they're just picking out of the garden," he
... trees in their backyards."

VI Consortium reporter holds up a rotten avocado

moments before an employee hauled them away with a cart

Yusuf continued: "We try our very best to make sure that our products are rotated. We try to make sure that the products get the attention that they need, because you've got products that come in every week. Every week we get a new batch of products and we try to make sure that we rotate [these products], not on a weekly basis, but twice a day. And that [goes for] all the perishable [goods] that we have.

"We try to give small quantities for the customers where we prepackage it, and that way they could still see. If there's any suggestions from any customers that they want to help

with the products that we have on the shelves, they give us any type of suggestions, and we automatically take them into consideration."

Yusuf said Plaza East takes action on customer suggestions and the company welcomes the feedback.

"Because, honestly, they are the ones who are buying the products," he said. "We want to hear what you have to say, and it's very important to us that every customer who comes in, is satisfied when they're leaving."

This *VI Consortium* investigative will continue with other supermarkets on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Cynthia Graham assisted with reporting for this story.

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