

Delays to Valencia harvests in Citrusdal

September 15, 2017

Despite excellent Brix levels, there have been delays in Midnight, Valencia and some late Mandarin packing in Citrusdal, Western Cape. Acid levels have been slow in dropping to the required levels – a localised phenomenon that occurs from time to time – presumably related to climatic conditions, and has caused as much as six weeks' delay in the Valencia harvest.

Citrus growers in this area have access to the USA market, which generally requires a high sugar-to-acid ratio, and growers are keeping the fruit on the trees until levels are safely below the maximum of 1.5.

Citrusdal growers pride themselves on the sweetness of their soft citrus, like late Mandarins (as well as navel-types and Navels). They say that's due to their Mediterranean climate, their water quality and their soil type.

The Volcani Institute's Orri is becoming a particular favourite. "It is incredibly tasty, known for its high Brix and distinctive scented flavour which makes it quite unique," says Piet Smit of Favourite Fresh Export. "Most markets don't yet make a distinction between the Orri and the Mor, but in France they've started distinguishing and they ask for Orri specifically. Our big markets for Orri are France and the USA."

He singles out soft citrus – Clemenules, late Mandarins, as well as Nadorcotts – as the outstanding cultivars of the season in their region. Hendrik Warnich, marketing manager of ALG Estates, agrees that the Brix levels are excellent this season.

Buoyant Valencia markets globally

"The markets for Valencias are looking good, and we don't have the problems we had for navels," says Smit. "Demand is high in the EU, the USA and the Far East and still relatively strong in the Middle East. This is due to sensible and responsible marketing by South African exporters."

Hannes de Waal, managing director of the Sundays River Citrus Company in the Eastern Cape says that their total citrus volumes were the lowest this year that it has been in 10 years due to three very difficult factors: the infamous navel splitting, followed by hot winds in mid-winter damaging the trees and lastly, extremely small-sized lemons. However, Valencias are working out well for the Eastern Cape this year.

The Valencia harvest is riding high on a buoyant market. In-store juice machines in Europe have been a boon for South African Valencias, especially in the wake of hurricane Irma in Florida, although South African Valencia exporters say there was strong demand even before that. The global orange market was empty, with South Africa sending out almost seven million fewer cartons of navels this year.

"A small size on a Valencia is no sin," notes De Waal. "We have a lot of 88s and 105s – medium sizes – which is just right for the Middle East and Europe. Perhaps we have more 144s than we'd like, but we have a good juice market. There's firm demand for South African Valencias, regardless of volume."

Effect of drought

Citrusdal is situated along the upper reaches of the Olifants River, which has been their salvation up until now. Producers are allowed to withdraw water from the river until the end of September, as the region is a winter rainfall area, and growers are currently filling their dams from the river for the coming season.

"We're expecting water restrictions going forward, and we're in trouble. It's going to be an incredibly challenging season," warns Piet Smit. Okkie Burger of Quattro Citrus, part of the Muñoz Group agrees, citing this winter's below average rainfall figures. Where usually they expect around 350mm, he's measured only about 130mm thus far. "What we're waiting for is a solid amount of rain, 50mm or more, to fill up the river. This winter we've been getting a lot of small showers."

Tough decisions

There are indications of citrus producers following the example of topfruit and stonefruit producers in the Boland, which is to prioritise the water needs of high-value, productive orchards at the expense of older or less productive ones.

Less productive orchards are sometimes cut back, leaving the rootstock and a basic framework of branches, painted white to protect against sunburn, and just kept alive for the coming season, foregoing a harvest from those blocks. Other growers are taking out orchards originally only earmarked for removal some years hence.

The Sundays River Valley has been in a more fortunate position than both the Western Cape and the other large fruit production regions of the Eastern Cape – Patensie and the Langkloof – because of their relative proximity to the giant Gariep Dam, which is a reliable source of irrigation water for them. The dam is currently 66% full, so water isn't such a concern but precipitation isn't the only thing that rain brings.

Complex combination of factors

"There's a whole combination of factors that have to be right, among them cooler temperatures during blossoming and attempts to avoid the problems we had last year with the Navels. We're lucky to have sufficient irrigation water but rainwater washes away built-up salts from the soil. Thunderstorms release nitrogen to an extent that's difficult to do manually. You can see the trees are greener after a thunderstorm," explains Hannes de Waal of the Sundays River Citrus Company. "We're not complaining, we're still very grateful. Our situation isn't as critical as in other parts of the country but still, we need rain. We need about 100mm before the end of November."

In Citrusdal and the Sundays River Valley, as in the rest of the Cape, farmers are hoping for substantial late winter rains or, at least, a mild spring. –*Fresh Plaza*

Related Posts





Good citrus season especially for Valencia

"The citrus season in the north is going as well as we hoped, with volumes...



South African citrus export estimates for 2017

The 2017 citrus export estimates aren't that dissimilar to those of 2015, says the CEO...



Soft citrus growers pleased with strong global demand

The strong and warm wind that accompanied the good rain and snow two weeks ago...



South African grape growers invest in late season varieties

Big expansions are taking place in the Namibian grape production. It is one of the...



A very different citrus harvest for South Africa

The citrus harvest in Citrusdal in the Western Cape of South Africa is running around...



High temperatures produced quality citrus

The hot summer was very good for Citrusdal's citrus, according to Piet Smit, marketing director...



South African cherry planting expands to the Cape

South Africa has a very short cherry season which is difficult to predict, but just...



South African mango season in an off cycle

After what was possibly the largest harvest in the history of the South African mango...



Eastern Cape: Early signs of splitting on late navels

Navel producers in the Eastern Cape are making the most of the cards they were...



South African table grape season well on track

South Africa's table grape producers in the Orange River region have finished picking, as have...



South Africa's worst drought in a century reduces citrus harvest

Production of navel oranges and soft-citrus fruits from the Western Cape province is forecast to...



Western Cape vets gets international accreditation

The Western Cape's veterinary laboratory in Stellenbosch has received international accreditation for its animal disease...

