

South Africa: Great prices for grapefruit, but quality needs to improve

This season has been a particularly good season for South African grapefruit, but it has been an extremely odd one, according to Stephan Scillers of Soleil Citrus, as the pre season first started with a lot of talk and planning between producers, exporters and people with their own agendas, which is normal in all forms of business and certainly in fresh produce industry.

"We have welcomed the odd situation, because it's positive for us. The South African crop was good, it has met the volume expectations and certainly where there was a plan put together by certain role players to manipulate how we export our volumes, it worked," according to Scillers.

Instead of all the growers shipping the grapefruit as soon as they could, they actually stretched it out which avoided the spike in volumes which usually happens every year. So the reduction in prices was avoided. "The probable lesson that can be learnt out of this is that we should be controlling the delivery of volumes, spreading this over a longer period. I am of the opinion that to ensure we achieve this, we need to increase internal standards of quality. Our official export minimum standard is very low, yet in general South African grapefruit quality is good, so why harvest before it reaches its optimum quality? By doing this the likely hood of achieving the longer delivery period as mentioned would probably work automatically. What indirectly happened this year, was that we didn't take the grapefruit off the trees at a rapid rate, and the main reason was that it hadn't coloured up properly yet. Which meant some of the areas, instead of taking up all their product up to, say, week 23, which is quite a common thing and then being done with it, they ended up having to wait for the colour and it took much longer," explained Scillers.

The lack of colouration was due to winter being almost non-existent this season in the main grapefruit growing areas in South Africa. It took a lot longer for the fruit to colour up and this meant that the fruit wasn't being rushed off, but was actually being taken off as best as it could at the time, which basically lengthened the season. Stretching the season is vital in bringing stability to the market.

"We have a surprisingly low minimum export standard of quality in South Africa," according to Scillers. "Its rather annoying as in general the standard out of South Africa is of high quality. This does open itself up to growers being able to harvest earlier and this in turn potentially brings our reputation as a whole down."

This year it has worked out from a South African point of view because of the exchange rate, the shortage in the market and the levelling of the delivery. In Sciller's view a lot of people will be thinking, 'We did really well this year, everything is sweet and the future is bright' but according to him, the reality is that they have to look at why it worked out and learn from why it worked out.

"International countries need to place higher minimum standards on our internal quality. Japan for example has a minimum of 9 brix. If you ask the Japanese what a good standard is, however, they will say 9 is far too low. The least we should do is increase our minimum standards to 8 instead of the current 7 for the non Japanese markets. I'm saying this because we don't generally have a brix problem, but I would even welcome 9. If we increased it, the amount that could be exported, would in part not be able to be exported and/or be forced to be exported at a later stage both potentially resulting in a increase in demand."

"What we need to do is put a better quality product on the market. If we want to get the younger generation interested we should be giving ourselves a chance by letting their eating experience be a positive one. If you give them a high quality product you're creating an opportunity for them to adopt it. I love grapefruit and I believe the Florida grapefruit is the best in the world, because it truly is. The main reason for saying this is that its eating quality is so good. In South Africa we pride ourselves on the phenomenal appearance but our eating quality is still low in comparison, can you imagine if we improved this?

"This year we have had a lot of factors that have worked out for us. As it happens the market generally across the world was low on stock by the time we arrived and we didn't deliver at high speed as usual due to the colour. There is hardly a market in the world that hasn't done well for us this year, but we can't bank on this happening again next year.

"The sensible thing to do would be to deliver the fruit over a longer period of time like this year. But we all have the mentality of picking the fruit as soon as we can and sending it so we can get there before everyone else. Hopefully this year's example will be a lesson to everyone, but I know how we all think and we tend to say, while everyone else is storing their harvest, we'll quickly send ours," Scillers concludes.

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