Citrus growers in KZN believe in tomorrow

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Justin Chadwick, CEO of the Citrus Growers’ Association (CGA) suggested at the magazine’s last board meeting that I should visit Durban to meet with some role players within the citrus industry, as well as with the editor of The SA Sugar Journal. Being editor of the SA Vrugte Joernaal/Fruit Journal for almost five years now, it was actually a visit long overdue. Thanks to the outstanding organizing skills of Gloria Weare, Justin’s personal assistant, I experienced an unforgettable week in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN).

A
after getting lost on my way to the Fawncastle Guest House in Hillcrest on Sunday night and being rescued by a Zulu taxi driver (an angel sent straight from heaven), I spent a lovely evening with Gloria and her son, Craig, at their home for dinner – getting my wits back for exploring the countryside the next day…

On Monday morning Gloria met me at 8:00 to visit some of the growers in southern Natal. Driving past field after field of sugar cane, it felt almost impossible to believe that in this beautiful landscape of never ending green hills (a thousand hills to say the least), I was to meet with some citrus growers. But, like any other visitor to this part of our country, I was in for the biggest surprise of my life. Even though Gloria and I ‘almost’ got lost near Ixopo, we managed to find our way to the Woodburn brothers’ farms.

Meeting Michael Woodburn

CGA regional director - Southern-KZN

The Woodburn brothers, Mike, Ken and Peter are the fifth generation farming on Finchley, the original family’s farm, just north of the Umzimkulu River. The farm was cultivated since 1857 when their ancestors settled themselves on this former no man’s land. Twenty-five years ago the first citrus trees were planted in this area. Since then the area has been identified as specifically good for lemons, hence lemons have become a big focus point.

In 1996 a group of commercial farmers in the Umzimkulu Valley began establishing citrus as a commercial crop with a view to targeting the export markets. Approximately 190 000 trees (278 hectares) of orchards were planted during a six-year period and these orchards began producing marketable fruit in 2001.

The farmers were convinced that the most cost effective method to pack fruit for export would be through a central packhouse. Various options were available to the group and in September 2002, Carisbrooke Valley Citrus (Pty) Ltd (CVC) was awarded the tender to purchase the Tambankulu packing equipment located in Swaziland. After nail-biting organization and last-minute arrangements the packhouse equipment was transported on eighteen super link-trailers and relocated onto the Carisbrooke premises in time to pack the 2003 citrus crop. The packhouse floor had to be cast just weeks prior to all the packing equipment being delivered.

In February 2005 a de-greening facility was built so that early season fruit could be packed and marketed to its best advantage. This allows CVC growers to target early high paying markets with certain orchards and also helps to spread the picking season.

May 2007 saw the opening of the chemical-free production line. This line was built so that growers could target niche export markets, in particular Japan chem-free lemons. This development has proved to be a major success and indications are that it will provide CVC growers with a significant competi-
tive advantage in the market place.

Mike took us on a sightseeing tour through the packhouse, their pride and joy! On entry one is immediately overwhelmed by the lovely citrus aroma and splashes of orange color everywhere. We were fortunate to see this facility in full production with lemons and palmer navels being packed for various markets. According to Mike 134 people are employed in the packhouse during the season. Craig Archibald, in only his second season as packhouse manager, enjoys all the challenges provided by this exciting industry. A very serious hurdle for the growers in this area is that of land claims that have yet to be settled.

A river runs through

Near Richmond, after climbing out of the stunning Umkomaas Valley, we pulled into the farm driveway of Rob Crausaz. When he said we should leave the car there on the dirt road we knew we were in for another breathtaking experience. Rob drove us in his 4X4 vehicle through a rocky, mountainous paradise, his farm Doornkloof. Nestled in the Umkomaas Valley, we drove through orange orchards with warthog families, bushbuck and impala grazing peacefully everywhere. Rob laughingly remembers Nino Pirelli saying that if you grow oranges here, in this valley, you really WANT to grow oranges!

According to Rob the valley has the ideal climate for navels and valencias. He has almost 30 hectares of citrus and plans to replace his sugar cane fields gradually with more citrus orchards. Their citrus is packed at the Katope packing shed in Richmond. Because of heavy dew, packing starts only at 10:00 in the morning. He hires staff on a day to day basis. Apart from the oranges, Rob also cultivates tomatoes and cabbages.

In 2000 Rob started the second part of his business, a game lodge for mostly overseas trophy hunters, with kudu, impala and bushbuck to be hunted. The landscape is truly spectacular with the Umkomaas river running through the farm of 2 000 hectares of unfenced land at the bottom of the valley. Over four hundred species of birds live in this area, making this a popular destination for bird watchers.

Apparently Cecil John Rhodes and his brother started farming in the valley below Doornkloof before he set off for the diamond fields. According to history they planted cotton. Rob is the third generation (since 1912) of the Crausaz family farming in Richmond. He and his wife, Liane, have two children; Andrew, studying at Stellenbosch University and Nicola (27), filming and
editing safari’s all over Africa. With the love of the land running through their veins, it is no surprise that Andrew plans to start farming as soon as he finishes his studies. Taking us back to our vehicle, he told us that he looks forward to it.

**Durban Port: where the action takes place**

On Wednesday I paid a visit to the Durban Port, under escort of Mitchell Brooke, the new Logistics Co-ordinator of the CGA. A lot of activities take place at this point, before shipping. All citrus destined for the special markets, Japan and South Korea leaves from this point. Two percent of cartons of each consignment are inspected. The sample cartons are inspected by the Department of Agriculture, as well as the inspectors from the country of export, such as Japan or South Korea. The random checks play a very important role in ensuring that the fruit shipped to these special export destinations comply with all phytosanitary requirements. The fruit undergoes a 72 hours pre-cooling period before it is loaded onto the shipping vessels. According to Faisal Asmal (Special Exports Programme Co-ordinator) Citrus Black Spot rejections have dropped dramatically compared to previous years.

The CGA plays a facilitating role, running the whole programme, getting all parties involved and seeing to it that the chain is run continuously. Growers, exporters, shipping lines, containers, inspectors, clearing agents and getting all of these together, ensuring that everything runs according to plan, requires careful planning and multitasking. “You can plan the whole week’s schedule, but still there will definitely be delays. Whenever there is transport, there will be some kind of delay,” says Faisal. Inspection starts at 8:00 each morning from Monday to Friday and finishes at 16:00. On Saturdays and Sundays inspection takes place from 8:00 to 18:00. This busy schedule runs usually from mid April, until the last week in July, with a minimum of ten South African inspectors for both terminals. Sixteen to eighteen vessels per season on average leave from Durban Port. The average capacity per vessel is five and a half thousand pallets, but sometimes they load super reefers with even more fruit.

Faisal, referred to as ‘babysitter’ to the Japanese and South Korean inspectors visiting South Africa during the season, tells with enthusiasm and compassion about the requirements, effort and restrictions regarding the accommodation and safety of these inspectors. Strict restrictions from their governments have to be applied at all times. Their safety is a big priority, as well as any social appointments that may occur in order to safeguard them from briberies etc. “My day starts at 06:30 and I am lucky to be home at 21:00, seven days per week.” Due to his dedication, South Africa has a clean record and good standing with these countries.

According to Faisal, the Korean special export is the most expensive programme, because it is very time consuming and actually very small. In 2005, a booming year, 4½ to 5 million cartons were shipped to Japan compared to the 200 000 cartons shipped to Korea. China’s registration process is very strict, like Korea’s, with inspectors coming to South Africa the year before harvesting, with very strict quality requirements.

Faisal has been working in the citrus industry for the past fourteen years, nine of these years for the CGA. When asked
how his long hours at work influence his family life, he said that Shumshaad, his wife, is very supportive and that they and their only child, Tasneem (15) make up for some special family time the rest of the year.

**People stand together in heart of Zululand**

Heading north of Durban, passing Stanger, Mandini and Nyoni we took the Dokodweni offramp on Thursday morning to Gingindlovu/Eshowe/Ulundi right into the heart of Zululand. Along the way, between sugar cane fields and citrus orchards irrigated by sprinklers, Shane Dellis (CGA Nkwalini director) met us to show us the way. At the Crookes Brothers’ Riversbend Estate in the Nkwaleni Valley I met with some growers of this part of KZN, Shane, Dieter Hietsermann of Crookes Brothers Ltd and Bester Snyman. Citrus has been cultivated here since the 1930’s.

The Nkwaleni Valley has a unique climate. Surrounded by mountains they have a very low rainfall and the whole area depends on water from the Goedetrou Dam, the Mhlatuze River and a 42 kilometer canal system. With a rainfall of 650 to 700 millimeter per annum, as opposed to the annual 1 000 ml on the other side of the mountains, this valley of 11 to 12 thousand hectares of crops has a relatively high risk profile regarding availability of water. Everything cultivated here has to be irrigated, mostly done by micro-irrigation. An estimated 160 000 ton of sugar cane and 2 000 ha of citrus (2.5 million cartons) are harvested annually, with white grapefruit being the main citrus crop. This area is also ideal for subtropical fruit. Pests are under good control with only a small percentage of fruit fly and Blackspot. False codling moth is becoming a bigger problem with an invader fly from Mozambique a possible threat. “We are monitoring everything and do not experience real problems with pests.”

As in most parts of KZN, land reform and claims are one of the challenges at the moment. According to Shane, Bester and Dieter the people in the Valley are in a transition period from previously privately owned land to partnerships between old and new owners. “More land will go, but with mentoring programmes, profit sharing and other partnerships working very well, we are positive about the outcome for everyone,” says Bester who has been involved in mentorship for the past five to seven years.

Shane, Bester and Dieter agree that at the moment the biggest challenges for this area are water, electricity and labour. Because of the escalating HIV/Aids related mortality rate, more and more pickers had to be fetched from other parts of the country or even from neighboring countries. “Two years ago we started getting people from the Transkei during season times. This year we even had to fetch workers from as far as Mozambique,” says Dieter. “Further more, regarding price increases with everything just getting more and more expensive, we are stuck in a pair of pincers, with our profits getting smaller and smaller.” In spite of all the challenges, everybody agrees that the people of the community in the valley support each other, standing together, believing in and hoping for a better tomorrow.

**A better future**

It is said that in South Africa, one does not encounter problems anymore. The word has changed to challenges. Meeting with people in agriculture, specifically in this case the citrus fruit industry, one is awed by the sincerity, integrity and enthusiasm with which all role players try to overcome obstacles, facing challenges in order to build a better future for all.