Australasian topfruit developer Prevar is aiming to rejuvenate and revolutionise the international fresh pear business by launching a range that combines the flavour of European pears with the texture of Japanese varieties and the shelf-life and storage capabilities of Chinese types.

Targeting what it sees as broad consumer appeal for the new pears among traditional Asian and traditional European pear consumers, the range could eventually include pear varieties with new flavours including melon, coconut, plum and tropical fruit.

The first cultivars to be released, which are due to be planted in 2014, are said to constitute an entirely new consumer fruit range boasting unique and striking skin colours and shapes, as well as a crisp, juicy and tasty eating experience. They will be sold initially as a premium purchase under the Piqa label, although a move towards more mainstream markets could follow.

According to Prevar chief executive Brett Ennis, as conventional, interspecific hybrids of European, Japanese and Chinese pear cultivars, Piqa fruit will offer the same ready-to-eat convenience of apples combined with "exceptional" potential in terms of their storage and shelf-life.

"Most European pears require exposure to cold temperatures after harvest followed by warm conditioning before being ready to eat. When ripe they have a soft, melting or buttery texture and often characteristically strong flavours, but tend to have short shelf-life," he explained.

"In contrast, Chinese and Japanese pears can be eaten from the tree and have crisp textures, but mostly mild flavours. Chinese pears used in the breeding programme had a coarser texture than Japanese pears, but superior coldstorage and shelf-life performance. The new fruits combine the best traits of those three species to produce fruit that can be ready to eat at harvest without conditioning after coldstorage, and which can still develop strong flavours."

Child of the eighties

Piqa is the result of a three-decade initiative established by renowned breeder Allan White during the 1980s and now led by Richard Volz and Lester Brewer. Since 2004, Prevar has been working on developing a strategy to introduce the fruit to growers and markets.

Combining attractive colours and shapes with high eating quality, the Piqa

cultivars due to be released in the coming years have an apparent low susceptibility to scuffing when handled.

Many of them also have interesting and novel flavours, some of which have not been found in pears before. "These include tropical fruit, tropical pear, melon, coconut and plum, as well as recognisable European pear flavours," Ennis revealed. "Acid levels are generally low or balanced with high sweetness. These attributes are often maintained over a long cold-air storage and shelf-life – for some, up to six months' storage and possibly beyond, followed by three weeks' shelf-life."

Brett Ennis, Prevar

Prevar is poised to begin marketing one of its new Piqa-branded pears in Australia and New Zealand, with plans to begin planting trees in 2014, with fruit available two to three years after planting. Commercial release of a further cultivar is anticipated in 2015 or 2016.

In the meantime, testing of elite selections is already underway at a number of commercial orchard test sites. Prevar has already licensed a fruit marketing company in Europe and will be making a joint announcement very shortly.

"We expect one Piqa-brand cultivar to be available in limited quantities in selected European markets as early as 2015," suggested Ennis (pictured). "Several further releases are scheduled to be available in the five to seven years following this."

The latest issues of Eurofruit, Asiafruit and Americafruit carry an exclusive interview with Brett Ennis about the launch of the new Piqa pears range. Click here to subscribe...