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By Martyn Fisher

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FPJ Interview: The Mango Man

FPJ speaks with Paul Tilbury, head of fruit at Wealmoor, about the latest goings-on in the world of mangoes



Martyn Fisher speaks with Paul Tilbury, head of fruit at Wealmoor, a family-owned business and leading supplier to UK retailers, and the foodservice and wholesale sectors.

Where do mangoes fit into Wealmoor's business?

The mango is very much a part of our heritage, and has been a core product within the company's diverse range of tropical fruit and vegetables for more than 40 years. We initially brought the first commercial arrivals into the UK by air from Mexico.

The ensuing period has enabled the business to build up a unique and comprehensive sourcing network throughout the world with vertical integration and key partnerships with some of the world's best commercial growers throughout South and Central America, the Caribbean, West Africa, Israel and the sub-continent, and this ability to knit together a mix of relatively short seasons for preferred varieties and balancing both the

expectations of growers and customers alike has been central to the company's success.

How has the market changed in recent years?

While the market has seen steady growth, the strong consumer preference for fibreless varieties such as Kent and Keitt has brought its own set of challenges, especially with an increased preference in continental Europe for fibreless mango backed up by an ability to deliver strong values back to growers - the UK marketplace having to work particularly hard to match the performance of the European market over the past couple of years, especially in periods of relative scarcity such as season transitions during May and June. This is especially important when growers continue to face upward pressures on cost alongside the typically smaller yields in marketable sizes compared to mainstays such as the more fibrous Tommy Atkins variety.

How are things looking for the summer?

Changes in seasonal production are difficult to predict - for example, the soon-to-start Israeli season experienced an almost perfect flowering, but the final fruit set has not quite matched early expectations and production is now likely to be a relatively modest increase on last season. Earlier sources such as West Africa have already experienced much improved flowering and production in 2014 compared to last year - particularly the Ivory Coast where the season has recently finished and also in Gambia where Wealmoor has been farming for more than 20 years and is anticipating strong volumes from the company's own 500-acre Radville Farm mango plantation, which is currently in harvest.

What are the key varieties?

Wealmoor's understanding of the marketplace with an early recognition of the consumer preference for visually attractive 'blushed' fruit with smooth flesh and high sugars has been fundamental in the further development of the company's farming activity. A

<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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number of mango varieties including Kent, Keitt and Maya as well as Haden are now grown in conjunction with a wide range of air-freighted seasonal legumes, baby vegetables and legume crops. With a stable government, close proximity to port, fertile soils and strong water supply, Radville enjoys almost uninterrupted sunshine with virtually no rain from November until the end of June, enabling its widely experienced agronomy team to produce varieties such as Kent a little earlier in season than near-neighbour Senegal, although the focus as with other Wealmoor sources is on harvesting a little later with a higher state of maturity.

In addition to the latest investment of a just-completed planting of a new 40-acre block of Kent, Wealmoor's insight has culminated in first commercial volumes of nearly 125 tonnes of Maya mangoes from Radville following a seven-year development period. Rightly

celebrated for strong visual appeal with a colourful yellow-pink peel allied to high sugars and a characteristic aromatic flavour, this is a unique development for the Maya variety outside of its traditional Israeli home, and has seen air-freighted first arrivals in ready-to-eat condition well received by a range of clients across the UK and mainland Europe during June 2014. Although the harvest period for Maya is typically short, Wealmoor is excited by the prospect of a unique five to six-week supply window giving consumers an early taste into this variety ahead of the main Israeli maya season (mid-July to September).

How much of an impact has the ban on Indian mangoes had?

The ban on Indian mangoes into the EU has at least given some benefit to other producers with small highly-coloured 'local' varieties from the Dominican Republic having some success

through traditional channels, as well as early Pakistani varieties in full flow with strong demand. But the expectation is that with not all orchards being approved for export from Pakistan, overall export volumes will be down and with some upward pressure on values.

How can we get the UK eating more mango?

Building consumer confidence and education in how to use and prepare, which are both key barriers to purchase, communicating the meal context and versatility of mangoes with use in many types of cuisine, and also delivering fruit at riper maturity stages at point of purchase whilst ensuring vibrant abundant displays are all key in increasing both consumption and market penetration.