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By Mike Knowles

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## A new avocado avenue for Italy?

Growing demand for tropical fruit among number of new options for country to consider, says head of trade fair Macfrut



Renzo Piraccini believes there will be plenty of new opportunities for Italy's fresh produce business in the coming years

**M**acfrut, the international fresh produce trade fair, returns to Rimini on 9-11 May. Here, the show's president Renzo Piraccini explains why Italy's fruit and vegetable business is enjoying something of a resurgence, and explains how new opportunities are opening up for the country's exporters around the globe.

**In the May issue of Eurofruit, which will be distributed freely at Macfrut, our coverage of the Italian fruit and vegetable business has focused on the considerable potential of major names along the entire supply chain, such as Valfrutta, Jingold, Marlene, From and Unitec. What's your view on the role that Italy's fresh produce brands are going to play in future as the sector tries to keep up with a rapidly evolving marketplace and shifting consumer preferences?**

**Renzo Piraccini:** Italian fresh produce is experiencing a new spring, with brands

that are among the most appreciated in the world. In particular, people are rediscovering Italy as a true mark of origin for a lot of supply chains and real added value at a global level. Whoever puts product quality and value at the centre and abandons the idea of fruit and vegetables as commodities, has big opportunities to grow.

**What new features can we expect at this year's Macfrut? Are there any notable new countries, companies or products on show this time around?**

**RP:** This year's edition is shaping up to be a record one, both in terms of exhibitor participation and its international presence. In the last four years, Macfrut has undergone a decisive change of direction towards internationalisation. Here are some data relating to this approaching edition: one exhibitor in four is from abroad (+40 per cent in four years); the 1,500 threshold for buyers has been exceeded (four years ago it was 250); and the main global retail chains and tropical fruit importers are present.

What's more, many of the new entrants are from Africa, a continent that is increasingly strategic for Italian fresh produce: Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique are joining other returning countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tunisia and Egypt, with around ten companies or so occupying a big area at the event. Then we have another ten or so new companies from Uzbekistan, as well as others from Honduras, El Salvador and Greece from the Athens market, production and packaging. And we also have about twenty leading export companies confirmed from South and Central America – Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Peru and 2018 partner country Colombia – and a similar number from China.

**What about other private companies and retail chains?**

**RP:** There are lots of individual exhibitors taking stand space at Macfrut. It's worth noting in particular the

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presence of major international grocery chains such as the German group Rewe, which will bring buyers from all of the countries in which it is present, Edeka, Austrian group Spar, the Portuguese company Jeronimo Martins, Polish operator Biedronka, Carrefour Romania, Lulu in the United Arab Emirates and lots of other chains.

**What have you been doing over the past 12 months to promote the show and increase the number of visitors and exhibitors taking part?**

**RP:** Our Macfrut presentation tour has made an unprecedented effort in visiting 20 countries on four continents. We have presented the fair in North America, at the International Banana Congress in Miami and at PMA in New Orleans; in Peru, Chile and Colombia in South America; and in Zambia, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania in Africa. In addition, we've been to Asia (China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Hong Kong) and the Middle East (Dubai), not forgetting Europe where we've held roadshows in Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia, while giving presentations in Spain (Fruit Attraction) and Germany (Fruit Logistica).

**We continue to see some positive developments when it comes to Italy's fruit exports gaining access to overseas markets (citrus to China being one notable recent example). Do you think enough is being done to sustain and even boost that momentum? What more can be done?**

**RP:** There is still much, very much to do. Here's another figure: Italy's exports grew 2.5 per cent in 2017, going above the €5bn threshold. So, good, that was a record. One fact remains, however: 94 per cent of our exports are aimed at Europe. Broadening Italian produce's reach

is increasingly vital for us, which is why other markets, starting with China, have been central to Macfrut for some time. Next November in Shanghai, we will host 30 leading international food buyers invited in partnership with Cibus. It's essential that we manage to remove phytosanitary barriers blocking Italian apples and pears as soon as possible, so that we can widen the range of our products on their tables.

**Why have you decided to focus Macfrut's conference programme on avocados and mangoes this year? Is this going to become an annual meeting, or will you continue to select a different product category each year as before?**

**RP:** Interest in exotic fruits is increasing more and more in Europe, with the numbers showing double-digit growth. In Italy, for example, this kind of fruit has become so important to the point of now being included in Istat's basket [of consumer goods]; and in fact, avocado consumption has increased 23 per cent. More generally, across Europe imports were 340,000 tonnes in 2016, with a forecast for 517,000 tonnes in 2018. Mangoes and avocados fit in perfectly with the new health trends, which explains the staggering rise in demand. The Tropical Fruit Congress, the first in Europe hosted by Macfrut, aims to be a meeting point between demand and supply at a global level: a trade fair makes sense if it knows how to bring together innovation from the world of food business. The event was conceived as a one-off, but maybe it could be repeated with a focus on other fruit categories.

**What opportunities do avocados and mangoes offer the Italian sector itself? Do you think these products could be produced at a commercial level in Italy?**

**RP:** In the south, in Sicily and Calabria primarily, there are excellent opportunities to produce mangoes and avocados. We're talking about areas that for decades have been dedicated to production of oranges, a product that nowadays doesn't earn a great deal. There are some big opportunities ahead for Italian producers, with global demand rising and a real transport revolution involving perishable products like exotic fruit. Today, the system can carry even modest volumes of produce in refrigerated containers, which enables small and medium-sized producers to open markets too.

**Finally, more generally, do you believe there is currently enough innovation and investment to carry the Italian fresh produce business forward and ensure it remains competitive on the world stage?**

**RP:** I am confident, but a lot depends on the mentality of those involved. There are supply chains like those for kiwifruit, apples, pears, table grapes and different kinds of vegetables that are among the most appreciated in the world. It's definitely necessary for companies to know how to seize opportunities presented to them by globalisation. Logistics, let me repeat, allows you to reach the whole world in short times and at reasonable cost: you cannot remain confined to the same patterns, which are often psychological rather than geographic.

Macfrut 2018 takes place at the Rimini Fiera Expo Center on 9-11 May