

For fresh fruit and vegetable marketing and distribution in Asia



By Tom Joyce

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Belco ready for opportunities

As Egypt's grape season heats up, the exporter sees flexibility, innovation and investment as the best ways to respond to the present challenges, says export manager Shereen Serry



How is everything looking for the current grape season in Egypt?

Shereen Serry: This season, we are expecting an increase in our volume of around 15 per cent compared with last year. We are constantly looking for the right investments with worldwide breeders, exploring new opportunities concerning varieties and timing. Over the past three years, we are pleased to have added around eight new grape varieties to our varietal calendar. This season, we will be one of the two exclusive suppliers of the sweet-tasting Cotton Candy variety to our customers. The grapes were developed by horticulturist David Cain and his team at Bakersfield, California.

What are your main varieties at Belco?

SS: We are one of the founders of the Early Sweet grapes club, with the cooperation of horticulturist Shachar Karniel, the president of Grapa varieties. Our main varieties are Early Sweet,

Sugraone and Flame. We have a wide range of grape specialties from IFG (International Fruit Genetics), including Sweet Celebration, Sweet Globe, Sweet Sapphire, Sweet Mayabelle, Jack Salute and Sweet Surrender, in addition to Cotton Candy. We also have other varieties available, such as Arra 29 and Starlight. There are some more surprises on the horizon that will be added to our varietal list in the coming seasons.

Are you making efforts to extend the season?

SS: Yes, we start our season with early white varieties such as Early Sweet, followed by Sugraone and Sweet Globe. We have managed to import some new white varieties to extend and stretch our white grape season. The same goes for the red and black seedless season: we start with Flame, followed by Starlight, Arra 29 and Sweet Surrender. We are still looking for optimum earliness, to start earlier and prolong the season with medium to late red and black varieties like Sweet Celebration, Jack Salute, Sweet Magic and Sweet

Which markets are you targeting? Are there any new ones you are looking at?

SS: We mainly target continental Europe and the UK. This season, we were planning to make significant inroads in Asia and China, but due to the pandemic we faced some challenges at the start of the season. The situation is getting better now.

How is the Chinese market developing for grapes?

SS: China and Egypt signed an export protocol back in 2018, enabling the latter to access the Chinese market. However, many challenges are yet to be addressed to take full advantage of this agreement, although grape exports to China have been increasing since then.

Europe appears to be saturated with Egyptian grapes, so we need to look at opportunities in other markets. In China, we do have a chance of growing, but we have to export extraordinary varieties in terms of characteristics like flavour and

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Sapphire.

size in order to be rewarded with good returns. Shipping public varieties to China isn't always a good decision.

Are you developing particular varieties that are suited to the Chinese market?

SS: We already have various varieties that are preferred in China, and in Asia in general, such as Sweet Globe, Sweet Celebration and Jack Salute, as well as Sweet Sapphire, which is very unique. The variety has a dark, purple-black skin with a very unique elongated shape and large size. We have other varieties like Jack Salute and Red Globe that are also in demand in China.

How has the Covid-19 crisis affected business?

SS: So far there hasn't been a significant disruption to our business, but we have had to take a lot of measures in order to avoid any surprises during the season. All employees that belong to the higher-risk group have been asked to stay at home on paid leave, we have increased the number of shifts in the packhouses, and we have started using previously unutilised spaces in the packhouses to increase the distance between workers.

Frequent disinfection of all workstations, floors, bathrooms, kitchens and accommodation is essential. We work in fresh produce,

so we have to be more cautious. We have a dedicated full-time doctor who is available at all our sites and we're still encouraging everyone to stay at home if they have any flu-like symptoms, guaranteeing their pay during this time.

As for logistics, the fresh produce sector has been affected by the thousands of containers stuck at Chinese seaports. This shortage lead to an increase in demand that affected freight costs. The collapse in oil prices did nothing to reduce freight rates.

What other challenges are you facing?

SS: One of the main challenges we are witnessing this year, as in previous years, is in vessel departure times. Most Egyptian exporters rely on Felixstowe, Rotterdam, Ravenna and Koper seaports when shipping Egyptian grapes to Europe and the UK. Our shipping schedule to all these destinations requires the loading of grapes from the farms over the weekend at the same time, which presents a challenge. We believe that if shipping lines were able to provide flexible schedules, that would help growers to work more smoothly. We have discussed the matter with freight forwarders and shipping lines every year, but we still face a lot of issues.

Another issue has been

the decrease in orders this week to Europe. Due to the delay in arrival of Indian grapes, we still see some Indian grapes available in Europe in week 23.

Is climate change an increasing worry at the company?

SS: Climate change is a growing concern for everyone in the industry. We work in agribusiness, which is governed by the weather. We are not factories that can guarantee production despite changes in the conditions. Due to climate change, we foresee changes to the timings of the seasons and to the export windows, and we anticipate longer or shorter seasons. This instability worries us all and that's why we at Belco are investing in greenhouses to control and modify the temperature to fulfil and sustain our commitments to our customers both in terms of volumes and quality.

At Belco we are continuously developing and investing in our infrastructure, systems, and technological and agricultural capabilities. We regard the challenges facing us as an opportunity to drive flexibility and innovation at the company and realign the business with today's dynamic market.