

Safresco

South Africa remains Germany's main supply of Southern Hemisphere citrus

"Lemons have been great, there's been really strong demand," says Safresco head of sourcing in Southern Africa Jacques Morgan. "With emptier markets, South Africa has become more relevant as a lemon supplier."

Safresco forms the Southern Hemisphere division of Citri&Co. Their volumes procured from across South Africa are now rounded out by fruit from Botswana.

In the Eastern Cape's Sundays River Valley – a valley "made for lemons" - one of Safresco's partnering farms is Christo Meiring Boerdery where the current lemon harvest surprises even general manager Cobus Symington. "We have been taking off 50% of the total crop during the first pick in some orchards, just under 50 tonnes per hectare. What helps a lot is that around 75% of our fruit falls into the three best counts for Europe: 88s, 100s, 113s, followed by 138s. This places us within the preferential range of counts in our core markets, and 90% of the crop is sold in Europe."

The farming enterprise entrusts its full crop to Safresco, whose global market intelligence unlocks value from the whole bin, Symington says, even from the fruit that a month ago sustained hail damage.



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Further lemon expansion on the farms, carefully balanced by new navel and Valencia plantings, wasn't a difficult decision. "For me it is fairly straightforward: lemons farm very easily here, we get good sizes, and with the four fruit sets per year, even if there's a problem with one set, there are three others you can bank on. In 2021 and 2022 we thought perhaps we'd made a mistake, but in retrospect it is the safest citrus commodity for us here. We get 100 tonnes a hectare. You're guaranteed a profit simply because the crop is so large."

Through planning, timing and cooperation throughout the value chain, the risk of an overlap with lemons from the north of South Africa is managed. Control over the citrus black spot fungus, more of a challenge in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, is key: northern citrus producers often need to focus on markets like the Middle East, which in a usual season takes the pressure off the Eastern Cape's core markets in Europe and the UK.

Middle East of great value to South African oranges, soft citrus

For that reason, Morgan explains, oranges and soft citrus are a source of concern: 20 to 25% of the country's orange crop traditionally goes to the Middle East.

The orange juice price is significantly lower, no longer offering a profitable alternative to exports. More Egyptian oranges are channeled to the Middle East, India, and Europe as well; fruit that is very price-competitive due to its proximity to markets.

Oranges did receive a stroke of luck with the tariff exemption from US authorities, Morgan adds, which keeps Western Cape-grown oranges away from other, possibly oversupplied markets.



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Chinese soft citrus loom large

However, the 10% tariff remains on Western Cape soft citrus going to the United States, and it's creating much uncertainty among those growers, possibly leading to an overflow to the UK, Russia, Canada and Europe.

"The world is moving away from early soft citrus varieties, and it's becoming more difficult to find good markets for clementines and Novas. As an industry we're fairly worried about those varieties," Morgan says. Europe has for several seasons not been keen on clementines and Novas, the varieties preceding what they really want, late mandarins.

A large proportion of South African soft citrus traditionally heads to the Middle East where China's presence is growing. "China has a tremendously large soft citrus crop, and they're busy sending a lot of fruit on consignment to India, to the Middle East. That, along with our freight costs, means we are readying ourselves for a challenging season."

"We are still in a privileged position in South Africa that the local market is not so sensitive to soft citrus with cosmetic blemishes or wind marks, more tolerant than on lemons and oranges. You can still get programmes for class 3 fruit in South Africa."

Safresco holds the license to Nadorcott and to Tango; in many markets those varieties are treated interchangeably.

Uncertainty erodes value

Geopolitical uncertainty is directly palpable in logistics and freight cost. Even if and when shipments to the Middle East resume, the journey time will doubtless be a week or two longer. All of the value chain variables make themselves felt back on farm where farmers are losing, Morgan reckons, between R4 and R7 in value per kilogram or R60 to R105 per 15kg carton.

Symington notes a sharp rise in diesel prices in April, expected to climb even more during May. "Cost pressure caused by higher transport costs and living costs is passed onto consumers, and this will have an impact on purchasing power. Indirectly, we could see an impact on the demand for products like citrus."

Safresco has resumed shipping to the Middle East, offloading at ports ahead of the Strait of Hormuz for overland trucking to destinations.

Congestion at ports unaccustomed to current levels of sea traffic, like Port Louis in Mauritius, Singapore and Hong Kong, can become a factor as the season progresses, Morgan notes. On the positive side, he says, they do not foresee a shortage of containers to develop because of the increased vessel traffic around the southern tip of Africa since the closure of the Red Sea in 2024, leaving empties at South African ports.



© Christo Meiring Boerdery

Sustainability as foundation

Safresco supplies German retail with mostly lemons and soft citrus, and lesser amounts of oranges and grapefruit. "Germany is a low residue receiver," says Jeandre Meyer, key account manager at Safresco. "It is a very relevant market to South Africa. They don't have their own production. They obtain citrus mostly from South Africa when importing from the southern Hemisphere."

Adds Symington: "That's a big reason why we aim to have as few residues as possible when it comes to harvesting. Germany is a strong market; it's good business." It gives him satisfaction to notice that biological control agents, like parasitic wasps, have multiplied and settled into the orchards. Chemical applications are reduced through integrated pest management, and it improves control over residue levels.

However, the vogue among some UK and European retailers, including German ones, to demand residue levels roughly a third of the accepted maximum residue level is regarded by the South African citrus industry as a well-intentioned but misguided approach that ironically leads to resistance building among targeted pathogens.

"We are increasingly making use of J608 or bulk bins on certain exports, especially when fruit will be repackaged, to save costs and reduce waste," Symington says. "We also supplement citrus production with vegetables as part of a more sustainable approach to production. Our soil and water are monitored throughout with the help of production partners like Irricheck and Laeveld Agrochem. At the end of the day, these are the types of partnerships that offer the key to sustainability and success over the long term."

Gaining from their alliance with Safresco, Christo Meiring Boerdery wants to be that long-term partner to the Umgcambo Workers Trust in which the farm's permanent black employees hold a 51% stake. Without Safresco's assistance, Symington says, the ongoing establishment of citrus and vegetables benefiting the community would not have seen the light of day.

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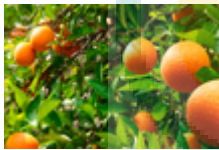
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