

Schoonbee Landgoed: citrus starts well after sterling grape season

South Africa's Senwes area is the second largest lemon production region in the country with an estimated 4.5 million 15kg cartons expected this season. The area's increase from 3.67 million cartons last year is illustrative of the increase in lemon plantings here, as elsewhere in the country.

Schoonbee Landgoed, between Groblersdal and Marble Hall in the Senwes citrus production region, started their lemon harvest two weeks ago. "The fruits are smaller than last year, with a peak between 113/138, and a good spread of some big fruit and some small fruit," says Gert Upton, Schoonbee marketing manager.

"Our first lemon harvest will run until week 22 or 23, and the second will follow at weeks 26, 27, 28. Lemons (and navels) from our area are ovoid, a shape preferred in the Far East because you can cut more slices from an ovoid lemon than a round one."

The Senwes lemon harvest follows after the early lemons from Limpopo and comes before the start of the Sundays River Valley, the engine room of South African lemons (whence 8.5 million cartons are estimated for this season).



Difficult times ahead for lemons

It used to be easier to find a market for small lemons, counts 189 or 216, but markets like the Middle East aren't interested in these counts anymore, having burned their fingers before, while locally the juice price is coming down.

Gert Upton expects what could be a difficult lemon season – in fact, he foresees a difficult couple of years ahead.

"In South Africa there are more lemon blocks not yet in production than ones that are already producing," he points out. "This year the total for the industry is estimated at almost 21 million cartons. After the intensive planting of the past few years, I think in future there's going to be sifting out on the basis of quality, consistency of supply, window of supply and sizing."

"Last year the Russian market, which takes the large counts, was under pressure because of high Argentinian volumes and with news that the local Argentinian juice market is slow and that they are going to export 30% more this season, the big question is: how much of that fruit is going to end up on traditional South African markets and what will the effect be on pricing? Prices in the Far East are currently good but for how long will this be sustained? In Europe the price is picking up because they're finished with

Primofiore and busy with Verna. The Verna harvest isn't as large as last year, so there will be a small opportunity for fruit to do well and thereafter it will move over to fixed programmes."

He points out that Argentinian lemons are sold in 18kg cartons, compared to the South African industry's 15kg cartons. "Price per unit is always a factor one has to keep an eye on."

"The big pressure in the lemon market will be in Russia and Europe," he concludes.

Young soft citrus blocks mature in quality

Apart from lemons, at Schoonbee Landgoed they're currently packing clementine (nules) and Novas, with the mid-season navel harvest due to start this week.

Because of the youth of many of their soft citrus blocks, the impact of tree immaturity on fruit quality is still a challenge, albeit year on year a diminishing one. The Satsuma (Miho wase) harvest started well with better sized fruit than last year and improved quality due to older trees. Similarly, older clementine trees registered very good yield and quality, with some granulation on fruit from younger trees.

Same thing with Novas and clementine (nules). "The Novas look much better than last year, the trees are much larger and the fruit set was good with 300 to 400 more fruit per tree," he says.

"With soft citrus the age of the trees is a big factor. In the case of clementine (nules) the trees have to be at least seven or eight years old, which makes it a very expensive tree but it is a much sought-after cultivar because its sugar has to be above 9 brix, otherwise it is marketed as an ordinary clementine, unless it has seeds, in which case it is a tangerine."

They market their clementine (nules) in the UK and Europe where Spanish production of the cultivar has whetted consumer appetite. It is also far and away the most popular clementine variety planted in South Africa.

Coming up in the soft citrus line-up will be Nadorcott in about six weeks' time, overlapping with Orri, followed by the Thoro Temple, a tangor hybrid that's losing field in South Africa. "It's a beautiful fruit, luminous orange, but it has an exceptional amount of juice. You eat a Thoro Temple in the bath tub, but it's one of the best-tasting soft citrus in my opinion: very high sugar coupled with very high acid. Africa takes a lot of our Thoro Temple because it travels well, it's large – 3X to 5X – and it shows no granulation."





Photo by Littish Photography

Schoonbee brand almost year-round on the market

Schoonbee Landgoed has 850ha of citrus, of which 580ha is currently in production. The balance is expected to start bearing over the coming three years, which will necessitate a doubling in their current 11,000m² citrus packing capacity. This season a total of 1.6 million cartons of citrus will be packed on the farm (Senwes is the largest navel production area in the north of the country).

In the summer months they produce table grapes on 380ha. The 2017/18 table grape season was a very good one for them: theirs was the only table grape production region in the country that increased in production and a good season for Schoonbee Landgoed to put their new 8,000m² table grape packing facility into use. At 175 metres, their Wildebeest grape packhouse is the longest under roof packing facility in the country.

The previous season they'd had 240mm of rain during the grape harvest, which led to an increase in quality problems, but this year quality problems were negligible.



Photo by Littish Photography

For the past four years, Schoonbee Landgoed has started taking a hand in the marketing of their own fruit, a function they share with a number of dedicated exporters, depending on areas of specialisation and return on effort. "We pack for 9 or 10 months of the year, so we can have our brand almost year-round on the market. Consistency and quality is what drive us," Gert says.

They have introduced a range of brands within the Schoonbee stable of which the Schoonbee Premium brand sets the benchmark for the export table grape and citrus fruit category. The Schoonbee red-and-blue flagship brand, still most popular among the company's global customer base, is now complemented by the Hello Fruit brand that reflects the diversity of both the people and the fruit at Schoonbee Landgoed. Both are marketed globally and domestically. The Fruit Suit brand for the domestic market "shows that a fruit that looks knocked down, can be dressed up in a suit and tie and be restored to its original star status".



The brand portfolio of Schoonbee Landgoed (photo by Littish Photography)

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