

Late Southern Hemisphere mandarins pushing Spain's earliest ones away from the market

"There were strong suspicions which have now been confirmed. Producers were concerned that the lack of purchases at origin was the result of a calculated strategy by Europe's large distributors, which have chosen to purchase the late mandarins from the Southern Hemisphere instead of the earliest Spanish Satsumas and Clementines (mostly grown in Valencia)," as denounced by the agrarian organization LA UNIÓN de Llauradors.

"This is showing once again that the signing of the EU-South Africa agreement harms the Valencian citrus sector, because it has motivated producers in the Southern Hemisphere to choose late varieties that are now sold in Europe, causing great harm to EU producers. Also, no market aid is expected, nor has an economic impact study been carried out, nor has progress been made in the approval of more demanding export protocols in these countries to ensure that no pests are introduced," says a representative from LA UNIÓN.

In September, the organization again denounced that the voluntary suspension of South African Valencia Late oranges "was a mere diversion to be able to sell other varieties, as we are seeing right now." Moreover, they point out that "the South African citrus lobby and its contacts in the European distribution sector may be behind this strategy."

The agrarian organization also denounces "the deception entailed in offering citrus fruits that were likely harvested about two months ago in areas that, in the best case scenario, are about 8,000 kilometers away. That fruit has undergone a long journey in chambers, and has been treated to extend its shelf life, probably without the European consumer being aware of it."

"For decades now, the first Spanish Clementines have hit the Central European market at this time of the year. The British really appreciate our Satsumas; they are used to seasonal fruit and now they are being offered mandarins brought from

the other side of the world, which could introduce pests and whose quality and freshness is affected by the long journey from their areas of origin," explains the head of the citrus sector at LA UNIÓ, Carles Peris.

LA UNIÓ has been able to check that this situation is more or less widespread on the shelves of the main European supermarkets, but not in the Spanish ones, which have maintained the usual and expected supply policy for the Valencian production, which will soon dominate the market. The situation in the rest of the EU has been caused by a delay of about two weeks in the ripening and coloring of the earliest Valencian citrus fruits, and has also been fueled by the lack of demand derived from the high temperatures still recorded in the continent, which always discourage consumption.

"This situation has been used by exporters in South Africa, Argentina or Chile to stretch their off-season campaign and sell their growing production of Nadorcott, Tango or Orri mandarins, as well as of other unprotected varieties, such as the Ortanique. The acreage devoted to the latter has, in fact, been expanded exponentially in recent years. They had probably been preparing this move for years, and now, taking advantage of our delay, they have gone ahead with it," says Peris.

According to a study carried out by the organization, the overlapping of the productions is taking a toll on the marketing of extra-early varieties that have higher production costs, such as the Clemenrubí, the Oronules or the Clemenson, which had aroused great interest among citrus growers in recent times. "These are citrus fruits that require many thinnings, as well as precautions to prevent the appearance of flies. This entails the hiring of more laborers, even though the yields per hectare are lower. Therefore, they reach higher prices at origin," they explain.

"Large distributors sell citrus fruits in two categories: premium and second class, with the latter reaching more affordable prices. The former has been taken over by late mandarins, to the detriment of the early Spanish Clementines, and the second class continues to feed on local varieties with lower costs, such as the Marisol, the Arrufatina or some Satsumas, for which there is a good demand," says the representative of LA UNIÓ. "Sales would surely improve if the consumer was not given such limited options and a third one was offered," says Peris.

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