

George Hall - Dibanisa Fruit/Unipack Fruit

“The rest of the country can’t touch us on soft citrus”

“Our exposure to the deciduous fruit industry changes the way we farm citrus,” says George Hall, marketing manager at Dibanisa, of the grower-exporter-shipper’s eight farms in Ashton, Bonnievale and Swellendam, where you’re more likely to find wine grapes or persimmons than citrus.



“We farm our citrus a bit differently from the rest of the country, in a much more intensive way. I have experience of apple production and I prune my soft citrus trees every year for light management. In this way you get fruit both on the outside and the inside of trees, which is especially important for soft citrus.”

The Overberg region is one of the smaller citrus production regions in the country but, George asserts, “the rest of the country can’t touch us on soft citrus.”

The company offers predominantly soft citrus grown in this mild part of the Western Cape, starting with Satsumas in March and ending with Nadorcotts in September. The mandarin season is about two weeks earlier than usual. Their location enables a long citrus season, ending around week 40.

Twice-distinguished lemons



They have also recently started investing in lemon orchards and, particularly, in 2PH seedless lemons which they additionally pack on a chemfree line for clients in primarily Germany and Spain.

The climate and soil in the Western Cape lend itself to the production of soft citrus of smaller sizes, well-suited to the requirements of the European and UK markets, and therefore about 70% of their export portfolio go to those markets, with the balance to the USA, Russia, Middle East and China.

In the UK soft citrus prices, along with consumption, are relatively stable, while in Europe prices for late mandarins are a fraction lower than last year, he notes. George feels that the perception of the big soft citrus volumes to come from South Africa already has a perceived dampening effect on current prices.

Dramatic increase in US supply

Despite being in a black spot-free area with US access, they haven't up until now sent much to the US, but this year there's a big drive to dramatically increase their US exports, through servicing the US Halos programme.

Their Satsumas are some of the earliest from the country and this year, like the past five seasons, has been another good season. "Price-wise we get a good, stable average for Satsumas and we don't get any quality claims. I wouldn't say it's necessarily because of our mild climate but more a factor of hygiene and rigorous procedures in our packhouse, Unipack in Ashton." In summer they pack stonefruit in the same packhouse.



Packing soft citrus at the Unipack packhouse

Wind hasn't been a particular bother. "The Western Cape is a wind-blown province, but that's why you put up nets. We have around 100ha of our late mandarins under cover."

In fact, apart from the fact that the Western Cape towards the Klein-Karoo is still dry (the Brandvlei Dam, near Worcester, is 30% full) and that the winter rainfall and cold aren't yet where it could be, George says that production-wise, all varieties are fine. "The only negative is that our Satsuma crop was down because of last October's heatwave."

Logistics aren't so fine. "We're behind in our programmes because of the problems at Port Elizabeth Harbour and with Eastern Cape fruit now coming to Cape Town. The delay in vessels in Cape Town have had a knock-on effect, there's been fruit that has been moved from one vessel to another, it's been chaos. It's an inconvenience and supermarkets just can't have empty shelves, let alone a loss of revenue. We're trying to work around it."

For more information:



George Hall

Dibanisa Fruit/Unipack Fruit

Tel: +27 23 6151290

george@unipack.co.za

<https://www.unipack.co.za/> (<https://www.unipack.co.za/>)

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Author: Carolize Jansen

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