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SA citrus strikes gold in Asia

Marketing prize for mandarins in the land of mandarin

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Picture Werner Hills

There was more sweet success for South African fresh produce exports to Asia when fast-growing brand ClemenGold won an award for its marketing of mandarins in China.

It's not an award to be taken lightly: China is the world's biggest producer of citrus fruit with nearly 39Mt, including its own huge mandarin crop. South Africa's is a modest 2.8Mt, which places it 12th in the world, according to statistics provided by South Africa's Citrus Growers Association.

In terms of exports, however, South Africa is second only to Spain, and is fast catching up on that European country. During the northern winter of this year, China's mandarin yield hit 27Mt, according to the World Citrus Organisation (WCO). That accounted for 68% of the global output. This makes South Africa's marketing success with ClemenGold mandarins in China all the more impressive.

The sales in Southeast Asia and the Far East are vital for the success of South Africa's citrus exports. About 21% of the country's total export volume is delivered there, with an estimated sales value of more than R5bn. This is likely to increase dramatically in future.

The South African mandarin's appeal is obvious: its oblate shape (flattened slightly at top and bottom) might be smaller than the common spherical orange, but it's a lot sweeter and easier to peel. Those are attractive qualities in a nation of 1.4-billion that eats a lot of citrus fruit.

The prize for South African mandarin marketing was made at the annual pan-Asian awards, held in Thailand in November, and presented by Asia Fruit Logistica and the Asiafruit Magazine. John Hey, executive editor of Asiafruit Magazine, says the award celebrates excellence and recognises outstanding achievement by ClemenGold in Asia's fresh-fruit and vegetable business.

South African exporters first tested the Chinese market in 2013 with mandarins and between 2019 and 2021 it expanded six-fold, according to Fruitnet.com

Adéle Ackermann, marketing manager at Fruitalyst, which manages the ClemenGold brand, says the long-term success relies on quality fruit and smooth logistics. "It has more to do with strong branding, backed by marketing excellence and the strength of the complete value chain supporting the process," she says.

She says it is vital to deliver consistent quality in taste to retailers and consumers, and to have a visible brand. "This was especially important in a challenging citrus year like 2022, where supply campaigns, backed by branding and marketing investment, had a significant impact," she tells the FM.

Abs van Rooyen, founder of the ANB Group, the holding company for Fruitalyst, emphasised innovation and "cutting-edge technology" for the success in Asia. He says that being growers themselves, the group understands the challenges. It runs companies that develop citrus varieties, nurseries and has some of the biggest fruit-packaging operations in South Africa.

Most of the group's activities are to equip growers to compete in a globalised, competitive industry. "This extends from spearheading the introduction of leading global varieties into the industry, to creating a reliable and scaled source of quality plant material, to pioneering new ways of growing, to establishing a consolidated marketing platform that affords partner growers with secure shelf-space and market positioning," says Van Rooyen.

The award to ClemenGold comes with South African fresh produce making strides in Asia. South African exporters recently achieved greater access for fruit including apples, pears, citrus and table grapes in China, as well as apples and pears in India.

Ackermann says the company is focusing on "pockets of opportunity" to persuade customers in Asia to deliberately choose the South African brands. "Our brands and their marketing messages are tailor-made to speak to different cultures globally," she says.

Fruitalyst CEO Lianne Jones says in developing a brand, the country of origin becomes less important to consumers because they connect more to the values that the brand demonstrates.

"But country of origin is important to us because it is our securing point to have a southern-hemisphere supply of citrus. That creates the base volume for the brand, enabling us to establish branded programmes within different markets."

She says it also allows the company to expand the brands globally by supplying as close to 12 months of the year as possible. "Making sure that there is consistency in quality elevates the brand and keeps consumers coming back for it."

Jones says having a range of brands aimed at different markets, and with different "emotional connections", is important across the full extent of citrus fruit. "That drives repeat purchase and brand recognition and loyalty."

Van Rooyen often refers to the company's success as "another Gold". ClemenGold's concept is being extended to LemonGold for seedless lemons, and Sweet C and ClemenOrange. In South Africa, ClemenGold has had a 16-year partnership to supply exclusively to Woolworths.