

Marcel Blignaut, Caracal Fruit Trading:

"India becoming a vital market for South African citrus and top fruit"



Five years ago in South Africa, Caracal Fruit Trading was started as part of Jaguar The Fresh Company. With Marcel Blignaut as Managing Director in Paarl, the company focuses on exporting South African top fruit and citrus to Europe, the rest of Africa, and the Far and Middle East.

Right: Egyptian navels, currently harvested

"We sell nothing on the local South African market," begins Marcel. "The company focuses purely on exports. We also handle sourcing for the other companies within the Jaguar family. Annually, some 50% of the volume consists of citrus and 40% of top fruit. We sell a small volume of grapes, too, which doesn't fall into the other two product groups."

Caracal Fruit Trading can rightfully call itself a top fruit specialist. Packing of the first South African Williams Bon Chretien pears has begun, and the apple season is about to commence. Caracal supplies a wide range of apple varieties, like Golden Delicious and Royal Gala, as well as Cripps Red, Jona, and Pink Lady.

"We expect a similar harvest to last year. The Cripps Red and pear crops seem somewhat smaller, but we've only just started packing," says Marcel.

Ample fruit available



This year's big advantage over previous seasons is that there haven't been big logistics issues. "There were major delays last year, but so far running smoothly for grapes and stone fruit. The wind is causing fewer delays, but fortunately, there's a different, sorely needed wind at the ports."

Right: Marcel Blignaut of Paarl-based Caracal Fruit

Product availability does not appear to be a significant hurdle either. "We have a large grower network. If you buy at market-oriented prices and provide good service, there's enough fruit available. I still see many growth opportunities," Marcel explains.

The African continent is good for around 35% of Caracal Fruit Trading's top fruit sales. "Countries such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria know that South African top fruit is well appreciated. Golden Delicious sells well there. We also export a lot of top fruit to places like India, China, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia." Marcel expects especially the Indian market to grow. "Plenty of importers from India are driving around South Africa buying fruit. The red varieties are particularly popular. Equally important, you can get rid of your large, less popular sizes," he says.

India is a top sales market

Europe is a crucial market for citrus, but much of it is also sold in countries like India and Bangladesh. "We serve all sales markets outside the United States. The group also has a strong position in Egyptian citrus, which combines nicely with the South African citrus package." Blignaut says there is little quality difference between the two countries of origin. "Egyptian citrus often has good color, but South Africa has the fantastic Valencia," he explains.



The group's strong position in Egyptian citrus combines nicely with the South African citrus package.

South African Navel sales, though, often struggle more. "That often clashes with the Egyptian Valencia season's end and is priced differently. However, Cambria and Witkrans Late Navels, for example, do very well in the Middle and Far East." Marcel adds that they have not ventured into organic citrus. "There's often waste with organic citrus. Different prices, which aren't paid, are then needed," he points out.

"Last year's easy peeler season was excellent, with good prices. The same goes for orange sales. Exports to the EU, though, didn't go as expected; neither did the Middle East perform as anticipated. Those exports were difficult until the end. Regardless, every year is different. The Spanish season seems will end earlier this year, so expectations are high again." According to Marcel, a positive for the South African industry is that increasingly, more customers from Eastern Europe who used to buy their citrus from South America are switching over to South African citrus. "Also, the South American countries are focusing more and more on the US, which reduces the effect of those exports on us," he continues.

Synergy with other countries in the group

Entirely in line with the names of other group members - Jaguar in Europe, Leopard in China, Pantera in Egypt, and Otorongo in South America - Caracal's name refers to the wild cat found throughout Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, central and southwest Asia as far as India. Those are not entirely coincidentally essential markets for the South African company. Marcel says there is much synergy to be gained between the group's members. "For instance, I

introduced a Malaysian client to our company in South America, and they're now doing plenty of business in blueberries. That's ideal for the buyer who can buy a wide package from different countries with one phone call."



At Caracal Fruit Trading, expansion plans to other products are, for now, not a priority. "We have a good blueberry position in South America, but in South Africa, we are still busy strategizing to develop this product line. Avocado is 'the new kid on the block' here, but we haven't, so far, made any moves ourselves either. For the time being, we're enjoying the citrus and top fruit. Caracal Fruit Trading has been in business for five years and has shown very good growth year on year. I want to double our current volume in two, three years," Marcel concludes.



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