

Jacobus van Staden – Sunfed/Soleil Citrus

Empty market welcomes South Africa's early citrus



The Soleil Group, situated in Hoedspruit, Limpopo, has citrus farms and packhouses in Limpopo. The company is among the earliest in South Africa to start exports when supply chains switch over to the Southern Hemisphere, giving them direct exposure to the last of the fruit from Turkey, Spain, Egypt, and Israel.

This year, that exposure has been minimal as many Northern Hemisphere production areas ended earlier, including China, whose domestic crop is down, an excellent position from which to kick off the new season, says Jacobus van Staden, Sunfed founder and managing director.



© Soleil Citrus "Especially from Europe, there have been many enquiries into early season lemons, before the Eastern Cape harvest starts, about a month after us." In Europe, he remarks, South African Eureka lemons are preferred to the Spanish Verna.

The Middle East is traditionally the early strong market for lemons, which can be

to its detriment when it is overloaded and crashes a few months in, as happens many years. In his opinion, in terms of lemons. The market will probably start declining by June.

"Every year, Russia takes higher volumes of our citrus. It's becoming a larger and more important market to us, with more stable prices. I think the relationship that our country has with Russia makes it an important market for the future."

Investing in grapefruit consumption

Grapefruit has become the most difficult citrus category to manage, requiring careful coordination among growers not to oversupply markets. In fact, the level of cooperation among grapefruit farmers and exporters is perhaps unrivalled in South African fruit exports.

Consumer demand for grapefruit has slackened in many markets, and the citrus industry hopes its promotional campaign planned for May will stimulate grapefruit demand across a number of markets, especially among younger consumers.

Several years ago the one of the biggest buyers of South African grapefruit used to be Japan: last year, not even a million boxes went there. The population is ageing, and with it, the appetite for grapefruit has drastically dropped. Moreover, grapefruit goes to Japan on conventional (breakbulk) vessels, the most expensive form of seafreight.



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South Korea has been taking Japan's place in this regard. "South Korea is to some degree more stable than Japan, but that said, markets in Asia are always up

and down, according to the forces of supply and demand. They're very sensitive to oversupply," Van Staden says.

Not many manage to successfully export grapefruit to South Korea. The fruit is fine-combed for signs of mealybug by a South Korean inspector based at Durban port, and some seasons there can be many rejections. Soleil Citrus is one of two dominant grapefruit suppliers to South Korea, a position they carefully protect.

Recently, as a mark of confidence in South Africa's seriousness around compliance, the government of South Korea agreed that the South African Department of Agriculture can be entrusted with these inspections. "We're very pleased about this development, and we expect that the inspections will be quicker. The past year or two, there were a lot of delays with a single inspector for all shipments."

OJC prices erode grapefruit acreage



© Soleil CitrusSouth Africa's grapefruit volumes have remained stable over recent years as growers held on to their orchards. Van Staden expects that the pace of grapefruit orchard removals will pick up in response to last year's historically high orange juice concentrate prices.

The juice concentrate price won't repeat that performance as the global availability of juice concentrate increases. In Egypt, many exporters and growers have already, or are planning to set up juice factories to share in the windfall from which South Africa handsomely benefited during 2024.

Egypt's increased involvement in the juice market is no bad thing, Van Staden reckons. "Having the options of sending second-class oranges for juicing will keep a lot of lower-grade Egyptian fruit off the market, and it creates better chances for class one fruit, especially towards the latter part of the year."

A large percentage of Soleil Citrus' fruit is destined for Europe, which can be a high-risk destination for phytosanitary reasons. "We just make sure we know what's going on in our orchards at all times. We know our blocks well: some blocks we will never pack for Europe to reduce the risk, while those we earmark for Europe are scrutinized. Every week, scouting reports are compiled, and if we pick up the least indication of the appearance of a pest or disease, we immediately pay close attention."

As the industry annually loses permission to use chemicals deemed hazardous, such as a certain fungicide that has long been a stalwart in the fight against citrus black spot, its industry research body, Citrus Research International, works around the clock to find replacements for next season.

"Every year we're getting better at biological control," he says. "It's become a very important aspect of integrated pest management. You cannot take your eye off the orchard for a moment."



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Looking ahead at shipping, he remarks that they have for the moment decided not to send any citrus from the Middle East through Mozambique's Maputo port, due to recent political unrest in the Indian Ocean country.

The Soleil Citrus group employs 370 permanent employees and provides an additional 500 seasonal employees with jobs.

"Our citrus brands are renowned for delivering top-quality fruit that surpasses consumer expectations," he says. "Favourable climate conditions enable us to produce citrus with near-perfectly balanced sugar levels. It is globally recognized among buyers that grapefruit from South Africa's north surpasses those from the

Western and Eastern Cape."



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