

SEPTEMBER RAINS IN Gamtoos Valley

The rainfall in September brought about a welcome break to growers in the Gamtoos Valley area. By Yolanda Ntlakaza



The Gamtoos Valley has endured a prolonged drought since 2015. When the rains began falling, citrus farmers breathed a sigh of relief as dam levels rose.

The drought had brought about considerable adversity, making it a thorn in the flesh of the growers of this area. The lowest level of the Kouga dam was recorded on 17 February this year, at 12.36%. As a result of global warming, erratic rain patterns and high levels of evapotranspiration have become the norm in the agricultural sector. This has led to water shortages, which necessitated imposing water restrictions on growers by water authorities, to as low as 15%. This has had a detrimental knock-on effect on the fruit size and the resultant price.

Farmers had to think on their feet to find alternative ways to use the water efficiently and minimize loss as much as possible, to save this scarce resource. This included the use of soil moisture probes, drip irrigation, and the clearing of alien invasive plants. Mrs Crewelyn Katoo of Entabeni Farm confirmed that the water restrictions have led to them uprooting some of their trees. The reduction of orchard size compromises job creation prospects.

On 28 September the Kouga Dam reached 92.19%. The highest measurement taken from the water flowing from the Stuurmanskraal weir was p: 115 000 l/second. At the time of writing, with the persistent rain, there was a concern that the dam would start to overflow – an occurrence last seen in 2015. The growers continue to keep a watchful eye. 



Yolanda Ntlakaza



Above: Two-year-old Shiranui tree

Below: Shiranui fruit tasted in California



The Shiranui arrives in SA

About 10 years ago an article in the *LA Times* about a high-quality Easy-peeler fruit, caught my eye. By Jon Roberts



"I still remember the first time I tasted the legendary fruit the Dekopon [a.k.a. Shiranui]. Think of a huge Mandarin, easy to peel and seedless, with firm flesh that melts in the mouth, an intense sweetness balanced by refreshing acidity, and a complex, lingering Mandarin orange aroma. I've tasted more than 1 000 varieties of citrus, and to me, the Dekopon is the most delicious." This is the opening paragraph from "The Dekopon arrives in California" by David Karp, an article that appeared in the

LA Times. David was often referred to as the "Citrus detective", due to his continuous search in all corners of the planet of weird and wonderful citrus varieties – new and old.

I was lucky to test and taste the variety on a visit to California shortly after reading the article. Externally, the fruit looks terrible, with a coarse peel, and a protruding "nose" on the calyx side. It could easily be referred to as an "ugly duckling" but wait till you taste it. I must concur with Karp: Shiranui is the finest tasting piece of citrus I have ever eaten, and probably the most expensive in the world.

Known in Japan as Shiranui, that has been genericised to the name Dekopon, it has a very interesting and surprising lineage for a variety that tastes so good. Its name indicates the one parent in the breeding, "Pon" for Ponkan (a fair but not exceptional Easy-peeler commonly planted throughout China/Southeast Asia). Deko, 凸, デコ, means convex for the protruding bump on the calyx end.

The other parent is Kiyomi, which – it appears – lacks appeal and has low Brix and high acid. However, it's known for its exceptionally soft flesh that melts in the mouth, which is part of David Karp's description for Shiranui. A deeper dive into Kiyomi's parentage evokes even more confusion: Kiyomi is a cross between Satsuma and orange, neither of which possesses the knockout flavour punch of Shiranui. It is quite amazing that these ordinary parents have created such an outstanding piece of fruit, used as "gift" fruit in the East.

Research into Shiranui for possible import, presented firmly shut doors at every enquiry I made. But then I came across information about a farmer of Japanese origin in Brazil who had been farming the variety and had selected it for tolerance to humidity and heat. After a visit to Brazil, we were able to import this selection – Kinsei – from the Brazilian Citriculture Institute which, having passed



Shiranui fruit in supermarkets

through quarantine, has now been planted in small trial sites around SA where it'll be known as Kinsei.

This year we have the first Kinsei fruit from three-year-old trial sites in SA that are showing the very same 15 – 17 Brix that I tasted in California. The rind is coarse and rather thick, but easy to peel, and the flavour is incredible for such a young tree. In the next year or two, as the trees mature, the rind will probably become thinner and the fruit smaller, as seen in California. Judging by production in the first year, the cultivar is precocious and bears easily, in line with its Satsuma and Ponkan parentage.

It appears that the only issue is where the market puts it. It is an Easy-peeler, for sure, and has the flavour of a high-quality Mandarin. Thus, it must be marketed as such, but the fruit falls into the biggest Easy-peeler size range 1XX – 1XXXX (X: extra large). We have several Mandarin cultivars that fall into this size range currently. All are of high quality with distinctive flavours but fall in a larger size range than normal Mandarins. It would be a pity if they were to languish outside mainstream markets due to pre-conceptions of what sizes Mandarins should fall into.



Jon Roberts

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There was great excitement at the time of writing, as the first fruit was packed and sold locally, and marketed in one of the leading supermarket chains in SA. Be on the lookout for a large, coarse Easy-peeler with a big nose, in fancy packaging. If you find it, peel it easily, close your eyes and let your taste buds do the rest. 