LOOKING BACK many sets of footprints

The world has gone from building things to last, to building them to adapt. And adapt, we have. By **Catherine Milward-Bridges**

The coming of age of the *SA Fruit Journal* (*SAFJ*) attests to the rich history of the dynamic fruit industry of SA, and the resilience and agility of its people. To capture the essence of the industry journey over the last two decades – and that of the broader agriculture sector – it's best to speak to some of those in the know.

The early days

Hortgro Executive Director Anton Rabe recalls the early days as a time of significant but necessary change.

After deregulation in 1997 the Deciduous Fruit Producers' Trust took over the co-ordinating role for the deciduous fruit sector (pome- and stone-fruit, and table-grape industries), inheriting *The Deciduous Fruit Grower* – which became the *SAFJ* in 2002. The Trust was then renamed Hortgro Services in 2007, and Hortgro in 2013.

Anton was tasked with building this publication from the ground up. Initially it only featured content for the deciduous fruit sector of the fruit industry. But realising that the *SAFJ* needed to transition to a *bona fide* enterprise that pays for itself, he approached other sectors within the fruit industry to help achieve this goal. The Fresh Produce Exporters' Forum (FPEF), South African Table Grape Industry (SATI), and Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) all agreed to come on board, and SA Fruit Journal (Pty) Ltd. was formed. This milestone was aptly marked with a celebratory function at J.C. Le Roux in Stellenbosch that was attended by growers and industry role-players, recalls Anton. He lists these as significant changes in the *SAFJ* journey, to date: transitioning from a monthly to a bi-monthly publication, adding an advertising component to support financial goals, and adding a digital version.

Justin Chadwick (CGA CEO) remembers the CGA jumping at the chance to have content featured in the *SAFJ* – which was fast becoming an effective industry mouthpiece. Leaders in the CGA are encouraged to contribute regularly to *SAFJ* content, shares Justin. On the transitionary journey that the publication has meandered, these enhancements stand out to him: a refreshed layout, an increase in photos and graphics, and an expanded news section featuring more transformation and market access content.

But to fully appreciate the strides made by the *SAFJ* (and the fruit industry as a whole), some agricultural perspective is required.

A bit of context

Inevitable change

For SA deregulation of agriculture in 1996/97 was instrumental in opening markets and providing impetus for trade, recalls Dr John Purchase [former CEO of the Agricultural Business Chamber (Agbiz) of SA]. He also highlights the compilation of the National Development Plan (NDP) in 2010 that was released in 2012. The late Prof Mohammed Karam, he confirms, was the National Planning Commissioner who led a two-year industry consultation during this process. "They came up with a very good framework, which formed Chapter 6 of the NDP. Though not a very detailed plan, it does focus on high-value irrigation food crops, and identified where the highest potential lay to create jobs." Hearteningly, says John, many of the targets set in the Plan for 2030 have already been met by the fruit industry. However, given prevailing challenges like loadshedding, port setbacks, and rising input and regulatory costs, the industry is not resting on its laurels.

Removing the albatross

Around 2018 an economic growth contraction had become an albatross around the neck of the agriculture sector (and in fact, the entire SA), recalls John. This demanded an immediate intervention. "Dr Johan van Zyl from Toyota International developed an automotive masterplan with government, which sparked significant automotive investment in SA." And with SA (a net exporter of agricultural products) having run into market challenges, John accompanied Roelf Meyer to propose to President Ramaphosa a growth strategy through meaningful collaboration. This partnership would be driven by policy, logistics, and trade agreement negotiations. Once Ramaphosa had agreed to it, the Public Private Growth Initiative (PPGI) was developed to grow the economy, and the Agriculture and Agro Processing Masterplan (AAMP) was crafted concurrently. John led this process from the private sector side, alongside representation from government, labour, and community members. Researchers from entities like the National Agricultural and Marketing Council (NAMC), Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) did a deep dive into fruit industries with detailed targets, to ensure that the AAMP contained the necessary checks and balances to monitor progress, reflects John. With the BFAP Baseline projecting plateaued growth for the agriculture sector for the next 10 years if the status quo prevails, he views this as an ideal progression towards sustained growth: strengthened collaboration with government to create conducive conditions for increased investment, resulting in economic growth and an uptick in employment.

For John additional concerns include the prevailing energy crisis (agriculture is the hardest hit), infrastructural inefficiencies (including roads, rail, ports), border delays, freight costs that have nearly quadrupled in the last year, rising protectionism, international market dynamics (the government of SA has for the first time brought a case before the World Trade Organisation regarding the latest false codling moth protocol), and a lack of robust agricultural finance mechanisms.

Growth victories

Wandile Sihlobo (Agbiz Chief Economist) weighed in with a much-needed reminder: Since 1994, growth in agriculture has seen its value and volume more than double due to improvements in areas like genetics, seed breeding and fertiliser, and increased exports. In fact, reports Wandile, agricultural exports reached US$12,4 billion in 2021 and US$12,8 billion in 2022 with fruit and wine being the key growth drivers in this respect. He is also heartened by the rate of job creation in the fruit industry (the biggest agricultural contributor), the food secure status of SA (notwithstanding the threat of loadshedding), and the openness of regulators in SA to fertilisers, for example. As for the South African government, he recognises its vital role in achieving the fruit industry growth rate in the last couple of decades. But more effective collaboration remains a necessity, indeed.

And we'd be amiss, he continues, not to also recognise as growth levers the African Growth and Opportunity Act, and the opening of trade agreements with the European Union.

John also highlights as a victory, the much-needed lifeline extended to agriculture by the government during the COVID-19 lockdown, declaring the sector essential and therefore, able to continue its operations. This helped feed hundreds of thousands of South Africans during what turned out to be a dire time for many. He also draws attention to the fruit industry projection of a 50% harvest growth rate by 2030. Maximising this windfall will demand proficient ports and receptive destination markets. Are we ready? asks John rhetorically.

The elephant in the room

Shining the spotlight on access to finance as a conduit for inclusivity, Wandile broached the need for agricultural finance particularly for black farmers, to ensure crucial acquisition of title deeds. Neglecting this area, he cautions, will impact negatively on the dynamics of the political economy in the sector.

John and Wandile also recognise how growers' challenges have evolved, and encourage them to navigate their territory with this in mind.

We've come this far as an industry, let's continue to adapt in the next 21 years, and beyond.