SA CITRUS

Strength in an uncertain world

Keeping citrus on the table requires joining the battle for the modern consumer's attention. By Jon Roberts


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At the recent Citrus Summit, Eric Imbert from CIRAD Market News Service provided an insightful presentation that shone the spotlight on the uncertain world in which we operate. His final slide, titled: "A much more uncertain world: climatic or political changes or issues," was well-timed.

It seems that the global order we once knew – pre-COVID – is unravelling at an accelerating pace. At the time of writing, US President Donald Trump announced sweeping tariffs on nearly all their trading partners, including SA, and more specifically, on South African agricultural goods. Many experts predict this may lead to a trade war.

Imbert also warned of the "limited margins of growth in all the citrus markets for the moment", due to demand constraints (in oranges, grapefruit, and lemons) and the anticipated increase in global production.

Lauding SA for its possession of information and adaptability – essential tools for success in this unpredictable environment – he also noted its strong organisational structure. In Imbert's view, the country is well-positioned to navigate these turbulent times.

The South African citrus industry has proactively harnessed these "essential tools", guided by strong, visionary leadership. Justin Chadwick, a key figure in this success story, was praised by several speakers at the Citrus Summit for his pivotal role in the establishment and growth of the Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) of Southern Africa. During his tenure, citrus exports leapt from 60 million to a remarkable 160 million cartons. After 25 years, he has stepped down to hand over the reins to his successor, Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele.

How we got here

From the outset, South African citrus growers have – with the help of the citrus industry – taken responsibility for their collective future. This led to the formation of various industry bodies that culminated in the establishment of the CGA – an organisation created by growers for growers, who agreed to fund it through voluntary levies.

The core mission of the CGA has been clear from the beginning:

- gaining, retaining, and optimising market access
- funding and implementing cutting-edge research and development through the Citrus Research International (CRI).

This strong, coordinated approach has given the citrus industry the capacity to develop suitable strategies, overcome regulatory hurdles, apply complex trade protocols, and open new markets. Today, thanks to this long-standing legacy, CGA-aligned farmers enjoy access to a wide range of global markets, backed by a diverse portfolio of high-quality citrus varieties suited to each region.

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Blood orange

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South African citrus exporters are able to adapt their focus – according to changing demand – between key destinations, including Europe, the US, China, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the rest of Africa. This flexibility reduces reliance on any single market and enhances resilience in the face of global uncertainty. Hence, the CGA remains well-positioned to innovate, adapt, and grow in alignment with its Vision 260 objectives.

In my travels, I have not encountered another region like Southern Africa, blessed with the climatic diversity to produce high-quality major fresh citrus types: oranges, easy peelers, lemons and limes, and grapefruit.

Citrus types among our southern hemisphere competitors:

- Brazil is globally recognised for its oranges, primarily used in juice processing.
- Chile and Peru are known for certain easy peelers.
- Argentina has historically specialised in lemons.

Varietal diversity

Oranges are the most widely planted citrus type in SA, comprising two primary commercial varieties:

- Valencia, prized for its juice content and late-season availability
- Navel, a popular, early maturing eating orange with a sweet flavour.

As for the more niche blood oranges, they are successfully cultivated in select South African microclimates. This demonstrates the adaptability and potential of our growing regions yet again.

Cultivar diversity and seasonal spread

Growers have access to a wide range of cultivars within the Valencia category, spanning early- to late-ripening ones with seedless and seeded options. These cultivars are highly versatile, and suitable for both processing and fresh-fruit markets.

Similarly, thanks to an extensive range of early-, mid-, and late-season selections, Navel orange cultivars are available consistently throughout the season. Hence, SA can supply high-quality Navels for a longer period than many of its competitors. And climatic diversity enhances this seasonal coverage further. In warmer regions, early cultivars ripen first, followed by a 2–3 week delay in intermediate zones, and 4–5 weeks later in the cooler areas. Both scenarios are ideal for orange production. This natural spread in ripening also applies to lemons, mandarins, and grapefruit, giving SA a sustained export window across citrus categories.

Innovation through cultivar development

Many of the current citrus cultivars were discovered by South African growers and refined through local research efforts. Others were bred offshore, but have found a conducive home in SA, especially the flavourful, seedless, easy-peeling mandarins; and the sweeter, medically safer grapefruit hybrids. In addition to taste and marketability, health-related discoveries in citrus are gaining global attention. Recent research into compounds like lycopene and other antioxidants in citrus varieties suggests promising roles in combating childhood obesity, diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Furthermore, some new rootstock cultivars are already showing tolerance to diseases like HLB. These relate to the modern generation of cultivars now being evaluated and entering early release stages, laying the groundwork for a more resilient and health-promoting citrus future.

Citrus varietal map: SA's climatic advantage

Data to demand – turning variety into value

By harnessing a wealth of information, the local citrus industry is able to show agility amidst new market challenges and opportunities.

The remarkable diversity of citrus types, varieties, and cultivars is clearly illustrated in the newly released 2025 CGA stats book. It features over 47 mainstream cultivars listed for each citrus type – a testament to the depth of the local varietal base. Many new cultivars are currently moving through the evaluation pipeline, with hundreds under assessment. In the past year alone, around 250 000 buds of these emerging cultivars were released. This ongoing investment in innovation and information sharing supports Imbert's critical stance: "Information is key".

Persistent challenges

The limited margin of growth in all citrus markets, referenced by Imbert, prevails. This is despite the robustness of the citrus industry, a favourable climate, and rich varietal diversity.

The primary reason, he notes, is the declining per capita consumption of citrus across global markets, especially oranges, grapefruit, and lemons. A disheartening trend considering overwhelming scientific evidence in support of the health benefits of citrus consumption. Numerous research papers, articles, and even clinical trials, including some previously published in the *South African Fruit Journal*, make a strong case for citrus as a vital part of a healthy diet.

Plus, the new generation of citrus cultivars strengthens this argument: they are increasingly seedless, flavourful and easy to peel, meeting the convenience demands of the modern-day consumer.

Imbert argues that these advantages make citrus ripe for a powerful generic advertising campaign. Yet, he laments the lack of a strong, professional, cohesive global mechanism to promote citrus collectively. Furthermore, citrus competes with well-funded, strongly marketed alternatives: sweet dessert products, and sweetened and unsweetened carbonated drinks that are tailored to the fast-paced, convenience-driven habits of evolved consumers.

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Above: Comparison left to right, Rosalina, Caracara, Val
Left: Blood orange

A call for unified global action

The solution, according to Imbert, lies in expanding the World Citrus Organisation (WCO). Former CGA CEO Justin Chadwick played a key founding role in this organisation. It's important that the robust local industry leadership helps drive global representation and coordination through the WCO. This is vital for the viability of the global citrus sector.

This level of collaboration can help:

- promote the natural health benefits of citrus
- fund and launch effective global consumer campaigns
- reinforce the place of citrus as a nutritious, convenient, and essential part of everyday diets.

Without a coordinated global effort on the part of the citrus sector, the highly organised, corporate-driven convenience food and beverage giants will continue to dominate, while citrus risks losing ground in the battle for the modern consumer's attention.