

Hot weather has led to an even earlier fig deal for California-based company Stellar Distributing this year, with expectations to increase sales of the tiger variety fourfold. At www.freshfruitportal.com, we speak with salesman Michael Simmons, who hopes to open up fresh overseas markets and forge new import channels for a wide range of produce items in the process.

Simmons says the first brown turkey figs of the season were picked on Monday, making the harvest a week earlier than last year from Stellar's orchards in Madera, California.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the high heat. We've seen a couple of back-to-back 108-109°F days already in the Central Valley where we're doing our main crop, so we're looking at two to three weeks earlier than any regular main crop fig season," he says.

"We're also fortunate enough to be able to alternate because we're have a fig ranch in the desert, and that ranch actually produces three seasons and will start in December." 

The company is shaping its season around being "the guys with the earliest and the latest" in brown and black figs, hopefully shipping through to the end of the year.

Aside from the more traditional fruit, Stellar also now has 300 acres of tiger figs, representing around one tenth of its growing land dedicated to the fruit. The fruit should be ready for harvest by July 21 at the earliest

"This is only the third year that we've had tiger figs and really only the second year that we've had good production," he says, emphasizing a goal to sell 400,000 half-trays of the variety.

"The tiger fig has had some major appeal to retailers and wholesalers alike the last two years and we have had the privilege of being the only shippers who have the tiger fig.

"We are putting more into the ground, and probably will continue to so long as we're met with the same kind of demand."

He said the fruit's aesthetic with green and yellow stripes made it unique, while the fruit's interior was appealing as well.

"Once you get inside there's a really bright, raspberry jam type of color that you don't see in any of the other figs either; the brighter the fig inside, usually the sweeter it is.

"It's definitely a nice intro to what you're going to eat. A lot of people say they're sweeter

too - I think they're equally as good as Black Mission figs, but some people prefer them more."

He says the domestic market is so crazy for figs that you "can't get them out fast enough", and the toughest part of that was that during some times in the year buyers have to be told "we don't have any", or they have to adapt to the sorts of varieties or pack types available.

"But inevitably they always end up taking whatever's available even if it's not exactly what they wanted."

To try and lengthen the season, the company has imported Chilean figs in the past but encountered difficulties because of the necessary methyl bromide treatment. Simmons says that for a similar timeframe, Stellar's parent company has figs in Mexico that it would like to bring into the market once the source of origin is granted approval by U.S. authorities.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) released a [pest risk analysis for Mexican figs and will be accepting comments until Aug. 8](#).

Export-import ambitions

Even though domestic demand is so strong, Simmons highlights the company is now placing a greater focus on fig exports and is looking to ship the fruit via airfreight anywhere in the world.

"It's something we haven't touched on a lot. It is tough because figs are so fragile, but I think if you do the right job you can make it work.

"We're trying to expand as I think if you get the global market going it always helps on your domestic market. Not that the international market needs more buzz around figs, but the more you get your name out there on a large scale, the better off you're going to be."

Another perceived benefit of such a move for Stellar is the partnerships that could be forged for trading in other products.

"For example there could be somebody who takes our figs in Israel and also deals in persimmons, and we make a good relationship with them in importing persimmons here. It's just a good way to get more exposure.

"We're just thinking ahead. We start our persimmons usually at the end of September, and we'll go right through to the end of February, maybe the end of March depending.

"The share of persimmons out of Spain and Israel come in around February, so it's kind of a good segue from our persimmons into their persimmons, and we kind of keep going with our customers that way."

The company is also looking to make links with chestnut importers or exporters in Italy and China.

"We want to attract Chinese and Italian chestnut shippers so that we may make connections to be able to import from them to the U.S.," he says.

"We also have California Chestnuts which would we also be ready to look into exporting as well so really it goes both ways.

"We already have Italian and Chinese chestnuts that we import but we are always looking for new connections."

Other seasonal crops Stellar deals in are pomegranates and apricots.

"On pomegranates we have a bunch of our own grown here. It's always hard to compete with a giant like POM Wonderful, but we do a pretty decent job - we have some retail business and we have some other guys who buy pretty consistently for us.

"We've actually exported pomegranates, the last I think was Russia, so we have a little bit of experience. Those go by boat."

Apart from the aforementioned products, Stellar also has a year-round lime and kiwifruit deal, but 2014 has been a challenging year for the latter on the import front due to the frost that wiped out more than half of Chile's crop in September.

"This year everybody's been scrambling to get all the Chilean shippers to give them their kiwifruit just so they can make sure they have something comparable to last year, but that's just not going to happen," Simmons says.

"We've been trying to store and store away so that we have for our customers when nobody else does, and that's been our philosophy."

He adds the California kiwifruit season starts at the end of September and will go through to February or March, before transitioning to Italy, and again to Chile.

Photo: Stellar Distributing



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