

South African table grape growers have said the current season leaves little to be desired, with excellent weather, strong markets and production hectareage on the up. 

A marketing representative of Northern Cape grower-exporter Pitto told [www.freshfruitportal.com](http://www.freshfruitportal.com) the company began its harvest around two weeks ago, and a lack of recent rainfall had led to higher fruit quality than normal.

"It's all going very well. We have a lot of good quality, crispy grapes, even berry size, everything that can go well so far this season is good," Lorna Basson said.

"Last year we received some hail and frost just before the season started, so that was not very good for the grapes, but it's been great this season."

Pitto - whose name stems from a mix of the two grower co-founders, Pieter Dykman and Tokka van den Hever - has total production land of 386 hectares in the Orange River region, and an annual output of around 1.2 million cartons.

The harvest started a couple of weeks ago with white seedless varieties such as Prime, Sugraone and Thompson. They will be followed by red and black seedless cultivars, including Flame, Rally, Crimson and Autumn Royal.

Pitto's owners have just planted significant additional hectareage of the relatively new Rally variety, and are also increasing production of the more traditional Crimson.

"Crimson is a variety that is getting more and more popular each season. It's not new but it's very popular. They [the owners] will definitely try to fill other gaps in various countries," Basson said.

She added there was plenty more arable production land not yet in use in the area with an ideal semi-desert climate and a sufficient water supply from the Orange River.

Some 45% of production is shipped to the EU, with fruit also sent to the Far East, South East Asia, Canada and the U.K - where the company's market share is growing - and small amounts sent to the Middle East and Africa.

So far Basson said she had 'no complaints' about the markets this season.

"It's all very very good. We've loaded a lot of grapes on conventional ships to U.K. and Rotterdam and we hope that everything goes well and the fruit can be in the market before Christmas, so we're really looking forward to that," she said.

"In the European market the prices are very good before Christmas and then after that we know that the prices will go down. Percentage wise I can't really say how much, but we do expect that prices will go down all over the world after Christmas.

Basson described the closing stages of the year as a 'good time slot' as there was not only strong demand in many key markets but also limited competition from other countries or South African provinces.

"We like to be in the market early and the earlier the red seedless grapes can be in the market before the Western Cape starts the better for us," she said.

"We can fill a very nice gap in Europe and the Far East at this stage, so we prefer that we don't have any competition."

Pitto's grape season will typically run until early February.

### **Perfect weather**

Another grower in the opposite side of the country echoed Basson's very positive seasonal outlook, describing the weather as 'perfect'.

"This is a very good season for us," said H.N. Pieterse production manager Cristoffe Smith.

Harvest began around Oct. 20 on the company's 150 acres in the northeastern Limpopo Province. The company has many similar varieties to Pitto like Prime, Flame, Red Globe and Crimson, and also grows Starlight and Midnight, amongst others.

Smith said the company was increasing its production land with a few new varieties, including ARRA 15 and Tawny.

He also said the markets were 'very open', with the fruit fetching good prices.

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