

With its roots in New Zealand-developed proprietary apple varieties, T&G Global has been living up to its name in recent years with growth in new geographies, one of them being the U.S. Northwest. At www.freshfruitportal.com, we interviewed a new member of the team, Joe Barsi, who last week started his new role heading up T&G Global North America Pipfruit. An American national, Mr. Barsi is responsible for facilitating stronger relationships with key in-market stakeholders and tripling the volume of T&G Global apple sales across North America by 2022.

First of all, how do you feel about your new role with T&G Global, and how different is this challenge to others you've had in your career like at Tradin Organic and California Giant Berry?

I'm excited about my new role with T&G Global. Our apple varieties are in demand in the marketplace and are what consumers are looking for. There are always challenges with growing a market or developing a new product. The real difference with this position compared to my previous roles is that we are dependent on our strategic partners to grow, pack and sell our varieties. However, we're aligned with a well-established, high quality growing and sales organizations to accomplish this.

What are some key lessons you've learned in your time in the produce industry, and in what ways are other categories you've worked with similar to and different to proprietary apples?



It starts with good growers who produce high quality fruits and vegetables. Growers are the true artists in this business and we are fortunate to have very good growers who ensure quality produce flows smoothly through the supply chain.

The apple space is crowded when it comes to varieties and when you don't include sliced apples the fresh category in general has stayed fairly static in terms of consumption per capita. What will it take to take Jazz, Envy and Pacific Rose from the popularity they have now to that next level of development while still keeping returns reasonable?

Pacific Rose and Envy have built up very good trade recognition over the past decade. We're now looking at taking these brands to the next level with a focus on consumer recognition and purchase.

We'll do this through increased promotion of our brands. Our varieties are out of New Zealand's Plant & Food Research programs who are world leaders in innovation and plant breeding.

We are excited to exclusively manage these world leading apple varieties. Jazz, for example is dense, firm and bittersweet and stores well. It is a genuinely unique apple that tastes and looks different and is ultimately better than many other traditional varieties in the market.

On a personal level, what were your first impressions of these varieties, whether it was in the supermarket or the field?

I've been consuming Jazz and Pacific Rose apples for awhile. I was impressed with Envy's flavor, color and size. In addition, our growers really like growing Envy.

Could you please give a summary of T&G's North American apple production by variety and acreage, and a bit of an idea about the percentage that is in full production and how much is new?

T&G currently produces 2.5 million cartons of apples. Jazz accounts for approximately half of that production and Envy and Pacific Rose make up the other half. This mix will change in the future with the largest growth coming from Envy and we have significant new plantings planned in Washington State to help meet our growing global demand for our unique varieties.

What new market outlets will T&G need to tap to move the expected tripling of apple volume?

The primary growth will be delivered in the North America market as we look to expand our range to retailers. We also expect growth in Asia markets as we reach more customers

through our newly-opened offices in the region and build our ability to offer retailers fruit for 12 months of the year. Our increasing focus on marketing and brand awareness and value will further support our growth aspirations.

Looking at the production side of things, has it been more challenging for growers to secure enough of a labor force ahead of the harvest this year? What initiatives are in place for this?

This is an ongoing issue that affects all our growers but we collectively work closely with the industry to resource this need. We are also fortunate to work with progressive growers who are investing in technology that can improve production and post-harvest.

On that same note, are you trialing automated procedures for harvesting or packing, for example?

T&G through their global business has a strong R&D and innovation program to improve our fruit handling and quality practices. A recent example is encouraging our growers and packers to invest in automated defect sorting to produce a better product for our customers at a lower cost for our grower and packer partners.

What other innovative practices are your growers undertaking for these apples?

We're fortunate to partner with some of the best growers in the world and this is true too of our Washington State growers who by nature are very innovative people and early adopters. A great example of a modern grower using the latest root stock and growing systems and investing in high flavor, new variety apples - including Jazz, Envy and Pacific Rose - is Scott McDougall of McDougall and Sons, a co-owner of CMI, who was recently named US Apple Grower of the Year. It's a fantastic acknowledgment for Scott and we're really proud of our growing partnership with him.

You recently worked in organics. Will you be putting a strong focus on the organic aspect of the business with T&G?

Look, the organic market is a US\$43 billion market in the U.S. and fresh fruits and vegetables account for half of that. It is growing at double digits. I believe there is real opportunity in growing our varieties organically.

What consumer trends do you think it's important for the sector to catch on to and harness in order to progress with the apple category?

Consumers are increasingly time poor and want to buy something quickly that is healthy and guilt-free. Apples are the perfect solution as they're easy to grab and enjoy on the go, nutritious and affordable. We need to continue to tell this story as the global trend towards health grows.

Finally, how are markets looking right now in terms of demand and pricing compared to last year?

It is really too early to predict, since we are just starting harvest with other varieties like Galas. We know the Washington crop will be slightly larger than last year. We're currently selling out of New Zealand Jazz, Envy and Pacific Rose and pricing is firm. Demand has been very good so we expect the Washington crop to follow on that trend.

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