

California-based table grape breeder Sun World Innovations has recently added two more Italian companies, Orchidea Frutta and Salvi Group, to its long list of licensees worldwide. The move comes in a country where seeded cultivars dominate but farmers are increasingly looking to seedless grapes for export opportunities and domestic market development. During Fruit Logistica in Berlin we caught up with Sun World's licensing manager for Europe, Maurizio Ventura, to discuss which brands were finding favor with producers in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula.

Ventura arrives for the interview fresh from a heated discussion with an Italian grower over royalties. As is the case in many countries around the world, his compatriots don't always take kindly to paying for intellectual property.

"It is a problem that is not very present in people's minds, except breeders who have the need to see their IP rights protected and growers who do not want to pay the royalty," he says.

"The thing is the grower community is paying a lot for inputs like water and fertilizer. The new varieties are simply a different factor of production, something that helps them, and they have a cost to produce.

"I would like to change the mentality that some have of let's just steal the variety and grow it. We are supplying some knowledge which is a tangible good to these growers, they are paying the rest of their suppliers so why don't they want to pay someone who provides innovation?"

It is a rhetorical question. Most do and Ventura emphasizes there is just a small percentage of growers who violate IP law.

"But they make a lot of noise. Even if it is a few hectares or a few vines, everybody knows something is going on," he says.

"They do it to experiment whether it is worth growing commercially, but we are already doing this with our testing and we believe our testing is probably better than each individual small grower planting five vines."

However, Sun World's licensees are generally far from small and it now has six of them in Italy.

One of the group's earlier varieties Sugraone (Superior Seedless) is fairly common in Italian supermarkets, while other cultivars are either on the rise or in development for exports or domestic sales.

"Sugraone is still good for the early season and it's good enough to be appreciated by the Italian consumer. The real problem is in the late season where of course you need a black or red seedless to try and diversify," Ventura says.

"In Italy our partners are producing Midnight Beauty commercially, which is the Sugra13 variety, but it has a neutral flavor so it is more for the U.K. market.

"And we are growing Sugra19 commercially with the trademark Scarlotta Seedless. This is a red, late variety - later than Crimson - and it's performing very well, impacting the late season and it's well accepted."

But is there enough volume to merit substantial supermarket programs?

"So far yes. We are always ready to increase the program on the surface area as soon as the demand rises - that's not a problem," he says.



Sun World Innovations licensing manager for Europe, Maurizio Ventura.

"I think we are growing in a good way. We are also starting with the development of Sugra35, or AutumnCrisp, which deserves some words."

AutumnCrisp is well-received everywhere he says, with just enough muscat to fit with Italian consumers' tastes but not so much that it would lose interest in northern Europe.

"It's a mid-late season variety with harvests around September- it can store a while until October, but it is not truly a mid-season or a late-season variety.

"The taste is very good with a hint of muscat, it's very crispy. It's not too much - it's not Italia. You have just a small hint of Muscat.

"Everybody is interested in late white seedless and this is almost for the late window."

He adds AutumnCrisp is also great for producers as it's fairly easy to grow.

"So we have a lot of expectation that it will be requested by growers and the market and that it can really make a change for various markets," he says.

Time to market - the labor of decades

AutumnCrisp is at the front of a new wave of grape varieties coming to Europe, having passed rigorous testing and years of assessment in California.



AutumnCrisp has just enough hints of muscat to tap into Italian consumer preferences.

"I recently gave a presentation about how long it takes to prepare a variety, and it is something like this - let's say you do the crossing in 2004. Then you collect the berries, do the agriculture to take the embryo, and you plant in the field in 2005," Ventura says.

"You see the first fruit in 2006 and you think it's important so you graft as much as you can off this vine in 2007, then in 2008 you see 50 vines and you do testing through 2009.

"Then in 2010 you decide this is good enough, let's go commercial and start planting a few hectares."

Meanwhile the company is also testing the post-harvest viability of these cultivars and seeking feedback from supermarket customers.

"That's just in California. Then when California is ready to plant commercially we distribute the variety to the rest of the world.

"Then you wait for the material to go through quarantine, you have five vines and you start again.

"You have to develop the protocols to have something to recommend to the grower who will then plant. So it takes literally 12-14 years to develop a commercial variety from one country to another. It's a very long process."

The nuances of new varieties

After taking so many years for a cultivar to go from experimental plots in the United States to becoming a commercial proposition for producers in the Mediterranean, there is never any guarantee of success.

Sun World's black grape brand Sable Seedless is the perfect example.

"It has been in Italy for many years but it didn't find favor with the Italian growers because it has very small bunches and small berries," Ventura says.

"Unfortunately the rest of the world thinks it's a good variety because of the tropical taste and aroma - the rest of the world does not care about the berry size.



Adora Seedless looks promising for Italian vineyards but rigorous testing is still needed to develop protocols.

"What we are selling is flavor in this case, but the Italian growers thought the size of the

grapes was more important than the taste.

"Adora seedless is a completely different story because it's 28-29mm naturally. It's an incredible huge, late black variety, but it's not easy to grow. It's very vigorous so we need to test carefully to have the right protocol for Adora."

But the commercial success isn't only driven by grower demand. Sometimes the opposite is true - growers love a variety but Sun World finds it doesn't work well in Italian conditions.

"In fact, we were expecting to have a big planting of Sophia Seedless but it does not store well," he says.

"It's one of those cases where we avoided disaster because everybody wanted to plant it, but we said 'wait, let's go slowly and see what the market says'."

As for early season varieties, starting around mid-July in Italy, Ventura sees niche opportunities for the varieties Sugra41 and Sugra36.

"These two are really muscat and very early because they are about 10 days or two weeks before SugraOne," he says.

"We are selling the muscat flavor because to be honest the berry size is 18mm and the bunch size is small. It's early, it doesn't have big bunches, so normally the expectation is for something that's bigger but in this case the flavor is amazing.

"Everybody comments on how good they are. I think they are niche varieties for having bi-colored muscat grapes for a particular market that can appreciate this kind of flavor.

He says the Italian season can easily run until November, while the common seeded public variety Italia can be sold until Christmas.

We ask Ventura what he thinks this means for competition with the start of the South American table grape campaign in Europe.

"So far it's too different because muscat seeded varieties are for the domestic market and Spain, while the fruit from Peru is more for the U.K. supermarket. But there is an overlap," he says.

And what about an overlap in future with seedless proprietary varieties from Italy in the U.K. market?

"I'd say not so much because there is this window of October-November that is filled by Brazil and Peru. It really depends what the supermarket requires in that window.

"That could be Adora Seedless or Scarlotta Seedless from Europe - Italy or Spain. Spain is doing a very good job with this variety as well."

Outlook in Spain and Portugal

According to Ventura, while the last survey (way back in 2010) showed Italy had 40,000 hectares of table grape production with around 85% made up of seedless varieties like Italia, Red Globe and Victoria, the percentage of seeded production has been on the decline.



The late season variety Scarlotta Seedless has been well accepted and is having an impact on the market.

In Spain the production might not be as significant at 23,000 hectares, but in contrast to Italy around a third are made up of seedless table grapes.

"It's very likely that 95% of the seedless grapes planted are in the region of Murcia. In the north of Spain or in Valencia seeded varieties are still grown but it's changing fast," he says.

"Sable is very well received and popular in Spain because the supermarkets were enquiring a lot with us, so there has been a lot of planting," he says, adding testing has also begun with Adora Seedless like in Italy.

"In Spain, Moyca and El Ciruelo are big players that are strong supporters of us and we are strong supporters of them."

Spain's season starts at the end of June, compared to mid-July in Italy. Both these countries are mostly export-focused as far as Sun World's varieties are concerned, but the situation is a bit different in Portugal.

"In Portugal with Vale da Rosa we are doing a very nice job. It's more focused on the domestic market but we also have some export," Ventura says.

"It's mostly Sophia Seedless and Midnight Beauty. Sophia seedless is one of the first varieties we introduced but it is really a muscat-flavored variety but again, the problem is it doesn't travel well.

"As long as you are selling in the domestic market you are okay but you cannot export it."

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