

Florida-based tropical fruits importer and distributor HLB Specialties is getting ready for its first rambutan shipment of the season, which will start in the second week of May.

The company will first receive Guatemalan rambutan in its Miami depot and soon after in its Los Angeles distribution center.

HLB Specialties has been supplying U.S. retailers and wholesalers with their unique 12oz clamshell and 5-pound bulk box for the past four years, expanding into Canada this year.

While rambutan is a tropical fruit originally from Southeast Asia, HLB's rambutan is grown in Guatemala and Honduras. When HLB Specialties pioneered its 12-oz ventilated clamshell in 2016, the fruit experienced explosive growth in U.S. retail stores. Since then it has become very popular, largely in part to its convenient presentation, ease of handling, and sweet taste.

The HLB Rambutan label includes eating instructions and a playful cartoon character, which is meant to entice kids to try it.

"Rambutan tastes like peeled grapes and is the perfect kid snack, just watch for the pit," HLB's director of communications Melissa Hartmann de Barros explains.

Social media has been an especially helpful tool to promote rambutan. In mid-2018, the hashtag #rambutan had close to 200,000 mentions worldwide on Instagram alone, which was an increase of 48,000 posts over 2017. Today it has close to 223,000 tags "and by the end of the season this year it will surely have increased tremendously," Hartmann de Barros adds.

HLB Specialties sources rambutan from exclusive partner-growers in Guatemala and Honduras, one of which is the largest GlobalGap certified grower-packer-shipper of rambutan in the world. HLB can distribute out of the company's five warehouses throughout the US, or shipments can be flown directly into any U.S. or Canadian airport.

30-year anniversary

The company is also celebrating its 30-year anniversary this year. Founded by Brazilian Homero Levy de Barros in Germany in 1989 as HLB Tropical Food GmbH, the company first focused on importing and distributing seafood from South America to Europe and added papayas and more tropical items in 1992. The German company continues operations in Frankfurt/Main.

"When I think back to the early 1990s, papayas were a rare sight in Germany and they were almost exclusively brought in by ocean, completely green and tasteless," said HLB's founder Homero Levy de Barros.

"We worked hard to show the industry that papayas needed to be air-flown and with at least 50% maturity. We absolutely transformed the market and today it makes me happy to know that we contribute to a healthier lifestyle."