

South Africa may be renowned as one of the world's top table grape exporters, offering a broad selection of new and improved varieties to markets in Europe, North America and Asia, but many of these new cultivars are also finding favor among consumers in the domestic market where they are giving the category a boost.

Tania Van Der Merwe, National Procurement Buyer of Stone fruit, Grapes and Exotic Fruit at Freshmark - the fresh produce procurement arm of leading African food retailer Shoprite - said that the introduction of numerous proprietary varieties is having a positive impact on sales and helping to extend the sales season for domestically grown fruit.



Van Der Merwe spoke to FreshFruitPortal.com ahead of the inaugural Global Grape Summit taking place in London on June 5, during which she will be a panelist in the session entitled "Consumer Response to New Varieties".

Van Der Merwe has been at Freshmark for 17 years, with the last five years in her current position. Freshmark is a division of Shoprite Checkers Supermarket Group, and supplies fruit and vegetables to Checkers, Shoprite, Usave, and OK Franchise stores in South Africa and throughout the African continent.

Although it is taking longer for many new varieties to become household names in South Africa, due to competition with the export price structure the market's price-sensitivity, there are some notable changes taking place on the domestic table grape market.

"Better early varieties have had a positive impact on our sales. We have been experiencing a better eating quality and larger berry size," Van Der Merwe said.

"Meanwhile, better late varieties has given us the opportunity to achieve a better shelf life that is able to extend our season with approximately six weeks. We have also become more accurate with our storage programs, which is needed for late varieties."

For the last two years, she added, there was no need to end the season with seeded

varieties, as had been the case in the past, when it was common for table grape sales to drop by around 60% when seeded varieties started. In fact, as in many other markets, demand for seedless varieties has increased so strongly that Shoprite has gone so far as to stop selling seeded grape varieties, with the exception of Red Globe.

"The introduction of new varieties has led to more choices and has changed our specifications. We're still competing with the export market, but there are more newer varieties available for our local market," she said. This evolution has led to a more flavorful selection of grapes available to shoppers, she added.

Some of the newer varieties that are proving particularly popular with South African consumers are Autumn Crisp, Adora, Sweet Globe, Candy Hearts, and Cotton Candy. But she noted that the latter two only sell well at the correct price point, and consumers are often not willing to pay the premium.

In addition to the more recent varietal introductions, a couple of more traditional cultivars remain popular, such as Crimson seedless, and Red Globe, which is the highest selling grape in the northern area of the country.

In general, she said the most important table grape characteristics for South African consumers are good color, large berry sizes, full flavor and price.

Outside of the South African season, Freshmark imports from a few other table grape-growing countries to keep demand satisfied throughout the year.

"Spain is our preferred importing partner due to shorter travel time, competitive pricing and bigger varieties," she said. "Generally there are more varieties to choose from when importing." The company also brings in fruit from Zambia, where the seasons begins around a couple of weeks ahead of South Africa, as well as limited volumes from Egypt and Israel.

There remain some challenges associated with introducing new table grape varieties into the market, Van Der Merwe said, such as achieving a consistent supply of new varieties due to the heavy competition with export markets. In addition, she said that consumer price sensitivity is an ongoing challenge, as well as many growers' high price expectations. Harvest packouts have also not always been as high as producers had anticipated.

Asked what advice she would give the supply side of the table grape industry to help advance the category - based on how consumers are responding to new varieties - she emphasized that quality, consistency and price point were crucial.

"Quality remains key for any consumer, are therefore suppliers need to ensure shelf life," she said. "They also need to ensure consistent harvests annually. The worst for retail is to market a new line for a season and then have limited volumes the next season."

"In addition, when launching a new variety, you need to work together with your supplier to ensure we enter the market at the correct price point.

"There is a definite ceiling price for new cultivars. Consumers are still uneducated when it comes to different varieties and most consumers only know a red, black or white grape. It is our responsibility as retail, together with the suppliers to educate the consumer and also offer them this "testing" phase at a reasonable price."

## **Global Grape Summit attendance "extremely important"**

The upcoming Global Grape Summit will include numerous educational sessions aimed at providing key insights and increasing attendees understanding about most the pressing issues facing the industry, such as how consumers around the world are responding to the wide range of new varieties now on offer.

Other sessions include panel discussions on what the next decade holds for the industry, new production areas around the world, and retail opportunities in the U.K. There will also be ample networking opportunities.

"As a retailer, it is extremely important to attend this summit," said Van Der Merwe.

"It gives us great exposure to the general international trends. It provides feedback from the various industry players regarding the future of the industry, new product development, environmental responsibility regarding packaging and general farming practices and provides information on varieties being trailed and the successes and failure that has been experienced thus far."