

Rupert Maude, commercial director of Spain-based table grape and stone fruit company El Ciruelo, is about to take the stage at the inaugural Global Grape Summit as part of the London Produce Show and Conference, where he will be a panelist on the session called Fast-Forward to 2029.

We recently asked Matthew Ogg, contributing editor [PRODUCE BUSINESS](#) and [FreshFruitPortal.com](#), to get a preview of Rupert's thoughts on the matter.



*Q: At the Global Grape Summit, you'll be participating in a panel discussion, which looks forward to 2029 and what's in store for the grape industry. From your experience and what you're seeing at the moment, what do you think the future holds in the decade ahead for this commodity?*

A: That's a very good question, because I think, if anything, time and experience have shown me that you can't predict the future. A long time ago a gentleman who had been in the business for 50 years told me that his knowledge and experience were not very relevant, because it's changed very rapidly and it's changed so much.

Ten years on, the only thing I would say with any certainty is fruit will continue to be consumed. I would be very surprised if grapes didn't continue to be a very popular product — as to how it would reach the customer or the final user, in what format, that I think is beyond me.

Looking around the world and the way grapes are marketed, it's so different. You see most of Europe, and quite a lot of the world they use punnets and other places they like to do it completely loose, no packaging whatsoever. And in other places they use bags.

I think that will evolve, so different kinds of packaging will come out; packaging that will enhance the product, that will increase shelf life or increase the presentation at point of sale.

*Q: On the other hand, whilst we can't know what's going to happen for sure, when growers are planting vines it can take time for the fruit to come into being, so they still have to do a bit of guesswork. Where is that guesswork heading in a broader sense as far as varieties and markets are concerned?*

A: If you're a breeder you have a very clear remit. It was summed up very well by a large California grower - the grape needs to be good, and that means good color, shape, size, eating and shelf life, so five points. And it must be cheap and efficient — efficient to grow. In other words, you can't spend a lot of time hand-trimming it or any work that's going to involve a lot of labor, because labor gets expensive.

*Q: And how are you as a company future-proofing your business, and where do you see the greatest opportunities and challenges?*

A: The opportunity is doing an ever better job more efficiently, and breaking that down it's making sure you reduce your claims and your reductions. Therefore, if you do a better job in the fields, you'll have less reduced yields, less issue and therefore cost, and if you do a good job post-harvest and get it to the customer in the right state, then you're winning again because you're going to have fewer claims.

Everybody must look to grow the best reputation they can, because at the end of the day the reputation is what you're judged by, whether you're a journalist, a grower or a fighter pilot; it's about who you are, what you've done and how you do it that matters. For any business going forward, it must be sustainable, environmentally friendly, not just to the environment but to the whole sector whether it be suppliers, customers, the general public, everyone.

*Q: What do you see as some of the most prospective markets for table grapes where companies like yours are finding more opportunities or are acting more aggressively to position yourselves?*

A: I think Asia has huge possibilities, but it also has a lot of risk. India has tremendous potential but it's not there in my mind yet. We see other markets like Australia and New Zealand, which are being served by people like California, and we see no reason why we couldn't do that, so the potential to do an awful lot of things is there, but it's a question of arriving at the time when we're able to engage.

*Q: What kind of threats do you see from new growing regions? For example, we've seen massive growth in production from places like Peru, which is having an impact on markets.*

A: I don't see the Southern Hemisphere as a direct threat, but it's an indirect threat because if they do a poor job and manage to reduce the average price of grapes across the world, then that will have a knock-on effect obviously.

Of more concern to us is the African countries that are emerging, like Tunisia, Morocco or

Senegal, where there is an ambition to grow grapes, and they haven't done so before. If they are sponsored by the right breeding programs, they will get traction with customers, and they will just divide and conquer. Supermarkets love a new offer.

At the moment it isn't happening, but I think we'd just have to work alongside. There's no easy fix on this.

*Q: We've covered a fair bit of ground here. When it comes to issues for the future, is there anything else we haven't touched on that you'd like to discuss?*

A: I think the big thing for the future is packaging and plastics — you see all these terrible pictures of seas of plastic just floating around the world's oceans, and I think a lot can and will be done to reduce the use of plastic in packaging, and to make manufacturers, producers, everybody more accountable for residues.

I remember going to a show back in the day and going to a meeting about recycling packaging, and there were two of us plus the third guy who was giving the talk. It just showed how little interest everybody had in it, whereas today there is pressure from our customers, pressure from the media, and I think it's self-conscious as well; everybody feels they want to leave the world a better place than when they entered it, so I think that will be the biggest thing in the next five or 10 years.

*Q: On that note, are you making any inroads experimenting with different packaging methods that incorporate recyclable or compostable materials?*

A: Of course. First of all, there are many types of packaging available today and there are also a lot of new ones coming out. Two years ago, no one would have thought about having a cardboard punnet because it's so much cheaper and easier to use a plastic one, but cardboard punnets are becoming available and they're heat-sealable.

We're working with that, and we have worked with paper bags forever; we're extending that out. We're also looking at cellulose, which is a plastic that is far more recyclable, and it will be a question of looking at different packaging materials.

Wood isn't really an option because you get splinters, but paper and cardboard are going to be much more prevalent in packaging going forward.

The U.K. market is probably the most aggressive market in the world where everything has had to be cheaper, but I think that's changed. I think Brexit will change that and the revolution of packaging will change that, where people will have to pay for the right

materials and the right way of doing things, and that is just a concept that gets passed on whatever the product, whatever the field.

*Q: And hopefully as more people enter the space to supply and find efficiencies, then it will get cheaper. That's fantastic you're taking on those initiatives and thanks for your time today.*