

Colombian tropical fruit exporter [La Dona Fruit](#) says its newly opened packhouse in the country will serve as a "launchpad" to expand exports of limes and other products to the U.S.

The company's new "pioneering" Valle Verde packhouse and coldstore for Tahiti limes in Apartadó, Antioquia, in the north of Colombia, opened earlier this week.

Equipped with the most advanced packing technology in Colombia, the 1,542m² facility is one of the most innovative in Latin America, the company says.

It will "cement La Dona's objective of becoming the largest lime exporter in Colombia, and serves as the launchpad for exports to expand to the USA and the Caribbean, to complement existing business in Europe".

The packhouse is managed by agricultural investment management company Farmfolio, and has been built to bespoke specifications. The machinery features infra-red sorting, sanitising, drying, waxing, and classifying modules.

This will enable La Dona to implement a highly automated and fast packing process, as well as homogeneous quality and sizes. By December, the facility will be certified by GlobalGAP and SMETA.

Dax Cooke, Farmfolio's Founder and La Dona's Head of Global Marketing & Sales, comments: "I truly believe that Valle Verde will change the landscape for limes in Colombia for years to come! This packhouse is dedicated to limes first and foremost, and that is our biggest point of difference.

"Every other facility packing limes in Colombia is focused on avocados first. They are not able to screen limes accurately, they lack the logistical channels to distribute limes effectively, and they don't have agronomy programs in place with the growers to guarantee consistently top quality limes. This is what separates La Dona Fruit from the rest."

Oscar Baracaldo, La Dona's Head of Customer Experience, adds: "Although Colombia has been exporting limes for nearly a decade, the sector presents high opportunity for disruption. After packing in third party facilities during the last year, we can now confidently say that we operate the best lime packing technology in Colombia.

"Furthermore, our Valle Verde packhouse is located strategically within Colombia's Free Trade Zone in Urabá, which is close to two Atlantic ports. This awards us major advantages

over our direct competitors in Colombia in terms of maximum product freshness, as well as tax-free machinery and electronic equipment.”

Launching Exports

The Valle Verde packhouse has the capacity to pack 1,000 tonnes of Tahiti limes each month for export to Europe, the USA and the Caribbean.

Baracaldo said: “Colombia can supply limes for 52 weeks of the year, and we will be focusing on specific windows to plug the gaps in global production from September to November, and from January to March.”

La Dona has been eager to launch exports of Tahiti limes to the USA and the Caribbean, and the opening of the Valle Verde packhouse makes this possible. This summer alone, exports to Europe doubled in volume.

Next, the group is looking to welcome more growers into the fold to help maximize capacity at the new packhouse as La Dona broadens its markets. From 2021, monthly exports will triple in volume to Europe, the USA and the Caribbean.

Cooke explains: “Recently, we firmed up agreements for exports to begin to the USA in October. At the same time, we’re distributing to wholesale markets throughout Europe via our own La Dona channel. Overall, we are shipping 4-6 containers per week to the USA and Europe.

“We’re also speaking with French, Spanish and Italian importers about establishing direct, fixed programmes year-round. We want to create stability on the lime market through fixed programmes with fixed prices to develop a sustainable business for the growers and our investors.”

The La Dona model is based upon establishing direct grower relationships, and its Tahiti lime venture Valle Verde is no different.

Baracaldo comments: “By having our own packhouse we remove the need for third party players. We buy the limes directly from the growers in order to pack and ship directly from our facility. As we expand the business for our investors, we will be supporting our lime growers to produce a superior product, and to enjoy a better quality life.”

Currently, there are 450 hectares (ha) of limes under production within La Dona’s grower network, which will grow to 1,200ha next year as more farms come online.

Baracaldo concludes: “Our intention is to produce the highest quality limes in Colombia, with the most juicy fruit and delicious flavour, all year round. That way, we can achieve a better price for our growers, and a better offer for our customers. Colombia is a very young lime producer with the potential to become a considerable supplier. We look forward to solving more challenges along this journey.”

The inauguration will take place on Oct. 15 2020 and can be viewed live [via Zoom](#). The public and private sectors of Colombia will attend, including Colombia’s Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism; Colombia’s Vice-Minister of Agricultural Affairs; the US Ambassador; and ProColombia’s Vice-Presidents of US Foreign Investment and Agro-Exports.