

Fresh produce importer-marketer Vanguard Direct has described the recent Peruvian table grape season as one "like no other", with multiple factors creating major challenges for the industry.

In a season recap, the company said that the once-in-a-lifetime pandemic catapulted global industries in a twisting rollercoaster would have been enough of a challenge to tackle in one season.

However, the 2020/2021 grape season in Peru had another plan, it said. Issues stacked one behind each other to create the most unique and challenging season Vanguard International has ever experienced.

Or as President of Vanguard Direct, Dirk Winkelmann describes, "A year like this undresses your weaknesses - which can be a good thing."

The first domino that shook the 2020 Peru season were the labor strikes that peaked just before the Christmas holidays. This interruption caused around a 10-day delay during the critical harvest schedule, he said.

As labor returned when the calendar flipped to 2021, the ever-changing Covid-19 pandemic phases caused understandable hesitation in the workforce and led to inconsistent teams, Winkelmann explained. A continually changing staff required regular re-training sessions to assure quality consistency of products.

The unsteady labor carousel led to additional packing delays, and the next domino - a more competitive day-to-day labor environment with quickly escalating costs.

Somewhat of a bidding war commenced for labor between the numerous growers and packers. This led to increased costs and key team members moving to neighboring operations. More critical still was that harvest and packing times were delayed resolving these workforce and HR challenges.

Underlining all these factors was the ongoing and quickly heightening pandemic concerns. The health and safety of the Vanguard International team during the pandemic has always been a primary focus.

"We reconfigured the entire operation and packing house facilities to ensure appropriate social distancing and Covid-19 safety. 12 lines reduced to 9 to allow for proper distancing which cost us a 30% decrease in efficiency," Winkelmann said.

"Management transitioned to working from home when possible. Additional entry points had to be added to the packing house. Additional buses had to be contracted to transport personnel to the fields and packing house. Kitchen facilities and lunchrooms had to be expanded.

"New monitoring logs for daily temperature and health checks, along with HR protocols, had to be put in place. And these were just a few of the changes made in this "new environment" we are operating within."

While trying to steady the labor force we began to face arguably the most challenging issues of the season - a vessel shortage and container backup. What was an estimated peak of 60,000 cartons daily being harvested and packed went quickly to 90,000 cartons daily and there were not always enough containers to transport the fruit.

The process began to bottleneck. Fruit needed to come off the vines, cold storage was full, and fruit couldn't get out the door fast enough - the port and container/equipment situation tied our hands and severely affected our operations overall and eventually affected the condition of the fruit.

With the last few cartons being sold, the team is now starting to turn their focus to the 2022 season.

"We know how to grow exceptional grapes, so in reflecting back on the quality of our product for the 2020/2021 season, we definitely feel that the quality, size, and taste were all great. It was the myriad of industry events outside of our control that impacted the condition of the fruit," Winkelmann said.

"This is important to understand - we executed well on the quality, but the confluence of outside events negatively impacted the condition.

"Seasons like this are chaotic, incredibly stressful, and stating the obvious, not ones we hope for, but out of these periods comes change, addition of systems, process tweaks, and planning that makes our organization and products better for years to come."