Edwin Wolf, Origin Fruit Group:

"Growing citrus surpluses as South African cultivation continues to expand"

The South African citrus season is facing a number of challenges. "It's not just the higher volumes, but quality management in particular that's an issue this year," says Edwin Wolf of the Origin Fruit Group in Rotterdam. He also questions the ever-increasing production levels in South Africa. "It's great to keep growing, but simply producing fruit isn't enough, and the surpluses are getting bigger every year. As an industry, we'll have to give that some thought."

The current surpluses are caused by increasing production, but also by the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine. As a result, South Africa's sales opportunities are dwindling, and the surplus often ends up in Europe anyway. Opportunities for local concentrate processing are also limited at present.

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A saturated grapefruit market

This season, the grapefruit market, among others, is experiencing difficulties in finding buyers. "At the start of the South African season, there was a lot of produce on the market from Europe, Egypt, and Turkey, among other places. That really stood in the way of a good start to the season. The volumes South Africa is supplying are virtually the same as last year, but back then the grapefruit arrived in an empty market, whereas now it's arriving in a saturated one," says Edwin.

"What's more, we're seeing that, due to the poor weather in South Africa, the quality isn't always optimal either. Sales to the wholesale market are sluggish, and the retail sector isn't taking up the volumes we've been used to in recent years. Prices in the spot market are therefore at a dramatically low level, between 6 and 8 euros," says Edwin. "On top of that, there is a bigger underlying problem: grapefruit consumption is gradually declining after all."

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Many more lemons to Europe

"The lemon market is also a remarkable story this year. South Africa had forecast exports of around 45 million boxes, but this ultimately rose to 49 million. Normally, South Africa always sells well in the Middle East, but as a result of the current situation, much more produce is now coming this way. In total, no less than 40 per cent more has been sent to Europe than last year. In addition to South African growers, Argentine and Chilean growers have also sent larger volumes in anticipation of a strong market," says the importer.

This is bound to have an impact on the market. "At the start of the season, prices were still sky-high, but they halved within a week when larger volumes arrived. Prices have since fallen even further to between 10.50 and 12 euros for the good sizes," says Edwin. "We're also seeing that, particularly from the Patensie and Eastern Cape growing regions, quality isn't holding up due to the rain at the start of the season. As a result, a lot of the produce has to be sorted and repacked."


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Congestion at the Port of Durban

"The South African mandarin season is getting off to a very slow start. The early varieties such as Satsuma, Nova, and Clementines have now cleared the market, and we've been dealing with Nadorcott for a couple of weeks now. Due to the later harvest, the market is getting underway later. Moreover, the supply consists mainly of larger sizes, for which there is less demand in Europe," says Edwin.

"On top of that, we're facing significant congestion with fruit exported via the port of Durban in northern South Africa, as opposed to Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. In Durban, there are queues of lorries stretching back a week outside the port. As a result, the fruit is currently arriving only in dribs and drabs, but those volumes will still need to reach the market. I also fear that we will see the effects of this later in the season. Prices for Nadorcott are currently still between 15.50 and 17 euros, but it remains to be seen whether those prices can hold up when the peak volumes arrive."

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"We're seeing the same situation with oranges. Due to the rain at the start of the season, the fruit is very large, with a peak in the 72–64 size range, while the market mainly demands the 88–105 sizes. This is causing a shortage of the smaller sizes, while the larger sizes are readily available. These are selling for between 12.50 and 14 euros. The price of the smaller sizes is between 15.50 and 17 euros," continues Edwin.

"One positive factor for citrus consumption is that the holidays are now drawing to a close. We already saw this last week in the increasing demand for mandarins from Scandinavia, and we're now seeing the same trend in the Netherlands and Germany," concludes Edwin. "But I hope that, as a sector, we can also find a solution to the rising volumes. Due to the geopolitical situation, South Africa now has virtually no alternatives to Europe for its lemon exports. As a result, there are still plenty of lemons in storage, while Spain is already about to start its harvest again. This makes programs increasingly important, but it also requires a response from the sector in South Africa. What can they improve in the long term in terms of volume planning to prevent oversupply?"

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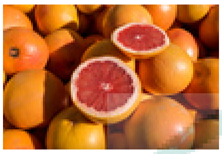
- 
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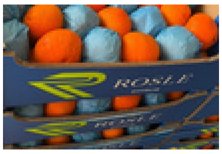

- ## "The demand has been encouraging, supported by the fruit's eating quality"

- ## The EU imported a record 1.57 million tons of citrus fruit this season