

Agroecology: soon to be a differentiating factor in international trade?

Exporting fresh fruit becomes quite a perilous activity in the current international context marked by significant logistical tensions, increased competition, and ever-higher customer expectations. In order to establish a lasting presence in distant markets, Select Fruit and Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée – both specializing in the export of French apples – have decided to join forces by creating the Tasty and Select alliance. The two companies are thus pooling their strengths to increase quantities, commercial agility, and their ability to meet the growing demand coming far destinations. “We can count on each other's contribution to build up our volumes and our ability to serve the customer. This allows us to pursue joint programs,” explains Philippe Jean, CEO of Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée.

The two companies are very much complementary in terms of varieties and terroirs – since Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée's production is concentrated in the southeast and Select Fruit's in the Loire Valley – but also in terms of markets: “Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée has a long-standing presence in Southeast Asia. We have been exporting to markets such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore for

several years. We also have a presence in Israel, more sporadically in the Middle East, and are developing trade flows to Latin America, particularly Ecuador,” explains Philippe Jean.

SELECT FRUIT: ENGLAND AS PREFERRED MARKET

For its part, Select Fruit has historically built its business around the British mar-

ket, which still accounts for 60 to 70% of its export sales. “This is our preferred export destination, thanks to our geographical proximity and our expertise in packaging at source, often under our customers' brands,” explains Delphine Robin, export director at Select Fruit. But over the past three years, Select Fruit has accelerated its development in the global export market. “Markets such as Asia, but also Latin America (particularly Brazil) and Central America (Ecuador) are looking for sizes that complement the markets we have historically covered. Fruit consumption is very high in these markets, which are high-potential markets where we want to be present because we have the capacity to meet their needs.”

Select Fruit also has expertise in exporting organically grown varieties, particularly Gala apples: “We have been involved in organic farming for a long time and have a real capacity to develop programs, both on the domestic market and for export,” says Delphine Robin.



A FAVORABLE CLIMATE FOR FRENCH APPLES

The current season is part of a generally favorable context for French apple exports. The harvest has been fairly positive for France, while some competing countries have experienced difficulties. “This year, the export market is

very dynamic for us. Turkey has had half a harvest, Serbia and the Baltic countries have recorded lower volumes, and Italy – a major player in the market – has suffered from a reduced Granny Smith harvest, with a high proportion of large sizes. This situation has therefore created a commercial opportunity for us,”

explains Philippe Jean. This situation has prompted the Tasty and Select Alliance to explore new markets in Africa, the Middle East, India, and other Latin American countries.

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FROM ORCHARD TO TRANSPORT: SPECIFIC EXPERTISE REQUIRED TO REACH DISTANT MARKETS

Growing on the domestic market is one thing, but conquering the export market is quite another. This second ambition requires specific expertise in terms of production, marketing, and sales: "In the export market, shelf life is a determining factor. You need apples that can withstand five to six weeks of transit. The most popular varieties are Gala, Granny Smith, and Fuji. Brands are also very popular, particularly Legend, Pink Lady, and Joya. To ensure optimal quality, a rigorous selection process is put in place, starting with the planting of the trees. When renewing orchards, producers take care to choose resistant clones. Har-

vesting also requires specific expertise, as do cold storage and packaging. Everything is designed to guarantee a very high level of quality. Rigorous selection of batches is also essential to limit the risk of disputes, which are particularly costly in these distant destinations.

While not all varieties can be destined for faraway destinations, terroir is also a decisive factor. Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée and Select Fruit both produce Gala apples, but when grown in the southeast, the variety cannot be exported, whereas it has every potential to be exported when grown in the Loire Valley.

STANDING OUT IN A COMPLEX AND HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKET

Although the current climate is favorable for French manufacturing, the cards are reshuffled every year: "We operate in an international market characterized by complex logistics, fierce competition, and an unstable geopolitical context. Every year, the balance shifts and we have to rethink our strategy. While the elements are in our favor for this campaign, this may not be the case next year. It is therefore important to stand out from the competition. As we have said, this means offering premium quality, but also creating brands and implementing impeccable farming practices," reports Delphine Robin.

THE BRAND: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR DIFFERENTIATION

In a context of strong international competition, marketing remains a powerful tool to differentiate: "At Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée, we created the Tasty Gran-



ny brand 15 years ago, which remains a benchmark for exports, and we are continuing to develop the Legend brand (Innored variety). In addition, the rise of the European Pink Lady orchard opens up significant growth opportunities. However, this is conditional on building lasting brand awareness and a distinctive image, particularly in markets such as Southeast Asia, where consumers are particularly receptive to new and distinctive brands. The goal over the next few years is to position Pink Lady as a premium brand and the number one brand in these emerging markets," says Philippe Jean.

AGROECOLOGY TO SET FRENCH PRODUCE APART?

Agroecology and respect for the environment also appear to be drivers of differentiation in the medium and long term. Although these practices are still not widely promoted in the export market, customer interest is very real. "From a general point of view, French production meets particularly demanding specifications in terms of agroecology, some of the most demanding in the world. As far as our two companies are concerned, we are particularly committed to these issues, which are part of our DNA. We sense that our customers are interested, but it may still be a little too early to influence their purchasing decisions. However, they know that we offer products that are grown using environmentally friendly practices, as validated by the Vergers Ecoresponsables label. It's a safe bet that these criteria will become paramount in the coming years."



Despite the challenges posed by their ambition to expand into the international market, Select Fruit and Cofruid'Oc Méditerranée have a number of assets that enable them to move forward step by step in the uncertain world of international trade. Their experience in highly

demanding markets, such as the United Kingdom, has enabled them to develop recognized expertise in quality, preservation, and compliance with strict specifications. In a highly competitive international market, this expertise, combined with a strong brand strategy and a firm

commitment to responsible agricultural practices, could well give them a significant edge in the future. •



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