

Mexico's fresh focus on UK

Given its geographic closeness, it is little wonder most of Mexico's fresh produce goes to the US, but the UK and Europe are becoming increasingly attractive alternatives. Steven Maxwell reports

Mention Mexican food to most UK consumers and the chances are they will associate it with burritos, nachos and refried beans – in fact almost anything but fresh produce. However, although most British shoppers may be unaware of it, Mexico is a major exporter of fruits and vegetables, whose share of the UK market has steadily grown over the last decade.

Sharing a border that spans some 3,169km, it is probably unsurprising the US receives the bulk of the country's fresh produce exports. However, with the global recession hitting US spending levels, Mexican exporters have begun to cast their eye over other, potentially lucrative destinations, among them the UK.

As recently as 2007, Mexico only exported 7,579 tonnes of its primary fruit commodities – citrus, avocados, bananas and berries – to this country.

However, this figure had increased to 17,263 tonnes by 2011.

Although berries are an important export product to the UK, figures from Mexico's Ministry of Agriculture reveal huge increases in lime and orange sales. Persian lime exports to the UK rose from 1,192 tonnes in 2007 to 8,619 tonnes last year, while orange shipments increased from 2,409 tonnes five years ago to 4,226 tonnes by 2011.

According to Fernando Fernandez from promotional body Mexico Calidad Suprema, the growth in exports to the UK is being driven by the ability of Mexican growers to deliver a stable supply of quality fruit all year round.

Fernandez says the UK now counts among Mexico's five principal export markets in Europe, receiving a wide range of desirable products including strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, orang-

es, Persian limes, avocados, bananas and grapefruit.

According to Fernandez, the UK accounts for over 18 per cent of total Mexican fruit exports to Europe, although less than two per cent of Mexico's vegetable shipments are sent to the continent.

EXPORT DEMAND

Sofresco GmbH is, perhaps, typical of Mexican producers that currently export to the UK.

The company exports limes to the UK during the summer months, followed by blackberries from October to May. According to the firm's chief operating officer, Gerardo López, Sofresco expects to deliver 1,000 tonnes of fruit to the British market this year, worth an estimated £1m, which is equivalent to around 30 per cent of its total volume shipped to Europe. >>



- 1— Mexico is a renowned producer of limes
- 2— La Piedra del Sol, the Aztec calendar stone



Comtiem tackles fruit quality on board Technology

Mexican fresh produce exporter Comtiem recently reported that it's adopting Purfresh technology in the long-haul shipment of its limes from Mexico to Europe and the UK, in a bid to maintain fruit quality and improve the company's bottom line.



3—Mexican chillies are known the world over

Outside these two key products, López says the company is also planning to promote Mexican blueberries.

Michoacán-based soft-fruit and grapefruit exporter Grupo HerEs is another Mexican exporter that is keen to establish Mexico-grown blueberries in the UK.

At the present time, Grupo HerEs exports 1,000 tonnes of blackberries to the EU, including the UK, and hopes are high that it can increase its level of business in the country.

"The UK is one of our most important markets because although it is very demanding in terms of quality and certification, it is very stable in terms of prices and our clients there are among the most reliable you could work with," says Grupo HerEs' Mydory Ramirez.

The company's strategy for increasing its UK business is, she says, focused on improving the added value of its products and services to clients combined with substantial internal investment to improve HerEs' ability to meet quality, volume, food safety and logistics demands.

Ramirez says HerEs believes it can achieve further growth in the UK through its organic range, which she says has already attracted interest from a number of clients.

Campo Elite, a berry exporter based in the nearby region of Colima, exports 60 tonnes of blackberries, raspberries and blueberries during its soft-fruit season to Europe – some 80 per cent of which goes to the UK.

In fact, Campo Elite's Raúl Fernández says the company's annual sales to the UK reach around \$700m and is considered one of its principal markets, alongside the US and Canada.

"We view the UK as a demanding, but very fair client," he says. "This is



—3

an advantage for us because we offer very high quality products from a region that boasts very high food safety levels."

In the case of its blueberry exports, which are relatively recent, Fernández says Campo Elite has been able to differentiate its product from Chilean competitors by emphasising this quality and targeting "gourmet" and high-end retailers.

DIFFICULTIES REMAIN

Of course, all of this is not to suggest that the UK has suddenly become the market of choice for Mexican producers. Far from it, argues Paul Nicholls of UK importer Total Exotics, who says many Mexican growers still need to be convinced about the merits of exporting to Europe.

"The key point with Mexican sourcing is their very strong traditional focus on the US – their trade deals and close proximity means the US is an important outlet for them and there is a risk Europe can suffer in terms of lower availability, especially when the US is promoting," explains Nicholls.

For this reason, he says that Total Exotics has undertaken great efforts to "educate and inform" Mexican growers that "there are alternative outlets for their products, not just the US".

But Nicholls adds: "This has been a real challenge, especially with avocado and mango growers."

Another difficulty when dealing with Mexico, he continues, is the



fact that many of the country's packhouses, while equipped to handle large volumes, can only accommodate modest packaging requirements. Bespoke packaging, as required by many UK retailers, is often expensive to implement, says Nicholls.

Total Exotics' current imports from Mexico primarily consist of limes – around 20 tonnes a week, from May to December – followed by 10 tonnes a week of asparagus between January and April.

Despite this, it also appears that the question of prices in the UK has proven to be a negative factor for some exporters.

Sun Belle, a US berry producer with extensive farming interests in Mexico, exports Mexican blackberries to a wide range of European markets between October and May, and is experiencing steady growth in the continent.

However, company president Janice Honigberg says the same cannot be said to be true for the UK. "Our business in Europe is growing significantly, but we have little to no growth in the UK," she says.

"The biggest difficulty in the UK is the low prices, so it's difficult to interest growers given the alternatives in other markets." — FPI