

The future: expanding or contracting the acreage?

Belgium: Potential in tomato speciality market, acreage nearly doubled this season

The Belgian acreage for tomato specialities has nearly doubled this season. The Belgian traders supplying these special tomatoes are mainly Hoogstraten and BelOrta. Natalie Snijers of Hoogstraten and Raf Heylen of BelOrta talked about the specialities and their pricing. Both traders have a wide range and currently there is already some production.

BelOrta

BelOrta owns 300 hectares for tomato production, of which 32 are devoted to specialities (about 10%). Raf Heylen says that they have many different cherry tomato specialities in various calibres and weights. "New to BelOrta this year is the Corrimo, a strawberry-shaped truss tomato with deep red glossy fruits of the Edioso variety. Another popular speciality is the pink flesh tomato. Demand for Sweet Pink is clearly on the rise. This is a pink tomato with a sweeter taste, whose colour gives it an exclusive appearance. "He said that cherry tomatoes take the largest acreage; "four hectares with Coeur de Boeuf and 3.5 hectares with Cherry Star."



He said that prices are currently under pressure. "From a European standpoint, there are still large volumes on the way, including quite a bit of produce from Spain." There are some specialities that reach exceptional prices. The San Marzano, for example, which is expensive because of a good contract with a Belgian department store, and it performs even better in the marketplace with consumers. He does not expect the acreage for tomato specialities to grow much in the coming years. "I think the acreage will first contract due to the pressure from poor prices this spring," but it is still early in the season. In any case, it will not be easy. The balance between supply and demand is very unstable. If there is but a small shortage, prices sharply increase; if you have a little excess, prices drop also very quickly. The speciality market is becoming increasingly sensitive, although it is also gaining attention from consumers."

Hoogstraten

Veiling Hoogstraten owns a tomato acreage of 150 hectares, of which about a third are devoted to specialities. "The two largest crops are the Bellino and Cherry Star.

Bellino is of the Sweetelle variety and it is cultivated by four growers with a total of 9.2 hectares. Sales are mostly based in Belgium, although we expect things to become more difficult from now on, now that the big productions are starting to arrive. CherryStar is the Juanita variety, for which we have four growers with a total of 8.5 hectares," explains Natalie.



According to Natalie, prices have remained fairly stable. "Of course it is still too early to make any definite statements, given that the largest productions are yet to arrive. Prices vary per week; one week a product is more expensive, while the next is different. In the same way, the price of a given product can always suddenly plunge." She also stated that the situation is currently a bit difficult. "I think we can say that the situation for tomatoes in general is currently difficult everywhere. There is still quite a lot of produce on its way from the south; large productions are coming faster as a result of the good spring weather and I expect a few tough weeks for most specialities."



Natalie believes that trends will continue to move towards speciality varieties. "Buying patterns are changing (more snacking and convenience), which means that there is certainly a growing market for specialities. Offering a true variety of products, however, is more difficult to achieve, as supermarkets have limited shelf space. If a new product is on the shelf, this will usually be at the expense of yet another product that must disappear."

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