

After dominating the US market, Mexican berries look to Europe

The Mexican berry sector is setting its sights on the Old Continent, after having snatching the supremacy that Chile and Argentina had in the US market.

One of the most appealing markets in the European Union is Great Britain, as its value amounts to 1.2 billion euro and consumes 185 thousand tons of berries per year, according to a report by Roberta Cook, a specialist in agricultural economics of the University of California.

One of Mexico's advantages is that it is one of the few countries in the world that produces all the berries: strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries.

"Mexico has access to the European Union without tariffs and more and more companies are developing export programs," Cook said. She also stated that Europeans thought Mexico had inconsistent shipments, and that they were concerned about the taste of the berries.

Many producers decided to convert their traditional crops to berries because the value of this production increased, from 2001 to date, by more than 2 thousand percent, said Araceli Almaraz, a researcher at the Department of Economic Studies of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

The change has allowed Baja California to have the second biggest area devoted to strawberries in Mexico, and to rank third in the production volume of raspberry.

According to data from the Ministry of Agricultural Development of Baja California, the planted and harvested area has gradually increased and it currently reaches 2,857 hectares. The Valley of San Quintin is the main producing area in Baja California.

Some producers from San Quintin, such as BerryMex, are already working to reach the Chinese market. William Hedrick, the vice president of operations of BerryMex, said that the Mexican government and the berries associations had been searching for new markets for three years.

A complex product

Hedrick said that one of the challenges they had to export quality fruit was maintaining the cold chain, which couldn't be broken, as the fruit should be kept at 1° C since it arrived from the field.

"We export to the United States and to China. We produce in Portugal and in Morocco. We supply the European market through Driscoll's. We have lands and associations with producers in the places where it operates," he said.

Another challenge, he said, is water consumption, especially in Baja California, which has had an intense drought for more than 30 years.

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