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# California fresh fig deal gets under way in desert

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In early May, Western Fresh Marketing began harvesting and shipping Brown Turkey figs from the Coachella Valley in the Southern California desert.

George Kragie, president of Western Fresh Marketing, noted that the Madera, CA-based firm represents the only commercial grower of figs in the desert, so it is first to market with the new crop. The southern end of the San Joaquin Valley will be the next area in the deal during the first week of June, according to Kragie. He said other growers and shippers would join the deal around that time.



Kurt Cappelluti, sales manager of Stellar Distributing Inc., based in Madera, CA, confirmed that the

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San Joaquin Valley fig deal for Stellar would start around June 1. While Stellar, and its parent company Catania Worldwide, based in Toronto, does not have early season figs from the Coachella Valley, it currently is shipping figs from Mexico. Cappelluti said its Mexican deal is very well established, producing from Nov. 15 to June 1, giving the company year-round supplies of fresh figs.

Kragie noted that California fresh fig volume in May would be on the light side, as the Breva crop (the fruit from last year's fruit wood) will begin the deal in Coachella, followed by the regular crop (from this year's fruitwood) around the 20th of the month.

Even after the San Joaquin Valley deal gets going, volume of fresh figs will be on the light side until early July, according to Kragie. He explained that the same dynamic would take place with the Breva crop carrying the load through much of June in the San Joaquin Valley. The heat in the Coachella Valley (already reaching into the 90s the first week of May) tightens the gap between the Breva and the regular crop. As the harvest moves north in June, that gap will be about three to four weeks long.

"In early July, I think we will see good volume," Kragie said, noting that there are fig plantings throughout California's Central Valley. As a result, July will see many fig orchards come into play from the Lost Hills district in Southern San Joaquin Valley to the mid-valley districts of Chowchilla, Merced and Madera.

Kragie said once a fig tree starts producing, it continually bears fruit until the first frost and must be picked often. Fresh figs from California should be on the market into November.

Cappelluti suggested that the best time to promote California figs this year would be during August when supplies will be at their peak.

Speaking to The Produce News on May 7, he said rain this spring and a colder-than-normal May could push the start of the San Joaquin Valley deal back as much as a week to 10 days behind last year.

The Black Mission fig is the most common variety followed by the Brown Turkey, but there are several other varieties as well, including Calimyrna, Kadota and Tiger. Anecdotally — garnered through sampling events — Kragie estimates that about 60 percent of consumers prefer the traditional black fig while 40 percent like the larger brown fig. Of course, there are also several other colors, including green. The color refers to the skin once the fig is cut, with a red hue being most prevalent.

He recommended that retailers sell a variety of colors to tap into the desires of a greater number of consumers. Fresh figs are typically sold in varying clamshell sizes, such as eight or 12 ounces.

"Retailers do promote them and a good promotion can increase sales," Kragie said, adding that he has seen successful end cap displays as well as BOGO (buy one get one) promotions.

He credited food shows, food magazines and innovative chefs for helping to increase consumption of fresh figs. Of course, he said there is nothing better than trying one. "When people try it, they like it."

California has thousands of acres of figs with the majority pruned and harvested for the dried or processor market, with fig bars and the famous Fig Newton being the most recognizable fig product. Kragie said dried figs are also used in many ways such as in trail mixes and in baking.

He said fig farming is a profitable venture in California, as a fig needs very little water compared to

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other fruits. Fig trees go back to ancient times with some trees having been known to last as long as 200 years.

Stellar is looking to add acreage and is also looking at completely focusing its attention in the fresh arena and eliminating its dried fig program. Cappelluti said Stellar is “always looking at longer shelf life in stores by always picking and shipping the same day.” This season, he said customers will be able to pre-order and set up the shipping day to coincide with the picking and packing day.

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