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Coachella expecting grapes in early May

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The California table grape season is expected to get going about 10 days earlier than last year with the first grapes slated to be harvested around May 5.

“Last year we started May 16 or 17, but that was an aberration,” said George Tudor, principal owner of Tudor Ranch Inc., based in Mecca, CA. “We had a very cool spring last year. This year has been normal.”

Overall, he predicted an average crop. Tudor is anticipating a relatively good spring grape deal, but he did admit that Mexico production will have something to say about that. In 2019, Mexico had a huge crop and that production negatively impacted the California grape deal even into the San Joaquin Valley deal in the summer. Reports have said that Mexico's grape production should be down 10-15 percent this year, which Tudor is hoping will mean better f.o.b. pricing for California's grapes. He lamented that Mexico's potential spring grape production is too much fruit to be marketed.

"Even if they have 20 million cartons (which is much less than 2019), you can't move that amount of fruit in five to six weeks. It's just too much."

While Tudor believed U.S. grown Coachella Valley grapes should be able to do well this season with the relatively limited supply (3.0 to 3.5 million cartons), he's not counting on it for the long term. "The solution: it's diversification," he said.

A dozen years ago, Tudor Ranch grew 1,600 acres of table grapes and about 100 acres of lemons. Over the years, the family-owned operation has reduced its table grape acreage, increased the acres devoted to lemons and added dates to its mix.

He also noted that U.S. retailers can be part of the solution by sticking with Coachella in the early part of the season and promoting the-first-of-the-year U.S.-grown table grapes. He admitted that with 20-22 million cartons coming out of Mexico, a retailer might not feel that he needs Coachella.

"We'd like to see them buy grapes from their own country, where we are providing masks for our workers," he said referring to the impact COVID-19 will have on this year's harvest. "We are already putting in new protocols to protect our workers, who have been deemed essential workers by the state."

Tudor said there is typically one worker in a row and rows are 12 feet apart, so that required no additional rules to achieve social distancing. "Everyone is wearing a mask and we have told the workers not to eat together," he said, adding that the company will need access to more masks as the season moves on. Currently, they have been rationing out the PPE (personal protective equipment) to those that are most likely to come in contact with each other.

Tudor said factoring in all of the issues, 2020 will be a challenging year. The company is expecting to have more volume of the Valley Pearl variety, a new variety that can only be grown in the United States and is gaining favor among retailers. He said the University of California-developed variety is of "middle green color" and produces a nice round grape about one-inch in diameter. "It holds some cache and we are hoping it becomes a good variety for this area," he added.

Tudor said the jury is still out, but the COVID-19 situation may also ground the company's sales staff. For 30 years, Andreas Economou and his Tastyfrutti International Inc. crew from Philadelphia have come out to Mecca to sell Tudor's grapes. They will still be doing the sales, but they may have to stay in Philadelphia.

"We are going to have to wait and see if they can come out this year," Tudor said, noting that if the stay-in-place rules are still in effect, the sales team won't make the physical transition this season.

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