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Gourmet Trading continues blueberry growth

By

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Southern California-based Gourmet Trading Company transitioned its year-round production of blueberries to Chile in November, starting with organics just before the month dawned and adding the conventional blueberry SKUs by the middle of the month.

Luciano Fiszman, blueberry category manager for the two-commodity organization (asparagus being the other), explained that the company's blueberry rotation transitioned from Mexico to Peru in the summer and now on to Chile.



"The trick is to have a little bit of an overlap but not too much," he said, adding that managing the overlap is why Gourmet's organic production in Chile started before its conventional was ready.

Chile has both a north and south growing region with the southern region having more acreage in production. Gourmet has an organic deal in each region, but its conventional production is rooted in the south, which starts later. The company started harvesting organic blueberries from the north region in late August with that production expected to peak in November. The southern organic production is expected to start in late December and peak in late January.

Because of the volume of its conventional crop in Peru, Fiszman said there is no need to procure northern district fruit from Chile. Instead, conventional blueberries start in Chile when production from the south is ready.

Combining Gourmet's several puzzle pieces, Fiszman told The Produce News that the company expected to have promotable supplies of both Chilean organic and conventional blueberries until at least February. In mid-November, he said the organic blueberry spot market "is all over the place ranging from \$14 to \$24."

He explained that Gourmet has been a blueberry specialist for many years and has built up a book of business that gives it very steady, contract business. "We have built a consistent supply and have product that you can rely on."

Conversely, he said the spot market is much more volatile with constant fluctuations. He marveled at

the overall volume of organic blueberries. Noting that there would be promotable volumes for the next several months, Fiszman said no one could have predicted 10 years ago that a U.S. retailer would be able to promote organic blueberries for Thanksgiving.

While production of conventional blueberries in Chile is not expected to increase significantly this year, Fiszman said there will be promotable volume well into 2021. While others have indicated that there is currently an oversupply of blueberries on the market, Fiszman took issue with that statement. He said blueberry consumption continues to increase and while “the offer and demand” are not always perfectly in sync, he indicated that promotional pricing is the key moving forward. In fact, he predicted that looking down the road a bit, demand will again outpace supply. He said year-over-year consumption continues to increase and there is not a “tsunami of fruit” on the horizon.

Fiszman does believe that all blueberry producers should continue to work on improving the variety, packaging and transit protocols. He believed there is room for improvement in the genetics to give the blueberry a longer shelf life and more firmness so that it can better cope with the long transit times to the United States from the South American production regions. “The trick for Chile is to work on quality through a better product, better genetics and better transit times,” he said.

Commenting on merchandising blueberries during the pandemic times of these past eight or nine months, Fiszman said the larger clamshells have proved to be the best sellers. For this current Chilean season, Gourmet Trading is emphasizing the sale of blueberries in the 18-ounce clamshell. While there is also a two-pounder in the industry’s arsenal, Fiszman, who joined Gourmet from Argentina 15 years ago, said the long transit time between South America and the United States makes it more difficult for blueberries to survive the trip unblemished as the bottom berries are supporting a lot of weight, relatively speaking.

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