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**Fresh Farms deals with Mother Nature's 2021 curve balls for Mexican grapes**

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By

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The good news, according to Scott Rossi, is that “we really anticipate it will be a great market for Sonora district grapes” this spring. “There should be great demand to fill pipelines” created by shortages of late Chilean grapes.

“May will be a difficult month for U.S. retailers, and we’ll be ready to put out heavy volume in June,” said Rossi, who is the sales manager of Fresh Farms LLC.

In recent years, Grupo Molina plunged forward in developing its Mexican table grape business by extending its Sonoran vineyard operations southward to the state of Jalisco.

The Jalisco strategy is to begin harvesting in early April, leading to a seamless transition a few weeks later with Sonoran production.

This season, Mother Nature brought very early grape maturity to Jalisco. Furthermore, for the third straight season, Sonoran grape production has been late. In 2021, “seamless” isn’t expected to go to plan.

This, Rossi said, is the hand he’s now playing for Fresh Farms. Rossi works in Fresh Farms’ Visalia, CA, office. Headquartered in Nogales, Fresh Farms is the sales arm of Grupo Molina. Grupo Molina’s offices are in the epicenter of Mexico’s grape industry, Hermosillo, Sonora.

Rossi indicated that Molina’s Jalisco vineyards had started shipping the popular Cotton Candy variety by March 22, “which is very early. That’s three weeks earlier than normal. That’s not what we had planned for; Jalisco is still new” to commercial table grape production. There is a learning process in Jalisco. Grupo Molina began experimenting with Jalisco production 11 years ago. “Still, there is always something you need to adapt in the learning process.”

Last year in Jalisco, Cotton Candy harvest “began rolling” about April 12-14. Ivory’s started April 10. “This year is definitely an anomaly,” he said.

With young plantings approaching maturity, Fresh Farms expected Jalisco’s volume to be up 30 to 40 percent over 2020. “Mother nature played its role and “the crop will be much lighter than we expected. Our production will be close to last year.”

In Jalisco, Grupo Molina protects its valuable grape vines with netting to guard against adverse weather, but it wasn’t enough.

To a degree, Jalisco’s early production puts Fresh Farms’ sales desk in competition with Chile’s late grape deal. Each year the transitions between countries will start to go seamless because of new

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regions and new varieties, which will only benefit the grape consumer.

Rossi said it was just too early to know when Sonoran grape harvest would get under way. Sonoran weather late this winter was very cool, slowing fruit maturity.

“If we do not get some heat in Sonora, it looks like we’ll be late like the last few year years,” he said.

Chilean red grape exporters normally ship until the third week of May, but the rain will put Chilean red grapes out of the market a couple weeks earlier than normal. Thus creating the aforementioned grape shortage.

Thus, Rossi expects there “will definitely be a gap from Jalisco” until Sonora’s earliest fruit begins. “No doubt, there will be a gap,” he reiterated.

He noted that last year, Jalisco’s timing was “just right” for the seamless transition with Sonora, with Jalisco going into the first two weeks of May. Which is when Sonora gained steam.

“I just don’t know” when Sonora will start. Probably, red grapes will start in the second or third week of May “with big volume by the end of May. It’s very late again. I am hoping in the next month we get warm weather and close the gap a little.”

Rossi said Fresh Farms’ overall marketing plans “are pretty much customer-dictated.”

With this, “we are pulling the conventional varieties from production and planting newer higher flavor varieties.”

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