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Grapeman Farms enjoying 'hot' grape market

By

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Grapeman Farms has a rich history in the grape category and working in the San Joaquin Valley, the area that produces approximately 99 percent of all table grapes in the U.S.

Jared Lane, vice president of sales and marketing for the Bakersfield, CA-based company, noted demand for new varieties seems to rise every year, and the company has been a leader in the trend of offering these new flavors year after year. As an example, Jack's Salute and Great Green are expected to do well in 2021.



As of early June, the company was coming off a very challenging Chilean season due to heavy rain at the start of the year, which set up an empty pipeline going into Mexico. Currently, it's about 15 percent through Mexico and then will turn its attention to California for the early San Joaquin Valley grape crop.

Looking at the early San Joaquin Valley grape crop, the company expects to be up in volume this year compared to 2020, and forecasts a high-quality crop.

"The early San Joaquin used to be a huge deal, but a lot of the early grapes have been removed due to production issues," Lane said.

"There's not as much volume as there used to be in the early deal because Flames are becoming an unwanted variety per se and there's not a lot else to fill that gap. I do see retailers staying longer in Mexico on proprietary later season reds and greens as a result."

He describes the grape market as being "pretty hot" right now and better than most years.

"With things starting to open up, we're hoping people will be out this summer in parks eating plenty of grapes," Lane said.

One challenge of the San Joaquin Valley right now is the effects of the drought.

"Water prices have doubled in some areas, and even tripled in others," Lane said.

"Another issue with grapes is that 65 percent of input cost is labor and minimum wage jumped up a dollar so costs are quite a bit higher than it has been in year's past and it's been hard getting retailers to understand that. They want us to go down in prices when our costs are going up."

In fact, Lane has taken to writing letters to his customers to explain this issue so they better understand the reasons for higher prices and hopes they do what's best for everyone involved.

Retailers are attracted to the San Joaquin Valley's grapes, he shared, because they like getting a fresher crop than what they would be getting importing in from other areas.

“But being that so much production has moved, I anticipate they will stay in Mexico more than in years past,” Lane said.

“The biggest thing the table grape industry is going for is the larger percentage of newer, higher-flavored varieties. We’re hoping that raises consumption, which raises demand, and that will raise sales costs.”

Other new varieties that Grapeman expects to do well include Allison’s, Ivory and Candy Snap, which is a sister grape of the popular Cotton Candy.

“We’re seeing good demand for that most of the year,” Lane said.

“That’s an early variety harvested with Flames. It has a very good shelf life and very good flavor.”

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