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**Agrokasa continues to expand blueberry footprint**

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By

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Agrokasa is expected to more than double its blueberry export shipments this season, with a similar increase expected next year.

José Antonio Castro, director of the Lima, Peru-based grower-shipper-exporter of avocados, table grapes and asparagus, told *The Produce News* that the addition of blueberries several years ago both expands the company's risk management portfolio and allows for better utilization of its labor force.

With those four crops, the company can now offer good value jobs to most of its workers from April through February. He said that is a very important consideration as having a full-time, steady labor force is a competitive advantage.

The company is also attempting to gain a competitive edge through the varieties it grows and technology it uses. Castro said Agrokasa has experimented with several different varieties and cultural techniques since planting its blueberry farms in two distinct regions: Ica and Barranca.

"Those two regions are different and offer different challenges," he said, noting that their climatic conditions are not the same.

Farms in Ica allow for open field production while the Barranca fields use micro-tunnel technology to create an optimum environment for the fruit.

"In Barranca, we are not protecting against rain but rather the cold," he said.

He added that Agrokasa has been using micro-tunnels for many years with its asparagus and table grape crops, so it has great experience with that technique and has been able to transfer it to blueberry production.

Castro said the newer varieties and this cultural practice enables the company to produce blueberries that yield well, with good quality, nice size, a good crunch, and the good flavor that consumers in the United States and around the world prefer. He also noted that since the blueberries come from Peru they must also have an extended shelf life to be able to thrive even after the long ocean voyage.

Agrokasa began exporting blueberries in 2018 by sending about 282,000 1.5-kilogram boxes to the market. The following year, shipments doubled to 581,000 cases and jumped another 270,000 units in 2020. For the 2021 season, the company has estimated 1.8 million cases with 3.9 million boxes expected in 2022 and close to 6 million the following season.

Castro said about 40-45 percent of this year's fruit will be exported to the United States, where it

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works with its sister company, Miami-based Pacific Produce, to distribute throughout the United States. Agrokasa works with Pacific Produce in the United States with all four of its fresh items, and it sells direct to some customers. It also exports the blueberries to China and Europe, and neighboring Chile is another important customer.

Castro said it is an advantage to be able to offer customers a handful of different items as a way to build on existing relationships. On the other hand, he did note that for some retailers these four items are handled by four different buyers.

Blueberry production has risen dramatically over the last decade as points of origin throughout the world have started growing the crop or have increased their acreage. But Castro does not believe the market is saturated. In fact, he said the goal of produce suppliers of all commodities should be to get more consumers to eat healthy and grow the overall consumption of our produce.

“Blueberry consumption continues to increase,” he said.

He added that successful suppliers will be those that can control their costs and bring a superior product to the marketplace. He said Agrokasa is in a great position to deliver on both counts.

He reiterated that the addition of blueberries allowed the Peruvian producer to extend its peak employment season to include the April-through-June time frame. Harvesting of the blueberries, in fact, began in a small way in June with the first shipments arriving in the U.S. market early in the second week of August.

While the company would seemingly have its hands full developing production and sales for this relatively new item, Castro said it continues to look at other opportunities.

Agrokasa, he said, is in the very early stages of experimenting with cherry production, with two hectares. Like with other crops that might not appear to be a natural fit for a country close to the equator, Castro said technology and varietal development is often the answer. He noted that the blueberry and table grape varieties that the company produces are thriving on far fewer chilling hours than is traditionally the case.

Thirty years ago, he said, it seemed unlikely that avocados, asparagus or table grapes would be core fresh crops for Peru. Now blueberries have joined the party and who’s to say that cherries won’t be next.

*Photo: Agrokasa uses micro-tunnel technology in its blueberry fields in Barranca, Peru, to create an optimum environment for the fruit.*

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