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Chilean grape artist, expert grape marketer fuel international partnership

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It's the month of February and that means table grapes from Chile are harvesting and being sent to markets across the globe. At the heart of Chile's grape production is Santa Elena, a company that is not only a grower of [Divine Flavor International](#) but also a partner of the produce brand, which harvests grapes in Chile from December to March. Overseeing a vast majority of Santa Elena's production is grape specialist and part owner, Gonzalo Tocornal.

Roughly 10 years ago, Tocornal crossed paths with Divine Flavor/Grupo Alta's Carlos Bon at a grape field day in South Africa. Both men, quite involved with their respective grape-growing territories, were attending the South African event for various reasons. Bon had his eyes set on expanding the menu of table grapes for Grupo Alta's farms and Divine Flavor's customers.

One of those varieties was Muscat Beauty, a specialty grape that is owned by Santa Elena and exclusively grown by a handful of growers around the world. It was during this trip that both Bon and Tocornal would spend their time getting to know one another discussing grapes, flavor and the industry in general.

For Bon, it was clear that Tocornal was an expert grape grower. For Tocornal, he saw a successful grower who marketed his own products, something not too common in the industry. For these two grape connoisseurs, they would spend the rest of their visit in South Africa discussing their passion for grapes, and not long after, their arrangements for an international partnership.

"The Muscat Beauty was a key part to starting our partnership, but we both knew early on after meeting each other, the potential of Santa Elena together with Divine Flavor would have a tremendous impact on the future of our companies," said Tocornal.

"From the very first moment meeting Gonzalo, it was very obvious the type of grower he was and what Santa Elena stood for," said Bon. "His values, knowledge, and passion of grape growing greatly resembled that of what we do in Grupo Alta and we saw an opportunity to expand our offerings with an expert grower dedicated to flavor and key varieties."

Bon appreciated Tocornal's form of grape growing as very precise and elegant, which he considers artistic. After visiting the Santa Elena farms in Chile, Bon witnessed how Tocornal considers every single detail to producing the best quality and flavored table grapes — everything from the exact number of berries per bunch/per variety to how many grape bunches on the vine is optimal without compromising the integrity of the fruit. Even the amount of sunlight a grape row needs at certain times of the day.

"Santa Elena produces at a commercial level, but they are not an industrial farm," said Bon. "Rather, what Gonzalo Tocornal does in Santa Elena is an artform fueled by passion. There's a purpose to every decision he makes during pre-production, production and post-harvesting, and not only does he know how to grow flavorful grapes, but he also grows a piece of finished fruit durable to withstand the supply chain to other countries. He truly is a grape artist."

Born and raised in Santiago, Tocornal spent much of his childhood growing up in the farms alongside

his father. At the time, their farm included different vegetables as well as some stone fruits. There, Tocornal would learn a variety of farm practices, which eventually led to his interest in the agricultural industry. Later in his young adult life, he would study agricultural engineering/agronomy at the University of Santiago. Soon after his time in University, Tocornal would go on to be a technical adviser for several other agricultural businesses in the region where eventually he started his career path with Santa Elena in 1998.

Santa Elena was founded in the 1970s by a California grape company and has been through several owners throughout the years. Now, the company is owned by Tocornal alongside a few other shareholders, and it's closely managed by him, Francisco Alessandri as the general manager, Francisco Amar who oversees production, and Gonzalo Merry who manages the commercial areas.

Tocornal believes the collaboration between like-minded companies is essential for international partnerships. Before the relationship began with Divine Flavor, Santa Elena's fruit was sent to various brokers around the world. For its company, their mission has always been to market the fruit they grow to the end consumer. But prior to working with Divine Flavor, they felt their reach fell short of their desired expectations.

"There's a lot of hard work and investment to grow table grapes," said Tocornal. "In my 40 years of doing this, I have learned you have to be focused on what you do and have passion to be the best."

Tocornal explained that table grapes are a commodity that can set a company apart from its competition, and what is marketed to the end consumer is a direct representation of the work done at the farm. Tocornal, who mainly focuses on the grower side, has always searched for how to best market his grapes, and reach the final consumer in North America.

"For our company, it is very important to work with grape experts and those who understand the amount of effort which goes into this business," he said. "Divine Flavor and Grupo Alta share the same experience as we do in Santa Elena, which is why our partnership excels. They are not only a big grower in Mexico, but a marketer who has built an excellent relationship with customers around the world, so to have this partnership with them is the best way to have consumers eat our fruit."

Divine Flavor and Santa Elena are starting their seventh import program together this year, which also includes other grape companies in Peru such as Ecosac and Campo Del Sur, and another Chilean produce company, Unifrutti Group.

Both Chile and Peru serve as important grape-growing regions until Divine Flavor's grape programs start in Mexico during the late spring. The Chilean season is full steam until April with fruit supplies lasting until mid-late May. Grape offerings will include varieties such as Sable Seedless, Sweet Celebration, Scarlotta, Muscat Beauty, Autumn Crisp, Cotton Candy, Candy Hearts and Candy Snaps/Candy Dreams.

Photo: Gonzalo Tocornal, a grape expert and co-owner of Santa Elena in Chile, with Carlos Bon of Divine Flavor.

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