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**SunDate plans for the future to meet growing demand for organic dates**

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By

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March 3, 2023

SunDate has been methodically working to meet the increasing demand for organic dates around the world.

Its parent company, Anthony Vineyards is headquartered in Bakersfield, CA, but has date-growing operations in Coachella Valley. “SunDate is the largest organic grower of dates, both Medjools and Deglan Noor,” said DJ Ryan, the company’s sales and operations manager.

Vertically integrated from pollination to production, packaging and shipping, SunDate has been transitioning its gardens to organic through the years and is carefully tracking production to meet growing demand. “It takes three years to transition gardens from conventional to organic,” Ryan said. “We do offer both conventional and organic, but organic comprises about 70 percent of what we handle. That number goes up each year.”

“The ownership group has been very aggressive in planting both varieties, but particularly, Medjools,” Ryan noted. “The Medjools are the ones that have come on really strong in the last twenty years. It’s a fresh semi-soft date, so it’s not dehydrated or pasteurized in any way. They are just picked, processed and sold.”

Ryan said it takes about seven years from the time a date seed is planted to when a crop is ready. “There is another four to five-year window where each year the volume increases,” he said. “So, we have a very clear understanding of not only what we are going to have this season, but also, what we are going to have next season, and what will be going out the next 10 years because we know what is in the ground already, what’s scheduled to be planted or in some phase of production.”

The expertise to be successful in this transition and expansion comes from the growers at Anthony Vineyards, which has been a preeminent grower and marketer of organic table grapes over the last 20 years. “They understand a lot about the fertilizers, cultivation, weed control and pest control from an organic standpoint as opposed to a traditional, conventional approach, so that’s helped a lot,” Ryan said.

Ryan added that the machinery has become more sophisticated in the last five years on the handling and grading side. “There have been a lot of advancements in electronic sorting that allows us to become more efficient and automated,” he said. “There is new technology in electronic visual grading of Medjools and we’ve made tremendous investments in that arena.”

According to Ryan, SunDate handles 20 million pounds of dates each year. “About 45 percent of our business is overseas and it’s a big part of what we do,” he said. “It’s good for us to try to mirror what we do in the U.S. overseas, particularly with the Medjools.”

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The climate in California is similar to that of the Middle East, which is another significant region where dates are grown. “Dates are a desert crop that requires a specific climate to grow, said Ryan. “The California desert is on the same latitude as the Middle East, so we get the same weather. It’s very hot in the summer and very mild in the winter, but very dry. Most of our plantings are below sea level.

The prospects to capture more sales are ongoing. “As we get closer to Ramadan, there is an opportunity to feature dates,” Ryan noted. “We will work with retailers to feature our product with display stands over the next six to 10 weeks.”

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