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SunDate anticipates robust 2023 date harvest

By

Adam Campbell

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Like most California date shippers this season [SunDate](#) will be harvesting its Medjool date crop later than usual. DJ Ryan, sales and operations manager for SunDate acknowledged that this delay may actually be a blessing, given the adverse weather conditions brought about by Hurricane Hillary and subsequent storms. “We were hopeful that the dates were at a stage of ripeness where they could weather that rain a little better than in a typical year when we would have been more on top of harvest,” said Ryan.

Reports from the field paint a positive picture, with indications of a good-quality crop. SunDate has made significant strides in the organic sector, with approximately 75 percent of its production being organic. This growth is attributed to transitioning date gardens, a process taking three years to certify, and the introduction of new plantings, which require seven years to reach full production.

While the organic market continues to expand, conventional markets, especially overseas, remain substantial. “We look for opportunities to grow that market, but there are still plenty of conventional markets that don’t really care about organic, particularly overseas,” said Ryan.

SunDate has established itself as a significant exporter of dates, with approximately 40 percent of its volume earmarked for export. Major markets include Australia, the UK, Europe and Southeast Asia. Interestingly, the packaging landscape is evolving to mirror trends seen in the U.S., with growing demand for retail packs.

“As far as this season’s crop, we’re optimistic,” said Ryan. “It’s going to be a good year on both varieties [Medjool and deglet noor] for us. We’re starting harvest on Medjools toward the end of September, which is late. On the deglets, they seem to be more of a typical growth pattern this season as far as when harvest is going to be, so we’ll start harvesting those by the second week in October.”

SunDate has carved a niche for itself as a year-round supplier, ensuring a consistent supply for customers throughout the year. Ryan emphasized this point, saying, “We don’t want to run out, so we plan our sales based on what we have in the barn, so to speak.”

Dates have evolved from being a seasonal treat to a year-round commodity. Increased demand, driven by factors like Ramadan, the rising popularity of dates as a natural sweetener and the emergence of food enthusiasts, has reshaped the industry.

“Dates have become a year-round item,” said Ryan. “People expect to have them 12 months out of the year. So, the days of dates only being here from Thanksgiving until Easter are long gone. Now it’s a 365-day commodity. A lot of importing is done to cover that demand domestically.

“There’s a lot more domestic product for Medjools but still, the U.S. is a big market, and there are a lot of other areas that are starting to plant as well, including Mexico, the Middle East, Israel, Morocco and South Africa,” he continued, noting that the volume of competition varies significantly between Medjool and deglet noor dates which he attributed to volume differences and cost considerations, such as labor. “New crop will be in the stores by October, and we’re looking forward to a robust year,” he said.

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