Setting standards to ensure eating quality

The Australian table grape industry has collectively agreed to develop minimum maturity standards that are closely-aligned to consumer taste expectations.

A Stakeholder Working Group (SWG) was established in October to determine the best way to develop maturity standards for the whole industry. Members of the SWG include The Australian Table Grape Association (ATGA), growers, key retailers and marketing companies. The SWG will be aided in their decision making by the grape maturity data, collected as part of the ongoing table grape supply chain quality project.

The project *Table grape supply chain quality 2017-2020* (TG17002) is a strategic levy investment in the Hort Innovation Table Grape Fund. It is funded using the table grape research and development levy and contributions from the Australian Government.

ATGA Chief Executive Officer Jeff Scott says, "We are working together as an industry to identify the best and most appropriate measure to determine maturity to ensure eating quality is consistently good.

"We've had workshops with all three major retailers and their key suppliers, and everybody is in agreement that we want to work towards a level that provides a good solution for everyone. We are moving in the right direction and the feedback has been very positive."

A key objective of this project is to increase the demand and consumption of Australian table grapes by developing minimum maturity standards that will improve the overall eating quality and consistency.

Grape maturity monitoring has been expanded for the project's second (2018/19) season to ensure the maturity standard decision is based on as much science as possible.

Both Brix and acid are being measured again this season and a testing methodology was circulated to growers to enable them to contribute their results to the data set.

Mark & the Crooks: Table grape supply chain quality project leader, Mark Loeffen (left), went to Emerald in August to finalise sampling protocols for the 2018/19 season. Mark is pictured here with growers Neville and Christine Crook who own one of the three farms monitored in Emerald.

Monitoring was carried out from late September to the end of November in Emerald, and from late November in Sunraysia to allow a full flavour progression profile to be established for Menindee and Flame Seedless. Juice from every berry sampled in Emerald and Sunraysia is being measured for Brix, acid and liking to help build a stronger understanding of crop maturity and variability.

Delytics Ltd Managing Director Mark Loeffen, who is leading the project says, "Taking the time to collect more data will provide a stronger evidence base for the industry to determine the best methodology to use in the eventual maturity standards. Our aim is to help the decision makers achieve the best results for the industry by helping them make a confident and informed decision based on robust science."

Although it has not yet been determined which measurement will be used in the maturity standard, Mr Loeffen says that acid has been shown to strongly influence taste and is likely to be included in a measure such as Brix Acid Ratio or BrimA. Because of that, growers have been encouraged to measure acid to enable a fuller data picture to be established. The SWG will use that information to guide their decision making and will also consider the possibility of varying maturity standards by region, based upon the data collected this season.

As research continues to strongly suggest, getting the taste right for consumers is critical at the start of the season, in order to see strong retail sales progress throughout the table grape season.

Mr Loeffen says, "Consumer research by Hort Innovation has shown that consumers will not purchase for about six weeks after a bad eating experience, which would undermine the benefit of any premium price they may have paid for early season fruit. The work we are doing is focused on achieving greater returns over the whole season by focusing on the life value of a customer, which will ultimately deliver higher returns for the growers."

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