

Planasa serves up more choice

NAVARRA—The firm is strengthening its portfolio of early season strawberry varieties with new offerings for growers in Europe and the Americas.

by Maura Maxwell



Spanish breeder Planasa expects to see sustained growth across all berry categories in 2014, fuelled by the introduction of new varieties and strong sales from its three subsidiaries in Chile, Mexico and the US. “We opened our most recent division in California in 2011 and although last year was only our second season there we have already sold more than 40m strawberry plants,” says manager Alexandre Pierron-Darbonne.

Planasa’s two most recent offerings for the strawberry market – Sahara and Safari – are both extra early varieties developed for Mediterranean and subtropical climates. These are the earliest varieties it has developed to date, their production season preceding even that of Sabrina – one of the company’s most successful strawberry varieties.

According to Pierron-Darbonne, Sahara produces fruit of exceptional quality that will satisfy even the most demanding markets, and is ideally suited to growing conditions in southern Spain, Italy, North Africa and Turkey.

Safari, meanwhile, has an even earlier production window than Sahara. It was developed at the company’s research farm in central Mexico for cultivation in subtropical zones such as Mexico, Florida and California. “Safari can be harvested from the beginning of November, although quality-wise it doesn’t quite match

up to Sahara,” he explains. “The other big advantage it has is that it is highly resistant to disease, while its compact form also allows for much easier harvesting.”

While both varieties are designed to plug the important gap at the very early stages of the season they are unlikely to match the success of Sabrina, which, in the three years since its launch, has become the most widely cultivated strawberry in the Mediterranean region making up more than a third of total planted area. Beyond Europe, Sabrina is also gaining a rapid following in Latin



America, particularly among growers in Argentina and Chile, while new plantings of another of the company’s strawberries, Cristal, are gathering momentum in Peru and Brazil.

The company has similarly high hopes for the range of varieties it has developed for more temperate and continental climates, which includes Dream, Darselect, Amandine and Deluxe. Pierron-Darbonne acknowledges, however, that sales growth will proceed at a somewhat slower pace than was the case with Sabrina. “Establishing a market for a new variety in northern Europe is a slower and more complex process than in the south of the continent, simply because the production and marketing base is more fragmented,” he explains.

In spite of these challenges, he claims Dream is enjoying “spectacular” success in southern France and the UK. “It was developed in response to grower demands for a high quality early season variety with a long shelf-life, which up to that point wasn’t available,” he explains.

By contrast sales of Amandine and Deluxe have been developing at a slower pace. Amandine is a day-neutral variety, while Deluxe is a mid-season variety with the same production window as Elsanta which currently dominates production in Northern Europe. In both cases, Pierron-Darbonne claims they offer improved productivity and shelf-life, as well as exceptional eating quality.

Outside the strawberry category, Planasa has high hopes for Ventura, its low chilling new blueberry variety and its Adelita raspberry, whose respective planted areas are expected to reach 250ha and 1,000ha over the coming season.

“No new variety is perfect: the key is to find a balance between satisfying the needs of growers, marketers and consumers”



“Consumption of blueberries, raspberries and blackberries is still very low in most parts of the world and I’m convinced that there is huge potential for these products,” says Pierron-Darbonne. “In Europe alone the market could easily grow at least five-fold over the coming years.” Eventually, he predicts that blueberry and blackberry consumption will surpass that of raspberries. “Blackberry potential in particular remains largely untapped, given the genetic resources that exist to improve the product and extend its season,” he points out.

While the company’s focus to date has been primarily on Europe and the Americas, he identifies Planasa’s next big challenge as conquering Asia. In fact, the company is already collaborating with partners in China, India and Australia, but Pierron-Darbonne sounds a note of caution. “Apart from the obvious cultural differences, the

BLUEBERRY BOOST

Onubafruit has inked a deal with the University of Florida and its Spanish partner, Rústicas del Guadalquivir, to introduce tighter controls to the production of blueberry varieties developed by the university in the Spanish province of Huelva. Under the terms of the agreement, growers who fail to comply with the new rules could face criminal prosecution.

Blueberries currently account for just 4,000 tonnes of Onubafruit’s 70,000-tonne annual production, the remainder being mostly strawberries. However, this was double the previous season’s total and volumes are set to continue rising in the future as demand in Spain and other European market grows.

difficulty with markets such as China is that very little protection exists for intellectual property rights,” he notes, adding that if and when the situation improves, the company will be first in line to set up research programmes in the country.

Summing up, Pierron-Darbonne says breeders have to tread a fine line between meeting the needs of the grower along with those of the marketer and the end consumer. “No new variety is ever perfect, the key is to find a balance between all three. It may not have the optimum characteristics but the important thing is for it not to have any major weaknesses.”

ABOVE RIGHT—Planasa’s Alexandre Pierron-Darbonne

ABOVE LEFT—Clockwise, from top: Sahara, Sabrina and Safari are early or extra early varieties developed for Mediterranean and subtropical climates