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Motiti Island
Where the avo season begins



**Twisted
Citrus**

First pick on Motiti Island

By Alison McCulloch

The first fruit out of the starting gate for what is set to be a record season for avocado growers didn't come from mainland New Zealand, but from an island about 20 kilometres offshore from Tauranga called Motiti.

And it's the same every year: Motiti island growers finish picking and packing weeks before many mainlanders even think about seeking clearance for their fruit.

Several avocado orchards dot the roughly 740ha island, but the biggest is Sunchaser, a 145ha property on the island's southern tip that is planted in 80 canopy hectares of avocados, with plans underway to put in another 2,000 trees next spring. Mt Maunganui based Mark Yortt is one of three shareholders in the orchard, which they bought in 2004. Back then, just two small blocks totaling 3.5ha had been planted.

Yortt says the orchard was given dry matter clearance to harvest in early June and the harvest was over by early August. Sunchaser fruit hits the market so early each year, Yortt says some people wonder whether it can really

be ready to pick. "AgFirst collected the fruit in early June and tested it for dry matter, and gave the official clearance prior to picking. We've done that every year for the last 10 years," he says. "We're supplying the major supermarket chains, so there's no way we're going to supply fruit that's not mature."

This year's crop was a record for Sunchaser at around 95,000 trays, all of which went into the domestic market. Yortt said demand was strong, and the feedback had been good. "We were picking to a plan that was managed by Zeafruit, so they managed the logistics from the coolstore through to the supermarkets, and managed the ripening. All fruit is labelled and all fruit is ripened."

ISLAND CHALLENGES

Being first in the country to harvest means getting premium prices at



a time of year when avocados are in short supply. This year was no exception, with reports of fruit thefts from orchards as prices reached as high as \$9 a piece. But growing on an offshore island also comes with extra costs and challenges.

Yortt said when he and his fellow shareholders bought the orchard, the first thing they had to work out was how to handle the logistics. "We purchased a large seagoing barge from Australia, so we're totally self-sufficient on logistics," he said. The barge, called Deliverance, has a roll-on-roll-off capability and the company also owns three 8-wheeler trucks. "We can't just get a contractor to roll up and do work," Yortt says. "We tend to be self-sufficient with our equipment but any specialised equipment like additional harvesting equipment and shelter trimming and things like stump grinding and areas where it doesn't justify spending the capital, we transport the equipment over on the barge."



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Mark Yortt, Sunchaser Avocados



Left: Sunchaser's orchard is on the island's southern tip. Photo credit: Sunchaser

Below: Part of Sunchaser's orchard, looking toward the Bay of Plenty coastline.

Photo credit: Sunchaser



GREAT HOLIDAY SPOT

There's a workers' lodge on the island for contractors and maintenance crew, and the owners, as well as friends and family who often have camping holidays during the summer months. Sunchaser generates its own power and collects its own water, and there are plans to build a hamlet with about 11 lots for holiday homes.

John Emmett of the post-harvest operator DMS (Direct Management Services), which packs Sunchaser's fruit, says it's the island's climate that makes all the difference. "It's surrounded by open ocean so that gives them a climatic advantage – it doesn't get that cold in winter, it doesn't get as hot in the summer, but it's probably the winter temperatures that help it," he said.

Another advantage is having a better shot at keeping out unwanted pests and diseases. "Because of the separation from the mainland, we haven't to date had any issues with

phytophthora root rot and that's a real positive for us," Yortt said. And while Motiti islanders – around 40 people live there year-round – don't have any biosecurity border controls, Yortt says "machinery that comes over is always cleaned down, and we're trying to protect that".

Sunchaser's focus for this season's crop was the local market mainly because of timing, but the fruit is managed based on export guidelines. "This is around fruit quality and spray programmes. Historically we have run an export programme in conjunction with the local market, and in future years we are quite sure that there will be an export component in the crop subject to market conditions," Yortt said.

BAYFARMS GO ONLINE

Te Puke-based Trevelyan's Pack and Cool also packs for an island orchard, owned by their main contractor, David Wills, whose picking got underway on 9 June; the company's export market harvest started in mid-August. Trevelyan's avocado manager Daniel Birnie said 2016 was going to be a record crop for the company, which expects to pack 800,000 trays in total, with about 550,000 of those for export.

Birnie said overall, avocado maturities had been a bit later, and there was a bit of wind rub damage in the wake of some severe gales in the Bay of Plenty over the winter, but the season kicked off well. "We've picked enough fruit to meet the flow plans... fruit size is good and quality is great, too," he said. >>



Trevelyan's avocado manager Daniel Birnie.

Trevelyan's, well-known in the industry for thinking outside the (avocado) bin, has this season started what Birnie describes as a first for a packhouse: selling avocados and kiwifruit online directly to consumers, which is being done through the company's BayFarms brand (online at bayfarms.net.nz). Birnie said there was at least one orchard offering direct online sales, but because Trevelyan's packs fruit all year round, its supplies won't be seasonally limited. "We have 12 months' supply," he said. "You can buy a box of 10, a tube of 5, a tray of 24 or a box of 40, and you can buy kiwifruit as well, and we'll courier it out."

SALES RISE IN ASIA

Meanwhile, on the market front, the chief executive of New Zealand Avocado, Jen Scoular, says of this year's record 7.6 million tray crop, just over 5 million trays will be exported, with Australia still the biggest destination. Scoular said demand was a bit slow across the Tasman because "there was quite a lot of Australian fruit when New Zealand fruit started coming in, and there has continued to be quite a lot of fruit in that market".

"We are significantly increasing volumes from last year into Japan, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan, and then small amounts are going into Malaysia and Pacific Islands and India," she said.

While China is not yet an export destination, because New Zealand avocados don't have phytosanitary access, Scoular says avocados are "on the top of the list for MPI (the Ministry for Primary Industries) negotiating for us". She recently returned from a trip to Shanghai with other

New Zealand horticulture exporters "meeting with players in the market, with New Zealand agencies and with commercial entities about looking at what the strategy needs to be for market entry for New Zealand avocado".

INTRODUCING AVOCADO MAN

Domestically, the outlook is also strong, she says. "We had a record year last year having doubled the value of the New Zealand market since five years ago from \$20 million to \$40 million, so there's very positive collaboration in the New Zealand market and good communication between New Zealand Avocado, the local marketers and retailers and the foodie industry as well".

As part of a push to further build the local market, New Zealand Avocado has made a new TV commercial which aired for the first time during the 18 September episode of *Karena and Kasey's Kitchen Diplomacy* on TV One. The ad featured a new character, referred to for now as Mr Avocado Man. "We're having a competition in a month's time to help us name him," Scoular says. 🥑

