

Introduction to the Tasmanian Cherry Industry

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Cherries have been grown in Tasmania since soon after settlement. While cherry production has never been a huge industry in the past like apples, soft fruit or even apricots, most orchards have always had a few trees and there have been a small number of growers who have concentrated on cherries. The families of Smith, Clark, Cripps and Domney have been associated with cherry production for up to 4 generations. During this time growers predominantly served the local Tasmanian market and there were some cherries that were being shipped by steamer to eastern seaboard mainland markets as early as 1940's.

In the mid to late 1990's the potential of the sweet cherry industry started to be recognised. Tasmania's cool maritime climate and southerly latitude make it one of the latest maturing cherry production regions in the southern hemisphere. This late maturity particularly after mid January coincides with a reduction in supply from other southern hemisphere suppliers. The cooler growing conditions and longer growing season aid in the production of larger size and firmer fruit that have demand worldwide.

In the past decade there have been significant volumes of plantings occur and the industry is now expanding its production very rapidly as these plantings come in bearing. Based on current plantings it is estimated the industry has potential to produce 5,000 tonnes/annum within the next 5 years. The greatest challenge to production in Tasmania is summer rainfall and its significant effect on packout.

The industry is geographically spread right around Tasmania from the north west coast around the Mersey Valley, through the Tamar Valley in the north and in the south in the Huon, Derwent and Coal river valleys.

There are a wide range of varieties grown but the majority of recent plantings concentrate on late season varieties mostly from the Canadian breeding program at Summerland. Production is dominated by Lapins and Simone. These varieties are consistent producers of quality fruit and are the basis for the industry. Van is still a major variety and has been important to the industry because of its heavy bearing characteristics but it is loosing preference among export customers. Stella is another variety that is loosing preference among customers. Kordia and Regina have been planted in reasonable volume but many growers are finding them a challenge to get consistent crops. Sylvia is proving to be a very high quality large size cherry but slower to come into production and lower cropping. Sweetheart is a very firm cherry that tends to be medium size and is very prone to rain damage.

Recent plantings are mostly medium to high density compared to other parts of the world. The majority of recent planting have been trained to the Spanish bush system so row width is generally 4.25m to 5m while tree spacing is usually 1.5m to 2.5m with most plantings around 2m. Most plantings result in a density of 1,000 to 1,250 trees/ha. Some growers prefer trellis systems the most popular of which are variations of the Tatura trellis at tree densities usually around 2,000-2,200 trees/ha. There is a very interesting planting demonstration trial comparing different training systems that has been established at the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry Water and Environment (DPIWE) Grove Research Station.

Cherries are packed through over 20 packing facilities many of which are handling fruit for multiple growers. While some parts of the industry are focusing on developing export markets in 2004 export only accounted for 25% of the total volume shipped while the domestic Australian market, mostly the eastern seaboard still accounted for 75% of the volume. Domestically Sydney and Brisbane are the biggest volume markets with Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth accounting for smaller volumes. Taiwan is by far the biggest volume export market, followed by continental Europe and the UK. There are many other destinations receiving small volumes and in total last year the industry has supplied fruit to over 15 different countries. For

the past two years there have been small volumes shipped to the US. In March 2005 Tasmania was granted access to the Japanese market under a fumigation protocol.

There are many challenges ahead for this young industry to build its customer base and consistently deliver high quality cherries to supply world demand.