

AUSTRIA

Austrians spending more on fresh produce

A new study indicates that Austrian consumers spent an average of 140 per household per month on fresh produce during 2015, the study also shows that sales were up 1.3 % per year. While fruit and vegetable purchases saw an increase in sales last year, meat and dairy products saw a drop in purchase patterns. "This is certainly due to the extremely long and hot summer," said AMA market researcher Micaela Schantl.

Last year also saw an increase in spending on organic food, which has risen by 29 % over the past five years. Approximately 120 was spent per household last year on organic produce. Private label sales in fresh produce also increased, the study found, with own-brands now accounting for 77 % of sales in the eggs category, for example.

AUSTRALIA

SwarmFarm launches cropping robots

SwarmFarm Robotics an Australian technology start-up has launched its robot technology for use in cropping, which will improve productivity, lower costs and reduce environmental impacts.



The launch on 22 March included a multi-robot demonstration of spot-spraying weeds at a farm in Emerald, central Queensland.

"The robots are adjustable in height, with a simple design, that can be used on a variety of crops from tree crops and vegetables to sugar cane, cotton and broad acre crops," Andrew Bate told Produce Plus. "They're more like a tool carrier, and can be used for weed spraying and spot-spraying."

Bate said one of the major issues affecting growers in Australia at the moment is herbicide-resistant weeds. So, Bate and his partner Jocie began develop-

ing solutions with universities, eventually partnering with the University of Sydney's Australian Centre for Field Robotics and the Queensland University of Technology to develop the robotic technology.

"We're not trying to automate farming, but we want to create better farming techniques to improve yields and efficiencies," Bate said. "These robots have the ability to move slowly, with high-level precision, and perform repetitive tasks with precision. They're also light-weight, which reduces soil compaction."

SwarmFarm Robotics has also announced its partnership with agri-firm Elders, which Bate said has been a fantastic boost for the early stage start-up to go commercial.

CHINA

Great expectations for China's berry market

China's retail market is creating new opportunities for marketers of fresh berries driven by rising growth in its urban, middle class population, expansion. This trend was noted at Global Berry Congress by David Smith of importer SVA Fruits. Giving an overview of the Chinese berry market, Smith predicted further growth in demand and good opportunities particularly for Canada, which recently signed a protocol to send blueberries from British Columbia to China.



Meanwhile, China's own production is expanding too. According to national figures quoted by Smith, planted area for blueberries in the country rose above 26,000ha last year, while production is forecast to exceed 71,400 tonnes by 2018. Chinese per-capita consumption of blueberries, however, remains a long way behind the levels seen in other countries.

GERMANY

Metro Cash & Carry trials in-store farms

A pilot project for growing on-site herbs and vegetables is launched by Germany's Metro Cash & Carry at one of its wholesale stores in Berlin. A high-tech kitchen garden developed by start-up company Infarm has been installed at the shop in the district of Friedrichshain, in which products such as basil are grown hydroponically in a space-saving vertical greenhouse.

The retailer said the scheme enables customers to receive the freshest possible produce grown without the use of pesticides, while reducing the company's carbon footprint as it avoids the need for transportation. Axel Hluchy, Metro Cash & Carry Germany's managing director said, "The InStore Farming concept shows how we are using innovations to shape tomorrow's retail and wholesale. We are increasing the benefit for our customers and at the same time conserving



resources." The vertical greenhouse covers 5m² and produces a range of herbs and vegetables, which the builders claim have a more intensive flavour as the high-tech facility supplies each individual plant with the optimum amount of nutrients and light. The products are packaged during the growth phase, thereby guaranteeing freshness.

Frank Niemann, store manager at the Berlin supermarket, claimed the pilot has already proved success. "Our gastronomy customers in particular are delighted," he said. "Harvesting directly in the kitchen enables a unique, full flavour." The project is being overseen by Metro's business innovation division, which for more than

a year has been promoting start-up companies providing high-tech services in retail, wholesale, gastronomy and the hotel industry that aim to give customers added value through innovative and digital services.

ITALY

Underwater salad farm seeks partners

A company 'Nemo's Garden' in Italy is trialing underwater salad production and is looking for partners interested in growing in a double pressure environment. It is based off the coast of Italy and has been growing salad and herbs underwater for the past four years. It is run by Italian-American group Ocean Reef Group, which has specialist expertise in scuba diving equipment and an interest in innovative growing.

According to the project coordinator Gianni Fontanesi, "We will give the possibility to rent part our site and our technologies to anyone (universities, laboratories, etc) keen to study the plant's growth in a double pressure environment." He further said, "We are creating unique underwater laboratories. The scalability could be a real chance, with the right combination of resources and efforts. At the moment we are doing everything by ourselves, but we are open to future partnerships."



Having begun with basil, the site now produces green basil, red basil, tomatoes, salad, ourgette, green peas, beans and mint. Produce grown in the tanks has not been sold commercially, although they were eaten at a recent milestone event held by the group. Most of the crop is sent to labs and universities for testing.

“The primary goal for this project is to create an alternative food source as nowadays is not possible to cultivate in so many places all around the world due to desertification, lack of fresh water, unfertile soil, bugs, changing weather, big gap in terms of temperature between night and day.

The group is currently working on controlling the high humidity level in the underwater tanks, as well as testing different growing systems and structures that can resist the swells in the sea.

SYRIA

Syrian produce shipped to Russia

Syrian producers are seizing the opportunity to export fruits and vegetables to Russia. According to Aslan Panesh, managing director of Russian importer Adyg-Yurak, told newspaper Kommersant that 3,000 tonnes of Syrian-grown citrus, tomatoes and cabbage were shipped to



the Russian port of Novorossiysk last week.

The importer is in discussions with local supermarkets to establish regular programmes from Syria, which could help plug the gap left by the ban on Turkish food after the downing of a Russian military plane by Turkey last November.

However, Panesh said the poor quality of Syrian packaging was hampering trade. Adyg-Yurak has invested more than US\$3m in boosting the logistics network between the two countries and is

said to be planning further investments in establishing a modern packaging operation in Syria in the next six months, bringing its total investment to US\$10m.

GEORGIA

More Georgian produce for the EU

The EU and Georgia are working together to grow trade relations and realize this goal. According to the European Commissioner for Trade Issues Cecilia Maelstrom, Georgia has real potential to increase the amount of Georgia-made products to the EU market and its 500 million consumers. Eighteen months ago Georgia's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement came into force and since then Georgia and the EU have both benefitted greatly from the deal.

Commissioner Malmstrom visited Georgia's capital Tbilisi on March 21 to meet politicians, business representatives, students and members of civil society to take stock of the implementation of the EU-Georgia DCFTA deal, which came into force after the Association Agreement was signed in June 2014.

The EU-Georgia DCFTA has strengthened the trade relationship between the EU and Georgia. Today the EU is Georgia's first export destination, receiving 29% of Georgian exports - an



increase of 15% in the first year of the trade agreement. Total trade between the two amounted to over 2.5 billion last year.

SPAIN

Improvement of Crimson Seedless with reduced irrigation

As demonstrated by a doctoral thesis presented this month at the Polytechnic University of Cartagena (UPCT) the grape variety Crimson Seedless can be grown with substantial water savings while improving the fruit's size and colour.

Research conducted by Maria del Rosario Conesa has demonstrated the suitability of this variety to be handled with techniques such as a regulated deficit irrigation (RDI) and partial root zone drying irrigation (PRD), achieving average water saving of around 35% while keeping production volumes and crop quality stable and boosting essential attributes, such as size and colour.

The thesis, funded by a research project of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and directed by Dr Alejandro Pérez Pastor and Rafael Domingo Miguel, of the research group Soil-Water-Plant of the School of Agronomics of the UPCT, was also a pioneer in the use of Information technology and Communications in commercial plan-



tations through wireless data loggers distributed by the technology company WIDHOC.

These studies, conducted with table grapes, will move to other major crops in the Region of Murcia, such as extra-early nectarines, apricots, peaches and Paraguayo peaches etc.

MEXICO

Mexico and EU announce plans for organic trade deal

The Mexican government and the European Commission of Agriculture have

announced the start of negotiations on a bilateral agreement for trade in organic products.

At a press conference the Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food, José Calzada, said that there has been an increase of 150 % from 890m in 2000 to 2.2bn in 2015 .

Bananas, coffee, honey and beef are among the products that Mexico is looking to position in the European market.

The European organics market remains one of the most dynamic sectors and Mexico has great potential to develop business opportunities for producers of organic products, Calzada noted.

Around 24,500ha were planted with organic crops in Mexico in 2014, with production reaching 104,000 tonnes with a total value of MXN1.062bn.

In the European Union, meanwhile, the area cultivated with these products during 2014 reached 10.3m ha compared to 6.4m ha in 2005.

The EU is also the second biggest organics market, accounts for 40 % of global sales, behind the US on 43 %.

Last week, EU agriculture commissioner Phil Hogan visited Mexico accompanied by a delegation of 35 businessmen representing a wide range of products from the European food industry. ♦

