

How Brazilians Learned How to Put the Sweet in Melon

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Yellow tones are part of the landscape of the Northeast of Brazil, a sunny region almost all year round. And now this scenery gains strength with the yellow melon crops that are spreading all over the northeastern Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Piauí and Bahia.

Itaueira, alone, one of the companies that produce the fruit, should expand its cultivated area by 45%. The company currently produces melons over 380 hectares - 11,400 tons. "In 2006 we want to grow to 550 hectares of farmland," stated José Roberto Prado, the commercial director of Itaueira.

The increase in the cultivated area is anchored to the growth of consumption, mainly on the foreign market, which is around 40% a year. According to Prado, half of the company production is exported. Currently, the main buyers are countries in Europe, like Spain, Italy, England, Germany and Holland.

The Arab nations are also included in the Itaueira plans for coming years. "They are new markets that we intend to work on. The climate is hot, which surely favors the sale of Brazilian melons," stated Prado.

The Itaueira melon farm started small - covering an area of only eight hectares in the city of Itaiçaba, in the interior of the state of Ceará. The year was 1999. The company's objective was to produce sweet yellow melon, according to Prado.

"We used to produce cashew and a client who liked our product said he was very dissatisfied with the melon, which he bought from other farmers. He said that the fruit was tasteless and asked whether we would be interested in producing melons," stated Prado. The challenge had been launched.

The company then started working on researching to produce "melons that did not taste like cucumber", explained Prado. There were three years of mistakes and losses. "In one of the attempts we had to plough in 30 hectares due to a pest," he said.

The experiments served to identify factors contributing to the flavor of the fruit, among them harvesting at the wrong time and inadequate transport, often done on trucks without cooling, under dark plastic tarpaulins.

The second step was investment in harvesting and transporting the fruit. The pickers were told to pick only the ripe melons, leaving some on the plant. "You cannot pick the fruit and let it ripen later. That is when the flavor is lost," explained Prado.

"The farmhands at Itaueira were authorized to cut melons at the farm so as to taste them. If they were tasty, they could proceed with the harvesting," he added.

Transport was also modified, and started being done in cooled trucks. The result was positive. "Although they are more expensive for the producer, Itaueira melons are well accepted on the domestic market," stated the executive.

Pioneer

Another company that has good results with melon is Nolem (melon, spelt backwards), a pioneer in the cultivation of the fruit in the city of Mossoró, in the northeastern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte, where they generate around 11,000 direct and indirect jobs.

Nolem cultivates an area of 3,400 hectares of fruit, the largest area in Brazil, and hopes to increase foreign sales by 15% in 2006. "The forecast is that we should export seven million boxes of melon," stated Sérgio Abreu, the company manager.

The growth is also based on expansion on the foreign market. "Next year we are going to try to open new markets and consolidate those we already have," stated Abreu.

The countries in the European Union (EU) are the main buyers of fruit produced by Nolem. There, Brazilian melon competes with Spanish melons, but, in general, it is preferred as it is sweeter. Apart from melon, the company also produces watermelons, cashew, coconut, pineapple and pumpkin.

Semi-arid Production

So as to produce melon in the semi-arid, the companies use irrigated agriculture during the growth of the plant. The water is brought from wells that are drilled. For 2006, Itauera is going to invest around US\$ 60,000 in the sector. At harvest time, the semi-arid climate makes the difference. "Melon is very sensitive to rain at this time. It prefers a warm climate," stated Prado.

The cycle of the fruit is short, between 65 and 90 days. In Rio Grande do Norte, most of the fruit is harvested in August, and the date coincides with the period between harvests in Spain, an important European Union supplier.

However, Brazil has the fruit almost all year round. Last year, production totaled around 350,000 tons. The reason: the diversity of the Brazilian climate.

"When one farm reaches the end of its ideal productive period, we go to another," explained Prado. Itauera has another two productive areas - apart from Itaiçaba. One in Canto do Buriti, in Piauí, and another in Cipó, in Bahia. And that is how yellow melon is coloring the Northeast.

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