

# Big red still needs work

By Elaine Fisher

It's "sweet with a berry twist" and has won favour with consumers in Singapore and New Zealand, however, a red kiwifruit will only be joining Zespri's portfolio if it can meet a number of stringent criteria.

"For a red to be released as a commercial variety, it has to also perform through the supply chain, and from an agronomic point of view, it has to be viable for orchardists," says Bryan Parkes, Zespri's cultivar innovation manager.

Information gathered from this year's trials and data on supply chain performance are currently being analysed. This information will be the basis on which the Zespri board makes a decision in December about whether or not to commercialise Zespri Red.

"Zespri has invested a lot of money over a long time to build a brand which is known for its premium quality kiwifruit, so anything we do has to align with that brand," Bryan says.

"Approving a variety for commercial release is a very robust and extremely detailed process because the consequences of that decision are huge for the industry. There is no point in having a great tasting variety that is not economically viable to produce or does not store well.

"We also have to determine if all this translates into consumers' willingness to pay. Liking something and buying something are not necessarily the same."

Bryan says no kiwifruit variety is without risk, but what Zespri sets out to do is understand as much as possible what the risks and benefits are for each cultivar.

"When Zespri releases a variety, it looks at the process as a commercial product offering, not unlike a share offering.



Bryan Parkes is Zespri's cultivar innovation manager.

We have a prospectus about the cultivar and make very clear what we do know and don't know so investors, the growers, are in a position to make an informed call about what they are getting into."

Growers are not only investing in the licence fee. They also face a loss of income during the time it takes to graft over to the new cultivar or develop a green field orchard.

"Growers also make a big emotional investment beyond the money. If their investment goes extremely well it's very energising, but if it doesn't it's not much fun and can be quite demoralising."

Storage has been an issue for previous Zespri reds, but Bryan wouldn't be drawn on the performance of the current cultivar.

"There are two major concepts around storage. Firstly, does it store well enough to be commercially viable? A variety which stored for a week would be rather a challenge for our shipping-based business.

"The second is, even if it stored for a number of weeks, every week beyond that optimum storage increases the scale of the opportunity. So let's

say a commercially viable cultivar will store for 10 weeks, but if we could store it for 20 weeks, we can effectively sell twice as much volume."

Growers, Plant & Food Research scientists, the post-harvest sector and Zespri staff involved in the trial of Zespri Red are no doubt anxiously awaiting the board's December decision on the future of this particular red cultivar, but Bryan says they are also united in their belief that it must be the right decision.

"Everyone wants a red which works. No one wants a red which fails." 

