



BRIX SCORE: If consumers like the taste, they will buy again, Zespri chief executive Lain Jager says

Photo: Sarah Brook

Taste secret in the drymatter

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COMMANDING up to twice competing countries' retail value for kiwifruit is a high bar for New Zealand growers to meet and is getting higher as Zespri re-assesses fruit taste and orchard practices.

Zespri's premium price position required big, consumer-driven perceptions of fruit taste and appearance to be backed by proactive orchard practices and quality control, chief executive Lain Jager said.

They came even before the fruit got to the packhouse for grading and shipment.

At the National Fielddays last month Jager outlined to growers how Zespri was looking to further increase the minimum drymatter level for harvested green fruit to 15.5%, from 14.5%.

Ultimately, Zespri marketers would like to move that higher again, to between 16.5% and

18.5%. Drymatter was a proxy indicator for sugar (brix) and therefore taste.

"There is a strong relationship

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Lain Jager
Zespri

there between consumer 'liking' score and the brix levels. If they like the taste, they will repurchase.

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double what competing Chilean fruit sells for at times and taste quality is a key to achieving that."

Given the bulk of kiwifruit competed in the huge US\$500 billion global fruit trade and accounted for only a minuscule 0.2% of that trade, significant weight had been put on the fruit's quality to distinguish it from "commodity" kiwifruit, with fruit taste a key component of that quality definition.

"By moving the drymatter level up we are further able to distinguish our fruit from Chilean fruit. We want to minimise the overlap with Chilean fruit in drymatter where possible."

The taste parameter now formed 70% of fruit payment for SunGold, 50% for green and was the major driver in a matrix of factors that included size, volume and picking date.

Taste profiling and payment premiums were among the latest in an evolving system of standards orchardists had to comply with

to deliver fruit Zespri could command a premium for.

Jager talked of the Zespri System as a collection of food safety standards coupled with KiwiGreen low-to-zero residue standards working in with Good Agricultural Policy (GAP) standards on sustainability, traceability and safety, a programme all horticultural producers subscribed to.

In recent years the quality and grading standards had come to incorporate the taste profile.

Orchardists, in turn, influenced that by the way the plant was pruned, fruit density, its exposure to light, when the fruit was picked, with brix levels generally rising the longer fruit was left on the vine.

More recently Zespri had started to study how fruit carbon and water footprints could be incorporated into quality standards as consumers demanded more information on the crop's environmental impact.



When NZ was in the midst of the food miles furore over exported lamb to Britain in 2007, Zespri moved quickly to trace the carbon footprint of kiwifruit sold there to counter any possible criticism.

Interestingly, consumers' shopping, buying and consumption of kiwifruit accounted for a large portion of carbon emissions in the supply chain, at 22% while orchards accounted for 17% and shipping 41%.

Work since the 2008 study included sticking with efficient, chartered reefer vessels that were 27% more energy efficient than container ships and Zespri was working on incorporating "next generation" reefer ships with improved fuel efficiencies.

Nitrogen losses were also being measured this year along with optimised nutrient application trials. An overarching sustainability programme similar to one the wine industry has had for 20 years was also not being ruled out by Jager.

One of the industry's largest packhouse companies, Trevelyan's, kept a full sustainability ledger reporting yearly on outcomes in a format similar to a finance-focused annual report.

But by that company's own admission its efforts were not yet delivering a premium on fruit, given the bulk was marketed by the single desk seller. But Jager said such an overarching sustainability goal could not be ruled out for the entire industry.

"We do think this is an increasingly critical area to focus on in the future."

Whether the Zespri System could be adopted as a template by other primary producers, Jager said the system was unique partly because of the collaborative, integrated nature of the industry onshore and the single desk approach to overseas marketing.

It was one that could prove difficult to achieve in other industries unless there was a high degree of vertical integration.