Spain: The future of strawberry depends on more promotion and more varieties

By Belén Toledo

The unusual heat this winter, which is doing so much damage to other crops, has been a joy for strawberry growers. High temperatures in December and January have ripened fruit at a time in which there is little competition from other producing countries, and that's a start of campaign for optimism. President Freshuelva (Onubense of Strawberry Producers and Exporters Association), Alberto Garrocho, explained in an article published by the organization in December: "The collection of the fruit has been almost a month ahead of the usual date of collection ". Huelva strawberry is therefore "more competitive" by the heat, which has given him "optimum quality and taste" a month earlier than usual.

However, it is impossible to know whether this positive trend will continue for the rest of the season. The season is long and there are many factors that can influence the good figures are

consolidated or truncation, by all agents involved in the sector consulted for this report. Since Freshuelva they confess that it is "too early" to make predictions: "The campaign will be determined, as always, the weather and the price of fruit in the market, two conditions that are completely unpredictable." The province accounts for 95% of the Spanish production, so Garrocho's point of view summarizes the status of most of the Spanish strawberry sector.

Uneven recovery after years in the price

This good start to the campaign comes after three years of many irregularities in profitability. Last year was good, but part of 2012, 2013 and 2014 brought major declines in the price. According to the Observatory of prices and markets of the Board of Andalusia in the 2013/14 marketing year the average price in origin was 2.2% below the previous season and 19.6% less than in the 2011 campaign / 12. The result was that the turnover of production companies in 2014 was 18% below the level achieved two seasons ago.

The 2014/15 campaign was the recovery, with an increase in prices of 16.7%, although their results have not yet reached the level of the 2011/12 season, according to the Observatory. Freshuelva gives a slightly higher figure numbers and recovery last year over the previous by 22% and overall revenue growth of 20%.

What these fluctuations are due? Why strawberry prices fell almost 20% in 2014? The answer is related to the complexity of this sector, and therefore no single factor. Freshuelva notes that in this campaign was an abundance of product that arrived at the same time to markets, a fact that prices plunged. From Palos strawberry, leader in Spanish, marketing director market, Jaime Zaforas producer organization, other factors added: "The general fall in prices in the last five years could lead to increased plantings of both African producers in other countries, whose productions match with our campaign earlier, as Europeans, whose strawberry growing anticipates more and coincides with ours since mid-campaign. " Zaforas also noted "the negative consumption growth" in countries such as Spain in recent seasons.

Onubafruit, one of the most powerful companies, explains that "the decline in turnover is always a compendium of different factors." Among them, overproduction "at certain times," the drop in consumption "for lack of product quality" and "earliness of our competitors." Their technicians also say the climate. It rained heavily at the peak of production and this led to rotten fruit and mushrooms. This is a "complicated to manage because it affects the entire industry. There is no treatment and as much as you check the fruit evolves quickly. " The consequence is that consumers bought less, and retailers were afraid to build up a highly perishable product. So the price per kilo sank.

Zaforas, of Palos strawberry, also agrees that the climate problem could influence the fall in profitability: "The offer depends on available production, which in turn depends heavily on uncontrollable external factors such as, among others, climate, which does not serve market rules

and also directly affects product quality. (...) Despite having the best professionals with the latest technology, yields can be early or late and have varying quality, for or against our commercial interests, and by the time the campaign we meet. "

Huelva, a world of strawberry production

Beyond fluctuations, the truth is that the Spanish strawberry sector is the largest in Europe and fourth in the world, and works in many different directions to further strengthen its position. According interprofessional, Interfresa, its production is about 300,000 tonnes. Regarding competitor countries, it depends on the time of year. Spain's climate is warmer than in the rest of Europe, which comes before the Spanish strawberry market. However, competition strawberries are Germany, France, UK, Italy, Morocco, Turkey and Egypt, explains Freshuelva.

Of the total production of Spanish strawberry fresh, 90% is dedicated to export. Foreign sales have grown an average of 15% over the past five years, reaching in 2014 around 290,000 tonnes. Regarding the destinations on the Spanish strawberry, Germany and France are the main destinations of the Spanish strawberry. Over the past three years, the market share in Germany has grown to 90,000 tonnes. After these two countries are situated UK and Italy.

Huelva is thus one of the most important centers of world production of strawberries. True, the number of hectares planted to strawberry campaign has fallen 8.73% from the previous-a total of 5,860 hectares plantadas-. But the rest of -frambuesa, blackberry and berries arándano- has experienced an average increase of 25%, which demonstrates the diversification of products towards which the industry say from Freshuelva.

In search of new varieties

The province is a hotbed of research and reflection on how to strengthen the sector. The main route of improvement is the search for new varieties. After years in which we have worked to get more resistant to long commutes required of Huelva strawberry fruit, the general tendency is to look for a better taste to please the European market, especially English, which according to industry sources It is the most demanding. With this effort, large companies have their own departments of innovation on which it is committed to the "binomial quality-taste" in the words of Zaforas. Improve the taste and smell is also betting on Onubafruit to "repeat purchase" occurs.

Another reason to look for new varieties in Huelva is to reduce external dependence. "The industry is experimenting with native varieties that are better suited to the weather conditions in the province and therefore involve cost savings by not having to bring US mother plant, as is now being done in the Fortuna" explained from Freshuelva. In this spirit, it was created in 1999 Strawberries New Materials (FNM), a company owned by most of the strawberry sector in Huelva, along with the Caja

Rural del Sur, and dedicated to the development of new varieties of strawberries.

A fundamental part of FNM shareholder is represented at nurseries in Castilla and Leon, where strawberry plants which need a certain number of hours of cold desarrollarse- grown from March to October. In autumn, they take Huelva and transplanted there, where the temperature is -18 degrees the ideal medium for fruiting. In its 17 years of existence, FNM has created varieties that have been widely accepted both among producers and in international markets. Its variety Primoris Fnm, according to company sources, combines great taste and good resistance to transportation.

At present, the company develops the selection A10483 still experimental. The main objective of this future variety is to maintain its quality throughout the entire campaign, especially the taste. It aims to solve the problem presented some varieties, from April show a decrease in fruit quality and production. This is one reason why local strawberries target markets gaining ground Huelva during May and June. From Strawberries New Materials, they explain that the A10483 aims to offer a comprehensive range from all points of view, allowing the producer to compete with European strawberry season even in the last moments of the campaign.

More promotion and more sustainable cultivation

Another of the ways to improve the sector's promotion. Interfresa is involved in the presentation of an advertising campaign with the slogan "Vive la Roja". It will be held over the next three years in Spain, Germany and France, and aims to boost consumption. It is co-financed by the European Union, the Ministry of Agriculture and Interfresa and has a budget of three million euros. It has been chosen as protagonists singer Manuel Carrasco and a known chef country: Alma Obregon, Lea Linster and Chloé Saada.

Finally, the strawberry producers are also investing in improvements in the crop. Freshuelva reports that are betting on more sustainable production, with increased automated drip irrigation and applying for years a protocol for controlling pests by the release of beneficial insects, called biological control of pests. "Similarly, the vast majority of the strawberry hectares are cultivated following the protocol of integrated production, ie that meet the parameters set by the quality standards in force and setting out guidelines of good practice in the field and cultivation" They say from the organization.