

## HISTORY OF PRUNES IN SOUTH AFRICA

There is considerable confusion as to when the first prunes were grown in South Africa.

The Dutch seafarers started a refreshment post at the Cape in 1652 In 1658 Jan van Riebeeck the Governor at the Cape, reported in his diary that grapevines and apricot trees had been planted. Dried fruit was exported from the Cape before 1775 although there is no indication that prunes formed part of these exports.

As the early European settlement in South Africa was from Dutch, English and French origin it is commonly accepted that the prunes in South Africa are from French origin, but could have come via California.

The French Huguenots settled at the Cape in the Wagenmakersvalley, now known as Wellington, in 1688. They are said to be the founders of the South African dried fruit industry, which started with raisins and apricots.

In 1892 the first official mention of prunes was made in the Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope when Mr. H. E. V. Pickstone imported Prune D'Agen trees. Pickstone was an immigrant from California and would most probably have imported from his native country. Although it can not be proven beyond doubt, it is thought that these trees were the first to be planted as a commercial venture.

The first large pack house for dried fruit was erected by Krone and Co. in the town of Worcester in 1875. They originally only served the local market but gradually also tended to the export market.

In approximately 1895 the first orchards were planted in Tulbagh at Erfdeel, Mont Rouge, Opstal, Remhoogte and Waveren. In those days these farms still formed part of other farms and had other names. Orchards were indeed planted before 1895 at Franschhoek, Stellenbosch, Wellington and Paarl but were soon discarded because the winter climate was not cold enough. However, according to Mr. N C Krone of Krone & Co., his father bought his first dried prunes in the Franschhoek area, also around 1895.

The Agricultural Journal reports in 1893 that Piet Cillie, a grape grower famous for his excellent quality raisins was sent to California by the Department of Agriculture for eight months to investigate fruit production After his return the interest in fruit production, which included prunes, grew rapidly

Piet Cillie started the Pioneer Dried Fruit company in 1894 near the town of Wellington. This was possibly the first enterprise run on cooperative principals. This venture motivated Cecil John Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896 to start the huge farming operation, Rhodes Fruit Farms, in 1897 in Simondium with the purpose of drying fruit.

Piet Cillie pleaded with growers to unite in their efforts to expand production of good quality dried fruit. He formed growers associations to push for expert research and extension by the Department of Agriculture for the fruit industry.

To combine their efforts the prune growers of Franschhoek, Paarl, Stellenbosch and Wellington formed a cooperative association, the South African Prune Growers Association, in 1907. Only prunes from members were accepted and packed at a rented pack house at Koelenhof near Stellenbosch.

In the first season of existence the Association received more prunes than the local market could absorb. The quality was not exceptional and an export market had not been established. The directors had to stand surety for a loan of £500 to pay growers for their crop. In November 1907 a meeting was held in the Masonic Hotel, Wellington to discuss the possibility of forming a company with limited liability.

The result was the founding of the South African Dried Fruit Company by 16 members on March 18, 1908 which originally handled only prunes. One of the founder members was John X Merriman Prime Minister of the last Cape Parliament (1908-1910), and later member of the Union Parliament. The South African Dried Fruit Company was registered in 1922 as a Cooperative and in 1962 the name was changed to the South African Dried Fruit Cooperative Ltd. (SAD). In 1998 it was again restructured to an unlisted public company.

A long period of fluctuating production and prices continued for the dried fruit industry. Buyers dictated the terms of sale and price and arbitrarily rejected deliveries without reason.

In 1921 the Government appointed inspectors under the Export Act of 1914, to control the standard of all dried fruit at the docks before shipment. By 1935 production of dried fruit grew to such an extent that new markets had to be found urgently. Some measure of regulation, quality control and discipline was needed in the industry, and the Dried Fruit Board was established in 1938. Just after establishment of the Dried Fruit Board the Second World War started. Exports stopped due to lack of cargo space on ships. Prices dropped and production reached a low. Unfortunately there are no reliable early statistics available on prune production as production figures were only published from 1936.

During 1908 the South African Dried Fruit Company (SAD) moved its operation to Wellington where it rented a pack house from Messrs. Coaten and Louw. They also gradually started packing other dried fruit than prunes. In 1914 SAD bought the Pioneer Dried Fruit Company and in 1931 they also bought the Worcester Boeren Rosynen Koöperatiewe Vereniging Beperkt. Their packing plant was moved to Worcester in 1923 and still operates from there.

In 1942 there were 24 registered packers of dried fruit handling a total crop of 18 838 tons and this called for disaster. Some went bankrupt and others merged, until only eight remained of which SAD, Boland Packers, Barry Dried Fruit, Wellington Fruit Growers Ltd, Cape Dried Fruit Co, Ceres Dried Fruit Co. and Standard Cannery and Packers were the most important. SAD bought the other seven packers in 1956 and agreed with Villiersdorp Moskonfyt Coop to market their dried fruit.

The smallest dried Prune crop was in 1968, 1 060 metric tons and the biggest crop was in 1990, 3 512 metric tons. The average over the last 40 years is 2086 metric tons, which shows that production has been fairly stable for a long time.

The main variety of prunes has for long been Prune D'Agen. In the early seventies it was overtaken by Van der Merwe, a local mutant of prunes d'Agen which was discovered by a Mr Van der Merwe who grew prunes in the Breede River valley. Van der Merwe is similar to

D'Agen, but requires less winter cold to bear a good crop. It is therefore better adapted to the main production areas of South Africa which has fairly mild winters with plenty of sunshine. D'Agen has since the early eighties been overtaken by another local mutation, Erfdeel. Currently about 45% of the area under prunes is planted to Van der Merwe, 28% to Erfdeel and 23% Prune D'Agen. The rest is made up of unimportant varieties such as President, Imperial and clones under evaluation. There are 575 ha under prunes of which approximately 545 ha are in production. There has been a slow decline in prune planting from 1989-1998, but since 1999 new orchards have been planted at an increased rate, but not to the extent that an oversupply will be created in the near future.

The Prune D'Agen flowers early October during a normal year. It is prone to delayed budding and a winter rest breaking spray is essential. Currently DNOC 3% is commonly used. Most orchards of d'Agen are getting on in years, the oldest nearing 100 years, and are grafted on peach rootstocks. It bears fruit of exceptional quality and size and it is not thinned by hand, the only trusted method of thinning in South Africa. Although bacterial cancer, crown gall and dieback are problematic, trees in general remain healthy.

Erfdeel is a mutation of D'Agen which flowers during the last week of September. Like D'Agen it is an irregular bearer and rest breaking sprays are used by host growers. It is a more vigorous grower than its sister, Van der Merwe, but ripens only a day or two before D'Agen. It too is a good quality fruit, though when bearing heavily tends to be smaller than D'Agen.

Van der Merwe is the gar of the South African prune industry at the start of the new millenium. Trees are grafted on both peach and Mariana rootstocks. It is not a vigorous grower, but bears regularly, flowers just before Erfdeel, but ripens at last a week before D'Agen, but in some years up to two weeks. It also ripens very evenly, has excellent quality and size and is cheaper to produce as no rest breaking sprays are required.

In South Africa all harvesting is done by hand and new planting are mostly high density orchards. From 750-1200 trees to the hectare are planted. Brown rust, red spider mite and fruit fly are the most common disease and pests.

When the older orchard were replanted during the sixties an seventies, it was found that the new orchard struggled to grow, dropping leaves very early (during summer). Although fumigation with various substances improved growth even today replanting remains a major problem.

Currently about 15-20% of the national prune crop is sold in the fresh form, almost all of it locally. The bulk of the crop, about 70% is procured by SAD in the dried form, of which about half is rehydrated.

The first dehydrators were built in 1956 (Opstal) and 1958 (Waveren) by the Theron and the Krone families whose descendants still own the farms. Other surnames that come up frequently when talking about prunes are those of Du Plessis and Du Toit, another connection with France.

The production district of the town of Tulbagh is responsible for 80% plus of the prune crop which makes the industry vulnerable to fluctuating crops because of climatic conditions. Although hailstorms are uncommon in the area the storm of 1934, 1959 and 1999 had devastating effects on the production area.

## Administration of the Industry

The Dried Fruit Board was established as a statutory body in the industry. The objectives of the Dried Fruit Board was to regulate the orderly marketing of dried fruit, including export from the Republic of South Africa. The Board's aim was to achieve these objectives by exercising its powers of registration and secondly to create and maintain stability in the industry.

The Board registered and created stabilisation funds for each fruit type to act as a buffer against unexpected and unavoidable price decreases in such a way that the shock for producers was kept to a minimum and production was maintained as far as possible.

Research was undertaken into various aspects of production, processing, packing and marketing to exploit and develop new markets and ensure adequate supplies of good quality fruit. Auditing of the quality control function was undertaken to ensure that correct uniform grading was done and the quality standards were adhered to. The Board's appointed agents to receive dried fruit on behalf of the board and aid the producer a fixed advance price. The agents sold dried fruit on behalf of the various pools and on instruction of the Board.

The Dried Fruit Board was liquidated in 1997, because of the deregulation in the industry after the first democratic elections took place in 1994. Some of the functions were retained and are now handled by Dried Fruit Technical Services, with it's head-quarters in Paarl.

Also in 1997 growers of all the various kinds of dried fruit formed the Dried Tree Fruits Advisory Committee, chaired by Mr Chris Krone, member of the I.P.A. executive committee.

South Africa was accepted as a member of IPA in November 1994 when, after a long period of general isolation because of the policy of apartheid, the country was accepted back into the international fold.

Although the South African prune industry is comparatively small it is highly regarded as a leading creator of jobs, being labour intensive and is the provider of a stable income to those growers who are serious about producing quality prunes under third world economic and general circumstances.