



REPORT

—Papayas

HLB opens new centre



KELSTERBACH—Specialist Brazilian papaya supplier HLB Tropical has invested in its first distribution centre to process an expanding product line into Europe.

by Luisa Cheshire

Specialist Brazilian Caliman papaya supplier HLB Tropical has opened its first European distribution centre near Frankfurt airport in Germany. The inauguration of the Kelsterbach, Hessen, facility comes as the company – which has headquarters in Germany and the US – celebrates 23 years in the fresh produce business.

The new centre is certified by IFS Food and equipped with coldstorage and ripening rooms, explains HLB Tropical's CEO Homero Levy de Barros. This allows the company to condition its fruit – including ready-to-eat papayas – to the different maturity levels required by its many retail clients.

"After 23 years we felt we had gathered enough experience in this business to have our own distribution centre," Levy de Barros explains.

"When I started selling Brazilian Caliman papayas in Europe the fruit was super exotic, and the perception was that the fruit had to be green, by boat and cheap, as it was used mainly as decoration or filler in the tropical department."

Today, Levy de Barros says retailers are better informed and colour is a requirement for the majority of clients. "That is why we have decided to invest in our own distribution centre, where we can condition the product according to client needs."

TOP—HLB's main papaya brand is Brazilian Caliman

ABOVE RIGHT—Homero Levy de Barros, CEO of HLB Tropical



Another reason for the company's decision to invest in new facilities was HLB's expanding product line, Levy de Barros explains. As well as papayas from Brazil, HLB now sources tropical fruit from Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador and the US.

"The distribution centre is located 1.5 miles from the air terminal at Frankfurt Airport and it takes just a few hours after the plane lands for it to be inspected and stored in our facility. This maintains freshness and expedites our logistics," he says.

In line with its growth HLB Tropical Food has expanded its European sales team with the addition of

Heavy rains in Brazil during November and December 2011 damaged the country's papaya plantations and reduced volume for the 2012 deal, according to suppliers.

The reduced fruit availability has generated strong demand within the domestic market and pushed up prices. Papaya grower association UGBP predicts low volume will continue from June through August 2012, with more stable quantities returning in January 2013.

Meanwhile, Brazilian papaya exports to the US have been unaffected by the salmonella outbreak linked to Mexican papayas in 2011, according to exporters, who added they were not experiencing any residual effects on sales in 2012 either.

"I think we reacted quickly to educate clients that there is a big difference between large papayas from Mexico and small papayas from Brazil," says Homero Levy de Barros, CEO of Brazilian papaya supplier HLB Tropical.

"Although we had no significant increase in orders during 2011, we did not experience any retraction in demand either."

Andrés Negreros as head of business development. A native of Guatemala, Negreros is well versed in tropical fruits, Levy de Barros says. HLB is also debuting a website for its European and North American operations.

HLB's portfolio includes papayas of the Golden, Formosa, Calimosa and Solo Sunrise varieties, fresh figs, mangoes, rambutan, guava and tropical avocados. The company's main papaya brand continues to be Brazilian Caliman. ●