



Cypriot salads take their seat at Europe's top table

Impressive investment in infrastructure, new product ranges and international hygiene standards mean Cypriot producers are better placed than ever to supply the UK and European markets

As the irrepressible spread of convenience formats continues across the western world, opportunities are opening up for new suppliers to enter the market and supply high quality pre-cut lines to international customers.

Nowhere is that more true than in Cyprus, where the last three years have seen producers seizing these new opportunities by expanding their production facilities and establishing new markets both domestically and abroad.

Freshest produce

A major player in the market is Alion Vegetables & Fruits Co Ltd, a company whose new purpose-built multi-million euro factory handles half of all exports of Cypriot salad crops.

In a nod to the retailers' demands for more vertically integrated suppliers, the company has also invested in its own production facilities, as well as rapidly expanding its portfolio of products in the fresh-cut arena. The business handles everything from a full range of herbs such as basil, chives, marjoram and rosemary to leafy vegetables including spinach, greens, rucola, red chard, watercress and pak choi. It has also recently introduced a new edible flower known as 'cappuccino' which has a notable spicy flavour. "It's very important to have your



own production," explains director Theodoros Zavou "One reason is to control the quality of the products and not have to depend on others, but also it gives you the stability of supply."

The new factory, built three years ago and meeting all international standards such as BRC and IFS, has given the company a real edge for supplying UK retailers, which is a key market for them. For western European countries, Cyprus's challenge is always how to reach supermarket shelves in the best condition, but Alion is turning its use of airfreight into a positive point of difference by offering the freshest produce possible – cutting the crops in the morning and getting it on retail shelves

by the following morning. "We believe it's one of our competitive advantages because we are making use of the good connections Cyprus has with many countries thanks to tourism," says Zavou.

Website: www.alionveg.com

Opportunities abroad

Export-orientated firm SEDIGEP is planning to step up its move into the international fresh-cut arena. Targeting the major European markets, SEDIGEP is working towards greater access to the wider European sector, leaving it well-positioned as a quality supplier.

The move will give the company a key foothold in the added-value segment, and will expand a portfolio

that already includes iceberg, romaine and cos lettuce, spinach, rocket, lollo rosso, lollo verde, julienne carrots and a real range of mixed salads.

"We are now looking to expand further in Europe," says financial controller Savvas Savva, adding the company is flexible with customer requirements and is planning to expand further into fruit salads. "Fresh cut is a real trend in the UK. Young people want to buy a fresh-cut fruit or ready salad rather than three different packs."

The UK is also one of SEDIGEP's main markets, where it supplies two customers. The company's capacity to export has also been boosted by significant investment in refrigerated cold storage and new machinery for cutting to give it an edge from both a productivity and food hygiene point of view, while most of its producers are GlobalGAP certified and packhouses are covered by the BRC standard.

Website: www.sedigep.com.cy

Innovation

Innovators such as M G Kakas Ltd, which claims to have been the first Cypriot company to have got into fresh cut salads when it started with peeled onions and diced pumpkin in 2006, are also investing. Since then they have expanded into chopped parsley, lettuce, herbs, chips and everything in between as they try to

stay ahead of the influx of rival businesses in the sector.

M G Kakas is moving into a new 1,000 sq metre facility this summer, which will allow it to bring in a range of high spec machinery to permit continuous production. The site is ideally suited to convenience production. And growth prospects are good with the predicted rise in convenience purchasing, says director Marios Georgiou. "It is becoming more and more necessary as our lives become more rushed. With everything going on nowadays, convenience is a must."

The facilities tick all the boxes from a food safety and environmental point of view too, with ISO HACCP certification having been achieved and product containing fewer pesticides thanks to Cyprus's advantageous weather conditions.

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Expansion

Another company that has made a significant spend on improving its factory space and reaching the highest hygiene standards



in preparation to begin exporting is Christakis M. Stephanou Ltd.

The company deals with spinach, lettuce, rocket, frisse, lollo rosso, lollo verde and oakleaf among others, as well as mixed salads with seven different types of

leaves that can be offered with cheese or seafood.

On the back of its impressive facility expansion, the business has big potential for entering the export market, according to the company's manager, Yiangos Evangelou.

Website: www.cms.com.cy

New investment

Major player Amalthia Trading Ltd, which specialises in fresh herbs alongside a vast range of other conventional and organic lines, is building a new packhouse with the latest cutting, washing and preparation facilities as it looks to remain at the forefront of the growth in fresh cut produce. The company's range of salads includes mixed salad, coleslaw, iceberg, lettuce hearts, lollo rosso, lollo biondo, baby spinach and rucola.

The facility will allow Amalthia to expand its fresh prepared offer at a time when TV chefs are enthusing the younger generation to experiment with cooking in a new way, according to manager Andreas Agrotis. He believes the new packhouse, with its upgraded washing and preparation area, will give them more opportunity to supply new markets with high quality, tasty produce in a range of formats. He also expects the facility to boost its capabilities in the organic market.

Website: www.amalthiatrading.com

Evolving formats

Another company looking at expanding into fresh cut fruit is Marcos Stephanou & Sons Ltd, which currently specialises in salad and is reporting a growth in demand for washed mixed lettuce bags. The business is trying out a range of new pack sizes and formats on tomatoes and lettuce as it looks to offer customers options that appeal to the ever-more demanding consumer palate.

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The company has history dealing with the UK, having supplied the British forces with fruit and vegetables for many years. Its full range of salads includes mixed salads, spinach, cabbage, shredded carrot and lettuce leaves and hearts.



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For the future Marcos Stephanou & Sons is looking to expand its offer as it positions itself as a supplier of choice for the convenience market. With food hygiene certificates having been achieved and the quality of the products said to be excellent, the possibilities for the business look wide. It is also going to new premises with new machines and has future plans to expand into fruit salads.

Website: www.cyfresh.com

Looking ahead

So the future looks bright for Cypriot producers in the fresh cut salads sector as the fledgling industry starts to come alive to the possibilities that the modern consumer is presenting to them. With high quality hygiene standards, huge investment in new facilities and a point of difference in product quality, the country is set for a real period of export expansion. ■

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