

Posted on Mon, Mar. 26, 2007

More citrus growers are going organic

Citrus growers are seeing an increased demand for organic orange juice.

By Susan Salisbury

The Palm Beach Post

The news has been bleak for orange juice sales this year, with diminished supply leading to higher prices for consumers.

But there's one category of Florida's signature beverage that's growing.

It's organic orange juice, and although sales account for less than 1 percent of all OJ sold, advocates say it's a product whose time has come.

"The demand for organic citrus is extremely high. It's been hard to supply it," said Kevin Spooner, a Vero Beach-based grower who supplies fruit that ends up as juice at Whole Foods Markets and also serves as a fresh-fruit shipper under the Spooner's Organics brand and consultant to other organic growers.

Spooner, 43, owner of Sailfish Citrus, is one of 37 organic citrus growers in Florida producing fruit on more than 4,900 acres, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture's citrus license and bond office in Winter Haven.

WELCOME 'PESTS'

The groves three miles west of Interstate 95 near Vero Beach are overrun with weeds and insects -- even fire ants -- but Spooner welcomes both.

Weeds are good because they provide a place for beneficial insects to live and, when cut, become compost. Fire ants and other beneficial bugs eat some insects that Spooner doesn't want in the grove.

"Conventional growers used to make fun of my groves because of all the weeds. Organic growers were the laughingstock of the industry," Spooner said. "They thought it was a passing fad. Now, nobody's laughing."

Organic orange juice is made from fruit that is grown without synthetic chemicals of any kind. Most conventional groves use pesticides and fertilizers, and their trees stand in well-manicured, orderly rows.

Liz Gelfand, a Boynton Beach resident and artist who buys organic orange juice occasionally, says she prefers it because it is grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic chemicals.

"I buy organic because it is better for the environment, better for the bees, and I prefer to support Florida growers," Gelfand said.

Other consumers like her buy organic for many of the same reasons.

The history of organic citrus in the state goes back to the 1940s, said Mary Mitchell, who co-owns the Eagle's Nest Grove in the Putnam County town of Crescent City with her husband, Robert. The 20-acre grove is the nation's oldest one continuously devoted to organic agriculture, said Mary Mitchell, 47.

"Back in the early years, we did not wash the fruit, grade it or anything," Mary said. "The true organic person wanted it unwashed and unwaxed and sent from tree to box. As it got more accepted and started moving toward mainstream, customers started demanding it washed, waxed and in a clamshell."

NATURAL RESISTANCE

As organic agriculture grows, more nonsynthetic fertilizers and natural treatments are being developed to serve the industry. Trees that are not chemically treated seem to become naturally more resistant, growers say.

Wade Groetsch, president of Blue Lake Citrus in Winter Haven, said his operation began producing organic orange juice under its Nobel Organics line in 2004.

"You start bringing back the natural ecological system to the grove. The animals, birds and insects that are good for the operation get reestablished," he said.

Groetsch estimates organic orange juice production in Florida at about 3 million gallons, worth \$18 million or so. That's a fraction of the \$1 billion Florida citrus industry.

The U.S. market for organic beverages of all kinds totaled \$1.3 billion in 2006, an increase of 97 percent from 2001, according to Mintel International Group of Chicago. But organic beverages account for just 2 percent of overall beverage sales.

Still, the world's largest orange juice company, Chicago-based Tropicana, has taken notice.

Tropicana's first organic orange juice debuted in February at Whole Foods Markets stores and by May should be in select Florida supermarkets, Tropicana spokesman Pete Brace said.

"It's the only growing market sector in orange juice," said Jack West, president of Inter-Global, an import-export firm based in Dade City. "The whole market for organic products has taken off. The only limiting factor has been the availability of organic products such as orange juice in sufficient quantities to support demand."

Matt McLean, founder and president of Uncle Matt's Organic in Clermont, the nation's second-largest organic orange juice brand after LaFarge, Wis.-based Organic Valley, said he welcomes the attention Tropicana's entry will bring to the category.

GROWING EXPOSURE

"It will give us a little bit more visibility, which will be good for the industry," said McLean, 35.

McLean's family has grown Florida citrus since the 1920s. In 1999, he founded Uncle Matt's Organic, and now 15 groves are under the company's organic certification.

"I started looking into the organic market and said, 'This is something Granddad has been talking to us about.' This is how we used to grow citrus," he said.

Conventional growers are finding it harder to see the benefit of organic growing, McLean said.

One primary reason is money: This season, the premium for organic juice is only 10 percent to 20 percent higher than conventional juice instead of the usual 30 percent or more. But fresh organic fruit can still command two to three times the price of conventional citrus, growers say.

Secondly, conventional growers worry that if they go organic, their groves will suffer from pests and diseases, such as citrus canker and greening, that they will not be able to fight with the usual chemicals, including the insecticides used on the psyllid insects that spread greening.

Stan Carter, citrus division manager for McArthur Farms in Fort Pierce, said the company has considered growing some organic citrus but decided against it because volume would decline.

"Right now I am trying to salvage what groves I can from canker and greening, and I am not willing to lose any more to pests and diseases," Carter said. "I am not convinced this is not just a flash in the pan."

In Vero Beach, Spooner said psyllids have not been a problem in his grove because beneficial insects "eat psyllids like candy."

Despite the challenges, McLean said the company has 600 to 700 acres in transition to organic.

What the organic growers are really doing is returning to growing citrus the way it used to be grown in the 1950s and earlier, Spooner said. He uses standbys such as fish emulsion fertilizers, which also help control citrus problems such as rust mites.

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Spoooner began converting his first 150 acres of groves to organic methods in 1991, after paying a visit to Colorado and seeing the headquarters for Wild Oats Markets under construction and deciding there must be a future in organics.

He learned by trial and error and by consulting pioneers such as the Mitchells. His groves were certified organic in 1994.

Today, he leases 1,355 acres of organic groves and handles fresh fruit and juice for Lindsey Citrus Management with just under 2,000 acres.

"We basically listened to the trees. When they needed food, we gave them food. When they needed water, we gave them water," Spooner said. "I felt that it would be a neat way to go and keep from poisoning the Indian River Lagoon."