

Sensational Summerfruit reflections

I had the pleasure of joining the two grower workshop sessions set up to discuss the *Sensational Summerfruit* Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme during May.

Despite some robust discussion during the two workshops, the picture from the days that sticks clearly in my mind was one I saw while driving around Cromwell. I saw a group of Asian tourists that had stopped by an orchard, and were enjoying themselves, taking photos with the striking autumnal colours of the cherry trees in the background. For those of you that grow in Central Otago you probably take the colours for granted, but for that group of tourists, and me, they are something unique and special.

The terroir where you grow your fruit is one of many opportunities available to connect your apricots, cherries, nectarines, peaches and plums to consumers here in New Zealand and in current and potential new export markets.

It was surprising to hear a grower note that they know their customers because they come to the orchard gate. I have been strongly of the view for many years that the best way to really understand your customers is to invest in spending as much time as possible in market. This enables you to understand the product attributes that are most important to your customers, how they currently (and could) fit your product into their lifestyles, what expectations they have around packaging, provenance, market channel and many other factors all of which will ultimately help you to capture more value for your product. I would note that this is as important if your key market is Auckland as Shanghai or Tokyo.

The beauty of the *Sensational Summerfruit* PGP proposal is that the government is offering to invest alongside growers in developing insight that will be available to all in the industry to enhance the alignment of your individual businesses with your customers.

We heard in both sessions about the positive impact a similar PGP programme has had on the avocado industry over the last five years. While the avocado industry is different in some respects, I recall presenting at an industry conference some years ago and questioning why we bothered to grow avocados in New Zealand – it just seemed too difficult with biennial bearing and a lack of sustainable export markets. The reality is that the PGP has focused the industry on the benefits of collaboration and they are now well on track to quadrupling industry value. Growers, packers and exporters have all benefited, the industry is growing sustainably and there is no way I would now question the role the industry plays in our primary production landscape.

With changes in the way the government is supporting primary sector innovation moving forward, the summerfruit sector has a unique opportunity to embark on a similar journey. The *Sensational Summerfruit* programme has many elements to it and, as was the case with the avocado and other PGP programmes, I would expect these will be refined to ensure every dollar is directed into areas that deliver value.

Having enjoyed the robust conversations at both of the workshops, I really hope that the industry does commit to this programme. You have great products, produced in beautiful parts of New Zealand – the potential is there to enhance industry sustainability and value by collaborating to understand more about your customers.

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