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AGRICULTURE & FARMING

# Quality, Quality, Quality: Linda De Nadai

Across China, Unifruit's kiwifruit are considered the gold standard in terms of quality. The South African company entered the market two decades ago and has worked hard to establish a strong reputation for its brand there. So it was a strange sort of complacency when commentators in the country began predicting the Unifruit kiwifruit a few years ago.



**Linda De Nadai**  
CEO Unifruit South Africa  
Words - Jacob Goldberg

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Priced of the kiwifruit were booming and commentators knew that having the product under the brand name of the multinational company would be lucrative. But it didn't last. "Last year, we took a very strong stand against it. We basically stopped it at airport. It went over because of the whole COVID situation," says Linda De Nadai, Unifruit South Africa CEO.

"It's strange because you wouldn't think that people would want to take a fruit brand. You'd think that they'd concentrate on other things," she reflects. "But this just proves to me that the value added that we put in the brand is significant. So, in a way it makes me proud to think that we are being imitated, but it does present an issue and we needed to step in."

It is this emphasis on excellence that sets the company apart from competitors. "We are known as the quality company. People within the industry identify the Unifruit brand with the quality product," Linda reveals.

In the South African market, another factor that distinguishes Unifruit is its widely dispersed supply chain. "If I compare us to the average South African exporter, we have a very diversified geographic situation in terms of where we are sourcing the fruit in South Africa, which gives us a more controllable sales capacity."

The company also produces more than 30% of what it exports, giving it firm control over the availability of products and the volume it ships. Using mostly or solely third-party suppliers would create more uncertainty as the company would have less of an idea about what is going on in the orchards.

We are very careful about what are the right nutrients to apply to the land without having any kind of health issues.

This is also an advantage globally, and another plus for the company at this level is that it has since competition in the various markets, meaning it can adopt a more targeted sales approach to reach the end consumer.

## Twenty years strong

The other 50% of Unifruit South Africa's suppliers are growers who are not part of the company's shareholding or audit. "I would say that a good 80% of our external fruit suppliers have been with us for the past 20 years," Linda says.

"Agriculture is about the long term. We mostly use packaging companies, and these relationships have been working with the same companies now for quite a few years."

We are meeting the needs of even the most demanding consumers in terms of health and safety.



"It's about having more control about what is going to happen in the years to come in terms of pests and volumes. It is also about working on the safety of the product," Linda explains, adding that it allows Unifruit to invest time in working with growers to improve its production in changing market needs.

"The same happens in some of our other projects. It needs to be worked out and the strategy needs to be planned with the suppliers in order to work in certain markets."

To maintain the quality of its outsourced products, Unifruit has its own packaging and cold storage facilities in three areas across South Africa. This enables the company to package fruit that is export ready and thereby improve quality controls.

The company also has its own assessments and other reports when regularly visit growers throughout the growing process and work closely with them to ensure healthy and productive crops.

"We give a lot of advice and we have a good approach in advising the growers on what are the best fruit varieties to plant and which is the best approach to their get to into the right market," Linda shares.

Such cooperation creates quality is especially key in consumers become more and more demanding, and more conscious of the provenance of the fruit they buy.

## Peculiar fruit

"The mainstream consumer has become very health conscious and when it comes to the product they buy, they are also wary of how it has been treated in terms of pesticides or fertilisers," Linda says.



Unsurprisingly for a company with such a strong focus on quality Unifruit has made satisfying these demands a central part of its strategic vision.

We are not afraid of a crisis. We are a very resilient and elastic company when it comes to handling issues and moving quickly within a changing environment.

"We've become very controlling. We have a focus on getting our growers to use the right fertilizer and pesticide protocols so that we are meeting the needs of even the most demanding consumers in terms of health and safety," she confirms.

Linda has been with Unifruit for her entire professional life: she joined straight out of university in 1991. She has deep familiarity to the company, with one of her ancestors being the founder and her father a former distributor. She learned the ropes as a junior supervisor while also gaining technical knowledge about the company's processes.

"It's not a very peculiar product to sell," she admits. "You start here & here, you start also understand what happens in terms of the shelf life and evolution, and the way it travels. I have no other professional experience outside the Unifruit world. Her within the Unifruit world, I found there was a commonality. They, slowly but surely, I started getting more involved in the agricultural parts in various parts of the world - in Chile and in Turkey."

When Unifruit started its investment in South Africa in 1998, Linda was involved in the marketing side of the business, helping to drive sales into the European market. Then, in 2002, she was appointed CEO of the company's South Africa operations.

## Lenient and elastic

Since Linda took the lead, Unifruit has undergone a shift from a more traditional model to focusing on a sustainable approach to agriculture. "We started to focus on trying to maximize the use of resources such as water and land. I would say that, since 2003, we've made a lot of progress on sustainability and healthy production," Linda says proudly.

And while the company remains in the hands of a group of family businesses, since 2013 it has shifted toward a more corporate governance structure, where management is now independent from shareholders.



"I would suppose that's due to a generational shift and the fact that many of the people who used to manage the group of companies are aging and want to enjoy life more," Linda suggests.

"I was lucky to start from the beginning and my responsibilities changed with time. I'm happy to still be here." Under Linda's leadership, Unifruit South Africa has also invested in improving the lives of its employees while maintaining the level of quality the company had as a more traditional exporter.

"On the one hand, what we are producing now compared to what we used to produce is diversified in terms of the fruit we can offer to the consumer," she says.



"On the other hand, we are still focused on the nutritional aspect of the fruit and try to apply the same kind of fruit with the least possible addition in terms of chemicals. We are very careful about what are the right nutrients to apply to the land without having any kind of health issues."

Another feature of Unifruit's corporate make-up is resilience. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the company suffered a hit as overseas, warehouse and local businesses shut brought its fruit from overseas dry up. The company worked hard to make up those losses in food retail, which naturally did much better during lockdowns.

"I think the one thing that has always been important for us is that we are not afraid of a crisis," Linda insists. "We are a very resilient and elastic company when it comes to handling issues and moving quickly within a changing environment."

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