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OUT THERE

Southern California date growers scramble to fill Ramadan orders

Good thing the fruit freezes well, because the shifting timing of the Muslim holy month means this year it's out of sync with the date harvest.

August 18, 2009 | Raja Abdulrahim

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Here, on his 150 acres of date groves, Jensen is an observer. He watched the workers but didn't say anything -- in part because he doesn't speak Spanish but also because he didn't want to disrupt the chain of command.

Under shade from the palm fronds, workers in harnesses pulled white polyester mesh bags over each date bunch and tied them off at the top and bottom to protect the fruit until it is ready for harvest.

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When that happens, most of the dates will be sorted, graded and packaged and sent directly to commercial freezers for next year's Ramadan.

Though the date demand will be out of season for years to come, it turns out it is the ideal fruit to store in freezers for a year or more. Any changes to the fruit are more noticeable to the eye than the palate, including sugaring on the surface and skin breakage, Jensen said.

But the thought of year-old fruit remains unappealing and callers to SeaView insist on fresh produce. Some, unfamiliar with the ripening process, ask if the dates can be picked a few weeks early.

"The funny part is when they argue with you, 'Why aren't they ready?' " said Roya Jensen, Dennis' wife, who oversees sales. "Because every year they're ready in September."

Growers including the Jensens have been dealing with the supply-and-demand crunch the last few years, with harvested dates rushed from the groves straight to markets. This year, growers have had to rely on last year's crop going into the season.

In January, SeaView sent its annual Ramadan shipment to Malaysia as well as to France. In years past, the company has sent dates to Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

"The medjool grown here are larger than the ones over there," Roya Jensen said.

Dave Nelson, a farmer with the Bard Valley Medjool Date Growers Assn., said it is a combination of soil and environment, as well as care, that makes the California medjools able to compete with dates grown in Jordan, South Africa and Saudi Arabia.

"We just have all the elements that it seems to require to grow good medjool dates," he said.

The group, is made up of farmers in the Imperial Valley and Yuma, Ariz., ships about half a million pounds of dates for Ramadan, domestically and internationally. In June, thousands of pounds were sent by ship to Muslim customers in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The growers' dates can also be found closer to home.

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