

Table grape minimum maturity changes imminent

Updates to the minimum maturity standards for Australian table grapes are expected to be finalised soon, following extensive industry consultation.

The proposed changes are based on the analysis of maturity monitoring data from all major public varieties carried out over the past two seasons.

The project Table Grapes Supply Chain Quality 2017-2020 (TG17002) is being funded by Hort Innovation using table grape industry research and development levies and contributions from the Australian Government.

A key objective of this three-year project is to increase the demand and consumption of Australian table grapes by ensuring consumers have a consistently good eating experience, throughout the entire season.

Research strongly suggests that consumers will buy more fruit when they are confident it will taste good, and that getting the taste right for consumers at the start of the season is critical.

Key Australian table grape industry stakeholders have collectively agreed to develop minimum maturity standards that are well-aligned with consumer taste expectations.

A Stakeholder Working Group (SWG) was established in October to determine the best way to develop minimum maturity standards for the whole industry to ensure eating quality



Jenny Hunt collecting samples for the maturity project.

is consistently good. Members of the SWG include the Australian Table Grape Association (ATGA), growers, Hort Innovation, and key retailers and marketing companies.

Maturity data from 13,500 table grapes collected from farms, supermarkets and export has provided science-based evidence to assist with the industry decision making.

In June 2019, the SWG agreed on proposed updates to the minimum maturity standards for table grapes that they believed would best meet the needs of both consumers and the industry.

Growers will have an opportunity to be thoroughly updated on the project and offer their input in a series of

meetings that will be held in August in conjunction with the ATGA export registration.

For Sunraysia, the meetings will be held on 31 July and 1 August, with meetings in Queensland and Western Australia at a later date.

Key team members of the Table Grape Quality Improvement project will be on hand to discuss the proposed maturity standard changes with growers at the August meetings, including Delytics Managing Director and project leader, Mark Loeffen, ATGA Chief Executive Jeff Scott, and retail management consultant Tristan Kitchener.

“I strongly encourage all growers to make it a priority to attend these meetings,” Mr Scott said.

“It is imperative that we all understand why these changes are important and how they will benefit our own businesses so we can embrace them with no reservations.”

The Table Grapes Supply Chain Quality project was commissioned by ATGA in direct response to grower concerns about immature fruit in the market, especially at the start of the season.

Mr Scott said numerous growers expressed concerns to the ATGA over many years about the negative effect immature fruit has on table grape



Table Grapes Supply Chain Quality project team members, from left: Retail Management Consultant, Tristan Kitchener; Delytics Managing Director and project leader, Mark Loeffen; and ATGA Chief Executive Jeff Scott.

Areas for discussion

The ATGA is trying to increase domestic table grape sales for the benefit of the entire industry. The data collected over the last three years provides tangible evidence showing that to achieve 80% consumer acceptability, and repeat sales, grapes need to be a minimum of 16°Brix.

Growers are urged to attend scheduled meetings to see the results and discuss the following to map the path forward:

- *Setting the standard and grower agreement for compliance*
- *Monitoring compliance and implications*
- *Tracking the results*

the maturity data clearly shows that consumer acceptability is not where it needs to be yet. "This season's results show that 30% of consumers found the fruit unacceptable, and one in every three fruit did not meet their taste expectations," he said.

"When consumers have a negative eating experience they will not buy any more fruit for at least six weeks and will likely buy something else instead. Competitor categories such as mangoes, stone fruit and cherries are continually raising the bar in terms of quality, so it's critical that the table grape industry creates a platform for change to ensure consumer's needs are met and they feel confident that buying table grapes will give them a good eating experience."

Mr Kitchener points out that implementing minimum maturity standards has successfully increased purchase frequency and grower returns for other fruit categories and similar results are expected for table grapes.

He says, "Complying with the industry maturity standards will benefit everyone in the industry by getting the taste right for consumers, which will encourage them to purchase more table grapes."

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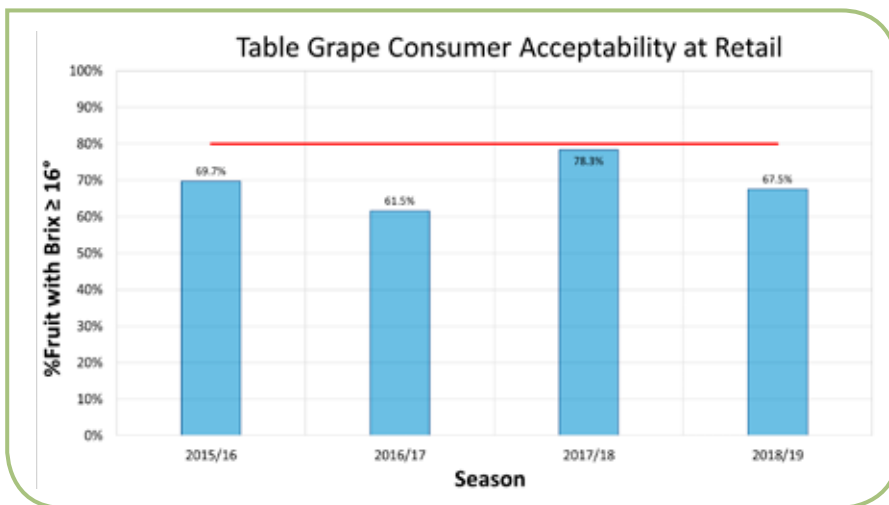


Figure 1. Table grape maturity data demonstrates a need for change. This graph shows that Australian table grapes only met the targeted 80% minimum consumer acceptability once in the past four years.

sales and value. "As we all know, if a consumer's first buy is of immature fruit that doesn't taste very good, they won't purchase any more table grapes for six to eight weeks, and their confidence making that next purchase will be low," he said.

"This project aims to address this problem by providing science-based minimum maturity standards for the whole industry that will ensure the majority of Australian table grapes meet consumer taste expectations.

"If we can have that consistent throughout the industry, then we will have a win-win situation. Consumers will know that when they buy Australian table grapes they will get a mature quality product, and growers should get a better return."

"This season's results show one in every three fruit did not meet their taste expectations."

The ATGA was expecting the maturity monitoring results to improve as the project progressed and growers became more aware of the importance of consistently supplying the market with mature good tasting fruit. However, despite a reasonable growing season last year, the overall consumer acceptability of Australian table grapes only reached 70%, far short of the targeted 80% (Figure 1).

"Analysis of the maturity monitoring data has shown that we should be

aiming for 80% consumer acceptability to achieve the best results for growers, and that's easily achievable at 16°Brix," Mr Scott said.

"It is surprising, and disappointing, to see that we haven't achieved that so far, but I'm confident that we will if growers agree to work together towards a common goal.

"I firmly believe that everyone will benefit from doing their part to ensure Australian table grapes are consistently liked by consumers."

The August meetings will outline the proposed updated maturity standards and the benefits that every grower can expect from following them.

Tristan Kitchener, who is contracted by Hort Innovation to engage with supermarkets for this project, said



Measuring brix is vital to ensure grapes are mature and ready to eat.