

Producer country file

The date in Morocco

by Carolina Dawson

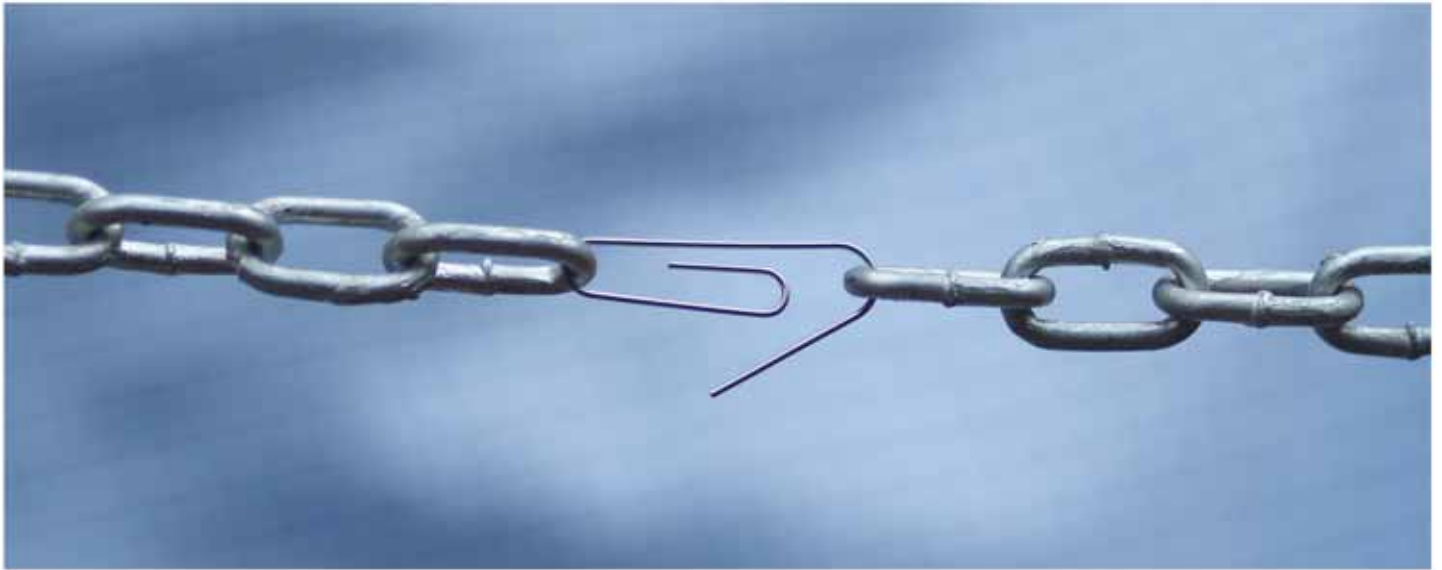
In this traditional date producer and consumer country, the date industry is rising from the ashes. Moroccan production had been distinctly weakened by severe agronomic constraints. The industry has only managed to get back on even keel thanks to the support of State programmes since the 1980s, and above all since the implementation of a vast revitalisation plan, the so-called “Maroc Vert” plan, in the mid-2000s. This investment is already bearing fruit, though production is still far from meeting a highly dynamic and growing national demand.

Oasis in the Ziz valley

© Mustapha Zemzami



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Date – Morocco

Location

Extending over more than 50 000 ha, the date planted area is concentrated in the oasis zone of the south of the country, mainly along the Ziz or Tafilalet valleys (Errachidia) and the Drâa valley (Ouarzazate, Zagora). This vast territory encompasses several southern Moroccan provinces: from Guelmim in the west to Figuig in the east, as well as Tiznit, Tata, Errachidia, Zagora, Ouarzazate and Tinghir.

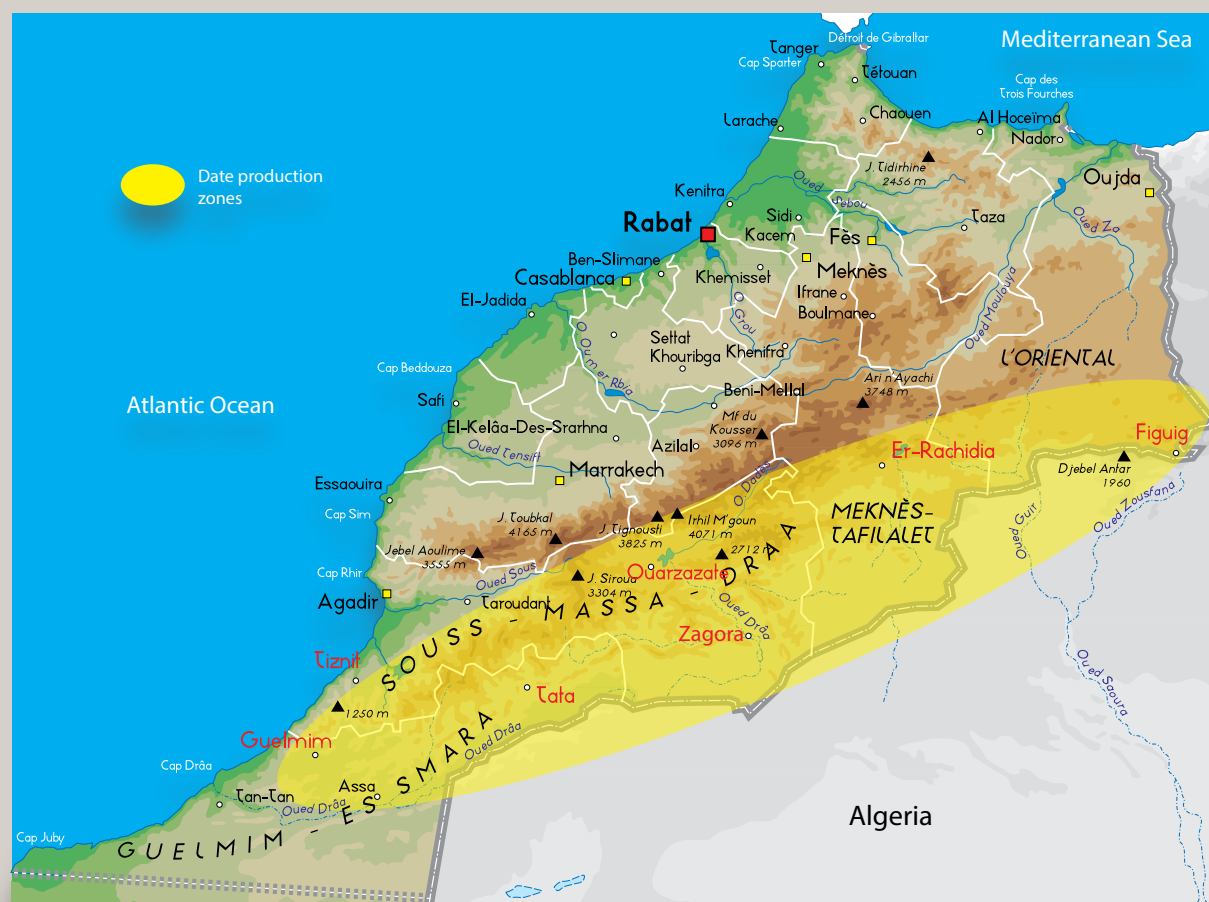
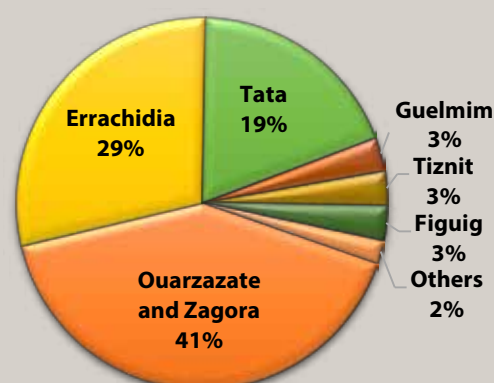
Because of phytosanitary constraints (Bayoud absent), the 17 000 ha of new plantations are located outside of the traditional planted areas, in new virgin areas where the date palm has never been planted. These surface areas are situated mainly on the Errachidia plateau, which has the advantage of irrigation water from the Al-Hassan Addakhil dam, and in Boudnib, which is in the vicinity of a new dam under construction. The drip irrigation system is favoured in these high-tech extensions.

In the traditional zones, the intensification and densification of planting are raising certain questions over the fragility of pre-Saharan oasis ecosystems, which are

facing the phenomenon of desertification and drying up of groundwater due to overexploitation. The State's production-focused, high-tech approach (intensive Medjoul) is also on probation with regard to water resources and conservation of genetic heritage.

Date palm - Morocco - Breakdown of planted areas

(Source: Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture)



Date – Morocco

Production

The arrival of Bayoud disease in the early 20th Century marked a turning point for Moroccan production, one of the world's biggest at the time. In addition, it has had to cope with increasing constraints, whether agronomic (low water availability, sanding-up of arable land, low yields), climate (increasing frequency of droughts) or organisational (commercial disorganisation of the industry, poor post-harvest and quality management). Thus hundreds of thousands of date palms, and even certain varieties, disappeared, leading to a collapse in production.

In the 1980s, restructuring plans helped safeguard production, but a genuine renewal began only with the launch of the vast "Maroc Vert" programme in 2008, the objective of which is to upgrade the entire industry.

The national date palm development plan is aimed at expanding the planted area from 48 000 ha in 2010 to 65 000 ha by 2020, planting 3 million plants, to rebuild and densify the existing planted area, as well as create 17 000 ha of new modern plantations.

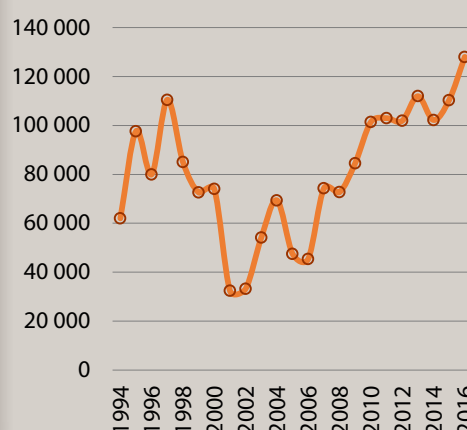
Regarding Bayoud, for which there is no means of eradication, integrated management systems have been implemented in zones already infested, and resistant varieties such as Nedja have been planted. Furthermore, use of vitroplants for the new plantations is helping prevent the disease from extending to non-infested zones. Drip irrigation is favoured by the new plantations. The upgrading of the industry as a whole is also supported by the construction of refrigerated storage and packing stations, by the promotion of Geographic Indications including the labelling of Tafilalet Medjoul dates and by the reinforcement of the interprofessional association (Fimadattes). In addition, the protection and exploitation of the date plantations has been governed by a special decree since 2007, with the creation of a dedicated protection body, as well as the registration of oases in southern Morocco in the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves (2000).

This plan should help achieve a production of 160 000 tonnes by 2020, and then 185 000 tonnes by 2030. An estimated 5 000 tonnes should be earmarked for export in 2020. The mid-way results are already very encouraging, with 128 000 tonnes produced in 2016 (professional sources) over a surface area of nearly 57 000 ha (source: FAO).



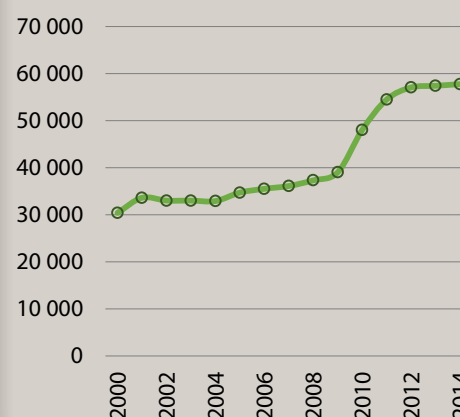
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Date - Morocco - Evolution of production
(in tonnes / Professional sources, FAO)



Date - Morocco - Planted areas

(in hectares / Source: Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture)



Date – Morocco



Weaning date palm vitroplants



Acclimated vitroplants

Varieties

The Moroccan planted stock is characterised by the existence of a host of varieties, with a predominance of so-called “Khalt” varieties (unidentified), which have low commercial value. The “distinguished” varieties (Medjoul, Boufeggous, Aziza, Jihel) and the new varieties designed to withstand Bayoud disease (Nejda) represent only a small proportion of the supply, at around 20 %. The top-of-the-range varieties, with a good commercial potential for both the local and export markets, are central to the new renovation and extension projects under the “Maroc Vert” programme. From 2011 to 2013, it was mainly the Nejda variety which was planted. For the period 2015-2020, Medjoul and Boufeggous will be favoured over the old varieties and on the new plantations.

Medjoul (or Mejhoul, Al Majhoul, Medjool) remains the most prized variety. It was from Morocco that the first Medjoul was introduced in California in the 1930s. They were decimated by Bayoud and reintroduced in Morocco thereafter. Medjoul is a soft, large and sweet date, weighing between 20 and 30 grams, whereas other dates range between 6 and 11 grams. The harvest starts in late July-early August, and finishes in October-November. Freezing to between 0° and - 2°C in the early season, and then to - 18°C during the production peak, make it available year-round.

Boufeggous, Fegousse or Bofkousse is an aromatic, slightly caramelised date, with medium-soft consistency. It is very popular in the regions of Ouarzazate and Zagora.

Aguellid, also known as Malik toumour (king of dates), ripens early and bears a golden colour. It too is one of the high commercial value varieties, with a sweet flavour and soft consistency.

Bouskri is characterised by its medium-dry consistency and pleasantly sweet taste.

Date – Morocco

Outlets

Morocco's main date production outlet is the highly dynamic local consumption, which has practically doubled in the space of ten years, going from 270 g/capita in 2003 to more than 500 g in 2015. However, the quantities produced locally remain insufficient to satisfy this rising consumption, close to 180 000 tonnes per year. So imports, also on the up, are helping top up the local supply. They represent nearly 40 % of volumes consumed in the country (i.e. nearly 70 000 tonnes), and come mainly from Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

Despite the ambition to progress on the international markets (targeting 5 000 tonnes of exports by 2020), and in particular the European market with top-of-the-range dates, of the more than 120 000 tonnes produced in 2016 the share of exports is estimated at less than 1 %, i.e. 700 tonnes. So the 50 tonnes bound for the European market in 2015 is no more than an anecdotal figure.



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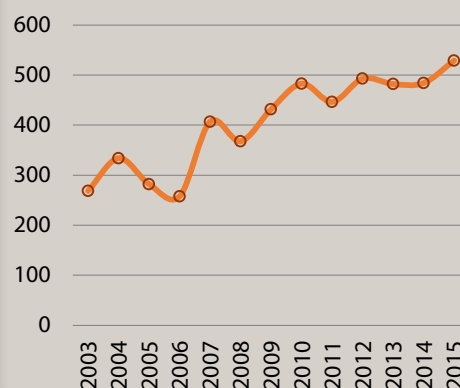
Prospects

Despite agronomic constraints still in place (Bayoud disease to be managed, water and desertification problems), the large-scale investment and technical development of this crop (vitroplants, drip irrigation) will help production continue to rise. The vast programme initiated in 2008 is nearing its goal. However, the cost of this new management remains high, and the investments need to be made profitable. So the quest for added value is becoming crucial for the industry.

There are still margins for progress to be tapped, especially regarding improved productivity and valuation.

Local demand is registering uninterrupted growth, and represents a major reservoir, especially since Moroccan consumption is still far behind those of other North African countries, close to 10 to 15 kg per capita on average. The target of 5 000 tonnes of exports still seems distant given the consumption potential of the local market.

Date - Morocco - Apparent consumption
(in g/capita / Professional sources)



Date - Morocco - Supply
(in tonnes / Professional sources)

