

Counter-season melon campaign becoming complicated

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While Brazil dominates counter-season melon exports, attention is also focused on other origins such as Senegal, the French West Indies and Morocco, before the massive arrival of Spain from mid-May, with the Charentais melon. Regarding the watermelon, shipments also come mainly from Brazil, but Morocco is on an upward trend, with bulky 10 kg to 15 kg watermelons dedicated to European ethnic consumption.



Brazil the top supplier to the EC market

European melon imports totalled 361 546 tonnes in 2020-21. Brazil dominates the counter-season, with volumes in excess of 149 358 tonnes, down 7 % on the previous campaign and 2 % below the three-campaign average. Export melon planted areas in Brazil have gone up from 12 000 ha to 15 000 ha, with production aimed mainly at Europe, via the North European ports (Rotterdam or Hamburg), and then distributed across the EU. For its part, Spain mainly imports Piel de Sapo from Brazil in the counter-season. Out of the total 15 000 ha, 50 % are planted with the Canari yellow melon, 20 % with Piel de Sapo and 15 % Cantaloupe (ribbed Harper, without grooves). We can also find some Italo, which is larger than Charentais, but more complicated to produce, with the rest comprising green Charentais, a small proportion of which is exported.

The production calendar extends from September to March, with the best quality produced from September to early January. Thereafter, the quality deteriorates because of the intense rains which can batter the production zones. Hence the two main destinations, the Netherlands and the UK, then switch to other Central American origins to top up and secure their supply, such as Costa Rica (23 893 t in 2020-21, down by 46 % over one year, and 58 % below the three-year average), Guatemala (1 199 t, i.e. + 38 % over one year) and Honduras (28 816 t, i.e. - 6 % over one year, and 9 % below the three-year average). This year, operators will need to reckon with the increased container price out of Brazil. With some companies using more than 200 containers per week, there could be large sums involved. Hence over the past two years, the transport cost has increased six-fold.

From February-March, European imports focus on Senegal (17 868 t in 2020-21, i.e. - 0.5 % over one year, and 1 % below the three-year average). Then it is the turn of Morocco (44 020 t in 2020-21, i.e. 4.5 % over one year and 6 % below the three-year average), before Spain takes over between early and mid-May. Spanish production comprises 60 % the Piel de Sapo variety, planted over 800 ha, with the rest being yellow Charentais over a stable area of 500 ha. Production is at its most abundant between March and April.



Morocco and Spain on the early side

For nearly five years, Morocco has stepped up its early shipments to Europe, with volumes in excess of 21 000 tonnes in April, before subsiding to 16 000 tonnes in May. The Moroccan campaign starts in March with Dakhla melons, which this year were reportedly sown over an equivalent area to last year, or slightly smaller, as well as greenhouse-grown melons from around Marrakech. In the space of ten years, greenhouse areas have seen a distinct expansion in Morocco, going from 20 % to 60 %, with field cultivation now representing just 40 %.

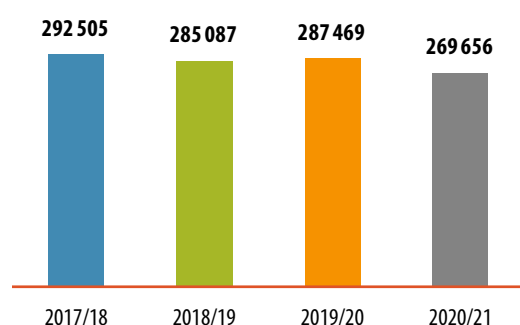
Since the appearance of Covid, i.e. for two campaigns, Morocco has shifted its production calendar to the early melon. Around Marrakech, multiple green Charentais greenhouses have been set up, enabling the origin to arrive on the European market well before Spain. Conversely, we can see a decrease in surface areas, especially in Dakhla where a historic operator has halted its production. Hence the Marrakech zone has taken over from plantations further south in Morocco. The logistical costs of transport from Dakhla (no less than 2 600 km by road) could affect the profitability of Charentais from the zone this year. Morocco will begin its campaign in February, with early production until May, just before the arrival of Spain.

Melon – EU27+UK – Extra-Community imports

in tonnes	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Total	292 505	285 087	287 469	269 656
Brazil	153 477	143 988	159 410	149 358
Morocco	40 748	41 516	42 019	44 020
Honduras	33 538	34 275	27 033	28 816
Costa Rica	38 600	40 095	35 017	23 894
Senegal	17 679	18 639	17 824	17 869
Turkey	3 337	1 429	3 057	3 109
South Africa	3 384	2 208	1 613	1 344
Guatemala	319	702	454	1 199
Panama	1 423	2 234	1 043	46

Sources: Eurostat, UK Trade

Melon - EU27+UK - Extra-Community imports
(in tonnes | sources: Eurostat, UK Trade)



Early production is also prevalent in Spain, with greenhouse-grown Charentais melons from Murcia. Hence Morocco loses its advantage over Spain in May, with the arrival of the tastier Spanish yellow melon. The Spanish production calendar is very long, but for the past two years the climate vagaries have tended to reduce the trading campaigns. Hence the calendar has narrowed by one month, with an increase in early greenhouse-grown melons from Murcia and late melons on the way out. Note that for two years Spain has had tough springs, which are not favourable for yields in the most complicated campaigns. The Cartagena region has also been the subject of a regulatory ruling, making melon growing in the zone difficult.

In Senegal, the winding-up of a historic French operator has not been made good, hence the planted area is smaller. The FWI began in late January, and will be present until late April-early May. Volumes are similar to last year, over slightly smaller surface areas, with the objective of providing an Easter weekend presence.

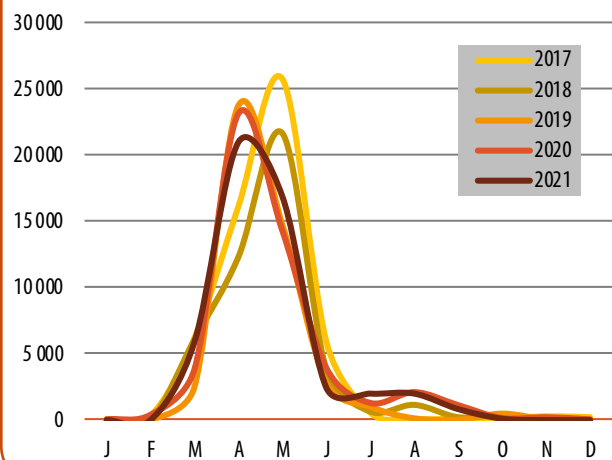
Watermelon – EU27+UK – Imports from main supplier countries

in tonnes	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Spain	112 427	127 405	151 891	128 906
Morocco	108 429	88 202	151 922	128 060
Brazil	36 149	42 921	42 176	41 349
Costa Rica	34 326	44 787	37 602	37 480
Senegal	13 382	13 845	11 299	13 358

Sources: Eurostat, UK Trade



Melon - EU27+UK - Monthly imports from Morocco
(in tonnes | sources: Eurostat, UK Trade)



Watermelon taking market share

European counter-season watermelon imports represented a volume of 322 166 tonnes in 2020-21, mainly from Brazil. This origin is making headway on the European market, especially to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, to meet demand for processed fruit salads. Brazil started out 7 or 8 years ago with small 2-kg watermelons, with a very firm texture, before expanding its range with 6-kg watermelons, ideal for the industrial sector, thereby stimulating consumption.

In Senegal, Spanish operators based in the country have developed the Sugar Baby seedless watermelon, a round 5-6 kg fruit, for shipments between March and April.

Moroccan operators have not developed seedless varieties, and exports large-sized 10- to 15-kg watermelons, initially cultivated for the national market. Shipments have swelled with watermelons from Zagora, south of Ouarzazate. This is mainly to supply ethnic populations based in Europe. The export calendar starts in April.

Spain comes onto the market from June-July, with seedless watermelons in the majority. In 2021, 9 500 ha were planted in Almería, for a production of 550 000 tonnes according to the report by the Andalusian Prices and Markets Observatory, representing a 12 % increase over one year. This zone is one of Europe's top watermelon production regions, accounting for nearly half of Spanish production. But the unusually cold and rainy weather in Europe has curbed consumption of the product. The big mismatch between supply and demand has had a decisive impact on prices. Hence operators which have started planting are sceptical with regard to the season now starting. Production costs could soar with the increasing input costs. Some growers are reportedly abandoning the product in favour of safer crops such as the courgette ■