

# Booming pomegranate market paves way for bright future

**Laura Gould** spoke to Kaushal Khakhar of Indian producer Kay Bee Exports to find out just why this relative newcomer in the fresh produce range is swiftly becoming a firm favourite in Europe and the Middle East

**H**OW would you describe the current market for Indian pomegranates? How do you explain the rising popularity of this fruit?

Indian pomegranate exports have seen explosive growth in recent years. The beneficial effects of pomegranates have long been known to ancient civilizations.

The level of antioxidants found in pomegranates is one of the highest amongst all fruits, so what is key is communicating these benefits to consumers. Marketing efforts by numerous companies around the world have benefited the Indian pomegranate sector.

Until last year, different varieties of Indian pomegranates were available for 10 months of the year. But from now on, they will be available year-round.

**How many tonnes of pomegranates did Kay Bee market in 2006? How do these volumes compare to 2005?**

To date, we have exported 40 sea containers in 2006, as well as operating a sizeable airfreight programme. This equals around 1,000 tonnes of pomegranates. Last year, volume was less than half of this, so our year-on-year growth rate has been more than 100 per cent. However, there is a big difference between volumes and profitability, which is especially true for a developing product like pomegranates. The key variety exported from India is the Bhagwa. Other varieties include Mrudula, Arakta, Ganesh and many other hybrids.

From December to May, there are very few pomegranates grown in the world. However, this is the peak season for Indian pomegranates, which is why there has been tremendous interest in this fruit from India during this period.

**Which are your principal markets for pomegranates? Have you seen demand for your produce increase in any countries?**

Europe is our principal market, although a large proportion of Indian pomegranates are exported to Middle Eastern countries, as Arabs have been consuming pomegranates for many years. But for European consumers, demand for pomegranates has been a very recent phenomenon, with more and more countries showing interest each year.

**On how many hectares of land does Kay Bee produce pomegranates and whereabouts in India?**

Our pomegranates are grown on 350ha, spread across different states of India. Only the top 40 per cent of the harvest is exported. Every single piece of fruit is checked by hand for any external or internal defects. What distinguishes our pomegranates from those of our competitors is the human skill of identifying defects with bare hands, which comes only after years of experience.

We once had a foreign technical team visit our operations, where we demonstrated this skill. Needless to say, they were amazed by the 100 per cent accuracy rate.

We operate out of a coldstore in southern Maharashtra, which is the prime producing area for pomegranates in India. We are also investing in various packing and grading facilities, in order to offer a consistent top quality product all year round.

**What do you see as the key issues facing the Indian pomegranate sector at the moment? What can be done to overcome these?**

Very little research has been done on storage and shelf-life extension for Indian pomegranate varieties. So, except for a few key varieties, other types of the fruit are not yet being trialled for export. A good example of this is the Ganesh variety. It is a better eating variety than the Bhagwa variety, but is visually not as appealing, and hence has lost out on export volumes. But local demand for this variety



Kay Bee pomegranates are checked by hand remains high.

Farmers are also still not well-versed with food safety principles. We have an internal training programme to guide farmers on numerous issues, thereby ensuring loyalty and developing long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

**What are the current aims for the future for Kay Bee's pomegranate volumes? What can the company do to ensure it continues to go from strength to strength?**

We are already known as pomegranate specialists in India. And we want to strengthen this reputation further still by offering value-added produce in the form of retail packs and innovative packaging.

Our customers are very confident about our ability to deliver the goods, which helps us to focus on product development and marketing, thus creating a niche for ourselves. ■