

Grapes with the best reputation

The German fruit and vegetable retailer Kölla wants to improve the image of Turkish-produced grapes. Working together with its Turkish partner, the company produces table grapes close to Izmir according to the rules of Bayer CropScience's Food Chain Partnership Initiative. A success story.



The area around the town of Alaşehir, which lies near Izmir, presents the observer with a romantic view: grapevines as far as the eye can see. Millions of juicy grapes ripening under a blue sky. A pretty-as-a-picture landscape that could be straight out of a travel catalogue. But in this case, any traveling that's done starts from here and goes in the other direction – to Germany, for example.

Within four days of being harvested from the fields around Alaşehir, the grapes are to be found in supermarket displays in Hamburg, Cologne or Munich. They're pretty certain to find buyers there – customers associate Alinda – the trademark under which they are marketed – with a particularly high quality standard.

Change of perspective

In the past, that isn't something that could have been said of all grapes produced in Turkey. "Turkish grapes didn't have the best image in Europe", admits Björn Hardt, until 31st March 2009 Head of Marketing and Development at Bayer CropScience in Turkey. This was the fault of a few individual producers who failed to observe pre-harvest intervals (meaning that the maximum residue limits were often exceeded), or used crop protection agents that were either not recommended in Europe, or were indeed prohibited there. "Unfortunately, this damaged the reputation of the entire growing community." Turkish products were often rejected off-hand by European consumers as being "contaminated".

The fact that the Alinda-grapes are now setting new standards is partly thanks to Bayer CropScience.

For their high quality is attributable to the Food-Chain Partnership Initiative, which now covers projects in 40 countries, and represents both a new philosophy in crop protection, and a successful business model: "The idea behind the Food-Chain Partnership Initiative is to offer customized services together with our partners in the food industry and the trade, and to offer an optimized use of production tools to farmers so that all partners benefit," says Dr. Birgitt Walz-Tylla, Head of Food Chain Management



Dr Mehmet Kaya from Bayer CropScience, Gündüz Sadak from Kölla and Björn Hardt from Bayer CropScience discuss the crop cultivation.

at Bayer CropScience. "We have, so to speak, brought about a change of perspective: Bayer CropScience now has the needs of every single partner in the food chain in view – from the farmer, through export/import, to the retailer and the consumer."

The change of perspective starts right at the farm. "Today's farmer faces a range of challenges", explains Walz-Tylla: "He must guarantee that the history of his products can be traced back, and must therefore plan and carry out his cultivation work in a transparent way. Without adequate specialist knowledge, including that of crop protection, he won't succeed. The farmer also has to contend with the challenge of keeping up with new cultivation technologies and practices. Moreover, he has to keep a careful eye on his target markets, in order to keep the agronomic measures he is planning in line with new rules and changes to the law in these countries." Bayer CropScience has acquired a good deal of expertise in all of these areas and is able to offer it to the farmer – from optimal cultivation methods to the controlled, environmentally-compatible use of crop protection agents, such that the legally-determined maximum residue limits are held to.

It is obvious that every partner in the food chain profits from this: the exporter, the importer and the trade enjoy the confidence that they are able to introduce the highest quality food into the market. The customer can also rely on the quality, and on the fact that there is a complete absence of a health risk from the apples, grapes or zucchini he finds in the supermarket.

Mistaken practice led to a bad image

But even the best concept is nothing without partners you can rely on. In Alaşehir, it is the German company Kölla and the Turkish company Çelikoglu that work together so well with Bayer CropScience – according to the rules of the Food-Chain Partnership Initiative. They are producing sultana table grapes, which are destined for marketing in Germany and Austria – with considerable success.

"Many years ago, we had a constant problem with the grapes we used to import into Germany from Turkey" says Gündüz Sadak, Kölla's Managing Partner, who is responsible for the Turkey business: "Crop protection agents were often being used in grape cultivation that were not registered in Germany. And the maximum residue limits were continually being exceeded. We therefore took active steps to contact the producers of crop protection agents – and when we approached Bayer CropScience, we found people who were willing to listen."

Considerable need for education

In the meanwhile, the cooperation has become one of the showpiece projects of the Food-Chain Partnership Initiative. It has led to a significant improvement to the image of Turkish grapes. The principle: Kölla and Çelikoglu lease areas of land from local farmers and cultivate grapes on them under the guidance of crop protection experts from Bayer CropScience. The agronomists and field workers are brought

in by the Çelikoglu company, which also provides a modern packing station and acts as exporter. Kölla is responsible for the advance financing, and coordinates the importing into target countries. Kölla-worker Sadak: “In this way, we’re able to make sure that the treatment the product receives is entirely appropriate, from cultivation through to the customer.”

But it took some effort to reach this stage. “At the start, a lot of education was needed”, is how Björn Hardt recalls the initial stages of the project in 2005. “On the one hand, you had the demands of the retail food trade and the consumers, who expected to find high-quality, nutritious and healthy fruit in German supermarkets. On the other hand, you had the local cultivation conditions and producers who were rather restricted in their thinking.” So the first priority for Bayer CropScience was to familiarize both the farmers and the exporters with the requirements of the German grocery trade. “In taking on this role, we were acting as mediators between two different worlds”, observes Björn Hardt.

Gündüz Sadak of Kölla: “Most farmers had no idea how bad the reputation of locally-grown grapes was abroad. They also lacked knowledge of which crop protection agents are registered in Germany, and which are not. Where should they get this information from? It’s complicated enough for a German farmer to keep up with all the EU-rules.”

Cultivation according to strict guidelines

Through consistent cooperation, based on mutual trust, the three partners have been able to overcome the initial obstacles and to establish a production system that really works.

Any possibility of a regression into the old ways can be excluded for the production of Alinda-grapes. They are cultivated according to strict guidelines. “None of the producers who participate in the Food-Chain Partnership Initiative chooses crop protection agents autonomously,” says Björn Hardt. With the support of experts from Bayer CropScience and Çelikoglu, the appropriate treatment regime is selected for each plot, within the framework of a crop protection plan that is especially tailored for export to Germany. Hardt: “Of course

it must be carefully documented which crop protection agent was used when, and at which application rate. In order to catch diseases before an epidemic is able to start, we do continuous monitoring, so that if we have to intervene, we can do so in a targeted way, applying no more than is necessary.” In order to make sure that we fulfil our promise in terms of quality, we go as far as to exclude grapes that were grown in plots directly abutting onto adjacent land from marketing within the framework of the Food-Chain Partnership concept: their quality could, after all, be affected by sprays from neighboring fields.

The partners also go the extra mile when it comes to monitoring residues. Kölla representative Sadak: “About one week before harvest, Kölla employees collect samples from the field and send them to Germany for analysis. The corresponding crop is only given the go-ahead if the results conform with the customers’ requirements. Because we take these pre-harvest samples from all of our plantations, we can practically claim that we have taken a sample from each lorry-load that leaves the plantation. However, the rules require that samples are taken from at least every third lorry. So we are doing much more than the trade actually demands of us.”

Moreover, every grape he sells can be traced back to the field it was grown on, because every plot is bar-coded. The retailer – for example the supermarket – receives the plantation codes along with the first delivery. By logging on to the website www.alinda.eu with his own password, the supermarket supervisor can then use the plantation code to download the latest laboratory analyses corresponding to the delivery he has just received.

From the importer to the producer

A concept that works – for the Turkish farmers who provide the land too, as Sadak emphasizes: “We offer the local farmers an instalment right at the beginning of the season, calculated according to average earnings during the previous year. The rest of the money is paid out after harvest.” An arrangement that quickly spread on the



The project team from Kölla, Çelikoglu and Bayer CropScience



Grapes are prepared for shipping

grapevine, as it were! In the meanwhile, farmers with suitable land are queuing up to take part in the project. “In this region, the plots are usually very small. In 2006, we had to work hard to persuade every single participating farmer to lease his small plot of land to us. So we needed nearly three months to get an area of 60 hectares together. In 2007, we had 300 hectares within a week! Whole villages wanted to take part in the Food-Chain Partnership Project.” The 2008 season went equally well. Almost 4000 tonnes of grapes were



The cultivation of grapes in the Turkish Food-Chain Partnership Project is done according to strict guidelines. Experts from Çelikoglu and Bayer CropScience select the appropriate treatment regime.

exported to Germany. That corresponds to 180 lorry loads. In 2004, it was only 43.

The Turkish Food-Chain Partnership Project has already established a name for itself in Austria. There, Kölla works closely with GLOBAL 2000. The organization has already rated the grape project positively on a number of occasions. ■ Katja Nau

Quality speaks for itself