

# insider

## Good ripening requires maturity

Frits Popma of Popma Fruit Expertise explains how a little applied knowledge can go a long way in the global banana ripening business

**In 1990, I saw the first 18kg box of green bananas from Honduras. I had just started my career as a quality inspector for Chiquita Banana Company and was responsible for tropical produce like mangoes, papayas, melons, grapefruit and so on. But because Chiquita's main activity was bananas, it was obvious I would also inspect bananas. "No way," I said, "this is too boring." A year later, I was off to Honduras to work on pre-and post-harvest systems for bananas. The virus had caught me.**

Since 2001, I have worked as a consultant in the banana industry, advising on both sides, green and yellow. My idea is – and it works – to look at the total process from the end back to the production. Sad to say that in every company the process is divided in departments; every department – transport, shipping, pre-harvest etc – has its own objectives and budget.

My question to my European and Middle East customers is this: what can your consumer expect from a banana? Most of the time, they are not able to answer this question. Lack of knowledge on the 'yellow' side is one; for example, buyers and consumers believe that a green banana has a longer shelf-life. Absolutely wrong. The specifications for a ripened banana are as follows: a good taste; shelf-life; attractiveness (no scars, rot or mould); yellow colour; and shininess. Everybody will say "of course", everyone wants a good-tasting banana, "but why don't we get them?"

It is proven that during ripening, especially in the beginning of the process, high humidity is key. If we keep this in mind, what do we know about the whole process? At the moment I am advising NEH Philippines in Davao on the design of a transport hub and coldstorage centre for green bananas. During the fruitful discussions we have had, I noticed that the objective was to cool bananas as fast as possible, to have lower production costs in the coldstore. Other companies work like this, but what will happen with those bananas when they arrive in the Middle East? Low humidity, difficult to ripen, less taste, off colour and so forth. The bananas can tell us how we have to design the project and it will be paid back with a higher quality in their markets.

We can also look at the end of the banana process as I explained. Go into your supermarket and have a look at the bananas. Do you recognise the five specifications we set? When was the last time that you had a good-tasting banana? Let me guess... when you were on holiday in the tropics?

In previous years, I have rolled out projects with the largest supermarket chains in my country the Netherlands and abroad; really interesting projects, because everybody in these organisations had the feeling that they did a perfect job so why are there complaints?

The most difficult part in a project is that we do not speak a common language – the banana language. For example, what can we expect when a shopkeeper rings me with the comment "the bananas turn around"? Probably, he means the bananas do not have shelf-life.



Frits Popma (left) talks to an Egyptian customer in the country's capital Cairo

Why does a banana does not have shelf-life? Many reasons, but one of the reasons is short ripening cycles, of four days or fewer. The banana ripener is happy because he can do almost two cycles of ripening bananas in one week, thus production costs are very low. Good job. However, our friend the shopkeeper receives fewer kilos in his 18kg box because the bananas have dehydrated. The final result is the bananas do not have a good appearance and taste meally.

Working with a supermarket organisation means to know their process first, then set objectives for the team and the banana ripener. Every banana ripener will tell you that he is the best banana ripener in the world. Not to blame the banana ripener, whose job is stressful seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, but where did he learn his job? For 50 per cent or more, I'm sure it was his own father or uncle who taught him.

I have worked and trained ripeners in more than 150 different ripening facilities all over the world. The beauty of working in bananas is that you have a quick result when you start to change

**Buyers and consumers believe a green banana has a longer shelf-life than a yellow one... they are absolutely wrong**

the process. It is not always necessary to invest a lot of money to do a better job. Common sense will help you. Working with supermarket chains is challenging – some of them sell more than 20 per cent bananas after just six months – but you have to understand bananas. More and more supermarkets have the idea to set up their own banana chain, sourcing from the tropics, looking for a refrigerated vessel and a banana ripener. They forget that a banana is more than a piece of fruit, that you cannot stop working at 5 o'clock. Bananas require attention 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This commitment will be paid back.