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Southern European solar greenhouse adapt to new consumer trends

Several varieties of gourmet tomatoes, mini aubergines, small melons, seedless watermelons and sustainable products are just some of the new eating habits.

XXX 2022- In order to respond to the changing tastes and needs of consumers, the solar greenhouses from southern Spain are constantly adapting their offer and production. The new shoppers range from consumers looking for new flavours and varieties to enrich their dishes, to singles who prefer smaller packages or people who want healthy ready-to-eat snacks for themselves and their families. There has also been an increase in demand for sustainable production from consumers concerned about sustainable production from labour or environmental point of view. This is the conclusion of a report prepared by the consortium of producer organisations behind CuteSolar: "Solar Resorts and New Consumer Habits".

The consortium of producer organisations behind Cute Solar points out that: "The fruit and vegetable production of the solar greenhouses in Almeria and Granada is a testimony to the capacity of local producers to innovate and adapt to new consumer trends". This consortium has carried out a report on "Solar greenhouses and new consumer habits", which deals with the leading consumer trends and how solar greenhouses have adapted to these new market niches. The main conclusions are as follows:

1. Gastronomic and exclusive products

6 out of 10 Belgians say that the quality (62.8%) and the taste (58.6%) of their fruit and vegetables are the most important criteria while shopping. Furthermore, almost half of the Belgian populations prefer to buy luxury fruit and vegetables with a high texture, aroma and taste, over the usual standard one's*.

The southern European solar greenhouses are following this trend and producing some special varieties of fruit and vegetables. These gourmet varieties are known for their excellent organic characteristics (colour, taste, texture and aroma) and are also produced in a sustainable way. Due to their high quality, they are used both by great chefs with international fame, such as Spain's Ferrán Adriá, as well as by many amateur cooks.

Some of these premium vegetables are the RAF tomato, which is characterised by its intense flavour and juicy, fleshy texture as well as the chocolate pepper, which owes its

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name to its colour. This pepper is characterised by its sweet and aromatic taste and by the fact that it has few seeds inside. In addition, the courgette flowers that are only cultivated in sunny regions are a true delicacy. These edible flowers, which can be prepared either raw or cooked, have a soft, fleshy texture, making them a tasty treat.

2. Minis as a healthy snack

Concern for healthy eating is prompting consumers to consume more nutritious and wholesome products instead of unhealthy snacks. When shopping almost 4 out of 10 Belgians say it's important to buy healthy food*.

Aware of these trends, in recent years so-called baby vegetables have been grown in solar greenhouses as a healthy snack. Besides cherry tomatoes, which are probably the best known and most widely consumed snack vegetable, small cucumbers, mini aubergines and sweet bite peppers are also grown.

Their miniature size not only makes it easier to consume these vegetables, but also makes them attractive for cooks to include in their recipes. The result is not merely beautiful, but also healthier dishes.

3. Products that adapt to single-person households

In Belgium, the number of people living alone accounts for one in three households (35%), a number that is increasing every year**. Growing concerns about food waste and the demand for adapted packaging have prompted Spanish farmers to make large fruits, such as watermelon or melon, smaller for convenience and edibility.

4. New varieties for new tastes

When it comes to food, it is not only the taste buds that count, but also the eyes. That is why seed companies and farmers are constantly developing new varieties that surprise consumers with their taste, size, colour, aroma and texture. In the sunny terraces in the south of Spain, the R&D centres and experimental farms of the world's best seed companies are located, working on new fruit and vegetable varieties.

"Every year, the seed companies evaluate the performance of thousands of new crosses between different varieties, of which, after a long selection process that can take 7 or 8 years, only a small percentage manage to reach the status of a commercial variety," explains the CuteSolar consortium.

5. Easier and more user-friendly products to consume

The busy lifestyle of consumers also has an impact on food trends. More and more products are being developed that are quick, convenient and easy to consume, both inside and outside the home. Southern Spanish farmers are adapting to this by

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growing seedless watermelons or fruit and vegetables that are already cut up and ready to eat. The key to the success of these products is not only their ease of use, but also the fact that all their characteristics and freshness remain intact.

6. Products that respect the environment and people.

Today's consumers are increasingly concerned about sustainability, both in terms of the environment and of labour.

Crops grown in southern European sunshine areas are characterised by the sustainable use of water resources through precision agriculture, recycle 95% of the plastics used and are world leaders in the application of biological pest control techniques.

From an employment point of view, the value chain of solar energy - from the moment the products are grown to the moment they are on the supermarket shelves - has a significant social impact. The sector provides a livelihood for 14,500 families, 45,000 direct jobs (of which 60% are migrant workers) and more than 100,000 indirect jobs.

*Online survey conducted by an independent research firm between 9 September 2022 and 16 September 2022 among 1000 Belgians representative by language, gender, age and degree. The maximum margin of error among 1000 Belgians is 3.02%.

** Statbel 2019 <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/nouvelles/un-tiers-des-menages-belges-sont-des-isoles>

What is a solar greenhouse?

A solar greenhouse is a closed structure covered with a plastic film through which the sun's rays shine, giving the plants the light they need to maintain the right temperature for their development during the winter months so that they can carry out photosynthesis. In the process, the plants produce nutrients from the CO₂ they absorb from the air and release enormous amounts of oxygen into the atmosphere. Solar greenhouses are very different from the production methods used in other greenhouses, which use fossil fuel-based heating and lighting systems that consume up to 30% more energy and are therefore harmful to the environment.

What is NOT a solar greenhouse?

A greenhouse with solar panels that convert light energy into electrical energy that can then be used to artificially heat or illuminate crops.

About Cute Solar

Cute Solar is a promotion programme funded by the European Union (EU) and supported by a consortium of Andalusian fruit and vegetable growers' associations (APROA), the Spanish inter-branch fruit and vegetable association (HORTIESPAÑA) and the Assembly of European Fruit and Vegetable Growing Regions (AREFLH). The aim of the information and promotion campaign is to inform consumers about the sustainable and environmentally friendly production methods, the high standards of greenhouse technology and the quality of European fruit and vegetables.

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The programme, with a total investment of €1.95 million, is co-financed by the proposing organisations and the European Union, will run for three years (2020-2022) and will be implemented in Spain, Germany and Belgium.

Disclaimer

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