

## MARKET RIPE FOR iTi TROPICALS

Gert van Manen, president of iTi Tropicals, Princeton, N.J., a supplier of tropical fruit purees, concentrates and IQF pieces speaks with *Stagnito's New Products* magazine.

**Q** *SNP: Discuss the focus of your product portfolio — why tropicals are the products you are choosing to supply and how that focus matches current market trends and industry demands?*

**A** van Manen: In 1988, the tropical fruit business was still in its infancy, especially compared to Europe. A mango or passion fruit beverage or ice cream was a novelty back then. Now when you go to a supermarket you will see fresh papayas and mangoes year-round. That's one of the trends we look for.

The key in deciding on our product line was supply and the popularity of the fruit on a worldwide basis. Bananas and mangoes, for example, are two of the most important fruits grown in the world. Global production for bananas is 45 million metric tons — that is almost 100 billion pounds. The U.S. consumption of fresh bananas is 28 pounds per capita. Per capita consumption of mangoes is only 1.2 pounds per capita. It is not surprising to learn that consumption of mangoes is the fastest growing, both in fresh and processed forms. The market in Europe for products such as passion fruit juice, mango and banana puree is still four times as large as the U.S. market, so there is still plenty of opportunity for growth here in the United States.

**Q** *SNP: What core competencies within iTi Tropicals are reflected in your products? How do your products provide a solution for your customer applications?*

**A** van Manen: Trust is a key word in the business of an importer. Many deals are still made on the basis of a handshake. Our customers recognize this trust.

We bring exciting flavors to our customers and we offer them a reliable and consistent supply and quality. We realize that our customers have much at stake in terms of marketing dollars. The bottom line is that we deliver the goods. Not only are we reliable in quality, but also in shipping arrangements and price agreements.

And while we value consistency, we always look for ways of improving and innovating — both economically and socially. Fourteen years ago we were scrambling to come up with samples, correct documentation, or in some instances even product! Now we are working on more sophisticated projects. For instance, we were recently instrumental in the inception of a study by the University of Florida called "Health Benefits and Nervous Brain Activity of Passion Fruit." At its completion, the results of this study will be published on [www.passionfruitjuice.com](http://www.passionfruitjuice.com), which is one of the many web sites we have available. We are working towards a unique Web site for every product we carry.

**Q** *SNP: Are you instrumental in your customers' new product development processes?*

**A** van Manen: Because more responsibility is being carried by fewer people at most organizations today, we need to work more efficiently. By listening better, we can address our customer's needs more efficiently. As a supplier we've become more instrumental in new product development because most customers today limit the number of suppliers they



**iTi's Gert van Manen enjoys the opportunity the U.S. market holds for tropical fruit products.**

work with. What was done internally at most companies years ago is now being done at our level, per the requests of our customers.

**Q** *SNP: Is the current food industry climate affecting how you work with customers on product development projects?*

**A** van Manen: Because of limited resources, our customers are looking for ingredients that are more value added (thus enabling them to do things more efficiently on their end). We are a supplier of tropical juices, purees, concentrates and IQF pieces. However, in conjunction with our network of processors, we have developed specialized passion fruit, banana, mango, guava and coconut products for a number of customers. These specialized products involve detailed coordination and communication between iTi Tropicals and our processors. The development of these products provides proper functionality in our customers' finished products and meets their requirements for the finished food items as well.

**Q** *SNP: Do your customers' development cycles place a time crunch upon your R&D personnel?*

**A** van Manen: Timeframes do vary. In some cases, the customer needs the project completed yesterday. In other cases, the project ends up being more long term and for developmental purposes. For example, because of the short season of mango, the development process does get altered. If a customer is developing a finished food product for summer that uses mango, we have to make sure that our mango product will be available in the summer.

A lot of the product development cycles are short — 3 to 6 months, because of the nature of the product line (tropicals are popular for seasonal product development). Even so, there are other projects where the developmental timeline is very long, and can be 12 to 18 months.

We have limited R&D at iTi Tropicals; therefore, we rely on our processors for product development and new R&D input. In turn, however, our processors look to us for guidance in regard to the products/projects they are to be working on.

**Q** *SNP: How do you feel iTi Tropicals impacts the success of new products?*

**A** van Manen: When I walk through a supermarket I see many products of which we are part. That puts a smile on my face every time I see them. Some of these products have been around now for more than 12 years and are, I guess, what you call mainstay. So are we! ■