

BUSINESSFOCUS

Tech, best practices give Chinese apples big edge

Fruit farmers set sights on opportunities worldwide, expand market reach

Editor's note: Implementation of the China-EU Geographical Indications Agreement is expected to expand the reach of quality products from both sides. This series looks at goods poised to tap into East-West markets.

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For 10 busy days in August, fruit farmer Zhang Yuqing could be seen fussing over the apples in her orchard.

"We need to carefully trim the branches to make sure the fruit is exposed to as much sunlight as possible. It's crucial for their color and taste," she said.

"A farmer must know what the trees need at their specific stages of growth. It's like taking care of babies."

Zhang, 66, grows the apples in her 0.67-hectare plot in Yantai in East China's Shandong province. Fittingly, the close attention she pays to her trees has earned her the nickname "Apple Mom" among fellow Liujia-wang villagers.

Zhang, who has three decades of experience growing apples, has also been replacing the old trees in her orchard with newer varieties.

Her expertise and efforts on the ground reflect the latest developments in the apple growing industry, which is a major pillar of the agricultural sector. Apple growing hubs across the country are increasingly meeting international industry standards through the use of improved technology and investment in global business practices, resulting in bigger markets at home and abroad. Yantai is expanding the markets for its crunchy, pink and red apples by upgrading old orchards and investing in automation, sorting and transportation to boost the quality and quantity of its products.

It plans to upgrade its 80,000 hectares of orchards within two years to increase output and maintain quality, according to 2020-2025 industry development plans issued by the city government last year.

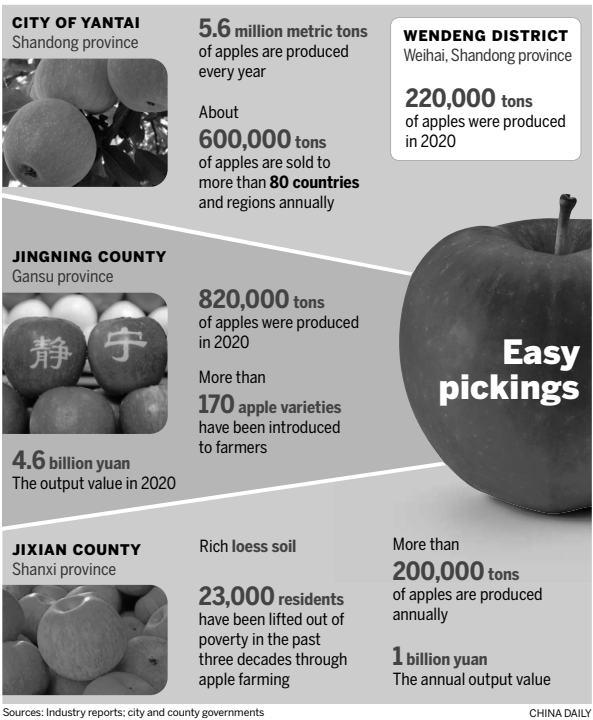
The city has 186,660 hectares of apple orchards, which produce 5.6 million metric tons of apples every year. About 600,000 tons of Yantai apples are sold in 82 countries and regions every year, including Southeast Asia, the European Union and the United States, according to official figures.

There are also plans to build more than 300 apple distribution centers in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen by 2022 to help expand markets.

Apples from agricultural hubs like Yantai are set to reach even more consumers worldwide, following their inclusion on the list of China's 100 geographical indications under protection in the European Union. The indication is a label for products that have a specific geographical origin with qualities or a reputation that are due to



Farmers sell apples via a livestreaming session at an orchard in Yantai, Shandong province, in November. WANG SHUYUN / FOR CHINA DAILY



that origin, according to the World Intellectual Property Organization.

Quality quartet

Last year, China and the EU rolled out measures to protect 100 of the

EU's geographical indications and 100 Chinese geographical indications against imitations.

Apples from four areas in China — Shandong's Yantai and Wendeng in the city of Weihai, Jingning coun-

“You must know what the trees need at their specific growing stages. It's like taking care of babies.”

Zhang Yuqing, who is known as "Apple Mom" among fellow villagers in Yantai, Shandong province

ty, Gansu province, and Jixian county in Shanxi province — have attained the geographical indication classification, amid the growing global recognition of quality Chinese agricultural products.

"Being included on the list is hugely significant to developing the city's apples into a global brand," said Wu Chenguang, deputy head of Yantai's bureau of agriculture and rural affairs.

Yantai's annual apple exports are expected to reach 800,000 tons in five years, according to the city's plan, with major companies beefing up technology and automation in preparation for the increase.

Qilu Quanyuan Supply Chain spent 10 million yuan (\$1.54 million) setting up an automatic apple-sorting production line last year.

The apples are tracked and checked by cameras for their color, appearance and condition before packaging, the company's produc-

tion manager, Zhou Yannan, said.

In neighboring Weihai city, Wendeng district's apple orchards cover more than 11,000 hectares. Farmers produced 220,000 tons of apples last year and a modern industrial park covering more than 2,600 hectares has been set up to tap markets, in line with the industry's expansion plans.

In Gansu's Jingning, the environmental conditions and climate are advantages that help nurture the county's popular apples. Jingning's orchards are situated 1,340 meters to 2,245 meters above sea level, average annual rainfall is over 420 millimeters, there are 2,250 hours of sunshine a year and the average daily temperature variance is about 12 C.

More than 66,600 hectares of orchards produced about 820,000 tons of apples last year, with an output value of about 4.6 billion yuan, according to industry figures.

Over 170 apple varieties have also been introduced to farmers and 1,300 hectares of land set aside for a product demonstration base to help take the industry to the next higher level.

Li Jianming, head of the county's fruit research institute, said investments include state-of-the-art "smart-sorting" production lines, while packaging lines have also helped provide jobs for more than 1,200 local farmers.

Higher standards

In Shanxi, Jixian county's rich loess soil and other natural advantages have been complemented by the

latest management and production techniques that help its apples meet domestic and foreign storage, preservation and technology standards, said Yang Chaohui, head of the Apple Industry Development Association of Jixian and chairman of Jixian Hukou Organic Agriculture.

Apple farming covers nearly 19,000 hectares, with annual output of more than 200,000 tons and output value of more than 1 billion yuan.


Most of Jixian's orchards have geographical indication certification and its apples have an estimated brand value of more than 3 billion yuan, according to a research report from the China Fruit Marketing Association and Zhejiang University.

Ding Zhenrong, general manager of Jixian Super Zheng Fruit, said Jixian apples entered Southeast Asian markets a decade ago, with exports subsequently making headway in the US, Australia, Russia and other global markets.

The industry will now have to successfully move beyond COVID-19 and other challenges, like supply-chain disruptions, rising transportation costs and the economic slowdown abroad, Ding said.

The sector also involves at least 90,000 farmers and apple-growing makes up more than 80 percent of per capita rural incomes, according to county figures.

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