



On the FAST TRACK

With apple variety breeders putting a strong emphasis on accelerating the breeding process, it only makes sense to commercialize the resulting varieties as quickly as possible.

That's the opinion of Michael Weber, managing director of a Swiss company called VariCom GmbH, which was created five years ago to commercialize new fruit varieties from the federal breeding program in Switzerland.

Weber points to the European apple variety Pinova, which languished for many years after being released in Pillnitz, Germany, in 1986, as an example of a variety that took too long to achieve recognition. It went through several name changes before Stemilt Growers, Inc., in Wenatchee, Washington, obtained the U.S. rights in 2004 and gave it the brand name Piñata.

Varieties can be more quickly commercialized under a managed system, but not necessarily a club system, Michael Weber says.

by Geraldine Warner

"It took 20 years to get the variety going," Weber noted. "If the breeder and the breeding programs are putting so much energy and resources into accelerating their breeding results, and, on the other hand, the marketing people are not going to somehow manage it, we lose time with the introduction."

Weber believes that it is no longer possible to successfully introduce a new variety without a managed commercialization process. A trademark is important for brand recognition, he said, as he sees it as a tool for communication.

"I don't believe you will be successful, or it will take 30 years, because we have deregulated the world," he said, referring to the end of single-desk marketing in New Zealand and South Africa. "It's a fragmented marketplace, and somehow you have to provide a platform where people can communicate and know where they can address their concerns."

The name VariCom stands for variety communication and commercialization. Partners in the company are the nursery organizations Mondial Fruit Selection in France, Artus Group in Germany, and Konsortium Südtiroler Baumschuler in Italy, along with Weber's own company, Webfruit in Germany, which provides services relating to international fruit trade.

VariCom is the sole legal representative for new varieties from the breeding program at Agroscope Changins Wädenswil in Switzerland. Releases so far include Milwa (which is sold under the trademarks Diwa in Switzerland and Junami in other parts of Europe) and La Flamboyante, which is sold under the trademark Mairac. Those varieties are available to all Swiss apple growers, but VariCom is charged with managing their introduction in other parts of the world.

La Flamboyante

La Flamboyante is a cross of Gala and Maigold made in 1986 and released in 2002. It is a crunchy and juicy apple with a good balance of sweetness and acidity. It has dense flesh. In Europe, it is marketed only after it has been stored for a time to allow the flavor to mellow. It is not susceptible to bruising and does not become greasy or mealy in storage.

The tree has a compact growth habit and is grower friendly. The fruit matures with or just after Golden Delicious, and the fruit is large (averaging 75 to 85 millimeters [3.0 to 3.4 inches] in Europe).

The variety was introduced under the brand name Mairac in Switzerland, but without having an exclusive club system. The VariCom nursery partners said they didn't want to restrict who could buy the trees because they wanted to serve their customers. Growers pay tree royalties to VariCom, which pays a percentage of its royalty income to the federal breeding program, but no production royalties.

About 40 hectares (96 acres) have been planted in Switzerland. The crop totaled about 440 tons this year, and will probably double next year. One vertically integrated grower,



