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Cyprus's year-round sun and temperate Mediterranean breezes attract millions of tourists to its golden beaches during every summer season. But, beautiful though it may be, the island's unique climate isn't just ideal for visitors looking to relax by the sea.

Set away from the holiday-makers' hot-spots, the favourable weather conditions also make Cyprus the perfect place to nurture a wide range of top quality natural products.

Cypriot producers have two major advantages when it comes to meeting demand from the rest of the world. Many producers possess agricultural know-how on natural farming methods that has been passed down through many generations working the land.

Complementing this invaluable insider knowledge is an up-to-date business sensibility. Cyprus has the common benefits of EU membership, plus the fast, reliable air links that ensure fresh goods reach suppliers in Europe quickly and efficiently.

Many European consumers already enjoy Cypriot produce in their diet, whether it's tasty Halloumi cheese, or the delicious, tangy citrus fruits that the island is famous for. In fact, Cypriot foodstuffs made up the top three products exported by the country to the UK in 2008, with Halloumi topping the table.

But there's so much more

Discover Cyprus

Find out how passionate producers are turning the 'garden of the Mediterranean' into the perfect place to source delicious natural delights.

about Cyprus for your customers to discover. From home-grown honey with added health benefits, to gourmet salt and aromatic herbs. Cypriot produce has always been inspired by nature. And now, thanks to a new generation of producers who are passionate about forgoing chemicals and pesticides, Cypriot products are arriving on customer's plates just as nature intended.

Cyprus's carob connection

The growing popularity of carob around the world is an excellent example of how an international audience is catching on to the natural health benefits of traditional Cypriot food.

The carob tree is cultivated in countries right across the Mediterranean for its edible seed pods, which are a distinctive dark brown colour when ripe. But because Cyprus's limestone-enriched soil provides the trees with nutrients, those found on the island are prized for their superior taste and texture.



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Founded in 1978, Chrikar Trading Co Ltd (www.chrikar.com) supplies high quality food ingredients, including pure carob syrup, to over 2,500 customers from Africa to the UK.

“We supply a lot of carob syrup to retailers in the UK and sell it in bulk to use as an ingredient,” says Mr Afxentiou, managing director. “Studies have shown that carob syrup has health benefits for the heart and is good for fighting cholesterol.”

Central to carob's international success is its naturally

sweet taste, which makes it an excellent healthy alternative to traditional European confectionery. It has seventeen times less fat than chocolate, and contains vitamins A, B and C, so it's also a fantastic tool for combating the obesity epidemic.

Carob has also proved a hit within the ever-expanding 'free-from' market too. Studies show that carob is richer in calcium than milk, and it is derived from an animal-free source.

The products brought to market by Stavros Parpis Foodstuffs Ltd (www.parpis.com) prove just how versatile a product carob can be. Alongside carob syrup (which can be used as a sugar substitute in tea or coffee and is a useful sweetening agent for cakes) and carob powder, Mr Parpis has seen demand steadily rise for his selection of carob snacks, which include no-sugar chocolate substitutes.

“Customers are looking for natural products that are good to eat while being healthy,” he says. “Carob is the perfect





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Carob syrup is one of the island's popular natural exports

solution. We've definitely seen business grow year on year. I attend exhibitions all over the world which gives me access to new markets."

For customers with a sweet tooth, honey is another natural product that has both quantifiable health benefits, and strong connections with Cypriot tradition.

The experts behind Mellona Honey Spread (www.mellona.com.cy) blend pure honey with a variety of local Cypriot fare like almonds, grapes and carobs. The result is a range of tasty products, each with its own unique health benefits. For instance, the almond-enriched spread is a good source of protein, fibre and vitamin E. The company launched two organic lines in 2006, and plans to develop more in the future.

The honey Mellona



is produced without heating, to retain goodness and keep the finished product as raw and unprocessed as possible.

"When it comes to selecting our ingredients we have three different criteria," says company director Mr Stylianou. "They have to be nutritious, have characteristic tastes and flavours, and come from Cyprus."

"Fifty years ago around 90% of the population of Cyprus would have been farmers growing crops like carob, grapes and almonds. We're keeping with that tradition."

From sweet to salt

While sweetness has an undeniable place in Cyprus's palette, salt is just as important. During the early twentieth century, all the salt on the island was sourced direct from Larnaca's impressive salt lakes. In 2001 M.P. Theodorou (Salt Industry) & Co Ltd (www.sailorsalt.com), who had worked in the salt industry for generations, spotted the global demand for natural products and decided to market their gourmet Mediterranean sea salt flakes to the rest of the world.

To set them apart from the wider market, the company set about making their products as natural as possible. Their sea salt flakes are certified organic and free from additives. The salt is harvested in a traditional way, through a series of ponds fed by sea water, and carefully hand-packed by experienced salt workers.

Because salt is increasingly viewed as a gourmet ingredi-

Cyprus goes for organic growth

Like other countries in Europe, Cyprus has discovered the benefits to customers' health and the environment, of growing products to organic specifications.

It's a sector that's gradually gaining pace, thanks to advocates on the island who are passionate about organic produce, and who want to spread the word among the island's growers.

"In Cyprus, interest in organic produce really began when we became a full member of the European Union in 2004," explains Mr Mouzakis from organic advocacy group Green Network (www.greennetwork.com.cy). Currently, 95% of our organic produce is imported direct from Europe, but as our knowledge over here grows, there's a real opportunity to increase our organic exports."

Mr Mouzakis is keen to ensure Cypriot producers sell their products to shops that understand the guiding principles behind the organic movement.

"We try and sell to smaller shops who understand what we're doing," he explains. "It is a business, and there are some great opportunities opening up, but there's an ideology behind it too. It's about helping the environment while supporting our local producers. Growing organic produce is a real way for small producers to do something different that stands out in the global market. It adds value to Cypriot products and ensures they're the very best quality."

In Cyprus the Pancyprian Association of Biofarmers (www.pasybio.blogspot.com), formed in 2001, has grown to 80 members and helps to protect organic farmers' interests abroad and promote the organic message.

"The association tries to organise the farmers by providing them with technical information when they're making the transition from conventional to organic farming," says Mr Mouzakis. "They also find international buyers for the farmers' products by attending exhibitions across Europe."

Organic farming methods have been actively breathing life into some traditional Cypriot industries that were in danger of dying out. Table grapes (grapes designed to be eaten rather than used for wine) were prevalent on the island right up until the 1960s. Unfortunately cultivation slowly



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began to die out when competition started to appear from other countries.

"The valleys used to be all green, planted with grapes," says Mr Theofanous, managing director of SEAP Ltd (gelaro@cytanet.com.cy). "And then, gradually, there was almost nothing."

That was until Mr Theofanous's workers' co-op decided to experiment with organic cultivation methods in the late 1990s.

"In 1997 I started looking for new marketing methods which would promote the grapes we were producing and so save the crop," he says. "We decided the best way was to make the leap over to organic."

"By 1999 I had grapes ready to export to Germany. The next year, I exported many more. Suddenly other farmers in the area started to understand that this was the solution and they began entering into the certification system."

In 2009 SEAP is no longer finding it difficult sourcing buyers for its intensely-flavoured grapes. And by convincing other farmers of the benefits of organic, its doing its bit to make Cyprus's valleys green once more.



Sailor Salt make the most of Mediterranean Sea Salt

ent, the company supplies a selection of flavoured varieties spiked with natural ingredients like sea weed, mixed spices, chilli and rosemary.

“We can add different ingredients depending on what our customers want,” says Mr Iacovou, marketing manager at **Theodorou Industry**. “We’re also looking at diversifying our packaging too. We’ve had requests from America to reduce our use of plastic, which will ultimately make our packaging more appealing and eco-friendly.”

Working together for finer fruit

One of the ways that Cypriot producers are meeting the global demand for natural fruits and vegetables is by working together for better, more marketable products.

Sedigep Ltd (sedigep.com.cy) is a co-operative growers’ union which has been helping Cypriot farmers promote their products since the 1960s. The co-op boasts 1200 members and, as well as organising 40% of the island’s export trade in fresh fruit, also looks after the farmers’ sorting and packaging needs. The co-op focuses on providing quality, service and reliability to its customers, and has a turnover of over 30 million euros per year.

Mr Phylactou, Sedigep’s general manager, believes that the co-operative method is perfect for ensuring that farmers make the most of international trade.

“The co-op system makes everything fair,” he says. “You have the power to help small growers in Cyprus become bigger.”

One of Sedigep’s trademark exports is the citrus fruit that has become synonymous with Cyprus.

“We have local varieties of thin-skinned, juicy lemons that are very bitter and have a lot of juice. Our grapefruit are also extremely rich in flavour. The Cypriot climate means we can harvest early in the year and so can produce ahead of other countries.”

Alongside these traditional varieties, Sedigep is helping farmers respond to changing trends in the world market. Growing mandarins (a natural hybrid of mandarins and



Herbs are packed for rapid transit to Europe

oranges) means the farmers are able to meet international demand for fruit that’s easier to peel.

The island’s herbal helpers

Cyprus is well known for its strong tradition of using the power of herbs to heal. As Mr Lazarou, creator of the **Lazar Collection** (www.cyprusherbs.com.cy) points out, there are documents in Cyprus dating back to Hippocratic times that support the use of herbs as medicines.

“That knowledge is still there,” he says. “It’s been passed down from generation to generation.”

Lazarou was inspired to enter the family business by his mother, a committed herbalist.

“I remember when I was a kid, if I had a stomach ache then my mother wouldn’t give me medicine. She’d make me a chamomile tea and I’d start to feel better.”

Twenty years ago his mother cultivated a small plantation featuring ten dif-

“The Cypriot climate means we can harvest early in the year and so can produce ahead of other countries.”



Every box is checked for quality and freshness

ferent varieties of herbs. Today, the company offers 172 different kinds of medical herbs, which are sold in pharmacies across the island. He also sells to the UK, Germany, Russia and mainland Greece.

The Lazar Collection features massage oils, essential oils, and a new range of organic cosmetics including face and hair treatments.

Lazarou makes sure that the herbs are picked by hand to maximise their efficacy.

“We minimise the machinery we use because it’s the only way to keep the healing energy of each herb at maximum levels. That way the herbs actually work better in each remedy,” he says.

Of course, the herbs produced in Cyprus are not just reserved for healing. A far larger proportion of the island’s annual crop is despatched to season food cooked by consumers around the world.

When you enter the offices of **Elsaro Aromatics Ltd** (elsaro@cytanet.com.cy), you immediately realise why international retailers prize the

herbs that are grown on the island. The scent rising from the packing table as a batch of fresh herbs is being prepared for export is almost overwhelming.

Mr Sakkalos, **Elsaro Aromatic’s** managing director, believes that this freshness and aroma is the key to his firm’s success.

“The herbs have to be fresh when they get to the consumer,” he says. “So, we make sure that whether it’s summer or winter, our herbs are kept cool from the moment they are cut.”

“Because of Cyprus’s regular and reliable air links to Europe, we can move fast. Our herbs are always with customers within 48 hours.”

Elsaro’s range of products includes everything from coriander to chervil and rucola to rosemary — anything that a European chef might need to season their food.

It’s not surprising that Sakkalos manages to keep standards so high. Agriculture has been in his family’s blood for generations. He has been working with herbs since



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Preparing herbs for export

1998, and was one of the first producers on the island to cultivate fresh cut herbs on a large scale.

Sakkalos believes that Cyprus's climate helps keep growers ahead in what's proving to be a competitive international market.

"You always need to be on top of what your customers want, to maintain and grow your client base. We achieve this by offering excellent service and a really top quality product.

"Herbs need maximum sunshine and the minimum of water to thrive," he concludes. "We have both in Cyprus — so the year-round sun and dry conditions make for great-tasting herbs with a superior aroma."

Situated just 20 kilometres from Cyprus' main airport, Alion Vegetables & Fruits Co Ltd (www.alionveg.com) is also well-placed to make the most of international trade. The company began in 1990, and has built a reputation for supplying customers with herbs and vegetables produced in Cyprus. They include a range of baby leaf salads, herbs all the way from mint to marjoram, and leafy vegetables including spinach and watercress.

The company's exporting expertise has been officially recognised by the Cyprus government. Alion has been



Some producers are diversifying into shellfish

awarded the Cyprus Export Award for Agricultural Products three times in the last decade.

A bright future

As the global economy starts to improve and consumer confidence returns, the stage is set for the natural products market to experience another boom. And with its superior knowledge, passion, and business know-how, Cyprus is determined to be at the forefront of the industry.

"The consumer leads the way," says Mr G Hadjiafentis, senior officer for commerce at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Tourism. "The international market is demanding natural products — food grown without fertilisers or chemicals — and producers in Cyprus are well-placed to meet this demand." ●

Fresh fish from the Mediterranean

The calm, clear, unpolluted waters around Cyprus's coast provide a model environment for the cultivation of fresh fish. And Cypriot producers are making the most of their specialist knowledge of the Mediterranean to provide consumers with some of the best quality fish available in the world.

Mr Kimonides, managing director of **Kimagro Fish Farming Ltd** (www.kimagrofisheries.com.cy), drew on his training as a marine biologist to create Cyprus's first floating cage structures back in 1989.

These open-sea cages, located a short boat ride away from Limassol Bay, now form the basis of a modern eco-friendly fish farming

operation. Currently his site supplies approximately 1,000 tonnes of sea bass and sea bream a year, 75% of which is then exported to customers in France, Italy, Canada, Russia and Israel.

"We are not interested in massive production, we're only interested in quality," he explains.

"We take care of what we are feeding our fish and we are always concerned with our environmental impact. We have created a micro ecosystem around the fish farm where all the end products are used by nature.

"We haven't destroyed any existing animals or the natural flora or fauna, and there are no signs of change in the eco system around the farm.

"We take care of what we are feeding our fish and we are always concerned with our environmental impact. We have created a micro ecosystem around the fish farm where all the end products are used by nature."

"Being an island we can't send fish to clients by boat or track, but we can use air transport, which is relatively cheap. This means you have better quality, fresher fish to pass on to your customers."

For the future, Mr Kimonides is considering moving towards organic certification after the Soil Association visited his farm and gave him a very favourable report.

Meanwhile, further inland in an office located in Nicosia, Cyprus's capital, **Blue Island Holdings** (www.blue-island.com.cy) has been busy consolidating its position to become Cyprus's biggest fish farming business.

"When the company started in 1993 we were produc-

ing 150 tonnes of fish a year, says company director Mr. Kremmos. "Now our production rate is much, much higher."

Blue Island is dedicated to a production chain that's fully traceable, from the initial fish egg right to the customer's plate. They pride themselves on choosing fish that are genetically identical to those found naturally in the Mediterranean Sea.

The fish are farmed without vaccines, growth promoters or any other chemicals. This means that the end product, the company's sea bass or sea bream, has a natural appearance and retains high levels of omega-3 fatty acids, plus other healthy polyunsaturated fats.

