

Texas Grapefruit Taste as Sweet With New Names

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McALLEN, Texas — Grapefruit gourmands, relax. "Ruby Red" hasn't disappeared from the market. It just has a new name: "Texas Ruby-Sweet."

So has the much-heralded, redder "Rio Red" variety, which first hit the market last year. It is now promoted along with its older crimson cousin, the "Star Ruby" under the new name of "Rio Star."

The name changes are part of an aggressive new campaign from the Texas citrus industry, bouncing back five years after a rare, hard freeze that wiped out groves and scared many growers out of the grapefruit and orange business.

The new crop is just beginning to hit the market. This year, producers say, they finally have enough fruit again to promote Texas citrus in Japan, Europe and throughout the United States.

So intent is the Texas industry on recapturing its lost market, some growers are shipping almost all the fruit they have out of the state, much to the dismay of some of the folks back home.

"We're trying to reach people who really like to eat grapefruit," said Texas citrus promoter Mary Bentley McKeever, adding that there is a touch of snob appeal: "Do you want to say the connoisseurs?"

"We are very interested in presenting Texas citrus as a very premium grapefruit, getting it out of the generic category of grapefruit," Ms. McKeever said. She is marketing manager for TexaSweat Citrus Advertising Inc., the McAllen-based promotional arm of the Texas citrus industry.

"By establishing the new categories that we have for our red grapefruit that's produced exclusively in Texas, we really feel like we can have some distinction for Texas," she said.

The state's citrus industry is concentrated in its three southernmost counties in the Rio Grande Valley. Rio Star will represent the two reddest varieties grown there, while Ruby-Sweet will refer to the lighter Ruby Red, Henderson Ruby and Ray Ruby.

The Texas industry is trying to make up ground given up to its Florida competition since the 1983 freeze, particularly in the Midwestern market. Florida produces more than 10 times more grapefruit than Texas and 100 times the Texas orange crop.

But Texas contributed 20 percent of the nation's total fresh grapefruit shipments in the past year because of the state's emphasis on fresh fruit, said Leslie Whitlock, manager of the Texas Valley Citrus Committee, also based in McAllen.

TexasSweet began its comeback last year with promotions in the Midwest, especially Cincinnati,



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Reynaldo Alvarado harvests grapefruit near McAllen, Texas. The new crop is starting to hit the market.

where it shipped nearly all of the limited quantity of the new Rio Red variety.

The promotional effort annoyed some Texans who found they could not buy the new, improved fruit with red meat, developed in Weslaco by Dr. Richard Hensz of Texas A&I University. Kroger Co. had shipped it all to Ohio.

Whitlock said the young Rio Red trees will produce more this year, but still have not matured enough to make the fruit easy to find in local stores.

Also contributing to the local shortage are overseas sales of the largest, most expensive grapefruit.

"We're selling the large-size fruit in Japan," said Ken Martin, president and general manager of Warehouse Farms Inc., the Rio Grande Valley's largest citrus packing company. In Japanese gift stores, Martin said, people have been known to pay as much as \$25 for one grapefruit, and routinely pay \$2 to \$2.50 per fruit.

A survey by the Florida Department of Citrus earlier this year found that consumers believe white grapefruit is the most tart while pink and red are sweeter, according to an article in the Oct. 8 edition of "The Packer," a national weekly publication of the fruit and vegetable industry.