



HIGHER RETURNS

# THE SWEET FUTURE OF DURIAN

Demand from foreigners has sent the price of the fruit soaring, with an expected 10pc increase in earnings this year from exports, writes **FERNANDO FONG**

**E**ATING durian is a luxury these days with the high price it fetches due to the strong demand from tourists willing to pay top dollar to savour it.

But what can be described as a loss for local durian lovers points to a major gain for those who produce and sell the fruit.

Given the right investment in technology to boost the fruit's production and support from trade missions abroad in marketing, the "King of Fruits" can fetch billions for the country.

The crop can provide an alternative for diversification to the Malaysian agricultural industry in view of higher returns.

Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek said, during a fruit fair in August, the export value of durian was RM74 million

last year.

It is expected that the earnings will increase by 10 per cent this year, with durian prices buoyed mainly by demand from China, where the Musang King had acquired a legion of loyal and wealthy fans.

In 2013, the average retail price for the renowned Musang King, or Mao Shan Wang durian, was RM36.50 per kg, but the price had shot up to an average price of RM90 per kg this year, a massive increase of 42 per cent.

The low supply and high demand for durian is worsened by changing weather patterns, which affected the harvest.

This is the situation despite the fact that durian farmers have made improvements in orchard

management through better horticultural practices as they strive to crank up production and cash in on the massive surge in prices.

Durian expert Lim Chin Khee, 43, said unlike the hardier kampung planting materials, which were relatively easier to manage, the latest durian varieties, such as Musang King and Musang Queen, were more demanding in their crop husbandry.

Gone are the days when durian trees were left to grow and bear fruit without much care and attention.

Proper horticulture practices, he said, improved economic conditions of the farmers and entrepreneurs, enhanced exports and foreign exchange earnings, and provided nutritional security to the people.

Lim, an agriculture science graduate from Universiti Putra Malaysia, had spent more than 20 years sharing with farmers his in-depth knowledge in the establishment of durian farm, crop husbandry, as well as the common mistakes that



Durians are subjected to stringent evaluation based on pulp texture, creaminess, stickiness, aroma and sweetness. FILE PIC

beset fruit quality.

Lim, a key speaker at the International Durian Conference in Melaka recently, said the conditions for increasing production of durian crops were very favourable in the country.

For a start, Malaysia is blessed with ample land suitable for durian farming with favourable terrain for good durian cultivation.

He said as much as 90 per cent of prospective investors in fruit cultivation had durian in mind.

Lim added that there was sufficient know-how on modern farming technologies for farmers to adopt, minimising post-harvest losses and increasing durian production through activities such as pruning, irrigation, management of fertiliser applications, pests and disease control,

and fruit treatment technologies, such as the use of liquid nitrogen, enabling the durian pulp to be frozen in the shortest time while maintaining as much as 95 per cent freshness and flavour for export, there is considerable added value attached to the exportation of fresh or processed durian.

"Many farmers have been planting more durian trees in recent years, but it will take at least six years for the trees to start bearing fruit, and a further three to four years for the trees to reach their prime age for fruit production.

"Yet, at the same time, many attempts at large-scale durian farming had been largely unsuccessful.

"Compared with oil palm, for example, durian has its very own specific water and fertiliser requirements."

He said durians, being a premium fruit, were subjected to stringent evaluation based on factors such as pulp texture, creaminess, stickiness, aroma and sweetness.

"With advanced horticulture practices, we can make the durian husk thicker or thinner, or the flesh sweeter, bitter or creamier.

"This is necessary as the market places much emphasis on the texture and flavour.

"What the durian industry needs is a government agency responsible for the promotion and development of the industry in Malaysia, balancing domestic needs with challenges in export growth."

Lim said the agency could help put in place policies and priorities for the wellbeing of the durian industry, such as the direction of research in improving quality and quantity of durian.

The agency can also help farmers manage their farms, such as in dealing with diseases such as *Phytophthora*, the most dreaded disease which affects different

into durian farming.

Lim estimated that it would be another 10 years before durian became more affordable for Malaysians, when large-scale farms established presently will be at their prime.

He said durian export to China could only meet a fraction of the market demand.

On another note, he said a substantial proportion of Malaysians had never tasted the Musang King.

"However, there are many durian species, which are just as good if not better, like the Musang Queen durian, officially registered as D160 with the Agriculture Department and widely known as Tekka, or the Bamboo."

Lim is conducting training courses on durian cultivation for prospective durian investors, mainly from non-agricultural sectors, like manufacturing, and a smaller number of durian farmers.

parts of durian in all stages of development.

He said the industry was too fragmented with many individual farmers, although multinational corporations and government-linked companies were foraying

## AMONG THE POPULAR DURIAN VARIANTS



## POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH

# 'King of Fruits' made RM1.97 billion last year

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Durian is planted on nearly half the land cultivated for fruits in the country last year, according to the Agriculture Department.

The fruit generated a sales volume of RMI.97 billion from the 66,038ha of land planted with the fruit, or 47 per cent of the total 139,476ha of land cultivated with premium fruits.

Durian growers produced 302,000 tonnes of the fruit and at the rate of its popularity, along with the high price it fetches and strong demand, it has all the impetus for growth.

The Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi) had contributed to the growing importance of the durian crop by producing three notable durian species - MDUR 78, MDUR 79 and MDUR 88.

Mardi is introducing other new species with better aroma, taste and texture. The new species would also be more resistant to disease, such as the stem canker caused by the fungus *Phytophthora palmivora*, said Pauziah Muda, the director for Horticulture Research Centre at Mardi.

She said the new species had also been designed to bear fruit at different times of the year to ensure continuous supply.

"This can be achieved by planting durian at various ecological zones in combination with the

various durian species designed to bear fruit either at the beginning, middle or end of the year.

"At the same time, Mardi is continuing research on the best horticulture practices for durian farming, such as fertilising, water supply, stemming and the use of flower inducing hormone."

Among Mardi's breakthrough is the introduction of the wild durian *D. lowanus* as root stock plants, which are resistant to stem canker.

She said the research, which spanned more than 17 years, found that only 7.5 per cent of the durian trees (D24, D96, D99 and D114 clones) using the root stock had succumbed to stem canker.

To extend the shelf life and marketability of durians, Mardi had developed a "minimally-processed" technology.

Pauziah said the technology provided ready-to-eat fresh durian pulp for the export market.

"The advantages of this technology are that it can extend the shelf life of durian pulp by up to three weeks, combined with odour-free packing that can offer product visibility to consumers.

"It can also reduce the cost of shipping by eliminating durian skins as, on average, only 30 to 35 per cent of a whole durian fruit is edible," she said.

A longer shelf life also enables better marketability by air or by sea.

The introduction of minimally-processed durian helps industries to overcome obstacles in market access for whole durian fruit in China.

Durian entrepreneur Simon Chin, founder of D'King, which manufactures durian downstream products, such as pastries, desserts and

confectionery, said the nation must not take its position in the durian industry for granted.

He cautioned that neighbouring Thailand could overtake Malaysia as the country that produced the world's best durian.

Chin noted that Thai durians were generally perceived as inferior in quality to Malaysian durians, but this was only because Thai durians were harvested before the fruits had ripened.

"Consumers can't really tell the differences between the various durian species in the market, such as the Golden Phoenix, XO, D13, D1, D101 and Red Prawn, each with its own colour, taste notes and geographical origin.

"Only the hardcore durian fans can tell."

Chin said the market penetration in China had been driven by tourists who tasted durian in Malaysia, and also through direct promotion by the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority and Tourism Ministry.

On how to cope with the durian shortage and ballooning prices, Chin said the solution lay in the large-scale commercial farming like the Federal Land Development Authority planting scheme.

"We need systematic cultivation of durian and scientific management of its plantation.

"We also need more involvement by Bumiputera en-

trepreneurs as the industry players are mostly Chinese."

Chin said there should be more effort to promote the benefits of durian, such as its nutritional value.

Chin said there was a lack of cohesion among industry players in the country, which led to challenges such as price war and farmlands being owned by foreigners.

He said it was time that the government take the lead as durian had proven itself to be a valuable commodity crop.

"It is clear that durian is the most lucrative cash crop from a value per acre perspective.

"The government can point the industry in the right direction and increase the total amount of crops planted, rate of yield and revenue per unit sold."

Chin said there was also the potential of durian orchards becoming ecotourism destinations, as had been developed by some durian farmers, which had gained good results.

"Every year, during the harvest season, tourists can come to the orchards and enjoy the fresh air, stroll under trees laden with durians, lie in a hammock or enjoy fresh durian.

"This can boost the value of plantations and improve the income of farmers." **By Fernando Fong**

