

# Agrintesa, a key player

**F**or ten years now Agrintesa has invested heavily in apricots, which have now rightfully become one of the cooperative's strategic crops.

The numerical data, more than anything else, give us an idea of the important forward steps that have been taken. In 2010, in fact, production stood at 3,400 tonnes with a growing area of 409 hectares, while 9 years later the hectares

had become 602 and production had literally quadrupled to 13,200 tons. 2019 was certainly a record year in production terms, which 2020 would not have been able to repeat even without the frosts that affected it, particularly in the Romagna area. In any event, **as of now Agrintesa - with its current 610 hectares - has the concrete potential to handle something in the region of 12-13,000 tons of apricots annually.**

This is undoubtedly a remarkable achievement over such a limited period of time, made possible by a targeted strategy on the cooperative's part and its use of all the technical and commercial know-how acquired over the years to rapidly become one of the key Italian players in the apricot market. Let's now take a look, therefore, at the lines of development along which apricot growing has moved and continues to move within Agrintesa. **B**



## VARIETAL INNOVATION

At the beginning of the new millennium apricot trees were literally inundated by a plethora of new varieties that have radically transformed the entire sector.

Within a few years the crop has undergone nothing less than a metamorphosis. First and foremost the ripening calendar has become longer, above all at the end of the season, enabling apricots to be sold until September; secondly there has been an evolution of the fruit's pomological characteristics, particularly in terms of appearance, which has created large cultivars and an attractive, pronounced red blush.

Agrintesa had no hesitation in tackling the varietal challenge. In fact it has gone further, helping its fruit growers to innovate and selecting and testing the varieties regarded as most suitable for the soil and climatic conditions where they operate. This was made possible by the work of the technical office, which has its own specialists both for the cultivation of apricots and the development of innovations - particularly as regards varieties - within the fruit-growing sector. In practice, they "hunt" on the one hand for the best cultivars and, on the other, they research the best agronomic techniques to grow them with. The result is a list of the most suitable varieties for Agrintesa members, updated annually. This varietal list currently comprises about twenty cultivars covering the entire ripening calendar. The very early period is covered by Mikado, Wondercot, Fuego, Niro-



sa 1, Flopria and Nirosa; mid-season ripening cultivars are Gemma, Kioto, Bergeval and Lady Cot; and finally, towards the mid-late part of the season, we find Anegat, Albinova, Swired, Milord, Carmingo Farbela and Menphys. Worth noting is the work carried out by the technical office to rationalise these varieties, simplifying the choice available to producers and guaranteeing continuity for customers. In fact a list has also been created of varieties that have not, over the years, come up to expectations, and of those that have been replaced by more interesting innovations.

## GROWING TECHNIQUES

It is clear that varietal innovation on its own is not enough, and that producers need to adopt the best

possible growing techniques to exploit all the potential of a particular cultivar.

In this case too, the work of the technical office in identifying the best combination between breeding systems and the relevant growing techniques is crucial, adapting this to the existing soil and climatic characteristics and the fruit grower's technical ability. In the most fertile areas, therefore, orchards have been planted using a medium-high density spindle-trained system, while in more rustic hillside areas large-volume forms such as those for open-centre pruning - at relatively low density - have been adopted to ensure the growth of a vigorous tree more suited to a harsher environment.

A technician's work is obviously not restricted to setting up the orchard but continues on a daily basis, sup-



porting the producer throughout all growing phases (nutrition, defence, pruning, thinning, etc.) to ensure that harvest arrives under the best possible conditions.

The first outcome of this approach is certainly an increase in productivity per hectare, which has more than doubled in modern trees compared to the outdated ones. Obviously productivity should not be overdone to avoid damaging the quality of the fruit and above all the



flavour, which is the most important element to monitor.

Over the next few years Agrintesa will continue to progressively replace older trees and to gradually expand growing areas while maintaining the correct degree of balance with market demand.

## SALES STRATEGY

Bolstered by the notable volumes now reached by Agrintesa (though certainly not in 2020, but the trees are alive and well to be able to resume good production in the coming years), Alegria is in a perfect position to adopt a very flexible sales strategy that can adapt quickly to market demands.

**First of all, the important work done at varietal level now makes it possible to cover the entire sales season, from early May to late August or even September,** ensuring consistency not only in the continuity of volumes but also in terms of uniformity of the product. This may seem easy to say but is in fact an extremely complex job, above all for a crop like apricots that are very sensitive to environmental changes and that require a series of slightly distanced gaps between them to ensure the best possible organoleptic quality. To this we can add the complexity of orders for same-day delivery, increasingly requested by modern retailers and an additional source of problems for the production system (putting the processing line under significant strain due to requests to sales personnel that are not always in-line with

daily handling capacities). At least partial management of orders for next-day delivery would probably allow a marked improvement in the cooperative's organisation, with considerable benefits also for the customer and without affecting the quality of the product sold. A possible win-win solution that merits further analysis by the distribution and production teams. Another subject of great importance for Alegria is segmentation, which has become an increasingly strategic tool when



all sales channels are considered. With a view to this, premium products have for several years been sold under the Valfrutta name, one of the best-recognised brands among consumers and now widely regarded as a winning combination of "Italianness" and high product quality. An ad hoc project is currently being developed precisely in the high-end sector, to be unveiled in detail next season, which has the ambitious goal of raising the bar even higher in terms of quality by intervening on all aspects of the supply chain - from the producer to processing in the warehouse - with the aim of offering consumers the best experience imaginable when tasting an apricot.