

Nelson growers optimistic about new early season apple discovery

Story by Barbara Dunn

Photos of Premier Star courtesy DN Palmer Ltd

Photo of Greg and Stephanie Buck by Barbara Dunn

Nelson orchardists Greg and Stephanie Buck have discovered a new apple variety they hope could be the pick of the bunch for growers looking for a suitable replacement for their Royal Gala trees. Ten years after the sport, which they have named Premier Star (PVR), first appeared the couple have taken the fruit around the world and gained support to export and market the variety from DM Palmer.

The Bucks have orchards on the Waimea Plains. In 1999 Greg noticed a branch on one Royal Gala tree in his home orchard where the fruit was block red in colour, rather than showing the traditional stripes. He carefully watched that branch for the next couple of years and the fruit remained stable, so in 2001 he took budwood and the first small plantings began on M26 rootstock. At that time trees were also sent to Hort Research for testing.

Greg and Stephanie knew then they were embarking on a long-term project, but it appears their early optimism was not unfounded.

"I decided to show the fruit to as many people as I could," said Greg. He was excited by the bright block colour, the size of the fruit, the skin firmness and the timing of maturity, which would put the fruit on the market early in the season. Greg says Premier Star's thicker skin gives it an advantage over a lot of the new varieties, which have a softer texture, making them hard to handle.

"We think it might have value for organics, too. We haven't done disease testing yet, but it seems to be robust enough."

| Premier Star maturity indices 2009 | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Background colour | Starch Pattern Index | Fruit Firmness | Soluble Solids |
| 10 Feb | 3.6 | 0.0 | 9.4 | 12.2 |
| 17 Feb | 4.5 | 1.0 | 8.7 | 12.4 |
| 24 Feb | 5.1 | 1.5 | 8.1 | 13.2 |

| Premier Star storage samples 2009 | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Sample type | Fruit Firmness | Soluble Solids |
| 26 May | 90 days | 7.5 | 15.3 |
| 25 June | 120 days | 7.1 | 14.6 |

Better pressure

Premier Star grows like Royal Gala but is sweeter and firmer. Greg Dryden of Fruition Horticulture, who has been evaluating the fruit for the Bucks, said Premier Star is firmer by half a kilogram under pressure testing than Royal Gala.

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Stephanie and Greg Buck, Nelson growers, who have developed the new apple Premier Star. Greg discovered this block red 'sport' in 1999 on a Royal Gala tree.

Premier Star key attributes

- *Early season – possible Royal Gala replacement.*
- *Outstanding block colour.*
- *High dry matter >16 % at harvest (Royal Gala 12-13%).*
- *Higher brix by 12-13% at harvest.*
- *Firmer than Royal Gala.*
- *Grower friendly – good size, easy handling, no internal disorders.*

“After four months it still has pressure, it’s well up there,” he said. Even after 120 days storage the fruit still pressure tested well.

He said their comparisons were against Royal Gala because it is the main other early season variety. However, he said the fruit was comparable in colour to the Pacific series, such as Pacific Queen, and was brighter and higher in sugars than Jazz™. “It’s a different flavour – more sweet,” he said.

In 2005, Hort Research identified that Premier Star was a new sport and the Plant Variety Registration (PVR) was finally granted in 2007.

As growers, the Bucks were excited by the fact the Premier Star was easy to grow and handle, and alongside them

international marketer Quentin Tull, supply manager for of DM Palmer Ltd (DMP) could see strong market potential for an early season apple with block colour that would travel and store well.

During the five-year testing process fruit was also being sent for commercial testing by international fruit buyers. In those tests the colour of the fruit was the real standout, while Premier Star was rated “good” for its taste and texture. At harvest and out of air storage it tested better than Royal Gala.

US and Dutch testing

Quentin’s customers in the United States were showing strong interest in the fruit, so much so that they flew to New Zealand to meet with the Bucks and to see the trees. Budwood was then sent to Washington for pathogen testing, to ensure the trees didn’t pose a quarantine risk and could be safely grown in the US. Budwood is also currently being tested in Holland.

From a sales perspective Quentin said the sweet, bright, firm fruit was ideally suited the US and Asian markets.

“We are very encouraged by the response in the US. We’ve also got some very good feedback from the UK, but we’re still waiting for hard data,” he said.

DM Palmer holds the international marketing licence for the fruit and growers will have to sell their Premier Star fruit through the company. DMP has a sub-

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licence with a partner in the US who has sole rights in that market.

“DMP wants fruit as quickly as possible. Our US market wants more. This has to be market driven and the way this fruit has been received by importers in the US was extremely unusual. That gave us the greatest momentum.”

Volume niche

Quentin hopes to establish a reasonable volume niche market, saying he doesn't want Premier Star to slip into the commodity market.

“Growers are very price sensitive,” he says, wincing at the mention of exchange rates. From where he sits he can't think of anything currently available that will compete with Premier Star.



Premier Star, which has been evaluated in the United States and other markets by exporter DM Palmer Ltd. The apple is considered to have great potential in Asian markets and the US.



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The Bucks hope that within the next decade there will be at least 100,000 Premier Star trees in production worldwide. Their own home block is devoted to the variety now with 10,000 trees, 5,000 are planted in Riwaka and another 2,000 in Hawke's Bay.

Waimea Nurseries has been granted exclusive international propagation rights. All of the trees currently planted are on M26 and M9 rootstock but the Fruition evaluation at this stage suggests it will be suitable for most orchard specific rootstocks. Greg Dryden said the fruit sampling, storage evaluation and tree management all look good.

“It tends to be very grower-friendly. There's no reason this couldn't be an 80 ton per hectare variety as it lends itself to good cropping levels,” he said.

After 10 years the Bucks know they are only half way to realising their dream, but they hope the momentum that has been generated so far with Premier Star, particularly in the international markets will encourage New Zealand growers to seriously consider it as their early cropping replacement. 🌱