

Bearing Fruit

Florida's most traditional citrus cooperative has successfully gone global — with the help of a CEO who started her job not knowing the difference between a navel and a Valencia.

For more than a century, Florida's citrus growers dominated America's produce aisles in the winter, especially in the Northeast. Bright orange and yellow citrus displays went up in grocery stores around the first cold snap, and pent-up demand from consumers who hadn't seen oranges, grapefruits and tangerines all year guaranteed the growers healthy sales and profits.

Global trade eliminated that seasonal advantage, however. Buying fruit from around the world, Wal-Mart, and then other grocery chains, began to stock everything from blueberries to navel oranges and watermelon all year long. The international cornucopia eroded Florida growers' status with their grocery customers in two ways: New competitors from Spain to South Africa took market share in the winter, and the Florida growers had no fruit to sell during the rest of the year.

By the 1990s, Florida's oldest citrus cooperative, Seald Sweet, had begun trying to enter the import business, buying fruit from various overseas growers and reselling it in the U.S. The initial efforts were spotty and by most accounts halfhearted — dealing with foreign farmers was

an uncomfortable proposition for the ultratraditional leadership of the cooperative, a non-profit organization that let the Florida growers combine their marketing and sales efforts. "Growers are sometimes their own worst enemy," says Frank Hunt III of Hunt Bros. in Lake Wales, a member of the co-op since 1928.

What Seald Sweet needed was a real overseas partner. And in 1998, the cooperative's growers agreed to sell a 50% stake to Hein Deprez, a Belgian businessman who ran a global produce company called UniVeg. Deprez, who'd been a customer of Seald Sweet, took the cooperative private and, with then-CEO Bruce McEvoy, set out to make the company a global player. "As much as they needed a global market, UniVeg needed a U.S. market," says Deprez. "As a customer, we knew they had a very good reputation and market position for citrus in the United States."

At a company whose historic leadership was all-white, all-male, all-Florida and all-citrus, Deprez's and McEvoy's first key hire was a shocker: A young, Cuban-American woman who admitted she didn't know a navel from a Valencia.

Born in Cuba in 1962, Mayda Sotomayor-Kirk had moved to Miami when she was 3 with her parents, who were textile entrepreneurs. She started the University of Miami in prelaw — her father's wish. But her plans changed when she took a part-time job at an import company, where she fell in love with the work of helping farmers in Honduras and Costa Rica grow and find markets for their melons and peas.

Upon graduation, Sotomayor-Kirk stayed on with the company full time, handling USAID grants to South American farmers. When the grants dried up in 1989, Sotomayor-Kirk had to look for a new job at a particularly bad time: With an infant and a toddler at home in Kendall, she was

Seald Sweet's business has increased about 30% since Mayda Sotomayor-Kirk arrived in 2000, with all the growth coming from citrus imports and deciduous fruit. Citrus imports have grown from less than 1% of revenue to 36%; deciduous fruit from zero to 14% of revenue.

