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# World Market for Rambutan

RAP Market Information Bulletin No. 1

### INTRODUCTION

The rambutan is a small, globe-shaped, red-skinned fruit with hairlike protrusions. It is a close relative of the lychee, and its flesh is translucent, sweet, and succulent. The rambutan is still best known in Southeast Asia, and most production and trade are concentrated there. However, with demand from Asian immigrants, imports into North America, Europe, and the Middle East have increased. New producers such as Australia and Honduras are also entering the market, supplementing traditional supplies from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. With increased production, improved postharvest handling for long-distance transport, and anticipated cross-over demand in temperate markets, world demand and competition are expected to increase.

### Production

Rambutans are cultivated most extensively in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, although they are also grown for export in Australia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Central America, and for domestic consumption in other tropical countries.

**Thailand's** production was estimated at 430,000 metric tons (MTs) on 60,000 hectares in 1984. Some rambutan farmers there have been switching production to higher-value durian. The rambutan season extends from February to September, peaking between May and August. Production from eastern Thailand (February-June) reaches the market before that from the south (May-August).

**Indonesia's** production was estimated at 273,425 MTs in 1992, up from 148,000 MTs (on 43,000 hectares) in 1984. Rambutan trees generally fruit from November to February throughout Indonesia, except in North Sumatra, where the season runs from June through September.

Rambutan was produced on 20,000 hectares in **Malaysia** in 1984. Rambutan is harvested twice yearly, with the main season lasting from July to November.

Production area in the **Philippines** is estimated at only 500 hectares. Fruit is available from July through October, peaking in August and September.

Although rambutan was produced on 700 hectares in **Singapore** in 1981, production area has rapidly diminished with urban expansion. Singapore harvests the primary crop June to August, and a secondary crop between November and January.

Rambutan production in 1995 is predicted to increase to 1,140 MTs in **Australia**, and to 1,210 MTs in 1996. Production is highest during November and December.

Rambutan was produced by only 30 farmers on a combined area of 60 acres in **Hawaii** in 1993. Production totaled 2,273 kilograms, down from 3,091 kilograms in 1992. Production for 1994 is expected to be significantly higher as new planting begins to bear. Farm prices in Hawaii increased

from \$3.26 per pound in 1992 to \$4.00 per pound in 1993, with total farm sales in 1993 at only \$20,000. Overseas markets for Hawaiian product are limited because of phytosanitary restrictions on imports to the U.S. mainland and strong competition by regional producers in Asian markets.

Production statistics for other producers, namely **Vietnam** and **Honduras**, are not available.

## Exports

Most official national trade statistics do not provide details on imports of rambutan. Therefore, world trade is estimated using export statistics of three of the largest supplying countries: Thailand (1992, fresh and canned), Malaysia (1991, fresh), and Indonesia (1992, fresh). Tables 1 and 2 itemize by importer the canned and fresh exports of all three countries by volume and value, respectively.

Total annual exports for fresh and canned rambutan from these three suppliers was \$3.9 million (f.o.b.) in 1991/1992, composed of \$1.9 million of fresh product (3,691 MTs) and \$2.0 million of canned product (1,558 MTs).

Thailand is the world's largest exporter of canned rambutan, and exported only slightly less fresh product in 1992 than Malaysia did in 1991. Although Malaysia is the largest exporter of fresh product, 99 percent of its exports in 1991 (1,726 MTs) were destined for Singapore. Thailand exported its 1,700 MTs to several destinations: Malaysia (45 percent), Singapore (32 percent), Laos (10 percent), Hong Kong (5 percent), and Taiwan (4 percent). Thai exports have more than tripled since 1982.

Unlike Malaysia and Thailand, which send exports mainly to nearby consuming nations, Indonesia sends the vast majority of its exports of 265 MTs to distant markets, most notably those of the United Arab Emirates (51 percent) and the Netherlands (41 percent). Because of its high perishability and its handling difficulty, the markets for fresh rambutan are concentrated in Asia. Markets for canned product are more evenly distributed throughout the world.

## Markets

Singapore accounted for 61 percent of total apparent world imports of fresh rambutan in 1992 (based on export statistics of Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia). Singapore's imports amounted to 2,261 MTs. Malaysia, the largest exporter, was also the second-largest importer of fresh product with 759 MTs (or 21 percent of apparent world imports). Other significant importers of fresh rambutan included Laos (167 MTs, 5 percent of apparent world imports); the United Arab Emirates (161 MTs, 4 percent), the Netherlands (113 MTs, 3 percent), Hong Kong (94 MTs, 3 percent), Taiwan (77 MTs, 2 percent), and the United Kingdom (12 MTs, 0.3 percent). No other country imported more than 10 MTs of fresh product in 1992.

Although the United States imported only 6 MTs of fresh production (according to Thai export statistics) in 1992, it was the largest importer of canned rambutan (371 MTs). Other major importers of canned product included Singapore (212 MTs), Japan (152 MTs), Malaysia (102 MTs), Hong Kong (96 MTs), France (95 MTs), Australia (80 MTs), Saudi Arabia (71 MTs), and the Netherlands (54 MTs). No other country imported more than 50 MTs in 1992, although nine others imported more than 10 MTs (United Kingdom, Taiwan, Canada, Germany, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sweden, Israel, and Brunei). Worldwide, 50 countries imported canned rambutan from Thailand.

## North America

Estimating demand in North America is difficult because statistics are unavailable. However, it is apparent from the export statistics of producing nations that a large amount of canned rambutan is imported by the **United States**. Thai exports to the United States were estimated at 371 MTs (\$451,500 f.o.b.), making the United States the largest market for canned product from this supplier. Canned rambutan is distributed in the United States mainly through Chinese, Vietnamese, and other ethnic groceries. Rambutan is grown in Hawaii, but it is not exported to the mainland. Fresh rambutan is not permitted into the United States from Southeast Asia, but a limited amount of frozen product does arrive. Fresh rambutan (either thawed or contraband from Canada), retails in Chinatown, New York City, for as much as \$5.00 per pound, a price that reflects the fruit's inaccessibility.

According to Asian export statistics, **Canada** imported just less than 3 MTs of fresh rambutan from Malaysia in 1991. Canadian importers reported receiving production between September and December and in April for restaurants, caterers, and some retailers. Demand from the ethnic market was highest during the summer months. Demand is limited, and there has been little cross-over appeal to the general population. Importers interviewed in 1994 reported receiving some fresh product from Thailand and the Netherlands (re-exports). Primary consumers of rambutan in Canada are the Asian community (the fastest-growing minority group in Canada) and hotels and caterers, who use the unique fruit for its decorative quality during the holidays. Toronto wholesalers reported prices ranging from C\$4.40-C\$7.50 per kilogram, and Montreal wholesalers reported a similar range (C\$6.00-C\$8.00 per kilogram). Imports of Thai canned rambutan, which supplies the market when fresh product is not available, totaled 35 MTs in 1992.

## Europe

The **Netherlands**, because of its colonial experience, has a large population of Indonesians, who are the main consumers of rambutan. The Netherlands was the largest European importer of fresh rambutan in 1992. It imported an estimated 113 MTs, supplied mostly by Indonesia, with small amounts also entering from Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Honduras. The Netherlands also imported 54 MTs of Thai canned rambutan in 1992. The Netherlands is a re-exporter to other European Union members, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Canada. All the major Dutch specialty importers, including Exotimex, Bud, and FTK, import rambutan. These importers said that they paid \$3.50-\$5.00 per kilogram for landed product. Although Indonesian and Thai product is available year-round, importers supplemented their summer supply with product from Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Importer prices for 1993-1994 reported by the International Trade Centre (ITC) of the United Nations (Table 3) show importers selling rambutan from Indonesia and Thailand for between Hfl9.00 and Hfl13.00 per kilogram, with an average price of Hfl 10.00 per kilogram (\$5.50). Honduran product arrived in January and March of 1994, and was sold for between \$1.80 and \$2.50 per kilogram.

**France**, with its large Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Thai populations, led the list of European importers of Thai rambutan in 1992, although most of this volume is canned. Producing nations reported exports of fresh rambutan to France in 1992 at only 5.5 MTs, almost all of which was sourced from Indonesia, with some also entering from Thailand. These statistics reflect only a portion of the fresh market, however; France also obtains imports from Vietnam from May to October. Canned rambutan imports from Thailand stood at 95 MTs (\$128,600 f.o.b.) in 1992. French importers sell fresh product for an average of FF42 (\$8.09) per kilogram (see Table 3). The highest prices paid in the last year were during May and June, when the average price was FF48 (\$9.24) per kilogram.

According to Thai statistics for 1992, the **United Kingdom** was the largest European importer of fresh Thai rambutan in that year (8.2 MTs) and imported 1.8 MTs from Malaysia. U.K. imports of canned product from Thailand amounted to just less than 40.5 MTs (valued at \$77,100 f.o.b.). Indonesia, since 1992, has also been supplying the U.K. market. British importers complain that high airfreight charges and perishability prevent them from supplying rambutan, a complaint echoed by importers in other countries. Importer selling prices ranged from L4.50 per kilogram to L6.25 per kilogram, and Thai product was sold for an average of L6.00 per kilogram (\$9.20), according to 1993/1994 ITC price reports (see Table 3).

## Middle East

The oil-producing countries of the Middle East count thousands of Southeast Asians among their guest-worker populations, and import rambutan mainly for these consumers. The **United Arab Emirates** was the largest importer of fresh rambutan from Indonesia in 1992 (133.7 MTs) and also received 26.2 MTs and 0.6 MTs from Thailand and Malaysia, respectively. According to the Market News Service of the ITC (see Table 4), importer selling prices varied between Dh12.00 and Dh20.00 per kilogram (currently \$1.00=Dh 3.68). In general, Indonesian product imported between November and April sells for Dh12.00-Dh14.00 per kilogram, whereas Thai product imported between May and November sells for Dh16.00-Dh20.00 per kilogram.

Table 4 also shows that **Kuwait** receives most of its product from Australia, the Netherlands (re-exports), and Malaysia. Australian product was sold by importers for KD3.00-KD4.75 per kilogram, although since May the price has been relatively stable at KD3.50 per kilogram (currently \$1.00=KD

0.30). Dutch-supplied product sold for KD2.70-KD4.75 per kilogram in 1994, with prices normally in the KD3.00-KD3.50 per kilogram range. Importers sold Malaysian rambutan for KD2.25-KD4.40 per kilogram (mostly KD2.75-KD3.00 per kilogram) between July and October.

Thailand is the largest supplier of rambutan to **Bahrain**, providing 6.2 MTs of fresh product in 1992. ITC reports importer selling prices for Australian rambutan in Bahrain for 1993/1994 mostly at BD4.00 per kilogram (currently \$1.00=BD 0.38). Indonesia and Malaysia also occasionally supply this market, with prices ranging from BD1.50 to BD2.50 per kilogram. Thai rambutan was sold by Bahrain importers for BD2.00-BD3.20 per kilogram (mostly BD2.00-BD2.50 per kilogram).

**Saudi Arabia** imported 8.7 MTs from Indonesia (5.2 MTs), Thailand (1.3 MTs), and Malaysia (2.3 MTs) in 1992. Saudi Arabia also imported 71.0 MTs of canned Thai product in 1992.

## Asia

Trade in rambutan is concentrated in Asia, where consumers (principally Thai, Malay, and ethnic Chinese) are most familiar with the fruit. Malaysia and Laos, Thailand's neighbors, were the first- and third-largest importers of fresh Thai rambutan in 1992, with large amounts also sent to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Singapore and Japan were the second- and third-largest importers of canned Thai product, respectively. Thai export statistics for the first six months of 1993 show Hong Kong imports of canned product at almost 200 MTs, double the amount for all of 1992, and imports by China, negligible in 1992, jumped to 100 MTs for the same period.

**Singapore** is the largest importer of fresh rambutan in the world, importing 1,710 MTs from Malaysia in 1991 and 550 MTs from Thailand in 1992. Singapore receives supply from both Thailand and Malaysia packed in rattan baskets. Australia ships some product by air to Singapore during the off season in single-layer, five-kilogram cartons, but its price is too high for many importers. Thai rambutan, by contrast, is quite inexpensive. Importers and wholesalers at Pasar Panjing Wholesale Market report that wholesale prices range from S\$20-S\$25 per 15-kilogram carton, or \$0.95-\$1.20 per kilogram. Singapore was the second largest market for Thai canned rambutan, importing 212 MTs in 1992.

**Taiwan** imported 77.2 MTs of fresh rambutan from Thailand (74.3 MTs), Indonesia (2.3 MTs), and Malaysia (0.7 MTs) in 1992 figure for (figures do not add because of rounding). Taipei importers sell Thai rambutan for \$1.50-\$2.00 per kilogram. Taiwan imported 40 MTs of canned rambutan from Thailand in 1992.

**Hong Kong** imported 94 MTs of fresh and 96 MTs of canned rambutan in 1992. Thailand supplied the majority (90 MTs) of fresh imports, and a small amount (4 MTs) entered from Malaysia. In April 1994, observers reported Thai product selling at \$2.50 per kilogram.

**Japan** imported only 8 MTs of fresh rambutan in 1992, supplied by Indonesia (6 MTs) and Thailand (2 MTs). Japan, however, was the third-largest market for canned rambutan from Thailand, importing 152 MTs in 1992.

## Export Grades and Standards

There are no formal published grades for international trade in fresh rambutan, although export markets have similar importer preferences. Draft standards for Thai rambutan (Rong-rien and Sea-chompoo varieties) were developed by the Chanthaburi Horticultural Research Center (see Table 5). Only the highest-quality fruit should be exported. Following are general standards obtained through published technical articles and interviews with importers in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Exporters should follow specific guidelines provided by their importers.

**General:** Free of bruises and other defects, insects, and disease; clean; attractive "hairs" (spinterns)

**Size:** Medium to large (generally greater than 30 grams each)

**Stem:** Not more than 1 centimeter in length

**Color:** Good red color

**Internal:** Thick, firm aril that easily separates from seed; small seed; 18 percent soluble solids

**Packing:** Bamboo baskets used within ASEAN region; extraregional exports should be in corrugated fiberboard cartons (3.5-10.0 kilograms in capacity) for better appearance and protection. Lam, P.F. and Kosiyachina, S. (editors). *Rambutan: Fruit Development, Postharvest Physiology and Marketing in ASEAN*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ASEAN Food Handling Bureau, 1987. 82 p.

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