



HONOURING AREND VENTER

The industry has lost a giant with the passing of Arend Venter.

By the time Arend came to Dole in 1998, he was already a doyen of the South African fruit industry. It's fair to say that Dole pulled off a coup with the appointment of someone of Arend's stature, considering that he was at the time Number 2 at Outspan, the industry giant.

Without even having the benefit of an office, Arend put together a formidable team containing the likes of Marguerite van Rensburg, Barry Dowling, Eugene Brand, David Kruger, Marius Deyzel, Martin Le Roux and Willie Messerschmidt. They had to hit the ground running as the citrus season had just started.

Of course citrus was Arend's forte – whether we talk about his knowledge of every citrus variety or his connections with people in the agricultural space. So passionate was he, that Dole's first citrus volumes were procured from his dining room table in Pretoria; he was not going to sit around waiting for office space when he could get the job done.

Back then, getting close to producers was difficult because many growers were members of co-ops. Arend and his team crisscrossed the country visiting co-ops and growers to introduce themselves. In the words of Martin Le Roux, Product Manager at Dole, "He talked the right talk, and there was no better person at the time to promote the Dole brand."

A natural salesman, Arend did not take No for an answer. The message to everyone he met was: we have a well-known international brand in the fruit trade, we are established in all markets, we have a distribution network of note and we want to sell your fruit at competitive (best possible) prices... and we do not want to be your competitors in production!

An excellent host and marvelous orator, Arend was also renowned for his staying power and his meticulous feedback to growers. On the road, his constitution was legendary. He relied on minimal sleep, coffee and, for his only real meal of the day, medium rare steak accompanied by red wine and capped with a double espresso.

Arend was indeed a force to be reckoned with. Descriptions such as larger than life, feisty, passionate, dedicated and direct come to mind. Even so, his right hand for nearly 40 years, Marguerite van Rensburg, recalls his respect for everyone who crossed his path.

Everyone who knows Arend will agree that he is one of a kind. It is not surprising that his name comes up often when ex-colleagues at Dole reminisce about the old days. Like the time each member of the small Dole team was given a leather jacket at the end of Year 1, with gigantic Dole branding embroidered on the back and Dole's mascot Bobby Banana emblazoned on the front. Or his signature navy blue with yellow collar fleece. Come rain or shine, Arend wore his Dole apparel with pride.

Arend is a man able to sum up a situation or give wise counsel freely, recalls Martin Le Roux. He remembers giving Arend directions from Cape Town to Ceres. Thinking that he was doing him a favour, Martin suggested a short cut via Slanghoek. One problem: it had been raining and the river came down in flood, blocking the road. Arend's response to Martin: ***Better to take the long road you know than the short road you don't know.***

On another occasion, when a young group of Area Managers were not able to make a quick decision (which was often required), a slightly agitated (and Arend was seldom agitated) response was: ***In life, make a decision even if it is the wrong decision, but the best you can make at the time. It is better than making no decision.***

Like so many, Arend made a huge impression on countless Dole colleagues: Eugene Brand was a wide-eyed newcomer to the world of shipping, marketing and logistics when he worked with Arend in the early years. "We hit the road, without a break, in single-minded pursuit of his goal," remembers Eugene. "You had better be prepared when Arend called you on a Saturday to say that the next morning he needed you to travel with him to see growers. We would travel hundreds of kilometers, then sleep over in Tzaneen. The next morning at 5 am we were on the road again." This was just a typical day for Arend and the team.

Relationships formed the bedrock of Arend's approach to work, relationships he'd built up over years. "Growers had not heard about this new Dole. But they knew Arend. Without Arend in those early years, Dole might not have become the success it is today. You see, for Arend it was not always about money, it was about the grower and the relationships built." An Arend quote which stands out for Eugene is: ***Don't lie to people. Be honest. Tell them the truth.***

And lest we forget Arend's Angels: Saartjie Eksteen (nee Malan), Colette Le Roux and Tammy Leisegang. Saartjie recalls that "While relationships were key in Arend's strategy, it was also his ability to treat everyone the same." "We once visited a grower up North. He had a grandson, probably five years old. Arend sat talking to the little boy and asked him how he was and how he was celebrating his birthday. He pulled out a R50 note and told the little boy to buy something special. You see, whether it was a little child, or a grower's son who graduated and was so arrogant that he did not even want to acknowledge him, or the grower ... Arend treated everyone with the same level of respect." The most important advice she received from Arend: ***You can't be everything to everybody. Somebody is bound to be upset with you.***

We are eternally grateful for the role Arend played at Dole South Africa in those very crucial early years. The fact that Dole has retained growers since the first citrus season in 1998 is testament to Arend's character and tenacity. We wish to express our gratitude to a formidable man – one who has dedicated his life to the fruit industry. Thank you for your tireless efforts, your dedication and commitment to excellence.

Hannes Nieuwoudt

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