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Al Dahra invests \$20m in Namibian date farm

Tom Arnold

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Date fans will be better able to buy their favourite delicacy all year round thanks to a UAE company's multimillion-dollar investment in a date farm in Namibia.

Al Dahra Agricultural Company's US\$20 million (Dh73.4m) backing of a project in the southern African country is expected to boost availability of the fruit across the Middle East outside the summer harvest season.

As much as 2,500 tonnes a year of dates are forecast to be exported to the Middle East once the farm is fully cultivated, due to be in four years, said Abdulkadir Yousef, the chief executive of the Namibian operations of the Abu Dhabi food company.

He initiated the project in 2007, securing 200 hectares of land from the Namibian government and shipping out 24,000 date palm trees from the UAE to cultivate.

"The climate in Namibia is very good for date growing and the season there complements the off-season in the Middle East," he said. "With this project, Al Dahra has two seasons to produce dates as we have two date farms in Abu Dhabi."

While the UAE is estimated to be the fifth-biggest date producer globally, Namibia had little foothold in the industry before the investment. Namibia currently exports 300 tonnes of dates a year, mainly to Europe.

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1,000 jobs in the Karas region in southern Namibia where the farm is located.

Al Dahra established a 50-50 joint venture with the Namibia Development Corporation, a government agency that promotes economic growth. Profits will be divided equally between the two shareholders.

"It's unlocking an industry with huge potential to help the Namibia economy through job creation," said Pieter de Wet, the acting managing director of the Namibia Development Corporation.

The warm climate and rich soil make Namibia suitable for growing dates throughout the year.

Medjool, barhee, khalas and hilali are among the dates being grown as Al Dahra is keen to ensure varieties of the fruit familiar to Middle East consumers are produced. Grapes will also be produced on a 20ha site, with the produce being sold to the local market. Water supplies for the dates come from the nearby Naute Dam, Namibia's third-largest dam. Etihad Airways transported the first batch of 30 tonnes of the fruit from Johannesburg, in neighbouring South Africa, to the UAE in February and March.

Production is due to be gradually increased each year from the existing 13ha of trees currently cultivated.

The venture plans to begin exporting the dates by sea from Namibian ports to markets across the Middle East once production reaches 2,000 tonnes a year. Some dates will still be air freighted to customers wanting dates picked less than 48 hours previously.

Al Dahra has established itself as a main player in the UAE's drive to boost food security through global investments in agriculture.

In addition to Namibia, it has operations in Egypt, Pakistan, Spain, Sudan and the US. Within its 14 domestic farms in Al Ain, it produces dates as well as vegetables and other fruit.

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