

Healthy living trend makes rooibos tea top export product

By **BRONWYNNE ESBACH**

A surge in entrepreneurship in the Western Cape, coupled with a global trend towards healthy living, has led to an upswing in the export of indigenous food and beverages from the province.

Western Cape Trade and Promotion Agency (Wesgro) said the food and beverage sector was showing exceptional growth.

Riana Meyer, an economist at the Global Business Intelligence Unit at Wesgro, said the province had positioned itself as a major national player, describing the region as a "key location for South African food processors".

Meyer said six of the 13 food and beverage processors listed on the Johannesburg Securities Exchange were based in the Western Cape.

Exports from this sector accounted for close to R4 billion of total provincial exports each financial year, said Meyer.

"The prospects for the Western Cape food sector are very strong. Overall economic performance in the province is expected to match or outpace that of South Africa in the medium term."

Meyer highlighted the increase in the production of indigenous spices and teas.

"High production in areas including spices and sauces and indigenous teas, such as rooibos and honeybush, has developed in recent years."

Rooibos tea, known for its healing properties, is grown only in the Cederberg area and is exported globally.

Meyer said trends towards health consciousness meant that beverages such as rooibos tea would soon be in even

higher demand. The success of this product was merely an indicator of the region's untapped export opportunities, and other indigenous plants also held potential for export.

"The Cape Floral Kingdom contains around 8 000 plant species, of which 68% are endemic. Only a small number of these plants have been developed into foods and beverages. Responsible commercialisation could offer investors a unique product range."

The SA Rooibos Council agrees that rooibos has grown in international popularity, and could be used as "case study for other indigenous crops".

Soekie Snyman, a consultant with the council, said apart from the health benefits, rooibos had become a base ingredient for new medicines.

"Neutraceuticals are becoming popular as natural tablets. They have not hit the international market yet, but there has been an international trend to move towards a healthy lifestyle," said Snyman.

The council had also noticed the increase in exports, and Snyman said there were new markets for rooibos.

"These include Kazakhstan and Poland. Another 30 to 40 countries import it regularly."

Durban rooibos exporter Simon Beverley believed current economic conditions meant that it was an optimal time to enter the international market.

Beverley established the Simon Beverley Agencies in 2005. He said potential exporters should move fast to stay ahead of the competition. "I lost a few deals to export rooibos tea because I moved too slowly. You need to be your best as an entrepreneur."