

Hydroponics, partnership, and perseverance: Eldorado Fresh leads the way

After a third hailstorm in consecutive seasons destroyed [Eldorado Fresh's](#) open-land lettuce fields in 2010, founder Ivo Rugani knew the farm needed a new direction. What seemed like a devastating setback became the turning point that transformed the business into one of South Africa's most innovative farming operations.

Now, 15 years later, Eldorado Fresh is the country's largest producer of hydroponic iceberg and speciality lettuce, a key national supplier, and the Shoprite Group's 2025 Supplier of the Year in the Fresh Produce category. It's a story of resilience, reinvention and partnership that reflects the future of South African agriculture.

From open land to hydroponics

With open-land farming no longer viable, Rugani committed to a bold solution by converting the farm to mid-tech hydroponics, then a rare approach for iceberg lettuce growers.

Hydroponics offered control over temperature, moisture and nutrition, significantly reducing water use and ensuring consistent, year-round production. What began with four hectares in 2012 has grown to 50 hectares, supported by a state-of-the-art vacuum cooling system that chills lettuce to 2°C within minutes – crucial for freshness and shelf life.

Eldorado Fresh now supplies around half of South Africa's marketed iceberg lettuce, alongside speciality varieties and celery.

A partnership that changed everything

The transition required more than vision, it needed the right partner. [Freshmark](#), the Shoprite Group's fresh fruit and vegetable procurement and distribution arm, recognised the opportunity.

"When we reached that tipping point, we approached the Shoprite Group with an idea that must have felt unconventional," says Rugani. "They didn't just listen, they saw how it could strengthen both our business and their supply chain."

With shared commitment and investment, Eldorado Fresh doubled its hydroponic capacity within 18 months, confirming market demand for reliable, high-quality lettuce.

Freshmark's Divisional Head Buyer, Pieter van Zyl, credits their supplier's discipline and consistency: "What Eldorado Fresh has achieved shows what's possible when farmers innovate and retailers support that innovation. Their consistency is remarkable, and this award is well deserved."

Impact beyond the farm

Despite its technological advancement, the lettuce producer remains a key employer in the Vlakplaas area in Gauteng, with up to 500 workers. Hydroponics has also brought technical roles in climate control, crop monitoring, nutrient management and equipment operation.

"Our employees are the backbone of our company," Rugani says. "This method requires precision and teamwork."

Neighbouring smallholders also benefit from surplus leaves used as animal feed, while year-round production supports food security in the surrounding area.

Sustainable growth for the future

With hydroponics providing predictability and water efficiency, Eldorado Fresh is expanding its sustainability efforts through diversified energy sources. The operation can run on the national power grid, generators or a new 1.5MW solar installation, reducing operational risk and its carbon footprint.

A well-earned recognition

Rugani says the accolade recognises the success of their 30-year partnership with the Group and everyone who contributed to the farm's journey. "Success is built through vision, discipline, faith and strong partnerships," he explains.

"Eldorado Fresh didn't just rebuild, they transformed. Their journey is an example for all South African farmers," adds Pieter Van Zyl.

Rugani's advice to growers facing adversity reflects the principles that guided Eldorado Fresh: focus on your craft, expand carefully, reinvest consistently, and always be open to learning new things. "It's the small details that build the legacy," he says.

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