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THE VARIETAL TREADMILL: AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK FOR FRUIT GROWERS' VARIETAL SWITCHING

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In an emerging consumption landscape, consumer demand is increasingly reshaping agricultural production, raising the question of how smallholders strategically recalibrate their practices. Drawing on the agricultural treadmill and vertical integration perspectives, this paper develops the concept of a "varietal treadmill" to explain continuous and frequent crop-variety switching that is initiated by smallholders even in contexts not directly controlled by large capital. Based on fieldwork in the Langya Mountain fruit industry, the study finds that new consumption trends—centered on novelty and visual appeal—generate consumption-driven supernormal profits, i.e., short-lived price premiums that exceed ordinary returns, and these profits become the primary impetus for varietal switching. Where smallholders retain a degree of autonomy over varietal choice and bargaining power in marketing channels, they can capture these premiums in the short run. Yet this strategy also propels them into a recurring cycle of "searching for a hit variety–rapid diffusion–price decline–renewed search," producing subtle differentiation and renewed stratification among farm households. Conceptualizing these dynamics as a varietal treadmill offers an analytical entry point for understanding smallholder agency and its relationship to capital under a consumption-led agrarian transformation, while specifying the concrete pathways through which consumption-driven supernormal profits are translated into changes in production.

Palavras-chave: varietal treadmill; consumption-driven supernormal profits; smallholders; agricultural capitalization.