

Bristol business nation's largest buyer of organically grown corn

BY JOE GERAGHTY

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Prime Choice Foods
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BRISTOL, Va. – Jose Gomez isn't satisfied counting corn by the ear or even the bushel.

As president of Prime Choice Foods, the nation's largest buyer of organically grown corn, Gomez needs to think bigger.

In July, he plans to tear down his warehouse, now stacked high with 50-pound bags of corn. In its place will stand six silos with a combined storage capacity of a half-million pounds.

Jose Gomez, left, his son Mauro, center and brother Adrian, right, own and operate Prime Choice Foods in Bristol VA. They purchased the former Terry's Potato Chip building and are expanding into national marketing of their own branded products.
BY EARL NEIKIRK (Bristol Herald Courier)

Gomez also plans to add a second production line and about 15 full-time employees at his plant on Newton Street. When done, the company he founded in 2000 will have more than doubled its capacity from about 8 million pounds of tortilla chips a year to more than 18 million pounds.

The initial headcount of two employees could reach 50 before the end of the year, Gomez said.

"Organic is definitely a growing market," he said. "When I started in this business 20 years ago, I didn't know if it was a fad or not. But it's here to stay."

According to Organic Monitor, the world's leading provider of business intelligence for that market, organic foods account for \$26 billion in sales a year globally. It projects annual growth of more than 25 percent.

Organic farmers use no pesticides and grow no genetically modified foods.

The company tests its chips at every stage of production to make sure they meet organic standards, Gomez said. Outside auditors, including a rabbi who certifies the products as kosher, file in and out of the plant regularly to keep tabs on the process.

Gomez got his start with a company in Los Angeles when organically grown was a foreign term to most Americans.

He realized the potential for growth on the East Coast at the turn of the new century.

Organic foods had been big out West for years but had yet to make inroads in the East, he said.

At around that time, the old Terry's Potato Chip plant was on the auction block, and Gomez saw an opportunity to capitalize on an untapped market.

He flew to Bristol overnight to look at the equipment. He participated in the auction and bought the machinery. A few weeks later, he came back to town to buy the building.

"Little did I know how much work it was going to take to get it started," Gomez said.

Since purchasing the plant, he's had to put in all new electrical wiring, install new plumbing and fix leaks in the ceiling and holes in the floor.

Don Wright, who had worked for Terry's since 1977, was one of the two initial Prime Choice employees. He and Gomez spent a year just cleaning the plant.

"It was a mess," Wright said.

Gomez landed two clients early and started production, but the initial investment in equipment and building improvements weighed heavily on his bottom line. By 2003, Gomez began to worry about the viability of his business.

Then he secured production deals with a couple of major customers in a row, and almost overnight the plant was running at full capacity and having trouble meeting the demand.

Two years later, Gomez wants to launch his own brand, Go-Mex Organic Tortilla Chips. Until now, the plant has produced private-label chips sold by grocery stores under their own names.

"Building a product like that takes a lot of money," Gomez said. "We just focus on it, stay under the radar, and there's a lot of millions to be made."

To foster Go-Mex's growth and also continue to market the plant as a private-label manufacturer, Gomez brought in his son Mauro to help.

Mauro Gomez graduated from the University of Nevada Las Vegas in May with a degree in restaurant and business management. He returned to Bristol to take on marketing and some of the financial aspects of the business.

His brother Adrian came to Bristol six months ago to manage the production side of the factory.

It's not strictly a family operation. Todd Denton, in charge of maintenance and engineering, has been with the company a little more than a year.

Jose Gomez said he's learned he has to hand off some work to others. Even after delegating some of his responsibilities, he finds himself at the plant seven days a week.

"I'd like to get to a point where we can slow things down," he said. "Then maybe I can take weekends off."

For now, though, he has work to do. He can watch the plant's operations through a window in his second-floor office, but it's on the floor where he's in his element.

"We want to be able to do every job on the floor," Gomez said. "We have to set the example as owners that we're willing to work just as hard as anyone."

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