

## Bristol site a prime choice for business

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**David McGee**  
Staff Writer  
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BRISTOL, Va. – Company founder Jose Gomez knew Prime Choice Foods was growing – but even he was surprised by just how much.

The Bristol-based organic snack foods manufacturer recently was named the nation's second fastest-growing Hispanic-owned company, according to Hispanic Business magazine.

The honor was due to Prime Choice's 200 percent growth in sales over the past five years. The 6-year-old firm reported more than \$10.4 million in sales in 2005.

"We were pretty surprised to be in the top 100," Gomez said. "It's really been an honor. That will open a lot of doors for us in terms of marketing our products."

The list includes companies ranging from three to 3,000 employees in all parts of the nation. Only a Texas-based medical firm ranked ahead of Prime Choice.

The company achieved or surpassed all aspects of its five-year growth plan within three years, Gomez said.

The recognition sends a positive message to both current and potential customers, he said.

"It shows both our potential and existing customers that we're striving to be the best at what we do," Gomez said. "Being a minority-owned business is hard enough. This gives us more leverage to expand."

Gomez, a California native, started the company in the former Terry's Snack Foods plant on Newton Street.

Earlier this year, he purchased the 72,000-square-foot former Cross Stone building near Interstate 81's Exit 7. In addition to significantly expanding the company's warehouse and distribution space, the acquisition now houses its corporate offices. "We didn't think we'd be in a big building this quick," Gomez said. "This gives us room to expand our facility and bring in new product lines over the next 40 months. That means more business and more jobs."

The company has grown from 25 to 45 employees during the past year and he expects to add another 40 during the next 40 months.

The plant currently operates in three shifts on one production line and Gomez expects to add shifts to its second line by next year.

About 80 percent of the company's business remains private-label snack foods for major retailers like Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Kroger, Ingles and Garden of Eatin'.

Prime Choice also is preparing to launch a new organic chip product for Food City stores and is expanding its offerings with Kroger, he said.

"Our customer base has grown so much. We had one major customer when we started in 2001. By 2007, we'll probably be up to 12," he said.

Prime Choice also continues to market its own Go-Mex brand of snack chips and hopes to expand its offerings, Gomez said.

"The fastest-growing segment most retailers are looking at is the Hispanic market. That is going to be a major selling point, as well as our Go-Mex brand," Gomez said. "That brand has a lot of potential to diversify, not only in tortilla chips, but in other Mexican food items."

The company is the nation's largest user of organically grown corn for its products. That corn comes in a rainbow of colors like yellow, blue, white and red, but most is grown outside this region.

The company is working with Virginia Tech to develop organically grown, colored corn that can grow in this region, Mauro Gomez said.

With its success, the company is planning to add two additional manufacturing plants outside the Bristol area.

"We have plans to expand and be national. That's our focus now," Gomez said. "There are two targets (cities) that I'm not ready to discuss yet. That's more from logistics because freight is going to become a big issue."

He declined to outline a timetable for the planned expansion.

The company's success comes at a price, Gomez said. He, his sons, Mauro and Adrian, and other managers often work seven days a week to meet their customers' demands.

"It's a lot of pressure," he said. "When you have a higher profile, people hold you to it. But if we keep doing our job, we'll have a successful company and that's what's important."

[dmcgee@bristolnews.com](mailto:dmcgee@bristolnews.com) | (276) 645-2532