

Local companies find their place in produce

By Pamela Riemenschneider
Staff Writer

AUSTIN, Texas — In a quiet, sparkling clean greenhouse about 15 miles from downtown, micro-greens and living basil await their short trip to diners' plates.

Similarly, just a 30-minute drive from the capitol building, greenhouse tomatoes are ripening.

In the suburbs of the Texas capital, two companies have found their niche.

Dripping Springs-based Bellaverdi Farms grows micro-greens for the foodservice industry and living basil sold in local retailers. Proprietor Darrell Joseph left his job in the technology industry to pursue his foodie side.

"I decided that money was less important than doing what I like," he said. "I thought about a lot of different things and I found this niche accidentally."

For Cedar Creek-based Reliable Organics, location was everything, said Steven Crider, president and chief executive officer.

Reliable Organics is a two-year-old concept designed to provide local, organic tomatoes year-round to major cities in Texas.

The company's founders used Austin as its home base because of its proximity to the local and organic food powerhouse, Austin-based Whole Foods Market Inc.

"According to Whole Foods — local produce is no more and often much less — than seven hours from the store," he said. "With that in mind, we're locally grown from here to all of the Texas cities."

For Joseph, growing micro-greens has proven an interesting challenge and, surprisingly, is very similar to being in the technology industry.



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Microgreens are popular with white tablecloth restaurants. Darrell Joseph of Bellaverdi Farms, Dripping Springs, Texas, says his company ships to foodservice distributors in every major Texas market. Below, organic beefsteak tomatoes are hand-packed at the Cedar Creek, Texas, shed of Reliable Organics. From Cedar Creek, the tomatoes are delivered to every major city in the state.



"Both are ultra-clean facilities," he said. "This is not that far off."

What started as a local service to Austin customers has expanded to Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and beyond. Joseph said he ships greens to Tennessee, Colorado, Oklahoma, Florida and plans to ship to New Orleans soon.

Bellaverdi currently has about 14,000 square feet under glass. Joseph said the company is expanding into another 3,500 to 7,000 square feet to start growing more specialty herbs and lettuces.

"It took us about two years to get our feet under us," he said. "Microgreens is a specialty deal — it's very seasonal. My business

here kind of follows the seasonality of high-end restaurants."

Expansion is also in store for Reliable Organics. In November, the company secured an additional \$2 million to expand an additional 1 ¼ acres to bring their total acreage to 2 ¼. That's enough to do about 1.1 million pounds of beefsteak tomatoes a year.

Crider hopes the expansion will give Reliable Organics the metrics it needs to expand the concept.

"I believe that we can be a national brand," he said. "It's an answer or a solution to a big problem. Everyone wants locally grown produce, but you can only do that in so many parts of the country."