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Longtime farming family in Palm Beach County tests the retail market

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"Buy local" is a popular mantra, and now with a longtime Palm Beach County farming family stepping into a new venture with a retail farm market, buying local will become easier than ever.

Bedner's Farm Fresh Market, a 9,800-square-foot barn-style building to be constructed at U.S. 441 and Lee Road west of Boynton Beach, is expected to be open by early 2010, said Steve Bedner, 44, one of the eight family members who work in the business. A field behind the market where customers can pick strawberries and tomatoes could open as early as mid-December.

"We are going to try to have a little bit of everything fresh off the farm," said Steve Bedner. His farming cousin operates a seasonal market in Pittsburgh that opened in 1956.

"I've always had this in the back of my mind," said Bedner, who has been working on the market's plans since 2005. "I think it is all coming back around. People want to go back to the mom-and-pops and get that personal touch. We want it to be a destination for the whole family."

Bedner and his brothers Bruce, 48, and Charles, 50, own and operate Bedner Growers, a major pepper and cucumber farming operation their father, Arthur, started in Broward County in 1950, then moved to Palm Beach County in 1960. Their agricultural roots go back to the late 1800s in Pennsylvania.

Although Palm Beach County's approximately 40 vegetable growers produced crops valued at \$262 million wholesale in the 2008-09 season, no major grower operates a retail produce store, said Art Kirstein, agricultural economic development coordinator, Palm Beach County Cooperative Extension Service.

"You have to diversify. There is a big push for fresh produce. When you acquire it from a local grower in the area ... This is the ultimate buy local," Kirstein said. "You are getting vegetables that are 24 to 36 hours old."

In April, the Bedners sold some of the produce they grew for their personal use at the Delray Affair street festival. The romaine lettuce heads were so large, people weren't sure what they were.

"They had never seen any like it. It was so dark green and fresh," said Marie Bedner, Steve's wife. People returned during the three-day festival to buy more produce, saying they loved the fresh taste.

As customers clamored for more, Bruce Bedner's daughter Megan, 23, was put in charge of a roadside stand that operated from April through July. She will be working at the market.

"I grew up with the farm. I want to carry on the tradition my grandparents started," said Megan, who majored in hospitality management at Lynn University.

Marie Bedner said one goal is to involve the "next generation" and keep the operation going in Palm Beach County. Education and giving people a chance to connect with their food and the farmer who grows them will be other benefits.

"We are looking forward to sharing our crops that we grow right here," Marie Bedner said. "A lot of people are not even aware that we exist."

Mark Sodders, president of Pahokee-based Lakeview Farms, which produces sugar cane, said: "They are getting the middle man out of there. It could be a boon, or it could kill you. You are in direct competition with Publix, Winn-Dixie, Walmart and Sam's. It's tough."

Steve Bedner adds: "It's a risk we're willing to take."

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