



Dave Leder/For the Capital Press

Eddie Alvarez, left, runs Alvarez Farms in Mabton, Wash., with his father, Hilario, and younger brother, Steven.

Yakima Valley organic farmers find niche with city-dwellers

By **DAVE LEDER**
For the Capital Press

Alvarez Farms has been around for 35 years, yet many of the family's Central Washington neighbors have never sampled their abundant selection of organic produce.

That's because most of their customers live in the Puget Sound area, a three-hour drive from their 80-acre farm in Mabton, 35 miles southeast of Yakima.

"We don't get a lot of attention around here because there's not a big market for organics," said farm manager Eddie Alvarez, whose father, Hilario, started the business in 1986. "Most of our customers are from the Seattle area — probably 90% of them — and that's the way it's always been."

Alvarez Farms grows an extensive variety of organic row crops — including lettuce, kale, onions, shallots, asparagus, tomatoes, garlic, squash, peppers (hot and mild), potatoes, zucchini and peanuts — and transports the produce over the Cascades every day from April through October with its fleet of 15 delivery trucks.

Their customer base includes grocery chains like Whole Foods and regional distributors like Charlie's Produce, plus restaurants and home delivery services. But the Alvarez Farms name is most recognizable to farmers market patrons on Washington's west side.

"I remember when I was 14, a friend of mine pointed me to the Pike Place Market," Eddie Alvarez, 41, said of the iconic waterfront market

in downtown Seattle. "That's where I built my reputation and started getting interest from different market managers. Now, we sell produce at more than 20 farmers markets a week."

The family also attends two markets east of the mountains — one in Pasco, one in Roslyn — but the focus of the business is, without a doubt, big-city consumers. Alvarez said home deliveries have become increasingly popular in the Seattle and Portland markets over the past year due to COVID-19.

"Lots of restaurants have shut down, but the home deliveries have really taken off," he said. "We see that as the next step for our business — combining our produce with other organic products like meat, bread and cheese and delivering it to people's homes."

Seeking to create more alternative revenue sources for the winter months, the family purchased a commercial food dehydrator to boost sales online and at early-season farmers markets. Starting this year, they will be selling a wider selection of dried peppers, pickled vegetables, and other non-seasonal items such as pepper wreaths.

But it won't be long before the Alvarazes are growing full time again. They stock their greenhouses in February and start planting hardier crops like beets, peas, fava beans and salad onions in March. The transplants go out in early May, and then it's off to the races.

"It can be tough because the crops need to be picked when they need to be picked," Eddie Alvarez said. "Sometimes we're out picking at midnight with a headlamp because we

don't have a warehouse. Everything is picked fresh every day."

Alvarez's younger brother Steven oversees the deliveries and wholesale operations, while their father remains involved in all facets of the business. In fact, Hilario Alvarez, 67 — who immigrated from Mexico to Wapato, Wash., in 1970 — still enjoys agricultural work as much as he did in his youth.

"My dad started out as a farm laborer in Mexico, and that is all he's ever known," Eddie Alvarez said. "We depend a lot on his experience when we make decisions about what to plant from year to year because he just understands how things work. He has a real green thumb for this, and we depend on him every day."

Learn more about Alvarez Farms at www.alvarezorganic.com.

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