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## FOOD

# Open a can of farm-fresh flavor

Northwest Ohio's tomatoes go from field to can in just hours

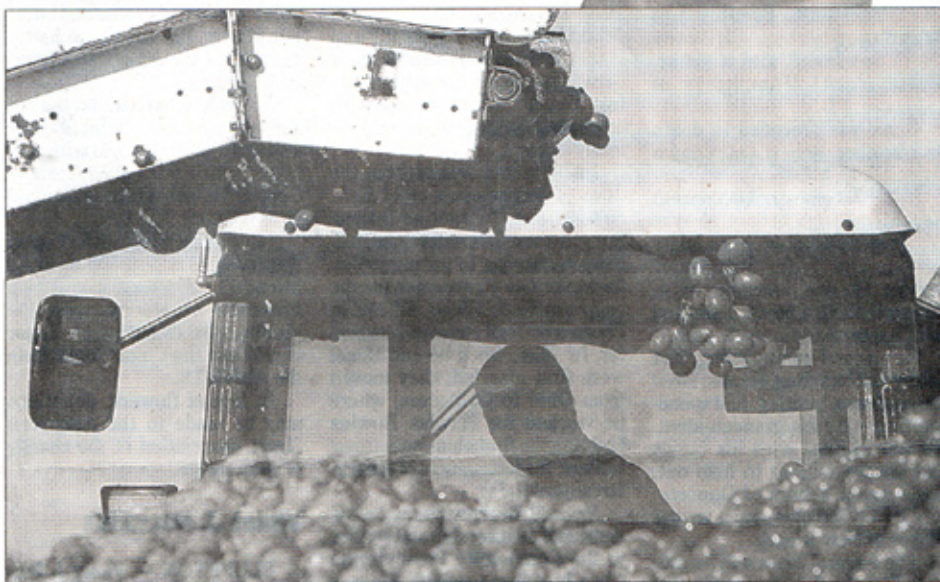
By MARGARET DWIGGINS  
FAMILY EDITOR

Anyone who has ever tasted a freshly-picked tomato on a summer day can appreciate the difference in flavor from the bland offerings in the tomato bin at the grocery store during the off-season.

Capturing that freshly-picked flavor is what drives Steve Hirzel, president of Hirzel Canning Co. and Farms, a family-owned packing company which sells tomato products under the Dei Fratelli brand and sauerkraut under the Silver Fleece brand.

Cans of Dei Fratelli tomatoes, which are distributed in the Midwest and central and southeastern states, are filled with only tomatoes grown on family farms in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan and processed in three canning facilities, not far from the fields where the tomatoes are grown.

Hirzel said almost half of all the tomatoes processed by the company are grown within 10 miles of a packing plant.



RANDY ROBERTS / The Courier

MARK HOVEST watches as tomatoes come off a conveyor and into a wagon he is pulling at the Cherry family farm near Pandora. The farm is one of several in northwest Ohio that supplies tomatoes to the Hirzel Canning Co., which cans and sells the tomatoes under the Dei Fratelli brand.

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"That's really unusual for this business," he said. The company's main facility is in Northwood, with another in Ottawa and a third in Pemberville.

Northwest Ohio's soil is particularly good for growing tomatoes, Hirzel said. The tomatoes are picked at peak ripeness and, with the close proximity of the packing plant to the farm fields, can go from field to can in a matter of hours.

Hirzel said the company uses six major tomato varieties, none of which are common garden varieties but are specially developed to ripen all at the same time. All the plants come from seeds germinated in the company greenhouse. The plants are given to the farmers to transplant into their fields.

Farmers are given incentives for producing high-grade fruit, Hirzel said. Almost all of the tomato crop is harvested mechanically, which ensures the safety of the crop since there is very little possibility of human contamination. Also, each plant is individually tracked, so that if a problem should arise it can be easily traced.

The season for harvesting northwest Ohio's tomato crop is winding down now. The packing season begins in early to mid-August and typically ends with the season's first major freeze, Hirzel said.

Once at the plant, the toma-

atoes are floated out of the truck to reduce damage and given a first wash. They are then graded by size and color, sorted and

rinsed again, then peeled and put through another wash. Lower grade tomatoes are used for sauce or puree, with higher grade tomatoes canned as whole or diced tomatoes.

Crushed tomatoes are the company's biggest seller.

The Hirzel company was founded in 1923 by Hirzel's great-grandfather, a Swiss immigrant. Tomato products, cabbage

and sauerkraut were originally sold under the brand name Star Crossed. Today, Hirzel operates the business along with siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins.

The Dei Fratelli name came from a contest for company employees. One employee suggested Dei Fratelli, Italian for "of the brothers," which was chosen because of the family nature of the business and because the products are popular in making Italian foods.

The family remains close, Hirzel said, continuing a tradition started by Hirzel's grandfather of

planning events frequently where the whole family can gather.

Hirzel said he cooks occasionally for his family and especially likes the company's new line of pasta sauces, which are sold in 26-ounce jars and flavored with fresh frozen herbs.

"I'm really proud of these. My favorite is a fire-roasted vegetable," he said.

At 44, he has grown up in the family business, starting out tending tomato plants in the fields as a child. He graduated from Ohio State University's agriculture school and worked in California for several years before returning to northwest Ohio to work in the family business.

Despite spending his entire life surrounded by the juicy red fruits, Hirzel said his fondness for them never wanes.

"I'm still not tired of tomatoes. They just taste so darn good," Hirzel said.

Dwiggins: 419-427-8477  
margaret.dwiggins@thecourier.com



### Black Bean and Corn Chicken Salad

- 1 jar (16 ounces) Dei Fratelli Black Bean 'n Corn Salsa
- 1 fully cooked whole rotisserie chicken (approximately 3 pounds)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro or flat leaf (Italian) parsley

Break down whole chicken, discarding skin and bones. Pull dark meat into coarse shreds. Dice breast meat into cubes.

In a mixing bowl fold Black Bean 'n Corn Salsa with prepared chicken (juices from salsa will be absorbed by chicken).

Fold freshly chopped cilantro or parsley into mixture.

#### Serving suggestions:

Mix salad with 16 ounces cooked farfalle (bow tie) pasta. Place on a bed of mixed greens. Serve room temperature.

Or, serve salad on a whole-wheat baguette or bread of choice.

Serves: 4-6.

### Tomato Basil Bruschetta

8 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese, sliced, or soft goat cheese

Chopped basil leaves for garnish

Bruschetta topping:

1½ cups Dei Fratelli petite diced tomatoes, drained (approximately half of a 28-ounce can)

15 pitted Calamatta olives, coarsely chopped

3 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped

2 cloves fresh-garlic, minced

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

Rusks/bread:

1 loaf ciabatta bread, sliced ½-inch thick

2 cloves fresh garlic

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Brush slices of bread with olive oil and rub with cloves of garlic. Place on cookie sheet and place in the oven for approximately 5 minutes on each side or until golden brown. Remove bread from oven to cool.

Combine ingredients for bruschetta topping in a bowl. Mix gently.

On cooled bread, place sliced mozzarella or spread on goat cheese. Add a spoon full of bruschetta topping. Garnish with chopped basil.

Serves: 4-6.

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