



# Dei Fratelli In The News

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## FEELING saucy



**T**he tomato sauce labels on grocery store shelves might conjure images of the Sicilian countryside, but one family hopes Ohioans don't forget about a business in their own back yard.

"If it's got our name on it, it came from right here in northwest Ohio," said Steve Hirzel, whose family produces the Dei Fratelli brand of tomato products.

More than two decades ago, it was a growing interest in far-away foods that helped build the Italian-themed brand, but today's consumers are more interested in buying local, according to Hirzel. As customers ask questions about how their food made it to their plates, he is eager to provide the answers.

Consider that it only takes about 6 to 10 hours for a Dei Fratelli tomato to go from a local farm into its final container. The end product, be it pasta sauce, diced tomatoes or tomato

### Ohio business booms on locally grown tomatoes

story by SETH TETER  
photos by JODI MILLER

juice, uses "strictly ingredients that you can understand as a consumer," Hirzel said.

"You read it, you can say 'Oh wow, it's basil, oregano, garlic, onion, pepper,'" he said, noting there are no preservatives or additives.

Nearly half of the farmers are within 10 miles of one of the company's three Ohio processing facilities. The company even has its own greenhouse where it germinates tomato seeds.

"That's where local rings very true and we live it every day," Hirzel said. "One of the secrets behind a high quality product in a can or a glass jar is the high quality fruit coming in from the farm. We can't make it any better; we can only preserve how good it is coming out of the field."

If it came right down to it, Hirzel — aided by satellite tracking and meticulous record keeping — could pluck a jar off of the store shelf and within 15 minutes tell you the field in which the tomatoes inside were grown.

That might lead you to Brad Cherry. Working with his dad and brother, Cherry grows 185 acres of tomatoes for Hirzel Canning in addition to operating a grain farm and farm market.

Tomatoes are fun to grow, said the Putnam County Farm Bureau

own tomato ties stretch back 3 when his great-grandfather the business by growing caber sauerkraut. Tomatoes soon d, and now the company has than 100 full-time employes a couple hundred seasonal . There are nine fourth- ion family members that are operators and three from the neration that are still involved. f the local farmers who provide es have also had a relationship e company for generations. hen it comes to the compan- ature fruit (yes, botanically g, tomatoes are a fruit) there oom for growth. For example, npany has started composting f its leftover product with other acts from the community and g it back to the fields. o about everything imaginable atatoes," Hirzel said. **o** ment on this article, call 614-246-8223 info@ourohio.org.



OPPOSITE PAGE Hirzel Canning oversees nearly all aspects of the tomato growing process from when the seeds are started in the greenhouse to when the tomatoes are brought in from local farms in Ohio, eastern Indiana and southern Michigan. This helps ensure the quality and safety of the product.

THIS PAGE Processing tomatoes are mechanically harvested and loaded. They will be shipped to Hirzel Canning immediately in order to preserve the freshness.

ember, although they're a lot more rk. For example, Cherry can plant to 20 acres of tomatoes in a day compared to 200 acres of corn or soybeans. While he might never know just ere his corn or soybeans end up, he es being able to say that tomatoes in e: Fratelli products could have come om his farm. "It does give you a sense of pride to that it is a small group of growers at are all local," he said. Having a contract with the nearby ecessing plant also gives him a idler income from a crop that he ight not otherwise be able to sell. "It would be hard to get rid of 200 tons (of tomatoes) on the open rket," Cherry said. That doesn't mean he can produce y old tomato, though. To work with Hirzels, he knows he must produce igh quality product. "I think they're very proud of what y do," he said. Still, this raises the question, is a rthwestern Ohio tomato worth asting about? Hirzel, for one, will you that you don't have to always k to sunny California for great dduce. "We're really blessed with some of est soil and a climate that's really dducive to growing tomatoes," he d. adding that Ohio also has plentiful er. "This is one fantastic place and



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that's why there's still an industry here." Ohio State University has also been a resource for commercial tomato growers by breeding varieties with helpful traits, such as a uniform ripening date. That's important as tomatoes grown for processing are harvested all at once by machine.

In all, Ohio produced nearly 6,000 acres of processing tomatoes in 2007, and ranked third nationally in total production. Fresh tomatoes totaled 4,300 acres, placing Ohio sixth nationwide.

#### New State Fruit

Earlier this year, children from a rural Fayette County elementary school



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