

Freshly picked herbs and baby lettuces have found a niche in Miami

The Rock Garden

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Renown Washington D.C. area chefs like Nora Pouillon and Robert Damon had grown accustomed to the quality of Charlie Coiner's specialty organic produce and fresh herbs. But they started looking elsewhere when the solar greenhouse he had built on his grandmother's farm in the Shenandoah River Valley burned to the ground in 1984 and was flooded a year later.

A series of adversities and circumstances spurred by a meticulous feasibility study led the seventh-generation Virginia farmer to consider the Caribbean, Central and Latin American countries, such as Costa Rica at first, to rebuild his business.

Today, in Miami, more than half of the 47,000 square ft warehouse, deliciously

perfumed by the aromas of freshly picked cilantro, basil, sage, rosemary and thyme, is comprised of walk-in coolers and cold packing houses where hair nets and rubber gloves are *de rigueur*.

The daily supply of year-round specialty herbs and exotic vegetables to national distributors such as Coosemans, Tavila, Carnival, A-1-A and Sisco among the largest, comes from a vast number of strictly controlled cooperative farms. (Coiner provides everything from seeds and "plugs" to supplies and well pumps,) from West Virginia and Colombia to Central Florida and Israel.

"All cleared by the FDA, USDA, US Customs and State of Florida Department of Agriculture," insists Coiner, the company founder and owner, who is anxious to show his in-house lab where everything is

meticulously tested for bacteria, fungus, pesticide residue and more by biochemist Diego Rodriguez.

Recently hit by a TV report that wrongly charged his products as a source of bacteria, Coiner lost a large South Florida account. Soon after, the FDA and Centers for Disease control traced the bacteria to the food handlers at a Maryland catering. Rock Garden was exonerated but left hurting.

"Gourmet and exotic foods have definitely found a dramatically increasing market and that is a niche that we are trying to fill," says Coiner as he walks through the aromatic cold rooms brimming with boxes of more than 60 types of herbs, green papayas, shiny Japanese eggplants, baby squash and other specialty items.

Coiner has developed a clear "breath-



Charlie Coiner, Rock Garden CEO.

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able film box" which enables you to view the labeled product while minimizing damage from handling during shipping and in the store. The use of gel ice during transportation and a paper box liner for ethylene absorption protects the products and ensures freshness. "Chefs are very conscious of the origin of the products they use, and Florida is the only state in the nation that requires labels identifying country of origin," explains Coiner, still smarting from the reckless TV report. "This law doesn't apply anywhere else in the entire United States."

But the nerve center of his operation is on the second floor. Like in a busy airport control tower faxes and telephone don't stop ringing, computers flash data, charts indicate flight schedules and a direct line to the US Customs speeds up handling of the delicate merchandise.

Coiner is intent on protecting his lifetime work and investment. He is not a stranger to adversity, from the time he

contracted a nearly fatal disease as he volunteered to help victims of the Guatemalan earthquake in 1975. Losing part of his liver shocked him into eating organic food and he started an organic farm with a naturopath-nutritionist who grew pharmaceutical herbs, which he developed into a fresh herb and specialty produce farm retailing to restaurants.

Losing his farm to fire and flood only spurred him to befriend the then assistant Secretary of State who helped him find a farm in Costa Rica as part of the Caribbean Basin Initiative during the Reagan Administration. "This concept grew into NAFTA, based on economic ties to foster political ties," Coiner explains. "And now there is an unfortunate backlash against foreign products." When he felt safe selling to Safeway, the Channel 4 TV report destroyed his credibility.

But Coiner who traces his roots to the *Mayflower* is not about to give up. He is starting a new line of dried mushrooms, "the best from China, California and Europe," he assures.

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