

Organic growth opportunities

by Kirby Lee Davis

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Danny Watson at soon-to-be Cam's Grocery in Tulsa. (Kirby Lee Davis)

TULSA – Like a cake decorator squeezing out icing, Danny Watson pressed new mortar between bricks in the old downtown Tulsa walls that soon will house Cam's Grocery. Although many, many man-hours lie ahead before Cam's targeted March 1 opening, the brickwork and sandblasted wood roof already instill some of the natural ambiance expected of this future organic foods provider.

In his office some five blocks west, Cam's founder Daniel Cameron focuses on a different type of mortar – the supplier deals that will keep his 7,000-square-foot grocery stocked with organic produce, meats, and other products.

"Right now I think we have about 15 where we have agreements," he said.

"Some of those are national, big players in the game. A handful of them are local. Many of our people are produce providers, and they're familiar faces you see over at the farmers markets."

Such activity points to a potential boom time for eastern Oklahoma growers and suppliers, since Cam's is just one of several shops expected to open in Tulsa over the next year, following a pair of similar Oklahoma City openings this year. Befitting their environmentally friendly nature, all will boast of local products.

"I think we'll have at least five new grocers come to town," said Tulsa retail analyst Mendy Parish, a senior broker with CB Richard Ellis of Oklahoma. Others have projected seven or more, their ranks anchored by a new Whole Foods planned for 91st Street and Yale Avenue in south Tulsa.

Cam's isn't even the only one slotted for downtown. Entrepreneur and Tulsa City Councilman Blake Ewing hopes to open his 4,800-square-foot Archer Market in February.

Despite all the shelving on the horizon, some growers wonder if they will see any significant increase in sales.

"We would certainly hope so," said Kris Gosney, who with her husband, John, operates the 4,000-acre John's Farm in Fairview, provider of certified organic wheat, spices and chili mixes. "I think there's certainly interest in organic and sustainable farming in the Tulsa area."

The challenge comes from a handful of basic economic factors.

Like many producers, John said his capacity is already largely accounted for.

"We've got more to do now than we can really say grace over," he said. "We're a pretty large farm. To try to do it organically, it takes more labor, more time to do it this way. I don't really anticipate trying to grow size-wise."

Others, like Conrad Farms in Bixby, focus more on their own distribution system.

"We don't really do a lot of wholesaling," said partner Eugene Conrad. "We usually just run most of our stuff right through our own market. We do have some of the vendors that make

the farmers markets.”

With only 300 acres devoted to organic vegetables, and their output heavily dependent on weather, he doubts they will strive to produce more.

Kris Gosney said local grocers accounts represent only 25 percent of John’s Farm business. Because of that, and the fact that locals like Cam’s may only place orders at time of need, that revenue stream does not get the same attention of national accounts.

“We sell our products across the U.S.,” said Kris. “We ship wheat to mills across the United States.”

Ironically, that will get them into some of these new Tulsa stores.

“We are already in Whole Foods with several of our products,” she said. “We are in a couple of chains in Oklahoma City that I believe may be some of those coming into Tulsa.”

Cameron understands that low emphasis. While environmentalists emphasize local produce to reduce carbon emissions and keep transportation costs down, many health stores still depend on regional suppliers that may tap local, regional or national producers. Cameron said he expects Cam’s Grocery to draw only 10 percent of its non-produce inventory from area producers. On the other hand, 90 percent of his produce will come from Oklahoma.

Besides John’s Farm wheat flour, Cam’s will buy greens and fruit from Peachcrest Farm of Stratford. Meats will come from Pork and Greens Farm in Broken Arrow, Blakley Family Farms of Oologah and Koehn’s Grassfed Meat of Texas. Lomah Dairy of Wyandotte will provide milks and cheeses.

Theragamics of Tulsa will sell natural soaps and essential oils. The Peaceful Housewife in Sand Springs will supply body care products and laundry detergents.

All these and more will be among the 12,000 products Cam’s will offer on a regular basis.

“That’s why they have three managers on the floor,” he said, referring to himself and his first two of 45 eventual hires, Produce Manager Jeanette Reynolds and his yet-unnamed cafe director.

“They really have to have an understanding of the pulse of a grocery store,” said Cameron. “Obviously there’s ways to track what you’ve been ordering and what you’re selling and how to keep up on it.”

Between health care reform’s emphasis on wellness and growing concerns over preservatives and freshness, Parish anticipates growing demand for organic produce. She sees it with every Saturday trip to Cherry Street’s Farmer’s Market.

“It’s amazing how many farmers come to that,” she said. “If you question them, they’ve got very big gardens that they come from.”

Although Conrad said many of those sellers buy and resell his inventory, he also sees growing public interest in natural foods. He projected the coming wave of organic groceries may heighten that demand simply through their visibility.

“I do see renewed interest in juicing,” he added. “We get quite a bit of that business.”