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# Farmers see growing market in ethnic vegetables

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**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - Formisano Farms in South Jersey began growing ethnic vegetables more than 20 years ago, starting with the herb cilantro.

A staple in several ethnic communities, cilantro is on its way to becoming mainstream. It's a key ingredient in salsa, which has surpassed ketchup sales, and now makes up 10 percent of the farm's income.

The explosion of immigrant populations is fueling the growth of ethnic vegetables like cilantro and bok choy, giving farmers new, and potentially more profitable, revenue streams to add to their American staples of corn, sweet peppers and tomatoes. They'll have less competition for this narrow niche, crops that an ethnic population would have consumed in their home country, now growing in small quantities in the U.S.

"Cilantro is widely used almost everywhere today," said John Formisano, whose family has been farming for nearly a century. "When we first started, most people hadn't ever heard of it."

Today, the American public may not recognize Chinese eggplant's long, slender purple shape, or aji dulce - small, colorful sweet peppers - two vegetables commonly used in Asian and Hispanic cooking.

But farmers have recognized demographic trends that show a change in the consumer base, said Bill Sciarappa, a Rutgers agricultural extension agent with a Ph.D. in economic entomology and agricultural pest management.

"Today's niche market is the future mainstream market," he said.

Farmers are expanding their product line, using familiar growing techniques to transition from parsley to cilantro, standard Italian eggplant to Chinese eggplant, peas to edamame beans, Sciarappa said. He is part of a team at Rutgers University developing a comprehensive production and marketing plan for ethnic vegetables to help East Coast growers.

"That's what gave me the idea 20 years ago when I saw farmers switch over to cilantro from parsley," he said. "It was the same growth pattern, same planting culture, same

harvest procedures, but you got twice the money then. We see the cycle repeated over and over again."

It can be even more profitable, depending on market conditions. Farmers sell eggplant on average for \$10 per box, while ethnic eggplants - Japanese, Chinese, Indian - can sell for \$30 per box, he said.

Farmers are getting help from agricultural experts at Rutgers, using a market-driven approach determined by census data, economic forecasting and bilingual surveys of consumers.

The plan is to create a blueprint that would develop a market along the East Coast - including Connecticut, New Jersey, Florida and Georgia - to link growers with ethnic markets.

Farmers would produce potentially more profitable vegetables like bok choy, tomatillos and bitter melon that can be successfully grown in their own local markets. Gourmet consumers and specialty food stores are also interested in ethnic produce.

Economists are measuring the demands carefully so farmers won't glut the market and make these potentially premium crops lose their value.

The study, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is documenting the market demand to find opportunities for East Coast farmers to grow and cooperatively market ethnic crops, creating a year-round supply.

This would give a small, 30-acre farm in New Jersey, where farmland is unusually expensive, a fighting chance to compete with large corporate farms in California, the nation's leading vegetable supplier.

Using interpreters, Rutgers has taken surveys of four large ethnic groups - Asian Indian, Chinese, Mexican and Puerto Rican - to better understand the market, asking what they purchase, how much they're willing to pay and how far they would travel to shop.

Then farmers in New Jersey, Florida and Massachusetts will test out the climate for the crops with growing trials over two years.

"We're trying to convince the growers that they need to work together up and down the coast and not thinking of each other as competition," said Rick VanVranken, who heads an extension center based in Atlantic County, N.J. "Our competition is California, not the East Coast."

That's an idea farmer Henry Estenes understands.

He began growing ethnic vegetables, including a Jamaican pepper, about 10 years ago on his 75-acre farm because he has a new market for them.

"If I have to continue growing the common peppers, they're no more expensive than they were 10 years ago and for that reason I have to continue growing more or a new pepper," he said. "That's why I went into the ethnic pepper group."

But growing ethnic vegetables isn't a guaranteed ticket to high profits, said Chuck Obern, whose 2,500-acre farm on the edge of the Florida Everglades grows more than 50 types of ethnic vegetables. He is test growing some of the Rutgers crops.

Profitability depends on how many people in the world are growing certain crops, competing for a very limited market.

"Viability is 100 percent supply and demand," he said. "The risk is huge because it doesn't take very much to go from a profit to a loss. You don't know what other people are going to grow."

Obern said he got into ethnic vegetables in 1986 because he didn't want to compete with "the big boys." He said the idea of an East Coast cooperative is promising, and it could create a year-round supply that could compete with California.

"There's always strength in numbers," he said. "You're at least limiting or controlling supply."