

PROFILE

Farmer Growing a Business

By ROBERT WALSH
The Salinas Californian

Juan Perez, owner of J & P Organics, says his game plan is to grow the new business to the point where his father, Pablo, can quit his current job and work full time with J & P.

Perez leases two acres on Old Stage Road from the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), which trains farm laborers and others to become small farmers of their own crops. He grows a number of organic crops, including strawberries, carrots, corn, tomatoes and cilantro.

Perez also experiments with crops that wouldn't likely be found on a larger outfit, including organic epazote, an herb used in Mexican cuisine to spice beans.

He's become a bit of a celebrity in the Salinas area as well. He's in television, radio and newspaper ads for a promotion of the Steps to a Healthier Salinas anti-obesity campaign, and an 11-by-12-foot photo of him is featured in another "Steps" ad on a flight of stairs at the Salinas Sports Complex.

J & P Organics is a family business. Perez's father, mother, brother, sister and girlfriend all help out on the farm. Looking ahead to the day when his father can spend all his time on the farm, the young entrepreneur decided to include both men's initials in the firm's logo.

During the week all the family members help in the field growing the organic produce. Each Friday, Perez delivers boxes of fresh vegetables, flowers and fruit to his list of customers.

After his clients are taken care of, Perez sells the excess produce either to two markets in Salinas or ALBA Organics, the licensed produce distribution arm of ALBA.

On his weekly rounds, Perez delivers his produce to 40 customers. His route stretches from the Monterey Peninsula and Carmel Valley to Salinas and north Monterey County. Using the J & P Web site, www.jporganics.com, clients can check to see what is available and order accordingly. Perez's girlfriend, Wendy, handles the confirmations, and the family harvests and prepares the boxes on Thursday afternoon.

J & P offers three types of produce boxes. The basic box is equally divided between fruit and vegetables. A second option adds a dozen eggs to the mix while "Box 3" includes fruit, vegetables, eggs and fresh flowers.

The contents of a box (12 to 14 items) include whatever vegetables and fruits are in season. Perez said he obtains the fruit and flowers



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Juan Perez displays a box with fresh picked zucchini. In the background is his mother, Florencia Perez, who helps out of the farm off Old Stage Road near Salinas.

Juan Perez

- **AGE:** 23
- **OCCUPATION:** Owner of J & P Organics.
- **WORK:** Assistant manager for the Watershed Institute at California State University, Monterey Bay, 2002-05; internships with Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, summer 2004 and spring 2005; founded J & P Organics in 2006.
- **EDUCATION:** Graduated from North Monterey County High School; BA from CSUMB in 2007.
- **PERSONAL:** Single, lives in Castroville.

by trading with other growers when necessary.

"We put enough in each box to feed a family of two or three," he said.

After completing the ALBA training program, Perez began the business a year ago while still a student at California State University, Monterey Bay, from which he graduated this year.

"I started with just an acre," he said. "I experimented with the crops I wanted to grow and worked on a business plan." Because his family had worked five acres in Watsonville about seven years ago, farming wasn't a new endeavor for the young man.

Although it was a little slow at first, Perez is now meeting his expenses and making a small profit. This fall, J & P Organics will add an additional acre.

"My father and I have basically done this together," Perez said. Both men look forward to the time when the business is large enough that Pablo can say "adios" to his day job at a Central Coast nursery and join his son full time.

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