

## Fresh Start champions healthy food, fair trade, and caring for nature

There is a movement currently sweeping the province of Negros, one that has already made a positive impact on its environment, business, and people for the past decade. This is organic farming, a method of growing food naturally or without the use of chemical inputs. Fresh Start Organics in Bacolod City is a perfect example of how it works and why it will be a driving standard of the future.

Inside one of Bacolod's major malls is a Fresh Start retail store cum cafe that serves innovative and healthy organic meals in addition to selling a wide range of certified organic products. These include fertilizers; fresh salad greens and vegetables; unpolished white, brown, red, and black rice varieties; rainforest shade-grown coffee; and an assortment of personal care and home products from Fresh Start and other labels from around the Philippines.

The owners, social entrepreneurs Ramon "Chin-Chin" Uy, Jr. and his wife, Francine, decided to open the outlet in 2011 because of a surplus of produce from their organic farm in Silay City. The farm itself was their first venture into organic farming in 2005, as a way to prove the effectiveness of their organic fertilizer made mainly from vermicast, or worm manure.



Since then, Fresh Start's products have found their way into eco-stores in Manila, Dumaguete, and Iloilo, and into the kitchens of culinary experts such as Margarita Fores of Cibo fame.

"It was a fresh start for us because when we started the business, we just got married. It is a fresh start for farmers who want to go into organic and sustainable farming, and for people who want to change their lifestyles by being healthy and changing the way they eat," says Francine.

"People often have the misconception that organic products are expensive. What they don't see is that products grown and manufactured through the conventional, chemically-laden farming process have hidden costs to the environment and the health of consumers. Rather than organic products being too expensive, conventional products are actually too cheap. Organic products reflect the real costs of fair production," explains Chin-Chin.

He says that organic farming enriches the soil directly and does not harm the agricultural system.

"It is sustainable because it does not depend on chemicals to grow crops. Rather, it works side-by-side with nature. For example, we plant marigolds around the farm as natural pest repellents as well as sunflowers that attract beneficial insects to prey on the pests. Organic farming is also adaptable to climate change since organic soil absorbs up to three times more water, making it more capable to withstand droughts."

Fresh Start was born at a time when volatile world sugar prices have led many Negrense landowners to diversify from sugar-led production to alternative industries such as organic farming. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis had left Ramon Uy, Sr., Chin-Chin's father, in total bankruptcy because he was unable to pay the high-interest loans his foundry business generated. But through his invention of the RU Shredder in 1999, designed to convert solid waste into compost or organic bedding materials, and the passing of the Philippine Ecological Solid Waste Management Act (RA 9003) in 2000, he found renewed success and a wealth of potential business opportunities just waiting to be tapped in the organic market.



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"That started everything. We saw an opening in the market with our technology that is efficiently able to produce organic vermicast, the number one fertilizer in the world. I knew then that this technology will revolutionize the agriculture industry," says Ramon Uy, Sr.

In 2005, the local governments of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental signed a memorandum of agreement committing Negros Island to become a leading organic producer in Asia. With government support, Fresh Start received its organic certification in 2010 from the Negros Island Certification Services (NICERT), the first organic certification body accredited in the country in compliance with the Organic Agriculture Act.

"Negros has always been dominated by big sugar planters, and small farmers have always been looking for their own niche. We have found it in organic farming, and this is their opportunity," says Chin-Chin.



"We give them the fair or premium price for their produce, contrary to the low price they are usually offered by middlemen. We train them to break free from the dependence on chemical inputs by teaching them how to make their own compost and providing them with start-up technology. As farmers they are the first to wake up to work, but they are also the poorest in society. We empower them because without them, all of us will starve," he adds.

Now, as one of the most active advocates of the organic movement in the province, Chin-Chin serves as the president of the Organic na Negros! Organic Producers and Retailers Association (ONOPRA), which facilitates the partnership of retailers with different organic suppliers in order to meet the growing demand for organic goods.

For him, the good thing about Negros organic producers is that they are consolidated, which makes them capable of producing bigger volumes than otherwise possible.

"When you go organic, it won't work with just the private sector alone - it needs to be multi-sectoral. Private producers, the government, the support of restaurants and local consumers, the Church - these sectors all need to be present. For our part, we can share our technology, but it will only catch on if different sectors cooperate."

Next year, Fresh Start will join other organic producers showcase their products in the Negros Occidental pavilion of the International Food Exhibition (IFEX) Philippines 2013, the country's biggest export-oriented food event.

Slated on 16 to 19 May 2013 at the SMX Convention Center in Pasay City, IFEX is organized by the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions (CITEM), the Philippines' export marketing authority, and the Department of Agriculture - Agribusiness Marketing Assistance Service (DA-AMAS), which helps the country's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) market their farm produce and processed products.

"We joined IFEX to gain more exposure for our growing set of products, and because we believe the future for organic goods is very bright. The Philippines has a huge potential to be very competitive in this industry because we are essentially agriculture-based. We have a large workforce in rural areas who can be empowered





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to go organic. We also have a very diverse and rich culinary heritage with different kinds of exotic products such as fruits, cacao, coconuts, heirloom rice, and coffee that's only grown here in the country," says Chin-Chin.

With Negros Occidental as the show's partner province, the pavilion is the culminating promotional activity for these enterprises after they undergo an intensive coaching program led by CITEM to increase their competitiveness in the local and global markets.

Global market research firm MarketsandMarkets (M&M) claims that the global organic F&B sector is expected to grow from US\$57.2 billion in 2010 to US\$104.5 billion in 2015.

For more information on IFEX Philippines, contact CITEM's Vicky Arellano at tel. nos. 8312336 or 8312201 local 277. You may also email [ifexphilippines@citem.com.ph](mailto:ifexphilippines@citem.com.ph) or visit [www.ifexphilippines.com](http://www.ifexphilippines.com).

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