

Infinite Herbs' Colombian production applies various means for the same end

By TAD THOMPSON

BOGOTA, COLOMBIA — On one fresh herb farm, visitors must don sterile surgical scrubs before entering a super-high-tech greenhouse. Inside, harvesters in blue scrubs and armed with sterilized scissors are suspended over the crop, hovering face down above broad rows, comfortably reaching a few inches to clip basil.



Sergio Gutierrez, a grower-partner of Infinite Herbs, at his Cota, Colombia, farm with Dalmiro Rodriguez, operations director for Infinite Herbs in Colombia.

On another herb farm, a rabbit hutch is at a corner of the property for the purpose of gathering waste that falls or flows from beneath the animals' cages. Sheep and goats graze outside the more rustic greenhouses to provide a very green environment for producing exports.

The two farms each produce certified-organic herbs for the U.S. market. Infinite Herbs has sister offices in Miami, FL, and Everett, MA, and the firm will soon open a mid-Atlantic facility.

The *Produce News* toured these and other Colombian operations Feb. 8-11 with Camilo Peñalosa, vice president of business development at Infinite Herbs, which has 65 long-term grower partners in Colombia.

The Infinite Herbs farms on the tour were within a three-hour drive of Bogota. Mr. Peñalosa noted that Infinite Herbs "is not in the real estate business," so it chooses to partner with growers who make their own farmland arrangements. From its office and packinghouse in Bogota, Infinite Herbs provides growers with technical assistance from Dalmiro Rodriguez, operations manager of C.I. Agroaromas Ltda. of Bogota, a sister company of Infinite Herbs.

Infinite Herbs provides the packaging, market information and transportation services for the growers. In essence, Infinite Herbs is involved in all aspects

of the herb business beyond farming.

The high-tech operation, with its floating harvesting beds, is detailed in the story beginning on page 1.

Moving beyond dairy

A broad contrast to this operation is one that belongs to Alejandro Villamil, whose family began dairy farming in Colombia's Ubaté Valley around 1777.

To this day, dairy is so important that the town of Ubaté has a statue of a dairy cow at the city gates. But in recent years, Mr. Villamil has worked to find a more lucrative use for portions of old family land. In 2003, he first entered organic herb production. Over the last two years, he joined a partnership in selling a wide herbal variety to Infinite Herbs. Mr. Villamil said that his organic production has tripled in that time. He has the land to again triple production.

Mr. Peñalosa said that, like all of his long-term grower-partners, Mr. Villamil has GlobalGAP certification (for Good Agricultural Practices).



Dolly Nuñez and Camilo Peñalosa discuss herb production in Ms. Nuñez's basil field.

Infinite Herbs is involved in technical support, farm supervision, postharvest handling and providing packaging materials, transportation and marketing.

"Any agricultural practice done on the farm is at the recommendation of our staff," he said. "We visit every farm at least two times a week with our own technical people. And we

are always looking to grow with partners for the long-term."

Mr. Villamil possesses food-safety certifications from Colombia, the United States and Europe, and the farm has started to work on a certification from Japan.

Most of Mr. Villamil's production is in greenhouses. Mr. Peñalosa said that rosemary in general is a very slow-growing crop and long-living shrub, so greenhouse rosemary production is not customarily a good investment.

Mr. Villamil showed his rabbit hutch and the simple use of trays below the cages to channel excrement. Rabbit waste is added to the farm's compost pile, which is properly maintained according to organic industry standards. The compost pile includes waste from goats and sheep that trim the grass outside the greenhouses. The compost pile also includes herbs that for one reason or another are commercially harvested but not shipped to market. Mr. Rodriguez said that leaving remnants of an old crop in a greenhouse is an invitation for disease problems. The finished compost product is used as organic fertilizer.

From housewife to grower

Another of Infinite's grower-partners is Dolly Nuñez, who had a comfortable life as a housewife but decided she would be happier making her own money. Two years ago, she began her own conventional basil farm, and this year her basil field production is up to 75 acres. She said that she usually cultivates 13 acres at one time, leaving the rest to grow legumes, thereby revitalizing soil nutrients. The farm produces fresh basil for Infinite Herbs throughout the year.

Ms. Nuñez's farm is about 1,200 feet above sea level — much lower than most farming partners affiliated with Infinite Herbs. She grows sunflowers on her farm because sunflowers are sensitive to a lack of moisture. She said when her sunflowers start to look droopy, it is an indication that water is lacking and the drip-irrigation system must be



Jesus Alarcon, a partner in Inversiones el Bambú Ltda., with Camilo Peñalosa, a partner and vice president of Infinite Herbs, and Mr. Alarcon's partner Julian Garcia. Mr. Peñalosa is working with the growers to move their greenhouse emphasis on floral greenery to fresh herbs and baby vegetables.

checked and perhaps turned degrees F for a few hours. on in the basil fields.

Chives and more

Near Cota, Colombia, Sergio Gutierrez is an Infinite Herbs partner, producing conventional and organic tarragon, mint and chives. Mr. Gutierrez, who is also a partner in the aforementioned high-tech greenhouse operation, has field production of conventional rosemary at his Cota farm.

Mr. Gutierrez has field and greenhouse production. To qualify as certified organic soil, dirt was brought to the greenhouse from the abutting mountain. The greenhouse is certified to have 100 percent organic production. Beyond herbs in the greenhouse this winter, Mr. Gutierrez is experimenting with French bean production for Infinite Herbs.

Cota has an elevation of 7,355 feet and is 4.8 degrees north. This gives the farm very consistent high temperatures throughout the year, although in January and February, nighttime temperatures will occasionally fall as low as 29

Baby vegetables in the mix

In Tenjo, Colombia, Infinite Herbs is working with growers Jesus Alarcon and Julian Garcia to produce not only fresh herbs but also baby vegetables.

The growers' farm, Inversiones el Bambú Ltda., traditionally has grown floral products, such as baby's breath and statice. The growers feel there is a limited future for such items, so they are shifting production to more profitable items.

Mr. Peñalosa is interested in developing baby vegetable sales for Infinite because that category is generally purchased by the same buyers that order herbs. In February, the growers were testing production of baby carrots, baby green leaf and red leaf lettuces, baby yellow squash, peas, snow peas and French beans.

Mr. Alarcon started his company in 1983. "I've always grown flowers and now we are changing to herbs and vegetables. The flower business, I think, is not as good. The world needs food, not flowers, at the moment."

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