

# *From Field to Plate*



Years ago, he never would have thought that such a small piece of technology would become such an important part of his life. Today, he never leaves home without it.

"I am very well-known for this little black earpiece," Bernie Thiel, owner of Sunburst Farms and Gordito's Mexican restaurant, said. "It's probably my trademark."

With his family owning and managing two farms and a restaurant, work seems to follow Thiel wherever he goes.

"It really has to be something you love and really enjoy doing, because it is pretty demanding as far as time is concerned," Thiel said.

That love for farming that he refers to seems to have been running through the Thiel bloodline for generations now. In 1939, Thiel's father and four brothers moved from farming

potatoes in Idaho Falls, Idaho, to the Hereford area and in 1940 they harvested their first crop of about 200 acres of potatoes using only a two-row tractor.

"They were very hard workers," Thiel said. "They really loved what they did as far as the farming was concerned."

In 1972 is when Thiel really started focusing on farming and purchased the land where Sunburst Farms now stands. It began with 20 acres and has now grown substantially to between 800 and 900 acres.

Sunburst Farms grows produce that includes fresh market squash, turnips and mixed vegetables such as black eyed peas, tomatoes, okra, corn, cucumbers, cantaloupes, five different varieties of peas and four different varieties of peppers. Thiel said they are one of the largest producers of fresh market squash in Texas.

However, Sunburst Farm's success does not come without its fair share of obstacles.

"The weather can be a big hassle to us," Thiel said. "That's probably one of our biggest problems."

In Lubbock, farmers are forced to face the hail and high winds that often come with the changing weather conditions. Although this is a major issue they face, the weather is not their only problem.

"Then of course you have the labor situation," Thiel said. "It is obviously not easy to get people to do what we are doing here seven days a week."

There are approximately 50 people that work on the farm during harvest season and about 12 to 15 during the offseason. These workers pick all of the produce harvested by hand. This is a lot of work for 50 people who will often work 10 to 12 hours a day during harvest in order to get it all done.

Needless to say, Thiel said this is a very hard business to be a part of. But even with these obstacles, they decided not to stop at just the farm.

In 1990, the Thiel family opened up Gordito's Mexican restaurant, which closed in 2000 and

reopened in 2010. Thiel said his brother had been in the restaurant business for 50 years and decided to open up a Mexican restaurant in Lubbock that would showcase some of their

*"It's all a challenge. That is why I absolutely love it."*

family recipes and use vegetables from their farm.

"Gordito's is different from other restaurants in town because it is owned and operated by a local family," Thiel said. "Also, not many restaurants in town use locally grown produce, much less produce that they themselves have grown."

However, more restaurants in the Lubbock area are slowly joining in on the "local movement." Matt Williams, regional field representative for the Texas Department of Agriculture, has been dealing directly with these restaurants that are beginning to use fresh, locally-grown produce for a number of their entrées.

He currently helps with the marketing for about 10 of these restaurants in the Lubbock area including The Texas Tech Club, Manna Bread and Wine, The Funky Door, The Overton, Las Brisas and Top Tier Catering. Most of these restaurants are getting the locally grown produce directly from the Lubbock area, unless it is out of season which they then branch out to other parts of Texas.

"I think we are going to start seeing a lot more locally-grown food in restaurants," Williams said. "They are of higher quality, have less transportation costs, and the customers are beginning to want a more local flavor and know exactly where their food is coming from."

This is why Gordito's has been using these benefits to their advantage for years. During harvest season, fresh tomatoes, squash, onions and peppers are taken from the farm to the restaurant to be used in some of their signature dishes.

The rest of the vegetables harvested are shipped out to grocery stores in all of the major metropolitan areas in Texas, including the Dallas/Fort Worth area, San Antonio and Houston. These vegetables can be seen in H-E-B, Brookshire's and United Supermarkets. This is a large population that they deliver to, with all three cities being in the top ten largest cities in the United States. Thiel said they do not intend to expand their distribution any more in the future.

"I don't have any reason to expand or get any bigger," Thiel said. "I just want to do a good job at what I'm doing and make sure it's the best out there."

Thiel said that the quality of their product is one reason they have been able to continue working with some of the same customers for over 35 years.

"It is a big challenge working against the rest of the country as far as their product and our product," Thiel said. "So we have to make sure we are doing our job right."

For this reason, Sunburst Farms is one of the few vertically integrated farms in the state of Texas.



This means that they do every aspect of the planting, farming, picking, packaging and shipping on their own.

"We have our workers who plant, pick and package all of the vegetables for shipping," Thiel said, "and own two shipping trucks of which we keep one on the road to Dallas at least three times a week."

As if that does not keep the Thiel family busy enough, they also have a second farm in Carrizo Springs, Texas, where they have been growing turnips for 22 years. They will work at the Lubbock farm until December and then move down to the Carrizo Springs farm in February to begin planting and harvesting. They started this farm to keep income coming in year-round.

While the average workday is nine to five, Thiel said it is nothing for him to work from five in the morning until dark during harvest season. Working that many hours does not exactly leave Thiel the amount of time off that he wishes he had.

"I try to take off-time, but I mean really off-time, no," Thiel said. "As long as we are harvesting or have something to sell, I am never really off. I mean

I can go out of town but I still have to keep in touch and manage everything."

That is where his little black earpiece comes in to play such an intricate role in business. Even with his earpiece practically glued to his ear every day, Thiel said he would not change what he does for anything in the world.

"It's a lot of fun to plant the seeds, watch them grow, then market and sell them," Thiel said. "It's all a challenge. That is why I absolutely love it." **T**

