

South Florida CEO

December 2004

Budding Sales: FIU marketing professor Andrew Yap grows the family business.



Organic Growth

One Liberty City fresh produce company is a statewide success while giving back to the local community in the form of jobs.

■ **L. George Yap is a big believer in second chances.** The Jamaican born son of Chinese immigrants got his when he came to Miami in 1976.

Undereducated and unskilled when he arrived, Yap had a young family to support and few prospects for work. Borrowing from relatives and friends, he scraped together \$15,000 to buy a business. The criteria: anything he could afford. Yap took a chance on a bankrupt bean sprout company — a business he knew little about. But he learned. Today the CEO's Liberty City-based Leasa Industries is Florida's largest producer of bean sprouts and is set to post sales of \$5.7 million this year.

Yap, in turn, has been doling out second chances to employees along the way.

His employee base is ragtag: former substance abusers and convicts, welfare mothers and school dropouts. But, says

Yap, that is part of the reason he does business in Miami's impoverished inner city.

"These people become the best workers when they are given a chance," says the 63-year old entrepreneur. "I got a second chance and they should too. I don't care what they did before. Once they walk through my door they have a clean sheet."

Today, Leasa employs 60 area residents. Some, such as production manager Lincoln Williams, have been there nearly 20 years. "He taught me how to grow sprouts, and everyone in the family treats me with respect. I appreciate that," says Williams.

Most other businesses overlook Liberty City and similar disadvantaged neighborhoods, but doing business there has its advantages. Because a minimum of 35

percent of the company's workers reside in the area — considered to be below the national poverty level — the federal government designated Leasa an enterprise and empowerment zone. That classification allows the company access to a variety of grants and subsidies.

With a \$1 million subsidized loan from the Miami Dade Urban Task Force, another \$1 million from the Miami Dade Empowerment Trust and a \$1.5 million

Economic Development Initiative grant from the federal government, Leasa expanded operations in

July to a new, state-of-the-art, 65,000 square-foot facility.

Here the company pumps out 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of bean sprouts a week for customers such as Publix and Winn-Dixie supermarkets as well as Wal-Mart Super Centers. A far cry from the 20 pounds of sprouts Yap produced on his own during his first year in business.

Todd Harms, a produce buyer for Lakeland-based Publix Supermarkets Inc., says, "We've built up a good working relationship with Leasa," which supplies the company 1,700 cases of sprouts a week for 830 of its stores. "They're our only provider of sprouts," Harms says. "They

MARKETING

Clips From:

**O'CONNELL
&
GOLDBERG**

understand how we do business and the quality is excellent.”

Leasa expanded its offerings to include packaged, fresh cut vegetables for stir-fry, bok choy, wonton wrappers and fortune cookies, among other items. Tofu is also on the list. In the new facility’s tofu manufacturing area, employees preside over massive bins of soaking soybeans that later are pureed, cooked, pressed, cut and packaged. Leasa is the top manufacturer of tofu in the state.

These days Yap is taking more of a back seat role in the company while son Andrew, its chief operating officer, handles day-to-day operations. The younger

Yap, who works fulltime and serves as an adjunct marketing professor at Florida International University’s College of Business Administration, has brought his strategic marketing and management expertise to the organization.

“I have to take this company to the next level,” he says. “To do that you have to have a methodical strategy.”

Since taking the helm five years ago, the 38-year old Yap orchestrated a number of changes including an expansion of the tofu line, adding vegetables, cilantro and a spicy version to the product mix. Sales have grown accordingly, though Yap declined to say by how much.

In the new facility, Yap aims to double both capacity and number of employees to bring sales up to \$10 million by 2006. The professor says increasing market penetration and new market development should help the company reach its goal. He is already working toward expanding distribution in the Southeast, and is pursuing department of defense contracts. In the pipeline, too, is a new line of soy desserts including tofu-based cheesecakes and cookies.

“We’re in a great position,” he says. “People are focusing on vegetables. Everyone is trying to eat healthy.”

— *Barbara Perkins*

