

## Startup satisfies chefs' hunger for locally grown, organic food

By Nancy Dahlberg  
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Daniel Lessem won second place in the FIU Track of the Business Plan Challenge for his plan is to get vegetables from the farm to the chef. Here, he visits the Homestead Farmers market and collected some fresh vegetables.

South Florida restaurants would offer more locally grown produce on their menus if only there was an easier way to get it. That's what Daniel Lessem, a chef himself, has heard over and over.

Lessem won second place in the Business Plan Challenge FIU Track for his plan to supply these restaurants by working with micro-grower partners. His company, called Urban Forager, would do the "foraging" so restaurants themselves would not have to expend staff time or energy to do so.

Now, small organic growers typically sell their products in farmer's markets and to subscribers who buy weekly "shares." They aren't set up to service chefs who need deliveries at least three times a week and an efficient ordering system

where customer service is key, says Lessem.

"Chefs know that consumers are demanding healthy food and they know that it would benefit them if they could tout locally grown on their menus, but it is completely inconvenient to try to run a business and at the same time try to source and locate all the products. There is a real problem that Urban Forager is going to solve."

Currently, his research has found, high-end restaurants that do their own foraging have to pass on the added costs to the patrons, something moderately priced and family restaurants can't afford to do. He wants to change that. "That's really my goal. That's what gets me really excited about this business. Right now those customers are priced out of the organic market," Lessem says.

Using Urban Forager's model, Lessem can offer moderate as well as high-end restaurants more accessibility to more growers through economies of scale by buying in bulk with less packaging waste and no need for restaurants to own or lease refrigerated trucks.

"Urban Forager has identified a great market opportunity and innovative approach to help restaurant owners and chefs offer fresh local produce on their menus. It is a real challenge for these businesses to meet the growing demand by their customers for fresh, local and green," says John Fleming, one the Business Plan Challenge judges.

Urban Forager is green through and through, with plans to use hybrid-electric vehicles and small

“zip cars” for foraging and transporting, reusable bins for foraging, an energy-efficient pickup schedule and solar-powered warehouse space.

At the front lines of his business will be what Lessem calls “go-getters.” More than drivers, they will be encouraged to forge relationships with chefs, educating them on the best options out there for their menus. Lessem plans to hold monthly workshops involving growers and restaurants to keep everyone abreast on what’s new.

Lessem, who has an MBA from FIU and degrees in Food Service Entrepreneurial Management and Culinary Arts from Johnson & Wales, has also owned and operated a mobile entertainment company called Traveling Chefs, has been an executive chef at fine-dining establishments, and has managed large food service operations. Most recently, he worked in restaurant management, corporate marketing and research and development for Pollo Tropical for nearly eight years. “Working with the capable leadership of Pollo Tropical really helped me refine my skills as a food service professional in the industry at large.”

But in 2010, “it was time for me to get going on my own dreams,” says Lessem, a freelance chef who works trade shows, events and conventions as well as gigs as a private chef to help pay the bills while he develops Urban Forager.

Lessem is still in the research phase of his startup. In fact, his original plan was to open an urban farmer’s market and café but in doing research for that concept — and in writing his business plan for this contest — he discovered how difficult it would be for him to find and buy the products he would want to offer. When talking to chefs and growers, he discovered a widespread need in the market for a micro-distributor. He shifted gears.

Lessem is in the process of incorporating. He will be attending the Florida Organic Growers Association gathering in August to get a better grounding in the grower end of the business. He’s also looking into vehicles and warehouse space.

“I want to set up all the infrastructure right from the get-go. ... so i can really be a lean and green operating machine and because I think it would be more attractive to investors in the long run.”