

Ram's Farm: A Q&A with Rafa Crevoshay

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Rafa Crevoshay is a certified crop advisor and principal at AgSustain, which handles the sales and distribution for Ram's Farm. Founded in 2005 by Crevoshay and Haim Ram, Ram's Farm is located in Baja California Sur, Mexico, and specializes in growing organic heirloom tomatoes and organic bell peppers. OPN recently caught up with Rafa for a conversation about Ram's growing operation, its customer base, the history of heirloom tomatoes, and more.

What is the history of Ram's Farm?

I met my partner Haim Ram a little more than 16 years ago. He had been farming in Baja conventionally and was ready to make a change to organic production. He wasn't very satisfied with the results of conventional farming (the market was certainly a factor in determining that), and he really appreciated that organic farming is divorced from toxic industrial chemicals. At the time, I was partnered with an investor, and we were looking for opportunities. Haim was a good fit, so we funded him and got him started.

As Haim initiated production, it became clear that he didn't have the other pieces of the puzzle put together—namely what happens to the product after it's grown and harvested. So I agreed to sell it, and we've been partners ever since.



Haim Ram, Founder, Ram's Farm



Was it difficult for Haim to make the transition from conventional to organic ag?

No. He had a specialist whom he followed and from whom he obtained composting knowledge and some additional crop management skills, but Haim had many decades of farming experience. He had farms in Israel (he left there in about the mid-'80s), and he worked in Jamaica, Florida, and wound up in Colombia for about 10 or 12 years before coming to Mexico. His preference—what he loves to grow—are tomatoes and bell peppers, and that's what he specializes in now as an organic grower.



Ram's Farm organic heirloom tomatoes

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Can you tell us about Ram's organic heirloom tomatoes?

The heirlooms are a very unique story in that heirloom tomatoes were generally the standard tomato in this country prior to World War II. After World War II, there was a huge sea change. I call it the three "S"s—superhighways, suburbs, and supermarkets. Those things attracted the breeders of tomatoes to create a new kind of tomato—the LSL, a long-shelf-life tomato. It's a tomato that can be picked at full color and stays firm for weeks and weeks and weeks. LSL tomatoes were very attractive to the buyers at the new supermarkets because they could ship them across the country, put them on the shelf, and not worry about them decaying.



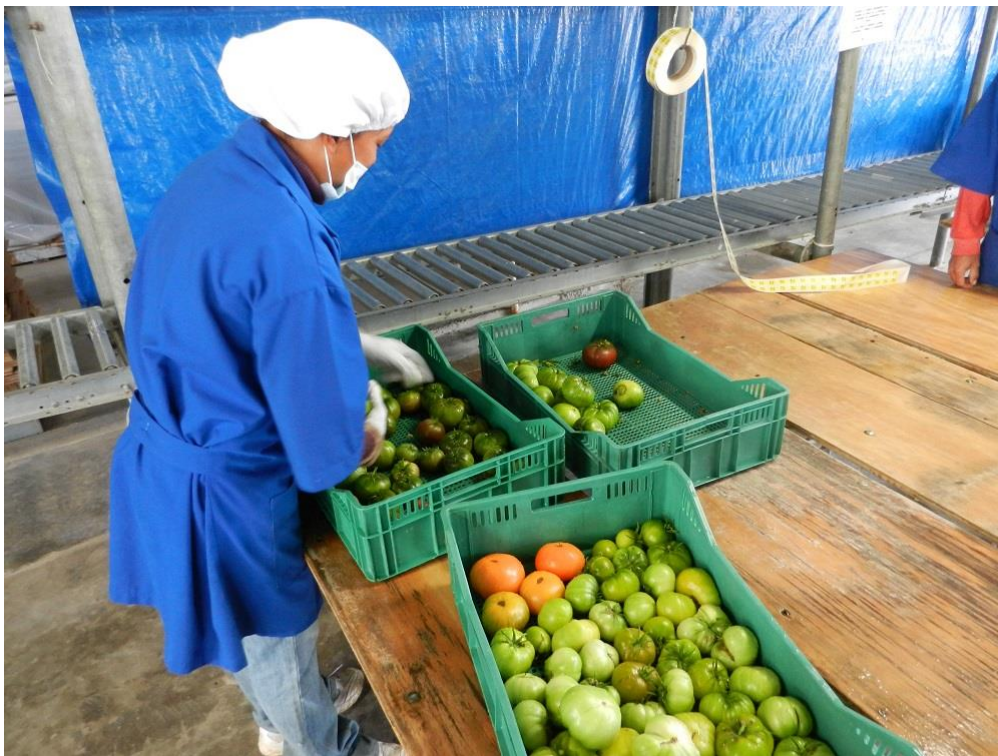
Ram's Farm organic heirloom tomatoes

So the LSL became the standard tomato of the United States, and generations have eaten that. The problem is it tastes like crap. When we give people a chance to sample our heirlooms (we currently offer four varieties—red, purple, yellow, and green), invariably we get a reaction, “Wow, that's what a tomato tastes like? I've been eating this other junk for years that has no flavor.” So the flavor distinction provided us with a market opportunity. Consumers recognize the quality difference in heirlooms—they love them!

"[Haim's] preference—what he loves to grow—are tomatoes and bell peppers, and that's what he specializes in now as an organic grower." - Rafa Crevoshay

Are there challenges with shipping and selling heirloom tomatoes given that they're different from the LSL tomatoes you described?

A feature of heirloom tomatoes is that they need to be shipped, handled, and consumed within a relatively compressed time frame—not hugely compressed, but relatively. And another thing that needs to be understood is that by the time these tomatoes get to the shelf, they are often a bit tender, which means they're good and ready to eat. So the criteria that are used to rate LSL tomatoes don't apply to heirlooms. If LSL tomatoes were found to be tender on the shelf, they'd go in the trash. So we have to educate produce managers and consumers to appreciate the difference. Heirlooms are not to be compared with conventional tomatoes in *any* sense.



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When are your organic bell peppers and tomatoes available, and can you give us some insight into Ram's Farm's growing methods?

They are available December through June. We have almost 35 net houses that are one acre each in size, and they are the method of choice for us. The nets filter the

sun, exclude insects, and can be readily moved around as needed, which is very helpful because our area in Southern Baja is very prone to hurricanes.

The real key to Ram's Farm's healthy crops is that the plants are watered with an organic tea that has several components to it—cow manure, fish emulsion, molasses, humic acid, *Bacillus subtilis*, and kelp meal. It's very nutritious for the plants, and the results are good.

"The flavor distinction provided us with a market opportunity. Consumers recognize the quality difference in heirlooms—they love them!" - Rafa Crevoshay

Who are your customers?

That is continuing to change. When we started out, we focused on the vendors who were either dedicated to organics or had some kind of specialization in it because they appreciated what we had—companies like Veritable Vegetable, Pacific Coast Fruit/Pacific Coast Trading, Jimbo's, and Ocean Beach People's Organic Food Market. Other more traditional vendors were not so receptive because they didn't value the organic thing. They would say, "Look, this is what we're paying. We don't pay a penny more for organics." But that's all changed!



Haim Ram, Founder, Ram's Farm

Now our customer base has broadened to include companies such as Specialty Growers, a foodservice distributor in San Diego, and NorCal in Sacramento. And occasionally, we'll get some business with Veg-Fresh in Los Angeles, which is a big volume tomato supplier to Vons and the bigger chains. They use our heirlooms more and more. So the whole landscape is changing, and it appears to be an irrepressible trend. Organics has no predictable limit at this point—so away we go!