



Elizabeth Gallo, a Ridge to Reef Farm apprentice, left, serves a customer, S.J. Monk, on Saturday at the Ridge to Reef "Farm-Tienda" farm stand on Mahogany Road at the Lawaetz Museum in Frederiksted.

Tom Eader

“Farm-Tienda” farm stands aid local farmers, provide access to fresh food

TOM EADER
Bureau Chief

ST. CROIX — While traversing the roadways from east to west, motorists are likely to come across one of The Big Island’s “Farm-Tienda” farm stands that could be selling any variety of locally-grown produce in season as well as value-added products.

The farm stands, awarded to a handful of eligible farmers who applied on St. Croix by the St.

Croix Foundation through a grant from Coca-Cola, serve their intended purpose to support farmers recovering from the back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes of 2017 — Hurricanes Irma and Maria — to help stabilize and expand their businesses.

The farm stands also allow residents and visitors to purchase locally-grown produce or value-added products, providing an alternative to indoor, congested groceries during the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic.

Another special purpose of the “Farm-Tiendas” is that they are steel containers designed to be outfitted with solar panels, Wi-Fi and potable water to serve as resiliency hubs for neighboring communities in the aftermath of future storms.

The St. Croix Foundation received \$100,000 from The Coca-Cola Company to replicate a project Coca-Cola offered on Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria



Tom Eader

The Ridge to Reef Farm “Farm-Tienda” on Mahogany Road at the Lawaetz Museum in Frederiksted offers a variety of organically-grown produce as well as value-added products.

to aid “mom-and-pop” small businesses by providing “Pop-Tienda” container stores (tienda is Spanish for store), according to St. Croix Foundation. While assessing the community’s needs immediately following the storms, the Foundation worked in concert with its nonprofit consortium to include the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition as well as Coca Cola and determined local farmers on St. Croix were one of the most vulnerable populations and, in turn, created economic vulnerabilities in the community. The Foundation and Coca-Cola rebranded the small business container concept into “Farm-Tienda.”

Other sponsors of the “Farm-Tiendas” include Global Giving, The Island Spirit Fund, Cruzan Rum, Southern Glaziers Wine and Spirits and the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture.

Deanna James, St. Croix Foundation president, said the Foundation is committed to building partnerships that nurture resilience in the community, according to a Foundation news release issued in May 2019 to

announce the grant opportunity.

“Through initiatives like the ‘Farm-Tienda,’ we are connecting stakeholders with resources to support their needs as we continue to amplify our platform around social equity,” James said in a prepared statement issued at the time. “It’s truly exciting to pioneer new pathways for addressing long standing issues. Over the next year, the Foundation will be collecting data in order to evaluate the impact of each ‘Farm-Tienda’ on the farmer’s business. This data will help to inform our research on resilience, food security and environmental stewardship in the aftermath of future disasters.”

Agriculture Commissioner Positive Nelson said the “Farm-Tiendas” help local farmers to get their crops directly to market.

“They have a market at their farms thanks to these ‘Farm-Tiendas,’” he said. “We’re hoping someone can duplicate this in the future for other farmers.”

One of the “Farm-Tiendas” was awarded to Sejah Farm, owned

and operated by Dale and Yvette Browne, founders of the Virgin Islands Farmers Cooperative Inc. Yvette Browne said Sejah Farm had intentions of using the farm stand as a mobile market to go

into neighborhoods and accommodate elderly residents in addition to using it on their farm, located on Caspar Holstein Drive near the Midland Road intersection, until COVID-19 came. Now, Sejah Farm uses the "Farm-Tienda" as its business office at the

farm, allowing for paper work to be completed throughout the day while the farm is open six days a week. Those who visit the farm will find safety protocols in place to protect against the spread of COVID-19.

"We're just praying we're able to

get over this hurdle sooner than later, but in the meantime, we'll just continue with our safety measures to make sure we are functioning," she said.

Nate Olive, of Ridge to Reef Farm, was awarded a "Farm-Tienda" that is located at the turnaround at the Lawaetz Museum on Mahogany Road in the rain forest, operating from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. every Wednesday and Saturday. He said receiving the farm stand enabled Ridge to Reef to utilize the space at the Lawaetz property without having to build a structure, noting the "Farm-Tienda" is mobile so it can be moved in the future. A rope is strung up around the front of the farm stand to distance shoppers, who are required to wear face masks when approaching the farm stand. Olive pointed out items can also be brought to the vehicle, noting the farm stand offers great visibility, his customers comment on it and market stand sales have increased.

"It's a safe way to continue getting our crops out and I've been really pleased with it, and it's also made us money," he said. "As a farm business, it's more than just being cute on the side of the road. When you grow the crops, you have to sell them to stay in business."

The quality of food produced by Ridge to Reef Farm, the only certified organic farm on island, is so good S.J. Monk, an island resident, drove from the East End to the West End on Saturday to purchase her produce from the "Farm-Tienda" at the Lawaetz Museum. She said she also likes the value-added products as well as the prices on everything.

"I appreciate these guys a lot," Monk said, purchasing carrots, radishes, cucumber, lettuce, passion fruit and celery, as well as some value-added products. "They provide a quality-level,

clean product that you feel like is much fresher than what you can get in the grocery."

Elizabeth Gallo, a Ridge to Reef Farm apprentice from Pennsylvania, has helped facilitate daily farm operations for the past five months to include planting and harvesting in addition to serving customers from the farm stand.

"This is just what I'm passionate about," she said. "It makes me feel satisfied to be able to provide people with this little bit of joy."

Saerah Meehan, of Misfit Island Munchies, has teamed up with Ridge to Reef Farm to offer her prepared foods. She is not cooking to order like her previous set up due to COVID-19, but the farm stand gives her a place to sell value-added products made with food sourced from Ridge to Reef Farm to include her frozen pork tamales that can be taken home and reheated, as well as jams and jellies.

"This is the most magical place in the rain forest," Meehan said about the "Farm-Tienda." "Having this farm stand through COVID has been the greatest thing that ever happened."

Olive said the timing for Ridge to Reef Farm to receive the farm stand was great because it happened back in March at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We felt like we needed a way to get a lot of our organic produce to people, especially to our neighboring area out west in Fredriksted because there's not a lot of outlets and you have to travel to go to a big supermarket," he said.

Meehan said the farm stand has united the community more than ever, noting it makes social distancing easy.

"We've been able to meet the whole neighborhood and it's just brought our community together," she said.

Genevieve Whitaker for Senator

34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands (U.S.)

PLATFORM

#3

W: genevievewhitaker.com | E: gotv@genevievewhitaker.com | P: (340) 690-2375

Facebook: facebook.com/genevievewhitakerforsenator

#Focused #Determined #Honest



****2020 General Election: November 3rd****

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (REBUILDING OUR ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE)

Capitalization on our natural beauty and resources, cultural diversity and our unique historic positioning to create economic opportunities with geo-tourism as the strategic goal

EDUCATIONAL REVITALIZATION (PUTTING OUR CHILDREN'S HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST)

Revolutionizing our education system to create engaging, impactful experiential and competency-based learning, empowering our young people and creating lifelong learners

HEALTHCARE REFORM (IMPROVING OUR LONG-TERM HEALTH & HEALTHCARE INFRASTRUCTURE)

Reforming our health care systems aimed at improving the quality, value of care, and access