

FARM TO ADD CONVENIENCE

Twin Pond is converting a store next door to offer its distinctive products 12 months of the year.

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 10/12/06

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ASSISTANT BUSINESS

HOWELL — Melissa Kerr of Howell couldn't be happier to hear she soon will be able to buy fresh-baked pies and produce from Twin Pond Farm all year round, now that the business on Route 9 is taking over an old convenience store located next door.

"That's awesome," enthused Kerr, a lifelong Howell resident and longtime shopper at Twin Pond. "Their stuff is so great here."

The store, scheduled to open Monday, will feature many of the typical foods you'd find in a roadside convenience store — milk, coffee, deli sandwiches, chips, etc. But as its newly renovated barnlike exterior and country-themed interior indicate, it's also designed to evoke a traditional farmer's market, both in decor and in products.

And unlike the existing market, an open-air structure that closes in January and February, this one will be open all year long.

"We want to make homemade apple cider doughnuts right before your very eyes," said Chris DiGregorio, part of the family that runs the business.

This is the kind of thing more farmers today are doing, said Charles M. Kuperus, the state's agriculture secretary. It makes running a farm more profitable for farmers, as it shortens the supply chain between the producer and the consumer, he said.

"Family-owned enterprises are always going to adapt," Kuperus said. "It's the same as for any other business. The telephone that's on your belt is very different from the one you had 10 years ago."

DiGregorio and his brothers, Gary and George, are part of a third-generation farming family. "We started working on the farm as soon as we could walk," he said.

In 1923, Italian immigrant Giacinto DiGregorio rented five acres in Brooklyn and started farming, selling his produce in Manhattan. In 1950, the family bought a farm of their own in the Cheesequake section of Old Bridge. Fifteen years later, they sold that farm and moved to a plot of land in Howell fed by two ponds, giving the place its name. Giacinto's son, Angelo, took over.



TWIN POND FARM, HOWELL

Origins date back to 1923, when Giacinto DiGregorio started farming a rented field in Brooklyn. By 1950, the family moved to Old Bridge, and in 1965 they moved to Howell.

The farm market started with a roadside stand on Route 524 in the 1980s. The DiGregorio family opened a market on Route 9 in 1995.

In addition to baked goods and produce, much of it grown on the family's own farm, the business sells plants and home and garden products.

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By the 1980s, Angelo and Evelyn's sons started selling some of the farm's produce out of a wagon on Elton-Adelphia Road (Route 524). That led to the purchase and opening of the current market on Route 9 by 1995, Chris DiGregorio said.

Any expansion plans beyond that were just fantasies until the family got a call late last year from the owner of the Milk & More convenience store located just south of their property telling them that he was looking to sell.

"The opportunity came, and we took the ball and ran," DiGregorio said.

They worked out a deal, and by this past July the DiGregorios started gutting the inside of the store and renovating the exterior, too. A new door and walkway connect the existing market with the new store.

The look, which includes wooden barrels and toy tractors, was deliberate. "We wanted to tie it in with our existing store," Chris DiGregorio said.

They hired Debbie LeMoine, a family friend with 18 years of experience in the deli business, to manage the new store.

The DiGregorios will continue to sell plants and other garden materials through their existing market, and they still have the Route 524 farm stand just off their farm.

Chris DiGregorio wouldn't say how much the family spent on buying the new store and renovating it, but acknowledged it's a risk.

"You keep going, you keep plugging away," he said. "It's a huge investment. You totally stick your neck out. If you don't try, you'll never know."