

Ugly tomatoes produce marinara students will enjoy







DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Karl Dias (below, right) creates tasty marinara from local farm-grown bruised tomatoes.

By Ann Triegeer Kurland | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 10, 2015

BROCKTON — Boxes of Massachusetts-grown tomatoes, blemished, bruised, and misshapen, sit in a chilly storage room at food processor Boston Fresh here. Most shoppers would likely deem them unappealing, though they’re perfectly safe to eat, with flesh that’s dense and

This season alone, Medford food entrepreneur Karl Dias has bought 150,000 pounds of these flavorful but ugly types and trucked them to the processing house. They have come from a half-dozen local farms as close as Ward's Berry Farm in Sharon and as far away as The Bars Farm in Deerfield. Among the hundreds of pounds is a smattering of first-picks, because the bumper crop this year yielded more than some farmers could sell.

Instead of wasting in the fields, the tomatoes will make 18,000 gallons of marinara sauce that Dias

provides for the university dining services at Harvard and Tufts. "These tomatoes have flavor not beauty," says Dias, 47. "Now they're making a product that would not have sold otherwise."

When Dias met two years ago with dining service directors from five universities, he pitched the idea of manufacturing a sauce from second-tier tomatoes. The meeting was organized by Simca Horwitz, program director of the Massachusetts Farm to School Project for Eastern Mass., based in Amherst. The project helps schools and other institutions buy local food, and facilitates their relationships with farmers. Dias's intent to take advantage of a homely bounty aligned with the project's mission. "It's an opportunity to bring extra income to



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Harvard and Tufts signed on and now their cafeterias use the marinara as a starting point for other dishes. “Our goal is to serve quality and as many local products as we can,” says David Davidson, managing director of Harvard University Dining Services.

There’s also pressure on universities for initiatives that are sustainability-oriented, says Julie Lampie, nutrition and marketing specialist for Tufts Dining. “Whatever we can do for the local farming community is beneficial to everyone,” Lampie says. “It’s a win-win for everyone.”

At Boston Fresh, workers hand-sort the tomatoes, then clean, core, and cut out dark spots and bruises. Machinery slices and dices. The prepped tomatoes are sent 2 miles away to manufacturer Flavor First Foods in West Bridgewater. Here, they’re seasoned, cooked, and churned into marinara, and then packaged in 4-pound Cryovac pouches; this year 34,560 of them, each one shelf-stable to last the entire school year.

Flavor First’s owner and chef Gregory Silva worked with Dias and the schools to craft custom recipes low in sodium and sugar. The sauces are bright and lively. Harvard’s is velvety and lightly seasoned; Tufts’ is chunkier and more herb-forward. “The sauce we had before had high fructose,” says Lampie. “And I like that we have our own formulations.”

Dias left a career in software sales six years ago to



first endeavor, which he launched while still working at NetProspex in Waltham, was FATBOY Marinade, a company name he picked to mock himself (although he's lost 60 pounds since then). Stop & Shop sold the brand but, Dias says, "It just languished on shelves."

Besides the marinara, he wholesales Karl's Pizza Kit, a pack that includes two wood-fired pizza crusts, pizza sauce, and mozzarella, which is gaining traction. And he sells salsa to stores and restaurants who in turn sell it under their own labels; those sales are booming. In fact, the marinara idea came to Dias when he was shopping for salsa produce at a Deerfield farm and saw field tomatoes spoiling because the farmer couldn't afford to harvest imperfect ones.

Dias's sauce costs the schools three times what they had previously spent on commercial brands. "It's worth it," says Davidson from Harvard.

Lampie from Tufts says many students are used to processed sauce and now they're getting freshly made. "We're doing the right thing as a university."

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