

5/1/2023

Back to the Beginning

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At this year's Indoor Ag-Con in Las Vegas, keynote speaker and Plenty CEO Arama Kukutai put up a slide early on in his talk with the words: "End of the Beginning." It meant CEA was moving out of the R&D phase and into the commercial scalability and profitability phase. Not all will join in the profitability, and there will be consolidation in the future, according to many people I talked to at the show and since.

In my interview with Matt Ryan, CEO of Soli Organic, he likened the CEA industry to the early days of electric cars, and how many of the designs were innovative and interesting, but ultimately not commercially viable.

It's interesting he said that because about two weeks later I found myself wandering the halls of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., where I saw some of those early electric vehicles. And among the displays of history like America's wars, First Lady dresses and the fight for voting rights, I also saw something else that made me realize while we may be at the end of CEA's beginning, we're moving back to the beginning of food production in general.

It was a display of the history of food production in the U.S. and the impact of the locomotive. Before large modes of transportation, we grew food locally. Of course, it was all weather dependent, which was evident in our tour of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, where cellars, curing meats and pulling ice out of the Potomac helped keep food over the winter and through early spring until crops could grow again.

Back to that museum display: the locomotive, the development of refrigerated cars and creation of cross-country railways made food more accessible from the fertile lands of California to the rest of the U.S. It's a model that we depended on, for better or worse, for more than 100 years.

But now we've come back around to where we started. Growing more local food reduces our reliance on one or two areas of the country, and based on some of the announcements I've heard over the last six to eight months, there are several operations ready to ramp up their footprint to reach more cities across the U.S.

One of those is our cover story subject: the folks behind the Pure Flavor brand of produce. It's a story of quick, but targeted and thoughtful, expansion, designed to increase reach and provide a variety of crop options for retailers and the end consumer, including the first-ever greenhouse-grown melons. You can find that story on page 8.

Another example of expanding their footprint is Soli Organic, a unique herb operation that started out completely field grown and expanded to first move into greenhouses and is now focusing solely on indoor growing for cut herbs and leafy greens, including a move into spinach. Check out their story on page 18.

Of course, expansion can be fraught with challenges and our research team bringing us the Frequently Asked Questions series has a bonus edition on that very topic. Turn to page 14 to read about CapEx, OpEx and potential causes of farm failure.

And, finally, to bring it all full circle, the aforementioned Indoor Ag-Con was a whirlwind three days full of panel discussions, trade show new product finds and side meetings. Get a taste of the show on page 12.