



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast

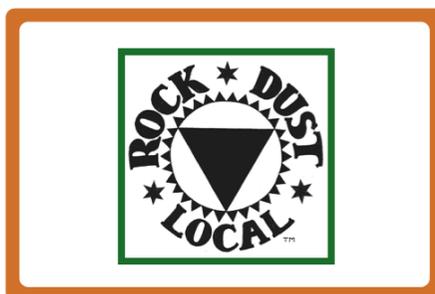
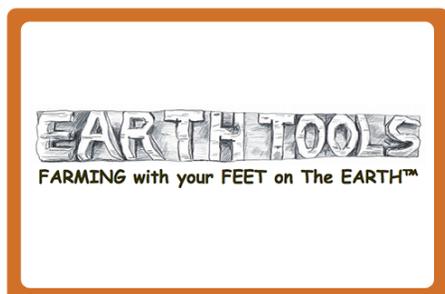


EPISODE 125

Eduardo Rivera of Sin Fronteras Farm & Food on Bootstrapping a Farm Business and Farming while Latino

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Chris Blanchard: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast episode 125. This is your host, Chris Blanchard. Less than 1% of the people farming in Minnesota are Latino and Eduardo Rivera is one of them. His operation Sin Fronteras Farm & Food specializes in producing fresh healthy food for restaurants, grocery stores and a 40 member CSA marketed to the Latino community in Minnesota's Twin Cities. Eduardo started farming with his infant daughter on his back on a quarter acre of rented ground near Stillwater. The farmers grown to three acres of production still on rented ground. We discuss Eduardo's rigorous business planning process and the progress he has made towards his goals as he has financed his farms growth and development.

Eduardo shares the challenges of piecing together infrastructure like greenhouses and cold storage in multiple occasions while he works to finance a land purchase. We dig into the challenges and opportunities that Eduardo was found in marketing his produce especially with regards to making it available through Latino markets in the Twin Cities. Eduardo also provides lots of great details about cilantro and pepper production, his irrigation system and hiring employees and more.

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[00:02:00] Eduardo Rivera, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Eduardo Rivera: Thanks for the invitation Chris. I feel really honored to be on your podcast. Thank you.

Chris Blanchard: I'm so pleased that you could join us today. I know that the sun has finally come out here in the Upper Midwest after a really wet spring. Thank you so much for making the time.



- Eduardo Rivera: Yeah, no problem. This is exciting so I had to make a little bit of time for this.
- Chris Blanchard: Eduardo, I'd like to start off by having you give us a little bit of background with Sin Fronteras Farm & Food. Where are you guys located? How many acres are you farming? How are you selling your produce?
- Eduardo Rivera: Sin Fronteras Farm & Food started in 2014. I started on about a half-acre that year and this is my fourth year in production. I am currently farming at least three-and-a-half acres but I farm three acres. I market to the Twin Cities, St. Paul, mostly Minneapolis through various restaurants and natural food stores like co-ops and then I'm doing a marketing of a CSA directed to a Latino community in the Twin Cities since a lot of the stuff that I grow is in my diet. Me being from Mexico, I grew a lot of the things in the diet so I try to have that option for people of color in the Twin Cities.
- Chris Blanchard: You're located just west of Stillwater, right, which is east of the Twin Cities?
- Eduardo Rivera: West of Stillwater, Minnesota and about 15 minutes from the border of Wisconsin. The Twin Cities are about 25 minutes away from the land that I lease.
- Chris Blanchard: You brought up the subject to the CSA. I know that's something that your farms actually gotten a lot of attention about is this effort to reach into a community that I think is it would be fair to say as traditionally underserved in the CSA marketplace. How was that going for you?
- Eduardo Rivera: It's going pretty well. I mean, I wouldn't say that it's something that I'm still trying work on. I'm not saying that I have 100% of my customers are Latino. It's something that I am still working towards having be mostly Latino families but it's going really well. I mean, I started with six people my first year which then I did a combination of CSA. That's six people farmer's market which is a lot of work and then wholesale and that was my second year in production, I did that. Now, going into my fourth year of production, I have close to 40 members and no longer doing farmer's market because it takes a lot of labor that could take a certain amount of produce and not sell that much produce and just sit there and takes a lot time.
- Chris Blanchard: The restaurant and natural food stores market in the Twin Cities I know is a booming marketplace. That's where I used to do most of my selling of produce when I was farming. Are you focusing on ethnic foods for that marketplace?
- Eduardo Rivera: Yeah. I mean, when I started farming, I quickly realized that I didn't want to farm any bok choy, any Asian greens or just things that I wasn't eating. I quickly realized that I wanted to grow things that were common to me that I could cook all the time or that I knew how to use them in that way I would be able to market that stuff. That kind of worked out really well. My number one seller at my farm is jalapeno. Peppers are something that I market is probably I would say a good chunk, I'm not going to guess on how much of the percentage but I would guess a good chunk. Peppers are a good chunk of my total gross at the end of the year. I grow a lot of hot peppers, lots of tomatillos, lots of cilantro. I



think tend to market those kinds of things that I remember eating and that I remember my grandfather farming.

Chris Blanchard: Did you grow up on a farm?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, I grew up in a small village. I mean, we called it a rancho which is a term for like a really small population of people that live in a little secluded area. My grandfather was a farmer. He grew black beans and pinto beans, lots of dry beans and also lots of maise, lots of corn for masa. We all lived in a courtyard where he had about an acre-and-a-half of stuff that he would grow for the house. That's where I remember, we had orchard there where he had peaches, plums, apricots, [inaudible] I remember having figs. I remember having lemons, limes, grapes. I don't know how he did it now that I think about it because he had no tractor. He had some of the family help him but he did a lot of space and dry bean and corn and then just built it enough for the family to eat.

Chris Blanchard: How did you get from there to being in Minneapolis?

Eduardo Rivera: My father migrated to Arizona in the 80s. My mother stayed behind us with myself and three other siblings. In '92, my mother decided to migrate and to join my dad up in Arizona. We migrated there. I spent the majority of my life in Arizona. When I graduated high school, I moved to Washington State for a couple of years and then I came back and my wife was currently going to school there in Flagstaff, Arizona. That's where I met her. She was originally an indigenous person, native to Minnesota. She's Anishinabe. Meeting her over there, we got married over there. My daughter was born over there in Arizona but she wanted to be closer to her family so we ended up moving to the Minneapolis. We've been here for, what is it? Seven ... yeah, this will be our seventh year.

Chris Blanchard: How did you get started farming in the Minneapolis area?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, it was really her that got me really interested in farming. Like I said, I grew up having that be a normal thing where I grew up and I remember foraging for wild potatoes, foraging for cactus to eat. There's so much foraging happening when I was a kid. I lost track of that when my mother moved us up to the state. When I met my wife, she was really into the idea of eating local and organic and healthy. Part of her friend started a little ... there was a bunch of indigenous people that were doing this in Flagstaff. They were growing corn and squash in this soil that you could literally grow anything.

I got really fascinated and seeing how well the combination of the three sisters did in that soil and how some of the techniques that like the hole where they dig holes and have water down there and like let's it out really slow down. There's lots of technique and I got really fascinated by that. When we moved up here, we found a community gardening spot. I did a couple of years of community gardening and then I finally ... I think the year after we moved here, I did I think internship or not an internship, I can't recall what they call it, apprenticeship on a quarter acre. That was my first year. I farm with my daughter on my back sometimes because I was a stay-at-home dad then.



I was farming with a quarter acre with my daughter sometimes on my back. That was my first year. Yeah, it was literally ... I think when I met my wife that she got me interested in farming. We wanted to buy land and there's no other way that I could figure out, the jobs that I could get are not going to get me a mortgage on a farm. The only to see that dream reachable was to start a business out of farming and hopefully do it well and be successful and try to buy some land. I did my planning on ... I did a three separate, one 5, one 10 and a 15-year plan. I'm currently approaching the end of my five year plan. I'm thinking I'm on track for being able to apply for a loan, having the history, the numbers that the banks need to apply for a loan for a farm at the end of this year. If everything goes well, I'm hoping that I'll start my fifth season at a new spot.

Chris Blanchard: You're on lease plan now?

Eduardo Rivera: That's correct.

Chris Blanchard: Did you work with Minnesota Food Association with getting started or did you just dive in on your own?

Eduardo Rivera: No. I dove it on my own. I did a lot like I research them but it was too expensive. It's like a thousand bucks for a quarter acre and I live in the city and it's a 45-minute drive. On top of that, you can't camp there. They have all the tools. I don't know how people can make it work, man. It seems like it's a very difficult thing to make work so I just took matters into my own hands. I found this land through some nonprofit organization and billing through the land owner and I've been here four years. Yeah, I don't ... the help that I have been getting is from the Land Stewardship Project because I've been part of their Farm Beginnings program. The Farm Dreams, I did that first. Then Farm Beginnings, now on the final one, the Journey person course. Well, I'll be graduating from that in the winter of 2018.

Chris Blanchard: When you started on a quarter acre your first year, you must have financed that startup yourself. You came in, you got the tools and just figured it out.

Eduardo Rivera: Pretty much. See, what happen was that I landed a job three years before I started. I worked at a nonprofit that is also led by indigenous people up here in Hugo, Minnesota. They have a 10-acre farm. Their name is Dream of Wild Health. What happen was that I was working there, I did a year in the kitchen, working with youth from the farm to the kitchen. We would cook meals. Then the following year, I started farming with them three days a week. Again, that's when I kind of just figured that I wanted to do things or start learning more because I asked them to see if the following year I could be more of a process, not the managing process but just learning how to plan.

I wasn't able to get that opportunity. I think they just needed me as labor and I was just ready to get rolling on learning more other than labor. I knew that it took labor to get going on a farm. I would ask that's what our people do. We work hard. I didn't get that opportunity so I just took it into my hands, rented the land and I bought seeds. I rented a stall at the farmer's market and went at it, finance it myself the first year. The beginning of the first year, it was an acre and a third but lost about half an acre of brassicas to the flea beetle because I



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didn't know I was supposed to cover it with raw cover because of flea beetle. I lost a bunch of crops my first year. Yeah, it was a very learning, it was a very much ... I mean, it still has been every year is a learning curve.

Chris Blanchard: Now having grown up to three acres, tell me a little bit about the tools and equipment that you're using for farming?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, I still have some of the same tools when I started. Well, I guess the first year I didn't have rototiller but I have a walk behind rototiller, a big brush mower that I cut my cover crops with and it's basically hand. We do a lot of stuff by hand. This year, I'm hoping to buy a little Kubota from the land owner that I'm renting land from. He has this really nice little tractor that would suit my farm really well. He gave me the keys already and I've been practicing on it. I'm hoping to land that little thing. If I do, I've been gathering a few things through grownup like you said.

I currently now have a better truck. I have a nice Toyota that gets me around the tundra. I've been able to acquire a trailer that I converted into a cooler with a CoolBot that I was able to acquire through a grant. I've been able to finance a lot of the stuff that I've been doing through grants. I've been doing a lot of research. I mean, even that alone, it takes work to be able to write the story, edit it to the likings of the boards that affect your story. Well, yeah, I have a few things that I'm hoping that I'll get me enough especially after buying ... if get this tractor, I'll be able to move some more and be able to start somewhere fresh.

Chris Blanchard: Now, when you talk about financing through grants, what kinds of organizations have you found the grants through?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, I've only gone two grants in my four years. The first grant ... I didn't do my grant my first season, obviously I did that alone and figured it out. The second year, a lot of the co-ops here around town have these like small grant per farmers. One of them is called Lakewinds Organic Food Co-Op I believe. It's Lakewinds, that's what I'd always call it. I think their name is little longer. Then I did a grant with them my second season and I got that. That's what I did the farm journey person course I got the money to do the course for that. Then I skip the season ... no, the following year again, this time the grant ... I went for a little bigger grant and I did that through the Rick Bayless Foundation, the Frontera Farmer Foundation out in Chicago.

Chris Blanchard: Right.

Eduardo Rivera: I got that grant. That grant helped out a lot because with that grant, I was able to buy a lot of landscape fabric that it's the really heavy duty stuff that apparently last for 20 years, that's what they're saying but that helped out my farm a lot with weeding and production to get better yields. That also helped with the cooler. That's what I mean. I think with ... I've been able to that I was with 12,000. Then I think another five with Lakewinds, so like \$17,000 that I have been put out of my pocket to be able to hopefully get me like I said at the end of that fourth year, a lot of the equipment that I'll need to move on to a space of my own because I'm ready for it, man.



This is very stressful having your greenhouse in town, having your land 25 minutes out. Its cloudy part of the morning, you don't want to open your greenhouse, you want to keep it nice and warm but you leave and all of a sudden, the clouds break and it's 120 degrees in the greenhouse and you lose all your peppers. I'm ready to have everything in the same spot.

Chris Blanchard: You're in the process of looking for land right now? How are you going about that land search?

Eduardo Rivera: Oh, just mostly doing it by myself on evenings after farming that I have found to do research on the computer, not much of a computer guy. I just use it because I have to. I do a lot of the search through the Land Stewardship Project. They have that land access stuff and then land watch, people that know people I guess. I haven't been very successful. There was a farm about two hours from here that I was really interested in but it was too far for what I want to do. I grew a lot of hot peppers and even going two hours north is a pretty much ... it's a different for a growing season. I feel like if you don't have the right equipment.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I think about the difference between Madison, Wisconsin and heading from here up to the Twin Cities. I can only imagine what two hours north would do to you. I'm really curious. I ask this as a White male. When we think about farmers here in the Midwest, I don't think most people think about Latinos. They think about White people farming because that's something 99% of farmers at least that get counted are falling to that category. How was your reception been as a person of color, as a farm owner and a farm operator?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, I mean, I think the most simplest way I can answer that is that I'm on your show right now. I don't think I would have gotten that opportunity otherwise. I stand out because ... and that was intention was being a farmer and being out there once I decided to just get myself out there. That was the intention of bringing in the attention of people to know that the people behind agriculture are actually a lot of people of color. You don't really see the farmers of color having their own farms or being managers. I wanted to express that in a way where I can hopefully reach some of my community, some of those farmers that are out there and look at me and say, "Hey, look at that Mexican dude."

I came from Zacatecas out of nowhere who had nothing and started with nothing. I mean, I still have nothing but four years later and I'm feeling pretty comfortable about where I am. If I can do it, I feel other people also gets inspired and do something similar to what I'm doing.

Chris Blanchard: Have you had negative reception in any quarters?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, there's always little strolls when you publish articles and things like that that have those negative, well you better be a citizen of his farming or that was like one comment I got or the other one is that they should build a fence around my farm so that my daughter can't get out. Yes, I've heard some stuff. It's pretty ridiculous. I tend to focus more on positive feedback from the people that I grow my food for. Everyone is really receptive to my ... going to my fourth season, I still haven't had anything rejected, anything sent back that wasn't good



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yet. I take a lot of pride in what I do. I don't let those people, those one out of 500 people ruin my day or get me bothered. I just shove it off, brush it off and keep moving forward. I tried not to get those little distractions to get me off my path.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, I know just from the background research that I did. That it's important to you to be marketing into the communities of color in Minneapolis and St. Paul. You talked a little bit about the CSA, are you working with stores and restaurants on the ... sorry. I have a hard time asking these questions because again, I'm the White guy here. I privileged up the yin-yang.

Eduardo Rivera: It's okay to feel a little uncomfortable. There's nothing wrong with it. I mean, that's just part of being human. It's all right.

Chris Blanchard: Thank you.

Eduardo Rivera: Yes.

Chris Blanchard: I appreciate that. How has it been trying to market to the Latino community in the Twin Cities? What kind of a reception have you had there?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, like I said earlier, it's not a process that I would is totally finished and that I figured out how to market it in my community. No, it's not easy. I mean, my produce is not cheap. Unfortunately, I'm not a nonprofit and I can't have a sliding scale on my CSA or on my wholesale produce. Unfortunately, labor doesn't work that way. Labor doesn't have a sliding scale, you know what I mean. I don't try to take any cuts for anyone. I mean, I feel like everyone needs to pay what our work as farmers is worth. Even that, they should be tipping us because if we're not growing their food, they don't know how to grow it, they ain't going to eat. We should be like servers. We should be getting tips too but that's beside the point.

Chris Blanchard: It's an important issue when food costs are such an issue when people are used to being able to get cheap food.

Eduardo Rivera: Right. That's why it's difficult to market to the community. I mean, I tried several stores in Latino corridor on Lake Street in Minneapolis try to sell my stuff. My tomatillos 375 a pound, they get their stuff I don't know, 10 cents a pound, they sell it at 99 cents a pound. When they see my price, they're like, "No man, I can't sell your stuff." I don't think it's may not be that people can't afford to buy my stuff. I think it's just a deeper problem that people don't make enough money to eat well. I think it's a combination of things. Yeah, definitely it's not easy but I'm definitely trying. I'm not going to give up.

That's what my CSA is for because I was trying to be more of a part of the community and bring in what I love to do. Because for me, farming is not even a job anymore, this is what I love to do and I look forward to doing it as much as possible. I'm always going to continue to be here as an option for when people are ready to make that switch to eating healthy and being okay with paying what it really cost to be healthy.



Chris Blanchard: Have you done anything different with the CSA to try to reach into an underprivileged marketplace?

Eduardo Rivera: I worked with some organizations in the Twin Cities that we bring youth out. My daughter's older school is a nonprofit. Also, they get a share for the youth program. Slowly starting, like you said earlier, you said it yourself, it's the first time at least that I know anyone ... at least in the Twin Cities I try to market to a direct ethnic population of people. I don't think it's like one way street where you just going to have it figured out right away or there's going to be a lot of things that you going to run into that you got to figure out as you go.

For example, my plan for next year is to hopefully do some advertising on the Latino radio stations around town and see if I can get more workers and if I can get more people sign up, just trying to get more active on marketing a different way.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned an indirect competition with nonprofits. I know of at least one, Minnesota Food Association, that's marketing produce in the Twin Cities up there. Has that been a challenge for you to be ... I mean, yeah, I guess to be identifying in a similar way as being an immigrant farmer, a Latino farmer, a farmer of color and to have nonprofit organizations that are also supporting that and marketing and subsidizing to some degree the marketing of that produce?

Eduardo Rivera: I don't think so. I don't really have any conflict with that. I feel like I think those programs are out there for a reason. If they work for people, then that's great. Unfortunately for me, I just figured some of those programs were not the way that I wanted to go. I'm not saying anything that they don't work or nothing like that is just that it might not work for me but it worked for other people. As far as like the marketing, not necessarily. To be honest with you, I've been pretty ... bit marketing has been really not easy but like it's been relatively something that I was able to do pretty comfortable. I think it really started because before I knew I was farming, I was already kind of pretty my stuff and situations where I was going to be farming.

For example, I was working at co-op. I worked at a couple co-ops in town where I was working in the produce departments. I got the meat buyers. I've made relationships with like the co-ops that way. At a different co-op, one of my managers was a chef where one of the restaurants in town and so, through him, I met other chef. The marketing to my wholesale has been really good. That's why I have a little bit of flexibility to try to figure out this marketing to try to reach more community of color in the Twin Cities.

Chris Blanchard: Did working at food co-ops and working in the kitchen at Dream of Wild Health, did that help inform your farming practices?

Eduardo Rivera: Yeah. I think it all had a part of how what I want to be doing at the end. My goal is not to be farming the rest of my life. I'm hoping to start a farm to table Mexican restaurant. I don't think there's one in the Midwest where they're having ... the model is out there but I don't think there's many, many Mexican restaurants that are using local fresh ingredients. That's my end goal in my 15-year plan is to be able to have that restaurant but then having the farm as



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well. Yeah, that's the dream to be able to farm and put my food, be able to jump back and forth if I need to. I'd give myself until 50, 55 to work hard. At least 50, I feel like I'd be pretty good to about 50. By 50, that's what I want to have it set up where I cannot be farming all the time and be focusing on other things.

Chris Blanchard: I think that's smart. For me, the difference between farming at 25 and farming at even 35 but certainly when I closing now on 45 was a lot different.

Eduardo Rivera: Yes, for sure. I'm 35 right now, I started when I was ... four years ago, so 31 when I started. I gave myself that timeline. I said 50 is the max. You got to figure out before then the retirement plan. Hopefully, having that restaurant by the age of 50 and being able to step away from farming and just stepping into a role of managing, not managing but just being in the background, making sure that things work.

Chris Blanchard: How many employees do you have on the farm?

Eduardo Rivera: Let's see, I have two people that come part time three days a week and then I have one person that comes full time with myself full time and then I have three worker shares that come for a day, once a week. Then they come on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I have people here pretty much. The only day that I don't have help quite enough yet is on Fridays. I think we'll be getting another person that will be helping a little bit more because I'm going to be stepping away to the Stone Barn Center for Food & Agriculture for this fellowship coming up in July. Little worried about it but I think it all work out.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about the food and farm fellowship.

Eduardo Rivera: After I came out on the New York Times video, some other people from that organization reached out and I got invited to the conference that they have, the National Young Farmer's Conference. I went to that and it was really full of experience. I met a lot of cool people. Because of that, I got connected to them. They're having a fellowship this year with I guess on the 15th, 14 other people that are going to be coming together for three weeks talking about ... brainstorming I guess about creating an alternative model for the current food system that we have in place right now. It's a combination of farmers, lawyers, doctors, distributors, produce buyers, range of people from across the country that will be like I said together for three weeks brainstorming. It sounds really fun.

Chris Blanchard: You said that's coming up in August.

Eduardo Rivera: Actually, in July.

Chris Blanchard: Oh, okay. What are you doing to get ready for that? I mean, because from a management standpoint, stepping away from the farm for three weeks is ... I mean, a couple of days is one thing, one week is another but three weeks is a long time to be gone.

Eduardo Rivera: Yeah, I thought about that but I don't know, I feel pretty confident that two of the people that are working with me worked the last few years with me so they know pretty much how I run, how we do the things around here. I'm leaving two



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people in charge. One person in charge of the CSA and then another person of the wholesale and the deliveries, I'll be connected every day with them through my laptop. Because there are some of the things that I do through the CSA too is that I barter. I don't sell all my shares. Some other shares I barter. I barter a share with a guy that he writes code.

He was able to put together a website for me that I'm always connected to that I know what the orders are and people can print out their receipts. It's made my life easy by ... I mean, I can't even describe how much. That's in place. I feel pretty confident being connected with them. They know when we do the successions of things. I've pretty much have a calendar with everything that needs to go on the ground. When we have harvest list of the CSA, we more or less already know when our peppers are going to come through because that's what we grow. I don't know. I mean, I feel like I've been trying to put everything in place to make it easy for them to do what we do on a daily basis without me being here.

Chris Blanchard: That's awesome. Just really putting in the advance planning work I think is a lot of what that's all about.

Eduardo Rivera: The important thing is the website because this is my invoice setting system is connected to my website. People just log on to my website. They have a username, a password. When they log in, it auto populates what they order. The thing that I'll be connecting with my guys here is like what they're thinking of availability. We do everything on 250 foot bed so we know that we can get 15 cases of cilantro per bed. There's a lot of things that are already in place would be able to help them send out information to me so that I can update our availability through the website where they just go in there, like I said log in, order their stuff, print their invoice then that system emails me a list of the harvesting list.

Then what I do is I just forward it to my guys to his personal email. He just prints the harvest list for the day and the gal who is in charge for the CSA list then they get that harvest. I feel pretty comfortable. One of the things as a farmer, I don't think you'd be able to function if you don't believe on achieving what you set out for us to do. You got to have faith, you got to trust and ... what that's word? I can't remember the word but there's a saying for that. When it comes back to me...

Chris Blanchard: Okay. All right, tell me a little bit about operating on rented land as you scaled up. What are you doing for infrastructure? You mentioned that you got a cooler that's part of a trailer that you used for deliveries. Do you have an additional packing facility besides that?

Eduardo Rivera: Oh, I wish. There's no infrastructure here that's why I had to get the CoolBot trailer. The only thing that was here when I got here was water, a well. My first year I had to water my plants in the middle of July when it was like 90 degrees with five-gallon bucket. The second year I was like screw that. Everything that I made at first year, I put it into my irrigation system. No, I have no infrastructure. I have no greenhouse. I have no infrastructure, no shed. I mean, I built the shed out of pallet. I think I spend about 100 bucks on other lumber and hardware to put this pallet shed together for all my tools. I bought a big old canvas part, the



ones that you buy or are on billboards. That's what I use for the roof. I covered it with plywood, filled that and it was a long extension so I extended it long enough to fit my walk behind mower and my brush mower and my filler.

Yeah, literally I have no infrastructure out here. That's what I was saying to you earlier. I'm just kind of ready to have everything in one place. There are organization where I work previous years, Dream of Wild Health still allow me to have like maybe one greenhouse table in their greenhouse. I have plants in Hugo, Minnesota. I had plants at one of my employee's house in Minneapolis, plants on my house for two weeks. The greenhouse in St. Paul, plants out here. The CoolBot I just used to store my produce while I'm harvesting, I leave it out here. My final storage is in St. Paul as well at the Good Acre. It's everywhere, man. It's a mess. I don't know how I keep head on my shoulders.

Chris Blanchard: I think you got to be a good manager to pull that off.

Eduardo Rivera: I try. I think I still have a lot to learn.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about doing storage at the Good Acre. I know that Good Acre is ... I've got a little bit of familiarity with it but I know it's something that most of my listeners wouldn't recognize that name.

Eduardo Rivera: The Good Acre is a big organization that's funded by the Pohlads I believe and they're a pretty wealthy family in the Twin Cities. They put this facility together. I mean, it's humongous. It's so nice. They have coolers. They have a kitchen. They have like processings facility, a washing station. It's like a hub where a lot of farmers ... they also run a CSA with us farmers. I'm one of the farmers for their CSA. I sell them a lot of hot peppers and other things, radishes and things like that. Yeah, through them, because it's kind of a hub, I rent about a pallet-size based of cooler at their spot where I do the final before I do my delivery the night before.

It's a cool organization. I haven't utilized the kitchen as much as I would like. Like I said, that is part of my plan at some point but maybe stepping away for these three weeks, depending on how this works. I'll figure out how to step away a little bit more to try to get this side of things going. The land first, we got to buy land first.

Chris Blanchard: How much do you pay for that pallets worth of space? What's essentially a food hub there?

Eduardo Rivera: Right, right. I don't know, I think because other farmers ... I don't know. I don't think that can be disclosed.

Chris Blanchard: Fair enough, fair enough.

Eduardo Rivera: I think I have a special relationship with them because part of their startup process. I also think that they might do a sliding scale. I don't know if they do but I think depending on where you are on your farming experiences and your infrastructure and things like that, I think that's how they charge. It's not much for me, I tell you that. It's very affordable. I know that if I was trying to do that somewhere else, it would be insanely expensive. I'm very grateful for being a



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part of the initial startup and having that base accessible to me at the price that I pay is very nice.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that after your first year farming, you plowed all of your capital back in doing your irrigation system. Can you tell us about the irrigation system there are Sin Fronteras?

Eduardo Rivera: Yes. I mean, the irrigation system is a little crazy. I'm still trying to figure it out. The guy that was here before on this land, his pump is humungous. I think it does 100 gallons a minute. It's just too big for what we were trying to do. What I had to do is I had to buy a separate tank that I could pump the water from the big pump into the tank and then I bought a smaller pump to pump from the tank out to the field. I basically just ... before I notice, what side was that? What's side drip works? It helps a lot to lay out how ... well, I'm more or less got ideas from that website. I kind of figured out to do my stuff in sections and sections that my pump would be able to pump water without having a pressure regulator.

[00:44:00] I don't have any pressure regulator. My pump runs, it has enough pressure to reach my fields everywhere right now. Even currently I opened some new land farther away from the pump and it still does really well. I'm currently setting it up. It's a new area so I'm getting for a couple of couplings to come in from Dripworks and be able to finalize it. I do a combination of drip and Wobblers. I can run drip and Wobblers at the same time if I have a section around they're actually needed. I'll run my Wobblers through there and then on my carrots, I'll put if they need water.

Yeah, that's the thing. I have it set out because I learned my lesson about farming and how much you need water. I put a lot about half of what I made. Half of what I made, I put back into the irrigation system. What I've been trying to do with my farming practices is basically farm the way my grandfather did. He didn't have any kind of fancy irrigation system and so I try to farm with the rain cycles. I have the irrigation system as a backup just in case it goes like this weekend. I mean, we went from like swimming in our fields not being able to get in to plants and do what we got to do to now it's been dry and this weekend is going to be 90 degrees.

That's why I'm waiting for those couplings because my plants are definitely going to need water by the end of the weekend. That's probably how I'm going to be spending my weekend is watering the fields this weekend.

Chris Blanchard: With that, I'd like to stop here and take a break. Get a quick word from couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Eduardo Rivera from Sin Fronteras Farm & Food west of Stillwater, Minnesota.

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[00:47:30] We're back with Eduardo Rivera from Sin Fronteras Farm & Food west of Stillwater, Minnesota. Eduardo, we were talking just a little bit about irrigation before we went on break. You said earlier that you specialize in some crops like cilantro and hot peppers and I thought it would be interesting kind of dig into some of your production techniques and what you're doing to make those crops work especially well for you. Can you walk us through what cilantro production looks like at Sin Fronteras?

Eduardo Rivera:

It's a very simple easy process. I mean, we direct seed into our beds early spring. Our beds are four feet wide. We fit the seed about one, two, three, four, five rows of cilantro more or less. I've seeded it really thickly, really thick so that it's like really dense and you can get a bunch in about half a foot. You get two good bunches out of a foot. Yeah, and then we just try to ... we let it go, we leave enough space in between to do the wheel hoe. We run the wheel hoe a few times before when once it comes up to knock the weeds down once it gets going.

We let it be so it gets to a nice size. Once it gets to a nice size, the weed before harvest we do a good weeding by hand to clean out all the weeds that are right next to the row because everything else the wheel hoe get. Then yeah, we try to get about two bunches per box. The way we market is, I don't know. I mean, I'm not dissing on cilantro from, I guess I am a little bit, from California but I mean, when you look at that stuff, it looks horrible. I feel like I take enough time to do a really good bunch to where people don't mind paying what we charge.

I think I charge about \$15 more per normal case of cilantro at 30 count, I think you could get it probably anywhere from 25 to 30 bucks, mine is 45 bucks. Yeah, I take pride on how we harvest that cilantro and a lot of the chefs like that they can get a bunch from my farm and literally use it from leaves to stem.



Chris Blanchard: You talk about doing really nice bunches with the cilantro. What goes in to the making of really nice bunch? What's your harvest process and what's your definition of a really nice bunch?

Eduardo Rivera: Well, the definition for me of a nice bunch is that you can use a bunch from leaves to the end of the growing tips or the stem. I don't know. I mean, I don't like to leave any growth in the cilantro in the stem. I brush that out. I bunch my stem in my hand but then I grab it a little higher without damaging leaves and then I brush the stem portions and all these little clippings fall off. Some of us keep it, some of it just goes back on the ground. My stems are really clean. There's no growth, small growth. That's where I found that the problem was with cilantro is that when you bunch it, there's a bunch that growth that's like sometimes weeds and cilantro, that's the small growth and that's the stuff that tends to go rotten faster, the stuff around the rubber band which is stuff that is all bunched up.

That goes fast. If you clean all that stuff out and all you have is stem in the rubber band, then your stems can last in a cooler up to a week, even longer. I've had my stuff in coolers longer. I've done comparison where it has the bunch of growth and weeds and stuff in the rubber band and that stuff starts going black before my bunch is due. Yeah, we take a bit extra more time to clean those stems so that there's no growth. In that way, you don't have a problem where you open the box, the first couple bunches are nice but then you start farther in and you start noticing all the black around the rubber bands and to me, I think that's why. I think there's little time to clean it up really well. The stem and rubber band and that just keeps it really fresh.

Chris Blanchard: Are you harvesting each patch of cilantro multiple times or is it just going through the once?

Eduardo Rivera: No. We do two cuttings per bed. I let it grow to a size where the second growth is still done there and so we take most of the stem and the first growth and we chop it and then that leaves the stems of the first growth. Like I said, I seeded it really, really thick. There's stuff that germinates and then there's stuff still germinating when stuff already germinated. The second cutting is the other like the rest of the seed that got seeded in there, like a one ... I used the Earthway seeder but I use the plate for beet. You know how big that is? I don't know if you're familiar with it. I use that to seed it but instead of like doing it, I think I cover every other hole and that tends to seed it really nice and thick band.

It seeds also like a good ... so you don't have too many spaces in between where you don't have nothing basically. It's like a really good solid band the whole way down. Like I said, I do the first cutting and then probably that second cutting will happen a week later. If I cut on a Monday, I'll probably cut that same area the following Monday and I'll cut a different row on Thursday. Then that Thursday area will get cut the following week on the following Thursdays, so we get two cuts.

Chris Blanchard: Then what's your post-harvest handling process?



Eduardo Rivera: If it's really hot, we put it in cold water in the back of the pickup. We bring buckets with cold water and then we ... yeah, so we harvest it and we put it in there. We harvest a box at a time and so once we do that, we bring it into the wash tubs and our tubs have some OMRI approved stuff that we use when use to clean leafy stuff. That's about the process.

Chris Blanchard: Awesome.

Eduardo Rivera: We make sure that the buckets are sanitized before we start harvesting. That's just something to get me going through the spring. I guess people ... I really haven't really labeled myself as specializing in anything really because I grow so many things. Some of the people that I work with, this guy that I sell peppers to that makes sausages for one of the stores that I sell produce to, one of the stores has their own meat department and that guy I've been working with for a while and so, he's like ... in town, we have this guy named or his business name is the tomato king because he does tomatoes really early.

I think they're hydroponic or something like that. They're like the first tomatoes that come out in the season. There's the tomato king. I grew a lot of peppers. I just like growing spicy. My state I believe is like the pepper capital of the Mexico where we grow a lot of peppers. This is something that I really love about, just it kind of reconnected me to being back home, growing lots of different peppers. He was like, "You're the pepper king dude." I was like, "No, I'm not." He was like, "You're specializing in peppers." You just kind of stop that way and so, yeah, my number one seller is jalapeno.

When I first started, I did a lot of research though and it turned out that in Minnesota, the average that we're being eaten was jalapeno, poblano, serrano, which are the most common one. I just started growing those and marketing those. Yeah, those are the ones that I sell but I also grow some special varieties that you can't get that some of the chefs really like. Some of them are trendy now like the shishito and the padrones. I started with those a few years back and the chefs really like them. I grow some of those special varieties this year. I took a trip to Puerto Rico and I brought back some seed. I don't know if I should be saying this.

Anyways, some peppers from down there called aji dulce, so now be able to put recipe in my newsletter of how to make a special sauce that they make in Puerto Rico. I grow different varieties of the special peppers that people like.

Chris Blanchard: Now, Minnesota as we talk, I mean it's not exactly warm in Minnesota for most of the year. The seasons can be fairly short. How are you actually going about producing those peppers?

Eduardo Rivera: We start in the greenhouse that I ... every year is a hassle to try to find greenhouse space but we started greenhouse space, we've started in the greenhouse. What I've been doing after I got that grant from the Farmer Foundation from Rick Bayless is that I put them into that landscape fabric then I cover them with the slitted plastic, real plastic. That helps them a lot to get going. That helps to get them a jump. I end up planting peppers by the end of



mid ... the 20th of May 18, 16 somewhere on there, some of the peppers under that stuff do really well that we have peppers by the first week in July.

Chris Blanchard: Wow. You're taking that plastic off once the pepper start to blossom is that right?

Eduardo Rivera: Where they're slitted and it has ventilation, bugs get in, bugs are always pollinating. They don't come up for a little while. They get pollinated in there. Once we start seeing pods, then we start uncovering it up but they stay in there. It still cools off at night. In the morning, that plastic is slitted so there's a lot of wind ventilation where it's not going to be ... I mean, like I was saying earlier, I lost pepper. I thought I lost peppers earlier a couple of weeks ago in that greenhouse. That's what happened to me. I was out in the field. It was overcasted in the morning so I left it close by two o'clock. It was just like super scorching hot.

I freaking excessively spend down to town try not to get a ticket or arrested. Once I got there, the temperature reading was 120 when I got there. My serrano plants all looks dead. I took a picture of and two weeks later now, I took another picture to put it on Facebook but they're like back alive. I don't know man, plants are so resilient. I think we as humans are more vulnerable and weaker than plants are. I don't think I could have survived a day at 120 degrees and come back from that. Plants teach me a lot. Plants teach me so much every year round. Every year I have doubts about something not working out and man, these plants they talk to you. They really do talk to you if you listen. They're just super, super strong. They just know what they're doing.

Chris Blanchard: You talk to the plants too?

Eduardo Rivera: Some of the time, when it's coming to be blossom season, I tend to encourage them to say like, "Come on, yo, start plotting out. I need those peppers to be selling."

Chris Blanchard: Now, do you prune off?

Eduardo Rivera: Yeah, I do.

Chris Blanchard: Okay good. Do you prune off early blossoms?

Eduardo Rivera: No, I don't.

Chris Blanchard: Well, just as soon as you can gather ...

Eduardo Rivera: [crosstalk] production, yeah.

Chris Blanchard: Yeah, okay.

Eduardo Rivera: I mean, I just let my peppers go whenever they're ready. They just start setting peppers. That's why I plant so much peppers, I'm going to take time to do that. I think I'd rather take time to do that and go pick up the potato beetles, man, those are crazy. Peppers are still going to come. That potato beetle takes over your field and you're just screwed.



- Chris Blanchard: Yeah. Are you trellising the peppers?
- Eduardo Rivera: [01:00:30] No. They don't get trellised, they just get planted. We lay out drip, irrigation first under the matting like I said it's my safety plan just in case, my JIC plan I call it just in case. I lay out the drip and then I lay out my fabric. If it's brand new, I have to be precise on how I lay my drips so that I don't burn my holes with the torch as I'm burning the whole floor. We got to be precise. We burn holes and we plant straight into that. They are spaced about a foot apart. They love the little low tunnels, the heat at night that keeps the warmth at night. They tend to like 70 to 80 degrees as they can get it all average. I don't know. I think that works.
- Chris Blanchard: That's awesome. For harvest, with something like a jalapeno, how do you decide when those are ready to pick?
- Eduardo Rivera: Basically, see, that's one thing I do do when we start having first little pods, I tend to pick off the one ... because plants will pop one off so I don't pick up the pods but I do pick up the pepper once the pod comes out. That encourages more of the blossoms to come out. We go through and we pick off the little pods that come out and then once that get going, those blossoms get going. Once there's enough on a plant, I look for them. You know this probably because you've grown peppers. Before they get to the process of being ready, they have this waxy look to them.
- Chris Blanchard: Yup.
- Eduardo Rivera: When they get ready to be harvest, they have a shiny part of them. I look for that as well as the feel. When they're not ready, when they're that waxy look to them, you feel them and they're kind of squishy. They feel squishy but then when you feel them when they're glossy looking, they tend to be more hard. Once they get that, I squeeze them a little bit and they crunch in your hand a little bit, that's when I know they're ready.
- Chris Blanchard: Right. How often are you picking the peppers? Are you cycling through once a week, twice a week?
- Eduardo Rivera: We're harvesting twice peppers that ... yeah, twice a week we're harvesting. We probably average about 200 pounds a week of jalapeno last year, once they get going.
- Chris Blanchard: Okay. That's a lot of jalapenos especially from Minnesota.
- Eduardo Rivera: Yeah. I mean, Surly, one of the restaurants that I work with, Surly Brewing Company. They pickle a lot of elements so they go through at least 50 pounds if not more a week.
- Chris Blanchard: [01:03:30] Oh, that's awesome. How lucky you are to be working with Surly, that's not a bad choice of customer right there.
- Eduardo Rivera: No. Like I said, I have little connection from previous manager. He was a chef at a restaurant but he knew the chef at Surly. He got me connected with him. He



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ends up being from Mexico, the chef from Surly. He like that I was growing all kinds of peppers and tomatillos, that kind just one right up at the alley too. It was kind of connection that I try to make is that I try to find the chefs that buy the stuff that I'm already growing. Once we get that rolling, they ask me, like a chef this year asked for holy basil so I'm growing some holy basil for him this year.

He asked me for some beets, so I'm growing beets, things that I would normally not wholesale. They got to be able to buy other stuff first, otherwise I can't ... I asked for \$100 minimum per order per twice a week. I've been pushing my customers to try to hit about \$10,000 mark with me of my produce that I sell to them off season because I think once I get through about 10,000 per customer, I'd be able to pay people 15 bucks, have a mortgage and be able to live okay. I'm not in farming to get rich. I just want to buy land and hopefully have my farm be a destination place with the restaurant, that's about it. It's not too much to ask for or to try to go for.

Chris Blanchard: And to be able to pay people fairly is a big deal.

Eduardo Rivera: Yeah, that's important to me man. I mean, I paid \$8 an hour just because I didn't have the cash flow to be able to do more but my last year went pretty well and so my guys that I started this year I went up to 10 bucks an hour, still not perfect. I don't get paid more than they do. I pay myself the same. I just happen to work more hours than they do because all of the stuff that I do out of the field as well. I pay everybody the same as I get paid. If I go up to \$12 an hour for myself or my crew, depending on who stays. I feel like \$12 an hour at anyone that wants to come out and farm and is willing to learn is worth it. I mean, 15 would be good but can't do that yet.

Chris Blanchard: Especially for those folks who come back that second year when it really is skilled labor at that point. People really do know what they're doing.

Eduardo Rivera: Right. Yeah, I mean, those two guys I guess that came back from eight, I paid them up to 10. The other gal I got this year as well, I started her at 10. Currently, we posted something on our Facebook wall to try to hire somebody for the month of July that I'm going to be gone. Basically, just trying to ... like I said, I have things in place to be able to get it done. I just want to leave an extra pair of hands, my hands that would be missing to help them harvest and do the various test at the farm. This is how it goes.

Chris Blanchard: Is your wife involved in the farming operation?

Eduardo Rivera: No. She has a full time job. She's not really a farmer. She's involved. She helps me with the newsletter. I write the grants but she's the one who went to school so she edits them. She does a lot of stuff for me. She's not in the fields. I don't know if that would be a good idea, you know what I mean. We already at home all the time and we'd be working together. We probably try to hit each other with some hose or something.

Chris Blanchard: Not allowed to do that.

Eduardo Rivera: Right. Keep it that way better.



- Chris Blanchard: Now, you've talk several times as we've been going on today about your business planning process and goals and markers that you wanted to make. An example would be, just now, you talked about wanting to get to \$10,000 of sales per year per wholesale customer, that would set you up where you needed to be and to be able to pay mortgage and to be able to pay people a decent wage. Can you talk to me about how you went about that business planning process?
- Eduardo Rivera: Yeah. The land stewardship project ... excuse me, has a farming program. It's a nonprofit here in Minnesota and Minneapolis. They have a farming program called the Farm Beginnings. Previous to that program, they have the entry level course called Farm Dreams. That's kind of where you start the planting your seed if you want to become a farmer or not. You get to do all the crazy things that you have to deal with and that's where people or what people would get discouraged and maybe farming is not for me.
- Then they have the Farm Beginnings Program. In that one, their approach is a holistic management approach. Through that model, I was just able to figure out exactly ... it's not set in stone yet but it gave me a track to be able to figure out ... to put goals into place and then on top of that to do active things to get me to those goals. That program helped a lot.
- Chris Blanchard: I assume you have all of that written down, this is an actual document that you were able to refer to over time.
- Eduardo Rivera: Yeah, there is like I said three sections to it. The first section was trying to buy land in five years. The other section of that is paying off some of the land and doing the same thing that I did with farming like acquiring things that will get me to the next point of my next part of the plan.
- Chris Blanchard: I think it's really great. I think one of the real values are going through a program like the Farm Beginnings classes. Do they give you a foundation and help guide you through doing some of that work? That's not always really clear how you go about coming up with the business plan.
- Eduardo Rivera: I mean, I take a little bit from everything. I would even say, even going to your workshops has helped me a lot at most to do some record keeping and trying to be more clean on the desk. Everything helps. You pick up a little bit from everyone that's already done something and so why not put it into what you do and all of a sudden, it starts evolving into this thing and keep learning from that.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned earlier learning to farm from your grandpa. You talked about learning especially about water and water conservation. What else do you feel like you brought to your farm that maybe somebody that grew up in the city here in the United States would have brought to their far?
- Eduardo Rivera: That's a tough one. I don't know. I mean, I think one thing that I can think of is I just remembered how my grandfather didn't rely on anything else besides mother earth. I feel like that's one of the things that here I think we get used to is like being able to go out and just buy any implement for a tractor or being able to get drip or those kinds of things. I think having that approach to be able



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to do like believe and how people use to farm without those kinds of systems that are currently in place. I think that's what I probably bring difference to farming. That's the best thing I could think of right now.

Chris Blanchard: With that Eduardo, I think it's time to turn to our lightning round. We're going to get a word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back.

Eduardo Rivera: [01:11:30] Sounds good.

Chris Blanchard: This lightning round is brought to you by you, the listeners of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. The nice thing about that is I probably don't need to go on and on about it because factor here probably means that you already think the Farmer to Farmer Podcast just kind of cool. If you value the show, please consider heading over to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate to have look at our options for directly supporting the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. Your direct support helps make this show available to a wide variety of farm workers and farmers to be across the country and the globe.

I would especially encourage you to check out the option to support the Farmer to Farmer Podcast through Petition which provides a way to make a monthly contribution to the show, \$5 a month comes after just over a buck a show and that makes a big difference to keeping the tractor running over here, that's farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate. Thank you.

Eduardo, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

Eduardo Rivera: The wheel hoe.

Chris Blanchard: What kind of wheel hoe do you have?

Eduardo Rivera: I have ... gosh, oak valley wheel hoe.

Chris Blanchard: Okay. That valley oak, yeah, that's a nice one.

Eduardo Rivera: Valley oak, yes, yes.

Chris Blanchard: What's your favorite crop to grow?

Eduardo Rivera: Peppers.

Chris Blanchard: That seems kinds of no brainer right there.

Eduardo Rivera: Yeah.

Chris Blanchard: What's been your favorite resource or learning how to grow these hot weather crops in Minnesota? Where do you turn when you need information?

Eduardo Rivera: I don't think like a place where I turn for information for hot weather crops but I do reference when I first started farming, I base my first year of production based on the John Jeavons' book, grow food or grow more food. What's it called?



- Chris Blanchard: How to grow more I think ...
- Eduardo Rivera: You know what John was talking about ...
- Chris Blanchard: Yeah, something with how to grow more vegetables than you can imagine in less space than you ever thought possible or something like that.
- Eduardo Rivera: That was one of the first books my wife gave me. Yeah, from there I planned my first season. Time to time, I tend to reference like spacing and I feel like it has a lot of information. It's very useful.
- Chris Blanchard: That was actually one of my three base books when I started farming at Deep Springs College. I'm right there with you on that one. What's your farming super power?
- Eduardo Rivera: Farming super power, I don't know. I tend to just make things work, I don't know. I have that like I can build things. I don't know how to weld yet or not an electrician but anything beyond that, I could pretty much figure out. I feel like I could make things work with very little. I've been able to figure out. I mean, I started with nothing when I first started. No irrigation like I mentioned. I watered with five gallon buckets my first year. I just feel like I'm able to figure out when I come to problems, like I find solutions.
- Chris Blanchard: That's a great super power to have. Finally, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Eduardo Rivera: Probably get little bit more experience before just have been full on. I think that the one thing I would tell myself is ... yeah, like find your markets first, do all the research first and then throw your seeds in the ground.
- Chris Blanchard: Awesome. Eduardo, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Eduardo Rivera: Thank you. It's been a pleasure and I look forward to hearing it.
- Chris Blanchard: All right, so wrapping things up here. I'll say again that this episode 125 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for the show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Rivera, that's R-I-V-E-R-A. The transcript of this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk behind farming equipment and high quality garden tools in North America and by Rock Dust Local, the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the best rock dust and biochar for organic farming.

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You can support the show directly by going to farmertofarmerpodcast.com/donate like we talked about after the lightning round. I'm working to make the best farming podcast in the world and you can help.

Finally, please let me know you would like here from on the show through the suggestions form at farmertofarmerpodcast.com. Eduardo was on the show today because of recommendations that I received through that form. I'll my best to get them on the show if you recommend them.

Thank you for listening. Be safe out there and keep the tractor running.