

LUNA BURGER

Barbie and Megan Luna are herding local vegetable growers, not cattle, to supply their burger business.

Luna Burger LLC started making vegetarian burgers in Columbus in May 2009, and by mid-September had already outgrown its rented kitchen space at Himes Vending. Now the company has its own 2,400-square-foot facility on the city's Far East Side, where it takes delivery of kale, carrots, grains, beans, onions, garlic, apples and paprika peppers – mostly from Central Ohio farmers – and fashions them into veggie burgers for local stores and restaurants.

“Our initial definition of local was Ohio,” said Barbie Luna. “We try to find ingredients in Columbus, or as near to us as we could. We had to go beyond Franklin and Fairfield counties, but maintain the same values, and the same impact of supporting farmers and growers.”

It took time to find a stable of steady suppliers. Now she's hopeful that the early success of the couple's business will trigger growth in other in other local-food processing and distribution businesses, which in turn will encourage more farmers to grow for local markets.

“The more other small entrepreneurs we talk to about buying local ingredients, the more of a snowball effect it has,” she said.



The Lunas, fans of community-supported agriculture and local farmers markets, started modestly – and used farmers markets as a springboard.

“Food – and access to healthy food – have been important to us,” Luna said. “We wanted to do wide variety of things, and began with vegan meal delivery, including burgers. People were receptive to our burgers, and we started our line from there.”

To get ingredients, they started with growers they met at farmers markets. After they started production at the Himes facility, they started selling the burgers at farmers markets. As local restaurants and retailers showed interest, they quickly outgrew that original facility.

Luna Burgers are sold at independent Columbus-area grocers Weiland's, Huffman's and The Hills, and at Clintonville Community Market and Bexley Natural Market. They are served at area restaurants such as Drexel Radio Café, Hal and Al's and Oatganic.

On the supply side, Luna said all the carrots now come from Wayward Seed in Union County. Kale and beets come from Sippel Family Farm in Morrow County. Staples and grains were harder to get, but they found an Amish farmer in Holmes County for oats, and that led to an arrangement with a Northeast Ohio distributor for maple syrup and molasses.

Luna does not have a business background, and so she has learned a lot in a short time. Because there's so much to learn – and because she wants to keep a local orientation – she doesn't want

the business to grow too fast. Still the company envisions growth – perhaps keeping Central Ohio production, but distribution in other parts of the state.

“We’d love to support community gardening more – make contact with smaller and urban growers. As we grow, will have to diversify our supply stream,” she said.