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HOMESTEAD

Here He Stands: Development pressures don't budge the man behind Robert is Here

By Lydia Martin

A strange thing happens as you approach Robert is Here, the famed Florida City produce stand where sun-baked tourists line up for tropical-fruit milk shakes in flavors most have never heard of and can't pronounce.

A smell overwhelms your car, jogging old memories. What is that -- freshly tilled soil?

"That was yellow squash. Got harvested," Robert Moehling says of the now-bare field just across the way from the stand his family has run for 47 years.

And in the field on the other side of the road, where pickers in wide hats are crouched over short plants; what's that?

Clearly, you're city folk. But Robert can be a sport.

"That's snap beans," he says as he whacks sugar cane with a big knife, cutting the stalks into chewable chunks. Then he's quiet and there is nothing but the whack-whack-whack.

"Developers tried to buy those fields to build apartments on them," Moehling finally says.

Robert is Here is a landmark, a place where heaps of luscious mangoes, strawberries, papaya, carambola, mamey, guanabana, tamarind, you name it draw huge crowds during the winter months.

Things wind down by Easter with the South Florida growing season, meaning less local produce but shorter milk-shake lines.

Moehling, 53, could sell the 10 acres and walk away rich, like so many of his farmer buddies have, making way for too many town-house complexes and strip shopping centers.

"People have been getting 200, 300 thousand an acre," he says. "Wasn't that long ago the land was dirt cheap."

To Moehling, though, the land is priceless. He vows that as long as he has anything to say about it, there won't be anything but cabbage, collard greens, sweet onion, basil, tomatoes, papaya, sunflowers and snapdragons sprouting here.

It's a hard life. Moehling is up before light and works seven days a week. "Last time I took a day off was the day after Thanksgiving, when my wife and I went shopping for a Christmas tree," he says.

Just today, he got up at 2 a.m. so he could have the pick of the California lettuce, Lake Placid oranges and Chilean grapes at the Miami Produce Market in Allapattah, his source for fruits and vegetables he can't grow himself or buy from neighbors. By the time you meet up with him at 7:30 a.m., he's put in a half a day.

Why not cash in and slow down?

"I don't like change. I was born outside Chicago on a farm my family had. Fifty years later, it's all concrete and asphalt. It's the middle of the city.

"You can't stop change. There won't be any farmland left down here one day. Already, all the limes are gone thanks to [citrus] canker. There's no potato growers anymore. But Robert is Here is staying as long as I'm around."

That's good news for produce snobs who make the drive to Moehling's place for strawberries that actually taste like strawberries, basil so fragrant it startles the senses, mangoes so sweet you vow never to buy them from the supermarket again.

There's also the dizzying array of jams, jellies, honeys and dressings with the gold "Robert is Here" label.

"Mangoes are not in season right now, but we get them from Peru. Not all outside mangoes are bad," Moehling says. "I go for the tasty ones. I buy the Kents. They're so good I eat them all day long."

Moehling loves all his tropicals, but he does have one favorite.

"Guanabana. It just tastes wonderful. And it feels good. You get a great vitamin rush or something when you eat guanabana.

"Plus tourists are funny with guanabana [wah-NAH-bah-nah]. They can't pronounce it. It's usually gua-banana, or GUAnaBAAna," says Moehling, who will crack open a tamarind pod or slice up a ripe mango or mamey just to see the looks on customers' faces when they get their first taste.

The tourists are built in; Moehling's produce stand is pretty much the one oasis on the way into and out of Everglades National Park. Plenty of Germans, Italians and Brits can say they've made a pit stop at Robert is Here.

In fact, on the day you visit, a TV crew is there shooting a European car commercial. Something about an Opel being so compact it can be tucked between orange and grapefruit bins.

"It's just a good place to hide a car," says producer Abby Jenkins, from England. "This place is all about color."

The story behind the name has passed into South Florida lore: When Moehling was 7, his dad had a crop of cucumbers to sell, so he stood Robert on the corner of a field where the produce stand is now and propped up a sign by him that read "Robert is Here."

The sign worked. And Robert is still here. His four children, now 18 to 24, have grown up working at Robert is Here, and Moehling hopes they'll keep it going. After all, farming is something that's in your blood.

"A couple of years ago I went down to Guatemala to teach some agriculture classes, and one day I was down in the market, looking like a big American, completely out of place. But I didn't feel out of place at all.

"They didn't know who I was. That I was a farmer, too. But I knew who they were. They were all my people. They spoke only Spanish, they had dark hair. But they were still my people. My people are good old earth people. We work hard and we tell you what's what.

"And I wouldn't ever want to give that up. Even if I'm the last guy down here doing it."



FRUIT APLENTY: Customer Lyle Landgren, of South Dakota, drinks one of the famous shakes. Charles Trainor Jr./miami Herald Staff