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Urban farm in Germantown apartment complex aims to put fancy greens on diners' plates

by [Jacob Adelman](#), Updated: January 29, 2019

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JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The fancy garnishes, heirloom microgreens, and edible flowers served at some of Philadelphia's finest restaurants soon will spring up in an unusual spot: a former office suite in a Germantown apartment complex.

Adam Green, a recent Temple University graduate backed by his finance-industry pro father, is in the midst of remodeling the onetime corporate offices of his landlord at the Rittenhouse Hill apartments, the real estate group Post Bros., into a high-tech hydroponic growing room for herbs and veggies.

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A Green Farms, as the 5,000-square-foot indoor farm is to be known, marks the latest attempt to make small-footprint urban agriculture financially feasible in an industry where most growing is done on sprawling rural fields staffed by low-paid workers and in big greenhouses.

By offering hard-to-source items to chefs who serve well-heeled patrons, Green aims to fill what he hopes will be a profitable niche, despite the high energy costs associated with year-round indoor farming and the wages expected by urban workers. He expects to employ a staff of five.

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“Garnishes and specialty heirloom products don’t travel well,” Green said. “Being in Philadelphia — where we’ve got a really great, strong restaurant scene — puts us in a really great place to be successful.”

Green said he chose the space in the Rittenhouse Hill complex, near Wissahickon Avenue and Lincoln Drive, for the easy commute — he lives in an apartment upstairs — and because Post was offering less stringent lease terms than some of the other potential landlords he considered.

The deal with Post was also smoothed by his existing connection with Philadelphia chef Michael Schulson, whose new restaurant Giuseppe & Sons is housed in a Center City retail property owned by the real estate group, Green said.

Randy Hope, managing director of Post’s retail arm, said AGreen Farms was a good fit for the Rittenhouse Hill offices because the property doesn’t have enough parking to accommodate a user that would draw more traffic. The suite had been vacant since Post moved five years ago to offices within its Presidential City complex on City Avenue.

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“It was space that was lying fallow,” Hope said.

Green’s effort may be greeted with extra skepticism, after the failure of the 100,000-square-foot facility that had been known as Metropolis Farms in South Philadelphia. That project had been hyped as the farm of the future before it folded amid [accusations of fraud](#) aimed at its founder.

Its closest antecedent may be FarmOne in New York’s Tribeca neighborhood, which similarly focuses on a restaurant-industry clientele. It supplies produce to Michelin-starred eateries such as Eleven Madison Park, Atera, Daniel, and Jungsik.

FarmOne, however, is a smaller operation at just 1,200 square feet, and it makes money from farm tours — \$50 for an hour-long visit — as well as sales.

Henry Gordon-Smith, founder and managing director of Agritecture Consulting, a New York-based adviser to indoor-farm operators, said Green is wise to focus on high-end chefs with specific needs.

“Typically, you can’t compete with traditional agriculture in most product sectors,” said Gordon-Smith, who helped FarmOne’s owners set up their business but who is not connected to Green’s project. “But there are some areas where you may be able to compete, usually because of the quality of your product.”

Green’s Germantown space will accommodate about 150 growing racks stacked four levels high that will be fed nutrient-enriched water from eight 50-gallon tanks, so the crops can grow without ever touching soil.

By using lamps instead of natural light, along with other climate controls, Green can guarantee stable year-round production of whatever his culinary customers request. The method uses up to 95 percent less water than conventional agriculture, although the constant lighting makes it a big user of energy, Green said.

Green's initial production run will comprise about 80 different kinds of herbs and specialty greens, including micro-radishes and micro-cilantro, he said. Growing will begin soon after the end of construction, which is scheduled for early March, with the first harvests coming later in the spring.

Green, 25, grew up in Cherry Hill and discovered hydroponic agriculture as his calling through jobs at indoor farms and restaurants during and after his studies at Temple University, where he graduated in May with a degree in adult education.

His father, William, chief executive of the Crestar Group of Cos. financial businesses, lent him the nearly \$1 million needed for the indoor farm's construction and is aiding his son as a business adviser.

To serve as his head grower, Green recruited Brandon Merrill, a hydroponics expert who learned his craft at a research center in Japan that was established to develop indoor-farming techniques after the [Fukushima nuclear disaster](#) of 2011 stoked fears of soil contamination.

Since then, Merrill helped start an indoor farm in Nova Scotia, Canada, where fresh vegetables can be scarce during the region's long, dark winters, and has worked at New York's Gotham Greens rooftop agriculture enterprise and at the Oasis Biotech vertical farming facility in Las Vegas.

Merrill said he was drawn to Green's farm in Germantown because of the opportunity it offered to focus on high-end greens and to experiment with the indoor cultivation of specialty crops such as edible flowers.

Green is "really big into food, healthy food, quality food, responsibly sourced food," Merrill said.

AGreen Farms has lined up a roster of chefs, including Schulson, who plan on sourcing produce from the business, said William Green, who declined to identify others for fear of being preemptively undercut by those buyers' existing suppliers.

Schulson did not immediately respond to messages asking about his interest in Green's products.

Yianni Arhontoulis, chef at Mica in Chestnut Hill, said an operation like Green's could be an attractive source of veggies for Philadelphia chefs like him who strive to prepare dishes with locally sourced ingredients.

"Something Philly can call its own will definitely be an asset for higher-end restaurants," said Arhontoulis, who had not previously been aware of Green's plan. "It sounds like a great project."



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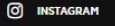
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