

Fresh out of school

Chile-peddling business grads have farming roots that run deep

By Amanda Bradford '03

Chile is big business in New Mexico – growers in the state produced 65,000 tons of chile in 2013, worth \$49.5 million – and nowhere is it bigger than the Hatch Valley, where some of the region’s longstanding farming families have been raising the crop for nearly a century.

Second-generation NMSU alum Preston Mitchell '13 '14 comes from one of those farming families – his great-grandfather, Joseph Franzoy, is widely credited with being the Hatch Valley’s first chile farmer, coming to the region in the early 1920s. Another branch of his family tree is great-grandfather Ed Berridge, who started Berridge Farms in 1944.

And while Preston and his wife, Elaine Mitchell '13 '14 – herself a third-generation Aggie with family ties to agriculture in the region – recently earned their bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the College of Business and are working full-time with successful financial firms, they’re also carrying on the family chile tradition.

The young entrepreneurs own and operate the Hatch Chile Store, a chile e-commerce site, and recently acquired the fresh and frozen online sales portions of Biad Chili Products. They also opened a processing facility and storefront on West Picacho Avenue in August. The facility is closed and quiet now, but was abuzz with some 30 seasonal employees during the peak of the chile harvesting and processing season last fall.

Buying Biad’s operation was a big scaling-up for the Mitchells.

“We went from processing a few thousand pounds of product to processing tens of thousands of pounds of product overnight,” Preston says. “It was a big jump – but we’re hoping to grow through acquisition again in the next few years.”

Most of their chile comes from Berridge Farms, along with a few other growers in the Hatch Valley. They ship the



College of Business alumni Preston and Elaine Mitchell are scaling up their chile processing and online sales business, the Hatch Chile Store.

prized peppers all over the country, often to transplants who’ve moved away from New Mexico, but still need their fall chile fix.

Elaine says it’s a lot of work, but it’s a business they really love.

“It’s really fun, and we use so many of our skills that we learned at NMSU and from our parents,” she says. “It’s a great business and something that people love, so it’s really easy to sell our product.”

It’s also a business that allows them to embark on their careers in financial services. With her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in accounting under her belt, Elaine is working as a staff accountant with local firm Beasley, Mitchell & Co. After earning bachelor’s degrees in management and accounting and information systems, as well as a master’s in accounting, Preston is working as an auditor with KPMG, a top national firm.

Before the ink was dry on their degrees, the couple was looking for ways to give back to NMSU. In October, they visited with the College of Business ambassador group to encourage them to explore

their business ideas now.

“We talked about becoming entrepreneurs in college and not waiting,” Elaine says. “A lot of students have great ideas and they might not follow through with them because it’s scary. But it’s actually a great time to try something.”

The pair is also contributing a portion of their proceeds from the Hatch Chile Store to NMSU’s Chile Pepper Institute in support of the research being done there and the resources the institute offers to businesses like theirs.

“They’re working on solving the disease problems that the industry struggles with,” Preston says. “They’re making strains that are more resistant to disease and more consistent in flavor, heat level, size and even how quickly the peppers peel.”

Eventually, the Mitchells hope to set up a scholarship or contribute to some of the funds they benefited from during their time at NMSU.

Learn more about the Hatch Chile Store at www.hatch-green-chile.com.