The urban farm with a global growth plan

Reckoned to be Europe's largest, most advanced vertical farming site, Italy's Planet Farms could soon appear elsewhere

Produce more food, of better quality, using fewer resources. Luca Travaglini and Daniele Benatoff's message to the Tiemana exhibition in Milan was crystal clear: their start-up company Planet Farms is planning to build Europe's largest and most advanced vertical farm, then establish similar projects in other countries around the world.

Work on the new centre begins this month and is due for completion in spring 2020. Located in Cavenna, halfway between Milan and Bergamo, the farm will eventually extend across 4,500m² and supply 40,000 packs of produce per day. Inside, an innovative growing process from seed to packaged product is set to turn out zero-residue fresh produce that will impress in terms of their taste, long shelf-life and high level of sustainability.

"Vertical farming is about agriculture what formula 1 is to cars," say Travaglini, an apt description given the centre is just a few minutes' drive from Monza world-famous race track. Planet Farms will employ state-of-the-art technology to grow baby leaf salads, basil and other aromatic herbs in a completely controlled environment situated right at the point of sale, 365 days a year. A capillary system of sensors allows the entire production process to be monitored constantly and, because the entire process is automated, Planet Farms says the consumer will be the first to touch what is a completely fresh product. Each plant will grow from a traditional seed in pure air and water, without the need for pesticides, with water usage minimised.

The new structure could be just the start as far as Planet Farms' ambitious global development and growth plan is concerned. In fact, it aims to make Lombardy a vertical farming capital by exporting its model throughout the world, as co-founder Benatoff confirms: "The Cavenna plant represents the starting point on a path that will take us all over the world, a project that speaks Italian and that will soon see new concrete applications both in Italy and abroad."

As with any F1 team, lots of other specialists are involved behind the scenes, including architect Studio Dordoni, lighting provider Signify, Travaglini FarmTech, WoodBeton, Sirti, 203, Repower and Netafim. Travaglini, which has years of experience in food production, is helping to plan for self-contained traditional farm factories that can be controlled: "Our research and innovations can then be transferred to traditional agriculture," he says. "We cannot and do not intend to replace it."

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