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By LAUREN W  
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Photos by ADAM WISNESKI/Missourian

Besides moving their store from Providence Road to Broadway, the Root Cellar owners Kimberly Griffin and Walker Claridge, shown with their son, Lushen, also plan to make Root Cellar products available in major grocery stores.

# Putting down new roots

## At new location, Root Cellar aims to expand offerings

By JOHN HENDEL

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Walker Claridge and Kimberly Griffin, co-owners of the Root Cellar, have always stressed the benefits of buying local. But lately they have elevated their vision to new heights. This partly explains the Root Cellar's new location, strategically positioned next to Uprise Bakery on Broadway.

"We're going to be more of a distribution center for local goods and processing," Claridge said. "We're trying to position all these products for people to access them."

Part of the plan is for the Root Cellar to become a "more complete grocery" for Columbia, though still with local goods like the Root Cellar's Spicy Peach Salsa and Isabel's Country Mustard. He wants the store to have a variety of readily available goods for people downtown while also bringing Root Cellar products to major groceries' shelves.

Claridge and Griffin worked to accomplish this feat at the Root Cellar's old Providence Road location, which was inefficient due to its small scale and "too many balls to juggle," Claridge said.

He said the new business plan calls for separating the "brain" of the system, the central warehouse, from the "nervous system," various outlets such as processing, the store, other retail, restaurants and potentially, retail and restaurants in St. Louis and Kansas City. Previously, everything happened at one location, which was unrealistic and more of a showcase for what people could achieve with local goods, Claridge said.

Claridge also hopes to work with more farmers. Right now he works



Root Cellar employee Nick Taylor sorts through mixed greens grown in owner Walker Claridge's greenhouse.

imagines working with 1,000 in a co-op setting within a couple of years. He anticipates the new business model will produce 10 times the product.

Claridge referenced a dynamic "multiplier effect," where every dollar spent locally generated five times that amount as it cycled back through the community, according to the Columbia Locally Owned Retail & Services Web site.

"Rural areas can be the last haven for refuge and peace," Claridge said, referring to what he calls a fading farm lifestyle. "We'd like to see that rural fabric being rewoven. One way to do that is to buy local and keep that fabric together."

While Claridge and Griffin have long imagined the new business model, the change in location for the Root Cellar was rather sudden. The Root Cellar had been at its old location for more than five years and on a seven-year lease, but opportunities coincided in late August.

A lessee expressed interest in the Providence Road site and the Broadway

nally considered for the Root Cellar, became available.

Claridge said the whole process occurred in only about two weeks, and the store is still a "work in progress." Since the Root Cellar reopened in early October, it has received more business than Claridge said he expected, especially without any advertising about the new location. Its proximity to the Uprise Bakery, a business the Root Cellar endorses, has helped, Claridge said.

"We're not going to do deli and prepared foods like hummus right now," he said about the lack of a kitchen at the new location. "Certainly we're going to have a kitchen together by next spring and maybe even sooner."

Claridge also plans for the new warehouse to open by next June in time for the growing season.

Despite the Root Cellar's changes, its heart remains a central feature of the business. Claridge and Griffin know their customers and often greet them with a hug. Their 18-month-old son, Lushen, also often makes appearances, sometimes riding a toy car around the store.

"We have some crates of toys and what-not at the store," Griffin said with a laugh, adding that other children also make use of them.

"He's the poster child for the store," Claridge said.

Claridge has a set plan but takes it day by day, he said. His priority now is getting the word out about the big supply of local, free-range turkeys for Thanksgiving.

"We definitely have some set goals and know where the finish line is," Claridge said. "We just need to figure out how to get there. All we'll need is time, energy and will."