

**MARKETS CLOSED**

U.S. financial markets are closed today for Labor Day. Markets abroad are open.



Jeff Ostrowski

## 0 rentals to rise Delray

region's condo market may  
tered, but an Atlanta-area  
er is betting that Delray  
rental apartment market  
strong.

Partners of Marietta, Ga.,  
August paid \$22 million for  
along Congress Avenue,  
th of Atlantic Avenue and  
the street from the Tri-Rail  
It plans to break ground in  
er on a 440-unit apart-  
mplex, said Jay Jacobson,  
South Florida director.  
Median condo price in  
each County plunged  
ent in the past year, the  
Association of Realtors said  
st, and many would-be  
are forced to rent their  
units. But Jacobson said  
en't many of those empty  
near his site.

ing as you're not in an area  
ere are a lot of condos  
being rented, the apart-  
market is strong," he said.  
ng was considered a fool's  
ring the housing boom  
ed in 2005. But with mort-  
s available and property  
d insurance bills in the  
ere, renting a home no  
oks like such a bad deal.  
i the credit crunch, people  
ord to get a mortgage, so  
y have no other choice but  
Jacobson said.  
roperty's seller was Antho-  
se, the Delray developer  
as to build a new town in  
Junction.

scam hedge fund KL  
ffed its landlord on its  
a-month rent. Then, soon  
ning its lease, KL failed.  
up for its losses, the own-  
Esperante office building  
keep KL's \$500,000 secu-  
posit, according to federal  
cuments.  
roup was the suddenly  
stment firm that raised  
lion from Palm Beach's  
only to blow the cash  
living and bad trades.  
regulators closed the  
y in 2005.  
office at Esperante, the  
1 tower in downtown West  
ach, included plasma  
Dakota Jackson designer  
wo of the firm's three  
ls are in jail for fraud.  
ante's owner, ING Clarion,  
'appointed receiver Guy  
id been haggling over  
h KL owed its former

ante claimed \$6 million in  
i. The receiver agreed to  
ndlord keep KL's \$500,000  
plus a few grand from the  
e scammers' furniture.

ecorators Signature build-  
5 S. Congress Ave. in  
beach post.com

## 'We're freezing, but we have a job to do.'

MICHAEL HOPKINS, 11-year Merchants Export employee



Staff photos by GARY CORONADO

Omar Rodriguez loads an order of fresh produce into a truck at Merchants Export in Riviera Beach. The company operates out of a 100,000-square-foot warehouse at the Port of Palm Beach, storing and shipping tons of 'everything from tenderloin to toilet paper,' says company Vice President Jeff Ullian.

# Making sure food stays cold keeps business hot for Merchants Export

By SUSAN SALISBURY  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

**RIVIERA BEACH** — It's 93 degrees outside, but inside the Merchants Export warehouse at the Port of Palm Beach, employees clad in winter coats, ski caps and thick gloves are working in temperatures as frosty as 10 degrees below zero.

It's a sweat-free zone designed to keep packaged meats and seafoods frozen before they are shipped to the company's outlets in the Leeward Islands, and then to restaurants and resorts there. "We're freezing, but we have a job to do," said Michael Hopkins, 45, an 11-year employee who serves as a liaison between the purchasing and receiving departments.

The Port of Palm Beach Cold, as it's known, is the 100,000-square-foot home base for Merchants Export, which distributes 65 million pounds a year of meats, poultry, cheeses, eggs, produce, bread, prepared gourmet desserts, beverages, even toothpaste and pillowcases — anything that a restaurant or resort would need to run its business.

### Top exports

Here are the top items Merchants Export Inc. ships annually to the Leeward Islands:

Chicken	5 million pounds
French fries	3.5 million pounds
Romaine lettuce	624,000 pounds
Mozzarella cheese	315,000 pounds

Source: Merchants Export Inc.

It also stores food for companies such as Carnival Cruise Lines and Tropical Shipping, and for the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth cruise ships in New York.

"The product comes in cold, stays cold and goes out cold," said Jeff Ullian, 58, Merchants Export's vice president. "We sell everything from tenderloin to toilet paper."

Workers in the family-owned



Kenzie Louis uses a forklift to move food from a freezer, where temperatures are kept at minus-10 degrees. The firm has operated in Florida since 1975.

company's warehouse are in constant motion. Some are on foot, while others operate forklifts as they load, unload and move boxes of sea bass from Chile, romaine lettuce from California and lamb from Australia.

Merchants Export's revenues top \$100 million a year, and it has grown 11 percent a year for the

past 14 years, said Terry Collier, 58, the company president.

In Florida since 1975, the company was started in St. Thomas and St. John in 1965 by Isabel Amengual, a single mother who fled Cuba in 1961 after that country's Communist revolution.

See EXPORT, 6F ▶

**We have been working with them for 20 years. We find them fresh produce, such as peppers, squash cucumbers, beans, eggplant and sweet corn, wherever it is being grown.'**

CHRIS ERNESTON, vice president of J&J Produce Inc. in Loxahatchee



Eddie Orengo, a Merchants Export employee for 20 years, pulls an order for inspection from the freezer at the warehouse. The company's Port of Palm Beach Cold facility, once the site of Perry Submarine Builders, keeps its storage areas at five different temperatures.

Staff photos by GARY CORONADO

## Company's impact in Caribbean 'enormous'

### ► EXPORT from 1F

Now in her 80s and based in St. Thomas, Amengual is the chief executive officer of Merchants Exports.

Amengual was unavailable for comment, but her daughter Maria Collier, Terry's wife, said her mother got into the business by working as a bookkeeper at a Baltimore meat-packing plant.



M. Collier

"They had a customer, a food company in St. Thomas, who went bankrupt," said Maria, 57, who is Merchants' secretary and treasurer. "They took over. They ended up owning that business."



T. Collier

Amengual was asked to go to St. Thomas to run the company.

"A year later, she made them an offer to buy the business, got an SBA loan and bought it," Maria said. Amengual named her new company Merchants Market.

"Back then, it was all small local stuff," Maria said. "For every tenderloin, thousands of pounds of goat stew was sold. The lettuce was iceberg. Now it's romaine."

Amengual expanded the firm to St. Croix in 1974, and to Florida a year later. In the 1990s, she established facilities in St. Maarten and then Anguilla.

Merchants is the Port of Palm Beach's second-largest tenant and the biggest customer of the largest tenant, Tropical Shipping. Tropical ships all of the products Merchants distributes in containers. Less than 2 percent of

products arrive in the islands by air, Ullian said.

Lori Baer, the port's executive director, said Merchants Export is known for its friendly, can-do attitude and is a big part of the port's identity.

"They are an incredibly impressive and progressive company," Baer said. "Their scope and impact throughout a number of places in the Caribbean is enormous."

The company has huge buying power through its membership in Atlanta-based UniPro Food Service Inc., a \$31 billion 328-member distribution network with 738 suppliers.

Merchants also buys from local suppliers such as J&J Produce Inc. in Loxahatchee.

"We have been working with them for 20 years," said Chris Erneston, J&J's vice president. "We find them fresh produce, such as peppers, squash cucumbers, beans, eggplant and sweet corn, wherever it is being grown."

The company's Port of Palm Beach Cold facility, once the site of Perry Submarine Builders, contains storage areas at five different temperatures.

Products such as paper towels, bottled water, ketchup and coffee are held at room temperature.

Then there's the 45-degree large loading dock, where the frozen products are brought from the minus-10 degrees storage rooms to be loaded onto ships. A smaller loading dock keeps produce such as mangoes, tomatoes and onions at 36 degrees.

Chocolates, raisins, pasta and specialty flours such as whole wheat are stored in a 60-degree low-humidity room, Collier said.

"Otherwise, bugs and weevils will get in the flour and the pasta," he said.

When Merchants moved to the site 10 years ago from West Palm Beach, they made it more energy-



Mangoes are prepared for loading. Merchants is the Port of Palm Beach's second-largest tenant and biggest patron of the largest tenant, Tropical Shipping.

efficient. The building's roof and steel exterior were covered with a ceramic heat-dissipating coating like that used on the tiles of the space shuttles. Also, the ceiling was insulated with polyurethane foam.

Still, the electric bill to operate the industrial anhydrous-ammonia cooling system is more than \$800 a day in the summer, Terry Collier said.

And it's critical that the power never be interrupted, which is why all of Merchants' facilities have had generators for years.

The products Merchants Export distributes to the islands have become more high-end as islands such as Anguilla have changed.

"Anguilla gets all the celebrities. It's not a highly populated island. It's been discovered," Maria Collier said.

Anguilla is a getaway spot for the super-rich, such as Janet Jackson. In November, Jackson requested 8 ounces of Beluga caviar while at an Anguilla resort, and Merchants shipped it,

Ullian said.

The islands also are filled with fine restaurants. St. Maarten's alone, the "culinary capital" of the Caribbean, has more than 400, Terry Collier said.

Those in that demanding business say dependable food service deliveries are a must.

Christopher Gagnon, 45, business manager at The Fish Trap & Seafood Market, a family-friendly restaurant, and Stone Terrace, a fine-dining spot, both in Cruz Bay, St. John, says he can count on Merchants to deliver in a timely, responsive manner. He's dealt with them for 15 years.

Merchants is the two restaurants' primary purveyor of frozen and chilled foods from seafood to produce and dairy, as well as paper goods and cleaning supplies. The top items it ships: shrimp and crab legs.

"I have customers, and Merchants has customers. My folks want quality. They want quality. They understand it," Gagnon said. "It is a pleasure to work

### Merchants Export Inc.

**Founded:** 1975, West Palm Beach, as sister company to Merchants Market, founded in 1965 in St. John and St. Thomas

**Officers:** Isabel Amengual, chief executive officer; Terry Collier, president; Jeff Ullian, vice president; Maria Collier, secretary/treasurer

**Headquarters:** Riviera Beach

**Annual revenue:** About \$100 million

**Employees:** About 200

**Operations:** Port of Palm Beach Cold, a 100,000-square-foot cold-storage warehouse in Riviera Beach; Merchants Market, a 20,000-square-foot warehouse on St. Maarten; Merchants Market St. Croix, a 27,000-square-foot warehouse; Merchants Market Anguilla, a 7,200-square-foot warehouse

**Web site:** [www.merchantsexport.com](http://www.merchantsexport.com)

with folks that work just as hard to get the job done as I do."

Of the company's 200 people, 75 work in Riviera Beach, and the others at its sister outfit, Merchants Market, which is the oldest, largest distributor in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It has cold storage facilities in St. Thomas, St. Maarten, St. Croix and Anguilla and serves other islands from those sites.

Terry Collier said the company's success can be credited to a growing market and a strong workforce.

"You have to have good luck and good execution. We happen to be in a growing market," he said. "You have to have good people. We have great people."

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