Where Budding Magnates Experiment With Recipes

CLIENTS Innocenzo Visceglia with his sauce.

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BRIDGETON, N.J.

WHEN Innocenzo and Michele Visceglia stopped making their pasta sauce at the Rutgers Food Innovation Center here in late August, it was the end of an era — but not the kind would-be food entrepreneurs might feel reluctant to bid adieu. Every Wednesday since early this year, when the Visceglia first began using the compoundlike center’s equipment and space, they rose at dawn and traveled 45
minutes to get here from their home in Williamstown, near Glassboro. By 7:30 a.m., they were suited up in the center’s regulation white smocks, rubber boots and hairnets. Around 3:30 or 4 p.m., they emerged, exhausted and splattered in the day’s yield of 600 quarts of tomato sauce.

Still, Ms. Visceglia said, when it came time to tell the Food Innovation Center staff they had found a commercial kitchen space of their own, complete with a storefront, in Williamstown, she had mixed feelings.

“I felt bad, I really did, telling them we were moving out,” she said. “They helped us a lot. But I know they expected us to go eventually.” Now that the Visceglias are able to make sauce without relying on someone to open the doors for them in the morning, she said, “they’re happy for us.”

If the couple’s pasta sauce — labeled Visceglia’s and sold in around 250 stores, including some ShopRites — one day becomes as well known as Ragú, the Food Innovation Center team can claim some of the credit.

Since 2008, when the 23,000-square-foot center opened, food producers like the Visceglia have been bringing their recipes here in hopes of eventually churning out batches for the masses. Dr. Schar U.S.A., a European company, started using the center to bake its gluten-free hearty white and whole-grain breads for consumers in the United States two years ago; it is currently developing two frozen bagel products at the center.

The Visceglia were on a fast track to “graduation” — mostly a series of informal goodbye-and-good-lucks from the staff, Ms. Visceglia said — because of their level of experience as food entrepreneurs. Ms. Visceglia, 47, had already been working for about five years to get the sauce into wider distribution when she signed a contract with the center; it was formulated in 1997 by her husband at a deli they once owned in Washington Township.

But the center, a program of Rutgers’ New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station in New Brunswick, mostly attracts budding entrepreneurs. Margaret Brennan-Tonetta, the executive director, estimated that the center, home to more than $1 million worth of food-processing equipment, has helped start 35 products to date.

Not everyone who arrives comes armed with a big idea and a secret recipe, though. Some need “an entire strategy to get started,” said Dr. Brennan-Tonetta, 53, of Vineland, who holds a doctorate in public policy and is an associate vice president of economic development at Rutgers. “And we can provide it, soup to nuts.”

The beginning of that process often takes the form of one of the four-hour Food Business Basics Workshops organized several times a year by Diane Holtaway, the center’s associate director of client services. (The next workshop will be held Oct. 12.)
A session last month attracted 24 hopeful or early-stage food or beverage producers, who heard Ms. Holtaway and guest lecturers, including Clarence Fullard, assistant director of the New Jersey Small Business Development Center at Rutgers-Camden, espouse their theories about what can make or break a pioneer.

“Are you entrepreneurial?” Ms. Holtaway asked of the class members, who were all New Jerseyans except for two from New York; all had paid $100 a person or $149 a company to register. Their ideas included artisanal condiments made from local ingredients, authentic Mexican salsa and healthful spreads for sandwiches and snacks aimed at children.

Though some of the information in the workshop applied to would-be entrepreneurs in any category, much of the day’s discussion involved identifying the appeal of successful products. A case in point: FatBoy’s Cookie Dough, which played a part in Ms. Holtaway’s presentation.

FatBoy’s founder, Joel Ansh, 48, of Franklin Lakes, started working with the Food Innovation Center in 2005, five years after it was started. At that time, the center operated out of a small office in Bridgeton. It had no production center, and its primary purpose was to provide business mentoring, training and technical help.

“I started with a plain white box with a label stuck on it,” Mr. Ansh said in a phone interview. “They really helped me with the packaging.” The cookie dough, which is made for the company in a commercial center in Fair Lawn, is now sold in around 100 stores in states including New Jersey, Virginia, Massachusetts, Maine and Ohio.

The box “speaks to consumers on an emotional level,” Ms. Holtaway told the workshop, holding up a retro-looking 12-pack of FatBoy’s chocolate chunk. She pointed out that Mr. Ansh “puts a statement above the nutrition information: ‘If you have to read below, you don’t want to know.’ That’s meant to tell the consumer that every once in a while, you need to treat yourself. It’s O.K.”

Another Food Innovation Center client, Reuben Canada, 33, of Philadelphia, was on hand at the workshop to explain the trajectory of Jin-Ja, a carbonated drink made of green tea, ginger, lemon, mint, cayenne pepper and cane sugar.

Mr. Canada brought his recipe to the center in September of 2010. Jin-Ja is currently sold in 10 stores in Philadelphia, and one in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

Before learning about the center, Mr. Canada worked in a shared kitchen and needed to improve efficiency.

“I tried doing it on a larger scale, but the flavors were compromised — the soul was missing,” he said. “I don’t need to make 5,000 cases a day.” At the Food Innovation Center, he added, “I can make 150 cases a day.”

The center “fills a gap in the food industry between a home kitchen and a high-volume facility,” Mr. Canada said.
Before the center agrees to work with clients, it screens them “to make sure their product is viable,” Dr. Brennan-Tonetta said. Once a client is accepted, the rate for mentoring, including advice on marketing and packaging, is $85 to $125 an hour. Dr. Brennan-Tonetta said that an initial round of consultations typically runs 15 to 20 hours. Those further along in the product-launch process are charged $350 to $1,000 a day for use of the center, depending on the space needed and the size of the company.

The money is well spent, Ms. Visceglia said.

“People call me all the time wanting to know: ‘How do you do this? How do you start a business?’ I tell them, ‘You’ve got to call Rutgers.’”

And just because she and her husband have graduated, she said, does not mean they won’t call on the Food Innovation Center again.

One of the Visceglia’s next projects is a crab sauce, “and to do it we’ll need to fill out a bunch of paperwork,” Ms. Visceglia said. “I’ll definitely look to them for help with that.”

The Rutgers Food Innovation Center is at 450 East Broad Street, Bridgeton. For information: (856) 459-1900; foodinnovation.rutgers.edu.
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