Reuben Canada offers perhaps the best local example of what can happen when a new food product scores big.

Canada, 34, was mixing drinks for friends in 2009 when he stumbled upon a blend of ginger and green tea that tasted good warm or cold, with or without alcohol added.

By 2010 his Jin-Ja all-natural, herbal tonic with ginger, cayenne, lemon, mint, green tea, and sugar was in Whole Foods stores from Princeton to Philadelphia. In 2012, it will be in all of that company’s Mid-Atlantic stores.

"It works as a sorbet or a glaze," Canada says. "It's complete, but you can add to it."

Jin-Ja (jinjadrink.com) is now on the drink menus of some of Philadelphia's hottest new eateries (the Dandelion and Tashan, with more to come).

And Canada is poised to start hiring - three employees by the end of February, at least 20 by the end of 2012. That's in addition to driving the economic growth of other small businesses involved in labeling, bottling, and shipping.

A Swarthmore College grad who lives in Point Breeze, Canada quit his day job as a patent attorney around this time last year. He's been featured in the New York Times, Allure, and national magazines.

And he is indebted, in large part, to the Rutgers Center for Culinary Innovation in Bridgeton, N.J.

A business incubator, the center spurs economic development by helping people launch small food businesses. On a fee-for-service basis, the center offers legal and business advice, marketing, labeling, packaging, and shipping.

"When you think about it, I was driving business even then because Rutgers hired people from South Jersey to do the labor for me," Canada says.

Supported in part by Rutgers University, the center does not lend money or invest in products. But it is equipped with some production facilities, including a small bottling plant that Canada has since outgrown.

"It fills three bottles at a time, but that was enough to get me started," Canada says. "The center has an amazing staff of people with experience in the food industry. They not only understand the production process but had an idea about how to deal with distributors, and profit margins."

"It's all fun and fantasy while you're in the kitchen and you have a full-time job. But it's another story when you're making it in volume," Canada says.

"But the numbers have to add up," he says. "Otherwise, it's just a nice idea that failed."

- Dianna Marder