FOOD ENTREPRENEURS UNITE

Rutgers Food Innovation Center helps food entrepreneurs develop a recipe for success

New Jersey’s food and agricultural economy is already an $82-billion-dollar business. Leaders at Rutgers University’s Food Innovation Center, an economic development program of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers University, are betting on entrepreneurs in the food business to add even more value to the Garden State’s harvest – and reap more than 1,000 new jobs in the next few years. Those start-up businesses are expected to chalk up $200 million in cumulative new revenue – and $5 million in local tax revenue – over the next three years.

But launching a food business isn’t easy. Dreaming up the concept for a new value-added product or developing a proprietary formulation or production process is just the start. There are countless decisions to be made on ingredients, shelf life, packaging, marketing and distribution. Then there’s a maze of regulations covering health codes, labor, product labeling, transportation, sales and storage.

The Food Innovation Center staff helps entrepreneurs work through the necessary decisions, and even develop their products from test recipes to finished marketing plans.
The team has also pulled in more than $825,000 in grant money to boost agricultural producer businesses in the state. And Rutgers is breaking ground this summer on a $7.65 million Food Processing Incubator, a fully equipped food processing facility in Bridgeton that will offer food startups commercial production capabilities, from formulation to packaging, for rent by the day or hour.

**New Network for Entrepreneurs**

Even with all the technical support, navigating start-up challenges can be lonely work for entrepreneurs. Enter the Food Entrepreneurs Network (FEN), a chance for tomorrow’s food magnates to provide professional and moral support to each other.

“Starting out, you’re on your own,” says Diane Holtaway, associate director of business development for the Rutgers Food Innovation Center. “We created the Food Entrepreneurs Network because we wanted to create a forum so our entrepreneurs had a venue to talk to one another. It’s such an advantage to have the opportunity to exchange ideas on how to solve similar problems or find opportunities. So many of our clients are non-competitive with each other, so there’s a lot of discussion.”

FEN members connect online through an active listserv that boasts 220 members, and in-person at networking meetings called Fun FEN Events.

“The members are very cooperative and helpful in giving information when needed,” says Clair McDermott of Cbey Distributors in Prospect Park, NJ. Adds Christophina Tagoe of Comfort and Joy in Burlington, NJ, “Knowledge is power, and FEN events definitely give that power.”
Holtaway says networking is as much a way of life for the lean Food Innovation Center as it is for the entrepreneurs it advises. “We have limited staff, so we tap into outside resources within the university and within the business community,” she says. Many of those contacts become featured speakers at Fun FEN Events, a string of popular, informal events held around the state every two months for a dozen or so FEN members.

Recent Fun FEN Events include a talk with broker/distributor Marty Corcoran at the FIC in Bridgeton last November, a January workshop with advertising agency executives Joe Delmar of Delmar Communications and Mike Murray of Peeltown at the Rutgers EcoComplex in Bordentown, and a March event with Rutgers Food Science professor Kit Yam and a presentation and factory tour by the staff of Logotech, a manufacturer of pressure sensitive labels in Fairfield.

“We were delighted to be able to host a Fun FEN Event,” says Leslie Gurland, president of Logotech. “It’s great to be able to support the Food Innovation Center. What they do for start-up and small businesses is a real service to the entrepreneurs, the businesses that serve them, and to the entire state economy. It’s also exciting to help them explore how packaging relates to enhances their products – as well as to show entrepreneurs what we do at Logotech.”

Louis Cooperhouse, director of the Food Innovation Center, says connections with companies like Logotech extend the program’s reach across the state. “Our mission at the Food Innovation Center is to create these types of synergistic economic benefits, whereby New Jersey's food and agricultural product entrepreneurs meet with each other, and also with New Jersey based ingredient and packaging suppliers,” he points out. “In addition, we are developing relationships with New Jersey based retailers, restaurants,
farmer’s markets, and other foodservice customers. With programs like FEN, these introductions are now able to be made, resulting in increased opportunities for our clients, and positive impacts to the state's economy."

Holtaway says the label program filled up so quickly that FEN held a second session at the Logotech facility in May. She’s also preparing a survey for members to help the Center fine-tune future Fun FEN Event offerings.

Food Business Crash Course

The Food Innovation Center is also preparing for a half-day Food Business Basics seminar, which will be held at the Rutgers EcoComplex in Bordentown on September 19 to introduce budding entrepreneurs to the food industry. “This is really for the planners, for the people who say, ‘I really want to get into the food business, but I have no clue where to start,’” Holtaway says.

Christopher Shyers, business development specialist, explains that the program is designed to be an introduction to the food business. “The Food Business Basics workshops assist concept-stage and early start-up entrepreneurs to understand how to fill in the blanks of their strategic plans,” Shyers says. Food Business Basics will start with the most fundamental question – are you cut out to be an entrepreneur? – and walk participants through food industry trends, commercial-scale production, business planning, state regulations, and marketing, he explains.

“We’re trying to open their eyes to what they need to be thinking about and what they need to be engaged in to move forward,” adds Holtaway.
From an initial free consultation for prospective food entrepreneurs to detailed coaching and technical support that can help bring an idea to life, the Rutgers Food Innovation Center is committed to boosting New Jersey’s bustling food sector. Fun FEN Events are informal and low-key, but they’re turning out to be a valuable piece of the pie.

“It’s a win-win for everyone, to take a few hours out of their day,” says Holtaway.

To a businessperson eager to launch a business, it’s a lifeline – a point that’s made clearly in a note from Tonia Hobbs of Family Traditions & Generational Blessings of Orange, NJ after the Logotech event. “This was an excellent presentation and all the speakers were extremely knowledgeable,” Hobbs wrote. “Also, the resources provided are definitely helpful. If at all possible, I would like to schedule an appointment to discuss business growth strategies for my company.”

That’s a recipe for success.

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For more information on the Rutgers Food Innovation Center and its Fun FEN Events, visit www.foodinnovation.rutgers.edu or call (856) 459-1125.