Rutgers University helps food vendors keep up with latest trends

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By Tara Nurin for NewsWorks

Among foodie-friendly Philadelphians, the term "farm-to-table" tends to evoke thoughts of chef-driven restaurants rather than jars of ketchup. But in Bridgeton, N.J., a Cumberland County hub surrounded by land that keeps the "garden" in "Garden State," a group of scientists and food-industry veterans are shaping the multi-faceted locavore and artisanal-food movements in a way that often gets overlooked by restaurant-centric urbanites.
Working on behalf of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center (FIC), an arm of the university's Agriculture Experiment Station, veterans from the food and beverage industries, as well as a broad base of Rutgers professors, have been steering both budding entrepreneurs and multi-national companies along their journeys to bring specialty food products to the retail marketplace since 2001.

Though the incubator program -- duplicated in only a few locations nationwide -- was initially founded to help New Jersey farmers turn their harvest into produce-based items like jam and salsa, FIC consultants are more recently compelled to respond to significant philosophical shifts in their clients' goals. More than ever, they're coaching novices -- retirees, homesteaders and young professionals -- looking to introduce high-quality, pro-wellness, locally sourced shelf products that meet the clients' own nuanced dietary requirements and represent their own community-oriented values.

**Consumer demand**

"Organic is still pretty strong but natural is what our clients really talk about," says director Michael DuBois, who adds that clients are striving to infuse the idea of "wholesomeness" into their products. "No hormones in food, no unnatural ingredients ... whole grain or fiber in food, no tropical oils. We get a lot of clients coming in with gluten-free, vegan and veggie foods."

"There's a high demand for natural, high-quality products," agrees Patrick Leger, a Princeton-area organic farmer and co-owner of First Field, which makes ketchup and relish that are sold at Whole Foods in the Philadelphia-region. "Ten years ago I don't think we could have created this company."

He's probably right. According to Specialty Food Magazine (SFM), sales of specialty foods have "rocketed" by nearly 20 percent over the last three years, with approximately 4,500 such foods and beverages being introduced in the U.S. over that time period. Two years ago, Leger and his wife/business partner, Theresa Viggiano, were "just growing tomatoes." Leger says FIC helped him scale his recipes to maintain taste and consistency as he made larger quantities of ketchup.

Their First Field company sources all of its produce in-state. And that factor -- more than any other health or quality issue -- drives demand from the American specialty-foods consumer and enhances the FIC's ability to boost profit margins for New Jersey farmers.

SFM reports that three-quarters of retailers rate "local" as the most influential product claim in this niche industry, followed by "organic" and "all-natural" then trailed by "sustainable," "eco-friendly" and "fair trade." In New Jersey, this interest translates to the growth in the number of farmers markets: 40 in 2000 to 140 now.

**Exotic goes local**

But there are more than local considerations involved in the locavore movement, which, thanks to a burgeoning acceptance for exotic foreign flavors, even welcomes the consumption of cuisines developed abroad, particularly if their ingredients are locally cultivated.

Jatin Patel is one FIC client who can deliver on this. Because the former Saladworks franchisee was tired of eating what he describes as commercialized Indian-style simmer sauces, Patel says those amounted to canned tomatoes drowning in water. Last year he introduced Beyond the Spice sauces, which he makes with mostly fresh and local vegetables and fruits, along with spices that he grinds by hand before each batch. Because he doesn't use chemicals, stabilizers or artificial preservatives, it took him and FIC staff seven months (and six different brands of coconut milk!) to perfect his recipes. The effort has paid off with his recent inclusion in the rotation at three suburban Philadelphia Whole Foods locations and a display at the nationally lauded, impossible-to-get-a-reservation Talula's Table in Kennett Square.

"My goal is to be the number one Indian gourmet simmer sauce producer in the tri-state area within three-to-four years," he says. "I cannot imagine how I would do it without the help of the FIC."

In order for Patel to expand his distribution into the specialty retailer realm, it's not enough for him to produce all-natural, high-quality foods. He must also consider the environmental impact of his packaging and production methods. As such, the FIC team develops the simplest packaging possible to maintain the safety and integrity of the product. They also respect that modern food entrepreneurs may choose to use less-than-modern methods in order to be, well, modern.

**Ethical consumerism**

"The marketplace has such an enormous appetite for products that are driven by values, and for us that means going back to how it was done in old times," says First Fields' Leger, who grew up, like many of his fellow Quebecois, making their own versions of dish-specific ketchups.

Bridgeton thrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a center for ketchup production but larger operations later made it hard for the smaller manufacturers to compete. This helps Leger weave a narrative that connects his company back to how it was done in old times," says First Fields' Leger, who grew up, like many of his fellow Quebecois,

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Tom Petty and Red Hot Chili Peppers will join the Lumineers, Foster the People, Vampire Weekend and a host of other acts at the second annual Firefly music festival in Dover this June.

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