Incubators help develop food products

By JANET FRANKSTON LORIN

FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP, N.J.

Goat chops, goat sausage and goat loins aren't appearing on most American menus today, but Jim Lechner is working to change that.

The New Jersey goat farmer knows there's a demand for his meats in the ethnic market, including Muslims seeking halal meat. He's hoping a food "incubator" at Rutgers University will help him sell his product to high-end restaurants and turn his goat meat into a gourmet product.

Since 2001, the Food Innovation Center at Rutgers has helped develop and refine ideas for new products grown and manufactured in New Jersey.

These incubators, so-named because they "hatch" ideas, exist across the country to help food producers keep up with a changing American diet and palate.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has awarded $10 million in grants, including $1 million to Rutgers, to provide technical and business development assistance to agricultural producers for new food ventures or to add value to existing ones.

Similar to incubators created for other sectors like technology, the centers offer sophisticated guidance -- akin to research and development arms of large companies -- to assist farmers and entrepreneurs with business development plans, market research and focus groups, and in some cases manufacturing.

"There's a tremendous thirst for new products in the marketplace and the opportunities are ripe for new companies to be quick to market with products that meet the needs," said H. Louis Cooperhouse, director of the Rutgers center.

Many incubators are affiliated with universities -- at Oregon State, the University of Idaho, Cornell University -- and offer different menus of assistance. Other food venture centers and incubators, in Vermont and Indiana, are non-profits.

They represent steps beyond the traditional alliance with universities, extension centers that historically assisted with pest management, agriculture genetics and crop rotation.

In New Jersey, where the food industry is estimated at more than $8.1 billion annually, Rutgers' Food Innovation Center helps small farmers and entrepreneurs develop new products such as organic gelato and fresh-cut asparagus in microwaveable pouches.

The center has operated as part of Rutgers for years and will get its first dedicated building in 2008. The $7.4 million, 23,000-square-foot building will offer food processing equipment, technical and business support services, office space and manufacturing and storage space.

Lechner, for example, will be able to use center's test kitchens to work on sausages or ready-made dishes.

He also has received two grants from the center, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to create goat meat cuts and to work with chefs to create a guide with recipes and tips for preparation and presentation.
"In the culinary industry, chefs are always looking for something new and different," Lechner said, walking around his 165-acre farm in Franklin Township, an hour west of Newark, over the din of bleating goats. "I compare goat meat to veal. It's more tender and it has a sweet flavor."

Cooperhouse said the changing eating habits and multicultural desires of Americans are providing new markets for foods.

"People looking for more prepared foods, but they're looking for higher quality prepared foods and they're looking to make connections with local producers," said Brian Norder, project director for the Vermont Food Venture Center.

The Vermont incubator helped David Barash, an alumnus of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, with the startup of the Vermont Mystic Pie Co.

He needed a place to scale up his recipe and help to flash freeze the pies. Apple and apple-blueberry frozen pies are now sold at Whole Foods markets on the East Coast.

"We went from baking several pies a day at home to making several hundred a day and it allowed us to really experiment with what worked," he said. "If it hadn't been for the incubator space, I don't know what we would have done."

Incubators are taking different shapes in other places.

The Oregon State program also helps existing businesses add products. In Geneva, N.Y., the Cornell Agriculture and Food Tech Park opened last year, offering manufacturing space to startup food companies as a complement to its Food Venture Center.

The Business and Technology Incubator at the University of Idaho, opened in 2004, offers kitchen space, test labs, and business and technical advice. It also matches entrepreneurs looking for local ingredients with growers, said director Jim Toomey.

The center helped an apple farmer add apple barbecue sauce to his product line and a wheat farmer expand to pancake mix.

As the fourth largest dairy state, the Idaho center is also working with business to create more artisanal cheeses to meet a growing demand. Next, it plans to offer technical services for the wine industry, Toomey said.

"The intent is to retain food dollars in the local economy," he said.

In New Jersey, Blackwell's Organics, which sells 12 flavors of organic sorbet and lactose-free gelato, has increased production from 50 to 300 cases monthly with marketing and organic certification help from Rutgers.

Founder Marcia Blackwell said startup businesses like her year-old company need assistance navigating the changing food market.

"People are looking more for quality than to just fill their stomachs," she said. "Fifteen years ago, people were just looking for a meal and now they are savoring the foods they eat. They are more educated about where their food comes from."

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On the Net:

Vermont Mystic Pie Company:  http://www.vermontmysticpie.com

Blackwell's Organic: http://www.blackwellsorganic.com

Goat World: http://www.goatworldnj.com