In the perfect world of slogan writers, your “better mousetrap” attracts just the right number of customers, you have just the right perfectly-priced mousetraps to satisfy them all, and the path they beat to your door is your only distribution problem.

If life were that simple, we’d have had sinfully-rich soy vegan Blackwell’s Organic Peanut Butter Chocolate Swirl Gelato in our local markets a long time ago.

But, as any food innovator will tell you, no matter how brilliant—or delicious—your original idea may be, getting a better edible product to market is anything but easy.

Fortunately for farmers, food companies, retailers, even startup entrepreneurs like Marcia Blackwell with her passion to produce healthier gelatos and sorbettos, New Jersey has The Food Innovation Center, a resource designed specifically to help guide better food products out of the test kitchens and into local food stores.

As the economic development branch of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, the Rutgers Food Innovation Center brings the intellectual richness of the Rutgers University system together with the economic juggernaut of New Jersey’s agricultural industry to develop the foods the state already produces into the startling new products we didn’t even know we were hungry for until we got our first taste.

For Marcia and Joe Blackwell, the idea for better gelato grew naturally from their personal lifestyles and dietary needs. Home organic gardeners who compost, recycle, and live in a solar
house, the couple is committed to eating organic and creating only vegan, dairy-free products free of preservatives and extracts. Of course, they also have to taste fantastic.

“The Food Innovation Center was instrumental in getting our business off the ground,” says Marcia. “We had to overcome not just ordinary food business problems, but also those specific to organic products and, as if that weren’t enough, frozen organic products.”

Julie Elmer, Associate Director of Food Technology, helped the new business through the challenges of establishing a manufacturing plan and finding suppliers for basic commodities in batch sizes they could afford. Then, to help her new clients achieve their commitment to the planetary concerns of fair trade and sustainability, she steered them through the maze of special requirements for organic certification.

“To be certified organic, you need to establish and demonstrate chains of custody for your ingredients,” explains Elmer. “Especially if you’ve made a commitment to use only Certified Fair Trade ingredients. You even need to follow guidelines in choosing what products you use to clean your equipment.”

Labeling and packaging issues can be arduous, too, for new food companies. Blackwell’s Organic needed special permission from the FDA to market their products as gelato and sorbetto, Italian names for which the FDA had not yet established guidelines for US production.

“Julie helped us through all the nuts and bolts production issues,” says Marcia. “She recommended we buy pint containers in quantity and label flavors individually, with adhesives that hold up under freezer conditions and label media that won’t smear if they get wet. As our sales grow, we’ll have to meet more stringent labeling requirements, but for now we’re in compliance if we list our ingredients on each package and offer complete nutritional breakdowns on our website.”

Food Center business development specialist Christopher Shyers helped the fledgling company refine its product story, marketing materials and sales pitch. “It was fun,” says Marcia. “Chris knows how important it is for a startup food company to tell a unique story. It was wonderful to email him my package designs and marketing materials and get immediate feedback from his business expertise.”

“I can’t say enough about the wealth of information I’ve received from The Center. Everyone has an area of expertise, and for every problem there are a dozen resources at Rutgers they can call on. But, beyond that, they’re great cheerleaders, always in touch.” In May, the company signed its first big distribution deal with Garden Spot Distributors to deliver premium frozen desserts well beyond its headquarters in Red Bank. “I guess we must be doing things right,” Marcia concludes, “Because the roadblocks keep tumbling down as we approach them.”

Diane Holtaway, Associate Director of Business Development for the Food Innovation Center, with its offices in Bridgeton, Cumberland County, sees the double advantage in promoting food innovation using local products. “Here in the heartland of New Jersey’s agriculture, we see thousands of acres of farmland looking for better, more profitable markets. If we can help growers find new uses for soybeans, or a better method of packaging asparagus, we’ve benefited the economy in several ways.”
For Tom Sheppard of Sheppard’s Farm in Cedarville, one of New Jersey’s biggest asparagus growers, the business challenge was how to add value to a product he already knows well and produces in quantity.

Working a farm that’s been in cultivation since 1683, Tom is very familiar with the efforts of the Agricultural Experiment Station to help local farmers develop hybrids, attract grant money, generate bigger yields and test-plant new crops like organic vegetables.

“This year, they came to us with a brand new idea,” says Tom. “They’re helping us market our asparagus pre-trimmed, pre-washed, and ready to go into the microwave in two different packages: a 10 oz. tray with a clear film wrap, and a 10 oz. bag with a steam-valve, 3 minutes on high and straight to the table.”

“The Center worked with us on labeling, what consumers like about the packaging, cooking instructions - the entire presentation. Now, we’re in the infant stages of a new product, just starting to develop new customers,” he concludes.

Dr. Tom Orton, Extension Specialist for the Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension service, was the primary consultant from the Food Innovation Center on the value-added asparagus project. He describes the venture as a dialogue.

“We had technical ideas about how to present a better asparagus at market,” says Orton, “and the grower brought production expertise and the desire to incorporate technology into their business to reach more markets and generate profits. Together we’re bringing a wholesale commodity into the consumer product arena in a way that benefits everybody.” The packages, developed from an original concept by Dr. Bill Romig of MidAltantic Perishable Commodities Services, are made of a food film microperforated to allow the contents to breathe just enough. “The package increases shelf life, extends product quality and controls which types of gases are contained,” Dr Orton explains. “It’s also easier for store owners than standing banded bunches in a water and ice bath, which only promotes bacteria growth and creates a chore for the produce manager.

“Inside the microwave, the bag expands, the valve releases excess steam, and it’s the steam that cooks the asparagus, not the microwaves. The finished food is much better looking, better tasting than asparagus microwaved loose, and retains more nutrients inside the bag than asparagus steamed on a stovetop.”

Customers don’t need to trim the woody parts from the bottom of these pre-trimmed spears, either. As a bonus to the farmer, the stumps are a “co-product” rich in compounds the pharmaceutical industry is happy to pay for.

The Kings chain of supermarkets near the Experiment Center planned its first test marketing of the new Sheppard’s Farm asparagus packages for early May.

As it continues to pursue its mission to promote food business in New Jersey, the Food Innovation Center plans to build a 23,000 sq. ft food business incubator facility in Bridgeton, New Jersey, and begin construction during late 2006 or early 2007. The Center will be complete with food processing and laboratory space to develop new products and test prototypes, and to provide access to test kitchens, hot- and cold-processing, and assembly and packaging facilities for companies too small or too new to afford them. Who knows what new agricultural wonders will show up soon on shelves throughout the state?