Beyond tomatoes

If you like New Jersey-made food, look forward to more.

The Rutgers Food Innovation Center broke ground last month on a $7.4 million state-of-the-art building in Bridgeton to cultivate start-up food companies and help the state’s farmers.

The 23,000-square-foot facility will contain food processing and laboratory equipment, and provide entrepreneurs with technical, business and educational support. The government-funded building is expected to open in the fall of 2007.

"The mission is to create higher paying jobs in New Jersey, and also preserve farmland," said director Lou Cooperhouse.

Companies will be able to test products and even manufacture them, he said. Farmers can bring their fruits and vegetables to be cleaned and prepared for market with the facility's equipment. The center also aims to help farmers by increasing the number of food-manufacturing companies around the state.

Cooperhouse cited the case of peach farmers who throw much of their crop away because it’s not high enough quality to be sold in stores.

"Thirty percent of peaches are plowed under every year," he said.

"Those peaches are perfectly suitable to make peach cider or peach pie." Instead, a new company could decide to make pies or cider, or the farmer could do it himself using the available equipment.