Beyond tomatoes
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Think New Jersey food. If tomatoes, saltwater taffy and Texas wieners come to mind, think again.

How about Irish soda bread, pickled Macedonian peppers and frozen Indian curries?

Quietly, the state has become a prominent purveyor of fancy foods.

The menu runs from New Jersey-made mints, organic kosher pastry shells and Chambord cakes to cheese, snails, p• and dried fruit imported from around the world.

The New York-based National Association for the Specialty Food Trade says it now has more members per capita of population in New Jersey than any other state.

Association President John Roberts cites two reasons: Any state with an agricultural base tends to produce fancy foods. And New Jersey's location makes it a gateway to the world, both for products and people.

The state's ports make it a natural place for many food importers to set up shop, he said. And the large, diverse immigrant population boosts the variety of food companies because they are often started by new arrivals, he added.

"Lots of specialty foods are related to immigrants wanting to celebrate or experience the foods of their homeland," Roberts said.

New Jersey's growing culinary profile will be displayed July 9 at the association's Fancy Foods Show, perhaps the largest gathering of specialty food purveyors in the nation.

New Jersey's diversity

More than 100 New Jersey companies will show their wares at New York's Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. And New Jersey will for the first time have its own pavilion, staffed by representatives of the state Agricultural Department, New Jersey Commerce, Economic Growth and Tourism Commission and Rutgers Food Innovation Center in New Brunswick.

"The goal is clearly to create awareness amongst buyers about the great diversity of products that New Jersey companies have to offer," said center director Lou Cooperhouse.

Typical of the entrepreneurs is Jo Naughton, co-owner of Nutley-based Celtic Passions, which makes dough mix for Irish soda bread based on the recipe Naughton learned from her mother, who was born in Ireland.
Naughton, 77, said the company was conceived nine years ago after she concluded that playing golf with her husband was an unsatisfying way to spend her retirement.

"I said, 'Gee, I'm really getting bored with this. Let's do something better, something that's worthwhile,' " she recalled.

Naughton said she thought about how her home-baked soda bread was popular among friends and family. And her daughter, Joanne Manley -- now co-owner of the company -- suggested they turn the distinctive bread into a business.

These days, the company's 50-pound sacks of bread and scone dough mix are sold in ShopRite and Safeway. The company has 10 Nutley-based employees who make the mix for East Coast customers. A Nevada-based contractor produces it for the West Coast market.

Sales grew about 10 percent a year for the first part of the decade and jumped 80 percent last year when Safeway picked up the mix, Naughton said. The company sells about 6,500 50-pound bags of mix a year.

"Most of my clientele -- hard to believe -- are Italians," Naughton said. "Irish people think they make better bread than we do."

Immigrant customers

Still, it's invariably ethnic customers looking for food from home that provides the initial clientele for fancy food companies.

That's the case with seven-year-old Fast Pak Trading Inc. of Paterson, importer of preserved vegetables from Macedonia, once part of Yugoslavia.

The company's hard-core clientele are European immigrants, including those from Poland, Macedonia, Albania and Croatia, said Kiro Ivanovski, 27, the company's vice president.

Sales have risen from $1.3 million in 2003 to $2.3 million last year, he said, and are expected to jump to more than $3 million this year. And the company now hopes to attract a mainstream clientele, selling through the Amish Market in New York and The Market Basket in Wyckoff.

"The ethnic market is already saturated," he said. "There are only so many people from that part of the world that will buy it."

Ivanovski's father, Ivanco, 59, started Fast Pak in 1991 after his employer, a Macedonian machine-tool producer, collapsed amid the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

At first, Fast Pak sold machine tools, but switched to selling food when the supply of Macedonian tools dried up, he said.

Fast Pak has 10 employees in New Jersey. Another 100 work in a factory in Macedonia, which the company bought a year ago, Kiro Ivanovski said.

"It's a small town," he said. "We basically employ the whole town."
Ivanovski said he's not surprised that New Jersey is the home to so many specialty food companies.

"I think it's because of the fact that New Jersey has such a large population of outsiders," he said.

"When people arrive from Europe, they don't go to the South or the West, they start here. And they bring these specialty products."

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A CORNUCOPIA OF ETHNIC DELIGHTS

NAME TOWN PRODUCTS

Bergen County

The Fillo Factory Dumont Gourmet organic and kosher dough, pastry shells

Forni & Fattorie USA LLC Lyndhurst Italian bread

Fratelli Beretta USA Inc. South Hackensack Italian deli meat

Giulia Specialty Foods Inc.

dba La Bomboniera Inc. Lodi Balsamic vinegar, panettone cake, Swiss rolls

Haram-Christensen Corp. Carlstadt Variety of foods from Germany, Switzerland, Austria and other countries

Hoboken Eddie's Hasbrouck Hghts. Barbecue, chili, peanut and other sauces

John Wm. Macy's CheeseSticks Elmwood Park Cheese sticks, cheese crisps and sweet sticks

Lazzaroni U.S.A. Corp. Saddle Brook Italian baked goods, pasta

Lemberger Candy Corp. Paramus Chocolate from Spain, Holland and Mexico

Liberty Richter Saddle Brook Food from Vietnam, Thailand and Holland

The Multiflex Co. Wyckoff Marzipan, candies

New York Mutual Trading Inc. Moonachie High-quality Japanese food and sake

Niche Import Co. Cedar Knolls Chocolates from Germany, Colombia and Italy

Overseas Food Trading Ltd. Fort Lee French chocolates
Pietro Coricelli North America Ltd. Tenafly Olive oil

Silver Palate Kitchens Inc. Cresskill Chutney, mustards and vinegars

Source Atlantique Inc. Englewood Cliffs Food from numerous countries, including Brazil, Morocco, Greece and Thailand

Tiger Tiger USA Fair Lawn Asian sauces

Wissotsky Tea Ltd. Englewood Cliffs Kosher tea

YLK Inc. Englewood Cliffs Imported celery, carrots, snails and cheese snacks

Passaic County

Adagio Teas Clifton Tea

Buono Pane USA Passaic Italian food

The Cheeseworks Ltd. Ringwood Organic products, including cheese, p? and olives

Del Maximo Foods Clifton Hispanic foods

Fast-Pak Trading Inc. Paterson Pickled vegetables from Macedonia.

Mirrotek International LLC Passaic Sesame, teriyaki, moo shu and other sauces under Iron Chef name

Morris County

Bri-Al LLC Morristown Specialty food from all over the world

Hudson County Italian Products USA Inc Secaucus Gourmet products, including mushrooms, truffles, pesto and tapenades

Jana Foods LLC Secaucus Cheese from Holland, Denmark and Australia

Posh Nosh Imports Inc. Kearny European chocolates, mustards and pickles

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