Planting seeds for Jersey agriculture

Some Turnpike travelers no doubt guffaw at the notion of an entity that appears to consist solely of highways, urban landscapes, oil refineries and landfills calling itself the Garden State.

Unfortunately, this is one Jersey joke that has some basis in fact.

Not that New Jersey agriculture isn’t viable. It’s still the second-largest consumer goods industry in the state. But the past couple of decades have been tough on Jersey farmers, largely because of ever-increasing competition. Where we once waited patiently for locally grown blueberries, asparagus, corn and tomatoes, modern packing practices and speedy transportation now bring them in from around the world 12 months a year.

Moreover, the departure of such large food processors as Campbell’s has removed some of the biggest bulk buyers of New Jersey produce.

In the late 19th century, almost 3 million acres of New Jersey (out of 4.75 million) were farmland. By 2002, the figure was about 800,000.

Fortunately, this doesn’t mean we soon will be reading about the last Jersey tomato. Someone is taking action. In 1998, Rutgers and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station did a study on state farming, and the results, if not surprising, were resounding. Not only did farmers need help, but so did entrepreneurs looking to break into the food production industry. And so, in 2001, the Rutgers Food Innovation Center was created — the first project of its kind in the country.

“The study captured the essence of how many entrepreneurs are out there — particularly in a downsizing economy,” says center director Louis Cooperhouse. “And we saw a way to help them.”

In five years the center has helped some 500 farmers and food entrepreneurs with projects ranging from educational seminars to business plans and marketing to hands-on development of new products.

“We had one farmer come to us who wanted to find a way to utilize peaches that were not 100 percent grade A but still a really good product,” says Diane Holaway, associate director of business development.

“We helped him identify a product he could produce, and he now has a nice, growing business with peach cider. Which is perfect because the trend in specialty beverages is growing by leaps and bounds.”

Or consider asparagus guacamole, a product, that the center helped Gloucester County’s Circle M Farms produce.

“Escarparagus is not only delicious,” says Holaway, “but right on track because, unlike the traditional avocado guacamole, it has zero grams of fat.” First sold in local markets and specialty stores, Escarappago recently got into the Albertson’s grocery store chain.

What the center’s seven-member staff has needed badly, and is about to get, is a facility that will bring its programs — education and business planning, packaging, production, marketing — under one roof.

This fall, says Margaret Brennan, associate dean of research at Cook College-Rutgers and assistant director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, construction will begin on an incubator in Bridgeton, thanks to $7.4 million raised through federal grants and state, the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, the Cumberland Empowerment Zone and other sources.

“We’ll be the first tenant in the new food industrial park,” she says. “Our building will include a product development kitchen, a microbiology lab for the chemistry testing of foods, a sensory evaluation center for consumer taste-testing, and sophisticated production and packaging equipment.”

Yet that 23,000-square-foot facility — even with its 12,000-square-foot expansion capacity — won’t meet the center’s needs for long. So Cooperhouse is looking to create satellite facilities that would bring programs closer to those they can serve.

“We’re trying to identify locations with existing kitchen operations, maybe at tech schools that have a fair amount of downtime — where there is an interest in making the facility available to the local community during off hours,” says Cooperhouse. “In the case of a school, students could participate. Our technical and marketing strength could be used in a mentoring capacity.”

Cooperhouse already has advanced this proposal in several counties and believes it’s likely Sussex will provide the center’s first satellite facility. “Everybody will win with such an arrangement,” he says. “The entrepreneur creates his product, the facilities would make revenue and the enterprise will create community good will.”

One unknown is whether the major state cuts in the Rutgers budget will affect the Food Innovation Center. Cooperhouse says he doesn’t know yet. But it will be an enormous error if its mission is downsized. It would, quite literally, be taking food from the mouths of New Jersey’s farmers and food entrepreneurs.

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