

# EDIBLE COMMUNITY

BY BETH FEEHAN

## BUILDING A BETTER PARADIGM

*Rutgers Food Innovation Center helps bring food ideas to reality. Now, with the opening of a new facility, the possibilities are expanding.*



Does everyone tell you that your mother's strawberry jam recipe is the best they've ever tasted? Do you have an idea for creating a new food business? If you do your homework and speak to the folks at Rutgers Food Innovation Center, your concept may very well turn into reality. And, this summer, those dreams will get a big boost when the center opens the doors to its new 23,000-square-foot food business and processing facility in Bridgeton, Cumberland County.

The food business incubator, originally formed in 2001 as a part of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (NJAES), helps farmers and cooperatives, start-up and existing small and mid-sized food companies, and retail food service establishments move from food product concept to commercialization.

Incubators exist in a variety of industries and are aptly named because they "hatch" ideas. The Rutgers-based organization provides practical guidance on considerations such as pricing, marketing, distribution and other concerns critical to business success. The Food Innovation Center (FIC) has already helped hundreds of entrepreneurial food businesses in the state; its new site will dramatically expand capabilities, enabling food product prototypes to be tested, evaluated and commercialized in a state-of-the-art processing facility.

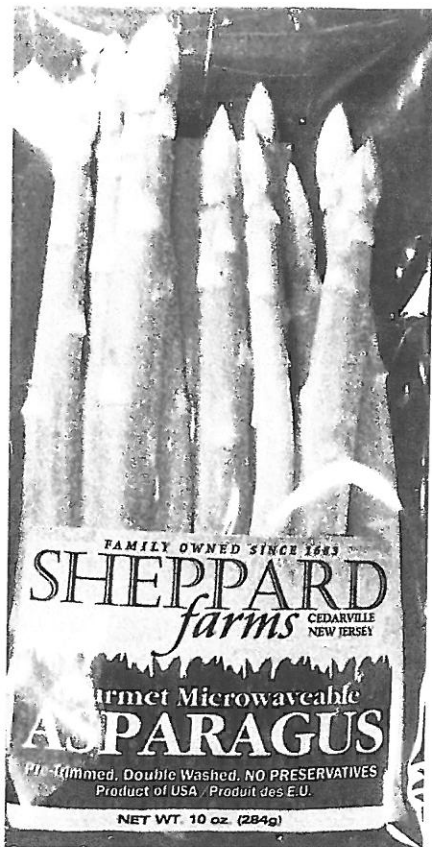
The center's location is a critical advantage. Over 50 million people live within six hours driving time of New Jersey. This regional access to an ethnically diverse and hungry public is central to the accomplish-

ment of the organization's mission. From processing to packaging, not to mention product development, consumer research and a host of other support services, the Food Innovation Center is broadening the appeal of New Jersey's quality produce and food products.

"The Food Innovation Center serves as a catalyst for the food entrepreneur, providing critically needed resources for new business ideas and resulting in a dramatically increased likelihood for success," says Lou Cooperhouse, executive director of the center. "In addition, the center supports established food businesses and provides access to new technologies and market innovations that can differentiate companies from their competition."

The focus is on value-added products, goods created when a producer takes an agricultural commodity, like milk or vegetables, and processes or prepares it in a way that increases its value to consumers. Blackwell's Organic line of natural sorbetto, for example, features real fruit, including blueberries from Hammonton. Launched in 2005 with help from the FIC, the Red Bank-based products are now available in Whole Foods Market and other stores and restaurants throughout the region. (See related story on page 30.)

Diane Holtaway, associate director of business development at the FIC, says she considers the greatest success of the Center to be "when you've counseled somebody who's come in with just an idea and you see that product hit the shelves and start selling." Here are some examples:



## ASPARAGUS REDEFINED

Tom Sheppard and his brothers Dave and Erwin are 14th-generation farmers. Sheppard Farms of Cedarville in Cumberland County has been in their family since the 1600s. When the Sheppards wanted to develop a novel packaging creation that would extend the life of fragile asparagus stalks in season and would also be microwave friendly, they turned to the Rutgers Food Innovation Center.

What brought Sheppard Farms to the center? "We were talking with a supplier about things we could possibly do," recalls Tom. "He had a microwavable bag. We

got together with Tom Orton, Rutgers Agricultural Research Center extension specialist and member of the Food Innovation Center, who helped us look at packaging innovations that differentiated our product from the competition and created a new convenient product that consumers want."

Fourteen months later, the specialized microwavable, perforated package was ready for use. It extends the shelf life of asparagus to 21 days, from the usual 10–12 days, and cooks through convection, rather than steaming. The entire package of trimmed and washed seven-inch stalks can go in the microwave and is ready to eat in two or three minutes.

In 2006, the Food Innovation Center helped Sheppard Farms se-

cure a "value-added" grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That same year, with new package-sealing equipment, the brothers rolled out a few thousand 12-count boxes, selling to Kings, ShopRite and IGA distributor Bozzuto's. Whole Foods Market bought locally, as did Wegmans.

New Jersey's asparagus season runs from mid-April to mid-May, so maximizing the short window of production is critical to success. Plans are to expand year-round production by sourcing from other states' asparagus crops. (To learn more about Sheppard Farms, visit [jerseytomato.com](http://jerseytomato.com) or email [efresh@mindspring.com](mailto:efresh@mindspring.com).)

## THE ENERGY BEHIND MIJOVI

In August 2004, environmental consultant Marcos Carrington went to the Rutgers University Department of Food Science with an idea. The entrepreneur wanted to produce a coffee-based drink that would feature the energy benefits of many emerging drink brands. He believed that the use of coffee, one of the world's most familiar flavors and commonly perceived as an energy enhancer, would help his product stand out in the growing functional drink category. Carrington contacted the FIC at an early stage; he was in the process of developing recipes but was waiting to go into production. The FIC stepped in with marketing intelligence, providing extensive help with branding and positioning the product. The



## WHO DOES FIC SERVE AND HOW CAN YOU APPLY?

"Helping New Jersey's agricultural economy expand is the main mission for the center," says Andrew Law, state director of Rural Development for the USDA in New Jersey. Value-added programs increase the net operating income of the state's agricultural economy and positively influence the survival of agriculture and food production.

"The Food Innovation Center is the conduit to the food industry," he adds. "It can get the entrepreneurial juices flowing and focus people inspired by an idea to take it all the way to market."

Run under the auspices of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, the Food Innovation Center gives help to the following entities:

- **Farmers and cooperatives** desiring to create new businesses based on value-added agricultural products or considering new markets for their existing commodities

- **Start-up food companies** coping with challenges such as financing, technology, regulations, market development and other infrastructure requirements
- **Existing small and mid-sized food companies** seeking to access new technologies, upgrade quality assurance capabilities, enter new markets and expand and improve their operations
- **Retail and food service establishments** seeking to improve their operations and purchase locally grown New Jersey products

The center is now meeting with prospective users of its new incubator facility and also sponsors quarterly "Food Business Basics" seminars for would-be food entrepreneurs. For information, contact the Food Innovation Center at 856-459-1125 or visit [foodinnovation.rutgers.edu](http://foodinnovation.rutgers.edu).



first batch of the new drink was distributed in February 2006.

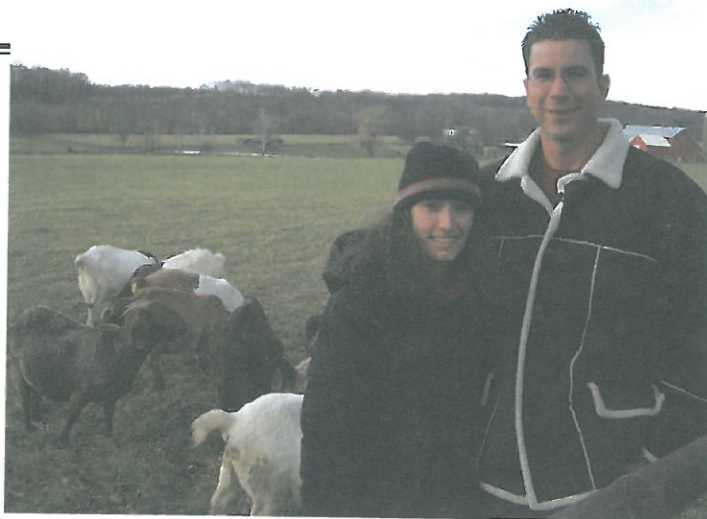
"We have been assisted tremendously by being affiliated with the FIC," says Carrington of the services, advice and guidance the center has provided to his business.

Currently, Mijovi (whose name was inspired by the name of Carrington's fiancée, Jovita, along with Latin-origin words meaning "joyful life") can be found at Vingo Wine & Spirits and Buy-Rite Liquors; select 7-Eleven stores, Krauszer's, Zebu Forno; and several pizzerias, delis and cafes. Future plans include a low-carb, sugar-free version of Mijovi to be introduced this spring. ([mijovi.com](http://mijovi.com))

## A WORLD OF GOATS

Jim and Nicole Lechner (pictured right), the owners of Pittstown-based Goat World, are cultivating new markets for goat meat with the help and guidance of the Food Innovation Center's multi-disciplinary team. In 2005, the couple obtained a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education partnership grant with the center, enabling them to do taste testing, marketing research and recipe development with chefs so they could expand demand for goat meat outside its traditional ethnic market.

Growing up on his parents' 180-acre farm, Jim had always been involved in the family's beef cattle operation. In 1990, he diversified the operation to include meat goats. Today, Goat World has grown to be the largest meat goat operation in the state and Jim is finishing his PhD in meat goat production at Rutgers University. He espouses the



value of goat meat, which, according to the USDA, is healthier than other red meat. A three-ounce portion of roasted goat has less than three grams of fat; a similarly sized portion of beef has eight.

The center is currently assisting Goat World with their 2008 USDA Value-Added Producer Grant and the couple considers the FIC an invaluable resource. Jim believes that the new facility "is going to be a huge asset to New Jersey."

"I just can't say enough positive things about the FIC program, Lou, and his staff," he adds. "We definitely would not be in the place we are today without their assistance. We had a concept—and they're helping us bring that concept to market."

([goatworldnj.com](http://goatworldnj.com); (908) 735-5928)

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