

H. Louis Cooperhouse, director of Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center, stands near a Holstein dairy cow at the Cook College dairy barn in New Brunswick. (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

Turning Jersey lemons into lemonade

Rutgers' Food Innovation center helps farmers develop 'value-added' products

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BRIDGETON — Each July, when farmer Santo John Maccherone harvested, some of his sweetest fruits went to waste.

Despite being perfectly ripe, about 10 percent of his peaches had to be thrown out or plowed under, too delicate to withstand shipping without suffering bruises or getting overripe.

So Maccherone, 52, a third-generation peach farmer, had an idea: Use the peaches that weren't suitable for fresh markets to make peach cider.

Helped by experts at Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center, Maccherone now sells 7,000 gallons of his Circle M Peach Cider a year. In addition to the sales revenue it generates, the cider has helped drum up new customers for the peaches, white peaches, nectarines, apples and asparagus produced on his 200-acre Mullica Hill farm in Harrison Township.

Talk about turning lemons into lemonade.

"I don't have to produce anything new. I'm taking something that was going to be discarded and making money with it. And the cider enhances the sales of my peaches," he said.

Maccherone's success story, and a handful of others like it, are the fruit of a nascent agricultural program aimed at helping New Jersey farmers develop "value-added" products

from their fields.

The effort is being spearheaded by the Food Innovation Center, a pioneering agency that provides business development and technological support to New Jersey farmers and the state's food industry in general.

"This might be the last chance for the survival of agriculture in the state of New Jersey," said Andrew Law, director of the state office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program. "We cannot compete producing

raw products with the markets of South America and eastern Europe. Labor costs are too high, land costs are too high and the pressure to change the use of that (farm) land is just too compelling to survive."

Established in 2001 by Cook College's New Jersey Agriculture Experiment Station, the center operates out of a 19th-century office building in downtown Bridgeton. It has six full-time and three part-time employees.

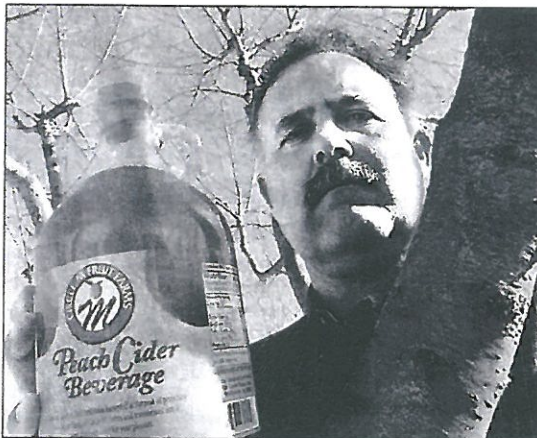
In three years, it has helped

250 clients from all but one of New Jersey's 21 counties to develop business plans, identify new markets, help farmers with quality assurance and participate in workforce development efforts.

Among its clients: Villa Milagro Vineyards, in Warren County, which is developing wine jams; the Landisville Produce Cooperative Association, in Atlantic County, which is trying to help New Jersey farmers get into the bagged salad market; and Goat World, a Hunterdon County company assessing the potential appetite for goat meat in New Jersey restaurants.

The early successes have prompted Rutgers to propose building an \$8.8 million building that would house the center, offering 23,000 square feet of test kitchens, cold-processing areas and focus group rooms.

The building project, which is being paid for by the state of New Jersey, the New Jersey Agriculture Experiment Station, the Cumberland County Empowerment Zone, the city of Bridgeton and the state Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, is expected to break ground later this year, according to H. Louis Cooperhouse, director of the Food Innovation and Research Center.



Peach farmer Santo John Maccherone shows a bottle of his peach cider on his farm in Harrison Township. Rutgers' Food Innovation Center helped him develop the cider. (ASSOCIATED PRESS)