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FEATURED

Food Venture Center celebrates 30 years, big renovations

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A ceremony celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Cornell Food Venture Center was held Thursday at its Geneva location. A host of officials from the state, Cornell and the food industry, celebrated renovations to the Food Venture Center's Pilot Plant, which features some of the highest tech gizmos available in food processing and preservation research and development.

Spencer Tulis / Finger Lakes Times

GENEVA — Cornell Food Venture Center Director Olga Padilla-Zakour was never the shy one when it came to expressing what her facility needed to do its job, said former State Sen. Mike Nozzolio, a longtime supporter of the work at Cornell AgriTech.

"Olga's Kitchen," as Nozzolio called it Thursday afternoon during a ceremony celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Cornell Food Venture Center, needed some renovations.

Job done.

Nozzolio, along with a host of other officials from the state, Cornell and the food industry, celebrated renovations to the Food Venture Center's Pilot Plant, which features some of the highest tech gizmos available in food processing and preservation research and development.

The state has invested \$13 million into the renovated space, where Food Venture Center workers have helped hundreds of companies bring thousands of products to the marketplace since it opened with a meager \$48,000 grant back in 1988.

A Cornell AgriTech release said the renovated Food Venture Center "will allow entrepreneurs to introduce more natural ingredients, design smart packaging materials and incorporate other cutting-edge innovations."

Among the new technologies: Continuous pasteurizers to produce safe beverages for refrigerated or shelf-stable products, batch pasteurizers for bottled products and commercial pressure cookers to produce shelf-stable foods packaged in cans, glass or pouches.

Among the other technology: new concentration and dehydration equipment that will maximize the quality and longevity of liquids, sauces, jams, jellies and pastes.

Padilla-Zakour said the new equipment "will allow our food entrepreneurs across New York to utilize our facility to develop new products without impeding their existing production schedules, and will allow entrepreneurs to make small batches for market testing purposes."

Richard Ball, commissioner of the state Department of Agriculture and Markets, called the renovations “beautiful” and an “incredible accomplishment” which he said reflects the state’s commitment to agriculture and food production as an economic driver.

Ball said his grandparents, who were dairy farmers, could never have envisioned what is going on in agriculture and food science, “but we can.”

The day will come when scientists and researchers at the Food Venture Center and Cornell AgriTech will be “doing things *we can’t imagine.*”

Kathryn Boor, dean of Cornell’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, said the renovations provide “an even greater edge” for New York’s agriculture and food industries.

State Sen. Pam Helming said the products the Food Venture Center helped businesses bring to market can be found at grocery powerhouses from Wegmans to Aldi to Trader Joe’s.

“We truly have a lot to brag about,” she said.

Boor acknowledged the support of many but singled out the work of Nozzolio, who has seemingly made it his mission to develop Cornell AgriTech. She said his “constant support” helped secure the money needed for so many upgrades at the experiment station campus and at the Food Venture Center.

“This is a VIP — a very important place,” said Nozzolio, who turned the praise back to Boor for her “far-sighted, focused leadership.”

Although not in attendance, Gov. Andrew Cuomo issued a statement on the Food Venture Center’s three decades of work:

“Farms and food are critical components to our economy upstate, and these improvements to Cornell’s hub for advanced food technology will help drive innovation and profitability in the Finger Lakes,” he said.

After the ceremony, guests were treated to foods and beverages from companies whose success is linked to the Food Venture Center. Among them: Red Jacket Orchards, Cheribundi, Freeville Farms, Arbor Hill, Nunda Mustards, Perfectly Pickled Products, Wegmans and Giovanni Foods, whose chief financial officer, David Monahan, spoke and took part in ribbon-cutting ceremonies. The company is based in Onondaga County.

About the Cornell Food Venture Center

Established in 1988, the Cornell Food Venture Center is a hub for food businesses in New York state, providing comprehensive assistance to beginning and established entrepreneurs through educational materials, workshops and direct assistance with product process development, product safety evaluation and guidance in local, state and federal regulatory compliance. The CFVC also provides referrals for business assistance, financing sources, and local suppliers and service providers.

— *Cornell AgriTech*