



Steve Buchiere / Finger Lakes Times

**Chris Smart, director of the School for Integrative Plant Science at Cornell University (far left), leads a panel discussion Tuesday on creating “ecosystems of innovation.” The talk took place at New York Loves Food, a day-long gathering at Cornell AgriTech’s Jordan Hall in Geneva focused on ways to develop New York agriculture and food-related businesses. From left: Tom Schryver, executive director of the Cornell Center for Regional Economic Development; Andrew Rose, director of innovation for Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit; Ed Harwood of Just Greens/Aerofarms; Charlie Haberkorn of Stonehenge Capital; and Michael Annunziata, chief executive officer and co-founder of Farther Farms.**

## Geneva event looks to drive food and ag innovation

Experts offer ways to develop New York as a food hub

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GENEVA — While agriculture — at least when it comes to what’s grown in the field or orchard or produced in the dairy barn — may not be as large a driver of the New York economy as it once was, there is a lot of upside. Especially in the food-processing sector, driven by technological advancements that are being developed by great minds right in the Finger Lakes and New York as a whole.

That’s according to Kathryn Boor, dean of Cornell University’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, who provided those thoughts in her welcoming remarks at “New York Loves Food II,” a day-long symposium at Jordan Hall on the Cornell AgriTech New York State Agricultural Experiment Station campus Tuesday.

The subtitle of the program was “Building an Ecosystem of Farm and Food Tech Innovation in the Empire State.”

Members of the agriculture and food industry, as well as state legislators and other state and regional business and government officials took part in the conference as well.

Boor said New York’s agriculture industry is ranked 23rd nationally — it was 16th 50 years ago — but is ranked second for the number of food-processing companies.

While Cornell continues to develop innovative ways to help farmers grow crops, it is also a na-

tional leader in developing food-processing technologies that are helping companies turn ideas into market products, and ultimately jobs.

Boor said that for every food-processing position created, five more jobs are hatched, one of the “highest multiplier effects” of any industry.

Cornell and Cornell AgriTech are among the national leaders in developing food-processing technology through the Cornell Food Venture Center and a host of other college researchers in Geneva and at the main Ithaca campus.

The time is ripe to prime the pump, she said.

“We will only succeed if we innovate now,” Boor said.

A company whose leader served as a panelist at the Tuesday forum is an example of what can happen when agriculture, science and technology — and a little help from the government — come together.

Cornell graduate Michael Annunziata is chief executive officer and co-founder of Farther Farms, which has developed an all-natural, organic process to extend food shelf life by months without using preservatives, chemicals, refrigeration, or freezing. Its first product: a never-frozen French fry that doesn’t need refrigeration and has a three-month shelf life.

“We are doing high-speed potato processing in upstate New York,” said Annunziata. “It is an intense food-processing operation.”

Company co-founder and fellow Cornell graduate Vipul Saran conducted the foundational research for the food-preserving process in Cornell’s Department of Food Science. Farther Farms has taken

that technology to the Eastman Business Park in Rochester, where they hope to use the process on a number of other fruits and vegetables. The company received, among other grants, a \$250,000 National Science Foundation grant to assist Farther Farms’ research.

Cornell is serving as the sponsoring research institution for the project.

It’s these types of companies — developed among educational institutions, industry and government — that new organizations such as Locate Finger Lakes, led by former State Sen. Mike Nozzolio, can drive the region’s economy. Nozzolio was among the speakers during the afternoon session at Cornell AgriTech.

While the ideas and brainpower are here, panelists said, there is a need for more capital for startup food ventures in their embryonic stages.

Tom Schryver, executive director of the Cornell Center for Regional Economic Development, said “large numbers of small checks” are what these fledgling firms need to get off the ground to develop marketable products.

It’s only then that these companies can chase the venture capitalists, he said.

However, Schryver said, there’s a misconception that there isn’t venture capital flowing into the Finger Lakes and upstate for food-innovation projects.

“The fact is capital does come here,” he said. “Just not enough.”

Panelists also said they think New York can do a better job of creating a national brand, given that the state is a leading producer in a number of agricultural categories — from apples and grapes to corn and cabbages.