An old-fashioned taste with a new twist

An Oklahoma food company is adding a new twist to the old-fashioned taste of traditional food items.

Wes Higgs, 1999 graduate of OSU and owner of Red River Gourmet Food Co. of Stillwater, Okla., has developed a food product that incorporates raspberries.

“My vision is to create a line of products that are simple yet sophisticated and create a taste sensation that wows consumers,” Higgs said.

The company currently offers mild-, medium- and hot-flavored raspberry salsa, raspberry chipotle salsa and original- and spicy-flavored raspberry barbecue sauce.

“Our long-term goal is to build a value-added food processing facility in Stillwater that will not only produce our products, but would also take up the capacity for other local products in North Central Oklahoma,” Higgs said.

This goal not only helps the Red River Gourmet Food Co., but it will create new jobs for Oklahoma.

Higgs was first exposed to raspberry salsa in the early 1990s when someone in his family received a jar as a gift. Thirteen years later, armored with his experience in the food service industry and his love for the culinary arts, Higgs set out to reproduce the taste.

The first few batches of raspberry salsa were made fresh from ingredients out of Higgs’ garden. Higgs was so excited by the reactions from his family and friends that he began to share it with others.

“At the suggestion of a friend, I attended a workshop at the Food & Agricultural Products Center in Stillwater on how to take a homemade food product from the kitchen to market,” Higgs said. “Much of our success is a result of our relationship with the FAPC.”

The FAPC assisted Higgs in the development of his final formula and helped answer questions about processing, packaging, image and store placement, said Corey Stone, business and marketing specialist for the FAPC.

“Wes has taken a very entrepreneurial approach to his new business,” Stone said. “He identified a market and found a product that was under-represented in that market, and then proceeded to develop his gourmet line as extensions from the original product.”

Stone said Higgs had the capacity to be flexible with his formulations, which expedited his venture into the marketplace.

“He now has a high-quality gourmet product line that is safe and affordable to the consumer,” Stone said.

Red River Gourmet Food Co. offers a variety of raspberry products.
A message from the director

The Food Marketing Institute has published information this year on consumer trends that show convenience, price, portion size, appearance and flavor, health and nutrition and ethnicity are the principle drivers of retail food purchases. Even though the retail food market is very competitive, consumer trends also show that quality plays a very large role in food purchase considerations.

In other words, with all things being equal, the average consumer has had sufficient food dollar flexibility to “upgrade” when possible to more of a premium product.

It is interesting to note that in a very recent Wall Street Journal article on the top 10 trends in 10 industries, speed and variety were identified as the leading trends in the $440 billion U.S. food service industry.

This article discussed the various components of the restaurant industry including fast food restaurants, traditional restaurants and the more premium restaurants. Certainly, the article focused on the speed and variety aspects of food service consumer demands, but clearly woven into the discussion was the demand for high quality products and the demand for high quality and very clean restaurant environments. Further, there was a clear bent toward a demand for foods that are perceived to be healthful and nutritious.

When reviewing retail and food service food consumption trends over this last quarter, there is increasing emphasis on the aspects of both perceived food quality and the perceived health and nutrition of foods. As an example, the organic food market continued to demonstrate significant growth when compared to the more stable traditional food market. Organic food retail buyers have said they purchase organic food preferentially, even at higher prices, because they believe organic is better for their family, and methods to grow organic food are friendlier to the environment. It has been estimated that the organic retail food market in the United States will exceed $30 billion by 2009.

Agricultural producers and food processors in Oklahoma should see opportunity in these trends. The great thing about consumer markets such as retail food and food service is that they are not static. Consumer preferences change. It makes sense that agricultural producers and food processors in Oklahoma critically evaluate opportunities in value-added food products and allow their businesses to grow as these new demand areas grow.

The FAPC Industry Advisory Committee holds meeting

The FAPC Industry Advisory Committee met in early December to discuss issues affecting the FAPC and the food and agricultural industries. J. Roy Escoubas, FAPC director, met with Chair Roger Ediger, of counsel for Mitchell and DeClerck P.L.L.C. in Enid, Okla., and the committee members and discussed the activities taking place at the FAPC.

The faculty and staff also met with the committee and discussed key projects the faculty and staff are working on at the FAPC.

This meeting gave the new committee members Bob Collins, executive secretary of the Cooperative Ginner’s Association of Oklahoma in Frederick, Okla., and Bill Wiley, president of Oklahoma Refrigerated Services, LLC in Oklahoma City, a chance to take a tour of the FAPC and meet the faculty and staff.
FAPC teaches continuous improvement tools

The FAPC hosted a workshop for beginners focused on food and agricultural processing applications to learn about continuous improvement tools.

“Continuous improvement tools are used to maximize companies’ competitive advantage,” said Tim Bowser, FAPC food engineer and chair of the workshop. “These tools help individuals and teams work smarter to identify the root cause of problems and solve them.”

Jason Young, FAPC quality management specialist, also spoke to the participants about quality.

“Customers expect a product to match or exceed expectations, such as the product supplied on time and a price the customer can afford,” Young said.

Bowser and Young described several continuous improvement tools participants could use in businesses to increase the quality of their products. The tools included flow charts, cause and effect diagrams, data collection, pareto analysis, run charts, correlation charts, histograms and control charts.

Kenneth Case, regents professor of industrial engineering and management and featured luncheon speaker, encouraged the participants to incorporate the continuous improvement tools taught during the workshop.

The workshop consisted of speakers from business and industry who provided valuable information regarding being successful in the food-marketing arena.

The workshop featured keynote speaker Vince Orza, Eateries Inc. chair and CEO, and luncheon speaker Randy Earhart, Taco Mayo president.

Other speakers included Del Van Horn, Advance Foods; Bob Johnson, Sysco Foods; Steve Long, Food Marketing Specialists; David Brooks, Shawnee Milling Co.; Gerald Cockerham, Associated Wholesale Grocers; Mark Harsha, Harsha & Associates; and Lee Ann Potter, Oklahoma Restaurant Association.

The workshop also included a panel discussion with the presenters and FAPC specialists answering questions for participants.
The coalition identified three areas of concern with the greatest potential for beneficial results. These concerns include soil quality, economics and water resources.

The SPARC coalition hopes to improve these concerns by educating producers, providing producer incentives, purchasing equipment, performing research and demonstrations and sharing expertise.

One of the goals of SPARC is to have producers certified by next spring and the products ready to go to market in spring of 2006.

Jim Brooks
FAPC Business Planning and Marketing Specialist

The entire steering committee of SPARC has made tremendous progress in defining the vision of the coalition and will now focus on very specific goals and objectives to be completed during the next year.

Jim Brooks