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Science of Sustenance

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Fadi Aramouni

Science of sustenance:

Foods laboratory helps Kansas companies prosper

The nation's breadbasket is home to some of the country's largest food-related companies, and this presence can be overwhelming to a small food producer looking to enter the market. But a Kansas State University laboratory offers Kansas companies the resources to be successful — and at an especially low cost.

The Kansas Value-Added/Product Development Laboratory supports the Kansas food industry through a variety of services, including: the development of new products; consulting on methods to add value to existing foods; performing pertinent evaluations and tests; offering food safety training; and generating nutritional information for labels. All services are available at a low cost to Kansas companies because of an annual grant from the Kansas Department of Agriculture to the laboratory.

"It's important for these companies because it gives them a comparative edge," said Fadi Aramouni, extension specialist and professor of food science.

Aramouni coordinates the value-added program through Kansas State University Research and Extension. He has guided the laboratory from its humble beginnings to an efficient operation that receives dozens of requests monthly for its services. Requests not only come from Kansas companies, but also from surrounding states. The frequency of requests can be attributed to the laboratory's specialized offerings and responsiveness, Aramouni said.

"We are different in that we respond very fast to a client," he said. "We do the research needed to ensure that they get the contract they are working toward. That is not common at universities."

Among the lab's clients is Grandma Hoerner's Foods Inc., of Alma, Kan. The lab has established an organic certification program, assisted in product development and given food safety programs. Grandma Hoerner's has reciprocated the lab's help by providing internship opportunities for some of the lab's student staff members.

Working with Kansas companies helps Kristin Wirth, junior in food science and industry and the laboratory's microbiologist, identify more with her work.

"Here at Kansas State University I can take it to the next level and help assure the safety of the product," Wirth said. "When I see the counts come back low for microbes it's a good thing."

Wirth and other students have essential roles on the laboratory's staff. Kathryn Deschenes, master's student in food science and industry and laboratory manager, handles communication and outreach as well as special projects. She has received several awards in national contests for product development.

Brennan Smith, doctoral student in food science and industry, is conducting research with protein chemistry, specifically in the development of gluten-free products. His research has focused on substituting sorghum flour and carob germ flour for wheat gluten.

"The actual finished product is probably one of the only, if not the only, gluten-free breads you could compare to wheat bread as far as texture, density and overall quality," he said.

Smith also recently received an award for product development.

Deschenes believes all of the services offered by the Kansas State University laboratory have a great benefit for Kansas companies.

"You really see the impact of your work when you go and visit them and you see how important it is to keeping their business afloat by preventing food safety issues," she said. "It's evident our services are important."