

Virtual marketplace goes online

Internet-based Puget Sound Food Network opens doors

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BOW, Wash. - As 2-year-old Johann Maas contentedly licked his way through an ice cream bar produced by Whidbey Island Ice Cream Co., he flashed a wide chocolatey smile of approval.

The happy toddler was just one of the many appreciative people sampling regionally produced value-added goods - among them, wines, pickles, sauerkraut, dairy products, and barbecue sauces - during the festive launching of the Puget Sound Food Network at Rosabella's Garden Bakery.

Thanks to a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Commerce Department, the Northwest Agriculture Business Center's web-based network will soon connect Puget Sound producers, processors, manufacturers, restaurants, retailers and consumers.

By allowing the parties to communicate with one another in "real time," the network will serve as a regional clearing house that will help boost farmers' profits.

For Mary Stoll, co-owner of Whidbey Island Ice Cream, the network will be a good marketing tool that will help get the company's name out to more potential buyers.

"As more people taste our ice cream they'll be asking for it in more local stores," she said. "It (the network) will help expand our marketing efforts, and make them more efficient."

The project, whose website has not yet been created, will feature value-added products from Clallam, Jefferson, King, Island, Kitsap, Mason, Pierce, Snohomish, Skagit, San Juan Thurston and Whatcom counties.

With Alan and Rosabella Merritts' apple trees and flower garden as a backdrop, guests at the launching event dined on sandwiches, salad, and made-from-scratch baked goods from Rosabella's Garden Bakery while they learned more about the regional network.

"We know they (Western Washington farmers) can grow anything; the challenge is finding the markets," said Tim Van Hofwegen of Northwest Farm Credit Services, as he introduced the program during the event, which the agency co-hosted with Rosabella's.

David Bauermeister, executive director of the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, echoed those



Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., left, helps celebrate the launch of a new value-added product, Skagit Fresh, a line of sparkling juices made from apple and berry juices supplied by Skagit County, Wash., growers Alan Merritt, center, co-owner of Merritt's Apple Farm; Perkins Variety Apples; and Sakuma Brothers Farm. To the right is David Bauermeister, executive director of Northwest Agriculture Business Center, which helped develop the project.

More Information

For more information about Northwest Agriculture Business Center and the many projects it's working on, go to www.agbizcenter.org or call 360-336-3752.

Food Network meetings

- Lynden: 11:30 to 1 p.m., Aug. 25, Bellewood Acres, 231 Ten Mile Road.
- Everett: 11:30 to 1 p.m., Sept. 8, Shawn's Produce, 6501 Rainier Drive.

thoughts when he told the group that preserving farmland in Western Washington hinges on helping farmers develop value-added goods for regional markets.

Pointing out that farmland is disappearing at a rate of two acres per minute, Bauermeister said the current food-distribution system, which requires massive amounts of fossil fuel to transport food many hundreds of miles, doesn't make economic sense from a farmer's perspective.

"Less than 8 cents of the consumer's dollar goes to the farmers," he said.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., who along with U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., helped secure funding for the network, described the online project as "a tremendous new opportunity to bring local goods to local markets."

"We want your food on our tables," she said, a comment that evoked nods of agreement from her fellow diners.

When asked about the significance of the project, Murray didn't hesitate to say it could have widespread implications across the nation.

"If we can make this work here, we can go forward with it in a lot of other agricultural communities," she said.

Larsen also praised the network's potential to help the region's farmers.

"Food travels quite a long way to get to our tables, but it does not need to be that way here in the Northwest, because we have plenty of great farmers," he said.

The event also celebrated the launch of Skagit Fresh Natural Sparkling Juice Beverages, whose juice flavors were chosen with the contemporary marketplace in mind - Ramblin' Raspberry, Sassy Strawberry, Big Bad Blackberry and Bodacious Blueberry.

Made from apple juice and berry concentrate supplied by Merritt Apple Farm, Sakuma Brothers Farm and Perkins Variety Apples, Skagit Fresh will be owned by the local farmers involved in the project.

The juices are expected to be available in four packs of 12-ounce bottles in Haggen stores in September. In addition, Town & Country Markets and Brown & Cole Stores have shown an interest in the juices.

For apple grower Alan Merritt, the new juices represent another chance for his apple orchard. He said that with foreign imports undercutting local producers' profits, some orchardists have torn out their trees and given up on apples.

"It just breaks your heart to see some of these apple trees pulled out of the ground because the farmers aren't getting enough of a return," Gary Merritt, marketing director for the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, told the group during the luncheon.

Pointing out that a panel of professional tasters liked the juice, Gary Merritt offered this prediction: "I think everyone is going to be surprised at how well it sells."

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