

HERE FOOD PROCESSORS CAN FIND BOUNTIFUL GROWTH



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

CIFI SUCCEEDS WITH FOCUS ON HEALTHY EATING TRENDS

By Lawrence Bivens



While North Carolina leads the nation in sweet potato cultivation, the crop has been something of an unsung hero in the state's agribusiness community. That perception is changing thanks in part to a Nash County company now promoting food and beverage ingredients that align with today's healthier, nutrient-rich diets.

Carolina Innovative Food Ingredients, Inc., (CIFI) began in 2015 as an affiliate of Universal Leaf North America. Its quarter-million square-foot production facility sits amid the fertile farmlands that make up Nash County, North Carolina's #3 producer of sweet potatoes. Aside from the 36 jobs CIFI has created, the company supports the region's growers. "Probably more important to the local economy is the new market for locally grown agricultural products provided by CIFI," explains Jim Nagy, the company's president.

CIFI makes juices, granules and flours from sweet potatoes grown in North Carolina. Those and other products are sold to food and beverage businesses that use them in a variety of baked goods, sauces, salad dressings and drinks - even pet foods. The company can thus purchase irregularly shaped sweet potatoes that may be less desirable for supermarket produce shelves, even though they pack the same nutritional punch. "CIFI intends to purchase increasingly larger quantities of locally-grown sweet potatoes that are not suitable for fresh market sale," Nagy says. "Hence, CIFI provides sweet potato growers a totally new sales avenue for an important portion of their crop."

Sweet potatoes were among the earliest crops ever cultivated in North America. Until recently, they loved in the shadow of more popular "white" potatoes. But the 21st century consumer tastes have ignited demand for sweet potatoes around the world. Unlike the processed sugars and high-fructose corn syrups that sweeten many foods and beverages, sweet potatoes boast a low glycemic index, which acts to stabilize

- not spike - blood sugar. A source of fiber, they also provide vitamins B6 and C, as well as important minerals like iron and potassium. But much of the sweet potatoes' nutritional appeal centers on its potency as a source of beta-carotene, a key defense against cancer, heart disease and aging-related illnesses. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture calls for regular servings of "red-orange" vegetables such as sweet potatoes in school lunches.

"Our products are ingredients that can be used in a variety of consumer products - some currently on the market and some yet to be developed," says Nagy. Dehydrated sweet potato can be added to health bars, snack foods and desserts. Liquids derived from sweet potatoes similarly form the basis of condiments and beverages. The nation's current craft beer craze even presents an opportunity, with sweet potato lager emerging as a year-round favorite. "Juices can be produced in a variety of filtration levels and concentrations, depending on the amount of solids desired," he says.

CIFI does not use sweet potatoes that have been genetically modified, another facet of the company's emphasis on sustainability. In mid-2016, it was certified under the USDA's National Organic Program, enabling CIFI to tap the marketplace for organics, which is growing by double digits. Organic products are now available in nearly three out of every four American grocery stores, the USDA reports.

The Twin Counties were an obvious choice as a base for CIFI. "Nash County offered numerous advantages that influenced our location decision," Nagy says. Close proximity to quality raw materials was critical. "Our business is built upon processing sweet potatoes grown by North Carolina growers, and Nash County is the geographic center of the state's sweet potato growing area," he says.

As an affiliate of Universal Leaf North America, Nagy and other CIFI leaders were familiar with the region's business assets. Universal Leaf has operated a significant production facility near Nashville since 2001. "We've experienced first-hand the multiple advantages in Nash County," he says. The region's strong infrastructure, including roads and utilities, appealed to company officials. When additional wastewater capacity was needed, local leaders were quick to step up with a new 30-inch sewer line and other hardware necessary to accommodate CIFI's needs. The Town of Nashville tapped state and federal funds from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and Economic Infrastructure programs in order to improve wastewater service at the site. Support from local government and economic development officials factored into the company's location choice, Nagy says.

Also key was Universal Leaf's positive experiences with the region's human resources. "The workforce we've been able to attract from the area really knows how to work," Nagy says. "they have a great work ethic and take great pride in their work." In staffing its new \$25 million facility, which is equipped with the latest technologies, CIFI is assembling a flexible, adaptable workforce. "The employees at CIFI have been both patient and persevering - doing whatever it takes to help us get the plant successfully started," he says. Jobs there range from entry-level production workers to product development professionals and management staff.

CIFI's Nash County operation intends to employ 64 workers. The company's vision includes branching out beyond sweet potatoes into healthy food ingredients derived from other regionally-grown farm products. Nagy is confident the support systems CIFI has tapped in the Twin Counties will help foster its continued development. "Nash County is in close proximity to growers producing a variety of crops," he says. "We can look at additional value-added processing as our business moves forward."



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