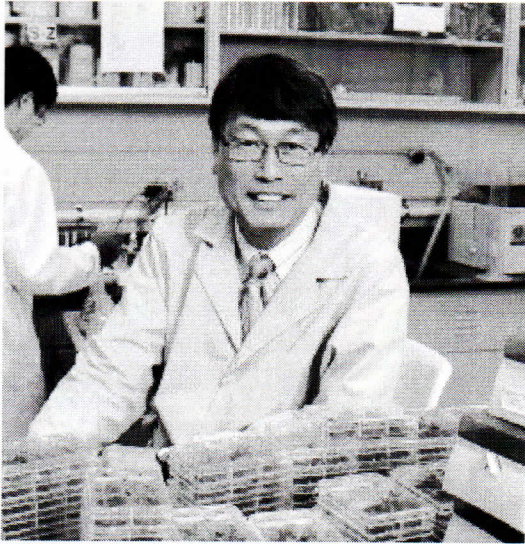


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Food's in the forefront

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Ken Lee, director of the Food Innovation Center, wrote the grant that launched the five-year \$3.75 million project. The center is entering its fourth year and has more than 290 members from all 14 colleges working on food innovation projects.

Members of OSU's Food Innovation Center work to solve the world's biggest issues — from malnutrition to cancer

by Christina Drain

The next time you attend a county fair or other local event, if you see soy pretzels and tomato-soy juice on the menu at one of the food concessions — it's likely thanks in part to Ohio State's Food Innovation Center.

Yael Vodovotz, associate professor of Food Science and Technology, proposed the idea to use food trucks as a way to promote "functional foods" developed at the university. She was looking for marketing strategies to place potentially cancer-fighting foods in front of consumers and to get feedback on the products.

And Ken Lee, the center's director, agreed and saw even further potential benefits.

“She came up with the idea of putting healthy or functional foods, foods that have benefits beyond just nutrition, in a food truck,” Lee said. “This might be a partnership of benefit to the health trucks that offer screenings and to get Ohio State branding to major food events.”

Vodovotz is still researching costs for a mobile unit versus a storefront, but likes the mobile approach because the unit can accompany university outreach efforts. With more than 100 food trucks roaming the Columbus area, residents are familiar with the rolling restaurants.

“The mobile food truck concept is an interesting one and worth exploring,” Vodovotz said. “The medium is accepted in the community.”

The idea is just one of hundreds that have been proposed to the Food Innovation Center, which numbers more than 290 members from all 14 colleges.

The center, nearing the end of the third year of its five-year \$3.75 million university grant, claims several major accomplishments: OSU and Columbus-based Abbott Labs are investigating new solutions to reduce and prevent malnutrition through crops locally produced in Haiti; conversations are ongoing with the MidOhio Food Bank to build food security; several clinical trials are ongoing to improve nutrition and combat cancer; a symposium last fall heightened awareness of childhood obesity and chronic disease; and OSU researchers have developed a pasteurization technique to eliminate salmonella from eggs, which is being commercialized.

But the center's biggest success is the collaboration among the colleges. Lee points to Ohio State's world-class Wexner Medical Center, and specifically the James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute, as an example.

“The faculty collaborate quite willingly with others all over campus who are doing research with food,” Lee said. “It was really a low-hanging fruit, to make the pun, to put these collaborations under food innovation.”

The center also has provided 55 seed grants since its inception, in the hopes that recipients can leverage the funding to go after larger grants.

“There's quite a portfolio of research,” Lee said. “We have funded everything from little discussion groups that advanced the conversation about obesity or using social media to combat childhood obesity, to projects that engage the private sector or enhance our competitiveness for extramural awards.”

“I think the greatest thing is that for each dollar we have spent in the Food Innovation Center, we have generated \$13.59 in extramural support. That's showing a great return on investment for a lot of our researchers.”

The center also serves as a think tank with local food banks and other stakeholders, encouraging “what if?” questions that have led to some interesting discussions about food security and urban food deserts — areas with little access to fresh or healthy foods but often served by plenty of fast food restaurants — nationally and internationally, Lee said. Lee contends there is a need to solve the global problems but do it by local initiative.

“Food security is a worldwide problem,” he said, “but there are things that ... are being proposed by the researchers in the Food Innovation Center that improve the local food security situation and could be a template for how we act on a global basis.”