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Innovation Campus adds Korean food processor

Chris Dunker

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Violet Park, 5, niece of Suji Park, founder of Food Dreams Made Real, enjoys a sampling of Japchae at Monday's ceremony. Suji's Cuisine USA, Park's company and a producer of South Korean prepared meals, is opening an office at Nebraska Innovation Campus for research and development.

Courtesy Photo / Craig Chandler / University Communications

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Suji Park owns and operates Korean restaurants in South Korea and caters food service at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul -- but she has long been drawn to Nebraska's status as the Beef State.

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“It’s the Silicon Valley of red meat,” said Park, whose Suji’s Cuisine was announced Monday as the fifth private company and first international tenant of Nebraska Innovation Campus. They already have a sales office employing six people in Omaha.

When the Korean food manufacturer opens a research office in the Food Innovation Commons this summer, Park said, Suji’s Cuisine will expand its line of low-sodium, gluten-free beef and pork products that are now on shelves in California and Japan.

Suji’s Cuisine will research ways to take authentic Korean recipes, which use all-natural, gluten-free ingredients free of MSG – a sodium commonly used in Asian foods – and produce them safely and efficiently on a large scale.

The business plan has gained the confidence of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, which awarded Suji’s Cuisine two “Value-added Agriculture Academic Research and Development” grants totaling \$300,000 to create two market-ready meat bowls and two sauces.

Invest Nebraska, a private non-profit corporation that offers financial support to high-growth companies, also gave an additional \$150,000 in seed money to help Park launch new products. Invest Nebraska is partly financed by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

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“All indicators point toward economic growth and success of these companies both in the U.S. and the world,” said Brenda Hicks-Sorenesen, director of the department.

Park said Suji’s Cuisine has 12 products already in markets in California, Texas and Japan. With a small research staff ready to start at Innovation Campus this summer, she said, eight more products could be on shelves by the end of the year.

One of those products, the Korean vegetable side-dish kimchi, is the subject of a research collaboration between University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Korean food scientists.

“Kimchi is a very, very difficult product to make, because it continues fermenting,” Park said. “It can’t have a shelf life, so we are looking how we can make it stop fermenting while also keeping the good probiotics to stabilize it enough to be sold in stores.”

Park said it’s a natural fit to locate an office at Innovation Campus.

“People ask me, ‘Why are you moving to Nebraska?’” Park said. “I tell them simply, ‘because it’s the best.’”

Gov. Pete Ricketts said leveraging the state's reputation as a leader in fostering value-added businesses like Suji's Cuisine food processing company is a natural track for Nebraska.

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“We’re already known for agriculture; now it’s time to build on the value-added businesses and be able to grow them here in the state,” he said. “We are an agricultural state, and food processing ought to be part of that strength.”

Suji's Cuisine is the fifth private company to lease space at Nebraska Innovation Campus.

ConAgra Foods, the first partner announced at Innovation Campus in 2012, plans to partner with the Food Science and Technology Department in conducting research on popcorn and tomatoes, continuing a research partnership that currently exists on UNL's East Campus.

Since that announcement, recruiting the private sector to the public-private development has been slow going. Innovation Campus Executive Director Dan Duncan told the NU Board of Regents in September that interest has been high from companies of various sizes, but much of the recruitment may come after construction is completed later this year.

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In February, three small businesses announced partnerships with Innovation Campus.

Quantified Ag of Lincoln, which is partnering with Communication Systems Solutions to develop a sensor capable of relaying an individual animal's vital signs to a feedlot manager, will headquarter at the research park.

Hastings Mayor Vern Powers also will move two businesses to the Food Innovation Center – Hastings HVAC and Echo Canyon Services – to do research and create internship opportunities within a 4,500-square-foot lease space.

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