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Joe Duggan

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NU's Innovation Campus to host packaged Korean food producer's research HQ

By Joe Duggan / World-Herald Bureau
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LINCOLN — On land once famed for food on a stick, an Omaha entrepreneur declared Monday that she's hoping to put kimchi on a shelf.

Suji Park, founder and “chief inspirational officer” of Suji's Cuisine USA, announced that the company will soon open a modest research and development division at Nebraska Innovation Campus. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln technology park occupies the former location of the Nebraska State Fair.

Park, who employs six staff members at a marketing office at 1299 Farnam St. in Omaha, said the company last week launched a line of packaged Korean barbecued beef and pork at 54 Costco stores in Northern California. As the company ramps up production and distribution capabilities, she said the products will become available in other grocers nationally and locally.

Flanked by Gov. Pete Ricketts and UNL Chancellor Harvey Perlman, the native of Seoul said she chose to base her company in Nebraska because of its central location, ample agricultural resources and welcoming business community. Startup incentives and cutting-edge food production technology provided at Innovation Campus sealed the deal, she said.

“It's the Silicon Valley of the red meat industry,” she said.

Although Suji's Cuisine USA is a new venture, Park has for years operated restaurants and sold food products in Korea and Japan. She said she employs about 60 workers in those countries.

She contracts with food manufacturers to produce her products. For example, the beef and pork now for sale in California was produced and packaged at Omaha Steaks.

During Monday's announcement, the governor shared how he has a fondness for Korean food, including kimchi, the spicy fermented cabbage that's a Korean staple. Ricketts said Suji's Cuisine is just one example of the kinds of value-added food processing businesses that Nebraska needs to attract to create an agribusiness hub.

"Technology and innovation go along with agriculture," Ricketts said, "playing upon those strengths to create this hub that Nebraska could be world-renowned for."

Park said her two research and development staff (one of whom will start part-time) at UNL's Food Processing Center, will work on innovations such as developing kimchi that can be sold on the shelf without spoiling.

Suji's Cuisine USA plans to offer a dozen products including fully-cooked Korean barbecued beef, pork, rice bowls, cooking sauces and marinades. The products use no MSG and include gluten-free offerings, she said.

The company will receive \$300,000 in value-added agriculture grants from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. Invest Nebraska, a private nonprofit focused on assisting high-growth companies, provided the firm with \$150,000 in commercialization seed program funding as well.

Park said the company has a lot of hard work to do in order to grow, but Monday marked an important first step.

“We’re still in the infant stage, but because of Nebraska, we’re here,” she said. “I see being successful with Nebraska.”

Contact the writer: 402-473-9587, joe.duggan@owh.com

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