Rutgers eager to cook up technology

Mississippi trip shows Pirolli what operation did for catfish, cheesecake

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BRIDGETON — Mayor Michael Pirolli has seen Bridgeton's future. He's tasted it, too - in the form of fish, cheesecake, and Southern hospitality.

Pirolli traveled to Mississippi earlier this week to visit a model for Bridgeton's upcoming Center for Advanced Food Technology, which will be an extension of Rutgers University.

"It was really a neat kind of trip," Pirolli said of his recent travels to Mississippi. "It was valuable for me to be able to see an example of what a university can do for a city."

Pirolli and a number of Rutgers University representatives flew to Columbus, Miss., to learn about the Food and Fiber Center, which is an extension of Mississippi State University.

Pirolli said that facility, which is already operational, does research for food production, marketing, packaging and transportation. After talking with representatives from the center, Pirolli said the group visited a catfish plant that has been working with the university.

"The interesting thing was, it is a business that was done completely with the help of the Food and Fiber Center, and over the last couple of years it has tripled in size," Pirolli said.

Pirolli said the Mississippi facility consists of scientists and researchers who work intimately with the companies.

"You're talking about scientists and professors being the equivalent of in-house research," he said.

Bridgeton last week received a Memorandum of Agreement from Rutgers Center for Advanced Food Technology, providing for the opening of the Center for Advanced Food Technology.

Pirolli said the center's services will be available to all aspects of the industry here, and will include services in food packaging, transportation, preservation, and distribution.

He said the Mississippi catfish plant was the recipient of very individual attention - an engineer working with them on a daily, and later monthly, basis.

"All the companies here that are interested in getting the same kind of attention," Pirolli said. "That's exactly what Rutgers is trying to develop here."

Pirolli mentioned a cheesecake factory in Mississippi that basically began around a woman's kitchen table.

"She went to the Food and Fiber Center and told them she wanted to make a great cheesecake," he said. "They got together with her, and taught her about producing in bulk, packaging, cheesecake markets and transportation. The whole nine yards."

Pirolli added that he can vouch for the finished product firsthand.

"We actually ate dinner at a restaurant that served her cheesecake," he said. "Let me tell you, it was incredible."

He said the Rutgers center also aims to incorporate an "industrial incubator" into its facility, with the goal of helping new food businesses develop.

Although the city is eyeing several sites in the downtown area for the center, Pirolli said Rutgers wants to get started even before they settle in.

"These folks are interested in getting started now," he said. "They want to help businesses right away."

Representatives from the center will meet with local food businesses today for a conference on the needs of the business.

"This is basically to introduce them to the notion and their level of interest," Pirolli said. "Rutgers will also be touring a couple of sites here."

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