

Food to Table puts old IBM kitchen to new uses

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ULSTER — Two local food advocates have remodeled the old IBM kitchen into a storage,



Luc Roels, center, of Farm to Table Co-Packers, leads a tour on Friday of the industrial kitchen at Tech City in Kingston. The former IBM facility is now used by regional food producers, packers and wholesalers. Times Herald-Record/CHET GORDON

production and packaging center for use by farmers and food entrepreneurs.

Farm to Table Co-Packers celebrated the opening of its 21,000-square-foot production kitchen on Friday. That same kitchen used to serve 7,500 meals each day to IBM employees, until the company ditched Ulster County in 1993.

Amid greasy kettles, leaky ceilings and 17 years of neglect, Jim Hyland and Luc Roels dreamed up a new use for the expansive kitchen. Eight months and \$1.2 million later, the space has become a center for storage and production of local food.

"From the business end, there was nothing like this in the region," Hyland said.

They converted IBM's dishwasher into a semi-automated vegetable washer. The conveyer belt that once moved lunch trays now acts as a production line. The facility has 250-gallon kettles to cook big batches of food, machines to slice veggies and grind meat, and a blast freezer that quickly brings food to storage temperature.

Farm to Table is certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, allowing processors to cook and package meat in the super-sterilized kitchen.

The facility has many uses. Farmers can rent storage space in the 1,200-square-foot freezer. Wholesalers can use the kitchen to cook and package their specialties, then ship them from the loading docks.

"We want to be open two shifts a day, six days a week," Hyland said.

Luba Pincus cooked and packaged four gigantic vats of her Manhattan Chili here last week. The chili is sold nationwide in grocery stores and in Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan. The chili includes Hudson Valley ingredients, but Pincus and others said they'll now use more meats and vegetables from nearby farms.

"There's going to be a whole connection with local farmers," she said. "The availability, the freshness and the economies of scale are right here."

Hyland, a former equities trader, started Winter Sun Farm when he moved to New Paltz five years ago, freezing surplus produce from regional farms and selling it to local food lovers during winter. Roels and his wife own Pika's Farm Table, which makes quiches, tarts and soups. Getting those goods packaged and delivered to big markets was the challenge. Many are already convinced that Food-to-Table is filling the void.

"It has more capacity, better quality and more food safety," said Rick Field, who pickles Hudson Valley vegetables and sells them in New York City under the label Rick's Picks. "It's everything we'd look for."

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