

Innovations in food products: Mission to the Big Apple

For an enterprise to survive in today's competitive business environment, product innovations are vital. Product innovations in the food industry can involve value added to an existing product to enhance its appeal; reformulation of ingredients for new flavor, textures, shapes, and scents; and expansions of product ranges to meet consumer demand and cultivate new markets.

Innovative food products deliver combined functional, nutritional, economic, and sustainable benefits to customers. Product innovations also lead to reductions in labor costs, materials, waste, environmental impact, and energy consumption. In the current state of the global economy, food companies, especially in developing countries, need to continue to invest in innovation to become or remain competitive.

The USA has established food innovation centers to support enterprises, particularly SMEs, in product and package development, food safety and quality testing, novel processing technologies, custom equipment design, and training. Because most developing countries do not offer such services for small businesses, an APO study mission on Innovations in Food Products visited New York City (known as the Big Apple) and environs, 27 June–1 July. Fourteen participants from nine member countries heard presentations on the US customs clearance process for food products, challenges in food exporting to the USA, markets for specialty/ethnic/organic foods, and restaurant networks.

As in any study mission, the highlights were the observational visits. The first was to the Summer Fancy Food Show in the heart of New York City, exhibiting 260,000 innovative specialty foods from 80 countries. The renowned Dean & DeLuca, a multichannel retailer of fine food, wine, and kitchenware, spent a morning explaining its food-handling technologies and marketing strategies. Participants then traveled to a branch of Trader Joe's, a grocery chain with customer value as its core philosophy and a history of community involvement, followed by a discussion with local importers in Chinatown.

Rutgers Food Innovation Center (FIC) in New Jersey allowed mission members to observe its unique business incubation and economic accelerator program for new and established food-related companies. The FIC's mentoring program assesses need, proposes plans, and provides ongoing assistance to clients in the food sector who need to innovate products and services. Similar incubators and mentoring systems could be adapted to the food sector in APO member countries with fine-tuning for local markets and distribution networks, suggested Secretariat Agriculture Department Director Joselito Bernardo, who led the mission. Bernardo also noted that participants were given plenty of food for thought on other areas for innovations in their food-processing sectors. 