UGA-Griffin’s Food PIC names director

Kealey has launched more than 200 products in 30-year career

BY SHARON DONOHOE
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Kirk Kealey spent the last 30 years helping to develop and launch products like Mountain Dew, Tropicana juices and Dove chocolate. Now, as director of the University of Georgia’s Food Product Innovation and Commercialization Center, he’ll do the same for small and large food businesses in Georgia and across the Southeast.

Based on the UGA campus in Griffin, the Food PIC program helps new food business owners with product development, packaging, food safety, consumer acceptance and marketing.

Kealey was majoring in biology and French in college when a trip to France led him to change his focus to food science.

“In France, a tour guide talked for an hour about the art and chemistry of making Camembert cheese, and I was hooked,” he said. “I went on to Cornell University after that and did my Ph.D. research on cheddar cheese and cottage cheese.”

Kealey began his product development career at General Mills Inc. He later worked with M&M Mars Inc. and for the past 14 years, he worked on carbonated soft drinks and fruit juices for PepsiCo Inc.

“Working initially on confections and later switching to soft drinks, I’ve taken my career from solid sugar to liquid sugar, some might say,” he said. “I was looking for something to do next in my career, and this position at the Food PIC (Center) seemed like the culmination of everything I’ve done in the past.”

Kealey has launched more than 200 products, most of them beverages like a Mountain Dew for Gracias, an apple soft drink for China and a mango juice drink now sold in Laos. Through these experiences, he learned the numerous steps necessary to create a product consumers will accept.

“PepsiCo had an apple soda for Mexico that was doing remarkably well, but when we tried to introduce it in China, as is, the dark color was not acceptable, nor was the flavor,” he said. “Consumers there wanted the color to be green, not brown, and they didn’t like the cinnamon taste. We discovered the Chinese people don’t particularly like cinnamon.”

UGA researchers with the Food PIC Center have been working with limited laboratory and pilot plant space, said UGA food scientist Dick Phillips, who served as director of the Food PIC through its infancy.

He has helped a number of food businesses, including a Belgium company, new to the U.S., that developed a grain-based milk alternative.

“Unfortunately, we didn’t have the facilities to help them carry the product to the next step, so they went to California for help from a private company,” he said.

“The product has gone through a lot of changes since then and will soon be available in Whole Foods.”

Georgia’s 2013 budget provided $2.5 million for the Food PIC building and UGA and the Griffin-Spalding County Development Authority also provided $1 million each to the project. Ground was broken last October for the 45,500-square-foot building, which should take a year and a half to build.

“We are ready for someone to carry us to the next level,” Phillips said, “and now we’ve found him.”

Kealey’s first day on the job was April 1, and he’s already receiving calls from potential clients.

“One was looking to put a new twist on a chocolate peanut butter cup, and I think that’s something we could easily do here,” he said.

“We want to help food companies develop their product’s sweet spot,” said the new Food PIC director, who said the center’s primary focus will be on Georgia food companies and products, but would like to see the UGA center become the best in the U.S. There are similar food development centers in states like Arkansas, Indiana, Michigan and New York, but the UGA Food PIC is the first in the Southeast, Phillips said.

“Our focus will, of course, be on Georgia products like peaches, peanuts and blueberries. The role of the Food PIC will be to develop value-added products with our clients to meet consumers’ wants that are not being met today,” Kealey said. “Part of my career has been in raw material development. I traveled the globe looking for just the right cocoa beans for M&M Mars’ chocolates, and I believe we can promote Georgia products as well. New products equal new businesses and more food company employers.”

The Food PIC staff includes engineers, chemists, microbiologists, consumer sensory scientists and research chefs — from within the university and from private industry. They guide food business owners in product development, packaging, shelf life, food safety, consumer acceptance and marketing, he said.

“The way to be truly successful in the food industry is to get out in front and fulfill consumers’ desires for a variety of new foods and beverages before they even know they have them,” Kealey said.

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