

Dairy store delights

From left: Jodeen Figner prepares nachos. Keith Smith, a dairy store patron, ice cream, one of many homemade products.

Photos by Mark Davis



Filley Hall, near Holdrege Street on East Campus, looks like another stone, gray building, filled with classrooms.

But inside, more than 300 people take breaks each day in the building's red and white room — the UNL Dairy Store.

Furnished with colonial-style tables and chairs, the room is adorned with pictures of former dairy princesses on every wall.

The store, which offers cheese, yogurt and homemade ice cream, is an extension of the University Food Processing Center. The center was built around 1918 as a dairy to produce bottled milk and dairy products for residence hall cafeterias and student unions.

Ten years ago, the UNL department of food science and technology made food processing research its goal and created the dairy store, which is used as a test market for products made by Nebraska producers and industries.

"We want to work with industry, not compete with them," Merlyn Znamenacek, manager of the food processing center, said.

The center, a joint effort between UNL, the state Department of Economic Development and private food industries such as Campbell's Soup Co. of Omaha and Beatrice Foods, is aimed at improving Nebraska's economic growth by working with industry.

The food science and technology department currently works with Tofu, a product extracted from soybeans, Znamenacek said. Food science employees have formulated a frozen dessert made from Tofu, which is high in protein, low in cholesterol and lactose-free.

Although Tofu products are common on the coasts, food science workers would like to improve them and develop an outlet in Nebraska, Znamenacek said.

The Midwest Tofu and Sprouts Co. of Omaha initiated the research last July, hoping to create a market in the state, he said.

UNL's products development class, composed of food science majors, also is involved in research.

About two years ago, the group decided to experiment with yogurt formulations. Within a year, sales increased from 50 cartons a week of a national brand to 500 cartons a week of the UNL brand, Znamenacek said.

"Our concept of product development is handled the same way a firm handles development," Glenn Froning, UNL professor of food science and technology, said.

Class members divide into groups, focusing on analytical and sensory evaluation, formulation and processing, quality assurance, packaging, labeling and marketing.

The class has been formulating a frozen yogurt since February to test market in the store.

"Our yogurt is still in its crude state," said Susan Armstrong, a food science and technology major and student in the products development class.

Lynn Fletcher, teacher's assistant for the class, said the marketing plan, which includes cost analysis, flavor evaluation and packaging by the students, should be completed by the end of the semester.

Another product, Husker cheese, was developed in the early 1940s by members of the UNL food science staff. The Husker brand is the most popular of the eight cheese varieties sold, Jill Gifford, manager of the dairy store, said.

The center also can produce 250 different ice cream flavors, which are rotated so that 14 flavors are offered at one time. Nachos and hoagie sandwiches, made from UNL meat lab products, also are sold.

Charles Curtis, a research technologist in agricultural economics, is a regular customer at the dairy store. Curtis, whose office is in Filley Hall, said the center's proximity was a major factor for his visits. But price and quality also brought him back, he said.

Pat Bryant, a secretary in the Agricultural Economics Department, said she eats lunch at the dairy store at least twice a week. Bryant, a one-year employee of the department, said she came to the store for ice cream, even before she worked in the building.

Gifford said university students and faculty are a large part of the store's business, but the Lincoln community also supports it.

Although the dairy store does no advertising, it relies on its reputation and "word-of-mouth" for business, she said.

The store makes enough money to pay the staff and maintain equipment, Znamenacek said. Any remaining money is put back into research and expansion of the center, he said.

— Michelle Kubik