

## An old-fashioned taste with a new twist

STILLWATER, Okla. – An Oklahoma food company is adding a new twist to the old-fashioned taste of traditional food items.

Wes Higgs, a 1999 graduate of Oklahoma State University and owner of Red River Gourmet Food Co. of Stillwater, Okla., has developed a food product that incorporates raspberries.

"My vision is to create a line of products that are simple yet sophisticated and create a taste sensation that wows consumers," Higgs said.

The company currently offers a mild-flavored raspberry salsa, but is being considered for a product expansion loan from the Oklahoma Agricultural Enhancement and Diversification Board.

This loan will help Higgs expand his product line to include a hot-flavored raspberry salsa, a raspberry chipotle salsa, an original- and spicy-flavored raspberry barbeque sauce and raspberry vinaigrette.

"Our long-term goal is to use the income from this loan money to build a value-added food processing facility in Stillwater that will not only produce our products, but would also take up the capacity for other local products in North Central Oklahoma," Higgs said.

This goal not only helps the Red River Gourmet Food Co., but it will create new jobs for Oklahoma.

Higgs was first exposed to raspberry salsa in the early 1990s when someone in his family received a jar as a gift. Thirteen years later, armed with his experience in the food service industry and his love for the culinary arts, Higgs set out to reproduce the taste.

The first few batches of raspberry salsa were made fresh from ingredients out of Higgs' garden. Higgs was so excited by the reactions from his family and friends that he began to share it with others. The positive response from those who sampled it was overwhelming.

"At the suggestion of a friend, I attended a workshop at the Food & Agricultural Products Center in Stillwater on how to take a homemade food product from the kitchen to market," Higgs said. "Much of our success is a result of our relationship with the Food & Agriculture Products Center."

The FAPC assisted Higgs in the development of his final formula and helped answer questions about processing, packaging, image and store placement, said Corey Stone, business and marketing specialist for the FAPC.

"Wes has taken a very entrepreneurial approach to his new business," Stone said. "He identified a market and found a product that was under-represented in that market, and then proceeded to develop his gourmet line as extensions from the original product."

Higgs provided samples of his raspberry salsa to the FAPC to determine if the pH was low enough to sustain shelf-life stability in the market. After the product passed, the product was scaled-up to produce a mass quantity.

"This was very exciting because I was beginning to see the fruits of my labor," Higgs said.

Stone said Higgs had the capacity to be flexible with his formulations, which expedited his venture into the marketplace.

"He now has a high quality gourmet product line that is safe and affordable to the consumer," Stone said. "The FAPC will continue to assist with market development as Wes's business grows."

Red River Gourmet Food Co.'s raspberry salsa is available at Company's Comin' II in Stillwater, Okla. For more information on the company or upcoming products, visit [redrivergourmet.com](http://redrivergourmet.com) or call 405-624-1505.

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