



# Making It: Bringing new food products to Michigan

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2023



MSU Product Center

In recent years, several Michigan-based retailers have dedicated additional shelf space to locally made jams, sauces, condiments, chips, cookies and the like – sometimes even dedicating prime aisle space with special “Made in Michigan” signage.

This is due in part to the growing number of passionate and creative individuals putting



in countless hours of research, recipe development, taste testing, marketing and sales to turn their dreams into reality.

Michigan State University has been leading the charge to connect producers with buyers (retailers and wholesalers) through its Product Center. In 2021, the MSU Product Center worked with 900 clients, assisted in the creation of 201 new jobs and reported \$44.1 million combined financial investment from owners, grants and loans.

“MSU Product Center helps Michigan entrepreneurs and businesses to develop and launch new product and service ideas into the food, ag and bioenergy markets,” says Becky DeYoung, Innovation Counselor for the center. “Whether a budding entrepreneur or well-established company, the Product Center is a key to the front door of Michigan State University’s vast and varied technical expertise, research and outreach services.”

While the center operates year-round, one key event brings all interested parties together under one roof each spring. The 16th annual Making It In Michigan Conference takes place Thursday, April 20 (9 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.) at the Lansing Center in downtown Lansing.

Considered the premier food networking conference in the state, perhaps the Midwest, the event draws more than 300 attendees and about 170 exhibitors showcasing their latest products.

Hundreds of businesses have launched their culinary ideas at the Making it in Michigan Trade Show, including noted brands like Achatz Pies, Dave’s Sweet Tooth, Ethel’s Baking Company, Pop Daddy Popcorn and Safie’s Specialty Foods, to name only a few.

“Becky Deyoung and the MSU Product Center helped us launch into the immunity shot market a little over four years ago,” says Stacy Oros, who created GingeRx with her husband, Mike Davis. “We landed our first distributor at Making It In Michigan in 2018, and the connections we continue to make each year have been invaluable. A great aspect of the conference is the feedback we receive directly from buyers.

“We are able to hear why our products work in some markets, and more importantly, why our products may not be a fit. This data has allowed us to pivot our marketing

strategy and pursue certifications that have proved to be advantageous to our brand thus far," she adds. "We look forward to each year that we can meet face-to-face with buyers and consumers who share our love for health and wellness. We are excited to attend the Making It In Michigan conference again, where we will introduce our newest flavor to the lineup."

In addition to connecting with would-be buyers of their products, participating businesses also get the chance to network with other small business owners to brainstorm ideas, share operational tips and even talk about collaborative opportunities available. It is especially valuable for those new to the food production and marketing industry.

The Detroit-based artisanal ice cream company Aruba Freeze was established in 2018 only to be frozen in its tracks early in the game due to the pandemic. They took the downtime to build out a food truck so they could hit the ground running when things reopened.

"With two very successful seasons on the road, we were able to create brand recognition and a strong following of customers," says company founder Tiffany Reo. "We decided to pursue our luck with the retail space. Becky [at the MSU Product Center] was a tremendous help in guiding us through this process."

With the assistance of the Product Center, they've been accepted as a vendor within Meijer stores and one Fresh Thyme store. Their goal is to become the first nitrogen ice cream product on the market across the state.

"We are looking forward to showcasing our product at the upcoming Making it in Michigan show," says Reo. "We hope to gain much more exposure and interest with additional new clients in carrying our product."

Aruba Freeze is unique in the way it is produced, using a distinct "flash freeze" process. Using proprietary recipes, Aruba Freeze currently has 28 flavors (with more in development all the time). They use 100% organic cream and also produce vegan and sugar-free flavors as well.

“This method removes excess water and minimizes any ice crystals on our product,” Reo says. “It also provides an exceptional finished product as the ice cream is far more creamier and dense.”

As part of this year’s Trade Show, Pure Michigan Business Connect (an initiative of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation) and the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MCDARD) is hosting one-on-one matchmaking meetings between purchasers (distributors, retailers and grocers) looking to add locally made foods and beverages to their inventory with the individuals and small businesses that make those items.

The ultimate goal of the day is to strengthen the state’s supply chain while generating or increasing revenue for all involved.

The Making It In Michigan conference begins with a Welcome and Keynote with representatives from PTIS, an Ann Arbor-based packing company founded more than 20 years ago. Five panel discussions make up the morning educational sessions, sure to whet the appetite of attendees looking to enhance their operational strategies and take their businesses to the next level. This year’s topics include Co-Packers, Financing, Distribution, Retail Experts and Entrepreneurial Best Practices.

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#### **The main floor at the annual Making It In Michigan Trade Show.**

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Another highlight of the conference is the Michigan Good Food Fund – a partnership with the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems – which provides two local food businesses the opportunity to pitch their ideas to a panel of judges for the chance to go home with investment funding of \$3,000 or \$2,000. This money can be used for things like ingredients, equipment, packaging, marketing and other goods or services to further the business along.

The cost to attend the Making it in Michigan Conference is \$125. A pre-conference reception will also be held on Wednesday, April 19 (6 p.m.- 8 p.m.) at the Lansing Center’s Riverstreet Pub.