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Pickled asparagus turns into business

Winning idea may pay for college

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What started as a simple little Future Farmers of America project for Neal Ely has grown into a full-blown business that could help pay the 17-year-old's college bill.

First, however, the young entrepreneur has to finish high school.

Ely's entry, pickled asparagus spears, was selected the best new Nebraska food product in April in the 12th annual contest by the Nebraska Food Industry Association. He's the youngest winner of the contest.

This was no State Fair-like event, though, with winners vying simply for blue ribbons. Ely and most of the others who enter food products in the association's annual contest either already are marketing the food in supermarkets or other outlets, or want their creations sold on a wider scale.

Although the contest is open to any of the 300 food manufacturers in the state, "it tends to be small entrepreneurial companies that participate," said Rick Williams, president of the association. "It's a good opportunity for them to get some exposure for their product."

And the winners generally have been smaller entrepreneurs like Ely who want to parlay family recipes into something bigger.

The association, together with the entrepreneurial assistance program of the University of Nebraska Food Processing Center in Lincoln, gives a boost to the new products. This year those products ranged from oatmeal cookies to garlic sauce to microwave popcorn.



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Neal Ely of Grafton, Neb., holds up jars of his pickled asparagus spears in his process kitchen. The teen-ager created the best new Nebraska food product in the 12th annual contest sponsored by the Nebraska Food Industry Association. He is the youngest winner of the contest.

A panel of judges selected Ely's product from more than 60 entered.

Young Ely, who lives on a farm about a mile west of Grafton, has been producing jars of the asparagus spears for two years under the Ely Farms label.

The asparagus is produced using a recipe developed by Ely's mother, Tami, and makes use of dill seed, garlic and hot chili pep-

per, among other ingredients.

The product was the result of a brainstorming session with Ely, his mother and his father, Mike, to come up with an idea for Ely's FFA project.

For the first batch, he used all the asparagus that he grew on an acre at the family farm, sold all the product and decided to buy more asparagus to increase production.

Ely got a loan from the Grafton State Bank to build a small processing kitchen adjacent to the family home and hired about nine people to process 500 16-ounce jars. This year, production was boosted to 5,000 jars.

"They say your biggest problem is in finding your market," he said. "We thought our market might be in grocery stores, but we've learned in the last couple of months it will be more with gourmet and specialty stores."

So far, he has sold more than 1,200 jars of the asparagus, mostly in specialty shops in Grand Island, Hastings, York and Lincoln. The suggested retail price is \$6.75. He has approached the Hy-Vee Food Store chain, which has become one of the biggest boosters of products turned out by small entrepreneurs.

Nick Steinbach, store director of the Hy-Vee store at 96th and Q Streets, is receptive to trying Ely's product.

"I think the kid with the asparagus has a unique idea," said Steinbach, who planned to contact Ely.

Ruth Mitchell, a spokeswoman at Hy-Vee's headquarters in Des Moines, said Hy-Vee operates differently than most large chains. "Our stores have a lot of autonomy," she said. "They can take on a product not carried through our distribution system. If there is a local entrepreneur in Omaha or Lincoln that, say, makes a barbecue sauce or a salad dressing, individual stores in the market can decide to carry that product."

The chain gets hundreds of requests a year from entrepreneurs wanting the chain to put their product on shelves, she said.

"Sometimes they take off and do a good job," said Steinbach. "There are other products that die a slow death."

One of the things the small food producer should be prepared to do, he said, is to make

some effort to market the product, to make it known to consumers. "Marketing support isn't always advertising," he said.

One of the most popular ways new products are introduced is through demonstrations and free tastings done in the store, Steinbach said.

An example of that, he said, is a microwave popcorn produced by BKH Popcorn Inc. of Phillips, Neb., a product that also took first place in the snacks, candy and nuts category contest of the food industry association.

Keith Heuermann, the owner, has done a number of demonstrations in the store, Steinbach said.

Ely's project has paid dividends in another way. He ended up winning the state FFA's agricultural sales proficiency award this year, which qualifies him to enter the national FFA contest in Louisville, Ky., later this year.

He says he may wait a year to enter the national contest, to give his company - it's a limited liability corporation created by him and his parents - another year to mature and grow.

"The UNL food processing center has been very helpful," he said. "When we started, we had no idea what to do."

The center gives advice to aspiring food makers, among other things guiding them through health and other government regulations they need to know, and helping them size and label products.

Ely's venture has already turned a profit, and he is paying off the loan to build the processing kitchen.

"My first goal is to use (any other profits) to pay my way through college," he said. "My next goal is, if I attend college, to be able to own this business and come back over the summer and operate it."