

# WISCONSIN INNOVATION KITCHEN: Continuing to Fulfill Dreams

Formerly it had been Hodan Community Service's (HCS) Dairy Queen – the first fast food restaurant in the U.S. to be owned by a community rehabilitation center serving adults with disabilities. Then in 2010 the transformation into a 10,000 square foot, state-of-the-art food processing facility in Mineral Point took place.

It has been over 11 years since Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen (WINK) opened its doors and began operating as an FDA approved, state-inspected and licensed commercial co-packing facility. Within that time, former Director Kent Genthe, who recently retired after seven years of service, has helped WINK evolve to meet the needs of new entrepreneurs and to keep pace with customers who are growing. He has been instrumental in the growth and direction of WINK, and its ability to sustain itself.



WINK's experienced staff is comprised of Ray Guenther, now Director, who joined HCS in 2009 after working in shipping and receiving, then sales with H & H Foods for 33 years. Assisting him with production is Equipment Technician Seth Jones, who began helping out at HCS when he was 16 years old. After graduating from high school, he worked in food service at HCS for many years before moving on to become a staff member at WINK and putting his food knowledge to work in production. Both

men are certified with the State. Production Supervisor Summer Hamille has been with WINK for five years and is responsible for overseeing the Client-Employees and assigning them tasks. She had worked closely with Kent Genthe in Food Service at Lands' End for five years as the Cafeteria Supervisor overseeing proper food safety for five separate cafeterias within the Lands' End campus.

WINK's reputation as being a minimum volume co-packing facility has brought many entrepreneurs and farmers to its doors from around the region and across the country. It enjoys relationships with local customers like **Bob's Bitchin' BBQ** in Dodgeville, **Siren Shrub** in Amherst Junction, **Prem Meats** in Spring Green, **The Woods** in Lone Rock, and **Wun Doe Mus** in Platteville as well as customers further away like **It's Just Sauce** in Iowa, and **Barmalade** in Texas. And it continues to get calls from all parts of the continental United States to process product for retail sale.

WINK specializes in producing products (sauces, mixes, beverages) that can be cooked in kettles, pumped and automatically filled using only the safest methods. WINK's staff oversees production and work diligently to ensure compliance with proper processing guidelines.

Even as its customers have grown, WINK has been able to keep pace and provide the efficiencies and expediency necessary to maintain its services. This is due, in large part, to the USDA/Local Food Promotion Program grant that Hodan Community Services received in September of 2018 for its co-packing facility. The purchase of new equipment has allowed kitchen staff to maximize efforts and reduce waste.

Guenther is very happy with the installation and use of the new equipment purchased through the grant. "The amount of preparation time it saves," he said, "not





to mention the unnecessary waste, equals a full day of production. The pump we use for ketchup alone is a huge time and ingredient saver. What we get done in a day," he adds, "used to take us three or four days. We get six times as much done now because we're not doing everything by hand. Plus the yield is greater for the customer."

With money from the grant, WINK now enjoys upgraded equipment like a bottling conveyor, heat tunnel for shrinking tamper-evident bands on bottles, new box taping machine, battery-operated fork lifts, dry-fill machine, kettle, automatic liquid filling machine, bottle-feed table, ribbon blender, pallet wrap machine, and an electric pump that gets bulk ketchup out of barrels.

The new equipment has served WINK on two levels: first, it speeds up the production process, and second, it allows Client-Employees to work on other projects concurrent to kitchen staff. One example of this is long-standing customers Bob's Bitchin' BBQ and Coffee Chew. While barbecue sauce is being pumped into bottles for **Bob's Bitchin' BBQ**, Client-Employees Miranda McAuliffe and Brooke Chandler are applying labels to tins for **Coffee Chew** in preparation for its production while Paul Bailie is putting shrink bands on cooled bottles.

Hamille said, "It's amazing the amount of production we accomplish now. While my co-workers are in the kitchen producing for one customer, I'm in the warehouse with the Client-Employees getting ready for production runs coming up. It's now a seamless process," she adds. "The efficiency we have gained from this new equipment is monumental," said Jones, "Our customers are impressed with how quickly we process their products for them."

"Working with entrepreneurs and businesses to produce food and beverages that are safe to consume is our primary concern," said Guenther. Now under his guiding hand, WINK is continuing its grant goals of (1) expanding the capacity of WINK for existing and new local food growers/entrepreneurs through the new equipment technologies, and efficiencies; (2) working with new local food entrepreneurs/enterprises/ organization that source ingredients from local and regional growers; and (3) beginning/increasing local food processing of new and existing products, as a result of new sales/distribution channels into retail and wholesale opportunities.

What began as a kitchen through which to process its own successful line of Farmhouse Recipes foods has now progressed into a full-service co-packing facility that helps entrepreneurs get their product made in small, easy-to-manage batches without a lot of capital outlay and onto store shelves. WINK continues to fulfill entrepreneurs' dreams. ●

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