

MSU Introduces 'SWEET' New Ice Cream Flavor



By Bob Ratliff

Sweet potatoes are great baked or in pies, but fans will soon have a new way to enjoy one of their favorite foods.

The Mississippi State University Dairy Processing Plant is adding sweet potato to its list of ice cream flavors.

MSU has a history with ice cream production going back to the 1940s, and the campus plant currently churns out 15 flavors. Most are the standards, including chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, but sweet potato will join muscadine ripple as the second flavor unique to MSU.

Mississippi is the nation's third largest sweet potato producing state, so it's only natural for MSU to add the flavor to its ice cream lineup, said Benny Graves, sweet potato specialist with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce's Bureau of Plant Industry.

"We're excited about the possibilities for this new product," he said. "Many of our growers have had the chance to sample the ice cream, and their reaction has been very positive."

The idea for producing an MSU sweet potato ice cream came out of research funded by the Mississippi Sweet Potato Council.

"The growers' association funds research to find-value added products for sweet potatoes," said Patti Coggins, director of the Garrison Sensory Evaluation Laboratory. "We were working with adding sweet potato to several different foods, including yogurt. It was quite good and led to the idea for a sweet potato ice cream for sale on campus."

The food scientists at the laboratory tried several recipes, including mixtures containing sweet potato puree with various combinations of pecans, coconut and marshmallow. Taste tests were conducted in the laboratory and at the 2006 North Mississippi Producer Advisory Committee meeting in Verona, where more than 100 committee members sampled and evaluated the new flavor.

The winning combination, which contains toasted pecans and marshmallows, will go on sale in the MSU Cheese Store this summer.

A search of the Web and cookbooks will produce recipes for sweet potato ice cream, but Coggins said the MSU product will be the first available for retail sales.

"It's a good product, high in nutritional value," she said. "We would like to work with a food product company interested in producing sweet potato ice cream commercially."

Work with other food products containing sweet potatoes is continuing on the MSU campus.

"Sweet potatoes are one of the most nutritional foods, and even though we eat a lot of them in the South, they are underused nationally and in other countries," Coggins said. "The juice blends well and can be used to add nutritional value to other foods, including fruit drinks."

Mississippi farmers grow sweet potatoes on about 16,000 acres each year, and in 2005, the crop contributed a record \$57 million to the state's economy.

Above: Student worker Tim Satow serves freshman Meredith Minetree a sample of sweet potato ice cream at the MSU Bakery. (Photo by Marco Nicovich)