

Posted on Tue, Oct. 14, 2003

Volunteers put tastes to the test  
By Andrea Widener  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

DUBLIN - Taste a savory side dish to see if it is too spicy, or not spicy enough.

Smell a new kids' soda to see if the bubble gum scent is overwhelming or nonexistent.

Test the texture of a cookie to see if it is too gritty or too soft or just right.

These are just a few of the things the 15,000 volunteer taste testers at the National Food Laboratory do every day as part of surveys to find the perfect food with the perfect target audience.

While taste testing may be what it is best known for, the laboratory does not just try out products on people. The staff of 90 does nearly every kind of food-related testing you can think of, from finding bacteria in samples sent from food processing plants to examining packages to make sure printing inks do not leak into the food itself.

They even create new food products that may someday show up on your shelves, in a secretive design division that has been involved in products as diverse as a Dole's Jell Cups or Mattel's Harry Potter Iced Pumpkin Drink Maker and the Barbie Mixin' Magic Real Food Kitchen.

All of their work comes from a bevy of 600 clients, who hire the lab to test their food both on the research bench and with a critical crowd of taste testers.

"It helps guide their decision making in terms of what goes out to the market," said Christie Hoyer, a vice president at the lab who oversees consumer tests.

The food lab has been at its Dublin location since 1985, when it moved to the Tri-Valley from Berkeley. That is when its scientists started inviting the public in to test out everything from frozen tri-tip dinners to tangy power drinks.

The tests take place in a long, thin room with cubicles along one wall and illuminated with specially-designed lighting to make sure the food has a consistent color -- or no color at all, if that is the goal. There can be up to 100 people participating in the tests, which happen three or four days a week.

Food lab employees prepare the food, or "food product," then slide it through a two-sided breadbox-like door to the waiting tester, who never sees his server.

Most often, the object is to taste food. But other times, it could be to smell new cleanser scents or test new lotions for greasiness or examine the color of a new drink. Or they can invite testers to a row of standard kitchen ovens to prepare the food themselves.

In addition to on-site testings, the lab sometimes puts together take-home tests for products such as cake mixes, cleaning supplies or margarine, so their clients can get a feel for how easy a product is to use or how likely a tester would be to actually use it at home.

"While we do pay them a certain amount to come in, that is really not what motivates them," said Hoyer, explaining that the 15,000 testers in the database mostly come for fun and a chance to influence the marketplace.

Testers get from a few dollars for a simple tasting, to up to \$100 for tastings that may be more complicated that require them to come in three or four days in a row.

The lab also conducts focus groups, complete with a two-way mirror so clients can see first-hand what people have to say about the shelf life of an old standard or the tanginess of a new product. The lab has interviewed people about their new houses or their cleaning products.

And the lab occasionally looks outside California to find testers in, say, Chicago or Atlanta, if the product will be marketed nationwide.

"California is a lot more tolerant of spiciness," said marketing director Jena Roberts.

The lab also employs a team of specialized testers who have trained for six months or more to perfectly describe nearly every smell, taste or texture they come in contact with. They might test alcohol or olives or chocolate bars or tomato sauce.

Like many Tri-Valley residents, Teresa Landis always wondered what went on at the lab, so she volunteered to be a taste tester. The experience so enthralled her that now she is a full-time chef at the lab, designing new products and testing them out on the volunteer troops.

Landis keeps track of what new flavors are becoming popular, then turns that knowledge into new food. She is currently working on a new "creamy breakfast product" that she says has her clients very excited.

"The palate of Americans is becoming very sophisticated," she said. "I can't go too far out."