



## CrispTek Mixes Up a Better Batter

By Susan Kim, STAFF WRITER

**They like to call themselves "five guys and a fryer."** And that's just what they were when they gathered in the kitchen to use a food product patented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and began exploring its commercial potential.

They simply added some spices, then "tried to fry everything that would sit still for us," said John Howell, now vice president of finance for a startup called CrispTek. The chicken (and everything else) browned nicely and CrispTek's first product, Choice Batter, was created. Howell and his colleagues found that Choice Batter was not only gluten free, but also had "low oil uptake," which simply means it fries food that has less fat in the finished product. These characteristics not only help the rapidly growing number of people who can't tolerate gluten, but would also appeal to health conscious eaters as well. At first, it sounded too good to be true, Howell said. "We had some major discussions, all centered around two questions: 'Would it work?' and 'How would it taste?' During the marathon kitchen session, they found out their answers: Choice Batter got crisp, it stayed crisp and it tasted great.

### At a Bistro Near You?

What started as a project in Howard Community College's (HCC) Technology Transfer program in the fall of 2006 became the next potential wave in food preparation. The idea emanated from Wayne Swann's Tech Transfer class, which helps students explore how to assess patented technology from agencies and laboratories, obtain a license, then commercialize and sell it on the open market. Howell was part of a student team that assessed a rice flour-based, low oil uptake frying batter invented at the USDA. The formula uses rice's natural water-absorbing characteristics to resist oil uptake when prepared as a batter coating for fried foods. Fried foods coated with the batter absorb up to 60% less oil than commonly used wheat-based batters and the coating is gluten-free. Gluten-free products are needed for 3 million people in the U.S. who, because they have celiac disease, cannot eat products containing wheat. After investigating the formula's commercial potential, the students presented their assessment, capturing first place at HCC's Entrepreneurial Celebration that year. Swann, who has since semi-retired, is now chairman of the board for CrispTek. As the company works with manufacturers for its first product run, Swann said local restaurateurs are already intrigued. "Aida Bistro's owners [Joe and Mary Barbara] are interested, as they have gluten free menu items. We are setting up a meeting with the owner, per his request, and the chef [Sean Riggs]," said Swann, who projected that Choice Batter will be ready for sale on the Internet in the first quarter of 2009.

### Cooking Up Funding

CrispTek has also attracted the attention of the local business development organizations. In July, the company was accepted into Howard County's NeoTech Business Incubator, and was awarded a \$75,000 Maryland Technology Development Corp. (TEDCO) grant to support commercialization efforts. More recently, on Oct. 30, CrispTek was honored by Sen. Ben Cardin and presented with a ceremonial check from TEDCO and the USDA's Agricultural Research Service. TEDCO leaders are proud of the innovative thinkers behind firms such as CrispTek, said TEDCO President and Executive Director Ren ze Winsky. "To date, 114 companies have received funding through the Maryland Technology Transfer Fund and completed their projects," Winsky said. "With an investment of \$6,812,113 by TEDCO, these companies have gone on to receive downstream funding from angel and venture investors, federal awards and other resources nearing \$205 million."

### From the Drive-Thru?

For now, CrispTek's founders all have "day jobs," but they put in a significant number of hours at the NeoTech Incubator, said Carol Morrison, who directs the facility. "They have an interesting story and an interesting product." Looking into the future, Howell, who is (for now) a commercial real estate lender, said he envisions a CrispTek logo appearing on the packaging of popular fried foods, much the same way the NutraSweet logo appears on Coca-Cola products. "I would like to see a CrispTek sticker on a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken," he said. "We have in mind a lot of large companies we're starting to explore." From a technological standpoint, Choice Batter is a simple product, he said, but its timing is ideal. "Everyone is concerned about their health, and more and more people are diagnosed with celiac disease." Plus, there's the taste. "It exceeded all of our expectations," said Howell, a veteran tester of every fried food under the sun.