



THE QUÉBEC NUTRI EDGE

This cluster continues to make impressive progress propelling Quebec food companies forward in domestic and foreign markets

—BY TREENA HEIN —



Keen to build connection and partnerships across Canada, Québec NUTRI is a vital spark in assisting its member companies to develop, commercialize (and export if desired) brand new food products and healthier versions of their existing products. It's celebrating its 12th birthday this year, proudly standing as one of four industry "clusters" of the Capitale-Nationale region, supported by economic development agency Quebec International and funded by the Quebec Ministry of Economic Development, Innovation and Export Trade.

Its members, 85 in total, range from innovative start-ups to well-established heavy-hitters like Prana, Diana Food Canada, Exceldor, Krispy Kernels and Vigneault Chocolatier. The vast majority of members are in the Quebec City area, for good reason. "The companies in this region are different from those in other regions of Canada or even the U.S. in that they have a very

strong focus on science," says director Julie Daigle, who leads Québec NUTRI's small but mighty staff (but they work closely with their 80 colleagues in Québec International). "These companies have strong relationships with Canada's largest group of researchers in nutrition, at the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods (INAF) at University of Laval. They also work with the University Institute of Cardiology and Respiratory of Quebec (IUCPQ), the largest group of researchers in Canada working on obesity and metabolism disorders. These scientists and the food processors have worked hard to develop communication pathways to ensure that applied research addresses specific product development needs."

Quebec NUTRI's 15 board members, from ↗

major firms like Maison Orphée, Biscuits Leclerc, PharmaLab and Fruit d'Or, all strongly exemplify this desire to differentiate using science. They lead the charge, says Daigle, constantly taking their processes and products to the next level and inspiring the entire industry to do better.

In addition to having many food and health researchers nearby, food companies in the Quebec City region also benefit from other support systems to bring science into product development. There are in fact 10 health and food science-related research centres/groups, and Daigle points out that Québec city ranks third of all Canadian, U.S. and European cities (after Baltimore, USA and Stuttgart, Germany) in R&D sector investment. In total, there are about 150 food companies in the region that sustain 6,750 direct jobs and generate \$1.3 billion in annual revenue. And the bigger picture reveals a region which boasts 5,000 scientists and associates in total across 400 labs addressing research in myriad sectors, and that is ranked first worldwide for the lowest operation costs among cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Absorbing all of this, it's hard to argue that the historic European flavour of Quebec City has been transformed today into a food industry powerhouse, producing super-modern products that rival any in the world in flavour and more.

Four areas of service

Québec NUTRI has four main missions, and the primary one is to help companies innovate new or improved products. "We find the funding to enable this and set up collaborative projects with partner companies that share the same goals, supervise pilot projects and more," Daigle explains. "We continually grow the network of contacts, advanced technologies and applied knowledge for our members to help support businesses to grow, to maintain or increase their competitiveness and develop new markets." An example from this network is food product incubator Mycélium (Daigle actually worked on its development before she came to Québec NUTRI). It accepts a number of start-ups into its annual accelerator program, providing courses, product testing and other forms of personalized support.

The focus of all the innovation for new and improved products is always on health. Québec NUTRI has



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assisted Fumoir Grizzly, for example, to partner with INAF-spinoff Innodal (also a Québec NUTRI member) and replace some of the salt and preservatives in its smoked salmon with patented natural antimicrobial technology.

Québec NUTRI also helped in the development of Nomadlab (previously called Goûteur à Domicile), a partnership with a firm called Inbe which offers companies a consumer product-testing-and-feedback platform. During the pilot project, Inbe honed how it prepared and shipped samples to select consumers and polished its easy-to-use online interface wherein consumer-participants give product feedback. A system to analyze the feedback to maximize its reliability and usefulness was also completed. "During this pilot, each participant company was given personalized support for using the platform to carry out tests on two new products, as well as a half-day training course on understanding today's consumers," Daigle explains. "The platform was launched on the market in 2018 and won an award from the International Economic Development Council in the category of public-private partnership." The pilot cost about \$80,000, with 30 per cent of that funded pub-

licly by Quebec's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Daigle calls it "a great example of a service that's been developed to give companies the edge they need."

Another project called 'Neurophenol' involved a group of Quebec food companies and INAF developing a range of products made from blueberry and grape extracts which can help prevent cognitive decline. A team of researchers and companies in France was also included. The project has resulted in new Quebec-made products coming to market in North America, says Daigle, as well as a much higher level of scientific knowledge about the extracts at the participating firms. The total cost of the project was about \$1.3 million, with about \$350,000 of that from public funds.

Commercialization and export

A second mission of Québec NUTRI is to help companies bring their products to the domestic market and beyond, through identifying and connecting them with potential financing partners and product buyers. This is accomplished through events, coaching programs and more. "Last June we had buyers from TJX Canada (the parent company of Marshalls, Home Sense and Winners) come for the first time to Quebec City," Daigle reports. "They visited the new annual Grand Marche de Quebec and had one-on-one meetings with 10 Quebec companies. Many relationships were formed."

Québec NUTRI also helps member firms come up with export plans that include cost planning, foreign market research and targeting of potential buyers. Daigle says the main types of functional food products being launched in Quebec for export (as well as the Canadian market) include fruit extracts, plant protein products, functional beverages and products containing less salt along with healthier sweeteners and fats.

Labour access

Through programs such as its HR marketing program, job fairs, networking events and development of better communication channels, Québec NUTRI also helps its

members get access to the labour they need. "Labour is so key for a company's development and growth," says Daigle. "We have huge labour needs in the region in processing plants in every sector including food, ↗

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