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Local scientist brings new ultrafiltration process to Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt, expanding production to serve over 75 grocers

\$171,850 in funding from the Canada-B.C. Agri-Innovation Program helped this Vancouver Island company to create authentic Greek yogurt and support local agriculture

Victoria, B.C. – Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt is pleased to launch its unique artisan Greek yogurt made from 100% Canadian milk at the Victoria Public Market at the Hudson, today, during the Farmers' Market. The company's gourmet yogurt, which is made from fresh whole milk from local grass-fed cows, is unique to the yogurt aisle, because the thick and luscious texture is created without any milk powders, fillers or thickeners.

In just two years, the company has grown to serve farmers' markets, restaurants and over 75 grocers on Vancouver Island and in Metro Vancouver.

Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt was started in Courtenay, B.C. two years ago by microbiologist Scott DiGuistini, PhD. and his wife Merissa Myles. Committed to the local food movement, the couple settled in the Comox Valley where they could combine DiGuistini's scientific experience and Myles' passion for food and the Island's source of grass-fed milk to create a high-quality, grass-fed yogurt not otherwise available in Canada. Research shows that grass-fed milk contains more Omega 3s, Beta Carotene and Conjugated Linoleic Acid (CLA).

"We developed recipes for grass-fed yogurt without any fillers because we are passionate about the benefits for humans, cows and the land," says Myles. "Management of pasture land with grass and forage crops is also good for soil ecology, plant biodiversity and for maintaining wildlife habitat."

Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt was an instant success due to its delicious recipes using 100% fresh local dairy. Tree Island's Greek Yogurt comes in a variety of decadent gourmet flavours inspired by traditional recipes from the Mediterranean and the Silk Road, including Natural, Chai Latte, Lemon, Orange Blossom & Cardamom, and other seasonal flavours.

To meet the enormous demand for more of the labour-intensive, artisan Greek yogurt product line, the couple had to innovate. DiGuistini led a one-year project to adapt a ceramic-filtration system for making extra rich and luscious Greek yogurt without thickeners. The technology removes the watery whey from milk to naturally thicken the yogurt as the authentic Greek recipes require.

"This type of machine is commonly used for water purification, but we have adapted it to work here for artisan dairy processing. We are the first in B.C. to implement the technology," explains DiGuistini. "This is much different than competitors' 'Greek-style' yogurts, which use skim milk powder, modified milk ingredients, or milk protein concentrate to thicken their yogurts. We can trace our milk ingredients back to the farm and guarantee that they are free of antibiotics and bovine growth hormones."

Tree Island was able to complete this project with \$171,850 in funding provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture through the Canada-B.C. Agri-Innovation Program under *Growing Forward 2*, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The program is delivered by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of B.C.

“Helping a small-scale food processor like Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt expand production while maintaining quality is one of the many ways Agri-Innovation funding is keeping the industry competitive,” says IAF chair Ken Bates. “We continue to support projects that advance agricultural innovation and competitiveness in B.C.”

“This funding provided matching funds that go a long way to help us increase production of our gourmet Greek yogurt and meet consumer demand for local, grass-fed dairy as we expand into major grocery stores,” says DiGuistini. “Most importantly, using this technology allows us to stay true to the original method for making yogurt, using just whole milk and bacterial culture.”

Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub Chef Ali Ryan, a Director with the Island Chefs’ Collaborative, is already a fan of Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt, and used it for cooking demonstrations during the launch event.

“We use this product in our restaurant because it has amazing texture and it’s grass-fed. We believe in supporting local, Vancouver Island-based food producers,” said Ryan. The Island Chef’s Collaborative is committed to supporting local food producers and is dedicated to sustainable agriculture practices and the ability of future generations to meet their food needs.

Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt is available in Victoria at stores including The Root Cellar, Village Green Grocer, The Market Stores, Lifestyle Markets, Country Grocer, Pepper’s, Red Barn Markets, and will be on Thrifty’s shelves in 2015. In Vancouver, Whole Foods Market and other natural food stores are carrying this product. Find out more about Tree Island Gourmet Yogurt online: <http://www.treeislandyogurt.com>.

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Media contact:

Brenda Jones, APR
Public Relations Consultant
Nyac Public Relations
604-312-1070
brenda_jones@shaw.ca