KTofuILSoyMarket mugshot, SIDEBAR tasting tofu

Nameline: Minh Tsai

Tofu entrepreneur offers growing

market for Illinois soybeans
BY KAY SHIPMAN
FarmWeek

 Illinois soybean growers, a growing market that offers premium prices awaits in Oakland, California.

 Minh Tsai, founder and CEO of Hodo Foods, shared the roots of his tofu company and projected growth during the recent National Direct Agriculture Marketing Summit in Rosemont. A native of Vietnam, Tsai launched his food business after working 10 years as an investment banker, management consultant and software builder.

 Starting an artisan tofu company was “the craziest idea ever,” Tsai said with a laugh.

From humble beginnings of selling his own product at farmers’ markets “the only ones to accept me,” Tsai described building his company sales from 100 retailers to more than 4,000 currently. By next year, Hodo Foods plans to sell to 5,000 to 6,000 retailers, he said.

 Consumers may select from 12 retail products -- five ready-to-cook items and seven ready-to-eat ones.

 Tsai is also expanding his markets by working with restaurants, both white tablecloth establishments and fast-food chains. “Chefs not only buy our products, but they come up with amazing recipes and help with our innovation,” he said.

 “We moved something (tofu) that is potentially misunderstood ... and educated consumers and chefs how to use it, and that path hasn’t changed,” Tsai said.

 Currently, Hodo Foods processes 3,000 bushels weekly.

 Knowing his products are only as good as the soybeans they are made from, Tsai said, “We try to get the best soybeans possible. ... We pay a premium price for them.”

 All of the soybeans Hodo Foods processes are grown in the United States and the majority are from Illinois, John Notz, Hodo Foods founding partner and chief financial officer, told **FarmWeek**.

 Tsai and Notz recommended growers who are interested in selling to Hodo Foods reach out to them at {hodofoods.com}, and they will send the company’s specifications, including protein level and fat content. The company processes certified organic, non-GMO soybeans.

 “For us, it’s a relationship that is mutually beneficial,” Tsai said. “We want great beans and we’re willing to work with them.”

 And Hodo Foods plans to continue its grown-in-the-USA product. “We want to be a domestic channel for soybean growers who want to supply us,” Tsai said. “People from Canada and South America reach out to us, ‘You want to buy our beans?’ No, we buy domestically.

 “We believe we are a great supporter of U.S. soybean growers,” Tsai said. “We recognize the importance of the soybean source from the grower to the end product.”

 Hodo Foods’ pride in processing U.S. soybeans may originate in the background of its founder. Asked by a summit participant when he felt like he’d made it, Tsai answered: “Making it is coming to America. ... the boat ride, surviving, being an immigrant, the rest is icing on the cake.”

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