

CHIANTI OPTIONAL

Fava beans transformed into tofu thanks to process developed at Winnipeg's Prairie Research Kitchen

By: Eva Wasney | Posted: Saturday, May 7, 2022

At first glance, the off-white brick looks like any other block of tofu. For staff at Red River College Polytechnic's Prairie Research Kitchen, however, the unassuming rectangle made from fava beans is a new frontier in plant-based protein and the culmination of years of work.

"To the best of my knowledge, this is the first ever commercialized soy-free tofu," research co-ordinator Kyle Andreasen says. "Getting this product to market has been the highlight of my time here... it's been really exciting to be part of it."

The fava tofu is being manufactured and distributed by Big Mountain Foods in Vancouver, but the product has strong local ties. It was developed in the food science lab on the top floor of Red River's Paterson Global Foods Institute and is made from Canadian beans processed by Prairie Fava in Glenboro.



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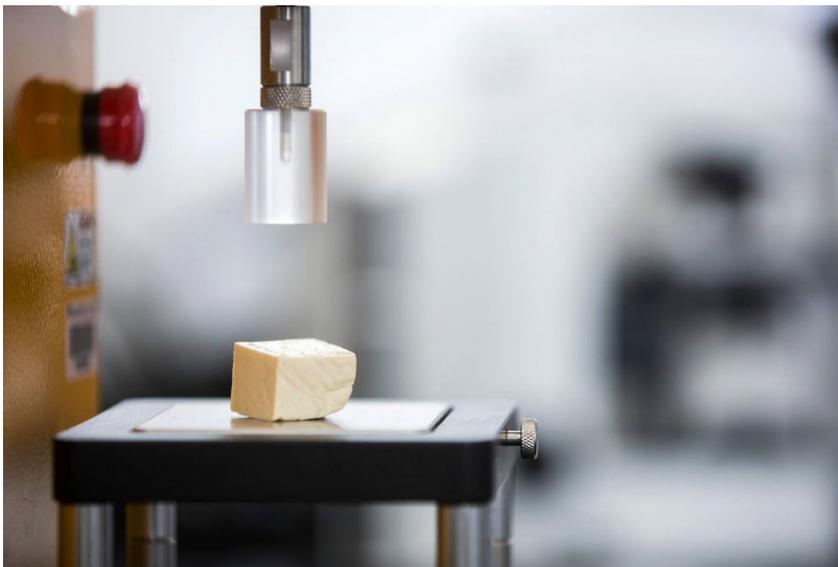
Kyle Andreasen, a chef by trade, is a research co-ordinator at the Prairie Research Kitchen at Red River College Polytechnic.

Soy has long been the standard for plant-based protein, but growing demand has created an opportunity for new beans to enter the market.

"I think it's important to give people options," Andreasen says. "Some people have food allergies, some people have preferences."

While fava beans share a lot of similarities with soy — they're both high-protein, high-fibre pulses — turning them into tofu is slightly more complicated. Tofu is traditionally made from coagulated soy milk, the curds of which are pressed into a block (similar to cheese-making). Fava tofu follows the same process, although making fava milk is a bit trickier.

"It's just a slightly different route to get to the same end product," says Andreasen, adding that the exact methodology is a protected trade secret.



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Fava bean tofu sits in a texture-analyzing machine at Red River's Prairie Research Kitchen.

The Prairie Research Kitchen was established in 2013 and is made up of a team of chefs, food scientists and culinary students who work with businesses to create and market new food products. Andreasen, a chef by trade and a graduate of Red River's culinary program, worked in local restaurants for a decade before taking a job with the research centre to satisfy his curiosity about food development.

As lead for the fava tofu project, he was tasked with coming up with a formula that was scalable and delicious.

"It doesn't matter how interesting it is, if it doesn't taste good and work, it doesn't matter that it exists," Andreasen says. Suffice it to say, he's eaten a lot of tofu over the last two years.

"Some people say that tofu doesn't taste like anything and I would beg to differ. These ingredients taste like the raw product and I think that fava tofu tastes delicious — it's a really mild flavour."



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Prairie Fava, located in Glenboro, processes Canadian-grown fava beans to create flour, split and whole beans, flakes and grits.

Fava tofu can be prepared and eaten in the same ways as its soy counterparts.

For Hailey Jefferies, co-founder and chief executive officer of Prairie Fava, tofu is a natural next step for a bean she's been championing since 2016.

"At the time plant-based protein was just starting to become quite popular... pea protein was on the rise, and I thought, 'Why not fava?'" says Jefferies who runs the vertically integrated company alongside her husband Cale's family farm and seed business, Jefferies Seeds.

Prairie Fava works with contract farmers across Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to grow their own variety of fava beans, which are then processed at the company's facility in Glenboro, a municipality 180 kilometres southwest of Winnipeg. The goal is to find new applications for fava, which has, in the past, largely been exported for canning or used in livestock feed.



Supplied: Prairie Fava co-founder and CEO Hailey Jefferies has been championing fava beans since 2016.

"Farmers wanted to grow them due to how beneficial they are to the soil — they're one of the top nitrogen fixing crops," Jefferies says, referring to a process that allows some plants to pull nitrogen from the air. "But they struggled to find a market for them."

Prairie Fava produces flour, split and whole beans, grits and flakes that can be used in a variety of food products. Jefferies hopes the new tofu line will get more farmers interested in growing fava beans.

The development of Big Mountain Foods' soy-free tofu was made possible by an investment from Protein Industries Canada. The product is set to make its grocery store debut this month.

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