

THE SPIRIT

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By KatieKohler

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Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf continued his Jobs That Pay Tour at Jyoti Natural Foods, an Indian foods manufacturer in Sharon Hill, Monday morning. He was led on a guided tour by co-owners Dr. Vijai and Jyoti Gupta, pioneers in Indian heat-and-eat canned foods who launched the venture in 1979.

“My wife and I insist on their food products, especially their rice, because it’s really well done,” said Wolf, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in India. “This is what Pennsylvania is about. These folks have taken a germ of an idea, when there was little demand for this, to now when the demand is exploding to the point they have to say ‘no’ to some of their customers. This is a really great success story.”

Vijai greeted Wolf by showing him a table of Jyoti products. The passionate-about-his-product Vijai grew especially animated discussing types of rice. “How many people can cook rice that is shelf-stable for two years and looks this good? he asked the governor, explaining that basmati rice, like good wine, gets better with age.

“Remember, governor, don’t try to age brown rice because it will stink like cat litter within six months,” he said to the laughter of Wolf and a small crowd.

Continuing the tour of the 50,000 sq. ft. facility, Vijai, an inventor of 24 U.S. patented technologies, explained each machine from the various steam-heated kettles, and retorts for sterilizing pouches and cans. Jyoti Natural Foods has been built technically and financially by the owners with no taxpayer dollars.

Out of necessity, Vijai invented a radically different, but simple, technology for the cleaning of beans that are free from foreign debris. With the invention, the Guptas decided to build their own food processing plant, using their own technical and financial resources. Since then, they have never had a complaint related to debris in beans.

“To buy someone’s junk and convert it into a working machine, that is technology innovation,” pointed out Vijai.

Jyoti, who has a graduate degree in nutrition, developed vegetarian recipes that used only fresh ingredients, reasonable fat and salt quantities, and involved no preservatives.

“She tells me what to do and I get it done,” Vijai said.

“It’s the opposite,” she insisted.

“Your name is on the bag,” Wolf offered. He went on later to praise Jyoti by saying how small the market for Indian food was at the company’s inception and that someone like her has the “understanding of business and skills of a nutritionist.”

“Who could have seen that the demand for Indian food would blossom? These two folks took some real gambles and that’s the heart of entrepreneurship,” said Wolf.

The visit culminated in Wolf sharing an early lunch (for which he paid) of butter chicken, basmati rice, saag paneer (spinach with cheese) and a samosa with the owners, state Rep. Leanne Krueger-Braneky (D-161), and State Rep. Maria Donatucci (D-185), at an employee roundtable.

The company currently employs 40 people with an additional 10 jobs expected to be added this year. The majority of employees are immigrants and many worked for the business for 10-15 years. While many of the employees reside in the Delaware County area, their issues were of national concern and included immigration and the Affordable Care Act.

“If you look at every chain in the food production process in this country from growth to processing to restaurants to retail, immigrants are a big backbone of the workforce. If you make it hard for them to come into the country, or scared to stay, a significant portion of our economy will fall apart,” said son Anuj Gupta, who is general manger of the Reading Terminal Market.

Jyoti food products are available in many grocery stores, and they also make food for airlines. Jyoti Indian Bistro opened in Philadelphia’s Mt. Airy section in 2013 with much of the preparation work done at the Sharon Hill facility. The company has invested \$2 million in the plant since they opened after outgrowing their first in 2006 and are planning an additional \$1 million in machinery and marketing investment this calendar year.



Lupini beans are among the foods processed by the company that was started in 1979.



Gov. Tom Wolf (center), who said he and his wife only eat Jyoti rice, enjoyed an early lunch with the owners, Vijai (left) and Jyoti Gupta, as a gaggle of media people covering the event looked on. The company was named in honor of the wife.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf gets a personal tour of the 50,000-square foot Indian foods plant in Sharon Hill by owner Vijai Gupta.

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