



## FOOD + FARM EXPLORATION CENTER GRAND OPENING DRAWS ENTHUSIASTIC CROWD

Board members, donors, legislators, growers, and the media got a first-hand look at the center

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*



**Above:** Food + Farm Exploration Center Executive Director Andy Reitz gives celebratory remarks at a special Grand Opening ceremony, November 30, for donors and board members, legislators, industry professionals and representatives of the media. "It's an amazing facility, a space where we can share agriculture successes, create lesson plans, and bring education to students through state-of-the-art exhibits and demonstration fields. This is a place for common ground," Reitz remarked, "where the community and even tractors of different colors can come together."

**Left:** Wisconsin potato growers Carole and Cliff Gagas (left) chat with Wisconsin Sen. Joan Ballweg (right) during the Ceremonial Grand Opening program, November 30, of the Food + Farm Exploration Center (FFEC). On October 25, 2023, the Wisconsin State Building Commission approved the release of \$3 million in state grant funds, through a joint effort that included Sen. Ballweg, to support construction of the FFEC, in Plover, a monetary sum that was recently enumerated in 2023 Wisconsin Act 19 for the Farming for the Future Foundation Inc.



The Food + Farm Exploration Center (FFEC) in Plover, Wisconsin, was buzzing with activity, November 30-December 2, during three Grand Opening events befitting of the brand-new facility.

The activities kicked off with a Ceremonial Grand Opening Program, November 30, for FFEC Board members and monetary donors, Wisconsin state legislators, industry professionals, growers, and media representatives.

That was followed, December 1, by a ribbon-cutting ceremony with the Portage County Area Business Council that included a private open house.

Last, but certainly not least, was a public Grand Opening, December 2, which officially kicked off the Exploration Center's regular business hours, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on weekends, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursdays. The center is closed on Mondays.

The state-of-the-art FFEC facility is a science and technology center where visitors have the chance to learn about Wisconsin's rich agricultural industry and innovative practices through an immersive experience.

It is a destination for learning, exploring, and celebrating agriculture, as well as being home to the world's largest potato masher.

The 50,000-square-foot center sits

on 24 acres generously donated by Worzella & Sons, Inc., and includes 60 hands-on, immersive, interactive exhibits, four acres of demonstration farm fields, a kitchen lab, Colorful Plate Café, meeting, events and exhibit space, an agriculture lab makerspace, Farm Tech Shed, and Ag Grand Hall.

#### RECONNECT PEOPLE TO AG

The FFEC focuses on STEM (Science, Technology, Education and Math) and literacy initiatives, and helps address the challenges of fewer students choosing agricultural professions.

"There is a profound need to reconnect people to agriculture,

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**Left:** Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers attended the Ceremonial Grand Opening of the FFEC, where he said, "It's wonderful to see the finished project. What you've accomplished is incredible. I'm happy to support such an innovative project that, in turn, supports the ag industry. I want to thank Dick and Barb Paveleski, the Farming for the Future Foundation [FFTF] and PepsiCo for supporting farmers." Gov. Evers signed a \$3 million grant for the FFTF to be used toward building and operating the FFEC.

**Right:** Michelle Peariso (left), FFTF founding member, secretary, and treasurer, and Mike Carter (second from left), FFTF cabinet member and co-owner and chief executive officer (CEO) of Bushmans' Inc., present Michelle's parents, Barb and Dick Paveleski (right) with a framed rendering of the FFEC during the Grand Opening Celebration. Dick is the FFTF founder, and Bushmans' Inc. made a sizable donation toward the FFEC.

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## Food + Farm Exploration Center Grand Opening . . .

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for them to understand really where their food is coming from,” says Dick Pavelski, founder and president of the Food + Farm Exploration Center.

“We are bringing everyone to the table here to learn about how we farm sustainably, the technology we use, how food gets to the grocery store and how that can help in feeding the world,” Pavelski remarks.

Planning for the exploration center began four years ago. The Farming

for the Future Foundation identified a need to reconnect people to their food and the farmers who grow it.

After a \$41 million fundraising campaign and state-of-the-art facility and exhibit design, the exploration center is now complete.

“After years of planning, we are so excited for this dream to become a reality,” FFEC Executive Director Andy Reitz says. “Wisconsin and its farms feed the nation and the

world, and now this one-of-a-kind facility will allow current and future generations to learn about innovation and sustainability in the agriculture industry.”

Learners of all ages are invited to visit the exploration center. It is a place to learn, play, explore, and discover. Come and see the incredible technology and sustainability used in modern production agriculture.



**Above:** Seated in the front row at the FFEC Grand Opening, November 30, are the visionaries behind the FFEC and FFEC, the Pavelski family, including, from left to right, Barb, Dick, Charlotte, Eleanore Davisson, and Jeremie and Alicia. Directly behind Dick in black dress with maroon scarf is his daughter—FFEC Founding Member and Emeritus Director Andria Davisson. Seated directly behind Jeremie (in blue collared shirt) is Stevens Point Mayor Mike Wiza and his wife, Chris (to Mike’s right).

**Left:** Posing for a photo opportunity at the FFEC Grand Opening are, from left to right, FFEC Executive Director Andy Reitz, FFEC Founding Member Michelle Peariso, Wisconsin Sen. Patrick Testin, Gov. Tony Evers, PepsiCo Senior Director of North American Potatoes Steven James, FFEC Founder Dick Pavelski, and Bushmans’ Inc. CEO and FFEC Cabinet Board Member Mike Carter.



Learn more and purchase tickets for your visit at [www.explorefoodandfarm.org](http://www.explorefoodandfarm.org). Pre-purchasing tickets is strongly encouraged.

**Above:** During the FFEC Grand Opening Celebration, Great Northern Distillery Founder Brian Cummins (wearing vest and facing camera in the first image) gave a hands-on mixology lesson on crafting a signature Fall Frangipane cocktail in the Kitchen Lab. Seated in the front row during the mixology lesson (second image) are, from left to right, Theresa and Eric Schroeder of Schroeder Brothers Farms, Mark Finnessy of Okray Family Farms, and Kevin Schleicher and John Bustamante of Wysocki Family of Companies.

**Right and Below:** Hands-on agricultural exploration at the FFEC includes a Soil and Water exhibit generously sponsored by Worzella & Sons, Inc., and a children's grocery store and food truck.

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*“We are bringing everyone to the table here to learn about how we farm sustainably, the technology we use, how food gets to the grocery store and how that can help in feeding the world.”*

**– Richard Pavelski,**  
*president and founder of the Food + Farm Exploration Center*

**Left:** Taking advantage of a hands-on crop irrigation tool at the FFEC Grand Opening Celebration are, from left to right, Luke Wickman, Valley Irrigation territory sales manager, Scott Polzin of North Central Irrigation, and Jay Warner of Warner & Warner, Inc. and Warner Packaging.

**Above:** The FFEC Farm Tech Shed houses a rotating exhibit of modern precision agriculture equipment, including the John Deere See & Spray™ Ultimate sprayer available from Riesterer & Schnell.

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**Above:** Kay Nicklaus sits in a realistic ag simulator that places FFEC visitors behind the wheel of a modern tractor where they can plant and harvest potato crops. The tractor cab where she sits is set into the floor where it is accessible to all and surrounded by flatscreens in a U-shape

around the exhibit for a 360-degree total immersive experience. Kay's son, Todd Nicklaus, is president of Incredible Bank, which made a large donation to the FFEC. Her husband, Ron, who recently passed away, was founder of Incredible Bank, as well as being a long-time, successful

bean farmer in Northcentral Wisconsin, owner of a bean harvesting operation that spanned the area and five other states, and the subject of a nice feature article in the November 2019 issue of the *Badger Common'Tater*. **BCT**

**Contact: Jim or John**

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