



Tribune photos by Nancy Stone

Guillermo Trias (left) of Solex Partners pitches his family company's imported Spanish foods to Fancy Food Show attendees Stas Kazmierski (middle) and Caterina Callegari.

# Taking a fancy to gourmet tastes

Trade show puts  
specialty foods  
in the spotlight

By Robin Mather Jenkins  
Tribune staff reporter

Guillermo Trias is busily trying to interest people in a product he can't show them.

The young Spaniard is talking about *pata negra* products, hams and other cuts from the near-legendary black Iberian pigs. In Spain's *dehesa*, a Mediterranean woodland of evergreens, cork oaks and other plants, the pigs fatten on chestnuts. They are the last free-ranging and grazing pigs in Europe.

Trias and his brothers and sisters all live in Chicago now, and their company, Solex Partners, will be among the first in the country to offer Iberian ham. It has never been available in the U.S. because there wasn't a USDA-sanctioned slaughterhouse in Spain. A small family-owned slaughterhouse, Fermin, received USDA approval nearly two years ago and the hams they started curing immediately are only just coming to market. The first hams should be here in early summer.

For tasting, Trias has other *pata negra* cuts that took less time to cure, here at the 8th Spring Fancy Food Show.

The Fancy Food Show, sponsored by the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade, occupies a 55,000-square-foot space crammed with more than 400 companies trying to interest the men and women who buy goods for your supermarket or specialty foods store. This is one of three such shows each year; the others are in San Francisco and New York.

In Chicago, Fancy Food is one of five shows under the umbrella of the Food Marketing Institute, which hosted the three-day event held last Sunday through Tuesday. The other four shows—Food Marketing Insti-



Yellingbo Gold extra-virgin olive oil drew tasters to its product made from olives handpicked on the family farm in Australia.

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tute, All Things Organic, Produce Expo and Conference, and U.S. Food Export Showcase—fill other spaces at McCormick Place. The shows are open to the trade only.

Exhibitors from big companies and smaller mom-and-pop operations come from around the world. We saw some fascinating products as we walked through the show. These items may show up in Chicago-area markets later this year.

Nina Gibson is project coordinator of the Elephant Pepper Development Trust in Zambia. Elephants, it seems, dislike chili peppers. When farmers in the area grow chilies instead of more traditional crops, the elephants won't devastate their crops by foraging. Gibson's company uses those chilies in a line of top-notch condiments.

Charlotte Ashamu and Philippe Longonda are exhibiting

Hexagonale's four traditional meads (wines made from honey) from their company in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. Hexagonale uses honey from Congolese equatorial rain forests, and their meads range from dry to sweet to strong. They are dazzlingly good.

Closer to home are the folks from the Blueberry Store in Grand Junction, Mich., showing a line of products from salsas and chutneys to coffees, baking mixes and beverages. Their Blue Nectars, in several flavor varieties based on blueberry juice, are made without corn syrup. They are light, bright, refreshing and delicious.

Back at the Triases' Solex Partners booth, Guillermo shows off other Spanish delicacies that are available now. Chances are, if you see Spanish ingredients at markets like Fox & Obel, Binny's Beverage Depot stores, Sam's Wines & Spirits, Schaefer's, Pastoral, Artisan Cellars or Sunset Foods supermarkets, they're from the Triases. The young company wants you to enjoy them. "It is as if you are eating at our table," Guillermo said.

As he might say, *buon provecho!*

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