Indiana native Linca Jenkins tours the Tabasco bottling facility Friday while visiting Avery Island in New Iberia.

The McIlhenny Co. has broken ground on a visitors’ center that offers more of what tourists say they want to see.

"It'll be a real experience and not just a 15-minute tour"

The Tabasco factory on Avery Island is making several additions and improvements for visitors.

- New visitors' center to open in 2015
- Greenhouse visits to see peppers' growth throughout the year
- Enhanced parking lot
- Food tours
- New cafeteria serving south Louisiana cuisine
- A look into the company's warehouse and processing plant

Tourist get to learn how Tabasco is made when they visit Avery Island near New Iberia, viewing a short film about the McIlhenny family and enjoying a quick walk through a small part of the Tabasco factory the family built.

But they've been asking for more and the company listened, breaking ground recently for a new visitors' center that offers more of what tourists say they want to see.

"They (Tabasco visitors) wanted..."
to see peppers, get out in the fields and see the peppers growing," said Angie Schaubert, senior manager of brand sales at Tabasco.

The new visitors' center, set to open in summer 2015, will offer a self-guided tour that, in addition to providing a history of the island and the McIlhenny family, will give visitors an opportunity to visit the greenhouse where Tabasco peppers are grown and to see inside the company's warehouse and processing plant.

"They will get a bird's-eye view and smell the pepper sauce," Schaubert said, adding with a laugh that the smell can be rather overpowering.

Peppers are grown only for a few months out of the year, she said, so visitors will see peppers growing in different stages, including the planting process at the greenhouse.

"It'll be a real experience and not just a 15-minute tour," Schaubert said. "There'll be a lot more to see." 

The new visitors' center is a major investment for the company and will be located near the present complex on Avery Island, company officials said. In addition to the visitors' center, the parking lot will be enhanced and a new cafeteria built with a large wrap-around porch and seating areas. South Louisiana cuisine will be served, including such dishes as jambalaya, boudin, and crawfish étouffée.

"Here we are at Avery Island and tourists are hungry and looking for a place to eat," Schaubert said of the current situation.

As part of the new enhancements at Tabasco, the company is now offering food tours. Vans or tour-style buses leave Avery Island on Tuesdays through Thursdays to visit six venues throughout New Iberia. Visitors will enjoy cuisine and an explanation at each stop, Schaubert said.

"We travel with you and go into the community," she said. "We explain fishing for crawfish, for instance, then eat crawfish or discuss boudin and then sample boudin, show you how to eat it. It's not just going to six venues and eating, but you learn about Cajun culture." Venues will change, but this past week, the tours visited The Boiling Point for crawfish, Legnon's Boucherie for boudin, Dave's Quality Meats for stuffed bread and crackers, Konriko Rice Mill for a lesson in rice production, Bon Creole for gumbo and Clementine's for bread pudding.

The tours last 3½ hours and return to Avery Island, allowing visitors time to do both the Tabasco tour and the food tour. The price is $49.99 per person, and the bus leaves at 1 p.m. at the Tabasco Country Store on Avery Island, returning around 4 p.m. Reservations must be made by noon on the desired day.

For more information on the food tours, or to make reservations, call (337) 373-6139.

Schaubert sees both the Tabasco food tours and the new visitors' center as offering a major destination for tourists visiting south Louisiana.

"We definitely see this as a top attraction in the United States, definitely in the top five," she said.