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COLUMN ONE

Where culinary dreams take shape, batch by batch

Chef's Kitchens and other incubator kitchens give cooks a place -- fully stocked -- to share and nurture their food-related businesses.

By Mary MacVean

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In one kitchen, Bob Suchyta perfects his muffins and brownies, trying to build a business in case the economy costs him his radio job. In another, Chelsea Britt, a recent college graduate, bakes in hopes of keeping her dad's panforte business going. In a third kitchen, Robyn Chandonnet prepares vegan raw cheesecakes.

There are dozens of stories behind the bowls and stoves and recipes at Chef's Kitchens, an incubator for food businesses. Stories of people shedding careers or adjusting to new and unexpected challenges. People with a dream and a cleverly decorated cookie or a family tamale recipe or the goal of owning a restaurant.

A small food business often starts at home -- cooking or baking after a day job, handing out samples, asking friends and family for advice. But after that, the home cook must confront the reality of insurance, permits, packaging, marketing. And a kitchen. Selling food from most home kitchens is illegal. Building one can cost tens of thousands of dollars; rental kitchens are scarce.

Enter the "incubator kitchen" -- for rent, stocked with equipment and licensed by health authorities.

"We want to be a place where people can start from nothing and grow -- and grow out of us in some ways," says Andrea Bell, the owner of [Chef's Kitchens Co-op](#), in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los Angeles.

CC Consalvo would like nothing better than to outgrow Chef's Kitchens. She and two part-time employees of Clean Plate Meals make and deliver organic "farm-to-table artisan" meals that accommodate dairy or gluten intolerance and other special requests.

Her dream is to own a cafe.

But for now, she says, she feels at home at Chef's Kitchen, where the five kitchens are open 24-7 for the 40 or 50 businesses operating there. Rents at the 25-year-old facility -- a stucco building whose front door leads to a narrow hall, with two kitchens to the left and three to the right -- run from \$16 to \$25 an hour, depending on how much time a cook, teacher, photographer or other tenant needs.

Last fall, Bell says, the economic news left her worried that "things could get pretty rough" for her incubator, but that hasn't happened. In fact, she says, her office is getting more calls, five or six a day, inquiring about the kitchens.

The recession has hurt some specialty food manufacturers, but overall, the industry reported \$48 billion in retail sales nationally in 2008, an increase of 8.4% over 2007, according to a report by the National Assn. for the Specialty Food Trade. Experts say that tough economic times inspire creativity.

"I think the economy will stimulate the entrepreneurial mind," says Mari Fassett, who "searched high and low" for a kitchen after she began her successful Marimix snack company in 1993, and who now is building a four-kitchen incubator in Orange.

"Everybody has a dream of some kind of food . . . a favorite dish they really think people would love," says Bell, a former caterer with 25 years of experience. "People are a lot more interested in what goes into their food, the ingredients, the health aspects. By buying from people who are also concerned about that, you can get food of the caliber you would make at home."

Chef's Kitchens is one of about 60 such [incubators](#) around the country. La Cocina in San Francisco was conceived to help low-income people develop businesses. Others help farmers get their products to consumers. Mi Kitchen Es Su Kitchen is a consulting firm in New York that operates three incubators in the off-hours at kitchens run for another purpose, such as job training, says Kathrine Gregory, owner of the firm. Rents are around \$20 an hour.

These days, Gregory says, she encourages people to "think small and package small." While a shopper might hesitate to buy a big box of expensive cookies, they're likely to feel comfortable with a \$5 splurge.

At Chef's Kitchens, Bell and partner Sarah Cawley say some of their tenants work full time, and others work as little as four hours a week.

There's a bookcase of cookbooks for sharing, as well as informal advice about getting a spot at a farmers market or shelf space at Whole Foods, and referrals for packaging or insurance. (The cooks who use the incubator must get certification in food handling, and insurance. If they want to sell

food in L.A. County, they also need a business license.)

And should a cook need an egg in the middle of the night, he or she can usually borrow one.

"Sometimes, you go in and the music is playing and people are dancing and singing and cooking," Bell says. "You are not stuck in your kitchen."

Cawley, who came to the U.S. from Ireland in 1982 and worked for Bell at her catering business before becoming her partner in Chef's Kitchens, has a reputation as a mother hen. Tenants say she can quickly get an oven fixed or a scheduling problem solved.

"The people who are here -- they put their faith in me," she says. "They have faith in me and I have to give that back. I don't want them to worry."

Sometimes, it's worry that leads people to the kitchen in the first place.

Robyn Chandonnet was a hairdresser when her husband's multiple sclerosis began limiting his activities. After seeing many doctors, he turned to alternatives, cut out all processed foods and eventually began eating only raw food.

For a party, when her father-in-law turned 70, Chandonnet tried to make a cake that her husband could eat, consisting entirely of vegan ingredients. An idea was born, and Chandonnet went to work trying to perfect a product.

"A lot of cheesecake went into the toilet in the process," Chandonnet says, but in 2005, when she had a recipe she thought was marketable, she went to Chef's Kitchens.

"It was like coming home," she says. "I love Sarah. Without this place, I would never be in business."

Her Nude Foods cheesecakes -- raw and vegan, in seven flavors, including lemon-blueberry, chocolate and pumpkin spice -- are sold in some Whole Foods stores. She began alone, and now has three employees; her gross sales went from \$32,000 the first year to \$122,000 in 2008.

Bob Suchyta hopes his muffins and brownies will prove just as appealing.

He worked in his father's Dearborn, Mich., bakery from the age of 5. By the time he was 20, he'd had enough. Now 43, he's worried about the future of his radio job.

Last year, he brought his low-fat apple muffins to El Segundo's town fair. Soon, he was sinking money into equipment, and in January, he started working at Chef's Kitchens. He sells his baked goods at the Torrance Farmers Market on Saturdays and has been trying to get a contract with a cafe.

He still has his day job, but he says he's closing in on breaking even as a baker.

Chelsea Britt, 25, also hopes to use what she learned from her father, Randy, a farmer in Chico who, along with the produce he brought to a farmers market, ran a business that sold a California-style version of the Italian cake called *panforte*, made with almonds, dried apricots, and nectarines and dates.

"I remember him practicing," says Britt, who designed the label featuring a stylized almond tree.

Last April, her father died. Britt had already moved to Los Angeles and wanted to stay. She went home temporarily to his kitchen to learn the ropes. She's now working on the business at Chef's Kitchens, with a hoped-for fall debut at a Santa Monica farmers market.

There's no guarantee any of them will succeed, but the dreamers keep coming. Chef's Kitchen alumni include Akasha Richmond, who used one of the kitchens as a caterer and to test recipes for her well-regarded Culver City restaurant, Akasha.

Bell says she doesn't know what percentage of her tenants go the distance, but she advises people not to plan on making a living in food for at least two years.

"You really need to not just be a good cook, but a good businessperson," she says.

"People who think they are going to jump in and cook a few chocolate chip cookies and make a living at it are probably setting themselves up for failure."

Two young men came in recently to take a look at the kitchens; they want to make healthful, organic food, Cawley says.

She advised them to keep their computer business jobs as they work on their food careers.

"Maybe they'll last a week," she says. "Maybe five years."

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