



PASADENA STAR-NEWS

Career incubator

Pasadena facility fosters creation of new jobs

By Janette Williams, Staff Writer

PASADENA - Joe Colletti was worried. After three years of planning and a series of setbacks that delayed the opening by about a year, the doors finally opened in August at the \$2.6 million nonprofit Mama's Small Business Kitchen Incubator.

But almost no one was signing up to use the facility, which has state-of-the-art kitchens for food-related start-up businesses, said Colletti, executive director of Episcopal Housing Alliance and Economic Development.

"People were scared off by the recession. We were at the point where we said, 'Do we need to do something different?' The small-business incubator was the first phase, then a job-training restaurant," Colletti said. "We thought, maybe the restaurant should be first, and then the incubator."

"Then all of a sudden, it kicked in."

Since September, more than 30 small business entrepreneurs have used the kitchens and more than 100 people have worked there at least once, he said.

One entrepreneur has already gone on to open a restaurant, while another has launched The Flying Pig, a



Michael Christie of La Crescenta roasts tomatoes and Texas sweet peppers over a mesquite grill for his fire roasted salsa for his business Texas Fajitas Company at Mama's Small Business Incubator in Pasadena Wednesday January 6, 2010. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Walt Mancini)

catering truck business billed as a team of "dedicated maniacs presenting the finest in exuberant, street-inspired yumminess."

Chef Larry Bressler, the incubator's general manager, and instructor Chef Farid Zadi - both graduates of the California School for Culinary Arts in Pasadena - provide professional expertise and business plan advice.

“More than anything, we mentor people’s dreams, and make sure they’re practical,” Kessler said. “Dreams are wonderful. But your feet have to be on the ground and you have to have an idea of how to achieve your goals and be successful.”

Colletti, who started working on the Mama’s concept in 2007, said a major boost has come from a new \$1 million grant from the Henry T. Nicholas III Foundation.

Local support for the venture in Pasadena also has been strong; in 2007 the Pasadena City Council backed the enterprise with a \$425,000 loan toward the building’s \$1.8 million purchase price.

Private and corporate foundation funds, including \$50,000 from the Pasadena Community Foundation, were used to rehab and equip the former restaurant space.

Now that it’s up and running, Mama’s costs \$9,000 a week to operate, Colletti said. Means-based user fees, usually around \$20 an hour, do not yet cover all those costs, he said, but the weekly shortfall is down from \$5,000 to \$4,000.

“The (Nicholas Foundation) grant is going to make up the \$300,000 deficit for the next couple of years, so we can have time to increase the number of entrepreneurs and be 100 percent self-sufficient,” he said.

Things have come together so well, Mama’s is throwing a community open house from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. today, featuring tours, exhibits and food samples from the kitchen users, plus information on the facility and what it offers.

Mayor Bill Bogaard, who is slated to have an open house cook-off with Broadcom co-founder Henry Nicholas and Episcopal Bishop J. Jon Bruno at today’s event, plans to highlight Mama’s in his upcoming State of the City address, Colletti said.

So far, several caterers and personal chefs, plus dessert- and cookie-makers have signed up as regular users of the facility.

In July, Christine Hanson, a former communications executive at Art Center College of Design, launched Auntie Fruf’s Aahsome Fudge, available online at aahsomefudge.com as she works on lining up retail outlets.

“You can’t work from home. You have to have a certified kitchen if you’re going to sell food,” said Hanson, who commutes from Studio City. “I love



Christine Hanson
(SGVN/Staff Photo by Walt Mancini)

being here, with people with such passion for what they do. We all help each other and bounce ideas off the chefs.”

Out in the parking lot, former corporate financier and Texas transplant Michael Christie cooked up mesquite-roasted vegetables for salsa, to be served up with his authentic Tex-Mex fajitas.

He said he was shocked at what Californians are served up as traditional Texas cattleman fare.

Christie - at texasfajitaco.com - is betting locals will love the marinated, grilled skirt steak, salsa, guacamole and tortillas he’s been cooking for USC tailgate parties.

Now, with a business plan in place, he’s looking for restaurant space.

Another one ready to go, Colletti said.