

Get a Food Business Cooking, Cheap

A kitchen incubator could be the place to start for home cooks looking to turn a hobby into a business

By Kerry Miller

The culinary translation of the traditional business incubator, the kitchen incubator, offers shared workspace and equipment, and business advice to aspiring caterers, bakers, and specialty-food makers.

Compared with the cost of equipping a commercial kitchen from scratch, the price of using a kitchen incubator is a steal. Fees average around \$20 per hour, plus the cost of storage. Kitchen incubators typically require tenants to obtain a license from the governing food safety authority (usually \$200 or less) and product liability insurance, which can cost from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. Some incubators offer only informal mentoring, while others offer a full range of services to help startups with everything from business plans to nutritional analyses.



La Cocina

San Francisco

<http://www.lacocinasf.org>

Opened: 2005

Size: 2,200 square feet

Kitchen rental: \$10 to \$40 per hour

Other services: training, mentoring, and one-on-one consultations on business and food industry topics, access to capital, pro-bono legal services

Active tenants: 24

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 3

What can an incubator provide to an aspiring business owner? One La Cocina client, Veronica Salazar (not pictured), ran an informal weekend restaurant out of her apartment to supplement her income as a line cook. With the help of La Cocina she opened a real restaurant, completed a business planning course, built a catering clientele, and opened a popular booth at Alemany Farmers' Market in San Francisco. Salazar now employs three other family members.



Artisan Baking Center Kitchen Innovations

New York

<http://www.mikitchenessukitchen.com>

Opened: 2005

Size: 5,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$180-\$220 per eight-hour shift

Other services: Seminars, access to entry-level kitchen-trained staff, informal mentoring, and sales assistance.

Active tenants: 45

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 3

Artisan client Deborah Bonner says her 40th birthday present to herself (with support from her husband) was to take a leave from her corporate career to pursue her longtime dream of starting a baked goods company. Three years later, Debbie's Soulful Sweets is going strong, and Bonner says working out of the Artisan Baking Center, one of the few incubator programs that is turning a profit, allows her to keep her overhead low so she can reinvest revenues in her growing business.



ACEnet's Food Ventures Center

Athens, Ohio

<http://www.acenetworks.org/foodventures>

Opened: 1996

Size: 4,200 square feet

Rates: \$8 to \$42 per hour

Other services: business counseling, marketing assistance, regional branding program

Active tenants: 31 per month, on average

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 34

Former client Crumbs Bakery is a "worker-owned" business with eight full-time employees who produce breads, rolls, crackers, and a tofu-pasta line.



Vermont Food Venture Center

Fairfax, Vt.

http://www.edcnv.org/programs/northern_enterprises/food_venture

Opened: 1996

Size: 3,600 square feet

Rental rate: \$27 per hour

Other services: marketing, product development, food safety and food science analysis

Active tenants: 35

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 30-plus

Former client Vermont Mystic Pie's high-end, ready-to-bake pies are sold nationally in Whole Foods ([WFMI](http://www.wfmi.com)) stores.



Pacific Gateway Center's Culinary Business Incubator

Honolulu

<http://www.pacificgateway.org>

Opened: 2003

Size: 20,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$12 to \$50 per hour

Other services: Business and food-industry training classes, one-on-one consulting, business

computer lab access

Active tenants: 75

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 12

With 12 active kitchens, Pacific Gateway Center says its kitchen incubator is the country's largest. So far, 15 of the kitchen's current clients have taken their businesses from part-time hobby to full-time career. After hatching at the incubator, custom-cake design company Cakelava opened its retail storefront in Kailua, Hawaii earlier this month.



Blue Ridge Food Ventures

Candler, N.C.

<http://www.blueridgefoodventures.org>

Opened: 2005

Size: 11,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$22 per hour

Other services: Help with business plans, packaging, marketing, regulations, and other business

needs

Active tenants: 30 to 40

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 3

Headstart Gourmet's handmade wine-reduction compound butters are sold at several Whole Foods stores in the Southeast.



The Starting Block

Hart, Mich.

Opened: 2006

Size: 2,500 square feet

Rental rate: \$10 to \$15 per hour

Other services: Business education courses and workshops, one-on-one consulting

Active tenants: 35

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 2

After developing its business over several months at the incubator, one client, Fremont (Mich.)-based Maple Island Pie company, secured a commercial business loan to build a licensed kitchen, hire several part-time employees, and develop the business into a full-time occupation.



University of Idaho Food Technology Center

Caldwell, Idaho

<http://www.ag.uidaho.edu/ftc>

Opened: 2004

Size: 4,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$14 to \$27.50 per hour

Other services: Contract food processing research and development, food analytical services, food industry training and education

Active tenants: 61

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 9

Incubator tenant Prosperity Organic Foods won "Best of Show" for the best new vegetarian product at Natural Products ExpoWest 2007, the country's largest natural and organic food trade show.



Northwest Ohio Cooperative Kitchen

Bowling Green, Ohio

<http://www.agincubator.org>

Opened: 2004

Size: 5,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$20 per hour

Other services: Recipe/formula costing and nutritional analysis, educational seminars, office and conference room, office space, greenhouse space, farmland

Active tenants: 14

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 2

Since it was established at the incubator in December, 2006, Willy's Salsa has produced and sold more than 25,000 pounds of fresh and jarred salsa. Now sold in 35 retail locations in nine states, Willy's will soon be moving to its own production facility. It plans to distribute its products nationwide.



Shoals Commercial Culinary Center

Florence, Ala.

<http://ccc.shoalsec.com>

Opened: 2001

Size: 3,000 square feet

Rental rate: \$25 per hour

Other services: Product development, product testing, ingredient procurement, packaging, labeling, cost analysis, health department compliance, marketing and business seminars

Active tenants: 17

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: 1

Made on site at the incubator, Mook's Cheese Straws (not pictured) are sold in several large grocery chains throughout the Southeast.



Rutgers Food Innovation Center

Bridgeton, N.J.

<http://www.fire.rutgers.edu>

Opened: 2001 (new incubator facility scheduled to open in 2008)

Size: 23,000 square feet

Additional services: Assistance with business development, market development, quality and food safety assurance, regulations and compliance support, and workforce development

Active tenants: n/a

"Graduates" who have gone on to start their own businesses: n/a

The Rutgers Food Innovation Center was awarded "Incubator of the Year" in 2007 by the National Business Incubation Assn. in recognition of the center's assistance to over 700 food and agriculture entrepreneurs.