

# Incubator kitchens nurture small-business dreams

A Los Angeles co-op rents cooking spaces to people starting or running a food venture

By MARY MacVEAN  
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In one kitchen, Bob Suchyia perfects his brownies and muffins, 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 Chandonet prepares vegan raw cheesecakes.

There are dozens of stories behind the bowls and stoves and recipes at Chef's Kitchens, a Los Angeles 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 tale male recipe or the goal of owning a restaurant.

partner Sarah Cawley say some of their tenants work full time and others 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 insurance and certification in food handling. 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, she can usually borrow one.

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 get an oven fixed or

a scheduling problem solved quickly.

"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."

Suchyia hopes his muffins and brownies will prove appealing. He worked in his father's Dearborn, Mich., bakery from the age of 5. By 20 he'd had enough. Now, at 43, he's worried about the future of his radio job.

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

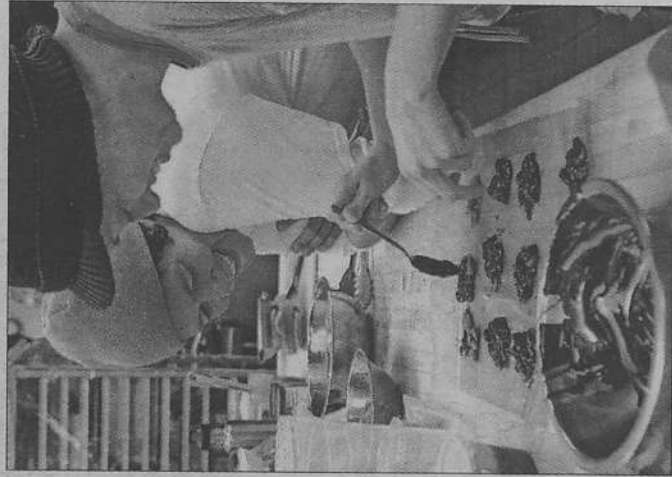
He's still got his day job, but says he's closing in on breaking

even as a baker.

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

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

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



At Chef's Kitchens in Los Angeles, CC Consalvo (left) watches Susan Brownstein make chocolate candies. The kitchen rents space and equipment to small food companies, giving them the means to grow their businesses.

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*Continues with "Bad Economy Inspires Entrepreneur"*

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 and 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.

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 intolerances 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.

## Bad economy inspires entrepreneurs

Last fall, Bell says, the economic news made 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 had an effect on the specialty food industry, which reported \$48 billion in retail sales nationally in 2008; nonetheless, last year sales increased 8.4 percent over 2007, according to a report by the National Association for 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 when she began her successful Marimix snack company in 1993, and who now is building a four-kitchen incubator in Orange, Calif.

"Everybody has a dream of some kind of food ... a favorite dish they really think people would love," Bell, a former caterer with 25 years of experience, says. "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 kitchen 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 company in New York that runs three incubators during off-hours at kitchens run for another purpose, such as job training, says Kathrine Gregory, owner of the business. Rents are around \$20 an hour.

### Small indulgences are more likely to sell

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

Continues with partner Sarah Cawley 4 [Column 2 under headline]