

## For Women, a Recipe to Create a Successful Business

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Peter DaSilva for the New York Times

Sarah Rocklin, center, and Ellie Sherman sell food items produced at La Cocina, an incubator program.

One morning in May, Veronica Salazar stuffed refried beans into sandal-shaped masa cakes, concentrating to block the commotion in a cavernous kitchen here in the Mission District. The chopping of vegetables added to the din as the clang of metal pans against stainless steel equipment competed with background music from a local Spanish-language radio station. But this kitchen, known by the Spanish name *La Cocina*, is no ordinary restaurant or commercial operation. Instead, the chefs here — all women, most of them immigrants — work side by side to achieve a common goal: starting their own food businesses and, in some cases, elevating themselves out of poverty.

Known as a “kitchen incubator,” *La Cocina* (la-koh-SEE-nuh) is a shared-use space created two years ago to provide a platform for women entrepreneurs without assets. Offering a low hourly rate for access to 2,200 square feet of restaurant-quality kitchen space, the nonprofit *La Cocina* also provides training from high-profile mentors and technical assistance on creating business plans and building marketing programs.

“There’s an entrepreneurial gene,” said Valeria Perez Ferreiro, executive director of *La Cocina*. “And we are finding amazing entrepreneurs who are already cooking or have a product that is so promising that it deserves to be seen in the market and that we think has a chance for success.”

Ms. Salazar, 32, was one of the first participants in *La Cocina* and is one of its bigger successes. Her company, *El Huarache Loco*, makes traditional foods from Mexico City.

Working with intensity, she needed to produce 700 of her trademark huaraches, the bean-filled cakes, for her weekly booth at a farmer’s market and hundreds more for Carnival San Francisco festivities over Memorial Day weekend. She also prepared fish and shrimp ceviche as an employee stirred 30 gallons of carnitas in a brazing skillet for a catering job for 100 people.

“I come here to learn all the business, and I need to learn more every day,” Ms. Salazar said, while dicing pounds of tomatoes for a salsa roja. “Tomorrow, I have three parties. So if I do this tomorrow, I know I can do something by myself.”

The specialty foods prepared here are a reflection of the ethnic makeup of La Cocina's participants. More than half the women are Latina, with another 8 percent African-American. The rest are Asian or Caucasian. Their products, both fresh and packaged, range from Mexican street fare to Irish chocolates, vegetarian sushi, South African meat pies and Brazilian cakes.

La Cocina has opened its own booth at the high-end Ferry Building Marketplace, where it sells its participants' packaged products along with house-made charcuterie, pricey olive oils and \$8-a-dozen organic eggs.

Every day La Cocina's calendar is replete with participants preparing packaged products and hot food for catering jobs, coffee shops and a busy farmer's market near the airport. Anna Shi's Gourmet has a standing weekly order for 900 of her vegetarian tofu egg rolls for the Berkeley school district. Maria del Carmen Flores sells 1,500 of her yucca and plantain chips in 50 stores. Independent grocers around the Bay Area and Whole Food Markets throughout the state have picked up many of La Cocina's specialty products.

"The really cool thing about a business incubator is that when you get entrepreneurial people in one place, there's a synergistic effect," said Tracy Kitts, vice president and chief operating officer of the National Business Incubation Association, a nonprofit membership organization. "Not only do they learn from staff, they learn tons from each other, and this really contributes greatly to their success."

The association estimates there are 1,200 incubation programs in the United States. Only 19 of them are kitchen incubators, Mr. Kitts said, because the start-up and operating costs are much higher than for a mixed-use space. Eight of those programs are in urban areas, including Rochester, New York City, Denver and Minneapolis.

La Cocina is housed in a starkly modern structure wedged among tattered row houses and apartment buildings in the Mission District. Residents are primarily low-income people from Mexico and El Salvador, where Ms. Perez Ferreiro says there is a strong tradition of entrepreneurship.

La Cocina was created by the California Women's Foundation in response to a survey that indicated that 90 percent of women in the Mission District said they needed adequate equipment and proper permits to run their businesses, but that commercial kitchen space in San Francisco was either unaffordable or geographically inconvenient. Many of them said they were cooking illegally out of their homes.

The foundation and government grants make up more than three-quarters of La Cocina's \$575,000 annual budget. About 17 percent of its funding comes from rent charged to six commercial tenants (including men), who pay \$30 to \$40 an hour, depending on the type of equipment being used. The program participants pay \$8 to \$10 an hour for the space, utensils and small ware.

"We are not creating a parallel nonprofit world where they are in a sheltered workshop," Ms. Perez Ferreiro said. "The reason we charge a fee is that we want them to have a business model that is sustainable. If they don't incorporate the cost of doing business, it's artificial, and it's going to crumble."

To avoid that, Jason Rose, La Cocina's culinary director, and Caleb Zigas, the program director, both of them bilingual, meet weekly with the women to review food costs, recipes and sales and marketing plans. Participants also pair with consultants from partner organizations who work on finances and cash flow statements.

Ms. Salazar of El Huarache Loco employs five family members at her booth at the Alemany Farmers' Market, where Mr. Zigas says she takes in \$3,000 every weekend. Costs of goods, licenses, employee wages and kitchen rental means she nets \$1,000. But he points out that Ms. Salazar will soon be able to afford to buy a home; he is searching for commercial space for her to open a restaurant, a prospect he calls "thrilling."

"It's the translation from informal economy, which is cash-in, cash-out, to a formal economy, which is concept, then investment, then growth," Mr. Zigas said. "It's a really hard conceptual translation to make, to go from knowing how much you're making every day to thinking about money in a longer-term vision."

When Jill Litwin applied to La Cocina, she had abundant vision but needed help with what she calls her "road map." Ms. Litwin is the owner of Peas of Mind, a line of frozen organic toddler food that she developed in Vermont.

At first, she was only capable of making 12 mini-casseroles at a time. The staff brought in a food scientist to help Ms. Litwin recalibrate her recipes so that each batch would turn out 400. They also introduced her to a human resources specialist and made a critical introduction to a food buyer for Whole Foods Market.

"They are helping people produce products that are high quality and of great integrity," said Justin Jackson, executive coordinator for purchasing at Whole Foods in Northern California. "If it wasn't well thought through and executed properly, our interest wouldn't be what it is."

Peas of Mind is now in 80 stores in California, 20 of them Whole Foods Markets, which is discussing plans to take her product national. Ms. Litwin says she has doubled her 2006 sales in the first quarter of this year.

"If you are an entrepreneur, you are in your own world and you never know if you're on the right track," Ms. Litwin said. "This is definitely a community you can bounce ideas off of. And if they don't know the answer, they'll find somebody who does."

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