

Community First Fund finances thriving kitchen incubator

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Community of cooks

North Plum Street kitchen brings together 19 chefs, bakers, caterers and others to prepare their foods



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It was an "aha moment" for Leah Margerum.

The 35-year-old city resident was looking for a commercial kitchen to prepare items for her organic baby food business a few years ago.

She called around to fire companies and churches, seeking to rent space.

"I couldn't find any place," she said, "but a lot of them said they get these phone calls frequently. I realized there was a need for a place like this."

Five years later, Margerum owns and rents out space in her own commercial kitchen, East Side Community Kitchen.

In the business, along North Plum Street just before it curves into New Holland Avenue, 19 chefs, bakers, caterers and others rent space for \$20 an hour to prepare and cook all kinds of food.

From their hands come crunchy granola, decadent chocolate cakes, Puerto Rican dishes, whoopie pies, Iranian and Nepalese casseroles and spicy stews, vegan dishes and even gourmet dog treats.

The kitchen tenants, who all have individual health licenses, gathered last week to prepare one dish for city health officer Kim Wissler, so she can see how everyone works in the kitchen, which also has its own license.

Wissler also regularly pops in unannounced when cooks are working in the building.

During the group inspection, the air was fragrant with the smell of simmering Mediterranean meatballs, just-baked muffins, fresh cilantro and chicken cordon bleu that was being taken out of the oven.

"As you can see, there are a lot of us with culinary skills but no place to work," said Joey Settles Landon, gesturing around the bustling kitchen.

She drives more than an hour from Limerick, Montgomery County, to bake desserts at East Side. "This is like a blessing. It really is."

Nearby, Christina Maldonado was chopping spices and preparing beef empanadas for her Lancaster catering business, which specializes in Puerto Rican foods.

"When I heard about Leah, I said, 'That's exactly what I need,'" Maldonado said. "Without her, I don't know what I would do."

Margerum started out renting space herself from Anne Eshelman, the Plum Street Gourmet chef who previously owned the building.

In 2008, Margerum bought the building and began renting space to others, while continuing to use it for her own baby food business, called This Little Piggy, and catering business, Your Dinner Belle.

A commercial shared-use kitchen is an unusual — and popular — concept.

In addition to Montgomery County, current cooks come from as far away as Washington, D.C.

When Margerum started the kitchen, she researched the idea and found only two similar operations, one in Chicago and one in California. A shared-use kitchen later opened in Philadelphia but has since closed.

"I can't even tell you how many phone calls I have received from ag extension offices and universities who want to find out what we are doing, the operating costs and what advice I would have for people starting these in their community," Margerum said.

"It's crazy. Someone from Ohio called this week."



Leah Margerum stands in the doorway of East Side Community Kitchen. (Suzette Wenger / Staff)

The kitchen works on many levels.

It allows smaller businesses — several are one-person deals — to have a large space to do their work without the costs of buying or setting up their own facility.

East Side encompasses 1,400 square feet and includes two convection ovens, two walk-in refrigerators, a walk-in freezer, a 10-burner range, prep stations, large pots, mixing bowls and other tools of the trade.

Cooks, who pay a onetime \$50 membership fee in addition to their hourly rate, bring their own food and can store it on shelves, stacked with labeled

containers holding items including pistachios and white chocolate chips, and coolers, filled with boxes of organic produce.

The kitchen has become a business incubator, a place for chefs looking to expand.

Two businesses that got their start there — a tomato sauce company and a juice company — outgrew the kitchen and now have their own facilities.

Maldonado has done so well in the space that she is quitting her job next month to pursue catering full time.

The chefs at the kitchen range from seasoned to novice.

Chef Bernard Henry, a native of France, recently moved his business from Washington, D.C., to Lancaster, after being attracted to the affordable fresh food here (as well as a girlfriend).

A former California vineyard owner, he prepares upscale cuisine for clients at events including a recent fancy dinner in Bryn Mawr and an upcoming event for the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Upohar Ethnic Cuisines just started in January. Owner Srirupa Dasgupta of Lancaster started the cooking business as a way to provide employment for resettled refugee women from Iraq, Nepal and Syria.

The women cook a variety of their native foods, which are mostly vegan, for dinner drop-offs, catering and a stand at the Lititz Farmer's Market.

"It's a very interesting group," Henry said of the kitchen. "The beauty of it is that it's serving a lot of needs."

East Side is a community unto itself, a place where chefs help each other and collaborate.

On the group inspection day, a young woman in a T-shirt and bandanna showed a Muslim woman from Iraq wearing a head covering how to use a large can opener.

Jennifer Fischer of Lancaster got the Prince Street Cafe to carry her Fischer's Fresh granola after meeting the folks from the city restaurant at the kitchen.

Cooks from the kitchen also share a stand Saturdays at Eastern Market, 308 E. King St., and also are at Flavor Fair, on the second Sunday of the month at Building Character, to the rear of

342 N. Queen St.

"It has the community feel I want it to have," said Margerum, who said she loves the business but is not making a profit yet, turning everything back into electric and gas bills, linens, cleaning supplies and other kitchen upkeep items for the time.

She's hoping the business continues to grow and serve the community.

"It's an investment," she said.

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