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Helping Tia's Flans

Time-share cooking facilty for startups

By ROBERTA C. YAFIE

WHEN Arlene Jime-nez lost her job of 18 years, she didn't let it get her down — she threw a party.

Her e-vite featured herself, a 40-year-old art director, in the roof garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art holding up a sign, "Will Design for Food."

Now food is designing her future. Tia's Flan, the business she started six months ago, is a family affair inspired by the recipe taught to her by her aunt, Tia Panchita, who emigrated to the United States from Cuba in the mid-1950s.

After making some subtle adjustments and adding an array of flavors, taste-testing her flan on family and friends, this labor of love is a staple at six Whole Foods locations in New York and New Jersey. It is also a feature at The Dumpling Man restaurant on the Lower East Side.

It's labor intensive work, to be sure. But like so many entrepreneurial success stories, this one has a splash of serendipity in the mix.

Home cooks who want to turn their talents into a commercial enterprise immediately face the challenge of where to cook. State laws prohibit sales of food products prepared in home kitchens.

'Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen' turned that around.

Created by food industry veteran Kathrine Gregory in 1996, this time-share rental facility, known as a kitchen incubator, provides a certified working environment, complete with heavy-duty equipment, for start-up food businesses.

A not-for-profit venture, Mi Kitchen partners with other not-for-profits to provide those organizations with work environments where they can place people in their programs.

Jimenez cooks up her flan at the Workers Education consortium in Long Island City, which provides training for unemployed and dislocated workers twice a week, after leaving her day job as an art director at Time-Life Inc.

She heads for the kitchen in a mini-van packed with eggs, sugar, condensed milk, flavorings and the tools of the trade.

The consortium also provides porters — graduates of its food service program —to assist the entrepreneurs.

On a recent evening, two other start-ups were sharing the space: Dogtown Bites, purveyor of gourmet dog treat; and Black & White Bakery which sells out of street fairs and currently has a stall at the Union Square Holiday Market.

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Jimenez and her cousin, Jim, unpacked, and within minutes she'd started the caramel. Meanwhile, Jim was cracking 18 dozen eggs into a huge stainless steel vat; he'd already opened 36 cans of condensed milk. At the ready, were 4 1/2 gallons of whole milk. This reporter pitched in to affix Tia's Flan labels, which Jimenez designed, to 200 plastic lids.

The night's work —Jimenez would depart at 2 a.m. — was 280 flans: vanilla, café con leche, almond and green tea, the latter for The Dumpling Man. She'd load up the finished product, take it home to Edgewater, N.J. and return to Manhattan the next day to deliver them.

The workspace costs \$160 a night; there's a \$650 security deposit. Jimenez pays \$1,100 a year in liability insurance. Her three-month lease expires this month, and she plans to renew for a year. Eventually, she wants to open her own space. She would love to have a store-front in New York City.

For now, her business relationship with Whole Foods is the engine driving her business. As she tells it, timing was everything. A meeting with the manager of the new Union Square store just happened to precede a regional-managers gathering the next day. The store manager passed around her samples.

They loved it," she recalls. "I think the fact that it's ethnic has a lot to do with it too."

Whole Foods gave her a laundry list of requirements to meet its stringent all-natural specifications, including cage-free eggs. The manager introduced her to a distributor, Gourmet Guru.

In addition to Union Square, Tia's Flan is sold in White Plains, Manhasset, Milburn, N.J. and her home-town of Edgewater. Last week, the Chelsea Whole Foods requested some product to test market.

She admits that she's taking it slow. It's a strategy that Mi Kitchen's Gregory thinks is right on target.

"Now she needs to work with Hispanic restaurants and bodegas. Making flan is a painstaking thing. Many restaurants don't have the time," she says. "But Arlene's got the rhythm."

Gregory notes that most start-up cooks use incubator kitchens for a minimum of a year, and most work at it part time because they need to earn the money to build the business. Jimenez's next step is marketing and billing.

"She's going to be in the kitchen making it, or she'll hire someone. She already has the marketing down. I'd expect her to be looking to hire someone to train and do the work part-time."

Gregory reckons that within three to four months Jimenez will need to come in once or twice per week for manufacturing.

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