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A Kitchen-for-Rent Is a Lifeline for the Laid-Off

By **FERNANDA SANTOS**

In New York's culinary world, with its unending appetite and closet-size kitchens, it is an unimpressive building housing a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour revolving-door operation built on need, ambition and nostalgia.

Marisa Angebrannt, who lost her job at a hedge fund when Wall Street collapsed, now makes [whoopie pies](#) there.

Shafalee Patel, who had a hand in one of the most ambitious construction projects in the Middle East before being laid off, uses the space to turn out [Indian sweets](#).

Miguel Urrego, a son of Colombian immigrants who had worked as a bartender's assistant, waiter and cook all over Manhattan, [caters parties](#) with a menu produced there that is as diverse as New Yorkers' palates: gyoza and mini-falafel; focaccia and soba noodles; bite-size burritos and croquettes.

On a block in Long Island City, Queens, shared by car washes, plumbing parts manufacturers and livery-car garages, the three, as well as other cooks, pay by the shift to use a commercial kitchen equipped with 80-quart mixers, deep-frying caldrons and walk-in ovens, churning out food they sell on the Web and at farmers' markets and coffee shops.

The kitchen's 5,500-square-foot work space is both a refuge for dreamers and a life preserver for the unemployed.

"There are a lot of career-changers here, a lot of casual gourmets who channeled their energies into cooking as a way to make money," said Meg LaBarbara, a former travel consultant who makes dips and spreads at the kitchen, called the Entrepreneur's Space, on 37th Street near Northern Boulevard.

Working at a hedge fund, Ms. Angebrannt, 35, had organized meetings and retreats for

high-level executives. After the fund shut down in 2008, she invested her severance pay and savings in whoopie pies, adapting her grandmother's cookie recipe and her own fillings — no marshmallow, but a dozen flavors of butter cream.

“I started out making cakes for my friends, then I asked them to spread the word, and next thing I knew, I was cooking at home until 2 in the morning,” Ms. Angebrannt said. “I figured, there's less money, but also less stress and more fun.”

Ms. Patel, 32, worked as a civil engineer for Bermello Ajamil & Partners, which is based in Miami, and was involved in the development of artificial islands off the coast of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates until she was laid off last year.

The idea to make sweets to sell first occurred to her while she was still in Dubai, where she said chocolates are packaged and consumed as if they are luxury goods. Once she lost her job, she put the idea into action, cooking in her mother's kitchen in Passaic, N.J., before moving to the commercial kitchen in Queens.

It is too early to know if whoopie pies or Indian treats will be lucrative, but neither Ms. Angebrannt nor Ms. Patel is worried about that.

As Ms. Patel said, “I haven't looked for a job since I started cooking here.”

The kitchen, rare in its approach, solves many problems. It offers cooks space they do not have at home, is fully equipped and complies with the city's health code. The place has also fostered an informal network, where cooks combine purchasing orders for things like butter and olive oil to save money, or rely on one another as taste testers.

But like many of its users, the kitchen suffered when the economy cratered. It used to function as a training ground for unionized workers, available for rental to commercial cooks at night and on weekends. Once grants and donations dried up, though, the [Consortium for Worker Education](#), the union-backed nonprofit group that sustained it, could no longer afford to lease the space.

The kitchen was supposed to close at the end of August, but its manager, Kathrine Gregory, hatched a survival plan and enlisted the cooks to help her.

One made [vegan](#) pâté. Another baked Finnish ruis bread. Ms. LaBarbara made sun-dried tomato hummus, and Ms. Angebrannt, of course, baked whoopie pies. The food was laid out before a small group of officials from the city and nonprofit groups who had gone to the

kitchen to hear Ms. Gregory's pitch. They left extending a bailout package worth more than \$250,000 and a \$1-a-year lease agreement for the equipment.

"The way to a funder's heart," Ms. Gregory observed, "is through his stomach."

Seth Bornstein, executive director of the [Queens Economic Development Corporation](#), which invested \$100,000 in the venture, described the kitchen as "a laboratory in taking chances."

Had the kitchen closed, it would have displaced 100 small businesses, like Ms. Angebrannt's [WannaHavaCookie](#), Mr. Urrego's [Creative Concepts](#), Ms. LaBarbara's [Dinners Almost Finished for You](#) and Ms. Patel's [Sweet Silk](#).

On a recent weekday, Tom Petty crooned from a boombox — "You don't have to live like a refugee" — as Ilale Gooden squeezed globs of chocolate cake strips and Grand Marnier liqueur to roll into truffles for her cake business, [Nana Pearl's Wooden Spoon](#).

Nearby, Mr. Urrego, 35, shouted orders in Spanish into a cellphone cradled between his ear and shoulder as he traveled from stove to slicer to table, arranging bits of chipotle-glazed chicken and beef with chimichurri sauce onto a party platter. Trays of Gruyère and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, red grapes and strawberries, mini-burritos and quesadillas lay on a nearby cart, destined for a car dealership's office party in Midtown.

"Sorry I don't have a lot of time to talk today, but this is a busy time of the year for us," said Mr. Urrego, who started his catering company last year in space he leased at a bakery in Ozone Park, Queens.

At the kitchen here in Long Island City, space is rented by the shift; the most expensive is from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., which costs \$231, and the cheapest is from 1 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., which costs \$154. Mr. Urrego is the most regular client, taking eight or more shifts each week, often overnight.

Some of the cooks work alone, but Ms. Patel drafted her mother into the kitchen, and her sister made the packages for her concoctions. Her brother designed the company's Web site.

"It's a true family business," she said.

Ms. Patel creates variations of an Indian sweet called burfi, a type of fudge flavored with nuts, fruits or spices that she had watched her mother make "a thousand times." She favors cardamom over curry and chili, combines coconut with dark chocolate ganache, and mixes

nutmeg and apple cream or pecan and maple caramel for a distinctly American twist.

Her first order, right after she got laid off, was for 100 favor boxes for her best friend's wedding, each containing two sweets made with dates and coconut. For Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, celebrated in November, she sold 500 gift boxes. "And," she said several weeks ago, "I already have a bunch of orders for Christmas."