
August 8, 2007

When Cooks' Dreams Outgrow Their Ovens

By INDRANI SEN

DEBBIE BONNER'S carrot cake, with its moist, macadamia-spiked layers, pineapple tang and aroma of candied ginger, could have come straight from her family's kitchen in North Carolina.

The ruisleipa rye bread that Simo Kuusisto bakes is a dense, chewy, faintly sour taste of his homeland, Finland.

And crunching into a pickled cucumber barrel-fermented by Jon Orren practically transports one to an old-fashioned New York deli counter.

But all three foods come from the same place — a squat industrial building in Long Island City, Queens.

Ms. Bonner, Mr. Kuusisto and Mr. Orren are among three dozen food makers who rent space at Mi Kitchen Es Su Kitchen, a community kitchen and entrepreneurial "incubator."

Created by Kathrine Gregory, a former restaurateur, Mi Kitchen solves a perennial problem for start-up food businesses in New York City: where to do all the cooking.

The options are limited. Using a home kitchen is complicated by health and insurance regulations. Renting space for a professional kitchen and equipping it is prohibitively expensive for most beginners, and commercial kitchens are scarce and often don't allow the flexibility that new businesses require.

For the last two years, Ms. Gregory has rented sections of the 5,000-square-foot teaching kitchen of the Artisan Baking Center, a nonprofit worker-training center. The kitchen is available only when classes are not in session, and she charges \$180 a night or \$220 for a day shift.

"I was very lucky to find this space," said Mr. Orren, who started his small-batch pickle company, Wheelhouse Pickles, in 2005. He has made pickles at Mi Kitchen since April of last year. "If Mi Kitchen didn't exist," he said, "I think the only other alternative for me at that point in the company's growth was to try to find a restaurant that would allow me to use the kitchen in the off-hours."

Ms. Gregory said about 60 percent of those who use the kitchen are "talented home cooks." Among them are producers of granola, toffee, hummus and chocolate-covered pretzels. Many still have day jobs.

"Most of the people, this is their dream," Ms. Gregory said. "One night a week or one night a month they're going to work a 9-to-5 job and then come over here and work another eight hours standing on their feet in a hot kitchen.

"Their passion is so strong that they're willing to subject themselves to this."

That's certainly true of Mr. Kuusisto. A chef for the Canadian ambassador to the [United Nations](#), he first picked up bread-baking as a hobby, spurred in part by his craving for the Finnish rye bread he grew up with. Now he's

considering a career switch.

“This is my first step toward maybe doing a bakery,” Mr. Kuusisto said as he shaped loaves around midnight on a recent shift at Mi Kitchen. He paused to knock on the wooden countertop. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll conquer America with this bread!”

After a full work week, Mr. Kuusisto bakes at Mi Kitchen from 6 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. on Friday nights, producing 150 to 200 pounds of bread to sell at a farmer’s market on Long Island.

“It’s a good playground for me,” he said with a slightly bleary smile. “To see if the bread sells.”

Mi Kitchen fits in with the Artisan Baking Center’s mission, said Rebecca Lurie, the center’s director. Mi Kitchen’s rent helps pay for the classes. Ms. Gregory runs Mi Kitchen as a business but offers free mentoring and entrepreneurial workshops. And Ms. Lurie said, “You can see how there’s a quick tie-in — because as those businesses grow, they need trained workers.”

Mi Kitchen is one of a number of similar incubators across the country to help entrepreneurs. The National Business Incubation Association includes 21 kitchen incubator programs, said Meredith Erlewine, the group’s director of publications.

On a recent Saturday morning at Mi Kitchen, Anthony Brisbon, a graduate of the baking program, assembled fruit and cheese plates for Two Mamas and a Cook, a catering company he recently started with two other graduates. Ms. Bonner mixed cake batter for 12 fudge layer cakes. Kelli Bernard, the owner of Amai Tea & Bake House, wandered over with a tray of her fragrant tea-infused butter cookies to ask Ms. Bonner’s opinion on some shapes she was testing.

As useful as Mi Kitchen has been, Ms. Bernard said, there have also been frustrations. Access to the kitchen is limited by class times, and sometimes the foods juxtaposed there have had disastrous interactions — early batches of sour pickles got moldy because of the bakers’ yeasts in the air; doughs have absorbed the smells of foods cooling beside them in the refrigerator.

“Pickles and cookies don’t go together,” said Ms. Bernard, who plans to open her own cafe in Gramercy Park this fall. “Nor do salmon and cookies.”

Still, for Ms. Bonner, who left a career in marketing to start her company, Debbie’s Soulful Sweets, the kitchen’s community feeling is a great advantage.

“Baking alone, isolated, you don’t last very long,” she said as she sliced a German chocolate cake. “I want to be big. I want to be manufacturing nationally and selling mail order. But before I can be big, I want to be good. And in order to be good, I have to be here.”

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