

Feeling burnt out from a career in restaurants, a R.I. chef sought a more meaningful next act

Sean Kontos, the former chef de cuisine at Local 121 in Providence, is now program director at Harvest Kitchen, a culinary job training program for Rhode Island teenagers involved with DCYF

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 29, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



A variety of preserves like these pickles are produced by about 40 Rhode Island young people per year as part of Pawtucket's Harvest Kitchen. RYAN T. CONATY/RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

For most of his career, Sean Kontos could be found in a kitchen where his skills in animal butchery and sustainable cooking shined.

After graduating from Johnson & Wales University, he worked stints as the sous chef at [Dante's Pasta & Vino](#) in Barrington, N.H., and as the kitchen manager at [Farm & Coast Market](#) in Dartmouth. Most notably in Rhode Island, he became the chef de cuisine at Local 121 in 2013, a once popular restaurant in downtown Providence that focused on local ingredients.

But like many who have spent years cooking in the back of the house, Kontos felt burned out from the industry where he'd spent his entire career. He wanted to do something that felt more meaningful and began volunteering at [Farm Fresh Rhode Island](#) in a program where he taught elementary school students in low-income areas about locally grown produce, how to prep vegetables, and how to cook. He decided to step away from restaurants in 2018 to work at Farm Fresh full time, becoming the program director of the [Harvest Kitchen Project](#) in Pawtucket.



A variety of preserves like these pickles are prepared at Harvest Kitchen in Pawtucket, R.I. RYAN T. CONATY/RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GL

What is Harvest Kitchen and how does it work?

Kontos: It's a job training program where we work with youth involved in [the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families] and create

jarred products. Some of the products that we make are utilizing B-grade produce and access produce from farms that are usually too big, too small, or too ugly to go onto shelves.

It's a 20-week hands-on culinary-focused program where they learn the basic culinary kitchen and some life skills that will help them work through the situation or place in their life that they are currently in. [Kontos said the program started in 2012].



The food at Harvest Kitchen is available for in-person dining and take-out at its Pawtucket location. RYAN T. CONATY/RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GL

What kinds of products are you making with the teens?

Shelf-stable, acidified products like applesauce, stewed tomatoes, and various pickles. In 2020, we produced 5,740 jars. In 2021, we produced about 7,930 jars. We're only in our first quarter and have already produced 3,017 jars this year. If this trend continues, then we will expect a more than 50 percent increase in production from last season.

We also work with a lot of farmers directly. So while some of our products are sold for revenue, we also work with farmers for co-packing purposes [so far this year, they have worked with 10 farms in co-packing deals]. They'll give us products that we make a jarred product for them, and then sell it back for them.

How old are these teens, generally, and why are some of them involved with DCYF?

They are typically between 16 and 19 years old and they are generally from Providence, Central Falls, and Pawtucket. It's a case-by-case basis as to their circumstances. Some of them are just post-juvenile detention or just out of the training school. Others live in group homes or are in foster care. But many are on probation.

This program is completely voluntary for them, it's not required whatsoever and they can leave at any time. We generally serve about 40 teens per year and about 250 have gone through the program.



Sean Kontos serves as program director of Harvest Kitchen. RYAN T. CONATY/RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GL

Many of these teens are likely supporting themselves. Are they getting paid to be part of the program?

Yes, and they receive a money order so it's not a tax for them. They are with us for about 15 hours per week, but we talk with them a lot about why they do this program when they could go to McDonald's and easily make \$15 an hour — or more in some cases.

But we act more like mentors and help them try to navigate what post-high school life could look like so they realize that they aren't stuck in the position they are currently in. We have been able to connect some of these participants to different internships after they leave our program, and some of those internships have become full-time jobs.

Is this program self-sustainable?

DCYF is a major funder, but we also receive funds through private donors and we make our own revenue. The money we make in the café, at Farm Fresh's [Market Mobile](#) [online orders], the jarred products, and co-packing efforts do make money to help support the program.

We are in the process of building another facility that is more focused on our production aspects so we can be more self-sustainable and less reliant on grants and private donors. That will be located at the Farm Fresh building on Sims Avenue in Providence.



Bernard Miller is the education manager at Harvest Kitchen. RYAN T. CONATY/RYAN T. CONATY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

What are the goals for the next five years of the program?

Right now, we are at capacity for the number of youth we can serve per year in the facilities we are in. We don't have enough space to serve more. And our output is pretty incredible for the number of people we have and the space in our facility. But I really want to see our café become a more realistic food service experience and grow. I want to see more customers in here and actually know about what we are doing and who is creating this food. We have a catering business as part of Harvest Kitchen, and so I'll be looking to scale our catering orders more.

Harvest Kitchen is at 2 Bayley St. in Pawtucket, R.I. Check its [Instagram](#) for updates.

Alexa Gagosz can be reached at alexa.gagosz@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@alexagagosz](https://twitter.com/alexagagosz) and on Instagram [@AlexaGagosz](https://www.instagram.com/AlexaGagosz).