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A New England Food Incubator Launches An App To Further Boost The Local Food Scene



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Lisa Raiola in a kitchen at Hope & Main, the food incubator she founded in Rhode Island. RUPERT WHITELEY

Lisa Raiola knew nothing about the food business when she decided to start an incubator for food businesses, which, in a sense, was exactly the point.

Raiola was looking for commercial space for a food business she wanted to start when the town planner showed her an 18,000-square-foot empty school building. Something just clicked.

"I got this vision in my head of others like me who wanted to start a food business but didn't know where to go or had trouble finding a commercial kitchen," says Raiola. "I went home and told my husband that I was going to buy a school."

A few years later Raiola opened Hope & Main in Warren, Rhode Island, to give food startups access to commercial kitchen and equipment as well as support with branding, marketing, packaging and other business needs. About 150 businesses have been housed at Hope & Main since 2014.

As big as Raiola's vision was the day she came upon the school, Hope & Main continues to grow beyond it. Its become an active hub for the area's food community, hosting events, cooking classes, and a Meet Your Maker farmers market. Hope & Main recently launched an app that makes it easier for customers near and far to buy from its startups. About two dozen of Hope and Main's businesses have expanded nationally, but most founders have chosen to remain regional brands. Among its successes are Sacred Cow Granola, Miss Georgia's Kitchen, The Backyard Food Company, Just Like Nana's, and Rose Mary's Pralines.



Raiola's journey to Hope and Main began at a time she needed quite a bit of hope. She was teaching at Brown University—she has a masters in public health—when she was diagnosed with cancer. During her treatment and recovery, Raiola had to eat a highly specialized diet. She relied on friends and volunteers—one of those helpful people later became her husband—to cook her meals. "I always said if I got better I would do that for others," she says.

When Raiola was ready to begin working again, she decided to keep that promise and start a food business for medical shut-ins. Then, she found the school building. The more she researched the idea of a food incubator the more inspired she became. It was the midst of the recession and agriculture was one of the few growing industries in Rhode Island. Raiola learned that local food industry jobs had a multiplier effect, supporting the state's struggling economy.

Raiola went down every path she could think of to find the \$3 million needed to buy and renovate the school. Finally she secured a loan through an economic development program of the USDA. The school was a public building, however, and local voters had to approve any sale. Raiola began spreading the word. Though the vote was scheduled on a Monday in football season, and it rained that day, turnout was unusually high and the community approved the sale. “I saw the whole circle,” Raiola says. “I wanted to support local food entrepreneurs and the community wanted jobs and local food.”

Startups rent Hope & Main’s kitchen by the hour, and each of the companies purchases and stores its own ingredients and runs its own business. The incubator provides assistance with business and tactical decisions. The food industry is a tough one, with high barriers to entry, numerous regulations, and plenty of competition, to name a few. The failure rate is high. By devoting the incubator solely to food companies, Raiola says founders learn from other people’s mistakes while learning the ropes of the industry. “Small businesses have a thousand ways to die,” she says. “With food companies, mistakes are more costly. Our founders share their mistakes so they don’t repeat one another’s.”

The incubator community also provides support when founders make tough choices that might otherwise sink a new company. “Being about to get feedback and pivot without losing capital is vital,” she says. For example, one of Hope & Main’s startups, Anchor Toffee, was developing a truffle business when the founders discovered customers were more excited about the toffee they were making on the side.

Hope & Main began with grants but Raiola designed it to become a sustainable business. The incubator does not take equity in its companies, and revenue comes from rentals and programming. “We have created something that is self-sustaining that is not relying on government funding or philanthropy,” she says.

Raiola says in many ways not knowing how difficult industry can be had its benefits, keeping her from giving up too soon and allowing her to take fresh approaches. Raiola, who has left daily operations and sits on the board, encourages women, entrepreneurs or not, not to let setbacks defeat them. Says Raiola: “I think women underestimate their ability to underestimate themselves.”