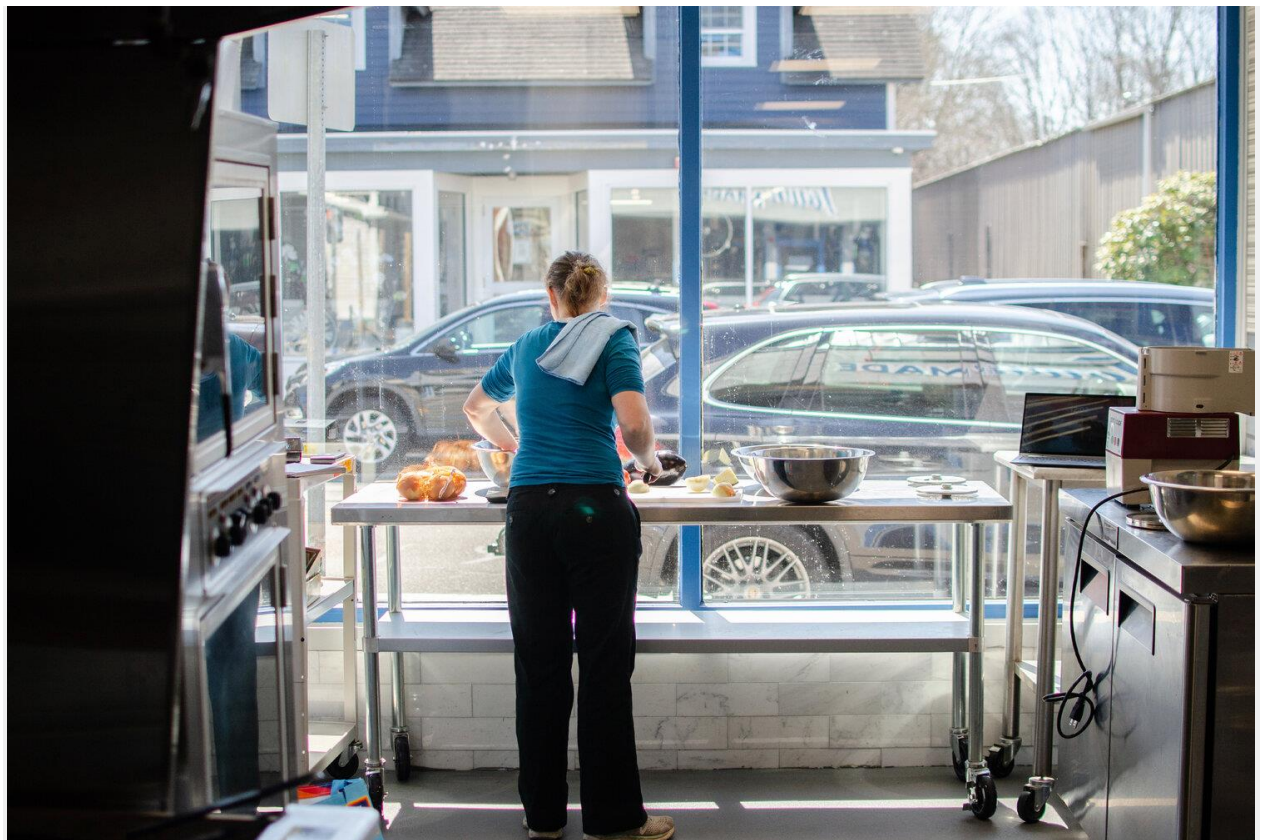


How Shared-Use Kitchens are Changing the Way Rhode Island Eats

Culinary incubators around the state are helping Rhode Island food entrepreneurs get their goods to consumers



Hard at work in the kitchen at Wakefield's Town Made
PHOTO BY LINEAGE CORPORATION, COURTESY OF TOWN MADE

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By Andrea E. McHugh

What's the best job in the world? Ask Rhode Island's Lisa Raiola, whose business for nearly a decade has been to turn dreamers into doers, to turn "one day" ideas into

today's reality. It's a good gig for the founder and president of Hope & Main, the nonprofit culinary incubator and shared-use commercial kitchen in Warren that's launched nearly 450 food businesses. But this gourmet fairy godmother doesn't wave a magic wand. She has more of a "teach a man to catch a fish" approach, setting foodmakers up for business sustainability and sensible scaling – two of the most challenging rungs on the ladder of success. And finally, after years of envisioning it, she cut the ribbon on the Downtown Makers Marketplace in Providence, where locally sourced products from more than 100 makers, including Hope & Main members, line the shelves, fill the refrigerators, stock the freezer, and are served fresh made for breakfast and lunch. It's a dash of "happily ever after" for any small food maker's fairy tale.

"When you put Hope & Main in, you're putting over 100 small businesses into one 5,000-square-foot space, because literally there is not one thing in there that is not locally made," says Raiola, adding that the market wouldn't have been possible without the financial support from Papitto Opportunity Connection along with Paolino Properties. "They actually came to us when there was a long-time vacancy in the building due to COVID and said 'We really want to support something vibrant here, something that has an amplification effect for small business.'" Though the market is new, the concept is far from it. Raiola's been asked about launching a retail location since Hope & Main opened in the East Bay in 2014, but the challenges were many, starting with the product itself.

"You really need to have some critical mass to open a store," Raiola explains. Getting a food product to evolve from a maker's grandma's oil-stained recipe index card into an actual, packageable product is the focus at Hope & Main, but Raiola's kept her eye on growing local food sections at community grocers, from Dave's Fresh Marketplace – Rhode Island's largest independent grocery store chain with 10 locations – to smaller markets and shops, as data points measuring consumer demand. "Local food is really what brings a lot of people into those stores," explains Raiola. "It is a different reason than, say, why they might go to Stop & Shop."

But demand is only one hurdle. Let's back up.

In basic terms, most small food makers start with an idea, then dive into the research and development (R&D) phase, where they learn more about production, packaging, labeling, and distribution. Some makers craft their product from start to finish, while others employ Hope & Main for co-packing, or small-batch manufacturing. For example, Matt and Tami Mullins of Newport Sea Salt Co. harvest

sea water off Newport's Brenton Point, bring it to Hope & Main, and use the facility's commercial kitchen to evaporate the water. Then, they take the flaky, briny sea salt, package it, and deliver it to retailers, prepare it for farmers markets, and fulfill online orders.

Conversely, in the case of Foss Farms in Saunderstown, for example, Doug Foss started with a recipe for his marinara sauce, approached Hope & Main to co-pack the product, and now it's made, packaged, and delivered by Hope & Main before being sold at a handful of farmers markets and nearly three dozen retailers. "It's another service that is almost impossible to get for a small food company... We're that middle R&D step. They can grow without ever having to build a factory themselves. If you are Pace Salsa or Tostitos or Newman's Own, you have a big factory and are running thousands of cases of salsa at a time. Doug Foss can't say, 'Can you run just a couple of cases of my sauces?' It's not gonna happen," explains Raiola. "I call it the 'missing middle' in food, because it's really hard to scale from a small food company to a big food company without the middle."

When Katie Potter launched Newport Chowder Company, her product was actually chowder-less. It was a package containing all of the dry spices and bullion used to make her mom's famous chowder that was a longtime staple at Muriel's Restaurant in Newport, which closed many years ago but left a loyal following. East Bay markets, including Clement's in Portsmouth, Foodlove in Middletown, Only in Rhode Island, and the Newport Mansion stores were just some to stock the product, and she found success

customizing labels for corporate partnerships and social events, including wedding favors. When the pandemic hit, those bulk orders came to a grinding halt.

"It became pretty clear that if I wanted to continue my business, people were going to have to be able to taste our seafood chowder," says Potter. "I started making small batches with the help of Hope & Main and their co-packing program. We started with 10 gallons at a time, and eventually scaled to 90-gallon runs." Today, the proprietress serves the chowder at her two food trucks and via food cart for small events, and she'll be opening her first pop-up brick and mortar on Newport's busy Thames Street this summer. The location became a reality when Potter won a \$10,000 prize at the Sam Adams' Brewing the American Dream program through Hope & Main. The initiative supports food and beverage entrepreneurs across the US with access to capital, networks, and business coaching.

Town Made in Wakefield also provides a launching pad for foodpreneurs to produce, market, and sell their products. Rachael LaPorte, director of food operations at Town Made, says the facility has two class 4 commercial kitchens where food producers can make “all level and manner of food.” Ten-burner stoves, refrigerators, freezers, grills, deep fryers, a 40-quart mixer and specialty equipment, including a proof box for baking, give members the scope of tools they need to succeed, eliminating the prohibitive infrastructure costs a maker would otherwise need to source with via exorbitant loans or investors. “Instead of a maker having to shell out a quarter of a million dollars opening up a brick and mortar,” she explains, Town Made lets them “really kick the tires of their business here” and work out the kinks. “Research and development, food costs, packaging, labeling – all of those things.”

Those wraparound services paired with culinary business consulting and support, she says, tee businesses up for growth and sustainable success. Though Rhode Island passed a new cottage food law (see sidebar) last November, which allows residents to legally sell homemade baked goods when they register through the Department of Health, they must be in compliance with several regulations and it can be more complex than meets the eye. “The new cottage food laws are very limiting,”

explains LaPorte. “Here at Town Made, we make sure we are up to code as far as the building and facility is concerned.” Moreover, the floor-to-ceiling windows on Main Street and retail space for pop-up shops gives makers an opportunity to familiarize themselves with point-of-purchase sales systems, packaging, logistics, and, of course, perfecting their sales pitch.

“At the farmers market, there really are a lot of components. How are you going to set up your tent? How are you going to load in? How are you going to load out? Are you going to need a hand-washing station? Will you be providing samples? The retail space is a fantastic training ground before going out to larger markets,” adds LaPorte.

Food incubators, cooperative kitchens, and the business of locally made and sold food products are the lifeblood of Rhode Island’s food economy. According to Raiola, Rhode Island has the highest direct consumer ratio of food sales in the country – meaning per capita, how many people can buy their food directly from a farmer or a maker. The state boasts the highest per capita farmers markets in the country, a statistic Raiola credits to Farm Fresh Rhode Island.

“It is also about economic mobility for those makers. Sixty percent of our companies are women-owned, and 40 percent are owned by people of color. [It’s] that diversity, that ability to create affordable ownership of a business. When you can own something, you can grow something. You can create generational wealth for your family,” explains Raiola.

Minnie Luong, who came to the US as a refugee from Vietnam as a child, saw a void in the market for the fermented kimchi she grew up enjoying with her family. When she and her husband, Tim Greenwald, became more serious about producing an accessible kimchi product in 2015, they moved from Los Angeles to Rhode Island, took a family recipe and turned it into a full-fledged business with the support of Hope & Main. Kimchi is Chi Kitchen’s flagship product, but they expanded their line to include kimchi pickles and sesame slaw as well. In addition to the dozens of markets and stores like Whole Foods and the Downtown Makers Marketplace that stock the products, the company wholesales to colleges and universities and James Beard award-winning restaurants, among other accounts. Along the way, Luong has developed a passion for helping other makers navigate the gauntlet of food business success.

When one walks through the doors of Basil & Bunny in Bristol, they likely see a thriving plant-based, Instagram-worthy restaurant in a cool, repurposed mill building. What they don’t see is the years of labor Lyslie Smith and Mathiew Medeiros put into conceptualizing and development. “[Hope & Main] gave us never-ending support as well as a great community of like-minded people,” says Smith. “It was great to be around so many people working to turn a dream into a reality. It really is a special place. The amount of Rhode Island staples, from packaged foods to some of your favorites restaurants, are here because of Hope & Main and Lisa Raiola. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to learn, work and grow through them.”

Heather Zoller had already created a successful business selling Z Pita Chipz from a food truck when she decided to focus on making the chips full time, only she needed a commercial space to do so. “This is when the enthusiastic team at Hope & Main came to the rescue,” she says. Onboarding classes, seminars, and panel discussions with seasoned professionals in the food industry helped her fine tune her business plan, and opportunities like the organization’s annual business to business trade show, The Rhode Island Tabletop Show, connected Zoller with an exponentially wider audience. “Hope & Main’s exclusive Tabletop Show is the only event of its kind in Rhode Island, bringing local entrepreneurs and industry buyers together in order to build business relationships. These connections, along with the

unyielding

support from Lisa and her team, have undoubtedly helped in setting me up for success.”

The trade show also brought together Little Maven Lemonade, founded by Brazilian-born Mariana Silva-Buck, with buyers from Boston’s Children’s Hospital. “They loved her lemonade,” says Raiola. “Before them, [Silva-Buck] only sold on a shelf in a store, but [the hospital] liked it so much, they made a deal to put her lemonade on every tray going into every patient’s room. So you think about how that deal helped her to scale immediately. She was co-packing with us and went right into a big co-packer...and at no point did she build a lemonade factory. She worked within our system, which gave her all of that affordable access in that process to launch and scale and grow to the point that she is now.”

On average, 15,000 new food products enter the market each year in this country, making the food industry exceptionally competitive. Getting to a major market store shelf – and staying there – isn’t easy. “Big Food” – large food companies that dominate the playing field – often pay “slotting fees” (sometimes called “pay-to-stay”) for premium positioning in the supermarket, costs that are passed on to the consumer,” explains Raiola. “The price of those fees are built into the cost of the product to the consumer, and the American consumer pays a lot to be marketed to by those big food companies – and you don’t see any of our food companies taking ads during the Super Bowl.”

But the consumer holds the power to make buying decisions, and outlets like Hope & Main make it easier than ever to choose local.

COTTAGE FOOD LAW

By Shay Costa

The term cottage industry may bring to mind people weaving from their homes in days of yore, but according to the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), cottage food manufacturing refers to producing food in a residential kitchen that will be sold directly to the consumer.

In November 2022, Rhode Island became the last state in the US to pass a Cottage Foods law, allowing residents the opportunity to sell shelf-stable baked goods prepared from their own home kitchens. This change is the result of bill H 7123, which passed into law five months earlier. Prior to the bill passing, farmers were the only Rhode Islanders who were able to sell homemade food items; otherwise, a commercial space would be required to make and sell baked goods.

While the Cottage Food law is a boost to biz-minded homecooks, it still has a number of requirements. Bakers must register through RIDOH, which comes with a \$65 fee, complete food handler training, and adhere to an annual sales cap of \$50,000. Cottage Food manufactures are only allowed to make and

sell baked goods that do not require refrigeration or time/temperature control for safety, such as yeast breads, cookies, muffins, and cakes that do not require refrigeration or temperature-controlled environment. Learn more at HealthRI.gov and IJ.org

INCUBATOR ALL STARS

15 businesses that got their start through Hope & Main

Anchor Toffee

The Backyard Food Company

The Black Leaf Tea and Culture Shop

Blondie's Bakery

Bootblack Brand

Bottega Bocconi

Dune Brothers Feast & Fettle

Flat Waves Food Shack

Hunky Dory

JA Patty

Just Like Nana's

The Perfect Empanada

PVDonuts

401 Garlic Sauce

GET COOKIN'

Shared-Use Kitchens and Resources

Bath Food Co.: Restaurant co-op with 20+ partner restaurants. Providence, BathFoodCo.com

Hope & Main: RI's premier culinary incubator and among the top 10 in the US, launching nearly 300 businesses since 2014. Warren, MakeFoodYourBusiness.org

Millrace Kitchen: Incubator program with space, staff, and equipment for rent. Woonsocket, MillRaceKitchen.org

Sankofa Initiative: Community kitchen and food market. Providence, WestElmwood.org

SCLT Food Hub: Commercial kitchen available for use by neighbors and farmers. Providence, SouthSideCLT.org

Town Made: Shared-use kitchen, marketing consults, and more. Wakefield, TownMade.com