

## Incubator kitchens provide a space to try out a dream

Article by: Kim Ode

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At the sink, Ryan Billig stands rinsing a vast stainless steel bowl of soybeans. Behind him, Patti Heimbald stirs sheet pans of mixed nuts laced with rosemary. Across the way, Angela Gustafson mixes a small mountain of oats for granola.

Each is hoping to someday turn a decent profit. So far, none of them say they'd rather be doing anything else.

That they're able to do this at all is due, in part, to the rise of licensed and inspected facilities where small entrepreneurs can rent space to make food for public sale. They're called incubator kitchens, after the warm, protected sanctums where eggs hatch into chicks. Here, ideas can hatch into businesses — or at least get a fighting chance.

City Food Studio, 3722 Chicago Av. S. in Minneapolis, is the newest among several in the Twin Cities, joining Kitchen in the Market and Kindred Kitchen in Minneapolis, and GIA Kitchen in St. Paul as the top spaces for cooks and bakers with a dream, food truck operators, and purveyors whose business is bigger than their kitchens, but not big enough for their own sites.

"I think people didn't used to start as small as they can now," said Journey Gosselin, who developed City Food Kitchen. "It's actually easier to sell yourself small in certain places," noting Oxendale's Market in south Minneapolis and Kowalski's Markets as being receptive to small-batch products.

The Twin Cities' co-op and farmers market cultures also have created an environment where a tasty idea — with proper marketing, and enough effort, and adequate finances, and good timing — has a shot at success.

Consider tempeh, a nutrition-packed food made from fresh soybeans that Billig ferments and presses into 8-ounce packages. Many Westerners encounter it as a meat substitute, but Billig said that Indonesians have it on their tables every day, "more like a condiment, really."

He'd traveled to Java and Bali as a member of the Schubert Club's gamelan ensemble, to study that native Indonesian music. Upon his return, he began making his own fresh tempeh for himself and for friends. He made adjustments for Minnesota's less-than-equatorial climate and found a substitute for wrapping it in traditional banana leaves. He could have imported some, "but that defeats the purpose of making this sustainably."

After eight years, and a strong response from some local Indonesians, "it was just time to do it."

Is he making a living with tempeh?

He smiled: "This is how I'm attempting to make a living," adding that he's a musician, a house painter, a remodeler.

And the name, Tempeh Tantrum? It was a brother-in-law's casual suggestion that just stuck, and led to the shrewdly memorable packaging with a screaming baby — which apparently described Billig's own infancy. "I was known as Cryin' Ryan," he said. Funny



Angela Gustafson of Gustola Granola mixed her granola by hand at City Food Studio in Minneapolis.

Photos by KYNDELL HARKNESS • kyndell.harkness@startribune.com,



Patti Heimbald of Patti's Granola put her toasted rosemary nuts in a bowl.

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Jen Thorpe, of Green Bee Juicery, washed fennel on the left as Patti Heimbald, of Patti's Granola, emptied trays.

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Ryan Billig of Tempeh Tantrum prepared to separate the husks from the soybeans.

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how these things work out.

#### Turning fun into a job

Patti Heimbold's story follows the familiar narrative of the food entrepreneur who hears the siren song of friends eating their wares and urging, "You have to sell this stuff."

She began roasting mixed nuts with rosemary and spices in her home kitchen to sell at fundraisers, legal under Minnesota's "pickle law," which enables the limited sale of some home-processed and home-canned foods.

Then she set about getting licensed by Minneapolis and the state. The process was daunting, "but people are so willing to reach out and help you," she said. Still, "labeling was a huge thing, getting the nutritional facts and portions." Also, "a friend wisely advised me: Never, ever give out your recipe."

Heimbold, of Minneapolis, is at City Food Studios twice a week, making 100 pounds of nuts at a time, in addition to a line of granolas. She sells at farmers markets, in co-ops and recently got shelf space at Kowalski's.

Is it still fun? "It's actually gotten more fun," she said. "Last year, there were times when I wondered if I really wanted to do this. But then customers kept coming back, and that's kind of what always made me tick: making people happy with food."

She's not making much money, freely acknowledging that being married to someone with a corporate job makes her business possible. With two kids in high school, what she makes "takes the edge off of some hockey costs."

Ten feet away, Angela Gustafson tells a similar story, right down to shoring up her family's hockey budget. She experimented with different granola formulas, finally settling on one that's super-crunchy.

"I think of it as more of a snack," she said, one that popular with cross-country skiing friends and hockey players. In fact, her Gustola Granola label graces hockey jackets as an official (and slightly ironic) sponsor of her kids' teams.

Gustafson, of Minneapolis, said she decided to turn her granola into a business "because it's fun and people like getting it," a common refrain. What caught her off-guard, however, is how much her kids are learning about economics by watching her and other vendors.

"I've always said that money doesn't grow on trees," she said. "I think they're getting to see how hard some people work for a living, and for not a lot of money."

#### Playing well with others

It's difficult to know how many entrepreneurs are renting space in licensed kitchens, whether in incubators, at churches or during a restaurant's off-hours.

But there are more all the time, thanks in part to Homegrown Minneapolis, a 2008 city initiative designed to expand "our community's ability to grow, process, distribute, eat and compost more healthy, sustainable, locally grown food," according to its website, which contains a wealth of information to encourage — or wisely discourage — some dreams. (See [www.minneapolis.gov/sustainability/homegrown](http://www.minneapolis.gov/sustainability/homegrown).)

Gosselin began dreaming of an incubator kitchen more than 10 years ago. A data analyst for Target Corp., he scoured the city for the right building, then spent another year getting the financing in place, and another doing renovations. "You really need to keep your expenses down," he said of the time spent.

The studio opened in January, renting space for \$8 to \$18 an hour depending upon use. There's usually some space available, he said, with the challenge being to schedule the gluten-free folks on days with no conventional bakers, or to make sure everyone doesn't need sinks all at once.

An incubator kitchen isn't for everyone, he said. "You find out fairly quickly who's good at working in a shared space and who doesn't fit in," he said. "You're not going to have a whole kitchen to yourself. But most people are driven by the enjoyment of trying to make something."

City Food Studio has hours on Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings when the public can buy vendors' products. Gosselin aims to start hosting cooking classes and wants to accommodate some pop-up restaurant concepts.

In the meantime, he also operates his own cheesemaking enterprise, Underground Dairy, in a pristinely white basement room where he makes feta, camembert and mozzarella. His goal is to develop a pasta dough and a ricotta for his own line of ravioli, the kind he remembers from his childhood in New York City's Little Italy.

For now, he's making cheese, often in quantities as small as four pounds at a time, ideally to find a spot on some restaurant's cheese plate.

"It's not even micro," he said, laughing. "It's nano."

