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Can Do For You – From Recipes to Packaging, Kalamazoo Cooks Have a Resource

Kalamazoo's Can-Do Kitchen, a home for entrepreneurs, is becoming a business of its own. Next year, the Can-Do Kitchen will break away from its parent organization, Fair Food Matters, and become a separate non-profit group. The change will include a new location, but one thing that won't change is the opportunity for local business owners to make their dream a reality. "We want to break down the barriers to food entrepreneurship," said Lucy Dilley, who founded the Can-Do Kitchen in 2007. "Food ties so many things together: the economy, community."

The Can-Do Kitchen is a business incubator, where people with an idea for a food product receive guidance on everything from packaging, to food safety regulations, to placement on store shelves. Sometimes, would-be entrepreneurs have a family recipe they want to sell to a wider audience. Others have a concept in mind, and have already done the market research to see if people in southwest Michigan would buy what they're making.

Over the past eight years, there have been about 100 different businesses under the Can-Do Kitchen umbrella, Dilley said. There are 19 food companies working there now, offering everything from bread to pickles. Baked snacks, coffee and salsas are popular foods for entrepreneurs; they don't have state licensing to create meat products. Some foods, like honey, eggs and maple syrup, fall under Michigan's cottage food law and have fewer requirements than food items the Can-Do Kitchen helps with. The Kitchen is licensed with the state of Michigan, and the training emphasizes the importance of food safety.

There are a few men selling their food products with the help of the Kitchen, but 95 percent of the entrepreneurs are women or women-owned. About 33% are owned by minorities.

TRY BEFORE YOU SELL

Dilley and her Can-Do Kitchen partner, program director Sheena Foster, walk through each step of the product development process with their entrepreneurs. The cooks can schedule time to use the Can-Do Kitchen facilities to test their recipes and make the amount of food they

need to sell. The pots and pans are included with their kitchen time. The ingredients have to be provided by the business owners themselves – though the Can-Do Kitchen can help with sources for their food, and at just over wholesale prices.

The Kitchen helps with other parts of the process too, like designing a logo, finding appropriate packaging, and putting entrepreneurs in touch with local grocery stores to carry their creations. Many stores in Kalamazoo, including Sawall Health Foods, Harding's and D&W, carry products by Can-Do Kitchen participants. The Can-Do Kitchen shares a wall with the People's Food Co-Op, another place where entrepreneurs can offer their foods. Some products have even made it to Meijer store shelves, and Whole Foods in Ann Arbor.

"We want to see graduates," Dilley said. "This gives them a low-risk environment to try a business out – they don't have to deal with paying off a loan for buying their own kitchen."

The Can-Do Kitchen places entrepreneurs into different groups: incubator businesses are using the Kitchen's resources for the entire process, from product testing to sales. Quick starter business owners have sales experience already, and may just need to make connections with local stores, or need a place to prepare food. Fees for business owners range from about \$7 to \$25 an hour. Most entrepreneurs are in the Kitchen once a week, for 2 to 8 hours. There's no time line for a business owner to be out of the Kitchen and out in their own facility, and many make their food in the Kitchen before shipping it to markets across the state.

"We make them understand it's an investment, and that it takes time to make a profit," Foster said.


ON THEIR OWN

The kitchen is just like the ones you'd see at a restaurant. There's a freezer, refrigerator, industrial stoves and tables for preparing food. Dilley and Foster share a table as office space. Boxes of miscellaneous goods are around the corner. It's a small spot, and one reason the Can-Do Kitchen is moving in the next few months. In October, Fair Food Matters announced that the Can-Do Kitchen will become a separate entity. Fair Food Matters will concentrate on its elementary school-aged gardening program.

Dilley said she has a few locations in mind for the Can-Do Kitchen's new location, though nothing has been finalized yet. She expects the transition to a separate non-profit to be completed by January. She said the Can-Do Kitchen is the only place in southwest Michigan offering food incubation services.


Andrew Domino once visited the CanDo Kitchen for a canning class. He likes cooking, though he's never tried making his own coffee or pickles. You can see more of his writing at www.dominowriting.com.

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