

Shared kitchens concept keeps cooks cooking

By Lisa R. Schoolcraft
STAFF WRITER

For some new businesses in metro Atlanta, there are never too many cooks in the kitchen.

For caterers and specialty food producers, “shared-use” commercial kitchens, with multiple cooking stations to make and bake their wares, are becoming a cottage industry.

Julie Farr, owner of **Shared Kitchens LLC**, opened her first shared-use commercial kitchen in Suwanee in 2009 and business grew so rapidly she nearly had to put clients on a waiting list. Instead, she opened a new facility in Decatur in October 2010.

The Edge Kitchen, a public/private enterprise in Kennesaw, opened June 14, and a New Jersey businessman is currently doing due diligence to see if he can convert his family’s commercial kitchen in Kennesaw into a shared-use facility.

“This burgeoning cottage industry is starting to take off,” said Todd Semrau, owner of **Urban Eats Consulting Group**.

The concept of shared kitchen space, which has been in New York and Chicago for years, offers affordable, health code-approved kitchens to new businesses on a budget, he said.

For many small-business owners, “the shared kitchen is really their savior,” he said.

The shared-kitchen concept is “fantastic, and a smart thing,” said Tony Conway, CEO and founder of **A Legendary Event**, one of Atlanta’s top catering companies. “Partnerships are the way to go today.”

Even **A Legendary Event**, which caters more than 2,000 events a year and has its own commercial kitchen, has some down time, so Conway “might consider evening kitchen space for another caterer, but it

would have to be well thought out, because we are so busy.”

Farr said her facility is licensed not only as an agricultural kitchen, which lets specialty foods processors make or bake their goods at her business, but also as a commercial catering

kitchen, allowed by a variance she got from the state.

Since she was working in uncharted territory, she built her first kitchen in Suwanee, not far from her Gainesville home, even though she knew it would probably be better suited inside the Perimeter.

But location was not an issue, Farr said. “We saw huge growth,” she said. “A little over a year later and I very nearly had to start a waiting list.”

An 8,000-square-foot Decatur kitchen opened in 2010, pulling some clients from the Suwanee facility, “but if we continue to grow, we could be full by the end of the year,” Farr said.

Growing business

Between the two facilities, **Shared Kitchens** has 80 companies as clients.

Many of her clients are entrepreneurs who were downsized or outsourced during the Great Recession and are now pursuing careers in the food industry, Farr said.

The shared-use commercial kitchen, where clients book times to make or bake their products, is a trend throughout the country, she said, “because it makes economic sense.”

To start an independent catering company, it can cost \$75,000 to \$100,000 to set up a commercial kitchen. Caterers are not allowed to use residential kitchens for their operations.

“If you are trying to start a business, and you don’t know how successful you will be, you don’t want to hock your house,” Farr said. “We allow them to get their feet wet.”

A shared kitchen “allows them to build their clients and get a consistent revenue stream before investing that capital,” she said.

Some clients have grown too big for the shared operations and left, or others have failed and dropped out, Farr said. “As companies leave us, we are replacing them with new entrepreneurs.”

The Edge Kitchen, which just opened, is an agricultural kitchen, which means no meat can be cooked in the commercial kitchen, said Patricia Harris, executive director and CEO of **The Edge Connection**, a small-business incubator.

Funding for the 4,400-square-foot kitchen began about five years ago as the **Edge Connection** realized 20 percent of its clients



SPECIAL

On the cutting edge: The **Edge Kitchen** opened in Kennesaw June 14 as part of a burgeoning industry in the area.

—about 400 of them—were in food-related industries, she said.

“They were cooking out of their homes illegally because we don’t have many shared commercial kitchens,” Harris said.

Although **The Edge Kitchen**, a public

private partnership between the **Kennesaw Development Authority**, the city of Kennesaw, **Kennesaw State University**, and **The Edge Connection**, is not licensed for cooked meat products, Harris expects to consider a catering kitchen later.

Bill Cariste is part-owner of **Costa’s Pasta** in Kennesaw, a specialty pasta company owned by his family. He’s considering converting the business to include a shared-use commercial kitchen.

Cariste believes there is a growing demand from entrepreneurial food vendors, including food truck operators and caterers, for these types of facilities “but there is really a high barrier to entry to build a [commercial] facility and keep it inspected.”

Since his family has a 10,000-square-foot kitchen, “we think there might be a good opportunity here in a market that is badly underserved,” Cariste said.

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