

What's cookin'?

La Cocina helps Mission District women with culinary talent go pro.

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By Joanna Currier

IT'S A MONDAY afternoon in the Mission District, and the modern, gleaming commercial kitchen La Cocina (2948 Folsom, SF. 415-824-2729) is bustling with women. A small, multicultural group, they cheerfully swap stories and encouragement, though each remains intently focused on her own work.

At one station, South African pie-maker Yumna McCann pulls from the convection oven a tray of savory steak puff pies that smell heavenly. Four months ago, McCann walked into La Cocina with one of her mother's recipes and an idea. Today, the fully trained and licensed owner of the catering company Mystipied (415-533-6360, www.mystipied.com) is working hard to keep up with demand and just landed her first wholesale account, with Oakland's Pizza Rustica.

"I have worked four jobs at a time before and have never been this tired," she says with a laugh.

"It's a seven-day-a-week, 25-hour-a-day job, but for the first time I feel like an active participant in my own life."

Like other commercial kitchens, La Cocina — with its 4,400-square-foot facility — offers the full range of industrial cooking equipment necessary for large-scale food and catering production: mixers, ovens, professional ranges, slicers, and commercial-size freezers. Unlike for-profit kitchens in the Bay Area, however, these shared facilities are affordable, convenient, and reserved for low-income Latinas in particular (they also help low-income immigrant women).

"We're a small-business incubator," explains executive director Valeria Perez-Ferreiro from La Cocina's sunny administrative offices. "We offer the resources to help these people forge their own economic futures."

Established last year through fiscal sponsorship from the Women's Foundation of California (415-837-1113, www.womensfoundca.org) and additional funding from an impressive list of private donors and organizations, La Cocina's Mission location is no accident. When gentrification and escalating rent during the late 1990s forced many Latino families out, one anonymous donor provided the idea, financial backing, and her own piece of property to help neighborhood women create sustainable micro-enterprises. She and Women's Foundation president and CEO Patti Chang discussed how many neighborhood Latinas were creating and selling food products from their own homes.

"We thought, what a marvelous way for them to rise from an underground economy and position themselves in a way where they can truly succeed and help support their families," Chang explained in a telephone interview.

Planners completed construction in April, though prospective participants began the application and training process back in 2004. Gaining admission to La Cocina's program is no cakewalk. Applicants must submit an idea for a viable product, along with a solid business plan. Those with a history of working in restaurants and catering businesses are also taken into consideration.

Once accepted, program participants benefit from La Cocina's low, hourly rent — from \$10 to \$15 on a sliding scale, substantially less than the rate at Coop Kitchen, a for-profit enterprise in Emeryville that charges roughly \$18 an hour. Within approximately the first three months, participants must apply for a business license and insurance, for which the program offers translation, course work, and other helpful services. Under the guidance of chef and program director Laurie Mackenzie, they learn to mass-produce and market their product. A staff of four and a high-profile list of advisors — including chef-owners Traci des Jardins, of Jardinière, and Patricia Unterman, of Hayes Street Grill — offer invaluable consultation.

The results are inspiring — and delicious. La Cocina's star baker, Michaela Olavarri, a once-struggling single mother of seven, now provides luscious guava pastries to Cafe lo Cubano (3401 California, SF. 415-371-9933), one of many venues for which she personally makes deliveries via public transportation. Peas of Mind owner Jill Litwin's organic, healthful, tasty toddler food has caught on at 15 Bay Area stores in four months (415-407-2578, www.peasofmind.com).

Mexican cook Veronica Salazar represents another local success story. She once informally sold fresh antojitos — including authentic empanadas and huaraches — from her San Francisco home. With the help of La Cocina's translation services and workshops, she passed her licensing exams. Now she is brainstorming bilingual marketing materials and keeps a proud, popular booth at the Alemany Farmers Market (100 Alemany, SF).

Surrounded by her new friends and fellow women entrepreneurs in the kitchen, Salazar explains La Cocina's impact.

"They make my dream true," she says.

Food entrepreneurs and industry experts interested in volunteering at La Cocina should contact Valeria Perez-Ferreiro at (415) 824-2729. Commercial clients are also welcome to inquire.

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