



# Chiknegg Kitchen

*a case study*



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# Timeline



## Introduction

Officially defined as “licensed commercial spaces that provide a pathway for food entrepreneurs to launch and grow their businesses<sup>1</sup>,” shared kitchens are a relatively new business development strategy. Despite this being a newly emerging sector, communities across the U.S. have adopted this strategy to enable diverse local food businesses to produce, store, and sell their products through a wide range of channels.

As a developing and dynamic sector of local and regional food systems, shared kitchens provide a valuable resource to communities seeking to address potential barriers to business development, including access to facilities and capital. A 2019 survey<sup>2</sup> of 180 food business owners operating out of shared kitchens found that 50% of kitchen respondents were established within the last five years, and another 28% were established within the last 5-9 years. Additionally, more than half of the kitchens surveyed responded that their primary goal for using shared kitchens was to “assist early-growth businesses” in their communities. Chefs, caterers, food truck operators, bakers, value-added producers and packaged food and beverage makers are among the food business owners who utilize shared kitchens.

To learn more about the dynamics of businesses using shared kitchens, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, Colorado State University, and the Food Corridor collaborated in 2021 to compile data about the role of shared kitchens in communities across the U.S. and the food business owners operating out of these facilities. This information is now available through a series of research briefs and case studies published by the USDA.

## Chiknegg Kitchen: Putting Its Vision into Action

Chiknegg is both a shared kitchen and kitchen incubator in Goochland, Virginia. As a licensed commercial shared kitchen that is certified for food production, the kitchen “incubates, hatches, and nurtures food businesses” by providing consultation, training, and commercial kitchen space for food entrepreneurs.

Lisa Dearden, the owner and founder of Chiknegg Kitchen, has been in the local foods business for many years. Lisa started a local farmers market in Goochland in 2001 and is now the Executive Director of RVAg (operating in rural Virginia) which manages six farmers markets in the area. While managing the markets, many of her vendors asked her about where they could prepare their products for the market. As a result, Lisa began looking for her own place to begin a kitchen incubator to help her current vendors as well as the broader community. Once a building became available, Lisa created a shared kitchen with her built-in network of clients from the farmers market and opened with a mission to “take people under her wing” and work with them until they were comfortable enough to venture out on their own.



Running these farmers markets, everyone kept coming up to me and asking me ‘could you help us find a kitchen’? At the time, I was on the Chamber of Commerce Board, I worked at the Y for a while, and I was a Master Gardener, I knew a lot of people so I would go and ask at the fire station, at the school, churches ‘Can I cook my food here’? They all said no unless I was a nonprofit.

– Lisa Dearden



Two outstanding businesses that have come out of Chiknegg Kitchen are Mother Shrub and Local Love. These businesses have shared their stories and journeys within and beyond Chiknegg to showcase the relationship they have with the kitchen, its role in their business development, and the value they found in its incubator services.

## Building a Place for Innovation

Chiknegg Kitchen is in the heart of the rural community of Goochland, Virginia. According to Lisa, “there was a definite need in the community [for a shared kitchen], there was one incubator kitchen, in Richmond, about 30 mins away. ...It was very popular because it was the only thing around us in the community, but one thing that was missing from that kitchen was the incubator services, so they went out of business.” This example highlights the difference between two models that exist: commercial kitchens that offer “for hire” spaces and equipment for food businesses, and the more common type known in the food sector as “shared kitchens,” for enterprises that bundle business development services in addition to access to physical facilities.

Chiknegg Kitchen provides a pay-by-the-hour fee structure for business entrepreneurs which makes starting a food business more accessible to community members. As Lisa says,

“Other kitchens charge a lot, and by the time vendors were coming back to Goochland from Richmond, they were losing money. Because we are such a rural community, we were able to charge less. I also want to give people a break if this is the first time, which is why we offer the Beginning Food Entrepreneur Program.” In this program, beginning entrepreneurs are only required to rent the kitchen space for as little as 5 hours a month and pay a minimum of \$100 in rental fees in order for them to be part of the kitchen. In comparison, full time members are required to rent for at least 40 hours a month and spend at least \$900.

Lisa stated that people will come to the Chiknegg Kitchen because it is cheaper, the food business has use of the space to themselves, and they have Lisa’s technical assistance and support. She also shared that “Kitchens have to do a lot to get by, it’s more than just collecting rent.” When asked about the most common needs of Chiknegg Kitchen’s members, Lisa said that vendors don’t prepare for being a business. Therefore, business incubator services such as marketing and food safety courses are essential, as well as providing support to get access to financial assistance.

In terms of business creation and growth support services, Chiknegg Kitchen offers ServSafe Trainings in ServSafe Food Handler classes and ServSafe Food Protection Manager Certifications. Lisa also provides help at every stage and ensures that they have everything completed on her “Punch List” before moving to the next stage. She has two Punch Lists depending on whether the applicants are regulated by the Virginia Department of Health, or the Department of Agriculture.

## Department of Health Punch List

- Complete both the online Rental Application and Rental Agreement by Virginia Department of Health (VDH)
- Submit your application for your mobile unit to VDH
- Fill out the Food Service Plan Review
- Obtain your Virginia Department of Taxation Retail Sales and Use Tax Certificate
- Get your Food Protection Manager Certification

## Department of Agriculture Punch List

- Complete both the online Rental Application and Rental Agreement
- Get Certificate of Insurance using Food Liability Insurance Program (FLIP) for General Liability Policy
- Submit your application to Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)
- Check out the Food Innovations Program info on the Virginia Tech website
- Get your Food Protection Manager Certification

Within the community, most of the members utilizing the business services come from within a 45-minute radius. Referring to kitchen size and operations, Lisa commented “Our kitchen is not really big, but it’s not really tiny. The kitchen is 900 sq. ft. so it’s a pretty good size, but it’s big enough where you could really get a lot of stuff prepped and spread out, but it’s small enough that you don’t have to share it with anyone else at one time. Any bigger, and I wouldn’t be able to keep up with it.”

Members of Chiknegg Kitchen utilize many of the resources and business incubator services as they begin their dream. Meredyth (from Mother Shrub) said that Chiknegg offered her confidence, security, motivation, support, and help at every stage. She collaborated with other members and Chiknegg’s diverse supply chain network, using a broad array of resources including the equipment, storage facilities, tradeshow, food business support groups, and food markets. Debbie (from Local Love) said the most important resources Chiknegg Kitchen gave her were the space to work and equipment. Chiknegg gave her everything she needed without having to spend a ton of money.

## The Ripple Effect Within the Community

Chiknegg Kitchen not only offers shared kitchen space and business marketing services, but they also offer a wide variety of market channels and exposure opportunities for its members. Chiknegg offers a Beginning Food Entrepreneur Program, ServSafe certifications, kitchen incubator services, and access to farmers markets to their members.

Lisa helps with every step of the process from marketing, to building a brand, to finding financial assistance, to connecting food entrepreneurs with community members and everything in between.

“It’s always nice to know that I can go to Chiknegg and make whatever I need to make for my orders. I will always keep going there just because it gives me autonomy and I’m not relying on a co-packer or anybody else. The role Chiknegg played in my ability to sell and market my product given the small rural community and lack of access to the same amount of marketing channels available in a larger city, was that I felt confident telling people I made it in a shared kitchen, because this gave buyers a sense of security. It’s inspected and safely made in the Chiknegg kitchen.”

– Meredyth Archer

In summary, Debbie stated, “Lisa encouraged me every step of the way, pointed me in the right direction, and gave great mentorship from her and her staff. She was willing to work with me no matter what and was very positive throughout the whole process.”

As previously mentioned, Lisa also helps to manage six farmers markets in the area and kitchen clients have found great value in the Chiknegg kitchen because of the access it provides to these exclusive market channels. Meredyth states that she thoroughly enjoys selling through the farmers markets. She chose to sell through a number of the farmers markets because of the accessibility it gives her to reach and broaden her customer base. She joined the farmers markets because she missed connecting with her customers. Since she has an unusual product [vinegar mixers], customers are able to fall in love with her product after tasting it.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chiknegg was not able to open their farmers markets. They had over 100 vendors and Lisa wondered how to proceed. Chiknegg ended up starting an online farmers market. Customers were able to order and pay online and then pick up their order from the kitchen. Debbie thought that the online farmers market was amazing and gave her wider exposure. She was able to get her products delivered at farmers markets (she also sells local products including canned products, jams and herb salts) which was super helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With her relationship to the Chiknegg kitchen, Debbie has been able to diversify her sales channels and expand her business through farmers markets and collaborations with businesses in the community. For example, Debbie teaches youth cooking classes and charcuterie board making classes at the kitchen to diversify her income channels.

# Opening Doors for Underrepresented Communities

“Chiknegg is in a small, rural community where there are more cows and donkeys than people,” Lisa said jokingly in the interview. This brings about different benefits and challenges being in such a small community. For example, though the distance to travel to the kitchen can be a challenge for some people, Lisa says that many members do not mind making the drive because of the money they save on rental fees and the benefit of the additional services provided by the kitchen.

Lisa shared more about the benefits of being located in a small community, “Being in a smaller community provides a sense of community unlike any other. Within a small community, everyone knows one another, and this helps others get involved and helps businesses get started more quickly.” For example, having a close relationship with the local health inspectors (Lisa comments that “she knows them on a first name basis”) is helpful to Lisa’s business and her kitchen members who need help to navigate the process of securing all the proper licenses and certifications necessary for their type of food business.

## Words of Advice

### *From the Kitchen*

“Negotiate cheap rent, take a food project manager class early on, make sure your kitchen is registered as a non-profit (if eligible) because those get more funding, buy all your equipment second-hand and know the amount of electricity you will need and buy more than that.”

– Lisa Dearden, Founder of Chiknegg

### *From the Businesses*

“Don’t be afraid to go to the state’s Department of Ag and go through the permitted channels. There is a lot of help at the State level so take advantage of that! Don’t be afraid to ask questions, usually people are always happy to point people in a starting direction.”

– Meredyth Archer, Founder of Mother Shrub

“Just do it. It takes a lot of work; you have to keep moving forward! Don’t be afraid to ask questions because we don’t know until we ask. If this is your passion, there are always ways, believe in your concepts and reevaluate often what your goal is. Take the help that people offer you but don’t let it bog you down.”

– Debbie Mast, Founder of Local Love

## Endnotes

1 Meader McCausland, Dawn, Rachael Miller, Ashley Colpaart, Meghan King. 2018 Shared Kitchen Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Planning, Launching and Managing a Shared-Use Commercial Kitchen. Fort Collins, CO: The Food

2 Econsult Solutions, Inc. 2020. U.S. Kitchen Incubators: An Industry Update. Retrieved from [https://econsultsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Kitchen-Incubators-2019\\_1.14.20.pdf](https://econsultsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Kitchen-Incubators-2019_1.14.20.pdf)

## What Chiknegg Provides

### Equipment

- Four-burner range w/grill & Double Oven
- Four-burner range w/Single Oven (can switch to Convection)
- Five-shelf Convection Oven
- Two Portable Convection Ovens – Half Sheet Pan Sized
- Proofer
- Three-door Commercial Freezer
- Three Commercial Refrigerators
- 8 x 12 Walk-in Freezer
- Meat Slicer
- Meat Grinder
- Two Table-top Mixers
- One 20-qt Hobart Floor Mixer
- One 20-qt Hobart Portable Mixer
- Immersion Blender
- Microwave
- Stainless Nesting/Mixing Bowls
- Three Baker’s Racks
- Baking Sheets
- Rolling Carts for transporting goods in/out of vehicle
- Dry Storage Rolling Carts or Lockers for Rent by the Day or Month
- Small Food Warmer (for Rent by the Day)
- Stainless Steel Prep Tables (numerous)
- Two-minute Cycle Dish Washer
- Commercial Salad Spinner
- 60 Cup Rice Cooker

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