

Program shelters entrepreneurs from economic storm

By KYLA CALVERT

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On a recent afternoon, six women stood along a shining stainless steel table. One placed neat circles of dough in an empanada mold. Another spooned filling into the awaiting cradles and closed the form to seal the empanadas. The finished half moons were then packed for freezing. The women spoke in Spanish while their hands worked quickly.



Photo: Kyla Calvert. Employees pack Rasol Empanadas' Mini Arepas for delivery. Rasol Empanadas specializes in Colombian fare.

A year ago, there were more than twice as many workers in the kitchen at Rasol Empanadas. Business has dropped 25 to 30 percent since then, said owner Ramón Acevedo, whose wife, Solbey, started making empanadas for sale out of their home in 1998. It might have been worse. Rasol Empanadas is one of three businesses receiving help from the Urban Horizons Kitchen in Morrisania.

"We could probably find another kitchen like this to rent in the New York metropolitan area," said Acevedo. "But here, the organization is very helpful, they are understanding and can accommodate emergency situations."

The organization is the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation. Since 2002, the corporation has run the Urban Horizons Kitchen Food Incubator, a program that provides low-cost commercial kitchen rentals to fledgling food-related businesses. In addition to Acevedo's company, a vegan baker and an organic baby food maker rent kitchen time at Urban Horizons.

Most of the businesses that move into one of the three kitchen spaces were started in the owners' homes. To grow into formal companies that sell products to grocery stores and restaurants, they must comply with New York laws requiring that their foods be made in a certified commercial kitchen. Urban Horizons provides affordable access to these facilities, which would be out of reach for many mom-and-pop operations otherwise.

"Right now we have started cold packing soups and other products for a chain of Colombian restaurants that is opening up in the city," said Acevedo about opportunities working in the Urban Horizons space provides.

Across the city the number of jobs in non-durable good manufacturing, which includes food manufacturing, decreased by 9.2 percent to 54,200 between December 2007 and December 2008.

Food manufacturing alone employed 2,007 people in the Bronx at the end of 2007, making it one of the 25 largest borough industries by employment.



Photo: Kyla Calvert. Some tenants rent space five or six days a week, while some use the kitchens as many days in a month.

Even with the extra push Urban Horizons gives growing businesses, most of them do not survive beyond their time in the rented spaces.

"It is tough to start a food business," said Tom Gultinan, Urban Horizons Kitchen manager. "There are a few successes, businesses that have moved into their own spaces."

One of those successes is Lali Gooden, baker and owner of Nana Pearl's, a cake baking company. While Gooden got her start at Urban Horizons, she has since moved into another rented space in Long Island City, Queens and is now considering moving into her own kitchen.

"Starting at Urban Horizons really let me see if there was a market for my cakes and if the business could be successful without laying out \$100,000 to build out my own space," said Gooden. "It was essential to getting Nana Pearl's off the ground."

Whether the kitchens' current tenants make it to the point where they can afford to create dedicated kitchens for their businesses, Urban Horizons may be softening the economic blow on their companies today and will do the same for these and other companies tomorrow.

"Right now is a terrible time to be trying to make money in any way," said Nancy Biberman, president of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation. "But this is a model that is working and will always work. There will always be people at this point, trying to grow from a mom-and-pop operation. People will always have to eat."