

Kitchen incubator in the works on York Road



Jonathan Fishman, left, and Eben Altmann are partners in B-More Kitchen, a community kitchen where entrepreneurs can incubate their food businesses. (Barbara Haddock Taylor / Baltimore Sun)



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B-more Kitchen is getting started on York Road as a business incubator for food manufacturers.

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Something's cooking on York Road.

Behind the walls of a former Chevy dealership, local architect Jonathan Fishman is whipping up B-more Kitchen, a for-profit shared kitchen designed to help small food manufacturers — bakers, caterers, picklers, hot sauce makers and the like — amp up production and distribute their goods more widely.

The concept shares its core logic with traditional business incubators, communal spaces that are designed to lower overhead costs for startups.

Fishman said the arrangement is especially important in the food world, where developing a business typically requires finding the money to pay for permits and fit out a commercial kitchen.

"The cost of building these kitchens is tremendous," he said. "If you've decided to quit your job and pursue your passion for making pie or something, most of those people don't have a few hundred thousand dollars lying around that they can invest in kitchen equipment for something that is just a startup venture."

A 2013 federal report estimated that there were about 170 similar establishments across the United States. In East Baltimore, the Food Hub in the works on Oliver Street is pursuing similar goals, although in a nonprofit model.

Fishman said the new facilities reflect a growing appetite for locally sourced and prepared foods, as well as the increasing number of businesses emerging to satisfy that market.

He saw the opportunity after his wife started to sell her "Woot" granola at local farmers' markets. B-more Kitchen's membership manager, Eben Altmann, encountered the real estate barrier himself, when he moved to Baltimore in 2013 hoping to start a charcuterie business.

"There's clearly a national trend," said Fishman, a principal at RCG Architects. "We're actually a little slow to catch on."

For a monthly fee expected to range from \$750 and \$1,500, B-more Kitchen members have access to the building's kitchen and storage facilities, Fishman said. B-more Kitchen also expects to lease some space through more traditional arrangements, as well as bring in money by organizing a catering service and renting out a 300-person event space on the second floor.

Members also can tap into the distribution relationships established by Union Kitchen, a Washington-based business that is partnering with Fishman and lending its model to the venture.

Jonas Singer co-founded Union Kitchen in 2012 as an offshoot of a bakery. It has succeeded in part because Washington's high real estate costs serve as a barrier to entry, he said. He said an arrangement that combines a communal kitchen with a network focused on promoting small local businesses could be as useful in smaller markets as well.

Union Kitchen now has more than 50 members, which report more than \$25 million in annual sales, and has grown into a business with its own grocery store, event catering business and distribution relationships with major grocers such as Whole Foods and MOM's Organic Market.

"This notion of trying to build a local food system and get local food on local shelves ... is really not unique to D.C. or the Mid-Atlantic," Singer said. "What we've learned is that the challenges in running a food businesses are not singular."

The building at 5604 York Road, which B-more Kitchen purchased in February for \$425,000, is expected to host between 50 and 60 members, who would be expected to commit to the space for at least six months, Fishman said. He said he plans to start seeking letters of intent early next year once the renovation is closer to completion.

There is likely to be demand given what appears to be a burst of small food manufacturers in Baltimore, said Meaghan Carpenter, co-owner of Hex Ferments, which sells fermented goods from a 200-square-foot space in Belvedere Square and already agreed to lease some of the building's traditional, non-incubator space.

"They're filling a need," she said. "People are really, really excited for this."

The building, located south of Belvedere Square at York's intersection with Bellona Avenue, is currently occupied by a furniture store, which will move, Fishman said.

The \$3.2 million renovation, which started this fall, includes a 10,000-square-foot communal kitchen, cold and dry storage facilities, event space with a deck on the second floor, as well as some more traditional rental space. The first phase is expected to open to members in March, Fishman said.

Max Reim, 28, of Patterson Park, who started his Pie Time business in February, said he's interested in the concept, which he said could save a businesses from having to repeat costly and time-intensive public permitting processes if they grow and need to relocate — as he hopes to do.

"The space to add people power is what's really key," he said. "Changing places is so incredibly difficult so being able to grow in one space I think is a pretty awesome thing."

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