CommonWealth Kitchen is home base for the Baja Taco Truck, one of many food trucks that operate from the Dorchester facility.
**Name:** CommonWealth Kitchen  
**Location:** Dorchester, MA  
**Opened:** 2009  
**Business Model:** non-profit  
**Staff:** 12+ employees

**Facility at a Glance:**  
- 36k square feet overall  
- 3,450 square feet shared kitchen space  
- 2,145 square foot commissary kitchen  
- Dry, cold, and frozen storage  
- Food truck parking and dedicated washdown area  
- Six dedicated production spaces

**Annual Revenue:** approx. $1.25 million  
**Annual Budget:** approx. $2.5 million  
**Current Clients:** 30-40 in incubation, plus 20 commissary clients  
**Incubator Graduates:** 43  
**Services:** kitchen rental, business planning, food safety and other technical assistance, value-added processing and co-manufacturing, marketing support

**More Information:**
CommonWealth Kitchen (CWK), formerly CropCircle Kitchen, is a collaborative community whose mission is “to help aspiring entrepreneurs build great food companies, create jobs, improve healthy food access, and strengthen our regional food economy.” Founded in 2009 to take over a shared-use kitchen in Jamaica Plain (JP) formerly run as Nuestra Culinary Ventures, CWK in 2014 partnered with the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation to renovate the former Pearl Meats Factory on Quincy Street, transforming the site into a full-service culinary business incubator. CWK operated both facilities through August 2016, at which point the JP kitchen space was sold to Fresh City, a frequent user of the space. As of November 2016, the Dorchester incubator had 40 businesses, producing for wholesale, catering, and food trucks. All six of the dedicated production spaces were leased by four different businesses, two of whom were former incubator clients.

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**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

1. Incubator client success requires support along each step of the process.
2. Business training for new entrepreneurs needs to be industry-specific.
3. The ability to offer contract manufacturing and co-packing is a valuable asset.
4. Dedicated production space for graduates supports long-run success.
5. A community of entrepreneurs promotes peer learning.
6. Incubator membership opens marketing doors.

See pages 10-11 for more detail.
THE CHALLENGE

In taking over the operations of the 5,000 square foot shared-use kitchen from Nuestra Culinary Ventures in 2009, CommonWealth Kitchen inherited a great idea that was seriously constrained by its physical space. Providing a space for new food entrepreneurs to make their products without the burden of up-front capital investment in a dedicated facility was a wonderful concept. Unfortunately, the limited storage space and lack of larger capacity equipment was a serious challenge for any business hoping to scale. As CWK began formalizing operations and planning for the future, it quickly became clear that the facility they had purchased wouldn’t support their ambition to help launch food businesses that would create jobs and help address racial, social, and economic inequality. It also became clear that simply offering shared kitchen space wasn’t addressing many of the challenges their clients faced to launching and growing successful businesses.

Acting in accordance with their vision of inclusive entrepreneurship meant CWK was often working with entrepreneurs who had little formal training or prior business experience. As any experienced businessperson will attest, having a great idea (or in this case a great recipe) is no guarantee of success. CWK staff are very clear on the fact that they “aren’t simply in the business of renting kitchens or providing space for hobbyists;” their goal is to nurture successful companies. According to the US Small Business Administration (SBA) approximately one in three small businesses cease operation within their first two years of existence.¹ To improve the odds for clients of the incubator, CWK staff decided to look at challenges at every stage of a food business’ growth, from idea through scale-up, and search for ways to offer integrated support to help businesses succeed.


STARTUP & GROWTH: SEVEN CRITICAL STEPS FOR A FOOD BUSINESS
Even before work had begun on moving to a new facility, CWK leadership was hearing from users of the kitchen about the challenges they faced in trying to grow their businesses: not enough hours in the day to be in the kitchen and handle sales and marketing, difficulty finding and keeping employees, and the impossibility of finding a dedicated space they could afford. The last challenge was particularly shocking. Even in 2009, in the midst of the worst economic climate in recent memory, small food businesses were struggling to find affordable production space in Boston. When potentially suitable spaces did exist in the city, commercial landlords were often unwilling to subdivide. The City of Boston health department had also made clear that it did not want multiple producers sharing a facility without a single entity willing to assume liability. The result was that small food businesses looking for space were finding very little in the Boston market. CWK spoke to some who had ended up moving production to a distant suburb, only to have their staffing struggles compounded, as access typically required a car or hours spent on public transit. This realization led to two innovations to support businesses as they reached the end of their time in the incubator: include a commissary kitchen to help scale up production, and offer small dedicated spaces as a bridge for clients ready to expand from the shared-use kitchen but not yet able to grow into a full-scale facility. Both of these goals were important in shaping the vision for a new facility.

In 2010 what is today the Bornstein and Pearl Food Production Center was the long-vacant, derelict site of the former Pearl Meats factory. The property was purchased by the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (DBEDC) and following a process of community engagement, job creation was identified as a primary goal for development of the site. The DBEDC mission to “build a strong, thriving, and diverse community in Boston's Dorchester neighborhoods” aligned well with CWK's focus on inclusive entrepreneurship and sustainable employment, and the two organizations partnered to plan the new food production center. The center was designed to include a shared kitchen, commissary contract production kitchen, and dedicated space for lease by food businesses. The transition to Bornstein and Pearl was challenging. Cost overruns to retrofit the existing buildings were significant (the final total was approximately $15M) and CWK faced a change in leadership in early 2014, when current Executive Director Jennifer Faigel took over from prior leadership. CWK officially moved into the Bornstein and Pearl facility in June 2014, but continued operating the JP kitchen until August of 2016. Having staff time and attention split between the two facilities was a major challenge, even as the organization ramped up client intake, continued fundraising, grew headcount, and began looking for other ways to support their clients.

CommonWealth Kitchen moved to the Bornstein and Pearl Food Production Center in June 2014.
Starting in 2014, CWK staff began providing one-off training opportunities for incubator clients. Initially, this was driven by the immediate needs/interests of existing client businesses. To maximize what they could offer clients, in 2015 CWK partnered with other organizations with particular expertise to deliver a variety of trainings. The first of these, in March, was a workshop on scaling up offered in partnership with Boston Public Market and Interise, creators of the StreetWise ‘MBA™, a capacity-building program for small business owners focused on sustainable growth. Workshops on various topics of interest to clients soon followed; approximately one per month covering everything from finance to marketing to HR. While these were helpful, the different levels and needs of participants were occasionally challenging to meet in a group setting. For this reason in 2015 CWK began to supplement the workshops with “office hours,” during which either CWK staff or an outside expert would be available for one-on-one consultations with client businesses.

Office hours and one-off workshops were addressing the needs of existing incubator clients, but CWK staff realized they were spending a huge amount of time screening applicants who really weren’t ready to start a business. Feedback from attendees of the Interise workshop had been positive, so CWK and Interise partnered with Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) to offer a seven to ten-week “food business 101” course aimed at early-stage entrepreneurs, which ran three times from fall 2014 to summer 2015. There was an immediate and clear benefit; incubator clients who had attended the course came to CWK with a better sense of their business numbers and greater clarity on what it would take for their idea to become a reality. When the funding JVS had obtained to run the series reached its end, CWK staff decided some form of the course was necessary and community and operations manager Roz Freeman began working to develop an alternate training. Feedback from incubator clients who had attended other business start-up courses around the city had been mixed, with many commenting that while the information was helpful, it wasn’t specific enough to their food business. Taking this to heart, Freeman worked with the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights to develop a nine-week course that covered business fundamentals within the specific context of the food industry. This course, titled Food Biz 101, was run for the first time in Summer of 2016; 12 potential incubator clients attended, and reviews were positive.
In its current form, the twelve-week Food Biz 101 course covers all the business fundamentals a new entrepreneur is likely to need from a food-business perspective, as well as additional food-specific topics like recipe scaling, food safety, cost of goods and pricing. Perhaps more importantly, it forces each participant to ask themselves two tough questions: “Is food entrepreneurship right for me?” and “Is this business idea viable?” From the perspective of CWK staff, one of the most positive outcomes of bringing the course in-house has been relieving the pressure from funders to evaluate success based on the number of new businesses started. Faigel emphasizes that having a participant realize that their idea isn’t viable in its current form after taking the class (but before launching a business) is in fact a positive outcome, in terms of avoided time, cost, and heartache.

There’s a balance between maximizing access for potential entrepreneurs and helping ensure each incubator client has the best chance of success. CWK is unapologetic about the importance of the latter for producing businesses that can be sustainable engines of economic development. As awareness of CWK has grown, staff have found themselves dealing with a flood of interested potential entrepreneurs. The application process has been expanded and application review put on a rolling two-month cycle, but Freeman is still in active communication with 25-30 potential incubator clients at any given time. Freeman hopes to eventually integrate Food Biz 101 into the CWK application process as a requirement. While still optional at this point, adding Food Biz 101 as a pre-screen ensures more potentially viable businesses enter the application and onboarding process.
Once a nascent food business has been accepted as an incubator client, CWK staff supports them through several critical steps before they can begin production. First is technical assistance to test and adapt the entrepreneur’s ideas to develop commercially viable recipes, and take all the necessary steps to get the product ready for market. This includes working with clients on costing, understanding labor requirements, figuring out which equipment to use to make production efficient, reviewing packaging options, and developing a label. Depending on the type of business (wholesale specialty food product, caterer, food truck), these initial steps vary in timeline and cost. Once complete, the client has a Food Process Flow Plan (FPFP) that outlines exactly how they’ll make their product at CWK. Before they can begin production, however, clients need to have completed food safety training, allergen awareness training, had their food tested (if required), registered their business, and obtained the necessary product liability and (if they have employees) workers compensation insurance. CWK supports this process by periodically offering ServSafe training, as well as connecting clients to accountants, lawyers, insurance agents, designers, and other professional services providers experienced at working with start-up food businesses. Once the client's business is formed, insured, and properly trained, they sign a contract with CWK and staff help them with the last hurdles to beginning production: obtaining a license from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Food Protection Program or the City of Boston Inspectional Services Division and, if needed, registering with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Tia Jackson, owner of Tia’s Cakes & Pastries, at work in the shared commercial kitchen at CommonWealth Kitchen.
The classes, one-on-one advising, and technical support provided by CWK throughout the onboarding process help entrepreneurs take their business from an idea to the threshold of production. At that point, most begin renting time in the shared-use kitchen to produce their products. CWK continues supporting clients to refine, test, and scale new recipes as they grow their business. Over time, CWK has built out new shared spaces to fill specific needs as clients grow, including a separate, humidity-controlled space, three-phase plugs for ice cream machines, and a cold room for temperature-sensitive processing. While well-appointed, CWK’s shared-use kitchen isn’t unique. What is unique is the addition of a professionally staffed commissary kitchen just across the hallway. Launched in the fall of 2015, the commissary kitchen allows CWK to support incubator clients both directly and indirectly, making it a key asset in the organization’s end-to-end service delivery model.

CWK’s commissary kitchen supports incubator clients directly by offering recipe testing and development, as well as small-run co-packing. For those clients who want to focus time outside of the kitchen on the sales and marketing needed to grow their business, CWK offers small-run co-packing services, using trained staff to make a client’s products in the commissary kitchen. Unlike traditional co-packers, CWK is willing to take on smaller minimum runs and products that may not be a natural fit for the space and equipment (e.g., fresh salsa, which without specialized equipment requires significant hand-work to prepare). The ability to offer these services to incubator clients is key to supporting business growth, especially as new products “cross the chasm” and demand grows to the point that clients can either invest in their own facility or successfully contract with a traditional co-packer.

The commissary kitchen also supports incubator clients indirectly in two important ways. The first is as a revenue center, through straight contract work. Jasper Hill Creamery, for example, has a booth at the Boston Public Market and wanted to sell mac and cheese, but didn’t have the space to prepare it. The CWK commissary kitchen now handles the preparation, making 260 pounds of mac and cheese every six to eight weeks. The custom recipe is delivered to the Boston Public Market in hotel pans, ready to be baked and served to Jasper Hill Creamery’s customers. This type of account leverages CWK’s existing equipment, keeps the kitchen team fully employed, and brings in revenue to support the other uses of the commissary kitchen. The second is as a platform for strategic partnership development. CWK receives inquiries from various institutions interested in working with the facility to produce specific products. Even if the products under consideration (diced tomatoes for Chartwells, the dining services providers at Northeastern University, for example, or local tomato puree and barbecue sauce for the dining halls at Smith College) aren’t particularly profitable, CWK sees that it can use these contracts to build partnerships with regional institutions. These institutions, which often purchase large volumes, can then become an additional sales channel for the products of incubator clients.

Leveraging strategic partnerships to cross-sell incubator client products is an example of one of the hardest-to-quantify benefits that CWK offers clients: relationship marketing. What this means for individual clients varies significantly. For some, such as Blue Nile Foods, it means an introduction to the right buyer. CWK recently connected owner Ellena to the regional prepared foods buyer at Whole Foods, a potentially...
game-changing account. For others, it might mean introduction to a customer with an already-identified need. When the Boston Public Schools (BPS) were struggling to find healthy prepared options for their growing school breakfast program, for example, CWK was able to make a connection to Third Cliff Bakery, a baker client of the incubator who jumped at the chance to expand their product line and add a new wholesale account.

Faigel uses the term “family of brands” to describe the different products produced at CWK, emphasizing that through the selection process each business in the incubator is screened not only for product quality, but for ethical alignment with the CWK mission. With the wealth of applicants its urban location affords, this screening allows CWK to avoid having multiple incubator clients in direct competition. This means that in discussions with buyers, CWK is able to offer a diverse assortment of products. Given an increasingly crowded marketplace (the US Specialty Food Association reported specialty foods sales of $120 billion in 2015; up 21% from the previous survey in 2013)\(^2\) face-time with these decision-makers is hard to come by. CWK, with the ability to introduce a buyer to 40 to 50 products, is far more likely to gain access than individual producers on their own. One buyer, at Volante Foods in Needham, goes a step further, telling CWK staff to send any incubator client their way. Acceptance as a CWK client, and the confidence of knowing the product is produced in a facility overseen by experienced professional staff, is enough of a screen that they’re likely interested.


**COMMONWEALTH KITCHEN TODAY**

The tapestry of different support structures that CWK has woven over the past seven years has not come together without setbacks. In some ways, the first four years spent in the Jamaica Plain kitchen hardly count; they were a period of observation and learning before the organization launched onto its new course at the Bornstein and Pearl Center. The transition was challenging, early trainings sometimes missed the mark, funding dried up, and the organization has had to continue to iterate. Staff continue to adjust, evaluate strategic partnerships, and look for the right balance of clients, products, and commissary contracts. Nevertheless, the hum of activity around the center is that of a powerful economic engine. With an application process that weights diversity and inclusivity over sheer profit potential, CWK may never fully fund operations from earned revenue. To be at 50% after less than three years in the new facility is a significant accomplishment, one justly celebrated by staff. Even more important, however, are the outcomes of the end-to-end service model: as of June 2016, 47 businesses call the Bornstein & Pearl home. The 40 current incubator clients have created more than 140 jobs to date. Of these businesses, some 70% are owned by people of color and women. Forty-three alumni businesses have already expanded to traditional co-packers or dedicated space of their own and CWK feels they’re just getting started.
1 Incubator client success requires support along each step of the process.
Access to kitchen space is necessary, but no guarantee of success. Many users of the JP kitchen struggled to scale up their businesses due to limitations of the space. Many others needed support with HR, marketing, and other aspects of running a small business. New applicants often had a great recipe but limited sense of market demand, no real business plan, and no understanding of what it would take to produce their product for wholesale. Training and support is needed to select promising business ideas, to help them grow, and to help them transition from the incubator to the next level.

2 Business training for new entrepreneurs needs to be industry-specific.
Food is complex. Navigating the regulatory thicket, understanding supply chains, and efficiently managing inventory are all more complicated when working with perishable products for human consumption. The increasingly crowded specialty food market and shifting opportunities as impacts of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) ripple through the supply chain have important impacts on business planning. A generalist introduction to business, while important, doesn’t provide the detail new food businesses need.

3 The ability to offer contract manufacturing and co-packing is a valuable asset.
In addition to being a revenue center for CWK, the commissary kitchen provides a critical bridge between small batch production and the large minimum runs of a traditional co-packer as well as a platform for developing strategic institutional partnerships.

4 Dedicated production space for graduates supports long-run success.
Dedicated spaces (in the same facility, leased from DBEDC) provide businesses that have outgrown the shared-use and commissary options room to scale to the point they’re ready to either set up their own facility or move to a traditional co-packer.

Continued on page 11
A community of entrepreneurs promotes peer learning.
The interaction between businesses at different stages of growth is extremely helpful to clients. Once a business has a few years of experience, they are able to advise others just beginning. Conversely, new businesses bring fresh ideas and perspectives to those further along.

Incubator membership opens marketing doors.
Incubator clients benefit from the ability of CWK staff to make critical introductions to professional service providers with food industry expertise (accountants, lawyers, etc.) as well as potential customers. By offering a “family of brands,” rather than a single product, CWK staff is more likely to gain the attention of wholesale buyers, increasing the odds that incubator clients can quickly tap into those markets.