Chef Richard Allaire prepares a popup meal at Hope & Main as part of the “Cookin’ it Old School” chef tasting series.

To learn more about Hope & Main, visit https://makefoodyourbusiness.org

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OVERVIEW

HOPE & MAIN

MAKE FOOD YOUR BUSINESS

Name: Hope & Main
Location: Warren, RI
Opened: 2014
Business Model: non-profit
Staff: eight full-time

Facility at a Glance:
• 18k square feet total
• Four production kitchens (6.5k square feet total)
• Cold and dry storage, dedicated packing area
• Demo kitchen, event space, indoor winter market space

Annual Budget: approx. $500,000
Services: education and outreach, kitchen rental, training and technical assistance, co-packing, event space rental and production, farmers and producers markets

More Information:
Rhode Island’s first culinary business incubator, Hope & Main was started with the mission to “help grow the local food economy by creating a community of support for food entrepreneurs and cultivating an environment where emerging culinary startups can test, create, scale and thrive.” The non-profit incubator helps local entrepreneurs jump-start early-stage food companies and food-related businesses by providing low cost, low-risk access to shared-use commercial kitchens, training and technical resources. Of the six businesses that have graduated from the incubator to date, one has contracted with a co-packer and the remaining five have each moved into their own production facilities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Events are a great way to engage the local community and raise awareness of an incubator’s services.
2 Markets provide a forum for incubator clients to gain sales experience and get customer feedback.
3 Incubator clients are a valuable resource for education and outreach.
4 With some creativity, the same space can serve many different functions.

See page 7 for more detail

Hope & Main proudly occupies a 100-year-old brick schoolhouse in the center of Warren, Rhode Island.
THE CHALLENGE

From its beginnings, Hope and Main (H&M) has grappled with the challenge of space. Housed in a sprawling 100-year-old brick schoolhouse at the intersection from which it takes its name, the facility is located in the heart of Warren, RI, a town of 10,000 just 20 miles southeast of Providence. With the costs of construction largely funded by a USDA Rural Communities Development Loan, goals of food access, education, and community engagement have been at the heart of H&M’s programming since its inception. The question has always been how best to use the existing space to achieve those goals. Events, it turns out, are a big part of the answer.

THE HOPE & MAIN MODEL

To understand how events have come to play such an important role at Hope & Main, it’s helpful first to understand the basic business model. With kitchens open 24/7, the organization is intensely focused on client businesses; getting them the knowledge, space, and production time they need to scale up and succeed. Executive Director of Operations Luca Carnevale divides the support Hope & Main provides into four stages:

1. **Prelaunch**, before a budding food entrepreneur becomes a member of the kitchen. This stage is focused on basic business topics (branding, bookkeeping), specific food industry knowledge (costing, food safety), and an all-day boot-camp.

2. **Incubation**, once a business owner has achieved ServSafe certification, obtained a business license, and is ready to get cooking. This stage covers marketing, how to talk to buyers, managing a product line, quality assurance and quality control, and how to scale up recipes for production.

3. **Growth/Acceleration**, after a business has been in operation for a reasonable amount of time and has growing accounts. During this stage, Hope & Main provides guidance on how to start a founders board, and where to find professional services (legal advice, accounting, etc.) who understand food businesses. Staff maintains a list of 80+ retail contacts and helps introduce clients to potential buyers. Hope & Main also works with each business to explore options for further growth, including the pros and cons of co-packing vs. creating one’s own facility.

4. **Exit**, when a business is ready to leave the nest and strike out on their own. The focus of this stage is supporting the business as they plan for expansion and staying in touch to help navigate any bumps in the road during the transition.

In addition to the technical assistance and coaching that accompany each stage of incubation, Hope & Main offers some co-branding materials (e.g., “Made @ Hope & Main” and “Made in Warren” stickers that clients can use on their packaging), and offers small-run co-packing to help clients bridge the gap between self-production and the large minimum orders of traditional co-packers.

Ashley Nichols of the Flaky Crust Pie Bakery prepares pies at Hope & Main.
MARKETS AS THE ANCHOR

Given the many ways they support incubator clients, the abundance of space, and the central location, one might imagine Hope & Main would create a retail space to help businesses get their products to customers. Hope & Main, however, choose to take a longer view. Rather than competing with local retailers, they used their space to offer something Warren didn’t previously have: regular farmer/producer markets. These have become the cornerstone of the organization’s community outreach and events programming, bringing hundreds of people into the facility on a weekly basis throughout the summer and monthly throughout the winter.

The summertime Schoolyard Market was launched in July of 2015, featuring fresh fruit and produce from three local farmers and value-added products from 35 local vendors, almost all clients of the incubator. Lasting 16 weeks, from mid-July through late September, the market accepts SNAP/EBT benefits, helping deliver on Hope & Main’s goal of increasing community food access while giving incubator clients valuable customer exposure and the chance to hone their sales pitch, gain feedback, and refine their products. Building on the success of the summertime market, in the fall of 2015 Hope & Main launched the monthly “Meet Your Maker” wintertime market. These markets take advantage of the facility’s ample indoor space to provide a showcase for approximately 30 local food producers (again, almost all incubator clients), allow producers to continue gaining valuable customer exposure, and continue the momentum of the Schoolyard Market in providing community access to local food. The holiday market (the last Sunday before Christmas) is particularly notable: 2015 saw more than 800 people pack into the space!
Not all of Hope & Main’s efforts at community engagement have been as successful as the Schoolyard and Meet Your Maker markets. The “Food Groupies” Hope & Main membership, conceived of as a way to engage people who weren’t going to start their own food business, provides discounts on classes, space rental, and tickets to events. Despite these incentives, the concept “never really took off” confides Carnevale. While membership is still an option (interested individuals can sign up on the Hope & Main website), staff energy has increasingly been directed to other means of engaging the community.

One means of engagement that has shifted and grown over time are the community classes Hope & Main offers. These started fairly informally, with topics based on the availability of instructor with specific expertise, such as sushi-rolling, knife skills or chocolate-making. When a knowledgeable and interested instructor was found, says Carnevale, they simply put it on the calendar. The results, unfortunately, were spotty: a number of classes had to be canceled due to under-enrollment, instructors lost enthusiasm, and the program’s financial results (while many classes are offered free, some require a $25 to $35 fee to recover costs) weren’t great. More recently, Hope & Main staff have realized they can leverage the expertise of incubator clients and have begun having them lead classes. Rather than paying an instructor’s fee, Hope & Main simply gives clients free kitchen time. The result is a mutually beneficial: client businesses get to meet new members of the community potentially interested in their products, attendees get the passion and hands-on expertise of someone making a go of it in the industry, and Hope & Main gets high-quality instruction at zero cost. Since January 2015 there have been some 70 classes with more than 600 attendees.

In addition to markets and classes, Hope & Main hosts a number of signature events. The largest by far is the annual fundraiser; in 2016 the event was a Lobster Boil held in partnership with the Rhode Island chapter of the American Culinary Foundation (ACF). Tickets go for a hefty $100 per plate and attendance has grown, hitting 220 in 2016. The products of several incubator clients were featured, putting their name and brand in front of many of the area’s tastemakers. “Cookin’ it Old School,” an intimate pop-up restaurant series featuring local chefs preparing and serving a seasonal menu from Hope & Main’s demo kitchen, launched in 2015 and has featured eight chefs and attracted more than 120 guests to date. Finally, the spring of 2016 saw the first Tabletop Show event, a “farmers market for buyers” that brought together distributors and retail buyers from the region to browse the products of incubator client businesses, meet founders, and talk pricing. More than 30 buyers attended the May event; one incubator client sold more than $1000 of product and another met a distributor with whom they subsequently began working. The second edition of the Tabletop show saw even better attendance, with more than 50 buyers representing 34 different companies present.
Hope & Main was recently feted by Providence Business News as one of fastest growing and most innovative companies of 2016, and Carnevale sees events as an important component of maintaining that momentum. Since assuming the ED role in January, 2016, he has overseen a number of shifts in operational strategy, including changes to scheduling and pricing, and the launch of a new cohort model for training incubator clients. The last, aimed at providing a peer group to foster mutual learning and support and make more efficient use of Hope & Main’s instructional resources, is a first step in expanding the business-planning aspects of the incubator curriculum. At the same time, enrollment has continued to be a challenge for the four to five community classes held each month. Target attendance is 15 (a number that can comfortably fit in the demo kitchen) but typical turnout hovers around eight to ten. Despite the cost-saving shift to instruction by incubator clients, these may take a back seat to the incubator curriculum, says Carnevale, if attendance does not increase. Even should this happen, other events such as the lobster boil and the highly popular markets, which draw upwards of 300 people, will continue to provide a means for the community to engage with Hope & Main.

Given its success to date, the biggest challenge facing Hope & Main is to maintain momentum. That means building a strong pipeline of incubator business clients, as well as helping businesses move through the stages of incubation to independent operations in a timely fashion. Mindful of this fact, Carnvale’s biggest fear is becoming stagnant – he wants at all costs to avoid the fatigue that comes with “that’s the way we’ve always done it” thinking. The upshot is that classes, curriculum, and events are likely to continue evolving and will remain a dynamic part of Hope & Main’s programming for years to come.

Live music is a part of many community events hosted by Hope & Main.

Fox Point Pickling Company, now in their own facility, was one of the first companies to graduate from Hope & Main.
KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Events are a great way to engage the local community and raise awareness of an incubator’s services.**
   The large number of people attending the schoolyard and “meet your maker” markets, as well as those participating in classes or signature events, learn about what Hope & Main is and the services it offers clients. This awareness, and the press coverage events receive, is a key strategy to keeping a healthy number of potential food business entrepreneurs in the organization’s pipeline.

2. **Markets provide a forum for incubator clients to gain sales experience and get customer feedback.**
   The low barrier to participation (vending is free for incubator client businesses) makes taking part in the Schoolyard and “Meet Your Maker” markets something even very new food businesses can handle. Interactions with potential customers provide valuable feedback on product, pricing, and packaging and help entrepreneurs develop their pitch and demonstrate traction for their company before attempting to develop wholesale relationships.

3. **Incubator clients are a valuable resource for education and outreach.**
   Apart from the positive word-of-mouth advertising they can provide an incubator, many are willing to trade their time/knowledge to lead classes in exchange for kitchen time. As long as there’s spare capacity in the kitchen, this is a win-win situation.

4. **With some creativity, the same space can serve many different functions.**
   The demo kitchen at Hope & Main hosts classes and pop-up restaurants, but also serves as an extra conference room, temporary office space for incubator clients, and the H&M staff break room. The multiple uses mean Hope & Main is making the most of their investment in the facility.

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