

Natural foods manufacturing hub eyes home in Louisville

The Kitchen Coop could house up to 50 start-ups in unique business incubator

By John Aguilar Camera Staff Writer
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LOUISVILLE -- It could be the solution for small start-ups looking to gain a foothold in an increasingly crowded natural foods market, as they chase dreams of growing into the next White Wave or Rudi's Organic Bakery.

The Kitchen Coop, a proposed natural foods business incubator, would house up to 50 early-stage companies -- making everything from granola to soup to candy -- in a 32,000-square-foot building in Louisville's Colorado Technology Center.

The center would feature up to 18 commissary kitchens, a fully operational warehouse, and legal and financial services for entrepreneurs struggling to juggle the demands of developing great food ideas while, simultaneously, building a viable business.

"What's important is that we enable the food entrepreneur to focus on what they should focus on -- making their products, developing their brand and selling it," said Jeff Greenberg, a food industry consultant behind The Kitchen Coop concept.

Unlike Fresca Foods, which makes and packages natural and organic food products on behalf of established companies such as Justin's Nut Butter and 34 Degrees, The Kitchen Coop would focus on working with small and growing companies new to the market.

Greenberg said The Kitchen Coop would provide a "proper manufacturing facility" for the dozens of companies in the Denver metro area unable to afford their own kitchen and storage space. He plans to pump up to \$3 million into outfitting the building and buying industrial kitchen equipment, including a drive-in refrigerator and freezer.

"I want to create a physical hub for the natural foods industry," he said.

Greenberg, who is still working out leasing details with the building owner, goes before the Louisville City Council on Tuesday night to request a business incentive package. If all goes according to plan, The Kitchen Coop would open this summer.

'Impossible to grow'

Elisabeth Saucier, owner of year-old ZazaRaw, said she sees the merits of Greenberg's incubator for companies like hers, which operate out of commercial kitchen space scattered throughout Boulder and Broomfield counties but don't see much room for growth in their present locations.

She said the commissary in Boulder, where she prepares her vegan and gluten-free cheesecakes and chocolate ganaches, has limitations in terms of ingredient delivery and product distribution. Zaza desserts are carried at regional Whole Foods stores.

"I can see in a few months it's going to be a problem," Saucier said of the kitchen she shares with a half-dozen other small food manufacturers. "It's pretty impossible to grow."

Saucier said she likes that The Kitchen Coop would offer end-to-end business services, including payroll, accounting and legal expertise. But before committing to the venture, the Montreal native wants to know what it will cost her.

"I'm willing to pay more because there are more services, but at the same time, I am a small business," she said.

Greenberg said he is preparing a price list that will vary depending on how many hours a business uses the facility and at what time of the day or night it is in operation.

He acknowledges that The Kitchen Coop will likely be more expensive than what natural food start-ups now pay in rent to cook and prepare their products, but the payoff of his business model will be in the economies of scale entrepreneurs can gain by consolidating every aspect of their business at one location.

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That includes operating in kitchens varying in size from 200 to 2,000 square feet and equipped specifically for a variety of specialties, including hot liquids, candy-making and gluten-free baking.

For companies that experience success at The Kitchen Coop, Greenberg said, there could be opportunities to grow further by going the co-packing route and contracting out manufacturing operations to his facility.

He also hopes to eventually provide space in his Louisville building for other industry types, like consultants, branding and marketing experts and food scientists.

Less to 'micromanage'

Bill Capsalis, natural organic program manager for the Boulder Innovation Center and a long-time consultant to the natural foods industry, said The Kitchen Coop may be making its move at just the right time.

"There's a relatively huge demand for co-packing space from companies in the \$150,000 to \$1 million in sales category," he said. "People are looking for help and advice on how to create their products."

Capsalis said Greenberg's facility could help give direction with such mundane tasks as food formulation, bar-coding and labeling. And having a concentration of like-minded entrepreneurs in one location has its advantages, he said.

"Any time you get around this community, there's this energy and this friendly competition," he said.

Jody Nagel, who started Boulder Granola 18 months ago with her son, is intrigued by The Kitchen Coop concept. She now rents space 20 hours a week at a commercial kitchen in Boulder and sells her four flavors of granola through Whole Foods, Vitamin Cottage and Sunflower Farmers Market.

"Right now, it's working all right," she said. "But we're growing, and we're going to be needing more space."

She said her kitchen lacks temperature controls in its storage area, putting her chocolate chip-containing products in danger of melting in the summer.

Mostly, Nagel feels that joining The Kitchen Coop would allow her to take her mind off the minutiae of day-to-day operations, leaving her with time to devote to the more visionary pursuits of developing new flavors and growing the business.

"I wouldn't have to micromanage every detail," she said.



Kitchen manager Emily Hayden, left, and ZazaRaw owner Elisabeth Saucier make raw, vegan chocolate ganache Monday at the ZazaRaw kitchen at 6331 Arapahoe Ave. in Boulder. (Jeremy Papasso)

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