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La Cocina helps get cooks out of the kitchen, into business

Nonprofit offers low-income women ingredients to become entrepreneurs

By Cicero A. Estrella

Veronica Rivera ran an informal catering business from the cramped kitchen of her Nob Hill apartment for eight years. Through friends and relatives, she found two to three jobs a month preparing huaraches, sopes and other Mexico City-style finger foods for office parties, holiday celebrations and other special events to supplement her part-time wage as a cook.

Her tools at home -- a four-burner stove and her kitchenware -- were basic. For larger jobs, she enticed neighbors with samplings of her food so they would allow her the use of their ovens.

Her satisfied clients continually encouraged her to open her own restaurant. Rivera always was willing, but was unsure of how to start a proper business.

Rivera is all cooking skills and enthusiasm, with little business know-how and means. She is the type of budding entrepreneur that La Cocina, an incubator kitchen in the Mission District, is looking to mentor. The startup, which is seeking nonprofit status, will help low-income women develop food service businesses by providing commercial kitchen and storage spaces, mentorship and business training, as well as moral support.

"We're bringing the hidden entrepreneurs into the light and seeing how we can help them build their business," Executive Director Valeria Perez Ferreiro said. She says La Cocina, which opened in February, is one of only a handful of nonprofit incubator kitchens in the country. No other exists in the Bay Area.

La Cocina's priority clients are women of color, particularly immigrants, from San Francisco. Some, like Rivera, might have prepared traditional ethnic foods in their own homes and sold them through informal networks -- to friends at work, at fairs and farmers' markets, or by peddling them on the streets. Although an accepted practice in other countries, it is illegal here to sell food prepared in a noncommercial kitchen.

"We're looking for a good mix of people," said program manager Laurie Mackenzie, who has walked around San Francisco looking for potential clients among the food street vendors.

"We already have women who have professional experience at restaurants," she said. "A couple have had formal training, while others learned to cook from their mothers and grandmothers. There are also those who operated businesses in their country of origin."

La Cocina, or the Kitchen, will guide clients for up to five years, with the ultimate goal of having them launch and sustain a business that will stabilize their families' economic situations. It will provide mentors -- including members of its board of directors -- with diverse experiences in the food industry.

The application and interview processes for admittance are thorough. The nonprofit wants to make sure its clients are serious about completing the program. Potential clients are asked to sketch out a business plan and provide marketing material (business cards or menus) and samples of their product. Once admitted, they must obtain insurance for up to \$500,000 liability, at a cost of about \$600 a year.

La Cocina works with partner institutions that provide business training to its clients. Rivera, for example, was referred to take classes in the Mission District, where she is learning about permits, loans and other business-related issues. The partner institutions also refer their food service-oriented clients to the nonprofit.

La Cocina has six clients, who rent kitchen space at a sliding scale of \$10 to \$15 per hour. Eventually, the program will be able to accommodate 14 to 20 clients.

Rivera grew up in Mexico City as one of 11 children who learned to cook and fend for themselves when their mother worked at a restaurant. Her family owns six restaurants in Mexico.

The mother of two and wife to a full-time cook moved to San Francisco 10 years ago and continues to dream about opening her own restaurant. She realizes it's a trickier task here than in her home country.

"Everything is much more difficult here," Rivera said through an interpreter. "In Mexico, if you have pots and pans, you're ready to open your doors."

La Cocina was born from an idea of one of its partner institutions, the **Women's Initiative for Self Employment**. The Bay Area nonprofit, which assists low-income women with their small business, found that many of its immigrant clients were interested in the food industry but were unable to secure affordable and convenient commercial kitchen space. Many were forced to work out of their kitchens or rent time from restaurants during nonbusiness hours.

The Women's Initiative and the Mission Economic Development Association commissioned a feasibility study in 1999, and La Cocina began to take shape

with assistance from a number of nonprofits and government agencies. The nonprofit Women's Foundation of California, for example, will serve as its fiscal sponsor until La Cocina obtains its own nonprofit status later this year.

"The partnership between the foundation, individuals and people in the food economy has been marvelous," Women's Foundation of California founder Patty Chang said. "We have people who believe in this project and who believe in people helping themselves."

The Mayor's Office of Community Development has provided \$125,000 in grants, much of which went into purchasing kitchen equipment.

"There are a lot of challenges in launching these micro-enterprise businesses," said Al Lerma, program director of the Mayor's Office of Community Development. "You really need a licensed commercial kitchen to do it the right way. We're happy to support it and nudge it forward."

The 4,400-square-foot commercial kitchen space was built on donated land on Folsom Street where an abandoned warehouse stood for years. It has been stocked with specialized equipment that makes preparation of ethnic foods easier -- a broiler for chiles and tomatillos, a steam chamber for tamales, a high-powered blender for salsas.

"La Cocina is the perfect place for me," said pastry chef Gayle Gonzalez, who is working to launch her Sin Pastry Studio catering business. "It's what everybody who loves to prepare food is looking for -- a well-designed, clean, professional work space with great light and great camaraderie."

Gonzalez says the support from La Cocina's staff and board of directors are just as valuable as the kitchen space.

"It's an amazing, creative spirit," said Gonzalez, who meets regularly with Mackenzie and Perez Ferreiro to work on her business plan. "The support is incredible. It's the kind of synergy that I'm looking for."

Jill Litwin, whose Peas of Mind business is developing organic frozen foods for toddlers, agreed. "I feel like I'm part of a family," she said. "They really care about my business succeeding."

Where to call

La Cocina is at 2948 Folsom St. (415) 824-2729.