

Taste the Delicious Success of San Francisco's Pioneering Incubator Kitchen



By [Renee Brincks](#)

In a challenging marketplace, La Cocina helps small Bay Area food businesses succeed.



La Cocina graduate Crumble & Whisk's cheesecakes (©La Cocina)

Charles Farrier didn't expect cheesecake to change the course of his life. But when the [Oakland](#) resident baked one for a company potluck a few years back, coworkers clamored for more. Farrier started crafting cheesecakes for acquaintances and eventually sold a few to customers at barbershops and salons in his neighborhood.

When a friend introduced him to [La Cocina](#), the San Francisco nonprofit that helps low-income entrepreneurs establish their own food businesses, Farrier decided to pursue a dream.

"I'd gone to culinary school and I always wanted to start a small business, but I never knew how to go about doing it," he says. "La Cocina gave me the opportunity."

Two years after Farrier was accepted into La Cocina's incubator kitchen and courses, his [Crumble & Whisk](#) patisserie is a staple at local events like the [Treasure Island Flea Market](#) and Oakland's [First Fridays](#) art walk. Last year, he earned a Whole Foods Market grant that will help him further expand the business.

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NeoCocoa truffles (©La Cocina)

Though Farrier arrived at La Cocina with only a vague idea of how to grow Crumble & Whisk (“I had a wonderful product and I had the numbers, but I did not have direction,” he remembers), the experience helped him narrow his focus. Today, he whips up crispy shortbread crusts topped with handcrafted cheesecake blends in classic and creative combinations. Top-selling flavors feature organic strawberries, vanilla sugar, bourbon and caramel and roasted organic baby beets with blueberries and a dash of lemon.

Farrier eventually hopes to open his own dessert bar but produces his pastries in La Cocina’s Mission neighborhood facility for now. The nonprofit provides him with more than just affordable commercial kitchen access.

“They take a lot of the headaches off your plate. They help you build up advertising and press, and they draw people to your website. They bring a lot of customers to you, and they have a lot of connections,” he says. “If I had to do all that on my own, I wouldn’t know where to start.”



The La Cocina kitchen (©La Cocina)

Since La Cocina launched 10 years ago, the organization has provided more than 150,000 hours of subsidized kitchen access and 11,000 hours of technical assistance to budding small business owners in the San Francisco Bay Area. Program participants have recorded approximately \$483,000 in retail sales at La Cocina’s [Ferry Building](#) retail kiosk and [farmers' market](#) stand, and the organization has sold another \$643,000 worth of gift boxes packed with participants’ products.

By providing affordable kitchen access, tailored business advice, technical assistance and professional support, La Cocina equips participants—primarily

women, immigrants and individuals from communities of color—with the tools to succeed in an expensive and crowded arena. Entrepreneurs attend informational sessions and complete a rigorous application process before entering the program, and they must meet income requirements, business readiness benchmarks and other qualifications.

“In addition to reviewing the application and business plan, we interview people and taste their food. We make sure they have good product quality and viability,” says La Cocina deputy director Leticia Landa. “We’re also looking for an entrepreneurial spirit. Someone has to have that desire. They have to say, ‘Hey, I want to do my own thing. I want to sell. I want to be in business for myself, and I’ll do whatever it takes.’”



Onigily rice balls (©La Cocina)

Once accepted into the program, individuals participate in workshops where they outline their brand, identify target markets, calculate operational costs and refine products. They work in the organization’s incubator kitchen to polish recipes and ramp up production, and eventually start testing their business model by selling at local markets, special events and retail shops. La Cocina team members help participants apply for permits, create websites, tackle financing challenges and, when they’re ready, graduate into their own production spaces and brick-and-mortar restaurants.

La Cocina’s incubator program accommodates approximately 30-35 emerging business owners at a time. The length of time they spend under the organization’s umbrella varies, but it can take years to scale up production, stabilize income and make the switch from part-time incubator student to full-time culinary entrepreneur. In addition to facing high start-up costs and an often-complicated permitting process, many participants are also working through language barriers and juggling family and full-time work commitments.

“We have had 20 graduates over the last 10 years. We currently have 12 with brick-and-mortar locations throughout the bay area,” says Landa.





Azalina's Malaysian condiments (©La Cocina)

That list includes La Cocina graduate Veronica Salazar of [El Huarache Loco](#), who brings her authentic Mexican specialties to the weekly [Alemany Farmers' Market](#) and also established a permanent restaurant at Larkspur's [Marin Country Mart](#). Guisell Osorio built the successful [Sabores del Sur](#) catering company before recently opening a Walnut Creek cafe of the same name. In February, fifth-generation Malaysian street food vendor Azalina Eusope debuted a permanent [Azalina's](#) location in [The Market](#) food emporium in downtown San Francisco.

Other La Cocina graduates operate food trucks and sell packaged goods through local and national retailers. Their success inspires current participants such as Stephanie Fields, a former music publicist who joined La Cocina and launched [Sugarfoot](#) in 2013. The North Carolina native cooks up cheese grits, chicken-and-slaw sliders, fried okra and other Southern fare, and describes her incubator experience as invaluable.

"It's like getting a master's degree in running a food business," she says. "La Cocina opens doors in ways that sometimes you don't even realize. There are a lot of people in the food community in San Francisco that prioritize us. They give us opportunities. I really can't say that I would have made it this far without this experience."

SUCCESS STORIES

By establishing cafes, food carts and packaged product lines, La Cocina participants are building self-sufficient businesses and strengthening the community. [Claire Squares](#) founder Claire Keane joined La Cocina in 2006 and recorded \$300 in sales that December. Today, four employees help her craft the company's caramel and chocolate-topped shortbread treats and flapjack cookies.



Claire Keane of Claire Squares with her Irish treats (©La Cocina)

*Dionne Knox of [Zella's Soulful Kitchen](#) joined La Cocina in 2007 and earned \$500 from her first catering job. She now employs six and started serving her healthy soul food at West Oakland's [Mandela Food Cooperative](#) last fall.

*After joining La Cocina in 2009, [Onigilly](#) founder Koji Kanematsu sold \$3,000 worth of *onigiri* (Japanese rice balls that often are wrapped in seaweed). In 2014, he recorded \$1 million in sales, and he now employs 15 at three San Francisco locations.

*Reem Assil of [Reem's](#) joined La Cocina in 2014 and sells her native Palestinian cuisine through various Bay Area markets and pop-ups. Her largest catering job to date earned her \$2,300, and her goal is to eventually open a cafe in Oakland.

TREATS TO GO

Want to tuck a taste of San Francisco into your suitcase? Several La Cocina graduates sell their packaged, locally made goods at Bay Area grocery chains and gift shops. That means you can shop for travel-friendly food souvenirs while also supporting the nonprofit. Here are four more places to pick up products by La Cocina participants.



La Cocina holiday pop-up (©La Cocina)

La Cocina's Ferry Building kiosk

Swing by the [Ferry Building kiosk](#) for an array of packaged treats, from [NeoCocoa](#) truffles to chocolate-covered confections from [Kika's Treats](#) to organic [Love & Hummus](#) blends.

La Cocina Night Market at 18 Reasons

The team at [18 Reasons](#), a Mission-based culinary and cooking nonprofit, hosts a [community marketplace](#) featuring La Cocina participants on the last Saturday evening of each month. The vendor list changes regularly, and it's a great opportunity to sample the work of local culinary entrepreneurs.

La Cocina online store

Purchase gift boxes packed with sweets, snacks and small bites by assorted La Cocina participants via the [La Cocina website](#). Gift certificates are also available.



Onigilly owner Koji Kanematsu outside his eatery (©La Cocina)

LA COCINA BY THE NUMBERS

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La Cocina helps low-income entrepreneurs build food businesses by linking them to affordable kitchen space, technical assistance and market opportunities. The nonprofit works primarily with women, immigrants and individuals from communities of color. Participants in the 2014-15 class represent a wide variety of backgrounds.

36: Number of business owners welcomed into the 2014-2015 program, including 32 women and 4 men

32: Number of participants from communities of color

24: Number of participants who are parents or grandparents

19: Number of participants who are immigrants

13: Number of languages spoken by participants



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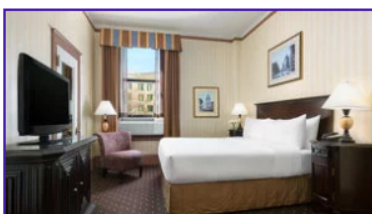
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