

Commercial shared kitchen offers opportunities galore

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The new Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen in Mineral Point held its Grand Opening July 11th. The event was attended by over 600 people, including Alice in Dairyland, Christine Lindner. Here Norma Goodenough (third from left) a Hodan Center client employee, cuts the ribbon to officially open the facility. Goodenough has been with the Hodan Center since it opened in 1972. She was also one of the first employees hired 22 years ago at the Hodan Center's former Dairy Queen, which has been remodeled to comprise part of the Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen building. Helping Goodenough wield the huge scissors is Rick Terrien, Executive Director of the Iowa County Area Economic Development Corp.

"This is a huge opportunity in so very many ways", says Rick Terrien on a tour of the new Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen in Mineral Point.

The sparkling 10,000 square foot commercial kitchen and retail store, which is owned by the Hodan Center, held its Grand Opening at 851 Dodge St. on Sunday, July 11th. At times when it is not being used by the Hodan Center, the kitchen will be shared with food businesses, food entrepreneurs, and the wider community.

The state inspected Innovation Kitchen holds \$500,000 worth of state-of-the-art commercial food processing equipment. Including property already owned by the Hodan Center, such as the former Dairy Queen building, which was remodelled to create the new retail store, the facility is valued at \$1.5 million.

When the Hodan Center's Dairy Queen opened 22 years ago, it was the first fast food restaurant in the U.S. to be owned by a community rehabilitation center serving adults with disabilities. Terrien, who is Executive Director of the Iowa County Area Economic Development Corporation, feels that the opening of the Innovation Kitchen continues Iowa County's tradition of leadership in community support, business entrepreneurship, and food innovation.

The Hodan Center is expected to start manufacturing its popular Papa Pat's Farmhouse Recipes products in the kitchen this month. Shortly thereafter, it will be used by area entrepreneurs for processing their products.

The rehabilitation center undertook the Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen project in order to have more space for manufacturing the successful Papa Pat's food line. It was started in about 2001 to raise revenue for the center.

Since then it has mushroomed to include 150 different bottled liquids and dry mixes, which are sold at more than 700 stores in 26 states. Amazingly, this volume of product has been manufactured pieced-together production areas that totaled about 1,500 square feet.

"We've had to store things in every little nook and cranny because our building wasn't set up for producing that much food", said Tom Schraeder, Hodan Center Executive Director. "Now the new facility is going to be so efficient, not only for size, but it is set up exactly the way we want for moving the processes through efficiently."

"Four different processes can be done at the same time without people bumping into each other," he added. "In dry production we've had 3 - 4 people working and now we can probably have 12 - 14 people. It will create so many more opportunities for our client employees and we'll be able to take larger contracts for work."

"We needed to expand our papa Pat's Farmhouse Recipes production space. and also to make the kitchen available for use by other entrepreneurs that would want to rent the space," he said. "Or they can hire us to produce their product under their label, which creates even more jobs for our client employees."

For the construction, Hodan Center received a \$750,000 Community Development Block Grant through the Wisconsin Department of Commerce. The Center also obtained a matching grant for \$56,000 and a low interest loan of \$56,000 from the U.S.D.A, which helped toward the purchase of equipment.

A fund drive to purchase equipment was started late last fall and it collected over \$100,000 from local individuals and businesses. There were more than 300 donors whose names will be listed on a plaque in the entryway.

"In addition, we had terrific racking (about 200 feet of steel shelving) donated by Cummins for our storage area, and they donated two days of labor to install it," Schraeder said. "It fits perfectly and exactly meets our needs. And Alliant Energy donated office furniture, shelving and other equipment."

The Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen is the only enterprise of its kind in the U.S. Terrien believes. "We haven't been able to find another community access kitchen that includes professional food processing staff, as this one does," he said.

Terrien commissioned Edgewood College to survey all the community access kitchens in the U.S. The study showed two main reasons why community access kitchens often fail - the lack of consistent production staff, and the lack of business support.

These issues have been addressed in developing the Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen. Partners who use it will be strongly supported in both areas.

Members of the kitchen staff have all earned the top level of food service certification available in Wisconsin, and they are overseen by a highly qualified and certified Food Service Director, Annette Pierce.

To assure that Partners have readily available business support, Terrien has assumed the role of Entrepreneur in Residence and established his office in the building. He is in-house to assist interested Partners, from the initial steps of considering their plan through carrying it out.

The Innovation Kitchen staff may be utilized as preparation partners, providing all services needed to professionally prepare recipes for commercial sale. Services include purchasing, preparation, processing, packaging, labeling, storage and distribution - as well as business, marketing and sales support.

Producers and entrepreneurs may also choose to use the state-of-the-art equipment to process recipes themselves. With appropriate certifications, they can rent the facility on an hourly basis to process their own recipes. The kitchen's design allows the processes of baking, canning, dehydration and dry mix production to be carried out simultaneously.

The facility provides key opportunities in three areas. First, existing food businesses can grow their enterprises and create new jobs using shared infrastructure, equipment and services.

"Existing food businesses will be able to expand without capital investment," Terrien explained. "Private labels can be used by food stores, specialty stores, food distributors, restaurants, supper clubs, and taverns. Caterers and others can benefit from the preparation and storage services available."

Small quantity, affordable production runs are available. Dozens of delicious recipes, which the Hodan Center has already registered, are available to utilize local farm produce. Terrien encourages existing farm businesses to private-label their farm with a brand and logo, and to use their specialty crops as the main ingredients."

"Wisconsin is now the second largest vegetable growing state in the U.S. but we leave at least one-third of our crop on the ground every year because it is bruised or not big enough for retail sale," Terrien said. "Processing equipment and opportunities are usually rare or very expensive. Here we have 9 or 10 months where you can't grow stuff, but if you can use your 'seconds' in salsas, tomato sauce or granola mix by putting it in a jar or drying it, then your farm or business has a product to sell year round."

In addition, new food businesses can start up affordably with the advantages of a state-certified commercial kitchen. "We have Partner programs to support most kinds of business startups and expansions," Terrien said. "This

takes the risk out of trying a new business. The Innovation Kitchen is a great platform for experimenting with small food startups."

Also, non-food businesses and organizations can support their own businesses as well as local foods. "It will help promote and raise funds for local causes," Terrien said. "People can have delicious food products produced for sale with the logo for the cause and their supporter's logos on the label.

The kitchen will provide community support in two ways. It may be used by "Event Partners" who wish to produce food-related special events utilizing the facility. It also serves as a "Purchasing Partner" to provide ingredients, packaging, and related materials for Partners working in the kitchen; or for partners in the community who need commercial quantities of food grade supplies for their own operations.

"The possibilities for this place are really unlimited," Terrien said enthusiastically.

A community event will be hosted at the Innovation Kitchen on the second Saturday of each month. Chef Joel Olson, a culinary educator who teaches in Washington D.C. will instruct a day-long course called "Everyday Cooking Without Recipes Using Wisconsin Local Foods."

For more information call Terrien at 608 987 3558 or go to www.wi.innovationkitchen.org

"It is a huge blessing to Hodan Center and to our community to have this kitchen now available," Schraeder said. "It will help our client employees by creating jobs for them, and stimulate local produce purchases and create possible new food entrepreneurs in the area. All those things are true blessings."

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