Helping aspiring “foodpreneurs” turn their ideas into business

AT A GLANCE
To help meet demand and grow food and value-added agriculture businesses, UI Extension facilitated food safety and business trainings with the Teton Valley Kitchen Incubator in Driggs, Idaho.

The Situation
Between 2013 and 2015, four regional assessments based on economic development and agriculture markets in Teton County were completed. All studies acknowledged the rise and need for local agriculture development, support for family, food and agriculture producers, and infrastructure to support food production.

Regionally, there are increasing opportunities for value-added agriculture and specialty food products and a growing need for small business development and food safety education for food entrepreneurs. With tourism and agriculture as large economic drivers in the region, it is important to develop opportunities for new food and agriculture businesses. In a rural, isolated area with limited resources, food producers have expressed a desire for more affordable, publicly available shared-use and certified commercial kitchens, as well as education to support their efforts.

Our Response
To help budding culinary entrepreneurs, City of Driggs Community Development staff reached out to UI Extension educators in Teton County to help open a certified kitchen incubator called the Teton Valley Kitchen Incubator (“TV Kitchen”). Previously, the nearest certified shared commissary kitchen was a 1.5-hour drive away. The TV Kitchen opened in February 2017 and was created to provide licensed kitchen space at affordable rates, commercial grade equipment, training and business support services to enable food entrepreneurs to grow small businesses using shared resources. Due to high operational costs and other unforeseen challenges, the Teton Valley Kitchen space closed after nine months.

Aside from these challenges, UI Extension recognizes the community need and potential for more educational opportunities for food and value-added agriculture entrepreneurs, as well as advisory support for any future commissary kitchens in the area. To help foster positive momentum for growing more viable food and
farm businesses, as well as the sustainability of a shared-use certified kitchen in the vicinity, UI Extension, Teton County began teaching free community workshops for “foodpreneurs” focused on food safety, business planning, product development, marketing and distribution.

With grant support from University of Idaho Extension’s Community Development fund, eight food business classes were held during 2017 and 2018. In addition to teaching about local procurement and best practices in direct marketing, Extension faculty brought in local and regional experts to assist with the trainings, including faculty in family and consumer sciences, food science, health department inspectors, and USDA Small Business Administration and Eastern Idaho Small Business Development Center staff.

Program Outcomes

Post-workshop survey evaluations indicated increased knowledge of food safety requirements, increased understanding about developing a food business plan, positive interest by participants in starting their own food business and increased interest in utilizing the space (N=54). Five known class participants have also expanded or started new food and value-added agriculture businesses since participating in one or more workshops.

Partnerships were cultivated between the TV Kitchen, UI Extension, food and agriculture producers, non-profit organizations, and government agencies and municipalities, resulting in increased social capital resources. This has led to educational and cultural events serving a variety of culinary needs and stakeholders throughout the area, including farm-to-table fundraisers and collaborative grant applications to support shared goals around the Teton food system. Word-of-mouth and press coverage about the workshops and TV Kitchen have brought increased awareness about opportunities and lessons learned to open and sustain a shared-use, certified kitchen incubator space.

While the future is uncertain about another location for the TV Kitchen, it is apparent that a more financially sustainable location is necessary to sustain this type of shared-use, certified kitchen. User fees at shared kitchens need to be affordable yet balanced with operational costs. Shared-use kitchens would be aided by having regular trainings for users and additional sources of funding for operational costs. Examples include retrofitting a business incubator space or shared kitchen owned by a government municipality, like the county fairgrounds and/or using a kitchen associated with a culinary training program or other compatible use (e.g., with a trade school or higher education).

The Future

UI Extension, Teton County will continue to help support small business development for food and value-added agriculture producers regardless of whether a public certified kitchen is open in Teton County. In the near term, Extension Educator Jennifer Werlin will continue to support the TV Kitchen as an advisor and partner, and help the community explore more sustainable models for operating a certified, shared-used commissary kitchen. Classes and workshops based on the 2017-18 food entrepreneur series will also be repeated and adapted as necessary for future needs. A case study analysis of the TV Kitchen is also currently in progress. This analysis will help the community learn and move positively forward, as well as provide valuable insight for other rural communities facing similar scenarios.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Teton Valley Kitchen, City of Driggs, Teton County, Teton Food and Farm Coalition, Teton Regional Economic Coalition, USDA Small Business Administration, Eastern Idaho Small Business Development Center, Eastern Idaho Public Health, Julie Buck (UI Extension educator) and Jim Toomey (Director, University of Idaho Agribusiness Incubator).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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