

Excerpt from “The Food Business Incubator”

by Mandalit Del Barco

- 1 “La Cocina” means “the kitchen” in Spanish. It’s also the name of a business incubator¹ based in San Francisco’s Mission District. Since it began in 2005, it’s been helping local food entrepreneurs, many of whom are low-income immigrant women, develop their small businesses.
- 2 Over the years, many of its alumni have found success: more than 50 chefs in its program have become self-sufficient business owners, and many of them have opened their own brick-and-mortar restaurants. Two alumnae of its culinary program . . . were even recognized as semi-finalists for prestigious James Beard awards.²
- 3 A new cookbook, *We Are La Cocina: Recipes in Pursuit of the American Dream*, tells some of their stories.
- 4 Executive director Caleb Zigas says the nonprofit La Cocina grew out of two grassroots economic development organizations³ who found many people cooking at their homes and selling food on the streets. The vendors needed an affordable commercial kitchen space and technical assistance in order for their businesses to be legally viable. La Cocina provided just such a space, in addition to helping them develop business plans, pull city permits and more.
- 5 Zigas says as many as eight businesses can work in the kitchen space at La Cocina at any one time. Some can prep for a farmers’ market sale, corporate catering gigs or weddings, while others might be making and packaging their food products.
- 6 “It’s just an incredible and exciting range of techniques, flavors, perspectives, age, language. And that’s a really beautiful thing,” he says. . . .
- 7 Twice a year, La Cocina hosts “F&B: Voices from the Kitchen,” a storytelling project where their chefs can tell their own stories, as they do in the new cookbook. Some of the chefs will be on tour to promote the book, whose proceeds will go to support La Cocina entrepreneurs.
- 8 NPR⁴ caught up with . . . La Cocina chefs, who shared their stories:

Mariko Grady, Aedan Fermented Foods

- 9 At La Cocina, you can often hear Mariko Grady singing or humming as she prepares miso, *koji*, and *amasake*. Her fermented products come in four different flavors, including mushroom and chicken, to be used in soups and sauces. She originally brought the fermenting rice and barley

¹**business incubator:** company that helps new and startup companies develop by providing services such as management training and office space

²**James Beard awards:** an award named after American cook and author James Beard, considered one of the highest honors in the culinary industry

³**economic development organizations:** organizations whose mission is to promote economic improvement within a specific geographical area

⁴**NPR:** National Public Radio, a nonprofit media organization that produces and distributes news and cultural programming

koji seeds from Japan, where she had a 30-year career as a singer and dancer with the prestigious modern theatrical dance group she founded, Pappa Tarahumara. They performed around the world, and 16 years ago, had a one-night show in San Francisco. The man who would become her husband was in the audience. She soon joined him in San Francisco, often returning to Tokyo to rehearse. But after the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in 2011, her company disbanded. . . . Grady focused on nourishing her family and creating a line of fermented products that she sells online, at local Bay Area stores and at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market. She began at La Cocina in 2012 and named her business after her son, Aedan. (Written in Kanji characters, the name means “wisdom” and “handed down from generation to generation.”) . . . Her fermented products are “also full of wisdom about how to relate to nature and how to create a healthy life,” she says. . . .

Shani Jones, Peaches Patties

Shani Jones is a native San Franciscan. Her father was born in New Orleans, her mother, in Jamaica. She says their home was always filled with a variety of spices and dishes like jerk chicken and Jamaican patties—savory pastries filled with beef or chicken. Jones says she learned to cook from her mother, whose nickname was Peaches. After returning from college in Atlanta, Jones worked on her doctorate in organizational leadership and management while driving a Lyft⁵ car. She often told passengers about her idea of opening a catering company with her mom’s recipes. They steered her to La Cocina, where she developed her own business, named after her mother. Five years later, she caters and runs a kiosk⁶ at a small food cooperative in Bernal Heights, where some of her handmade patties have an Ethiopian twist, “because my husband is Ethiopian.” Jones has big aspirations for Peaches Patties: “The ultimate goal,” she says, “is to be the patty kingpin⁷ of the West Coast.”

From “The Food Business Incubator That Helps Immigrant Women Pursue The American Dream” by Mandalit Del Barco from WEEKEND EDITION SUNDAY, June 19, 2019. Copyright © 2019 NPR.

⁵**Lyft:** ride-sharing company where people use their own cars to provide rides to customers

⁶**kiosk:** cart or small structure with one or more open sides that is used to vend merchandise or services

⁷**kingpin:** the leader in a group or undertaking

QUALIFICATIONS FOR LA COCINA APPLICANTS

Level of Income	La Cocina considers assets and access to opportunity when screening applicants. La Cocina's mission is to support entrepreneurs who face barriers to becoming successful in the food industry. Applicants must be classified as low- or very-low-income earners according to the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Guidelines for San Francisco.
Business Plan	Applicants must have a business plan that is ready to be put into action. La Cocina will help applicants refine an existing business plan. Applicants without a business plan should contact one of La Cocina's partner organizations for guidance in developing one.
Viable Product	The applicant's food must not only be delicious but also stand out. For a business to make a profit, there also has to be a market for the food.
Entrepreneurial Work Ethic	La Cocina is excited to work with entrepreneurs who are motivated and passionate about growing their business. Succeeding in the food industry requires a lot of heart and hard work.
Community Spirit	The 30+ entrepreneurs who share La Cocina's kitchen are from many different backgrounds. La Cocina values the community it has created and expects each entrepreneur to be active in bringing the spirit of La Cocina to the wider world. In order to succeed in the La Cocina kitchen, accepted applicants must be flexible and willing to work closely with others.

Source: La Cocina