

# Bean's Ghost Kitchen Playbook

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## A rotating food concept out of the space next door

*Last updated: February 2026*

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**How to use this doc:** Each section stands alone. You don't have to read it top to bottom. Jump to whatever you need today. Numbers are your friends -- follow them in order when you're ready to move.

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## 1. The Big Idea

You lease the closed restaurant next door. You license it as a real food establishment. Then you rent that kitchen to food truck operators -- who cook and serve FROM the building, not from a truck on the street.

This sidesteps Denver's food truck proximity rules entirely. Those rules apply to trucks on public streets. A licensed restaurant building is a different category. You're not bending the rules -- you're using a better one.

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## 2. Why This Works in Denver

Denver restricts food trucks on public streets. The main rules:

- Trucks can't operate within **50 feet of a brick-and-mortar restaurant** on a public street
- Certain zones restrict street vending entirely
- Trucks need a licensed commissary to prep food -- and those are hard to find

**Your space solves all three problems.**

A fixed address licensed as a **Retail Food Establishment** is not a food truck. It's a restaurant. Denver's proximity rules don't apply to it. Full stop.

The space also becomes a **licensed commissary**. That means operators who use your kitchen can satisfy their commissary requirement through you. That's a real service they're currently paying someone else for -- or struggling to find at all.

**New in 2026 -- HB25-1295:** Colorado passed a statewide reciprocal license law, effective January 1, 2026. A food truck operator with a valid license can now operate from a fixed location more easily. This removes a bureaucratic barrier that used to exist. Timing is good.

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## 3. What You Need to Pull This Off

Six things. Not in any order yet -- just the full picture.

### 3.1 The Space (Lease or Use Agreement)

- You need legal access to the building.
- This can be a full lease OR a use/license agreement with the landlord.
- A short-term trial (30-90 days) is a smart ask to start.
- The landlord doesn't have to know every detail -- you're proposing a food business operating out of a restaurant space. That's straightforward.

### 3.2 The License

- Apply for a **Retail Food Establishment license** through Denver's Department of Excise & Licenses.
- CDPHE (Colorado Dept of Public Health & Environment) also has jurisdiction -- you'll need to coordinate with both.
- Ghost kitchens operate under standard Retail Food Establishment rules. No special category needed.
- Budget time: licensing can take **4-8 weeks**. Start early.

### 3.3 Commissary Setup

- The kitchen needs to meet commissary standards: three-compartment sink, adequate refrigeration, hand-washing station, proper ventilation.
- If the old restaurant is in decent shape, you may already have most of this.
- Schedule a **pre-inspection walkthrough** with CDPHE before applying. They'll tell you exactly what needs fixing. This saves time.

### 3.4 Operator Agreements

- Every food truck operator who uses your space needs a **written agreement**.
- Cover: schedule, payment terms, cleanliness standards, liability, what happens if they cancel.
- Keep it simple -- a 1-2 page document is fine. Have someone review it before you use it.
- Each operator should carry their **own liability insurance**. Require proof.

### 3.5 Basic Ops Setup

- A shared calendar or scheduling app (Google Calendar works fine)
- A cleaning log -- who left the kitchen clean, who didn't
- A lockbox or key system for access
- A point-of-contact rule: one person to call when something breaks

### 3.6 Your Own House Rules

- Post them in the kitchen. Laminated. Simple.
  - Examples: No shared ingredients without permission. Clean as you go. No overnight storage without arrangement. Lock up means lock up.
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## 4. How to Talk to the Landlord

**Your goal:** Get 90 days to run a test. Low commitment for them, enough time for you to prove the concept.

### What's In It for Them

- The space is currently sitting empty and generating zero income.

- You bring in a tenant (you) plus foot traffic that keeps the building active.
- A clean, operating food business next door is better for property value than a dark storefront.
- If it works, you become a longer-term, reliable tenant.

## What You're Asking For

Keep it simple. Something like:

*"I'd like to lease the space for 90 days as a test. I'll license it as a food establishment and run a rotating concept out of it. I'll cover utilities [or negotiate split]. I'll keep it clean and maintain the equipment. If it works, we talk about a longer arrangement."*

## The Short-Term Trial Frame

- 90 days. Firm start and end date.
- You handle all licensing and permits.
- Monthly rent -- get a number that works for both of you. Lower is better at first; you're proving the concept.
- Option to extend or negotiate longer lease at end of trial.

## What to Bring to the Meeting

1. This playbook (or a 1-page summary of the concept)
  2. A proposed monthly rent number
  3. Your liquor store next door as credibility -- you're already an established neighbor
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# 5. How to Find and Pitch Food Truck Operators

## Where to Find Them

1. **Denver Food Truck Association** -- start here. They know everyone.
2. **Instagram** -- search #DenverFoodTruck. DM operators directly.
3. **Local food truck events** -- show up, introduce yourself, hand out a card.

4. **Commissary boards** -- food truck operators actively hunt for commissary space. Post there.
5. **Word of mouth through your liquor store** -- you already know people.

## What to Offer

- A licensed kitchen, available on a rotating weekly schedule
- Commissary status -- they can list your address as their commissary
- Fixed location serving -- they set up and serve FROM the building, no truck restrictions
- Storage options (negotiate per operator)
- A real address for marketing, catering pickups, and Google Maps listings

## What They Get (Say This Out Loud)

*"You get a licensed kitchen, commissary status, and the ability to serve from a fixed address without the street parking fight. You keep your truck for events. This is your home base."*

## Your Pitch Vibe

You're not begging anyone to show up. You're offering something genuinely useful. Lead with the commissary and fixed-address angle. That's the pain point. That's what they need.

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# 6. The Rotation Model

## Basic Structure

- **Weekly slots** work best to start. Monday-Sunday = one operator's week.
- Or split the week: Operator A gets Mon-Wed, Operator B gets Thu-Sun.
- You set the schedule. Operators apply for slots.

## Monthly Schedule Concept

- Month 1: 1-2 operators, staggered
- Month 2: Add a third operator once you've worked out the kinks

- Month 3: Consider a "resident" anchor operator (Mon-Fri lunch) + rotating weekend operators

## How to Handle Conflicts

- **First rule:** The schedule is final once posted. No swaps without Bean's approval.
- **Second rule:** 48-hour cancellation notice required. Short notice = they lose the deposit.
- **Third rule:** If two operators want the same slot, the one who committed first gets it.
- Put all of this in the operator agreement. Don't rely on memory.

## Scheduling Tools

- Google Calendar (shared, color-coded by operator) -- free and simple
  - Or a whiteboard in the kitchen for the current month
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## 7. Revenue Model

Three options. Here's the honest breakdown for your situation.

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### Option A: Flat Weekly Rent

**How it works:** Each operator pays a set fee per week they use the kitchen. Example: \$200-400/week depending on hours and storage.

**Pros:** - Predictable income. You know what's coming in. - Simple to track. No need to verify anyone's sales. - Easy to explain and enforce.

**Cons:** - You don't benefit if an operator has a killer week. - May be too high for newer operators just starting out.

**Best for:** Getting started. Simplicity is worth a lot right now.

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### Option B: Percentage of Sales

**How it works:** Operator pays you X% of their gross sales from the kitchen (e.g., 8-12%).

**Pros:** - You share in their success. - Lower barrier for operators who are earlier stage.

**Cons:** - Requires trust and verification. How do you know what they actually made? - Adds complexity -- point-of-sale integration or honor system. - Cash sales are hard to track.

**Best for:** Operators you know well and trust. Or as an add-on to flat rent.

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## Option C: Hybrid (Recommended)

**How it works:** Low flat weekly rate + small percentage of sales above a threshold.

Example: \$150/week base + 5% of sales over \$1,500.

**Pros:** - Floor income is guaranteed. - You participate in upside without it being all-or-nothing. - Fair to operators at different stages.

**Cons:** - Slightly more complex to track. - Requires a clear agreement on what counts as "sales from the kitchen."

**Best for:** Once you have 2+ operators and want a model that scales.

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**Bean's starting recommendation:** Start with flat weekly rent. Keep it simple while you learn what works. Revisit in 90 days.

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## 8. First 90 Days Checklist

Work through these in order. Don't skip ahead.

### Week 1: Assess and Decide

- [ ] 1. Walk through the restaurant space. Make notes on condition.
- [ ] 2. List what equipment is already there and what's broken.
- [ ] 3. Write down your number: what monthly rent can you afford to pay the landlord and still make money?
- [ ] 4. Decide: are you doing this? (Yes? Keep going.)

## **Week 2: Talk to the Landlord**

- ☐ 5. Request a meeting with the landlord.
- ☐ 6. Bring your concept summary and your rent number.
- ☐ 7. Ask for a 90-day trial agreement.
- ☐ 8. If they say yes, get it in writing before you spend any more time on this.

## **Week 3-4: Licensing and Inspection Prep**

- ☐ 9. Contact CDPHE for a pre-inspection walkthrough. Ask what you need to fix.
- ☐ 10. Contact Denver Dept of Excise & Licenses. Ask for the Retail Food Establishment application packet.
- ☐ 11. Get quotes on any equipment repairs or upgrades the inspector flagged.
- ☐ 12. Submit your license application.

## **Month 1: Build Your Operator List**

- ☐ 13. Join Denver Food Truck Association (or contact them).
- ☐ 14. Post in 2-3 food truck operator groups that you have commissary + kitchen space available.
- ☐ 15. Have at least 3 conversations with interested operators.
- ☐ 16. Draft your operator agreement. Have someone read it.

## **Month 2: First Operator**

- ☐ 17. Sign your first operator agreement.
- ☐ 18. Set up the shared calendar.
- ☐ 19. Post the house rules in the kitchen.
- ☐ 20. Run the first week. Watch what breaks. Fix it.

## **Month 2-3: Refine**

- ☐ 21. Check in with your first operator. What's working? What's not?
- ☐ 22. Add a second operator if the first is going smoothly.



- [ ] 23. Revisit your revenue model. Is flat rent working?
  - [ ] 24. At 90 days: decide whether to extend or renegotiate the lease.
  - [ ] 25. Celebrate. This is real.
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## 9. Watch Out For

### 9.1 The Licensing Takes Longer Than You Expect

**What happens:** CDPHE and Denver licensing can take 4-8 weeks. You make promises to operators before the license comes through.

**How to handle it:** Don't promise operators a start date until you have the license in hand. Tell them you're in the process. Give them a realistic window, not a firm date.

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### 9.2 Operators Don't Clean Up After Themselves

**What happens:** Someone leaves a mess. The next operator is furious. You're in the middle.

**How to handle it:** Document the kitchen condition with photos before and after each operator's week. Hold a cleaning deposit (\$100-200) from each operator. Return it if they leave it clean. Keep it if they don't. Put this in the agreement.

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### 9.3 Your First Operator Falls Through

**What happens:** Someone says yes, signs a loose agreement, then ghosts or flakes at the last minute.

**How to handle it:** Take a deposit before you put anyone on the schedule. Even \$50-100 shows commitment. If they bail, you're not left holding nothing. Have a second operator lined up as backup.

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### 9.4 The Landlord Gets Cold Feet

**What happens:** After you've put time and money into licensing, the landlord changes their mind or changes the terms.

**How to handle it:** Get the agreement in writing before you spend money on licensing or repairs. Even a simple letter of intent helps. Know your walk-away point before you start negotiating.

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## 10. Resources

### Licensing

- **Denver Department of Excise & Licenses** Website:  
denvergov.org/Government/Agencies-Departments-Offices/Agencies-Departments-Offices-Directory/Excise-Licenses Phone: 720-865-2740 *Ask for: Retail Food Establishment license application*
- **Colorado Dept of Public Health & Environment (CDPHE)** Website:  
cdphe.colorado.gov/retail-food-establishments *Ask for: pre-inspection walkthrough and Retail Food Establishment requirements*

### Community

- **Denver Food Truck Association** Find them at: denverfoodtruck.com (or search on Facebook/Instagram) *Start here for operator connections and industry advice*

### Legal Reference

- **HB25-1295** -- Colorado statewide reciprocal food license Effective January 1, 2026. Simplifies fixed-location licensing for mobile operators.
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### Your First Three Calls to Make

1. **CDPHE** -- Ask for a pre-inspection of the restaurant space. Tell them you're planning to license it as a Retail Food Establishment and want to know what's needed.
2. **Denver Excise & Licenses** -- Request the application packet and ask about current processing times.

**3. Denver Food Truck Association** -- Introduce yourself. Tell them you're opening a ghost kitchen/commissary space and want to connect with operators.

That's it. Three calls. Make them this week.

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*Bean -- you've got the location, the context, and the community trust. This thing is real. Go build it.*

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