

## CDC celebrates decade of realizing small food biz dreams

### Food Processing Center's three-pronged approach a recipe for success

By RICHIE DAVIS  
Recorder Staff

Every weekday morning, they're cooking for hundreds.

As early as 6:30, the nine Meals on Wheels workers show up at the Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center on Wells Street, heat up 325 meals that drivers will deliver to seniors around Franklin County. Those lunches, delivered the night before by a Worcester County caterer and refrigerated at the Greenfield nonprofit commercial kitchen, are part of the 10-year-old food processing center's mix of ingredients for success.

The Franklin County Community Development Corp., which built the center after more than a decade of planning, will host its 32nd anniversary gathering at the shared kitchen Thursday from 4:30 to 7 p.m. as a way to celebrate the mix of nearly 250 businesses that have used the kitchens since 2001.

By now, it's no secret that the food processing center has spun off successful businesses that have outgrown the shared kitchen space and built their own, like Raw Pickles, Hillside Organic Pizza, Chubby's Sauces and Katalyst Kombucha.

But there are other businesses — 23 in all now — that produce an array of inventive specialty foods and products, like the zucchini relish made by Sunderland-based Relish the Harvest and commercial-strength coloring for cake frostings made from spinach leaves, beets, blueberry skins and other all-natural ingredients by The All Colors Group of Amherst.

"I'm grateful that the food processing center was there to help small producers with their venture," said Jessica Tudryn Wisniewski, who would only eat the zucchini relish that her mother, Elizabeth Tudryn, used to make when she was growing up in Sunderland. "I always told her, 'I'm going to produce this and market it someday.'"

Now Wisniewski, who has worked in quality control for Minute Maid and Breyer's, sells two varieties of the relish that she makes from locally grown zucchini, onions and peppers at the Greenfield center. It's sold in about 15 stores.

This fall, the center processed 95,000 pounds of local produce, according to Waite. Nearly one-third of that was by co-packing for clients like Bart's Ice Cream and Atkins Fruit Farms, another 28,000 pounds was through "farm to institution" freezing crops for schools, and about one-third was by Belchertown-based Hedgie's Hot Stuff.

Like a three-legged stool, the food processing center depends on food entrepreneurs like Wisniewski and Steve Nelson of Hedgie's to build businesses out of sauces, preserves, relishes and other products that use local ingredients.

"It's a great venue," said Peter Levy of The All Colors Group, who admits he uses the center infrequently but adds that it plays a key role in getting small food businesses up and running.

The CDC does that by also offering training for would-be entrepreneurs, like the class of 14 that's now under way, and also providing technical assistance and loans to many of those businesses. And that's apart from the networking opportunities for the businesses, often while they're cooking their products.

"The CDC's about business development and job creation," Waite said. Sometimes, it helps the startups write their business plan, often it helps promote the use of local ingredients.

When Nelson began making his salsa, he bought his tomatoes from a wholesaler at what he thought was a good price, said Waite, but he wasn't particularly looking for local products.

"He thought it would be more expensive, but what he found is there's less waste, so economically it comes out the same, or better," said Waite. For years, Nelson has been buying tens of thousands of pounds of local tomatoes, onions and peppers.

“A lot of food businesses come in here, some wanting to use local, and others switch over because we encourage it, and they hook up with local farmers,” he said. “People need to be exposed to it. The old system is you buy food wherever it comes from.”

By year six, the center — built with federal and state grants — was breaking even, but then fell behind because it hired an assistant to help run the business.

So to make ends meet, the center added a second leg: co-packing for other businesses.

The center now produces products for Horse Listeners Orchard in Connecticut, which pays the center to dice 17,000 pounds of tomatoes for sale to schools, while Red Fire Farm in Granby has the center freeze more than a ton of peppers, tomatoes, peaches and other products in season to provide to its Community Supported Agriculture shareholders in winter. And Bart’s/Snow’s ice cream makers had the center freeze more than 4,000 pounds of local peaches and strawberries for its products. About three years ago, the food center developed its third leg, buying tomatoes, peppers and other vegetables directly from local farmers on a trial basis to freeze for sale to schools, colleges and other institutions. With \$67,000 of a larger regional Food to Institution grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the CDC has ramped up its food-to-institutions effort to include four area farmers providing thousands of pounds of broccoli, cauliflower, peppers, as well as zucchini, winter squash, turnips, tomatoes and carrots.

Money also came from a new state agriculture grant and funding from Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, the John Merck Fund and Wallace Center.

Most of that produce is delivered to freezers at Performance Foodservice, a branch of the national Performance Food Service Group in Springfield, for sale as part of the Farm to Institution program.

“The next step will be for the CDC to increase its 320 cubic feet of freezer space, maybe in conjunction with others in the PV Grows consortium that are looking for added cooler space and added root-crop storage in the Pioneer Valley. It could make use of the same kind of FreeAire system that food center graduate Real Pickles uses in its coolers across the street, with a computerized controller to make use of outdoor air when temperatures fall below a certain level.

“We’re maxing out; we need more cold storage, and a lot of other people need it,” Waite said. “We’re trying to figure out our role. We’re going to be involved as entrepreneur or as part of a larger group. That’s the kind of thing we want to be involved in.”

Through its entrepreneurship classes, Wells Street Venture Street, technical assistance and loan programs from a pool totaling more than \$3 million, the 32-year-old CDC has tried to encourage others in the community — which it’s now defining as all of western Massachusetts rather than simply the county — to launch their own ventures.

“If there’s a gap, and entrepreneurs are not doing it, we can do it,” Waite said.

Through its coordination and involvement with other CDCs and other organizations working on economic development, Waite said, “It’s all about collaboration. We’re just making the pie bigger.”

On the Web: [www.fccdc.org](http://www.fccdc.org)



**At the Franklin County Community Development Corp.’s Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center on Wells Street in Greenfield, Saw Mill Site Farm owner Terry Ginnan, in gas mask, Jessica Wisniewski and Lou Potorski jar fresh horseradish from the farm.  
Recorder/Paul Franz**