

Eating Life | Big Questions About Small Batches

As consumers go nuts for products with that homemade touch, **Joanna Tymkiw** explores issues of food safety in commercial kitchens and farmers' markets



All cookies are not created equal — at least according to my father, who graciously accepted Mr. Morgan's platter of shortbread every year on Christmas Eve. This generous gesture of fanned-out crescents from his family to ours was proudly displayed; each buttery, celestial shape melted on our tongues like the snowflakes falling outside our windows.

Years into this tradition, I realized I had never once seen Dad take a bite. When I finally complained that this must be a personal protest against Mr. Morgan himself, he simply answered, "Have you ever met *Mrs. Morgan*?"

No, I thought, and my mind raced with images of a stranger's hands fiddling with fingerprinted dough. I backed away and never ate one again. Sure, they were baked before touching my lips, but still, the human mind is one tough cookie.

But where one oven door closes, another opens, and the essence of homegrown is now what propels the food industry: enter stage left, small-batch goods.

Whether it's pickles in a Mason jar or cured curiosities rolled tightly in parchment, we all know small batches when we see them: at high-end shops or open-air markets, they look as if they could have been plucked right out of Grandma's cupboard (but with just enough labelling to let you know that they weren't). And right now, they are everywhere.

However, I've found that as I've grown warier, the food world has become less so. The time seems ripe

for an analysis of the commercial chemistry of small-batch foods in order to help consumers understand exactly what they are purchasing and how it got there.

Wentsi Yeung, founder of local beverage company Culture Kombucha, began to witness first-hand the emphasis on proper food handling when she started working at the Ottawa-based organic food distributor Mountain Path. "I was really lucky to get that experience. I learned the hardcore logistics of food distribution and running a food space, as well as food manufacturing and processing. It was a good segue into operating my own food business."

Indeed, a food premises licence is required for any space where food is prepared for public sale or distribution. Obtaining this licence is based on meeting a number of strict criteria, which fall under Ontario's Health Protection and Promotion Act: everything from a facility's ventilation and lighting to the placement and temperature requirements of sanitation stations must pass muster.

When applying for this licence, the applicant must also provide three copies of floor plans, have already obtained the green light from Ottawa Public Health, and be covered for \$1 million in general commercial liability insurance. Not simple, but that is what is called for to maintain and operate what is deemed to be a sanitary food environment.

For Yeung, renting an already licensed kitchen facility was the best way to avoid these stumbling

particulars. A year into the beverage business, Yeung has taken all she has learned and has opened The Ottawa Food Hub and Incubator Kitchen, a place for those looking for to create and sell their own small-batch food products.

Not only is this a licensed commercial kitchen, it is also HACCP compliant (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) and offers members 24/7 access to its facilities. Yeung and her team have taken this space one step further by offering guidance on recipe development, ingredient sourcing, packaging, distribution, and marketing.

For those wanting to take a less formal approach to getting their products out to the public, farmers' markets are a good alternative because they are exempt from the stricter criteria of the Health Protection and Promotion Act. This exemption allows vendors to produce goods in their own homes, avoiding a costly kitchen rental altogether.

But in order for the market to be granted such an exemption, it must meet a number of city-approved standards, one being an overall risk assessment. Markets like the Ottawa Farmers' Market, which is responsible for the Lansdowne and Byron Park locations, also ask vendors to follow a lengthy regimen of food-handling guidelines to avoid potential food-borne illnesses and cross-contamination.

"Educating is our primary concern with food handlers," says Siobhan Kearns, a health inspector with Ottawa Public Health. "Our goal is to support local businesses while keeping residents safe. Farmers' markets are here to showcase local products, so our authority here is protection as well as promotion."

Another exception from the food premises licence is eCelery, a new online service in Ottawa that allows individuals to order meals from people — some individuals cook out of their homes, some out of commercial kitchens. Unlike other food businesses in Ottawa, this company does not function under a food premises licence or have an exemption; as Philip Powell of the city's licences and permits department explains, private kitchens cannot be licensed because private residences cannot be inspected (and the kitchen environment, with other family members, pets, etc., cannot be controlled). Instead, eCelery operates under an e-commerce licence, relying on subcontracted cooks and delivery drivers.

"The cooks set their prices and are responsible for all the food shopping and preparation. We provide the internet access to them and then the delivery method," says eCelery CEO Cyril Moukarzel.

But so-called germaphobes can take comfort in the fact that each cook is encouraged to hold a food handler certificate and must be insured for the same amount as a commercial kitchen.

"The customer's protection is in our best interest," says Anatoli Chichkine, a former restaurant cook and now one of eCelery's featured chefs. "It makes sense to handle food the exact same way I would in a restaurant kitchen. Those habits have transferred over, for sure."

Working with eCelery is Chichkine's ideal scenario, because cooking in a restaurant is a far less attractive profession than people might think. "It can really take you to hell and back. [eCelery] actually gives me the creative freedom I want."

With eCelery's structure, it is easy to draw comparisons with other web-based companies that have used the internet to gain momentum — and then have found themselves criticized for their alternative approach. For example, Uber and Airbnb have raised the ire of traditionalists by bypassing specific licences.

So what do Ottawa's small-business owners — who have had to invest in commercial rentals, obtain appropriate licences, and endure city health inspections — think of the e-commerce shortcut?

Michael Sunderland, creator of gourmet confectionery line Michaelsdolce, says: "There are serious steps that you take to open a food business. A lot of people who are passionate about getting something out there will go through these steps." With his ever-expanding brand that sells throughout Ontario, his no-loopholes approach to success can't be dismissed.

My dad always said that anything worth having is also worth fighting for (apparently the shortbread — at least during the gluttonous holiday season — was not). In any case, safe food production is by no means an effortless task. But as far as good investments go, customers will always come back to a well-made product — and there's something to be said for a carefully considered, clean workspace. ■

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