

Food Processing Case Study

YOUTH BUILD JOB SKILLS THROUGH LOCAL FOOD PROCESSING

FEATURED FACILITY: FARM FRESH RHODE ISLAND

By Nathaniel Brooks

Proud Harvest Kitchen Project graduates sell the fruits of their labor at a Farm Fresh Rhode Island farmers' market.



To learn more about Farm Fresh Rhode Island, visit www.farmfreshri.org

Find this case study and others on our website: www.farmtoinstitution.org/case-studies

OVERVIEW



Name: Farm Fresh Rhode Island

Location: Pawtucket, RI

Opened: 2004

Business Model: non-profit

Staff: 21 full-time, multiple part-time and volunteers

Facility at a Glance: Farm Fresh RI doesn't own kitchen space. The Harvest Kitchen Project leases 2,550 square feet at 2 Bayley Street in Pawtucket.

Annual Budget: approx. \$2 million, of which approx. \$250k is for the Harvest Kitchen Project

Services: farmers markets, wholesale aggregation and distribution, produce subscription, equitable food access, nutrition education, farm to cafeteria programs, youth job training, food processing

More Information:

Farm Fresh Rhode Island was started in 2004 with the mission to “grow a local food system that values the environment, health and quality of life of Rhode Island farmers and eaters.” In 2010 Farm Fresh RI launched the Harvest Kitchen Project, a 20-week culinary skills and job-readiness program for youth within RI Department of Children, Youth, and Families Juvenile Corrections Services. The following year, the curriculum was adapted and program staff began working with incarcerated youth in the RI Training School (RITS). Now in its sixth year, the Harvest Kitchen Project has 2.5 full-time staff plus a six-person part-time production crew of program graduates. More than 200 youth have participated to date.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Strategic partnerships are key.
- 2 Customized training is crucial.
- 3 Troubleshooting is a big part of the training.
- 4 Management should start from a place of respect.
- 5 Success doesn't look the same for everyone.

See page 7 for more detail

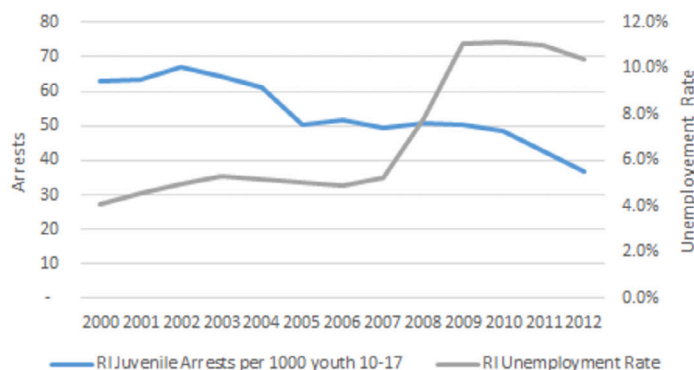


Harvest Kitchen Project participants canning pickles.

THE CHALLENGE

Legend has it that it was an apple's fall that sparked the train of thought that led Isaac Newton to propose the law of universal gravitation. In 2009, an abundant windfall of excess apples in Rhode Island orchards prompted a different question in the minds of Farm Fresh RI program staff: Why not make applesauce? More specifically, why not find a way to use one challenge, an excess of local produce at certain times of the year, to address two others: the lack of value-added local products and a falling but still-too-high population of youth in the juvenile justice system facing a historically bad labor market. This idea, of turning excess crops into value-added local products while providing job training to an at-risk population, became the basis for Farm Fresh RI's Harvest Kitchen Project.

JUVENILE ARREST RATE & OVERALL UNEMPLOYMENT



PROGRAM DESIGN & EVOLUTION

Project lead chef Jennifer Stott was hired by Farm Fresh RI in September 2009 and spent several months designing program curriculum, building community partnerships, and recruiting participants

HARVEST KITCHEN PROGRAM PARTICIPATION BY YEAR

YEAR	HARVEST KITCHEN PROJECT	RI TRAINING SCHOOL
2010	16	N/A
2011	17	20
2012	16	25
2013	16	30
2014	17	30
2015	13	30
2016	7	30
TOTAL	102	165

before launching the program as a pilot in early 2010. The program is structured in two parts: a 15-week training period followed by a five-week supported internship at a local food business. The training takes place 3:30 to 6:30 pm Monday through Thursday (as many participants are still in high school), and consists of three parts. The first five weeks are spent on basic job readiness: timeliness, personal presentation, kitchen skills and food safety—all participants must achieve ServSafe food handler certification. The second five weeks focus on retail sales training in preparation for selling at farmers markets. Participants have to be comfortable talking about the program, working with money, and able to sell product. The final five weeks focus on getting ready for internships and include resume preparation and review, and mock interviews. Each cohort is made up of eight students, ensuring each participant receives personalized instruction and support from program staff.

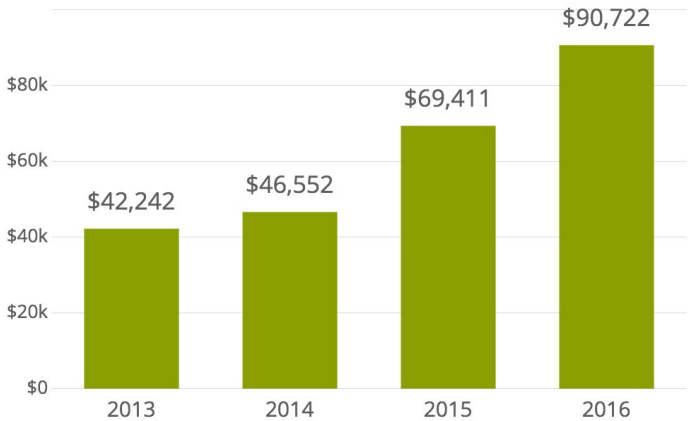
Although the core focus of the program hasn't changed, the curriculum has evolved over time to include exposure to additional culinary knowledge, a greater emphasis on self-care, and more field-trips to local farms and other food related sites. There have also been multiple operational shifts as staff continued looking for the right product mix and production/teaching space. Initially held in the commissary space of a local bakery, in the summer of 2010 the program moved to the basement of Open Table of Christ Church on Broad Street in Providence. Unfortunately, this kitchen didn't have a commercial license, so could be used only for teaching and recipe development, not production. In 2011 the program moved again, this time to Matthewson Street Church in downtown Providence, which did have a kitchen licensed by the RI Department of Health. The Harvest Kitchen Project produced its first marketable products in this space: applesauce, zucchini pickles, onion relish, apple chips, and stewed tomatoes. The downtown location was convenient for program participants, but as the program continued some of the drawbacks (no internet, limited storage and refrigeration) became constraints to further growth. In 2013 operations were shifted again to the former Classic Cafe on Pawtucket Avenue, which had much better facilities.

In the midst of these moves, program staff continued to look for opportunities to use the work program participants were doing to further support the Farm Fresh RI mission of strengthening the local food system. Summer recruitment was tough, so beginning in 2011, staff launched the "Harvest Kitchen All Stars," which brought top-performing graduates of the program back as members of a seasonal production crew. With a more experienced team in the kitchen, staff were able to work with farmers to create other products from seasonal bounty, including dill pickles, dehydrated zucchini chips, dilly beans, spicy pickled carrots, and seasonal specials like canned peaches and onion relish. Starting in 2013, the project also began taking on co-packing work, beginning with a partnership with City Feed and Supply to produce pickled green tomatoes according to their recipe. In many cases, this was farmer driven, with area farmers contracting the team to make items like jarred stewed tomatoes for their farm stands and CSA shares, and to sell at winter farmers markets.

Not every effort has been an unqualified success. In 2013, staff partnered with AS220, a Providence youth-focused nonprofit that does music and art education, to recruit for the summer session. With the larger product line and the short season for some local crops, however, newcomers in the kitchen weren't able to hit planned production targets. As part of a Farm to Cafeteria program piloted at the RI Training School in 2014, Harvest Kitchen staff attempted to process and freeze local vegetables for school dining services. While Stott saw market demand, the pilot was ultimately discontinued. The physical layout of the kitchen space (many locked doors, no pallet jack access) made material handling difficult. Because processing is all done manually to help participants build culinary skills, the kitchen simply didn't have the capacity to serve the institutional needs.

What has been highly successful is the program's integration with other Farm Fresh RI programs. The twelve farmers markets run by Farm Fresh RI provide a ready channel for year-round retail sales and give program participants a chance to build their sales skills while delivering on Farm Fresh RI's objective of increasing access local food. Similarly, both Market Mobile (a wholesale farm-to-business distribution system launched in 2009) and Veggie Box (a produce delivery service launched in 2011 that delivers to workplaces and community centers) carry Harvest Kitchen products, providing wholesale channels that increase the project's market. The result has been more youth jobs (in 2014 the program added four permanent part-time production crew positions, two more were added in 2016) and steady growth in Harvest Kitchen revenue.

PROGRAM-EARNED REVENUE BY YEAR



THE HARVEST KITCHEN PROJECT TODAY

For a program that has called four different kitchens home in the last six years, 2016 brought a welcome change for the Harvest Kitchen Project. After completing another move in July, the program has found a new more permanent home in a renovated 700 square foot commercial kitchen in the mixed-use development at 2 Bayley Street in Pawtucket. While there are ongoing challenges, the new space has been leased for five years and carries many exciting possibilities, including the room to add onsite retail, something that wasn't possible in previous locations. Farm Fresh RI is collaborating with the RI Department of Health on a program to create healthy snacks and meals for the Pawtucket and Central Falls Health Equity Zone (HEZ) as part of a community-wide collaboration to improve health outcomes. The new space also gives staff the ability to host onsite fundraisers, pop-up farm-to-table meals, and community education classes.

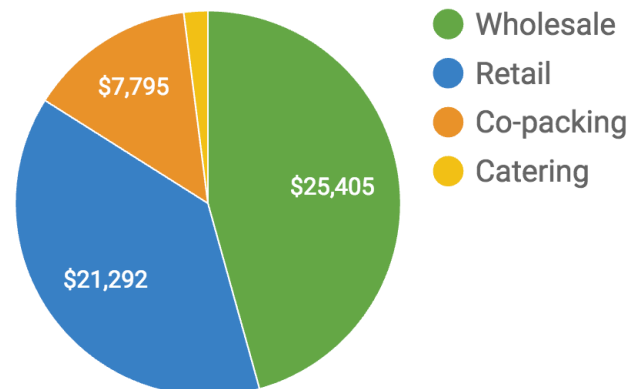
Despite another move, in 2016 the Harvest Kitchen Project produced 100 cases of pickled green tomatoes for City Feed and co-packed for seven different farms, creating everything from carrot cake, to marinara sauce, pickled sweet peppers, and sauerkraut. Staff also works with other community organizations to develop custom product lines. One ongoing collaboration is with the African alliance of RI, with whom Harvest Kitchen Project is developing a line of culturally-relevant value-added products like spicy bitterball relish and spicy carrot-apple chutney using produce grown by African farmers in Providence's urban gardens. A second is with SouthSide Community Land Trust's youth gardeners, with whom Harvest Kitchen Project is working to produce a custom sofrito, a sauce used as a base in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Latin American cooking.

The relief of finally having a long-term space for the program has made program staff anything but complacent. Beginning in January 2017, a new contract with the RI DCYF will let the Harvest Kitchen Project double the number of youth served by

adding a daytime program (10:30am-1:30pm) for out-of-school and incarcerated youth eligible for work release. Programming will also expand to five days per week, with the additional day focused on work at the farmers markets, in the new retail space and delivering healthy lifestyle/self care education. Stott is also looking ahead to the launch of onsite retail in the spring of 2017 and working to further scale up her kitchen team's capacity. She anticipates that a continuous feed food processor purchased in the fall of 2016 will immediately increase the efficiency of pickle and chip production, and hopes to take on additional co-packing projects, further growing the program's earned revenues and providing more work for participating youth.

Looking further ahead, Farm Fresh RI is thinking big about the potential for local food processing to make a positive impact on the local economy. In September 2016, Farm Fresh RI announced plans to build a Food and Agriculture Campus on a three-acre site on Kinsley Street in Providence's Valley neighborhood. The vision for the campus is a cluster of food and farm related businesses with Farm Fresh RI as the anchor tenant, revitalizing this once-proud industrial neighborhood. The new food hub will allow expansion of the organization's successful aggregation and distribution operation (Market Mobile) and create space for the further growth and development of the Harvest Kitchen Project.

2015 HARVEST KITCHEN FOOD SALES



IMPACTS



A Harvest Kitchen Project participant talks to customers at the farmers market.

“More time in the kitchen, less time on the streets.”

– Osbert Duoa, Harvest Kitchen graduate and current retail sales manager

The contribution of program-earned revenue is significant, accounting for approximately 20% of the Harvest Kitchen Project budget in 2015, and is on track to nearly double in 2016. More important than the financial benefits, however, are the many other program outcomes. The program has a graduation rate of 63% since inception, meaning gains in

knowledge, confidence, and critical job readiness for an ever-growing number of youth in challenging circumstances. Participants have the chance to get out of the city, see where food comes from, and through their participation at farmers markets, help break through negative stereotypes. Employers get interns and new staff with food safety knowledge, entry level culinary skills, and a support network to help them succeed. At the same time, local farmers gain a market for their excess or B-grade produce, and area consumers get to enjoy high-quality locally-sourced products. As the program’s tagline puts it: Youth Made, Local Farms, Job Skills, Good Food.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Strategic partnerships are key.

Farmer partnerships, and the low-cost inputs they provide, are critical to the program's success. Understanding their surplus and waste and working to find win-win products is a challenging but crucial piece of the puzzle.

2 Customized training is crucial.

Working with individuals to recognize their strengths and challenges, then giving them tasks at which they can succeed is key to building confidence and positive momentum. Being flexible and keeping open lines of communication is critical to helping participants succeed, learn, and grow.

3 Troubleshooting is a big part of the training.

To help participants succeed requires far more than just imparting information. Many are facing challenges with lack of stable food, housing, transportation, family difficulties, and other stresses outside of the workplace. Helping participants address these issues is critical to keeping them engaged and learning. Expertise in youth work and workforce development is as important as culinary skills to the successful running of the program.

4 Management should start from a place of respect.

This means respect for abilities, differences, and effort, as well as respect for challenges that may not always be relatable. Respect and compassion, coupled with clear (and high) expectations, help motivate participants to achieve their goals.

5 Success doesn't look the same for everyone.

Many program participants are 16 to 19 years old; some are still in school, and not everyone is ready to step into full-time work in a fast-paced restaurant kitchen. Program staff works with each participant individually to help them transition from the Harvest Kitchen Project to the next step that is best for them. And even after graduation, the doors to Harvest Kitchen remain open to trainees who often return to Stott and other staff for continued advice and support.

Find this case study and others on our website: www.farmtoinstitution.org/case-studies

Learn more about Farm to Institution New England at www.farmtoinstitution.org