

Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation
“RISE to the Challenge” Pitch Competition

Project Kitchen X

Brittany DeNovellis // brittdeno@gmail.com // (Student, 2018)
Emily Lerman // lerman@jhu.edu

April 2017

Executive Summary

Overview:

Project Kitchen X (PKX) is Baltimore's first and only community-driven, worker-owned kitchen cooperative focused on empowering refugee and immigrant women by tapping into their passion for cooking, self-expression, and creating community. PKX will offer Baltimore diners unique meals from around the world, focusing on local ingredients with an emphasis on the quality and accessibility of our products. PKX will kick-off with its first event in early May 2017, continuing with pop-up events throughout the city while planning for constant growth and a brick-and-mortar storefront. Individuals who come here seeking refuge are eager to put their skills back to use to re-establish an independent, sustainable livelihood. PKX will achieve this as a cooperative, as the women involved will have ownership in this enterprise they build together. This allows for each individual to not only strengthen their culinary expertise, but also build equity and have a voice in the operations. PKX is founded upon the values of empowerment, accessibility, ownership, social justice and a commitment to quality food.

Opportunity:

Due to the implementation of new policies targeting refugees and immigrants, we've seen this population grow increasingly vulnerable and fearful. In response, however, we've witnessed individuals come forward, displaying compassion and empathy, and offering additional support to a vulnerable population. Nationwide, the number of food enterprises dedicated to providing employment opportunities to newly-arrived individuals has increased. However, none use a cooperative ownership model to foster empowerment. The "worker-owned cooperative element" is the defining characteristic of PKX that makes it an enterprise focused on development of a sustainable livelihood.

Solution:

At Project Kitchen X, we understand that individuals who have been forced from their homes come to the United States with hopes to move forward from an often horrific past. While government and non-government agencies offer assistance, it is often not sufficient to establish lasting and sustainable opportunities in which individuals can support their families. Newly-arrived refugees often have difficulty finding career opportunities that take advantage of their passions, expertise and experience. For women, we've also identified a need for supportive and nurturing communities that encourage confidence and empowerment. The empowerment of women through economic opportunities has been shown to improve women's confidence, community participation and results in greater investments in the health and education of their children and families.

Baltimore's culinary scene is on the rise. There is no shortage of new chefs, restaurants, marketplaces and food incubators coming to the city. However, we feel these opportunities are not accessible to refugees and immigrants, especially women.

Impact:

Our community kitchen connects diners who are passionate about extraordinary food with unique culinary experiences cultivated by talented refugee and immigrant women. Adventurous epicures and curious foodies can get their fill of elusive international cuisine while supporting a worker-owned cooperative that enriches the livelihoods and confidence of individuals who might not otherwise be able to tap into Baltimore's growing food scene. By committing to quality ingredients and local partnerships, PKX will also ensure our products are available and accessible to all of citizens of Baltimore's citizens, and not just a small percentage. We will achieve this by ensuring the space is designed and programmed around and according to the community -- this is why the cooperative model is essential to the success.

We've had no shortage of women who are eager to participate. We plan to minimize costs in the beginning and take advantage of kitchen space to hold pop-up events. From there, we plan to grow into a brick and mortar space that will serve as not only a staging kitchen, but also a restaurant and community space, where we can offer catering services and host cooking classes and other community events. The programming decisions will be made by the cooperative owners.

Our model is unique because it offers women an opportunity to earn ownership in the business. It is also scalable, and due to catering and cooking class offerings, we can take advantage of times when restaurants may not be busy with customers, and invite more women into the cooperative. Unlike the competitors who offer refugees employment opportunities in food businesses, but do not emphasize long term objectives like learning how to grow and operate a business of their own, PKX focuses on ownership. We hope that participants gain the access to resources to open food businesses of their own. While there are no current competitors in Baltimore, there is an increasing number of "refugee focused" food businesses throughout the world - none which are worker-owned.

Our product offering will also be unlike anywhere in the city; we will offer diners an opportunity to try foods from Iraq, for example, and the next times Syria, Eritrea or Cameroon. As an anchor institution in the city, The University of Baltimore can play a valuable role in this project by supporting the need encourage newcomers in the US are given access to business opportunities.