

GROWING FOOD BUSINESSES WORKSHOPS 2018:

STORIES OF IMPACT AND SUCCESS IN MONTANA



WESTERN
EXTENSION
RISK MANAGEMENT
EDUCATION



United States
Department of
Agriculture

National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture



Lake County Community
Development Corporation
Business Development Center

INTRODUCTION

During the 2015 Montana legislative session, Montana's food entrepreneurs gained important new opportunities resulting from changes in state law. Following a two-year study of the state's food laws and much public comment, Montana's retail food laws were significantly rewritten, including changes to allow cottage food operators to make low-hazard food products in their home kitchens, and sell them directly to consumers year-round in any direct venue. Sometimes referred to as the "Cottage Food Law," these changes were in accordance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). The law also clarified and offered additional opportunities for temporary and mobile food service operations, for farmers direct-marketing their raw agricultural products, and more.

Between November 2017 and April 2018, AERO, along with the Montana Food and Agriculture Development Centers, planned and coordinated six day-long workshops around Montana that worked to explain and illuminate these new opportunities and their governing regulations. This workshop series followed a series of similar workshops offered in 2016. Given the success and positive reception for the 2016 series, and in light of the continued progress and evolution of how policies and procedures upholding the new regulations were

carried out across the state, AERO decided to fund and offer these 2018 workshops, which were also supported by a grant from the Western Extension Risk Management and Education (WERME) Program.

The workshops were intended for and attended by retail food businesses and entrepreneurs, direct-market farmers, market managers, state and local health officials and educators, business and economic development professionals, local food non-profits, and folks with cottage food business ideas. Each workshop provided participants with the information needed to succeed at starting or expanding a food business, as well as help insure the law's successful implementation.

Presenters and facilitators included staff from the Food and Consumer Safety Section of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Lake County Community Development Corps, and AERO.

Over the course of the six months following the conclusion of the 2018 workshop series, AERO staff interviewed participants to learn about how they were using, learning, benefiting from, or experiencing challenges from the implementation of the food laws. The following articles offer examples of folks on the ground working to increase local

food production, and grow their businesses and opportunities. Each represents unique challenges and successes as we continue working to produce and keep food local in Montana, and strive to understand and improve the laws governing production. We hope these stories inspire you.

If you would like to connect with the producers, business owners, or resource people described here, please reach out to AERO at aero@aeromt.org, and we'll put you in touch.

Please also visit our ongoing forum for questions and topics regarding the new food laws, at the Montana Food Economy Initiative, at <http://www.mtfoodeconomy.org/forums>.

Interviews were conducted and articles written by AERO staff, primarily our Local Food Systems Coordinator Jackie Heinert and Program Manager Kaleena Miller, with editorial assistance from Corrie Williamson. Layout and design by Corrie Williamson. All photos by AERO or courtesy of interviewees.

Read and download the 2016 success stories at <https://aeromt.org/workshops/>

Find resources on food policy and regulations from AERO, DPHHS, and more at <https://aeromt.org/workshops/workshop-resources/>

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AERO is a grassroots nonprofit whose mission is to empower communities to nurture and promote a more sustainable Montana.

We envision a future where all Montanans have access to clean energy, healthy food, sustainable agriculture, and a network that provides leadership, resources, and advocacy.

Photo provided by Elevated Harvest



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COMING TO THE TABLE TOGETHER IN GLASGOW

In the midst of early January snowstorms, I met a diverse group of people interested in learning more about Montana's Cottage Food Law, all gathered in Glasgow for the second of AERO's 2018 Growing Food Businesses workshops. One of those folks was Dyan Carlson, owner of the catering and cooking school, "Table for Six." She visited with me about how she is putting to use some of the knowledge gained from that workshop, and also shared a little about the local food scene in Glasgow.

Dyan recently expanded Table for Six to get a Retail Food License for selling food at a Glasgow coffee shop, The Loaded Toad. Not having retail food experience before, she told me that our workshop helped her ensure she was on the right path for success. "I found it helpful to sit and speak with Valley County Sanitarian, Cam Shipp. Food safety is everything, and the workshop reinforced what I knew, and informed me of things I didn't," Dyan told me. "I can now share with those who are exploring their own ventures the importance of being in compliance with the Cottage Food Law."

The workshop gave Dyan confirmation and confidence in the direction she is taking to incorporate local foods in her business, and she is excited about the numerous opportunities that still await. "July 2018 marked the one year anniversary for my collaboration with The Loaded Toad, and now another coffee shop, Hot Shots Espresso, has

begun selling my Overnight Cheesecake Oats," she said happily. "It's taken 5 years of being in business, but my reputation for producing great food is now firmly established and people are open to trying many of the unfamiliar dishes I offer!" One of her personal favorites is her Spanish Seafood Salad which contains squid and octopus, fresh tomatoes, red onion, olives, and red wine vinaigrette. "I thought for sure no one would buy it. It sold out in 2 days," she said.

Dyan encourages sampling in the private dinners and classes she offers, as well. She prepares items in a classroom style kitchen and presents them family-style. Laughing, she noted, "It's just like your mama told you, 'You don't have to eat it all, you just have to try it.'"

Even though she's been cooking for over 30 years, Dyan never expected she'd own a cooking business in what she calls, "The middle of nowhere." (Glasgow is in Northeast Montana, with a population of about 3,400). Ingredients can be impossible or very difficult to find, especially for the Asian-style cooking classes she hosts. Dyan's menus use items that can be found in nearby markets as much as possible, and she only orders online for items that she can't find locally. "I order extra supplies so that people who take my classes can easily purchase hard-to-find items and reproduce the recipes in their own homes," she said.

Before Dyan moved to Glasgow and started Table For Six, she came from a richly diverse culinary scene outside of Washington, DC. Like many, she found that much of Montana is a food desert (meaning that fruits, vegetables, and other healthy whole foods are difficult to find locally) and she wanted to share her love of different cuisines, educate people on cooking skills, and offer a venue for people to have a night out with great food and a relaxed atmosphere. "I found a hidden subculture of gourmands, and knowing that 'Foodies' will unite and seek out each other, I opened Table for Six in my home in 2013!" she said. At that time, her dining table sat a maximum of 6 guests: four years later in her rented space, she can feed up to 24.

After moving to Montana, Dyan learned quickly that farmers and ranchers stand behind their products. She wants to support friends and neighbors who grow, raise, and offer agricultural products, but due to food safety rules she can't buy



an ungraded beef to use in her meals. “I have a farmer friend who gives me lentils out of his field and I pay him back with finished dishes like Mediterranean Lentil Salad and Cassoulet,” she said warmly. While her friend was harvesting in the fields, she worked in the kitchen with his home-schooled children to make lentil brownies.

When I asked who normally tries her items, Dyan told me, “Most of my dinner guests are local, and tourists are surprised and pleased to find my food at the coffee shops. The items offer healthier options not usually available on the road.”

Making a business a success in a rural area is not easy, and Dyan admitted, “The marketing opportunities in Glasgow are very different since being so remote offers unique challenges not found in larger urban areas, like Billings and Helena.” Facebook posts have helped her business locally; for several years her advertising was all word of mouth and people were confused, misunderstanding her business model. “People called to make reservations like I had a restaurant! And the category limitations of Facebook make it confusing to classify what I actually offer,” she said.

Dyan is eager to see what the future holds, and she is working hard to plan and develop slowly, to make sure it’s right from the beginning—which is how she started Table for Six. “Taking the slow steps and building a reputable business have set me up to have a better chance of surviving and growing. I would like to open a storefront, but there are currently no structures in downtown Glasgow to move into. Realtors are looking, and it will happen eventually, but not as a restaurant,” she notes. If she had opened a storefront when she was brand new to town, she is certain she would have failed. She has worked her way gradually into the community’s trust and interest, and now, “It’s clear that there’s a want and a need for local, healthy foods in rural towns,” Dyan says, and her method of bringing it to the people of Glasgow is proving to be a success.

Check out Dyan’s Facebook page Table for Six and website tableforsixglasgow.com to learn more about this unique Montana business.

- Jackie Heinert



Photos provided by Dyan Carlson

GO WITH YOUR GUT

HOUSE of Ferments



Kombucha, sauerkraut, and kimchi, oh my!

Erin Belmont describes her business as an ‘I don’t have a box to check’ kind of venture. Erin walked into AERO’s Growing Food Businesses workshop already in possession of wholesale and retail licenses. Her goal was to acquire new knowledge and build upon her network of food business owners. It’s safe to say that she can now check those boxes. Her business, House of Ferments, has been providing fermented foods and beverages to the Bitterroot and Missoula Valleys for the past two years.

Among the many questions Erin receives from customers, one of the most interesting is, “Which product has the most units of probiotics?” Although some commercially produced probiotic items have labels detailing how many Colony Forming Units they contain, Erin points out the many variables that go along with live products such as kimchi and sauerkraut. Providing consistent and accurate information about probiotic units is nearly impossible for small batch producers, she says. Besides, the benefits of these live products go well beyond probiotic unit content.

Erin found the networking aspect of the workshop to be the most beneficial element of the day. Meeting other food entrepreneurs and Department of Public Health and Human Safety (DPHHS) staff led to interesting and informative conversations throughout the workshop. The face-to-face interactions made it easier to ask questions and build relationships with attendees over the course of the day.

Erin acknowledges the trials and tribulations food business entrepreneurs experience, and she felt that

one of the values of the workshop was that it reminded her and other attendees that they are not alone. Gaining a better understanding of the Cottage Food Law has allowed Erin to help others understand it, too, and break down the barriers for them. Erin notes that acquiring a Cottage Food License is a great way to get started without a significant initial investment. She finds working with the state has been pleasant and easy, as well as connecting with Ravalli County sanitarians.

When asked what her top reason for starting her business was, Erin struggled to pick just one. She had explored fermenting for some time and then reached a point where she told herself, “Go big or go home.” Since fermented food and beverages are a current health trend right now, and more people are thinking about their gut health and overall immune system, Erin saw a potential opportunity in something that she was already doing. Staying committed to local food and resources is a huge driving force in Erin’s life. As a consumer, she wants to be eating local all the time - restaurants, grocery stores, in her house, etc.

The Bitterroot Valley provides many opportunities for local food to those who live there and who pass through. Erin describes the abundance of hardworking people who grow and make food there, and says she’d like to see even more local food businesses. The fermented food business is a good way to get local food during the ‘lean time’ in Montana’s climate zone - winter. Eating local supports her neighbors, Erin says, and impacts the local economy: “It’s a way to be a part of your community.”



Photos provided by Erin Belmont



As of September 2018, House of Ferments will be two years old. Right now, all of their buyers are local, but Erin is contemplating an online market in the future. Local means something different to everyone, she notes. How people define local makes a big difference - whether when we say local we're talking about within our watershed, our region, the state of Montana, or the country. Idaho is within fifty miles of Erin's business, so for her that constitutes a local market. Currently, her market consists of the Bitterroot and Missoula Valleys, and she is exploring opportunities to break into the Helena market. Erin notes that if everyone bought local, there wouldn't be a need for an online market because each region would be supporting their local businesses. In an ideal world, Erin said she would prefer not to have online sales, noting the environmental benefits of having fewer trucks to move products from place to place. Distribution is a hurdle as margins become tighter when you add players to the system - the distributor, grocery store, etc., she points out. "These things all add up. I don't want my product to be a luxury item, I want it to be a part of people's everyday food," Erin emphasizes.

Erin hasn't had any trouble networking with other local producers in the Bitterroot Valley. Friendly folks are easy to find and eager to talk about what they've learned through different farming, ranching and food businesses experiences. She has connected with many producers outside of the Bitterroot during her time as a vendor at the Clark Fork Market in Missoula. At this stage, she is still working on planning and identifying what her

sourcing needs will be each season. Periodic gaps in produce are filled by the Western Montana Growers Cooperative.

As Erin describes her business communication strategies, she places a lot of emphasis on expectation management. "It's important to be really clear with your expectations and understand other parties' expectations as you develop and build upon your business agreements," she says. "Contracts are really important, regardless of your relationship to that person prior to the business conversation."

Erin finds putting her business out into the world to be challenging at times. Developing a marketing strategy amidst the constant barrage of social media streams can make her head spin. Erin reminds herself from time to time of what's important to her and her business - staying true to what she's doing and why she's doing it. "Marketing is a forever battle," Erin proclaims. By and large, she much prefers one-on-one interactions with customers via demonstrations at grocery stores or conversations at the farmers market. Erin acknowledges that there is still quite a bit of public education needed regarding fermented foods.

Erin describes the value of organizations such as AERO and CFAC as helping small businesses and food producers in general. There are a lot of programs, workshops, and classes that exist that she can't attend due to her schedule, but Erin would like to see these educational opportunities continued to be offered all over the state so more folks in different communities can attend. Erin also describes the wheelhouse of skills that small business owners are expected to have, and that wearing seven different hats and wearing them all well is not an easy feat.

An area that Erin sees a need for more assistance is in the realm of branding and marketing. "Have you seen my logo?" she says, laughing.

Competing with national brands on the shelves in grocery stores is very challenging. Stay tuned, however, for a new look for House of Ferments in the near future. Thanks to a Montana Department of Agriculture Growth Through Agriculture Grant, Erin is currently developing a new logo and a new look for her business. Soon enough people will say, "Have you seen that logo?" as they cover their computers and laptops with House of Ferments stickers!

- Kaleena Miller

YOU CAN'T CONTAIN THIS BUSINESS!



Photos provided by Elevated Harvest

Brittany Morelund became an accidental presenter at the Growing Food Businesses workshop held in Joliet in February 2018. A Freight Farmer who grows her produce in a shipping container, all the workshop attendees were immediately curious about Brittany's operation, and she graciously answered their questions, adding a touch of real-life humor and humbly speaking of her business's success.

Aside from her extensive knowledge of indoor farming and sustainable growing methods, she has a way with food, and she provided a buffet of all-local meal and snack items for attendees. Watching a mega-snowstorm outside while eating a salad of fresh greens picked from their freight that morning was sensational, and the other items she brought (Kalispell Creamery parfaits with Cream of the West granola!) were also outstanding.

Brittany's Luther, Montana business is called "Elevated Harvest," and they grow heirloom varieties of lettuces, leafy greens, and herbs in an up-cycled shipping freight container. The

hydroponic vertical indoor farm is energy efficient and uses 90% less water to sustain a nearly 2 acre pesticide and herbicide free environment. Launched in 2016 with her husband Ben, Elevated Harvest offers local, fresh, quality greens year-round through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares and at restaurants in the Red Lodge area, effectively shrinking the distance from farm to fork.

Brittany shared with us her experience at the workshop, and how their farm is doing. She told us, "The most helpful aspect for me ended up being the networking - especially meeting folks from Lake County Community Development Corporation who subsequently were a great resource for setting up my UPC code," she said. A UPC is a Universal Product Core, or bar-code, for scanning products and prices. "I've been able to pass along that information to other farmers looking to get into grocery stores who had the same misconception that UPCs are tedious and expensive."

Since the workshop's primary focus was on the Montana Food Modernization Law (also referred to

elevated harvest



as the Cottage Food Law), the Department of Public Health and Human Services and AERO placed a heavier emphasis on these types of businesses. However, many of the attendees throughout all the workshops had questions outside the scope of Cottage Food, and it was helpful to have presenters and experts from different realms of food production to tackle those questions. Take Elevated Harvest as an example: “It clarified that our business squarely falls under wholesale licensing requirements and is not a cottage food business,” Brittany said. “Although I have ideas for future cottage food ventures, especially ways to create a value added product from our produce, I’m holding off for the time being.”

Her wish for future additional resources from AERO and others would involve assistance walking her through creating an on-farm food safety plan. “I have done this on my own, but sitting with an expert would be incredibly helpful!” she admitted.

Brittany and her husband feel that staying and supporting “local” is extremely important in their lives. “I started farming simply because growing wholesome produce that nourishes my neighbors and family was a calling - the nature of farm work is so invigorating, noble, challenging, and incredibly humbling.”

She told us, “Local food is of utmost importance because it strengthens our local economy. And in an age where the global economy outsources everything (jobs, environmental destruction, human connections) creating strong ties to simple things like who makes your clothes or grows your food enriches life so deeply.”

In towns like Red Lodge, an hour south of Billings, the community is very close, yet also a major stop on tourists’ travels to the Beartooth Highway and Yellowstone National Park. Brittany and Ben have found success in working with some local restaurants and smaller grocery stores, and community members eagerly sign up for their CSA. In the works for Elevated Harvest and other producers in

the area is the Yellowstone Valley Food Hub, which has spun off of the Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council. This coalition of producers in Eastern Montana aims to revitalize their regional agricultural system, which once met 70% of Montana’s food needs. Brittany and Ben are deeply involved in this endeavor, but find that everyone is so busy and these projects take time to gain funding and develop into a reality.

Most of the workshops wound down with networking, chatting, and informal conversations, but the Joliet workshop continued with Brittany and a few other producers describing their businesses’ challenges with Montana’s food laws. The other attendees and I were so interested and time flew by. It was an exceptional closing to a great day, with plentiful positivity and sharing. We are so very glad to have such passionate producers in our state, and look forward to the exciting projects they are bringing to life!

- Jackie Heinert



FRESH PASTA, ANYONE?

Kim Gilchrist entered the Hamilton Growing Food Businesses workshop with two hats on her head: a potential food business owner, and a resource provider. Learning the rules and understanding the steps through the workshop made her feel much more comfortable thinking about launching her own small business - either in pasta-making, or running a small farm stand: “It made the whole process feel less intimidating than it seemed prior to attending the workshop,” Kim said.

As a resource provider, Kim attended the workshop wearing her Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC) hat, where she works as the non-profit’s Food Access Program Manager, promoting equal access to healthy local food, including coordinating the Double Snap Dollars Program for Missoula. “I work frequently with Farmers’ Markets, and I get a lot of questions about various rules from vendors and market managers,” Kim said. “I received a call from someone the day after the workshop asking about micro-greens; I was able to direct them to their local sanitarian.” In Missoula, sanitarians are available in-person and

accessible,” Kim said.

At the workshop, Kim learned more about Montana’s broad definition of a farmers’ market, and was excited to realize that she and her partner could start a farm stand outside their house as a side business. Zoning concerns are not an issue, as a Missoula County sanitarian has previously approved a farm stand at a home in Missoula. The farm stand idea appeals to Kim because her neighborhood in Missoula is technically considered a food desert, and she would like to help the availability of good local foods increase. The conversation started with their local economic development agency, where Kim began exploring various possibilities of starting a market stand with local gardeners. She’s still considering the homemade pasta business, as well, as no one is doing this at the Missoula farmers’ markets and she sees a unique niche and possibility. She learned from the workshop that dried pasta falls within the realm of the Cottage Food Law. Fresh pasta, however requires a different food license, but one that is still in the realm of possibilities for Kim.





Kim is attracted to the lifestyle and schedule of the small business owner: she feels the urge to build something. Owning a small business could potentially lead down that path - and be a fun learning process, she says. Local businesses allow for creative ideas with a human scale, and contributing to a positive, healthy community environment is important to Kim. “I want to support my friends and neighbors, as well,” she says.

Networking in the food and agriculture world around the state is relatively easy for Kim, who has readily connected with individuals and resources on the local level and through her role at CFAC. The peer support is genuine, she says, and she’s witnessed peer-to-peer connections and relationships leading to many opportunities for folks. Workshops, classes, and field days held by AERO, MSU Extension, and NRCS all provide a positive learning atmosphere and another way to connect aspiring food business owners and farmers with resources they need.

One unique challenge that the Missoula community faces is that there are so many events taking place at any point in time that it can be hard to cut through the clutter to get the word out about CFAC events, Kim says. While it’s great to have so many local opportunities, CFAC’s marketing challenge, and goal, is to reach audiences beyond the choir. If people are not already invested or knowledgeable about the local food scene, Kim says, the challenge is to find common language to connect with those individuals and reach a broader audience.

Putting her personal business hat back on, Kim says she took a lot away from AERO’s workshop. She gained new knowledge about rules and logistics, generated creative new ideas, and drafted next steps for her business plan. From the very beginning stages of the workshop, Kim was on the lookout for other resource providers - business plan experts, technical assistance, marketing research experts, and feasibility study resource providers, with whom she could build connections, and continue to grow her broad resource network.

- Kaleena Miller



Photos provided by Kim Gilchrist

FROM MANGOES IN MAUI, TO CHICKPEAS IN A FOOD TRUCK

In our conversation, Sarah Manuel of Havre admitted that Maui's local food opportunities may be a little better than the Hi-line's, but the draw of being back in Montana and connecting local food to consumers was too strong to ignore. I met Sarah at one of AERO's 2018 Growing Food Businesses Workshops where she, her mother Crystal, and 15 others braved a Havre winter storm to share and learn about Montana's Food Modernization Laws.

Sarah recently opened Streatery, a local food truck located outside the Triple Dog Brewery in Havre, and I called to learn about her desire to open a new type of eatery in Havre - one that focuses on using Montana's finest foods.

papayas for the farm stand," she recalls. Once the owner found out Sarah knew how to cook, he had her set up a Farm Tour and Farm to Table Dinner, hoping that she would stay on as a chef and develop this enterprise. But Sarah was heading home to help her family for the summer, specifically for the Montana Organic Association's Farm Tour, held at her family's Prairie Grass Ranch, south of Havre. Sarah, her mother Crystal, and chef Claudia Krevat of Claudia's Mesa, made the most mouthwatering Farm to Table meal, using as many local and organic ingredients as they could get their hands on. I was fortunate to attend the tour with my kids, and it was a visual and tasteful experience we will not forget.



Sarah attended culinary school, and after graduation headed off on a World Wide Opportunity on Organic Farm (WWOOF) adventure in Maui. At her first farm, she participated in the actual ground-breaking, an exciting time of planting seeds, setting up beehives, and getting a Farm Stand going. Then she finished off the experience at "Rancho Relaxo," a well-established permaculture farm in upcountry Maui. "The owner, a 70 year old man, was so knowledgeable, and I worked with bees, tilapia ponds, chickens, and picked mangoes and

Seeing the success of, and excitement around, the day's meals, and considering the opportunities for using her family's beef and pork, Sarah wanted to create a food service establishment that would source locally from her family and others around Montana. "Local food just isn't that popular in Havre like it is in Missoula, Bozeman, or Helena, but the potential is there. It boils down to the truth that local is the only thing that makes sense," Sarah told me when I asked her why it was so important to her. "I don't want to serve people food if I don't know where it came from." If items can't be local, then she aims for organic products, knowing that the

USDA's organic inspections are stringent and ensure quality food. "I make it a point to visit a farm or establishment to make the connection --I want to make sure everything I'm serving is high quality!" she says.

Sarah told us that she learned about the opportunity of a food truck while at the Growing Food Businesses workshop, and the wheels started turning right away. Meeting the Hill County Sanitarians at the workshop was helpful, and she learned that her food business would not fall under a Cottage Food enterprise. Similar to the 2016 workshop attendee sentiments, she reported that the networking and discussions were valuable. After the workshop, she met with Sanitarians Sadie and Clay, showed them a rough draft of the menu and floor plan, passed the inspection, paid the licensing fees and it was a go! "For a long time I was intimidated about it, but after talking to Sadie, she made it so smooth," Sarah said. "It is literally their job to help people and share their knowledge to get your business going."

She named the food truck, "Streatery," and held a successful soft opening on St. Patrick's day. Her ingredients span the state; she uses Montana Flour and Grain (Fort Benton), The Oil Barn safflower oil and produce from Quinn's Farm (Big Sandy), dairy products from Lifeline Farm (Victor) and Amaltheia Organic Dairy (Belgrade), and most of the meat she serves is from her parents' Prairie Grass Ranch. "At the workshop, I met Charley Overbay from Quinn's Farm and talked to him about sourcing potatoes and safflower oil. He is also going to provide orach and other produce," she told me. "I have LOTS of ideas and plans--like Flathead cherry dressings, philly cheesesteak using our meat and Lifeline cheese, Amaltheia dairy for my feta.... The sanitarians want a draft menu, so I have a lot of freedom to come up with meals, as long as I am executing it in a sanitary manner."

Along with staying busy creating her menu, Sarah is in the process of starting a meat distribution company; she is navigating the Department of Livestock regulations and licensing, and deciding whether to sell to individuals or out of state. She said she wishes AERO or other organizations could provide workshops and training on the meat side, and that Jan Tusick's insight from Lake County Community Development Corp and Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center was helpful. "I'm working with restaurant owners in Helena, Missoula, and Great Falls to try and get them to use Prairie Grass meat, but still could use help in keeping the meat in-state, and more local."

She tries to attend workshops all over Montana to learn more, but it's not always possible; the distance



is a challenge, and finding time to get away can be tough. AERO planned the workshops in the winter to be off-season, and we hit a rural component of Montana, but there are still more folks to reach and more information to teach!

Sarah is off on an amazing food business adventure, even if it is mainly in Havre--for now. She has taken Streatery to MSU Northern for a tribute concert, may set up shop at the summer's brewfest, and can possibly go to different counties if she decides to. But for now, Streatery is located Thursday through Saturdays at the Triple Dog brewery, catering to all those driving by and looking for a local meal. "We get a lot of the brewery crowd, and quite a few Canadians passing through," she said - so it's feasible to say, she already has an international following!

- Jackie Heinert

Photos provided by Sarah Manuel

DREAMING OF PEPPERS

Jonathan Burras dreams of growing peppers and creating value added products with them such as peppered jellies and vinegars. Jonathan attended the workshop both as an individual with a food business dream and as an employee of Helena's Real Food Market and Deli, where he was responsible for local food procurement. At the Growing Food Businesses Workshop in Helena, he learned that his business idea falls outside of the Cottage Food Law, and so he will have to explore other avenues for licensure. He's not intimidated, however.

"Why peppers? I just love peppers!" Jonathan exclaims. During the 2018 season, he planted between 15-20 different varieties of peppers, noting how well the waxed peppers and Triple Divide Seed (a Montana-based organic seed cooperative) varieties grow in this climate. After listing some of the producers who grow and sell peppers fresh during the summer in Montana, he notes that he hasn't been able to find value added Montana pepper products, and that he dreams of filling that niche.

"My southern roots have influenced my business dreams – I want to make the peppered vinegar I grew up with," says Jonathan, who grew up on the North Carolina coast. Jonathan has been thinking about the time-line to make his dream a reality: he needs at least another year to launch the business now that he has learned more about the steps needed between now and selling that first value-added pepper item.

Jonathan appreciated the opportunity to connect in person with County Sanitarians and DPHHS representatives at the workshop. Being able to pitch ideas and discuss the process of food business development face to face was the most valuable element of the workshop for him. "It was much more beneficial to communicate in person, compared to emailing back and forth or even a phone conversation," Jonathan said. "I learned about what small value added producers can and cannot do. I shared what I learned at the workshop with coworkers at the Real Food Market who weren't able to attend."

Jonathan views his future pepper business as a way he can help support operating a fully functioning farm, combining seasonal vegetable production with value-added off-season products. His dream is to run a successful food business, growing and selling fresh peppers and other produce during the summer and

fall, and filling the production gap in the off months, which is particularly relevant here in Montana with our short growing season, with those value-added jellies and vinegars. "It brings me great joy to grow food and see people enjoy eating it," Jonathan said. "To be a producer in Montana, you need infrastructure and/or value added products."

Jonathan's network is slowly growing; it's been challenging for him to break into circles of farming networks, both in the region and around the state. AERO events have played an important role in his connection to other farmers around the state, he said. At the 2017 AERO Expo in Butte, he met Helena farmers and small business owners Kate and Ian McLean, and they hatched a plan to share land and grow food together.

The financial aspect of farming is challenging for Jonathan. He mentions business-oriented classes as an area of need in the Helena region and Montana generally. He would also support, and hopes to see, future legislation that helps smaller scale producers and works to level the playing field. Making a living farming can be daunting, he acknowledges, but he believes it's possible for him with all the resources available now and those that will come through networking, workshops, and legislation. As for what exactly is in store for Jonathan next, he's not entirely sure. But one thing he knows is that peppers are in his future.

- Kaleena Miller



AERO file photo

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

“I just like tea,” Heather Foslund, owner of Helena-based Ascension Teas told me, when I asked why she started her business. Heather is fairly new to the Helena area, and wanted an avenue to integrate into the community and make connections. She had a business idea, and was able to attend AERO’s 2018 Growing Food Businesses workshop. These workshops provided a unique opportunity for people who have ideas swimming in their heads to meet face to face with health officials. She gained enough information to take the next step to starting her local tea business.

“I felt the workshop really opened up with finding out what people wanted to know about--the burning questions--which was useful to gear the workshop towards the attendees,” she said, when we connected afterwards. In the social time during lunch, Heather met the local Sanitarian and DPHHS officials, who were eager to help. “I already knew about the cottage food law, and kept starting with my idea and then chickening out over the years, and so I talked to Eric (Lewis and Clark Co. Sanitarian) at the workshop and pitched my idea.” Eric had recently started the job and wasn’t familiar with the cottage food requirements for tea, so she sent him an email with her ideas, and he did some research and helped her figure out what would fall under the Cottage Food law.

They determined that there are many different guidelines with licensing and registering. For example, her items need to be sold face to face. “Under my Farmers’ Market registration, I can’t ship my teas, but I can drop them off directly to buyers, or sell them at a Farmers’ Market,” Heather told me. “After registering with the Secretary of State and doing the Cottage Food registration process, I was just going through the motions,” she admitted, and getting booth space at the Helena Farmers’ Market made the venture real. “Some of the best advice I heard (from listening to marketing and entrepreneur podcasts) when considering starting a business, is, ‘Start before you’re ready,’ and so that’s what I did!” she joked.

So what is her interest in tea? “I stumbled on Teavana (loose-leaf and herbal infusion teas), and was amazed by the complexity of blends. I wanted all my friends to try these drinks!” she said. The more she learned about tea, and its close relationship with culture and environmental ethics, the more interested she became in the



process. “Farmers treat their tea plant as an individual, and a lot of people don’t know that the same plant produces all of the tea varieties (the white tea, green tea, black tea etc),” Heather told me.

When I asked Heather if the workshop gave her any ideas for new opportunities or caused her to make major changes, she offered, “The Cottage Food law is restrictive, because of the face to face component. I would like to donate gift sets of teas to fundraisers, but that isn’t allowed.” She would also like to register new recipes, using fruits and herbs from local farmers to incorporate into blends. Using



Photos provided by Jackie Heinert

Montana materials would allow her to market more to the local-minded consumers, which there are a lot of in the Helena area. She currently sources her tea from a direct tea trade group, “Tealet,” where the owner screens farms for organic practices, rainforest alliance participation, and quality and environmentally-friendly harvest techniques are used. Her blends are personalized with other dry ingredients and extracts to make an enchanting drink.

One major benefit Heather has with her small business is that she is able to take baby steps and go slow, and only have a small inventory. This method lets her perform detailed quality control and modify her teas based on what people like. “I’m dependent on word of mouth a lot. Social media is tough - unless you ‘like’ my facebook page you won’t know details about the tea,” she admitted. Similar to other workshop attendees’ sentiments, she mentioned that something that would be helpful for AERO to do is assist with marketing and advertising, and the new Facebook platform “Shopify.”

Heather is very creative, designing her labels and tea blend names with a nod to area landmarks (think Vigilante Oolong and Mann Gulch Spiced Tea) and is working at marketing herself at her booth, but doesn’t always have the time to spend on the outreach aspect. “After listening to a YouTube broadcast about marketing, I taped a bright yellow

sign for “ready to go drinks” up at my booth, and sold out of both hot drinks!”

Heather’s new business is easily establishing connections and she is always coming up with new

ideas and marketing strategies, and she cited the Helena Farmers’ Market and the AERO workshop as a great way to kick off her business. The Farmers’ Market setting is a very neighbor-to-neighbor atmosphere, and she looks forward to continuing the seasons with her co-marketers.

Some of the connections she’s making have given her ideas like starting a “tea club,” similar to a CSA, where each month she would create and deliver tea blends for the members. “I could extend my season to 52 weeks, instead of the shorter 35 week farmers’

market season.” In addition, she has thought about doing face to face sales with party favor teas for bridal showers, weddings, and anniversaries. But for the summer, Heather prefers to stay small, selling mostly at Farmers’ Markets and face-to-face, and will explore branching out to retail or restaurants someday.

If you would like to find and try Heather’s Ascension Teas, stop by the Helena Farmers’ Market, or contact her through her Facebook page. She offers hot and iced tea (depending on weather) to purchase while you are shopping the market, with a different blend each week.

Along with extensive knowledge about the blends, she will share interesting information, such as the fact that each tea has a specific temperature where you can taste different notes. “With black tea, you drop it in at boiling. The water for green tea needs to cool down a little, otherwise it becomes bitter,” she explained. And I asked if there were opinions about using sweeteners, and she smiled and said, “Some of my blends use sugar. It’s like salting food, where it helps the flavor come out a bit.”

-Jackie Heinert



PUTTING THE TABLE BACK ON THE FARM

Like many of the individuals who attended the 2018 Growing Food Business Workshop series, Catie Demets came wearing multiple hats. She works as a Beginning Farmer Resource Coordinator at Missoula's Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC), and she has dreams of launching a pizza farm in the area.

Prior to the workshop, Catie had visited briefly with her sanitarian and found the prospect of all the paperwork and logistics for starting her own business to be overwhelming. The workshop provided a nice launching off point for meeting with the sanitarian afterwards, and helped to make the possibility of her own small business endeavor seem more feasible. The specificity of information offered at the workshop was on point, she said, not too much as to be overwhelming, but not too little to leave her with lingering questions. Experts in the room were helpful, as was the one-on-one time built into the day's schedule. As a relatively new employee at CFAC, cottage food questions hadn't fallen in Catie's lap yet, but when they do, she'll be ready to refer curious folks to the sanitarian and explain what they can offer.

Following the workshop and the connection she made there, Catie feels that there are more possibilities for value added local food business, and she is more optimistic about the ability of farms to add another revenue stream to their business through cottage food and value-added production.

Despite the popularity of the locavore movement, there is still a huge need for people to feel connected to their farmers, their food and their community, Catie says. Locally produced food is an avenue for addressing some of the larger issues of our time - including climate change and consumerism, to name just a few.

Catie envisions a pizza farm in her future. She'll take an existing farm - and add a pizza oven, closing the loop on the local experience. She calls it "putting the table back on the farm." Mirthful Farm (her future business name) will grow ingredients that go on the pizzas that folks eat on site. Down the road, she'd like the project to spin off into something much larger, which would have a strong social justice component. Aspects of the business which could contribute to that social justice element might include a sliding scale to pay for products, as well as bringing on youth interns.

Many of Catie's connections to producers in the region were established during her Environmental Studies graduate program experience, when she was a PEAS farm intern and a teaching assistant at the University of Montana. She led farm field trips every Friday, where students learned about the many facets of operating a farm business. Catie built upon that network through several Lake County Community Development Corporation research projects, including poultry cooperative research as well as working with Triple Divide Seed Co-op.

Beyond the network in Western Montana, Catie comments on the natural divide that distance provides between that area of the state and the rest of it. "As service providers, we can all keep working at bridging those divides across the state," she says, helping expand opportunities and local resilience.

- Kaleena Miller



Photo provided by Caitie Demets

HELENA'S URBAN FARM GAL

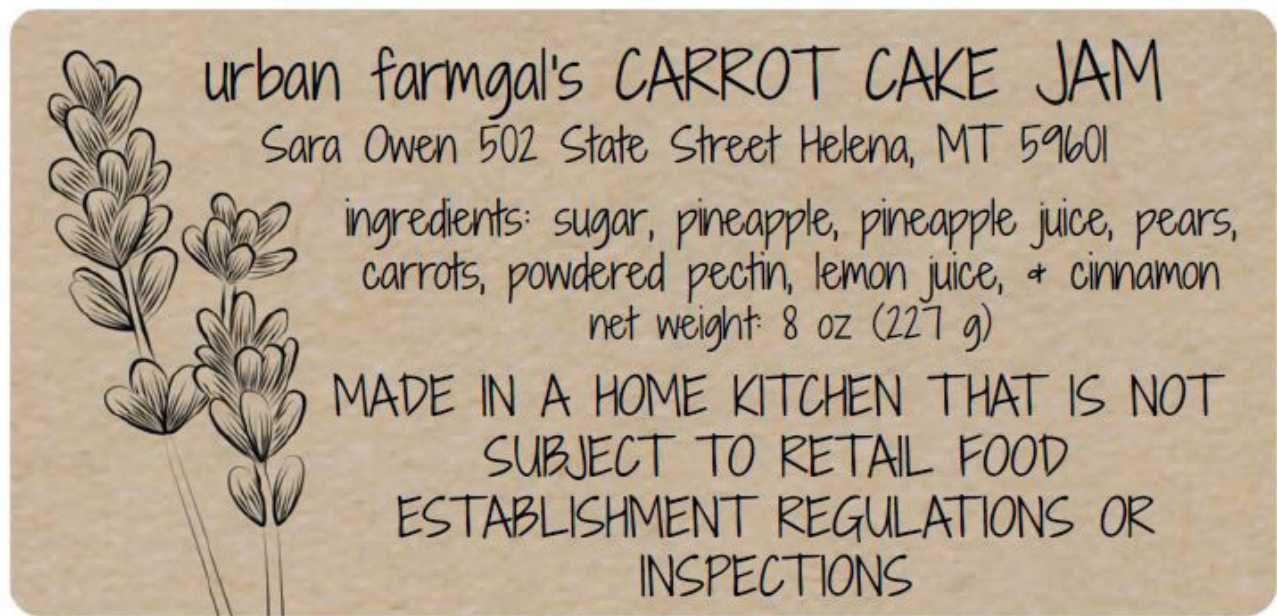


Sara Owen, otherwise known as the Urban Farm Gal, is never short of creative food projects. She walked into the Growing Food Businesses workshop with a list of questions and walked out of it with ideas and inspiration.

Among the highlights of the day, Sara said that talking directly to the county sanitarian was at the top of the list. Establishing trust and having a sanitarian as a partner throughout the food business journey is a great way to ensure an enjoyable and painless process, she said. The impact of having that face-to-face interaction with the sanitarian was so significant that, after the workshop, Sara reached out to a friend of hers who she knew was ready to start her own cottage food business. Sara shared her workshop materials with her friend, brought her up to speed, and then brought her along for a follow-up meeting together with their county sanitarian.

As for her own goals, Sara attributes the progress she's made in her business plan to what she picked up at the Growing Food Business workshop. The workshop helped to clarify some of the do's and don'ts of the Cottage Food requirements, she said. For example, learning the approved list of fruits for jams and jellies was very helpful. She learned that she can use some previously published recipes such as from the Ball company, rather than having to invent her own.

Sara explains that she's turned her front yard into a garden and she wants to convert some of what she grows into value added products. After learning about the dried herb requirements (such as the specific temperatures at which the herbs must be dried), she's decided not to go that route. Backpacking meals are a new idea of hers, and she has brainstormed some bagged dish names like



“Curry in a Hurry.” She is developing several jams and jellies, and considering hot chocolate mixes and maybe powdered fruit flavors, as well. Potential markets for her products include the Helena Local CSA, which she has helped to coordinate in previous seasons, as well as farmers’ markets and cherry festivals. In 2018, the Helena Local CSA had thirty six members, sourced local vegetables from four farmers, secured eggs from three sources, and occasionally had honey contributed to the weekly bounty.

Sara is always looking for new niches and creative product ideas such as peach and thai basil jam. If people love it, she shares the recipe and makes a video to show how to make it. You can find her videos on YouTube if you search for “Urban Farmgal.” “I like food and I want people to have good, tasty food,” says Sara. “I’d like to make one person’s day a little better.”

One barrier is the affordability for small diversified farmers in the valley. Maybe exploring a producer incubator program in the future is in order, she muses, where folks can lease small plots and share tools and storage space. Sara would also like to see more seasonal eating celebrated, so more people know what is in season, and how to prepare it.

Most of the growers in Sara’s network she met through the Helena Local CSA. Saturday Farmers’ Markets in Helena are tough for her to attend because she travels regularly. One of the challenges Sara encounters is marketing for the CSA. There are many Helenans who haven’t heard of their program despite advertising in the paper, on the radio, and of course in AERO’s [Abundant Montana Directory](#). Sara hopes that Helena Local can grow more in the future.

Reducing food miles is another important aspect to Sara as she thinks about the locality of food. Sara has also been influenced by Barbara Kingsolver’s book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. She believes we should all be supporting local growers as it will help us get back to our roots in agriculture and our connection to the earth. “It’s hard to make a living as a farmer, particularly a local, diversified, small farm,” Sara said. “You deserve to be rewarded.”

- Kaleena Miller



Photos provided by Sara Owen

TRYING OUT LOCAL IN MALTA

Michelle Mackey attended AERO's Growing Food Businesses workshop in Glasgow in January, 2018. Originally from Dodson in Phillips County, Michelle lives in Malta with her husband, Thayne, and their two kids. She and her husband own and operate Hi-Line Kitchen and Processing Center, a certified commercial kitchen for "farm to plate processing" and Brookside Woolen Mill, which produces and sells pillows, duvets, batting, and more Montana wool products.

Michelle is a self-taught baker, and so gifted that people told her she should start selling her baked goods. Michelle's mother owns Glasgow flower shop, "Tulips and Treasures," and so Michelle, who also works there, began selling her baked items at the shop. She originally wanted to build a commercial kitchen to bake items with the intention of increasing traffic to the flower shop. Part of the year she works full-time at Tulips and Treasures,

working eight hours a day, then going home to bake items to sell there. With all these enterprises going on simultaneously, Michelle thought the Growing Food Businesses Workshop could be a valuable learning opportunity! She attended the workshop, along with her husband, to network, find out what others are doing, and visit with her local sanitarian.

The Mackeys had their kitchen certified as a commercial kitchen, so that they don't have to worry about producing food for sale in their house, but they do have concerns about keeping in compliance with the cottage food rules. A few local cottage food registrants have asked about using their commercial kitchen, because it could be handy for them with their own startup ideas. For example, a pizza place in Glasgow wants to make BBQ sauce, but can't make and sell it commercially in their own restaurant kitchen, so Michelle has made the facility available to rent. She noted that there are mustard



producers in the state that would like to use it, but aren't able to source ingredients produced in Montana, such as vinegar, and so have not committed to making the product yet.

Michelle says, "There are lots of people around here with ideas, and they all say, 'We used to make anything we wanted until the laws changed,' and now they are deterred a little to try anything." Michelle is the only one using the kitchen right now, but they are planning to hold classes down the road. The flower shop where she sells her products is located next to a coffee shop that doesn't offer baked goods, so Michelle gets a lot of customers coming in to buy her treats to go with their coffee. (The coffee shop has since closed, but that hasn't stopped anyone from coming in for her baked items!)

Michelle appreciated having Cam Shipp (County Sanitarian) at the workshop to be able to ask him specific questions about her concerns and opportunities. "It's not that we were coming up with hard questions to try and trick him or find an easy way out, but all of us have questions and want to be legal. We want to try to figure out specifics for each idea or plan," she told me.

We were happy to hear that the Growing Food Businesses workshop gave Michelle MORE ideas for her business. The lunch caterer (Dyan, from Table for Six) talked about using more Montana products in her business, which inspired Michelle to plan a Farm to Table garden meal. Michelle, Thayne, and their gardener Liz have planted seven acres of veggies and also put up a greenhouse for growing starts, and are now able to grow a lot of the food for these meals. Michelle supports local food opportunities in the area and shops at Bear Paw meats in Havre when she can. "Havre is 100 miles away, but in Montana terms that is still pretty local!" she says.

At the time she first started baking, she didn't have a "local food" mindset, but now finds it important and easy to find Montana products, once she started looking. She realized she can get flour grown and milled in Montana, sugar from Montana sugar beets, and use her own eggs, and those are the three main ingredients for almost everything she bakes. "I wish I could buy Montana products closer to Malta, instead of in bigger cities like Missoula," she admitted. With her busy schedule, she doesn't travel often to get products from too far away, limiting her ability to get specialty items.

When asked how her business is growing, Michele says, "A lot of my advertising is through emails, texts, word of mouth, and Facebook." She and Thayne have many plans for bringing local food and

awareness to the region, and are part of AERO's Montana Food Economy Initiative (MFEI) project. MFEI supports the development of a regional food economy through the use of values-based supply chains and information sharing, and the Malta region has been identified as needing support and a plan. Their recent Farm-to-Table dinner coincided with a MFEI community meeting, and highlighted local products and the interest the Malta area has in local food.

It was truly a memorable experience to eat on the Hi-Line Kitchen's patio, look over at the garden and at our table-mates, and realize that most of what we were eating had a connection to someone there. Even in remote areas of Montana, people are finding ways to get, and share, the best food.

- Jackie Heinert



Photos provided by Jackie Heinert

COTTAGE FOOD A HUGE BENEFIT TO MONTANA'S ECONOMY

The format of the Growing Food Businesses workshop received Andrea Sarchet's highest praise. Having face to face opportunities and understanding what roles each stakeholder plays in our local food system were very valuable networking exercises for her, especially in her new role as a Food Safety Coordinator for the Montana Department of Agriculture. Throughout the day, Andrea made many new agency and a few producer connections. The value of seeing sanitarians interact with food entrepreneurs and build those relationships necessary to local business growth was very high, she said. Andrea learned about what resources are available through AERO during her time at the workshop, as well, helping to continue the long relationship of resource sharing between AERO and the Department of Agriculture. She now feels more knowledgeable about AERO's programs and comfortable sharing those resources with others in the future, she said, reinforcing the collaborative impact of the workshop series and the importance of bringing all the players to the table.

From time to time, Andrea does find herself fielding cottage food questions from interested parties. Andrea credits the cottage food law with providing a huge benefit to Montana's economy. Through this law, Montanans are able to explore viable business opportunities. In the future, Andrea mentions that listening sessions might be valuable, allowing the state to assess our progress, successes, and challenges with the cottage food law.

Knowing your farmer is so valuable, Andrea says. It allows us to say, "Oh yeah, that is how food is produced!" which can contribute significantly to communities, health, and our local economy. We are seeing genuine progress in Montana, she says: as a state, we are growing more of our own produce, and seeing more of it in grocery stores. Diners are requesting more local food in restaurants. Economic development, knowledge of where our food is coming from and the development of a closer knit community are all important components of a local food system. We need to continue working towards an economy that is diversified in what we grow, that contributes to more sustainability and resilience in our food system, she says. Food deserts are prevalent in some parts of the state. If folks in those communities don't have local food, they don't have fresh food.

Andrea comments that Montana has room to grow in terms of a network of peers. "We've made strides as resource agencies to get folks through the hoops, and we see creative business ideas becoming viable businesses, paving the way for others," she says. "But there could be better communication among growers regarding what products they are growing and wanting to sell."

Marketing access and resource identification will continue to be big needs in this field, Andrea says. The annual Montana Food Show hosted by the Montana Department of Agriculture helps address this in some ways. More attention to processed, value added foods will continue to be important in the future, as well. Andrea is committed to working hard for Montana food businesses through her role at the Department of Agriculture.

- Kaleena Miller



Photo provided by Andrea Sarchet

**NOTES? IDEAS? QUESTIONS?
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Plus, visit the Montana Food Economy Initiative forum at

<http://www.mtfoodeconomy.org/forums>

to post a question, get answers, and read what others are trying and learning!



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