Home APPÉTIT

Small eateries are on the rise, thanks to cottage industry laws and shared-use kitchens

COURTESY OF VIRGINIA COX

By **LYDIA HILL**

Virginia Cox is a familiar fixture at the Brazos Valley Farmers' Market, cheerfully chatting with customers from behind her table lined with pickle jars and other sundry goods. She wears a matching necklace and earrings that proclaim her proclivity for the briny cucumber, and a lime green shirt bears her business name, Pickle Your Fancy.

Cox has been a vendor at the market for seven years. But despite her pickles' popularity, it was her hens that first brought her to the event. "I was just going to the market to sell some eggs," she recalls with a laugh. "I really hadn't intended to make a business out of it." When she saw how quickly she sold out of eggs, Cox knew she needed something else to make her time there worthwhile. She began offering herb-infused vinegars and quickly expanded to pickles, becoming the market's main purveyor of the product, she says. Now, she sells 10 different varieties of pickles, such as dill or bread and butter, in addition to other briny vegetables, flavored vinegars, and meat rubs. She also makes and sells jams and jellies, from standard strawberry and blueberry to more unusual tastes like mango habanero or carrot cake.

All of her products are made by her and her husband, Roy, at her home in Hearne. They are among Texas's many food business owners who operate out of their house in accordance with the state's cottage food laws. Along with chefs who are required to use commercial kitchens for their culinary creations, these food entrepreneurs bring handmade goodness to the community.

Home Cooking

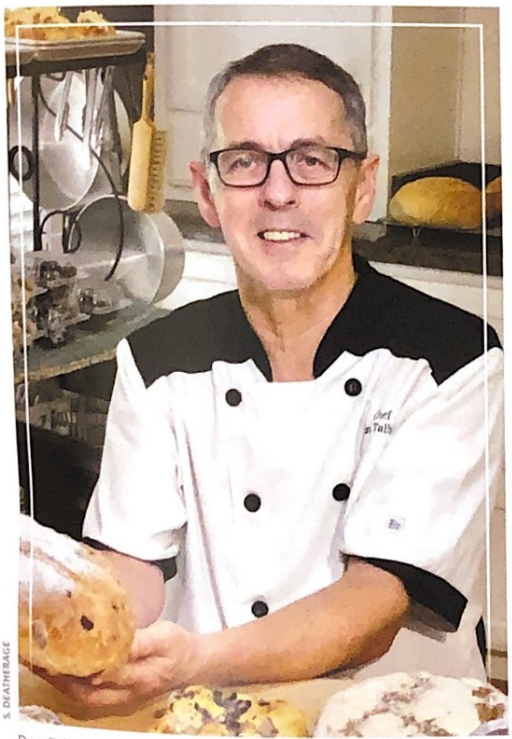
Per cottage food production laws, anyone can sell food made in their home if the product does not have specific time or temperature requirements. Besides obtaining a food handler certification, home cooks do not need a license or inspections, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) website. Cottage chefs can produce a variety of items, from granola to roasted coffee to baked goods such as bread, muffins, cakes, and cookies. A recent update to the law expanded this list with a greater array of pickled fruits and vegetables, Cox says. Although the time commitment for a cottage food business can be demanding, Texas laws make it easy to operate from home, she says. "The cottage food laws are pretty versatile," she adds.

Since Texas passed its first cottage food law in 2011, the number of food entrepreneurs has rapidly grown, according to a Forbes article. In 2017 and 2018, close to 700 people took Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Services' online course Cooking Up a Cottage Food Business, says Julie Prouse, extension associate for AgriLife's Food and Nutrition Unit. "There are so many different reasons people start a cottage food business," she says. "A lot of them get interested in it because everyone talks about how wonderful whatever they like to make is. It's something for them to do as a side business."

ELLEN RITSCHER SACKETT

Virginia Cox makes pickles, jams and jellies, and other goods in her home kitchen to sell at the Brazos Valley Farmers' Market.

S. DEATHERAGE



S. DEATHERAGE

Don Talbott, a retired pastry chef, enjoys making and selling his homemade baked goods, such as apple fritter bread.

The ease of creating food at home appeals to many cottage cooks, such as Don Talbott, who started his business, Delectables by Chef Don, after moving to Bryan four years ago. He retired from his position as an executive pastry chef at casinos throughout the central U.S., in charge of producing enough baked goods to fill a 15,000-square-foot shop. He says he found his own kitchen to be a less complicated option for his Bryan business. "It gave me the chance to make what I like and be where I like," he explains. In his two ovens, he makes sweet and sourdough breads, flaky croissants, hefty cinnamon rolls, and gourmet cookies to sell at the farmers' market.

But a cottage operation can only go so far. Home cooks cannot sell food that requires high or low temperatures, such as meat or dairy, according to the DSHS website. They must also sell and deliver directly to consumers through ordering or farmers' markets, and their business's annual gross income must be less than $50,000, according to the DSHS website. If a food business falls outside these parameters, they must operate in a commercial kitchen. Such a kitchen, however, can be expensive, particularly for a business startup.

Beyond the Cottage

Enter the shared-use kitchen. These spaces provide health-department-certified commercial facilities for multiple food entrepreneurs to rent rather than making the financial commitment of purchasing their own kitchen, says Isabel McPartlin, owner of the shared-use Renegade Bakery and Culinary Studio in Bryan.

A shared-use kitchen "is the next logical step if you want to build a business around your food," she says. Although her kitchen's seven tenants sell directly to consumers — similar to cottage food businesses — their access to commercial facilities gives them a better opportunity to expand, she says.

ISABEL MCPARTLIN

Isabel McPartlin creates and sells cookies and elaborately decorated stuffed apples in her commercial kitchen.

McPartlin's kitchen has also been a space for her to innovate her own food creations, she says. She first purchased the kitchen in 2018 to start selling savory keto-friendly muffins. Since then, she has expanded to sparkly cookies dusted with edible glitter and hand-painted cheesecake-stuffed apples. "I've always been an entrepreneur at heart, and now I have the opportunity to do it," she says.

MANDY CHAHAL

Per cottage food industry laws, Larry Olivarez crafts small-batch ice cream sandwiches and pints in a commercial kitchen in Bryan.

More than 600 shared-use kitchens throughout the nation are helping cooks launch or grow their culinary endeavors, according to a 2020 report by The Food Corridor. Larry Olivarez is one such tenant. His ice cream business, What's Good, is required by cottage industry laws to operate in a commercial kitchen, he says. A search for suitable spaces led him to Sharon Wells's Aquatic Greens Kitchen in Bryan. "I had some kitchen experience, but nothing quite this scale," says Olivarez, who worked in software design for 20 years before deciding to turn his ice cream idea into a reality. "[The kitchen] is available for people like me who have an idea and want to work some stuff out." Olivarez operates What's Good with his wife, Mandy Chahal. They sell handmade ice cream sandwiches and pints, and offer a few flavors each week — from coffee to lemon bar to boom chocolotta — at the farmers' market and The Local at Lake Walk. They are also expanding their catering options and hope to open a small shop one day, he says.

Many food business owners enjoy the same opportunities to develop community connections, whether they're cooking at home or baking in a commercial kitchen. "It's been a lot of fun," Cox says. "You get to know people and they become your friends."

"Food is very special," McPartlin says. "It's the one thing we can all share and experience differently from each other in our own unique way. It brings people together." IN