

CCCC launches Advanced Culinary Incubator

"Visionary" is the word Central Carolina Community College Natural Chef graduate and culinary arts entrepreneur Margo Bennett used to describe the recent creation of the Advanced Culinary Incubator on the college's Pittsboro campus.

"It's not your average community college program," Bennett stated. "CCCC is really a leader in this area."

Begun in August 2012, the Advanced Culinary Incubator is a laboratory cooking course that allows students the opportunity to start their own culinary businesses with sustainable practices and local foods.

And that is just what happened for Margo Bennett and her daughter Katie.

Bennett, co-owner with her husband, Shelly Bennett, of Bennett Farming, in Chatham County, credits the Incubator and its instructors with the growing success of her new culinary procurement business and her daughter's new gluten-free baking company, Katie B Bakes.

"The Incubator provides a vital service to its students by giving us a chance to combine what we have learned with what we are personally passionate about to become entrepreneurs," explained Bennett. "It also helps with all those pieces you don't think about at first, such as book-keeping, transportation, and tax ramifications as well as product shelf life, packaging, and marketing."

Most importantly, she said that the Incubator gives students access to an approved kitchen in which to prepare their food products, a space that Bennett declared is "almost impossible to find."

"Our businesses are a direct result of Chef Gregg Hamm and the culinary school teaching us not only how to cook but how to take it on the road as well," she said.

The Advanced Culinary Incubator was established at the Chatham County Campus for graduates of the college's Natural Chef or Associate in Applied Science in Culinary Arts programs. Students must also be ServSafe certified, and have familiarity with kitchen



Helped launch business . . .

Central Carolina Community College's Natural Chef graduates (from left) Katie and Margo Bennett, a daughter-mother pair from Chatham County, have used the Advanced Culinary Incubator at Central Carolina Community College's Chatham County Campus, in Pittsboro, to help launch their new businesses. Margo, who owns a small sustainable farm with her husband, Shelly Bennett, has recently started Sourced by Bennett Farming, a culinary procurement business that buys local, seasonal farm products then sells them to area restaurants and retailers. Katie B Bakes is Katie's new company, which specializes in gluten-free baked goods.

equipment, rules, and setup. It provides ongoing instruction and guidance in important areas including packaging and labeling laws, food safety, time use and basic culinary skills.

The Incubator, held two days a week, is open to 16 students per semester. It provides access to all kitchen items, including utensils, equipment, ovens, refrigerators, freezers, and storage space.

"The Advanced Culinary Incubator is a huge asset to the community for start-up businesses, not only to use the space but also to have guided instruction and very low cost," said Chef Gregg Hamm, chair of CCCC's Hospitality and Culinary Arts Department and the chief figure responsible for launching the Incubator.

Hamm's idea for starting a kitchen incubator came after touring other incubator facilities with his Natural Chef students, who expressed a keen interest in having a shared kitchen of their own. Now, a year into the Incubator's establishment, Hamm states that "all of the Incubator students are selling goods in one way or another, using local, wholesome foods in their cooking and preserving."

The emphasis of the Advanced Culinary Incubator is on value-added food products - that is, taking the produce grown and using it to make something else, like sauce or jam. It was this value-added

aspect that first interested Bennett and her daughter in the Natural Chef program, a continuing education curriculum emphasizing sustainability, natural health, and the use

of locally raised natural, organic, and whole foods.

They enrolled in the program in August 2011. At that time, Bennett wanted to introduce value-added products to the seasonal harvests of berries, peppers, and tomatoes from the two-acre sustainable Chatham County farm she owns with her husband. As their work became more integrated with program instruction, challenges arose concerning the acquisition of produce from multiple farms.

This was a challenge Bennett was interested in solving, so she started a company, Sourced by Bennett Farming. Bennett describes her role as "a middle woman between farmers and local restaurateurs and retailers," buying farm products then selling to interested parties, making the deliveries of local, seasonal produce herself.

To find out more about the Bennett businesses, visit www.bennettfarming.com and www.katiebbakes.com. For more information about CCCC's Associate in Applied Science in Culinary Arts or its Continuing Education Natural Chef program, visit www.cccc.edu/culinaryarts.