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## Valley Isle food businesses bloom with help, support

By Sara Lin  
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COURTESY MAUI FOOD INNOVATION CENTER

Twelve food entrepreneurs participated in the Maui Food Innovation X-celerator's first cohort in 2016, pictured in the test kitchen at the University of Hawaii Maui College.

The closing of Hawaii's last sugar mill on Maui was the end of an era. But there's a new cadre of innovative food startups and entrepreneurs hoping to write a new chapter for the Valley Isle's agricultural story.

Take Jen Fordyce of Waikapu Pickles. The high school teacher noticed that there were no local pickles sold in stores, only the kind shipped from far away, packed with preservatives. So when a local farmer friend shared his overflow crop with her, she started testing and trying pickle recipes at home.

She decided to attend Maui Startup Weekend, a 72-hour event that challenges participants to take a business idea and launch a new company by the end.

“At the time that I went to that event, I had made one jar of pickles ever,” she said. At the end of the weekend, she had the viable beginnings of a business plan. So she tried it.

A year after launching, she was making enough pickles to sell at farmers markets, but she needed help growing to the next level. Making pickles takes few ingredients — you can count them on one hand. “But running a business, especially on an island where there’s no jar factory, there are so many other elements to it,” she said.

Fordyce was accepted to the Maui Food Innovation X-celerator. During the course — which meets one night a week for eight weeks — she and 11 other food entrepreneurs learned how to grow their businesses and expanded their network of contacts and mentors to troubleshoot problems. MFI also has access to a large test kitchen that enabled Fordyce to increase production. Waikapu Pickles is working on entering Whole Foods Maui.

Dawn Anderson of bRaw energy bars approached the food accelerator for similar reasons. The former chiropractor and travel director started out selling vegan energy bars at the Kihei Farmers Market.

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” Anderson recalled. But she had a quality product and a business card. Within a year bRaw bars landed in Down to Earth and Whole Foods Maui, and she increased her production to 1,200 bars a week from 400.

But she too needed help growing to the next level.

“When I first got there, I wore my hat down and could barely speak about my business,” Anderson said. “Now I can go up to people, tell them about my product and nail it. I know why my bar is different from everybody else’s. I have an elevator pitch, I know my value proposition and I can talk to investors — none of these were terms I knew anything about before.”

Today Anderson has expanded her market to include Whole Foods stores on Oahu and other stores on neighbor islands. Just last week bRaw bars rolled out in 45 Whole Foods stores in Southern California.

“What’s exciting is that we’re finding that Maui has a real affinity for this type of innovative food production,” says Chris Speere, site coordinator at the Maui Food Innovation Center.

The list includes cacao powders, poi doughnuts, raw macadamia nut spreads and, in the latest spring cohort, ulu noodles made with breadfruit flour. To date, the accelerator program, supported by grants from entities such as the Small Business Administration, Maui County and the state through the HI Growth Initiative, has graduated 36 entrepreneurs.

The moral of the story is that there’s a way for government to help startup businesses by filling in the entrepreneurial ecosystem with Startup Weekends, test kitchens, accelerators and follow-on investment funds. These Maui food startups show what can come together with just a little bit of support.

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