Shared Tastes

By ROB WALKER

For some, the old cliché that you are what you eat has taken on increasingly complex implications: food choices can be a stand-in for social, ideological, even political identity and beliefs. Eaters can form communities of a sort, and businesses are built catering to them. Surely this has contributed to the interest in “incubator” programs designed to give new opportunities to aspiring food entrepreneurs. The concept has all the foodie do-gooder trimmings, often involving local cooks making cuisine linked to their immigrant backgrounds.

On the other hand, none of that quite fits with the goal of a typical business incubator, which is to help start-ups achieve success in the marketplace. Markets and communities have similarities but also differences. For an example of how this gets reconciled by a “kitchen incubator,” it’s useful to look at one of the better-known examples of the form, La Cocina, in San Francisco, which opened in 2005. A communal dimension is a core of the enterprise — but it’s at the back end: a shared commercial kitchen, used primarily by low-income women, mostly immigrants, who want to build a food business but wouldn’t have the resources to do so on their own.

The program, a nonprofit, also offers practical business training and mentoring. The upshot is about 40 independent enterprises operating out of one kitchen. One such business is El Buen Comer, owned by Isabel Caudillo. Caudillo used to cook and sell traditional Mexican food from her home kitchen; now she rents space at La Cocina, has a catering business and sells at the Noe Valley Farmers Market. El Buen Comer can produce more with access to a professional kitchen, and La Cocina helps Caudillo reach new consumers, for instance by helping out with a Web site that both advertises her food and tells her story.

That back story, combined with authentic recipes and ingredients, is perfect for the deeper-meaning-of-food consumer. And yet that conceptual framework means very little to someone like Caudillo, observes Caleb Zigas, La Cocina’s executive director. When she was cooking out of her home, her customers were neighborhood workers whose ideas about food were to fill up on something tasty for a good price. That attitude, Zigas continues, is a lot closer to the hardheaded business thinking La Cocina looks for and tries to instill in its participants, a point that sometimes gets lost. “The value they offered for the food they make is really good,” he says. (In fact, he adds an amusing anecdote about another participant, Veronica Salazar, the owner of El Huarache Loco, telling an interviewer that she didn’t use organic ingredients. She finally admitted that, actually, she does — but avoids saying so because to many of her customers it simply “sounds expensive.”)

Even so, it seems reasonable to assume that at least part of what attracts consumers to these incubated food makers is the halo effect of entities like La Cocina. The concept isn’t exactly new. The ACEnet Food Manufacturing and Commercial Kitchen Facility in Athens, Ohio, has been around for years and is shared
by around 150 food entrepreneurs. (It’s part of the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, which offers broader business-incubation programs as well.) The Food Innovation Center at Rutgers University operates a 23,000-square-foot shared facility. Zigas says La Cocina gets about a call a week from some entity or other looking to start a kitchen-incubation program.

Assumptions aside, it may be that the most successful food entrepreneurs put the least emphasis on the societal impact of their mission. La Marqueta, a revival of an East Harlem market underneath a stretch of elevated Metro North tracks, will include a food-incubation program, operated by Hot Bread Kitchen. It is a new step for the founder and executive director Jessamyn Waldman, but her nonprofit has a few years of experience selling its line of breads (focaccia, challah, corn tortillas, Armenian lavash, Moroccan m’smen), as well as granola and other products, all baked by foreign-born women looking for a pathway into the food business or for the chance to start a business of their own. She has drawn some conclusions in that time. One is that not everyone is cut out to be an entrepreneur. Another is that a positive back story helps, but it’s not the right centerpiece for a food brand, because in the end it “isn’t going to make the sale,” Waldman says.

The 4,600-square-foot professional kitchen will be ready to go by the end of the year, and Hot Bread is currently seeking potential participants to share it. New York, Waldman points out, has an unusually vibrant culture of food hounds sniffing around for the hidden-away kimchi joint or fresh tortilla source. There’s an identity-signaling factor in that community, but it’s not so much about food ethics as about alpha-eater taste status. That’s the highly demanding market that La Marqueta vendors will need to remember. Hot Bread is a nonprofit that depends in part on direct donations from a public that cares about its mission, but despite this, Waldman is careful about spending too much time telling its story: “I don’t want to sell too much granola with our granola.”