CREATING A CULINARY CULTURE
BRIDGETON, NEW JERSEY

BY CAROLA LILLIE HARTLEY
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Created in 2009 by the City Council, with help from the city’s Main Street organization, Bridgeton’s Culinary District is a foursquare block area in the heart of the downtown. This district is within the Main Street District and is the center of the largest historic district in New Jersey, and one of the largest historic districts in the United States.

When people talk about the Culinary District, they automatically compare it to a restaurant district, an entertainment district, or even a culinary arts district. It is much more than that.
WHAT IS A CULINARY DISTRICT?

So, what is a culinary district? The best way to describe it is to look first at the word “culinary,” which is defined as something related to, or connected with, cooking, the kitchen, or the art of cookery. If you use this definition, you now know that downtown Bridgeton’s culinary district was created to recruit, develop, retain, and support businesses that can have anything to do with cooking and food: growing it, packaging it, preserving it, preparing it, marketing it, and other social network sites. Food blogs are inundating the Internet. As a result, we are seeing the food industry develop into a “Culinary Culture,” and we are now finding places, not only in the United States, but also around the globe, that see the financial benefits in promoting this culture to the “culinary tourist.”

FOOD AND TRAVEL

Culinary tourists pursue unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences. Primarily motivated by an interest in food, culinary tourism can be urban or rural in context. A subset of cultural tourism (cuisine is a manifestation of culture), culinary tourism differs from agritourism, considered a subset of rural tourism. However, culinary tourism and agritourism are definitely linked, as the seeds of cuisine can be found in agriculture.

It’s also important to note that culinary tourism is about what is “unique and memorable, not necessarily what is pretentious and exclusive.” In other words, it is not limited to gourmet food. Culinary tourism encompasses all types of food and anything related to food, chefs, the kitchen, etc. Subsets of culinary tourism include wine and beer tourism.

This culinary tourism is rapidly becoming a major part of the larger tourism industry. For those interested in becoming more involved and even starting a career in culinary tourism, there is a World Food Travel Association where you can become a Certified Culinary Travel Professional (CCTP). To learn more, visit their website at https://worldfoodtravel.org/.

In this new world of food-motivated travel, Bridgeton, New Jersey, is a perfect place for a culinary district. Throughout its long colorful history, this town located on the Cohansay River in the southern part of New Jersey, (the garden state) has always been about food.

“FOOD IS BRIDGETON”

For more than three centuries, Bridgeton has been at the center of industrial and manufacturing growth, especially in the food industry. From the farming and distribution of the 19th century to Hunt Wesson Foods, Bridgeton has been a part of the food sector that has fed and supplied both the region and the nation.
Bridgeton is located in South Jersey, the agriculture and aquaculture region of the Garden State. Local farming has always been a huge part of everyday life. But Bridgeton is not just agrarian; it is also industrial. Food is not only grown here; it is also processed. As far back as the 1800s, Bridgeton canning plants not only processed local crops; some also produced their own cans. The American Can Company, located in the city, made state-of-the-art tin cans for Bridgeton’s food-processing industry in the early 1900s. Some of the foods packed in Bridgeton included vegetables and fruits, such as Jersey tomatoes, peaches, apples, lima beans, and sweet potatoes. Catsuup and salad dressings were also produced from local crops.

Glass bottling plants, the first one established in 1836, are also part of Bridgeton’s food industry. As many as 20 glass plants, producing bottles and canning jars for use in food-processing, canning, and bottling, were listed in Bridgeton in 1889. Glass making remains an important part of the Bridgeton area economy today.

Bridgeton also had a very successful flour mill, which ground 75 barrels of flour each day. The Bridgeton Condensed Milk Company produced evaporated milk at its downtown facility in the last century and marketed it in small cans for consumption in homes and restaurants. And, copper, tin, and glass funnels, used in home kitchens and food production plants, were also manufactured in the city.

With its location on the river, a part of the Delaware Estuary and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, Bridgeton has always had an abundance of fresh seafood available. Animal farming made fresh meats and dairy products also available to supply local kitchens, food preparers, and restaurants.

This remains true today. Cumberland Dairy, a family-owned—and-operated New Jersey company located in Bridgeton, is one of the nation’s premier specialty dairy and non-dairy product manufacturers. Started as a part-time job for Charles Catalana in 1932, Cumberland Dairy is now one of the nation’s largest dairy companies, producing more than 20 million gallons of products annually with sales of $60 million.

And then there is Seabrook Farm, located just outside of Bridgeton, which was one of the leading food producers in the country during the 20th century. It is said “Seabrook fed the world and the troops during the two world wars.” C. F. Seabrook, called the “Henry Ford of Agriculture,” was an early user of overhead irrigation of crops, and his oldest son, Jack, is credited with improving a method of quick-freezing vegetables invented by Clarence Birdseye. Seabrook began to process frozen vegetables in the late 1930s, eventually turning out 90 million pounds a year. In 1955, Life magazine heralded Seabrook as the largest vegetable factory in the world.

While the food business has changed and evolved over the years, Bridgeton’s relationship with the industry has remained constant. From Cumberland Dairy, WhiteWave Foods, Inc., and Cumberland Freezers to the Rutgers University Food Innovation Center and the Cousteau Marine Center at Bridgeton, the city continues to be a hub for the food industry.

There is much more that could be said about Bridgeton’s connection to food, but I think it's now apparent why a downtown Culinary District fits the community. Food is Bridgeton and Bridgeton is about food.
FROM BOOM DAYS TO DOOM DAYS

When Bridgeton Main Street, the oldest Main Street program in New Jersey (founded in 1990), reorganized in 2008, one of its main objectives was to create a niche, something that would draw businesses and people to its struggling downtown. And struggled it has.

Bridgeton’s downtown has a long and storied past. The first bridge over the Cohansey River was erected at Commerce Street in 1716. This provided access and a distinct centrality to the area now known as the downtown. In 1863, when the city was incorporated, the population stood at approximately 7,500 people. This growth resulted from the growing glass industry, which would become Bridgeton’s most important industry. By 1889, there were 20 glass factories in Bridgeton, which helped spur downtown’s growth. The downtown remained a vibrant part of the community fabric during the first half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, that growth and prosperity would not continue.

The decline of Bridgeton’s “boom days” started after World War II and continued through the decades to become Bridgeton’s “doom days.” Established companies merged, consolidated, and even worse, many closed. This left abandoned plants and a lot of unemployed workers. Between 1963 and 1983, Bridgeton lost more than 4,500 jobs. This had a tremendous negative impact on the entire city of 20,000 plus. With so many local people unemployed, downtown traffic and shoppers declined. As a result, stores began to shut down or move to strip malls and areas on the outskirts of town. Many residents moved from the historic section of town to nearby communities and suburbs. Demographics began to change, especially downtown. Soon, downtown Bridgeton was more a collection of empty buildings than the bustling “mom and pop” business area it had been. Something needed to be done.

Bridgeton Main Street (BMS) and the City of Bridgeton recognized it had a problem and looked to economic restructuring as a solution. Realizing the downtown would never be what it had been in its heyday, the organization made plans to convert the historic buildings that once hosted successful shops into spaces where new kinds of businesses could operate and thrive in today’s world.

Because downtown Bridgeton’s merchants, property owners, and residents are extremely diverse, ranging from Native Americans, South Americans, and African Americans to Scandinavians, Mexicans, Caribbean, Japanese, and East/South Asians, it was important to find something that would connect all of these cultures to each other and to the community. Given the city’s long history as an industrial food hub, creating a culinary district downtown seemed a natural.

The Main Street Economic Restructuring (ER) Team met with the City of Bridgeton Office of Development and Planning (Economic Development) staff to discuss the downtown’s problems. Capitalizing on the new Rutgers Food Innovation Center, the city was already looking at the food industry as a way to bring businesses and jobs back to Bridgeton. It had earlier transformed the town’s two “industrial parks” into Food-Business Park North and Food-Business Park South. Developing the downtown into a district that would complement the business parks and take advantage of the Rutgers facility, located less than a mile from the business district, seemed the best strategy.

With the city administration and Main Street both on board, the city council officially created the Bridgeton Culinary District in 2009. It was decided this district would focus on all types of food-related businesses. The idea was to encourage entrepreneurs to open businesses such as food stores and services, including restaurants, gourmet stores, coffee shops,
tearooms, ice cream parlors, wine/liquor stores, and cheese shops, among others. Businesses that sell kitchen wares, appliances, dinnerware, linens, kitchen furnishings and supplies, as well as service centers for kitchen appliances and equipment, were also considered for development and recruitment.

CREATING A CULINARY ECONOMY

The first step in developing this district was to conduct an inventory of existing food-related businesses in the four-block downtown area. This gave the organization a foundation to build on. A steering committee was appointed, a plan of action was determined, and goals and objectives set in place. The next step in creating the district was to brand it. Through technical assistance from Main Street New Jersey (MSNJ), including several months of work with MSNJ's digital design and branding consultant, the Bridgeton Main Street Design and Economic Restructuring Team decided on a brand.

The next step was to get people excited about the Culinary District and attract potential entrepreneurs to town. Bridgeton’s four Main Street committees were all made aware of the importance of the Culinary District and asked to consider a culinary theme in all new projects and activities.

One of the first projects the Bridgeton Main Street tackled was to create a “pocket park” on a vacant lot in the heart of downtown. This lot had been the talk of the town ever since Rosa’s Pizza and three other businesses were lost in a fire nearly a decade ago. The only thing going for it, besides the tumbleweeds, was a lone Christmas tree that was decorated during each holiday season. Otherwise, the lot had remained vacant.

Over the years, the City of Bridgeton acquired the entire property, which belonged to four different property owners, through foreclosures. The BMS Design Team decided a temporary solution to the “empty lot” was to turn it into a small downtown park. Later, when times get better, the property could be sold and used for a new downtown business.

After three years of dedicated hard work and generous donations of funds, in-kind services, and labor totaling more than $180,000, Culinary District Park opened in downtown Bridgeton on Sunday, October 16, 2011. Besides creating an inviting green space, the park includes a beautiful mural by Cesar Viveros-Herrara, a world-renowned mural artist from Philadelphia. The mural, which was a gift from Appel Farm, a cultural and arts center located a few miles from the city, showcases the history of agriculture and food production in Bridgeton. The center received funding from PNC Bank’s Arts Alive Initiative to produce the “Arts in the Marketplace” mural.

The park is not only a great place for people to visit; it also provides a perfect venue for the Bridgeton Outdoor Market, Bridgeton LunchFest, Heritage Cooking Demonstrations, and other downtown events. A community herb garden is planned for a corner of the park, to be planted in the spring of 2013.

Outdoor dining is encouraged not only in the park but throughout the Culinary District. Tables and chairs with green umbrellas were ordered by the city for use in the district. The Main Street ER Team works in partnership with the city to distribute the tables to downtown eating establishments. The tables, purchased by the city using Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) funds, are given free of charge (one or two) to downtown food businesses that are UEZ certified. These tables, chairs, and umbrellas are also used for the Bridgeton Outdoor Market and at all outdoor festivals and events downtown.

CELEBRATING THE CITY’S CULINARY HERITAGE

The other teams got involved and created successful culinary-themed events and activities to promote the district, bring visitors downtown, and raise funds for Bridgeton Main Street. These include:

- **Bridgeton FoodFilmFest**. An annual fundraiser for Main Street organized by the promotion and organization teams, the film festival features a gala movie/dinner/
THE CULINARY INDUSTRY: RICH WITH OPPORTUNITY

The food industry today is one of the largest industries in the United States. Even in today’s economy, many people still have money to spend and they like to eat good food. And as more women step out into the professional world, they have less time to devote to various traditional household chores, cooking being one of them. Of course, we know that men also cook, but they also have jobs and other responsibilities. It is the lack of time for cooking that also leads to many jobs in the food industry. With more money to spend and less time to cook, people look for alternatives.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the culinary or food services industry will grow by nearly 11 percent from now through 2018. A variety of careers are available in the industry, including professional and management positions.

According to the National Restaurant Association, restaurants employ 12.8 million people, which makes up 10 percent of the American workforce. Even better, more jobs are being created. In 2011, the culinary industry added jobs at a rate of 2.4 percent compared to 1.8 percent overall for the national economy.

Think about how this growing industry could help struggling downtowns. The following is only a partial list of the wide variety of culinary jobs that could help communities grow a culinary industry: bakers, caterers, cooks, chefs, executive chefs, sous-chefs, pastry chefs, private chefs, research chefs, hospitality managers, restaurant managers, food service managers, food preparation workers, servers, hostesses, waiters, restaurant owners, culinary instructors, culinary artists, food consultants, food writers and photographers, food scientists, gourmet retailers, nutritional consultants, advertising and marketing specialists, bartenders, kitchen retailers, wine and spirits retailers, food research specialists, food development specialists, culinary tourism professionals; and the list goes on, creating endless possibilities for new businesses and job opportunities in America’s downtowns. The culinary industry is something we may all want to look into as a way to help grow and sustain the downtown economy.

COOKING DEMONSTRATION NIGHT IN APRIL. HELD IN 2011, THE FIRST FILM FESTIVAL WAS ITALIAN NIGHT; THE 2012 EVENT WAS MEXICAN; AND THE NEXT EVENT, PLANNED FOR APRIL 2013, WILL HAVE AN AFRICAN AMERICAN THEME AND WILL FEATURE THE MOVIE SOUL FOOD. BEYOND BEING A REALLY FUN NIGHT, THE EVENT PROMOTES THE CULINARY ARTS, FOOD HISTORY, AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY VISIONS FOR BRIDGETON’S DOWNTOWN.

- Cinco de Mayo Cultural Festival. Held on the first Sunday of May in the heart of the Culinary District, this celebration of the famous Mexican holiday brings together downtown’s Mexican merchants, with all of the city’s residents and out-of-town visitors. The festival features Mexican music, dancers, dancing horses, and, of course, lots of great Mexican, Latin and other foods.

- Bridgeton Outdoor Market. Held in the Culinary District every Friday from the...
CREATING A
SPECIALTY DISTRICT:
DO'S & DON'TS

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<td>1. Research the history of the community.</td>
<td>1. Don't try to rewrite your community history. Do your homework, build on the town's history, and make sure your district fits your town's identity.</td>
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<td>2. Study and describe the social, political, physical, and economic environment of your town, especially the downtown area. Identify what your community is about and build on that.</td>
<td>2. Don't push the district on the community. Make sure you get support from a majority of your downtown stakeholders.</td>
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<td>3. Conduct an inventory of the downtown area where you want to create the district. See if there are businesses and other assets that fit the focus of the proposed district; then determine what needs to be added, improved, changed, or eliminated. Also make sure you inventory other areas of the community and market area to see what you already have that can support the proposed district.</td>
<td>3. Don't make the district a political issue. Take your time, follow the plan, and get bipartisan support.</td>
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<td>4. Determine if there is a market in the community and surrounding region for the businesses that would operate in the district you want to create. Determine if this district can help make your downtown a destination.</td>
<td>4. Don't fool yourself and the community into thinking the district can be developed overnight. Take small steps that are successful and show that improvements, even small ones, are occurring downtown.</td>
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<td>5. Form a steering committee and create a plan of action. Set goals and objectives.</td>
<td>5. Don't try to reinvent the wheel. Reach out to other Main Street communities and your state and national Main Street organization for help as needed.</td>
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<td>6. Reach out to your state Main Street office, the National Trust Main Street Center, and other Main Street communities for help and advice as needed.</td>
<td>6. Don't pay attention to naysayers who say “it can't be done.” If you have the support of a majority of downtown stakeholders, you can be successful no matter what anyone says.</td>
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<td>7. Build community support by forming partnerships with groups and organizations that understand and support your vision for downtown.</td>
<td>7. Don't get discouraged, it will take time, probably years, for changes to occur and your vision to be realized.</td>
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<td>8. Get city government and other political groups on board as supporters of your plan.</td>
<td>8. Don't assume that the Bridgeton CrabFest originated as the Bridgeton Downtown Farmers Market several years ago. After the Culinary District was created, it evolved into the Outdoor Market, which is sometimes held in Riverside Park along the Cohansy River and sometimes in the Culinary District Park. A special feature of this market is locally grown Jersey Fresh produce; freshly prepared food; and Heritage Cooking Demonstrations by local/area chefs, cooks, and personalities.</td>
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<td>9. Get city government to formally designate your downtown district.</td>
<td>9. Bridgeton CrabFest. Part of the Cumberland County Cohansy Riverfest, which is held on downtown Bridgeton's riverfront every August, CrabFest was created to promote river activities and celebrate the area's seafood industry. The CrabFest is a project that grew out of the partnership between Bridgeton Main Street and the Bridgeton Area Chamber of Commerce. The festival features music, entertainment, children's activities and education, tours, a beer garden, and a great crab dinner, which is the main focus of the celebration.</td>
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<td>10. Brand the district. Use this brand on everything you do.</td>
<td>10. LunchFest in Culinary District Park. Held at lunchtime every Friday in April and October, this newly created event features local and area chefs who give Heritage Cooking Demonstrations during the lunch hour. Residents and visitors alike are encouraged to pick up a brown bag lunch from a local restaurant/eatery and come to the park to enjoy the cooking entertainment. Brown bags are printed with the LunchFest schedule. The bags are used not only as promotional fliers, but are also given to all downtown restaurants and eateries to package the brown bag lunches.</td>
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<td>11. Develop a campaign to educate the community about what you are doing to create your downtown district. Talk up the value and importance of the district to the downtown and the entire community.</td>
<td>11. Heritage Cooking Demonstrations. At different times and different locations in the Culinary District, local and area chefs and cooks hold cooking demonstrations that...</td>
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celebrate the cultural and ethnic diversities of Bridgeton. The heritage cooking demonstrations combine the creative foods of our past with the good dining of today.

Preparing and sharing food is a great way to bring together people of different cultures and backgrounds. Heritage cooking makes that connection personal. Cooking helps us remember and share our past and our heritage through food. It’s entertaining and educational. Recipes used during the demonstrations are links that connect us to special people from the past and to handwritten scraps of paper tucked in old cookbooks or family letters. They keep us in touch with those moments when we shared a special dish, a special meal, with a special person. Besides chefs, local and area personalities are invited to share a recipe or two during downtown festivals and events. Even Bridgeton Mayor Albert Kelly has given heritage cooking demonstrations during some events.

**Bridgeton Legends.** An annual fundraising dinner, Bridgeton Legends celebrates local families who are making a difference in the community. A different family is honored each year. The evening’s menu features a meal prepared using only Jersey Fresh foods. Only in its third year, this event has raised more than $100,000 to help support Bridgeton Main Street and two other local nonprofit organizations.

**Bridgeton Holiday Parade.** Held each year, the holiday parade takes place in the middle of the Culinary District. The theme of the 2012 parade is “Celebrating with Holiday Foods.”

**Bridgeton Historic Holiday House Tour.** The annual tour of the Bridgeton Historic District, with its beautiful homes and buildings decorated for the season, draws many people to downtown. The 2012 tour will also feature a Heritage Cooking Demonstration of holiday sweets and an exhibit of marzipan by a local cake decorator/artist.

**Cumberland County Culinary Stars.** This group works to develop programs that help not only Bridgeton but also all of Cumberland County. Projects include Heritage Cooking Demonstrations and Classes, Safe with a Smile Food Safety & Hospitality Training (currently offered by Rutgers Food Innovation Center), and the Bridgeton Co-op Kitchen.²

**Bridgeton Culinary Library.** Currently housed at the Bridgeton Office of Development and Planning located downtown in the Bridgeton Tourist Center, this collection of cookbooks and food-related books was donated to the city by the general public. The library is made available to anyone interested.

² Cumberland County Culinary Stars is a partnership of Bridgeton Main Street with Rutgers Food Innovation Center, Rutgers Cousteau Marine Center at Bridgeton, Cumberland County College, Cumberland County Technical Education Center, City of Bridgeton, Cumberland County Empowerment Zone, Gateway Community Action Partnership, Mill Creek Urban Farm, and others.

**PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRAMS**

Bridgeton is fortunate to have several food-related projects and programs already in place that help support the four-block downtown Culinary District. These include:

**Rutgers Food Innovation Center.** Located less than a mile from the Culinary District, the Rutgers Food Innovation Center is a unique business incubation and economic development accelerator program that provides business and technology expertise to startup and established food companies in the mid-Atlantic region. It also utilizes its outreach capacity to reach food and agribusinesses throughout the world. The Food Innovation Center team, combined with the vast resources of Rutgers University and the strategic partners the center has developed throughout the nation, provides assistance in business development, market research, product and process development, workforce development and training, regulations and compliance support, and quality assurance and food safety systems.

**Rutgers Cousteau Marine Center at Bridgeton.** Located in a restored 1790s building in Bridgeton’s Culinary District, the Cousteau Center’s focus is on marine life (seafood) with staff very involved in
the Oyster Restoration Project. Formal and informal education and training programs address local and regional concerns for sustainable economic development and conservation of the environment and coastal resources in Cumberland County.

- **Mill Creek Urban Farm at Bridgeton.** Located less than a half mile from downtown, this urban farm sits on four acres of land once belonging to a housing complex that was demolished in 2006. The land sat vacant for years because it was too soft to build on; the former buildings had been sinking a little each year. A project of Gateway Community Action Partnership, the farm was created in 2009. Earth Boxes are used to grow tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, butternut squash, a variety of lettuces, spinach, kale, collards, mustard greens, beets, and more—if you can think of it, it's probably growing at Mill Creek. The farm sells produce to the general public at its location and at the Bridgeton Outdoor Market in the Culinary District.

- **Bridgeton Food-Business Parks.** To build on the food niche and support the downtown Culinary District, the City of Bridgeton has redefined its industrial appetizers, entrees, desserts, and a "table for two" meal for that special someone. The city is hoping to bring additional workforce education and training to downtown Bridgeton as an ongoing satellite program of the college.

- **Area Farms and Farm Stands.** Bridgeton is surrounded by rich farmlands that produce a large variety of Jersey Fresh fruits and vegetables. Many of the farmers sell fresh-picked produce at farm stands located on their property along most of the highways leading into the city.

- **Greater Bridgeton Amish Farm Market.** Opened in June 2012, this new market place offers a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as country meats, seafood, salads, pretzels, cheeses, homemade candy, cakes, pies, and other prepared foods to take out or dine in. Located in nearby Hopewell, the Amish market is less than three miles from Bridgeton's Culinary District.

- **Bridgeton Community Garden.** Located just a few blocks from downtown, the Bridgeton Community Garden (Huerto Comunitario de Bridgeton) is part of the Food Justice Project, supported by

- **Bridgeton Bazaar Market in the Culinary District.** Groundbreaking for a Vendor Park and Bazaar that will turn downtown's vacant lots into green space is set for 2013. The park will provide a place for vendors to sell their wares and foods in downtown Bridgeton. The city plans to purchase vendor carts and tables to create a consistent, "themed" look for the bazaar, which will be organized and administered by Bridgeton Main Street. The hope is that, with Main Street's guidance, successful vendors will eventually open retail shops downtown.

- **Bridgeton Culinary Marketplace.** Planned for 2014, this marketplace will be a retail incubator for aspiring entrepreneurs looking to serve the local food service industry.

- **Bridgeton Co-op Kitchen.** This community kitchen would serve as a centralized food preparation center. Bridgeton Main Street feels the Co-op Kitchen will be an important anchor for the Culinary District, helping spur downtown revitalization and establishing the Culinary District as a destination.

"The truth is that the distance between problems and solutions... can be enormous, filled with... memories of the way things used to be. ... We know we can never go back to those days, but we can... forge a new identity with new possibilities and opportunities."  –Mayor Albert Kelly

- **Cumberland County College Cooking Classes.** Working with the Cumberland County College's Continuing Education program, the city has partnered with the college to provide a four-part cooking class at the Ashley McCormick center in the Culinary District. Students prepare

- **CATA—the Farmworker Support Committee.** The garden is located on a formerly vacant housing lot. Neighbors volunteers have cleaned up the lot, built a garden fence, and installed a new water service for irrigation. The mission of the garden is to increase access to healthy, organic foods by giving people the space and resources to grow their own fruits and vegetables, at the same time building a sense of community in the neighborhood. The garden will be fully functioning by the spring 2013.

In addition to the culinary projects and activities already in place, others are planned for the future. These include:

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It is also hoped the kitchen will attract entrepreneurs for the culinary industry Bridgeton is building, as well as providing much-needed commercial kitchen space and training for local/area caterers, food-based home businesses, and up-and-coming entrepreneurs.

It is a proven fact that community or co-op kitchens allow access to business ownership in underserved communities and can serve as an entry point back into the workforce for many. They can also:

* Provide training for these individuals;
* Provide a “sense of community” downtown; and
* Draw more people downtown, thereby creating foot traffic.

A building for the Bridgeton Co-op Kitchen has already been selected, a marketing study and business plan has been drafted, and architectural drawings have been completed. Plans call for a commercial kitchen on the first floor, with a retail shop in the storefront. The second floor will house classrooms and meeting space.

Funding is being sought for the Bridgeton Co-op Kitchen at this time. It is hoped the kitchen can be completed and open to the public by the end of 2013.
CULTIVATING THE FUTURE

When Bridgeton Main Street first began working on the Culinary District in 2009, the initial inventory of culinary type businesses showed 29 restaurants, eateries, and food-related stores in the four-block designated downtown area. Although everyone knows the district will take years to develop, we believe Bridgeton already has made significant progress toward its goal. As of July 2012, the downtown had 35 food-related businesses, employing more than 200 people, with six more set to open before the end of the year. The newly created culinary-themed events and activities are attracting large numbers of people to the historic downtown, and these visitors are out-of-town tourists and potential new entrepreneurs.

Bridgeton Mayor Albert Kelly recognizes the value of these improvements in downtown but also knows there is much more to do. "The truth," says the mayor, "is that the distance between problems and solutions, especially when it comes to redefining our downtown, can be enormous, filled with regulations, limited resources, past practices, but mostly memories of how things used to be... We know we can never go back to those days, but we can go forward and forge a new identity with new possibilities and opportunities.

I am also mindful of the fact that our small city remains an "unfinished work"... it is meant to be unfinished... always challenging us and calling on us to make of it what we will... to innovate, to adapt and overcome... to write the next chapter and do the next thing. We are hoping that the next chapter will be a story of how we turned a struggling downtown into a destination where residents and visitors meet, shop, break bread together, and enjoy a real sense of community."

Jef Butcher, State Coordinator of the Office of Main Street New Jersey and Improvement District Programs, notes that "BMS, working with its array of public and private-sector partners, is leveraging its authentic assets—heritage and built environment, to name a few—to cultivate a 21st-century niche for its downtown economy. As with everything, change takes time, but Bridgeton and BMS are clearly improving the "facts on the ground" every day.

Although there is still much to do to transform that four-block area into a viable Culinary District featuring many different kinds of food services and businesses, the future looks bright. The downtown has significantly improved over the last three years, and attitudes about the commercial district are gradually changing. Downtown merchants and property owners are meeting on a regular basis and becoming more involved with the community and with each other. The culinary-themed events and activities are popular and attract many new people each year. Increasingly, the general public is becoming aware of the district and are now identifying downtown Bridgeton as not only part of the largest historic district in New Jersey, but as a Culinary District as well.

The City of Bridgeton, through its partnership with Bridgeton Main Street and many other organizations, is gradually building and improving its culinary economy.

Carola Lilie Hartley is a "seasoned" Main Street manager who has worked in the profession for more than 20 years; she has worked in five communities in three states—Louisiana, Kentucky, and New Jersey. Carola has owned and operated her own business in her hometown of Opelousas, Louisiana, and has worked for other private businesses, as well as in the public sector where she served as the Louisiana Open House Consultant for the Louisiana Office of Tourism from 1989-1991. She is one of those people who describes herself as a "foodie." She enjoys cooking different foods and learning about and sampling foods of different cultures. And, of course, she loves to eat! She is currently the executive director of Bridgeton Main Street and lives in the heart of that city's historic district and culinary district with her husband Tim, his Aunt Susie, their three dogs, and one cat.

For additional information on Bridgeton's Culinary District, contact Bridgeton Main Street at 856-453-8130, e-mail Carola at carolahartley@aol.com, or visit the website www.getbridgeton.com.