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Young Food Entrepreneurs Make Their Future by Hand



Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Fabiana Lee's spicy beef empanadas are traditional Argentine style. Of Korean heritage, she grew up in Buenos Aires.

By [JULIA MOSKIN](#)

Published: June 1, 2010



THEY carry home-grown radishes and red-cooked pork. They transport dozens of empanadas, juggling sheet pans on the G train. They pack boxes of butterscotch cupcakes, Sichuan-spiced beef jerky and grapefruit marmalade. They haul boiled peanuts, ice-grinding machines, sandwich presses and at least one toaster oven painted hot pink.



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Trained in interior design, Ms. Lee, left, now sells empanadas at the Greenpoint Food Market.

One Saturday morning each month, the vendors of the Greenpoint Food Market converge on the Church of the Messiah in Brooklyn.

“This is my investment in the future right now,” said Fabiana Lee, 26, an interior designer who lost her job in 2009. She has been selling at the Greenpoint market since its inception in October. After experimenting with [cookies](#) (too much competition), she has pared her offerings down to two: gorgeously browned empanadas and irresistibly twee “cake pops,” golf-ball-size rounds of cake perched on lollipop sticks. At the moment, they are her main source of income.

Young, college-educated, Internet-savvy, unemployed and hoping to find a place in the food world outside the traditional route, she is typical of the city’s dozens of new food entrepreneurs. As the next generation of cooks comes of age, it seems that many might bypass restaurant kitchens altogether. Instead, they see themselves driving trucks full of artisanal cheese around the country, founding organic breweries, bartering [vegan](#) pâtés for grass-fed local beef, or (most often) making it big in baking as the next Magnolia Bakery.

Joann Kim, 26, who organizes the market, cited the intersection of the economic downturn and the rise of the local artisanal food movement as reasons for the recent flowering of small culinary start-ups.

Aspiring cooks (and the adventurous eaters who love them) come face to face at markets like this one, which are opening and expanding at a brisk pace. The Brooklyn Flea, the Hester Street Fair and the soon-to-reopen New Amsterdam Market have become tasting destinations, where handmade food is as much of a fetish as vintage Ray-Bans or bargello pillowcases. The all-food Greenpoint market, which is open to home cooks of all stripes, is one-stop shopping: Mexican-Indian tacos, artisanal soda pop, roof-grown produce, exotic chili peppers, long-brined pickles, Taiwanese street food and retro-Southern snacks under one roof.

“I feel like I’m at a science fair and I get to eat all the experiments,” said Erin Massey, a Chicago native who lives in Brooklyn, looking around the crowded church basement. “It’s like going to a music festival with all the different bands, only here it’s different kinds of kombucha.”

There were almost 50 vendors. Many had been up since dawn, rolling rice balls, filling containers with waffle batter, crimping pie crusts. In headscarves, retro-chic aprons and all manner of eyewear, they skidded around the crowded basement, jockeying for electrical outlets and space.

“We do whatever it takes,” said Nicole Asselin, who brought tiny pies filled with organic rhubarb,

chocolate chip cookies (to be warmed in the hot-pink oven) and logs of butter mashed with wild ramps that she had gathered in Vermont.

Each vendor had paid \$25 to \$50 for a table, with half the money going to the church and half to Ms. Kim. The cash they earned was theirs to keep. At \$4 an ice pop or \$3 an empanada, the margins on many products seemed high, but some of the vendors who have been operating without official certification may soon see their profits shrink.

On May 28, the New York Department of Health confirmed that all food vendors in the city must have a food handling permit, and may use only approved commercial kitchens. Renting space in a commercial kitchen costs about \$200 for eight hours. For some vendors like Ms. Lee, who is in the process of getting her permit, that would mean the difference between making a small profit and just breaking even on a day at the market.

Ms. Kim said that she believed that the fact that the money benefited the church meant that unlicensed vendors were allowed to participate. “I guess we’ve been trying to fly below the radar a little bit,” she said, acknowledging that the bustle of the church basement might disappear under official scrutiny. “It’s been a wild ride.”

Some of the vendors were amateurs there on a lark, to earn brownie bragging rights and a little spending money.

But for many, the stakes were much higher. In these markets, cooks like Laena McCarthy of [Anarchy in a Jar](#), who makes extraordinary preserves from local fruit, have a shot at developing a viable food business without working with a commercial processor, such as the large food companies that she deems “evil agribusiness warlords.” (Her company’s motto is “The Revolution Starts in Your Mouth.”) Ms. McCarthy’s jams have recently been picked up for sale by a Whole Foods store in Manhattan; for her, and others, a national distribution deal is the dream.

But for now, most of the vendors have a “day job” of some kind. Ms. McCarthy works as a librarian and teaches library science. Ms. Asselin is a pastry chef at Marlow & Sons in Williamsburg. Jun Aizaki, who makes Japanese rice balls called onigiri, wrapped in and scented with banana leaves, has designed the interiors of New York restaurants such as Rayuela and Macondo.

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Ms. Lee makes her empanadas in her Chelsea living room.

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Ms. Lee also makes cake pops in various designs to sell at the market in Greenpoint.

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Hannah Goldberg, left, is an owner of La Newyorkina, a stall selling paletas, or Mexican ice pops, at the Hester Street Fair.

Two eminent but unemployed pastry chefs — Fany Gerson and Hannah Goldberg — banded together to start La Newyorkina, making delicious Mexican-style paletas, or ice pops, in flavors like mango, guava and horchata (cinnamon-rice). They have been selling outdoors at the new Hester Street Fair, and handed out mini-paletas to children to draw their parents in.

“If we first build a following at the markets and online,” Ms. Goldberg said, “then we can get the money to open a storefront that much more easily.” Professionals like Ms. Goldberg say that a commitment to marketing, packaging and general hustling are as important — or more so — as kitchen skills. [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Etsy](#), Tumblr and Blogspot are important for spreading the word; so are the city’s many new amateur cooking contests, like the [Brooklyn Pie Bake-Off](#); so are food shops with a commitment to local artisans, like Blue Apron Foods in Park Slope and the [Northern Spy Food Company](#) in the East Village.

So is paring down your line.

“I’ve already seen that you do much better if you’re ‘that girl’ who sells ‘that thing,’ ” said Ms. Asselin, who has yet to commit.

Ms. Lee is still deciding whether her business, La Tía Faby, will focus on empanadas or cake pops. Growing up in Buenos Aires, she said, she set her sights early on a life in New York City.

“I was used to being the only Asian girl at school,” said Ms. Lee, whose parents were born in South Korea and now own a knitwear company in Argentina; she is fluent in English, Spanish and Korean. “But I loved the mix of people and food in New York.” Ms. Lee said that her mother, who served steak with kimchi on many nights, taught her the basics of cooking, both Argentine and Asian. Ms. Lee’s chorizo and kimchi empanadas with Korean glass noodles are pleated down the edge, like huge Chinese dumplings; the spinach and mushroom version is folded like a fortune cookie.

Ms. Lee moved to New York to study interior design at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; when she graduated in 2006, she quickly found a job at a downtown firm. But in early 2009, she said, the effects of the stock market downturn began to hit. “It was almost a relief when I got laid off like everyone else,” she said. “Better than sitting at my desk waiting for it to happen.” Then she spotted an online open call for vendors at the Greenpoint market.

The recession weaves through the back stories of many of the itinerant vendors, even those who are not new to selling food. Matt and Alison Robicelli had both a fledgling cupcake operation and a specialty foods shop in Bay Ridge until last October, when they decided that brick-and-mortar was a losing

proposition. “We sat down with an adviser who looked at our crazy life and said, ‘You have three things to take care of: your shop, your cupcake business and your kids,’ ” she said. “He told us we had to pick two.” Now they sell cupcakes — including a dark, bittersweet “Bea Arthur” number that combines chocolate, coffee and cheesecake flavors — through various cafes, at the Greenpoint market, and at another newly opened Brooklyn venue, the outdoor Red Hook Mercado.

Ms. Lee is still unemployed, but she has never worked harder, she said, trying to build a viable business one bite at a time. The day before the Greenpoint market, in her sixth-floor walkup in Chelsea, Ms. Lee folded hundreds of empanadas and painstakingly decorated dozens of cake pops to look like pale yellow chicks, using sprinkles and edible inks she orders from online candy suppliers. (Cake pops and cake balls, made by mixing fresh cake crumbs with frosting, then dipping balls of the mixture into “candy melt” for a smooth, Ring-Ding-like coating, are up-to-the-minute successors to the no longer trendy cupcake.)

“Transportation is by far the biggest stress,” said Ms. Lee, who must travel by subway or taxi to Greenpoint; there are many casualties among the empanadas. But her wares have always sold out, so far. All day at the market, women exclaimed over the cake pops and asked about custom orders for baby showers and birthday parties; only a few of these inquiries have ever panned out. She took home about \$500 in cash, having sold out by 3 p.m.

One of the charms of the food-market scene is an Old World sense of cozy community: everyone seems to know one another. But this also means a race to capture shoppers before somebody else does. At Greenpoint, two vendors of kombucha were stationed right across from each other, and there was more than one seller of pickles, fizzy drinks and gluten-free muffins.

“I didn’t know there would be another granola,” said Alex Crosier of [Granola Lab](#), eyeballing the competition for her ginger-molasses and cranberry-cashew mixtures.

At the end of the day, said Ms. Asselin, the vendors are very tired, very thirsty (much of the food is very sweet, very salty or both) and not much richer.

“It’s hard work,” said Hannah Goldberg, speaking about her time at the Hester Street Fair. “Our ancestors came through the Lower East Side to find a better life, and our parents think it’s crazy that we’re back here selling from a pushcart.”

New York's New Movable Feasts

Following are some markets around New York City selling products made by local food artisans.

GREENPOINT FOOD MARKET Church of the Messiah, 129 Russell Street (Nassau Avenue), Greenpoint, Brooklyn; [greenpointfoodmarket.wordpress.com](#). One Saturday a month, noon to 5 p.m. (the next market is June 26). Worth tasting: [P&H sodas](#), Masala Loca Indian tacos, [La Tía Faby](#) empanadas, Kings County Jerky Company beef jerkies, [MilkMade](#) ice creams.

HESTER STREET FAIR Hester and Essex Streets, Manhattan; [hesterstreetfair.com](#). Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Worth tasting: [La Newyorkina](#) ice pops; [Hominy Hominy](#) corn crunch; [Luke’s lobster](#) rolls; [Sigmund Pretzelshop](#)’s pretzel, peanut-butter and chocolate-chip cookie.

RED HOOK MERCADO 410 Van Brunt Street (Coffey Street), Red Hook, Brooklyn; [redhookmercado.com](#). Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 9 p.m. Worth tasting: Country Boys carne enchilada huaraches, Rojas Ceviches’s ceviches, [Robicelli’s](#) cupcakes, Grindhaus corn dogs.

THE BROOKLYN FLEA 176 Lafayette Avenue (Vanderbilt Avenue), Fort Greene, Brooklyn, Saturdays 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 1 Hanson Place (Flatbush Avenue), Fort Greene, Brooklyn, Sundays 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; [brooklynflea.com](#). Worth tasting: [Scratchbread](#) breads, [Liddabit Sweets](#) candies, [Kors](#)

[d'Oeuvres](#) dips, [Choncho's](#) fish tacos, Milk Truck grilled-cheese sandwiches.

NEW AMSTERDAM MARKET South Street (Peck Slip), Manhattan; newamsterdammarket.org.
Monthly in June, July and August, then every Sunday from Sept. 12 to Dec. 19, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Worth
tasting: [Nordic Breads](#) whole grain sourdough breads, [Brooklyn Brine](#) small-batch pickles, [Kombucha](#)
[Brooklyn](#) kombucha, [Mother-in-Law's Kimchi](#) kimchi.