

Success Stories, Challenges, & Boots-on-the Ground Testimony

from participants of AERO's 2016 "Growing Food Businesses:
Opportunities Under Montana's New Food Laws" Workshop Series



Introduction & Background

During the 2015 Montana legislative session, Montana's food entrepreneurs gained important new opportunities resulting from changes in state law. Following a two-year study of the state's food laws and much public comment, Montana's retail food laws were significantly rewritten, including changes to allow cottage food operators to make low-hazard food products in their home kitchens, and sell them directly to consumers year-round in any direct venue. The law also clarified and offered additional opportunities for temporary and mobile food service operations, for farmers direct-marketing their raw agricultural products, and more. Between April 5th and May 12th of 2016, AERO, along with the Montana Food and Agriculture Development Centers, planned and coordinated five day-long workshops around Montana that worked to explain and illuminate these new opportunities and their governing regulations.

These five-hour workshops were held in four locations: Bozeman on April 5, Billings on April 7, Arlee on April 13, Great Falls on April 15, and Kalispell on May 12th and attended by over 100 participants. The workshops were intended for

- and attended by- retail food businesses and entrepreneurs, direct-market farmers, market managers, state and local health officials and educators, business and economic development professionals, local food non-profits, and folks with cottage food business ideas. Each workshop provided participants with the information needed to succeed at starting or expanding a food business, as well as help ensure the law's successful implementation.

Presenters and facilitators included staff from the Food and Consumer Safety Section of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, and AERO.

The workshops were funded by AERO and grants from the Montana Department of Agriculture's Growth Through Agriculture Program, the High Stakes Foundation, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program.

Over the course of the 10 months following the conclusion of the workshop

series, AERO staff interviewed participants to learn about how they were using, learning, benefiting, or experiencing challenges from the implementation of the new food laws. The following articles offer examples of folks on the ground working to increase local food production, and grow their businesses and opportunities. Each represents unique challenges and successes as we continue working to keep local food local in Montana, and strive to understand and improve the laws governing production.

If you would like to connect with the producers and business owners described here, please reach out to AERO at aero@aeromt.org, and we'll put you in touch.

Please also visit our ongoing forum for questions and topics regarding the new food laws, at the Montana Food Economy Initiative, at <http://www.mtfoodeconomy.org/forums>.

Interviews were conducted and articles written by AERO staff, primarily our Local Food Systems Coordinator Jackie Heinert, with editorial assistance from Outreach Director Corrie Williamson.



AERO

is pleased to offer

Growing Food Businesses: Opportunities Under Montana's New Food Law

These workshops are for food entrepreneurs, direct market farmers, state and local health officials, business and economic development educators, local food non-profits, and folks with cottage food business ideas.

- **NEW Addition! Kalispell - May 12th**
- **Bozeman - April 5**
- **Billings - April 7**
- **Arlee - April 13**
- **Great Falls - April 15**

Registration is free & refreshments are provided.
For more information & registration visit:
aeromt.org/workshops
or contact cwilliamson@aeromt.org
406-443-7272

Come with your business ideas, plans, and big questions about how to operate under Montana's new Food Policy Modernization Law and its rules.
Workshops are limited to 30 participants!



Co-hosted by the Montana Food and Ag Development Centers & in partnership with DPHHS Food and Consumer Safety Section. Funded by AERO and grants from the Montana Department of Agriculture's Growth Through Agriculture Program, USDA's Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, and the High Stakes Foundation.

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Growing Our Local Communities: Wrapping up the 2016 Workshop Series

Paul Taylor drove through a blizzard to come to the Growing Food Businesses Workshop in Great Falls because he's determined to start up a food truck called The Amazing Philly that will sell the best Philly cheese steak... well, outside of Philly. "I'm pretty offended by what passes for a Philly cheese steak in Montana," the Philadelphia native told the group of participants and facilitators who gathered at the Montana Farmers Union Times Square building during an April snowstorm for the fourth in AERO's workshop series "Growing Food Businesses: Opportunities Under Montana's New Food Law."

The workshops were offered in the wake of policy updates during the 2015 legislative session, made possible due to the collaboration between the Departments of Agriculture, Livestock, and Public Health & Human Services (DPHHS), along with Montana state legislators and the Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition. The changes allow cottage food operators to make lowhazard food products in their home kitchens and sell them to consumers year-round in any direct venue, such as a farmers' market. The law also clarified and offered additional opportunities for temporary and mobile food service operations (like Paul Taylor's The Amazing Philly), for farmers direct-marketing their raw agricultural products.

Although workshops were offered free of charge, each workshop was capped at 30 participants, and AERO worked hard to ensure a diverse workshop group at each location. As Executive Director Jennifer Hill-Hart put it: "A real bonus of these workshops was the chance to network with other food entrepreneurs, food regulators, economic developers, and more." The general consensus among attendees appeared to be that the networking and interactive nature of the workshops were an enormous part of their value, in addition to accessing raw

information.

As attendee Samantha O'Bryne, Director of the O'Hara Commons & Sustainability Center in Hamilton, told us, "The interactive nature of the workshop illuminated many facets of the new Cottage Food industry law which I would not have questioned otherwise. The conversations led to a much greater understanding of each sector affected by the law." The workshops were facilitated by longtime AERO friends Nancy Matheson, Pam Mavrolas, and Barb Rusmore, along with representatives from the MT Food and Agriculture Development Centers, Ed Evanson and Melanie Shaw of DPPHS, with multiple local sanitarians attending each session. That meant there was a lot of serious brainpower and knowledge in the room to allow attendees to have their specific questions and concerns dealt with directly.

Winona Bateman of Missoula, a self-described aspiring urban agriculturalist, came wondering what kind of business model, and which permits, would be most appropriate for developing ½ acre trial plots to sell micro-green varieties, while Rosie Goldich (former AERO intern) came to the Great Falls workshop to learn more about getting a commercial kitchen started (see this issue's Abundant Montana feature for more on commercial kitchens!). In addition to having their questions answered, attendees had the opportunity to meet with their local sanitarians and establish relationships with the folks whose help they need to receive the appropriate permits and licenses.

On May 12, AERO completed the last round (well, for now!) of our Growing Food Businesses workshops, traveling to Bozeman, Billings, Arlee, Great Falls – and then (because our members asked for it!) a late addition in Kalispell, with the help of some fantastic long-time

AERONAUTS, as well as new friends at Farm Hands and Nourish the Flathead. It was inspiring to see all the creative and innovative work folks are doing around Montana to grow our local food economies, and to see farm and business dreams taking shape.

Kate McLean attended the Bozeman workshop while her husband Ian shopped for organic compost. Newly transplanted back to the Helena area, Kate and Ian are just launching their first season at the Helena Farmers' Market with plant starts, vegetables and greens, and from-scratch baked goods (check them out at Fox Valley Farm if you're in town on a Saturday: the cinnamon rolls are out of this world). Kate told us, "I'm choosing to remain small and start out with the lowest level of licensing, but I now know what steps to take when I'm ready to expand the business if the baked goods turn out to be popular. I know my limitations, but I also know what resources are available to me."

We're thrilled to have been able to offer the workshops and by the enthusiastic response from people all across Montana working to sell food close to where it is grown, while building resiliency in our communities through networking, knowledge, mutual respect, and support.



SpiritWorks Farm: Finding a Focus with Montana's New Food Laws



Image: Lindy Dewey's cabbage moth deterrent: she hangs these throughout the gardens and the moths see them and think there is already a moth present, so they move on. Cabbage moths are highly territorial. All images are taken by AERO staffer Jackie Heinert or provided by the participating interviewees.

The herbal mandala at SpiritWorks Herb Farm and Healing Arts Sanctuary in Whitefish has three spirals in the shape of a celtic triskelion, which symbolize the key elements of the farm: learning, farming and building health. The mandala is clearly a focus point for Lindy Dewey, the farm's owner.

In following up with attendees of our Growing Food Business workshop series, AERO was invited by Lindy to tour SpiritWorks. As a result of Montana's recently revised Cottage Food Law and the workshop training, Lindy has put her commercial dried herb business on pause. In the past, she set up drying racks in a farm building, but now is required to prep and dry her herbs in a commercial kitchen if she intends to sell to the public.* "The monitoring, space and time requirements to dry the quantity of herbs I have, require that I do so

on site," she says. She has declined three large accounts their medicinal herb orders until things are sorted out with the law. Looking ahead, Lindy purchased a trailer and plans to retrofit it into a mobile certified commercial kitchen customized for herb drying.

Lindy now sells potted plants and fresh cut herbs at Farmers' Markets, and hopes, as she gets her herb drying process within the regulatory requirements, to supply wholesale herb markets with handcrafted, artisan quality dried herbs. She is also trying different crops to identify what her community wants and needs. SpiritWorks is a transitional organic farm and they are preparing for organic certification. This spring, 500 lbs of "chemically clean" strawberries were harvested, and there is a healthy crop of tomatoes and peppers growing inside a high tunnel greenhouse.

The meticulously maintained vegetable gardens supply food for her family and the WWOOFers, student interns, and volunteers that land on her farm. Interns all have a "leave behind" project evidenced by a chicken coop, grape arbor, and informational signs identifying various plants and their medicinal qualities.

Lindy has begun brainstorming sustainable revenue ideas for her farm, and the most interesting is her pursuit to reconnect young people and urban dwellers with food and herbal medicine production. She is developing a Farm Stay Wellness based learning center. A bright room with mirrors and exquisite woodwork is a meditation and yoga studio, and will become an herbology, healing arts, and medicine making classroom. She plans to set up a program where herbologists,

the farm to be around live plants and “rekindle their passion for their medicine.” She’ll sell live plants to visitors who can grow and dry their own herbs, ultimately passing this beneficial knowledge on to their communities.

Lindy’s focus on learning, farming and building health stems from the fact that many of her interns, buyers, and market regulars have gained a great wealth of knowledge from visits to the farm, or in group discussions around her picnic table. A presentation hosted by the Montana Organic Association suggested farmers create health spas on their property, which for Lindy is an easy shift as she is a healing arts practitioner and with her herbal farming focus, this makes even her small farm a viable educational venue.

Lindy has much to share, and in between big picture planning, she is busy growing and nurturing plants and people on her 10 scenic acres. Before ending the beautiful gardens tour, she summed up her life’s goal with a smile: “Do what I can to benefit others with what I’ve got.”



The Troy Farmers’ Market

Increasing Food Access in the Yaak

Five years ago, Shawna Kelsey began working to increase access to healthy food in rural Montana by starting a Farmers’ Market in Troy, in the northwest corner of Montana. Working for the Yaak Valley Forest Council, Shawna collaborated with a core group of vendors and volunteers, and that first season there were 2 vendors, and 25-50 patrons mingled in and out of the market.

Fast forward to 2016, where the market averaged 12 vendors and the event has

become a community hub on Friday afternoons, bringing over 200 customers each week. Shawna says kids come by in the afternoons, and locals and quite a few seasonal tourists visit with the vendors—and each other—while browsing the fruits, vegetables, and crafts for sale.

We were excited to meet Shawna at one of AERO’s Growing Food Businesses: Opportunities Under Montana’s New Food Laws workshops held in last spring, and spoke with her recently

to hear about the 2016 Farmers’ Market season and her successes and challenges with the new food policies.

The workshop helped Shawna become the go-to resource for vendors or consumers with questions about selling products, she says, instead of only having the county environmental health specialist as a source of information.

“People get excited about selling things, and it doesn’t always make sense



The Troy Farmers' Market is reducing food miles by leaps and bounds, and encouraging the community to first stop and shop from the neighborhood before heading to the big stores. One significant success was receiving a Federal Grant in 2016 to purchase a large cider press, which became a huge attraction during apple harvest time. Shawna estimates that in 4 hours over 75 gallons of cider were made with the press!

A quick browse of their very beautiful and informative Facebook page can give you a peek into what this amazing group has accomplished. We're happy to highlight the Troy Farmers' Market, which is located at the lowest elevation in the state! It's worth a drive to visit the market, which occurs on Fridays afternoons from 3:30 to 6:30 pm, June – September on the lawn of the Troy Museum.

why they can or can't do it," Shawna told us, "items like Kombucha and Kimchi and salsa are raising lots of questions."

A key piece of information Shawna gained from the workshop was that products that weren't allowed in the past— such as spices and baking mixes — are now allowed under the new Cottage Food law. She came up with a list of new opportunities and items for vendors to consider selling.

Thanks to AERO's Expos, workshops, and forum on the Montana Food Economy Initiative website, it has been easy for Shawna to network and gain support with other farmers markets, she says. The northwestern part of Montana is considered a food desert, and folks like Shawna are working hard to encourage the culture of local foods and sustainable agriculture in the area.

Luckily, even in rural areas, there are always those that surprise and encourage us, such as the Troy market vendor who lives in town and grows a market garden on 1/8 acre. Shawna says vendors are "hungry for knowledge" and that her vendor training series are well attended, encouraging new vendors to try their hand at selling at the Farmers' Market.



Images: Troy Farmers Market apple press obtained through a GTA grant! To learn more about these grant opportunities, visit: <http://agr.mt.gov/>



Trucking Along: Wicked Good Farm

Not only does The Wicked Good Farm deliver locally grown and organic produce each week at the Whitefish Farmers Market, they deliver it by bicycle and cart! If you attended AERO's Expo in Kalispell this fall, you may remember that The Wicked Good Farm supplied kale. Additionally, farm owner Brooke Bohannon acted as a liaison between the chef at the Red Lion and local producers to provide a nearly all local menu. Food was sourced from ten farms in the Flathead valley.

Farmers Brooke Bohannon and Sean Hard started The Wicked Good Farm (WGF) because they believe in preserving the ability to produce quality food. They grow fresh greens, herbs, produce, and strawberries at an urban farm in Whitefish. When outside working, they visit and exchange stories with neighbors, hoping that this "Over the fence" interaction inspires others to grow their own food. "The majority of our consumers are local, they are our neighbors!" Brooke says. They find it easy to network with consumers, farmers and producers in the Flathead valley; since it is a relatively small community they find connections everywhere. Participation in farmers' markets and trainings like AERO's Growing Food Businesses workshop have provided excellent networking opportunities.

WGF attended AERO's Growing Food Business workshop in spring of 2016, and they learned that the updated

Cottage Food law will help with their direct sales to consumers, such as in Farmers Markets, deliveries, or pop-up stands. The representatives from DPHHS, Mission Mountain Food Enterprise, and other agencies fielded specific questions and allowed for a tremendous amount of information exchange.

Brooke said the workshop also helped them clarify and understand confusing parts of the Cottage Food Law, which is valuable for their plan to "test the waters" with potentially non-hazardous



food items. They learned flour is "shelf stable" and exempt from the Cottage Food Law, unless a farmers' market requires one (but currently they are limited to direct sales). Recognizing that cereal grains are a huge part of Montana's agriculture production, they are attempting to increase accessibility to Montana grown whole wheat flour.

Part of The Wicked Good Farm's goal is



to increase their immediate community's accessibility to local foods, and this venture aligns well with their ambitions!

So, it is exciting that they have recently begun milling Montana-grown grains, selling directly to consumers, with the intent to eventually offer it wholesale. Preliminary sales will help determine if there is a viable local market for fresh stone-milled whole wheat flour. They are hoping the locals get on board, and they'll proceed to the next level, wholesale.

We're fortunate to have growers like The Wicked Good Farm in Montana, and especially happy that they are AERO supporters and members.

An update on the Dried Herb question:

In the Expo issue of the Sun Times, AERO interviewed Lindy Dewey at SpiritWorks Herb Farm and Healing Arts Sanctuary. (You can read the SunTimes article on AERO's web archive). Lindy attended the Growing Food Business Workshop series, and some specifications relating to herb drying were vague, so AERO began working with Department of Public Health and Human Services officials and Flathead County sanitarians to determine the requirements for commercial herb-drying. You can read the final document and follow up article at: <https://aerotourblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/27/an-update-on-the-dried-herb-question-from-the-growing-food-business-workshop-series/>

Growing Food (and a Business!) in the Flathead

Last spring, Tawnya Rourke Kelly attended AERO's Growing Food Businesses workshop that was held in the Flathead.

Tawnya, a practicing permaculturist, currently owns and runs, "HeartStead Home & Garden LLC," a landscape business that helps people in the Flathead design and maintain gardens with an eye towards attracting pollinators and using native and food-bearing plants.

She attended the workshop with the mindset that someday her small farm will generate enough income to scale down her landscaping business and allow her to focus on growing food to feed her community.

Like many workshop attendees struggling with the logistics and the language of the new laws, Tawnya found the seminar valuable in helping her gain a clear understanding of the breakdown of what small producers can or can't legally sell in Montana. What stuck out to her was that the current cottage food law appears to not allow her to have an income that matches her landscaping business. Based on income modeling and her calculations, it would take making the leap to wholesale to bring in profits, Tawnya said, and as a one-woman enterprise, she simply can't make that work.

Tawnya has a passion for food and feeding people, and it is obvious in the many activities and events she is involved with. She is a co-organizer of the wildly popular Free the Seeds event, and a board member of Farmhands-Nourish the Flathead. She is also coordinating the upcoming Inland Northwest Permaculture Convergence which will take place in Hot Springs

this Labor Day. Tawnya has no trouble talking about growing things, and the networking at AERO's workshops, events, and other garden/farm-centered gatherings is very valuable, she says.

Tawnya's challenge, which is not an uncommon one, is getting locals and farmers interested and involved in classes or workshops. "Farmers are super busy for not a ton of income, have families, and don't want to overextend themselves," she told us. Making classes appealing from a time-management and profit-increase level will be the most effective, in her opinion.

That way, farmers will see the benefit of making time to attend.

Tawnya, along with Purple Frog Gardens owner Pam Gerwe and staff at Farmhands, were part of the team in the Kalispell area that asked AERO to bring the workshop to the Flathead. When workshops were planned in Bozeman, Billings, Great Falls, and Arlee, Tawnya and other movers and shakers helped bring the workshop to more folks. Indeed, many attendees have responded that the various location options



throughout Montana made attending feasible. Often, trainings and workshops for beginning farmers and ranchers are based in one part of the state, and the travel can be prohibitive. Like others, Tawnya is hoping for a follow-up class with further clarifications for some of the cottage food laws, as well as ways to grow markets and buyers so that small-scale production can be feasible for business-women and producers like her. We have great news for Tawnya (and



everyone!) : in March of 2017, AERO received \$50,000 funding from the Western Extension Risk Management Education Center to hold another workshop series to help Montanans better understand the state's updated food policies and grow their farm and food businesses.*

For Tawnya, making her passion for growing food and feeding people a financially feasible option is a great priority. We wish her the best of luck in this admirable endeavor!



Distilling Local Products at the Gulch

While having a cocktail in Gulch Distiller's tasting room, you might look through the glass to the distilling room and notice the unique elk mount with one antler drooping low over its eye socket, and then you might see the dried herbs hanging a few feet away. And then you'd realize that the large tanks and urns in there are making what you're sipping. This business is definitely a local and unique treasure in Helena and across the state.

Steffen Rasile recently treated AERO staff to a tour of Helena's only micro-distillery. Steffen and business partner Tyrrell Hibbard purchased the distillery in 2015 with a shared passion for whiskey and quality spirits. The two Helena natives own and operate the business, fermenting, distilling, and bottling on site. They use only Montana grown grains in their grain-based spirits, and aim to eventually source as many of their products from Montana as possible.

Steffen attended one of AERO's Growing Food Businesses workshops in 2016 on behalf of The Gulch, and we followed up with him and Tyrrell this winter to see what they've put into practice from the workshop, and how AERO can help with future resources and course offerings.

They went to the workshop to learn what equipment they would need to make infrastructure improvements and, eventually, new products. They were curious about stainless appliances and sinks, and what their options are for sourcing local products to make syrups and liquors.

What the two found was that there are very few detailed rules written down, and product acquisition and legality is on a case by case basis due to the variable cottage food law requirements. "There

are no checklists for small businesses to follow in order to purchase and use locally grown or harvested products," Steffen said. "Can we buy lavender or basil from a Farmers' Market vendor to use in our syrups or drinks?" Or would that be illegal because the farmers have an exception under the food law, but Gulch does not. We asked the Department of Public Health and Human Services for clarification, and Nina Heinzinger of the Food & Consumer Safety department provided some information.



Nina told us: “For retail food operations, the business owner must buy his food from approved sources. Usually locally grown produce (such as from a CSA or farmers’ market) is approved, but the operator should check with their local sanitarian to verify this. Many operations use locally grown produce on their menus, and some contract with CSAs for produce.” She went on to explain that an example of an unapproved source would be food prepared in a home kitchen. “The main concern is that the owner maintains a record (i.e. bill of sale, invoice) to be able to track their sources of their food,” she told us. More guidance and documents explaining the Cottage Food laws can be found on DPHHS website.

Another piece of advice when purchasing fresh produce is to ask the grower if he or she is GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certified or if they follow the Good Agricultural Practices guidelines. This helps demonstrate that the grower is carrying out on-farm food safety practices. When performing updates to the Abundant Montana Directory, web designers added a “GAP certified” spot in our directory, so producers can be searchable that way!

Steffen and Tyrrell aspire to use as many Montana products as possible, and are working on securing botanicals for products like absinthe, fernet, and aperitifs.

Hanging in the corner of the shop are mugwort, mint, wormwood, and chamomile, which are used in the Fernet and test liqueurs and grown around Helena. “We haven’t been able to find all the herbs and botanicals we want; somehow we need to tell farmers what to grow,” Steffen admits. “For 40 cases of gin, we need about 60 lbs of botanicals.”

The distillery currently uses wheat from Townsend Seeds, and the Great Falls company MaltEurop (suppliers for Coors and Budweiser) reserves malt for Montana breweries and distilleries. One of the appliances we noticed in the

distillery room was a grain mill, where Steffen says they coarsely mill their own wheat and barley. “I have a finer-grind mill at home for baking flour,” Steffen grinned.

During the process of malting and brewing, the liquid by-products left are rich in protein and fibers, and this spent grain is picked up by a Helena pig farmer. “Otherwise I guess we would have to pour it down a drain,” he admits. This arrangement works out to be a good deal for both parties! Happy people, happy pigs.

Steffen mentioned he would appreciate AERO’s assistance in finding answers to their questions about local products and producers, and hopes we continue to build his supply of sustainable Montana items, which might help with their never ending needs for botanicals!

Gulch Distillery is mostly a local liquor provider, though they hope to expand out of Montana and onto craft distillery shelves around the west. Right now you can find their liquors in Helena at The Windbag, On Broadway, Silver Star Steakhouse, and Miller’s Crossing. Or head to their business location in the former Montana Distillery and Bottling Warehouse at the north end of Helena’s main, historic gulch. They’re just downstream from the strike that turned a gulch into the mining camp that became a state capital.



In researching Steffen’s food law questions, we are reminded of the clear need for a forum to answer questions about the laws, and using local products. AERO manages the www.mtfoodeconomy.org website, and will continue to publish these discussions on there.

Visit the forum to post your own question, and we’ll help connect you to answers!

Building a Resilient Bitterroot

The O'Hara Commons and Sustainability Center is a new and active organization, located in an old farmhouse in Hamilton. Samantha O'Byrne is its founder and director, and shared her thoughts with us about the Growing Food Businesses workshop AERO held last spring. I asked where the name came from, and Samantha said, "Robert O'Hara was the first mayor of Hamilton, and Marcus Daly's attorney." He built the farmhouse back in 1896 and its regality has been well-preserved over the years.

Samantha tells us she has been on the path of sustainability all her life, and has lived in the Bitterroot for quite a while, operating a small retail shop in Hamilton for 13 years. "Ravalli County has a lot of unemployment and poverty, and lots of people getting unhealthy food," she said. She began offering healthy food education and resources to all economic strata and age groups in the community, and The O'Hara Commons and Sustainability Center grew from those workshops and programs.



The O'Hara Center connects people to local foods, and their mission, "Empowering a Resilient Community," is an admirable one. Their long term vision is to utilize and develop available resources to benefit community through education, resource sharing and demonstration gardens. They do this in

a manner which builds local economy, promotes healthy food options, and develops regional self-sufficiency. Like AERO, they are a membership-based organization; O'Hara's membership is on a sliding fee schedule, with the intent that people join in at a level that fits their ability to give. Samantha wanted to be sure we shared that "scholarship memberships are available in order to ensure that we can be inclusive to families and individuals who may not otherwise be able to participate in our programs."

During AERO's Growing Food Businesses workshop series, the Center was in the midst of relicensing their commercial kitchen, so they attended the workshop in Arlee hoping to learn how the new laws would fit in with the kitchen upgrades and remodel. Through workshop discussions, they eventually redirected their intentions for the kitchen, and built an education-based kitchen instead of a wholly commercial kitchen open to the public. Updating the past licensing information at the kitchen delayed the opening, but it is now properly licensed and members have access to all the kitchen's tools, and all other shared resources.

The workshop provided some great networking opportunities, Samantha told us, and the information sharing between sanitarians and other local organizations was valuable. Samantha feels that networking in the Bitterroot is not difficult, and there are many producers and growers in the area that are aiming for the same "local foods" goals. "It is easy in our area to access producers of local healthy food options," she says, compared to other "food deserts" in Montana.

Samantha noted that workshop presenters received so many questions about the law, some of which did not yet have clear-cut answers or guidelines,



that attendees felt a follow up class was important. The many nuances of the law are still being hashed out, and attendees hope for updates, or more detailed classes. (Good news! AERO received a Grant for more workshops, to be held this fall!)

This summer, the O'Hara Center will be hosting a Wednesday Farmers' Market, brought about by the need for a mid-week market. They will promote a "regional food" market, which includes the nearby Lemhi county in Idaho, and include a "truth in labeling" project which will provide information such as "organic," or "grass-fed" at each vendor spot.

The O'Hara Center is membership based, and joining gives you access to discounted workshops and tool rentals. They also offer truck and cider press sharing, as part of an effort to help those with storage space or financial limitations. Samantha's passion for healthy, local food was evident in our conversation, and a look at their website shows a full set of workshops aimed at every age and ability. Check it out at www.theoharacommons.org

From Soup to Seed:

Cooking up a Business with Black Bear Soup

Due to a clerical error, Black Bear Soups and Produce almost rolled out to the public as “Black Bear Soap.” Ellie Costello, owner, tells us that this is only one of the small challenges she has faced while trying to establish her business and sell her locally grown and handmade soups.

Ellie attended AERO’s Growing Food Business Workshop last spring, and was interested in learning what next steps she could take in order to grow her business. She admitted that many portions of the new Cottage Food Law don’t apply to her because her soup products need to be created in a commercial kitchen. However, there are a number of grey area items included in the soup production, including dried herbs and spices. Although regulations from the Department of Public Health and Human Service are becoming clearer, more streamlined and consistent, (see AERO’s Spiritworks Herb Farm and Healing Arts Sanctuary writeup), Ellie chose to rent a kitchen space in a commercial kitchen from the start so as not to run into any problems. This way, she avoided the confusions of the Cottage Food Act, and her products would be prepared according to USDA regulations.

2017 will be her third year working part time with this business, and most of her sales are at the Saturday Market in Missoula, selling directly to customers. She also aims to obtain a catering license to provide her delicious, mostly vegetarian soups to larger groups. Ellie grows her own produce in Missoula on a rented farm plot, and what she can’t supply from her own land, she sources locally from other farms. “Because soup is so versatile and broad, I knew I would be able to use almost any kind of produce grown in Montana,” Ellie



said. “This was crucial because I not only wanted to provide soups during the winter, but year round as a quick, healthy meal option, and I appreciated the thought of serving our customers in a way that helps them feel more in sync with the natural progression of the crop season.” She felt the versatility would allow a menu that adapted to each harvest season.

Ellie thinks customers might like to see that the produce she grows goes directly into the soups, so she may sell veggies next to the soups at the Farmers’ Market this year, as well. Ellie’s full time job is Organizational Director for Missoula’s

Urban Demonstration Project (MUD), where she works to promote urban sustainability efforts in Missoula, so her time to grow the business is limited. She has many ideas, such as joining the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, and providing her soups in a CSA style, but hasn’t been able to fit it in her schedule yet. “It is tons of work, and not a lot of profit. I’m time and income limited, and right now there is no budget for marketing or business planning.” She says she’ll keep working on making soups because, “this type of business hasn’t gotten a fair shot yet.”

For Ellie, networking through AERO, or other partner’s workshops, has been valuable. With the Cottage Food workshop, she told us, “it was great to have all the various people in the room – the health department, other producers. The discussions at the workshops helped create inspiration and ideas that were maybe on the backburner.”



She feels supported by the Missoula nonprofit Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC), and is grateful for free or affordable trainings, such as their Planning for On-Farm Success workshop. “The challenge for people in farming or agriculture is marketing and business planning. I’m good at growing and making things, but not great at sitting in front of the computer,” she laughs.

She mentioned, “It has been nice to see that the Health department in Missoula is willing to step back and evaluate some of the regulations. When it’s too much for small businesses, they recognize the challenges and are working to make changes happen.” Ellie believes one of the best innovations in the Missoula area has been the Moonlight Kitchens incubator, run by AERO members Anne and Pat Little. Black Bear Soups and Produce uses the commercial kitchen there to prepare their food products, and Ellie fully supports their vision of offering facilities that community members can use to expand production and business opportunities.

Ellie says she is going to give it her all in 2017, and use the things she’s learned over the last two years to make more delicious soups and recipes to sell. In formulating AERO’s fall workshops, we’ll definitely be taking Ellie’s and other’s comments into consideration. We want to provide Montana farmers, producers, local food heroes and others, what they give to us: hope, and really good food.



Picking Your Path: Families, U-Pick, & Growing It Local

“If people know the family that is behind the farm, maybe they’ll see the importance and value of keeping small farms going,” says Julie Peters of Red Hen Farm. Julie, her husband Greg, and their two kids own the u-pick berry farm and orchard just outside of Missoula’s city limits. Along with unsprayed berries and soon-to be certified organic apples, their farm offers eggs year round, as well as plant starts and produce in season. Julie agreed to share her thoughts about farm longevity, as well as dealing with rules and regulations, after attending AERO’s Growing Food Business workshop last spring.



When asked about the history of the farm, Julie said, “My husband needed more space for his landscaping company’s equipment, so we purchased the farm. We were always passionate about fruits and finding u-pick places, and it was our dream to try and have one.” The first year, 2011, they planted several apple trees. Then they solicited friends to help figure out how many strawberries they would need to plant to maintain a U-Pick farm. They bought thousands of plants, intending to market the strawberries until they could find

a buyer for the apple crop. Now, in their 6th year, they have strawberries, raspberries and other vegetables. In the height of the season, u-pick visitors have picked over 100 lbs of berries a day, no doubt going home with red-stained fingers!

Julie told us, “The workshop was helpful to have Health Department professionals in the same room, to ask detailed questions one on one, and it was great to have options around the state to attend. In fact, we would love to see more AERO workshops available

discussing ag. legislation. One of our biggest stumbling blocks is that we don't always know what farm projects or products are under regulation," Julie said. Learning more about Montana and the USDA's farming regulations would be very helpful for their business. So far, they have not filled out the Cottage Food Act registration, which is something Julie admits to being a bit overwhelming. The Cottage Food regulations will help them determine the requirements for growing their business with value-added products, like drying fruit or making cider for sale.

"I'd love to go to more workshops AERO put on, such as how to diversify our income, or agritourism information sessions." They'd like to know what options are available for small farmers beyond growing a new crop, but need help weeding through local and state regulations. Last year, Red Hen Farm started offering Community Supported Agriculture shares, with weekly offerings of berries such as strawberries, gooseberries, currants, eggs, vegetables, and fruits such as peaches or apples. This year they have 30 families signed up to get their delicious, organically grown fruit. If you can't make it to the farm, you'll be happy to know they provide berries and fruit to Missoula restaurants including, Mmm Waffles, Caffe Dolce, Great Harvest, and Green Source.

Along with their busy U-pick and CSA schedule, Julie and Greg plan to create a "Farm Friday" farmer's market on their property. "At the height of the season we'll have veggies, eggs and fruits available," she told us. Another project they hope generates revenue is Greg's apple tree grafting. He has searched for a diverse group of heirloom and rare apple scions, and is doing personal field trials to determine what trees will grow and produce best in the Missoula area. In fact, they are doing these comparisons with many of their plant stock, in order to have the best production on their farm.



From our afternoon chat, it was obvious that Julie is very passionate about providing food to the Missoula community, in the healthiest way possible. They love being on the edge of the city, so that Missoulians can get there quickly and easily. Their beautiful location and life are very welcoming, and we've already planned a family trip down to pick berries from their farm, happily avoiding the box store. We wish them the best of luck in their 2017 growing season!



Breaking through the Bottleneck: Bringing Commercial Kitchens to Communities

In 2012, when Anne Little wanted to create a soup cart in Missoula, she couldn't find a commercial kitchen that met her needs. After talking with other cooks and the Health Department, as well as visiting a few less-than-optimal kitchens, she and her husband, Pat, realized that what Missoula really needed was good commercial kitchen space (and maybe a soup cart). They started looking for a location and eventually opened Moonlight Kitchens in late 2014.

The space currently offers 2 kitchens, a work space, cleaning area, and loading area.

In 2015, Moonlight Kitchens applied for and received a "Growth through Agriculture" (GTA) grant from the state of Montana to install an 8'x12' walk-in cooler and high-temp dishwasher, increasing the efficiency and usability of

the kitchens, thus reducing the cost to the cooks. Moonlight Kitchens continues to look for ways to help cooks and business entrepreneurs succeed, and currently offers a variety of classes and events during the year to expose new cooks and the general public to their facility and the local food system in Missoula.

The mission of Moonlight Kitchens is “to connect our farmers with our neighbors through our cooks, and to run a triple bottom line business (people, profit, planet).” This means they work with, and donate to, related local non-profit food organizations, encourage the cooks to use their recycling facilities, provide cooks with information and access to local food suppliers, and facilitate their process of creating viable food businesses.



AERO staff had a brief interview with Anne, to ask for her thoughts on the 2016 Growing Food Business workshop, particularly as someone who is also working to educate and empower food producers! Anne admitted that, while she couldn't remember exact details, she thought the general information and handouts were helpful, and that like many other attendees, she found the open discussion among participants to be highly useful. “We appreciate making connections with other commercial kitchen businesses. The information we got out of the workshop was good, but the connections were most valuable.”

When asked if Moonlight Kitchens has made any changes after the workshop,

or after the new law, Anne admitted that the policy changes have actually decreased her business. When cooks come in to rent a kitchen, if it sounds to Anne like they could do their preparation and production at home, she makes sure to tell them. “I’m not required by law to tell them, but even if I lose their business, I want the cooks to know they can save money by making their products at home,” she said. This includes the homemade chocolate chip cookies or pastries that you find at any Farmers’ Market, which can now be produced at home under the cottage food law.

On the flip side, there are cooks who are making items at home that are now legally required to have been prepared in a commercial kitchen. Anne follows the legislative bills closely, in order to stay up to date on new laws, and has opinions about which are beneficial to local food farmers and ranchers.

When asked why she and her husband are doing what they do, Anne laughed and said, “How much time ya got? Pat and I are committed to supporting local farmers, which is basically our mission statement,” she says. “In our experience, commercial kitchens are the bottleneck in local food systems.” There are not enough spread throughout the state to support those who are producing Montana products. After a longer discussion about processing and distribution centers in Montana, she said, “Supporting the local economy is important, especially with food security issues.”

2017 will be Moonlight Kitchen’s third summer in operation. They are keeping busy, especially after a winter spent implementing their Growth Through Agriculture grant for the cooler and dishwasher.

Their local food passion extends far beyond the kitchen doors. Anne has worked in food co-ops since the '70s, has run several small businesses, and currently helps keep the Five Valley

Seed Library going. She’s a former board member of MUD (Missoula Urban Demonstration Project) and a current member/owner of the Missoula Community Food Co-op. Pat’s background is in engineering. Originally from the UK, he’s worked for several large aerospace companies and most recently was employed by The Nature Conservancy doing computer support work. He’s served on the Missoula Planning Board and currently manages the Five Valleys Audubon website. He’s also a co-op member/owner. Anne and Pat have lived in Missoula since 2009.

Whenever possible, they go to Farmers’ Markets and talk to the vendors, inviting them to come and see their kitchens. “We have regular potluck dinners for the public to meet the farmers. 15-20 people show up and we all just get together and talk!” she says. It’s beneficial for farmers to meet their target buyers, and of course, the other way around also.

We’re so grateful for Montana’s farmers, ranchers, and producers, and it’s easy to forget there are unsung heroes that aide in getting local products to us, the consumers. Moonlight Kitchens has been unrivaled in the support of AERO and a sustainable Montana and we are eager to promote (and taste) all the products they help deliver!



ALTERNATIVE ENERGY RESOURCES ORGANIZATION • PO BOX 1558 • HELENA, MONTANA 59624

PH: (406) 443-7272 • WWW.AEROMT.ORG

Leading the way to a sustainable Montana



We thank the participating farms and businesses who joined us for our workshops, these interviews, and who strive every day to feed Montanans with Montana-grown produce, to grow our local food systems and economies, and support sustainable, responsible agriculture in our state.

All interviews initially appeared in AERO's quarterly newsletter, The Sun Times, or on AERO's blog and social media.

AERO is certified 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, founded in 1974.

AERO's mission is to empower communities to nurture and promote a more sustainable Montana. We envision a future where all Montanans have access to clean energy, healthy food, sustainable agriculture, and a network that provides leadership, resources, and advocacy.

Learn more and become a member at www.aeromt.org.



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