As an innovative and newly emerging sector in the food supply chain, shared kitchens enable diverse local food businesses to produce, store, and sell their products through a wide range of channels. They provide a valuable resource to communities who seek to address potential barriers to business development, including access to facilities and capital.

Shared kitchens are defined as “licensed commercial spaces that provide a pathway for food entrepreneurs—ranging from chefs, caterers, food truck operators, and bakers, to value-added producers and packaged food and beverage makers—to launch and grow their businesses.”

Given their relatively recent growth, little is known about the types of operators using these facilities and the dynamics of their business growth. In 2021, Colorado State University and the Food Corridor, funded through a cooperative agreement with USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service, conducted a survey of food business owners operating out of shared kitchens to learn more. Survey responses were collected from April through October 2021 with a total of 179 complete responses. Questions focused on business operation characteristics, motivations, and challenges they face.
A Quick Look at the Sector

Shared kitchens are a relatively young and dynamic sector. Given the recent growth of shared kitchens, a 2019 survey of 180 food business owners operating out of shared kitchens may have been the first-ever attempt to gain an understanding of this sector. This survey found that:

1. 50% of kitchen respondents were established within the last five years, and another 28% were established within the last 5-9 years.
2. Over half of the kitchens surveyed responded that their primary goal for using shared kitchens was “assisting early-growth businesses.”

To explore further, the 2021 survey was conducted to expand our collective knowledge of the shared kitchen sector with a specific focus on food businesses working out of shared kitchens. Active kitchen managers distributed the survey to food business operators, and it was promoted through The Kitchen Door—a directory of available kitchen space. The survey was active from April through October 2021. A total of 179 complete responses were collected from across the US (Figure 1). Qualified respondents needed to: 1) be the primary owner/operator of a food business, and 2) have previously operated or be currently operating in a shared kitchen facility.

Figure 1. Map of Respondents by State

Key Food Business Characteristics

The 2021 survey asked about several key business characteristics, including company type, age of company, and how long they’ve been operating in a shared kitchen. We found that the surveyed businesses are relatively young. This was expected, as an average small business is about 10 years old, and shared kitchens are a common resource used by those in the start-up phase of a food business. Regarding the age of their businesses, respondents reported the following tenure (as of 2021):

- Operating since 2020: 30% of respondents (n=54)
- Opened between 2016–2019: 54% of respondents (n=95)
- Opened between 2010–2015: 12% of respondents (n=22)
- Began operating before 2010: 4% of respondents (n=8)
Shared kitchens are an important first step in some food business operation's life cycle:

- 64% of respondents had not operated anywhere except in a shared kitchen

A share of respondents (n=64) also operated in a different type of facility prior to using a shared kitchen. Individuals transitioning from a home kitchen to a shared kitchen was the most common pathway.

- 50% also operated out of a home kitchen
- 19% also operated in a dedicated commercial kitchen
- 18% also operated out of a food truck or restaurant
- 13% had brick and mortar stores

**Figure 2. How long have you been producing in a shared kitchen?**

- 0-6 months: 17%
- 7-12 months: 13%
- 1-2 years: 30%
- 3-5 years: 26%
- More than 5 years: 14%

Note: N=179, respondents could select one option.

**Figure 3. Description of Business Operation**

Note: N=179, respondents were allowed to select up to 3, so totals may exceed 179.

Survey respondents were asked to select up to 3 categories that best describe their food business operation (Figure 3). The top categories were:

- Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) (24%),
- Caterer (20%), and
- Baker (17%).

Interestingly, 27% of respondents selected more than one option to describe their business. Frequent overlap occurred with Food Truck/Mobile Vendor and Caterer categories and Baker and Caterer categories.
Characteristics of Food Business Owner/Operators

In addition to business characteristics, the survey also collected demographic characteristics of the owner/operators.

- Most of the sample identified as Female (61%).
- Age distribution of the sample was mixed, with the youngest and oldest groups representing the smallest share of respondents.
- Respondents were more racially diverse than the U.S. population at large, with Black and African American, and Asian respondents making up 18% and 11% of the sample, respectively (compared to 14.2% and 7.2%, respectively in the broader US population, according to the 2020 U.S. census).

**Figure 4. Household Income of Food Business Operators**

- Poverty Level and Below ($29,999 and under) 13%
- Lower Middle Income ($30,000 - $69,999) 22%
- Upper Middle Income ($70,000 - $99,999) 22%
- Upper Income (More than $100,000) 23%
- Prefer not to answer 20%

Note: N=179, respondents could select one option.

**Figure 5. Age of Food Business Owner/Operators**

- Prefer not to answer 3%
- 18-24 2%
- 25-34 21%
- 35-44 26%
- 45-54 25%
- 55-64 19%
- 65 or older 4%

Note: N=179, respondents could select one option.

*Thresholds are based on 2020 U.S. Census poverty threshold for family of 5 ($31,161) and median household income level ($67,521).

** Household income includes all forms of income earned by members of the household, not just income generated from the food business.
Endnotes


3 US Census Bureau, Business Dynamics Statistics, 2019

4 A common response to “Other” included delivery-only business concepts and “virtual restaurants.”