

SFGate.com

ADVERTISEMENT

That's getting it done  
at SprintSpeed.™Online Exclusive  
**FREE**The rugged Motorola®  
Blend™ ic402

Shop now &gt;



Sprint ahead

SFGATE HOME • BUSINESS • SPORTS • ENTERTAINMENT • TRAVEL

CLASSIFIEDS • JOBS • REAL ESTATE • CARS

Search

SFGate

Web by Google™

Sign In | Register

San Francisco Chronicle

**THESE FIRMS ARE BITE-SIZING****A profitable feast: Food-related entrepreneurs are turning the Bay Area into a free range of innovation, and their customers are eating it up**Ilana DeBare, Chronicle Staff Writer  
Sunday, July 29, 2007

SHARE

COMMENTS (5)

FONT | SIZE: - +

TOOLS  
SPONSOR:

Bibby Gignilliat hovered behind a group of Financial District employees who were hurriedly trying to stuff cheese, red peppers and garlic into raw boneless chicken breasts. "You guys have 25 minutes!" she called out. "Twenty-five minutes!"

"Oh my God!" exhaled one employee, slapping the stuffed breasts into a grill pan.

Gignilliat smiled, knowing from experience that the countertop chaos would gel into a delicious meal.

Gignilliat runs a company called Parties That Cook. It provides corporate team-building events based on cooking, such as the "Iron Chef"-style competition she was overseeing last week for a group from Barclays Global Investors.

A cooking school graduate, she could have parlayed her passion into a traditional food-related business such as a restaurant, a catering firm or a specialty food company.

But Gignilliat is one of a growing number of gourmet entrepreneurs who have stepped off the beaten path and created more unusual food-focused businesses.

A cheese-tasting school. A business that cooks a gourmet dinner in your home while giving you a private massage. Companies that provide healthy lunches to schools and child care centers. Companies that lead walking tours of farmers' markets, ethnic eating places and artisan bakeries.

"This is a really, really wide-open city for more (food) experiences," said Lisa Rogovin, a former advertising saleswoman who recently started a business called In the Kitchen With Lisa that gives tours of the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market. "Every day something new is popping up on the artisan side or chef side. It's gotten so much bigger than selling a product or cooking a meal."

No one tracks the number of offbeat food-related businesses in the Bay Area or elsewhere.

But industry experts say that such enterprises are on the rise - part of a heightened national fascination with gourmet food that has been spurred by the Food Network and the phenomenon of celebrity chefs.

"With the advent of the Food Network, everyone wants to be a food critic, and interest in food is at an all-time high," said Louise Dawson, owner of Five Star Restaurant Consultants in San Francisco. "Any kind of business that is educating a very hungry-for-knowledge public is on the upswing."

At the same time, the Bay Area has unique qualities that make it particularly fertile ground for unusual food-related enterprises.

San Francisco's long history as a tourist destination laid the groundwork with a plethora of restaurants and chefs. The proximity of Napa Valley and other winemaking regions fostered a community of wine and food lovers. Over the past two decades, Alice Waters and

**Business  
& Finance****Get Quote:**

Detailed

Submit

Symbol Lookup

**Main Business & Finance Page:** Stock quotes, portfolio, funds and more...

**Small Business Center:** A new resource for small businesses. Get expert advice, forms and more.

**SFGate Technology:** It's a high-tech world - we just plug you into it...

**Akeena Solar**

www.akeena.net

**High Electric Bills?****Click here to sign up for a Free site evaluation!**

MOST READ

MOST E-MAILED

TOP STORIES

1. GOLDEN GATE PARK SWEEP - CAN CITY MAKE IT STICK? HOMELESS ROUSTED: 4:30 a...
2. Police: More Victims in Submerged Cars
3. Sleepless in San Francisco Top places to flirt in The City
4. Marin man gets 200 years for molesting daughter's classmates
5. Bargain bus company riding into Bay Area next week
6. McGoldrick's link to Mission condo developer
7. No Tillman cover-up, Rumsfeld tells House panel

**TopJobs**

**CONSTRUCTION**  
Estimator/  
Manager SF  
commercial

**CONSTRUCTION**  
Airport Construct  
Projects Manager  
County of San  
Mateo

**DRIVERS**  
1000 HIRING  
BONUS Deliver  
small

**EDUCATION**  
College of Marin  
College of Marin

**ELECTRICIANS**  
JOURNEYMAN P&G  
COMMUNICATIONS

**FINANCE**  
Leading non-profit  
provider of  
CASCADIA  
BEHAVIORAL  
HEALTHCARE

**FINANCIAL**  
ANALYST \$6,370 -  
\$7,747 annually

**HEALTHCARE**  
RNs, OTs, PTs, STs  
Sutter VNA

**MEDICAL**

Get up to  
\$1,800 in  
energy  
efficiency  
rebates.

CLICK HERE

**ADVERTISERS**

Own '06 Chronicle Quake  
& Fire Photos &  
Frontpages

other socially conscious restaurateurs drew people's attention to how food is produced.

Meanwhile, the Bay Area's thriving technology industry has given many people unprecedented disposable income to spend on gourmet-related services. It also gave them the entrepreneurial skills and savvy to experiment with new business models.

"The Bay Area is wonderful for startup businesses since people are really open-minded about startups," said Lesley Kohn, a former high-tech manager who co-owns Chefables, a Corte Madera firm that delivers hot meals such as "Mac & cheese with toasted quinoa" to schools and child care centers.

"People here are great about food. They love to try new things. But that also makes it hard sometimes, keeping everyone happy, because people have high standards."

Some offbeat food entrepreneurs come from traditional culinary backgrounds, with restaurant experience or culinary school training.

Stephen Gibbs, for instance, graduated from the California Culinary Academy and worked as a chef at Postrio, Stars and La Folie. But Gibbs had been an actor before becoming a chef, and missed the interaction with an audience.

So he and his life partner, Molly Fuller, started a business that, like Gignilliat's, provides cooking parties and team-building events.

"Stephen has this interest in teaching people about food, sharing his experience, and sharing with people the joy of cooking," said Fuller, whose company is called Hands On Gourmet.

By contrast, other "foodie" entrepreneurs had completely unrelated professional backgrounds before starting their businesses.

Richard Festen was a biochemist when he decided to pursue his childhood passion for cooking. He enrolled in the Culinary Academy and in 2003 started a business called BakingArts, which provides individual and group instruction in baking.

"There's some amount of fantasy in making these baked goods - these amazing, fantastical things out of sugar," Festen said.

Meanwhile Sara Vivencio left a career in advertising in New York to work in a San Francisco cheese store and, in 2006, opened the Cheese School of San Francisco. She now offers classes in cheese tasting several times a week.

"It's ton of fun," Vivencio said. "I am ridiculously crazy about cheese. To demystify cheese is really my reward."

While a few businesses such as Parties That Cook and Hands On Gourmet are direct competitors, most tend to see each other as partners in a crusade to spread the gospel of good food.

Gignilliat, for instance, is co-sponsoring a cheese- and chocolate-tasting class next weekend with the Cheese School and with a business called the Art of Tasting Chocolate.

And Shirley Fong-Torres - whose Wok Wiz walking tours of Chinatown food, history and culture have been around since the 1980s - welcomes newer food tours such as Local Tastes of the City, which leads walking tours of North Beach and Chinatown.

"The more, the better," Fong-Torres said. "The only thing I hope is they have the same passion I had from Day One, that they're not just doing it for the money."

One question about the growing number of offbeat food-related businesses is whether they will ultimately survive.

Many are still young and struggling one-person operations. In some cases, idealistic foodies are having to teach themselves details of marketing, budgeting and business planning.

Tom Medin began Local Tastes of the City tours in 2004, providing behind-the-scene views of coffee roasting at Caffe Roma, truffle making at XOX Truffles and focaccia baking at the Liguria Bakery. With no employees, he leads every tour himself and has had a steep learning curve.

"The first year, if I got three hours of sleep a night, I was really lucky," Medin said. "The second year, I got certain things in place. Now we've reached break even and are paying debts off."

ASSISTANT Dr.  
Roy Jones seeking  
a

**MEDICAL**  
CLS/Med  
Technologist

**PLUMBERS**  
Earn \$4k-\$6k  
monthly + bonus

**REAL**  
ESTATE SALES  
Baja is Booming

**RETAIL**  
Jewelry Sales  
Westfield Center

**RETAIL**  
Beyond any store  
of its kind.  
*Bed Bath &  
Beyond*

**SALES**  
Great Opportunity!  
*Reynolds &  
Reynolds*

About Top Jobs  
View All Top Jobs  
Search more Jobs

PROVIDED BY —  
**YAHOO! hotjobs**

Meanwhile, Juliette Jacques remains far from break-even with her fledgling venture, a Moraga business called Table of Dreams that provides a gourmet dinner and personal massage in a client's home.

Jacques - a longtime massage therapist who contracts with professional chefs to cook the dinners - would need about 10 Table of Dreams clients per month to break even. But when she started the business early this year, she was getting only one booking every other month.

Jacques enrolled in a class about how to run a business through a nonprofit called the Women's Initiative for Self-Employment. But for now, she still relies on her regular massage practice to make ends meet.

"Everyone who tries Table of Dreams is excited and says, 'I'll tell my friends,' but then maybe they forget," she said.

Only time will tell if food-related startups like Jacques are part of a permanent trend, or just a passing fad.

If the Barclays Global Investors employees are any indicator, though, food-related events are here to stay.

The Barclays group had done other kinds of team-building activities in the past, including go-cart races and a scavenger hunt with global positioning devices. But Gignilliat's cooking contest got top reviews - even from employees who rarely cook at home.

"It was great," said Barclays employee Jim Lewis, chatting with a colleague and finishing the dessert they had made, a warm Scharffenberger chocolate souffle cake with salted caramel sauce. "It's more inclusive. Everyone can do food. Everyone eats."

---

#### Offbeat food-related businesses

The Bay Area is home to a variety of food-related businesses that go beyond the traditional categories of restaurants, caterers and specialty food manufacturers. Here are just a few:

##### Cooking parties and events

These companies provide cooking contests and lessons for private parties or corporate team-building events:

- Table of Dreams (private dinner with massage) - [www.tableofdreams.com](http://www.tableofdreams.com)
- Cook Club (cooking parties and events) - [www.cookclubparties.com](http://www.cookclubparties.com)
- Hands On Gourmet (cooking parties and events) - [www.handsongourmet.com](http://www.handsongourmet.com)
- Parties That Cook! (cooking parties and events) - [www.partiesthatcook.com](http://www.partiesthatcook.com)
- TasteWine (wine tasting events) - [www.taste-wine.com](http://www.taste-wine.com)
- Uncorked Events (wine tasting events) - [www.uncorkedevents.com](http://www.uncorkedevents.com)

##### Food and cooking classes

Culinary schools, colleges and gourmet stores have a variety of cooking classes. But some startups are also offering classes in unusual niches, such as:

- The Art of Tasting Chocolate - [www.theartoftastingchocolate.com](http://www.theartoftastingchocolate.com)
- Baking Arts - [www.bakingarts.net](http://www.bakingarts.net)
- Cheese School of San Francisco - [www.cheeseschoolsf.com](http://www.cheeseschoolsf.com)
- What's Cooking (cooking classes for children) - [www.whatscooking.info](http://www.whatscooking.info)

##### Home-delivered meals

- Cook (home-delivered meal kits) - [www.cook-sf.com](http://www.cook-sf.com)
- Home on the Range - [www.homeontherangemeals.com](http://www.homeontherangemeals.com)
- Jessie et Laurent - [www.jessieetlaurent.com](http://www.jessieetlaurent.com)
- **MagicKitchen** (nationwide delivery) - [www.magickitchen.com](http://www.magickitchen.com)

##### Meals for schools

These firms specialize in healthy, sometimes organic, meals for schools and child care

centers:

-- Chefables - [www.chefables.com](http://www.chefables.com)

-- Kid Chow - [www.kid-chow.com](http://www.kid-chow.com)

-- Revolution Foods - [www.revfoods.com](http://www.revfoods.com)

Prep kitchens

These businesses have mushroomed in the past two years. They provide recipes and ingredients to assemble family dinners, which people can take home, freeze and then reheat:

-- The Chronicle's Food Section described and listed a number of these companies last year - [www.sfgate.com/ZMT](http://www.sfgate.com/ZMT)

.

Food tours

-- Food Lovers Tour of San Francisco (also tours of North Beach and Nob Hill) - [www.graceannwalden.net](http://www.graceannwalden.net)

-- In the Kitchen With Lisa (Ferry Plaza Farmers Market) - [www.inthekitchenwithlisa.com](http://www.inthekitchenwithlisa.com)

-- Local Tastes of the City (North Beach and Chinatown) - [www.localtastesofthecity.com](http://www.localtastesofthecity.com)

-- Wok Wiz (San Francisco Chinatown) - [www.wokwiz.com](http://www.wokwiz.com)

Gourmet games

-- Smartsco (flashcards for party games about wine, chocolate, coffee, beer and food) - [www.smartsco.com](http://www.smartsco.com)

-- BlindWine (kit to host your own blind wine tasting) - [www.blindwine.com](http://www.blindwine.com)

*E-mail Ilana DeBare at [idebare@sfgate.com](mailto:idebare@sfgate.com).*

*This article appeared on page **D - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

SHARE

TOOLS SPONSOR:

(5)

**Share your thoughts on this story.**

[Add Your Comment](#) [View Comments](#)

Ads by Google

What's This?

**Real Estate In Panama**

Ocean Front Real Estate Developers Escape or Retire in Paradise!

[www.habitatsrealty.com](http://www.habitatsrealty.com)



Get up to 50% off home delivery of the Chronicle for 12 weeks!

[Back To Top](#)

San Francisco Chronicle Sections

Go

© 2007 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)