

UW-River Falls: Food Ready Space opens at St. Croix Valley Business Incubator Center

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April 13, 2022 — When the new 3,000-square-foot Food Ready Space opened in February at the St. Croix Valley Business Incubation Center, it required no marketing before all seven spaces were filled with entrepreneurs ready to launch or grow their businesses.

State and local licensing laws require that most food products publicly sold must be produced in commercial-grade kitchens, which can prove too costly for many upstart and small food business owners.

“We did see a gap and a need for this in the area and we helped fill it,” said St. Croix Valley Business Innovation Center Director Sheri Marnell.

At the center, members rent a 225-square-foot food production space and can choose to rent four-foot sections underneath a kitchen hood with fire suppression equipment to install equipment such as stovetops and ovens. Members bring in the equipment they need at the Food Ready Space.

The center first opened in January 2018. It is a collaborative effort of four founding partners including UW-River Falls, the city of River Falls, Chippewa Valley Technical College and the River Falls Economic Development Corp.

“The partnership of the organization is really the key to the success of the center,” Marnell said of the nonprofit organization.

The center is a business incubator which provides management guidance and technical assistance to new business owners, as well as a variety of workspaces

available for rent from cubicles and private offices to co-working rooms and industrial space. A total of 29 businesses are on site, creating a 96% occupancy, Marnell said.

“We are creating an entrepreneurship ecosystem,” Marnell said. “The center is available to all members 24-7. Being an entrepreneur can be pretty lonely. Being around like-minded individuals, you get to collaborate and learn as well.”

Marnell is available to the incubator tenants as a coach and adviser to talk about what is working with their businesses and to help them establish goals to grow their businesses.

The center provides UWRF the opportunity to work with businesses and the community and connect students with business and faculty research with businesses, Marnell said.

“From the university perspective, it would be great to have professors utilize space and do class projects. Ultimately, we want to grow economic development in the area,” Marnell said. “We want our students to have places to work and be exposed to as many career possibilities as possible and we have nearly 30 different businesses under one roof, what a great opportunity for us!”

There are student internship opportunities with the center as well.

Josh Woll, a UWRF senior majoring in marketing communications and communication studies, interned at the center from April 2021 to February. The role included office management, running the center’s social media and other marketing.

“To this day was the best job I’ve ever had,” he said. “I love the people I was able to collaborate and connect with and learn their stories and what made their businesses unique.”

Woll, who graduates in May, has rented space in the center and is starting his own marketing company, Visionary Solutions Media.

Myron Marko, a UWRF alum who graduated in May 2021 with a degree in business administration-management, is renting one of the Food Ready Spaces for his business Holy Donuts.

Marko, originally of Amery, started Holy Donuts in 2016 when he was a sophomore in high school.

Marko first made donuts by hand for fun with a small ring donut maker he found.

Later when his parents told him it was time for him to get a job, Marko started making donuts out of a small trailer his dad originally bought for a mobile deer shack and Holy Donuts began. His first festival selling donuts was at the Amery Fall Festival in September 2016.

“We had a really good day there even though I could only make eight donuts at a time at the fryer,” Marko said, noting he stores his trailers outside the center. “People were lining up because they were supporting me.”

Marko never expected to be an entrepreneur and start his own business.

“It started as a way to avoid getting a normal job,” Marko said. “It’s rewarding. I get to see customers enjoy the donuts and I get to do so many different things every day.”

In addition to Holy Donuts, Food Ready Space tenants include Simply Sourdough, a bakery making sourdough pretzels, bagels, challah, sandwich bread and more; Rising Bread Company, a bakery specializing in naturally leavened and long-fermented loaves of bread and pastries using locally sourced, certified organic grain; Mindful Fork, a business providing healthy ready-to-eat meals; Anytizers, a food truck serving sandwiches and soups; Bug and Mini Co., makes consumable products for immune health, including elderberry syrup and fire cider; and Blue Haze, a startup producing smoked products.

Members in the Food Ready Space signed two- to four-year leases.

Marko enjoys being part of the center with the other food businesses.

“It’s cool. It’s like having co-workers plus community,” he said.

For more information on the resources available at the St. Croix Valley Business Innovation Center, visit <https://www.stcroixinnovation.org/>.