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Nonprofit culinary training program expands at Chelsea Market, and Google covers the rent

BY CARA EISENPRESS

A nonprofit that promotes economic mobility through training in the food industry has a new, central location and a deal on rent.

Fourteen-year-old Hot Bread Kitchen has taken over a 10,000-square-foot space in Chelsea Market that used to be the Food Network Test Kitchen. Google, a longtime partner, will cover the rent for the next three years.

The move from its previous location in Harlem will allow Hot Bread “to focus our resources more directly on our programs and expansion, or, more plainly, to invest in breadwinners rather than rent,” said Leslie Abbey, the CEO. Abbey said the new space would allow Hot Bread Kitchen to work with 1,000 women and expand into the other four boroughs.

At its core, Hot Bread Kitchen is a culinary training and job placement program. Women, mostly immigrants and people of color, enroll in a short program to enhance skills and get help with job placement and other support, from financial literacy to child care.

There is also an entrepreneurship program, which provides a framework for participants to open their own small businesses, which many have done. In more than a decade, the organization has helped nearly 300 program participants to get jobs in the food industry, and it has supported 250 small businesses that developed through the entrepreneurship program.

One of them is Nafissatou Bande, a bakery at Colson Patisserie in Brooklyn. Bande, who is from Burkina Faso, went through the Hot Bread Kitchen training program in 2016. When she first came to the United States, she ran into a Catch-22: no one would hire her without any experience. Eventually, she took a job as a cashier, before hearing about the culinary program.

“I wanted to learn something that would benefit me later,” she said.

Equipped with culinary skills, she was able to find a job as a baker. When she had a baby



Buck Emris

and left that position, she said that Hot Bread Kitchen helped support her and later hired her at its in-house kitchen. By the time she was ready to apply for different jobs, she had enough experience that she received several offers, including the one at Colson, where she now bakes bread and croissants, considered some of the best in the city.

Google and Chelsea Market have existing relationships with the nonprofit. Google has been both a donor and an employer for program graduates. The tech firm also used to purchase Hot Bread Kitchen’s baked goods for its cafeteria. It sponsored a kiosk in Chelsea Market for Hot Bread Kitchen participants to sell their wares.

“We have been working with them to create a stronger partnership,” said Angela Pinsky, head of government affairs and public policy for Google.

Conversations between Google and Hot Bread have continued, said Abbey, who joined recently as CEO. Last year Google came to the organization and asked if it was again interested in the Chelsea Market stall.

At the same time, word was out that Food Network was leaving its test kitchen, said

Kristine Borok, chief operations officer. “We said, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we could move in?’” she said.

On a fast timeline, Google helped turn the idea into a reality, Borok said, an example of how the tech firm was thinking creatively about its support of nonprofits.

Now, with rent taken care of, Hot Bread Kitchen said it would be able to expand its offering to more women throughout the city.

There are 18 stations for learning in the Chelsea Market space, as well as an empty studio that will now house some of the supplementary programs, such as personal finance. The old location had about 3,000 square feet for the culinary programs, in addition to a bakery that used to sell bread at markets and through wholesale.

In addition, Abbey said that Hot Bread Kitchen would treat Chelsea Market as a hub, adding smaller spaces in the other four boroughs. That will help with outreach.

That expansion comes because of the huge expense now taken off the table: paying for space.

“We’re not paying rent in Chelsea!” said Borok. “We’re extremely grateful.”