

Building a Triple Win: Maker to Market "Food Accelerator" Goes from Farm to Retail

BY AMY CAMPBELL

The Twin Cities metro area has a longstanding history as a leader in the food and agriculture industry. With our bountiful growing season and the most food co-ops per capita in the entire country, there is no shortage of innovation coming from within the local food community.

As the better-for-you and farm-to-table trends have boomed, you might assume our community would reap those benefits, but we at Lakewinds Food Co-op haven't always seen that. We did launch the Lakewinds Organic Field Fund in 2011, offering support to local organic producers; Organic Field Fund grants in 2017 totaled nearly \$58,000 to 11 farms and farm associations.

But we wanted to do more. Are local farmers being tapped to produce the ingredients needed for some of the new brands? Do local food makers know how to connect with local farmers?

With all of our community's resources and knowledge, we knew there had to be a better way to harness this energy and give consumers exactly what they were looking for: locally made products using local ingredients that support local makers. And with that, in a Lakewinds conference room fondly referred to as "the fishbowl," the Maker to Market idea was born.

Supporting farm to retail

Maker to Market is a "food accelerator" with a mission to scale slow food, made possible through our partnership with The Good Acre, a non-profit food hub in St. Paul. Through the Lakewinds program, aspiring makers source Minnesota-grown produce from The Good Acre's farm network; gain access to com-



LAKEWINDS
FOOD CO-OP

LAKEWINDS
ORGANIC
FIELD FUND

2017 GRANTEES

A TOTAL OF
\$57,985

in grant funds was awarded to a group of 11 farms and farming associations. This committee is made up of 16 passionate people about organic and sustainable agriculture. We're proud to announce this year's recipients and we wish them much success as they work on their projects.

SOGN VALLEY FARM
Insulate and install washable walls within existing packing shed to bring wash and pack operation into full compliance with GAP standards, improve production for CSA and potted-plant sales.

\$8,000

Lakewinds Organic Field Fund grants in 2017 totaled nearly \$58,000 to 11 farms and farm associations. But we wanted to do more.

mercial kitchen space, storage, and distribution; and gain marketing and retail insight from the Lakewinds team. Makers in the accelerator are also guaranteed six months of shelf space at all Lakewinds locations.

Lakewinds Food Co-op has been serving the western suburbs of the Minneapolis–St. Paul metro area for over 40 years, ever since our humble beginning on the front porch of two long-time friends in Minnetonka. Over the years, we have grown to three locations and a team of 350 employees serving more than 23,000 community owners. The thriving co-op market in the Twin Cities creates a landscape that encourages natural and organic grocers to take on initiatives that differentiate their stores within the market space.

Maker to Market helps Lakewinds accomplish a key goal as a co-op: differentiating ourselves from mass-market retail chains that have started carrying the kinds of organic and local offerings previously found only at co-ops. This accelerator allows us to give consumers new, locally made products to fall in love with, available exclusively on the shelves at Lakewinds. Win number one goes to the consumers.

Lakewinds and The Good Acre

The retail and marketing side was the easy part for us. The big hole we needed to fill was figuring out how to connect these makers with the local farming community. Enter The Good Acre, a local food hub launched in 2015 (Learn more at thegoodacre.org/our-mission.)

The Good Acre strives to enhance how food is grown and shared in the Twin Cities region and to improve marketplace opportunities for diverse, independent, immigrant, and



low-income farmers. “Our team looks to connect underserved local farmers and ensure they can reach their fullest growing potential,” explains Emily Paul, director of programs at The Good Acre. “Not only do they benefit from our guided counsel, the community also has increased access to healthy, locally grown produce. When connecting with the Lakewinds team on this concept, it was apparent that what The Good Acre brought to the table perfectly complemented their offerings.”

In addition to the connections to local farmers, The Good Acre provides Maker to Market participants with workshops on kitchen technical assistance and skill building. The benefits of working directly with farmers are clear: makers can confidently rely on fulfillment of purchase orders to meet their produce needs, and farmers are able to crop plan more effectively and rely on business from these local makers. Win number two goes to the farmers.

Lakewinds and The Good Acre quickly realized we had the opportunity to bring fluidity to relationships within the food economy. This “food accelerator” helps independent food makers turn their most promising concepts into retail-ready products, all while receiving support from the two organizations. Win number three goes to the makers.



Sisters Mel and Ky Guse of Gyst specialize in lacto-fermented vegetables.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAKEWINDS FOOD CO-OP

By supporting products that majorly utilize produce and are reliant on local farmers, Maker to Market serves as a win-win-win for the shelves of Lakewinds and their shoppers, for The Good Acre’s farming network, and for aspiring food makers. Together, we inject fresh creativity into the Twin Cities local food community by empowering consumer packaged goods startups to unleash their inner entrepreneur.

Maker to Market products are evaluated by a panel and selected based on taste, uniqueness of the product, trend in category, adherence to Lakewinds product standards, and the ability to source ingredients from local farms. In its inaugural year of 2017, Maker to Market had 29 applicants, four of whom were selected for the accelerator: Danielle Wojdyla’s Señoritas de Salsa, Mel and Ky Guse of GYST Fermentation, Mona Khemakhem’s Caldo Foods, and Karen and Peder Schweigert’s Little Red Hen Foods. (See sidebar.)

With completion of the accelerator program in September 2017, the path from farm to retail was simplified, streamlined, and flattened, creating links in the food system chain. In just six short months, we led businesses from startup phase to retail level—usually a much more strenuous and time-consuming process. All this was accomplished while also providing Lakewinds shoppers with exclusive, high-quality local products. The success of Maker to Market’s initial four product lines came to the tune of \$15,000 in sales and over 1,600 products sold by the end of September.

For Wojdyla of Señoritas de Salsa, the multi-faceted approach to building her brand was what inevitably set her on the path to success. “The support of rent in a commercial kitchen is great, but beyond that, the extra attention to marketing, pricing, social media, and distribution gives a small producer room to breathe in the first few months...while not getting lost in all the details of a new operation.” From a farming standpoint, eight farmers expanded their income sources, largely due to the ability to crop plan pre-season and to finding usage for surplus and/or ugly produce.



Emily Paul from The Good Acre recognizes that the program did highlight one challenge in particular. “Even through this process, we can see how the local food maker scene in Twin Cities is disjointed. That said, our teams now have this opportunity to continue our efforts and become a sophisticated food hub for early stage food startups.”

This opportunity will continue in 2018, with a second class of makers selected to participate in the Lakewinds food accelerator. We’re hopeful the accelerator will serve as an inspiration for other communities to explore their own concept of bridging the gaps within the food community, with Maker to Market serving as a model that could scale hyper-local, slow food consumer packaged goods nationwide.

Lakewinds and The Good Acre will open applications for a new class of makers at the start of 2018, with the selected makers to be named in April. •



Food Accelerator Services

An offering of soft and hard services alike is provided to the group of makers through the Lakewinds Maker to Market accelerator:

- Access to commercial kitchen space, production equipment, and cold storage at The Good Acre, financially subsidized on a sliding scale.
- Access to local produce growers via The Good Acre’s farmer network and other ingredient suppliers via Lakewinds. Learn more at: thegoodacre.org/meet-our-farmers.
- Consulting support to create brand and package designs, determine pricing, and conduct product demos in stores.
- An exclusive shelf run at all Lakewinds Food Co-op locations, with sales analysis and product review at the end of the period.
- PR and marketing support through activations such as in-store demos, media and influencer product drops, participation in Minneapolis farmers markets, and other program partnerships.

Maker to Market Producers

Señoras de Salsa

Danielle Wojdyla’s line of fresh, refrigerated, authentic Mexican salsas and sauces was not the only factor that caught the eye of judges; she also stands committed to empowering immigrant women throughout the Twin Cities community.

Gyst

Sisters Mel and Ky Guse specialize in lacto-fermented vegetables; their seasonal varieties may include Golden Beet with Ginger and Orange, Daikon Radish and Chili, and Spicy Blueberry Kraut.

Caldo Foods

Mona Khemakhem’s fresh harissa (gourmet pepper blend) and carota (gourmet carrot dip) combines international flavor with Midwest ingredients.

Little Red Hen Foods

Karen and Peder Schweigert combined their 22 years of food industry experience to make a frozen cauliflower pizza crust that utilizes more vegetables and less-processed grains.