

## This Class Will Whip Your Food Business Idea Into Shape

By CARRINGTON MORRIS | December 16, 2015



The road from food business dream to reality can be a perilous one. While charming, the idea that “if you build it, they will come” still leaves something to be desired in terms of a profit model. Many good ideas, recipes and products see a heartbreaking and untimely death not for lack of merit, but for want of a plan.

How to shoot for the stars while minimizing risk? It turns out Natural Gourmet Institute (NGI) has a certificate program for that. And while there are no guarantees for success, NGI’s eleven-week “Food Entrepreneurship” course can help those starting out get the best footing to let their product shine — be it restaurant, cookie or catering service.

Under the guidance of food business consultant Terry Frishman of Culinest, students explore how to get their product idea from concept to market and navigate through the labyrinth of business strategy, brand identity, marketing and scale. The course emphasizes both the face of the product and nuts and bolts of production. Students refine their concept weekly, folding feedback into their pitches and business plan.

Students arrive day one with a food business idea in mind, which could be anything from a nutritionist catering concept to vegan marshmallows. During the eleven weeks, students visit notable food enterprises throughout the city to hear their stories, check out their operations and practice pitch their projects to leaders in the field. This fall’s term included, among others, pizza sensation Roberta’s, CSA delivery favorite Quinciple, gluten-free bakeshop Krumville and even a session with our editors on how to pitch the media.

So-called “field trips” alternate with in-class weeks, with both geared toward strengthening product, presentation and business model. Through repetition, students hone their pitches until on the final day of class they present in a mock-Shark Tank format to a panel of investors.

Because this is Natural Gourmet Institute, there’s an ethical component to the business concepts, including good health and good sourcing, and it’s also reflected in the choice of participating local businesses.



At a recent class, students paid a visit to catering pioneers Great Performances, who back in the late '70s entered the field while innovatively supporting the arts by hiring artists as servers. Using locally grown, highest quality ingredients, the catering op provides its delicious fare to many of the city's noted cultural institutions, including Lincoln Center, BAM, the Apollo Theater and Brooklyn Museum. For the class night, founding proprietor Liz Neumark generously brought in GP's design, PR and warehouse directors as well as two chefs and VP of business and ops Anthony Fassio, who's also known for his work with Slow Food. All explained the catering operation from their unique perspective, fielding questions and providing feedback to each of the students' several-minute pitches.

Feedback focus had big-picture emphasis on strategy and setting goals; on using branding to define perception of companies and to distinguish products in marketplace; and on starting small to minimize risk while refining production and then scaling up. Particulars ranged from health codes and shelf life to concept viability and managing costs. All of it serving to maximize the knowns and minimize the unknowns and to make way for what Frishman considers among the most essential good business principles of all — having fun along the way.

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