This is the process food entrepreneurs and small food business start-ups undertake from idea generation and concept development through to commercialization and/or scale up. It looks at the typical pathway for a food entrepreneur and where resources exist to assist them. It also identifies challenges that affect start-ups and hinder their progression.

The Food Entrepreneur’s Journey is written from the perspective of the food entrepreneur. The term food entrepreneur is referred to throughout and is defined as an early stage food and beverage processing start-up business. This viewpoint does not include food retailers or food service businesses including restaurants, food trucks, and catering companies.

The Food Entrepreneur’s Journey was produced by the Agri-Food Management Institute with funding from Growing Forward 2 (GF2), a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agri-food Management Institute (AMI) promotes new ways of thinking about agribusiness management and aims to increase awareness, understanding and adoption of beneficial business management practices by Ontario agri-food and agri-based producers and processors.

This guide is intended to be used by prospective food business owners, as well as newly established ones. It is not a comprehensive all-inclusive document, but rather, an easily read guide that combines the experience of new entrepreneurs with industry experts. It will enable entrepreneurs to see what is required at the various stages, add context to what they will be experiencing, and prompt them to seek further information and resources. This guide is an excerpt based on the full report: Food Processing Startups and Small Businesses in Ontario: Barriers to Scaling Up White Paper, Barb Shopland, June 2017, with contributions from Al Brezina, Feb 2018.
FROM CONCEPT TO COMMERCIALIZATION/SCALE UP

This model was created and developed with input from twelve food entrepreneurs, small food business owners and several seasoned professionals working in the areas of product development, education and training, distribution and economic development.

The model depicted is linear in nature to illustrate the general phases of a food business start-up. However, it should be noted that the entrepreneurs interviewed stress that the process is very organic. Fran Kruz, CEO and Founder of Not Yer Granny’s Granola, in Barrie, described the process she continues to go through:

“This is not a linear model – at least not in my experience. The process continues to be very organic, multi-directional, and in some cases, it’s one step forward and two steps to one side, three to the other side, one back and a leap forward… I guess you could call it a dance!”

CONCEPT TO COMMERCIALIZATION

There are five distinct phases or stages within the process, each defined by a number of activities and milestones. The two major outcomes of the process include: 1) a business plan and 2) a product. The success of these two outcomes is dependent upon catalysts or facilitators and several technical requirements.

The concept to commercialization model is intended to help a food entrepreneur engage in business development and visualize the process in its entirety. Food entrepreneurs tend to be activity-focused in their approach to business. They want to know what to do and how and when to do it. They also want to understand why such a model will help them navigate the journey from concept to commercialization. The next section describes each phase of the model in order to provide that guidance.
1) PHASE ONE: THE IDEA AND CONCEPT

This phase is all about research, fact-finding, investigation, and asking many questions.

Many people have great ideas throughout their life, but few take the great idea and translate it into a business. Doing so requires an enormous amount of effort and research. There is no assumed timeframe for this phase; some entrepreneurs can take months, even years to complete their research, while others with access to resources such as experts, money and information, may take less time.

PHASE 1 ACTIVITIES:

- **Opportunity Identification**: Understanding how the business concept and the selling of the product fulfills a market need;
- **Consumer Research**: Defining who will buy the product and the demographics/profile of the consumer;
- **Industry Research**: Understanding where the business and product fit in the food industry sector;
- **Competitive Analysis**: Finding out who, why, where, and how a similar product is being sold;
- **Business Planning**: Finding a business plan template that can be populated with specific product and business information;
- **Available Resources**: Looking for people, tools, and information that will help.

This can be a very exhilarating phase for food entrepreneurs as they contemplate their new food products. Questions abound. Is there a demand? Is the product competitive? Is it unique?

At this stage, many food entrepreneurs get caught up with the excitement of their idea. Often they do not know how to analyze their idea objectively and/or understand just how complex running a food or beverage business can be.

Successful food entrepreneurs know the danger and vulnerabilities of being stuck on their idea rather than the process of turning the idea into a business. John Pickard, Executive Director of the Henry Bernick Entrepreneurship Centre at Georgian College, has worked with entrepreneurs for many years after launching his own successful business. Pickard spoke about ideas and business:

“If you need more than an idea to start a business. You need to be able to create a product or deliver a service that people want and will pay for. You also need to be able to market it and know how to run a business. In short, you need far more than a good idea, but it is the idea that will propel the business. Unless you have identified a solid customer base, know how to access it, and have a business plan you can take to the bank, as well as a viable business model, then all you have is a great idea.”

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John Pickard
Executive Director of the Henry Bernick Entrepreneurship Centre at Georgian College, Barrie
“In my case, I already ran a business but was seeking new and healthier foods for my expanding family. I had limited knowledge of any sort of cooking or food preparation so had to do a lot of research. It started with a few simple questions: how could I make pasta healthier, would it sell, was anyone else doing it or should I just feed my son good pasta? I attended as many entrepreneurship seminars I could find and spent months on my research looking for anyone who knew about pasta and more importantly, knew how to become a successful food business owner. The hardest part was finding the food experts.”

RESOURCES AVAILABLE

One of the best ways to capture the idea, process it, and ‘propel the idea to a business’ is to start with a business plan. There are many business plan templates available online and some software packages are available for purchase. The key for many food entrepreneurs is finding a templated plan that resonates with their own style and purpose.

Most communities have small business enterprise centres and/or entrepreneurship organizations that offer business consulting services, mentorship and coaching, networking, and business planning resources. There are many websites available providing business start-up tool kits, including business plan templates, checklists, and tests to measure whether one has the capabilities and characteristics to become a successful entrepreneur.

Resources for food-specific support are very limited. Food incubators offer programs for food business start-ups. There are also some food-specific seminars for food entrepreneurs offered by municipalities and community colleges.

CHALLENGES

Although there are a growing number of beginner seminars and workshops tailored to the food industry sprouting up across the province, they are by no means accessible to everyone interested in developing a food business.

Food entrepreneurs struggle with the complexity of the information available online. Many websites are either confusing, too general, or written in technical language they find difficult to understand. This frustration was particularly amplified by food entrepreneurs who do not speak English as a first language.

At this very early stage, food entrepreneurs want to be guided, not overwhelmed with too much information. They need a personal contact to speak with and pose questions to, and their desire is to talk to someone who knows the food sector or has gone through the start-up process.
2) PHASE TWO: PROOF OF CONCEPT

Sometimes called the feasibility stage, this phase helps a start-up food entrepreneur determine whether their product and potential food business are viable. According to Amy Bracco, an independent research chef and product developer, north of Toronto who works worldwide,

“This is when the entrepreneur is trying to figure out if they have a valid business idea. They start to think more about the product they want to make, where they plan to make it and how they plan to sell it. After that, they can research the compliance associated with those things.”

PHASE 2 ACTIVITIES:

- Concept Feasibility: An analysis and evaluation to determine whether a product and business are feasible; technically, financially and by the skillset of the entrepreneur;
- Food Prototype Development: The model or physical representation of a product generally used to demonstrate or pitch;
- Business Model Selection: Choosing the legal model of the business: sole proprietor, partnership, not for profit etc.;
- Seed Money/Funding/Financing: Where and how to source the finances to cover all of the costs associated with starting a business;
- Marketing Plan: Specific actions to spark interest among potential customers and persuade them to buy a product;
- General understanding of food safety regulations and permits: Awareness of compliance requirements governing food-processing sector.

The importance of this phase, particularly the development of a feasibility study, cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, many aspiring entrepreneurs skip these important steps, citing the difficulty in finding information specific to food business start-ups or someone to talk to who can answer their questions.

This is especially true when food entrepreneurs start looking into permits and food safety regulations. Food is a heavily regulated industry. It is governed by an array of municipal, provincial, and federal government laws, permits, and strict regulations designed to ensure that all food which is produced, distributed and sold to the public is safe for consumption. Similarly, all ingredients and packaging used in food production must meet the same regulations. The production facility and operating procedures must also meet regulatory standards. These regimes are daunting to food entrepreneurs so it is important to take some training in food safety, do the research and get advice from experts. This is one of the greatest barriers to success for food businesses.

It is critical for food entrepreneurs to be aware that there are regulations. Specific compliance requirements come later on when the food entrepreneur completes their investigative research and prepares for actual product production.

At this stage, the food entrepreneur should try to determine where they plan on producing their product because the production location has implications on so many
things. Bracco also stresses the importance of determining where the product is going to be sold, as that affects many future decisions related to packaging, design, pricing, production location, and distribution channels.

This can be a very precarious time for those entrepreneurs who have been passionately focused on their own new product ideas. They need to undertake the important task of starting to develop their business plan. Incomplete research in Phase One can affect one’s ability to complete a feasibility study and the business plan.

Tess Gonzoles, CEO of Baker ’n Batter in Milton, a business she has operated for the past two years, speaks about the intensity and time it takes to write a good business plan.

“I took six months to complete a business plan after I convinced my family that I had a great idea. I wanted to just start baking but was advised by my local small business centre to focus all of my attention on working through the plan. I had never seen a business plan let alone produced one, and I have to be honest; I was overwhelmed with the table of contents and thought I would never get through it – it was the best thing I ever did.”

By working through all of the activities in this phase, the idea will start to take shape. By now, enough information should have been gathered to inform decisions on the appropriate business model to be adopted and how to meet regulatory and permit requirements.

An equally important part of the validation process to determine the feasibility of the business or product, involves talking to people about the idea, seeking mentors and colleagues who can share their experiences (and often shortcuts), and exploring financial resources.

RESOURCES

Many organizations across the province can help with the non-food specific activities such as business planning, feasibility plans, funding sources etc. These include economic development offices, small business enterprise centres, Community Future Development Corporations (CFDCs), business associations, Chambers of Commerce, etc.

CHALLENGES

Finding expertise qualified to assist with prototype development is a challenge. There are only a few consultants in the province that can assist with this, and they are often committed to medium and large-scale food businesses and are located in larger urban areas.

The more complex or unique a product is (perhaps requiring rare ingredients, specialized equipment or techniques), the more challenging it will be to find expertise to assist. This is typical in the process of innovation and food entrepreneurs may have to go further afield for this or develop their own expertise.

This phase of the process also requires a kitchen or food-friendly environment such as a food incubator or commercial kitchen. However, there are few incubators and commercial kitchens can be difficult to locate.
3) PHASE THREE: PRODUCT AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The process of developing a food product and creating a business plan is by far the most complex phase toward successful commercialization. The following activities are included:

- **Product Design and Pre-Production Prototype**: Creating the look, feel and taste of the product and determining the ingredients, size, shape and cost of a single unit of the product as well as its packaging, including the label.

- **Production Process**: Determining the steps through which raw materials are transformed into a final product; ensuring an efficient, cost effective process and that the prototype product can be manufactured when scaled up.

- **Market Validation**: Testing and interviewing people in a target market to solicit feedback.

- **Marketing Plan (Concept Development)**: Includes the product or service offered, pricing, target market, competitors, marketing budget & promotional mix.

- **Compliance/Regulations/Permits**: Adherence to laws, regulations, permits, guidelines and specifications relevant to the food industry sector. They may pertain to facilities, location, processing, storage, handling and general business operations.

This phase is complex. It is a time when one gets down to final decisions about the product, as well as meeting a host of regulatory and permit requirements. This stage demands knowledge of a range of requirements such as design, sensory evaluation, food safety, shelf life stability, product claims, and other labelling elements. It also requires having access to experts who know about packaging design, graphics and structure in order to help meet regulatory requirements. The production processes and ultimately the production plan (including production kitchen layout, storage, and production flow) also need to be developed at this stage in order to meet food safety regulations.

Due to the detail required and the need to complete this phase correctly, many food entrepreneurs find it a time when expertise and additional funding is needed. For example, it is critical to have lab tests done to determine shelf-life stability, to access specific software to determine nutrition and ingredient panels on the label, and obtain expertise to understand what and how packaging and design materials are compliant with industry standards and regulations.

For Collingwood-based food business owner Monica Roe, CEO of Crooked Tree,

“I couldn’t believe I had to source a food scientist and testing lab in Vancouver to help with my product [artisanal nut spreads] but there was no one local or even in the province who could help me. I found them when I was out at a specialty food show. We spent a lot of time on the phone and on email which wasn’t ideal but I had no choice.”

The predominant reason a food entrepreneur spends time and money in this phase is to build a marketable product that is tested, meets regulatory requirements and can
be shown to possible investors. It could also be templated for a small batch run to solicit feedback from family and friends as well as customers and colleagues who are more at arm’s length.

RESOURCES
For all of the general business development activities of this phase, most communities offer resources. In major urban areas, food product developers and product development companies are available to help. At this point, most food entrepreneurs are not investing in their own production space, and generally make do with whatever commercial kitchen facility they can find. Access to specialised equipment may be more difficult, but for small batch prototype production, much of the processing is done by hand or using home grade equipment. With regard to regulatory and permit compliance, there are a number of resources available through municipal health departments, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and local Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) offices. In addition, the University of Guelph and a number of colleges now offer training on food safety regulations.

CHALLENGES
Geographical access is a challenge. Specialized skills and facilities are limited in many parts of the province, especially in rural areas. For example, most product developers, food scientists, food test labs, food packaging and label designers are located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the Guelph area.

Funding for product development is another challenge. This work can be expensive, and at present it is almost impossible to source any funding to cover these costs. Banks and investors generally view food entrepreneurs and food businesses as high risk. Sadly, food entrepreneurs try to get by without spending money at this stage, and many fail.

Access to food experts, relevant online materials and government documentation on food safety regulations is one of the major barriers for food entrepreneurs. They often experience frustration with regulations and procedures, conflicting information, and the multiple websites one has to visit, many of which are unhelpful.

This phase calls for some initial production. However, the shortage of food-grade space across the province is a major issue. Many commercial kitchens are small hall or church kitchens that are generally poorly equipped, lacking in expertise, and in many cases, restricted in hours of availability. Since regulations concerning production space are becoming stricter, food entrepreneurs are forced to travel greater distances to find appropriate space.
4) PHASE FOUR: PRE-COMMERCIALIZATION TRIALS AND SALES

Prior to launching products into the market, attention is spent preparing, testing, planning, revising and re-costing both products and the business plan. Activities in this phase include:

- **Commercial Prototype/Product Testing/Quality Control**: Sample replicas of products are tested and evaluated for compliance, quality, and costing;

- **Production Process/Manufacturing**: Mapping out how the product will be processed or made. Protocols and procedures are determined and documented.

- **Raising Capital/Business Structure**: The cost of commercial equipment, facilities, staff, purchase of ingredients and packaging materials, supplies, etc. must be estimated, budgeted and funded. Appropriate financing for up-front and ongoing operating costs must be secured.

- **Business/Product Launch**: A plan of approach about how the product and business will be launched into the market;

- **Staffing**: Labour required to run the business including where to find trained personnel, determining what they will do and how much they will be paid.

- **Marketing Plan Execution**: Launching and activating the marketing plan, establishing selling price and promotional plans.

This is the stage where prototypes are tested and production processes and controls are put in place. This is when the entrepreneur scales up to manufacturing — meaning, the product can be replicated in large numbers and still be as good as the original small-scale prototype.

At this point, the food entrepreneur typically makes decisions about whether or not to self-process (make everything themselves in their own owned or leased facility or in a food business incubator) or outsource to a co-manufacturer or co-packer (another company does this for you for between 25-40 per cent cost). Understanding one’s financing and having a thorough cost analysis done before outsourcing is essential. For many food business owners, raising capital and determining a business structure including staffing, are also priorities. At this point, there is great need to multitask and juggle many elements of the business including technical requirements, regulations, and operations.

It is extremely rare to find a food entrepreneur or new food business who invests in building their own facility. Notwithstanding the incredible costs associated with constructing a food-grade space, few businesses would embark down this path if they didn’t have a proven product. Food entrepreneurs often seek out co-packers located in their community. Challenges with going to a co-packer include the size of production runs may be too small for the co-packer to accommodate, the co-packer may not have the equipment needed for the particular product and ensuring contractual control over confidentiality.

With respect to financing, entrepreneurs launching a business are forced to spend an enormous amount of time looking for money or seeking investors. Capital and operating resources are needed to cover expensive equipment and facilities,
operating budgets for utilities that are often in high use, and labour. Despite there being a handful of government funds available, at present few cover any capital and most are matching funds.

If the food entrepreneur is a one-person shop, they are likely being pressed to begin running the business in preparation of launch. They are also busy trying to establish financing, managing production staff, and trying to market their product. For those unfamiliar or just beginning to learn, finding talented staff, accessing experts and relying on mentors is important.

Assuming the food entrepreneur has a feasible, safe, and market-ready product, the marketing plan is executed at this stage. The sales channels have been determined and distribution networks are in place. Often food entrepreneurs use farmers’ markets as a venue to test products or sell small batches. These markets are generally accessible to food entrepreneurs as a first entry point to the market.

As distribution is most often challenging at this stage, a decision is sometimes made to seek a distributor to manage the process. Finding a distributor can be an issue for a start-up. Most distributors want proven products and brands, so many food entrepreneurs begin to distribute at local farmers’ markets and specialty food stores. It is very rare for a new food start-up to get to this phase and find themselves on the shelves of a national grocery chain store and listed with a major distributor.

This is why new online distribution networks have become highly attractive to food entrepreneurs. Some are simply e-commerce platforms linking products to consumers, while others, like FreshSpoke, include a wholesale online marketplace linking wholesale buyers, such as specialty food retailers to local producers or food businesses and delivery providers.

According to Marcia Woods, CEO of FreshSpoke, in Barrie.

“The food entrepreneurs face real challenges with traditional distribution models, due to the higher costs involved and minimum case lot requirement. By applying new technology solutions to link buyers, sellers and drivers, food entrepreneurs can get their products to retail outlets promptly and affordably.”

Marcia Woods
CEO of FreshSpoke, Barrie

In addition, it is important to continue to research market trends and develop and assess customer feedback on the product at this stage. Even though the food entrepreneur isn’t in full commercialization mode yet, the product should be very close to perfect. It is important to spend time observing and researching competitors and reviewing production processes which may provide insight about appeal and brand positioning, as well as possible efficiency gains, process improvements, partnerships, and product line extensions.

RESOURCES

Food business incubators, private product developers, colleges are available and accessible in urban areas, while commercial kitchens in some communities are available to rent.

Small business enterprise centres, community partner organizations and local entrepreneurship centres are adept at helping all business start-ups with coaching,
mentoring, marketing plans, staffing plans, writing job descriptions, and linking new businesses to any funding agencies or private investors in their area.

Sampling and testing at farmers’ markets is available across most of Ontario, although these are mostly seasonal. Sampling will provide valuable information not only on the product itself, but also who will buy the product, but how often, where and what price they will pay.

**CHALLENGES**

A major challenge at this phase was finding food business expertise. There are a limited number of people across the province capable of providing food entrepreneurs with the expertise they need.

Also, there are only a handful of places across Ontario where food entrepreneurs can access food-grade space, expertise, mentorship, and equipment all under one roof. This realization often hits food entrepreneurs at this stage and it becomes a barrier for most to progress beyond farmers’ markets and local shops.

**5) PHASE FIVE: COMMERCIAL SALES**

This phase is all about actively selling products through the business to another business or direct to a consumer.

- **Marketing for Return on Investment (ROI):** Ongoing marketing activities that bolster impact, widen reach and provide an improved return on money spent;
- **Distribution:** The process of moving or transporting finished products from seller to buyer;
- **Customer Support:** Methodology and systems set up to facilitate communication between buyer and seller. Also includes practices the seller has put in place for promotions, orders, delivery, accounting, recalls, complaints, and recourse;
- **Scale-up Production Process:** Migrating from small scale production to larger scale production to meet market demand. Could include expansion of product lines;
- **Supply Chain Management:** Encompasses the planning and management of all activities involved in sourcing and procurement, processing, providing business services and all logistics management activities.

This point in the process can baffle many food entrepreneurs who think they have arrived. Their product now meets all regulatory standards and is packaged and labelled properly. Company brochures and flyers have been printed and websites have been created. Everyone who has sampled their product LOVES it. Some food entrepreneurs think the research and learning has stopped and now they can sit back and start collecting money. Not so.

Distribution and commercial sales are tough work. It requires much attention, tracking and agility. At the same time, food entrepreneurs must pay attention to others parts of their business including operational and human resource efficiencies, and ensure
customers and clients are supported with appropriate communication networks. New systems including accounting, order and delivery, and customer management processes also need to be addressed.

Often owner-operators are faced with the real need to add staff and may come to a decision to look for competent partners to join the company. It is at this stage too, that the business, based on the successful execution of the marketing and distribution strategy, may consider scaling up to meet market demand. Consideration might be given to distributing nationally or exporting outside the country. If that is the case, labelling, packaging, advertising, distribution partners, and plant enhancements all need to reviewed. This is especially true if one wants to cross provincial boundaries or export. This expansion could require additional financing, increased production capacity and additional human resources, as well as equipment changes or production line expansion.

In the case of Chickapea Pasta, self-manufacturing was never a viable solution so a search for a co-packer was undertaken. Unfortunately, a suitable one could not be found in Canada to make the type and quantities of pasta needed to meet provincial, national and export demand. In the end, the company was forced to find a co-manufacturer (another company with the specific equipment needed) to make the pasta product, ship it to a co-packer, and package, label and store the product in preparation for distribution across North America.

Once a product is in market, and as sales are monitored, food entrepreneurs – now food businesses - will be looking for greater efficiencies. Tremendous focus will be given to finances, bookkeeping and quality controls. Traceability and recall plans are necessary, and in some cases, expertise that was found externally, may start coming into the business as staff. If a food entrepreneur has decided to outsource production to a co-packer, they may decide to source a co-packer that offers a suite of services including production and quality assurance skills, food scientists and packaging expertise.

Victoria Watts, Co-Founder and Owner of Pasta Tavola, an artisanal food manufacturer of specialty pastas, sauces and oven-ready meals in Belleville, spoke about her experience in scaling up her business:

“After we’d been in business for a few years, and had been taking on every kind of sale of product, we hit a wall. We had to make some key decisions. We were making all our products by hand, were at capacity and some of our business wasn’t sustainable. We made a huge decision – to invest and go forward. We approached things very differently, meeting with key industry leaders, streamlining our products, investing in the right equipment as well as new production space. We also developed a new website to tell our story. We now have the infrastructure in place to support our growth for the next few years.”

RESOURCES

Distribution companies are available in most urban areas. Online platforms are emerging in central Ontario and parts of the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Most of the resources available at this stage are private companies. There are some government funds available at this stage. Industry associations and peer networks are very
important during commercialization for ongoing learning, input and finding solutions to the inevitable challenges that arise.

When demand increases and contracts are waiting, banks, and financial institutions are open to discussion as long as the food entrepreneur has a solid business plan, real orders, and a compelling financial cash flow projection. For food businesses growing into the export market, OMAFRA has a department dedicated to helping business owners interested in exporting.

**CHALLENGES**

There are very few seminars and workshops being offered which target those reaching the commercialization phase. This is where most entrepreneurship centres and especially regional innovation centres could play an important role – however, they generally lack experience and expertise in food production.

Access to food-grade space continues to be a barrier to many food entrepreneurs at this stage, especially if smaller production lines are inefficient to address the needs of increasing demand. Larger facilities are hard to find and, if found, they may need investments in new equipment and reconfigured space. Although most economic development offices are well versed in the availability of local industrial space, they are not experts in food processing and its specialized needs. Furthermore, most food production plant designers and engineers are located in the GTA and southwest Ontario. There are few in the rest of the province.

Many food businesses in the process of commercialization have expressed a challenge in finding talent to hire or contract.
APPENDIX – RESOURCES

STARTING OUT
Colleges, community groups, commodity associations and some municipalities offer business seminars and workshops at little or no cost. Most municipalities also offer some kind of entrepreneurship networking sessions.

Food-specific seminars for food entrepreneurs are also offered by some municipalities and community colleges. Examples include those offered by the City of Toronto, Innovate Guelph and Georgian College.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) has an excellent booklet – “Guide to Food and Beverage Manufacturing in Ontario”, which is available at no cost on their website, and will be an invaluable reference throughout the journey. The Ministry’s website also provides additional valuable information about the food industry in Ontario.

FOOD INCUBATORS
Food Incubators are facilities where start-up and small food processors have access to shared kitchen facilities and food grade production space, in a facility that is managed by full time staff knowledgeable in food processing.

The existence of these is fairly recent, with most having started in the last 3-4 years. There are several such facilities in Ontario including: Food Starter in Toronto, the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre in Colborne, Northumberland County, and the Ottawa Incubator Kitchen.

Food business incubators offer lots of value to the food entrepreneur: They provide food-grade space; programming; mentors; and business experts. Food experts often lead them, and create an environment for networking with other food entrepreneurs. This is an important component as successful businesses are seldom created in isolation. An individual’s willingness and ability to network, reach out to others, ask many questions, and accept feedback is critical.

Although food business incubators are ideal places for food entrepreneurs to go to for the product/food business development process, there are associated costs, and some of the critical testing and lab requirements may not be available. There are other organizations available to assist with the product and prototype development, and related functions.

ONTARIO COLLEGES WITH FOOD PROCESSING INDUSTRY PROGRAMMING
The Institute of Food Processing Technology (IFPT) at Conestoga College in Cambridge meets the needs of the food and beverage manufacturing industry by providing education, training, research and technical expertise. It has a unique production scale pilot plant which is used to train students in their Food Processing Programs such as Quality Management and Operations Management. They also conduct research on food technology projects, and can be a valuable resource.

The Canadian Food & Wine Institute Innovation Centre at Niagara College, in Niagara on-the-Lake provides a variety of services used in innovation and commercialization of new products and processes. These include: recipe and new product development, food and beverage safety and regulatory assistance, sensory analysis and consumer testing, nutritional labelling and also specialty services in beer, cider and hops analysis.
The Food Innovation and Research Studio (FIRSt), at George Brown College in downtown Toronto specializes in getting new food products into market and onto store shelves. FIRSt offers industry access to technical resources, state of the art facilities and networking opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses for the food and beverage industry. Services include: technical support, applied research, food product development, recipe creation, sensory evaluation, nutritional analysis and labelling.

Georgian College in Barrie offers courses and programs related to food entrepreneurship as well as food regulatory training. They also offer community seminars and networking opportunities for food entrepreneurs.

The University of Guelph, well known for its Food Science expertise, offers food science degree programs as well as shorter applied courses and seminars in aspects of food processing. The Guelph Food Innovation Centre (GFIC) located at the University of Guelph offers product development, analytical testing and food safety and quality support for the food industry.

COMMERCIAL KITCHENS

The Greater Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance has created a database listing food and farming assets including commercial kitchens and food-grade facilities. This inventory covers only the Greater Golden Horseshoe and is accessible through regional economic development offices. As more of these are coming available, a web search may best identify the closest available facility to use.

PRODUCT AND PROTOTYPE DEVELOPMENT AND OTHER RESOURCES

In addition to the organizations listed in the preceding sections, there are a number of private companies with expertise in prototype development. The majority of them are in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the Niagara Region, and in southwestern Ontario near Guelph. There are a few listed in eastern Ontario near Kingston and Ottawa.

Examples include: The Food Development Group in Toronto and NSF in Guelph who offer many services in product development and testing for a fee. George Brown College’s FIRSt is equipped to help food entrepreneurs in prototype development and testing.

The services of private product development companies are not inexpensive and the fees could be viewed as a deterrent, or instead, as an investment in the product design depending on the business plan.

THE LANDSCAPE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING.

The resources listed in this section are a representative snapshot of what is available at this time, but the list is not exhaustive, and the service providers do change over time. Additionally, the food industry covers many sectors all of which have unique processing technologies and requirements so many facilities focus only on certain sectors.

The food entrepreneur will need to inquire through contacts at municipal economic development departments, colleges and universities, incubators, trade associations such as the Agri-Food Management Institute and Food and Beverage Ontario, as well as networking with both other entrepreneurs and professionals in the food industry to find the resources that best suit their needs for the particular stage of the journey they are in.