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# Kitchen Collaboration

Maine's first food lab/commercial kitchen/tasting room comes to town.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

**Y**ou have to have a little moxie to pay half a million dollars for 5,000-plus square feet of empty building in West Bayside that just last year was one of *The Bollard's* "That's My Dump" targets.

Neil Spillane, who, with business partner Eric Holstein, has purchased a hulking, empty brick warehouse at 72 Parris Street, leads the way into the brick-walled gloom.

"This place started as Hirning's Bakery. There was the wholesale Alma Florist business for a while. Then it went through

a phase as a boxing gym." In its unrenovated state, illuminated by a few bare bulbs, the brick-walled warehouse does have a certain *Fight Club* aura.

## THE VISION THING

"This is going to be the face of Fork Food Lab," Spillane says. Fork Food Lab is a self-described "collaborative commercial food kitchen serving new and existing businesses." Spillane and Holstein are now standing in the square, cinder-block former garage

Eric Holstein, left, and Neil Spillane anticipate 72 Parris Street's second floor changing from *Fight Club* to food lab.



attached to the left side of the 1910 brick building. A few days before renovations begin, the future face of Fork Food Lab doesn't look like much. But this garage will become a tasting room and shop welcoming retail customers.

An embedded video on the [forkfoodlab.com](http://forkfoodlab.com) website shows the bleak garage transformed into an airy space with table seating indoors and out, the cinder blocks vanished behind attractive siding. The work is being done by Landmarc Construction of Portland, who also built the clean, handsome interiors of Roustabout, Sur Lie, Central Provisions, and Portland Hunt + Alpine Club.

"People will be able to come right into the tasting room and eat, shop, and see what we're up to," says Spillane.

And what they'll be up to is collaborating with food producers of all sorts who need licensed commercial kitchen space to prepare food for sale and use elsewhere.

"We supply everything—prep space; stoves; ovens; storage; cold storage; and clean, inspected, licensed commercial work space," says Spillane. "We do all the health

Fork's tasting room—before and after—and lunch from Fork member Fishin' Ships food truck.



FROM TOP: MEAGHAN MAURICE; RENDERINGS BY ERIC HOLSTEIN; FRIED FISH PHOTO COURTESY FISHER'S SHIPS

## HUNGRY EYE

# The Spark for Fork

Eric Holstein and Neil Spillane credit **Union Kitchen** in Washington, D.C., as the model for Fork.

Union Kitchen began in 2012 when Jonas Singer & Cullen Gilchrist opened The Blind Dog Café in D.C. Blind Dog's chocolate chip cookies became so popular they needed an off-site facility to bake them, which led to the purchase of a 7,500-square-foot warehouse, which led to so much kitchen space they started signing up other food producers to share it. This led to becoming a full-fledged "food incubator" with multiple locations, a distribution network, and a grocery store featuring Union Kitchen members' foods. Last year, it came full circle. Blind Dog closed and turned into a "permanent pop-up" space for Union Kitchen's members.

**Commonwealth Kitchen** in Boston, another inspiration for Holstein and Spillane, calls itself "a collaborative community working to strengthen the local economy, particularly for people who have been impacted by racial, social, and economic inequality. We offer shared kitchens with integrated business assistance, creating and growing dynamic food-based businesses and careers." They have 45 wholesalers, food trucks, and caterers on board and two commercial facilities.

Also in Boston, **Stock Pot Malden**, a "culinary incubator," provides guidance in planning, permitting and regulations, finances and bookkeeping, marketing

support, recipe development, and event opportunities. Current members include food trucks, bakers, an omega cooking oil producer, and Boston Chai Party teas.

ChaiaDC, a "farm-to-taco" member of Union Kitchen.



Japchae potato noodles with veggies from the Gogi on the Block food truck, a member of Stock Pot Malden.



## Finding Fork



and safety." Members—who pay two months' rent (starting at \$500 per month) up front to get started—arrive with their own legitimate, insured business and their ingredients and

get cooking.

### HOW IT HAPPENED

"We did it with a combination of investors, loans from Bangor Savings and from Coastal Enterprises, and some grant money,"

Spillane says. As winners of a Maine food innovation challenge, part of their prize was six hours of legal services. "We used some of it for the real-estate transaction, but we still have some hours left."

You also need some smarts and experience. Neil Spillane, 29, a Brunswick native, attended "UMaine at Orono. Then I did an MBA at Quinnipiac University." Eric Holstein, also 29, is from Westchester, New York, and he attended Colby—"which is when he fell in love with Maine," says Spillane—and majored in hotel finance.

Spillane comes to Fork from the trench-



Fork member Gelato Fiasco's "innovation lab" will test new flavors and offer classes.



es of other small Maine businesses that persevered and got bigger. "I was CFO at Urban Farm Fermentory [which shared its kitchen space on a smaller scale], then moved my way up to CEO," says Spillane. "I had a part-time job with Portland Fruit & Nut Company. I worked summers during college at Pine State Trading, Maine's largest food and beverage distributor."

**H**olstein was a food and beverage manager for "the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York and Boston, and I worked for LRA Worldwide, a subsidiary of Deloitte. I focused specifically on food and beverage consulting. I worked on projects around the world through them—New York, California, Dubai, Singapore."

And then there's location, location, location. Fork Food Lab is on Portland's epicurean peninsula, literally down the street from Back Bay Grill, Bayside American Cafe, and Isa bistro on Portland Street. It's a short walk from Deering Oaks or Monument Square, as well as right off 295 at the Forest Avenue exit.

**THE GRAND TOUR**

On Fork's first floor, adjacent to the tasting room, will be "Gelato Fiasco's flavor innovation lab," says Spillane. Gelato Fiasco began as two guys with a shop in Brunswick and has become a Maine business success sto-



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## HUNGRY EYE

ry itself, with distribution to stores in most of the 50 states. “This won’t be their main production facility. They’ll be testing flavors and teaching gelato-making classes here.”

“Other things on the first floor will include tables, members’ lockers, a meeting room, offices, ovens, a dishwashing station, dry storage, and walk-in cooler/freezer. The tasting room itself will offer Fork Food Lab members’ products and be staffed by Fork employees.”

The shared commercial kitchen/lab is going on the second floor. The renderings indicate a long room with ovens, stoves, and cold-storage units lining the walls.

### STRATEGIC PLANNING

Spillane and Holstein did a lot of homework before deciding to start Maine’s first innovative, collaborative food incubator/commercial kitchen. The tasting room, however, was their own idea.

“Our model was Union Kitchen in Washington, D.C., and places like Commonwealth Kitchen and Stock Pot Malden in Boston,” says Holstein. These are all bigger operations with multiple locations. “New



Vision meets brick and mortar on Parris Street.

York has them, too, and the city encourages them with grant money.”

**F**ork has enlisted a few high-profile “think-tank” consultants who will be available to members for advice on branding, labeling, distribution, and legal matters. Among them are Ben De La Cretaz, finance director of Stock Pot Malden; Sen. Justin Alford (D-Portland), a fellow Bayside entrepreneur and co-owner of Bayside Bowl; Caroline Paras of the Greater Portland Council of Governments; Taja Dochendorf, founder of Pulp + Wire (branding and marketing); attorney Ezekiel Callanan; and Mac McCabe, the veteran sustainable-business guru and former CEO of the O’Naturals restaurants.

It’s worth noting that Holstein and Spillane have so far put Fork together without any crowd-funding campaigns.

“We’re going to have one Kickstarter effort, though, for the retail tasting room. We’ll be announcing it soon,” says Holstein.

### WHAT’S COOKING?

So who are these members, other than Gelato Fiasco, and what will they be creating?

“We’re not quite ready to name names, but some of the foods include specialty popcorn, smoked nuts, craft soda, maple syrup, and kale chips,” says Holstein.

Kale chips are still a thing? Spillane laughs. “We try to steer away from calling trends. We’ve also got bakers, caterers, and diet-specific food-ready-to-go.” This last is

FROM RIGHT: RENDERING BY ERIC HOLSTEIN; SARAH MOORE

A large advertisement for "2016 FARM TO TABLE DINNERS". The background shows a person holding a chicken and another person holding a glass of wine. The text is overlaid on the image.

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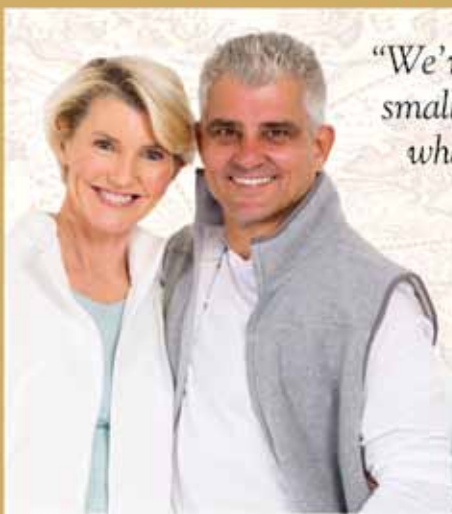
“Bakers are great for the shared-kitchen concept. They put bread in the oven at 3 a.m., so they’re gone when others come in. We’ve got 32 letters of intent from various businesses already. We’ll cap membership at 50 to start.”

“At this point it looks like about half our members will be specialty-food producers,” says Spillane. “About a one quarter will be food trucks. And the other quarter will be caterers and restaurants-existing businesses that just need another space.” There will be food truck charging stations outside and some overnight parking for food trucks. Sam Gorelick and Arvid Brown of Fishin’ Ships food truck fame are signed up.

This means Fork Food Lab is likely to operate around the clock.

“We’ll have Fork employees running the tasting room and constantly monitoring food safety standards,” says Holstein. “Food safety is absolutely paramount. By law, every new business needs an inspection to start operating. We expect to be inspected all the time.” ■

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