



2025 PLATE BY PLATE

HOW FOODLAB CHICAGO
BUILDS STRONGER BUSINESSES
AND COMMUNITIES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE HANDS THAT FEED A MOVEMENT

This evaluation was produced in partnership with the Greater Chatham Initiative and authored by Lori Smith, Senior Research Advisor at the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO). We thank the FoodLab Chicago team and the Greater Chatham Initiative for their leadership, innovation, and partnership in supporting food entrepreneurs. We are deeply grateful to the entrepreneurs of FoodLab Chicago, who generously shared their time, stories, and insights to help us understand the impact of this work. We also acknowledge the contributions of community stakeholders, local funders, and ecosystem partners who offered context and perspective that enriched this evaluation. Finally, we thank the funders—Chicago Community Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, Wells Fargo, The Coleman Foundation, The Polk Brother Foundation, and LISC—whose support has sustained FoodLab Chicago and made this impact report possible. Their investment has not only supported stronger businesses, but also reinforced the culture and economic vitality of the neighborhoods they serve.

GREATER CHATHAM

Greater Chatham is comprised of four Chicago southside neighborhoods: Avalon Park, Auburn Gresahm, Chatham and Greater Grand Crossing. It has 120,000 residents living in 50,000 households. This 15-square-mile area is home to over 5,000 businesses that employ 30,000 people and draw two million visitors each year. Since the 1950s, it has been a proudly mixed-wage, predominantly Black, stable, and storied community.

Greater Chatham's dynamic and diverse population of entrepreneurs, artists, athletes, and civic leaders has included:

- **Business giants** Gary Comer (Lands' End) and George Johnson (Johnson Products)
- **Black financiers** Ernest Collins and Moses Proffitt (Seaway Bank) and George Johnson (Independence Bank)
- **Sports greats** Ernie Banks (baseball), Willye Brown White (track and field) and Marshall Walter "Major" Taylor (cycling)
- **Entertainment legends** Mahalia Jackson, Nat King Cole, Thomas A. Dorsey, Earle Lavan "Von" Freeman, Eddie Harris, Chance the Rapper, Lena Waithe and Kamau Bell
- **Esteemed writers** Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, Herbert Nipson and Natalie Moore

Greater Chatham's business community – which included the once largest Black-owned banks in the nation – financed Chicago's only Mid-Century residential district, designed by Black architects, and bankrolled the Civil Rights movement. George Johnson, who founded the first Black-owned business listed on the American Stock Exchange, also sponsored the hit show "Soul Train," that mainstreamed Black pop culture in United States. Greater Chatham artists created Civil Rights protest songs and founded the Black Arts Movement and Kwanzaa. Today it is Chicago's Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African food district.



ABOUT

3 Senators mural at 110 E 79th Street, Chicago by Mike Stidham, Artists

THE GREATER CHATHAM INITIATIVE

The Greater Chatham Initiative (GCI) is a community and economic development nonprofit working to placekeep and catalyze Chicago’s South Side neighborhoods of Chatham, Auburn Gresham, Avalon Park, and Greater Grand Crossing. Building on Chatham’s historic role as a beacon and an anchor of Chicago’s South Side, GCI develops and implements strategies to strengthen commercial corridors, expand opportunity, and position Greater Chatham as a community of choice for residents and businesses alike.

The Greater Chatham Initiative is recognized for its numerous placekeeping awards including:

- 2020-2021 Merit Award for Design from the Illinois Chapter of the American Society for Landscape Architects (ILASLA)
- Designation as a 2021 CityArts Project by the City of Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE)
- 2021 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Creative Placemaking award, as part of the Chicago Neighborhood Development Awards (CNDA)
- 2021 Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) Charter Award in the Block, Street and Building category
- 2023, the short film “Making Mahalia Jackson Court” received an Emmy for Midwest Documentary.

RESEARCH AT AEO

As the leading voice of innovation in microbusiness, the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) has an extensive history of conducting research that aims to understand, support, and promote the interests of underserved nonemployer, small, and microbusinesses. For more than 30 years, AEO and its member and partner organizations have helped millions of underserved entrepreneurs in starting, sustaining, and growing their businesses. Together, AEO is working to change the way that capital and services flow to underserved entrepreneurs so that they can create jobs and opportunities for all.

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CHICAGO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION





Lem's Bar-B-Q photo

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Mahalia's Mile at 540 E. 79th Street, Chicago, East View to Lake Michigan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHERE EVERY PLATE BECOMES A CATALYST *HOW FOODLAB CHICAGO TURNS CULINARY PASSION INTO COMMUNITY PROSPERITY.*

FoodLab Chicago demonstrates how supporting food businesses can also strengthen entire neighborhoods. Built on the simple premise that if every plate is profitable, the business can be profitable—and when food businesses thrive, communities thrive—FoodLab has helped more than 80 entrepreneurs on Chicago's South Side improve profitability, access capital, and preserve the culinary traditions that define their neighborhoods.

At its core, FoodLab is more than a training program. Launched in 2020 by the Greater Chatham Initiative (GCI), a place-based community and economic development nonprofit, FoodLab takes an ecosystem approach that blends business fundamentals, storytelling, and peer connection to help entrepreneurs build confidence, operational discipline, and visibility. Through workshops, one-on-one coaching, and shared learning, participants have reimaged menus, restructured costs, and strengthened ties to Black culinary heritage. These individual transformations have fueled visible community change: stronger restaurants, more vibrant corridors, and a growing reputation for Greater Chatham as a culinary destination.

CELEBRATING CULINARY EXCELLENCE AND CULTURAL LEGACY



Justice of the Pies Interior

By blending culinary excellence with cultural expression, FoodLab Chicago is helping shape a shared food identity for the South Side; one that draws visitors, reinforces neighborhood pride, and ensures that both couture and down-home Black food traditions are celebrated.

LOCAL JAMES BEARD WINNER & HONROEES

This cultural and culinary impact is increasingly recognized on the national stage. Four chefs and entrepreneurs connected to Greater Chatham or FoodLab Chicago have been honored by the James Beard Foundation:

- **Carmen Lemons and Lynn Walker-Harvey of Lem's Bar-B-Q** received the 2025 America's Classics Award, celebrating longtime neighborhood institutions with timeless appeal.
- **Stephanie Hart of Brown Sugar Bakery and FoodLab Chicago** received the 2019 America's Classics Award, recognizing her role in preserving and advancing Black dessert traditions.
- **Maya-Camille Broussard of Justice of the Pies** was a 2022 nominee, known for her creative reinvention of sweet and savory pies rooted in justice and storytelling.

From neighboring Hyde Park, Chef Erick Williams—a FoodLab Chicago advisor and founder of Virtue—made history in 2022 as the first Black chef to win Best Chef: Great Lakes from the James Beard Foundation.



Lynn Walker-Harvey and Carmen Lemons
Lem's Bar-B-Q

James Beard Foundation photo



Stephanie Hart
Brown Sugar Bakery



Maya-Camille Broussard
Justice of the Pies

ALUMS SECURED \$8.2 MILLION IN CAPITAL 500 JOBS MAINTAINED OR CREATED

FoodLab's impact is both human and measurable. Nearly all alumni report greater confidence and connection to a supportive business community. More than two-thirds increased profitability, grew revenue, and added jobs—collectively securing over \$8.2 million in loans and grants. Alumni have created or sustained nearly 500 jobs, with over 60 percent paying above minimum wage, showing how business growth and job quality can rise together. These results mark a broader shift toward shared prosperity across Chicago's South Side.

GREATER CHATHAM IS CHICAGOLAND'S SOUL FOOD, CARIBBEAN, AND WEST AFRICAN FOOD DISTRICT WITH 2 MILLION VISITORS

FoodLab's impact also lives in the stories behind the data. Alumni businesses such as Haire's Gulf Shrimp, Brown Sugar Bakery, and Majani have modernized operations and expanded their reach while preserving intergenerational legacies that anchor cultural identity. Several FoodLab-connected chefs and restaurateurs have earned James Beard Foundation honors, amplifying South Side cuisine on the national stage. Together, these successes are helping reframe Greater Chatham as a center of culinary innovation and Black cultural excellence—an identity rooted in continuity and pride.

GREATER CHATHAM'S CULINARY DENSITY GREW UP TO 24% , COMPARED TO THE CHICAGO'S 5% AVERAGE

The program's reach extends beyond individual enterprises to the broader culinary sector. Between 2018 and 2023, culinary business density grew by up to 24 percent in Greater Chatham—nearly five times the city average—and 16 points higher than comparable neighborhoods even after controlling for neighborhood demographics and baseline business activity. Chatham now ranks among the city's top-performing neighborhoods for culinary business growth, outpacing nearly all of Chicago's 77 communities and trailing only West Englewood, Armour Square, and Burnside on the South Side. By 2023, neighborhood restaurants drew more than 2 million visitors annually. These results underscore how sustained investment in food businesses and public spaces can reshape neighborhood economies from within.

ETHNIC BUSINESS ENCLAVES CAN POWER THE NEIGHBORHOOD MULTIPLIER EFFECT

These gains matter because they illustrate a model for inclusive, place-based development. By combining technical assistance, cultural identity, and public-space activation, FoodLab helps entrepreneurs stabilize and expand while demonstrating how local business ecosystems can power community development. Greater Chatham's story shows that when investment is sustained and grounded in culture, the benefits ripple outward: new jobs, stronger corridors, and neighborhoods that retain both their heritage and their economic vitality.

As cities across the nation search for ways to foster equitable growth, FoodLab Chicago offers a compelling blueprint.

KEY FINDINGS

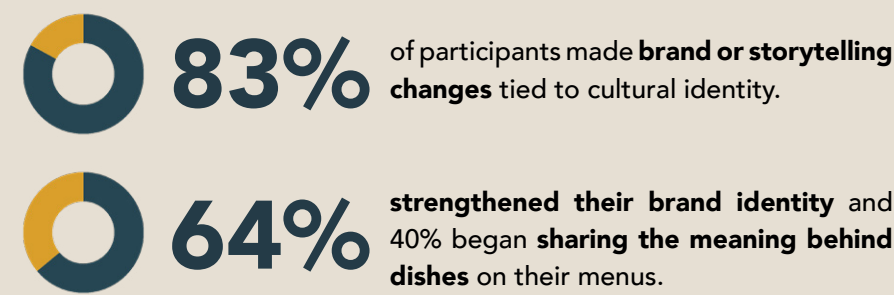
PROOF ON THE PLATE

HOW CULTURE, CONFIDENCE, AND COMMERCE CONVERGE TO DRIVE TRANSFORMATION

Over five years, FoodLab Chicago has demonstrated that targeted support can transform both businesses and neighborhoods. The program equips food entrepreneurs to strengthen their operations, preserve cultural identity, and energize commercial corridors that anchor Chicago’s Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African district.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VISIBILITY

FoodLab helped entrepreneurs turn cultural heritage into a business strength. By weaving family histories and community pride into their brands, alumni built restaurants that serve as both businesses and cultural landmarks.



These shifts helped attract more than 2 million annual visitors to South Side restaurants.

Figure 1

“FoodLab is getting the word out about hidden gems—restaurants like mine—to people from other neighborhoods who might not have thought to come here.”

— Aisha Murff, Haire’s Gulf Shrimp

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND CONFIDENCE

Over five years, FoodLab Chicago has demonstrated that targeted support can transform both businesses and neighborhoods. The program equips food entrepreneurs to strengthen their operations, preserve cultural identity, and energize commercial corridors that anchor Chicago’s Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African district.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VISIBILITY

Food entrepreneurs often launch without a roadmap or trusted advisor. FoodLab stepped into that role, becoming the mentor many never had.



These networks continue to drive mentorship, referrals, and collaboration well beyond the program.

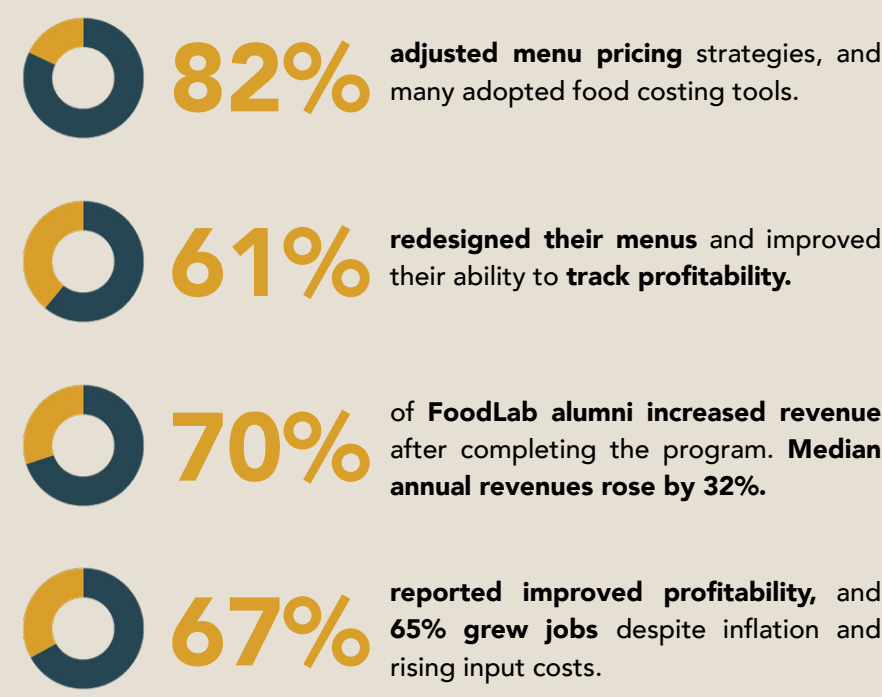
Figure 2

“FoodLab feels like that mentor I was trying to reach out to when I first started... I had nobody not a soul. And now I feel like I have someone.”

— Michae Wilson, Sunday’s Catering

BUSINESS GROWTH AND FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

At the core of FoodLab’s model is a simple idea: if every plate is profitable, the business can be profitable. Entrepreneurs applied this fundamentals-first approach to strengthen their operations and bottom lines.



Collectively, alumni secured over \$8.2 million in grants and loans to stabilize, grow, and expand their businesses.

Figure 3

“FoodLab has been more than just a resource—it’s been a turning point in how I operate and grow.”

— Bettina Slaughter, Boozy Treats

NEIGHBORHOOD AND CORRIDOR DEVELOPMENT

By equipping restaurateurs to thrive, FoodLab has fueled entire corridors. From 2018–2023, the number of Greater Chatham culinary businesses grew by 19%—nearly four times the citywide rate—and neighborhood activations boosted foot traffic, creating a virtuous cycle of growth, community pride, and connection.

Culinary Business Growth, 2018 - 2023

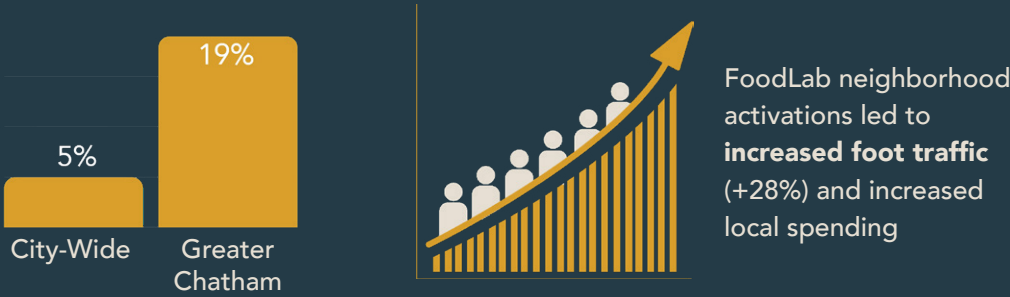


Figure 4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns, 2018 and 2023 (the most recent year available).

“Our growth has inspired other business owners to get involved because the results are clear. This program has steadily improved food businesses in our community, and that progress has helped elevate the entire neighborhood.”

— Stephanie Hart, Brown Sugar Bakery



Greater Chatham Initiative photo

THE INTRODUCTION

PLATE BY PLATE, A NEIGHBORHOOD RISES

WHY RESTAURANTS ARE THE BEATING HEART OF COMMUNITY VITALITY ON CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE

Restaurants are powerful engines of neighborhood vitality. They do more than serve food: they draw foot traffic, reflect cultural identity, and create spaces where communities connect and placekeep. On Chicago's South Side, Black-owned restaurants have long played this role, anchoring commercial corridors and serving as cultural landmarks. Yet despite their importance, many face persistent barriers: limited access to capital, uneven visibility, and a lack of tailored business support.

*"IF EVERY PLATE IS PROFITABLE, THEN THE BUSINESS WILL BE PROFITABLE."
- FOOD LAB'S MOTTO.*

FoodLab chicago was built to close those gaps—plate by plate. Rooted in the belief that if every meal is profitable, the business can be profitable, the program takes a fundamentals-first approach to building stronger restaurants and, by extension, stronger communities. Across five cohorts, FoodLab has helped entrepreneurs improve margins, streamline operations, access capital, innovate offerings, and reimagine their business models in ways that honor family, culture, and profitability. This report evaluates those five cohorts, spanning 2020–2024.

But FoodLab is more than a technical assistance program. It is also a platform for visibility, identity, and collective power. By combining business fundamentals and menu engineering with storytelling, peer connection, and Black culinary culture, the program supports entrepreneurs in strengthening their operations and shaping a shared vision for thriving South Side dining corridors. These corridors collectively form Chicago's Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African District.



FoodLab Chicago 5.0 Cohort Members. Greater Chatham Initiative photo

MIXED-METHOD EVALUATION YIELDED PROGRAM FINDINGS

To understand the reach and limitations of this approach, we conducted a rigorous mixed-methods evaluation drawing on a wide range of data sources: administrative records, cohort intake and evaluation surveys, a final alumni outcome survey fielded in May–June 2025, in-depth interviews with FoodLab participants and community leaders, and external datasets such as Chicago business license filings, ZIP code–level establishment data, and U.S. Census Bureau indicators. Our analysis combines descriptive trends and statistical modeling to assess how FoodLab has influenced both individual business outcomes and broader patterns of community development.

This report presents those findings to explore how a fundamentals-first, culture-forward model of support can advance inclusive, community-rooted economic growth.

ABOUT FOODLAB CHICAGO

BUILT ON HERITAGE, DRIVEN BY NUMBERS

A SCIENTIFIC METHODS FIRST, CULTURE-FORWARD MODEL CONNECTING PROFIT TO PLACE

FoodLab Chicago is a program of the Greater Chatham Initiative (GCI), grounded in the belief that Black-owned restaurants are vital community anchors. Nearly half of Black-owned businesses on Chicago’s South Side are food-based, making this sector central to the region’s economic and cultural vitality.

Launched in 2020 and inspired by the FoodLab Detroit model, FoodLab was created to address long-standing inequities facing Black food entrepreneurs—ranging from limited access to capital to gaps in technical and operational support. At the heart of its theory of change is a simple but powerful idea, articulated by Executive Director Nedra Sims Fears: “If every plate is profitable, the business can be profitable.” By helping entrepreneurs understand their numbers, build an online presence, expand delivery and takeout options, and celebrate Black cuisine, FoodLab generates ripple effects that extend from individual kitchens to entire commercial corridors.

FOODLAB USES A COHORT AND PLACE-BASED APPROACH

FoodLab operates primarily through cohort-based incubator programs, engaging 10–20 entrepreneurs in hands-on training, one-on-one coaching, and peer learning. Participants are generally mid-stage food entrepreneurs operating for three years or more. Workshops cover bookkeeping and financial management and modeling, menu engineering (i.e., helping restaurants set up their menu to boost sales of top items and reduce waste), plate costing, inventory control, marketing/branding/storytelling, website and workforce development, food innovation, and kitchen design. Workshops are paired with coaching from expert advisors and supported by a trusted peer network—what one participant called “that mentor I was always looking for.”



BLACK DIASPORA CUSINES 101

ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL DEFICITS IN CULINARY TRAINING

Most culinary schools still emphasize classic French and Italian techniques, but few offer curricula rooted in Black diaspora foodways—such as Soul Food, Creole, Jamaican, Trinidadian, or regional Bar-B-Que traditions. Chefs who want to specialize in these cuisines are often left to piece together the nuances and cultural context on their own. At the same time, traditional culinary programs rarely equip entrepreneurs with the business acumen needed to run a profitable restaurant. Accountants may understand tax codes, but they often lack insight into the industry-specific performance metrics and financial models that drive day-to-day viability. And beyond finance, most training programs do not cover essentials like nutrition labeling, food innovation, or kitchen design optimization—leaving a wide gap between what is taught and what entrepreneurs truly need to succeed. FoodLab fills that gap by pairing culturally relevant training with hands-on support.

WORK SMARTER: HOW TO OPERATE A PROFITABLE RESTAURANT

Most culinary schools overlook Black diaspora foodways and rarely teach the business skills entrepreneurs need to succeed. FoodLab fills that gap—pairing culturally relevant training with hands-on support, from menu costing to nutrition labeling and kitchen design.

CULINARY INNOVATION

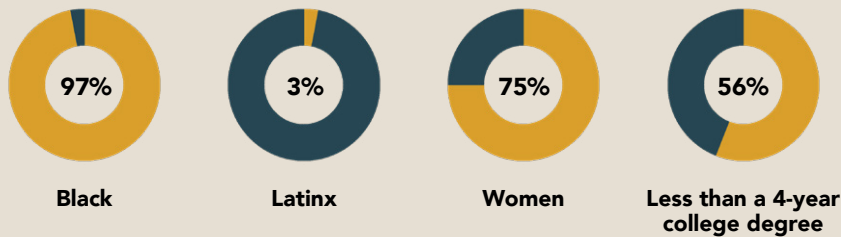
FoodLab Chicago has broadened its reach beyond the core cohort model. In 2024, it partnered with the City of Chicago to launch the Early Stage Food Incubator, supported by the Chicago Good Food Fund. This year-long program is designed for newer food entrepreneurs—including food truck operators, bakers, caterers, and consumer packaged goods startups—who need both space and guidance to grow. Participants gain access to a state-of-the-art commercial kitchen “learning lab” on the South Side, where they can experiment with culinary innovation, secure nutrition labels, and refine their signature products with the support of teaching chefs. By focusing on earlier-stage founders, the incubator complements FoodLab’s main program and creates a pipeline of businesses ready to establish and scale. In addition, FoodLab offers publicly available restaurant resources and periodic open workshops, extending its impact to the wider community.

FOODLAB ALUMNI AT A GLANCE

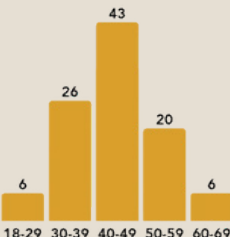
FoodLab Chicago participants reflect the heart of the South Side’s food economy. The program as built for entrepreneurs facing structural barriers such as limited access to capital, gaps in operational support, and underinvestment in Black culinary heritage.

At the time of this evaluation, 81 businesses had completed the program across five cohorts, with many returning for multiple cohorts. Their stories—and their impact—reflect the community they serve.

Business Owner Demographics



Age Distribution (%)



Firmographics

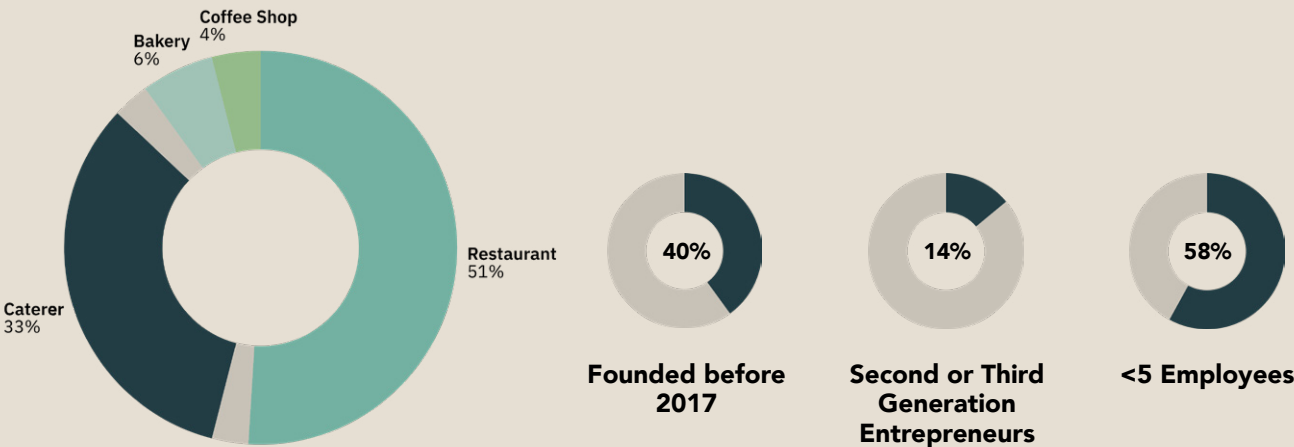


Figure 5

ALUMNI LOCATION BY NEIGHBORHOOD

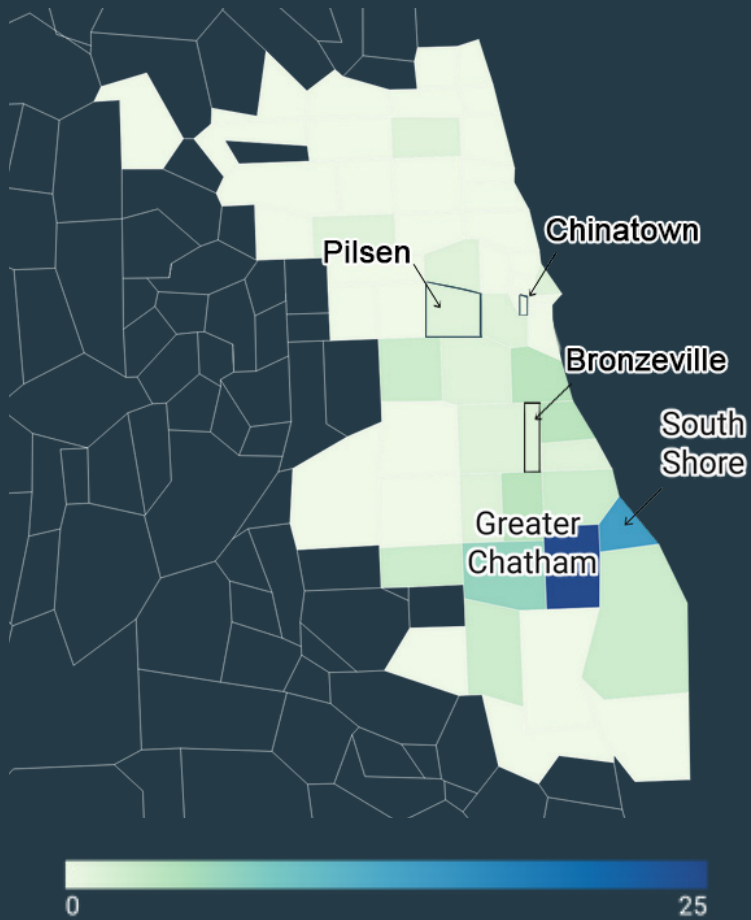


Figure 6

WHERE ALUMNI OPERATE

FoodLab businesses are concentrated in Greater Chatham (Chatham, Auburn Gresham, Greater Grand Crossing, and Avalon Park), as well as South Shore, and with a growing presence in adjacent South Side neighborhoods and beyond.

THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

FoodLab meets entrepreneurs where they are, combining personalized coaching with support with branding, menu engineering, and capital access. Alumni grew their businesses while navigating one of the most volatile periods in food service—evidence of their resilience and the program’s value.



Rendering of tour bus patrons stopping at Lem's Bar-B-Q, at 311 E 75th Street, Chicago

THE FINDINGS

TASTE AS TESTIMONY

HOW BLACK CULINARY TRADITIONS BECAME THE BLUEPRINT FOR COMMUNITY RENEWAL.

To evaluate the impact of FoodLab Chicago, we organized our analysis around three interconnected domains: cultural, social, and economic. These domains reflect the program's theory of change—that business fundamentals, when grounded in identity and supported by strong networks, can drive individual success and community development.

Each domain captures a distinct but mutually reinforcing dimension of impact:

Cultural Impact explores how FoodLab supported participants in expressing their identity, shaping their brands, and positioning their neighborhoods as culinary and cultural destinations.

Social Impact examines how the program influenced participant confidence, peer connections, and perceived support: factors critical to long-term resilience.

Economic Impact assesses changes in business performance, capital access, and job creation.

Community Impact looks beyond individual businesses to corridor activation, neighborhood vibrancy, and the role of food enterprises as anchors of inclusive growth.



75th Street Restaurant Row Mural at 311 E 75th Street, Chicago - Summer Coleman, Artist

CULTURAL IMPACT

Greater Chatham is widely recognized as Chicago's Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African culinary district: a vibrant landscape rooted in Black heritage and shaped by generations of restaurateurs.² FoodLab Chicago harnesses this legacy by helping food entrepreneurs elevate cultural identity as a competitive advantage. As FoodLab puts it: "Black-owned businesses are the foundation upon which the South Side of Chicago was built. When these businesses stay in the neighborhood, culture stays in the neighborhood." Through FoodLab, that cultural foundation is not just preserved—it's amplified.³

Ethnic food enclaves have long served as powerful engines of community development in U.S. cities, functioning as both economic anchors and cultural sanctuaries. Recent research highlights that districts centered around cuisine—such as Chinatown in New York or the Village Bottoms Black Cultural District in Oakland—help preserve heritage, foster pride, and draw outside visitors while strengthening internal community ties.⁴ FoodLab's approach mirrors these nationally recognized best practices: it leverages culinary traditions to build brand identity, neighborhood vibrancy, and economic momentum from the inside out.

FoodLab equips entrepreneurs to tell the stories behind their food and connect with customers through deeply rooted traditions. Storytelling workshops and branding exercises guide participants to define their mission, articulate their values, and build authentic brands that reflect who they are and where they come from.

BRANDING THE SOUL OF A COMMUNITY

TURNING FAMILY HISTORY INTO A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE.

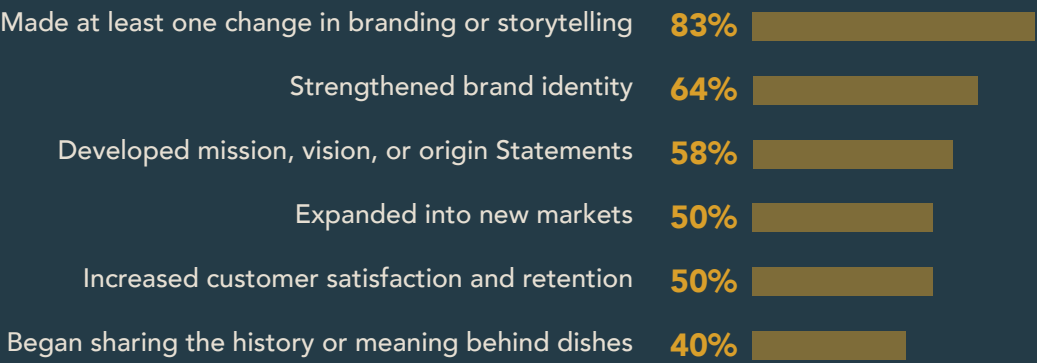
Storytelling workshops and branding exercises guide participants to define their mission, articulate their values, and build authentic brands that reflect who they are and where they come from. One participant, Aisha Murff, inherited Haire’s Gulf Shrimp, a South Side staple built on a family recipe passed down from the Great Migration. “It is literally Black history keeping it going,” Murff shared. With FoodLab’s support, she launched a new website and online ordering system that increased her sales by 15%—while safeguarding the identity and spirit of the restaurant.⁵

Importantly, this storytelling is more than marketing—it is a form of cultural preservation and intergenerational transmission, especially vital in communities historically excluded from formal preservation efforts. In total, 83% of participants reported making related changes in their business. A majority of FoodLab alumni (58%) developed mission, vision, or origin statements, and 64% reported strengthening their brand identity as a result of the program. Many (40%) began sharing the history or meaning behind dishes on their menus, turning everyday meals into opportunities for cultural storytelling. Half expanded into new markets and reported increased customer satisfaction and retention, reflecting the power of identity-driven branding to support business growth.

“FoodLab is getting the word out about hidden gems—restaurants like mine—to people from other neighborhoods who might not have thought to come here.”

— Aisha Murff, Haire’s Gulf Shrimp

Percent of alumni who reported making changes in branding, marketing, and storytelling as a result of participating in FoodLab Chicago



First item captures the percent of businesses who reported making at least one of the changes described in the figure, for the question “Which of the changes have you made as a result of participating in FoodLab Chicago?”

Figure 7

ALUMNI FEATURE

AISHA MURFF

HER FAMILY’S RECIPE FOR RESILIENCE

PRESERVING A GREAT MIGRATION LEGACY, ONE SHRIMP PLATE AT A TIME.

Alumnus Aisha Murff revitalized her family’s legacy restaurant, Haire’s Gulf Shrimp—launched during the Great Migration—by building a brand rooted in history. With FoodLab’s support, she added a new website and online ordering system, boosting sales by 15%. Her story is now featured in Choose Chicago promotions, helping position Greater Chatham as a cultural destination.



The Culinary Queens of the 75th Street Restaurant Row- Stephanie Hart of Brown Sugar Bakery (left), Carmen Lemons of Lem’s Bar-B-Q (center), Lori Seay of Soul Veg City (right)

TODAY, the Greater Chatham area is home to approximately 1,000 food businesses that collectively draw over 2 million visitors annually.

The impact extends beyond individual FoodLab alumni. Today, the Greater Chatham area is home to nearly 1,000 food businesses—including more than 250 restaurants with employees—that collectively draw over 2 million visitors annually.⁶ A recent analysis from the Chicago Federal Reserve found that more than half of all visits to Greater Chatham restaurants come from outside the neighborhood.⁷ These trends echo national findings that ethnic food districts—when supported with infrastructure and storytelling—become culinary destinations that stimulate local economies while preserving cultural heritage.⁸

“Since participating in FoodLab, my business has become a destination restaurant. I love telling my from out-of-town customers about the Harold’s tradition and suggesting items for them to try.”

— Tracie Starling, Harold’s Chicken

FoodLab contributes to this momentum by helping business owners position their eateries as anchors of identity and community. The Greater Chatham Initiative is now working to create a Black Culinary & Cultural Heritage Trail to highlight local restaurants and promote the South Side as a culinary destination. This work leverages cultural identity not just to attract foot traffic, but to affirm the community’s value and secure its place in the urban fabric.

WHEN supported with infrastructure and storytelling, ethnic food districts become culinary destinations that stimulate local economies while preserving cultural heritage.

As alumnus Aisha Murff of Haire’s Gulf Shrimp summed up FoodLab’s role in attracting new visitors, referring to fellow cohort member Lem’s Bar-B-Q: “You’re going to have people from all over the world coming to a place on 75th Street.” These stories echo the data showing that Greater Chatham restaurants increasingly serve as citywide—and even national—destinations.⁹

SOCIAL
IMPACT



300 Block of East 75th Street Restaurant Row, Chicago

THE TABLE AS MENTOR

WHERE ENTREPRENEURS FIND BELONGING, CONFIDENCE, AND COLLECTIVE STRENGTH.

FoodLab Chicago goes far beyond business training: it builds a lasting foundation of confidence, connection, and care. For entrepreneurs who often navigate the restaurant industry without formal support or community, FoodLab offers a transformative space: a place to grow not just as business owners, but as leaders rooted in their neighborhoods.

“FoodLab feels like that mentor I was trying to reach out to when I first started... I feel like 10 years down the line, wherever I’m at, I can say, ‘Hey y’all, I got an idea.’ And that, to me, is awesome. I had nobody. Not a soul. And I feel like I have someone now.

— Michae Wilson, Sunday’s Catering

“FoodLab made me feel more empowered and confident as a business owner—I learned how to understand my costs, design an effective menu layout, and price items strategically.

— Darryl Fuery, Haute Brats

This sense of support isn’t anecdotal. It’s measurable: 96% of participants reported increased confidence, and 86% said they felt part of a supportive business community. In an emotionally taxing and high-risk industry, confidence and connection aren’t soft outcomes—they’re essential infrastructure for long-term resilience. As alumnus Lorene Wilson reflected, “FoodLab made me more confident to ask for more help.”

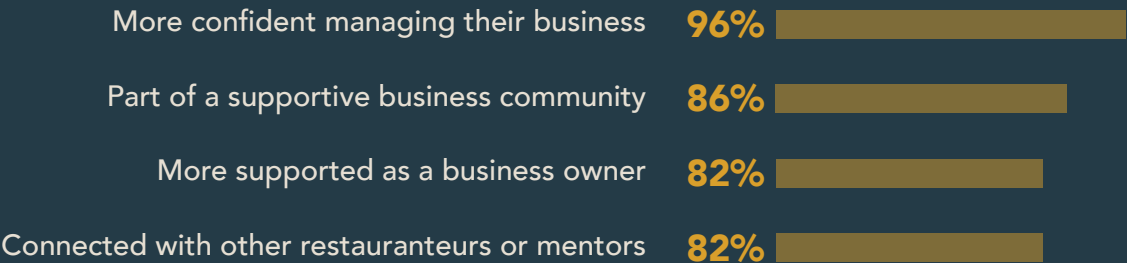
“to FoodLab’s support, we’ve gained more confidence and knowledge to operate with values at the center... it’s sparked a network of collaboration and care that we’re proud of.

— Nicole Fryison, Doughboys

“FoodLab created a community of business owners I can grow with, learn from, and invest in. I began contracting other individuals from Food/ab or simply passed opportunities along.”

— Marquinn Gibson, 7323 Chicago Cafe

Percent of alumni reporting that as a result of the program, they feel:



Each item reflects the percent of alumni reporting that they agree or strongly agree with each statement. Of those who did not agree, most or all reported that they neither agree nor disagree.

Figure 8



Chicago's Chinatown, 2139 S China Place. Greater Chatham Initiative photo

FROM ISOLATION TO COMMUNITY
SUPPORT THAT FEEDS BOTH SPIRIT AND STRATEGY.

Many participants describe FoodLab as the first time they felt supported not just as entrepreneurs, but as people working to build something meaningful in—and for—their communities. That includes running businesses aligned with their values, whether that means paying fair wages, reducing food waste, or expanding access to healthy, affordable food.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE, SHARED RISE
NETWORKS THAT TURN INDIVIDUAL PROGRESS INTO COLLECTIVE POWER.

That collaboration often starts with practical knowledge-sharing. Through FoodLab's training, business owners learn how to run leaner, smarter kitchens. For example, Michae Wilson shared how one session helped her rethink an expensive mac-and-cheese recipe. With peers offering ingredient swaps and portion guidance, she restructured the dish to reduce cost—without sacrificing flavor.

Beyond technical upgrades, the program fosters a deep sense of solidarity. From day one, the program creates space to connect, collaborate, and build relationships that last well beyond the cohort.

National research confirms what FoodLab fosters locally: thriving food districts are built on strong peer networks. From New York's Chinatown to West Oakland's Black Cultural District, studies show that "bonding social capital"—mutual trust, shared knowledge, and reciprocity among business owners—is what sets these districts apart. These relationships fuel resilience, civic participation, and long-term growth, especially in historically underserved communities.¹⁰

TOGETHER, WE RISE
A MOVEMENT SUSTAINED BY MENTORSHIP AND MUTUAL INVESTMENT.

FoodLab's alumni network continues to grow as a source of mentorship, encouragement, and shared opportunity. Participants don't just strengthen their own operations—they uplift others.

"Our growth has inspired other business owners to get involved because the results are clear. This program has steadily improved food businesses in our community, and that progress has helped elevate the entire neighborhood."

— Stephanie Hart, Brown Sugar Bakery

This ripple effect is at the heart of FoodLab's social impact. What begins as individual transformation becomes a movement: one rooted in cultural pride, mutual support, and a shared commitment to community development. FoodLab entrepreneurs are not only building stronger businesses; they're shaping a stronger South Side.

Brown Sugar Bakery Factory, 76th Street & Western Avenue, Chicago. Greater Chatham Initiative photo



FOODLAB'S ORIGINS AND IMPACT DURING COVID-19

When COVID-19 shut down dining rooms and devastated the restaurant industry, South Side entrepreneurs—many already operating without safety nets—faced not only economic uncertainty but the threat of permanent closure. In response, FoodLab launched as an emergency intervention to keep local food businesses alive and anchored in their communities.

Through virtual sessions and hands-on coaching, FoodLab guided businesses through crisis response strategies—helping owners stabilize finances, apply for emergency grants, pivot to takeout and delivery, and stay connected. Cohort members exchanged tips, navigated grant applications, and processed the emotional weight of the moment with peer support. Some even discovered fellow restaurateurs just blocks away, forming connections they never had before.

FoodLab’s work also helped ensure that local eateries remained reliable food sources. When big-box grocers and national chains closed or scaled back, “people turned to neighborhood restaurants” as essential providers. In effect, these businesses became community utilities: places where residents could still access meals when other food sources were unavailable. By keeping them viable, FoodLab helped prevent deeper food insecurity across its target neighborhoods.



By the Numbers: Outcomes for Cohort 1.0 (2020-2021)

\$1.5M



COVID RELIEF
SECURED

93% Paycheck Protection
Program Loan
Success Rate

50%



OPENED NEW
LOCATIONS

8 entrepreneurs opened
new locations or launched
storefronts

179



JOBS
SUSTAINED

Across 16
participating
businesses

Figure 9

FoodLab’s Covid response also sparked lasting operational changes. More than half of the first cohort adopted QuickBooks and transitioned away from checkbook accounting. Many redesigned their menus for profitability, upgraded digital ordering systems, and began sourcing ingredients locally—moves that improved sustainability and reach. This transformation extended beyond individual survival: it energized commercial corridors. But FoodLab’s greater legacy lies in what came next: a network of entrepreneurs equipped not only to endure hardship, but to grow, lead, and reinvest in the community.



Maya-Camille Broussard of Justice of the Pies photo

ECONOMIC IMPACT

PROFIT AS PURPOSE

TRANSFORMING SMALL FOOD BUSINESSES INTO ENGINES OF NEIGHBORHOOD WEALTH.

In just five years, FoodLab Chicago has helped transform both individual businesses and the neighborhoods around them. This section focuses on direct economic outcomes at the business level: stronger performance, expanded access to capital, and new employment opportunities that together form the backbone of community development.

By the Numbers: Outcomes for 81 Alumni Businesses

\$8.2M



CAPITAL SECURED

Grants and loans leveraged for growth and stability

70%



INCREASED REVENUE

Median revenues and stability increased by 32%

479



JOBS CREATED & MAINTAINED

65% grew jobs, most (60%) pay more than minimum wage

BUSINESS PERFORMANCE AND RESILIENCE

EVERY PLATE COUNTS

PRICING, PORTIONING, AND PRECISION AS TOOLS FOR PROSPERITY.

Across cohorts, more than two-thirds (67%) of FoodLab participants increased profitability, 70% grew revenue (with median revenue gains of 32%), and nearly two-thirds (65%) added jobs—even while three-quarters faced higher input costs.

Much of this progress stems from FoodLab’s hands-on coaching model and fundamentals-first approach. As Bettina Slaughter explained, “one of the biggest shifts came from FoodLab’s help with pricing. I finally understand my profit margins and how to price my products in a way that’s sustainable and makes sense for my business.”



“FoodLab has been more than just a resource—it’s been a turning point in how I operate and grow.”

— Bettina Slaughter, Boozy Treats

Figure 10

CHANGE IN BUSINESS ACUMEN: FROM HOPING TO MAKE A PROFIT TO KNOWING HOW TO MAKE A PROFIT

Alumni describe specific operational breakthroughs. Many adopted new tools like Meez to track food costs, bundled popular items with high-margin add-ons, reduced waste, and redesigned menus to spotlight best-sellers.



“I needed to raise my prices, but I thought my customers couldn’t afford the increase,” recalled Chef Tsadakkyah Emmanuel of Majani. “With FoodLab’s plate cost price information, I learned that other neighborhood restaurants were charging more than I was. It gave me confidence that I would not lose my customers if I raised my prices.”

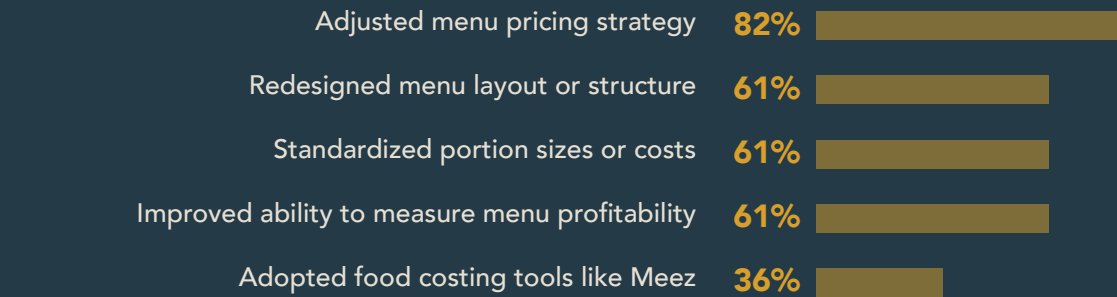


Across the board, FoodLab participants redesigned menus, standardized portion sizes, adopted costing tools, and became more confident in their ability to run leaner, more strategic kitchens (Figure 11). These shifts—small but strategic—contributed to healthier margins and better business decisions.

“ Their guidance helped us pinpoint our most profitable dishes and re-evaluate our pricing, which significantly boosted our margins.”
— Araceli Nacipucha, Los Barriles Restaurant & Sport Bar

Beyond operations, FoodLab helped entrepreneurs understand their competitive position in the market. Through a partnership with the Greater Chatham Initiative, restaurateurs received insights on neighborhood demographics and dish price ranges.

Percent of alumni reporting that as a result of the program, they feel:



Source: FoodLab Alumni Survey, MaNune 2025

Figure 11

These improvements reflect FoodLab’s core theory of change: with the right tools and support, small food businesses can achieve profitability and become pillars of community wealth creation. They also laid the groundwork for entrepreneurs to attract and effectively manage external financing.

CAPITAL ACCESS

FUELING DREAMS WITH DOLLARS THAT STAY LOCAL

HOW ACCESS TO FUNDING SPARKS LASTING STABILITY AND GROWTH.

FoodLab prepared entrepreneurs to secure the financing that fuels stability and growth.

Participants strengthened business plans, applications, and lender relationships—and learned to identify and navigate funding opportunities that translated into real resources during and after the pandemic.

“The Paycheck Protection Program kept my business open during COVID. The SBA loan and Neighborhood Opportunity Fund have helped tremendously in paying bills, buying product, hiring new employees, and renovating my property.

— Tracie Starling, Harold’s Chicken

For many, this funding was transformative.

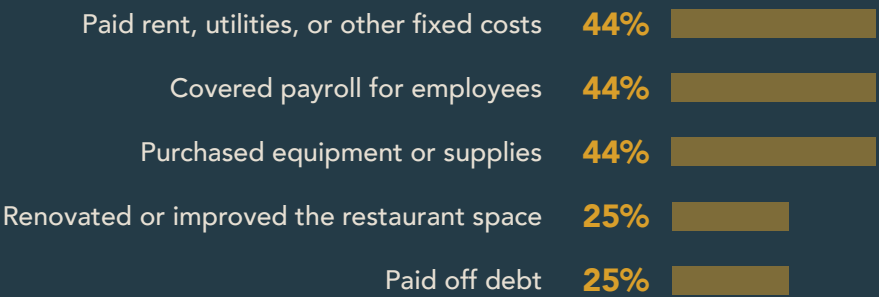
“This funding was a lifeline... it gave us the breathing room to think long-term, not just day-to-day.

— Nicole Fryison, Doughboys



How FoodLab Entrepreneurs Used Capital

Percent of businesses reporting each use (for the top five uses)



Source: FoodLab Alumni Survey, May-June 2025

Figure 12

Owners used capital to stabilize payrolls, purchase equipment, renovate, and in some cases, expand (Figure 12). Brown Sugar Bakery purchased its location and invested in automation that tripled output and doubled employment; Soul Veg City relocated to a larger 75th Street space; Nafsi opened at the South Shore Cultural Center, and Haire’s Gulf Shrimp plans to expand to offer dine-in services.

These outcome illustrate how combining technical assistance with capital readiness turns small enterprises into engines of neighborhood investment.

JOBS AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

HIRING FROM THE HEART

CREATING QUALITY JOBS THAT STRENGTHEN FAMILIES AND CORRIDORS ALIKE.

FoodLab businesses are engines of local employment. As of June 2025, the 81 alumni businesses provide approximately 478 jobs, including 242 full-time positions, with most (60%) now paying employees above minimum wage. As profitability improves, owners reinvest in staff and operations-hiring cooks, servers, managers, and consultants, often from within the community.

The benefits extend well beyond direct employment. As businesses expand their teams and customer bases, these ripple effects compound: restaurants anchor lively public spaces, draw new visitors, and strengthen commercial corridors across Greater Chatham.



COMMUNITY IMPACT

CORRIDORS OF CULTURE AND COMMERCE

HOW CULINARY ENTREPRENEURSHIP REVITALIZES STREETS, STOREFRONTS, AND SPIRITS.

Corridors with sustained FoodLab and GCI investment significantly outperformed citywide trends, showing the power of concentrated, place-based strategies

+24%



UP TO 24% CULINARY
BUSINESS DENSITY
GAINS

+28%



INCREASED FOOT TRAFFIC
FROM CORRIDOR
ACTIVATIONS

FoodLab’s impact extends beyond individual businesses. By embedding its work in public spaces and civic institutions, FoodLab activates local economies. Vendor pop-ups and the Chatham Farmers Market give entrepreneurs low-barrier ways to gain visibility, attract new customers, and generate revenue without the burden of high overhead. Meanwhile, initiatives like Mahalia Jackson Court and Mahalia’s Mile transform vacant lots and storefronts into vibrant gathering spaces filled with galleries, murals, and cultural events that invite residents and visitors to linger. As culinary businesses expand, the effects compound: they anchor public spaces and draw new visitors.

These corridor activations yielded measurable gains. An independent 2024 analysis by MasterCard Advisors found that FoodLab-supported events at Mahalia Jackson Court drove a 28% increase in foot traffic, alongside measurable growth in small-dollar purchases (under \$40 at restaurants and under \$250 at retailers). The impact is also evident in the broader culinary sector.

Figure 13



75th Street Boardwalk in front of Brown Sugar Bakery at 328 E 75th Street, Chicago

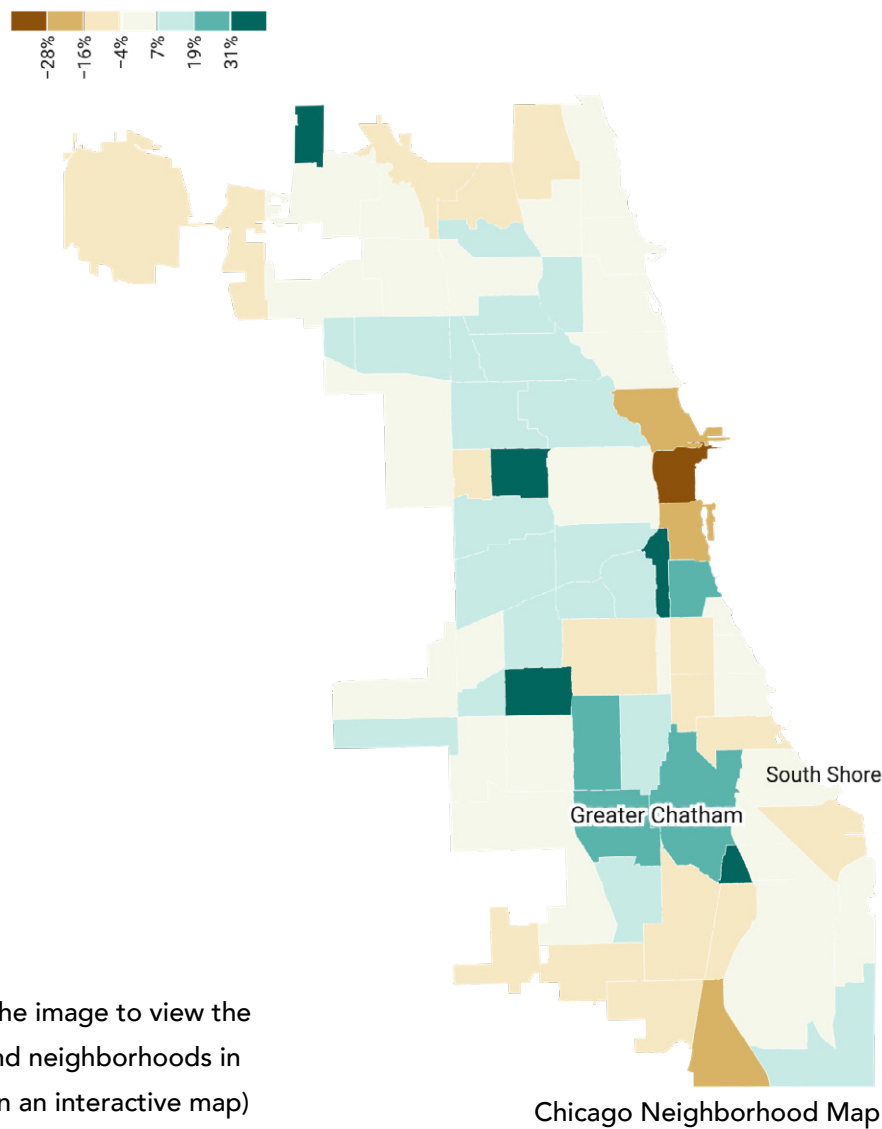
GROWTH & DENSITY

GREATER CHATHAM FOOD DISTRICT OUT PERFORMS MOST CHICAGO PEER DISTRICTS

WHERE CULTURE MEETS COMMERCE

The number of culinary businesses in Greater Chatham grew by 19% between 2018 and 2023. Culinary business density rose even more—by +21% in Greater Grand Crossing, +22% in Auburn Gresham, and +24% in Chatham—signaling meaningful commercial corridor development, not simply business growth as a function of population growth. Figure 14 below illustrates in detail how this plays out spatially.¹²

Percentage Growth in Culinary Business Density, 2018-2023



(Click the image to view the data and neighborhoods in detail in an interactive map)

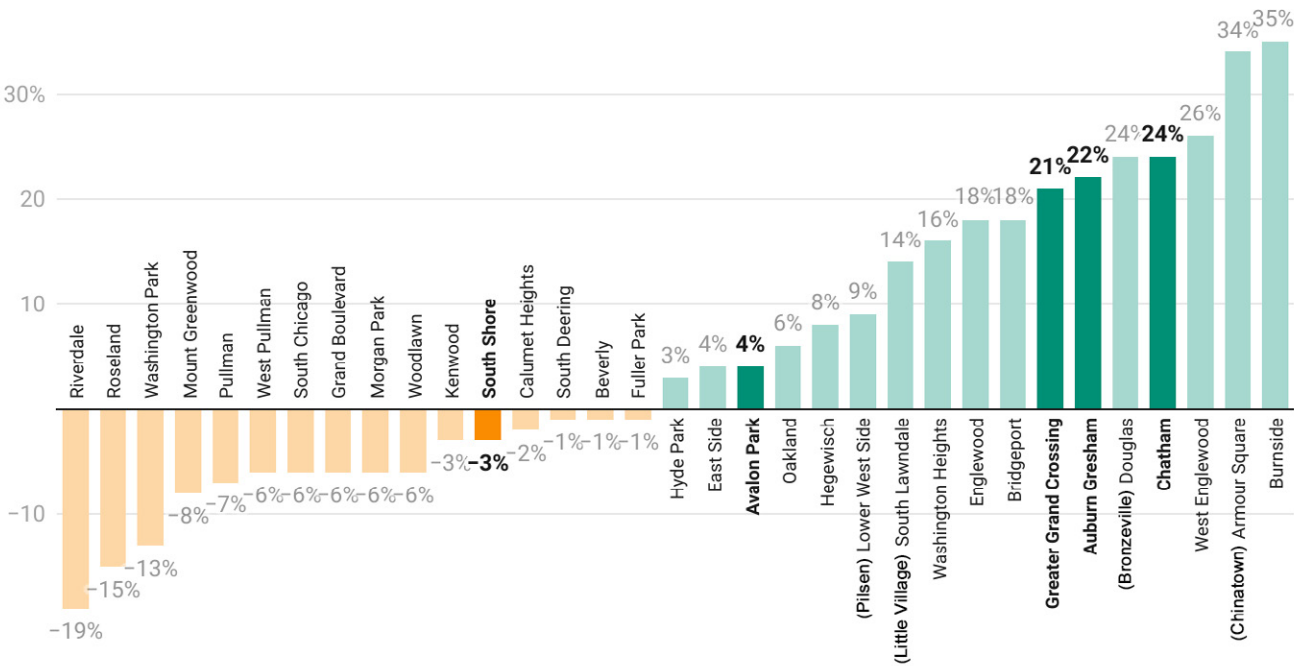
Source: U.S. Census Bureau CBP and ACS (2018, 2023). Culinary business density= businesses per 1,000 residents.

Figure 14

This growth reflects exactly what the Greater Chatham Initiative set out to support by pairing technical support with corridor activation: murals, Artists on the 9, Mahalia’s Mile, and consistent pop-ups. The results show how density, culture, and activation work to reinforce one another.

The chart below presents the same data on culinary business density growth shown in the preceding map, allowing clearer comparison across neighborhoods. It features South Side communities and several well-known ethnic restaurant corridors—such as Chinatown (Armour Square), Bronzeville (Douglas and Grand Boulevard), Little Village (South Lawndale), and Pilsen (Lower West Side)—given space limitations.

Greater Chatham neighborhoods recorded up to 24% growth in culinary business density, rivaling major cultural corridors like Little Village, Bronzeville, and Pilsen, and approaching Chinatown’s 34% increase. This growth underscores the momentum of Greater Chatham corridors as engines of community development on the South Side.



Source Author’s calculations using data from the 2018 and 2023 U.S Census Bureau County Business Pallems. South Side and select neighborhoods are shown due to space limitations. Culinary business density is measured as the number of culinary businesses per 1,000 residents.

Figure 15

Growth was strongest where GCI sustained engagement-such as 75th Street and Mahalia’s Mile-while areas with lighter investment-South Shore and Avalon Park—saw stagnation (South Shore falls outside of Greater Chatham but was home to several FoodLab alumni). The contrast highlights how sustained, place—based support drives durable gains.

CULINARY DENSITY

16-POINT ADVANTAGE

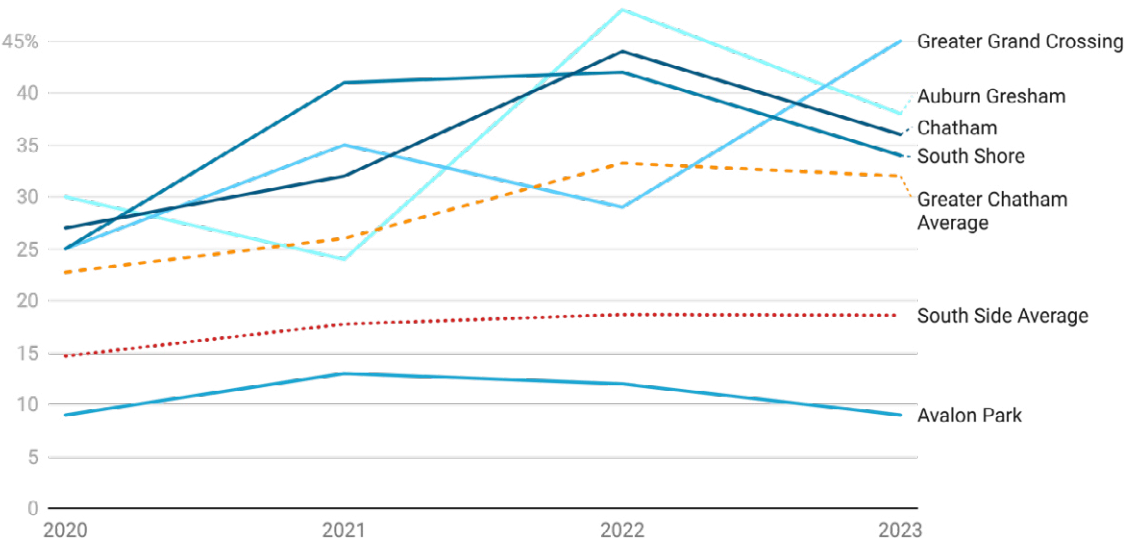
OUTPACING THE CITY, ANCHORING THE FUTURE

PROVING THAT PLACE-BASED INVESTMENT PAYS OFF.

Statistical modeling underscores the pattern: Greater Chatham neighborhoods saw a 16-point larger increase in culinary business density than other Chicago neighborhoods, even after controlling for neighborhood income, demographics, economic characteristics, and baseline food business saturation ($p < 0.03$).¹³

Chicago business license data adds another dimension: while new food business formation stalled citywide during COVID, Greater Chatham rebounded quickly, outpacing the South Side overall (Figure 16).¹⁴ In short, FoodLab and GCI’s target areas significantly outperformed the rest of the city. Business license data capture a broader spectrum of culinary businesses—from pop-ups and shared kitchen users to full-service restaurants, many of which operate without employees. This wider lens is particularly useful for assessing FoodLab’s influence, as the program explicitly targets early-stage and under-resourced entrepreneurs who may not yet have employees but are poised for growth.

New Culinary Business Formation, 2020-2023
Culinary business starts in FoodLab corridors rebounded faster on average than the South Side overall.



Source: Author’s analysis using City of Chicago Business License Data, 2020-2023.

Figure 16



Chance the Rapper mural at 130 E 79th Street, Chicago, by Damon Lamar Reed, Artist

Distinct taste profiles and Black culinary traditions are transforming Greater Chatham into a cultural destination that attracts millions each year.

This expansion is not just about more businesses: it is repositioning Greater Chatham as a cultural destination. A 2023 GCI asset-mapping study identified Greater Chatham as a regional hub for Soul Food, Caribbean, and West African cuisine. In 2023, Black-owned restaurants generated \$84 million in revenue and drew more than 2 million visitors—10 percent from over 25 miles away—underscoring how culturally rooted activation is turning Greater Chatham into an authentic, place-based culinary destination.

Targeted, corridor-based strategies work: dense clusters of restaurants and public art transform streets into destinations and engines of inclusive growth

These neighborhood-level differences also align with research on corridor development. Studies demonstrate that once a street segment reaches a critical mass of 10 food-based businesses, it begins to function as a destination: customers face lower search costs, dwell longer, and multiply local spending. Public art amplifies this effect: murals alone can attract visitors, but the gains are most powerful when paired with eateries and other amenities.¹⁵ This helps explain why 75th Street and Mahalia’s Mile on 79th Street—with their combination of clustered restaurants, cultural branding, and murals—have outperformed other corridors and emerged as anchors for inclusive growth on the South Side.

Taken together, these findings show that FoodLab’s combination of visibility, technical support, and community building can help stabilize and grow the local food sector. And critically, success breeds more success. Research shows that visible wins reduce perceived risk and spark aspiration, meaning FoodLab’s impact extends beyond today’s participants.¹⁶ It’s helping seed the next generation of South Side entrepreneurs.

SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

BEYOND THE COHORT

KEEPING PROGRESS ALIVE THROUGH CAPITAL, COACHING, AND CONTINUED CARE.

A fundamentals-first approach must be paired with follow-on investment to ensure long-term business resilience. Notwithstanding strong gains in revenue, confidence, and operational skills, many FoodLab Chicago alumni continue to face persistent barriers. Survey findings highlight specific areas where alumni seek additional support, echoing both local realities and national industry trends:

Capital and grant assistance topped the list of needs, cited by 82% of participants. Many FoodLab businesses are still operating on thin margins, and access to affordable capital remains constrained by systemic inequities in lending and investment.

General business coaching (64%) and financial coaching (61%) were also commonly cited, pointing to the importance of continued one-on-one support to reinforce practices introduced in the program. Although 82% of participants adjusted pricing strategies and 61% redesigned menus, only 36% reported fully adopting food-costing software like Meez during the program. Qualitative feedback suggests this reflects a need for ongoing guidance and hands-on support.

Many entrepreneurs flagged the cost of digital tools as a challenge. More than half (57%) said they needed help covering subscription costs for key technologies; for example, QuickBooks, online ordering systems, or marketing platforms. This echoes broader trends in the industry: digital transformation has accelerated, but tech adoption remains uneven, particularly for businesses operating below profitability.

Additional areas of need include mentorship and support (43%), social media/marketing assistance (43%), networking opportunities (40%), and HR or hiring coaching (36%)-all of which speak to the multifaceted demands of running and scaling a food business in today's environment. These findings reflect national data showing that restaurants are not only competing on flavor, but also on digital presence, operational capacity, and brand visibility.



Brown Sugar Bakery Factory, 76th & Western Avenue, Chicago. Stephanie Heart, Owner with Governor JB Pritzker, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton, et al. Greater Chatham Initiative photo

THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY EVOLVES. FOOD LAB CHICAGO PREPARES RESTAURANTEURS FOR THE EVOLUTION

Importantly, these gaps are not unique to FoodLab alumni; they are symptomatic of a transformed and more demanding industry. The pandemic reconfigured the restaurant landscape: off-premise dining surged, digital ordering became the norm, and ghost kitchens and third-party delivery platforms created both opportunities and new cost pressures. At the same time, inflation and wage increases have made profitability more elusive, especially for businesses with limited access to capital and support.

MULTI-PRONG SOLUTIONS REQUIRE MULTI-YEAR AND CUSTOM INVESTMENT

For Black-owned food businesses on Chicago’s South Side, these challenges are compounded by structural inequities. Many FoodLab participants operate in neighborhoods that were hit hardest by COVID closures and least likely to receive early relief funds. Though they’ve shown extraordinary resilience—often adapting quickly and rebuilding amid adversity—they continue to face headwinds that require targeted, sustained investment.

PLACE BASED INDUSTRY SPECIFIC BUSINESS SUPPORT MATTERS

As the industry evolves, so must the support ecosystem. The findings suggest that short-term cohort programs must be paired with long-term, embedded supports: trusted advisors, subsidized tech access, and coaching that continues post-program to help businesses stay on track. Without this, there is a risk that early gains stall, or that small businesses fall behind in an increasingly digitized and competitive market. Importantly, FoodLab continues to serve as an ongoing source of mentorship and guidance beyond the initial cohort.

“ FoodLab is an ongoing resource for support in scaling my business. We are in uncharted territory and FoodLab has served both in providing critical growth support and guidance in growth direction.”

— Stephanie Hart, Brown Sugar Bakery



Soul Veg City. 203 E 75th Street, Chicago. Eater Chicago Photo

THE CONCLUSION

LAYERED INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE, CULTURE, AND PLACE WORKS

FoodLab Chicago began with a simple idea: if every plate is profitable, the business can be profitable—and profitable businesses build thriving communities. Five years later, the evidence points to substantial impact. Entrepreneurs are not only growing revenue and jobs, but reshaping the South Side's commercial corridors, preserving cultural heritage, and creating new pathways to economic mobility.

This impact is not automatic; it reflects deliberate, layered investments in people, culture, and place. Through technical assistance grounded in community identity, FoodLab has helped entrepreneurs improve margins, expand access to capital, and build more resilient operations—despite rising costs and systemic barriers. These outcomes are reinforced by neighborhood—level trends: rising restaurant density, rebounding business formation, and growing corridor visibility.

CREATE A PLACE BASED FOOD INDUSTRY COMMUNITY

But the data is only part of the story. Participants describe FoodLab as transformational: a source of mentorship, practical know-how, and pride. They are growing their businesses while also strengthening community ties—sourcing locally, hiring locally, and modeling what inclusive growth looks like on the South Side.

CELEBRATE AND MONETARIZE ETHNIC FOOD DISTRICTS

As FoodLab looks ahead—to curriculum expansion, collective marketing, and cultural preservation initiatives like the Black Culinary & Heritage Trail—it offers a clear and compelling model for how cities can support entrepreneurs not just as economic actors, but as cultural stewards and community builders.

TURBOCHARGE NEIGHBORHOOD CORRIDORS WITH GEOGRAPHICALLY DENSE AND INDUSTRY SPECIFIC BUSINESS SUPPORTS

In a moment when small businesses are being asked to do more with less, FoodLab shows what's possible when they're given more: more support, more connection, more respect for the communities they serve. The result is not only stronger businesses, but a stronger, more vibrant South Side.



Justice of the Pies- Creator: Caroline Taft- Homegrwn Creative photo



Planned Greater Chatham Black Culinary & Heritage Trail

WHAT'S NEXT

EXPANDING CURRICULUM, AMPLIFYING THE BLACK CULINARY & HERITAGE TRAIL, AND CELEBRATING 250 YEARS OF FLAVOR AND RESILIENCE.

- 1 Expanding FoodLab Chicago into a curriculum made available to others and translating it into Spanish and Chinese
- 2 The Black Culinary & Heritage Trail will bring together 25 restaurants to draw visitors and drive local spending. Backed by MasterCard research on collective marketing, the initiative aims to capture 10% of the 1.5 million visitors projected for the Obama Presidential Center in 2026
- 3 Celebrate the history of Chicago Black Food Traditions from 1776 to 2026 with an exhibit
- 4 Black Culinary & Heritage Trail Cookbook

MIXED EVALUATION

This report draws on a mixed-methods evaluation of five cohorts (2020–2024), including surveys and interviews, and neighborhood-level data, to assess how FoodLab has influenced business outcomes and corridor development.

This evaluation draws on multiple sources to assess FoodLab Chicago’s impact on participating businesses and the broader community. Program administrative data provided the foundation for understanding baseline conditions, including cohort intake forms collected between 2020 and 2024 that captured business characteristics and owner demographics for all 81 alumni businesses. Post-program surveys administered at the conclusion of each cohort further documented immediate operational changes and outcomes.

ALUMNI SURVEYS AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS GROUNDED THE FINDINGS

To capture longer-term effects, we conducted an alumni outcome survey in May-June 2025. This survey was designed to assess shifts in profitability, revenue, employment, brand identity, and operational practices attributable to FoodLab participation. Thirty of the 81 alumni responded, representing a 37 percent response rate. At the 90 percent confidence level, results from this survey carry a margin of error of approximately ± 12 percentage points, reflecting the sample size relative to the full alumni population.

Analysis of baseline intake data indicated no systematic differences between respondents and nonrespondents in terms of business age, size, or owner demographics, suggesting the survey sample is broadly representative of the full alumni population. To complement the survey findings, we also conducted seven in-depth qualitative interviews with FoodLab alumni and community stakeholders, including leaders from local nonprofits and community lenders, to explore themes of resilience, cultural identity, and perceptions of community change.



75TH Street Restaurant Row at 312 E 75th Street, Chicago

METHODOLOGY

NEIGHBORHOOD TRENDS WERE DERIVED FROM US CENSUS AND CHICAGO BUSINESS LICENCE DATA

External data sources were used to situate these findings in a broader neighborhood context. The analysis focuses on 2018-2023, a period that captures conditions before and after FoodLab’s launch and aligns with the most recent CBP and ACS data available, enabling consistent tracking of program-related change. Restaurant and culinary business establishment data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s County Business Patterns (2018-2023) were analyzed at the ZIP code level and aligned with Census Tracts using a crosswalk with business address weights to track changes in restaurant counts and density across Chicago community areas. Community characteristics were drawn from the American Community Survey’s (ACS) 2018 and 2023 five-year estimates and incorporated into regression models to estimate the association between being located in Greater Chatham and changes in restaurant density relative to other Chicago neighborhoods. Models controlled for baseline culinary business counts, population levels, population change, racial and ethnic composition, and income distribution, and multiple specifications were tested to address potential collinearity and confirm robustness of the results.

Chicago business license data from 2020–2023 were used to identify new food business starts, defined as unique business entities newly licensed during the period or new locations associated with existing entities. Records were downloaded in May 2025 and analyzed at the address level, allowing for precise neighborhood classification. Food-related businesses were identified using industry codes and natural language processing of industry descriptions to identify food service categories. This approach captures a wider range of culinary enterprises and offers a fuller view of entrepreneurship and recovery in the sector than datasets limited to employer establishments.

ENDNOTES

1. Since the conclusion of this report, FoodLab has completed its 6th cohort in 2025.
2. Newberger, R., & Toussaint-Comeau, M. (2025, March). Reviving the restaurant corridor in the Greater Chatham neighborhood of Chicago: Challenges and opportunities. Chicago Fed Insights. Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.
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4. Min Zhou, Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992); and Wodsak, A., et al. (2008). Building Arts, Building Community: Informal Arts Districts and Neighborhood Change In Oakland, California. Urban Displacement Project. Center for Community Innovation, University of California, Berkeley.
5. AEO interviews with Aisha Murff, owner of Haire's Gulf Shrimp (June 2022 and April 2025); Loria, M. (2023, February 19). Food business program that's helped South Side staples is looking to train more restaurateurs. Chicago Sun-Times. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/business/2023/2/19/23599212/foodlab-chicago-south-side-entrepreneurship-program-neighborhood-restaurants-haire-gulf-shrimp>
6. Author's calculations using Chicago Business License data (Retrieved May 2025) and U.S. Census Bureau (2023) County Business Patterns (zip code-level weights) to estimate restaurant counts for Greater Chatham community areas.
7. Newberger and Toussaint-Comeau, "Reviving the Restaurant Corridor," Chicago Fed Insights, March 2025.
8. Alejandro Portes and Brandon Martinez, "They Are Not All the Same: Immigrant Enterprises, Transnationalism, and Development," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2019; Center for Community Innovation, Building Arts, Building Community.
9. Newberger and Toussaint-Comeau, "Reviving the Restaurant Corridor," Chicago Fed Insights, March 2025.
10. Portes and Martinez, "They Are Not All the Same,"; Center for Community Innovation, "Building Arts, Building Community"; Min Zhou, Chinatown.
11. LISC Chicago (2021). The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Creative Placemaking Award: The 75th Street Boardwalk - Greater Chatham Initiative. Retrieved from <https://map.lisc-cnda.org/2021/cnda/the-75th-street-boardwalk---greater-chatham-initiative>; Greater Chatham Initiative receives state of Illinois cultural district designation for Mahalia's Mile on Chicago's South Side. (2023). Chicago Crusader. Retrieved from <https://chicagocrusader.com/greater-chatham-initiative-receives-state-of-illinois-cultural-district-designation-for-mahalias-mile-on-chicagos-south-side/>
12. Author's calculations using U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns; see the methodology section for details. Culinary businesses were identified using relevant NAICS codes (722, 3118, and 445291) to capture a range of food-related establishments, including bakeries, restaurants, bars, catering services, and other eating and drinking establishments. Culinary business density is measured as the number of culinary businesses per 1,000 residents.
13. This trend holds for analysis of restaurant counts and restaurant density, with details on restaurant counts shown in the interactive link in Figure 14. When Avalon Park is excluded from the analysis, the growth in Greater Chatham corridors is even more pronounced.
14. Importantly, this data includes early-stage food entrepreneurs without employees, making it especially relevant to FoodLab's audience.
15. Jeong, H., & Hu, Y. (2025). "The role of public murals in street vitality". Cities, 165, 106085; Katz, B. (2022, February 11). Regenerating commercial corridors: A proposal for states. Nowak Metro Finance Lab, Drexel University. Jeong and Hu find specifically that in corridors where murals and at least 10 culinary businesses are clustered together, weekend foot traffic is 500% higher than citywide averages. This helps explain why 75th Street and Mahalia's mile on 79th Street—with their combination of clustered restaurants, cultural branding, and murals— have outperformed other corridors.
16. Van Ham, M., Reuschke, D., Kleinhans, R., Mason, C., & Syrett, S. (Eds.). (2017). Entrepreneurial neighbourhoods: Towards an understanding of the economies of neighbourhoods and communities. Edward Elgar Publishing.