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Sweet Auburn Curb Market viewed as business incubator

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 By Jeanne Bonner
For the AJC

Matt Hinton was not planning to open a restaurant. As a part-time professor of religion with two small children, he did not want to work nights.

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Special

Matt Hinton, owner Bell Street Burritos, at Sweet Auburn Curb Market.

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Goods on display at Sweet Auburn Curb Market.

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But he had built a loyal following for a burrito delivery service launched when some of his adjunct professor hours were cut. After attending an event at the Sweet Auburn Curb Market near downtown Atlanta, Hinton began thinking about opening a shop. The curb market, he decided, was the perfect spot to start. He opened Bell Street Burritos at the market in September.

"It's a good way of dipping one's toe in," Hinton said. "The market already exists. It has an existing population of customers who come here. The idea of having a standalone restaurant would be way too much to handle for me."

The one-story brick market on Edgewood Avenue is known for several things. It's a source for traditional Southern greens and other regional foods. It's also home to Grindhouse Killer Burgers, which has developed a cult following since opening more than a year ago.

Few would consider it a business incubator, yet that's part of market manager Pam Joiner's grand plan.

After all, Murphy's, a popular restaurant in the Virginia-Highland neighborhood, originally opened in the market, Joiner said. And now Grindhouse is poised to expand, with a second burger restaurant near Cheshire Bridge Road.

Joiner said the market offers fledgling entrepreneurs a number of tools to build their businesses, including a large lunch crowd from Grady Memorial Hospital and other downtown employers. Some of the market's newer tenants say in this economy it's much easier to open a market stall than a storefront.

"It was good for us to go into a small space first," said Alex Brounstein, who owns Grindhouse. "The fact that the curb market is only open for lunch and open six days a week instead of seven, I was able to fine-tune things."

Owned by the city, the market opened in 1918. It's home to longtime produce, meat and fish vendors, as well as a pharmacy. Located not far from the King Historic site, the market has seen its ups and downs in recent decades. But in

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the past year, young entrepreneurs are slowly helping to bring about a renaissance.

Any business interested in opening a stand must have start-up capital, a business plan and a history of financial stability, Joiner said. The market offers up to three months of free rent, business support and services such as security.

"What the market aspires to be like is the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia," Joiner said. "If you open a business there, you're virtually assured of success. We're not there yet."

Nationally, half of all new firms fail within five years, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. And Sweet Auburn has its share of failures. One food stand that opened earlier this year, The Greek Gyros and Pizza, is about to close, and another, Café Campesino, is retooling.

"We have been here a hair over a year, and it's been a struggle," said Café Campesino owner Tripp Pomeroy, who runs the fair-trade cafe from Americus, where he owns another coffee shop and a coffee roasting business. He employs an on-site manager, but Joiner, the market manager, believes his absence is taking a toll.

Pomeroy has made some changes, but he thinks the market could do more to promote itself and boost [traffic](#).

John Gianoulidis, who owns The Greek, said that's part of the reason he's closing. He believes the city needs to improve and promote the market.

Sweet Auburn is the only large municipal market in Atlanta, so comparisons are hard to come by. Some of [Gwinnett County's](#) Asian food markets, such as Assi Plaza in Duluth, house individual vendors. But Sweet Auburn may have more in common with seasonal farmers markets.

At the Peachtree Road Farmers Market in Buckhead, for example, 65 independent vendors sell their wares from April to December. Start-up vendors are using the market as a testing ground, market manager Lauren Carey said.

That has led the Buckhead location of Whole Foods supermarkets to scout new products at the weekly market, Carey said. The Buckhead location now carries items from a half-dozen market vendors.

"The fact that we incubate businesses is one of the principal reasons Whole Foods partners with us," Carey said. "It's like we're a focus group."

There's enough interest in Sweet Auburn as an incubator that several trendy vendors are considering spots there, including Westside Creamery, which makes high-end ice cream.

Joiner said she's aware of concerns about marketing and recently hired a firm to promote the market. But she said vendors need to bring new customers into the market.

One who has done that is Brounstein of Grindhouse Killer Burger, whose new location on Piedmont Avenue will open early next year.

"If I had just opened up in a strip mall in some part of town, I don't think the business would have taken off like it did," Brounstein said. "I completely credit being in the market with my success."

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