

The Home-Kitchen Pathway

A Data-Driven Review of California's MEHKO Program

Executive Summary

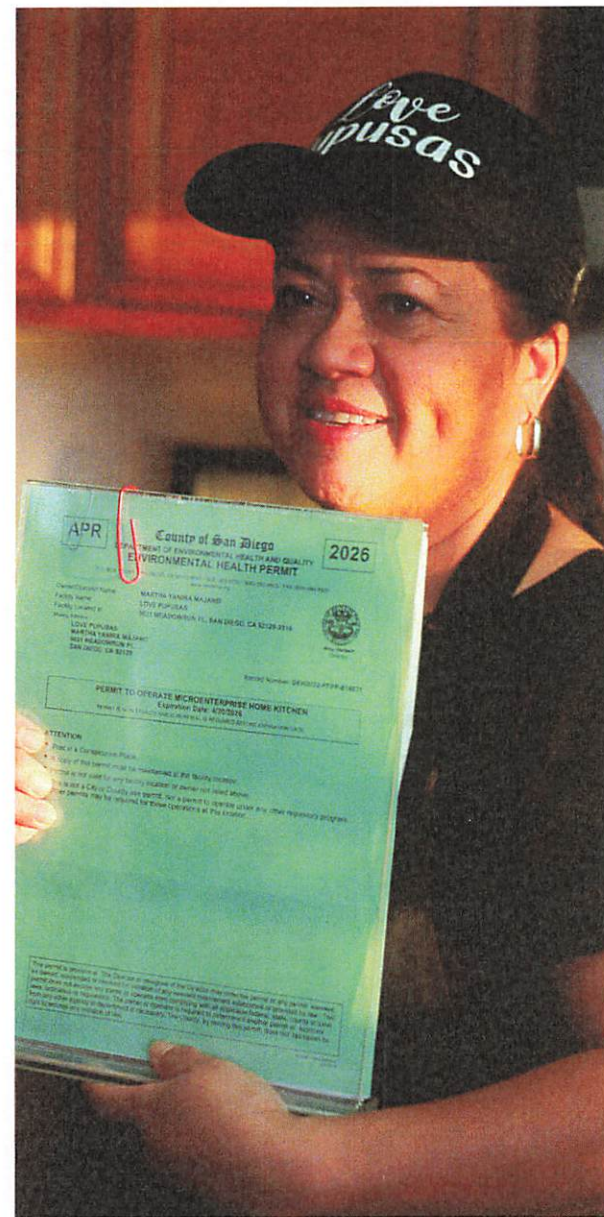
Small businesses are the backbone of the American economy and an essential part of California's diverse culture. Yet starting a food business remains out of reach for many, especially those without access to startup capital or the ability to absorb the risks of opening a traditional food establishment. Launching in the culinary industry can cost more than \$100,000 for a food truck¹ and upwards of \$475,000 for a full-service restaurant.²

Because of these high costs, many Californians opt to begin their food ventures from home. In 2019, the California Legislature created a first-of-its-kind program to legitimize these businesses. The Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) program allows individuals to apply for a permit to sell freshly prepared meals directly to consumers from their licensed and inspected home kitchens. In counties with active programs as of December 2024, MEHKO permit fees average about \$575.

MEHKOs are not statewide by default, so residents only have access if their local jurisdiction adopts the program. Since 2019, 18 areas have opted in, and permits continue to grow each year. By population, more than 60% of Californians now live in an area where MEHKOs are allowed.

This report examines the program's growth and community impacts in its first five years using data from environmental health and code enforcement agencies and surveys of operators and consumers.

Our research finds that MEHKOs are diverse, operate safely, and integrate well into their neighborhoods. Complaints about MEHKOs are uncommon, while problems associated with unpermitted operators occur much more frequently. Operators report positive financial outcomes, income flexibility that supports household and caregiving needs, and skill development through the MEHKO program.



97% of MEHKOs have never received a single complaint of any kind

73% of MEHKOs report that their business provides meaningful financial support for their households*

70% of MEHKO operators are women and 79% are people of color*

*Based on responses from surveyed operators.





Food Safety & Community Impacts

From the program's launch in 2019 through December 2024, 898 MEHKO permits had been issued statewide, and 518 of those permits were active at the end of that period. This analysis is based on complaint data collected through public records requests to environmental health and code enforcement agencies in jurisdictions with active MEHKO programs.

We collected all complaints within these categories that were linked to any address that has ever held a MEHKO permit, including complaints related to noise, traffic, parking, waste disposal, signage, food sales from a residence, or other community impacts. From environmental health agencies, we also requested any complaints, referrals, or emergency or investigatory inspections involving MEHKOs, as well as all complaints related to unpermitted food sales from a residence.

About the Data

This report draws on five sources. We collected statewide permit data from each environmental health agency with an active MEHKO program as of December 2024, and used permit addresses to request complaint records from cities and counties. These public records requests included all complaints involving permitted MEHKOs and unpermitted home-based food vendors.

We also partnered with EMC Research, an independent research firm, who surveyed 230 MEHKO operators, conducted a focus group with 22 operators, and surveyed 1,020 California consumers.

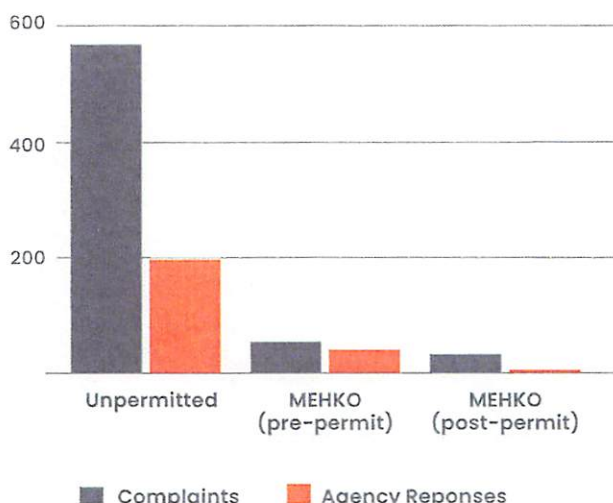
Key Findings

MEHKOs* generated very few complaints.

97% of MEHKOs did not receive a single complaint related to noise, traffic, parking, alcohol service, waste disposal, signage, foodborne illness, or other nuisances.

Most complaints involved unpermitted home-based food vendors*.

Unpermitted home-based food vendors received 606 complaints in the jurisdictions included in this analysis. In contrast, MEHKOs received only 32 complaints during the same period. Of these 606 complaints, 56 were associated with addresses that later obtained a MEHKO permit.



Many complaints had no substantive issue.

More than half of all complaints (52.7%) did not describe any issue beyond the fact that a home-based food business existed. This pattern held for complaints involving MEHKOs as well, where 40.1% contained no substantive concern beyond that someone was cooking and selling food from home.

*By September 2025, the total number of permits issued increased to 1,218.

*Although the phrase "permitted MEHKO" is sometimes used informally, this report uses "MEHKO" to refer only to permitted operations. Home-based food vendors without a MEHKO permit are referred to as unpermitted home-based food vendors.

*For clarity, this term refers only to unpermitted food enterprises operating from a private residence and using the home kitchen. It does not include street or sidewalk vending, which occurs off the home's property and is regulated separately.

Foodborne illness concerns were extremely rare among MEHKOs. From 2019 to 2024, only two foodborne illness complaints were identified among 898 permitted MEHKOs. Both were investigated and could not be definitively traced to the MEHKO, and each was an isolated single-instance report rather than an outbreak.

Most complaints about MEHKOs did not lead to enforcement action. Only nine of the 32 complaints (28.1%) resulted in any action by a local agency. None of the enforcement actions have led to the revocation of a permit.



“We couldn’t find a restaurant space that was affordable. Food trucks were too expensive. MEHKO was perfect.”

MEHKO Operators at a Glance

Diverse entrepreneurs

79% of MEHKO operators are people of color, compared with a national entrepreneur landscape that is majority white.³ Operators represent a range of cultural backgrounds, including Hispanic, Black, Asian, and Middle Eastern.

Women-led businesses

70% of MEHKO operators identify as women, compared with about 45%⁴ of new U.S. entrepreneurs, indicating strong participation by groups underrepresented in traditional food business ownership.

Immigrant representation

46% percent of MEHKOs are run by immigrants, many of whom bring cultural and regional food traditions into their businesses.

Economic motivation

Operators cited low start-up costs, supplemental income (including retirement income) as reasons for starting a MEHKO. More than half reported earning income when other work was unavailable.

Family & community

76% of operators said their MEHKO helps them meet family or caregiving responsibilities while earning income. Many also reported building community connections through their business.

Skills & growth

Operators bring varied experience, and many used the permit to formalize an existing business. 95% gained new skills, and 68% reported plans to expand.

FINANCIAL OUTCOMES

73% said their MEHKO helped them financially

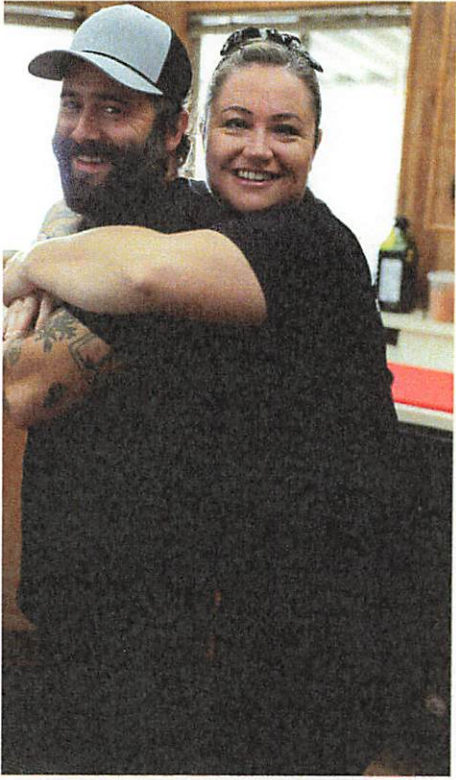
61% said their MEHKO is profitable

57% said their MEHKO provided income when they could not find other work.

53% said that their MEHKO helped them afford their rent or mortgage payments.

32% said their MEHKO helped them grow toward a larger food business

(such as a food truck, commercial catering operation, or brick-and-mortar restaurant)



How MEHKOs Operate

MEHKOs are home-based food businesses permitted by local environmental health agencies. Cooks must be certified in food safety and have their kitchens inspected, similar to restaurants. Meals must be prepared the same day and sold directly to the consumer, and production is limited to what can be safely prepared in a home kitchen.

Service Methods Reported by MEHKO Operators

California law allows three main service types for MEHKOs: takeout, delivery, and dine-in. Delivery must be done by the MEHKO itself; the use of third-party delivery services such as DoorDash or UberEats is prohibited under current state law.



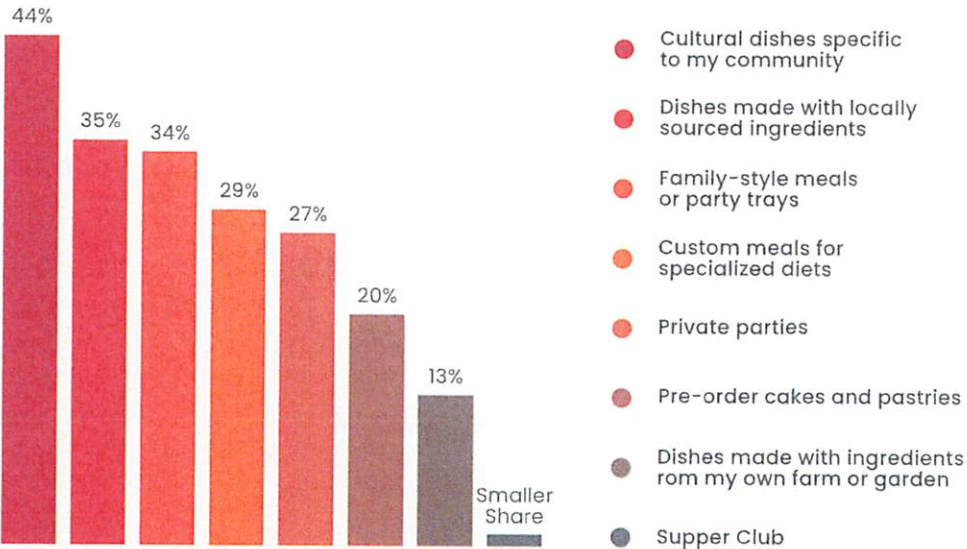
(Percentages rounded)

“

I've been able to make some money without having a huge financial initial lay out. I have also been able to cook on my own schedule, and to set my own "open" days.

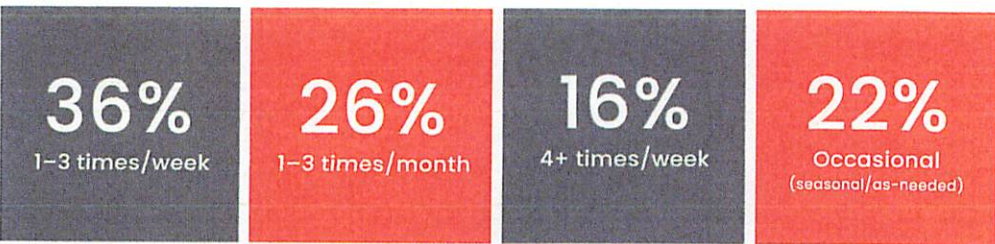
Types of Foods and Services Offered

Surveyed operators reported offering a wide range of foods and services.



Frequency of Operation

Operators reported varied schedules, most commonly cooking one to three times per week.



Where MEHKOs Operate

MEHKOs can be found in many different parts of California. Using National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) community types, permit data shows MEHKOs in large suburbs, big cities, midsize and small cities, towns, and rural areas.⁵ This means the program is being used in both busy urban areas and quieter, more rural communities.

Permit numbers reflect this variety. MEHKO permits were most commonly issued in suburban neighborhoods (44.7%) but were also common in urban communities (40.7%) and in rural areas or towns (14.5%). We maintain a map of active permits at www.cookconnect.com/map.

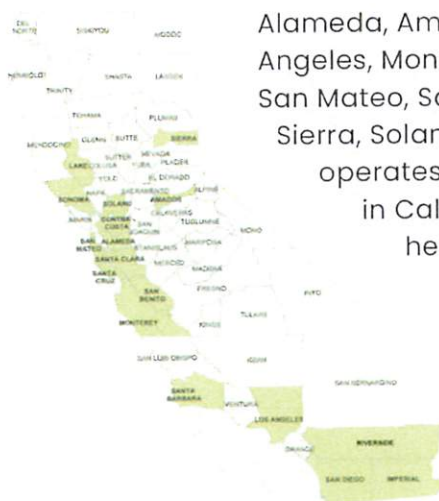
We live in a rural area and we're in need of a restaurant. Local zoning did not allow a typical restaurant so the MEHKO was perfect.

MEHKOs must operate out of the operator's primary residence. Survey data shows that 58% owned their home, 31% rented, and 5% lived with family.⁶

Because the program relies on local adoption, availability still varies across the state. By population, about 60 percent of Californians live in areas where MEHKOs are allowed.

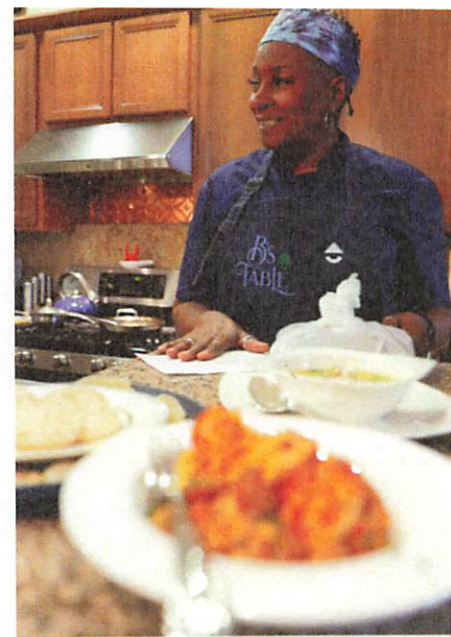
Jurisdictions With MEHKO Programs

(at the time of publication)



Alameda, Amador, Contra Costa, Imperial, Lake, Los Angeles, Monterey, Riverside, San Benito, San Diego, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sierra, Solano, Sonoma. The City of Berkeley also operates its own MEHKO program. Four cities in California have their own environmental health departments and may adopt MEHKOs separately from their counties.

Note: Los Angeles County, Santa Cruz County, and Sonoma County were not included in the permit analysis because data was not yet available. We did not receive data from Lake County except for the number of issued permits.



“ I need a job to live in this area, and it was an easy accessible way to start my own thing. And commercial kitchens, all of those things are really not viable. [MEHKO] gave me power and freedom.



Understanding MEHKO Operator Needs

MEHKO operators are clear about what they need most: support to grow their businesses. Many rely on personal networks to find customers, and most say marketing, branding, and customer outreach are their biggest hurdles. With 68% reporting no previous experience running a food business, many operators are navigating these challenges for the first time.

Research found that the program's inspection and training requirements were not major obstacles. 95% said the home inspection was easier than expected, and only 7% described the Food Safety Manager Certification as a significant challenge.

Across surveys and focus groups, operators consistently identified the supports that would make the greatest difference: grants, marketing assistance, technology tools for sales, mentorship, and opportunities to connect with other MEHKOs. Taken together, the findings indicate clear opportunities to strengthen support for MEHKO operators.

What Consumers Say About MEHKOs

Awareness is low

71% of Californians had no prior awareness of the MEHKO program.

Attitudes are positive

80% agreed that MEHKOs are a good way to try new foods, and 74% said they are good for communities.

Broad interest in homemade food

Consumer survey findings show that interest in MEHKOs is closely tied to perceptions of authenticity and a desire for home-cooked taste and quality.

Support for legalization is strong

90% said they would support their county implementing a system for legal, permitted MEHKOs.



MEHKOs are still new to many people, and for some potential customers, ordering from a home kitchen can feel unfamiliar or even intimidating, which makes attracting new customers challenging.



I started a MEHKO business to share the traditional food I grew up with and keep my culture alive in my new community. Cooking from home allows me to connect with people through food, support my family, and build a small business doing what I love.

Endnotes

1. SBDCNet National Information Clearinghouse (2023). "Food Truck Business". <https://www.sbdnet.org/small-business-research-reports/restaurant-business-full-service/>
2. SBDCNet National Information Clearinghouse (2024). "Full Service Restaurant Business." <https://www.sbdnet.org/small-business-research-reports/restaurant-business-full-service/>
3. Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (2022). "Who is the Entrepreneur? New Entrepreneurs in the United States, 1996–2021." https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Kauffman_Trends-in-Entrepreneurship-Who-Is-The-Entrepreneur-2021.pdf
4. Association for Enterprise Opportunity (2025). "Women Business Ownership Fact Sheet." <https://epop.norc.org/content/dam/epop/media/in-the-news/pdf/2025-women-business-ownership-fact-sheet.pdf>
5. Addresses were geocoded and classified using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale framework, which categorizes locations as City, Suburb, Town, or Rural based on population density and proximity to metropolitan areas. Most addresses were geocoded using the U.S. Census Bureau API, and OpenStreetMap and ArcGIS Services were used sequentially to geocode addresses that were not available from the Census Bureau. Percentages reflect percent of valid addresses in each category. Six MEHKO addresses for Lake County were not geocoded because we did not receive address data for those permits.
6. Some respondents did not provide a response to this question.

Acknowledgments

This report was developed through a collaboration between COOK Alliance, CAMEO Network, EMC Research, and Will von Geldern, University of Washington. The work was made possible by support from the California Workforce Development Board.

About the Organizations

COOK Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to legitimizing and uplifting home-based food businesses through training, resources, and policy work.

CAMEO Network strengthens micro-businesses through a 400+ member network of organizations that provide financing, training, and essential support.

EMC Research is a national full-service opinion research firm, serving an extensive and diverse range of public and private sector clients since 1989.

Will von Geldern, University of Washington is an academic researcher with expertise in policy analysis and public health. Will provided methodological guidance and collected and analyzed data for this report.

The California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) is the Governor's agent for the development, oversight, and continuous improvement of California's workforce development system.

Contact

hello@cookalliance.org
cookalliance.org

The full version of this report, including detailed findings and methodology, is available at

www.cookalliance.org/researchreport

