

## Where downtown Norfolk bar closed, a new space for food-business dreamers will open

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Bev Sell, shown here in 2016 at the now-closed Five Points Community Farm Market, will head up the Percolator community kitchen and culinary incubator at 435 Monticello Ave. in downtown Norfolk, planned for late summer 2018.



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Bev Sell, who coordinates the local Mobile Farm Market, talks with customers who stopped by to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables in front of Lester Hall at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk on Thursday, May 21, 2014.



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Beer taps at the future Percolator culinary incubator, at which owner Bobby Wright also plans to host beer and food events after the space opens this year. July 12, 2018.



Hinterland Trading - a plant importer and maker of terrariums, will open a new retail location at 435 Monticello Ave., at Percolator's new culinary incubator space. Hinterland sells air plants that don't require soil. Instead, they use organic matter found in the air.

When downtown Norfolk bar AJ Gator's closed suddenly on April 22, declining to renew the lease, downtown developer Bobby Wright was left without a tenant. But after touring the cavernous restaurant's open kitchen and walk in-coolers, the wine storage space and wealth of beer taps, he realized he had an opportunity.

At 4:17 a.m. on a Wednesday, he hopped onto Facebook. "Friends, is there a need for a commercial kitchen that can be rented on a daily basis?" he wrote. "Possibly could include a commercial bar/pop up space ... "

Among the 50-odd responses he received, the verdict was nearly unanimous: Heck yes.

Wright is the founder of Percolator, a year-old business incubator that has already opened two large co-working spaces on Granby Street and Monticello Avenue, home to everything from Realtors and city planners to masseuses.

But this new Percolator location, at 435 Monticello Ave., will be something different: a shared retail storefront, event space for breweries and chefs, and fully accredited, health-inspected commercial kitchen that can be rented out to budding bakers and hot-sauce makers.

Bev Sell, the former market manager at Norfolk's Five Points Community Farm Market, had planted the idea in Wright's head – and Wright tapped her to run the kitchen.

“Bobby and I had talked about a community kitchen years ago,” said Sell, who told The Pilot she’d tried unsuccessfully to get city funding for a string of community kitchens. “The concept is being done all across the country. It makes sense, just like a co-working space for small businesses.”

As she walked through the kitchen in paint-spattered jeans, Sell, a slight Portsmouth native with close-cropped silver hair, spun out idea after idea – like starting an in-house education program to certify each chef for food service, or partnering with Tidewater Community College.

She pointed out spaces where she could install induction burners and possibly an air fryer – healthier, she said, than the hot oil baskets at AJ Gator’s.

“I don’t think we’ll have need for three deep fryers,” she said.

The goal is to open the kitchen in August, and Sell said they’ve begun signing up chefs, including a baker, and caterers who plan to make ready-to-eat meals for home delivery. Three or four chefs at a time would be able to rent the space on an hourly or daily basis.

“The people are finding us at this point,” Sell said. “We’ve got a good mix.”

In the front room, meanwhile, at least one retailer has signed on.

[Hinterland Trading](#), an air plant importer working with farms in Guatemala, has long done most of its business online selling plants and terrariums, says co-owner Kelley Ryan.

His wife, Elizabeth, started the business after a debilitating car accident.

“She basically started Hinterland in her lap,” Ryan said, “building terrariums and selling them, at that time, on eBay.”

Amid a nationwide boom in air plant sales, they’ve expanded into a 6,000-square-foot warehouse in an industrial section of Norfolk. After the couple’s daughter badgered them into letting her open a small section of the warehouse as a retail shop for plants in 2016, Ryan said, they realized there was a huge need for a public space and retail storefront.

“Just to shut her up, we gave her 300 square feet in the warehouse,” Ryan laughs. “It did very well – so well we’d end up having parties where 150 people would show up.”

In their new shop at Percolator, opening by the end of summer, Ryan hopes to do more than sell plants and terrariums – potentially making use of Percolator’s food and liquor license by holding wine socials with snacks, to accompany classes on plant care and macrame. They also plan chicken-and-waffle classes with the owners of Lendy’s Cafe.

Jimmy Poplin, lead community manager at Percolator’s three co-working spaces, says they’re exploring a whole world of additional options in the space: renting the bar to brewers to release test batches, holding food classes and hosting pop-up dinners by local chefs. Two other retailers are also in talks.

“There are no limits,” Poplin said. “We’re not saying no to

anything at the moment, until we're told we need to say no legally."

To Sell, this food-focused culinary incubator is something that's long been needed in Hampton Roads.

"There are so many people that want to be entrepreneurs, but they don't have the opportunity that this allows them. This allows them to take the wheels off and try without spending a whole lot of money," Sell said. "They say small businesses are the backbone of the community. We're the chiropractor."

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