

**IN THE NEWS****GRAND RAPIDS**  
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by Abby Poirier

**Pitch competition to help jumpstart West Michigan food and beverage startups**

A group of state and West Michigan partners are teaming up to hold a pitch competition for food and beverage businesses looking for support to start or scale their operations.

The 231 Food and Beverage Pitch Challenge, which will be held at the Muskegon Farmers Market on May 16th, will give entrepreneurs the opportunity to pitch their ideas to local and regional judges. Finalists will receive support services ranging from marketing and branding to technical assistance and buyer connections valued at \$5,000.

“West Michigan’s economy is bolstered by hundreds of small growers and food and beverage businesses,” said Marty Gerencer, executive director of the Muskegon-based West Michigan Food Processing Association. “They are all under significant pressure from the effects of inflation on their cost structure, and the impact of inflation on consumer buying behaviors. Yet, there is increasing demand for locally sourced, sustainable grown and made food products by Michigan consumers and beyond.”

For the pitch competition, the MEDC teamed up with a group of partners including the City of Muskegon, Greater Muskegon Economic Development, Lake County Economic Development Alliance, Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development, Michigan Small Business Development Center, The Right Place Inc., and West Michigan Food Processing Association.

Gerencer said the program offers “a welcomed opportunity to provide ‘free’ technical services to selected businesses to work on solutions.”

Businesses interested in participating in the 231 Food and Beverage Pitch Challenge should complete an application before March 16, 2023.

Eligible businesses must be located in Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo or Oceana counties; have less than \$750,000 in annual revenue; employ 10 employees or fewer; and operate a food business under the Michigan Cottage Food Law or Michigan Food Law, if the business is already operating.

Finalists chosen by the MEDC and its partners will be invited to the pitch competition in Muskegon,

where awardees will have a chance to receive customized support service packages that may include consulting services and strategic planning, marketing and branding, production/processing space, technical assistance and buyer connections.

The final packages will be customized to meet the needs of each winning business, which will have the cost for the support services covered. MEDC did not indicate how many winners it plans to choose.

Julie Burrell, economic development director for Newaygo County Economic Development Partnership, said that the number of winners will be dependent on the number of participants and their needs.

“Small business support is crucial as we try to diversify the economy and try to improve all of our downtowns,” Burrell said. “For a food and beverage business, there’s so many additional things to navigate, from Cottage Food Law to selling at farmers markets and getting into food production. Having a competition like this and being able to bring all that support to one location is awesome to do.”

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