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Relay Foods adding prepared food to its menu

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BY MICKEY GORMAN Richmond Times-Dispatch

Relay Foods is getting into the prepared foods business.

The Charlottesville-based company, which specializes in grocery delivery, has signed a lease for restaurant space in Shockoe Bottom where its chefs will make meals and the company will deliver them to customers.

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The prepared foods service is the first for Relay Foods. It should begin next month.

Since it was created in 2008, Relay Foods' bread-and-butter has been partnering with dozens of vendors, including grocers, butcher shops, farmers and markets, and allowing customers to place orders online. The company then delivers the order to specific drop-offs or to homes.

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But Kevin Kurzendoerfer, Relay Foods' senior vice president of operations, said there has been an increasing demand for prepared foods.

"We will be using all of those same foods we already offer," Kurzendoerfer said. "We expect it to be wildly successful."

Relay Foods delivers groceries from 155 vendors to residents in Richmond, Charlottesville, Williamsburg and the Washington-Baltimore region.

The prepared foods kitchen at 1717 E. Franklin St. will serve as a hub for all of the company's customers. Dishes ordered by customers in Baltimore, for instance, will be prepared in the Richmond kitchen.

Prepared foods being offered from a grocery vendor is not a new idea, Kurzendoerfer said.

But opening its own kitchen will allow Relay Foods to offer more prepared food options to its customers that were otherwise prohibited by U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations, he said.

Relay Foods hired chef Ernie LaBrecque months ago to help the company pick the right-sized restaurant kitchen to accommodate its customer base. LaBrecque, who will be heading the kitchen operations, will be in charge of setting the menu and preparing dishes.

Kurzendoerfer said the company will not know what the new menu will look like until July, when the kitchen is slated to open. He said that the menu will rotate to offer fresh options and that it will accommodate any kind of dietary requirement.

To start, the kitchen will prepare foods only for delivery orders.

However, Kurzendoerfer said Relay Foods plans to be creative with the space.

"When the timing is right we may use it for customer events," Kurzendoerfer said.

Kurzendoerfer mentioned a cooking seminar as an example of a possible customer event.

In April, Relay Foods got an infusion of capital – \$8.25 million – to expand its services and make operational improvements.

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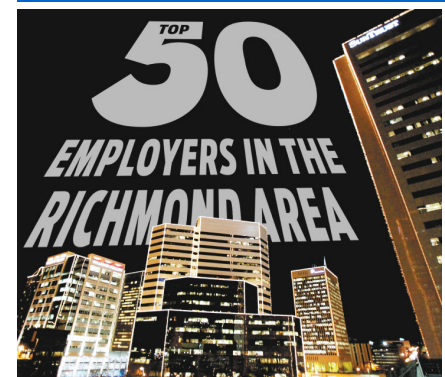
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