



Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)

is a vehicle for collaboration of the **Tourism Cohort**
of the **Jobs First Initiative**,
administered by the **Orange County Business Council**.

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Thank You for The Opportunity

By Zoot Velasco

This will be my last newsletter, produced in my capacity as Tourism Sector Lead for the OC Business Council and the CA Job First initiative. Jobs First (and my contract) was always scheduled to end at the end of September 2026.

It has been an honor to serve Orange County as we have:

- Improved workforce investment in Tourism with four tourism **pilot projects** reported on in this newsletter
- Completed the **Orange County Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Plan** with all its strategies and tactics
- Created a **steering committee** with 20 of the most prominent leaders in OC tourism
- Identified the 100+ leaders in OC Tourism, funders, employers, DMOs, and support groups with a **database**
- And created the **OCTAVE** Collaborative under my watch.

I am so proud of what we accomplished together and thrilled to transition the network to the Center of Entertainment & Hospitality Management at Cal State Fullerton.

Thank you all for your participation, grace, and partnership. A special thank you to Jesse Ben-Ron, Dr. Wallace Walrod, Maria Linares, Jim Lake, Jack Toan, my mentors, our pilots, and our steering committee! I look forward to seeing you all around Orange County!

"It is the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." —Charles Darwin





In Santa Ana, a pair of emerging community-based projects, backed by the California Jobs First Initiative through Orange County Business Council (OCBC) and funded by several funders, including the California Jobs First Initiative under the Orange County Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Strategy Activation Plan, are testing a different approach to economic development rooted in worker ownership, neighborhood identity, sustainability, and local entrepreneurship.

The projects, supported by **Cooperación Santa Ana**, include the already-operating **La Colmena** urban micro-farm/café project and the tentatively titled **Mercado Cooperación**, a planned worker-owned cooperative incubator and marketplace.

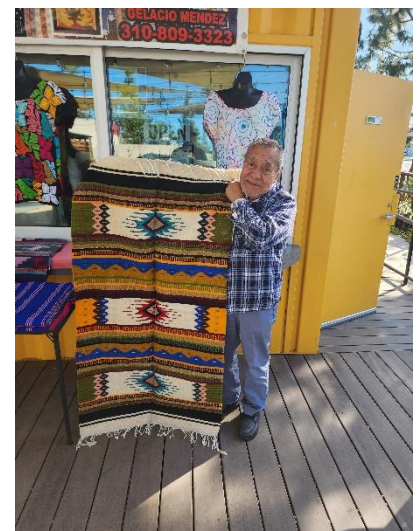
Together, the projects reflect a growing movement toward microtourism and community-centered economic activity, in which smaller-scale visitor experiences are rooted in local culture, food systems, sustainability, and neighborhood engagement rather than large destination attractions.

Cooperación Santa Ana was founded in 2019 to support worker-owned cooperatives and community wealth-building strategies in Orange County. The organization focuses on training, technical assistance, incubation, and the development of cooperative networks for entrepreneurs who have been historically excluded from traditional capital systems.

According to the organization, its mission is to build “a strong, locally owned, shared economy” centered on democratic ownership, workers' dignity, and environmental sustainability. The nonprofit supports cooperative businesses in industries including food and beverage, childcare, consulting, urban agriculture, and construction.

The projects are supported through the statewide California Jobs First initiative, a regional economic development program designed to support equitable job creation and long-term economic resilience. Orange County Business Council has served as the regional convener for the initiative in Orange County since 2023.

The first project, known as **La Colmena** (The hive in Spanish), and previously referred to as Walnut & Daisy (after its street location in Santa Ana), is already operational and serves as a hybrid urban micro-farm, cooperative café, artisan marketplace, and community gathering space. The Urban Micro-Farm received approximately \$3.8 million in

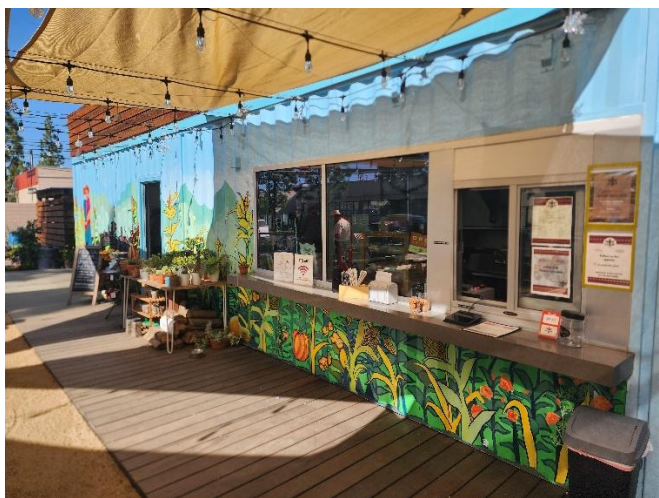


state funding through the California Economic Resilience Fund partnership involving Cooperación Santa Ana, CRECE Urban Farms, and THRIVE Santa Ana. In fact, the site is owned through THRIVE, which just completed the purchase this past April.

The project includes an urban farm, a cooperative café, an artisan retail space, outdoor gathering areas with a stage, offices, and a marketplace for local micro-enterprises and worker-owned cooperatives. La Colmena describes itself as a “community-owned and operated site” where residents gather through urban farming, local business activity, and community-led events.

The microtourism and ecotourism project demonstrates how neighborhood-scale agriculture and hospitality concepts can overlap with tourism and placemaking. Visitors increasingly seek authentic, locally rooted experiences tied to food systems, sustainability, arts, and culture. Rather than relying on major tourism infrastructure, projects like La Colmena create hyperlocal visitor experiences that circulate spending directly into neighborhoods while providing workforce development opportunities for residents.

The project also aligns with broader statewide climate and sustainability goals by promoting local food production, reducing transportation impacts, adaptive reuse, and community-centered economic activity. It celebrated its one-year anniversary on Friday, July 31st, and Cooperación Santa Ana and THRIVE hosted a report launch of [**Planting a New Economy: Stories and Lessons from La Colmena, a Cooperative Hub Held in Community Trust**](#). This report brings together the voices of the partner organizations, worker cooperatives, local community, and city officials who made La Colmena possible, as well as the lessons they seek to share with others.



The second pilot, the proposed **Mercado Cooperación**, has just completed the planning and feasibility stage and is destined to become one of Orange County’s more ambitious community economic development initiatives. It would create a worker-owned cooperative incubator with a commercial kitchen and marketplace.

The concept originally drew inspiration from Mercado La Paloma, a nationally recognized community marketplace and cultural hub in Central Los Angeles, close to transportation, museums, downtown business districts, LA trade schools, and USC, hosting some of LA’s most renowned

restaurants. However, now the design will evolve as it grows, starting with a shared commercial kitchen and eventually incorporating a marketplace for artisanal and other vendors. Other models are also being studied, including Store One in Anaheim, another Jobs First/OCBC pilot program, on which we report in this newsletter.

The Mercado Initiative aims to support at least 150 entrepreneurs through training, incubation, technical assistance, and cooperative business development. The facility is envisioned as a neighborhood-scale marketplace serving hundreds of community members daily and specifically targets historically disinvested communities. Upon opening, it will create quality jobs, improve food access, support arts and culture programming, and revitalize its neighborhoods through a community ownership model.

For Santa Ana, a similar model could blend tourism, entrepreneurship, arts, and workforce development into a single destination-oriented ecosystem. The Mercado project is currently in its concept and feasibility phase. According to project planning documents, the timeline includes:

Phase 1: Research and Consultation. This phase was completed in May and included market analysis, feasibility studies, community focus groups/surveys, consultant selection, and hiring.

Phase 2: Site Scoping and Identification began in May, identifying potential sites while dealing with zoning and accessibility evaluations and assessments. Phase 3: Business Plan will start in August with implementation plans, budgeting, timeline preparation, and partnership and responsibility structures.

Key project partners include Radiate Consulting OC, CIELO, Store One, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, and La Cocina. Beyond these stages, a final buildout timeline has not yet been publicly announced.

While neither project resembles a traditional tourism attraction, both highlight the emerging trend of community-based microtourism development. Increasingly, travelers seek authentic neighborhood experiences centered around local food, culture, sustainability, and social impact. Concepts such as urban farms, food halls, artisan marketplaces, and cooperative cafés can attract both residents and visitors while supporting small-scale entrepreneurship.

For workforce development, the cooperative structure also offers a different pathway into the visitor economy. Rather than relying solely on wage employment, worker-owned enterprises allow participants to build equity, governance experience, and long-term financial stability. This model may be especially relevant in Orange County, where the tourism and hospitality industries continue to face workforce shortages, affordability challenges, and growing concerns about economic displacement.



Projects like La Colmena and the proposed Mercado Cooperación suggest that tourism infrastructure can also serve as community infrastructure, creating spaces where residents are not only employees but also owners, cultural contributors, and economic stakeholders.

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Photo Credits: All photos taken by the author on a visit to La Colmena in January 2026

STORE ONE Centering Local Communities in Anaheim's Culinary Tourism Future

By Zoot Velasco



Anaheim's downtown revitalization over the past few decades serves as a national model for revitalizing a city core through public-private collaboration and adaptive reuse, preserving historic character while fostering economic and cultural activity. The Anaheim Packing District, transforming into a flagship food hall, and the Center Street Promenade, a pedestrian-oriented cluster of local eateries, boutiques, and weekly markets that link historic assets, are just two examples. Both draw local patrons and visitors, and both are in a successful partnership with developer Shaheen Sadeghi through his firm, LAB Holding. (We are proud to call Shaheen a valuable member of OCTAVE's steering committee.) Anaheim's original Carnegie Library Building was expanded by the City to serve as an anchor for the Muzeo Museum and Cultural Center. The Anaheim GardenWalk, while a later example of mixed-use development, also demonstrates how private investment can reimagine underutilized urban space into a lifestyle destination that supports arts and food experiences central to cultural tourism. These projects collectively show how Anaheim leverages public policy, historic preservation, local resources, and private capital to activate heritage sites and commercial corridors, enhancing downtown's appeal for community life and cultural tourism.

As destinations across the United States rethink tourism's role in community wellbeing, Anaheim is advancing a local approach to tourism that centers under-resourced residents as creators, owners, and cultural ambassadors rather than solely as workers or back-of-house labor. **Store One**, a culinary incubator and workforce training center in development by the City of Anaheim (hereafter referred to as "the City"), represents a deliberate shift toward inclusive, place-based tourism that builds wealth, preserves cultural food traditions, and elevates local voices through entrepreneurship.

Through conversations and focus groups, the City, in partnership with the community, has identified emerging culinary economic opportunities in the booming business landscape. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that the site of the former Northgate González Market is being transformed into a hub for culinary entrepreneurship and training. The site, located near downtown Anaheim in a historically distressed neighborhood, has long been associated with community gatherings and culturally significant foodways. The project recognizes these community voices and prioritizes low- to moderate-income residents from local communities as food business owners, skilled culinary professionals, and public-facing contributors to Anaheim's visitor economy.

Why "Store One" as a name? This site was the first store, the historic origin story, of what has become a regional Gonzales family chain of 45 Latino grocery markets (and counting) across Southern California. The store thrived on homemade carnitas from a backroom that brought customers from across North Orange County back every week and grew the business. It is a historic root of Latino



pride. But also, because for those who come for training and start businesses here, this will be their Store One as well.

Rather than importing outside concepts, Store One invests in the cultural knowledge already present in the community. Anaheim is one of the most culturally diverse cities in Southern California, founded as a German wine and arts colony, shaped by agriculture with a longstanding Latino presence, significant Asian American communities including Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino, and others, along with vibrant immigrant enclaves such as Little Arabia, representing Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern heritages that draw both residents and visitors. Immigrant entrepreneurship shapes Anaheim's social landscape while contributing to the city's reputation as a destination for authentic ethnic cuisines and cultural exchange. Together with diverse Asian American and other ethnic communities throughout the region, these populations contribute to a mosaic of cultures reflected in festivals, foodways, religious life, and everyday community interactions across Anaheim.

When opened, Store One will foster culinary entrepreneurship and workforce development programs designed to lower barriers to entry for aspiring food entrepreneurs who have traditionally been excluded from access to capital, commercial kitchen space, and formal business training. In doing so, the site positions local cooks, chefs, and food innovators as drivers of cultural and culinary tourism, offering visitors authentic, community-rooted experiences while generating economic mobility for Anaheim residents. The facility will also house a pop-up restaurant space, a central meeting hall, offices, cold and dry storage, a quiet room, and a back patio designed for events.

To date, the City of Anaheim has invested \$4.75 million in the acquisition of the property and has secured an additional \$5.5 million in federal, state, and local funding in support of Store One's construction. The City will continue to own and maintain the building, inviting local-area non-profits and educational partners to deliver the day-to-day programming. In preparation for this phase, over \$4 million in philanthropic funds have been raised through a fiscal sponsorship by the Anaheim Community Foundation to support capacity building and the purchase of furniture, fixtures, and equipment. Preparation for public construction bidding is underway, with a projected building opening in 2028.



Store One's core programming centers on two complementary pillars designed to drive economic development through culinary arts and tourism: Culinary Entrepreneurship and Culinary Workforce Development.

Culinary Entrepreneurship: The incubator will offer access to commercial kitchen space, product development support, batch production facilities, and business training, in partnership with other nonprofit and educational community partners that specialize in entrepreneurship and workforce training. These resources will help aspiring chefs and food innovators turn concepts into viable enterprises, enabling them to showcase diverse cuisines and culinary traditions to residents and visitors alike.

Culinary Workforce Development: With structured training pathways for chefs, line cooks, pastry chefs, and other hospitality roles, Store One aims to upskill residents for careers in Anaheim's large hospitality, events, and tourism sector. Through hands-on culinary instruction and workforce services, graduates are projected to secure higher-paying jobs, supporting household prosperity and strengthening Anaheim's food service labor market. Through these initiatives, Store One anticipates serving up to 50 entrepreneurs, creating 25 new businesses, and training 300 culinary professionals over its first five years, with wage increases anticipated for participants. By activating incubated food enterprises, the facility will offer venues for visitors and locals alike to purchase unique food products and enjoy dining experiences, strengthening the local food tourism ecosystem.

The Store One project aligns with **regional economic goals by fostering small business growth, workforce readiness, and tourism-related commerce**. The adaptive reuse of a storied site as a culinary destination adds to Anaheim's placemaking and tourism asset base, complementing nearby attractions such as Disneyland, Honda Center, Anaheim Convention Center, and Angels Stadium, which bring tens of millions of hungry visitors to the city annually.

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REVHUB's Tourism Business Navigation and Support Pilot: Building a More Inclusive Tourism Economy in Orange County

By Zoot Velasco

While destination marketing organizations, attractions, hotels, and major tourism operators garner the most attention in Orange County's visitor economy, many of the businesses that define the visitor experience are small, locally owned enterprises operating with limited resources. That is the impetus for RevHub's launch of the **Tourism Business Navigation and Support Pilot**, a new initiative to strengthen the county's tourism-serving small-business ecosystem.

Founded in 2019, the guiding vision of [RevHub](#) (formerly the OC Center for Innovation and Social Enterprise) is to "create the conditions where entrepreneurs can solve our world's most pressing societal and environmental problems." The backbone organization provides incubators, accelerators, mentorship, and investment-readiness programs designed to help mission-driven businesses grow while generating measurable community impact. It has become a leading organization in Orange County's social entrepreneurship and business support ecosystem.

RevHub has also played a key leadership role in establishing the **NorthSTAR Collaborative** (Systems To Access Resources), a countywide entrepreneurship support network designed to eliminate barriers for underserved entrepreneurs. The collaborative brings together universities, community organizations, chambers of commerce, and business development providers under a "no wrong door" approach that helps entrepreneurs find the resources best suited to their needs.



The *Tourism Business Navigation and Support Pilot* leverages these partnerships, networks, and systems by applying proven entrepreneurial support strategies to the tourism sector, where many small businesses may be unfamiliar with available assistance programs or disconnected from larger tourism networks.

Funded through the California Jobs First Regional Investment Initiative Catalyst Grants program, the pilot seeks to improve access to technical assistance, business resources, and economic opportunities for entrepreneurs serving OC's tourism sector. The project aligns with the [Orange County Regional Plan's](#) Strategy 4, which calls for *fostering innovation and sustainable development by cultivating an environment that promotes small business growth within the region's established tourism*

industry cluster. Orange County's tourism sector is one of the region's largest economic drivers, supporting jobs across hospitality, food service, cultural attractions, retail, outdoor recreation, and events. However, many small businesses face challenges accessing capital, navigating business support systems, developing workforce strategies, and effectively marketing to visitors.

RevHub's pilot was designed to address these barriers by creating a more coordinated and accessible support system for tourism-oriented entrepreneurs. The initiative focuses particularly on businesses operating in tourism-adjacent industries such as cultural events, food services, hospitality, outdoor experiences, and local retail. The pilot operates through two primary activities: (1) identifying partners and best practices for business assistance and (2) conducting targeted engagement sessions that combine workshops with individualized counseling. These efforts aim to build a stronger entrepreneurial infrastructure and help small businesses connect more effectively with tourism-related opportunities.

A central component of the pilot involves partnerships with trusted community organizations, ethnic chambers of commerce, universities, and other local stakeholders to develop an equitable engagement framework. RevHub is creating a rising tide for equitable small-business development with other community organizations, such as CIELO, Charitable Ventures, Store One, and Cooperación Santa Ana (all Jobs First partners).

This pilot's approach recognizes that many entrepreneurs, particularly those from historically underserved communities, often face challenges navigating multiple agencies, programs, and funding sources. By simplifying access to resources and establishing trusted referral pathways, the pilot aims to improve participation and outcomes.

For Orange County's tourism industry, these partnerships may also help identify businesses that have traditionally operated outside mainstream tourism channels but offer experiences increasingly sought by visitors, including cultural tourism, microtourism, ecotourism, local food experiences, neighborhood events, and community-based outdoor recreation.

The project's second phase focuses on direct service delivery. RevHub plans to support up to 50 small business owners through culturally responsive workshops and individualized counseling sessions. One distinguishing feature of the pilot is its emphasis on reaching entrepreneurs in disinvested communities, including Santa Ana, Garden Grove, Anaheim, and Westminster. The program also intentionally serves individuals facing employment barriers, including justice-involved individuals, foster youth, single parents, and people with disabilities. Topics include accessing capital and financing opportunities; workforce development strategies; marketing and customer acquisition; business planning; and alignment with tourism market opportunities. These services are designed to provide practical assistance while helping entrepreneurs better position themselves within Orange County's visitor economy. While this pilot is relatively modest in scale, its long-term significance may lie in strengthening the foundational infrastructure that supports tourism entrepreneurship.



In partnership with CIELO (Community for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and Opportunities), RevHub is supporting entrepreneurs from Santa Ana's immigrant business community as they launch and grow visitor-serving enterprises. Beyond

workshops and individualized counseling, RevHub has leveraged additional resources to provide micro-grants directly to CIELO clients. These grants are flexible capital that helps their small-business owner-clients invest in equipment, marketing, and other needs to move their businesses forward.

For Orange County's tourism professionals, the project represents an opportunity to cultivate a stronger pipeline of visitor-serving businesses that can contribute to destination competitiveness. As travelers increasingly seek authentic local experiences, investments in small business development may help ensure that Orange County's tourism offerings remain diverse, innovative, and reflective of the communities that make the destination unique.

RevHub's pilot demonstrates how economic development and tourism development work together. Rather than focusing solely on visitor attraction, the initiative seeks to strengthen the local businesses that ultimately deliver many of the experiences that visitors consume. If successful, the model will provide a framework for future efforts to support tourism entrepreneurship throughout the region.

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CONTACT: Info@OCBC.com

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