

Building a Healthy Local Foods Economy with Coopetition

BY ELLEN MICHEL

Every so often a question will be put forth among co-ops that, in its simplified version, asks something like this: “Does your co-op support farmers markets and community-supported agriculture (CSAs)? Aren’t they competing directly with your store?”

I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about possible answers to that question, and this article is a result of an ongoing internal conversation about local foods “coopetition.” It is also a response to the good news in the previous issue of *Cooperative Grocer*, with its reports from various co-ops across the country about how they are working in creative ways to develop strong relationships with farmers and to build the support systems necessary to help those farmers survive.

I’m happy to say that at Bloomingfoods, in Bloomington, Ind., our answer to the first question about supporting farmers markets and CSAs has always been an emphatic “Yes!” We invite farmers to sell CSA shares through our stores, which gives them access to credit card processing. Growers set up informal farm stands in the parking lot of our East store, and we also sell coffee and breakfast items at the large community farmers market and at the winter market on Saturday mornings. And during the summer, we also enjoy proximity to a Tuesday late-afternoon market next to our Near West Side store.

Local growers guild

Our support goes even deeper than that. In 2005, after receiving an equity payment on the sale of the Blooming Prairie Warehouse, our board decided to give more bite to the “We promote locally grown, nutritious, and non-chemically produced foods” portion of our mission statement. We used some of that windfall to help a group of local farmers create what is now known as the Local Growers Guild (LGG). Bloomingfoods became the LGG’s first retailer member, sponsoring a Guild gathering to connect local growers with potential customers such as schools and restaurants.

For the past several years, as LGG established itself as an agricultural co-op (with support from the Indiana Cooperative Development Center), I have served on the LGG Board of Directors. That experience has led me to consider more deeply collaborative ways in which the work we do in our food co-ops can strengthen the cause of local foods.



George Huntington, general manager of Bloomingfoods, tours Fields of Agape, Indiana supplier of organic popcorn, flax, and other grains.

PHOTO BY STEVE STROUP

Food studies

2010 was a landmark year in Bloomington around the topic of food. With a College of Arts and Sciences first-term “themester” on sustainability at Indiana University, our co-op had increased opportunity to engage with professors and students on campus whose work complements our mission. We were preparing to host the CCMA conference in June, just on the heels of a Food in Bloom conference, a joint meeting of the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS); the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society (AFHVS); and the annual meeting of the Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (SAFN).

As the first academic institution to establish a Ph.D. in the anthropology of food, Indiana University introduced food scholars in part by developing relationships with local food communities and farmers. In the months leading up to Food in Bloom, a number of food activists came to town, their visits supported by Bloomingfoods.

Michael Pollan was the keynote speaker during Arts Week, advocating resistance to the “Nutritional Industrial Complex.” Gary Paul Nabhan spoke

about RAFT, the Slow Foods project dedicated to Renewing America’s Food Traditions. Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm delivered a rousing message about the redemptive power of small farms and humane animal husbandry.

Emphasizing education, engagement, and urban restoration, Will Allen gave the keynote presentation at Food in Bloom, describing the impact of Growing Power in Milwaukee, Wis., with its innovations around the cultivation, production, and delivery of sustainable foods.

Later in the summer, Aaron Newton, coauthor with Sharon Astyk of *A Nation of Farmers*, met with local growers to describe the city-supported urban farming project he heads in North Carolina. With each of these diverse presentations, we had the opportunity to educate our staff and owner base and to build a shared vocabulary around local foods. One hundred (or more) seeds of friendship, common interest, and mutual dedication were sown.

A visit from Wendell Berry

In November 2010, writer, critic, and farmer Wendell Berry spent a week in Bloomington. ►



PHOTO BY ANN SCHERTZ

Volunteers strip locust trees to assemble a fence at the new Bloomington Community Orchard, a project supported by Bloomingfoods.

◀ Besides delivering two public readings and participating in a conversation with Wes Jackson of The Land Institute, he met with students to ask such questions as: “How will we feed the world in 2025? In 2050? Who will feed the world? Who will grow your food?” A performance of Malcolm Dalglish’s “Hymnody of Earth 2010,” an evolving song cycle based largely on Wendell Berry’s words and poetry, explored the value of environmental stewardship through the arts.

Berry was the guest of honor at a conversational brunch prepared by chefs from among the retailer members of the Local Growers Guild. In attendance were local journalists, food activists, educators, members of city government, and farmers. Jennifer Meta Robinson, author of *The Farmers’ Market Book* (Indiana University Press) read a proposal for the Indiana New Farm School, a project that would operate as a two- to three-year program for beginning farmers designed to eventually help them obtain farmland, perhaps through arrangements with the Sycamore Land Trust.

Recognizing the concept of the Farm School as “necessary and pioneering,” Berry’s advice to the group had more to do with social relationships than the specifics of farming. After pointing out his appreciation for the phrase “this year can be repeated” (appearing at the end of the description of the first year of study), he underscored the repetitive nature of working with the seasons and the soil and of learning to deal with the many challenges of social interactions. He delivered a passionate appeal to courtesy, kindness, and consideration.

Berry encouraged the group to build cooperation rather than competition among farmers, while respecting diverse and even conflicting points of

view. He recommended studying the example of the E.F. Schumacher Society in Great Barrington, Mass., called the Self-Help Association for a Regional Economy, in which a bank account is established for use as collateral “for local businesses with a positive community impact.” “Be fiscally scared,” he warned, referring to his own efforts working with banks and local governments in Kentucky. He made the argument that small-scale, sustainable agriculture must be considered an important component of regional economic development.

Overcoming challenges, building momentum

In the aftermath of this year of food activism, the prognosis for the local food economy in south central Indiana has faced challenges similar to other places across the country. To some degree the heightened awareness of food and farm issues has created a situation in which (in Wendell Berry’s words) “the demand going up has met the culture coming down.” The Local Growers Guild has identified a number of obstacles and opportunities:

Organizations such as the LGG operate on a shoestring, in which their internal capacity is continuously stretched. The round of eliciting annual membership renewals can overshadow the most important work of the organization, defined in its mission as maintaining the goals of providing quality food to communities through direct markets and retailers; preserving the viability of family farms; improving the quality of life for growers; making food issues visible; and promoting practices that preserve and protect the Earth.

The broad ambition of the LGG (or, for that matter, of Bloomingfoods and other collaborative

partners) has the potential to succeed only in limited ways, especially if measured strictly by a single bottom line. At the same time, our capacity for social transformation is huge, in large part due to our persistence.

Ownership is an issue that can be re-examined through the cooperative model.

The less that member-owners of the Local Growers Guild consider themselves members who merely pay dues to a club-like organization, the more they begin to function as active owners of a group in which they are visible champions of the cause of local foods.

Social ecology is a component of what we do.

In a world where certain species of plants and animals are endangered, so too are some forms of human communication and culture at risk. The focus on preserving the family farm takes place in a context where family groups are evolving, where farming may take place on small plots in or around the edges of cities, and where very diverse groups of people are trying to find common ground.

As Art Sherwood, Indiana farmer, business professor, and co-op consultant puts it, “**Don’t let Problem B overshadow your work on Problem A.**” Problem B is the one we focus on when distracted by lifestyle, religious, or political distinctions, or by petty human anxieties and prejudices that obscure our ability to concentrate on mutual goals.

Customers may assume that the availability and supply of local and organic food is much more abundant than it actually is.

We need more farmers with more access to the support they need to consider a transition to organic farming, with specific advice about certification, its

PHOTO BY ELLEN MICHEL



Plants at the Bloomingfoods East Garden Center all come from within 100 miles of the co-op, including natives, vegetable starts, herbs, and perennials from Stranger's Hill Organics in Bloomington.

timeline, and its costs. Making this information available is more helpful than getting caught in a quagmire of argument about the value of organics.

The hard work we have done in many food co-ops concerning governance, working to better manage the relationship between the board and its one employee may be helpful in other contexts, as a model for partnering organizations who may be hampered by an ineffective board process.

Financial support comes to those who collaborate. Despite the recession, there is a sleeping economic giant in our co-ops and our communities that can be awakened by working together with other groups to tell a compelling story about the need for increased food security. Aim to build enduring relationships, eliciting the strengths and skills of many stakeholders.

To that end, Bloomington is now home to a **Food Policy Council**, an open group that plays an advisory role in the community, working toward multiple food-related goals such as lobbying local government to adopt a Food Charter, to take steps towards a better community food supply.

All of these efforts point to the perennial importance of food and social relationships in our daily lives. Our attempts to improve the quality of food, making it available to more people across many income levels, is work that demands that we also improve our coping and group-process skills, cultivating the human empathy and cognitive dexterity required to move through the maze of current and future challenges. Our principles, values, and hard-earned history make food co-ops natural leaders in the effort to ensure greater food security for our world. ■

Links:

Gary Nabhan and Joel Salatin at IUB:
www.indiana.edu/~iubhonor/hdextra/photos/spring10/nabhansalatin.php

Aaron Newton: www.groovygreen.com/groove/?p=3447

Post Carbon Cities: postcarboncities.net/node/3431

RAFT: www.albc-usa.org/RAFT/images/Resources/Bison.pdf

Anthropology of Food: newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/6266.html

Michael Pollan at IUB: newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/13246.html

Meet one of our favorite cooperative developments.



Drupal

drupal.org

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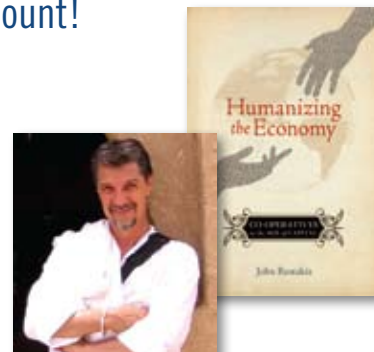
JUST ANNOUNCED!

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