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50 Years of Food Co-ops in Minnesota

BUILDING FOOD SECURITY AND COMMUNITY

BY NANI FERREIRA-MATHEWS

Food co-ops have a long history of protecting local communities against food insecurity, but what exactly is a food co-op, and how did Minnesota become the state with the most food co-ops in the USA? Today, there are 18 grocery co-ops in Minnesota, some with multiple locations, serving over 150,000 member-owners across the state. Food co-ops, unlike conventional grocers, are community-owned and serve the communities where they are located. On average 24% of items sold at a co-op are locally grown and produced, compared to 2% at a conventional grocery store.

Each co-op defines local in their own way. The Wedge, one of Minneapolis' largest co-ops serving 22,750 member-owners, defines local as any state that touches Minnesota, (Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota).

"The deli, for example, is 88% local," says Swapna Desi, Marketing Director of the Wedge. "If you look at both stores, Lyndale and Linden Hills, we're anywhere from 36-40% local," she says. The flowers are 100% locally grown and sourced.

IN THE BEGINNING

The first food co-ops in Minnesota began in the 1970s as buyer clubs organized within communities as a way to secure lower prices by purchasing in bulk. These clubs were often organized by members of the anti-war and counterculture movements of the '60s and '70s and focused on locally sourced produce, bulk grains and dairy. Inspired by a trip to a bulk co-op in San Francisco, community members founded the People's Pantry in Minneapolis in 1970. By 1971, the national co-op movement was cemented in Minnesota when the pantry officially registered as the North Country Co-Op. Between 1970-1975, 20 co-ops had emerged in Minnesota and nearly 40 had been established in neighboring states.

Over the past 50 years, there has been consolidation and expansion among the food co-ops of Minnesota and the nation, but the community-centric values and mission have remained the same. In 1999, the National Co+op Grocers (NCG) was founded in Saint Paul and became a "virtual chain" for food co-ops to compete against conventional grocers who were coming after the natural market. NCG is owned and democratically controlled by 168 member co-ops who operate 234 storefronts in 40 states with combined annual sales of nearly \$2.8 billion.

According to National Co+op Grocers, the goal in a food co-op is largely centered on sourcing local and organic foods in bulk, buying cooperatively and lowering the cost of healthy foods to community members. Food co-ops are voluntarily owned by the people who use it (member-owners) and operate for the benefit of its members.

The establishment of NCG resulted in huge membership advantages by unifying messaging, aggregating volume purchases and creating a place to share resources. It also gave members the ability to negotiate better pricing with the big distributors, like UNFI, the nation's largest natural food distributor and an important supplier for co-ops.

"Food co-ops get 70% or more of their food and the products on their shelves, including dish soap and non edible things, from UNFI," Joleen Baker, Director of Co-op Partner Warehouse (CPW), says. "Co-ops excel in fresh...deli meat, cheese and produce—or the perimeter of the store, if you think about it," she explains, "Most co-ops have almost exclusively local meat and cheese."

STRONG LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS BUILD RESILIENCY

Last summer, UNFI faced a cyberattack that forced a nationwide shutdown of all its systems and halted food orders and deliveries across the country for three weeks. While grocery stores scrambled to find alternate suppliers, food co-ops in the nation, and especially in Minnesota, turned to their local relationships to fill their shelves. The network of locally sourced food has strengthened as the movement has grown.

"We are lucky enough to have an incredibly dedicated, but also veteran crew here at Just Food Co-op," says Grocery Manager Paul Brown of the Northfield co-op founded in 2004. "Ultimately, it was a combination of national, regional and local distributors and vendors that were able to be pulled together to ease the burden," he says of the UNFI shutdown.

Baker says demand for CPW's Saint Paul-based produce distribution services increased by over 15% in that three-week period. CPW, a subsidiary of the Wedge, was founded in 1999, to bring locally grown produce to food co-ops in the region. Today, they serve over 400 customers across seven states, including food co-ops, independent grocers and restaurants.

Food co-ops source from an average of 175 local farms and producers, compared to 41 for conventional grocers, according to National Co+Op Grocers.

COMMUNITY IMPACT BEYOND THE REGISTER

Beyond sourcing from local suppliers, Desi explains the many efforts that exist at The Wedge to assist emerging producers and local makers in gaining access to their shoppers and in scaling up. "A lot of small growers don't have anywhere to go. They don't know how to do these things, so we want to provide education and outreach," she says. The Wedge works with 4 Access Partners to provide educational services to local food entrepreneurs.



HISTORY OF MN FOOD CO-OPS

1970

In 1970, Minneapolis residents began the People's Pantry in the West Bank neighborhood, now Cedar Riverside, as a place for community members to purchase "natural foods." The People's Pantry became North Country Co-op in 1971 and inspired many other food co-ops to follow suit.

1972

In 1972, Seward Community Co-op formed and is the oldest remaining original Twin Cities food co-op. Seward added a second location in 2015 to accommodate their growing membership which is currently over 25,000.

In 1972, the Minnetonka Buying Club formed in the suburbs of the Twin Cities when three women began offering bulk grain and cheese for porch pickups. This buyer club would continue to expand from the porch to the basement, before occupying a building in 1975—today you would know it by the name Lakewinds Co-op. This 3-store co-op serves 30,000 members, the most of any co-op in the state.

The list of community-driven initiatives is seemingly endless. "We have a program called Change Matters, which is rounding up at the register, and all of that money goes to local organizations directly in the neighborhoods," Desi shares. She mentions food drives, blood drives and the consortium of Minneapolis-based co-ops that united to donate to food shelves during the ICE occupation in January 2026.

Food waste is an ongoing community issue and massive efforts are required to address it. "We donate thousands and thousands of pounds annually to five different food shelves and food banks in the Twin Cities," Baker says of CPW. The Wedge does the same. "If we have waste, we donate it so it doesn't go into the garbage," Desi says.

FOOD IS OUR CULTURE AND OUR LEGACY

Back in 1976, farmer and environmental activist Wendell Barry pleaded with the American farm industry in his book, *The Unsettling of America*, when he said "Food is a cultural product; it cannot be produced by technology alone. Those agriculturists who think of the problems of food production solely in terms of technological innovation are oversimplifying both the practicalities of production and the network of meanings and values necessary to define, nurture, and preserve the practical motivations."

For 50 years, farming and the way we purchase and consume food in America has been operating on two parallel tracks. The mainstream approach of conventionally grown food for scale and growth, and the counterculture movement of locally sourced, organically grown, regenerative pushback that elevates the community over profits. Today, Barry's words still highlight a nation that is wrestling with these parallel tracks, one committed to growing and sourcing local food and serving the local community and one focused on large-scale food production for global distribution that relies on consolidation, growth and technological innovation.

Lucky for Minnesotans, food co-ops remain an economic and ideological alternative to the conventional farm and grocery store, and they are abundant. Becoming a member of your local food co-op will set you back less than \$100 for a lifetime membership and comes with a litany of advantages, both spiritually and economically. 

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1974

In 1974, The Wedge, affectionately named after the shape of Minneapolis' Lowry Hill East neighborhood, opened in a garden-level apartment on Franklin Avenue as a place for neighbors to purchase locally grown produce and organic foods.

1976

In 1976, Linden Hills Co-op formed and opened exclusively utilizing volunteer labor, a common practice to sustain the emerging business model. Linden Hills Co-op merged with The Wedge in 2017.

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