



TRUE FOOD ORGANICS

By Janet Wallace

In the heart of Fredericton, New Brunswick, a small food store offers organic food, a sense of community and support for local organic farmers.

Owned by Debbie Russell and David Cozac, True Food Organics is different from most other health food stores. For one thing, there is a wide selection of vegetables, meat and dairy, and almost everything in the store is organic. Another major distinction is that there are no supplements for sale—as Debbie says, “the vitamins are in the food, not in capsules.”

“We have everything a supermarket has,” she says proudly, “except for the processed food.” The store is compact, only six hundred square feet of retail space, but contains organic produce, dried goods, toiletries, frozen meals, meat and more.

David and Debbie are committed to environmentally responsible living, and they eat mostly local food (largely from their own farm). Their values and views led them to initially stock the shelves of True Food with only local organic food. However, after six months or so, Debbie “realized that not everyone eats a local diet, and we can’t be high and mighty and demand that they do.” So they brought in imported food. They thought they could wean customers off the imported food but that hasn’t been possible.

Now True Food sells everything from organic avocados to organic underwear. But wherever

possible, they buy from local farmers. If the food is imported, the label indicates the province or country of origin but, if it is local, it also includes the farmer’s name.

“We need a constant supply of food,” Debbie says, “so we can show local farmers how much demand there is. Now more and more farmers grow organic vegetables for us and we’re extending the season that local organic food is available.”

For example, until recently, there was no local supply of organic eggs so the store brought in eggs from Quebec. Some customers wouldn’t buy the eggs because they were not local. Debbie encouraged customers to buy them to create demand. Eventually, a local organic farmer asked

Debbie how many dozen organic eggs they sold a week. When she told him, he took the plunge and his eggs are now certified organic. Now local certified organic eggs are available in different stores in the province.

“Some people don’t know how much good they are creating by buying organically,” Debbie says. “They’re helping a whole industry get on its feet.”

“When you buy an organic chocolate bar at our store, you’re supporting local organic farmers,” says



At Big Sky Farm, a range of heirloom vegetables and herbs are grown but the focus is on garlic and beans.



“The people are the absolute best part of this business,” says Debbie Russell.

Debbie. In her view, buying anything at the store, imported or not, helps local growers. These sales help the store become more viable and, as long as the store survives, she will continue to buy from and support local organic growers.

From here to there and back again

Although David grew up on a farm in Northern Ontario, he had no intention to farm when the couple met. At the time, Debbie was getting her business degree and he was working towards an accounting degree. David worked as a stockbroker in Ottawa before they decided to move back to Debbie’s hometown of Fredericton. In 1981, they bought their first health food store, called Aura Foods.

Debbie and David wanted to sell organic produce in the store but soon realized that the supply was limited. This led David, along with Stu Fleischhaker (who later founded Speerville Organic Flour

Mill), to create a sustainable agricultural group, which evolved into the New Brunswick chapter of the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA).

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In the late ‘80s, the couple sold Aura Foods because, as David says, he “felt pulled back to the land and Debbie wanted out of the store.” Debbie was tired and felt uncomfortable selling so many products that they didn’t use themselves, such as vitamins and non-organic raisins. Also, she no longer enjoyed working for the store after it had grown beyond the point where it was a relaxing place where she could chat with customers.

After selling the store, the couple went to Nicaragua for a year with Oxfam. They worked with a fishermen’s union on a tiny island that had been nearly destroyed by a hurricane. David and Debbie remain active volunteers in both the organic and social justice communities.

After returning to New Brunswick, the couple found a beautiful piece of land on top of Keswick Ridge, a half-hour drive northwest of Fredericton. Big Sky Farm has four acres under cultivation: two in vegetables, the rest in green manures. A range of heirloom vegetables and herbs are grown but the focus is on garlic and beans. At first, the couple had a 15-share winter CSA; now they sell at Fredericton’s farmers’ market and at True Food Organics.

An idea revisited

Debbie thought that 1999 was a great time to open a new food store because of the interest in health. However, just a few months after opening, a large supermarket a few blocks away opened its organic section. Despite the fact that some products are sold at the nearby supermarket for less than what it costs True Food Organics to buy them—the result of concessions and lower wholesale prices some producers and processors give to the large stores—True Food Organics has survived.

“I don’t see the future of the small farm in the big stores,” says Debbie. “The supermarkets want too much supply instead of treating the food as a unique product.

“These stores don’t deserve to sell local food because they don’t treat farmers well. I’d like to see everybody wake up and search out local organic food. I think the real

David and Debbie live off-grid in a beautiful timber-frame house. Power comes from solar panels but, perhaps more importantly, the couple live a conserver lifestyle. They don't have a fridge or freezer but can keep food cool in a 'California cupboard' (an insulated space above a cool space) and in their root cellar. They have a vegan diet and grow much of their own food. They preserve food by canning, drying and using the root cellar.

The house is heated by a masonry stove. A cookstove built into the brick mass of the masonry stove is used year-round for cooking and hot water. Each year, only two cords of wood are needed to heat their house and water, and cook their food.



solution is to have a store like ours in every city.”

Debbie recalls being at an organic conference a few years ago and hearing a representative from a main supermarket chain talk about how local organic farmers could form cooperatives to sell to them. “He said that the stores don't deal with individual farmers at the back door. He made it sound like prostitution,” Debbie says.

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The chains want enough product to supply all of their stores in the Maritimes. The food has to be shipped to the main warehouses in Moncton and then shipped back to the stores throughout the three provinces.

Debbie gives the example of a farmer who sold peeled pieces of organic squash. “It was a beautiful product,” she says, “seniors and busy people loved it.” He sold it to both True Food Organics and the local supermarket. But then the supermarket chain wanted it in all their stores across the Maritimes. The farmer invested,

expanded and sold to the chain. However, because of the shipping time involved, the product was no longer fresh when it arrived at the stores and didn't sell. In the end, the farmer had to sell his farm and the cut squash is no longer available.

True Food has no plans to expand. In fact, it has cut back its hours. Now the store is only open Thursday, Friday and Saturday. On Wednesday, Debbie works in the store's kitchen and prepares hummus and vegetarian paté, among other treats. There is an employee at the store but Debbie is still at the cash most of the time. “I want to be out there,” she says, “because the people are the absolute best part of this business.”

A feeling of community radiates from the store where Debbie welcomes customers by name. Posters about yoga classes and community events line the wall near the door. There are hand-printed posters about why eat organic along with pictures of Debbie and David on their farm. The Gerrit Loo Memorial Achievement Award is on display; Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network (ACORN) awarded it to David and Debbie for their contribution to organics.

David and Debbie's desire to live lightly on the earth and support their local community permeates their lives. It seems that the garden, the store and their lives thrive on this strong ethical commitment—combined with much hard work, a sense of adventure and a willingness to adapt.

Janet Wallace is the editor of The Canadian Organic Grower.

Photo credits: Janet Wallace