

# Marquette Co-op: Building Local Food

BY MATT GOUGEON

In a small, rural community in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) of Michigan, a vibrant cooperative grocery store is proving to be a growing local economic player.

Marquette Food Co-op (MFC) boasts nearly 3,000 owners in a community of some 20,000 permanent residents (26,000 when Northern Michigan University is in session) located on the south shore of Lake Superior.

The U.P. comprises one-third of Michigan's land mass, but contains only 3 percent of the state's population. This statistic highlights what is essential to the story of Marquette Food Co-op: Our service area is enormous and sparsely populated, and the needs of our owners are diverse.

The co-op, which began in 1971, has grown in fits and starts, from a buying club to a storefront in the 1980s, reaching \$1 million in sales in 2005. MFC has grown by nearly 30 percent in the past two years, and sales are expected to reach \$4.4 million in 2011.

Growth in membership has nearly mirrored growth in revenue, and expansion planning is underway for a new or refurbished facility in downtown Marquette. Our connection to the local food economy has grown with our store, and as a result of education and community development initiatives to create a food-wise local population, demand has grown as well.

## Local food leadership

Much of the success of Marquette Food Co-op may be attributed to the distinct advantage that it has over its conventional competitors—namely, the opportunity of community integration through local food. With the bottom-up structure of a cooperative, it's the community of owners who decide what direction the co-op will take, based on what that community needs. That, in combination with a co-op community comprising 15 percent of the local population, ensures that the co-op becomes integral to the greater community. Our owners have been very



PHOTOS COURTESY OF U.P. AGRICULTURE ASSESSMENT

The co-op worked with two partner organizations to create hoophouses that extend the growing season.



clear that they want local food. We make local happen.

The formation of an outreach department in 2005 significantly opened MFC to the community at a time when the co-op was seen as an insular organization. Beginning with a “Think Local First” campaign, locally grown food and locally sourced products began to gain space on store shelves. Prior to this initiative, only a few local producers sold some produce, maple syrup, honey, and eggs. “We started with basic things like bulletin boards, literature, and both educational and cooking classes to get our owners interested and informed about the food on the shelves of their store,” said Natasha Lantz,

MFC outreach and education director.

Once the members began to understand the health, environmental, and economic benefits of local foods, demand increased. The need to find local suppliers culminated in a guide to producers called the Upper Peninsula Farm Directory, an annual periodical published by the MFC that is devoted to sustainable farms in the U.P. The directory has grown to include more than 80 farms and provides contact information, directions, and a narrative about each farm's product. It also is a repository of information on 27 farmers markets and CSAs in the U.P. Thousands of the directories have been distributed throughout Michigan.

## Institutional allies

MFC has increasingly become known throughout the U.P. as the “go-to” source for information about all things food. The co-op has developed significant partnerships with other organizations involved in health and nutrition education, as well as research on growing food in cold climates.

As part of the effort to better understand the needs of local farmers, MFC teamed up with



Marquette Food Co-op serves an area that's one-third of Michigan's land mass but only 3 percent of its population. When efforts began in 2005 to build the local food system, there was only one local farmer selling to the co-op.

Michigan State University Extension and Northern Michigan University to launch the Upper Peninsula Agriculture Assessment, a comprehensive survey of U.P. farms that sell directly to consumers. This collaborative seeks information from both conventional and organic producers of everything from maple syrup to flowers to vegetables to poultry. The survey prompted a response from over 100 farms across 11 counties. Members of the Ag Assessment team visited 20 of these farms, took tours of each operation, snapped photos, and conducted interviews that asked for the stories behind the farms and the farmers' views on the future of food in the U.P.

Marquette Food Co-op supports five area farmers markets with marketing assistance and volunteer coordination. MFC Education Coordinator Sarah Monte serves as market master for the Marquette Farmers and Artists Market, the U.P.'s largest farmers market. She is paid in part through Downtown Development Authority funding, but the co-op allows Monte to devote about 40 percent of her time at the co-op during market season to administer the market. In return, the co-op has a presence at the market—not to sell product but to offer literature, classes such as mushroom growing and beekeeping, and to underwrite musical performers. Though it is seemingly counterintuitive for a food retailer to support direct selling of the same products found on its shelves within sight of its front door, the opposite has proven to be true: farm market days are consistently the best sales days for the store.

In 2009, the co-op formed a partnership with Northern Initiatives, an economic development nonprofit, and Northern Michigan University's School of Hospitality Management, which houses a culinary school. Northern Initiatives received grant funding for a 22' x 48' hoophouse; however, the organization was hampered by limited capacity to administer the requirements set forth by the grant. The co-op was contacted and then facilitated a three-way partnership in which the university donated space and utility infrastructure for the hoophouse plus construction management students to build the structure. ►

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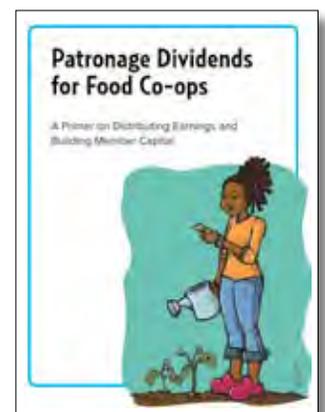
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◀ The co-op helped improve hoophouse soil quality and developed research and education programs, including workshops open to the greater community on topics such as vermicomposting and permaculture. Today, the hoophouse (see photo, page 20) grows great quantities of food, which is donated to local food pantries and used by NMU's culinary arts program. Extended-growing-season research is also conducted. Most financial support of the ongoing project is provided by the university.

MFC also has partnered with the Marquette County Health Department by facilitating the construction of three smaller hoophouses awarded to three area public schools—one elementary, one middle school, and one high school. The Health Department sought the grant with MFC in mind. Further, Special Projects Coordinator Kelly Cantway is working with the faculty and students at each school to develop programming and oversee the growing of food in each hoophouse.

Two major regional medical facilities also have found a willing partner in the co-op. Recently, Marquette General Health Systems asked MFC to assist in planning its first annual Nutrition and Medicine Conference, where the

idea of food as medicine took center stage. The co-op was present with an information booth and food samples for attending health professionals, to give a hands-on sense of what was espoused at the conference. Neighboring Bell Memorial Hospital has consulted extensively with the MFC regarding its own vegetable garden on hospital grounds, which will grow food for its kitchen.

### Creating a food hub

How does an organization like a community-owned grocery store know that it has become part of the fabric of the greater community? Perhaps it's when City Manager Bill Vajda says, "Partnership with the Marquette Food Co-op provides a powerful community commitment toward creation of a food hub. They offer the organizational capacity across the local supply chain to help facilitate local food products into mainstream markets and have demonstrated they could do so in an effective and cost-efficient manner."

Effective partnering generates the benefit of others trumpeting the results of your work. This opens doors to opportunity. At the end of November, MFC was invited to attend a state-

level meeting run by the Michigan Department of Agriculture. Representatives from a wide range of state and nonprofit food agencies, business, and consultancies gathered to deliberate the official definition of a food hub in Michigan, discuss the opportunities and barriers to the creation of food hubs, and determine the types of information and questions involved in a request for proposals to fund an initial state-sponsored pilot project. With "boots on the ground" in most aspects of what was discussed during the meetings, MFC is a frontrunner candidate to be named as the pilot project. Additionally, the co-op's Outreach Director Lantz was asked to take a seat on the State Food Policy Council. The seat was reserved for a food retailer. Consider that in a state with all the usual large retailers such as Meijer, Kroger, Whole Foods, and Walmart, a representative from a 3,200-square-foot cooperative grocery store will influence food and agriculture policy and legislation.

After six years, MFC's efforts to develop a vibrant local food network have resulted in local products topping 11 percent of total co-op sales this year. This is a good start, considering that the U.P. can see snowfall eight months of



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF UP AGRICULTURE ASSESSMENT

Left: Abbey Palmer of MFC Outreach visits with Gerald Mohlman of Mindokwin Sugar Bush. Right: Thomas Allan of Allan's Acres/Yooper Yaks.

the year. In the last two years alone, purchases of local products in the store have grown by more than 60 percent.

In 2010, the MFC entered into its first pre-paid advance with a local farm by purchasing \$5,000 of seed potatoes in an interest-free loan, repayable in potatoes. That farm now grows its own seed, relieving them of significant early-season costs. Efforts at growing small-

agriculture capacity in the U.P. have begun to take root—literally. Back in 2005, there was one small farm consistently bringing produce in the summer to the store. Today, Seeds and Spores Family Farm is the co-op's largest local supplier; co-op purchases of their produce and meat will top \$60,000 in 2011.

The MFC purchases goods from 70 local vendors, with products found in most

categories in the store. Those vendors that are farms also participate in direct selling; some have CSAs. Some would not exist or would not have had an opportunity to grow in scale without the MFC. Cheese Buyer Audra Campbell articulated the paradox that underlies the cooperative attitude toward local food: "The best thing about helping local farms grow is that it shrinks the world." ■



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