

People's Food Store

by Andrew Epstein

Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I was not aware of alternatives to the large supermarkets where we bought our food. My first job at age 16 was at Waldbaum's, earning minimum wage as a cashier. I never heard anyone talking about organic foods, packaging reduction, or local agriculture. If you had asked me from where our produce came, I probably would have answered, "a truck." That is all I knew.

I did not really consider the socio-political issues around food until I spent a college semester in Ecuador. I naively thought I would see a simpler life where people were not as removed from the land. I enjoyed the outdoor food markets, yet I was surprised when my host-mother took me shopping at SuperMaxi, the Ecuadorian equivalent of a supermarket. I felt hypocritical getting upset about a modern supermarket in Ecuador when that was where I had always shopped back in the United States. I wondered what would happen to the local food growers when the SuperMaxis took over.

During my final college semester I joined the Tufts Food Awareness Project, which worked to educate the university community about environmentally and socially responsible food choices. However, while I helped pressure our dining services to serve organic and local foods, I still shopped at a big supermarket where I do not remember ever seeing anything

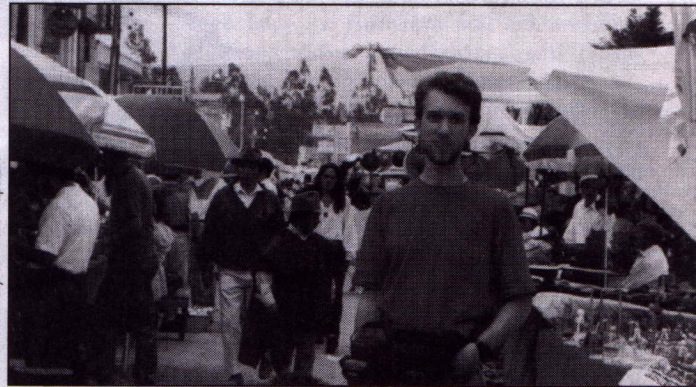
labeled as organic. I was not really practicing what I preached.

Soon after graduation, I hopped a train to Portland, Oregon, seeking to live in a quiet, more natural environment. Shortly thereafter I discovered a place which gave me new hope and a fresh perspective: People's Food Store, a cooperative. I liked the fact that it offered voting privileges and discounts on purchases in exchange for a few hours of work per week. I signed up to be a working member and soon began a weekly "bulk stocking" shift.

As a member of People's I began to make economic choices that reflected my personal values. I felt a greater sense of integrity being part of a group of people striving to "provide the community with a source of foods of the highest nutritional and health benefits with the least harm to the environment, to workers on farms and anyone involved in the food production system [thereby making] a substantial contribution to the self-improvement of the community." This philosophy was completely different from that of the major chain grocery stores I knew, whose primary goals are to maximize profits for distant shareholders and who have no real connections to the communities they serve.

In an age where our food is increasingly controlled by multinational corporations, and shipped all over the world, People's strives to support farmers and producers here in Oregon. Thus, People's contributes to greater local economic stability and especially helps small farmers whose numbers are dwindling as they struggle to survive in today's market. At People's there is less distance between food producers and consumers. This proximity is most obvious at People's weekly Wednesday "All Organic Farmers' Market" where people buy fresh produce directly from the farmers.

As a member of People's I am a part of a greater movement to take back control of our economic and food resources in a way that is respectful of the environment. Through their choice to only buy organic produce, People's becomes part of the solution to end the environmental degradation that occurs with modern day large-scale



Photos: courtesy of Andrew Epstein

The author taking Outdoor Market 101 in Ecuador.

farming techniques. Although this can sometimes be more expensive per item, for me that outcome is worth it. For example, much of the pollution in the Willamette River has been attributed to pesticide and fertilizer run-off. By buying only from farmers who grow food without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, People's supports farmers who are working to minimize their run-off impact on the river, and so promote clean water for all. The prices people pay for non-organic food products may be lower but, in the long run, these techniques do not take into account such externalities as the clean-up costs of a river.

Finally, I value being a member of a cooperative organization that brings members together to work for the good of the entire community. People's has been a great place for me to develop new skills, meet wonderful people and have fun. In this isolating culture, I have found that it is my connections to people that provides me with my greatest sense of community.

People's Food Store, a 28-year old cooperative, is located at 3029 SE 21st Avenue, Portland, OR, 97202. Andrew Epstein has been a member for three years and has served, most recently, as a member of the Board of Directors.

The International Cooperative Alliance's *Statement of Cooperative Identity* defines a cooperative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity."

