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Makin' Groceries with New Orleans Food Co-op

BY LORI BURGE AND ELIZABETH UNDERWOOD

While most New Orleanians wouldn't call themselves foodies, they are known for their love of food. "Makin' groceries" is a traditional term used for food shopping in New Orleans. "Makin' groceries" conjures images of old-time public markets and buying food directly from the farmers and ranchers who produced it. This longtime relationship is akin to the connection to food and its source that many modern-day food co-op owners deeply value and are rekindling.

Last September, NewsOne.com deemed New Orleans one of America's "Worst 9 Urban Food Deserts." In the article, Johan Thomas stated that "Researchers at the Congressional Hunger Center report that there are only 20 grocery stores in New Orleans, compared to 30 before Katrina, which means the average grocery store in New Orleans serves 16,000 people—twice the national average."

The New Orleans Food Co-op (NOFC) began organizing in 2002 to create grassroots solutions to increase community access to fresh, healthy food. Significant hurdles in opening the NOFC storefront included dealing with the hardships of the post-Katrina federal levee breaks and securing funding in the current lending climate. These challenges were exacerbated by the reality that, in New Orleans, the median income is nearly 30 percent lower than

the national average.

Despite these obstacles, the co-op is in business. NOFC mobilized over 1,800 owner-members and leveraged the equity, loans, and other resources necessary to open a 4,100-square-foot retail grocery store in the New Orleans Healing Center, a mission-driven organization housing over 20 businesses that share a credo to make a positive impact in the community.

On Oct. 10, 2011, the NOFC opened its doors. On Nov. 12 we celebrated with a grand opening festival lovingly entitled "Harvest." This store is the first full-service grocery store to open in its Eighth ward neighborhood since the federal levee breaks, and owner-members are finally sharing the benefits of 10 years of hard work, financial investment, and faith. The store dramatically increases access to healthy food for those living in the St. Roch, Marigny, Bywater, Lower Ninth Ward, and Holy Cross neighborhoods that surround it. Thousands of people now have improved access to groceries, seven days a week, from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. The doors are clearly marked, "Everyone welcome!"

Distinctive demographics

While the market study conducted by Debbie Sussuana of CDS Consulting Co-op predicted good sales for the site, NOFC has consciously traveled outside the conventional model of

natural foods stores, opening only in neighborhoods that have high income and education levels. As a mission-driven business, the NOFC has intentionally selected an underserved area with mixed income and education levels as its location. Thus far, this venture is proving successful. Weekly sales are averaging \$40,000, right on track for the \$2.1 million first-year sales projected in the study.

"Access to good, healthy food is a basic civil right," said Lori Burge, NOFC general manager. "Diabetes, obesity, heart disease and other diet-based health issues are on the rise, especially in New Orleans. Our community desperately needs and deserves healthier food options, as well as the opportunity to economically participate in a business that proposes to serve them."

Like most consumer food co-ops, the New Orleans Food Co-op is committed to advancing community education about co-ops, as well as increasing awareness of nutrition and the effects that food choices have on public health, the local economy, workers, and the environment. "We're excited to offer a wide selection of local foods that taste better and are healthier for you," said Burge. "But as a co-op, we offer more than your corner store and more than any big corporation. The NOFC is literally owned by this community; and this is how we can be actively engaged in our physical and economic health and in the sustainability of New Orleans' future."



From left: Batiste Cultural Academy students painted a colorful mural on the co-op. Activist farmer Jenga Mwendo (with her daughter) at the opening. Two founding members with their grandchildren. Opera Creolé performed selections from *Porgy and Bess* at the opening.



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The NOFC has yet another challenge—getting fresh, locally produced foods into the store. While New Orleans has some great gardeners, farmers markets, and restaurants that buy local food, the city is severely lacking the resources and infrastructure necessary to distribute the products of local vendors. “This challenge is another opportunity for us to be a leader in the local food economy,” said Burge. “Our mission includes promoting local and regional food production. As a result, we’re already supporting producers in navigating licensing issues, discussing the role and importance of organic farming, and upholding industry standards for packaging and marketing. Signage and in-store demos function on two levels: educating our shoppers and supporting local entrepreneurs.”

Additionally, the NOFC is committed to reflecting its unique community, and this is outlined in the co-op’s Ends statement. We understand that ensuring that everyone feels welcome means more than hanging a sign. Hiring from the community, creating a culture where every customer is respected as a valued part of the co-op, providing the highest standard of customer service to all, and playing music that will appeal to a wide audience are important ways the NOFC can create a climate of accessibility.

The NOFC’s product mix is another way to bridge the gap between new and experienced healthy-food shoppers. Finding the right balance between organic and fair-trade items and commercial, brand-name groceries is an important way for the NOFC to appeal to our neighborhood.

“As a co-op, we work to advance our mission while responding to the needs and expectations of our shoppers,” said Burge. “Our community

is very price conscious, and for many the product selection of the co-op is new. Given this, our ability to satisfy our shoppers is connected to our openness in offering some options from standard conventional lines alongside organic, local and fair-trade products. These choices are what our owner-members have asked for, and we’re listening.”

The NOFC accepts SNAP (formerly food stamps), and carries Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) items in an effort to be approved as a WIC store. Moreover, the co-op will be launching a discount program called “Food For All” to better serve our owner-members who live on a limited income. (The program is modeled after a similar program at People’s Food Co-op in Portland, Ore.) Owner-members who meet certain economic criteria can receive a 5 percent discount on eligible groceries. In keeping with our mission of providing healthy food for our specific community, projected losses are budgeted for two years to keep prices down while we achieve a greater economy of scale.

Additionally, NOFC is applying for membership in the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA). Acceptance into NCGA will connect us to a stellar support network and will also position us to get better pricing with our main distributor, UNFI, and give the co-op a little more flexibility in regard to margins.

The NOFC is committed to fostering community education and empowerment, especially as it relates to owner engagement. In-store tours with school children of all ages and direct engagement with area churches, neighborhood organizations, and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs is vitally necessary for the co-op to diversify and strengthen its owner-member base. And while we have participated in many health

fairs and tabled at numerous farmers markets, nothing beats one-on-one conversations with our neighbors, especially in New Orleans. In 2011, over 20,000 brochures and coupons have been distributed within a five-mile radius of the store, with countless hours spent sharing our mission everywhere from barber shops to bars.

The NOFC is also developing a calendar of free workshops on topics such as how to start a co-op and how to shop and eat healthier on a budget. Outreach Coordinator Elizabeth Underwood is working with a wide variety of local activists, such as Sess 4–5 of Nuthin’ But Fire Records, in order to further the NOFC’s mission. By participating in events organized by artists and organizations with a direct, positive impact on the community we aim to serve, the co-op’s chances of sustaining itself increase.

“There is probably no other city where it is more challenging to open a co-op grocery store with an emphasis on natural and local foods,” Burge exclaimed. “But the New Orleans community has so passionately rallied around the co-op that I’m very positive about our future. The need is so great and the expectations are so large; this is surely a great adventure. And I believe that the fact that we are figuring all of these issues out while operating a cooperatively owned business makes us a model for other co-ops.

“Of course, we are so thankful for the co-op community,” she said. “We could not do what we’re doing without its history, support, and inspiration. And thanks for loaning us the co-op quilt. It’s a big hit with everyone, especially the grandparents and kids!” ■

Contact: www.nolafood.coop, 2372 St. Claude Ave., Suite 110, New Orleans, LA 70117. 504/264-5579