

Supermarket Tour – Alternatives Section

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FOOD CO-OPERATIVES:

The easiest step consumers can take to avoid dependency on conventional supermarkets is through food co-operatives. With co-operatives, customers and workers own a share of the business, and thus, may exercise more control over what products are available and the way the business is run.

Co-ops usually take the shape of retail stores, but can also include buying clubs. They maintain enough profits to be economically sustainable mainly by purchasing large quantities of a given product or produce to reduce costs (volume discounts), or by including the processing and distribution into the equation, also leading to a reduced cost.⁸ However, co-ops have to be careful in selecting products that have enough market to support to be economically viable.⁹

Most retail co-ops exist as actual grocery stores, financed through member loans and food price mark-ups, however, delivery is an increasingly popular option. For example, the Ontario Natural Food Co-op has existing delivery routes throughout Ontario and into Western Quebec.¹⁰

To your local co-operative or buying clubs near you, visit the Ontario Natural Food Co-operatives (ONFC) website:

www.onfc.ca

OR, the Green Ontario website:

www.greanontario.org

Most co-ops follow seven general principles:

1) Voluntary & Open Membership: Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discriminations.

2) Democratic Member Control: Co-operatives are democratic organizations, controlled by their members, who "actively" participate in setting their policies and making decisions.

3) Member Economic Participation: Members democratically control the capital of their co-operative.

4) Autonomy and Independence: Co-operatives are autonomous; self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements, with say governments, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and that maintain their co-operative autonomy.

5) Education, Training and Information: Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operative.

6) Co-operation among Co-operatives: Co-operatives serve their members most effectively by working together.

7) Concern for the Community: Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

Overall, food co-operatives encourage the consumption and support of local farms, and usually stress the importance of organic and other sustainable agricultural practices.

CASE STUDY:

Located in Ottawa and founded in 1999, La Siembra Co-operative is a fair trade worker co-operative. They offer consumers high-quality, certified fair trade organic products that improve the livelihoods of family farmers and communities both at home and abroad. La Siembra was also the first organization to import, manufacture, and distribute fair trade, certified organic cocoa products in North America.

-Local Harvest

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE:

Community supported/shared agriculture (CSA) rose out of the local food movement, and while CSAs don't offer a complete alternative to the supermarket, they can effectively replace certain supermarket produce.

In 1986, there were only two known CSAs in North America. By 2000, there were over 1,000.
-Greer, 1999

How CSAs work:

CSA arrangements vary; however, all follow a similar overlying format: customers buy a pre-season share of a farmer's crop, with the resulting produce, depending on the season, gets delivered or picked up, usually once weekly, to the customer, fresh from the farm. CSAs encourage more consumer producer involvement in the production of food, not only through the buying of pre-season shares at a host farm, but also customers have an input into what should be grown, and, in some circumstances, assist with farm work as part of the deal.¹¹ Furthermore, farmers often go into debt before planting, just to get the crop into the ground, therefore, the pre-payment aspect gives farmers financial security and leads a joint sharing of risk between consumers and farmers.¹² Thus, while one crop may exceed expectations, those crops that, for a range of reasons (including pest or weather), are unsuccessful, get averaged out and replaced with other crops over the growing season.¹³

"I think a lot of people, because they don't have the interest in agriculture, an interest in the food chain, and because they're so removed from it, don't think about what goes into what they pick up off that pre-packaged shelf. What little bit a farmer gets, how far it's traveled, how much has gone into making that. I guess part of what I see a CSA doing is maybe making that more in the front of people's minds." -CSA Farmer (Sharp et al, 2002)

Since customers are encouraged to visit the host farms and direct contact with those growing the food, a greater level of transparency is developed between consumers and farmers, then could ever be possible in a supermarket. This not only leads to greater awareness of how and where food comes from, and fresher food, but, on the part of the farmer, encourages land stewardship and better farm and land management practices as a whole. For example, contrary to conventional farms that tend to be specialized, and thus, rely on monocropping, CSA farms usually have over 20 kinds of vegetables growing intensively on a few hectares, and tend to use less, if any, chemical inputs.¹⁴

Overall, CSAs link consumers with fresh, local produce, while also developing a regional food supply, leading to stronger local economies and maintaining a sense of community.¹⁵ It also enables farming in a more ecologically responsible manner.¹⁶

Similar to CSAs, there are a number of organizations and companies in Ontario that offer a weekly or bi-weekly organic food boxes, delivered right to your front door. For more information go to the greenontario website:
<http://www.greenontario.org/buygreen/food.html>

What you get:

One 'share', bought at the beginning of the season, is usually equivalent to a weekly supply of fresh vegetables for a family of four during the growing season (mid-June to mid-October for southern Ontario), but

can also include root storage crops such as onions, potatoes and carrots during the winter, usually available once monthly. The majority CSA's also offer half-shares for singles or couples at a lower cost.¹⁷

*Most CSA's specialize in vegetable crops only, however, more and more are expanding, providing products such as honey, fruit, herbs, flowers, eggs, poultry and meat to shareholders.¹⁸

FARMERS' MARKETS:

Another important alternative to the supermarket, or even just as a substitute for certain products or produce, are local farmers' markets. While farmers' markets are nothing new, the first appeared in Kingston,

ON in 1780, studies are placing more and more emphasis on the diverse functions that

"Whenever possible Canadians should buy local, seasonal and organic agricultural products to help sustain regional farming communities."

-Foodshare, 2002

farmers markets provide as an alternative to the current agro-industrial food complex.¹⁹

However, with the rise of convenience shopping in the 1970s, supermarket and shopping malls pushed farmers' markets into decline. It wasn't until the 1980s that the benefits of farmers' markets were reexamined and support for them

reestablished.²⁰ Since that time, the number of new markets has almost doubled, with 115 markets in operation today.

The Benefits:

Not only do farmers' markets provide a forum for people to make connections with their local farmers, but they enable consumers to question how food is produced. This puts pressure on farmers to avoid or reduce their dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, or genetically modified seed in their operations.²¹ On the other hand, it is in the farmer's financial interest to sell at markets, because it gives farmers an opportunity to sell outside the conventional market system and thus get a fair price on their goods.²² Meanwhile, farmers markets have also been shown to boost local economies as well:

For every dollar spent at the market, another two dollars moves throughout the provincial economy. In Ontario alone, sales at Farmers' Markets total almost \$600 million, leading to an economic impact of an astounding \$1.8 billion.

-Farmers' Markets Ontario, 2007

Approximately 27,000 people are directly involved in preparing and selling products at local farmers' markets in Ontario. Similarly, for every one farmer selling at the market, another two are back on the farm working.

-Farmers' Markets Ontario, 2007

Farmers' markets are good for local businesses as well. Studies show that 60-70 percent of consumers shopping at farmers' markets also tend to visit neighboring businesses on their way to and from the market.

-Farmers' Markets Ontario, 2007

Another issue with supermarkets and the current Canadian food system has to do with food miles. Tracing the foods' origins using product labels, Foodshare compared the food miles of supermarket produce to those found in a farmers' market, and found that the **supermarket foods traveled, on average, 81 times farther than the farmers' market foods.** Furthermore, using assumptions about the travel modes of the imported foods, they calculated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from their transport and concluded that **a year of choosing local over imported would save half a tonne of GHG emissions per household.**²³

Overall, farmers' markets are becoming more and more competitive with supermarkets. Although they may not completely replace the wide selection of supermarkets, they count as one more step in the right direction: localizing food sources, returning to small-scale, sustainable farm management practices, and evoking a sense of community between consumers and farmers, and amongst people in those communities themselves.

"Cheap energy for transportation and food storage has sustained the international trade in food. Consumers have benefited from lower prices and a greater range of food choices. Unfortunately, the cost of the global food market has been passed off on to the environment, farming communities and food quality. Local production reduces food transport distances, costs and environmental effects and because farmers have guaranteed customers, waste is minimized."

-Ferris, 1994

There are many alternatives to shopping at supermarkets. These are some options for those of you who want to take further action towards ensuring you and your loved ones are getting safe, nutritious, environmentally sustainable food. These opportunities not only ensure food security, they also offer better chances to connect with your fellow community members while ensuring that the health of our planet is not compromised.

GROWING FOOD WHILE GROWING BONDS:

Keep in mind: Starting your own community garden may not be feasible for everyone depending on your lifestyle, location and the point in time. If you do not have the time, resources, energy and people to get a garden in motion then look in your local newspaper and on the internet for an already established community garden in your area.

If you have time, knowledge and access to land, one alternative option is to participate in a **COMMUNITY GARDEN**. Community gardens are a form of urban agriculture (small scale agricultural practices in the metropolitan environment) which are not only a safe, affordable, informative means of acquiring food; they also provide the chance to get to know your neighbours and acquire new skills. Look on the internet, search the classifieds, ask a community representative for information about starting or joining a local community garden.²⁴

Major benefits to community gardens

- Local food
- Chemical-free food
- Sustainable growing methods
- Affordable
- A learning opportunity
- A chance to develop new skills
- A chance to meet new people
- Sharing of ideas and stories
- Co-operation among neighbors and friends

Below are FIVE crucial elements and helpful tips that will enable you to start your own community garden if there is not one already established in your neighbourhood:

1. People Power

Gather a bunch of like-minded individuals, choose a leader who will coordinate the garden and form action committees to get things rolling.

2. Location, location, location

Pick a sunny, open space (six full hours of sunlight per day is ideal). Make sure there is water available and inquire about the use of the land in the past (any possibilities of contamination?).

3. Getting started

Get people to tidy and organize the site by deciding plot sizes and marking plots with individual's names. Also, make a storage plan for tools, other equipment and a composting area.

4. Organization is a must

Decide people's roles and levels of involvement in the garden such as whether people will work together or separately with individual plots. Decipher a set of rules that the gardeners must follow in order to maintain some form of order.

5. Attention to Detail

Welcome everyone from the community to get involved. It may also be beneficial to make a sign and provide information about the garden project for those interested.²⁵

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

Unequal access to safe, affordable food is all too common in a country where there are plentiful amounts of supplies to feed the masses. A growing movement around the world is one you may have already heard of called, **Food Not Bombs (FNB)**. While this is not a complete solution to large scale supermarket woes, it is a positive, pro-active motion towards more equitable, environmentally sound, healthy means of sharing food and forming community bonds. Here are some facts and bits of information that may help in deciphering whether this is something you might want to look into.²⁶

- **What is Food Not Bombs?**

It is a volunteer run movement to raise awareness about social justice issues while cooking and eating food in a community setting. It takes place in most major cities and small towns all over the world. So find the one nearest you and get started on revolutionizing the food movement!

- **Who can take part?**

FNB is volunteer run so anyone can get involved if you so choose. Otherwise, the meals are served in public places for anyone and everyone to participate *without* restrictions.

- **What is the purpose?**

FNB strives for peace and justice through the sharing of food rather than resolving conflict through war and injustice.

- **Where does the food come from?**

The food is donated or gathered from various locations that would otherwise be throwing out perfectly edible rations.

- **When can you get involved?**

Check out the many websites or search your local newspapers and/or community bulletins to contact your nearest FNB collective.

- **Why is this revolutionizing form of food sharing gaining so much momentum?**

FNB strives for much more than providing food for those who need it. Food is crucial to our existence however, so is working collectively and creating a sense of community. FNB not only works towards ending hunger, it also fights to end oppression, inequitable globalization practices as well as the destruction of the earth.

Social benefits of FNB

- Available to EVERYONE
- Creates a sense of COMMUNITY
- Decisions based on CONCENSUS

Environmental benefits of FNB

- Food is NOT wasted
- Vegetarian/vegan diets = less production energy
- Less energy is wasted on the transportation of food from far away locations (the food is local)
- Takes advantage of seasonal produce

Economic benefits of FNB

- Benefits LOCAL organizations and individuals
- Food is donated or collected free of charge
- Meals are FREE to the public

GET INVOLVED!

It is not difficult to get involved in the FNB movement. The importance of food equity is extremely relevant today, especially when considering the needs of future generations. FNB is one way of getting informed, meeting people, gaining experience and eating healthily while promoting social, environmental, and economic justice.

www.foodnotbombs.net

Other options which will satisfy your grumbling belly... ...and feed your soul

Gleaning

When farmers have produce left over at the end of every season, people can take the remaining provisions. This reduces waste, provides food for those who otherwise would not have access and helps farmers clean up. The many benefits of gleaning make it extremely worthwhile.²⁷

Community Kitchens

These are creative and fun ways of joining people to cook meals together. Community kitchens (also known as collective kitchens) help stretch limited budgets while increasing the variety of food individuals can feed their families. Different people bring different ideas, knowledge and ingredients to the table. They are often organized by churches, community centers, YWCA's, independent organizers, or you could start your own with friends.²⁸

- Food for Thought -

“Power, inequality and privilege are interrelated within struggles for good food.”²⁹

Bulk Buying

A helpful hint to consider when shopping for food is that buying larger quantities or purchasing from bins not only saves you money but also takes the environment into consideration. You can bring re-usable containers to bulk stores and fill what you need. This assures no wasted packaging and buying only what you need reduces the possibility of food going to waste if not used in time.

That's a Wrap!

When grocery shopping, there are many important facets to take into consideration to ensure that the food you are purchasing is safe, healthy, ethical and environmentally sound. The choices we make every day affect not only ourselves and the people close to us but also those in our communities, small and large. While these are all

helpful alternatives to investigate and sample, they are not the be all and end all of the countless food insecurities, inequities and imbalances in Canada and through out the world. These are simply tools and tips towards helping you find what suits your personal lifestyle. Education in order to better understand the food system and ways of working with or around it is the first step towards making change for the better of all people. This book is an important tool for those of you who seek to challenge the large corporate industries that control what we put into our bodies. It is also meant to provide you and your families with a greater outlook on food options available to suit your various needs.

“Local organizing is necessary but not sufficient”

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LOCALISM

Most food activist discussions make a strong connection between the localization of food systems and the promotion of environmental sustainability and social justice. Food localism is about shortening the distances our food travels. Globalization has substantially increased the distance our food travels before it reaches our plate. Localism can therefore help reduce greenhouse gas emissions since food is grown locally and transported short distances. This localism movement attempts to re-link local production with local economic development. We can achieve this by purchasing things produced locally¹.

SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

How often do we, as a society, take time out of our busy lives to sit and enjoy the act of eating and preparing food? For many of us, the act of eating is overshadowed by our frantic pace of life.

In 1986, Carlo Petrini decided to protest against fast food and all that it represents when he organized a protest against the building of a McDonald's in Rome. After three years, Petrini and his supporters founded the International Slow Food Movement, taking a stand against fast food and the overall pace of the "fast life"³. This organization stands for more than just wholesome, meaningful meals and the abandonment of unhealthy fast food practices. The slow food movement also stands for deeper environmental and social issues. Like localism, the slow food movement is also based primarily on the idea of eating locally grown foods. Since so many people live in urban areas, we no longer interact or see where our food is coming from. The slow food movement, along with food localism allows us to interact with the people growing our food, which is an essential relationship. Sustainability is another important interest of slow food advocates, since many of the large scale farms do not practice a sustainable form of agriculture. The slow food movement offers a sustainable and healthy alternative to our current view of the food system. More information about the Canadian Slow Food Movement is available at www.slowfood.ca.

The concept of localism is directly linked with food security, because it encourages the consumption of locally grown foods. Localism therefore becomes a way to preserve and maintain rural livelihoods since local farmers are supported. Profits also go directly to these farmers by passing the middle man and larger corporations. Most small farms are run in a sustainable manner, especially compared to industrialized farming methods. This makes eating locally an environmentally conscious decision².

How to eat local?

Localism is increasing popularity; you can visit local farmers markets or join Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) programs. Look into food localism movements in your community as a way to eat healthy, local goods that promote food security. It is also an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable system of agriculture that relies on local resources and serves local markets and consumers. (Lyson, 2004)

The slow food movement now has over 75, 000 followers in numerous chapters worldwide (Slow food Canada, 2007).

ORGANICS

The demand for healthy, safe and environmentally friendly food products has become very popular in our society. Organic goods are produced according to certain production guidelines to ensure consumers are receiving true organic food. Organic produce is grown without the use of pesticides or chemical/synthetic fertilizers while organic livestock is grown without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones. This ensures the consumers are getting healthy, wholesome foods that are grown under specific standards⁴.

Are organics beneficial?

Organics provide a healthy alternative to conventionally grown foods, especially considering they do not rely on artificial fertilizers or hormones. Organics also provide an essential niche market for many local farmers. There have been an increasing

If we consider the cost of food globally, North America still pays considerably less than many European countries, making organics a valid economic choice!

What are the downsides?

From the rising success of the organic movement, a number of downsides have emerged. Many organic products cost slightly more than conventionally grown foods. Organic farmers generally must use more labor intensive means to grow and maintain crops compared to conventional farmers. Therefore, organic farmers originally tended to be smaller in scale in order to be better managed, since without the use of chemical inputs, farmers are forced to use more traditional techniques, such as crop rotation. Thus, organic products are marked up in cost in order for farmers to make a profit (Cook, 2007).

number of small scale farmers switching to organic, which is beneficial for the future of small farms. These small organic farms have the niche market to compete with industrial farms since some people are willing to pay more money for organic products. Organic farmers often have slightly less yields from their crops due to the absence of synthetic fertilizers. Yet, the higher price of organic goods compensates farmers for their increased labor requirements and somewhat smaller yields. These farms also operate in a natural way, that is to say, in a closed loop system. This means everything is used on the farm, for example manure from livestock can be used in place of synthetic fertilizers. Most organic farms are small scale and employ more sustainable agricultural practices that will ensure future soil health and productivity. Overall, organic farming offers sustainability and greater environmental piece of mind.

With the demand for organic goods comes rising commercial interest, with large-scale industrial farms switching to cash into the organic movement as well. Supermarket chains are becoming flooded with commercial organic products from emerging large scale organic farms (Cook, 2007). This means some of the organic goods we purchase are now being grown by means of industrial farms, begging the question: do large-scale corporate farms qualify as organic or sustainable? This can become confusing for many consumers, since there is such an increase in "natural" foods. Supermarket shelves are oversaturated with so many different labels and deceiving descriptions, consumers must be cautious when purchasing most supermarket products (Cook, 2007). Make sure to look out for certified organic goods, or better yet, visit your local farmers' markets or smaller specialty or co-operative grocery stores and get first hand information about how your food is grown.

FAIR TRADE

Fair trade is an independent organization dedicated to getting competitive prices for goods, improved working conditions, local sustainability and environmental consciousness, and fair terms of trade for farmers and workers in the developing world. By requiring companies to pay above market prices, Fair trade addresses the injustices of conventional trade, which traditionally discriminates against the smaller producers. It enables these farmers to improve their lot and have more control over their lives. Fair Trade products include coffee, fruit, vegetables, sugar, cotton, honey etc⁵. Fair Trade deals specifically with the relationship between Southern producers and Northern buyers and consumers⁶.

The **Fair Trade Mark** is an independent consumer label which appears on products as a guarantee that they have provided their producers with Fair Trade standards. The Mark is awarded by the Fair trade Foundation. Fair trade labeling was created in the Netherlands in the late 1980s.



Companies that supply Fair trade products are inspected and certified by Fair trade Labeling Organizations (FLO). They receive a minimum price that covers the cost of sustainable production and a small extra that is invested in social or economic development projects. The fair trade agreement helps because less money will go to the middleman while more will go to the producer themselves for coffee. These farmers will receive about 28 cents for every dollar spent by the consumer compared to 11 cents for non-fair trade coffee beans.

Does fair trade only help certain producers?

Not quite, there are programs established that divert some of the funds and distribute them to the wider community. This money goes towards building schools for example, not just benefiting a few producers (CBC, 2007).

Do Fair Trade products cost more than conventional products?

Yes, they can cost slightly more money. Yet, this is beneficial since you are paying for a superior product. For example, if you purchase an article of clothing you have piece of mind that may be handmade and not stitched in a sweatshop. In the case of coffee or tea, you can be assured that it was not grown and processed on a factory farm.

For more information visit their website www.fairtrade.net.

Rising Demand for Fair Trade Coffee in Canada

Fair trade coffee has grown from \$649,000 in 1998 to \$28.2 million in sales in 2004⁷.

¹ Jones et al. "Return to traditional values? A case study of Slow Food". British Food Journal. 2003.

² Patricia Allen. "Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship". Agriculture and Human Values. 1999.

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