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Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
Web: www.friscostyle.com

Ad Sales: (972) 335-1306



Debbie Vallejo, Ann-Marie Lindig & Donna Brandenburg all participate in organic food co-ops in Frisco.

photo provided by Debbie Vallejo

produce, so why are so many people willing to pay more to get the organic seal of approval? According to the OTA, organic tastes better because it is grown in well-balanced soils, it reduces the risk of cancer and other diseases, and it works well with the environment. That hits all the biggies; better taste, better body, better environment, what's not to love? In a nutshell, the price. When walking into a retail chain it is easy to see the difference when making the jump from conventional to organic produce. A family interested in going organic may make a concerted effort, but then revert back to conventional food when sticker shock from the first month's grocery bill hits. Hence, the birth of the co-op.

Suzanne Mulder and her family began researching the effects of pesticides and chemicals on conventionally grown food and made the decision to go organic. "We tried buying from the local health markets and grocery stores, but the items were limited and quite pricey," said Suzanne. "Learning about the existence of a produce co-op gave us a doable option." Suzanne joined the co-op over two years ago and has been involved ever since.

"That hits all the biggies: better taste, better body, better environment. What's not to love? In a nutshell, the price."

HOW IT WORKS

The word co-op is derived from the word "co-operative." A co-operative, in this sense, can be described as "an association formed and operated for the benefit of those using it." In other

Going Organic: the Rise of the Organic Food Co-op in Frisco

By Debbie Vallejo

ACCORDING TO THE ORGANIC TRADE ORGANIZATION (OTA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), consumer demand for organic food has increased 20 percent or more annually since 1990. The organic food and drink market reached \$23 billion in 2002, and is projected to reach \$30 billion by 2007. There are now newsletters, magazines, websites, trade associations, co-ops, and government associations existing for the sole purpose of educating consumers on all things organic.

Due to the rise in demand for organic produce, food co-ops are popping up everywhere, including Frisco. A co-op allows groups of individuals to purchase organic food, cleaning supplies, bread, milk, and other organic products in bulk and divide them up. This allows consumers to buy produce at a cost lower than the average retail chain.

DEFINING ORGANIC

If a food contains the label "organic," consumers may assume that the food was grown without the use of pesticides or chemical aids, and that it contains at least 95 percent organic ingredients. All organic meat, eggs, dairy, and poultry come from animals free of growth hormones or antibiotics. The USDA developed organic food standards that all farmers touting the name "certified organic" must follow, and a government certifier inspects any farm where organic food is grown to make sure the owners are following those national standards. Labeling a product "organic" that does not meet the requirements can land the violator a fine of up to \$10,000.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

The USDA makes no claims that eating organic is healthier or better for the human body than conventionally grown

words, for those of you old enough to remember the original film *Parent Trap*, “Let’s get together, yeah, yeah, yeah... think of all that we can share...” The organic food co-op is formed to provide members with the power to negotiate bulk pricing, and have the advantage of cheap distribution and labor.

Here’s an example of how it works. A refrigerated semi makes a large delivery to a set location once every two weeks. Local drivers meet the truck, divide the food into smaller loads and distribute the food to host homes. The host home is responsible for dividing the food and putting it into bins in preparation for pickup by each co-op member. Each member

then picks up the bin of food and leaves a check for the next delivery in two weeks time.

Monica Brown owns and operates a local area co-op. “Our co-op model works well because it connects and informs people,” says Monica. “Co-op membership allows people to interact with others who are making healthy choices a reality in their family.” Each host site provides information to the other members, and there are a variety of online user groups providing recipes, food storage advice, health news, and explanations of scheduled nutrition and cooking seminars.

A co-op can offer its members savings on organic food by ordering in large quantities and distributing the food through its volunteers. The local co-ops in Frisco are largely pre-order, where cost and delivery are preset and the member’s basic share of produce is determined by availability and cost. Host homes receive a break in price to compensate them for the additional labor, while members receive a bin full of produce without the grocery

store hassle. Each member handles payment through their host and no lengthy ordering process is required. “Our group operates in an efficient, business-like manner that consumers and suppliers appreciate,” says Brown. “We keep the labor low and don’t have lots of meetings and hassles.”



Bins of produce ready for pickup at the host home.

photo provided by Debbie Vallejo

“A co-op can offer its members savings on organic food by ordering in large quantities and distributing the food through its volunteers.”

THE FINE PRINT

What’s the catch? There are a couple of snags in an otherwise seamless operation. First, each member receives a basic share of produce without having input in the contents. Each delivery varies, but always includes a variety of vegetables and fruits. Still, Suzanne doesn’t mind the trade off. “I don’t mind having less choice for the convenience

of receiving two weeks of produce at a time and the price break,” said Suzanne. Many co-op members also feel the set basic share has forced them to branch out and try new things. Recipes are provided with produce that is a little more challenging for the average cook and access to online user groups assists members in how to prepare the more unusual foods.

Second, if a co-op member does want to order additional produce, they are responsible for finding others to share it with as each order comes in a large quantity. Members often email back and forth trying to find an ordering partner.

That being said, the whole idea of the “co-operative” is growing in popularity as organic food is more and more in demand. There are now six host homes offered in the Frisco/McKinney area, each providing a

food pick-up location for any number of families. Sites are also available in Corinth, The Colony, Lewisville, Plano, Prosper, Irving, Richardson, and many other cities in the Dallas area. Host homes are continually added as the need arises. “Folks in the Metroplex join an existing group or form one from their neighborhood or business location,” says Brown. As well as participating in the organic produce co-op, many members form smaller co-ops for ordering eggs and hormone free meat. “My husband and I also host a buying club that offers everything else, except the produce. It brings organic products to you locally without having to go to the store,” says Suzanne.

Whatever your feelings toward organic; strongly for, strongly against, or totally ambivalent, there is no denying the rise in consumer demand. The co-operative is a creative way for consumers to fulfill the demand for all things organic.

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.