

When Elisa and Martin Edwards moved to Berkeley two years ago, they knew something was missing.

In Brooklyn, the Edwards were members of the Park Slope Food Co-Op. They shopped there, buying cheap, locally-grown produce and organic foods, but it was more than just a grocery store to them. It was where they met friends and spent time volunteering—Martin was a cashier, and Elisa kept watch over children as their parents shopped. And it seemed strange that an area as famously progressive as Berkeley didn't have anything similar.

"One of the hardest things about leaving Brooklyn was leaving the co-op," says Elisa Edwards, 32. "At first, we would just complain to all our friends here about the size of our grocery bills, telling them, 'There should be a co-op here.' At some point, we realized that if we wanted one, we should start it."

Together with local friends Michael Weiler and Julia Carpenter, the Edwardses tackled the challenge. And by the end of the year, the Cooperative Grocery (CoG) could serve thousands throughout Oakland, Berkeley and Emeryville and beyond.

The idea immediately took root. The quartet launched the CoG Web site Aug. 2. Word spread quickly, through online bulletin boards and word of mouth. Elisa Edwards hoped they would get enough interest to entice 100 locals to join. They surpassed the goal in just 17 days, and had 300 members within a month.

When the Cooperative Grocery debuts, it will be the first time the East Bay has had a food co-op since 1988, when the old Consumer's Cooperative of Berkeley closed its doors. Founded in 1937, the Consumer's Cooperative served the East Bay for half a century before financial problems forced it to shut down.

"People here are ready for a co-op," says Carpenter, 44, who still remembers the old days of the Consumer's Co-Op. "It's a feeling that almost seems to be a lingering ghost. This will finally make it corporeal."

Carpenter, who's studying acupuncture, does the shopping for her household, which includes a vegan, a strict vegetarian, a lactose- and gluten-intolerant child and a dedicated omnivore. "I have to go all over the place—Trader Joe's, Whole Foods," says Carpenter, "and I don't like having to shop places that have something of a corporate edge. With a new co-op, we can solve that problem."

Although the co-op is just in its nascent stages, early indicators point to a community groundswell for the idea.

"The first thing you need in putting together a successful co-op is a group of people that really want it," says Richard Dines, program manager for the Food Co-op 500 Program, which provides seed money for new co-ops. "For example, if you hold an initial meeting and 300 people show up, that's a pretty good indicator that people want a co-op in the area." In the CoG's case, the deluge of early sign-ups reveals the same excitement.

Social service worker Tom Yamaguchi, 56, became a member of the original Consumer's Co-op back when he first moved to Berkeley in the early 1980s. When he received an e-mail telling him that a new co-op was in the works, he jumped at the chance to join.

Yamaguchi misses the community aspect that a co-op brings to a city. Before moving to Berkeley, he lived in San Diego, where he shopped at the Ocean Beach People's Food, a store that functioned as a de facto community center.

"It becomes a way people can identify as part of the community," says Yamaguchi. "The closest thing we have in the Bay now is the Berkeley farmers' market. It's got a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere, and you're always running into friends there."

Across the country, there are some 300 retail food co-ops and 7,000 wholesale buying clubs that turn out \$750 million worth of organic food sales. For many, the very notion of the food co-operative sounds elitist, with its emphasis on locally grown produce, organic foods and other commodities usually relegated to the shelves of high-priced grocery stores. But many co-ops make it a priority to keep prices low and reach out to lower-income communities.

"We really want to make sure this is something that can benefit everybody," says Carpenter, who wants to go beyond "feel-good" benefits to provide real, healthful grocery alternatives for working people.

Experts say the main obstacles to getting higher-priced organic produce and other healthful foods to low-income families are twofold: access and cost.

Joining the CoG requires an initial investment of \$100, refundable if you choose to leave, and a non-refundable membership fee of \$25. In addition, every member must donate two and a half hours of work time to the CoG every month. In return, shoppers purchase groceries at just 20 percent above wholesale—compared to the 70 percent mark-up at regular supermarkets.

According to Ronnie Cummins, national director of Organic Consumers Association (OCA), this is the real boon to working-class shoppers: The bottom 20 percent of American income-earners spend as much as 30 percent of their income on food when, on average, Americans spend just 10 percent of their income on food. With a co-op, you can stretch your grocery budget, and get good food in the process.

The CoG and other co-ops offer lower prices by using co-op members as stockers, cashiers, phone operators, childcare providers, publicists and more. The volunteer work component removes personnel costs that drive up prices in traditional stores and is ultimately what makes a co-op a co-op.

"We're trying to reach out to underrepresented portions of the community," says Edwards. "Because of the price difference between organic and sustainable food and the regular stuff in grocery stores, there's a notion that good food is elitist, something that only the wealthy can afford. We want to take price out of the equation, and

make this something that everyone can afford.”

The CoG offers reduced rates for people who are struggling financially or on any sort of public assistance. The elderly and people with disabilities are exempt from the work requirements, unless they want to participate. And for harried parents, who often can't get shopping done with kids in tow, the CoG will maintain a childcare area.

The CoG is currently looking for a location to set up shop, something easily accessible from Berkeley, Oakland and Emeryville by bike, foot or public transportation. In the meantime, the CoG will start out as an online co-op, where members can order food through a Web site and then pick up their purchases at a central warehouse.

“An online co-op is something pretty unique, something that hasn't been done before,” says Dines. “You have a pretty experimental bunch in Berkeley, but that's always been the case there.”

As a single mother who struggled to buy organics while she was a starving student living on food stamps, Carpenter knows firsthand how difficult it can be getting high-quality food on a fixed budget.

“There doesn't need to be the same mark-up on food that there is on other luxury items,” says Carpenter. “I don't like people making a profit on the things that people need. Good food has become a luxury. We need to break that down. The Park Slope model seemed right: People were raving about how they could buy four bags of groceries for \$30.”

“Typically, people involved in co-ops put a high priority on things like social justice,” says Cummins of OCA. “Since it's not tied to a governing structure that demands maximizing profits, a co-op is able to be a more ethical business. They don't have to worry about shareholders suing.”

Cooperatives stand out for their service, selection and especially community involvement, says Cummins.

“Many co-ops are involved with inner-city youth projects, getting organic food into schools, making bulletin boards and newsletters,” says Cummins. “They're open to community events, let political groups and local groups table outside. They're typically no-frills, and tend to be located closer to low-income communities. It's very hard for them to get capital, since conventional banks don't like to finance things like co-ops that won't bring in profits.”

Edwards thinks that's where the old Berkeley Co-Op started to lose its way—when financial troubles forced it to start closing down its education programs.

“Research on natural/organic food customers shows that the demographic spans ages, income levels and ethnicity,” says Dave Gutknecht, editor of *Cooperative Grocer*, a monthly trade magazine for co-op retailers. “That is, low-income and upper-income customers are both common. Young and old are both common. And blacks and Hispanics frequent natural/organic stores and shop those products in at least as high a proportion as whites.”

At the moment, few studies have been done on the effectiveness of co-ops at bringing organic or locally grown produce to lower-income people.

“Cooperatives are self-help organizations that require people to put something in in exchange for getting something out,” says Brett Fairbairn, a professor with the Centre for the Study of Cooperatives at the University of Saskatchewan. “This determines that most members of co-ops will be people who are not wealthy, since the wealthy don’t need a co-op to get what they want, but [who are] still fairly stable in their social circumstances, not completely indigent [so they have money or time to put in]. Co-ops are a classic tool for the working classes and lower-middle classes.”

But for Edwards, the economic benefits are just part of what makes a co-op exciting.

“The prices are part of the attraction, but there’s also the community,” she says. “You really feel work. You don’t feel money the same way. When you have a co-op where everyone works, it’s a wonderful, shared experience. You’re not just going to a store; it’s *your* store.”

Mike Rosen-Molina is a writer and frequent contributor to The Monthly. His work has also appeared in the East Bay Express, Davis Enterprise, and Sacramento News and Review. His favorite vegetable is corn.

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