



## WANT TO BUY LOCAL? JOIN THE CLUB

BY KIMBERLY FEHR

### Ways to buy fresh from the farm

East Vancouver resident Denise Wrathall wanted to buy local food, so when she found BC bok choy and beets at her local supermarket, she returned loyally for two weeks. One day she made a point of telling the manager how pleased she was that they were selling local produce. “He said, ‘Actually, it’s not from BC. I just didn’t change the sign.’”

Wrathall shakes her head, but since then she’s found a better way. She joined the Neighbours Organic Weekly Buying Club, which re-invented itself as a co-op in September (after shutting down last February). The brief hiatus hasn’t slowed it down—with 18 buying clubs, it’s well up from the 12 on its roster when it closed.

NOWBC had been operating as a small business since 2005, but proprietor Grant Watson found he still wasn’t making a living, even though membership doubled each year from 2005 to 2007. When he told members he was shutting down, they wouldn’t let him.

“There was huge outcry,” recalls Wrathall. Core members were really upset, and after much discussion they worked out a way to transform NOWBC into a co-op, and Watson into the General Manager. Approximately 50 members like Wrathall contributed \$20 each as seed money to get the co-op going. They started selling shares for \$90 in September, and the first deliveries were made in October. Customers don’t need to be a shareholder to buy from NOWBC’s online catalogue, but those who do buy a share will be eligible for dividends, plus the added reward of knowing they are putting their money where their mouth is.

“We are building a local food system,” says Watson. “We’re helping people reduce their carbon footprint with food that has travelled 60 kilometres instead of 2,400 kilometres. It’s healthy, it tastes better and it’s fresh—our produce is picked the day before we get it. And we’re building community by working with our neighbours to create a more sustainable future.”

With Neighbours Organic Weekly, there’s no guessing. Their website says exactly where their food comes from. When it’s not



local, NOWBC aims to offer the best of the rest. For example, they get items like wheat products from Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Peace River area of BC. “Our goal is to have 80 to 90% of the product from BC,” says Watson, who used to be an organic farmer himself. “Things that grow in BC, we’ll buy here. If it doesn’t grow in BC, we’ll look for organic and/or fair trade if it’s possible. It’s member-driven. Our members would get upset if we had bananas that weren’t fair-trade in the catalogue.”

Members can place orders online each week, and their goods are conveniently delivered to a drop-off point local to each buying club. The system is convenient for Wrathall; she has to walk the dog anyway so it’s easy for her to pick up her food.

She has also been a member of the *Nathan Creek Organic Farm* Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA), buying a share of the crop for the season with a friend. Every week during the growing season they split a tub of local produce. Last year, members of the CSA created Keep Agriculture Local and Empowered (KALE), with the goal of supporting the farmer and building community around the farm. KALE goes one step further than the CSA—creating a support system around the farm while trying to engage members of the CSA into taking more active roles. Everyone who joins the CSA also becomes a member of KALE. Members share in the farmer’s successes and failures, and are also encouraged to come and volunteer for the farm and attend social events. It’s their way of recognizing that organic farmer Stephen Gallagher has none of the resources of large farms, and all of the challenges of doing it alone. Gallagher envisions that eventually it won’t be his farm—it will be the community’s farm. “KALE aims to create a community for the farm to protect its existence, and help ensure farmers can earn a living from it,” he says.

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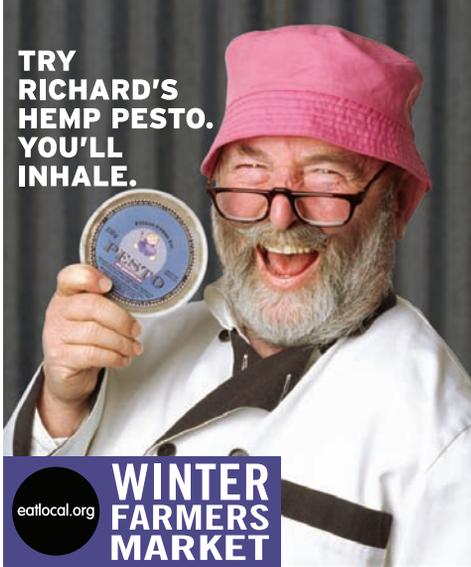
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KALE board member Derril Gudlaugson has been buying farm-direct since he saw a notice at Mountain Equipment Co-op in 1996. “At that time the big concern was vegetables grown in contaminated water in California and Mexico,” recalls Gudlaugson, who lives in Richmond. Now, he says, consumers need to be more discerning than ever. “We don’t know where the nuts in the nut-bar come from,” he says. “Listeria, melamine. Pick up a product in the grocery store. For example, sesame-covered pita—it comes from Vietnam. It’s difficult to know where every ingredient came from. Food safety and security are major issues. When a tub of vegetables comes from the farm, I know I can just pick out a carrot and rinse it under the tap and I don’t even have to peel it. I know that food is pure organic and there’s nothing that’s going to harm my family from that.”

Many people agree. Since moving last year to an abandoned organic tree farm leased by the Nature Conservancy, hiring an apprentice and renting additional land, Gallagher has been able to increase his capacity. In one year, membership in the CSA has nearly doubled to 125 shares, at which point Gallagher cut it off. The Langley-based farm now has a waiting list.

That means his farm is feeding about 260 people in total. Each week members receive a tub of produce at various drop-off points around the city. For the 2008 season, it cost \$550 for 18 to 20 weeks of produce during the growing season. “Every week it’s like opening a treasure chest and seeing what’s inside,” says Gudlaugson. The variety is far beyond what you find at the local supermarket: yellow carrots, several different kinds of tomatoes and tah tsoi (an Asian green).

Wrathall was also impressed with the variety, although the downside is that sometimes members get too much of a certain thing. But the upside is easy. “You learn what’s local by what is available. You learn what is in season and what you can freeze. You get a chance to be connected with the farmer and the life of the farm. And he had the most amazing mustard greens. They were really tasty, spicy when raw, and deeply green when cooked. Where else would you get something like mustard greens? I’d never tried them before and there they were in my box.”

For information about KALE and Nathan Creek Organic Farm CSA, visit [nathancreek.ca](http://nathancreek.ca). For information about NOWBC visit [nowbc.ca](http://nowbc.ca).

*Kimberley Fehr is a Vancouver-based writer (and communications coordinator for the Vancouver Foundation) who doesn't like food that is more well-travelled than she is.*

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