

Skagit Valley Food Co-op

If the Skagit Valley Food Co-op is simply a place you've zoomed by on I-5 in pursuit of fortunes hither and yon, you'll definitely benefit from a few insights about one of Mount Vernon's most identifiable cultural icons. But be forewarned – if you stop by once you could get hooked. I've recently had the good fortune to move to Skagit Valley, and for reasons beyond (but nearly overshadowed by) the Co-op's free wireless internet access, have begun an intense relationship with “the best food in the world” at their Deli Next Door and practically pay rent in the wine aisle.

Todd Wood is the General Manager of SVFC, and he recently took a few moments to talk with me about exactly how the Co-op tries to be as sustainable as possible and what's the story of their business. I learned a lot of interesting tidbits, like how it started in 1973 as a small buying club among like-minded people and currently serves over 6,000 households. The Co-op has experienced tremendous success in recent years, undergoing 3 expansions in their current site as a cornerstone tenant in downtown Mount Vernon, with more plans for improvements in the future. And renovations are now made even more possible with their purchase of the building last September.

But one of the things I found most interesting was how conscious the Co-op remains about what it sells even now, 33 years after its inception. Established by the Board of Directors in 1984, specific product guidelines ensure that everything available in the store meets at least four of the five following criteria: no harmful preservatives, no artificial flavors, no artificial colors, no refined sugar, and quality at the lowest possible price.

As a member of Sustainable Connections, a business network for local and independent businesses that believe in strong community, healthy environment, meaningful employment, and buying local first, Skagit Valley Food Co-op is right on track towards sustainability. They donate 4% of gross sales to a local nonprofit on the 4th Friday of every month – a big shopping day, mind you – giving about \$15,000 away every year to community groups. They've also recently signed up for Green Power through Puget Sound Energy (www.pse.com), have retrofitted all their store lighting for energy efficiency, use a heat reclamation system that actually heats hot water with energy from the refrigeration system, and all of this on top of responsibly recycling and composting as much waste as they possibly can. They provide jobs for over 100 employees and strive to offer a good work environment, flexible schedules, significant health benefits, employee discounts, and subsidized meals while on the job. One very innovative action they take for employees is that one of the 5 board members of the Co-op is elected solely by the staff. And when it comes to buying local, the Co-op's produce section does a great job of listing fruits and vegetables by farm and location, posting photos and bios of their supplier farmers, and as Todd reminds me, “Well, we make a lot right here, and that's about as local as you can get.”

For a shopper at the Co-op life is a dream, and that's what I mean about being forewarned. If you don't want to spend all day there simply avoid the deli counter, bulk aisle, salad bar, health and beauty department, produce section, and like I said before, their winery – I mean wine aisle. It's simply too good to be true (especially all the handwritten notes and comments on wines about which bottle is best with what kinds of

foods, which one is their favorite organic red, and which one was the gold medal winner at some festival in Idaho).

My friend's husband is frequently in Mount Vernon on business and just as frequently stops at the Deli Next Door to get her "the best gluten-free macaroon ever." So maybe you see my point: the Skagit Valley Food Co-op has a tractor beam pulling you in to the all the goodness they have in store. That must be why everyone is whizzing by on I-5, they're just trying to get by before getting sucked in. But then again – I take the County Connector bus home from Bellingham sometimes and get dropped off about a block from there. Occasionally I fight the pull and bike home without a stop at the Co-op, but usually there's some reason I just have to go there. And believe me, it's a really great decision every time.

Cathy Lehman is the Events and Program Coordinator for Sustainable Connections, a business network in NW Washington establishing and supporting a local living economy that sustains itself, our community, and a healthy environment – now with almost 500 members! Learn more about their programs and how you can join by visiting www.sconnect.org.