

Rochester Gradually Buying More Organic

A growing number of organic grocery stores and eateries offering more options for consumers

By Laura Weisbein

It might be the promise of no pesticides or genetically modified organisms, or the health benefits. It might be the appeal of being kind to the environment or knowing how your food is grown. For a variety of reasons, an increasing number of people in the Rochester area are seeking organic food and supporting the businesses that provide it.

Many Rochesterians frequent the local stores that carry organic and natural foods as a regular part of their grocery shopping. Ty, a Rochester resident (who declined to give his last name), is one of them. After doing a three-month test, he was convinced that he felt better when eating organic — he had higher energy levels, better sleep patterns, and clearer skin. He finds the benefits to be “well worth the price difference.”

Other local residents shop mainly at conventional supermarkets but include organic food in their purchases. Rochester resident Paige Sloan prefers organic produce for the lack of pesticides as well as for the health benefits. She buys both organic and conventional food at Wegmans, and she shops at Abundance when she is in the area.

The largest selection of organic and natural foods in the area can be found at Lori's Natural Foods, which opened in 1981 and began selling organic produce in 1992. Gregg Deutschbein, a manager at Lori's, says that the store “promotes the community and local growers, and provides a forum for healthy lifestyle changes.” Lori's prioritizes local organic farms, bringing in produce from other places only when needed (during the winter, and to get produce that cannot be grown locally). The store promotes health through its publications and its staff, such as an on-site nutritionist. Events coordinator Jeanne Sozio pointed out that the store also caters to many different diets, such as wheat free, gluten free, and dairy free, which is useful for people with allergies. Lori's expanded two years ago and can now display its many items without stacking them up to the ceiling.

Abundance Cooperative Market is

DEFINITIONS

- Organic: involves strict standards ensuring that no toxic chemicals have been used in the growing or handling of food. Certification ensures that organic standards have been followed.
- Natural: refers to food that is minimally processed, with few additives. This designation is not clear-cut and is not officially certified the way organic is.
- Transitional: in the process of converting to organic. It takes time for a farm to fully make the transition.
- Green: environmentally friendly.

another popular local store. Abundance opened in 2001, but it grew out of the Genesee Co-op Food Store, which dates back to 1970. While the original Genesee Co-op was not a true cooperative, Abundance is. This means that its members own the store, so they make policies and decide what the store will order. Anyone can become a member/owner, and each member/owner has one vote. Anyone is welcome to shop at Abundance without becoming a member, and many non-members do shop there.

Some local residents are committed to purchasing organic food directly from farms, either at farmers markets or through shares in community supported agriculture (CSAs). CSA members do not merely buy food; they become connected to the process of growing food and share in the liability as well as the bounty with the farmers. Members typically make a financial commitment to a CSA during the winter for the upcoming season and agree to spend a small number of hours working on the farm.

Stacia and Ryan Rush, Brighton residents, are members of the Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA) at Peacework Farm in Newark, Wayne County. The Rushes like the idea of supporting a local organic farm, which Stacia says is a way for them to “positively contribute to energy conservation and a sustainable organization.” The Rushes do not want their food to have to travel many miles to reach them, and they appreciate the taste and nutritional value of food from the farm.

According to Elizabeth Henderson, farmer at Peacework Farm, 20 years ago there were few people in the area concerned with organic food and few places for them to buy organic. Her farm's CSA was the first in the area, beginning with 29 members in 1988. Now, more than 300 households participate. While most of the farm's produce used to be sold at markets, now 95 percent goes to the CSA.

Another local CSA, Porter Farms, began in 1996 and now also has over 300 members in the Genesee Valley region. Several other local CSAs have begun in the past few years. Henderson says that the CSAs fill up fast, meaning that there are more people who want organic food directly from the farm than can currently be accommodated.

In addition to the local organic farms that supply nearby stores and markets, three local conventional farms in the past few years have set aside some of their land to become organic, which Henderson believes is a great start. These are the farms with the volume to supply stores such as Wegmans, she noted.

Both the GVOCSA and Porter Farms have pick-up locations in Rochester, so that members can pick up their share of food each week without having to go all the way out to the farm. Abundance's garage serves as the Rochester distribution site for the



Gregg Deutschbein of Lori's Natural Foods feels that organic is the definite trend of the future, which is helped by the fact that organic is becoming mainstream.

GVOCSA. According to Monique Marollo, Abundance member and acting general manager and also a member of the GVOCSA, the store and the CSA have a “fantastic complementary relationship.” The two organizations are based on the same principles, so it is not surprising that CSA members linger at the store and buy groceries when they go to pick up their shares from the CSA.

The past two years have brought the opening of several organic eateries, providing further opportunities for people to eat organic food. Organic Alley is a café that also contains a small market. It focuses not only on being organic but also on being green; its cups, utensils, and containers are biodegradable and made of renewable plant sources (wheat, corn, cane sugar, paper). Another option is Natural Oasis, which owner Solomon Kebede says showcases the healthy aspects of the Ethiopian lifestyle. Natural Oasis includes a small store with mainly herbs and supplements, and its café features a vegan Ethiopian buffet that is 90 percent organic.

While many organic businesses in Rochester are new, the history of organic food in the area goes further back and includes some prominent vendors and processors. Northern Soy (brand name SoyBoy) began making organic tofu here in 1976, in keeping with their goal of promoting a vegetarian lifestyle. Once Again Nut Butters, another local company, also began in 1976. Its products include organic and natural peanut butter and other nut butters.

As Gregg Deutschbein of Lori's Natural Foods says, organic food is an irreversible trend, which is helped by the fact that organic is becoming mainstream. The Rochester area seems to be catching up with the trend, and we can all benefit from it.

WHERE TO BUY ORGANIC FOOD:

Stores
Abundance Cooperative Market
62 Marshall St.
Rochester, NY 14607
(between Monroe and Broadway)
585-454-2667
abundance.coop

Lori's Natural Foods
900 Jefferson Rd.
Rochester, NY 14623
(look for the blue Genesee Valley Regional Market sign)
585-424-2323
lorisnatural.com

South Wedge Green Grocer and Garden Center
683 South Ave.
Rochester, NY 14620
(corner of Gregory St.)
swgreengrocer.com

Eateries
Organic Alley
7 Schoen Pl.
Pittsford, NY 14534
585-264-9150
organicalley.com

Natural Oasis
288 Monroe Ave.
Rochester, NY 14607
585-325-1831
naturaloasisny.com

Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)
Peacework Farm/Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA)
gvooca.org

Porter Farms
porterfarms.org

Farmers Markets
Numerous Monroe County communities sponsor Farmers Markets. For a complete listing by county, including locations and times of operation, see: agmkt.state.ny.us/AP/Community-FarmersMarkets.asp