

Central Minn. co-ops gain popularity, empower shoppers



Jake Laxen, jlaxen@stcloudtimes.com 12 p.m. CDT June 23, 2015



(Photo: Briana Sanchez, bsanchez@stcloudtimes.com)

ST JOSEPH – A trio of women push shopping carts around a slanted 116-year-old wooden floor on a Wednesday morning.

Each are regular Minnesota Street Market shoppers. And they own the 4-year-old cooperative grocery store with more than 580 other people.

"I feel as if I look forward to the function of the store as anyone else," explains Katie Ballantine, one of the shoppers. Her floral arrangements hang in the front of the 27 Minnesota St. W store.

"I like having a decision and a voice at the place where I shop. And there's a collaboration and camaraderie

you feel."

Minnesota Street Market, located at the old Loso's grocery building built in 1899, is one more than 40 cooperative grocery stores in the state.

Story continues below.



Produce farmer Lisa Baker delivers lettuce to Minnesota Street Market Co-op from her farm, Bakers' Acres, on June 17. (Photo: Briana Sanchez, bsanchez@stcloudtimes.com)

Another local cooperative is the Good Earth Food Co-op at 2010 Veterans Drive in St. Cloud. Initially established in 1971 at St. Cloud State University, it recently surpassed 3,000 members, marking an increase of more than 2,000 members over the past decade.

According to www.coopdirectory.org (<http://www.coopdirectory.org/>), a national food co-op registry, Minnesota has the most cooperatives per capita in the nation.

"We keep seeing more and more new faces," said Good Earth bulk department manager Luke Salisbury. "About 5-10 years ago people saw co-ops as a culture thing. Some people wouldn't set foot in here because it was supposedly just a thing for hippies.

"But now with the focus on natural foods and sustainability, the idea is more mainstream than ever."

Story continues below.



The Minnesota Street Market Co-op receives produce from local farmers daily. (Photo: Briana Sanchez, bsanchez@stcloudtimes.com)

Despite the growing popularity, cooperative employees regularly field questions about the model.

"The biggest question by far is 'Can I shop here?' " said Pat Benson, Minnesota Street Market's general manager and a member at four different grocery cooperatives herself.

"People think that to shop at a co-op you have to be a member. That's just not true. Anyone is welcome. Members just get more perks."

Both Minnesota Street Market and Good Earth offer lifetime memberships for a one-time \$100 fee — which can be paid by installments.

The cooperatives have a member meeting annually where a governing board of directors is elected by member vote. The boards meet monthly to make business decisions.

Story continues below.



Mary Ellenbecker-Johnson shops at the Minnesota Street Market on June 17. (Photo: Briana Sanchez, bsanchez@stcloudtimes.com)

Members at both Minnesota Street Market and Good Earth are also rewarded with various discounts each month.

Both markets put an emphasis on working with local farms for its produce and meat departments, each working with more than 50 local vendors. They list which farm each product came from.

Good Earth also offers a daily deli and vegan bakery.

"I think sustainable agriculture is one of the root sources of peace," said Marcia Allard, a top Minnesota Street Market shopper who was elected to the store's board of directors earlier this month.

"Personally I'm interested in local, sustainable and pesticide-free food. I believe it's going to promote health for my family, community and the local soil."

Story continues below.



Produce farmers Lisa Baker and Natalie Keane package basil that they delivered to Minnesota Street Market from Bakers' Acre on June 17. (Photo: Briana Sanchez, bsanchez@stcloudtimes.com)

And now that Minnesota farms are beginning to harvest vegetables, the shelves at local cooperative grocery stores get as local as ever.

"It's so much fresher and more aesthetically-pleasing this time of year," said Minnesota Street Market assistant manager Natalie Keane. "This is the time of year we look forward to most."

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