

An Alternative to the A & P

By Deirdre Moloney

There's no Musak playing in the background at the Potsdam Co-op, which is discreetly located at the side of a storefront on Market Street. Nor were there lines of metal shopping carts to greet me as I entered; here the mood is relaxed and quiet. On this early Monday afternoon, there are only a few customers wandering casually about the small store. While one manager is instructing a woman to weigh and package hamburger at a counter in the back, the other is talking with a customer in a small adjacent room where garden seeds are stored.

I began to browse among the shelves, and immediately notice the absence of almost all types of brand name packaging. Instead, the food products are packaged in plain brown or clear plastic bags, neatly labeled with black magic marker, and in plain jars and reusable plastic containers. Many exotic ingredients are shelved alongside more familiar products, and more than an entire aisle is devoted to teas and spices. Besides several types of Twining and Celestial Seasonings, there are bagsful of wild cherry, keemun, and licorice spice teas, while hibiscus, camfrey, coltsfoot and horehound hops round out the selection of spices. At the end of this particular aisle is a bookshelf displaying such titles as *Vegetarian Baby*, *Dr. Atkin's Super Energy Cookbook*, and *From Soil to Psyche*. Although the Co-op's meat selection is by no means extensive, there is a limited assortment of meats available here, including rib-eye steak and no-nitrate franks. Yogurt and cheese are popular commodities at the co-op; there is an entire refrigerator devoted to Birdsfoot yogurt in a large assortment of flavors, including plain and the special of the week. I came upon two unfamiliar names in the dried fruits refrigerator, miso and tahini. I later found out that miso is a soy bean paste from Japan which is generally used as a soup base or a seasoning and that tahini is a food imported from the Middle East, made from crushed sesame seeds and used as a spread in much the same way as peanut butter. At the end of the aisle where most of the grains are shelved, there is a section devoted to natural health products, including Neutrogena soap, peppermint flavored white clay toothpaste, bags of lavender, and frankincense. As I reach the back of the store, I find the produce neatly displayed in boxes. A blackboard on the wall indicates that a head of lettuce is 50 cents a head, while cucumbers sell for a mere 16 cents a piece.

These prices are not unusual for the co-op and I was quite interested in how the co-op is able to sell their food at such reasonable prices. Fortunately, one of the full-time managers, Art Pilitch, was willing to take some time between unloading merchandise and taking inventory to answer some of my questions. He explained that the whole structure, and the primary aim, of the co-op, is to sell highly nutritious food at a reasonable cost to the consumer.

In order to buy from the Co-op, you must be a member. This entails obtaining a membership card for an annual fee of seven dollars per family. Five dollars of this fee goes toward the operating costs and the remaining two dollars is used for the maintenance of equipment. In addition to this nominal fee, each family must volunteer to work for two hours every month. This work may involve transferring food from bulky containers to smaller packages, labelling products or performing such chores as sweeping and cleaning the store.



Originally there were no paid workers, but following the enormous growth of the co-op, it was necessary to employ managers. Yet considering that the members themselves contribute over two thousand hours of work per month, labor costs remain minimal.

Another factor enabling the Co-op to sell at such low prices is that almost all of the food is bought in bulk, thus avoiding the costs associated with individual packaging. Also, since the co-op is a non-profit organization, the mark-up of items is nominal. It is the combination of these various factors which allows the co-op to sell their food at prices well below those of either grocery or natural food stores. Yet although the co-op had employed managers, the major decisions involving co-op policies are made by a Board of Directors who are elected by other co-op members. This board holds monthly meetings which are open to all members, thus allowing the members to take control over the decisions which will effect them as consumers, owners and benefactors of this co-operative system.

I was also curious as to where the co-op food is bought and grown. Art explained that the co-op orders much of its food from non-profit food distributors, its main supplier is an organization called Clear-eye which also supplies many other co-ops in Upstate New York. Many of the more common herbs and spices are obtained locally; however, more exotic spices must be ordered from a co-op supplier in Iowa. Northern Bakery supplies most of the baked goods found at the co-op.

Although the co-op tries to buy their products locally (most of the dairy products, honey and syrup are obtained regionally) this is not always feasible, given the climate of the North Country. Instead, most of the co-op's produce is grown in the South and sent to a distributor in Syracuse. As a result, these foods are not usually organically grown. However, during the summer, vegetables are more frequently bought from around the area. All organically grown products sold at the co-op are designated by a red star on the label.



several renovations necessary to convert it into a modern co-op. Fortunately, because of these repairs, the rent for the present store on Market Street remains reasonable. At this time the co-op is once again in need of more space, but the co-op may opt for an addition to their store, rather than another move.

Art foresees no downward trend in membership and attributes this continued growth to the increasing awareness of the co-op through word of mouth (the co-op does not advertise) as well as to an growing concern over additives and chemicals in commercial foods and, of course, due to the tremendous increase of food prices in retail stores. Art further noted that new members will often be attracted to join the co-op when it begins to carry a new product at a considerably lower price than area markets, and will then take an interest in other foods available at the co-op. The co-op has just begun to carry garden seeds at a reduced cost, and this too is a result of widened interest in natural and wholesome foods and of economic necessity.

The people who shop at the Potsdam Co-op are different in several ways, they are as likely to be men as women, they come from downtown Potsdam, and from Massena, some are well off, while others have food stamps. Yet all the members share in the many benefits of joining a co-op, greater savings, better food, and a sense of community in an increasingly impersonal world.

The current membership of the co-op is about one thousand families and it does an annual business of approximately three hundred thousand dollars. This is quite a jump from the co-op's beginnings a decade ago. The co-op originated as a buyer's club, meeting once a week at a private home in Potsdam, with a membership of 27 people. Shortly afterwards, growing interest prompted a move to the First Baptist Church. Yet this too proved to be an inadequate location for the ever increasing membership, and the co-op made a second move to a small grocery store on Maple Street.

When membership had increased to an overwhelming 600 families in 1975, the co-op located a former trading stamp storeroom, and with the help of its members, was able to make the

