

# Twenty-First Century Box

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

**T**he death recently of my good friend of five decades, Bruce Bacon, is another reminder to enjoy what remains and also look to the future.

Beginning on family-owned land 45 years ago, Bruce was among the earliest certified organic growers in Minnesota; a tree inspector and woodlot manager; and a knowledgeable mentor and friend to many. He liked to echo a rough woodcut with these words: “Much has been said—now much must be done.”

For his successors at home and on thousands of small farms, there is a harvest of never-ending challenges. Today’s producers have benefited hugely from a generation of pioneers, such as Bruce Bacon, whose collective work includes building soil, establishing supply relationships, reviving direct marketing and local food communities, and helping other growers.

Extending this heritage, food co-ops continue to lead most markets in promoting local goods. But this advantage is diminishing or has disappeared for some co-ops. Co-ops can dither and diddle—or differentiate. Much still needs to be done.

Local and community are key elements of food co-ops’ identity or brand in the marketplace. Strong and clear messages are essential in countering strong competition along with widespread ignorance about “co-op.” Our cover story on Seattle’s PCC Community Markets from Heather Snavelly, the co-op’s vice president of marketing, provides much detail and background about their rebranding project: exploring who the co-op is; what its customers and owners and staff think about the co-op; and the steps involved in putting all the elements together.

The viewpoints of co-op staff are essential in considering and implementing such a campaign. Staff knows the products, they talk with the customers—their insights are unique. The PCC Community Markets rebranding campaign revealed a satisfying congruence between the views of customers and co-op staff.

Another way in which co-ops are improving staff participation and solidarity is through Open Book Management—revisited here in a report by Melanie Reid of CDS Consulting Co-op. Open Book aims to generate staff buy-in that helps achieve departmental and co-op goals, and it also is a means for encouraging participation and new leadership

within the ranks. Lessons from early adopters have led to improved results as new co-ops use these tools.

Social justice and a fair food system are further strong concerns among co-op leaders, members, and allies in the food chain—issues that also support co-op differentiation in the market. Domestic Fair Trade Association is a key example, and Erika Inwald, the executive director, reports on a December conference advancing its food system work.

Meanwhile, most of the 1970s generation of founders and leaders of today’s food co-ops, like the organic farming pioneers, have retired or are planning to. We honor the leadership and career of Susan McGaughey of Valley Natural Foods in Burnsville, Minnesota, who is retiring after 37 years at the co-op; and the landmark at another excellent example from that co-op generation, City Market, which is opening its second store in Burlington, Vermont. The kind of values found in such leaders and businesses are carried over in co-ops’ social impacts—and those values and impacts are further market differentiators.

The new National Co+op Grocers study of co-op impacts is summarized by Sheila Ongie, NCG sustainability manager. The report highlights social and environmental impacts of food co-ops, measuring their results in the areas of local food, organic food, food waste, owner participation, and community contributions.

What’s my differentiator, as it were, in these pages? See my review of *Drawdown* and *Global Co-operation* that points at the depth of global problems as well as cooperative, principled, and practical ways forward.

It’s easy to remember when I met my friend, who has left the earth that he helped nurture. Then, in 1967, we were in the midst of intense learning while also protesting the atrocities and invasion of small countries that were being perpetrated by our rulers.

Today, resistance and new directions are needed more than ever. War and the U.S. military continue as our largest contribution to global warming. The present economic arrangements, and a thoroughly militarized society and global stance, are leading to social breakdown, financial decline for the bottom 90 percent, and out-of-control heat for all.

“If not now, when?” •

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