



FOOD-SUPPLY FIRM TOOK ROOT ORGANICALLY

BY JANE ALBRITTON

Brian Freeman was born to be a presence in the organic food community. Literally. “I grew up in it,” he said. “My parents were ‘60s hippies and opened the first natural food restaurant and bookstore in Tempe, Arizona. I thought co-ops were the only place people shopped for food, and I was a vegetarian until I was 10.”

Now a partner in the Denver-based Grower’s Organic, a supplier of organic produce (including eggs, dairy and juice), Freeman makes his daily rounds through the cavernous halls of Giambrocco’s warehouse on Wazee Street down by the Union Pacific tracks, checking on what has come in that day.

Grower’s Organic operates in the middle of a delicate balance between farmers and retailers: restaurants and grocery stores. On any given day, there might be upwards of 300 certified organic items on the inventory list—both from local producers and from operations with growing seasons longer than Colorado’s 110 days, including produce from California and quinoa from Peru. That inventory turns over every week.

“The potatoes, avocados, pineapples and tropicals like to be at 40 degrees,” he said. “The tomatoes, onions, basil and shallots like it warmer, about 50 degrees. We make it possible for some small family farms to continue their commitment to organic because we will buy what they produce. We share 7 percent of our profits with them so they can produce even more. Profit sharing is just part of our philosophy. We share 3 percent of our profits with our employees.”

Freeman’s journey to organic living started when he was a kid in Arizona, but it found a focus in Colorado. In 1991, Freeman—then

Brian Freeman—King of his own hill. *Photo by Todd Pierson*

20—moved to Denver for a job at the Rock Bottom Restaurant and Brewery.

“I worked there for about a year and met lots of people in the trade,” he said. “It was good, but in 1993 I followed what interested me and went to work for Genesis Market, a little organic grocery store and restaurant. That was just before Wild Oats came to town, looking for places to buy. They wanted the Genesis acquisition to become their first scanning store. Since I had the most computer experience, I was put in charge of the Wild Oats’ first scanning grocery store,” he said.

He stayed there until 1998 when Wild Oats went corporate and moved to a central distribution system, a move that proved to be a defining moment for Freeman. All of his experience until then had reinforced the notion that the shortest route from the organic field to the dinner table is the best route. The central distribution model, while efficient for a corporate grocery chain, does nothing for freshness and puts small farmers at a distinct disadvantage.

“Farmers should be able to drive up to the back door with their produce,” he said. “Most of them don’t understand all the dynamics of distribution and the time it adds from harvest to delivery. For example, seven to 10 days are all that a leafy green will last without immediate cooling because once it is cut, it starts losing moisture.”

He added that small farmers don’t have the means to cool and hydrate their crops, and so the days added to go through a distribution center can basically destroy the crop and wipe out any profit that might be reinvested in raising more crops. In Freeman’s view, family farms and the corporate distribution model worked at cross purposes,

And so it happened that when Wild Oats went corporate, Brian Freeman took a new path to sustainability: He went to work as a mortgage broker for Universal Lending.

“I could have gone to work with farmers as a broker or consultant, but I knew that if I was going to move full-time into organic living, both personally and in my business career, then I needed money,” he said.

By 2003, Freeman was prepared to launch. Colorado’s Tres Rios Cooperative had taken on a project for organic produce distribution in the five major agricultural regions in the state and Freeman and his partners were prepared to buy it out when the time was right. Then the cooperative dissolved.

“So instead of buying them out, we bought all their stuff to begin distribution at the Denargo Market. Then it burned down,” he said.

The next move took Freeman and his partners—McCracken (Green Earth Farm) and Paul New (White Mountain Farm)—to Giambocco’s, a 101,500-square-foot storage facility, which after a terrible fire of its own in 1998 had come back better than ever with ripening rooms, controlled coolers and freezer rooms.

“They wanted us to take more of the new space than we were ready for, so we took what we could manage,” he said. “In three years we

have had a tremendous impact on organic farming and distribution in Colorado.”

And for those farmers who say that it is too expensive to get certified, the partners have little patience.

“It doesn’t cost that much to get certified if you are committed to it,” McCracken said. “And if you are making less than \$5,000 per year gross, then you are exempt. But if that’s all you’re making, then it’s a hobby farm. We just don’t buy products if they aren’t certified, partly because the ‘natural’ label is untrustworthy.”

Both Freeman and McCracken also argue that any restaurant owner who wants to go organic can without significant extra expense.

“Look at these potatoes,” said Freeman. “They are beginning to sprout a little, and so the stores don’t want them. So we put them in the bargain box here by the door for restaurants. When they are made into home fries, how they looked in the box doesn’t make them any less organic or nutritious.”

Freeman added that the chefs from restaurants as various as the Mercury Café, Elway’s, Rioja (Denver), and the Kitchen in Boulder work closely with him as part of their commitment to making organic more than a trendy thing to do.

“It’s a lifestyle. Even our facility is certified organic,” Freeman said. “The USDA came in and looked at everything. What they wanted us to do wasn’t onerous, mostly better tracking and putting sticky traps with no poison bait out for mice.”

He added that everything in his home is organic, too, and confessed that it sometimes drives his wife crazy.

“She says organic soap doesn’t get her clothes clean.”

Despite that small domestic drawback, the Grower’s Organic model is proving to be profitable, based largely on the company’s reputation for uncompromising quality and responsible business practices.

“We made \$3.5 million last year. We have the restaurants from here to Fort Collins; now we need more grocery stores,” Freeman said. “Our plan is to grow to \$10 million. Not too big, because I like knowing our farmers and their workers. And I like knowing what’s in my cooler.”

Sounds like a winner. Visit growersorganic.com and take a peek at what’s in their cooler, as well as a good list of certified organic farms.

Jane Albritton is an editor, writer and teacher. She is currently working on *Peace Corps at 50*, a four-volume collection of stories for the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps in 2011. She writes about the hospitality industry for the *Northern Colorado Business Report*.