



Local food co-op is a good budget bet

Dollars can go far in buyers' clubs

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

FORT KENT — According to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average household in this country spends about 13 percent of its annual income on groceries.

For many, making those food dollars stretch as far as possible is a priority that often means hitting sales at large chain or big-box stores.

Stacey Martin, manager of the Market Street Co-op in Fort Kent, believes there is a better, healthier alternative that is just as cost efficient.

"Shopping for local food at your local co-op is absolutely not a luxury," Martin said. "Co-ops offer plenty of affordable options that are also often healthier than what you might find elsewhere."

Martin said shopping at a co-op means consumers can participate in "buyers' clubs" to purchase products at wholesale costs or join forces to buy items in volume, which often means lower prices.

"We can't compete with [the larger] supermarkets and never will on variety of our goods or on some prices," she said. "Their prices and selection are based on volume, but we do believe our customers believe in the value of supporting local farmers and producers."

For her part, Martin said she feeds her family of seven by shopping at the co-op and said it really comes down to priorities and being a savvy shopper.

"I'm not a doctor or lawyer who makes a ton of money," she said. "But we make it work for our family."

According to one local economist, the co-op model is rooted in local commerce.

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STACEY MARTIN,
THE MARKET STREET CO-OP, FORT KENT

"Instead of a competitive model, you look at it as a community model," Tony Gauvin, associate professor of electronic commerce at the University of Maine at Fort Kent, said. "If you buy local, your money stays local and supports local individuals. When you look at that competitive model, often the money is spent on items produced outside the community so the money goes outside the community."

Martin says keeping food buying dollars local helps area farmers.

"Our culture often asks farmers to work at unfairly low wages," she said. "If you look around [at the co-op] a large part of what we have comes from local farmers, and when people shop here their dollars support those farmers."

Shopping at the co-op, where the food often is organic, also can have long-term cost and health savings, Martin said.

"If you eat healthy foods you are leading a more healthy lifestyle, and that can reduce your risks for illnesses," she said. "It's like health insurance in the form of food."
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MICKY BEDELL | BDN

Jeff Butler heats up soup with his 2-year-old son, Quinn, at their home in Knox on Tuesday. By the time his youngest son, William, was born on Nov. 8, Butler and his wife, Dani Scanlon, had raised enough money to allow them to spend four weeks home together before Butler had to go back to work at the Belfast Co-op.

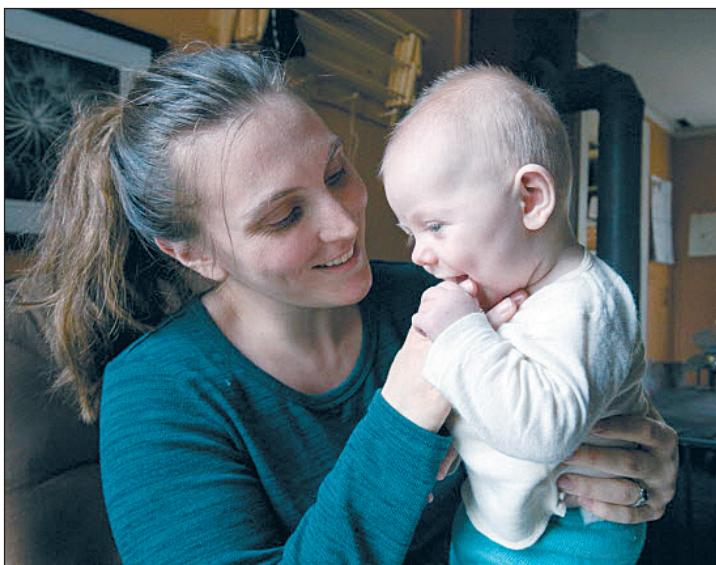
The virtual village

What does the rise of crowdsourcing mean for local communities?

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

When Dani Scanlon and Jeff Butler were preparing last year for the arrival of their second baby, they realized that rather than a bunch of cute onesies or new toys, the only gift the family really needed was more time.

So the couple did what many are doing these days when they need something: They took to the Internet to see if they might be able to find what they were looking for via the power of crowdsourcing. Through a new website that was developed by a couple of midcoast moms, MyBabyBond.com, Scanlon and Butler put the word out to their friends, family and others that a gift of \$20 would allow them to spend one extra hour at home with their expanded family. By the time baby William was born on Nov. 8, they had raised enough money to allow them to spend four weeks home together before Butler had to go back to work



MICKY BEDELL | BDN

Dani Scanlon holds her son William at their home in Knox on Tuesday.

at the Belfast Co-op.

"It's really sweet when people want to give you a thing for your baby, but we didn't need more things," Scanlon, a certified professional midwife, said. "Telling people what you need is hard, and asking for help is hard, but in some ways the same amount of money is circulating. It's just going towards what you deem is the

more useful thing for your family. We felt that nourishing our family is really important."

'An incredible thing'

Nowadays, it seems impossible to scroll down a Facebook feed without running across many pleas for help. The causes are as varied as people. A recent search through Maine-based campaigns on the website GoFundMe.com ran the gamut from the sweet — a teenaged beauty queen trying to raise enough money to make it to a pageant — to the tragic — a family raising money to bury a son who died unexpectedly.

Just a few years ago, when Mainers needed help, they were limited to activities such as holding a bean supper, asking family, friends and church groups and plunking down a coffee can at the local convenience store or coffee shop. The rise in usage and importance of such sites as GoFundMe.com shows how technology has broadened the scope and definition of community, both

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MICKY BEDELL | BDN

Dani Scanlon holds her son William at their home in Knox on Tuesday.

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A Maine farmer banks on rice

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

BENTON — When you think of where rice is grown, you probably think of hot, steamy locales such as Vietnam, the Philippines and even Arkansas.

You probably do not think of Benton, Maine, a Kennebec County town that is more known for its scenic views of the Kennebec River than its rice paddies. But that is changing, according to Ben Rooney, a 28-year-old graduate of Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association's Journeyperson program who has been growing rice at Wild Folk Farm in Benton for the last three years. Last year, the farm produced about 400 pounds of rice, and he has hopes that number will grow as much as tenfold during the 2016 growing season.

Rooney knows of no other farmers in the state that are growing rice, but he hopes that will change

"I consider myself an experimental farmer," said Rooney, who will be giving a presentation on growing rice in Maine on Tuesday, March 1 at the Belfast Free Library. "I'm hoping the talk will stir up people's excitement about growing grains."

He said that while people often tell him it sounds crazy to grow rice in Maine, he has found it to be an enjoyable and even successful enterprise so far. Right now, he knows of no other farmers in the state that are growing rice, but he hopes that will change.

"We started with a little bit of seed from the USDA. It worked," Rooney said. "One of the reasons we're growing rice is because we're learning to listen to our land. We have a lot of clay soil, and we thought we should try this out."

Wild Folk Farm features forests, meadows and some marginal pastureland with a high water table and that clay soil, which is good at holding water. So good, in fact, that Rooney and the other farmers at Wild Folk Farm are creating wetlands there. Uphill from the pastureland, there is a pond that the group has made larger with the help of an excavator. Water is transported from the pond to the eight paddies with the help of underground piping.

"I love the serenity of the still water juxtaposed with these bands of grain," Rooney said.

Wild Folk Farm grew three varieties of rice last year, all of which were short-grain, cold-tolerant varieties from either Japan or Russia.

"It definitely does not taste like rice from the grocery store," Rooney said. "It's fresh. It has flavor. There's just a huge difference between bland staples and something with flavor and taste."

For farmers and homesteaders who may be wondering if they could give growing rice a try, Rooney is encouraging.

"Hopefully we can show you can make some money doing this," he said. "And that it's not just an experiment."

Ben Rooney will talk about growing rice at Wild Folk Farm in Benton, Maine at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 1 at the Belfast Free Library.

Maine farms seek their seasonal hands

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

Help wanted. Must like vegetables. Perks: fresh air and all the produce you can stomach.

This time of year as farmers sharpen their spades, plant seedlings and gear up for the growing season, they scramble to find enough people to make the farm flourish.

From The County to Kittery, farms large and small are putting out the signal that the hiring season has begun. Long before the first green shoots burst from the earth farmers like Lisa Turner at Laughing Stock Farm in Freeport need a team in place.

"It's different year to year. It's like a ski resort," said Turner of the hiring pool for seasonal agri-

cultural work. This year Turner will hire eight full-timers. By late-February she had four in place. Now in the farm's 20th year, she gets more applicants from other states ... Connecticut, Virginia, Tennessee.

Sometimes demand is high and farm hands secure their spot early. "I have had college kids emailing me in November to work here in June," she said. "This year's been slow," she said. "I have not found there is a normal."

In Maine, hiring criteria differ depending on the farm and its scale. Diversified farms require different skill sets than large commodity operations.

The suite of skills needed for a small, organic farm doesn't necessarily apply at a commercial apple orchard, or potato or blue-

berry operation, where the workforce is brought in to accomplish a singular task, such as getting in the harvest.

Most jobs on vegetables farms run from April to after Thanksgiving. Farmers such as Ben Whately, co-owner of Whately Farm in Topsham, says it's tough to find qualified candidates willing to work for only eight months a year.

"It's not a bridge job," said Whately who stopped looking for farm hands on sites such as Craigslist and shifted to the more-targeted MOFGA.net. Entering the organic farm's fifth season, Whately has become more strategic, looking for "quality over quantity."

Because the farmer will only hire one person this year, the fit is crucial.



TROY R. BENNETT | BDN

Logan Puck picks out greens at Laughing Stock Farm's twice-monthly winter CSA setup in the Drummond-Woodsum building in Portland on Wednesday. Winter is the traditional time for Maine farms to look for summer help.

"We have high expectations of that one person," said Whately. "We are investing all of our time and training to that one person

and are incentivizing that person," said Whately. "It's different from a large farm just hiring a big

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