



COURTESY OF NATHAN BROADDUS  
Fresh food activist Jeanette Richelson holds a Maine Farm and Sea Cooperative sign last summer.

## The power of many drives new food co-op

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE  
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — An array of Maine farmers, fishermen, local food enthusiasts and dining managers recently formed an impressive startup to change the way institutions get their food.

The months-old Maine Farm and Sea Cooperative plans to take on giant food corporations such as Aramark and Sodexo and augment the local food pipeline from Fort Kent to Kittery.

“We have the operations experience and skills and ability and production in the state. We are saying you don’t need outside companies,” board member Jonah Fertig said. “This is a Maine food campaign that is also about sustainability.”

Over the summer the University of Maine System announced its goal to purchase 20 percent of food served on campuses from local producers by 2020. The initiative spurred individuals to act; forming a cooperative was the first step of an ambitious plan.

Led by former Bowdoin College dining purchasing manager Jon Wiley and Portland Public Schools food service director Ron Adams, the cooperative submitted a proposal to the University of Maine System for its dining services contract this month.

The team, which includes farmers, educators, students and plain old Mainers, is vying to oversee the dining services of six UMS campuses from Fort Kent to University of Southern Maine, with the exception of the University of Maine flagship in Orono, which provides its own food service.

**“Our goal is to bring more Maine food into Maine institutions and raise awareness that it is possible for a cooperative to do this.”**

JONAH FERTIG, BOARD MEMBER,  
MAINE FARM AND SEA COOPERATIVE

“This is an opportunity to make an impact,” Fertig, a cooperative specialist who sees this as a way to strengthen the state’s food system through a sea change of institutional sourcing, said. “We had a positive response from folks at [the University of] Maine [system].”

Farmers such as Penny Jordan, owner of Cape Elizabeth’s Jordan Farm, believe in the power of many instead of a profit-driven corporation.

“If we can all do this together, then it is one other way for farmers to help define what makes sense for them to get their product from farm to table and really participate in the profits,” Jordan said in a prepared statement. “I think that this cooperative is a good way to approach that.”

Although a recent article on the New Food Economy website doubts such a grassroots effort can take on global food service providers, they applaud their “audacious” efforts and say the group has “come forward with a new way of thinking about how local food producers and institutions can work together — one that will be talked about, imitated and refined for years to come.”

The cooperative has developed a plan to meet the University’s goal of 20 percent local food in the first year of operations and to increase it 2 percent for each year after that.

“Our goal is to bring more Maine food into Maine institutions and raise awareness that it is possible for a cooperative to do this,” Fertig said. “We can do it ourselves.”

The university is expected to make an announcement by the end of January.



FRANCIS FLISIUK | BDN  
A sampling station allows customers at the Portland Salt Cellar to taste such flavored salts as rosemary, lemon or coffee. The motto at the Portland Salt Cellar is “Don’t put salt in your food, put salt on your food.”

## From ocean to Old Port

### Sea salt from Maine is growing in popularity

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS  
BDN STAFF

There’s not much that’s simpler or more elemental than salt, a mineral that is a necessary requirement for human life and is found in great abundance in the ocean.

But unlike years ago, when a search for salt at the store may only have turned up heavy bags of rock salt to throw on icy walkways or dark blue Morton Salt canisters, the salt options today are abundant and unusual.

Here in Maine, there are companies that evaporate seawater to make fine-grained, mineral-rich sea salt and others that add unique Maine flavors, such as smoked maple sugar. For the last few years, there has even been an entire store in Portland dedicated to the mineral.

Judit Vano-Tydemann, co-owner of the Salt Cellar in the Old Port, said this week that she and her husband, Don Tydemann, first dreamed of opening a salt store after seeing one in Budapest, Hungary.

“We took a risk,” she said. “We said either we’ll take off or stagnate. We really did not know. We just believed in our salt.”

Their first store, in Portsmouth, New



FRANCIS FLISIUK | BDN  
Clerks at the Portland Salt Cellar say several of their customers are surprised something as simple as salt can have so many applications.

Hampshire, which they stocked with gourmet finishing salts, relaxing bath and spa salts, salted chocolate and more, took off. It did so well that four years ago they opened another in Portland. That store has been growing in popularity, too, she said, with sales each year increasing by more than 20 percent. When asked what she thought explained the trendiness of all things salt, Vano-Tydemann pinned it to the growing prevalence of cooking shows.

“I think we started at the right time,” she said. “If we had started five years before, it might not have been the right time.”

One of the products they carry comes from the other corner of the state — Maine Natural Sea Salt is made in Marshfield, near Machias, by Steve and Sharon Cook. Steve Cook said they started the company 17 years ago and believe they were the first in the state to make Maine sea salt.

“I went to a health food store and saw sea salt for sale,” he recalled. “I thought, we could make that. We have plenty of ocean. And we started looking into it.”

It wasn’t easy. They first had to learn how to evaporate large volumes of filtered seawater, which is brought to their property in a tanker truck and then placed in greenhouses.

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## Maine farmer travels 200 miles to market his wares

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS  
BDN STAFF

UNITY — Every week during Christmas tree season, Jim Buckle of Buckle Farm rises before dawn and begins the long journey — about 200 miles — south to Boston.

On the first miles, the country roads are narrow and quiet, the other traffic likely to be Amish buggies or bicycles, and the scenery largely limited to fields and forest. But as he gets closer to his destination, the bucolic views give way to the built-up infrastructure and the busy traffic of urban America. By the time the farmer gets to his ultimate destination — a parking lot in Jamaica Plain neighborhood in Boston — he is very far from home.

“Jamaica Plain for the longest time was where the weirdos were. Now, it’s half wealthy, and the other half a crazy mix of minori-

ties,” Buckle, 38, said. “It’s this really awesome mix and melting pot of people and ideas.”

The Unity College graduate is familiar with the city, where he worked for nine years managing Allandale Farm in Chestnut Hill, just seven miles from downtown Boston. After that, he leased a small farm on the South Shore for a couple of years, but when he saw that a 17-acre farm was for sale in Unity, his ears pricked up.

“The price of farming in Massachusetts was climbing up high, and I wanted to get back to Maine,” he said.

He and his partner, Hannah Hamilton, approached the Maine Farmland Trust and asked for help acquiring the property. They worked out a three year lease-to-purchase agreement. Since then, the couple has been busy rejuvenating the heirloom apple and pear orchards, raising pork on pas-



BDN FILE  
Jim Buckle (right), owner of The Buckle Farm, and Katherine Rahaim, an employee at the farm, pack vegetables in Unity in December 2014.

ture and cultivating vegetables. “I think we live in paradise,” Buckle said.

But when it came to finding a

market for their wares, the couple looked south, where Buckle had customers so loyal that they

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## How farmers survive the Maine winter

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE  
BDN STAFF

For Maine livestock farmers, the work continues year-round, no matter the weather. And for those with all-season greenhouses, it can as well. But while some farmers pour over seed catalogues in winter, planning for next season, others slip off the dirt-caked boots and enter the workforce when the ground freezes.

“Winter is always a hard time for people coming off of farm season. It can be stressful,” said farmer Bethany Allen, who runs Harvest Tide Organics in Bowdoinham.

To make ends meet, she started work as a sales support specialist for 32 hours a week at Johnny’s Selected Seeds in November. “As a seasonal worker, it’s a challenge ... it’s shifting your whole life.”

Picking up offseason work helps fill in the gaps for agriculturalists like Allen and Andrea Bachynsky of Honeysuckle Way Flowers in Whitefield.

Both women are working at Johnny’s this year, joining a handful of farmers hired in the Fairfield office of the Winslow-based seed producer. For Allen, who just completed a successful first year selling produce with her partner Eric Ferguson, working off-farm has its pros and cons. Though she drives 50 minutes each day for the needed paycheck, the social aspect is a plus.

“There are 25 people I get to interact with,” she said. “Working on a farm, your cohort co-worker pool is very small. There is value in working with other people.”

After working 100-hour weeks last summer, hitting the pause button to join a team is refreshing. Another pro: the entire business doesn’t rest on her shoulders.

“When I am farming, we are the boss. Here, I am filling a role. It’s seasonal, so it’s nice to go and do a job well. It feels like a little bit of a break,” said Allen, admitting though that “it’s hard to leave the farm,” even in winter when there is planning to be done.

For flower farmer Bachynsky, the season of colorful zinnias and dahlias is preciously short.

In coming years she wants to expand beyond June through September with harderier plants. Now in her fourth year as a Maine farmer, this is her first offseason working as a call center specialist at Johnny’s.

Lower on the ladder, her schedule is less predictable than Allen’s. She worked 16 hours one week, when she would have liked more.

“It’s a scramble to make money, but I’m doing what I love doing. It’s super rewarding for me and exciting to see what I can build and make work,” said Bachynsky, 29.

On the plus side, what she gleans on the job can be applied on the quarter-acre plot she rents.

“I am learning a lot through other people’s questions, and my co-workers are like-minded people,” said Bachynsky. “I’ve learned about different varieties of flowers and am gaining in-depth knowledge about vegetables, different varieties and hardiness.”

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