

Buying Clubs

Diverse organizations with complicated relations to retail co-ops

BY STUART REID

Try to define “buying club.” Is it a food co-op without a storefront? A stepping stone to a future retail store? A group effort to buy food as cheaply as possible? The only viable option for food in a remote community? Just a name implying better deals through group access?

All of these definitions would work for at least some U.S. buying clubs, but there are many more descriptions that apply as well. Buying clubs can be characterized by altruism, cooperation, and community outreach...or by profiteering. They may be incorporated, privately owned, or without a business structure.

Let a hundred flowers blossom

It turns out that understanding buying clubs, their role in communities, and how they relate to retail food co-ops is far more complicated than it appears. Where do we start if we want to understand buying clubs’ relationship to retail cooperatives?

Consider the following examples:

The **Daily Market** in Walla Walla, Wash., has operated a buying club for many years. Until recently, they kept a modest inventory of packaged goods and a few perishables in a small storefront/office with limited retail hours. When they lost their lease, they continued with a “Made in Walla Walla Box.” Contents vary to meet members’ needs and may include eggs, milk, artisan bread, salad greens, grains, meat, fruits, and vegetables. Their goal is to build community support for a future retail store. The Daily Market operates as a cooperative and is incorporated as a Washington nonprofit: www.dailymarket.coop.



Urban Greens Buying Club in Providence, R.I., has coordinated a volunteer-run cooperative buying club since 2000. A full range of groceries is purchased collectively, directly from wholesalers and farmers. Every month, participants can order products from Associated Buyers in New Hampshire as



well as from a variety of Rhode Island suppliers. The current focus of Urban Greens is to open a food market on the west side of Providence, where residents will be able to purchase local foods seven days a week without having to leave their own community. Urban Greens is incorporated in Minnesota as a cooperative: www.urbangreens.com.

Lake County Community Co-op in Clearlake, Calif., began operations in 2008 as a buying club with a modified Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. They focus on purchasing locally grown organic produce and a coordinated dry/bulk goods buying group that receives monthly deliveries from Azure Standard. Their larger vision includes a storefront in Lake County as well as a coordinated online ordering and distribution system for locally produced food: www.lakeco-op.org.



Fishes and Loaves is a cooperative, faith-based ministry. Their current project is to make wholesome food available to residents in the Hazelwood, Pa., area at reasonable prices. Hazelwood is considered a food desert, with no full-service grocery store since 2009. Founding organizations include a coalition of local churches and the Hazelwood Initiative Organization. The Catholic diocese of Pittsburgh provided a grant to help with operating capital, and they have received other donations and grants to help keep prices low. Members pay a one-time, refundable fee of \$20 to join the buying club. www.ststephen-hazelwood.org/flcm-buying-club.

Annie’s Organic Buying Club is based in Osprey, Fla., and supports pickup points all over Florida. Started three

years ago so that the founders could get organic produce, the club now boasts over 1,000 members and supports six full-time staff, additional part-timers, and a lot of farmers. Members pay no dues or fees. They can choose from a variety of fresh produce and dairy items for weekly or biweekly pickup. Buying club coordinators who provide a drop site and sorting help get a free box of food. Annie’s does not operate as a cooperative, but they embody the same sense of community and personal care. New members are welcome. Check them out at: www.annies-buyingclub.com/welcome.cfm.

Community Food Compact is a new kind of local community agricultural cooperative, with both producer and consumer members, that extends the CSA model. They are located in northern Columbia and southern Rensselaer counties, between Albany, N.Y., and Pittsfield, Mass. Producers cooperate to offer a product list of basic food staples: fruits and vegetables, protein-rich foods (meats, milk, cheese, eggs), grain staples (artisan breads, whole grains), and flavorings (sauces, dressings, sweeteners), plus local frozen foods that extend harvest eating. The co-op’s emphasis on nutrition and cooking with local ingredients supports the transition to a diet higher in healthful, local foods. They are incorporated as a cooperative under New York statutes: www.foodcompact.com.

And then there is **Safecastle Royal Crisis Preparedness Buyers Club**, designed for those who anticipate the need to stockpile food and supplies for the coming disaster of your choice (apocalypse-of-the-month?). This organization might be characterized more as a “Sam’s Club” for survivalists than a cooperative venture.

Buying clubs do have one thing in common—they all use the combined economic





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MEXICAN BELL VEGAN PIZZA

Ingredients:

- 1 large whole-wheat, vegan flatbread
- ½ cup prepared vegan pizza sauce
- ½ cup ground beef alternative
- ¾ cup Vegan Mexican Style Shreds
- ¼ red bell pepper, diced
- ¼ green bell pepper, diced
- ¼ yellow bell pepper, diced
- Fresh cilantro, chopped

Instructions: Preheat oven to 425° F. Place the flatbread on a pizza stone or sheet pan. Spread pizza sauce evenly over flatbread. Top with ground beef alternative, followed by Vegan Mexican Style Shreds, and finish with all the diced peppers. Place pizza in the oven and bake for 18 minutes, or until the Vegan Shreds are melted and light brown. Remove from oven. Top with fresh cilantro. Allow to cool slightly before cutting. Serve and enjoy! *(Pictured below)*

CHIPOTLE RASPBERRY DIP

Ingredients:

- ½ cup hot chipotle salsa
- ½ cup raspberry jam
- 8 oz. Vegan Cream Cheese Alternative, Classic Plain

Instructions: Mix salsa and raspberry jam. Spread mixture over Vegan Cream Cheese alternative. Serve with crackers or corn chips and enjoy! *(Pictured above)*



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◀ power of a group of people to better meet their food needs. In this way, they share the core motivation of most retail food co-ops and are often viewed as close cousins. However, like cousins, they may have very different backgrounds and points of view.

Why do buying clubs matter?

Now that we have established that there are more kinds of buying clubs than heritage tomatoes, let's examine why they matter to those of us in the retail co-op world.

For starters, there are probably a lot of our customers or potential members who are even more confused about buying clubs than we are. They will bring their perceptions and misperceptions with them when they are introduced to retail co-ops. It may benefit us all to learn about the buying clubs in our trade areas and be prepared to answer questions and explain differences. Retail co-ops may even find ways to partner with those clubs that share similar missions.

Buying clubs such as Urban Greens, Lake County, and Daily Market that are planning to evolve into full retail operations may be in special need of the help and encouragement of existing retail co-ops. Running a buying club can detract from a focus on business planning, use up organizational capacity, and build unrealistic expectations for food costs once the storefront does open. While seen as an opportunity to build membership and community support, many buying clubs have found that their members are not committed to the further investment in time and capital necessary to open a retail store.

What often results is a form of inertia that keeps the buying club operations running but with little or no progress toward the planned retail store.

Encouragement from existing retail co-ops is important to these clubs. The organizers and members need to be reminded of their original vision and shown why the extra effort will pay off. A guest speaker from a successful retail co-op can inspire any organizing group by simply telling their story—sharing the community benefits of having a physical space where the community comes together.

Buying club members may also need help understanding the different expense structure of retail stores, how that impacts food prices, and why it is worth the trade-off. Buying clubs represent an organizing effort with loyal members and some operating experience. With the right guidance and encouragement, they may be primed to become new members of the retail cooperative sector. ■

Members of buying clubs need to be reminded of their original vision and shown why the extra effort to build a retail store will pay off.

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