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Eating Healthy On a Budget At the Co-op: Can it be done?

by Jocelyn Furbush, Alberta Co-op Grocery
Marketing Manager *October, 2008*

Recently we received a comment card here at Alberta that said, "I heart co-ops, but wow-- it's always so expensive! What can be done?" This is a concern that's on a lot of people's minds right now more than ever, with food inflation high and budgets tight. Your Co-op has a mission of both providing healthy affordable food to our diverse neighborhood, and supporting local, sustainable farms. Sometimes these values can seem to conflict.

Everyone deserves access to healthy food. At the same time, the farmers, farmworkers, truck drivers, and many others that work to bring that food to our stores and our plates deserve to get paid enough to make a decent living. Hunger is a real concern in our urban neighborhoods, but did you know that many family farmers are themselves relying on food stamps? Along the way, we've got to grow and transport this food in a way that protects and enhances our environment. Having all of these things together is my definition of a sustainable food system. I know that one little grocery cooperative can't achieve all this on our own, so what can we do?

Part of what we do as a co-op is educate our owners and shoppers. This newsletter has articles that touch on some of what's driving the increase in food prices, and on how nutrition, community, and affordability intersect. We face extra challenges as a small store with less access to volume discounts or the ability to price some things at or below cost and make it up in other parts of the store. This is kind of similar to what small farms face when selling to brokers and wholesalers. A network that is wrestling with these issues and trying to bring everyone to the table is the Domestic Fair Trade

Coalition. In one of their surveys, when shoppers were asked whether they'd be willing to pay more for food that they knew had come from farmers and farmworkers paid fairly, they overwhelmingly said yes. Later, when asked what the barriers were to buying fair trade products, shoppers said, "It's too expensive." Many of us can relate. We hold strong values, but when we're standing in the aisle weighing two products or deciding which store to go to buy a block of cheese, our wallet is a big factor.

In the U.S. we do spend such a small part of our budget on food (an average of about 10% post-tax in 2007, 19-25% for low-income families) compared to the past (an average of 30% in 1955, with low-income families spending 50% or more.) Once I learned that, it really changed how I thought about my own food budget and the value I place on food. However, it doesn't change the fact that while food prices may have been kept artificially low, the cost of other necessities like housing and transportation have gone up a lot and more and more people are struggling to put food on the table. Education gets us a little ways at the Co-op in understanding and explaining why food costs what it does. First we have to get folks in the door, and then keep them here long enough to learn about it.

I'm thinking about the story a coworker shared with me recently of a shopper who came in, looked at that 2 lb block of Tillamook Cheese, said, "That's crazy, I can buy that for \$6.99 at Safeway," and walked right out. Even if we had been able to have a conversation about loss leaders and cooperative values, that might not have made a difference for her in being able to afford shop at our store. That's where education only goes so far. We're never going to be "the low price leader," and like the comment card writer, some folks may love co-ops and share our values but still not be able to fit us into their budgets easily.

In the long run, we can work in cooperation with our networks to build strong local economies with living wage jobs for everyone and to create more sensible national food policy. In the short to medium-term, we can support food banks, cooking and food preserving classes, community kitchens and gardens, farmers markets, and CSA farm share scholarships. As member-owners we can hold potlucks and supper clubs and share our incredible collective knowledge and our delicious low-cost recipes. Right now in the store, we can continue working to grow and advertise our Bargain Basics program of affordable staples and making these the healthiest foods we carry. We can talk with our community about the different ways that we really do believe folks of limited means can afford to shop here. I asked my coworkers to share some of their tips for shopping at the Co-op on a budget. The biggest thing is both simple and challenging: actually cooking at home with real, whole foods. A lack of time, knowledge and sometimes basic equipment are barriers to overcome for many of us, so as the Co-op we need to work on providing simple recipes and a connection to resources.

Shopping in bulk came high on the list, as well as taking advantage of case discounts. Nick in bulk suggests special ordering a 25 lb bag of rice, which you can then pour into 5 lb sealable buckets (often available here at the store) to keep it fresh and pest-free. Think

about the things you find yourself buying a lot of (cereal? coconut milk?) and consider splitting a case with your neighbors-- a great way to save money and build community. There's cooking up a big batch of something and making good use of leftovers, which can save time not to mention avoiding waste.

What about the higher price of organic and local? One thing to consider is a higher mineral, vitamin and nutrient content. Locally grown food has been picked closer to when it's ripe, which means you're getting the highest nutrient density. We can definitely see good food as saving us on health care costs and prolonging our lives. I'd like to have a regular newsletter column on eating economically, to go more in-depth on topics like buying bulk, cooking rather than eating out, inexpensive healthy snack foods, making your own salad dressings, growing your own, planned vs. unplanned shopping trips. What do you want to learn more about? What tips and resources do you have to share with your fellow cooperators?

I hope this just begins to answer the question of "What can be done?" We have lots of ideas here at Alberta Co-op, and I'm excited to hear more of yours. Come to the Owner Forum and share them! You can always write or call me at the store. Together in cooperation, we can achieve the vision of healthy, affordable food for everyone in a food system based on justice and care for the earth.